

Interview with Mrs. Esther Dupuy Breckenridge:

EDB: My name is Esther Dupuy Breckenridge.

H: When were you born and where?

EDB: I was born in good old New Orleans on February the (21) 1926, that way back!

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

EDB: Um, mainly. I've traveled some, but this has been my headquarters all these many years.

H: When did you first become aware that you were born in a community of jazz?

EDB: Well, I think that ragtime; I was very aware of music and was brought up in an atmosphere of music, taken to the opera very early in life; we had all sorts of music. Naturally when ragtime came in, my father had that too, and I can remember the turkey trots and things like that and then later on, when I was about 15 and 16, and started going to the fraternity dances. They had the Celestin band, Piron, and all the good Dixieland jazz bands of the city. Gradually, as we grew up in the debut parties and all the parties I ever went to in New Orleans, we danced to jazz music.

H: At debutante parties too?

EDB: Oh, yeah; and private parties, other private parties, tea dansants. The New Orleans Country Club had tea dansants on Saturdays and Sundays as well. They had the famous Piron himself and he knew all about crowd, and the ones that was gifted and could dance and sing and at all the parties he would act as master of ceremonies and call on us to get up and do our stuff. We'd sing, harmonize, dance; you really don't see the young people do that as much as we used to because that was the golden age of jazz and we danced every night and you know, in the daytime, we danced, I feel more than the generation dance today.

H: What do your parents think of jazz? Your parents and their friends?

EDB: They were very interested in it, as I say, my father and mother belonged to a very musical crowd and they were quite up to date, and they embraced that with any other music that happened to come along; they were interested in it, and actually had victrola records for us with that music, and even had, we used to have groups of people to our house and Piron over there to play for us. My father was always interested in listening to that music. He was a pianist himself and he thought highly of their technique and was interested greatly and in the movement.

H: Would you say he was into it as an art form or as a form of entertainment?

EDB: Well, he was entertained by it, but my father went into anything in music more deeply than most people would for entertainment, and he really thought it was an era and something that would live, and he was very proud of the fact that it had mostly originated in his part of the world.

H: How old was your father when you were born?

EDB: Oh, he was about I imagine thirty-something...! think. When I was born. Maybe about thirty.

H: Late 40s-

EDB: No, not late 40s! Did you say-

H: No, late 40s or early 50s when you started going to and having parties at your house.

EDB: Oh, yes.

H: When can you remember him starting having gatherings at the house?

EDB: Well, um, my father didn't necessarily have them; he just, he knew that we liked this group, Piron, and we had a crowd that would meet every Saturday and Sunday, and he didn't actually ask them to come to the house, but he was interested when they were there and if he was home he would (...), but whenever he was there he listened very attentively to them and often had conversations with them on their different ideas of jazz because he was such a gifted pianist himself. And my sister was a very gifted pianist and she was the first one that ever played jazz up at Newcomb. I had a concert of Gershwin, and she was a Gershwin exponent; I guess you could call Gershwin in the realm of jazz, too.

H: It's jazz but not New Orleans

EDB: Not New Orleans Jazz.

H: What did your parents' friends think of it? Did they universally like it too?

EDB: They did. Some of them were not as musical as my father, but they all condoned it. I don't have any recollection of any of them thinking it was trash. You know, they all, to my recollection thought of it highly and of course, we did too.

EDB: You and your friends?

EDB: Mmhhh. As I say, we were a very dancing crowd. We sang and danced, and uh, Celestin was a hero to me; I mean, I can remember seeing him -- I had been away a great deal and I saw him about 12 years ago and he hadn't seen me because he had been away and uh, it wasn't like the old days when he used to play at so many of the parties where I danced, and he said, "Well, Ms. Esther," he said, "I thought of you often but I haven't seen you around and I remember you and your sister harmonizing together," he said, "and I thought maybe you had made the big time stuff of it; gotten on Broadway!" And I said, "Well, Celestin, no I got married and had children instead," not that I ever would have made the big time stuff, but I said, "That surely is a wonderful compliment coming from you to think that I could have!" and we shook hands, and I thought so highly of him, I went to his funeral and being a member of the press, we were very near his coffin, and it was a beautiful ceremony, very interesting, highly religious, and of course a long line of people all marching with the band and it was very impressive, but I think, a great, great loss to New Orleans. And one that furthered jazz a great deal.

H: Well, among your friends, back in the 20s, did most of them just think of it as something to go dancing and have a good time to, or did any of them think of it as art?

EDB: Well, I'm afraid, uh, Harold Bartell was a lot more interested in our crowd than the others because he played the piano. And he played by ear like Steve [Lewis], who was Piron's piano player, who was so well known. And in fact, Steve gave him lessons, so he was interested in Harold, and I imagine -- and because my sister and I who sang a lot, were interested in the harmonizing part of it. But, most of them, I would say, were not as devoted to jazz clubs as [Myra] Menville and [Harry or Edmond] Souchon, all of them are today. It was so comparatively new that we accepted it as that and didn't realize what history it was making at the time.

H: In other words, you're saying they didn't think of it as an art form?

EDB: Not to my recollection; I mean, we were all interested in learning it, and borrowing, but we had no idea that a real culture was being born right there in front of our eyes.

H: You said all the dances you all used to go to did had jazz bands. Did you notice(...)

EDB: I don't remember. It seems to me we always had very good

colored bands down here, most of the dances that I've ever been to. Up east, you know, when I went to those big debut parties up on Long Island, they had other, the big-name bands, \Leo Rice, and all of those bands, but down here I thought it really stuck pretty much to the colored bands. They had Johnny DeDroit at some parties, and wasn't he at the Orpheum for a long time? But, you wouldn't call him Dixieland jazz exactly.

H: He wasn't colored...

EDB: No, I know he wasn't. It was a white band. And then the Owls -- what were they? That was Dixieland, wasn't it?

H: I really don't know.

EDB: That was Benjy White, \Ebbie Rau, \Guy Lyman, all those guys. \Monk Simon.

H: And they played jazz?

EDB: Mmhm. They were called The Owls, a group of white boys.

H: You have all your life been going to(...) kind of parties --

EDB: I never have remembered, even at the Patio Royal where most of our, you know a lot of the debutante parties were, we mostly had Piron and Celestin. There might have been a time there when they had a few white bands, but if so, I wasn't conscious of it, you know, I mean they weren't very good in my opinion; I don't even remember them.

H: \It sounds interesting,(...) white New Orleans to me maintained so that(....) party?

EDB: Whether they wanted it to remain?

H: Yes, well uh, like to listen to it and prefer to listen to that than to some other form of music.

EDB: I think they did. I think that we thought it was here to say, but we didn't realize how much of an era that it was creating.

H: You said you were a member of the press. You were doing society work I think -

EDB: Yes I had been 7 years before I was married, and then I was married. I resigned, and then they needed someone temporarily and I went back because of a newspaper (...) It was hard to get away from it and I stayed instead.

H: Well, how long have you been doing it?

EDB: Well, 30 years off and on, but I wouldn't -- a great many of those years I haven't been on. More recently, I was on 5 years. So, it has given me the opportunity through these years to have

kept up, pretty much, with activities, even though it was past the age of when I would have been going to debutante parties.

H: So you have been going to debutante parties every year?

EDB: Except during the war, and when I was away most of the time and sometimes I went from the newspaper to cover, for pictures and things, and sometimes friends of mine -- their daughters would make their debut and I would go, and it seems to me the most popular form of music, all through these years has been our Dixieland colored bands. Wouldn't you say?

H: I don't know about through the years. You say through the years it has been maintained?

EDB: I would definitely say that. Speaking for myself, and speaking for all my contemporaries and my daughter's contemporaries, and through the ages all the groups I've ever had to deal with --

H: You say your daughter's contemporaries like it too?

EDB: Oh, very much so.

H: And how old is your daughter?

EDB: She's 20 years old.

H: So, over the years it has been popular as a form of entertainment, something to dance to, but have you noticed any increase and interest in it as an art form?

EDB: Oh, yes I think so. I mean, all over America, and in England, too.

H: But, in New Orleans?

EDB: In New Orleans, I think the Jazz Club here is a very enthusiastic group, Harry Souchon, Edmond [Souchon], Myra Menville, and all that crowd. I've never been too active with them, because I have been away a great deal since it was organized, and it was (waiting) on the paper but I have often covered their meeting to take pictures of them and I thought their interest was very high and has increased all these years.

H: Would you say that represented a majority of New Orleans people that were interested in jazz?

EDB: I certainly would, and a different, you know, it covers all stratas, young and old, and from different walks of life, all over New Orleans. I think it covers a large assortment of people of New Orleans.

H: Well, then you would say that over the years, people have liked it? Most New Orleanians have liked it?

EDB: Have liked it, and I think gradually it is become in their eyes a form of art, and I think the Jazz Club has certainly increased that feeling amongst the people here. They've had a chance to study it...

H: When would you say the interest in it as an art form started? After the Second World War?

EDB: I don't think it originated until then, and it has widened its membership each year and has certainly increased the people in New Orleans to feel that it is art even now, more than entertainment, which we had always thought. Because, as I reiterate: they had a chance to study it in its various forms, which the average layman doesn't do; we just listen. But they have put a great deal, I mean, I'm sure Dr. Souchon has, I mean, he's been to a great many meetings all over the United States, and I imagine their meetings have wetted the appetite of a great many people to study it further in their Club.

H: Over the ages you can't remember, any signs of people thinking it was trash(.....) or (did most people like it)?

EDB: Most people. And I have always gone with a great many musical people, all during my life and I have never, to my knowledge, heard of anyone who thought about it as trash.

H: Ok. You think you have anything else to add on New Orleans or acceptance of New Orleans Jazz by New Orleanians of your social status(.....)

EDB: I really don't. But I've enjoyed being with you. And I wish that I had belonged to the Jazz Club all these years, because I would have been, had more at my fingertips to answer and to add to your little interview, and in fact, I think I will try to join up with the Club now that I have more free time.

H: Thank you very much. EDB: All right.