

HANDY, SYLVESTER
Reel I [of 2]
Dec. 13, 1961

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Also present: William Russell

Interview recorded at SH's home, 1825 Carnot Street, New Orleans.

Sylvester George Handy was born Sept. 8, ~~1903~~ in Pass Christian, Mississippi; ^{he is now 58 [years old]. [Cf. other data.]} he has lived in New Orleans since 1927. All his family were musical; his father, John Handy, Sr., played all instruments, including violin, mandolin and guitar, all by ear. "He was just a genius, but not with notes." His mother played by notes; in church circles she was known as Mother Richards; WR recalls having heard her at a church when SH, John Handy, Jr., Kid Howard, [Melvin Lastie] and Julius Handy (another brother who played guitar) played there. [See photograph by Lee Friedlander.] The name Mother Richards came from the mother's married name; she married a preacher named Richards; "that was the second time my mother have been married in her life; my father, he was married one time in life." She played piano; "she was a piano genius." She first played in Pass Christian. She played [reed] organ before she played piano, as they didn't have pianos then [in Negro churches in Pass Christian?]. She promoted the placement of the first piano in the Good Will Baptist Church on Davis Avenue (in Pass Christian). A Mrs. Fields took over SH's mother's musical duties at the Good Will Baptist Church when the mother left.

Albert Alexander built floats similar to the ones used in Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans; the Handy musicians played in the parades; Pass Christian was the town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast which had Mardi Gras floats. SH says, "I guess that was in 1901 or 1902; we had regular Carnival there just like we have here,

floats and all..."

John Handy [Jr.] learned clarinet and sax, SH learned bass violin, and the youngest brother [Julius Handy] learned guitar. "We was all musicianers from birth." There were three boys in the family (Eugene, Julius' twin, died when he was eight years old) and one girl (another girl child had died when quite small); the girl played piano. Four of the family [the children?] are still together.

Tom Albert, violin and cornet, brought John Handy, "clarinet wizard," from Pass Christian to New Orleans, [where Handy played in Albert's band and lived in Albert's home].

SH was brought to New Orleans for an operation for appendicitis. He recuperated at the home of his mother and sister in the Carrollton section. Afterward he got a job preparing automobiles for repainting. SH met many musicians, including Kid Rena, Kid Punch [Miller] and Buddy Petit.

SH was a self-taught on bass violin.

When SH's father had band rehearsals at his home in Pass Christian, Selby Thomas had a bass violin SH wanted, but he wasn't able to get it. Before SH took up bass, he would make bass sounds by rubbing his finger with the rung of a chair; WR says "Slow Drag" [Pavageau] did that for him once. "And my father and them, they would call a rehearsal, and as they would call a rehearsal, and when the bass player would get up to go to the bathroom or somewhere, well, I'd get up and I'd finger with his violin., And I began to catch on more and more and more and more and more and more. Well, after then, well, I become to like it, and still love it, and I don't think I'll ever hate it."

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SH's father had all kinds of musical instruments at the home; SH took up drums at one point; he also played trombone for a while; he returned to bass violin, which he still plays. He also played baritone tuba f [i. e., horn?] for a time. Booker [Washington?], a bass player who worked at the Budweiser [dance hall], taught SH how to read bass clef music; Booker is now dead; he didn't work at the Budweiser at the time Walter Decou killed [Butler] "Guyé" [Rapp]. SH also worked at the Budweiser for a long time.

SH's first bass violin was homemade from a soap box. He, Julius Handy, guitar and John Handy, [jr.], mandolin, had a trio which played every Wednesday at the Miramar Hotel in Pass Christian. A man and his wife danced the cakewalk, accompanied by the trio, as a regular part of the presentation. The trio serenaded people in their homes on other nights. SH says they made more money than in later years. Three cousins of SH also played in the serenading band.

In New Orleans, SH was worked with Kid Punch, Kid Rena, and with Louis Armstrong; SH explains that he sat in with Armstrong when Armstrong returned to New Orleans from Chicago [in 1931?]. SH also worked with Sidney Desvigne for years.

SH says he had decided to quit playing when he moved to New Orleans; he had left his bass in Pass Christian. A group called the Rhapsodians, a twelve-piece band, persuaded him to join them; Beansy [Fauria] volunteered to see that SH got a bass. SH worked at least once a week for Beansy, so Beansy deducted a certain amount of money each week from SH's pay. The

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Rhapsodians worked at the Astoria and at the San Jacinto [Club].
Jerry Green succeeded SH on bass with the Rhapsodians; he used
the instrument SH had played; when the band broke up years later,
SH got the instrument back. After being with the Rhapsodians,
SH played with Kid Rena, with Papa Celestin, and with [Henri]
"Kildee" [Holloway]. SH also worked with the Morgan brothers,
Andrew, Sam and Isaiah.

End of Reel I.

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Also present: William Russell

SH has recorded in recent years for WR [and others: with Kid Clayton, issued on Folkways Music of New Orleans Vol. III. He has also recorded with Babe Stovall, John Handy, John Henry McNeil, and his own band. RBA.] SH recorded years ago with Smiley Dewis or Smiling Joe [Pleasant Joseph]. He has played with Gilbert Young. WR reminds SH that he has recorded with Joe Robichaux; he also traveled ~~with~~ with Robichaux throughout Texas. SH recorded with Robichaux at a studio at Dumaine and North Rampart (WR says it was the J and M Studio), and with the Rhapsodians at WWL ~~radio~~ radio station. None of the records were issued. Some of the members of the Rhapsodians: Cary Lavigne, alto sax, a very young man; "Little Johnny," trumpet, a very young man who played sweet trumpet, lives uptown, and is still on the road; Waldron "Frog" Joseph, trombone; "Lucky," trumpet, who had "a long steeple head" and could play higher than Louis Armstrong. SH thinks Earl [Roach? Wiggins?] played piano; he has a portable piano now. Jimmy [Davis?] played guitar; it was made of steel, constructed something like a banjo, but was shaped more like a bass violin.

Other men SH has played with include [George] "[Kid] Sheik" [Colar], [Edgar] "Sambo" [Joseph] (who plays very loud), and [Henri] "Kildee" [Holloway].

SH plays bass left-handed, but his bass is strung right-handed. He can't play Narvin Kimball's bass, although Kimball also plays left-handed, because Kimball's is strung left-handed. SH plays his bass strung right-handed because he learned to play

on Selby Thomas' bass, and Thomas was right-handed. SH has played both bowed bass and pizzicato; he now plays only pizzicato, although he likes bowing. Talk of the "inconvenience" of bass violins. Talk of folding bass violins and pianos. SH doesn't like electric bass guitars.

SH encourages WR to come to a bar on Sumpter Street, which is the next street from SH's [Carnot Street], to hear a band of youngsters who will play on Friday nights from 9 p.m. until midnight.

WR mentions Fump and Mannie's place on Tchoupitoulas [and Lyons Streets], where he once heard Kid Howard. SH doesn't know the names of many of the places where he has played, but he says he has played all over the city of New Orleans and has played with everybody. SH worked with drummer Earl Foster, from Mandeville. WR says Andy Anderson, trumpet, was raised in the same area; SH worked with him, too; Anderson works with John Casimir [in the Young Tuxedo Brass Band and Orchestra] now, says WR.

WR mentions a man possibly named Tunstall who made cylinder recordings. [Cf. John Handy, Reel ?]. SH has very slight recollection of these cylinder recordings.

The trio in Pass Christian [see Reel I] played sweet music including "Old Black Joe" for dinner patrons. They would play sweet music or jazz of the period when serenading people in their homes. SH talks [inconclusively, and in a rambling manner] about the music played for dances in his father's time, and of the types of dances; he mentions the quadrille and shimmy-sha-wabble dances.

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When SH was playing with his father, his father's band played all types of music; they played jazz; SH says there has been jazz ever since he was a baby. SH doesn't see much difference in jazz then and jazz now. He says jazz came from the country, not from New Orleans; he says every jazz band came from the country. "Jazz is brought from some origination just from motherwit; it's not from writing of music; it's brought from motherwit from somebody from some far country [i. e., from somebody from far out in the country?]; wherever it is in the big cities, it wasn't rared up there." SH says church music had a lot to do with jazz. He says the piano players in the churches today play as much jazz as piano players outside the church do. The church piano players play sentimental things with a blues touch. Blues and jazz feeling came from the country. SH's mother played piano with blues and jazz feeling. [After the tape ran out, SH said, "The choir would sing better and more back of her (his mother) tthan others."]

End of Reel II

