

# KID THOMAS

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Kid Thomas Valentine, tpt: Manuel Paul, tnr. sax: Louis Nelson, tbn: Joe James, pno: Creole George Guesnon, bjo: Sammy Penn, drums: Alcide 'Slow Drag' Pavageau, bass.

Recorded at the WDSO Radio Station, New Orleans, 24th May, 1959

It is evident to anyone visiting New Orleans that the gloomy predictions regarding the future of "the music" by the noted Jazz historian, Samuel B. Charters, were well founded. Today the youngest New Orleans musicians to be found playing there are at least fifty years old and even these must be called "Modern" by traditional standards. To the optimist one must say that there are no young musicians who are keeping alive the spirit of Bolden, Keppard and Oliver. Of the older men, some are unknown, though in recent years a revival of interest in the music of New Orleans has led to one avid search after another leaving few men of note undiscovered. Others like Kid Howard, George Lewis and Paul Barbarin have become famous. Yet in a sense the music of their bands was without natural stimulus, the product of commercialism and for the most part it sounds just that. No dedicated Jazz critic, for instance, can take seriously the much publicised recordings by the Celestin Band which, at the best of times, was no more than a Society band, even though these were high-lighted by the clarinet playing of Alphonse Picou. In general, the spontaneity which characterised the classic period of New Orleans Jazz (1895-1923) has been missing since the death of Bunk Johnson and even he, it must be remembered, felt stultified playing with New Orleans men, preferring the "Moderns" of New York and Chicago. The household names which we today regard as typifying the spirit of New Orleans are propelled rather by public demand than by the joyous and melancholy factors that inspired the original creators. One only has to spend an evening at one of the nightspots on Bourbon St. to realise the extent of departure from Jazz feeling that has occurred at the hands of commercialism. To hear "the Saints" pounded out a dozen times per night with "no Blues permitted as they are bad for business" exacts a terrible toll. For such a virtuoso as Albert Burbank this soulless exploitation bears out the shame expressed in the New York Times that America had turned her back on her one contribution to World culture and folklore.

And yet there is one ray of light apart from the handful of itinerant Blues singers that have charmed Europe in the past five years, the integrity and loyalty of a youthful Algiers trumpet player. Although now in his sixty-sixth year, Kid Thomas Valentine can only be described as youthful; the boyish grin, the slender build and a head distinguished by a total absence of grey. Born in 1896 at Reserve a small plantation settlement near New Orleans, Thomas received his first musical instruction at his father's knee. By the time he was fourteen he was in regular attendance at rehearsals of the Brass Band in which his father played alto horn. At eighteen he formed his first band, naming it after his friend, the local druggist, called Nile. On the death by drowning of the trumpet player in the Marshall Lawrence band, Thomas was invited to join them. All the Hall brothers, Edmond, Clarence and Robert played clarinet at one time or another with this band whilst a fourth brother played sousaphone. In 1922 Thomas moved to New Orleans where for a time he worked in a Livery Stable, though keeping up his music by means of rehearsal. The names of others playing with Thomas at this time are somewhat uncertain but Thomas' first public appearance in New Orleans was with the Eagle band who by virtue of their red uniforms were known as the Red Devils. The band played both for parades and for dancing. During the same period Thomas played with the famous Jack Carey and it is reported that Carey wept when Thomas left the band to form his own. In spite of his admiration for Oliver, Mutt Carey and others and lessons from Prof. Manuel Manetta, Thomas has to this day retained his own style, nor has this style changed over the years as is the case with countless other New Orleans men.

After leaving Carey, Thomas played with many different musicians right up to World War II and later formed what was virtually his present band, the first to join him being Sammy Penn on drums. The few personnel changes sharply contrast the ups and downs of other New Orleans bands. The close personal friendships that have grown up among members of the band are remarkable not only for their duration, but for their fullness. Many of those who flocked to Speck's Moulin Rouge, the Tip Top and to the West Wego Fireman's Hall in the mid fifties were struck by

the spiritual force and presence exacted by the band, both collectively and individually, but most important, from our point of view, is their music. It is essentially the music of New Orleans, for which as yet no satisfactory definition exists. The question of how and why Jazz evolved may never be answered, but the fact remains that it did, in New Orleans. And, as time recedes, the best answer we can hope to find is in the living music, played in a natural environment, devoid of commercialism. That at least we can define.

These in short were the thoughts that prompted me to make these recordings. So with the co-operation of Kid Thomas, Manuel Paul, Louis Nelson, Sammy Penn, Joe James, George Guesnon and Alcide Pavageau, and the help and advice of Bill Russell and Bill Humphries, arrangements were made to hold a recording session in one of the television studios at WDSO Radio Station on Sunday, May 24th, 1959. With the help of Ralph Collins and his Oldsmobile, everyone arrived on time only to find that the studio was in use. After a brief conference with Bill Humphries it was decided to hold the session in a plush reception room adjacent to the WDSO News Studio. The room itself had been wired for recording but so far never put to use. Its acoustical qualities were, therefore, uncertain while the carpets and furniture hardly pointed to success. In the absence of a suitable alternative it was decided to go ahead and engineer Lyn Michel proceeded to set his microphones. While this was in progress came the heartening announcement from the news announcer that the session would have to be interrupted every fifteen minutes for news, weather and commercials!

None of these restrictions caused the least concern among members of the band. It was instead the audience that was glum—but we had learned our first lesson on the nature of New Orleans music, recalling the early days when the band kept right on playing even after a shooting. Nor as it turned out afterwards to our delight, was any of the tension we had feared, captured on the tape. Apart from an imperceptible shortening of "Maryland" (as the sweep second hand crept up to News time) the session might have been held under ideal circumstances. The fine organization of Bill Humphries and Lynn Michel played no small part in the success of this recording.

The repertoire was as varied as it was typical of any evening at the Moulin Rouge though one might have included a Viennese Waltz, firm favourite of the older dancers on the south bank of the Mississippi. To the devotees of Bourbon St. and its frenzied crescendo of noise, of strident trumpets and clashing cymbals, this record may come as something of a revelation. As, with drama, the most profound lines are seldom if ever shouted out, and yet there is nothing so forceful in the world of music today as Kid Thomas' trumpet attack. It must surely be one of the most powerful since Bolden and is certainly the most powerful today. But the most striking characteristic of Thomas' playing is not in the presence of power but rather in his control and use of it. At times he sounds almost languid, at times staccato, but always controlled.

"Stingaree Blues" is an original composition of piano player Joe James who like Thomas was a pupil of Professor Manetta. Joe was born at Oakville, La., in 1902. At twenty-five he took up banjo and played mainly with Teddy Johnson's band. At thirty Joe was playing piano and learned the blues from a guitar player. He travelled widely through the South-West before joining Thomas with whom he has now been playing for more than twenty years. Nearly every time he plays "Stingaree Blues" the vocal is different and Joe says the verses run to over a hundred.

"I Believe I Can Make It By Myself" is sung by drummer Sammy Penn who has been with Thomas longer than anyone. Sammy was born in Morgan City, La., in 1902 and started his musical career under Prof. Ezekiel Mark with whom he studied for about three years. After five years with Jake Johnson in Morgan City, Sammy played in turn with all the giants of the day, Jack Carey, Buddy Petit and Kid Rena. His drum style is simple and unaffected, his timekeeping perfect.

Louis was also born in 1902 in New Orleans, though while a baby, the family moved to Napoleonville, La., where his father had a medical practice. His first instrument was an alto horn and

he received lessons on this and trombone from Prof. Williams. His mother was a graduate of Boston Conservatory and a mathematician. Among those that he has played with are Joe Gabriel, Sidney Desvigne, Jack Carey and Papa Celestin.

The band also give traditional New Orleans treatment to two more pop tunes, "When My Dreamboat Comes Home" and "On A Coconut Island", the latter with a spirited Neo-Creole vocal by George Guesnon.

Of the other members of the band not previously mentioned, Manuel Paul, tenor sax, is well known as a long standing member of the Eureka Brass Band and has been with Thomas a number of years. A gifted musician, Manuel gives the band a tremendous rhythmic impact. On bass, Alcide "Drag" Pavageau, not a regular member of the band, and at seventy-four the oldest of the group, gives a fine performance, more often to be remembered by those familiar with the George Lewis band.

It is hoped that this record will provide a moment of truth for all lovers of Jazz and more especially to lovers of New Orleans music which the tracks here presented are, from first to last. Unlike many post-war commercial releases, this was completely unrehearsed, with a New Orleans band that has played and will continue to play together for a number of years. The music is primarily intended for dancing and has nothing of the clinical aura of a great deal that passes for New Orleans Jazz both on the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. and here in Europe. Like most of the great New Orleans jazzmen, the Thomas band prefer to play without sheet music, though to comply with requests they do occasionally have recourse to it. New material is played at sight, generally by Manuel Paul and in former times by Edmund Washington. As soon as the new piece is mastered, normally in a matter of minutes, the music is added to that already digested in a battered suitcase. Again this is indicative of the essence of New Orleans music, a freedom from the sterility that so often defeats the rendition of the academic school.

In recent months, the Kid Thomas band, unobtrusively and modestly have come to receive a little of the just recognition that we have tried to capture on this record. The band now plays regularly at Preservation Hall on St. Peters St., New Orleans, often with George Lewis on Clarinet, a feature developed by Grayson Mills and Larrie Borenstein. In February of this year they were featured in the Huntley-Brinkley report on coast to coast television and it is to be expected and hoped that arrangements will be made to bring this (and what is perhaps the last), of the great New Orleans Bands to Europe. **Mike Slatter.**

**PANAMA  
JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE  
ON A COCOANUT ISLAND  
MARYLAND, MY MARYLAND  
I BELIEVE I CAN MAKE IT BY MYSELF**

**EH LA BAS  
I CAN'T ESCAPE FROM YOU  
WHEN MY DREAMBOAT COMES HOME  
STINGAREE BLUES  
SIBONEY**

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