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10-6-2001

## Interview with Mary Ann Fisher, 1923-2004 (FA 200)

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1-1

**TRANSCRIPT**

**RECORDING LOG NO.:** AR/01/05 (CT 11)

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**INTERVIEWER:** Amber Ridington

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**INTERVIEWEE:** Mary Ann Fisher

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**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October 6, 2001

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**PLACE OF INTERVIEW:** Bowling Green International Festival, Bowling Green, Kentucky's Fountain Square Park.

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**OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT:** Crowd passing by

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**EQUIPMENT USED:** Sony MZ--R90 Minidisk recorder, with Sony stereo mike ECM--MS907

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**AMOUNT OF RECORDING (TAPE/MINIDISK) USED:** 1 cassette tape (28 minutes)

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**DESCRIPTION OF CONTENTS:** An interview with Mary Ann Fisher, vocalist, that is preceded by twelve minutes of Fisher performing with Robert Phillips on saxophone and Billy Madison on keyboard. Fisher tells about her early life and singing career with Ray Charles and other performers such as James Brown, B.B. King, and Marvin Gaye.

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**TRANSCRIPTIONIST:** Laura Burnett

**DATE TRANSCRIBED** (Jan 28, 2002)

Transcribed with the support of a Transcription Grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission, Kentucky Historical Society

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**KEY:** R= Amber Ridington;

F= Mary Ann Fisher

*Italics* = emphasis;

[ ] = comments not part of recording

// = interrupted/simultaneous speech

Three digits in left column represent counter on tape machine used for transcription (i.e. 320)

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000 Sounds can be heard from the crowd, and Fisher speaking before she begins performing.

Performance lasts 12 minutes. Tape stops, then starts again.

132 R: This is Amber Ridington um, sitting in Bowling Green with Mary Ann Fisher.

F: Yeah, I'm glad to see you.

R: Hi.

F: Yeah.

R: Let me get that on high. Um, I guess I want to find out a little bit about your career as a singer.

F: Well I'm from, I was born in Henderson, Kentucky at the--right across the bridge from Evansville. And um, but I grew up, partly grew up in Louisville in an

orphanage. And I got adopted out. It's just a whole lot to it. And uh, later on, I would say that uh, came back to Louisville.

Well Ray Charles, he came to Fort Knox when I was singing with the Army band out there. And ah, they kept on asking and on and on worrying him, "Ray Charles, let Mary Ann sing with their band." "Let little sister sing." [laughs] So he says, "Oh Lord, come on little sister." Because we kept on getting on his nerves you know. When I got to singing ah, ah, "I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good," because he had a beautiful arrangement on that tune. And, ah, "Yeah little sister, come on, sing again little sister." So he came on the (?) and they say, "I don't know nothing be back through here in Louisville with me tonight.

151 If you want to go with me, I would like to have you." So he said, "Okay," and ah, I said, "Okay." And he came back and ah, I left here May the ninth 1955. And I sang with Ray Charles uh, three and a half years. And I left Ray Charles uh, 1958, Not till that (?) of fifty eight. So he uh uh..

R: Who were some of the other members of the band at that time?

F: Um, David Newman, uh Fathead (sp?) And Whiskey, the bass player, uh Bridge Why (sp?) was on trumpet, me, I was on the vocal. I uh, right after we took intermission----uh, I would come on and sing about three or four songs you know. And ah, we just went everywhere----

R: What kind of a tour? What----was there a certain tour that you guys were on?

F: Ah----

R:(?) started or?

F: Well, whoever we----you know he was doing mostly dances and (?)doing, doing what he's doing, now. Right now he don't need to do that, he he can fix all these casinos and things like that now.

R: But that--was there ever--Did he have recordings out at that time? He must have had some recordings out?

F: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Yeah.

F: "Fool For You," "I Got a Woman," and "Come Back Baby." [laughs]

R: Okay.

F: (?) He had anything out, that was uh, that was some good stuff. Yeah it was. I enjoyed being in with him, I mean, I have a lot of love for him now because a country girl like me, from the country and uh, I hadn't ever been anyplace before. And he just took me everywhere. It was beautiful.

R: Hmmmm.

F: He picked me. I'm glad he picked me. (?)

R: Mmhmm.

F:(?) Out of clear blue sky, he could pick me and I was glad.

R: Well it must have been because of your voice I'm sure. [laughs]

F: [laughs]

R: Partly anyway.

F: [Laughs] Partly, yeah. He enjoyed me, yes he did. Mmhmm. And um, after leaving Ray Charles, I stayed with Ray three and a half years.

183 And after leaving Ray Charles I worked with Jackie Wilson, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, B.B. King, Bobby Bland. Yeah, just, just name some of them. I was there. And I was glad because uh some of them I, I was uh little knee high to the duck myself when I, I but I always liked their music.

R: Mmmhmm.

F: Oh, I was crazy about their music, couldn't nobody never tell me nothing that I would ever, ever sing with them, no but I loved their music. Yes I did. (?) And then it was a lot of love in the world then. Right now you know, I don't know where the love went. But uh, I wish I knew.

R: Was it different traveling back then too? Because that's before uh, before desegregation, and I know traveling on the road//

F: Yeah, uh,

R: This//

F: Traveling.

R: Finding places to live—stay//

F: Yeah, Stay//

R: In hotels and that kind of thing.

F: Well, we never could stay in the white hotels, no, *not then*.

R: Uh huh. Well how would you know where the. Were they in the black part of towns? Or how would you know where to stay?

F: Um, we would just feel our way. And then Ray, Ray got so, he did not want to, um, sing like that, be segregated like that. So half of the places we did not go. We didn't go, and so. We played in Vegas, we could not stay there, but we played there (?) So things like that.

R: So that was mostly a white audience in Vegas then? Or would that be a black audience?

F: White, white. Oh yeah. Yeah, He was there and uh he he decided he wasn't going to play no more like that so we didn't play, we didn't play if if our people couldn't sit there and and and hear him play, he didn't play.

R: Mmmm.

F: And then we rolled up the gas (?) he said, "Fill it up," and you say, "You got a rest room?" "No?" "Well then don't put no more gas in my car." And it, it was just like that. I said, "Ray, you going to get us killed."

R: (talks to a passerby who asked directions) (?) It's by that arch over there, that stone arch over there. [laughs] Sorry.

215 F: Yeah, so. Did you keep on touring-- When did you stop touring? About what, or did you ever stop? [laughs]

F: Ah, well I was in Chicago and uh we broke up there.

R: Ah, with Ray Charles?

F: With Ray Charles. And I came on back to New York and he tried to keep me out of New York, he didn't want me to go to New York. I guess he just scared for me, I don't know but I'm me, I I just wasn't afraid.

R: Uh huh.

F: Something guided me. Something has been with me all my life And it wasn't

nothing but the Lord, because New York was fast. New York was fast. I'll tell ya'll right now. It's too fast. And all them people, oh, I fear for them people. I fear for them really, I, I have a deep feeling for people. Never found them or nothing. But you know even through uh, the other day the bus driver--

(A man interrupts the interview and speaks to Ridington. Tape is stopped but interview starts again).

- 235 F: My mother and father, they were sharecroppers. She washed and ironed and all of that. And my father he worked in the fields with his, with his (?), with his son, farming. And uh he had a gold pocket watch. And uh, Sunday I guess he didn't [Fisher is distracted by the festival and details of getting paid] (pause: five sec.) Ah, anyway, she um (pause: four sec.) See ah, somehow he got--

(A man interrupts again. Ridington laughs. Interview continues.)

F: One Sunday we was going to going up this dirt road to meet him. And he was up at the white house with a man that he worked for up there. And, and, and, and, and they got a, they picked up, my mother came by and picked (?) his watch and they picked it up. And then all of a sudden, they shot his head off.

R: I'm sorry, say that again? [nervous laugh]

F: Shot his head off. We was running up the dirt road to meet him—

R: Oh my goodness. My goodness.

F: and we saw him coming and (?) We was running up the dirt road to meet him. And they just got on in the car (?)

R: Oh my goodness.

F: Drinking. Drinking. Drinking. So my mother sent us all off to an orphanage right here in Louisville. And that's where Louisville come in.

R: Mmmhmm.

F: I got adopted out here in Russellville. And I went to school in Knobb City for a little while. Then ah, the lady that adopted me was nice enough to let my mother have me back. So after I moved back uh. I went to school there for a few minutes and ah, my mother died. I went back in 1935. My mother died in 1938. So still going to school so they let me uh, my mother had us back. Uh, cut it off for me Amber.

(Tape stops but begins again)

269 F: Thirty five or thirty six years. And uh, uh I'm going. What I want to do is get my life story wrote. You see, my. Ray didn't write it good. I mean, I need to write it because ah, there was a lot of things that went down in them three and half years that ah Just needs to be told.

R: Mmmhmm.

F: And I want them told. He didn't tell them. But I tell you what uh, Marvin Gaye did. He told it just like it is. He said, "Working with Mary Ann," um, ah, he said that ah, she, then he said, "Now was that a taste of heaven." [laughs]

R: [laughs]

F: Yeah he did. We worked two weeks. We worked two weeks at the (Howard?) theater in Washington, D.C. And it was a beautiful thing. Marvin was such a beautiful person too. Having to die so young. You know? But uh, it was his time to go.

285 R: What did they call you? They called you the Songbird of the South?

F: The Songbird of the South.

R: [laughs]

F: [laughs] You're not trying to take my name. You cannot take my name. They cannot do that.

R: No?

F: They gave me that name.

R: Who gave you that?

F: (?) Huh?

R: Who gave you that name?

F: Frank Stanley. Uh, he was the owner of the Louisville Dependent. And Bill Summers, he was the emcee that had a midnight (?) show go off at the Lyric (?) Theater. So one night I went in there, I said, "Sign me up." I was signed and the rest is history. [laughs]

R: [laughs]

F: So that-- that--that's what they gave me The Songbird of the South. Just like ah--Dinah Washington. She was the Queen of the Blues. Aretha couldn't step through that till something happened to Dinah. And ah, the First Lady of Song, that was Ella. There was the (Diamond? Sarah Vaughn?) I mean, everybody had a name.

R: Mmmmmhmmm.

F: And I was-- I had my name.

R: Uh huh.

F: And I'm *glad* of my name.

R: Yeah, well, you earned it. [laughs]

F: Yeah I mean, so um, when is the next time you're coming to Louisville?

R: Well I probably won't get through there maybe somewhere around Christmastime. I'm pretty busy with school, here. [laughs]

F: Oh yeah. But you live here?

R: I live here in Bowling Green.

F: You kidding!

R: That's why I was surprised when I saw—

F: [laughs]

R:[laughs] Mr. Madison walking around.[laughs]

F: I thought you lived up in Frankfort?

R: No, I live here in Bowling Green. So I'm going to school here at Western.

F: All right. I like Bowling Green. See Russellville is not too far from Bowling Green.

R: No, its close by yeah. Yeah If you're ever in Bowling Green

F: Yeah.



1-8

R: I wish I had a card or something. I don't have any with me. But Robert knows how to get in touch with me.

F: Yeah.

R: He's got my number.

(someone says, "If you'll just sign here," for a paycheck)

R: I'll let you go now. [laughs] Let you do your business.

314 This has been Amber Ridington, in interview with Mary Ann Fisher October 6, 2001 at the Bowling Green International Festival in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Um, this is my tape AR-01-05. The tape was, uh, the interview was preceded by a live performance of Robert Phillips on saxophone, um Bobby Madison on um, keyboard and Mary Ann Fisher on vocals um, playing live at the International Festival in the square downtown of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

324