

Unedited first draft

BILL HUNTINGTON
REEL I [only]
December 27, 1961

INTERVIEWER: Richard B. Allen,
ALSO PRESENT: Paul R. Crawford
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman
AUDIT: Richard B. Allen,
21 February 1991

Richard B. Allen begins, saying, we are recording today in Seminar Room Two, Howard-Tilton (Memorial) Library. What's the date anyway?]

December 27, 1961 and my name is Bill Huntington. Edward William Huntington, [named after my daddy.] He was a violinist.

I was born October 2, 1937 in the Carrolton section of New Orleans. I heard nothing but classics until I was eight. My sister was an opera singer, by the way. She introduced me to jazz when I was about eight, through "Bunk" Johnson.

My mother used to turn on the Metropolitan Opera broadcast. When she left the room, I'd switch over to the station that played Dixie[land jazz] in the afternoons. The afternoon Metropolitan broadcast from New York. That's how I became interested in jazz, basically.

I was about eight [years old] then. Around that time, I was also taking painting. I had been playing piano, but I had to give that up for economic reasons.

My father didn't play around the house. He didn't have time to. He was quite busy working, generally. It was during the [World] War [Two]. He was doing war work.

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Mostly [I listened to] Bunk [Johnson]. I can't think of anybody else off-hand that I really listened to. I listened to Bunk and George [Lewis] and basically those people.

Basically, the album that Bunk put out when he went to New York, the Columbia album. [RBA notes the album came out ca. 1945.] That was very interesting to me.

I remember "High Society," and I remember "Snag It." "Snag It" was on there. That's all I can recall right now. I used to listen to that album over and over again. It was very stimulating. [See discographies on Victor album of 6 and 19 December 1945.]

Later on, we went to a pops concert. This was when I was about 11. This was when the Dukes of Dixieland had first formed their little band. They had a guitarist with them. [Probably the guitarist was Tommy Balderass. See photographs and other data. RBA 16 January 1991.]

I got a kick out of this. I decided I was going to start playing guitar.

But, in some way, I got sidetracked to playing banjo. Then, I learned that Lawrence [Marrero] was in town, and I started taking [lessons] from Lawrence.

The arrangement was that Lawrence would come out to the house. We lived out in the suburbs out in Lakeview [Metairie] [See map and city guides].

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This little colored fellow would come up to the house with the banjo. People began to notice that there was something strange, something slightly different about our attitudes toward life, family.

Lawrence was, more or less, part of the family. I was, more or less, part of his family. We would always have some gumbo for him. My mother's a very good cook. We'd sit around eating.

Mostly, we'd sit around playing the blues. We'd go through this little banjo method that he had. And we'd talk. I think that the talking part of it was the most educational.

Later on, I began sitting in with George Lewis. I was about 12 then. When George was playing out at Manny's Tavern.

I began making sessions around. I began meeting different older musicians. Emile Barnes. People that I made those records with. Charlie...Love. [See discographies.] It was a real kick meeting Albert Glenny. That was really something.

Then I began to do some reading on the history of jazz. Read Rudi Blesh's book [Shining Trumpets. 1946]. Became interested in the sociological aspects of it, in a sense.

Are you interested in my complete development, or just? RBA says, Just say anything that comes into your mind. I'd rather not do that (Laughter.)

When I was about 15--actually through the efforts of Alton Purnell. I used to sit in with George Lewis, and Alton Purnell

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had a thing going where he'd play passing chords, and I was told, when I was a kid, that I had some kind of fantastic ear. I was some kind of a child prodigy or something.

I'd hear all the things he was playing. I'd tell Lawrence, why don't you play in the same chords Alton's playing? They sound like they fit in more with the harmonic content of what's going on.

I noticed that George would play the G-7 [see musical dictionary on G-7 & D-7] chord against a D-7 chord, and this was sort of an unconscious dissonance.

I began to hear all these things. Basically, through Alton, I began to realize this concept of passing chords, and such, and began to get interested in modern jazz.

I had stopped listening to classics with the exception of light opera. My dad would take us to different shows that came through town--stage shows, musical comedies. All of this kind of amalgamation of things, I guess, kind of pushed me into modern jazz.

I should say, really, the turning point was when I met Alden Ashforth [now, musicologist, clarinetist, and professor at U.C.L.A.]. He came down from New Orleans, and had known Dizzy [Gillespie], Charlie Parker, and those people. I began to listen to the records that he had, and I began to switch to guitar.

At first, I played tenor guitar. I began to listen. When I

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was playing banjo I had listened a lot to Lonnie Johnson, and Eddie Lang, and then Freddie Green. It was a very natural development.

And then I listened to - I guess - Teddy Wilson, and Coleman Hawkins. People of that sort. Benny Goodman. [Charlie] Christian. Christian's sense of time.

I began to realize that the same sense of time that guys like Bunk had played with - that same time feeling - actually was the same time feeling that the modernists were playing with.

But, it was only using different technical aspects of the instruments. Actually the same Negroid feeling was there.

I found it very easy to make the same transition rhythmically. Actually, it was a liberation in a lot of ways for me because I had been hearing so many things I couldn't apply to traditional jazz, and I began to play modern jazz.

I think Lawrence, too, instilled in me a lot of things that brought me around to modern jazz. Lawrence was pretty disgusted with the George Lewis band in general.

He used to say that at least 90 percent of the musicians around town are trying to do things that had been done long before. He was quite bitter about these things.

His attitude towards traditional jazz...was an unconscious thing on his part. He wasn't trying to tear me away from New Orleans jazz. He was just talking about these things, and

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naturally they turned me away. He was quite bitter about the whole thing.

He felt he wasn't much of a musician himself. He felt that his brother had been the musician of the family--his brother, and his father Billy [Marrero. Compare other sources on John and Lawrence Marrero.]

Through his efforts, I think, I began to see that possibly this music - although valid in it's time - was losing its validity. Although, I realize that if something is truly art, it survives. I think this [is] something that all jazz musicians should realize. I think, if jazz is to endure, it should be realized.

However, I think that you do have to compose for the present. If you are a genuine artist. If you do feel art genuinely, then you have to compose for the present.

You have to play for the present. Whether you're playing jazz, or you're composing classics. No matter what you're doing. You have to work for the present. So, basically, that's about what my development's been, anyway.

[I liked] Bunk, and George, and Jim [Robinson]. I like the way Joe Watkins played time. He wasn't much of a technician, but I kind of liked the way he played time with the [George] Lewis band.

Of course, [Alcide "Slow] Drag" [Pavageau] had such a hell

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of a pulse. Sitting [in] front of Drag was really something.

It really made me so conscious of this time thing, of just being able to lay back, and have the time there. That's sort of grown up with me into modern jazz.

That's why so many guys think I play with such good time. It's because of that background I had. This feeling that you shouldn't worry about swing, that you swing naturally. That the time will be there.

The important thing is to express yourself, and to create on your instrument; to not worry about swing, that you'll swing naturally. That I think is due to the efforts of people like Drag, and Lawrence, and [due to] sitting in with the [George] Lewis band in the background there.

[The Lewis band was my favorite during that era] because there was nobody else to listen to except on records.

When I played with [clarinetist Emile] Barnes, there were very few times when his chops were up, and he'd play something that was really meaningful.

When he did, it would really get to me. It was really something to listen to. So many of the other drummers would rush, or have some kind of problem here and there. The same thing with the other instrumentalists.

Then, from what Lawrence was telling me, there were very few very fine jazz musicians in New Orleans, and had been very few

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fine jazz musicians.

He was very conscious of the ability to discern. He was very particular in his likes and dislikes, and this got to me.

He didn't feel that everybody could play jazz, and that everybody should be playing jazz. That what everybody was playing should necessarily be called jazz because it prescribed certain rules.

He said that there was something that was objective. He didn't say it in those words, but he implied that there was something objective in jazz that you could listen for--a genuineness, and a sort of artistic ability, I guess you can say.

That was natural. I think Bunk had it. I think Jelly Roll [Morton] had it. I don't want to drop names because, right now, it's not a very easy thing to do anyway.

But, certainly a lot of people did have it, and a lot of people didn't have it, and it's been attributed to a lot of people who didn't have it. Lawrence said that. That was one of the things that he was very strong about.

[Lawrence Marrero] didn't teach exactly. I sort of observed. He had a very relaxed, I don't give a damn attitude, towards playing.

No, that's not the right word. It's not that he didn't give a damn. He just kind of realized that swinging was a very natural thing, and no amount of foot stomping, and exaggerated activity

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was going to make you swing. It was a very natural thing. I sort of observed this in him, and this got to me.

I think he had, what has been called in bop musicians, the cool attitude. I think Emile Barnes had the cool attitude. It's just a very natural thing.

[RBA mentions, "It looked restrained, and casual to me. () They weren't trying to prove anything to anybody."] Right, exactly.

[Allen continues, "If they felt like stomping their foot they would. If they didn't, they wouldn't."] Right, [that's just what it amoun--?] That is the cool attitude as far as I'm concerned

[I held my banjo] on the right thigh - usually cross my leg - just the way I hold a guitar usually, put on the right thigh.

Lawrence used to use a mute on his banjo which sort of put it half-way between - this is in relation to timbre - put it half-way between guitar and banjo; more of a legato feeling than this choppy banjo feeling which was very rhythmic, and tones were sustained.

It was a very pretty sound in that sense. A very smooth sound, but very rhythmic too. He used to hit it about in the middle of the--between the bridge, and where the neck would begin. Somewhere between there which is about the right place to hit it, to stroke it. [Compare photographs.]

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He didn't use any particular kind of pick or anything. His playing was very simple. Basically because he didn't have the technique, and he knew it. But, he just had this very natural thing going, very casual thing going.

Actually, the teaching amounted to just going through this banjo method, and after we'd go through a few more tunes, just played blues. I'd improvise on different traditional things; then I'd sit in with Lewis's band. That sort of thing.

[RBA says, "One day he (Lawrence Marrero) told him he wished he could solo more than he did, but he just said he never was much of a soloist."] No. He realized his limitations, and he made no bones about it. He just knew where he stood, and where others stood.

[His knowledge of harmony] was kind of vague to me. He had a kind of a sketchy knowledge, a theoretical knowledge. He knew about the relative family of chords, and--just the very basic knowledge, what he needed to get by, I think.

It wasn't a very grounded knowledge, a very formal knowledge. But, he did have a knowledge of chordal relationships, definitely.

I picked up a lot of the tunes just by sitting down. Lewis would kick off tunes, and I didn't even know the tune. I just played.

I had this ear, and I could catch chordal relationships, key

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relationships. It's relative pitch. It's having relative pitch. I could catch these things very easily.

I had no trouble in picking up these things because - usually - 90 percent of the traditional things were very simply harmonically, if not melodically.

Same way the traditional classics are. The Baroque classics are very simple harmonically. They're very simple to hear.

What the voices are doing is something else. The same thing in New Orleans jazz. It was very easy to hear the harmonic progression. So, there was no problem. I don't remember ever really going through any prescribed method for learning a tune.

George would usually [call a key and] say a B-flat concert-- he wouldn't [say] concert. He would say B-flat, meaning concert, naturally, and the band would just kick it off.

Or sometimes, he would just call the name of a tune, and since the band had been playing it for so long, they'd just kick it off in the right key.

I remember, once, Lawrence told me something, and I realized later on. Sometimes Jim [Robinson] would go through two choruses of playing in the wrong key, (laughs) and then finally realize that he had been in the wrong key. This was always pretty funny.

But, those were the kind of things that Lawrence didn't like. Those were the kind of things that Lawrence told me Bunk couldn't stand when he fronted the band.

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Lawrence said he was the only one who got along with Bunk. Whether that's true, or not, I don't know.

Lawrence said that he was constantly acting as a go-between, between Bunk and the rest of the guys in the band, and that Bunk was mostly irritable, and hard to get along with. Very temperamental.

[Bunk] felt that they were very poor musicians, even "Baby" [Dodds]. I think he used to call Baby the iron foundry, or something like that. I think that Bob Matthews told me that Bunk used to call--

By the way, Bob Matthews had a lot to do with my development in terms of transition between modern jazz and traditional jazz because I'd get together with him. He was playing vibes at the time, and I'd play guitar.

We'd play standards. Things written by Gershwin. I began to get used to listening for that kind of thing, impressionistic harmonic thing as applied to jazz. He was pretty important in [my] development. My ideas began to stretch out too, then. I began to listen to [Andres] Segovia a lot. But, basically that's what happened along those lines.

"Bob Matthews was a drummer from Decatur, Georgia," RBA says. A very interesting guy. Very intense. But I couldn't figure out what he was intense about. Pretty confused, I guess. I think he wanted to play the virginal, like Alden [Ashforth]. I think

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that was his big thing, playing the virginal."

Anyway, Bob later went down completely on New Orleans jazz, put it down completely as being a crude form of music, I think, with the exception of very few musicians. I don't know what he's doing now. Do you know? [RBA thinks he's in San Francisco, or Atlanta, or somewhere.]

"I think Bob was the angry young man of the revivalists," PRC says. "He was one of them. They were all angry." I was just reading a bunch of Record Changers. I think he was the angriest. PRC adds, "He'd have to be some mad then."

I remember about Bob that he had some very valid musical ideas. We were supposed to get up a trio. You'll probably find this very interesting. I was supposed to play the classic guitar, Bob was going to play vibes, and Bill Russell was going to play violin.

We were going to do this in nightclubs in New Orleans, of all places, with beer drinkers, the various happy inebriates, and unhappy inebriates.

Bill Russell never found out about it, fortunately. He probably will now. This was quite an ambition of Bob's. I shouldn't desecrate this. It was kind of sacred to him.

Actually, it was a very valid idea. Kind of out of context, you know. That's the only quarrel I think I had with it....

[Alden Ashforth] was getting an amalgamation of [Johnny]

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Dodds and [George] Lewis going, and he also was getting a pretty grounded musical knowledge at the time.

I don't know if he ever became a reasonably facile clarinet player. RBA says, "He was able to play with a band within two weeks or something like that." Alden's very talented....[Note that Ashforth had previously studied cello. RBA, 15 February 1991.]

A friend of mine named Charles Meriwether is, I think, kind of an unprofessional beatnik right now. He's very talented. He painted very well, and now I understand he's writing very well. He kind of lost interest in music completely because modern jazz confused him although he liked it very much. [He was learning to play drums.]

I think he came to the same realization that I did that you had to play music, the music that was expressive of your time, if it was to be improvisation anyway.

His name was Charles Meriwether. Actually, I was always instigating him into these things, and he was a kind of a reluctant partner in these things.

He had a very natural talent. I remember him playing things. He had a natural feeling for the beginning, and ending, of choruses. In other words, a natural meter which very few people have, even musicians, A natural meter.

He didn't have to be [] this is the bridge of the tune,

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and here you play something to introduce to bridge of the tune. He didn't have to be shown any of these things. He did all of these things very naturally. I was very impressed with it. But, he's very unconscious of the fact that he had this thing going, and he just fell away from music completely.

We used to get together a whole lot and listen to [Baby and Johnny] Dodds, the records the Dodds made--Dodds' washboard things. He was a great admirer of the trombonist...that made those things with Jelly, played very well as I remember, and also Tommy Ladnier. We used to dig Tommy Ladnier a lot.

I never went through the Chicago School stage too much. I dug some of the things that were going on, but not too much. I can see it as a valid musical form, especially now. I think - actually from what I've heard of them lately - that they're playing better now than they ever did.

I saw a television show with Bud Freeman, and Pee Wee Russell. Bob Haggart playing bass. The only thing missing was [George] Wettling. I was kind of disappointed in that. They had [Gene] Krupa in his place. But, it is very valid, very groovy. I sure would have liked to hear a lot more.

I never got on a "Bix" [Beiderbecke] kick because I think Bix was a frustrated classical composer much in the way Thelonious [Monk] is a frustrated classical composer. These people should compose. They do develop a facility on their

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instrument which is really fantastic. Nevertheless, their forte, their main thing, their facet should be composition, and they should compose.

I don't see why jazz musicians should be so frightened to compose. Scott Joplin seems to me said--RBA says, "You mean larger forms?" In other words, [Andres] Segovia shouldn't compose - there's a parallel here - because Segovia is the kind of musician that has this kind of facility on his instrument.

These people who seem to have problems putting down, playing their ideas on the instruments, should compose. They're only cheating themselves. That seems to be a kind of logical thing. I think there's a parallel between Bix, and Thelonious, and a few other people.

I just want to extend, and stretch out, and try to get into everything that I feel is valid. I'd like to write contemporary things for guitar, basically.

I'd like to still play jazz, but only good jazz. I only want jazz musicians around me that think like I do. I feel...it's very important to me right now.

I've got to move on. Right now, I'm just gathering my things together.

I was in Toronto last summer. It was very enjoyable, but I had to leave. Economic circumstances beyond my control. But, there's a scene there going where there's these interactions

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between the arts in general.

It seems to help jazz, and seems to help classical music. In other words, all arts seem to benefit from it in general.

[I'd consider moving to] Los Angeles and New York, I guess, are the only two alternatives, really. But, when I do go; I want to have a crystallization of, a gathering together of the things that I have been thinking about.

I don't just want to go, and develop up there. I want to develop here, and go there. Of course, further develop there. You always develop.

I do feel that I want to study for a while here before I do anything like that because when I do go there I want to be able to produce the things I've been thinking about, and the things I'm hearing.

Actually, right now, I'm against any kind of narrow-mindedness in relation to any musical form. I think you see this narrow-mindedness everywhere. This scholasticism in classical music, in modern jazz, and so on. I think this is something that's really dangerous.

RBA thinks the tape is about to run out, so we better call it to a halt then. They're about to close the library, so thank you very much.

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NOTES ON BILL HUNTINGTON INTERVIEW (TULANE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT) taken listening 3 April 1991 by Steven Teeter and Alden Ashforth.

Interviewed by Dick Allen, Dec. 27 1961. Paul Crawford also present.

Huntington born Oct ² 12, 1937 in Carrollton section. Introduced to jazz by sister when he was 8 or so, through listening to Bunk Johnson records. Had been playing piano, but gave it up through economic reasons. Father also musician, but had no time to play.

Listened to Bunk & George, especially Columbia [actually RCA Victor] album Bunk made in NYC. Listened to High Society & Snag It over and over.

Heard pops concert, Dukes of Dixieland, and was impressed by guitar player. Wanted to play guitar but got sidetracked to banjo. Started taking lessons from Lawrence Marerro, who came weekly to the Huntington house.

Lawrence very much like part of the family, and Huntington much like part of Lawrence's family. They'd sit around, play the blues, talk, eat gumbo.

Started sitting in with George Lewis at Manny's when around 12 [probably 13]. Started meeting other musicians, Mili [Barnes], Charlie Love.

Started reading about jazz too, especially Rudi Blesh's book.

When about 15, through efforts of Alton Purnell & Huntington's fantastic ear, started picking up more fancy harmonies than Lawrence would play, esp. passing chords. This started leading him in direction of modern jazz.

Turning point was meeting Alden Ashforth, listening to his records. Switched to guitar, tenor guitar first. Had listened to Lonnie Johnson, Teddy Wilson, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Christian (noted his sense of time). Realized the time feeling of Bunk's bands was much the same as modern jazz sense of time. Made it easy to make the transition, which was a liberation, letting him do things he couldn't do within traditional New Orleans jazz.

Says Lawrence was rather disgusted with Lewis band, saying musicians around town were only trying to do things that had been done before. Was quite bitter about it, and felt he wasn't much of a musician himself. When questioned further on this by Allen, says Lawrence didn't actually say this in so many words, but that Huntington sensed it.

From these feelings, Huntington began to see traditional New Orleans jazz was losing its validity, though it had been vital in its time. But you have to compose, play, and work for the present.

Allen asks who he liked when he started playing. Huntington: Bunk, George, Jim, Joe Watkins. Liked the way Joe played time with Lewis band, and Drag had a hell of a pulse. Huntington feels he developed his time, which he gets complimented on, from learning with New Orleans jazz.

Lewis band was his favorite, cause there was nobody else to listen to except on records. When Huntington played with Barnes his chops were only sometimes up to par. There were very few fine jazz musicians in New Orleans Got much

of this feeling from Lawrence, who was very particular. Not everybody could, or should be trying to play jazz. There was something objective [?] about jazz, something special that had to be there, and not everybody had it. Bunk, Jelly Roll, had it, but a lot didn't, and a lot are credited with it that don't have it.

Allen asks what Lawrence taught him.

Huntington says he didn't exactly teach; Huntington observed. Lawrence had very relaxed attitude towards playing, that swing was a very natural thing, and no amount of foot-stomping will produce it if it's not there. Lawrence had a very cool attitude.

Huntington says he held banjo in usual way, on the right thigh. Lawrence would hold it [play it?] sort of half way between guitar and banjo, which gave a smooth sustained sound, not choppy. Would hit it about the middle between bridge and where neck would begin. Playing very simple, because he didn't have the technique [for fancy playing] and he knew it.

The teaching amounted to going through a banjo method Lawrence had, then playing some blues, and eventually sitting in with Lewis band.

Allen says Lawrence told him he wished he could solo more, but knew that he couldn't. Huntington agrees, that he knew his limitations.

Lawrence's Knowledge of harmony fairly basic. Knew chordal relationships but not formally trained.

Huntington says he'd learn by just listening to Lewis band, when George would kick off the tune and Huntington would pick it up. It helped that many of the tunes were very simple harmonically, if not melodically. Very easy for Huntington to hear harmonic progressions, because he had a good ear: relative pitch.

George Lewis would call the key, saying B-flat, meaning B-flat concert. Often they knew the key from playing it so long, but sometimes Jim would go two choruses without realizing he was in wrong key. This was the sort of thing that must have really got Bunk annoyed.

Lawrence said he was only one who got along with Bunk, was constantly acting as go between with rest of band. Bunk didn't think much of the other musicians, even Baby [Dodds].

Would get together with Bob Matthews and play, sort of transition between traditional and modern jazz. Guitar and vibes, playing standard tunes.

Bob Matthews, now in SF, came to be very down on New Orleans musicians, with a few exceptions. Angry young man of revivalists.

Bob had very valid musical ideas. They had plans for getting up a trio, Huntington on guitar, Bob on vibes, Bill Russell on violin. They were going to play in clubs. Bill never found out about it, fortunately. Will now,

unfortunately. A valid idea, if out of context.

Allen: Bill Russell would have fit into this group, but can't see it fitting into the audience.

Allen & Huntington discuss being impressed about Alden Ashforth's development on clarinet, picking it up so fast, sitting in with bands in only two weeks. Never got to be professional quality, but still had something special.

Talk about Charles Merriweather, who had a natural talent if rather reluctant about getting drawn into those things. Had a feeling for the beginnings of choruses, a natural meter. (Now out of jazz, a writer somewhere. Fell away from music completely.) They used to listen to Dodds things, and Tommy Ladnier.

Huntington never went through the Chicago phases, not too much. Saw TV show with Bud Freeman, Pee Wee Russell. Doing pretty well, very valid.

Huntington never got into Bix; says Bix was more a frustrated classical composer. He should have composed. People who (unlike Segovia) have problems somehow putting things down on their instruments, playing, should compose.

About himself, Huntington says he wants to extend, get into everything that he feels is valid. Write contemporary for guitar, play jazz but only good jazz.

Feels he must move on to find enough good musicians to play with. Just getting things together before moving on.

Allen: Where could you go? Los Angeles & NYC the only real alternatives. But when he does go, Huntington wants to have a crystallization of what he is before he goes off there. Wants to study more in New Orleans first.

Really against narrow mindedness.

Interview ends.