

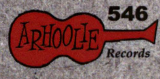
# PAPA LEMON



New Orleans Ukulele  
Maestro & Tent Show  
Troubadour



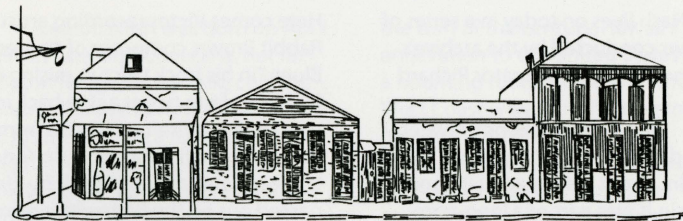
the 1959-61 Oster & Allen Recordings  
**LEMON NASH**







Dick Allen (standing) with Tulane Hogan Jazz Archive "founding fathers," William Ransom Hogan (right) and Bill Russell (left) circa 1958. PHOTO COURTESY TULANE HOGAN JAZZ ARCHIVE



Longtime New Orleans resident Tom Stagg remembers seeing Lemon Nash hanging with the regular crowd around Jackson Square in the late 1960s. Alongside the usual brass bands and hustlers, there was Ruthie the Duck Lady, who wore roller skates and a wedding dress, a row of ducks waddling behind; Mississippi bluesman Babe Stovall, playing guitar behind his head for a growing number of hippies; street evangelist and folk artist Sister Gertrude Morgan, routinely harassed by the musicians she tried to overpower with her gospel; and a man known only as Grandpa, owner of the longest tongue in the world — "a massive, dreadful tongue, like a cow's tongue" — that he would roll out to the horror of young ladies. Somewhere in that scene, playing a number or two on his ukelele then

moving on, was the guy they called Papa Lemon. Jackson Square was not his first variety show.

In the 1920s, Lemon traveled with a medicine show hawking blood tonic for an Indian chief and a legless cowboy. Later, he took to the road with at least three different circuses. But over the years, with the exception of two stints on the railroad and a stretch with the Merchant Marine, he was most likely to be found hustling tips in the streets and barrooms of New Orleans, sometimes in a small group, sometimes on his own. "We'd go anywhere," he tells us. "We didn't have no special place. Anywhere we could get a dollar, we'd go there and play." More often than not, that meant down in the Vieux Carré on Bourbon or Decatur Street. And it is in New Orleans at Tulane's Hogan Jazz Archive where



Lemon Nash lives on today in a series of interviews conducted by the archive's late founder and head curator Richard B. Allen.

On three occasions between 1959 and '61, Allen sat down with Lemon to ask him about his life, acquaintances, and music. It was part of a long-term effort by Allen and historian Bill Russell to build a large archival collection of jazz oral histories. Several of the songs and all of the interview segments on this record come from those sessions. The rest come from the collection of Dr. Harry Oster, founder of FolkLyric Records and dedicated field recorder of Louisiana music, who caught up with Lemon around the same time.

The Hogan tapes comprise six reels, totaling nearly four hours. Allen leads the interviews, with Russell present but mostly quiet at the first and last sessions. A few others (particularly Allan Jaffe) chime in with questions on the final tapes. Their avid curiosities about the bars, brothels, and musicians of the early jazz scene drive Lemon's street-level recollections. As the sessions unfold, and Allen's pour gets heavier, a long gone world and its inhabitants emerge:

Here comes Victor recording artist Rabbit Brown, composer of "James Alley Blues," in his frock tailcoat, raising a false fire alarm to get a ride back into town with his fireman friends from the station. There lies Barrelhouse, "one of the lead serenaders and fish fry kings," passed out on the floor with an empty bottle of Sweet Lucy wine. Where the Superdome stands today, we now find the Battlefield, a tough red-light district known for its dives, dance halls, and theaters, and where the famous "sixteen shooter" Winchester rifle, in Lemon's telling, is standard issue. Out on Bourbon Street, Earl Roach blows his fist "just like a trumpet," then heads with Lemon down to the Absinthe House before cutting over to Pat O'Brien's. Honky tonks, cabarets, bootleg houses and good time houses: Lemon brings them all to life with colorful detail. He also takes us through a little bit of his medicine show routine, and tells us a few tales from his time away from New Orleans — like that regrettable night at Pickett's Hall in Knoxville, Tennessee, when in the excitement of a fatal stabbing, some terrible guy stole his coat and hat.

Lemon Nash was born on April 22, 1898 in Lakeland, Louisiana, not far from Baton Rouge. As a young child he was brought to live in New Orleans, where his mother ran a rooming house. Among the musicians he recalled hearing in his early years were Buddy Bolden, Buddie Petit, Papa Celestin, and Bunk Johnson. There was music in the family, too. Three of his uncles had a string band, and young Lemon followed suit, picking up guitar and then mandolin before settling, around 1917, on what would become his signature instrument.

Public fascination with the ukulele had been building for nearly forty years — growing steadily, it seemed, from the very moment in August of 1879 when a group of Portuguese workers arrived in Honolulu from the island of Madeira carrying with them a little four-stringed instrument they called the machete. Interest spread fast among the locals and soon jumped to the mainland where, in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair, the ukulele made its official stateside debut. By

the turn of the century, Hawaii's annexation to the United States and a booming tourist trade with the West Coast were contributing to a growing appetite for Hawaiian music. Sales of Hawaiian records, especially those featuring steel guitar, soon grabbed a huge share of the budding market, and while there were very few ukulele records made, the instrument itself was flying off the shelves. Down in New Orleans, a teenager was getting ready to jump on board: "Uke was so famous out here at the beach and different places," Lemon explained, "I saw everyone was playing the ukulele, so seemed like they all liked the ukulele so I got with the uke." Guitar would always be in the mix, and soon an added banjo, but the ukulele remained a Lemon constant for the next fifty years.

If the ukulele was reaching its height of popularity in the early '20s, the medicine show tradition, its own peak already thirty or forty years past, was in sharp decline. Still, around this time Lemon hit the road with the Big Chief Indian and Western



Photo by Ben Shahn. Unknown Performer, Medicine show, Huntingdon, Tennessee, Oct. 1935 Library of Congress, FSA-OWI Collection



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Cowboy show selling Royaline Blood Tonic throughout the South. "They had the old Indian man, Chief Half Moon," he explained, "and a cowboy that lost both his legs riding wild horses. They was in partnership together. We was the string band: we had a mandolin, ukulele, guitar, and a fella with a trumpet."

Borrowing from minstrel shows, vaudeville routines, Wild West exhibitions, and Native American culture, the musicians, comedians, dancers, and other performers drew crowds at a time when entertainment was not yet widely available at the twist of a dial. Tonics, laxatives, bitters, salves, and other patent medicines were advertised to cure everything from indigestion to madness. The shows were free, but the medicine was a buck a bottle. From Lemon's perspective, business was never better. It was his job to prime the pump for the pitchman with music and comedy, and then to get out there among the gathered crowd, hand out the medicine, and collect the cash. Standing among the people was a shill, or a plant, there to testify on cue about the miraculous effects of the medicine. "Man," Lemon recalls, "I come back with my two hands

I couldn't hardly hold them dollars." Over the years, Lemon spent more time out on the road with traveling shows, including the John Robinson, Downie Brothers, and Sells-Floto circuses. For a while he hovered around Tennessee, working out of Nashville with a nine-piece band and doing live radio ads for a music store. In the 1940s, he logged eight years with the Merchant Marine, sailing out of Norfolk, Virginia, up to New Haven and Boston. Of course he had his ukulele with him, and the other sailors were more than happy to throw a little something his way for a number.

In the late fifties, Lemon was a regular drop-in at Larry Borenstein's art gallery at 726 St. Peter Street in the French Quarter. Jam sessions featured Kid Thomas, Billie and DeDe Pierce, George Guesnon, and bazooka player Noone Johnson, among others. Some forty years later, 504 Records issued eleven Lemon cuts recorded informally by Borenstein at his gallery. These and one track on Oster's Storyville LP *The Country Blues* represent the only other commercially available recordings of Lemon Nash. In 1961, Allan and Sandra Jaffe took over the lease of 726 St. Peter,

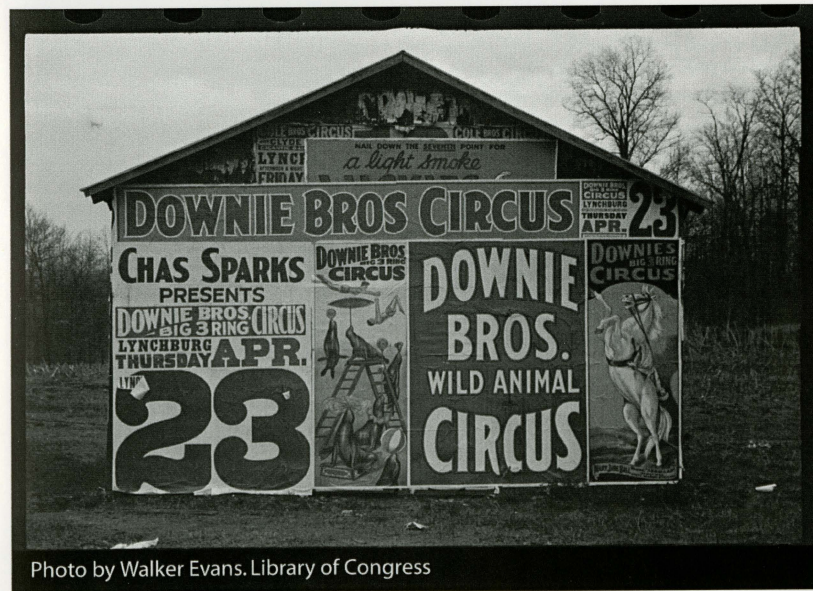


Photo by Walker Evans. Library of Congress



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## New Orleans Ukulele Maestro & Tent Show Troubadour



## the 1959-61 Oster & Allen Recordings LEMON NASH

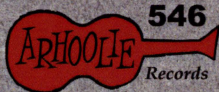
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1. Bourbon Street Parade
2. Papa Lemon's Blues
3. Serenading with Frank Wagner
4. Grave Digger's Blues
5. Trouble With the Man
6. What Was A Medicine Show Like?
7. Bowleg Rooster, Duckleg Hen  
/ Sweet Georgia Brown
8. \$25 a Night
9. Nobody Knows You When You're Down  
and Out
10. Anybody Seen My Kitty?
11. Please Give Me Black and Brown
12. Barrelhouse
13. Let the Good Times Roll
14. What a Friend We Have in Jesus
15. Way in the Hee Hi Hoo
16. We Played Anywhere
17. I'm Blue Every Monday
18. Stagolee
19. The Battlefield
20. Rabbit Brown
21. If You Could Fight Like You Can Love
22. Those Drafting Blues
23. Spano's and Fox
24. Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen
25. Big Rock Candy Mountain
26. The Jiggler Vein and the Raincoat
27. Brownskin, Come and Go With Me