

ED ALLEN

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January 14, 1961

Also present: Herbie Friedwald.

Ed Allen was born in Nashville, Tennessee on December 15, 1897. His mother played a little "ear" piano, but he was the only one of the family who really did anything in music. He liked to drum on tables with his fingers, and his parents decided to have him take piano lessons, which he continued for six months. Then a "kid band" was formed in St. Louis [where he lived at the time]; Allen wanted to play in it, but not on piano, which was considered a "sissy" instrument for a boy; he began playing bugle, and took up trumpet about 1916. The band was sponsored by the Knights of Pythias, and the band director, the father of clarinetist Thornton Blue, taught the members; the elder Blue was a wonderful cornet player. The band consisted of from 20 to 35 musicians, and was strictly a military band. Some of the members, however, organized a small piano-less dance group, which played [apparently for various benefits, etc.] around St. Louis. Allen became a professional musician about 1918, playing in small groups at roadhouses around St. Louis. In response to a question, Allen says there were not many clarinetists around St. Louis then, that they were slow in coming up, and that one of the best was Thornton Blue. Allen left town in 1920 [or when he was about 20], when he went with a small group to Seattle, Washington; he has not had any job other than playing music since then. Allen says the

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bands he came up with, even the trios and quartets, were reading bands, and that they began "faking" only in later years. Allen stayed in Seattle two years, then came back to St. Louis, where he worked in a night club during the winter. He went with a six-piece band to play day trips (9 to 5) out of St. Louis for the Streckfus [Steamship Co.] people; Allen says the passengers on the boat were usually going to a picnic. The clarinetist, Costello, was the leader of the band. [Check Goffin, La Nouvelle Orleans . . .] In response to a question, Allen emphasizes that every musician in St. Louis could read, that some would learn to play by ear as they went along, but every one of them could read. Allen says Streckfus furnished the music they used, getting new tunes every week. [RBA: Check to find out who was where and where boats were. PRC] Allen says that Fate Marable and his orchestra were usually on the J. S., the Streckfus boat based in New Orleans, but that Streckfus wanted to make a change in New Orleans, so a band made up of musicians from the night band of the steamer St. Paul, from the day band (including Allen) of the same vessel and from the band already on the J. S. was sent to New Orleans with Allen as leader; the band was called "Eddie Allen and his Gold Whispering Band;" Allen says they played very softly, hence the "whispering." The year was about 1924. Some of the members of the band, other than Allen, were: Floyd Casey [drums, later heard on Clarence Williams' washboard band records];

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Gene Sedric, tenor sax; [Norman] Mason, alto sax and arranger; [George] "Pops" Foster, string bass; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo, later replaced by [Willie not] George Foster, brother of "Pops." [Manuel Manetta, piano. RBA] The band played on the steamer Capitol. Allen says the band was a big hit, that they played a sort of big band (10 pieces) Dixieland which they evolved. Allen says they would "rock the boat" with their rendition of one of New Orleans' standard numbers, "Panama," and that Captain Joe [Streckfus] would tell them not to play it any more [because of the rocking[?]], but the crowd would make so much noise demanding that they play it that Captain Joe would tell them to play it again, but to make it short. Allen says the band later went back to St. Louis to work on the Streckfus boat there, and that they took the city by storm; the band also was the first colored band to work [as house band] on the St. Louis boat. Allen later says that the alto sax was just beginning to be used instead of the C-melody sax. In response to a question, Allen says he remembers a good trumpet player in New Orleans [at the time of the Gold Whispering Band] named "Kid Punch" [Miller]--he says, in fact, that it seemed that all the trumpet players then in New Orleans were named "Kid." He always admired the trumpet players from New Orleans for their swing. He says that he used to hear Louis Armstrong in St. Louis when

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Armstrong was on the boat with Fate Marable's orchestra, and that he later heard Armstrong with [Joe "King"] Oliver in Chicago. He met Oliver in Chicago, and in later years in New York worked with him quite a bit. Allen says that although several people have said that his playing on records sounds like that of Oliver, he himself thinks it sounds different, that he liked Oliver's style, but does not think they really sounded that much alike. In answer in a question, Allen says the ten piece band [Gold Whispering Band] was the first band of which he was a member that played jazz; he says it was a very good band, that they themselves didn't realize how good. He says the band broke up after about two years. He says the men wanted more money, so he went to Capt. Joe and demanded more money; Capt. Joe said the men were satisfied, that Allen was the only one who wanted more, but that he would give him a raise; however, the band would then be under the leadership of Fate Marable. Allen worked under those conditions for about three months, then took a job for "Nigger [Bootsy--Butsy]" [sp?], who ran a club next door to the cafe run by "Beansy" [Fauria]; Allen was paid more money than the other men in the band and he could come to work later and leave earlier than they, because of his reputation from the boat job. The band has three or four pieces including Udell [Wilson], piano. He says he would spend most of his time in

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Beansy's cafe, fooling around with the girls, and when he was wanted to play, someone would knock on the wall between Butsy's and Beansy's and he would go play. Butsy wanted Allen to stay in New Orleans, saying that he would give him the money to bring his family there.

Allen, however, wanted to leave, so one night, two hours before job time, he got on a train and went back to St. Louis. In 1927 and 1928, while working in the band with [Allie ?] ^[i.e. Alonzo? No - see note] Ross and Leroy Tibbs at Connie's Inn in New York, Butsy came into the place and reminded Allen of his abrupt departure from New Orleans, but was glad to see him again. Allen says the band at Butsy's played a lot of blues and swing numbers, but that the band on the boat played a little of everything, that they had complete orchestrations; Allen repeats that the band was unusual in that it was a big band playing jazz. Allen agrees that [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin had a nice band, about 7 or 8 pieces, and says that he has seen Celestin on television in recent years. He says that Manuel Perez also had a good band; Perez' band used to play opposite Allen's band on the boat some Sunday afternoons, and Allen says he used to say to himself that he hoped he could play like Perez when he got to be his age, about 40. Allen says he didn't know [A. J.] Piron in New Orleans, but met him later in New York, through Clarence Williams. Friedwald remarks that Piron and Williams were

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publishers together, and Allen agrees. Allen says he did not know Williams in New Orleans, that he met him in New York through Jasper Taylor, who was the drummer in the Black and White band that Allen was with, too, in a burlesque show. Williams gave Allen some recording work, and Allen would record some whenever he came off the road. When he decided to settle in New York, he called Williams from Cleveland, where he was with a show; Williams told him he would give him plenty of work, so he went to New York. Allen had left St. Louis to go to Chicago to work with Earl Hines probably at the Elite; a friend of Allen had called him to play because Hines and his other musicians were from Pittsburgh, and Local 208 of Chicago would not let Hines use Chicago men. Then [^{Joe Jordan}~~Joe Johnson Jones~~ ?] told Allen he was auditioning a band for burlesque, and Allen was included; the band got the job, rehearsed in New York and went on the burlesque circuit. After two years, the band broke up [in Cleveland], and Allen went to settle in New York. Allen says Clarence Williams recorded for everyone including Edison in New York, and that Williams had several recording sessions every week. Allen answers that most of the music Williams and the washboard band recorded was composed by Williams, sometimes at the recording session. If a recording made a hit, Williams would then publish the sheet music. Allen says Williams didn't do any playing other than at the recording sessions.

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He says Williams was a very good musician, though not trained; when he made up a new tune, he would have someone else notate it and arrange it for publication. He says Williams had a first-class music [publishing] house. Allen says Williams would take anybody to make a recording [if he thought the person had possibilities of talent], once taking one of the office people [a man] to make a vocal recording, the other side being a recording by Williams' wife, Eva Taylor, the session's being made for Bluebird c. 1931 or 1932^{with 8 pieces}. EA hums tune.

Allen answers that Floyd Casey played washboard on a lot of the Clarence Williams washboard band records, and that others on the records were Cecil Scott, [Cyrus] St. Clair, and [Willie] "The Lion" [Smith]. Allen says a lot of the records that are supposed to have Clarence Williams on piano are actually "The Lion." Fats Waller also recorded for Williams some, as did Buster Bailey. Williams would be at some of the sessions at which he did not play. Allen says Williams used any of the [good] musicians who happened to be in town, particularly Waller and. . . .

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Also present: Herbie Friedwald.

Allen agrees that a lot of New Orleans musicians have had numbers published by Clarence Williams, that Decca bought Williams' entire catalog and that Williams receives royalties for those numbers; he says that Williams received royalties for the movie, "High Society." Allen says Williams has been sick. He says Williams operates a "thrift" shop on 125th Street, and Friedwald says he has been there, that he met Williams' son there. Allen says he has two sons, one a policeman and the other in Connecticut. Allen says Williams had a girl working in his shop who was going to record for him, also, a few years ago. Allen says there have been rumors that Williams does not have any money, but that Williams has shown him that he does. Allen says the last time he saw Williams that Williams and his wife [Eva Taylor] were separated, but were planning to go back together; Friedwald says they have been married since about 1922. Allen says Eva Taylor was a very good singer, that she was once with a band called "The Band [with a Thousand Melodies"?!], and that she had her own NBC radio show once. Allen repeats that Williams used any good musicians who came to and through New York. He talks about musicians who say that they have never heard themselves on records, and then says that anyone can make a record but that the average musicians

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want to record and get paid for it, too. In response to a question, he says that the sessions for Williams were not very relaxed, that the rehearsals were long, and that the musicians might not even know what they were to do when they went to the studio; he says they may have rehearsed something one way and when they recorded it would have to do it another way, or that they might not even do the tunes they had rehearsed. Allen says that once he was in a Williams recording group which recorded every day for about a week for QRS, the piano roll company, which was making up a phonograph record "catalog;" Allen says they must have recorded 15 or 20 numbers that week. Allen agrees that King Oliver made a lot of records with and for Williams, and says that Williams would use Oliver on dates even without Oliver's own band, to give Oliver the work. Allen talks about OKeh record company's holding blues contests in towns all over the country, and then bringing the winners of the various contests to New York to make recordings. Then Allen talks about recording with Williams again, saying that he himself made records that he never heard at all. Allen says Williams always used good men on the recording dates. He says musicians coming into or through New York might call Williams to ask if he had any work, and Williams would tell them to come to his office, that he had something he could use them on, or that he would

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call them later. In answer to a question, Allen says he was with the Connie's Inn band, headed by [Allie ?] ^[i.e. 1/2020²] Ross at first, later by Leroy Tibbs, when he made most of the recordings with Williams. In answer to another question, Allen says he thinks the washboard band idea was Jasper Taylor's, and that Taylor was the washboard player first used on the records. He was replaced by someone who was replaced by Floyd Casey. Allen says Williams used [?] Williams, a brother, on a few of the washboard records. Allen says washboard was a good substitute for drums, as bass drum wouldn't record in those days anyway. Then Allen again mentions that Willie "The Lion" Smith played piano on many of the washboard band dates, and Fats Waller played a few. There follows a discussion about Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club, Allen saying that a person gained prestige if he had worked at either place. The names of [Duke] Ellington and Fletcher Henderson are mentioned; Allen says he never worked with Henderson, but he has played some of his arrangements. The [A. J.] Piron band was in New York before Allen settled there. Allen says that after his Connie's Inn stay (about 2 years), he jobbed around, making recordings, etc. In answer to a question, he says there were some New Orleans musicians around New York. Friedwald then asks if the New Orleans men were good; Allen says there was

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nothing wrong with New Orleans musicians--"What's wrong with Louis Armstrong?"--and makes another reply that he is crazy about Armstrong's playing. Another trumpet player he liked was Charlie Creath, from St. Louis, who may have [he did] make some recordings for Okeh, in St. Louis. ^[See discographies] Creath had a beautiful tone, could really play the blues, did not use [manufactured? RBA] mutes much, but featured use of the derby, as did King Oliver. Allen then answers that his tone was somewhat similar to Creath's; he says Zutty Singleton's wife, a sister of Creath, once heard Allen without seeing him, and said it was not Allen, it was her brother. Allen says Creath and he are about the same age, and then says that Creath is dead, having committed suicide in Chicago within the last 10 or 15 years. Allen says Creath could lay off playing for weeks, pick up his horn (or any trumpet, for that matter, and any mouthpiece) and sound as though he had been playing regularly; he says that Creath could be identified by his tone alone. Allen never heard of George Mitchell, active in Chicago; Allen says he himself stayed in Chicago about three months, at the longest. Allen has not played as a regular member of any band since the Connie's Inn job, except at present, preferring to job around; he has played at other dancing schools ^(and dance halls) during the years, but the present job is the first time he has been a regular member. He says to say the job is tiring is putting it mildly. His lip is still

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pretty good, if he does not have to blow too hard. There follows a discussion of the dancing-school [taxi-dance] job--the size of the band on various nights, tempos, price of tickets, whether or not the place makes money, and the men in the band. Floyd Casey, previously mentioned, plays drums; the pianist is leader; Rudy Powell (who has played with a lot of name bands, including Fats Waller and Cab Calloway) plays clarinet and alto sax (Allen says Powell is a very fine musician); the tenor sax is quite young, less than 30, and [Weaver ?], the bassist, is about 50--all the others are older. Allen says all the musicians in the band would like to get out of the place, but they don't because the salary is steady, and music business is not good now. In answer to a question, Allen says the band is allowed to play anything, that the management doesn't care what they play, so long as they play. Allen says that sometimes during breaks someone will turn on the radio to listen to the news, and the patrons continue dancing, not even noticing that there is no music. Allen says the place where he works now is the only one of its sort still using live music; it is the Roseland, by name. He has worked in a half dozen or more of these places in New York. Allen answers a question, saying he made records with a lot of blues singers, among them being Bessie Smith, Clara Smith and Sara Martin.

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He never recorded with Ida Cox; when told she is contemplating a come-back, he says he hopes she makes it, that he always likes to see them [old-timers ?] get money. The first time he played the style he played on those blues records was when he came to New York and made the records; he says he would play something Clarence Williams liked, and he would use that; then, if he tried to play something pretty and smooth, Williams would protest, saying, "Come on, cuz, they don't want to hear that; give me some 'kwaw-kwaw-kwaw-kwaw-kwaw-kwaw'." Allen says a record he made in a less-than-rough style was rejected by Columbia, the officials saying it wasn't the style they wanted; they wanted something rougher, and although Williams agreed with Allen that there was nothing wrong with the recording, they made it over, and in a rougher way. There follows a discussion of one of Williams' publication [or non-publication] policies. Then there is talk about rock-and-roll, Allen saying that the band at his job plays a little of everything, and the fact that old-style Dixieland is becoming somewhat popular again. Friedwald mentions Buck Clayton, and says that he has gone back to Dixieland. [Clayton is usually thought of as a Kansas City style and big-band musician.] Allen then talks about the "clique" in New York music circles, saying that it matters most who a person knows there, not how well he plays.

End of Track II

