

KIMBALL, NARVIN H.  
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November 25, 1961

Also present: William Russell

(Interview recorded at NK's home, 3537 Calhoun Street, New Orleans)

Narvin Henry Kimball was born March 2, 1909, in the Irish Channel section of New Orleans, around Seventh Street, between St. Thomas and Chippewa [Streets]. He has been known as "Little Henry" or as "Henry Kimball, Jr.," as his father's name was Henry Kimball; however, he is not Henry, Jr. During the time NK lived in the section of his birth, there was much association between the Irish and the Negroes of the section, with members of either acting as baby sitters for members of either, regardless of color. The boys of the section fought together against boys from other wards; they played sandlot ball together, also.

NK tells of seeing bands on trucks and wagons, advertising lawn parties in the neighborhood; his chief interest was given to the trombone player, who, with the bass violin, was on the back (i.e, tailgate) of the vehicle, where he had room to move his slide.

NK's father, Henry Kimball, would be 85 years old if alive today; he was born on March 24, 1876 (year deduced by WR, with NK in agreement). Henry Kimball played string bass until 10 or 15 years before his death, when he also began playing sousaphone. NK doesn't remember his father's playing in parades. Henry Kimball died in 1932 or 1933, when he "was about 53 year old then". [Therefore born about 1880 RBA]. NK remembers from his childhood that his father played with John Robichaux's orchestra; WR has pictures of

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Henry Kimball playing with Fate Marable on the boat, which was in later years, says NK. Henry studied with a Professor Nickerson; WR says Manuel Manetta speaks of the Nickerson family of teachers, and WR says Jelly Roll Morton studied with one of the Nickersons. Henry got his start, on violin, in the band at Southern University, which is now Xavier Prep (Magazine at Soniat); NK's mother also attended Southern University. NK attended New Orleans University (on St. Charles Avenue); WR says Bunk Johnson attended that school, that George "Pops" Foster says he did, and that Manuel Manetta went there for a short time. NK attended James Lewis School (elementary), McDonough (high), and later to New Orleans University.

Henry Kimball played with some of the old-time musicians [in casual bands--PRC] before joining Robichaux, the first regularly organized band he worked with. When NK was 8 or 9 years old, his father took him to the Lyric Theater, where he was working with Robichaux, who had the pit band there; Charlie McCurdy was on clarinet, Vic Gaspard was on trombone, Walter Brundy played drums and Andrew Kimball was playing trumpet. Andrew Kimball was Henry Kimball's brother, although NK didn't know it until he himself had begun playing music; he met Andrew and [his wife?], Mrs. Margaret Kimball, in Shreveport; trombonist Bill Matthews brought a message to NK, saying that Andrew wanted to talk to NK. NK's grandfather was also named Henry Kimball. Four Kimball brothers--Ed, Benny,

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Henry and James--had a vocal quartet. One of NK's sisters took piano for a while, in school, but didn't continue long; NK then took up piano, his first instrument, when he was seven or eight years old; he didn't like the piano, as his friends kidded him, calling him a sissy. NK's first [sic. Compare above] instrument was banjo-like, made by NK from a cigar box and a neck he made at school. He would get strings from "Coochie" Martin, guitarist and friend of his father, when Martin would break one. NK and his sisters sang together, in what he called a "kitchen trio," which sang in the afternoons, when the dishes were being washed. (Martin was the brother of Henry Martin, drummer.) Henry Kimball was playing with the (Maurice) Durand (who has just died, in California) - (Willie [J.]) Humphrey Band at the time [he got the strings for NK from Coochie Martin?] Johnny St. Cyr was also in the band; Coochie Martin was not in that band. When NK was attending McDonogh 35 School, he bought a ukelele; an upperclassman there was [Henry] "Red" Allen, [Jr.], who played very well on the ukelele. NK learned how to play a bit over the weekend he got the instrument. Henry Kimball was playing on the steamer Capitol at the time (Henry had also played on the steamer Sidney, which preceeded the Capitol, beginning about 1918 or 1919); NK entered high school in 1922. (WR mentions the recordings made by the [Fate Marable] band [in later years],

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saying that Pops Foster was on bass, [Compare discographies] and various others were in the recording band.) Henry Kimball was in the band when Louis Armstrong joined it; NK says his father and Armstrong were roommates, living on the texas [deck] above the boat when it traveled from New Orleans to St. Paul [Minnesota]. Baby Dodds and Davy Jones were in the same band. Henry Kimball bought NK a tenor banjo while he was still in high school; NK studied for about a year and a half with Willie Foster, brother of Pops Foster (WR says Willie Foster lives in Baton Rouge, with his mother, who is 106 years old). NK played with the band led by Paul Moliere, trumpet player. When Willie Foster, who had been playing with the Capitol band, left to go to California, NK was given the opportunity to try out for the banjo chair in that band. At the time, NK was nearing the end of his first year in college. Although NK didn't do so well reading the arrangements at the audition rehearsal, the captain of the boat had NK play a solo, for which NK chose "Tiger Rag;" the captain decided that help from the other musicians, and experience would enable NK to handle the job, so he was retained. Other musicians in the band: Floyd Campbell, drums; Fate Marable, piano; [i.e., Burroughs?] Lovingood, piano [See Captain <sup>Vern</sup> ~~Vin~~ Streckfus, reel ?]; Henry Kimball, bass violin and sousaphone; Willie [J?] Humphrey, clarinet and tenor sax; Bert [ ?], alto and baritone saxaphones; Bert's brother-in-law, alto and baritone saxophones; Nathaniel Story,

trombone; Dewey Jackson, trumpet; Irving Randolph, second trumpet (who worked with Louis Armstrong in Chicago, where WR knew him). Floyd Campbell also sang; WR says he made some recordings with Charlie Creath; NK says Creath joined the band later, replacing Jackson, who left the band after being in New Orleans a short time. Creath used his influence to have NK and Henry Kimball replaced by "Red" Brown (NK had replaced him [?]) and Al Morgan, respectively. [NK probably meant to say he was replaced by "Red" Brown. See above.]

Before joining the boat band, NK worked with Paul Moliere's band, a family band. Moliere, now dead, as are most of the other band members, played trumpet. The only probable living member of that band is the younger Paul Moliere, a drummer; NK doesn't know where he is. Ernest Moliere, clarinet, was a son of the elder Paul Moliere; another Paul Moliere, and uncle of the elder Paul Moliere [the leader of the band], played bass violin; NK played banjo. Paul Moliere lived at about 1022 Dumaine Street then. Joe Petit, an old man then, played slide or valve trombone with the band, depending on his mood. (WR recorded Petit with "Wooden Joe" Nicholas's band, which included [Albert] Burbank.) Petit had only one tooth (the eye tooth) when he played with Moliere's band. Moliere wished NK luck in playing with the boat band; NK says musicians of that time had a mania for playing on the boat; playing with a boat band led to more recognition, as Marable always had good bands.

After working on the boat, NK joined Sidney Desvigne's band, staying with him about three months (Desvigne was on the boat in later years). Pops Foster, Walter Pichon, Louis Barbarin and NK were the rhythm section of that band. Eddie Cherrie, Adolph Alexander [Jr.] and Walter [Earl?] Pierson were the saxophone section (NK thinks Pierson was a cousin of Eddie Pierson, trombonist). During the time of this band, bands played at the Bulls Club, at Eighth and Rampart [now Danneel]; there were contests between bands every Tuesday night. After three or four months with Desvigne, NK joined [Papa] Celestin's band, remaining with him eight or nine years. Some members of Celestin's band when NK joined; Ernest Kelly, trombone; Celestin, trumpet.

End of Reel I

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In [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin's band [when NK joined it]:  
Abbey "Chinee" Foster, drums; Celestin and Guy Kelly [trumpets];  
Ernest Kelly, trombone (who was playing a modern style even then)  
(NK joined Celestin after Celestin split up with [William "Babá"]  
Ridgley); Jeanette Salvant [later married to NK], piano; Simon  
Marrero, bass violin; NK (who replaced John Marrero, banjo),  
banjo. Personnel changed quite a few times. About 1929 or  
1930, the band began playing at the Buena Vista and White House  
hotels in Biloxi. The first band at the hotels comprised: Joe  
Rouzan [spelling?], tenor saxophone; Bill Matthews, trombone;  
Clarence Hall, alto saxophone; Guy Kelly, trumpet; Cie Frazier,  
drums; Simon Marrero, bass violin; NK, banjo; Richard Alexis,  
trumpet, [Compare below] Celestin, trumpet and Jeanette Salvant,  
piano?]. Later personnel on the hotel jobs included: Adolphe  
"Tats" Alexander [Jr.], "Son" Johnson and Cecil Thornton (of  
St. Louis), saxophones; Bill Matthews, trombone. Thornton now  
works in the St. Louis post office, still plays, and still  
arranges; he was a fine arranger when he worked with Celestin.  
NK remembers playing on two tunes recorded by the Celestin band;  
they were "Ta Ta Daddy" and "Sweetheart of T.K.O." Guy Kelly  
played trumpet on the recordings; Abbey Foster played drums.  
Kelly was in the band before Ricard Alexis, who replaced Kelly  
*(Discussion of notes from BA case captioned)*  
in the band. [See above] Foster was in the band before Cie  
Frazier. NK doesn't remember making "It's Jam Up" and "When

"I'm With You." NK made other recordings with the band, but he doesn't remember the titles; he made only the one recording session with Celestin then, however. Celestin didn't record again until about ten years ago. [Compare discographies.]

While with Celestin, NK wrote several numbers, including "Don't Let Old Age Creep Up On You." The band was playing and broadcasting from the Peabody Hotel in Memphis; record company scouts wanted to have the number recorded, but by a smaller group. The Celestin band gave NK its approval to have it recorded, although NK wanted Celestin's band to make the recording. Joe Robichaux, who had a smaller band then, was to record it, along with several of his own numbers. [Joan?] John Lunceford was singing with his band then. NK tried to get a definite commitment from David Kapp about his number, but failed; NK asked Robichaux not to record it then. NK had to go to a job; Kapp told Robichaux to record it; Robichaux demurred, saying NK has asked him to wait; Kapp told Robichaux the other numbers would be out if he didn't record NK's number, so Robichaux recorded it. NK later heard a recording of the number on a juke box; it was by the Ink Spots, on Decca 1731 (WR says that Dave and Jack Kapp, first with Brunswick, started Decca); the Ink Spots had listened to Robichaux's recording, and made theirs by copying his. (NK's name was listed as composer, and he did receive \$700 or \$800 royalties.) The tempo of the Ink Spots recording was wrong, and so were some of the chord changes. About five years ago, when Deke Watson, with the Ink Spots (whose personnel had changed during the years), was in New Orleans, Walter Pichon introduced NK to



Watson. Watson said, "Don't Let Old Age Creep Up on You" "made" ASCAP, that it was used in picture with Caeser Romero and Fay [Wray?], which was made in 1941. NK didn't even know about it until Watson told him, and never got any money for it. NK hasn't renewed his copyright, which is due to be renewed about now.

NK did some arranging when he was with Celestin's band; Cecil Thornton and Walter "Fats" Pichon did quite a bit of arranging for the larger band. NK took a correspondence course from Archie Bleyer in arranging, and Pichon pushed NK along in that; Thornton helped NK quite a bit, and he learned to write some.

NK played banjo and guitar with Celestin in Biloxi; Simon Marrero was on bass. NK played banjo on the Celestin recordings. NK later played bass with Celestin; NK's guitar was stolen (and recovered), and, as the Depression was rather tough at the time, he couldn't buy another one; he began playing his father's bass, which he knew how to play already, as his father had shown him how when he was a small child. (His father played right-handed, and the bass was strung in the conventional manner. NK now strings his bass in reverse order [i.e., for a left-handed player, with the high string furthest away from the player's body--[PRC]. WR mentions Sherwood Mangiapane, left-handed bass player, whose bass is strung in the conventional [i.e., for a right-handed player] manner. NK can play a bass strung for a right-handed player). Banjo had become almost "obsolete" then, around 1935, so NK began playing bass violin. He rejoined Sidney Desvigne's band in 1941, remaining with him until 1947, when that band broke

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up. Then four members of Desvigne's band--Fred Minor, guitar; Louis Barbarin, drums; Alvin Alcorn, trumpet; NK, [bass]--organized a group called the Four Tones, which remained together for two or three years. The rest of the [Desvigne] band was taken over by Joseph Phillips, trumpet player; it was called Joseph Phillips' Orchestra. After about two years, William Houston, pianist in Desvigne's band, bought the band from Phillips; Houston still operates as William Houston's Orchestra. (Desvigne went to California in 1947, where he died last year). WR says he heard the Desvigne band in 1942; NK says they were playing quite a bit at the Gypsy Tea Room then; WR heard them at the San Jacinto Hall; NK says they played there, too. NK free-lanced after the Four Tones broke up; then he joined Herbert Leary's orchestra, playing with him until now. About a year and a half ago, he took charge of the band at the Paddock Lounge, which is how he got his Dixieland band [That is, playing the off night there? RBA]. <sup>cf. autobiography by NK</sup> He plays with Albert French's Tuxedo Band on out-of-town trips, when French's regular bass player can't get away from work. NK's band sometimes plays on St. Peter Street [Preservation Hall?].

Jeanette [Salvant] was NK's first wife; she and NK didn't play in theaters together. [See Jeanette Kimball interview]. NK worked, either before or after playing with Paul Moliere [see Reel I], with Charlie Love [trumpet], either on Chartres or Decatur streets, at the corner of Toulouse, perhaps; in the band: Love; [Manuel] Manetta [sax?]; Red Dugas, drums; "Freddy Boo Boo" [Miller?]

trombone; Joe Robichaux [piano]; NK, banjo. They worked at the place, frequented by seamen, only a short time.

The first organized band NK ever played with was in high school; it was led by pianist Valmore Victor, now a retired schoolteacher. Victor taught a lot of good musicians, including Jack Willis, trumpet; Al Goodman, bass; "Foots", drums. Victor and NK grew up together and were classmates. In the band they had, which played for afternoon functions at the school, were: Victor, piano; Hannibal, violin; Graham, violin; Graham (brother of first), clarinet; NK, banjo. Victor played and taught all instruments, although he didn't teach music in school; he taught "literary" subjects.

NK's [high?] school class had its dances at the Pythian Temple Roof Garden, where Manuel Perez's band was playing; in Perez's band was banjo player Caffrey Darensbourg, whose playing got NK really interested in music. WR says George Guesnon said Darensbourg was great; NK says Guesnon's single-string solo work is quite similar to that of Darensbourg.

NK's father [Henry Kimball] used a bow for playing bass more than he picked it, even later when playing with Fate Marable's band on the boat. The elder Kimball used his bow to simulate a pizzicato stroke; NK mentions Willie [J.] Humphrey, with whom the elder Kimball worked [see Reel I].

Andrew Kimball [see Reel I] was younger than his brother, NK's father. NK didn't know about Andrew until later years; he says there was some family mix-up, caused by his [NK's] grandfather [the father of Henry and Andrew], and his father had never told him anything about Andrew until later in NK's life. [End of Reel II]