

HARRIS, L. D.
from DON ALBERT reel I
tracks 1 and 2--Digest--Retype
June 6, 1961

1

Also present: Don Albert, Paul R. Crawford.

L[awrence] D[ouglas] Harris was born and raised in Brenham, Texas, which is about half-way between Houston and Austin. He began playing music when he was 13-14 years old, in a band organized for youngsters, led by Gus Allen, known as "Uncle Beansy". He first played alto horn, then valve trombone and then slide trombone. During the summers of his fifteenth through eighteenth years, he was allowed to go to Houston to play with Sid [Iles?]; LDH says Iles had the whole southwest [Texas, parts of New Mexico and Louisiana] "tied up" as far as music was concerned, that a mention of his name would draw a crowd. LDH says he learned the business of managing and leading a band from Iles. [The interview is interrupted as the participants go to hear Jonah Jones on TV.] He left Iles to go with a carnival band to Mexico, along the U.S. border; he describes a trick he used to get his clothes from Iles, who had promised his father he would take care of the boy, and he would not give him clothes to go out on his own. LDH went to Mexico and did well. Later he returned to Houston and got married. He and others organized a band, Alexander's Ragtime Jazz Band, about 1921, named for Dave Alexander, a well-known ice truck employee who doubled as a comedian. The band did well. It was booked by Freeman Mitchell, who worked in the roundhouse of a railroad in Houston. LDH says

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2

the band played for the openings of several places. He says that Duke Ellington was playing the Pilgrim Temple in Houston, while the Alexander band was playing at Don Roby's Harlem Grill, and the Alexander band was so good that "we closed Duke up."

Don describes the formalities of recording before tape, describing the way the record thread piled up from the cutting needle, etc. LDH says it was that way when he first recorded; he says the bandsmen were so taken with their recording that some even saved the thread.

LDH says that when the Alexander band was just starting, they were given the extra jobs that Frank Davis could not handle; on those jobs, they called themselves "Davis Number 2". The Alexander band participated in a movie made at "Kamp Killkare" [sp?], run by Kirby and Ratcliff, which was a resort on a body of water about 30 miles from Houston, toward Galveston. LDH says four governors [of states] were there, and he names Neff, Hall and Ferguson [the latter being the Texas governor who was impeached and succeeded by his wife, "Ma" Ferguson], not remembering the fourth. The Alexander band got a lot of good publicity from the film, and got much work. Frank Davis told them he would sue them if they used his name again, but they said they did not need it anyway, that they had not asked for it in the first place.

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3

When LDH left Houston, he was with Ida Cox; he says he sees that she is going to cut some records [and try a comeback], and Don says she has cut some for Riverside records. LDH says they had the best piano player he ever heard with them, a fellow named "Skinny", from Houston, who could not read at all, but who could really play. Don says it seems that most of the pianists from the early twenties to the thirties couldn't read. He says, and LDH agrees, that Edgar Perry, from San Antonio, who left S. A. with the Royal Garden Band, was a marvelous pianist, but could not read at all. Don says Steve Lewis, pianist with [A. J.] Piron's band of New Orleans, could not read, either.

LDH went to Waco, where he joined the band of George Carver. He mentions the name Walter Wardell, but says he has left out a lot, so he says he went to Nebraska, joined the band of Nat Towles, and stayed around Nebraska three years. Then Don asks him to talk about [Wild] "Cherry", a recording he made with Boots and His Buddies. LDH continues, saying he came to Temple, Texas and organized a band. While there, Boots, with whom LDH had played in Houston, recommended that Walter Wardell, then forming a band, get LDH for his 1st trumpet player. LDH left his band in Temple, having his wife run it while he tried out. The Wardell band finally got work, and LDH stayed with it until it broke up. The Boots band which made the recordings was

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4

organized in 1932, the recordings made in 1933. [?] LDH tells how the recording of "Cherry", called "Wild Cherry", came about--it was one of three tunes cut by the Boots band at the session. The band had an arrangement of "Cherry" which was written too high for the band to play. One day at LDH's house, he and "Si-Ki" Collins, formerly of Troy Floyd's band, were fooling around on their horns, as they often did. There was to be a band rehearsal at LDH's house that day, and LDH was trying the high "Cherry". When his lip tired, he began ad-libbing the tune in a lower register; Collins liked what he played, and encouraged LDH to play it again, with Collins joining him. They played it at the rehearsal, Boots and the rest liked it, and when the recording director [Eli] Oberstein heard it, he declared it an original. LDH explains that he used some of the chords of "Cherry", but changed some and most of the melody, and slowed down the tempo indicated on the arrangement, thereby changing the whole character of the piece. It was decided that LDH should be given composer credit for the new piece, but Lawrence Douglas Harris was considered too long, so it was listed as "Joe Harris", "Joe" being a popular name among musicians at the time [as was "Mac" in later days, especially in the armed forces]. LDH says it was thrilling to put a nickel in a juke box and hear his own piece.

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5

"Lazy Daddy", whose real name was Henry Fillmore, was not only a fine pianist but a friendly person. LDH says that Fillmore, around Houston then, although unable to read, could cut [i.e., read the music for] the shows that came to town, could play in any key and had no trouble with anything musical. Don repeats that it seemed to be a trend for piano players in the twenties and early thirties not to be able to read, but they could really play. LDH says that talking of "sheets", as Don was, in reference to sheet music, that Billy Young, Lester "Prez" Young's father, could write an arrangement while in conversation, writing the parts before he wrote the "cue sheet" [score], which he might write after he had written the parts. LDH worked for Young about a year; Young played saxophone, and a little [bit of] piano. Don says that Lester Young was from New Orleans [born in Woodville, Mississippi]. LDH says the band was named [something to do with New Orleans]; the band was part of a "stock" company. In it, besides Billy and Lester were Irma [Young?] and Lee Young, the latter a terrific dancer and singer who also played drums. Irma played trombone, and could sing and dance. LDH says that "Lazy Daddy" taught him [LDH] a lot about leading, managing and booking bands, etc. LDH explains why a band leader has to get more money than a sideman. LDH talks about Sid Iles and the money he accumulated. Since leaving Boots' band, LDH

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6

has been on his own, having his own bands; he has recorded ["Wild
Cherry"] for T N T label, of Tyler, Texas, but says the record didn't
do much because it didn't have good distribution; he says the sound
was not good, either.

End of Tracks 1 and 2

End of LDH