

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 13, 1970
INTERVIEWEE: EDIE ADAMS
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ
PLACE: The Fairmont Hotel in Dallas, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

F: Miss Adams, first of all, how did you get mixed up in politics?

A: Well, it was the 1964 campaign. Before that I really felt that anyone in show business should keep their political feelings private.

F: You hadn't campaigned for Kennedy in 1960?

A: No. It was when Goldwater was announced; it really terrified me.

F: Were you on the West Coast at that time?

A: Yes. At the time I didn't think he was serious, I didn't think he had a chance. Billy Wilder said, "Not only does he have a chance, it looks like he's going to win." I went home and I thought about it and I thought, "Well, now's the time; if you ever want to speak up, now's the time." Poor, dear Mr. Goldwater--I hate to say anything about him, but I had known--how can I say--not personally but friends of friends of friends, and I just felt that he was not only not qualified, but it really terrified me that the hands of the country could even possibly be put into his hands. All those swimming pool things where he went under--all those things were all true from analysts that I knew. It just terrified me. So that's what entered me into politics, sort of a left-handed way of getting into it.

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F: I'm supposed to be non-political in this, so I won't agree with you at this time, but I do. And it's not difficult really to place myself back in 1964. Did you contact the [Democratic] Party, or did you just get the word around among friends?

A: They were campaigning. It was Humphrey actually, mostly. To whoever it was--I don't know the Democratic leader out there, they were having a rally for Humphrey--I just said, "Oh fine, marvelous!" It was mostly a Latin American thing. I know I was in the car with Cantinflas. I remember it was very exciting. We sang some Spanish songs. But anything they wanted, [I did because] I just was fearful [of a Goldwater election].

F: Where did you learn your Spanish?

A: In high school, three years, very bad Spanish. I could sing in Spanish, but unless I'm there for about two weeks, I can't get along too well.

F: You let the melody carry you, you don't pay much attention to the lyrics.

A: That's it.

F: Did you then get sort of on a circuit with the party after the appearance with Humphrey, or how did this general campaign develop?

A: I don't really know. I did get involved with the governorship [race].

F: You mean, Pat Brown?

A: Yes. [It was] President Nixon's worst defeat. I was there very, very much for Pat Brown, I must say.

F: Oh, you had taken part in that?

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A: In that, yes.

F: Incidentally, I've seen him twice so far.

A: Really?

F: We still have other work to do, because that could go on forever.

A: I just personally felt about that, but I didn't involve myself as much as I did in the 1964 campaign. Then I really attacked it. I said, "Whatever you want me to do, I'm there. I'll be there, whatever you want."

F: To whom did you say this? To your California people?

A: There was a big party at Danny Thomas' house mostly for Hubert Humphrey, and I said, "Whatever you want, just call on me." I guess he remembered. And I was on the last campaign.

F: How did you balance this with your contractual commitments?

A: Whenever I was available I said I'd do whatever they wanted.

F: When did you first meet Lyndon Johnson?

A: I think it was that rally in Austin. You know, it's kind of funny. I got a phone call one Saturday morning, I remember.

F: You're talking about the one in November?

A: Yes.

F: Right before the election.

A: They said, "This is NBC. We have the White House on the phone. Can we give them your private number?" What do you say? No? No. That was to ask me to go to that rally. I guess that really was the first time I met him.

F: Tell me about the trip.

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A: It was very exciting. There were one hundred and twenty-five thousand people, did I hear, there. I could believe it.

They said, "Could you please come down?"

F: Did you come by commercial plane?

A: Commercial plane. They said could I just do about twenty minutes, because it was just to hold the crowd until he got there. Of course, he was about an hour and fifteen minutes late, and we sang "The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You," maybe one hundred and thirty-three times.

F: And "The Yellow Rose."

A: And "The Yellow Rose of Texas." I sang everything I'd ever sung in any nightclub act that I'd ever done.

F: Were you given any sort of a bill of fare that you were supposed to follow?

A: No. That nice fellow from Austin, what's his name? The cowboy with--

F: Cactus Pryor.

A: Yes. He was there, thank heavens! Telling me what to say next, and he'd say, "Just five more minutes." "Okay." "Try a chorus of this." Or, "How about this?" or "Get that fellow up here and talk to him for awhile."

F: I was there that night, incidentally, and I remember that I thought your patter was quite effective. Did Cactus feed you some of that?

A: He was giving me some of his lines and telling me who [people were]. Just coming straight from California, I didn't know who [anybody was] and he'd say, "Bring this fellow up," or, "Talk to this one," "Say this," and "Say that."

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F: How much in advance did you get to Austin ahead of that?

A: Very, very little time. I remember that I was getting my hair combed in the car.

F: From the airport to the rally?

A: No, from Los Angeles, from my house to the airport. I don't know what happened, but he was combing my hair in the car. He combed and then he changed cars, and my husband drove his. I don't know, it was very exciting, getting there.

F: Did you bring a group with you? Did you come alone?

A: No, a conductor only. It was Al Pellegren, I think. I don't think it was Joe Berlinger. He was from the West Coast. It was Joe Berlinger.

F: On something like this, do you pick up the tab? Does the party pick up the tab? You've got certain out-of-pocket expenses.

A: I think they sent the ticket and whatever.

F: Do you have any rehearsal time at all?

A: I don't remember.

F: What time of day, for instance, did you get in? Do you remember?

A: I think it was late afternoon and it was an evening rally. I don't know whether he had a run-through with the group or not.

F: But you didn't?

A: No, I don't think so. I don't remember it anyway.

F: Do you get any big gaps in a case like that where the local orchestra goes off in one direction and you in another, or can you pretty well coordinate?

A: No, they were very good. I didn't really know what to expect, but they were very, very good. Any time we'd say, "Try another song in

the key of G," they'd go straight ahead and play it in the key of G.

F: What did you do after the rally?

A: The thing about Johnson at that time was--you know, there were one hundred and twenty-five thousand people and ninety million people involved at that last minute, that was the big wind-up thing--he made a big point of coming over and thanking me through this whole big [crowd]. He had security, and you just can't imagine the crowds and the excitement. And I could see this tired, tired look in his eyes. He shook hands and that hand must have been twice the size of a normal hand. It was so hot! He must have been shaking hands for the last three months. I thought, "Oh my heavens! That poor man!" And it wasn't a little handclasp, it was a real, hard meaty handshake.

F: He came and gave it especially for Edie Adams.

A: I thought, "That poor hot hand." He had been shaking hands, and he really made a special point of coming over. I really appreciated that.

F: Did you see him again?

A: No, I had to go back and vote. I was supposed to stay and listen to the results, but if I did I couldn't vote.

F: Oh, you went on back that night?

A: I went back and voted right away. I had to get back to be up in the morning.

F: That made a long night.

A: Yes. I know I had to be back that morning. He said to stay and we could all watch all this excitement there, and I couldn't. I had to be back.

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F: How many times do you figure, in rough estimate, did you go out for the party during that period in 1964?

A: I really don't really, not too many times, but every time seemed to have been an important time. Every time I would do it would always show up on television somewhere. It really wasn't that much, but whenever I was available.

F: Regional and state-wide rallies and all that sort of thing always.

A: Yes, regional things.

F: Was there any essential difference between working with a Lyndon Johnson show and a Hubert Humphrey show?

A: Yes, Johnson's were more organized, much more organized and much more carefully planned. You had a feeling that somebody up there knew what was going on. Whereas, in Humphrey's--and I love the man dearly, I feel badly for him because he really should have won--if he'd had the organization going in the last three days, he would have made it, I feel so sure. *

F: This election should have come on Friday.

A: Absolutely, I believe that firmly, I really do. Because everywhere I would go, there were too many people bustling around, and there wasn't one that would say, "No, here, this." It wasn't, I felt, as organized. But Johnson knew. He had everybody, he had twenty-three people but each one knew exactly in whose department what was.

F: For instance, in that last night in Austin, you didn't arrive and sort of felt lost and wondered where you could [go]?

A: No, I knew exactly. They had Cactus Pryor just assigned to me and, thank heavens, because that's the only contribution I could make, and they had the right man there. Other places I had different

* Segretti's dirty tricks. . . little did we know! I would return from many of these campaign trips and say to my family. "If I didn't know better I would swear that someone was actually trying to sabotage his [Humphrey's] campaign!" How could we know someone was. EA 7/7/78

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people. With Humphrey, it was this and maybe no, then I was late and they'd say, "Oh, it should have been--," it was not all together. I felt that Johnson's campaign was very much together.

F: Did you take any part in politics in the years between the two campaigns?

A: No. I came down for [Governor] Connally's inauguration. Just the local ones, the last one with Reagan, unfortunately, we didn't win. Whatever I can do, I do, if I believe in it.

It's very funny, because in California I am a Democrat, but in New York [Jacob] Javits, I think, is a fine, fine man, and I love Rockefeller. So I'm sort of in-between, sort of a liberal Republican in New York and as I go West, I get more and more Democratic.

F: Did you have more or less the same set of songs always when you appeared at these rallies, or was any of the program-making left to you, or was it pretty well prescribed?

A: No, I think it was pretty much left to me, unless there was something specific that somebody wanted--an inspiring song, or a song about--you know, I don't even remember. There were a couple that seemed to be suited for campaigning. They weren't geared that way, but they sort of made themselves--

F: In this last night again, it's November and it's night, fall, which is not the best time for a singer to be singing out-of-doors. Are you fearful of what may happen to your voice in a case like this?

A: Oh, no, the excitement carries you through. I never had an audience that big. I played in the Hollywood Bowl to twenty-eight thousand once, but I'd never had one hundred and twenty-five thousand before.

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That's exciting. You don't get chilly, you don't get cold, your voice doesn't cool off. But if you had an hour and fifteen minutes of-- what is the expression?--flop-sweat, then you would have lost your voice; you would have been freezing cold. But this was too exciting, there was just too much going on.

F: Did you ever get invited to the White House?

A: Yes, many times. I just loved that; I just couldn't get over that. And there were no show folks there. Walter and Jean Kerr were the only other people that were even remotely connected with show business the first time.

F: What was the occasion?

A: It was Upper Volta, the African nation; it was the presentation of--

F: It sent you to your Atlas, didn't it?

A: I tell you, I saw this and I thought it was an Al Capp country. I didn't realize there was an Upper Volta, I thought somebody was putting us on. I was appearing in San Francisco and I thought, "I can't." It was a day off and so I flew from San Francisco to the White House. And that's pretty exciting, I want to tell you, that's a big thrill.

F: A black tie affair.

A: Oh, completely--formal dinner and reception at--was it the State Room or the Blue Room? That's pretty exciting.

F: Entertainment afterwards?

A: Yes.

F: What other occasions did you go?

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A: Just different times. There was once to a cocktail party; again, it was formal. I can't remember what it was on. The black jazz man was there, so it was the black--I can't remember.

F: Ellington?

A: No.

F: Louis Armstrong?

A: No, the other one. Dizzy Gillespie, Crazy Dizzy Gillespie. I remember that one very well because Dizzy began to get a little bit happy. He was feeling pretty good, and it was a little problem getting him to leave, so I was elected to help get him to leave.

F: He liked this club he was playing.

A: He liked it, it was a pretty good gig. They were having a little problem. He was going to stay. He was enjoying himself, so we sort of helped him along.

F: On such occasions, was there a general sort of relaxed air around the White House?

A: Yes. I couldn't get over--now, Johnson was a professional politician, that we all know. But what he did was, he always paid his debts--that little thing that I did for him. I tell you, they were so nice to me, even after [my] doing a Lady Bird impression and things. As a matter of fact, that's the thing I miss now. I could do political bits, I could do humor about the whole four years, and I didn't have that horrible feeling. The audience loved it. I always tried to stay in the middle, but I always ended by putting a little more accent the way I felt, but, do you know, now I can't do that. This is an aside, maybe this isn't relevant to what we're speaking of.

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F: I do think though that, outside of maybe Martha Mitchell, this is not a very fun affair.

A: There is nothing to crack a joke about. I tell you--and I've had some of the best writers in California writing different things-- it was on ABC, "the line of the year, Edie Adams, with 'it was a small wedding, only the immediate country.'" (Mrs. Johnson accent impersonation) Now, that kind of humor to me is refreshing; that's easy. That's the kind of humor that everyone can relate to.

F: It makes you really feel pretty warm.

A: But it wasn't hawking the President. My Lady Bird impersonation was never done detrimentally, it was done with warmth and love.

F: Was the Lady Bird impression your idea?

A: Yes. She's such a lady, she's a lady from beginning to end, and she was there. All the jokes were "when we became president," and "only the immediate country." (accent impersonations)

F: Did she ever hear it, do you know?

A: No. But at the White House she asked me once, she said: "I hear you do something I should hear." I was swallowing hard, choking, and I said: "Well, actually, I do a lot of impressions." She said, "Well, what do you say?" "I say a lot of things." She said, "No, what do you say?"

F: She's a good woman for boring in.

A: "Well, I do say, 'when we became president,'" and she thought about it. She said, "No, I always did say, 'when we were in the Senate and when we were in the House.'" But I just loved her. I thought she was great. I felt the freedom as a performer to talk about current

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events. I would pick up a newspaper and talk about whatever was going on, and if it was pro or anti, it didn't matter, just to be able to speak freely. Now I tell you, I can't mention anything current because a pall sets on the audience, and it's no longer funny. I'm hoping for an election year when I can get back and get a little more of a barbed tongue there.

F: And at least be able to work with the opposition.

A: If you can't have humor about a situation, then I get very fearful again.

F: Did you get any insight at all into the President's entertainment tastes?

A: He was a marvelous dancer that first time at the White House.

F: Did you dance with him?

A: Yes, a strong lead. You don't find dancers like that anymore. Usually they're sort of Milquetoast fellows, but, boy, he knew exactly where he was going.

F: The fact that he was taking on a professional didn't deter him in the least.

A: Oh, no, but he was good. The only other one that dances that well is George Burns. He dances with a strong lead, he tells you with his hands, "This way, this say," and I thought, "Gee, that's good, this is a good strong man we've got up here running the country. I like that."

F: Does he seem to favor one tempo over another?

A: No. But that was sort of a fast fox trot, and he was going in and out, back and forth. He was feeling good. Then somebody said they

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were dancing too much at the White House, and then they didn't dance after that. I was very upset about that. I didn't like that so much.

F: Were you in any position to sort of assay the film and the general entertainment colony's feelings toward Johnson? I know they, of course, gradually changed as Vietnam became more of a problem. But was it in a sense unified, or did you have a wide range?

A: I would say a wide range. All the way through, I must say I was with him. A lot of the Hollywood people like Shirley Maclaine and Sandy Vanocur [?] and some of people were very [vocal], "Why don't you say something?" Not then--that was Humphrey--but before that. I would have liked to have a more peaceable ending, but the man, I understand, was in an untenable position. I think what he did was the only way out, and even as he was doing it, even in the clubs, that's when I was able to talk. Now I'm not able to talk in them. It makes me a little frustrated. You could say, "Gee, the poor man. It's a terrible way to go. Don't you understand what's happening? Look what's happening!" At the time, there was a lot, with that whole group--Shirley's my best friend, and she was very--

F: I was at the 1968 convention in Chicago and enjoyed watching her.

A: She really means it. She's very dedicated and committed.

F: That was strictly a no-nonsense performance.

A: Yes. She's very involved. She goes a little further than I do. I try to do what I have to say in different ways. I don't like to carry signs a lot.

F: See if you kind of round off the edges a little.

A: Yes. Sort of a little bit, and slip them in here and there where you have a chance.

F: I won't take any more of your time.

When was the last time you were at the White House? Do you have any memories of that?

A: It was in May before the November election.

F: After Johnson had read himself out?

A: Yes. I was seated next to Humphrey, my old friend from the 1964 campaign in Spanish-America and all over. I was very pregnant at the time and I knew it was going to be August. He said, "Now, Edie, we're going to need you a lot." And I said, "I just can't do anything until November." He said, "Well, we're going to call on you now. We're going to call on you a lot." "Okay." And I did go to Cleveland or somewhere, I flew out to several things. As I say, I only wished he had been as organized as Johnson.

F: I missed Merriman Smith because I've been hitting the older newsmen and I wasn't anticipating this, but I understand that he shared at least one anecdote with you.

A: Yes. He used to tell us that Johnson, while he was campaigning, had the most marvelous nose for dogs. And I said, "What?" He said, "No matter where we were, it could be the smallest, dirtiest, dustiest town and he's say, 'Stop here.' Sure enough, out would come a dog." He had a nose for dogs. He knew exactly where they were going to be and a dog was going to be right behind that gate. They'd come out of the house.

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F: That dog, you know, that finally wound up at the White House, has always been incredible to me. Luci found him at a service station and brought him to her father. He was a mongrel, pure and simple, and the people at the service station said that he'd been hanging around for some days and nobody seemed to claim him. I cannot believe, people being what they are, that you could have brought a dog in and given him the kind of publicity, all the press exposure he got, and no one ex post facto wouldn't have claimed him.

A: It seems especially now that he was a famous dog [someone would have].

Another time I remember going just to go on tour of the White House with my little girl. She was then about four, and Luci was out playing with the dog. She was playing with Mia, and my daughter Mia wanted to take this dog home. She cried and cried and cried because she wanted that dog, that same famous dog.

F: You created a little White House crisis.

A: Oh, it was terrible. She wouldn't have no for an answer, she was going to take that dog home. It was Luci's dog, and Luci was saying, "That's all right honey. Your mommy has another one."
"No. I want that dog, that's my dog."

F: What did you do?

A: I just said, "Thank you, dear, goodbye."

F: I judge, though, that you didn't feel that you had been ruined, but that every American family had been through it in this case, or had a similar situation.

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A: I didn't know what to say with that.

As I started to say before the press photographers, I had sung for Eisenhower and for Kennedy, and I never was asked by Johnson. And they said, "Well, he didn't attend those." "Is that true? I didn't know that." I just did one for Nixon, which surprised me. I said, "I think you have the wrong girl, fellows. Did you check this out with everybody?" They said yes, and he couldn't have been nicer. He came and he stood for photographs and sent pictures, and did all kinds of things. But never for Johnson. Maybe he didn't like my voice.

F: I wouldn't believe that. There was too much other--

Back to those White House visits. I rather gather you always figured that you came as a friend of the Johnsons' rather than in the capacity of an entertainer.

A: I was never asked to sing. At first I was flattered and then I thought maybe he really doesn't like my voice. He has never asked me to sing at the White House. But we were there four or five times, always with very few--the one time with showfolk, as we say. That was flattering, I guess.

F: I think it was. Did he invite your whole entourage at that time?

A: No, just my husband and myself. I cherish all the memories. I've kept all of my little menus and programs and everything. I wish he were back.

F: All right.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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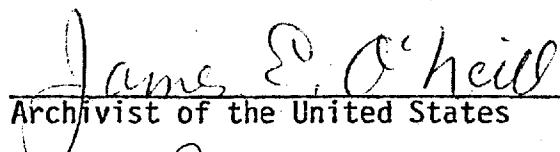
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