

*Interview with Elizabeth O'Kelly Kerrigan, May 4, 1958*

EOK: This is Elizabeth O'Kelly Kerrigan.

HH: Go on.

EOK: Well, I'm 52 years old. Born in -- I moved to New Orleans when I was 3, and the first time I remember anything about jazz was at Pass Christian; this small Negro band called the Watson Brothers started off with homemade instruments, and they finally, by going around and serenading people in the evening and people would go out and either pay them because they liked it or pay them to get away, they managed to acquire enough money to buy a few, I think they had a banjo and guitar, and I don't remember exactly all of the various things that they did have, and they used to play what was I suppose jazz, and we loved it. And they used to play at the dances we used to have on the end of the pier... and that was when I was maybe 12 or 13, 14. And then the first Negro band that I saw playing at New Orleans parties was when I was around 15 or 16. Several people had dances at home, and they would have this Negro band Celestin playing in that band. And I don't remember if it was his band, or whether he was just a member of it.

HH: When was that, around 1920?

EOK: That was around 1920, yeah. Then I didn't see any more or hear any more jazz until we used to collect records. We had a lot of... You know, what was it, Bessie Smith?

HH: The blues singer?

EOK: Yeah, then we had the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and the Original Dixieland Band, and I remember when I went off to school I took two Piron records up to school in New York with me, and the girls, they thought it was just noise. That was in 1923. They didn't appreciate it at all. And I got embarrassed after I played it once or twice, and they all thought it was so horrible, and I never played it anymore.

Then the next year I made my debut, and Piron played all of our parties. And he played popular tunes, you know, the songs of the day, but in a jazz sort of way. And then we used to go out... to the Halfway House. I wasn't allowed in it. It was kind of a road house and it was supposed to be rather shady, so I wasn't allowed to go in the place, but we sat and listened to the music, and they had a wonderful orchestra. Then over here at the Pass, sometimes we'd go to, when the Negroes would have dances, a bunch of us, you know, teenagers, used to go and park near the Negro dance hall, and they used to play wonderful music. Just marvelous. And then Piron, he was the most popular jazz band that played in our era, but I know some things that Jack has told me, because he was in on this sooner than I was.

There was a band called Robichaux that used to play at the Louisianne, that was very, very popular in 1918. Then Piron used to play out at the Tranchina's out in Spanish Fort, and that was a great place to be, that we used to go to. But to me one of the ones who first took up jazz was Dr. Souchon -- Edmond Souchon, because he had his whole band when he was going to Tulane, the 6 and 7/8 Band. And they used to play jazz. And he knows more about it I think probably than almost anyone, about the early jazz, that was played, you know, in those days.

HH: Do you remember what your parents or your friends' parents thought about it? Or what your friends thought about it? When it first started becoming acceptable? Good society in New Orleans, having it played at parties, debutant parties?

EOK: Piron was already established at the country clubs before I came out, so I don't know if it was before my time that he started playing there. All my friends loved it; the parents didn't care for it too much. I remember when I was at Newcomb, that was in 1922 I guess, there was a Negro cemetery near Newcomb and they would always have a band, you know, preceding a funeral procession, and they played very slow dirges going to the cemetery, and then coming back they would really break out and play wonderful jazz. We used to be sitting out on the campus sometimes studying, and we would hear them really going to town on the way home from the funeral.

But as I say, there are several others that know a whole lot more about the early stuff, because it was fairly well established by the time I made my debut.

HH: Can you tell me how long it lasted? When people stopped listening to it and then when they started again?

EOK: Well I think there were a lot of these sweet bands that got popular. [Directed at someone else: Was Piron playing when you made your debut?] But he died not too long after that, and then say five, six years maybe a little bit longer than that, the people started going in for the sweet type of music. All during the 30s, they liked that type. I think Celestin got his start back here at the Pass, because you know, John Curran got him to come over here, because all of our generation just loved it, and the kids picked it up, and then they started playing it in New Orleans again.

(pause)

Well, I remember now that the first Negro jazz band that played at any social white parties in New Orleans was called the Tuxedo band, and Celestin was not the leader, but he was a member of the band. And they played for private parties, and they might have played at the Country Club, but that was before my time, so I wouldn't know it. But I would say in around 1918 or 19.

HH: Well what about this party? You were born in 1905, how old were you... at this party?

EOK: Well he played at a birthday party. I was either 14 or 16, I can't remember. It was just a dance at home. And this same Tuxedo Band played at several of the parties, and they also used to play at the fraternities, the high school fraternity parties