

JOE RENE
I [of 4]--Digest--Retyped
September 8, 1960

Also present: Richard B. Allen
Marjorie T. Zander

(Interview recorded at 2200 Jackson Avenue, New Orleans -- Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses)

There were movies made of the funerals of JR's brother [Henry "Kid" Rena (sic)] and of "Black Benny" [Williams]; the movies were silent, as there were no sound movies then [Kid Rena died in 1949: PRC]. Black Benny's funeral was the largest of any; Kid Rena's would have been as big, but he was Catholic, and wife and the priest didn't want any music. St. Katherine's Church, on Tulane Avenue, was the church used for the funeral service; the burial was in St. Louis Cemetery Number Two, in a section allotted to the Knights of Peter Claver. Kid Rena was buried in his favorite suit, a tan one he reserved for special occasions. RBA mentions [Oscar] "Papa" Celestin's wake. Black Benny's funeral was about ten blocks long, with around 900 second liners. JR says the second line used to dance with their back on the ground. JR thinks more money was spent on Black Benny's funeral; Black Benny didn't belong to any insurance group, and all the funeral expenses were paid by collections taken up for the purpose by friends of his. Black Benny was very popular, as he was a sort of prize fighter, was a good drummer and used to be a band man, too. Black Benny would violently break up fights even when he was playing in a parade.

JR comments on lengths of parades now as compared with the older times; he used to play in a band playing for the parades of the Bulls and the Hobgoblins (who paraded on Halloween); neither club is in existence now; he thinks the longest parade was the white organization, the Jefferson City Buzzards, who marched

from Carrollton to the Barracks [Jackson Barracks, at the St. Bernard Parish line, all the way across New Orleans from the starting point--PRC. Compare other interviews and newspaper accounts. RBA.]

There were more fights at weddings than at any other event. JR comments on the fights during weddings at Italian Hall.

The street band JR worked with was often led by Kid Rena; JR explains that they had a "gutbucket" band, in which whoever got the job was the leader; the band would be assembled for the occasion. Flowers, a banjo player, played alto horn in the band (RBA says Flowers is in and out of town, and that he has never been able to catch him); Morris French [played trombone]; Zeb Leneries was on clarinet; the others would be hired as they were available, people such as Chris [Kelly?]. When Black Benny would get a parade, he would get the Kid Rena band if they were available. "Papa" Celestin's Tuxedo Brass Band [often?] played at the front of the parade, featuring marches; the Rena band would be further back, "tunking" [i.e., playing jazz]; all the second line would be following the "tunk" band. Kid Rena often had playing contests within the street band with other trumpet players (e.g., Ricard [Alexis]). There would be only one clarinet in the band; JR says John Casimir, the elder Willie [E.] Humphrey, and one or two others were the best street band clarinetists; they played E-flat clarinets, although some of them played C clarinets. RBA mentions that Casimir played a funeral recently for the Merry-go-round Club; JR says that is an old club.

Talk about how a body was laid out; earlier times compared with present. Talk of food and drink served at old-time wakes. There

would be all-night singing at Protestant wakes; the Catholic wakes were much quieter. Talk of songs sung at wakes and played at funerals; they were pretty much the same. The "main" [after burial] song was "[Oh,] Didn't He Ramble?", which is seldom played now, says RBA, unless the corpse has been a good-time man. Discussion of different attitudes concerning the playing of blues and other songs with meaningful titles at funerals--the reactions today and the reactions in the earlier times; conclusion is that people of today react more negatively than the people in the earlier times. JR and his brother, Kid Rena, once worked in St. Louis Cemetery whitewashing tombs. Then JR got a job "hustling" [selling?] in the cemeteries. He thinks the time was in 1928 or 1929; the P.W.A. [i.e., W.P. A.?] [was operating at the time?]. Their band played only for white as they were sure to pay.

JR and Kid Rena began working at the Budweiser Dance Hall in 1935; personnel besides the two brothers: Duke Ducongé, piano; Butler "Guyé" Rapp, guitar; "Sport" [Young], clarinet and saxophone; (he was the brother of) Austin Young, trombone; Sylvester Handy (brother of John Handy, saxophone and clarinet, and Julius Handy, guitar), bass. (RBA says he thinks Lester and Lee Young, brothers, were cousins of Sport and Austin Young.) JR says Sport Young was a perfect musician, but an habitual drunkard; Young could read

anything at sight. JR says the band were such good sight-readers that bands from the hotels would bring music to be played; the Rena band would play it as fast as it was put up for them. Sport Young played alto saxophone. After Kid Rena left the Budweiser, Andrew Anderson, trumpet, got the job; Anderson, who had his own style, was a pretty nice trumpet player. RBA says Anderson had a good break [playing] with George Lewis. [Restricted]

In the street, the snare drum had to be tuned loose because of the sun [might cause the head to tighten too much and crack?]; the bass drum was better tuned loose, too, so that there was some vibration, which provided a better, more booming sound. JR tuned his bass drum to various pitches when playing dances; the tuning depended on the key of the piece being played.

End of Reel I

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JR says the wife [i.e., widow] would request "Bye, Bye Blackbird" at her husband's funeral if the husband had had another woman. Talk of the various wives of one man and their behavior and position at the funeral of their man. JR says that a long time ago [in his youth] funerals were held around one or two in the afternoon when the musicians could get off a half-day from their regular work, instead of anytime of the day (and even at night [?PRC]), as funerals are held now.

JR comments on the honesty of musicians and people in general in the old days as compared with the [lack of] honesty today.

JR usually played snare drum in the street; he occasionally played bass drum. The Rena band didn't play many marches; they played only one 6/8 march, "Gettysburg", which was later recorded by Kid Rena; the band played the hot numbers, such as "Tiger Rag", "High Society", and "Clarinet Marmalade", the blues. When the people wanted nice march bands, they got the Eureka [Brass Band] or the Tuxedo [Brass Band]. JR attended some rehearsals of the Eureka when they first organized; he says he could have been their drummer, but he didn't want to cut in on the other drummer. The band rehearsed at ["Big Duval's"?], which was upstairs at Howard Avenue and Rampart [Street]. JR emphasizes the importance of rehearsals.

JR is trying to organize a nice [concert--see previous interview] band now. Verret played bass in the Eureka band at the time mentioned above. JR doesn't remember the others.

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Looking at a picture (shown in "The Pictorial History of Jazz", p. 48) taken years ago at the Waifs's Home, JR identifies: old man Jones, JR's brother [Henry "Kid" Rena] (next to the trombone player), Jimmy Brown (bass drum), Richard Williams (trombone), Professor Peter Davis. Both Kid Rena and Louis Armstrong played bugle in the Waifs Home at first; then Armstrong went to trumpet; when another trumpet was needed, Kid Rena was chosen. Nicodemus is mentioned. Louis Armstrong is also shown in the picture (an arrow is pointing to him). Johnny Kelling [spelling?] is mentioned. [Louis] "Shots" [Madison] is mentioned; he was in a Waifs Home band, and played alto horn for a while; he is not shown in the picture. Ikie Smooth, trumpet, is shown in the picture; JR says that "he got to be one of them smart guys", and didn't continue playing music. RBA mentions Armstrong's book, Satchmo, My Life in New Orleans, saying that Armstrong talked a lot about Smooth.

JR changed the spelling of his name from Rena to Rene when he found out the latter was the original spelling.

Armstrong was also an "ace" on the slide whistle. JR says Armstrong's public manner is the same as it has always been; he has always joked and laughed, ever since he was a kid.

JR knew "Blind Gilbert" from playing; Gilbert and Kid Rena were pretty good friends. Gilbert could play piano, too, although he primarily was a trumpet player. RBA says he plays guitar now. Gilbert could catch a musical phrase very quickly; he had a good head for music.

Talk about the old-time musicians, who played for fun and money; the musicians of today play only for money, says JR. Discussion of second line.

Some of JR's favorite drummers: [Eddie] "Face-o" [Woods], "Red Happy" [Bolton], [Abby (check spelling)] "Chinee" [Foster]. JR was in "that reading class", with [Louis] Cottrell [Sr.]. Alfred Williams was a good orchestral drummer; JR doesn't know about his reading ability, but he played well. JR mentions William's playing with Sam Morgan's band. JR concentrated on rhythm, striving to keep the time even. JR thinks the sock cymbal came into use around 1928 or 1929. RBA says JR's drum recording seems to be mostly snare and bass drum, with occasional crash on the cymbal, rather than much use of the sock cymbal, as JR claims to have used mostly. JR says Willie Santiago was the man approached to get the band together for the recording; Santiago recommended Kid Rena (who, he said, had begun around the time of Buddy Petit); Kid Rena wouldn't play without JR on drums, as they were familiar with each other. Kid Rena wouldn't play his high note style for the recording, as he didn't want anyone to get his style. JR says Jim [Robinson] was the one who made the recording sound good, as he never quit playing. [Compare records.] JR says the bandsmen didn't want to play because they were getting a flat price of twenty-two dollars per man for the recording, without royalties agreements. [Alphonse] Picou and ["Big Eye"] Louis Nelson were both on clarinet for the recordings. JR says the man who had them record must have made a lot of money; RBA says he doesn't think so.

JR points out a picture of Paul Barbarin.

JR mentions Punch Miller, says he is looking good now.

JR mentions Bunk Johnson; he says Bunk showed his brother, Kid Rena, plenty [on the trumpet]; Bunk would teach him for a ten cent bottle of wine. Bunk played nice horn.

Continuing his looking at the picture book, JR mentions Jim Robinson and his wide influence.

JR says the Eureka Band and the Tuxedo Band were the only ones who had uniforms, the only ones who spent money on their uniforms. JR describes those uniforms. RBA points out the [brass] band of [Henry] Allen [Sr.]; JR says the old-time uniforms were like the ones shown as worn by that band. JR says the Rena band wore tuxedos every Friday night when playing at the Gypsy Tea Room in Audubon Park [?PRC].

JR illustrates the beats a drummer would make for the various parts of a funeral.

End of Reel II

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JR continues his illustrations of the various phases of funerals. He says it is sometimes requested that no music be played when the band is almost to the church, as some people "fall out" [i.e., faint] when they hear music approaching the funeral church. JR says the E-flat clarinet makes a sound like a baby screaming; he says the E-flat is not used in bands anymore, but RBA points out that John Casimir still plays the instrument, and that Paul Barnes has just taken up the instrument for the first time to play with the Eureka [Brass Band].

JR says a jazz trumpet player should play the melody, putting in his runs and other effects only when he comes to long tones in the melody; JR says jazz is nothing but filling in a melody. The jazz trumpet player should play the melody. A hot trumpet player plays chords, not melody. JR says the players in old-time jazz bands played their separate ways [i.e., not as they would in a larger band comprised of sections? PRC.] Only the trumpet player would read his part [and then only sometimes.RBA] when his brother started. JR didn't like Georgie Boyd's playing; Boyd played his clarinet in a manner different from any other JR heard; Boyd's harmony was unusual; Boyd would play completely "off" from the band and the chords they were playing. Boyd played a lot of animal sounds, one like that of a rooster. JR liked clarinet players like Earl Bostic, and like "Sport" (not Young), a "bright" fellow who used to come on the boat; JR liked Sidney Bechet's clarinet playing, too. "Sport" worked on the boat with Fate

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Marable; he also played saxophone. RBA mentions Gene Sedric, clarinet and saxophone player from St. Louis; JR doesn't recognize the name.

A lot of musicians hung out at Rexach's; some were Sidney Bechet, Bob Lyons, Frankie Duson, Johnny St. Cyr, [Willie] Cornish and others. JR first went there with Bechet, who used to carry his clarinet in his pocket; Bechet would play his clarinet for a can of beer. The musicians JR mentioned were not much for reading, but they could play; the readers couldn't play like Bechet. Bernell Santiago, brother of [Lester] "Black" [Santiago], couldn't read, but he could play anything he heard; his piano technique was very fast, and he played all over the keyboard. [Compare recordings in John Redd [check spelling] collection, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Arkansas].

"Cook Shop's Son" wasn't much of a drummer; he was on the order of Willie Parker. Parker and people like him could get good jobs and they would always get good men such as JR to play in the band with them, and they would be able to get return engagements because the band was good. Kid Moliere wasn't much of a trumpet player; he could play straight lead, but not without the music. His son, Ernest Moliere, known as Kid Ernest, played pretty good clarinet. Paul Moliere (same as Kid), father of Ernest Moliere, was first a bass player; then he took up trumpet.

JR says the reason permits were necessary [for bass players and drummers] to ride the streetcars was that Jimmy Brown, bass

player with Manuel Perez, fell off a car and wanted to sue the operating company.

The Maple Leaf Band is mentioned. The Young Maple Leaf Band was made up of young men, from uptown, including banjo player Emanuel Sayles, whose father was George Sayles. JR says the band he played in with "Duck Ernest" [Johnson] was known as the Young Tuxedo. The Young Tuxedo personnel: Duck Ernest, bass (and leader); JR, drums; "Freddy Boo Boo" [Miller] [trombone]. JR says, "That's how they broke that Liberty [Bell?] Band up, when I got with Duck Ernest and I started stealing the men from them." JR thinks they [Young Tuxedo] used [Willie] "Kaiser" [Joseph] on clarinet. The band got a lot of jobs "front of town" [i.e., near the river, and perhaps bounded by Canal Street, St. Charles Avenue and Jackson Avenue--PRC]. A very tall and big man named Powell, who was a foreman on the river, promoted dances in the area; there was no trouble at Powell's dances, as he was also very strong. JR mentions "Wallpaper", a bass player who lived upstairs at Duck Ernest's home; Duck Ernest sometimes sent "Wallpaper" to play in his place, but Wallpaper wasn't very good. Duck Ernest had a good trumpet player, a man who was a blacksmith and is still around, lives on St. Peter Street, is big and "bright", and who has one glass eye. [Peter Locaze. See JR, reel IV, *ibid.*] Some Harris, or Harrison (not Harrison Barnes or Harrison Brazley) played trombone with Duck Ernest.

"Guttin'" is when a man [or band] is playing with all his might; he will be playing loud. [Abby (check' spelling)] "Chinee" [Foster] was fired from Papa Celestin's band a couple of times for "guttin'"; Chinee would get playing his hardest, which would throw his band off stride. JR thought up a little trick of shaking sleigh bells when his band played "Ice Cream"; he says he had a boxful of gimmicks to show off his band.

Johnny Brown was the clarinet player with Duck Ernest.

RBA thinks the brothers Oke and Vic Gaspard had the old Maple Leaf Band; JR thinks the reed man in that band of eight pieces played saxophone [and clarinet?] as the saxophone was coming into use at the time. JR says drums used to count as two pieces (i.e., one each for bass and snare drums); [Harold] Peterson knows all about how Kid Rena operated with the six men, seven piece band. KR kept the extra pay.

Talk of a second liner, a jolly man who was a peddler; the rest of the second line would do whatever that man did. He hung around Franklin and Gravier [streets].

End of Reel III

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The women in the second line are the ones who "cut up", not the women belonging to the clubs participating in the parades. JR talks about the money individual club members spend on their costumes and uniforms for the various functions of the clubs; he says colored people are funny, that they don't care what happens as long as they have their fun. JR talks of the women's auxiliaries of the organizations and clubs. The Merrygoround Club is mentioned. Talk of grand marshalls: if there are two for one club, the first grand marshall marches in front of the band; the second grand marshall marches in the back [behind the band and in front of the club?PRC]. JR discussion of order of march with more than one club and band. Although "Black Benny" [Williams] didn't belong to any club, almost every club in the city, including the Zulu Club, marched in his funeral. JR says the second line [are supposed to--PRC] march on the sidewalks, while the club members march in the street. JR thinks the custom of having bands for funerals must have started with the clubs; he has heard that friends who hung around various corners would get together and hire a band to play for one of their group who had just died, and that they would march in the procession; "then, I think it went into the clubs, and different places." JR himself set up many clubs, and often collected money to pay a band; if he didn't get enough, he would pay the rest himself. Some of the clubs have been in existence for a long time.

[Compare Marjorie T. Zander's master thesis in Archive of New

Orleans Jazz] JR says that he and others formed the White
Roses [or ?] Club just after they had collected money
to hire a band for the funeral of an acquaintance. The club
had a few dances, using a four-piece band [with JR in it?], but
all the money taken in went toward paying the band; some of the
members didn't like that, as they figured JR was getting the
money, and was in the club just to make money. The club broke
up in a little while; the seven remaining members, including
JR, split the money in the treasury; JR got seven or eight dollars.
The club pays for the funeral. JR doesn't belong to any clubs
now; he got out of them and put his money into insurance; clubs
have dues, and also have taxes for missing funerals, etc.
Club's clothing is expensive.

Clubs and societies [also called benevolent associations.
RBA] are about the same; the benefits may vary a little bit;
however, a man is better off belonging to a club; club members
will sometimes have benefit dances for sick members, but societies
just tax the other members for sick benefit. JR says white
people take care of their own; he tells of a man sick for three
years who was succored by his friends, who held benefit dances
for him. JR says all societies and fraternities are contrary
to the church, which is supposed to take care of the sick and
bury the dead; the societies, etc. came into existence because
the church neglected those obligations. Many more people have
insurance than belong to clubs. Societies have anniversary

banquets as their fun; clubs have parades for theirs; insurance companies celebrate their anniversaries by opening new offices, expanding.

JR's church doesn't participate in parades; everything at that church is free, including weddings. JR has just returned from Kansas City, Missouri; he was trying to get [by telephone? RBA] Count Basie, whose home town is Kansas City [actually, Red Bank, New Jersey--PRC]. JR likes Kansas City and its people. JR says he wants to see [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.] when he goes to New York. JR's congregation is composed of evangelists, ministers and missionaries; "everyone is a minister and a missionary." The church operates on contributions; JR explains the organization of the offices; JR takes care of the territories, the school, issuing the magazine; he can preach a funeral if requested. There has been only one funeral from his church; the sequence and ceremony are the same as in other churches. JR describes same at length.

Songs at wakes are usually sung in a slow blues style and tempo; the Baptists all sing in a sort of blues style; when JR used to play for churches, all they did was play the blues; he recalls a job he played with George Lewis outside a church, to draw people to the attraction inside; all they played were the blues. Music in JR's church is not blues; the musicians have to know how to read, too. JR says the [other churches's?] people like the

long meter songs, [in blues tempo and with blues expressive nuances rather than blues form?RBA]. JR says his church, the Catholic church and perhaps, the Presbyterian church have good music [i.e., written, and not blues?].

The Pigpen was at 223 [or 2203?] South Liberty. She [the owner's wife?] still lives there, in the same house.

JR worked several times with [Alphonse] Picou, and [in the same band with Picou] with Dr. [Leonard] Bechet.

Peter Locaze was the trumpet player [mentioned previously, but not by name] who worked in "Duck Ernest" [Johnson]'s Young Superior [i.e., Tuxedo] Band.

JR thinks Picou was in the band being set up with Dr. Bechet, JR, and O'Neal [check spelling] [Lavoiser (check spelling)?] on violin; the trumpet player could play written music, but couldn't play jazz.

Peter Locaze played in Duck Ernest's Young Tuxedo Band.
[See above JR, reel III].

"Sidney Desvigne mostly had the Maple Leaf Band." He later had his own band; Desvigne played on the President a lot.

Rachet sticks are mentioned.

End of Reel IV