

(SISTER) BERENICE PHILLIPS

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Reel I [of 3]--Retyped

September 3, 1960

Also present: Richard B. Allen

(Interview recorded at 2120 St. Andrew Street, New Orleans)

Berenice Phillips is also known as Sister Berenice Phillips, ~~the name~~ and the name under which she recorded, because of her religion, which is Baptist.

RBA mentions "Babe" [Phillips]. BP was born July 18, 1894, in Natchez, Mississippi; RBA says he has been there, that he saw Mitchell McAlister, guitar and perhaps banjo, who played with Bud Scott [not the New Orleans Bud Scott--PRC]. BP's husband [Babe Phillips] was born August 16, 1884, and died March 16, 1960.

Music BP remembers hearing in her youth was at "singing concerts" held in the churches. Bud Scott, the leading musician of the area then, had the only band in the area. Some songs BP remembers hearing at the concerts were "Go Down, Moses," "Wade in the Water" (which she recorded in later years), and "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray." Tempos were slower then; fast music, "jumpty jump," was not sung in the churches then. BP demonstrates long meter, singing ["Father, I Stretch My Hand to Thee"?]. The first hymn BP ever learned to sing was "Sending up My Timber," (which she sings). BP and the other singers in the area learned hymns from hymn books; there were also "cup" [i.e., cylinder] records available. BP's grandmother played the old pump organ which was in the home; her favorite hymns were those called Dr. Watts hymns, after Dr. Isaac Watts. One was "Dr. Watts, Go Preach My Gospel, Saith the Lord"; another was "Before This Time Another Year I May Be Dead and Gone."

The people of that time weren't allowed to hear or play "sinful songs"; BP says hymns were allowed, but not songs. RBA says that today one hears songs ~~xxx~~ about love on the radio that sound like church music; BP adds that the music is "all of it gumboed up together"; RBA mentions Ray Charles as an example of that kind of singer. ~~xxx~~ RBA mentions one of his favorite singers, "Blind Willie" Johnson, who used to beg on the streets of New Orleans; he came to New Orleans in 1929 to make some records. RBA thinks he was a Baptist. RBA remembers hearing a blind singer [Dave Ross] at the corner of Rampart and Canal [Streets] sing one of Johnson's hymns; the singer knew Johnson; some friends of RBA later recorded the singer RBA heard; the singer lived on Calliope Street, and was from Napoleonville [Louisiana, originally]. BP says she thinks it was illegal to sing and beg on the streets of Natchez. RBA [and Harry Oster] recorded a singer [Reverend Pearly Brown] who sang on the streets of Macon, Georgia. [See Folk Lyric 12" LP.]

BP talks about her childhood in Natchez; she had to help her father with his labor, as there were no boys in the family; her father sang as he worked; his favorite song was, "Jesus, the Only Friend I Know" (which BP sings). BP says, "To my estimation it was more touching in the songs them days than they are now. They really would be touching."

BP talks about the singing in the churches of her youth; the singers, who had no accompanying instruments in most cases, were so good and sang so movingly that white people would stand outside

to listen; the whites would pass their collection [i.e., offering of money] in through the windows. BP said there were no tambourines in her church; sometimes the singers would clap their hands in the rhythm of the humn. The "sanctified" churches used tambourines. (BP sings, "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," accompanying herself by clapping.)

She discusses the churches and preachers.

Joseph "Gossoon" [spelling unknown to JP, Jr.] lives somewhere downtown.

BP says Henry Zeno [drums], long dead, was a member of the Eagle Band. Joe Oliver left New Orleans and went North, but Zeno remained in the Eagle Band, which was re-named sometime afterwards. BP says Chris Kelly died away from New Orleans. Zeno died sometime between the end of World War I and the depression [i.e., between 1918 and 1929]; BP says Zeno and his mother had a restaurant on Clio Street. BP thinks Zeno had just played for a funeral when he dropped dead, as did [Willie] Pajaud [shortly after the death of Babe Phillips]. BP talks about talking with Pajaud shortly after Babe Phillips's death.

End of Reel I

Also present: Richard B. Allen

BP recorded for Rudi Blesh, with Baby Dodds and George Lewis. BP knows George Lewis well, and knew his mother [Alice Zeno]. Lewis and Babe [Phillips, BP's husband, now dead] played music together a lot; Babe would hire Lewis; if he couldn't get Lewis [clarinet], he hired [Willie] Pajaud [trumpet]; sometimes he hired John Casimir, clarinet, leader of the Young Tuxedo Brass Band. (RBA says Casimir has a funeral to play for the Merry-Go-~~R&E~~ Round [Club], which is located at Eagle and Hickory [streets].)

BP recorded about five songs, including "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray" and "Walk on the Water." [Cf. discographies.] Her nephew, Harold Lewis, also sang on the recordings; he can [also] play anything [i.e., any instrument?].

Instruments played in churches now may include a horn, although BP's church used only organ and piano; BP says a trombone is used in a church at Liberty and First [streets], ~~NE~~ near [Nelson] Joseph's Barbershop. BP says her husband played with [one of the] Joseph brothers; [Willie] "Kaiser" Joseph, clarinet, was killed [by an automobile] on a visit home to New Orleans; Leo Songy, cousin of BP's husband, played banjo in the band with her husband when the Joseph brother was in it; BP says the Joseph who has the barbershop (RBA says that is Nelson Joseph) played with her husband; RBA mentions that another brother, John Joseph, also works at that barbershop, but he plays bass, so wouldn't have been in the band with BP's husband, also a bass player.

BP and Babe Phillips were married in 1931 (she thinks), at which time Babe said he was forty-nine years of age. BP is having trouble getting his social security benefits, as it is difficult to prove Babe's real age. She talks about his actions just prior to his death, and says he was only in bed a week before he died. His sickness was diagnosed as "ferocious of the liver."

BP says her husband, George McCullum, trumpet; [Kid] Howard, trumpet; Lawrence ["Picklehead"] [Marrero], banjo; George Lewis, clarinet, and [Red? Black? Brown?] Happy" (the latter a drummer), played regularly every weekend in Violet, [Louisiana] for a long time.

The band which accompanied BP on her recordings comprised George Lewis, Baby Dodds, and ~~KIMM~~ Lawrence Marrero (banjo).

RBA mentions that trumpeter Punch [Miller] is back in town; BP says she hasn't seen him in many years. BP says Punch married someone she knew very well, but they separated and Punch left [New Orleans].

BP says there is to be a big funeral today, but RBA says he talked to Red Clark [then manager of the Eureka Brass Band], who said the burial was "by committee," not with music; BP says the deceased was a member of the Young and True Friends [Benevolent Association], who usually have music at their funerals. BP explains that a burial committee consists of the officers of the organization plus the burial detail, a total of twelve members; they ride ~~X~~ out in ~~K~~ limousines to the funeral. BP ~~XXXXXX~~ herself belongs to one of the oldest colored ~~X~~ clubs in New Orleans, the

Lady Tulanes [check spelling] Social, Aid and Pleasure Club, located at Gravier near Roman. She also belongs to the Lady Olympians, the Golden Rule, the Lady Delachaise, the St. Stephen Benevolent and the Eastern Star; she belonged to more than that before she became sick. BP explains the sick benefits, saying that some organizations pay \$3 per week for five weeks, then drop the person from membership; others pay \$1.50 per week until death, but the recipient must present a certificate costing fifty cents from a doctor each time.

RBA reads evidence that BP's husband, whose real name was Joseph Phillips (misspelled on the paper RBA reads) was born in Edgard, Louisiana, March 18, 1884.

BP talks about "penny parties," which were held Sunday evenings [i.e., no doubt Sunday during the afternoon]; they were originally for children, but the admission charge was about a quarter; they were called penny parties because permits for them cost less than for other such functions. Refreshments included chicken and home brew beer, all at extra cost. A band played for them. Lawn parties and fish fries were held on Saturday nights; big bands played for them. Babe Phillips played for a white man, "Chicken" Powell, who held parties for revenue at St. Mary and St. Thomas [streets] for Negroes. BP says that in that section, called the Irish Channel, everybody lived mixed up [i.e., integrated neighborhoods], and everybody had a good time. BP mentions going to Nine Mile Point for

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picnics. BP says that now clubs and churches hold fish fries and other similar functions, but that in earlier times individuals held them for their own benefit.

BP's maiden name was Hardin.

The music at a fish fry [might] consist of only a guitar player, who worked for about \$2 plus viands, etc. Also pianists might play.

BP used to work for undertakers, as a night maid; duties consisted of making the coffee, serving the people [at wakes, etc.].

End of Reel II

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Also present: Richard B. Allen

BP left Natchez College [Mississippi] because her father died; she hadn't completed her first semester there; she moved to New Orleans then. She was living in New Orleans when the September, 1915, storm struck the city; she had come to live with her mother about one and one-half years before that time.

BP says her cousin Henry Zeno's funeral was very large; she was in it; the procession extended from his home, at Hurst and Hillary [streets] to the cemetery entrance at Hickory and Lowerline [streets]. There were two or three bands. "Black Happy" [Goldston] carried his [i.e., Zeno's] drum, which was draped for the occasion. (RBA mentions that Happy plays with the Eureka Brass Band.) BP tells of her first knowledge of Zeno's death; she had talked to him the day before; his death was sudden, possibly from poisoned whiskey, according to BP. RBA mentions trumpeter Robert Taylor, paralyzed in the same manner; Punch [Miller] told RBA about it. BP tells of woman's jealousy. BP thinks Henry Zeno was younger than she. Mildred [Washington?], a sister of Zeno, is still living, somewhere on Hamilton Street; she once played piano for Plymouth Rock Baptist Church. BP mentions other relatives, among them ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Harold Lewis, who recorded with her [See Reel II].

BP mentions that she once gave fish fries. She was once chairman of the banquet committee of the Tulane Club.

BP remembers Buddy Petit, who was a musician [a cornetist]. BP knew Dude and Foster [Lewis]; RBA knew Dude in 1945; BP says

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she thinks Dude died before Foster, who lived at Eighth and Rampart [streets]. RBA says Dude was working with Joe Avery [and Wilbert Tillman's band] when he met him; BP says Dude worked with her husband, too. BP mentions a trombonist from Carrollton [section of New Orleans--"Bebé Ridgley?]; he was an old musician, just like [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin. BP mentions Joe Oliver; she says he worked as a butler at a house at Second and Magazine [streets]; he had one bad eye, and was called "Big Eye" at one time. The people for whom he [and BP?] worked were show people; they were named [Coushon?]; they moved to California sometime after ~~1914~~ Oliver left New Orleans. One of their sons learned to play music under Oliver's instruction.

BP knew Zeb [Leneries]; she says some of his relatives live ~~XXX~~ right across the street.

End of Reel III (and of Interview)