

ORAL HISTORY T-0003
INTERVIEW WITH CHICK FINNEY AND MARTIN LUTHER
MACKAY
INTERVIEWER: IRENE CORTINOVIS
JAZZMEN PROJECT
MAY 21, 1971

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Today is May 21, 1971 and this is Irene Cortinovis of the Archives of the University of Missouri-St. Louis. I have with me today Mr. Chick Finney and Mr. Martin L. MacKay. They are musicians from St. Louis of long standing and we are going to talk today about their early lives and also about their experiences on the music scene in St. Louis. Suppose you start, Mr. MacKay, and just give us your full name and where you were born and all the vital statistics.

MACKAY: I was born in Foristell, Missouri, the son of a Methodist minister, Martin L. MacKay, Sr., and my first experience in music was in Sedalia, Missouri at George R. Smith College. From that point my father went to a charge in Kansas City and I, after having taken music under William L. Dawson, did a little professional work even as a youngster in what were known as cabarets, roadhouses, silent motion picture theaters and whatnot. And later in life after I attended Illinois College in Jacksonville, I played with the college bands and went on the road with some name bands such as Lips Page, Count Basie's first group, Clarence Love, Coleman Hawkins, and others....

CORTINOVIS: And where were you when you played with these bands? How did you make contact with these people?

MACKAY: Well one's reputation gets around because musicians having played with you they discuss your abilities in far away spots then you get the inevitable telegram offering you a job.

COR: How did you meet Count Basie?

MACKAY: Well that's a long story. Count Basie came to Kansas City in 1928 with a road show which was known as the TOBA (Theater Owner's Booking Association) Circuit at the time and Gonzelle White was the name of the group he was with. He was a pianist with some very fine musicians with the group, and they became stranded in Kansas City. Basie was out there without work, and I was playing with Clarence Love. We had a little gig as they call it, a one night stand, at the Y.M.H.A. So Harry Smith who was their trumpet player suggested I use Basie. And then we used him on various jobs and later on he did organize his first group. He used me as his drummer before Joe Jones joined the organization.

COR: Isn't there another instrument you play besides drums?

MACKAY: Yes, a vibra-harp and all the accessories, chimes, temps and whatnot.

COR: Are you playing right now, are you playing tonight?

MACKAY: Yes.

COR: What's your band now?

MACKAY: I'm using four pieces, a quartet-guitar, bass, drums, vibes, sometimes piano, sometimes tenor sax. My first experience with the boats was on the Idlewild which later was renamed the Avalon. My headquarters at the time was in Alton, Illinois. The line was under the executive leadership of Mr. Henry Meyers who I understand is in the Streckfus offices. It was quite an experience because during flood time, why, we had to practically stay on the boat, weeks at a time. And I think this was the end of a beautiful era for musicians because the money was practically clear, you could leave your money up and collect at the end of the season and no expenses and whatnot. And you had the opportunity to travel quite a bit.

COR: What kind of music did you play?

MACKAY: For the most part it was a combination of jazz and commercial.

COR: Who took these excursions on the boat and did you give us the year that you first started on the Idlewild?

MACKAY: That was 1942.

COR: Well I think by that time it had been re-christened the Avalon.

MACKAY: That's right, that's right.

COR: Was it before that? But it was 1942 when you started there?

MACKAY: That's right, 1942.

COR: And who took these cruises?

MACKAY: Oh, it was various organizations, often times it was as many as four boats a day- a morning boat, and an early afternoon, and a little late one, and a midnight boat.

COR: A midnight boat- who took that?

MACKAY: This was before the situation that we now have, there were segregated units, you know. The midnight boat was usually for colored folks.

COR: Oh, out of Alton?

MACKAY: Not necessarily out of Alton, almost anywhere, Cincinnati, Nashville, Chattanooga, all up and down the line.

COR: And what about the band, was that segregated?

MACKAY: Not really. Because at that time there really were no quarters. It wasn't really a Modern boat at all. Some slept on the bandstand, on the top deck and things of that sort.

COR: Well, that was kind of roughing it, wasn't it?

MACKAY: Yeah, it was kind of roughing it. We were sort of the status of deck hands.

COR: Do you mean you had an all Negro band on the Avalon?

MACKAY: An all Negro band- yes.

COR: In your experiences along this line, what have they been as far as playing with all Negro or white bands or mixed bands? Could you tell us a little bit about that?

MACKAY: Aside from working on the boat ride, there never was a hard and fast line drawn between the races because in Kansas City especially in the cabarets which stayed open for practically twenty-four hours when the artists like Jack Teagarden, Ray Bauduc, Paul Whiteman's group, Ben Pollack, and whatnot came. All the fantastic side men would come in and sit in with us and jam with us. So there was really no color line, no one really minded at all.

COR: When you say side men came in to jam with us, what do you mean by that?

MACKAY: Jamming was a sort of free-for-all exchange of ideas. This is possibly the area in which improvisation got its birth. It was a free f exchange and sometimes fellas would play as many as ten, fifteen choruses on their own.

COR: Now you mean this was late at night after the place closed?

MACKAY: Well not really, because they really didn't close.

COR: Oh, but it was pretty late?

MACKAY: It was pretty late-yes. The early hours of the morning.

COR: That's when things would really groove.

MACKAY: Really groove, yes. Really groove.

COR: In this connection, once before I asked you about what you thought jazz really was?

MACKAY: To me jazz is a free expression of one's instrument's. Of course you are confined to basic chord structure but you do get away from melodic line and do your own thing, as they say.

COR: People have been doing their own thing long before that expression came in.

MACKAY: Yes, much before that expression.

COR: And who usually carries this lead and who usually does the improvising?-all the instruments?

MACKAY: Well, the lead is usually established on the first chorus and after that the rhythm section sets the pattern and holds them within a framework.

COR: Does one of the horns establish this lead on the first chorus?

MACKAY: Well, not necessarily. Could be the piano, could be one of the horns, guitar, whatever.

COR: Can this work on almost any composition?

MACKAY: Yes, it can. Even the classics.

COR: And as far as the Blues are concerned, then you would have to say that the lead was established by the voice, wouldn't you?

MACKAY: Yes, you would because even in the Blues although there is one basic pattern, there is a set melody to whatever Blues is being sung. Of course, the lyrics establish what that particular Blues is all about. The lament and the reason for the lament. You know, "I woke up this morning cold" etc., etc.

COR: Well, the Blues are always kind of sad-or at least on the mournful side- mmmm?

MACKAY: Paradoxically, a blues can be happy.

COR: Can it? Like for instance?

MACKAY: Strange as it may seem, Count Basie's "One O'clock Jump" was based on a blues pattern, wasn't it Chick?

FINNEY: Yeah, it was a happy moment because at that time the fellas in the band and the band director looked for the time when it was time to go home and some bands used to play a theme song and the last song was "Show Me the Way to Go Home"- and I've learned that someone in Count Basie's band, I think it was a trumpet player, if I'm not mistaken, wrote the number. I don't know off hand, but it was one o'clock and the dance was four hours-from nine to one, and this is the time to go home so they say "One O'clock Jump" and they've been jumping ever since then.

COR: Suppose we let Mr. Finney talk for a while. Chick, you tell us a bit where you were born and your early life- how you learned to play piano.

FINNEY: I'm a St. Louisian, a native St. Louisian. I always did have a yearning for music, but it's strange that I came up the way that Mackay's doing fine, as a tubber-percussion, drummer, whatever you want to call it. And I was a small sized developed fella in the band and I became a joke to them because there were so many instruments to put in the car that I put on top of the car. They were trying to embarrass me, and so I wanted to make a change.

I'm known as a man who dreams and speaks of a dream ahead of time and as he discusses his dream with a friend or co-worker, he is also practicing to make this dream come true. I wanted to be a pianist and I was encouraged. Duke Ellington played in St. Louis, I think in 1933 up at the Coliseum and I was so thrilled watching Duke play this piano that I walked downtown and bought me a sheet of music. And I used to fool people that I was a musician- "see my music here"- when I didn't know one note from another. I just looked at the music. But finally, associated with the Y.M.C.A. and some fella there who played ear piano, he showed me some things, you know. I used to just get ideas from him.

COR: You mean you never took any lessons?

FINNEY: I'm coming to that— took plenty of lessons.

COR: Oh, don't let me rush you.

FINNEY: And so when the Crackerjacks were looking for a pianist, I was at the YMCA with another pianist. My uncle who is also in the music world, Austin Wright, he sings real well, he was a good vocalist at that time. He's a show producer now, one of St. Louis's most outstanding master of ceremonies.

COR: What was his name again?

FINNEY: Austin Wright. So it was almost like a double trick, they called. He wanted Austin and he wanted me, but since pianists were just and accompaniment instrument, the horns are more important so if I could play just one chord or just play any chord- that was it. So I went to Chicago with the band in '33 or '34 and I did play one chord- for four hours. It. The music was It.

MACKAY: The nickname. Chick, is that associated with music or did that come before you started playing? FINNEY: That came before. They gave me the name Chick.

COR: What's your real name?

FINNEY: Joseph Finney. No one don't know that but you and MacKay. So the same time I was with the Crackerjacks Orchestra, I found that I could go straight on through and no one will tell ya they ain't gonna change- Earl Garner is supposed to be the top pianist and he ain't never changed. But I wanted to make a change- I wanted to be a musician to play everything. I wanted to be a musician, of course, I'm interested in being a composer and I could just hear a tune but I couldn't put it down. So I began taking lessons from Professor Terry. I wanted to take organ, here's another joke about me, too, and the organ was up there so Terry, he said, "Well shile the lady is on the organ, why don't you practice on the piano?" And when he saw me practicing on the piano, he carried me from the first grade to the tenth grade. I'd been playing years with a jazz band making a big name and got my instrumental fundamentals of music from J. Roy Terry.

COR: Is this Clark Terry's father?

FINNEY: No, no- no relation. It seems like you do something and don't know about it but I knew about it, the fundamental chords and the others, the seventh, the ninth and all that- see,

and with the Crackerjacks you could read chords, after you learned how to read chords, but taking off on the solo you're just lost in the fog-see. And through the years all the boys just played the four-beat chords-see. That's what I did and so sitting down to play a beautiful song like Rachmaninoff, a Chopin number, or something I like with feeling to play a little melody or an arpeggio, I was lost until I started taking music lessons. MACKAY: But don't knock it, because Fletcher Henderson was really a background pianist, you know.

FINNEY: Never played solo?

MACKAY: Never played solo.

FINNEY: I guess there's a lot of boys that way.

MACKAY: And Duke is really a background pianist.

FINNEY: A background pianist. Now you might want to talk about the Crackerjacks.

COR: Yes. These pictures you brought today...

FINNEY: Let's take picture number one. As I said earlier, this is Oliver Cobb- Oliver Cobb, that's the name. Eddie Johnson was a great young pianist and he was the kids' idol because he played on KMOX. I was going to Vashon High School at that time. And when we got out of high school to go over to the confectionery store which is still there- to listen to Eddie Johnson come on the radio with his band and it was a young band and the band had just reorganized due to the death of Oliver Cobb who was a trumpet player. When Eddie got the band, this fella named Sam, they called him, Lester Nichols, I think, he named the band Crackerjacks. There was a dance team out of New York called the Crackerjacks years ago I think. And he named the band Crackerjacks. And so I was just learning to get interested in being a pianist. I didn't think I was going to play- but it was just in my mind when this band started up, I had to take lessons and learn more than one chords. So that makes two bands that came in- Crackerjacks 1 and Crackerjacks 2. Eddie lost his reed section, what we call reed section, with the three saxophones, the trumpet man who's just passed formerly with Duke Ellington, and his brother, who just passed. They went to the reed section, and made him the leader of the band, Winfield Baker, and that's the band who found me, that's the band that was on the boat also.

COR: This is Crackerjacks #2?

FINNEY: Yes, everything MacKay said about the boat is always the same. Like when we were playing we slept in Dungarees remember that? We'd sleep in clothes cause there weren't no facilities, no pajamas or anything like that. Cause that water's cold out there. And with Crackerjacks #2 there was this fella named B.B. Baskervilles who I was telling you about before we got on the microphone, he was a gifted arranger. With any band, what makes a band sell today is what it does different from the other bands. If you play Tuxedo Junction then you play it in your own manner, it was very good. People like to hear the way you play it. In that time they were still copying off the French, and off of Tom Jones, Jamie Jones, whoever you want to name, and Jimmy Lunsford was one of the leading, black bands at that time. He created a style that Stan Kenton was amazed over. Stan Kenton today was saying that his style came from the late Jimmie Lunsford.

CORTINOVIS: You mean he was a national band, Jimmie Lunsford?

FINNEY: Oh, yes. , So this boy took the top of the music from note to note. You see, Jimmie Lunsford's a name band out of Memphis, Tennessee, was if?

MACKAY: Now let me see.

FINNEY: A school town, Nashville, Tennessee, he came out of a school town The band came from Fisk University. Most of the personalities came...

MACKAY: Crawford came out of there—a drummer.

FINNEY: Yeah, Crawford. Now this band disbanded in 1938. Because we had just made a record, "I Sat on the Deck of Labor" and fortunately, they numbered three of my compositions. Of course, we made about six sides, "I'm Blue Thinking of You", "Fussing All the Time", "Echo in the Dark"

COR: And you wrote all those songs.

FINNEY: All those songs, yes. I still followed the Duke Ellington pattern: I wanted to be a composer and I began to compose music.

MACKAY: Back to Lunsford, after he died, he died in a plane crash, didn't he?

FINNEY: That's right.

MACKAY: Well, the pianist carried on for a while, you know.

FINNEY: Wilcock and also Joe Thomas out of Kansas City. So when we went into the musicians' union, there was so much confusion over Crackerjacks number one and two...

MACKAY: Like the Inkspots. FINNEY: You asked Mr. Mackay a question a few minutes ago—he didn't get a chance to answer it. What do we mean by side men? Side men are the men on the record to the side of the meter.

MACKAY: Aside from the record.

FINNEY: Aside from the record. If I'm playing with Mackay, I'm a sideman. If he plays with Chick Finney, he's my side man.

COR: Oh, okay. Now I know what a side man is.

FINNEY: So the Crackerjacks had notices that bands before them had trouble with side men, so they decided to have a cooperative organization. Like the late Tommy Dorsey had one. What I mean by cooperative organization, well we've got ten members, we're not ten leaders, but we all vote and have rules and regulations. Right?

MACKAY: Glenn Gray had that type.

FINNEY: Yeah, Glenn Gray had that type. So this was the type of band the Crackerjacks had under my supervision. Although I had certain things to do, B.B. was our chief arranger, music director and so on and so on. When you come into the local, the local says stop right there. We take each member in as a member per man. The man who gets the job is the contractor, he's the leader. He pays his men so and so and so and so. If he would get a chance to make forty dollars more, we don't interfere cause you all getting paid what the pay is—see? And this got on a lot of things a cooperative never heard before. Because the men go out and get their jobs, well, you've got to bring this back to this cooperative band and they might dicker on it. But if he's his own leader, he spends what he wants to spend cause all they going to get is their correct union price.

MACKAY: And now a sidelight on sidemen—some exceptional sidemen get more money.

FINNEY: Yeah, yeah , yeah.

MACKAY: These are usually considered feature men, but still basically sidemen. Like you say. Buddy Rich is a sensational drummer or Sonny Payne.

FINNEY: Now that brought on confusion with this boy who Duke Ellington was after him when he was with us then- the late Harold Baker. The late Harold Baker finally when we broke up or when he left his brother's band- he joined Don Redmond, and from Don Redmond to Pearl Bailey's husband—what's his name, Louie Belson he finally ended up in Duke Ellington's band. Now Duke Ellington's men start at \$250, \$300 a week but Ray Nash was making \$600 or \$700 a week. And this brought on confusion why was Duke paying his men more. Like Mackay said, the men are paid according to their ability and their asset to the organization and their box office appeal. Like in baseball, Stan Musial was making one thing, look at our boy Bob Gibson, he's making a \$100,000 while another man ain't making \$20,000 pitching.

COR: Now when you speak of the local, you mean Local 19.7 here.

FINNEY: Yes, 192, but not no more. They have merged.

COR: Yes, there were two locals of the American Federation of Labor in St. Louis, isn't that right?

FINNEY: Yes, one was Local 2, which was the white local and 197 was teb black local. Now they both have merged, they call themselves Local 2-197.

COR: And when was that?

FINNEY: January 1, 1971.

COR: Just this year?

FINNEY: Just this year.

COR: They are a little bit behind the times, aren't they?

MACKAY: It's been in the works for a long time.

FINNEY: It's been in the works for nine, ten years.

COR: You were going to tell me about this arranger, what was his name?

FINNEY: B.B. Baskervilles, William is his name, but they call him B.B. And he's been ill for quite a while. And I'm trying to bring sunshine back into his life by taking pictures, telling stories to him, making him happy. People who call me up to write music-I don't have the time now that I'm in public relations work. People who want to write songs, write a poem and want you to put a song to it, and I used to have the time and other boys who teach school like Vernon Nashville, they charge maybe 25, 30 dollars to write some melody-and you write it. But B.B.—I've been turning those jobs over to him cause he's, what do you call it? convalescing, he's a shut-in.

MACKSY: He's chronically ill.

FINNEY: Yes, he's chronically ill. And so I've been trying to work, and he's got a little brighter smile on his face, and he thought now if the boys were around him, all the musicians of yesteryear, there's Banjo Pete...

MACKAY: Speaking of Fellows like Nashville writing lead sheets...Remember years when you could get a lead sheet?

FINNEY: Yeah.

MACKAY: What happened, do you know? Do you know why you can't get a lead sheet now?

FINNEY: You mean from the stores?

MACKAY: From any store, yeah.

FINNEY: Well, I don't know.

MACKAY: I wonder why. Have you ever thought about that?

FINNEY: No, never have thought about that.

MACKAY: That's a good question, isn't it?

FINNEY: Yeah. Now in the heyday of the Crackerjacks, we'll stay in that area for a while, moves in Jeter, Pillar.

COR: All right.

FINNEY: They come from Cleveland, Ohio.

COR: About what year was that?

FINNEY: We'd say 1934, wouldn't we say or 1935? Jeter, Pillar come to our town in '29 with a band called Alphonso Trent.

MACKAY: You better explain—these are two different..

FINNEY: I'm gettin to that. Alphonso Trent was one of, the greatest hands of the Southland. It was the Harvey Davis of the New York era. I mean they played all the big houses down there, Dallas, Texas, And they was making big money. Jeter is named James Jeter, Pillar is named Hays Pillar. Two different fellas from the same native state, I think, Arkansas. They've been playing together since high school. And here they come for a two week engagement at the Club Plantation which, was on Vandeventer and West Bell, later moved to Grand and Delmar and they had a very terrific band. They were playing nightly at a night club and making little bit of big money, see.

MACKAY: Back even in the late '20's, Alphonso Trent set a precedent by being the first, and only Negro band to play at the plus, Adolphus Hotel.

FINNEY: In Dallas, Texas?

MACKAY: Yes, in Dallas, Texas, when Texas was really a closed place. Which shows you what music can do for a town.

FINNEY: These boys were with the band, James Jeter and Hays Pillar. They stayed a period of nine, ten years at the Club Plantation. Their next move was a USO tour. That was in 1944-45. And when they returned to the United States within a year's time, they didn't do much gigging or anything like that, because they was band men and they couldn't hardly get a job as soloists cause bands had broken down from the big bands to the little bands. When we got out to the small bands, which I went to the small bands, each man had to be a star in his own instrument to make a good showing unless they had an arranger like John Kirby or the late Bugg Robinson. You write everybody a lot part to play by the parts you're playing. If you've heard the name, big-band sound, well the men who write open chords ninth, thirteenth etc. chords and harmony,' they could take four chords and make it sound like a big band. And with the bass on it.

MACKAY: It was what you call the Arquette sound.

FINNEY: Yeah, the Arquette sound. So Jeter-Pillar, they faded out aid they went into other work. In the '50's, they did get jobs selling beer for a distributor of Budweiser, and they made a big name as salesmen. I think they retired not so long ago, I heard. Getting back to Chick Finney and his interest in music, it's still the same: I carry my union card which is to this merged organization. But most of my time in music has been mostly voluntary music, and making a contribution and trying to brighten the corners with entertainment for shut-ins, hospitals and things like that. Most recently, where you got this record from, is in '51, when there is so much disturbance, with the gangs in St. Louis, I was requested to form some kind of program which they call a talent show at the Corner Theater. And we gave prizes, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, - \$5, \$10, \$15 something like that, and in doing that we got the kids off the street, and in a short time there was no more grabbing purses or stealing cause they was interested in music. And that was the birth of the Chick Finney Tomorrow's Stars. I took the best and

formed a group called Tomorrow's Stars and we played at every place I just named, civic, community, religious programs. And out of that, some of those people went further in music. For example, Ron Townsend from the Fifth Dimension, he came from my group called Tomorrow's Stars.

COR: Oh, he did.

FINNEY: And everywhere he go, he say, "I come from the Chick Finney Tomorrow's Stars." Now I have a young man who sings very good. We are supposed to make an appearance on television soon. And a young girl who is out of Mississippi,, and she is showing promise.

MACKAY: What happened to Heidi Hogan?

FINNEY: Yes, Heidi Hogan, she's another young lady. She was hailed as the second best to Pearl Bailey at that time. She could recite and sing, but they go into the young motherhood and that stops. So since I've been associated with the Argus since 45, at the present time, I'm still deep in music, but mostly to help someone to further their knowledge and experience in music.

COR: Mr. MacKay, where do you play now?

MACKAY: Presently I'm still playing for a young social club called the Sec's & Execs. They give their functions at the Chip & Plank, formerly known as the Carpenter's Hall, out on Hampton. This is two or three Saturdays a month. Sees and Execs are basically a single's club where young men and young ladies get acquainted. Fellas come stag now, you know.

COR: And you're working at the Argus now?

MACKAY: At the Argus, yes.

COR: Suppose we turn this off for a minute and I'll show you what I've written and I'll ask you to go over it for me, if you please.

FINNEY, MACKAY: Alright.

COR: There are just a couple of subjects that I'd like to cover then, before we finish up. One is the question of discrimination in trying to make a living in music how do you think it did affect you as you were coming up and developing your careers in music? How about you, Martin?

MACKAY: Well, we were denied some of the better jobs in hotels for which I think we were qualified. Even as late as 1947, I had run into an incident in Charles City, Iowa. I was one of the five Negroes who lived in this little town of 12,000 people. I was the house drummer at a night club there. They would bring the bands from Mason City and different places to come into play and I would do a feature number with them. Some of the bands refused to work with me. And I had to carry that up to the national body before they would carry out the line.

COR: Is this one of those big halls in small towns where people from surrounding territories come to?

MACKAY: Yeah, that's true.

COR: There are a few of those left, you know.

MACKAY: Yes, there are.

COR: Not too many.

MACKAY: But a few.

COR: There are a few in Southern Illinois that I know of.

MACKAY: Years ago you'd be surprised, they were really elaborate edifices.

COR: People would really come from miles around...

MACKAY: And they'd play big names like Paul Whiteman and all those sort of fellows.

COR: Something like the Avalon in Chicago ?

MACKAY: That's right, and what was the other one- Castle Ballroom. And I think, what's the fella's name? He's still around- Chick? In Chicago, remember, he was—not Wayne King, he was one of them, but there were a couple of other bands. He's still around.

FINNEY: It wasn't Roy Simon, was it?

MACKAY: No, these were white bands, commercial-type bands. They're on a kick something like Lawrence Welk.

COR: I suppose Wayne King was a predecessor of Lawrence Welk.

MACKAY: That's right, that's right. Wayne King, that's right.

COR: 'Well in the early days, you say you've been playing since 1924, and you played mostly in Kansas City then, in your earliest days.

MACKAY: Yeah, that's right. I don't know how I got around the Child Labor Law then.

COR: During Prohibition, wasn't it?

MACKAY: How's that?

COR: Nobody cared about Child Labor Laws those days. If you weren't working in a factory, I don't think they came after you too much.

MACKAY: No that's true.

COR: I know Russ David tells how he used to dodge the flying bottles when he was playing as a child.

MACKAY: That's right, your contract in those day's was a gangster's pistol. You didn't have a written contract.

COR: Sounds dangerous.

MACKAY: It was. We didn't have sense enough to realize it. We were so innocent in the heart that we didn't care.

COR: Now in your earliest days, did you play in all Negro places?

MACKAY: Yes, we did. We played in little clubs for as little as 85(? a night.

COR: Each? I hope.

MACKAY: That's right. A dollar and a half was tops at one time. But you were dependent for the most part on tips, which were pretty good. I remember in 1928, I played at the White House Tavern, and it was during an election year. It was nothing for us to make a hundred dollars a piece on Saturday in tips.

COR: I see. About how many pieces would you have in a band?

MACKAY: Five or six to eight pieces.

COR: And there was a place to dance?

MACKAY: Oh yes, oh, yes, a place to dance.

COR: It must have been a pretty big place then?

MACKAY: That's where they used to sell bootleg liquor, frog legs, fried chicken and whatnot.

COR: Say, that sounds pretty good.

MACKAY: But the thing of it was, you never knew what time you was gonna get off. I've already gone to work at-8 o'clock in the evening and not got home till noon the next day.

COR: DO you get overtime for that?

MACKAY: Not hardly, not hardly. You get a lot of sleeping time.

COR: Now the other subject that I wanted to cover was on the riverboats, I'm especially interested in those and you said that you played on the Idlewild, what year was that? I think we have that but...

MACKAY: That was 1942.

COR: t942 was the first time you went on the riverboat?

MACKAY: That's right.

COR: And did you play on any other?

MACKAY: No, I didn't. Now the situation on the riverboats has changed quite a bit since the days of Fate Marable.

COR: Did you know Fate Marable?

MACKAY: Yes, I did. I knew him. I knew him very well.

COR.: Is this the same Fate Marable, or is this the same man, I guess ip in his late sixties who used to play at the Victorian Club?

MACKAY AND FINNEY: Same one.

COR: Is it? Because my husband and I used to go down there to listen to a jazz pianist.

MACKAY: That was Fate Marable.

COR: And they used to have a big piano bar and people used to stand around it and sing.

MACKAY: And Beverly White used to play there, didn't she?

FINNEY: That's right and also a guy named, I can't think of it, he came out of my talent show.

MACKAY: Who was that?

FINNEY: I can't think of the name right now.

COR: Fate Marable is really Very famous as far as Riverboat jazz is concerned. And he started playing as early as, I believe I've read in some books, as 1907.

MACKAY: Yeah. The reason I say times have changed because Streckfus was a power unto himself on the river, you know. He was a strict martinet.

FINNEY: I heard, though, that Streckfus educated Fate Marable.

MACKAY: Yeah, well he'd wake the boys up a three o'clock in the morning and rehearse. He was good to them in one way and I guess he was quite a disciplinarian on the other hand.

COR: It sounds like he was.

MACKAY: That's right. So it might have been all for the best.

COR: Maybe. It seems hard when you're doing it, I guess.

MACKAY: Yeah, because out of all these strict rehearsals some good bands developed.

COR: Louis Armstrong himself did credit Fate Marable with insisting that he learn to read

music.

MACKAY: That's right.

COR: Because although he had learned to read music early in his life at the Waif's Home in New Orleans, he had forgotten it really, but when he got a job with Fate Marable out of St. Louis on the boats, only people who read music, according to some authorities that I've read, would Fate Marable hire.

MACKAY: That's right. There were quite a few boys who were alumni of Jenkin's Home (also Waif's) and most of them were trumpeters, weren't they? Jabbo Smith and...

FINNEY: He came out of there?

MACKAY: Yes, he did. He came out of Jenkin's Home.

MACKAY: Jabbo and Louie both...

FINNEY: What did you call it? He calls it Jenkins' Home.

COR: It's called a Waif's Home. Actually it's kind of a misnomer. It was not in any sense of the word a reform school. It was for younger boys who maybe got in a little trouble on the streets and Armstrong didn't do hardly anything but he had family problems.

MACKAY: Bustin' up the newspapers or something like that.

COR: But he had family problems. There used to be a couple of homes here in St. Louis which have now closed down, and to the great regret of a lot of social workers, because now if a boy does a little something there's no place for him to go but a reform school. And so Louis Armstrong's life would have been a lot different if he had to go to a reform school instead of a waif's school.

MACKAY: That's right.

COR: Chick, suppose you try to cover those subjects.. if you were ever discriminated against as you were coming up in music.

FINNEY: Mackay has answered most of the important questions. There was segregation all along the line: it had been that way for quite some time. We don't know who the credit should go to, but I think the late Nat King Cole began to open doors in the Airway...

MACKAY: John Hamilton.

FINNEY: Who?

MACKAY: John Hamilton.

FINNEY: John Hamilton began to bring Count Basie out of Kansas City. We had the same problem in music as we had in baseball which the credit goes to Jackie Robinson. Another

thing the boys used to fear was- the occasion came around when a person you call buddy and friend would steal your style and idea and the boys didn't like that at all. The next week or the next month the same person who stole one of your ideas is making big money and big jobs. And I would hope at the present time with the locals merging around the country, and there's no such thing as this getting a black hand a little cheaper because he's down in the ghetto area of the land or the town. You hire and you pay union prices. Mac didn't bring this up and I'm glad that I got on the subject, there was a time when we played music and there was no guarantee at all because the promoter used to run away. And, too, when you mentioned the word busted, we use the word-another word we use when the band was broke up.

MACKAY: Stranded?

FINNEY: Stranded- That's the word I'm thinking of. When the band was stranded nowadays let me say to the change of the times, no band is stranded because the local requires a large down payment. You take James Brown- he wants \$10,000 for an appearance. He wants \$5,000 in advance and he wants \$5,000 when he gets off the plane. That means he ain't gonna play a note, well he's gonna play a note, he's not gonna play a note till he gets his \$10,000. Today, as Mac and I was talking about, you play a job, a lot of jobs was on percentage.

MACKAY: 60-40.

FINNEY: 60-40.

MACKAY: Sometimes 7Q-30.

COR: You mean you got the 30?

FINNEY & MACKAY: Yeah.

FINNEY: I remember the time we played in Hot Springs, Arkansas, we got 15 cents per man.

COR: Oh. my goodness, you'd th.ink they'd be ashamed to offer it to you.

MACKAY: We. were glad to get it.

FINNEY: Glad to get it. And so those were some of the hardships that Black musicians had. But I guess the whites had the same line of guarantee of salary,

MACKAY: Don't forget the lack of accommodations.

FINNEY: That's been our problem and its still our problem in some cases. I will say a word of praise- through the years the musicians have broken down a lot of ill-feeling between the two races- the've brought the gap up because people love music all over. And no matter who they are, when they get a chance to relax and enjoy themselves, black or white, they all are artists.

MACKAY: You know who broke it down in reverse, don't you? Lucky Milner, you know, he

took some white boys down to the South, you remember that?

FINNEY: Yeah, so the point is, I haven't been to none of the union meetings, of course I am a member, I'm so busy with the newspaper, but I've been out and had private conferences with the officials and they think this is one of the best things that ever happened.

COR: Was St. Louis one of the last places to have the merger?

FINNEY: I think so, but I can't tell you, because Kansas City has had it for quite a while.

COR: I had no idea that it was still national policy up until this year to have separate locals in the AF of M.

MACKAY: That's right. But there was two sides of the coin, you know. There was reluctance on the part of the musicians to merge, too, you know.

COR: And for what reason?

MACKAY: Well, for economic reasons. They thought that in as much as the jobs would come through the white local, they might not see any of them.

COR: Oh, I see.

FINNEY: Not only that, you take a musician like MacKay and myself, we believe in the old school and learning the right way. Because opportunity is great. You remember, you see a sign on the board in the local, and the sign would say that we have an audition for a violin, and a vocalist. And if they go out there without any special guiance or training, it's just a smack in everybody's face. When they put a sign up an audition you better know what you're gonna do.

MACKAY: Have you ever been to the New York Local?

FINNEY: No, I've never been to the New York Local.

MACKAY: They have there what is almost like a union hall for stevedore.

COR: A hiring hall.

MACKAY: A hiring hall- yes. With a great big blackboard-with wanted: such and such and fellas hang around there all day.

FINNEY: They do, huh?

MACKAY: That's right.

FINNEY: To get jobs?

MACKAY: That's right- hundreds of fellas. They just hang around all day. COR: Can you join the union just by applying? If you want to?

MACKAY: Oh, no. It isn't that easy. Now in New York, I think the requirements are a little more stringent than they are in other places. It's a matter of politics, too.

COR: What do you have to do to join the union here?

FINNEY: First you have to be a musician.

MACKAY: That's right. You're supposed to go before a full examining board.

COR: Yes, that's what I'm trying to establish- you just have to be a musician or a good musician.

MACKAY: If you're an established musician, then they won't take you before an examining board because they know what you can do by your reputation.

COR: Say a young fella.

MACKAY: Well, an untried product would have to go before an examining board.

COR: There is an examining board before you get a card?

MACKAY: That's right.

OCR: Okay. That's what I want to know. The other thing I wanted to ask you. Chick, did you play on any other boats besides the Idlewild?

FINNEY: No, I didn't.

COR: We talked about Fate Marable before, do you know any other old jazz musicians?

FINNEY: Charlie Creath, we mentioned Charlie Creath, and the late Dewey Jackson, and we just lost one last week, William Roland.

MACKAY: What about the fella with the non-union local?

FINNEY: Who's that?

MACKAY: Dollar Bill.

FINNEY: Dollar Bill and...

COR: Dollar Bill what?

FINNEY: They call him Dollar Bill.

COR: What's his last name?

FINNEY: I don't know- he plays piano and he was very fabulous around here.

MACKAY: He helped a lot of musicians.

FINNEY: Oh, yeah- there's Mose Wiley, there's Eddie Randle named in the story- I'm supposed to go up to his house to get some material. But Eddie Randle broke a lot of doors down, he had a one night band. He played out on the highway in Missouri and Illinois. He was very well known for that playing and most everybody come. I come to his band first on drums and John Cotter on piano- you almost can name 'em. Lawrence Smith...

MACKAY: Dollar Bill unofficially had a book on just about all the jobs on the South side.

FINNEY: He did?

MACKAY: I guess so- 50 or 60 jobs, that come through Dollar Bill.

COR: I thank you both very much for giving us this time this afternoon I know you're both busy and I've kept you a long time but I know that we have really a wealth of information. This afternoon. May 21, 1971, this is Irene Cortinovic 616 the Archives and Mr. Chick Finney and Mr. Martin MacKay have been talking with me about their days as musicians in St. Louis and nationally. So thank you, gentlemen.

FINNEY & MACKAY: Thank you.