

[Allen:] He plays--

[Handy:] Plays bass now.

[Allen:] Bass now.

[Handy:] Yeah, he's a bass violin player.

[Allen:] Well, it's his daddy then? That's what I wanted to get straight.

[Handy:] Yeah, it's his daddy, uh-huh. Well, after I left the Pelican, well, I left here and went to St. Louis; work at the Democratic Club there under a fella by the name of Hawkins, [who] had the Democratic Club at that time. My--by me going up there, it was through Charlie Cress [Creath]--he used to work with Fate Marable--he played trumpet, and he played accordion.

[Allen:] Oh.

[Handy:] He's dead now, [poor fella?]. Up there I had--I can't remember this guy's name, I don't remember one man's name, up there, [who] was playing with us, too. I remember a fella called "Cabbage" playing tenor saxophone, and another boy called, "Bubba," I think they called him--he's a drummer, used to be on the boat with Fate. And I played at the Democratic Club for about eight or nine months--maybe probably a year I played in the Democratic Club. And I left there, and went down to 31st and Market; played with a fella down there, [an] Italian named Sam; and I played there for--until I got sick. I was there about six months, [or] seven months. Matter of fact, that's the last place I seen Guy Kelly; he was with Walter Barnes' band, that got burned up in Natchez there.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] He was with that band. He come down and stopped in St. Louis there--as a matter of fact, they played somewhere near St. Louis and on their way back to Chicago they stopped in, and somebody told them I was at, at 31st and Market down there. And they come down there--the whole band come down there. But I was playing with a fella by the name of Joe--Jay Golston [spelling?] then. He was a nice

arranger, and he was a piano player; we had ten pieces in there, every night.

That's where I made--met Jeter and Pillars, out of St. Louis; they were at that, that Club Plantation--I think that's the name of the place that they were playing.

[Allen:] Did they have many New Orleans guys up there with those fellas?

[Handy:] No; [Al] Guichard, he's from here, but he was playing with another band by the name of Eddie--Eddie something he was playing in. He's a saxophone player, too, alto player; and he had a brother--Guichard--he played bass. But I think the young one's dead--the bass player--I think he died. We had a fella out of Shreveport with Golston's Band; guy played lot of trombone, too--little skinny fella; I forget his name--fine trombone player. And they had a guy playing trombone, trumpet there--second trumpet--called him "Sleepy"--he come down here with Fate, too. That guy wouldn't play nothing but second trumpet--wouldn't play nothing. And Guy Kelly come in that night and sat in there and played a number or two with us--and this fella had been sitting up there playing like that for seven or eight months; nobody thought he couldn't play nothing but second. And Guy would come in there and <sup>(blow)</sup> blowed so much trumpet, man, and this cat got up and washed Guy out, man; he washed him out. Broke up the house, man--we all had to stop and look at him. Didn't know--he was sitting back there for eight or nine months and hadn't played nothing but second, strictly music--wouldn't try to get off at all, you know. Man, all of a sudden, he come out there, blowing. Well, I stayed at that place until I got sick; I got sick around '38, '39, and I stayed in the Homer Phillips Hospital there in St. Louis for three months, three weeks, and three days.

[Allen:] Uh!

[Handy:] Well, they claimed I had an ulcerated stomach. They didn't do anything for me--made me take a lot of rest, give me medicine--and I come out of there with the same thing that I went in with. I went back down to, to my job; they had a fella from here--Italian from here--had a place in Springfield, Illinois, [who] come up and asked me to come up there and play, work for him. I taken six pieces, and went

driver after they had taken us home--by the way, that's where I met Don, Don, Don Albert, in Springfield.

[Allen:] You didn't know him down here, huh?

[Handy:] Yeah, I knowed him down here, but I hadn't seen him in about three or four years. He had Alvin Alcorn with him then, and a drummer from around here, used to call him "Fat"--he died out there in Texas a couple of years ago. Now he was playing with me when he left and went with Don Albert--"Fat" and Alvin Alcorn was playing with me, on the As, on the Pelican. And they left and went with Don.

[Allen:] What was the Pelican?

[Handy:] That was on Gravier and Rampart--just a big dance hall; one of the bigger dance halls that was around here at that time. I remember when I first come here to New Orleans, those guys used to have a habit of--when they want to trick you on the bandstand, they'd let you get up there and blow your tops.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And then a trumpet player would slip his trumpet out in [the key of] A, see, and knock off a number--now, you find him. ["Kid"] Rena did me that out at the Fairgrounds. I was out there. I had played five or six numbers--people all gathered around the stand, carrying on, clapping and raising sand--and Rena slipped that trumpet in A on me, and knocked off "High Society." Partner, I couldn't find no note, note the first, no kind of way. And I know I had been playing with Fate on them jam sessions--Fate Marable--well, Fate Marable would start a number, in one sharp and run it all the way to seven. And he'd come back, right back, and start on number one flat and go all the way to seven flats. And that was in a jam session. But he never did lose me. But Rena lose me, lost me in "High Society." Playing "High Society" and pulled his trumpet out in A, and I couldn't get in there nowhere in the world. I never did forget that, either.

[Allen:] Did you play much with Rena?

[Handy:] Oh, yeah, I played a lot with Rena. As a matter of fact, he tried all kind

kind of ways to get me to join his band. I wouldn't leave Tom Albert. He had a nice, he had a nice clarinet player with him--a fella by the name of "Zeb" [Lenoir] playing clarinet with him.

[Allen:] Is he still alive--"Zeb"?

[Handy:] No, "Zeb's" dead. The guy I really liked to hear play clarinet--he played such a sweet clarinet--was a fella by the name of [Joe] Watson; he used to play with Sam Morgan. I used to like to hear him play a clarinet--and he used to like to hear me play, because everywhere he'd see me, he'd want me to blow. And I, you know--I'd just rather hear him play than play myself. He didn't make so much, but what he made was so pretty and clean. A real fine clarinet player. I went down to Peter Herman's, and played down there with "Bébé" Ridgley.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And at that time, they had John Porter on bass, Alfred Williams on drums, "Shots" [Madison] on trumpet, "Bébé" on trombone, Emma Barrett on piano, I was on alto--I was--was I playing alto?--no, I was playing clarinet--I was on clarinet, and a fella by the name of Earl--his name was Earl Trosclair, he's the first man ever showed me any fingering on a clar-, on a saxophone. We alternated--he showed me my fingering on the saxophone, and I showed him my, his fingering on the clarinet. And that's the only thing anybody ever showed me about a saxophone--nobody never showed me nothing about a clarinet--only on the saxophone. And that's the only fella that ever showed me anything, and that's--he showed me how to finger it. And other than that I didn't [have no help?]. That's all I needed anyhow, because if I learned how to finger it, I could learn how to play it. All I wanted to know [was] how to finger it, you know. And we played, we stayed down there at Pete Herman's for oh, I guess, a year and something. That was right after ["Papa"] Celestin and "Bébé" Ridgley broke--broke their band up.

[Allen:] Who took ["Papa"] Celestin's place when they broke up?

[Handy:] Well, you know Celestin just made up his own band.

[Allen:] No, on the trumpet, with Ridgley.

[Handy:] "Shots"--

[Allen:] "Shots."

[Handy:] Uh-huh.

[Allen:] And was he playing with you at Pete Herman's?

[Handy:] Who, "Shots"?

[Allen:] Yeah; I forget who you said was there.

[Handy:] Yeah, "Shots" was on trumpet at Pete Herman's.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Uh-huh. Yeah, he was playing trumpet. What else?

[Allen:] I [was] wondering about--did you ever meet Charlie Parker, around Kansas City or St. Louis, or any of those places?

[Handy:] Charlie Parker? No, I don't think [so].

[Allen:] Well, I just wondered if he was coming up then in those years.

[Handy:] No.

[Allen:] Did you ever know him?

[Handy:] No, I never knowed Charlie Parker.

[Allen:] Somebody had just mentioned, you know, that he used to listen to you; somebody told me that, you know--

[Handy:] He might have.

[Allen:] Several years ago.

[Handy:] He might have, but I, I didn't know anything about it, because they used to have so many of those guys slip around and stand on the outside; they wouldn't show their face, they'd stand outside there and listen. Like this fella, Earl Bostic--

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Well, Bostic didn't care who'd seen him, because he'd come in anywhere I'd be. And wouldn't blow a note--all the horn he played, he wouldn't play a thing. But he'd stand--I don't care where I was playing, if he'd couldn't come in there, he'd be

outside. And he just kept on hanging around, hanging around, hanging around, till I when I did hear him play, I thought it was me playing. Edgar Saucier was the same thing. "Wiggles"--you know, [Theodore] Purnell?

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] He was the same thing. All them listen, hung around, hung around--Joe Harris--now that was a fine tenor saxophone player; used to play with Earl Foster. Do you know him?

[Allen:] I don't know him; I can't place him; I must have known him.

[Handy:] He's got a wonderful tone. And he play a lot of horn, a lot of horn, Joe Harris could; he played a lot of horn. At least he was; I haven't heard him now for about five or six years. Because he got paralyzed, and he can hardly walk, unless he's walking with a stick--but I seen him at the, at the banquet; he didn't have no stick when I seen him at the banquet; he was getting along fine.

[Allen:] Yesterday we were talking about Earl Foster, and some of the guys that used to work with him. Who did you mention?

[Handy:] Yeah; well, I said he was playing with "Kaiser" [Willie Joseph].

[Allen:] Oh, yeah, "Kaiser" used [to be with him?].

[Handy:] Yeah. They was at Canal and Burgundy playing at a night--jitney dance, taxi-dance up there, upstairs. And they worked there for quite a number of years. Oh, Earl used to sing till he'd sing hisself to sleep.

[Allen:] Did he fall asleep while he was singing?

[Handy:] Fall asleep while he was playing the drums. I went up there many nights and played for an hour or so for him, [to] let him sleep--played drums for him. [He'd] go downstairs in his car and go to sleep. The only trouble about that, you couldn't stop playing the drums.

[Allen:] Couldn't go get him, huh?

[Handy:] No, you [could] send somebody for him, and you'd send somebody downstairs

and they'd forget to tell him--keep going. Yeah, that's one thing about the drum and the piano, and the guitar--course, the piano stopped, if he want, and the guitar plays, and when the guitar stops, the piano plays. But the drummer never did stop. And I hadn't fooled with drums in quite a number of years, and it would get you in your ankle, you know; when you play so long, your ankles begin to get swell up on you. And Earl never would come upstairs; [he'd] be down there snoring in that car. But he used to--Earl's a smart guy, you know? Earl play that music all night, and drive that big old truck all day long, picking up that pasteboard stuff there, Earl done bought him two, three homes like that. And he got money now. Yeah, Earl's a smart guy. I should have bought me a truck when I had that fifteen cents. But I wasn't thinking about nothing like that. I had some mighty good offers to leave here, when I was a young man, and I still got a lot of telegrams around home there; but I fooled around and got married, and after I got married and my first child was born, well, I couldn't leave then. No, I wouldn't go nowhere.

[Allen:] You want to save all those telegrams and letters, you know?

[Handy:] Yeah, I got them around home there somewhere in some, some of the drawers.

[Allen:] Yeah, we might can make copies of them, you know; we got a camera to do that/

[Handy:] Oh, yeah? Uh-huh.

[Allen:] I'd like to do it. Who all did you get offers from--who were some of the different people?

[Handy:] I got an offer from Earl Hines; he wanted me to come up. And [Joe] Oliver wanted me to come up there with him, but I wouldn't leave, though. And then they had this fella "Fat" Wallace [Fats Waller]; he wanted me to come up with him, but I wasn't going nowhere.

[Allen:] Well, how did "Fats" Waller know you?

[Handy:] "Fat" used to come down here often; yeah, "Fat" used to come here at the Lyric Theatre, when I was working for "Beansy" [Fauria].

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Sure, "Fat" used to come over there and sit in and play with us a lot of times.

[Allen:] This was at the Elite?

[Handy:] Yeah, uh-huh; that was the Elite. Yeah, he used to come in there a lot of times.

[Allen:] Well, was he good in a band?

[Handy:] Yeah, he had a band.

[Allen:] I mean as a band piano player.

[Handy:] Yeah, sure--

[Allen:] When he played with you, how did he sound?

[Handy:] Sure, fine, fine. Yeah, he was a fine man in a band. As a matter of fact, he has a good band. Yeah, them guys--I think he had six pieces there--was wonderful. Because they used to come down here often, and they'd play on the stage; and course, he'd do his act and things like that, but to come down to the actual playing, he could play a lot of piano. "Fat" was a good musicianer, but he just do that clowning and singing and going on. But he could play now--(don't sit down beside him and think he couldn't play; play a lot of piano. I often wondered why those, the youngsters these days don't like to play the type of music that we played years ago; all they want to play is this rock-and-roll. And if you take that away from them, they can't even fill their horn. I remember here--it's been about four months ago--a trumpet player of ours got sick out there in Bay St. Louis, and they went and got one of those little rock-and-roll trumpet players; and that guy come in there playing--he was trying to play this progressive music.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Running all over his horn, [that] cat like to run overboard with his horn; running so far out of the key, I thought he was going overboard there in that water out there. Couldn't play a waltz; [we'd] play a waltz and he'd have to hold his horn in his hand, and listen. Couldn't get in there; if he got in there, he wanted to play that [scats sounds]. I thought, "Oh, Lord, there he go again."



[Allen:] Could he hold a note and get a tone out of it?

[Handy:] If he could, he didn't; everything he played was running--he was gone.

Now, now, he was with a good band, the what-they-called-them--Good Rockers--and they do a lot of work over there on that coast, a lot of work. But it's nothing but that rock-and-roll. And if you get him out of that, he can't play nothing. And not only him, it's a gang of them like that. We got a gang of them right around here like that. Well, you take them out of that rock-and-roll band, and you won't hear nothing in the world they can play. And I don't know why. Now this boy--now [Wallace] Davenport used to be like that. Yeah, Davenport used to run on that horn from--I don't know what, what he'd be making and how he'd be making, but I know he used to be like that. He got so wouldn't nobody hire him. You see what he's playing now. He come right on down with that Dixieland, and he's a fine trumpet player. But he used to play all that stuff, and he swore he wasn't gonna never play Dixieland. Well, he's playing it today. If he want to work, he gonna play it.

[Allen:] I was wondering about some of the bands you heard when you were a kid, when you were very young, before you even started playing--do you remember any of them other than your father's band?

[Handy:] I mentioned the few I heard--well, as a matter of fact, I heard practically all of them, because they used to come out there on that coast--such as Sam Morgan, Chris Kelly, Rena, Buddy Petit, "Punch" Miller. Had a band used to come out there called the Maple Leaf Band; that was with Freddy Keppard; he was the leader of that band. And all those boys used to come out there; I used to hear them. As a matter of fact, they used to have what you call a trolley ride from Biloxi to Pass Christian; they'd hook five or six trolley cars together like an excursion train. And they'd come down there--oh, they'd have eight or nine hundred of them on that thing come down there. And they used to have a place there they called the pavilion--just a top on it, and a floor--no sides. And it was a summer place, you know? And they'd come down there and dance for four hours, and then that trolley car would pull right back up in front of the place, and everybody would load up on that trolley car and

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go on back to Biloxi. Or either they would leave Biloxi--some--one time they go--I mean leave Pass Christian and go to Biloxi. And my daddy used to play a lot of them; and then they used to get--a lot of times they used to get Sam--used different bands, they used to get.

[Allen:] Who was in your daddy's band; did he have a band of his own or what?

[Handy:] Yeah, he had a band of his own. He had a fella by the name of Joe Davis playing guitar; a fella by the name of Selby Thomas on bass; now, what's this trumpet player name? Moliere Melancon, he was on trumpet; and I was on drums--my cousin was playing drums, before I got big enough to play drums.

[Allen:] And his name?

[Handy:] Charlie Watson. And who else? At that time that they wasn't using a guit-- I mean a piano.

[Allen:] Did he have a trombone?

[Handy:] On trombone he had a fella by the name of Frank Towles, playing trombone. As a matter of fact, his son is playing trombone now, somewhere around Memphis.

[Allen:] Do you know his son's name?

[Handy:] They call him "Wash," but I don't know, I don't know his other name. All I know is "Wash."

[Allen:] Did you name a clarinet player with your father's band?

[Handy:] No, uh-huh,

[Allen:] No, he didn't have one, or he did?

[Handy:] Yeah, he had a fella out of Bay St. Louis they used to call Sumler Labot, [who] used to play with him a lot; had another fella out of Bay St. Louis that used to play with him, too, but I forget his name. They used to do nice work, though; I remember when we was playing at the Great Southern Hotel there in Gulfport, playing out there on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sundays, and I was making around \$35 to \$40 a week; and that was pretty good money in them days--yeah, that was a nice salary in them days.

[L. SUMLER LABOT]  
[L. SP  
on his interview]

[Allen:] Were they a straight reading band or were they ragtime style, or what?

[Handy:] Just ragtime stuff. Didn't nobody in the band read at that time. Sum<sup>er</sup>, read a little--he was about the best musicianer that they had in there; [and they had the clarinet player?]. But, none of the rest of them didn't read note one; they just got together and got to playing, that's all.

[Allen:] Well, how long do you think they've been playing ragtime or jazz, or could you judge?

[Handy:] Oh, ragtime music has been here, I guess, since around '80, [18]86 [was the beginning of?] ragtime music--as a matter of fact, I heard a record my daddy had around home there made in '86--

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] By a fella by the name of [tunsall]--

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[Allen:] What was the man's name again, that made that record?

[Handy:] Fella by the name of John Tunstall-- [William Tuncel?]

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[Allen:] Yes.

[Handy:] I wish I could think of the name of it. But that was way back around 1906 or '07, something like that. I couldn't think of the name now to save my life--or the number.

[Allen:] But it was a ragtime tune, or a jazz tune, you say?

[Handy:] It was, it was a ragtime number. Something like--at those times they call them kind of numbers a one-step--dances, call them a one-step.

[Allen:] And how old would you be when you first heard the record, did you say?

[Handy:] I was around about six, seven years old.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Uh-huh.

[Allen:] And your father had had the record for a number of years?

[Handy:] I'm gonna tell you the truth, I don't know how long my daddy had had that record. I used to hear him play it a lots, he used to play it a lot on Sundays when his band used to come down there to rehearsal--

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And they play that record a lot, to learn it. And they learned to play it pretty good too, yeah, that particular record they learned it pretty good.

[Allen:] Well, would you say that record was hot music, jazz music, just like they played here in [the] 1920's? Was it on that style?

[Handy:] No, no, [nothing like that?]; it wasn't on that style at all.

[Allen:] What style was it?

[Handy:] Well, it was on just a ragtime style of playing music.

[Allen:] Did they sound like they were reading?

[Handy:] Well, I don't know.

[Allen:] You don't remember the record that clearly, I guess.

[Handy:] No, and at that time, if they was reading, I didn't know anyway.

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] I was too young to know the difference between reading or just playing by ear. I'd like to have it now, just to, for memories, you know?

[Allen:] Uh-huh. Well, maybe we'll run across it. Was it a cylinder or a flat record?

[Handy:] Oh, it was made something like this; you know, something like that?

[Allen:] A round cylinder--

[Handy:] Yes, it was round.

[Allen:] What they call a round cylinder.

[Handy:] Yeah, round record.

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] It wasn't flat.

[Allen:] It wasn't like this; it was--a cup, they call them also.

[Handy:] Yes, it was round.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] It wasn't a flat one like they make these days; it was a round one. But it was a good--I mean, it was a good record, because I think my daddy had it quite a while, and, and we played it a lot. And when he wasn't there, we was playing it a lot. He had about ten or fifteen records around there, and we'd--you know what I mean--we'd just pick them up and play them, any of them.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And, but I think Tunstall had about the best band at that time. So we just, we just keep playing that one over and over--jumping and dancing and hollering and we'd play it again. And we had this--what do you call those things?

[Allen:] A wind-up side?

[Handy:] Yeah.

[Allen:] Like an Edison [phonograph].

[Handy:] Wind it up and they had them big bells on it, and sit out there. I've done forgot what they call them; used to call them phonographs or--

[Allen:] [unintelligible]

[Handy:] Something like that.

[Allen:] Gramophones is another name, too, I guess. Orthophonics, they used to call them.

[Handy:] Used to call them Orthophonic?

[Allen:] Uh-huh. Now how did you know the date the record was made? Did you?--

[Handy:] No, I didn't write it down, but we used to argue about it so much.

[Allen:] Oh, I see.

[Handy:] My cousin and I--he'd want to tell, say it was made in one year, and I'd say it was made in another, and we'd run back and we'd get the record [and] look on it.

[Allen:] And it had it written on the back?

[Handy:] Yeah, it, it was on there, yeah, it was on there; they had the date on there.

[Allen:] Well, we'll try to find it.

[Handy:] Well, I don't know where you're going to find it.

[Allen:] Oh, I know a guy who collects those things around here.

[Handy:] Oh, yeah?

[Allen:] Raymond Burke, the clarinet player. Did you ever know him?

[Handy:] Yeah, yeah. He collects those old records like that?

[Allen:] Oh, yeah.

[Handy:] Well, he might find it. As a matter of fact, I think the old man broke up a lot of old records he had here about five or six years ago. Just threw them out in the yard, [and] broke them all up.

[Allen:] That was terrible.

[Handy:] Uh-huh.

[Allen:] You shouldn't do that, when things are worth money.

[Handy:] Well, I didn't know they were worth anything, and I know he didn't know they was worth anything; he just got tired of them laying around in the way; he just throw them out in the yard and broke them up. Had about twelve, fifteen of them [that] he threw out there--trash. After he belonged--I mean, after he joined the church, he don't worry with that no more. He sit down and look at television; that's his biggest "idle" now; just sit down there, after he come from work, and look at television and sleep.

[Allen:] Is he still alive?

[Handy:] Oh, yeah, sure.

[Allen:] Where does he live at?

[Handy:] In Pass Christian, Mississippi.

[Allen:] You got his address? I might look him up when I go over there.

[Handy:] Yeah; I got it, but it's in the room in there [Janitor's closet].

[Allen:] Okay, we'll get it later.

[Handy:] Yeah.

[Allen:] Because there are several fellows I want to look up over there, you know.

[Handy:] Oh, yeah.

[Allen:] Probably still several bands going, you know. I was planning to make a trip over there to see Isaiah Morgan, but he came here.

[Handy:] Oh, yeah; but he was in Biloxi, though.

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] Uh-huh. Yeah, he's here.

[Allen:] What's your father's full name? You told me once; it's John Handy, Sr., huh?

[Handy:] Yeah, that's his name, yeah.

[Allen:] Well, we wouldn't have any trouble finding him, if we got over there, anyway.

[Handy:] Oh, no, you just ask anybody for him, from little children up to the old ones; they'll tell you who he is, if they can find him, 'cause he'll be working in the day.

[Allen:] Well, what's--what's his age now? Is he much older than you?

[Handy:] The old man's around seventy-eight.

[Allen:] Seventy-eight?

[Handy:] Yeah, he's around that age.

[Allen:] He was twenty when you were born, then.

[Handy:] Yeah, about, just about twenty, yeah, uh-huh. My mother's seventy-eight, too.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] You know my mother, though, don't you?

[Allen:] Oh, yeah.

[Handy:] Yeah, uh-huh; she's seventy-eight, and my daddy's seventy-eight too.

She's pretty sick now, though.

[Allen:] Who, your mother?

[Handy:] Uh-huh.

[Allen:] A lot of people have been sick lately.



[Handy:] Yeah. They've been sitting up with her for the last couple of weeks; the doctor says she's got a bad heart, a bad touch of heart failure or something.

[Allen:] You know Eddie Pierson is sick; supposed to be in Charity the last time I heard.

[Handy:] Yeah; well, he's still in there.

[Allen:] He had a stroke.

[Handy:] As a matter of fact, I played over there Friday, Friday evening, there at Charity.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] But I didn't get a chance to go up there and see him, because I had to, I had to work out at the Country Club Friday night, and when we left there it was late. So, I had to rush home and get me something to eat; I had to change clothes and go pick up my brother, and rush out to the Country Club.

[Allen:] I wanted to ask you: who were some of the best clarinet players in New Orleans when you first came here?

[Handy:] Oh, when I first come here, I liked Joe Watson with Sam Morgan.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] I liked to hear him play clarinet. And they had another fella I liked pretty good--used to play with ["Kid"] Rena; called him Zeb [Lenoir].

[Allen:] Oh, yeah.

[Handy:] Yeah, he was a nice clarinet player. And they had this fella "Blind Freddie" [Small].

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Wonderful. He used to play about as much clarinet with one piece of it as the average guy used to play with the whole horn. And he was a wonderful harmonica player, too.

[Allen:] I think he still plays harmonica.

[Handy:] Uhhh, I don't know; he maybe do, but I haven't seen him play in a long time. As a matter of fact, I haven't heard him play anything in a long time. I run across him every now and then--yeah, he was passing by my house--[unintelligible]. And they had this fella--[Lorenzo] Tio, [Jr.] used to play a lot of clarinet, too, with [Armand J.] Piron, but he was mostly a reading man--just sit down and play with his music.

[Allen:] Well, how did he do if he got in some barrelhouse place and had to cut loose? Suppose he--

[Handy:] He never was there.

[Allen:] He would never sit in with a band, huh, or anything?

[Handy:] No, no, no; you'd never get him to sit in with nobody; he played strictly with Piron, and after he finished that, that's all. As a matter of fact, he'd go home; he wouldn't never come around and [unintelligible]--no, no. Unless he was just passing there, [or if] the rest of the band stopped there for [to] listen for awhile, he might stand up there and listen, but he'd soon disappear; he'd go.

[Allen:] Well, what about those guys like him, the reading guys--did they come around much, and listen to the, the real ragtime jazz musicians?

[Handy:] Well, they used to come around occasionally, they didn't come too often. Some fellas--they didn't think we was doing right, that's what they--that was their idea about that.

[Allen:] They thought, they thought music was the only way?

[Handy:] Only way, yeah, uh-huh. So, they didn't care too much about our style of playing, and they didn't come around too much. Now Piron, used to be around often, him; Piron used to come often. You couldn't keep Steve Lewis away from there, him. Steve was just an addict to music.

[Allen:] What kind of guy was Steve Lewis?

[Handy:] Steve Lewis?

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Oh, Steve Lewis was a wonderful piano player, liked to crack a lot of jokes, and he'd sing a lot of songs with a lot of some smutty things to it.

[Allen:] Did you ever know "Papa De Da Da"?

[Handy:] No, I don't [unintelligible].

[Allen:] Piano player?

[Handy:] No, I don't think I [unintelligible].

[Allen:] He was one of Steve's buddies; he was always get in trouble, you know, and Steve would get him out of jail.

[Handy:] Oh, yeah? No, I don't know him.

[Allen:] What would these songs be about that Steve Lewis would sing?

[Handy:] Anything [that would] come in[to] his mind. Yeah, anything [that would] come in[to] his mind, he'd say it.

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] Yeah, he didn't care what he said, and the way he say it; anything that come in his mind, he'd say it.

[Allen:] (Radiator noises.) We'll ruin the tape recorder.

[Handy:] Turn it the other way.

[Allen:] I'll close it. . . . and all that kind of stuff, huh?

[Handy:] Just a whole lot of burlesque stuff, he would do. I remember he was playing there on Canal and Chartres, and man, you couldn't get in the place, from the time he got there until the time he'd leave. He didn't get here until around-- he was due there at eight, and he'd get there until around ten, eleven, anytime. But the people would still be there waiting for him when he come there. Man, he'd walk back there, and the people would give him a big glass of whiskey--serve[d in a] beer [glass], that's what they gave him whiskey in. He'd take him a big drink of

that and sit it on the piano. And man, he'd start singing back there, and there was no way in the world for you to get back there to him. All the people around him, just giving him money, and making him sing, and giving him money and making him sing, and they'd get him drunk. And then, they used to take him from there; he used to leave there around three, four o'clock in the morning and they'd take him from there and they'd take him to the Roosevelt Hotel or somewhere up in there, and have him sing up there until nine, ten o'clock the next day.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] He made a lot of money; then he was--no, thank you--then he was, he was a regular guy. Fine, fine guy Steve was. That's the only fault Piron had of him: drinking so much. Never messed up--he would go ahead and play, but he just, he liked to drink, and Piron didn't like that.

[Allen:] Did you work much with Piron?

[Handy:] No. No, I didn't do much playing with Piron because Piron had a lot of hard music, and I couldn't cut it.

[Allen:] Well, that's good; it might have interfered with your playing or something.

[Handy:] Yeah, well, I didn't--. He kept a lot of stocks; he kept a lot of arrangements for his band, and they used to do a lot of rehearsal, and you know, just to go sit in there, you had to be pretty good. And--

[Allen:] Well, you know--excuse me, go ahead.

[Handy:] Unless he was playing "Dinah" or "High Society" or something like that.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] [Well, you could get in like that?] Only time we'd play them was when we had requests for them. And [the other head music was wrote there?] played it strictly by the music. Then he was playing out there at Tranchina's anyhow, and he was playing for a better class of people, and they didn't go for too much of that--

you know, rough music, so all his stuff was smooth and soft and things like that. And then he had you playing it note for note, and crescendos and different things. Well, that's the way he wanted it played, and that's the way you had to play it for him. So, if you'd go set in his band, you understand what I mean, you had to be a pretty polished musician to go set in his band.

[Allen:] Well, who liked jazz music in those days? In the--say in the twenties, when you were here?

[Handy:] Well, practically everybody around here in New Orleans liked it. Because--

[Allen:] But you said Piron played for a special class of people, though, huh?

[Handy:] Yeah, he played for the better class of people, see? He played for the doctors and lawyers, and people up here on St. Charles Street, and people back in Audubon Place and all, all them kind of people--the higher class of people, see?

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And they liked that sweet music, and slow--waltzes [and] a lot of things like--you know, something like that. Well, the average band around here didn't play that, see? Like John Robichaux and Piron; and they had another fella here they called Peter Bocage, and his bunch--well, they played all that kind of music. But we went on down there and got down in the gutter and bounced 'em around a little bit. Well, that's what they liked. And we used to go down to the old Cooperators Hall down there and start playing down there around eight o'clock or eight-thirty at night, and play until three or four o'clock the next morning. Cooperators, Economy [Hall], San Jacinto(s) [Hall]--yeah, it was there then. And then they had another hall up there on Howard Avenue, sits back in the yard--I forget the name of that one. I know we come down here from Baton Rouge to play a contest against Celestin over there, on Howard Avenue there. And, I believe that was the first time a lot of those guys heard me play clarinet--[guys that] was in Celestin's band at that time.

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[Allen:] Who won the contest?

[Handy:] "Toot"; "Toot" Johnson won it. He had a good band.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] He had a real good band. Well, it's just like anything else, I don't know. They way "Toots" won it but I don't know; you take maybe that's because that was the first time they heard "Toot's" band; everybody liked it. But that didn't prove that they had a better band than Celestin. But the first time hearing something, it sounds good to you. I imagine if we had stayed around here three or four weeks or a month or so they would have forgot about it. But that particular one-night stand, they go over big. Course, when I was with him, he had a good band, though.

[Allen:] Did they have one guy who would be acclaimed the best clarinet player in town? Be chosen, at any time?

[Handy:] Where, here?

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] That was Sidney Bechet.

[Allen:] He was considered by who to be the best?

[Handy:] Everybody.

[Allen:] Everybody? Musicians, listeners, everybody?

[Handy:] Everybody considered him to be the best.

[Allen:] And then after he left?

[Handy:] Then I come into the picture. Uh-huh.

[Allen:] And how long did you stay--well, what did they call it? What did they call the guy that was the best clarinet player? Did he have a special name?

[Handy:] No, no, uh-huh.

[Allen:] I mean "Clarinet King" or anything like that?

[Handy:] No, no.

[Allen:] Didn't call him that?

[Handy:] Just called him by his regular name.

[Allen:] Yeah.

[Handy:] Yeah, that's all.

[Allen:] I thought maybe they gave him a title, you know.

[Handy:] No.

[Allen:] Like "Kid," or "King," or something, you know.

[Handy:] No, no, they called him by his regular name.

[Allen:] And so you came into the picture after Bechet?

[Handy:] After Bechet left, yeah.

[Allen:] And then you put the clarinet down, huh?

[Handy:] I put it down for alto saxophone.

[Allen:] And who took over on clarinet after that? Who would you say?

[Handy:] Well,--

[Allen:] Or was anybody on clarinet?

[Handy:] Yeah, George Lewis.

[Allen:] You'd say he was the King, huh?

[Handy:] Yeah, he was, he was about the next to me--George Lewis.

[Allen:] When did George Lewis start coming in the public eye, would you say?

[Handy:] Well, George started to come into the eye of the public around, around I'd say around '22.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Around 1922. Because we was playing at the, at the Humming Bi--at the Elite, and we'd get through there--and they had a place back Iberville Street there, [at] Iberville and Marais called the Boutoir; all the musicians used to go back there when they'd get off of work, all of them used to go back there [and] jam--jam there [un]til six or seven o'clock the next morning. Well, George was playing a lot of clarinet then. So, I'd say he was about the next one around here.

[Allen:] And was his style similar to his today, or different?

[Handy:] No, just about the same as it is today--same style; and I could tell him anywhere I hear him: Same style he play on. Well, then Willie Humphrey stepped in the picture then--course he's an older clarinet player than either one of us--but he stepped into the picture after George begin to travel, and then Willie Humphrey come up. But they got some clarinet players around here that you don't hear so often--great. You take the president of our Local, Louis Cottrell.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] A great clarinet player--great. But you don't hear, you don't hear much of him, but he's a great clarinet player. And they've got another boy around here that plays a lot of clarinet--I can't think of his name now. He's Harold Dejan's brother-in-law, but I can't think of his name, right now. He plays a lot of clarinet, too.

[Allen:] Have you ever heard Manuel Crusto, or whatever his name is?

[Handy:] That's who I'm talking about--Manuel, Manuel Crusto; he plays a lot of clarinet, too.

[Allen:] See, I'm a mind reader.

[Handy:] Yeah, you must be. (Laughter) Yeah, you must be, because that's who I was talking about--Manuel.

[Allen:] Well, does he work at all now; what does he do? He just spots, or what?



[Handy:] I don't know what Manuel's doing; I know he's working in the day some place; he's a plasterer or carpenter or something like that. But I don't think he's doing much playing at night, there. Manuel's a fella that--he's a nice musicianer, and he plays--he knows a lot of, a lot of instruments, I mean; he knows a lot, he knows a lot of trumpet, he knows a lot of sax, and he knows a lot of clarinet. But he's a swell guy as long as he's not drinking, but if he gets to drinking, he's liable to walk off at the Roosevelt Hotel and leave you there. Horn and all, he leave it. He get to drinking [and] that mind hit him, and he jump right about the chair and walk straight on out there. And you don't see him no more until the next day or two, three weeks, something like that. Well, you see, that's the kind of type of fella he is.

[Allen:] What does he drink?

[Handy:] He drink anything you drink, but he just gets to--that rambling mind or something, I don't know. A lot of them people scared of him, round here; see, you [are] liable to hire him and he [is] liable to jump up and leave any minute if he get to drinking. Now, as long as he's not drinking, he, he loves to work; he loves to play them instruments, all of them. But that's the trouble; you have to stop him from playing sometimes when he [is] not drinking; he'd play all night long and never stop playing if you don't stop him. But if he gets to drinking, you got to watch him then; he's liable to leave. Well, he's--people get scared of him like that, see. About the same way with "Son" Johnson, one of the greatest alto players in this city today. [I'll tell you?], he's a great alto player. [People are] scared of him; he's liable to--as a matter of fact, he's more apt not to come than he is to leave when he gets there; if you ever get him there, he won't leave, but trouble is to getting him there; that's Son's troubles. But he's a great man, and he can play a lot of clarinet, too. You never heard him play clarinet, have you?

[Allen:] Never.

[Handy:] Man, he's a great clarinet player.

[Allen:] Never heard him; never can find him.

[Handy:] You never heard him play? Huh?

[Allen:] He always plays with somebody where I'm not there, it seems like. It's funny.

[Handy:] And he's a very quiet guy; he don't say nothing to nobody; just sit there. I bet you he'd sit there and play all night and wouldn't say three words; never say nothing unless you ask him something. Now you ask him something, he give you that flat answer and that's all--no more talk. Yeah, he's a peculiar guy; won't talk. Now, he talk too much when he get to drinking, but very seldom [he] ever drink--he don't drink that much. At least, he didn't use to drink; I haven't seen him now in about eight, nine months. But he's great, he's a great--he's a great alto player and he's a great clarinet player. Matter of fact, he's a great musicianer, cause he's been--he was teaching over there at Werlein's. He taught there for a good while. You didn't see him there? Werlein's?

[Allen:] Never.

[Handy:] Man, man--

[Allen:] Well, say, ah what happened to your Louisiana Shakers? You were telling me about that band. Did they bust up, or?--

[Handy:] Yeah, I left here and went to St. Louis.

[Allen:] Oh, yeah. and we got up there, and then what happened? You came back here from St. Louis, I think you told me.

[Handy:] No, I left St. Louis and I went to Springfield [Illinois]; I played out of Springfield for six or seven months out there. Then I got sick--matter of fact, I was sick when I went there. And I had to leave Springfield and comeback home because I was about dying on my feet up there with my stomach, and I left and

come back here. I went back to Pass Christian, and opened up me a little business and kept that up for about two, three years and my stomach started feeling better, and I left there and came back over here.

[Allen:] You had your own business there?

[Handy:] Yeah, uh-huh. I left there and come back over here and started to playing again.

[Allen:] Did you ever play at all in Pass Christian?

[Handy:] Oh, yeah, yeah, I played there a lot of times.

[Allen:] While you had your business, I mean? Or did you just?--

[Handy:] Yeah, yeah; I played once or twice there; I couldn't do no playing though, because my stomach was bad.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Played every now and then, I'd play a job.

[Allen:] What happens when your stomach's bad? Your playing--what does it do?

[Handy:] It, it's not bad any more.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] No.

[Allen:] But I mean, it gives you a bad tone, or something?

[Handy:] No, it just stops you from playing.

[Allen:] It's the pain.

[Handy:] It pains you so. It pains me. I remember when I was playing at the La Vida with Lee Collins and them, I'd have a quart of whiskey here on this side, and a quart of cooking-soda water on this side.

[Allen:] Um!

[Handy:] 'Cause I'd be standing up taking a solo on my horn and "boom," one of them pains [would] hit you and double you up. And you drink that soda water quick, and then you'd sit down there for about three or four minutes, would pass away. But when it hit you like that, you've got to do something. I suffered with my stomach since 19, 1913. I remember when the first pain hit me, on a Friday evening, coming from work.

[Allen:] Since 19 when?

[Handy:] '13.

[Allen:] You were 13 years old?

[Handy:] On a Friday evening, coming from work, one of them pains hit me. I had had pneumonia, typhoid, malaria fever, hard liver, something else--I had all of that at once, when I was around 12 years old. And a fella, a doctor by the name of Dr. Woodson cured me of it, but he told them I would always have something, always suffer with something; and that's what it left me with, a bad stomach.

[Allen:] Well, when you stopped your business in Pass Christian and came over here, who did you play with?

[Handy:] Oh, different fellows. I never had no particular one to play with. Just after they knew I was in town, they'd call me up, ask me to work, and I'd accept the job.

[Allen:] Ever work with "Kid" Howard?

[Handy:] Oh, yeah; Howard and I, Howard and I had a band together.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Uh-huh.

[Allen:] When was that?

[Handy:] Oh, that was back in the thirties.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] Yeah, we had a band together. As a matter of fact, I tried to get Howard to keep the band going when I left and went to St. Louis. He said he was, but

business run out on him, I suppose. Course, I was getting a lot--I was getting most of the work.

[Allen:] Well, who took your place in that band when you left for St. Louis?

[Handy:] I don't know; that's something I never did find out. Because I don't think they stayed together much longer after I left, because I was doing all the booking and that's what was keeping the band together, some work--if you didn't have no work you couldn't keep the band together. So I was doing all the booking. And, when I left, that stopped the booking, see, so they didn't do much playing. Course, Howard had a few jobs, and they didn't want a big band--because I had ten, eleven, twelve pieces in my band at that time, and they just wanted--Howard was getting a lot of six-piece jobs, and you know how long that's going to keep a big band together--taking six out and playing. First opportunity they got to join another band, they just left. So, that was the end of the Louisiana Shakers.

[Allen:] So, when did you come back to town from Pass Christian; what year was that?

[Handy:] Ohhh, I don't know exactly what year I left Pass Christian and come back here.

[Allen:] Was that during World War II or after?

[Handy:] No, no, uh-huh.

[Allen:] Was it before or?--

[Handy:] In World War II, I was in Pass Christian then.

[Allen:] Uh-huh.

[Handy:] And, I don't remember the year I left there and come back over here but I was there in World War II, I know.

[Allen:] I'm trying to remember some of the different people I heard you with, you know.

[Handy:] Oh, yeah.

[Allen:] Since 1949--like Howard, Abbie Williams, some, huh?

[Handy:] Yeah.

END OF REEL I

December 15, 1958  
JOHN HANDY

