

WILLIAM "BABA" RIDGLEY
I [of 4] --Digest--Retyped
April 7, 1961

Also present: Richard B. Allen
Dave Dutcher

(Interview recorded at 9005 Edinburgh, New Orleans, Louisiana)

William "Baba" Ridgley first played bass violin; then he played trombone and last, drums; he quit playing when he lost his health.

DD, who has had formal instruction in trombone playing, asks "Baba" Ridgley what he was thinking about when he played Dixieland trombone in the old days; BR explains that most of the old-time trombone players either didn't read music or read music very little, and that they made up their parts, playing bass notes mostly, , or a "slide" [i.e., glissando], with an occasional small solo; they "faked" their parts, relying on their ears to tell them what to play. BR, Kid Ory, Jack Carey, Frankie Duson and Willie Cornish read little if any; Buddy Johnson was a reader, but his brother, Yank Johnson, was not; Vic Gaspard was a reader. The music played then was almost exclusively "made up" [i.e., ad libbed]; if the musicians could figure out the melody from an orchestration, they would make up the other parts, [so apparently at least some of the "jazz" tunes were available in print, but the jazz musicians didn't rely on them for the harmony and/or accompanying parts--PRC]. BR says "When The Saints [Go Marching In]" was a Baptist hymn, and didn't appear as a written arrangement. He says [Alphonse] Picou took the piccolo part of a piece written perhaps by [John Philip] Sousa, or some other great writer, and

made a clarinet part of it; BR doesn't know what the original piece was called, but the result was called "High Society" [original was called "High Society", composed by Porter Steele, arranged by Robert Recker, copyright 1901--in Robichaux Sheet Music Collection (not filed or cataloged yet, June 9, 1966--PRC)]. Picou, George Baquet and Lorenzo Tio [Jr.] (the latter of a family of clarinetists) were the ones who could play the clarinet part Picou developed. Tio played with [A. J.] Piron; BR says Tio also played with his brass band and orchestra, the [Original] Tuxedo; BR explains that he took care of the Tuxedo orchestra, and that [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin took care of the Tuxedo brass band; the musicians were [much] the same in both organizations.

Talk of flutter tongue technique; BR says he thinks Jack Carey, who could double and triple tongue, was first to use flutter tongue. BR says Carey was about the same age as himself. He says he and his contemporaries had no idea that a trombone could be played as [facilely] as it is today.

BR explains to DD that the trombone part was fundamentally a bass part, but that the trombone sometimes filled in open spots, played harmony with another horn, or sometimes took the lead [i.e., played the melody], although the cornet usually had the lead. He says Louis Armstrong had a wonderful ear and was good at playing harmony parts. BR says "Maryland, My Maryland" was a good piece for trombone lead [in the trio--PRC]. A clarinetist

named Zeb Leneries, who worked with BR, had the ability to learn melodies quickly from records and the ability to help the other musicians in the band make up their own parts. It took the band from two to five hours to learn a tune; after they learned it, they always played it the same way, just as it was on the record. Mutt Carey would sometimes make up tunes on the job; he would teach them to the band, and they would play the tunes before the job was over. Buddy Petit was also good at making up tunes like that.

BR was not a high note trombonist; he could play as high as B flat (above middle C); Honore Dutrey and Eddie Atkins could play quite high, much higher than BR. DD says that Dickie [same as Rick?] Nelson, trombonist with [Bob] Scobey, can play quite high. Kid Ory was not such a high note man, but "he had a-plenty stuff with it."

Talk of what BR would play on trombone in various situations, and of what the other instruments would play. BR apparently has some knowledge of harmony, being able to play chords on the piano.

Talk of bands on [advertising] wagons meeting and playing against one another. He emphasizes the need to improvise.

WILLIAM "BABA" RIDGLEY
II [OF 4] --Digest--Retyped
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BR talks about some of the elements of his style of trombone playing; Jack Carey is mentioned. BR says the trombonists of yesterday were ^{not} technically as accomplished as those of today. DD asks about the general or usual range of BR's playing.

BR says his band played mostly two beats to the measure until Davy Jones joined the band; Jones had "been up the line a long time"; he got the band to playing four beats to the measure, or faster. BR had played with Jones on the Streckfus steamers for a while; BR returned to New Orleans when [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin, working at the Suburban Garden, sent for him, and as he could make more money at the Suburban Garden, BR left the boat. The band continued playing four beats after Jones left the band; the people liked the rhythm better than with only two beats.

Talk continues about "Maryland, My Maryland", and about BR's thoughts as he would be playing it [or any other tune]. Talk of the routines of tunes. There were few changes of key.

"Maple Leaf Rag" is mentioned; BR's band didn't play it much; it required a good clarinet player; BR's band didn't use the "Red Back Book." RBA says the Superior Band, led by bass player Billy Morand [i.e., Marrero] played from the Red Back Book. BR's band listened to and used arrangements recorded by other bands; they listened to "every one [band] that had a good record; every one that had something that the people liked." They used some of

WILLIAM "BABA" RIDGLEY
II [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
April 7, 1961

5

the [Original] Dixieland [Jazz Band]'s recordings, and some of Paul Whiteman's. BR tells of one of the tunes featured by his band; it was called "Hoye [or Whoa] Nellie" [spelling?]. [Compare Paul Whiteman, ^{"Whoa! Nellie"} Vi 19641]. BR liked "Down Home Rags [i.e., Rag.]" which they [Tuxedo Orchestra?] recorded as "Tuxedo Stomp" [actually, ^{actually "Black Rag" (WS Schaffer - 6/11/74)} "Original Tuxedo Rag"]. Others the band recorded were "Careless Love", "Hoye Nellie", and "Black Rag."

BR's band got along very well. They had two good banjo players [one at the time]; Tom Benton, banjo, also sang and was a good "head" piano player; John Marrero was the other good banjo player. "Sweet Emma" [Barrett] also played [piano] with the band. Mrs. Caroline Benjamin, [now?] living at St. Charles and Joseph, help BR's band get a lot of good work because she and other young girls liked the way Emma Barrett acted while playing piano. The girls sat in with the band several times when they played at the Harmony Club, which was located at Jackson and St. Charles [avenues]; they played the various rhythm instruments. Hugh Evans, president of D. H. Holmes Department Store, often sat in on drums with the band. RBA says Harry Souchon told him that Evans took lessons from [Abbey] "Chinee" [Foster].

BR says his band practiced everything they played; if something didn't sound good at rehearsal, they wouldn't use it on a job. The band members grew to know what to expect from the other members; they knew they could depend on one another to

WILLIAM "BABA" RIDGLEY
II [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
April 7, 1961

6

play the same way every time. Discussion of improvisation. ✓

Buddy Petit is mentioned. Mutt Carey is mentioned. Both had the talent of being able to make up the parts for the rest of the musicians, as well as for themselves.

End of Reel II

WILLIAM "BABA" RIDGLEY
 III [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
 April 7, 1961

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Jack Carey was a good "routine" [i.e., played by ear] trombone player; he could tongue rapidly, and was a good "singer" on his instrument. Carey was the first around New Orleans to play "Tiger Rag," but he got it from the recording made by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. ^{cf.} [Jack Laine, reel ?] BR doesn't really remember how Carey sounded as it has been thirty(or forty) years since he heard Carey play.

BR has been a church member for many years; he is a steward in his small Methodist church, and sings in the choir.

BR didn't allow smoking or drinking on the stand in his band.

Tom[my] Ridgley is BR's nephew; [Tommy Ridgley is leader of a popular local band--PRC].

BR says he hopes he will be remembered after he is dead.

RBA says a copy of BR's record of "Careless Love" and "Original Tuxedo Rag" [with the Original Tuxedo Band] is in the ^{ma Stitz} museum at Jackson Square; there is also a picture of BR with Fate [Marable]'s band, taken on the boat [S.S. Capitol?]; [See The Baby Dodds Story As Told To Larry Gora, p. 98.] BR was in the first colored band to leave New Orleans and go to St. Louis to play [for the Streckfus Steamers company]; Louis Armstrong and George ["Pops"] Foster were also in the band [led by Fate Marable].

[New Orleans jazz] music was called Dixieland after the Original Dixieland Jazz Band became famous; before that time, it had been called ragtime, which is what Bunk Johnson called it, according to RBA.

Punch [Miller] is back in New Orleans; RBA says he is still playing, but is playing ^{more or less} a be bop style now.

"Red", trombonist, took BR's place when BR quit playing; "Red" went through New Orleans every year, playing with a traveling circus band; "Red" replaced BR, using BR's trombone, which he never returned.

RBA mentions that [Abbey] "Chinee" [Foster] played slide whistle on the recording of "Careless Love" made by BR's band with Celestin. BR's mentions "Chinee's" trick of shouting into his snare drum to obtain a particular effect.

Talk of mutes BR used with his trombone. Trombonist Louis Nelson and his tea-kettle mute ^{are} mentioned. Chris Kelly, trumpet, couldn't read; "Mutt" Carey [trumpet] was not a good reader, nor was [clarinetist] "Big Eye" Louis Nelson. RBA says Chris Kelly used a rubber toilet flusher for a mute.

Most of the work BR's band played was for whites; he says they might not play for colored once in six months, and that the colored would say they just didn't want to play for colored; BR says that was not so, that they had so much work for whites they just didn't have any time left. BR's band played for the Boston Club; they also played every year for the Twelfth Night Revelers affair, on January 6.

BR's first trombone had a trill valve, in addition to the slide.

BR was born January 15, 1882, on Sundown [i.e., Sundorn--PRC] Street, which is near Causeway [Boulevard] in Jefferson Parish. BR, who has cut cane himself, talks about the cane cutters; he says the songs they sang were frequently the "good old Baptist hymns." BR says the cane cutters seldom sang blues; he says hymns came before blues.

BR had a variety of jobs.

BR was about twenty-five years old when he took up his first instrument, bass violin; he first studied with Professor Jim Humphrey, who came every Sunday to teach BR and several other boys; after a while, Humphrey had BR change to slide trombone. The members of the first band BR played in were: Frank Hill, cornet; his brother, John Hill, bass violin; Louis Drayton [spelling?], clarinet; Simon Brown, [banjo?]; Jordon Scott, drums. While still living in Jefferson Parish, BR played with the Silver Leaf Band, which was under the direction of Albert Batiste; BR's first job with that band was in the Washington Artillery Hall, which he thinks was on St. Charles ^{Street [sic]}. BR played the job mentioned three times a week; he was playing bass violin at the time. After leaving Batiste's [Silver Leaf] band, BR and Celestin organized the [Original] Tuxedo Jazz Band. Celestin left the band a couple of times. BR says he had an assistant cornet player named Hypolite Charles; Charles now lives in St. Martinsville [Louisiana] where he owns a grocery store. The first band BR played with, in Jefferson

Parish, was just a student band which didn't become good enough to take any professional jobs. BR's first [professional] job was the Silver Leaf. The Silver Leaf Band didn't fake much; they were good enough readers to play the music used then which wasn't very hard. Sam Dutrey, Sr., brother of [trombonist] Honore Dutrey, was clarinetist in the band. Another Dutrey brother, Peter, was a barber, but also played violin; he was not a regular member of any band.

End of Reel III

Also present: Richard B. Allen

BR remembers playing quadrilles⁴ one time, on a special occasion, for one of the colored clubs in New Orleans; he says quadrilles were not part of the popular music of his time.

The Original Tuxedo Band got its name at the suggestion of Sim Black, a leader of a Boy Scout troop in New Orleans; BR had band headquarters at a pressing shop on Howard Avenue between Dryades and Baronne; the pressing shop did a lot of work for the Boy Scouts; Sim Black liked the BR band; he said the band should dress in tuxedos, etc., and call themselves the Original Tuxedo Band which they did. The band even played for the particular Boy Scout troop in Kentwood when the troop was encamped there. The band got much work through Sim Black and through their association with the Boy Scout troop.

BR mentions trumpeter Louis Prima, who followed BR's band around New Orleans when he was a youngster.

BR mentions some of the jobs his band played, including one in a chair which could hold the entire band simultaneously, and one in an airplane, for Gates Aerial Circus; the latter job was on Friday, June 13, 1924. The band was the first to play music in the air. BR's band played many other jobs at many locations, including a nine-month (approximately) stint at Tranchina's Restaurant, after [A. J.] Piron's band had left [to go to New York].

Henry Lambert was in the first band BR was in, the one taught by [Jim] Humphrey; Lambert originally played tuba, but he began playing string bass in the band when BR began playing trombone; Lambert was from Jefferson Parish; BR says Lambert's son, who doesn't play music, still lives around the same neighborhood. The elder Lambert had played in Jefferson Parish for funerals and other functions for which brass bands play with George Moret and others, but when he began playing in a string [i.e., dance] band, he played with BR; when BR left Jefferson to come to New Orleans, Lambert formed his own string band. Lambert played with old-time brass bands such as the Excelsior and the Onward.

Frank Welch, cornet, taught BR and the others [in Jefferson Parish?]; he was also the first [chronologically] cornet player with the Albert Batiste band, playing at the Washington Artillery Hall. His son, Joe Welch, was a drummer, but BR thinks he has quit playing. The elder Welch died years ago. Frank Welch played with bands before he played with BR; he played with brass bands, too. Frank Welch wanted to quit playing cornet, so he told BR and the Silver Leaf Band to get [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin; that was BR's first contact with Celestin.

Manuel Perez, cornet, is mentioned. Manuel Manetta, once known as a fine pianist, is mentioned.

Some of the members of the Silver Leaf Band, other than BR, were Albert Batiste, leader and violin; George Sayles (father of Emanuel Sayles), guitar and viola; Oscar Robinson, bass violin.

IV [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
April 7, 1961

George Sayles didn't play banjo. RBA and RB mentions guitarists who switched to six-string banjo; among those who played with BR were ~~Bud~~ Johnny St. Cyr, John Marrero and Louis Keppard. The drummer in the Silver Leaf Band when BR was in it was Ernest Rogers; RBA heard him at Luthjen's, playing with "Big Eye Louis" [Nelson, clarinet], "Big" [Alcide] Landry [trumpet] and Benny Turner, piano, who was later replaced by Louis Gallaud.

BR played a long time at the 101 Ranch where tips were good; those in the band were: Jean Vigne, piano (son or father of Jean Vigne, drums); Celestin, cornet; [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.], clarinet; Louis Cottrell [Sr.], drums; BR, trombone.

End of Reel IV