

OCTAVE CROSBY

I [of 2]--summary--retyped

March 26, 1959 Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

Octave Crosby, pianist, was born June 10, 1898, in New Orleans' 13th Ward, which is uptown at Lyons and Water [Possibly now Leake Ave] [Streets]. The other members of his family were not musically inclined. Self-taught on drums, his first instrument, he became interested in piano at first, he later took lessons from Camilla Todd, who played at the First Baptist (later says Methodist) Church, First and Dryades Streets, and then with Miss Massey Dubernay [sp?] who lived on Foucher Street. Miss Todd also played with dance bands, among them that of Hypolite Charles<sup>y?</sup> (at the New Orleans Country Club) and with Joe Howard, who played trumpet and [later] tuba [in the same band with Charles?]. OC's piano lessons were in standard methods, including learning to read; he had played by ear for a long time before he took lessons, and had worked with bands both on drums and on piano. He worked with Louis Dumaine on drums and then on piano; he was with Chris Kelly on piano. (WR says George Williams told him he worked with Kelly on drums; OC says Kelly was playing at the Bulls [Club, 8th and Danneel] then.). OC worked with Buddy Petit on the boat Susquehanna, which traveled [on weekly excursions] from West End to Mandeville; besides Petit on trumpet and OC on piano, there were Buddy Manady [or Manada] on banjo and Earl Foster, drums (not [Abbey] "Chinee" Foster, who played at one time with Papa Celestin). OC worked with Dumaine [trumpet] at The Bungalow, at WesttEnd; [Bill] Willigan played drums, Tom Parker, sax, [Clarence?] Gabriel, banjo and Joe Watson, clarinet and sax. OC also played solo piano for house parties, for whites, playing for Mr. Rickman [sp?]

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superintendent of Lane Cotton Mills, many times. OC says people in New Orleans had rent parties, too, which they called house parties (to get enough money to pay the rent), and fish fries for the same purpose. Locations of fish fries were designated by the hanging of a "toss" light, otherwise, Japanese lantern, in front of the ] place; there was room at some of the fish fries for dancing; advertising for the fries was [usually]by word-of-mouth.

OC played with Peter Locaze's band at the Sans Souci Hall. He played with trombonist Gus Metcalf, who led the Melody Band; others who played with the band, from time to time, were Omer [Bernard], trumpet and Eddie Morris, trombone; the band didn't use two trombones, OC explains--Metcalf was the leader [?!]. OC also traveled with Metcalf, working with the Miller show, a carnival, going as far as Arkansas; OC's travels began in Kenner, La., and the show worked up the Mississippi River.

Chris Kelly was a good trumpet played<sup>er</sup>; he most often employed a "toilet flusher" as a mute; one of his feature numbers was "I'm Going Back to Jamaica" ["Going to Jamaica," or "West Indies Blues"]. Kelly was a fine blues player, one of his best-known features being "Careless Love." Kelly would quite often be in contests for loving cups; two bands would be hired for the contests, and the one which received the greater applause would be awarded the cup. Kid Rena was also a competitor for some of the cups; he was a fine trumpet player. OC worked with KR at the Budweiser taxi dance hall. Buddy Petit was a fine trumpet player. Bunk Johnson was another good

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trumpet player; OC first heard him a long time ago, when Bunk played a job at the Bulls'. OC also heard a very good trumpet player from Crowley [La.], Evan Thomas, play a job at the Bulls'; WR says Bunk mentioned him, Bunk having played in Thomas' band at one period; OC says Bunk was not with Thomas when he heard Thomas. The first music OC remembers hearing when he was a little boy was that played by bands on advertising trucks [wagons, if OC was quite young], playing to advertise dances; OC says two bands would frequently have "bucking contests", both playing until one gave up and left. OC says he played the same style piano with the older bands as he does today, that the bands played the same kind of music, jazz, as is now played, except the older bands [sometimes] played waltzes at dances, and the tempos today are faster than then. OC played drums on advertising trucks; he says pianos were not used on trucks in the early days, banjos being used instead. OC began playing drums when he was about 16 years old. OC first attended McDonogh School Number 6, but was later transferred to Southern University. The only music he heard in church was that of the organ, at the Baptist church where his parents took him. His teacher, Camilla Todd, played at the First Street Methodist Church; she also played with all the bands. OC says that years ago [most of the men who played piano did so without being able to read music; women were hired to play piano for shows, or other events requiring music reading; in later years the men began studying and learning how to read. OC agrees that there were not many men playing piano in the early days because piano was looked upon as a "sissy" instrument. OC says Camilla Todd's regular band was that of Hypolite Charles, but that she worked with almost everyone, including Kid Ory, she also

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worked a long time with [A.J.] Piron, until replaced by Steve Lewis. She later gave up playing for anything except the church; she is still living, once having lived on Magnolia Street; Todd is her maiden name. OC says Clarence "Little Dad" Vincent, a banjoist and quite old (from around Buddy Bolden's time), could tell a lot about early times and music [see Clarence Vincent interviews]. OC never heard Bolden. Some of the bands he heard on advertising trucks were those of Ory, Chris Kelly, and Buddy Petit. OC mentions the Sans Souci Hall, on Howard St. [now LaSalle] [as the scene of band contests?]; he agrees with WR that it is still there, but there is no dancing there now [the hall has since been demolished.]. Steve Lewis, pianist, was very good; he was a good blues pianist; his style was something like that of Earl Hines; he could play good, big chords; he would sometimes play solos. He did not read much [if any]. In the old days, the trumpet usually played any solos, as the bands were built around the trumpets; other instruments seldom played solos. The pianists played accompaniment [block chords, probably, played one on each beat]; sometimes the pianists would play an up and down bass [I to V, tonic to dominant, of each chord]. Buddy Christian, pianist (WR met him in NYC; OC agrees that he also played banjo), played at the Lyric Theater for the [moving] pictures. OC played for the movies, too at the Dauphine Theater; he played for shows [movies] at the Lyric. The Dauphine was a burlesque theater for whites, but it was converted to a movie house, and catered to colored. OC played solo at the movies, used no music, just played something which would fit the action.

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[John] Robichaux's band played for the stage shows at the Lyric; OC played for the movies there, between live acts. Robichaux had a very good drummer, "Red Happy" [Bolton]; when he died, Zutty Singleton replaced him. Zutty left New Orleans long ago; WR says he is in New York now. OC mentions Red Allen [as another who left New Orleans], saying that he played with Allen at the Pelican [Club], Gravier and Rampart, when Allen still wore short bloomer pants [knickers?]; John Casimir was also on the job. OC says Allen had to play with people of whom his father [Henry Allen, Sr.] approved; OC says the younger Allen could play then, too, even though quite young. Some of the early pianists OC remembers--~~men~~ who did not play with bands, but for house parties, fish fries, parties, etc., as soloists--were Son Swan and Ray Baptiste [sp?], who were blues players. There was another, "Johnny Stringbean," and another "Tink" [Baptiste?]; Tink also played with bands, playing with Kid Rena at one time. WR says Joe Robichaux says the pianist who helped him the most was a blues player called "Game Kid," from around the Irish Channel; Jelly Roll Morton mentioned him, too; OC doesn't remember him. OC never heard Morton, but he heard Tony Jackson, who was good. Jackson played during the time the District was wide-open; OC played in the District, but after it was "closed." Jackson was good, about the best OC heard in New Orleans in those days; Jackson played in "sporting houses." OC says Jackson was good, not agreeing with a contention that he was mostly a singer; there was, however, a singer who could play chords for his own accompaniment;

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he was [Noble Finney?], and he was a local success. Another blues player was [Cavaliè]; OC says if a pianist could play the blues well, he did all right. USually they were also what were called "one-key" players; they could play only in one key; usually B flat, which is one reason ~~they~~ never played with bands, but they sounded good. WR says he has heard of pianists who played only in black keys, usually G flat.

OC took lessons from Camilla Todd for about a year or more; he studied with Miss Duvernay for about ~~K~~ 6 months; he says that at first trying to play piano from written notes held him back, but knowing how to read doesn't affect his playing now.

OC says the only boogie-woogie pianist he knew in New Orleans in the old days was "Slim," who was very good; he heard him when he, OC, was about 21 or 22 years old. The blues pianists, other than "Slim," used a "Swinging" bass [left] hand [stride style?], not using any [parallel <sup>ten</sup> ~~ten~~ methods]. OC says the style was not vamping, explaining [by demonstration] that vamp piano is the alteration of first left hand and then right hand [left hand playing bass notes on beats one and three (in 4/4 time), right hand playing chords on beats two and four.].

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OC says that when he played with Chris Kelly and Buddy Petit, bands like that, he mostly played "vamp" style [see Reel I] piano, but sometimes played "comp" [block chords, one to each beat, both hands together]. The trumpet player in a band would always kick off the band, but the drummer would sometimes play two licks on his bass drum to get the band in (OC demonstrates how "Panama" would be done). The trumpet player would play most of the time, taking only short lay-outs, because he wanted to feature himself, as trumpet players were usually the leaders. OC never played with a band which had a violin, but he heard some; he says Ory had a violinist, and old man [John] Robichaux, who played violin, was a leader; a lot of bands had violins then, and a lot of the violinists led bands. The Lyric Theater band was usually about 7 pieces; in the white theaters, the bands were larger. OC didn't know about the pianist Alfred Wilson, but he knew Udell Wilson, a good pianist from Kansas City, one who also played for movies at the Lyric sometimes. OC says Manuel Manetta was a good pianist, but "heavy;" Manetta also played accordion [and violin?]. OC didn't know Albert Cahill, or Carroll [or something]; WR says it was not Tapoline [sp?] Cato, as suggested by OC. OC says another fine trumpet player was Joe Johnson, who played mostly parades; OC thinks he dropped dead on a parade. OC never played any parades. OC heard Bunk Johnson at the Bulls' Club, where he also heard Evan [Thomas]; OC was still a boy at the time. WR says he doesn't think Bunk came back to New Orleans after 1914, but OC says he did [referring to Bunk's return about 1940], and that he visited Bunk shortly before he died, in New Iberia, La., when OC was with Papa Celestin's band through there [about 1949]. OC played with Celestin off and on in earlier years, replacing Jeanette Kimball when the Celestin band would go out of town; Jeanette

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would not travel. OC joined Celestin as a regular when Celestin began playing at the Paddock [Lounge] [about 1949?]. Celestin had had Emma Barrett on piano before Jeanette Kimball played with him; OC explains that when Emma was with Celestin, the band was not Celestin's, but "Bebe" Ridgley's Tuxedo Band [led by Celestin and managed by Ridgley]; then they split, each using the name Tuxedo Band, but differentiating by adding the name Celestin or Ridgley [viz., Celestin's Tuxedo Band]. Emma Barrett remained with Ridgley, and Jeanette Kimball joined Celestin.

OC has recorded with Celestin and with Bill [Matthews] for Southland records, and in California with his own group (basically the same as the Matthews band, but Matthews didn't make the trip); the replacement trombonist who was supposed to go on the trip couldn't go, so OC used Irving Verret, a white trombonist originally from, OC thinks, Shreveport, La., on the recording session and on the job. The tunes recorded were "Gettysburg," "Ting-a-ling," "Paddock Blues" and "I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None of This Jelly Roll."

In 1926, OC, Clarence "[Little] Dad" Vincent [banjo] and Herb Morand, trumpet, traveled on a ship to [the state of ] Yucatan, Mexico; they were with Charlie Towles' band. They landed in Progreso [Yucatan], where they played for a short period; then they boarded a train and went to the city of Yucatan [no city of Yucatan shown on map--probably the capitol of the state, Mérida], where they played in a Mexican club, the Yucatan Club. The entire trip lasted about 3 months. The band heard a lot of Mexican bands, strings only; OC said it was fine; the Mexicans had never heard New Orleans music before; they liked it. One of the Mexicans favorite tunes then was "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby," one of the popular tunes of the day. OC has also traveled in Texas, and has been to Baltimore and Louisville [Kentucky].

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OC has been playing at the Paddock since May 10, 1949. He says he gets tired of the job, playing the same tunes in the same way, and tired of having to play nothing but fast tunes.

OC says that most of the early bands didn't use pianos because the bands moved around a lot; John Robichaux, who was most often on steady jobs (such as the La Louisiane<sup>n</sup> restaurant [and theaters]), always used piano [because there was always a piano at the places where his band played], almost always having a woman playing it. The famous bands of Chris Kelly, Buddy Petit and Sam Morgan didn't have pianos; the rhythm sections would consist of guitar [later banjo], bass, and drums. The piano was added rather than replacing an instrument. Morgan used piano only in later years. Kid Rena had a good guitarist, Son Thomas, and Punch [Miller] had a good one, Walter Preston. Punch was playing fine in those days; OC says Punch would make "lot of foolishness" with his horn--play like a preacher preaching, growl, etc. Punch was a strong man; people went wild over him. Punch mostly used a toilet plunger for a mute, making a "wa-wa" sound. Punch was comparable to Chris Kelly, but Kelly was the best on the blues; nobody beat him playing "Careless Love." Buddy Petit was a good trumpet player; he had "fast fingering" [i.e. made a lot of notes], but didn't get very far away from the melody. Buddy would sometimes take 3 or 4 jobs for one night; of course, he couldn't play but one of the jobs, and the people running the jobs he missed would look for him the next day; when they found him, he would always talk them out of beating him. OC played a job with Buddy in Bogalusa, La. one time; Buddy, imbibing, played his horn at 3 AM on the porch of the mayor; he got out of that, too. "If he can talk to you before you hit him, you ain't gonna hit him!" He was a fast talker, and he stuttered; when he talked to the offended party, they usually parted with the offende[s]

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patting Buddy on the back and saying that it was all right, but not to do it again. The victims would not even ask Buddy to return the deposits they had given him for the jobs; he would have spent it already anyway. George Washington usually played trombone with Petit; WR suggests Edmond Hall and George Lewis played clarinet with him, at various times. OC confirms EH. Georgie Boyd played a clarinet with Punch; Boyd was good; he was wild; all of Punch's bunch were wild; the drummer had to stay on the cymbal, make plenty of notes. [Abby] "Chinee" [Foster] played drums with Buddy for a long time (Chinee later joined Papa Celestin, remaining with him a long time); [Bill] Willigan played drums with Buddy for a long time, as did [Eddie] "Face-o" [Woods] (Face-o played with Punch, too). ["Black] Happy" [Goldston], who worked with OC [in Celestin's band] a long time, played drums with Punch for years. Petit's band used no music, except for an occasional lead-line for the trumpet player; Buddy wasn't much of a reader, but had a good ear. Lee Collins was another [trumpet player] who had a good ear. OC worked about 7 years with Eddie Jackson, who played tuba on the street, at the Music Box, a taxi-dance hall on Canal St., located where Stein's Clothing Store is now (Canal and Carondelet); Sunny Henry played trombone with them. Others who played there [at times] were the trumpeters Lee Collins, Willie Pajaud, and Arnold Metoyer. Metoyer was light-skinned, used to play a lot with white bands in parades; the white musicians knew he was colored, but he was very light-complexioned. OC knew Dave Perkins, said he played with nothing but white bands. Metoyer was good; also, he never sat when playing; he was a good musician, could read very well, etc. OC worked on excursion boats only on special occasions, as when two bands would be hired. He did, however, work with Petit on the boat, Susquehanna, which made one trip each Sunday, from West End to Mandeville. White bands were usually used on the boat,

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with colored bands being hired rarely. WR says Raymond Burke mentions working on a lake excursion boat, but WR says he thinks it was the Camellia. OC worked the boat in the 1920's. OC also played with trombonist Frankie Duson, who was very good. OC says that in those days musicians didn't work regularly with any band, but would switch from band to band upon demand, [or bands played mostly spot jobs?] There were not many jobs during the Depression; the only band going [mush] was the WPA band; OC didn't belong to it; he says he was lucky, that he always has had a job playing piano, never working at anything else. OC says he listened to the reading bands, such as ~~Robi Rhotxi and Rironand~~ <sup>ES</sup> and they used all stock arrangements; they were about the only two bands that OC knows about which did use a lot of written music [not to mention Fate Marable, Desvigne, etc.] OC says the people liked rougher bands, like Punch and Buddy Petit, better than the reading bands. OC played at Milneberg; on the week-end there would be bands in all the camps; during the week a piano player might be hired solo; there were pianos in all the camps. OC played there with the band of the trumpeter Albert Snaer, and also with trumpeter Willie Pajaud. The pavillion where OC played was open to the public--no admission charge, but the people would buy drinks, etc., and go from camp to camp. OC mentions "Smoky Mary," the train which ran out Elysian Fields Avenue to Milneberg; fare was a dime. The dances at Milneberg stayed open until 11 or 12 o'clock at night. The era of those dances ended before the Depression [was it not about the time of the erection of the seawall, around 1935?],

End of Reel II

