Above are the talented musicians who comprised the Jean Goldkette Orchestra until it broke up in 1927. Top row: Don Murray, Howdy Quicksell, Frank Trumbauer, Bix Beiderbecke. Bottom: Ray Ladwig, Irving Riskin, Spiegle Willcox, Doc Ryker, Bill Rank, Chauncy Morehouse, arranger Bill Challis, Steve Brown and Fred Farrar.

FROM RAGTIME TO JAZZ

An Exclusive Interview of Steve Brown by Frank Gillis

The following interview was made by Frank Gillis at Steve Brown's daughter's home in Detroit, Michigan, in May of 1953.

Steve Brown was born in New Orleans in 1890, and very early in his life began playing the string bass with a band organized by his brother Tom Brown. Tom brought the first white group up from New Orleans in 1914 and was supposedly responsible for the term "jazz" being applied to this certain style of New Orleans music. Brown tells his story of how this came about, along with other aspects of jazz in New Orleans, after the turn of the century.

He stayed in music in New Orleans until 1913, when he left both music and New Orleans. He did not take up music again until 1920. At this time he worked with a number of bands in the Chicago area, including the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, considered by many the earliest significant small group playing in the white jazz tradition.

Later Brown worked with many outstanding jazz musicians in the Jean Goldkette orchestra in Detroit. It was while with this group that Brown first played a string bass pizzicato on an electrically made recording for the Victor Recording Company. Up until this time only the wind bass was used since the string bass would not record well on the master, spreading the grooves too wide.

Steve Brown died in Detroit on Sept. 15, 1965.

Brown: In the very beginning of this so-called jazz craze, around 1905, the bands down in New Orleans were known as ragtime bands. My brother Tom Brown and I organized a band, a dixieland combination, which was very successful in being engaged in all the exclusive places around New Orleans. At carnival times we enlarged the band to a brass band which secured quite a number of prizes in parades.

In the dixieland combination we just had five men, sometimes we had six. We used no pianos. The bands didn't have pianos in those days. When they came up north they had pianos, but we brought a guitar player along for accompaniment on jobs because half the places in those days didn't have a piano. In a brass band, instead of playing string bass I played tuba. We were considered very good. During that time, around 1905 up to 1913, (Nick) LaRocca and (Larry) Shields used to come around and listen. In fact, LaRocca used to sit down and play alongside of us to get the general idea of how we played.

Gillis: Who was the trumpet player with you, Steve?

Brown: Ray Lopez. He was playing cornet with Gussie Mueller - as the clarinet player. The dixieland combination that came up to Chicago two years after my brother, why they weren't experienced like the men that my brother had in the band. The difference is that when my brother came up to Chicago, his men received such large offers from other leaders that they soon left him and he had a lot of trouble getting extra men. But the dixieland combination, knowing my brother's trouble that he had, Eddie Edwards who was manager of the band, he incorporated that band, which accounts for the success that the Dixieland (the Original Dixieland Jazz Band) had. But my brother's band was the first one to come up to Chicago. I had left my brother's band in 1913 in New Orleans, and shortly after I left them, they came up to Chicago.

Gillis: Where did they open at in Chicago?

Brown: Lamb's Cafe.

Gillis: Who were the men he had with him in the band at that time? Did he still have Lopez?

Brown: Well, yes, Ray Lopez, and I think Gussie Mueller was still with him. And the boy that'd taken my place on bass was Arnold Loyacano. The band that was playing in Lamb's Cafe before was Jean Goldkette. The union was pretty sore about Lamb hiring this dixieland combination, or the ragtime band as they called it. They tried to get Lamb to get rid of the band, otherwise they wouldn't be able to get another union band. He was paying the boys more than union scale and he told them "If you can get a band that will produce as well as these boys, I'm willing to talk business with you, but unless you are, don't talk to me." At that time, the unions all over the country required a strict musical examination to accept anyone as a member, and after catching a lot of slurs about Lamb having this jazz band, as they expressed it - - instead of a ragtime they called it a jazz band . . .

Gillis: This was a slur?

Brown: This was a slur because jazz was in the tenderloin district. Lamb thought it was a good idea, so they changed the name from ragtime to jazz. The crowds increased at such a terrific rate that the other cafe owners went down to New Orleans and said that anyone who had a band similar to my brother's band, they'd hire. The result was the whole place was flooded with different dixieland combinations or ragtime bands.

Gillis: What year did you get up to Chicago?

Brown: I left New Orleans in 1913, and I stayed away from music until 1920. And I hadn't touched a bass in that time.

Gillis: What was the full name of Tom's band when he first came up to Lamb's Cafe?

Brown: Tom Brown's Ragtime Band from New Orleans.

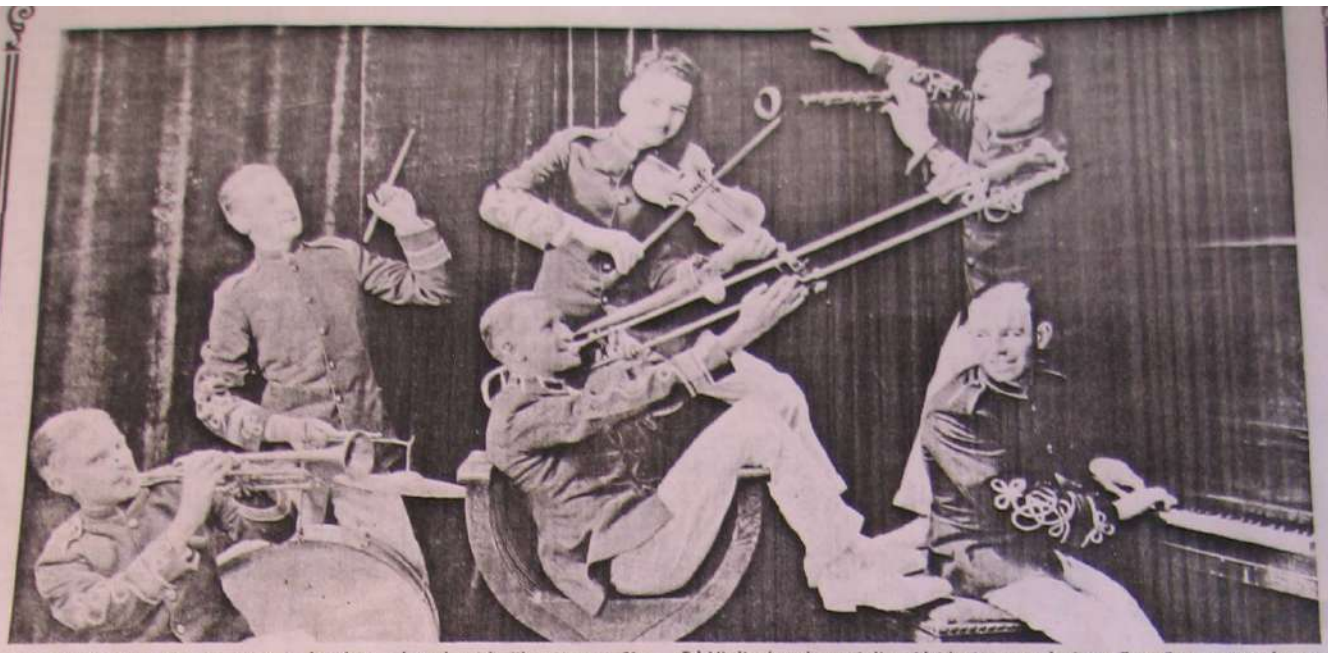
Gillis: What about New Orleans in about 1905? I know that the negro bands used to play for functions like parades and funerals and things like that. What did the white musicians do at that time?

Brown: Well, the white musicians played a lot of clubs at Lake Pontchartrain, exclusive boat clubs. In fact, we had the cream of the work down in New Orleans. We played for all the prize fights. We played for Wolgast, we played for Rivers, and Jeffries, and quite a number of great, known fighters that come down there. We used to play on the ringside, in between rounds. We received good money for all that. And then we played dances, and dance halls. We had steady jobs. We played three of four nights a week at a dance place and then we'd play the rest of them in single engagements in different places.

Gillis: Did you play parades, on wagons or anything like that, to advertise?

Brown: No we didn't . . . well, we did play ballyhooding for prize fights and things like that from corner to corner, sometimes in a

On the cover: The Jean Goldkette Orchestra, May 21, 1927. Steve Brown remarks, "This was a rush job for Ivy Ball in Philadelphia. Some could not get there in time, so we used two dummies, left rear and second from right rear. Ed Sheasby, who conducted, is seated at right in front." From left rear: Dummy; Fred Farrar, Howdy Quicksell, Steve Brown, Irving Riskin, Spiegle Willcox, dummy, Doc Ryker, seated: Don Murray, Frank Trumbauer, Ray Lodwig, Rill Rank, Bix Beiderbecke, Chauncy Morehouse, Ed Sheasby.



Trombonist Tom Brown, Steve's brother, played with The Happy Six (Yerkes' Band) in the early 1920s. The pianist and cornetist are unknown.

Ed Violinsky plays violin; Alcide Nunez, clarinet; Tom Brown, trombone; and either George Hamilton or Joe Green were on drums.

truck. Sometimes we'd get out of the truck and stand right on the street and get a crowd around us. And then, in those days they would have a balcony out in front of the dance halls. It was a custom for bands to go out on this balcony and play, to let the corwd know what type of music they had. And if it pleased them they'd all come in, see. Sometimes we'd play at a place where they'd be three of four places of like character, and each band would get out there and blow their brains out in order to get the crowd in, see.

Gillis: What do you remember about the first bit of jazz? Do you think that the jazz band, like say Tom's band, stemmed a little bit from the American marching band, inasmuch as it didn't have a piano?

Brown: No, down in New Orleans, there's always rhythm. Seems like everything has rhythm. You can sit down along the Mississippi River, and it just runs along in a rhythmic manner. You can see the logs that are floating bobbing up and it seems to bob up in a rhythmic manner. The roustabouts, they sing songs, and even while they're working they're keeping time with their singing while they're marching along.

We had some very fine music, musicians from all over the country that had come to the French opera house, legitimately. But this here rhythmic type of music which the majority of people wanted, now called jazz, was really called ragtime, because . . . I don't know, I think the way it really got its name ragtime was because the majority of musicians, who were too poor to study the legitimate way, improvised and played by ear from their soul, which was appealing to anyone that was listening. We had a band down there in my kid days by the name of Stale Bread's Band. A group of newsboys . . , they called him Stale Bread. And he had a band, and he used to stand on the street corners and collect nickles and dimes from the people.

Their instruments were home-made. The bass player had a half of a barrel, cut down, lengthwise, and a thin board was put over the front, and a piece of wood for a neck and as a stand too, and the strings attached to that, and it had a peculiar sound. But it sounded something like a bass. Then they had two kazoo players with them, washboards and things like that. They strummed on different things. The drummers in those days had pans and pots to hit on because they didn't have the equipment they have today.

I believe my brother sould have the credit of perfecting the first trombone mute. He was in the sheet metal business, and he wanted to muff his trombone, or mute it. He experienced with different types of metal and formed it into the way the mutes look nowadays, tapered you know, and he experimented until he got some that sound right in tune. Because if they made them too long sometimes they'd be out of tune, a little too flat or a little too sharp, as the case may be. But he got it just so that sounded good. He used to carry a derby with him, too, besides being muted, he'd put the derby over the trombone and work it backwards and forwards to create different effects.

Gillis: What about a chap by the name of Papa Laine?

Brown: Papa Laine, Jack Laine and his son? I think his son is around the country here someplace.

Gillis: Did he have an orchestra there?

Brown: Well, he was sort of a booker. Sometimes he'd have about three or four bands out a one time, whoever wanted to take a job date with him. He didn't have a regular band. He'd get a job and he'd hire any available men that could accept that engagement.

Gillis: Did the white and negro musicians ever play together?

Brown: Oh, no!

Gillis: No?

Brown: Oh, no! Oh, no!

Gillis: What about the story of the bass fiddle, you made one you say?

Brown: Well, I think I was around fifteen years of age, and in those days there wasn't much money, and naturally we couldn't afford to buy any instruments. So I decided to make a bass fiddle myself. So I got two deep cheese boxes, they were about 12 inches deep. You've seen the type of cheese boxes? And we took the nails out of the round, steamed it, and formed it into the sides of a bass. And we took the thin wood that they were shipping victrolas in, thin plywood, veneer, and we glued that to the back. And the front section had an "f" bar, a bass bar, down to support the bridge. And we put plywood in front of that and put "f" holes in. And the neck that we made was homemade and sort of ridiculous in the respect, and we had these old fashioned wooden pegs. And in place of gut strings we used heavy twine, and as we tightened it, it give a bass tone. And in place of horsehair for the bow we used thread, and plugged that in, and it gave a sort of a bass tone which satisfied us. My brother first played a little fiddle, and we got a guitar player, and I played bass. So that's how it first started. We played together, and by going around and playing little parties, why the people began to know us. And as we done a

Steve Brown's famous brother, Tom, is pictured here with Johnny Bayersdorffer Orchestra in New Orleans in 1924. From left: Chink Martin, tuba; Tom Brown, trombone; Johnny Bayersdorffer, trumpet; Leo Adde, drums; Johnny Miller, piano; Steve Loyocano, banjo; Charles Scaglione, clarinet.

little better, why, we started getting paid for jobs, and it wasn't long before I was able to buy my first bass fiddle which was purchased from an old fellow that used to play with my dad. Well, he didn't have any use for the half-sized bass fiddle anymore, and he sold it to me for twenty-five cents a week. And that was big money in those days. Twenty-five cents a week – why a fellow could go out with twenty-five cents and stay out half the night and have a good time. In those days, for five cents you could go into a restaurant and get a very large schooner of beer and chicken dinner for five cents. So you can imagine just how far twenty-five cents would go in those days. And you could go to the theater for ten cents. And so you can see how the money value was in those days. So that's the reason twenty-five cents a week payment was quite large. But anyway that was my first string bass that I owned, really owned. Then we started playing engagements and the people started coming and calling on us to play certain affairs. And as we become better known and our music was appreciated, we began to get calls from exclusive places, and we played the highest places around New Orleans, the finest jobs. And we made more money that the union scale, we always charged more than the union scale. And the union, down in New Orleans, used to respect us, because they knew that we were really getting more than their scale. And while they didn't proposition us to join the union at all, at that time I think it was simply because we didn't read any music, and the rulings were that no one was permitted into their organization without being a reader, and we couldn't read a note, none of us. But we were producing marvelous music, and we were really getting from two or three dollars a man more than their union scale was. So they respected us, and whenever the carnival would come and they were short of bands, why they would permit us to go along and play among the union groups which had a monopoly on such engagements as that.

Gillis: What did you play mostly with this band of yours? Did you play ragtime music?
Brown: Oh, yes.
Gillis: It was that type of music, with a beat, with swing.
Brown: With rhythm.
Gillis: What were some of the pieces you played with that band?
Brown: Well, "Barnyard," "Dixieland," those numbers that the Dixieland combination (Original Dixieland Jazz Band) had a copyright on, we were playing these on the street long before LaRocca or Shields or Eddie Edwards could play their instruments. They were beginners in the game. But after they got up to New York and they found out that these numbers weren't copyrighted, why, they took advantage of it. But it was all public property down there. Different bands all over, not only our band but other bands would play it. And there were a great many numbers that we made up ourselves. We used to call a lot of these numbers that are well known today "Number Two," "Snot," and all kinds of funny names we would give to them. And if we wanted to find out what a fellow was going to play he'd say, "Never mind, just follow me." And he'd start off. And if it sounded good he'd try to remember it.

Gillis: Let's talk about how the New Orleans Rhythm Kings started up, or how you, for instance, came up to Chicago.
Brown: I came to Chicago in 1920, and in those days the bookers laughed at me when I said I played string bass. I didn't know what it was all about because I hadn't put my hands on an instrument since 1913, and I had a lot of nerve but still I didn't know what happened. I figured they'd use a string bass all the time, and finally one of the bookers told me, "Why you're corny, we don't use any string basses any more. We're using tubas," he says, "Go around and see all the bands." So I did. I went around and all the bands had tubas, with different colored lights, they'd flip 'em as they played. When these lights would hit it would reflect different colors, and from a distance it was very beautiful. Well, it was more showman than anything else, and the tubas, to me, they all grunted like a frog, anyway. So I was up in Chicago all by myself and I bought a tuba quickly. It wasn't but just a short time, why, I had enough that I figured I could get a job on tuba. Well, the bookers all had be down anyway as a string bass, see, hunting for a job on string bass. Finally, I thought I'd have to go to work at my trade. I'm a sheet metal pattern drafter, by trade. One night the booker called me up, says, "You got a tuxedo?" I says, "I don't have one, but I'll get one." "Get you a tuxedo and your string bass and report at the Blackstone Hotel." So that was my first engagement. I reported there, and there was a six - or eight-piece combination. I played my heart out in order to get another job. I played so well that the people, instead of dancing, gathered all around the band just to watch me. I hit the bass, I spun it, and I done everything I could to attract attention. And it was one of these affairs where they had two or three all-star orchestras supposed to come later. The little band was supposed to entertain and, soon as the big bands were to come, it was arranged so that the little band was to go home. Well, Cope Harvey was the booker, and the Merry Garden Orchestra, which was considered the star orchestra in Chicago at that particular time, because Vic Berton was on drums, and they had quite a number of fine musicians, well-known musicians, in that band. Well, the crowd was just enjoying itself with the little band. Finally it come time for us to leave, and Cope Harvey come and said, "All right boys, you can pack up now and get out, the band's coming in." The chairman come rushing up then. He said, "What are you going to do?" "Well," Mr. Harvey says, "as arranged," he says, "this little band is going now, and the large band is coming."

"Oh," he says, "no you don't," he says, "you leave that little band right there." He says, "We been having more fun and enjoyment with this little band than we've ever had with any of your other bands, Mr. Harvey." "Oh," he says, "well," he says, "what am I going to do with the big band." He says, "Put them upstairs in the balcony." Now that's the God's truth. So, Vic Berton and all the other big shots, they were shocked, they couldn't understand, so they all come down to find out what it was all about. Now I can remember Vic Barton, getting on a chair, just sitting there watching me play bass, and I was doing everything I could to get another job, see. So here comes Cope Harvey, and he calls me in the back room, and he signs a contract with me, play or not, I had a specific amount of money. That's the way they engaged me. I was just tickled to death. So, from then on, I left the tuba up this the corner.

From then on Cope Hlarvey'd send me different places, whether he needed a bass player or not, He'd send me because I used to help them put it over. It was all new to them to hear somebody making triple beats on the bass, and taking a solo and things like that, it was something. He was the only one that had a string bass player that could do that. Then finally another booker heard about it—Benson—and he bugged Harvey to let me go with the Courtney Sisters for a stage run and Harvey consented. I stayed with them – Florence Courtney – they were big shots in those days and they were put out as one of the star features in the theaters. They could really sing. And we had a string quintet, you know, and I didn't like it, too many legit men with it. So I didn't stay with it.

I came back to Chicago. To tell the truth, I really got fired because I was supposed to meet them in Milwaukee and get on the stage and I didn't show up. Cope Harvey was put out about it, and I got released from him and I got in with the Friar's Inn Band.
Gillis: Was Husk O'Hare the leader then?
Brown: Oh, no! Husk O'Hare had nothing to do with it.
Gillis: He produced some records?
Brown: Yes, that's right. So it was called the Friar's Inn Band. It was a group of boys – Leon Roppolo playing the clarinet, Benny Pollack, drums, Paul Mares playing cornet, and we had Jack Pettis playing saxophone, and we had (Lew) Black playing banjo, and Georgie Brunis playing trombone.
Gillis: What year was this, Steve, that you opened there?

The marquee behind Freddie Bergin's Orchestra reads, "Dancing -- the year round. Jean Goldkette's Graystone Ballroom and Gardens". The date was Sept. 8, 1930, and the band personnel was, from left front row: Slim Branch, trombone; "Bull" Snodgrass, guitar; Chris Fletcher, guitar and violin; Skeeter Palmer, accordian; Steve Brown, bass; Loss White, trombone; Freddie Bergin, piano and leader; Herb Fischer, sax. Back row from left: Hilly Edelstein, sax; Wally Urbanski, cornet; "Babe" Routh, sax; Frank Zullo, trumpet.

Brown: About 1921, I think. I played with them for about two or three years, during which time I was doubling at the Midway Gardens.

Gillis: Well, how did the New Orleans Rhythm Kings come into being? Did they come from the Friar's?

Brown: Yeah, somebody heard them on a boat. They were playing on a boat from New Orleans to St. Louis or something like that.

Gillis: Was that a different band -- the New Orleans Rhythm Kings? I thought that the same musicians in the Friar's Inn Orchestra were the ones that were in the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Wasn't it Paul Mares?

Brown: Yes, yes, well the same name. I think they changed it, changed the name when I left for awhile, so they wouldn't get mixed up with the royalties they were receiving. I left the band, they were going to do something or another, they were going to leave anyway. And I told them I didn't want leave, and I think they changed the name from Friars Inn to . . . I think it was New Orleans Rhythm Kings first. I think that's the first name, and then when they came to Friar's Inn, I think they put it down. They'd put down any name, as long as they were working, you know what I mean. Now Roppolo and Mares, they used to go out in the colored section and get ideas off the musicians, sit down and listen to them play. And that's where Roppolo got his ideas.

Gillis: Had he played any legit clarinet?

Brown: No, he just played this here jazz type of clarinet. 'Cause he couldn't read a note. Nobody could read a note! And my first thought turning to notes was at Midway Gardens. I got ahold of a method and started learning the scales legitimately on the bass, and go so that I could read enough to get by.

And there's a funny thing about a man that can play rhythm. Now you take Whiteman's orchestra, after the Goldkette band broke up. When I'd get out in front of Whiteman's orchestra, that rhythm wasn't behind me, and I didn't feel at ease. The result of it was I couldn't do the work that I'd like to do, and I couldn't play like I did when I was with the Victor band. See, it was just a certain background that the Victor band had that Whiteman's bad didn't have. Whether this was because Whiteman's band was so large, you know, with all those French horns and things like that, it may have had that effect upon the rhythmic touch.

Gillis: *Who was at the Midway Gardens? Any stars? Who had the orchestra?*

Brown: *Well, the fellows that are known today that were in that band was Benny Goodman, and another star that's known, I don't know whether you'd call him a star or* not, I just can't think of his name. He was a saxophone player, he put out this song "Doodle-Dee Do."

I played the both jobs for awhile, and then Cope Harvey wanted me in his all-star orchestra. So I played, for more money, naturally. Then I went back to the Midway Gardens and the Friar's Inn. I think the Merry Garden broke up. That was the cause of the band getting out of that place.

Gillis: What kind of a job was this Friar's Inn? Was it a good spot?

Brown: Oh, a live spot where they had, well, to tell the truth, they used to have a lot of gangsters coming in, and they had lots of money, and expensive clothes, and they'd spend a thousand or two thousand dollars, wasn't anything, each individual would. And they'd come up and request a certain number from us, and they'd put twenty, fifty or a hundred dollars in the kitty. In fact we made one hundred twenty-five dollars a week playing there, and our tips exceeded that. We averaged from two hundred and fifty up to three hundred in that particular time, and with no tax to pay, why it was quite a lot.

Scarface Al and all of them used to come in there. Because Mike Fischel, he knew all the underworld, and they were all right when they come in there. They'd treat us swell. Some of them would get lit up a little bit and see Roppolo, you know, maybe he'd have a tuxedo on a little frayed. "That the best kind of tuxedo you got, kid?" He would say, "That's all I got." . . . says, "There'll be a new one here for ya' tomorrow. What size ya' wear?" And the next day a new tuxedo would be there. And there'd be a lot of things. "What size shirt you wear, kid?" And we'd tell him. And sure enough the next day there'd be a half dozen shirts for some of us. We had a lot of fun in those days.

Gillis: What tunes did you play at that time? Do you remember some of the compositions, like "Clarinet Marmalade," was that around?

Brown: Oh, we recorded with the Friar's Inn Band -- "Farewell," "Bugle Call," "Eccentric," "Lot's of Mama," and "Tin Roof Blues," and a lot of numbers like that.

Now, how this Husk O'Hare had his name on (the records), he came in the Cafe one time, and claimed that he had influence with the Gennett Recording Company, and that if we'd permit him to put his name on the records, that he would arrange it that we could record and get royalties off of it. Well, naturally we didn't care, we were tickled to death, so he arranged everything, paid the expense for us in Richmond, Indiana, and we went down, and we put on every number that Elmer Schoebel had tried to submit to different publishers who had refused it, and also numbers that were published and shelved for awhile, and no sooner than those records were released, this Robbins, Jack Robbins, they flew to Chicago and signed Elmer Schoebel up with a contract to write all the tunes for them. And from then on, Elmer Schoebel was made, and we received royalties from different records. On "Farewell" alone, I think I received around two hundred and fifty dollars royalties.

Gillis: How did you come to record with Jelly Roll Morton? Were you in the band then?

Brown: No.

Gillis: One of the discographies mentions that you were in the band, with Mares, Brunis, and Jelly Roll was playing piano-- tunes like "Clarinet Marmalade," "Milenberg Joys," "Mr. Jelly Lord," "london Blues," remember any of these?

Brown: Was that under Columbia?

Gillis: No, that was Gennett yet--late 1923.

Brown: Well, I made "Milenberg Joys," but I don't remember him.

Gillis: You don't remember Jelly Roll Morton at all?

Brown: Oh, I knew him, sure. Things were happening so fast in Chicago, I don't know, there'd be a lot of strange fellows around there. I don't know if we recorded something under his name. All I know is that I was with the same group all the time, with the Friar's Inn group.

Gillis: You did know Jelly Roll though?

Brown: Oh, yeah, I met them all in Chicago.

Gillis: How did something like "Tin Roof Blues," which is a very famous composition, how did this number get started?

Brown: I think that was among Roppolo and Mares. I don't know really who was responsible for it.

Gillis: Did somebody just start out, then somebody else follow up?

Brown: Elmer Schoebel really should get credit for the type of harmony and everything because these fellows in the band, neither one of them read a note of music, and at rehearsal, it was almost a half day before these fellows could memorize every note that Elmer Schoebel told them to play for an entire tune. That's how complicated it was, but when that tune was played, those fellows just played from their very soul. We packed that cafe, you couldn't get a seat, we had musicians from all over to come in there. We had Bee Palmer, who was a very exclusive person, she was one of the best dressed women in the country. When she came into the cafe, and heard that band, and wanted to take the band to New York with her, I refused. I wouldn't travel, same as so many others that had offered me jobs and I turned down because I didn't want to travel. I had my wife and children in Chicago. And Ted Lewis, he wanted me to come and I turned him down, turned quite a lot of well-known bands down. And I got hooked with Jean Goldkette. I had bought a home in Chicago and I was playing at the Midway Gardens.

Gillis: What year was this?

Brown: 1926. And my obligations were so that I had to make a certain amount in order to cover everything. And one of the sessions they had cut out at the Midway Gardens lowered our salaries a little bit. Now mind you that was considered one of the best jobs in Chicago. It was the old Edelweiss Cafe, where they had beautiful gardens on the outside, where they had a 60-man symphony used to play for the people when they drank from the Edelweiss Brewery. Horvath, the manager for Jean Goldkette, came into Chicago, and stopped over there and propositioned me, and offered me a very high salary, and he says, "Oh, we've been having the band for a long time." I wanted to know whether it was a steady job. And so I spoke to one of the boys that was along with him, and he said "Oh, you needn't worry about that job," he says, "I've been at the Graystone (Ballroom) in Detroit for five years." And I said, "Well," I says, "it must be a steady job, I think I'll take it." So I told Charlie Horvath that I would accept, and I left my wife and children in Chicago, and I drove up here. And after I was here for awhile, I found out that the band was preparing for a road trip. And there I was. I couldn't get out of it. I traveled all over the country with Goldkette, and all these bandleaders that I had turned down -- told them, "No, I wouldn't travel, I was going to stay right in Chicago"-- they all jumped my neck when they saw me in New York and couldn't place me. And so that's how I came to travel. Of course I enjoyed it, to a certain extent.

Gillis: Was this the all-star band, with Bix in it? And Chauncey Morehouse?

Brown: Oh yeah. This was the Victor Band. The first Victor Band, Russ Morgan was director . . . the first Victor Band, before 1926, was a legitimate band. It made trips, toured through the New England states, but they flopped, terribly. But now they changed it all around to a modern jazz band, as you'd call it, and it was very well accepted in New York. And we got quite a lot of good publicity, and the records sold.

Gillis: You said they were surprised and called you corny when you came up from New Orleans in 1920, because you slapped the string bass instead of playing . . .

Brown: No. They considered me corny because they weren't using string basses anymore. All the youngsters were using the tubas. They only considered the bass fiddle suitable for symphony work and things like that. And they didn't use them much in dance orchestras, because they claimed it couldn't be heard. In those days the bass players would all bow, see? And the notes wouldn't be right for them, or even if they pizzacattoed it, it would be too legit, and it wouldn't be like a slap. And for that reason they just used tubas. Because in those days, during the war days, they wanted as much noise as they could. And the more brass they had in, it seemed like it settled a persons nerves, or something.

Gillis: This is a good time for that story about recording the string bass with Jean Goldkette.

Brown: Oh yes, well when we got in to New York for our first recording date, Mr. King, who was manager of the Victor Recording, he told Goldkette, he says, "Why," he says, "you want us to record string bass?" "We can't record string bass," he says, "you have to get tuba." So I left them and went and borrowed a tuba, rented a tuba from a music store, right in New York, brought that up in the studio. But Goldkette says, "No," he says, "listen," he says, "we're featuring Steve, out from the band, all over," he says, "and we want that string bass on." "Well," King says, "I'll show you how it sounds." So they turned on the test, and I played it, a few notes, and he played it back to them. There it was, "aaah, aaah, aaah," just spread the wax, see, the vibrations spread the wax, and Goldkette says, "Well, I don't care," he says, "that's the picture that the people have, and I don't care." And King says, "Well, if you want to pay the expense of all of this," he says, "we'll do it." Goldkette says, "Go ahead and do it." So, here's what happened. The composition, I believe of the test, was softer than the composition of the wax in the master. Rather, that's my idea of it. Becuase when it come out on the master, it was perfect; but playing the test back, it spoiled the music. It spread the wax. So from then on, whenever we would record, I wouldn't play the test. I'd wait until the boys all got lined up and played their test, and had everything straight, then

Steve Brown is shown here with the Dixie Five, Detroit, Michigan, in 1949. From left are Eph Kelley, Andy Bartha, Al Jenkins, Brown, and interviewer Frank Gillis.

I'd step in. I'd always have the easiest way. So, I think, and I know, that I was the first one to record on the wax. Then, the Edison people, and other recording companies, they heard about it, and they thought I had a special way of recording. So they come secretly to the places where we were playing and offered me fifty dollars or a hundred dollars to come over to their studio and play a few notes, see? Thinking they'd get the idea. Well, I didn't say anything. I says, "Okay." I was looking for that extra money on the side (laughs). So, I'd pluck a few notes, and they'd look and I'd see them shake their heads, because it done the same thing -- it spread the wax, see? So, I didn't want to give away on the Victor people, so it was some time before all of them caught on to it. But still I think the Victor people made a discovery at that particular time. Up until then, they couldn't record string bass. Now the records that I made with Friar's Inn, you can't hear a string bass, because it didn't record in those days. We had the megaphones, but it recorded all the instruments except bass, but the boys brought me along to record with them because of the rhythm that I was giving them.

Gillis: You were behind, farther away from the megaphone, though? Quite a bit?

Brown: No, no matter how close I got . . .

Gillis: Oh, I see, it just wouldn't pick it up.

Brown: I just wouldn't pick up the bass. It wasn't tuned so that it picked up any vibrations that low.

Gillis: This was electrical recording, though, with the Goldkette band at that time?

Brown: This was when they changed to electrical. That's the reason they made that discovery. Don't know what else I can tell you. I'm just a musician, rather just one of those fellows that made a lot of money, but where it went, I don't know.

Gillis: This is the case with most musicians.

Brown: Well, you take a fellow that's traveling, at that particular time I was making two hundred dollars a week with Whiteman, and my expenses. But when we'd be on the Pullman train, we'd always take care of the porter that took care of us on the train, then we'd take care of the redcap, then we'd take care of the taxicab driver, then we'd take care of the bellhops, then we'd take care of the valet when we got into the hotel. And then if we sat down to eat in a restaurant, all the waiters knew us -- you know what I mean -- and we'd leave a tip for them. And I think that's about where the money went. Of course I used to send my wife maybe a hundred dollars a week home, but that wasn't anything, with a family.

Gillis: Do you know any stories about when Bix joined the band? He was in the band when you joined already?

Brown: Well, they were all coming together. No, Bix come there a little later, after I got there. He couldn't get there. And Trumbauer come a little later. Just a few days later, anyway, they were all getting together forming this new group. And, they were trying that. While the band made quite a lot of money and they sold a lot of records through it, it was mismanaged. And the money, the profits of the orchestra, was thrown away, in one way or another, by mismanagement. But the band was well accepted all over the country. And Jimmy Dorsey and Tommy Dorsey . . . well, Tommy Dorsey wasn't with the band then. He left the band and played in one of Goldkette's outfits in the Book Cadillac (Hotel). And just Jimmy remained with us. Don Murray was playing, also. It was a very good band.

Gillis: Do you have any especially prize stories about Bix, since he's become so famous?

Brown: Bix? Well, his mind was always on music, or something, cause his mind was never on anything else. He was a typical musician, or a typical artist in the respect, that is, he never gave his appearance much of a thought . . . his heart and soul was with his instrument. Although I can't say that so well, because I remember leaving one town and going about three hundred miles away to play, and Bix comes on the job without his cornet. So he had to call up and have a cab to bring the cornet. How that happened, I don't know, I think he had a little bit too much hootch in those days. And during the dry days, the stuff that we were drinking, why it was . . . It was surprising to see what it would do to you, you know.

Frank Gillis

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Has worked since 1938 as pianist with small jazz groups in Detroit, New York, and Minneapolis, and is still working in this capacity in the Bloomington area. Recorded14 sides with own jazz group, THE DIXIE FIVE, in Detroit (1949-50) and with the Doc Evans Dixieland Jazz Band in Minneapolis (1957-59). Researched and studies jazz at Wayne State University (Detroit, 1949-53), Columbia University (New York, 1953-55), and the University of Minnesota (1955-58). Received M.A. in Library Science from the University of Minnesota in 1958. Presently Associate Director of the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music, which holds one of the world's largest collections of phonorecordings of folk and popular music. The tape recording from which this transcription was made was taken in Detroit while Steve Brown was a member of the DIXIE FIVE. Steve recorded eight tunes with the DIXIE FIVE on August 17, 195090. Four of the tunes, "My Pretty Girl," "Mr. Jelly Lord," "That's a Plenty," and "Milenberg Joys" were issued on United Records.

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