

Nick La Rocca
Reel I
January 3, 1960

Interviewed by: David Winstein
Digest: Jill Infiorati
First Check: Kathy L. Allen
Second Check: Richard B. Allen
Typed: Kathy L. Allen

DW introduces NLR, "one of the most famous characters who has ever come from the city of New Orleans." DW explains that NLR is the organizer of, trumpet player^{with,} and leader of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. NLR is being interviewed by telephone because, at seventy-one years old, he is unable to get around easily. NLR mentions that his legs bother him.

2:35 DW asks NLR how he got started in music. NLR replies that he took up a horn in 1898, about the time of the Spanish-American War. When he was nine years old, he tried to teach himself. He would take his father's cornet to an empty house down the street and try to learn to play. His father was a musician but didn't want NLR to learn how to play.

:52 NLR began to play professionally around 1908 when he was sixteen or seventeen. He was playing in string outfits without pay before this; that was around 1902-1903. Of those outfits, NLR says "we'd go serenading around the Irish Channel." He had the only brass instrument in the band. he played a cornet which had such a high pitch that it broke the strings (of the other players); eventually he had a piece of pipe put into the cornet to lower the pitch. NLR had no band of his own at this time and played with any band, usually free. NLR said they would go to parties to play where they were known as the "no beer, no music bunch."

:15 DW pauses to give a sample of the type of music which NLR played as a very young man. The Dixieland Jass [sic.] Band [i.e., the Original Dixieland Jazz Band] plays a song of the same title [i.e., actually "Original Dixieland One Step", which first had the title "Dixieland Jass Band One-Step "].

:10 In 1908 NLR was about to become a professional musician. He had a band, called La Rocca's Band, but found that he had played so much free music that no one wanted to pay him. He began to play with other bands, including: Joe Barrocca, Leon Roppolo, Bill Gallaty, Sousou Ramas, ^{and} Harry Nunez. NLR says about 1912 he began to play with Jack "Papa" Laine. He became the leader of Papa Laine's Ragtime Band from about 1912 to about 1916. Until this time NLR says, everyone was playing ragtime, not jazz. NLR says the record of "The Dixieland Jass Band" was made in 1917. Ragtime was music syncopated to four beat music while NLR's new music was syncopated to "a march beat or a two beat." DW says there was not jazz until roughly 1912 or 1913 then. NLR responds that it was even as late as 1916.

:41 DW asks about NLR's first organized band. NLR says he was playing on a cart on Canal Street, where the impresario Harry James [not the trumpet player, see below] heard him play and asked if NLR could furnish him with a band. NLR was also working at the old Haymarket [Cafe] and he formed a band with the men he knew there. [Cf. H.O. Brunn, The Story of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band on Johnny Stein role.] He took that band to Chicago in March of 1916,

and stayed for nine months. (DW explains that NLR is referring to the cabaret manager, Harry James, not the trumpeter of the same name). NLR thought he would be a flop in Chicago so he had the band swing some of the tunes they had done in carnival parades. He also added syncopation because he noticed that the people were dancing the one-step. NLR was a very good dancer. NLR says "and we tried one and the people hollered. . . Give us more jazz. In less than a week, they had the police and firemen to come out there." The band developed jazz rhythm by watching the dancers try to imitate Vernon Castle, doing "The Castle Walk," a one-step. Until he went to Chicago, NLR says, he had never heard the word "jazz". Harry James renamed the band the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, because the band's success brought many people from New Orleans and every band called themselves a New Orleans Jazz band.

DW plays a song which NLR and Harry Shields [actually Larry Shields] composed, called "At the Jazzband Ball", performed by The Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

55 DW mentions "Livery Stable Blues". NLR recalls that one of his band members (whom NLR had let go) wanted to take a part of NLR's "Livery Stable Blues" and get it published himself. NLR got an injunction against them [i.e., the composer and publisher]. NLR was able to prove that he had written the song and it is now copyrighted under his name. [C.F. Frank Gillis, () in Jazz Journal or Jazz Monthly.] NLR couldn't learn new tunes as fast as the people would ask for them. He had to have new tunes. Although NLR couldn't write

music, he would take the chord construction of an old tune and construct a new melody around its chord construction. "Shine on Harvest Moon's" chord was the basis for "[At] The Jazz Band Ball." "Georgia Camp Meetin' Ball" became the basis for "Fidgety Feet", except for the last part. [i.e., "At a Georgia Camp Meeting"].

NLR says he played chords on the piano. "e adds, "Most all fakers can play 2 or 3 instruments."

Originally, no one in the band could read music. [Cf. H.O. Brunn, The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Baton Rouge, L.S.U., 1960, pp. 91-92.] Later, after the original piano player, Henry Ragas, had died, ^{his replacement,} pianist Russel Robinson, could read music. Eddie Shields came up from New Orleans and couldn't fit in. NLR says, however, that the band members understood one another and he was always one note ahead of them, they could follow wherever he went. From Chicago, the band went to New York and "turned Broadway upside down." They were at Reisen ~~Webers~~ Cafe, 58th ^{close} and Columbus Circle. DW says he is looking at an old picture of NLR and comments that NLR originally played cornet left handed. Cap

45

In 1918, [Eddie] Edwards was drafted and NLR had to find his replacement. NLR came to New Orleans, and picked up Emile Christian. After rehearsing for a few weeks they went back to New York where they fulfilled that contract and in the middle of January they went to London, England and "introduced jazz into England."

DW says that he has a copy of the tune "Satanic Blues" that was composed in England. "Satanic Blues" was written by Emile [Christian]

Nick La Rocca
Reel I
January 3, 1960

5

and [Larry] Shields. DW asks if there is a story behind "Satanic Blues". NLR says they were a cooperative band; it didn't matter whose name was on a tune. NLR would play the melody, Shields would "put the lace on it" and the trombone player "sewed it up".

(P
tr)

NLR agrees with DW that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was made up of good friends. NLR says again that they were a cooperative band but that he handled the business and leading. "When it came to splitting the money up, it was a five way split." DW then announces "Satanic Blues," but "Livery Stable Blues" is played. Then DW plays part of "Satanic Blues." NLR and DW discuss the fact that these songs were in the tradition of 2-beat dance music which was born in Chicago as the "sudden inspiration" of watching people dance. This was the only music The Original Dixieland Jazz Band played.

5:00

NLR continued to write numbers while in New York. There were about thirty or forty popular numbers. NLR names "Old Joe Blades" [sic.], "Ramblin' Blues", "Toddlin' Blues", and "Some Rainy Night." He would listen to a band in Central Park for inspiration. While listening to this band that was playing the "Second Hungarian Rhapsody," he got the idea for "Skeleton Jangle". The name was given to NLR by a man in a Dallas phonograph store. DW plays a recording of "Skeleton Jangle". They had a contract with Victor for twelve numbers. NLR had only three or four so he had to make eight more. He started to work on these tunes.

(K
R)

:45

La Rocca's "Tiger Rag" is mentioned. NLR scats parts of this composition; it is based on a tango, "London Bridge is Falling Down", and the chord construction of Sousa's National Anthem [i.e., Emblem] March.

Their recording [the ODJB's] were sold all over the world. NLR went to London but didn't remain long. He returned to New York in 1920. NLR came back to New Orleans in 1925 brokenhearted because they were "run off" of Broadway. NLR believes it has something to do with the appearance of the white man in jazz and with the "petty moralists" whose laws forced them to leave Broadway. The band was to appear in The Big Broadcast of 1936 [CF. Brunn, the same], but NLR was building a house on Jackson Avenue. NLR says he could not get the boys together in time. Because of the adverse publicity ^{and} the fact that "they" were playing Dixieland idioms, NLR made up his mind that he was going back into the business to show the people that this music came from New Orleans.

Nick's address ^{, 2218 Constance Street,} is given so that

people may make him happy by writing to him. DW asks about another tune "Lasses Candy" which NLR wrote in London. NLR says he originally named this tune "Belgian Doll", but the publisher did not like the name so he named it after the candy which was popular in New Orleans. A record of the tune is played.