

NICK POLITES
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
October 8, 1963

Also present: Richard B. Allen
Paul R. Crawford

Nick Polites was born July 2, 1927, in Melbourne, Australia. NP came to New Orleans by way of Europe, where his band [the Melbourne New Orleans Band], originally booked for six months in England, wound up staying almost two years, with some time spent playing in Germany. The job ended in April, this year, and NP had been taking a holiday, gradually going back home. His interest in jazz was triggered by his seeing the movie, "Birth of the Blues", in which clarinetist Danny Polo's playing with [Jack] Teagarden's band impressed him. At about the same general time, the early Forties, Graeme Bell was beginning to play jobs around Melbourne; [besides Bell on piano] some others in that band were: Bell's brother, Roger [Bell, cornet]; Ade Monsborough [valve trombone and various other instruments]; clarinetist Pixie Roberts. Melbourne was the ["birthplace"] of Australian jazz. Graeme Bell organized his band after the [World] War [II], which made a trip to a World Youth Festival in Czechoslovakia, then on to England, where NP believes, they started the first English jazz club [among other things]. [Cf. David Boulton, Jazz in Britain, pp. 77-78]. By the time they arrived back in Australia, there were several other jazz band playing, and quite a bit of interest in jazz. Next to [chronologically and in importance] Bell's band was the Southern Jazz Group, from Adelaide, South Australia; led by Dave Dallwitz, trombone, it included Bill Munro, a very fine trumpeter and

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Bruce Gray, an excellent clarinetist. The Bell band had a style [and approach] similar to the Lu Watters band, but with a peculiarly Australian sound, perhaps because of the trumpet of Roger Bell. The Southern Jazz Group was less stilted--they had a very good tuba player, Bob Wright--reminding RBA of King Oliver through Lu Watters, to which NP agrees. Tony Newstead was playing at the time, although he never kept a band together for very long; his was more of a Chicago style, looser than that of the two previously mentioned bands; he liked to play [cornet] somewhat like Bix [Beiderbecke]; he was never a force as a band leader. The two forces were the Bell band and the Southern Jazz Group, followed by Frank Johnson and Len Barnard. The Johnson was styled loosely after Watters; Barnard's main influence was Louis Armstrong, and his Hot 5's and Hot 7's; Barnard's young brother, Bob, cornet, sounded much like early Armstrong. The Barnard band later replaced its trombonist with Ade Monsborough, on alto saxophone, and made probably the best jazz recordings ever done in Australia; they were sort of a hot Clarence Williams style. RBA mentions "Azted Princess" written by Roger Bell, and asks about other Australian originals; NP says Dave Dallwitz wrote quite a few, one being "Crocodile Creep", and Frank Johnson wrote some, his "Hilarity March" being quite good. The influence on bands in Australia was all from recordings, mostly those of Watters, [Armstrong], Johnny Dodds; these influences set the styles in the Forties and into

the Fifties. No one took much heed of the Bunk Johnson--George Lewis records until 1957, when the Melbourne New Orleans Band began playing.

The Frank Johnson band had no star as such; it was a good all-round band to play with; NP says the first time he played with them his playing was fifty percent better, because of the excellence of the other men. NP then says that the star of the band was the clarinetist, Geoff [Kitchen]; when he left, the trombonist, Warwick ("Wocka") Dyer, "grew in stature"; unfortunately, he was killed in an automobile accident. The strength of the Johnson band, however, was that it played as a band, the ensemble work being forte. Johnson's was the first recognized band NP played with; previously, he had played with anyone. His first instrument was saxophone, which he got when he was fifteen; he had no lessons; when he was about eighteen, he switched to clarinet. He says there is not enough interest in jazz [per se] in Australia to provide a living for a person. When jazz is played in Australia, people dance, they don't listen; NP says this situation is good from a musical point of view, as a musician doesn't feel that he has to do something spectacular in order to impress a seated audience. RBA speaks of dancing and dance halls, mentioning the new Luthjen's and the Harmony Inn. Responding to a question about drinking at the dances, bars, etc., NP says the bars in Australia close at six in the evening, and that there is no

drinking allowed anywhere, especially not at dance halls, as no drinks may be consumed within, he thinks, one-half mile of any public dance hall. NP says the effect of the early closing hour is that at six o'clock there are many drunks on the street, as they rush from their work and consume as much alcohol in an hour or so as they can. The dances usually begin about 8:30 PM, and last until midnight. NP does not drink.

The jazz conventions are a sort of amateur thing, run by musicians; they are held between Christmas and New Year's, for a week, in one particular town [changed each year] in Australia. The musicians play, talk, drink, etc., day and night for the week, and have a marvelous time; NP says that strangely enough, they [the conventions] make money. They began in 1946.

NP says Australian jazz bands don't use two clarinets, as a rule; RBA asked about that, recalling Ade Monsborough's "Two Clarinet Blues, [Amp 14]", and adding that Tom Pickering was sometimes used, as a second clarinet, by the Southern Jazz Group; (NP identifies Pickering as a Tasmanian); NP says if a clarinetist sits in with a band, the band will do a two-clarinet set, or at least a couple of numbers. RBA mentions the doubling by many Australians, but NP says there isn't much doubling, except by Monsborough, who has played all instruments (he currently plays tenor saxophone; he was first known as "Plunk", [because] he played the banjo). NP says Monsborough is a subtle musician,

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unlike most Australian musicians, who are usually equipped only to blow out loud noises. (He includes himself in that group). Warwick Dyer also doubled, playing piano in a limited style; NP says Dyer regarded the piano as a tune ful drum, and was very good to play with because he beat out the chords strongly. He was a very good trombonist, very hot. Dyer was killed in an automobile accident with the Frank Johnson band; Johnson was driving the group home from a job about one hundred miles away from Melbourne; the time was about 3 AM; too much speed, car ran off road, Dyer killed, all injured, NP with broken neck. Replacing Dyer with Frank Traynor, a very good trombonist, also, the band continued working, but Johnson's musical idea were changing about that time, so NP and others resigned about the end of 1946⁵. NP says Johnson came under the "bad" influence of Louis Armstrong, the first jazz band to be heard in person in Australia; the Armstrong band played set routines, tunes, etc., were great crowd pleasers, but no one, with the exception of Edmond Hall, and Billy Kyle, to a lesser extent, was doing any [extemporaneous] improvising. [See reel II for dates of his visits]. NP says the style was all right for Armstrong, but unfortunately, a lot of Australians began to play the same way, which was ridiculous for them. NP had about decided there was no sense in playing anymore, when, a few months later, an English trombonist, Llew Hird, let him know that he wanted to form a band; a group was formed--not great instrumentalists, says NP, but "technique doesn't matter that much."

They played a while, and then were a success at the jazz convention of 1957, held in Adelaide. A number of other groups began playing in the same style, a sort of George Lewis-English "trad" style. The Melbourne New Orleans Jazz Band became the most popular band around, made a few records (which sold very well, surprisingly, as they weren't good), and were offered a contract in 1961 by Lyn Dutton, an English agent who heard some of the records; they accepted, and remained there until early 1963. NP and RBA talk of the change in repertoire which occurred when he began playing with the Melbourne New Orleans Jazz Band; he says he had been playing tunes associated with King Oliver and Lu Watters until that time, and his repertoire now became the tunes recorded by Bunk Johnson, George Lewis, etc., but not trying to copy their styles. NP and RBA discuss the influences on NP's personal style; the names of Johnny Dodds, Bob Helm and Ellis Horne are mentioned; NP says he himself probably sounds too much like George Lewis, but he will get over that. It was considered that his style is more like that of Omer Simeon than anyone else including Dodds, Helm, or Ellis.

End of Reel I

[Restrict until death of George Lewis]

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NP comments about the success of George Lewis, agreeing with RBA that Lewis is not a showman; NP says that actually he considers Lewis an amateur--playing badly out of tune on some occasions, etc.--but agrees with RBA that the amateurism is part of the reason that Lewis is [still] so good.

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Raul R. Crawford

[Restricted]

NP listened to [Omer] Simeon records a lot, but he also listened to many other players on records; he says his interest in jazz is basically as a listener, rather than as an "attempted player", that he has never had any idea of becoming a great player of jazz.

NP says some of the English jazz bands have been influenced by George Lewis to a great extent, some of them becoming too imitative; quite a few good bands were formed, but as jazz became more popular, elements of commercial began appearing [to the detriment of good jazz content--PRC], and the most popular of the bands--Chris Barber first, followed by Acker Bilk and Kenny Ball--were imitated in the commercial tricks by the lesser bands, so that interest in [genuine, so to speak] jazz has suffered a decline. There are still some semi-professional bands playing jazz because they like it; the first to come to mind is Ken Colyer, who also manages to make a living at it. Kid Martyn's Ragtime Band, led by ^BMarry Martyn (frequent visitor to New Orleans), is a very good band; Mike Daniels has a fine band, and has had it for ten years, but he won't turn professional because he wants to play what he likes; the Daniels band plays a lot of Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver tunes. Most of the other bands, however, are playing "traddy pop" music; although NP has been away from Australia for about two years, he has heard that "traddy

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pop" music; although NP has been away from Australia for about two years, he has heard that traddy pop has come to his homeland; Acker Bilk and Kenny Ball have played there, [fostering the influence incidentally?] (NP says Bilk still plays some good jazz, much superior to any the Kenny Ball group does). Graeme Bell, the leader of the original jazz movement in Australia, has taken to traddy pop, having a group of musicians who play what NP would call "slick Dixie." NP says the chances of traddy pop having a great influence on Australian jazz are not too great, that most of the bands probably won't be influenced by the market for jazz, as there isn't much of a market anyway.

NP enjoyed the few moments he heard the Onward Brass Band of New Orleans, when they were making a television commercial; he had heard the [Atlantic] recording by the Young Tuxedo [Brass] Band, which was a bit wild, and says the Onward had a more-disciplined and broader sound. NP comments on the musicians he has heard at Preservation Hall, saying his hearings have enabled him to figure out a little better what [New Orleans] jazz is all about, something he doubts recordings are able to do. NP tells of meeting Raymond Burke, whom he knew, by reputation only, as the best white New Orleans clarinetist; NP had never heard him or any of his recordings. Burke told NP he had trouble keeping up with fast tempos, and asked if he thought it was because he didn't play very much; NP, in all sincerity, said it seemed likely that Burke's facility might suffer from not playing, that a little warming up and practicing each day would perhaps offset his problem.

NP says it seemed so ridiculous that a player like Burke, whom he heard later (describes Burke's tone as beautiful, and his playing as subtle), ~~w~~ould ask anyone for advice, especially someone like himself. Asked about the personality of New Orleans musicians, NP says he didn't like Barney Bigard, who was in Australia with Louis Armstrong in 1954, but he did like Edmond Hall, with Armstrong in Australia in 1956, who was a far better player and a very nice person, modest, patient, etc. NP says the musicians he has met in New Orleans are of the same mold as Hall. NP and RBA tell of meeting Jim Robinson, talks of his playing bits of tunes on his way home from working with the Onward Brass Band; NP says hearing Robinson is certainly one of the highlights of his visit here, and that Robinson is playing as well as or better than he played twenty years ago, on records. NP has also been impressed by the "natural" playing of Percy Humphrey.

NP talks of trumpet player Keith Hounslow, from West Australia, who came to Melbourne because jazz was being played there. His style has changed from early-Armstrong to the most modern jazz being played in that country; he is one of the reasons NP doesn't laugh off modern jazz. NP says the Australian Jazz Quartet, which came to the United States, are not very well known in Australia. Ken Owens was a "boy wonder", sixteen or seventeen years of age, who played beautiful cornet, but who, at about the age of thirty now, has not developed further musically. Ian Burns, a fine honky

tonk pianist, working with Frank Johnson at the time, died suddenly; NP [with Johnson then, also] played in a band at Burns's graveside. John Sangster, with whom NP played most before joining Frank Johnson, was a very rough, bad cornet player until the jazz convention in 1948, when he surprised everyone by playing very well; he didn't keep it up, however. Later on, he joined the Graeme Bell band for their second [European] tour, playing drums with them; he became interested in modern jazz and now plays drums and cornet in a modern manner. [Restricted section].

NP and RBA discuss Kid Ory and Mutt Carey; NP says he was very impressed by one Ory session, with Darnell Howard on clarinet, but he was not ever so impressed by Howard on any other records. He says that Rod Cless, clarinetist on the Muggsy Spanier records made in 1938 [for Bluebird], also impressed him, as the records were then about (1940-41) being issued in Australia. The influence of Mutt Carey on Ken Colyer is discussed.

NP's repertoire is discussed; NP says the reason he began playing special "feature" numbers (which he doesn't, or didn't really like to play) was that the brass players in his band couldn't continue playing all night, every night, on their European tour, so he began playing some solos, tunes he had played in his home, especially rags, and found that he enjoyed that very well; he has enjoyed playing things like "Perfect Rag", "Nonsense Rag", tunes Tony Parenti recorded, such as a Parenti composition,

"Crawfish Crawl." NP says he plays less like George Lewis then, and shall possibly find a style of his own someday. NP says that at the Australian jazz conventions for the past several years he has teamed up with probably the best jazz pianist in the country, Graham Coyle, to form the Polites-Coyle Ragtimers; they play rags as a feature at the conventions, and their presentation has become a bit of an institution at the convention.

When NP listens to jazz, he listens for ensemble work rather than for solos; he likes to hear George Lewis, [Johnny] Dodds (NP considers the Dodds with Oliver "just about a perfect New Orleans ensemble style), Omer Simeon (on the Jelly Roll Morton records).

End of Reel II