

SR/ RECORDINGS SECTION

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THE SINGING HORNS

By FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

This article carries forward part of a long program of study made possible by awards from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. A series of on-the-spot recordings complementing the verbal text has just been issued by Folkways.



Jack Wimes, bass-horn of the Lapsey.

BRASS band playing has contributed so much to American music and to celebrations of Independence Day for so long a time that it should be no wonder that elements of a lusty tradition of brass survive in remote country areas. It is a matter of some wonder, however, that very little probing into the history of early Negro brass bands has been done. In many ways, the tradition of horn playing that grew up in these bands may have formed a principal ingredient of the first known forms of the new dance music that evolved in New Orleans, possibly in the 1890s, later known as jazz.

As early as 1838, when the *Daily Picayune* reported "There is a real mania in this city for horn and trumpet playing," there was a love of band music, and the horns that blew it, in New Orleans. Horns were also making themselves heard in small brass bands that blew out in the country. The Greene County, Alabama, *Gazette* of July 12, 1830, carries an account of a Fourth of July commemoration held in the countryside near

Eutaw: "An excellent barbecue was prepared, of which it is supposed more than 500 persons partook." The observance at nearby "Greensborough" (Greensboro, Hale County) was illumined by several "Tunes" struck up by a band as each patriotic toast was delivered.

The *Gazette* ran a list of titles: the first selection played was "Hail, Columbia!"; this was followed by "Washington's March," "President's March," "Hail to the Heroes, Whose Triumphs Have Brightened," and a number of others. The "Star Spangled Banner" placed seventh on the list, and numbers twelve and thirteen, winding up what must have been a long, hot afternoon of memorable toasting, were "Toll Not the Bell of Death for Me" and "Haste to the Wedding."

Sixteen years later the notes of dedicated federalism and patriotism sounded at earlier observances of Independence Day had given way to a carefree atmosphere of celebration for celebration's sake. The Alabama *Whig* of July 7, 1859, reflects the

change: "'The Fourth' was celebrated in various ways by our citizens. Some of them went to the Grand Barbecue at Candy's Landing, some to Boligee, some to McGeehee's above Springfield, some to a game and fish fry on the river, and the remainder passed the day as they best could. . . ."

"Very early in the day the delegation to McGeehee's commenced moving in squads, with a four mule team in the rear carrying the Band of Music. 'Yankee Doodle,' 'Hail Columbia,' and 'Wait for the Wagon' 'caught it' as they left and we suppose all the way, as they left town playing them and came back doing the same thing. . . ."

"The fish and game dinner was participated in by twelve or fifteen gentlemen, as many boys and twice as many Negroes. The company assembled on the river bank near an excellent spring, each one bearing Fish, Squirrels, Birds, Vegetables, and other provisions with 'sunthin' to wash it down,' and after cooking the dinner, we can say of our own personal knowledge, all hands 'eat into'

the pile with astonishing voracity."

This account of a Fourth-of-July-with-Band-of-Music predates, by only six years, "the Surrender." Combined with the other reports, it establishes: existence of a strong band tradition; the presence of Negroes at celebrations; music played for "good times"; a patriotic repertory of white man's music.

The Negro side of the story begins with "the Surrender," and has had to be reconstructed from interviews with persons living in rural Southern counties. No accounts of music played by Negroes were published by county papers.

All persons interviewed concur on one point: the date of origin of Negro brass bands is always given as just "after Emancipation" (1863) or "after Surrender" (1865). The first bands were named after plantations where the Negroes had been slaves, after churches, or geographic place-names. Thus, one region in Alabama saw formation of the Lapsey Band (named for a plantation), the Old Oak Grove Band (for a church), and the Laneville Band, from Laneville. Of the many bands known long ago, only two survive: the Lapsey Band and the Laneville-Johnson Union Brass Band, made up of members of the old Laneville group, and the Johnson Band.

The essential point to be noted, in connection with all the Negro brass bands formed shortly after Emancipation, is that they played without instruction, and picked up their tunes by ear. The instruments played, then and now, are members of the saxhorn family. Of the saxhorn family, Willi Apel, in his "Harvard Dictionary of Music," concedes that "All agree that there is an inextricable confusion of nomenclature in this group." On one point, however, the "Harvard Dictionary" is firm. This relates to the family of brass horns: "A more characteristic feature of the family in question is the mouthpiece, which always has the shape of a cup, hence the name 'cupped-mouthpiece family.' . . . Even if this definition is rejected . . . the instruments in question must be defined as 'lip-vibrated aerophones,' i.e., wind instruments with which the lips of the players serve as reed."

The point is worth establishing, be-



"One can see a free, loosehopped dance flowing along in the Second Line that follows a funeral in New Orleans today."

cause the music played by members of these early plantation brass bands was based on song—they blew *singing horns*. Their repertoire came, not from the white man's stock of patriotic sheet music, but from Negro church and secular songs. From the church side, they played spirituals, jubilees, and possibly some early chants. From the everyday or secular life they adapted rags, reels, blues, work songs, and ballads.

"Well, I tell you how it was," George Herod, retired leader of the Lapsey Band, recalled one hot afternoon in May as we sat in the courthouse square of Marion, Alabama, "take a man, when he would play music, he'll set down, if he hearin' 'bout a sing, a hymn. Well, after he got it prompt in his mind, then he'll pick up his horn. Then he'll try to play it, you see? That's the way it was. They first started playing spirituals . . . got them at the church. They go 'way back.' . . . Later, the brass band musicians picked up secular tunes from "people who went through—hear a guitar fellow pickin' a guitar . . . he be pickin' reels. Us boys would catch that from it."

Herod named some of the tunes the Lapsey has played; he is sixty-four now, and he remembers hearing some

of them as played by the band when he was ten years old. They were: "Move, Members, Move"; "Uncle Bud"; "They Had a Home in This Rock, Don't You See"; "Katy, I Got to Go"; "You Can Kick Me and Knock Me All Night Long. But Mama, Don't You Tear My Clothes"; "I'm Goin' Up the Country, Baby, Don't You Want to Go"; "Great Scott, Fell Out the Window This Morning Soon"; and "Luke and Mullen," a bad man's ballad.

In the days when every Fourth of July celebration called for a band, and there were many church and plantation groups, the musicians were competitive. They went out to their jobs on wagons, blasting all the way: "We be goin' this way, an' we run cross Hatchet's Band, and then we'd stand, and play different tunes. . . . We'd just have a good time when we run up on one another . . . one band would try to outplay the other."

"Anybody can hear us," Herod remarked, mingling past and present, "four an' five miles around . . . as clear . . . us can come in a place

at two miles, five miles. Then somebody will say, 'I heard you at such and such a place.' Comin' up to the party, we'd strike up a piece, 'bout half a mile away from there. We'd hold that piece coming in till we got there. . . .

"At mornin', fo' day, when we be comin' back, peoples be standin' in their nightclothes . . . girls, child'ens . . . stand out, hearin' us come through. When we be comin' home at nights, we do that to keep from sittin' up there goin' to sleep. Lot o' times, boys set up there an' go to sleep, an' drop their instruments down . . . wagons would roll over 'em."

THE quality of *loudness* is so often used by persons of this region to describe music played by the country bands that a parallel immediately comes to mind; the way all the old people of New Orleans recall Buddy Bolden's cornet, and his band, as playing *loud*. One of the older musicians, Johnny St. Cyr, when interviewed in New Orleans by Dick Allen, mentioned another quality of the new New Orleans music as he first heard it: "Oliver, Keppard, Bolden, those fellows all featured a hoarse tone."

Admittedly, this report of Bolden's
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Plotkin vs. the Networks

By ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON

THE big story in broadcasting now—notwithstanding the furor over Subscription TV—is still Plotkin (Harry M.), until recently special counsel for the Democratic side of the Senate Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. Lawyer Plotkin's one-man "memorandum" to the committee, released last February, reviewed present network practices and threw out "provocative" suggestions to Congress, to the Federal Communications Commission, and to the Department of Justice for Federal action to ameliorate the alleged duopoly of NBC and CBS in the television field. The Plotkin Memorandum was followed by a somewhat milder Progress Report, prepared by special counsel Robert F. Jones, bespeaking the Commerce Committee's minority Republican point of view. Subsequently the FCC majority had its reassuring say with a "things are not as bad as they may seem" inflection. And finally Commissioner Frieda Hennock, an unusual one-woman minority, in an April statement to the Magnuson Committee, vigorously criticized all three preceding reports and sounded the notes of urgency and alarm.

Add more recent bristling statements by network executives and you have a picture of major industry forces rolling out cobalt bombs for a decisive battle that has long been building. The Communications Act, which governs American broadcasting, was written twenty-one years ago. The FCC, empowered under the act to administer the broadcasting concept of the people's representatives in Congress, has been the storm-child of many tempests since. "Industry stooge" and "New Deal tyrant" are two disparate epithets that have been launched at it; inept, overworked, ambitious, overly-cautious are others.

During the Commission's seven-member wrestling with one mighty technological revolution after another, no peep has come from Congress clarifying ambiguities in the agency's grant of authority. As put by the Senate committee chairman, Warren C. Magnuson, in the covering letter which he sent with the Plotkin Memorandum to committee members: "No comprehensive study or analysis—no survey broad enough to appraise the developments in this (broadcasting)

field during the past twenty years—has, to my knowledge, taken place during that time." The Eighty-Third Congress began such a probe: The Eighty-Fourth appears seriously determined, at long last, to have that fresh look at the modern facts of broadcasting life. The determination is backed by a Senate budget of \$75,000 for the committee's study and staff. The magazine *Broadcasting Telecasting*, a leading radio-TV trade newsweekly, has declared editorially: "This is as good a time as any to ventilate the broadcasting house. Otherwise the day will only be postponed. . . . Mr. Plotkin may over-extend and overdramatize, but there's smoke enough for Congress to call out the fire brigade."

Whether the "agonizing reappraisal" will eventually result in significant changes remains to be seen. The two lesser networks, the American Broadcasting Company and Dumont Television, have all to gain and nothing to lose from any future shake-up: currently theirs are only the lambs' slices of the TV pie. But the two leading networks, NBC and CBS, are likely to defend to the last decibel their present preferred positions. Dr. Frank Stanton, CBS president, has already stated: "CBS believes that many of the proposals of the Plotkin Memorandum, insofar as it deals with network television, are mistaken, impractical, and unwise. If these proposals were to be adopted, network television as it is known today would be gravely crippled, and the public's investment of \$13.5 billion in receivers would be substantially depreciated."

Probably very little of the shooting will find its way into the daily press. The issues are complex, technical, and difficult even for experts to understand. They include the destiny of the new ultra-high-frequency channels (UHF), network time options, exclusivity arrangements between networks and affiliates, ownership of stations by networks, etc. Basically, the problem seems to be one of healthy competition and maximum diversity of operation vs. alleged artificial advantage (monopoly) and minimum diversity. Television still isn't pumping out enough programs over enough stations to serve all the nation. There are still areas in the country where viewers are limited to the programs of only one station, and in others two. With tele-

vision the big business it has phenomenally become, you'd think the normal instincts of relatively free economy would soon plug up the gaps. But in 1948 the normal instincts were "frozen" by the FCC—all new TV construction was stopped—while fundamental engineering problems were solved.

Three-and-a-half years later, when the "freeze" was lifted and station building began again, there were (as Dumont puts it) "two strongly entrenched national television networks, and two relatively weak networks." CBS and NBC had most of the well-established VHF stations, and ABC and Dumont looked mainly to the new UHF channels to help them overtake the leaders. People who could see TV only if they bought UHF receivers bought them. People who were already seeing TV on VHF had less of an incentive to convert to UHF. Today the predominantly VHF networks have more money, more stars, bigger audiences. They flourish. UHF (mostly) withers. CBS explains its dominant position in terms of "the hardest kind of work, the most courageous kind of investment in plant, facilities, talent, and creative programming." Dumont, while graciously acknowledging "the fine ability" of NBS and CBS in taking "advantage of a situation which presented itself to them in 1948," asserts that the race would have been somewhat more equal if the FCC had opened up the UHF part of the spectrum when there were only 800,000 TV sets in the hands of receivers rather than 17 million. The argument is a fascinating drama in economic history with luck, shrewdness, and charges of "politics" quickening the plot. Its overtones are serious enough for the thoughtful viewer.

MONOPOLY is an ugly charge in a free society. Monopoly in the terms of the awesome influence upon men's minds to which television is fated is a burden which no enlightened management, however alert for success,

