

SAMMY PENN
I [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
April 21, 1960

Also present: William Russell
Manuel Paul
Ralph Collins
[Tape speed varies.]

Samuel Hughes Penn was born September 15, 1902 in Morgan City, Louisiana, the only musician in his family. The first band he played with was managed by Jake Johnson; the band played "swing", both reading and faking, but not Dixieland. [Anachronistic use of term "swing." What does he mean?RBA.] SP describes his first drum set and sticks--a tub bass drum, cheese box snare drum and sticks made by Johnson, who also taught him how to get started playing drums. A brass band in which SP played was made up of players from Morgan City and from Berwick, Louisiana, across the river from Morgan City; the band was seven to eight players, consisting of clarinet, two trumpets, trombone, baritone horn, bass drum and snare drum (SP on snare). SP was about thirteen years old at the time, as were the rest of the band members; the band was the only one in that section; SP says they would go to play in other towns nearby, on holidays. Jake Johnson orchestra played for dances; there was another band around, that of Ezekiel Mack, of Berwick. Johnson, now dead, was the oldest man in his band, about five or six years older than SP. (SP's first sticks were made from chair rounds [rungs]). Johnson, a string bassist, was no relation to "Toot" Johnson [bandleader] of Baton Rouge. SP learned to play drums by listening to other drummers. Another band, led by two brothers, was from Crowley, Louisiana; SP sat in with them when they came to Morgan City. Discussing music and styles [names of], SP says he didn't know anything about Dixieland until he came to New Orleans, that the [hot] music they played in

his town was called jazz; the band also played other types of dance music. SP studied trombone for a little while, but soon went back to drums. His first set of good drums was bought for him by Chester Morrison, an uncle from the country. SP explains about his trombone lessons and instrument, saying that he used a horn belonging to a neighbor. SP does occasionally play [Louis Nelson's] trombone. SP describes drum sets of the time, and the later drums his uncle bought.

A New Orleans band which occasionally came to Morgan City was that of Jules Barnes, trombonist and manager of the band; SP, about 18 years old at the time, was allowed to sit in with the band, and was encouraged by Barnes to come to New Orleans; SP did eventually come to New Orleans, when he was about twenty-two years old. [Compare Tom Albert, reel?] He was introduced around the city by Barnes, and worked with him occasionally. SP was afraid, at first, that he wasn't good enough to play with the New Orleans bands; however, he worked with Barnes for a time, and was asked to be the regular drummer in that band. SP had been talking to Buddy Petit, whom he had met through Barnes, and decided to join him instead; SP became more confident during the time with Petit. SP was with Barnes about three years before joining Petit. Some of the others in the Barnes band with SP were: Edmond Washington, alto sax and clarinet; Mutt Carey, brother of trombonist Jack Carey, trumpet; Zeb [Leneries], described by SP as a nice fellow and a good clarinetist; Tom

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Harris, [string] bass (SP can't remember the name of the banjo player) [probably Clarence "Little Dad" Vincent--PRC]. [Compare other interviews for date of Mutt Carey's leaving New Orleans, that is, Alfred Williams]. When SP was with Petit, the band worked at the Fair Grounds, and at advertising jobs on the streets, among others; SP was with Petit a long time, being with him when Petit had his first stroke. SP talks about advertising jobs. Willie Cornish was the trombonist in the Petit band when SP was a member. SP doesn't remember the name of the clarinetist; it was not Georgie Boyd, who did work some with Petit, nor was it Zeb, who also played some with Petit, with [Kid] Rena, and with a lot of bands, but not regularly in any band, being a free-lance musician. Petit was a wonderful musician, a particularly fine 2nd trumpet player. He couldn't play as well after his first stroke, but the band, including SP, still traveled, going to Chicago and Texas, among other places. SP was still playing with Petit when he had his fatal stroke, dying in Covington, Louisiana. Petit was about the same age as SP. SP was with Petit about five years, three years before his first stroke and two years after, until his death. Petit only played second trumpet when he was in a band other than his own, in one where there was a lead trumpet; SP says Petit played a long time with Kid Thomas [Valentine], over the river at Specks' [Rodriguez--Moulin Rouge--dates may not jibe--PRC]; WR says Thomas has commented on Petit's wonderful second trumpet parts. SP compares Petit's style with that of Punch [Miller]. Petit used mutes often, especially

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his derby hat. Both he and Chris Kelly played cornets, not trumpets. Kid Thomas "is about the only one I know" that uses a glass as a mute. Kid Rena also used mutes, very much; SP played with Rena only when Rena's brother [Joe René(sic)] could not play the job. After Petit died, the band began to get less work, so it broke up. SP joined Chris Kelly.

End of Reel I

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Also present: William Russell
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When Buddy Petit died, SP joined Chris Kelly; SP liked playing with Kelly because he had a lot of advertising jobs in the street. Some others in the Kelly band were Zeb [Leneries], from time to time, [Willie] Cornish on trombone; Kelly used two trumpets sometimes, usually hiring (Dominique]"'Ti' Boy" Remy (at one time leader of the Eureka Brass Band), Remy playing second.

SP used to play a lot of parades; he played with John Casimir, and with Willie Cornish; he always played snare drum, never bass. SP liked parades, except at Carnival time, when he had to play from the very beginning to the end, never getting a rest; other times weren't so hard. SP picked up a street beat from a show drummer playing a parade for a showboat which had come to New Orleans. The showboats sometimes had white bands and sometimes colored bands. There is talk of street drums, and of how they are supported when being played. The last parade SP played was about four years ago, on Carnival [Day], with [Anderson?] Minor's band; the trombonist with SP [in Kid Thomas' band], [Louis] Nelson, persuaded him to play that one.

Manuel Paul mentions Mack Dorsey's Footwarmers; SP played with that band soon after coming to New Orleans, after [and perhaps during] his time with Jules Barnes. Dorsey's band, a good one, played country towns, not like the bands SP worked in when he became good. The band had a good trumpet player, now dead, who SP thinks was a relative of Percy Humphrey. Jules Barnes sometimes played trombone in the Dorsey band.

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SP worked at a place where two bands played for dancing on Sunday and Monday nights; the place was National Park, which was either at Third and Willow, where the Thomy Lafon school is now located, or [on Prieur between Third and Fourth] where the Hoffman school is now located. [It is the Edgar P. Harney at Third and Willow. RBA.] SP also played at the Fair Grounds, where two bands were used. SP was playing with Buddy Petit at the time he worked National Park; the other bands might be that of [Kid] Rena or of Chris Kelly. There is talk about the dancing at the Fair Grounds--a discussion of the operating procedure [apparently the Negroes danced under the grandstand and in the open air also. The dances were regularly scheduled].

Drummers SP admired and liked to hear were "Red Happy" [Bolton] and [Abby] "Chinee" [Foster], both of whom worked [at one time or another] at the Lyric Theater; SP also liked [Christopher] "Black Happy" [Goldston], and Alfred Williams; Williams worked with the best bands in New Orleans (SP says Williams is just back from [several years] in California [Texas?]) [Williams died in 1964--PRC].

SP's livelihood was strictly from music until after his marriage; he even went to Chicago playing music for the Missouri-Pacific Railroad one week after his marriage, on an excursion. He explains that the practice of dancing in the baggage car was confined to short excursions (to Morgan City, for instance). He played a lot of those, too; [Kid] Thomas [Valentine] got a lot of those jobs. SP mentions that the Kid Thomas band, with SP,

played for twenty-odd years for Specks [Rodriguez, Rodrigues], in one place [Moulin Rouge]. In Chicago, SP played one night with trumpeter Lee Collins; Louis Armstrong came around and sat in [or on a subsequent night, at a banquet]. In the band with SP were [among others] Albert French, banjo, and Mike Delay, trumpet; the tenor sax player was from downtown and sold cigars for a living; Andrew Morgan played clarinet. The band was SP's named "Penn and his Five Pennies", which he had formed after he left Chris Kelly. Walter Daniel was the pianist with the band. At that time he lived on Broadway.

SP played in Lincoln and [or?] Johnson Parks; he was with Kid Rena at the time. Lincoln Park sometimes had some of the amusement park rides, while Johnson had [only?] dancing, in the pavillion there. WR mentions Professor [Manuel] Manetta, who told him about Buddy Bottlely [spelling?] and his balloon ascensions from the park[s]. National Park was almost strictly for dancing, there being dances every Sunday and Monday, and sometimes on Wednesday. Beside working there with his regular band, Buddy Petit, SP worked there with Chris Kelly some, also.

SP worked with Punnh [Miller] before Punch left New Orleans with a show; Punch was leader (SP says Punnh was a "tough" man in those days--meaning he could really play); Eddie Dorsey [that is, Dawson] was the bassist; Willie Cornish played [(valve?)trombone]: There was a pianist (since dead), but SP does not remember his name. SP has played some dances with Punch since Punch's return to New Orleans [1956], and says he was surprised that Punch still

plays well, especially after his sickness [1957]. Punch played very much like Buddy Petit.

Chris Kelly was the best blues player in the old days. He used a derby, and sometimes a [tin] can for mutes. His style was like that of Kid Rena (both also played cornet).

SP picked up his own style of shouting encouragement to the other members of the band while playing. [Compare Baby Dodds AM 10" LP No. 1 or 3]. SP began singing years ago; he had to, because there were no "songsters" in bands then. He quit singing [so much] only a few years ago.

End of Reel II

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SP sings a few songs now, but he used to sing many; he used a megaphone, and stood on one foot, while beating the bass drum with the other and using one stick on the rest of the traps. He talks about his singing across the snares of his snare drum, creating several effects. He has also used his snare drum like a guitar, stroking the snares to produce various rhythm patterns. He describes a contraption he had which could produce a sound like the roar of a lion; he says he had all sorts of things for novel effects when he was playing at the Patterson Hotel, on Rampart near Julia Street, with Punch [Miller's band]. SP describes his use of the ratchet. SP tells about the use of light-weight and heavy-weight sticks. SP talks of playing jobs on trucks; he says the drums were placed at the front of the truck [against the back of the cab]. SP talks of his use of tom toms, rim of the bass drum, etc. SP talks about his mutes [or mufflers] for his bass drum, and about tuning the bass drum to the G string of the bass, and the snare drum to C (probably).

Tom Harris, string bass (and a good one, says SP), worked some with Mack Dorsey's Footwarmers, with SP on drums; SP liked his playing, and says he was also a clown. [RBA remembers him spinning his bass at Tyler's Beer Garden with the Avery-Tillman band in 1945.] He was the first to pick his bass with the end of the bow. Babe Philip [check spellin on wife's interview (Bernice P.) string bass, who played some with Kid Thomas' band, also played that way some; Philip, recently dead, was a good bassist. WR mentions Bob Lyons.

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SP and Joe [James, piano] are long-time members of Kid Thomas's band; when SP joined, "Teet" [Check spelling] [Rouchon], now dead, was bassist; [Edmond] "Wash" [Washington], no longer with Thomas, was playing sax and clarinet. Manuel Paul has been playing tenor [sax] in the band since wartime [World War II]. [Off and on. RBA.] [Reuben] Roddy replaced the ailing "Wash." SP has been with Thomas since Thomas has had a good band. SP says Thomas has a good reputation for showing up with the same men in the band, year after year. Emile Barnes played clarinet with the Thomas band for about three years, at Specks' Moulin Rouge, in Marrero; his playing reminds SP of that of Zeb [Leneries]. MP asks about a banjo player who worked with Thomas during the war, and says Batiste [Spelling?] [Mosley] [Check obituary] was playing drums with Thomas at the time. SP was with [Willie] Cornish for a short time the, but went back with Thomas. SP says Emile Barnes is a good clarinetist, that he really likes to play with him, that he helps push [the rhythm of] the band.

MP comments on Edmond Washington, saying he is a wonderful alto sax player, that he has heard him since he [MP] was about fourteen years old, although Washington was playing clarinet then. WR and SP say Washington is also a good entertainer.

Emile Barnes is mentioned again; his sickness has had little effect on his playing, says SP. The differences between the styles of Emile and of Paul Barnes, his [younger] brother, are discussed; SP would rather play with Emile, although he says Paul [who also played at Specks' with Kid Thomas] is good.

RC asks about the use of various range registers by the clarinet; SP says the clarinet should play low sometime and high sometime, depending on what else is going on. He prefers lower register.

Kid Thomas plays soft and loud; he plays as strong at the end of a job as he does at the beginning.

End of Reel III

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SP points out members [in a photograph] of the Kid Thomas [Valentine] band, taken after the war [WW II], at McDonoghville American Legion Hall. Henry Russ (who was in the Navy [at Algiers] band) was on bass; [Harry?] Venet [Spelling?], one of two brother musicians, was playing trumpet [besides Kid Thomas]; the others were regular Thomas musicians, Joe James being on piano, Manuel Paul on tenor sax, [Edmond] "Wash" [Washington] on alto sax, SP on drums.

SP tells about the use of an electric light bulb inside his bass drum, explaining that it keeps the inside dry and makes it possible to keep the drum up to the correct tension; he says an old bass drum without a light inside can't be tightened enough.

WR states that "We all say now that ...your band...is the best band around... . They play together better." WR asks SP to tell about the time SP was fired from a music job, and how Kid Thomas threatened to take the entire band out if SP were not rehired. The band remained intact and returned to the job. SP and MP talk about the good relationship the men in the Thomas band have with each other. WR notes that the New Orleans bands, past and present, stick together better than bands in other parts of the country. Joe James' singing and present ill health is mentioned.

SP says drummers didn't take breaks, solos or play tags [at the end of a tune] in the old days; he says those things are good, because it gives the drummer a chance to "play his part" [that is, show what he can do?PRC]. WR says Baby Dodds told him he first heard "tag endings", in New York, in the Forties

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[by the Condon band? RBA.]; SP says he got the idea from the drummer with Sharkey [Bonano]. SP disapproves of too-frequent use of the practice.

RC asked about the style of Kid Rena, saying the styles of Buddy Petit and Chris Kelly have already been discussed. SP says there were only two bands in New Orleans which had styles different from any other bands; Rena had one of the bands and the other was the Creole Serenaders, Dwight Newman's band [father of Joe Newman]. Concensus was that those bands were less jazzy [perhaps less powerhouse?] than most other bands. Rena had his own style of trumpet playing.

Sam Morgan had a good band; his and [Papa] Celestin's bands were the two most popular bands of their time. WR says he has been told that Morgan was the first to use a slapstick; SP thinks Chris Kelly was the first to use one; Celestin used one, too. SP likes the use of slapstick, saying it helps him, in that he can play more "stuff" when the slapstick is being used.

Kid Thomas's comic abilities are mentioned and discussed; SP tells of Thomas's marching all around the dance hall, and sometimes even going outside, playing all the while, just for fun; he tells of one time in New Iberia when Thomas played out the window of the hall to get the people inside, which he accomplished.

SP was on a trip with Kid Rena the day of Buddy Petit's funeral; Petit lived in Covington, Louisiana, his wife's home,

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 bit SP thinks he was buried in New Orleans. SP says he played the last dance with Petit, before his 2nd [and fatal] stroke, and that the people burned down the hall some time afterward; the place was in Covington. Both of Petit's strokes began on the bandstand; they were about two to three years apart. [Compare above, reel I, p.2.]

Zeb [Leneries] died prior to Petit's death [city directory of 1932 lists Leneries]; Zeb lived close to Louis Dumaine [both within a block of the corner of Louisiana Avenue and Freret Street]; SP thinks Zeb was born and reared in that section.

The Humphrey family is discussed; SP worked at Milneburg with Willie [E.] (the elder) Humphrey, father of Percy and Willie [J.] (the younger) Humphrey, and of Earl Humphrey. SP also worked with the younger Willie when he worked with Willie, the elder. SP talks about Milneburg.

SP remembers working a parade for the Merry Go Round Club, located on Hickory Street, prior to a dance; Wilbert Tillman was in the band. SP also played at the Sans Souci Hall, with Kid Rena, and with Buddy Petit.

Manuel Paul made a movie, "Cinerama Holiday", with Papa Celestin, at the Old Absanthe House. [Part of sound track issued under Celestin's name (Columbia EP 4-48009)]MP had played with Celestin as an extra man, and on trips. He also rehearsed with Celestin before Celestin's last band, but dropped out of it.