

JOSEPH THOMAS
I [of 3]--Digest--Retyped
September 29, 1960

Also present: William Russell
Ralph Collins
Interview recorded at
Joseph Thomas's home
2027 St. Ann Street
New Orleans, Louisiana

Joseph William Thomas was born December 3, 1902. His father played broom (a resined broom stick is drawn across the thumb, which is supported by a table; the sound resulting is like that of a bass [violin]); his mother sang; his uncle played comb and tissue paper. WR has heard Blow Drag [Pavageau] play the broom. All JT's family, including a cousin sang. Lyrics of songs included "Mr. Moon, you bright silvery moon, please shine your light on me." They also sang "Down By the Old Mill Stream." JT was born on Tonti Street, between Dumaine and St. Ann, across from the Tonti Social and Pleasure Club; he has lived most of his life in the same neighborhood. One of his brothers tried to learn C melody sax, but gave it up, as it was not the right instrument (not used in bands anymore). Kazoo was also used at the song sessions involving his parents and uncle. JT didn't follow any brass band parades when he was small; his parents were very strict and demanded that the children remain close to the home. He did get to see Carnival parades with his grandmother, and the Hobgoblins with his mother. JT thinks Louis Barbarin's daddy [Isidore Barbarin] played in the band for the Hobgoblins. JT remembers hearing Kid Punch [Miller], Kid Rena, Buddy Petit and Chris Kelly; he says there was a vacant lot with a pavillion at Orleans and White where Punch's band played for dancing.

In 1923 JT bought an Albert system clarinet for \$5.00; after a period of experimentation, he began to be able to play "Home, Sweet Home," "Nearer My God to Thee" and similar

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numbers. (His mother called him "Brother.") He began taking lessons from [Paul] Chaligny (living then on St. Claude between Dumaine and St. Philip); JT played in Chaligny's brass band, which was directed by Chaligny's son; the band rehearsed at the San Jacinto Club. An uncle of JT, Wellington Knox, also played clarinet in that band, but gave up the instrument. (WR mentions Emile Knox, drummer in the Young Tuxedo [Brass] Band led by John Casimir; no relation to Wellington Knox.) Chaligny charged 25¢ for a half hour lesson, was very strict, but good. Chaligny played only trumpet, but was ~~loosing~~^{losing} his teeth when JT studied with him, so wasn't very good. JT learned to read very well, "but all that got away from me." He studied with Chaligny about a year. JT lost his first clarinet; he borrowed a silver [i.e., metal] clarinet from George Lewis, and played it for a good while. JT, Gilbert Young (trumpet) and others would rehearse in a house on Orleans at Rocheblave; JT says they had an arrangement of "Sophisticated Lady," but were never able to play it properly [tune mentioned was introduced in 1933--PRC]. Gerald Kendrick, trumpet, asked JT to play with his band, which played by ear only, [Robert] "Buster" Moore, [left-handed] trombonist, played with the band later, and George Young was with the band when JT joined); JT played with the band so long that he forgot how to read. Lately the band [Albert French's] has been rehearsing, learning a lot of new numbers by music, and JT has been brushing up on reading. After leaving Kendrick, JT played with various bands, including a party in Brown's Velvet [dairy] plant with Jack Carey. JT played

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with Kid Rena, replacing George Lewis, who was sick. JT played a few jobs with Chris Kelly, at Co-operators Hall and Economy Hall. JT played with Kid Thomas on St. Peter Street, at a lumber-yard which had been cleaned up for a dancing place; Kid Thomas had about the best band in New Orleans then. JT also worked with Thomas over the river quite a few times. [Chronology of above should be cleared up. RBA]. Chris Kelly sounded good, was a great musician; nobody beat him playing the blues; his use of the rubber plunger for a wa-wa mute went over big. Punch could make more [notes] on his trumpet than JT could on his clarinet; Punch played some wonderful variations in those earlier days. Punch didn't play many high notes, preferring to remain with notes in the staff. Buddy Petit played a similar style; Kid Rena could play variations, too. JT enjoyed playing with the older men; he got a lot of experience that way; he can play a lot of the tunes they played. He got a lot of numbers from Louis Armstrong records, also. He learned "March of the Bobcats" listening to Irving Fazola [on the Bob Crosby record].

JT got his nickname, "Brother Cornbread" during his school days; his mother would give him cornbread to take to school [for lunch], so he got the nickname, which he has had ever since. Before that, he was called Brother, or Brother Will-yam [French pronunciation]; his father was called Will-yam.

JT switched from Albert system clarinet to Boehm system during World War II when he was playing at the H & J Tavern, he thinks (WR, staying about a month with George Lewis one summer, was advised by Lewis to hear Brother Cornbread; the year was 1943; WR heard Cornbread at the H & J which was on St. Bernard near Rocheblave). JT bought a Boehm clarinet for his son, who did well on it, but gave it up shortly; not wanting the instrument to go to waste, JT began taking it, plus his Albert, to the job at the H & J; after a while he could play the Boehm; now he no longer can play Albert system. He worked out the Boehm fingering himself. JT thinks it easier to get a bigger tone on the Boehm clarinet; he also uses a strong reed (3 1/2 strength). JT has to become accustomed to his new [false] teeth; he says he hears that George Lewis has no trouble with his own. [In 1965 he still was not able to play with them in his mouth. RBA] JT has owned 6 or 7 clarinets since his first one; the Boehm he has is the one he bought for his son; he does have another Boehm; he alternates them at irregular intervals. JT would not like to lose his lip for clarinet playing by playing sax, as clarinet has kept him going all these years. Still he would like to try tenor sax.

End of Reel I

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Talk of clarinets-- e.g., LeBlanc, Buffet; [Harold] Peterson [owner of a music store] is mentioned; JT bought one clarinet through Louis Barbarin from a boy who attended Grunewald School of Music.

WR says JT has mentioned trumpet players Punch [Miller] and Kid Rena; asks about favorite clarinetists. JT says Georgie Boyd was his favorite; he also liked George Lewis. Boyd died years ago; Kid Howard was playing with him, or vice versa. Lee Collins talked about Boyd to WR, and took him to meet Boyd's widow, then living on Perdido Street, in an area which has been torn down; WR saw a picture of Boyd then; JT thinks her name is Daisy; he doesn't know where she lives now. [WR gave her name as Daisy to RBA earlier.] JT lived on Gravier Street, in the same area, for 18 years. Boyd's widow gave JT boyd's clarinet. One picture WR saw was of Boyd in uniform; JT confirms that Boyd had been in the armed services during World War I. (Talk of rubber bands used as springs on clarinets: JT says only one he knew who had a lot of rubber bands on his clarinet was [Kid] Ernest Moliere who died not long ago; JT himself carries rubber bands for emergencies. RC says Punch said Boyd's clarinet had rubber bands on practically every key.) JT gave the last two pieces of his [last] Albert system clarinet to [John] Handy. JT says he heard George Lewis went to Boehm once, but went back to Albert. WR says [Alphonse] Picou told him he had learned to play Boehm, but didn't play it much. Zeb [Leneries] was another old-time clarinetist JT liked; Zeb played with Kid Rena before George Lewis did. JT can't

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swear that he ever heard Lorenzo Tio [Jr.], who was supposed to be great. JT lived near Georgie Boyd; knew him well; they were good friends; Boyd helped JT with his clarinet. JT thinks Boyd died in the late Thirties or early Forties; he himself was playing music at the time, having begun in 1924, so he figures Boyd must have died in the Thirties. Boyd had tuberculosis. Boyd played until shortly before his death. Kid Howard, a great one for fun, always kidded Boyd about his health. Howard is looking better now [who had recently been ill?] there was a banquet at San Jacinto Hall recently; a lot of musicians were there, including Howard, who was looking good. RC took [George] "Sheik" [Colar] to the banquet.

The trumpet players, like Kid Punch, Buddie Petit, Kid Rena, knew what they were doing; JT didn't know Bunk Johnson too well; JT didn't hear Joe Oliver before the latter went North. JT heard [Louis] Armstrong, who was playing in Papa Celestin's band for a while. JT tells of hearing Celestin at the Fairground; Celestin would knock off the tempos with a big piece of two by four [lumber]; Armstrong was with Celestin there. JT also heard ~~A~~ Armstrong with 6 or 7 pieces, but only for a little while, as Armstrong went away.

JT has been with Papa Celestin's Original Tuxedo for 12 or 13 years; JT was with the band when it went to Washington and played a command performance for President Eisenhower; JT was with Celestin when [part of] the picture "Cinerama Holiday" was made in the Absinthe House. The band was planning a European trip when Celestin died; the trip was cancelled. There was also talk of sending the

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band to South America. The number of jobs for the band has declined since Celestin's death, when Eddie Pierson took over; when Pierson died, jobs declined further. The band still plays for the departue of the boat; the band now plays on Monday, instead of Thursday, because of a routing change. JT mentions talking to Albert [French]. The band plays the boat job about every two weeks; information on arrival of the Del Mar, Del Sud or Del Norte can be obtained by looking in the newspaper. The ships belong to the Delta Line.

Albert French is now the manager of the Celestin band, and doing a pretty good job of it. Talk of jobs recently; the band went to Pensacola, Florida last week for a job at the yacht club. The band travels in a station wagon; French, JT and ~~Marvin~~ Kimball [bass (and also banjo^{im} other bands)?] take turns driving. Kimball is an ex-husband of Jeannette Kimball, who is still with the band. Celestin got Jeannette in the band when she was just a girl; he got her in Pass Christian [Mississippi]; Papa used to call her his daughter. She has been playing with the band on and off ever since.

JT played regularly with another band, years ago; it was the Original Royal Jazz Band; Joe Harris, trombone and leader (died quite a few years ago), belonged to Odd Fellows, and got a lot of jobs from them. One was at the Fairground, where JT had the experience of watching Celestin knock off the band with the lumber [see earlier²], this reel]. Harris lived on Magnolia Street; he

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was a wonderful fellow. Harry Vinet from St. Rose was playing trumpet with the [O.R. Jazz] Band; "Little Jack" played banjo. Vinet played with the band until it broke up, when all went different ways, to different bands. The band consisted of trombone, clarinet, trumpet, banjo, bass violin [and drums?]. Frank Mills, dead for years, was the bass player; sometimes Chester Zardis replaced him when he would become sick. The band was playing four and five times a week. JT was in that band after he quit playing with Gerald Kendrick. JT has remained for long periods with most of the bands he has played with. He worked at the H & J [Tavern] for 6 or 7 years; others in the band: Emile Riley [guitar?]; Emma Barrett; Jules "Jock" Pierre, drums; [Walter] "Blue" [Robertson], trumpet (whose father, Walter Blue, was a trumpet player of earlier years). Blue was a fine trumpet player, until he was drafted; JT replaced him with Wendall Eugene, who played trumpet on the trombone; he played the lead, and did a fine job. JT left the H. & J. band to join [Herb] Morand and "Big Foot" Bill [Phillips] at the Rainbow Room on St. Charles Avenue [Compare Herb Morand reel]; Phillips got JT into the union; Ricard [Alexis] [bass?] and Howard Davis [member of this band?] questioned the use of a non-union man in the band, but were shown receipted proof that JT was a union member. Phillips played drums; Morand played trumpet; JT doesn't remember who played guitar or banjo. Jules Pierre, drummer, has lived all his life downtown; JT thinks Pierre played with Kid Clayton some.

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JT says he himself used to play with Sheik [Colar], all down in St. Bernard [Parish]. JT played with Kid Howard in Grand Isle. JT has played with quite a few bands and musicians. JT has played a lot of jobs with Andrew Jefferson, and with [Fred] "H.E." Minor; Minor always calls JT for parades, giving him first preference. JT used to use Minor on the jobs he himself booked. Minor has a cousin, "Specks" Robinson, with whom JT has played a lot of jobs.

When JT had been playing for a few years, he was taken sick; while in the hospital, he entertained the doctors, nurses and patients of Charity Hospital by playing for them; JT had been playing 8 or 10 years then; it was before he joined Celestin.

End of Reel II

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Also present: William Russell
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JT says he bought a Boehm system Noblet clarinet from [Harold] Peterson or through [Louis] Barbarin; JT now has 3 Boehms: a Regent (originally bought for his son), a Noblet and another one.

Papa Celestin didn't kick off the tempo for his band in later years with a two by four [piece of wood] as he had smaller bands; the time he used the wood, he had a brass band of about 20 pieces.

Early brass bands didn't have saxes; they had a lot of alto horns, and used more than one clarinet. [Isidore] Barbarin is mentioned as having played alto horn. JT never played E flat clarinet. The sound of the early brass bands was not much different from the bands of today, as far as the different instrumentation is concerned. JT played a lot of brass band jobs in the earlier years, but only with bands gotten together for the occasion; he played with the Eureka, but only in later years; he doesn't remember that he played with any of the regular, organized bands, such as Onward, the Maple Leaf [possibly not a brass band], the Silver Leaf, etc. (WR says the Leaf band sign RC saw may have been Silver Leaf, and on a drum which [Bat] Moseley had.) JT doesn't remember playing with Kid Rena in a brass band; he played in dance bands with Rena at Economy Hall, at Cooperators Hall, and at a lodge hall over the river. JT played a lot of advertising jobs with Rena, on trucks. Talk about location of the various instruments on the truck. JT tells of being on a truck job; during its course, a low-hanging branch of a tree snagged the bass and the bass player, who held on to his instrument until

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his colleagues got him and the bass down from the tree (it was not Sidney Brown, who is too big, as the player JT remembers was small). While JT was traveling in Mississippi with the band of "M. C.," the bass (belonging to member Frank Mills), which was on the outside of the car, was smashed against a bridge railing.

JT used to play with a band called The Yo-Yo Boys; members: Andrew Jefferson [drums]; Joe Goods, banjo (Goods has given up playing, because his father has a big drayage business) "Little Red," kazoo; "Stackolee," piano. (Stackolee's real name is Lawrence Tunnage.)

The last advertising job JT remembers playing was about 1952 or 1953; it was with Peter Williams [drums], and was for a picnic to be held the following Sunday; the band started the job at Jackson Avenue at about Johnson, and worked only in the uptown area. WR remembers seeing one about 1952. Last Carnival JT saw Ernest Milton, [drums], Rene Mercadel, [saxophone], and others playing on a truck parked on a neutral ground, but they were playing just for the fun of it; Jack Willis, Wallace Davenport [trumpets] and others passing by sat in with them. JT mentions the Zulus. WT mentions bands at Carnival. Answering RC, JT says the best place to find the Indians, a Carnival organization, is on Conti around Galvez or Johnson or Miro, where a tribe called the Yellow ^{For Poken Hunters?} Pocahuntas meet; the Indians meet early, around eight in the morning. The only instruments JT has seen with the Indians are tambourines, which are played by the members of the group. The Indians may sometimes give dances, perhaps one on Carnival night or on St. Joseph's night. [Compare Lyle Saxon et al., Gumbo Ya-Ya].

(JT's sister, Noella [Spelling?] Mack, enters). JT says

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many people, including Jeanette Kimball, pianist in band JT works with, have said his sister has a lovely voice; she sings in the choir at St. Peter Claver, a Catholic church. (There is a Baptist church at Galvez and Dumaine, right across the street from Joe Watkins.)

Although none of JT's family played music, so far as he knows, they were all musically inclined.

JT was going to take up trombone, even before clarinet, but an instrument he thought of buying cost too much; he says he should have been a pianist but didn't go about it correctly.

Talk of reeds; JT has never used a plastic reed; he sometimes gets over a month's use out of each trimming of natural reed. Talk of cork grease, strength of reeds. JT plays without teeth.

JT started with Papa Celestin at the American Legion Hall on Royal Street; Bill Matthews and the others in the band were supposed to play the job, but they wanted to stay at the Paddock [Lounge]; Celestin got JT, Cie Frazier, Mercedes Fields, Harrison Verrett and Eddie Pierson and played the Legion job; Celestin and that group jobbed around awhile, adding Paul Barnes on clarinet and sax. [Compare date of PC first employment at the Paddock (c.1948?). See Bill Matthews reel ?] Then Celestin took the same group (without JT) into the Paddock [c. 1950-1951 RBA]; when the Celestin band left the Paddock, JT rejoined them; Paul Barnes, who played clarinet and [alto] sax at the Paddock, went to California. After the disagreement (with Matthews et al), Celestin didn't play any more with [Alphonse] Picou and Octave Crosby [and the others].

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JT was not with Celestin when Kid Shots [Madison] played with him; WR says Madison was with Celestin early, and also in his big band around 1946; JT says Celestin's big band played at the Pelican around that time, and that there was a good little trumpet player with the band. After his big band broke up, Celestin gave up music, going to work at a shipyard, where he broke his leg [See photograph in ANOJ files made by Skippy Adelman]; he made a comeback in music after that.

End of Reel III

