A commercial and academic author and retired college president, James A. Drake earned the Ph.D. degree from the Ohio State University. To earn “pocket money,” Drake played piano and clarinet in a pub near the Ohio State campus. “I was the back-up ragtime pianist when the owner of the place, who was a fine pianist, took a night off,” Drake recalled, “but I was mainly the clarinetist in the small band that he hired to play there. Because I had studied clarinet with a well-known local teacher, I regarded it as ‘my’ instrument, so I collected recordings of the great jazz clarinets—especially Ted Lewis, whom I had met when he gave a show at the Ohio State Fair in the 1950s.”

In 1968, through an Ohio State professor, Jerome D. Folkman, the rabbi of Temple Israel in Columbus and a personal friend of Ted Lewis, Drake conducted what became one of the most thorough interviews that Lewis ever gave. During the next ten years, with funding from pioneer recording director and arranger-conductor Gustave Haensch, Drake conducted similarly detailed interviews with clarinetists Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Jimmy Lytell and Barney Bigard, among others.

“Each of these legendary clarinetists had very different perspectives about their instrument and their careers,” Drake said. “Most of them were not ‘fans’ of Ted Lewis’s clarinet style, but all of them acknowledged and respected him as a pioneer in popularizing jazz as a musical form.”

Drake has also written extensively about vocalists, especially opera singers. His biographies of Rosa Ponselle and Richard Tucker, to which Luciano Pavarotti contributed the forewords, and of Lily Pons (with a foreword by Beverly Sills), received international acclaim in the press. Drake lives in Merritt Island, Florida, USA, and writes online articles for various music-related websites.

I’d like to ask you several questions about the clarinet. When I had the privilege of meeting you between your shows at the Ohio State Fair about ten years ago, the clarinet you used in your show was an Albert system. I know of some players who started with the Albert and then switched to Boehm. Did you ever do that? Can you play both systems?

The Albert [system] was popular with the ragtime fellows, but the Boehm was what many of the New York fellows were playing. I tried to learn it, but it was so different than the Albert that I just couldn’t stick to it. So I stayed with the Albert.

Do you recall the name, or brand, of your first B-flat clarinet?

Yes, it was a Lambert. It was a good name in clarinets. Made in Paris, and imported over here.

Is that the instrument you were playing when you joined the Earl Fuller band?

Well, I still had the Lambert when I went with Earl, but not too long after I settled in New York, I tried out a clarinet made by a fellow named Brancati, O. M. Brancati, who had a store on Lexington Avenue. I heard that he had an arrangement with Vandoren in Paris to ship him barrels, pads, keys, spring, and such. His [Brancati’s] workmen would assemble and adjust the instruments to suit the client.

Do you have a preference in mouthpieces?

I think I’ve tried them all at one time or another. For a while, I was playing with a glass mouthpiece. The one I learned on was a wood mouthpiece. It was okay because it was well seasoned, but I was always worried that I might drop it and put a chip in the tip. I worried about that with the glass mouthpiece too. I used a hard-rubber mouthpiece on and off, and it was very stable. I use Bakelite mouthpieces most of the time.

I wondered if you were using a plastic mouthpiece these days.

I should try one of the newer ones. Plastic has come a long way, and I hear that some of them are pretty good.
You use a standard metal ligature. Did you always use a metal one?
Yes, and I've had several different ones. The one I liked the best had three screws instead of two. Now, the old players, the ones who came up from New Orleans, they used string for a ligature. Some of them used fishing line to hold the reed in place.

Of the several New Orleans clarinets who came to New York when the jazz movement started, did any of them have an influence on your playing?
Oh, yes—there were several, as you say, but Al [Alcide] Nunez was the one I really admired. All of the New Orleans fellows he played with thought Al was the tops. He had a nickname, “Yaller,” which was the way the fellows who played with him pronounced “yellow.” I don’t know if you know this, but Al was with the band that became the Original Dixieland Jazz Band when they were just a five-piece band playing in Chicago. About the time I started with Earl Fuller’s band, word was coming out of Chicago that Al Nunez was the hottest clarinetist of them all.

What was it about his playing that influenced your style?
In one word, everything! If you listen to the records he made with the Louisiana Five, you hear how easily he could play in the upper register—and I mean an octave above what almost any other clarinetist could play. You don’t hear his low register in those records, because it didn’t record very well, but his low-register playing was almost like what you’d hear from a classical clarinetist. Oh, he could do the growling, “reedy” low notes that you hear Sidney Bechet play when he’s on clarinet. But Al could play like a conservatory graduate when he wanted to. Every note he played had the same quality, high to low and low to high, and his vibrato never varied from top to bottom.

Your own clarinet sound and your high-register playing are really distinctive. Has your tone and your style changed a lot from when you were starting out with the Earl Fuller band?
You mean my “wah-wah” vibrato? That’s the style I developed when I was with [the Fuller band]. We were a novelty act, a “clown band.” The kind of music we played, meaning the songs we played, we called “nut songs” back then. I developed that high-register “wah-wah” as my part of the act. I always held the clarinet pointed upward, and moved it all around—left and right, up and down—while I was playing. Sometimes I would do a dance while I was playing, or I’d mimic a guy marching with big, high steps. That’s where the top hat came in, too.

In a Columbia catalog supplement from the late-1920’s, there is a photo of you playing saxophone. Did you “double” on sax and clarinet in your band, or any of the bands you played with before you formed your own group?
Only when I had to, meaning when another sax player was necessary for an arrangement. The sax was the electric guitar of the 1920’s, you know. You may have heard of Rudy Wiedoeft—
Yes, the composer of “Saxophobia,” and the man from whom Rudy Vallée borrowed his first name. That’s right. Rudy Wiedoeft, and a group called the Six Brown Brothers, and also a fellow who worked for me from time to time, Bennie Krueger, were the ones who were considered the top men on sax in those days.

Staying with Rudy Vallée for a moment—and he was just here [in Columbus] about two months ago, and I interviewed him about this—he said that when he put together his first band, the Yale Collegians, he did an impersonation of you. His impersonation of you, along with the one he did of Maurice Chevalier, became part of his show at the Paramount Theater. I would guess that you and Maurice
Chevalier and Al Jolson have been impersonated more than any other performers. Would you agree?

If you’re talking about performers in general, not just singers and musicians, I think you’d have to add Groucho [Marx] to that list. But, yes, I saw Rudy’s impersonation in one of his shorts [short films], and it was pretty good because he could imitate my swaying and my “strut,” you might call it. And he could play the clarinet in my style, too.

Of the stars you just mentioned, I think I’m the easiest to imitate because I don’t really sing, I “talk” a song. Chevalier and Jolson “talked” lyrics too, but they were singers. They talked a little just for an effect. Now in my case, a fellow can get himself an old battered top hat, and a white-tipped cane, and a clarinet—even if it’s just a prop and they don’t play it. And if they can mimic my inflections and my gestures, why, they can do me pretty easily.

Were you and Al Jolson friends?

I knew Al, of course, but Al was a fellow who didn’t socialize much. I’ve belonged to the Friars Club for more years than I can remember, and I love going there and playing cards with my friends in show business. Al wasn’t like that, you see. Al was always “on,” even when he wasn’t onstage.

Your delivery of a song is so distinctive that I think it’s right to say it’s unique. How did you develop it? Where did it stem from?

From Cohan. George M. Cohan. He “talked” a song, you know. I saw every one of his hit shows, and each one was greater than the one before it. Have you seen the movie with Jimmy Cagney?

Yes, several times. Jimmy Cagney was a dancer, you know, but his style was nothing like Cohan’s. But when you see him dancing as Cohan in that movie, you’d swear you were seeing George M. Cohan. Now, Jimmy doesn’t sound like Cohan, but he “talks” the lyrics like Cohan did. The only difference was that Cohan would sing more of the lyrics than Jimmy Cagney does in that film. Jimmy’s not a singer, he’s a dancer. Cohan could sing “straight” when he wanted to.

Ted Lewis (second row from bottom, far right - No. 2), brother Edgar (second row from bottom, fourth from right right - No. 19) and Oscar Ameringer (No. 12), Circleville, c. 1902. Photo courtesy Ted Lewis Museum
Going back to the very beginning of your career, who was "Cricket"?

Cricket Smith was his name. He had a band that he and several other Negro barbers had put together. Not that all of the players were barbers. They were black musicians who happened, some of them, to be barbers. (Contrary to some reports this was not the trumpeter William Crickett [his baptismal name] Smith (1881-1947). Cricket Smith's other claim to fame is that he was the father of jazz violinist Hezekiah ‘Stuff’ Smith, and gave him his first violin lessons - Ed).

In interviews I've read, you have given a lot of credit to "Cricket" and his influence on your playing style. How would you describe what you learned from him?

Syncopation. I learned that from [Cricket Smith's] band. What they played was totally different from what we thought of as a “band,” which was a marching band, a military band, in those days. Very oom-pah-pah. The black band players were playing in a syncopated style.

Were they trained musicians, any of them?

They didn’t read music. They played by ear, and they would play a melody to suit themselves. The sheet music might have, say, eight bars of half-notes and quarter notes, and a rest here and there. But since these fellows couldn’t read music, they held onto a note if they wanted to, or added what you call “grace notes” here and there, which made their playing swing.

How did you come to know Cricket Smith?

I used to sweep out his shop. I was good at sweeping out stores. My father had a dry-goods store, and one of my “jobs” was to sweep the inside of our store, and sweep the walkway outside it.

What was the name of his store?

The name? You mean my father’s name, or the name of the store?

Both, if you please.

My father’s name was Ben, or Benny as he was called, Benjamin Friedman. Benjamin and Friedman—they were my parents. The store was Friedman’s Bazaar. It was on West Main Street in Circleville. It was about, maybe, seven or eight blocks from the house I grew up in. It was a two-story home, or three-story if you count the attic, which we also
used, on West Mound Street in Circleville, at 158 West Mound.

**How many were in your immediate family?**
I’m the second oldest of five kids; my brother Edgar was the first, then me, then my brother Milt (or Milton), Leon, and Max. We also had a clerk at my father’s shop living with us, and at times we also had a laundress living with us.

**You began in a municipal band in your hometown, am I right?**
It was what used to be called a “cadet band,” and it was formed by a German bandmaster. In Circleville, in fact in the big Ohio cities, it was the Germans who were usually the bandmasters. And were the teachers, too.

Was he the Oscar Ameringer who formed and led that band?
Yes, Oscar Ameringer. He called himself “Professor” Ameringer. Just like I call myself “Professor Lewis” when I do “Medicine Man for the Blues.”

**Was he the Oscar Ameringer who became a prominent Socialist, and either founded or wrote for labor-union newspapers?**
Yes, indeed. He came to Circleville from Cincinnati, and I think he lived in Columbus for a while, too. He was very friendly with John L. Lewis, the mine-worker leader. Oscar was our bandmaster in Circleville. And he kicked me out of that band. Do you know that story?

I’ve heard a version of it, but I’d much rather hear it from Ted Lewis personally!

Well, we were playing a concert in the park, and one of the pieces was the “Poet and Peasant Overture.” Being German, Oscar Ameringer liked the Suppé overtures, especially “Poet and Peasant” and the “Light Cavalry” one. They were popular back then. Our band had played “[Poet and Peasant]” so many times that frankly, I was sick of it.

In the middle, and again toward the end of the overture, there’s a passage in \(\frac{3}{4}\) time and the woodwinds, especially the clarinets, are more prominent in those parts. The brass section “rules the roost” in the opening of the overture, then the strings and brass, then the woodwinds. Anyway, I think I played the first section the way it’s written. But in the second section, I stood up and “noodled” my way all the way through that passage. I was all over the place, improvising in the upper register. Well, as soon as that concert was over, I got fired!

Did Ameringer re-hire you after he calmed down?
No, and it wasn’t long after that when I went to Columbus and started playing there. Later on, after I got well known in New York, he apologized to me about ten times.

What took you to Columbus from Circleville?
Well, my father wanted me to go to college, to learn how to run a business and maybe become part of the family business. So he paid my tuition to go to a business college in Columbus.

Was that Bliss College?
I think it was called Columbus Business College back then, but it’s still going, I think. I was only there one term, one semester, and it wasn’t for me. The classes mere mostly in the morning, and I’m not a morning type of fellow. Show-business folks are night-time folks, you know. So I didn’t stay in [business] college. But if I do say so myself, I’ve done pretty well in business. Not the kind my father had in mind, but in show business.

Do you recall where you lived in Columbus?
A boarding house on East Town Street, about two blocks from Town and High Street. I think it’s still there.

Do you recall the name of the store you worked in?
Yes, Goldsmith’s Music Store, on South High Street near where the Capitol building is. At that time, it was a very large operation. They sold all kinds of musical instruments, and phonographs, and player pianos, and they also sold and demonstrated sheet music for customers. I did odd jobs there —sweeping up, and raising and lowering the awnings, and doing deliveries, mainly. I did learn how to adjust keys and springs on the clarinet, and how to shave reeds, and how to put in pads. But I was just an errand boy.

May I ask you about your religious upbringing? Although I’m a goy, I study with two rabbis at Ohio State, one Orthodox, Rabbi Marvin Fox, and one Reformed—the great man Rabbi [Jerome D.] Folkman, who has made this interview possible for me. Not being Jewish, I don’t know if there are strict lines that separate Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Judaism, but if you had to characterize your family when you were growing up in Circleville, in which tradition would you place your family?
First of all, in Circleville there were only, I think, five families including ours that were Jewish. My father came
from what you’d call a Conservative background today. There was no temple in Circleville, and the Jewish families that lived there, if they got together much at all for religious purposes, got together in one of their homes. Honestly, I don’t remember much of anything about what it meant to be Jewish until I came to Columbus and saw the beautiful synagogues there. I’m sure you know the name Lazarus, the department-store family. The patriarch was Simon Lazarus, and he and several other wealthy Jewish families donated the money and headed the fund drives for those wonderful temples in the East end. As for me, to be honest I’m not [an] observant Jew. Adah and I were married by a rabbi after [our] civil ceremony because we wanted a mitzvah, a blessing, for our marriage. But being on the road like I’ve been throughout my career, I couldn’t follow the dietary laws and say all the prayers you’re supposed to say before and after meals, and at sunrise and sunset and throughout the day. But I’m Jewish and I’m proud of it, and I really like this temple [Temple Israel] where my brother belongs. And everybody here loves Rabbi Folkman. I bet he’s a good professor.

Indeed he is—and please tell him I said so, although he’s not going to give me any bonus points for a compliment! Staying with the subject of Columbus and your time there, did you play any of the vaudeville houses in Columbus?

Much later, yes, but not at the time I’m talking about. At Goldsmith’s, I met a man named Gus Sun, who had a vaudeville circuit that played the East Coast. He hired me, and it was through him that I got to New York. I was hired by a band that played at Rector’s, which was a very posh restaurant in Manhattan.

Was that your first band, meaning the first one that was called the “Ted Lewis Band?”

No, my first band was a little before that. I had put together a band in 1915, just five pieces, two clarinets, two cornets, and a Sousaphone. We played shows at Coney Island. We also played a few dates at the Brighton Beach Pavilion.

When you formed that first band and were playing at Coney Island, were you playing in the style we hear on your first Columbia recordings?

No. We were playing songs that were suited to that type of a small band. We weren’t improvising. We were playing “straight.”

When would you say that you first began playing jazz, then?

Well, the group that popularize jazz was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. Nick LaRocca was the one who made that group what it was. When they got the gig at Reisenweber’s in New York, and then when Victor picked them up and started promoting their records, that’s when jazz really took off. Now, I had been playing in that style before the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. I was with a band called Earl Fuller’s Novelty Orchestra.

When and how did you become associated with the Earl Fuller band?

It was either at the end of 1915 or early in 1916 (It was the spring of 1917 - Ed). Earl heard my little five-piece “nut band,” as I called it, and he liked my style, so he offered me a job. It wasn’t until I got to know him that I found out he was an Ohioan, too. He was from Warren, Ohio.

Did Earl Fuller just lead the band, or did he play in it too?

Earl was a pianist, what we used to call a “novelty pianist” in the style of Zez Confrey and Felix Arndt. Do you know those names?

Yes, “Kitten on the Keys” and “Nola” and so many other piano pieces that I wish I could play!

Are you a musician too?

No, sir, except in a very liberal use of the word “musician.” I play clarinet at a little bar on High Street, a block north of the [Ohio State University] campus. The owner is a ragtime pianist, and three nights a week I am his clarinetist. But I hesitate to say that I am a clarinetist in the presence of the great Ted Lewis!
If the money and the tips are helping you get your doctor’s degree, it doesn’t matter how well you play.

I’ll remember that, sir. Going back to your days with Earl Fuller, were the Fuller band and the Original Dixieland band the major jazz bands in Manhattan around the time that the U.S. entered World War One?

No, there were others in and around New York that were novelty bands, although what they were playing was our New York version of New Orleans jazz. Ben Selvin was there, and he had a novelty band, and Gus Haenschen had a banjo orchestra that he’d brought from St. Louis. The Warings, Fred and Tom, had a banjo orchestra, and there was the Original New Orleans Jazz Band too. So there were several, and all of them were copying the Original Dixieland Jazz Band—not the “live” band, but their Victor records. Victor really promoted those records.

You left Earl Fuller’s band, as we were talking about earlier, to form your own band. Was that a mutual decision?

Well, yes and no. He was older, and doing three shows a night, every night but Monday, was wearing thin for him. And to be honest about it, I had an act pretty much planned out, and I needed my own band to do my act the way I had conceived of it. I was full of pep and eager to get started, and I talked to several of the guys in the [Fuller] band, and they were willing to take a chance on sticking with me, so they came along.

Did you and Earl Fuller become competitors, then?

Not really. He was winding down, tired of the grind. When I was with him, the band had done several trial recordings for Victor, but very few of them were released. We had better luck with Columbia, and that’s how I got into Columbia and why I stayed with them after I had my own band. Columbia, you know, was the David to Victor’s Goliath. Columbia would try new things that Victor was reluctant to do.

Victor, as I said, promoted the Original Dixieland records pretty well, but that wasn’t what the [Victor] management wanted in 1917 and 1918. Their biggest selling band was the [Joseph C.] Smith band, which was a “society” outfit. Now that changed when they got [Paul] Whiteman, but that was after the Original Dixieland fellows had run their course. Earl, you see, wanted to be like Joseph C. Smith and be a society band. And that was exactly what I didn’t want to be.

Did you and Earl Fuller stay in contact after you became famous on your own?

Just incidentally. Earl went into radio when it became big. He stayed in radio, pretty much in the Midwest. Somewhere around World War Two, I think, he was the musical director
for a big station in Cincinnati. So he did all right for himself—another Ohio boy who made good in the music business.

I'd like to ask you more about the unique way you perform the lyrics of your songs. On your Columbia recordings, your early acoustic ones, you seem to sing more than you did when you made your electrical Colombias, and your Decca recordings several years later.

Well, that had to do more with the way recording was done back then, and also the way that records were promoted. All of the record companies put out annual catalogs that [listed] their records according to categories. So there would be a section for dance records, a section for symphonic records, a section for popular music—ballads, waltzes, and what-not—and a section for humorous records, monologs and such, and always a special section for records of opera arias and an overture or section from a symphony. There may have been one or two others [i.e., categories], but that was the idea, the way these catalogs were put together.

When I made my first records for Columbia with my own band, around 1919, if the label of the record had the words “vocal refrain” or “vocal chorus,” the people who bought the record expected to hear singing. Not necessarily ballad-singing, but you couldn’t just talk the lyrics, you had to sing them.

When I recorded When My Baby Smiles at Me the first time, I was singing into a metal horn, and my band was on bleachers that were in a circle, or semi-circle, right behind me. If you listen to that [Columbia] record, I sing the line “When my baby smiles at me” just like it’s written. On any of the later [recordings], I did it like this: “When my baby”—and I say “baby,” I don’t sing it—“smiles at me”—I sing the words “smiles at,” but on “me,” I speak it. On the first record, I sang the next line, “My thoughts go roaming to paradise,” all on pitch, singing it “straight,” in other words. The recording director wanted to hear that “g” in “roaming” on the recording. Later, I would do it like this: “My thoughts to roamin’—roamin’—way up there to paradise, yessir,” and I’d “talk” the line.

Do you remember where did you make your first recordings for Columbia?
In New York. The very first ones were [recorded] in space they rented on an upper floor of a building on Sixth Avenue.
Then they built a new set of studios on the top floor of the Gotham Building when it was finished. Those were nice studios because the building had, I think, twenty-three stories, and the studios were on the top floor, so none of the sounds of the traffic way down below could be heard. There were big windows on three sides of each studio—there were two separate studios, back to back—and in good weather, the windows would be open and it would be very comfortable in there.

I have to say, I can’t get over your altissimo playing on your Columbia records and in [the film] ‘Is Everybody Happy’, which Joe Franklin has as you probably know. Joe Franklin? The little guy that Paul [Whiteman] hired to help him put together his radio shows? I have a copy of the film myself, but it’s beginning to deteriorate because of the type of celluloid they used in the movie industry in those days.

But as I say, I just can’t say enough about your altissimo playing, your ease in the upper register on your Columbia Viva-Tonal records from the 1920s. I can see why you liked Artie Shaw—I think he’s the only other clarinetist who was so at ease above the top C on the clarinet. Were you always able to play that way in the upper register?

Yes.

Was the “Viva-Tonal” the ones that were made with the microphone and electrical process?

Yes, that was the name Columbia used to distinguish its electrical recordings from the standard blue label discs they put out before then.

Of course, you had the special Ted Lewis silver label for your Columbia records. You made many recordings for Columbia, both acoustical and electrical. Do you remember any of your first sessions, which I believe were in 1919?

Yes, I signed with Columbia in 1919 and I stayed with them until the 1940s. Even when I was making records with Jack Kapp at Decca, I was still recording with Columbia too. (Strictly speaking, this is true: Ted recorded dozens of 16” airshots for the Columbia Transcription Service in the late 1930s and 1940s - Ed) I don’t remember this many years later, but I think some of the first ones were Oh! and, of course, When My Baby Smiles at Me. I remember doing two versions of Oh!—one with my band, and another “take” with

Ted Lewis at Columbia’s Bridgeport, Conn. pressing plant, 1928. Photo courtesy Ted Lewis Museum.
one of the Kaufmans, I think it was Jack, doing a vocal chorus on the recording. Those were done in 1919 or 1920. I think that Ted is referring to the two separate sessions at which “Oh” was recorded - November 24, 1919, and December 9, 1919, implying that he, not Jack Kaufman, sang on the first session, although Kaufman is named as being present on the Columbia file card.

How many songs would you record on a typical day in the Columbia studios?

Usually we'd record two. That doesn't sound like much, but you have to understand that we would do maybe three or four "takes" of each song. Between "takes" the sound engineer, who was behind a wall which the recording horn was sticking out of, would be listening to a throw-away playback on a wax disc, and the band and I would stand around waiting. It would take an entire morning or entire afternoon to get two songs recorded in the days when there was just a horn and no microphone or amplification.

Now, if we weren't playing a gig and didn't have to worry about time, we could do several songs in one day. We would break for lunch after a morning session, and then we'd come back and do two or three more, and we would record a couple more in the evening. I remember doing that in those early days. Once, we took an entire day and we turned out seven or eight recordings. Not all of them were released, I don't think, but we were exhausted by the end of that day. I remember it was in the summer, and the new [Columbia] studios on the top of the Gotham Building hadn't been built yet—and, of course, there was no such thing as air-conditioning back then—so we were recording in our undershirts after a while.

Looking at the Columbia recording logs from the 1920s, I see that you recorded a number of songs that were associated with Whiteman—for example, “Everybody Step,” “Three O’Clock in the Morning,” and “Marie,” for example. Was there any rivalry behind picking those songs?

None at all. You have to understand that those were popular songs that everybody sang or played. Everybody Step was an Irving Berlin song from one of his Music Box revues, and like Alexander’s Ragtime Band a few years before, Everybody Step was heard in every vaudeville house and naturally on recordings too. I don't remember Whiteman recording Marie, but I know I did and so did Ben Selvin and many other bandleaders. Later, of course, Tommy Dorsey made what is probably the most famous recording of it. (Ted’s memory is at fault here, as the Tommy Dorsey version is a different song! Ed)

I understand your point now. In those days, everybody recorded whatever was popular, as long as it fit their vocal or instrumental style, correct?

That’s right. My band and I recorded songs that the popular singers of those days were singing onstage—for instance, we recorded Second Hand Rose, which was Fanny Brice’s song in the "Follies," and Margie, which Eddie Cantor made popular, and a lot of the songs that Al Jolson made famous. I used to follow the “Follies” to see which numbers got the biggest response from the audiences. Bert Williams, the Negro comedian, had some wonderful songs like When the Moon Shines on the Moonshine, which my band and I recorded at Columbia. Now, some of the songs that were what I’ll call “straight,” as opposed to jazz or blues, I recorded with my band and the Columbia people put them out under the name “Ted Lewis and His Band,” as opposed to the “Ted Lewis Jazz Band.”

You did record a number of blues, based on the Columbia ledgers. Do you remember some of those?

Sure. I remember Wang Wang Blues, which Henry Busse made popular later, Beale Street Blues, and W. C. Handy's Memphis Blues and St. Louis Blues. We even recorded one that was more of a novelty song, Aunt Hagar’s Blues.

Do you remember your first electrical recording for Columbia when the Western Electric system with its amplifiers and microphone replaced the old acoustical “horn”?

I don’t remember why, but my band and I didn’t start making the Western Electric recordings for several months after it was installed in the Gotham Building studios. Ben Selvin, who was the A&R [artists and repertoire] man at the time, wanted to make sure that the new system could record everything from a light-voiced soloist to a 20-piece band to a chorus of maybe fifty of more voices. Ben is one of the brightest men this industry ever had—and one of the nicest guys, too. He convinced Rudy Vallée, who hated Nat Shilkret and the Victor people, to come over to Columbia and record for them. He even gave Rudy his own “picture label” with his signature on it, similar to what I had in the earlier days with my face and my hat on a silver label, and to what Ben created for Whiteman when he switched from Victor to Columbia.

As we talked about earlier, Columbia used the term “Viva-Tonal” for its new electrical recordings. Personally, I think the Viva-Tonals give listeners an even greater sense of your altissimo playing than even the best acoustical discs did. What strength reed were you using on those Columbia Viva-Tonals and in the movie “Is Everybody Happy?”

Well, I usually went with a #3, but all of us in those days sanded the playing end, the thin end, of a reed to get just the right sound we wanted. As I told you before, I used a lot of different mouthpieces, even a glass one, but it was the reed-shaving the made the differences. That and the fact that I was an Albert system clarinetist. The upper register is easier to play on an Albert system instrument than any other clarinet system that I know of. It’s simpler—and that’s why it’s always called “the simple system.”

You made a recording with Sophie Tucker singing “Some of These Days.” Do you remember making that record for Columbia in the late-1920s?

Oh, sure—I had known Sophie since we were playing the Manhattan restaurants like Rector’s, where I played when I came to New York. She was just making her way up the vaudeville bill with Keith-Orpheum in those days. She’s Jewish, like I am, and if you know anything about Jewish vocal music, there’s a melancholy background to it—that’s similar to some of the blues songs that she sang. She was easy to work with, and she was still going strong when she took sick a few months before she died [in 1966].

Were you offered a contract by Victor when you were at Columbia?

No. They had other bands by the late-1920’s—[Jean] Goldkette, [George] Olsen, and of course Whiteman—and I was happy at Columbia. I did well for them, and they did well for me. They designed a special silver label for my
records. That was the first time any of the record companies designed a special label for a performer. That became my trademark at Columbia.

**You stayed with Columbia until you went with Decca Records, correct?**

Yes, although around 1922 or 1923, Gus Haenschen tried to get me to sign with Brunswick when he was the A&R [artists and repertoire] man there. Brunswick put out some great-sounding records in the days before the microphones came in. I said no to Gus’s offer, but around the time that the new [electrical recording] process came in, Ben Selvin became Columbia’s new A&R man. I had known Ben since, oh, 1914 or around that time, and he was a really great guy to have as the new A&R man.

**Had you known Jack Kapp, the founder of the American Decca company, before you signed with him?**

Oh, yes. Jack worked for Brunswick, and he headed their low-priced records, which were released under the Vocalion label. That was Jack’s label, although his supervisor was Gus Haenschen. A lot of people in the [recording] business thought he was crazy to start a new company to sell low-priced records when you could hear any singer or group you wanted to on radio for free. But Jack had a vision for Decca, and he made it into one of the most successful businesses of its type. He got Bing [Crosby] to invest in it, and several of us who knew Jack also bought stock in Decca. I think Bing would agree that Jack made Bing’s career bigger than it had ever been.

**You re-recorded most of your great songs for Decca. Are you pleased when you hear them even now?**

They’re my best records by far! Jack always had the best arrangers, the best studio musicians, and the best sound engineers. Later, when the long-playing record and the little 45 record came out, those Deccas were dubbed into those new speeds in high fidelity sound, and they sound terrific.

**There has always been talk that you didn’t play all of your songs yourself, and that some of the studio men who later became legends—and I’m thinking of Shaw and Benny Goodman in particular—actually played your clarinet parts. Is that true?**

Not Artie, no, but I did have Benny play several of them. My embouchure wasn’t as good as it had been, and I was never the clarinetist that Benny Goodman is, so I had him play several of my solos. His tone was much better, and he mimicked my playing so well that if it hadn’t have been for [his] tone, I would have thought I was playing my standards.

**Do you recall how many “shadows” you have had over the years?**

About six in all. For each one who has to go onstage with you, there has to be a back-up just in case the fellow gets sick the day of an appearance. Eddie Chester was the first, and he was great. I also had Harry Stumpy with me for a while. He had been part of a duo called “Stump and Stumpy.” But the best of all was my buddy Charlie “Snowball” Whittier. We were very good friends in addition to being stage partners.

**Do you recall how many “shadows” you have over the years?**

About six in all. For each one who has to go onstage with you, there has to be a back-up just in case the fellow gets sick the day of an appearance. Eddie Chester was the first, and he was great. I also had Harry Stumpy with me for a while. He had been part of a duo called “Stump and Stumpy.” But the best of all was my buddy Charlie “Snowball” Whittier. We were very good friends in addition to being stage partners.

**It’s somewhat ironic that Al Jolson is listed as one of the writers of “Me and My Shadow.”**

He did that with most of the songs he made famous, and he could get away with it because he told the publishers that since he was responsible for putting the song over, for making it sell in the tens of thousands, he should get a piece of it. I doubt that he ever contributed a single word to any of those songs, including “Me and My Shadow,” which he never sang as far as I know.
Was that a relatively common practice for stars to insist that they be given songwriting credit for any hits that they made?

I don’t think so, for two reasons. One was George M. Cohan, who wrote his own songs and performed them. Everyone in the business respected George M. Cohan, and since he never put his name on anything he didn’t write, everyone but Jolson tried to follow his example. Another very big star in those days was Harry Lauder, and he wrote almost all of the songs he performed—“Roamin’ in the Gloamin’,” “It’s Nice to Get Up in the Morning But It’s Nice to Say in Bed,” and “I Love a Lassie.” And there was the team of Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth. They wrote and performed several hits, especially “Turn Off Your Light, Mister Moon Man” and “Shine On, Harvest Moon.”

The second reason was that the big fellows in ASCAP, and I’m thinking of Irving Berlin in particular, would never allow anyone to put their name on one of his songs. I know that Jolson tried to get Berlin to put his name on one or two songs, but Berlin told him where to get off. In my case, I wrote part of the lyrics for “When My Baby Smiles at Me” with Andy Sterling in 1919. Bill Munro wrote the music, and Andy and I wrote the lyrics. I have a draft of the lyrics in my collection, and it shows who wrote which lines. But to get back to your question, I never put my name on any song I didn’t contribute to. I think Ted is being economical with the truth here - cornetist Ray Lopez recalled in an interview with Dick Holbrook that Ted agreed to record his composition ‘Bees Knees’ “providing I cut him in for half, which I did very gladly” -Ed] * Ray Lopez and Dick Holbrook: ‘Mister Jazz Himself’, Storyville 69, Feb- Mar 1977, p. 103.

Another trademark of yours is your white-tipped cane, which you seem to be able to do anything with. You twirl it so fast that if it had lights on it, they would be a blur. How long has that been a part of your show, your act?

The baton-twirling? I had learned it as a kid, and I got to lead a very big medicine show when it came into Circleville.

Do you remember the name of the medicine show? I understand that there were a lot of them in the Midwest at the turn of the century.

It was called Hamlin’s Medicine Show. It was quite a production—like a circus coming to town. There would be posters put up everywhere weeks ahead, and the show would come into town led by a marching band. [Oscar] Ameringer used many of us in the cadet band, along with others, especially brass players, to lead the parade of the Hamlin wagons into town.

I used to practice almost day and night twirling that brass baton. It wasn’t like the white-tipped walking sticks I use in my act, not like what I use in “Me and My Shadow.” This one was longer, and it had a kind of bulb on one end. It was a tapered tube with the other end rounded off. I got so I could throw it in the air, catch it behind my back, do all sorts of tricks with it. I wasn’t the only bandleader who could “twirl,” you know. George Olsen used a baton in his floor shows. I think he had been a drum major.

As you hardly need me to say, there is an ongoing debate about who was first “jazz king,” Ted Lewis or Paul Whiteman. Would you comment on that debate?

To start with, look at the dates. When I was playing with Earl Fuller in 1916-1917, Paul was playing viola in a symphony orchestra. That was his background and training. His father was the conductor, or maybe director, of the Denver Symphony, which is where Paul got his start. Then listen to his first records, and compare them to mine. He didn’t make any recordings till at least two or maybe three years after I was recording with the Fuller band. Where he was lucky is that he was signed by Victor, and two of the songs his band recorded in one of their first sessions, “Whispering” and “The Japanese Sandman” were big hits.

Frankly, I never thought of Paul as a jazzman. He loved that “King of Jazz” title, and that “talkie” [of the same title] definitely put him over with the public more than his first records ever did, but if you listen to his radio shows and read some of the interviews he gave, what he talks about is not jazz in the New Orleans style, but what he liked to call “symphonic jazz.” Of course, he got that from being the one who introduced “Rhapsody in Blue,” and the one who recorded it with George [Gershwin] at the piano. But he didn’t have as much to do with that premiere as he claims he did. Ferde Grofé and Gershwin were the ones who wrote the arrangement.

Paul was a solid musician—no question about that. He had that symphonic training, and he was taught by his father. But as any of the fellows who were in his bands will tell you, he was not a very good player, and just a so-so conductor. If you
talk to Joe Venuti and ask him about Paul as a violist and violinist, Joe will tell you that [Whiteman's] playing could be almost embarrassing. Yet he'd insist on playing a violin solo from the podium, always with a spotlight trained on him, and he'd be sharp or flat throughout the solo.

Did you get to know each other when you were both with Columbia in the late-1920's?

Not really, no. The reason he left Victor and came to Columbia was because the head man at Victor, Nat Shilkret, had an ego like Paul did, and he wanted to decide what Paul would record. Paul thought he had made so much money for Victor that nobody there should be trying to tell him what to do. And there was another fellow [at Victor], Eddie King, who didn't like jazz at all, and he was a “yes man” to Shilkret.

Now, Ben Selvin, who got the A&R job at Columbia around 1925 or 1926, knew Paul and knew how much interference he was getting from Shilkret, so Ben talked Columbia into giving Whiteman a much better contract. Not so much better money-wise, but better because Paul could pick all of his players and arrangers, and could record whatever he wanted. And as they had done for me, the [Columbia] management designed a special label for Paul's records.

As you know, there are music historians who maintain that jazz and blues began with a black players in New Orleans, and that white musicians, especially Whiteman, “stole” the music from its black originators and commercialized it. To the best of my knowledge, no one ever said that about you. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Everybody who started playing jazz around the time I did, knew that this was New Orleans music and that the players who brought it to the north, whether we’re talking about the Midwest or New York, were blacks and Creoles. Louis Armstrong was the giant of all of them, and everybody knew where Satchmo was from. He was King Oliver’s star player. Same with Sidney Bechet. Practically every one of those early jazz and blues players you can name, whether it’s Jelly Roll Morton, or Lucky Roberts, or James P. Johnson, or the blues singers like Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith and Ethel Waters, they were all from the South.

I was thinking more about why Paul Whiteman, but not Ted Lewis, has come to be seen as the one who “stole” black music, commercialized it, and made a fortune from it without ever acknowledging its real origins. I can only give you my opinion, and it's that Paul promoted himself was the “King of Jazz.” If you're going to advertise yourself as the King of Jazz, and you make a movie called “King of Jazz” and you're the star of it, then you're almost saying that this is your music, your invention, and that you're the best one who can play it.

I never did any of that. And I never pretended to play “symphonic jazz,” or anything like it. And I didn’t lead a band, let alone try to be a conductor. My band was the backdrop for my act, which has always been a stage act. I’ve never promoted myself as a bandleader because I’m not one. I came out of vaudeville, and my place is the stage, not a podium in front of a big band.

I'd like to ask you about films in which you have appeared. The first I want to ask about is the film “Is Everybody Happy?” What are your recollections of making the film?

I can barely remember the plot, to tell you the truth, because it was just the musical sections from a longer film. I remember that the character I played was named “Ted Todd.” He was a jazz bandleader looking for a break in show business, and he had two women fighting over him. One of the first numbers I did in that film—it may have been the first, now that I think about it—was “Say It with a Tune.” My band I played another one called “New Orleans,” which was meant to be a “hot” contrast to a tenor or baritone, I don’t remember which, who had just sung a song in an opera-type voice.

One that I remember for sure is “Medicine Man for Your Blues.” I remember that one because it was the first time I ever sang and played that on film. I also remember not liking it when I saw the movie because I performed it
at too fast a tempo and delivered it too loudly. Then there was the “Pirates” scene, which was comy and probably should have been cut. (Ted is confusing his appearance in “Is Everybody Happy” with the Warner Brothers revue film made at the same time, ‘The Show of Shows’, in which he appears alongside Noah Beery, in which he and his band perform “The Pirate Song” and “Lady Luck” - Ed). There was a ballad that they worked in called “Wouldn’t It Be Wonderful?” which was a good tune overall.

Now, I did a lot of playing in that movie, and I have to say that I was probably at my best on the clarinet in that film. You know, it was a two-reeler and there weren’t any retakes, so everything had to be done right the first time. I played pretty well in that movie, and I played a lot more than I did in any later films I was in.

The title of the film, “Is Everybody Happy?,” is the tag line that belongs to the one and only Ted Lewis. How and when did you “invent” that line?

Have you ever heard the name Eva Tanguay?

Eva Tanguay, the “I Don’t Care Girl”?

That’s her, yes. Back when I was starting out in New York, Eva Tanguay was one of the top stars in vaudeville. She was a saucy little thing, and she was very shrewd from a business standpoint. She was her own manager and her own publicist—and that was unheard of in big-time vaudeville. Her song “I Don’t Care” was her big hit, and it was the peak of her act. Now, she would tease the audience by saying, “Are ya happy now?” Then she’d say it again: “Are ya happy now?” Then she would say, “I don’t care”—and she would then sing “I Don’t Care.” I thought that was very effective, and the more I thought about it I came up with “Is everybody happy now?” After a while, I dropped the “now” and just used “Is everybody happy?”

Your first movie, as we talked about, was “Is Everybody Happy?” Among the other films you appeared in during the 1930s was “Manhattan Merry-Go-Round” in 1937. That was essentially a revue made into a film, am I correct?

That’s right. It was a collection of acts of all kinds—I think even Gene Autry was in one of the scenes—and it was pretty typical of movies of the Depression period. I think my old friend Jimmy [James] Gleason was in every one of them!

Let me ask you about a later film in which you played and sang: “Hold That Ghost,” the 1941 Abbott and Costello movie. You were in it, and so were the Andrews Sisters. How did that come about?
The reason is pretty simple: the “ghost” plot couldn’t carry the film on its own, so the producers had to insert other acts to make it a standard length movie.

Were the scenes with you and the Andrews Sisters filmed with Abbott and Costello present? In other words, was it done in continuity?

No, no. Our parts were filmed separately and then inserted into the film. In fact, I don’t remember much of anything about Bud and Lou during the shooting of that film.

Were they getting along off-camera or were they having the troubles that caused them to split up a bit later?

I really don’t know because I wasn’t around them. I had heard that Lou Costello wanted to be paid more than Bud because he claimed it was his character that was getting all the laughs. But that’s never how comedy teams worked. The straight man, in their case Bud Abbott, was always paid more because the straight man sets up the joke that the other comedian delivers. With every comedy team that had a straight man, the straight man was always paid more.

You have been so generous with your time this afternoon, and I don’t want to take any more advantage of it than you have allowed me to. But I would like to end this interview on the same topic we began, which is the clarinet. I can’t think of a well-known clarinetist of the 1930’s and 1940’s who didn’t play in one of your bands. In fact, I can’t think of any big-band member who didn’t play in one of your bands! If you won’t mind giving me your thoughts about these clarinetists, I’ll really appreciate it. Let me begin with the two best-known ones, Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. You hired both of them for your studio sessions, am I correct?

Yes, both of them played with me at different times when they were studio players. I had Benny play my some of my solos in my Columbia [electrical] records. Both are great players, but if you’re asking me which one I consider the best, it’s Shaw. I haven’t heard high-register playing like Shaw’s since Al Nunez. I’m not taking anything away from Benny, who’s a terrific improviser. But Shaw was tops in my book. I just wish he hadn’t walked away from it when he did.

Four other names, if I may: Johnny Dodds, Jimmy Lytell, Pee Wee Russell, and Lawrence Welk’s discovery, Pete Fountain.

Johnny Dodds was the real thing, one hell of a clarinetist! You know, he replaced Al Nunez when Al had some medical [dental] problems. To me, he wasn’t anywhere near the player that Al Nunez was. You know, Pee Wee [Russell], who was probably the closest thing to the old New Orleans players, said that Al Nunez was the greatest jazz clarinetist who ever lived. That tells you a lot about both of them, because if they held one of those old “carving contests” like they had in New Orleans, Pee Wee could outplay just about anybody you’d put up next to him.

You mentioned Jimmy Lytell, who’s a favorite of mine. Jim can play anything you put in front of him—a hell of a studio clarinetist—and he can improvise with the best of them. And Jim is an Albert [system] player. Did you know that? Of course, that makes him special to me because he didn’t switch like the others did.

Now, about Pete Fountain, there’s no question that he’s a first-rate clarinetist. I don’t see how he can last with Welk, any more than he could have years ago with, and I’m just picking names, Guy Lombardo or Shep Fields or Kay Kyser or Wayne King. Those fellows got where they were by sticking to a formula, and it’s not a formula that leaves much room for a “hot” soloist. Welk doesn’t pay anybody either—he pays scale, or just a little over scale. He’s lucky to have Pete Fountain because Pete draws people who wouldn’t watch Welk.

Welk’s show is really a musical variety show, sort of a cross between the “Hit Parade” and a vaudeville bill—a pop song by the whole band, then an Irish tenor, and the Lennon Sisters, and a violinist, then the kid with the electric guitar, and then Pete Fountain. For a New Orleans jazzman, that’s not much of an opportunity to play. So we’ll see how long that lasts with Pete.

I have asked you about Jimmy Lytell and Benny Goodman, and there are several additional musicians and singers whom you either worked with or had in your bands different times, and I’d like to ask you about them. Let me begin with Red Nichols.

Of course, he was known mainly for his recordings as “Red Nichols and His Five Pennies.” I don’t remember ever having Red in any of my bands, but he was a good cornet and trumpet player. I can’t say that he was a great one because he wasn’t. And he wasn’t “original” either—he took a lot of his phrasing from Bix Beiderbecke. Anyone who knew Red well will tell you that. (Although Red Nichols never recorded with Ted Lewis, he - and Jack Teagarden - appear in the 1931 short ‘The Happiness Remedy’ - Ed)
How about the Dorsey brothers? Your opinions of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey?

Tommy Dorsey was the finest trombonist, period. And I don't mean the kind of playing he did in his big band—"Marie," "Song of India," and such—but as a jazzman. In the old days, as I mentioned before, they used to have what they called "carving contests" in New Orleans to see who could outplay whom. That's how Louis Armstrong got famous in his early days. Well, if there was a carving contest for the trombone, Tommy Dorsey would have blown away anybody who came up against him.

Jimmy was the more versatile of the two, since he played both the sax and the clarinet. He was one of the few who was equally good on both instruments. I thought that on the clarinet, when he was playing jazz, he was up there with Benny Goodman.

Where would you place Sidney Bechet as a clarinetist?

That's hard to do because Sidney Bechet could play almost every instrument! Do you know that record he made by what they now call "over-dubbing," where he played every instrument and became his own "orchestra"? He spent a lot of his career in France and other parts of Europe, but he belongs up on a cloud with Satchmo and Duke Ellington.

Something I have wanted to ask you is about your movements on the stage, and how fluid and flexible your movements are. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you're so flexible and every part of you seems so fluid when you move—your legs, your arms, even your fingers—that a man half your age probably couldn't match. How do you do that?

Well, part of it is the luck of the draw, I'm sure, because I don't have arthritis or any of those diseases that affect many people my age. I think a lot of it has to do with the mind—\^ with mental attitude—and how you feel about your age. I don't think of age at all. Probably the best answer I can give you is that I work all the time, so I'm constantly onstage and constantly doing the kinds of movements you're talking about. When I can't do that anymore, that's when I'll retire.

Your most recent recordings have been the LPs you've made on the RKO Unique label. The first one, if I have my information right, was "Me and My Shadow," which you followed with "A Million Memories." Did you make those Unique LPs in California or New York?

They were all made here in New York, at a studio on East 45th Street. I really enjoyed making those LPs because they let me pick whatever songs I wanted, and I had my pick of arrangers to get them just the way I wanted each song to be heard.

The "Me and My Shadow" LP has many of the songs that have always been associated with you—"When My Baby Smiles at Me," "Medicine Man for the Blues," "Wear a Hat with a Silver Lining," and of course the title-song of the album—but it also contains several that you do wonderfully even though they're associated with other performers. I'm thinking of "September Song," for example.

As you probably know, that was written for Walter Huston, who was not a singer. He sort of "talked" the lyrics, which made it a natural song for me. And I love the verse of "September Song"—"When I was a young man courting the girls"—which I did on that Unique LP.

You ended Side Two with "Me and My Shadow," but in a very novel way: you sang "The Cop on the Beat" and then used it as a segue into "Me and My Shadow.

You liked that, did you? Well, I had done that in personal appearances, but never on a recording until I made that LP. I made transition from the phrase "the cop on the beat ... the man up in the moon ... and me ... and my shadow, strolling down the avenue." I'm glad you liked it.

On your "Million Memories" LP, you included a song by Gus Edwards and you prefaced it by talking about how famous he and his songs once were, and all the stars he created in his "newsboys" act. The song you chose was his "If I Were a Millionaire." What led you to choose it as opposed, say, to "Goodbye, Little Girl, Goodbye" or one of his other better-known hits?

I chose it because the sentiments he and Will D. Cobb put into "If I Were a Millionaire" are ones that everyone who has ever gone to school and wished they didn't have to can dream about: I'd buy up every schoolhouse in the nation / And I'd write upon the blackboards big and clear / Instead of one there would be two vacations / Each vacation six months twice a year. I'd never let you go if it was rainin' / And I'd make you stay at home if it was fair / I would buy you soda fountains / And build you ice cream mountains / If I were a millionaire!

I tell you, there isn't a man or woman in this great country of ours who didn't feel that way about school at least once in a while when they were kids.

On a talk show recently, Artie Shaw and Beverly Sills were asked how they manage criticism, whether from music critics or gossip columnists like Dorothy Kilgallen. In so many words, they said you must have, or else you must develop, thick skin and then consider the source. You have had a few critics during your long career, and one of them seems to be Eddie Condon. As you may have heard, he said in his recent book that "Ted Lewis could really make the clarinet talk, and when it did, it said, 'Please put me back in my case.'"

If he really wrote that, if those were his own words and not his ghostwriter's, he can't take any credit for being original. That line has been around as far back as I can remember, and it applies to any instrument that comes in a case, whether it's a violin or a trombone or a clarinet. But, look, he's trying to make some money to pay the rent, so he thinks he has to put down other people in the business. It doesn't bother me not only because it's not original, but because you have to consider the source. Eddie Condon is no Eddie Lang. Eddie Condon plays a four-string guitar. A four-string guitar? Please! That's nothing but an oversized ukulele. And maybe I shouldn't have given Eddie all the work I gave him!

I can't thank you enough for the time you have given me for this interview. I'm a proud Ted Lewis fan, and will never forget how kind you were to me ten years ago when I asked for your autograph. And I assure you that I'll never forget how generous you have been to me today. Thank you again and again and again.

This interview was conducted in 1968 at Temple Israel, in Columbus, Ohio, courtesy of Rabbi Jerome D. Folkman.