

SONNY WILLIAMS
I [of 3]
January 13, 1961
[Friday]

Also present: Richard B. Allen,
Marjorie T. Zander, Houston Williams,
Sr., (oldest son of Sonny Williams)

(Interview recorded at 2115 Toledano Street, barber shop [SW's], New Orleans)

RBA investigates a contract naming Sonny (his actual name) Williams' Jazz Band; Williams then lived at 2031 Foucher Street; he lived there 36 years, having moved to his present address only a few years ago. [Real name was Joseph Williams according to his daughters, Hazel W. Williams and Ernestine W. Fluence, April 15, 1969.] SW says he got that particular [set of] contract[s] in 1927. The printer, Benarby, (not a musician) had an uncle, Lucien Benarby, who played trombone with SW. [Lucien?] Benarby was an uncle of [trombonist] Ernest Kelly. RBA says [Clarence] "Little Dad" [Vincent], banjo player now dead about one year, told him about the Benarby family. [cf C "LD" V, reel ?] SW says he doesn't understand how "Little Dad" could play, as he couldn't hear well, but that he did play pretty well.

SW was born December 26, 1889, in Lecompte, Rapides Parish, about 18 miles this [N. O.] side of Alexandria. An uncle, Buddy Blair, played alto [horn] in bands in St. Charles Parish. SW moved to St. Charles

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Parish, town of Ama, when he was 6 months old. Ernest Kelly was from Ama; a trumpet player named [Val?] Eugene, trombonist Eddie Atkins (he and SW grew up together and began playing together; SW played guitar then) and his brother, Freddie Atkins were from Ama; Freddie Atkins played drums; he played in a little jazz band they had there in the country. Eddie Atkins began playing valve trombone; he came to New Orleans and he later went to Chicago, was in the army [World War I?] for a time, remained in Chicago until 6 or 7 years ago, when he came home [to Ama?] to die. He began as a reading musician, studying with Professor [Jim] Humphrey.

SW's uncle, Buddy Blair, played alto horn in the St. Charles Brass Band, (SW is not certain of the name of the band). They were strictly a reading band, and were organized and directed by Jim Humphrey, the grandfather of Percy [and Willie and Earl Humphrey]. Some of the members of that band, which was about 14 pieces were: Arthur Griffith, trumpet; Jean [Ussaint?], trombone; Martin Roland, tuba; Ernest Ben-

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arby, alto horn; Henry Benarby, baritone horn; [Caleb?] Hamilton,
clarinet; Marshall Bennett, snare drum. The band, hired by the various
candidates, /played all over
the parish during elections. SW mentions the Pickwick Band of St.
John [the Baptist] Parish. The band was organized when SW was a little
boy. Louis [Horace?] was another trumpet player in the band. Joe
Avery, of Waggaman, played with the band once in a while; Avery played
violin before he took up trombone.

SW mentions Louis Dumaine, a good "music writer" [i.e., arranger?
RBA] SW mentions Pinchback Tureaud, who was from St. James [Parish],
but whom SW met in N.O. SW began playing, guitar, in a band in his
hometown; it was led by [Caleb?] Hamilton, who played "C" clarinet
(played melody, from the violin part); others in the band were: Joseph
Bennett, violin; Willie Lee, bass violin; Eddie Atkins, trombone;
Lucien Benarby, trumpet [cf above, p.1., on LB's instruments.] Talk
of the roles the various instruments played in the band. Talk of tempo
and dance.

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SW studied guitar with Professor Humphrey, who taught all instruments. He played clarinet, trumpet, violin, bass violin, [and possibly other instruments.] SW quit playing guitar because he couldn't sing ;[wasn't capable, or couldn't sing and play simultaneously?]

Talk of valve trombones; SW says the last person he saw playing valve trombone was Willie Cornish, who later took up slide trombone.

SW took up guitar in 1908; when he quit, two years later, he took up clarinet, which he played until 1925, when he changed to trumpet. SW says his first job on clarinet was with the Bulls' Band, a 14-piece brass band [for the Bulls' Club], and he decided to change to trumpet because they couldn't keep any trumpet players, [Does he mean he played his first job on trumpet with the Bulls'?]. The other members of the Bulls' Band played only in that band; SW says Steve, a trombonist, wouldn't play any dance work, as he preferred playing only brass band music.

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SW was in the band at Ama for 2 years; he came to N.O. in 1918.

He didn't play clarinet in bands in the country. SW joined the Bulls' Band in 1920. SW played several jobs in the country with [Val?] Eugene, and with others; the brothers Homer and Wendall Eugene, of N.O., are mentioned. SW played with the Bulls' Band about 5 years. The Bulls' Band did no orchestra work; Sam Morgan and [Kid] Rena played all the dance music [for the Bulls' dances].

While still living in the country, SW heard the Olympia Band/ Eddie [of N.O.]

New Orleans?
Atkins, back home [from Chicago?] played with that band. Edward Clem, from St. James [Parish], also played at SW's home; Clem, not a reading musician, was a jazz trumpet player; he played blues a lot. [cf. Punch Miller reel ? for an imitation of ED style. RBA.] SW says Clem really played "Tiger Rag," and it was about 1928 he heard him play it. SW heard Buddy Bolden several times in N.O. B.B. was very loud. SW has been coming to N.O. since 1902; he came to see , Mardi Gras, and hasn't missed seeing one since. There was less music in parades at Mardi

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Gras in the old days. SW remembers that the [Kiyall?] Pickwick Band,
/colored,
from St. John [the Baptist] Parish, led the Mardi Gras parade one time;
they were from around Reserve, from where Kid Thomas [Valentine] and
Edmond Hall and his brothers come.

End of Reel I

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Also present: Richard B. Allen,
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Sr. [who departs during this reel]

RBA says he heard SW play once with the Eureka [Brass Band]. [i.e.,
"sitting in" on "Panama"] (SW plays trumpet solos of "Somebody
Stole My Gal" and "Tiger Rag.") RBA mentions Buddy Bolden. SW
says [Edward] Clem played [cornet] in a style similar to his own.
Louis Dumaine also played in a similar style. SW says Chris Kelly was
a jazz cornet player.

(SW plays "She's Just A Sailor's Sweetheart" and introduces (part
of) "Home Sweet Home.") SW has a collection of sheet music. SW played
in the W.P.A. Band [in the 1930's].

Talk of SW's Buescher trumpet, bought in 1929, and the various
mouthpieces he has for it. Talk of clarinet reeds. RBA mentions Emile
Barnes, exclusively a clarinetist.

After leaving the Bulls' Club Band, SW organized his own group;
some of the men in it, from time to time, were: [Manny?] Dude Gabriel,
clarinet; [?] Cato, drums; Charlie Moore, banjo; Percy Humphrey,
drums (for about 2 years).

SW played with Pete Badie, saxophone; Badie, now dead, had a son

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["Chuck"] who now plays music. SW says the last time he played with Badie was at a rehearsal of the Eureka Brass Band held at Badie's home; SW played with the Eureka for a time.

SW worked 37 years for the Illinois Central Railroad as a freight handler.

SW never took a trumpet lesson. He has always been a reading musician, seldom playing without music. He doesn't like to rehearse with [A.B.] Spears' [E. Gibson] Band, as they don't use any written music. SW may begin playing for funerals again. He says the band uniform consisted of all black, including the shirt, when he was playing; he played his last funeral about 16 years ago. Some members of the Eureka band/were: [Joseph] "Red" [Clark], slide trombone [later, sousaphone], now dead; Ed Verrett, bass horn, also dead; Willie Wilson, trumpet and manager, although he didn't play often then, also dead. [Willi Pajaud was not in the band then, nor was Perchy Humphrey. "Little Jim" [Mukes?], bass drum, is mentioned. There were no saxes in the band then; when saxes were brought in, they replaced the alto and baritone horns;

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SW says the band sounded better with saxes. E flat trumpet [i.e., cornet] was also used.

Houston Williams, Sr., tells of seeing horse-drawn funeral processions when he was a boy. He works for a florist. [He leaves the room.] SW says he himself had 4 sons and 2 daughters; none of them play music, although most of them took lessons on various instruments at one time or another.

RBA mentions banjo player Sam Chase. Charlie Moore, who died about 2 months ago, played banjo with SW for a long time. Moore also played with Jack Carey. SW played clarinet several times with Jack Carey; personnel included: Jack Carey, trombone; [his brother] Mutt Carey, cornet Willie "Kaiser" Joseph or Zeb [Leneries], clarinet. Joseph was killed [by a hit-and-run driver] during a visit to New Orleans. Jack Carey's band was good, although it was "routine" [i.e., didn't use written music]. Other good "routine" bands were those of [Kid] Rena and Sam Morgan. SW [probably means "Kid Shots" Madison? PRC] says Punch [Miller]/was playing with [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin, a band which always read; [John] Robichaux's band and [A.J.] Piron's band always read

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music. The Olympia Band read and played routine also; they were good.

SW, a barber, says a lot of musicians were barbers; August Rousseau, trombonist, was a barber. Jack Carey had a barber shop, but wasn't a barber, as he had a moving business. Amos Riley was a barber.

SW played with many brass bands when he had his own dance band; the only brass bands he played with that used music were the Bulls' Band and the Eureka Brass Band. SW played a couple of parades with Amos Riley's Brass Band. RBA says Amos Riley's son, Theodore Riley, plays trumpet with George Williams' Brass Band; SW says Amos Riley had no children.

End of Reel II

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Also present: Richard B. Allen,
Marjorie T. Zander

SW says there has been a dance hall at the river-downtown corner or Elysian Fields [Avenue] and Chartres [Street] for a long time; the place is for whites; a 4-piece band is employed there now; the leader plays piano, there is a sax, and the drummer's name is Joe Bayou [sp?]. SW played trumpet there twice, but the proprietor said trumpet was too loud. RBA says [new] Luthjen's is about 2 blocks from the place SW mentioned; "Big Eye Louis" [Nelson], now dead, played [clarinet] at the old Luthjen's for a long time; George Lewis, and Billie and DeDe [Pierce] also played at the old place. RBA says George Lewis travels all over the world now. SW says he doesn't think Louis Armstrong will ever return to N.O.; he thinks Armstrong left N.O. before Eddie Atkins did. [cf other data. RBA.] SW talks about his own travels [not connected with music]; he heard Louis Armstrong and Louis Prima in New York, where both were playing on Broadway at the same time. He heard Eddie Atkins (from his home town) in Chicago in 1949, when Atkins was playing at the Regal Theater. SW knew trombonist Roy Palmer, who moved

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from N.O. to Chicago many years ago. RBA mentions Danny Barker, guitar and banjo, who lived in New York; he is a nephew of Paul Barbarin. SW says [Henry] "Red" Allen [Jr.] lived in the Bronx near a cousin of SW. SW mentions Henry Allen [Sr.], who had a brass band which played "tough" music; SW never played with him. August Rousseau played upright alto horn [with Allen?] before he changed to trombone; Joe Howard played trumpet with Allen, but later changed to tuba. [cf. photograph in Jazz Men.] SW says that so far as he knows Howard played tuba with only 2 bands, the Eureka [Brass Band] and the W.P.A. Band [cf. discographies]. Howard was a good reader.

Willie Cornish [valve trombone] had his own band; the only other member of that band whom SW remembers was "Little" Cato, guitar, (also played drums). SW cautions that "Little" Cato was not the same as [Tabaline ?] [Tabalon (Sp?)] Cato, pianist and bassist, who was his brother; another Cato brother also played piano, and there is a Cato nephew in California who plays piano. Tabalon "Big" Cato played with [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin for a while. He was "routine" piano player, then SW discusses

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his health.

SW mentions that he played with Dan Moody, bass and trombone, in Covington in 1944; Moody died last year. RBA and SW speak of the quickness with which death took [Joseph] "Red" Clark and [Willie] Pajaud.

SW discusses his ulcer operation.

Jack Carey's was the best "routine" band SW ever heard; besides Carey [trombone], there was his brother [Mutt, on cornet], Zeb [Leneries, clarinet], and Tabalon Cato, bass, plus others.

SW talks of playing at Milneburg.

Charlie McCurdy and [Lorenzo?] Tio [Jr.?] were good clarinet players.

Joe Oliver was a good trumpet player; SW heard him in N.O. but not in Chicago.

SW and RBA discuss mutes, including one made by [H.N. White?]

SW says there are more bands, including school bands, in carnival parades now than in the old days.

The marching clubs, such as the Garden District, the Delachaise Sports, the Eleanora and the [Jefferson City] Buzzards, marched in the

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old times during Carnival, as they do to this day, although they haven't been allowed to parade on Canal Street for the past 6 years. There are about as many of the clubs now as in the old times. The Zulus are an old club.

RBA mentions Mamie Desdune; SW says he didn't know her, but that she may have been related to someone who lives nearby; his name is Oscar Desdune, and he once was a piano player, as Mamie Desdune was. RBA mentions Clarence Desdune [a band leader].

SW played at a lot of picnics; he describes them.

End of Reel III