

1st
draft

"Sometimes like my father, he would come home
three o'clock in the morning, and he'd get the blues.
He'd sit on the back step in the yard all night long
with the guitar....And it looked like the later it got,
the sweeter that music sound. And people would want to
hear it....They wouldn't call the police."

---taped interview with Harold Christophe, by
William Russell and Ralph Collins, reel I,
Aug. 1, 1961

Chap III

HAROLD CHRISTOPHE
I [of 2] --Digest--Retyped
August 1, 1961

Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

[Interview recorded at HC's home, 3425 Loyola St., New Orleans, La.]

Harold Eugene Christophe was born July 4, 1912, in the Garden District of New Orleans; he has lived in the same section all his life. [This section is not called the Garden District by most people.] His grandfather played guitar, as did all his paternal aunts and uncles; his father played guitar; a maternal uncle, Eugene, played guitar. They had a family [string] band, and he [Eugene?] sang French songs. The family band would mask [for Mardi Gras] and go together as a musical group; they also played and entertained at fish fries. Talk of fish fry customs, admissions, charges for food, etc. Talk of an old custom practiced at the various dance halls throughout the city (Cooperators Hall, which was previously called Hopes Hall, where HC's grandfather was "laid out" [for his funeral], is mentioned): at the end of a "set" [several tunes], a march would be played; it indicated that one [or some? or all?] man [or men?] was to treat one [or some? or all?] woman [or women?]; the march frequently used was "Gettysburg." The family band played different types of songs; they also made up their own words to various tunes; HC says that some of the words being sung to rock-and-roll tunes today came from the old times. The family musicians sang a lot of Creole songs; HC says his family band could take any song and sing it in French, and the people would enjoy it. The beat of the bands in the old times was different from that of today, as the drummer had the old overhead drum pedal, which has been replaced by the modern and faster pedal. Dave Bailey had the last overhead bass drum pedal in town. The bass drum was also struck with the stick.

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HC always liked the guitar; he would fool with his father's guitar when his father was not around; HC was mystified that his father knew when HC and his siblings had been handling his instrument; HC later figured out that it was because his father had left the instrument tuned, and when he took it up again, there would be some variation in the tuning; HC had no trouble after he learned this, and learned how to tune it himself. His interest in guitar led him to take up also saxophone, in 1929. He picked up pointers from some of the better musicians around town at first; then he began studying with Davy Jones (who is still alive, in California). HC studied "catechism" before he began actually playing the sax; he says he studied hard on his instrument, as he didn't want to have to take the same lesson over because it would cost him another 50¢, the price of each lesson. WR mentions that Jones recorded with Lee Collins, playing tenor sax; HC says Jones first instrument was drums ("Papa" John Joseph has a photograph at his [barber] shop showing Joseph, Kid Ory, Davy Jones and [Anthony] Holmes in their own band, in Lutchter [La.]; HC says the picture was made around 1915 or 1918; [Cf. John Joseph reel.] Jones was playing drums in the picture).?] Jones played at the Tick Tock in the Thirties, when Lee Collins was there, and at the Astoria with Collins [or were they the same place?] about the same time HC began studying with him. When they left, [Kid] Rena took the job at the Astoria, remaining there all during the Thirties. Jones got his "foundation" [his work before he became a musician?] working on the railroad; when he was teaching music, he had

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plenty of students; he was a good musician; he had a good ear for his students' mistakes. HC says Joe Martinez, [director] of the W.P.A. Band, also recognized musical mistakes his charges would make; "you couldn't fool him; we called him 'Hawkeye.' "

Among the bands HC has played with are the Tuxedo Band, the E.R.A. Band, and the Tonic Triad Band (led by Professor Pritchard, and functioning around 1939). HC's very first job, about 6 months after he got his sax, was at the Gypsy Tea Room, on Royal Street. HC played for fraternity dances after that, and various other jobs. He learned to play without written music when the older men on the job would insist that he put away his music and play from the "Green Book" (meaning without written music). HC says being able to read music and being able to use the ear in playing are both important, but that being able to use the ear is more important; he has worked around blind people, who have to depend on their ears. On that first job at the Gypsy Tea Room [HC, leader?], Morris French played trombone, Penny (who had no legs) played piano, and Dick (about the same age as HC) played drums; French and Penny were older, experienced musicians. (Penny, still alive and living uptown, is a member of the Fifth Baptist Church.) Penny was a good piano player. He got his legs cut off by a sugar cane cart around Litcher, when he was young.

HC talks about jam "sections" [i.e., sessions]: when a musician didn't have a job, he would take his instrument and go sit in somewhere; "all that was good recreation, and then let the other fellows see what we could do."

Some of the musicians also jammed after their jobs.

419 HC, Son Johnson and Eddie Johnson were known as the alto saxophone players who could play the melody, could take the lead on numbers; most of the other saxophone players improvised around the lead of the trumpet and didn't know much straight melody.

Good trumpet players in HC's earlier days: Sam Morgan, Buddy Petit, Punch [Miller]; Kid Rena (whose tone was second only to that of Sam Morgan, who had a sweet tone) and others. Petit was known as a barrelhouse player; he played a lot of "ragtime." He played into a bucket a lot, using it as a mute. Sam Morgan "held the city" [i.e., was the most popular] until 1925, when his band was in a contest at the Pelican with that of ["Papa"] Celestin; nobody had heard much use of mutes, so when Celestin played "My Josephine" ("a steal from 'Some Of These Days'") using a wa-wa mute, the people liked it so much they awarded Celestin the [winner's] cup; from then on, Celestin held the whole city. HC talks of bucking contests; he also says that there was hardly a Sunday when one didn't hear at least one band playing for any of numerous occasions. *[Quote, in RBA's file. Book section, Top Row. [Portraits chap?]]* People who could play any instrument, but especially piano or guitar, were welcome into the homes of others. Sometimes HC's father, Louis, would come home late at night feeling blue; he would play his guitar in the back yard, sometimes for the rest of the night; nobody complained;

597 "it look like the later it got, the sweeter that music sound."

590 *[Quote on not being homesome. See RBA's file. Book section Portraits chap.]*
A first cousin of HC, Ferdinand Joseph, who is between 70 and 80 years

old, learned to play on HC's father's guitar; Joseph still plays; he lives on St. Ann Street; he can talk about Buddy Bolden, and about the women who took poison and/or killed themselves when Bolden lost his mind. Joseph never played professionally.

End of Reel I

Harold Christophe

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Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

HC shows a method book he had when studying with Davy Jones. He shows another one, a chord book by [Jimmy?] Dale (he mentions Sam Lee [perhaps he got the book from saxophone player Sam Lee?]). He shows other books and some stock arrangements, including "Jumpin' At The Woodside." He shows popular sheet music, saying he learned the words of the songs, too, as he also sings. The Dale book also shows how to play a "hot" chorus and a "dirt" chorus. HC also has a book of folk songs from various countries; he says sometimes he has to be able to play them, in case someone wants to sing them. Also shown is a sheet, "Jambalaya," by Hank Williams. HC also does a lot of arranging; one arrangement shown is "Leroy's Special," written for 3 saxes; Leroy [Robinet?] plays tenor sax with HC. During the Depression when they couldn't afford to buy arrangements, they would make their own; however, they couldn't play a job with [unauthorized] arrangements of copyrighted music, so they would memorize their parts. HC says, "They would come and knock you off with copyright music;" he tells of a job he played in Mandeville [La.], on which his band played so many tunes that "they" thought they must have copyright music; [however, they didn't have any on the stand, so nothing could be proved.] HC says he seldom forgets a melody. Talk about arrangements, etc., continues. HC thinks it is sometimes better to be able to see a tune than just to hear it, or to be able to see it after hearing it-- that is, to learn a new tune, it is better to be able to look at the music than to have to learn it by ear. HC has some music stamped "W.P.A." The piece of music WR asks about is dated "1941" which is the year the W.P.A. ended, according to HC. The W.P.A. Band played strictly from music.

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HC played with the St. John's Band around 1937; the brass band was formed by the named society, which bought all the instruments, also. The band traveled with the society on all their trips. [Eddie] Richardson [trumpet?] (later with the Eureka Brass Band), [Richard?] Batiste [trumpet?] (no longer playing), Dave Bailey [drum], Adam Page and "Buster" Moore [trombone] were in the St. John's Band with HC. The band broke up during the [World] War [II]; [A.B.] Spears got some of the men and formed the [E.] Gibson [Brass] Band; Dave Bailey, Richardson and Carroll [Blunt], all from the St. John's Band, are about the oldest [i.e., in tenure] members of the Gibson Band. [Cf. other interviews- omits Jackson Brass Band. RBA] The [St. John's ?] band was about ten pieces, such as the bands playing today. The band had alto horns in it; HC says the alto horn parts are very important, and pretty; HC used to play alto horn parts on his alto [sax]. HC was shifted back and forth, from alto horn parts to alto sax parts, playing lead or secondary parts.

Photo of the [Young] Tuxedo Brass Band is shown; HC was a member of the musicians union at the time, as the band is a union band. Members are identified: Wilbert Tillman, tuba [i.e., sousaphone]; [Reginald] Koeller, trumpet; Vernon Gilbert [trumpet]; John Casimir [E flat clarinet, leader]; Andy Anderson [trumpet]; HC [tenor sax]; Joe Avery [trombone]; [Albert] Warner [trombone]; [Ernest Rogers, snare drum]; Emile Knox, bass drum. The photo was taken in the [early] fifties.

Also shown is a photo of the E.R.A. Band, taken January 15, 1935. HC identifies [most of] the men shown. Among those mentioned: Shots [Madison]; Jim [correctly William Grant] Brown; Son Johnson, supposed to be the greatest sax player of all time, who also played piano at one time; [Ernest] Poree; Judge Riley; Ernest Trepagnier and "Black Happy" [Goldston], considered by HC as the greatest drum team at the time. The band performed as a unit and also as smaller units.

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The photo shown was taken at Jackson Square, where the band regularly played concerts; the band rehearsed nearby, at the Fifth Ward Athletic Association, in the place operated by Patomo's. The band also played concerts at many and various places throughout the city; the concerts were free of charge. Some members of the large band would also get private work, at night, playing for people who had heard them in the public concerts.

HC frequently played on advertising trucks. He also played a goodly number of excursions which moved by train. The band, in the baggage car, played for the entire trip. HC has gone as far as Chicago on excursions. HC talks about playing at Milneburg, which still had a few camps when he was working there; he says the roads, such as Elysian Fields [Avenue] had not built up until shortly before World War II.

HC also played in Professor Pritchard's Tonic Triad Band, a symphonic band; they played once at the Fair Ground, or at the Jefferson Track[?], i.e. Jefferson Downs, when Jessie Owens ran there [in competition with a horse?]; the concert was a financial flop. The band rehearsed at the Cooperators Hall, which was also [previously?] called Hopes Hall, and is now a church [demolished partially by Hurricane Betsy, September 9, 1965, and completely by wrecking crew since then-- PRC and RBA]. [Elmer] Talbert was also a member of the Tonic Triad Band.

He was one of the first to organize a 3-piece band, during the war. [!!! RBA]

END OF REEL II