

July 26, 1955

Mahalia Jackson interview

Interviewed by unknown Swedish interviewer and recorded by William Russell at Mahalia Jackson's home in Chicago.

Swedish Interviewer (name unknown---hereafter listed as SI): I sing because I'm happy, is that right?

MJ: Yes, that's right, and I am happy!

SI: Well, I can see that when you are singing.

MJ: Oh yes.

SI: And one can hear it. Well, why are you so happy?

MJ: Well, music makes the soul happy. And I think I sing all the time, and it keeps my spirit happy.

SI: So you sing at home too?

MJ: Oh yes! I sing when I'm cooking, when I'm working 'round the house. Sing so much the neighbors sometimes come around and listen. So I just sing. It keeps me happy. It helps me to bear the burdens of the day.

SI: What do you like to sing the best?

MJ: I have a number of songs that I love to sing. Some songs for certain moods I'm in. Well I, I like to sing that particular song. If I'm in a sad mood, well I sing a song with a cry. And when I feel happy, jolly, well I sing a song with a lot of beat and a lot of rhythm to it, such as "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Keep Your Hands on the Plow," "Didn't It Rain," songs like that. They are jolly songs you know. And I just get around the house and sing 'em till I sing my blues away.

SI: You like to sing those songs with a beat, don't you?

MJ: Oh yeah, yeah.

SI: Now one other thing about your songs. They're all religious songs, aren't they?

MJ: Yes, they are. Well, I am very religious, should I say myself. I'm religious to the extent that I sacrifice myself, and don't use my voice for anything else but singing religious songs. I have a type of voice that I hear people talk about, that has a blue note in it. And what I mean about a blue note is, it has the American music, like we call the blues in America, you know. Well, in other words, it has the cry in it. It has sort of heart, you know. And of course all bands would like me to sing the blues or the popular songs. So I am, like some people say, I'm very---I'm over emotional. So I sacrifice and sing nothing but religious songs! Truly, OK, I don't think I can really sing the blues like they think I can. I just might sound like it, but I don't think I could. I just love to sing these religious songs because they are part of my life. I believe what I'm singing. I believe in these songs. It has done so much for me. And that's why I sing it, because it done so much for me. And I like to sing it, because it helps other people.

SI: You sing in church too, don't you?

MJ: Oh yeah, I sing in churches, and in fact I started out in the churches.

SI: Which ones?

MJ: In fact, I've been singing all my life. Down in New Orleans, I come from New Orleans, you know. It is known as the home of the jazz in America. But people down there got religion too. I start singing in the church when I was just about four or five years old.

SI: Well, then you have done some church singing indeed. Now tell me, when you grew up, did you only hear the singing in the church? Or did you also hear the blues singing? Or the jazz?

MJ: Oh yes, I couldn't help but hearing it. I knew all about Louis Armstrong, and "Papa" Celestin, and I'd seen them all my life. And "Kid" Kelly[?] and Bukka Johnson, and all them. I knew all of those people, and um, I met 'em. And they used to go to church too, that's why they can play these religious songs, like uh, "When the Saints," and what's this other song? "We Shall Walk the Streets of Glory," and uh "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," and "By and By When the Morning Comes," because they were brought up in that. There isn't much different in music. All music is basically the same thing. There isn't but 88 keys on the keyboard, so it isn't too much different. But, the difference in the music is one is reverence to God. And another, well, people might say it's to the devil. But, some people just sing, when they're happy, maybe folk songs. You know, they get around, like down in New Orleans, you know, in the winter time we used to be on the levee, the correct word I think is used, dike. But we used to get on the levee, that's the high mound of ground that divides and protects you from the Mississippi River, you know? And um, we used to sit out there on the levee near the railroad tracks. The Mississippi river, the levee, and the railroad tracks. And we would just make up songs. They weren't bad songs, we just made them up to amuse ourselves. We weren't rich, and we couldn't go to nightclubs or things like that. So we sat as kids and made up songs, and sang by the fire. And, we used to eat popcorns and sugar canes, and things like that. Had a glorious time.

SI: Now tell me, are you still making up songs?

MJ: Yeah, I write most of my own songs.

SI: That's very interesting, that's why I asked you?

MJ: I can't read a lick of music.

SI: No?

MJ: No, don't know how to. Uh, I don't know how to sight-read. I never had a day's lesson in my life. But I hear music. I can hear it. And as I hear it, I sing it that way. And folks think it's alright.

SI: Well, you see that don't you when you are singing. You close your eyes, and you sort of listen into yourself. And one can see, and one can well understand that you are listening to what you are going to sing. Now it must be rather difficult though to make music and also to arrange music, as I see you do, when you don't---can't write. How can you go about it?

MJ: Well you can hear it. You can hear it, and you- um. Like my piano player, now she can read music. She can sight-read and all that, but she doesn't have, she can't hear what I hear. I can um, I hear this music. And I go to her and I say, I go to her and I hum it (humming). And she says, "Do it again, do it again," 'till finally she can pick it out on the piano.

SI: That's how it's done?

MJ: That's how it's done. (laughs) That's the way we do it. Then I get another kind, like somebody write a song, and the song sounds empty, no feeling. You know, some people write music and it's so dead, you wouldn't want to hear it unless you was in a cemetery. You know, I say, "Ooh! There's lots to be done with that song." So um...

SI: So you go ahead and do it.

MJ: Yeah! I'll go on and hear something. Maybe she's up there playing the notes, playing the piano. And she's saying, "Oh, isn't it beautiful?" "Yes, but it's empty." Just like a fellow brought a song to me the other day, and he tried to make a song a prayer. And he tried to make it semi-classic. So I said, "Well, he had a little bit of beat in it, then he had a little bit of sacred.

But it wasn't sacred enough for it to mean anything. So I just changed the thing and gave it a real bounce. (sings: bah dah dah dum dum bee bah bah) See, that's the song. I didn't call the name of the song, because it isn't mine. (laughs) But that's the tune we used. Just give it a good bounce, you know? Had the bass going. (sings: bum bee bee bum bum bah bum bum buh). See? And we went on with the song, and it was moving pretty good. And we got to sing, and we got to rocking, you know, moving our bodies like that. And, that's how these things are done.

SI: Tell me, I've read somewhere that Bessie Smith has meant something to you.

MJ: Well, in the South, in New Orleans where I was born, I didn't get a chance to hear the great singers like Roland Hayes and um, Grace Moore, Lilly Pond, and all those great singers until I came to Chicago up North. Well, we did have a chance to hear the blues. Because, it's the type of thing that you can hear in the South as soon as you get off the train. People in the South have a radios or the old-time phonograph just as loud, and you can hear the blues. You know the blues were borned in the South. And they don't mind playing 'em, and they're not ashamed of it. And everybody---that's one thing, that people in the South love the blues and they play it. And, in fact all of America loves the blues. And of course we got a chance to hear more of Bessie Smith. And, I suppose basically, that's why so many people say that I sound like Bessie Smith. I suppose I do. She was a great singer. It's an honor to sound like her, but I don't think I sound as great as Bessie. But then, since she's dead, they're giving me the credit. This is the living Bessie Smith. (laughs)

SI: You wouldn't say that you learned directly from listening to Bessie.

MJ: No, no, because time advanced so fast. I've lived up North here for more than 25 years. Now, I have had a chance to hear the best of singers, and to listen to them on radio and television, and at the great concert halls here. I have heard some of the finest artists, but I still think that Bessie is a great artist. But I have learned a lot from her time.

SI: Once before, you and I talked a little about rhythm. In your way of singing, rhythm certainly seems to mean a very great deal. Rhythm is really the heart of the music, isn't it?

MJ: That's right. That's right.

SI: Now, do you feel it helps when you have an audience that responds rather physically?

MJ: Sure! I don't like to sing to these longhairs that look like they can't be moved by music. I believe that any living soul should be moved by music in one way or the other. Everybody's not as emotional as I am. But, I like to see people that they have an enourmous, beautiful smile come on their face when they hear music.

SI: You don't mind people clapping their hands?

MJ: Oh no! No, no, no. I think they should.

SI: You've traveled a great deal, haven't you, Mahalia?

MJ: Yes, I've traveled all over. I've been everywhere in the United States, and of course, I was in Europe---your part of the country in '52.

SI: Yeah?

MJ: And I was so well received there! I sold quite a few records in Denmark, and over in Paris and England. The people were very nice. I remember I went to Denmark for one night. And I stayed there five nights. And oh my God, in Paris, you know how they are. They just love music! Danish people are very sweet too.

SI: You had a very great success in England, didn't you?

MJ: Yes I did. But I didn't think I had... I think the success was wonderful for my first time there. I had around 5,000 people, but I'm so used to having a tremendous crowd in America. So

I thought [Royal] Albert Hall should have been packed to 10,000. And the producer, or rather the sponsor of the program told me that he thought it was fine for a person making a first appearance in England to get 5,000 people. Of course, Paris at the La Salle Palais [?]- I think that's the right name for it, it was packed out two nights straight. And, they were very wonderful. And then I went all through the different towns in France.

SI: So you spent some time there in France?

MJ: Oh yeah, I stayed there six weeks. In Europe. Six weeks.

SI: Are you going back there?

MJ: Well, I am now doing local television work. And I want to see---I'm just on the verge to get this coast to coast television job. And of course, if I get that I won't go back to Europe. But, if I don't get it, I think I'll even go to Europe again, in October maybe.

SI: I hope for Europe's sake, that you go again

MJ: Oh, I love to go over there, the people are so nice.

SI: Now where would you go if you were to go to Europe?

MJ: Well I know I'd have to go back to the places I first went to. I have to go back to Denmark. Oh my goodness, I had about, um, oh, I think I had around 8,000 people there. But it was 4,000 at this---I forget the name of the place. But, one night it was 4,000, and then the other night the church seated around 2,000, called the Holy Ghost Baptist Church. And that church was about 2,000 years old. I was really amazed. To be able to sing in a church where people 2,000 years ago came in to worship God. Oh that was so wonderful to me! I could never get that church out of my mind.

SI: Are you going back there?[?]

MJ: Oh just to stand there one more time. That's beautiful.

SI: Where else would you go?

MJ: Oh I would--- when I go back to Europe next time I'm going to make it my business to stay there about six months. I just wanna--- I want to see all the historical things over there. That's the old world, you know. And it's so much different than ours. Everything over there means so much! Every building over there is dedicated to something great that somebody before them has done to make this a great world, you know? It has taught our new world, yet the beautiful way of life. And every time you look at one of those buildings you know somebody great has been there. You just---you look like your back into history.

SI: Will you intend to go down to Italy for instance?

MJ: Oh my god yes, I must go there.

SI: I think you said once you went to Palestine?

MJ: Yes I want to go to Jerusalem. It's always been my desire to be in Jerusalem for Christmas. You know my Christmas song, "Silent Night," which is a European song, sold so many thousands here in America and in Europe. And, it was my best song that I sang. I was there during the cold weather. I was there during October-November. I always wanted to be there since that beautiful song was written, and I understand that the song was written not very far from Bethlehem. Somebody was telling me the story about that song. But I have so much to think about, that I can't remember that now. But, somebody was saying that the composer didn't live very far from Bethlehem. And I would love to be in Jerusalem on Christmas Eve night.

SI:I was wondering...[unintelligable]

MJ: Yeah. Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton--- all of them.

SI: You don't want to?

MJ: No.

SI: You think that it wouldn't be right? [?]

MJ: I do. I really do. Because, I feel like this. That no matter how wayward a person might be, they feel they have a supreme being that is their superior. And, they want to always be able to resort to that something, as something to lift them up, and it's not this type of work that I do. It is not merely something for entertainment. It is an uplift. It is a revivance of humanity. When man's spirit is low, we look to the divine. If you think about it, you don't anybody to terminate [?] with that.

SI: Now I understand so well what you mean. And, I think it's wonderful that you will sing the songs you sing. And we hope to hear many many more songs sung by you. We want to hear many many more of your beautiful spirituals sung by you.

MJ: Oh I love to sing spirituals too. Well, I don't know. I think a lot of the late American ballads they've got like "I Believe," and "His Hand." That's one of my late records on Columbia. I'm now with Columbia records. I was with Apollo for two years, because I had a record there that opened the doors for me, for making these big concerts. Well, I, it was an old time script that I revived, with a bounce. Gospel singing had just started to have this bounce. And I was the person to start this bouncy gospel singing. You know, it was just like a lot of dead music. You know, they used to sing it like everybody was dying and going to a funeral. But that's when the choirmaster would sing it. But I always found out that in church service, that the congregation would always emote joy and sound better than the choir.

SI: They sounded as good [?]

MJ: Yes, I determined that if the people sing it, it comes out of their hearts. And the choir always sounds dead, because the choir director or the person who wrote the music took all the feeling out of it and made it scientific instead of making it real. And so I didn't like the way the choir sings, and I started to sing it the way I hear the people sing it in the congregation in the church, around the home. And of course leaving the South and coming to Chicago, I started that type of singing, and many people that had left the South, they were living in Chicago! When they heard that type of singing, it was the type that they liked. And that's how it got popular and spread it all over.

SI: What was your very first song? [?]

MJ: The one that I came up from New Orleans with? We sang the old song about "Daniel saw the storm" You might hear the choir sing it with a lot of awkward tones to it. You know, but I didn't. I sang it...(sings) "Oh Daniel saw the storm and he head up the mountain.... (repeated) ... came down" It was simple, and the people could catch on. I started singing and everybody in the church: (she sings the chorus part)...sopranos...alto...all the bass together without any training. And it came out of their hearts.

SI: It must be wonderful to sing with that spontaneity.

MJ: Yeah. I don't like to be singing too formal. I like to relax myself. (train horn in background) Right now, if we started to sing that now, I bet you the people would come up. You wouldn't have to tell them what voice was singing, 'cause their voice would automatically blend in

SI: I'll tell you one thing, the first time I came to see you, and we started to talking, I thought for a moment....in your opinion....came to life.....[unintelligable]

MJ: Yeah, people wants to be alive, that's right.

SI: I felt that much better when I left you.

MJ: Oh isn't that wonderful.

SI: I almost got lost in the street on my way home...

MJ: Oooh. (laughs)

SI: Well, I think we've got enough now. Don't you?

MJ: Well I'll say this, this new world we are living in are tired of putting on a frown. People wants to live. People wants to enjoy life. They don't want to go to church and not be a part of the service. I get the whole church to sing---not just the choir. Let everybody sing the song. I don't care if it sounds good or bad, that's their song. And they'll feel good trying to sing their song.

SI: I think that's a wonderful idea....

MJ: Do it yourself. Get out and sing yourself ...dance yourself and you'll feel better. Don't you?

SI: That's right.

MJ: I think so. I find myself and if you're going to church sitting there just listening. Be a part of that...[unintelligable]