

Professor Will Jackson
Interview 123a
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ABSTRACT: In this interview with KSPL, Professor Will Jackson reminisces about his time in W.C. Handy's band and their big hit "The Memphis Blues." He also tells the interviewer about Dr. Tyler, the man who adopted him and taught him to play several instruments and Harry James, Professor Jackson's student.

Part I – Professor Will Jackson being interviewed by KSPL Radio.

KSPL's special events department (hereafter KSPL): We are pleased to have with us today Will Jackson who is at the ripe old age of 97 years. Will Jackson has the unique distinction of being one of the original members of the W. C. Handy Band. For the benefit of those in our younger age bracket, W. C. Handy was a colored man and a musician before your time. He wrote "The Memphis Blues" and is one of the forerunners of blues as we know it today. Will Jackson, known as "Professor" to his friends in the Diboll area has lived here for many years. He taught music, taught many Diboll children how to play instruments, taught them how to read music. And as I understand it, he had a band here for a number of years.

Professor, would you like to tell us a little something about your experiences with W. C. Handy when you were playing with him in his band in Memphis?

Professor Will Jackson (hereafter PJ): We would always go out and play for dances, then we would have rehearsals, we played from place to place. Wherever they wanted us, we would go and play. Handy always made the arrangements; we were just playing for him.

KSPL: Handy was a pretty good operator then. He had a band that was operating in Memphis with a group of musicians. What year was that when you played with him, do you recall?

PJ: I don't know exactly, somewhere along about – between '12 and '15, I know.

KSPL: About 1912 and '15. Well, that is a good while ago. The "Memphis Blues" was immediately accepted by the people of Tennessee and there is some sort of statue there in Memphis commemorating Handy and the band for writing that tune?

PJ: Yes, it is out in that park.

KSPL: Can you remember any other members of the band who played with you at that time? Can you give us some of their names?

PJ: Fellow named Walton, he played trombone, Williams out of New Orleans, he played clarinet. Several others, I'll have to think of their names.

KSPL: What instrument did you play, Professor?

PJ: I played trumpet.

KSPL: You played the trumpet and I believe you told me Handy played the violin, is that right?

PJ: That's right.

KSPL: There is something about the lyrics in one of the songs you were talking about, something about Handy and his bow, would you like to go over that for us like you did before we went on the air?

PJ: Yes sir, in writing the "Memphis Blues" he started out – "Folks, I just been down, down to Memphis town. That's where the people smile, smile on you all the while – Hospitality it sure was good to me. Didn't have to spend a dime, had the finest time. Had a fellow there named Handy. Folks said that man sure could pull some bow. He would make a fiddle moan like a sinner on Revival Day."

KSPL: I understand those lyrics were later changed though. I wish – of course, in those days they didn't have recording facilities like we have now, it would be wonderful if you could recapture some of the music of the early day bands. What did you do, did you play with a circus band at some time, Professor?

PJ: Yes sir, Christie Brothers Circus and then Dee Brothers, his No. 2 show. I played on the Gentry Brothers Show.

KSPL: It is my understanding that you had a little to do with a fellow by the name of Harry James, is that true? Did you know him in his younger days?

PJ: When I was a kid, I started him out on music.

KSPL: I'll say, that is most unusual. We are certainly glad to have you, Professor Will Jackson of Diboll, Texas – 97 years young and one of the original members of the W. C. Handy Band. Thanks for being with us, Professor.

Part II – KSPL interviewing Professor Will Jackson.

KSPL: This is the second of a series of public interviews from KSPL with Professor Will Jackson, a Diboll resident who is 97 years old and is one of the original members of

the W. C. Handy Band. Those of you old enough and those of you interested enough in blues will recall that W. C. Handy wrote “The Memphis Blues” and the “St. Louis Blues” and many, many other blues selections throughout his career. It is a very interesting aspect in Prof. Jackson’s association with W. C. Handy. Being a colored man and growing up in a period of time when he did it is very unusual that he would have been afforded the opportunity to study music and to learn to read music and to learn to play an instrument. That was an unusual happening for any person, especially as we said, a young colored boy growing up almost a hundred years ago.

Professor, would you like to tell us what happened in your early life that made it possible for you to learn to play music and everything?

PJ: I always liked music. One day my mother carried me up town and there was a minstrel show there parading. I saw that and I thought that was the prettiest thing I had ever seen in my life. So I wanted to play music. You couldn’t buy any instruments. I would always get me two sticks and get out on the steps or get a tin can or something and start beating on that. One day I was sitting down, she had gone to the store, and I was sitting down on the steps playing, and I looked around and there was a man standing at the gate. I thought the police was coming to arrest me for the noise. He laughed and came to me and asked where my father was. I told him my father was dead and my mother had gone to the store but she would be back directly. He asked me how I would like to come and live with him. He had three other little boys and wanted another. He asked me my name and I told him “Will Jackson.” He said, “You are just the boy I’m looking for.” So when my mother came back he talked her into the notion of letting him have me so he took me up to his house and raised me.

KSPL: Who was this man you are talking about, Professor?

PJ: J. L. Tyler, Dr. J. L. Tyler – he was raised in Berlin, Germany. He came over here to the United States, stayed in New York a while. He found friends in Milwaukee, moved there with them. That’s where I got with him.

KSPL: In other words, you were born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin 97 years ago?

PJ: That’s right.

KSPL: Now this Dr. Tyler, this is interesting to me, you say he was a doctor and also a musician – did he teach you to read music? He taught you how to play a horn and how to read music?

PJ: Yes, he taught me all kinds of instruments. Everyone could play almost anything he had there reed, string or brass.

KSPL: Was he a hard taskmaster? I mean by that, did he make you study hard and was he a little bit difficult to please when it came to playing the horn?

PJ: Made us “cross every “t” and dot every “I”. When we got to be big boys, he wouldn’t whip us. He would take us to the conservatory room and get out a piece of music and lay it on every instrument in there. Now we weren’t allowed to play or do anything but stay right in there until we got so we could play that piece of music perfectly.

KSPL: In other words, he had a four-piece band that was pretty hard to beat. What instruments did these other boys play?

PJ: We just mixed up, sometimes we played the violin, guitar, bass violin, and cornet.

KSPL: In other words, you learned to play how many instruments?

PJ: Oh, I played pretty well played all of them, reed, string or brass.

KSPL: That is very unusual. Back to W. C. Handy, you were playing with him in Memphis along about 1910, or somewhere, and he came up on the idea of “The Memphis Blues,” would you like to go over these lyrics that he first put down on “Memphis Blues” for us, please.

PJ: The first thing he wrote, there was “Folks, I just been down, down to Memphis town. That’s where the people smile on you all the while. Hospitality, it sure was good to me, didn’ have to spend a dime, had the finest time. I went out dancing with a man named “Handy.” Folks, that man could pull some bow. He could make a fiddle moan like a sinner on Revival Day.”

KSPL: Lyrics to “Memphis Blues” and a little interview here with Prof. Jackson of Diboll, Texas. We are glad to have you with us, Professor, and we hope you will live many more years. Now, I want to ask you this question that everybody always asks a man who gets close to a hundred years. What do you attribute to your living so long?

PJ: I never was a hearty drinker and always honored my mother and treated everybody right, behaved myself. The Lord just blessed me, I guess.

KSPL: Well, he certainly did. Professor Jackson, 97 years old and you are bending a little bit physically but I’ll say this for you, your mind is as clear as a bell and it is a pleasure to talk with you.

Part III – KSPL interviewing Professor Jackson

KSPL: We are pleased to present a third series of public service programs from KSPL. Our guest is Professor Jackson, a 97-year-old musician who played with such famous names as W. E. Handy. He is credited with being one of Harry James’ first instructors, knew him as a youngster on a circus circuit, and traveled all over the world. He was reared by a doctor and musician who had moved to this county to Milwaukee, Wisconsin from Germany. When Will was seven years old, ninety years ago, as a matter of fact, this doctor taught Will and three other young colored boys to be expert musicians and their

careers went from there. Will has played with numerous circuses. He has played with numerous bands and in 1920, for some peculiar reason he decided to come to Diboll, Texas.

PJ: They came and got me to come to Diboll to teach the band they had here.

KSPL: Well, that's fine. They had a band in 1920 that I'm sure some of our older listeners in this audience will remember. Would you like to go into a little detail on the band, some of them might remember some of the people who played in it, if you can recall them without much trouble.

PJ: Well, Ed Jones, Frank Oslaw, Freeland Goldman, Preacher something or other, Winston Brown, Winston's boy was called "Buck Shot," little Ed Jones – that's what I can remember right now, several of them.

KSPL: Well, you had about a thirteen or fourteen piece band, is that right?

PJ: Fourteen-piece band.

KSPL: It has been quite interesting, we discussed Prof. Will Jackson's career here at length this morning, and as I told you, he played with W. C. Handy's band in Memphis, Tennessee. At the time Handy wrote "The Memphis Blues." We have gone over this a couple of times but we are going to ask him once again to give us the lyrics, the original lyrics that W. C. Handy wrote to "The Memphis Blues."

PJ: "Folks, I just been down, down to Memphis town. That's where the people smile, smile on you all the while. Hospitality, it sure was good to me. I didn't have to spend a dime, had the finest time. They had a fellow there names "Handy" and folks say that man sure could pull some bows. He could make a fiddle moan like a sinner on Revival Day."

KSPL: The original lyrics to W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues." Handy, as you indicated in the lyrics was a violin player.

PJ: Fiddler, violin player.

KSPL: Also the leader of the band, and of course, he has been immortalized by not only "The Memphis Blues" but for "St. Louis Blues."

PJ: And the other bands I have played with Billie Richard Minstrel, Black Betty and her band in my younger days. I stayed with David Billie two years, stayed with Black Betty about eight months.

KSPL: You had a very interesting career before you came to Diboll in 1920. I'd like to ask you something. You went to work for the railroad here, is that right?

PJ: I went to work for the railroad in 1942.

KSPL: Ed was telling me earlier that you were the first President of a safety organization, is that correct?

PJ: That's right.

KSPL: Would you like to tell us a little about that?

PJ: We had a safety organization here. We had meetings every month from one sawmill to the other. They would give us a nice time, always prepared eats for us and we would have a speaker there speaking on safety. Teach you how to be safe at work.

KSPL: Well, that's fine. Will Jackson, it has been a pleasure to talk to you. Will Jackson is 97 years old and I think it is remarkable the clarity of his mind at that age. As I told him earlier he is beginning to slow down a little physically but his mind is still as sharp as it can be. He has certainly had a very interesting life. A pleasure for us to have you on our program.

END OF INTERVIEW