Interview with Albert Goldberg
April 19, 1982
Interviewer, Marian Knoblauch Franc

AG:

This is a conversation between Marian Knoblauch Franc and Albert Goldberg concerning the Federal Music Project , this is April 19, 1982.

AG:

Um, I thought maybe you'd like to know just how I became involved in this and what things were like at the beginning of the Music Project. It was in, uh, probably October of 1935 that I met Rudolph Ganz on the street one day. And he told me, he ended up telling me something about the Federal Music Project , which I had not even heard before, how the government was going to form a Symphony Orchestra and all very sounded very big and glorious. A few days later, I met a fellow on the street that I knew a guy named Joel Ley. Joel was sort of a fat head tenor, who was a ladies man, and, and sang loud in the churches, Joel informed me, that he had a job with a new WPA music project. I don't think it was called WPA. Then the letters were probably something different, but, uh, the government was going to employ musicians and he was a state director.

AG:

And he said, maybe the be a job for you. I saw maybe there would. What kind of a job? Well, he said I'll inquire. This, um, uh, this was the last I even thought about it. Then a few days later, I get a notice to appear, uh, before some man who was a, uh, assistant state director, a district director, WPA. And he interviewed me. Uh, he talked to me quite awhile and then he said, I have to send you the personnel. That's my nothing. Go ahead. And the man talked to me a little while and he said, I don't see that you have any qualifications for this job. Or my qualifications were that I had been music critic for some time. At that time, I spent four years and the conducting class to the city orchestra. I had taught in Chicago. Uh, the job has seemed, uh, consisted of, uh, putting musicians who were on relief to work on a project.

AG:

Uh, when the man said you are not qualified for the job, I left and forgot about it. A few days later, or probably a few weeks later, I got something out of the clear blue sky and notice to appear for work on December 1st, 1935. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I had no idea how much money I was going to get. And actually I worked at first a week free of charge because I didn't have enough sense to sign a time sheet. The time sheet was an important element of WPA and I spent a good bit of energy getting around it because I was determined that I wasn't going to sign in and out time I had to come in and out of that building, I was assigned to the director of district two. The whole state was divided into districts, district two consisted of Oak Park, Aurora Elgin, some of those Western suburbs, where they were comparatively fewer people on relief altogether. And certainly not many musicians. Uh, I decided, well, I'll take the job. Maybe I'll have, uh, enough money to get home to my, get back to my hometown for Christmas and see what we're getting here.

MKF:

You turned it off. I stopped.

AG:

It's hard to understand at this late date, look back at the confusion that existed. My first assignment was to start a band in Oak Park. I finally located the conductor named John Decambio all, and we sent out what were called requisitions for what seemed to be eligible musicians. This took almost a month and of the day was appointed for the first rehearsal, Decambio and I showed up at a certain hall and an Oak Park and not a single musicians reported for work. It was months before we got that band underway and working, Oh.

MKF:

Sorry.

AG:

The papers, especially the Chicago Tribune were decidedly against everything WPA, and they ridiculed everything that we tried to do. And it was an easy target because District 3, the Chicago district, had as its head a man named Alexander Savine S A V I N E. He was a Serbian who did not speak very good English and his favorite phrase because he couldn't express himself as English. He started a sentence and he said that particular "ting". He was an old world gentleman he'd been a conductor and something of a composer. He, it was absolutely unfettered for, uh, an administrative position at an American bureaucracy. He went around with a fur-lined overcoat, a Derby hat, and a gold headed cane. The Tribune caught onto the ridiculousness of this. And once they wrote a long story about how he went out and taught one of the courses at rehearsal. Uh, all this confusion went on for a long time.

AG:

Nobody seemed not to know what to do. Nicolai Sokoloff had been appointed the national director. Sokoloff had been the first conductor of the Cleveland orchestra was in a way a very good man for the job because he insisted on high ideals. Heaven knows what would have happened in the Music Project if it hadn't been for Sokoloff. He didn't turn out to be the ideal administrator, but, uh, we did finally get things done. Uh, one of the first questions I had faced who was eligible for employment on the music project? In the very beginning, we had trouble with James Caesar Patrola, the head of the Patrola, of the Musicians' Union. Patrola took the stand that only union musicians could be employed by the music project. Well, of course, that was a ridiculous, it was a project for all citizens, and you didn't have to pay a fee to belong to the muni, to the Musicians Union to be employed by the Federal Music Project. Uh, eventually it was decided that people were eligible for employment on the Music Project, if they had made a certain percentage of their income from music. Uh, this was a little bit difficult to determine because, uh, a lot of the people in the small towns where we had musicians who are relief, uh, sometimes belong to unions and some did not, but they've also made a certain amount of money playing dances on Saturday night and that sort of thing. It was a difficult matter to determine who should be on and who should not. And we had some strange experiences

MKF:

Wasn't there. May I ask you a question at this point, wasn't there something about, uh, the dance, uh, orchestras, the union dance orchestras objected to WPA dance orchestras because they didn't charge wasn't there something about that they, they played free and that was trouble?

AG:

That's an entirely different matter. Oh, you see, uh, the underlying principle of WPA was it, it should not conflict with private employment. Yes. And that's what we tried to do when, uh, when we finally had the

so-called [inaudible] Symphony Orchestra in full swing. We had to try to avoid duplicating the programs, having the same people that they manage of all the Symphony Orchestra had. Uh, there was this constant conflict. And in the end, this was what spelled the end of the theater project. Uh, the theater project had made a great success with us. So-called Hot Mikado. Mrs. Roosevelt saw it in Chicago and wanted to be taken to New York. Meanwhile, Mike Cod had found out that this was his success. He can make money for him, and he put his own production in the Hot Mikado on when the WPA production moved to New York, he claimed unfair competition. The matter came up in Congress, and that was the beginning end of the theater project, Mrs. Roosevelt played a certain influential role in all these things.

AG:

She, uh, she never held any, uh, official position, but she took an interest in the arts projects. And after she took over and through her influence all the leading people, the, uh, top district supervisors, not on the, on the technical prizes themselves, but then the administrators then became women. They were all social workers. They'd all had a certain experience in public work and handling people like this, but they knew nothing about the arts. And, uh, they were, many of them were primadonnas. They were difficult to handle...

MKF:

Like Ellen Woodward?

Speaker :

Ellen Woodward, where have I heard that name?

MKF:

She was one of the heads.

AG:

Where was she?

MKF:

Washington.

AG:

In Washington. Well, yes, but I'm speaking of the district level too. Uh, there was a Mrs. Moon in Chicago, a Mrs. Byron, and a Florence Kerr. Yes. Who came from Grinnell, Iowa, which was a hometown of Harry Hopkins, who was a president Roosevelt's right-hand man. So there were so many complications about all these things. Where do we go from here?

MKF:

You want to pause

AG:

Underway to find the right kind of people for conductors. Patrola finally backed down and gave us a certain amount of support. Although there were frequent, uh, altercations with Ms. Patrola, but the project, as a whole was not going well because it had, none of us had any training in administration.

None of us understood how the government operated. It was all Greek to us. We were inundated inundated with directives and, uh, manuals of operation. We didn't know how to handle basically. We got things organized. We, uh, organized, first of all, small orchestras, our first orchestra of any consequence was called the American Concert Orchestra. And eventually we brought Izler Solomon from Michigan to conduct that orchestra. We gave the concerts, our first concerts and the Great Northern Theater in The Loop with the American Concert Orchestra. We got good reviews. And then later we organized the Illinois Symphony Orchestra. That eventually became the real show piece of the whole national project.

AG:

We were very fortunate because about the time that WPA started, the Chicago Opera went out of existence. They, they went broke. So all the musicians in that orchestra went on relief. Those were good routine musicians. And out of that nucleus of musicians, we formed the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, and it was probably, well, probably 1936 before we had our first, uh, downtown performance, the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, ans Mr. Sokoloff came on to conduct the orchestra. And Sokoloff was a very good conductor. And we were very anxious to make a good showing for him and a good [inaud.] Before the public. He wanted to play one of his big show pieces, uh, Rachmaninoff's second symphony. So for at least two weeks before hand, I rehearsed the orchestra daily in Rachmaninoff's second symphony By the time Sokoloff showed up, they could have given an entirely respectable performance. So the first rehearsal he, I had told him all this, he kept saying, you read marvelously, you read marvelously.

AG:

I never heard an orchestra read so well, they'd been rehearsing this piece for two weeks, but he was trying to flatter them. And they all saw through him. Uh, the concert went very well and occasionally Sokoloff came out and gave guest appearances. Izler Solomon, more or less, became more or less the regular conductor. And I, I did part of the conducting because the meanwhile I had become the state director, Guy Maher who had played with the original piano team of Guy Maher and Mia Patterson, one of the most successful, the most successful two piano team of that period had been appointed a regional director. Guy had long been a friend of mine, and he was a man of lots of ideas, uh, that they were, they weren't at all practical. And he would give me orders and he'd come back to town on my flight there. And he said, I don't know, what's using my coming to call. You don't do a thing I tell you to. Well, I don't know what would have happened if we followed all Guy's ideas, but anyways, rather nice to have Guy around.

AG:

Uh, we started the Illinois Symphony Orchestra on the policy, uh, based on the policy of giving appearances to American composers, performers, conductors as nearly as possible, and to not enter into competition with the Chicago Symphony. But [unintelligible] by that time I conducted the... that would be 1936. He'd been conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1904, I guess it was when he took over. And the repertoire was pretty well picked-over. He, he played some novelties. He was a comparatively, uh, open-minded conductor, uh, as conductors were in that period. But there were all kinds of things that he never touched. He never touched the early Schubert symphonies. He never, uh, uh, he, he only played the first or second Sibelius symphony. So we had a large field in which to experiment. We gave, uh, appearances to many, uh, younger composers. One of my most memorable experiences was conducting the, uh, American debut of, uh, Benjamin Britton. Hans [unintelligible] had been associated with the firm of Boozy and Hawks, who were Britton' publishers.

AG:

And he wrote and said that, uh, Britton was in this country, but I liked to have him play with the Illinois Symphony. So I said, certainly I would, they paid his way to come out. And we were going to play his first piano concerto, but everyone was enchanted, but then he was a charming man. He was mainly a pianist. He could have had a career. Could've had a career as a virtuoso, if he had been so minded. And he certainly was one of the best accompanists that ever existed when he's paid for appearances. We rehearsed the whole week. And maybe we had the concerto very well in the hand. All that week, Ben had run around in a drab, a old sweater, and we began to wonder, is that all the clothes he has?

AG:

How's he going to look at the concert? Well, there came the night of the concert at the Blackstone Theater and Ben looked immaculate. He was, uh, an English man in white tie and tails and full bloom. Uh, we'd had a good deal published about that concert, and the theater was full. And we went out to start the concerto. I can't remember what I played the Brahms Second or the Sibelius Second on that program. But the orchestra started with a couple of [unintelligible] introduction and the piano came in with the big orchestra passage. Well, in rehearsal, Ben had always made a big show of these things. And now all I heard was a tinkle out of the piano. I thought my God, he's scared to death. What's going to happen. First thing I knew there was a pull on my arm and he said, "Albert, stop the orchestra. Something's wrong with the piano!" So everything stopped. The concert started, the audience was all in place. And we found out then in moving the piano on the stage, the stage hands that pushed up the board underneath the keys. So the keys didn't go down all the way, we finally got that fixed and I had my arms raised to the downbeat again. And then suddenly Stern stands up and faces the audience and says, "I hope we don't think it was, I was to blame" and the audience roared across, and that minute on, they loved them. We had many experiences like that.

AG:

Of course, we had lots of experiences in the, in the southern states too. And in the southern part of the state, southern Illinois, where there were many people on relief. They were hard hit by the depression. We had a Negro chorus in the little village of Colp - C O L P, which is about six miles outside of Herrin. Herrin was the mining town that had a lot of notoriety for its labor troubles during the coal mining [unintelligible]. Oh yes. There were strikes there. And we had this chorus who really sang very well. Its conductor was Felix, can't think his last name, but he got them to sing very well, but we had trouble engaging, eh, getting engagements for this group because it was so much racial prejudice. Uh, black people were not permitted in Herrin after six o'clock at night. They had to be back in Colp.

AG:

They could not stay overnight in any of the towns. We could only book them for engagements, uh, places, where they would be within the riding distance of their own home. But they could come back home after the concert.

MKF:

Ahhh... Like South Africa.

AG:

Yes. It was something like that. And it probably hasn't changed much. Southern Illinois is a desert. Always will be. But we used to have a lot of fun going back and forth there. First time now let us see, I

made periodic trips around the state, listening to the projects and talking to the various district supervisors. We each had a district supervisor. And there was, of course an overall district supervisor, WPA, who was always a political figure. Uh, politics entered a good deal, and as end of the Writer's Project, to a certain extent, the Art Project, but hardly any of the Music Project, because all the legislators and the people who would like to have tinkered, they knew nothing about music.

AG:

They only, we used to get complaints from Everett, Dirksen, from Peoria, who was a junior in Congress then because we didn't play enough marches. But that wasn't a very serious complaint. Uh, and on the whole, we got good support from the, from the main body of the, the WPA. We started touring during the, uh, Illinois Symphony Orchestra. We had to have expenses, had to get our expenses, but these people were permitted to make a profit on it. The local sponsor, uh, the first out of town concert, I think was at LaSalle, Illinois. I was to conducted and I thought, well, I will get down there the night before and get some rest, get out of this hassle in the office. I went on probably the Rock Island. I'd never been that way before. And the first thing that I knew, the town of LaSalle was receding into the distance.

AG:

So I called the conductor and he said, well, we can't stop the train. So I pulled out my government identification, what it was. And I said, I'm a G man, I have to get off this train. So he stopped the whole train in the next town where they weren't supposed to stop, and I got off, it was bitter cold weather, about zero. I got up carrying my luggage and the train pulled off and left me there in the darkness. I saw a light up the street and it was a bar. Some guys were loud, loafing around. I told them my story. And one of them said, well, we were being sponsored by a Catholic school. Our concert was to be in the high school in LaSalle. And he said, um, my brother goes to that school. I'll take it to LaSalle. So yeah, I got in the car with this perfect stranger in the bitter cold and he took me to my hotel in LaSalle and the concert came out very well.

MKF:

That's an interesting story... You answered the one about the union problem already.

AG:

I can tell you more. Well, how about I tell you another Patrola story?

MKF:

Oh, alright...

AG:

Yeah. He's asked me some questions about the union or the trouble.

MKF:

I do want, I want to know more about the problems with the union and Patrola, particularly.

AG:

Well, the biggest fight we ever had was over a conductor. We had a small orchestra that was to play concerts in the public schools in Chicago. We had good cooperation in the public school system, Oscar

Anderson. And there was another woman you remember who it was a woman who was the head of the music department in public school. I don't remember Helen... Helen Howell, I think it was.

AG:

Any case. We needed a conductor who could train the orchestra, who could select repertoire, who could make a little speech. But all of a sudden I found that a man named Bjornsen had been pensioned off in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was on relief. He'd been at first violinist, he'd had a world of experience. And I thought really just ideal for the job. I didn't know that Bjornsen was a great friend to Patrola. So I put him in the job. Well, Mr. Bjornsen was a nice man. He couldn't conduct, he couldn't train [unintelligible]. He couldn't get up and speak. It was obvious as we had ever changed because the whole thing was a crock. So It was a young fellow in Jolliet, Illinois named Ralph Cisney who had been doing pretty good work down there with a Jolliet Symphony Orchestra. And I brought him in to take, uh, Bjornsen's place. And I was going to make a place for Bjornsen playing in the orchestra. I understand the conductor's job was a supervisor position, they got $150 a month. Whereas the rank and file, uh, the musicians, uh, received the P and T professional and technical rate of $94. The workers on the construction project received a $65 a month. So the jobs on the P and T projects where the premium. I bought Cisney in, and this started a great explosion, uh, Patrola announced that he would not let the Cisney conduct in Chicago because he didn't belong to the Chicago union. Well, things went from bad to worse. So finally, I had to get Robert McCabe, who was one of the top administrative officials in the administration.

AG:

We went to a Patrola's office and we haggled and haggled. And Patrola was as tough as everybody said he was. He has his desk drawer open, and you can see a gun lying there. We finally wrangled. We finally had to come to some compromise because the show had to go on. He had agreed to let me bring in Cisney to conduct the orchestra, but he would not agree to taking Bjornsen off the supervisory payroll. So we had to read to continue paying Bjornsen, $150 a month to sit and copy music in the copyist project, which was against all the rules and regulations that we finally. I was pretty crestfallen. I was not getting into Patrola at all, but, uh, Bob McCabe knew that we had to make some compromise. But the minute I agreed to all this, the whole atmosphere in Patrola's office changed. He became friendly. He stood out, he put his arm around me. He walked me to the door and he says, Goldberg, you got to learn to take the shit.

MKF:

(laugh)

AG:

Well you go ahead and ask some questions if you like.

MKF:

Um, I wanted to ask about, um, whether the Music. Project was subject to charges of communist activities, the way the Writers and Art and Theater Projects or did that ever occur on the music project

AG:

No, not really. Sometimes. But we give the first performance and most of the first [unintelligible] you cover most of the Shostakovich symphonies, but after all music is not a definite language. People didn't

know whether they were preaching communism or atheism or what all. There was not much political intervention in that direction, but we had a couple of them, the German members of the orchestra with a lot of Germans in the orchestra were out and out Nazis. They resented me, they resented Izler Solomon. Uh, they caused the getting [unintelligible]. It wasn't serious, but it was a good deal of, you know, feeling about that time, because that was kind of the war that was coming on. And it was in full sway. But I wouldn't say that there was, we didn't run the same trouble because we weren't accused of putting out, communist propaganda, like the other projects were.

MKF:

So we pause just a minute. Let's see one of the, uh, things I wanted to know. Yes, please. I'd like to know how you would evaluate the music project as a whole it's do you think it made a lasting contribution to music in this country?

AG:

No, I don't think so.

MKF:

You don't?

AG:

No. Uh, it had every promise of doing that, and it attracted a lot of attention, but when WPA finally folded in 1943, only one of the numerous orchestras that had been set up the country was continued under private sponsorship is out in that, but that was the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra.

Speaker 3:

I thought there were several in the East that did.

AG:

They never get, they never got full support. You see, we gave concerts in the Great Northern Theater, Sunday afternoon concerts for which we were fully prepared, had quite good concerts for 50 cents admission, 25 and 50 cents. Yes, the place was usually filled. But, uh, the government footed the bill, of course, anybody had to pay for this even in those depressed times. there would have been enormous deficits, so, and made it attractive because it was the first time their government ever took an interest in music. It was sort of a left-handed interest and it attracted lots of attention, but there were no lasting results. None of these orchestras had very few of the performers went on to careers, Izler Solomon was going to have a great career. He'd been very successful with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra. He ended up with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, and he stayed there for a number of years. Uh, but that's not exactly a first class position. And he never, although he had many opportunities, he never really achieved a first class career as a conductor.

MKF:

But how about the, uh, what the project did in introducing new music? I thought that was a lasting contribution. Wasn't it? And making people aware of, uh, new music and then promoting new music and in promoting American compositions, which had not been done before that.

AG:

Well, the time was right for that sort of thing. And we had pretty good publicity always. We managed to create a certain interest in that sort of thing because of the, the major Symphony Orchestras played Vernal and new music, they paid very little attention to American compositions, but I don't think there was much lasting in there. I don't know any composers. I can think of a lot of secondary composers whose music we used to play, but I don't think that they went on to big careers. Or that we established any great reputations.

MKF:

Well, how about some of the first rate composers like Virgil Thompson and William Schuman, whose works? Some of whose works are introduced by the Music Project?

AG:

Not many, those, those people like [unintelligible], Thompson, who else did you mention Schuman. Wew well-established and major artist is because of this scene. Sutaski in Philadelphia, we're playing their works. Once in awhile, we would get a small piece and get a chance to give it a premiere. The WPA did not establish the reputations of those people.

MKF:

Well, how about the Composers Forum, for example, uh, William Schumann's early works. His first symphony, I believe in his first, uh, was it his first string quartet, uh, were tried out by the Composers Forum, I understand. And later he dropped them. Then, uh, later he doesn't listen to them anymore among his works, but they gave, you know, they gave him a, a chance of a hearing very early in his career as a composer.

AG:

Well, that's probably true. We started Composers Forum in Chicago. They went on for awhile. We did a public interest. Uh, and the best thing we did was that the composers here, their work, they were usually young untried composers. We didn't uncover any masterpieces. We played for instance, because they were friends of mine. The first performance is a piece by Robert. [End of Interview]