

# PENNIES TO POUNDS

The story of Red Nichols' rise from  
obscurity to fame via hot jazz, told  
in a personal interview

to B. M. LYTTON-EDWARDS

RED," I said, "you're odd!" The affluent boss of Loring Nichols Orchestras Inc. faced up, smiling. A slight, alert, Huck Finn in English tweeds with autumn-tinted hair and wise brown eyes. "Uh-huh?" he queried.

I looked round the immaculate office: steel files and safe, shelves of neatly-bound arrangements, *Hallelujah, Chinatown*, etc., lining the walls. My eye took in a manual of Company Law and Roget's *Thesaurus*, flanking the Company Seal in its tailored, rexine cover. The set-up was prosperous, businesslike, and Hyltonian. Particularly when one noticed the photo of smiling Jack himself on the wall. In its case, opened for my inspection, Red's trumpet gleamed, compellingly, to eyes which, around the corner in Tin Pan Alley, had seen no less remarkable instruments lying amongst all kinds of litter in their lonely glory and verdigris.

"Darned odd!" I said. "How on earth a guy reared on hot music can cultivate an atmosphere like this . . ."

"Cultivate is right," Red emphasised. "That 'tidy-mind of jazz, refining influence' stuff they attribute to me is hokey. Actually, when I started, my ideas were wild and woozey . . ."

"And hot," I supplemented.

"So hot that I drove my bosses dippy. In a year I'd run through all the available band leaders, and I started my own band because I found the only guy who could put up with Red was Red. I've learned a lot since then."

"About hot music?"

"Yes. The one thing I've learned about it is that, for a fellow with a family, hot music, as a wage-earner, is a



Red Nichols—as he is to-day

swell hobby." He favoured me with a goblin grin. "I've still got my hobby."

"Then you're still hot at heart?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed. I should explain that this ejaculation does duty for *Yes, No, Really*, and most other rejoinders with Red. He says it thoughtfully, with a world of difference in the intonations.

"Just how wild and woozey were you?" I asked.

"Thoroughly and often. I don't think there was anyone in the business with less sense of responsibility. You see, it was my first taste of freedom, the first time I did what I really wanted."

Red told how the great adventure of breaking into jazz was delayed in deference to his father's wishes. Nichols Senior educated his son to love music as an art; to fear it as a profession. A brilliant cornettist himself, he earned a hack wage teaching and walked four miles to and from work so that Red and his sister could have pocket money. Occasional public performances eeked out the Nichols' finances. Red took part in these, and at the age of eleven

was "song-and-dance-man" with the Nichols' Family, a vaudeville act which he also enlivened by playing piano, violin and trumpet.

Red's heart was set on a musical career. When his father expressed contrary opinions, he respected his views, though too young to understand them. He worked hard for a scholarship, which took him to Culver Military Academy, where he greatly improved his technique. Two notable adventures then befell him: he met Miff Mole, on wax, and Bix Beiderbecke in person.

The first hot records to come Red's way were by Bailey's Lucky Seven. He would play them again and again, revelling in the revelations of Miff's trombone. He caught the burn, experimented with his trumpet, and converted a number of his companions at Culver, who were only too glad to devote their spare time to jam-sessions under his leadership. During a holiday in 1921, he sat in with a band at the Tokio Gardens, South Bend, alongside the great magician, Bix.

To mention Bix is to start Nichols raving. He says definitely that no other living white musician has had so great, so lasting, or so fine an influence on jazz.

In spite of his new enthusiasm, Red worked hard to please his father, and secured an award that admitted him to West Point. Then, unaccountably, his obedience cracked up and, with a few choice spirits, he ran away and formed his first band—The Syncopating Five.

The little combination, in Dixieland tradition, knew its ups and downs. Weeks of success alternated with weeks of dish-washing. The estrangement between Red and his father grieved him, sapping his courage though not his persistence. Then, suddenly, came a letter from his father, enclosing the key of the house. "If you want to be a musician, go ahead," he wrote. "Good luck; but keep this handy."

With so large a cloud removed from his horizon, Red, with new attack,



"We Three" recording group—Red, Eddie Lang and Vic Berton.

sought an engagement for the band. He secured a swell job at a swell joint, The Palm Heath Inn, Florida. The proprietor stipulated that the personnel must be increased by two, and a classier title improvised. Overnight the Syncopating Five became the Royal Palm Orchestra.

In a short while Red had saved enough to take the plunge, and migrated to New York, where he was immediately signed up by Harry Susskind for the Pelham Heath Inn. His next ambition was to get on working terms with the ace by augmenting and improving his own outfit to the utmost. Whenever

possible he took excursions to hear, meet, and learn from the other musicians whose names were beginning to roll off tongues—the Dorseys, Jiv my ace trumpet in those days; Miff with the Memphis Five and other groups; a trio under Joe Venuti, who played "salon style"; and, of course, Bix.



Venuti, contacted at the hotel where he worked, wasn't sure if his ideas and Red's would fuse; the two retired behind a door marked "Gents" to practise, and the undignified duet began the long professional association between two individuals. The up-and-coming guitar-boy, Eddie Lang (also with Venuti), had to be passed up for the moment as being more than Red could afford. Joe was practically signed with

Goldkette, and was leaving immediately. Red argued with him all the way to Penn Station and won his point as the train steamed out of the depot.

Virtual partners, Joe and Red took a band to New Jersey. The acclaim they aroused dizzied them, and Red explains with a twinkle how "... we used to dance with the customers while the collegiates played our instruments."

But Red sensed trouble when the manager auditioned another band, but Joe pronounced, phlegmatically: "Aw, they couldn't do without us." They could and did, and Red got a fortnight's notice.

Back in New York, Red concentrated on his greatest dream—to make records

with an all-star band. Miff, still Red's idol, sharing the Memphis Five with Napoleon and Signorelli, consented to join him. Next he grabbed up Vic Berton and Jimmy Dorsey and, at last, Eddie Lang, and secured a spot on the air over W.E.A.F. as the first hot outfit to break into radio.

"But it was too easy," Red says now. "We could get away with murder in those days. We clowned all the time; nobody took radio seriously; it was just a gadget. Joe used to let down one string, and I tried effects by 'weaving' all round and under the mike. But still, we went over big!"

So big that, when the first discs by Red Nichols' Redheads appeared on the market, every dealer in town sold out and every recording company began bidding for the services of the crazy, brilliant bunch.

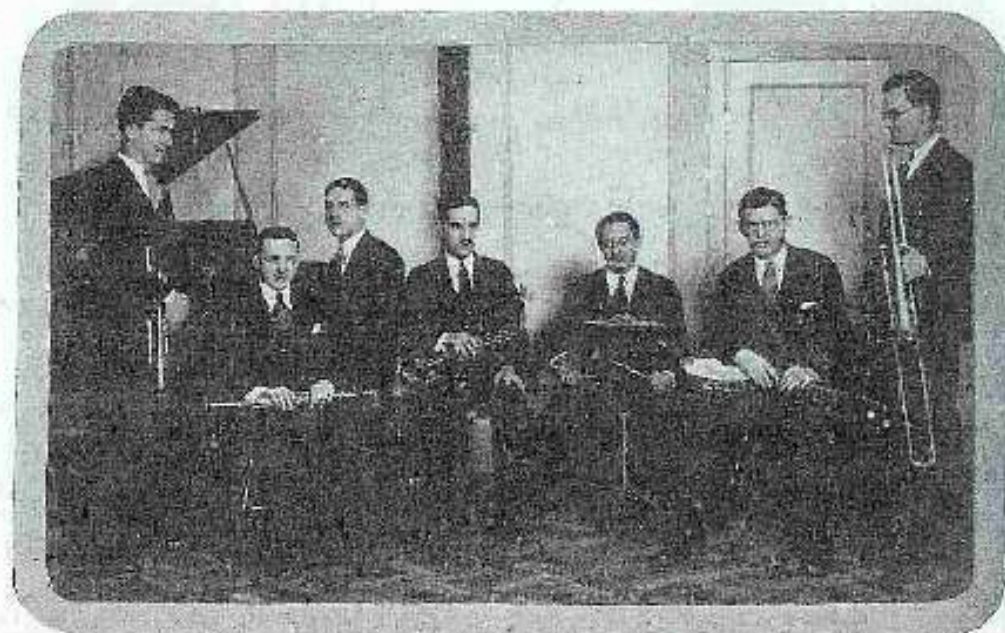
"My real big moment came at my first recording session with my own band," Red said devoutly. "Just think of it: all top notchers, and me only a kid of twenty! Gosh, it was a thrill hearing them played back!"

"Because they were so darned good?" I said.

"They were, weren't they?" Red beamed. "So were the later ones when we'd grown more blasé."

"You don't mean bored?"

"Tih-hob!" It was an emphatic negative. "Never that. But we didn't take it so seriously any more. I told you we were wild and woozey. We let our concentration go by the way and each session brought more fun than the last. Anything for a laugh. Wingy Mannone was one who clamoured to join the gang. He did unofficially. Remember



One of the early "Five Pennies" groups.



Red correcting parts at an N.B.C. rehearsal.

that startling break in *Baltimore*? He crept in on us with that one. Like every other occasion, his entry called for a celebration."

Howard Sinnott, Red's encyclopedic and humorous manager-cum-brother-in-law, smilingly produced the accompanying photo of Don Voorhees' Orchestra. Note the swopped instruments, the glorious, muzzy, far-away look in the boys' eyes.

"What were you celebrating when this was taken, Red?" he inquired. "I never knew," Red told us solemnly. "When the proofs of that picture turned up not one of us remembered having it taken!"

He continued: "These confessions of my mis-spent youth should dispel all the junk that has been written about my colleagues making technically perfect records that yet lacked inspiration because they were such a sober, learned lot. If true jazz can only be produced when the spirits are circulating, in glasses, then there were occasions when my lads were oiled to a pitch of genius! Actually, I believe the reverse of good jazz. A gin-soaked bunch, however inspired individually, is usually so darned individual that the general effect is smug. My bad boys produced good jazz because they were technically trained musicians; not just haywire hoboes with a flair for rhythm.

Something in their equipment stopped them losing balance, however merry. Our records were good in spite of, and not because of, liquor."

I remarked that a more sober sounding set of discs never existed. They even sounded rehearsed.

"We were sometimes sober! But rehearsed? No. The intros and codas were set, the rest genuinely busked."

All the recording companies wanted Red and his boys. They offered ten pounds a side per man, and ten sides a day was an average bag. Red's unit adopted multiple names, including Tennessee Tooters, Red and Miff's Stompers, Captivators, Six Hottentots, Charleston Chasers, Wabash Dance Band, and, of course, Five Pennies. Red obligingly listed other combinations, the ownership of which were popularly ascribed to him, though he actually only took part in them as a paid member: Ladd's Black Aces (Lanin), Goofus Five and California Ramblers (Rollini), and the Memphis Five (Napoleon-Signorelli).

Lanin and Red had each separate units of Arkansas (pronounced Ark-an-saw) Travellers, but his own records are easily distinguished by their typical Redhead stylishness.

The big leaders, not contented with employing the now famous Pennies individually, dangled lucrative contracts before their collective eyes; but they seemed determined to retain their compact, independent personality. Finally, however, Paul Whiteman offered them such attractive terms to play with his ensemble, and feature as a separate unit in the show, that they succumbed.

This was at once their triumph and their downfall. When it came to signing the contract, Miff, the proud possessor of a newly acquired home and a baby daughter, jibbed at the clause for a European tour. Five little Pennies—then there were four!

The four couldn't settle down. In their splendid Whiteman surroundings they missed their home-made jam. Vic Berton packed up after only one session. After a few weeks Red convinced Paul (still his great friend and best man at his wedding) that the only guy to boss Red was still Red. Lang had gone North with Venuti, though later they rejoined Whiteman. Schutt felt out of his element and begged off. Jimmy Dorsey alone, equable and adaptable, stayed with Paul for several months.

Red was once more besieged with



Don Voorhees' Orchestra "celebrating." Note the swopped instruments and the far-away look in their eyes.

## Pennies to Pounds

continued

recording offers for the Five Pennies. But the original gang was irretrievably scattered. Nothing for it but to collect an entirely new bunch.

Here Red disposed once and for all of the canard that he was dissatisfied with the first Five Penny records, and altered the personnel and the idiom from choice. He angrily refutes the idea that he ever considered the work of his first men outworn or demodé. By the time he assembled his second Pennies, the originals were going strong elsewhere, right on the top of the heap. Much as Red's new chums won his admiration and affection, he regretted the fate that had robbed him of his early super bunch.

Red says: "Jack T. couldn't play like Miff—why should he? His own stuff was great. Same with Sullivan and

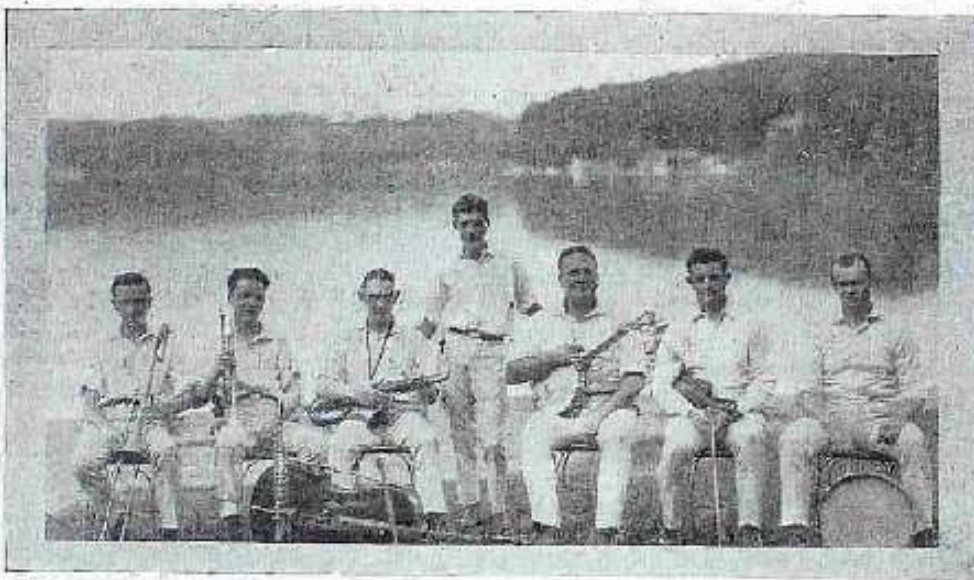
Schutt; Krupa and Berton. My new group turned out records as financially and rhythmically satisfying as the first. Jazz was becoming Swing."

Then that sudden and unexpected blow: the terrific slump in the recording trade. No more pounds for the Pennies in that direction!

It was a shattering blow. Almost overnight the lion-



At the Paramount, New York—Red hitting "the lights."



18-year-old Red and his very first band—The Royal Palm Beach Orchestra, at Lake James, Indiana, in 1923.



Red and Miff Mole—taken during the Redheads' period.

ised hot men found the very asset that had lifted them up the liability that might drag them down. Their virtuosity was neither needed nor appreciated in the commercial field, way over the other side of the fence. Still, not a few, swallowing pride and prejudice, were grateful to creep through.

Red didn't creep through; he vaulted over. He'd stopped being wild and woozy, and forged a determined way to new recognition on Broadway, in the Dance Halls on the Air. His was the first band to be signed for a star spot simultaneously by the N.B.C. and Columbia airwaves, to be honoured by a re-booking for the coveted tour of College Proms.

"You needn't think it didn't hurt," Red says gravely. "I liked being hot, and I loved my Pennies. But I just had to move with the times and do the new job as well as I could."

That is Red's axiom: to do everything as well as you can. Which is the sole reason why he has not so far, despite a continual trickle of requests, reformed the Five Pennies for recording purposes.

"A Five Pennies unit requires certain qualities," he says. "It must be a small, intimate group, and the members must have perfect homogeneity in whatever idiom they exploit. That idiom must, necessarily, emanate from the players. But they've all got to have the same basic type of inspiration to give that continuous, even flow and happy fusing of ideas which was so noticeable a feature of the early Pennies records.

Red has every intention of reforming the Pennies. And he'll do it as well as ever he can. Already he has several likely names fixed in his mind; the recording companies and the fans are urging. So, before long, Red and his Five will *Sing a Song of Sixpence* once again.