

LOUIS JAMES

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May 25, 1959

Also present! William Russell, Ralph Collins

Louis P. James, Sr., was born April 9, 1890 in Thibodaux, Louisiana. He had two older brothers and two younger brothers, all of whom played music; his youngest brother, in California now, still plays clarinet and sax, and is a "wonderful musician". LJ's first instrument was his heel, which he would rub on the floor to produce a bass sound, and comb and tissue paper. By observing and listening to his brother~~s~~ and a cousin, both of whom played mandolin and guitar, he taught himself how to play "Home, Sweet Home" on the mandolin; he wanted so much to learn that he even paid one of his sisters to bring in water for the house [apparently his job]. The mandolin on which he was practicing belonged to Joe Gabriel, and LJ was not sure Gabriel would approve of his using it, but when LJ finally decided to show Gabriel what he could do, Gabriel (who accompanied him on guitar) approved. Then LJ taught himself to play "Home, Sweet Home" on the violin (also Gabriel's). John Robichaux's band came to Thibodaux, and LJ was impressed by George Baquet's clarinet playing (especially on one number, which he hums ["National Emblem" march]), so he decided he wanted to learn clarinet. The event occurred about 1909. Besides Robichaux (a good, left-handed violinist) and Baquet, others in the band were [Louis] Cottrell [Sr.] on drums and cornetist James Williams, of Houma, Louisiana. LJ says the music was all 2/4 then, like a Dixieland beat, and played slower than [is usual] today. The Joe Gabriel band and the Claiborne Williams band were the bands in that area then; four [James] brothers played in the Gabriel band. LJ started on clarinet, and then was switched to sax, which he taught himself from a method. There was no one else playing sax [in the area]. He taught himself to read by buying music, from John Robichaux in New Orleans, and then studying it on the train going home; he says he already knew the "air" [the tune] and he knew his instruments, so he would figure out which written notes went with the various fingerings of his instrument. LJ explains that the James brothers were the four brothers

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[see Woody Herman] who played in the Gabriel band; his oldest brother played guitar, the brother just older than LJ played trombone, clarinet and bass, and the youngest brother (now in California) played sax, violin and clarinet (his son, "Skeet", is playing, too, [and use to be (see p. 4)] with Pichon. The first song LJ learned to play on clarinet was "Next to Your Mother, Who Do You Love?" LJ says they played schottisches, mazurkas and quadrilles [among other dances] in those days; he says that the bands would play a set comprised of two waltzes, two two-steps, two schottisches, two mazurkas and the five-part quadrille; he himself learned one set like that--he says it was like having beans and rice one day, and then having rice and beans the next day. The band would take a break after each quadrille; when they came back to play, they would reverse the order of the waltzes, two-steps, etc. and none of the dancers would be the wiser; after about three sets the function would be finished, the band would play "Home, Sweet Home" and that was that. LJ says tunes lasted a long time in those days; he says they would use a tune for probably two years.

There were very few bands in those parts then; the Gabriel band [of Thibodaux], the Claiborne Williams band of Donaldsonville, a band in Crowley and the band of Johnny and Willie [Barry or Barrow?] of Morgan City. LJ also worked some with the [<sup>Eureka. name in paper - Thibodaux</sup>Yucca? or Euc~~koa~~?] [Brass] Band of Thibodaux, and so did two of his uncles; the band had fifteen or eighteen pieces. Clay Jiles (who played later with the Eureka [Brass] Band of New Orleans) played bass drum in the Yucca; his brother, Albert Jiles, played snare drum in the Yucca, and also was the drummer with the Gabriel band. Albert has a son, Albert Jiles, who now [1959] plays in New Orleans. LJ says that in those days the only [reading] musicians in New Orleans were from the country, that the New Orleanians didn't read [obviously not true, see below]; when LJ was playing with Manuel "Fess" [Manetta], Manetta would put music on the stand to chase

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[Sidney] Bechet, who was playing across the street from Manetta and couldn't read, away; LJ says he likes Manetta for helping that way, and says that Manetta and Joe Gabriel are the only two who saw to it that he got ahead. Gabriel, no longer playing, and sick, still lives in Thibodaux. The Gabriel band played mostly for whites, at balls, etc. in halls in various towns throughout Southwest Louisiana; the band played every night, and was so popular that they were booked a year in advance for holiday jobs. The Gabriel band members were paid six dollars a night (plus transportation, food, drinks, etc.) which was big money compared to the dollar-and-a-half being paid in the New Orleans red light District. He was paid two dollars and fifty cents per Saturday night when he first started. He lived on this rather than work in the fields for twenty-five cents a day. Although LJ's father didn't play, he loved music; LJ's uncles played, one being a trombonist and the other a bass horn player; they worked in the brass band[s?][too?]. LJ has two brothers living; one, a guitarist, does not play anymore; LJ says that his brother would not play anymore at dances after the band had played "Home, Sweet Home"; he just figured it was time to quit when that was played no much more money was offered.

LJ first came to New Orleans in 1915 (later changed to 1913), where he remained until the District was closed [1917]; he worked in the Whitney Bank, and then began playing music in the District, at The Villa. His first music jobs were before he played at The Villa, however; he played clarinet on casuals with Frankie Duson [see below, p.4], Jack Carey, and made records with Louis Dumaine [a good bit later than 1917, however, for the latter], on tenor sax.

LJ first had an Albert system clarinet, which he bought for eighty dollars; he then was put on alto sax, which he pawned and was unable to redeem it (Ernest Himes bought the pawn ticket and redeemed it); he later got a tenor x

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sax. He doesn't "worry about" clarinet [or sax?] now, because he won't play rock and roll. His only lessons on clarinet were from Presley [Goff?], now living in Thibodaux, who taught him the scale. LJ tells about the reason his band [Joe Gabriels] decided to quit cutting the titles off their music [as the white women would ask the titles and it would not do for a Negro to give such titles as "If I Could Be With You One Hour Tonight". The leader would show them the written title. Their music came from Sears and Roebuck. He also mentioned that white women would put bouquets at the leader's feet. He discusses religion, sex, and race briefly. LJ is Catholic. LJ says the difference in the styles of music in the country and in New Orleans was that the country musicians read and the New Orleans musicians did not; he says the non-readers could get more out of a piece of music by playing it "wrong", but the readers sounded more together. The first band in New Orleans LJ would "call myself playing with" [i.e., steadily?] was that of Amos Riley, and that of Joe Howard, who got LJ and Manetta together. Before LJ quit the Gabriel band and came to New Orleans in 1913, he had a pool room, soft drink and beer stand, boxing ring combine, and played music almost every night. Amos Riley's band played at private parties, never at big dance halls. LJ played with Kid Rena at some lawn parties; Rena's brother [Joe Rene] was playing drums in the band. LJ also worked with Willie Pajaud; he worked with John Robichaux at the Palace Theater a couple of times. LJ played clarinet with Amos Riley, taking up the tenor sax when he joined Louis Dumaine; LJ had a bass years ago, which he let his brother use; when the brother died, about 1935, LJ took up bass playing again. LJ explains that he never did play with Frankie Duson's band, that Duson was playing with Dumaine when LJ was in it; others in the band were Willigan LeBoeuf [is same Willie Willigan?] drummer, Clarence Gabriel, banjo. LJ explains that he considers that he was really only a member of one band, the Dumaine band, but he played with a lot

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of othersbands [as a substitute, etc.], such as Jack Carey's, and with other musicians, such as Percy Humphrey, and Earl Foster, with whom LJ's [youngest] saxophone-playing brother also played.

Others in Jack Carey's band [besides Carey on trombone and LJ on ?] were Zeb [Lenoir] on clarinet and Mutt Carey, Jack's brother, on cornet. (LJ didn't know Punch Miller, later the trumpet player with Carey, in Carey's band, but met him in Raceland, where Punch was born and reared; Punch didn't play with the band [Joe Gabriel's] because the personnel was so set; Gabriel later left the band, and it became the [four] James Brothers band).

End of Reel I

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There were six pieces in the Joe Gabriel band: slide trombone, violin, guitar, [string] bass, drums and trumpet; the James Brothers band had saxophone, clarinet, bass, drums, and trumpet [and probably guitar]. The trumpet player in the latter band was [Holly Howard?] [ <sup>Schriever\*</sup> ? ], of [Shreveport? Louisiana; at one time Bunk [Johnson], then living in New Orleans, would come play with the band. Bunk sometimes played with the Gabriel band when he lived in New Iberia. Bunk had a good style, and was a good trumpet player. LJ says good music will always last, but things like rock and roll will not; rock and roll is too limited; LJ will not play with rock and roll groups because they are below his ability, and he does not want anyone to think that that is all he can play; on the other hand, he realizes his limitations (his sight is not so good any more, so he doesn't take reading jobs). His false teeth don't fit so well for playing clarinet, so he takes out his upper plate when playing; he employs the "double embouchure" system of holding his mouthpiece, a system he learned himself. WR says Manuel Manetta says Sam Dutrey [Sr.] taught him that system. LJ doesn't know what system George Baquet or Lorenzo Tio [Jr.] employed. He does know that he couldn't transpose as [Charlie] McCurdy, of John Robichaux' band, could--McCurdy could play "A" clarinet parts on B flat clarinet; LJ had an "A" clarinet for such parts, and he explains a system of ~~transposition~~ transposition he had, exclaiming that he couldn't understand other methods of transposing, but nobody else understood his system.

LJ played B flat clarinet in brass bands; he had his own [brass?] band for Carnival, playing for the Eleanore Club, he thinks. Carnival was not much celebrated in the country towns, although there were small parades, with two or three floats. LJ was always working on Carnival, and other holidays. He says he worked at a place in Houma every Sunday night for over four years; [Joe Gabriel's?] son took over the band at the time LJ returned to New Orleans (he had been back in Thibodaux since the District closed) in 1923, where he

\* just south of Thibodaux

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has lived ever since. He didn't play much when he was back in Thibodaux [before 1923], because his brother [the youngest?] had begun playing. Before LJ joined Manetta's band at The Villa, Zeb [Lenoir] played clarinet with Manetta; when LJ began playing clarinet in that band, the other musicians were Eddie Atkins on trombone, Baby Dodds, drums, Lemon [Nash?], guitar, Joe Howard, cornet, and Manetta, piano. Eddie Dawson, bass, was playing with Beb [Frank], at the Entertainers. The Villa was not the same place as the Tuxedo Dance Hall, [where Manetta was working when Billy Phillips was killed there, or Manetta was playing "private" (i.e., in one of the brothels?) when LJ met him]. The Villa was on Villere Street; LJ remained there until the District closed. Manetta was a good pianist. Other good pianist around then were "Dude" [probably Frank Amacker], who substituted for Manetta some, and was a crony of Manetta; Clarence Gabriel was good; Walter Decou [who killed Butler "Guyé" Rapp] played in the same neighborhood with LJ. LJ worked at The Villa for about two years; the hours were from eight PM until three or four AM; the pay was a dollar and fifty cents a night, but the bandsmen got good tips. LJ used to go back to Thibodaux when his wife was to have a baby, because she preferred the country to the hospital. LJ has six children and ~~tw~~ twenty-four grandchildren. LJ's oldest daughter learned how to play piano a little, and he has a son who plays sax. LJ played in a band with [Matthew] "Fats" Houston, at Tulane University; LJ says he thinks Houston played in the band [Dumaine's?] that he made records with. [Cf. below.] LJ played some dances ~~a~~ with Percy Humphrey, at the New Orleans Country Club. (The interview participants look at a "home-made" record made with LJ on violin and [Houston on drums?].) The compos~~it~~ion on the record was composed by Amos White. The Dumaine records were made somewhere on Rampart Street; LJ didn't play on the ones Ann Cook made with the band; Willie ["Kaiser"] Joseph played clarinet on them; LJ played sax on the ones he made; Earl

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Humphrey played trombone on the sessions, Clarence Gabriel played guitar, Willie LeBoeuf [Jim Willigan?] played drums. [Cf. discographies. Leonard Mitchell, a banjoist, sang on some sides.] Yank Johnson, of Algiers, used to play with the Dumaine band [before Humphrey]; Johnson's style was similar to that of Kid Ory; he could play lead on trombone. He played slide trombone; Frankie Duson played valve trombone, as did LJ's uncle; LJ says people used to come from New Orleans [to Thibodaux] to hear his uncle play. LJ considers George Baquet the best clarinetist in New Orleans in the earlier days, although Lorenzo Tio [Jr.] was good. Baquet was a more or less straight clarinetist. Sidney Bechet was wonderful, although he put in a lot of "that funny stuff", but he played it "clean". Johnny Dodds, a good clarinetist too, playing with Ory at the time, LJ thinks, had all the [sharp and flat?] keys on his instrument tied down; LJ tried to play it and couldn't; LJ thinks Bechet's instrument was about the same as Dodds'. LJ says he has to "give it to them" [meaning he admired the way they could play], but he was glad he had somebody with him who could read, who "kept me out of the storm". Manetta would put music [which LJ and the others in that band could read] on the stands, and Bechet could not play it. Joe Howard [then playing cornet, or trumpet] had to have music for everything, not being able to memorize much. LJ says that he can't remember songs very much since he has been playing clarinet and bass, as he plays harmony and not melody. The band at The Villa played "real Dixieland style". The Charleston [dance], which came out [c. 1925] when LJ was playing with Gabriel, broke up a lot of marriages, says LJ, because the women began to think that they could be anything they wanted--  
and  
just like the teen-agers today, with smoking/all that...just too much temptation. The Villa band played the blues, but in different style [from the nasty style of today]; LJ says the blues is even played in churches now. LJ remembers that "Big Eye" Louis [Nelson] was a wonderful clarinetist; he

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had his own recognizable style. Baquet played high, but not as high as Nelson. [Alphonse] Picou played nice clarinet, too; he worked some with John Robichaux. The Gabriel band played blues--"Memphis Blues", and others. The blues came to be played by bands about two years after LJ began playing; there were people around the plantations who played guitar and sang the blues, however. LJ says the guitar style was called Spanish instrument, [style or tuning?]; there were two Mexicans in Thibodaux; one was a trumpeter and one played violin; Joe Gabriel learned from them; another fellow, named Allen, played mandolin. The Mexicans played classical music. The trumpet player would get up ~~x~~ in the morning, and the first thing he would do was to hit a high "C". LJ got harmony from [Addie Obert?], Joe Gabriel's brother-in-law. LJ says they used to play the "Tennessee Waltz" [check copyright date] and all that, in his time.

LJ can't quite remember Jimmie Noone, who was a friend of Freddy Keppard, whom LJ remembers. [Noone then known as "Jimbo".] LJ didn't play with Joe Oliver, but he heard him play.

LJ concludes the interview by saying, in essence, that rock and roll is what used to shout in churches where spirituals were sung, in his time.

[Refers to ring shout? RBA]

End of Reel II



unedited first draft

LOUIS JAMES  
REEL III [only]  
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INTERVIEWER: William Russell  
ALSO PRESENT: Ralph Collins  
NOTES: Richard B. Allen  
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman  
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[Just go ahead any time, you want to play, WR says. We'll pick it up. LJ begins playing "Stardust" on the clarinet, with squeaks.

[Start again, if you want, WR continues. It's alright. LJ starts again, with some fluffs, and squeaks.]

That's good, WR says. I'll put a note on here--that's Mr. James playing on his clarinet, a little, by himself at his home.

Play it again? LJ asks. Yeah, WR replies. [LJ plays "Stardust."]

It's alright, WR says. Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it squeaking. Everybody squeaks on the clarinet, sooner, or later. I'd like to play a hymn on that other side, LJ says. Oh yeah, WR says. Go ahead...that's fine. Anything you want to play.

[LJ plays "When I Come to the End of My Journey..."]

Alright, WR says. That sounds nice. Maybe, if you want to run over that whole little number on that old, little bass of yours...play a few notes, only half a minute. We don't want to bother you all evening...

[LJ plays "When I Come to the End of My Journey," on bass.]

That's good, WR says. How long have you had this bass? This bass, I had it for about 14 years, LJ notes.

Did you have any lessons on the bass, or did anybody help

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you when you took up bass? WR asks...I picked it up by myself, LJ answers.

Did you ever use the bow much? WR asks. Yeah, yeah, LJ says. I got my bow.

In the old days, WR continues, did you use the bow more, or pick, when you were young, up in the country, with the bass they played? Used the bow, LJ says, [most of the time.]

Did they ever slap the strings very much, WR asks, I mean make that slapping, you know where you hit that finger board? No, never, LJ replies.

That's very good, WR continues. I don't want to bother you more, but I certainly am glad to hear you play your bass a little bit, and the clarinet. I can play another on the clarinet, if you don't mind, LJ says.

Sure, go ahead...another number, WR says. I'd like to hear it. Or even a couple of notes on the violin, too, to show all the different instruments.

There aren't a lot of people except the Professor [Manuel] Manetta that can play so many different instruments. Hardly anybody plays more than one instrument.

I'm gonna to play for the Christian folks, LJ states. Good, WR adds.

[LJ plays "His Eye Is On the Sparrow," on violin.]

Very good, WR says. What was the title of that? The name of

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[it]? Well, the name of that, they say is "The Sparrow," LJ notes, but I don't know. "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," WR says. But it's comparable to that, LJ continues...you know, it's not exactly, [it's] similar to that.

The other hymn that you played on the clarinet, WR continues. What was that? "When I Come to the End of My Journey," LJ says, and WR repeats title. I've heard it, but I couldn't think of the title.

Oh, you were going to show how you played with the bow, WR continues, and how they used to do. Yeah, LJ says...WR says that somebody told me, in the old days, they used to use thread on their bow, sometimes, in place of the hair.

[On bowed bass, LJ plays a boogie-woogie blues arrangement.]  
Yeah that's good, WR says as LJ laughs.

[LJ plays "Stardust" on bowed bass.]

Who was your favorite bass player in the old days? WR asks. Who did you like best on bass...of the old-time players when you were young?

Well, we had a fellow they called Bourgeois Stripling...[of] Thibadoux. And next, Dixieland bass, we had old man Tom Harris. (Laughs.) [He wasn't up in the country.] He was down here. I never knew him, WR says. He's dead, I guess. Yeah, LJ says.

And, we had another good bass player, LJ continues, that was pretty good. Kimball. [Henry] Kimball. I never heard him, WR

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says. I've seen his picture. Old man Kimball, LJ notes.

Did those old time fellows use the bow most of the time, or pick? WR asks. I think Kimball used the bow too, LJ says. He used the bow.

Well, we don't want to keep you longer, WR says. But we certainly enjoyed hearing you play those numbers on the bass, and the violin, and the clarinet...

I played sax, and mandolin too, LJ adds...guitar, banjo...I got a banjo, yeah, but when, on the screws...I understand, WR says. We certainly appreciate it.

RC thanks LJ also.

END OF REEL