

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

Draft: Lars I. Edegran and  
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Theodore Purnell was born in March [26, see below] 1908 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He doesn't remember when he started playing music or at what age. He started playing clarinet. [Compare previous interview in Archive.] Nobody else in his family played music except for his brother Alton, pianist. TP took lessons from Prof. [Paul] Chaligny, an old Frenchman, now dead. He studied for a pretty good while with him.

He switched to saxophone later upon request of [other band members]. He has no pictures when he was playing clarinet. TP's first band was lead by Billy [i.e., "Big Foot Bill"] Phillips (Compare interview of February 3, 1961, Reel I, page 1). He also played with Lawrence "Toca" [Martin] and Kid Clayton. He can't remember all the men or all the bands he played with but admits that he played pretty good himself.

Members of the Lee Collins & Dave Jones band that TP recorded with [in New Orleans, 1929]: [Al] Morgan, Albert Martin (drums), Joe Robichaux (piano), Manuel Sayles or Danny "Son Do" Barker (banjo). Roy Evans was TP's drummer [with Jones & Collins]. TP says, "He was real good." He died "a good while ago." TP thinks he knew Raphael, a drummer who played uptown. Joe Strohter played [drums] with [Jones &] Collins on their recordings. [Compare above

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

on Albert Martin.] TP does not know what happened to JS.

David Jones played all instruments including saxophone. DJ is the only person TP knew "who could play a lot of a French Horn." DJ died in California. TP started playing with DJ at the Astoria. DJ came from New York where TP thinks he had his own band. He had great tone. DJ played all saxophones. He played tenor with TP. DJ made records in New York in 1925 with the Cotton Club Orchestra. He had his own band in New York. He was called "Fess" [and Professor] Jones.

TP worked at La Vida on Iberville Street with Lee Collins, Joe Robichaux, Albert Martin, and John Marrero, a guitarist and banjoist who had a good beat. [Leading by RBA here. Compare recordings of JM & Lawrence Marrero.] JM went to New York where he died.

When RBA asks about time-keeping ability, TP mentions Louis Barbarin as being a good drummer [rather than a banjoist.] LB was with Sidney [Desvigne's] band. His brother Paul was also "a hell of a drummer" [i.e., good].

TP brings up his age by asking LIE and RBA how old do they think he is. He says he was born March 26, 1908.

TP played all types of jobs--shows, dancers, and for singers. La Vida didn't feature any singers. It was just a dance hall. At the Astoria there were singers and an M.C. The late Arthur

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

Wynn was an M.C. at the Astoria. He would announce the acts, make jokes, etc. He was "kicks." TP worked with Sherman Cook (M.C.) who also used to be around the Astoria. TP was told that SC died in Chicago. There were many good acts at the Astoria. TP said "they were all stars" (all the acts). Gladys [i.e., Bentley? RBA, December 13, 1978] sang "Am I Blue?" well.

Joe Robichaux's girl friend, Joan, was a singer with JR's band.

Jones & Collins' [Astoria Hot Eight] recordings were made on Esplanade Street in the Italian Hall. Davey Jones, Joe Robichaux, Manuel Sayles made up the names of the pieces. Some of the recordings were: "Tip Easy Blues" which TP doesn't know meaning of its name; "Damp Weather"; "Astoria Strut"; and "Duet Stomp". TP knew Lorenzo Tio, clarinet player, now dead [Cf. earlier interview on lessons from Tio.]

TP took lessons from Adolphe "Tats" Alexander. TP had no lessons from Lorenzo Tio. He had no lessons on the saxophone. He could play sax when he first picked it up. At a rehearsal he played "In a Little Spanish Town" when he first tried sax. TP started on the Albert-system clarinet. He says there is "plenty [of] forking" [fingering on Albert system]. Eugene Porter taught TP about Boehm [system].

Prof. Chaligny was old and retired from playing when TP knew him.

TP has travelled all over the country: New York, Chicago,

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

st. Louis, Kentucky, etc. He travelled with Walter Pichon, Mamie Smith and Sam Morgan.

TP played on the [steamer] Capitol for years. Then he played on the President for [the] Streckfus [family]. He was with Sidney [Desvigne] and A. J. Piron. Piron, a violinist, played society music for all the rich people uptown.

TP liked all kinds of music. At that time they had to read [music]. "Purple Rose of Cairo" was Piron's theme song and [later] TP's theme song at the Famous Door [with Smilin' Joe (Pleasant Joseph) and His Blues Trio. RBA, June 22, 1972]. Pete Fountain used to come to the Famous Door all the time. The tenor player with Louis Prima[s' band] Sam Butera used to come there too.

TP "used to play the hell of a baritone" [sax] also. He played with Frankie Duson at the Pelican, a big dance hall on Gravier and Rampart.

TP, RBA, and LIE discuss picture RBA inquired about. [Machine off.] TP confirms identification of Sidney Desvigne's band in [Al] Rose and [Edmond] Souchon, [New Orleans Jazz...] except for Wilson who TP doesn't remember [and an unidentified musician?] who is to the right of [Louis] Nelson.

Sam Dutrey [Jr.] used to play tenor with Sidney Desvigne. RBA and LIE agree that SD played clarinet more than tenor before he died.

TP played both sax and clarinet in later years [but primarily]

THEODORE PURNELL  
 June 16, 1972  
 Reel I [of I]--Summary

clarinet when I heard him. RBA, December 12, 1978.] He also played soprano. He tried all the different saxes. His clarinet is now broken. It was messed up during Hurricane Betsy. He still has his alto.

TP played with Herb Morand (trumpet) and his brother "McGee", drummer [i.e., Morris Morand].

Lucien Johnson, sax player, died in California. LJ didn't have a band but played in Big Foot Bill Phillips's band. Everybody played with BFBP.

The late Kid Clayton was one of the first good bands TP played with. KC could play anything. Lee Collins was the [ ?

] man TP played with. LC couldn't read much, but he had a quick ear. He could play [a] second [part] to anything. LC used the two back valves [i.e., second and third valves] a lot. TP played with Red Allen.

Jones & Collins band used some written arrangements. TP played alto lead. They had many head arrangements. The recordings were "all head stuff." A white boy, Sidney Arodin played clarinet on the recordings. The fact that he was known to the others, and could play are the reasons he played with them (Compare interview of February 3, 1961, Reel I, page 4). SA lived over the river. There were not many intergrated bands at that time, but musicians used to sit in a lot. RBA questions on David Jones tempo. TP says DJ could set any tempo you want, fast or slow. [Someone once told me that DJ brought back the practice of playing in a very fast tempo from New York. Compare recordings. RBA, June 22, 1972.] Recordings were made for Brunswick. [Cf. discographies.] Eight or nine men were in the band. TP used to

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

stomp a lot so they had to put pillows under his feet. TP  
"used to like to blow."

TP stopped playing in 1955 when he had his first stroke  
(Compare interview of February 3, 1961, Reel II, page 3).  
Last stroke was last year. He has had four strokes. They  
affected one of the legs mostly.

TP played clarinet in the Navy. In the Navy band he played  
classics like "William Tell [Overture]" and others.

TP played with Chris Kelly before he died. Also he played  
with Sam Morgan. TP played with Buddy Petit. He would substitute  
with these bands. He played with anybody who had some money. TP  
was a "money musicianer". Only one guy "got funny" with TP's  
money: Kid Clayton. TP and his brother went to beat up KC. TP  
comments that one can tell the fellows who knew him [well] since  
they called him "Wiggles."

From the Chicago Defender of January 19, 1935, states that  
[Walter] "Fats" Pichon's Band was at the Old Plantation Nightclub  
in Memphis: Raymond Brown, Joe Barnes (trumpet), Robert  
Carroll (trombone), [Cf. WRHJA files] Luther West of Tulsa (alto),  
the George Clark of New Orleans, who died a couple of monts ago,  
(tenor), Fred Minor (guitar), Chester Zardis (bass), and Judge  
Riley (drums). TP doesn't remember Haywood Walker, Walter  
Robinson (trombone), Lester Peabody (sax). TP discusses Earl  
Bostic who was good. He could read and play anything. He was

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

an arranger. TP is listed with FP in this newspaper.

TP went to Chicago in 1930 and Louis Armstrong played with [the Jones and Collins band] [i.e., sat in. Cf. other interviews.] Lee Collins, Sherman Cook and Joe Robichaux were there. LC and LA played well together. On "When You're Smiling" LA had nothing on LC. LA and LC didn't try to cut each other as they were buddies. They grew up together. LC could play high notes. They played "Skelton in the Closet." Lee played second. Lee still tried to blow trumpet when he was sick upon his return to New Orleans. TP played with LC at the Paddock then. Lee could play as high as the piano could at the La Vida. The Old Man [i.e., God] can stop him. [TP pointed up.] No matter how great you are. When LC's band got to Chicago, Louis Armstrong was sick, but he came out to play with them.

A discussion of travels with Mamie Smith occurs. MS wanted to keep Pichon with her, but he wouldn't stay. FP had "a left hand like nobody." The band toured with MS a good while. TP discusses a huge stage, possibly in Little Rock. Pichon arranged for Mamie Smith.

John "Pickey" Brunious and Dave Bartholemew (trumpets) were with FP after TP. Alvin "Fats" Walls [check sp] is in another picture which TP thinks he can find. This band (the Navy band) was the best band TP ever played in. "All them guys" could write

THEODORE PURNELL  
June 16, 1972  
Reel I [of I]--Summary

[i.e., arrange]. "Sweet and Lovely" was arranged by [ ? ]  
Grimes (trumpet). It was pretty. It took him a long time to finish  
it. All four trumpet players could play high.

END OF INTERVIEW