Jazz and the Italian Connection

During a recent academic conference held in New Orleans there occurred an exchange which might best be described as droll but which was intrinsically didactic. The setting was a panel discussion on jazz, and the panelists were all historians who were actively researching and publishing on the subject. Following the various presentations which were devoted to the life-stories of musicians such as Sidney Bechet, Buddy Bolden, Jelly Roll Morton, and Lester Young, a gentleman from the back of the audience asked: "What about the ODJB, the first band to record jazz?" A hush fell over the room, attended by looks of horror and pity emanating from the podium. For a moment the panelists seemed startled, until one launched into the by now almost perfunctory response to the question, stressing that the circumstances which had permitted the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to make the first jazz recording were another indication of the racist bias of the recording industry and suggesting that, beyond that, the question should not be dignified with further elucidation. Somewhat nonplussed, and duly ambushed, the gentleman returned to his seat, no closer to an answer (or serious consideration) than he had been at the outset. Yet one can only wonder how historians who are trained to ask hard questions
could have contented themselves with such a brusque and simplistic response to an apparently sincere request to hear their views on the matter of the ODJB and its influence. Had the gentleman been better prepared to make a case for the importance of the ODJB, he could clearly have done so, for the evidence on their behalf is quite impressive, if presently obscure. Why, then, should a question on the ODJB be dismissed as "politically incorrect"?
The answer can be traced back to the earliest jazz studies in the late 1930s and to the aesthetic predilections of the men who wrote them.

Jazz history has often been written from the perspective of the "great man," emphasizing the influence of musicians who enjoyed widespread critical acceptance, especially in retrospect, and ignoring the role of "lesser" artists whose activities are ipso facto less important. In the case of the ODJB, however, personalities also became a factor. When Marshall Stearns' "The History of Swing Music" appeared in Down Beat in twenty parts between 1936 and 1938, objections from the leader of the ODJB that Stearns had denigrated the band's significance in the original development of jazz began to circulate within the jazz press. LaRocca's letters to Down Beat, Metronome, and Tempo in the fall of 1936 all argued that the ODJB had invented jazz and disputed Stearns' claim (based on conversations with members of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings) that the Original Creole Orchestra had been first. In a personal reply to LaRocca dated January 11, 1937, Stearns complained that "you failed to give colored musicians a break; and that is why I exaggerated the other extreme, since the public is inclined to believe you and musicians of your opinion." While considerable attention was given to the ODJB by Charles Edward Smith in Jazzmen, an early American jazz history published in 1939, his interest in the ODJB was not typical of the general trends among "hot" jazz collectors. Most of them preferred the recordings of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, Joe Oliver, or Jelly Roll Morton, considering the earlier records by the ODJB to be rhythmically "stiff" and a little too cacophonous. Since all the early histories were written by "hot" jazz collectors, such aesthetic predilections had a bearing on historical perceptions, relegating the ODJB to "second-class" status aesthetically and therefore historically. Some fifty years after the fact, it is apparent that a reappraisal of the ODJB and its influence is long overdue.

Indeed, the reaction of American jazz scholars to the ODJB has been remarkably similar to that of the Columbia Phonograph Company which made the first aborted attempt to record the band in January 1917. Consider the account given by H.O. Brunn in The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (1960):

The interweaving strains of jazz bounced from wall to wall until the resultant
reverberations became one continuous din. The recording director closed the door to his office from the inside. A gang of carpenters, who were building shelves in the studio, laughed and threw their tools about to contribute to the bedlam. After two numbers the musicians were paid their $250 and ordered from the studio. Columbia had washed its hands of jazz. (pp. 64-65)

But Columbia's attitude changed dramatically when the band's "Livery Stable Blues," recorded soon after by Victor, surpassed the million-and-a-half sales mark for that company within months of its release. By August 1917 Columbia's ODJB version of "Darktown Strutter's Ball" was vying for the attention of record buyers on the shelves, and newspaper advertisements for both Victor and Columbia products by Maison Blanche in New Orleans show how important they were as harbingers of a jazz revolution which was only just beginning. Maison Blanche left little doubt as to why "Livery Stable" was so popular: "Here is positively the greatest dance record ever issued. Made by New Orleans musicians for New Orleans people, it has all the 'swing' and 'pep' and 'spirit' that is so characteristic of the bands whose names are now a by-word at New Orleans dances. It is more proof that New Orleans sets the pace for 'wonderful' dance music—a fact that is recognized and commented upon the country over." The "Darktown" copy was comparable: "It's played by New Orleans boys, too, for here is where 'Jazz' music originated and it has been the craze the country over." Mercantile hyperbole notwithstanding, the overriding theme of these advertisements is that the ODJB was representative of New Orleans music and a model for further development. As it happened, the influence of the ODJB on New Orleans musicians, both white and black, can be extensively documented and serves as a useful counterpoise to the usual historical accounts.

The context for any discussion of an ethnic "connection" to New Orleans musical culture, be it Italian, Irish, Creole, German, Latin American, or African-American, is the process of transculturation which fused diverse traditions into a distinctively regional blend. Demographic patterns which created a "crazy quilt" of mixed neighborhoods also yielded an extremely eclectic musical amalgam, and in a town renowned for its festival traditions, all citizens had access to the music which was performed on the streets, at the camps at West End, and in the cabarets and dance halls which fed the neighborhoods. Consequently, one of the essential features of an Italian connection to New Orleans jazz was that it was not intended for the sole enjoyment of Italians but contributed instead to the development of a New Orleans style of playing improvised music, duly enriching it. Within the ODJB there were Italians (LaRocca, Sbarbaro), Irish (Shields), and English (Ragas, Edwards), but what they played was a New Orleans sound which exceeded the sum of its parts. Local reactions to the recordings of the ODJB tended to be enthusiastic, and far-ranging. John Wigginton Hyman (Johnny Wiggs), by his own recollection, had first gravitated to jazz after hearing Joe Oliver at subscription dances at Tulane in 1916 and was applying what he could pick up with the Invincibles, a string band made up of middle-class youths from the uptown.
area. Yet it was hearing the ODJB that revolutionized his conception of the music: "In 1917 the Original Dixieland Jazz Band released their first record on Victor. This was too much for the Invincibles and we began to yearn to play 'real jazz.'" Throughout his long career Wiggs rubbed shoulders with various Italian musicians who shared his dedication to "real jazz," including Tony Parenti, Charlie Scaglioni, Leon Roppolo, Santo Pecora, and Sherwood Mangiapane, and as a child he had played streetcorners with young Joseph Manone for small change. For him, the ODJB was a model for nascent jazzmen to follow, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that he was not alone in this opinion.

The impact of the ODJB on black New Orleanians was no less telling. When Dink Johnson, a drummer and clarinetist who worked with the Original Creole Orchestra, Jelly Roll Morton, and Kid Ory, was interviewed by Floyd Levin in 1950, he had some interesting observations concerning his reaction to the ODJB: "I was actually a drummer, you know. I had always wanted to play the clarinet since hearing Larry Shields with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band." The effect of the ODJB's recordings on the most popular black dance band in New Orleans in 1917, Kid Ory's, is another case in point. What was known as the Ory-Oliver band included future stars such as Joe Oliver, Johnny Dodds, and occasionally Louis Armstrong and held forth at dance halls like the Economy and Cooperators, where its popularity was unassailable. Testimony by Manuel Manetta, the violinist in Kid Ory's band, illustrates what happened throughout the city in the wake of the ODJB recordings. The two "readers" in the band were Oliver and Manetta, with the latter serving as "straw boss" for Ory in the selection of material and direction of the band. Yet Manetta was fired because "Joe Oliver and Kid Ory wanted to follow the format of the Dixieland Jazz Band and use only five pieces." Prior to 1917, many New Orleans dance bands either carried or were led by violinists. After that year, violins all but disappeared. Manetta ended up dropping violin, offering saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and piano to prospective employers. The success of the ODJB through the medium of the phonograph completed the revolution in dance-band instrumentation begun by Buddy Bolden two decades earlier, supplanting violinists with cornetists and standardizing the jazz-band lineup. The success of the ODJB vindicated "faking" and fused the term "jazz" to the New Orleans style of instrumental ragtime, collectively improvised, which had been developing since the turn of the century. The term itself became a rallying point for New Orleans musicians of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, creating conditions for the formation of a community of interest in support of the new music, which was perceived as a local product. While the roots of jazz were undoubtedly nourished largely within the African-American community (which was itself extremely diversified), its subsequent development before 1917 was a more broadly communitarian phenomenon, drawing on a variety of musical cultures extant in New Orleans. Music, in other words, brought people of all affiliations together, in spite of the social conditions which were often designed to keep them apart.

In addition to the success of their records, the ODJB were the first link between jazz and the youth culture that emerged in the wake of the First World War. Indeed, the band had caught the doughboys going and coming, first as the hottest ticket in New
York City 1917-18 when the city served as a major port of embarkation, and later in London in 1919 at the Hippodrome and the Armistice Ball, where they played for the returning servicemen and their generals. The same celebration of the joys of self-expression that was present in jazz was also found in the interpretation of Freud as a means to health through the unrestrained libido or in the fashions of the flapper, mutually reinforcing the reaction against the formalism of the Victorian Era. Comparison of the early musical experiences of Italians such as Nick LaRocca or Leon Roppolo with those of creoles of color like Sidney Bechet or Freddie Keppard reveals the operation of a generation gap which presaged the general rebellion of youth in the 1920s.

LaRocca’s father forbade him to practice cornet and destroyed several, even though he himself was a player. Roppolo came from a long line of Italian clarinet virtuosi, who urged him to take up the violin because there was no money to be made playing clarinet in America. Keppard rejected violin in order to take up cornet in the manner of Bolden. Bechet started with clarinet but eventually gravitated to soprano saxophone, largely because it enhanced his ability to predominate in ensemble situations. In each case, young players opted for faking over the more traditional formal pedagogy which was prescribed by their parents, creating similar situations in the households of Italians and creoles of color. Jazz was, after all, a musical vehicle for the expression of personality, and the tribulations of the Roppolo and Keppard families were later experienced by the Beiderbeke family in Illinois. But there was one major difference. New Orleans such as Bechet, Keppard, LaRocca, and Roppolo were reacting to the music they heard all around them; Beiderbecke and Tuggey got their first exposure by listening to ODUB records, which led them to seek out other New Orleans bands such as King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in Chicago.

There is still much to be learned about jazz history and its early development from the story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and fortunately a reassessment of its contributions is already underway (see Jack Stewart’s piece elsewhere in this issue). If we are serious about understanding the culture which produced jazz in New Orleans, then it is incumbent upon us to broaden our horizons to include each and every thread in this complex tapestry. The Italian connection was but one strand of many, yet the presence of Italian musicians in so many of the early New Orleans jazz bands tells us that it was a significant factor in the development of the music and deserves recognition. LaRocca and Sbarbaro with the ODUB, Roppolo with NORK, Curly Lizana with the New Orleans Jazz Babies, Charlie Cordilla with the Halfway House Orchestra, or the subsequent activities of Joseph “Wingy” Manone, Sharkey Bonano, Tony Parenti, Louis Prima, Irving Fazola (an honorary Italian), and others all attest to an Italian jazz connection which was deep and abiding. To dismiss any of this body of work as imitative or derivative is to appease the critic at the expense of the historian and to remove from discussion some of the music’s most colorful and charismatic personalities.

Bruce Boyd Raeburn

Sources:


Manetta, Manuel. Taped interview, March 21, 1957, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.


New Orleans Times-Picayune, April 15, 1917.

New Orleans Times-Picayune, August 8, 1917.

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band's Place in History

Many years ago as a young student writing a paper on jazz, I first began to perceive the "history" of jazz to be a confusing array of opinions, legends, hearsay, and a few hard facts. Most of it, even now, consists primarily of loose, marginally-documented commentary reflecting personal preferences in music and musicians.

During the course of studying research methods in the social sciences, a vividly recalled aspect of jazz commentary suddenly came to mind that made me want to rush out and immediately apply a scientifically investigative approach to jazz history once and for all, if only to clear up the confusion for my own satisfaction. The thing that came to mind was this: in the Encyclopedia of Jazz, Leonard Feather refers summarily to Sharkey Bonano, Wingy Manone, and Louis Prima all as Louis Armstrong imitators.¹ When I first read these comments almost thirty years ago, I reacted negatively to them, as I felt that the three trumpet player/vocalist/bandleaders were more than just Armstrong imitators. However, my new reaction was different. My new thought was, "Hey! They’re all Italians from New Orleans!" and I laughed out loud. The possible implication here was that their commonality with Armstrong was based on his having adopted some of their shared Italian cultural and musical characteristics rather than their having adopted Armstrong's approach, as Feather has implied. Some further thought and research on the subject has led me to believe that my hypothesis was right.² However, that is not the point that I am making here. The point is that the conventional wisdom that has constituted the mainstream of jazz history is only partially right about most things and this is evident when these things are looked at with any degree of objective scrutiny.

I think that conventional wisdom with regard to the role of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in jazz history is one of these hastily or shoddily conceived conclusions, especially since it is primarily a negative conclusion, i.e., refuting seemingly inconclusive evidence with other inconclusive evidence. The "ODJB invention of jazz" vs. "some other invention of jazz" has never really proceeded in any real manner other than as an argument between pro-LaRocca forces and anti-LaRocca forces stating their musical preferences, or talking about how 1917 ODJB records can’t compare with King Oliver or Jelly Roll Morton records made seven to ten years later.³

Conventional wisdom concerning jazz history as it becomes more educated and sophisticated is finally beginning to come to the conclusion that even if the ODJB did not invent jazz, then at least through their immense success on phonograph records, they became a prime influencer of its subsequent style. In other words, the dominant paradigm becomes the major form determinant. However, I think that there is more than this to discover.

In a project that I am currently working on, I am having to grapple with the "ODJB in jazz history" question, even though it is not the central element to my theme. Using an empirical approach that is not often used in jazz history (Gushee, Kmen, Marquis, and a few others are exceptions), I am assembling a chronology based on hard facts and/or corroborated testimony, and then connecting the dots and letting come what may. I am presently looking at a few elements that have hardly been analyzed in a thorough manner before, such as the enigmatic New Orleans ragtime that many musicians referred to, late nineteenth-century popular music in New Orleans, and dance tempos and rhythms throughout the entire period.

The questions that bear on the ODJB’s part in history are several: what was the New Orleans music that immediately preceded the ODJB sound, and how was the ODJB sound different from it? What was the sound that immediately followed the ODJB and how was it different from the ODJB? What did the ODJB possibly encounter outside New Orleans that may have been different from anything experienced in New Orleans, and/or what did they encounter that the other groups leaving New Orleans—Brown, Keppard, Morton—did not? What testimony by New Orleanians or others at the time of the transition from New Orleans ragtime to New Orleans jazz exists, and what does it have to say about the difference, when and where the difference occurred, and who initiated the difference?

Photos at left:
Clockwise: Leon Roppolo, Charlie Cordilla, Joseph "Sharkey" Bonano, and Joseph "Wingy" Manone, four strong links in the Italian connection.

Photos from the Joe Mares Collection

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The answers that I am finding to these questions are surprising, and even though I have not finished all my research, the preliminary conclusions that one almost has to draw from the combined answers are startling.

Jack Stewart

Notes:


2. Art Hodes, Selections from the Gutter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 13-18, and Gary Boulard, Just a Gigolo (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1989), pp. 11-14. Although Manone and Prima definitely admired Armstrong, Armstrong seems to have drawn a lot from his exposure to Italian culture in New Orleans. His early record collection was made up of almost entirely of either ODJB or Italian opera singers. (Richard Merryman interview, Louis Armstrong – a self portrait [New York: Eakins Press, 1971], p. 24) He also stated that his favorite piece of “serious” music was “Cavalleria Rusticana” (an opera with a Sicilian setting) and that he had sung “Pagliacci” at the Metropolitan Opera. (Heritage Series, Program No. 4, WQED, Pittsburgh, August 23, 1960.) The influence of opera is strong in Armstrong’s style, especially in the early swing period, where his vocal clowing and his reaching the high notes on his trumpet are decidedly operatic in presentation. Additionally, Sharkey Bonano’s father was a classical flautist (John Chilton, Who’s Who of Jazz [Philadelphia: Chilton, 1972], p. 35), and the high “stinger” notes played by the flute and piccolo in orchestral music were taken over by the trumpet when the orchestral form was “compacted” into the jazz band. Prima’s biographer also summarizes a list of cultural similarities between Italians and African-Americans in the U.S. (Boulard, Just a Gigolo, p. 9.)


The Eyes of Jazz

On March 18, the Archive opened an exhibit called “The Eyes of Jazz,” showcasing the works of African-American photographers active from the early years of jazz through the Great Depression. Images by New Orleans photographers Arthur P. Bedou, Villard Paddio, and Magnolia Studio’s McCormick and Abadie will be on display through the end of May.

Jazz, called one of America’s most original cultural contributions to mankind, is one of the few art forms that has been photographically documented near its inception, and New Orleanians are most fortunate to have their photographic heritage preserved at home rather than scattered throughout the world. The exhibit was conceived and mounted with the help of graphics historian Girard Morant Mouton III, who has done extensive research on the history of local photographers and their works. An experienced photographer in his own right (as a photographer each year for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival), Mr. Mouton welcomes biographical, and/or contextual, information on early local photographers. For instance, the only information he has been able to obtain on the Magnolia Studio photographers are the names McCormick and Abadie. If anyone can provide the given name of either McCormick or Abadie, it would be appreciated.

Photographer Arthur P. Bedou was born in 1882 and lived in his Treme neighborhood until his death in 1966. Although his talent was known outside Louisiana (he travelled extensively as Booker T. Washington’s personal photographer), Bedou remained a lover of New Orleans and photographed its folklore throughout his career. Adding a touch of romanticism enhancing a style of classic composition, A.P. Bedou showed the serious self-perception that jazz musicians brought to bear when they named their groups “orchestras” rather than “bands.” As a photographer, he was called a perfectionist who took his time while shooting. He became the first name to call when African-American jazz figures needed a portrait because of his well earned reputation and the friendship of his musical subjects. In addition to having photographic skills, Bedou was also a pianist and would sometimes play the instrument during his photo sessions.

Manuel Perez’s Orchestra at the Pythian Temple Roof Garden was photographed by Bedou during the 1920s. On display are three different poses of the orchestra taken during the same photo session. In one shot, the band arranged themselves as they...
Dooky Chase Orchestra (c. 1940s): The right person can make photo identification easy. Just in from Mr. Dooky Chase are, left to right, front row: Warren Bell, Sr.; Larry Smith; Charlie Gaspard; Sterling White; Hilton Carter; Curtis Trevigne. Second row: Awod Johnson; Benjamin Powell; Dooky Chase (standing); John Pickett Brunious; Doris Chase; Andrew Smith. Top row: Anthony Moret; Theodore Riley; Arnold DePass; Vernel Fournier; LeRoy 'Batman' Rankins.

One of A.P. Bedou's 'action shots' of the Piron-Williams Orchestra (1914). These musicians were preparing for an Orpheum circuit vaudeville tour that never materialized. Standing, left to right are Clarence Williams, Ernest Trepagnier, Jimmie Noone, John Lindsay, and William "Babe" Ridgley. Seated are Oscar Celestin, Tom Benton, Armand J. Piron, and Johnny St. Cyr.

Photo by A.P. Bedou from the Al Rose Collection
would have actually appeared on the bandstand for best acoustic rendition of their live performances. Another pose is quite exaggerated for the music and style of Perez’s Orchestra. The last shot shows the band standing in what was undoubtedly an aesthetic arrangement from the eye of the cameraman with the placement of the instruments and musicians in a manner to catch the eye of the viewer.

During the 1940s, Bedou photographed Dooky Chase’s Orchestra on the bandstand. The musicians appear less formal than those on earlier Bedou prints, perhaps because the photographic technology had advanced rapidly during World War II, resulting in faster film. Subjects no longer had to be stiff from the long exposures, and exuberant smiles were easier to hold. The Archive’s staff has had a problem with identifying the personnel of this band and look to our readers for help. So far, John *Picky* Brunious, Sr., (piano) and Dooky Chase (trumpet) are the only two musicians who have been identified. Other bands captured on camera by A.P. Bedou include the Louisiana Shakers, Fate Marable’s S.S. Capitol Orchestra, Celestin’s Original Tuxedo Orchestra, and Paul Barbarin with Arnold Metoyer’s band at Tom Anderson’s saloon.

Villard Paddio was one of several photographers to learn his trade from A.P. Bedou and was one of the most talented of the master’s pupils. Paddio’s jazz subjects were many of the same people and places photographed by Bedou, and he may have been with his teacher as he was producing some of the jazz images. Born in the mid-1890s in the New Iberia/Lafayette area of Louisiana, Paddio served in World War I and later settled in the Treme section of New Orleans. A few doors away from his home was the San Jacinto Hall which he photographed, providing a visual record of this early jazz site. He took a more simple, documentary approach to photography than Bedou, and his technique can be seen in photos on display of the Sam Morgan Jazz Band, the Tonic Triad Band, and Sidney Desvigne’s Orchestra aboard the S.S. Capitol.

Paddio’s most important photos are probably those he took of Louis Armstrong. The first time he photographed Armstrong was when Captain Jones hired him for the Wally’s Home photo session in 1912, when young Louis was a member of the band. Later, as a young adult, Armstrong took his mother, Mayann, and his sister, Beatrice (*Mama Lucy*), to Paddio’s studio for a family portrait. In 1931, with an international reputation, Armstrong returned home to New Orleans to appear at the Suburban Gardens and to visit the Jones’ Home, where jazz’s most famous son was photographed extensively by Villard Paddio. Years later, after learning of personal medical problems, Paddio hired a cab driver in May 1947 to take him to the West Bank via the Algiers ferry, where, according to the cab driver, he dove
into the river shortly after the ferry got underway, never to return.

Two generations of McCormick's and Abadies operated the Magnolia Studio from the 1920s until the 1960s. Their documentation of New Orleans jazz was a normal part of day-to-day business, with portraits and the like constituting their basic bread-and-butter. Located in uptown New Orleans, the Magnolia Studio's team photographed venues such as the Rhythm Club where Joe Robichaux, Smilin' Joe, and others performed. Their straightforward manner gave us views of groups of varying sizes, from dozens to hundreds, such as the image of the Jackson Fraternal Band with the Lafon School Band, the Emergency Relief Administration Band, and the Works Progress Administration Band.

Viewers of the exhibit can see, as music scholars have noted, the instruments of the early jazz groups, the players, and the places they performed. The photographically trained eye can note the talent and competency of these pioneers, but all New Orleanians can proudly appreciate the importance of their work as a window to the early days of jazz.

Girard P. Mouton III and Alma D. Williams

A Testament to Two Friends

This article will cover two birthday speeches given for Chester Zardis and Percy Humphrey. I have included a bit of introduction to acquaint you with the two men before I go on to the speeches, which I have produced almost as they were delivered. Information in the speeches comes from many sources not mentioned. Sometimes it comes from standard reference works, sometimes from the Hogan Jazz Archive's files, sometimes from tape recorded interviews.

To know these musicians, one must share their lives. The best tidbit of information may happen at a bar, over a meal, or even at a wake. Naturally, nothing replaces the experience of listening to live music in the right circumstances. The parades and funerals were so inspiring. Records help, and are often almost the only source. For example, the various Louis Dumaine recordings are the only accurate information on Earl Humphrey's (brother of Percy) style in the 1920's. Unfortunately, too little is known about his life because he was away from jazz centers for years. I have never heard a recording which captures the accuracy of his playing at dirge tempo.

Many experiences are irreplaceable. New Orleans, and its music, have changed. I hope that I have been able to hint at its value and the musicians' value.

When praising Chester Zardis at his 90th birthday party, a bit of hyperbole snuck in when I described Chester Zardis as the best and greatest bass player. In fact, I was not sure what best and greatest meant, but I was sure that Chester deserved all the compliments he received that night. He was still a powerful bassist, and enjoyed making money and getting praise, as well as working. I remember distinctly that his mind was clear, and when we managed to break away briefly from the crowd, I asked him a few questions. I asked him if he had heard of Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Chester had told of being in the U.S. Army in Arizona, and he replied that he had been at Fort Huachuca, and also at Camp Ellis Arnall. Upon later investigation, I discovered that Arnall had been a governor of Georgia, but I found no entry for this camp in several atlases. Black troops were stationed, however, at Camp Ellis, Illinois, and I probably misheard what Chester said. (For more on Camp Ellis and Fort Huachuca see Ulysses Lee, The Employment of Negro Troops, United States in World War II. Washington D.C.: Office of Military History, United States Army, 1966.)

Percy Humphrey, who was much quieter, he asked for two copies of the speech. No doubt, one was for his current lady friend.

Chester Zardis
(Delivered May 27, 1990)

"Somehow, I think you should know by now when Chester was born, so we won't waste time on that or a lot of other things you can look up. You probably don't like long speeches, and I surely don't like giving them.

"We have a friend here who is known around the world and who has many followers on the bass. His style is the one for young bass players who want that New Orleans beat. He got most of his own musical education from Billy Marrero, the patriarch of that musical family. He was also educated at the Walf's Home. Chester was a fighter, and he got into a little trouble. Of course, you have heard of the other famous alumni of that Home, like Louis Armstrong, Kid Rena, and Kid Shots. This school was also called the Jones Home because Capt. Joseph Jones and his wife ran it, and they ran it with discipline tempered with love. Maybe there's a lesson in all that they did for this city by turning out

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such fine young men. We could use a couple like the Joneses today.

*We all know that Chester was born in New Orleans and has spent most of his life here, but he has left it several times to play on boats, to do service in the Army, and to take a few trips to Denver and Philadelphia. He worked in small bands, marching bands, and big bands (even working briefly with Count Basie). He may even have worked with King Oliver, but I have never been able to find any evidence of this. Does anyone know of any sources?

*In 1954, Chester quit music to farm in New Iberia and Cade, Louisiana. In 1965, he came back home and began a successful revival of his musical career. (Although he is from the city, he certainly knows what it is like to step out on a cold morning to a nice, clean cow yard.)

*His first two recording sessions to be issued put Chester on the top since they were with Bunk Johnson in 1942 and George Lewis in 1943. The Lewis date was the famous Climax session, and there were plenty of climaxes. They hit you like a steamroller. Bill Russell was amazed at Chester's power. He was so energetic that he jumped up and down so hard that he knocked the recording needle out of the groove. Everyone should hear the numbers like 'Milneburg Joys,' 'Careless Love,' and 'Climax Rag.' They recall almost forgotten days of Chester's youth. He made history with the Band and the George Lewis records.

*In 1963, Barry Martyn found some home recordings of Kid Howard's band from 1937, which must be Chester's earliest documented efforts. The other musicians were little Sammy Hopkins on piano and Frank Murray on guitar. Even though the recording quality is far from professional, Chester can be heard well on both tracks, which Barry issued on his Music of New Orleans label. (Thanks to Barry.)

*One final thought about Chester before we take appropriate action. Even today, Chester is so strong, so full of youthful energy, that he overpowers drummers. Gentlemen, keep time or else. There'll never be another one. I feel that I am one of his biggest fans -- as you can see by the big picture of Chester on my shirt. But I think I can say in all fairness that he is considered the best bass player in the world for jazz.*
"During the late forties and the fifties, Percy's fame spread among the young musicians and fans. In Ken Colyer's first autobiography, New Orleans and Back, he describes what he heard in 1952 and 1953: 'Percy's trumpet playing I find hard to liken to anybody...So quiet at times that you feel him as much as hear him. Then he would come out with electric, clear, stabbing phrases, rocking the band along like nobody's business....At a parade with the Eureka Brass Band, Percy's high singing tone rang out above all the others.'

"In my estimation -- in fact, in the estimation of the musicians and music lovers in general -- Percy's leadership and musicianship while in the Eureka was the high point of his career. Percy loves that kind of music, and it turned out to be the high point of listening. We went again and again. Don't forget the pageantry of those parades and funeral processions was part of the whole experience. The second line's enthusiasm helped. Also their wine. (Salute) It was all one experience. And the Eureka was a standard band. They rehearsed regularly. The musicians played parts. They wanted to give you full value. "There was no chaos when Percy was there; things never fell apart. The band played dirges, pop tunes, blues, marches, hymns, rock and roll -- whatever the organizations and second line wanted. Sometimes, I believe the musicians even got to numbers they wanted to play."

"But Percy was always there, always watching the whole band to make sure the music was right and the band was together. I loved hearing that trumpet soar on top of it. Percy never relied on cheap vaudeville tricks. In fact, he never relied on cheap New Orleans tricks. Percy always came up with something original. Perhaps his creativity makes imitation difficult. Certainly, Percy's reputation has grown since the early fifties when he joined George Lewis, and writers began to notice Percy's style, and the Eureka's. I still recommend the Eureka LP recorded in August 1951. (I hope it gets reissued, George.)"

"By the way: there is a new CD of the George Lewis band with Percy. You can buy it at the nearest place that sells records. (Right, Nina.) There is some recently discovered music from this band coming out

Percy Humphrey  
(Delivered January 10, 1991)

"This is a special pleasure for me since I have known Percy Humphrey longer than anyone else in New Orleans. I met him in 1946 at the original Tyler's Beer Garden up on Walnut Street. I'll never forget him or his playing. He is a unique person and a unique musician."

"By now you know when Percy was born so I won't waste time on that or a lot of other things we can look up. Besides I don't like long speeches any more than you do."

"Percy is truly from a noted musical family. Most people don't know that the famous drummers Fred "Tubby" Hall and Minor "Ram" Hall are his cousins. I am sure I could tell you a lot about his cousins by the dozens, but we should stick to music in his close family. His grandfather James B. Humphrey probably taught more musicians in Southern Louisiana than any other professor. Jelly Roll Morton mentioned "Pops" Humphrey as one of the people who taught the clarinetists in this city. I assume that Morton meant Willie E. Humphrey, the father of Percy, Earl, and Willie J. Humphrey. Percy's brother Earl was already a top-notch trombonist in the twenties, to judge from his reputation and recordings. The other brother, Willie J. Humphrey, is almost as famous as Percy. Seriously, both have become very famous in the last thirty years. We all know that."

According to Ken Colyer, "Percy's high-singing tone rang out above all the others."

Photo from the Grauman Marks Collection
on CD. According to the producer, Barry Martyn, there will be about three hours of music. Barry said Percy even got paid! Right?

"In 1961, Riverside recorded many traditional New Orleans musicians. In Herbert Friedwald’s notes for the Sweet Emma LP’s, he states: ‘As a trumpet player, Percy has all the tools: tone, technique, imagination, and taste. His playing is lyrical, hot, and always original.’ On the notes for Percy’s LP, Herb maintains, ‘If there were a king among New Orleans trumpet players today, Percy Humphrey would be a likely candidate for the crown....’ Herb was one of the people who second lines and went to the neighborhood dance halls. (And he listened, too!) I trust his judgment more than most because he knew the New Orleans music and the life here.

"Since many of you know the story of Percy’s life from the sixties on, I’ll skip that and end with a tribute to the Percy G. Humphrey trumpet style. He has never changed his style in all the almost forty-five years I’ve known him. He is always the same. In fact, he hasn’t improved a bit. He knows what he wants to play and the way to do it. No one suggest any influences. He is himself, and I am sure none of us want him to change one bit. He always had high standards.

"Percy, thank you for running those bands and being so creative. Happy before-birthday, and happy behind-birthday from now on."

Richard B. Allen

Errata: In Richard Allen’s “Who Was Bennie Pottle?” (The Jazz Archivist, vol. 5, no. 1-2 [October 1990], p. 4, column 2), lines should read: "Dr. Bernie Steinau remembers my telling him that her married name was Shapiro." And: "Orin Blackstone, part-owner of the New Orleans label, Cosimo Matassa of J&M Records, and I were in the studios."

Picturing the Past

Painting of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band circa 1922-23, now hanging in the Hogan Jazz Archive. At this point, only three of the five who had recorded in 1917 remained—LaRocca, Edwards, and Sbarbaro. Who are the other two musicians pictured? (For an answer, see Brian Ruet’s Jazz Records or Brunn.)

Image selection and caption by Alma Williams