THE JAZZ ARCHIVIST

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Cover: A seldom seen photo of the King Oliver Band, reportedly taken at the “Entertainer Club” in Oakland, California, perhaps at a Christmas banquet, presumably in 1921. This cropped version affords a good, close look at the musicians. Standing from left to right: unknown, King Oliver, Honore Dutrey, Ed Garland, Johnny Dodds, Lil Hardin, and Baby Dodds. One might wonder if Kid Ory, who apparently helped open the door for this great band’s West Coast appearances, was about to pop out from behind Baby Dodds’s head. We recently excavated this artifact from a backlog of materials in the collection of Orin Blackstone, the New Orleans-based jazz discographer and publisher of Jazzfinder and Playback magazines. It was originally obtained from West Coast saxophonist Paul Howard by jazzologist Irving Jacobs, who wrote an article on Howard for the July 1949 issue of Playback. Blackstone published several of the photos Jacobs got from Howard, but, for some reason, he appears to have let this one gather dust. Thanks to Chris Clifton, Barry Martyn, and David Sager for helping to confirm the identity of the band members. An uncropped version of the photo appears at the end of our “Curator’s Commentary.”

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Don Suhor—From Dixieland to Bopsieland

By Charles Suhor

My brother Don Suhor played clarinet and alto sax in a stunning variety of jazz contexts for over 55 years—almost exclusively in New Orleans. I always felt frustrated by Don’s lack of concern with legacy. He made a few recordings as a sideman, none of which displayed the range and the uniqueness of his talents. Some of his best work is preserved on tape recordings made at a few private sessions, which he was reluctant to attend. Guitarist John Eubanks once commented, “You know how hard it is to get Don into a recording studio.”

Don’s career just about defined “low profile.” But as bassist Bill Huntington said, “Other musicians knew what a great player he was.” Historian/clarinetist Thomas Jacobsen wrote, “He was one of the most respected musicians in the city among his peers... a ‘musician’s musician.’” Trombonist Al Hermann counted him “among the top three or four clarinet players of all time.” Vocalist Thais Clark said, “Don Suhor, my man. Anything that I wanted to do when it came to jazz, Don knew.” When he was terminally ill late in 2002, a benefit jam session at Palm Court Cafe organized with a week’s notice drew over 250 musicians and friends. “We had an amazing response,” said Palm Court proprietor Nina Buck. “It was packed. Don was too sick to attend, but at least he knew we did it for him.”

If I had not been overly cautious about nepotism when writing for Down Beat during the 1960s, Don might have been a more familiar name in the national jazz community. I mentioned him sparingly. In my 2001 book on postwar jazz in New Orleans, I placed him in context as one of the musicians who advanced modern jazz in the city. In this article I’ll trace his rich background of extensive performance in Dixieland, swing, and modern jazz settings and his development of a personal style that assimilated various influences.

Ninth Ward Beginnings

Born August 30, 1932, Donald John Suhor was the third in a family of five children of Anthony Suhor, an accountant, and Marie Porte Suhor, an elementary school teacher. Both were first generation
Americans, raised in the Ninth Ward. They married in 1927 and settled in the upper Ninth at 1310 Bartholomew Street. Anthony was the fourth of five children of Antun Suhor, a Croatia-born seaman, and French-American Marie Hondareyte. Had Antun not died at sea at age 42, his family might have grown wealthy on his abundant salary as a bar pilot. Marie lived as a young girl with her French parents and two siblings in a house on Douglass Street in the lower Ninth, where they raised chickens and cows. Marie had a natural ear for music. Unable to afford a piano, her parents got permission for her to practice next door at the now-famed Steamboat House on Egania Street. During Sunday living room music sessions at our home, a Norman Rockwell scene: Anthony struggling mightily to read sheet music on a C-melody sax as Marie played in a lilting manner commonly called “school teacher piano.”

Don took up clarinet in 1944 when Marie insisted that he and the two youngest children, Jane and I, should “get some sort of musical education.” I grudgingly chose piano, as did Jane. Neither of us had a taste for scales and key signatures, so we soon cried our way out of it. Don chose clarinet because he had heard Artie Shaw on the Swing Era records that our older siblings, Mary Lou and Ben, had bought, and he thought Shaw looked handsome playing the instrument.

Don took beginners’ group classes at Werlein’s Music Store under Johnny Wiggs, the noted Bixian cornetist and co-founder of the New Orleans Jazz Club. Don’s immediate enthusiasm led to serious study with Emanuel Alessandra, oboist with the New Orleans Symphony. He was stimulated by the classical approach, even gamely reciting traditional solfeggio exercises required by the oboist. Pete Fountain also studied with Alessandra. He and Don were among those who entered a Benny Goodman search for the city’s most promising young clarinetist when Goodman came to town to play with the New Orleans Symphony at Municipal Auditorium in 1947. The finalists were Don, age fourteen, and nineteen year-old Don Lasday, who later became a versatile reedman and teacher in the city. Lasday played a bluesy improvisation. Don won the Goodman trophy playing, ironically, two memorized Artie Shaw solos from Gramercy Five recordings, rendered with flawless control of feeling and inflections.

Shortly after, Don told me—no, announced—that he was going to learn how to “fake” and “jam,” explaining that faking was playing a melody by ear, and jamming was “taking a ride,” improvising an original solo based on a song. He dug in with gusto, woodshedding alone or playing along with jazz records. Shaw, Benny Goodman, and local great Irving Fazola were his earliest influences, followed by Buddy DeFranco. His record collection also included Hank D’Amico, Peanuts Hucko, Jimmie Noone, Barney Bigard, Arne Domnerus, and Jimmy Hamilton. He also deeply respected locals Lester Bouchon, Sharkey Bonano’s clarinetist, and the ever-expressive Raymond Burke.
At Nicholls High School, 1946-1950, Don was encouraged by the gentle band director/cornetist Charlie Wagner, who once played across the street from Bix in Chicago. Wagner enjoyed talking to Don and fellow clarinetist Paul Vicari, trumpeter Jack Barratini, and other jazz-oriented students about the music and its history. Barratini (later, Jay Barry) led a jazz and dance combo on weekends with Vicari at a popular neighborhood bar, the Harmony Inn on North Claiborne and Piety. The Harmony, though segregated for white patrons only, featured traditional black bands over the years led by trumpeters Willie Pajaud, Kid Sheik Colar, and others.6

Wagner was generously permissive in relation to jazz. During marching band practice for football season, Don would occasionally improvise contrapuntally during the trio sections of marches, with Wagner’s tacit approval. While the dance band was on break at school events, Wagner sometimes played piano with a breakout group of students who could fake and jam.7

Don led a combo at weekend dances at teen venues like the Woodmen of the World (W.O.W.) Hall on Almonaster Street (a block from Luthjen’s). They played Hit Parade favorites, popular standards, and songs from the Dixieland repertoire. Don also taught them some infrequently heard jazz tunes like Art Hodes’ mournful blues, “Clark and Randolph” (named for a street corner in Chicago noted as a jazz club site) and the Bob Crosby Bob Cats’ novelty song, “Don’t Call Me Boy,” engagingly sung by trumpeter Paul Emenes. I plugged Don’s group in 1948 as a guest on Roger Wolfe’s popular weekly “Dixieland Jazz” radio show on WDSU.8

Don also gigged with solid young Irish Channel musicians like trumpeter Al McCrossen, tenor saxophonist/pianist Johnny McGhee, and the Assunto brothers. As with the Nicholls players, the level of talent was uneven. Don told me about an amiable channel guitarist named “Toots,” who knew only a handful of songs but would strum away, casually playing wrong chords, often utterly lost. Don’s solution on tunes like “Sweet Georgia Brown” was to set a challenge for himself. During his jazz chorus he would visualize the song’s structure and chord sequences, regardless of the chaotic background din, and just stop playing when his chorus ended.

At age 16 Don sat in with Sharkey Bonano’s band at one of their Sunday sessions in a side ballroom of Municipal Auditorium. He worked steadily on weekends with veteran trumpeter Stuart Bergen (“Red Hott”) and frequently with alto saxophonist Joe Helwick and trumpeter Dutch Andrus.
Bergen was especially fond of “Lil’ Donnie” and brought him to jam at New Orleans Jazz Club meetings. I was three years Don’s junior, the awed kid brother, caught up in the local postwar jazz revival, proud of my collection of 78s of Bunk, Louis, Bix, the Bob Cats, Wild Bill, and others. On Saturdays I would hang out at Harvey and Orin Blackstone’s New Orleans Record Shop on Baronne Street near Perdido. I talked Don into playing along with records in a booth, but he was reticent about sitting in at the occasional Saturday jam sessions in the back room with Johnny Wiggs, newcomer George Girard, Raymond Burke, drummers Freddie King and Gilbert Erskine, and others.

Don was a natural teacher. Neither he nor I knew the meaning of the word “mentor,” but over our teen years he mentored me in informal talks about jazz genres, styles, and history, with regular reference to local players and our expanding record collection. Some of his insights might have come from talks with Charlie Wagner and magazines like *Metronome*, *Down Beat*, and *Band Leaders*, and from my collection, *Jazz Record* and *Record Changer*. But his understanding of the music grew in a large part from his inquiring mind and keen intuitions.

Don persuaded me to accompany his front-room solo jams. At first I used coat-hanger sticks, cardboard boxes, a pot cover cymbal, and a small stepstool for a woodblock. I was strongly attracted to Baby Dodds and George Wettling, who were sensitive colorists as well as great timekeepers. I bought a second-hand drum set from Phil Zito. Don learned dozens of standard tunes from Goodman and Shaw’s combo records. Inspired by Goodman, he tested himself—and me—with breakneck tempos on tunes like “The World is Waiting for the Sunrise.”

Don took up alto sax in his late high school years and was soon playing in local dance bands. He chose alto sax rather than tenor because he liked the bright sound of the instrument in big band sax sections, especially Les Robinson’s with Artie Shaw. But he became enamored of a radically different sound when he heard the dauntingly complex early recordings of Lee Konitz and the Lenny Tristano school. Jamming in our living room, I could almost see the wheels of his mind turning as he wove out long, complex solo lines. On clarinet, he raised the bar by playing tunes like “I’ve Got Rhythm” in the standard key then moving up a half step to improvise in every key.
Self-taught on piano, Don learned chord progressions and played energetic solos. Session players in the Quarter welcomed his backup because of his attention to well-voiced chords and hip comping. Alto saxophonist Mouse Bonati and trumpeter Mike Serpas were also excellent accompanists. Not being trained as keyboard technicians, they refrained from overly busy pianistics, concentrating on spare, laid-back comping.

**College Years, the Quarter, and the Army**

Don enrolled in the Loyola Music School in 1950. As a freshman he played third alto in the big band amid veteran musicians. Veterans, literally. Many were Swing Era ex-servicemen studying under the GI Bill of Rights. The band, directed by John Whitlock, was a non-credit activity, but it carried a modest scholarship and was officially sanctioned by the administration. Not that the administration was ahead of the curve in jazz education; the band was the heart of a student recruitment and campus entertainment troupe called “Campus Capers”—a lighthearted name that signaled a less than serious musical intent.\(^\text{11}\)

But the Capers band had a solid lineage. They were descendants of the “Loyola Moods,” a fine postwar student band with skilled swing and modern jazz musicians, among them trumpeters Woody Guidry, Rupert Copponex, Bill Scarlato, and Louis Escobido (also a jazz vibist); trombonist Larry Valentino; saxophonists Al Belletto, Frank Mannino (later, Frankie Mann) and Jack Day; pianist Fred Crane; bassist Oliver (“Stick”) Felix; drummer Louis Timken; and arrangers Jack Martin, Jack Day, and Clem Toca.

John Whitlock ran afoul of the administration by giving most of his energies and time to the Capers group, allowing the concert band to devolve into an unlistenable aggregate of unmotivated students. The Capers band performed for student dances, campus variety shows, recruitment programs, and non-profit organizations and played a 15-minute Saturday radio show on the university-owned radio station, WWL. The administration feared that the band’s visibility was resulting in the music program being labeled a “jazz school”—still a highly negative label in Academe, and a particular danger in the city known for its jazz history.\(^\text{12}\)

Whitlock resigned in the summer of 1952. I entered Loyola in the fall semester and began four years with the Capers group and the concert band. The latter was given new life by the passionately dedicated George Jansen, trumpeter with the New Orleans Symphony. Paul Guma, Don’s highly respected clarinet teacher, took over the Capers band. A fine classical and jazz clarinetist in the Goodman mold, Guma was also an excellent lead alto saxophonist and gifted classical guitarist. But the next year a student director, Nicholls High School alumnus Paul Emenes, was assigned to lead the group. By this time, however, Don and most of the other jazz players had either graduated or dropped out. A dozen
years would pass before the directorship was established as an official faculty position. At Loyola, Don was edged toward modern jazz by fellow students like pianist Fred Crane, bassists Herbie Hollman and Oliver (“Stick”) Felix, and trumpeters Mike (“Black Mike”) Lala and Jerry St. Amand. The music school occupied a lovely old three-story house on the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Calhoun Street. The practice rooms in the basement were the site of floating jam sessions by the young modernists, much to the consternation of the old Belgian dean, Ernest Schuyten. “It was frowned upon,” Don recalled at a 1998 symposium. “The dean would come down and say, ‘vot ees dees booogie voogie!’ like an old Hollywood movie.” Some of the Loyolans gravitated toward the French Quarter, where be-bop was being explored by young modernists at strip joints, out-of-the-way clubs, and after-hours session sites.

During those sessions, Don’s conception on alto shifted from Konitz’s ethereal style to straight be-bop. The superb alto saxophonist Joseph “Mouse” Bonati, recently arrived from Buffalo, New York, became his idol, along with, inevitably, Charlie Parker. Don became a hard-swinging bopper among the pioneering modernists who were nowhere on the radar of the press or the general public.

Concurrently, a coterie of black New Orleans innovators was forging ahead brilliantly, but for the most part, separately. The most exciting group was the American Jazz Quintet (AJQ) composed of Harold Battiste (later, Nat Perrilliat), tenor sax; Alvin Batiste, clarinet; Ed Frank (later, Ellis Marsalis), piano; Chuck Badie (later, Richard Payne), bass; Edward Blackwell, drums. Despite state and local segregation laws that prevented integrated performances, white musicians heard black jazzmen regularly in white-clientele clubs like the Texas Lounge on Canal Street, where Don and I first heard drummer Earl Palmer. Furthermore, Don, Bill Huntington, and I attended American Jazz Quintet concerts at black venues like Hayes Chicken Shack (in 1960, Vernon’s). But the converse was not true. Blacks were not welcomed by owners of the clubs where we played. Despite all, musicians like Al Belletto, Benny Clement, and Earl Palmer played at interracial sessions, and sometimes they were arrested.

Don’s clarinet style had already come under the influence of Buddy DeFranco. Don’s continued work with Dixieland groups prompted the development of a full-blown “bopsieland” style, making adaptive use of his prodigious technique in numerous Dixieland settings. The term “bopsieland” and its alternate, “Dixiebop,” merit explanation. They were used most often in the 1950s to refer to modern jazz ensembles in which one or more horns played contrapuntal lines around a lead instrument, or played freely in all-out group improvisation (e.g., Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker). The term also applies to soloists who bring modern jazz harmonies, phrasing, rhythmic complexity, and instrumental techniques to some degree into Dixieland settings. Modernists who have done this effectively in New
Orleans include trumpeters Wendell Brunious, Leroy Jones, and Herb Tassin; clarinetists Don Suhor and Tony Mitchell; trombonist Joe Prejean; bassists Chuck Badie, Jay Cave, and Bill Huntington; pianists Fred Crane, Ellis Marsalis, and John Probst; and drummers Bob French, Ernie Elly, and Reed Vaughan.

Don’s after-hours jazz activities had long been a source of anxiety for our strict Catholic parents, who had originally encouraged music as a respectable hobby. They connected his dedication to jazz, rightly in part, to his lack of enthusiasm for academics. In high school his grades fell below their standard of near-perfection. At Loyola he quickly grew tired of the liberal arts courses required for the BME (Bachelor of Music Education) degree and switched to the Bachelor of Music, finally ratcheting down to the non-degree status of Certificate Student.

But volatile conflicts with our parents had begun in Don’s early adolescence, when he wanted to move from a beginner’s metal clarinet to a Selmer wood clarinet. An expense: would he stick with it? He did, then fought for permission to play around town for teen dances. All right, but no night clubs and no drinking. Okay, night clubs were permitted but not in the Quarter. Well, the Quarter, perhaps, but Bourbon Street and strip clubs were out of the question. I benefitted from Don’s string of rebellions. By the time I started playing, the distressing scenes were over; the victories were won. I freely entered dubious environments at an earlier age and more guardedly than Don. We both benefitted from the police department’s lack of concern about underage drinking. The going joke was, if you were tall enough to reach up and put the price of a beer on a bar, you’d be served.

The parental angst wasn’t just a prudish imposition of Catholic values. The Quarter was transparently riddled with vice—B-drinking, prostitution, gambling, violence, bribery, drugs, and organized crime. Don’s youthful good looks and the passionate energy of his music provided ample opportunities for what one writer called “the more delectable form of sin.” Drugs were a particular problem, nationally and locally, in the jazz world. Modern jazz icons like Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Red Rodney, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, and Gerry Mulligan were known to be addicts, and many admirers mistakenly thought that heroin was what gave a creative edge to their playing. Don’s friend, Donald Guidry, a talented tenor saxophonist, died of an overdose. Several others in the local bebop coterie were
seriously addicted.

Don was a moderate user, taking a variety of “uppers” and “downers” to stay alert and go to sleep, according to the needs of his erratic hours. Beer and Scotch were the chasers. Marijuana, then regarded as hugely harmful, was ubiquitous among musicians. Don was no stranger to pot, but an after-hours incident put his attitude towards drugs and booze in perspective. We were playing a late jam session in about 1956. The bar owner decided to close. Relentless, we moved to another venue, drums and all. Amid the heavy odor of weed, someone kicked off “Strike Up the Band” at a fast clip. I recall Chick Power taking several choruses, then Don stepping up on alto sax, his main instrument at the sessions. After a few bars he turned away, put his sax in the case, and sat down and listened for the rest of the session. He explained later that he had been smoking pot, and as he started his solo he imagined he was playing tenor sax so he started out in the wrong key. When it came to pot vs. his art, the latter won out.

Don was drafted into the post-Korea, peacetime Army in 1954 and stationed at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas (near Fort Smith). He was never an athlete but was physically fit and went through basic training without a hitch. While in the band there, he and trombonist Kent Larsen (who subsequently was a longtime member of Stan Kenton’s band) played AWOL late night sessions at the Branding Iron, a Fort Smith club where they were welcomed by local drummer Arnie Peele and a fine pianist named C. J. (last name unknown). The latter had converted from Western Swing to a relaxed be-bop style in the manner of Hank Jones.

Some inexplicable delays occurred before Don was established as a bandsman. Dejected in the interim, he made woeful long distance collect calls, asking that we play his Parker and Konitz records. His service ended with a stretch at Fort Lee, Virginia. He moved to Washington, D.C., where he lived briefly as the stereotypical starving artist. He reported that he subsisted for a time on Cocomalt and crackers. But he had occasional gigs and was jamming with young pianist/vocalist Shirley Horn, tenor saxophonist Buck Hill, and others.

Not surprisingly, Don couldn’t find work as a modern jazzman when he returned from the Army in 1956 at age 23. “The only thing to play down here was Dixieland and strip shows,” he recalled. “In order to keep my chops up on clarinet and alto, I chose strip shows.” Grim as the local scene was, relocating or going on the road was never an option. I know of offers that he rejected from the Dukes of Dixieland, Lou Sino, and the Disney World Dixieland band in Orlando. He was, quite simply, attached to the city and his family and not looking for a breakthrough to fame. During the next forty-three years, Don played innumerable gigs. I’ll briefly discuss six that reflect his musical range and the jazz culture of the times: the Dream Room, Prima’s 500 Club, the Sho’Bar, the Famous Door, Crazy Shirley’s, and the Court of Two Sisters.

Don got an unexpected call in the summer of 1956 from Zonia Dill, an attractive accordionist, to play at the Dream Room, then a posh Bourbon Street nitery for listening and dancing. (I later heard Buddy Rich and Jack Teagarden there.) Zonia, who specialized in popular tunes and standards, had an
unlikely aggregate of sidemen. The bassist was Chink Martin, born in 1886. Reed Vaughan, a premier young modernist at age 19, was on drums. The pianist was F. A. Cassanova, a well-rounded classical musician at Loyola with a light jazz touch. Possibly, Zonia's husband, a capable cocktail lounge vibist, was on the band. A straight-ahead swing trumpeter (possibly Jack Bachman) joined Don in the front line. It wasn't a promising outlook, but Don took the combination seriously. He taught them head arrangements, signaled solo sequences, and called out chords to the rhythm section on less familiar tunes. Chink Martin played with accuracy and drive but couldn't believe that the drummer would be given solos on the bridges of last choruses, a practice unheard of in early jazz but common among modernists. The combo had unity because everyone was tuned into the musical essence, regardless of styles. And Don would go jamming after hours.

Two strip clubs were among Don's regular gigs in the years that followed. He was with trumpeter Tommy Yetta's pit band at Prima's 500 Club for seven years (1960 to 1967). Well-known strippers like Lily Christine (the Cat Girl), Kalantan (the Heavenly Body), and Alouette Leblanc (the Tassel Twirler) were deemed classy enough to draw audiences that wouldn't be seen at the sleazier strip joints. The band was ordinary fare, but Don was featured on clarinet during the Cat Girl's signature routines.

In the late sixties, Don led the pit band at the Sho'Bar. Like the 500 Club, the Sho'Bar aspired to appear a cut above the average strip club. In the fifties it had cultivated the brand of a conventionally risqué showplace, with comedian Lenny Gale and red-hot mamma vocalist Carrie Finnell, along with "exotic dancers." Don consciously cast his group in the longstanding local tradition of be-boppers backing up strip shows. The musicians were well acquainted with the unison bop charts in the Parker/Gillespie tradition. They doggedly ignored the drummer's thumping tomtoms, rim shots, and cymbal crashes that punctuated
the strippers’ bumps and grinds. Don played alto sax almost exclusively. His sidemen were seasoned modernists Bob Teeters, trumpet; Pete Monteleone, piano; and a succession of hard-working drummers that included Joe Morton and Smokey Johnson. It would have been unthinkable a decade earlier for Johnson, a black drummer, to be playing in an integrated band at a white strip club. But after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Al Belletto brought bassist Richard Payne into the Playboy Club, and the barriers were toppled.

When I heard Don with Santo Pecora’s group at the Famous Door in the early seventies, I was surprised by the absence of a trumpeter in the front line. Santo, of course, was a pioneer trombonist with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, widely known in the postwar revival for his work with Sharkey Bonano. As a septuagenarian he played an extremely strong lead, with Don accompanying on alto or clarinet. Each soloed with aplomb and authority in their own style. No one told them this shouldn’t work, so it did. Don returned to the Door later in the decade to work with trumpeter Thomas Jefferson.

Crazy Shirley’s, located across the street from Maison Bourbon at the corner of St. Peter, was the home of George French’s Storyville Jazz Band in the mid-seventies. This was “Dixieland” only if Dixieland is taken to mean “eclectic.” Trombonist Freddie Lonzo was the only straight-ahead traditional jazzman. Ted Riley played a fiery, Eldridge-style trumpet that drove the band’s ensemble. Don was in full “Bopsieland” mode, egged on by the rhythm section that was splendidly modern—George French on bass, his brother Bob on drums, and Ellis Marsalis or Emile Vinet on piano. Don played with a similar mix of modernists and traditionalists in bands led by banjoist Albert “Papa” French and onetime be-bop trumpeter Wendell Brunious. It was odd, but understandable, that Don, a bopper in Dixieland settings, was named in the “traditional” category in the 1997 New Orleans magazine selection of traditional and modern jazz all-stars.

During a twelve-year span with banjoist Amy Sharpe’s trio at the Court of Two Sisters (1988-2002), Don took the group beyond the lunch crowd hits, bringing in longtime favorite Gramercy Five tunes, swing classics like “Seven Come Eleven,” and standards like “Crazy Rhythm.” Sharpe welcomed the task. “So much I could say about Don—how much I learned from him,” she said. Don appreciated that she had the gift, like Lawrence Marrero, of playing banjo without the nagging, percussive twang so often heard in revivalist bands. Veteran bassist Al Bernard added a solid rhythmic ground to the group.

Thanks to daytime work at the Court, Commander’s Palace, and other venues, in some years Don worked more gigs than there were days in the year. He was free to play night gigs with pickup bands and pinch-hit for regular reedmen in groups led by Al Hirt, Connie Jones, Ronnie Dupont, and others. After clarinetist Pud Brown died in 1996, he joined the Friday night band at the Palm Court Jazz Cafe, a sympathetic environment for his style. The public brand of the Palm Court was Dixieland jazz, but I heard multi-genre players like the brilliant trumpeter Leroy Jones and versatile drummer Ernie Elly there. Don’s ubiquity, though, did not translate into prosperity. Most jobs paid little more than union scale, and he
was raising two teenagers during his busiest years. And, again, he had no long-range career goals. He simply wanted to improvise every time he went on a gig, regardless of the genre, venue, or personnel.

Stylistic Changes

Don’s improvisation on clarinet initially favored Artie Shaw’s well-sculpted solos, with an overlay of Benny Goodman’s fiery, freewheeling energy. He appreciated pre-Dixieland players like George Lewis and Alphonse Picou, but never came under their thrall. On our family’s first summer motor trip in 1948—

two adults and five teenagers in a ’48 Ford— he played in the car for our entertainment. At my urging he did George Lewis’s solo on “Tishomingo Blues” but declined to repeat it because he didn’t like straining for the traditional tone and vibrato.

During that time Don was fixated on finding reeds that gave him the exact sound he wanted—a jazz sound with a “legit” foundation, which he didn’t see as a contradiction in terms. He went through boxes of Rico reeds in compulsive frustration. Thomas Jacobsen, longtime columnist for Clarinet magazine, notes that “the hunt for the ‘right’ reed is a well-known obsession with many clarinetists.”

I retrospectively infer that Don’s concern with tone was driven in part by his classical training with Emanuel Alessandra and the requirements of the concert bands in high school and at Loyola. He knew that Irving Fazola, Paul Guma, and Sal Franzella played jazz with a tone approaching the European models, but I sensed that he was pursuing a more impassioned sound, a golden mean, a Holy Grail that he couldn’t define.

Don took the role of clarinet in the ensemble seriously. The underrated Lester Bouchon with Sharkey’s Kings of Dixieland was a fine local practitioner, harmonizing with or weaving contrapuntal lines around the trumpet lead. Don cultivated sensitive front line playing, first with his teenage band

New Orleans Magazine 1997
Traditional Jazz All-Stars. Left to right: Eric Glaser, bass; Alvin Alcorn, trumpet; Tom McDermott, piano; Don Suhor, clarinet; Louis Cottrell, drums. Photo (c) Rick Olivier, used by permission.
then working weekends regularly with various combos, most notably trumpeter Stuart Bergen (“Red Hott”) around 1949-1950. This was a good laboratory situation, since Bergen played in earnest imitation of Armstrong and Bill Crais filled the traditional trombonist role splendidly.

At some point, Don simply outgrew his search for reeds that would give an ideal jazz/legit sound—possibly, when alto sax became his preferred instrument for bebop sessions in the Quarter. But his fondness for alto sax didn’t extend to playing in sax sections. After subbing with the excellent Lloyd Alexander big band, he would come home and say, “Yeah, it’s really a good band. They play mostly specials [specially written arrangements rather than over-the-counter “stocks”], but you know, I didn’t get much chance to play.” By which he meant, to improvise, beyond the usual solo space given to the third alto chair. He continued to play occasional big band gigs. When he sight-read Lionel Hampton’s book at the 1980 Jazzfest, reviewer Vincent Fumar wrote, “Another New Orleanian, alto saxophonist Don Suhor, launched a flighty solo that displayed the best of his bebop style, and also romped with a series of extremely fast and tricky runs, all of them marked by squeals and a rich melodic sense.”

Sometime in the 1970s, Don developed a more powerful clarinet sound—incisive, but not shrill. He told me this had become necessary when amplified keyboards and electric basses grew more common in Dixieland groups. Crowd noises had long been a problem in bars, but ensemble playing over amplified rhythm was more demanding, in terms of sheer volume. Don was fond of the lower register, so admirably modeled by Raymond Burke, and he continued to make abundant use of it during solos on mike.

Two distinguishing qualities marked Don’s mature style. On clarinet, he came to have a true New Orleans sound. That phrase has never been adequately defined, but we know it by its incarnations. Don’s passionate, unmistakably personal vibrato and confidently projected timbres evoke recognition as a New Orleans musician. His unique sound, steeped in tradition, is seamlessly merged with fleet modern jazz lines.

Another mark of Don’s originality was his way of incorporating notes above the normal range of the clarinet and alto sax into his solos. This skill wasn’t employed as an attention-seeking gimmick. “Showmanship,” whether in the form of instrumental hotdogging or strained bodily contortions, was antithetical to his unassuming personality. The notes were simply there, like all others, accessible for unaffected use in melodic improvisation. His fellow musicians were stimulated by his bopsieland synthesis, with few exceptions. When he was subbing with one Dixieland group, the leader whispered nervously, “Think Faz, Don, think Faz!”

Late in 2002 Don, a lifelong smoker, was stricken with lung cancer. I drove to New Orleans from my Montgomery, Alabama, home to be with him during the weeks of decline. I helped organize the January 13, 2003, benefit jam session at Palm Court Café. The last thing I heard at the end of the final set was a shout from the bandstand. “We love you, Don!” He died two weeks later at the age of 70.

Click the links below to hear three examples of Don’s playing:
1. “Petite Fleur,” Amy Sharp Trio (Amy Sharp, banjo, Don Suhor, clarinet; Don Bernard, bass).
2. “How Deep Is the Ocean,” Don Vappie Quartet (Don Vappie, bass; Don Suhor, alto saxophone; Phil Parnell, piano; Stan Joseph, drums).

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3. “Basin Street,” Gary Burghoff Mardi Gras Celebration Band (Gary Burghoff, drums; Jim Weber, trumpet; Jim Duggan, trombone; Don Suhor, clarinet; Paul McGinley, tenor saxophone; Bob Mollinelli, piano; Oliver Felix, bass).

Thanks to Amy Sharpe, Don Vappie, Gary Burghoff, and Terry Marino of Shalom Records for permission to share this music with our readers.

Endnotes
1 Charles Suhor phone conversation with John Eubanks, April 2003.
4 “A Dramatic Death, Captain Suhor Climbs Aboard Sabine to Pilot Her In, And Succumbs Suddenly, While at the Wheel,” Times-Picayune, November 16, 1905, 1.
6 Barry was a strong swing-style trumpeter who never became a headliner. I reported his occasional appearances as a leader in the 1960s “Where and When” club listings and “Strictly Ad Lib” reports in Down Beat. He played at the Absinthe Bar during the post-WWII revival; in 1965 and 1966 he played short-lived local jazz gigs at the Boom Boom Room and Caesar’s Palace. Willie Pajaud is pictured at the Harmony Inn in a 1950 Ralston Crawford Collection photo at the Hogan Jazz Archive, online at http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16313coll4/id/567. I reported Kid Sheik playing weekends at the Inn for several months in my “Where and When” club listings of Down Beat, beginning December 31, 1964. When I visited the club as an adult, I saw some marvelously fluid freestyle dancing by neighborhood working class couples.
7 Several years later I joined the Nicholls band after a confused summer of learning to read music with “old man Peterson.” George Peterson’s sight was failing, but he had been a renowned tympanist and was the patriarch of a musical New Orleans family. Wagner tolerated my poor reading and encouraged my jazz efforts. During the “stop chorus” of a schmaltzy band arrangement of “Look for the Silver Lining,” I improvised a woodblock solo, and Wagner kept it in, to the surprise of visiting Supervisor of Music Rene Louapre.
8 Wolfe’s program was one of the major factors in the local postwar revival of traditional and Dixieland jazz. He occasionally invited jazz fans to play their favorite records on the program.
9 In 1949 Zito organized the International City Dixielanders, a band that included Girard, Fountain, trombonist Joe Rotis, pianist Roy Zimmerman, and bassist Emile Christian. After the band cut a lively album for Columbia, the front line and Zimmerman left to form the Basin Street Six in 1960, subbing Bunny Frank on bass and Charlie Duke on drums.
10 By then I was influenced by drummers like Max Roach, Shelly Manne, and local greats Earl Palmer and Ed Blackwell. I had studied left hand/bass drum independence and other techniques from 1951-54 with the versatile show and jazz drummer Lou Dillon at Grunewald’s, prompted by my friend Reed Vaughan, who would be in the Stan Kenton band by age nineteen. Dillon’s big-hearted instruction formed the basis for my teaching of Johnny Vidacovich and other high school drummers at Campo’s Music Store from 1960 to 1966.
11 Terminologies are relevant here. The specialized term “stage band”—more acceptable than the suspect “jazz band,” the dated “swing band,” or the amorphous “big band”—came to be applied in high school and university
settings. A Google Ngram search (imprecise, but indicative) of “stage band” is consistent with my recollection that the term came into wide usage in the 1960s, peaking at about 1980. Later, the term “jazz band” lost its taint and came to be acceptable in schools, but Ngram doesn’t distinguish between educational contexts and others in which that term is used.

12 Loyola took special pride in its training of nationally known opera singers like Charles Anthony, Norman Treigle, and Audrey Shuh. Identification with jazz was seen as a threat to its reputation.


14 “Modern Jazz Pioneers in New Orleans: A Symposium,” Loyola University, New Orleans April 22, 1998; noted in Suhor, Jazz in New Orleans, 280. I organized and moderated the program for the New Orleans International Music Colloquium. Panelists were Harold Battiste, Germaine Bazzle, Al Belletto, Earl Palmer, Richard Payne, and Don Suhor. Ellis Marsalis and Bill Huntington were invited but were unable to attend.


18 The Gershwins song, popularly associated with marching bands, was a frequent vehicle for improvisation among boppers. Lee Konitz famously wrote “Tautology,” a complex chart based on the song’s chord progressions, recorded in 1949.

19 Arnie Peele and C.J. were still active at the Branding Iron when I was stationed at Fort Smith, in 1958. I worked on base and in town with C.J. and two excellent fellow draftees, Brooklyn tenor saxophonist Charlie Brown and Boston bassist Bill Hill.

20 Suhor, Jazz in New Orleans, 272.

21 In 1957 Don had a daughter, Donna Marie, with his first wife, Betsy Ferne Perry Suhor, who died in 1967. He had two sons, Nick (b. 1979) and Chris (b. 1981), with his second wife, Bridget Babbs Suhor. Donna is an activist for the disabled in New York State; Nick, a restaurant manager and wine connoisseur, has worked in New Orleans and Portland. Chris died in 2004; Bridget, in the same year.

22 I heard Don play frequently, even after I left New Orleans in 1977 to work for the National Council of Teachers of English in Urbana, Illinois. I visited the city regularly and kept close contact with Don about musical and family matters.

23 The 500 Club was owned by trumpeter Leon Prima, Louis’s brother and pianist Buddy’s father.


26 Letter from Amy Sharpe to Charles Suhor, January 9, 2015.

27 Email from Thomas Jacobsen to Charles Suhor, January 22, 2016.

28 Berendt speculates that the classical French woodwind tradition, alive in the city through the French Opera House, influenced black Creole musicians who were strongly connected to French culture. See Joachim Berendt and William Claxton, New Orleans Jazzlife 1960 (Toronto: Taschen, 2006), 21. New Orleans-born Sal Franzella returned to the city in 1949 after years on the road, first with jazz groups then as a CBS studio musician and guest performer with various symphonies. Don admired the breadth of his skill but felt that his jazz lacked intensity. See Eugene Chadbourne, “Sal Franzella,” http://www.allmusic.com/artist/salvator-franzella-mn0001796614.

29 Vincent Fumar, “Jazz fest ‘80: Hampton’s big band and local brasses: a truly ‘all star’ night on the President,” New Orleans States-Item, April 17, 1980. Also in the band were trumpeters Wendell Brunious and Wallace Davenport.
Dr. Michael White:
My Years among the Elders (1980-1995)

By Michael G. White

The four years that I spent as the clarinetist with Doc Paulin’s Brass Band (1975-1979) were life changing. That was my introduction to traditional New Orleans style jazz and life as a professional musician. I had been submerged into the heart of the local African American community during the last years when authentic traditional jazz still dominated the almost isolated world of social club parades, jazz funerals, and church parades. There I learned about the true meaning and spirit of jazz as an expression of New Orleans life: the hopes, aspirations, humor, passions, customs, language, and movement of the people. Those years paralleled my student life as a senior Spanish Education major at Xavier University and my early graduate school years at Tulane University.

Although playing in scores of community events was fun and exciting, it was more like a “school” than anything else. I became part of an underground community in which I was exposed, challenged, nurtured, taught, and transformed. There was an intense spirituality about being a part of those events that also sparked a life-long interest in jazz history, African American history, and all things New Orleans. When my time came to “graduate” from the “Doc Paulin Academy,” I joined the local musicians’ union with little hope of ever paralleling the excitement and discoveries of those years in the streets. I didn’t know many union musicians and was very inexperienced in playing and improvising outside of the brass band context. I thought that I would never play much again. I could not have been more wrong.

The next decade and a half was an extended “school” in which my contact with dozens of older musicians furthered my growth in jazz and in life. These were the last performing years of surviving second generation jazz musicians, many of whom had been active during the 1920s with some of the
most important figures in early jazz: Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, and others. Some of them had travelled during the 1920s heyday of early jazz, while others had remained in the New Orleans area – only to become heroes of the 1940s New Orleans jazz revival, playing with popular legends Bunk Johnson and George Lewis. Much more than the stereotype of old geezers past their prime who fumbled with an instrument every now and then, these were active performers who played regularly in town, toured around the world, and still made recordings. I was blessed to have played with most of them dozens, and in some cases, hundreds of times. A number of these older musicians became my mentors, teachers, and close friends. Like with many of the community people I had met in the street parades, being among them made me part of an extended family. We often rode together to jobs, talked on the phone, visited, ate out, and had one-on-one practice sessions. They not only shared their music, but the essence of their lives; their secrets and true feelings – which were often very different from the things found in interviews and history books.

Since there was a big stylistic gap between most of the musicians born before 1910 and the younger ones of swing band, modern jazz, and rhythm & blues orientations, it was very unusual for an even younger black musician like me to become so deeply immersed in the authentic style of music that was two or three generations older. As a result of the Civil Rights movement, many black people wanted to abandon everything that came from our difficult history, including early jazz, which was often viewed as “Uncle Tom music” or just an old remnant of a disturbing past. For some reason I saw positive values, like strength, pride, and unity in the music. It was at the heart of our collective African American creations in America that came to be enjoyed and shared by the entire world. For me New Orleans jazz is a timeless expression of the universal human experience that will always remain fresh and musically valid.

As the process of my listening to records and the very little jazz there was on the radio and reading jazz history books grew, so did the desire to hear the older musicians play live. At first my shyness would only allow me to observe them from a distance: at Jazz Fest, public concerts, Preservation Hall, and other places. To me they were legends and giants. I trembled and froze the first time I saw trombonist Louis Nelson at the Maple Leaf Bar. He seemed to be eight feet tall as he passed by me with his hollowed, stone-faced American Indian expression – issuing only a light grunt, which could have been a greeting or a warning to get out of his way.

So, how did I break into what was often viewed as an impenetrable circle of older jazz royalty? How did I get so close to them and gain their trust and respect? Why was I being chosen to play with them with increasing frequency? There was nothing that I consciously did. In retrospect, it was divine planning. The Creator put me in the right place at the right time with the right people. I had started playing in a number of bands and even had a stint as a street musician for a couple of years. I continued to play with brass bands that mainly performed in the more commercial world of tourists, conventions, and Mardi Gras parades, like the Young Tuxedo, Olympia, Royal, and Ellyna Tatum’s Second Liners. A friend I met while listening to Andrew Hall’s band on Saturday nights at the Maple Leaf, Lawrence Batiste, had introduced me to a young white trumpet player, Brian Finigan, who soon hired me in his Magnolia Brass Band. We played public concerts, nursing homes, hospitals, and parades for St. Patrick’s Day and other holidays.

One Sunday afternoon in the fall of 1979 Brian had a concert in Jackson Square. Although the job was contracted for ten musicians, for some reason he decided to do a large “sit down” band instead of the usual brass band. I got to the job early and was putting my clarinet together when I saw a strange figure approaching; an old man carrying a beat up trumpet case. He had on a blue suit, a red and white-checkered shirt, a brown hat, and a brown tie. Somehow he looked very cool as his leisurely gait brought him near the bandstand. It was Kid Thomas Valentine! Among the cadre of international fans of New Orleans jazz, Kid Thomas was the most famous surviving musician. Born in 1896, he was also the oldest active jazz musician around. For many years he led a popular band that played in the remaining dance
halls and for functions across the Mississippi River in the Algiers section of the city. He became a legend when he began recording in the 1950s and touring in the United States and abroad.

I had heard Kid Thomas’s Algiers Stompers at Jazz Fest and had a couple of his records. Here he was in the flesh - about to play with me. At the age of 83 this hero of the jazz revival had driven himself from Algiers to play for a union scale job with a bunch of upstarts. This showed both his love of playing and the typical low paying jobs that even widely imitated international jazz legends were accustomed to. Kid Thomas spoke and just set up quietly, occasionally looking in my direction with his customary frown. Soon came another familiar face, banjo player Emanuel Sayles, another legend known for playing and recording with George Lewis. Sayles was very pleasant and smiled as he came up and shook my hand: “How you doing young man?” Then came another very old man with a banjo case, Julius Handy, brother of acclaimed alto saxophonist Captain John Handy. I had played a few dances with him and Doc Paulin a few years earlier. The rest of the band included Nat Dowl on trumpet, Curtis Mitchell on bass, Larry Batiste on drums, Joe Gordon on saxophone, and James Stafford on trombone.

As the other guys were setting up, it became clear that I was the youngest and least experienced one on the bandstand. My nerves took over as we began to play. Up to that point I had only really played brass band style clarinet: upper register fills, riffs, and extended high notes. Playing in the lower register, having featured solos, and doing songs in different tempos and tunes that were more harmonically involved were all very new to me. I struggled through the first few songs and then Brian asked if I knew “Burgundy Street Blues.” I just looked at him for an eternity before answering. Why on earth did he want to feature me and why did he pick that song? It had only been a few months before that I had gotten my first George Lewis record, *Jazz at Preservation Hall*. Upon hearing it I was captivated and transformed forever. It was a spiritual experience that changed my life and opened me up to the depths of New Orleans jazz. I listened to the recording for hours and finally played along with the record. Especially powerful was George’s soulful rendition of his “Burgundy Street Blues.” I didn’t know that it was a well-known song. It somehow seemed to tell the story not only of George’s life but also of mine and of all black New Orleanians. It was so soulful and powerful that I sat there for hours and learned it note for note that night. Now I was going to play it with Emanuel Sayles, who had played and recorded it with George Lewis many times. Everything seemed to be in slow motion as I went up to the mike. I closed my eyes and counted it off: 1-2-3 and played the three note figure to begin the song. Soon all fear was gone and replaced by a feeling of detached calm – as if something else was in control of my body and clarinet. We made it through the first two choruses and I hit a high note trying to get close to that piercing, singing vibrato that George had. All of a sudden something hit my forehead. I kept playing but opened my eyes as it happened again and again. A hard downpour was suddenly upon us. We all ran for cover by the Cabildo. Seeing the dejected look on my face, Mr. Sayles extended his thin withering fingers to shake my hand and said, “You see. You made the sky cry. That was beautiful, young man. I haven’t played that since George Lewis.”

The rain had ended the job and my first public performance of “Burgundy Street Blues,” but the song lasted long enough to set off a series of life changing events. A few minutes later trumpet player George “Kid Sheik” Colar came up to where we were taking shelter and through a large smoldering cigar in his mouth his goat-like growl asked, “Who was that playing that ‘Magundy Blues’?” They pointed at me. He said, “Nobody plays that anymore. I was two blocks away and heard that and came running to see who that was. I ain’t heard that in a long time.” Sheik asked for my phone number. A few months later, during Jazz Fest, he called and invited me to a party on Royal Street. There were many older musicians, their relatives, and jazz fans from all over the world. The musicians took turns jamming, and the music was very spirited but relaxed. Kid Thomas played the drums, as did street performer Kokomo Joe. There were also Louis Nelson, Emanuel Sayles, Harold Dejan, Chester Zardis, and several others. Eventually, I joined the dozen or so musicians that were playing as people talked and ate big plates of red beans and rice and fried chicken. Right after we finished an up-tempo number Kid Sheik came
up and said, “Hey White. Play dem ‘Magundy Blues.’” I tried to ignore him but he told everyone that that song was up next. This time I was less nervous and played along with the steady rhythm section. Soon the entire yard became silent. This was my introduction to the world of the older musicians and international jazz fans that adored them; and it was their introduction to me. I had no idea at the time, but they saw me as a refreshing ray of hope. They were concerned that the old style New Orleans jazz would die out in its birthplace after the older men were gone. In an article describing many events that he saw during the 1980 Jazz Fest, Belgian fan and writer Marcel Joly wrote about the party for a British jazz magazine:

It is a sad thing that most of the younger musicians of New Orleans ... are playing in a very modern way showing off their remarkable technique but leaving the tradition of their home city far behind. They play the traditional tunes ... but the results sound more like Dizzie Gillespie and Cie [sic, Charlie Parker] more than like New Orleans music. A notable exception is Michael White. At a private party we heard him play Burgundy Street Blues, not copying George Lewis but playing in the tradition of the great master. The enthusiastic response from the audience forced him to play the number again. The second time it sounded completely different but just as wonderful as the first time. ... He is very conscious of the great musical heritage of his city. For me he was the true revelation of this visit to New Orleans (Marcel Joly, “New Orleans 1980,” Footnote, May/June 1980).

Kid Sheik began hiring me when he needed a clarinet player, as did other older bandleaders later: Percy Humphrey, Louis Nelson, and Kid Thomas. We played for public concerts, private parties and at Jazz Fest. I was in my twenties and early thirties and many times would be the only musician on the bandstand under seventy years old. All of the older musicians told stories about their lives and the early days of jazz. They were eager to give advice about playing and life, and I was a very attentive student. They all remembered and told me things about my early jazz musician relatives, Papa John Joseph, Willie Joseph, and Earl Fouche.

The older musicians had come from varied musical backgrounds and different levels of training. Some had had private lessons and could read music well, while others could not read and were self-taught. They were all very individual players with their own personal styles and expression. What they all shared was a similar understanding of the roles of each instrument and how a New Orleans-style ensemble should sound. They were all very proud of making good music and that special feeling that it can create for listeners. They came from a time when New Orleans jazz was mainly played for dancing – not stage concerts. They spent most of their lives making hot swinging music largely devoid of the concessions sometimes made for concerts and shows. During those years I heard and played with at least a half dozen older musicians on each instrument, which gave me a very good sampling of aspects of tone, ensemble playing, improvising, soloing, the roles of the instruments, and how to incorporate one’s personality into personal musical expression. I also played very often with dozens of musicians of the next generation, born between 1910 and 1925. Many of these musicians had gotten musical training in the military and later under the GI bill. Most of them had played in reading swing bands, modern jazz combos, or early rhythm & blues groups. There was a big difference in their sound and approach to traditional jazz as opposed to the older pioneers. Between both groups of older musicians, I played quite often with trumpeters Kid Sheik, Kid Thomas Valentine, Percy Humphrey, Lionel Ferbos, Teddy Riley, Jack Willis, Alvin Alcorn, Frank Mitchell, Dave Bartholomew, Wallace Davenport, and Vernon Gilbert. On trombone there was Louis Nelson, Preston Jackson, Worthia Thomas, “Brother Lee,” Clement Tervalon, Waldren “Frog” Joseph, and Wendell Eugene. I also played on a number of jobs with other reed instrument players like Willie Humphrey, Raymond Burke, Emmanuel Paul, Harold Dejan, Ernest
Watson, and Herman Sherman. Banjo and guitar players I worked with during those years were Emanuel Sayles, Narvin Kimball, Danny Barker, Father Al Lewis, Clifford Brown, and Buddy Charles. Bass players on many of those jobs included Jerry Greene, Chester Zardis, James Prevost, Lloyd Lambert, James Carter, Stewart Davis, Frank Fields, and Edmond Foucher. Among the older drummers that I worked with were Louis Barbarin, Cie Frazier, Ernest Kid Milton, Leo Quezerque, Frank Parker, Chester Jones, Lawrence Trotter, Alonzo Stewart, Stanley Williams, Milford Dolliole, and Freddie Kohlman. Piano players that I worked with during that time were Sweet Emma Barrett, Sing Miller, Frank Moliere, Dave “Fat Man” Williams, Jeanette Kimball, Sadie Goodson, Edward Frank, Isidore “Tuts” Washington, and Quentin Batiste.

Among the many older musicians that I was very close to, banjoist / guitarist Danny Barker (1909-1994) was the first one that I met (after Doc Paulin). That was a strange experience. In the fall of 1975 as a senior at Xavier I had a habit of spending a lot of time in the university library’s Black Collection Room. In there were many books about black history and culture, including quite a lot about music and jazz. One afternoon I was looking at a New Orleans jazz book and turned to a page that had a picture of Danny and Blue Lu Barker. I got a sudden strange feeling and looked up only to see in the doorway an old man with a suit on carrying a guitar case and a bag, frozen but staring in my direction. It looked just like Danny Barker. I thought it was not possible to look at someone’s picture in a book and at that instant they appear in real life. A second after I closed my eyes and shook my head there was no one there. Wondering if I was losing my mind, I got up and began to search for that man. I looked all over the library’s three floors and didn’t see him. Finally the librarian told me about a new classroom hidden on the third floor. I found the room and sure enough there was Danny Barker in the flesh. He was at Xavier to begin teaching an African American Music class. (A strange thing is that I have been teaching that same African American Music class at Xavier since 1987; most of that time in the same room that had been the Black Collection Room.) I introduced myself and asked if I could sit in on the class. Many times we would talk after class. One day he invited me to bring my clarinet and we played a blues song that felt like the one he played with Pee Wee Russell on a famous television show and recording from 1957 called This is Jazz.

He told me I should join the Fairview Brass Band, a kids’ group that he had started a few years earlier. The band was just beginning its second generation. The first, which included Gregg Stafford, Joseph Torregano, Lucien Barbarin, and others, had left to form the Hurricane Brass Band with Leroy Jones. Although I had already been with Doc Paulin’s band for a year, at the age of twenty-one I became the oldest “kid” in the Fairview Brass Band. For a couple of years we played in the French Market on the corner of Decatur and St. Philip Streets for tips. Several of the kids were very talented and competitive, and we had our first attempts at playing solos. Several of those second generation Fairview musicians became professional musicians and are still playing today, like William Smith, Harry Sterling, Jerry Anderson, Effram Towns, and Edward Paris.

Danny Barker had played and recorded with the widest stylistic range of musicians in the entire history of jazz. He loved to tell stories about famous musicians and his many experiences among celebrities during the Harlem Renaissance. He was the first one to make some of the greatest figures in jazz come alive for me in ways that history books, films, and recordings couldn’t. While he spoke quite a bit about the swing era and modern jazz legends he had worked with, like Coleman Hawkins, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker, he especially loved to talk about the New Orleans musicians who were living in New York when he moved there in 1930. Among the musicians he knew and played with, the three he talked about the most were Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Sidney Bechet. It wasn’t surprising that he considered Armstrong to be the greatest and most influential of all jazz musicians. He talked about how musicians in New Orleans would crowd outside a record store on Rampart Street to get “lessons” every time Armstrong released one of his innovative Hot Five and Seven recordings. He took great delight in telling about how northern musicians
first laughed at Armstrong’s loud attire and “country” ways. After hearing him play many of them started to imitate not only his trumpet playing but everything about him, including his speech, flashy dress style, and mannerisms.

Danny Barker also liked to talk about Jelly Roll Morton, with whom he played a number of parties and cruises when he first arrived in New York. He told me that Morton didn’t play many of the classic songs from his famous 1920s Red Hot Peppers recordings that made jazz history. By that time Jelly Roll had gotten frustrated: “He said he couldn’t find people that could play his music right; so we just played head arrangements and regular numbers.” He recalled many afternoons watching as Morton would get into arguments outside of Harlem’s Rhythm Club, repeatedly telling anyone within earshot how he was being cheated by record companies and how all of the successful big band leaders had stolen his music and style without paying or crediting him. Danny Barker also had great admiration for clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet, who he said was a hero that inspired other New Orleans musicians because he was the first jazz musician to leave the city and become successful in New York and abroad. He played and recorded with Bechet on several occasions and often spoke of his creative genius. He loved to tell the story of how Bechet defeated the great tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins in a musician battle after the younger man had insulted New Orleans musicians.

I hired Danny Barker many times in my Original Liberty Jazz Band and also played with him with Gregg Stafford’s band and a few times with his Jazz Hounds. We also played together on concerts at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall and on Wynton Marsalis’s 1989 recording Majesty of the Blues. Over the years I visited the Barkers at their modest Sere Street home many times and had several meals and outings with them. Mr. Barker and I served together on a few jazz-related boards and committees. He was a highly opinionated man who often expressed himself with a bold, sly humor. I remember one jazz board meeting in which a noted historian with a reputation for flagrantly making wrong statements shouted out: “Duke Ellington never composed a song in his life. He stole everything that he’s given credit for.” The ridiculousness of the statement completely silenced the room. All of a sudden came a loud snore from an apparently sleeping Danny Barker. Everyone burst out with laughter. No better wordless non-violent protest has ever been given. That was Danny Barker. By 1994 he had been sick for a while,
and one Sunday afternoon after a job I got a feeling that I needed to go to his house. I opened the door and yelled to the back room to let his wife know that I was there. He was in a hospital bed in the dining room. After a minute of watching his thin lifeless body not moving I said, “Mrs. Barker I think something is wrong.” She yelled, “No he’s just sleeping.” His body was cold and there was no pulse. We called for an ambulance and indeed he was gone. Although he had expressed many times that he didn’t want all the carnival atmosphere and “monkeyshine” of what most musicians’ jazz funerals had become, Gregg Stafford spearheaded a respectful, beautiful traditional funeral ceremony that would have made Danny Barker proud.

Since I had begun playing a few jobs with Kid Sheik soon after that jazz party, in 1981 I also started to play with him on occasion at Preservation Hall. In those days most of the musicians playing in the four different bands at the Hall were born before 1910. Only a couple of young musicians were allowed to play there. A lot of musicians thought that you had to be “old” to play there but it was also a matter of style. A lot of the swing, modern jazz, and rhythm & blues era musicians that I was also playing traditional jazz jobs with had a style and approach that – although very competent – just didn’t have the same deeply spiritual folk-like feeling of the older musicians. For me, some other locals, and thousands of jazz fans throughout the world, there was a big difference in being left feeling, “Oh that was very good,” as opposed to hearing music so pure and honest that you are moved to tears and the core of your being is shaken up. Kid Sheik’s band had several legendary musicians that included Preston Jackson on trombone, Sweet Emma Barrett on piano, Chester Zardis on bass, Louis Barbarin on drums, and Father Al Lewis on banjo. Louis Barbarin (1902-1997) was the brother of the famous drummer Paul Barbarin who composed the popular standards “Second Line” and “Bourbon Street Parade.” I remember him laying down a steady solid beat, playing on the bass drum on each beat and playing press rolls that sounded like tearing a sheet of paper. Although he varied his rhythms from time to time, the basic beat was never lost and he never got in the way of a soloist. He also had a tremendous parade beat that made you feel like you were on the streets in a social club parade. He really knew how to drive a band.

Despite her name, Sweet Emma Barrett had a look and personality that were often the opposite of what her name implied. Born in 1898 she had played since the 1920s with Papa Celestin and other popular dance band leaders. For many years she led her own group and was among the better known musicians in traditional jazz. She called me over the first time we played together and was very complimentary. She got excited when she heard I was related to Papa John Joseph. On many occasions I saw her threaten, cuss out, or throw water on patrons who asked for an autograph or to take a picture.

Kid Sheik’s Storyville Ramblers at Jazz Fest, 1983. Left to right: Father Al Lewis, banjo; Michael White, clarinet; Kid Sheik Colar, trumpet. Photo by Syndey Byrd, courtesy of the Syndey Byrd Estate and the Louisiana State Museum.
Most of the time the customers found her abrasiveness cute and charming. One guy wouldn’t take no for an answer and repeatedly asked for an autograph: “Please Miss Emma. I have come five thousand miles all the way from Germany to see you.” She looked at him, then spoke softly: “Where’s that you came from?” He replied, “Germany,” at which point she barked out, “Well you need to go back there!” before she quickly turned away. One night after an especially rough handling of an unsuspecting autograph seeker she called me over: “I guess you say I’m pretty terrible, yelling and fussing all the time. But if you were old and crippled in a wheel chair like I am you’d be mean too.” One day she had me to come close and she opened up the beat-up, long red purse that was always glued to her lap. In it were about ten packs of paper tied with strings and rubber bands: “You see these? Each one of them is a thousand dollars! That’s all my money. See me, I don’t trust no banks.” That lingering common Depression Era mind-set was the cause of her being robbed of her life savings on more than one occasion. After being beat up on one of those occasions she suffered a stroke and remained paralyzed on her left side. Although she only had use of her right hand she played a strong, steady four-to-the-bar piano style that helped the band to swing. It was comical to hear her sing suggestive old risqué songs like “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” or “Ain’t Gonna Give Nobody None of My Jelly Roll” with her whiny voice. When she sang slow songs, especially “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” something about her sadness and sincerity would bring tears from the audience every time. Sweet Emma passed in 1983, and I felt blessed to have played with her several times during her last active years.

Trombonist Preston Jackson was another of the older musicians I shared a special bond with. Born in New Orleans in 1902, Preston had moved to Chicago as a teen. He grew up listening to and playing with many of the greatest figures in early jazz that had migrated there and become famous. When I first met and played with him he was living in a small apartment on Orleans Street in the French Quarter. He would invite me to his house to practice and listen to records. He gave me a lot of pointers and told me what recordings I should listen to. Preston had recorded under his own name in the 1920s and later recorded with two of my clarinet heroes, Johnny Dodds and Jimmie Noone. He gave details about their clarinet styles and character – Dodds’s hot, big-toned blues style and Noone’s softer, sweeter, more technical approach. He told me about his many days spent listening to and sitting in with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band. He said that they sounded so much better than on the famous 1923 recordings. They played longer ensemble choruses, swung more, and had more featured solos. Preston’s favorite reed player of all was Sidney Bechet. On several occasions he’d put on a Bechet record and say, “Man if you could learn some of this, that would be something.” In the early 1930s Preston was a member of Louis Armstrong’s Orchestra. He was on the tour when Armstrong played at the Suburban Gardens in Metairie. He gave me his first-hand account of the moment when a white announcer refused to introduce Armstrong and the trumpeter simply took the mike and introduced himself. He recalled seeing hundreds of Blacks who were not allowed in the segregated facility sitting on the nearby Mississippi River levee to hear what they could. Preston had a special glow in his eyes whenever he talked about his time with Armstrong, who he also considered to be the greatest jazz musician ever. The trombonist once recalled that many people believed that he had died along with popular swing band leader Walter Barnes and most of his musicians in the tragic Rhythm Club fire in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1940. Jackson had been a regular member of Barnes’s band at the time, but for some reason missed the fatal trip. He was a direct link to the great New Orleans musicians that influenced the course of jazz in Chicago during the 1920s. He gave me a much deeper understanding of Dodds, Noone, Bechet, Armstrong, Oliver, and others that went far beyond what I learned from records and books.

After Preston Jackson died in 1983, Louis Nelson (1902-1990) became Kid Sheik’s regular trombone player. Nelson was very popular in the international traditional jazz world, largely because of his tours and recordings with George Lewis and other legendary figures since the late 1940s. In his early career Nelson had played in reading swing bands and translated that experience into a highly personal tone and expression in traditional jazz groups. He played soft sweet melodies on ballads like
“Whispering” and exciting fills, riffs, and tailgate growls on up-tempo songs. At times Nelson had his own band jobs for parties and festivals, and he would hire me on clarinet. Casting a powerful figure with his strong African/American Indian features, appearance, and demeanor, he was a father figure to me. He always gave positive advice about playing and was always happy to see a young black man so interested in the real traditional style. He told me a lot about being on the historic 1963 three month long tour of Japan with George Lewis and other tours in Europe. He filled in a lot of gaps about how the Japanese respected the very old Papa John Joseph, who was the bassist on that tour. Nelson was generally quiet on the bandstand, but he could be defensive and even protective at times. Once a tourist came up to him and pointed at me: “What is he doing here? He’s too young to play with you.” Nelson looked directly at him, shrugged his shoulders and said, “Huh. That young man knows more about the history of this music than I do.” The tourist silently slithered away. Louis Nelson was always the first call for my Original Liberty Jazz Band jobs in the 1980s. We played many jobs together, and he was a featured part of the band in the New Orleans music documentary Liberty Street Blues made in 1987.

In addition to subbing occasionally with Kid Sheik’s band at Preservation Hall, I also began to play with the other bands there from time to time. In 1982 I became a regular member of Kid Thomas Valentine’s Algiers Stompers, playing at the Hall on Mondays for many years. Kid Thomas (1896-1987) had developed a very unique trumpet style. He was self-taught and didn’t read music, but that led to a high degree of individuality though his use of unusual note choices. He had a rich full tone and was a minimalist, in that he played short but meaningful lead lines and melodic solo statements – leaving lots of space for the clarinet and trombone to fill in. Kid Thomas’s playing sounded very much like his talking, ranging from rough growls and fussing-like phrases to soft whispers. He was a master of various trumpet mutes and effects. When he played a soft, muted “Moonlight Bay,” it sounded like a baby crying. One time he asked what I wanted to play and I said, “Milk Cow Blues.” I loved his playing and singing of that song on records. It was such a thrill to sit next to that deep soulful blues expression that to me was a great example of musical individuality. To satisfy dancers for so long Kid Thomas had developed a wider range and repertoire of tunes than some traditional jazz bands. He played all sorts of ballads, swing numbers, and popular songs from other genres, like “In the Mood,” “On a Coconut Island,” “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” “What Am I Living For,” “When My Dreamboat Comes Home,” and “Siboney.” As Kid Thomas approached his mid-eighties young trumpeter Wendell Brunious was hired to help him with lead playing. Long time members of Kid Thomas’s band back then were Emmanuel Paul on tenor saxophone, Worthia “Showboy” Thomas on trombone, Emanuel Sayles on banjo, Dave “Fat Man” Williams on piano, Frank Fields on bass, and Alonzo Stewart on drums.

Kid Thomas’s band was one of my favorite groups of all to play with. The band could really swing and I learned a lot from the veteran musicians. It was great to sit next to Emanuel Sayles and get his advice about chords and hear his recollections of earlier times. Born in 1914, Frank Fields was of a slightly younger generation and through his long association with Dave Bartholomew’s band had played on dozens of early rhythm & blues hits by Fats Domino, Little Richard, Ray Charles, Professor Longhair, and others. I played on many private jobs with him in my own groups and those of others for several years. He was a solid bass player with great timing and very correct chords.

In addition to playing with Kid Thomas, Emmanuel Paul (1904-1988) was a popular long time member of Dejan’s Olympia Brass Band. He was a rare saxophonist in a traditional jazz band that didn’t double on clarinet. He had also participated in some of the earliest brass band recordings with the Eureka in the 1950s. Mr. Paul was especially praised for his haunting solo passage on the Eureka’s “West Lawn Dirge.” He had a big, full, singing tenor saxophone sound, at times reminiscent of Coleman Hawkins’s. He had the widest vibrato ever – wider than Sidney Bechet’s – that some musicians called “that nanny goat sound.” His phrases merged the New Orleans and swing styles and were exciting and soulful. Famous modern jazz saxophonist Rahsaan Roland Kirk recorded a few songs from the New Orleans repertoire that critics thought were imitations of Bechet’s soprano saxophone style, but Kirk had
come to town and sat in with the Olympia; locals knew that he was trying to get that special personal sound of Emmanuel Paul.

Trumpet player Percy Humphrey (1905-1995), along with his brother Willie on clarinet, were the main touring attraction with Preservation Hall for many years. I had known about the Humphrey brothers since I was a very young. They lived in uptown New Orleans in my mother’s childhood neighborhood. During the 1930s they played regular concerts in the Soniat playground as part of the Works Progress Administration program. As they passed my mother’s Liberty Street home on the way to and from the park they would stop and talk to her family. My mother always listened to the Humphreys play and remembered many of their songs. When I moved into that same family home in 1980 I would see them in the neighborhood and sometimes visit them. Percy started to hire me on private jobs when Willie was out. Although I loved playing with him, it was tough at first to adjust to his more fluid style and the different keys he played in. One day he hired me to play a public concert in Armstrong Park. On that job he hired a relative on second trumpet who was a very accomplished modern jazz player. As we played I noticed the trumpet player staring at me several times with a weird look on his face. A couple of years later he explained what had been on his mind: “Man when I first heard you that day in the park I didn’t know what to make of you. You were a real young guy and you sounded just like those old men. I mean there was no trace of bebop in your playing. I really thought you were retarded or something. Then I found out more about you … that you had a lot of education. Now I understand where you are coming from.” This was a common attitude and criticism that I had to live with for many years, as a number of the modern jazz and rhythm & blues generations of musicians expressed their dislike and disapproval of what they viewed as that “old man’s” or “Uncle Tom” music. Some of them were focusing on other issues and were sometimes envious of the steady work and praise that the older musicians got.

I saw the positive, uplifting aspects of traditional jazz as a means of providing visibility, strength, unity, and protest against social and legal limitations. For me it was the ultimate exercise of democracy and the collective creation of African Americans that dealt with concepts like change, possibility, and the incorporation of diversity. That music was the first thing that gave me a sense of belonging and pride in being a black American. It took many years of perseverance and passion for things to turn around for me. When I look back and think about the social climate of the post-Civil Rights era, it does seem strange and highly unlikely that back then a younger black person could ever have such a deep connection with ancestral traditions or anything from the past.

For several years during the 1980s and 90s I replaced Willie Humphrey in Percy’s band on the road after he stopped touring, mainly in California and a number of northeastern states. It was amazing to see how many people followed the band in the many theaters, universities, parks, and wineries that we regularly performed in. Percy also had a very personal trumpet style that was very exciting. He used to tell me stories about his many years leading the standard bearing Eureka Brass Band. We talked a lot about how they loosely read dirges, their three part trumpet harmonies, and several of the musicians that had played with him. During my early years of touring with Percy Humphrey the band also included several well-known older players like Narvin Kimball on banjo, Josiah “Cie” Frazier on drums, James “Sing” Miller on piano, and James Prevost on bass. California native and Jim Robinson disciple Frank Demond was on trombone. Most of our concerts were two hours with a break in the middle. Although on regular jobs Percy played a wide variety of songs, his concert repertoire remained pretty much the same: “Hindustan,” “Panama,” “Shake It and Break It,” “Bourbon Street Parade,” “St. Louis Blues,” “Closer Walk,” and “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Narvin Kimball usually had one or two vocal and banjo features like “Georgia” or “He Touched Me.” Sometimes he’d do beautiful vocal duets with Sing Miller on “Amen,” “His Eye is On the Sparrow,” or “Memories.” Frank Demond usually did a trombone feature on “Ice Cream.” I had a choice of doing a clarinet solo and usually did “Burgundy Street Blues,” “Petite Fleur,” or “Summertime.”

Throughout those years the brass bands I played with never played in social club parades and

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only did a few occasional community church parades, fairs, and jazz funerals. Since the 1960s the more commercial arena of hotel conventions, festivals, sports events, and stage concerts had opened up for brass band work. For many of the older brass band veterans that played in these groups it was easier, safer, and more pleasant to play a few songs in an air conditioned hotel than do the grueling six hour social club parades in the hot sun. Besides, the convention jobs paid better. Many times these bands had only seven or eight pieces and only played two or three songs for the events. We would march conventioneers into a large hotel ballroom to begin a meeting, wait outside for an hour or more, and then march them out into the hallway with a final song. Some of the larger hotels would have actual mini-Mardi Gras parades – complete with floats, high school bands, masked riders with throws, people on horses, and even motorcycle police escorts. We would play walking around the room a few times, and with all the noise and goings on they felt like real Mardi Gras parades. The great thing for me was that during those many long breaks the musicians would tell jokes and stories about the old days: bands they played with and how certain musicians played. In a way this was an additional “school.” Many of the older brass band players were born between 1915 and 1925 and were easily old enough to be my father. The group that I played with the most during the 1980s was the Royal Brass Band, led by trumpeter Teddy Riley (1924-1992). Teddy was the son of an early jazz trumpet player, Amos Riley. He was a well-seasoned musician who had played through numerous musical eras and was known for his work in big bands, modern jazz groups, and especially his touring and recording with rhythm & blues giants Roy Brown and Fats Domino. In later years he played traditional jazz with Louis Cottrell. Riley made national news in 1971 when he was chosen to play on Louis Armstrong’s first cornet at a local ceremony in recognition of the jazz legend’s death. In addition to the Royal Brass Band, I played many jobs with Teddy in his smaller groups ranging from a quartet to seven pieces. We played a variety of events like parties, conventions, and weddings. Teddy had an exciting rhythmic trumpet style that combined modern jazz phrasing with traditional jazz growls, bent tones, and feeling. He played a variety of traditional songs, standards, and swing era tunes that often caught me unprepared and fumbling. Although this was at times quite embarrassing, it taught me many different songs and how to focus on hearing chords and melodic structures. Regular jobs that we did, like the annual Mardi Gras season battle of the bands at the New Orleans Country Club, became a gage for me to measure my progress. Each year I was a bit better at handling the obscure tunes that Teddy would delight in calling.
My very first trip playing outside of Louisiana was to a festival in Baltimore, Maryland, with the Royal Brass Band. Teddy also led the Excelsior Brass Band, with which I made several trips, including one to play before the Royal Family in Monaco. We also played a large jazz festival in Jacksonville, Florida, for several years, at which we were able to meet and hang out with legendary performers like Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Sarah Vaughan, and Louie Bellson. One year the Excelsior made a very good brass band recording there, despite its corny title, *Jolly Reeds and Steamin’ Horns*. Many times Teddy hired older experienced brass band veterans, many of whom became good friends of mine, like Clement Tervalon, Wendell Eugene, Oscar Rouzan, and Lawrence Trotter. The tuba player Jerome Greene (1903-2001) was a long time close friend and mentor to me. He had been a musicians’ union official and knew a lot about the early days of jazz and the inner workings of the music business. Mr. Greene was a consummate gentleman and professional musician who had an inner toughness that made him very sly in approaching life and the music world. He taught me a lot about the hidden truths in music and about getting ahead in life and the music business. Like my father, he was what I call “an old time black man” - meaning those that came up during rough, hostile times and depended on their strength, wit, and intelligence to acquire a number of survival skills that they used creatively in everything from music jobs to plumbing, carpentry, and other areas. On one brass band convention job in a big downtown hotel we had one of those long breaks. We sat out in the hallway and talked. Mr. Greene had left his tuba and disappeared for a long time. Finally he came back carrying a large full plastic trash bag on his shoulder like Santa Claus. Clem Tervalon – known for his sarcastic humor – said, “Jerry, what is that?” The old man said, “These are empty cans. I can get a penny for each of them. They are for my grandson. I’m trying to teach him how to make a little money.” Clem said, “Yea but that’s embarrassing. You going round a big hotel like this picking in the garbage and carrying that sack around. You left your horn and everything. How many cans you got in that bag?” Mr. Greene said, “About forty or fifty.” Clem yelled out, “That’s a shame. All that to make fifty cents. Hell, I’ll give you five dollars right now if you put that got damn bag down. That’s too embarrassing.”

A special feature at the end of a banquet in many large hotel ballrooms is the Baked Alaska Flambé desert “ceremony.” After the dinner plates were collected, the room would go completely dark and silent. Then the brass band would start to play, as dozens of waiters came second line dancing through the darkness, carrying the flaming desserts. We were playing on one such occasion at Gallier Hall, when a guest knocked the flaming dessert onto an alcohol-soaked tablecloth. All of a sudden there was a loud “whoof.” The whole table lit up in flames. Most of the people at the table people were on fire. Within seconds the smell of burning hair and flesh was all over the room. People were Screaming, running, and rolling around. Luckily the convention dinner was for doctors, who quickly put the fire out and gave immediate aid to their colleagues - none of whom suffered life-threatening burns.

During the early 1980s I also played a lot in the musical comedy *One Mo’ Time* at the Toulouse Theater in the French Quarter. The play was written by New Orleans born actor Vernel Bagneris, who also starred in it. The show was a humorous but realistic look at on-and-off stage life for a 1920s black vaudeville touring company. There were skits, jokes, dancing, and period songs that included New Orleans jazz, classic blues, novelty songs, and ballads. The play lasted for two hours with an intermission in the middle. The five-piece band was visible on stage the entire time and was part of the actual show. There were written scores for most of the show’s twenty-seven songs. The clarinet part was very involved and featured playing behind singers and a number of improvised solos. This was a great experience for me because it forced me to start reading music again and to play a wider range of songs. *One Mo’ Time* went on at the Toulouse for several years, while the original cast had a long run at New York’s Village Gate. There were also touring companies in the United States and abroad. I usually played the show at least once or twice a week and sometimes for a week at a time. In all I played it over one hundred times. There I got to work with a number of really talented singers (mostly from rhythm & blues, gospel, and modern jazz backgrounds), who mostly first learned early jazz and Bessie Smith
style blues songs to do the show. These included Lillian Boutte, Juanita Brooks, Barbara Shorts, Wanda Rouzan, Lady BJ, and Sharon Nabonne.

What was especially good for me was that three of the original five band members had stayed in New Orleans: trumpet player Lionel Ferbos, drummer John Robichaux, and Walter Payton on tuba. Robichaux (1916-2005) was the nephew of popular early society bandleader John Robichaux, whose orchestra battled the Buddy Bolden band for dominance of the early 1900s black dance band scene. He was a solid drummer with a strong steady beat. He didn’t add many frills or fancy stuff, but he always had great timing that helped to create a swinging ensemble. His sense of humor was very keen, but he always stood up when he felt that he wasn’t being treated fairly. We got along very well and I used to hire him to play for my Original Liberty Jazz Band and with Chester Zardis’s band. We once had a band trip to perform at a university in Oregon. During a layover on the way there we saw “Robe” standing still on the walking belt in front of us. He went back and forth this way over a dozen times. Finally, he looked at our puzzled faces and said, “I’m getting my exercise.” Eventually Robichaux retired from playing and disappeared from the scene. I was very sad to learn that he, his wife and son all drowned in their Franklin Avenue home during Hurricane Katrina.

One Mo’ Time’s original trumpet player Lionel Ferbos was a great friend and mentor to me until his death in 2014 at the age of 103. In younger years he had been a sheet metal worker. He taught me a lot about the realities of life and the music business. I visited him on many occasions and in later years we would go to lunch with his family for his birthday. Born in 1911, he was among the last of an older generation of skilled reading Creole dance band musicians that paralleled the development of jazz. Ferbos was never a true jazz player because he only read music and didn’t improvise. He actually wrote out and read or memorized his solos. He had a very pleasant personal trumpet tone and was a charming singer of ballads, jazz tunes, and old pop songs. He helped me quite a lot with learning the show’s cues, where to take a breath in long fast numbers, and where to cut out a few notes to save my lips for harder parts. It was strange and a bit comforting to learn that, after all of his years of playing, he still got very nervous. That helped me quite a bit with the performance anxiety problem that plagued much of my own early music career.

Mr. Ferbos played with my Original Liberty Jazz Band on a number of occasions. Once we were playing at a dance that appears in the documentary Maroon from 2005. The song “Shake It and Break It” was getting hotter as the dancers became more excited. Everyone in the band felt the tension build and the need to play an extra out chorus. When that climatic moment came Ferbos just ended the song and stopped cold. It was a disappointing train wreck for musicians and dancers alike. Mr. Ferbos just looked up and said, “That was the end of the song. See, right there,” as he pointed at the sheet music. The written music ended and so did he. Case closed.

Of all of the older musicians, bassist Chester Zardis (1900-1990) was the closest one to me. I first met him when he played in a small group at the Maple Leaf Bar in 1979. He invited me to come hear him play at Preservation Hall with Kid Sheik. That was the beginning of my regularly seeing many of the older legendary musicians who I would soon come to know and play with. Chester was among the best bassists in the New Orleans tradition and had played and recorded with Bunk Johnson and George Lewis. During the 1940s he sat in with Count Basie who made him an offer to join his big band. Chester was a very small man with strong hands.

![Lionel Ferbos and Michael White at Jazz Fest. Photo by Eric Waters.](image)
made more powerful by his soaking them in salt. All of his fingers had permanent hard callouses with
grooves cut in from the bass strings. He had a perfect sense of timing and could always establish and
maintain the center of the beat. Chester had a way of constructing four beats to the bar phrases that
would sound like counter melodies that followed the contours of each song and added an intense lift
to the ensemble. He had a loud full bass sound formed by his preference for a high bridge and using
two wire and two gut strings. He was a master of the slap style bass and produced a much better sound
than anyone I ever heard live. The thing that stood out the most about Chester Zardis’s playing was not
his volume, which was louder than most bass players; it was a certain presence that seemed to vibrate
everything around him: the floor, the walls, windows, other instruments, and people’s bodies. It felt like
that rhythmic vibration somehow aligned or massaged your inner body or spirit. Many times I could still
feel the effects of his playing reverberating through my insides the next day after hearing him.

Chester and I were soon talking on the phone several times a week. He loved to reminisce about
his early days and the great musicians he played with. He told me about participating in cutting contests
when bands on advertising wagons would accidentally meet up on the streets. He recalled one such
event when the other band was winning the crowd’s applause: “All of a sudden I put that slap on them
and it was all over.” As a young musician in the 1920s Zardis played with a number of legendary bands
and musicians in and around New Orleans. He talked about playing on steamboats like the Susquehanna
and the Mandeville on Lake Pontchartrain. The bands often played for excursions after the cruise and
sometimes played in dance halls in the city of Mandeville. He often talked of playing with the legendary
cornetist Buddy Petit, who he said was better than Louis Armstrong. He said Petit had a very beautiful
way of playing in the middle and low registers of the cornet. He said Petit messed himself up at a young
age because “he had too many of dem women and drank too much of that hot whiskey.” I got a kick
out of shocking my African American Music students at Xavier by bringing Chester to class. There was
a picture of him with Buddy Petits band in 1920 in our textbook. Although he was in his eighties he
didn’t look much different from the picture. The students couldn’t believe he was the same person. He
also talked a lot about Chris Kelly - another widely discussed trumpet legend of early jazz who never
recorded: “Boy that man could really play the blues. I wish you could have heard him. He played so
good on that ‘Careless Love’ that a lot of people thought that it was his song. They thought it was ‘Kelly’s
Love’.” I asked him about the best clarinet players he had worked with. He mentioned two obscure
names - Zeb Lenoirs and Isidore Fritz - as having big tones and being good players, but his all-time
favorite clarinet player was George Lewis: “You see, for the clarinet, tone is everything. A lot of them
fellas make all of them notes but don’t have a good tone. They ain’t saying nothing.”

I used to hire Chester Zardis every year for my quartet job at Jazz Fest, along with Steve
Pistorius on piano and Stanley Stephens on drums. One year we featured him on the classic 1920s
Johnny Dodds song “Bull Fiddle Blues.” His playing was better than ever - supplemented by some rolling
lines and figures that I hadn’t heard him do before. It was like he released a spirit that swept through
the audience, which afterward gave him a long, rousing standing ovation. He was so excited that the
diminutive eighty-six year-old picked up the bass and held it straight up in the air as if he were a weight
lifter. It was a magic moment. In the mid-eighties Chester played with me at many French Market
concerts, parties, public concerts, and jazz history programs. He was with us in the documentary Liberty
Street Blues, in which he was also interviewed. We also made a recording for the British 504 label called
T’Ain’t Nobody’s Business. In the early to mid-1980s Chester also booked some of his own jobs and I
managed the band for him. We played a few private jobs and several times played in Mandeville at a
bar called Ruby’s Roadhouse. He mainly used older musicians but many times we had Gregg Stafford
on trumpet. People would dance to the music and Chester said it reminded him of the old days with
Buddy Petit. Chester died in 1990, marking the end of an important link to the early days and local
development of New Orleans jazz. His passing was very hard for me, but he left a part of his musical
spirit that is etched in my soul forever.
I was blessed to have heard and met a number of early jazz clarinet players by the late 1970s into the 1980s. Each one was very much an individual player with his own unique sound, phrasing, and approach. They had all had very different levels of training, development, and career experiences. Most of them played the old Albert system type of clarinet, which aided each one’s ability to create their own beautiful rich tone. They all were very willing to “talk clarinet” and give advice to a shy young player who viewed them all as stars and asked endless questions. I learned quite a lot of things about practicing, mouthpieces, reeds, brands of clarinets, projection, and other things from them. They also talked about their early years of playing with some of the most popular jazz musicians in history. Of the older generation clarinetists, one I knew well and heard play many times was Willie Humphrey (1900-1994). He was a member of a musical family that included his brothers Percy and Earl, and his father and grandfather who were highly respected clarinet players and music teachers. Willie had travelled north as a young man, playing with King Oliver and other New Orleans musicians in Chicago in 1919. He had a rather thin and wiry tone, but he made it work very well. His high notes would sing out with a more pleasing sound than most clarinets in the upper register. His lower register was very rich and warm with a lot of tone color and vibrato. He knew how to project his tone so that it would always cut through. There was an overall sense of joy in his playing. Willie created his personal style using long sweeping runs, extended high notes, and singing melodic phrases. Even late in life he practiced daily and continued to improve on his ample technique. He also gave lessons at times. He used to check my embouchure and was very complimentary on my tone. He advised me to always practice scales to better know the instrument and gain a more fluid technique – something that I continue to do to this day. I played with him in 1980 at a night-time Jazz Fest concert in a twenty-piece All Star Brass Band, which was an experience that I will cherish forever. Willie Humphrey was very encouraging and supportive. He conveyed the feeling that he was passing the torch of the special New Orleans clarinet style to me. I was quite humbled and honored by Mr. Humphrey’s words in a 1982 interview conducted by Charlie DeVore:

CD: Of the clarinet players today, is there any that particularly impresses you?
WH: Well, there’s this black fellow. I think he’s working on his doctorate now ... And he plays a nice clarinet. You might have met him - he’s associated with Tulane. ... His name is White.
CD: Michael White?
WH: That’s right. He’s very good. I really enjoy listening to him (“Talking with Willie,” Mississippi Rag, vol. 9, no. 8 [June 1982], 3).
My father was Louis Cottrell’s mailman, and he told him about me when I became interested in jazz. In his early days Mr. Cottrell (1911-1978) had studied clarinet with the famous early jazz clarinetist and teacher Lorinzo Tio. As a result, he was an excellent reader and was technically very competent. He had a long career in which he travelled extensively, played in big bands, and made a number of recordings. Mr. Cottrell served as the president of the local black musicians’ union for many years. In his later life he led his own traditional jazz band, which gained national visibility. Mr. Cottrell had a full mellow tone and a style based on long smooth runs and extended bent tones. I heard him many times with his own six-piece band, the Onward Brass Band, and small quartets. His advice to me was that to be successful on the clarinet you had to study and practice hard for many years. I try to remember his smooth mellow low register sound on ballads, which I had in mind on my composition “Crescent City Serenade.”

I also had the chance to hear and meet Paul “Polo” Barnes (1901-1981) and Joseph “Brother Cornbread” Thomas (1902-1981). Both of them had switched to the Boehm type of clarinet long before I heard them. Paul Barnes was the brother of clarinetist Emile Barnes who became well known late in life. Paul had played and recorded with King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton in the late 1920s. He had also played and recorded in New Orleans with Oscar “Papa” Celestin and was featured on saxophone on the 1926 recording of his own composition “My Josephine.” I saw him only a couple of times and could not hear him too well in the loud Kid Thomas band. I got some of his recordings and liked his pleasant sound. He never heard me play but was very encouraging when I told him of my interest in traditional jazz. It was an honor for me to play at his wake with Louis Nelson in 1981. After his death I got his Eb clarinet from his wife - which unfortunately was among my many treasures lost in Hurricane Katrina.

Joseph “Cornbread” Thomas was a self-taught but respected musician who was best known for his association with the Papa Celestin and Papa French bands since the 1950s. Although he struggled to play without teeth, he had a pleasant tone and good technique. I heard Cornbread several times and got to sit in with him on a quartet gig at the Maple Leaf. He called me once because he was having trouble getting a sound out of his clarinet. Inside I found a wedge of what looked like caramel candy stuck in the bore. After it was cleaned out the horn was fine. He thought I was some kind of genius for fixing his horn.

Baton Rouge-born clarinetist Joe Darensbourg (1906-1985) was often associated with the New Orleans players. I first heard him at Jazz Fest with Barry Martyn’s Legends of Jazz. Darensbourg had played with Jelly Roll Morton and Kid Ory, but was better known for having been a member of Louis Armstrong’s All Stars during the early 1960s. Around 1982 I went to UCLA to give a lecture on brass bands and was brought to Darensbourg’s Los Angeles home by jazz aficionado Alden Ashforth. We spent the afternoon with Darensbourg who was very eager to talk about clarinet playing and his career. He pulled out his Selmer Boehm system clarinet and showed me how he did his famous slap tongue technique on “Yellow Dog Blues” that made the clarinet sound almost like a string instrument. He gave me some reeds and talked about mouthpieces. I didn’t know that he was the composer of the popular jazz song “Lou-easy-an-ia,” which was a favorite of the George Lewis band. He autographed a copy of the sheet music, which he proudly gave me. He spoke with great fondness of his time with Louis Armstrong, revealing things that are not in jazz history books.

I also met and heard Herb Hall (1907-1996), the brother of famous clarinetist Edmond Hall. He had been living in Texas and came to New Orleans to make a recording. I heard him in a small ensemble at the Maple Leaf in which he was the only horn. He was a very good player who had a nice melodic approach. His Albert system clarinet had a big mellow tone but lacked the growls, excitement, and inventiveness of his brother’s playing. I didn’t get the chance to ask him too many questions, but it was great to hear another live variation of the distinctive New Orleans clarinet sound.

The older generation clarinetist who I interacted with the most was Raymond Burke (1904-1986). He was the most eccentric and unorthodox musician I ever saw. Raymond rarely performed...
outside of New Orleans and was not among the most famous clarinet players (although he was an underground legend to many traditional jazz fans). He was very unpretentious and very humble. When he played he often twisted and writhed about as if very uncomfortable or in pain. He usually played on beat-up, really old Albert system clarinets, sometimes replacing broken springs with rubber bands. He removed the side keys off the clarinet and closed the holes with wood filler. He told me, “I don’t use those keys so I got rid of them.” His reed would often be cracked, dirty, and chewed up. Once I saw him take his reed off to change it and inside the mouthpiece was a thick layer of slimy goop that covered the inner chamber. Raymond believed that he could get a better sound by opening the tip and chamber of standard mouthpieces. He reduced the delicate art of mouthpiece adjustment - a controversial and very exact science - to “scraping it with sandpaper” or “rubbing it on the sidewalk a few times.” Despite all of these peculiarities, which would have severely hindered anyone else’s playing, Raymond had the most beautiful tone imaginable.

His sound was big and full, with a rich upper register and a deep, mellow low register. He was a master at producing rich tone colors and bluesy effects. Because he was self-taught, didn’t read music, didn’t know notes and chords, and only depended on his ear, Raymond had a very unique style. It allowed him to easily negotiate different keys and song structures that trained musicians might consider difficult. He had a very keen sense of harmony and played beautifully with the trumpet lead. He was a minimalist and let the music breathe with well-timed open spaces. He made unusual figures and note choices sound good – often conveying the feeling of conversation. He often started his solos on an unusual high note and worked his way down into the middle and lower registers – the opposite of what most players do. During his last couple of active years I was hired to play alongside him every Monday night at Preservation Hall. He was suffering from respiratory problems, and I covered solos when he wasn’t up to them. Even when he struggled to get only a few notes out, the richness of his sound and sincere, assured conviction of his playing sounded better than anything I played at the time. We always “talked clarinet” when I gave him a ride home after the job. I had been asking him for some time how he got that sound. He encouraged me to experiment with harder reeds and more open mouthpieces. I was curious but never got up the nerve to ask about what some people called his “secret.” Everyone assumed that Raymond Burke was white. He looked white and lived that way throughout his lifetime. I occasionally heard that he was secretly hiding the fact that he had “black blood.” Early on he had changed his real last name from Barrios to Burke, which in New Orleans sometimes indicated a racial “secret.” I never found out the truth for certain. All I know is that he fit in very well with the black bands that he played with. He had some of the most soulful blues playing ever on clarinet. I was very fortunate to have had so much time with Raymond Burke. He influenced my approach to tone and phrasing. Much more than that, he gave me an important lesson about exploring creative individuality and possibilities in jazz improvisation – which was a great supplement to the more orthodox things I learned from other players and my own musical training.

The most famous early generation clarinet player that I got to hear was Barney Bigard (1906-1980). He had studied with master clarinetist and teacher Lorinzo Tio, Jr. and developed into one of the most prolific and important jazz clarinetists in history. In the 1920s he played and recorded sometimes
on saxophone) with King Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton. He joined Duke Ellington’s Orchestra in 1927, with which he became an important part of the “Ellington sound” for many years. In addition to playing fills and solos on many classic Ellington recordings, Bigard was featured on a number songs, most notably “Clarinet Lament (Barney’s Concerto),” which Ellington wrote for him. Bigard was also credited as co-composer on a number of songs, including the famous Ellington standard “Mood Indigo” – which was derived from a tune introduced to him by Lorinzio Tío. He later gained fame as a frequent member of Louis Armstrong’s All Stars between 1947 and 1961. He can be seen and heard on film clips with Ellington and in movies like New Orleans (1947) and St. Louis Blues (1958) with Armstrong and several other stars. Bigard was a technically accomplished player known for his big mellow tone, patches of fast, smooth chromatic runs, and long sliding glissando notes from the upper to the middle register. He successfully translated the distinctive early jazz Creole clarinet style into a valid, more modern swing style that was widely imitated.

I only heard Barney Bigard once, when he performed at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in a Louis Armstrong tribute concert in 1978. By then his playing had weakened somewhat, but his characteristic tone was still very beautiful. After the concert his wife went off to talk with friends and he remained alone on the side of the stage waiting and fuming. That was great for me because for about an hour I had him alone to myself. I asked him all kinds of questions about clarinet playing. He obliged with several tips about how to practice scales to get those legato runs and how to make those difficult long glissandi notes with the lips and fingers. We talked about reeds and he gave me a few of his – which to my surprise were the very soft size 2½. He talked a little about playing with Ellington and Armstrong. He told me that he was a product of many hard years of studying and practicing, who didn’t tolerate bad playing. I got someone to take some pictures of us and he gave me an autograph. When his wife finally came back he chewed her out, but I was very grateful that she had given me an opportunity to learn from one of the great legends of jazz. I still practice the things he told me and remain thankful to him when I play slow songs and make those extended sliding notes.

Even though I never had aspirations to become a bandleader, the job sort of fell in my lap. There was a lot of talk at that time about whether younger people could or would carry on the authentic traditional style after the older musicians passed on. Dodie Simmons, then a producer at Jazz Fest, asked me to put together a trio for a concert at the Fairgrounds Racetrack. My first group had Steve Pistorius on piano and Frank Oxley on drums. The job was well received. I added a bass player and the job continued for many years as the Michael White Quartet. In 1981 a colleague at Xavier, Dr. Thomas Bonner, asked if I could do a program for an academic conference that would involve me talking about
jazz history along with a live band. I tried to give the job to Teddy Riley, who just smiled and said, “It’s your job. You should do it.” With some reluctance I hired Teddy on trumpet, Louis Nelson on trombone, Jeanette Kimball on piano, Jerry Greene on bass, Emanuel Sayles on banjo, and John Robichaux on drums. I prepared a talk about the origins of jazz, its major figures, and its repertoire. The band gave musical examples of marches, rags, blues, and hymns. The program turned out better than anyone expected and was the highlight of the conference. That was the origin of what became my Original Liberty Jazz Band and also of the special jazz history programs that I have refined and performed for conferences, government agencies, universities, and other organizations dozens of times over the years.

I adopted the name “Liberty” for several reasons. In 1980 I had moved into my mother’s childhood home on Liberty Street. I thought that the name was in line with my objective of trying to free traditional jazz from the many stereotypes associated with it. It also was in line with the fact that in its original manifestation New Orleans jazz had a spiritually and socially liberating dimension in the community. I also discovered that Liberty Street ran through the history of jazz, linking various people and places together. I felt like it also connected me to the history of jazz. Buddy Bolden’s home was on First Street right near the corner of Liberty. My cousin Nelson Joseph ran a barbershop on the same corner, which doubled as a “musicians’ headquarters” where Bolden and others hung out, practiced, and booked jobs. Several musicians like Willie Warner and Professor James Humphrey lived on Liberty Street. As a youngster Louis Armstrong sang for tips on the corner of Liberty and Perdido Streets. Willie Humphrey lived on Cadiz Street just off of Liberty. The park where the Humphreys gave regular jazz concerts in the 1930s was on Liberty and Soniat Streets. Right across from the park was Soniat Cemetery, in which early jazz clarinetist Willie “Kaiser” Joseph (1892-1951), a cousin on my mother’s side, is buried. I could see his grave from my porch. Thus the name “Liberty” seemed perfect, as it embraces so much of jazz history, my goals in presenting the music, and my own life. In 1985 I formed the offshoot Liberty Brass Band, with many of the same objectives in mind.

Since I was teaching Spanish fulltime at Xavier starting in 1980 and playing quite a lot with other groups, I never intended to use my band beyond special occasions. As time went on, though, more and more jobs came: concerts at Xavier University, jobs in the French Market, parties, a few out-of-town gigs, and more. We played several times at the 1984 World’s Fair in downtown New Orleans. In 1988 the Original Liberty Jazz Band was part of the documentary film Liberty Street Blues, produced for the
National Film Board of Canada by Andre Gladu. I was a consultant on the project, which features an in-depth look at various local cultural traditions and forms of music: street vendors’ songs, Mardi Gras Indian practices, a social club parade, a gospel quartet rehearsal and street performers. My band was filmed at a house party that also had several older musicians and relatives of musicians, like Johnny Dodds’s son and Bunk Johnson’s daughter, in attendance. We had all of my regular Original Liberty Jazz Band members at the time: Louis Nelson, Danny Barker, Sadie Goodson, Chester Zardis, Gregg Stafford, Stanley Stephens, and myself. It was great to have several of the older musicians interviewed and filmed, talking about their music and demonstrating techniques.

Sadie Goodson (1901-2002) came from a Pensacola, Florida, musical family and was the sister of famed pianist and singer Billie Pierce. As a teen she played piano in the New Orleans area with Buddy Petit, Kid Rena, Chris Kelly, and several other jazz bands. She once accompanied blues singer Bessie Smith. She spent many years out of music and in Detroit, Michigan, as a nurse before returning to New Orleans and music in the 1980s. Full of life in her eighties, she soon renewed her relationship with her old boyfriend from the 1920s, Kid Sheik Colar. Sadie had a loud, full, two-handed, four-to-the-bar piano style that always swung with a rocking backbeat. She was a perfect fit in a driving rhythm section. Less than five feet tall, she sang the blues with a powerful Bessie Smith-like voice. She remained a vibrant feisty performer all of her life, specializing in classic blues and old pop songs. Some of her special numbers included “Don’t Get Around Much Any More,” “St. Louis Blues,” “Careless Love,” “I Cried For You,” and “Some of These Days.” I played many jobs with Sadie in the 1980s and 90s. We played together at the Mediterranean Café in the French Market with Gregg Stafford’s band on weekends for several years. She did many jobs with my band, and she and I played together with Kid Sheik and others. She had a big smile and laugh and loved the many ovations that she got from audiences. Many times she would stand up, stretch out her hands, wave at the crowd and say, “See me, I’m the star.” Sadie went on to tour Europe and make several recordings before moving back to Detroit in her last years.

By the mid-1980s I had started the first of dozens of international tours. In 1983 I performed in Lugano, Switzerland, with Wallace Davenport. The next year, while the World’s Fair was going on in New Orleans, I had one of my most memorable tours, going to Japan with Kid Sheik Colar. For a long time Kid Sheik and Louis Nelson had fueled my imagination with stories about touring there with George Lewis and how much the Japanese loved New Orleans jazz. For me this trip was a dream come true. The tour was sponsored by a Japanese concert association, which hosted various world musical styles and intercultural exchanges. In a month we played in seventeen cities on Japan’s three main islands in packed 500 to 2500-seat theaters. From the start there were many memorable moments. In addition to myself and Kid Sheik, the band included James Prevost on bass, Chester Jones on drums, Buddy Charles on banjo, and Frederick Lonzo on trombone. Kid Sheik loved Japan. He had been there a half dozen times before and always had fond memories of playing there. We performed in Osaka – Japan’s second largest city – on the same night as heavy metal star Ozzy Osbourne. In fact, we stayed at the same hotel, and Osbourne sat at a table next to us.

Sadie Goodson with the Original Liberty Jazz Band. Left to right: Fred Lonzo, trombone; Gregg Stafford, drums; Michael White, clarinet; Sadie Goodson, piano; Ernie Elly, drums. Photo courtesy Gregg Stafford.
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at breakfast. Somehow, the presence of a more famous musician in Osaka at the same time as he was got past Kid Sheik. Ozzy had played in a large stadium that night for tens of thousands of wild screaming young people. As we returned in our bus from our nice, quiet little theater concert we could see a few hundred anxious Japanese fans hoping to get a glimpse and maybe a photograph of the famous rocker. Most of the kids were “punked out” in their manner of dress: purple and green hair, safety pins and nails in their ears and noses, leather jackets, chains and heavy makeup. Thinking that this was his audience, Kid Sheik got very excited. He jumped up and hurried to greet them. He walked up to a group of young girls who had gotten close to see who was getting off the bus. Sheik looked at them and said, “Konichiwa. Did y’all go to the concert?” The girls looked at each other and said nothing. He got closer to them and said very loudly this time, “Con-cert. Con-cert. Did y’all go to the concert tonight?” One of the girls nodded and said yes, to which Sheik proudly replied, “That was me y’all saw! That was my band y’all heard tonight!” Then he pulled out a stack of autographed pictures of himself and handed a couple out. I would give anything to have a picture of the girls’ expressions as they stared at him, looked at each other, and walked off. My side hurt so hard from laughing that I had to sit in the hotel lobby for a half hour before I could go to my room.

Erving “Buddy” Charles was a great rhythm guitar player from the swing and early rhythm & blues eras. He had a very good ear and excellent timing, but he hadn’t played much traditional jazz or banjo before the Japan trip. Shortly after our arrival in Japan, Buddy called me on the phone: “Hey Mike, can you come down to my room? I think I have a little problem.” I ran to his room thinking that he may be sick from the long trip or the food on the plane. He opened the door and there was the banjo he had borrowed on the table in a million pieces. He looked rather embarrassed and said: “I took this damn thing apart and now I can’t put it back together. See this is my first time fooling with a banjo. I don’t know nothing about it.” We had to call all over Tokyo and lose most of our off day with our Japanese tour guide trying to find a banjo in a music store. We finally found one and that’s what Buddy played for the rest of the tour. One day the band was invited to a restaurant for a typical Japanese meal. There were no forks in the restaurant. I had learned to use chopsticks on the plane. They brought out a small square of fried tofu. Buddy just looked at the food for a while and asked how he was supposed to eat it. The waitress tried to show him how to use chopsticks. After several failed attempts Buddy looked at the plate for a while and finally figured out how to eat it. He put one stick down and viciously stabbed and picked up the tofu with the other. He victoriously yelled, “I got that sucker now,” before taking several bites. He asked what it was and the host replied, “Tofu. It is made from soy beans.” Buddy replied, “Toll food? Oh, soul food.” A few minutes later he whispered to me, “They say this is made of soy beans. I’ve been eating this s.o.b. for fifteen minutes and ain’t found a bean yet.” For the sake of digestion I didn’t eat next to Buddy for the rest of the tour.

Kid Sheik was in top form for most of the tour. Even though we played the same songs on just about every concert, I’d hear him practicing every day. His self-taught phrases and individual melodic interpretation never sounded better. We played “The Sheik of Araby,” “St. Louis Blues,” “Shake It and Break It,” “Over the Waves,” “Burgundy Street Blues,” “Bourbon Street Parade,” “The Saints,” and a few other songs. Although I don’t really like to sing, Sheik wanted me to sing “Ice Cream” every night. When Sheik played “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” there was such a purity and honest sadness and sincerity in his tone that every night I fought back tears. It was as if I could hear the entire history of the black experience being sung through that horn. The band usually sounded very good with the steady parade beat from Chester Jones on up-tempo songs. Along with him, Buddy Charles and James Prevost provided a swinging tempo that was always made the horns sound good. We knew that this job was important to Sheik and we were having a good time, so Freddie Lonzo and I, the two youngsters, did our best to play as a team. Our performances were well received, but it was strange to see the audiences sitting motionless throughout the concert until the end at which point there was usually wild applause. I have returned to play in Japan five more times with my own band, but that first trip with Kid Sheik was
As the 1980s came to an end it became apparent that my time with the older musicians was also drawing to a close. Every few months the bass drum would beat slowly to begin the sad dirges of yet another one of their jazz funerals. There were so many illnesses, hospital visits, and funerals that at one point I became numb. The death of each one of them felt like losing a close relative. It seemed strange back then how many of them were so concerned about the music during their final days. Many times I heard, “It’s up to you now to keep this music going.” It was as if each one was leaving a piece of themselves with me – the part that had the soul and spirit of their music; a part that maybe they had inherited from the first jazz generation; a spirit that was meant to continue, like an eternal flame; a part that I would nurture, share, and eventually pass on when my time comes. I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility and humility. By 1995 almost all of the early generation musicians that I played with were gone. As much as I felt honored and blessed to have been around and shared this special musical tradition, there was also anxiety over how the music would continue. Sure, there were many good musicians all over the world who were devoted players of the authentic traditional style. The older musicians generally loved and appreciated the interest of their cult of followers around the globe. But deep down they knew that the true spirit of New Orleans jazz (as it was passed on and remained in the city since the days of Buddy Bolden) comes from the lives, experiences, and soul of black New Orleans. Today the same spirit and feeling that went into the early jazz style is still very much alive – but it has been mostly channeled into more contemporary genres, like the modern brass bands, Mardi Gras Indian music, funk, gospel, rap, and bounce. Most of the musicians of the swing, modern jazz, and early rhythm & blues era who did play some traditional jazz strangely died out with the older musicians in the 1980s and 90s. Among the musicians of my generation and younger, many are only vaguely familiar with the authentic New Orleans jazz style and few take it very seriously. Many view traditional jazz as a “tourist” music, played only to make a living. Some of them view it as a limited set of simple tunes to convert into the “modern” (now over seventy years old) jazz style.

There is a small number of local musicians of my generation and younger who are addressing a more traditional approach, but few of them regularly listen to the music of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five and Seven, Jelly Roll Morton, Bunk Johnson, or George Lewis. Most of them never heard recordings by great New Orleans jazz musicians like Clarence Williams, Sam Morgan, Richard M. Jones, Dr. Michael White at Doc Paulin’s funeral, 2007. Photo by Derek Bridges.
Papa Celestin, Punch Miller, Red Allen, and so many others. As the years pass and I find myself among the “older” traditional musicians, I continue trying to pass on the knowledge and lessons that were passed on to me. Over the years there have been a few successes that give me hope. Although playing the clarinet is still what I love to do and do the most in music, my “mission” has branched out to include several related areas, like composing, recording, consulting, lecturing, writing, producing concerts and presentations, and being involved in films.

While working with so many New Orleans jazz greats, I have also had powerful encounters with major figures of other musical genres, like composer and stride pianist Eubie Blake (1896-1983), “father of gospel music” Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993), founding father of modern jazz Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993), major competitor of Louis Armstrong Jabbo Smith (1908-1991), and many others. I have been fortunate to perform in over two-dozen foreign countries and in almost every state in the Union. There have been a lot of adventures and exciting things to see. We have been able to bring New Orleans jazz to different and wider audiences. Hopefully we have raised the acceptance and consciousness of the music and its significance. I have been trying to show that New Orleans jazz is a style or an approach that can incorporate songs from many sources – not just traditional marches, rags, blues, hymns, and pop songs, but also songs from other ethnic folk musics and newer genres. I often express the belief that the authentic New Orleans style is one of the world’s greatest musical forms. It has not been exhausted by any means. Its principles can be used to make new compositions and fresh interpretations of classic songs and standards. It still can remain predominantly traditional in style and sound, but grow to include a musician’s personal experiences and feelings. On countless jobs we prove time and again that the music can still be socially relevant and quite pleasing to audiences of all ages from around the world – not just to older jazz fans.

At the close of the 1990s, my career as a full time university Spanish professor and my thriving musical life were becoming too difficult to handle together. My faith and many years of signs, messages, dreams, and “coincidences” related to this music were being put to the test. Just as I was on the verge of going through with the tough decision to leave academia, I was blessed by being awarded the Keller Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Xavier, which allowed me to stay on and do exactly what I was going to leave academia to do. Since then, I have continued teaching the African American Music course, produced the Culture of New Orleans concert / lecture series each semester, and have had the freedom and time to devote to scholarly and other activities that promote New Orleans music and culture. My productivity as a musician, composer, writer, producer, and teacher has increased tremendously. Much of what I consider to be my success has come from the Creator having allowed me to participate in the last years of traditional jazz as the dominant style in community parades and funerals, and to experience many years of camaraderie with the older musicians. They taught me things that could never be learned elsewhere and gave me experience that has formed my continually growing musical conception. I will forever carry inside the spiritual flame of New Orleans jazz that they all shared with me. I will continue to present and pass this special gift to the next generation and the world until the bass drum sounds for my next transition.
Clockwise from top left: Stephanie Cox and Natalie Rech; Russian visitors Svetlana and Valery Pisigin, bearing gifts of Valery's books on American blues and jazz, plus an exemplary Soviet-era jazz underground "bone recording"; Curator Bruce Raeburn shares orchestrations with musicians Bennet and Eliot Pearce from Anchorage, Alaska; Helen Regis; Melissa Weber, host of WWOZ’s Soul Power show and student in Tulane’s MA Musicology program; Greer Mendy; Olufunmilayo Arewa and Peter Riegel.
Clockwise from top left: Curator Bruce Raeburn and Bethany Bultman, Director of New Orleans Musicians Clinic; Hans Lychou and Lars Edegran; Alaina Hebert and Babette Ory; Elaine and Peter Haby; saxophonist and music educator John Doheny talks shop with the Curator; trombonist Frank Naundorf poses with his artwork; Tulane Library alumnae Annie Peterson (Preservation) and Nicole Shibata (Jazz Archive) return to the scene of former triumphs.
IN THE ARCHIVE

Clockwise from top left: The curator shares our newsletter with Walter and Ilona van de Leur of the Amsterdam Conservatorium; Jalynn and Tanya Justice; Calypso scholar Ray Funk (foreground) with Jerry Brock, Barry Martyn, and the Curator; Victor Hobson; Garnette Cadogen; Dr. Gerald Horne; Catherine Russell, daughter of pianist Luis Russell, and Paul Kahn.
Bessie Smith: Three Puzzles, Two with Answers

By Wayne D. Shirley

[Note: song titles refer to Bessie Smith recordings unless otherwise specified. Every record mentioned in this column is readily hearable on YouTube.]

In my last year’s column – my first for The Jazz Archivist – I found myself using the word “blues” only when it was part of a title. This wasn’t a stunt; it started as mere happenstance and ended as a device to avoid having to take up that insoluble problem of “What Is a Blues Anyway?” In penance, this year I’ll write about three of Bessie Smith’s recordings which identify themselves in the title as a blues, all of which stand in some relationship to the twelve-bar, AAB, “blues changes” harmonic pattern which we refer to when we say casually “it’s a Blues.”

I’ve picked them not as Examples of the Blues but because each of them has posed a puzzle for this Bessie Smith fan. In the case of the first and last I found an answer to the puzzle – to the first by listening to a recording of the song by other artists, to the last with the help of its copyright registration. The middle one is an example of a puzzle which at first seems easy to solve, but which, looked at more closely, yields a deeper question. The three are “Yodeling Blues” from 1923, “Sorrowful Blues” from 1924, and “Foolish Man Blues” from 1927.

“Yodeling Blues” (it’s spelled “Yodling Blues” on the record label; I’ve expanded the word to its spelling on other sources) was recorded in New York on June 14, 1923, with Fletcher Henderson’s authoritative (if somewhat staid) piano accompaniment. It was released on the same record with “Lady Luck Blues,” recorded on the same session. The third song from the session, “Sittin’ on the Curbstone Blues,” was never released in Bessie Smith’s version. The authorship of “Yodeling Blues” is credited to Clarence Williams and A. Hill. It is in a fairly standard form for a Bessie Smith record called a “Blues”: popular-song verse followed by a series of 12-bar/AAB blues stanzas which form the chorus. In the case of “Yodeling Blues” there are three twelve-bar blues stanzas followed by a free (if fairly routine) coda:

I’ve got the blues,
Go spread the news:
I’ve got those doggone yodeling blues.

(“Lady Luck Blues” is a verse-and-chorus popular song pure and simple; no trace of a three-line stanza.)

What’s the puzzle? Yodeling itself is the puzzle. Bessie Smith sings:

I’m gonna yodel, yodel my blues away,
(I said, my blues away);
I’m gonna yodel, yodel my blues away...
[Two-note attempt at a yodel]
I’m gonna yodel till things come back my way.

Why a song about yodeling that has so little relation to the yodel? Well, “Yodeling Blues” had been recorded before Bessie Smith made her record. This other record, while it contains no simon-pure
yodeling, establishes clearly the song’s relationship to yodel tunes. The record, made a month before Bessie Smith’s, has its writer Clarence Williams accompanying his wife Eva Taylor and his favorite singer Sara Martin in a hilarious duet version in which the tune of the first two lines of the chorus is clearly based on one of the standard yodel patterns—perhaps the best-known yodel pattern of them all. The yodel pattern appears as the first line of the manuscript copyright deposit (our Figure 1); the quickest way to hear it is as the yodel proper on Jimmie Rodgers’ “Blue Yodel no. 1,” easily findable on YouTube.

At least as important as the tune are the words of this pattern—the “yo-de-le-hi, yo-de-le-hi” which most of us know. As given to Bessie Smith, the first stanza of the chorus of “Yodeling Blues” runs:

Lawdy, Oh Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawd.
Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawd.
My man went and left without a cause.

Those first two lines are intended to be sung to a parody of that well-known yodel pattern; the “Lawdy, Lawdy” is a close parallel to the “le-hi...le-hi” of the yodel. (Indeed the point of the joke is the parallel between the yodel syllables and the often used “Lordy, Lordy” line of blues lyrics.) It’s clearly heard in the Eva Taylor/Sara Martin recording (where this stanza comes last of the three twelve-bar stanzas—punch line at the end).

But Bessie Smith, as happens fairly often, doesn’t follow the music she’s been given. Seeing two full lines of “Lawd” and “Lawdy,” she imposes an entirely different, declamatory musical line on them, also reducing all the “Lawdy”s to “Lawd”s. The result is magnificent, but it completely eradicates the point of the song. In Bessie Smith’s performance “Yodeling Blues” becomes a very listenable and quite serious blues about a woman whose man “has gone without a cause,” which suddenly veers into a determination to “yodel my blues away”; in the Eva Taylor/Sara Martin record it’s a romp on the idea of turning a standard yodeling pattern into a blues tune. Copyright deposit as well as the Taylor/Martin recording show the musical reference Clarence Williams had when he wrote “Yodeling Blues”; but it’s their recording which shows the spirit in which he wrote the song, and it’s from this record that I learned the answer to my puzzle. Both recordings are well worth listening to; only the Bessie Smith is a “puzzle.”

The second “puzzle”—the one I do not have a solution for—relates to “Sorrowful Blues,” which Bessie Smith recorded on April 6, 1924, accompanied by Robert Robbins, violin (not quite “fiddle”) and John Griffin, guitar. The session also included “Rocking Chair Blues,” accompanied by Robbins and by Irving Johns, and “Pinchbacks—Take ‘Em Away!” accompanied by Irving Johns alone. “Sorrowful Blues” is a straightforward blues of five stanzas (with a brief, famous introduction constructed from the syllables “Twee Twa Twa Twee”); “Rocking Chair Blues” consists of four twelve-bar blues stanzas with a four-line ABAB stanza between the first and second of them; “Pinchbacks” is a rollicking verse-and-chorus popular song using the tune of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” Writer credit for each of these is given to Bessie Smith and Irving Johns.

“Sorrowful Blues” is the one Bessie Smith recording which includes no keyboard instrument in its accompaniment. This may well have been done to suggest the folkish nature of “Sorrowful Blues”—five twelve-bar stanzas, picked each for its effectiveness with no thought for coherence of theme, let alone narrative or plot. (In fact none of the stanzas is particularly “Sorrowful.”) David Evans, on page 146 of his Big Road Blues, calls this kind of blues “nonthematic,” a good solid word for scholarly discourse. But, writing of “Sorrowful Blues,” I once described it as “not a coherent blues but rather a salad

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Leader 3 2  \textit{Modeling Blues}  by Lawrence Williams

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Figure 1}
\end{figure}

I wonder who leftist the hurt on me.
I wonder whoenson sent the hurt on me.
My man's gone back to his need to live.

Yodle, I'm going to yodle my blues away.
Yodle, I'm going to yodle my blues away.
Yodle, yodle, tell things come my way.

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of effective couplets.” Since then I’ve thought of this kind of blues as a “salad blues,” a term I’ll use for the remainder of this column.

“Salad blues” does not indicate the source of the stanzas which make up the salad. They may be new-minted stanzas -- by the person credited with the authorship of the song or by someone else --; they may be a collection of traditional stanzas; they may be a combination of both. The next-to-last stanza of “Sorrowful Blues,” indeed, seems to be a crystallization of an acknowledged truth:

It’s hard to love another woman’s man.
It’s hard to love another woman’s man:
You can’t get him when you want him, you got to catch him when you can.

It is now quoted, in these exact words (without repeating the first line), as folk wisdom, without necessarily any consciousness of its relation to Bessie Smith.

Now to the “puzzle.” About a month before Bessie Smith recorded “Sorrowful Blues,” Ida Cox recorded her well-known “Chicago Monkey Man Blues” for Paramount. (It is dated “ca. March, 1924” in the standard source.14) “Chicago Monkey Man Blues” is not a “salad blues”; it alternates stanzas addressed to the singer’s man John (“I’m Goin’ to Chicago, John, but I can’t take you”)15 with stanzas where the singer boasts directly to the listeners about her sexual prowess. Author credit for “Chicago Monkey Man Blues” is given on the record label to “Williams, Austin, Cox” – probably Clarence Williams, almost certainly Lovie Austin.

“Chicago Monkey Man Blues” and “Sorrowful Blues” share not one stanza, but two consecutive stanzas. Stanzas three and four of “Chicago Monkey Man Blues” run on the recording as follows (I transcribe from the second take):

I’ve got fourteen men now, and only want one more.
I’ve got fourteen men now, and only want one more;
As soon as I get that one, I’ll let these fourteen go.

John, I’m goin’-a tell you like the Dago told the Jew,
John, I’m goin’-a tell you like the Dago told the Jew:
“When you no gotee no money, mama can no usee you.”

Stanzas two and three of Bessie Smith’s “Sorrowful Blues” run as follows:

I got nineteen men, and I want one more.
I got nineteen men, and I want one more:
If I get that one more, I’ll let that nineteen go.
I’m gonna tell you, daddy, like the Chinaman told the Jew,
I’m gonna tell you, daddy, like the Chinaman told the Jew:
“If you don’t likee me, me sure don’t likee you.”

Before we get to the “puzzle” proper, here is what we can find out fairly readily about these matching sets of two stanzas each. Our first reaction may be “Ida recorded before Bessie, therefore Bessie borrowed/stole from Ida”; but the recording of “Chicago Monkey Man Blues” was not released until May – the first ads for it in the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier are May 31 – so Bessie
Smith could not have heard it in early April. So both the stanzas – separately or together – would have come from the blues repertory as performed live, most probably in venues such as black vaudeville.

Looking at the words just as words, “likee” is vaudeville-Chinese, not vaudeville-Italian (“Dago”): and the joke about mutual dislike is much more trenchant than the provide-money-or-no-sex sentiment of Ida Cox’s lyric. (Bessie Smith’s other Chinaman is a walk-on in “Put It Right Here (Or Keep It Out There),” one of Bessie’s several provide-money-or-no-sex songs.) What Bessie Smith sings – whatever its origin – seems to be the model and Ida Cox’s the later variant. (There’s no such differentiation to be made between the first stanzas of the two excerpts. Fourteen men or nineteen, either works as a lyric.)

It’s hard not to believe that these stanzas are traditional blues stanzas from the black vaudeville repertory surfacing in recorded versions, rather than material newly written by Bessie Smith or Ida Cox. But this is not the “puzzle.” The puzzle, in its smallest form, is how these two stanzas, without any obvious relationship to each other, show up together in two very different recorded contexts, apparently within a month. This is part of the ongoing puzzle of the blues in its twelve-bar AAB form: what are the origins (there are many) and what is the evolution of the blues lyric repertory. This puzzle will never, finally, be solved; we will never even have enough pieces put together to see the full design the completed puzzle might reveal; but even coming up with two pieces already put together is a delight and a reward.

Our third “puzzle” is set by “Foolish Man Blues,” recorded by Bessie Smith on October 27, 1927, with the accompaniment of Tommy Ladnier, cornet; Fletcher Henderson, piano; and June Cole, tuba. (June Cole’s tuba was probably wanted for the funereal atmosphere of “Dyin’ by the Hour,” the other number recorded that day – it even has the near-obligatory quotation of the Chopin Funeral march – but Cole acquits himself equally well in the peeved-rather-than-despairing context of “Foolish Man Blues.”) Author credit is given to Bessie Smith.

“Foolish Man Blues” is – this is our puzzle – Bessie Smith’s one comment on the world of LGBT. Chris Albertson’s biography makes it clear that Bessie was no stranger to lesbian encounters (without implying that they were her main interest), but it was not yet a topic for the standard blues repertory. When Bessie Smith sings of other women they are either rivals (“St. Louis woman, with her diamond rings…”) or, perhaps, gossips (“I never knock nobody, wonder why they pick on me”). When she complains about men she complains about one of four things: infidelity, violence, impotence, or lack of financial support. The closest she comes to a blues about non-standard sexual practices is “Salt Water Blues,” where the singer’s man apparently wants oral sex. (Her reply is “Man, I ain’t no billy goat.”) But “Foolish Man Blues” – four straightforward twelve-bar AAB’s – starts with two stanzas complaining in the abstract about gay behavior. The first stanza is perhaps a bit indefinite:

Men sure is deceitful, they getting worse every day.
Lord, men sure’s deceitful. They getting worse every day.
Actin’ like a bunch of women, they just gabbing, gabbing, gabbing away.

The second stanza, involving both sexes, is clearer:

There’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I can’t understand.
There’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I can’t understand:
That’s a mannish-acting woman and a skipping, twisting, woman-acting man.
The third stanza veers into the personal – “Lord, I used to love that man, he always made my poor heart ache...”, which, given the ability of twelve-bars to switch casually from third-person to first-person, suggests to the first-time listener that the singer is revealing her reason for the remarks in stanzas one and two. “Crooked as a corkscrew and evil as a copper-headed snake” is pretty much a standard blues-singer’s-eye view of a man avoiding responsibility, but it might also apply to a gay man with whom the singer has had a brief, experimental-on-his-side affair. Then the final stanza turns solidly hetero:

I knew a certain man who spent years running a poor girl down.

I knew a certain man who spent a year running a poor girl down,

And when she let him kiss her, the fool blabbed it all over town.

(Thus the final stanza gives “Foolish Man Blues” its title.)

Bessie Smith and her colleagues do a splendid job on “Foolish Man Blues,” which is a serviceable B side to its session-mate “Dyin’ by the Hour,” but it remains a puzzling song. For many years I was puzzled by the shift from the theme of the first two stanzas (which I extended to the third stanza, seeing the song as developing some narrative thrust) to a final stanza where the singer just changes the subject. I started listening to the full corpus of Bessie Smith recordings in the early 1970s; I continued to be puzzled by “Foolish Man Blues” until, early in 1990, I called up its copyright deposit during my work on the transcription of Bessie Smith’s lyrics. When the copyright deposit came up – a typed page [our Figure 2] with an attached page of score-paper with music but no words – the explanation came instantly: there on the typed page were the four stanzas, with the note

Blues (extra verses)
Miss Bessie Smith.

So the four stanzas were not meant as a coherent song (or as a pre-chosen “salad”) but as a series of stanzas, any of which could be used by “Miss Bessie Smith” when she needed one more stanza to fill out the time of a record. That the first two stanzas were about gay behavior is an indication of the antipathies of the anonymous writer, not an announcement of a subject. When Bessie Smith and her trio of accompanists needed another number for the session which produced “Dyin’ by the Hour” Bessie just sang down the four stanzas, and a somewhat confusing salad blues was born.

Who wrote the four stanzas? Certainly not Bessie Smith; of the four only the third has the proper feel of the blues. The first stanza is, admittedly, a possibility – “Eavesdropper’s Blues” has a little of its idea, though it’s much more personally expressed (“I never knock nobody, wonder why they pick on me”). But the second stanza really seems unblueslike, especially the phrase “I can’t stand.” Bessie Smith, in fact, changes it to “can’t understand” (as transcribed above), which sings better; I suspect she also thought it made the line better purely as a statement of how the singer feels. The final stanza – if the kiss of “when she let him kiss her” is just a kiss, then it’s pretty weak tea for something to “blab all over town”; while if it’s a euphemism for something else – well, a blues describing a seduction in third person is hard to imagine. (I have a vision of the writer as a lady in her early forties, respectably married, churchgoing, typist for a music company which prepares lyric sheets for blues singers. She has been asked to make up a series of individual stanzas which Bessie Smith can use if she needs a spare stanza to fill out a record side. She’s not so anti-LGBT as the first two stanzas suggest; she just wishes they didn’t exhibit it so [her italics]. And she remembers when she was younger and something like the final stanza...
Almost happened to her. She has enough understanding of the blues idiom – she’s typed enough of them! – to manage to produce one really resonant stanza, the third.

This solves my third “puzzle”; “Foolish Man Blues” is a “salad blues,” a series of unconnected stanzas, whose first two stanzas give it the illusion of being a blues on a particular subject. But it raises in its small way the complex subject: who wrote all those blues attributed to Bessie Smith? We have seen this question come up in our second “puzzle” as well. The answer to this – which includes the statement “yes, she did write some, perhaps many, of the blues attributed to her” – is material for another article. I am not the person to write that article, but I may well nibble at the edges of it in future columns.
Endnotes
1 Manuscript copyright deposit; Clarence Williams/Eva Taylor/Sara Martin recording.
2 You can hear “Sittin’ on the Curbstone Blues” in a lively instrumental version by Piron’s New Orleans Orchestra on YouTube. (The Carol Woods recording, also on YouTube, is a different song.)
3 On the label of the Columbia Records LP rerelease (GP 33 / CV 1041), credit is merely to Clarence Williams on the manuscript copyright deposit. (I have not seen the published music.)
4 With a brief and somewhat drab instrumental chorus by cornetist Tom Morris.
5 Jimmie Rodgers’ “Blue Yodel no. 1” was recorded in 1927, four years after “Yodeling Blues”; it is by no means the source of this yodel.
6 That is, as it appears in the manuscript copyright deposit. The Eva Taylor/Sara Martin recording gives the stanzas in a different order, ending with the “Lawdy, Lawdy…” stanza.
7 I dislike the spellings Lawd/Lawdy. I’ll quote accurately from written/printed sources, but will use “Lord/Lordy” when writing of what is sung.
8 Bessie Smith is fonder of “Lord” than of “Lordy”: see her “Lonesome Desert Blues,” which has the lines: “Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord / Oh Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord!”
9 An extreme example is “Baby, Have Pity on Me.” Bessie Smith’s tune is completely different in rhythm and contour from the tune as given to her; you can hear the tune-as-given played straight, as a half-chorus solo, by trombonist Charlie Green after her first chorus. (Given a well-known song like “After You’ve Gone” or “St. Louis Blues,” she will stick to the tune as it is known.)
10 There was also a published copyright deposit of “Yodeling Blues” (perhaps with the stanzas in the Taylor/Martin order?). I have not seen it: my fault, not that of the Copyright Office.
11 “Irvin Johns” in Chris Albertson’s Bessie (second and revised edition [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003]). I use the spelling found in most sources.
12 In “St. Louis Blues” Fred Longshaw substitutes reed organ for his usual piano to wonderful effect; in all other cases the keyboard instrument is piano.
13 David Evans, on page 69 of his Big Road Blues (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), suggests a sort of circular coherence to the five stanzas. It’s an interesting attempt but is not, for me, convincing.
15 Often quoted as “sorry, but I can’t take you”; but the word on both takes is clearly “John.”
16 “tole.” In the last line of this stanza, I can just possibly hear “use-a,” a good bit of stage-Italian, rather than “usee”; but it’s definitely “usee” in Take 1.
17 “provide money”: These songs tend to suggest an ongoing relationship which has gone sour (“But don’t you know, he would not work” from “Pinchbacks – Take ‘Em Away”) rather than a one-shot deal.
18 I will admit that there is interspecies sex – “zebra said to the camel…” – in the last verses of “You’ve Got to Give Me Some.”
19 A standard blues-melody formula of no particular interest to the researcher.
20 This paragraph is written partly to refute the just-possible suggestion “Maybe Bessie Smith herself sketched these stanzas and had somebody type them out in case she needed them.”
21 That is, in the sense “violently dislike.” “Can’t stand up, can’t sit down” – from “Moonshine Blues” – is a classic blues line. (Its opposite – “I can stand” – can be quite acceptable: “If he can stand to leave me, I can stand to see him go” in “Hateful Blues.”)
Central to the origination story of the Black Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans is their commitment to honor Native Americans who assisted Africans that escaped from bondage. In the history of the United States there is no greater example of this than the story of the Seminoles of Florida. This article is an effort to present brief nineteenth century background in context of a buried and forgotten past of the Seminoles in New Orleans.

The Seminoles were creative, industrious, and intelligent people made up from multiple Indian tribes, clans, Africans, and people of mixed ethnicities who joined together for nearly a century (1763 – 1858) to revolt against aggressive southern expansionists, slavery, and U.S. military forces. Between 1817 and 1858 the United States officially declared war against the Seminoles three times. As home to a United States military outpost, New Orleans was engaged in three decades (1830 – 1860) of Seminole war activities, negotiations, and, ultimately, removal of the Seminoles from Florida to Indian Territory.

Military records document all of the Seminoles who were removed to New Orleans as
“prisoners,” but local press commentaries suggest otherwise. Of the more than two thousand Seminoles who came through the city, most were quartered either at Fort Pike or the New Orleans Barracks (later Jackson Barracks). Many of the Chiefs and their parties, including women, children, wives, spiritual leaders, interpreters, and warrior braves were hosted and treated as visiting dignitaries.

Ironically, while a majority of public reports on the Seminoles refer to the Africans and people of African descent as slaves, military records suggest that Blacks were often leading the Indians, or that the two groups at least shared a common bond. Undoubtedly, military and political leaders did not want to encourage additional African and Indian uprisings or revolts, so the majority of Blacks who traveled through New Orleans in the Seminole migrations were deemed slaves under protection of the U.S. military.

Following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Seminoles conditionally agreed to the Treaty of Payne’s Landing on May 9, 1832. Article 6 states: “The Seminoles being anxious to be relieved from repeated vexatious demands from slaves and other property, alleged to have been stolen and destroyed by them, so that they may remove unembarrassed to their new homes; the United States stipulate to have the same property investigated, and to liquidate such as may be satisfactorily established, provided that the amount does not exceed seven thousand dollars.”

This being one more example of a decades-long argument on Black freedom. The entirety of the Seminole struggle can also be viewed as the longest and most successful African revolt in U.S. history.

The Seminole leadership was diplomatically adept, and their success in battle combined with their ability to evade U.S. troops exacted a toll on the military’s war chest, which led to three decades of peace negotiations with Seminole delegations visiting Washington, Baltimore, New York, Charlotte, and New Orleans. Future Presidents Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor, along with the military leader General Winfield S. Scott and others, could not defeat the Seminoles, so the U.S. opted for a policy of diplomacy and endurance mixed with war. U.S. diplomatic efforts grew following national and international outcry when General Thomas Sidney Jesup deceived and captured the Seminole warrior Osceola and his party at a peace negotiation meeting near St. Augustine in October 1837.

Osceola’s fame as a powerful and brilliant warrior was unmatched during his life. He was born Billy Powell of Creek and Scots-Irish ancestry and raised by his mother as Creek. The artist George Catlin observed that, “at all the plays, and other many sports, Powell was reputed first in the Nation: and his name was changed to As-se-o-la from the fact that he could drink a greater quantity of the 'black drink' (called as-se-o-la) which was prepared from some bitter and nauseating herbs and drank preparatory to the fast and feast of the green corn dance.”

Osceola died on January 30, 1838. In Louisiana and elsewhere following his death his name was reborn and perpetuated through love and respect in the given names of the very next generations; a practice that extends to the present. There are monuments and namesakes in his honor throughout the United States and world.

Two months after Osceola’s death, on March 17, 1838, the Daily Picayune published this newsworthy item: “The St. Charles is to be honored tonight with the presence of some celebrated warriors, viz: - old Micanopy, the king of the Seminole tribes; Jumper, the orator, warrior and constant
companion of the late Oseola [sic]; Cloud, who commanded the hostiles at the battle of the Wahoo Swamp; King Philip, so long one of the principal leaders, and Coahajo, the most kind hearted and friendly disposed man among all the tribe, attended by six of their picked braves."

The following day a review came out on the “Visit of the War Chiefs”:

The visit of the Seminole Chiefs Micanopy, Jumper, etc, to the St. Charles Theater on Friday evening attracted a large audience. The untutored savages manifested a high degree of interest in the entertainments of Holland and Barrett. Sometimes their mirth was so uncontrollable, that commencing in a low murmur, it broke forth in boisterous whoops and yells, as amusing to the pale faces as were the performances on the stage. To these the warriors, the whole affair must have given an idea of the magnificence which they never before entertained concerning the works of human art.

The grandeur of the house, to say nothing of the music life on the stage, or the plaudits of the dense crowd, was itself a novelty which could not have failed to please them.

After the performances were over, they were accommodated, as we understand by Mr. Caldwell. A sumptuous repast was spread for them in the Green Room; after which they were provided with comfortable lodgings of their favorite kind (i.e. with blankets) on which we venture to say they slept with far more comfort than when among the alligators of the Florida hammocks.

Chief Micanopy and his followers were moving to the west. He had visited Washington, D.C., and attended theater in New York prior to this event. Chief James Jumper, who was with Micanopy at the St. Charles Theater, became Head Chief of the Seminoles upon Micanopy’s death. Members of Jumper’s family were among the approximately 300 Seminoles who, by agreement, remained in Florida following the conclusion of emigration to Indian Territory.

Micanopy, circa 1838. Lithograph by Thomas McKenney and James Hall, from painting by Charles Bird King. Florida Memory, State Library and Archives of Florida

Two months after the St. Charles Theater event, another delegation of Seminoles made news in the local paper:

The Seminole Wedding

Sauntering along the levee on Sunday last, (a performance for which we enact every seventh day for the purpose of cultivating our bump of romance and devotion, both of which are wondrously excited by means of the numerous objects there exhibited, illustrating the handy work of Nature,) we observed a considerable procession of Seminole Indians, of both sexes, moving upwards. When we first saw them, they were near “the Vegetable Market” comin’ as we supposed, from the new garrison. The leader of the column or line, (which is more proper expression we know not,) was a stout athletic sample of a red man, painted with a rainbow or something else containing all sorts of colors, and hung about with as many rings and bells as a Chinese Pagoda. We made some inquiry as to what was on foot, and soon found that it was a wedding party.

The stout Indian at the lead carried in one hand “an ensign with the union up” and in the other a scrip of paper with some writing upon it. In the same hand he also bore a small vessel something like a sub-treasury safe, for receiving the “special depositories” of those who might like to disburse a portion of their “surplus revenue” – said depositories to constitute perhaps a dowry for the tawny bride, or more probably to be spent in carousals during the honeymoon.

At the other end of the train, were the blissful twain who were about to be consolidated into one – the ceremony being conducted upon the plan of a Free Mason’s march, where the most important personages bring up the rear. –

In their progress they stopped at every shop or store where there happened to be a gathering, and went through a performance which may be considered very good among that nation to which the performers belong, but in our opinion it would suffer aside an Italian opera. As to the paper above alluded to and its inscription, we had not the specific resolution to examine it, as one who attempted to read it informed us that the first word was so crooked, that his mouth was twisted clear around in endeavoring to pronounce it.

Wherever the party stopped, they were treated with the utmost kindness and lots of money was presented, whether to compensate for the music or to get the amateurs to depart, we cannot say.

A sufficiency of the rhino having at length been served, the weddingers returned to their quarters; and though the shower which threatened, may not have overtaken them, yet we have no doubt they were well soaked.13

It appears, though it’s hard to imagine, that some of the Seminole delegations to New Orleans were free to move about the city on their visits, and, while some spent only a few days, one group of more than a thousand stayed over a month. On June 23, 1838, an advertisement for an evening at “Vauxhall” inside the St. Charles Theater noted:

THE SEMINOLE INDIANS
Mentioned below will visit Vauxhall
This evening, Saturday June 23, 1838,
Ho-la-too-chee, Head Chief of the Seminoles,
Kla-e-fus-ke, Chief & Warrior

The entertainments will commence this evening with a Grand Concert, after which Vaudeville, Love in Humble Life.14

Among the listed visitors, Ho-la-too-chee was the son of Micanopy. Sc-aahk-tuste-nugee, Chief of the Istelustes and principal interpreter, was also known as Old Abraham or Negro Abraham. He was top advisor and interpreter to Micanopy. He was an African who escaped slavery, educated himself, spoke multiple languages, and as a leader interpreted for Seminole chiefs with U.S. Presidents and military leaders. Sc-aahk-tuste-nugee visited New Orleans on three known occasions.15

The Vauxhall performances included some of the city's leading instrumentalists and singers, orators, and comics. George Holland was the theater's stage manager and artistic director during the visits by Micanopy and Ho-la-too-chee. Holland was born in London in 1791 and worked in early nineteenth-century theatrical productions in England as an actor and comic. He moved to the U.S. and did the same until 1836, when he was hired by James Caldwell as his personal secretary at the New Orleans Gas Light Company and treasurer at the St. Charles Theater.16 He entertained at least three Seminole groups during that time.

In November 1841 Chief Wild Cat and Hospitaka visited the city briefly. Wild Cat and John Horse later led the Seminole migration to Mexico. When Osceola was captured Wild Cat was with him and he led the escape for the rest, while Osceola, who had fallen ill, remained behind.17

Following the death of Osceola and western emigration of Micanopy, the Head Warrior Chief of the Seminoles was Billy Bowlegs, who remained defiant for another twenty years, evading and battling U.S. forces and negotiating peace agreements without ever agreeing to move from his homeland.18 Arrivals at New Orleans in November 1849 included a:
“SEMINOLE DELEGATION. – The Steamboat Ohio ... with the Seminole Delegation being thirteen in number, including two interpreters. These Indians are en route to Florida for the purpose with having a ‘talk’ with Billy Bowlegs, Sam Jones, and other chiefs, in order to induce the remnant of the Seminoles to consent to leave the peninsular and rejoin the main body of their nation in the West. The following are the names of the Indians composing the delegation: Hallech-tus-tin-ug-gee, Tus-senuc-chop-co, Cho-co-tus-teineee-coo-che, Tar-co-se-fixico, Cot-char-fixico, Al-butta-chee, Ma-ke-me-kee, Ho-ial-ke-harjo, Jim Factor, Joe Reilly interpreters.”

A New Orleans Daily Picayune account of the meeting with Chief Billy Bowlegs reads:

THE SEMINOLE INDIANS. The Republic has been permitted to read and make extracts from private letters received in Washington from a gentleman who was present at the late council between the Seminoles and the commanding General in Florida, and whose knowledge of the language of the Indians and long residence amongst them impart weight and authority to his statements. The replies of Assunwha and Billy Bowlegs to the talk about emigration do not indicate the willingness of the Indians to go West, which was inferred from other advices from Tampa Bay. ... The Indians, some fifty or sixty in number, had been there nine days with three of the murderers, and the hand of the fourth, who was killed in the attempt to capture him. Every chief and sub-chief of note of the nation was there. They looked haggard and depressed, and spoke of their having gone through much trouble and many trials in capturing the young men who committed the murders on Indian River. After the United States commander-in-chief addressed the council, Assunwah, the chief speaker of the nation replies as follows to that part of it which related to the removal from Florida: We did not expect this talk, when you began this new [removal] matter I felt as if you had shot me. I would rather be shot. I am old and I will not leave my country. Gen. Worth said he spoke for your President, too – that he was authorized to make peace and leave us quiet in our country; and that so long as our people preserved the treaty – yours would. For many years you have had no cause to complain; and lately when a few bad young men broke the law, a thing that cannot be prevented among any people, did we not hasten to make atonement? We met you as soon as we could, and promised to give ample satisfaction; and from that day we have not rested. We have killed one of our people, and have brought three others to be killed by you, and we will
bring the fifth. There has been much trouble and grief; but we have done justice, and we came here confident that you would be satisfied. Now when you ask us to remove, I feel as though you had killed me too. I will not go, nor will our people. I want no time to talk or think about it, for my mind is made up. As for the delegation [alluding to a proposed delegation to be composed of members of the tribe heretofore emigrated to Arkansas, and brought to Florida to induce their friends to follow them.] I did not invite them to come and see me. Some Seminoles went to Arkansas a long time ago. We were then sorry to lose them; but we have got over that sorrow long since, and now they are nothing to do with us, and we do not desire to see them. I did not expect this talk, and had I done so, I would not have helped to deliver these men up to you.

Billy Bowlegs who is fine looking fellow of forty followed with great earnest and dignity of manner. After talking somewhat to the same effect as Assunwah, though with more wildness of phrase, but not of manner, added:

We have now made more stringent laws than we have ever had before, and I have brought here many young men and boys to see the terrible consequences of breaking our peace-laws. I brought them here that they might see their comrades delivered up to be killed. This business has caused many tears, but we have done justice.

I now pledge you my word that if you will cease this talk of leaving the country, no other outrage shall ever be committed by people, or, if ever hereafter, the worse among my people shall cross the boundary and do any mischief to your people, you need not look for runners, or appoint councils to talk. I will make up my pack and shoulder it, and my people will do the same. We will all walk down to the seashore, and we will ask but one question: ‘Where is the boat to carry us to Arkansas?’

... When Billy Bowlegs was asked, after the council, if the delegation from Arkansas should be sent out to him as soon as they arrived, he became agitated and held his breath for a moment. He then said with great deliberation: “Wild Cat is my friend! Tell him not to come to our country until I send for him.”

In April 1850 it was reported that Chief Bowlegs recommitted to General Twiggs his determination to never emigrate.21 And in November 1852: “The Seminole Indians, now, in Washington, had an interview with the Indian Commissioner on the 16th inst. Abraham, the old negro, acted as interpreter, and the commissioner gave them a long talk, setting forth the advantages and benefits that would accrue to the Indians in Florida, if they would consent to move to the West, and give up the folly of their attempt to resist the power of the United States. To all of which Billy Bowlegs responded that he had a bad cold and would consider the subject.” The delegation also visited New York including Manhattan and Brooklyn on this trip.22

Chief Billy Bowlegs remained defiant to move west until 1858. That January a delegation from Indian Territory returned to Florida to attempt to intervene in favor of western migration. On January 12 the news broke in New Orleans:

Death of An Indian Chief: Yah-hah-Anglice [sic] Brave Chief, one of the Seminole tribe died suddenly on Customhouse street yesterday. A post mortem examination showed that death resulted from a congestion of the lungs. The deceased was one of the delegation at present in the city, on their way to Florida, the purpose of their mission being to have a “big talk” with that belligerent redskin known as Billy Bowlegs on the subject of smoking of the calumet of peace with the whites, who wish to sit down under their own vine and fig tree in the pleasant everglades of the Floridas—a laudable desire
which the Seminole brave makes it impossible to accomplish with any degree of comfort. The friendly Indian was interred, in the St. Louis Cemetery with all the honors customary amongst his tribe on such occasions, and that could be given under circumstances.  

The next day it was noted:

INQUEST—An inquest was held yesterday on the body of Yah-hah-toxica [sic], an Indian chief of the Seminole tribe, and one of the delegation now in the city in transit to Florida at instance of the Government, to induce Billy Bowlegs to accept with his tribe a reservation west of the great Father of Waters.

This Seminole brave was overtaken by the insatiable archer, without the opportunity to gather his riches about him; and with the dignity that characterizes the race, meeting the call of the Great Spirit while chanting his war song. In the busy haunts of the white man, while traversing into streets—curiously, yet with apparent indifference, eyeing the evidences of his powder—he fell amidst a group of his delegation; and his spirit entered the unknown hunting grounds, which according to his religious faith, are prepared for the Indian braves.

His associates bore his remains silently to their lodgings, and after submitting to the inquisition of the Coroner, gave him a burial in one of our cemeteries, using the rites of their tribe as far was as practicable in a crowded city.

The incident was one that was unusually interesting, and many watched the proceedings of these sons of the forest with more than ordinary curiosity. His death was caused by congestion of the lungs.

The hardship of the wars made disease the leading cause of death on both sides.  

After three decades as a warrior and two decades leading the Seminoles in battle and in negotiations, Chief Billy Bowlegs understood that the Americans would never leave him alone, so he chose to migrate west. The front page of the May 15, 1858, edition of the Daily Picayune declared:

End of the Seminole War: Arrival of Billy Bowlegs

The U.S. Steamer Grey Cloud, Capt. Drake, arrived yesterday at the Barracks from Calosehatchee River, Fl., with 165 Seminole Indians on board, among whom are Billy Bowlegs, principal Chief; Assoonwah, second Chief; Nokose Emathlah and Foos Hadjoe, sub-chiefs; Nokus Harjo, Inspector General; and Foos Hatchu Emathla Bowlegs, Lieutenant, with a large majority of all the Indians in Florida.

Col. Rector, Superintendent Indian Affairs, who is in charge of the delegation from Arkansas and the Indians emigrating, has been quite successful in his operations, and is unquestionably entitled to the thanks and commendation of the Government for the final close of the Florida war. The remaining Seminoles in Florida will emigrate as soon as an opportunity is made known and offered to them. The Government has expended millions in carrying on a war against a few brave men, who would never surrender to force, but who, through kind treatment and judicious management, have been induced to leave their native and immigrate to the country provided for in the West.

Three days later the public was invited to meet Chief Billy Bowlegs: “Billy Bowlegs at Vanheulls [sic] —All curiositydom will be at 107 St. Charles Street, at 10 o’clock in the morning, to see the renowned Seminole Chief Billy Bowlegs who will be present for the purpose for receiving visitors. Those of his tribe who are here with him will accompany him on the occasion.” Seminole Warrior Chief
Billy Bowlegs emerged for the last time from his homeland and onto St. Charles Street with his wives and party of near two hundred braves and the untold number of locals that joined him. A New Orleans correspondent wrote a two-page feature on Chief Billy Bowlegs’ two-week stay in the city:

Billy Bowlegs, the King of the Everglades has been with us. For a week he was our Lion-in-Chief. ... that he would honor our city with a brief visit I felt that it was my duty to “take” him in another way, so that his royal features might be handed down to posterity in the pages of Harper’s Weekly.... the result of my efforts in the shape of the portraits of his Majesty of the Everglades. His two brothers-in-law, his young wife, and last but not least, his “guide, philosopher and friend,” the negro slave Ben Bruno.

Our admirable photographer, Clark [J. H. Clark Studio, 94 Canal St.], placed the whole of his apparatus, together with the capital operator, Carden, at my disposal for this purpose. ...

Billy Bowlegs – his Indian name is Halpatter-Micco – is a rather good looking Indian of about fifty years. He has a fine forehead, keen, black eye[s]; is somewhat above the medium height, and weighs about 160 pounds. His name of “Bowlegs’ is a family appellation [of the name Bollek] and does not imply any parenthetical curvatures of his lower limbs. ... He has two wives, one son, five daughters, fifty slaves and a hundred thousand dollars of hard cash. ...

No-Kush-Hadjo, his Inspector-General, and the brother of his “old wife,” is as fine a young fellow as you would hope to see. He wears his picturesque Indian garb with the grace of a drapery of a Greek statue, and, with his silver circlet around his head, stalked along our streets with an air that seemed to imply that he honored the pale-faces by condescending to walk through their brick-and-mortar city.

Long Jack, Billy’s Lieutenant, and the brother of his younger wife, is much less prepossessing. The unflattering photograph gives a perfect presentation of his figure, features, and dress, even to the night-gown of gaudy calico in which he evidently flattered himself that he was making a decided sensation. ...

Billy’s young wife, who had no name, as far as I could learn, is a quiet modest squaw though her features bear a striking resemblance to those of her rakish brother, Long Jack. ...

Ben Bruno, the interpreter, adviser, confidant, and special favorite of King Billy, is a fine intelligent looking negro. Unlike his master, he shows a decided predilection for civilized life, and an early visit to a ready-made clothing establishment speedily transformed him into a very credible imitation of, “a white man’s nigger.” He has more brains than Billy, and all his tribe, and exercises almost unbound influence over his master.

Billy Bowlegs is a direct descendant of the founder of the Seminole Nation. A little more than a century ago, a noted Creek chief named Se-coffee, broke away from his tribe, and with many followers, settled in the central part of the peninsula of Florida, they were followed by other bands, and all received the name of Seminole, or Runaways. ... At first the Micksasukies, the legitimate owners of the country, at first opposed ... In a short time all the Indians amalgamated and joined in efforts to resist the white man...

In 1821 Florida was ceded to the United States, emigrants began to pour in who demanded possession of the lands. The Indians were estimated at about 4,000 men, women and children with eight hundred negro slaves.\(^{28}\)
When Billy Bowlegs arrived in New Orleans, he came not as the “poor Indian” on exhibit; but as Chief Billy Bowlegs, the proud and undefeated Chief of the Seminole. The Seminoles had held off and survived the best the U.S. Army, Marines, and Navy could throw at them. There is no known account of the day’s activities on St. Charles Street on May 18, 1858, but with Chief Billy Bowlegs, his family, closest friends, and at least one hundred and eighty five warrior braves, it is hard to imagine that there was not ceremony, songs, dance, music, and powder.
Chief Billy Bowlegs and the Seminoles continued their Native American story unlike anyone before or since. They were far slower to adopt white conventions than the other “Five Civilized Tribes” that settled Indian Territory. The Seminole Black and Indian relationships affected their relations with other tribes in Oklahoma and caused fragmentation within the tribe. Many Seminoles migrated to Mexico, and some returned to Florida.

The presence of the Seminoles faded in New Orleans print until after the Civil War, when the June 17, 1868, edition of the *Carrollton Times* ran an advertisement from their office at Second (now Maple) and Short Street:

Grand Exhibition,
To be given at Boese’s Hall,
Corner of Leonidas and Levee Streets,
This evening,
June 17, 1868
At 7:00 P. M. by
FIFTEEN SEMINOLE INDIANS!
The entertainment consists of
INDIAN SCENES, SONGS, SPEECHES,
And
WILD INDIAN DANCES!
Programme,
Long Dance, or Journey Dance,
Drunkards Dance,
Regions Song – Tom Wildcat and squaw,
Wild Buffalo Dance,
Green Corn Dance,
Chula Bungo Dance,
Bull Dance,
Tick Dance,
To conclude with the
SCALPING SCENE.
Admission 50 cents children 25 cents
Doors open at 7 o’clock P. M. performance
Comiences at 8.29

George Boese, a German immigrant who dealt in groceries, dry goods, and a tavern in Carrollton, had opened the Hall about six months earlier. Peter Soulier, the owner and editor of the *Carrollton Times*, wrote, “The Celebrated Seminole Indian Company have given general satisfaction and delighted the audiences wherever they have performed. It is new, novel and interesting. All who wish to see fun should go to Geo. Boese’s this evening.”

*Carrollton Times*, June 17, 1868.
Four days later the Seminoles appeared in Algiers Point:

Magnolia Park, Algiers, Sunday June 21, 1868. A Free Exhibition to the visitors of Magnolia Park will be given as above from 3 to half past 6 P.M. A Band of WILD SEMINOLE INDIANS. The entertainment consists principally of Indian Scenes, Songs, Speeches, and Wild Indian Dances. To conclude with the startling and thrilling SCALPING SCENE, 1. White Man Pursued by Indian, 2. The Search, The Discovery. 3. The Attack, the Great Scalping Scene. A fine, and for the present last opportunity to see, in their athletic manhood, the once proud possessors of this continent, and witness the strange customs and habits of natural warriors.

The railroad ferry, opposite Jackson Square, connects with Magnolia Park, and the trip itself makes a fine excursion. Fare only five cents. 31

On June 24 they returned to Carrollton:

Lookout for the Indians! Another Grand Exhibition will be given on this evening, at the Hall of George Boese by the Seminole Indians! New songs, dances, etc., will be the entertainment of the evening, after which ladies and gentlemen will have the opportunity of taking a trip on the “fantastic toe.” The Indians will give their last performance on this evening, previous to their departure for the European tour. It is estimated there were over three thousand persons who witnessed their performance on Sunday last, at the Magnolia Park, in Algiers. Those who have not witnessed their performance should not lose the opportunity. 32

The Baton Rouge Daily Advocate advertised:

INDIANS - The Seminoles are among us, there will be a performance given at Pike’s Theater, on Tuesday evening June 30th, of fifteen Seminole Indians who are accompanied by their young and handsome chief Wild Cat.

The Indians sing their strange, wild songs, perform their war dances, and get up mimic, scalping scenes for the benefit of those who have never been scalped. These Indians are said to be of those who accompanied Billy Bowlegs on the warpath when he was once the scourge and terror of Florida. Don’t fail to see them, for tomorrow evening is their first and last appearance in this city. They are now on their way to Europe for Exhibition. Go early and get seats. 33

Chief Tom Wild Cat and the Wild Seminole Indians apparently wanted a change from their life in Mexico and returned stateside, first appearing in Galveston, Texas, before making their way to New Orleans. It is possible that Chief Tom Wild Cat was the son of Chief Wild Cat who had been to New Orleans twenty-five years earlier. It’s also conceivable that they had been to the city with Chief Billy Bowlegs a decade earlier, and, if so, its likely one or more of them attended theater in New Orleans. 34 It’s unclear whether a European tour ever materialized, but a month later on July 23 the Seminoles received their final mention in New Orleans, and what became of them afterwards is unknown:

Three Seminole Indians called at Headquarters this morning, and one, the spokesman of the party, handed Major Keeler a document written on a piece of
yellow paper, which gave a somewhat muddled account of an arrangement entered into between certain parties in behalf of the United States and one James McHenry, Col. 1st Creek Regiment, for the purpose of including the Seminole Indians to remove west. McHenry represents that, though he did not succeed in getting the whole tribe to emigrate, that a large number had done so through his influence, and he has never received any pay for his services. Major Keeler, after trying in vain to get at their wishes, was compelled to hand them back their paper, and informed them that he knew nothing of the matter. One of the Indians was a full blooded Seminole, and quite aged; he did not seem to comprehend why the Major did not at once hand him over the amount specified.

The storylines that feed into the history and tradition of the Black Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans date to at least 1718, when the first enslaved Africans arrived here. The traditional music of the Mardi Gras Indians in their call-and-response singing and polyrhythmic drumming is ancestrally tied to African and African Caribbean life, but it is in the dress, dance and wildness of character that the Mardi Gras Indians embody and pay tribute to the Native American.

There were many tribes in the New Orleans area historically, and today, including the Choctaw, Tunica, Atakapa, Chitimacha, Natchez, Houma, Bayougoula, Creek, Tensas, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Acolapissa, Illinois, and others that should be better recognized and included in any discussion of local contributions made by Native Americans to New Orleans’ cultural legacy. It is only because of the breadth and significance of the Seminole story in New Orleans that evidence exists to acknowledge some of the people and a brief part of their life in an urban cultural interchange between African Americans, Native Americans, and Euro-centric Americans that includes song, dance, and theater.

“Chula Bungo,” one of the dances performed by the Seminoles at Boese’s Hall in Carrollton in 1868, could be a direct influence on historic and present day Mardi Gras Indian dance traditions. This is the earliest known account of the Chula in New Orleans. The Chula dance is a challenge dance traced to 16th century Brazil. It is rooted in Africa and Iberia-Spain and popularized by the Portuguese. The Seminoles had a long past with the Spanish in la Florida. Historically the Chula featured two male dancers facing off in a competition of heavy rhythmical and quick steps along the line and length of a spear with boastful movements. A strong rhythm of bass drum, hand percussion, cymbals along with lead instruments such as a guitar and viola in a call and response pattern drove the music. Today it often features an accordion. In Brazil three groups adopted the Chula: the African Brazilians of Bahia, the practitioners of Capoeira, and the Gauchos in the south. The Black Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans perform a Chula dance in their own style including a face off challenge with war-like moves and postures, quick strong steps and music of strong rhythmic percussion and call and response.

The story of the Seminoles in New Orleans is one of those rare accounts where, even though the U.S. deployed its torch and destroy policies against them over a long period of time, there were moments of recognition and celebration and the coming together of people of different races to celebrate life in defense of their rights, honor, and mutual livelihood.

Author’s note: It’s important to recognize that the Seminoles are still a force to be reckoned with in Oklahoma and Florida and their websites are easily found. The history of the Seminoles is rich, long and consecutive, and an important part of American history. Each Seminole who lived to maturity had generally three names and often four during their lifetime, as well as an American name. My focus was their time in New Orleans, so I used the name used in local press and documents. There were many other Seminoles who came through New Orleans that did not get mention here for the sake of brevity.
Thanks to the staff of the Hogan Jazz Archive and the Louisiana Research Collection at Tulane University, whose patience and service is greatly appreciated.

Endnotes
2 Seminole Emigration Records; www.seminolenation-indianterritory.org/seminole_emigration_records.htm
3 Anthony E. Dixon, “Black Seminole Involvement and Leadership During the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842” (diss., Indiana University, 2007), 156-7, 188: “As a tactic to sever the bond between the Seminole Indians and the Black Seminoles, [General Jesup] began to entertain the idea of offering those Indians who vehemently opposed migration a reservation in the [Florida] territory. ... It is clear that General Jesup and the United States military viewed the Seminole Indians and the Black Seminoles as two distinct groups. ... On December 9, 1836, Jesup reported, ‘This you may be assured, [the Second Seminole War] is a Negro, not an Indian war.’”
4 Treaty of Payne’s Landing, 1832, Article VI (www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/seminoles/sets/1832_paynes_landing/).
5 New York Evening Post, May 1, 1826, 2: “The Indian Chiefs of the Seminole and Creek nations, now in the city under charge of Humphrey’s, visit the Park Theatre this evening. Their names are Gov. Hicks, Meconoper [sic Micanopy], Ocholochemish, Fockalasles, Talsamatr, Mekamates, and Daefairman.”
6 Tom Hatch, Osceola and The Great Seminole War: A Struggle for Justice and Freedom (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 236: “By the time of his death, Osceola had become a larger than life character and the most famous Native American in the world.”
8 United States Census, 1790 – 1860. Given name Osceola (death January 30, 1838) does not appear until 1840 U.S. Census. From there the name continues to grow in number and location; Family Search and Ancestry.
17 “The Indians are arriving … Wild Cat and Hospitaka,” New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 19, 1841, 2.
18 Dan L. Thrapp, Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography: Volume 1, A-F (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 111-2: “Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco), Seminole Chief (c. 1808–1812 – January 1, 1864) and a shrewd leader of the Seminoles in two of their wars against the whites, and head chief of the Florida bunch of that people.”
25 Hatch, Osceola and the Great Seminole War, 255: “The U.S. Army officially recorded 1,455 deaths during the [second] war, mostly from disease ....”
27 “Billy Bowlegs at Vannheul’s [sic],” New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, May 19, 1858, 2.
29 “Fifteen Seminole Indians,” *Carrollton Times*, June 17, 1868, 2.
30 *Carrollton Times*, June 17, 1868, 2.
32 “Look out for the Indians!” *Carrollton Times*, June 24, 1868 (Carrollton, La), 2.
36 Peter Fryer, *Rhythms of Resistance and African Musical Heritage in Brazil* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 129: “In 1822 the Venetian geographer and statistician Adriano Balba (1782-1848) included the fado ... *chula* and *volta no meio*, in a list of ‘the most common and most noteworthy dances of Brazil.’”
38 Listed below are YouTube links to the three forms of Chula found in Brazil. African Brazilian: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxMecqXsE6c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxMecqXsE6c); in Capoeira: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5VAnq3Cqd8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5VAnq3Cqd8); and Gaucho tradition: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H53ztfJS_A4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H53ztfJS_A4).

Chief Billy Bowlegs, seated third from left, with a group of Seminole Indian delegates in New York, 1852. Standing at right is Abraham. Photo by Meade Brothers Studio. The Isenberg Collection, Archive of Modern Conflict, Toronto.
Curator’s Commentary

Looking back on nearly three decades of growth, I have to marvel at the broadening of boundaries and range of topics that The Jazz Archivist has incorporated in that time. In this issue, for example, the voices of distant indigenous people who influenced the development of New Orleans music in the 19th century commingle with that of a contemporary musical icon whose musings on the “passing of the torch” to him by jazz elders in the 1970s and 80s inspires reflection on the ways in which tradition influences innovation in New Orleans music. It’s all relevant to deepening our understanding of how New Orleans music has been shaped and by whom. Thanks to Lynn Abbott and Alaina Hebert for taking this newsletter to the next level.

During the past year, our Swedish friend and benefactor Björn Bärnheim has been an active participant in the Hogan Jazz Archive’s outreach efforts. In conversation with the Curator, he presented the results of his research on Louis Armstrong’s return visits to New Orleans at the 2016 Satchmo SummerFest on August 6 at Le Petit Theater, correcting misinformation about Armstrong’s departure from Chicago in May 1931 (see his article in the 2015 newsletter). Coverage also included Armstrong’s reign as King Zulu in 1949, and the controversy that attended it in the media, using a photograph of Armstrong, jazz critic Leonard Feather, and Master of Ceremonies George W. “Tex” Stephens taken at the Zulu Ball, along with a letter from Feather to Orin Blackstone recounting the fun he had in New Orleans. Björn has already been booked to present his findings on Armstrong’s response to civil rights issues in the decade before the Little Rock incident for the 2017 festival symposium.

These Armstrong materials surfaced just in time for Satchmo SummerFest thanks to the processing of the Orin Blackstone Collection by Archive staffer Lynn Abbott—a treasure trove of photographs and correspondence revealing the inner workings of the collector community in the 1940s especially. Thanks to Alaina Hebert, the John Robichaux Sheet Music Library is now available as a discrete collection, a concomitant of the research conducted by Fulbright scholar Mathilde Zagala, a Ph.D. candidate from the Sorbonne, who delved deeply into that collection in her investigation of “secondary ragtime” in New Orleans in 2014-15. Björn’s activities in August also included conducting an interview with Down Beat correspondent and clarinetist George Lewis’s manager Nick Gagliano in tandem with Lynn Abbott. The Curator and

Orin Blackstone, New Orleans-based newspaperman, pioneer jazz discographer, jazz journal editor, and jazz record store proprietor. Orin Blackstone Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
Lynn interviewed saxophonist John Doheny as well, exploring the vagaries of a career that spans jazz and rhythm and blues and has extended from Seattle through Vancouver to New Orleans, where Doheny now makes his home. Although the Archive has been less ambitious about conducting interviews than in the past—most of our efforts now go into preserving what we have gathered over half a century—when we see a good opportunity, we jump on it.

Right: Nick Gagliano with the press camera that he used during his 1940s-50s tenure as a New Orleans correspondent for *Down Beat* and manger of the George Lewis Band. Photo by Björn Bärnheim.

Below: Nick Galiano’s photograph of Louis Armstrong at the 1949 Zulu Ball, Booker T. Washington High School Auditorium, February 27, 1949. Left to right: Leonard Feather, Louis Armstrong, George W. “Tex” Stephens, Zulu Queen Bernice Oxley, possibly former Zulu Queen Edwina Robinson. At far right is bassist Arvell Shaw. Orin Blackstone Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
Leonard Feather letter to Orin Blackstone, March 3, 1949, regarding his recent adventures at Mardi Gras.
Orin Blackstone Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
Sheet music cover, “Tee-Na-Nah,” 1910. John Robichaux Performance Library of Sheet Music and Orchestrations, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University. For the benefit of our researchers, this invaluable resource has been reconfigured as a discrete collection.
Meanwhile, Christopher Coady, a lecturer in musicology at the University of Sydney Conservatorium of Music in Australia, was the first recipient of two Björn Bärnheim Research Fellowships awarded in 2016. He visited the Archive in September, working on social justice issues related to New Orleans brass band traditions, including a close look at the role of high school marching bands, such as the Saint Augustine Marching 100.

Among the recent enhancements to the Archive is a scrapbook belonging to Original Dixieland Jazz Band trombonist Eddie Edwards, donated by his grandson, Gary Edwards.
Gary was in New Orleans for the US premiere of Italian director Michele Cinque’s *Sicily Jass: The World’s First Man of Jazz* at the New Orleans Film Festival on October 15. Cinque made extensive use of the Nick LaRocca collection at the Hogan Jazz Archive and sought to re-evaluate LaRocca’s story without capitulating to or ignoring the controversy that often surrounds it. We applaud all efforts to view jazz history with fresh eyes, and toward that end, encourage readers who are working on relevant research topics to submit articles to our editors, Lynn Abbott and Alaina Hebert. As usual, back issues of *The Jazz Archivist* are available as pdf files for free on our homepage. For those who wish to have hard copy of the newsletter, checks made out to “Hogan Jazz Archive” for $25 to cover printing and mailing costs will be necessary. Thanks to all, and enjoy this spectacular issue.

- Bruce Boyd Raeburn

The King Oliver Band at the “Entertainer Club,” Oakland, California, 1921. Orin Blackstone Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University
The indomitable New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival was preceded and informed by similar efforts dating back to the 1940s. One progenitor of the “jazz fest” idea in New Orleans was the National Jazz Foundation, which held a remarkable series of jazz concerts in 1944-45. The good work of the otherwise obscure National Jazz Foundation has been chronicled by Bruce Boyd Raeburn in his *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* and by Charles Suhor in his *Jazz in New Orleans: The Postwar Years Through 1970*. A welcome addition to the literature on the National Jazz Foundation has emerged in the form of concert programs saved by Orin Blackstone. Above is the program for first National Jazz Foundation Concert, held at the Municipal Auditorium, New Orleans, on October 4 and 5, 1944. Orin Blackstone Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.