

ORAL HISTORY T-0106
INTERVIEW WITH GUS PERRYMAN
INTERVIEWED BY IRENE CORTINOVIS
JAZZMAN PROJECT
APRIL 27, 1972

This transcript is a part of the [Oral History Collection \(S0829\)](#), available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at shsresearch@umsystem.edu.

Today is April 27, and this is Irene Cortinovis from the Oral History Program of the University of Missouri-St. Louis. I have with me today Mr. Gus Perryman, a piano player, who lives in St. Louis, and he's been a part of both early jazz and the jazz revival of the '50's in St. Louis. So, I want to talk to him today about his experiences in music. Gus, we'd like to start by having you tell me where you were born; and, especially, we'd like to know where you learned to play the piano.

PERRYMAN: I was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

CORTINOVIS: I'm going to write this down, you know...all these words, because then when the kids transcribe them, they need the spelling. Okay. Do you tell when?

PERRYMAN: October 31, 1901.

CORTINOVIS: 1901. Well, I must say you look wonderful for 71. Just tell us a little bit about your parents, or your family. What we are trying to do is to get a little background before we go into music. For instance, were your parents musical?

PERRYMAN: Yes, my mother was musical. She played the piano and the organ, She played for all the church activities and different functions. Of course, they were both religious people, and my mother started me out playing the piano when I was about six years old. I'd just watch her play, and I became interested in it. I liked to see her play and I always felt that I could do it, too. She always told me that I could do it. She saw the potentialities in me and the talent...that I had talent. So, she taught me as far as she could, and then she put me under teachers, different teachers, and just started advancing from there on the piano.

CORTINOVIS: Hattiesburg, Mississippi in those days (1901) was a place in which very few opportunities were given to blacks. Now, how do you suppose your mother learned how to play the piano?

PERRYMAN: Well, you see, my mother came up under a little mixed-up background. And ancestry. And, of course, by parents...part of her parents being Irish... why, naturally, they took an interest in her and her girlhood days and taught her everything and gave her music. Of course, she learned well enough to play.

CORTINOVIS: Did she live at home with her white parents?

PERRYMAN: No. Up until she got married...you see, my mother...the way that was, I want to get that right...my mother's mother was white. Her father was part colored. And that is how it came about. But...

CORTINOVIS: She lived in a black neighborhood?

PERRYMAN: Oh, yes. She went as colored.

CORTINOVIS: Yes. In the South if you were any part colored, you were colored.

PERRYMAN: That's right.

CORTINOVIS: However, your grandmother took an interest in her musical education, and her other education?

PERRYMAN: Sure, sure. And, of course, my mother, she was married to a colored man. My father was colored and part Creek Indian.

CORTINOVIS: Part Creek Indian? This is interesting. I believe that you must be the fifth or sixth musician that I've interviewed who has told me they were part Indian.

PERRYMAN: Well, I'm not half, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, no, but, I mean, you have at least one Indian ancestor...your father was part colored and part Creek Indian. Did you know him? I mean, did he live long enough for you to live in the home?

PERRYMAN: Sure, he worked in Hattiesburg up until he died.

CORTINOVIS: How many of you were there in the family? And where were you in the family?

PERRYMAN: There were ten of us. I think I was about the seventh child. And I'm a twin.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, you are a twin?

PERRYMAN: And my baby sister, she was a twin.

CORTINOVIS: Now...did you have a piano in your home?

PERRYMAN: Sure.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, that's how you...did someone else in your family play?

PERRYMAN: My sister. My mother started her off, and she got up to a certain point and then she put it down.

CORTINOVIS: And you are the one that has stuck with a piano?

PERRYMAN: The only one.

CORTINOVIS: Is your mother still tving?

PERRYMAN: No, my mother passed in 1915.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, well, you were just a boy then.

PERRYMAN: Sure. My father, he passed in 1922. I wasn't quite 21 years old.

CORTINOVIS: Were you on your own then?

PERRYMAN: Sure.

CORTINOVIS: Just try to tell me whatever you remember about your home and your family.

PERRYMAN: There are so many things that I can remember, you know. They were mostly all good. My mother and my father, they were good to us. And, naturally, we were taught to always appreciate what we had. And we weren't trained to just want everything all the time, you know. Just whatever they were able to give us, we appreciated. I was an idol of my mother... of all the family. And she kept me in music. I was in a class of seven girls and I was the only boy in the class, you know, to advance that far. And so, we had a recital, and I was the only boy in the class. My mother, she sat behind the piano the night we had the recital. When it came time to play my solo (each student had to play a solo), I shall never forget, I played "Moonlight Reverie", and my mother was back behind the piano beating the time, so I wouldn't play too fast or too slow.

CORTINOVIS: She was a living metronome; (laughter)

PERRYMAN: She really was, a living metronome. But I was thankful that she lived long enough for me...to hear me play, and play the piano not as a beginner, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Do you think that had something to do with your being her favorite? That she saw in you this...

PERRYMAN: Well, I was the image of my mother.

CORTINOVIS: In looks, you mean?

PERRYMAN: That's right.

CORTINOVIS: Maybe that's why you look so much like my father. My father didn't come from Ireland, but all my grandparents came from Ireland, and that could be why you look so much like him. I swear to you that you are really the image of my father...about the same size; he was heavier than you, but about the same size. Well...do you think that she saw in you...in your interest in the piano... this, you know, what she loved?

PERRYMAN: I think so. I'm quite sure. Because I never did shirk or nothing... I always practiced when she told me. She took pains with me, and she could

see that it was in me.

CORTINOVIS: It's a wonderful thing to have a loving memory of a parent which you, obviously, do have. I'm sure it has carried you over many a rough time.

PERRYMAN: It has. And they taught me things that I still practice now. When I was ten or twelve years old...I still remember those things.

CORTINOVIS: How much were the lessons at that time?

PERRYMAN: Well, at that time, the lessons were only 75^ per lesson.

CORTINOVIS: And how often did you go?

PERRYMAN: I went twice a week.

CORTINOVIS: A dollar and a half. Wasn't that pretty hard to scrape up?

PERRYMAN: Well, you see, at that time my relatives, my aunts and so forth, they would help me. And I would sell newspapers. In the neighborhood there, there was a white boy. We came up together. As a matter of fact, he was from a big family, the Parley's. And my aunt was their cook. Well, we would stay over at each other's house...I'd stay at his house more than I'd stay at home, sometimes...and he'd stay with me more than he'd stay at home. So, this boy got a paper route, and he got me to help him. And that would help me and my music, you know, because he would pay me a little money. Sometimes he would give me enough to pay for a couple of music lessons.

CORTINOVIS: So, you'd help pay for those yourself?

PERRYMAN: Yes, and then, after I got able to play church music, sacred music, well, they hired me to play for my Sunday School Choir. They started off paying me, I think, \$4.00 per month. But when I ended up playing for the Senior Choir, they paid me...they raised it to \$7.00 per month. Well, I went right on playing, and my mother gave me the most of it...saved the most of it back to pay for my music. In doing that, I think I had about five different teachers. She wouldn't let me stay under one teacher too long.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, she liked for you to move around?

PERRYMAN: To move around...

CORTINOVIS: That's quite different.

PERRYMAN: ...get different versions of it.

CORTINOVIS: Yes; you know, Gus, I'm very interested in that sort of tracing, too. Do you have any memories of any of these teachers?

PERRYMAN: Well, one was named, I think. Woods. Delia Woods. Another was a Mr. Crittenden. He was a man, see. And he was a very nice pianist. Theoretically, he was very

smart. But the best one of all was a girl...her name was Hattie Jones. Her father was the principal of the school there. Her father had sent her to a New England Conservatory, and she was very, very accomplished.

CORTINOVIS: Were these all members of the black community?

PERRYMAN: Oh, yes, and I studied under her. And that was the last teacher that I had. She was the one we gave the recital for us before she was fixin' to go away.

CORTINOVIS: I'll tell you now why I asked the names, particularly, because some people think that the German music teachers who settled in the Midwest and fanned out to the small towns, they were mostly responsible for most of the musical education. Of course, they would be white, and you didn't take from any white teachers in Hattiesburg?

PERRYMAN: No, not in Hattiesburg. But I did study under the conductor of the Orpheum Theatre Orchestra. We were playing professionally, and playing a job at the 19th Century Club... that's a white club. . .played there every Friday and Saturday night. And this conductor belonged to that club. And he came up to the piano one night. He looked and heard me play, and he asked me for my name, and asked me, "How would you like for me to give you some lessons?" He made himself known. He said, "I'm Dr. Bojes...he didn't say 'Professor'..." And he told me where his studio was in the Orpheum Theatre Building. He told me to come up there the following morning, and he would talk to me. He says, "I'm going to give you some lessons." He said, "Don't worry whether you have any money or not, because I'm going to give them to you free."

CORTINOVIS: He must have been impressed with your playing.

PERRYMAN: Yes, he was. So, I went over, and he told me, "There are so many things I won't have to teach you or explain to you, but I wanted you to come up for the reason I want you to play something... or see you do what you did last night." He said, "Because there is something you won't have to study for." And the first thing was my tutor. He said, "You've got something that God gave you. I had to study for it." He said, "You've got touch and you've got a good ear." So, he taught me...he gave me eight lessons..-eight lessons, and he didn't charge me anything. But I would have...he would have taught me longer, but, you see, I was in music playing, and that was my living then.

CORTINOVIS: Do you think you got something from him that you didn't get from anyone else?

PERRYMAN: Quite a bit...as from the technical side. He gave me three or four of those lessons which were nothing but scales, you-.know. He said that that was some of the best exercises you can have on the piano is to have those scales.

CORTINOVIS: What did you... from which of these teachers did you get your musical theory?

PERRYMAN: Well, he explained some theoretical parts at times, and he would come up and show me, probably in diacritical marks. Well, I would put it like that, you see. Like I come upon a phrase and would have an Italian word there... that meant thus and so. Or German...

CORTINOVIS: Like 'Andante', or something?

PERRYMAN: Or, they would have French. Well, he would tell me what that meant. "Allegreto" and "Allegro" and all like that, you know. He taught me all that, because I wasn't well aware of that, you know. I hadn't been playing that type of music that high up, you know. But where I really got my theoretical part first. I had moved to Jackson, Tennessee, in 1924.

CORTINOVIS: Is that when you left Hattiesburg?

PERRYMAN: No, I left Hattiesburg actually in 1919. I was playing well enough so that I could get out and play with a band.

CORTINOVIS: What was your first band?

PERRYMAN: The first band that I played with? It was Charles H. Booker's Band from Memphis.

CORTINOVIS: How did you make contact with him?

PERRYMAN: They heard about me. I was in Brookhaven, Mississippi, living with my oldest sister, because her husband was a railroad man and he worked there. He was a brakeman there on the railroad, and I was there living with her for the time being, and they heard about me and they got in touch with me. They wanted me to play with them and go down to the Gulf Coast and Biloxi.

CORTINOVIS: They'd already heard of you? This was Charles H. Booker, you mean?

PERRYMAN: They wanted to replace the piano player that they had. He was from Tuskegee Institute, you see. He was going on back to another college...he was getting out of music for that time, so I went down on the Gulf Coast with them. I stayed down there that season, and the following season, I went back and played with them and toured all of the Gulf Coast...Pensacola, Florida, Mobile, Biloxi, Bay St. Louis, and all of them. But we were playing there in Gulf port in a recreation park. You see, that was a naval base, too, and they had a big recreation...beer parlor...and this guy had a band playing there. He had twenty downstairs tables for whites and he had ten tables upstairs for colored, but he had the band situated right in the center between the two floors letting us play to downstairs as well as to upstairs. And, of course, when we would get miscellaneous engagements, they'd let us out, you know, to go play those engagements.

CORTINOVIS: How many members did this band carry?

PERRYMAN: Well, he carried eight pieces, I think.

CORTINOVIS: A pretty big band...

PERRYMAN: Yes, eight pieces.

CORTINOVIS: Do you remember how much you made with Booker?

PERRYMAN: Well, it was pretty good for those days. I think he paid us in Gulfport something like \$35.00 a week. You know, that was a lot of money.

CORTINOVIS: It sure was.

PERRYMAN: And with all the side gigs that we'd get...you count that up...

CORTINOVIS: And you were only eighteen, nineteen years old?

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: Now, was this a young band?

PERRYMAN: They were mixed, you know. We had some old and some young guys. But, I was the youngest in the band.

CORTINOVIS: An all black band?

PERRYMAN: Well, we had one guy in there...he was Puerto Rican. And, of course, we had another guy in there, he was from Panama, but from the complexion, you couldn't...

CORTINOVIS: Kind of like all nations?

PERRYMAN: In a way.

CORTINOVIS: What kind of music did you play for these dates? At this recreation parlor?

PERRYMAN: Well, we just played pop tunes...what we, in the band, called pop tunes. Then we played mostly Dixieland style...like...all Dixieland numbers, "Tiger Rag", "Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister, Kate", "_____ Blues"... we even played the Russian Rags.

CORTINOVIS: But, see now you say, "Dixieland", and you're talking "Rags". See, you know, is old Scotch-Irish Rags..."Tiger Rag" is old. _____

PERRYMAN: No, no, "Tiger Rag" is composed by one of the guys from the original Dixieland Jazz Band.

CORTINOVIS: (singing) Oh..."Hold that tiger...hold that tiger?"

PERRYMAN: Yeah, yeah. That era.

CORTINOVIS: Now, Ragtime was just about out by now, wasn't it? Around... But, you know... like St. Louis, but there was still playing Rag; they were still ragging it down there? That must have been 1918-1919.

PERRYMAN: But, you see, you found most piano players playing the rag, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Well, rag was originally for piano music.

PERRYMAN: And the bands sometimes, they would play a band arrangement of a Rag, you know, that they made up from the kids. But, mostly we played music around coming from here to New Orleans, see.

CORTINOVIS: Yeah, you were right across the Bay there...Bay St. Louis. Did you have any New Orleans players in your band?

PERRYMAN: In our band? Yeah, I think we had a bass player from New Orleans... Miller.

CORTINOVIS: Miller?

PERRYMAN: Yes, he was a Creole.

CORTINOVIS: Where did you first hear the word, "jazz?"

PERRYMAN: I can't recall, it's been so long ago, when jazz was first coming in. That would have to be say around 1916, see.

CORTINOVIS: Were people talking and using the word "jazz" by the time you went down there to play? At Bay St. Louis?

PERRYMAN: Sure.

CORTINOVIS: They were? They were talking "jazz".

PERRYMAN: Talking jazz, yah.

CORTINOVIS: And did you ever go over to New Orleans?

PERRYMAN: Oh, yes, I went to New Orleans when I was young. I had an aunt that lived there and a cousin. I went to New Orleans, but I didn't get around to play music then, because I was still in school.

CORTINOVIS: Yeah. But, I mean...

PERRYMAN: But I did spend four years in New Orleans.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, did you? When was that?

PERRYMAN: Well, that was, say around, 1931, I'd say, up until almost '35. I played on steamboats... that was down there on the steamer, "Capitol."

CORTINOVIS: Oh, yeah, I remember the "Capitol."

PERRYMAN: We played here for the summer engagements and then go down there for the winter season. I played five years...I put in four seasons down there. Then we'd come back and play the summer engagements, and then we'd go back down the river playing excursions all the way to New Orleans, you know.

CORTINOVIS: And what towns did you stop at?

PERRYMAN: All the major towns...some little pigstops...

CORTINOVIS: Some not so major!

PERRYMAN: Yeah, we'd all get together...

CORTINOVIS: Like Cape Girardeau?

PERRYMAN: Yes, Cape Girardeau. We'd get people from Cape and surrounding Caps. Girardeau. We'd start out here. We'd stop at Cape Girardeau. Go down to Caruthersville, Memphis, Helena, Greenville, Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and New Orleans. But we'd make other little towns in between there, you know.

CORTINOVIS: How long did it take you from St. Louis?

PERRYMAN: Well, it would take us almost three weeks,

CORTINOVIS: You went down in the fall?

PERRYMAN: Yes, when the boat closed here after Labor Day, we'd head out the next morning for New Orleans. And we'd leave there in May, about the third weeks in May, we would leave New Orleans and come back north. And we'd make the same towns coming back.

CORTINOVIS: But all winter, then, would you play in New Orleans? On the boat?

PERRYMAN: Yes, on the boat.

CORTINOVIS: Someone else told me they did that; it must have been Sammy Long. Did you know Sammy?

PERRYMAN: Sammy Long was in the band.

CORTINOVIS: Was he? Who was the leader of the band then?

PERRYMAN: Harvey Langford.

CORTINOVIS: Harvey Langford, yes.

PERRYMAN: Charlie Creath was the director of the band. Harvey was the manager, but Charlie Creath was the leader. He led the band, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Well, Charlie, of course, is older than .you. And he was one of the first to be employed by Streckfuss.

PERRYMAN: That's right.

CORTINOVIS: And Sammy told me about it. Cliff Batchman played with Charlie a few

times, too.

PERRYMAN: Yes, that was here in the city.

CORTINOVIS: Yes. Now, when you would go down to New Orleans and play there all winter, did you ever go off to the French Quarter?

PERRYMAN: All the time. We wouldn't play there, but we'd just go out there, you know.

CORTINOVIS: That's what I mean.

PERRYMAN: I was all over New Orleans. I went across the lake over there...

CORTINOVIS: Lake Ponchartrain?

PERRYMAN: ...Gretna. Go over there and see all the mysterious weird people they talked about, you know. They were there. Suspicious, you know. I went over there and had my fortune told. (laughter) French-Creole and Spanish, too.

CORTINOVIS: But did you ever jam up there...play up there?

PERRYMAN: We never got a chance, you see, because we were on the boat every night, we'd play at night, and we'd play day trips, too.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, dear, you were working hard.

PERRYMAN: Sure. The boat would leave at nine o'clock in the morning, and we wouldn't get back until about five o'clock that evening, and we'd have to rush home and get a little dinner and then it was right back to the boat. So, we never got a chance to get out of New Orleans.

CORTINOVIS: How much were you making in those days?

PERRYMAN: Well, I'd say we made right around \$35.00 a week. Of course, I made extra because I played the calliope; I played that every night,

CORTINOVIS: Well, you know, we lost a few years in there. You said you first went to the Gulf Coast around 1918-19 when you played with Charlie Booker. Then, you talked about playing on the Streckfuss out of St. Louis in the '30's. How about the intervening years?

PERRYMAN: Well, that's what I wanted to tell you. You see, this happened in 1931 up until 1934-...was when we played the Streckfuss. But, prior to that, is a long story of my musical activities.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, well, I've got all morning! (laughter)

PERRYMAN: Because when I left Memphis, I went to Jackson, Tennessee, and I played with a band there...that was about 1921...and I played around Jackson. And I went back to Hattiesburg, and I got a call, and I went back to Jackson, and joined the band again...the

same band...and I played with them a little while. Then, the white fellow heard about me, and he got in touch with me, and he got me to come over to Helena, Arkansas. He had a big drugstore, colored drugstore, but he always had live entertainment, you know, because he had a huge business. And he asked me if I would get a band up, that was in 1923, see. Well, I went to work and got this band up for him, and we played the summer of 1923. And at that time, I went to Jackson and I got married. May 20, 1923. So, I took my wife back to Helena. We went on back there and played the engagement out. Then, I went back to Jackson, Tennessee, which was my wife's home where I married, and I got a telegram to come here in Illinois...most of this same band that I organized in Helena, Arkansas, came to Illinois and got a job. There was a swell roadhouse.. .you know, they had roadhouses, then...they didn't call them "clubs" so much.

CORTINOVIS: Why did they call them "roadhouses?"

PERRYMAN: Well, they were out from town, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Yes.

PERRYMAN: Some of them went under the name of club, but the place we worked, they went under the name of the "Riverview Club", but yet it was a roadhouse.

CORTINOVIS: Was this during Prohibition?

PERRYMAN: Yes, 1923. Because they operated like gangsters, you know.

CORTINOVIS: They served liquor there.

PERRYMAN: Oh, yeah, well...but, then it was bootleg liquor, you know.

CORTINOVIS: You'd go down the road to find them?

PERRYMAN: No...

CORTINOVIS: Isn't that why they called them "roadhouses?" You had to go down the road to find them?

PERRYMAN: Maybe so, maybe so... So, I played there with those guys. I think I left there in October or November, we left, and I came back to Jackson, Tennessee. And then I got another call and went back to Helena, Arkansas. We went over there, that was 1924...same band. At the end of that engagement, we came back to Jackson, and I got connected with a band there. Johnny Brown's Playtone Orchestra.

CORTINOVIS: Well, gosh, wasn't that unusual for a drugstore to have a band?

PERRYMAN: No.

CORTINOVIS: No? Tell me about that drugstore, I haven't heard of that.

PERRYMAN: Well, you know, he sold all kinds of drugs, had a soda fountain there...

CORTINOVIS: Was there a place to dance?

PERRYMAN: No, no place to dance. We were just there playing. He built a bandstand up, sitting up on that bandstand...

CORTINOVIS: You were an attraction then?

PERRYMAN: Yes, on display!

CORTINOVIS: How many pieces?

PERRYMAN: Six pieces.

CORTINOVIS: Well!

PERRYMAN: I got a picture of that...I wish I had brought that along.

CORTINOVIS: I'd love to see that.

PERRYMAN: Well, sometime, maybe you can see it. I have several pictures that I would like to have you see. Because Floyd Campbell is in there, you see, that's a that came back here and I played with in 1924...Floyd Campbell. Sammy Long was with Floyd Campbell. He was in the reed section.

CORTINOVIS: Now, was Floyd Campbell the leader of the band in the drugstore?

PERRYMAN: No, no. I was the leader.

CORTINOVIS: What was the name of the drugstore...just for fun?

PERRYMAN: Sayle's Drugstore.

CORTINOVIS: He sounds like a real enterprising guy...a big businessman?

PERRYMAN: He was, and he was a fine man. Yes, he was, thought the sun rose and set in me. I don't know why. He just liked me.

CORTINOVIS: Why not?

PERRYMAN: Liked me. When I first worked for him, he said, "Now, Gus, anything in this drugstore that you want, just ask for it. It's yours. Be careful of your department, and how you go...be careful about how you handle yourself." I knew what he was talking about. He said, "Because I'm in your corner, see?" You know..."If anything goes wrong, you come to me; don't try to take charge!"

CORTINOVIS: You mean he was talking about if you would get into trouble in the town?

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: Well, why could you get into trouble, Gus?

PERRYMAN: Well, he didn't know. You know, sometimes, jealousy can do certain things...but he told me to always come to him because he was in my corner, see. If I'd take it upon myself, there would be very little he could do.

CORTINOVIS: Yes.

PERRYMAN: So, when I left, we left in good friendship and everything.

CORTINOVIS: That was two years you played there?

PERRYMAN: Altogether, all the seasons. Getting back to Jackson, Tennessee... when I got back there in 1924, I got with Johnny Brown's Playtone Orchestra, and I played with him all of '24 up until the spring of '27. But in that time, I studied a year and a half at Lang College Conservatory under Professor Isaac Berry. I studied there under him. And that's where I learned the theoretical part of music. He started me off on that.

CORTINOVIS: Now; when you were with Johnny Brown, what kind of music did you play? And where did you play?

PERRYMAN: Well, we played different engagements, mostly for whites. We traveled, you know...

CORTINOVIS: In the Tennessee area?

PERRYMAN: In the Tennessee area...Alabama, Georgia, Atlanta, Savannah, Arkansas, down into Mississippi and Louisiana.

CORTINOVIS: Who did the bookings for this?

PERRYMAN: Brown...he booked himself...although we did have a fellow in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who used to book us up in there.

CORTINOVIS: Did you play for dances?

PERRYMAN: Oh, yes, dances. We played all popular music, you know. Numbers like, "Ain't She Sweet?" "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone"...all of those old numbers, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Did you call it "jazz", Gus?

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: Did you think you were playing jazz then?

PERRYMAN: Sure, because you know we were improvising, playing the same structure of music, improvised as we went along, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Is that what jazz is?

PERRYMAN: Yes, that's all it is.

CORTINOVIS: What else really is jazz?

PERRYMAN: They called it variety and accents... that's a good definition for it. Take the strains of the melody, instead of playing the straight melody, we'd add on a couple of notes, you know. You know, any number like that, "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone" (singing)...(resinging, adding notes and changing rhythm)...see? That's the only definition of jazz that I know, see.

CORTINOVIS: Is that fun when the leader says, "Take it, Gus:"

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: Is that fun?

PERRYMAN: (laughing...) yes.' Then the trombone and the clarinets, you see... that's where it (the jazz) actually came in instrumentally...was the trombone making those different slurs, and low pedal notes, you know. The clarinet making them squeal...and the trumpet... every once in a while would hit a little higher than what he'd usually play. Of course, trumpet players didn't get very high until Louis Armstrong came out.

CORTINOVIS: Yeah.

PERRYMAN: I'd say he revolutionized...or originated high notes for trumpet players, playing jazz. That didn't start until Louis came out.

CORTINOVIS: What I read...Louie was sort of the heir of the New Orleans patterns of this that were really African patterns...this call and response.

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: And with the instruments like the clarinet giving the initial call and then the other instruments responding. You can also do this with the human voice, and when blues was so popular, the voice did that, too. Did you have a singer with Johnny Brown?

PERRYMAN: No, I used to try to sing a little myself. And, then, one of the trumpet players did, you know.

CORTINOVIS: But, you never traveled with a singer?

PERRYMAN: No, I never traveled with a singer.

CORTINOVIS: Did you ever play much with women blues' singers? Did you ever accompany any of the blues' singers? The big blues' singers?

PERRYMAN: No, not any of the big blues singers. Now, there was one girl from Europe...I played for her about two and a half years. Jewel Bell.

CORTINOVIS: Here in St. Louis?

PERRYMAN: I used to accompany her.

CORTINOVIS: Was she a good singer?

PERRYMAN: Yes, wonderful.

CORTINOVIS: Is she still singing?

PERRYMAN: Yes, she is still singing. Although, now, she plays piano, too. She plays for herself now.

CORTINOVIS: She sings and plays for herself?

PERRYMAN: Yes.

CORTINOVIS: In New Orleans, when you'd go off to the French Quarter to listen... do you think that was reflected in the music you played?

PERRYMAN: That we were playing then? Well, to some extent, but we tried to keep right in style with what they played down there, because the captain wanted us to play...instead of playing strictly to the sheet. He said, "Forget about that. After you learn the theme of the number, just do away with that and play the way you feel."

CORTINOVIS: Are you talking about Charlie Creath? Or, are you talking about the captain of the boat?

PERRYMAN: Streckfus CORTINOVIS: Oh.

PERRYMAN: He was a musician, too.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, that's why he knew.

PERRYMAN: Yes, he knew tempo and everything; he'd tell us, "Just forget about the music after you get it down and play yourself, put your image in it."

CORTINOVIS: Well, what I mean is, do you think that playing in New Orleans for the winter influenced the way you played jazz?

PERRYMAN: Do you mean, did it help me any?

CORTINOVIS: Did it make any changes in the way you played piano?

PERRYMAN: Make any changes? I don't think so, because as far back as I can remember, I played now just like before I went to New Orleans on engagements.

CORTINOVIS: The same style?

PERRYMAN: The same style. I haven't changed. I only play my version of it, see. What I

mean, I don't care how Oscar Petersen played the piano, I don't care how Peter Nero would play the piano. I don't care how Teddy Wilson plays the piano. But, I'm saying, I play like I play. That's the way I played, and I haven't changed. And for a wide execution, I don't go into much...just enough to redress the number, a little, you know. Make it sound like it's got a little addition to it, you know. So, it hasn't changed me at all. Because I had to play, "Someone to Watch Over Me"...I'd play it the same way as when it first came out. And, if I had to play the "St. Louis Blues", I'd play it just like I first played it back there in 1917-18. Because I was playing the "St. Louis Blues."

CORTINOVIS: Yes, so, you came to St. Louis the first time in .1930-1931?

PERRYMAN: Oh, no, no, I was living here then. My first time coming to St. Louis actually was in 1921, see, 1921. And I came back, I stayed here awhile, I stayed until the fall; no, I went back, and then I came back, and in 1922, I got a job playing at the roadhouse here, the old "Maples", they called it.

CORTINOVIS: Where was that?

PERRYMAN: That was out in the county.

CORTINOVIS: Do you remember where it was?

PERRYMAN: Well, it was close to the center of Webster Groves...out there... Dinty Colbeck's old place. This was "Carters", they called it. But they called it, the "Maples." And I left. The next time in St. Louis was 1924. I came through here; I was with a band out of Jackson, Tennessee, and we stopped here for a few days. But the very next time I came back here to live was in 1927. So, I came to join Floyd Campbell. But all that had happened prior to that, you know.

CORTINOVIS: Gus, it sounds to me like you've never had much trouble getting a job.

PERRYMAN: No.

CORTINOVIS: You always worked "steadily when you wanted to?"

PERRYMAN: When I wanted to, yes.

CORTINOVIS: You always worked at music exclusively? You never had another job?

PERRYMAN: Oh, yes, sure, because that was during the time back here 19...before World War II, I got a job, and I went to work, and I worked for a man out in the county, that was in 1940. He had a little boy and a little girl, and he hired me just to take care of the little boy because he suffered with asthma, and he had to be out in the open air all the time, you know. And he hired me just to take care of him. He said, "You don't have anything to do, just take care of him, disregard what my wife tells you to do," he said, "because I hired you, and you look to me for your check." He said, "But I want you to take care of Tommy, and I want you to teach Tommy the tricks of boys, because I want him to come up a boy. The little boy took a liking to me right away. He was crazy about me. His wife used to tell me to do chores, you know, so I'd tell her, "Mrs. _____, I have to take care of Tommy. You'll have to get someone

else to do it." So, she'd tell him. He'd tell her, "Well, I told him that." He was a good man. He was the head shoe buyer for Wolfe Shoe Company...a pretty big man. But, now, getting on...after I left him, I got a job with the Shell Oil Company, that was in 1941. January, 1941. One of the musicians was working there, and he got a different job as a maintenance man. So, he gave me the job he had. I worked for Shell about four years and a half. I left and got a job...the war was going on, you know...and I got a job playing in a night spot at Kingshighway and Delmar, called the Club Adult... It was an all night spot. See, we stayed open and caught all the shifts coming from the plant, you know. War plants, you know. And I worked there, that was in 1944, and I worked there from 1944-1947, September, 1947. Then, I was out of a job. And I went to Barnes Hospital and I got a job, working in the maternity hospital. And the lady who was the superintendent of the hospital, she was a very, very nice lady. She liked me all right, but she cheated me, all right, on my color, you know. And my housekeeper...she was just sweet...Ms. Fort. And I worked there about five years at Barnes. When I left Barnes, I got a better job at Principia School, and I went out there as just a laborer, you know, and I wound up receiving clerk and the mail handler at Principia. Over there on Page and Delmar. I worked there seven and a half years. Yep...so, I got a job at the Forest Park Hotel after Principia.

CORTINOVIS: With Singleton Palmer?

PERRYMAN: No, I was a houseman at the Forest Park Hotel. I had to work, you know, and I didn't mind working whether it was labor or music. I was always agreeable, you know. I worked there at Forest Park about two years...better than two years and a half. But in that time, we got a job working in Gaslight Square.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, yes:

PERRYMAN: In 1961, I became 60 years old. I said, "I'm going to quit." You see, how long I worked...I haven't accomplished anything, I haven't accumulated anything; although...! did accomplish quite a bit, because... to be grateful for...I managed to keep living; survive, you know. I was thankful to God for that. But, anyway, I quit, because we were working again at Gaslight Square. So, we stayed there, as I told you. I left the Forest Park Hotel in September, 1960. I stayed there eight years.

CORTINOVIS: Tell me about down at Gaslight Square.

PERRYMAN: Oh, well, we had a good stretch of it. And I enjoyed it. I met so many people, practically from all over the world, yes. I really enjoyed my job. I always had a nice bunch of fellows to work with, you know. All congenial and everything...and we were just like one happy family.

CORTINOVIS: What kind of music did you play mostly down there?

PERRYMAN: We played Dixieland. You see, that's why we stayed there so long.

CORTINOVIS: Exclusively, Dixieland?

PERRYMAN: Yes, Dixieland.

CORTINOVIS: How would you say Dixieland differs from other kind of jazz.

PERRYMAN: Well, as I told you before, a lot of improvisation...in Dixieland... you know, you play what you feel'. We didn't use any music just to be sitting up there reading music, we had rehearsals for that...go there and get them down... then we played the notes the way we felt. Then, you could be relaxed and play. See what I mean? But, if you're sitting up there reading a lot of music, you can't. You're tense, you see, you hope and pray you don't make a mistake the entire night.

CORTINOVIS: As I remember that place, there wasn't any place to dance, was there?

PERRYMAN: No.

CORTINOVIS: People just came in and listened.

PERRYMAN: That's right, no dancing, we just done concerts.

CORTINOVIS: Gus, did you ever play North? It sounds to me like St. Louis was as far North as you got?

PERRYMAN: Well, just recently, we played in Omaha, Nebraska. We went up there for four days. And, of course, before that, we went to Chicago and played at "The Blue Note" after we came out of Forest Park Hotel. We went to Chicago and went to "The Blue Note"...that was when the Blue Note was in the basement. We were there for a three weeks' engagement. That's about as far North as we have been...Chicago. We have had, you know, offers to come to Minneapolis and St. Paul, but we never did come through. So, we've made Chicago. So, that's about as far as we've been.

CORTINOVIS: In music, what is the most fun for you?

PERRYMAN: In what way?

CORTINOVIS: What do you like to do most? Do you have any particular songs you like to play, or way you like to play?

PERRYMAN: Well, I don't know of any particular numbers. I just played whatever he called for me to play.

CORTINOVIS: What kind of music do you like the best?

PERRYMAN: You mean, of all music?

CORTINOVIS: Yes.

PERRYMAN: Well, I like all music.

CORTINOVIS: Do you?

PERRYMAN: Honest, I do. I like all music. I don't downgrade no music, regardless of how

bad or how good they are playing. Because there is one thing that I respect them for and I appreciate...their efforts. You know, no matter how bad they may sound, I still like them because they are trying.

CORTINOVIS: How about some of the new music? What do you think of it?

PERRYMAN: Well, some I like...some I don't. I'll be honest with you, some I don't like.

CORTINOVIS: How about serious music? Do you ever go to the symphony, or listen to serious music records?

PERRYMAN: Sure, I go to pop concerts quite often. If I see that Rubenstein, or someone like that...why, sure, concert violinists. Yes.

CORTINOVIS: I just wanted to ask you one more thing. This period when you played on the Gulf Coast...was anybody that you ever heard still playing original ragtime, do you think?
(We're almost out of tape here)

PERRYMAN: On the Square?

CORTINOVIS: No, on the Gulf Coast.

PERRYMAN: Oh, sure, I'd run into several.

CORTINOVIS: Quite a bit of ragtime?