

It's All in the Tone
The Life and Music of
Johnnie Jessen



By Johnnie Jessen
as told to Kim Pearson

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Jessen Music Foundation
Seattle, Washington

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Chapter One

A Young Musician in Seattle

When I was about five or six years old, I found an old violin in a closet in our basement. It was my grandfather's violin that my father had brought with him from Denmark. Nobody ever played it; it had just traveled with Pop from country to country, house to house, closet to closet. But when I found it there, boy I was excited.

My father belonged to the Danish Brotherhood that was a lodge for men from Denmark. They had a big dance hall with a stage, and they held all sorts of festivities; parties and dances and such, my goodness did they have parties! We would always go, the whole family, Pop and Mom and my brother JC and my sisters and myself. That was one of the things we did for fun. This was about 1915, so there were no movie theaters close by, and of course no radio or television. People gave a lot of parties and dances then.

At the Danish Brotherhood parties they usually had a violin player and a piano and a drummer up on the stage, and they played all the old standard tunes, the good old tunes like "Yes Sir That's My Baby", for people to dance to. So I listened to those tunes from the time I was a baby, and I

thought they were terrific. When I found the violin in the closet, I took it out and I got to strumming on it, sliding my finger back and forth, and playing those little tunes. I thought the violinist at the Danish Brotherhood was great and I always listened closely to his playing when we went to the parties, so I could learn to play like him. When I was older I practiced those great jazzy tunes like “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” and I’d try to play them on my violin. Well, I got so I could play all of them.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby". The title is at the top left, followed by the tempo marking "Moderate". The score is written for a single melodic line, likely for a violin or saxophone. It features a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "p" (piano) and "f" (forte). The lyrics are: "Yes, sir, That's my baby, No, sir, don't mess 'em up, Yes, sir, That's my baby, No, sir, we won't hide it, Yes, sir, That's my baby, Yes, sir, you're la-ry-ed now, By the way, When we reach the presch-er I'll stay, Yes, sir, That's my baby, No, sir, don't mess 'em up, Yes, sir, That's my baby now."

“Yes, Sir, That’s my Baby”

Words by Gus Kahn, Music by Walter Donaldson

First Made famous by Eddie Cantor

Pop wouldn’t let me take violin lessons, though, because he had paid for my brother and three sisters to take music lessons, mostly piano, and I guess he got to thinking it was a waste of time. Only my sister Lina kept up with it; she played the piano pretty well. I was the youngest in my family, and Pop wanted me to be a building contractor, like he was.

But I just went on learning the violin by myself, by listening to the tunes and playing them by ear.

We lived in the Fremont District in Seattle, on 40th and Greenwood. Pop owned the property and built the house. The house is still there, in fact.



Our house at 40th and Greenwood, as it looks today.

When I was about 9, a family by the name of Clark moved in down the street. The Clarks had a boy named Freeman, who was a little younger than me, and we became friends. When I first saw Freeman, I said, “Oh boy, your name must be Tubby.” Because he was. I have always liked to nickname people. Many of the nicknames I’ve given people over the years have stayed with them. Tubby’s nickname did; he was known as Tubby Clark his whole life. He even used it as his professional name. He later became a well-known Seattle radio personality and entertainer.

Tubby loved music too, and we used to practice together, Tubby on the piano and me on the violin. Even though we were young, we both got so we could play pretty well.



Tubby (left) and myself, all grown up, about 1935.

Tubby's father, Mr. Clark, was a mail clerk, and also one of the greatest ragtime piano players I ever heard. He just played for his own kicks, and boy was he good. One day, when Tubby and I and some other boys were playing baseball in the street, Mr. Clark was in his house playing the piano. I went up on the porch and listened to him. I put my nose against the window and I watched him playing, and I noticed there was a violin lying on top of the piano. So I tapped on the window and when he opened it, I said, "I can play that." He let me in the house and took his violin down and tuned it up, and I played with him, he on the piano and I on the violin, for a long while. He showed me how to finger it, so I could slide from one note to another, and he showed me how to bow.

After we had played for a while, Mr. Clark turned to me and said, "You know, you play pretty good. There's a big party coming up, the Mail Clerk's Ball. I'll tell you what I'd like to have you do, is come and play with me at the ball. Would you like to"? And I said, "Fine, I'll do that."

So I went to the Mail Clerk's Ball. It was held in a big ballroom out by Green Lake. All the postal workers came. The women were all dressed up, and it was a big deal. Mr. Clark and I played for the dance. He played the piano and I played the violin. We played for the first part of the dance, and it just went great. During intermission, Tubby came over and sat down at the piano and played, and I picked up my violin and played with him. We played all through the intermission, and then we continued to play on during the dance, too. It must have been funny to see two little kids playing for that big dance. A lot of people were amazed that we were so good.

After the dance was over, a wealthy lady who lived in the Mt. Baker area, which was one of the rich neighborhoods, came up to us. She said, "I'm going to have a big house party, and I want you to come and play for me. I'll pay you whatever you want. Will you do it?" And of course we said, "Sure!"

In those days many wealthy people had ballrooms in their homes. They would give enormous parties and dances and get-togethers, and they'd hire bands to come and entertain or play for dances. It was called the society circuit. So Tubby and I went and played for her party. What fun. People came up to us and asked us to play this tune and that tune, and they put money in our pockets, and generally made a big fuss over us.

Well, from that party, we got another job, and then another, and from that time on we were quite popular at the parties and dances on the society circuit. My mother would dress me in a sort of Little Lord Fauntleroy outfit, and Tubby's mother did the same with him. We were a great hit because we were so young. We had no music, because at the time we only played by ear. So we played the songs we knew. For re-

quest numbers, if someone could hum it, we could play it. I sometimes made more than \$5.00 a night, which was a lot of money for those times.