LB: This is an interview with Mr. Frank Danzig in Los Angeles, California, July 19, 1977.

LB: Mr. Danzig, how did you happen to join the Federal Theatre Radio Division?

FD: Lorraine, at the time I was working at WNEW New York as a continuity writer and by invitation of Leslie Evan Roberts, the executive director or the manager of the Federal Theatre Radio Division, I was assigned to become the assistant to Elsie Dick, whom I also knew through WOR New York. Elsie Dick was the national continuity editor. I was the assistant national continuity editor.

LB: What do you do if you're a continuity editor?

FD: I can just vaguely remember that we used to check in scripts and made sure that they conformed to the exact form that the Federal Theatre Radio Division insisted upon and that everything was properly written for actors' ease to be in keeping with the way proper scripting was done. And also more than just that merely clerical type of thing, Elsie Dick in our department developed program ideas, brought in writers for modest sums and developed shows which were then used on the air. So it was two-fold, one for conformity and standards and two, for creativity. So we had, everything that was written came through our office.

LB: You joined the project rather late, although of course you didn't know that the project was going to come to an end in 1939. But it had been going on for some time before you joined the group. Why did you wait so long?

FD: I was working at WNEW, and I was just invited, whenever that was, in 1938. I didn't know too much about the Federal Theatre Radio division. Of course, as soon as I arrived there, I realized how much was done.

LB: Did you have meetings or was it the duty of people in charge? I'm struck by the wide range of programming that you had. You did something on Microbe Hunters, and you did something called The Epic of America. Were there discussions that you know about?

FD: Most of those programs had been originated and developed before I got there, but I believe that if Miss Dick or Mr. Roberts or any of the hierarchy had an idea for a program, then they would meet about it and it was cleared or it was decided to have it developed, a script was written, and if it seemed to be

contributing something to the airwaves, then it was actually broadcast. The Federal Theatre would go to the network or station and offer the program. And of course, who's going to say no because they were beautiful scripts, very well done, with a terrific cast.

LB: That was something I was going to ask you about. What was the general quality of radio fare during the thirties, just as far as commercial radio was concerned?

FD: During the thirties, there was considerable radio drama and these were superior programs, as I remember them, in the main. One other thing, there was so many actors available that when a program was recorded, there were a lot of parts for background people, for sounds and voices, and there were a lot of montages with. a lot of people. There were so many actors that they were delighted to assign to each program.

LB: So the radio stations were just then happy to have them broadcasting companies?

FD: Have the completed shows, yes. Nobody was mad at it, and they were very well done. Some of them were very well done. I think it's a shame that there aren't a good number of recordings of some of those top shows that you just mentioned.

LB: And you were given prime time?

FD: In the main, yes.

LB: It wasn't a matter of your just being put aside?

FD: I was never involved in that kind of time search or arrangements, but in the main, it was prime time or near prime time. These were semi-educational, but they were very good programs of high quality.

LB: Did you work on other programs as far as the continuity editor before you did your own Story of Swing?

FD: Yes. I was involved in a lot of the programs in a mechanical manner. I really don't remember too much about all that. The one that, The Story of Swing interested me because it was my hobby, and I played the principal role of Dave Morton on the recordings in the show. And you're taking the recordings back with you which so evidence.

LB: You were saying at lunch that you had musical background. Could you tell us for the tape the story of your--

FD: I. was a trumpet player from a very early age. It went through grammar school, high school, and college. And I was very active in music in college. And after college, I think my final appearance was on the Tommy Dorsey Amateur Swing Hour which program one week I was the winner of, I think it was $75 as a prize. But with the Dorsey orchestra--it was sponsored by Raleigh and Kool--this was a very exciting moment for me.

LB: As far as your M.A. thesis was concerned, because presumably that was the first documentation or the documentation which led to the series of scripts, what was available in libraries about this subject before you put this program together?

FD: It was a B.A. thesis, senior thesis in sociology, for Dartmouth College from which I graduated in 1937. And it was my idea to write, to do the thesis about the history of jazz. I went to the New York Public Library, and there literally was nothing there. There were occasional magazine articles, there were books like Discography, which is a French publication which I still have, listing many of the early jazz records by Penassiere I think, Ig Penassiere is the man's name. But there was very little written about jazz. It wasn't a popular subject. Jazz music, with its humble beginnings, was not too prominent and certainly not worthy in some people's minds of any scholarly approach although it seemed to be a culture complex that had its own paths and traveled as it would.

LB: Yes. So that it was a new area and to treat this seriously, treat it in an academic way, certainly was as difficult for you as you indicated.

FD: It was fun, and I have that thesis somewhere. It's not too great, but it's all there, and I know what was available because it's all listed in the index or the glossary.

LB: There is in the scripts that I brought to you today and that I was looking at this morning a rather delicate problem, and that is to balance the contributions made by blacks and the contributions made by white musicians. And I think the scripts did a good job. I remember talking to Eubie Blake, and Eubie saying he had to learn to write music for whites because writing music for blacks and for whites was different. And it seems to me that this was part of the problem that you had in telling the story in these half-hour segments was to try to give credit to the proper people, try to trace this very complex history.

FD: Well really, the history starting, let's say, in New Orleans really is a black, more black art than white. And yet the major contributions in music seem to be from black composers and black musicians, in my mind. Maybe others would not agree, but the Ellingtons and the Armstrongs and all those celebrated and much missed people were the great contributors. Also the early New Orleans kind of jazz, which is the whole, precedes those people. But I think it is a black developed art and belongs as a contribution of the black people.

LB: What are the problems of trying to tell that story in half-hour segments? Now it seems to me that once you have the idea it's a good idea and once you have your Dave Morton, and you told me earlier that you played the part of Dave Morton, you have the format. But what are the kinds of things that you thought about at that time as you put this program together?

FD: Well, we had 30 minutes, which is never 30. It's always 27 something, whatever the timing was. And we wanted to do so many records which somehow or other slow down the program in a sense because you've got to wait for three minutes until that's over before you progress with the conversation. But it was a way of playing records and also advancing the program by saying something as you were going along. But we know that--I'm just guessing--there were three or four records in every show, and we had an opening bit and a closing and some records, and then we had a subject that we'd write bits of narration and dialogue to advance the subject. We knew that we had to write three or four different scenes.

LB: And of course you'd never know in that kind of show whether people had heard the program preceding so that I noticed it was a very skillful job of bringing them up to date about what you had covered before. I'm thinking now of tracing this history, beginning in New Orleans. That certainly was another one of the--

FD: Thank you. That's very nice. It was not really a very great accomplishment. It got a good deal of notice, as you saw, from the publicity because it was unusual for the WPA or the WPA Federal Theatre to be doing a series on jazz. That was the main part. As far as the show was concerned, I didn't think it was terribly extraordinary. It was just okay, and we enjoyed doing it. I wrote this with a man named Bob Bach, Robert Bach, who to this day is on the staff of Goodson-Todman in New York, television producers. And Bob Bach and Frank Danzig became Bob Frank, and I don't know why but I guess as a minor executive I

couldn't have my name on a script. I know that Bob Bach was paid because I brought him from the outside. So therefore I guess I was, too. I have no idea what amount. I've forgotten that detail, but it was kind of a dumb idea because even if it had just been written by Bob Bach and left me out, at least somebody would have gotten name credit. As it was, nobody did and nobody knew who we were.

LB: I know we had some difficulty tracking you down for that very reason because we weren't able to find--

FD: It was a silly idea but anyway, that's how that occurred. I think that maybe it was prohibited for one to be on the staff and also to be paid as a writer, something like that. On the other hand, there was nobody around there to do this kind of show or to sparkplug it, and I did.

LB: Let's talk for a moment about the quality, professional quality of the Radio Division. I've heard other people say that it was very high. Would you agree?

FD: Very; very high. There were fine writers, there were excellent directors and there were a number of great, great performers who because it was a WPA project, maybe they needed the work, which was not offered to them. And then as the project developed over the years, many of these leading performers went on into civilian life and sometimes held both a federal job and their own business and eventually phased out their WPA as when the Federal Theatre was closed. But a lot of people were given a great opportunity to do good work with the Federal Theatre Radio Division.

LB: How did you use your experience from the Federal Theatre days and subsequently in your career? Did you go on to use--

FD: Well, it was my first experience in a minor executive job. I'd never had that before because I had been a continuity writer at WNEW which meant writing commercials basically or very simple openings and closings to programs. It was just an experience in the dramatic arts, which I had really had very little experience in, which I put to good use after I left Federal Theatre. I went to work at WHN New York as assistant night manager, I think, which meant I collected the records for the next day's programming and I did two news casts at five minutes of one and five minutes of two. And after I left WHN, I went on to WMCA, where I became very briefly an announcer, but mostly a producer. And then I started writing and directing programs, which experience—the previous experience with the Federal Theatre was

a great help to me because I knew the form, I knew the business. I knew how to write a script, a dramatic script, from this.

LB: Tell me a little bit about how these radio scripts were staged. Now you described with your own script that you had some records and then you did have some dialogue. Now what about yourself as Dave Morton? Did you somehow create a new kind of atmosphere in the studio?

FD: Literally none. The principal actor whose name I have lost and I don't know. He was a black man and a very good actor and a professional actor. I was neither. I just was playing a role in my boyish voice. I was supposed to be an older man, which I wasn't. But I just remembered that at WMCA where years later, two or three years later, I had a job as a director, we were shoved in a rather small studio. And there was an audience in the hallway, and some of them got inside the studio. And there was no attempt to stage it in any sense because we were all kind of incongruous, the cast, I playing the part of an older man and the young black man as my pal. It was kind of an unusual kind of thing, but we just were going for sheer radio. The director was in the booth, we were on the floor around the microphone, somebody else was concerned with the timing. One of the two samples that I'm passing along, I know towards the end of the last scene I seemed to be hurrying tremendously. Obviously somebody was giving me a speed-up to get off. But it was just done as a radio show, and radio then was kind of exciting and dramatic. And nobody quite understood it, and there was a lot or parlance and a lot of "on the nose." And the clock was very important, and everything was done live. There was nothing prerecorded. It was just all live show. It had to be done right.

LB: And you got the sense that that year on the show was pretty typical of the way things were done in general?

FD: Yes. Some of the programs that were done were much more impressive. They were all dramatic, with enormous casts and many scenes, and they were carefully rehearsed and carefully produced with top sound people. Whether the music was live or recorded, I don't remember. But they were very, very well done.

LB: But no time to prerecord or none of that?

FD: No, none of that was done. No. As I remember, Bing Crosby broke the tape on that when he did a show for Philco--I think it was Bing Crosby — here and it was prerecorded on acetate, and that was the first time. Prior to that, everything had to be live. There was no such thing as recorded programs.

LB: That's interesting. Did you see Federal Theatre shows other than participating in the Radio Division? Did you see any plays?

FD: I remember seeing, coming to mind right away, One-Third of a Nation. I remember seeing that.

LB: What kind of theatrical experience was that?

FD: It was very exciting because it was living theatre and it was very up-to-date. It was extremely dramatic and very liberal for those days, but it made its point very clearly.

LB: You stayed with the Radio Division until the Federal Theatre closed, is that right, in 1939?

FD: That's right.

LB: Could you tell us a bit about that closing, how you felt about it, why you think the Federal Theatre was closed down?

FD: I think I remember that there were no funds left, something like that. I was very sorry because we were just getting into some very interesting things. I don't remember what, but they were always developing new shows. And I liked my own show. We might have done something else in music. But all of a sudden, it came quite suddenly, we learned that the project was to be terminated. Funds no longer existed, and they were folding it up, and it was kind of sad.

LB: Do you think it was for political reasons? You just mentioned that One-Third of a Nation was liberal. Was it because there were allegations of Communism?

FD: Many allegations of Communism then and probably in certain government circles the Federal Theatre was an embarrassment to some people. We were living in different times then.

LB: And I guess in some people's minds it served a relief purpose, and when that purpose seemed to be over, then it was time to close the project.

FD: But there was always one other aspect that the marvelous thing about the Government having its Federal Theatre, which had never been done before and never has been done since where the Federal Government has its own theatre, be it radio or stage, which was thrilling.

LB: Do you think the times are right for some kind of national theatre now or is the time for that passed?

FD: Very much so. The times are always right for it. I don't know why it doesn't exist, but it just doesn't.

(End of Interview)