

JACK DYSON
Charlie Vergo's Rendezvous – Memphis, TN

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Date: July 2, 2008
Location: Charlie Vergo's Rendezvous – Memphis, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 14 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Big Jack-Rendezvous Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Okay; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. We are still at the Rendezvous and I am here with Big Jack, a waiter here at the restaurant. And sir, can you please state your name and date of birth?

00:00:13

Big Jack: I'm Jack Dyson, born in 1934, August the 10th.

00:00:23

RF: And—and for how long have you been a waiter here at the Rendezvous?

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Big Jack: I've been here 40 years.

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RF: Forty years, and how long were you known as *Big Jack* 'cause I know there's a *Little Jack*?

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Big Jack: Well at—at the time I was much larger than I am now. But since I've gotten older I lost a whole lot of weight so I'm down to *Little Jack* now. **[Laughs]** But back in the day, back in the '60s—I started here in 1968, so back in the '60s, you know I was much larger.

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RF: And you have a son that works here also?

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Big Jack: No, no; I don't have a son that works here.

00:01:02

RF: I'm sorry; I'm mistaken—I'm mistaken.

00:01:06

Big Jack: His son works here.

00:01:06

RF: Okay; well tell me a bit about yourself. Where were you born?

00:01:07

Big Jack: I was born right here in—I was born in Covington, Tennessee. It's about 30 miles up the highway. And I worked here at night and I worked at a plant—a textile mill in the daytime, and I worked here at night.

00:01:24

RF: And—and how old were you when you started working in '68?

00:01:26

Big Jack: Well I was you know somewhere—I can't recall but I was in my 30s—about 39, 40 somewhere along there.

00:01:35

RF: And was it your first—your first job in a restaurant?

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Big Jack: No, no, no, no; I worked in restaurants before. I did a hitch in the Marines and then I got out of the Marines and I went to work for a textile mill but I worked at a—a restaurant called Fortune’s Jungle years ago when I was a young boy going to school.

00:01:54

RF: And tell me a bit about Covington. Did you—did you eat barbecue there as a kid growing up?

00:02:00

Big Jack: Well I—I was born in Covington but I was raised in Memphis. So I really, you know my roots are really here and not in Covington because it’s just—that’s where I was born but I didn’t live there long. I only lived there about five or six years and then my family moved to Memphis.

00:02:20

RF: Well what are some of your early barbecue memories here in Memphis? Do you remember eating at places that might be closed now or—?

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Big Jack: Well uh-uh; we had a barbecue place years ago called Uncle Joe's. That was back in the '50s and '40s and he had some real good barbecue. He was known for his crisp skins that he would cook.

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RF: And where was—where was this place located?

00:02:48

Big Jack: This place was on Abel; that's about six blocks from here—maybe—maybe eight blocks called Uncle Joes and he really—. Back in the old days, back in the '50s he had the good barbecue.

00:03:04

RF: Do—do you cook at home? Do you barbecue at home?

00:03:06

Big Jack: Well no, really I don't do too much barbecuing at home. My wife does all the barbecuing. She said she can make the ribs taste better than me, and she do a different type you know. She likes the barbecue sauce and I like the dry ribs, so when I cook I use the dry seasoning and when she cooks she uses sauce, so—. And she makes her own sauce. But that's the only barbecue I do really.

00:03:34

RF: So let's—let's talk about working here at the restaurant. You have a very special uniform that you wear at night. Can you describe it?

00:03:41

Big Jack: Well not, you know—back in the day we really wore what we could. You know, whatever we had, and then we went through the Nehru coats. That's what we'd start with, the Nehru coats and the—they was kind of hot so we moved from the Nehru coats to the short-sleeve shirts. And then we moved to the bow tie maybe in the '80s. And that's where we've been since with the bow tie and white shirts.

00:04:15

RF: And—and I know—well I've heard from—from John [Vergos] that when long-time customers come in they go straight to their—their favorite waiter and—. How—how does that work? If—if I've—if I've been eating at the Rendezvous with my parents for 30 years and I walk in on a Saturday night what—tell me what happens? How do I—and you're my waiter and you've been my waiter for a while—how does that happen?

00:04:44

Big Jack: Well—well what really happens you know I'm waiting on my third generation you know. I'm watching the children's children come in. Now they came—the children came in with their parents and they come—brought their children and their children brought their children, so that's the way it works. I'm waiting on my third generation, so I know mostly everyone, you know, that's been coming here for years. And so, you know, they quite naturally when they come

in they be looking for Jack, you know. They've been coming here for 40 years and I remember when they was born a lot of them.

00:05:15

RF: And do a lot of these third generation families do they sit in the same section or same table?

00:05:21

Big Jack: Well not—not really the same table but they sit in the same section, you know. And I—I been waiting back there for 38 or 39 years, so that's why they come back to my room as they call it—that's Jack's Room, you know, and it can seat anywhere from 54 to 55 people, so. Anyway on a good night you know, I'm—if I'm full they'll wait.

00:05:42

RF: And can you describe where your room is in this—in downstairs here?

00:05:47

Big Jack: Well when you come down the steps I'm straight ahead. Just keep going 'til you can't go any further. I'm all the way in the back. They always say Jack in the back.

00:05:54

RF: Jack in the back all right, and Mr. John [Vergos] was telling me about you're—you're supposed to eat your ribs dry here and—and—or without sauce I should say and you like them that way too. When you see a customer pick up—when you put the plate of ribs on the table and you see a—a customer pick up the bottle of barbecue sauce do you say anything?

00:06:15

Big Jack: Well—well most of the time I will tell them—I said these, you know a lot of people said dry ribs or wet ribs but we call them Rendezvous Ribs. And when I see a customer pick up a sauce bottle I say try them like they are before you put that sauce on them, I say and then you'll be eating a Rendezvous Rib, you know. A lot of people they don't realize that that's really the seasoning on it, so I tell them; I say try the Rendezvous style before you go to the sauce. And most of the time they'll—they'll say, "oh that's better."

00:06:44

RF: And they listen to you?

00:06:45

Big Jack: Yeah; and you know that's—that's Rendezvous but you know we don't call them dry or wet. We call them Rendezvous Ribs, and that's the way it's been done down through the years.

00:06:57

RF: And do you have any special stories that you'd like to tell about memorable nights?

00:07:04

Big Jack: Well not really you know. You have good days and you have bad days. **[Laughs]**
You know—well the *Rolling Stones* when they first came in I waited on them and—

00:07:16

RF: The second time?

00:07:18

Big Jack: —the first and the second time they came. And the first time they came you know by them being—they wasn't used to ribs, you know and they was referring—bring some beef or chicken you know—anything but ribs. And so I told them; I said well let me fix you some of my ribs and try them. So I fixed up some ribs and I kind of brought them out and they thought it was something. They said, “oh I never had anything like this,” and so they just went wild on them. So the second time I didn't have to tell them. They ate—when they came in they wanted ribs.

[Laughs]

00:07:51

RF: And you—you still wait on them when they come in?

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Big Jack: Oh yeah; when they come—they—they always come, you know and—and they don't forget names, you know. They remember Jack.

00:08:01

RF: And—and how many days a week—how many days a year do you work? How many days a year is the restaurant open?

00:08:08

Big Jack: Well when I first started for about 20 years I never had off a day—seven days—we were working seven days a week. *[Laughs]* And—and in 20 years I didn't take off a day except when we was closed.

00:08:21

RF: And—and how long—how often now do you work?

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Big Jack: Well we're closed now for the—the winter and we're closed down a week in the summer.

00:08:29

John Vergos: We're not closed a week in the summer.

00:08:31

Big Jack: We used to—yeah that was John and he said but you know we used to be closed—in the summer, but now we don't—you know we just close up and take our vacation as—.

00:08:43

John Vergos: Yeah; Jack is semi-retired.

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Big Jack: *[Laughs]*

00:08:47

RF: Oh how—how much—you’re semi-retired; can you explain that?

00:08:48

Big Jack: Yeah; I work you know the boys let me work—you know they let me work you know.

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RF: You pick up shifts from—?

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Big Jack: Well I work—most of the time I work four days a week.

00:09:00

RF: Okay.

00:09:01

John Vergos: Except when he takes two months off and goes to Europe.

00:09:02

Big Jack: [*Laughs*]

00:09:05

RF: You go—and how long do you want to work here semi-retired?

00:09:08

Big Jack: Well you know I talk to a lot of people that retired and they told me said—don't stop serving because if you do you'll fade away, so I just try to keep going and look like it's just keeping me going. You know I get plenty of exercise walking. **[Laughs]**

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RF: And can—do you—?

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John Vergos: He used to work two jobs.

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Big Jack: I told him I worked two jobs for years. He knows.

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RF: And—and would you like to share any stories about—about the owner, about Charlie?

00:09:35

Big Jack: Oh yeah, Big Daddy? We call him Big Daddy; yeah Big Daddy—Big Daddy was the man. He—he didn't pull any punches and he was always shrewd you know. He was the type of man that what he said you could put your foot on it—as he said, “*put your foot on it; it's right.*” And he didn't believe in doing it wrong. You do it right. And the only favorite thing I remember about him, he'd do—he did not like to see a light bulb out in the place. Thousand light bulbs, if one out—he wanted a light in there; he said make it look like we're open. **[Laughs]** And we got 1,000 lights and he said—if one out, and he'd look—we closed or something?

00:10:17

RF: And he'd go after you to put the light bulb in?

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Big Jack: Oh hell—anybody that get there—put the light bulb in, you know he—and he believed in feeding you. Whatever he had he shared it with all of us. And he was a good man; he's still a good man.

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RF: All right; just one more question—what makes the ribs here so great? What makes them—?

00:10:38

Big Jack: The—the dry seasoning that he mixes and I—and I see a lot of people try to duplicate you know—fix his dry seasoning and they'll go and have it analyzed. But he could mix it and taste it and it would be just what it was supposed to be. [*Finger Snaps*] He knows just what to put in there and how to mix it and how much and it will be right. But you—I could mix it 1,000 times and I still couldn't get it right like him.

00:11:08

John Vergos: Can I say one thing too? And Jack you'll agree with this is one—one of the things that I think made my dad more proud than anything is he loved it when you guys started buying your own homes, taking vacations, and I even like it now. We go out and they buy me dinner.

00:11:23

Big Jack: [*Laughs*] Well the old man was you know he always liked to see your progress and regress; he liked to see your progress you know. He always told us, you know if the sun ain't going to shine—he used to tell us all the time; he said the sun ain't going to shine every day son. He said, put away something. Don't throw it all away; always put up something for hard times. And we always lived up to his word; you know we—we put away.

00:11:53

John Vergos: That's why we kid Jack. Jack has made so much money that when—when he passed on there are going to be all kinds of people digging in that backyard looking for that can to see where you buried all your money.

00:12:02

Big Jack: Yeah; that's what John always says I have the money in the backyard. But the old man taught us—.

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John Vergos: That's why he does his—his own yard work. He doesn't want anybody to get near that hole he's got all his money buried.

00:12:12

Big Jack: That's right. [*Laughs*] But the old man always told us always save something. Put away something, and we took heed to it—most of us. And we live pretty good. As the old man

used to say it's about 10 or 15 families that live out of this restaurant and said we want to keep it that way. But the most memory thing was—it was when we was coming—when we first started out and got busy we used to make our own change in the bowl you know, and we'd go up to the bowl and whatever your check was we would make your change and put the rest of it in the—in the rest. And the old man used to tell us all the time, he'd say “hey; when y'all go up to that bowl y'all jingle something now.” He said because, “hey; take a little and leave a lot so we can open up in the morning.” **[Laughs]** But that was him you know. That—that was the kind of man he was. You couldn't find a better—better man than his father and the family. They have always been good to us—the family. As his father—his father used to say—we all family; he said we be with each other more than we do—be at home, so that's the way it was.

00:13:24

John Vergos: That's why I'm hanging around to make sure he says all the nice—nice things.

[Laughs]

00:13:30

RF: Well maybe that's a good time to turn off the tape recorder.

00:13:30

Big Jack: **[Laughs]**

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John Vergos: When I walk around the corner he's going to say I'm damn glad that asshole is gone.

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RF: Well thank you.

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Big Jack: It's been true. The boy has been good and the girl has been good to us you know so we ain't go no complaints.

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RF: Okay; well thank you. That's—that's a good note to end on. Thank you very much, sir.

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Big Jack: All right; it's been nice talking to you.

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RF: Okay; thank you.

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Big Jack: Okay; you take care.

00:13:48

[End Big Jack-Rendezvous Interview]