

Alphonse Picou  
Reel I  
April 4, 1958

Also Present: William Russell,  
Al Rose, Ralph Collins, bar-  
room crowd

Notes by Richard B. Allen  
Checked by Richard B. Allen

Digest by Mark S Fleming  
Retyped by Bonnie Nelson

[Al Rose told me that this was a difficult interview as Picou was drunk. RBA. July 19, 1974.]

[Recorded at 1601 Ursuline St., Picou's Bar]

There is a discussion on clarinets, in particular, cheap plastic or hard rubber ones. Picou says that the clarinets in the old days were made of just about anything, just like the cars of today. [Leading here. RBA, July 19, 1974.] A.P. says that horns were not good when he was young. His first horn was a saxophone, "like a saxophone, but straight," [i.e., a metal clarinet?? RBA, July 19, 1974.] A.P. remembers that he played for a Dr. Carter's wedding. This was with Piron's band and theirs was one of the first bands with a saxophone [i.e. in New Orleans??.] AP says they played what is called "ragtime."

When questioned by Rose, Picou agrees that he started with classical music. One of the pieces he learned was "Chicken Reel." He had learned music from "Old Man" (Morand, Morette?), a violinist. [He got the instrument at?] St. Bernard and Urquart Street. With a little prompting from W. Russell, A.P. recalls that his first instrument was the guitar which he learned how to play from his uncle, [Saint Evi?] Picou, a poet. His brother was Octave. A.P. also recalls that his uncle was very sick for

Alphonse Picou  
Reel I  
April 4, 1958

-2-

several years. When A.P. was young, his fellow musicians called him "Pike".

The first band he played with was the Independent Band when he was sixteen years old. A.P. recalls that one day he was practicing his method on what is now Gov. Nicholls [St.] when Bouboul Fortunette [sp? Cf. Mr. Jelly Roll, first edition, p. 73, and city directories], a barber, heard him playing. B.F. lived around the corner. B.F. had a band, needed a clarinet, and asked A.P. to come to the barber shop that night with his clarinet. Picou agreed to come without realizing that he was to rehearse. Upon arriving and realizing that they intended for him to play, A.P. tried to explain his way out by the fact that he only knew how to play from written music. He couldn't play by ear. But the band convinced him to tune up and try it anyway. So A.P. played along on the first number, and they actually gave him a solo. The band liked his playing and after a few numbers, talked him into playing with them at Hope's Hall on Liberty Street where they had a job. When A.P. arrived, the hall was packed with people. They played "Chicken Reel" and other pieces until 4 A.M. He was paid two and one-half dollars, which was "big money" then.

The next day they had a job at Milneberg, playing at a picnic. Picou caught a train at Elysian Fields and Claiborne

Alphonse Picou  
Reel I  
April 4, 1958

-3-

at nine o'clock that morning and played at Lucien's Pavillion until six o'clock that evening, for which he was paid three and one-half [dollars.] They had him play with them at Milneberg every Monday and "mostly" [i.e., nearly] every Sunday, until he eventually learned all their numbers by "head". A.P. says that he made a big hit through playing with that band. A.P. then played at Manuel Perez's at a rehearsal on Marais--[machine off.]

A.P. then talks about playing for or with Joe Bouzan [sp?] who was a "common guitar player." ["Bouzan" mean party? Cf. Danny Barker interviews. RBA, July 30, 1974.] J.B. paid him to play at picnics at Milneberg again.

A.P. remembers that M. Perez, a wonderful trumpet player, couldn't come on one particular occasion, so A.P. carried M.P.'s trumpet out to Milneberg for him. [See below; trumpet is actually cornet.] There was a big crowd at the picnic that day, so Freddy Keppard, their guitar player, said he could play a little cornet and fill-in for M.P. who was not feeling well. They played a blues number and Keppard played cornet; he really "shined." From then on, Keppard put down his guitar and played cornet. By the time of his death, FK was considered as a wonderful cornet player in Chicago.

A.P. goes on to say that King Oliver was with "us,"

Reel I  
April 4, 1958

[although he never says who "us" refers to.] "They" played at Jackson's Cabaret . [in Chicago? See Reel II.] Jackson was an undertaker. "They" had A.P. playing in the same band with M. Perez, and Louis Cottrell, who was one of the best drummers "they" ever had.

In the middle of his solo in "High Society", A.P. says that he saw a woman come in and raise her hand [as if to order a drink?] The waiter came up to AP. after the song and asked him what he wanted to drink. The white woman wanted to buy him a drink. After the show, A.P. saw the woman outside, and she told him to get into her car. She was a pretty woman. She put her arms around A.P. At the time, A.P. [was afraid of women, but?] he was crazy about them. They went for a long ride and finally parked in an alley. She got out and called A.P. up the stairs and into her room. She ordered him to bed.

Besides playing music, A.P. also worked as a tinsmith and plumber. (At the time, being a tinsmith necessitated being a plumber and vice versa.) He first worked for a man on Royal St. and then for "Old Man" Morales, who finished training him for the tinsmith trade. When he was first married, A.P. made about equal amounts of money from his tinsmith trade and from his music. He never really considered himself as a musician

Alphonse Picou  
Reel I  
April 4, 1958

-5-

as such, until he was asked to join the Bloom Symphony, which consisted of approximately twenty-two men. [Does this mean that Picou considered himself a reading musician? RBA, July 30, 1974.] They played old French music because the French Opera was still in operation at the time. The tunes [i.e. compositions] that they played were generally hard orchestrations of tunes not normally used in jazz. For example, "[Les?] Huguenots" was a tune they played.

R. Collins asks A.P. about the hardness of reeds that he uses. A.P. says that it depends on how he's feeling at the time. A.P. still uses a piece of glass to trim the reed, but he never widens the [lay of reed on] the mouthpiece.

In response to W. Russell, A.P. says that he was born on October 19, 1888. He says that he'll be "80 years old October the nineteenth." [Cf. Mr. Jelly Roll, p.71.]

A.P.'s father was a cigarmaker. A.P. was the only musician in the [immediate] family. He had five brothers and two sisters. His uncle taught him to play the guitar. There were no other children in the neighborhood who became musicians. A.P. lived on Robertson Street between St. Ann and Orleans. He was born on Gov. Nicholls between Liberty and St. Claude, right next to Gus Morales' metal shop of today [1958.] WR says that Gov. Nicholls was called Hospital St. and A.P. agrees.

Alphonse Picou  
Reel I  
April 4, 1958

-6-

In response to a [rather leading] question by Ralph Collins, A.P. says that he does have alternative fingerings for certain notes, but it all depends which is easier to get to in the particular piece he's playing. A.P. says that he also played the piccolo, but he first played "High Society" on the clarinet. He says that he played the flute also. A.P. says that he composed and copyrighted the whole piece but sold the copyright to a man for \$225, and A.P. confirms that his name still remains on the piece. Al Rose asks if this person was a New Orleans man, and A.P. says he was.

A.P. is also called Alphonse Floreston [sp?] Picou. He spelled it F-l-o-r-s-t-o-n on the tape.

END OF REEL

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

Also Present: William Russell,  
Al Rose, Ralph Collins, and  
barroom crowd

[Recorded at 1601 Ursuline St., Picou's bar]

A.P. is talking about his Godfather, who was a "great undertaker" on Rampart and Hospital St. (which was changed to Gov. Nicholls St.) A.P.'s Godfather gave him his name, Floreston Alphonse Picou, which A.P. changed to Alphonse Floreston Picou because everyone had trouble with Floreston.

A.P. says that the word "jazz" first came in with Mamie Smith, the first woman to sing the blues over the radio. (WR suggests Mamie Smith.) A.P. was one of the leaders who led everyone else to "true jazz." A.P. was friends with two other New Orleans clarinet players, Lorenzo Tio and George Baquet. L.T., G.B., and A.P. were the only three clarinet players in New Orleans who could do that kind of stuff [jazz?] because they used to play those "funeral and everything....." [!!! RBA]. The last time A.P. played with Lorenzo Tio was in Los Angeles, California [!!!RBA]. "They" threw a party for him (A.P.) and made him sing, "Eh, La Bas." Lorenzo Tio was from a Spanish place. W. Russell suggests Mexico and A.P. agrees. L.T., Sr. was a great teacher; he didn't really care about doing dance jobs. L.T., Sr. used to lead a big band with a baton.

A.P. used to play old Creole songs on dance jobs. His brother, Ulysse Picou, wrote all "Creole songs" [sic] : "Who

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

- 2-

Stole My Bottle?" [i.e.] "Qui, [Pourquoi?] Volez Ma Bouteille?"  
"Qui [Pourquoi] dit toi que [vos t'as parler?], [vote à' parler?] la bàs?" , "Who Told You I Was Going Over There?" Brother [Ulysse?] had a light tenor voice which everyone liked. The Creole song Mo' Pas L'aimez Ça , which means, "I Don't Like That," was a Mardi Gras song. A.P. played it at Mardi Gras, when he sometimes had three or four jobs a day. A.P. says that "Les Oignons", another Creole song which he played, translates "The Onion Is Something What's Good."

A.P. says that he played both Boehm and Albert systems of clarinet. A.P. liked the Albert system better because it was more suited to jazz and because it has less keys. But the tone of both systems was the same. A.P. doesn't put his teeth on the clarinet because this would "ruin his Head." A.P. played E flat clarinet when he played outside.

A.P. says that it depended on the song as to the length of time it took<sup>k</sup> the band to learn it. For example, according to Rose, the blues tunes then were usually pretty fast [i.e., learned quickly?]. "[Oh,] Didn't He Ramble " was an example of a tune that used to be played by brass bands in a non-jazz style before they became jazz "standards." A.P. says that "Muskrat Ramble" was always played in jazz style, never in non-jazz styles.



Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-3-

A.P. says that he was the first man to compose the blues [!!!RBA, Cf. below.] He played at Billy Phillips on Villere and Iberville . A.P. and Jimmy Brown, a bassist, were in the same band. He had a woman [that used to play piano?.] They had a piano. [A.P. changes subjects abruptly.] A.P. first learned of the blues when J.B. took him down to the railroad tracks and singing the blues. A.P. liked it. J.B. later asked A.P. if he could do anything with that song. J.B. knew the words. A.P. and J.B. went back to A.P.'s house where A.P. blew the melody for J.B. on the clarinet. They had a steady job[at Rice's?] so that night they performed it. "That's where the blues come from." This was in the "[red light] district" at the time.

A.P. was twenty-two when he got married. According to A.P., that's when he first started smelling himself. A.P. worked in the district for a long time from eight to four for \$1.25 a night. He played in a nightclub where there wasn't much dancing. People would just request songs, and "we'd" play them. A.P. can't remember any of the songs, just that they were popular songs. [leading here.] Most of the customers were white and from out of town. But they always tipped, often ten dollars per request. This "would help" that dollar and a quarter [i.e. their regular salary?] A.P. remembers one night

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-4-

when a man requested a song, and on that particular song, A.P. really shined. When they finished, the man gave the four-member band a fifty dollar bill. Sometimes they had a piano in the band (the pianist doubled on guitar.) They used to go to a restaurant on Basin and Iberville or Bienville where A.P. would always have the number seven steak. (W. Russell thinks it was called Touro's, from an interview with Manuel Manetta.) Manuel Manetta played with A.P. on Bienville and Liberty streets.

Most places A.P. worked in were in that area, and were very near (six or seven block according to WR) his house. Consequently, he walked to work. A.P. worked for Lulu White in one of the big mansions in the district. Also he worked in Emma Johnson's. A.P. remembers Tony Jackson, the piano player. He and T.J. played at Johnson's Cabaret in Chicago. T.J. composed (according to Al Rose) "Pretty Baby", "Oh, You Beautiful Doll", and "Ice and Snow." A.P. agrees. [Cf. sheet music and other sources. See Al Rose. RBA, July 29, 1974.] A.P. also remembers Jelly Roll Morton. [Mention is made of "Windin' Boy" ]

When A.P. played at Lulu White's, there were just two in the band: a clarinet[ist] and a pian[ist.] Sometimes women would sing. A.P. and T.J. would play in the front parlor. [Leading here.] They had pretty late hours. Musicians played in the open, not having to sit behind plants and screens. French Opera was the only place in the district which had shows of any

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-5-

kind.

When A.P. was young, he used to love the French Opera. A.P.'s father was French. A.P. used to live about a block from the Opera on St. Peter and Bourbon. He used to pay fifteen cents to sit in the balcony.

A.P. loves French and Spanish and speaks them both. A. Rose and A.P. speak Spanish briefly. A.P. played in band concerts. They did not have the same musicians as those he played with in the district.

French Opera had a big orchestra. "They" had A.P. play in the orchestra one night. A.P. can play in any band: jazz, opera, or ensemble, as long as they put the music in front of him.

A.P.'s clarinet has the same fingering and keys [as the usual Albert system clarinet?.]

A.P. has a long list of pupils: Sidney Bechet, Charles Oliver, ["Big Eye"] Louis Nelson, Jimmy Noone, and Achille Baquet. [ Cf. their interviews and other sources. Much leading here.] Archille Baquet had white pupils according to Rose, but A.P. can't seem to remember having any. He knew Sam Dutrey [Sr. or Jr.?.]

A.P. played in traveling shows, carnivals, etc. [leading.] He went to Texas and Oklahoma with a carnival show. [More leading.]

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-6-

W.R. says that Wellman Braud, the bassist, heard a band when he was young called the Georgia Minstrels. The band contained Bab Frank on piccolo, one of the Tios, and A.P. A.P. traveled around the country with the Georgia Minstrels. A.P. says that he traveled around the world with Papa Celestin. He also says that he's been to every country that's known [country or the country ( as in the country)?.]

When A.P. first went to Chicago, he played with Manuel Perez at Johnson's Cabaret and at the Grand Theatre on State Street. This was before World War I.

Dave Perkins was in the band. William Russell talks about talking with Manuel Perez before he died (about 12 years before this interview.) M.P.'s band needed a clarinetist because their old one, Charlie McCurty, was getting old and wasn't so good anymore. So M.P. told the bandleader that he knew of the ideal replacement, someone who could play just as good as always, no matter how old he got. They had A.P. brought up to Chicago. A.P. couldn't agree more with this statement.

A.P. wants to hear Ralph Collins play the clarinet, but he has only been taking lessons for a month. B.C. requests that A.P. play some [but he does not play].

E flat clarinet is the same as the other one except the fingering is a little closer [ as the instrument is smaller than

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-7-

the B<sub>b</sub>.] A.P. plays the regular clarinet part with the E<sup>b</sup>, not piccolo, etc. Al Rose wonders whether or not they used to play clarinet with the mandolin part, but A.P. does not know about this. A.P. didn't alter the mouthpiece any by filing it down to widen the lay of the reed. A.P. says that you shouldn't do it because it ruins the clarinet.

End of Reel II

Alphonse Picou  
Reel II  
April 4, 1958

-7-

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End of Reel II

Alphonse Picou  
Reel III  
April 4, 1958

Also Present: William Russell,  
Al Rose, Ralph Collins,  
barroom crowd

Notes by RBA  
Checked by BRA

Digest by Mark Fleming  
Typed by Bonnie Nelson

[1601 UrsulineSt., Picou's Bar]

Ralph Collins says something about his clarinet. A.P. buys #3 reeds for his clarinet. If the reed is too strong, he shaves it down slightly with a piece of glass.

When A.P. gets a new pupil, the first thing that he teaches him is the proper blowing technique and the correct lip placement [embouchure.] [Picou gives visual aids.] When asked what the biggest mistake that his new students make was, A.P. replies, "All of them." A.P. says that the other clarinetists (the Tios in particular) used only the single embouchure (covering the teeth with the bottom lip only.) W. Russell mentions that Barney Bigard has switched techniques and now uses both lips, called a double embouchure. A.P. used a single embouchure. The best pupil who A.P. had was Adolph Alexander [Jr.] A.P.'s best pupil, George, (Picou can't remember his last name) plays three nights a week on Royal St. He is not young. [sic.]

A.P. says that he has had business with George Lewis, but they were not contemporaries; they were not playing at the same time. [Apparently A.P. means he began before G.L., RBA, Aug. 16, 1974.] Albert Burbank was also one of A.P.'s boys [pupils?]

Alphonse Picou  
Reel III  
April 4, 1958

-2-

A.P. was in the Excelsior and Onward Brass Bands. When A.P. was in the Excelsior Brass Band, Manuel Perez was the leader [!!! RBA, Cf. other sources, Aug. 6, 1974.] The brass bands then used only one clarinet, an E flat. A.P. also played with the Lyre Symphony Orchestra conducted by Joe Bloom, who also played the flute. A.P. played with John Robichaux for sixteen years. A.P. also played with George Moret's band. A.P. says that George Moret was one of the best trumpet players ever in New Orleans. G.M. was very good on the high notes in a parade. G.M. was the first one who came over to Gov. Nicholls St. and gave A.P. his first job. [Leading here; compare with reel I and below.] A.P. remembers Oscar Duconge. O.D. played cornet. A.P. says his band was only fair. R.C. asks if it was a brass band, and A.P. answers, "Yeah."

Manuel Perez had a band called the Imperial Band according to W.R. When A.P. was the leader of his own band, it was called the Golden Leaf Band. The first band that A.P. played in was the Independent Band with Boulboul Fortunette [sp?], who was a barber. A.P. says that Fortunette was short and "looked like a Mexican."



Reel III  
April 4, 1958

A.P. says that if he told an aspiring young clarinetist anything about music, it would be how to blow the clarinet correctly. A.P. says that one thing they used to do was to play a waltz in its original time and then change it to jazz time. A.P. says that he plays both harmony part and the melody in the ensemble. [To me, A.P. seems vague on this. RBA, Aug. 6, 1974.] A.P. says that variations on the melody depend upon the player. A.P. doesn't work up to and memorize his parts; he just figures them out as the band is playing. In the old days, whether or not the band played solos or ensemble depended on the number played.

A.P. replies that it was difficult to find a good piano player in the old days, but it is even harder to find one now. A.P. says that there aren't any good drummers left today [implying that it was easy to find one in the old days?] A.P. mentions "Old Man" Contrell [i.e., Cottrell], the drummer. A.P. says that the best drummer around now is Paul Barbarin, but Louis Contrell [i.e. Cottrell] was the king [of drummers.] Johnny MacMurray was also a good drummer. He played "with us." Happy Chandler was good, too. Happy Chandler and A.P. played at the Lyric Theater with John Robichaux.

There were no saxophones in the bands when A.P. played. There were other specialty horns which are not used now; the

Alphonse Picou  
Reel III  
April 4, 1958

-4-

melophone, sousaphone, bass trumpet, and slide tuba. [Much leading. Cf. other sources on bass trumpet and slide tuba.] A.P. says that the violin was the king; they used to play jazz on them (e.g., Piron.) The violin used to play the lead part. A.P. liked playing with a violin in the band. A.P. can't remember when or who he first heard play "Tiger Rag". Al Rose asks about "Jack Carey" [an alternative title for "Tiger Rag"] but A.P. doesn't remember. [Jack Carey, a trombonist and band leader, featured "Tiger Rag".]

A.P.'s clarinet was made in France but A.P. can't remember the maker. It is an Albert system clarinet. A.P. is the only one to use a clarinet with a curved bell, even though the curved bell is standard in France. [Cf. photos.] The man who gave the clarinet to A.P. was one of the head men at Werlein's Music Store on Canal Street. The man had a French name. It was about thirty years ago that he gave A.P. the clarinet and A.P. can't remember his name.

A.P. learned the clarinet in just eight months. He practiced for a long time every day, but he says that he can't tell the interviewers how long he practiced each day. A.P. says that you should wait until about age sixteen before starting to learn the clarinet. He also says that you should let a child wait until he wants to learn an instrument instead of forcing

Alphonse Picou  
Reel III  
April 4, 1958

-5-

him to learn it when he's young.

W. Russell and A. Rose thank A.P. for his time and say they will only keep him for about five more minutes. They compliment A.P.

A.P. played with Papa Celestin for about sixteen years. This was at the same time that he was in California where he played with Kid Ory. A.P. remembers Sidney Arodin, who took lessons from A.P. at one time. A.P. adds "I'm the boss. They all come under me." A.P. also knew Leon Roppolo, who, according to Al Rose, probably studied under his father. Sidney Bechet learned how to play on a tin flute, and from there he picked up the clarinet. Then A.P. taught him.

A.P. says that a student should learn to read music first. A.P. can't remember the name of the method he used to teach clarinet; his brother-in-law has the book that he used.

A.P., misunderstanding <sup>A</sup> the question, says that he has a nice income. He has a collection of old sheet music and photographs. A.P. promises to show everything to the interviewers the next time they come. He also promises to let them copy some of them. A.P. no longer has a picture of Tony Jackson or any sheet music of his tunes. But he does have pictures of the old bands.

Ralph Collins wants A.P. to play for them at that time but A.P. refuses saying that his clarinet is locked up. The

Alphonse Picou  
Reel III  
April 4, 1958

-6-

interview was made in the morning. He says to come by on Sunday evenings; they start playing at 8:30 P.M.

[Machine off.]

A.P. has four of his own numbers which he wants to record because he's never had a chance to do so. All four songs are his own compositions and A.P. has written them down on paper. He tried to record them with Papa Celestin, but didn't succeed. A.P. says that he has one number that is next to "High Society" for clarinet variations "and all that." "They" tried it, but "they" didn't like it. A group of guitarists who come to his bar can't follow A.P. ['s playing.] A.P.'s compositions are arranged for the whole band. A.P. wrote other pieces that other musicians play. [Check card catalog, Arch. of N.O. Jazz, and King Joe Oliver.] Occassionally A.P. has problems with springs [clarinet] and has to use rubberbands. A.P. cleans out his clarinet when he finishes playing, but he never oils the bore or the outside.

END OF REEL III AND INTERVIEW