

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Sweet “Bell Gal”

What an orchestra it must have been! One of the most highly regarded New Orleans brass bands of the 1910s and 1920s, the *Tuxedo Jazz Band*, led by Oscar “Papa” Celestin, was named after The Tuxedo Dance Hall, a popular Crescent City bar and music venue. The band played there from about 1910 until 1913, when a shooting brought about the club’s closure.

A group photograph from 1914 shows off the stellar line-up: legendary pianist and music publisher Clarence Williams (piano); Ernest “Ninette” Trepagnier (drums); Armand J. Piron (violin); Tom Benton (banjo/vocals); Johnny St. Cyr (banjo); Jimmy Noone (clarinet); William “Bébé” Ridgley (tuba); leader “Papa” Celestin (cornet/vocals); and John Lindsay (bass).

Celestin played a driving lead and sang, while Joe “King” Oliver delivered hot bluesy counter melodies on his trumpet (pioneering the use of mutes). Other notables rounded out the changing personnel, such as the great Louis Armstrong, Peter Bocage, Manuel Perez, Mutt Carey, Louis Dumaine, Eddie Atkins, Harrison Barnes, Sunny Henry, Jim Robinson, John Casimir, Johnny Dodds, Alphonse Picou, Louis Keppard and Zutty Singleton (to name but a few). The group never did make a recording (though the *Original Tuxedo Jazz Band*, a dance band using some of the same musicians, did record in the mid-1920s).

Also around 1910, a 12-year-old girl (who had grown up listening to street corner serenades) began singing in the clubs, bars and tawdrier venues of the city. This young self-taught jazz pianist and vocalist became and remained one of New Orleans’ most beloved and enjoyed entertainers her entire life. In her younger days, she was known as the “Bell Gal” because of the wonderful eccentricity of wearing a red dress, red woven skull cap and attaching bells on her garters that jingled as she tapped her feet to the glorious jazz rhythms. This enduring jazz legend was Emma Barrett, also nicknamed “Sweet Emma” (allegedly for her “artistic” temperament), born in New Orleans, March 25, 1897.

Emma could not read music, but was in constant demand. By 1923, Emma was playing with "Papa" Celestin and later "*Bébé*" Ridgley's *Original Tuxedo Orchestra*. She remained with Ridgley until 1936, a time in which she also performed under such renowned bandleaders as Armand Piron, John Robichaux and Sidney Desvigne. Emma developed a blunt, barrelhouse piano style known as the "pile-driver attack". Her vocal phrasing was impeccable, belting out naughty double *entendres* with just the perfect delivery. Innuendos were delivered with a subtle bemusement (at times poignant and others with humor), yet never missed by the listener. There's a wonderful YouTube video of Emma superbly navigating this terrain. It's her rendition of Spencer Williams & Clarence Williams' "I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None of My Jellyroll". One can discern the nuances and delight in watching those bells jingle on her garter. With gusto, Emma let's her audience know:

"I know you want it. You can't have it. I ain't gonna give you none!"

Also check out her interpretation of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find".

In 1947, "Sweet Emma" accepted a steady job at a local club, Happy Landing, and in the 1950s she worked with Percy Humphrey and Israel Gorman. She led her own band of local veteran musicians, sometimes touring as *Sweet Emma and the Bells*. Though there was an obscure live set from Mardi Gras in 1960, 1961 marked her true recording *début* with her own album for *Riverside Records New Orleans: The Living Legends*, which brought her acclaim from beyond New Orleans' borders. The 1960s are greatly remembered for her tenure as the iconic pianist with the *Preservation Hall Jazz Band*.

Musical performances at Preservation Hall, located at 726 St. Peter Street in the Quarter, began at the start of the 1960s with the opening of an art gallery. Older jazz musicians played for tips with the idea of attracting potential customers. People loved the music more than the art. And Emma was the star. The late Allan Jaffe took over running of the Hall and made it famous, in part by doing everything counter to what was necessary for a successful jazz club: hard wood benches, a time-weathered exterior, no amplification, no air-conditioning, no dance floor and no food or drinks. Asking to play "The Saints" did require a heftier donation, however. But the only products sold were the Preservation Hall players' recordings and those of other New Orleans jazz musicians. And being next to Pat O'Brien's didn't hurt.

Far from glamorous Emma was featured on the cover of *Glamour* magazine and written up in international publications, which led to overseas tours. The *Preservation Hall Jazz Band* and Barrett toured in the United States, as well, including a 1963 stint at Disneyland. But Emma continued to feel most comfortable in her own hometown,

especially in the French Quarter.

In 1963, on her album *The Bell Gal and Her Dixieland Boys Music*, Barrett sings on four of the eight songs and heads two overlapping groups. The set gives listeners a good idea of the sound of New Orleans jazz back then, and the ensemble renditions of "Bogalusa Strut", "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" and "Big Butter and Egg Man" are great fun, too. The "Bell Gal" led other sessions for GHB (1963-1964), Preservation Hall, Nobility, and a 1978 album for Smoky Mary.

1965 is remembered for Emma's brief but memorable appearance with the *Preservation Hall Jazz Band* in the movie, "The Cincinnati Kid," filmed in New Orleans and featuring a close-up of Barrett as vocalist and pianist for the band.

In 1967, "Sweet Emma" suffered a stroke that paralyzed her left side, but that did not keep this enthusiastic performer down. She continued to do live performances and occasionally, to record, until her death in on January 28, 1983.

And long after Emma's passing, (whether performing at Carnegie Hall or for the King of Thailand) the *Preservation Hall Jazz Band* continues its ambassadorial mission of travelling around the world in order to "nurture and perpetuate the art form of New Orleans Jazz".

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