Marvin Allen
Carousel Bar — New Orleans, LA
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Interviewer: Rien Fertel
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START INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at* 0:03]

Rien Fertel: Alright, this is Rien Fertel with The Southern Foodways Alliance. It is April the 22nd, a Wednesday afternoon, almost four in the afternoon. I am at Superior Grill in New Orleans off St. Charles Ave. — on St. Charles Avenue, and I'm interviewing Marvin Allen here, who is — it's his day off, one of his only days off, so we're meeting here over margarita's and some chips. He's the head bartender or the bar manager, we'll figure that out, at the Carousel Bar at the Monteleone Hotel and we're going to talk about his history and the history of that bar. I'll have him introduce himself now.

[0:00:45]

Marvin Allen: Okay, I'm Marvin Allen. Birthdate's August 28, 1952. I've been around forever. Been in here New Orleans almost thirty years and been at the Carousel Bar for the last thirteen.

RF: Where are you originally from? Where were you born?

[0:01:02]

MA: I was actually born in Alpena, Michigan, which is about sixty, sixty-five southeast of Mackinaw right on Lake Huron. But an interesting story is my heritage actually gets traced back to Gaspe Bay up in Canada, up around Acadia, and my grandfather, my dad's father, and his brothers were actually on their way down here back in the late 1800s, early 1900s and got shipwrecked in Michigan and had no money to come any further. So my actual heritage is, I guess, Cajun French.

RF: So they were going to come here, you mean Louisiana?

[0:01:40]

MA: Right.

RF: They were going to come to French Louisiana?

[0:01:41]

MA: Right.

RF: Were they coming down the Atlantic or down the Mississippi? Do you know that story?

[0:01:45]

MA: They were actually coming through the Saint Lawrence seaway through the Great Lakes and coming down that way and then got stranded and had no money to go any further, so we got lost in Michigan.

RF: Tell me more about where you're from. Is that in the Upper Peninsula, is that in the Mitt [*Short for mitten – referring to Michigan as the shape of a mitten*]? Where are we?

[0:02:04]

MA: That's actually in the Lower Peninsula right in the Mitt, it's at the 45th parallel. It actually goes through the city, and I lived just a little bit north of that. And I left, actually, Michigan in 1978, and was in Dallas and Houston and South Carolina, and landed here almost thirty years ago.

RF: What did your parents do in Michigan? What did your family do?

[0:02:34]

MA: My dad actually ended up retiring from GM. He'd been there about twenty, twenty-five years. My mom worked for the government, Social Security Office and stuff, and she retired from that. And just basic good folk and stuff. Stayed pretty close in Michigan. They did a little bit of travel and stuff. Growing up, they were products of basically — they were both born in 1927 — so they were products of that era through WWII and the Depression and so forth, so they kind of grew up with that.

RF: Do you remember — did either of them — were they cocktail drinkers? Did they make cocktails? Were there cocktails at home? Was there a bar, large or small, at home?

[0:03:18]

MA: Not really. They did have some drinks. There was booze in the house. It was things like Canadian whiskey, some gin, basic highball-type cocktails. They were not into a lot of entertaining. And the entertainment at that time, I remember growing up, was just going to other people's house, maybe having a highball or something during the holidays or maybe some spiked punch, but beyond that, the community I grew up in were not big drinkers.

RF: So how old were you when you left the state, Michigan, and where did you go and what you brought you out of Michigan?

[0:04:00]

MA: I was about twenty-five when I left Michigan and I was working for Arby's Roast Beef at the time, and they actually transferred me down to Dallas. And the winter prior to me

leaving was horrible in Michigan. And I got stranded at work for like five days and I'd had it with the snow and the winter, so when they asked me to go to Dallas, I jumped at the fact. I was in Dallas about two years and ended up moving to Houston, was there about six or seven years. And then the restaurant I worked for in Houston actually transferred me down here to New Orleans and been here ever since.

RF: What was that restaurant in Houston?

[0:04:38]

MA: It was a place called Birraporetti's. It was an Italian restaurant and Irish bar, and that's where I first got involved in actually booze, basically with working with it. Prior to that it was fast food and never really anything with alcohol, but at Birraporetti's I started getting into alcohol, learning how to mix drinks, and so forth. And then when I left the restaurant, Birraporetti's here, I kind of bluffed my way into getting a bartender's job at the Old Crown Plaza on Poydras Street, and never having really bartended before, but just wanted something to do because I was planning on bartending and waiting tables for six months or maybe a year before I went back into restaurant management, because I was really burned out at the time, but all of a sudden discovered I enjoyed bartending. And then I got in bartending right at a great time because it was right on the cusp of the big cocktail movement, the big cocktail movement that was going on for the last fifteen years or so, and basically started with — really got jumpstarted here with Tales of the Cocktail, which is now in its thirteenth year, I guess. Yeah, this is the thirteenth year. I've been basically involved with them ever since, and they brought back a lot of the old cocktails, getting old cocktail books reprinted, and stuff like that, so it gave me a lot of opportunities with that.

RF: I want to get to Tales, but I want to back up and ask a few questions about your time here. So the restaurant out of Houston, they opened a location here? Where was it and what was it called?

[0:06:19]

MA: It was called Birraporetti's. It was up on Jax's Brewery, up on the fourth floor up there. It was really a great restaurant. Unfortunately it didn't make it for a lot of factors. We had a beautiful view of the river, a couple patios out there. It's now — the location is now a party place, an event, whatever you want to call it, and still has a beautiful view of the river.

RF: You said you moved here thirty years ago, so that's '84 [1984] or '85 [1985]. Did you move here before, during, right after the World's Fair?

[0:06:55]

MA: It was right after.

RF: Right after.

[0:06:57]

MA: Yeah, I moved here right after the World's Fair, so I got here at the aftermath of that and when I first moved here, I told the corporation — because I had never been here before and I didn't know what it was like — I said, "You put me up for six months and I'll make a decision after that whether I want to stay or not." Well I knew after the first week that I wanted to stay here, but I let them pay my rent for six months.

RF: Well, had you been to New Orleans before? And what was your first impressions of New Orleans within the six months?

0:07:29

MA: I had never been here before. The first day I was here I was up in the hotel room and glanced down and there was actually a parade going down Canal Street. To this day I don't know what it was and it was, and it was on September 26th, so I don't know what it would have been. But that just kind of got me fascinated. And then, as I gradually got into more and more, and I had a lot of good fortune when I first moved here to experience a lot of stuff. One of the things I was able to do the first year I was here was I got invited to the Mayor's Mardi Gras Ball at Gallier Hall, which really got me involved with Mardi Gras and really getting to see that side of Mardi Gras, which was phenomenal and a fantastic experience. Just a lot of stuff like that got me to just fall in love with the city.

RF: And so you said you eventually transitioned over to the bar, to bartending. Why did you do that? You said you were burned out. You were managing these restaurants?

[0:08:38]

MA: Yes.

RF: Okay, so was it an easy transition? Was it tough? Was it similar between managing a restaurant and running a bar?

[0:08:46]

MA: It was tough in that I was no longer in charge, but it was also easy because I was no longer in charge. When I left that management position, I had been here about two years and I

had four days off, so I was really, really burned out. And it was really nice to be able to work five days a week, not have to worry about phone calls or anything else. That has gradually changed to where now I do a lot more than just bartend. I do some menus for the hotel, for the drinks, things like this, so I've gotten more involved in that. But it's different because I really don't have all the responsibility.

RF: So what year did you move to behind the bar?

[0:09:38]

MA: That would have been, I think, 1989.

RF: And so what was the bar scene like at that bar or in New Orleans in the late '80s [1980s], early '90s [1990s]?

[0:09:57]

MA: At that time, like I like to explain to people, is at that time the high-end rum was Bacardi. The high-end whiskey was, like, Jack Daniel's, there was Crown Royal. The high-end tequila was Cuervo Gold, Cuervo 1800. And it was just basic cocktails. The sazerac was almost unheard of. I remember a guest coming in and teaching me how to make my first sazerac.

RF: A guest at the hotel?

[0:10:30]

MA: A guest at the hotel, because we had never served them. It was just basically a lost cocktail. The cocktails at the time were just your basic highball cocktails, what I like to call the

"slurpee cocktails," the frozen daiquiri type styles, and even the cosmo was kind of a unique entity at that time, which is now kind of passé.

RF: Were there Manhattans, martinis, I'm guessing? Was it sugary drinks? What was going on?

[0:11:07]

MA: There was the occasional Manhattans, but there was there were more vodka and gin martinis, the sugary drinks, and basically what I call the shot and a mixer cocktails, and some of the frozen drinks and that was it, and some wine, but beyond that, it was pretty limited. I remember one time a guest came in wanting an orange blossom cocktail, and I had no idea what it was. I called a couple of friends of mine that were bartenders trying to figure it out. We were all having a hard time. Finally discovered it was essentially gin and orange juice, but we had never heard of it. That was kind of at the very, very, very beginning of the whole cocktail movement.

RF: So when did you become interested in higher end spirits or better spirits or more crafted spirits, more artisanal spirits? It must have changed a bit before Tales, right, your interest?

[0:12:09]

MA: Yes, it actually changed before Tales. When I first really got into it, started to get into it was when the Crown Plaza Hotel, that was on Poydras, was renovated and become a W Hotel. This was back in, I believe it was 1999, and that was part of Starwood, and they brought in some of these new ideas from New York and some of these new cocktails and some of the

people that had to help with the transition were into these things and started teaching me. Then I started learning about this and then discovering some of these newer products that were just, just on the horizon and started to come out. And started discovering things like the sazerac, what fresh ingredients were, and things like this. It was also at the same time, that this was happening, was when Dale DeGroff was really getting started at the Rainbow Room up in New York and he started getting this and that news started making it out. And the liquor companies were starting to catch on and a few of them understood what was going on and would bring me information. And it just gradually grew from there.

RF: What was the name of the bar, the W when you were there when it switched over?

[0:13:31]

MA: I actually worked in the Zoë, which was the restaurant bar up there on the second floor, and they had the Whiskey Blue on the first floor. And then I was there about — I was actually in the building about twelve or thirteen years, and then I got the opportunity to go over to the Monteleone and the Carousel Bar, and of course that's an iconic place, even back then it really was. And I jumped at the chance to go over there which has actually allowed me to really expand.

RF: When they hired you at the Monteleone and the Carousel Bar, did they hire you as a bar manager or did they hire you as a bartender?

[0:14:09]

MA: I actually started as a bartender basically back in the old service bar, which was great, because it really got me to be able to hone my craft a little bit more. And about the same

time that I started was when Tales started, so I kind of grew up with them and got to learn more and more and then got to know the people that are involved with Tales.

RF: Just one more question before we move to the Carousel Bar. Did you have a favorite bar/watering hole in New Orleans in the ’80s throughout the ’90s and was there a favorite bartender also that you would go to?

[0:14:49]

MA: Not really, because at that time there were just neighborhood little joints and stuff. One of the places we’d go to a lot of times after work was Harry’s Corner on Chartres and Dumaine. We’d go there or there were other little dives downtown that you didn’t go for bartenders, it was just that they were open late at night, have a couple of cocktails, like the Chart Room, things like that. So there’s not really any bartender like there is today.

RF: So it’s just these sin industry places?

[0:15:25]

MA: Right.

RF: There was no guy doing craft cocktails somewhere in the ’80s or ’90s that was just invisible or who has been lost to history?

[0:15:36]

MA: Right. Yeah, basically when you look back at that era, the ’80s [1980s] and really into the ’90s [1990s], you look at that — what maybe called craft cocktails in a way, were places like Applebee’s and Friday’s, which would have their sugary sweet cocktails or whatever they

had. But there wasn't anything where you could actually go and really enjoy really great cocktails. You could go have a couple of drinks in nice environments, but you couldn't enjoy a really good cocktail.

RF: So when you're hired by the Monteleone and the Carousel Bar, had you been there before, had you frequented the place? And what were your first impressions of that bar?

[0:16:20]

MA: I had actually been going there for quite a while. A friend of mine, Janice Medlock, used to play the piano there, so I'd always go and see her. And in fact, the night, it was actually September 11, 2002, I walk in, she had been on vacation all summer, so I go in to see her in just shorts, a shirt and shorts and tennis shoes, and the first thing she said to me was, "Marvin, they need a bartender here. You need to apply." I said, "Oh, okay." I said, "I'll come in whenever they're taking applications in the morning and stuff." One of the cocktail waitresses said, "Marvin, they need a bartender." I said, "Yeah, Janice was just saying." She said, "In fact, let me let you talk to John. He's here tonight, the manager, one of the managers, and I'll let you talk to him." I said, "Oh, okay." I was kind of like whatever. Because I'm sitting there drinking a glass of wine and listening to Janice play and chatting and catching up, and John comes up, and we sit and talk for about an hour. He said, "Okay, you need to talk to my food and beverage director and I'll call you and let you know." I said, "Okay." At that point I'm thinking, "Okay, whatever. This is kind of a blow off, whatever." Sure enough, on that Sunday night I get a phone call from John saying he's got me set up on Monday afternoon to come in and meet Gary at this time and if there's a problem please let him know and we'll reschedule. I'm going, "Okay." So I go in and meet with Gary. As they say, the rest is history. I started work about three weeks later.

RF: So this hotel, the Monteleone has a kind of long and storied history. It's one of the original French Quarter hotels — there are lots of hotels in the French Quarter now. What's the short and sweet version of the history of this hotel and maybe the bar too or, at least, I'm sure in the training process you had to learn a bit about the hotel and you have to present that to the customers in some way. What's your history of the hotel when someone asks you when they're there?

[0:18:14]

MA: The hotel has been the Monteleone since 1886, when Antonio Monteleone bought the Commerce Hotel that was on that piece of ground. I believe it was about a fifty-room hotel at the time when he bought it. He was a shoemaker, shoe cobbler from Sicily and actually, where, on the corner across the street from us where the Angela King Gallery is, is where his shoe repair shop and stuff was. And if you look in the entryway, you'll see the Monteleone crest in there, in the tile. So it has expanded into what it is today. The Carousel was put in in 1949, was when it first started spinning. It has a great history in the hotel itself. Authors such as Eudora Welty have written about it. Her book — her short story called "The Purple Hat" was set in the bar, in the Monteleone Hotel, prior to the Carousel even being there. Tennessee Williams, of course, was a great patron of the bar. Ernest Hemingway has written about it. And as far as modern times, you've got people like Winston Groom, who is most noted for Forrest Gump. Stephen King has also mentioned the Monteleone Hotel in his book *11/2[2]/63*. So there is a long history. And we're also one of three literary landmark hotels in the country.

RF: Oh, I didn't know that.

[0:19:52]

MA: Yeah, it's us, the Algonquin and the Plaza, both in New York.

RF: The Carousel, why is there a carousel in the bar? Did other bars have carousels in them in the late 1940s, early '50s [1950s]? Was that a thing? Have you ever heard of other carousel bars? Was it a carousel before it was put in the bar or was it built for the bar?

[0:20:20]

MA: From what I understand is, the owner, Mr. Monteleone at the time — it's still owned by the Monteleone Family — but he just thought it would be something cool to do. He saw something similar when he was in Chicago or somewhere and thought it would be something great for New Orleans. And so he just put it in, and it's been an icon really ever since, and each year as it goes by, it becomes more and more of a fixture. In fact, just recently, we were listed on BuzzFeed as the number two place to go to before you die, which is pretty incredible. People almost get into fights to get to sit at the bar, which is amazing. And working there, sometimes you tend to forget how amazing the place is that you work at, unless you actually step back and look at it from a guest's point of view, which I kind of did this weekend. And I'm just like, I'm looking at it and looking at the lobby and looking at the hotel, looking at everything just from a guest, the place is mind-blowing. It is so great.

RF: It is. How would you — for someone reading this or listening to this — how would you describe the bar, maybe the movement of the bar, how the bar looks? It's iconic, so a lot of people have been there and have seen it and maybe seen the video of it, but how does it operate?

[0:21:54]

MA: It operates by a half-horsepower electric motor that makes the twenty-five seats turn. It takes fifteen minutes to go once around. And people come in and they're excited about it, they become little kids because they want to sit and ride and have a cocktail. And what's happened is, throughout the years — and again I go back to the Tales of the Cocktail, we're home base for Tales of the Cocktail every year —and I've seen the gradual increase to the cocktail and the cocktail movement as we've changed with the times. When I first started at the bar in the Monteleone, it was just your basic cocktails. The sazerac was just becoming to get its own again. The Vieux Carré, which is a standby for the Carousel since 1939, which was created there, has always been there. But now we're getting into things like Corpse Revivers. We're getting into Deaths in the Afternoons. I've been fortunate enough to be able to create some cocktails that have gone on to people really liking them too, so it's all getting into this whole cocktail movement.

RF: Is there an iconic bartender from the past associated with that bar? Is there anyone that comes to mind or anyone that you heard or learned about?

[0:23:23]

MA: Probably the one would be Walter Bergeron, who created the Vieux Carré cocktail in 1939. There's been other bartenders that have come through. One would be a gentleman that we called Mr. Ed, who had been there for about thirty years. But other than people that would come there or people that work with him are virtually not really nationally known because during that period, the bartenders weren't — they were just kind of there. Whereas now bartending has become a legitimate career again.

RF: Because the Vieux Carré is so associated with that bar and was invented at the Carousel Bar, tell us what it is and if there's a story behind it.

[0:24:12]

MA: Like I said, the Vieux Carré was created by Walter Bergeron in 1939 and it consists of Benedictine, cognac, rye whiskey, sweet vermouth, and bitters. And as the story goes, he did it in kind of a tribute to some of the ethnic groups that were living in the French Quarter at the time. The French with the cognac and the Benedictine, the Americans with the rye whiskey, the Italians with the sweet vermouth — because at the time, sweet vermouth was only basically produced in Italy. And then the bitters of course, the Peychaud's, which has a long history associated with New Orleans going back to the early-1880s, late-1700s with Amédée Peychaud. And then also Angostura for the islanders of the area.

RF: So he invents that in '39, but the bar doesn't come for another decade later. Was there another name for the bar before it was the Carousel Bar, before it had a carousel?

[0:25:17]

MA: I'm sure there was, but I've never really thought about it. It may have just been like the Monteleone Bar or something. It's actually something I'd like to do some research on. It would be fascinating to find that out, what it was called.

RF: You've mentioned Tales a few times. Were you invited to the first one or did it come later? When did it really enter your radar? What do you think that organization or that event means to the city? Say some more about that.

[0:25:59]

MA: Okay, I first got involved in Tales when I entered a competition with them the first year they were doing this, and didn't win, but I was actually not — it was extremely small. It was just kind of a thing with a magazine called *Culinary Concierge* and they were doing a cocktail competition, and I entered because I was still at the W Hotel then. The following year, I entered again when they were doing it, and that's when Tales really started, and actually tied for second place, my cocktail. And then really got involved with Tales going from there, getting to know Ann [Tuennerman], working with her, and just doing more and more Tales events. You always did the happy hour that they used to have and then just gradually learning. And the thing about Tales was — and I tell people all the time about Tales — is it really jumpstarted the cocktail movement for the country. People like Dale DeGroff, Dave Wondrich, Gaz Regan, Tony Abou-Ganim, and there's a lot of other ones out there, they were all having little pockets of these craft cocktails throughout the country, but Ann and Tales of the Cocktail actually got them all together here. And all of a sudden it exploded into this — this will be the thirteenth year — to this event that's got 20,000 to 25,000 people that invade the city in the middle of July to talk about spirits, to talk about craft cocktails, to learn more. Liquor companies have discovered that bartenders really want to go back to some of the old ways, the old forgotten liqueurs, so to speak. Ten years ago, crème de violette was almost lost. Pisco is another one that was almost virtually lost. But because of Tales, they've all come out and become noted again, and bartenders and bartending has gone from being basically kind of either a temporary job or something that you get into and you're just kind of slinging beers and highballs, or you're working for places like TGI Fridays or whatever, and there's no real craftsmanship or whatever in it, whereas now, bartending has become a respected profession again, where people are making it their careers, like I have

myself. Like I said, I really got into it about twenty-five years ago, which was right on the cusp of everything changing and that's why I think I stayed in it rather than going back into management.

RF: What is the importance of New Orleans, the city, to Tales? Could Tales have happened or could it move to New York or Vegas and other kinds of big entertainment, convention cities? Is it important that those bartenders that you mentioned that were in these pockets, that they came here to meet for the first time, or meet and shake hands and make drinks for each other and talk about the history of cocktails?

[0:29:14]

MA: The importance here I think of Tales being here is the fact that one of the iconic cocktails of the city, the sazerac, which is also the official cocktail of the city, is also one of the first cocktails from the early 1800s. New Orleans has a rich history in spirits and cocktails. And you look through history too, and from 1920 to 1933, while the rest of the country was in prohibition, rumor has it, and from what I've been able to read, New Orleans kind of forgot about that, and we basically drank just as much and people just kind of looked the other way. So I think the city and cocktails, and being a port city, it's just a natural. And you look at Bourbon Street, the bars on Bourbon Street, then you look at what's going on today, the bars like the Carousel, places like Cure, Cane & Table, it's any number of them out there that are doing great cocktails.

RF: You arrived today with two books, you recently published your own book of cocktail recipes, and you talked about searching online for new books. When did you become

interested in the literature of cocktails in recipe books, and was there a first transformative book that really kind of matter and got you very interested in both the old and the new?

[0:30:57]

MA: Basically it goes back to the very beginnings of Tales of the Cocktail and first meeting Dale DeGroff, and actually his was probably the first cocktail book I really bought, and that just kind of transpired from there, and meeting people like Robert Hess, Ted Haigh: Dr. Cocktail, Jeff "Beachbum" Berry all these guys that have got books. And then discovering the reprints of Jerry Thomas's old book and — what's his name — H. William, or something. There's a number of them out there. And you mentioned I brought a couple in today. One is actually Jeff Berry's, Beachbum's latest book on rum and the other one is an interesting book, it's called *Shaking up Prohibition in New Orleans*. It's a book that just recently was published, but its roots go back to the early 1930s, by these two ladies that lived here in New Orleans at the time — one was an illustrator and one was a writer — and they wrote this book sort of thumbing their noses at Prohibition. And it's poetry inter-spliced with different drink recipes, with all the letters of the alphabet start with A through Z, and they have cocktails for all of them. A couple of them are a little bizarre, like one with castor oil and milk of magnesia. I don't want to try that one.

RF: So tell me about your own book, and how that came about.

[0:32:38]

MA: Well the title of my book is called *Magic in a Shaker: A Year of Spirited Libations*. It actually got started about five years ago. I was at an event and ran into Antoinette [de Alteriis, Promotion Director] that works for Pelican Publishing, who eventually did publish the book, and

we were talking and she said, "You really need to write a book." I said, "Okay, yeah, whatever," and just kind of blew it off. A couple of years later, I ran into her again. You know, "What's going on with the book?" "Oh, nothing really." And we talked about some other ideas and stuff. She said, "You really need to start putting some of this stuff down." I said, "Okay." Well, it really go me motivated to start doing a few things, and in fact, a lot of the book was written here on the patio at Superior. I used to come here and have two or three margaritas and do some writing. Eventually, it came out a year ago and I'm proud of it. It's a cocktail book I think more for the average person. It's very easy to read. There's some history of the different spirits and I've set it up to where each month is a different spirit I focus in on and recipes. And the feedback I've gotten has been really positive and it's been a lot of fun. It was a lot of hard work doing it, but it's fun.

RF: Were drinks in that book or not in that book — I'm guessing they're in the book — that are of your own invention, that you're most proud of, or that you like to make or that have become popular at the bar that might be on the menu?

[0:34:19]

MA: One of the ones I created was a cocktail competition for Tales called the French 007, which is pomegranate liqueur, pear liqueur, topped with sparkling wine or Champagne. It's very popular at the bar. Another one that actually tied for second place in Tales was the Southern "Comfortini," which was Southern Comfort, peach schnapps, black raspberry liqueur, pineapple juice, and a little bit of lemon juice. It's kind of served as a martini. I'm proud of both of those, but there's been other cocktails that I've come up with throughout the years. The hotel and the Carousel actually hosted the premier party for a little short movie called *The Purple Hat*, which

is based on a short story by Eudora Welty that was set in the hotel's bar prior to the Carousel being there. I actually created a cocktail for that event called the Purple Hat, which is vodka, black raspberry liqueur, fresh lemon, a little simple syrup, and an egg white, and we actually garnished it with a purple flower. We still make the cocktail at the bar, we just don't garnish it with a purple flower.

RF: I need to come have that.

[0:35:32]

MA: It's a fun — it tastes kind of like a sweet tart, and it's a fun cocktail and I enjoy making cocktails with egg whites because it gives it a nice froth, a nice mouth feel. Another one I really like to make is an old Peruvian cocktail, the pisco sour, which is probably one of my favorites. The best way I can describe that is it tastes kind of like key lime pie. It's with fresh lime juice, the pisco, which is a brandy, a little simple syrup, and an egg white.

RF: So what makes a good cocktail? Is it a combination of ingredients? Is it the ingredient itself? You can buy, nowadays, a twenty-dollar bottle of bourbon or rye and you could buy 200 or 2,000 bottle of these liquors. What matters when inventing a cocktail or making a cocktail?

[0:36:29]

MA: The best things that matters in making a great cocktail is balance. You don't want it too sweet, you don't want it too sour, you don't want it too tart. You want a nice balance in there. Fresh ingredients are very important, especially when it comes to juices and fruit. And just always remember too — this is what I tell people too and new bartenders: "Your cocktail is only

as good as your weakest ingredient." So if you have, say, a 500 dollar bottle of gin, and you're making a martini and you put in a five-dollar bottle of vermouth, it's going to ruin the whole cocktail. And also, I want a rum cocktail to taste like rum; I don't want it buried. Bourbon cocktail: I want bourbon to be the foremost flavor for my personal taste and what I like to make for people. Like for me as a bartender, the hardest spirit to work with is vodka because it doesn't taste like anything.

RF: Right.

[0:37:37]

MA: And then it becomes really important that the rest of your ingredients are very fresh, because if you've got, let's say, canned grapefruit juice and vodka, it's going to be a bad cocktail no matter how good the vodka is.

RF: We're about to hit the ten year anniversary of Katrina, and a lot of things have happened to this city, especially in the restaurant industry and the bar industry since Katrina. Did you — going back to '04 or'05, even '06, '07, '08, did you foresee the changes that were going to occur? And we've talked about Tales a lot, but did you ever thing that there would be multiple bars now in the French Quarter, within blocks of your place, that are solely dedicated to rum, or celebrity bartenders now in the French Quarter? Did you ever think this would happen? Was this written in the wind? What was going on?

[0:38:41]

MA: I really never thought it would happen. When you talk about celebrity bartenders, there's like myself, there's Chris Hannah at French 75. There's — his name just escaped me —.

RF: Well, there's "Beachbum" Berry.

[0:39:03]

MA: He came here, right. I was thinking of Chris McMillan. Okay, kind of the three of us and a few others from right after Katrina, we're kind of all around, we were doing our own thing. But for it to explode to what happened to have Jeff "Beachbum" Berry come in and open a bar/restaurant, I never would have foreseen that, even though it's a great place for it to happen, it makes sense for it to happen here, but I never would have foreseen that. I never would have foreseen some of the other craft cocktail bars opening up, doing things like they're doing, like SoBou on Chartres Street. There's a place on Rampart. I can't think of the name of it right now.

RF: Bar Tonique?

[0:39:53]

MA: Bar Tonique is another one. These places to where people really to go to. And what I find fascinating from working behind the Carousel too is people are coming in — like you go to other cities and you have destinations you want to go to, basically sight-seeing things like landmarks, museums and stuff — people are coming here with bars and restaurants on their list that they want to go to, which I find absolutely amazing! Five years ago, bars weren't on this list. Now they are, and a lot of that really has to do with Tales, with the proliferation of shows like on A&E, some of the bar shows that they have on and things like this, which has started to

showcase New Orleans, and the whole tourism industry — the cruise ships coming in and the marketing the city has done to bring these people in since Katrina — has really, really helped the food and beverage industry a lot.

RF: You've talked about some of the positives of this movement over the past ten or fifteen years: so is it revitalization of the bar industry, revival of spirits — pisco and others, the fact that men and women can have careers behind the bar that you couldn't before — you mentioned that. Are there negatives, are there fears to go with this movement at all? Are there, not bad things, negatives happening?

[0:41:29]

MA: I don't know if it's so much of a negative as the general population is much more educated, so people in this industry have to be almost one step ahead of them. And also with easy access to the internet, people can look things up, so you really have to work and be on top of your game. You can't really kind of BS your way through anymore, you really need to know what you're doing. And that's not necessarily negative. You also, as a bartender, I think, you need to really do some studying and really keep up with what your craft is doing. And like I tell new bartenders is, "You're only as good as the last cocktail you served." That's what's going to be remembered. If you serve a bad cocktail, you're going to be remembered for that. So you need to make each cocktail the best that you can. And sometimes that can be a negative, especially when you're really busy that it may take a little bit extra time to do it, but you're not just slinging, you know, I hate to use the term "slinging burgers at McDonald's." You're really doing something that's special, you're making each one. Because, as a bartender, each cocktail I kind of look at it as you're preparing a separate meal for each person each time, especially when you

get into some of the more elaborate cocktails, the ones with a little bit more ingredients, let's say a corpse reviver, where the measurements need to be very precise, because if you overdo, let's say the absinthe in a corpse reviver, it's going to ruin the cocktail, throw the balance off. Or a Manhattan, if you overdo on the vermouth, it's going to throw it off, things like this. So you've got to be really precise, and when you're really busy sometimes, that's hard to do. That could be kind of a negative, but also it means that you've got to be on your game.

RF: Why do you think this movement took off when it did? You've talked about Tales and you've talked about some of the personalities behind it, but just aside, when I express an interest in cocktails and the interest I've had maybe just for the past three years, maybe five max, friends who might be detractors of that, who just like to sit back with a beer and might drink whiskey, but don't think anything of a sazerac or an old fashion much less the more complicated drinks. They denounce it as "a flash in the pan", as "hipstery," as something that is from New York. Why did this happen at this time? And, to me, it doesn't seem like a youth movement, the men you mentioned, yourself, you're of a certain generation. You're not young and tattooed. Dale DeGroff is not a young man. Chris McMillan is not a young man, "Beachbum" Berry, they're all of another generation. What was happening ten years ago, maybe in America or in culture? Why do you think that is?

[0:44:49]

MA: I think it was — I really have to go back to Tales and, at the time, Tales came out of a tour group that was doing little bar tours here in the Quarter. And they were going to some of the iconic bars in the Quarter like the Carousel, the Old Absinthe House, Court of Two Sisters, things like this, and checking them out, Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, and it kind of worked its way

out of that to where — and also at the time, I think in America and the U.S. in particular, the people, like I said, the personalities like Dale and Ted Haigh and people like this were doing these little things here and there to where they were fascinated with it and liked going back and looking at the history of the cocktail. And the cocktail history is very, very fascinating. I've got a number of books at home that go back to the early-1900s, late-1800s. I love reading them because the cocktails back then are essentially what we're drinking now, things like a sidecar. If you go into the history of the Bacardi cocktail, which, in order to be called "the Bacardi cocktail" by New York State law, has to have Bacardi in it. They actually went and sued for that. I mean — and it's fascinating, Louisiana and New Orleans in particular has its own cocktail designated by the State Legislature, which is the sazerac, so all of these. Then you look at some of the TV shows that have become popular in the last five to ten years, Mad Men, for example, which really re-popularized the Manhattan, brought back the three martini lunch, things like this. And the movies: James Bond with the "shaken not stirred" martini, and from what I understand, the new James Bond coming out is going back to a martini. He's dropping the beer, which is really cool.

RF: Right.

[0:47:06]

MA: But things like this, I think that's what started getting people interested and the internet, of course, and people being able to look at these things and look at the old cable TV and the old movies, the old black and white movies from the 30s [1930s] and 40s [1940s], where cocktails played an important part in some of these movies. There were cocktails named after different roles movie stars played. In fact there's a Scotch cocktail called Blood and Sand, that

was named for Rudolph Valentino's role in the movie *Blood and Sand*, I think it was, if I'm not mistaken. Mary Pickford, who is an old movie start from the '30s [1930s], has her own cocktail named after her. And some of this history, some of these old movies coming back, I think has also jump-started it.

RF: What do you like to drink when you have a day off and you're not here and you're not at home, where do you like to drink it? Where do you go in the city?

[0:48:05]

MA: Man, that's a tough one. I like coming here because I'm just really comfortable here. Like I said, a lot of the people know me here and stuff, so it's really cool. But I like places like Cure, does a good cocktail, and like I tell people too is, it's a problem for me to go out and get a cocktail because I've been fortunate enough to taste some really, really great tasting spirits and stuff. I really cannot afford to drink what I really like! [laughter] When you've tasted thirty-year old single malt scotches and single malt whiskeys that will run you sixty or seventy dollars a shot, you really can't go out and drink those a lot. Or you drink eighty-year old cognac and taste these things, it's really difficult. But by the same token too, I just enjoy a good cocktail, no matter where it's served. If it's served to the best of their ability to what the establishment is. I go into — the same as I go into a restaurant, if I go into, let's say an IHOP, I'd know what to expect, and that's what I expect. Likewise, if I go into Galatoire's or one of Besh's restaurants or something, I have a lot higher expectation and that's what I expect. And it's the same with cocktails. If I go to the local bar on the corner, I may just get my scotch on the rocks. But if I go into Cure, I'll be more adventurous. If just depends.

RF: Just one or two more questions. I want to ask about the Carousel Bar again. So like a carousel, the outside turns and the inside is stationary. Is there a danger that come with that, for you or for customers?

[0:50:07]

MA: Well I think the only danger is hopping over the bar every day to get in there. There is no other way except to hop up and hop over the bar, which is actually part of the fun of the bar too, because especially at shift change, we're coming and going and people are applauding us and everything else.

RF: You have to go over and not under?

[0:50:23]

MA: We go over the bar. We do not go under. There is no "under," there's no door, there's no nothing. We have to basically hop up, put our rear ends on the bar, spin around and hop out. And people love it. There's been times when they gave us, like in the Olympics, they gave us points from 8.9 to 10, things like that. They applaud us and we have fun with it. People get excited about it. I joke with them and say, "It's just like at Buckingham Palace, the changing of the guards when the shifts change." I also like to tell people that there's a couple of things about working behind the carousel that are kind of cool. Is A) "I am the center of the universe, because the world does spin around me." That's basically both of them there: "The world spins around me and I'm the center of the universe." But then I go home and it's just the dog and she becomes both of those. And it's a novelty, it's a lot of fun, and people like to come in just for that and have the good cocktails and we actually — myself and all the bartenders — really pride ourselves in trying to serve the best cocktails we can.

RF: Is it ever dizzying, or has there ever been a bartender there that couldn't hack it because they have some minor issues with vertigo or something? Although it spins slowly, it turns and moves. Has there ever been a problem in that aspect?

[0:51:55]

MA: There has been in the past one or two that really couldn't do it because of the spinning, and it can become disconcerting if you really focus in on it, but if you look at it as working any other bar where people are constantly moving around you, it becomes a non-issue. But if you focus on the rotation, then it does get disconcerting, but if you just focus in on like it's another bar and people are constantly moving, it's great. And we have, as bartenders, we've kind of timed it to where we know where people are going to be after we make their cocktails and we kind of know where it is. So if the bar is not spinning, if it's broken down or something, we generally get lost then and we have more problems with finding people when it's actually spinning, because we've got this timing in the back of our head's in our subconscious that we know what's going on. And there's twenty-five seats at the bar, it takes about fifteen minutes for one rotation. And people — like I said, people have fun with it. And I know there was one time a few years ago a gentleman whose daughter had just gotten married and had a big reception at the hotel and everything, he comes in and he wants to get a cocktail after everything is all through and he sits down, orders his cocktail, puts his jacket on the back of the chair, gets up and goes to the restroom. Well, he leaves through one door and comes through another door, and started screaming and yelling how bad the hotel is because we lost his jacket, we lost his seat, couldn't find his cocktail. He goes running out grabbing a manager, as he comes back here, it had rotated back to where he was and there was his jacket and there was his cocktail, because he didn't realize the bar moved. And there's also times when people will come in, they'll be sitting down

and talking and especially when the bar is fairly crowded, you don't realize it's rotating, because there's so much action going on around you, and all of a sudden they could be around two or three times. All of a sudden it dawns on them that they are actually rotating, which is fun to watch when that dawns on them.

RF: You mentioned what I wanted to ask next about the timing. Is that something you train new bartenders? How does that timing work? "The customer is at twelve o'clock and then he'll be wherever whenever I finish making his martini." How does that work?

[0:54:33]

MA: It just becomes instinct is really what it is. I think there's anything you really train them or tell them about. When I've trained new bartenders, I've explained to them, I tell them that "It's going to become instinctual. It's something that you're just going to know." It's one of those subtitles like in any type of food and beverage operation, like waiting tables, you notice, you read people, you notice things at the table: how they're picking up their coffee cup, whether it's empty or not, that you need to go over there. It's little things like that. It's the same as working at the Carousel. It just becomes very instinctual that I hate to say it, but "You either got it or you don't." And it's the same with bartending, you either have that knack of knowing how to put a cocktail together, even though you have a recipe — it's like cooking, you may have the exact recipe, but if you don't know how it works, you're not going to be able to execute it. You could have your grandmother's recipe for, I don't know, beef stew, but if you don't know how the carrots and the onions actually work together, it's not going to taste right even though you had the exact recipe. And it's the same with cocktails. If you don't — it's going to be the variance of the difference between Bombay Sapphire gin and Hendrick's gin. If you know that

Bombay is more citrusy, Bombay Sapphire is a little more citrusy and Hendrick's has the cucumber and rose essence in it and know how those react to the different ingredients in your cocktail, you just can't grab one and mix it with the other. That would be the difference between using a Bermuda onion and, let's say, a Vidalia onion.

RF: The Carousel, I'm guessing, must breakdown every so often. I've never seen it or heard of it happening, but I'm guessing it has to be fixed sometimes. Does business dip dramatically? Do people just go, "Oh, well"?

[0:56:49]

MA: It doesn't really dip, it has happened in the past where it does break down and has to be maintained and stuff, but people just get upset. And it's a little bit more stressful on us because we have to explain what happened and why it's broken. And after the initial shock that it's broken down, they still have a good time, and they still actually kind of experience everything except the rotation, and because it is still an iconic bar, not just for the city, but I think for the country itself.

RF: Last question. I'm very interested in Bourbon Street. What are your thoughts on Bourbon Street? I've always thought of the Carousel Bar as a place where you could get a very good cocktail, but also kind of fool yourself in a way — it's, of course, not on Bourbon Street, it's on Royal Street — but there is a sense of fun, there's a circus-like atmosphere, but it's not even that, the atmosphere, but there's something more happening than just a bar, and that is how Bourbon Street bars kind of have established themselves as sensory overload, in all types of ways. Do people confuse the Carousel Bar as like a Bourbon Street place? Does it ever get out of control in that way? And your thoughts on Bourbon? That's a long rambling question.

[0:58:27]

MA: It's an interesting question. We don't really get out of control like they do on Bourbon Street. We're totally different. Bourbon Street is interesting in that — like I said, I've been here about thirty years — and the change in Bourbon Street has been really interesting over the last thirty years.

[0:58:50]

When I first moved here, thirty years ago, Bourbon Street was really a fun place to go to. They had some great music venues. I remember the 544 Club with — I can't think of his name — Gary — can't think of his last name right now — but he played at the 544 Club for years. There was other places that had great, great live music and live entertainment and it's kind of eroded to — I don't know exactly how to describe it, but it's not the music venue it used to be, it's more just bars. You know, the Cat's Meow, which I'm not knocking or anything, but it's a karaoke bar. People are going in there, getting the three for one cocktails, okay. And I think the change really came when the Absinthe House because a daiquiri shop, and that's where the change started. And you saw places like Lulu White Mahogany Hall disappear. The 544 Club. Where the Four Points by Sheraton right now is on Bourbon Street, they used to have a great, right on the corner there, they used to have a great piano bar that you could go sit and have a few cocktails, watch Bourbon Street, like even in the afternoon, listen to music and stuff. And it was a lot of fun. You could walk up and down Bourbon Street, listen outside the clubs and hear the great music that was being played at the time. And especially since Katrina really a lot of that has disappeared, I think, and it's not — and I hate saying, but in some ways, Bourbon Street has

become kind of a "let's see how drunk we can get" in a way, and I don't like that because that's not what it's supposed to be.

[1:00:52]

And I've noticed that a lot of the music and stuff has moved over to Frenchman Street in the Marigny, Bywater-area, which, if it continues the way it's going, you're going to see that area become what Bourbon Street was thirty, thirty-five years ago. If you go back into the '50s [1950s] and '60s [1960s] and you look at the history of Bourbon Street then, yeah, it has always been a little bit raunchy. They had their, quote, strip clubs at the time, but these were actually burlesque shows where you didn't see the strippers actually strip. They actually left a lot of the imagination. I can't think of what her name is, but it was the Oyster Girl that appeared in the oyster shell.

RF: Evangeline.

[1:01:38]

MA: Evangeline, right, and you never saw her naked. She always had veils and pieces of cloth and everything else. It was very erotic and if you look at pictures from the time from these clubs, the people that went were dressed up. The men were in suits and ties. The women were dressed up with their hats and stuff, and they were very much — it was an evening out. Now you've got the different strip clubs and stuff, and that's what they are. I'm not knocking them or anything, because that's what it is, but it's lost that mystic, I think that was there. And I think that's one thing the Carousel has kind of kept up is we've still got that — where people like to come there even though they don't get dressed up like they used to twenty years ago — but we've got the entertainment four days a week, four nights a week. The people want to come and

have a great cocktail, enjoy, visit with friends and stuff, and make an evening out. We have a large, large local following, not just from New Orleans, but from the whole Gulf Coast in general.

RF: Well good, I want to thank you for this interview. This was really great and informative.

[1:03:03]

MA: Thank you. I hope you got something, I wasn't too rambling.

END OF INTERVIEW