

PIERRE MERLIN  
I [of 2] --Digest--Retyped  
August 14, 1961

Also present: RBA, Elizabeth Snapp

Pierre Merlin was born in Bordeaux, France, on June 30, 1918. He went to Paris in 1942, on a scholarship to study art. The first time he was exposed to American music was in about 1925, when he heard what he thinks was an American jazz band in the casino of Vichy (where his grandmother had taken him along on her holiday); the band had a Negro saxophone player, who walked between the tables. His parents didn't really have any jazz records, only some French imitations of American music. In 1935 he started going to Art School in Bordeaux, and through some friends who collected records he became very interested in jazz; he started buying records himself at that time; around 1940 or 41; these same friends and he began to play jazz; PM doesn't remember if any of his fellow musicians turned out to be professional musicians.

When he went to Paris in 1942, he met Claude Luter and started playing with him; he played with Luter for six years, from 1943-1949. During the German occupation of Paris they only could play jazz in the basement of the jazz club in Paris; dancing and drinking was not allowed, but a few concerts could be held; PM says a few Germans liked jazz; the Germans did not prohibit anything "cultural", such as jazz concerts, as long as they weren't popularized too much; but amusements such as dancing were restricted only to the Germans at that time; PM says nevertheless they had parties in private. PM never really had a teacher; a friend who had a teacher tried to

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teach him some, but not too successfully; PM had trouble with his lip, and he didn't have enough time to practice, it seems, as he was not a professional then, he was still painting and sketching. He became a better musician playing with Luter; he started to "play really" then. Before World War II PM only heard American musicians on record, never in person. He was in Bordeaux ~~z~~ before the war, and it wasn't easy to get good records; he listened to the [Louis] Armstrong Hot Five, Bix Beiderbecke, some white bands; they had to order most of the records they wanted, and it was very difficult to get them; the only current jazz they could buy was Bob Crosby, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Jimmy Lunceford; (this was from 1935 to 1940). He didn't read music then, and he hardly does now; he says he never had enough courage to really go into it. When he moved to Paris on his Art Scholarship, he came to hear more records at the Jazz Club. They had quite a collection there, but people stole from it all the time. When he played with Luter, once a week they used to go to Henri Bernard's (a well-known collector in Paris) house and listen to records. It was then that he really deepened his knowledge of good jazz. He listened to King Oliver, Clarence Williams, Benny Moten. When he first started playing, he was influenced by what he had heard, Rex Stewart, Bix Beiderbecke, Armstrong. Later on, in Paris with Luter, he played the first trumpet, King Oliver's part, and they played

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most of Oliver's tunes, also Moten and Clarence Williams. His favorite trumpet players are King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Ladnier and also George Mitchell. Bix Beiderbecke to him is in a class all by himself. PM has no one favorite tune or record. He likes all of the King Oliver repertoire, also Moten's and Clarence Williams's.

After the war quite a few American musicians came to Paris. The first American musician heard was Don Redman and his big band. He heard Armstrong many times; he heard Lionel Hampton at a dance at a PX; he liked him very much. At a very small auditorium he heard Willie "The Lion" Smith, piano; [this was still during the <sup>NO</sup> war?]; he found it very enjoyable; he thinks this was in 1946 or 1945. He likes styles other than New Orleans jazz. He prefers a medium[-size] band like King Oliver's, with two trumpets, clarinet, trombone and four rhythm. This to PM is the best formula, the best balanced combination; it provides arrangement and enough freedom to improvise; it's not rigid. He listens to everything but doesn't like everything. PM likes Duke Ellington a little, prefers his records of the Twenties; likes blues guitar a little. PM doesn't like bebop at all. It bores him.

RBA asks who was in the Luter band when MP started playing with him. MP answers RBA, saying there were Claude Luter, clarinet; Claude Robinette [spelling?] and PM, cornet; Mowgli Jospin, trombone

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(he was the pianist before he played trombone. PM doesn't remember the name of the first trombone player). Christian Assi [spelling?] piano; Claude Philip [spelling?], banjo; Michel Pacou [spelling?], drums, and Roland Bianchini on bass, who is still playing with Luter now. They played with this same combination from the end of 1946 until 1949.

In 1948 the band played at the Nice Festival of Jazz; the Louis Armstrong orchestra and Mezz Mezzrow's orchestra were there at the same time, and after they returned to Paris, these musicians came to Paris also, and for one whole week they played with Baby Dodds, [clarinet], Pops Foster, [<sup>ss</sup>banjo] Bob Wilber[cl, ss?] Jimmy Archey [trombone] and once with Mezz Mezzrow [clarinet]; it was a very enjoyable week. He played with Sidney Bechet only a few times in 1948 or 1949; the Luter orchestra accompanied Bechet in concert a few times. This was a little too much music for PM, rehearsals and all; it wouldn't leave him enough time to draw, and furthermore he didn't feel up to playing with Bechet, he wasn't good enough, so he quit. Later on he joined Mowgli Jospin's (Luter's trombonist) band, which included Claude Robinette [spelling?], cornet; Pierre Atlan, clarinet; Martine Mor<sup>e</sup>ale' [check spelling], piano and a very frequently changing rhythm section; they try to play the same kind of music, no matter who is in their rhythm section; PM plays with this band every Sunday now. They played with Albert Nicholas a few times,

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also once with Bechet. Twice they played with an American Negro singer who sings in the style of Bessie Smith. Her Name is Billy Poole, [Check spelling] she is about twenty-three years old and very good. Two or three of his musicians read a little. Most of the time they can't get the sheet music for the tunes they like, so they learn by records. ES would like to know if PM ever plays for private parties. PM answers saying that he does, for instance he has played for St. Catherinette's da parties (St. Catherinette is the patron saint of all the unmarried girls twenty-five years of age or over and traditionally on her anniversary all the young women working in the fashion industry in Paris have a big party.)

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Answering RBA, PM admits that they sometimes play picnics, but it is usually a very improvised picnic, i.e., the party was in the house originally, but because it is a beautiful day they decided to move it to the outside; they sometimes have pianos at such a party also. He has never played for a parade. RBA would like to know who listens to the different kinds of jazz in Paris. PM doesn't think there is really a special kind of person who listens to to New Orleans jazz. He believes that the young people like rock'n'roll, because it is new and in fashion, but it is not as popular in France as it is in Germany or England, he thinks. He believes that mostly snobs like bebop and progressive jazz, but he admits that this might be a personal prejudice, because he doesn't like bebop. Probably half of the people like modern jazz, and the other half like traditional jazz. He doesn't believe that the artists like any special kind of jazz. PM answers RBA saying that at first he used to play mostly on the west side of Paris, where the rich people live, and in the Latin Quarter, where the students live, these two categories of pw oplw likw jazz most. Now jazz spots have almost disappeared on the west side; they are all on the left bank, in the Latin Quarter. People have become used to going there whenever they want to hear jazz.

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PM draws pictures of anything, depending upon the job he has. He worked for an advertising agency for three years, did lay-outs for exhibition booths, designed record jackets and did some drawings for a French TV film on jazz. He drew sketches of King Oliver, his like, etc., for a TV short on him, as they didn't have many photographs. He also played in that same TV production on Oliver, also on Clarence Williams, with Billie Poole, who sang a Clarence Williams tune, and he played in another TV session, during which Billie Poole sang Bessie Smith tunes. He got connected with television through the former pianist of the band with which he plays on Sundays, Jean Christophe Averty [check spelling], who is now in charge of jazz programs at the French TV station. PM answers ES saying that Averty keeps most of his sketches. He says he has designed very few posters; they are hard and costly to make, so usually it's the well-known specialists who do posters for jazz events. ES wonders if PM couldn't send some sketches that he wouldn't keep anyway to the Archive, as we collect such things; RBA suggests that he could send the Archive a sketch or two, and PM answers he'd like to exchange pictures [what kind?]

Answering RBA, PM is not quite sure if the French like the same musicians that the English like. There is not much exchange between English and French musicians. It seems that people like Bunk Johnson, "Wooden Joe" Nicholas, and George Lewis are much more popular in England than they are in France, and some other old-

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timers that are popular in England are virtually unknown in France. PM has no explanation for this. PM has heard George Lewis only on records; he doesn't think this music is so much different from King Oliver's and the [Louis Armstrong] Hot Five; he thinks the difference is mainly due to aging and in the recording technique. PM wishes there were Bunk Johnson records from the time that Oliver made recordings, because he was such a good musician, even his recent records which he recorded when he was quite old, were good. He hasn't heard much music in New Orleans yet. He thinks it is a shame that all the musicians are so old. He has heard "Slow Drag" [Pavegeau] on guitar and enjoyed hearing him very much. He also heard DeDe Pierce; the music on Bourbon Street seemed too commercial to him, but he hasn't heard much and doesn't remember who he heard. PM says he is quite impressed with Southern Hospitality. He thinks Preservation Hall is a good idea; it is the only way to hear the old musicians who are not professionals; <sup>[European definition]</sup> the place has a friendly atmosphere and doesn't seem commercial at all. He heard Kid Howard on cornet and liked him. PM believes that New Orleans jazz is very different from Dixieland. Dixieland is the commercial "deformation" of New Orleans jazz. PM can't say if the musicians here are more entertainers, in the sense that they show off more, than French musicians in France; he says he has heard American musicians in concerts only, and there they usually show [off] a little.



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PM is going to draw sketches of the buildings in the French Quarter. He doesn't want to draw people here, he is afraid of annoying them. Answering RBA, PM says that other French orchestras are Claude Luter, who has changed in style since PM played with him; the musicians playing with him now are more modern; there are a few regular orchestras, dance bands that play some good jazz; there are about ten bands in Paris that play good jazz; only one half of them are regular bands, the others change more or less. They play everything, some play New Orleans jazz all the time. He can't remember too many names. The most outstanding name to him is Claude Bolling, who is mostly a composer and arranger now. He writes for big bands, but a big band, in PM's opinion, can't survive for a long time, so he writes mostly for TV and movies. PM answers ES that musicians don't play in cafes or restaurants while people eat. What people drink depends on the kind of license the place has. In general, the places featuring New Orleans jazz have "little licenses" which means that they can't serve alcohol; they cater mostly to the young people; he believes that modern jazz appeals more to snobs and is found at the more expensive places, where older people go. However, he is not sure. There is not as much canned music in France as there is in the United States of America.