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Kate Ellis: Will you state your name and when you were born?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Michael J. Gourrier, born New Orleans, Louisiana. February third, 1940.

Kate Ellis: Okay. The first school you attended?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: The first school that I attended was Blessed Sacrament Elementary School.

Kate Ellis: Let me just get a little bit, usually what I do is I start at the beginning and get—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: You want some background?

Kate Ellis: I want some background.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Okay. Well, I guess the most noticeable person as far as my family, Chris, is concerned, is a great uncle, my maternal—I'm sorry, my paternal grandmother's brother had a band here in New Orleans around the turn of the century. He was one of the society bands that were real common here in New Orleans during that particular period. His name was John Robshow and he played the violin and he was the lead of his band and was one of the popular bands that were here in the city. And I guess as a result of this type of association, a seed of music appreciation was planted in our family because from my earliest remembrance, we've had an exposure to music in the family in the house, and then also having the opportunity to be exposed to music in the community. One of the assets of coming up here in New Orleans was having a resource of the Xavier University Opera Association.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Xavier has had a reputation for some time as a real fine music school, and during the forties, fifties, and sixties, their music department would put grand opera on. And from a small kid we got exposed to, shall we say, that particular type of music. And this is over and above the normal music that you would be exposed to here in the New Orleans area. On a personal note, I was a member of the church school choir for a number of years, and there's a popular picture that had been circulated on a regular basis during the tenure of the former mayor who served two terms, Sydney Bartholomew. He was a member of the choir and also a musician named Deacon John Moore, who's a real popular local performer. He was also in that same choir with me as we were kids coming up.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And as I said, we were always exposed to music of a variety of types. I can remember everybody from the Ink Spots and Nat King Cole to Guy Bardo and Fred Wearing and everybody in between. And I mean, this is from a structured point of view, and we always did have an oversaturation of our local artists. New Orleans, as you know, is one of the real hotbeds as far as musical evolution from a historical perspective. So this kind of music to us was a regular occurrence, whereas some of these other

forms that I mentioned were something different. And so it added variety to the spice of life.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: I first started off as far as my personal music appreciation was evolving in the—I guess I could say the middle fifties where I started to listen to other types of music with a little more intent than the regular rhythm and blues in the city. And I guess during that particular period, it was like people like Amai Jamal and Ramsey Lewis and what I call cocktail musicians. And I had a job working in the quarter. And one of the records that they had on the jukebox was attuned by a gentleman that I'm a real fond admirer of, Horace Silver.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: It was a composition of his called Senor Blues. And this broadened my horizon as far as my music appreciation as before I told you had been listening to the small trio groups but Horace Silver opened my ears to a wider perspective. And shall we say, that set the course for the style of music that I'm most appreciative of today. And that's called, was generally accepted as bebop and post bop, which was the next generation of that particular type of music.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And with that type of background, I felt I had a good foundation to explore other types of music. And over the years I've had the opportunity to travel and actually hear a lot of musicians live and go to other places in and out of the country and have the opportunity to listen to that particular type of music. I've been doing a radio show here in New Orleans for the last twelve years, and I had worked in radio in Texas for seven years before I came here. And the main thrust of my presentations on the radio has been in the jazz venue. The main focus being on the bebop period, but then also subsequent artists who emulated and perpetuated that particular style. I do other types of music, big bands, blues, blues jazz and the like. I'm not a real big advocate of free jazz, avant garde jazz, and I'm very selective as far as vocals are concerned because it's not really one of my big favorites. Although I do have some favorite vocals. I'm a real big fan of Common McElroy and Betty Carter.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And the stuff that Johnny Hartman did with John Coltrane, and anybody has a similar sound that's a new artist out of Kansas City. And I think I can predict big future for him. His name is Kevin Mahogany. He's shown me that he has a strong enough voice and has the ability to deliver a good jazz performance. And he's done a couple of albums. And as I said, I think that he's well on his way to being somebody that will be known in the future as one of the premier male jazz singers on the scene.

Kate Ellis: All right, let me ask you some questions.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: All right.

Kate Ellis: I want go back. Well, one of the main things I'm interested in finding out as it pertains to your life and as it pertains to this sort of music scene in New Orleans is how race relations, how Jim Crow kind of may have in some ways shaped your life, shaped the music scene in New Orleans?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: From that perspective, and you have to realize that I'm giving my own opinion of the situation.

Kate Ellis: That's all I would ask.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: New Orleans was a segregated society to an extent. It still is today. But from my perspective, music is a language that transcends all races, ethnic backgrounds and laws, whether legal or illegal. And my recollection of the particular period that you are referring to, I can say that the Kota Oakley shared about separate but equal. Well, the other areas of activity around the city as far as the housing and the general accommodations and all, they might not have been able to live up to that particular adage. But as far as music is concerned, I think that it is definitely one of that you could say was really separate but equal, if not better. In fact, a lot of the White musicians just died to have opportunity to play and set in with the Black musicians.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Going back to the historical development, the basic innovators and originators of the idiom that we know as jazz today were people of African-American heritage. And even back before that, when you can say it was in a pre-incubatory period, during the colonial period where you had these illegitimate children that were born between unions of the current day gentry and the local women. And the majority of them were of mixed race, or as the legal limits said, one 10th to 1% Black. But there would be kids born of these unions. And in a lot of instances, these kids were afforded the opportunity to go to Europe and receive formal musical training.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And when they came back, they encountered this problem of mixed race situation. And in order to have an avenue to vent their talent, they formed the Philharmonic Society. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but that's an organization of formerly educated musicians of African American ancestry that was active in New Orleans around the middle of the 1800s. And as the music evolved, the Civil War sort of acted as a catalyst because prior to that time, New Orleans was living in, I guess you could say the closest thing would be like a caste system.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: We had your variety of terms that they used to were assigned to people of the different racial structures. They had the Grifts, the [indistinct 00:12:36] males, the Mulattos, the Octoroons, the Quadroons, and all of these terms. And in my perspective, it's like a caste system. And each one of these caste had different stations and they provided different services, and this was their call. And you had members of these groups, like I said, that were formerly trained and they kept their own individual station. But then when the Civil War came, all that went aside and it was either one thing or the other, you were either Black or White. So there was no more variance as far as the cast were concerned. And so in effect, what you had then was you had a group of newly freed Black slaves, and then you had the group of formerly trained Blacks that had European training.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And it was an amalgam of these particular groups, the free Black slaves and the formerly trained African Americans that evolved into what originated as the brass bands. And then subsequent to that, the further evolution of the genres. In New Orleans, in the '30s, '40s, '50s, there was no racial intermixture on a general public basis of musicians or even the people that liked the music. The Black musicians would play for the White artists. During that particular period there was out on a lakefront, there

was a resort area called Milneburg, and a lot of them would play out there.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Now, regardless of how they want to put it to you, as far as the quarter, French Quarter never really did provide that much of a setting, nor did the fabled Red Light District Storyville, because if you look at it objectively, the people in Storyville, I mean this was legal—This was prostitution. They weren't there trying to promote any bands or anything or entertain people. The most they might have is say a player piano or a solo piano player just to background music. My transactions were made and people were killing time and the like. So a lot of people are under the misconception that Storyville was a place where the bands really got started, but it wasn't actually in Storyville, but more so in the neighborhood clubs and also in the fraternal organization clubs.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: The genres, I mean, the France, these were originally organized as burial societies to make sure that when you died you had a proper barrier and you might pay anywhere from three cents a nickel to a quarter a week to belong to these organizations. And they had halls in the different neighborhoods and bands would play there. But then here again, I mean this was within the Black community.

Kate Ellis: Which is—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And these same bands would also play at White clubs and also at the resorts on the lakefront. But it wasn't until I'd say the 1960s that you had just outright real integration as far as the musicians were concerned.

Kate Ellis: You would playing together.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Playing together, right. You would in private establishments, if people wanted to sit in with one another, they wouldn't have to worry about the Jim Crow laws that were in effect. But as far as public places, they would always have to run the risk of somebody complaining or the police just being in a bad mood and running people in for mixing of the races.

Kate Ellis: This is something— I mean, I'm curious about that there was more of a sort of restrictions against Blacks and Whites playing in bands together, say prior to the 1960s.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, it was just an extension of the current laws, which prohibited any type of racial intermingling.

Kate Ellis: And that did extend into bands.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Everything. It even went into the churches.

Kate Ellis: Well, this I have heard. I mean you talk about your church.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: The churches, well, I mean, I'm a Catholic and the majority of the people here in the city are Catholic. And we have a rich Catholic tradition not only from a personal perspective, because I have a cousin that's the bishop of Baltimore. Another one of my cousins is the principal of the grammar school that I went to. After I left Blessed Sacrament, I went to Corpus Christi and she's currently the principal at Corpus Christi. And then I have a brother who is a Josephite brother. He's been in an order for twenty-five years.

Kate Ellis: Which church did you attend?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Corpus Christi. It's down in the Seventh Ward.

Kate Ellis: Okay. Well, we haven't even talked about your coming up time, which I wanted to real quick.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well—Oh, I was going to tell you about the churches. The churches were segregated. I mean, it wasn't a written type thing, it was just a unwritten thing. If you went to a church that wasn't in a Black parish, you just sat in the back of the church. And even the Catholic schools were segregated. And the sixties was the era of revolution and change and everything just turned around 360 degrees. And the first integrated band that I can remember was Al Belletto was the musical director at the Playboy Club. And he had Ellis Marcells and Richard Payne playing in his band down there. And from then on, it sort of just took hold and evolved.

Kate Ellis: Let me ask you something though. You had said a few minutes ago, and that it was certainly White musicians who would go to Black musicians for their innovations. It was often them turning to the house. In what venues, where could they do that? You mentioned in private now what is called—What is private, what would be a place?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: A membership type club.

Kate Ellis: In other words, where could Whites go? White musicians go to seek out Black musicians to play with them, learn from them?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, at night, some of the White musicians would come down to some of the Black clubs. And I mean, I'll give you a classic example. Dr. John used to hang around at the Dew Drop as a kid, but it wasn't anything that anybody would make a big production about because it would cause problems. There was a potential for the people to lose their liquor license. So it really wasn't publicized. But White musicians would come to the clubs where the Black musicians played, and not specifically to play with them, but to maybe pick up techniques and phrasing and style and just general deliverance. And like I say, on occasion, the situation presented itself where this one might pull his horn out of that one might pull his horn out of it might be, like I said, at a private gig. And private property is a different situation as opposed to public performance.

Kate Ellis: So do you know how Black musicians felt about White musicians coming in to hang out? I mean, I

asked them—Well, go on them and respond. I ask them, because some Black musicians I've talked to expressed a bit of resentment that Whites might pick up some of this stuff and then they might be the ones on some level that will get the credit for it.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: From my perspective, I've never met a musician who I felt would object to sharing any of his talent or art form with another musician. Personalities surely enter into these type of things. But from an objective observation, I've never felt a scene where this would be so. Now you can have the situation where you got to a poor, as they said, no playing musician, where that you don't want to be associated with. But any serious performer or advocate of the art, I've never seen where anybody would object to that. And as far as the credit. This is something that's taken for granted. I mean, people have had all types of stuff stolen from them. So it's just a thing that occurred and it has occurred, it is occurring, and it will occur. So I mean, it's not anything that you can guard against. I mean, they have the copyrights and the trademarks and all, but people can copy all they want.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And the old cliche about mimicry is the highest farm of flattering. And when somebody is playing something and when they copying it, you can actually hear that particular performance. And I mean, if I'm a bad saxophone player and somebody wants to copy my style, and I feel very elated that they chose me to be their motto. And I think this is so in a lot of instances and situations. As far as the legal aspect of the music, and when I'm talking about legal aspect, I'm referring to copyrights and trademarks and that type of stuff. There has been a lot of injustice suffered by African American musicians. And for one thing, they had no formal knowledge in procedures and protocol in documenting their particular contributions. And then there was a lot of unscrupulous people who gave them the impression that they had their best interests at heart. And actually their motors were more greed than anything.

Kate Ellis: So these might be record producers, managers.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Yeah. Well, the whole gamut, whatever title that you want to ascribe to them. But those things have caused problems, bit of feelings. And to this day, there's still a lot of people that have bad taste in their mouth, not only for these charlatan type people, but also for other musicians who shall we say went along with them in the program that they were putting on over the rest of the musicians.

Kate Ellis: So you mean there might be, in other words, like a band member might be in some sense co-opted by the unscrupulous.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Right.

Kate Ellis: So you've sort of seen that?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: I'm not going to call any names or anything like that.

Kate Ellis: Okay. You don't have to. That's the kind thing that's going way back mean as far as—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, it's more of a contemporary. Well, I'd say in the last twenty years.

Kate Ellis: That's the thing.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: But there was a lot more trust in brotherhoods, shall we say. Times have changed and people have changed.

Kate Ellis: Well, tell me about a lot them questions. I want to hear this. Well, tell me about the trust in brotherhood. I mean, obviously the period I'm interested in mostly is before integration and all of that, that obviously bears on what we're talking about. But I mean, what do you mean by the trust in brotherhood?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, a man's word was his bond. You didn't have to have a written contract to do a gig, a performer gig or make a performance. If I told you, okay, I want you to be here and this is what the gig pays, then that's it. And it wasn't till I guess the unionization was the main proponent of this particular type of thing. But the old cliche of a man's word is this bond, this is what was the motivating factor for a lot of associations here in New Orleans. And you always did have people that took advantage of human nature and took advantage of situations that were presented to him. But for the most part, the musicians were such that you didn't have to have anything written. And that's why a lot of times, as far as the music itself, other people have taken credit for writing songs that they actually didn't write, or it has been attributed to other people who started playing them and they weren't really the originators of the music.

Kate Ellis: Well, this is what's just one thing that's interesting to me. I also talk about unionization, but you started by saying music transcends all boundaries. And that's something that on some level I have believed in. I have felt that in some sense is one of the powers of music is that so many people can respond to it on such a deep level.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Music has no color. I mean, it's not black, it's not white, it's not red, it's not green.

Kate Ellis: But this is the thing, and what's curious to me, because you can say that and I wouldn't contradict that. And yet it seems that as far as race issues are concerned, and the stuff we've just been talking about, we're talking in the past, Black musicians being exploited by in the music business. And I guess you could say the music business is something wholly different from music itself, but it seems like there would be some— I could see how it would get complicated.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, I mean, you not only had unscrupulous White promoters and managers and the like, but you had unscrupulous Black promoters and managers too. So I mean that particular problem extended everywhere.

Kate Ellis: What do you think about those that say that it's the White, it is mainly White people who exploited Black musicians?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, you have to look at it from the perspective of how long has it been that Black

musicians have had the opportunity to have either themselves or somebody with training to a point where they knew what to do to protect the musician as far as the copyrights and this type of stuff. Blacks have always been at a disadvantage as far as the educational system in the United States is concerned. And music business is an area that one has to be educated in order to acquire the necessary information to become prosperous in it or to even avail oneself of the—Well, what can I say. The benefits of the knowledge of the inner workings and the fine points of the music business. And I mean, like I said, plain is one thing, but dealing with the business aspect is a whole different thing. And it was a long time before Blacks were privy to the actual process of how to go about dealing with music with really.

Kate Ellis: When would that have started to take place in this area.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, it's a difference—That now that was a good point. This area, because you have to qualify because now say in up north and in the northeast, just information and the process I would imagine started in the twenties. But because for lack of another term, the backwardness of the South, they were always behind and they were just slow in evolving. And then because of the segregation, Blacks were extra slow in being exposed and afforded the opportunity to be involved in this particular aspect. So I think this was one of the big factors as far as why everything here was, and shall we say, a later stage of development than it were other places. Because I mean, if you go back and you look at the period called the Harlem Renaissance. What were we doing down here? I guess you could say we were just one step past the menstrual shows during that particular period down here.

Kate Ellis: Although jazz—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Right. We came of age, but our progress and development wasn't as great as it was because we were limited by the legal and social aspects of the society in which we live.

Kate Ellis: Which is one of essential interests of the project in the sense is how were Black musicians limited by things like the Jim Crow, that was everywhere. And also how did they get around those limitations as far as their own development and prosperity?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, it was difficult to get around because the whole south practiced segregation. So unless you went to the north where these legal issues were not debated as heavily as they were here, then you didn't have to contend with it up there. Whereas here, everybody's heard of the old stories of the chiding circuit where the Black musicians would crowd in a bus or crowd in a car and go from one town to another and they'd stay at the Black motels and boarding houses because they couldn't stay in the major hotels. And I can remember another little point that I'd like to throw in from—This is something that I picked up in my research gathering, and that's something I'm constantly doing. I'm massing a real nice library because when I retire from being a psychologist, I plan to devote my time to being a jazz historian in lecture.

Kate Ellis: Oh really? I can hear that.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And I'm in the process of getting my material together because I hope to in the next seven, eight years max, I will be doing that on a full-time basis. But this was in the fifties, it was all women's band called the Sweethearts of Rhythm, and they did have some White women that traveled with them as musicians and they were referred to as mulattos or albinos.

Kate Ellis: The White women?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: To get by the local customs relative to.

Kate Ellis: Staying separate.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Yeah.

Kate Ellis: Oh, I see. So they would be like, what are you all doing together? And I see.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: I'll give you the example. They used to say that Charlie Parker said that Red Rodney was albino to get him in clubs.

Kate Ellis: I see.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: But people would try all kind of subterfuges to try and accomplish an end, which actually shouldn't have been made so difficult to accomplish.

Kate Ellis: And I mean, I agree with you. And that's one of the things again, I mean that we're really interested in is what kinds of subterfuges were used. I mean, there are so many often in genius ways, often to sort of—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, one thing as a result of the racial intermixture here in the South and New Orleans especially, that we have African-Americans roughly all shades of the rainbow. So I mean, somebody wanted to claim to be Black and say, well, hey, my grandfather was White, or whatever ingenuity you could come up with to get your situation completed with as little hardship or inconvenience as possible, then that was up to you.

Kate Ellis: Well, let me ask you something about that. And you don't have to respond if you don't want, but you're fairly light skinned. And I understand that a number of people, I mean everybody I've talked to put it this way in this who have interviews, but everybody I should say who's really light at some point has almost needed to pass as White in order to get food for their friends or to do this or to do that.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, I'm not light enough. I'm definitely not light enough.

Kate Ellis: Really? So you've never had that?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: No, I've never had that.

Kate Ellis: Do you know people who did?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: I mean, well, of course. And like I said, they're African Americans of all shades of the rainbow. And from their features, you could never tell. My wife is from Texas and we moved down here in 1982, and she's still amazed to this day that she cannot discern fair-complected, some fair-complected Blacks from Caucasians. And I mean, they have some that you can look at them and you'll say, well—And I can remember when I was in undergraduate school, I saw this lady across the quadrangle and I asked somebody, I said, I thought this was a school for Black and Indians.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And they say it is. I said, well, look at that woman over that. She ain't Black. They said, yes, she is. And it's a small warehouse. She subsequently came to be my brother's sister in law because one of my brothers married her younger sister. And to this day she still looks White to me. And in her state of age, she looks like a typical old White woman. Her skin is wrinkled and she's got gray hair. If I didn't know who she was, I'd say, well—But from the aspects of genes, they got some people that there's no way that you could tell what their roots or heritage were.

Kate Ellis: But as far as musicians are concerned, if they did want to play, if they did want to bring a White guy in or somebody or a White woman in, they may just sometimes say, well, whatever. Their ancestors—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Whatever. Yeah.

Kate Ellis: That's actually been a really interesting thing about New Orleans is hearing about that kind of range.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, I think that Mr. Dejan will be able to give you a far greater insight into that, Harold Dejan. Because his health has not been too good in recent years, but his band is one of the original bands from the late 1800s, the Olympia Brass Band, and he's been playing a long time. It's unfortunate that you didn't get the opportunity to talk to one of our real unique individuals, Mr. Danny Barker, who just died a couple of months ago. But Danny was a walking encyclopedia. He could tell you—And he would punctuate his stories with little anecdotes about situations and occurrences that he had encountered over his life in music.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And it was really a joy just to listen to him, relate experiences that he had been associated with over his life, because he lived up in New York for a number of years, and then he moved back home and he became real active in the movement to educate young kids. And he was one of the real strong advocates of the Renaissance of the Brass Band because it was really going down because there were less and less people following that particular style. And now there are anywhere from fifteen to twenty brass bands and the majority of them are traveling throughout the world. And there's been—As I mentioned before, a Renaissance, there's been a rebirth of interest in the brass bands and the New Orleans Jazz Heritage Foundation, of which I'm a board member, sponsors the Heritage School of Music, which is under

the directorship of Sir Edward Kid Jordan.

Kate Ellis: Oh, yeah.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: And it's a project that we wholeheartedly support because what it does is take inner city kids and offers them the opportunity to have formal music instruction and thereby plant a seed for potential development of our next generation of musicians.

Kate Ellis: I want to ask you a little bit about your own growing up. And then actually stuff that you've been saying, but before I do that, let me finish something with you about this. I'm curious about what you were saying about the benevolent organizations and I know that they have been many Black communities, a real central part of the community as far as helping to provide healthcare and things like that, that weren't—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, not so much healthcare. Like I said, these were benevolent. They actually took care more. I cannot say just burial societies, but they eventually evolved into I guess a more contemporary term would be social and pleasure club, but these evolved from the burial societies that were common here in the 1800s and early 1900s.

Kate Ellis: Well, can you tell me a little bit more what you know about how bands or music within them, what evolved out of them, out of the benevolence as well?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: No, no, I didn't say they evolved. The bands would perform at their halls. That was one of the venues that the bands would perform at.

Kate Ellis: And thereby they would gain more exposure.

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Right.

Kate Ellis: Okay. I see. That was the kind of place where they could do that. And so that's interesting. Okay. As far as your own background, where were you raised? What community did you come up in?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, I was born in the 13th Ward. It's a section of uptown New Orleans. It's near the Mississippi River, and it's also the spawning place for the New Orleans's most famous contemporary musical family, the Neville Brothers. They come from that neighborhood. And when I was eight years old, we moved downtown to the Seventh Ward. And the Seventh Ward was—I guess from going back to that caste system type thing we were talking about, it was the central area where there was a high concentration of what were called Creoles during that particular period. And I can remember that there was a lady that lived on the corner of our house actually established an organization called the New Orleans Creole Fiesta Association.

Kate Ellis: The New Orleans—

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Creole Fiesta Association.

Kate Ellis: What was that about?

Michael Joseph Gourrier: Well, it was a— Guess you could say it was a glorified social club, but the people, they would dress up and they would—