

LESTER SANTIAGO
Reel I--Summary--Retyped
January 9, 1959

Those Present: William Russell,
Richard B. Allen, Ralph Collins

Lester Lionel Santiago was born on August 14, 1909, in the Tremé Section of New Orleans, at Ursulines and [N.] Roman Streets. When he was a kid, his uncle, Willie Santiago, played with Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong. Uncle Willie used to visit Lester's home, bring instruments over, on Sundays. That's how Lester took a liking to music. Willie was a banjo player. Played with A. J. Piron, Louis Keppard, and several of the old fellows. He died in 1945, at about the age of 58. He too was born in New Orleans, at North Robertson and St. Ann Streets. [W.R.:] Bunk Johnson used to call him "The Mexican." Willie and his brother, Lester's father, were "part Manila." [See also later on reel--Paternal grandparents from Manila.] Lester's father was named [Melvin or Albert or Alvin ???]. Alvin [?] played the guitar and mandolin, just for fun. Lester's mother also played piano and organ. That's where they got the idea about music. [Mother's people French --later on reel]

Lester liked the drums, and at the age of about 13 took lessons from a neighbor named [Lionel--see Reel II] Bartholomew. Bartholomew was playing with Kid Rena and Sam Morgan and bands of that time. Lester thought he could play drums pretty well, but was too small to carry them around, so gave them up, stuck to the piano. His oldest sister plays piano well--learned from their mother--plays popular music, strictly by music. "My mother had twelve children"; each tried to outdo the other on the piano; had a whole family of piano players.

Bernell Santiago, one of Lester's younger brothers, was a wonderful piano player. He died [when?]. He was one of the first to play at Hyp Guinle's Famous Door Lounge when they had just piano and drums there for a number of years. Bernell picked it up, without formal lessons.

Lester took piano lessons from a woman named May, and from Willie

Humphrey, [Sr.?]. Arnold DePass was leader of the Supreme [check this] Band; he was Elmer Talbert's brother-in-law. He went to rehearsal with them; went to work with them for a number of years.

Went to work with Eddie Jackson, the tuba player with the Tuxedo, had the Supreme Band at the Music Box, corner of Carondelet and Canal Streets.

Played lots of funerals and parades with the [Original] Tuxedo Brass Band playing drums, too.

Replaced Jeannette Kimball with Papa Celestin when Jeannette got married, had first child. Remained with this band until it broke up.

Also played with [Baba] Ridgley's Tuxedo Orchestra and Creole Serenaders. This is where he learned to play vibes [vibraharp]. Peter Bocage was playing both vibes and trumpet, taught Lester vibes and trumpet, taught Lester vibes so he could relieve him.

Other personnel in that band at that time [Creole Serenaders]: Peter Bocage, Charlie Bocage, Henry Bocage, Louis Warnecke (manager), [Edmond] Son White [Washington], d. (now playing with George Williams' brass band). They played hotels, country clubs. Had no trombone in that band. Warnecke played saxophone and clarinet. Warnecke and Willie Humphrey [Jr.?] used to double on clarinet at one time.

After this, Lester played with A. J. Piron a while, after Louis Warnecke died, and the band broke up. After Piron's death, Lester went with Paul Barbarin; has been with him ever since, about eight years.

Lester has taken alto saxophone lessons from Manuel Crusta and Willie Humphrey [Jr. or Sr.?]. Has played spot jobs with it, funerals, a few dances, and so forth.

Brass bands Lester has played with: Young Tuxedo, Eureka, George

Williams. George Williams started him back with brass band. Played snare drum, usually. Has never played bass drum, but thinks he could.

Santiago's uncle Willie played with Freddy Keppard, Louis Armstrong, A. J. Piron, Buddy Bolden, Kid Ory. Was about 68 when he died. [See p. 1 where he says Louis Keppard and a little later where he says he was 58 when he died.] He was self-taught. Made his own first banjo. Changed to guitar. Doesn't know why he quit, "He was well recognized in the music field." Last record he made was with Kid Rena's band. Doesn't know of any other records he made.

Willie made his banjo when someone gave him the neck of an old banjo, and [he found a body ?] and put it together. It was apparently a good enough instrument, because he played it in bands a number of years before he bought another. He used to fix mandolins himself. Played mandolin. Never played piano, just string instruments.

Santiago's parents lived in St. Bernard Parish, were fishermen. His mother died in 1940.

Lester had pictures of bands his uncle played in. He gave Paul Barbarin an old picture of a band, with George Filhe, trombone player, and all those fellows on it wearing brass band uniforms.

Mr. Russell has a picture of Uncle Willie playing with Paul Barbarin, Albert Nicholas, and Arnold Metoyer at Tom Anderson's. Willie worked there a good while. Willie also played the Steamer Capital. So did Lester with Piron. Willie was also with Piron when he played the boat. At that time Piron had the whole Bocage band, the Creole Serenaders. The Creole Serenaders were organized as such after Piron died [See Peter Bocage Reel _____]; they were the members of Piron's orchestra.

Lester did not replace Steve Lewis; he doesn't remember the name

of the man he did replace who's now dead. He replaced Dwight Newman with Eddie Jackson's orchestra at the Music Box.

Lester played most of the jitney dance places: one on Iberville Street, another at St. Charles Avenue and Poydras Street, others on Chartres Street and also Royal Street. Doesn't remember the names of the places; he was in his early twenties. He heard Freddy Keppard when he was young.

When Lester was quite young, he followed funerals and advertising furniture wagons. One of the main corners for bucking was St. Philip and Liberty, around Cooperators Hall. The headquarters to meet was at Ursulines and Villere Streets, around Economy Hall. They would buck there on Sunday evenings. There would be two dances going on, a band in each place. The band that won on the buck would draw the biggest crowd. Uncle Willie played on the furniture wagons quite often.

When still quite young, Lester worked with Manuel Perez, out at the lake, at Milneburg. Remembers one picnic out there particularly, thinks that's one of the first jobs he worked with Paul Barbarin. Manuel Perez had hired Paul for the job. Joe Howard played bass.

Johnny ^[Prudence] ~~[Prudence?]~~ another old bass player. Lester knew of him, but never worked with him, never knew his wife, although [RBA:] according to Albert Glenny, she lives somewhere near Lester.

First band Lester played with was Arnold DePass. Then mixed in with Kid Rena, Sam Morgan, others. The majority of them, after they found out he could play, used him. At that time they were using George E. Parker, ^[Edward] [Everett] Johnson (alias Plitzen), Red Cajou, all those old fellows. Don't know what Red Cajou's real name was. "He mostly played in the fast houses in the Vieux Carré and so forth." [i.e., district ?]

John Brunious the trumpet player's wife, Chinee, was Lester's

baby sister. She played the piano. Bernell was born about 1915 during the time of the storm. It was in his blood to play the piano, and he made a wonderful pianist. He was playing fine piano when he was twelve years old. Their mother had an organ and a piano, and she tried to help by listening and catching bad notes, even when she was working in the kitchen.

Lester made a trip with Harold Dejan on the S. S. Dixie around 1928, '29 or '30 until '32. It went from New Orleans to New York City and while traveling on this ship they decided that the band would have to play to entertain the passengers, and those people had their own music so they presented Lester with the music on one trip and Lester had to tell them he didn't know how to read. They got a passenger to play his part and Harold told him that they would have to let him go since he did not read. Harold told him that Lester probably had enough friends around that would teach him free. That is when Lester started to take lessons. After studying for about a month, he began to read. Harold Dejan heard he was doing good and helped him. At the same time, John Brunious, who was on one of his first jobs on the ship, was just out of college and Harold Dejan would teach them both. They'd find out from the captain if anybody had anything to sing. They'd call a rehearsal. Dejan would play melody on the saxophone; Lester would try it out. Parts Lester couldn't make, Harold would teach him until he "got to reading pretty good." Lester kept the job on the ship till around 1932 when they were laid off. He then played with plenty reading bands, Sidney Desvignes, Piron, and you had to know how to read. He played with Herbert Leary who had the Society Syncopators. Leary played the piano but would mainly direct the band.

Bernell didn't read at all. He tried it one time, and it interfered

with his fingering. He could play so fast that he could play "Flight of the Bumblebee" and "Sophisticated Lady" and he featured himself with these. He discovered that the way that the music was written was altogether different from the way he fingered the instrument.

Bernell met Fats Waller at the Fairgrounds here and others who wanted to take him away, but he never wanted to leave. He made one trip on the Dixie, too, when Lester was on there in New York and met Billy Kyle who was supposed to have run several people off the piano. Paul and Danny Barker were in New York at this time, and Danny would have Bernell play first, and then get someone else to follow and Paul told Lester that Billy Kyle was the only one to run Bernell off the piano. Kyle is playing now with Louis [Armstrong].

Lester made a trip with Paul to New York. They went to Boston; Hartford, Conn., New York City where they played Child's Paramount Restaurant. Every Sunday evening they played against a different group. They met some strong players there. They also went to California together. They played on T.V. twice with Dave Garroway. [See tape of T.V. show] They made a lot of recordings and are on five different labels.

Bernell made one record that Lester knows of: "Deep In The Heart Of Texas." His sister has it. Russell knows of John Reid's recording of him on "St. Louis Blues." He died in 1946 or 1947 and is buried in St. Louis #2. "He played all sorts of music, classic and everything, numbers like "Sophisticated Lady," hard numbers like "Body and Soul." He could play blues and jazz, too. He could imitate anyone. He could play Duke Ellington's records, but his style was more like Art Tatum and Fats Waller. He had small hands but fast fingers. He used mostly the swinging [i.e., stride ?] bass at that time: this is defined. He imitates anyone by listening to records.

Louis Armstrong was in full bloom then with "Mahogany Hall Stomp" and he could play--could play it just like Louis did on the record. Each man's part he played on the piano. He composed a few numbers, but his sister knows more details about that.

Lester lives with his sister, Leonella Johnson whose husband was a saxophone player named Edward Johnson, Number One. There was another Johnson, but they called him "Big Head," No. 2. They worked with George McCullum. Lester worked with him also, and with "Shots" in the W.P.A. Band. At one point they had "about 80 some odd pieces in the band." Johnson travelled with Minstrel shows, but had to give it up because of sickness. He has two boys who are good saxophone players now. One of them goes to Xavier University, Lloyd, and Edward has finished school and plays a nice horn.

Lester knew May a tall girl, but doesn't remember her last name, when she was playing with Baba Ridgley's Tuxedo Band. He would replace her when she would lay off. He remembers Emma Barrett when she worked with Ridgley [this was probably before May]. He knew Wilhemina Bart at the Alamo where he replaced her over [McCrery's] on Canal Street.

END OF REEL I.

The pianist, May, previously mentioned, who played strictly by music, had long fingers and could play in good bass style with her left hand, where she played many 10ths. Her style was on the order of Steve Lewis. She was from "over the lake," from around where Ricard Alexis was reared, which would be Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. She was a very good reader, and was well-liked by reading bands for whom she worked, but she didn't do so well in bands which played only by head [i.e., by ear]. Lester first met Steve Lewis in the Hummingbird Cabaret, a tonk on the uptown-river corner of Iberville and Marais Streets; the music there was strictly piano playing, day and night. Lester also first met Manuel Manetta and Fate Marable there. Lester was still under-age when he first went there; a brother took him there, where he saw Steve Lewis. His uncle, Willie Santiago came there unexpectedly and "caught" him, but since he was already there, they had a jam session, and Willie had Lester play the piano so that Steve and the others could hear him. From that time on, Steve would pick Lester up occasionally and take him out to the Southport Club with his parents' permission, where Steve and A. J. Piron would entertain with a piano-violin duet, and Lester would play between their sets. The Southport Club was [and is] at Oak Street and the Jefferson Parish line. Lester became good friends with Piron by going to the various places, like New Orleans Country Club and Metairie Golf Club, where Piron's band was playing; he would be allowed to sit in with the band, so that after a while he caught on to the style of the band and eventually was the regular piano player with that band. William Russell says that someone told him that Steve was the brains of that band, the one who made the arrangements. [Was he a reader? See Peter Bocage Reel_____]. Lester answers by saying that Steve had his own songs, which he would play and sing, and that the people liked

his songs and his voice, and his songs and delivery were on the order of those used by Walter "Fats" Pichon. Pichon and Steve would "buck" in concerts they would give. While Steve was singing, the band would not play except for a chord at the end. The names of some of his songs are "Woman, Don't You Lie To Me" and "Mistreatin' Mama." Lester says that his piano style was not unusual from that of the average good pianist; he was not as fast as Lester's brother, Bernell, but he was noted for his good bass patterns, a "walking bass," or "double rap" bass, which Lester got from Steve and still uses sometimes. Lester describes the "double rap," and it appears to be a broken, or rolled 10th pattern in which the 10th is played first, the 5th second and the root last; the rhythmic pattern is triplets, with an accent on the first note of the triplets. Can be used on any number, but he has not recorded it. Steve Lewis died about 1939 or 1940, and would be about the age of Willie Humphrey, Jr. if he were still alive--fifty-five or fifty-six [would be almost sixty-five years old]; he was playing somewhere around Royal Street when he died. Lester likes Teddy Wilson as a pianist, but thinks that Art Tatum was the best anywhere. Of the pianists in New Orleans, he thinks his brother, Bernell was the best. When Lester was a child, Steve Lewis, Walter Pichon and Fate Marable were the best. For playing by head, Lester liked "Little Willie," also known as "Long Head Willie," who lived around St. Ann and N. Derbigny Streets; he made changes which would make a person think he was reading them, and he could play any kind of music. At that time, if you didn't play 10ths people thought you couldn't play, but some good pianists had fingers too short for that. Willie worked with Kid Rena and other bands. When Lester was very small, one of his uncles [presumably Willie] would bring a pianist by the name of Freeman to Lester's home; Freeman was from Chicago;

played with Fate Marable, he thinks, when his uncle was playing with them. He was a wonderful piano player. Moved away, never do see him any more.

The old-time musicians, his uncle's friends, used to meet after jobs at the Wagon Top, on St. Ann Street between Marais and Liberty Streets. They also met at the Hummingbird, the Entertainers' Club, Pete Lala's.

Professor Manetta was known for his reading. Would be hired by himself to entertain. Played wonderful piano. Worked with bands, too. Played all the rags, "Climax Rag" and others. Always could read well and was a first class musician, but would get off the music and jazz it up, too.

Lester heard talk of Tony Jackson, but didn't know him personally. Lester doesn't know Alfred Wilson, Alfred Cahill or Carroll, or Buddy Carter.

When he was very small, Lester heard Jelly Roll Morton.

One time he heard Kid Ross (who worked in the houses on Basin Street) in a speakeasy on Dumaine and Robertson Streets. He came down there to buck Little Willie. All the piano players in town, when they felt strong enough, would buck against Willie. Kid Ross and Willie tied up quite a while in that Speakeasy. Lester came in near the end and heard several numbers he played. He was a nice piano player. Everybody was pulling for "Long Head Willie" because he had the reputation at that time; he was the best.

Lester doesn't know Buzzy Williams, another white pianist who was Kid Ross's roommate.

They still had houses in the District in the [19]20's, the one-room cribs. Still had cabarets, but they were beginning to tighten down on them a little. The Entertainers' was the last one to be

closed. They had name bands there, leading bands of the city, Kid Rena, Buddy Petit, Sam Morgan. In 1927 it was still open, but was being run decent then. When Lester first knew it they had all kinds of shows going on there, more of a burlesque than anything else. White and colored came there from all over.

Pete Lala's closed before the Entertainers. Santiago doesn't remember Nancy Hank's Saloon, but knows of a place at Liberty, maybe Nancy Hanks, that wasn't too popular. He heard talk of old places like Rice's and Abadie's, but never went around them. They were before his time.

At the Entertainers' the white and colored musicians would get together and jam and sit at the table together. They had a little platform for those who wanted to dance and at a certain time at night they would put on a show. Sometimes the people would stay until 10 or 11 o'clock the next day and as long as there were people the band had to work and not for extra pay. There was no knocking off time in the contracts. The salary wasn't too much at that time: about \$3.00 a night. You mostly had to live on the tips.

They had music at the Big 25 Club which was usually composed of three or four pieces. Fats Pichon worked there a while with Alfred Williams [drums], and Charlie Bocage on banjo. The band was in the back and a bar in front. The band was near the "Cotch" table and the dice. The building was divided up: the gambling room, the night club, and the bar. In those days, about 40 years ago, Bunk Johnson and Tony Jackson were there, and they had what they called the Wine room where there was a piano just for musicians and nobody else was allowed in there. They still had this at the twenty-five when Lester was young. It was a little separate booth then with a piano in it and a table. The piano player would take just his bunch and lock the doors. It was

a room about 9' x 12'. You could hear the piano as it was really just a wall partition and the top was open. No dancing just a table to sit and drink.

They had upright pianos--pianolas. Sometimes they used the room for interviews and auditions [implied] and probably that is the way Piron got to go to New York. Many white people used to go there.

They would follow Steve all over; if there was a bunch out having a good time, they'd search for Steve: The Entertainers', The Hummingbird, Big 25, Wagon Top, and the Astoria. The Wagon Top was on St. Peter, between Marais and Liberty [earlier, says St. Ann, between the same streets.] It was a stable where they kept horses years ago. They opened it up with a bar and a band stand and when the musicians would get off from work they would go there for a jam session and sometimes play till 10 or 11 o'clock the next day.

Santiago liked Ernest Trepagnier on drums. He played bass and snare both, member of the Original Tuxedo Band at that time. That was the Tuxedo when Paul's daddy [Isidore Barbarin] and Tat's daddy [Adolph Alexander, Sr.] were in it. He was a good reading drummer and was also in Piron's orchestra. Ernest and Louis Cottrell, Sr. were two of the best leading drummers they had around here at that time. Cottrell had the best roll. "He rolled on a snare, sounded like he was tearing paper. Lester has a snare drum that he uses for playing funerals and parades called a Duplex. The drum that Cottrell had had strings on it--ropes. Lester's has a wooden shell, but he has iron clamps on it. Happy's [Goldston ?] the only other one he knows with this type. [Also Alfred Williams has one.]

Lester did not take lessons on drums. He used to practice on a neighbor's drums which he had rigged up at all times. Harold, Lester's oldest brother, would go over and play the piano and the

neighbor would play drum and then let Lester on them, and he would show him how to play. The neighbor's name was Lionel Bartholomew. He was not related to Dave Bartholomew. Lionel died a young man.

Lester heard Red Happy Bolton, in fact, he was a good friend of Lester's. He was a nice drummer, too. He was considered one of the best. He was an ace on the street playing bass drum.

Lot of people liked to hear Black Benny Williams, but Lester liked Ernest better because Black Benny liked to clown on the streets, and Ernest was a better time keeper. "When he set that time, that time 'stood' [stayed] there." Benny was a good drummer, too.

Lester didn't know MacMurray or "Little Mack" Lacey, but he knew a fellow named "Little Jim" [Mukes] and played with him right before he passed, out at Shrewsbury at a parade. That was in John Casimir's band [Young Tuxedo Brass Band]. He worked with "Little Jim" a couple of Carnivals ago, too, for the Eleonore Club. He was a pretty good drummer, too.

Lester made a few homemade records like Bernell did, but the first record he really made was one with Papa Celestin: "My Josephine". Celestin recorded this twice; once with Lester, once with Jeannette [sp?]. Both used the same arrangement. His was made in the twenties. He might have made it on Okeh or Columbia. The band consisted of around 18 pieces: Bill Matthews, Guy Kelly, Ricard Alexis, Lester Santiago, Lee Collins, Simon Marrero on bass, Manuel Sayles who played with Snookum Russell, Clarence Hall was the alto who is now playing tenor saxophone, Robert Hall [also a saxophonist]. [Note: four trumpets seems unlikely] Celestin sang on this record. Lester has made only this one record. He does not remember the reverse title.

Ferdinand Joseph, Waldran Joseph's brother, used to sing some with Celestin. Another brother Willis is a drummer. Eddie Pierson was

on trombone at that time and Yank Johnson on trombone with Celestin.
Yank died around 1938. Lester worked with him about that time.

When Lester played with Rena they had: Son [Thomas ?] was on
banjo, Joe Rena on drums, Richard McLean on guitar, Joe Avery from
Waggaman [La.] on trombone, "Big Eye" Louis Nelson on clarinet.

END OF REEL II