

unedited first draft

ROBERT LEWIS [clarinetist]
REEL I [only]
November 10, 1959

INTERVIEWER: William Russell
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[Tape begins with William Russell saying: O.k., we're going.]

This is Robert Lewis. I've come down to New Orleans to visit Bill Russell.

[WR understands that RL was one of the two pupils that Sidney Bechet had. I hope you can tell us a little bit about your lessons with him, and your experiences with Sidney.]

I guess I was one of his pupils, but not for very long. I was going to school at the time. Of course, he was travelling a great deal. I suppose I took no more than eight lessons in total from him....I started in 1947....

[At the first lesson,] he asked me to play something on the clarinet. I played it very badly, of course. So then, I came back, and he gave me a lesson.

[WR mentions that it was a little piece you heard from a Johnny Dodds record.] Oh, yes. "Stealing Away."

[While WR thinks of it, RL mentioned this afternoon that SB didn't think much of Johnny Dodds.]

Sidney was always Sidney. When it came to talking about other musicians--why, of course, he had to think about himself, too, as many musicians do....He just didn't think [Dodds] was the musician that Sidney Bechet was....

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[The first piece he taught me] was a little exercise in the key of "F." [He had me stick to the low register first,] and it was mostly training in fifths, and thirds....

He always used the single embouchure. [He put his teeth on to the mouthpiece.]

[RL plays the exercise by ear...]

Everything we did was by ear. [He never wrote down anything for me, or had me bring any written music.]

Once, he asked me to tell...which keys were which. I put my finger on "A," and called it "B." He didn't call me on it. So, I thought I'd get away with that. But, we didn't go into the technical aspects very deeply.

[He never talked about breathing,] and said to leave the vibrato alone. He said that's something that you can do by yourself, if you want to, or leave it alone, if you want to.

I came in. I hadn't prepared a lesson at all. I thought I could, sort of, get by with it.

Well, not with Sidney. He said, would you talk to me that way? I just let go with some terrible squawks, and that's what he said. Would you talk to me that way?

[That reminds WR about the other occasion. RL told me, in Belgium once, where SB didn't like this drummer.]

The drummer wasn't doing what he should have done. Sidney, first of all, started stomping one foot on the stage platform to

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get him in time. The drummer still wouldn't get the idea.

So, Sidney took the entire band - that's the walking band - around to the back side of the stage, which was open. That's where the drummer was.

When Sidney got there, he growled furiously. I think the drummer came to--eventually.

[WR was interested because other New Orleans musicians consider music a form of communication, which it really is, and they'll talk.

[WR thinks (of) that fight between Ed Garland and Kid Ory, out in San Francisco. Garland knocked him off the stand when Ory said something to him on the trombone--a few dirty words or something, and made Garland mad.] Well, it's a very expressive form of music.

[WR was going to ask about that saxophone. We had that letter, that you were kind enough to let us copy this afternoon, when he gave you the saxophone.

[That was about two years ago, you say, WR continues...a year and a half before he died. What make is it?]

It's a Buescher....It was originally gold-plated. The repairman told me it had been gold-plated.

Of course, there wasn't much gold left on it when I got it. Sidney had left it in this country for some time.

[WR prompts RL to play a few notes. He plays "Bill Bailey."]

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[SB taught me clarinet on the Boehm system.] I know he always played the Albert system. He said, himself, many of the old-timers preferred the Albert system.

I asked him, why? He said, they just figured that taking up the Boehm, again, would be another instrument to them, and they were already accomplished on the Albert.

[He never mentioned anything about the Albert having a better tone, or being easier to play. He didn't object to my bringing the Boehm.] As a matter of fact, he taught Bob Wilbur on the Boehm.

I asked Sidney about the proper form of embouchure. Sidney said: some people can play like this, and he sort of puckered up his mouth. Then, he said, other people could play like this, and he stuck out both his lips [real far.] He said: which one is better if the second one can play like hell?

[WR notes that the technique itself didn't matter much as long as you got results.] Most of [Bebop] is my old phrasing, [SB told RL.]

[SB said his grandfather was white.] I never knew it until he told me in [] Belgium, two years ago. I didn't inquire any further. He just said that his grandfather was white.

He said that he'd like to come back to America. This was two years ago. I was trying to do what I could to get him back here.

But, I have a feeling that he also had some problems over

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here, too. He had a home in France, and it was just a little too much machinery to get the thing put through.

[WR mentions an article in Esquire that said SB had two homes, and asks if he had two wives, including one in Germany.] That was always hard to keep up with. [Yeah, it was in this country, I know, WR adds.]

He adopted the boy [that was the younger girl's son]. It was his boy, but not by his wife. You just never know how those things work out for him. He usually moves so fast. It was like hearing him play "Maple Leaf Rag."

["Les Ognons"] sold a million copies [in France.] He was very happy [in Belgium. Drove his own car.] He was doing extremely well, too, and very much admired by the people of [], and certainly Belgium as a country.

He said that Mezzrow was not as close to him as he was some time ago [when they made the records together.] He didn't [play with Mezz over there.]

They just kind of fell apart. Mezzrow was playing over there, of course. I don't know that they had much to do with each other. That's all.

He was signed up with Vogue [records] over there. I read that he was making [around \$40,000 a year.] I believe it because I know he was making a considerable amount in Belgium.

He...really wanted to get my technique down. I didn't have a

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very good comprehension of scales. He also taught me "High Society." [He had me play scales,] and sustained notes, too. He said just forget [vibrato.]

[I studied clarinet, rather than saxophone with SB.] He played ["High Society,"] first on his clarinet. I remember, I played the slow part. This was after I learned the slow part. [This was] on Quincy Street, Brooklyn.

I met Laura. He was married to Laura at that time. I don't know if she was Indian.

[He taught "High Society"] by ear. Finally, he said, alright, now play it. He had his instrument in his hand, and he played the fast part while I played the slow part.

I got half way through the slow part, and I found myself listening to him so intently that I stopped. He said, why did you stop? Well, I said, I don't know. I was listening to you.

He really taught me technique, more than anything--trills. Then, we got on to a series of interval lessons, harmony, and that kind of thing.

He asked me to get a method [book]. He didn't recommend any particular method. He just said, get a method. He did teach me the first part of "Moulin [au Cafe]" which he recorded much later in Paris.

[He had a rubber band to hold down] the D-sharp; really, the E-flat key. There's an alternate finger in here, and the

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alternate's not so good. It comes out as kind of a fuzzy tone.

Sidney always kept a rubber band around that to hold the key down all the time. He would use the first fingering.

[WR mentions that Raymond Burke does things like that, and a lot of players here have done that, too, to keep down certain keys, and simplify the fingering.]

[The lessons] would last almost any period of time. Sometimes, they'd last all afternoon, or they'd last only half an hour, depending on how he felt, and actually [was] physically. If he had a hard session the night before, and was very tired.

He always told me to work with my fingers, and my mind, together. Always be conscious of this: that your mind, and your fingers, can not work separately.

He also told me that I had to bring out my rhythm, that it hadn't been brought out. [He had me pat my foot.] It's a habit I wish I could get over because you don't. [Well, they do down here, WR notes. They still pat along.]

I think you, and I are sad that he's no longer around. [WR was shocked to hear SB had died.] A great shock....

END OF REEL

