

CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Professor Robert MacDonald

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Florida Southern College

DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 30, 2010

M= James M. Denham ("Mike")
R= Professor Robert MacDonald
U= Unidentified Female Speaker

M: Today is November 30th and I'm once again resuming our conversation with Mr. Robert MacDonald here at Florida Southern in the McKay Archives. And we're here to resume our conversations beginning with his tenure at Florida Southern. Before we do that, we want to go back a little bit and talk a little bit about the time period between when you first came on campus in 1962 and playing in the Byculla Club.

R: I did that but that's not on campus. I didn't perform on campus in any type of chapel. There was no auditorium.

M: So tell us about your experience at the Byculla Club and how you ran across some people associated with Florida Southern College.

R: The Byculla Club was a very exclusive club in the Poconos, where wealthy house owners and landowners from Manhattan mainly obviously Manhattan west, had their cabins, which turned out to be approximately 20 doors, 23 rooms each. I was able to play sometimes three, at least the first summer, I played two concerts there. That was a first for them. They were a marvelous audience and they could afford to pay. Our daughter was three years old the first summer and almost four the second summer. So we had a wonderful tradition going there. I might have kept it up had we not come to Florida Southern.

The way I learned about the opportunity at Florida Southern then was through my booking agency was booked there for that concert but the widow of the former president, I hope I'm right about that that it was the president that she was the widow of, she was in residence there every summer. She was one of the ones who were used to the wealthy around us. It was eventful to get to meet her.

M: Ludd Spivey's widow, correct?

R: I'm pretty sure that it was.

M: If it was not Ludd Spivey's widow, it was somebody else that was very much associated with the college.

R: Very much associated with the college. I'm sorry, I would just correct myself. I'm glad you said that, the former head of the music program, the first significant one.

M: I thought Ludd Spivey lived beyond 1962.

R: Yes.

M: So it was the former head's of the music program at Florida Southern College widow?

R: The name escapes me at the moment. But that first gave me the impression of Florida Southern. The time when I was first there, I think I talked to you about, and the arcades and wandering about in the dusk.

M: That made a dramatic impression on you?

R: A dramatic impression on me because of the time of day. I have found in my not-so-short lifespan that things that occur at sundown are especially attractive and poignant.

M: Well, even today if you walk the campus at dusk, there is a certain picture that emerges.

R: Emily Dickinson caught it. There is a certain slant of light in the afternoon and that slant of light always fascinates me that it makes contrast more distinguished and clear.

My impression when I first stepped on campus, I was especially impressed by the fact that Frank Lloyd Wright, little did I know that I would learn so much about him later on, I knew what most people know, but the fact that he built so many buildings, designed so many buildings, I had no idea. I am convinced by the way that he advised at the beginning of the '50s, if I'm correct in the timing, that he advised his former apprentice who designed the auditorium, I am sure that Frank Lloyd Wright helped him. Because his other buildings later included --

M: Next door, the library.

U: That's Nils Schweitzer. He designed Branscomb.

M: If I follow you correctly, what you seem to be suggesting is these designs, the basic outlines of these designs were already on paper long before they were

actually built.

R: They were less in detail than in their relation to each other. For example, the music department was to be over the water of Lake Hollingsworth and that was before air-conditioning don't forget and the humidity and what it does to pianos was not known to him, the then president.

M: That music building was built later but –

R: I was going to say, the reason you were saying that you thought it was not by Schweitzer, Nils Schweitzer did everything at ground level. But as you go beyond that towards Lake Hollingsworth, that's only nine or ten years old. That was an architect out of Illinois. I forget just where. He did a magnificent job. He was better than Nils Schweitzer for such a job. Nils was not awfully good at small spaces and making them line up with each other.

When I first came, I managed to say I did not know all about the department when I first came. But I had loads and loads of opportunities since Dr. Thrift was unaware even on his own campus of the music department's schedules. So in those days, I was able to just do whole seasons of concerts elsewhere. I'm very glad because I got more of a perspective on the American scene. You see my main concert experience had been through the State Department and tours in five European countries. But I could have told you a lot about Yugoslavia much more than anything west of Tennessee and Carolina.

M: Can you tell us about the first time you met President Thrift? Obviously, it was here on campus in '62. Did you have much interaction with him then?

R: I apparently did not meet him. I met Dr. Snodgrass, who was the vice-president.

M: So it was Dr. Snodgrass who was really your connection?

R: Yes.

M: And hired you to do the '62 concert?

R: No.

M: When you came to Florida Southern, can you tell us about what your conversations were like with President Thrift and what your precise duties were going to be as artist in residence? He obviously envisioned this position, this was a new position. They had never had it before. So what was the conversation with you regarding what can you do for us, how can you make this work?

R: Actually, it started me out with a clear slate but let me say I think I understood him. He and I understood each other so well because of my rural Carolina background. Comedian that I am, I was able to call up that background.

M: So you could say you kind of hit it off.

R: It was hard for me not to change to a South Carolina accent when I was around him. But we hit it off. It gave me a rapport with him, although I still did not have any opportunity to bring him up to snuff on what the music department should be. That worked two ways to an advantage. That meant that I would never have been able to have been absent that many times my first few years here. I just dropped by sometimes between concerts. That gave us publicity also around Florida but also in Texas and all over.

M: So you really were given a lot of running room I guess if we want to use football terms, a lot of running room to do pretty much what you wanted to do and how you wanted to do it?

R: Absolutely.

M: Because what he seemed to want out of this job was public recognition, stature, and also engage the Lakeland community as well and create a fine arts connection for the college.

R: Right. And the person who changed that was the then dean, who was given a short notice, he was told in September that he had to find a new music department.

M: Was this pretty quickly after you got there?

R: No, it was two years after.

M: About '67 then?

R: Yes, I had had the freedom to come and go. Little did I know that that freedom was coming to a screeching halt because he sent me to the first meeting of the curriculum committee. I remember his name was Nelson Huffman.

M: He was the dean?

R: Right. He was a remarkable person. I think he was not from the south but he had lived long enough in Florida to understand the southern families and the southern people.

M: Obviously, even though you're artist in residence, which means you're able to do whatever you want, you're obviously going to meet the music faculty and

you're going to become familiar with the students, you're going to become familiar with the music faculty, how would you evaluate the music faculty when you came in 1962?

R: I had no means of comparison. My visits to other campuses were pretty much limited in contact to the one person who was running the concert series. In fact, this agency out of New York, whom I was engaged with, was a specialist, The Association of American Schools and Colleges, was very versed at bringing the first art series, arts and concerts to campuses. They especially liked the fact that they could be the first at smaller institutions. So I was back and forth across Pennsylvania and Ohio and all over the place, in Washington and Florida.

M: How many music faculty at Florida Southern were there?

R: I would guess about five or six.

M: Would you be able to assess their credentials, quality?

R: I think their credentials were in some cases excellent, especially in the voice department, the main voice teacher. But they had not been called upon to use their own talents because the curriculum was the hang up. You would not have believed there was no music history course. How can you have a department without a history of music? The whole degree was of course a bachelor of arts. That's fine and good but there had never been a senior recital. I think there was one Steinway piano on the entire campus. It was in my studio. It was not a great one I assure you, it had been overused. It had to be moved by me to have a senior recital at Annie Pfeiffer Chapel. For some reason, the president wanted it to be at Annie Pfeiffer Chapel. He felt it would be more prestigious. So I had to do without a piano in my studio. I had to run up the hill and back and forth until we got it back.

The main thing was I was gradually becoming aware but nothing had been thrust upon me yet, so the day that my lesson was interrupted by the academic dean and he called me outside and said I want you to be chair of the music department, I said: Chair of what?

M: In the middle of a class that you were teaching?

R: Of a piano lesson. And I thought I got out of it by saying I knew absolutely nothing about it. And he chuckled and said: Okay. That doesn't matter, you're already on the curriculum committee. They'll teach you about it. So as I assume authority over everybody in that department and knew nothing at the same time, they were giving me my first branch of awareness.

M: What was the reception of the other faculty to learn you were going to be the new leader?

R: Looking back, I had to appraise it. I would have been less a problem to someone popping in who had no idea of what a history requirement was in their curriculum. I couldn't find much help in the catalog because that was based on the time back then when there was no national awareness in the department. But what I was lucky to have was a dear friend, Jack Houts, who was you might say head of the voice program. And we'll talk about the other person in that program too. Here were the marvelous inconsistencies; you had no music history course; you were devoid of someone who is absolutely essential for a department, but you would never have had the audacity to suggest it. Yet I could learn along with educating the department, and because of this Jack Houts who understood my dilemma, he had come from a small college in Tennessee, albeit very well versed in music, and he helped me get my bearings.

The old music building was a former brick residence which faced westward where the current jazz band and the studios for recordings and so forth, that's the only thing left of the old music building. The music building proper was razed. Jack Houts was so understanding of my having so little knowledge that he helped me. The one thing I knew a lot about ahead of time was what we wanted in the way of pianos, that was easy to figure out, just give yourself five minutes and you couldn't find a Steinway that was in my studio, was that we had to have some magnificent gifts. I discovered something that I might have talked about, but I discovered an ability I never knew I had and that was to talk well to people into parting with their money.

M: Well, that leads me into another area of conversation, we can come back to this, that is your involvement in your community, the people that you met when you first came here. What was the Lakeland community like in 1965 when you came here? What was the town like, what was the community like? How much interaction did the community have with Florida Southern?

R: This was very interesting because there was no concert series whatsoever. I had only been on this arts program series because it was given to colleges and universities that didn't have one, didn't have a concert series. Nothing had developed any father on that score. Who was the man who played Mark Twain?

M: Hal Holbrook?

R: Hal Holbrook. Of all things, inconsistently enough, we had a couple of really distinguished people in their fields.

M: Who were some of the leaders in the community that you met?

R: The leaders in the community were the people obviously who were interested at all in the arts. Luckily this lady, I'm trying to think of her name, she gave at

least seven of the pianos. I was able to know her and she had been a piano major at a small college somewhere upstate. She understood our dilemma. Her husband had a restaurant and delved in alcohol sales. He was very good at that and his fortune was already plentiful.

M: Well in the '60s, Polk County was a dry county, wasn't it?

R: So one of his establishments was right at the county line. But they were such a boom to the art world because she was so effective with persuading her husband.

M: So you immediately made contacts in the community and bring people into the college that probably before had not really been involved that much.

R: Right. But ironically enough, because I knew so little about academe, I was not tied down. I could get around in a way that I have never been able to since because I always had a class or I had to go hire someone for this, that or the other. But I hasten to add another colorful person on the faculty at that time. That's what I liked about, as I look back on it, and I still like about the inconsistency of the irregularity, the freedom that you get from not knowing any better.

The former president, whom I unfortunately just missed knowing, Spivey, had just died when I arrived. I heard nothing but legendary stories about him. Of course Charles Thrift had been his vice-president and understood him so well. I was aware that he had these unusual encounters, he went back and forth to New York. He was a Methodist minister from Florida as well as I know but when he went to New York, he would meet such people as Frank Lloyd Wright. You find me somebody who would come into those circles who was president of a teeny-tiny college nobody had ever heard of. That's what happened, that's when he met Frank Lloyd Wright.

He also met a lady named Anne Roselle. She was extremely important to the development of this department. She was an opera star. She had sung at the Met for several seasons and her husband had just died previous to one of the trips that the college president had made to there. He was fascinated by her. She had an accent a mile long. She was Hungarian. She would say: "Hello, dahling, I am so glad to see you, dahling." She sounded like Zsa Zsa Gabor, slightly older. She taught voice and she had never had to teach voice before so she taught some very unusual lessons. Be that as it may, she was so colorful and so interesting that I would have stayed here just if nothing else on account of her.

M: She was teaching here?

R: Yes. And every Christmas when we had that Christmas dinner that the wives

put on, our ritual was that she was to sing *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*. I don't think she knew it in English because she had come to New York from Dresden and met her husband, who was a business man in New York. You couldn't think of there being Christmas season going by and having that dinner, which was so important back then. Dinners like that were still, since the college had no level of sophistication whatsoever that I can remember, this was the main social event at the cafeteria. Everybody would go. So she would sing that.

She came to our house very frequently and I'm glad to say that she left us an absolute legacy of pictures and memorabilia. They are sitting right now as I speak on my piano and I'm not knowing what next to do with them. I think they are archive stuff. There are such people as Richard Strauss standing there on the lawn in front of his house in Bavaria with her. He heard her sing in Dresden and he gave all four of his best leading roles in *Romeo and Juliet*. What was the religion one, which she especially liked because by then, she was Christian Science. She had joined the Christian Science Church. Those operas were so famous then that that was her card to sing anywhere in the world she wanted to. She sang on the *Queen Elizabeth*, no, on the *Ile de France* she sang and they just packed the house because she was quite well known for her European background. When she came to Florida, there were people in New York who thought: What happened to Anne Roselle, she dropped in to oblivion. She loved to be here and she loved teaching.

M: She actually just ran into President Thrift in New York City, he invited her to come down and start teaching. So that was kind of how we got her, correct?

R: Well, from Spivey.

M: I meant Spivey, I'm sorry. Were there other people like that on campus when you were here in the '60s that were world class, famous, for one reason or another, some twist of fate, Spivey might have lured them to come teach here?

R: You have some non-musical ones?

M: Yes, any other people like that in various departments on campus?

R: I'm not thinking of any right now. One of the things that impressed me most, I might be very happy had it never happened, remember I'm in the music department hanging over Lake Hollingsworth, you could imagine what that would have done because the humidity, with or without air-conditioning. That fell through, I forget just why, there are pictures I believe in the -- what do you call it?

M: Roux Library.

U: The Buckner and Hollis?

R: Yeah, right, the Hollis. There are pictures that show some of the plans that have done that. That would be interesting for you to see by the way. You probably have already.

U: I had a question, with you being a musician, the organ that's in Pfeiffer Chapel, was that ever used by the music department like the students would learn on it?

R: Yes. In fact, its predecessor which was a very, very important large organ –

U: So there was another one?

R: Oh, yes, the one that was put there by Frank Lloyd Wright. I'm trying to think of the best known organ in the world.

U: I have the invoices so I could look it up.

R: The one that is now there is just a laugh compared to it. It's a nice small organ and it would do except for the fact that we don't have serious concerts there. We don't have all that ceremonial need.

U: Was the other one more along the lines of what they have at Stetson?

R: Absolutely.

U: It was that large one?

R: Absolutely. And all over that balcony was pipes and pipes. You saw every triangle and opening.

M: What happened to it, was it dismantled?

R: It had not been looked after and then humidity had caught up with it. There was a great drive on some three years, four years after I arrived here where the president of the alumni association sort of took it over. That was to get donations for it. I dare say she did a better job of it than us musicians because she could run around and find people who were not even connected with music but organs oddly enough attract people. I think it's the church connection. They can understand that. If you had three Steinway pianos, they're not impressed but if you get them a Hammond Organ...

U: It has been incredible because I have seen the invoices but I haven't figured out if that was the original or not. But you got to see the original.

R: Oh, yes. Of course, I haven't mentioned to you that there was no type of

chapel or a place to assemble, there was no place where the entire student body could have assembled in those days. That's why Branscomb was so welcomed by the people. By having that, I have to recall that night that I played the first concert when I was on tour. This program that I played, I played it all over, I don't know, because what I didn't know the level of it because I played the most difficult program I've ever played in my life. It was major, major works and nowadays, I would just begin with lighter music to make it more dramatic. I had to show everybody, in my New York debut recital, I had to prove that I could play the most difficult piece in the works.

U: How are the acoustics in Pfeiffer?

R: They're excellent for that. And I must say that was one of the main concerns when the new building was going up, would it have that compatibility with the music. I don't know if that was an accident or what. Perhaps it was his penchant for low ceilings and then less low ceilings and less low ceilings. There were fewer plunging walls. There was a way of coming in for newcomers that you go first into a vestibule at the doors, at the portals, there is a very low ceiling, then a slightly less low ceiling, then a slightly higher one. You come into like a crescendo.

U: Like a reveal.

R: Exactly.

U: That's his style.

R: He really got it right. I'm looking at some of these questions which are interesting: Did you have a job description? Well, obviously not.

M: What I would like to do now, Bob, is ask you a little bit about the campus, the student body, what were the students like here, what are some of the things that you remember about the students the first time you came to campus? Was this the same as other campuses you've been to as far as the student body or what were some of the characteristics of it?

R: My contact with most of the campuses was of a nature that probably wouldn't give me much more insight there, as many places as here. I do remember that here I was impressed by the inconsistency. I had one of the best music majors we've ever had to a person who didn't know middle C. I was suddenly teaching at a level which to twiddle, to let anyone know that I was called artist in residence teaching these little fingers to play or these not-so-little fingers to play. I used to be embarrassed about it but I'm so glad I had to teethe on that and build from that. Had it been an already established department, I might not be here now because I would probably be moving around. But talk about engaged learning, it was engaged working, trying to improve over zero.

M: What was the socioeconomic and ethnic makeup of the student body in '65?

R: I think probably very similar to now, although there was certainly less knowledge ahead of time of specific departments. So I guess I have to admit that it was very inconsistent in the music department. You didn't know how in the world you would justify graduating such a person, not necessarily by their own fault.

M: Some were tremendously ill prepared and others who were tremendously well prepared.

R: Right. And the ones who were really gifted, I can't say they had a well-rounded education but pretty quickly we got busy. That was Bill Huffman's idea. As quickly as he would get me a little bit of knowledge, a little bit of know-how in curriculum, we started. They couldn't keep up with the new developments for the catalog.

M: Who were some of the other colleagues that you know? One of the things that when you were given a new job as far as chair of the department, who were some of the other faculty that you got to know in the 1960s that you think we ought to know as far as their accomplishments and their abilities?

R: I think you meant non-musicians as well?

M: Yes, I did.

R: And this is a non-musician, she was head of the German department, Juliana Jordan. You could never tell from that name that she was a Berliner. She was married way back to someone named Jordan. This was Spivey for you. It's another Anne Roselle but this was not in music. He went to, among other places, he happened up in Salzburg. And he wanted to have a tour of the main attraction in Salzburg. Someone brought him to the theater there and the secretary in the theater was Juliana Jordan. She had her doctorate already from the University of Berlin but was working and happened to have a job here. She just stood right up from her desk and took Spivey around and gave him a tour. That's how she turned up here because to thank her, he hired her. I forget whether it was on the spot or not. It wasn't long. It didn't take him long to decide.

She came and she taught first German but then also theater because he learned after the fact, that she was an actress; that had been her profession before. She's the one I think helped them to realize they should have a head of the theater department who had a good theater background. Later on, she still taught German for quite a while but about four years after getting here and building up all that curriculum and so forth, I was getting pretty ready to have a little change in my life and I wanted to if not a year-long program, at least a

semester-long program. Well, I found my chance at the University of Freiburg in Germany. That's where we had a program, the Association of Mid-Florida Colleges, that's Stetson, Rollins in Orlando, us and a few more. There's a black college up there.

M: Bethune Cookman.

R: Yes. I was very lucky to have landed on that because it gave me a chance to learn how to get on with students, how to help them plan their lives. These were students from all over but mainly from Central Florida. I know there were four from Florida Southern but we had the University of Pennsylvania, people had somehow found out about it. It was a magnificent program. It was to last nine months. Two of the leading numbers, the two young men who were basketball players, one of them very gifted in art, got hepatitis in the very last week before we were to leave after nine months and I ended up having to stay and look after those two for the entire summer and spent most of my time talking with their parents in Kansas and Pennsylvania. It became a kind of an experience for me where I learned how to deal with crises and to learn how to deal with young people who were not pianists. That was quite a development in my life.

M: So this is a primary program, continued on for quite some time?

R: Oh, yes. It was well established. Juliana, back to her, had been their contact here. There was always one person who had initiated it on each campus. She was the one there.

M: So were there any other faculty like Juliana that were particularly outstanding?

R: I should have put forth more home study looking for a couple of old catalogs. The names alone would have just produced memories. Should I still try to do that?

M: Yes, maybe we can do that next time.

R: The lady in the community who was so gracious, Thelma Kells, gave the money for the pianos, including 50 percent of the proceeds off the piano, which today would run about \$75,000 as the entire price. That thing sitting on that stage is an absolute miracle compared to most colleges.

M: So Thelma Kells was the person in the community that gave you the money for the pianos. Then as time went on, the current music building was insufficient so you got enough momentum on campus to build another building. Can you go ahead and talk about that?

R: The specific way the momentum came, what was happening in that old

residence hall, it was a four-square, old brick, two-story building, two-story residence right on the highway. It was so limited, the formal living room or sitting room as it was called in those days had been made into studios. There was a second floor even. So that square building was it. We were just busting out the seams. It had a basement though.

All the practice rooms were in the basement. The practice rooms in the basement would have been strange for anywhere but in Florida, it meant a wading pool if it rained as much as two days straight. So imagine pianos sitting in that humidity and as much as a half inch of water on the floor of each practice room.

One time the third day came around and it was still raining and I found myself walking up this hill to the president's office. His favorite habit, someone had canceled. He was sitting by himself at his desk and his secretary was on lunch break. I went to his door and tapped lightly and he let me in. I went in. I had heard that he was planning to retire and that he was looking for a project financially for building. The best chance was that there would be a new men's dorm. Without realizing how profoundly it would register with him, I said: "Can we have a new building; can you envision our ever having a new music building?" His face lit up incredibly and he wanted to hear more. That's what he wanted to do. You will see his name down there.

M: This was President Robert A. Davis?

R: Yes, right. He was so elated to have a musical project because his wife was a pianist. She went to the conservatory school. So from there on, he convinced the trustees and everybody that we'd have a new music building. I am sorry to tell you this, it's the one thing that frustrates me about my accomplishments at this college, I don't know why it is that that particular subject can't register with anyone. I think I actually have colleagues who probably think I made it up. I don't know why the credibility should be so doubted with that particular subject. I don't want to go running around genuflecting and crossing themselves but it certainly would be nice to know that they're going to a top-notch building that wouldn't have been there if I had not walked up the hill that afternoon in the rain.

M: Let's go back a little bit and walk me through the process of putting together your first fine arts series. When you were artist in residence, was that part of your responsibility to put together an arts series?

R: Yes. He had brought me here for the concert series. Being academic dean and having been a music major, he was interested to help the music program.

M: The fine arts program, who were some of the first people that you brought in?

R: Hal Holbrook. There were no well-known pianists. That was probably

because I wanted to be the only pianist. I hadn't yet learned the magnanimity of concert presentation. We would have outstanding pianists for the rest of my 20 years that I was involved with. That had to be taken over that year by someone. I tried to do the best I could long distance when I was in Germany that year.

I started out, I picked up the phone to Columbia Artists in New York, I didn't know what I was going to say, but it turned out that I had established myself with them. There were at least four or five major agencies in New York who were thrilled that they could find in Central Florida a concert opportunity. Why? Because they could make up tours that would have their artists find something that he would pass through and not just a blank date.

M: So they're coming to Orlando, they're coming to Tampa, they're coming even to Miami. They want to be able to fill up a day.

R: Even say from Columbus, Georgia to Miami and then Lakeland, Florida. So it worked out. We would get things in the four-figure category less than at the major universities. It was remarkable. Oddly enough, Ingrid booked Mark Twain for the first time because my father died and I had to leave the day before the concert. I had gotten the agency to promise to talk him in to letting our theater majors watch him put on that makeup which changed him into a 65-year-old man. She had never booked a concert in her life before but it was amazing.

How Juliana really helped out, got into a good fashion, was when I went to Germany that year. She stepped in and took over. I was so enamored of her being the head of it that I just thought: You keep it. I enjoyed my freedom from having to book the concerts. But it ended up she asked me any of the musicians, she needed to have my knowledge.

M: Well, you had the contacts anyway, correct?

R: Yes.

M: You knew people already that were probably easier to get.

R: Yes, especially the European ones. I would do orchestras, symphonies. We had them from Moscow and all over the place.

M: In the 1960s, the middle '60s, this was a time of tumult and conflict everywhere, particularly on college campuses. Civil rights movements were going on, Vietnam War was going on, what was Florida Southern like?

R: That was indeed international because that one year in Germany, that was very much the case also. That was in the '60s.

M: I was wondering what the Florida Southern campus was like during those

years, was it as active and as tumultuous as say the University of Florida?

R: There were certain disturbances, it was very active and one managed to seem devoid of respect for these particular youngsters who were after all they were interesting themselves nationally and internationally, but it was so renegade in nature. I'm glad I don't have too many specific memories of the faculty who felt that way, particularly the music faculty did not think that way.

M: What we'll do then is conclude today and we will pick up with this the next time. We will announce that day at the appropriate time.