

unedited first draft

ED KIRKEBY
REEL I [only]
June 28, 1961

INTERVIEWER: John Steiner
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[Tape begins with John Steiner saying, this is an interview on June 28, 1961 with Ed Kirkeby, who has been a booker in New York for...years, and was the booker, and originator of the California Ramblers.

I find, JS continues, that he has some acquaintance with New Orleans items which, I believe, will make his story of interest to the Archives of Jazz Music at Tulane University.

Ed. What was your first acquaintance with New Orleans music? Where did you first hear a New Orleans group, do you think?

The first New Orleans group that I heard was at Reisenweber's, EK replies. That was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band which came up in 1917.

I was with Columbia, as I said, at the time. I believe, from the records, but my memory is very vague on the thing, that they made a couple of records for Columbia at that time; but, which, for some reason or another, were not put out.

Victor finally signed them up. The reception of the public was so great that Columbia tore its hair out, and got after me - who had an assistant manager's berth there in charge of popular records - to get a jazz band together.

So, it was then that I turned to Earl Fuller who had a Rector Novelty Orchestra with some very fine New York musicians

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in it at the time.

Earl also, by the way, had Ted Lewis in a jazz band in the upstairs, after-hours room, and it was to him that I turned. He came down, and I think that Earl Fuller's jazz band were the first jazz band records that Columbia put out.

[JS notes that it may have been the first jazz band that was derived from the Original New Orleans Jazz Band, too. Do you remember anyone else imitating the Original New Orleans jazz band style?]

We did make some records down there. Wilbur Sweatman - he had a small combination - but the style, to me, again, is vague. I haven't heard a Wilbur Sweatman record since I left the company, which was in 1918.

But, those were the two [that] I would call jazz bands. Bands that played jazz, let's put it that way, that I recollect with Columbia, because, in those days, jazz was pretty much of an unheard proposition.

[Victor] was more commercially minded, and they saw the fact that the Original Dixieland [Jazz Band] at Reisenweber's was a terrific sensation.

People could dance to the tempo, the two-beat tempo, and the result was that their business was fabulous. So, from a commercial sales aspect; why, the sensible thing was to get records on the market.

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When Victor beat Columbia to the punch, and got them on the market, why, they did a terrific business.

[The dance-ability was very important as far as the record was concerned.] I think musically, too, the band hit. It was something new, and something that had a terrific lift - beat, as we call it now - and there it was.

Before that, we, at Columbia, were using Prince's Band, making these 12-inch records of medleys of tunes which were supervised by the Hepburn Dance School, at the time, to make sure that they got the proper one-step, and foxtrot, tempos for which the records were sold, strictly for dancing.

But, it was not modern, not even up to the dance bands in the night clubs such as Rector's. It was shortly after that, that I began to plug - shortly after joining the company - began to plug dance bands to come in, and record. Real dance bands.

Art Hickman, I think, was one of the first bands, if not the first dance band that Columbia imported. We had a terrific time recording it with both saxophones, and I know we couldn't take the banjos.

I was with Columbia from 1914 until about 1918. [I am vague about whether the ODJB recorded for Columbia. They say they made one date which was not released at the time.] I was in charge of test recordings [of] new voices, and new combinations that came in, you see, which we'd present to the committee.

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The committee would judge them accordingly, appraise the possibilities commercially, and go from there.

[The bands] could have been sent on from a local dealer. There were times when artists came in to the auspices of a local dealer for test recordings which were handled by, say, the concert department, or the international department, and maybe not the popular department. Or maybe, by one of the big officials themselves. That's how it probably skipped by me, you see.

The committee would decide what to record. [After the successful ODJB Victor recording,] then we heard the blow-up... At that time, they started after me to get a jazz band to compete...

Earl Fuller, I know, played drums with the group, but who beyond that, I can't tell now. I think it was a clarinet, which was Ted Lewis, and a trumpet, of course. The usual jazz band: trombone, and drums.

When I left Columbia, I went in the artists' representation field, and I made records for many companies besides the big two.

I picked up the Memphis Five, with Philly Napoleon, Miff Mole, Frankie Signorelli, and Bert Lytell, that was the trumpet. What was Bert's right name? Jimmie Lytell. [Also,] Jack Roth, who is now with Jimmy Durante, and has been with Jimmy Durante for many, many years [was the drummer.]

Jimmy Durante, I think, didn't he have a jazz band down at this place, the Silver Slipper? [JS mentions the Alamo which was

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far uptown.] May have been, I don't know.

[JS says (Frank) Cush has mentioned the Alamo as the place where he played with Durante, and (Achille) Baquet. He thought that they were considerably imitative of the original New Orleans Jazz Band.] Could be, could be. I should say, would be.

I made [the Memphis Five's] first [recording] date. We, then, free-lanced around. I think that the first date was for the Paramount Records which was an independent company at the time, 1140 Broadway. [cf. discographies.]

In fact, I auditioned the original California Ramblers down at 1140 Broadway for Paramount. Of course, I made records for them under a nom de plume--by the Original Ramblers with Red Nichols, and Jimmy Dorsey, and Tommy Dorsey and, of course, Adrian Rollini, who developed into the greatest bass saxophone player in the world.

So, we had a real team, at that time, you know, with real stars, and...I think I used about 20 nom de plumes, or more.

I think that, as far as recordings are concerned...I've - as an independent orchestra leader, and production man - made more records than any other individual.

[JS adds that, more than any other man, also, you've confused the picture for the jazz historian who tries to follow all the places you've been.]

I had a team of research men here for weeks, looking over my

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records, and diaries...getting personnel for the dates that I had on payroll books since 1925, or [192]6, on.

But, prior to that, it was simply the diaries. I've got the diaries from 1919 on...They had a real holiday, and field day. I understand those are coming out on discography form in various issues of magazines from time to time [in] Record Research magazine.

[I used mainly the New York men.] I don't remember any New Orleans men. We had a lot of good men in New York that were influenced greatly by the Harlem bands.

Our band...The boys, after getting off from the California Ramblers Inn date, they used to hobnob down at the Nest, which was a famous night club [that] had a big band....That's where they got a lot of their inspiration for jazz.

[JS says the bands had a lot of respect for each other. Even the non-jazz players used to visit (Duke) Ellington, and used to visit the Harlem bands to hear the tremendous sound they were producing. JS asks about the first Memphis Five record, and mentions "The Sheik."]

"The Sheik," was the California Ramblers. The funny part of it is that I had Philly Napoleon in the California Ramblers band. [I had Napoleon with the California Ramblers] on that tape for Aeolin.

I think I made the first [Memphis Five] records, and [was]

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booker, and supervisor of their dates for some time.

[The Louisiana Five] worked the same type thing [as the ODJB]. Philly Napoleon, and the gang, as the Memphis Five, worked up in Healy's Balconades - one of the jobs when I had them - on 66th and Broadway. Lincoln Square, I think they call it.

That was a very popular dance hall. They really tore up the place there on Friday, Saturday nights. Did terrific business...I had nothing to do with the Louisiana Five.

When [Red] Nichols, Jimmy Dorsey, and Tommy Dorsey joined the Ramblers...We had previously, just previously to the latter two, that's Red Nichols, and Tommy, joining...I had organized a group called the Little Ramblers of which I had Bill Moore, known as "Jazz" Moore on trumpet. We had Adrian Rollini, of course, on bass. We used no trombone. Stan King was on drums. And we had Jimmy Dorsey on saxophone. That was the first Little Ramblers.

Of course, when Red Nichols, and our trombone, Tommy Dorsey, joined--why we put them in, and, of course, we began to get some real sound.

We had built... What I had built was the first big swing band with jazz men in it...That was my effort, to build within the organization those men who could take off, who could play jazz.

We did it with what we called head arrangements. We would take a stock arrangement with no orchestration whatsoever, as far

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as special arrangements were concerned, and go into a studio.

Routine the thing there by giving this man a break, another man a sixteen bars, and an eight bar release. Or, a duet here, and duet there. Strictly head arrangement.

All the Little Rambler stuff was that way. The Goofus Five on Okeh. The Birmingham Five. Birmingham Babies. That was another Okeh combination of mine. But, with all the same men. With all head arrangements.

The men [had to be up to the capability of making head arrangements.] Don't forget, my men had done more recording than any other white group - and colored group at that time - by recording for all these companies.

My experience with the Columbia company, in production, and balance. Also, my musical knowledge, and knowledge of the jazz beat, and so forth, made it possible to go out, and turn out those sides, that number of sides.

[JS says the New Orleans nucleus of good, hot men in a small all-star cast may have started with the ODJB. But, you found, after you got the big band, there was great appeal in having a smaller nucleus of stars do a performance in a small band setting.]

That's right. We had Red Nichols. We had Tommy Dorsey on trombone. We had Jimmy Dorsey on alto sax, and clarinet. We had Adrian Rollini on bass. We had Stan King on drums, all of whom

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were soloists. [Irving] Brodsky on piano. All fine, superb musicians.

In fact, that band was known by the music publishers, which was a great tribute, as the band for the okaying of their arrangements.

They'd come up with a manuscript. The boys would put it on the stand, read it, and knock it right off. No rehearsal, whatsoever. That's a band--that can do that. No rehearsal.

Then, we'd cut it up. We'd take solo parts here, and give it to Red make a modulation, here, for Rollini. Ideas would multiply, and the first thing you'd know you'd have a terrific jazz content within the arrangement.

[This was seven, or eight, years after the ODJB. By this time, players were showing some originality, and independence on phrasing, JS notes.]

They were evolving. Don't forget the old stuff was kind of raw, and very few people could play it. Certainly, the New Yorkers.

I picked up a fellow by the name of Bill Moore who was a mulatto. Really, he was the first negro musician to play in a white band. A big, white swing band.

Benny Goodman claims that prestige, but it's not so. The Ramblers beat him by 10 years.

[JS mentioned (Jimmy) Durante and Durante had (Achille)

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Bacquet, so there's another case...] I'm talking about a big swing band...Oh, I think down in New Orleans...I'm sure, there was a mixture of musicians.

[Stan King didn't do much drumming on recordings because of the early acoustical limitations.] I don't believe, even when electrical recording came in...

We made the first electrical session for Columbia in Columbus Circle. I remarked, at the time, what a different set-up was going to mean in comfort, and ease of operation, as far as balance; and isolation of solo parts, and things like that were concerned.

We were very much intrigued by the fact that the drums, which we couldn't get before, even as far as snares are concerned. We began getting that thing.

But, I don't believe we ever used a drum - a bass drum - until years later when Red, and the rest of them, had gone to other fields.

Stan King had a terrific rock beat. Funny thing. He came from Hartford, Connecticut. You'd hardly think that a boy without some New York influence - or Harlem influence - would be able to drum the way he did.

I think he was the first one to use the press roll. [That's interesting, JS notes.] The first one, in the big band field, to use the press roll.

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He was steady as a rock. He's the one that gave us our fundamental beat. He, and Rollini, and Brodsky - between the three of them as the rhythm section - were great.

We, of course, were far from attempting to create pure jazz. We used kazoos, and every other instrument, in the way of a novelty.

We even put on a record with Rollini playing, as a flute, instead of the pseudo-saxophone it was supposed to be. A thing called the couesnaphone.

I said - the recorder asked me what it was - I said, well, it's a couesnaphone. He said, geez. That's a word, is it? I said, sure. From now, it's the goofus. I coined the word, and that's where the Goofus Five came from. I named the Goofus Five.

[Using novelty instruments] came fundamentally from the negro...street bands. The idea was to get a novelty in the record. We might use it only for sixteen bars, as, say, what we would call a break chorus--sixteen, eight, and eight.

It kept us spending plenty of money for imports of couesnaphones from France because they'd go out of tune very quickly.

The evolution of jazz in New York covers a big field. When I joined Victor as manager of A&R reps in 1925; my job, then, was to, sort of, lean over backwards to see if those people who were jazz-minded couldn't get more product. It was then that I began

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bringing in bands to Victor.

For instance, Adrian Rollini came in with a group. He was playing at the...President Hotel.

He had a little joint down there, and he had Fats Waller as pianist in the place. [The] Tap Room Gang. It was Adrian Rollini and his Tap Room Gang. So, we made some records of Adrian and his Tap Room Gang.

Then, we brought in Joe Marsala and made up a lot of groups to cater to the ever growing demand for jazz records.

I went, following Victor...I went with the National Broadcasting Company--Consolidated Radio Artists, which was the band booking division. We handled [Paul] Whiteman, and [Xavier] Cougat. We had Guy Lombardo, and Benny Goodman.

In fact, during my regime at Victor, Benny Goodman broke wide open. I gave him the tune that broke him wide open. That was the "Stomping at the Savoy."

He was making this tour, and the orders poured in for that record, and Benny Goodman was the "King of Swing."

It was there, by the way, that Nick LaRocca, and the old Dixieland Jazz Band formed a big organization with the little organization within it...

They organized [their own big band]. I remember that they came to Consolidated Radio Artists, because of it's NBC connection for booking. But, it was not a successful

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organization.

I don't think they took the big band with the [successful] theater tour. I don't think so. That's vague.

[JS saw them at the Riverside Theater, Milwaukee, on the Orpheum Theater tour. They had only the small band, and it was a local band that played in the pit.]

I think the big band was unsuccessful. We couldn't sell it for the money that was necessary. I'm pretty sure. [We tried records.]

I think [] Mills made some records. He was associated with us at that time. He had Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway. He was in personal management.

And Chick Webb, by the way, out of which Ella Fitzgerald came at that time. Great band. Great little band.

[JS mentions that the ODJB big band tried to sell commercial titles, and current songs, while the small band played the original repertoire.]

I don't recall anybody in the big band. We had so many bands in that day that personnel didn't enter into it. It was a matter of getting jobs, we were concerned with.

When I took over Fats [Waller] in 1938, that was the job of a lifetime, 'cause, if ever there was a hunk of talent - weighing 285 pounds - who was a genius without doubt; but, who, at the same time, loved to have a good time like any other mother's

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favorite son...

I'm telling you that I spent six years of glorious listening, and a great deal of mental turpitude (laughs), and harassment until the sad day occurred, when the body could no longer take it; and Fats passed on, on that train coming in from Hollywood, California--1943, December 15th.

During that period of his life, in the musical business, he not only played for every type of audience - and I think we were the first ones to do the first jazz concerts - strictly jazz concert out in Seattle for Norm Beaubreaux [sp?] way back in 1943...[Voice trails off as tape ends...]

END OF REEL