

MORRIS FRENCH

I of [2]--Digest--Retyped

June 24, 1960

1

Also present: Richard B. Allen, Marjorie T.
Zander, Punch Miller

(Interview recorded at home of Morris French, in Laplace, Louisiana)

Morris French was born March 14, 1886, [PM was amazed at his age, thinking he was much younger. RBA] in Laplace. A brother, Bob French, who was three or four years older than MF, played tuba, working in New Orleans, with [Kid] Rena and [Kid] Ory. MF, who began playing music in Laplace, first played [?] in a brass band there; when his brother became ill, he took his place in [Kid Rena's?] band in NO, playing tuba; he played with Rena five or six years. MF played with Buddy Petit and played with Louis Armstrong in a night club operated by Pete Lala; he also played with "Black Benny" [Williams, drums] and Steve Lewis [piano].

Some others in the brass band in Laplace were Thomas Anthony, clarinet, and [Vincent?]. The Matthews brothers, Lewis "Chief" Matthews and "Stonewall" Matthews were from Woodland plantation, where Ory also came from; they played in Ory's band. Ory had a band before he ever came to N.O.

In N.O., MF played for dances in Laplace, and also in brass bands, playing parades for such organizations as the Jefferson City Buzzards, the Mysterious Babies and the Odd Fellows in New Orleans. The Goodwill Society in Laplace was one of the local organizations which used music for parades. MF played funerals in Laplace (and in Alexandria [La., says a relative of MF?]); the band played funeral hymns to the burial site, and anything, including "Oh, Didn't He Ramble," on the way back.

MF moved to N.O. five or six years before the big storm [1915], and remained in the city about thirty years. The first band he played in in N.O.

MORRIS FRENCH

I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

2

had Steve Lewis, Black Benny and Joe Lindsay in it; they played in a night club operated by Pete Lala; Mack and Mack, entertainers, played there around the same time. Punch Miller says he left N.O. with them after World War I. [Steve Lewis was the leader of the band when MF worked with him?] Lewis would work with anyone who hired him; he later became the regular pianist with [A. J.] Piron's band. Black Benny was a pretty good trap drummer; RBA says he was noted for his parade bass drumming. The best [trap?] drummer was "Red Happy" [Bolton], followed by [Abbey] "Chinee" [Foster]. Black Benny was a very exciting parade bass drummer; he was better than [Ernest] "Nenesse" [Trepagnier]; everyone watched Black Benny when he played.

Funerals in Laplace were the same as in N.O.; the bass drummer played the single cymbal atop his drum with a wire beater, the same as in N.O. There are no funerals with bands in Laplace.

After Steve Lewis's band, MF worked with Buddy Petit, a good trumpet player; others in that band: Simon Morand [i.e., Marrero, bass]; Zeb Leneries [clarinet]; Buddy Manaday [sp? guitar]; Alfred Williams, drums (Williams later played with Sam Morgan's band). All the Marreros, including the father, Billy Marrero, are dead [except Eddie--PRC]. Sometimes Petit used a piano in the band; he used Manuel Manetta on piano. BP made up many tunes. MF was with Petit four or five years, or longer. After Petit, MF went with Kid Rena, remaining with him seven or eight years, or longer [cf. above, pl.] in Rena's band then: Rena's brother, Joe Rene [sic--drums]; Albert Glenney [bass]; Zeb [Leneries, clarinet]; Richard McLean [banjo? guitar?] (RBA says he is now playing bass on Bourbon Street);

MORRIS FRENCH
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

3

Simon [Marrero?]; Buddy Manaday, banjo (RBA suggests that he and McLean would alternate); when a piano was used, Edna Francis (wife of drummer Albert Francis) usually played it, although sometimes Manetta or Camilla Todd was the pianist. [cf. Geo. Lewis, Joe Rene, and Richard McLean interviews] RBA mentions John Joseph. Punch says he and Camilla's brother, Clarence Todd, were in the Army together.

MF played some in N.O. with Ory's brass band; he also worked in a brass band from [Laplace? Reserve?], [Pikwick] Brass Band, when they would come to N.O. They didn't have any trumpet, so MF would play lead.

MF's first instrument was valve trombone; next was bass, which belonged to his brother; next was [slide] trombone, after he got to N.O. He studied the latter instrument with Dave Perkins, with August Rousseau and with Johnny Lindsay. MF played before he had teachers.

Jim Humphrey [grandfather of Percy and Willie J. Humphrey] taught in Laplace, right across from MF's home; the band he taught there was called the Onward Brass Band; MF thinks [Vincent Lashille? Lachille?] was leader of the band, he played tuba.

Some occasional members of Ory's brass band in N.O.: trumpets, Chif Matthews, Kid Rena, Arnold Metoyer; clarinet, Johnny Dodds. Ory's band played strictly by head; they played all kinds of music, including hymns. Punch says Buddy Petit always played "What A Friend We Have In Jesus" at funerals. Petit didn't have steady personnel in his brass band; he, and others, would get bands together for the occasion, whenever they got a job.

MF says Louis Armstrong couldn't read when he first started; he and others would get tunes from phonograph records. MF worked with Armstrong at Pete Lala's

before MF went with Petit. [cf. Louis Armstrong, Satchmo..., Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, 1954, pp. 102-104, 97-99. RBA] MF thinks the time was before World War I, as Punch says when he got to town after the war, Lala's was just about closed. Punch says Armstrong is supposed to be two years younger than himself; the first place Punch saw Armstrong was in Pete Lala's; Punch had just come to N.O., discharged from the Army; Armstrong was with Ory then; Punch played with the band for a few numbers. Ory had the job at Lala's; when he got a better-paying outside job, he would get a band to replace him for the time; the substitute band usually included Armstrong, MF, Black Benny, Steve Lewis and Richard McLean. MF doesn't know who the leader of the substitute band was supposed to be. RBA mentions clarinetist Louis Probert. MF mentions clarinetists [Alphonse] Picou and [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.]; MF knew Bunk Johnson, although MF never worked with him; Bunk "and them" had their own band. Punch met Bunk a little before Bunk's death.

Johnny Dodds worked with Ory; Dodds went to Chicago; When he had been there a couple of years, he sent for Louis Armstrong to join his band there.

MF worked some with Joe Lindsay. Lindsay worked with Ory. He also played with [John] Robichaux, at the Lyric Theatre, on Iberville; Lindsay was a good drummer. MF agrees that Armstrong and Lindsay worked together some.

When MF left Kid Rena's band, MF went to Crowley [La.], where he played with Evan [Thomas]. Leaving him, he went with the Georgia Minstrels, staying with that company a long time. Then he got off the road [i.e., didn't travel]. Evan had a good band; MF wasn't in his band when he got killed; RBA says George Lewis was there; MF says "Chinee" [Foster] was right by Evan when he was

MORRIS FRENCH
II [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

6

Also present: Richard B. Allen, Marjorie T. Zander,
Punch Miller

When MF played [trombone] in Evan [Thomas] 's band, in Crowley, Louisiana, others in the band were Evan's brother, Walter, on drums [?], Irving Joseph, drums [?], his brother, John Joseph (now playing bass), sax, [and others including Evan, cornet]. Irving Joseph played with Pinchback [Tureaud] at one time. MF didn't ever know the names of some of the men in Evan's band.

MF quit playing about six or seven years ago, when he lost his teeth. He would like to play again, if he could only "fill the horn" [i.e., get a good tone].

MF was with the Georgia Minstrels about three years [after he left Evan Thomas--see Reel I]. The leader of the band was Freddy Jones, trumpet player from back of town; Jones used to chase all the bands in New Orleans with his playing; he was good reader, too. Punch Miller mentions Freddy Keppard and Freddy "Boo Boo [Miller]". Boo Boo played trombone with the Liberty Bell Band. MF says Boo Boo and Ernest Kelly played soft, that they could be heard only a short distance. Punch says MF could be heard, though. After leaving the Georgia Minstrels Band, MF moved to Alexandria [Louisiana], where he lived twelve or thirteen years; he moved back to Laplace about five years ago, when his mother died. There wasn't any good music in Alexandria then, John Tonkin [sp?] had died. MF agrees that [Clarence] "Little Dad" [Vincent] had stayed in Alexandria a long time, playing with Tonkin; he says [Eddie] "'Ti' Boy" [Gilmore], a good bass player, was there, too; he is dead, as is Little Dad.

Joe Rene, ex-drummer, is mentioned; he is now an official in a Jehovah's

MORRIS FRENCH
II [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

7

Witnesses church, in New Orleans. MF says Rene, his brother, Kid Rena [sic], Louis Armstrong and probably Black Benny [Williams] all came out of Jone [Waifs] Home; RBA says he thinks [Louis] "Shots" [Madison] also came from that institution, and MF agrees.

MF worked with Son Thomas; Thomas worked in Kid Rena's band; Thomas was first in New Orleans to have a tenor banjo; prior to that, guitars had been used. MF says clarinets were replaced by saxophones. RBA mentions Jessie Charles, says he wants to "come back" on clarinet. John Hardy, saxophone, who once was a great clarinetist, is mentioned. Punch says "Blind Freddy" [Small] was good, too, but has quit playing; MF says he was from Laplace; RBA says Blind Freddy now plays harmonica; Punch says, "Yeah, he's a harmonica dog." MF worked with George Lewis in Kid Rena's band; MF doesn't remember whether Lewis played before Zeb [Leneries] or after.

MF says he played with Sunny Henry [trombone], too; RBA says Henry died in January. Henry was in Sam Morgan's band; he was replaced by "Jim Crow" [Jim Robinson]; MF says Henry was a better trombone player than Robinson.

MF worked with bassist Albert Morgan in Rena's band; Morgan was in Rena's band a long time.

The biggest and best parades MF ever played were around Carnival time, and for the Odd Fellows; there might be fifteen or sixteen bands playing in parades at Carnival [i.e., Mardi Gras Day]; they played from 6AM until 6PM. RBA says the Zulus had the Eureka Brass Band this year at Carnival. Other still-active marching clubs at Carnival time are the Jefferson City Buzzards, the

MORRIS FRENCH
II [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

8

Garden District and the Corner Club (Punch says he used to work for the Buzzards every year; RBA mentions the Elenorea Club). MF says he used to work for the Jefferson City Buzzards, [or] the Mysterious Babies [or] the Sixth District Carnival Club on Carnival Day. The Mysterious Babies was a white organization, with headquarters around Tchoupitoulas Street; it was a big club, made up of Irish Channel people.

RBA says Willie Parker, bass drum and clarinet, must be about the oldest living musician; he played with the Lyons Brass Band and the Terminal Brass Band, with people like Man Creole [sp?] and "Sheik-o" (the latter played baritone, RBA thinks). Parker also worked with Al[cide] Landry and Ernest Rogers. MF says Landry used to play with the Eureka; RBA says Landry also played at Luthjen's, with "Big Eye Louis" [Nelson].

The biggest funeral MF ever played was for "Black Benny" [Williams]; MF and Punch agree that all the bands played for that one; MF says there were eight or ten bands. Punch says Henry Zeno had a big funeral, too. RBA says [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin had two fifteen-piece bands for his funeral. Punch says there were more brass bands when Black Benny was buried than there are now. His drum was "marked... 'Gone But Not Forgotten.'"

The brass bands MF worked in played all over town; they also went out of town, e.g., to Gulfport [Mississippi].

RBA mentions the [apparently modern] custom of taking up a collection to hire a band for the funeral of [some] people who didn't belong to societies; he talked to the son of Arnold DePass about it. PM and MF do not remember this

MORRIS FRENCH
LL [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

9

custom. He says Isidore Barbarin, father of Paul and Louis Barbarin, had a funeral with music. Willie Pajaud [trumpet], who died about two months ago, is mentioned. MF asks about Reese Cobette, saxophone, who came from the same area [St. Bernard Parish?] as Albert, Adolph and Pete Duconge. RBA says he thinks Pete has a bar up North, and that Pete was married to "Bricktop" [operator of a cabaret in Paris].

The best clarinetists MF heard around New Orleans were [John] Handy and the older [Lorenzo] Tio [Sr.]; Willie [J?] Humphrey was good, too. Humphrey and Tio played E flat clarinets, in addition to B flat clarinets. Tio worked in [A.J.] Piron's band; Punch thinks Tio was a member of the Onward Brass Band [so that Tio would be Lorenzo, Jr.]. MF says Tio worked with them in Rena's band for a long time; he played tenor saxophone, too. MF says Tio could play ratty, and could fake.

MF has never recorded.

When MF was starting, his favorite trombone player was Johnny Lindsay; August Rousseau was good, too, but he was mostly a reader.

MF says George Lewis is a good clarinet player, too; Punch says Lewis's playing has always sounded "puny" to him, as though the band he was with was too much for him, too heavy. Punch says men like Benny Goodman and Johnny Dodds used to play "whopping clarinets" [i.e., strong]. MF says the saxophone has replaced the clarinet, that there are not many good clarinet players now.

MF played funerals in Alexandria, but the bands had only seven or eight pieces. [cf. various writings] MF says he played for the funeral of Buddy

MORRIS FRENCH
II [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
June 24, 1960

10

Bolden, who died "up there" [in Alexandria?]. MF mentions Luther Denny, who repairs musical instruments in Alexandria. MF says Bolden died in New Orleans, but was taken to Alexandria; [cf. various writings] MF [now] says he didn't play for Bolden's funeral, that there was no music at it. MF talks more about Luther Denny, who has been in Alexandria since [at the latest] World War I. Punch used to play at Glasscock's, on Lee Street in Alexandria; MF says it was called the Sky Roof Garden, that it no longer exists. Funerals in Alexandria were like the ones in New Orleans except the second line didn't go as far [in distance].

End Of Reel II

