

**ORAL HISTORY T-0011a**  
**INTERVIEW WITH CHICK FINNEY, SAMMY LONG AND OLIVE BROWN**  
**INTERVIEW BY IRENE CORTINOVIS**  
**JAZZMEN PROJECT**  
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CORTINOVIS: This is Irene Cortinovic of the Archives and Manuscripts Collection of the University of Missouri. This afternoon, August 27, 1971, as a part of our Oral History series, I have in the office with me Chick Finney, a St. Louis musician, and Sammy Long who played trumpet and clarinet for a long time, Pam Ward and Olive Brown, blues singers. So, you first...just start off. Chick.

FINNEY; Well, I'll start off with making a correction, Irene. Sammy Long played saxophone and clarinet. Sammy Long is one of the dedicated musicians, who has been an inspiration to many of the youngsters from the early thirties, at which time he played with some of the names... Sammy wanted to know how he should address himself, and I said, "Well, Sammy, you stay at ease and just tell them like it is." So, Sammy, why don't you start off with telling your experience with Charlie Creath. How would that be? Tell me about Charlie.

LONG: I started playing mellophone with the Pythian [Lodge] Band, a kid band, that was my experience. From there I...my first inspiration to play the saxophone...! heard Ted Lewis play in the Greenwich Village Follies. So I managed to get a saxophone and I took lessons from Jimmie Harris.

CORTINOVIS: How old were you then?

LONG: I was twenty years old.

CORTINOVIS: In St. Louis this was?

LONG: Yes. So, at that time, music was getting pretty good around St. Louis, and how I got my break with Charlie Creath...the musicians he had were going back to Chicago, and one of the fellows recommended me for his band, and I started to play with him in '23.

CORTINOVIS: Was his sister, Margie, still playing with you then?

LONG: Margie, yes. We had Rad Cooper on the trombone, Alexander Royce on the drums and Wayne Rollins...he played sax and the other six pieces. And at that time there was only two jazz bands in town, because most of the other musicians were in pictures in the theater on Grand Avenue... movie houses.

FINNEY: Pardon me, there was only two dance bands in town...black dance bands?

LONG: No, not black. Ted Jackson and our band.

FINNEY: Oh, ust two bands...a black and a white. What year was that, Sammy?

LONG: That was in '22.

FINNEY: 1922. Good.

LONG; And in 1923, until they brought in those talking pictures and put them in the theaters, we had quite a bit of work. We used to play Creve Coeur Lake and Lynn's Grove... that's in North St. Louis. I played all the Turner Halls, North St. Louis Turner, St. Louis Turner Hall.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, that's interesting.

LONG: Yes, Concordia Hall and all those places down there...in fact, we used to play Bellerive Country Club, too. [UMSL is on the former Bellerive site.]

CORTINOVIS: Did you?

LONG: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: For dancing?

LONG: Yes, for dancing.

CORTINOVIS: Did you play any club dates? Or were there any club dates that took a band like yours?

LONG: No. The only night club I played of any note was called the Club Plantation, in recent years.

CORTINOVIS: Now, Charlie Creath had a pretty large band, didn't he?

LONG: After he went on the boat, he had it enlarged to ten pieces, but we had only six pieces starting out. Then after he got the job on the boat, he enlarged it to such lengths as George Foster on the bass, Zutty Singleton on the drums. I saw his name in the paper the other day.

CORTINOVIS: What boat was that?

LONG: St. Paul.

FINNEY: Another question...was Zutty Singleton a St. Louis fellow? Or did he come up here on the boat?

LONG: He's from New Orleans.

FINNEY: New Orleans product. Now, he married Charlie Creath's sister. On the boat. What year was that?

LONG: That was in '27 or '28.

FINNEY: Louie Armstrong played on that series, too, didn't he?

LONG: Oh, yes.

FINNEY: Louie A. came in 1919.

LONG: Yeah, I saw Louie Armstrong when he first was on the boat with a fellow by the name of Norman Mason was playing trumpet, too. And we had the Dodge Boys on clarinet and drums, and Davie Jones played the mellophone in those days.

CORTINOVIS: You were right in there with some of the old-timers.

LONG: Oh, yes. In fact, I took three lessons from Davie Jones after he went on saxophone. He's the only fellow I know that could jazz a mellophone; he preferred to play jazz on the mellophone. You know what a mellophone is, don't you?

CORTINOVIS: No, really, I'm not sure.

LONG: It's an alto horn in the band, brass band, only the French horn you played with your left hand, and you played the mellophone with your right hand.

CORTINOVIS: Ummm.

FINNEY: Eddie Randle played one of those horns in our band.

LONG: Oh, yes, right.

CORTINOVIS: Yes.

LONG: And that's the first time I saw Louie Armstrong. And then, later on, down the line, I played with different bands under Charlie, and then went with Dewey Jackson. I had my first experience in New Orleans in 1925.

CORTINOVIS: The boat left from St. Louis and went to New Orleans?

LONG: Yes. They had a boat which they called the Capitol which ran around St. Paul, Minnesota, a steamboat enclosed. So, in the winter- time, we'd pass through here. We'd take a boat to New Orleans and be there from the last of September to the first of May and then we'd start our trip back up. Then after we got here, we'd go on with jazz to St. Paul. The other boat would go all the way up the Missouri (?) River, see.

CORTINOVIS: Now, tell me, Sammy, about how you were employed. Were you hired by Charlie Creath? Did he have the contract with Streckfus? Or were you hired individually by Streckfus?

LONG: I was hired by Charlie Creath.

CORTINOVIS: You were hired by the band leader?

LONG: Yes. Of course, later on with other bands, you signed a contract with a company.

CORTINOVIS: But, was this an all-black band?

LONG: No. All black players? Yes.

CORTINOVIS: Ummm. And were any of the patrons black?

LONG: No, they were nearly all white.

CORTINOVIS: Some of the boats had like midnight cruises.

LONG: Yeah. Well...

CORTINOVIS: For blacks. Did yours?

LONG: Yeah, well, they had these on Monday nights.

CORTINOVIS: Monday nights?

LONG: Yeah, mostly.

CORTINOVIS: They would go out of St. Louis and like up and down the river? Or what?

LONG: They'd go down the river most of the time.

CORTINOVIS: At this time, did you belong to the AFL?

LONG: Always, yes.

CORTINOVIS: You were in Local 44?

LONG: That's right.

FINNEY: That's something I want to add in, too, Irene. Sammy hasn't brought up his Cincinnati experience in arranging. The band director looked for people all along who could lead a section, a reed section, and Sammy was very good. His tonation and his eye. He used the eye of his reading ability. And he was a valuable man not only in Charlie's band, but any band. And the band leader, of course, would tend to look for a good lead man. Another thing, too, about Long. He studied his work. He had a terrific tone which Willie Smith had and the late Tommy Hodges, to make the reed section sound beautiful. And his service was really in demand in those days. And he wasn't what you'd call a feature saxophone player, but he supplemented...

LONG: Yes, I think he was an individual.

FINNEY: It was mostly dance music.

CORTINOVIS: On the band? What about the living conditions on the boat? Where did you stay when you were making these long trips?

LONG: They had what was called a "Texas." We had two bunks per room. It was really quite nice. It was steam-heated, too, because lots of times in New Orleans, we had cold days down there.

CORTINOVIS: Yes...in the winter...sure it is. Now, this boat was the Captain, you said?

FINNEY: Capitol.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, the Capitol? Oh, sure, sure. Because I was going to say the Captain was a new boat for me, but I have heard of the Capitol.

FINNEY: Did they still have dances in the wintertime down there?

LONG: Oh, yes. We never had a day off. You see, we'd leave here, and our first town would be Chester, Illinois. We'd play all the way down. Sometimes, it would take about fourteen or fifteen days. We'd play Chester, Cape Girardeau, Hickman, Kentucky, Cairo, Louisville, Vicksbury, Natchez, Baton Rouge, all the way down. And coming back, we'd make the same stops.

CORTINOVIS: And spend the winter in New Orleans and summers in St. Louis. Well, how long did you play with Charles Creath?

LONG: I played with him in the twenties...to twenty-five...because in twenty-five, I went down with Dewey Jackson, and when we came back in twenty-six, I didn't put it in because I got sick...an entire year. So when I came out of the hospital, then I started playing with little groups again...Cecil White. He had a group that broadcast from the Chase Hotel.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, yes.

LONG: So, we were broadcasting the day that Lindbergh landed in France.

CORTINOVIS: And that was station KWK, wasn't it?

LONG: Yeah...I couldn't remember the station, but I remember we used to have another fellow come down from Chicago by the name of Sam...and he was quite an announcer out of Chicago. All live music. We had about a 45-minute program. And I'll never forget, it was Coca-Cola who sponsored it.

FINNEY: Was that the first time a black band broadcast from there?

LONG: Well, I don't know if that was the first time. I have reason to believe...

FINNEY: My brother was one of the first ones, wasn't he?

LONG: I don't know.

FINNEY: He's a band man, too.

LONG: But I remember he wasn't very glad when we all had to holler, "Hurray." You know, stop playing and holler to "Hurray."

CORTINOVIS: Oh, right. After Cecil White, who did you play with?

LONG: Then I went to the Fate Marable Band.

CORTINOVIS: What year was that?

LONG: That was the same year... '27. Because I had been in the hospital and when I came out, I started right away to rehearse...so, I was guaranteed a job after I got well. So I wrote Captain Joe a letter...he was in charge then...and he sent for me. And I played with Fate Marable all of '27.

CORTINOVIS: And from then on, you were hired by the Streckfus Company, right?

LONG: Yes. See, then I didn't go back to New Orleans...you see, the boat went back to New Orleans, but I didn't go back. I went with a fellow named Floyd Campbell and became part of his band.

FINNEY: Was Floyd a member of the Creath's band?

LONG: At one time, yeah.

CORTINOVIS: What boat was Fate Marable playing on when you were playing with him?

LONG: The J.S.

CORTINOVIS: And did you make the same kind of run down to New Orleans? Or what?

LONG: No, I didn't go back with him. Some of the boys did, but I was kind of afraid to go back for the reason that I had gotten sick down there. I didn't want to take a chance. So that was when I joined Floyd Campbell and worked with him two or three years.

CORTINOVIS: Around town?

LONG: Yes. And then we made trips as far as West Virginia, Huntington, West Virginia...Charleston. We had a booking agent out of Cincinnati. We got around quite a bit; we got quite a few jobs, north and south.

CORTINOVIS: And by that time, then, you were up to the '30's, and not only did we have the depression at this time, but sound movies came in, and jobs got a lot harder to get, didn't they?

LONG: Yes, they did. I was fortunate enough to work with the Work Project Administration to get a professional project. So a fellow by the name of Artie Mosby had that band. We played all community centers. I played from '36 to '42.

CORTINOVIS: For dancing?

LONG: Yes, and then it was all USO work. There were the federal troops and soldiers from Jefferson Barracks. All the YMCA's. There's hardly a hospital in town I haven't played.

CORTINOVIS: Even those jobs were hard to get then, weren't they, Sammy?

LONG: Well, you see, that was booked by the city. It was like USO work was. Naturally, they were inducting soldiers to go to Scott field...just for dancing for them, have girls...it was like USO work.

CORTINOVIS: Yes, those were the days that would make anyone, over years old, shudder...because jobs were hard to get.

LONG: Well, yes, but it was pretty nice. We got a pretty nice salary to live, I guess, because we were professionals. We got a pretty nice salary.

CORTINOVIS: What kind of music do you like to play best? What is your personal favorite?

FINNEY: Well, I like to play in a concert band, but I like dance music, too.

LONG: I like to play all of the better types of music. I know that I'm not a "Rock and Roll" guy. I like music you can understand, that has a meaning and all.

FINNEY: What suggestion would you give to a young fellow today who would like to have a musical life ahead?

LONG: Oh, I would suggest that he get the fundamentals first. Then you very often get into different things. You've got to have the fundamentals before you can ever start playing.

CORTINOVIS: I would like to ask, since we have two vocalists with us here, what kind of vocalist did you have? Or did you have vocalists in the band? On the boats?

LONG: On the boats, Floyd was the vocalist. He could sing.

CORTINOVIS: Did you ever have any women vocalists? Like when you got to New Orleans, did you hire any?

LONG: No, most of the vocalists were in the band.

CORTINOVIS: Well, how about you. Olive? You were starting to tell us a little while ago about your style and people were always saying that you've got this or that style. What kind of singing do you like the best?

BROWN: Well, jazz is what I like the best to sing, because this is what I came up under. You know, I heard this from a kid, and I saw some of them. I saw Ethel Waters and some of the other different people that I've seen and heard when I was a kid. Ethel Waters was the main one. But we had all of this, such as records, Sarah Smith, Sarah Martin's records, and Mamie Smith's records.

CORTINOVIS: At home you had this?

BROWN: Yes, and others.

CORTINOVIS: Was your mother a singer?

BROWN: Yes, my mother was a singer, but she never sang out in public. She just had two night clubs in her lifetime, but of some size, and I learned most of my songs from my mother that I sang. You know, from a child. But, as I told you, to start with I had been singing in the Sanctified Church, coming back and visiting my grandmother and relatives here in St. Louis.

CORTINOVIS: Olive, I don't believe I know what a Sanctified Church is.

BROWN: Well, they are called that, but they have another name. What is the other name?

FINNEY: The Church of God in Christ.

BROWN: Yes, the Church of God in Christ. But there's also another name.

WARD: Pentecostal.

BROWN: Pentecostal. This is a different name from what I come up under. That was Sanctified, and I'm still saying it, you know. And this where you get this rhythm at. As I say, "Rhythm is my business as the song goes and this is what I sell." So regardless of what people may think, you sound like this, and you sound like that other one...I feel that I have my own style of singing, but I feel that I got this style of singing in the church.

CORTINOVIS: In the church choir?

BROWN: In the church choir. And if not in the choir itself, along with the whole congregation, they used to sing.

FINNEY: Olive, we know that a lot of top notchers, like the late Dina Washington, have given credit to their backgrounds as a Gospel singer. Do you know anyone from St. Louis who has risen to top notch who came from a Sanctified Church in St. Louis?

BROWN: I really don't know of any from the Sanctified Church in St. Louis. I don't know where Josephine Baker came from, but she's from St. Louis. And she was a woman of renown, you know...talents. And I do more than one thing myself. You know, in show business...! come up under show business...and learned the fundamentals. I started off with the B.S. course, this is from your dancing, all the way up to mike presentation, and, you know, this sort of thing...how to bend your notes, how not to blare over a mike, this type of thing, and this was from being around older performers.

FINNEY: Olive, what do you mean when you said, "Bending a note?" I'd like to know.

BROWN: To bend a note is...if you can't hit the notes straight on the head, you know, as it's supposed to be, smoothly, without the vibrato, you bend it. You ease over this note and bend, and then I learned mezzo voce from Lucky Roberts in New York, and Lucky Roberts...just



stretching the vocal chords...and this taught me a lot. I liked to go around older people who really know about this business.

FINNEY: Did you know he was from St. Louis?

BROWN: Yes. Now this was the man from St. Louis! Did he go places! Yes, he did! It just came to me when you said this. And his cousin and sister in the schools...

FINNEY: Miss Julia Davis. I want you to meet her. You know her, Sam. She's one of our top historians.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, yes, we have an interview with her.

FINNEY: When I told my story, she brought him down to me as his back- ground, and I did stories.

BROWN: Oh, yes, I've got some of it at home. I stayed up there for at least six months...

CORTINOVIS: There's very little that Julia Davis doesn't know about Black History in this community.

FINNEY: Oh, yes, and Lucky was great. The late George Gershwin went to his house.

BROWN: That's right. That's absolutely right.

FINNEY: Do you remember this, Sammy?

BROWN: Yes, he got the transcript for the "Today" show when Ira was on, and he didn't want to return this. And he said, "This is Lucky Roberts."