

Interview with

COSIMO MATASSA

Interviewer: Tad Jones

Location: Tulane University

William R. Hogan Jazz Archive

January 15, 1994

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

2

- TJ: O.K. We're back. This is an interview with Cosimo Matassa. We're at Tulane University, January 15, 1994. This is Reel #1. I think maybe we're kinda skipping around and I got my notes and things here. I don't know where we left off. One thing I wanted to know is; you told me you had three children.
- CM: Right.
- TJ: Could you give me their ages and birthdays?
- CM: Yeah, they were born roughly two years apart, 1946, 8 [1948], and 50 [1950]. And the first was John, then Michael, and my youngest is Louis. John, the older, and Louis run the store that my father used to run.
- TJ: Which is now Matassa's Grocery?
- CM: Matassa's, yeah, in the French Quarter. And, my middle son has an art gallery in Santa Fe.
- TJ: Oh, O.K., I didn't know that. O.K., let's see, maybe we'll run down different people that you knew and just maybe make comments about...
- CM: [...?..][laughs]
- TJ: No, well, no, that's up to you.
- CM: I wouldn't do that.
- TJ: Oh of course not, no, just different people you've known or artists that you've known over the years and maybe make, maybe some general comments of people that we haven't talked about maybe, and I think you, well first, I don't have a list, I mean I'm looking at John Broven's book here and maybe we'll, some people and places will come to mind more or less. Allen Toussaint, just when did you first meet him and know who he was?
- CM: ...very young man, playing. He was starting to do session work and that sort of stuff and, I remember we had a guy come in from out of town who was going to do some recording and decided to put out a general call for talent. And that turned out to be a real zoo arrangement; that should never have happened. Because

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

3

we just had literally dozens and dozens and dozens of people waiting to be heard and Allen was playing for 'em, and as it turned out when he got through listening to everybody else, it was Allen he wanted to record, his obvious talent, his ability to work with anybody, you know. He could play anything, and for anybody, in any keys, and whatever, and literally he was helping everybody that came along do a better job, frankly, and, he wound up recording Allen. That's what brought in the "Wild Sounds of New Orleans" [RCA LPM 1767] ...

TJ: That album that he did, now who?

CM: ...the one where they phonetically spelled his name, you know, Tousan?

TJ: Tousan, I think T-O-U-S-A-N?

CM: Yeah, somethin' like that.

TJ: And I think some of the records were Al Tousan, yeah. So who was that for, what was that?

CM: Well, the guy that did it was a guy named Danny Kesler, and he produced and got it released by RCA Victor.

TJ: Was he working for RCA?

CM: Well, he wasn't working directly for RCA Victor but he had a, he had a friend on the inside connected with RCA. They took a lotta the things he did.

TJ: Right.

CM: He also got Capitol to do a few things.

TJ: Seems like a lotta of the, you, correct me if I'm wrong, seems like in New Orleans the majors, the RCAs, the Capitols, what I would call the majors, seems like more of the smaller labels...

CM: Oh, those independents or whatever were started in New Orleans.

TJ: The independents came from out of here.

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

4

- CM: With a couple of notable exceptions which you appreciate, the early days, it was Columbia and Victor, that they did those really pioneering recordings before even me, you know, and they deserve credit for that. But in the post World War II era or, whatever you wanna call it, it was the independents primarily who came, and notably you could probably divide 'em into two types; a few people fit both classes. There were those who loved the music and also wanted to get it out, and there were those who saw commercial possibilities and didn't care a damn about the people or the music. And I suppose it's probably best to let history decide which were which.
- TJ: Which were which, yeah. There were actually some who loved the music and made money.
- CM: Yeah, I don't fault that.
- TJ: No, but I'm saying there were some in both categories.
- CM: I'm a diehard Capitalist...
- TJ: [laughs]
- CM: ...so I think it's great to create wealth and if you do it the way some of those folks did, maybe it wasn't the best way to do it but they did get the product out. And the notoriety, if you will, was that, it created for us here in New Orleans a market for the talent and these guys were nothing if not opportunists. So when one guy would hear about somebody else's success or read about it in Billboard or whatever, obviously they would decide themselves. There were a couple or three stretches in there, you know it waxed and waned depending on market conditions, I guess, I don't know. And, but there were several periods where [...] one guy after another coming down here to record and generally speaking they were nice guys at least to be around, you know, and most of 'em had an interest in music. And one of the nice things was most of 'em were very open-minded about what to record. A lot of 'em would come to New Orleans with no idea who or what they were gonna record and they would just kinda go around. I shepherded some of 'em around and other people did. Some of 'em just went around on their own, you know, or whatever, and decided on that basis who they might

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

5

record, which meant a lot of the recordings, a vast percentage of it, really, was almost ad hoc; I mean, who or what, what songs, what sidemen.

TJ: You mean really coming here as virgins, babes in the woods, really just, just, in other words...

CM: Yeah, all, with a sense of what's possible but not having fixed on anything yet.

TJ: ... just knowing, well, I'll go to New Orleans...

CM: Yeah, they didn't come to New Orleans saying I'll record ...

TJ: ...X, Y, Z, just, I'll find somebody...

CM: That's right.

TJ: ...to record. New Orleans is hot.

CM: Or they made some tentative research, and decided on that; on the basis of that to come to New Orleans to record. But so much of it was that really kinda ad hoc thing and I think we, looking back on it, that we need to be grateful for that because, if possibilities that in a more structured situation would have probably shut out a lot of people who would've never gotten recorded, on the basis that most of 'em weren't very polished in their presentations.

TJ: But, can we look at that from the economic standpoint, in that, it didn't cost a lot in those days to get into the record business, to do a session.

CM: Oh, no! It was dirt cheap! I mean, they got me and the studio for fifteen bucks an hour! I mean, you know, and that included everything.

TJ: Was that, I mean, what year are we talking about? Fifteen an hour, that sounds like, sounds really...

CM: I'm talkin' about...

TJ: Late forties or early fifties?

CM: ...late forties, early fifties, into late fifties, you

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

6

know, what ...

TJ: You mean rates didn't change that ...?

CM: Didn't change much, no. I got up to thirty-five dollars an hour, I was in hog heaven.

TJ: [laughs]

CM: The cost of living was cheaper around here, you know. A guy could come down and if he hung out with the local musicians, he could come down here and live in somebody's house, you know, eat hot food, you know, and, which is a little different than what people might call soul food, and go to bars where the drinks were cheap, even if you bought a round, somebody else bought the next one, you didn't buy 'em all and that kinda stuff. So, it wasn't a major investment. It was no investment at all by major label standards, but to some of these folks it was a stretch, you know, 'cause a lot of 'em didn't have a lotta money.

TJ: Yea, yea and by that same factor a lot of people got into the business, released their first record, and was, were never heard of again. That did happen.

CM: Right, well there's a lot of that, a lot of that, and a lot of it had nothing to do with the quality of either the performer or the recording, unfortunately. I suppose one of the great things folks like yourself can do is discover those little gems that got lost along the way [laughs].

TJ: Oh well, yeah, I mean, I've heard that some of my favorite records are with the small little labels that ...

CM: Never got ...

TJ: ...had two or three releases and never, you know, never saw the light of day [laughs] after that.

CM: Well because, you know, the infrastructure for selling records developed rather quickly once WWII was over, the so-called independent distributors popped up all over, and they too, are an important part of this mix and we shouldn't overlook 'em. And generally those

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

7

are guys who were hard-nosed, sales types, you know. And of course that meant the original few guys who were driving around the countryside with a trunk full of records and stopped everytime they saw a stick out there, radio station antenna, and ask 'em to play their records. Then go to the local stores, [and say] 'this station in your town's gonna play this'; you know, take a few of these records. Those guys earned their money; that's tough.

TJ: Looking at it from that standpoint, it's the, the Johnny Vincents; I really have to respect them for that, they had a tough...

CM: That's right! Oh, listen! With all, with all their human frailties and, and everybody including myself have our share [laughs], the really pioneering go-get-'em types, you know, I mean, it's kinda tough. I mean a lotta those guys, man, slept in their cars, and, you know, it was rough. And, and as the business developed a few became immensely successful in the distribution and the record label. The record label started to have these meteoric existences where they flashed up and then destructed, myself and my labels included.

TJ: I think some of that had to do with getting into a certain trend of music and the trend ended.

CM: It had a lot to do with that, it had a lot to do with that. But also what happened was the structure kept changing also, and then once the majors realized the sales potential, they co-opted the business. And if you look around today, what you find are either, maybe separated now into three classes. The true afficianados of the music, maybe some particular genre, even sometimes even one particular artist who'd record things purely because of the value they see in the music. And then you got those very sophisticated little independent labels that are able to survive because the people that run 'em are sharp, and, you know, have enough capital to survive. That develops into things like Windham Hill, for instance, and Alligator. You know, I'm leavin' out all of a dozen good ones.

TJ: Yeah, but those are good examples.

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

8

- CM: And then, of course, the majors who unfortunately look at records as units, and artists as bottom lines, things like that. So what happens is depending on your favour in the corporate structure, you know, somebody might spend an inordinate amount of money trying to make you a hit. And other people who deserved maybe that kind of support don't get it, 'cause there's only so much of it to go around.
- TJ: So we transgressed a little bit, but it was a good transition.
- CM: I wander alot. You gotta excuse me.
- TJ: No, that's O.K.! We talked about Allen Toussaint. Was he, I mean do you and, I guess, people recognize his genius from, initially?
- CM: Well, I doubt that any of us ever used the word genius.
- TJ: I mean his wonderful ability.
- CM: To say this guy could play, Ahhh, yeah. But I think you made that decision in a very, what's the word, participatory sense. You raised these people to certain levels on the basis of what they did and what you heard and their effect on other people and that sort of stuff. You know, by the time Allen started doing sessions, producing sessions, it was obvious, the way I like to say it is, and I've said it before, is that; he could make a chicken out of a wishbone and a feather.
- TJ: [laughs]
- CM: He had this, besides his enormous musical talent. He had this sense of seeing in people the part of 'em that had this real value and then constructing things around that. And I know I've said this before, but, there were artists who really couldn't sing in the great sense of the word but who had a sound, a feel, a personality and he could draw that out and wrap it up in an arrangement.
- TJ: That showcased what they had.
- CM: Yeah! Showcased what they had, right! It didn't

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

9

require them to do what they didn't do, and he had this innate sense of that. He still has it really, of appreciating the value of people who otherwise might not be considered - quote - talented. He has that ability to an enormous extent.

TJ: Somebody, a singer with a limited range...

CM: Yeah, a limited range, for instance.

TJ: I'm thinking of Chris Kenner, for example.

CM: Yeah, right, right! Chris Kenner was, you know, really, he talked, but that's all he needed to do. Allen had everything else going.

TJ: I think you described to me how he related to musicians when he was doing arrangements in the studio.

CM: What I think, and even I think today, he operates on two levels with people. On the one, he's right there with 'em, and the other; he's totally removed from them in this creative process. I'm sure on the basis of what I've seen in the past, that he walks into the studio already hearing what it's gonna be like, and now the task is to get that out of the people he's dealing with.

TJ: Um-hmn, oh, O.K., I see.

CM: You know what I'm sayin'? 'Cause I've seen him change arrangements. He comes in with a full arrangement and starts dropping things as opposed to adding things, you know? Now, after he's done that basic thing he has a tendency to constantly want to add things, you know.

TJ: Tinker with it, play with it.

CM: Yeah, right, give it that other little something. But I always had the feeling that he came in hearing in his mind exactly what he wanted to do and then the process was to get that onto the tape.

TJ: Does he, did he come in with written arrangements...?

CM: Sometimes.

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

10

TJ: ...for musicians? Here's the horn part? Here's this part?

CM: Sometimes, yeah, sometimes very elaborately written, and that's another thing he an ability to do. And one of the things I hated to see him do sometimes was, he would hire people for some specific little thing about them, but they weren't complete studio musicians?

TJ: Oh, O.K.

CM: O.K.?

TJ: You mean some eccentricity?

CM: Or some sound of theirs, or some quality of theirs that he admired or wanted. And he'd come in with these arrangements and then they wouldn't be able to do 'em, or they wouldn't be able to do 'em the way he envisioned or perceived them to be done, so he'd start scrappin' things, changing things, simplifying things, dropping things. I've seen him do this many times. In other words he really, you know, like the old tailors talk; he cut the cloth to fit the man, you know?

TJ: Yeah, [laughs],yeah.

CM: And he tailored these things. It was fun! It was a great experience to watch him work, to be, like myself, on the other side of the glass and watch this process take place.

TJ: Did he accept input from the musicians, from singers and people?

CM: Oh yes! Oh yes!

TJ: Easily?

CM: But I think, you know, and I've heard him do this many a time, we'd do a take, and the talent, whoever, might say, 'Oh and that's good, I wanna hear that,' and he'd say 'Naah, I don't think you wanna hear that'. Telling them that they were willing to accept something that wasn't their best, where they might've, or being caught up in the process, they weren't being as objective as they might be, and he would, 'You know',

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

11

he'd say, 'I don't think you wanna hear that'.

TJ: [laughs]

CM: Or, you know, meaning, we're not gonna keep that we're gonna do this again 'cause it can be better. I think he certainly was one of the preeminent talents, exactly opposite in some ways from Dave Bartholomew, for instance. Dave would come in and work like a sculptor, take this hunk of rock and chip out what was gonna happen, and it was hammer and chisel a lot of times. I mean it was, you know; it was drive, it was push, it was demand. He's a real task master, Dave is. And he wouldn't accept...

TJ: Second best!

CM: Right. He demanded it and he worked with guys who cooperated, that basic core of guys that did a lot of sessions. And many of 'em were either originally band members of his or people that he recognized after their you know, after their contribution, you know, and used 'em. But, he insisted on performance. He ran his session like he ran his live dates, you know. You showed up on time and you were ready and you were directed. He was the leader. Yet that didn't forclose any contribution you made, any native ability you had, but he steered you down that road, you didn't wander off onto the byways, you went, [hits his fist on table] Highway 1 all the way.

TJ: About Dave, I was, and maybe not surprised, at Dave, how much control that Dave had, especially with Imperial records and his relationship with Lew Chudd.

CM: Well, Lew Chudd recognized, Lew Chudd recognized that Dave could produce for him, that Dave would give him values, Lew Chudd was a bottom-line oriented person-[that] ever was.

TJ: Yeah, from what I understand, yeah.

CM: If there ever was, and so he recognized Dave's ability to deliver, and Dave did, over and over and over and over again. I tell you, if you look back on it, it was a phenomenal stretch, I mean phenomenal. If you look

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

12

at all the other people who were produced, you can throw Berry Gordy and everybody else into it; if you look at the stretch that he did with varied talent over varied, you know, territory; he was a phenomenal producer.

TJ: 'Cause he told me, it didn't surprise me he said he had Carte Blanche. He could sign anybody he wanted to...

CM: Yes, yes!

TJ: ...to Imperial, and he could, had, from what I understand, input in marketing and promotion.

CM: Yeah, there was only one thing. Lew Chudd had some quirks. O.K.

TJ: Yeah.

CM: And one of 'em, for instance was, there were a few people in the country in whom he put an enormous stock about what to release. And he and Dave had some conflict. I don't know if Dave ever said anything.

TJ: No.

CM: He and Dave had some conflicts about that from time to time.

TJ: Anything specific?

CM: Well, there were a couple of disc jockeys and a couple of distributors to whom he would send advance pressings, and there were occasions when he didn't put out a record because they didn't want him to go with it. Either the distributors didn't say, 'Man, I'll buy a lotta those', or the Jocks said 'No, I don't think you wanna'....

TJ: This record or that record whether...

CM: ....'I'll go with this one for you', or whatever. And I'm struggling right now to remember one of 'em and I can't.

TJ: Probably a Fats Domino record.

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

13

- CM: Mighta been. But one of the things that I saw in it was the fact that certain distributors, independent record distributors, and I'm talkin' in a certain stretch of time, obviously, that had enormous influence on what came out and what happened later. There were guys, one in North Carolina, one in Atlanta, Cleveland, I think, out on the West Coast there were a couple who Lew Chudd and a couple of other people too, maybe not the same basic set of guys, but some guys were in everybody's set, [laughs] O.K.? They would send him records and ask him about, you know, what they should do with 'em, or whether they should put 'em out, or even whether they should keep that artist I think, sometimes. And I think there were a few times when Dave had contretemps with Lew Chudd over that. Where Dave was convinced of one thing and Lou would be talked out of or talked into something by some of these people he had a lot of faith in. But I can remember, even Art Rupe [President of Specialty Records], in particular what he did to two people. His brother had a distributorship in North Carolina and there was a guy who had an outfit in Atlanta, who were independent record distributors who, well, one of 'em, when somebody asked him what his territory was, he said, 'downtown Tokyo', meaning he'd sell records anywhere. He didn't give a damn whose territory he was sellin' into.
- TJ: ...whose territory selling into, right.
- CM: ..Transshipping was a painful thing to a local distributor if a few thousand records you were selling showed up with somebody else, and you realized what that meant was a guy was either undercutting you with a price or taking advantage of the promotional materials.
- TJ: Um-hmm, right, freebies, giveaways.
- CM: Yeah, a lotta that, a tremendous amount of that. All of it borne by the artist, incidentally.
- TJ: Oh yeah, of course, sure.
- CM: Poor artists, they didn't know it but they were entrepreneurs [laughs].

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

14

- CM: They weren't given credit for it either.
- TJ: So, you're talking about record distributors around the country, O.K. But getting back to the idea of having a record cut and going, or the tape, the master done and going to a disc jockey and saying 'whaddya think?' I mean; that's been going on.
- CM: Well yeah, well obviously, you know.
- TJ: And the reason it was ...
- CM: It was kind of a perverse marketing strategy, you know, and pretty soon it got really perverse.
- TJ: Well but, I think, in those days disc jockeys had so much power. I mean, until the scandals in the '60's individual disc jockeys around the country had tremendous amount of influence.
- CM: What happened, the scandals just moved it up to the program directors and station managers. Humankind did not change.[chuckles]
- TJ: Yeah, right, no, but the power structure changed.
- CM: The power structure changed more oriented to structure where before it wasn't structure and also as the station owners realized that these enormous personalities cost them a lot of money and they started subverting that or concentrating it, instead of having a major guy in every city, you started looking for the big 50,000 watt free channel.
- TJ: Yeah, a clear channel.
- CM: Clear channel guys and the ones who were syndicated and all that and that's where that developed. There were still always gonna be local guys who had some clout, but they're only local. So why, for want of a better word, pay 400 guys across the country when you can pay four. Even if you pay those four a lot you can still save money.
- TJ: Right, right. Where were we. I don't know if we talked about this the, I think this came up, the, I'm tryin' to think of going back to some other people and

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

15

somebody I don't know alot about and he died earlier was Joe Ruffino. If you could fill us in on some background on Joe and his ...

CM: Well, first of all, Joe Ruffino was a, an immense ego.

O.K.? Everything, his clothes, you know, he always dressed up like the little man on the wedding cake and...

TJ: [laughs] really?

CM: ...yeah and everything had to be just so and unfortunately some of his business ethics weren't the greatest. He contributed to that segment of the business that took advantage of the ignorance of the people in the business that they were dealing with. There's been an ongoing legal case that you were aware of, that, you know, it had its seed in Joe Ruffino's business practices.

TJ: But given the lawsuit and we're talking about, there's a lawsuit over "Carnival Time" by Al Johnson. Well, one of the things we found out, getting back to, is that there was no documentation. He didn't copyright his songs in his catalog, his music catalog. He didn't have contracts with musicians.

CM: Right, right. He could exist in his sphere without it.

TJ: Right.

CM: And, you know, there's a concept in law about the four corners, you know, that your agreement is contained in the four corners of the page upon which it's written. And everything else is just parley, talk. And he understood that in his own way so if it wasn't on the paper, it wasn't. And once he got beyond a certain point he wasn't interested, he didn't think nationally in the sense that a Berry Gordy might or in multiple releases, you know, that kind of thing. He only thought in terms of that particular piece of merchandise and there were a couple of...; he suffered some losses because of that. The Joe Jones thing, with "You Talk Too Much" and things like that, you know.

TJ: Was that true about his ...

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

16

CM: About what, I don't know.

TJ: Well no, there's the story of him and uh, Morris Levy, the Morris Levy story?

CM: Oh, well! You have to understand that Morris Levy was a total gangster. O.K. A total gangster. So yes, you know they'd threaten to throw you out of an office building.

TJ: Well I heard a gun to the head.

CM: Well yeah, could be.

TJ: But that was with Joe Ruffino putting a gun to his head and saying, 'Sign this paper!', but that sounds like ..

CM: But what you have to understand is that the first gun was a pen and Joe Ruffino wielded it. So, you know, there's not a lot of sympathy to be lost about any subsequent terrorism amongst gangsters.

TJ: So Joe Ruffino sort of lived by the sword and died by the sword.

CM: He died by the sword, well, he died of a heart attack.

TJ: Well, whatever [laughs]. He was that type who when something bad happened to him he, in a sense, may have brought it on himself.

CM: Oh yeah. Listen. There was a time when a bunch of us used to go early morning to what amounted to breakfast at the end of the day rather than the beginning of the day. There's a coupla different places we went. But, and we would have eggs and grits and toast and drink coffee and talk. And he joked about it but he was serious. He wouldn't sit with his back to the door.

TJ: Oh really?

CM: Yeah!

TJ: [laughs]Hmmmnn, that's really, that's real interesting. Why would somebody not turn their back to the door? [Still laughing]I wouldn't want to be at breakfast with them, I don't think. But was it Joe, did Joe actually,

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

17

now did he have a distributorship as well?

- CM: Yeah, for a period and he had his own thing. He also for awhile was working above Johnny Vincent's place. There's a whole story about that that I can't document. But literally, the guys who were working for Johnny Vincent were stealing records and slipping 'em up through the ceiling to Joe Ruffino who sold em.
- TJ: [laughs] That wouldn't surprise me-- at all.
- CM: No, as far as I know it's the truth but I don't know how I could ever prove something like that.
- TJ: Didn't he open, have his own sort of private studio, his own studio for awhile?
- CM: Yeah, at that location, that same location up on that floor. He did some recordings, he did some recordings elsewhere. He did a few pretty good things, you know? Picked good artists and did good songs.
- TJ: Now this is on, this is on [Ric Records, 630 1/2 Baronne Street.]
- CM: You couldn't fault him because of his business practices, for the fact that he did recognize certain talents and did record 'em and did help them do some...
- TJ: Oh yeah! He did some good records, some darn good records, that I liked!
- CM: Yeah right! Yeah, you should give him credit for that, along with everything else.
- TJ: Exactly. Who else? Are we almost---well, we're sort of almost out of tape on this reel.
- CM: Yeah, just about.
- TJ: Um, Joe Banashak.
- CM: Went through several phases of his life. At the time of his death I would consider him one of my better friends in the business. This was in spite of some, you know, human failings that he he had again, I wanna say don't we all? But he did try for a long time to run a

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel I

18

straightforward businesslike music business. And for the most part he did. Now, you know, later on when he became convinced that other people were just taking advantage of him, and literally cheating him and not giving him what he deserved; he resorted to some practices that he probably shouldn't have, only on the basis that he was convinced that although they might not have been --quote--a hundred percent legal. They were ethical in that he was doing what ...

TJ: Everybody was doing to him?

CM: Well, no, but, what, he was using things that somehow he'd been taken from.

Interview with

COSIMO MATASSA

Interviewer: Tad Jones

Location: Tulane University

William R. Hogan Jazz Archive

January 15, 1994

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

2

TJ: So we were talking about Joe Ruffino, I think.

CM: Well, the main thing, I think, if you're gonna capsule it is that he did do a lotta good records and that kinda stuff. That's really all there was to that; that's nice.

TJ: Oh, I said Ruffino; we were on Joe Banashek.

CM: Oh that's it right, okay.

TJ: It seems to me that Joe was the first, when he formed Minute Records, that was really the first serious record company; it seems to me here in the city, really. I mean, correct me.

CM: No, not really. There were some [experts] before that.

TJ: Maybe his became the most successful.

CM: Oh yes! No question about it. And the original Minit Records had a coupla partners who were partners by virtue of their ability to get records played as opposed to participating either in the capitalization or the operation of the company.

TJ: Who were the partners?

CM: One of 'em's obviously Larry McKinley.

TJ: Oh, I knew Larry McKinley, but I thought maybe there were some others that I didn't know.

CM: Well I don't know for sure but there are a coupla minor players. Not minor players in the sense of who they were, but minor players in the business sense. But to get back to what we were talkin' about; Joe finally succumbed to his understanding; his understanding that he'd been immensely cheated by a coupla major players; Art Rupe, primarily.

TJ: Lew Chudd, I think is ...

CM: No, no. Art Rupe. Yeah. Al Distributors was owned by Art Rupe, surreptitiously.

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

3

TJ: You mean Joe's AI Distributor was owned?

CM: Right. Right; by Art Rupe.

TJ: In other words, Joe worked for Art?

CM: In that sense, yes. But, the understanding was that Joe would buy Art out completely as they went along. And Art didn't let him. Art didn't let him; Art didn't live up to his end of the thing. I guess if he were still alive he would probably say that's not true; but I understood it to be true in just casual conversation over the years with them, you know.

TJ: So let me back up. When Joe, from what I understood, founded AI, it was Art Rupe who gave him the financing to get AI started.

CM: He had the financial backing. He literally owned it legally. They had some paperwork that said that this portion of it is Joe Banashak's and this other portion of it is behind Art. But Art Rupe managed to finesse Joe out of it, you know. That was the one thing. The other major disappointment he had was o'course, that he lost Allen Toussaint.

TJ: In what way? How?

CM: Well, Marshall Sehorn came in and created the new company, and Allen left Joe. Remember, Allen went off into the service.

TJ: Right. I knew that.

CM: Well, when he came back, Marshall got him to go be with him; be a partner with him; with Marshall; as opposed to Joe. And I think he felt that that was done in an unfair manner. I don't know whether it was or it wasn't, to be honest with you.

TJ: So Joe, and I picked that up from him, that he felt that when Allen came back from the service ...

CM: Yeah, 'cause all during the time that Allen was in the service, Joe was working hard to try to keep Allen an artist.

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

4

TJ: Because he was cutting records. Allen would come in from Texas and ...

CM: Or he [Joe] went to Texas and did 'em or whatever; you know? And he felt sort of; I guess, but he never used that word around me; but I think maybe he felt betrayed. And you have to remember Joe went through these major personal life changes too. When he first started, you know, he was a straight-forward guy. Then he got into drinking and gambling real bad. And then he straightened out to the enormous extent that a born-again Christian does. He was Roman Catholic; a devout one, incidently. He come from Baltimore; you know. And he became a born-again Christian. And, jeeze, I hope nobody ever holds me to this in the wrong way. Those kinds of people have this enormous ability to rationalize things by their tenets of their faith. And Joe quit drinkin', you know, quit gamblin'; got to where he was very straight-laced in his lifestyle. You know? And I think that somewhere along the way, a coupla the people he was involved with in that kinda disillusioned him; a pastor ... or somebody ... or whatever. But he never really gave it up. He remained, but he changed churches and stuff. And I think there was some pain in his personal life over it. Because he really had subsumed into that religious mode; and I think was kinda disillusioned for some personal ... again ... you know people lettin' him down 'cause he invested faith in these certain people and they turned out to be less than, perhaps he believed and stuff. And he had marital problems and stuff like that.

TJ: So all of this of course is affecting his business; I'm assuming so.

CM: Yes. Yes. Well, when he got to really drinking and gambling bad; he would never admit it. But it was part of the problems; the latter day problems of Al. You know, he was losing a fair amount of money at the track. And by going to the track, instead of being at Al, he was losing in other ways. And we talked about it from time to time. I considered him a true friend; a real gentleman. And I don't know, he had some painful life experiences because of it.

TJ: What about his relationship with Lew Chudd.

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

5

CM: Well, Chudd, from what I can tell, didn't invest alot of personal capital into anybody. I don't mean dollars and cents; I mean relationship capital. And I think that even with his enormous support over a long time of Dave Bartolomew; it was all bottom-line oriented. I may be over-simplifying Lew Chudd's personality, but if I had to over-simplify, I would say it was that. He only invested his friendship and his relationship with people if they meant something to him otherwise; in business. That was my experience with him. Okay? And near as I can tell it certainly was Joe Banashek's. I think that he became somebody that it was tough for Joe Banashek to deal with, you know. And I think in the last analysis, even Dave Bartholomew, he didn't treat as well as he might have. He gave Dave lots of money over a long period of time and invested alot of power in Dave's position. But I think even Dave would have to tell you .....[tape distortion].

TJ: But I always say you know, even if people at that stratosphere aren't paid, they're still driving around in nice automobiles.

CM: Oh yeah. It's kinda hard to feel sorry for a guy that buys Cadillacs regularly and that kinda stuff.

TJ: ...lives in a nice house, you know,...

CM: But I have a kinda feeling about that, that's the other way around. And the reason that I say that is because Lew Chudd also was in that category. He didn't need to skim money from other people. So it works both ways, you know. And like I say, it's hard to feel sorry for a guy that's doin' real well; but it's also hard to rationalize other people doin' even better! [Laughs] You know? Anyway that kinda sums, I think, in far too few words Joe Banashek. Because you'd have to go back and look at ... he really worked hard, he really worked hard. And he really paid the price wherever it was necessary to do well for people he was workin' for; you know, and when I say workin' for, I mean the artists.

TJ: So you would say he did right by the artists? [He] paid them what he was supposed to?

CM: I would say that if you compared the way he conducted his business with anybody else that I'm aware of,

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

6

including the majors, he stands head and shoulders above them all.

TJ: Head and shoulders above them all, yeah.

CM: One of the things that ... we talked about it ... 'cause you know we'd go eat lunch or have breakfast together. This was when he was tryin' convert me to a born-again Christian ...[Laughs]

TJ: This must have been in the latter part of his life.

CM: And we'd talk about some of the incidents that happened, you know. For instance, some artist who would say, 'Oh I never was paid,' And we'd talk about the incidents when guys would come in and not fold their check before they go spend it. And that kinda thing. I can remember; we had one guy; I was at his office [Joe's] when he cut him, not his first, but his first really big royalty check. At that time it was probably in the sixty/sixty-five thousand dollars.

TJ: Who was the artist?

CM: Let's skip that for now. If I feel like sayin' it later, I will.

TJ: I can probably figure ...

CM: There's only a couple or three that would fit that dollar example.

TJ: Sixty-five thousand, wow! [Laughs]

CM: And Joe and I tried to talk him into ... see, we already let out the women ... it can only be a male now in this mystery; but tried to talk him into go and buy a double house. And the thought was; that knowing that this particular artist was somebody who may never have another hit record; and may never handle his personal finances correctly.

TJ: He was probably a person who didn't.

CM: Hadn't up until then; there was no reason to believe they would do it now. And say, 'Look! Why don't you buy a double house; we'll go with you. You don't have

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

7

to pay us nothin'. We'll help you find a place you like in a neighborhood you like. And you can live in half of it; and get some money from the other half. And you're life will be better!' And o'course, poosh! Forget it, right?! And the reason I'm sayin' it in this kinda allegorical sense almost; is because there were no other cases. The numbers weren't as big and the talk wasn't that specific. But over and over that kinda thing happened. And looking back on my life and how I saw what happened to other people; it's the saddest part of it all that maybe a dozen people out there who either are living now as almost paupers, or who died as paupers; could have had nice lives.

TJ: Could have lived comfortably.

CM: Lived comfortably; lived well and been alot happier, been alot happier. Because you know, I think you're probably aware of it and I certainly am; of some people who lived the ends of their lives; who are living the ends of their lives bitter.

TJ: Saying, 'I was ripped off; I was stolen from.'

CM: And some were, of course.

TJ: Some were! But a lot of times they did get rolls of money and they didn't know how to deal with it; to spend it correctly.

CM: And incidently, I'd like to say this, because this is really important. I think the effort that several people in this city have made over the last six, eight, ten years, to try to develop a real business infrastructure in this city; is because most of 'em have seen that other side. And hope that legitimate managers and legitimate lawyers and legitimate whatevers; agents and so forth would at least open the possibility that this wouldn't be so pandemic. That everybody almost is sufferin' from this in one way or another. And for the most part that hasn't happened. So that's a job yet to be accomplished.

TJ: What, you don't think that exists today in this ...

CM: Not enough, not enough. There are too many people who still are kind of wandering in the wilderness, you

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

8

know, instead of in the real structured situation. And there are a few people who are very good at goin' out there and takin' advantage of 'em. We got a couple runnin' around this city right now that we'd be a lot better off without. And it's just kinda sad, you know, that it still hasn't happened.

TJ: We mentioned Joe. Who else in the music business; in that sphere were you close to?

CM: Well, let me preface all of this by saying that I made an immense effort over all my time in the music business not to become part and parcel of the music scene. I kept my kids and my wife separate.

TJ: Right! Well you said that; separate.

CM: And I did because I felt I could deal with some of the people that I dealt with; and maybe not be scarred too badly. But I didn't want them to have to. And so I kept that, my family life, really separate. There were maybe three people in the whole business that, say, ever came to my house. You know? And that kinda thing; except for Al Young who used to come regularly and fall drunk into the front door. And I'd have to, you know, take him around and get him coffee, get him sober and bring him home. So prefaced by that; I spent an enormous amount of time with all of these people. I mean there were times I didn't get home for two days! So I spent an enormous amount of time with these people; out eating and drinking at there houses and whatever; their apartments and this kinda stuff, you know. And I got to know an awful lot of people on a person to person basis. And the memories of some of that is painful, you know, it's just hard to ....

TJ: Did you, in a sense, try to keep your, sometimes, keep yourself at a distance from the record company people in that the musicians/artists-people would lump you in with ...

CM: Well, lemme tell you some of the things that happened.

TJ: ... sort of a co-op; the "white establishment"; 'Coz is just part of all that!'

CM: Fortunately there were enough black people, for

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

9

instance, who lived cheek by jowl with me, in many ways, you know. So I didn't have that problem with those people 'cause they knew me. But, there were other guys, Black and White, who used to complain about the studio clique, 'they couldn't get to do sessions, and they didn't play on record dates, and they didn't get to record.' And so far as I know I tried not to discriminate against somebody because they weren't in my little group, or somethin' like that. 'Cause I made it a practice to go out and listen! You know, I hung out [Laughs] in my early days. I spent an awful lotta time in clubs and bars and even people's houses listening to who was playing what. And then when somebody would come in a say, 'well, we need a band,' I would go find 'em, you know. They didn't have agents callin' me and sayin' they'd get a gig for so and so; I'd go find 'em at their houses, where they were, stuff like that. And I took people out when the guys came in; record companies lookin' for somebody to guide 'em to the clubs and places; and suggested that they go hear people and record people. I didn't always have alot of influence [Laughs], you know.

TJ: Well, just that you were taking them places where they do it.

CM: Where they do it, yeah. And so I don't think I had that problem in that sense. In later years, I got lumped in with the people who took advantage of people. And I don't think I've extracted myself entirely from that even 'til today! For instance, what's this guy, Zitler? [Justin Zitler], the lawyer for the ...

TJ: For Professor Longhair. For the estate of Professor Longhair.

CM: He's after my ass about a couple of songs.

TJ: About what!?

CM: A couple of Longhair songs that my name is on the song as writer! And ...

TJ: Which ones?

CM: "Tipitina " is one of em, okay. But there's a couple of 'em. I don't remember 'em right now. Anyway, he

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

10

sent me some letters asking me to meet with him to resolve the thing. Inotherwords, 'come in here and kneel, and confess your sins, and we'll pat you on the head and say go and sin no more!'

TJ: Well there's a real problem there.

CM: Well, let me tell you.

TJ: He doesnt own publishing on those songs.

CM: Let me tell you something.

TJ: That would have to be resolved by the owner or the publisher.

CM: He at some continuing education thing that lawyers have; made some remarks about me in that sense. Okay? So I didn't call him and say, you know you'd better do something about that. I'm trying to ignore it; I'm still trying to ignore it. But one of ... you know I mentioned earlier; there are a couple of people who the New Orleans music business would be better without. Well, they work with him on this project. And one of 'em called me and said that Zitler had asked him to call me about coming in and responding to his request about this. And I told him; I said, 'Well! I'll tell you what! If you give him this message that; if I see him, publicly, before he apologizes for what he said, I'm gonna loosen his front teeth!'

TJ: [Laughs]

CM: I'm sixty-seven, you know, I'm not cut out for that. But that's how I felt about the guy. It's out! I'm sorry, that's how I feel about the guy. Okay. So I got a letter. It was a half-assed apology, 'Well, I shouldn't have mentioned this da-da-da-da; however the facts are ...' And then he proceeded to recite his facts. And he's operating under the delusion that what happened was that Progressive [Progressive Music] paid for the session and gave me half of the songs. Well, both of those are incorrect assumptions. So I'm not sayin' anything. I'm waitin'. I'm gonna get the opportunity, you know, to embarrass this guy legally, and then I'm gonna loosen his teeth. Because I think he deserves it because ...

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

11

TJ: So, have you instigated a lawsuit?

CM: No! No! I'm waitin' for him to.

TJ: Oh, okay.

CM: Okay? And if he does, you know ... I mean, you know, ... I just feel like he's settin' himself up. But you know; as far as I'm concerned, he's just an opportunist. He's gonna milk whatever he can, and feed these people to a fare thee well. And then he's gonna be gone! You know? But hey! Since so few of those people in Fess's family did anything for him to begin with; it couldn't happen to a better bunch! You know, this is almost retribution. Because when Fess needed people, they were nowhere to be found. And so, we'll see. Anyway ... that's enough.

TJ: You brought up somebody I wanted to talk about. You brought up Al Young. And he's sort of an unsung hero in the early days.

CM: Yes! Well, everybody ignores all of the hard work he did. If you had to credit one person, if you had to credit one person for Fats Domino; it has to be Al Young!

TJ: In what way?

CM: In that, he's the one that got Fats recorded with Imperial. You know. Al was working for Apollo and another coupla labels down here; selling the records, and looking for talent and doing things with 'em. And how ... I don't know ... I never asked him; how he and Lew got together and all that. But Al was in at the very beginning on the Fats Domino stuff. And then he got shut out. Somewhere along the way ...

TJ: He brought Fats to Lew? He brokered ...?

CM: Well, I don't know! I don't recall; I don't remember. And they may not have been privy to all of it; what exact happened; who went to Fats; who presented him to Lew Chudd. I don't know.

TJ: You don't know about that.

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

12

CM: No. And I'll say this. I think it was a case of, once Lew Chudd decided Al Young wasn't gonna be valuable to him anymore or he didn't need him; I think he dumped him. You know. I think he just dumped him.

TJ: What was Al?

CM: Al was producer!

TJ: For the first sessions? For those early sessions on Fats?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

TJ: But wasn't he also ... I thought ... you said Apollo. I thought he would be, probably was distributing Imperial down here.

CM: Yeah, yeah. Let me see, who was distributing?

TJ: And usually the distributors wore more hats. They were also talent scouts.

CM: Oh, they were everything!

TJ: They were everything.

CM: They were a branch ...

TJ: ... of the record company almost.

CM: And, in fact, they did that for more than one company sometimes. Weird! The arrangements that happened. And in later years, you know, there were a couple of big battles over who should have gotten some artist; or whose record didn't get ... you know, and that kind of stuff, because somebody's loyalties were misinterpreted or misplaced. But, yeah! He was a nice guy. And he was one of those people who vested some personal feelings in the artists, you know? Even though, he was really tryin' to wear hats on both sides of the table; and maybe not successfully, sometimes. But he did have the artists interests at heart, to the extent of tryin' to get 'em labels, and tryin' to get their records out, and tryin' to get their records to sell, and that kinda stuff. It was just ... I wasn't payin' too much attention to everything that was goin' on back in those

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

13

days. You know, It was a time in my life when I was very Hedonistic. I was really enjoying life.

TJ: [Laughs] That doesn't mean you're Hedonistic, Cos.

CM: Well, I mean I invested too much in the music, and the people, and the food. And I didn't drink; so I was kind of a strange member of some of these groups, you know. I wasn't the "designated driver" [They laugh] it was just that I didn't drink. And there were a few places where I embarrassed bartenders by ordering Coke; so they'd give me Coke with a slice of orange or a cherry in it or something; thinkin', you're gonna stink up the place here drinkin' Coke, you know?' [Laughs] You know, that kinda stuff.

TJ: An Italian who doesn't drink!

CM: Yeah! It's a real anomole. I remember tellin' a guy once, I said, ' You know, I don't drink, I don't smoke, and I don't gamble.' You know I like to make jokes about this. He says, 'Well, what's the matter with you?' I said, 'Well, I just like to keep up my strength for a worthwhile vice.' [Tad laughs] And, yeah, but he came back pretty good. He says, 'Yeah, well, too bad you're a weakling.' He says, ' I got 'em all goin'!' [Laughs] Well, that was the end of that! But, yeah. If I had a failing in all of this, it was that every now and then my vision was focused on some woman's crotch.

TJ: [Laughs] Oh, that's your vice!

CM: Yeah. But other than that, I try to keep it fairly straight.

TJ: Well, that's okay! You know, there's alot to be said about that.

CM: Yeah, there's probably alot that shouldn't be said about that.

TJ: ...shouldn't be said about that; as we move along. Let's see, another group of people; and I wanna get you input and opinion of the organization was the formation of AFO [All for One] in 1960/61. Harold Battiste, Red Tyler ...

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

14

CM: Well, okay. There was one of those cases where I could be sympathetic to everything they felt; including some bitterness to whites. And you might say with a lot of justification, in fact.

TJ: Exactly. Right.

CM: Yeah. So, I think I was able to be, while not part of their inner circle, as such; I could be their friend and that kinda stuff; and work with 'em, and try to help and that kinda stuff. And so I don't think I had any personal problem with any of those guys as far as being white is concerned, you know.

TJ: But my question is; how did you perceive their organization? The concept of their organization.

CM: The concept, I thought, was great. I thought the concept was great if it didn't get bitter. And yet, I could understand the bitterness. Okay. I think you lose focus; and I think they lost focus when they concentrated on the blackness of some things; as opposed to the music of some things. You know. But having said that, I think first, the people were the right ones; talent wise and determination wise; and they did some great things. And they got cheated! You know? And unfortunately got cheated by a black guy! You know. Which is kinda double bitter, you know. But they're the ones that are still alive. Have survived that and have gone on to pretty good situations, you know. A couple of guys did; a couple died, of course. But they did okay; and they did some good records.

TJ: They did some great records.

CM: They did some gooooood records!

TJ: Some that didn't sell; some that did.

CM: Well, that's, you know; if you're a Harvard MBA a good record is a record that sells; and a record that sells is a good record. And that's, of course, crap. But that's part of what's goin' on these days. No, they made a lot of good records, including those that didn't sell.

TJ: Oh, yeah! Definitely! This is maybe going back. I

Interview w/Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel II

15

think you brought this up but I don't think we went into any detail on it. We had talked about movies coming to New Orleans; and you working with various movies?

CM: Yeah, I did some sound recording and some work. And a couple of times, just consulting. I didn't do the mixing because they had a guy mixing with 'em and he would do the mixing or whatever. Yeah, they did some at Preservation Hall, some at bars and other places in town, and stuff like that. But you know, film music, generally speaking, is exactly opposite from everthing everybody looks at now about ... you know. Generally, film music is done almost as an afterthought. In spite of how highly identified some songs are; the people who make movies, sometimes, I think, hate sound. You know what I mean? And especially music. They relegate it to a band-aid kind of thing. It's a shame, really. And there are a few, of course, who really get into it. Once they get into it; they like to ignore it, literally! You know they ignore it! Nobody ever mentions what the music is gonna be like in these scenes and stuff. I don't think they even think about it. And then at the end, you know, then they'll give some person; they usually pick talented people and that kinda stuff; and say, 'Do something with our movie, you know. But I never have reconciled myself with that approach to the music. And I've told a few of 'em that. I'd say, 'Why on earth would you come do this scene for this movie; the movie's done; you've reserved a place for this snippet, you know, and it's not gettin' the treatment it should.'

Interview with

COSIMO MATASSA

Interviewer: Tad Jones

Location: Tulane University

William R. Hogan Jazz Archive

January 15, 1994

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel III

2

TJ: I wanted to get to the Gov. Nicholls street studio; I wanted to get back to that.

CM: Well, there were two, actually.

TJ: Yeah, you had explained that.

CM: The first location I had was 525 Gov. Nicholls. That's a nice old building down there that has a carriage way through the center. And on either side, on the ground floor was my studio. Now this is a dilapidated old building that's empty, except for my studio, okay? Big building, but empty. It's now beautiful condominiums. Back then it was just a big old empty building. And facing it, facing the carriage way to the left, was where I had the disk-mastering room and my office; and on the right was a small studio control room. And the rest of the building was just empty.

TJ: It was just empty. Now, you owned that building?

CM: Yeah.

TJ: I mean, you bought it; purchased it. Did you think of doing anything with the rest of the building.

CM: Oh yeah! I envisioned somewhere down the line restoring that building. Gorgeous! It's got a circular staircase to the third floor, which, a lot of 'em had, like to the first floor were just ordinary. This was a gorgeous thing on either side; matching; gorgeous! Goes up to the third floor; gorgeous!

TJ: Were you ever able to do that?

CM: No, no. 'Cause what happened, the building next door became available. 521 Gov. Nicholls. It was a cold-storage room for avocados.

TJ: Is that what it was?

CM: Yeah and I got that building and true to my style; I just ripped out the stuff inside and made a studio out of it. You know, it wasn't air-conditioned and it wasn't ...

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel III

3

TJ: So you, in effect, had two studios?

CM: Yeah, umh-hmm. I had a small studio and a big studio.

TJ: What year did you buy the 520 building.

CM: I'm bad about those dates.

TJ: You're bad about dates?

CM: Yeah, but it was like, it had to be what? Late fifties?

TJ: Yeah.

CM: Yeah, late fifties. And 521 was after, you know, I mean the sequence of time was after; but in that stretch.

CM: And the second studio was the first time I had a big room. I really wanted a big room. By then, I had been spending some time self-educating myself about acoustics and things like that. And I could see where separation, just physical separation, could enormously increase the amount of control you had over the sound of something. And I'd been suffering through the other situation where everything was close and you struggled to get separation, and blend, and balance, and all that. And anyway, so I got the big studio and it was really big. Thirty-five feet across; and about sixty-five feet long!

TJ: For you that was big, yeah! It was huge, for you!

CM: You could've stuck the two earlier studios into that, you know, [Laughs] and have room left over. Anyway, so I did some things acoustically in this weird looking control room. And you probably never saw that control room.

TJ: No.

CM: Well, it was weird shaped. It was totally unsymmetrical; and highly damped. And the studio, itself, the room was live when I started. And I damped it greatly. There wasn't much room tone in that big room. It was more like a sound stage. It was like a

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel III

4

motion picture sound stage; pretty dead.

TJ: What type of quality was the space that wasn't dampened? Was it wood, concrete ...?

CM: Concrete.

TJ: Concrete.

CM: The floor was the only hard surface in the room; was the floor. And the walls were fiberglass.

TJ: Okay, what did you dampen?

CM: I built some traps, you know, sound traps. Measured as best I could with the equipment I had the basic resonances and damped those out at the bottom. And that was it. That was it. It was a big dead room.

TJ: Now what was your decision, in other words, what sessions did you do in the big room as opposed to sessions in the small room.

CM: For instance, then we started doing strings.

TJ: Oh, okay.

CM: Okay? Now, the first couple of things we did with strings ... they were Fats [Domino]... were overdubs.

TJ: On your third track?

CM: Multi-track, yeah. But then we started doing strings live! Okay? These were union sessions and all of that and we were doing strings live.

TJ: Now how was that? Was that a sort of precarious situation?

CM: No because what you had was the guy who did the string parts directing the string group and Dave [Bartholomew] running everything else. And that too, of course. And they were physically separated enough, the strings were further back in the room, and physically separated enough that there wasn't any bleed to worry about. And I did the score for a couple of TV movies in there too. I been tryin' to remember 'em for

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel III

5

years and I don't know what movies they were. But they were a couple of cheap movies that I did the soundtrack for.

TJ: Some local things?

CM: No. Some things from out of town. It was part of my education. I learned how it was done, you know, that's why I have a rotten attitude about it. I didn't like the way it was done. You know, it's an after-the-fact kind of thing. The guy that wrote the music, wrote it down, the scores, you know; and the work print of the movie. And they actually take a crayon, and mark the film. Like "fades out". He'll start at frame number so-and-so and as he winds through from the start of the fade to the end of the fade, for instance, he'll just move his crayon over; his wax pencil.

TJ: [Laughs]

CM: And what you get when you're watching the film, 'cause you're watching the film, is you see the stripe starting at the lower left corner and move over. You know? [Distortion] And things like that. [Distortion] And I just didn't want to start doing cheap taping over there. But the constraints were enormous, and also the budget considerations were enormous; 'cause we started out with about thirty-two players; strings, horns, and harp. And this guy who was very experienced, I'm tryin' to remember his name; anyway we started with the full ensemble. Everybody playin'; you know, we did 'em out of order. We did it in the order in which he took the resources for the full orchestra. And then they'd dismiss some beat players and we'd continue with the thing. At the end we had just the piano player left doing little things of; you know, four seconds in; four seconds out; little bridges; little stingers; little, you know, things like that. It was a liberal education up to a point. [Laughs]

TJ: And you can't remember the film? I'd love to know which one it was.

CM: No! I did two! I can't remember either.

TJ: Is there any reason they came to New Orleans to do it?

Interview w/ Cosimo Matassa  
January 15, 1994  
Interviewer: Tad Jones  
Reel III

6

CM: Yeah, they wanted to use New Orleans musicians, you know. But then they brought these arrangements that they didn't have nothin' to do with New Orleans!  
[Laughs] Oh a little, maybe. But, not much.

