
FULL TRANSCRIPT:

SUBJECT: Michael Smith, bartender @
The Columns Hotel
3811 St. Charles Street
New Orleans, LA 70115
DATE: March 31, 2005 @ 2:00 p.m.
LOCATION: The Columns Hotel bar
INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
LENGTH: Approx. 32 minutes

Amy Evans: Okay, this is Amy Evans, and it's Thursday, March thirty-first, two thousand and five. And I'm at the Columns Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana, with Mike Smith, the bartender here. And we'll start off with you just announcing yourself for the record, and you're full name, if you don't mind, and also your birthdate so—

Mike Smith: All right.

AE: —we know we've got the right guy.

MS: You got it.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: [Clears throat] Good evening, I'm Mike Smith. Born and raised January the third nineteen sixty-two, New Orleans, Louisiana. I—and I am a bartender at The Columns Hotel on Saint Charles Avenue—thirty-eight eleven—in New Orleans. I have been working here for going on twenty-one years now. Uh, I was voted best bartender in New Orleans for five years—voted by *Gambit Magazine*. [Clears throat] Also, I have done, uh, two movies, two videos. The name of the movies were *Delta Heat* and *Tightrope*. And I was in two videos: one with, uh, Aaron Neville and—and, uh, Linda Ronstadt and the song that, uh, was called "Don't Know Much About Love." It won a Grammy Award. And I did another video, which was called "Brother to Brother," which was [by] a rock group from London.

AE: Really?

MS: And [clears throat] and—and, uh, [short pause] we filmed that video down at Channel Eight studio. Also, I had, uh, a version of my own television show, which was called "Life, Love and Lunch." It was about the top chefs of the city of New Orleans. And a customer came in one day and he—you know,

he talked to me, and the guy's name is Jim Gabor. He kind of knew I was the best bartender in New Orleans, so he just, you know, kind of put me into the mix. And, uh, the, uh, television show was on channel thirty-eight, and I had a thirty-minute segment on bartending. And I made ten drinks in thirty minutes and talked about them and—and—

AE: So it was like a how-to kind of thing?

MS: —what have you. Yeah.

AE: Okay.

MS: It was a show—it lasted about [short pause] about a year and a half.

AE: And when was this, exactly?

MS: Uh, nineteen—uh, I would say, ninety-eight. Nineteen—

AE: So how did they—

MS: —ninety-eight.

AE: —recruit you for that? They just thought it was a really great gig to have a—

MS: Well, no. Well, the same guy that, uh, got me for this part here [in the television show] was the same guy [that] got me for the video.

AE: Okay.

MS: [The video for the song] "Brother to Brother." We done that one first. And he came in, you know, he—he had said, "Mike, I have something else for you," you know. "Do you want to do this too?" And I said, "Sure." And, uh [short pause]--

AE: So you're a rock star. [Laughs]

MS: And I—and I'll—I'll tell you, the video is pretty interesting because it was a scene like the [group the] Village People. Like people from all different walks of life. Like a postman, a security guard, this and that. And, uh, I was a, uh, body builder. That was about fifty pounds lighter, of course, you know. [Laughs]

AE: Aww, no. [Laughs]

MS: [Laughing]

AE: So how did you get the job tending bar here [at The Columns]?

MS: Well, I got the job here—I was a, uh, a bartender [at] the old Spaghetti Factory. You know, which is not here anymore. It was on Poydras and Saint Charles.

AE: Okay.

MS: So what happened was the people that owned the old—the old Spaghetti Factory, they leased the building from the owners we have here now.

AE: Oh, okay.

MS: The, uh—Jacques and Claire Creppel. So what happened was, uh, [after the Spaghetti Factory closed,] I was working down [at] the Holiday Inn, uh, downtown and, you know, just kind of doing my thing [as head of room service]. So I got a phone call, and they said, “Mike, would you like to come to The Columns and work?” Uh, I was like, “Sure.” But at the time, they didn’t have any positions open but a bar back. All right? They had no bartenders. Uh, uh—

AE: Openings.

MS: —openings. So what happened, it was all ladies working back here.

AE: Oh, yeah?

MS: And the, uh, guy—a guy told me, he said, “Well, Mike, I can’t—I can’t—I can’t put you in a bartender position, but I can start you off as a bar back.” So I said, “Well, I already have the job. So I’ll do the bar back and then kind of see what happens.” So what happened, the, uh, previous owners took the place back. You know, you know, they just wanted to do it themselves and, you know, and get their people in. So by that time, all the people that the Michael’s [previous owners] had in, they quit.

AE: So—explain that a little bit more. That Jacques and Claire had it before you worked here—

MS: Right, right. Well, what happened was they had the place.

AE: Uh-huh. **[COUNTER: 05:48]**

MS: All right? But by Jacques flying—you know, he was a pilot. And, you know, it was kind of too—you know, too much for Claire to—

AE: They weren’t really managing it—

MS: Yeah, to take on by herself.

AE: Okay. Gotcha.

MS: So they—so they leased the place out.

AE: Gotcha.

MS: Right? And, uh, what happened after that—they—I—I guess Jacques stopped flying, and they wanted to focus on running the place themselves.

AE: Yeah.

MS: So they, you know, it was a family thing and they just took it back over. So by that time, the people from the Michael's had already took off.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And then— [short laugh] they had no one left.

AE: Everybody—the position was open, personnel changed, and it was all you.

MS: So here's me! He said, "Mike, I'm throwing you to the wolves."

AE: Yeah.

MS: [Laughs] "You're my main bartender now!"

AE: [Laughs]

MS: That's what the guy—the guy that was managing the place's name was Tim Macaluso. And he said, "Mike, I got confidence in you. Go for it." You know. And I was a little nervous at first. Because those Spaghetti Factory—was a restaurant bar.

AE: Yeah. A lot different.

MS: Not high volume. It was basically—what it was, it was just like people coming from eating, have a little drink. It wasn't a real—like eight, nine people deep at the bar like this place gets.

AE: Yeah.

MS: So what happened, uh—then, after that, it was like, "Mike, go for it!" And that was all she wrote.

AE: Yeah? Well, how did you learn your trade before you got to the Spaghetti place or even during there—

MS: I didn't.

AE: —was it just kind of like learn by doing?

MS: Learn—I was on the job training.

AE: Yeah? What kind of drinks did you serve there?

MS: It was basically basic. Gin and tonic, vodka tonic—

AE: Yeah.

MS: And I had to learn the exotic ones by—by—you know, just by memory.

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know? All right, you know.

AE: Practice.

MS: Say if someone wants, uh, I would say a Sazerac or a—something fancy. Uh [short pause]—something like a Pretty Baby, like a Bluebird, any kind of exotic drink, I really have to memorize it myself.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And it was kind of hard at first but it—it—it's, you know, like anything else, you know. It's like [short laugh] you keep doing it? It's going to stick with you.

AE: Right.

MS: You know?

AE: And I imagine, just from our five minutes here together, [I can tell] your personality gets you a long way.

MS: Oh, yeah! I see!

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Now you know that! You see? [Laughs]

AE: I do know that. [Laughs]

MS: And you know, my—my thing is too—and I always tell people, is I—you know, personality—you can't buy that.

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know, you either have it or you don't. [Laughs] You know?

AE: Yeah.

MS: And I—and I always told the owners here, you know, we have our meetings, and I tell them, you know I—now, I have people coming back from nineteen eighty-four to now to see me. You know?

AE: Yeah.

MS: "Mike, you're still here?" You know? And the thing about it, they're still coming back. I tell people, I try to make everybody feel comfortable here. Like they're at their house. And each person, I treat them the same. You may have [short pause] you may have a hundred dollars in your pocket. This next person may have five. But I'm going to treat that person the same as I would treat you. The—and—and, you know, that'll keep people coming back. Either the people—you know, from all different walks of life. I mean, you know, I—I—I don't discriminate against anyone because people is people. You know? And like, you know, we have people coming here that's not so well-off, but they want to come to The Columns. And—

AE: Have that experience.

MS: And, you know, you can see—you see the ones wearing a suit and the ones that's trying to make it. But I treat them just as good as that guy that has nothing. But then—

AE: So is that what makes a good bartender? Personality?

[COUNTER: 09:46]

MS: Yeah! Oh, definitely! Because let me tell you, anybody can make a drink. I can put you back there and say, uh, "Give me a gin and tonic." It's easy; it's right there. Press—press the "T" button and put some gin in it.

AE: [Laughs] Right.

MS: You got your drink.

AE: Right.

MS: Everybody can't deal with people, though. You know? And like I tell—tell m—my wife all the time, I say, "Baby, I deal with a hundred personalities a night." That's not easy to do—in character. I mean, from here come one—everybody's different in here. You know?

AE: Oh, yeah.

MS: I mean there are people that come in and say, "Mike [laughs], how do you do it? You know, deal with all these people?" And, you know, I—I sing. I dance. I do everything to keep them entertained. They love that.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Yeah! [Laughs]

AE: All right, let's talk about some singing and dancing. What exactly do you do?

MS: Well, what I do—if I would hear a song—well, I kind of keep the same station on so I won't really [short pause] mess the crowd up or not interfere with no body. You know some people want to hear this, want to hear that. I do—I put old school R and B classics—

AE: That makes everybody happy.

MS: Oh, definitely! And see, to me, that music never grows old. You know, you're going back to Marvin Gaye or Al Green. Oh, the people love this! You know—and you know, and you get back to the, uh, the Drifters and then you get to Eric Clapton and Michael McDonald. See, you're going old school, so everybody's got a mixture. I mean, really, you get people had too much—"Oh, can you change the music?" I say, "It's satellite. It's cable, I can't touch it." Because it don't have no commercials, it just plays music. You see? [Clears throat] And, uh, I might hear a song, uh, like [short pause] "Heat Wave" or something and I'll, you know, I'll start singing—singing with the song. So the customers--all of a sudden, I hear everybody clapping and looking at me, and I'm like, [starts singing] "Always and forever, each moment with you. Just like a dream to me." You know. And everybody's like, "Sing some more," you know. And I also do birthday songs, if people have birthdays and—

AE: Uh-huh.

MS: —or, uh, anniversaries. Whatever occasion you want, I'll sing. [Starts singing] "Happy birthday to you," you know? Oh, it's—it's like, you got folks coming now from two years ago [and saying], "Hey, you remember me? You sung that birthday song to me."

AE: You and everybody else! [Laughs]

MS: I really can't remember, but I'll, you know, but I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, I remember!" But I got to do it like that. But I don't want to make them feel bad.

AE: Right.

MS: "Yeah! I remember you!" [Customer,] "Yeah, me and all my girls came in and—" But it's good, you know? But it's a thing—it has [an] effect on people.

AE: Sure.

MS: That you don't realize.

AE: People like to be paid attention to.

MS: And I'll sing and I don't know really what. And I'll sing, like I do for a lot of people, but then the good part about it is people remember this kind of stuff. You know, I'm thinking, well, I'll sing "Happy Birthday," you know, and they really don't care. But they, you know, they do.

AE: So do you think bartending was your calling—

MS: Oh, definitely.

AE: —to kind of mix all of this stuff together?

MS: You know, the owners just gave me a twenty-year anniversary party on my birthday, which was January the third. I had no idea it was going down because my wife had talked to the owner three weeks in advance. It was supposed to go as a birthday party, but they put the anniversary in it too. And [short pause. Begins speaking in a whisper] a hundred fifty people showed up. And folks came back from nineteen eighty-four [sound of someone getting ice from the ice machine]. I was like, "How did y'all do this?" You know? It was beautiful thing. It was amazing.

AE: Sure. Yeah. [Sound of the soda gun being used.]

MS: Yeah? And, uh, that was—that was like—that was like something special to me because—like I had to say a speech in front of all these people since I was, you know—good thing I had some drinks before I did it.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: [Big laugh] Because I'm—you know, I'm not too good in front of a—a lot of people. But you know, like you, one on one—I'll go all day! But you put like two hundred people, uh, "Mike, what do you say here?" But, you know, it's a good thing I had some drinks and, you know, I had a good speech. And like I told—told them I say, "You know what? I came here not intending to stay twenty years—twenty-one years!" [Laughs] That wasn't my plan. I—I just took it how it went.

AE: Yeah. **[COUNTER: 14:20]**

MS: And here I am.

AE: Did you *have* a plan?

MS: Well, basically, I knew I liked—I was in the industry—the service industry. That’s what I wanted to do. But I didn’t think I was going to be a bartender. You know [short pause] maybe room service, who knows. Because I did start out doing that at the Holiday Inn. And I was one—then—then I started getting a good feeling. Tips every night! So this—this is my calling here. Cash in hand every night [when] I’m leaving! So that’s pretty good. [Laughs]

AE: Heck, yeah.

MS: So, you know, when that happened, it was like on and on. Oh, all right! You know?

AE: Well, what about the clientele here? Because it’s such a neighborhood bar, but then it’s also well-known as a historical—

MS: Yeah. Well, the clientele here is so beautiful. We got tourists and we have locals. And we also get the, uh, undergrad students [from] Tulane [and] Loyola. You know, we get the twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five year olds. It’s a good mixture because from five—well until seven is happy hour. So from five to eight or nine you get the after work crowd: doctors, lawyers. And we get a good clientele come through here. Great. And then it’ll die for an hour. Ten-thirty you’ll get that—got that crowd over here. You know, the Tulane/Loyola crowd.

AE: Yeah.

MS: But they are just as well behaved. And it’s strange because this is not a dancing place [but] you would not believe how packed it will be here on Friday night.

AE: Yeah, it’s a very conservative kind of atmosphere—

MS: But they come here to meet people. Meet their friends and, you know, like, you know, you get dressed up? They get all dressed up. I mean, you know. You’d think they [are] going out to a club or out to eat dinner or something. They come here, get, you know—and it—it’s beautiful. You know?

AE: So what do most people drink when they come here?

MS: Oh, they—I can tell you, you now what has taken off [in] the last two years? Martinis.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Cosmopolitans, that's our number-one seller.

AE: Really?

MS: Apple martinis, they done jumped up. And just like—dirty martinis, period, they done jumped up. And [short pause] people don't mind paying the price for them, really. Some seven dollars, some eight dollars. You know? They—they—they don't mind doing it.

AE: What about traditional New Orleans drinks like the Sazerac and—

MS: Oh, the Sazerac.

AE: —drinks like that.

MS: Yeah, they come here, yeah—and that's basically tourists, you know.

AE: Yeah.

MS: The—the—because they want to try something "New Orleans."

AE: They want that New Orleans experience—

MS: Hurricane—see and I—I—I tell people, I do a Hurricane from scratch. I don't, you know [clears throat]—Pat O'Brien's, they're like red dye—colorings? For color? You know, and really, it has gotten so commercial now, you know, they're packing it up, sending it places—in a jug. Less alcohol. It's just like red dye. But I tell people, "You get one here, you're going to get it homemade." Which is, uh, dark rum, light rum, uh, I do a little o.j., a little pineapple, a little sour mix, a little cranberry, a little dash of cherry juice. You know, you get a good drink. That's a good drink there.

AE: So what is it about New Orleans, though, where there are all these places in the [French] Quarter that have these signature drinks, selling points that are the—you know, it's the name brand drink—

MS: Right.

AE: —of the establishment that kind of—it kind of seeps out of the [French] Quarter and comes to places like this, so places like The Columns are making a Hurricane, you know?

MS: Right. That's right. Well—

AE: Is it just because there's a demand for it and people—

MS: Yeah. Yeah, you know, because I have tourists come here—we have twenty rooms upstairs also. And I have people come down here [to the bar] and [they'll ask], "Hey, do you do Hurricanes?" And I say, "Yeah." And also, uh, it's a house drink we have, which is a "Pretty Baby." That was named after the movie *Pretty Baby*.

AE: Right.

MS: With, uh—

AE: Brooke Shields—

MS: Brooke Shields played in it. Yeah.

AE: What is that drink?

MS: The—it's, uh, vodka, light crème de cocoa, milk and a dash of grenadine.

AE: Oh.

MS: Just for color—[to] make it pink.

AE: Do you sell a lot of those?

MS: Yeah! Definitely.

AE: Because people know the movie and come in—

MS: Yeah.

AE: —and want the drink.

MS: Oh, yeah. "Can I get a Pretty—" And then I think it's really on-line too [on The Columns website].

AE: Okay.

MS: Like on the Internet? They'll have the history of the hotel and it'll say, uh, *Pretty Baby*—so, you know, they look at that too. You know, when they come and check in, you know, [they say], "We've seen it. Can we—" And a matter [laughs]—they also see me on the Internet too.

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know.

AE: Well, I had—like I said, I had a lot of people—

MS: [Laughs]

AE: —give me your name.

MS: Right.

AE: And a lot of people tell me stories about coming in here [for] the first time and ordering a drink and then—

MS: Right.

AE: —and then come back six months later—

MS: Right.

AE: —and you knew their name and—

MS: Their drink.

AE: —their drink and—

MS: That's right.

AE: You were ready for business.

MS: You know, they'll come in like, maybe two years later, but I'll remember their face.

AE: Yeah?

MS: You know, you know, you know, because I deal with a lot of people.

AE: Yeah. You've got to.

MS: But if they really [short laugh] stand out to me, I'll remember them. [Laughs]

AE: What makes—what makes a customer stand out?

MS: Well, basically, it's the conversation I have with them. It's a sticking point to me. And depending on how long I talk to them. Like if a customer [is] here for a three-day stay, and they get to know me? I'll definitely—definitely remember their name and things like that, you know.

AE: Yeah.

MS: [Laughs] you know!

AE: So what do you take the most pride in—in what you do here?

[COUNTER: 19:40]

MS: Well, I take the most pride in making people happy, feel comfortable. Uh, just being [short pause] being me, really. And, uh, I was telling a fellow the other day, I said, "You know what? I can't be you, and you can't be me. It's all right to be yourself." And well, yeah, you know, there are some people just like, uh, try to mimic after you or whatever. You know, you probably have somebody in your field [who] want[s] to be like you. You never know, you know? But I try to make people feel as comfortable as possible when they come into The Columns, so they'll want to come back here. You know? You know, regardless of, you know, your sex, your race, or whatever—that's me, I just love people—dealing with people.

AE: Um-hmm. So what kind of—is there a cocktail that you like to mix?

MS: Yeah. Uh, my favorite one I like to mix is a, uh [laughs] Long Island Iced tea.

AE: Oh, yeah?

MS: I love making it.

AE: That's got everything in it! [Laughs]

MS: Yeah, and also because I can do a different blend. See, you know what people don't realize is that they usually mess that drink up. You put too much of this, too much of that. But what I do is I put like my little shots of vodka, gin, rum, then I add my—little dash of Coca-Cola for the color. Make it [look like] a tea. Put some sour mix and a little dash of triple sec. That's all you need. [Short pause] But you know, you got people filling it up with sour [mix]. You know, I know a lot of places like that.

AE: Yeah.

MS: It's just—gets you just sick because it's all sour mix. The sweetener messes you up.

AE: Do you have places you go out [to] and drink when you're not working?

MS: Yeah, well, I have places I go out. And it's basically in eastern New Orleans where I go at. It's a little--one bar I go—it's a little local [clears throat]—local neighborhood spot called Thirty Something. [Clears throat] They call [it] that because you have to be thirty and older. But, you know, they say that, but you'll get in at twenty-five, though. Kind of went a little [laughs]—but it's—it's, you know, it's like a family oriented spot. Everybody

know[s] everybody. See I like places like that. You know, and—you know, I'm—I'm—I'm really not with the big, big places and stuff like—you know, I like that little place that's small and people know everybody.

AE: Yeah, it's personal.

MS: Yeah. And—and I—I tell you, when come through there, you know, "Mike! Mike!" Everybody know me so—you know. And I like that. And I feed off that too.

AE: What do you drink when you go over there?

MS: Oh, when I go over there I usually drink a Grey goose martini. Straight up, chilled.

AE: Nice.

MS: Olives. Clean, just like that. Cold. Oh, I tell you what! And, uh, then I have people buy me drinks. I buy them drinks. It—it's—it's, you know, it's a nice place.

AE: Yeah. Well, is there anything that you don't particularly like about bartending, or it's just a great gig all around?

MS: Well, I'll tell you what, it's a great gig all around. B—because I have been in it so long now, the negative is very little.

AE: You've pushed it on out, huh?

MS: Because I demand that. There's no room for negativity. No room for that. Got to, you know—I—I might have a bad day at home. You know, the wife or whatever, or if something happen[s] at home, I don't bring it here. When I walk through that door, everything ceases. It's all about making my people happy. [Pounds knuckles on bar]

AE: Yeah.

MS: They'll never know I've got a problem [when I'm] back here. At home or wherever. [Short pause] Because my job is to make them happy. See they—they deal with people all day on *their* jobs. They got problems, issues. They come in here, they ain't looking to hear my problems.

AE: Right. [Short laugh]

MS: I'm trying to make *you* feel better! [Laughs]

AE: Right.

MS: [Laughing] You walk in here—

AE: And something tells me that works every time. [Laughs]

MS: Yeah! That's what I'm saying! [Laughing] Hey--

AE: [Laughing]

MS: —that's why you come here, you know? Trying to get rid of that. [Laughs] One guy, "Oh, I had a bad day at work. But guess what: it's over now. I'm here!" [Laughing] You know? Somebody told me the other day. "That day is gone! I'm here now!" I say, "You're right. I got you covered!"

AE: Uh-huh. [Laughing]

MS: [Big laugh]

AE: So do y'all have—I was here probably six or eight years ago, um, with some friends—

MS: Buffet. You talking about the buffet they used to have?

AE: Yeah, that's what I was getting at!

MS: Well, a year ago we stopped that.

AE: Did you? Okay.

MS: Because one thing happened: we had too many [short laugh] people coming in [and] not buying drinks—just getting full.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And we couldn't control it because if I'm back here, and they're outside and whatever, then they start bringing in more friends and more friends. So what happened—we usually put out three pans when we do it.

AE: Uh-huh.

MS: But it got to a point, you—you put it out, and in five minutes, it's gone. That shouldn't be. So by the time the people that's really paying money come, there's no more food. You know what I'm saying? Folks will get a glass of water or, uh, then they'll go outside [and] have *three* bowls of jambalaya. [Short pause] That's taking advantage.

AE: Yeah. Getting greedy.

MS: So the owners got tired of that, and now—so now we have a bistro menu, which is good be—because it's selling. We have crab cakes, uh, paté, burgers, chicken sandwiches—uh, grilled chicken.

AE: Um-hmm. **[COUNTER: 25:05]**

MS: Uh, and shrimp remoulade. And bread pudding and, you know, for dessert.

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know. And the average price is like eight, nine dollars a pop. But, I mean, if people want to eat it—

AE: Yeah, if they're hungry—

MS: —they ain't worrying about he price.

AE: Is the kitchen open all night for that? For all the—

MS: Six to ten [at night].

AE: Okay.

MS: And, you know, that's the time in betw—you know, when you want to go to dinner. So what that does, if we got food here, that'll keep you here. It'll keep you drinking. Keep you from going to another place, then [they] don't come back. [Laughing] You know that? [Laughing]

AE: Yeah, I hear you.

MS: Yeah.

AE: So what about this bar? Do you know some history about this room?

MS: Well, the bar was, uh, brought in, I think. I— [Beats hand on bar]. This bar was. This [pointing to where the liquor is stacked at the back of the bar] was the library shelves.

AE: Okay.

MS: So they turned this around. [Knocking on bar] But this bar was built and brought in. And, uh, in nineteen seventy-eight.

[Short pause]

AE: It's nice. It's a real nice room.

MS: And, uh, yeah. The ceiling, I think, is sixteen feet high. Yeah, look at those big old doors, man. They really love that.

AE: Yeah.

MS: [Laughing] You know?

AE: This is a great space.

MS: Yeah. This is a great old house, I tell you. And you don't find wood like this anymore, though, you know?

AE: Yeah. And last time I was here—six or eight years ago—they were restoring those, uh, paintings on the ceiling—

MS: Oh—oh—oh, yeah, right there? [Points to ceiling in adjacent room.]

AE: —in that room.

MS: That's hand painted, you know?

AE: Yeah, I know. They did a beautiful job.

MS: Yeah! This is a nice place, I'll tell you what. And—and I tell you, I have met so many interesting people.

AE: I bet.

MS: Oh, and a lot of movie stars stayed here.

AE: Yeah? Like who?

MS: Uh, [short pause] Clint Eastwood, Robert Duvall, uh, matter fact—matter fact, we just filmed part of *All The Kings Men* here.

AE: Oh, really? Okay.

MS: With, uh, [clears throat] Jude Law and Sean Penn? They was here like three times a week. Just sitting here drinking. [Clears throat] You know? And, uh, you know, we've had some interesting people come through here, you know?

AE: I bet. Any memories that stick out of some crazy things that happened or people coming through?

MS: Uh—

AE: Besides the movie stars?

MS: Well, basically, these people [are] low key, they don't want to—see, that's why they come here. Not to be mobbed or recognized. You know what I'm saying?

AE: Yeah, yeah.

MS: But, you know, there's always somebody going to recognize you, you know? [Laughs]

AE: Yeah.

MS: And, uh, [clears throat] matter of fact, uh, [short pause] the—the place has come a long way, though. Long way. We done renovations on it, uh, about five years ago. And, you know, we have twenty rooms upstairs, which is nice. [Short laugh] They had hall baths at one time.

AE: Oh, yeah? Shared baths?

MS: Go down—go down the hall and share it with somebody. Now I think there's maybe one of them left, I'm not sure. But I—but I don't really go up there too much. But I have to start going because people [will] be asking me questions about ghosts and all this.

AE: Yeah? **[COUNTER: 28:04]**

MS: I say, "Oh, I've never been up there. I don't know."

AE: [Laughs] No ghosts in the bar, though, huh?

MS: No! Oh, no, not in here.

AE: Do you have a way that you like to stock your bar or set it up or anything?

MS: Yeah! Oh, definitely. There's a certain way I like it when I come in. You know, I put my cups here [points to left end of the bar], uh, cups here [points to the right end of the bar]. You know, do all my ashtrays, put all my candles out. You—you know, get that [laughs] get that romantic atmosphere in, you know?

AE: Uh-huh.

MS: And, uh, those are some of the [short pause] awards we have gotten over there. [Points behind the bar and above the cash register.] This one was—

AE: "Best of the Big Easy."

MS: Yeah, in [the year] two thousand and three. We got the "Best Bar to Have a Deep Conversation." [Laughs]

AE: What's the criteria for that I wonder?

MS: [Laughs] Yeah, well—aw, I have no idea.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: But I had wondered about that too.

AE: Yeah?

MS: And, uh, the best of—see, they just did an addition of that magazine. That was a different magazine. They had The Columns as the best happy hour, best hotel bar, best place to get a martini, and, uh, best bar to have a quiet drink. Now [that's], prob—probably on a Sunday. Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

MS: When it's kind of slow. And, uh, that's mine over there. [Points to a framed photograph right above the cash register] The best bartender in New Orleans. Five years.

AE: Oh, yeah. I see that. With your picture and everything.

MS: Yeah. [Clears throat]

AE: Well that's something.

MS: Oh, yeah.

AE: That's quite an award to keep getting. Says a lot. So, um, Southern Comfort, as I mentioned, is sponsoring this [project]—

MS: All right.

AE: And Timmy's—Timmy's ears heard me talking about that before we started recording and so— [Ms. Timmy Vernier is the assistant general manager of The Columns]

MS: All right. Cool.

AE: —this, uh, Woodland Plantation that appears on the label of Southern Comfort is a property that's owned by the owners—

MS: Right.

AE: —of the Columns here.

MS: Right.

AE: And that's a—

MS: Great people to work for.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Great people.

AE: Any idea how that came to be featured on the Southern Comfort bottle or what that connection is?

MS: Well, uh, I am not really sure how that happened. I am not really sure how that came to be featured on the bottle.

AE: That's okay. I'll ask Timmy.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, she'll probably know about that. [Clears throat] But I have to get back out to the plantation. I haven't been out there [laughs], since they were remodeling.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And that's been a long time ago.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Yeah. Yeah. And I—I tell you what, now to look at the pictures of it and how it used to look? Man! Like night and day! Like night and day. I was over there when they had alligators in the pond.

[From The Columns website <http://www.thecolumns.com>: *Woodland Plantation Discover true southern hospitality at an original Louisiana country inn. Built in 1834, Woodland Plantation was constructed in the time when sugar flourished as "the new gold." In 1997 the Creppel family rescued the property, completely restoring it so that it now stands as the only remaining plantation home in the west bank Mississippi River delta.*]

AE: Yeah?

MS: Yeah. You know?

AE: [Laughs] **[COUNTER: 30:27]**

MS: But, uh—

AE: Well, can you, um, since part of this project is about the history of cocktails in New Orleans—

MS: Um-hmm.

AE: —and bartending and all that—all-inclusive. Do you have any thoughts about the history of cocktails in New Orleans and kind of those traditional drinks and things that came out of the city and—Southern Comfort being one of those and—

MS: Yeah, well, uh—not really.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: I’m—I’m just basically—I don’t know. I’m –I’m just kind of—you know me, I just go with the flow. You know? And I basically kind of, uh, I don’t visit other bars too often because I really try to focus on what’s going on at The Columns and trying to build The Columns up. When I’m out, though, I’m pushing The Columns. “Come to The Columns Hotel!” You know?

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know, and a whole lot of people come just by word of mouth.

AE: Oh, sure.

MS: You know?

AE: Well, it’s a different kind of place.

MS: Yeah!

AE: So I can see the draw.

MS: [To a customer entering the bar] How you doing young man?

CUSTOMER: Hey, I think we need to close up our tab?

MS: All right. [To the interviewer] Hold on. Excuse me.

AE: Yeah, sure. Do some business.

MS: [To the customer] What did you have there?

[END TRACK 1 – COUNTER: 31:35]

[RECORDING IS STOPPED WHILE MIKE CLOSSES OUT THE CUSTOMER'S TAB. OTHER CUSTOMERS START COMING INTO THE BAR, AND IT'S CLEAR THAT MIKE NEEDS TO GET TO WORK. WE BEGIN RECORDING AGAIN TO CLOSE THE INTERVIEW.]

[BEGIN TRACK 2]

AE: Well, anything you want to add?

MS: Oh, uh, [clears throat]. All right, uh, I enjoy bartending, and I would hope to be here another twenty years.

AE: Yeah?

MS: And—yeah. Just serving people and making everybody happy and—[short pause] that's it.

AE: Yeah? All right, well we covered a lot and I—you know, it's nice talking to you.

MS: I tell you what, it's going on three—going on three o'clock. I didn't know I could talk that long.

AE: Yeah?

MS: [Big laugh!]

AE: [Laughing] Well, you did a good job—

MS: Time flies, huh? [Laughing]

AE: Yes, it does fly. Thank you, Big Mike.

MS: Oh, Amy, you're welcome so very much.

[END TRACK 2 - COUNTER: 00:43]