

Interview with Mr. George Johnson, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, September 1941

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Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [Sneezes (?)]

Mr. George Johnson: Bless you. That's when ah, he, he, was, he was giving niggas something to eat. Now when year of '82, they, the ah, the-e-e-e government had given Negroes some provisions, you understand. You see. And he [Jefferson Davis] didn't know had given Negroes enough something to eat, you understand. And so he come from New Orleans '82, in the overflow, and brought a steamboat of freight, to the Bend and landed at the [Ushering (?)] Store right to the levee; had it unloaded right there for his niggas. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mrs. Elizabeth Lomax: Did he sell it or give it to them?

Mr. George Johnson: Give it to them. No ma'am. Wouldn't sell them nothing in the world.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, ah you started to tell me about the instruments that were in this string band, string band used to play for the dances at the Cotton Picking celebrations.

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, well ah, had the bass violin, and guitar, two guitars; and bass violin, and solo bass violin, and second, first and second lead violin. And boy had a fife.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: A fife?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Had a fife. And they played those things too. In their way. They played them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, ah, di, ah you can't think of any things they played can you?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. No, sir. But they, they played those things. Really played them. Really played them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, ah how did they learn to play the, to play those instruments?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they had an old fellow there named, Old Man Campbell. Old Man Campbell learned them boys how to do that stuff. Old railroad carpenter.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Old railroad carpenter?

Mr. George Johnson: No he was a carpenter.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Oh.

Mr. George Johnson: Carpenter down on our home place there named, Campbell.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: He learned his two boys, and two more other boys, had that string band, understand. You see. Little boys, you hear them play all through the night. Wake up at night and they be practicing and playing. We'd be going home in bed, understand, but these boys be playing at his house. You know, by Campbell's house.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: And e-e-everybody enjoyed, you understand; but when they ever get ready to have a big something, why, they'd ride on the place there, why they, sent for them come over there play for them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: They'd have a dance that night, you know. Have a big time. Cotton Picking and on like that.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. It's too bad you can't remember those pieces because they be worth—

Mr. George Johnson: No. I can't think of those things, but I, see all my interested was in brass band and stuff, you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: My interest was in some brass band stuff.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See, I always liked brass band. I played brass band myself.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah what ah what a what instruments did you have in the brass band?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, had them all. Had two coronets: E-flat and B-flat. Solo alto. First and second alto. Two tenors. Viatone. Bass. And second bass. Had a B-flat bass, E-flat bass. Two drummers and pair a cymbals.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: And we had the [tie (?)] to ??? . We had plenty [tie (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah di, di, di, did they have any homemade ah instruments when you were there? People who could blow a bottle or blow a pipe? Or blow a pump pipe, or blow a bottle and that sort of thing?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, I had a fellow there once, had a fellow once that could pump blow a, blow a bottle.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Play a ??? with that bottle.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Play with?

Mr. George Johnson: ??? tune on that bottle. That tune. And had a fellow there once that could play, play ahhh, play a can. Take his can. Take a can make him a fife man blow from a can. And he make notes like a man on, on a horn. With his fingers.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Makes notes just like a man on a horn.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. With his, with his fingers. That can. He tried a ??? a fellow clean a fife, you understand. Made one just out of can.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: He could play that thing. Really play it. In the *Juice* [*Hop* (?)]. Started playing *Juice* [*Hop* (?)] *Hall*. I know it's a little thing cause I my mind on, on the music.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I wanted to learn music itself. And I learned it too. I really learned it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: So you weren't interested much in these homemade things—

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: —and so you, you were going play your—

Mr. George Johnson: I played brass band.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. I'm old I'll play a thing now.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I can, bet I can play *Fort Watch* right now.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Can you play *Faith Which*?

Mr. George Johnson: *Fort Watch*.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *Fourth Watch*?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. [*Not Guilty* (?)], play it right now.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, I can do it. Of course, in my head, you understand. I got ??? part of me. See. I played in two bands at home. A little old boy down in Marshall had a band. I had a little boy that know that stuff down there from them, them books down in there. I learned up here. Went to school learned it. Alcorn [Alcorn State College] I went through there.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You did?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Preston Burrows, President down there. James Burrows.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Preston Burrows, yes.

Mr. George Johnson: Preston Burrows.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Preston Burrows is from Fisk.

Mr. George Johnson: Fisk University, that's right. Yes, sir. At Fisk University. Now I did, when Alcorn first started in that book written down in history.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, who taught music at Alcorn Men?

Mr. George Johnson: George Comfort.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: George Comfort?

Mr. George Johnson: George Comfort. He and [Kurt (?)] Gibson. He had a sister named, Alfreda. She could play a horn too. She a brass horn player.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Mhumm.

Mr. George Johnson: She really played. Now we had a big time anytime, in, in, she was into dining hall and breakfast, you understand. Go out, some kind of march, then you know to make that circle come around and bring them to the dining hall. All the girls dressed in uniform, you understand. The brass band ??? to the, to the dinning hall. We had a big time. Leave from dining hall every fellow go his own classroom.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: We had a big time. Old Man Bird's brother, he a professor of mathematics. Another fellow there he professor of, of agriculture. Because agriculture, was mighty nice thing for us to study there too.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. Well, why did you stop school?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, my old father died. I had to come home.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: He died up here and he got sick and, died up here and I had to come home. For my mother.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did ah, a did you farm here ever? Do you just work around in the town?

Mr. George Johnson: No. I farmed a few years after I was married. My wife [family (?)] children. I farmed [with (?)] them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I lost my wife, [I almost lost them (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: My next son, he farmed, you understand. But got children. Raised them children for they get out of danger; got them up grown I just, let them alone, for children go out and look for themselves. And they got to be grown, you understand. See. I never turned them out loose by themselves. And their mother was crazy about them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, do you think that the, ah the songs that the colored people sang were better than the songs that the white people sang ah? Do you like the songs better? Do you like the way Negro people sang them better?

Mr. George Johnson: No. I tell you. Now I tell you one thing, a white man can't sing a song like a nigga.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Just can't do it. And he got something in his head. He ain't learned that stuff. I heard a nigga tell a white man once, he said ah, he asked them, "What you, what do you get of this Saturday Night thing?" Said, "What do you get?" I said, "Yeah." [taps cane] He said, "Man, if you get that trying be a nigga one night, trying to be a nigga one night, you want to be a nigga a thousand days." [laughter] Say, "Why?" He said, "Get the best curriculum out on Saturday Night [Jolly (?)] anything in the world. Rather be a nigga on Saturday Night."

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [chuckles]

Mr. George Johnson: I said, "I ??? poor thing." Ah he said, "I want be a nigga." "Darn fool, you ought to be awfully crazy. Worst thing in the world." Say, "I'm sorry to be a nigga."

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [*chuckles*]

Mr. George Johnson: "Sorry." I ought to been like, ought to be just like master Jeff. Just like him. If I had been around all my, if I had, if he had lived now I might, I never would be like him. I never would like him. Never under [heaven (?)]. I figure on some day writing young Jeff where, send me to go there. Go over there where he is. I'm a write himanyhow, un, un, this week or next week. 'I want some money. Yes, I am. I'm a write him. I need it. You know what I tell him what I need? For I get some wood.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm

Mr. George Johnson: I get some coal for the winter, understand. You see. And I write him he send it to me. I need it. He never will tell me no. Now when I ask him, tell him things right. Some people ask a man for money for, for-r, for whatever; and he don't tell, he don't have time for no money now. Because he got plenty money. That's a mistake. That's because I need. Say, 'I need coal for the winter.' Understand. You see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm

Mr. George Johnson: September, now it's fall, everybody getting coal reckon and wood, wood getting haul wood now from, from here, about Six Mile Lake, about six mile. In that road down there, understand. You see. That's while there raining and wood cost more and it wasn't raining. Well, I can get a little cord, cord wood. You see. Block wood, you understand, for about four dollars, you understand. You see. Well now, we should get rain hard, winter come, it cost me ten dollars. See now? That's how it is. Because coal will cost more, more always cost more if you get it at the depot there. For to haul put my yard shed, you understand. Something about three-and-a-half, and I do all right. But don't take this go with you time get a hard raining. Because while they getting wood and, out the woods to the ah gravel road, then you got to haul here, you know. Six miles. That's too long. Only treat him like he treat me. He nice to me, I'm nice to him.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, are there any musicians around here now?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. All my past music all them fellas, they all dead. They all gone.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Are there any, any fiddlers or banjo players left in the country? It's hard to find a banjo player now.

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. No, sir. Ain't none here. They started a little band at school there. Way at school there. And you know what I'm saying? I sat out there and hear them try a play a piece. And pray my lord. I stared and looked and looked and listened and listened, go down near the [county (?)] and stared and listened. And I could never because they couldn't, couldn't play a piece in your life.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *[laughs]*

Mr. George Johnson: They couldn't play a piece. And my band play a piece, maybe every night. They practice three times a week. Practice Monday night. Thursday night. I mean, Wednesday night and Friday night. Every night we play a brand new piece. Stay until two o'clock play a piece of music. But these young musicians now they, they, they, they head ain't even right. They, they head ain't right. They ain't got no room in-in-in there for common sense. That's a fact. Use their head just for hat rack.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *[laughs]*

Mr. George Johnson: That's [poor (?)]. That's just [poor (?)]. I'm, I'm, you know what I'm saying? I'm really glad I come up in the old days, so I know things. Young men don't talking about say, 'He don't know.' Good thing he learn how to read and write and, and before he check on somebody I know that's all you, all you can can do. Before he check on somebody. Fool somebody. Try and fool somebody. Somebody put him in jail. And there he go. *[disc scratch]* Man, it's just common sense. I tell you truth.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, ah you don't have any boys going through here now trying to fiddle or play a banjo? You don't run, run into them now?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. I heard gang here, I believe this morning, yesterday morning, right out there on the road there. I didn't get up to go out there to see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I say, "Some old past niggas." Say, "I didn't want to hear it."

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See, if I didn't, if I didn't know music, I'd do all [the music couldn't ask (?)] me about it. I pass along myself.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See, I learned it. And it don't bother my head at all. I can play ??? hear the music, but a man got to play something, play something high until I can understand you. I can't hear it. Just going out there and start that playing for bunk, I don't like that. I don't like, I don't like it. I know I'm poorly but I know how-how I was raised. They raised me. They raised me.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah you, did you say that your ah grandmother told you that Jefferson Davis had one eye?

Mr. George Johnson: One eye. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. See master Jeff was riding, my home place Brierfield to Hurricane, one morning soon, riding in a hurry, you understand; he was going to Hurricane. Riding that horse. His saddle horse. Bla, black horse called him, Midnight. And a scythe got in his eye. And they had to take his eye out. Grandma told me that when I was a little boy. So I see master, "Master got, got two eyes." Say, "No, son that's a glass eye." Grandma said that. My grandma a old slave time, old, old, old. My ma's ma. She old. See.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

George Johnson: See, she old.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: A how long did, did how, how, how long did she live?

Mr. George Johnson: Grandma lived till, [*pause*] Grandma died in '81. She died in '81.

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