

I [of 2]

November 6, 1962 Also present: Richard B. Allen, Jack Hurley

(Interview recorded at EJ's home, 1821 Sixth Street, New Orleans)

Edward "Big Head Eddie" Johnson, Sr., was born November 2, 1903, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The first band he played with was the Olympia Band, of New Orleans, led by Arnold DePass. EJ later played many jobs with the Tuxedo Band [led by "Papa" Celestin]. EJ also played with Arnold Metoyer at the Old Absinthe House; EJ explains that the place was called the Palace Dance Hall at the time, but it was in the Old Absinthe House building; the band played every night.

Although EJ wasn't playing music when he lived in Baton Rouge, he can recall the names of some of the musicians he heard there; there was "Toots" Johnson, no relation to EJ; there was Guy Kelly, who played in the Tuxedo Band, led by "Papa" Celestin, at the same time as EJ. Asked how the bands in Baton Rouge compared in sound with the New Orleans bands, EJ replies, "Well, during that time, jazz was really good; bands around Baton Rouge such as Professor Claiborne Williams and Knox, and 'Toots' Johnson's band, they were the only three bands at that time [doing ?] Baton Rouge." Knox was the drummer with "Toots" Johnson's band. EJ explains again that he wasn't playing music in Baton Rouge when he heard the men mentioned; he began playing only after moving to New Orleans. Guy Kelly was playing in Baton Rouge then; if he were alive, he would be about EJ's age; EJ thinks he died in Chicago. EJ was a teenager when he moved from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. He began studying music in New Orleans; his first instrument was alto sax, which he studied with Paul Barnes; EJ played tenor sax and soprano sax with "Papa" Celestin.

The Olympia Band, led by the long-dead Arnold DePass, was a fine seven-piece jazz band; at one time they worked every night for from four to seven months; all the jobs were at different places.

[Besides DePass, drums,] personnel were: [Elmer] "Coo Coo" Talbert, trumpet; Benny [Benoit? RBA], banjo; Edna Francis, piano; EJ, alto sax; Reese Cobette, tenor sax; a bass, name not given; Ike Robinson, trombone. Although the band wasn't a reading band, they did do some reading; Alphonse Picou wrote some arrangements for them, and they had some stock arrangements. Picou's arrangements consisted of introduction, first and second choruses. The time was around 1926, 1927. Solos were in evidence, but at least some of the other wind instruments would play harmony backgrounds for the soloist. The routine for each tune was to play the introduction loud, the first chorus soft, and the last chorus loud. Some of the numbers the band played were: "A Tisket, A Tasket," [Check copyright date. RBA.] "Heebie Jeebies," and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree;" waltzes they featured were "Three O'Clock In The Morning" and "Sometimes." The jobs the band played were usually five or six [or more] hours long; RBA says that wasn't much different from the Harmony Inn.

Musicians EJ admired were Paul Barnes and Barney Bigard; Bigard was playing clarinet when EJ admired him; EJ thinks Bigard was working with [A. J.] Piron; RBA says Bigard could play saxophone when needed, that he has heard Bigard play sax on recordings with King Oliver. Barnes was playing mostly alto sax then; RBA comments that he is a good clarinetist now, that he is playing at Disneyland. EJ says other Orleanians play in the band at Disneyland; Johnny St. Cyr, guitar, and Mike Delay, trumpet. Mike Delay sometimes filled in for Metoyer at the jitney dance job at the Old Absinthe House. Metoyer was a first-class musician; he was strictly a reading musician; he came up through the circus [bands?]. He could play "gut bucket," too. [Cf. Peter Bocage, , with BM &

RK] Asked about Manuel Perez, EJ says he could also play gut bucket, but he was a reader; he was a good street [brass bands] man. RBA mentions that the Onward [Brass] Band [organized and led by Paul Barbarin; an earlier Onward was led by Perez] is being brought back now; he says the new Onward played their first job Saturday, at Tulane [University]. EJ played quite a bit in brass bands, including the Eureka, the Original Tuxedo (led by Celestin), and the Tulane Brass Band, led by Alcide Landry, who is now dead. EJ says the men in that band were mostly straight men [i. e., little or no jazz?], men who played parades and funerals; two of them were Albert Warner [, trombone] and Ernest Rogers, drums. The band sometimes played two funerals in a day. EJ no longer plays brass band work, as he has arthritis. Some of the societies and clubs for which EJ played [with the Tulane Brass Band?] were the Tulane Aid and Pleasure Club, the Violets, and the Zulus. Brass bands of today are not like the older ones were; EJ preferred the older bands; he would rather play a funeral or a parade [than eat?]; there were such good drummers then.

Other musicians EJ liked were: Ernest Trepagnier, drums; George Mc Cullum, trumpet. EJ played with McCullum for quite a few years in the W. P. A. Band; EJ was in that band from almost the beginning until the end; he says he was in it at the end because he played an odd instrument, the baritone saxophone.

EJ didn't play clarinet much because he didn't like it. RBA mentions Emile Barnes.

Some members of the Original Tuxedo Brass Band when EJ was a member: "[Black] Happy" Goldston [, snare drum]; Ernest Trepagnier [, bass drum]; Celestin [, cornet]; George McCullum; EJ; John Porter, [Brass] bass; "Bébé" Ridgley, trombone; Paul Barnes, alto sax. Some men who played in the Tuxedo dance band also played

in the Tuxedo Brass Band; Paul Barnes was one.

EJ played last with the Eureka Brass Band about seven years ago; he wasn't a regular member; he would fill in when Harold Dejan or [during a different period?] [Reuben] Roddy couldn't play a job.

Talk of "Black Happy" Goldston's recent illness. RBA says Buster Moore, left-handed trombonist, has also been ill. RBA mentions "Sunny" Henry [trombonist]; EJ worked with him in the W. P. A. Band and in other bands, including the Eureka Brass Band. EJ says the W. P. A. Band didn't make any records; RBA says Sidney Montague told him someone made movies of the W. P. A. Band. This band never played for profit. EJ has never recorded.

EJ managed a band at the Palace Dance Hall for two years; he has led the band at the Harmony Inn off and on for about eight years.

Some members of the Metoyer band [at the Old Absinthe House, then called the Palace Dance Hall] were: Davy Jones, tenor sax; EJ, alto sax; Willie Foster, banjo; Milford Alexander, piano; Henry Russ, drums; [Metoyer, cornet]. EJ thinks Davy Jones is in California. Jones could play clarinet, soprano sax, melophone, tenor sax and trumpet; he could teach all the instruments. RBA says Captain Verne Streckfus still speaks of Jones and his melophone. Metoyer led the band at the Palace Dance Hall [Old Absinthe House]; EJ was manager. The music was the same as the Dixieland today; EJ says he always has been a Dixieland man, although he can play any kind of dance music. EJ has done arranging for his own little bands.

Talk of differences between the music of yesteryear and the present. There are only a few good drummers today. EJ likes a strong drummer who can play a four-four beat. Old-time bands had

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to be able to play waltzes and schottisches; a schottische EJ played was "Three Little Black berries." EJ also played rags, such as "Tiger Rag" and "High Society;" he didn't play many [Scott] Joplin numbers [rags]. There was no twist dance then; EJ thinks the twist has helped the music [for dancing] business.

End of Reel I

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EJ says six-string banjos, tuned like guitars, and five-string banjos, with the fifth [a shorter] string tuned as a drone, were used in orchestras; the four-string banjo replaced them about 1930. [Cf. photographs of orchestras. RBA] RBA says Johnny St. Cyr still uses a six-string banjo at Disneyland. EJ says St. Cyr was playing with Louis Armstrong at the time he played the guitar-banjo [i. e. six-string]; RBA comments that they made some wonderful records. EJ says the twelve-string and sixteen-string guitars are known as harp guitars; they aren't used in dance bands; JH says "Leadbelly" [Huddie Ledbetter] used one [i. e., twelve-string].

With EJ's band at the Harmony Inn now; EJ, alto sax; [Andy] Anderson, trumpet; [Alex] Bigard, drums; [John] "Smitty" [Smith], piano, "beginning tomorrow night." Some of the men who played there with EJ previously were Willie Pajaud, trumpet; Edgar Smith, drums, and Lanzsey Ramsey, piano. Ramsey doesn't play at all anymore; perhaps his fingers became "corroded," as did the mouth of clarinetist [Emile] "Mehly" [Barnes], who no longer plays. EJ doesn't think Ramsey worked anywhere else than with him at the Harmony Inn. He lives at St. Peter and Villere. ASked about pianist [James] "Sing" Miller, EJ replies that Miller played at the Harmony Inn with [alto saxophonist] Paul Barnes; RBA says [drummer] Earl Foster was also in the band. EJ says "Sing" Miller is now working at [the new] Luthjen's, with Reginald Koeller on trumpet. Koeller also worked at the Harmony Inn with EJ.

EJ mentions the ability to play together that comes from staying together.

Know^x, the drummer from Baton Rouge [mentioned on Reel I], was no relation to local bass drummer [Emile] Knox.

Sidney Montague played drums with EJ at the Harmony Inn; when

Montague became ill, Alex Bigard came into the band. The band quit playing the Harmony Inn for about two years; when they returned, Bigard was the drummer. A hillbilly band played during the time EJ's band was away.

EJ's day job is that of musical instruments packer; he has been at Werlein's for the past fifteen years; before that, he worked for C. G. Conn ['s New Orleans branch] for thirteen years. EJ mentions the W. P. A. band.

EJ tells JH what a melophone is; RBA says Jack Willis had one Saturday [with the Onward Brass Band.]

Favorite saxophonists of EJ are Johnny Hodges [alto saxophone] and [Harry] Carney, baritone saxophone; EJ had already mentioned his admiration for Paul Barnes and [Barney] Bigard [see Reel I]. EJ has liked Duke Ellington's band, as Hodges, Carney and Bigard all played together with Ellington for a long time. EJ likes the men he mentioned because a person can always know what melody is being played by any of them.

Other than the W. P. A. Band, the largest band EJ worked with was that of Papa Celestin; it consisted of twelve pieces plus an entertainer; most of the time the band played out-of-town dates. EJ also played with Clarence Desdume, now dead, a violinist and band leader from Omaha, Nebraska; personnel of Desdume's band: George McCullum [trumpet]; EJ [, alto sax]; Raymond Brown, trombone [and others, see below].] RBA says Andy Anderson told him that Brown's son was also named Raymond Brown, but was known as Clifford Brown, but not the Clifford Brown [of Wilmington, Delaware] who was killed in a automobile accident [1956].

RBA re-lists the personnel of EJ's band now at the Harmony Inn; Louis Gallaud, piano, will be replaced by "Smitty" beginning

tomorrow night.

EJ says it is hard to get good drummers now; drummers he likes are Alex Bigard and Andrew Jefferson. EJ plays all requests if he knows the tune even if there is no tip given. He learns tunes from juke boxes, radio and sheet music. RBA mentions that AJ rarely plays around the [French] Quarter. RBA mentions having heard Jefferson in a fine trio playing for dancing at Roux's Tavern [on St. Bernard Avenue]; other members of the trio were Alvin Alcorn, trumpet, and Fred "Achie" Minor, banjo.

Some others in Clarence Desdume's band with EJ: Harry Fairconnetue, banjo. RBA comments that he hopes to see Fairconnetue Sunday, over the lake [i. e., on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, in this case], when he goes there with Harold [Dejan]. Warren Bennett, also living over the lake, played tenor sax in the Desdume band. RBA knows about those people because Dejan told him; EJ says, "Oh, who is it that Harold don't know! Harold is a fine fellow; he's a good man; he ['s known by?] everybody."

Talk about soprano saxophone and clarinet. A good drummer now working in the French Quarter is George Williams, at the Paddock; however, RBA says he thinks Williams has left and that Bill Matthews [trombone] has taken a band into the place; with Matthews, according to EJ and RBA: [Richard] McLean [, string bass]; San Dutrey, clarinet; Chester Jones, drums. EJ says Jones is another good drummer. [Albert] "Fernandez" [Walters] is also in the Matthews band [, playing trumpet].

Good drummers of earlier years were Ernest Trepagnier, Ernest Rogers, and [Abby] "Chinee" [Foster]; (volume drops) Foster has been dead only a few months. RBA says Foster could play melody on his bass drums; tuba player [Wilbert] Tillman told him about it.

Trumpet players EJ likes: Albert "Fernandez" [Walters], Thomas Jefferson, [Andrew] Anderson, Joe Phillips.

One good trombone player was Louis Nelson; EJ worked with him a lot. Nelson worked with the W. P. A. band and with Sidney Desvigne at one time.

Joe Howard was a good [brass] bass player. "One Eye Babe" [Phillips] was good as a bassist and could entertain. Wilbert Tillman of the [Young] Tuxedo and Eureka [Brass Band] is a good sousaphonist.

RBA says Jerry Green sounded good [on brass bass] with Paul [Barbairn]'s Onward Brass Band.

Talk of changes in instrumentation through the years. The guitar gave way to the tenor banjo, which gave way to the guitar-banjo, which gave way to the guitar. EJ says Davy Jones was the only one to play melophone in dance bands. EJ speaks of a saxophone pitched in "F" [one whole tone above the E flat alto saxophone]; it was smaller than the E flat, larger than the [B flat] soprano. Talk of the C-melody saxophone.

Favorite banjo and [or] guitar players of EJ were Johnny St. Cyr and Lawrence Marrero.

End of Reel II

