

Alton Purnell  
REEL I  
March 3, 1968

Interviewer: Bill Dyer  
[At Santa Ana Elks Club]  
Digest: Richard B. Allen  
Audit: Dan Weisman

Bill Dyer mentions programs and introduces Alton Purnell.

BD has a record of AP made in Hamburg with Jimmy Archey, Darnell Howard, and others. Since then, [the group] made some records in England and AP thinks they are some of the greatest the group made. Except for English trumpeter Keith Smith, the band is the same. [Smith] has been to New Orleans listening and AP thinks he has really improved. AP thinks Bill Bacin [a record dealer] has some [copies] of this record.

AP didn't play on "Snag It" with [King] Oliver, but he made it with Bunk Johnson, of the trumpet players around Oliver's age. BD says, if he remembers correctly, his records of Johnson were made with Lu Watters up at Hambone Kelly's. [Compare with Johnson, Bunk and Lu Watters. 16 Historic Recordings. Good Time Jazz L-12024.] BD adds that this was after "they" rediscovered Bunk. "They" found him pitching cotton or something, bought him a new set of teeth and a trumpet.

This was around the time AP says he played with (Johnson), but in New York in 1945. "We made a lot of records there which were very good," AP says. "It's too bad Bunk passed away because this was my first chance to travel outside the South." Bunk hired the George Lewis band in which they all played together and [Bunk Johnson] was just a new man. When Bunk accepted AP's band to play with him, "they" named it Bunk Johnson's band. [Compare with Bethell, Tom. George Lewis: A Jazzman From New Orleans (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977), 185.]

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Bunk was a pretty good old man on trumpet. He died in the fifties or maybe late forties. BD thinks it was in the fifties because he was at a station in Berkeley at the time and it was an awful shock to all of them because he was a great fellow. [Bunk Johnson died at New Iberia, La. on July 7, 1949.] BD repeats that Johnson was a fine guy and he liked the way he played. He was so different from the other trumpet players musically. He made runs on diminished chords.

BD says BJ sang "Down by the Riverside," on the record and pronounced weapons, "weepons." Bunk came from New Iberia and these people pronounced words a little differently. BD says this is distinctly Bunk. [Compare other sources on Johnson's life and pronunciation.]

AP is expecting to go around Europe in the next three or four months and is waiting on a [confirmation] letter. BD suspects AP will be an "ambassador," and AP says it seems that way. AP notes he has been over there about five or six times and is pretty well known. BD asks how Europeans accept Dixieland. AP says they are really crazy about it. BD knows that "Satch" [i.e. Louis Armstrong] has done a lot there and wonders how those who are not as known to the general public as "Satch" do. AP doesn't think he is as well known as Armstrong, but thinks he is well known around the world. AP notes he has played all around Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, and so on, but not as [well known] as "Satch."

"'Satch is the greatest; that's my best friend," AP says. BD adds that he had Armstrong on an interview when he had [Jack]

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Teagarden and Barrett Deems. They were playing over in San Francisco and he had [Armstrong] on the air. He was a kick to talk to. AP says he doesn't have to hear him play, he can just talk with him and enjoy himself. "He's a wonderful guy to talk with."

BD asks if Louis sings about the way he plays [i.e. tone] and AP agrees, adding he has a wonderful mind. "All the stuff he makes is really new. He's got wonderful ideas. He should be an arranger." BD says he probably does that as he goes along, adding that "all you fellows do, never playing anything the same way." [He seems to be talking about extemporaneous improvisation.] Most of the original jazz men from New Orleans always play that way. It's hard to explain how these things come from your mind into your fingers or -- the way you play them, according to BD, but they all fit in.

BD says he will play a record which is a very good example of a very fine pianist who has been doing a tremendous job for a good many years. He looks much younger than he feels sometimes playing these sessions. BD and AP thank each other.

End of Reel