

unedited first draft

DOROTHY TAIT
REEL I [only]
December 21, 1968

INTERVIEWER: Tom Bethell
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

"I'll Be Glad When You're Dead," TB repeats. Those were lost, I'm afraid. They were just given to Kid Howard. They weren't...Bill Russell never intended to do anything with them.

Yes but there aren't many, "Old Man Mose," DT interjects. That's right, TB agrees.

We were talking about yesterday, the Bakersfield thing, TB notes....Let's make it September 1954. That's the closest I can come to it....

Well you see now. We had to sing that evening, TB says....Recording (Looking at a program from the concert.)

They did no rehearsing in that hall, DT says. It was Harvey Auditorium. But there was no rehearsing.

There was no warm-up, nothing like that. The band never did. They just went out.

DT thinks there are some tracks that Alfred Lyon used to fill up [a record]. There's something in my mind that says he filled out the record with either tracks that he had from the previous recording, or something like that. I'm almost certain of it.

TB gives the date December 21, 1968, and asks DT about how she felt being the manager of the band. DT replies she always connected [that] in her mind with the earthquakes.

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They had a summer of very severe earthquakes about every hour. They were all very terrified, and couldn't sleep.

DT used to lie awake listening to George Lewis records not realizing at the time that the band was still active.

One day she got a postcard from a friend who said they had spent the last four nights listening to the George Lewis band at the Beverly Caverns in Hollywood.

It was a matter of hours [before] she was on her way down there to hear them. That was where I first met George, DT says.

I came back on Cloud 15. It was magnificent music. the band was at their peak.

I got in touch with a non-profit group in Bakersfield, the Seven Arts Cultural organization devoted to bringing various interesting cultural events to the town. They agreed to sponsor the concert.

They couldn't do it for several months. Of course, the band had to go home.

One concert wouldn't pay the band's round-trip transportation plus a fee for the concert. There had to be other engagements.

At that time, Nicholas Gagliano in New Orleans was managing the band. He's now a New Orleans attorney.

We were pretty desperate. We didn't know how we would manage it.

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It was up to me to go out, and find some other places for the band to play. I had never done anything like that before in my life.

I managed to arrange three, or four, additional dates - one of them at the Royal Room in Hollywood - which brought in enough to make it worthwhile for the band to come out, and pay their transportation round-trip....

Something happened. They were scheduled to be on the West Coast later.

Something went wrong as it frequently does with band arrangements. It meant they only had that one engagement.

This was the Bakersfield trip. That was where the recording was made without authorization.

I tracked it down to the people who made it, and insisted that they give me the tapes. I got in touch with Alfred Lyon of Blue Note Records, and cleared it through the union.

They bought the tape, and paid the men, and everything was ship-shape. But I had to put up a bit of a fight to get the tape.

If there's one thing that makes me furious, it's a bootleg tape. This is the unforgivable to me.

Nick was starting in lawsuit about then. He had them booked on a college concert tour, and was himself unable to go.

He asked me if I could go with the band on the tour which I did. I was tickled to death of course.

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It sort of worked out gradually. I was able to get them some club dates in San Francisco and on the West Coast, and then sort of a gradual thing.

I had no previous [experience] booking whatsoever. It scared me to death.

They booked them at the China Lake Military [Base]. That was beautiful. It's right in the middle of the desert, nothing around.

It was outdoors at night--a beautiful warm desert night clear moonlight. It was one of the loveliest concert I've ever been to.

I was able to do that through people she knew. I forgot how I managed.

Somebody suggested I try the Royal Room. I managed to book them there for two, or three, weeks.

Somebody told me to see the man who owned the Royal Room. He was tickled to death to have them, and once he got them he was crazy about them, of course.

I had never done anything like that before, and would never do anything like that again. I was with Lawrence [Marrero] when he had a heart attack, and took him to the hospital.

They were playing at the Beverly Cavern, and it happened right on the stand. It was what they called cerebral anoxia [?].

It was a terrifying thing. I got him to the Hollywood

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Emergency Hospital.

From there he was transferred to the Los Angeles General Hospital because he was much too ill to be released from the hospital. Then, he returned home.

At that time he had very high blood pressure. I was told by the doctors then that he shouldn't travel.

Lawrence was always deeply hurt. But he didn't go on future trips because it was too big a risk.

TB thinks LM did travel again a little bit in [19]55 because he went to Boston. DT says that was all part of the same thing.

George Guesnon came up, and took his place. Then, Lawrence did come back during the latter part of this engagement.

That was on the same engagement that, later on in New York, George was taken sick. I mean the same period of time, DT notes, and Lawrence did come up to Boston and play later.

Tony Parenti was playing. I remembers that George didn't come to Boston, but the band left Tony Parenti.

Lawrence didn't go to Boston after all. Now I remembers and believe me this is off the record, Tony Parenti [

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George Lewis loved California, DT continues. Once in a while he would say that if he left New Orleans he would like to live in California.

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But, his mother was here, and his daughter, and, of course, Jeannette was still alive at this time. I doubt that George really would have left New Orleans because his family roots were deep here.

While I don't think George thought this was the greatest place in the world, at the same time I think his deep attachment to his family [meant] he would never really have left here. It was just an idea that it would be really nice to live in California.

GL said to DT one time, 'My daddy's buried there, my mother's buried there, my wife's buried there, and I'm going to be buried there.' But, he loved California.

Another place that he's very fond of because he has so many friends there is Cincinnati because of the big following he has there, too. I think some of George's most enjoyable engagements were in Cincinnati.

I met Reverend Kershaw. I went to Oxford [Ohio] for a concert. In fact, that first trip they did a concert there.

I remember it well. Lawrence Marrero had a birthday. They had Johnny Lucas, trumpeter, with them on that trip.

He's wonderful, a great person. He's in a wheelchair. He blew a beautiful cornet, trumpet. Lately, he tells me he's been learning the valve trombone, but he's playing a lovely trumpet.

George took care of him as if he were his own son. He helped

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him, and it was a very lovely relationship.

He just played with the band that trip. And then, he would sit in with them in Los Angeles often. But on that trip, he played a number of engagements in Chicago and Oxford.

He didn't play in Cincinnati, but he played a number of concerts on that trip. He played Purdue at the concert there, and it was a very happy trip.

TB asks about travel engagements. DT always tried to see to it that George always had a room by himself because he was not in good health.

He was in very poor health, and had to sleep in the daytime. She always tried to work it that way.

[Slow] Drag Pavegeau, and Joe Watkins, always shared the room. Alton Purnell. The others, Jim Robinson, and Kid Howard [shared rooms]. And then, Alton and Lawrence quite often.

They had enough to do taking care of their instruments. Joe taking care of his drums.

I would keep track of them insofar as checking them [into hotels,] transportation, and all that. There was plenty for them to do keeping track of their instruments.

They traveled by train, or plane. We flew a good deal. Jim Robinson was terrified.

It was his first plane trip. I don't remember between which two cities, although it was on TWA.

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He really was terribly apprehensive. I had with me some very mild sedative pills that I don't think would have affected a kitten.

I gave them to him. Apparently it was a psychological effect because the pill itself would have had no effect.

Jim kind of let out a sigh of relief, put his head back, and went to sleep. I'm sure it wasn't the pill I gave him.

I think George has a hard core of fanatic fans. You only had to see them lined up outside those clubs in San Francisco and Chicago, in fact anywhere.

You only had to see the crowds in New York. He packed them in at the Paramount, and that's a huge place.

It's no longer there. It was under the old Paramount theater on Broadway right by the [New York] Times newspaper building.

That place every weekend was packed to the walls. It held 600, and something. It was a very large place.

Of course, at the Beverly Cavern, and the Royal Room, they'd line up outside to get a table. It was the same way in Chicago.

But that does not necessarily mean that the younger people don't know this music. I would say George's popularity in this country is unequalled for this rock bottom true jazz.

There isn't anybody who can better him. I realize that there is a man named Louis Armstrong.

But he no longer represents what George represents because

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George's music never changed. His popularity among those who are New Orleans jazz what they call buffs....

Mercy yes [LA heard GL play]. Louis left New Orleans when he was about 17 years old. George never left until he was about 45. But, I'm sure Louis has heard him.

In fact, I think Louis went to some of his concerts in London. Louis and he were in London [at the same time].

I think one engagement, Louis was playing one concert. I know that we heard Louis, and George went backstage.

Louis is very fond of George. He thinks the world of him.

I remember Louis had a young man, a fan of George's from Cincinnati, who was at an Armstrong concert. He wanted to see Louis. He wanted to meet him.

They wouldn't let him in backstage. Louis--you know how the situation backstage can be.

This chap had a photograph of George Lewis with him. He took a scrap of paper, and wrote "friend of" on it, [and taped] it to the picture.

Louis didn't say bring him in. Louis came out to meet him, and brought him in himself.

TB speculates that one time Louis said something about having GL playing in his band, but DT doesn't think so. If he did, she didn't know anything about it.

I don't think it's true, unless Louis mentioned it to

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somebody. I know he never mentioned it to George. I would say that was one of the multitudinous rumors that spring up in the jazz world because I know nothing about it....

The younger college audiences loved it. Oh they loved it....

There was Ohio State, Purdue, [Brown?] - that would be in the East - a college in Vermont, can't remember the name. But, there were a great many of them.

Then, there was St. Paul's, a...prep school in Massachusetts, [where] they played. Alvin Kershaw arranged the date. He's moved somewhere else.

And, oh yes, the band played at Peterboro. They played at a very informal type thing at Peterboro for Al Kershaw, and in the middle of winter, ooh.

TB asks DT to describe very first time she heard them. I can't, DT replies.

It was such an overwhelming thing. It really was. It's not a thing I can put in words.

I went in. I got there. I called on the phone. I said must I make reservations?

They said yes, but don't expect us to hold them past a half hour after we open. Get here early.

I got there way early. I remember I asked one of the cocktail waitresses whether it would be possible for me to meet George Lewis. She said of course, and she called him over.

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We sat at the bar, and we had a drink. I tell you, I couldn't believe it was true.

Lawrence was there. Drag, and the whole group were there also.

George showed me just where to sit so I'd get the best sound, and so forth. I mentioned a number of numbers, and he played them all for me.

It was overwhelming. It really was. I think it's almost impossible for anyone to describe how they felt the first time they heard that real George Lewis group with Lawrence, and the whole group.

It's something you can't put in words. The world was all golden sound, you know.

I could hear it in my ears all night. To me it was a very overwhelming experience if you dig that music, and really love it.

TB says Good Time Jazz, a man--I keep forgetting his name. A very nice man. He's fat, but stately fat. He told me that GTJ had recorded George Lewis playing in the Berkeley campus a regular concert about that time, 1954.

I think it was before that, DT notes. They recorded in that...But the record's never been released until today, TB adds.

Whether they recorded them in the Hangover Club around then I do not know, DT continues. I know Lester came up there, and

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George refused to sign a contract with him, an exclusive contract.

[They can't think of who it is, and spend some time on it...It doesn't matter anyway. It's not important....]

About the character of David in the Five Smooth Stones? TB asks. Well, the character of David is not based on any one individual, DT answers.

But the character of Gramp is more or less based on George Lewis--Gramp, the grandfather, not completely. George is a well know clarinetist and Gramp in Five Little Stones is just a man who played banjo locally.

There were some differences. But as far as his character, and his personality, I admit it was frankly pretty much George Lewis.

So much so that Molly Moon came down here not long ago. Her husband is the national director of publicity for the NAACP.

And she went to Preservation Hall in the hope of hearing George. She didn't know him, and hadn't heard him. She walked in the Hall, and said, 'There's Gramp.'

But that [other] character is but the character of David who is the protagonist of the book [and] is not anyone in particular. The young man, sort of a composite of I couldn't tell....

I set up [an exclusive contract]. I had been wanting George to settle down to one company for a long time. I talked to Norman

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Granz, but we finally settled for a fairly nice arrangement.

It was for two years. It called for two, or three, records a year I forgot--I mean albums.

At the time of its expiration, Norman had sold to that other company, and then George's health was very bad at that time. It was when he was having those bad angina attacks.

It didn't seem safe, or fair to the company, although heaven knows the day that record companies - with one exception which is Alfred Lyon [of Blue Note] God love him - the day that record companies are completely fair to artists is the day that I [really will control....]

