

SING MILLER

Reel I

December 11, 1964

Digest

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Also present: William Russell
(Recorded at 732 St. Peter St.)

James Edward Miller was called "Sing" from his singing since he was a little boy, in his school days. He was born in New Orleans at General Taylor and Annunciation Streets, June 17 1913. His father was a piccolo player. SM had a violin, and picked it like a ukelele. He played with Eddie Hickman, Julius Simpson, still living, and a sax player now dead. [Cliff Bruce, Reel I pg.]. He began his professional career around 1927. He played Friday and Saturdays at the O.K.Lounge, "colored joint" on La Salle St. Then he went from joint to joint. He played with Kid Howard's band, Henry Russ's [band?]. Father Al [Lewis] helped SM with banjo, which he still has and plays. SM learned to play on Papa John Joseph's bass. He played with Jay McShann, from Kansas City, on the road. This was the first big band he played with. Then he played with the James Brothers of Houma. In this band, SM played with Claiborne "Crip" Williams [son of Claiborne Williams]. SM began playing piano in 1928, though, at school, he first played the organ. (William Russell adds reed organ, for some reason.)

SM went to the Lutheran, J.W.Hoffman, and Lafon schools, all in New Orleans. He had no lessons on piano. His father died when SM was five. His sister, 9 years younger than SM, played the piano, after learning from SM. SM learned to read from others. He never owned a piano. [See below] He spent around 16 years with Earl Foster, who is now ill and crippled. He started with EF's four-piece band at the Carnival Club on Dryades and Euterpe. Joe Bentley was on trumpet. JB and Cliff Bruce, who does not play anymore as he [died?] helped SM with reading music. Earl Foster and his band played a six year engagement at Club Plantation in Bogalusa. SM followed a better pianist, but people liked SM better. Richard [?], a student at Xavier [prep?] [University?] helped SM with reading, scales, intervals. SM would study at home.

1:25 Steve Lewis, Big Eye Louis [Robertson (sp?)], and Stack O'Lee, who is alive but no longer plays, were playing when SM was a kid. He remembers Walter Decou, playing the piano at the Budweiser. Austin "Boots" Young, then on trombone, played with Walter Decou at the Budweiser, helped SM with music. Austin Young played bass with Earl Foster's band. Austin Young and SM were good friends. SM met Lester Young in Dayton, Ohio. Other pianists SM heard when he was young were [Jeanette] Kimball [then Salvant], and Dolly [Adams]. He knew Dolly Adams' sons better than he knew her. SM and Walter "Fats" Pichon played duets at the Absinthe House. SM remembers Walter Pichon with [Fate Marable] when they played on the steamer President, and also with Papa Celestin,

1:50 SM also heard Isidore "Tuts" Washington, who was still playing in 1932, when SM got married. He played at houseparties. SM did likewise and outdrew Tuts. IW played at any joint that he wanted to play in. They had fishfries for which you had to buy tickets. Now the policemen are different about permitting fishfries and allowing people to escape. SM had trouble with the police. Moonshine was sold, and places had to pay the graft or be raided. SM's oldest son is a foofer, is 33, the youngest is 26. The youngest son is on the police force and is a pianist. SM bought a piano, taught the youngest son, and paid for his education. They talk about the costs of education being reduced.

2:27 SM always lived uptown. He has been in his present neighborhood for 22 years. He worked with Paul Barbain, George Lewis, George Williams, [Louis] Cottrell, Sheik [Colar], Kid Howard, [Kid] Thomas, (currently), Peter Bocage, Willie & Percy Humphrey, etc. His uncle was Eddie Johnson, bass tuba, who was older than SM's father. SM's father & EJ in the same band, played for the "Jolly Boys and Girls," "Young Men's Olympia," "Merry Go Round," and the [Jefferson City] Buzzards. SM was never in a brass band.

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[SM's mother?] bought a piano for \$10. SM would come home from school and play until supper time. SM talks about learning piano with the right hand. He learned by listening to Stack O'Lee, who lived two doors away, on Sixth St. He is alive and not playing. He works at the Milne Boys Home on St. Bernard St. near Cadillac St. Stack O Lee was a "How Long" pianist, i.e., he played mostly blues. He couldn't play too many sentimental numbers.

2:51 SM started playing in f#. When he worked with a group, he learned to "cross chord." The band couldn't tune up, so he played in another key. SM then learned the hard keys: e, b, Db. SM played with bands at the Bulls' Club and The Tulane Club, but lately he has become a soloist. He plays at the Gaslight on Sunday night. He has played at many dance halls, including the Last Round Up, La Lune (in the French Quarter), and La Vida. At the Last Round Up he played from 7 pm. to 5 or 6 am. for \$1.50 plus tips which came to around \$12.00. It was the place to close "in this vicinity" [i.e., the French Quarter]. His first jobs were with Julius Simpson, Cliff Bruce, [s], and Eddie Hickman. He replaced John Smith with Kid Thomas. John Smith replaced Joe James when James died. [Cf. verticle file.] At the Moulin Rouge, SM used to listen to and sit in with Kid Thomas around 1946.

SM was with Earl Foster's four piece band at Seymour s Coconut Grove for five years [near Moulin Rouge?]. SM would go down to the Moulin Rouge after the Coconut Grove would close, and sit in with KT. Sidney Desdunes, p & leader, learned from SM. Desdunes had Emmett ?¹, bj, who drank heavily. SM played at Mama Lou's on the Lake with Kid Clayton, when you could rent a bathing wuit for 15¢. He rode the train named "Smokey Mary" out to the Lake. He played there with Kid Clayton for three years on banjo. Also he played at the West End [confusing geography--RBA] [Cf. Street Railways of New Orleans.]

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SM played with Jerry Greene and Papa John, bass players. Slow Drag [pavageau] was then a grand marshal. he doesn't remember Slow Drag as a bassist then. Punch Miller courted SM's aunt. Eugene Miller, SM's uncle, is unknown to SM. Joe Harris is SM's first cousin. SM played with Joe Harris for six years before he knew that they were kin.

SM is now with his second wife. [Apparently lost photos which were left with his first wife?] He still has a few photos of Earl Foster with Austin Young, Willie James, and SM. This was the band at Coconut Grove.

(4:00) At the Lake there were private parties for which Kid Clayton played. They also played for lawn parties for fraternities uptown. He didn't play them in the French Quarter. At the fish fries "they" would have a red light on the gate. People bought fish, but there was no admission. They usually had a piano, sometimes harmonica, and guitar. Fish fries began around 6 pm. and lasted all night until the fish sold out, about 5 am. The fish fries were sometimes held out in the yard with tables outside. The fish fries were numerous on certain nights, with maybe two going on in the same block. Al had live music or wind-up phonographs. Men played on G or Eb harmonicas which would play easily with a tuned piano. The pianist played for tips. Most pianos were not tuned to 440. They sold home-brew and spiked lemonade at house-rent parties. SM would go home drunk.

The benefits were for the rent, the church, the sick and the disabled. The crowd would come and go, and few people stayed all night.

End of Reel I