
FULL TRANSCRIPT:

SUBJECT: Michael Santucci, bartender @
Touché Bar [and the Rib Room]
Omni Royal Orleans
621 St. Louis Street
New Orleans, LA 70140

DATE: March 30, 2005 @ 11:00 a.m.

LOCATION: Touché Bar

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans

LENGTH: Approx. 19 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here. This recording was conducted in the morning, while Michael was setting up his bar, so he is constantly in motion during the interview. He can be heard walking around, with his voice trailing off as he gets further from the microphone. He can also be heard moving bottles around, setting up glasses, moving bar stools, and unlocking and removing the heavy chains from the large French doors in preparation for the lunchtime crowd. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

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[Recording opens with sound of television in background]

Amy Evans: **[TRACK 1]** Amy Evans, Wednesday, March thirtieth, two thousand and five at the Touché Bar in New Orleans. **[BEGIN TRACK 2]**
This is Amy Evans at the Touché Bar with Michael Santucci, a bartender here.

Michael Santucci: *New Orleans*—[Sound of bottle hitting the bar as Michael sets up]

AE: [Laughs] And, um, he's setting up his bar and nice enough to spend some time talking about, um, his trade. So Michael would you, uh, mind also letting us know your birthday so we have on record what—

MS: I—

AE: —generation you are. [Short laugh]

MS: March fourteenth[beats on bar], nineteen forty-seven.

AE: All right. And how long have you been bartending?

MS: [Michael is spinning a bottle of liquor around in his hands. Sound of his rings hitting the bottle as it turns] Thirty-two years. Thirty-two years.

AE: Thirty-two. That's some time.

MS: Since nineteen seventy-two.

AE: Yeah? And how'd you get into the business?

MS: By accident.

AE: [Laughs] By accident?

MS: You know, my father taught me. You know, my father owned a bar [for] a couple years in the French Quarter. So I worked for him and just picked it up, and I was just very lucky. I worked all good places.

AE: What bar was your father's bar?

MS: It was called Mike's bar.

AE: Mike's Bar? Where was it?

MS: Royal and Kerlerac [pronounces this *Kell-or-ac*]. On the corner. It's still there.

AE: Yeah?

MS: On the corner of Royal and Kerlerac [Streets]. It's the R Bar now.

AE: Okay.

MS: He took that over in nineteen sixty-eight, sixty-nine. Sold it around [nineteen] seventy-two, which is when I went to work for Harry's Place.

AE: Okay. And so you just learned, you know, jumped both feet into the fire just—

MS: That's it.

AE: —working behind the bar.

MS: That's it. Went to work at Harry's Place. Goodtime Harry's Place was very popular. Lot of ladies used to go in there. A lot of professional people.

AE: Uh-huh.

MS: I started off [working there] a couple of days a week, and I just picked it up. And like I said, I was very fortunate. Every place I've worked—all very good places, where you can make money.

AE: Yeah. And so that's—is that primarily why you're in it, to make money? Or do you like—

MS: No—

AE: —mixing the drinks or the people—

MS: I'm in it to make money. And now I'm getting old, I don't have many more years left in this business.

AE: [Short laugh]

MS: In fact, four more years should do it. [Laughs]

AE: Yeah?

MS: Yeah, I hope so.

AE: Then you'll retire, huh?

MS: Well, I might cut down, you know, maybe find something easier. Two days a week or something. You know. Eh, four more years. Maybe five, tops, in this place.

AE: Yeah?

MS: If I'll make it that long.

AE: So you were born in New Orleans, obviously, yeah?

MS: Yes. I've been working at the [Royal Orleans] hotel here for fourteen years now.

[Short pause]

AE: And you like it over here?

MS: Yes, I like it. It's—I think it's very hard work sometimes.

AE: Yeah?

MS: I like it. I mean, look, [it] pays all the benefits. [Short pause] Pays the whole package, uh, 401[k], dental—whatever. Healthcare.

AE: Yeah?

MS: That's one of the reasons why I stay here, really. [Short pause] Like everybody else. [Sound of cooler door being shut] What else you got to know?

AE: Well, so tell me a little something about bartending in New Orleans. [Short pause] Since you've been around for a while.

MS: Well [short pause] I don't think no city in—in the United States pours more alcohol than this city—the population—big [with] tourists.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Lot of—lot of winos in this town. Lot of—lot of people like to drink. They come to New Orleans for two things: to eat and drink. Remember that. That's what they come to New Orleans for, to eat and drink. Pour a lot of alcohol. Mardi Gras time.

AE: Yeah?

MS: What else?

AE: So what about the history of the cocktail in this city and how—you know, a lot of people say that that word [cocktail] came to be used here in New Orleans, and Southern Comfort started here in New Orleans and—

MS: Really, I didn't know that.

AE: Yeah.

MS: But, uh, the New Orleans traditional drinks, you have the Ramos Gin Fizz, Brandy Milk Punch and, of course, the Sazerac. Those are the three drinks that were created here in New Orleans.

AE: Do you serve a lot of those?

MS: Yes. In the Rib Room, yes. [The Touché Bar and the Rib Room are both part of the Royal Orleans Hotel, and Michael has shifts at each.]

AE: Yeah.

MS: Here, no, not too much. But in the Rib Room, absolutely. Absolutely. [Sound of bottles clanking]

AE: What do you serve the most of here, do you think?

MS: Here it's basically beer, uh, a lot of whiskey drinks, you know.

AE: Uh-huh, and your famous Mai Tai you were telling me about yesterday.

MS: Yeah, well, I think it's good, Uh, and a lot of women like it.

AE: [Short laugh] Yeah?

MS: In fact, later on we'll make you one, if I can find my—I have it. [Sound of bottle being set down hard]

AE: Yeah.

MS: Nobody knows about that. [Brings a bottle of Crème de Banana over and places it on the bar in front of the interviewer] A Chinese man taught me—said it tops the whole drink off. Women like it. [Sound of Michael's ring hitting the side of the bottle] Basically, people that drink that, they just want one drink.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Basically women, they only want one drink.

AE: So you think women like the—the fruitier, fancier drinks?

MS: Yes, yes. Yes.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Older women? Absolutely. What else? What else we got to go on to?

AE: Would you consider the Mai Tai your signature drink?

MS: Mm, probably so.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Yeah, I make a good Mai Tai. Basically, Mai Tai, Rum Punch, Hurricane—now a Hurricane's sweet. I make a good Hurricane. Basically a Mai Tai and Rum Punch are basically the same. Different rums—dark rum, light rum. And you just got to make it a little lighter for women. You know, I—I top it off with Crème de Banana. That's what makes the drink.

AE: Ah. **[TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 05:09]**

MS: That's what makes the drink. Nobody I—not too many people do that. I don't know anybody that does it except for the Chinese fella.

AE: But who?

MS: Except the fella that taught me how to make it real good. A Chinese man.

AE: Oh, yeah.

AS: A Chinese fella—said top off with Crème de Banana, and they'll love it. He was right.

AE: [Laughs] So did you go to, uh, college or anything, or did you—

MS: I went to—

AE: —just get into the business?

MS: I went to grade school right here in the French Quarter. Saint Louis Cathedral. Uh, then I went to—we had a high school on, uh, Saint—Saint Aloisius. It was on, uh, Saint Claude and, uh, Esplanade. Two blocks from my house. Three blocks. And then after two years, then the brothers ran me out of there.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And I wound up going to Nichols—Brandestine Nichols public school. No college. No college.

AE: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MS: None, I'm the only child.

AE: Really?

MS: Um-hmm. [Short pause. Sound of bottles being moved around] Only child.

AE: So what does your dad—or did your dad think about you being in the service industry?

MS: Well, my dad's deceased. He died about five [years ago]. My mother's still living. It's a living. That's all it is is a living. Uh, I was married once. [Short laugh] Yeah, it didn't work out too good, but I was working a lot late at night, you know.

AE: Yeah.

MS: Of course you get out—let me tell you something, this business [slaps hand on bar]—it's the hardest thing in the world to go home. [Slaps bar again] Believe me, it's the hardest thing in the world to go straight home.

[Sound of bottles clanking] Now, you know, every night I go out and get a few drinks, but I will tell you one thing about me: I'm off [on] Saturday and Sunday [and] I don't leave the house. I like my days off. So it's only when I'm working. You know? What else?

AE: So what else? I saw you last night at the Napoleon House and—

MS: Napoleon's—that's my favorite place.

AE: Yeah?

MS: My favorite place to drink. You meet a lot of tourists, you get some local characters that go up in there like myself.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And that's about it. But I—I—that's my favorite place to go. Paul—I like Paul [Paul Gustings, one of the bartenders at the Napoleon House. See Paul Gustings interview] Paul—

AE: Yeah?

MS: You know Paul's got a—a dry sense of humor, you know. Paul sometimes can be rude to people, if you don't know him.

AE: Yeah.

MS: But I know him, and I just take him—he can be rude sometimes.

AE: He's a good guy. I—

MS: He's nice but—

AE: I spent some time with him last night—

MS: —but you got to—you got to know how to take him.

AE: Yeah. So what do you love especially about that bar? Is it Paul or is it just the feel—

MS: I like the people that go up in there. And I, you know, they—most—ninety percent of them are tourists but [short pause] that don't bother me. I like the opera music, its quiet.

AE: Yeah? What do you order over there?

MS: [Sighs] I—I been drinking scotch all my life, and in the last year and a half I switched off—over to vodka. I just got burnt out on scotch. Now I drink Absolut.

AE: Yeah?

MS: I got burnt out on scotch.

AE: So you mentioned the tourists over at Napoleon House, surely you've got a lot of tourists coming through here.

MS: Right. I like 'em, you know. I don't mind talking to tourists. I really don't. [Sound of bottles being put away] Look, the worst thing about this job, it's not pouring liquor, it's the food.

AE: How do you mean?

MS: We got to serve food here.

AE: Yeah.

MS: We—we have sandwiches—its just, you know, it's the food. And I'm the only one in here. And sometimes food can be hectic.

AE: Yeah.

MS: The Rib Room also. You know, if someone sits at the bar, they want food, you've got to serve them. [Sound of bottles being put away]

AE: Do you share a kitchen with the Rib Room?

MS: Yeah.

AE: Yeah?

MS: All of us has got the same kitchen. All this you talking—[moves hand around to gesture that the two places are connected]—all this that's connected? We got the same kitchen. The food is the only drawback.

AE: Yeah? [Sound of refrigerator door being closed] Do you have good food here?

MS: Excellent.

AE: What kind of stuff's on the menu?

MS: We have, uh, sandwiches, appetizers—

AE: Uh-huh, bar food.

MS: Our hamburger's our—I would say the hamburger—it's the best sandwich, you know.

AE: Yeah?

MS: The hamburger's number one. We sell, uh—but that's basically—appetizers, soups, salads, sandwiches.

AE: Well and when people eat, they sit—stay at the bar a little longer, don't they usually?

MS: Yeah, right. I mean, that's all—it's a drawback. Sometimes—like yesterday, I was really busy here with food. Weekends, I don't know how they do it.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: I don't want to find out.

AE: Yeah.

MS: Mardi Gras? It's like the Olympics. They should give it to the city every four years.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Every four years. [Recording stops and is immediately resumed]
[TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 09:28] [BEGIN TRACK 3] Everybody in New Orleans loves Mardi Gras. Me, I hate it.

AE: Why?

MS: It's just—it's just a down time of year for me. I don't like it, never did, it's just too busy and a lot of work involved. Thirteen straight days of work. It's a lot of work. The money's very good, but it's a lot of work. Especially Mardi Gras day on this street with all these doors open. [The front of the Touché Bar is a series of French doors that all open to Royal Street]

AE: What kind of stuff happens here on Mardi Gras?

MS: I don't know—I—I get here at eight o'clock in the morning [and] I don't stop working until I knock off at five-thirty. We open these doors up at nine thirty [in the morning], and I don't stop working—I have no idea—you could walk through here naked, and I couldn't tell.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Ahhh, I don't stop all day.

AE: Well, I bet you do see some crazy stuff with all these windows that open out to the street.

MS: Oh, yeah. Women are the worst. The women—half of them are nude.

AE: Yeah.

[Female employee walks in through the service door behind the bar and greets Michael]

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: Hey, baby!

MS: Like her, she's always— [Joking about the employee who just walked in]

AE: [To employee] Hey!

MS: I'm doing an interview with this lady.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: Ooh!

MS: That's how come—she's doing an interview with bartenders.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: Okay.

MS: See, she's got a machine.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: Awesome. [Laughs] Well, I just wanted to say bye before I go home.

MS: Bye? Where you going?

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: Uh, they didn't have a station for me?

MS: Come help me today.

FEMALE EMPLOYEE: [Laughs]

AE: There you go. [Laughs]

MS: I don't feel—come down, we'll be busy today. [To interviewer] I got a funny feeling a lot of people—[To employee] Okay, Ruth. I'll talk to you later. [Back to interviewer] But, um, I told her [to] leave that young guy alone and don't fool with him.

AE: [Laughs] [Short pause] So you have some good stories from some crazy days of customers being in here at Mardi Gras or some regulars—

MS: Oh, let me tell you!

AE: —doing it up.

MS: You know the best story I can tell you? And this is a kick. I don't know if you've [Michael is now on the other side of the bar to unlock all of the French doors. Sound of microphone being moved toward him]—this—this is the best I've ever seen in my life. I was working at—at the La Boucherie down the block on Chartres. A very popular place. Sound system downstairs. We had a regular restaurant and bar upstairs. We had a sound system and dancing. This is back in, uh, I'd say, early [nineteen] eighties. And, uh, this is the greatest. One night we were waiting—closing up—it was a weeknight. Thursday night. About four o'clock in the morning. [Chain being dropped on bar.] She says, "Come here." I said, "What do you want? I'm busy." She says, "You got to come see this back on the patio back here." You know, we had a little patio in the back. Some guy was sleeping on the sofa [short pause] knocked out. He must have thought he was [at] home. Oh, he had his underwear on, he had his socks and shoes in a nice little pile, his pants folded up. [Sound of glass hitting the bar] I said, "No, I'm not believing this." So she said, "What are we going to do?" [I said,] "What are we going to do? We're going to get him up." I said, "Do you know him?" She said, "I've seen him in here many times. But get him up and get him out of here. Call him a cab and—" So we got him out. [Sound of ashtray being put on the bar] And the next day, I'm coming to work, and somebody hits me from behind. Sure enough, I look around. It's the same guy we got— He had a big Cadillac. Young fella! He was about my age at the time. I said, "I'll be damned!" He says, "You got any damage [to your car] or nothing?" [I said,] "I don't have nothing done to my car. Just leave me alone, man!"

AE: [Laughs]

MS: So I—come to find out, the fella was a big attorney. And so—ah, he come in the Rib Room all the time, man. Big attorney, man. Uh, I don't want to say his name. He's a big attorney.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And—and you know, that's—that's back when he was a young—uh, he's was happening.

AE: [Laughs]

[Big crash of doors opening]

MS: I could tell you a bunch of stories, but I don't want to go into all that. You drink enough booze, it'll make you crazy.

AE: Yeah.

MS: Proved myself.

AE: What is, um, Saint Paddy's Day like around here? Is that pretty crazy too?

MS: Uh, really, Saint Paddy's Day is not all that crazy. That's basically uptown.

AE: Yeah.

MS: But we have—do a lot of business here, but basically [it's] all uptown. Saint Joseph's Day—the Italian parade—that's plenty crazy. Italians are pretty crazy.

AE: Yeah?

MS: So that's a big day. Saint Patrick's Day. Mardi Gras the big one, bar none. Mardi Gras the big one. You see sights you never—you been down here for Mardi Gras?

AE: Nope.

MS: See sights you'll never see, people parading up—and men and women. All of that. [Sound of chains dangling. Sound continues as Michael takes the chains off of the doors] Mardi Gras is unbelievable. You know, I'm gonna be honest with you, the last three years, I worked here on Saturday and Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays for Mardi Gras.

[A cat comes running into the bar from across the street and runs all the way to the back of the bar.]

AE: Does that cat belong in here? [Laughs]

MS: That belongs in that shop. In and out all day long. But there's nothing you can do about it. He's been doing it for years.

AE: [Laughing]

MS: So—that's the days I worked here—to be honest with you, the last three years [for] Mardi Gras I've been on the weekends.

AE: Yeah.

MS: The bar—it—that—that Saturday and Sun—I mean that's—it's Mon—Monday and Tuesday it just picks up. Forget Tuesday. Only thing that's gonna ruin Mardi Gras is plenty of rain. It can be cold, whatever, but people are gonna [sound of bar stool being moved across the floor] come out. They *will* come out. [Short pause] I worked out in Metairie one time at a popular restaurant.

AE: Uh-huh. **[TRACK 3 – OCOUNTER: 05:19]**

MS: A friend of mine used to own it, Mister Frank Occhipinti—beautiful restaurant [called Harry's Place]. I worked there for eight years about—eight and a half. Uh, just like the Rib Room. Lot of customers from the Rib Room used to come out there. And, uh, he used to close at Mardi Gras.

AE: He used to close for Mardi Gras?

MS: Oh, yeah. In Metairie? Well, he's a restaurant. He didn't want to bother with all that.

AE: Yeah.

MS: You know? That was the best thing. I'm down here—don't work for eight years Mardi Gras—then I came here fourteen years. [Sound of chains being placed on bar] That's it.

AE: How'd you move over here?

MS: You know, the food and beverage manager—when Frank closed his place, I was working around the corner. They had a little, uh, college place called Meelis'. And I was in between jobs, I was going—because I—I was getting unemployment. I said I'm not going to work [for] about four months. Just take this time to myself. I had a friend of mine, Timmy Meelis, over to the place. Tim said, "Why don't you come work for me in the daytime? I'll pay you cash plus you'll get tips." So I did that for four months, and the food and beverage manager at this hotel at the time, Gary Schwartz, used to come in there all the time. And I got to know him and all that and, uh, [coughs]. Excuse me. He said, "Mike, you know, uh, what you gonna do when Timmy closes? Timmy sold the place?" I said, "I know. I guess I'm gonna have to look for a job." [He said,] "Come over to the Rib Room. I got a job for you." So I worked at the Rib Room.

AE: Yeah.

MS: Got lucky.

AE: Yeah.

MS: I told you, I worked all good places. I've worked La Boucherie, Occhipinti's, I worked Georgie Porg—Georgie Porgie's, we unbelievable. We had great lines to get [in] there.

AE: What was that? What place was that?

MS: Georgie Porgie's in the Hyatt—it was in the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

AE: Uh-huh.

MS: We used to use four bartenders downstairs, two upstairs. Two girls upstairs, four guys downstairs. Everything.

AE: What was the big draw over there?

MS: It was just the people that owned it were local, they were very well known, and uh, it was just a lot of women. And it was just—sound system and—wild—everything. Prostitutes—What else you want to know?

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Everything! Roy and Selma [owners of Georgie Porgie's] was the greatest. Roy, uh—you—he knew—Roy had more night clubs in this city than—

MAN OUTSIDE: Hey, man!

WOMAN: [To Michael] You doing all right?

[Man outside still talking. Unintelligible]

MS: Unbelievable what Roy had! Roy and Selma were more like—

WOMAN: [To Michael] Hi, sweetie.

MS: How ya doing? [The two greet each other with a kiss]

WOMAN: Good, how you doing?

MS: Sit down, sit down. You want a coffee or something?

WOMAN: I'm gonna sit over there. Hell no, I don't want no coffee! I don't drink coffee. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

MS: [To interviewer] Now here's a customer—[to woman] this lady's doing an interview on this machine about bartenders from—for Southern Comfort.

WOMAN: Oh, he's pretty good!

AE: [To woman] Yeah, are you a regular in here?

WOMAN: [To Michael] As long as you get me a drink, you're good. [Short laugh]

AE: [Laugh]

MS: What you want, dear?

WOMAN: You know, I'm gonna have a glass of chardonnay.

[Sound of chains being moved off of bar]

MS: You like that DeLoach, right?

WOMAN: Yes. I got to fill out a couple of bills while I have a drink. It's small in my place, so I had to get out of there.

AE: Yeah, a little multi-tasking going on this morning?

WOMAN: Yeah.

AE: All right, Michael, well I'll let you get to work. I'll turn this off. Are we done? Do you have anything you want to add?

MS: No, uh, it's just that, uh, [short pause] I enjoy it, you know. I don't mind working, you know.

AE: Yeah.

MS: But I like to split my time up. Like I really like two days here and three days next door [at the Rib Room].

AE: Yeah?

MS: Because next door there's a lot of, uh—you know, people I went to school that I see and, uh, all professional people come in there.

AE: At the Rib—at the Rib Room, you mean?

MS: The Rib Room. Yeah. I like it. And that's about the end of interview, huh? [Michael can be heard getting the bottle of Chardonnay out of the refrigerator]

AE: Yeah, that'll do it. Thank you, sir.

MS: Well, you come down—you want some more coffee?

AE: Sure, that'd be great.

[TRACK 3 – COUNTER: 09:01]

[END]