

Transcripts of John Levy's Oral History Selections for the Classroom Activity

Clip 1: From Page 8 in the Full Transcript PDF

Levy: I recall going to these neighbors. There were an Italian family. I remember the boy's name. Goodie was my age, so Goodie and I were pretty much – we'd go inside each other's house and they'd come in my house and we'd have – so I didn't really run into anything in prejudice that made me being alerted to what segregation was, because on that block, or in that particular area, it was sort of mixed.

Mitchell: So neighborhoods – it was probably typical for the South in that period of time – neighborhoods weren't segregated . . .

Levy: No. They weren't segregated.

Mitchell: . . . in the South.

Levy: No. That's right. Not in New Orleans, anyway.

Mitchell: Right.

Levy: Not in that area. I don't know about any other part of the South, but in New Orleans, it wasn't. The first sense of segregation, or that there was some form of segregation, came to me through my godfather, who was a French Creole, but very light skinned. He passed for white. He would take me into town to shop for me, for a birthday or for whatever holidays. I don't recall the exact holidays, but I do recall the incident of getting on the streetcar and him going all the way up to the front where the motorman was. There was a motorman and a conductor. They had these signs where you put up in between each section – you could move – for example, if there were more white people on the streetcar at the time, then this sign would be moved back. Each seat had a little hole in [it] where you could stick this sign in. I had to stay behind that sign, and he would go up front. Then he'd come back and make a joke out of it, but I realized then there was a difference, that me being black, I couldn't go past that sign. Whites sat in the front end of it and blacks sat in the back end of it.

Mitchell: Can you describe how you felt even at that early time about that? Or did you have a sense of anything?

Levy: I felt very hurt about the whole thing, because I felt that I wanted to go up front, like any kid would like to do: go to the front of the streetcar and stand up and watch the motorman or whatever. I couldn't do that. So I really felt – it gave you a feeling of rejection. That was the first time I realized there was a difference.



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Levy: No. No, I didn't have that. All the singing was done pretty much in the church.

Mitchell: And long hours in the church I think.

Levy: Yeah. You spent a lot of time in church. That was your social life, really, in the church. But I heard music almost every day, because practically every day there was parades and stuff.

There was also – a form of advertising was music. They had a float – they had floats to advertise different events, like fish fries that were coming up the weekend, the movie – in fact there was a regular movie float that came on with the whole side of – each side of this float was pasted like we call “billboards” now. It was pasted [with] a billboard of what was appearing at the movie that week. On the float was a group of musicians. They'd have a bass player, which was on the end, a trombone player, a trumpet player, and usually a clarinet player. That was your sound. That was where you got your sound to bring the people out. They'd be playing music as they came along. They'd be playing all kinds of popular music. You could run out and see what's happening and follow – I would follow them down the block – not past that corner – coming right back after that.

Also if there was a funeral on the way to the cemetery, the band would be playing, and the family followed behind this parade. Here again, I'd follow that to the corner. Then when they came back through the same street – they'd come back after the funeral – then they'd be swinging. I'd go out and watch them, check up on the floats.

Clip 3: From Pages 48 and 49 in the Full Transcript PDF

Mitchell: In New York, like throughout much of America, it was fairly racially divided, but along 52nd Street, how could you describe or how would you describe the racial atmosphere among jazz lovers and jazz enthusiasts? These clubs were open to anybody, am I correct?

Levy: 52nd Street was open to anybody, everybody. It wasn't – there wasn't any restrictions on who could come in or who could – if you had the money, you came in and sat down, and that was all that was needed. But basically there's more whites turned out on 52nd Street than blacks. A lot of blacks didn't come downtown as much as you might think to see these kind of people play. Most of the blacks stayed up in Harlem, where here again was another group of people playing – musicians playing – that a lot of people went to see. They would go up to Harlem to see these people play.

Mitchell: What were some of the clubs in Harlem? I know they had Smalls' Paradise.

Levy: Smalls' Paradise.

Mitchell: There was one that was . . .

Levy: Another room especially that Basie worked in, and a room that was an organ group – it was a room that played mostly organs. That's where Shirley Scott and – even Basie played organ in there – this particular club – with a small group, before the big-band – all his big-band experience, which came later on.

The uptown, or Harlem, clubs catered to more of especially creative things. In other words, they did more shows where they would have a comedian and a singer and then a tap-dancer or something. It was more like production shows that were being done in Harlem, more so – 52nd Street was strictly music. There was no dancers – no dancing. There wasn't anything. It was strictly listening.

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Levy: But George turned everything over to me. In other words, anybody that had to talk about anything in regard to the engagement and what was going on, had to discuss it with me. In some cases, the club owners or the disc jockeys – people didn't know I was black. When it came up, face to face – I'd be there, and I'd say – for example, we were in Omaha, Nebraska, at this club we were playing. The setup was there – we played over a bar. People were seated all around. The piano was in a certain setting on this stage which is raised above the bar. I was standing there at the rehearsal and sound-check, just standing there. I hadn't made myself known to the club owner. He was there. He was talking to George. He didn't talk to me at all. He just talked to George. George said, "Talk to John about that stuff." He looked over. John. Yeah, okay. So the piano, he said – I was telling him, "You need to move the piano, because this isn't the way George works." I said, "You need the piano moved to the other side of the stage and turned" a certain way. This club owner said to me, "Look. You just the road manager, a flunkie, or whatever. We don't change this. This is our setting." I said, "I tell you what. If you want him to go on that stage tonight and play, you move that piano." I said, "Otherwise, he ain't going on stage." We went over and talked to George. George said, "He's the manager. Yeah. Whatever he says, that's the way it is."

That went all the way. We went to St. Louis. A disc jockey wanted George to come out front and sit with him when he came on the show. George would not sit in a club with the audience in a segregated place or in any city where his musicians weren't allowed to do the same thing. He just refused to go out and sit with the audience. They had to come to his dressing room or interview him. He wouldn't go out. This particular disc jockey was upset because I said, "George will not come out and sit with you. You're going to have to come back to the dressing room if you want to talk to him, or we'll come to the radio station, or whatever, but he's not going to come out and sit with you." So his saying was – he didn't see me. He didn't know me. We just had a conversation – phone conversation. He said, "This Jew that George Shearing's got working for him . . ." He said, "This Jew is trying to tell me how to run my station – how to do my job on the station and refused to have George come out and socialize with us." But he didn't know. He's talking about "this Jew." That was such a joke with all of us. We still laugh about that.