

GLOVER COMPTON  
I [only]--Digest--Retyped  
June 30, 1959

Also present: William Russell  
Mrs. Compton (Nettie Lewis)

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Recorded at GC's home, 3641 Prarie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois  
Gover John Compton was born January 6, 1884, in Harrodsburg,  
Kentucky (near Louisville [map shows the town to be about fifty  
miles SE of Louisville, nearer Lexington]). The leader of a brass  
band in Harrodsburg, a friend of his mother, taught him trumpet  
when he was twelve or thirteen years old; he picked up piano by  
himself and has never had a lesson, and at sixteen or seventeen  
could play anything he heard. He played what was called ragtime and  
syncopation, [one of] the first pieces he played [on piano] as a  
feature number was called "I Ain't Bothered Yet" (GC recites the  
lyrics). When he moved to Louisville (about when he was seventeen)  
he played at Tome Cole's place, and at Jimmy Boyd's, which was at  
Tenth and Walnut, and also he played at all the "pleasure houses."  
There were only pianists at the houses, not any bands; there were  
two pianists at the Cosmopolitan Club, Tony Jackson (who could also  
sing) and GC. GC first met Jackson there, in 1904; GC says Jackson  
wasn't writing songs then, that he began about 1911, when he was  
playing at the Elite Number two, in Chicago (GC was at the Elite  
Number one at the same time), where he wrote "Pretty Baby." GC  
recites the original lyrics to the tune, quite differencnt from the  
ones now heard, which were done by professional [Tin Pan Alley] lyric  
writers. [Compare Jelly Roll Morton, Riv. LP ]. Jackson was  
a good pianist then--"always was", says GC; there were other good  
ones in Chicago: Oscar Holden, Clarence Jones, Ed Hardin (who played

died  
1964

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at the Pekin Theater, 2700 State, where GC's wife-to-be, Nettie Lewis worked, with Lottie Grady, who now runs a tavern in Idlewild, Michigan). The Pekin was a theater then; the Pekin added a nightclub later. In about 1914, GC first heard a New Orleans band, that of Freddy Keppard, a fine trumpet player. Others in that band were Johnny St. Cyr, <sup>guitar</sup>banjo; Bill Johnson, bass; Slocum, a West Indian, or some kind of foreigner, clarinet (not George Baquet, as WR suggests); Kid Ory, who went to California about 1917-18, trombone. [Compare other interviews, e.g., Johnny St. Cyr, Kid Ory]The first [New Orleans]trumpet players GC heard were Freddy Keppard and Tommy Ladnier, who had a four to six piece combo. GC first met Ladnier (with whom he recorded) around 1911, <sup>or 1912</sup> about the time Jack Johnson [heavyweight champion of the world] opened his Café de Champion, at 41 West 31st Street. Ed Hardin was the first pianist at that place. (GC mentions a pianist friend of his, Will Taylor, of Louisville, who went on to New York and became a fine arranger, even before Benny Carter--GC says Carter is a great musician and arranger), GC first played with Ladnier about 1911, when Ladnier would drop around to play with the house band at the Elite Number 1, which was at 3030 State Street; the Elite Number 2 was at 3445 State Street. There was also a small <sup>calé band</sup>combo, (two or three pieces, perhaps) at the Elite Number 2, where Jackson worked; the personnel changed, except for Jackson, who was the star. GC played for Jackson's funeral,

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and Charlie Young, a singer from St. Louis, sang. In 1924, the colored political boss of Chicago's South Side, Dan Jackson, <sup>Hq at 34<sup>th</sup> + Michigan</sup> hired GC to play for the mayor of Chicago, "Big Bill" Thompson; the party in attendance boarded a boat, the Cape Girardeau, at Alton, Illinois; the boat went west to the Mississippi River, where it cruised for ten days, from Peoria, Illinois, to Keokuk, Iowa. GC tells of the cruise; apparently one of the highlights was when the members of the party bought chamber pots to use for drinking beer. GC mentions the name of Sonny Christian, his drummer from Baltimore, who was on the party, and tells a story connected with the pots. There is talk of politicians; GC says Hershey Miller was killed in the Pekin, and WR says he thinks Joe Oliver was playing at the Pekin then. Mrs. Compton says there was no band there at the time; she and Sammy Stewart [spelling?], pianist, worked upstairs as a duo; the patrons of the Pekin Theater would come upstairs after the theater show. Mrs. Compton says she would work downstairs [theater] first, and then go to work upstairs. WR suggests, GC confirms, that Shelton Brooks wrote "Some of These Days" in the upstairs Pekin room. Many famous performers played the Pekin: Bill ["Bojangles"] Robinson, Charlie Gilpin (in "Emperor Jones")--Gilpin [later] roomed with the Comptons for a while; so did Florence Mills. GC points out pictures: Florence Mills; "Aunt Jemima" (Edith Wilson); GC and Frank ["Big Boy"] Goudie, alto saxophone [and clarinet] in Zurich, Switzerland,

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where they worked at The Esplanade. GC first went to Paris in 1926, at the request of "Bricktop" [<sup>Smith Duncan</sup> Ada Jones<sup>?</sup>], cabaret owner, singer and entertainer (now in Rome, Italy), whose first job was at Jack Johnson's place in Chicago (Jelly Roll Morton ~~knew~~ <sup>very</sup> Bricktop ~~quite~~ well); Bricktop was a ragtime singer (GC says ragtime has also been called swing, rock-and-roll, etc. [apparently Bricktop was a blues and popular music singer], and that the drums are responsible for the differences in the various styles.)

GC tells the story of a shooting between Sidney Bechet and Mike McKendrick, Paris, 1928; Bechet took offense at a McKendrick remark, accosted him later outside a bistro; they exchanged shots, wounding GC in the leg, an English woman in the shoulder and lung and a French woman in the neck--neither duelist was hurt. No witnesses appeared against them at their trial (GC was promised compensation for his time lost from work, but he was never paid anything by Bechet or McKendrick), but they were sentenced to fifteen months in prison, the offense being "shooting a gun <sup>in</sup> on the streets of Paris"; they served a little more than twelve months each. At the time, McKendrick was with Eddie South's band; Bechet played with French musicians, having his own group. WR ~~says~~ Bechet was the most popular musician in France at the time of his death [1959]; GC says he was the most popular musician in the early days too. WR mentions a Bechet tune, "Petit Fleur" [best-known recording is by Monty Sunshine with Chris Barber's band]; GC says

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Bechet really was great on "High Society." GC himself stayed in Paris fourteen years and nine months (except for visits to the United States), leaving [about] when World War II started. (Una Mae Carlisle--a great pianist and entertainer, says GC--was assigned to the same U. S. bound ship as GC; she almost missed the boat.) GC mentions some of the United States bands which made trips to Paris when he was there: Glenn Miller, Paul Whitemann, others he can't remember; Louis Armstrong sent for GC on his first <sup>Paris</sup> trip. GC worked with Armstrong in Chicago at the Dreamland, <sup>3540</sup> with Ollie [Powers's--Powell's band?] Powers, now dead, was the best night club singer GC ever~~heard~~; Mrs. Compton agrees. Tommy Ladnier with Powers and Jimmie Noone recorded with GC; Noone wasn't a regular member of Powers's band, preferring his own small group. G<sup>c</sup> joined Noone's group when he left Powers; they worked at the Edelweis [spelling?], at 4816 State. Others in that Noone group were Minor ["Ram"] Hall, his brother; Baby Dodds also worked [later] with the group, and his brother, Johnny Dodds, with Joe Oliver at the time, would come out and play sometimes. Ollie Powers sang with the band, and later played drums in it.

GC says the differences between the New Orleans bands and the Chicago bands of early jazz (or, ragtime) days was that the drummers did things the Chicago people had never heard, and that the other

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musicians in the New Orleans bands played rhythms the others hadn't heard; the New Orleanians also played ballads ("Swanee River", for example) in ragtime, something no one else had done. GC says "[When] The Saints [Go Marching In]" and "Melancholy Baby" were two of the tunes he heard the early New Orleans bands play well. GC sat in at the Royal Garden some, when Lil Hardin (later married Louis Armstrong) was the pianist there; GC says Benny Goodman came every ~~night~~<sup>week</sup> to The Plantation, 35th and Calumet, to ask Joe Oliver to let him sit in; GC says Goodman could play then [too]. GC liked Joe Oliver best of all the New Orleans trumpeters, including Armstrong. Johnny Dodds was the best clarinetist, but Noone was more business-like. The Deluxe Cafe, 3503 State, operated by Frank Fria and Bill Bottoms, was where Jelly Roll Morton worked ~~at~~ a lot; it was "his place." The Entertainers, on State near Indiana, used only big bands; Freddy Keppard worked a lot there. GC first met and knew Morton in 1915, when GC came back from the San Francisco World's Fair; GC went back to the West Coast, and so did Morton; GC worked at the Waldorf, Morton at the Cadillac, both in Los Angeles. GC played at the St. Francis Club in San Francisco; Mrs. Compton worked at Lou Purcell's So Different [club]. In Paris, at Harry's New York Bar, where GC worked five years, Roy Burton<sup>a?</sup> alternated with GC at the piano; other entertainers there were Paul Farrell and Bill

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Henley; at the Royal Box, GC worked with Cricket Smith [among others?].

There is talk about gangsters; GC names the operators of the oldtime hot places (Deluxe, Dreamland, et al), and says they were all colored, and the places were not operated by gangsters; GC says the gangster-run places, Like Big Jim Colisimo's [spelling?] were around Twenty-second [and State]. GC himself ran a gambling club in 1941; he had to get the OK of Colisimo before he could open. GC says the clientele of the places along State Street was about seventy-five percent white, in those days. The whites were a late crowd; GC mentions the numbers of white musicians who would go to the places after they had finished their own work.

GC says his style and the styles of Tony Jackson and Jelly Roll Morton were about the same, but Morton played better without songs (i.e., on instrumental pieces), while Jackson was better with songs. Harry Collins brought the young Earl Hines from Pittsburgh in about 1920; GC took Hines around to the various places, introducing him. GC, who played for prize fights at the time, would have Hines sit in for him sometimes, to the acclaim of the patrons and of GC. Hines replaced GC in Jimmie Noone's band when GC left to go to Paris in 1926; the Apex Club was being built at the time.

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The New Orleans bands were very popular, being able to play better than the Chicago bands. GC says the Chicago musicians were better-educated than the New Orleanians, but that educated musicians just don't have that special something that "ear" musicians do.

Mrs. Compton was taught cornet (although she didn't play in a band) by P. G. Lowry, band director with the Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus; she was in a female quartet with the show, which also had a male quartet and the band.

End of Reel I