

Interview with Charles L. Dufour

H: All right, your name please?

CD: Charles L. Dufour.

H: And uh, date of birth?

CD: I was born in New Orleans January the 1th 1903.

H: And have you lived here all your life?

CD: Lived here all my life.

H: This is being recorded on the evening of Monday, the 12th of May, 1958. When did you first become aware that there was such a form of music as New Orleans jazz?

CD: Oh I would suppose during my college days at Tulane. I entered Tulane in 1921. Prior to that, we had, as a kid growing up, we had (...) known as ragtime. We had ragtime records on the phonograph, along with Caruso and other Red Seals, but the transition of ragtime into jazz took place, I believe, back during my college days, back in the 1921, 22 period. Now, you realize you're talking to a non-expert on jazz. I'm only giving you a recollection, which may not be authentic.

H: Well, uh you, you said when you were going to high school, when you were going to dances --

CD: Well, I wasn't much of a party boy during my high school days. I would say what was played in those days was the, mainly was what we called, still called, ragtime. It was, I can remember the Tuxedo Band was a famous band, and they played what was genuinely called ragtime all the way down until I think about the 20s. That's when the saying jazz came into the picture, and just how jazz differed from ragtime, as a non-expert, certainly I'm not in a position to tell you... [I'll leave that to] Dr. Souchon, Myra Menville and that group. I would say in the evolution of this thing--

(machine cuts off)

CD: ... hear those bands, and I liked to pat my foot to the music, but I've never, the music has never played an important part in my, should we say, musical experience. But I've never been opposed to it as I was opposed to Mr. E. Presley.

H: What did people think of it? What did your parents' contemporaries think of it?

CD: Well you see, my parents were quite old when I was born, and my father died in 1913 when I was just 10, and it had hardly emerged as an art form, and it was just, they grew up in the opera house, and anything that wasn't operatic music was "claptrap." The same can be true of my mother who listened to it a bit longer.

H: Do you know anything about your parent's friends? What they --

CD: Well I was hardly, at 10 years old, any of the habits of my father's friends, of course, your own great grandmother was a good friend of my mother's, Mrs. Waterman, lived right behind us, and I can remember going to the old French Opera with Mrs.

Waterman and my mother as a little boy. So that's how I could say that I know my mother, and Mrs. Waterman didn't go to any jazz parties in those days, so that may answer your question.

H: When you were in high school and college, did they tend to have ragtime or jazz bands at most of the parties you went to?

CD: They had those, what they called "script dances" in those days, and a couple of people, a comedian would get up to dances, and everybody would pay to come in, couples would pay, and what they paid, paid for the \script act. What they paid, paid for the band. A lot of them --

H: This was when you were in college?

CD: Well that was in college up to my day. I think from my day it began to die out. I heard them talk about my predecessors, but a lot of the guys, a lot of the bands about that time were like the 6th and 7/8 band, made up of college boys or high school boys. I remember one very fine band was Dick Mackey, you've probably heard about Dick Mackey around here. In fact, I think Dick lived, his family lived on the Gulf Coast where you are, and Dick Mackey had a band, and a lot of these boys had bands, and they grouped into little bands, and they go out and play at the various functions, and make money and work their way through college. Of course there were a lot of Negro bands, like Tuxedo, and later on Papa Celestin band, and there were others that I would have to say I don't know much about.

H: Before you went to college, did the parties generally tend to have jazz bands or ragtime?

CD: Well they had the ragtime band, yeah.

H: What about when you were in college, what kind of bands did they have?

CD: Well like I say, I wasn't a great party hound, so I'm not in the position to give you any expert information. But, when they had the fraternity dances at the fraternity houses, they'd hire a band. They would play the popular music of the day, and the popular music of the day, well, back in the days of Charleston, they played a piece called "The Charleston," "dadadadada," or however that goes; the "Black Bottom" and all of those kinds of things. Well, the music went with the song, I mean the dance. The dance took its name after the music; they were collateral, or relative. But actually, my recollection is that the evolutionary process, it went from ragtime into jazz; just what the difference is, the jazz musicologists like "Sou," Edmond Souchon, and Myra Menville, and Scoop Kennedy knows quite a bit about it, have you talked to him?

H: No, sir. I haven't. But, you would say, then, that the bands that were playing when you were in college were not bona fide jazz bands?

CD: I couldn't say that with authority. I could say that they played jazz, but to say that they were not bona fide jazz bands would call for...

[continued on Disc 1050]

DISC 1050

CD: I couldn't say that with authority. I could say that they played jazz, but to say that they

were not bona fide jazz bands would call for definitions which I'm not competent to give or not even competent to identify. You know what I mean? I'm just not that conversant with the old jazz movement. It was sort of something which, uh, I'd say it sort of passed me by without my being opposed to it, without my being any part of it, so jazz has actually meant absolutely nothing in my life. In my musical experience, it's meant nothing to me. On the other hand, it has never, I have never felt that it offended me, see what I mean? Where you pull your hair out over screeches in Mr. Presley and that raucous school of "so called" entertainment. Heck, I like, at the ball park for example, in the old days, the baseball park, I remember going back in 1926, 27, and *every* Sunday at the double header, they'd have a band in the Negro bleachers, and they'd play that "Maryland" roll call, dada dada dada dada, and man they'd make the crowd go crazy.

H: The white people there would really like it?

CD: Sure, everyone loved it. And every time the Pelicans went on a rally or Pelicans came to bat they'd give a couple of these fan fares and go off into it. That used to be a regular feature on some of those when you had 8, 10, that was when baseball, you had 8 or 10 or 12 thousand people on a Sunday.

H: When was that, during the 20s?

CD: They were the great days of the 20s, yeah, I'd say from 23-30, something like that period.

H: Thank you. Getting back to the parties again, would you say most of the music being played, they would tend to play mostly jazz music or--

CD: Once again, you're qualifying me as an expert in which-

H: I'm not--

CD: I really don't know, I really don't know. I would say it is hard to put your finger, or for me, who is not a student of jazz, to put my finger on a period at which what was once known as ragtime, when it was then considered to be jazz, when the transition took place.

H: I'm not worried about the difference between jazz and ragtime; did they tend to play hot music?

CD: They played what was hot for the day. They played "Jada, Jada, Jing Jing Jing," "Pretty Baby," that sort of stuff. But, where, 20 years earlier, they were playing "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now," which would be waltzing, the thing was pepped up and "jazzed up" as the expression went.

H: The music was definitely "jazzed up."

CD: I would say that was part of the evolution, yes.

H: Did they tend to have a lot of colored bands?

CD: I would say without knowing, that there was no, that there were considerable colored bands.

H: What about at the debutante parties? Would they have a jazz band at debutante parties?

CD: I can't answer that question; I wasn't a "DB."

H: Well, you said-

CD: Here comes somebody who might be able to answer your question. [speaks to other person]

Polly?

Polly: Yeah?

CD: This is Mr. Hillyer, my brother-in-law, Mr. Lebeouf. Come in here and (...)

H: Well you said that jazz didn't offend you. Did a lot of people say the same thing, that it was a lot of gutter clap trap?

CD: A lot of people did. I wouldn't doubt for a moment that I went through a period in which I felt that, but I mean in the overall feeling that I have now, is that it didn't offend me and it doesn't offend me, although I would never go out and seek it --

Polly(?): What about Elvis?

CD: [to Polly] Keep quiet! [laughs] [continues his answer] -- go out and seek it as a form of entertainment, and when I have, always under certain conditions, loved Papa Celestin for example: "When the Saints Go Marching In," or hear Souchon and his group play, particularly Edmond singing that that gravel-throated "If Ever I Cease to Love" version at Mardi Gras, but that's the best answer I can give you. I just feel confident that if my memory is correct, there were times when I did look down my nose at jazz.

H: And you said a great number of people did?

CD: I think that there were many that did.

H: Would you say a majority of New Orleanians --

CD: No, I'd say the majority accepted it and recognized it -- well you see, here's the point: if a person was a dancer and a dance-goer and a party man, and he'd hear it at the parties, hear it at the dances, and he'd have to be part of the experience. I didn't go in for that much, and as a consequence, my experience was less than someone else's, and your liking or disliking of something is frequently predicated upon your experience. So not having had sufficient experience, you see what I mean?

H: Yes, sir. Well, taking all that for granted, then; what did you, did you know a sizable amount of people who were very enthused over it?

CD: I wouldn't say that I knew a great number that were enthused over it, but I would certainly say that those that were enthused over it were actually really enthused over it, you see what I mean? They were debuties.

H: Yes, sir. Well, among these people, you said that most of the people that did like it were people that went to dances. Did they just think of it as a form of entertainment, just music --

CD: You're asking me to project myself back 30 years into somebody's mind, that I wasn't in a position to do then. I can't answer that, honestly.

H: Well, put it this way: Do you think, just in your opinion, which of course you have qualified, think that most people you knew that did like it, tended to think of it just as something to go listen to and have fun, or did they think of it as a music with intrinsic value such as classical music had?

CD: I think their first impression must've been something to have fun, to trip the light fantastic with, but that the final analysis, gradually, this idea of it as an emerging art form, or an indigenous southern New Orleans art form came about--

[Tape fades]

H: Well could you, sort of, carry it down to the present day. Have you noticed any increase in interest in jazz or a time when people stopped listening to it all together?

CD: Oh, no. I think the interest is continuing.

H: Even in the 30s would you say that?

CD: I would say so, but I would say that jazz evolved -

H: Well I'm talking about --

CD: The basic jazz?

H: Basic jazz rather than derivations such as swing.

CD: Well, you've had derivations; you've had swing, you've had symphonic jazz, and you've had, what --

H: I'm talking about New Orleans jazz.

CD: New Orleans jazz; I would say, without knowing again, that it's maintained a vogue; what we have today, they call Dixieland, is a present-day version of what was originally New Orleans, isn't that correct?

H: After a fashion, yes.

CD: After a fashion, See, I'm really not, I'm dealing with these things I'm really not qualified to deal with and all I can give you is a man on the other side of the fence looking in the pasture, see --

H: Well, that's what I'm looking for.

CD: I can't see all the animals in the pasture because I'm not close enough to them, and don't know enough about the animal husbandry. That's the way it is with jazz [laughs].

H: Would you say, you think a lot of people today think of it as music with intrinsic worth? Think of it as an art form?

CD: I'm sure they do. I'm satisfied they do. I'm satisfied they do.

H: The majority of New Orleanians and your acquaintances --

CD: I would say that many New Orleanians think so, yes. I would say so. On the other hand, I've heard New Orleanians say it's a fine; there must be other ways in which \$75,000 can be spent without writing the history of jazz in New Orleans. In other words, that's my opinion.

H: They think that's a waste of time? A lot of people feel that? Do you feel that?

CD: I don't feel any pro-research project is a waste of time. I mean I'd like the end result, but I don't think any project is a waste of time. If somebody spends \$75,000 writing the history of sewerage in New Orleans, at some subsequent date, that's going to be an important part of material on the history of New Orleans, and therefore, anything, even though I'm not enthused about jazz per se, I'm not opposed to it, \$75,000 spent on research on jazz, as far as I'm concerned, is a valuable contribution, a contribution to the history of New Orleans. And as a person interested in history, and in New Orleans, I think all facets of it are important, even though I may not be interested in that particular facet.

H: Well, you would say, though, that a lot of people do tend to think that's a waste of time and money?

CD: I wouldn't be able to evaluate how many.

H: But you do know people you're acquainted with?

CD: I've heard the expression made, I've heard the expression presented.

H: So you said, some of the versions of opinions, do you know any people who still think of jazz as gutter clap-trap or --

CD: I'm quite sure there must be some. I've got a dear friend, for example, who's got a marvelous collection of operatic records. The gentleman just celebrated his 50th anniversary, his wedding anniversary, and he's got a marvelous collection of operatic records. I'm quite satisfied (...) jazz is today. It's untouchable, just as it was 50 years ago, or 40 years ago, or 20 years ago.

H: Today, though, there's still a great diversion of opinion on it.

CD: I'd say that there are divergences, how great they are, I would say the divergences are less great today than they were 30 years ago.

H: And more people do appreciate it.

CD: I'd say the proportion of those who accept it as an art form is greater today than it was 25 or 30 years ago, just a guess.

H: Can you think of anything you could add on the subject?

CD: [laughs] I don't know. What I've said on the subject is purely a search in the dark.

H: Could you add the ages of your --

CD: My father was born 1854 and died in 1913, which I think would make him 59 years old. My mother was born 1865 and died in 1943, which would make her 78.

H: When you used to go to the opera, that was --

CD: It was prior to 1919 at the old French Opera House, because that's when the Opera House burned, and that would mean she went from her, almost her infancy back in the 70s when everybody in New Orleans, that was the one thing they did, they went to the Opera House, they lived in the Opera House, virtually, and the Opera House burned in 1919, as you know. And since then, we've had opera, but not the opera that was the opera of the 1840s down to 1919.

H: Thank you very much, sir.