

*unedited first  
draft*

PROFESSOR LONGHAIR  
(Roy Byrd)  
Reel I [only]  
May 30, 1969

INTERVIEWER: Hudson Marquez  
ALSO PRESENT: Alice Byrd  
NOTES: Richard B. Allen  
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman

HM gives date, and says conversation taped at the living room of Roy Byrd's home at 1522 South Rampart Street....

Professor Longhair tries to remember Papa Lightfoot, but can't. The name sounds familiar. (Background baby noise and low sound throughout.)

HM says a whole lot of people still around. Lazy Lester lives in Baton Rouge, and Slim Harpo, too.

PL says that name sounds familiar. He listened to one of his records yesterday.

PL asks what his [Lazy Lester's] real name was. HM doesn't know. PL asks his wife if she remembers a guy named Lester who played harmonica, and she does.

PL says he was born December 19, 1918. Robert Parker was a sideman on the "Bald Head" session.

They were mostly kids. He thought they were doing well enough to record. Al Miller was the drummer. He's still around but he quit playing altogether.

PL can't remember the other players. There were four. They did "Bald Head," and "Mardi Gras in New Orleans," back to back.

He was training them at the time, and he wrote the song with them. But when the session was on, he had handpicked men.

I had a little kid of my own, Walter Nelson, play guitar, PL

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continues. I called him Papoose. He helped me a lot.

I helped him, not by reading, but by ear. They had to be real good to top him because his daddy was a tremendous player.

They had a group called the Midriffs at that time. A bass player was named George Miller. We had a drummer named Boots Alexis, and a saxophone player named Batman [Caffrey]...

I had to train the fellows to do the things I wanted them to do because it's hard to assemble together. You play a thing in your mind. I used to arrange by head.

The group was together a good little while and brought out "She Ain't Got No Hair on Her Bald Head," and "Mardi Gras in New Orleans." We also cut "Hey Now Baby," "Hey Now Honey Child," a good one.

I got permission to re-do a Paul Gayten song because I felt I could do more with it. That was "Hey Little Girl." I did "Whole World Was Just a Hole in the Ground," a thing I wrote himself, "Tipitina," and "Her Mind Is Gone."

I recorded for so many different labels I don't remember them all. My house burned down, and I lost all his soundtracks, so I lost track. But I did pretty close to 100, and some, tunes....

Do you remember this thing "Hadacol Bounce?" That was the first thing I did on records, but something happened.

The fellow wasn't a licensed operator, or he was out of his

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jurisdiction, or something. The union killed it because that label wasn't no good.

That's when I got a chance to record with Mercury. I was putting all my time as much as I possibly could into music. But I wasn't getting paid.

Then, I recorded with Atlantic a little while. I talked to fellows who said my records were doing great.

I looked at Cash Box, and it looked pretty nice to me, but I still hadn't received any money. I was burned again.

I was suffering. I was doing pretty good, and didn't realize it when I was really starting out.

I started with trap drums. We used to build our equipment by hand.

[We made our own] drums, took dime horns, and put paper in them to make a kazooka. We got a kazooka right now, and we did well with it.

We used to make those trap drums, get the reels from movie picture theaters, take the reels out, and make snare drums out of the tin. I started off playing drums.

We enjoyed it so well, making bass out of guitar strings. It was more fun than the real music because there wasn't the jealousy in it. Everybody just enjoyed it.

We used to rehearse with glasses, and coffee pots, looking for certain sounds, and beats, and what-not. We'd straddle a

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truck, and use it for a bass drum, glasses, cans, and what-not.

We weren't expecting anything out of that. All that just puts more weight on you.

The next you know I was on the Federal label, and that didn't work. [I was on] Ebb label, and that didn't work.

I guess I've been on every label except Imperial. I've been on RCA, and Columbia. I know everybody, and know them all.

Everybody said you should have this, and you should have that. We don't go out for those kind of things. We go out to produce, and make the world merry, and expect to get enough out of it to keep a'going.

I got a piano up the corner now that I can't even work because I can't get it fixed.

I like all kind of music. All I'm looking for is like soul, uplift. I enjoy Duke [Ellington] work because he's a master at it....

HM has some traffic violations. PL notes they expect to get paid for them just like we expect to get paid when we do anything....

My favorite piano player is dead. (Tape off.)

I just quit recording. After I went down there yesterday to see Mr. [Joe?]...(Tape off.)

The tape broke, HM notes, this machine's no good. (Mike noises.)

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We were talking about piano players, HM resumes. Happy Man was a guy who played in New Orleans? I thought his name was Sullivan Rock, PL says.

He died around when PL was working at the New York Inn in the [19]40's, around [19]39-[19]40. That little fellow used to give me a hand, and then Father Tuts [Washington]. He's still around somewhere around here. I doesn't know his real name.

We had another little fellow, Stormy Weather. He was good. He's dead, too.

I listened to the real baddest fellows playing better. That's why he developed better because I learned so many different actions, changes, and cross-chords by listening from one to another.

I said I'll take them all together. So, I played a little bit of all their music plus what he could think of besides and that's how I learned how to play piano.

I'm sure I know this Slim Harpo HM was talking about. His records sound familiar and all.

Louis Armstrong used to live right next door to us before the house burned down. Mostly all the Dixielanders, old-timers--the majority of them are dead now.

[John] Handy, [the] Tio's, Lewis, and all of those [are dead]. I used to play with them a lot--Dixieland at that time.

Really, when I started playing the music I was playing,

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nobody knew what it was. Right now they really don't tell you what kind of music I play.

When I was working with Dave Bartholomew, and them, they didn't know either. They say let's call it the [ ].

I don't care what they were playing. I would just sit right there, and come up with something of my own.

Wouldn't overpower like you see them by running up high, or drowning out everybody. I'd get right in it, and smooth it out with a drive, beat, soul, and rhythm. I enjoy it these days.

I never really wanted to learn no certain numbers until I started to recording them. I had to have something of my own.

I had to have me a title. I had to get me a label. I had to have a name. That's when I started titling these things.

Like I said, Lee Allen--you've heard of Lee Allen. He was a real saxophone player, too.

He worked with me on a few sets. That wasn't on a label, or nothing.

Justin [Adams?]. He's a guitar player. He's still around somewhere in New Orleans.

Guitar Ray....I saw him a couple of months ago. Three Sundays ago he was in Algiers at the Greystone--he and Fats Domino.

He never was doing too bad. First like he was making more money than the average colored person.

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The Lastie brothers. Earl Palmer was my feeling right drummer. He's in L.A. now.

George Parker he was a good drummer. He's up there too. Earl Brown--they had him up there....

Sugar Boy, Eddie Bo--I know practically every fellow here....Johnny Adams--he got a pretty good tune out now, "Release Me."

That boy is terrific. I mean I'm not bragging on him, or anything.

He might have done "Release Me" here, but I don't recall anybody saying anything about those other numbers. It just sort of popped up.

But there ain't none that I didn't hardly know, or worked with, or worked for, or they working for me, or with me.

I was born in Bogalusa. I was small, about two months old [when I moved to New Orleans].

I call this my home. I really don't know nothing about Bogalusa.

I was interested in music because most of the people on both sides [of my family] were interested in music. Like I say, I started off beating on these trunks, and tin pans, and everything. I was around about seven, eight, nine years old.

We weren't making any money out of this, but we got kicks, had fun like at little parties. At that time they had fish fries,

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and things make \$2, \$3. That's plenty of money anyway, [and made a] big impression for us.

I was working for a fellow called the CJK man selling this medicine. They were doing medicine shows on the street.

They offered me a job that stopped me from playing this trap drum stuff. But when I got the job, I worked with them about a month, and found out I didn't like that kind of work.

We be cracking jokes, and things; and they pop pies, and things, in my face. They'd trick, or something, about you like this pie.

Everybody crowd all around wondering if they gonna give it to me to eat. I say, 'Yeah, I like it.' So, they pitched it at me, or they smacked me in the face with something. I don't like this.

That was around [19]27, [19]28, [19]29, [19]30 in there. I got out around [19]30 then. I decided I wanted to try to do something else because I couldn't go through too many days with them.

I started to dancing. Me, Streamline Harris, and Ike were three teen dancers.

We got familiar with this dance through Bill Robinson. He played on television with Shirley Temple. That dance he does.

We practiced, and practiced, and got really good on it. So, we started getting paid for dancing....

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We sat down one day, and said we gonna make some real money. We gonna get a band, and we did.

We got "Big Battle" to play trumpet...and Charlie up here who drink so much, his brother Junior was on the drums. We had no bass player.

We would be dancing, and they would be playing music. When everything was over with the music, it just stayed in there [with me].

One night Junior was sick, and I had to play drums in his place. They liked the way I played the drums.

They told me, 'You got a good beat. You ought to try to be a musician.'

I say, 'If I can get me a set of drums, I just might play drums. I'm getting tired of dancing.'

I really wanted to play music, but I learned how to dance, and everything. I struggled up to get a piece of drum here, a head there.

No one give you a hand [carrying the drums. They were all] taking their own stuff. They said, 'I don't want to fool with those drums.'

But [they] say, 'You play too well not to play something. But when he said something, I said, 'Do you think I can learn how to play piano? I don't have to tote nothing there. It's already here.' He said, 'I don't know, I'll help you.'

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I done so good, Sullivan Rock walked in. He was a blues piano player.

He said, 'Come on boy, let me show you how to play a fine gut boogie-woogie, so you have something to play to begin.'

They were always kidding one another about getting one another's music. They always figure they played better than the other.

When he said that, that was really when I wanted to learn anyhow because Brother Montgomery was a friend of mine. He was really the composer of "Pine Top Boogie Woogie," but Sullivan Rock could play it better than he could.

I learned the boogie woogie. I learned the boogie woogie, and I said this is easy to play.

I can play, and put them together myself; first, second, and third change. I know they have the four bars, a distant measurement.

I said I can learn music, but by the time you learn music you can get too old to play. If you lucky enough to learn music in-between, you got it made.

I had always been told, whether you can play or not, if you can read, you can make money, and I believe it now. I truly believe it now.

No matter how good you are, you can't make nothing. But if you can read, you can make a living.

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Like the old professors didn't enjoy this kind of music we playing...They didn't cotton to it, didn't recognize it.

After playing the piano a while, I started running into bad pianos, and things. I decided I was going to try to learn how to play something else. That was around [19]34-[19]35, something like that.

I used to get the cat's guitar. They didn't have the electric guitar then.

I caught on the guitar in one key, "C." Anything we play we had to get in "C" because that's all I knew.

My fingers started getting corns, getting sore. I went back to the piano, and I just stuck with that.

I tried practically everything--harmonica, juice harp, drum, guitar. I think I'll stay on the piano, and learn what I got to learn from this as much as possible, I can out of it.

They call me such a great piano player. I wanted to play so bad, I didn't care if they had [18 keys out of the piano?], I get some kind of sound out of it. It was fun.

Once I was playing on just a glass, and we was having fun, just the sound. So I stuck with the piano as long as I could, and lately I quit, but keep up that way....

That name [Professor Longhair] came from playing down at the Caldonia Inn. That was around [19]47-[19]48.

[Alice Byrd says around 1945]. No, in [19]45, I was running

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this restaurant for Junior Hite [?]. I didn't quit dancing yet.

When Junior Hite brought this piano player downstairs, they used to play hymns for his mother-in-law. She was sick.

She liked "Closer Walk With Thee" so well that I used to have to play that...She was a sick woman.

I could play what I wanted after I played that for her. That's really where I really started putting what I wanted together [at] Junior Hite. I left him about [19]46.

(Baby sounds, and noisy background throughout.)

Let me tell you about when they started calling me Professor Longhair. We were down here at the Caldonia Inn playing [with] Bixley, and Apeman Black was on saxophone.

I had this little kid with me like I said little Papoose, Walter Nelson. It was week four.

I had long hair then. Slick had his hair long, but it wasn't quite as long as mine. My hair was so long, I was wearing that bib [i.e., bandanna], you know. In them days it really was long.

Anyway, [I was about to teaching these fellows how to play.] Mike said, 'Well, I'm going to keep y'all. I want to keep this band. What name are y'all gonna have?'

And [Mike started] calling me Professor Longhair...He said, 'I'm going to name y'all the Four Hair Combo--Professor Longhair, Professor No Hair, Professor Need Some Hair, Professor Ain't Got No Hair.'

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That's how I got the idea of ain't got no hair, "Bald Head." That song from I ain't got no hair because, really, Black's head was bald. It was shaved. We was laughing at his head.

It all just came to his attention - you know how fun can come up - and that's when the name of Professor Longhair was previewed.

Before that, they were calling me "Little Loving Henry." I used to get beat up a lot because the fellows really believed in the name, and they didn't want their girlfriends or girls around me because of that name.

I would stand out. 'What's your name?' 'Little Loving Henry.' You see, the girls they would move out.

I met a lot of country kickers, bottle neck players like Chet Atkins. I don't know whether you call him a country man. He's good.

He was with me on that trip when I went and played with Chet Atkins. I think it was up in Shreveport.

We drove up there, and that's the only job I ever made any money on to tell you the truth about it....[It was 19]55, [19]56, somewhere's in there.

I mean, they offered me \$100 a night, free rent, and no food, or nothing, to buy. No cutting corners, or situations, when I got there, and I did get more nights than what they offered me. Everybody enjoyed it so well....

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Frank [PL's wife] never did get out to much with me. I never felt good enough to even invite her because I wasn't doing nothing.

If she was going, she'd have to sit up like a zombie. I couldn't buy her a coke, not even a sandwich. I was doing bad enough without bringing her along to let her see.

Some women if they see you're not doing something say, 'Look, I can't go with you with this.' So as long as they don't see, they never know how you're suffering, what you're taking, or nothing giving you the ability to go along until you get tired.

I was getting tired, but I didn't want no help. I wanted to get tired on my own which I did. Every chance I got on something that I knew was real, and I didn't have to worry about it, felt like I didn't have to worry about it, I would carry her along.

I wanted to take her on this trip to L.A. How I went: they had to send me transportation. They weren't going to send me no transportation for two, and she didn't play nothing.

If I had to drive up there, I would have taken her with me, and I'm glad that I didn't. The job didn't turn out like they said it was going to be.

I was hurted in it, felt disgusted, and bad, about it. I didn't have her to worry about getting back home.

I didn't go out. I didn't spend nothing, kept whatever they paid me, and it wasn't enough not even to get back home.

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HM thinks people on the West Coast now are trying to make music what it should be. Even down here people are playing a little for free, just getting that good will spread around as much as they can.

People playing free all the time, HM continues. Music ought to be something everybody can enjoy. If you like the music enough, go ahead, and why should you charge for it.

Now, on the West Coast people are playing a whole lot for free. They're making more than if they charged for it because after they play free, they say, now we played free for y'all, and we didn't want any money. If you want to give us something, go on, and give it. They were making real good money.

I'd say in the next couple of years, HM continues, there's going to be a whole lot of interest in the music of the [19]50's. People are doing so much music today, the young people.

Something that's different [comes] out. They taking any sound they can get their hands on, and [are] putting it out.

They make 16 sides on a record based on one little thing where 10, 15 years ago it would have been all those things in one song. A lot of people in the next couple of years [will be] going back to that music people are doing in their 40's, and 50's, and stuff.

PL says he sits down, and tells himself, he believes that is going to happen. All these old blues, like Lowell Fulson, Muddy

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Water, and Cleanhead Vinson.

Those are really [the blues]. They're not just somebody helped them up there. They got up there for what they knew, what they were doing, and how the people enjoyed it.

I even enjoyed it, PL notes. If I enjoy it, he's got something to offer.

Like I say, I enjoy all kinds of music. Just tell me what you're playing, and what it's based upon.

Like Dixieland, I really love Dixieland. I want to get in with them when the spirit hits me. That's the parade street beat, and it's harmony.

I love ballads like Solomon Burke. I like...Ray Charles does a few ballads too, and Sam Cooke.

I met [Ray Charles] down here, oh so many of them. "Monkey Something Going On," "Got the Whole World Shaking."

I wasn't for singing too much until I used to sit down, and listen to Louis Jourdan. He was the big fellow out here then because all these rhymes, and things, people are doing now in songs he was doing then. "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens," and "Down By The Hen House," and this, that, and the other one.

I say I'm going to learn how to sing. I started practicing songs behind his voice instead of just music alone.

Then I met Ray Charles down here Dumaine and Rampart. That's when I created that song "Mardi Gras In New Orleans."

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I made a few ballads from him. When he was rehearsing with that "I Got a Woman," I grabbed it and had it.

But now, the things he's playing now, I like them alright. There ain't nothing wrong with them, but I enjoyed him more when he was himself.

[Walter Nelson,] that's Papoose, he's dead. Walter Nelson Sr. is still living. They way down there around St. Philip and St. Claude.

You ever go around to the Caldonia Inn around that section, try to mention musicians that still around there because Al Toussaint got a little studio around there. They still think they got a chance.

If you meet the right people in this that don't mind letting you live - I don't say even treat you fair, but let you live - you can make it. You can get a little something out of this. You have to get a little something out of this so you can live.

I got seven children. At least I had seven, one died. And I got a bunch of grandchildren. I need to seek them out in different ways. All got to live together to make it. We got about four families right in here....

HM speaks about a female singer who was good, but who can't perform because she can't stop smoking. She sang Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith songs, but her voice is gone.

This cigarette here, PL notes, I keep switching brands. I

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don't enjoy the other brands. Kool don't taste like nothing to me no more.

These will make me cough, too, so I know right then it's messing with my lungs. I believe the cigarettes can really be a harm.

Nicotine in them is no good. You can draw this right through a piece of white cloth and see the stain.

HM agrees they're bad for you. I can't stop smoking either, HM says. I smoke camels.

Get your nerves, PL says. You can quit. HM quit for about four, or five, months, and couldn't stand it.

If you notice, you get a bad cold, PL says, and you lose the taste for these. The minute you got depressed, you grab for these....