

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

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Dr. Charles S. Johnson: ??? bar or, any fiddlers and things come in there? Any music you remember from around the saloon time?

Mr. George Johnson: No. Nothing but ours. Nothing but my band.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: My band. My own band in there playing sometimes ??? .

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Oops. I got to go a quick [piece (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. How a gang on the account in there buying whisky. I get the group plenty of whisky. I get my horn players bring a group, playing with that band. I love music, you understand. You see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: But you didn't have people just coming in to play pieces?

Mr. George Johnson: No. No. No. Nothing like that. No, sir. No, sir. We had our own band. Our own. Our own music. See, every fellow he can't play. He play what he hear.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: But when you put the music on record. On that black disc there. We doesn't just play, you doing something there.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See. Some fellows don't want to show up for [rehearsal (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: ??? his brother's ??? or ??? now why is that? What's this? Something else, when I was a kid in school—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —George Comfort, Alcorn.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Don't know what five lines and four spaces mean.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Then when you get the solo. I learned all that kind of stuff. Then when he play in the string band, he don't know whether he make a relative in the band, or else make a-a other thing. He don't know anything about it. Learn how to make those flats, sharps. Don't know. Don't know his flat when he see it. Don't know a sharp when he see it. Don't know natural. See. I learned those things.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Mh-mm.

Mr. George Johnson: From a boy. I got to school and learned sure enough. Best to get it in your head while you're young. Can't get it in when you get old.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Learn when your young.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Di-did you ever see anybody ah play the bones? [sweet (?)] bones between their hands and—

Mr. George Johnson: I see that too. See that too. See it in both hands. Knock all them bones from his hands, see. Had a fellow here could do that too.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You did?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Where did you first see that?

Mr. George Johnson: Where I was a boy down home.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: [In the (?)] Bend. A boy out on Hurricane Place, understand. A boy named ah, Will Louis. Will Louis can do it; take them bones just [cow rib (?)] bones. Saw him ??? , you understand. And People want everything just beat them all the pieces.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. ??? [fact (?)]. He real smart boy too. He was, he was ah, a drummer too. That boy was a drummer.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: He was?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. I'll tell you what happened to me and my band once. I, my band was playing a piece and a boy knocked a hole in the bass drumhead. And then old fellow, played in the Civil War, understand. He was a drummer too. His name was, Jim Miller, right here in Mound Bayou, and ah "I [got a hole (?)] in the drumhead." And he showed me how to put the drumhead in.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I never have forgot it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I'd put it in there today if I had one. If I had to, drum got a hole in it. If it got a hole in it, I put one in there. Say, 'I'll do it.'

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Learned when I was young, understand. You see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, whose the fellow who played the bones up here after you came to Mound Bayou?

Mr. George Johnson: Fellow named, Hex Singletary.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. How long ago was that do you reckon?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, it been ten or twelve years ago.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ten or twelve years ago?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. He was my drummer too. He was in my brass band.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Is he living now?

Mr. George Johnson: No. He's dead now. He dead. He real smart. Worked for cousin Isaiah a long time. Years worked, cousin Isaiah, used to drive a wagon for them. Haul logs. He was good with a wagon. Teamster. He real smart.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, do you, ah do you remember the first blues you heard that you didn't like? Do you remember what it was? Do you remember when you first heard it and didn't like it?

Mr. George Johnson: I don't know. The first blues I heard—oh, I hear a little old boy sing that thing here. I forgot it now, anyhow, right here in Mound Bayou.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Because that's something I didn't care for. It was a little stupid for me; I didn't care nothing about it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: A little stupid for you, huh?

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, sir. Yeah, sir. I didn't care no kind of blues. Didn't care nothing about it. I hear niggas, niggas sing the blues and I didn't want to hear it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You didn't want to hear it?

Mr. George Johnson: Never want to hear it. [I think (?)] he is crazy. That's right, [he is (?)] crazy.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [*laughter*] What did it sound like?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, it wasn't, sound like nothing. Just some—oh, lord most of, it wasn't nothing. Just some Negroes just acting monkey. Nigga act like he got shortcoming. That's right. He shortcoming. He uncouth. See. Nigga ain't got some kind of stuff in his head, why he just going be a monkey all his life, right. Care about it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Naw, I like the blues.

Mr. George Johnson: You do! I don't care nothing about it.

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

Mr. George Johnson: Nothing. Nothing about the blues. Want to get me to know something, like something, you get a brass band start let's go do a quickmarch out there. Show you what I'll do. quickmarch go I'll go play ??? *St. Alderman's Command, St. Alamo ???* you up. *[Mr. George Johnson taps his cane for emphasis]*

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *St. Alamo?* That's another, another one—

Mr. George Johnson: *St. Alamo*, my god all mighty! Man. Yes, sir. quickmarch.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: quickmarch?

Mr. George Johnson: quickmarch. Every foot *[tip scratch sidewalk (?)]* every, every fellow's foot just right there. Every fellow's foot.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, do you remember any other quickmarch titles?

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah. *St. Alderman's Command* quick, quickmarch.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Huhmm?

Mr. George Johnson: *St. Alderman's Command*.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *Saint* whose command?

Mr. George Johnson: *St. Alderman's*.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *St. Alderman's Command?*

Mr. George Johnson: Yes. *St. Alderman's Command* quickmarch. And the *Final Quickstep* quickmarch.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *Final Quicksteps?*

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. *[Mr. Johnson intones]* These are quicksteps to these quicksteps. Man, been all through that stuff. Been through it. Been through. See I, the reason I know everything,

because when you, fellow got to learned it from a blacksmith. He had lived had something in his mind and he's young. And he knew he'd get old. See. That's why I can tell you something about drilling a piece of iron. Because my dad learned me. He showed me how.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I don't fool with no kind of iron, you see. I played brass band long enough not to fool with a blacksmith. I play every now, you see. But don't take me like, can't use no, I know what, like I tear up a piece of iron like a rock.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See. I got it in my mind. In my head stuck since I was a little boy. You take a man [stick it in his head (?)] he soon forget that thing. You get them boy here he wanna learn it. He get to learn that stuff. Learn, if he's a boy, he can learn. Learned mine sixty-years ago. Sixty-five-years ago.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Got it from Daddy. Grandpa. Got it from pa, he wasn't ??? blacksmith but he know it, understand. You see. He's engineer. Civil Engineer. Now, he, master Jeff, sent my dad across Louisiana to chain [peg (?)] the chain to white folks land, you understand. And across the river Ashford Landing, niggas be in the field farming, you know, breaking up ground and cutting stalks like that. "See that nigga?" That nigga say, "What nigga you talking about?" He looks at them. "That Jeff Davis' nigga. That Jeff Davis' free nigga. That Jeff Davis, see nigga got them chains [pegging (?)] ??? , part nigga." When they meet day, you understand, that ain't no white man.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: "Yes, sir. That's Jeff Davis nigga. That nigga belong to master Jeff. I'm scared of that nigga." Now he come back with that ??? Mound Palmyra. Be on master Jeff's place, you understand.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Right.

Mr. George Johnson: ??? man on a chain, you understand. ??? . Give you money for it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You said that your mother was Creole?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, where eh and ah what part of Louisiana did she come from?

Mr. George Johnson: Red River.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Red River?

Mr. George Johnson: Red River. South of Natchez. Yes, sir. My mother. My grandmother. My aunty. My uncle. But my father's brother, they come Richmond. My father. My father's brother and my grandpa, they come Richmond—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —my father's side. I hadn't kn-kn-kn-known my grandfather on my mother's side. I know my grandma on my mother's side. Her name, Mateliza.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. Well, ah well, did your grandmother, Mateliza, on your mother's side, did she talk strange?

Mr. George Johnson: No. She Creole, you understand. She lord ??? .

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: I mean did she talk different from your, from the other folks?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. My mother too. Aunt too. They were [like that (?)] just that Creole, you understand. You see. They knew it. They raised up in that stuff, you know. In Louisiana. Down on sugar farm. On cane country.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: They made molasses and sugar, like that, you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did you ever hear your mother sing any Creole songs?

Mr. George Johnson: No. No. She ain't sing that. If she did I didn't hear her. I didn't know what she was talking about no how.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. [*giggles*] Know what your talking—

Mr. George Johnson: I didn't know what she was talking about no how.

Mrs. Elizabeth Lomax: You can talk a little of that Creole.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah can you, you, can you talk some of Creole?

Mr. George Johnson: Sure!

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, say something. Let me hear something.

Mr. George Johnson: [*speaking in Louisiana Creole: see endnote*] Mo, chuis pas t'un enfant. Mo, j'ai pas pres server. Je connais pas, connais pas, oui ??? [*last line undecipherable*].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: What were you saying?

Mr. George Johnson: I cussing you out.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Oh, you cussed me out. [*laughter from all*]

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Well, that's a great country down there. My father said that's a good country. Jeff Davis country. All his stuff was [right (?)]. Jeff Davis was [right (?)]. Jeff Davis had another plantation across the river at a new town just, he give a place to his brother's daughter. She married a man named, Jeff [Lockim (?)]. Place used to call Diamond, you understand. It's a rich place they called it Diamond. And he give that plantation to his niece. Miss Fannie. And she married Jeff [Lockim (?)] and called it [Lockim (?)] Place, you understand. Mrs. Fannie [Lockim (?)].

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

Mr. George Johnson: [Lockim (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Could you spell it? I, I, I, I can't get your pronunciation, that's the reason I—

Mr. George Johnson: Ahha. Jeff [Lockim (?)]? Now he was a sh-, oh, how you spell [Lockim (?)]? I don't know; anyhow, he was the sheriff Warren County sixty-years ago—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —and master Jeff was his uncle by marriage, understand. You see. He married master Jeff's niece, Miss. Fannie. She was Miss. Fannie Davis, understand. You see. Jeff-Da—Joe Davis' daughter. And he married her and he give her that place over there. [A place big enough for his (?)] children. Whooo man, lord! [Great big place they had (?)]. And a mansion over there, a

mansion over there, a mansion. There's a mansion there for them to live in. And ah she sent for my ma. Come over there see her. She loved my mother. Sent for her come over there to see her. She, she, she get ready ma to come over to see her, she sent me way over there, write letter tell, Mrs. Ilene, tell Mrs. Betsy say, 'Come over here.'

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Ma come over there [serve (?)] for Mrs. Davis.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. [Do everything for (?)] Mrs. Fannie.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did you ever hear any ah, any songs that they called paddling songs, or rowing songs, ah any kind any songs like that?

Mr. George Johnson: No. I'm afraid not. [*a door cracks open*] I'm afraid not.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [*clears throat*] Well, ah did, did, did you ah, remember ah any of those songs that they called tough songs?

Mr. George Johnson: What tough niggas sing? What tough niggas sing?

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. Like the *Green*, ever hear the *Green Corn*, *Dan Tucker*, *Arkansas Traveler*, *Mississippi Sawyer*, any of those songs?

Mr. George Johnson: Now, *Mississippi Sawyer*, I heard that thing, *Mississippi Sawyer* long time ago. And I heard *Arkansas Traveler*. I heard that played on in in different orchestras.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: I heard them play that thing. I couldn't play it. I heard them play it, you understand. I couldn't play it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Heard a fellow play it on a violin. Heard them play it out of key on a violin. ??? [De Lyon (?)] ??? [De Lyon Fiddleson (?)]. There was no violin like there is now. Now violin now too

high class for them fellows back in that kind of days. [People don't fiddle (?)] for that long, you understand. Great [real big old thing (?)] ??? a box. Well, they, for they had something good—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —but that was just an old time thing. But these [line (?)] of fiddles got now why you see most ??? don't have it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. I heard those things when I, I was a kid. Heard all those things.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, this music you hear on the jukeboxes now, jazz, do-do-do you think that's colored people's music, or do you think that's white people's music?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, it's mixed.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: It is?

Mr. George Johnson: It's really mixed. Really, really mixed. Now jazz music only thing they got going now. Only thing going now. I can play it on a horn.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You can play it on a horn?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. If it's music I can play it on a horn. I can play it on a horn.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, do you like jazz better than you like the blues?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, I care about no blues. Blues. Blues the kind of thing, the only thing the blues is, tell you what the blues is. Blues just, just ah a little type thing. A little type. As far as that ??? to me wouldn't touch it at all.

END OF SIDE A

Endnote: The interviewer goes on to ask him what he said, and he says “I cussin' you out.” But actually, Mr. George Johnson doesn't use any profanity. The basic translation of the passage is: I'm not a child. I'm not waiting on [you (?)]. I don't know, I don't know, yes ??? . Which in slavery times would most certainly have been considered impertinent and insubordinate, but it wasn't cursing. Mr. George Johnson seems to be having a bit of a joke on the interviewer, using the Creole to express some impertinence and resistant attitudes that don't at all come through in the English majority



of his testimony. Whether this is indicative of some wider sociolinguistic trend or not would make a fascinating research topic. We do know that in the 19th century, the Creole language was often used for satire and expressing emotions that would have been socially unpermissible in either International French or English.