

H: This interview was recorded on Tuesday night, the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1958.

H: Give me your name, please.

JC: My name is John G. Curran.

H: Date of birth?

JC: November 27, 1907.

H: Place of birth?

JC: I'm from New Orleans.

H: Have you lived in New Orleans all your life?

JC: I have with the exception of 4 years when I went away to college, from 1925 to 1929.

H: When did you first become aware that there was such a thing as New Orleans jazz?

JC: Well, it's so far back, I can hardly remember. I can remember the first dance I went to, which was about my second year of high school, I went to a dance where Oscar Celestin and the Dixieland band played their (...)

H: When was that?

JC: That was about 1923.

H: What did you think of the music when you first heard it?

JC: Oh, I always liked Dixieland jazz and I still do. I think they have changed it a little bit in the last 10 or 12 years, I would say. They've stepped up the tempo; they've stepped up the beat. Practically all the bands have done that.

H: What did your parents think of it? Do you know if they expressed an opinion?)

JC: Oh they enjoyed Dixieland music, naturally. I guess everyone in New Orleans was just crazy about Dixieland music.

H: As far back as you can remember?

JC: As far back as I can remember.

H: Were jazz bands hired, as a rule, for most parties...?

JC: Well, during the 20s they were hired for *every* party, everybody played Dixieland jazz at that time. New Orleans, of course, was the birthplace of all jazz, and out of that came Dixieland jazz, and Dixieland jazz has a, fundamentally has a jungle beat that originated with the colored bands, and some of them have maintained it, and some of them haven't.

H: Most were colored bands, they had?

JC: Originally, yes. In fact, the first, I guess the first jazz band in the world was the Claiborne Williams band from Donaldsonville, Louisiana. It was probably the first band, or jazz band at that time, probably in the world.

H: Was New Orleans jazz very popular in the 20s? Was it only a form of entertainment as dance music or did people tend to think of it as an art form?

JC: Well, at that time it was primarily for dancing. Today it is looked upon as an art and dancing, more art than dancing, and they have a lot of Dixieland concerts today that they didn't have before. Back in the 20s, they would have a contest between two Dixieland bands, and they would offer some prize or a loving cup for the band that had the greatest applause. They had quite a dance one time at the Chess, Checkers, and Whist club. One of the bands was the Princeton Serenaders and the other was the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and they couldn't decide; the judges couldn't decide what band was the greatest, the greater of the two, and they decided to split the prize, which was a cash prize, between the two bands. That has come back lately. They had a cash prize at (...) on the Steamer President, for a (...). And Jan Garber's band was at one end of the President, and Oscar Papa Celestin's band was at the other end of the President and they asked to have Jan Garber play first, and Celestin's band decided that regardless of what number he played, they would play it right back again, and after Jan Garber heard them play it back, the first time he played it, which was "High Society," he walked over to Celestin's band and he (...), and that happened just about 6 or 8 months ago.

H: Well --

JC: Jan Garber's band, by the way, dates way back to the famous Garber-Davis band. David has since died, and Garber has continued on with his band.

H: He plays jazz?

JC: Oh yes. He plays primarily Dixieland jazz.

H: (Hard to understand. To paraphrase: When you first started going to parties, did people tend to like jazz more then, or was it more popular in the 30s?)

JC: Well, Dixieland jazz dropped almost out of existence in the early 30s or the mid-30s and uh, went out of existence entirely during World War II. They just didn't have any Dixieland bands at all during that time, and the New Orleans Jazz Foundation got busy

and they started out, the first band they started out with was Bunk Johnson's band, they brought him back.

H: Do you know who proposed the New Orleans Jazz Federation?

JC: Well, a great many people, I guess were responsible for it. You may have heard over the years of Dr. Souchon and Mrs. John Menville. Those two covered (...), or the New Orleans Jazz Club, as they were known later on.

*The New Orleans  
Jazz Foundation*

H: You said (..)

JC: Oh, yeah. I said -- It has increased now to a time where it is on a national scope, and really, international scope. For example, last year they asked, in the last 2 years, 3 out of 4 of the major football bowl games have used "When the Saints Go Marching In" during the halftime parading of the bands and the playing of the bands. This was a tribute to what they call the roaring twenties, which was 1927, when "The Saints Go Marching In" was played for the first time by Oscar Celestin, and he failed to copyright it.

H: He didn't copyright it?

JC: No, sir. He never copyrighted it.

H: Would you say, now, people tend to look at jazz as not only a form of dance and entertainment, and as an art form in New Orleans?

JC: Oh yeah, definitely. And New Orleans is looked to by the entire world as the cradle of Dixieland jazz. It was born and (...) and kept alive later on, and brought back to life by the New Orleans Jazz Club, and today they have a Dixieland room in the Cabildo, which is Louisiana's number one museum, and when the Louisiana (...) society made (...), there is a Dixieland room down there today and the Latter Memorial Library, there is a Dixieland room that has all the, all the famous and worthwhile Dixieland records there for the whole world to play, in its permanent library of Dixieland music. This has been accomplished entirely by the New Orleans Jazz Club.

H: Would you say, at early thirties and forties, that New Orleanians enjoyed and were more interested in New Orleans jazz?

JC: Oh yeah... There is quite a bit of a tension from the sound of the original radio broadcast... South America and England, throughout the British Isles and all of Europe would correspond with the New Orleans Jazz Club... From New Orleans it was rebroadcast over... throughout the world. They were hearing records and numbers that they had never heard before.

H:... New Orleans jazz...

JC: Oh yeah, there's no question about that.

JC: The younger generation were awakened to the fact that Dixieland jazz is something that really belongs in New Orleans.

H: Would you say the majority of people in New Orleans like jazz today?

JC: Yes I do, there's some people, as you'll find in other cities aside from New Orleans that... jazz.

H: jazz per se...?

JC: No, never. As a matter of fact on Mardi Gras day at the largest single parade in New Orleans as well as the rest of the United States is the Krewe of Orleans and the Krewe of ... some idea of 200 decorated trucks, and on those trucks will be approximately 40 or 50 bands... 4 pieces, 5 pieces, or 6 pieces, and all of them are playing Dixieland music, without any question. That's every Mardi Gras, and each Mardi Gras keeps getting larger and larger. Dixieland bands don't all come from New Orleans, because we don't have that many in New Orleans. They'll come from Mississippi and South Louisiana, from all sections of Louisiana, but all of them will be playing Dixieland music.

H: Well, would you say...

JC: Oh, definitely.

H: ...

JC: Well, it was not that so much as a question of lack of interest. The Dixieland bands, the white bands, they all left New Orleans, and to put it bluntly, the Dixieland bands that remained in New Orleans at the time of Pearl Harbor, well they just broke up more than anything. Papa Celestin... <sup>called</sup> his band together the night of Pearl Harbor and they... It was war, and that was the end of it. And the other bands saw it, too. So, whether they wanted it or didn't want it, they had no music they could listen to.

said "we've played out"  
last note of music.

H: What about during the 30s?

JC: During the thirties, it was dropping down in popularity, there's no question of that. It was dropping and down in popularity.... it was just a change of music. But it came back, and it came back in quite a rush, and when it came back, it was not limited to New Orleans, it was through the entire United States, and the entire world.

H: New Orleans jazz has been ... other parts of the country?

JC: Well it was popular, it was limited to New Orleans to a great extent. Of course, New Orleans, and Chicago, and New York, and San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and St. Louis, and Memphis before World War II. Then Dixieland music... in Memphis... In fact then Memphis started claiming the birth of Dixieland music for Memphis, but they

missed it by about fifteen years. That was before World War II. After World War II, many, many colleges that had no connection with New Orleans in the cities I just named started Dixieland bands among the college students, because of the popularity of ... Dixieland music over the radio and over television. And that ... and even in smaller villages throughout the United States.

H: Do you think you have anything else to add to the subject of social acceptance of New Orleans jazz by New Orleanians?

JC: Well, I don't have very much to add to your interview, other than I know that Celestin has said that he has played for debutants, and he has played for those debutants' grandmothers at their debut party, because he did play in New Orleans over a period of fifty years. And he was accepted as a real heritage in New Orleans of all the colored musicians, because he was the one, single leader who refused to leave New Orleans for more than thirty days. He never left New Orleans regardless of how much money was offered to him to leave. And there are certain families in New Orleans who have been here for generations and generations that just could not have a debut party without Celestin or Celestin's band say, playing for that particular party. And where their band has always been limited to 7, 8, or possibly ten pieces, they might not play for the particular carnival ball, but the father or the grandfather will have that band playing back for the maskers as they're dressing before the ball, and as they're taking their costumes off after the ball is over, and they're preparing to go in their full vest to the Queen's Supper.

H:...

JC: Occasionally they would go to the Queen's Supper, but as a general rule, they would have a much larger band, which they would have at the ball... played at the Queen's Supper.

H: They wouldn't hire New Orleans jazz bands at the balls?

JC: No, they would not, because they wouldn't have the number of pieces in it. A Dixieland jazz band just cannot play with more than nine pieces. The greatest bands that they've ever had in Dixieland music on a national plan, consisting of 20, 24, 26, 28, 30 pieces, when they get to playing a strict Dixieland number, they'll immediately cut it down to 10, 9, 8, and sometimes 7 pieces; and I'm referring now to the king of all musicians, and that is Paul Whiteman, who established New Orleans as the birthplace and the creator of the greatest Dixieland and jazz musicians that they have throughout America. He said that on a number of occasions.

H: would you say that...

JC: Oh, very definitely. Today I would say that during the month of May, right at this time, I keep referring back to Celestin's band because he did have a band as far back as 1904, and his band is still going today, with the exception of Celestin, who passed away

several years ago, there's been no substitution in his band, and today you couldn't hire that band through the month of December, he's just closed up completely, and the very few times from the time the debutant season opened would he have open engagement, right on through til Mardi Gras. That's applying right now, with Mardi Gras... nine months away.

H: This occurred in the 20s, and the 30s, and the 40s? They always wanted to hire a jazz band at the debutant parties?

JC: Oh yeah, it's been almost standard in New Orleans, whether at parties in the afternoon or at night. Or at breakfast parties in the morning. It's just something that goes with New Orleans.

H: That was in the 30s, ... popularity... debutant parties continued... jazz bands.... acceptable?

JC: There were many times when the girl's family would come from a French section of Louisiana or from out in the rural sections; in order to satisfy the guests from other towns, they would hire Dixieland bands from Baton Rouge. They would hire Chris Johnson's band, or Victard's\ band. They'd have one band playing out on the patio, and one band playing on the inside. They'd have the New Orleans band playing one place and the Chris Johnson's band or Victard's\..., they were the two outstanding bands from out of town, playing on the outside. And that happened not once, but it happened on 15 or 20 occasions, when families from out of New Orleans had their daughters making their debut, or families who had moved to New Orleans, maybe for a generation you had some of their older friends from out of town, they'd have two bands alternating all night long, whether the party was at the country club or the Patio Royal or wherever it might be held, the Louisianne. And that was quite common, to have had two bands at the same party.

H: Can you think of anything else?

JC: No, not at this time.

H: Thank you very much.