

HENRY KMEN

I [of 3]

February 13, 1963

Also present: Richard B. Allen

[Most of the content of this interview can be found in the book, Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841, by Henry A. Kmen, L. S. U. Press.]

Professional musicians were generally Negroes after the Civil War. HK says the love of dancing, music and parades in New Orleans lend support to the claim that jazz originated in New Orleans; he says jazz might have been evolving more slowly in other sections of the country, which might be a reason jazz spread so rapidly.

HK says that a visitor to New Orleans in the 1950's said that he found New Orleans halfway between a ball and a parade every time he came to the city. HK thinks it was always that way. [Mention of Charleston]

[Mention of boatmen] RBA mentions James Caldwell, saying that Caldwell promoted boxing according to Nat Fleischer [ISP]. HK says he hasn't come across any references to boxing that early; he says he thinks boxing became a big sport in New Orleans after the Civil War.

Asked about racing, HK says RBA should ask Dr. [William R.] Hogan about that.

HK says there was hardly any social activity which didn't have dancing connected with it. He says there were even big dances given in Bay St. Louis [Mississippi] on weekends which were attended by people from New Orleans.

HK says a diary contained a notation about some free Negroes and their spouses, who were slaves, attending a ball celebrating the secession of Louisiana from the Union.

HENRY KMEN  
I [of 3]  
February 13, 1963

2

RBA says that Negro musicians play for both races, but white musicians play only for whites. [Generally true. cf. archive's files. RBA]

HK mentions [Louis] Gottschalk [famous pianist-composer of New Orleans].

End of Reel I

RBA mentions Jack Laine, who was born in 1873, who got his first set of real drums when the Cotton Exposition broke up [1885?], and who predated jazz. RBA asks about the social class of the white musicians playing at the French Opera. HK says they were acceptable in the better circles. The French Opera musicians also played dance music, sometimes in large orchestras, but often in smaller groups, and quite often as leaders. HK says his study of post-Civil War New Orleans has been slight, so he can't say what the musician encountered then; however, symphony orchestras were being started through the United States, and there is some prestige accorded a musician playing in one. Military bands were also very popular; HK mentions Pat Gilmore and [John Philip] Sousa. HK says it wasn't frowned on for a New Orleans white male to learn music; it was, however, the opinion that he shouldn't make a career of music, as there were more lucrative professions. RBA comments that the professional [white and Negro] jazz musician was from a working-class family. Negroes were attracted to the playing of dance music because it offered one profession in which they could rise. Visiting musicians were respected, and in the cases of performers such as [Louis] Gottschalk [of New Orleans] and Jenny Lind, idolized.

HK says there were many military funerals in New Orleans prior to and after 1850; many white males belonged to veterans' organizations and/or fraternal groups which buried with military music. HK figures the Negroes imitated the basic style of the military funerals in their funerals. HK says that during the yellow fever epidemics in the 1850's, complaints were made about military funerals with music; one complaint was that the bands made so much noise that gravely ill persons were disturbed; another was that the bands played "unseemly music" on their way back from the burial.

HK was born November 3, 1915 in Saratoga Springs, New York; the place was a summer resort for many years; in pre-Civil War days, it was a popular summer resort for many New Orleanians; Edna Ferber's novel, "Saratoga Trunk," was laid between New Orleans and Saratoga Springs. In the early 1920's, there would be as many as eight well-known bands playing in the gambling houses in Saratoga Springs. Vincent Lopez, Paul Whiteman and Ben Pollack had bands which played in Saratoga Springs. There were often jazz musicians in the well-known bands, as there weren't so many big bands then; HK speculates that Paul Whiteman, had he begun his career in the 1930's instead of the 1920's wouldn't have had a chance of getting jazz musicians, as they probably would have gone with bands which played more swing; HK mentions [Jack] Teagarden and [Bix] Beiderbecke.

There were also many territory bands; some became well-known later; HK says a New England band, led by Don Gann, or Gamm, later became the Les Brown band, although Brown got his start from Duke [University].

HK had some piano lessons when he was a child. He began playing saxophone when he was about 12 years old, around 1927. A boarder in the home of HK's parents brought home a C-melody sax; HK says [Frank] Trumbauer played C-melody sax, and so did Jack Pettis (not Jack Purvis, a trumpet player, who was from around Bogalusa, Louisiana, says RBA). HK never had lessons on saxophone or clarinet by his own choice. A young musician could get a lot of experience by sitting in with or listening to the many bands playing in the area. There were no color lines in sitting in; HK wonders if perhaps the center of musical activity moved from New Orleans to the North because of that; he says there were no integrated bands, but there were no bars to mixed sitting in. As the younger

musicians gained experience, they began playing with better bands; musicians from New York, Canada, Boston and other places had already drifted into the area around Saratoga Springs. HK says that when he was 14-16 years old he knew musicians in their 40's who had been playing a long time; one came from Canada, where he had played with Jack Denny; Denny's band became nationally popular via radio; his band broadcasted from CKAC, in Montreal; his band had no brass when he began; he added brass when he came to New York; HK thinks Denny had a Whitman's [Candy] Sampler hour. RBA doesn't know anything about the band; HK says someone should do a study on the big bands of that era before the information is lost; his favorite band of the time was the Lonely Acres Band, led by Paul Tremaine; he has never seen a reference to that band, but he recalls hearing the band on radio when he was still in [high?] school; the band played such things as "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane" and "[Oh, Dem] Golden Slippers" in big swing band style. RBA mentions a clarinetist called Teddy Brewer, later Teddy Martin, who talked about Tremaine's band. Fud Livingston was with Brewer c. 1950 on Bourbon Street. RBA says Paul Barbarin and Martin also talked about Tremaine's band. HK says Tremaine's band played the Young's Chinese-American Restaurant in New York for years, and that they must have come from some place, possibly a dance hall, called Lonely Acres [Cf. Brian Rust, JASS RECORDS, 1897 to 1931.] HK mentions the Casa Loma Band, which was considered the best of the big jazz bands then; HK says the memory he has of Tremaine's band is that they played with a more-relaxed style, on the order of the good bands of the later, swing era. HK mentions [Benny] Goodman. HK also occasionally heard Don Redman and Jimmie Lunceford, but not as often as bands like Paul Tremaine's, because

of the hotel situation [hotels used white bands almost exclusively.  
[Apparently most live radio broadcasts of bands came from hotels?]

"As early as I can remember, people looked up to Coleman Hawkins"  
[as a saxophone player], "when he was playing with Fletcher Henderson.  
And I mean real early--I'd say 1930 or even late 1920's," says HK.  
HK says many American musicians date Hawkins from the time when he  
returned from and abroad and made the recording of "Body and Soul."  
HK mentions Saxie Mansfield.

End of Reel II

HK liked saxophonist Saxie Mansfield, who played with the Isham Jones band, a pre-swing era band; HK says he probably wouldn't like Mansfield's playing today.

HK says Fletcher Henderson may have perfected the manner of writing for big jazz bands, but a lot of other bands were trying to play big band jazz or swing before that; even the bands considered primarily sweet played swingy numbers; bands of the era played sets of music, always ending a set with a swingy number. HK says Casa Loma Band was trying to play swing, and before them, the Jean Goldkette Band. RBA says Don Redman arranged for Fletcher Henderson band before Henderson began writing.

HK says Pat Davis, tenor saxophone player with the Casa Loma band, was a musician greatly admired at one time, but he had no lasting influence; [Clarence] Hutchenrider, clarinet, on the other hand, sounded good in the early days and sounds good to this day.

When HK became a professional musician, New Orleans style was considered passé, although some musicians still kept it alive; the music was considered corny by most New York [style?] musicians in HK's area. When HK went to New York, the first Dixieland "revival" was in progress; HK says it was due in part to the success of [Benny] Goodman. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band reorganized. At that time HK met Larry Shields in New York; he would see Shields in an apartment building frequented by musicians, including other New Orleanians: S Sharkey [Bonano] and Johnny Bayersdorffer. Sharkey cooked for the group sometimes. HK also met Tony Parenti, with whom he jammed. He and others considered Parenti a corny musician and an old man at the time. HK went to New York as soon as he got out of high school, possibly in 1933; he agrees with RBA that Goodman was not popular at the time; he remembers the first Goodman broadcasts for National

Biscuit Company and the impact they had on the musicians. The first Goodman records which had any wide circulation were "Sometimes I'm Happy," with Arthur Rollini playing a tenor sax solo, and with [Bunny] Berigan in the band, and "King Porter Stomp." RBA says George Van Eps played guitar on the records. HK says he thinks Frank Froeba was still in Goodman's band then. The first time Goodman was heard in Saratoga Springs was at a dance at Skidmore College; Gene Krupa and Helen Ward were with the band. JK met Adrian Rollini in those days; Rollini, then primarily a saxophone player, had developed a small reed instrument about the size of a fountain pen; he carried it with him so that he could sit in with the bands if he wanted to; RBA remarks that it must have been easier to carry than a bass sax [which Rollini often played].

Larry Shields was playing with the revived O. D. J. B.; HK says he has never met anyone who didn't respect Shields playing then, or at any other period. Talk of Shields' influence.

Miff Mole was well-known and respected then. There was also another trombonist, who was known as "Little Miff."

When Sharkey first went to New York [c.1933?], he had a slow start for the first six months (union rules); then he took an almost all New Orleans band into Nick's; partial personnel: Bill Bourgeois, clarinet; Johnny Castaing, drums; George Brunis, trombone; Turk, not from New Orleans, bass. At one time Sharkey had an English piano player who later played with guitarist Eddie Condon. HK sat in on tenor sax with the band. The Sharkey band "really made Nick's;" when business grew, a new place was built; Sharkey expected to lead the house band, but was eased out in favor of [cornetist] Bobby Hackett, who kept Georg Brunis with him. HK later played with Hackett in a little band at the New York World's Fair, and in a big band at The Troc, no longer there, but then on 52nd Street across from the more-

famous Famous Door; HK says Hackett never could play loud; he wasn't an accomplished trumpet player, the way Al Hirt is; "he was just a guy with a lot of fine ideas for trumpet, not all of which he always was able to execute."

HK often sat in at Nick's, although this wasn't done there generally. He had known most of the musicians before they began the job, and he took pains to see that his sound didn't get in the way. He says sitting in was the way to become known around New York then, He sat in frequently at Adrian's Taproom; Willie "The Lion" Smith played single piano there; in addition, there was a quarter composed of bass, tenor sax, Adrian [Rollini?] sometimes, on vibes, (HK believes) piano and drums. The tenor sax player was Artie Drillinger [or Drelinger?], still playing, probably now playing in the studios. Everyone played hot in those days, but many discovered they weren't hot enough, so they became "more legit." HK says a musician from Cortland, New York, was considered a very hot trumpet player, but he made his reputation playing high trumpet with the band of [Charlie] Barnet and Bob Crosby, among others; in the Crosby band, Yank Lawson played hot trumpet, and a bit better than Lyman Vunk, the high note man. RBA mentions Albert Nicholas, clarinet, and Danny Barker, guitar, who made some records with Rollini during the period being discussed. HK says Tony Almerico probably made trips to New York during the period, but HK didn't know about him then. Everyone, however, knew about [Irving] Fazola, who came into prominence with the Bob Crosby band just after Goodman made the clarinet so popular. Eddie Miller had played clarinet in the band prior to Fazola, and had made "one notable recording which set a fashion in clarinet," and Matty Matlock had also played clarinet with the Crosby band, but when Fazola came in, "he was the king in that band." HK says Miller's solo was in the low, or chalumeau register,

and that a low-register solo followed by excursions into the higher registers in the trios of march-type tunes has become standard in Dixieland bands.

Tony Parenti wasn't making much money at the time; HK says that was the way with a lot of good musicians, including Clayton "Sunshine" Duerr, a fine guitarist from New Orleans, who worked with the Joe Venuti trio at one time (he has been back in New Orleans for years, and still plays), and George Hartman [who died about 1965--PRC], also of New Orleans. HK says a musician was fortunate to get one job a week, and two jobs a week would do very well. Louis Prima had a band at the old Famous Door, with Joe Marsala playing clarinet; Marsala later moved to Hickory House with Wingy Manone; Marsala was a very fine clarinetist; he was from Chicago. Hank D'Amico, of Buffalo [New York], was another good clarinetist. RBA says Marsala has quit playing; he composes now; he had one hit, "Don't Cry, Joe" [in the 1940's]. HK played with Joe Marsala's brother, Marty Marsala, in a band organized and managed by Ben Pollack but led by Chico Marx; Marsala played trumpet; George Wettling was on drums.

Clayton Duerr played with a number of semi-name bands; one was led by Bob Sylvester; Duerr lived with Sylvester because Sylvester owed him money and the only way Duerr could get any of it was to live with Sylvester and deduct his room and board from what was due; HK says that was a typical way of doing business in those days. George Hartman was playing trumpet and bass, but primarily trumpet; HK says he was playing good New Orleans style trumpet. Johnny Bayersdorffer was also there, playing good trumpet.

HK says, however, that with very few exceptions the musicians from New Orleans were "pining for New Orleans all the time, longing to get back, and it didn't take much to convince them that they

belonged back in New Orleans. That's a trait peculiar to this city; the people that are born here seem to find it very hard to live happily anywhere else." RBA mentions Pete Fountain and a homecoming welcome given him.

HK played a few jobs with George Hartman, and a few with Bill Bourgeois; HK says Bourgeois reminded him that they had played a job for a Jewish [band] leader in New York at a dance celebrating Hitler's birthday. The leader was named Lou Lockett. [Cf. Bill Bourgeois reel] The band was probably eight pieces; they played a lot of jazz, took a lot of choruses; those bands usually used stock arrangements. A Leader might book more than one job for a certain night; if he did, he would turn the extra jobs over to friends of his; the actual leader might not have ever seen half his band until the job; as long as a musician could do what was expected of him, there were no questions asked.

HK says different lead men make their sections sound different from the other like sections although they may all read the same music; he says the sax section of Les Elgart's band is an example of that today; he says almost every band had a different section sound in the earlier days. The brass sections found it more difficult to sound different; one brass section which did sound different was in Isham Jones's band. HK says there were distinctive sax section sounds all the way from that of [Guy] Lombardo to that introduced by Benny Goodman when he had first [Toots] Mondello and later, Hymie Schertzer playing lead sax. HK talks about the many things which go into developing the style a particular musician has. HK himself is forced to adapt his style to any band with which he plays, be it modern or Dixieland;

HENRY KMEN  
III [of 3]  
February 13, 1963

12

he says there is some overlapping, but he wouldn't play a modern line with a Dixieland rhythm section or vice versa. He hopes to ultimately combine the best of all styles.

End of Reel III