

HAROLD DEJAN  
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped  
November 18, 1960

Also present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins

Harold Dejan was born February 4, 1909, on Miro [Street] between St. Louis and Conti [streets]; he was reared in the Tremé section, around Miro and St. Ann. HD's father (not a musician) had a difficult childhood, but by hard work became biggest colored drayman in New Orleans. His father cleaned and ground up red brick to sell as scouring abrasive; HD tells how people used the powder to clean their steps, patios, etc. HD comments on segregation, saying that he has always lived in a mixed neighborhood and that he didn't know anything about segregation until recently. [Compare newspapers of that date for references to (school riots?)].

HD's brother [Leo Dejan], who should be forty-nine years old, began studying his music hard after the first little band he and HD had; the name of the band was the Moonlight Serenaders. The first big band Leo was in was the Sunny South band, which was the best young band there has ever been in the city, says HD. Others in it: Alvin McNeal; (he thinks) Sidney Montague, drums. Leo left that band to join [A.J.] Piron, who was reorganizing at the time. HD was working in the various groups led by Bebé Ridgley.

HD's mother was an [amateur or perhaps a strictly-at-home] singer, who attended operas and could sing some of the arias from them. HD's grandmother spoke only French. When not wanting their

children to understand them, HD's parents spoke French; HD learned a little of the language from them.

Leo began his music study on violin, HD on clarinet; HD began when he was about nine or ten years old. HD went to school first at Holy Family (on Orleans [between Royal and Bourbon--now demolished]); then he attended Bayou Road School, which moved to St. Philip Street, and is now named Craig School. A third grade teacher played piano; HD would go to her house on Saturday to run over some marches used for some school activity. There was no music taught in the school that HD remembers. He first studied with Professor [ ? ] Nickerson; he later studied with [Paul] Chaligny and with [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.]; when Tio was out of New Orleans for a while, Frank Crump, brother-in-law of Henry Julian (fine clarinet and saxophone player who worked with George McCullum at the Music Box) would help HD out with his studies. Professor Nickerson was in his forty's or fifty's when HD studied with him; the Nickerson [Manuel] Manetta studied with was perhaps that Nickerson's father. WR says the daughter of the Nickerson HD studied with is at Howard [University, Washington, D. C.] now. HD says his teacher had a son named Dalton. WR mentions Johnny St. Cyr and a violin St. Cyr had (all in pieces), which St. Cyr said came from a violin-playing Nickerson; HD say it was probably from the Nickerson with whom he studied. HD's brother, quite young, took violin from Nickerson, and was very good; Benny [Armant?],

who went to California and played with a white band, was very good [and studied with Nickerson?]. HD tells of gangs of boys who would make music students play something for them, even if was only the day's lesson; they wouldn't bother JD and his brother, however, because of their brother, Charlie [?]. HD tells of working at the Corner Club (then at Second and Rousseau, in the tough Irish Channel); HD wasn't forced to do it, but other musicians, returning from jobs in the neighborhood, or just passing through, would be forced to play for the neighborhood toughs or risk having their instruments broken; HD wasn't forced to do that because the people in the area knew him, as he delivered bills for his father in the commercial district. HD says that about the first paying job he ever played was at the Corner Club, although he didn't actually get paid, as the contractor, Munson Hickman, got paid in advance, booked another job where he actually appeared, and didn't pay the musicians who played at the Corner Club. HD says not making any money on a job is called a "ham." He says that when he went on tour with Clarence Desdune and his band, they all made plenty of money until they played in Desdune's home town; Desdune had been saying they would make the most money there, but his father's band (like that of Claiborne Williams, around Donaldsonville and in that area) was very popular, and for some reason the people didn't take to the son as to the father. The Clarence Desdune band tour that time went through Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas and on into Omaha [Nebraska]. Desdune was a very good violinist,

but not very good on banjo; the other banjo player, Harry, who was very good, would sometimes fool Desdune by dropping out at breaks he would usually play, so that Desdune would be taking an unexpected solo. In the band: Harry Fairconnetue, banjo; Warren Bennett, alto [saxophone]; Lucien Johnson, alto saxophone; HD, tenor saxophone. Oliver Alcorn later replaced Bennett, and made the tour with the band; Bennett wanted to go back to Mississippi and put a roof on his house [joke?]. Lucien Johnson played the clarinet solos after Bennett left the band. Felix Goff [tenor?] was with the band a while. Earl Fouché was with the band as long as it was in New Orleans, but he did not go on the tour. Raymond Brown, father-in-law of "H. E." [Fred Minor], played trombone (very good trombone player). George McCullum, trumpet, was the only other brass in the band, but the two sounded like a full section. Old man [Henry] Kimball was on tuba. The banjo player, [Narvin] Kimball, first started playing bass when his father [Henry] played tuba with the Desdune band. Warren Bennett played piano with the band when Fouché played saxophone in it. Eurreal "Little Brother" Montgomery, piano, joined the band in Jackson, Mississippi; Eugene Porter also joined there; they made the tour with the band. WR comments that Montgomery was in New Orleans last year...,,Montgomery left the Desdune band in Omaha; he went to Chicago to make some records with a woman blues singer, who had sent for him.

[Minnie Hicks?, Lena Mattock (in Richmond, Indiana)?, Irene Scruggs (in Richmond, Indiana)?] Montgomery could actually stop a dance with his piano playing and blues singing; HD says he had one blues which would catch the attention of the dancers, and they would walk over to the piano to hear him. A woman pianist named Vivian, from Atchison, Kansas, replaced Montgomery; HD says they missed Montgomery because of his blues playing, but Vivian was excellent as a band pianist. Vivian returned to New Orleans with band, returning home when business became slow. HD tells of a contest with the [Findley?] Harris band in Kansas City; drummer Baby Lovett (from Alexandria [Louisiana], says WR) said to HD and others with Desdune to play New Orleans jazz numbers (they had a book of Ted Lewis arrangements) in the contest. HD said the Desdune band had a fine Dixieland group: George McCullum; Raymond Brown; (Kimball had been replaced on sousaphone by) Baby Woods, tuba (who could duplicate note-for-note a trumpet solo he had just heard.) The Desdune band won the contest, playing Dixieland as advised. HD says a fine band, the Sunset Royal, came to hear the Desdune band; the place where the Sunset Royal worked closed because of the Desdune band [i.e., all the business was with Desdune].

The Ridgley band traveled in a tarpaulin-covered truck. The Desdune band traveled in a new Model A Ford bus; HD says the bus was made in late 1929, when Desdune bought it. The musicians all took turns driving, doing fifty miles each. The Desdune

band ran into some very bad weather in Nebraska; the people in the town liked the band so much that one of them asked them to stay and play another night, and told them he would call the next town on the tour and tell them the truck [i.e, bus?] was being repaired.

[John] Porter was playing tuba with Ridgley's band when HD joined that group. The trombonist (unnamed) with the band (Ridgley was playing drums) wore his tuxedo all the time (the others changed into traveling clothes), but managed to look as fresh and well-groomed as the rest of the band. HD thinks Gilbert Young [trumpet] got HD in the Ridgley band; Emma Barrett, [now known as] the Bell Girl, was on piano; Felix Goff played tenor saxophone. Porter would sometimes play background on tenor saxophone for Goff's clarinet solos. The Ridgley band traveled around Mississippi and parts of Louisiana; Ridgley got a lot of choice jobs. Desdune got a lot of good jobs, too; HD figures Piron gave him some of them, because he [Desdune? Piron?] was a good violinist too. Ridgley called his band Ridgley's Tuxedo Band; [Papa] Celestin's was Celestin's Tuxedo Band; HD thinks there was no confusion about the names.

End of Reel I

HD can remember that when he was taking clarinet lessons he would sometimes hear Bernell Santiago playing the piano in a place at North Claiborne and St. Ann; Santiago was so small at the time that he would be standing on two Coca Cola boxes to be able to reach the keyboard. He would be in bucking contests with such good pianists as "Little Willie", "Baby" Bruce (who now has an automobile mechanics shop in the St. Bernard [housing] project, and has a piano in his garage), [see Baby Bruce interview] and "Plukezom" [selling?]. Walter Pichon was a "class" pianist, one who could play in competition with those mentioned above and who was also a "musicianer" [i.e., could read]. If Santiago had gotten the same breaks "Honey Chile" Robinson got, he would have made a million dollars. Santiago was beautiful; "looked like a little girl he was so pretty." Bernell Santiago was smaller than Lester Santiago; he was lighter complectioned, about the color [his sister] "Chinee", wife of [John] "Pickett" [actually, "Pickey"] [Brunious]. HD thinks Bernell just picked up his ability to play piano; his older brother, Harold Santiago, played piano; his uncle, Willie Santiago, played guitar; Bernell's oldest sister played piano; Everetta played piano; Chinee and Lester played piano. HD says he himself would learn tunes from a girl who played piano and who lived on the corner near his home, and his brother [Leo Dejan] would learn the tunes from him.

All the Santiagos played piano well; Harold, Lester and Bernell were qualified to play jobs. When HD [and others] first went to New York, Daniel [Danny] Barker, Billy Kyle, HD and [Art Tatum?] would take Bernell around to play; he played so well that some pianists didn't want to play their own pianos. Bernell could play anything he heard, any style. He knew all the Dixieland tunes, and would play them from the beginning, not just playing the most well-known part. HD tells a story about a time in 1930, when he, Bernell and others were on [as the band] the steamer Dixie [Morgan Lines, from New Orleans to New York]; a man offered them twenty dollars if they would play "I Like Mountain Music"; they didn't know it, but Bernell pretended they did, saying they had already played it; he got someone to play a recording of it, and it was finished, he played the first chorus just like the record; the rest of the band joined in later. He could play all the parts of all the instruments, just as he heard them on the recordings.

HD says Bernell played on Bourbon Street a long time; HD heard that Gasper (known as the "Mayor of Bourbon Street" then, and a brother of Pete Herman) spent a lot of money to try to get Bernell cured of his illness. Bernell died of dropsy, [1946-47--see Lester Santiago interview] or something like that. HD says the police didn't beat Bernell to death, and that the beating didn't occur at the end of his life, and WR adds that the policemen who beat him weren't regular [?] policemen. HD



HD says the ones who beat him were jealous [i.e., envious] of Bernell, because Bernell had a lot of nice clothes, came and went as he pleased, etc. HD says everybody was crazy about Bernell like a little [i.e., as though he was] child. HD says when he himself was working at the Gypsy Tea Room with Kid Rena, Bernell would come in and the girls would all gather around him; some would hold him on their laps, treating him like a doll. It is doubtful that Bernell ever recorded, except perhaps some home recording. [See John Reid [spelling?] Collection, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Arkansas]. HD says that when Bernell played with them on the Dixie, the band played the theme song [the first number]; Bernell took the second chorus, and all the audience stood up, because they had never heard anything like his playing. Bernell was a good band pianist, but he was at his best as a soloist. He was not as good a band pianist as Lester Santiago. Bernell had a slight speech impediment--"tongue tied", so to speak. Bernell made up little pieces of music, but he might play any of the pieces differently the next time; HD says that he doesn't know that Bernell ever did what could be called composing.

HD played in the Bienville Roof of the Bienville Hotel; he thinks Sadie [Goodson] (sister of Billie [Pierce]) was on piano. Others: Bill Phillips [drums?]; Reuben McClendon, Banjo (he could also play piano pretty well; Leo Dejan [trumpet]. The band worked there every Sunday evening. The Bienville Roof was

was a very swanky place; it was [also?] for hire, the same as the various rooms in the other hotels. HD played there in the Twenties. WR mentions that Sharkey [Bonano] played in a band which recorded as Monk Hazel and his Bienville Roof Band [Compare Monk Hazel, rell ?]; HD says they must have been the house band. HD worked the job for a private citizen [perhaps one of the owners of Hurwitz-Mintz Furniture Company?].

HD describes the Pythian Temple Roof Garden; Manuel Perez's Imperial Serenaders was probably the house band; sometimes there would be four or five bands in the place at the same time on Monday night. Monday nights were big for dances in New Orleans; there would be other events on Monday, too--banquets, etc. HD says a lot of people wouldn't go to work on Monday; they called it "Blue Monday." There might be a lot of musical events during the week, also; there were more bands playing for more funerals. HD says the Catholics used bands in that time, that the ban against funerals with music by the Catholics had come about in later years. Sunday was the day for bands playing advertising [for dances that night, or on Monday night]; one might look forward to seeing three or four bands out advertising on a Sunday. Banquets were held during the day; there was food, there was dancing to a band, things to drink, etc. There were fish fries on Friday night. Lawn

parties were usually on Saturday or Sunday night. There were a lot of clubs, of young people; they would meet a couple of times a week; then, every so often they would hire a band and give a dance. One club in particular that HD liked to play for was named the Carnation Club. HD talks about lawn parties; he says everybody had a lovely time; there was seldom a fight. Nowadays, a person attending some of the dances has to bring his "cannon" [i.e., pistol] with him. HD mentions that the Harmony Inn has cancelled its week-end dance because of anticipated trouble [i.e., racial disturbance].

HD recalls some of the marching societies, like the Jolly Boys and the Jolly Bunch; an old one was the Vidalias. Most all the clubs had boys clubs, and the boys would march in the parades with their fathers. WR mentions that the Young Men's Olympians still has a junior division. HD belonged to only one club, the San Jacinto Club; his father was a member, and he had HD and his brother [Leo?] join. The club is no longer active, although the hall is still available for rent. HD talks about the activities and the good times.

HD recalls playing a couple of times with Manuel Perez, after he (like Piron) had reorganized his band; the band rehearsed in a back room at Perez's home, which was on Prieur between St. Anthony and Pauger. When WR knew Perez later, Perez lived near St. Bernard Circle, in the area where Dr. [Leonard] Bechet lived. HD says he played several jobs with Dr. Bechet;

he wasn't the best trombonist, but he loved his instrument and his music. Dr. Bechet practiced trombone in his office when he had no patients; he kept his horn looking beautiful.

WR says Joe Robichaux says Elmer "Coo Coo" Talbert's brother is also a dentist [Dr. Bechet was a dentist]. HD says the son of Arnold Depass, also of that name, works at Lykes [steamship company] with him, and that the son has offered to write some things about Talbert, about the father Depass, etc. HD says when he and the elder Depass played at the Crystal Palace [when HD was young], HD would give Depass the beer customers bought for the band, and Depass would give him the ice cream [the employees of Brown's Velvet Dairy treated the band that way] they got. HD mentions the elder Depass's widow, saying she remembers a lot; she remembered personnel of Depass's band: Edna Francis (wife of Albert Francis, drummer), piano; Eddie Johnson [saxophone]; Talbert, trumpet; "Big Ike" Robinson, trombone; Benny Benoit, banjo (HD sees him every day; he is the brother-in-law of Cie [Frazier]). Benoit also played with HD at the Popeye, on Decatur Street.

HD's father required him to practice his clarinet at least an hour a day; HD says he doesn't think he ever practiced for even one hour on saxophone. HD says John Brunious, the father of the trumpet player, Pickey, would punch him if he couldn't play his music. Brunious was a sort of a prize fighter, known as "Slackroom--Cyclone?] Johnny." [Compare John Brunious, reel

?] He was a sharp dresser. He would come to HD's house sometimes, and play some blues on the piano; he expected

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HD to learn the blues on his clarinet. HD appreciated his help.  
HD says his own father was a tough old man, but he appreciates  
the way his father brought him up.

End of Reel II