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HILLYER INTERVIEWS

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Interview with Mrs. Mary Lucy Hamill O'Kelly, May 4, 1958

HH: Alright first, this is being recorded at Pass Christian on April 4th, 1958.

MLHO: May the 4th.

HH: May the 4th, 1958. I got mixed up to start off with. All right now, first I'd like you to tell your name, your birthplace, when you lived in New Orleans, and then, well start off on your memories of jazz.

MLHO: This is Mrs. Mary Lucy Hamill O'Kelly, born Mary Lucy Hamill in 1876 at Vicksburg, Mississippi. I lived after my marriage in 1900 at Ashwood, Louisiana, on a plantation that my husband owned. I came to New Orleans in 1909. Built a home there, and lived in New Orleans until 1940. And I came to pass with jazz from home there, and I can't remember when I first knew jazz as being jazz, I just thought it was sort of embroidery that the Negroes put on tunes that they played. They were not invented as jazz tunes, except for one I remember was the "St. Louis Blues." These Negro bands would take any regular tune and jazz it up, they'd add little extra notes and quivers and trills and runs and syncopation and make the thing sound entirely different. For a long time we just thought it was something that they all took to naturally, because I never heard any Negro sing a tune exactly as it was written by white people. They always added some little trimming to it. One band I remember in New Orleans was Piron's band. They played very well. There were numbers of smaller bands that played downtown, we called the French Quarter, and-

HH: Do you remember the... ?

MLHO: No, that was around 1915, I should say. And there was one very good band, I think it was actually called the Dixieland Band that played at the Halfway House, which was downtown on the road from, let's see, where was it? Well, it was called Halfway House. People who live in New Orleans would know more about it than I do, but I don't remember. But I remember that our young people, teenagers, were not allowed to go to this nightclub, the Halfway House, but they used to drive up near it and park and sit in their cars listening to this band, and they all thought that they were perfectly wonderful.

HH: Was that Piron?

MLHO: No, I don't know what band it was. But the Halfway House--I think it was probably the Dixieland Jazz Band now, don't you think?

Other woman in the background: It was called the Halfway House Orchestra.

MLHO: Oh, the Halfway House Orchestra. And the children thought it was wonderful. I thought all this jazz was dreadful, and I still do. (Phone rings.) Where was I?

HH: You were saying how horrible --

MLHO: Well I never cared for it, I thought then, still do. But there's one good thing about it. It's wonderful to dance by, because the New Orleans bands keep such perfect time and with the jazz and they're not wandering off and from hither and yonder, play with expression. They linger on one note or to add something of their own to the expression of the piece, but they just play the notes as they come absolutely in time, never missing a beat. And that's the kind of music that people that like to dance by. This isn't the kind of music I like to listen to. I much prefer classical music.

HH: Do you remember; did any of your contemporaries or your friends in New Orleans like it?

MLHO: I can't remember any of them that I knew cared for it, except for Myra Loker. I was quite shocked when she took it up so seriously.

HH: Who was this?

MLHO: Myra Loker, Mrs. Menville. It was the first time I remember anybody in our crowd, or set, of people who took jazz seriously. [Someone else in the room suggests that Myra Loker was not in their "set."] Not in our set; well, I mean, I knew her mother and father and all those people.

HH: Well, do you remember when it started being played at debutant parties or at balls or anything like that?

MLHO: Now, Dr. Souchon, Edmond Souchon had a band... They called it 6 and 7/8 Band, and they played jazz. And they played very well. Dr. Souchon was the leader of that, the organizer of that band. And they kept it up, they used to play at different parties, and I think that's about all I know about jazz. I never cared for it, especially...

HH: Thank you very much.