

Interview with

COSIMO MATASSA

Interviewer: Tad Jones

Location: Tulane University

William R. Hogan Jazz Archive

May 28, 1993

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TJ: I think what I'm going to try and do first is maybe start with the Matassa family, we'll talk about the family?

CM: Whatever you want; my time is your time.

TJ: Okay. Well that's good, Okay, great.

CM: I just can't stay over but I mean...

TJ: Oh yeah, well this is the first, the beginning. We'll see how far we get. Why don't we start with your birthday?

CM: Okay. I was born here in New Orleans, April 13, 1926.

TJ: Your father's name was?

CM: Well, his name was actually Giovanni Cosimo [Pronounced Cozymo]. Cosimo, that's my--his middle name was my first name. And my grandfather's name was Cosimo because that's the way that works sometimes. The firstborns are named after their grandfathers a lot of times. Anyway he was John C., John Cosimo Matassa. He was born in [...?...], Italy, in 1895. [He] Came to the United States in 1910. My mother was Dominica Leto. She was born in Palermo, Italy in 1902. Came to the United States in 1904 or 5 [1905]. My father originally went to a small town in Mississippi where he had a job because in those days if you came to the United States you had to have a job, a suit, and fifty dollars in your pocket, or something.

TJ: Do you know this for a fact or did somebody tell you this?

CM: Well, my father, yeah. And so he went to work for an uncle in a little town in Mississippi called Tchula, T-C-H-U-L-A, Tchula.

TJ: And where's Tchula?

CM: It's in the Delta. Not far from Jackson and Greenwood and like that; it was cotton country, especially in those days! And in fact he was there through World War I until right after World War I and there was a cotton crash. In fact, there's a blues song talks about "Ten

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Cent Cotton, Thirty Cent Meat." That's what they're talkin' about, right? And he came to New Orleans, where he worked for another uncle. That was Vincent Matassa, who had a grocery store in the French Quarter, and was a clarinetist. He played in the Italian Association Band. You know, they'd march on Saints' Days, Holy Feast days, and church things and stuff like that. In fact, my father was particularly proud that he was a soloist; somethin' about being a soloist meant somethin' to him in those days. When you think in terms of the nearest thing to what today you would call a marching band.

TJ: So, your father played...

CM: No, my father didn't play...

TJ: ...Just your uncle.

CM: Yeah, Uncle Vincent. And my father went to work for him, oh I guess, '22 [1922], '21 [1921], something like that. And then he went to work for A & P, managing the little A & P store up on Magazine Street. By that time he was married to my mother. They were married in nine....[Thinking].

TJ: Yeah, what year?

CM: [Still thinking] UH, let's see, they would have been married in '23 [1923], I guess; 1923, I think. Yeah.

TJ: What church; do you know?

CM: They got married by a Justice of the Peace in Mississippi. Tell you, for instance, how that kind of thing worked in those days. You got married. They eloped to the Mississippi Coast. [They] got married by a Justice of the Peace; came back and my mother, who'd been raised devoutly Catholic said; 'well, we should at least get married', as they call it "blessed", which meant have a church ceremony. And they went to a priest at, I'm not sure, but I think maybe what would have been St. Mary's but it might have been St. Louis Cathedral. But [it was] one of those two. In any event the Priest promptly informed my father, who didn't hold the Church in high esteem anyhow, that he wasn't married. And my father, being one of those absolutists, said, 'no, no, you got it backwards. If the State

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marries me, I'm married. If you marry me I'm not married unless the State issues me a piece of paper sayin' that it was okay. Therefore, I'm married now and I'm just going through the formality to please my wife.' The Priest proceeded to argue with him about it so he left and he never had a church ceremony because my father just, you know, couldn't put up with that kind of stuff.

TJ: Seemed to be somewhat of a pragmatist.

CM: Yeah, to a great extent. In any event he moved to Dauphine and St. Philip Street. And bought that business from a guy, a William Tinker, who was retiring out of the grocery business. So that corner of Dauphine and St. Philip, 1001 Dauphine, was probably a grocery since, maybe even the turn of the century. Sometime before that it had been an ice house, back when they used to bring ice cut from up North down on barges covered with sawdust and store it in houses and sell it that way. In any event, he came to 1001 Dauphine in 1924 and was there for many, many years. And that business went to two of my sons from my father, because I was off in the music business which he thought was a waste of my time, but that's another story.

TJ: Well, we'll get to that.

CM: We'll get to it, yeah. He wanted me to take over the grocery store and I didn't want to. I didn't have anything against the grocery business, but I liked what I was doing better. Well of course I was born in April of 1926.

TJ: Now were you, given your father's proclivity against the Catholic Church, were you baptized?

CM: Yes I was. Oh yeah, my mother prevailed over that. He relented. He was just teed off because the guy was trying to tell him what he knew wasn't right. He was one of those guys you don't tell him when he knows something's right or really believes it's right, you don't tell him it's wrong. Anyway, it was a minor blip in his lifetime as far as he was concerned.

TJ: So he bore no major grudge against the Catholic Church.

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- CM: No, in fact he was usually pretty nice to 'em.
- TJ: What church were you baptized at?
- CM: St. Louis Cathedral.
- TJ: Was that your family church when you were growing up; since you lived in the Quarter?
- CM: Yeah, well, St. Mary's normally would've been. That was the Italian church, yeah. But for reasons I don't know, my mother went to St. Louis Cathedral.
- TJ: But did you go there as a kid growing up?
- CM: Yeah, that's the school, that's the church I went to. That's where I was baptized, confirmed, all those things. [I] Studied catechism in the after-hours class because I went to public school. Actually I started in St. Philip School, the original school that's on the site of McDonough #15 now. And then we were moved. I was maybe just in the first grade or so. I don't remember the exact year. We were moved to McDonough #15, which then sat on the grounds of the now empty [lot], at Barracks and Dauphine? There's a big empty lot there. And we stayed there until they built the new McDonough #15 in the early '30's [1930's]. And then transferred to there. So I went to McDonough #15 when it opened up for the very first time.
- TJ: My point was that in those days St. Louis Cathedral was a bit more residential. I mean more French Quarter people going to the Cathedral rather than today, where it's much more of a Church of the City.
- CM: Oh yeah, it wasn't so much the Church of the City, although it was a pretty good church. I really think that Holy Name of Jesus up here by Loyola [University] probably in those days was more the place where the Archbishop and people like that, had their things. The French Quarter in those days wasn't exactly looked upon the way it is now.
- TJ: Yeah, I mean it was more family oriented whereas today ...
- CM: Yeah, and it wasn't upscale.

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TJ: ...upscale. Today, it's more tourists and upscale than during those times. So you had to go to catechism classes on a special ...

CM: Yeah, after school hours.

TJ: During the week? On a Sunday?

CM: During the week. I forget what days.

TJ: And they would have certain days that you would go, for kids who weren't actually in the Catholic school. Okay. Because it seemed like that happened an awful lot ...

CM: Yeah, well in those days the public schools, most people went to public schools and there weren't nearly as many or as large as the Catholic schools then.

TJ: So I that think the Catholic Church had to have more of these after hour schools that I think that you went to. That meant that there was more activity in that area. I started going through some of the city directories and there's some Matassas that I picked up going through the directories. The first one I see in 1908 is ... this may be a relative but I don't know. It's a Vincenzi ...

CM: Vincenzo ...

TJ: ...and it says Matasso, M-A-T-A-S-S-O.

CM: That's 'cause they mispronounced it; misspelled his name.

TJ: They just misspelled it?

CM: Sure. That was my father's uncle when he came to work there.

TJ: That was...?

CM: Vincent Matassa, yeah.

TJ: Okay. That was the uncle. Interestingly enough he's living at 527 Hospital Street which became 527 Gov. Nicholls...

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CM: Right.

TJ: [Laughs] Which you would own at some point in time. In 1911 there's a Vincent Matassa and he's working for the Lanasa Brothers. And they're at 1116 Decatur Street.

CM: I know 'em.

TJ: That's still him and he's living at 1210 Chartres.

CM: Um-hmm. Yeah, 'cause Chartres and Barracks was where the Uncle's store was. So it may be that...

TJ: In 1912, there's a Vincent, but they're spelling it Matassco, M-A-T-A-S-S-C-O.

CM: I don't know, too bad.

TJ: So it's always Matassa.

CM: Yeah, sure. It's always been M-A-T-A-S-S-A.

TJ: Because I'm seeing all these different spellings and ...

CM: For whatever it's worth, Matassa is the Italian word for "skein", S-K-E-I-N. You know it's a loop of loose wool.

TJ: Okay.

CM: Okay?

TJ: So there's actual meaning there.

CM: Yeah, yeah. Well most family names are, Smith obviously being the most obvious one; Baker, and so forth.

TJ: Let's see, there were a couple of others. Yeah, here. Vincent Mataso, M-A-T-A-S-O [They both laugh]. And he lives on Bourbon Street and he's a musician. This is 1918; he's listed as a musician.

CM: Okay. He's a clarinetist.

TJ: Right, but did he ....

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CM: But, primarily he was a grocer.

TJ: But he lists himself here solely as a musician, so I'm wondering if he's considering himself, or trying to go professional maybe.

CM: No, not in that sense, not far as I know.

TJ: So he always considered himself an amateur, basically?

CM: Yeah, well I don't think people considered themselves amateurs or professionals in that sense, in those days. It was purely what circles they played in that mattered. And it may be that that band played for fees. I don't know if they didn't. But I mean he wasn't a professional in the sense that that was his primary livelihood.

TJ: Okay. Now 1926 is the first time I see John Matassa listed.

CM: That's my father.

TJ: And that's your father.

CM: What address they got for him?

TJ: 1001 Dauphine.

CM: Yeah, right.

TJ: 1926. He had been there two years by then.

TJ: And then in 1931 there's a listing for Giacomina?

CM: Giacomina. That's Vincent's daughter.

TJ: Oh, that's a daughter. That's Vincent's daughter. And she's at 1234 Chartres. And there's John, okay. Then a Miss Mary?

CM: Yeah, that was another daughter. See John J. was also a son of Vincent Matassa. My father was John C. So John J. on Chartres Street would have been the son of Vincent Matassa. And John Matassa on Dauphine Street would have been my father.

- TJ: Okay. Let's see, in '33 [1933], yeah, there's a listing for John C. on 905 St. Philip. There's a John C., 901 Gov. Nicholls. And then there's a John J.
- CM: Well John J. is the one who would; he would be my second cousin. He's my father's uncle's son.
- TJ: Okay., and then Mary.
- CM: That's his sister, yeah.
- TJ: And then Vincent is living on Chartres. Your father only had one brother.
- CM: I had one uncle here, yeah.
- TJ: Are there other relatives other places. Are some in Mississippi. Do you still have relatives back in ...?
- CM: Yet another uncle in Mississippi.
- TJ: Who was?
- CM: That was a Maggio. He was actually my father's aunt's husband.
- TJ: Oh gosh, okay.
- CM: Alright, okay. In other words he was my father's uncle by marriage. He's the guy my father first went to work for in Tchula, Mississippi. And they lived at 637 Esplanade. That's the Maggios. [Vincent, wife, Angeline, and son, Charles].
- TJ: So did anyone ever give you any background on the family as far as why they came to America. I mean was it just economic.
- CM: Economics! Pure and simple! Oh absolutely! Yeah, have no fear! [Laughs]
- TJ: If you have any stories ...
- CM: Interesting sidelights and I don't guess enough people appreciate. Because it's happening today, that people don't appreciate what it means. 'Course today they

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tell you for economic reasons they don't want you to come to the country and that's only to hold the number down. But in Sicily where my father lived, his father died. His father was a miller. His father died when he was [long pause] ten years old. And at ten, and I'm quite proud of this, at ten years old my father went and ran his father's mill, and supported his family. And that came because obviously all you could do was eke out a living. They had a little plot of ground up in the hills where they raised some vegetables. The Italian name for that ground was "Mangiare Ferra". In Italian that means eat iron. And it's so rocky and full of stones that literally it ate up plows and tools and that's how it got its name "Mangiare Ferra". O' course you gotta remember, Italy is one big rock. There's not a whole lotta flat land or even airable land. So, yeah, he came to the United States, pure and simple, for economic reasons. And he had been studying in the "craft system" they have there which meant he went to school in the morning and in the evening he was apprenticed to a shoemaker. He was learning to be a shoemaker. And I remember him telling me that when he came to the United States, he'd only been here a short time, and some people had put out there trash to be picked up for trash collection. He noticed a pair of shoes being thrown away, a fairly decent pair of shoes. And as he told it to me, he says where he came from it wasn't unusual for someone to buy a new pair of shoes when they got married and be buried in that same pair of shoes. Okay? You know, you had work shoes and you had a pair of dress shoes and literally you make like one pair of dress shoes that lasted like your entire life. 'Course the shoemakers liked that because they got to ...

TJ: They kept resoling and reworking them.

CM: ... keep repairing 'em, right. But he said he knew then he was in the right place. You know, you could do business in a country where people threw away perfectly good shoes. You know? That's all right!  
[Laughs]

TJ: So, any stories of travels to this country? How they made it? How they got here? How he got the money?

CM: Well he saved up his own money and came here. But he

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had to have this "in writing" promise of a job and a sponsor, to be able to come. And, in fact, if I recall, he got here, I don't know if the age was just fifteen or sixteen, but below that age he couldn't come under the paperwork that he was coming on. So they kept him, literally, in jail at the immigration station. I think he arrived in Baltimore -- by ship. And they kept him confined for almost two weeks, until he became fifteen, before they'd let him out. He always referred to it as the "immigration jailhouse." Because that's what it was. They called it being detained.

TJ: Well there was a lot of that. The stories from Ellis Island was the same thing. Your father just came a little bit later.

CM: Yeah, I think the bulk of the Italian immigrations in this area had probably taken place by the time he came.

TJ: Yeah, by the time he came, yeah. The real surge was in the 1880's and 1890's.

CM: Uhmm-hmm.

TJ: Which is what I assumed when your people came. That's what I assumed.

CM: Well the other ones had been here before. You know, like I said, Vincent Matassa had been here before. How much before my father I don't know. But obviously he was here before -- you saw him, what, in 1908?

TJ: Yeah, right. That's the earliest one.

CM: And, he had run a little shop along with his shoe repair in Mississippi. And that's how he developed his activity as a retailer, if you will. That's all he ever did the rest of his life, except for a little bootlegging.

TJ: [Laughs]. How little?

CM: Very little. He made a little wine that he sold in the store before liquor was legal.

TJ: But didn't every Italian do that? [Laughing]

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CM: Yeah, I was gonna say, Prohibition wasn't exactly a popular law. It was acknowledged in it's breach, if you will. And yeah, the French Quarter was full of liquor. None of it legal, of course. Although I understood if you could get a doctor's prescription, you could always get Scotch. The Kennedy family took care of that.

TJ: Scotch was in the store for medicinal purposes, so to speak? [Laughs]

CM: Yeah, yeah. The original -- JFK's father made his fortune originally by owning the rights to import Scotch in the United States. And he got into real estate after that .....

TJ: But the way he could do it was ...

CM: Yeah, right. There was a medicinal use ...

TJ: That Scotch would have a medicinal use.

CM: So certain people ...

TJ: And lots of people used it? [Laughs]

CM: And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he sold a little bit "under the table", but [Smiling] who am I to impugn the family of the President, you know.

TJ: [Laughing] The Kennedys. Were you born at home or in a hospital.

CM: No, in a hospital. Hotel Dieu.

TJ: Hotel Dieu? Hey! So was I! [Laughs] There's always a problem with that when you tell people you were born in Hotel Dieu.

CM: God's Hotel? Wait a minute! Pretty fancy place, huh.

TJ: People from out of town think you were born in a hotel.

CM: Yeah.

TJ: You poor person, you were born in a hotel.

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CM: And I was an only child. I guess after they saw me they gave up.

TJ: Yeah, I was wondering. It would seem the Italians had ...

CM: Large families.

TJ: ...very large families and you were an only child.

CM: Well, part of that was, again, religiously based. It wasn't religiously correct. If anything it's to not have children. Supposedly that was the primary reason you got married... no, at one time.

TJ: Were you close to your other relatives, your cousins' relatives.

CM: Oh yes! In fact my mother's family had quite a lot of people who played music in there. They had what amounted to a family band, you know? Her sister played, Chetta played the piano and Chetta's husband played the clarinet.

TJ: What was his name?

CM: He was Joseph DiGuardi, D-I-G-U-A-R-D-I. And I came up hearing musurkas, polkas, and schottishes and marches. I mean, "Under the Double Eagle" were the staples and things like that. 'Course I also heard 'em because in those days the jazz bands on the street played 'em a lot more than they do now. For some reason those original things aren't played as much. When you go to, you know, a place now to listen to Dixieland or traditional jazz you don't hear as many of those kinds of things as they actually played in those days. I think it's because then they played primarily for people dancing. Now they play in concert fashion and people sit and listen. It's a different milieu.

TJ: So when would you hear the family play.

CM: Any occasion: Births, deaths, weddings, holidays, whatever, weekends, card parties, whatever; had a lot of music.

TJ: So whenever there was like a formal family gathering

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there would be music, and it would be supplied by the family or the family members.

CM: Almost always, yeah; or friends.

TJ: Or friends. What type of instrumentation, I mean was it a full group or was it...?

CM: It was piano, clarinet, drums, French horn, [thinking]; I don't remember saxophone. [There was] trumpet, but I don't remember saxophone. That kind of group; bass, of course.

TJ: Stand-up? Big upright?

CM: Sometimes, sometimes a small bass horn.

TJ: A brass horn but not an upright "bull fiddle", as they ...

CM: Well, there was, I can remember string bass, sometimes. But what I meant was not tuba.

TJ: Oh okay.

CM: Not the double E-flat; whatever it is.

TJ: ...the big tuba.

CM: The smaller bass horn.

TJ: So from the earliest days I mean you're hearing live music, from your earliest ...

CM: Yeah, but the whole French Quarter was full of live music.

TJ: So it's not just your family.

CM: No, it's lots of families and people who were professional musicians, of course. I mean, hey, you know some of the guys who lived in the Quarter. George Lewis, people like George Lewis lived a half a block away from me. Alice, his mother [Alice Zeno] lived across the street. All around me was music. On Burgundy Street, there was Slow Drag [Alcide Pavageau], I think, lived on Burgundy Street. Jim Robinson, I saw

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as a teenager. Yeah, but I wasn't aware of it in the sense that we're aware of those guys today. 'Course I have to give that same answer when people ask me about when I did some rock n'roll recordings and stuff like that. We were not making history; but we were making a living.

TJ: Well I don't think, you didn't feel like you were making history.

CM: Well that's what I meant. The orientation was to make a living. You know! Pay the rent, buy the groceries; maybe enjoy it along the way. But, in fact, the single greatest thing, I think, in my whole life was to have been able to spend my life making a living in such an enjoyable fashion. And I look back on it and I'm terribly grateful. It didn't, it wasn't, it didn't have a purpose that might be described in hindsight.

TJ: [Laughs] So how do you, looking at the music of your family, I mean those kind of songs that you heard; do you see it as an influence on black music you would hear? Did they have some kind of parallel?

CM: Oh sure! There's no question about it! Because black bands played a lot of the same tunes. They played, you know, I said this to someone just not too long ago; I said they played schottishes. He said, 'what's that?' You know. I said, 'well, it's a kind of dance.' And everything, to me, the whole basis of early music that I was aware of was dancin' and ballroom entertainment. It wasn't entertainment venues as such. 'Cause I'd have to bet that my uncles, aunts and my mother never went to a quote--"club". You know, functions in halls and, you know, things like that. That was different than clubs as such. I don't think you could have anything without music.

TJ: So your father had this grocery store. A lot of those were combination saloon/grocery stores.

CM: Yeah, well his was saloon/speakeasy until 1933.

TJ: Until Prohibition was ended.

CM: Prohibition ended. Then it was a saloon and grocery.

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TJ: Was there music in the saloon?

CM: Jukebox. Well, there were, you know, you'd get the one-man-band-type-guy. You know guy come in, whatever it was he played, to make a buck, you know.

TJ: To pass the hat kinda thing?

CM: Kinda thing, yeah. There was a lot of that. There wasn't any real music in there, in that sense, until my sons ran it years later. And they had guys that come in and played. But, no, when my father had it, it was maybe a single guy come in and play for a coupla hours to make money, and a jukebox of course.

TJ: So you never really heard music from a saloon.

CM: I heard saloon music, yeah. I heard jukeboxes.

TJ: I meant live music.

CM: Oh yeah, well, I heard it! I heard it! But it was me sneakin' off listenin' to it.

TJ: Where?

CM: Oh well, that's another thing. When I was a kid, the French Quarter was full of saloons. And when I say full, I mean full! In the block we were in, around on Burgundy Street, that would be say 1020, 1022, was a club. At the corner of Burgundy and St. Philip was a bar that had music from time to time. The Caledonia and the Gypsy Tea Room, were a hop and a skip across Rampart Street. Bourbon Street, in those days, had lotsa live music, lotsa live music, as opposed to today. And there were places; Exchange Alley, Iberville. Part of Iberville was really notorious, over there near Rampart. That was the old Tango Belt, kinda thing, and the dance halls, the "dime-a-dance" halls and that sort of thing.

TJ: And was there music in the dance halls?

CM: Sure! Yeah, real live people. People like, oh, what's his name? You hear a lot of his stuff here. The piano players play it. Oh, gee! Yeah, but there was lots of live music. Mechanical music only came in in the

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'30's[1930]. The jukeboxes; radio first, and then jukeboxes.

- TJ: So, and also in the Tango Belt or wherever this is; Iberville. When you say the Tango Belt, where do you mean?
- CM: That means, that's back by Rampart; Iberville and Rampart, maybe a block and a half toward Dauphine.
- TJ: Okay, but still in the Quarter?
- CM: In the Quarter, yeah, yeah. If you can remember, the infamous Storyville had been shut down by then. And what was taking place on Iberville was that activity transformed a little and moved. Yeah, obviously those folks don't go out of business, they just move.
- TJ: They just move [Laughs].
- CM: In fact the whole idea of Storyville originally was to put 'em all in one place, 'cause you gonna have 'em and you knew you were gonna have 'em! Then they'd have only one you could do something about either avoiding 'em or controlling it. Actually they didn't do either.
- TJ: [Laughs] Yeah, that's the way it ended up. They didn't do either.
- CM: But, you know, so it's spread around.
- TJ: Growing up, did you hear the Italian language in your home? Was it spoken on a regular basis?
- CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. My father and mother spoke it but never insisted that I speak it. They insisted that I know English; speak English.
- TJ: But could you converse in Italian with them?
- CM: Well, just a few words. They knew, they could tell me 'go to sleep', 'get up', 'take care of something', and that kind of thing. One word I learned early on was "capputta". That's the Sicilian word, the equivalent, it doesn't translate exactly, it's the equivalent of "pass the post".

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TJ: Which is?

CM: Which meant if there's a small kid who's out in the street, and I was having an argument with somebody, my father would holler, 'hey, don't hit him, "capput" him.' You know. There was no offer to fight him. Just go on, hit the sucka!

TJ: [Laughs].

CM: The first punch determined a lotta outcomes. But even, you know it's one of the things I look back on and I'm amazed. Kids had battles in those days like they do today. The difference was when it was over with, somebody saw to it that they shook hands and made up. Today they go home, get a gun, come back and finish 'em. And it's too bad, I'd like to see 'em go back to the other arrangement. [Laughs].

TJ: We need a little bit more of that, a bit more of that. So was your neighborhood integrated?

CM: Oh yes! We didn't know it! We weren't aware that we were integrated. We just lived that way. It was a mixed neighborhood. Some of the nicest people I knew were the black people.

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TJ: So, speaking of food!

CM: Yeah?

TJ: How was the food, growing up? I mean, you think about people in New Orleans eating red beans and rice, and here's this big Italian family ...

CM: Okay, wait a minute! Two things you gotta remember. I came up as a small child during the Depression. I was fortunate enough that my folks owned a grocery store. So I was spared the problems other people had, you know, what do we eat today? Yeah, so in that sense I was really lucky. But there was a lot of sharing, lotta caring, families tended to take care of family. That kinda stuff. And my father and my mother, I know, on occasion, did what they could to help someone that they knew needed help. Generally, the biggest single thing and it seemed to happen regularly enough, as I became old enough to be aware of it, was people who were in very modest economic means having children; new babies. That was always a time of joy but also a real problem, you know? And I can remember my mother being involved in that kind of stuff; you know, putting together a little package of stuff for somebody that just had a baby. Like I say, I was lucky. And you know I didn't want, in that sense. And although things were tough, food was, by today's standards, ridiculously cheap. You've probably heard the old thing about quart T- beans ... or maybe you haven't, I don't know.

TJ: No, no, tell me about it.

CM: Okay. For ten cents ...

TJ: Ten cents?

CM: For ten cents, you could go to the grocery store, and your little package of beans and rice and a little black pepper in another piece of paper wrapped up like that; for a dime. You could get a piece of salt meat for fifteen cents, a pretty big hunk of it.

TJ: And what was that called?

CM: It was called quart T which is a kinda half partial thing, you know? Normally you would buy a pound of

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beans. But if you didn't have enough money to buy a whole pound you could buy this lesser amount of beans and rice and be able to cook a meal. And the red beans became famous for Mondays because Mondays was wash days. And red beans was something you could cook without having to stand there and watch it all the time. You just go up and stir it every now and then.

TJ: Did you have standard food days? I mean on this day, was this meal, on this day was this meal?

CM: Yeah! Pretty much!

TJ: Pretty much.

CM: Pretty much. It was generally that real meat dishes were Sunday, roasts and chickens and that kind of stuff; and always pasta. Every meal had pasta.

TJ: Right! Always pasta!

CM: Every meal had some kind of pasta. You know, if it wasn't "the main meal", the main dish of the meal, it was either a first dish or a side dish or whatever; depending on how it was fixed. And there are a billion ways to fix pasta!

TJ: [Laughing] I bet you mother knew how to do it!

CM: Yeah! Right! [He laughs.]

TJ: But in those days you had to.

CM: Yeah, right! Pasta was a staple, it was a very inexpensive good food. In fact, most people don't appreciate it now, but a lot of dishes in those days were prepared because there was an entire meal in a dish; stews...

TJ: All in one!

CM: All in one! ... red beans and rice, macaroni and meatballs, and variations on that. For instance, most of the fancier pasta dishes were really done in those days because a working guy could take it from home and have it for lunch; and it was everything in one thing, you know. And in fact, Chicken Cacciatore means "hunter's chicken." Someone who's a cacciatore is

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someone who goes out and catches things, right? It's a good cognate, in fact. Anyway, because it was a meal of the chicken and all the vegetables and all, that a guy could take when he went out huntin'. Again, one little pot and he had everything; that and bread o' course; and wine or beer depending on whether you were Italian or Irish or Dutch, you know? Everybody drank in that sense, I think; just about everybody. But it was part of your meal. You weren't drinking in the sense of drinking; it was part of your meal.

TJ: So when are you first aware of commercial music?

CM: The jukebox. The jukebox. Which meant I was aware of commercial music when I was seven years old. And you have to remember that in those days, although my father had a saloon, it was really two.

TJ: How do you mean?

CM: It was segregated! There was a white saloon and a black saloon. His arrangement was unique. The wall between them had an arch big enough for a wide door. And they built a phone booth into that. So the telephone was accessible to either one. There was a door on each side of the phone booth. Can you imagine a phone booth with a door on each side?! That's the way it was. And there was a jukebox in the white bar and there was a jukebox in the black bar. So I got to hear country tunes, blues tunes, the whole thing 'cause I had 'em all.

TJ: So your hearing the standard pop songs of the day from the 1930's.

CM: Everywhere, yeah. And I was hearing o'course, what Black people listen to and what working class white people listen to at the same time.

TJ: Any songs come to mind, things that you heard that stood out, you know, as a kid?

CM: Well, yes and no. I can't now say that this was the most impressive song I ever heard. But you gotta remember in those days I was hearing things like Li'l Green, Ma Rainey, Armstrong o'course, early Jordan, Louie Jordan, and o' course on the other side I was hearing Bing Crosby. I was hearing the country artists

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and people like that, you know? And we always had one or two ethnic records on the white side; Irish tune or a German tune. Depending on who was a regular customer that played the box a lot and say 'why don't you get such and such'; and we'd get it for 'em. You know, that kinda thing.

TJ: So we talked about family. Were the Italian holidays very special to your family? I'm talking about Columbus Day, St. Joseph's Day?

CM: Okay. Yeah. Well, they always were, they always were. My father was a work-everyday-type, so you know, there wasn't a lotta times when he would take off and participate. But my mother and I and family would, you know. And yeah, every holiday was important.

TJ: What was special about it, what was done differently on the holidays?

CM: Well, different times, different things. For instance, as you know, in those days, it was - still is - but not in the same sense, but All Saints' Day was a very important, you know, you went out and cleaned and fixed up the tomb and did something about that and you also ... and everybody did it, everybody did it. I mean, you know, it was that kind of thing. All of the other holidays we, the rest of the holidays had to be the ones that were either national holidays or our version of it. For instance, in those days, it was Decoration Day...

TJ: Right. Which is Memorial Day.

CM: But it was a different day of the month; it was near the beginning of the month.

TJ: Oh, that's right, it was earlier in May than today we celebrate it.

CM: Decoration Day was Confederate Memorial Day in essence. And since the White power structure ran everything in those days that's the one you celebrated. I didn't know why. But, I mean, that's what it was.

TJ: Memorial Day became more of a National holiday ...

CM: Yeah, and it became the national holiday, yeah.

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TJ: ... which is what we celebrate now, for Decoration Day.

CM: Birthdays were always important. Quite often you celebrated ...

TJ: Was that special for you, I mean, being an only child?

CM: Yeah. But it was also special because you got to go to other people's birthdays, you know, which was a party. There'd be music and cake and ice cream and food.

TJ: Any special Italian birthdays. Do the Italians do birthdays any different?

CM: I don't recall anything that was peculiar to Italians, in that sense of the birthdays. Except Italians hug and kiss a lot more than some people do, you know; I mean everybody and anybody, you know? [Laughs]

TJ: Was that your family?

CM: Yeah sure. Oh yeah, you know. For instance, as a child, when I was brought to somebody else, you know, you kissed all your uncles and your aunts and that kind of stuff. And my kids were brought up that way. Now today, you're lucky if you can get a kid to say hello, you know. [Laughs]

TJ: I'm thinking of celebrations like probably something you would remember; like maybe your Confirmation. Was that a big deal for you?

CM: Oh yeah! That was a big deal. You planned for that for weeks and weeks. It was a big deal. You dressed, you got a new white suit and you wore a big band with a ribbon thing on it and you hauled a big gigantic [sic] calendar, candle with a ribbon on it and all. Yeah, it was a big deal. And you got your, you graduated to what would be your adult prayer book and beads too, you know?

TJ: Did you march in a ceremony?

CM: Oh yeah, it was a very large group and you, you know, marched down the center and you sat in a special place all together. And then the Archbishop would come down and everybody'd be terrified of the Archbishop. He

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represented some Power you didn't understand, you know.

TJ: Was that St. Louis Cathedral?

CM: Uh-huh.

TJ: It must have been scary. [Laughs]

CM: Yeah! Well you know kids. And in those days the Priests played games with reality, you know? You learned about the fact that the Host was God's body. And in those days as opposed to today, they would never put it in your hand. You can go up and take Communion now and then they'll put it in your hand. They would have never allowed you to touch It with your hand. I mean, gee whiz, no, no, no!..., and that sort of thing. And you were terrified you might drop it.

TJ: Oh yeah! [Laughs] Oh my god!!!

CM: Fall out of your mouth; that would have been a disaster. [Smiles] You'd be ruined for life.

TJ: So you're hearing music on the jukeboxes. What about radio?

CM: Yeah, oh yeah.

TJ: What stations are you listening to?

CM: I don't recall what stations, I gotta be honest with you. But I remembered, I remembered WDSU and WWL. And there was another one that no longer exists. What the Hell was it?

TJ: It was probably Mutual Station, Mutual Network.

CM: I don't really remember. There were two, you know, the government split the NBC. They declared they had a monopoly? So there was a Blue Network and a Red Network of NBC. And I think the Blue Network is what wound up being ABC later.

TJ: But it seems to me there wasn't as much music programming as there is today.

CM: Well, I think the single thing I remember most as a

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small child was the fact that very often Huey Long was on the radio. And that was an occasion. Let me tell you. The place would fill up. 'Cause my dad would put a radio up in the bar and in the grocery. And the place would fill up. People come to hear speeches by Huey Long. He had an enormous, enormous effect on people in my remembrance of it. Absolutely, people looked on him like a Savior. History proves differently but ... And he was a populist, you know, "Every man a king", "You can be a millionaire", sort of like Clinton. [Laughs]

TJ: [Laughs] I think in a small way.

CM: Yeah, in a small way. He was gonna pay your medical bills and tax the rich.

TJ: In a small way. So the radio wasn't as important as, I think, as live music was, as impressive.

CM: Oh, no! I don't think it would ever be considered anything but a second class substitute for live music. Live music was the defining thing. And luckily, McDonough 15, the public schools in those days had a good music program. Symphony players would come and demonstrate instruments, you know? In a little grammar school! They would never do that today, you know? They might put on something and haul eighty busloads of kids to an auditorium somewhere to hear 'em play or somethin'. But to think that three or four of 'em would come and show you their instruments and tell you how they're made and how they're played and why they played that. That happened in grammar schools in those days.

TJ: Which high school did you go to?

CM: Warren Easton.

TJ: You went to Warren Easton.

CM: It was a boys' high school then.

TJ: Didn't they have some kind of music program there?

CM: Oh Yeah! They had a great music program. Yeah, yeah! Big band. In a lotta ways it was like a mini LSU, Warren Easton. Same colors, purple and gold! And a

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big marching band! A great football team! I went to Warren Easton in 1937 to 1941. I'll explain why in a minute 'cause if you figure that out, your arithmetic, I was pretty young.

TJ: I was gonna say!

CM: Yeah. But I went to Warren Easton in 1937 to 1941. And in 1936, the year before I went to Warren Easton, in the regular season, the football team was undefeated, untied and unscored on!

TJ: Wow!

CM: 'Course they went up to Baton Rouge and got beat by ..... High, a bunch of big farmers; plowed up the field with 'em. [Laughs] But you know, those were days when Warren Easton had a fantastic athletic program. A very famous guy was the coach, Johnny Brechtel, who was really a good coach. He'd have been a professional coach by today's standards; good motivator, smart, and that kind of stuff. And he attracted kids. And then, besides that, the public schools had a lotta kids that were very old still in high school. We had a couple of guys on the team that were twenty-one years old; still playing high school football, you know! And they were brutes, you know? In 1937, 'cause I remember this 'cause it was so impressive, the line averaged over 200 pounds. You say, well that's not much, but wait! These were high school kids! Okay? And they were huge!

TJ: So how'd you get into Warren Easton at such a young age?

CM: Oh, well, when I was small my mother used to, since she had to work in the store, she'd bring me downstairs. In fact, as a baby they'd put me in a washtub in the store. And then sometimes customers had to watch me while my mother took care of working. But anyway, very early on, and I'm grateful 'til today that it happened that way, my mother used to take a cup and draw circles, and draw lines; and say 'what time is that?' You know a short line and a long line; she taught me to tell time. She taught me to count. She taught me my alphabet; how to spell my name, what my telephone number was. 'Cause one of the important things was that if I was a small child and I got out somewhere, I

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needed to tell somebody what my name was, where I lived, what my phone number was, okay? And so, very small, I knew all that. I could do my alphabet back and forwards and if they said 'M', I knew 'N' was next, and things like that. She played games with me, you know. She'd say 'P' and I had to know 'Q' was next, and that kind of thing. So, they also had kindergarten. It started normally around five [years] in those days because you were in first grade at six [years]. And I got put in kindergarten at four [years]. And because I had all this home training, after I was in kindergarten for about two weeks, they put me out of it. They put me in first grade. Because I was creating a turmoil with the rest of the kids 'cause I knew all of this that the other kids were still trying to figure out; or most of 'em. There were a couple ... there was one little Jewish kid, smart kid, James Cohn. He has a coin and antique store on Royal Street today; his uncle was a Feldman, who owned about three antique stores on Royal Street. They were well-to-do. And I can remember they had ... the family had a Pierce Arrow; big like a touring car! And they'd come pick him up after school with this huge Pierce Arrow. It was impressive! I tell ya, I remember it 'til today. It impressed me, I know! [Laughs] So I was in first grade at four, so I got out of seventh grade ... there was no junior high in those days. You went to the seventh grade and eighth grade was high school. And so I got out of [sic] Warren Easton in 1937 at eleven years old. I went to high school at eleven. But a lotta good things happened to me! I don't know if this is germane or what.

TJ: Oh yeah, oh yeah!

CM: I'll just rattle on.

TJ: No! Go on!

CM: For instance, my father's insurance agent was named Hirsch, Henry Hirsch, Jewish guy. And he had a friend Marcus Korn, another Jewish guy, who had a plumbing company, Marion Plumbing Company, uptown. And they used to take me to the Pelican ballgames, okay? And Henry Hirsch's wife always, whatever occasion it was, if she gave me a gift, it was a book. Okay? And one of the things that she did, and I didn't realize it 'til I'd spoke to her about it later, was

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she gave me the entire Tarzan Series, by Edgar Rice Burroughs. And it wasn't that she was interested in Tarzan, but she knew that Edgar Rice Burroughs was a good writer. In other words he wrote with good style and all those kinds of things. So without me knowing it I was learning the English language enjoying reading the Tarzan Series; and a couple others she gave me. But there were maybe seven or eight or ten of those Tarzan books and I got 'em all. You know, birthdays, Christmas, or whatever. And another Jewish guy lived in the middle of the block named Rau, R-A-U. And he owned an antique store on Royal Street. And he lived in the middle of the block. And he had a very Kosher family style.

TJ: Orthodox.

CM: Very. And, you know, I used to go over there. They'd have me over for supper or somethin' sometimes, and that kind of thing; just 'cause we were friendly and in the neighborhood and all that. So I was exposed to some ethnicity. I wasn't that aware of what it was. And in those days you heard French and Spanish and Italian and German spoken on the street.

TJ: You heard a lot of French and Spanish?

CM: Yes! Because of a lot of families still that first generation. And they were still a lot of times speaking that, you know. Next door to me on St. Philip Street would have been about 907 St. Philip, or 9 - somethin' like that - was a guy named Prouet, P-R-O-U-E-T. And he was the second cook at Antoine's Restaurant. And so I was exposed to that; and he was a real Frenchman, I mean, you know. His wife was Constance [pronounced Con-stawnz], and their daughter was Mignon. And they exposed me to that side.

TJ: Yeah, both of my grandmothers spoke French. But that was that generation; the last generation that did that.

CM: That's right!

TJ: When you were young and you were around the barroom and the grocery, did you work at the grocery?

CM: Oh sure! There's another thing my father and mother taught me. Everybody works. So as a small child when

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I came home in the evenings from school, as a small child I stacked soap on the lower shelves 'cause I couldn't reach anything else. And later on I put soap up on the middle shelves. And maybe as I got taller I put cereal on the top shelves. But everybody worked! And I was made to understand that you worked. 'Nevermind your daddy owns a grocery store; that has nothing to do with your life! You work! And you understand why people work.'

TJ: So the work ethic was there.

CM: The work ethic was there. There was no question about it. In fact, it was part of my life. So I wasn't told this is the work ethic. I lived it! I lived it! Which is maybe a part of the problem with the work ethic is maybe we need to quit calling it work ethic and just live it. Anyway ... and again even though it was a grocery store I could not go help myself to candy or a soft drink. I got candy after dinner, if I hadn't messed up that day. And I had a soft drink with dinner, again, if I hadn't messed up that day.

TJ: Speaking of messing up, what did that mean; "messing up"? [Laughs] What did you do?

CM: Oh,oh! Little things. I remember as a small kid, probably one of my ... another one of those basic character-building things ... I hope, this part of my character was. They had dug up the street to do some kinda repair. And of course in all of New Orleans is all that clay, you know. So myself and a coupla my little school buddies we discovered this mound of clay. So we immediately started to have fun with it, which meant making little balls of clay, and throwin' 'em to stick on the wall of the building across the street. And my father came out and everybody split. They left me, right? So he got me a ladder, and a bucket, and a rag, and I cleaned the clay off the wall. And I'm cryin' 'but I didn't do it all!' He says 'no he says, but I caught you!' Ha ha ha ha ha....[Belly laugh]

TJ: So was your father overall very strict? I mean, in general.

CM: He was strict in the sense that you did things the right way, you know; the way you worked on it.

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TJ: The wrong way and his way?

CM: Oh no! He was good about explaining to me why something was done this way and not that way, that kinda thing. But he wouldn't explain it but once. Okay? Yeah, that kinda ... no question about it ... And my father, o'course, since it was the Depression, he worked all the time. He owned a little pickup truck; Model A Ford pickup truck. And on weekends because people moved a lot, they couldn't pay rent, they'd move in with a relative 'til they could get a job and move back out again. And he moved families on weekends with that little truck; and made extra money with that.

TJ: So, jack-of-all-trades kinda guy?

CM: Sort of, yeah. Yeah, he also would pack his little black bag with eight or ten sets o' dice and a pistol and some foldin' money and go out to little towns and run crap games in the back of stores and things like that.

TJ: Well that can be dangerous!

CM: Yeah, it could be. That's why you took your gun.

TJ: I was gonna say! [laughs]

CM: And he made a few bucks that way, you know. And then later on he and a partner owned a little illicit gambling house. When gambling was taking place in Arabi and had the big gambling house? Illegal but obviously public? There were several smaller ones operating along, I think that's Friscoville Avenue; the street that runs from St. Claude to the River, that it was on. And my dad and a partner had a little gambling house, if you will; a little place in a little double house that had all the walls taken out inside of it. And so I got to learn about gambling, early on. The guy who ran that place was pretty much an expert gambler. And he showed me what to look out for; which is why I never became a gambler because ...

TJ: Showed you how to run the game?

CM: Well, how it worked, how it worked, for instance. There were catalogs of layouts of dice tables. You

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know how you bet on this, you bet, you get these odds here and there? And in those catalogs was a description of the odds versus the payoffs. In other words you could get one layout that was a little more liberal than another, and that kinda thing? So I was aware that it was a highly structured business; it wasn't a game of chance?

TJ: As in how to stack the deck? Against someone?

CM: No, well, you may find this interesting but it was so; that gambling houses had to learn about how people cheat to protect themselves? Gambling houses didn't cheat; they didn't need to. If you stayed there and gambled, you lost. It's built into the system. You cannot win. Now that doesn't mean that occasionally some fool doesn't win for a little while. But, you cannot win. In fact, they had these little chants they used to say; the guys would scoop up the dice and return 'em back to you and that. They had little chants that they'd say that literally taunted you, you know? And I remember one 'til today 'cause it rhymed. The guy would scoop up the dice and send it back to you and says: "If you stay you gotta go. The longer you stay the further you go." Meaning; 'I dare you to throw the dice out and put some money on the table 'cause I'm gonna beat ya! And if you do it twice, I'm gonna beat ya twice, if you do it ten times ...' you know, that kinda thing. And there were names, you know. All the names the dice for what the dice came up; "Little Joe", and "Craps", and "Poor Nate, the Hard Way"; meaning you got two identical numbers, all those kinds of things. A lot of 'em I don't remember anymore. And also, how cards were marked, for instance. And the evolution of crooked dice. Listen to this! The original crooked dice were what's called "loaded dice". And what they were were tiny little gold pellets put in the paint. You know they'd dig out to make the numbers; one here, two there. Right! So they'd be little gold pellets. So that side tended to lay down so the thing on the other side would come up. So "loaded dice" was the original thing. Well, the gambling houses, if they suspected somebody usin' loaded dice, all they had to do was pick the dice up and drop 'em in a glass of water and they would literally turn around. Yeah, right, they'd belly up, right! So then they started makin' 'em that they, uh, one side was very slick and the opposite side had

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more friction. And they would tend to go on and flip over easier; one way then another. Or that they were geometrically imperfect; they weren't perfect cubes, and things like that. So I learned all about things like that; and how cards were marked and all that. But it was because the gambling houses had to protect themselves from the clientele! Most people think it's the other way around, and it isn't. They don't have to cheat, believe me! You just stay there and play. They got ya! You know.

TJ: Was Mr. Valentino at Warren Easton then?

CM: No after.

TJ: Maybe it was after you. What's his first name; he became legendary at Warren Easton but I think he was there after you. Or maybe he went to Warren Easton. Could he have gone there at the same time?

CM: He may have, I don't recall that. I didn't know him in that sense then. Because I was there from '37 - '41, like I say.

TJ: You were obviously a good student.

CM: Well, I lived a disciplined life and I was an only child. So I didn't have any choice. O'course that made a difference. I was fifteen years old and I came to Tulane.

TJ: At fifteen?

CM: Yeah. And they told me that I had to wait 'til I was sixteen. Which I did.

TJ: And what did you study?

CM: Ha! This is the thing. I came to Tulane to be a chemist. Yeah, I signed up in Arts and Sciences and I took the scientific majors and that kind o'stuff. And by the time I was here two years and really knew what a chemist was; I didn't wanna be a chemist. And shortly thereafter, I was gonna be old enough, eighteen, to be drafted. World War II was goin' on. So we were having trimesters in those days because the government was in a hurry to get new soldiers. They had three semesters a year so they called 'em trimesters. And there was a

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very brief break between them. So you could do a year and a half in a year, because you went in three sessions. Yeah. And so, it was a big drag; you know, lotta work. And in January of the year I was gonna be eighteen, I told my father I didn't want to register for the Winter season; Winter session because I was probably gonna get drafted and I deserved a little time off. And he went along with that, he said okay, you know. But the War in Europe ended. I had poor eyesight and a hammer toe. So I didn't get drafted. And he told me, 'well, a good Italian kid gotta either work or go to school; you have no choice.' And he owned a half interest in a little jukebox business. And since I had by now determined that I didn't wanna be a chemist, and I didn't know what I did wanna be, I said, well lemme go work in the jukebox shop. And that's what happened. I went to work in the jukebox shop.

Interview with

COSIMO MATASSA

Interviewer: Tad Jones

Location: Tulane University

William R. Hogan Jazz Archive

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- TJ: So we're up to the point of World War II and you didn't get drafted.
- CM: No, I didn't get drafted. 'Cause like I say, by the time I was old enough to be drafted, the War was mostly over. And then I got passed up and wound up in the jukebox business.
- TJ: Wait! So who owned the jukebox business?
- CM: The jukebox business was owned half and half by my father and a partner names Joseph Mancuso.
- TJ: Now how did your father get in it. Was it another one of his sidelines?
- CM: Yeah it was a side and he put some money into it. 'Cause remember he used to own his own jukeboxes.
- TJ: Oh, when he had the bar.
- CM: When he had the bar; bought his own. Yeah, yeah, right. In fact, lemme tell you somethin' about that! Lemme tell you somethin' about that! In the early days New Orleans had a couple or three or four or five jukebox operators who controlled the jukebox business.
- TJ: But that's been true for years!
- CM: Yeah, but not in this sense. Wait'll you hear this!
- TJ: Oh the history of jukeboxes in this city!
- CM: Okay. So these guys literally controlled the business. Nobody else could get into a business ... into the business. Well my father found some way to buy a jukebox.
- TJ: You mean circumvent his own?
- CM: Yeah, buy his own jukebox, put it in and everything.
- TJ: Which must've infuriated them.
- CM: Well, he had it there maybe a couple of weeks. And a policeman, in uniform, comes into the bar and tells my

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father that he's gotta get rid of that jukebox. And my father told him in appropriate language to go to Hell, right? The next day the policeman came back with another policeman and a sledgehammer.

TJ: Oh! Okay.

CM: And they took the jukebox and unplugged it and brought it out on the sidewalk and smashed it. And told my father to be sure to get the trash off the street. So what my father done was he got the trash off the street and he bought another jukebox. And he'd made some political friends. One of the things that was big in those days was getting people out of jail. The political system was that every ward had a ward leader. This would be a politically connected guy that if your cousin went to jail, you could call him up and at two o'clock in the mornin' he'd get him out of jail and that kinda stuff. And if you had some kind of problem with anything with the city if you got to your ward leader he could..., you know, he had the clout. Well my father had made an arrangement with the ward leader down there. What he did was he had owned a couple of pieces of property, and he took the deed from one of those pieces of property and put it up as guarantee for people's bail bonds. And the ward leader used it; my father didn't. Inotherwords, what the ward leader would do if somebody come ..., he could pledge my father's property to get somebody outta jail and things like that. As opposed to like now you go down and pay a bondsman some exorbitant fee. But they did it for political power because then when your ward leader called you up and said, 'I need you to round up all your friends and relatives and go on Saturday morning or Tuesday morning and vote for so and so'; you generally did. And so my father had done this for some time. So the ward leader was ... so, the bottom line, without I don't know all the details, but the bottom line was that they convinced these guys that my father was a small operator. It didn't mean much; just let him go, you know? And they did. But not before he had to buy the second jukebox though! And nobody offered to pay him for the first one neither, I want you to know! But that gives you a little insight on politics in those days. I'll give you another insight! When I was, I guess, ten or eleven, I can remember the physical construction of that place was that in line

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along St. Philip Street was the grocery, then the white bar, then the black bar. Okay. But the counter ran along continuously behind all of 'em; the serving space. So you could be behind the grocery counter and then walk over a little ways and you were behind the white bar and you walked a little more and you were behind the black bar, okay? And the walls separated 'em. Okay. My father told me to stand at what amounted to the archway between the grocery and the white bar. And just watch what goes on and he'd explain it to me after it was over with. In comes a policeman in uniform. My father reaches over behind the back bar of the bar picks up a coin envelope and two packs of cigarettes; the brand that this guy smokes, that he knew, you know. And he hands it to him, the envelope and the two packs of cigarettes and they shake hands and 'Thank-you John! See you next week!', and off he went. And after he left my father said, 'Now, you know I got two card games in the back.' He says, 'I don't make any money off 'em, they're here for the people that play. I don't ... we don't cut or anything like that.' One card table was black women played "Pittypat". The other card table black men played a game that they played a lot in those days, I never hear it's name anymore, called "Cotch".

TJ: "Cotch" or "Skin", yeah.

CM: It's a kind of Spanish Poker. And, like I say, there was no cut or such, they just played the "Cotch"; there was no cut at all on the "Pittypat" table, as I recall. And there was a cut on the "Cotch" table but it bought drinks and stuff for the guys playin'.

TJ: So your father did make some money.

CM: He made money in the fact that it brought him business.

TJ: Right.

CM: Right! And that's why he did it, o'course. And five dollars a week, apiece, he paid protection to have those card games. And the point he made, and he was explicit about it, I don't know if he said it in these exact words but it was to the effect that, 'Whenever you see the Law violated in a large sense, I mean all over', I mean there were card games all over New

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Orleans; card games, crap games, you name it, all over, 'the law is involved, and it's as simple as that.' And I think about that a lot now when you see, for instance, the endemic dope situation. You say that there has to be some political and or police or both ...yeah ... paid off, bought off, made partners, or whatever. Because it's ... a fool can't miss it! ... you know what I'm sayin'? A blind man could see what's goin' on! And I hope the wrong people don't hear this.  
[Laughs]

TJ: No! Please feel open!

CM: In fact I really don't care.

TJ: This is the forum for it!

CM: You can play it for the Chief of Police, it'll be alright.

TJ: 'Cause we're gonna talk about that other Mr. Jones [Joe Jones]. [Laughs] And I'm sure you won't have nice words for him.

CM: Yeah, I'll be glad to say ... no, no, I can describe him accurately.

TJ: In the harshest terms, I hope.

CM: Not in nasty words but true words.

TJ: But true and accurate, inotherwords.

CM: 'Cause you've probably realized by now I don't use nasty words except on rare occasions.

TJ: So what was the lesson you learned; was that the lesson you learned?

CM: The lesson I learned was whenever you see the law violated widely, the law is allowing it. The law, the structure, the political police structure is allowing it to happen. And that's it!

TJ: But during that time it was an accepted practice to pay off the police.

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- CM: Yeah! What it was was, for instance, that it took the police down a notch in people's estimation. Because they, in effect, were shaking you down for doing something that shouldn't have been against the law to begin with. You know. I mean this was not some gross gambling thing. This was neighborhood people sitting down amongst themselves playing cards! And they were playing cards at the local bar because there was no place at home to play, to begin with, you know? Everybody was poor and lived, you know, a whole family in one ...
- TJ: And you could have a good time; you could drink at the same time.
- CM: Yeah! Right! In effect, nobody was gonna get wealthy off it. Nobody really went too terribly broke, except now and then, some fool who can't be saved from himself, you know. But that was the point, I don't know if it's a good one, but you find similar situations everywhere you look; if you just look.
- TJ: So ...
- CM: So anyway I'm now working in the jukebox business, right? This was part of my education.
- TJ: So, you weren't gonna be a chemist ...
- CM: No, so I had to go to work!
- TJ: ...So you had to go to work. So what did you do in the jukebox business when you first started working there?
- CM: Alright! The first thing I did was I went to a school called Gulf Radio School. Gulf Radio School was one of those little proprietary places where you could learn how, in those days, to fix radios. There weren't any TV's, okay? Radios and amplifiers and things like that. And since the jukeboxes ...
- TJ: General electronics?
- CM: Yeah, sort of. Uh-huh. Yeah. Basic electronic circuitry and that kind o' stuff. And I went to that because my father's partner was not a technical person either; the one that ran the jukeboxes. He knew how to

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fix jukeboxes and that sort of stuff, but you know, not ... anyway ... So I went to Gulf Radio School for about three months, four months. And I was also workin' on a jukebox route at the same time, you know, learnin' how to fix them mechanically. And then I went full time on the jukebox route.

TJ: What was your job?

CM: Well, originally I made service calls. People would call up and say the jukebox is not workin', I'd go out and fix it. And then I assisted as the route grew. The partner, Joe Mancuso, who used to go out and change the records, and collect ... count the money and that kind o' stuff needed help.

TJ: He was the counter; he was the collector.

CM: Yeah, right. So then the two of us were doin' that kind o' stuff. 'Cause it grew. When I first got into it we had maybe twenty-five, thirty locations. And over a space of a year or two we had like sixty-odd locations.

TJ: So, Joe also, now was he your quote - marketing person? Was he the guy who went out and did business?

CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, oh yeah! Well he was older than I, you remember I was, you know, I was just eighteen when I started.

TJ: Wait! How old is Joe. I don't know him. How old is he?

CM: Okay. He's probably maybe four or five years older than me that's all; six years older than me, yeah, somethin' like that. Not a whole lot older; I would say he was in his twenties when I was in my teens. Maybe ten years but that's at the most. And so that just developed. And then how I got into the recording business, okay?

TJ: Well, I think you're jumping a little. Are we jumping a little ahead?

CM: Well, no. Because it's all generic to this. It'll come up, it was part of this, it was part of this!

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What happened was that since we took the ... we're talkin' about 78's right? A popular record got worn and scratchy every week. You had to put a new one on; pull the old one off. And we used to sell the used ones in the office of the jukebox company which was next door to Rampart and Dumaine. It was a little place next door to that. There was a A & P food store at the corner of Rampart and Dumaine, a small one. And next door to that was where our jukebox office was where we repaired machines.

TJ: Was it 833 North Rampart?

CM: No, it had to be a even number ... It was probably 834.

TJ: Hold on, we got it right here. 838...

CM: No, that's the corner!

TJ: 838?

CM: That's J & M Music Shop. J & M Amusement Service was first.

TJ: Oh, okay.

CM: That's probably after '45 [1945].

TJ: This is from 1945, J & M Music Shop, [Tad Jones is reading an advertisement] "Records and Albums, All Makes, New and Used. Joe Mancuso, Manager. Home Phonographs and Radios For Sale. We Install Phonographs and Pinball Machines on a Commission Basis!" 838 North Rampart.

CM: Right, that's the new thing on the corner. But before that when I got into it we were next door and there was a grocery store on the corner. Anyway, and you gotta remember the World War was still goin' on, okay, when this came up.

TJ: So aren't records ... isn't there a shellac shortage and records are hard to get?

CM: Right. Everything, yeah. 'Cause shellac, the bulk of shellac came from Australia. And yes, it was scarce. Anyway, we sold the used records because, you know,

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we'd get some money out of 'em, you know? And since we had an office and a person there answerin' the phone there during the day; it cost no more to sell the used records than to not. Plus you had to do something with 'em. So we sold the used records. And the people who came in to buy the used records started asking for new records! So we started selling new records too. 'Cause since we were going to the record distributors and buying stuff two or three times a week, anyhow; we'd buy a few extra and sell 'em along with the used records. And then when World War II ended, we bought the building on the corner 'cause the A & P closed up. It was tiny and the small stores weren't that ... there still doing the same thing; closing small stores and making bigger ones. Only the small stores now are gigantic compared to those. In any event they closed that store and we bought that building and remodeled it into what it is now. And called it instead of J & M Amusement Service, J & M Music Shop. And we quickly became one of the prime record retailers. And we did for two reasons; first, it was a nice new place. We could maintain a large stock. And we did have used records. And we had a good handle on what the hot records were. Places like Werlein's, for instance, were rather stuffy about their records. Not that they were terribly straight-laced, but they didn't hop on to a hot thing the way somebody with a jukebox had to. We had to get 'em quick.

TJ: Right! You got feedback from your location too!

CM: Oh yeah! You read the meter! [Laughs] You knew in a week's time what people wanted.

TJ: Or you'd get a call! 'Why don't you have this record?!

CM: You'd get a lotta that because in those days the capacity of the machines was small. Some of 'em only had twelve records in 'em; others twenty-four. So it was a very limited amount of records you could put on anyhow, so you could never satisfy everybody. So you had to tailor it to the location and to the demand; which ones would get you the most play. In any event, we were in tune with that and so we had built in marketing.

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TJ: Now you're having black locations and white locations?

CM: Yes, oh yeah, everything! You name it we had it. We had three whore houses, we had a couple of Spanish restaurants, some Creole places, a coupla sweet shops where they sold snowballs and candy and that kind of stuff. In fact there was a little counter version of the machines that you could get, about that big [ he shows him how big]. In fact the one I remember only had ten records in it. But it could sit on a counter on a table. And we had some of those out in these little - quote - sweet shops and places like that. So we had 'em all over the place. In any event we got this reputation, if you wanted the latest thing we had it. And we advertised. We started going on the radio and things ... we advertised if we had it.

TJ: So you were doing radio and other types of marketing besides something like print.

CM: Yes, oh yes! Right! And one of the things we did was, we would take the records that were over stocked and some of the better conditioned records that we'd pull off the jukeboxes and we'd put a table out in front of the record counter and we'd put a sign on it. "Ask Us for Your Favorite Record and if We Don't Have It We'll Give You a Record." And the idea was if they asked us for a record and perchance we didn't have it ... we had a big stock. In those days record stores kept huge stocks. Not like today "Only the Hits" kinda thing. In those days records ... we had catalog. And there wasn't this multiplicity of labels either like there is now. So it was easier. And most of the time we had 'em. We had a big classical repertoire. We had country & western. In any event that thing was one of the things that was a good gimmick and it worked for us. And another thing was we started selling records the way One Stop sold records; before there was a One Stop. We started selling to jukebox operators. Because the smaller jukebox operators, instead of going to Decca and Columbia and da-da-da-da-da, they could come to us and buy everything in one place. We were the original "One Stop". It was us and Morris Music on South Rampart Street. We were the two places that the jukebox operators went to ... and Johnny's Music House was another! The three of us on South Rampart, right. But Johnny's was bigger more with retail than ...

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Morris Music House and us were bigger with selling to jukeboxes; including country operators who would come to New Orleans from little country towns. And to them it was really important not to have to go everywhere and back. In fact, we started it that they could call up in advance and say I'm gonna want twenty-five of this and twelve of that and we'd have it waiting for'em. Those kinds of things.

TJ: But back in those days I mean did people realize that Decca did have a distributor here and Columbia and all of those...

CM: Columbia, right! Now Columbia was distributed by an electrical supply company called Interstate Electric. Okay, that was before they had their own distributorship some years later.

TJ: But it's not like today. I mean today the way distributors do things. The majors seem to have distributors here.

CM: Yeah, right! Well they dominated the record business. They dominated the records. You remember, up until World War II there was no independent.

TJ: There were only three companies, basically; Decca, RCA...

CM: Columbia!

TJ: Columbia, yeah! And those were basically your three companies before the ... I think before the days of Rock 'n' Roll; I mean until the early '50's.

CM: And a couple of small companies started up at first and they got bought up by the big ones and then the independent record explosion ... the independent record label and distributor thing explosion occurred. And it was a marvelous time for the music business.

TJ: Oh yeah! I imagine!

CM: Because even in other businesses the innovation comes from the little guy.

TJ: Always.

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- CM: You know. Either because he's doing something he really loves or he's a real entrepreneur. He's bustin' his butt to make a quarter! You know. And a lot of it was they were doing things they really loved! You know, no question about it!
- TJ: Oh sure! Oh, no question about it! How much were you paying for a record in those days?
- CM: Oh, there's another strange thing!
- TJ: How much did you pay?
- CM: The major labels sold records for seventy-nine and eighty-nine cents.
- TJ: That was at retail? Wasn't it?
- CM: Retail! And the cheap ones were at like thirty-nine or forty-nine cents. Like for instance, Decca.
- TJ: He had budget lines.
- CM: I think Decca's was the Blue Label.
- TJ: Bluebird.
- CM: No, the Bluebird was Victor.
- TJ: Oh it was Victor. Okay, sorry.
- CM: Victor had RCA Victor and Bluebird and Decca had Decca and a Blue Label Decca. And the Blue Label Decca, I think, was the cheap one.
- TJ: Was the cheap one?
- CM: I think so. In any event the independent companies sold [records] for a buck. They actually charged more than the major labels and got it! 'Cause they had what people wanted! And then other things happened. For instance there was a guy that was a pullman porter on the train going to California, the Sunset Limited. The guy was a pullman porter on the Sunset Limited. So he was going to Los Angeles every week. And a lot of the independent labels were centered in and around Los Angeles, the new independents. And he would be aware

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of stuff that was just coming out there that hadn't spread across the country yet because the promotional things and the radio and all that were still happening, starting, congealing. And he'd come back with samples of a record and the next week he'd go out and we'd give him money to buy a hundred, two hundred, three hundred, five hundred of 'em and he'd bring 'em back on the train with him. So we also had a pipeline to the source that started to work real good for us! And then through that, then you know, ultimately it got to be big enough that we got names and phone numbers and these guys started coming to New Orleans and that kind of stuff. But it was a great time.

TJ: So, again, how much were you paying for a record?

CM: I think we were makin' about forty percent, yeah, makin' about forty percent, yeah. So I think we paid sixty-five cents or sixty-two cents for an independent and sold it for a dollar-five [\$1.05]. There was five cents ... there was a Federal excise tax on records in those days. So there was five cents worth of Federal tax on a dollar record; so they paid a dollar-five plus the local sales tax, a dollar-eight [\$1.08] in those days, I think.

TJ: A dollar for a record in those days!

CM: Well if you think of what people were makin' that was a huge amount of money. And in fact, there were many a person that came in with the price of a record and was torn between ... do I buy this or this or that? You know! So the whole process was far different than it is today.

TJ: I always look at those seventy-eights, and I look at how brittle. How did they ship those darn things?

CM: Well, you had a lotta breakage. But they were in nice corrugated boxes and they were packed, twenty, twenty-five in a single carton and that in a master carton and all that. And they made it; 'course you had a lotta breakage but, you know, if it was broke when it came in you could get refunds and that kind of stuff.

TJ: I've shipped seventy-eights, but one at a time, and I have to go through what I have to go through. I was

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wondering what it was like when you shipped in bulk in those days.

CM: Oh yeah, it's a major thing, disasterville, yeah.

TJ: So now you're up and running, your company's up and running.

CM: Yeah, and like I said, when World War II ended we bought the building on the corner, fixed it up, and started this business. And we were selling refrigerators and washing machines.

TJ: Oh, so you were doing appliances as well.

CM: Yeah, we sold appliances too.

TJ: So you're kinda becoming a catch-all, sort of a catch-all, kind of a business.

CM: Yeah, well we had, I tell ya, I don't know if you ever saw that store, but it was a great lookin' store. We had a local architect, Arthur Perez, design it. It's got gorgeous curved plaster ceilings inside. You know, the lights are hidden.

TJ: Is it still in that building; is it still there?

CM: Yeah, still, yeah, oh yeah! It's gorgeous! It was a very, very ... we had custom casework done in Moline, Illinois; blond oak counters and stuff like that. That place was gorgeous!

TJ: And didn't you have listening booths in there as well?

CM: Yeah, yeah, well, in those days people had ...they'd be your listening booths, yeah. Yeah, we had three; with machines in each one, yeah! Very nice, door, glass doors on 'em and all.

TJ: So you were state-of-the-art?

CM: Oh, sure, absolutely, absolutely, sure!

TJ: And who were your main competitors?

CM: Morris Music House who had been in business for years.

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- TJ: For years, yeah? That was Morris Karnofsky and his family ran that store.
- CM: Right!
- TJ: Who was Johnny's Music House.
- CM: Johnny's Music House, that was an Italian family that ran that. There still is a Johnny's Music House out in Jefferson somewhere. I don't know if it's the same family that runs it. But they used to be on South Rampart Street too.
- TJ: So how are you moving from that to having a recording studio?
- CM: Okay! Well, when they did the remodeling, the partner said, not me, the partner said, 'Wouldn't it be nice to have a place in the back where people could make records.' And so the architects found a source for the equipment and laid out the little recording studio room that we had and the control room. And I wound up running it because...
- TJ: Just by default ?
- CM: Yeah, and also I was a little bit more technical-quote, you know? And so I was the one who ran it. The guys that installed it for the record machinery company had to show us how to do it. And, in fact ...
- TJ: Who came in and installed it; all the equipment?
- CM: It was local guys and you made have heard of the son; but there was Bill Sargent, Horace Sargent and his son, Billy. Billy was a teenager back then. Billy Sargent is the guy that did the Burton Shakespeare thing on videotape. I don't know if you remember. It was a Broadway production and he used multiple cameras, videotape, and recorder. I forget which Shakespearean production it was but [it was] Richard Burton! And he left New Orleans and went to the West Coast and became a producer. And that was one of the things he did. But he was an "outside-the-establishment" producer. And that thing was one of the things 'cause film people, you know... Oh, in the first place, this thing, nobody's gonna pay to see this and in the second place,

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you know, you can't do that. You gotta put 'em in the studio and you gotta do a minute at a time, you know! A minute at a time and all that and he did a live performance onto tape, yeah. In fact, I don't know if it was on tape or on film. Come to think of it, it might have been on film. But, yeah, interesting people I've met along the way, kind o'thing.

TJ: So they installed all this.

CM: Yeah, yeah and then I learned how to use it.

TJ: Okay well describe what you bought.

CM: Okay, it was made by a company in New Jersey called Presto, P-R-E-S-T-O. Presto was a division of some larger industrial company and it was a disc recorder. And in fact, it was two disc recorders that ran in parallel on one big table with two huge sixteen inch turntables; with the overhead mechanism. They're literally lathes and that's what they called 'em "Recording Lathe". And because the lathe works just like a machine tool lathe, the cutting stylus is the tool and the work piece is the blank record. And the lathe mechanism moves the cutterhead over the disc. And so that's how I started. And the reason for two, was because the first play back heads were so gross that they damaged the record even after the first playing. There was visible, not terrible, but some physical damage. And since this thing had to be through a process, a mechanical process of replication and be the basis for the many thousands of records that were gonna be made, they couldn't start off with a damaged master. So you did a Master and a Safety at the same time. And you played the Safety and presumed the Master was as good; that it didn't have some defect that you had to ... you know.

TJ: So how did you learn? Did you learn this?

CM: Yeah, I learned it on my own. I mean, this guy showed me, you know, how the thing worked. And from there it was just me.

TJ: You had a manual?

CM: Oh yeah! There was a lovely manual in there, and all

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that. I built my ... originally you had to use a brush and brush the chip to the thread being cut out of it, out of the way because if it was fouled under the record it ruin it. So the first thing was that somebody had to stand there with this brush and brush this stuff aside as it was thrown outta the groove that was being created. And there were systems that use vacuum. But they were terribly expensive, so I built my own out of a vacuum cleaner, a pickle jar, and a rheostat to adjust voltage. And I adjusted the suction by controlling the amount of voltage fed to the vacuum cleaner. The vacuum cleaner sat out in the hall ...

TJ: [Laughs]

CM: ... 'cause it was noisy as hell. And the jar was on floor in there. And I had the typical kinda thing where you scoop up something and trap it in a jar or a container. The intake thing dropped it near the bottom and the air went out one that only poked into the top; so did the thread. And you put water in the bottom of it for two reasons. First, this stuff is terribly flammable. It's like movie film, you know? Which means that, just the way movie film will do, if you set it afire it'll explode. And the reason for that is it slow burns; it doesn't blow up. It slow burns, it burns fast, but not explosively fast. But it all slow burns at once. You got this tremendous surface exposed to the air. And the same thing with this air, you know, so it all burns at once. So it makes a hell of a thing. Plus this acrid fumes 'cause every now and then you burn one for one reason or another; and hit the thing. 'Cause one of the technologies that I graduated into later on was a "hot stylus". Where you wound a little heater coil, tiny fine wire, heater coil, onto the sapphire stylus itself and ran current through it to heat it. And that was more potential for starting a fire with the thing.

TJ: So how big, when you say studio, how big?

CM: The studio itself, it's still there. It's about, uhhh, fourteen by seventeen, not much bigger than this room. This room is about half the size of that studio. This room, yeah, this room is about half the size of that studio.

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TJ: Half the size, okay.

CM: Inotherwords, it was about ... well, let's say it's about a third of the size 'cause it was wider and longer so floor area ... it was maybe three times this room. So that's it!

TJ: Well how big ... the control room? How big was the control room?

CM: The control room was the size of four telephone booths.

TJ: [Laughs]

CM: That's the best way to describe it.

TJ: Four telephone booths?

CM: Yeah!

TJ: Long and ... tall?

CM: Well it was wide ... it was as wide as double the width of a telephone booth and about double or a little bit more the width of a telephone booth goin' back.

TJ: So you couldn't get a lot of people in the control booth.

CM: No! No! Two was comfortable, three was a crowd.

TJ: [Laughs] Three was a crowd.

CM: I had a three input mike mixer.

TJ: Okay, I was gonna say how many mikes could you mix from the board?

CM: So, originally, all I could mix was three microphones.

TJ: You had three microphones. That's it.

CM: Right.

TJ: What type of mikes did you have?

CM: Well, the first microphones I had were Shure 556. Oh

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wait! Shure 56, then 556. That's the famous ... you've seen the chrome kinda birdcage microphone, okay? That, the earlier version of the Shure like this? [he's pointing to the microphone he's doing the interview on.]

TJ: Which is? What model is it?

CM: I don't know what the number was then. This, I think is a 58 or a 59. But that was ...

TJ: Were they Cardioid?

CM: It was directional ...Cardioid.

TJ: Yeah, they were Cardioid?

CM: Yeah.

TJ: Okay, explain that. For somebody who might be ... what do you mean by Cardioid?

CM: Okay. Cardioid means heart-like. That's what the pickup pattern, the sensitivity pattern, in front of a Cardioid microphone is heart-shaped. If you think of the microphone being at the dip, you know, the conventional drawing of the heart? If the microphone's at the dip in the top of the heart, pointed at the point down in front of it; think of the usual heart thing but a little fatter, a little rounder. The equal sensitivity was ... Anyway so this heart-shaped pattern meant that at the rear, it didn't pick up sound coming from the rear as well as it picked up sound coming from the front. So then you could put it where you could select or pick up certain instruments or sounds and discriminate against others.

TJ: Other sounds.

CM: Right.

TJ: Well I'll ask you about that when we get into recording sessions. We'll get back to that.

CM: Yeah, okay.

TJ: But it has certain uses.

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CM: Yeah, right. It was a tool. It was a tool to be used that meant that you could more selectively pick up things that you were interested and not ...

TJ: And not ...

CM: ... And not things that you weren't.

