

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with CHARLOTTE KENT

by Karen Wickre
for the

RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia 22030

December 15, 1977
New York, New York

Transcribed by Rhoda Durkan
August, 1978

CK: I'm glad you have questions because I have a very bad memory, and maybe questions would help.

KW: First why don't I just get some background information about your training and your experience up to the time of the Federal Theatre.

CK: Well, my training was in Hunter College where I majored in music, and then I taught music in Hunter College High School immediately upon graduation. Not quite immediately. After graduation I had a job as a lovelorn editor on a pulp magazine. And then the head of the Department of Music at the High School called me and said there was a vacancy and would I please come and be a teacher of music. And I didn't want to. I loved my job. My mother and father insisted that it was a very safe thing to do. So I did it for 33 years and loved it. I just loved all that, and my first song that was ever produced was in the first Little Show. It was called, "Stick To Your Dancing, Mabel," and Clifton Webb did it. And then along with Ned [Lehac] and a lot of people, we all worked on the Billy Rose Show. Now, what was the name of that show? Sweet and Low. And there I wrote for Georgie Jessel, Fanny Brice, I don't know who else but a lot. And it was another thing just like Sing For Your Supper because it was in preparation for a hundred years. (Laugh) And we all used to meet in Billy's office and laugh a lot, and we liked Billy. Now, when he died, everybody wrote very snide reviews about his life, but I think Ned would back me up in the fact that Billy and all of us kids--there were a lot of us--just had a million laughs a minute. We just loved him.

KW: And he treated you well?

CK: Oh, no, not quite. We used to find his name as collaborator on things he never collaborated on. When they were ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers] possibilities, he would just put his name on it and

I used to think that was funny. But I understand it's naughty. (Laugh)
I still liked him. One of them made quite a hit. It was "Overnight."
You would never have heard of it. "Overnight I Found You and Overnight I
Lost You." And I made a lot of money on it, but you weren't born then.

KW: Right.

CK: (Laugh) I've been writing ever since and I did a lot of writing for Spivvey,
who had a night club on the East Side. And I did "The Madam's Lament" for
her. "They all go upstairs but me." I'll show you how one line of it goes.
(Sings) And it went on like that. This had a long life. And the other one
was the Daughters of the American Revolution Marching Song, "Nelly, Pull Your
Belly In. It's for the U.S.A." And they had a long life. She did those for
years on the roof.

KW: Spivvey Le Vo?

CK: Spivvey Le Vo. And I really haven't done anything since. I've done a lot
of writing, but absolutely nothing has happened. So I have a very short
professional history.

KW: The writing you've done since has been more for night clubs?

CK: No. I've been working on a book show. And nobody's going to do my book show
so why—I'm simply not known. And I don't think I have a prayer but I feel to
do it and try anyway.

KW: Now, about in the 1930's when you were working on these various--Billy Rose
and all that kind of thing--somewhere along the line, you heard of Federal
Theatre or you knew that they needed people for this specific show?

CK: I knew people who were with it. I knew Touche,* I knew Ned. Ned wasn't in it
either except like me, without a salary.

KW: Right. So you got paid for just the work that you turned in?

*John La Touche.

CK: Yes. It was about 30 cents of royalties (laugh) but, you know, the fun of it was--and the companionship of everybody. And our boss was Harold Hecht. Has anybody talked about him?

KW: Ned did a little but not really personally. He didn't mention him. What was he like to work for?

CK: Marvelous. I just loved him and he was our boss. And a less bosslike boss I have never seen. He was wonderful and very careful about what he was doing by being a good boss. I don't mean to say that he was careless. He was not. He was very demanding and I liked him a lot. Then he went into movie production, and now I've lost sight of him.

KW: That's the last I heard of him, too. I don't know what happened to him. Do you know--was it his idea to put together this musical revue?

CK: I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if it were.

KW: Did he stay with it till the end?

CK: Oh, yes.

KW: Didn't Charlie Friedman or someone else come in and work on it? Oscar Serlin?

CK: Oscar Serlin?

KW: Yes.

CK: I don't remember any connection with Oscar at all on this. Oscar was a famous producer. He had the longest living run, Life With Father, of practically anything. All these things may have happened. I simply am--I don't remember such a thing.

KW: Well, did you have other jobs when you worked for these, whatever it was--18 months or two years?

CK: Oh, sure. I was teaching.

KW: I see. So you just sort of went in as kind of a pinch hitter for some aspects

of it?

CK: Oh, I went in full strength. (Laugh) And my house, my apartment, was the headquarters for a lot of the action, a lot of the discussions. And of course I loved that. I felt that was all very wonderful. But I had a wonderful time.

KW: There seemed to be--why did it take so long?

CK: It didn't take so long. We had to pay people. People had to be paid because it was really welfare for people out of work. It could have been done in five weeks, but they just had to be paid anyway, so I guess Harold thought, "Let's get it as good as we can." We tried out a lot of material that wasn't done, you know; two and a half shows that were written simply never got done. I can't honestly answer your question because that's a managerial question and I wasn't on that level.

KW: I was just wondering if you^{all}/ever sat around and, you know, talked about your changes in the kind of loose story line or--

CK: Oh, there was no story line.

KW: No story line? I thought there was some kind of vague plot to cover everything.

CK: No. It was a true revue, no plot. The only unifying thing was an attitude, you know, of "Hooray for everything and the hell with it," which was great fun.

KW: I have a copy of the program I thought you'd like to see. That may bring back some memories.

CK: Oh, God! (Laugh) Coby Ruskin, of all things! Well, you know, my "We Didn't Know It was Loaded" isn't in here. And it was performed because it got reviewed. Oh, I remember "Papa's Got a Job." That was simply wonderful! That was a real Depression song, charming.

KW: Can you play that?

CK: (Play) That's the front phrase. I wouldn't presume to go any further because

I'm not sure.

KW: That was one of the famous songs^{that} and "Ballad of Uncle Sam" apparently were ^{that} the two big pieces of that. Did you think^{that} most of the people whom you worked with who were on it were real professionals?

CK: Oh, yes.

KW: Definitely?

CK: Oh, yes.

KW: You know, some people have claimed that the whole project and maybe even this show was just a prime example of boondoggling.

CK: No. Only Congress thought that. There were --Minnie , who had been, or would be Mrs. Nussbaum; with Fred--who's the great comic? Fred Allen. And she was certainly no amateur. Paula Laurence was there. She was no amateur. There were in fact--everybody, as I remember, was really very good, very professional, simply unlucky.

KW: Did you have a sense at the time that the whole show was really pulling together? Did you sit in on rehearsals?

CK: Oh, we rehearsed night and day. I went directly from school to the theatre because we had a whole theatre to rehearse in. And if I didn't go there, everybody came to me, which I adored. And as I say, with all that rehearsing and lighting, we did a number of shows. We had Sing For Your Supper plus about three shows or more that we never got done. But, you know, nobody cared. It was all wonderful.

KW: What do you remember about any of the writers that you worked with? You mentioned Johnny Latouche. Do you want to talk about him?

CK: Well, John Latouche was a pet. He was really on the Project because he hadn't arrived yet. And he was the most refreshing, funniest in the world, and the

most good-natured, and the most gifted. I absolutely loved him and it was a rare kind of talent. He wrote a poem to me saying, "Charlotte at the Chord." And then--can you be naughty on here?

KW: Oh, yes.

CK: We had a contest to write love lyrics, he and I, and he won hands down with his first line: "I have Bright's Disease and he has mine." (Laugh) So I said to Touche, "You win hands down. I won't even show you mine. That's it." I had a piano and a little parlor organ in my place on 17th Street. And we used to play spirituals and anything that came into our heads, Touche at the parlor organ and me at the piano making wild accompaniments for him. It was that kind of a time. We all loved each other. Did anybody talk to you about Max Goberman?

KW: No.

CK: Well, he was our conductor. And Max Goberman later did get famous. For example--he was a serious conductor--and he was the conductor in the first production of West Side Story. And that is no easy piece of conducting. He died subsequently, I think very young. But I had a thing with him that I wouldn't go near him for two weeks. I did a terrible thing! I had a big chorus, the one I told you about. There were at least 50 voices, a dirge for the things that were no longer in the world. And it sounded like religious music, you know, a funeral march, about things like bread knives and coffee grinders that were no--I made lists that went around the corner of things that we didn't have any more. And I rehearsed the chorus from my arrangement. Well, Max Goberman needed to have it orchestrated so he said, "Make me an extra copy. Write it all down, piano copy, and we'll get it to the orchestrator." Well, I didn't consult my original copy and I made all new

chords that were perfectly good. And the chorus and the orchestra got together and I heard that. And Max looked at me and I crawled up the aisle. I didn't come back for weeks. I don't know what I cost them with that, and I learned never to rely on your memory for chords. Because, you know, in any situation, quite a number of chords would fit. After rehearsing with them night and day, I did not remember. But Max was very kind about it afterwards.

KW: Was that chorus another thing that you were working with?

CK: Yes.

KW: For the Federal Theatre?

CK: Yes. And we had in that chorus a few opera people that were also in bad trouble. And they were very happy with this thing because it was funny but musically it was very fancy. I especially made it that way, thinking in my simple way that it would be funny and it really was.

KW: Did the chorus work as, you know, singers for productions? Or would they actually give concerts?

CK: Oh, no. This was all part of Sing For Your Supper. They were the chorus. We made use of them because they were ours.

KW: They were kind of a pool then?

CK: Oh, yes. And they were the people who introduced the "Ballad of Uncle Sam" with the soloists. Oh, they were beautiful voices.

KW: Do you remember Harold Rome?

CK: Yes. But I don't remember Harold Rome as being on the Project.

KW: Well, I don't know if this is true, but we've heard it from a couple of people, including Ned, saying that he by that time was already getting well-known.

CK: I think so.

KW: He apparently contributed something but didn't want his name used. So he went

under the name of Hector Troy.

CK: (Laugh) What a funny name! I'm afraid I simply don't remember, but whatever it was, he's called "Heckie." He was not part of our big, big, great big group.

KW: Well, apparently he was busy elsewhere anyway.

CK: I guess he really didn't want to be known.

KW: Yes, which was fairly common.

CK: Oh, really?

KW: Fairly, not always, but there were people who for whatever reasons--usually not because they were famous already. Usually because they didn't want anyone knowing they were down on their luck.

CK: Oh, I loved having my name on, and I wasn't down on my luck. I was making \$27.00 a week and you could live on it then. (Laugh)

KW: Yes, I know. I heard anyway. Do you remember any of the other people contributing things, like Anna Sokolow? And people like that?

CK: The dance lady?

KW: Yes.

CK: No, I'm afraid I don't. I didn't get to see much of the dance part. I wish I had. I never thought of it.

KW: Apparently she had one or two numbers, I think.

CK: Oh, I'm sure she did.

KW: Alex North?

CK: Oh, Alex North got very famous. Now, what was he anyway? An arranger?

KW: Yes, I think he--

CK: Or a composer? I think he scored movies? Did he?

KW: Yes, that's what he is apparently still doing. But in here, composed and

arranged "The Last Waltz," which was the dance number. Maybe he did something else, too. Did you ever do any, have any contact with ^{the} lighting guy, Feder, or costumes—

CK: No, I'll tell you, I had contact with the firemen because--and all the backstage guys--because I did, in the middle of that dirge for yesterday that I told you about, I had a real Sweet Adeline chorus interpolated. And they all rehearsed it. Wherever you went, there were four guys from backstage singing that thing in parts. It's funny, I think all men think they can sing that—I forget what you call it, you know. Like "Sweet Adeline." I forget what you call it. It's a very well-known thing, four men all dressed up, generally sing in parts.

KW: Barber Shop.

CK: Barber Shop! That's what I'm looking for.

KW: Did you know Gordon Graham, who also staged some of the musical numbers?

CK: No.

KW: There's the pages I was telling you about that I found. Maybe you can tell what version that is.

CK: Mine that I found isn't quite like this.

KW: And then it goes on.

CK: To "Papa's Got a Job," which was lovely.

KW: Very rousing, I understand.

CK: I just wouldn't dare to improvise on it because I'm afraid my memory won't be right and it was simply too good to be hurt in any way. I should think Ned would be able to transcribe it.

KW: He might. I don't know whether he has the music for it.

CK: Listen, I think that was Harold Rome's lyric.

KW: You may be right. Let's see what it says in here.

CK: Yes, it is, Hector Troy.

KW: That's right. These people that were playing these parts. I mean, under the number, "Papa's Got a Job." You know, it lists about eight people. Were they primarily actors who could sing, or singers?

CK: They were performers, people who could sing, dance, act, anything, and they were wonderful.

KW: Did you know that a couple of lines in that song were mentioned in the Congressional hearings?

CK: Of my song I know, two lines: "I don't want to be intellectual,
I want to be sexual."

They said, "Imagine spending taxpayers' money on this!" I loved that.

KW: Oh, sure. It was so ridiculous for them to notice it.

CK: Oh, they were crazy. It was a crazy time.

KW: You must have been following the Congressional investigations when they were going on?

CK: I don't know. Somebody told me about this and I laughed a lot.

KW: Sing For Your Supper opened just a couple of months before the end of the Project.

CK: That's what happened.

KW: So it might have had a longer run. I don't know. Do you think it would have?

CK: I have no idea.

KW: Was it well received?

CK: Oh, yes. I liked it a lot. (Laugh) I thought it was just great and it got some very nice reviews.

KW: It was just in New York, right? It wouldn't go to other--did you know about the Project in other cities?

CK: No, I did not. I was strictly in that theatre where the El used to run across

town. It was under that. The whole neighborhood is different now. It's all very elegant. It wasn't elegant then, just wonderful for us. Can you imagine having a theatre to rehearse in all that time?

KW: That's amazing. Which theatre was it?

CK: I forget the name of it. I think it was on West 53rd or 54th or wherever the El which was torn down used to run.

KW: Oh, the Adelphi this is. Is that where you rehearsed?

CK: I think--I was going to say Adelphi, but I was afraid my memory was off.

KW: There, you see, you remembered. Can you play the song and sing?

CK: I can't sing. I can talk it. Now, there's something that's not in there that we did, and I'm not sure I've got the same as yours.

KW: Well, you follow whichever one you know.

CK: I think it's this. Now, there's a song in the middle and I've forgotten how I led into it. It's an old-timey song of the kind these guys used to like to sing, to hear in the theatre and starts: "Toot Toot Tootsie." "They don't write songs like that any more. Oh, those were wonderful songs." And then I go into one and I can't remember how I went into it. I remember the song. I also can't remember how I got out of it, so that will be a little hairy at that point. Now, what happens is it's done in one, three men in white tie and tails, white wigs--you know, to be older men--and three stage doors. And one says, "WAITING FOR LEFTY" And one says, "DEATH OF A SALESMAN," I think. And the one says, "AWAKE AND SING." And they're all as gloomy as they can possibly be. And these guys come with little bouquets for the girls and they are turned completely back by the sight of these terrible titles and posters. And they say--now, I don't know if you're going to hear me. They say that to hear me, you have to sit in my lap. (Sings: "We Come to the Theatre to be Amused.")

CK: End of song.

KW: That's wonderful!

CK: You know, my memory is so bad I have to stop sometimes and I remember how it goes and I--

KW: Well, if you made different versions also. But that's a wonderful song.

CK: Oh, I'm glad you think so. You know, I've forgotten. I've written so much and I just don't remember much of it. And when I moved, I threw a lot out. I threw out the original opening for Sing For Your Supper, which I really loved. But it was supplanted by something better, which happened all the time.

KW: I imagine over all that time with all those changes that--

CK: And everything that was in first begins to sound old, you know. That's not my excuse. It was replaced by something better and I loved it. I don't remember what it was, but I remember I was very happy with it.

KW: With what supplanted it?

CK: Yes.

KW: When you had these meetings, Harold Hecht was there?

CK: Oh, sure. Well, when I met with somebody like Ned, it was just the two of us working on the song.

KW: Would you like to see it happen again?

CK: Of course! I'd love to see revue come back and have me have a chance to put something in. Revue really went out of style. Nobody wanted to see them any more. I had songs in three revues. I had some in the Illustrators' Show and Earl Carroll's Vanities and the . . .

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

KW: She's a little older.

CK: I think she's gone.

KW: Yes, I think she is, too.

Any opinions about the Federal Theatre or any conclusions you can come to about it as an experiment or as an institution?

CK: Well, since I was not really a part of it, it would be out of place for me to comment on the way it was managed in a managerial sense. What I know is that it was one of the most productive times I can imagine and also that the morale was very high. It was a very spirited time and everybody got along. I mean, we were the biggest club at the Adelphi. I loved all that.

KW: And my impression was in the other Federal Theatre groups and units, it was the same really, that a lot of people felt very close.

CK: Oh, sure, you couldn't help it because in the first place, the pressures of time of the commercial theatre were lifted completely. In fact, maybe too much, but we were not working against, you know, the terribly high cost of commercial theatre. None of that was bothering us. We were all getting ours through the Federal tax money except for a couple like Harold Rome and Ned Lehac and me. And there was a constant flow of new material which was a lot of fun to work on. And also we had the orchestra all the time. Imagine that! You know, just to call up an orchestra on the telephone costs \$1,000. And we had good players. They were--and a first-class conductor, Max Goberman. Of course I loved it.

KW: Did you go to other Federal Theatre productions and see them?

CK: No. I wish I had. And I'll give you Chubby Sherman's number.

KW: Great!

CK: Because he was in Horse Eats Hat. I know he was in the Mercury. I cannot remember that he was--then I'm not quite sure he was in Horse Eats Hat, but if you called him, you could find out.

KW: Right. And even so, he might have been in something else just prior to switching over to the Mercury. Many people did that.

CK: He is a raconteur par excellence. He's just wonderful, he's a doll. He's retired from the theatre.

KW: And he lives in the city?

CK: No, he lives in New Jersey, right near--over one of the bridges. I don't know which but it's near. Do you drive around?

KW: I can if there are people that are, you know--mostly, like this time, everybody's in town. But I know of people in New Jersey and New York State and right around that I could get to.

CK: Well, he's in my little telephone book also, very neatly inscribed.

(Interruption - telephone)

KW: You can't replace that, but like I said, anything--what we do is--and you'll get one of these--someone, it may be me or it may be one of the graduate students--we listen to every interview and make like a summary of it, an index. And we don't have money to transcribe them all, but eventually maybe we will. In the meantime, we have the summaries and they go in notebooks so that, believe it or not, people are writing dissertations and things on different aspects of the Federal Theatre. So someone will come and say, "I'd like to know about musical revues in the Federal Theatre." So we'll pull out, you know, your interview and Lebac, different people. And then they'll eventually, you might get quoted in somebody's dissertation or something. This is all if you decide to clear it. I mean, we have a legal release form and you can say, "Anybody who wants to quote me has to check with me first." Or you can say, "Nobody can quote me but they read the summary" or, you know, however.

CK: You mean of the interview or the song?

KW: Of the interview, which includes the song. I mean, you can say, if somebody wanted to--

CK: Well, if they call it the song, I'd like to have credit.

KW: Oh, yes.

CK: That's all I care about.

KW: Well, you can say that when I send you the /legal release form./

(End of Interview)