

OSCAR "CHICKEN" HENRY
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
July 11, 1959

Also present: William Russell
Ralph Collins

Oscar J. Henry was born June 8, 1888, in New Orleans, at 4729 Coliseum. In his family, only OH and his younger (by three years, eight months) brother concerned themselves with playing music; they both began studying piano, their first instrument, with Mrs. Louise Edler. [Check spelling Soards] Piano was not much used then in orchestras; violins were more favored. OH and his brother knew all their scales before they were twelve years old. OH heard music in church; he and his family attended St. James Church (African Methodist), on Roman Street between Iberville and Bienville. (The church WR mentions, saying it was in the District, ^{which was Methodist Episcopal} was St. Paul's Church ^{is . . .}). OH took up trombone in Detroit in 1918 or 1919; he always wanted to play trombone, but didn't have an opportunity until then; the husband of OH's first wife died, leaving a trombone, which someone stole and which OH recovered. The wife gave the trombone to OH; he began studying with Charles Clay, who was playing with the "In Old Kentucky" show, playing at the Crescent Theater; Clay played trombone, baritone, bass-- "in fact, everything."

When OH decided to give up playing piano (because there was no work for piano in bands), he became a plasterer; he was a plasterer when he was twenty-one years old, having taken up [learning] the trade when he was about fifteen or sixteen years old, at which time he stopped playing piano. [Leading on last clause.RBA.] OH was ten or eleven years old when he took up piano. His brother, not liking music, didn't continue his studies.

The bands OH heard when he was young were those of: Al G. Fields Minstrels; Primrose and Dockstader; Primrose and West; Barnum and Bailey Circus; (all came to New Orleans) Dandy Dixie Minstrels (a colored show). In the last named were Pat Chappel [spelling?] and the Campbell brothers, Manzie and [Bunk, Bo?] who [all?] played drums; the Campbells played the solo [or duet? RBA], "Oh, You Drummer." OH began liking trombone through hearing Doc Quigley, Billy Fields and others, who played with the minstrel shows. The minstrel shows played at the Crescent Theater, which was on Baronne Street, right where the Shell Oil Building is now-- "that used to be the Crescent and Tulane Theater." OH also heard the New Orleans street bands; "they had all kinds of parades." Old Man [John] Robichaux had a band; Freddy Keppard, Manuel Perez and Bab [check spelling] Frank also had bands. There was also the Onward Band.

Trombone players in New Orleans at that time; George Fihle; Vic Gaspard; Batiste Delisle (from uptown and very good); Zue Robertson and another man who went to Chicago Roy Palmer. Kid Ory was playing in the District when he was very young; Ory is about a year older than OH. Louis Armstrong wasn't playing then. "There was Ory, and Bab Frank; a fellow by the name of 'Coochie' Martin, he played banjo, and one of the Gaspards played bass; Robichaux, he played a violin."

OH followed the street bands; he carried the flag once for Al G. Fields show, to be sure he got a pass. The minstrel bands played a parade every day before the matinee; they also played a "concert" outside the theater. The minstrel parade bands swung like the New Orleans bands; they played everything, like [Henry] Fillmore's smear numbers ("Sally Trombone" et al) and "Hofstrau." They sounded as good as the Onward Band; they had more men; the other [New Orleans] bands had only one or two trombones, but the minstrel bands had three plus baritone, bass, E-flat cornet, etc. The New Orleans bands didn't use E-flat cornet much, but they used E-flat clarinet. Saxophones were just coming out then; the Six Brown Brothers, a stage act for the Orpheum Circuit, featured saxophones then; Tom Brown played soprano saxophone, and another played the giant bass [i.e., contrabass?RBA] saxophone. The Six Brown Brothers played at the Palace Theater, which was then the Grunewald [Greenwall? 901 Iberville--Soards, 1913] Theater, which was behind Maison Blanche on Iberville at Dauphine. (The Lyric Theater, was at the next corner, now the site of a parking lot; Robichaux played there all the time, for shows). Talk about minstrel parades: stayed in business district, had some performers besides band in them. Al G. Fields show band were all white; those in Pat Chappell's "Rabbit Foot" were all colored; "In Old Kentucky" show was a white show but had "a colored, pickaninny band." Latter band (show played at Crescent Theater) was good; they played "Massa's In The Cold, Cold Ground (With Variations)." "My Old Kentucky Home (With Variations)" and "Swanee River (With Variations)."

OH says that kind of music is not played anymore. Every instrument in the band would take a solo. Some musicians doubled in the show; Manzie Campbell, a drummer, was a comedian on the stage; Doc Healy and Doc Quigley, in Al G. Fields show (both played trombone), were also comedians on the stage. A lot of the band musicians also sang in the chorus on stage. WR says he has heard that Manzie Campbell was from New Orleans; OH doesn't know, says he met him around Chicago. [RBA has never heard that M.C. was from New Orleans. Check reference books and LP notes] Honey Boy Evans, from the Irish Channel [in New Orleans] was with George M. Cohan's "Hundred Honey Boys." Evans was the only New Orleans entertainer who became big-time. He sang the song, "Honey Boy, I Hate To See You Leave Me." (WR has his picture on sheet music.) One year Al Jolson came to New Orleans with Fields's band; Jolson had such a good time in New Orleans that his stay with the show was terminated. Shows never stayed more than a week; OH says the town has never been able to support any show for over a week. OH mentions that Julian L. [King?], the great female impersonator, was with Al G. Fields one year. From hearing the show bands and seeing the shows, OH took a liking to shows and the trombone.

OH was playing the trombone well when he was thirty-one years old; from his teacher, Charles Clay [in Detroit], he went to South Bend, Indiana, and joined the small band led by W. H. Gordon. The first parade OH played with a band was in 1920, for the opening of the first Studebaker automobile plant in South Bend; the band,

the only one from South Bend, and colored, was twenty-five pieces. OH next went to Chicago, where he played with such bands as the Knights Templars and the Elks. He went with a band to Atlantic City [New Jersey], remaining there about six weeks; upon his return [to Chicago?], he went to Hot Springs [Arkansas] with "a bunch out of here" [?]. OH alternated plastering and music, depending on finances. OH likes plastering. OH was a plasterer's apprentice under Johnny St. Cyr. OH first played on the same program with St. Cyr in Chicago in 1926; H was in the Elks Band which opened the program; St. Cyr was in Louis Armstrong's band, which concluded the program by making some recordings. The first time OH actually played in the same band with St. Cyr was at the Autocrat Club [in New Orleans] in a pick-up band. Armstrong made the records at the Coliseum where the Elks's function was held. [Compare Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith, Jazzmen, Harvest, p. 133-4.]

Talk about Elks Band, other bands OH played with in the North; OH says the bands played all kinds of music, including dance music; he says a concert musician finds it harder to "swing" than a musician who plays nothing but swing.

OH says New Orleans is only place with a "second line", and he doesn't know why there are no second lines in other cities. OH agrees with WR that the music played in New Orleans is better

and swings more than that played in other cities. OH says a good bass drummer can make or break a band.

When OH was growing up, there were ten or fifteen dance halls; there were dances almost every night somewhere; bands played at picnics at the lake on weekends. OH says the bands were like those which played at Mama Lou's[in recent years]. The music then was about the same as that of today. Talk about various dances. OH says that "bebop" dancing includes a movement which was part of the quadrille; when the male swings his partner around, as in jitterbugging, the couple are doing part of the quadrille. OH describes various tempos.

OH liked to hear trombonist George Fihle play because he played "up this way" [2934 Gravier Street] most of the time; one of the Gaspards [Vic] played trombone with Freddy Keppard. Trombone players then didn't play solo work much; the trombonists played "more of a vamp, behind the bass." OH demonstrates the vamp style. There were both valve and slide trombones in use, but slide became more widely used, as the smear became very important, and a smear cannot be made on a valve trombone. OH never played valve trombone.

OH was a playmate of Freddy Keppard, although they never played together; Keppard's ^{d's} Olympia Orchestra "were the first ones started playing syncopated music up this way; they called it jazz then." The band became very popular when the new style caught on.

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WR says Keppard played violin at one time; he got a mandolin from Louis Keppard, brother of Freddy; Freddy's name is scratched inside the mandolin; Louis said it was Freddy's first instrument. OH says Freddy started the Olympia Band around 1907 or 1908. Freddy Keppard was good, "almost as good as Manuel Perez; Manuel was supposed to be the king at that time; when you said Manuel Perez, you said everything."

OH thinks Joe Oliver came to New Orleans with a show; he got stranded here; he was not playing jazz then; he played straight show music then; he could read, and "he picked up jazz music after he stayed around here a while, and he got good." [Compare Walter C. Allen and Brian Rust, King Joe Oliver!!RBA]

End of Reel I

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OH left New Orleans in the early part of 1913, going from place to place (Chattanooga, Cincinnati, Florida, Birmingham, Dayton [Ohio]--at the time of the Dayton flood, Spring, 1913), working as a plasterer, not playing any musical instrument, until he arrived in Chicago, going there from Dayton; he returned to New Orleans March 11, 1930. Finding no work here, he again left town; when he returned, he "got on" the E.R.A. (Emergency Relief [Act], forerunner of the F.E.R.A., forerunner of the W.P.A.); then he got into the F.E.R.A. and finally the W.P.A. The W.P.A. was eventually divided into various categories of work abilities; OH, then a laborer, heard that Bob Gilbert was forming the "Stumpdiggers Band"; when OH presented Gilbert with his own Chicago Local 208 union card, Gilbert told him he had been looking for him, and signed OH for the band. The W.P.A. [or E.R.A. band?RBA] began then, with eighteen men; some of them were: Adolphe Alexander [,Jr.?], [Frank?] Crump, Frankie Duson, Wilfred Ledet and Joe Mitchell. OH and Duson were the first two trombonists in the band. [Willie] "Bill" Cornish was never in the W.P.A. Band. Sunny Henry joined when the band had been organized about three months. The band grew until there were 167 men in it; some read, some didn't. Old man Joe Martinez, sent to break up the band, found so many readers that he decided to develop it; he got rid of the non-readers and proceeded to make it into a group which could play anything from "William Tell," with the music, to ragtime, without music.

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OH says that the first Music Weèk in New Orleans had the W.P.A Band, fifty-seven strong, marching on Canal Street, playing many difficult marches. The band eventually declined (as the members got work), until there were only three or four men; OH left about then to return to his trade. Martinez was more a music supervisor; Louis Dumaine was the director; Martinez could tell a man what note he wanted played as he was a professional piano player. Dumaine played trumpet. Some of those in the band: George McCullum, Lionel Ferbos [Check LF, reel ?] [trumpets]; "Big Head" Eddie Johnson (who works at Werlein's) [saxophone]; Israel Gorman, Willie[E.]Humphrey [the younger], Joe Mitchell, and a tall man who now lives on Clouet Street, clarinets; "Little Eddie" Johnson, saxophone; Sidney Cates, banjo; Sidney Montague and Cie Frazier, drums; Ernest Trepagnier, bass drum; Joe Howard, bass; William Brown, bass; Sunny Henry, Harrison Barnes, Louis Nelson and OH, trombones; Gilbert Young and Ricard Alexis (who[later] played bass at Valenti's [Paddock Lounge]) were also on trumpet.

OH's nickname, "Chicken" or, as he says, "Chick", came from W.P.A. days; he knew more about chickens than any of the other men working in the field [as a laborer] and at one time could name all the parts of a chicken. He was first called "Chicken Man"; when he went into the [local] musicians union, he was called "Chick", and is more well-known by that name than by his real

name. [RBA has heard him called "Chicken" most often]. His middle name is Joseph. None of his children play music; one lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

OH has played all kinds of music jobs from dance work to pit bands; he says that when he learned, he learned so that he could play any kind of job.

OH demonstrates his technique for making his lips supple for playing; he takes the trombone slide, stops up one end, places his lips in the mouthpiece, and pulls the slide out and in; he says the resulting suction makes his lips supple. OH's partner [in the Eureka Brass Band], Albert Warner, says the theory is all bunk, but OH learned it from a professional trombone player.

OH's trombone is a Harry B. Jay; WR says [Louis] Armstrong and [George] Mitchell have used Jay instruments. OH traded his trombone to Mike Riley (not the well-known trombonist of this name) (banjo and trombone player) in 1927, receiving the Jay from Riley. Talk of trombones and their sizes, accessories, technique. OH says there should be five trumpets for every trombone, as a trombone can cover the volume of five trumpets; there should be five clarinets for each trumpet. OH was librarian of the Elks Band in Chicago for seven years; he says he could get the music any instrument could play, in case of shortage of parts for the particular instrument needing music--e.g., a trombone player can play the oboe part by ignoring the clef sign and playing as written.

OH, now a [regular] member of the Eureka Brass Band, has also played with George Williams [Brass Band]; he has played with John Casimir [Young Tuxedo Brass Band] several times; he has played with several "mixed" [i.e., gotten together for the occasion] bands sent out by the union. OH says he can play with any of them.

OH has played in dance bands with Paul Beaulieu several times; he played a concert with Alphonse Picou. (Beaulieu lives at 1128 or 1129 N. Robertson Street). There are not many dance jobs anymore, says OH; most of his work is with brass bands.

Trombone players OH has liked: Tommy Dorsey, [J.C.] Higginbotham, and Roy Palmer. OH's teacher, Charlie Clay, was a great trombonist; Clay is now dead.

OH lectures on the harmonic series of the trombone. Demonstrates vibrato. Demonstrates his method of cleaning the instrument.

In playing with dance bands, OH lets the drummer's beat dictate the style trombone he plays; the bass, the foundation [of the band], also has influence on what he plays. He sometimes plays an ob ligato to the bass, sometimes to the trumpet. OH says playing music is a conversation of instruments ; one instrument (or group of instruments) asks a question; another answers. OH listens to all the other instruments; he says if he can't hear the man sitting third to him that he [himself] is playing too loud. Thousands of musicians are musically deaf [as far as volume is concerned?]. OH says a man named Harper with

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Louis Armstrong in 1926 or 1927, was musically deaf; Harpet,
a beautiful second trumpet player, had to play under [in
volume] the others so that they could be heard.

End of Reel II