

un-edited first draft

LOVIE AUSTIN
REEL I [only]
April 25, 1969

INTERVIEWER: William Russell
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[William Russell begins saying he only knew Tommy (Ladnier) about six months before he died. He was a very nice fellow, very quiet.] He knew me for years, LA says.

[Nobody knew he had bad heart at that time, WR says. But, he had it for years. He was found dead one day, WR says. At least, he didn't suffer much.] At least that was good.

[WR says he is now working on some material on Jelly Roll Morton who was one of my favorite pianists and, of course, he wrote a lot of pieces.]

I know him from when he first came here [to Chicago] from New Orleans, LA says. I was working at a club on 35th Street.

I just had my teeth put in and can't talk real good.

Yes. When he first came here he came here with Billy Mack. They had a little show. Mary Mack and Billy Mack. They lived right down the street.

[You remember Punch Miller, WR says. His first records...he made with the Macks, and he traveled with them in their show. Johnny Dodds said he traveled with them, too.]

I was looking for a letter I had here from England, trying to get some data on him. You know, Johnny Dodds worked with me, too.

[WR says he knew him, and Baby [Dodds] very well.] Yes. Baby was the drummer, but Johnny was the clarinet player.

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[WR was just thinking about Johnny. Johnny used to have a house...an apartment house. His widow lost it soon after he died. It was, about, in the 4800 block on Michigan, on the other side.]

He played the clarinet. My clarinet player, Jimmy O'Bryant, just died.

[WR has quite a few of the records that LA made with Johnny, and with Tommy Ladnier.] I have a bunch of them. [Lovie Austin's Blues Serenaders, WR says.]

I've just completed working with another firm. I have the records back there. I'll show you the name of the records of the firm. (Can't remember.)

[WR says, I'm trying to think...Did you make just a few years ago a Riverside record?]

Austin: That's it. That's it.

Russell: Because we were talking about Lil' Armstrong. I interviewed her.

Austin: Yes. She made it along the same time I did.

Russell: She had. She has a talking record that she made.

Austin: Alberta [Hunter] came here with me...She's back in New York.

Russell: I never really knew her. Never knew her.

Austin: Yeah. She was on her way to Denver when she stopped here.

Hunter went to Chicago, and I sent her on to New York.

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[WR first saw her, about 1940, in New York.] That's when she first went to the show. Then, she went to Paris, and she stayed there.

But, she's back now, working at the hospital there, [St. Vincent's], in New York. She and I are very good friends. I hear from her about every week.

I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. You probably knew my father because he was a great musician, and a teacher in New York. Professor Calhoun.

[WR mentions that I wasn't around New York very much, actually. Didn't get to meet many musicians there, although, I did know, at places, Tommy Ladnier.

[I knew...there was one place where I met Jelly Roll Morton in Washington, and he came through. Just the last couple of years of his life was when I knew him. It was only 1938 when I met him, and he died in (19)41.]

I went to work at the Monogram [Theater as musical director] in 1913. I worked at 31st Street until they moved to 35th Street, and moved there with them.

That was the first time I worked in New York. I came right back, and stayed down there, and worked there 25 years straight.

Then, I went to New York and started working for [], taking out []. Then, I worked for Irving C. Miller for a long time.

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And then, I came home. My mother died in [19]31. So I just came home, and stayed. But, I been working at a studio downtown.

[WR says John Steiner told me you were playing piano for a dance studio.] Yes. Herb Paine's. I worked for him 17 years.

Then, I worked for another woman. A white woman had a studio down there at Jackson Boulevard, 22 East Jackson.

I got sick. I was in the hospital for four, or five, months, and I came out.

My sister just died in November in April. She's been dead almost two years now. I haven't been doing anything since my sister died. I've just been staying home. My brother-in-law and I get together. My sister's husband.

Up until that, I been doing pretty good. [WR says, I'm looking fine, really.]

I had all my teeth taken out. I just got my teeth back. I've been doing alright until this arthritis took me, and just put me down in this bed, and I just couldn't walk.

[I've just seen Ikey Robinson, the banjo player, WR notes. His wife was having trouble were her teeth. Had a nice interview. That was two days ago.]

Austin: You knew Jell Roll, didn't you?

Russell: I knew him. I met him only about four times.

Austin: You knew him when he was younger?

Russell: Not when he was younger.

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Austin: When he first came here, you know...

Russell: What was he like?

Austin: His bell-bottom pants. (Chuckling.) His big cowboy hat. He was kind of a clown, like, you know. But, a very, very talented musician.

Russell: I thought so too. I liked his piano playing.

Austin: And well, you know. He didn't know music [i.e. couldn't read].

Russell: Didn't really read music much?

Austin: No. No. Not much. Not at all.

[WR asks when I was at the Monogram...When did I first meet him?] I just can't remember. It was in the [19]20's.

[WR wonders if I met him back in (19)15, or so, because "The Jelly Roll Blues," was published by Rossitter in 1915. That was the first one...] I might have...

It might have been around then, because we named it the "Jelly Roll Blues." I used to take down all the music for him because he couldn't read music.

When he first came here, he couldn't read music. He wouldn't know a note if he got it on a telegraph wire.

When he was here, he wrote...[WR notes there were a lot of those pieces]...I mean there was...like "Wolverine [Blues]." Yeah, that's right.

[WR says I heard "The Pearls," the first time I went to see

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him. I asked him to play "The Pearls," and he did.]

He kept it all in his head, LA continues, 'cause he couldn't read. He would come...I didn't live here [in this house] then. I lived at 33rd--3360 in Calumet. [Calumet, repeats WR, not so far from the Sunset, and the Plantation (Clubs)]. Right down the street. I used to work at the Sunset.

Jelly Roll would come. He'd stay two, and three, hours. I would take his music all down, and make all of his copies. That's the way he gave copies to [].

He had no way to take it down. He wouldn't trust nobody but me. [WR doesn't blame him because people would steal it.]

I knew Tony very well. [WR knew Tony's sister.] He met here [with] Mrs. Sutter. She said people would steal his music--I mean Tony's, right now. He didn't care whether he had it published or not.

Irving Berlin stole a couple of pieces. [Some of Tony's I guess, WR notes.] Irving Berlin did himself. Told me, at his desk.

At a little one of them beer joints. Irving used to come out here, sit for hours, and listen to Tony. "Pretty Baby," all that stuff. [Oh yes, WR agrees. That was his biggest hit, I guess. "Pretty Baby."] Yes.

But, this boy [Morton] was a very nice musician, and I would take down his notes for him.

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[WR mentions he wore, kind of, sports collars, and all.]
Yes. Big bell-bottom pants, big hat. He was very loud mouth, but in a nice way.

Russell: He used to brag a lot, but still he was a wonderful musician.

Austin: I thought a wonderful musician.

Russell: If I could have played like he did, I would brag, too.

Austin: I don't think they'll ever have one that'll play rag[s] off-the-record like he did.

[WR notes that some people think his early records sound like ragtime, but I like his style.]

They do, they do, agrees LA. But, that was all we knew then. [That's right, in those days, WR notes.]

That's when I started making records. And he was very interesting. He was a very nice fellow.

He joined Mary Mack. I was just sitting here trying to think. I don't know whether one time he came here...Mary Mack used to always have dance bands, and she would bring them up with her show.

[Mutt Carey] came up with Johnny Dodds in a four-piece band with Mary and Billy Mack. Punch [Miller] came up with them.

They played at the Monogram [Theater.] That's where they played. The Monogram was on the State Street side of 35th Street.

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About three doors from 35th Street.

The Vendome where Erskine Tate used to play was at 31st Street. The Monogram, down on 31st Street, closed when they opened the one on 35th.

[That was before WR's time, not that he's not that old, but he wasn't in Chicago then.]

That was around...when I came to 31st [St.]. That was in 1913, going into 1913.

[When Jelly Roll came here (to Chicago), WR says, they already had the Monogram at 35th (Street).] Yes.

They moved the Monogram. I think I stayed at 31st Street about three years. [WR puts that at 1916, or so.] Right around then there, because, when they moved the Monogram to 35th Street...and I moved about 1919, that's when I moved to 35th Street.

I was one of the first colored families that moved over there because [Tony Moore?] lived over there, and I moved over there after he moved, after he died. I was one of the first ones to move over there.

Then, I moved over to South Park. That's when they started building that theater over there--the Regal.

And then, I moved from South Park over to 1531 - right down the street from you - right down 31st Street. I bought that house from Charlie Comiskey that owned the baseball park. All his kids

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were there. I mean the baseball team. [i.e., the Chicago White Sox.]

I lived there until my mother died. When my mother died, I just couldn't live there any more, so I moved. It's good to have a change in a case of that kind.

That was in [19]31. So, then I moved down here. I hadn't seen Jelly Roll since then. I had tried to keep track of where he was and...

[WR notes that then he went on to New York. In the early Depression he didn't have very good luck.

[He was in Washington when I met him, playing in a little nightclub there (the Jungle Club), and helping run the club.

[But, he didn't like it and stayed there until 1938. And then, he went away, back to New York in (19)39. I only saw him once in New York, up at the Rhythm Club where the musicians would all hang out. He played pool there a lot.]

I was in New York for a long, long time. Four years, I was out there, but I don't remember him. He didn't work in my band. I didn't play any jobs with him, but he worked in Mary Mack's band. He worked in the theater band where I was...the pit orchestra.

[WR remembers Manzie Campbell, the drummer, who worked with LA.] Oh, I knew Manzie. Manzie come from Bill[y] Kersands' [minstrel] show. That's where he worked. He had a brother who played the saxophone. His [Manzie's] mother was named Dutch. They

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used to call her Dutch.

He had a brother. His brother was a saxophone player. Billy Kersands, and his wife, moved to Chattanooga. They were from New Orleans, but Billy Kersands' wife's sister married one of my friends, and then they moved to Chattanooga.

Billy Kersands' wife's sister - that used to be in the show - married a boy from Chattanooga. So, when they moved, [they moved] there with his mother.

[WR didn't know Billy Kersands was from New Orleans. He had heard a lot of the old-time vaudeville people talk about him, his act. LA ^{says, "They both from New Orleans."} insists they broke from New Orleans.] His wife and I were very good friends.

Now I'm not so positive whether he was from New Orleans or not, but I know his wife was. I think he was from there. I know his wife was from New Orleans. His wife's sister, and I, were very, very good friends. She's dead now. She lived in Chattanooga.

Whenever she'd come here to Chicago, she'd always live with me because we were good friends, and she didn't know anybody in Chicago. She's dead now. Billy Kersands has been dead for years...very, very funny [man.]

Now Jelly Roll...what Mary would do because she had very few musicians who could read music...

The Macks are still here. [WR spoke to the Macs ten years

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before, and didn't think to ask about Jelly Roll.] They brought Jelly Roll here.

What she would do because her musicians couldn't read music--most of them. She would have them learn the show. Then, she'd bring this show out. Of course, ^{they had a circuit then, for colored shows, called Tobey (T.O.P.A.)} they'd have a [circle pen?] for the colored children, and she would bring them on the show. Travel all over.

Jelly Roll played in her band, and...Johnny Dodds. Not Baby Dodds, I didn't know him. [WR mentions that Baby Dodds came up to Chicago to play with "King" Oliver.]

"King" Oliver he went over to the [Midway] Gardens. [With WR's prompting,] I remember that Louis Armstrong, not King Oliver, played at the Dreamland.

Freddie Keppard played...at a cafe across the street. The ^{Entertainers Cafe (this is the name of the cafe)} entertainers were at 31st Street, just off of Indiana [Street], just down from...

Russell: Can you remember how Jelly played in those days? Did he play any solos when you first heard him, or just in the band?

Austin: Yes. In the band. They would play the show...

Russell: For the Macks...

Austin: And then they would play, you know, some kind of little something that they had together; because they got all the stuff together, nobody could take from them because nobody knew

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it.

Then, if he had a piece he could trade, he'd say, 'Lovie, I want you to come here. and help me with this.' and I'd say, 'Alright.' And he'd come over to my house.

He'd stay there for hours, and, hours, and hours...33rd Street. I would take it down for him, and play it for him.

When I would play it, he'd always pay me. He always had money. How he did, I don't know.

Russell: I guess he used to gamble a lot sometimes, maybe...

Austin: I don't know what he did. I never saw him gamble.

(Chuckles.)

Russell: He was a great pool player, people tell me.

Austin: Well. If he was, I never saw him. If he played pool, I didn't see him at it. I never saw him gamble.

Russell: You were never around those places, so...

Austin: No. Morton would come in when he needed work done, and then tell me that he was going out of town. 'I'll be back.'

He thought I was the finest musician in the world, and I felt that way about him.

[WR notes that Morton felt he could trust LA and appreciated that.]

I remember taking down "Wolverine Blues," and two, or three, other pieces for him, but can't remember them.

[With WR's prompting,] I remember "The Original Jelly Roll

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Blues."

[One time, Jelly Roll told some of WR's friends that his nickname was given him in Chicago.]

Right here! I gave it to him! I was making records. A record I made was called "Jelly Roll." What was his first name? Fred? [Ferd, replies WR.] Ferdinand, yeah.

I remember much of him, but it was a long time back then. So, we named him Jelly Roll.

[WR says Jelly Roll also told some people that sometimes he used to be on the stage.] I never saw him on the stage, or as a comedian.

He was a very, very good intelligence. But, very, very unfortunate with money. He didn't know how to keep his money.

I don't know what he did. I never saw him gamble, but I know every time I turned around, he was writing I.O.U. to Miller.

Miller's the one that had the theaters. He owned both the theaters. He owned half of the 31st Street, to the 29th []. He had a saloon there at...30th and State.

I can't think of his first name. His son still owns the building, maybe on the corner. Old man Miller. I worked for him 25 years.

When I went down to Alabama with the show, that's when he bought the Grand. When I was down in Alabama, I was trying to get my [] back on, because we got caught in the flood down there in

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Shreveport. Old man Miller sent me train tickets.

I traveled with Ida Cox. [WR notes we made all those records together. She died a year, or so, ago.] Is she dead?

She lived in Knoxville, [Tennessee]. That must be where she died. [WR didn't really know her.] I put her on the records. I put her, and Ma Rainey.

[WR heard all (Ma Rainey's) records, but never got to meet her.] She died. She was from around Columbus, [Georgia]. She was with me for years.

I worked with Ida longer than anyone else, so I guess I would have to say that [she was my favorite].

But, I would have to say that Ma Rainey was a singer when I was a little girl--I mean a little girl.

What's her name there that works with Columbia? Bessie Smith lived right next door to me. She was raised in my mother's house. We were raised together.

Well, you know Bessie made every record that I put out. She made them on Columbia.

The way Bessie learned how to sing...Ma and Pa Rainey, that's her husband...they used to come there with the carnival. They'd have it in a vacant lot. Bessie and I used to sit out ^{There} and ~~back of the carnival~~ beg for [] 'cause we couldn't go in.

We'd sit out there. Ma would sing...(imitating)...'Oh, these dogs of mine.' We would sit back out there, and she would imitate

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Ma Rainey's singing. That's the way she learned how to sing.

She was here with me just before she went away. She went down to Memphis. Her brother was driving the car, and had an accident.

[There's a man down in New Orleans now, WR says, Dave Boxleiter, who was in that show. He told me all about that...]

[Did you ever know Clarence Williams in New York? I guess you would have? WR asks.]

Oh, I knew Clarence Williams here. He had a music store right down State Street--31st and State Street. I knew him here before he ever went to New York.

[Jelly Roll would have know him, WR says.] The last couple of years of Jelly's life when he was writing music, Clarence Williams was trying to sell the music, and was the agent.

Clarence was trying to do good for everybody that was from Chicago. Of course, that was kind of a syndicate, too, around here.

When they wrote "St. Louis Blues." When [W.C.] Handy wrote "St. Louis Blues," in Memphis, I was there.

He worked at the white Dixie Park on one side of the fence, and I worked the colored park, right on Beale Street. He worked over there at the white park, and we worked over here at the colored park.

I got married to Dudley, I know you've heard of Dudley. [WR

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has heard the name.] That was my first husband. We brought the theater there - opened that vaudeville theater there - and that's where we separated.

And Klein. The fellow that used to book the shows for...that used to book the whole circuit, told me ,if you ever come to Chicago I want you to write me...

(Machine off...)

[WR mentions Tommy Ladnier, and asks LA when was the first time she met him, or start working with him.]

Tommy roomed at my house when he first came to Chicago. He and his mother lived over me, and his mother got killed.

[WR never knew Tommy very well.] His mother got killed. Tommy tried to say that he...and some man was fighting and he shot the man, and the shot killed his mother. So, they had him in trouble for a long time.

Then, he came to room with me. I was living in 33rd then. He was playing cornet...and got in a band.

I went to New York to see my father. That was the first time I went to New York. I was getting ready to go to England, and didn't have any cornet players.

[WR mentions that Ladnier was with Fletcher Henderson over there for a while,] and LA agrees, saying, before that.

I have trouble remembering the name of the band in England. Maybe, [Sam Wooding], and Sidney Bechet used to work with him,

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and us.

[Bechet] first played clarinet, and worked in Dudley's place. Dudley was a trombone player, and he had a band.

Sidney went to New York. I remember the first time he saw snow on the ground. He like to have gone crazy. He had never seen snow before.

[He was a funny fellow, WR says.] I agree. Bechet, you know him. You know, the best one of all--Sidney Bechet.

"Muggsy" Spanier could talk. He learned how to play cornet in my house.

[WR can believe that. Muggsy told him, too, that Tommy was one of his favorites. When Tommy died he wrote a little article in Downbeat about him. He gave him credit as being one of the great ones.] I know [Spanier] used to come every Saturday, and take his lessons.

I'm 83 [years old], and my birthday is the 19th of September. The 19th of September, I will be 83. I'm 82 now. [You look wonderful for your age, WR states.]

I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I graduated from high school there, and then I went to Roger Williams University at Nashville, Tennessee.

When the school burned, I went to Knoxville College. I didn't go to Fisk University in Nashville because my people were Baptist. I went to Roger Williams. Fisk was, kind of, a

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Congregational [i.e., religious affiliation.]

There weren't very many people who knew Jelly in those days. He used to call himself a loner. He figured it was because he couldn't read music. He was in Chicago, and he figured they were better than he was. He wouldn't go around then.

Of course, he was like that. He was a better musician than they were, but he didn't figure that. He figured he was the best piano player there was in the world. But, after he left the piano he just figured he was...

Clarence Jones was one of the best [piano players] there ever was. Clarence is dead.

Dave Payton was very good. Dave Payton was at the Grand Theater, and then the Regal [where WR knew him.]

Teddy Weatherford was a good piano player, but Earl [Hines] was different from all of them.

END OF REEL