

A TEI Project

Interview of Clora Bryant

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (March 29, 1990)

ISOARDI

Okay, Clora, let's begin at the beginning: where you were born and raised, what the environment was like, your family.

BRYANT

Well, I was born in a small town in Texas called Denison, Texas. It's right on the Red River. It's the first stop coming from Oklahoma into Texas. There have been quite a few celebrities out of my small hometown. Eisenhower was born there.

ISOARDI

Dwight [D.] Eisenhower?

BRYANT

Dwight Eisenhower. And Marshall Royal's father was the first black principal in my hometown, and they lived there. And Lionel Hampton's wife [Gladys Riddle Hampton] is from there. His mother-in-law [Clarice Riddle] taught me in the sixth grade. A saxophone player by the name of Booker Irvin [Jr.] is from there. We went to school together. What's his name—? There is another player from my hometown, an older man [Booker Irvin, Sr.]. I found out later that Buddy Tate, who was from Sherman [Texas], the saxophone player Buddy Tate— [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.] [Teddy Buckner, trumpet player, from Sherman also.]

ISOARDI

Yeah, a great saxophone player.

BRYANT

My Uncle Henry taught me the scales. Buddy and my uncle played in one of those southwest bands.

ISOARDI

He and Buddy Tate?

BRYANT

Yes. I didn't find that out until '87 when I went to Nice [France] and Buddy and I were talking. He said he was from Sherman. I said, "I'm from Denison." He said, "Oh, yeah, I knew a saxophone player from there. We worked together." I said, "What was his name?" He said, "Henry Young." I said, "That's my uncle." That was the one who got the little book for me to learn the scales and showed me the fingering.

ISOARDI

Everyone talks about those Texas saxophone players. You were in the middle of it.

BRYANT

That's right. Yes. My hometown was small. Main Street was about two blocks long, so you can tell how small it was. At that time, of course, we had separate high schools. Our elementary school was Anderson Elementary. It wasn't like junior high. You went from the first to the eighth grade in the same building, and then you moved to high school. Well, the first to the seventh, and then from the eighth to the twelfth you were in the high school. But by the time I got to high school—I started real early because my dad was raising me by himself. My father, whose name was Charles [Celeste], was a laborer, because he only had a fifth-grade education. But he was very intelligent. He could do anything he wanted to do. I think that's where I got my sense of knowing what I can do. My mother [Eulela Lewis] died when I was two. I have two brothers, Mel and Fred. Frederick Charles is the oldest, Melvin Celeste is the next, and then I'm the baby, so to speak. But my dad raised us by himself. This was during the Depression. He was making about \$7 a week. At that time, the late thirties, he was working in a hardware store. We were coming into the war years when I got to where I wanted to play the trumpet. I didn't want to play the trumpet until my brother left, went into the service.

ISOARDI

When did you start with music? You didn't start on trumpet, then?

BRYANT

No. I started on piano. My father always felt that we were talented. We'd go to see the movies, mostly musicals, come home and imitate the singing and dancing. Then, you had the black movies and black theaters, and you couldn't go to the white theaters. They would always have good black movies to show with people like— What's his name? He was with Duke Ellington. He was the black cowboy.

ISOARDI

Herb Jeffries.

BRYANT

Herb Jeffries and Willie and Lena Horne and the other man who was the black [Rudolph] Valentino [Lorenzo Zucker]. I can't think of his name. I did a show with him before he died. At the movies, they would have what they called "midnight rambles." They'd have a show after twelve o'clock. When the movie was over, they'd put on a midnight ramble. They'd have a four- or five-piece band, and they'd have a lady tap dancer, a comedian, and maybe a male singer/emcee. And that was one of the ways that I was indoctrinated with the musical side of it. But my father loved music. We had one dance hall. My father would take us to the dance hall. It was the Elks hall, but it was our dance hall too. He would take us to see and hear bands like [Count] Basie, Duke, Lionel, T-Bone Walker, Jay McShann, Jimmie Lunceford. All the bands came through there.

ISOARDI

And they played in this hall?

BRYANT

They came through and they would do dances there, because I've had a lot of guys that have played Denison tell me they played there. "Sweets" [Harry Edison] has been through there. All these guys tell me they've been through there. They knew Denison. [laughter] Dad would take us, but he wouldn't go inside. He would stand outside in the summertime so we could look in the window and put me on his shoulder so I could see. And you know what fascinated me the most? I'll never forget. It was the trumpet section with the hats. That's what drew me. I never knew at the time that I would be playing the trumpet, but that's what stuck with me. It was seeing those horns. They had a choreography, so to speak, with the hats. You know, the horns would be this way— [sings brass phrase] Later on I did

the same thing with the big bands, with all-girl bands. It was thrilling to be alive and to be a part of the musical scene of my hometown. They'd have carnivals, and they'd have a sideshow. The sideshow would have a small band and a woman dancer and a comedian and the singers and stuff or a little small chorus line, you know, the ladies up there kicking their legs up high. My dad liked that. [laughter] And then we had backyard barbecues, which is where they'd have family outings. Like on the nineteenth of June, which is our holiday down South. That's when they freed the slaves down in Texas. We were freed the nineteenth of June, 1862. We celebrated the nineteenth of June. They called it the "Juneteenth" celebration. You'd go to a picnic, and they would have a band. You know, everybody would take their lunches and go out to this— It wasn't like a park. It was like a field. It was bare, but they had grass. Sometimes the grass would be this high [indicates], but it was soft. You know, you'd take your picnic stuff and sit out there. And they'd have a band. Or else, like, my aunt [Lucille Young] belonged to a club. They had bridge clubs, and they'd have a dance, like, once every three months. They had the latest records of Basie and Duke and all those people. I was exposed to that. And, like I said, the backyard barbecuse, when we'd just have fun. Some Sundays my dad would barbecue. You'd dig a hole in the ground. You didn't have the little fancy grills like you have now. Pits, spits, or whatever. You'd dig a hole in this rich black Texas soil, and then you'd put a grill out of your oven over it and put the meat on. It was good old hickory wood, and you'd put your meat on that rack. When you got that good old hickory smell and the taste of the earth, it was beautiful. Everybody would have to put on some kind of show. Somebody would sing or play the guitar or dance or whatever.

ISOARDI

These were all local people, mostly?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. Backyard barbecues. Yeah, everybody was local, mostly family or neighbors. It was neighborhood, mostly, in the barbecue things. The neighbors would smell the barbecue and they'd come. At that time, well, it was Texas hospitality. Everybody would share. Because that was during the Depression. That was the WPA [Works Progress Administration] time, the NRA [National Recovery Administration] time, when [Franklin D.] Roosevelt came in. My dad got the free apples that they were giving away. They'd give away sacks of flour, rice. And then my brother, my oldest brother, went to work in one of the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps. You know, they were putting the poor people to work that way.

[Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.] [President Roosevelt came through Denison on the tail end of the train. All the school kids went down to the train station. One white kid and one black kid presented him with flowers.]

My father was in World War I, in the navy. When they came out, they were supposed to give them so much money. What did they call that? Some kind of "bouns pay" they called it. And all the men were waiting for that money. I think they got about \$1,000 each, all the veterans. I can't think of that. I've got to remember that before I write my book. And I remember, when my father got his— I had always wanted a pair of tap-dancing shoes, because I had been seeing Shirley Temple in the movies dancing, you know, with Bill Robinson. I told my dad when he got his money, that's what I wanted. My brothers wanted bicycles and suits and things like that, but I wanted tap-dancing shoes—little black patent leather with the little grosgrain ribbon bow and the taps. Oh, man! I just knew I was Shirley Temple. [laughter] Because we'd go and sit in the movie all day, all afternoon on a Saturday, and watch the show over and over and over and come home and put on a show for our dad and do the steps and stuff. And if we went to

see Tarzan, we'd come home and swing through the branches of the tree. [mimics Tarzan yell] [laughter] I was Jane and my brother was Tarzan. [laughter] It was fun. You know, it was an easy/hard life, really, because sometimes Dad would be broke. We'd have chicken feet. Have you ever had chicken feet? Fried chicken feet. See, Dad would go to the butcher shop, and you know those parts of the chicken they would throw away, the necks and the feet, Dad would go get those. At that time there wasn't anybody eating them. They're considered gourmet meats now.

ISOARDI

What did it taste like?

BRYANT

You fry them crisp. It was crunchy like cracklings. You know, like skins?

ISOARDI

Yeah. That's what it was?

BRYANT

Yeah. But you'd peel off that yellow skin part of their legs and feet. I forget. You dip them in hot water and peel that little skin part off of it and fry them crisp. And he'd fry the fried bread. I don't know if you've ever had fried bread like biscuit bread, but you'd fry it in the skillet. My dad knew how to cook, and he taught me. He could make the best cornbread, and he could make a lemon pie. You know, he did everything. He taught me how to be a young lady and to take care of the house. I started taking care of my dad and my two brothers when I was about eight or nine. I started at about eight washing and ironing and cleaning and learning to cook, which is good, because it stuck with me. My dad was in the navy. He taught us how to make up the bed where you bounced the dime on it, you know, with the corners like envelopes on it, hospital style. [laughter]

ISOARDI

That's right.

BRYANT

Hey, that's what he did. And you swabbed the deck. You mopped every day.

ISOARDI

Oh, did he really?

BRYANT

Oh, yes! Oh, yes. And he'd go around with his white glove.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, the navy made an impression on him. [laughter]

BRYANT

Oh, man, you'd better believe it! It sure did. It really did. But it helped us, me and my two brothers, to grow up to know what it is to have cleanliness. And our drawers had to be correct. Everything had to be folded in a certain way. It was easy. It wasn't that rough to us because we thought everybody lived the same way. You know, we thought everybody's parents did the same thing. It wasn't where he made us do it. He showed us how to do it and we did it. It became a routine. So my kids can tell you, I made them keep their drawers the same way. And when it wasn't, like Daddy, I'd come and dump the drawers on the floor. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Just like a drill sergeant. [laughter]

BRYANT

That's right. That's right. It's the truth. You ask my kids. I've done it many a time till, finally, they knew what to do. But

they don't do it anymore. Shoot, they got out of that routine when they got to twenty-one years of age. Not until they were twenty-one. Then they started saying, "Oh, Mom can't whip us anymore, so we can—" [laughter] And hanging your clothes with the hangers going in the right direction.

ISOARDI

But you know what they'll do to their kids. [laughter]

BRYANT

That's right. Well, I know what they're doing to them now. [laughter] They would go through the same routine. They'll tell them. They'll say, "Mom didn't go for that stuff," and my dad didn't either. But getting back to the music— See how you get sidetracked?

ISOARDI

Good stories.

BRYANT

Yeah. But getting back to the music— We would go to the movies. I'd see Shirley Temple, and I encouraged my dad to get me those shoes. He bought those tap shoes, and they were my prize possession until it was like the soles were hanging off. At that time, you'd buy these soles. They had this black leather— They were pressed rubber soles. You could buy the soles and put them on with glue. You don't know anything about it. [laughter] [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][During World War II, sometimes they made them out of old rubber tires.]

ISOARDI

Oh, no!

BRYANT

It was black. It was the shape of your shoe, you know, and it would be a piece of rubber like that. You'd glue it onto your shoe, and then when it would get hot it would come loose. You'd hear kids coming down the hall—flap-tap-flap-tap.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Time to get out the glue again?

BRYANT

Right! You had to carry a little glue with you unless you wanted to be made fun of. [laughter] I swear! It was really something. But I kept those shoes until I couldn't glue them anymore.

ISOARDI

So was that your first love, then? You wanted to tap-dance.

BRYANT

Yeah. Oh, yeah. My first love. I loved music. Everybody in my hometown had a piano, an upright piano. I always had a good ear. I could always go to the piano and pick out anything I wanted to play. One of the first things that I learned how to play was [sings], "There's a gold mine in the sky, far away, and we'll find it, you and I, some sweet day." And I learned how to play Claude Thornhill's— [sings melody] What is the name of that? [sings more melody] I can't think of the name.

ISOARDI

No, nor can I.

BRYANT

It's Claude Thornhill's theme song ["Snowfall"].

ISOARDI

I can't, either.

BRYANT

And then my aunt [Betty Gaddis] had a roller piano.

ISOARDI

A what piano?

BRYANT

A roller piano that has the rolls in it, and you sit there and you tread with your feet.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, yeah.

BRYANT

And I'd sit there and follow the keys. I learned how to play [sings], "When the red, red robin goes bob-bob-bobbing—" I'd sit there for hours and put my hand on the keys—you know, when the keys would go down—till I learned how to play that. That helped me to learn to play the piano a lot.

ISOARDI

How old were you when—?

BRYANT

I must have been about five or six. I wanted to play so badly. It was just in me. You know, the music was in me. My dad didn't have money to give me lessons. He knew that I had a talent for it. But there was a white lady that came from Sherman over to Denison to teach the black kids. And the two little girls [Tommy and Edith Mae Young] across the street from me, their father worked on the railroad so he could afford to give them lessons. And she would teach me and my brother free. Miss Lindsay was her name. I can still see her soft, caring face. She'd come over to my Aunt [Lucille]'s house, where we were, and teach us for free, until she got sick and couldn't come. Sherman was about ten miles from our home. They had

what they called the Interurban. Like now they have a thing— they call it Metro Blue Line—from Long Beach, those cars? That was the Interurban in my hometown. It was between the smaller cities. Well, she'd take that and come over and teach us. I never will forget. My first song she taught me was "Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum." [sings] "Tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum, playing on that big bass drum—" You know, going up the scale like that. [laughter] I can still remember that. I can still remember the smell of the piano, real ebony wood and real ivory keys. Because pianos at that time had a distinct smell. It was real wood, real felt on the piano. The strings were— I don't know what they were, but they had a distinct odor. And you kept them oiled, and you'd smell that, too. So I can still remember all those kinds of things and smells. But getting to when I started to— That was when I was a little girl. I started out with the piano. As I grew older, I was able to get the sheet music to songs like "Clair de lune" and play them, also Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp Minor.

ISOARDI

On piano?

BRYANT

On piano. What were some of the other—? Not "Kitten on the Keys," that other thing. "Doll Dance," the "Doll Dance" by Herb Nacio Brown. I liked that. There were so many— I liked semi-classics. I didn't like Wagner and all that heavy stuff. I liked Beethoven and Grieg, and Chopin I love. That's my favorite composer in the classics. Anything that he does is fine with me. [tape recorder off] That's how I got into it. Plus, I was singing with the children's choir in church. We were Baptists, and every time the doors opened we were in church, my dad had us in church. So I sang in the choir. And they had Easter programs every year. That was a big time for us, because you'd have to go to rehearsals, and there was a lot of music there. The lady who was over the program would take popular

songs, you know, like "Easter Parade," and parody it to fit our little community—the lyrics. I'll never forget my first Easter speech. I was reading Maya Angelou's book [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings] and she had the same speech when she was a little girl in church. It says, "What are you looking at me for? I didn't come here to stay. I just came to wish you a happy Easter day." She had the same speech. I must have been about five or six. Oh, man! That was the time you put on your little frilly dresses. Easter was the time you got out of your long drawers, because it was cold there in north Texas. There were cold winters there. We wore what they called union suits with the flap in back. [laughter] I hated those long, brown, cotton stockings, you know, with the garters. [laughter] You'd put your unions down in the stockings, and there you go. Sometimes we'd have to wrap our feet in newspaper to keep from falling on the ice. Oh, just all kinds of creative little goody things that we did. [laughter] But, like I said, the Easter program was a way for our community to get together, with all their children, and they'd put on the Easter pageant, you know, Jesus on the cross and stuff. But the kids' program was really something, and the grown-ups enjoyed it, because you'd get up there and make mistakes. And some of the kids would get hysterical and they'd start pee-peeing all over the floor, you know, they'd be so scared. [laughter] You know, it was fun. It was really fun. [laughter] But that was part of my musical beginnings too.

ISOARDI

The church music was important to you, then.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. We'd always have a preacher who sang and could holler and scream and preach. You know, Baptist preachers were known for that. And we always had a good adult choir. We'd bring in people like the Blind Boys, musical groups to come in and do concerts. And we'd have fish frys. I'm telling

you, you've never tasted fish until you've had it fried in these big black pots, deep pots. I mean, nothing but goodness. You drop this fish down in this deep fat. The pot was about this tall, but it was black. It was an iron pot just like the big iron skillets. That's what it was. Like that, only it was this deep, and it was full of good grease. Lard they called it then, because we hadn't really graduated to the shortening and stuff. [laughter] They did later, as I got older. But we had fish frys. There's something else they would do. Oh, in the summertime, they would have hot dog and hamburger things for the kids. The other thing, other ways you can get your music in small towns like this, is the games the kids played. There were certain games that were brought over from Africa and England. Like, you know, hide and seek has a history that it came from.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Yes. And "Little Sally Walker"— Have you ever heard of that?

ISOARDI

No, not that.

BRYANT

[sings] Little Sally Walker, Sitting in a saucer, Rise, Sally, rise. Wipe your weeping eyes. Put your hand on your hips. Let your backbone slip. Hey! Shake it to the east. Hey! Shake it to the west. Hey! Shake it to the one you love best. [laughter] Those were children's games you played in the summertime after your nap. Then in the evening after you came in and took your bath and put on fresh clothes, you'd go outside and play your little games. I saw a book over here at the black museum [California Afro-American Museum] two Sundays ago that has all that stuff in it. I'm going to go get it. All those little games we used to play. They have a history. Like I say, some of them

go back to Africa. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][But in researching I have read that Little Sally Walker was learned by the slavery kids from their European slave masters, who had a different version. It was "Little Sally Waters."]

ISOARDI

Marvelous.

BRYANT

Yeah. And there are some songs, too, that have been kept down in New Orleans, like "Oh, Li'l Liza, Li'l Liza Jane—"

ISOARDI

Oh, I know that song.

BRYANT

That's a slavery-time song.

ISOARDI

A lot of folksingers used to sing that song too.

BRYANT

I know. See, in New Orleans, that's one of their New Orleans folk tunes.

ISOARDI

I didn't know it went back that far.

BRYANT

"Oh Li'l Liza, [sings melody] Li'l Liza Jane. I've got a girl and you've got a boy, Li'l Liza Jane." [sings melody] That's a slavery song.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

My uncle [John Mills] used to sing that, my mother's sister, Lucy Jane's husband. That's why I learned it when I was a little girl.

ISOARDI

Gee, I learned it off an old Weavers record.

BRYANT

See, it is a folk song, but it goes back to Africa and slavery. There are quite a few. I can't think of them. That one came to mind because I've played it many times with New Orleans groups. We had one of those Philco radios with the "magic eye." You'd turn the radio on, and there was a green light in the shape of an eye, but the light was green, and that's when you knew it was on. I've seen some of those radios around now. They're antiques.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

BRYANT

And we had the Victrolas. We had the tall one that you let the top up on and you put the needle in. And when we ran out of needles, we'd break off a straight pin and use the sharp point.

ISOARDI

Well, those old needles were just big hunks of steel, weren't they?

BRYANT

Yeah. We'd take the pointed part of the pin and it would play. And you'd see it grinding out the wax. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh! [laughter]

BRYANT

We had one of those "His Master's Voice," the RCA Victor, the one you wind up. I'd sit there in front of that thing and listen to Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, and, of course, Duke and Basie and those people. I had a rich background and a diversified musical knowledge because my dad listened to all that on the radio. In the early part of the evening, in the forties— Well, '38, '39, and the forties, when the war was started over in Europe, but we hadn't gotten into it till '41, we had— [tape recorder off] Let's see.

ISOARDI

You were saying how you heard so many different kinds of music and—

BRYANT

In the early evening, on the radio shows, you'd have Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Spivak. We would get shows from the Casino Garden in [New] Jersey. Who were some of the others? It was all-white shows in the early evening. We had the Lux Radio Theater. I can still hear Cecil B. DeMille: "The Lux Radio Theater from Hol-ly-wood." And then the amateur show, Major Bowes's Amateur Show with Ted Mack. And then, on Saturdays, they'd have the thing at the opera. I could just picture myself being there. They'd describe it. You know, you'd come out at intermission, and you'd hear the people talking and carrying on. The radio was very good for your imagination, because you could make it whatever you wanted it to be. And I had a vivid, live imagination. [laughter] [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][In the late afternoon, say 5:00 P.M., the children's programs came on the radio. Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy.] I would put myself right in there with the people. The Lux Radio Theater I did. And then they had The Shadow and a couple of other mystery things that we'd sit around [and listen to] from about eight o'clock to about ten. Dad would let us listen. Then, when we'd go to bed, I'd sneak

into my brother's room, and we had the crystal set radios. You know what they are?

ISOARDI

Uh-huh [affirmative].

BRYANT

Well, my brother would put on one earphone and I'd put on the other, and we'd dig around in that little piece of crystal and find stations. That's the way I would find a Chicago radio station in Chicago, at the Persian Hotel. I'd hear Earl Hines, Cab Calloway, and all those bands. We could get the Casino Gardens, because we got it late at night, with Glenn Miller and all those people too. I can't describe it, but it has stayed with me until it's just like it's in the pores of my skin. That's how deep music is. That's why I can sit here from day to day and just be absorbed into putting down what I feel about the music and what I feel about my life, my beginnings, and what I've gone through, because the music outweighs the bad part of me not having things. I never had a bicycle when I was a little girl. I never had roller skates. I learned on my brother Fred's skates. There are so many things I never had, you know, but I didn't really miss them, because, once I found out about music, that became my friend, my companion. My dad would be at work, and, like, if on weekends, after I'd get through doing my work—I'd do my washing on Saturdays— When I'd get through doing my work, then I could sit around and fantasize, play with my dolls and fantasize about the movies that we'd see in the afternoon on a Saturday or cowboy movies, Buck Rogers, space serials, etc., Tom Mix, Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson. During the summer, Dad would let us go to the movies during the week. But there were always a lot of good musicals on, especially when the war came on. MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] had some fantastic musicals, and I'm beginning to see them on the cable now, since I have cable. My brother Mel, my younger brother, and I would always go,

and we'd sit there until we'd absorbed it like osmosis, everything that they were doing. My brother and I and another girl [Ollie Mae Bailey] at school were the Andrews Sisters. [sings] "I'll be with you in apple blossom time" or "Bei mir bist du schön, please let me explain." And those stupid songs they had— Harry Babbit was on— Whose show was that? "Down in the meadow, in an itty-bitty pool, fam fee itty-bitty fishes and the mudder fitty too," you know, all those stupid songs! We knew all of them, you know. But that was part of your musical day. Kay Kyser and his Musical College. Ish Kabibble was on that. All these stupid songs were—[sings] "My little playmate, come out and play with me and bring your dollies three, climb up my apple tree." You know. [laughter] "Climb down my rain barrel, slide down my cellar door, and we'll be jolly friends forever more." [laughter] You know what? I think about how I think these songs [today] are stupid, but I look back and I say, "Damn, that was really hysterical what we were talking about!" [laughter] And Dizzy [Gillespie] did that thing that I heard when I was a little girl. [sings] "Toodle looma looma, toodle looma looma, toodle ay yay. Any umbrellas, any umbrellas to fix today?" "The Umbrella Man." My teacher, Ms. Lindsay, that white lady I was talking about, taught me how to play that on the piano. That was around '38. And Ella Fitzgerald with [sings] "The five o'clock whistle didn't blow. The whistle is broke, so what do you know?" And [sings] "A tisket, a tasket, a brown and yellow basket."

ISOARDI

Her first big hit.

BRYANT

Oh! What was that other? Oh, there was this girl named Ida James— During the war years. It sounds like "Knock me a kiss," Ida James, you know. This girl sang it with Lucky Millinder's band. What I liked by Glenn Miller during the war— I liked his theme song.

ISOARDI

Oh, that was a great song.

BRYANT

Yes. "Moonlight Serenade." [sings melody] When I'd hear that, that would just soothe me right down. I'd lay back on my pillow and just listen. And Tommy Dorsey. [sings] "I'm getting sentimental over you." I thought that was the smoothest thing, you know.

ISOARDI

Did you ever pick up any broadcasts from Kansas City then? Because there were a lot of great bands then.

BRYANT

No, we never got the Kansas City broadcasts. We couldn't find those on the crystal set. We always got either Chicago or New York. We never got the in between. We didn't know how to find those.

ISOARDI

So you're playing piano now. When does trumpet come along? When do you get ahold of a trumpet?

BRYANT

My junior year in high school.

ISOARDI

It took you that long? Up till then it had been piano?

BRYANT

Yeah. Because, see, before that, my brother Fred was a trumpet player, but I was never interested in it. I didn't even realize it was there. I was into the piano. But when he went to the service in 1941—he was drafted—about that time we got a new principal, Mason S. Frazier, who brought in a lot of

innovations. He brought in the marching band, he brought in the orchestra and the swing band. We had a regular choir, high school a cappella choir. The girls began to play softball, tennis, basketball for the girls. He brought in so many innovations in this little black high school there in Texas. I still go to see him, you know. (I was taking Dizzy [Gillespie] to meet him one day, but his daughter said he wasn't up to it.) My brother went to the service and left the horn there, and that was when our principal brought in the marching band, in 1941. Naturally, I wanted to be a part of that. So my dad said, "Well, the only thing here is the trumpet." When we brought the letters home from school, my dad said, "Well, you'll have to learn to play the trumpet. That's the only thing." On \$7 a week, he couldn't afford to buy me anything else. And you had to buy your own instruments. At that time you didn't get your instruments free, you know. I picked up the trumpet and I looked at it. My brother was gone, so he couldn't show me how to do it. I picked it up and figured out how to hold it—put my little finger in the little hook—but I didn't know what to do with the fingers on the valves. And I took it to my uncle [Henry Young]. There had always been a saxophone there at my uncle's house, but he never picked it up. He never talked about it. I didn't even know it was his. He told us he played sax, but he never played it or anything. I didn't really believe it until Buddy Tate told me in 1987 that he played with him and that my uncle was a good saxophone player.

ISOARDI

You never saw him play?

BRYANT

He never did.

ISOARDI

You're kidding!

BRYANT

He never opened the case. Not when we were around.

ISOARDI

Do you know why?

BRYANT

No. I don't know why.

ISOARDI

If he could hang with Buddy Tate, he must have been a pretty fair player.

BRYANT

That's right. That's right. They played the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas, which was one of the larger hotels in Dallas. Jeter-Pillars Band played there for a long time. They did a nightly broadcast from the hotel.

ISOARDI

Oh, a good band.

BRYANT

Yeah. So I took the trumpet to my uncle. His name was Henry. I said, "Uncle Henry, can you show me what to do with this?" He took and placed my fingers on the right valves, and he said, "But I don't know if you'll be able to play, to fill it." So he showed me how you're supposed to do—because I was trying to play with my lips open. He said, "No, you've got to bring them back like you're smiling." And that's what I tell kids now when I teach them. I say, "Draw your lips back like you are smiling and say, `tu.'" Bring your tongue up behind— It's supposed to be— You open your mouth just a little bit and bring your tongue in between, "ta, ta, ta." You know, like that. And I did it. The first time I did it, the sound came out, and my uncle was amazed. [laughter] So right away, what he did, he wrote the fingering down for me. You know, like middle C, he showed me the C on the piano, what I was making. He said,

"That's open. The D is first and third, and the E is first and second." He said, "But as you get higher, you're going to have to tighten your lips up to make those notes." I worked on that till I got to G in the middle of the staff. That's when he got me a book, you know, and that showed me how to play "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and some of those songs like— You know, the southern ditty songs we played. A lot of little, simple tunes. They had the fingering in there. So that's the way I got started. This was during the summer. When school began in September, I was ready. I thought I was ready, and I found out I was ready to play. Because everybody was starting, just like me. You know what I mean? We hadn't had private band instrument teachers, people teaching you instruments, before. So I was right there with everybody else. But we had a good teacher that year. Our first band teacher was— It wasn't Conrad Johnson. I think it was Walter Duncan. He was a good trumpet player who graduated from Wiley College and played with the Wiley Collegians. He ended up being a dentist. But anyway, he and another man, Zenophon Brooks, taught the band. Duncan taught band and math. The other band director, Mr. Brooks, taught geometry and general science plus band. But they started out with us. All the kids were so eager to learn, we had a good marching band within that year. By the time I became a senior, we were playing proms for different schools out of town and in Oklahoma. Our swing band was that good. We were playing all the stock arrangements of all the current tunes, you know, by all the big bands.

ISOARDI

That must have been very exciting.

BRYANT

It was! It was, because, see, when I'd get through doing my work, I was free to just practice. You didn't have all these shopping malls or theaters to go to in a small hometown, and I couldn't go anywhere without being chaperoned. So I had

something to stay at home for. I'd work on the trumpet. And I wanted to play the high notes. I'd heard Harry James and seen him in the movies playing all that stuff. And then, when I heard Cat Anderson with Duke Ellington, I wet my pants. [laughter] But it was a challenge. I just knew— Well, I was playing just as good as the guys. There were two girls [Elizabeth and Clora Thomas] in the trumpet section and two guys [Horl Thomas, David Price]. And I was playing just as good as the guy who was playing first. Just that quick. It was just like my life had been waiting for me to find out about the trumpet, and, when I did, that was it. And it has been tunnel vision ever since. That's all I wanted to do. Because my daddy wanted me to play the harp. My dad loved the harp. And then my girlfriend [Frances Coleman]'s father, John Coleman, had a municipal city band. So during the winter we would meet in a barbershop, in the back of a barbershop, and we would play overtures like "Morning, Noon, and Night" and all that semi-classical stuff. He had a large family. Most of his kids played some instrument. He had one son [John Coleman Jr.] that played trumpet, and he played the lead. I was playing second and third trumpet in a municipal band.

ISOARDI

Wow. Marvelous. Marvelous. This is after a few months or a year on trumpet?

BRYANT

About a year, because it was the next— Well, I started in the summer. During that winter, that's when they let me come into the municipal band. It was just that fast. It was fast, because I'm like that about anything. Once I want to do something, I don't stop until I do it. You know, like, I crochet. I make stuff like that, that tablecloth. You know, once I find that I want to do something, I don't stop until I can do it.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's the way I am, too. That's marvelous.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (March 29, 1990)

BRYANT

Having a lot of time on my hands, after I did my chores and stuff, that was what I did. I forgot to mention, when I was younger I had to learn how to sew. I had to learn how to can and preserve food. We canned vegetables and fruits and things like that. They'd have quilting parties. I learned how to quilt on the quilting horses. You know, I learned all the things that, down South, you learned to do. Because, see, at that time if you were black, in school your main thrust for girls was home ec[onomics]. You learned how to cook and clean up. With boys it was wood shop. You learned how to build, how to do carpentry and paint stuff, because there weren't too many other outlets that they were going to let you get into or to learn how to do.

ISOARDI

So how about you taking up a trumpet? Did you feel any people saying, "Well, you're a girl. Why bother with a trumpet?"

BRYANT

No, no. Never.

ISOARDI

There was none of that?

BRYANT

Never. Never. By the next year, my senior year, most of the guys were going off to the service. They were glad to have females who could play. You see, I came along at the right time. And in my small hometown, the parents never said, "Well, this is what you do." The reason why they stressed home economics for girls in school and shop for boys was

because that's the way the education system had it down South. It wasn't because that's what the parents wanted. That's the way the supervisor of the schools in Texas had it. The educational system in Texas and in your hometown, that's the way it was. But when we had the band, the parents were behind all the kids who played. And they finally had car washes and things and bought us uniforms. It was during the war, and rubber was rationed. You had the ration stamps for meat and sugar and butter. And they'd put their stamps together and have banquets so they could raise money for us to get music and uniforms and things like that. When I got to my senior year and we were traveling around, they had what they called— What kind of rubber was that? Synthetic rubber.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

And we'd have blowouts. And we'd have a time trying to get tires up and down the highway, because they would say, "Niggers can't stop here." You couldn't use the restrooms, you couldn't get water, you couldn't buy things. You'd go in the back of the restaurant. You know, "Go around to the back" to get waited on. You'd go in the bus stations and you'd go in the side door. You know, all those kinds of things were prevalent then. If you rode on the train, you had your own separate segregated cars to ride in at the front of the train where all the smoke and cinders could come in the windows. You weren't allowed up in the other cars. We didn't have city buses and things when I was growing up. After I left, then they got buses that went around our city. But when I came up, you walked everywhere. I walked to school, which was about— I was about ten country blocks from school, which wasn't bad. Some of the kids came from the part of town called Joe Davis Hill or Rock Hill. It was quite a ways. They had to walk. In the wintertime, it would be cold, you know. But that was the way I

got started with the music in high school. We had a teacher, Conrad Johnson— Now, I just talked to him two weeks ago, when Illinois Jacquet was out here. My teacher and Illinois went to Wiley College together, the college I told you about earlier that my first band director, Duncan, went to. But this man, Conrad Johnson, I would take lessons from him on Saturdays. He's the one who got me into the Arban method book. To pay for the lessons, I babysat, I'd wash dishes, I'd iron, or do whatever, run little errands. And he would teach me on Saturdays. That's the way I really got into wanting to seriously play the trumpet. He would pump me up and make me feel good about what I was doing, which was being very - good. He would pump me up so he would make me want to keep doing it. Each step I made, I wanted to make the next one and the next one, so that by the time that I graduated, in 1943, I got scholarships. I was doing very well, you know. I was an honor student. I was the third highest in the class. My girlfriend Frances Coleman was the salutatorian of the senior class. She was just one point ahead of me. And this friend of mine that I told you was my first boyfriend, Claude Organ, Jr., was the valedictorian. He was a smartie. He's the top surgeon now teaching at U.C. [University of California] Davis. [laughter] But he was a prankster in school, too. By the time that I graduated, I had scholarships to Oberlin [Conservatory] and to Bennett College. But my professor got a letter from Prairie View [Agricultural and Mechanical University], which is down near Houston. The band director there, Will Henry Bennett, knew our teacher—our band teacher, Conrad Johnson—and he'd heard about me. My teacher had been bragging to him about me. They wanted me to come to Prairie View, although they didn't offer a scholarship. But when I found out they had an all-girl band there [the Prairie View Coeds], that's where I was going. The scholarships be damned! I wasn't going anywhere but there. So I went to Prairie View. And the way that I got through school was, my brother Fred was in the service, and he made out his allotment

check to me to pay my tuition. That's the way I got through college in those two years down in Prairie View, through my two brothers. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][My brother Mel also made out his check to me in 1944. Mel was in the marines.] I was happy that they reached back, you know, to help their sister get an education. And when I got to Prairie View, it was— I played some first trumpet and I played the solos.

ISOARDI

Right away?

BRYANT

In two years time, I was doing that. We had another young girl who played the drums, Helen Cole. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][Helen was very good. She can still play damn good drums.] They had never heard a female playing the trumpet like I was playing. You know, the Sweethearts of Rhythm had been out, but most of them were playing solos that the guys wrote note for note, except girls like Vi Buoneidy or Jean Starr and Tiny Davis.

ISOARDI

Oh, they were just copying.

BRYANT

Yeah, but I was creating my own solos at that time, when I got to Prairie View, except on some songs they expected to hear the same solo that was on the record, the solo on Erskine Hawkins's "Tuxedo Junction." So they were quite amazed by the whole thing, which, to me, was nothing. I was just doing what I liked to do. And I was glad that I was able to go to a place where I could continue. I was a music major at Prairie View College. I stayed there until January 1945. They were on the semester system—I left there when the semester ended.

The first part of January 1945 I came home for Christmas. I had to go back the first part of January and get my transcript, because I transferred out here to UCLA in 1945. My dad was coming out to Los Angeles to work in the shipyards in Long Beach. But while I was there, during the school year, on the weekends we'd play Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Austin, Waco, Port Arthur, Corpus Christi. We'd play all the large cities in Texas.

ISOARDI

Who is "we"? This all-girl band?

BRYANT

Yes. The orchestra, the Prairie View Coeds. The all-girl band. We played Houston. Just about every weekend we would be in Houston. But the weekends we weren't there, we'd be in these other cities.

ISOARDI

Right.

BRYANT

It was kind of hard to get around. Like I said, it was rationing time, you know, and there were sixteen or seventeen girls. There were seventeen with the girl vocalist. It was hard to get gas and tires. Everything was rationed.

ISOARDI

So it was a pretty standard big band, then.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

ISOARDI

If you had gone to, say, Oberlin or Bennett, your music training would have been different, then.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Would it have been more classic oriented?

BRYANT

That's right. Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely. And that's what I didn't want.

ISOARDI

Yeah. And they wouldn't have had an all-girl swing band, that's for sure.

BRYANT

Oh, no, no. No. I don't know what I would have done had I gone there. I probably would have dropped out of school because I wouldn't have been fulfilled. I wouldn't have been getting what I really needed. And so—

ISOARDI

You certainly wouldn't have been able to improvise.

BRYANT

No. So I was glad that I chose Prairie View without the scholarship. It was in the cards. I was supposed to go to Prairie View. That's all. That's the way I look at it. I was supposed to go to Prairie View, so I went. Because, like I said, it was tunnel vision, straight-ahead jazz, by that time.

ISOARDI

What kind of a reception did you get with this band, this all-girl band?

BRYANT

Very good. Very good. Like I said, they had the Prairie View Collegians, which was the boys band, and the Prairie View Coeds. We were able to travel because, see, the Collegians would be hurting for men. They had a good band, but the Wiley Collegians were better than the Prairie View Collegians. The Wiley Collegians band, male band, was better than our male band. But they didn't have a female band. So we were afforded the opportunity to play during the summer. We did one-nighters up and down the coast, the eastern coast, from Florida up to New York. We ended up playing the Apollo Theatre!

ISOARDI

The Prairie View girls band, the Coeds, played the Apollo?

BRYANT

Yeah. Yes. We played the Apollo!

ISOARDI

Marvelous. Boy, you never would have gotten anything like this at Oberlin.

BRYANT

No, no. No. We played so many places, like I said, from Florida up to NYC [New York City]. And we played the Howard Theatre in Washington [D.C.]. What was the theater in Baltimore? [Royal Theatre] We played all the big theaters. We played all the military bases: the marine, the naval, the air force, army.

ISOARDI

They must have loved to have a coed band!

BRYANT

Hey, they didn't love it any more than all us girls loved all those good-looking guys in those uniforms at that time! Whoa! [laughter] We got to Tuskegee and saw these black guys in

these airmen uniforms, flyers! Holy shit! I was overwhelmed.
[laughter] I'm telling you! But we had a chaperone.

ISOARDI

I was just going to say, was there a school chaperone around?

BRYANT

There was a chaperone. You know, all school organizations had to have a chaperone. Whether it's high school or college, you had to have a chaperone. So we had a lady. She must have weighed about three hundred pounds. [laughter] Like I said, we had the synthetic rubber for the tires. We'd have flat tires for days. She sat in the front, you know, with the driver— We traveled in three station wagons. And she'd sit in the front. She had a beautiful face, but so big and so fat. When she was in the bed, she looked like there was a mountain in the bed. [laughter] But she was a nice lady, classy lady. But when we'd get there and those girls— See, everybody was older than I was. I was the youngest one there. The other girls knew how to sneak out. Heck, I was scared. I had been raised by my father and had been sheltered. I didn't know too much about street life. That was new to me. I didn't know how to pull those kinds of tricks. A couple of years ago the girl bass player, Angie Mae Edwards, and I got together. Her mother lives here. She was talking about how they used to sneak out— I said, "When did you all do all that?" She said, "When you'd be laying up sleeping!" I'd be in the bed sleeping while they were out doing their thing. [laughter] I said, "What?" But they knew the ropes. You know, like I said, I was a freshman in college, and most of them were juniors and seniors. So they were hip to what to do. On the campus, we stayed in the dormitory, and they knew how to sneak the boys in their rooms and sneak over to the boys' dorms, you know. The guys would have pantie raids. They'd sneak over and get the girls' panties and stuff. [laughter] I found out about that after I left Prairie View.

ISOARDI

Oh, you're kidding?

BRYANT

Yes, I did. I didn't know anything about that. [laughter] I mean, I was very naive. I was still naive when I got out here. I still had a lot of my naiveté almost until I was fifty years old. But I said, "I had to come to California to learn how to be a Texas bitch!" [laughter]

ISOARDI

California can make you one. [laughter]

BRYANT

I'm telling you! But after I became fifty, then that's when I learned how to be one. But before that, I was trying to get along with everybody, it was pie in the sky, and everybody was beautiful. The "Hi, neighbor"-type stuff, you know. But now I know life for what it is. You know, there's no scrim over my eyes. I can see people for what they are. But in college, I didn't know what was going on, because I came from Denison. Like I said, my father had sheltered me, and those band girls protected me because I was the youngest one there.

ISOARDI

The youngest, yeah.

BRYANT

And the chaperone really protected me. [laughter]

ISOARDI

I'll bet. Probably you more than any of the other ones.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did you ever play with the Collegians? Did the Coeds ever get together with the Collegians to play?

BRYANT

No. But after I left, one of the guys in the Collegians took my place. They didn't have another girl. They were running out of musicians. At that time, they had so many all-girl groups. You see, they had Prairie View Coeds, the Sweethearts of Rhythm, the Darlings of Rhythm, the Texas Playgirls, Jean Parks and her All-Girl Band, and then they had a man, a trombone player from Houston, who had an all-girl band. There were all kinds of girl bands.

ISOARDI

Do you think it was just because of the war?

BRYANT

Definitely. We were a novelty.

ISOARDI

And with all the guys being drafted—

BRYANT

Yeah. The men were scarce. There were still bands, but they weren't the same. The guys were dropping out, and they were having trouble replacing the ones who were leaving. Like Clark Terry had to go into the service and all those kind of people. What was his name? A lot of them were in the Great Lakes Naval Base there in Illinois. I forget what you call that. They had good bands in the service. All the musicians were in the bands. They had some very good bands. When my brother Fred went in the service, he was shipped out to what they called the China-Burma-India theater, the CBI theater. He helped to build the Lido Road. They called it the Lido Road; they also called it the CBI Road. It was over there between China and Burma and India. But he was in some of the shows,

USO [United Service Organizations] shows. He was in the engineers, but he was able to perform with some of the shows.

ISOARDI

What did he play?

BRYANT

Trumpet.

ISOARDI

Also?

BRYANT

That was his trumpet that I played.

ISOARDI

Ah, that's right.

BRYANT

It was a Blessing trumpet. They used to be just school band instruments, you know, high-school-type thing, but now it's graduated into being a pretty decent instrument, I understand. I haven't played one of the new ones. But you see it advertised as a good instrument now. They used to be just in the band books, high school and elementary school band books. But that's what I started out on, a Blessing trumpet.

ISOARDI

So by the time you were a freshman, then, at Prairie View, you knew you could play. You're soloing for that band, right?

BRYANT

Right, right. But, you know, it didn't strike me that I was— The way it struck me is it was what I wanted to do, but it wasn't that I was cocky and I knew what I could do. It wasn't that kind of feeling. It was just that they were letting me play what I wanted to play. I was there. I was so happy I was there, and

I was playing what I wanted to play. And I'd go and listen on the days that we weren't working. I'd be listening to the records, to the radio, you know. I wasn't cocky about what I was doing, but I was confident in what I could do. When we got to the Apollo Theatre, at that time, one of the main songs or records that was popular was Harry James's "Back Beat Boogie." Remember that? [sings opening theme] I did the solo note for note, because when you play the stock arrangements— All solo musicians learned the solo note for note, because the people knew that record and they could hum every note. If you missed one, boy, you looked out there, they were looking you dead in your face because they knew you had messed up. [laughter] So that was my hit thing at the Apollo, the "Back Beat Boogie." Also, on the dance thing, they'd play— Oh, what was that song? I forget the trumpet player's name. [sings melody] And he'd hit that note way up high. I've got that 78 [rpm record] in there in my box. It was either Earl Hines or Lucky Millinder's band with a solo. It was like—

ISOARDI

Gee, I can't think who it was.

BRYANT

It was like— It wasn't "After Hours." What was the name of that song? It was a blues tune. But all trumpet players had to play that solo. And I could play it. [laughter] I knew it note for note, you know. And then "Tuxedo Junction," I knew that solo note by note. Dud Bascomb played the solo, not Erskine. Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, the whole country knew.

BRYANT

And I knew the "One O'Clock Jump" solo, Harry James's "Two O'Clock Jump" solo. I knew— What's that thing? Anything that Louis [Armstrong] did I could play.

ISOARDI

Really? Was he your first hero on trumpet? Was he someone you really—?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. He wasn't the first, because the only time I could hear Louis was when we played the records. You know, I'd go to my aunt's bridge parties and things like that, and Dad would buy his records. But, see, you were inundated on the radio with the white bands. My dad played the radio all the time. We were inundated with Harry James and Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and those people. Those are the ones that I heard all the time until we could play the record player. And Dad didn't let us play the record player all that much. Not like he did the radio. He kept the radio on. But when I did play the records, Louis Armstrong, Sweets Edison, Roy Eldridge, Charlie Shavers, Cat Anderson were the top players I listened to.

ISOARDI

Did you care for Roy Eldridge back then?

BRYANT

Oh, lord, yes. That's the next one that I know. Well, Louis is next—I'm doing a suite on Louis—and then Roy Eldridge, I'm telling you. But Roy Eldridge did a thing on "Ole Rockin' Chair"— And you could tell where he came from. He came out of Louis.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

You can tell when you hear Dizzy, you can hear where he came out of Roy. His early records, he sounded just like Roy. You couldn't tell Roy— Sometimes Dizzy, if it's an early record, he doesn't know if it's him or Roy Eldridge playing. [laughter] It's true! Just like now you can't tell Jon Faddis from Dizzy. But in some things of Roy's, you can't tell whether it's Louis Armstrong or Roy. I've got some things, "Rockin' Chair" and— what's that?—"After You've Gone." "After You've Gone," you hear a lick in there that Dizzy does. [sings phrase] He stole some of his licks, and after that Roy stole some of Dizzy's licks. You know, it all evolves. Sometimes it takes a little loop back, but it keeps going for a while. It will double loop and then go around again. But there are some things that Roy plays that are straight out of Louis. [sings] The way he attacks his note. His vibrato is all Louis. There are two things that I'm going to learn to play that Roy does that have some of Dizzy and some of Louis, to show how they evolved. You know, the whole point of me doing these suites is to connect the different eras of the music, how they came out of each other. See, that's what's missing now. The kids do not know where rock and pop and rap— It all came from the blues. It all came from way back. And "You can't get where you're going if you don't know where you've been." My dad always said that. And these kids don't know. They think they are creating stuff. It's not new. They were rapping when I was a little girl. [laughter] You know, true. It's true. Like I said before, that rock and roll is from the thirties. In the late thirties. It's documented, because Ella Fitzgerald sang "Oh, Rock It for Me." She sang, "Won't you satisfy my soul with the rock and roll." We were rocking and rolling in the thirties. All these dances they're doing, that lambada is almost like what we did, the 'snake hip,' that dance we call the 'snake hip.' There are dances that they took from trucking and steps they took from Sandman [Sims] when he was doing his sand dances. The mashed potato became something else, the jitterbug and those steps they were doing then. The frug and all that stuff, they're all dances that started

way back, but they just changed the name. Michael Jackson's moonwalk is nothing but James Brown's step. He had no name for it, but that's what it was. He started it. Kids have to know that they're building on top of a foundation, but they don't know what the foundation was. That's why I'm writing my book, to try to show them how each facet came out of the other one and how it continued on and built into something else. That's the third part of my book. That's what I'm using it for.

ISOARDI

So when you were at Prairie View, then, you were very much aware of the history of trumpet, then. I mean, you were listening to older players.

BRYANT

But I didn't realize that that was what it was, like it was the history of this. To me, it was just a learning process, because I was all ears and my mind was in tune to learning about these people. I didn't realize that I was learning history at that time, but I'm so glad that I did, because I can pull back the layers and recall stuff that some people had forgotten. Then I can listen to somebody else say something and it will spark something that I remembered way back then. Just like I had forgotten about the Easter thing until I read Maya Angelou's book and she said it. I said, "That's the very first one I ever said." You know, it's things like that that would spark your imagination. A lot of times the people are saying things, but they don't relate it to what happened before that or what has happened since, the time of whatever had happened with them. They don't relate the thing from a historical point of view. And that's what I try to do now. But when it was happening then, when I was learning about Harry James and Charlie Spivak and Roy Eldridge and Charlie Shavers— I don't want to leave him out either, bless his heart.

ISOARDI

Oh, nice player.

BRYANT

I did a thing that— I had a guy, Henry McDade, transcribe his recording "Well Get It!" I would do it with the Billy Williams Revue in the sixties, but I could only do it once a month, because he was up in the stratosphere all the time. He was a C— It was A above— It was octissimo A all the time. [sings melody] Bad! [laughter] Oh, lord! But I had this guy transcribe it note for note, and I played it. And I played it in New York. He got a chance to hear me do it at the Latin Quarter.

ISOARDI

Charlie Shavers did?

BRYANT

Yes. I did it at the Latin Quarter. I was with the Billy Williams Revue. It's a big nightclub. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][Lou Walters owned it, Barbara Walters's dad.].But I used to hang out at this bar [the Metropole] where Henry "Red" Allen and Charlie Shavers and Milt Hinton and Big Chief, the trombone player, and clarinet Buster Bailey— I hung out with all those guys [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][J. C. Higginbotham, Billy Kyle, Vic Dickenson, Jimmy McPartland]. There was a New Orleans bar there.

ISOARDI

This is in New York?

BRYANT

Yes. That's where I met Charlie Shavers. I told him that I was doing this thing, and he came. He and Dizzy came. They came by and they heard me do that. They were flabbergasted. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, did you know they were out there?

BRYANT

Yeah, because I was playing every Sunday on a jam session at this club.

ISOARDI

Hell of an audience.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah, it was great. In the sixties, there was still a lot of camaraderie among musicians, and the guys weren't really showing animosity toward women. In the seventies, there was a lot of animosity.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Eighties— Going into the nineties it's kind of reversing itself, but in the seventies and eighties women had hard times. But Charlie Shavers said, "Goddamn! How do you do that?"
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, he ought to know!

BRYANT

I said, "I had a good teacher." [laughter] It was so funny. It was really funny. And then, when Dizzy— When we went back to [Las] Vegas with Billy Williams, we stayed at the Riviera [Hotel] six months at a time. We had a very good revue. I mean, it was hot. It was the hottest thing on the strip. We got back there, and Dizzy had done a thing on "School Days." I brought the record to the rehearsal and told Billy Williams I

wanted us to do that, "School Days" by Dizzy Gillespie. [laughter] It starts out with a piano thing, like a Chinese rhythmic thing [sings]. I mean, Billy Williams had this guy, the legendary Honi Coles, do a choreography thing for us. You know, because we had a boy singer, Tommy Britten, and we had a four-piece boy group, the Four Dukes with Fats Hudson. I was the only female in the whole show. And we had a boy dancer [Skip Cunningham]. So the front line had to learn this thing. And we'd come in on that song. I'm not going to get up too far. [sings and dances introduction] I remember that.

ISOARDI

All right!

BRYANT

Yeah! And we'd come out like that, you know, and then say, [singing] "School days, school days. Dear ole golden rule days. Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic, taught to the tune of a hickory stick. I was your gal in calico, and you were my bashful barefoot beau." Then another boy would sing the next verse. And then, when the solos came in— What's his name? The saxophone player. Not Billy Mitchell. I can see his face now, but he was a bad tenor player. He played some powerful shit on that opener. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][We called him Foots because he had bad feet and walked funny. Walter "Foots" Thomas.] We were doing choreography that was— You know, we were doing stuff like this. [sings and dances]

ISOARDI

Whoa! [laughter]

BRYANT

We were kicking high and going around. It was bad! Honi Coles did the choreography. It was bad! And when Dizzy found out about that, he came to the Latin Quarter to see it. [Note:

Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][We had used his arrangement off the record Dizzy in Newport.] Because the word got around. One night he called. Before he came, he and Sweets called me one night. They were in New York. It was about five o'clock in the morning in Vegas. They had just gotten off of work, I guess, at four o'clock in the morning in New York. He said they were coming to see us when we got to New York. He'd heard about us doing his "School Days." It was bad. We used it as an opener, to open up the show. The show would hit. [snaps fingers at brisk tempo] I mean, it was hot. It was hot! I mean, Marlene Dietrich wanted us to go to Europe with her. Some other person wanted us to go to South America, but Billy was scared to go. We had gotten our passports and everything, and Billy reneged on it. I was sick. But when we got to New York— The Latin Quarter was right downtown on Broadway, right off of Broadway, on Forty-eighth. [Latin Quarter] That's the place where last year, near the end of the year, this stripper [Blaze Starr] who went with Governor [Earl K.] Long was talking about her relationship with Governor Long. Now, with the Billy Williams Revue we went to New Orleans. We played on Bourbon Street at a place called the Dream Room. It was right on Bourbon Street. Governor Long would come in there all the time. He had a crush on me. You know, he liked black women. He had a crush on me. He'd come in and lay a \$100 bill on the stage.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

BRYANT

Yes, he did. He followed us to New York, to this club. And I kept that note he sent back there with two \$100 dollar bills in it. I kept that note until I lost a lot of my stuff in storage. I had the note he sent back there. He followed me to New York, you hear me? I was still naive, though, you know. Really.

ISOARDI

This is the 1960s?

BRYANT

That's right. Nineteen hundred and sixty, '61, and '62, I was with Billy Williams. But at that time, they had just begun to "sit in" [desegregate] in New Orleans. And we'd come to work at this club. Billy had rented station wagons again, because inside of New Orleans we couldn't stay in the hotels there. So we lived across the river in Jefferson Parish at Marsalis's Mansion. That's where I first saw Wynton Marsalis. I changed his diaper. I held him, and he peed on me, and I changed his diaper. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Do you remind him of that?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah! [laughter]

ISOARDI

I bet you would!

BRYANT

He turns purple. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, I bet.

BRYANT

He turns purple. But he and Branford [Marsalis] were crawling around on the floor.

ISOARDI

And you were over at his folks' place?

BRYANT

Well, his grandfather, Ellis Marsalis Sr., has a place called Marsalis Mansion, so we stayed over there. Ellis [Marsalis Jr.], Wynton's father, and his family stayed right next door to us, you know, across the path or whatever from the hotel. And we went over there one day. Bobby Bryant was the trumpet player in the band, and we went to the house because Bobby was writing something for me. We went over from the hotel to use the piano, and the babies were crawling on the floor. I had no idea that sucker would turn out to be such a bad trumpet player. [laughter] Now he's my adopted son. See that picture up there? And the inscription on his other— You know, it's very telling. But it's funny how things— What I say about evolution, you know? It goes through a thing. We'd leave Jefferson Parish and come across the river, and as soon as we'd hit Bourbon Street and start down the street— See, at that time they still had those girlie shows and the guys outside hawking.

ISOARDI

They still do. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah, but they had the guys out there hawking them then, you know, and he'd open the door so you could see the girls putting on their show. And he'd stand there telling you about this one, describing it very sexual, you know, explicitly. Well, he got so he knew when we were coming. This car full of black guys was coming down the street, all up and down the street. When they'd see us turn the corner onto Bourbon Street, those doors would be slamming shut. They didn't want the guys to be looking in at the white girls. Boy, it's the funniest thing, because at night, when we'd get through playing, on the floor [of the car], down on the floor, would be all these white girls going back over across the river with us. They'd be down on the floor. I mean, you can't stop people from doing what they're going to do. But it was funny. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

It was funny, it was funny. I tell you, we could have gotten strung up in those days, and I don't mean dopewise.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Yeah. [laughter]

BRYANT

They'd get on the floor there, and we'd cover them up with instruments and stuff. They were determined they were going to do it. You know, you can't stop them from doing it. That was so funny. But it was even funnier when I told— Wynton, I didn't get to tell him about that until he was playing at [the] Playboy [Jazz Festival], and this is around 1985 or— I've got a picture taken that same day that I told him. It was either '84 or something like that that I told him about it, and he just turned purple. [laughter]

ISOARDI

That's funny. You eventually discouraged Governor Long?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. [laughter] I never encouraged him. But he was the type that you couldn't— He didn't— Like a lot of men, they can't stand rejection. He wasn't like that. You know, he just kept doing what he wanted. He was Governor Long, and he figured he was supposed to do what he was supposed to do, and he did. [laughter] I think he was a little off. But I liked him. He was a nice man. But I wasn't into that other stuff. But everybody kidded me about that for a long time.

ISOARDI

I'll bet! [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah, they did. But he sure came in New York and sent money backstage. In New Orleans, he put \$100 bills up there on stage. It was something.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Wow. Well, Clara, okay, you spent your first two years at Prairie View, is it?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

And then you come west.

BRYANT

Yes. My dad decided— Because, see, all during our lives, after Dad found out that we liked music and we were musically talented, he kept telling us he was going to bring us to California. Because when he was in the navy, he spent some time in California. He was stationed down in Long Beach, but he'd come to Los Angeles. Later, when we were small, he would tell us about the palm trees and the oranges growing in the yards and how the weather was warm all the time. In the wintertime there was no snow and no ice. And he'd be telling us that in the dead of winter, when we'd be sitting around this potbellied stove, you know, with the red spots on the side because it would be so cold there would be icicles hanging off the roof of the house and frosted windows, and he's talking all this stuff about sunshine and the moon and the stars and the palm trees swaying in the breeze, and we were looking at each other saying, "Daddy's lying." [laughter] "Ain't nowhere hot in the wintertime." No way in the world you could make us believe that. But he always told us he was going to bring us to California so that we could be discovered.

ISOARDI

So he really had a lot of faith in you guys.

BRYANT

He did. He really did.

ISOARDI

He thought you were very talented and he encouraged you.

BRYANT

He really did. He did encourage us. And that's what I've always cherished in my heart and admired about my father. He encouraged me doing what a lot of parents wouldn't have done. But when he found out that— He was working at the air force base there [Perris Air Field], right outside of my hometown, and he decided, in 1945, he was going to make a change. He wanted to come out here. He could make more money and give me a chance to be exposed. Because my brothers were in the service. Mel was in the Marine Corps and Fred was in the army. So when he left his job and I came home for my semester break, he said, "We're going to California." And that's what we did.

ISOARDI

He had a job lined up when you left?

BRYANT

Yeah. He got recommendations from Perris Air Field, there in Denison.

ISOARDI

So he was transferring from one military installation to another?

BRYANT

Right, right. Well, the shipyards weren't really military.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see.

BRYANT

But he had a letter of recommendation that he was a good worker, etc., and they could depend on him.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (March 29, 1990)

ISOARDI

Okay, Clora, as you were saying.

BRYANT

Well, I was talking about coming to California. I applied for UCLA and I was accepted, because my grades were good, pretty good.

ISOARDI

As a music student?

BRYANT

Yes, music major. You know, coming out of the South— I wanted to mention, too, about the educational side of it. We were kind of like— I don't know if you know anything about the Latin grammar schools, mostly in the East, but it's a certain type of school where you learn things that aren't taught in most schools, especially southern black schools. It's a wide diversity of education there, heavy on arts and sciences. We had Latin. When I got to college, I didn't have to have certain English classes. I didn't have to have Latin. I'd had Latin in high school. I'd had calculus, I'd had trigonometry, I'd had geometry and math, and we'd had arithmetic every year in school from grade one.

ISOARDI

This was in high school?

BRYANT

I'm talking from the first grade up I'd had arithmetic. Arithmetic, now—not math. I'd had arithmetic. I had math in

the eighth grade, when I got to the eighth grade— No, it was the ninth grade, because I skipped eighth grade. When I got to the ninth grade, I had math. Then I had geometry, calculus and trigonometry, and I had chemistry. You had government, you had civics, we had literature, we had language. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][We also had Negro history. This was in the early forties and was not an "in" subject.] You learned how to diagram a sentence. Kids don't know what you're talking about nowadays.

ISOARDI

Yeah. So this was— This was really a college prep program.

BRYANT

Well, they called them Latin grammar schools, something like that. That's their way of saying that it's the high level of education that's being taught. We had geography every year, you had history every year, you had English every year, you had handwriting, you know, where you practice this. [indicates] You know. Penmanship. You had health, you had science. I had biology, I had chemistry, I had physics. We had all those. The principal who came, Mason [S.] Frazier, a dean and special person, he's the one who brought in the trigonometry and the calculus and stuff. And he brought in— He liked to— You know, when you stuff animals and stuff. What do you call that?

ISOARDI

A taxidermist does that.

BRYANT

Well, he taught that, because that was his hobby. And we had general science. You had such a wide range of stuff, so, when I got to college, a lot of it I didn't need. I didn't have to have any math. I didn't have to have history. My major was music and my minor was French. So when I got out here to UCLA, I'd

had two years, four semesters, of French. But in my class out here, the woman said, "Well, you need to learn how to speak English before you speak French." Because, see, I was from the South, and we spoke it with a southern accent. [laughter] Speaking French with a southern accent.

ISOARDI

Right. [laughter]

BRYANT

But we were taught, you know. We didn't speak with "dese" and "dose." We didn't split verbs. Like I say, we had spelling bees. We knew how to spell. We knew how to compose a sentence. You knew how to write a précis. You knew how to write a story. We learned about William Cullen

BRYANT

's poem "Thanatopsis" and Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." I loved literature. I loved literature. Every story I can think of I learned. I liked that "Black is the night that covers me, dark as a pit from pole to pole. I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul." That's part of "Thanatopsis." Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." I liked Edgar Allen Poe. Who else did I like? I liked Byron. What's the name of—? I can't think of their names now. I've got to get that together. I liked any kind of subject that required reading. History I liked. I liked geography. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][I loved literature. We even studied Chaucer's English.]So when I got to UCLA, I thought I'd— When I went back in '79, I was going to take geography. It wasn't what I thought it would be. [laughter] Drop! [laughter] Wrong! I dropped that class fast! The only thing we didn't have in my school was philosophy and psychology. We didn't have either one of those. So when I got to UCLA, in 1946, I had to have psychology. I made an F. I wasn't used to huge classes. We met in the amphitheater.

There were two hundred people there, and I couldn't relate to it. So I had to take that again, and I made a B-, I think, this last time, in 1980, when I retook it. But I don't like psychology. I don't like philosophy. I took philosophy at UCLA in '79 because I— I took the religion part. I said, "Oh, great, I love religion." Wrong. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Not what you thought. [laughter]

BRYANT

No, but I couldn't drop it, so I made a C. But I argued every step of the way, because they were trying to talk about how we came from trees and plants and leaves. I said, "There's no way." I don't care. I'd go and have a conference with the teacher and I'd argue, argue, argue, argue. It would not go in. So I had to study to pass the exam. I don't remember none of the shit—excuse my French—because it went against my grain, you know. I just couldn't take it.

ISOARDI

So when you came out here to go to UCLA, you didn't finish at UCLA, then? You didn't finish your degree there?

BRYANT

No. No, I went a year. Because, see, when I got here and went out to UCLA to get my classes, the classes I needed were filled or they weren't offering it that semester. So I tabled my entrance and said I'd go the next semester, which I did. But it gave me a chance to discover Central Avenue. [laughter]

ISOARDI

And once you got a taste—

BRYANT

Oh, man, when I first got here, I think the first week that I was here—

ISOARDI

Where were you living when you first got here?

BRYANT

I was living in a beautiful mansion right up here on— It's a hospital, Saint John's Hospital is there now. It's Saint Andrews [Place] and Adams [Boulevard], right on the corner. It was a—

ISOARDI

Was there a big white—? Is that the place?

BRYANT

Yeah, the same, but it was a home then. It's a hospital now. They tore down the house. It was a three-story house right there. It was white stucco. Big, you know, trimmed in green. And the doors were that iron scroll, you know, fancy double doors. When we came from my hometown on the train, and we got off the train, it was in January 1945, and the sun was shining bright. I had just left all the snow, and we'd come through ice and sleet and snow and rain and stuff, and I got here and—

ISOARDI

Then you knew your father [Charles Celeste] wasn't kidding you! [laughter]

BRYANT

Oh, so I said, "Now I know what Daddy's talking about. It is the place where it's warm, and I'm in this place right now!" We get off the train and the sun is shining bright. It was in the afternoon, and there was a light breeze. It must have been about 70-something [degrees], you know, but it felt like it was 90 to me. I started shedding clothes, because I had left home in a three-piece suit, and I'd bought it back East. It was wool. You know, tweed. It was brown tweed, but it was wool. But the overcoat— Kind of like they wear with the double-breasted

camel-hair coat, tuxedo coat they're called, you know. And it had a velvet collar. Then I had a matching two-piece suit on. I had to come out of that, and I ended up with just my blouse and skirt on. But when I got here I told my dad, I said, "I see what you meant now, Daddy. It is the place where it's warm in the wintertime." He said, "I told you." Just like he had said when we were saying there was no place, he said, "You'll see." At Union Station, you know, you walk down into the station. And I'd never seen so many tracks. You know, they always stopped in Pasadena at that time. The movie stars would get off in Pasadena, because they didn't want to be overpowered by the fans or the press or whatever. It was just a clique thing, you know. It was great to get off. Pasadena was a rich city then. It was a stigma, really, an elitist-type thing. So we stopped at Pasadena and the train started coming into the Union depot downtown [Los Angeles], and all of these tracks and all of these trains— I'd never seen anything like that. Because when I was in New York, we were in cars, and we never went to the station down there, Penn[sylvania] Station. In my hometown, we had a lot of tracks, because the end of the MK and T line was right there in Denison— Missouri, Kansas, and Texas. Their line was there. They had what they called the roundhouse there. That's where they'd bring the trains in to repair them. You know, they put them on this thing, kind of like a turntable, and they'd go around, and men would be up under there repairing the trains. So we had a lot of train tracks, and we had a lot of trains in and out of there. But this— My eyes popped. I looked at all the trains coming and going and backing up and pulling out. You know, hustle and bustle time, I'm telling you. It was a point in my life that I will cherish. All of those early years of my life I'll cherish, because there was something exciting happening just about every day. When we walked down into the station, the people who were waiting for you couldn't go past this gate. You'd look and you'd see people waving, and they'd see somebody whom they knew was coming in. I looked and saw my brother

[Melvin Celeste Bryant]. I hadn't seen him in a year, because he had mustered out of the Marine Corps and came to California and didn't come home. I saw my brother and I started crying. My daddy was right behind me. We jumped into each other's arms or whatever. He swung me around, and we had our Bryant meeting there. Then we went on into the station, and there was this big huge room. They had these big, overstuffed chairs where you sat, and the loudspeaker was calling the trains. Everything was magnificent. Those were the days on the train where they had the red caps and the train porters and the Pullman porters and the conductors. And their stiffly starched uniforms— You'd go into the dining room and there was china and crystal and silverware, not the plastic nothing and no paper this and that. And the linen napkins folded neatly and the starched tablecloths, and the waiters had on their starched jackets with the gold buttons. It was just thrilling. We never got to ride on the Pullman coaches or anything, but you'd see the Pullman porters going through, bedding the people down, and you could walk through that area going wherever. When we got out at the station, we came through the waiting room, and there were the red caps. Hustle, bustle. They were grabbing the luggage and taking your tickets and palming their money, and they were whistling and calling the cabs. They'd put you in your cab, then they'd put your luggage in the back. You felt good, even though it was wartime. You felt good about yourself. On the train, you'd meet these men. There was a lot of military on the trains at that time, and we met a lot of guys who were coming out here to be shipped out to the Far East. Even though my dad and I were on the trip for a good, happy reason, you would still talk to some of those guys, and they would be talking about who they were leaving—their parents or their family or the wife was pregnant and they wouldn't see the baby. You didn't know if they were going to live or die or come back hurt or whatever. So you had kind of mixed emotions. But in the front of my mind, I always kept the fact up there that I was going where I

was going, and why I was going was for a good reason. My dad wanted me to better myself. So I would keep the other part in the back of my mind. But it was there, because the wartime was really hitting. There were trains everywhere and convoys of guys in these trucks up and down the highways. We'd ride alongside a highway, and we'd see them moving tanks and those long guns, anti-aircraft guns and stuff. So it was a learning process, and it was an emotional thing for you to deal with. You'd see families transferring along with their military husbands from camp to camp. You'd see families on the trains and buses and stuff being transferred to other places. When we got into the cab in Los Angeles and we started riding down the street, I did see the oranges and lemons and grapefruit trees. I looked at Daddy. He would be looking at me and saying— [laughter] Like that rooster in the yard says, "Mmm-hmm." [laughter] "Now you believe me?" The cab driver came through Chinatown, down Figueroa [Street], to Adams. We got on on Adams at that time. It wasn't run-down like it is now. There were mansions all up and down Adams Boulevard. From Figueroa, where Saint Vincent's Catholic Church is, there were beautiful mansions on each side of the street. There wasn't that much business thing before you got out to Vermont Avenue. After Vermont, there were a few businesses in there. Then you got past Vermont to Western [Avenue], and from Western on out it was beautiful homes and apartment buildings. Just the next street up from Western, there was Saint Andrews Place. When this man, this cab driver, pulled into this circular driveway and I looked and saw this big mansion— "Well, why is he coming here?" My brother said, "Well, Dad and Sis, this is your new home." Dad looked at me and I looked at him; we just knew Mel was pulling our leg. He got out and paid the cab driver. Dad said, "Well, maybe he's not lying." We got out dragging. [laughter] And Mel had the key to the door. I said, "Oh, shit! This is it!" [laughter] Just then the cab driver started taking our luggage out. So we were walking behind Mel looking at each other. You

know how you walk and are looking around and look at each other. And we'd look around— We got to the door. Mel opened the door, and this black lady came to the door. We thought she was the maid. She was dressed like one, you know. [laughter] You know how you dress, and the women have the aprons and stuff? She had on something that you'd buy from the— What's that store that used to have the house dresses all the time? Down South there was a store, and everybody had these kind of dresses on and an apron. Her name was Mrs. Helen Reyes. She was married to a Filipino. Mel said her name was Helen Reyes. Mel said, "Helen, this is my father and my sister." She said hello. She knew our names and everything. She called and she said, "Joe, come here." Her husband was Joseph Reyes, a nice-looking Filipino man. She was a black lady with big lips, and she was about five feet tall. She had her head tied up. Her color— She was about the color of the floor. You know, all kinds of things were going through my mind then, because I had never seen a mixed couple. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Never?

BRYANT

Never.

ISOARDI

Not even in New York?

BRYANT

No, not even in New York. Because we were only there for a week. We played the Apollo [Theatre] for— Well, we were probably there ten days. And the other places we played, I didn't see any mixed couples. Well, at that time, it wasn't prevalent, especially down South and on the East Coast.

ISOARDI

I'll say.

BRYANT

So then she called her daughters in. They had two daughters. Eduarda was the oldest, and they called her Eddie. Bernalda was the youngest, and we called her Bernie. And they were nice-looking girls with pretty, wavy hair. So then, she took us into the living room, and there, sitting very grand, was this beautiful baby grand piano. You know, I love— I have a romance going with piano, especially baby grands. Bernalda was painting it. She was busy antiquing it in white and gold. And she was painting— The furniture in the living room was white, eighteenth-century— Seventeenth-century— What do you call it? King something. I can't think. But, you know, that fancy antique stuff. [Louis XIV] And it was beautiful, with the heavy brocaded white drapes and— It was just gorgeous, you know. It was a three-story house. They had a tennis court in the back, a beautiful place. Now, you know, coming from Texas and our little old four-room shack, I wasn't ready for this. [laughter] So we sat in there, we talked, and then Mel said, "Well, we'll take the luggage upstairs." So we go up to the third floor, and there's this big room, and she had divided it off so Dad and I could have privacy. He had a double bed on his side of the room. I had a double bed over here. There were no king-size beds then. And we had the floor lamps— There was a big overstuffed chair that men like to sit in with the hassock, and there was a floor lamp beside it. I can see that room right now. There was a dresser with the two mirrors you could bring in so you could see in back of you. And there was a card table in the corner with four chairs. That's where I did my writing and studying and practicing. Dad sat in this overstuffed chair in the evening when he came from work and read the paper and listened to the radio or record player. But that first night, my brother told us to get bathed, hurry up and change and get dressed. We were invited to this movie actor's home up here on Sugar Hill. It was a part of L.A. up here called Sugar Hill.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What was your brother doing out here?

BRYANT

My brother was the first black usher at the Wiltern Theatre. But he was doing different things. This actor that he knew, Ben Carter was his name. He was a very good actor, but he died of diptheria in '46, the next year after I got here. But my brother was doing acting. You know, what do you call it? Bit parts and those other parts that you play—extras. He was singing. He's a singer. And he was doing whatever. You know, he had started to go to college out here, junior college, but he didn't keep it up. He said, "We're going over to Benny Carter's house up here on Sugar Hill." Now, you know, Sugar Hill was the area where the elite of the black actors and entertainers lived. It was the area from Normandie [Avenue], Western— I've got it written down in my book, the square area that it included. You know, like Harvard [Boulevard], Hobart [Boulevard], and those streets.

ISOARDI

Do you remember how far north it went?

BRYANT

North it went to Washington [Boulevard]. Was it Washington? Yeah, Washington. Because Johnny Otis had one of those homes later in the same block where— Because Ben Carter's home was 2833 South Harvard. And Johnny's church was either next door or down the street from it. So that night we went over to Ben Carter's house, and it was another big, beautiful place, you know. Eleven rooms! And his cook— He has a cook. Or it was a cook/maid? She had fixed this food for us, a good southern soul food dinner because she was from Texas too. We had roast pork with sage dressing and fluffy mashed potatoes and candied sweet potatoes and cornbread that melted in your mouth. I mean, the dressing was sage dressing that wasn't made from any of these boxes of stuff,

you know. And the cornbread was made from scratch. But the pièce de résistance— Well, you know, everybody had victory gardens then, and she had made this southern thing of sliced tomatoes and onions and cucumbers in vinegar. That's a very southern-type thing. And those vegetables were fresh out of the garden. It's a different taste to them, you know, than it is now because the ground was still full of vitamins and minerals and stuff. The best part was my very, very, very, very, very favorite: lemon meringue pie. I love lemon meringue pie. And she made a good pie. My Aunt Betty [Gaddis] was the best lemon pie maker I've known, but this woman came close. But to wash that down, down South, it was a custom to have buttermilk with your lemon pie. And this buttermilk, they had churned it themselves. They had gotten the cream and churned it, you know, and it had big flakes of butter in it. Oh, man, my daddy and I killed ourselves. On the train we didn't have the money to go in the dining room every day. We had some sacks of fried chicken. In those days, when you traveled on the train or the bus, you always fried up a bunch of chicken and cake and stuff and some kind of rolls or something and had these greasy bags on the train. [laughter] So Dad and I— It was the first meal we'd had in two days, since traveling on the train, and we stuffed ourselves. He had this big, long table with the crystal chandelier and the silver and the china. It was just marvelous. [laughter] I thought I was in a movie! I'd seen all that in the movies.

ISOARDI

This is a hell of an introduction to Los Angeles!

BRYANT

I'm telling you, it was. It really was for someone straight out of what Daddy called "Bam." Daddy called down South "Bam." [laughter] But we finished eating, and they ushered us into the living room and this gorgeous furniture. Everything was very well coordinated. He had this beautiful record player,

plus he had the latest records. And he had a couple of guests. This man—his name was Fred Clark—was Humphrey Bogart's butler, and he was a part-time actor. This was when Bogart was married to Margot [Mayo Methot] in 1945. This guy was from England. He was a black guy of mixed descent. He spoke in a very clipped British accent. He had us rolling, talking and telling jokes and talking about how Margot used to fight Humphrey Bogart. He had us in stitches. And then he'd go into the— [adopting English accent] And very, very, very British, you know, with the whole accent. he was as gay as a two-dollar bill. [laughter] So it was hilarious. Oh, I thought, "Oh, my God." [laughter] It was funny. When we went into the living room, we sat and we talked and they told us what to expect in L.A. and stuff. By that time, Daddy and I were so stuffed and so tired and sleepy, Ben let Mel use his car, his Cadillac, to bring us home. That did it too. When we came home, I looked at that house again, I went up to my room, and my bed was right by a window. I could look out the window and see the stars and stuff. I thought about my friends and my aunts and things at home and that cold weather. And here I was walking around with no coat on or nothing. Because even in the wintertime at that time, it didn't get like it does now, you know, nippy and cold. It was still warm. It was January, but it was still warm at night. And they had seasons then in L.A., because the next month was February. You had a rainy season then. But you don't have that now. The rainy season is whenever. They've been fooling with the elements too much.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you remember what some of the do's and don'ts they told you about L.A. were?

BRYANT

Do's and don'ts?

ISOARDI

Yeah, you said they sort of set you straight on L.A. Do you remember some of the things they told you about L.A.?

BRYANT

Well, it wasn't that kind of telling us what to expect. They were trying to tell Dad what to expect on his job. I guess it was they were telling him that there would be prejudices here in California, but they weren't blatant like they are down South. You know, you could walk into it. Nobody would tell you you can't do this and can't do that, but you could walk into it and be hit in the face with "You can't go here or you can't do that" or somebody might call you a nigger out there, you know. They were telling us not to be—what is it?—shammed or so relaxed and think that everything is just what we see on the surface. There were things to ponder. Like they told me how UCLA could be, which it was. Because I had applied to USC [University of Southern California], too, and then, at home, I heard that they were very prejudiced. But when I got out to UCLA, I found out that they were just as prejudiced. [laughter] It was the same thing, but it was subtle. The main thing they were telling me about was about the music. Because Ben was into the film business, but he visited or frequented all of the many places of jazz and music that they had in L.A. at that time, on Central Avenue mostly. They told me at the time there were more places on Central Avenue than there was on any single street in all of Los Angeles, which was true. [tape recorder off]The next day, my brother took me— I asked him to take me to UCLA. At that time, they had streetcars. We lived right on the corner. The streetcar stopped on Western—it was the "A" car—the streetcar stopped on Western and Adams. Going down Western, they had buses. There was no Western streetcar. Right on the corner of Western and Adams, where there's the Golden State [Mutual Life] Insurance building, there used to be a hot dog stand there. It was a "mom and pop" business. It was an older white guy and his wife who ran this, and they had some of the best hot dogs and chili dogs.

Oh, I can taste it now. My brother and I walked down to Western, caught the bus to Pico [Boulevard], Western and Pico, then caught the "P" car to where Sears [Roebuck and Company] was. It's not Sears anymore now. But that was the end of the line. They would turn around. You had to catch the bus to go farther out Pico, the blue bus. So we caught it there and got off at the turnaround and caught the blue bus, and it took me right to the gate of UCLA, where it's so much different now. You know, that was the gate to get into UCLA then when you came off Westwood [Boulevard] and LeConte [Avenue]. That was the gate to get in. So he went with me out there, and I went to the office and found out as I was making out my cards, my class cards, it seemed everything I wanted was either filled or it wasn't available that semester. So they said, "Well, come back for the next semester," which I did. But we walked around the campus. There weren't that many blacks on the campus at that time, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I'll bet.

BRYANT

Nineteen forty-five, we were scarce! [laughter] I mean, that was quite an experience when I did get into UCLA. That was quite an experience. But, anyway, we left there. I told my brother to take me over to— No, the next day I had him take me. We went back home, and I don't remember what I did that day, the rest of the day. But I had him take me over on Central Avenue so I could deposit my union [American Federation of Musicians] card, because I had joined the Dallas local [Local 72]. We [Prairie View Coeds] had to join that local before we went to New York.

ISOARDI

Oh, when? When you were at Prairie View [Agricultural and Mechanical University]?

BRYANT

Yes. I wanted to put in my transfer. I'd had the man from the union in Dallas and my teacher from UCLA [William H. Bennett] send letters of recommendation, and they did. So we caught the "A" car— Now, the "A" car would come down Adams to Catalina [Street]— You know, my street right up here, where you turn— Catalina over here at Adams and Catalina. It would turn down Catalina, go over one block to— what is it?—Twenty-fourth [Street] or something like that, and you would cross Vermont and go up to Figueroa. No, you would go up to Hill [Street], and then the "A" car would turn on Hill, and you'd go all the way downtown. But it wouldn't go all the way down Adams at that time. That streetcar would turn and go down a side street, too, to Hill, and then you'd go down Hill. So we went down to Hill and caught the "U" car, which would take you to the east side. It would take you to Central Avenue, the east side, to Compton or wherever. I never rode it to the end, so I really don't remember where it ended up. We caught the "U" car, and it would go down Central. We got off at Eighteenth— The black union [Local 767] was at 1710 South Central. Now, I think I've asked you if you've ever seen the Coke plant there, the Coca Cola [Bottling Company] plant. It had just been built. It's still there, right on the corner of Seventeenth [Street] and Central. The union was right across the street, on what would be the west side of the street. It was a frame building. We got off the streetcar, and I see these guys are sitting there. It was just a big house. You know, it was a two-story house, the union building was. Did I show you those pictures I had of the place?

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah.

BRYANT

We walked up, and the guys were sitting on the banisters and standing out on the street and sitting in their cars. I was

pulling back. My brother said, "Come on." And the guys are looking. I really got nervous. [laughter]

ISOARDI

You mean you weren't used to that?

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

After traveling all around, going to New York?

BRYANT

No, no. I didn't get to go anywhere by myself.

ISOARDI

Oh. [laughter]

BRYANT

I never went around those places where they hung out. Like, in my hometown, they had places where you hung out, at a place called the Blue Moon, but my dad would never let my brothers take me there. I had to have a chaperone, and my dad said, "No, you can't go." So I didn't go. But when I saw all these guys, I said, "Oh, my God." Mel said, "You'd better come on." He said, "Some of these guys who are looking at you, you're going to have to depend on them to get you work." So we're walking up the steps and then I hear this [wolf whistles]. My brother said, "They're complimenting you." I said, "Really?" [laughter] "That's a compliment?" Boy, dumb! I mean, I was dumb, you know, that way. Street-wise, I was very dumb. But I walked into the union, and I was met by this— The reason why I remember this is because I just did this chapter to send for a grant. This man walked out, Baron Moorehead. He was a little short man. His head was bald in front like that, and bow-legged, very bowed legs. But he was one of the first black pilots out here in California.

ISOARDI

What was his name?

BRYANT

Baron Moorehead.

ISOARDI

Oh, Baron Moorehead.

BRYANT

He was a business agent at the union. He had the first office. When you walked in the door, his office was on this side, to your right. It had been a living room, and there were couches around the room. He walked out and wondered, you know, could he help me. I told him I— I had called Florence Cadrez, who was the union secretary, and told her that I wanted to put in my transfer. So he said, "My name's Baron Moorehead." And I said, "My name's Clora

BRYANT

." I told him what I had come for. So he said, "Fine." He took me into the next room, which had been the dining room, I think, because Florence's desk kind of sat in the middle of the floor. She was a nice-looking lady, a pleasant smile, red hair, and freckles. She said, "Oh, yes, Clora. We received a letter from so-and-so, the president of the black local in Dallas, and from Will Henry Bennett," who was the band director. She said, "You come highly recommended." I said, "Oh, thank you, ma'am." [laughter] I'm still ma'am-ing everything. "Yes, sir" and "No, ma'am," you know, and "Yes'm." She said, "Oh, I like the way you talk." [laughter] Why not, huh? Being very respectful, you know. You always respected your elders. I'd been taught that. So she gave me an application to fill out, and I filled it out and gave it back to her. She said, "Well, you know, you can't work a steady job until you've worked off your transfer, and that takes about six weeks." And then she took

me around and introduced me to the president. His last name was Edward Bailey. And then she introduced me to Elmer Fain.

ISOARDI

Now, he was a business agent?

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

And who was the treasurer?

BRYANT

Paul Howard was the treasurer.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

And I met them. Then she took me to the kitchen where they had their fish fries and showed me the backyard where they had the homemade barbecue pits, like they're doing now. They're made out of those oil cans. They cut them in half.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

You've seen those?

ISOARDI

Sure.

BRYANT

And then she took me upstairs to the rehearsal rooms. There was a big room, and then there were smaller rooms. And I'll never forget, there was one room that had these pictures on

the wall of these bulldogs dressed like men. They had on these derby hats and these big fat cigars and these loud suits. I mean, I'll never forget it. They're sitting there playing cards and shooting pool. You know, different pictures. That room I remember as a rehearsal room. It had an old raggedy piano in it. Then my brother and I came outside, and just as we walked out the door, "Ginger" [Emma] Smock, a great violinist, jazz and concertwise, was coming in the door, I think. My brother knew her, and he introduced me to her. I met a lot of other guys. When I came out, there was Gene Montgomery and "Cake" [Al] Witchard, Clarence Jones—a bass player—and I met about four trumpet players, Parr Jones— I can't remember. I've got their names written down. I met about ten guys that day.

ISOARDI

Wow. Busy day.

BRYANT

It was. We left there and went on down Central. We caught the "U" car and went down Central Avenue. As we drove along, my brother pointed out the places where they had music, like the Jungle Room. It was an after-hours place. That's where Ernie Andrews's future wife, Dolores [Benemie] Andrews, at that time was the hatcheck person. And there was the Elks hall.

ISOARDI

Elks Club?

BRYANT

The Elks hall auditorium. Mel told me that's where they had dances and things and jam sessions on Sundays. The Lincoln Theatre. Bardu Ali had his band in there, Melba Liston was working in the band at that time. There were all kinds of theaters, the Bill Robinson Theatre. What's that black woman's name who was a singer in the twenties and thirties? I can't think of it. [Florence Mills] And they had about four theaters.

Bill Robinson— What's his name? The communist guy who went to Russia?

ISOARDI

Paul Robeson?

BRYANT

Paul Robeson. There was the Robeson Theatre. Yeah. They would have black movies, and then some nights they'd have a giveaway. They'd have drawings, and you could win sets of dishes and things like that. And sometimes some of those smaller theaters would have small shows, you know, live entertainment. And they showed me Brother's after-hours place. Then we got to the Downbeat [Club], the Last Word [Cafe], the [Club] Alabam, the little bar there under the hotel, the—

ISOARDI

In the Dunbar [Hotel]?

BRYANT

Yes. They had a small piano bar.

ISOARDI

Turban Room?

BRYANT

Yeah, the Turban Room. And on the corner was Cafe Intime. Upstairs was Dynamite Jackson's, and on Vernon there was— Oh, man, I have to look at my paper. There was so much going on! But it was still early afternoon—not early, but it was around four o'clock—and I told my brother I was hungry. So we went to this place called the Nickel Spot. It was a cafe where you could have a meal ticket. You ever heard of that?

ISOARDI

Well, I mean, you could buy like a monthly ticket or something like that?

BRYANT

By the week. It was a weekly thing. You could buy your ticket and eat, and then they'd punch it for the meal or whatever that day. So we ate there. He introduced me to the waitresses. We hung around there until almost early evening. The guys were out on the street, all of the night people: the pimps and the hustlers and the ladies of the evening. There were a lot of musicians. My brother introduced me to some of the guys he thought I should meet. We stood around while Mel talked with them, the guys hanging on the corner, the young guys listening to all this bullshit the guys are talking. And finally, when the Downbeat opened up— What's his name was working there—Roy Porter and Howard McGhee. Howard McGhee and J. D. King. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][We stood outside and listened to that great bebop band.] Did you mention J. D. King?

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (March 29, 1990)

BRYANT

The band was Teddy Edwards—

ISOARDI

Which band was this?

BRYANT

It was Howard McGhee's band in the Downbeat.

ISOARDI

Your first day you went there?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, wow.

BRYANT

It was right there on the corner of Forty-second [Street] and Central. It was right on the corner, on the southeast corner. Teddy Edwards and J. D. King were the tenor men. Howard McGhee, Vernon Biddle was the bass player, Roy Porter the drummer— No, Bob [Kesterson] Dingbod was bass player and Vernon Biddle was the piano player. They had a very, very good group. My brother let me stand outside for a few minutes to listen to them.

ISOARDI

But you didn't go in?

BRYANT

Oh, no. I was under the age. I couldn't go in. That was the first time I'd heard bebop live in L.A. And then some of the guys told me about listening to the broadcast from Billy Berg's late at night. They shouldn't have told me about that, because I started listening and started trying to figure out what they were doing.

ISOARDI

How did you react when you first heard the Howard McGhee quintet? You hadn't heard bebop on radio and records?

BRYANT

No. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][After I came to L.A., I began to hear bebop on the radio and records.]

ISOARDI

Nothing?

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

So you'd been playing swing.

BRYANT

Because, see, I hadn't been here long enough to listen to the right stations, and they didn't have those stations in Texas. My dad was listening to things that were sort of like Lawrence Welk or Kay Kyser or somebody.

ISOARDI

Right. And when you were in New York, you were just there a short time, so you didn't know what was going on at—

BRYANT

We were staying at the Cecil Hotel, where bebop was born. In 1945, we were staying there, where the guy started that room where the fellows, Dizzy [Gillespie], Bird [Charlie Parker], [Thelonius] Monk, and Klook [Kenny Clarke] started bebop.

ISOARDI

What? Minton's? Was it Minton's?

BRYANT

Yeah! Yeah, we were staying there. That's where we stayed when we were playing the Apollo [Theatre].

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

BRYANT

But I was too young. They'd rush you right past there. When we'd go out the door, you know, my chaperone— Some of the girls had a chance to go in there because they were older. But I didn't get a chance to go.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. So this is about 1944 when you were in New York, then, about?

BRYANT

Yeah, '44.

ISOARDI

That's when things were hopping at Minton's, wasn't it?

BRYANT

That's right. That's right. So I didn't really get to hear it at that time. When I went back in— When did I go back to New York? My next time was '40—what? No, the next time was in '50— 'Fifty-two, I think, was my next trip to New York, because my daughter [April Stone] was— It was probably '54, because she was about two when I went there. She was born in '51. Yeah, and then that's when I got— You know, Birdland was open, and I went to Cafe Society, and I went to all the spots I could go to then, because I was of age. But it seems to me there was a place called the Red Rooster or something.

ISOARDI

Where? In New York?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

The Royal Roost?

BRYANT

No. No, this club was in Harlem. I've got to remember that. I can't think of the man's name who owned it. He had been a dancer or something. It was an after-hours place. But, anyway, that day, I heard this band, and I couldn't figure out

what they were doing. Howard was a very good trumpet player, at that time. He was wailing his ass off. I said, "My God, what is this?" And then, when they told me about listening to Billy Berg's, there was [sings] "Cement mixer, putty, putty." Slim Gaillard, and a guy named Tiny Brown on the bass. And there was Harry "The Hipster" Gibson. Oh, what was that hit song he had at that time? "They call me handsome Harry the Hipster and I'll never, ever marry your sister!" I've got the original 78 [rpm record] on that. Yes, I've got Slim Gaillard and "Cement mixer, putty, putty." I started listening to that because the radio broadcast had opened my ears. I liked anything that's— It's like the kids nowadays. They like anything that's different. You know, I'd been inundated with swing, and I was ready for the next step, just like the kids are now. So after I heard that, I listened to Billy Berg's. I listened to Joe Adams in the daytime on the radio. I listened to Hunter Hancock. I listened to Gene Norman's jazz show. What is it? What's that man's name who had Hadda Brooks and Nellie Lutcher? He was— Oh, I can't think of his name. [Dave Dexter] And then after-hours broadcast from— The Bird in the Basket was where they had live jam sessions, you know. Like Wardell Gray and Dexter [Gordon] would lock horns there.

ISOARDI

And they broadcast those?

BRYANT

Yeah. They had live broadcasts. What's his name? Bill Sampson broadcast live from there. And then, at Dolphin's of Hollywood later on, they had live broadcasts from their window with— What is this man's name? Because his grammar was so bad. [laughter] I can't think of his name. [Charles Trammell] He sat in the window at this record shop, and you could go by and honk your horn and wave or you could walk in and make requests and things like that.

ISOARDI

This was Dolphin's?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

Where was that at?

BRYANT

It was out on Vernon [Avenue] off of Central, just south of Central on Vernon. And across the street, upstairs, was Lovejoy's after-hours club. Then across the street— See, the Alabam at that time was owned by Curtis Mosby.

ISOARDI

Curtis Mosby.

BRYANT

Who had been a bandleader. And the Last Word was owned by his brother, Esvan Mosby. Esvan's wife, later on, had a room called the Crystal Tea Room, where they had jam sessions. That was over on Avalon [Boulevard] and Fiftieth [Street].

ISOARDI

Oh, is that the place where Buddy Collette and Bill Green later had a studio or something?

BRYANT

No, they didn't have a studio there that I know of. They used to have sessions there.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. That's what it was. Once a week. Was it Sunday sessions or something?

BRYANT

Right. And that was over on— I'm not sure if that was Avalon [Boulevard]— Because, see, at that time, Wrigley Stadium was still over there on Avalon. It was somewhere around in there, across the street from there, I think. There was Cafe Society, and downtown was Shepp's Playhouse at First [Street] and San Pedro [Street]. Gerald Wilson's band played down on First and San Pedro. Howard McGhee and his wife later had a place, Club Finale, down there too. And then later—

ISOARDI

They had a club?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Do you remember the name of it?

BRYANT

I'm trying to think of it. I have it written down. And later, after Billy Berg closed his place [Billy Berg's] out there on Sunset [Boulevard] and Vine [Street], he had the Waldorf Cellar downtown, down on Main Street. I played down there, too. It was downstairs. He'd have shows, and he'd have jazz groups in there. There was a lot of activity down there. It was kind of Japanese town down in that area. The Japanese, those people had been relocated, you know. Those people had been moved out, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, during the war.

BRYANT

Farther out on Central, I worked with an all-girl group called the Darlings of Rhythm out there at the— What did they call it? The Plantation Club.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. That was down in Watts, wasn't it?

BRYANT

Yeah. I worked with the Darlings of Rhythm out there. And I worked with— What's this other? A man who had a group, an all-girl group. He was a trombone player. See, that same summer that I first came out here, I worked with the Sweethearts of Rhythm at the Million Dollar Theatre. I worked one week with them down there. They had a chaperone, Miss [Rae Lee] Jones, and she wanted me to travel with them. We were still living out here on Adams and Saint Andrews Place, and I went home the first day and told my dad about how these girls were feeling on each other's boobs and patting each other on the butt and kissing. Daddy said, "You come home." I had to come home at every intermission.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

From downtown on Second [Street] and Broadway, I had to come all the way out here on Adams and Saint Andrew's Place. I sure did. My dad said, "Ain't no way you're going on the road with them." I didn't know. You know, I didn't know what a lesbian was at that time. [laughter] I wouldn't have bleated it out to my father! [laughter] Then his eyes got big, "What?" But later on I did find out what they were talking about. I'm telling you, I was so naive it's not even funny. I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground at that time. But that was the beginning of my bebop Central Ave days.

ISOARDI

Of your Central Avenue days. Okay. Maybe next time we'll begin with Central Avenue.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE
(April 4, 1990)

ISOARDI

Last time I think we'd gotten to a point where you had just gone down to Central Avenue. But before we get into the Central scene, I just wanted to ask you, since this is a UCLA project and I know, among other things, the UCLA Oral History Program is trying to document the history of UCLA, also, maybe you could give me what your impressions were of UCLA around 1945. What was it like? I know you made a couple of references last time.

BRYANT

Well, it was completely different from the school that I'd just come from, Prairie View [Agricultural and Mechanical] College. My college in Texas was out from town, and it sat out up on a hill. It was very sparsely populated around that area, and the buildings were nowhere near the quality or whatever. In fact, my first-year dormitory at Prairie View was a place called Crawford Hall, and there were bedbugs and the whole thing. It was a frame building. My second year there, since I was in the band, I was able to stay in the senior dormitory, Anderson Hall, which was much better. I didn't have to be bothered with getting up, lifting the mattresses up, and burning the bedbugs. [laughter] You can't believe it! When I'd go home, my dad [Charles Celeste Bryant] would make me leave my trunk outside so we wouldn't bring the bedbugs and things home with us. It was really something. So when I got out here to California and I was going to UCLA— There's been so many changes made— Like I said, you came into the entrance there. The entrance was there like where you go into for the hospital at UCLA now, at LeConte [Avenue] and Westwood [Boulevard]. There are so many buildings that they've added. The music building wasn't there where it is now. I used to go to the library that's— Oh, now, what's the name of that library?

ISOARDI

The Powell Library?

BRYANT

Powell Library was there. And there was an area in there we used to hang out in. I don't remember what it was because that's been so long ago. But we'd hang out in there because they didn't have that cafeteria next door there, you know, where the stores are and the bookstore.

ISOARDI

Yeah, the [Ackerman] Student Union.

BRYANT

They didn't have the student hall there. Royce Hall was there. It was completely different. I just can't— I really can't zero in on a good picture. All I remember is that psychology class that I had where we were in an amphitheater. I'd never been in a class that large. It was about two hundred people, you know, where you walk down and you sit like you're in the gym or something. I'd never been in a class like that. It was so impersonal, I couldn't relate to it.

ISOARDI

In 1945.

BRYANT

Nineteen forty-five. I couldn't relate to it. No, it was September of '45, yeah, the first semester, because I missed the second semester in '45. So going into '46 is when I was able to get into classes. I only had one music class. I had French, which I had had—what?—four semesters of French in Texas. But my French teacher out there told me, she said, "Well, you need to learn to speak English before you can speak French." I said, "Well, that's probably because my teacher spoke the same way I do," with a southern accent or a drawl

or whatever. But I realized that UCLA and I are the same age. Yes, almost to the same month. My birthday is May 30, and, when I went back to school in '79, we celebrated our fiftieth birthday together. It was impressed on me again when I saw the school paper [Daily Bruin]. UCLA fifty years— I was fifty years old that year, too. That was in '79.

ISOARDI

What was the music like? You said you took one music course, and you were there as a music major, I guess, right?

BRYANT

Right. It was music history, which I wasn't interested in.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

But in terms of playing, say, how did they receive a jazz artist then?

BRYANT

I had no part, no connection at all. There was no such thing as jazz on the campus then. No. It was strictly Western music, classical. It was all classical. They had no jazz band or nothing there. And I wasn't a part of the marching band. It was like I wasn't a music major. The only thing musical that I had was that I had a phys ed [physical education] class where I had a dance class, and I was learning folk dancing. That's the only music that I had that I really enjoyed. And I had swimming one semester.

ISOARDI

How were you treated at UCLA when you went there? I know you mentioned last time that you felt there was some prejudice there.

BRYANT

Yes. I didn't take it to USC [University of Southern California] because I had heard that they were a little prejudiced, and then I got out there to UCLA and found out they were a little prejudiced, too. There were so few blacks out there. There was a guy going— And he doesn't even mention that he went to UCLA; he talks about graduating from USC. He writes for the [Los Angeles] Sentinel. Stanley— What's Stanley's last name? Stanley Robertson. He was going to UCLA at that time, but he never talks about it. But there were a few— I saw about twenty, if that many, blacks on the campus at that time. I was pledged to the AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha] sorority, but I couldn't make it because right after I pledged—and they had their meetings at night—I started to work out in Watts at the Plantation Club with the Darlings of Rhythm, so I couldn't make the meetings. So I never did get to be initiated. And I always wanted to be in AKA, and I've been trying to get them to make me an honorary member now. They're thinking about it. But it didn't impress me that much, it really didn't, because I don't have any burning memories of UCLA. All I remember is I liked the campus. I liked strolling. There was a lot of space. I liked strolling. And then, like I said, in Powell they had— I don't know if it was a room or what it was where we used to sit, and there was a piano, and I would sit and play the piano. I had learned Hamp [Lionel Hampton]'s "Boogie Woogie," and when I came out here I learned Joe Liggins's "Honeydripper," and the girls would have me sitting there playing it at lunchtime. Tommy Dorsey had turned it around and called it something else, but it was Count Basie's "Boogie Woogie" at first. Yeah, I had learned that, because I'd bought sheet music and learned it. Those are the only things I really remember.

ISOARDI

You said that there were probably a total of about twenty black students that you remember back then. Was there anything that would bring you together? Was there any kind of organization or anything like—?

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

Nothing at all?

BRYANT

No, not that I knew of. I didn't get to participate in the activities on the campus per se because I was working at night. There might have been, but I never heard about it. You know, there's a lady [Haroldene Brewington Browning] who was at UCLA with me. I saw her— Her father [Ivan Harold Browning] was a well-known musician. He went to Europe and sang with Eubie Blake. I saw her last year, the first time since I'd seen her in the forties when we were at school. Her father was well known. And there was another guy, Sheffield. I saw him afterwards, after I got married and had kids. He ended up being a policeman. But I know why I saw him, because he was my oldest son's baseball coach in Little League, and that's why I got to see him again. But those are the only ones that I remember. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][His sister taught my solfeggio class at Prairie View.]

ISOARDI

Yeah, okay. Well, let's get to Central, then. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah. Yeah, UCLA didn't do too much to impress me, because I really wasn't getting what I wanted, and I was kind of upset with the psych class. So that's all I can say about it. Now, when I went back, later on, we'll talk about that. Central Avenue. I think I was talking about—

ISOARDI

It was your first day down there, and your brother [Melvin Celeste Bryant] took you up and down.

BRYANT

Yeah, after I left the union—

ISOARDI

You ended up standing outside, was it the Downbeat [Club], listening to Howard McGhee's quintet?

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Getting your first dose of bebop.

BRYANT

Right. Right. After we left the eating place, the Nickel Spot, my brother introduced me to— Or was it before we went in? Anyway, he introduced me to a lot of the musicians who were standing around, and there were a lot of pimps, you know, standing outside of their cars. There were a lot of Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals on the street. And my brother introduced me to the ones he thought I should know.

ISOARDI

Everybody came to show off?

BRYANT

Yes, yes. Oh, yes. A lot of young kids just hanging there just to be on the scene and to learn. See, in those days, there was a lot of camaraderie. That's why I became a part of it. Because there was a caring and a sense of hooking up, or what we call networking now. That was our area. Central Avenue was our area. And, by the way, I just got a letter from a guy who wants me to be on a committee for something they're doing around Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Really? What are they doing? Do they want to have a—?

BRYANT

What is it? What did I do with the letter? He's supposed to get back to me this week to see what I think about it. I've forgotten how it goes now. But, anyway, Central Avenue is in now.

ISOARDI

Yeah, no question.

BRYANT

The young men, that impressed me a lot, seeing the young guys who weren't quite old enough to be drafted hanging around the guys who weren't eligible to go to the service to learn how to either be a pimp or a musician or whatever. Because I guess their fathers were gone in the service or whatever or else working all the time at the shipyards. There was so much activity on Central Avenue when I got there. It was like a beehive. It was people going in and out of everywhere, out of the clubs, out of the restaurants, the stores. There were all kinds of stores up and down the street, like furniture stores, five-and-ten-cent stores, doctors' offices, dentists' offices, restaurants, barbecue joints. What other places did I see? Used furniture stores, used clothing stores. There was so much activity! You know, when I was in New York, I didn't get to experience that much because, in the daytime, we started out playing shows early in the morning, and we'd get off late at night. So I didn't really get to see all the activity up in Harlem until I went back in the fifties. But on Central Avenue, I was able to breathe in some of the activities or the— What is the word I'm looking for? The people being into each other, interrelating— And it was all black, except at night. At night, that's when the movie stars would come over. I saw Rita Hayworth, Cesar Romero, Alan Ladd was there quite

often. What's his—? Not Gregory Peck. What's his name? Sonny Tufts. Later on, Ava Gardner. But there were lots who I don't even remember the names of. There were always some fine cars lined up outside the clubs on Central Avenue from the movie stars or people just from Beverly Hills. And I was talking to a guy on the radio in Denver, and he had gone to UCLA. He was teaching a music class at [University of] Denver, and he interviewed me when I was up there at the Fairmont [Hotel]. He said he had heard that what caused Central Avenue to go down was when they took the buses and they took the streetcars up. I said, "What are you talking about? That had nothing to do with the activity on Central Avenue."

ISOARDI

I've never heard that.

BRYANT

He said, "Well, the people stopped coming when they stopped those services." I said, "The people weren't coming on no public transportation. When they came over there, they came over to show their fine cars, their clothes, and their furs. They weren't about to take public transportation to come over there to show those diamonds and things off." I said, "You should—" I said, "Think about it for a minute."

ISOARDI

Humphrey Bogart didn't hop on a bus. [laughter]

BRYANT

Really! Think about it a minute. I said, "Are you kidding? Who told you that?" I said, "Central Avenue closed up when they found out how much money was being dropped over there and city hall started sending the cops out there to heckle the white people." They'd have the men patting the women down up against the wall. The men spread their legs, and they'd be patting them all over. You know, that's what stopped Central

Avenue. It was the insults, the heckles, raiding the after-hours places. That's what stopped it.

ISOARDI

Well, this is getting a bit ahead, but since you brought it up, though, I mean, Central Avenue had been swinging for quite a while.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

But all of a sudden, city hall decides to clamp down?

BRYANT

Yeah, because, see, the businesses began to hurt out west, northwest. Yeah, like we said, we're getting ahead of it. Places like the Mocambo, Ciro's, and all those places, they were losing a lot of business with the people coming down in there, coming south to see the shows over there. That hurt. The businesses— That's what happened. The businesses were hurting up in Hollywood, so it got to city hall. They couldn't have that, and they closed— That what helped close Central Avenue down is when they started insulting the whites when they came over.

ISOARDI

Driving them away, then.

BRYANT

Right. Right. And I don't understand—

ISOARDI

So white patronage was important to the economy of those clubs, then?

BRYANT

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And plus, the whites would come over there paying to get the black girls, you know. There were black guys who were standing on the corner just for that purpose. They had girls who were just there to serve the white guys. So when that was taken away—

ISOARDI

So Central Avenue, it was really—well, especially during the day—the social focus, then, and the economic focus, in a way, of the black community.

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

Very much so, then.

BRYANT

Definitely. I mean, that was it. And it was—

ISOARDI

If you wanted to shop, if you wanted to hear music, if you wanted to eat, if you practically wanted to anything, you'd go to Central.

BRYANT

Right. Yeah, it was right there. For the blacks, it was right there. And then it started moving west. When we left Central Avenue, we went straight to Western Avenue. That became the hub. And up to Washington [Boulevard]. There were some clubs up there.

ISOARDI

And this is getting into the fifties, mid-fifties? Is that when that starts happening?

BRYANT

Yeah, the late forties and the early fifties.

ISOARDI

So it sounds like you could pretty much get anything you wanted on Central Avenue.

BRYANT

You could. That's right. Anything. Drugs, women, whatever. Night or day. There was a place called Brother's where you'd go and sit around on the floor on the pillows, and the incense and the music and the soft lights, and that was it. People would go off into other rooms. I don't know what they were doing, but they must have been getting loaded or something, you know. And you would come back and lay out. It was called Brother's. He was a guy, and he wore all these long robes. There was a mystique there, you know.

ISOARDI

Really? This is about Brother's?

BRYANT

It was called Brother's. It was an after-hours place. It was a hangout for guys to go for guys and whatever. You could get whatever. But he was a nice man, a nice man. And he stayed open a long time after Central Avenue started to break down.

ISOARDI

Brother's still survived? Really?

BRYANT

Yeah. He was on Central Avenue kind of off the alley or back of a place. I'll have to asky my brother exactly where it was. But I remember you had to walk down a walkway to the back.

ISOARDI

Like a little alley to get—?

BRYANT

Like an alley or a path or something between buildings or something like that.

ISOARDI

[laughter] So if you didn't—

BRYANT

I said it was a mystique!

ISOARDI

If you weren't looking for Brother's, you wouldn't know it was there.

BRYANT

You had to know somebody who knew somebody to take you there. That's the way that was.

ISOARDI

Well, who hung out at a place like Brother's?

BRYANT

The movie stars.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. And the entertainers. Well, now, if the laypeople knew somebody who knew somebody, they were there. I only went there a couple of times, because that wasn't my shtick at all. There wasn't no live music!

ISOARDI

I thought you said it was an after— Oh, it was after-hours but no music?

BRYANT

Yeah, but no live music. No, they had soft records. There was no live entertainment there.

ISOARDI

A lot of little rooms tucked away where you could do what you want, then come back and crash.

BRYANT

Exactly, yeah. Yeah.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I see. I was always under the impression that it was like an after-hours jam place, but not at all.

BRYANT

Not Brother's, no.

ISOARDI

No, I see.

BRYANT

Brother's wasn't, no. That was Bird in the Basket [Jack's Basket], Dynamite Jackson's upstairs at Vernon [Avenue] and Central. There were a lot of after-hours places.

ISOARDI

Which are some of the ones that you remember most, maybe? What were they like? Any clubs in particular? I know there were a lot of clubs. You must have been in all of them or might have played all of them.

BRYANT

Yeah. Well, the—

ISOARDI

But maybe if you could tell us about—

BRYANT

The major one was the Bird in the Basket.

ISOARDI

For jamming.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. That's where they had a lot of famous ones between Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon.

ISOARDI

They used to play there regularly?

BRYANT

Yeah. Anybody who was anybody, when they came in town, they had to go by the— And, like I told you, they had live broadcasts there by Bill Sampson.

ISOARDI

From the Bird in the Basket.

BRYANT

That's where I had the challenge with the trumpet player [Al Killian], I told you, with Duke Ellington. Did I give you his name before?

ISOARDI

I can't remember if you did.

BRYANT

Because he's the one, he got into an argument with a guy in his hotel down on Fifth Street, and the guy killed him. He was a high-note man with Duke before Cat Anderson. But it was written up in the [California] Eagle too. J. T. [Gibson] wrote it. Like I told you, J. T., that's Gertrude [Gibson]'s husband. That's how she got into writing. J. T. Gibson wrote for the

Eagle. He was a trumpet player, but he only had one lung, so he had to stop playing. He was writing for the Eagle, but he'd hang out at all these places. And he was there that night when I challenged that man for high notes.

ISOARDI

What was the—?

BRYANT

I was not cocky, but I accepted a challenge for what it was. Because I didn't want them to feel like I was a mamby-pamby little tippy-toe female just because I played the trumpet. I didn't want men to think of me like that. I wanted to be on their same level, as far as the profession was concerned.

ISOARDI

Right.

BRYANT

But I never let them forget that I was a female, you know, because I always dressed as a female. Not sexy like Marilyn Monroe or anything, but I was a female-looking woman, you know, when I— [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, when you first went to the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767], all the guys outside saw it, right? [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah, right, right, right, right. [laughter] And I had big legs, and at that time they had the mesh stockings. You know, they were in. With the seam up the back. I'd get a whistle every time. [laughter]

ISOARDI

So you knew what you were doing. [laughter]

BRYANT

I knew what to do! [laughter]

ISOARDI

You weren't so naive back then. [laughter]

BRYANT

Right, right. I was naive towards certain things, but not when it came to that, because I'd learned that in college, how to dress so that I wouldn't have that stigma on me that I was a— When you play the trumpet, you had to be a man. That was my main purpose for doing that. Because when I was in college, we played some of these places. They'd say, "Aw, that ain't nothing but a bunch of lezzies in that—" I didn't want to hear that. I didn't want to become one of those kind of people where people thought you were playing the trumpet because you had masculine tendencies, which I didn't have. So that's why I dressed to impress. A female.

ISOARDI

Was it always a struggle to make that point?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Always.

BRYANT

Right. Right. I even played at a place that used to be up on— It's up on Vermont [Avenue]. It was a place called Ebb's, and it was a lesbian place. I was playing with a half-girl group and a half-boy group. I remember that the girls would go into the bathroom— I never went to the restroom the whole time I was working. I wouldn't go to the restroom at night after I found out what it was. I only worked there about three or four

weeks, and I found out what was going on. I'd see the women in the booths kissing on each other and—

ISOARDI

You didn't know it when you got the gig?

BRYANT

No. No, they called me for the job, and one afternoon I went to work. There was a great networking thing then about jobs that they don't have anymore. People knew who you were, and they'd call and see if you were available, and that's that. You got the job. And I wasn't driving at the time. I'd have to catch the streetcar and the bus to go to work. But we got away from Central Avenue. [laughter] You will find that we'll just— You know. Because something will lead to something else, and then we'll come back.

ISOARDI

Well, Ernie Andrews has a great phrase for it. Every time he'd go off, he would say, "Well, that's just another avenue of the avenue."

BRYANT

That's true.

ISOARDI

And he's right.

BRYANT

That's part of it. Because it all leads right back, or it leads to it.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Well, I think that part of the fascination of Central Avenue is that there were so many avenues off it. There were so many stories, so many different things that came out of it.

BRYANT

Yeah, and the other after-hours place where his wife [Dolores Benemie Andrews] was working— Did he mention that? The Jungle Room.

ISOARDI

Right, right.

BRYANT

They had shows in there.

ISOARDI

Oh, before you get to the Jungle Room, what was the Bird in the Basket like? What kind of a club was it?

BRYANT

It was a restaurant. It was really a restaurant. There were tables with the checkered cloths. If I can remember right, it was pretty nice-sized. It seemed like the bandstand was kind of in the left-hand corner on the back. It wasn't too big of a bandstand, but the atmosphere was tremendous. It was conducive to jam sessions because, like I said, everybody came there and they were listeners. Everybody who came in there had listened to— They did their research. They had their records. There was a tall guy who came in selling records. I forget what his name is. I saw him about five or six years ago over on Central Avenue. He had a bebop nickname. I can't think of his name. But he used to come around with a stack of records and sell— He sold— He was strictly a bop person, you know. And it took him a long time to warm up to me playing. [laughter] But he finally did. But the people would have the records, so they knew what was going on. They knew when you were playing whatever, and they knew everybody's solo. The laypeople knew the solos. You know, like Charlie Parker when he played "Now's the Time," or when he did that— It was "Night in Tunisia," the break on— And that thing Dizzy [Gillespie] did. It was "Dynamo A" and "Dynamo B," and it ended up being [sings melody]— No. Oh, I can't think of the

melody to it. But everybody knew all the latest bop songs, or they knew all of Lionel Hampton's band's and the soloists' solos. They knew Duke Ellington's band, their songs and their solos, and Count Basie's solos. You know, they knew! You couldn't go wrong. You had to play that first, you know, like Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train." The trumpet players had to do that solo first. [sings Ray Nance trumpet solo] Then you could go off into your own creation.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

But they had to know that you knew the song. The Bird in the Basket had a clientele of people who were there every night. Like I said, the pimps who were hanging on the street— What would happen there would— My brother explained to me the first night we were there that the number-one lady of the night would be the one who had made the most money on that day. That's who he would go out and spend the money on in the clubs. You could depend on the pimps to come in the clubs and spend money. They had to show off how much money the ladies had made that day.

ISOARDI

They made, yeah.

BRYANT

They hadn't made a penny, but they'd come in there spending the women's money.

ISOARDI

Yes.

BRYANT

And they'd get sharp. The women would go home and get sharp, and the number-one lady was the one who they'd bring

out. There was a lot of that. You got good tips. And the feel, it was infectious, you know. I think I saw a fight maybe one or two times the whole time.

ISOARDI

Sort of within the club, that kind of thing? Somebody getting out of hand? Only one or two times?

BRYANT

But everybody was— At that time everybody— It was the war times. The war was over, but the guys were still gone. The people were still living off of the shipyards and all the military stuff. There were still a lot of sailors and soldiers. In the jazz places, I never saw anybody fight. It's when you'd go into the other clubs where they'd just have shows, but they weren't jazz oriented. They'd have stage shows. Like I was talking about a place [Cricket Club] up on Washington where I first saw the Treniers. Dizzy played there, too. The Trenier Twins, and I think Redd Foxx and— Foxx and White. Yeah, Redd Foxx and Slappy White. They played there. It was called— It was on Washington and Vermont. What was that place called? I have to think. Those kinds of places, where it wasn't just jazz oriented, you might run into people who would have too much to drink and they'd start a fight or something. But they had bouncers and stuff, so it didn't last too long. But the jazz clubs, I never saw it. I never did see a fight in them.

ISOARDI

At a place like the Bird in the Basket, how did the jam sessions get going? Was there a regular show or—?

BRYANT

No, no, no. No.

ISOARDI

It was strictly for late-night jazz.

BRYANT

It was strictly everybody came in to jam. There wasn't a regular group hired to play to get it started. Everybody was—

ISOARDI

So most of the time it was just a restaurant, and then late night the hip crowd started showing up.

BRYANT

Right. Right. It was— Oh, Hampton Hawes, and my ex-husband [Joseph Stone] played bass there a lot. There were so many guys that you don't even hear about now who were very good players. I met a guy up in San Francisco the other day. His name was Simmons. He's John Simmons's first cousin. Did you ever hear of a bass player by the name of John Simmons?

ISOARDI

No.

BRYANT

Very good bass. He was with Erroll Garner quite a while, and he was on Central Avenue. I've got to talk to his daughter to get some stuff on him, because that was my first husband's second cousin. Erroll Garner, Art Tatum, they all hung out over there. But, like Benny Carter said, he wasn't— Benny was more of an elitist.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

He's always been that— He went to Europe and stayed a while, you know. But he never had been one to hang— I don't think he hung out in Harlem.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

I don't think so.

ISOARDI

That's where he came out of, isn't it?

BRYANT

Well, not per se. You know what I mean? Like, what I think hanging out is, you're in and out of the clubs all night, every night. You know, that's hanging out.

ISOARDI

But, I mean, wasn't he born in Harlem?

BRYANT

[Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][I stand corrected. I just talked to Benny. He was born in New York City. I was confused with the misinformation that he went to Wilberforce University and lived there. Wrong!]

ISOARDI

He was certainly around L.A. during these years, but he just never was down on Central much?

BRYANT

He had his big band a long time, right?

ISOARDI

Right. So he was well known when he came out here, then, I guess.

BRYANT

Yes. And he was one of the first into the studios. That's where he did his big thing. After I got out here, he had this record

out where he's playing the trumpet— Good solo. He was a good trumpet player.

ISOARDI

Oh, he still plays that horn, yeah.

BRYANT

I know.

ISOARDI

Is he eighty-two, eighty-three?

BRYANT

Yeah. But then, he was really playing. What's that record? I try to get him to play it now, that song. It's an old standard. It's something like "The Very Thought of You" or something like that, but it wasn't that. But he could play the shit out of that. It was one of his best records. All the trumpet players knew his solo, because he was playing. Oh— [sings fragment of melody] "I Surrender Dear." That's the song. He played that.

ISOARDI

Nice song.

BRYANT

Yes, he played that. I've got it on the— I had to buy it on the— It's on a 33 1/3 [rpm] album, but I had had it on the 78 when it came out. He played some solo on that. But he didn't hang on Central Avenue. I mean, he'd go to the union, but he's always been the intellectual. He's like you'd say a college-professor-type person.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

Where most of the other guys on Central Avenue were just down-to-earth musicians. You know, Basie was like that. Duke was a down-to-earth musician. He hung out everywhere. Art Tatum hung out everywhere. What's his name? Lucky Millinder and all the other band leaders, you know, Les Hite, they all hung out. But Benny wasn't a hanger-outer.

ISOARDI

Okay. Bird in the Basket. Then you had referred to the Jungle Room, where Ernie Andrews's wife Dolores worked.

BRYANT

Yeah, right. It was a kind of a dark— Whereas at the Bird in the Basket there would be some light around, the Jungle Room was kind of, like it said, jungley, you know, dark and mysterious. I met Dolores there before she and Ernie married. They'd have a show, not like you'd see at the [Club] Alabam or at the Lincoln Theatre or downtown. It would be local talent, you know, good talent. Not on that high-class professional level, but very good. They had a good band, and that's where Al "Cake" Witchard played. Cake Witchard and— What was that trumpet player's name? [Sammy Yates] A guy by the name of Jack La Rue, piano player. He was a little, thin guy. Oh, man, I can't think of— Clarence Jones, bass player, very good bass player. He died with a needle in his arm. They just got off into that dope. I saw a lot of my friends, guys whom I'd met and hung out with, dying just—

ISOARDI

Was it mostly heroin that people were using?

BRYANT

Yeah, that's what they were using then. Heroin. You know, marijuana was the main, main thing. And if you just wanted to be completely wild, then you went into heroin. When you wanted to be like Charlie Parker—I don't care what instrument

you played—if you wanted to be like Charlie— Like Frank Morgan says, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

He figured that's why he played like he did, but it wasn't.

ISOARDI

But you knew a lot of people who actually started shooting up just for that reason?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. Yeah, my ex-husband, Joe Stone, he knew Charlie Parker. But the guy who was a saxophone player— He was from Texas, from Fort Worth, Texas. Gene Montgomery. He— I don't know how he got off into it. I mean, the guy who was Vi Redd's first husband, a trumpet player [Nathaniel Meeks], they're the ones who turned my ex-husband onto it. You know, they'd give you some free and get you hooked, and then—

ISOARDI

Yeah, it's never free.

BRYANT

Yeah. And then that was that. But Sonny Clark, piano player, Chuck Thompson, drummer, Roy Porter, drummer, all these guys I knew started out with marijuana and then went to the needle. I've seen them run off the bandstand so they could go throw up. Yeah. Willie Cook, the guy up there on that picture where he's got his arm around me. Darn good trumpet player. He was with Duke Ellington at that time. He and Paul Gonsalves— That's when the guys were staying at the Watkins Hotel. The Watkins Hotel was right up here on Adams [Boulevard] across the street from where I lived when I first moved here. I was on Saint Andrews [Place] and Adams, and

this hotel was on Adams and Manhattan Place. That's where all the bands stayed. It was the first black-owned hotel on the west side.

ISOARDI

The Dunbar [Hotel] wasn't?

BRYANT

No, no.

ISOARDI

On the west side, on the west side, I see.

BRYANT

On the west side. This guy Bill [William] Watkins had come from Chicago. I think he had been a numbers man or something, and he had a lot of money. He came out here, and he bought that hotel. He bought a lot of property. But that hotel was where all the entertainers stayed.

ISOARDI

When was this?

BRYANT

In the late forties. I stayed there in '47 and '48.

ISOARDI

This was in the fifties.

BRYANT

In the forties, fifties, and sixties.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see.

BRYANT

I think he closed it up in the late sixties or something like that. Now it's an apartment unit. They made them into apartments. But they had a good dining room, and for a while they had a room where Kenny Dennis, who was married to Nancy Wilson, had a group in the little barroom. They had a little room in there. And when that hotel closed and they— The same room, they named it a club [Rubaiyat] up on Western near Venice [Boulevard]. They named it the same name as the— I forget what that room was called there. But many a day I was in the hotel to see Basie's band. I'd just hang out, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

Everybody would go there and hang out. You learned a lot. Before that, they were staying at— No, after that, when they were able to live further northwest, they were at the Vine Street— The Vine Lodge, which is a motel. The units are still there, just above Hollywood Boulevard on Vine Street, on the east side of the street, just before you get to the [Hollywood] Freeway.

***1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO
(April 4, 1990)***

ISOARDI

We were back on Central at the clubs. Let me take you back to—

BRYANT

Yeah, we've got to go back now. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah. Okay, we talked about a few of the—

BRYANT

We were talking about the Jungle Room.

ISOARDI

Was the Jungle Room an after-hours place?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

Did people go there to jam at that place also?

BRYANT

No, it wasn't a jam place. They had a hired group. If they jammed there, I never knew anything about it. And they had little shows. You know, it was run by a lady named Fat Ann. I never learned her full name. Everyone called her Fat Ann.

ISOARDI

Was she the owner of it?

BRYANT

Yeah, well, she was married to a white guy, so I don't know really who owned it. She was the boss. She was the one who paid and everything. They called her Fat Ann because she was a big fat black chick, and she was married to this white guy.

ISOARDI

Do you know much about her? Can you tell us anything about her?

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

Not at all?

BRYANT

My brother would, but I didn't. She seemed to be a jolly— You know, I saw her a lot of times, but I didn't have that much dealing with her, because I never hung with her.

ISOARDI

I'll just throw a couple of other names of clubs at you. How about the Downbeat?

BRYANT

The Downbeat, that was—

ISOARDI

Yeah, I know when you first walked by there, you were underage, right?

BRYANT

Right, right. Yeah.

ISOARDI

But when did you finally go in? And what was it like?

BRYANT

After I had been here—what?—a few months, by the summer, being a musician, you know, if you had a union card, they let you in.

ISOARDI

Regardless of how old you were?

BRYANT

Yes. That's the way Frank Morgan started getting in, because, see, he was under age when we were playing together at the Alabam.

ISOARDI

Well, I know a lot of people have told me, like Bill [William] Douglass and Buddy Collette and Jackie Kelso, when they were fifteen or sixteen, they were playing in all these clubs.

BRYANT

Yeah. If you had a union card and you had someone who was kind of saying they were chaperoning you to keep you from drinking alcoholic beverages, they'd let you in. But the Downbeat was run by a man we all called Pops. I never knew his real name. He was a little short Jewish guy. I guess he was easy to get along with. I didn't have that many dealings with him. But he knew who I was, and I'd come in there. Half the time I wouldn't have any money. The waitresses would let me sit there with one Coke or else they'd buy me a drink. I made a point to learn the waitresses, you know. And if I didn't have the money, either somebody whom I knew who was up there playing would buy me a Coke or else the waitresses would just bring me one. You know, where somebody had paid for something and didn't take it, they'd bring me the Coke. It was a small place. Like, the bandstand was— You walked in the door and over on this side, not all the way up against the wall— It seemed like it was kind of not in the middle of the room, either, but it was closer to the corner of— Closer to Central. Because it sat on the— Let's see. Central Avenue runs like— It was north and south, so it ran like Exposition [Boulevard]. Wait a minute. Yeah. So the club sat on the southeast corner of Central and Forty-second [Street], I think it is. You go in the door like— This is Central Avenue going this way. Now, you'd come in the door there, and the bandstand was kind of up against the wall, where my window is in there. I remember that part. I remember the tables and the chairs in the front. It seemed like, between the door and the bandstand, there was a row of tables, cocktail things, you know, small tables. The bar was along the wall on this— It wasn't a wide place. It wasn't a big place. I guess the room was about as big as my apartment. It was a little longer.

ISOARDI

So you're talking—what?—about, I don't know, twelve feet by twenty feet? Something like that?

BRYANT

No, no, no. My apartment's pretty big back there. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, the whole thing! Oh, okay. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's my living room. No, no, no, no, no, no. No, my apartment, because there was a bar on this wall. The bandstand was on that side, the bar ran along this wall over here. It wasn't that big. I don't remember the footage. But it stayed packed all the time. And they had jam sessions on Sundays.

ISOARDI

Only on Sundays?

BRYANT

Yes. Otherwise they had a group, a regular group, see. On Sunday afternoon, jam session.

ISOARDI

Was that a big one?

BRYANT

Yeah, that was a biggy. That was one of the biggies on Central Avenue. The Downbeat jazz session.

ISOARDI

Do you remember any of them in particular? Any memorable Sunday afternoons?

BRYANT

No, because they were all— At that time, I mean, the jam sessions were jam sessions. I mean, the people were so creative, you know, it would have to be an ass kicker, so to speak, for me to really remember something spectacular. But every night it was— Every time somebody played, it was sensational, because everybody was playing, everybody was motivated, and everybody was dedicated. Everybody was just tunnel vision playing their music. And it came out that way. It was a challenge. It was challenging to get up there. They'd get up there, and there were some who couldn't play who would get up there, and then they'd start calling tunes at ninety miles an hour. Or they'd call "Cherokee." [laughter] That was their pet tune to get guys off the bandstand.

ISOARDI

Oh, man! [laughter]

BRYANT

Race-neck speed of "Cherokee." [sings fragment of melody to "Cherokee"] They used to see the guys drifting off the stage and sitting down, taking their horn and sitting down. But they never did that with me. I knew how to play it. You know, you'd learn a set little solo to— Your little licks that you'd play on it. But I've heard J. D. King—you don't hear anything about him—he was a very good tenor player. And Teddy Edwards. Teddy Edwards was something. Teddy Edwards and Howard [McGhee] together were ass kickers. They were playing. That's why Teddy gets kind of depressed and disgusted, because he knows what he has done. He knows who he is and where he should be and that he isn't. He was a tall, good-looking guy, too. He had the chicks falling all over him. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.

ISOARDI

I just heard him last Saturday. He was over at Bill Green's studio.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. That's right, that's right. Bill said he—

ISOARDI

He gave a master class. He was talking about how, when he—
He makes most of his money and does most of his playing in
Japan and Europe.

BRYANT

That's right. That's right.

ISOARDI

He said when he's in Europe, in little villages everybody knows
who he is and he gets mobbed.

BRYANT

That's true. That's right. And, see, that can really make you
mad.

ISOARDI

Yeah. And he says nobody on his block has any idea of who he
is.

BRYANT

I know. It's true.

ISOARDI

But he goes over there. He said he went to one class in a little
French school in a little town, and they were doing a class in
jazz history. He said he saw this nine-year-old girl get up—
They not only all knew who he was and what his recordings
were but he heard this little nine-year-old get up and talk
about Billie Holiday and her early piano player on her
recordings, Teddy Wilson. He said he couldn't get over a nine-
year-old French girl getting up and talking about Teddy Wilson!

BRYANT

Right! That's right! That's right! That's just the way it is.

ISOARDI

Yeah. And he said, here, you know—

BRYANT

Those people over there know who I am. And right here in L.A., for forty some years, people don't know who I am. You know, it's sad. It really is sad when you spend half your life— Sonny Criss was the same way. He was very depressed when he had to go to Europe and they recognized him over there like that. Over here he couldn't get a job. If he did, they were paying him \$20 and \$30. dollars. You know, that does something to your ego and to your manhood or to your feeling of self-worth. You lose your self-esteem, you lose your motivation. You just lose it, because people don't give you credit for being who you are, what you are, and what you can do. So I can understand Teddy— Because, like I said, when I saw Teddy the first time, he— Teddy used to live down on Western. In fact, my ex-husband, they used to room at a place down on Western before you get to Jefferson [Boulevard]. I don't know if that house is still there or not. I must ask Teddy, because I just barely remember it. Teddy lived there. My ex-husband lived there. There are a couple of other guys who roomed in this place on Western Avenue. This was in the late forties. Yeah, it was the late forties, because it was before I got married. I got married in '49. I can't remember. There were about five guys who roomed in this place, you know. I'm trying to think of something that was earthshaking. I can't, because they all—

ISOARDI

Well, who were some of the people who were there regularly playing?

BRYANT

Who would come in and jam? Anybody who was in town. There were a lot of names that I called a while ago: Chuck Thompson, Charles Norris, a guitar player who died not too long ago. He died last year. He and my ex-husband used to work together with Jack La Rue. There used to be a group called Dusty Brooks and the Four Tones or something that— I think Frank Morgan's father [Stanley Morgan] played with this group for a while. Dusty Brooks— They worked at the Downbeat for a while. And the bass player who ended up playing with Max Roach and Clifford Brown's group was from Pasadena— George Morrow. Have you seen his name on the albums?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

Well, we worked together in the late forties, in '48. Yeah, in 1948, '47, '48, in Pasadena, at a place called the Onyx [Club] on Fair Oaks [Avenue]. It was Charles Norris, George Morrow, and I played drums and trumpet.

ISOARDI

You played drums?

BRYANT

Played drums and trumpet.

ISOARDI

When did you learn the drums?

BRYANT

At the same time.

ISOARDI

At the same time?

BRYANT

I played drums with this hand and trumpet with this hand.

ISOARDI

Come on! [laughter]

BRYANT

I've got pictures! I've got a picture of me at the Elks [auditorium].

ISOARDI

Doing that?

BRYANT

Yeah, and then a picture of us up in, I think it's Caldwell, Idaho, playing with this girls group [Queens of Swing], playing the drums and the trumpet. After I started doing that, there were a lot of guys who started trying to do that. [laughter] It's true. There's one guy who will tell you. [Red Mack] He's still living. He'll tell you. That's when he started. He saw me doing it, and there was no way he could let a woman get away with that. [laughter] Where's that book?

ISOARDI

Which one?

BRYANT

The picture book. I'll show you. I've got all this documented. Because people don't believe what— You know.

ISOARDI

Are you going to have the photographs in your book?

BRYANT

Yeah. Because people don't believe that.

ISOARDI

When did you pick up drums?

BRYANT

We couldn't find a girl drummer, and I just started playing.

ISOARDI

Had you ever played before?

BRYANT

I always had a good sense of rhythm.

ISOARDI

How great.

BRYANT

That's at the Elks on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Elks hall, 1947. And this was a group with you playing trumpet and drums.

BRYANT

That's right.

ISOARDI

Doris Meilleur, Minnie Hightower.

BRYANT

That's Miss [Alma] Hightower's daughter.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. And Elyse Blye.

BRYANT

Elyse Blye. Do you know what? I just saw where Harry Bridges died the other day.

ISOARDI

Yeah, right.

BRYANT

She used to go with Harry. We were working in Frisco [San Francisco], and she used to come down to the club every night.

ISOARDI

Who? Elyse Blye? Really?

BRYANT

Yeah. That's kind of like the thing with me and [Earl K.] Long, only she was his girlfriend.

ISOARDI

See how many ways Central Avenue leads? [laughter]

BRYANT

That's right. That's true, that's true, that's true. I'll show you the other write-up where we had that—

ISOARDI

It's the most important neighborhood on the West Coast.

BRYANT

Where I was playing, it was a— It's a write-up in the the paper. What year is that?

ISOARDI

"Four Queens of Swing playing at Green Spot." This is from April 16, 1947. What paper is it? Corraling?

BRYANT

Corraling. I don't know what paper that was. You see what color it is.

ISOARDI

And it's— Okay, there's a photograph of a group with Doris Jarrett.

BRYANT

In the same group. Oh, that was before she got married. I put her married name on there, but it was Jarrett at the time too.

ISOARDI

And there you are sitting at this drum set.

BRYANT

Yeah. I was playing the drums and the trumpet.

ISOARDI

Yeah. And Elyse Blye and Minnie Moore.

BRYANT

Her married name. But she was Minnie Hightower.

ISOARDI

So this was a group that— You guys hung out quite a bit and played together.

BRYANT

We played, we traveled, boy, we did quite a bit of— We played places like Caldwell, Idaho. What's that up in California, northern California, the red—? Not Redwood City, not Redding, but on the border of Oregon and California. Eureka, California.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

We played Boise, Idaho. [laughter]

ISOARDI

A lot of traveling, a lot of traveling.

BRYANT

We played there. We played Tucson, Phoenix. We played Las Vegas at— What's his name? The gangster had just built the Flamingo [Hotel].

ISOARDI

Oh, who was that?

BRYANT

We played at the Stardust [Hotel] the first—

ISOARDI

Meyer Lansky?

BRYANT

No, no. No.

ISOARDI

No. Who am I thinking of?

BRYANT

No, he got killed. Remember, his girlfriend [Virginia Hill] ratted on him. What was his name?

ISOARDI

Oh, I can't think who it is. Blank. I should know that.

BRYANT

This was a white gangster who built the Flamingo.

ISOARDI

I can't remember who it is.

BRYANT

No? [Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel] Well, anyway, we were there. This was in the forties. I think it was '48 or '49 when we were

there. And you know it was— You stayed on the west side.
There was no such thing as staying on the strip at that time.

ISOARDI

In Las Vegas.

BRYANT

Yeah. And those were like— There were a lot of those adobe houses over there then, on the west side. And where I stayed is where Pearl Bailey stayed. She stayed there, because her picture was there and everything. I reminded her of that a few years ago at Disneyland when she was down there with her husband, with Bellson, Louis Bellson.

ISOARDI

Louis Bellson.

BRYANT

She remembers the woman's name. I didn't. But she said, "Oh, yeah, Miss so-and-so's rooming house!"

ISOARDI

Okay, back to Central. So the Downbeat was a great club.

BRYANT

It was.

ISOARDI

A lot of people.

BRYANT

The Last Word [Cafe].

ISOARDI

The Last Word.

BRYANT

Right. Now, you know the Alabam was run by Curtis Mosby.

ISOARDI

Yeah. [laughter] What about Curtis Mosby?

BRYANT

Well, he was a little crooked. He owed a lot of people money, and they'd pay you under the table. Finally the union got after him, so you'd have to go to the union to collect your money.

ISOARDI

Oh, they were sort of regulating it?

BRYANT

They called it playing ball. He'd pay you the right money on the union check, and then you'd have to come back down there and kick back some money. But they finally caught him and put him in jail for taxes, I think it was.

ISOARDI

Oh, really? The IRS [Internal Revenue Service], the government, got him?

BRYANT

Yeah, he went to jail.

ISOARDI

I once heard a story. I can't say who told me, but I don't know if you could tell me— Maybe you know if it's true or not. But Mosby was one of these people where people will say "turn off the machine." [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah, I believe that. I believe that. I never had too much dealing except when I worked there with him, you know. But he was—

ISOARDI

There was one story that—

BRYANT

And he's an ex-bandleader too! A drummer.

ISOARDI

Yeah. I think I remember reading somewhere that, I think, Marshall Royal, when he was very young, played with Curtis Mosby's band in the late twenties.

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

I heard one story that I just want to get down—I won't say who told me—but the story about Mosby one time putting off the band— I guess it was at the Alabam. He kept putting them off, putting them off about money.

BRYANT

About playing, yeah.

ISOARDI

About getting the money.

BRYANT

Hey, I've been through that.

ISOARDI

And finally they—

BRYANT

He still owed me.

ISOARDI

They stood up to him or something, and he said, "Okay, okay, wait a minute." And he goes off somewhere into his office, and they wait and they wait and no Mosby. He'd gone out the back window. [laughter]

BRYANT

Oh, I didn't— No, he never did that with us.

ISOARDI

He never did that with you? Okay. [laughter]

BRYANT

But I'll tell you this: We were playing behind Al Hibbler, and pay night came. He was farting around and wasn't showing up or was behind the bar fiddling around again. And Al Hibbler said, "You dirty MF. You'd better give me my money or I'll shoot you." [laughter] He says, "Say something so I'll know where you are." [laughter] I mean, Al Hibbler was serious. He couldn't see, but he didn't take no shit. I mean, we got our money that week. We got our money. But Al was serious. He said, "Say something so I can hear where you are, you MF." [laughter] He'll tell you about it. That was funny. That was really funny. But he had made the money. The place was doing good business.

ISOARDI

Well, I mean, the Alabam was going for a long time.

BRYANT

A long time.

ISOARDI

It was always being remodeled.

BRYANT

Yes, that's right.

ISOARDI

And new shows, so there must have been some income.

BRYANT

That's right, it was doing good. And when we played there with Billie Holiday— Billie Holiday was— I hate that I lost those pictures I had where she autographed them to me and then to my two kids [Charles and April Stone], you know. Like I said, when I played there at rehearsals, she would hold— My daughter [April Stone] must have been about three months old, and she'd babysit my daughter while we rehearsed. And that was when she had the piano player. What was his name? They talk about him in that movie that they made of her [Lady Sings the Blues]. I can't think of his name, but he was still living. [Bobby Tucker] I'd go and sit and talk to her in the dressing room. She always wanted children. She loved children. She always wanted to have a child, and that's why she didn't mind holding my daughter. She never talked about men. We talked about— I'd tell her about what I was doing at home, you know. She wanted to hear about women who had a home life, a married life. Mine wasn't shit, really, because after my husband got off into the dope, you know, after my daughter was born, it was down the tubes. But she wanted to hear about women who were living what she called a normal life, you know, with a husband and kids. But she was— The image that you got from that movie was not the impression that I got the week that I worked with her.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

It was like most of the people who I know that get off into— Like the Frank Morgans and the Charlie Parkers. It was like they were looking for love, and it seemed that they thought they had found it in the needle, because they couldn't get a

human being to really give it to them. You'd come in the dressing room, and sometimes she'd just be sitting there looking around at nothing in particular, because there wasn't nothing in there to look at. But I imagine she was thinking. I knew she was doing that because she either wore those long gloves or she'd always hold her arm up. The left arm was always—

ISOARDI

Yeah, cover the tracks.

BRYANT

Because you could see the marks, you know.

ISOARDI

Where'd you play with her?

BRYANT

At the Alabam.

ISOARDI

At the Alabam.

BRYANT

Did I tell you who was in the band? It was Wardell Gray on tenor, Frank Morgan on alto.

ISOARDI

Wow.

BRYANT

Another tenor player by the name of Donald Wilkerson. He died a couple of years ago. He was with Ray Charles for a long time. Damn good tenor player, but he got on the needle. He died a couple of years ago. I think he died in '87. Harper Cosby on the bass, Oscar Bradley on the drums—he was a well-

known drummer—and the leader of the band was Lorenzo Flennoy. And Lester Robinson on trombone.

ISOARDI

I don't know that name.

BRYANT

He played with Gerald Wilson's big band for years. We had a good group.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Were you the house band at the Alabam?

BRYANT

Yes, we were the house band.

ISOARDI

Or was this just for Billie Holiday's—?

BRYANT

We were the house band. We played behind—what's her name?—Josephine Baker.

ISOARDI

Oh.

BRYANT

Like I say, Al Hibbler. Those were some of the big acts that were there while we were there. Redd Foxx and Slappy White came in. We played behind a lot of not-that-caliber entertainers. On Sunday afternoons, sometimes they'd have special shows, and that's where I met Earl Bostic. And there was this guy who was on Redd Foxx's show [The Redd Foxx Show] that— What's his name? He did— With the tables— He'd pick the tables up with his mouth. What did we call him? We called him—

ISOARDI

Oh, Iron Jaw or something?

BRYANT

Iron Jaws Wilson, yeah. That's where I first worked behind him.

ISOARDI

I've heard of that man.

BRYANT

When he was young, he— And that breakdancing stuff that they're doing now, he was doing that then. On one knee, you know, spinning on one knee and on your head and stuff. He was doing that then. That was in the early fifties. I'm trying to think who else was on. I meant to ask Frank Morgan if he remembered any of the other people that we played behind there. But there was a chorus line. We had— What's her name who did the—? Norma Jean Miller was the choreographer for the chorus line. And then we had this lady—what's her name?—and they all thought we were related, but we weren't. Her name was

BRYANT

, Marie

BRYANT

. You ever heard of her?

ISOARDI

The name rings a bell, but I can't place it.

BRYANT

Later on, she did a lot of choreography for people like Betty Grable and Marilyn Monroe in the movies. She was a very good

dancer. She was married to— What's the trumpet player-violinist with Duke Ellington?

ISOARDI

Ray Nance?

BRYANT

She was married to Ray Nance. She had a daughter by him. I've been trying to find her because her mother died of cancer too, but I haven't been able to find her. I forgot her name. They'd have comedians in there. What's his name? He used to be at the Apollo [Theatre] a lot. When I was there with the Prairie View Coeds, he was— Pigmeat Markham.

ISOARDI

Oh. So the Alabam was a real big nightclub kind of thing.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. They had a lot of slick black acts. The epitome, you know. That's where they played, the Alabam.

ISOARDI

Was it expensive to get in there? Was that a real pricey place?

BRYANT

I really don't remember. I'm sure he stuck it to them, you know, because he had classy people in there. But Johnny Otis had a big band in there. Gerald Wilson had his big band in there. Marl Young had a group in there.

ISOARDI

Oh. He was the leader of a group in the Alabam?

BRYANT

Yeah. Yeah, he had a group in there. I think that was after I left there. At that time there were a lot of service guys, you

know. I have pictures. I had a lot of pictures taken sitting at the club with service guys.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What was the Alabam like inside? Was it a fancy place?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Was it a big dance floor?

BRYANT

Yeah. Not huge. Not a huge dance floor, but it was big enough. You'd come in the room, and the stage was in front of you, and our dressing room was on this side of the stage.

ISOARDI

To the left of the stage, as you face it?

BRYANT

Yeah. And the bar was back here on this corner.

ISOARDI

Sort of the left wall?

BRYANT

Yes. And then I think there was a balcony up there. Seems like they had a balcony.

ISOARDI

Oh, so people could just sit and listen as opposed to—?

BRYANT

Yeah. Yeah, and drink. You could see the floor show from up there and everything. It was a nice room. I did have a picture. There's a picture of Frank [Morgan] with Wardell [Gray] on

there. I don't know how they cut everybody else out of it. I tried to get the guy who put the picture in the— It was last year or the year before last— I think around the year before last— With Frank and Wardell at the Alabam. We were all in the band together. So I was trying to find the guy who took this picture to see who else was in the picture that he cut off, because they just zeroed in on Frank and Wardell. But he told me who, when I contacted him— It was in People magazine. When I contacted him, he told me it was in somebody's— What do you call it? Not library, but—

ISOARDI

Somebody's personal archive? Something like that?

BRYANT

Yeah, something like that.

ISOARDI

The Alabam was right next to the Dunbar? It wasn't part of it?

BRYANT

Yeah, it was part of the Dunbar.

ISOARDI

Oh, it was part of the Dunbar.

BRYANT

Yeah, it was part of it. It was the room for the— You know, like, hotels have rooms, their showrooms.

ISOARDI

Like a main ballroom or something.

BRYANT

Yeah. And next to that, on the left, was a little bar, the little—

ISOARDI

That was—what?—the Turban Room?

BRYANT

Yeah, the Turban Room. People like Gerald Wiggins played there and Art Tatum played there. You know, it was a piano room, piano bar. It was jumping in the day and night. Yeah. You know, I never went up into the Dunbar.

ISOARDI

You never went up into the hotel?

BRYANT

No. I don't know what it looked like in the rooms upstairs. [tape recorder off] I never saw the rooms. I never went into the— Just the Alabam and the— Like I said, I was very live-music conscious. If there wasn't some live music going on somewhere, I usually wasn't there. And there was so much live music going on everywhere. Across the street, at the Last Word, across the street from the Downbeat and the Alabam—

ISOARDI

Was the Last Word.

BRYANT

Yes. Now, that was owned by Esvan Mosby, who was Curtis Mosby's brother. Curtis was the older brother. And at that time they had a mayor of Central Avenue. Did the guys tell you about that?

ISOARDI

No. No one's talked about that.

BRYANT

Really?

ISOARDI

I know there was that, and they used to have parades or something?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

Maybe you could talk about that.

BRYANT

Well, Curtis was the first mayor.

ISOARDI

What exactly was the mayor of Central Avenue?

BRYANT

It was a name. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Sort of an honorary position?

BRYANT

Right, an honorary position. It gave him a feeling that we had control of our east side. We called it "the east side." We didn't call it "South Central L.A." It was "the east side." This was "the west side," over here. There were only two mayors. Curtis was the first one, and then Esvan was the second and last one.

ISOARDI

Who picked them?

BRYANT

I don't know. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Maybe they just—

BRYANT

I think they picked themselves! [laughter]

ISOARDI

So there certainly wasn't an election, eh?

BRYANT

Right. But they had the parade and the whole thing, you know, and they rode in the open touring cars with their family, and the school bands. And Esvan was a horseman, you know. I think he was a lieutenant or captain or something in the— What do you call it?

ISOARDI

Cavalry?

BRYANT

Yeah, just like Bill Douglass was in the cavalry. He'd have his friends on horses. It was great. It was a good parade.

ISOARDI

What was the occasion of the parade? How often—? Was it once a year?

BRYANT

Once a year.

ISOARDI

When? Was it any particular time?

BRYANT

I don't remember. I really don't remember.

ISOARDI

But it was on a certain day every year?

BRYANT

I imagine so. All I remember was that parade and the two mayors. See, I was going to interview Esvan to get all that information, and he died. Because nobody's left. I don't know. He had a world of documentation, Esvan did.

ISOARDI

You mean in his head? Or some physical—?

BRYANT

I mean physical.

ISOARDI

Really? He collected things? No kidding?

BRYANT

Pictures and clippings and everything.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. That would be valuable.

BRYANT

I don't know where it is.

ISOARDI

It's got to be valuable because for a lot of people I've talked to there just aren't many photographs or anything anymore.

BRYANT

I know it. He had them. He had them when I went to his wife's funeral. But he had them on the wall. You know, when they had his funeral, when the guy killed him, I wasn't here. I was in Denver. So when I got back, he'd been buried, and they'd locked the house up. So I didn't get to— You know. Because I had been talking to him about getting some of that stuff. Never got it.

ISOARDI

Gee, I wonder where it's gone to. Does he have any next of kin?

BRYANT

He has a nephew. Curtis's son, Curtis [Mosby] Jr., lives in Vegas. I didn't have his—

ISOARDI

He must have gotten it, I would think.

BRYANT

I don't know, because, see, the circumstances that Esvan was killed under—

ISOARDI

Oh, he was murdered?

BRYANT

Yeah. It happened the day— It was on a weekend. That Saturday, we were leaving, going to Denver. I was riding in Johnny Otis's big raggedy bus. He had gotten killed. No, this is before he— Right. When I went by there— I went by his house to take— What did I go by the house for? To take a tape or something. Wait a minute. Now, let me get this straight. It was about twilight time. Me and my son— I had called and talked to Curtis Jr. Now, why did I go by there? Why would I go by there if he wasn't dead? Because I had made a tape. He had told me that when he died he wanted me— He knew he was going to die. I played for his wife's funeral—she had died about six months before he did—and he told me he wanted me to play "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano."

ISOARDI

At his funeral?

BRYANT

Too. I had played it at hers. [tape recorder off] His wife died six months before, and he had me play for her funeral. So he said, "When I die, I want you to play that same song," because that was their favorite song. I'm trying to think. The day I went by there— Oh, yeah. He was dead. This guy didn't kill Esvan. The guy who had Esvan's— What do you call it, over his will? Executor. His name was Charles [Williams]. He and Esvan were like this all through army days, through male life, adulthood. They were very, very good buddies. And so, in the will, he was in charge of everything. Esvan had quite a bit of property. He had a lovely home over here in Leimert Park. He did a limousine service. You know, they both had property and stuff. And they used to have women together. You know, they'd have those kind of parties. [laughter] They'd tell me about it. They'd tell me all this shit. I said, "Why are you telling me?" "Because you want to hear it, I know." I said, "Yeah, I do!" [laughter] So they would tell me about this stuff. But, anyway, the day that I was going to Denver, I had made a tape of this, "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano." I'd showed my son how to play it on the piano, and I played it on the trumpet. I wrote a poem for him called "A Portrait of Esvan," and they were supposed to read the poem— No, play the tape. I made the tape, and they were supposed to play that, and then, on the end of the tape was the song of me playing. But at the funeral, they just played the tape of me talking, and they stopped it before they got to the playing. I was very pissed about that. But when I went by there to take that, the Saturday evening about twilight, when my son and I went by there, as soon as I got out of the car, there was such an eerie feeling. My son said, "Mama, I'll go up to the door with you." Esvan had died, and usually when people die it's always people in and out, bringing food and visiting and stuff. The house was dark, the shades were drawn, nobody, no cars around or nothing. I said, "This is awful strange." I had talked to Curtis Jr., you know. He said, "Well, come on by. I've got to go to the store. I'll be right back." I got there. We walked up

to the thing, and I got a cold thing down my back. We got to the door—and they had the iron gate, door—and I knocked on it, because you couldn't get to the doorbell. So I knocked hard on the door, and it was quiet, deadly quiet inside the house. And my son said, "Mom, it doesn't look like anybody's here." I said, "Curtis has got to be here because he told me he was going to be here, and I've got to leave this now because I can't come back." We were leaving at twelve o'clock that night, and I had to go to Pasadena, to Johnny's house. So I knocked, and finally this guy [Jesus Rahisi Moja] opened the little peephole on the wooden door inside. He said, "Yes?" He had a Muslim—What's that? I knew him because Esvan had sent him to pick me up in the limousine to take me to the hospital to see him. I knew the guy, anyway, because he lived across the street from Esvan. He was Esvan's, like, flunky or whatever. So I said, "Is Curtis Jr. there?" He said, "No." I said, "Well, hi. This is Clora." He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I brought this tape by because I'm going to Denver tonight and I told Curtis I'd bring the tape by of this song I told Esvan I was going to play for him when he died." He said, "Okay," and still didn't open the door. So I said, "Well, you've got to open the door so I can hand it to you." He opened the wooden door, and then he unlocked that screen and stuck his hand out and took it. I could see there weren't any lights on in the back of him. It was dark and dreary in there. He was lying waiting for this man to come back. That's when he killed the man. Right after we left, he killed this man. Curtis Jr. was there. He told Curtis, he said, "I don't want to hurt you. You go next door."

ISOARDI

Who was he waiting for?

BRYANT

Charles, the man who was Esvan's executor. He didn't like it because Charles had told him he had to move.

ISOARDI

And he killed him?

BRYANT

He killed him. He got a lot of time out of that, too, because Charles was very big downtown. I mean, when I heard that, and they called me and told me that, my son and I said, "Oh, my God!" My son called and told me. He said, "Mom, that's what he was doing when we were there. That's why we had to—" When we turned around to walk back to the car, I heard his steps behind me. I didn't want to look, you know, and I couldn't roll my eyes far enough to the side to see. Finally, I kind of turned like this, and he was walking down the sidewalk behind us. And then, when he saw me kind of look like that, he turned and went to the driveway. The limousine was sitting behind the car. He got in the car. My son said, "Mama, hurry up and get in the car." He said, "Did you feel something?" I said, "Yeah, it was like ice." He said, "Yeah."

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BRYANT

So we drove on off, and the next thing we knew this lady called and told us this man had killed Charles [Williams]. So the guy's in jail. See, Charles had a lot of property too. He was married to a lady from the Philippines, and he had kids by her. They were grown. He was divorced from his wife, but she had just come back over here for some reason or other. So that's why I was saying that we can't get to the stuff, because of the way that his executor was killed. Esvan [Mosby] was dead, his executor had gotten killed, and they went through a whole lot of stuff. Esvan owned some property right over here on the next street, some units right on the corner, and I noticed they just began to fix the places up. So they must have settled it or something. That was in '87, I think, when he got killed. He had a lovely home over here. A lot of property. He had property down on Normandie [Avenue]. He had just fixed up his back room for having people come over and entertaining, and on his

walls were just pictures that they'd had from the [Club] Alabam and the Downbeat [Club].

ISOARDI

What kind of an owner was Esvan Mosby at the Last Word [Cafe]?

BRYANT

He was like his brother [Curtis Mosby]. They were slick. You know. I worked there with a girl group. We had to go to the union and get our money too, just like that, and bring it back and kick back. You were only making a few dollars, but at that time a dollar was a dollar. But you had to kick back \$5 or \$6 apiece. Esvan was a nice man, but they were businessmen. They knew how to— You know. And Esvan's first wife had a place called the Crystal Tea Room. Have you heard the guys talk about that?

ISOARDI

Well, yeah. It's certainly come up in the context of Bill Green and Buddy Collette, because of their Sunday jams or whatever they were there.

BRYANT

Yeah, right. She had that over there on Avalon [Boulevard].

ISOARDI

What was the Crystal Tea Room the other six days of the week? Was it a restaurant?

BRYANT

Yeah. But she had music in there every night.

ISOARDI

As well.

BRYANT

But the jam sessions were on Sunday.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. And then she had a regular group playing?

BRYANT

Yeah. The guy who played tenor with Lionel Hampton [Morris Lane] had a group in there for a minute. He was from Dallas. I think Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry started over there.

ISOARDI

The Crystal Tea Room?

BRYANT

Yes. I think. See, now, Ornette Coleman and also Don Cherry used to come— Did you hear about the sessions we used to have at the Milimo?

ISOARDI

Which place?

BRYANT

The Milimo, which was on Twenty-ninth [Street] and Western [Avenue]. I had sessions in there on Monday nights. Everybody came in there. Max Roach, Dizzy [Gillespie], Art Blakey, Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins.

ISOARDI

Twenty-ninth and Western. The Milimo?

BRYANT

The Milimo.

ISOARDI

When did this happen?

BRYANT

This was in the fifties. [tape recorder off] What was I talking about?

ISOARDI

Oh, the Milimo.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. We're getting off Central Avenue, but that's where jazz moved.

ISOARDI

Really? So this is the mid-fifties when you're running these jam sessions at the Milimo.

BRYANT

That's all documented in Down Beat too. You know who I used to have? Carl Perkins on piano.

ISOARDI

Wow, he was something!

BRYANT

I know. And Frank Butler on drums. Who was my bass player? Harper Cosby. It would vary. Sometimes Curtis Counce.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

This is an all-star jam!

BRYANT

Harold Land. This was when Harold had just come up here from San Diego. Everybody came. Everybody who was anybody came to those sessions.

ISOARDI

Well, who else? I guess Clifford Brown, was he around then?

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

No, he hadn't come to town then yet.

BRYANT

No. No, he wasn't around then. This is before. Pepper Adams and all the guys were— I mean, Paul Bley. Who's the guy who has the thing over in London?

ISOARDI

Scott? Ronnie Scott's club?

BRYANT

Ronnie Scott was jamming. I'm telling you, you name them, they all came to that club.

ISOARDI

Wow. How did you get this going? I mean—

BRYANT

How did I get the gig?

ISOARDI

How'd you get this going? This was a one-day-a-week thing?

BRYANT

One night a week, yeah.

ISOARDI

One night a week.

BRYANT

Yes. It was a jam session night.

ISOARDI

And you had this club.

BRYANT

I didn't have the club. It was—

ISOARDI

Or you got use of it for that one night?

BRYANT

Yeah. It was my gig on Monday night.

ISOARDI

Wonderful.

BRYANT

And to build it up, I had that much respect, you know. The guys come out.

ISOARDI

So it was initially a paying gig for you, right?

BRYANT

I probably just— Where's that thing? I've got a picture of me in the club that was in the [Los Angeles] Sentinel. This guy I was telling you about, Stanley Robertson, he took a picture of me. It was in the Sentinel.

ISOARDI

And everyone just started coming in to play?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And just pulled out their axes and went at it?

BRYANT

Yeah. There you are. What year is that?

ISOARDI

This is from the Sentinel, 1956: "Transplanted Texas lass carves trumpeter career. Proof in the tootin'."

BRYANT

This was taken on the stage.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

BRYANT

That was taken on the stage at the Milimo.

ISOARDI

"Clora

BRYANT

, she really swings." [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah. Now, that's Stanley Robertson. He's the one I was telling—

ISOARDI

Well, look at the way he begins his article, though.

BRYANT

I know.

ISOARDI

"As a rule, women don't make good jazz instrumentalists."

BRYANT

You hear that? That's the kind of a—

ISOARDI

And this is supposed to be an article on you?

BRYANT

That's right. That's the kind of prejudices you had. Most of them started that way. Most of them started that way. And he's that type of guy too. He's amazed that I've survived.

ISOARDI

Yeah, no kidding. I'll bet. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah. But those were some— I'm telling you, those were some days. That's the way— Let's see, Max had— This is after what's his name had— Max had Kenny Dorham with him. This is after—

ISOARDI

After Clifford Brown died?

BRYANT

After he died, yeah, because Kenny Dorham was with him. They were staying at the Watkins Hotel. And they had Sonny Rollins. Sonny Rollins was with them. Who else was coming in there? Miles [Davis] never came in there. But then, there was a club called Strip City at Western and Pico [Boulevard]. The same guy and his father— You ever heard of Maynard Sloate?

ISOARDI

No.

BRYANT

Well, Maynard and his father owned quite a few of the black clubs. They had the place over on Western and— What was the name of that club? It had shows. That's where Eric Dolphy worked. Because I was on a show with Eric and his band. I was doing a single. I was doing an act. That's the way I got my first record contract.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Yes. What did they call that club? Not the California— That was on [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] Boulevard. The club is still there, but it's been called many a different name now.

ISOARDI

Is this on King Boulevard?

BRYANT

No, this is on Western.

ISOARDI

Oh, on Western.

BRYANT

It was on Western just past Exposition [Boulevard]. Thirty-ninth [Street] and Western, I think it is. I'll think of the name of it. [Oasis Club] Anyway, Maynard Sloate and his father owned that. His father owned Strip City, which was right up on Western, this side of Pico. And then later they owned Jazz City, which was on Western and Hollywood Boulevard, this side of Hollywood Boulevard. That's where they recorded that— I think I showed you the album last time. It was "Last Night at Jazz City."

ISOARDI

Oh.

BRYANT

I was on there with Curtis Counce and all. Herb— Herb Gellen. Claude Williamson, piano. But the Milimo, they had good food. It was just a bar. The last thing it was, there was a travel agency in there, and I think it's closed now. I don't know what happened. Like, it closed awful fast. I don't know if somebody robbed it or what. But it's right there on the corner of Twenty-

ninth and Western. It was a small bar, but it jumped. It jumped. We had some good times in there. Good music. Some good music.

ISOARDI

So this is the period pretty much after Central Avenue declines and things are happening on Western.

BRYANT

Exactly. Right. That's like I said, it moved west, then it moved to Crenshaw [Boulevard]. And from there, it was open season to go— Well, by that time it was open season to go anywhere up north. What were some of the jazz rooms out there? Billy Berg's was the first, really, but they had a couple downstairs. I can't think of the name of them. I've got them all written down in my book, in my notes. But we're talking about Central Avenue, and I keep getting you farther— Things just keep coming, because I mention one name and it drifts off into some other place where we worked together.

ISOARDI

Sure. Are there any other places on Central that stick out in your mind that we haven't talked about?

BRYANT

Yeah. What was that on the corner upstairs? Although I didn't get up there too much, because they had a different—

ISOARDI

Oh, was that Lovejoy's?

BRYANT

Lovejoy's, yeah. I went there a couple of times when Art Tatum was playing there or something. Yeah, I think that's what it was. But, see, there's so much that went on just between the Alabam, the Last Word, and the Downbeat. And the Elks [auditorium], the Lincoln Theatre, the Bird in the

Basket, those were the main sources. At the Elks they had sessions not every Sunday, but they'd have some sessions that were— Like I said, that's where they did— What did they call it? Teddy Edwards and Wardell [Gray] did a thing. And then Wardell and Dexter [Gordon] did a thing.

ISOARDI

Oh, you mean like the two-tenor chases, those kinds of things.

BRYANT

Yes, yes, yes, yes. The chase. I think that's what— They did that at the Elks. I think that was recorded at the Elks, because I have a thing that— Roy Porter gave me a tape of that. He was playing the drums, and it was at the Elks. They used to have some hot sessions in there. I started getting into it when I wrote this chapter on Central Avenue for my proposal, but I didn't go deep into it because I didn't have that much space. But there were some things that transpired. And there was just as much going on on the street as there was in the clubs, you know, as far as standing out there talking to people and listening and learning. The camaraderie of the guys just hanging together and going around the corner, smoking their pot, you know, or doing whatever else they were doing. There were some stories that I've got to remember. Because that's the way I learned how to deal with the male part of— When I got tired of playing with girl groups, that's the way I learned how to deal and cope with things like you just saw in that write-up.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

I never got that from the guys.

ISOARDI

From the musicians. Yeah.

BRYANT

No.

ISOARDI

You never had trouble playing with them?

BRYANT

No, I'd get up on— Like at the jam session at the Downbeat, I'd sit there, and when they started playing something that I thought I wanted to play, then I'd walk up there. I'd take my horn up and walk on up there. A lot of times you'd have to sign your name and they'd call you down. Well, I wouldn't do that. If they played, they'd just let me do it. They let me do whatever I wanted to do, because I told them I wanted to learn. I was there to learn, and the only way you're going to learn is to be a part of it. I told the young trumpet— You know, our trumpet player up in San Francisco, that girl, she came up and introduced herself to me. She said, "I was playing the trumpet. Then I stopped playing. And then I read the article about you in this woman's book, Sally Placksin's book, *Women in Jazz*, and I decided I wanted to start playing my horn again." I said, "Well, where is your horn?" She said, "At home." I said, "Well, you have the nerve to come out here and say you're a trumpet player and you didn't bring your horn?" [laughter] See, I wouldn't do it. I would not go without my horn. If I knew there was going to be somebody there, I'd have my horn with me, because I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to try to learn something. It's not that kind of motivation now. But the process when you're young, that's what you have to do. You have to go out there and be a part of that. And I'll do it now. Sometimes when Dizzy's playing and I hear something he's doing that I know, I won't get out my horn. [laughter] I'll go up and take his horn! Because we play the same size bore, the same mouthpiece. Same rim. The mouthpiece I have he gave to me in the sixties. So I take it on. There was a write-up and a thing on TV. They were

interviewing him, and he was saying— And Leonard Feather has written about it since then— He said, "Yeah, she had the nerve to come up and take my horn and try to play the rim off of it!" That Dizzy, he will pump you up. Thankfully. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah. [laughter]

BRYANT

What he did, he walked over and he said, "Give me my horn. Who told you to come up here and play my horn like that?" You know. That impresses the people. But he's sincere when he does it, though, really. He's that kind of guy. I have nothing but admiration for him, because there are some guys who do not want you to come up there and challenge them, you know.

ISOARDI

That's good. You played with many girl groups, then. Later on we'll get into that in detail. But was there a problem getting in groups with the men? I mean, did you find yourself in a situation where sort of the only way you could play was getting girl groups together? Was it something like that?

BRYANT

No, because I never had my own girl group.

ISOARDI

So you were being asked to play in various groups?

BRYANT

When I first came out here, my first job was with the— I think I told you it was a male. This man came to my house. He had called me up right after I got my transfer. I had gotten my real [union] card. It wasn't a temporary. I had gotten my real card. He called me up and wanted me to play with him. We played at a place called the Cup and Saucer out in Norwalk. It was just three of us. It was just me, and it was no bass. It was

drums, piano, and myself, which was a different thing for me. But that was the first gig that I had and the only one I had for a long time after that, because, after that, I started working with girl groups. The first one was a ladies group called the Queens of Swing. Frances Gray was the leader. She played the drums. That group was the Queens of Swing. She left. She got into an argument with the piano player, and that's when she left. That's when we had to have a drummer. The girl groups were plentiful at that time because of the service, you know, military.

ISOARDI

Still, then.

BRYANT

The guys were still gone, most of them, and we were a novelty. But the Sweethearts was a good group.

ISOARDI

The Sweethearts of Rhythm?

BRYANT

Yes. Like I said, I played with them one week at the Million Dollar [Theatre], and then my dad [Charles Celeste

BRYANT

] made me stop.

ISOARDI

He made you stop playing with them?

BRYANT

Yeah, because I came home and told him about the girls feeling on each other. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, right, right, right, right.

BRYANT

And kissing. [laughter] He made me— Well, he didn't make me stop playing that week at the Million Dollar, but he made me come home at every intermission. I had to come home at every intermission. Rae Lee Jones wanted me to travel with them, and he said, "No way." Because they were trying to decide who I was supposed to bunk with on the bus. Oh, boy! [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, you would have had an education fast! [laughter]

BRYANT

I'm telling you! Lord have mercy. But the girl groups around town, I worked with just about all of them. And then, like I say, we traveled. We went to Seattle, Portland, those small places, Idaho. And Eureka. That was something. It was quite an experience, though. We went to Arizona. I took my kid and went into [Las] Vegas, like I said. After I had my son [Charles Stone], I'd take him on the road with me. I'd come off the stage and nurse him backstage. That's another thing that women have to deal with, you know, having children and going right back to work. I did that with both my young kids [Charles and April Stone]. I have a picture that we had taken out at a place in Watts, on 103rd [Street]. The same man who got killed, who was Esvan's executor, took these pictures. He blew them up, and they had them on the outside of the club. It was a girl group [the Queens of Swing], and they had all— The drummer [Frances Gray] still has hers, and the saxophone— Minnie Hightower is dead, but her husband [Walter Dade] still has her picture. The other two, they don't know where theirs is. But I have mine. I've got to have it redone, because it was laying up against something and it rubbed the nose. I'm going to have it—what do you call it?—restored. Because I was eight months pregnant with my son, but you can't tell it because I was tiny and had a little baby. [laughter] I had on this— And

Frances Gray, who was the leader of the band, she sewed, and she made all these homemade costumes for us. [laughter] There was always somebody pregnant in the group, so everybody else had to wear these— [laughter]

ISOARDI

Just passed around the pregnant gown! [laughter]

BRYANT

You know, every time she turned around, she was having to make these loose things, you know. But then she'd make them sexy. We wore the midriff things and the strapless and the— You know. She made them sexy because she was an ex-dancer. She decided she wanted to play the drums and sing. So I worked with that group, and, like I said, this group that we had that was on TV, the first group— It's a part of Central Avenue too, because we had been working the Last Word.

ISOARDI

Which group was this?

BRYANT

The one—

ISOARDI

Oh, the Hollywood Sepia Tones, was it?

BRYANT

The Hollywood Sepia Tones. The girl played guitar. Her name was Willie Lee Terrell. And Anne Glascoe was the bass player. Her uncle was Gene Ramey, the bass player with Basie, a well-known bass player from Texas. Anyway, we had a good group. We had a girl drummer at that time. Her name was Mattie Watson. The same group that traveled, did one-nighters, with "Open the Door, Richard"— What's his name? Tenor player. You said you were going to interview him.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. Jack McVea.

BRYANT

Yeah. I told you we did one-nighters on the bus all the way down to Texas. It was the same group that went on the tour with him that was the Hollywood Sepia Tones. We had been working at the Last Word and quite a few places we'd been working, you know. But the Last Word is where we worked on Central Avenue. But at the time when Benny Carter and Phil Moore were getting this TV show together, we were working down on Fifth Street at a club. I think it was the Waldorf Cellar. You ever heard of that?

ISOARDI

No.

BRYANT

That was owned by Billy Berg. I think it was after Billy Berg's closed. It was downstairs. That's why they called it the Waldorf Cellar. That TV show— We were on six weeks, but we couldn't get a sponsor. That was at the same time that Nat [King] Cole was on and couldn't get a sponsor.

ISOARDI

Really? What TV show was it? What was it called?

BRYANT

It was called The Hollywood Sepia Tones, I think it was called.

ISOARDI

You had your own television show?

BRYANT

We had our own television show is what I'm telling you. It was our show.

ISOARDI

I thought you had a guest appearance on it.

BRYANT

No, this was our show. We were the first jazz female group on television. I was pregnant with my daughter. She was born in October of '51. I was about seven months pregnant with her, about six or seven months pregnant. I think we were on six weeks.

ISOARDI

No kidding. You were on the air six—? Do you remember what channel it was on? Or what network carried you?

BRYANT

Yeah. I have this write-up that this man has in his book. I have it in one of my picture books. I'll have to get it for you. It tells the channel. I think it was [channel] five. It was [channel] five. You know, all the jazz things came on five, eleven, or thirteen. Very seldom do you see it on two, four, or seven.

ISOARDI

But it only lasted six weeks because you couldn't get a sponsor?

BRYANT

Oh, no. At that time, no. And also at that time, after my daughter was born, I got a call from the union [American Federation of Musicians] to do Ada Leonard's all-girl orchestra show on TV.

ISOARDI

Who's this?

BRYANT

Ada Leonard.

ISOARDI

Ada Leonard. I don't know her.

BRYANT

She had an all-girl band. So did Ina Ray Hutton. But I got a call to do Ada Leonard's show. And I was on there a week, and they got letters, "Get that nigger off there."

ISOARDI

No kidding?

BRYANT

No kidding. And Xavier Cugat's wife had an all-girl show, an all-girl band on TV at that time. What was her name? Lorraine Cugat. There were three white all-girl orchestras on there. I think that's where Benny Carter and Phil Moore got the idea to bring our group on, because at that time we had a pretty tight little group. But we were more jazz, and with a smaller group, you know, it was like— We had guitar, sax, trumpet, bass, drums, piano, and two singers—Vivian Dandridge and Evelyn Royal. We didn't have sections, but we had a tight little group. It was on Kinetoscope, so I've never been able to get any. There was another show that had some women. Oh, it was that country and western guy, Spade Cooley. He had a lot of women violin players.

ISOARDI

There were a lot of women performers, then, on television. A lot of musicians.

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah. Sure was. I'm trying to think of who else was around here at that time. They had a thing for the women in jazz in L.A., and I saw Ada Leonard. She doesn't look anything like she did. She was very, very— What do you call it? She wore her hair parted in the middle. She had long black hair

and brought back in a big bun back here. And she was built like an hourglass, you know. She wore these form-fitting crepe, satin dresses.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

BRYANT

Oh, she was something. She could wave that baton. Like Ina Ray Hutton, she was a flouncy little thing, like a little poodle or something. But Ada Leonard was very sincere and she did hers like a classical player or something. Ina Ray would roll those big eyes with those long eyelashes and flutter all over the bandstand. [laughter] But Ada just stood there and waved that baton. Lorraine Cugat was built real nice, and she did the same, you know. She was kind of in between Ada Leonard and Ina Ray Hutton. But those were three big bands we had on TV. And, like I say, it's documented; it was the first, The Hollywood Sepia Tones. Half-hour show.

ISOARDI

Marvelous. And you guys just played? Did you sing or—?

BRYANT

Yeah, we had vocal numbers too. But we had the two singers. We had Marshall Royal's wife, Evelyn. She sang. And then we had Vivian Dandridge, who was Dorothy's sister.

ISOARDI

Dorothy Dandridge's sister.

BRYANT

You know, Vivian used to go with Leonard Feather.

ISOARDI

No, I didn't know that.

BRYANT

Yeah. Yeah, they lived together in London. You know, he finally wrote about it in his book.

ISOARDI

Finally? [laughter]

BRYANT

He finally wrote about it. [laughter] Here everybody knew it, but he finally admitted it and put it in his book, that last book he did. Something.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (April 18, 1990)

ISOARDI

Okay, Clora, we're back on Central Avenue in, I guess, the late forties. Let's get into the music more and what the music was like, the different kind of styles you found on Central.

BRYANT

Well, you found the whole scope, the whole gamut of— I call it the tree of jazz. You had some of all of it. The only thing that I didn't really encounter on Central Avenue was New Orleans jazz. I don't remember anyplace that had that on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Now, in the mid-forties, wasn't there this big revival of Dixieland or New Orleans jazz?

BRYANT

Not on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Not on Central, but—

BRYANT

Not on Central Avenue. I don't remember. Now, maybe someone else would, but I don't remember hearing New Orleans jazz on Central Avenue. You heard rhythm and blues. The blues, swing, bebop, and just, well, always in between bebop and swing was jazz. To me, that was jazz. But to some people, the New Orleans jazz was the jazz. I don't remember anyplace, not any of the clubs that I remember, I don't remember hearing, per se, New Orleans jazz.

ISOARDI

Maybe it was— Because there was this big revival then. Maybe it was something more—

BRYANT

But the revival didn't come in the forties, though. Not in the early forties.

ISOARDI

Maybe it was more a thing in the white community, this revival of what they call Dixieland.

BRYANT

Yeah. yeah. As they moved farther out— I'm trying to think. And I've never heard anybody else mention, per se, New Orleans-type jazz on Central Avenue. Because I don't remember if Louis [Armstrong] played the [Club] Alabam or not. I know he played the Cotton Club, but that was out in Culver City, out on Washington [Boulevard].

ISOARDI

Maybe Central Avenue was too hip in the forties for New Orleans jazz.

BRYANT

I don't know. I really don't, you know, because at that time everything was changing, and New Orleans music wasn't— They considered Louis handkerchief-head, you know, Uncle

Tom and all that kind of stuff. At that time, the young lions who were coming up, they considered that kind of music— You know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

I just don't remember any club that had it. Not on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Were there certain clubs that were identified with certain types of music?

BRYANT

Yes. You know, like the Downbeat [Club] was definitely for bebop and straight-ahead music. At the Alabam they had floor shows, so you'd have all kinds of music. The house bands played it all, all the different ones. The blues you'd have sometimes, and rhythm and blues, or swing. When the bands would come in town and play downtown either at the Million Dollar Theatre or the Paramount [Theatre] or the Orpheum [Theatre], then they'd come over on Central Avenue, before they left town, and play. The Lincoln Theatre. I don't remember. I don't remember New Orleans. That is something I've got to look into, because I've never heard anybody else speak of it either. Because the ones who were playing New Orleans music later on, they weren't playing New Orleans music. Like Teddy Buckner, he started out playing bebop and modern jazz with Lionel Hampton, you know. And then he became a great Louis Armstrong fan in the fifties. Because I think he was with Buck Clayton's band when they went to Japan and were caught over there during the war. Teddy Buckner played in that band, "Bumps" [Hubert] Myers, Reginald Jones.

ISOARDI

Oh, that's right, that's right.

BRYANT

So when he came back, you know, I don't know what made him decide to switch to New Orleans style. See, when the trombone player came out here with his— That was, I think, in the early fifties.

ISOARDI

Trombone player?

BRYANT

Yeah. What's his name?

ISOARDI

From New Orleans?

BRYANT

From New Orleans, yes.

ISOARDI

Kid Ory?

BRYANT

Kid Ory.

ISOARDI

There were a lot of great New Orleans jazz men who either were in L.A. or passed— "Poppa Mutt" [Thomas] Carey was out here and Albert Nichols, people like that.

BRYANT

Yeah, but I think that was after.

ISOARDI

Oh, much later?

BRYANT

I think it was after, because, see, Red Nichols and them played out on Vine [Street] and those clubs out there. There was a place on Vine that had them. And then, Teddy Buckner and others were playing at a place on Eighth Street and another place out on Hollywood [Boulevard] [the Royal Room]. Then I played the Swing Club with— What's his name, the trumpet player who died last year or year before last? He was an alcoholic. Our girl band, we played opposite them. We were playing swing and they were playing New Orleans. In his band he had this little short guy [Matty Matlock] who played clarinet. He's dead now too. I can't think of their names right now. But it was—The Royal Room, that's what I'm trying to think of. The Royal Room on Hollywood Boulevard. Oh, what was his name, that trumpet player who had that band? [Pete Daily] And he had Pud on the tenor [saxophone]. There was a Bud Johnson and then there was Pud. This guy was Pud. Real good tenor man. And Matty Matlock. He also used to play down at the Hermosa Inn in Hermosa Beach. It was on the right-hand side of the Lighthouse, and the club where I worked, the High Seas, was on the left-hand side. Matty— Little short guy, played beautiful clarinet. But Central Avenue, that's where you'd hear blues singers like Charles Brown, T-Bone Walker, and Witherspoon.

ISOARDI

Jimmy Witherspoon.

BRYANT

Yes. My first husband [Joseph Stone] played with T-Bone, Pee Wee Crayton, Jimmy Witherspoon. That's where Charles Brown and Johnny Moore and the Three Blazes played, Central Avenue. It wasn't Charlie Brown's group. It was Johnny Moore's group. He was a guitar player. His brother was Oscar Moore. And it was his group that Charles Brown played with. That's when they made— When I got here, their hit record was

"Be Fair with Me." [sings] "If you've found somebody who loves you more than I do, be fair with me." I used to love that.

ISOARDI

Nice song.

BRYANT

Yeah. Who all was—? Oh, at that time, Lloyd Price was out here.

ISOARDI

Oh, really? Playing down on Central Avenue?

BRYANT

Yeah. When he made the [sings] "Lawdy, lawdy, Miss Clawdy."

ISOARDI

Really? He was out here then?

BRYANT

Yeah. He played the Alabam. And what's-his-name was out here too. The guy who played the tenor that got killed back there. His tenant killed him. He was on all the rhythm and blues records in the fifties.

ISOARDI

Saxophonist?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

King Curtis?

BRYANT

King Curtis. He was out here too. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the

transcript.][He was on the Billy Williams Revue album in the studio band (1961).]

ISOARDI

He was playing out here then?

BRYANT

He was out here, too. That's where I met him. Out here. He played the Alabam too. Oh, some of the other blues guys who were on the avenue— There was Percy Mayfield— What's this other guy's name? There were so many at that time. There were so many. Of course, Johnny Otis had his big band.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Blues was alive and well.

BRYANT

Yeah, Johnny Otis had his big band at the Alabam when I got here. And then, later on, Gerald Wilson had his band there. And also, when I got here, Bardu Ali had the band at the Lincoln and, of course, Melba [Liston] was in that band. And Gerald Wilson got Melba and some of the other guys that had taken [lessons] from Miss [Alma] Hightower, you know, like Lester Robinson, Anthony Ortega, an alto player.

ISOARDI

I've heard of him.

BRYANT

He lives in San Diego now. He did real good with Lionel Hampton's big band. And Dexter Gordon, you know. Who were some of the other guys? See, Miss Hightower got started in the thirties with— Remember the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt thing, the WPA [Works Progress Administration]?

ISOARDI

Sure.

BRYANT

They sponsored a lot of programs, because my dad [Charles Celeste Bryant] and my brother [Melvin Celeste Braynt] worked on it in CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps. And my dad was in the WPA. We used to get those bags of flour and sacks of apples and stuff like that. But Miss Hightower was employed over here. It's on Avalon and Fifty or Forty-something. Oh, what do they call that park? [South Park] Anyway, she had a certain job there, but she would make the kids come in and play music. There was a piano there. I think that's the way she started having the bands, and then she started teaching. She got a studio in the back of her house where she taught kids, because I took lessons from here then, and her school was in the back of her home. But she started out through the WPA in the thirties. And Lloyd Reese, of course, you know.

ISOARDI

I've heard many stories about Lloyd Reese.

BRYANT

On Vernon [Avenue].

ISOARDI

Did you ever encounter Lloyd?

BRYANT

When I first came out here, yes, through the recommendation from the lady [Florence Cadrez] at the [American Federation of Musicians] Local 767, because, you know, I told her I wanted to take some lessons. And I went to him. I only took about four lessons, because I couldn't afford it. But he showed me how to breathe from the diaphragm, and he was teaching me, like, you put the trumpet on a string, you know— [laughter]

ISOARDI

Trumpet on a string?

BRYANT

Yeah, that embouchure, you know, little trumpet thing. You'd hit high notes, hit octissimo C, with a trumpet hanging up there.

ISOARDI

You mean he'd have it suspended?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And he'd just walk up to it and blow?

BRYANT

Yeah. That's the kind of embouchure he had.

ISOARDI

Oh, steel! [laughter] Jeez!

BRYANT

Yeah. The guys will tell you. Buddy Collette and others will tell you that. So, like I said, I only got to take three or four lessons from him. That was before I was able to get into UCLA. After I started going to UCLA, naturally, I stopped. But I couldn't afford it anyway. My daddy could only afford the tuition at UCLA.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you remember when—? Well, you told me about your first encounter with bebop, which was that first day on Central, outside.

BRYANT

Yes, yeah.

ISOARDI

It was at the Downbeat [Club] listening to Howard McGhee and Teddy Edwards.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Were you around at that famous gig that Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker had at Billy Berg's?

BRYANT

Yeah. I'd listen to it every night.

ISOARDI

Did you—? You were up at Billy Berg's every night listening to them?

BRYANT

No, on the radio. They broadcast every night from Billy Berg's. That's the way I first heard the music. This was before I went to Central Avenue, the first week I got here. Not the first week I got here. I'm telling a lie. It wasn't the first week I got here. It was after I'd been here.

ISOARDI

I think they were at Billy Berg's in early '46 or something like that?

BRYANT

No, they opened in December of '45. And I came in January of '45, so it was a long time. I'm trying to think how that connected. Oh, I know. I always listened to the late-night broadcasts, because that's the way I heard Slim Gaillard and Tiny Brown and Harry "The Hipster" Gibson. I used to like— [sings] "They call me handsome Harry the Hipster," you know.

ISOARDI

Who was he?

BRYANT

He was a piano player. I've got his record of "Handsome Harry the Hipster" and "Who Put the Benzedrine in Mrs. Murphy's Ovaltine?" [laughter]

ISOARDI

That was a song he recorded?

BRYANT

Yeah, that's a song. That's a song that he did. [laughter] I mean, he did because, you know, he was a heavy pot smoker. He had one about marijuana and Tijuana— "Mary, do you want to go to Tijuana to get some marijuana?" I forget the title of that, but those two words are in the title. That's when Slim Gaillard and Tiny Brown did "Cement mixer, putty, putty." And while Dizzy, Charlie, and Milt Jackson were here, they recorded with Slim Gaillard. I did have that record too.

ISOARDI

Did bebop take off fast on Central?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. It did.

ISOARDI

Everybody was working at it quick?

BRYANT

Yes. All the young were working on it. The older ones didn't. It didn't sit well with them at first, you know, because there was something strange to the ear. But it's just like now. Rap: the kids take to it because it's something new and something different. They can call it theirs. That's the way bebop was. We

could call it ours. Although I was in tune to all the other music, anyway, from hearing it when I was a little girl, but I was ready for a change too. And I'd listen. You know, after Billy Berg's closed at the corner of Vine [Street] and Hollywood Boulevard, what's-his-name opened up the record shop right there at Sunset [Boulevard] and Vine. He had Capitol Records. What's this guy's—?

ISOARDI

What kind of a record shop was it?

BRYANT

It's a big record shop right there on Sunset and Vine.

ISOARDI

The only one that comes to my mind in Hollywood then was Ross Russell opened a place called Tempo Records. Something like that?

BRYANT

No, his was there before this one was. Oh, man. Everybody knows this record store. Oh, man. I don't know why I can't think tonight. But, anyway, you could go in, you know, and they had the booths. You could play your records, and if you didn't want to buy them you didn't have to buy them. I'd go out there, and as the records would come in, I'd listen. You know, I'd go out there— I almost called it. Wallich's Music City. Wallich's. He [Glenn Wallich's] is the one— He and— What was the musician's name that started Capitol Records? [Johnny Mercer] Capitol Records started— Like, the record store was right on the corner. Capitol Records was like a storefront place a couple of doors down. Then he built the tower, you know. But they said that was the tower that Nat [King] Cole built. [laughter]

ISOARDI

I believe it.

BRYANT

Yeah, because he sold the most records. He's the one who really put Capitol Records in business. But I'd go in there and listen to those records, and I'd buy whatever I could, and then I'd come home and listen to them. I'd put them on my record player and play and play and play and play. The first thing that I tried to emulate Dizzy on, that I could really understand, was "I Can't Get Started." And the first time I had a chance to get up on the stage with him and play that with him was when he was playing at Strip City. Strip City was right there on Western [Avenue] this side of Pico [Boulevard].

ISOARDI

When was this? When did you play with him at Strip City?

BRYANT

It was '50-something. I got up on the bandstand. He gave me his horn. Yes, he did. I had the nerve. I had the nerve and audacity to get up there and play it, you know. [sings melody to "I Can't Get Started"] And he stood there watching. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Did you know him well then?

BRYANT

No! I didn't know him that well. [laughter] No, I didn't, you know. But I did it. This must have been —what?—'54 or '55, something like that. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Good story.

BRYANT

Yes. And then he said, "Give me my horn. I didn't tell you to get up here and play my horn like that." He's told that story on

a couple of TV shows. Before, see, what had happened, he was playing at— What do you call it? He had— This is when he had his big band when I— The first time I met him was through Melba Liston. Melba was with the band, and he had Lee Morgan. I don't know if Quincy [Jones] was still in the band. It seems like he was. Billy Mitchell and Wynton Kelley was playing the piano. It was called the Radio Room, I think. It was right there on Hollywood Boulevard and Western. His big band was playing there, and I was sitting at the bar. I was sitting there between "Sweets" [Harry Edison] and Georgie Auld.

ISOARDI

George who?

BRYANT

Georgie Auld.

ISOARDI

Oh, the saxophonist.

BRYANT

The saxophonist, yeah. So when the band came out— That's when the whole band had the turned-up bells.

ISOARDI

He had his whole section playing with turned-up bells?

BRYANT

Yeah, the whole section had those bells. I think Quincy was in the band too. And Al Grey on trombone, Ernie Henry on alto, Charlie Persip on drums. When they came off, he came over. Melba had told him. He walked over to me and said, "Hi, Clora," and kissed my hand. I didn't wash it for a whole week! [laughter] I was ready to faint, you hear! And he just started talking to me like he'd been knowing me all his life. That's what really bonded me to him, because no other musician had given me that kind of respect. They all respected me, but not

like that. All the guys in L.A. respected me. When I came around with my horn, they all would let me come up and play. I'd get in line to go up and play and it was no problem. But nobody of that stature had really walked up and— Because everybody was looking up to him at that time, which they still do, I guess. But at that time, he was number one. His band was getting ready to go do that— Later on, they went on that tour. What they do call them?

ISOARDI

Oh, the State Department tour? Yeah.

BRYANT

Yes. So his band was big at that time, and for somebody like that to come over— Because, I mean, I knew Sweets, but Sweets had never done that before. You can just feel when people are being for real. Especially musicians and especially a trumpet player. You can feel if they are genuinely secure with knowing that you do play the same instrument they do and knowing that it's a difficult instrument too. Like I said, Dizzy has no insecurities. He's not intimidated by anybody or any sex or anything. No matter if you're female, male, or whatever, he'll give you a chance to come up there and play. Just like he did Jon Faddis, you know. Jon went to see Dizzy play, and he asked him who was going to play the ending on this song. Is it "Night in Tunisia" where you play the high—? Not "Manteca." It was either "Night in Tunisia" or that other— Anyway, Jon asked him who was going to do it, and Dizzy said, "Why don't you play it?" So he went out and got his horn. He had his horn outside in the car. He went out and got his horn and came back in. Just as he walked in, they got to the part he played, and he started playing it from the back. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh. And Dizzy didn't know Jon Faddis?

BRYANT

No!

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez! What an entrance!

BRYANT

I'm telling you, he's just that secure with himself. And when he was younger, he was a cocky so-and-so. [laughter] But I loved him for that, because I could feel that he had no inhibitions. He knew who he was, but he never shoved it down your throat like a lot of people I know do. And that's why I admired him, because he was just Dizzy. The name fits him, but it doesn't fit him, you know. If I could rename him, I'd name him something else. But he has grown into the name, really. It's just like you don't think about what the word really means. You just think about, "That's Dizzy." That's his name, period. I had been indoctrinated with him. First I was indoctrinated with the records, and then hearing it on the avenue, and then, at the end of the year, hearing him. Because, see, before that, when Dizzy came out here, the people weren't used to that kind of music at Billy Berg's. That's why after opening night, they didn't do shit. You know, the business was nothing. Billy Berg felt like he had made a boo-boo by booking them, Dizzy and Charlie Parker, because the people kept wanting to hear somebody sing and carry on like Harry "The Hipster" and Slim Gaillard. And Tiny Brown was the kind— He'd play the bass and twirl it around and do all that bullshit. But it wasn't bullshit, it was just him. And that's what they were expecting. And Dizzy was crazy, but he didn't do all of that stuff. At that time, he hadn't really grown into the showman that he is. But that's where I first heard Dizzy, really. Not in person, but almost. It wasn't a recording. It was live. A live, late-night broadcast. It was something to—

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Really. Do you remember when R and B started coming in?

BRYANT

Well, it was already in when I got here.

ISOARDI

Oh, it was?

BRYANT

Yeah. Because, see, R and B was going when I was in high school. Rhythm and blues, I guess, had always been another— You know, when I came, we weren't putting handles on music. It was rhythm and blues, but we didn't call it rhythm and blues. It was the music. The only thing that had a definite, distinct title was the blues. And there were three or four kinds of blues there, you know, like the low-down blues and then just regular blues. The low-down blues my dad didn't have in the house. He never bought those kind of records, but I heard them, naturally, because a lot of my friends had those records, and sometimes my aunts would play them at their club dances and stuff. But people like T-Bone Walker, who was in my hometown a lot, his blues wasn't considered low-down. It was like Leadbelly and those kind of people that—

ISOARDI

More country blues was the—

BRYANT

Yeah. Like I said, they put titles to all of that stuff, but I would have a hard time saying what it was right now, because it was just blues. And swing was swing. Everything else was swing. Even rhythm and blues was swing. Like I said, it was music. It

wasn't called rhythm and blues, but that's what it was. Later on, I found out that's what it was. They had all these different records out. They were called race records then. You could only buy them at certain grocery stores in my hometown or down South, because we didn't have any record stores. Most of the large cities had their own black record stores, but we didn't. You had to buy them across the counter at the market, at the grocery store. Or send away for them, send to Dallas and get them. But, like I said, when I was coming up, we heard in the carnivals with the sideshows and the midnight rambles in the theater, they were playing blues and I guess what you would call rhythm and blues. By the time I got to high school, I was playing— Louis Jordan was out. And [sings] "You'd better beware, brother, beware, brother, beware. You'd better beware." [sings] "I'm gonna move"—oh, we loved that one, boy—"to the outskirts of town." Who else was doing—? Billy Eckstine was heavy ["Jelly, Jelly, Jelly"]. Lucky Millinder, "Sweet Slumber." [sings] "Sweet slumber till dawn, till the last star is gone." Trevor Bacon recorded that with Lucky Millinder. And Al Hibbler, with Duke Ellington, [sings] "In my little book with the silver binding—" "In My Little Brown Book." And his "Squatty Roo" and "Out the Back Door," Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump" and Harry James's "Two O'Clock Jump," and— You know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, right.

BRYANT

And Benny Goodman's [sings "Sing, Sing, Sing"] What's the name of that?

ISOARDI

What? "Sing, Sing, Sing"?

BRYANT

Is that "Sing, Sing, Sing"? I think it is. Yeah. With the trumpet player doing a good solo on it. And Artie Shaw's theme [sings "Day Night"]. And I like Charlie Spivak's theme song. That used to be my theme song, too, when I first started playing. I had a group I could call my own. [sings melody] It's called "Star Dream." He had the sweetest sound on the trumpet, Charlie Spivak, you know.

ISOARDI

You referred to your group. Maybe you could talk a bit about the groups you played with, the girl groups and what it was like out—

BRYANT

Yeah, when I left high school and got with the all-girl group, the Prairie View Coeds, we had some thrilling times up and down the road. We had a lot of trying times, you know, staying in different places down in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, you know. We played in where they'd have the tobacco hanging out, you know, barns. I forget what you called them, you know. They were—
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yes. That's where you played some one-nighters, yeah, in those kinds of places. And they had no hotels, you know. Some of the smaller places had no hotels. You stayed in people's homes. I remember one time, we pulled up to these people's house, and they had the goats staying in the house. So we slept in the car that night. We did not go in the house. Couldn't make that. It smelled. You know, goats smell.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. [laughter]

BRYANT

And we stayed in hotels where there were chinchies, bedbugs, in the bed. Hey, it was a learning process. I was so young it didn't bother me. It was just something that was— You know, we laughed about it. We laughed a lot about it. And going through those mountains up there, the hills— What do you call those black hills up there in Tennessee, the mountains up there? The Blue Ridge Mountains? We'd be going around the side of the mountain and you could look over the big drop-off. You know, I'd never experienced anything like that. It was quite a learning experience for me. And playing for the army bases and the naval bases and the air force and the marines, seeing all those guys, and all that adoration and stuff. We played this camp in Alabama, and there was this good-looking guy in the audience. [laughter] And this girl— He kept coming up to the bandstand and told everybody he was a musician, he played drums. And this girl, his girlfriend, was getting jealous. It seemed like he had three or four girls in this town, you know, because he was so handsome.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

BRYANT

You know who it was? Chico. Chico Hamilton.

ISOARDI

Chico Hamilton? [laughter]

BRYANT

And one of the girls got mad and threw a Coke bottle up at the bandstand. There was a jukebox on the side, and it hit the jukebox. Boy, we hit the floor. Everybody hit the floor. But Chico and I laugh about that now.

ISOARDI

Funny.

BRYANT

Isn't that funny?

ISOARDI

Yeah. What a coincidence.

BRYANT

It is. When I got to California and I saw him, he pointed at me.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

And we still do that when we see each other now. [laughter]
That was so funny. This broad was serious. He had to take her out of there. She got jealous because— Well, he was a musician, you know. He was flirting, too, because that's just the way he is. He does that now. He's a flirt, a big flirt. She was very upset, but he had the run of the chicks there in that town. And you know who else was there—and I don't remember him, but he remembered me—is Jimmy Cheatham. He was there at the same time. He remembered seeing me in the band, but I didn't remember him. I remembered Chico. Everybody did, because this broad threw this thing up there. She was throwing at him, because he was standing right there by the bandstand, and it hit the jukebox. Wow, did that break up the dance! [laughter] People scattered. It sounded like a gun shot, you know, when that Coke bottle— In those days, Coke bottles were Coke bottles. That thing was no plaything.

ISOARDI

Deadly weapons. [laughter]

BRYANT

Most of those bottles wouldn't shatter. They were made like steel or something. But there were so many of those kinds of things that happened, you know. I was talking about when I met Sarah Vaughan's husband [George Treadwell]. She wasn't married to him [then]. We'd play Houston when we didn't go out on the road going to Dallas or San Antonio or Corpus Christi or Fort Worth or somewhere. We'd play opposite some of the acts that were there. And George was playing with King Kolax, who was a trumpet player, too, a very good trumpet player. But we'd play the intermission. And after the dance, we were all standing around talking, and George came over. We knew we were going to go to New York that summer. So he said, "Well, when you get to New York, get in touch with me." So I said, "Okay." All this was very new to me, all this adoration and stuff from these guys. And seeing the other girls being very— Everybody was older than I was, you know, so they knew what they were doing. I didn't know. I didn't know what was going on. But, anyway, when we got to New York, he came backstage. We played the Apollo [Theatre]. He came backstage, and he said, "Well, I'd like to take you to dinner." He came backstage in the afternoon between one of the shows. He said, "When you guys play your last show tonight"— because, you know, New York was open all night— "I'd like to take you to dinner when you get off." Well, we had a chaperone. Her name was Mrs. von Charleston. I said, "But I don't think she'll let me go." But, see, all the other girls were sneaking out after Mrs. von Charleston went to bed. I didn't know that. I was going to bed too. [laughter] I was going to bed too. I didn't know that they were sneaking out. In fact, I didn't know that until the bass player who was with the band told me this a few years ago right out here.

ISOARDI

You didn't know until then? [laughter]

BRYANT

I didn't know that they were all sneaking out. [laughter] It was so funny. He didn't understand that, because he didn't realize that I was as young as I was. So he couldn't understand that. He wasn't really going to take me to dinner, anyway.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

And you just found that out, right?

BRYANT

Yes, yes, I found that out, too, after I saw him when I went to New York in the sixties. [laughter] He had an office. What's-her-name [Sarah Vaughan] had divorced by then, but he was still her manager. I went up to his office because I wanted to get booked, and that's when he told me what his intentions were. [laughter] I never told Sarah that. I never even told her that I knew George before she did, you know. But I'm— I said I was going to try to— He was at her funeral. He's still living. I didn't know if he was living or not. I would like to get in touch with him, you know, for old times' sake. It's weird. Just—

ISOARDI

When— Go ahead.

BRYANT

I was trying to think of some other little episode. But what were you about to say?

ISOARDI

Well, I was going to say, when you first came to Central, then, were you playing primarily with girl groups?

BRYANT

My first job was with— After my transfer was in and I'd been here not six months, three months, this man called up and

asked me if I— You know, what's her name, the lady who was the secretary [of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 767] had told me—

ISOARDI

Florence Cadrez?

BRYANT

Florence Cadrez, yes, She told me she was going to help me get a job. And this man called me and wanted me to play with his group. They were playing at the Cup and Saucer in Norwalk.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, that's right. I remember you said that.

BRYANT

So I played. It was just he and I and the drummer. No bass player. When he called me about it, I said, "Well, I have to talk to my father about it." He said, "That's fine." So when my dad came home and I told him about it, he said, "Well, I don't mind, but he has to come by here and pick you up and come up and meet me," you know, because we were on the third floor of this house. So he did. And when Dad saw him—he was a middle-aged man, you know, he was in his late forties—Dad said it was fine. He didn't mind that. But that was my first job. And this place, it was prejudiced. We had to sit back in this back room where they kept the liquor, the storage room, and there was no going out. No talking to the customer. We entertained ourselves, really. There was no talking to the audience or anything. They could bring up a request. See, they had a kitty on the piano. They would make requests and put the money in. I worked out there with him about six weeks. And then I started getting calls, because this man, the piano player, he hung out at the union. He went back and told them that I could play. I started getting calls. There was another guy named Clint. I can't think of Clint's name. He got

an all-girl group together. And then Floyd Ray got an all-girl group together.

ISOARDI

Did he really?

BRYANT

Yes. And, oh, there's another guy who was a trombone player. He had a group, another group, the Darlings of Rhythm. We played the Plantation Club out there in Watts on 108th [Street] and Central. Oh, yeah, I wanted to show you this picture. I'm going to have it restored.

ISOARDI

Oh, wonderful.

BRYANT

Nineteen forty-nine.

ISOARDI

Is that you?

BRYANT

Yeah. I was eight months pregnant with my son, Charles Stone.

ISOARDI

Well, they covered it up very well, didn't they? [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah. Everybody had to wear those kind of dresses. That's Frances Gray, the one I showed you on that picture. She was the leader, and she made all the dresses. And there were two of us pregnant at the same time. The piano player, Perry Lee, was pregnant, and I was pregnant.

ISOARDI

Marvelous photograph.

BRYANT

Yes. I just called four places today about getting it restored, because the man that was going to restore it—his name is Charles Williams—got killed. He was going to restore it for me a couple of years ago. It was in '87. And he got killed.

ISOARDI

This is a publicity shot for when you were playing with the Darlings of Rhythm?

BRYANT

No, it was with the Queens of Swing.

ISOARDI

Queens of Swing.

BRYANT

We were playing right there on 103rd [Street] and Central. It was upstairs. I forget. And Charles blew these pictures up. You know, they were our glossies, eight-by-tens. He blew it up, and everybody had one. They were in the window.

ISOARDI

Gee, they're great.

BRYANT

This place was right on the corner. It was right on the corner. I did have the glossy of that, and it was lost in storage.

ISOARDI

Oh, too bad. Still, that's nice. It's great you're getting it restored.

BRYANT

Yeah, they'll be able to do it. They can look at some of these other things and get— You know.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Who else was in that group?

BRYANT

In this group?

ISOARDI

Queens of Swing.

BRYANT

Minnie Hightower, Miss Hightower's daughter.

ISOARDI

Oh, that's the group you were talking about last time. How long were you guys together?

BRYANT

Oh, we were together about three or four years, off and on.

ISOARDI

Long time. And you toured quite a bit, as well.

BRYANT

We traveled quite a bit. There was an agency— I have a picture outside of Billy Berg's. His name was Reginald Marshall. He had a booking agency. The girl piano player, she was a good hustler, and she knew how to front for us, you know, where we wouldn't have to go through the changes of trying to get the jobs. She knew how to talk to the people and do whatever else she had to do to get the job. Her name was Elyse Blye.

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BRYANT

Elyse Blye was the pianist. We worked Arizona. We worked Phoenix, because when I worked Phoenix, I had just had my son, Charles Stone. I took my son. He was a baby, and I'd have to come off stage and nurse him backstage, you know, come off stage and nurse him. And then we worked Seattle. When I first worked there in '48, that was before I got married, before I got pregnant, you know, before I had my son. That's when I met Quincy Jones and Ray Charles. Quincy was playing with Bumps Blackwell's junior band. They were kind of like a— Not ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] or something like that, but it was the younger kids' band that Bumps had. Bumps Blackwell was the one who was the manager of Little Richard for a long time. He played the vibes. His brother, Charles Blackwell, was a very good, well-known drummer for a while, and then he moved to Hawaii. But in 1948, Quincy was in that band. Ernestine Anderson was singing with the band. And Ray Charles was singing like Nat Cole and Charles Brown. He wasn't singing Ray Charles, you know. And he was playing saxophone and clarinet.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Yes. We used to hang out together. In fact, last year, Quincy was telling Dizzy about when we'd hang out. I was working in a place called the Washington Social Club with Frances [Gray] and Doris Meilleur—you know, the other girl I showed you the other day—and Minnie. And everybody came. It was after hours. Everybody came, everybody who was in town. Cab Calloway came in town with— He was doing "Sporting Life." J. C. Higginbotham. It was the "in" place to come after hours, you know. That was quite an experience, too, because where we stayed— We had a room in this couple's home. My room was upstairs. Well, you know, the bedrooms were upstairs.

And this lady was very jealous of her husband, and she got it in her mind—

ISOARDI

That she had the Queens of Swing staying in the place?

BRYANT

Yes! [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, she's crazy for inviting you in! [laughter]

BRYANT

I'm telling you. Hey, I looked up once, and this woman was coming in my room with a knife.

ISOARDI

She did?

BRYANT

A butcher knife, yea. Her husband had to come and get her. And I don't think— And right after that, I sent for my husband [Joseph Stone]. We weren't married then. I sent for my boyfriend. He was going to be my husband. I sent for him to come up there, and I moved. Of course, I moved. [laughter] She had been to the club, you know, and sitting, and she was just nice. But when she got to drinking, she— This day she got to drinking, and she just knew that I was going with her husband. [laughter] And her husband comes down here all the time now from Seattle. She's dead now. But he said she pulled that with an awful lot of women. She was very jealous. I said, "How did you stand it?" They were married about twenty-five years before she died, though he had divorced her, because he said the older she got the worse she got. But that's like one time when I was working over in Pasadena at a club that was with— That was when I was playing drums and trumpet at the same time, when Charles Norris was on guitar and Elyse was

on piano and George Morrow was the bass player, the one who played with Clifford Brown and Max Roach. I mean— Yeah, Clifford and Max. We were playing at a place on Fair Oaks [Avenue]. What was the name of that place? [Onyx Club] But, you know, the women would just sit there, and, of course, their husbands would be— I played with my eyes closed. I never saw what was going on, you know. And they would sit there and just get very upset. This woman was pulling her knife out of her purse, too, and I had my eyes closed, and Elyse said, "Look out, Clora!" [laughter] I said, "Oh, my God."

ISOARDI

Clora, you had so many people coming after you! [laughter]

BRYANT

I'm telling you, it's no fooling. I wasn't the only one. I mean, any girl musician you know can tell you stories like that. The women just—

ISOARDI

So, as a woman musician, you had it not only tough just being a woman jazz player—

BRYANT

Just being a musician, right.

ISOARDI

—but you were getting it from some of the women, too, just from jealousy and—

BRYANT

Right, from the women. From the women, oh, yeah. You'd call the fellows up about rehearsal or something and they'd say, "Well, who's that bitch?" You know, "Is that your bitch?" I heard one woman asking her husband that one day. I said, "Tell that bitch I ain't no bitch." [laughter] Because I had no— It was Clifford Scott's wife. Clifford Scott is a very good sax

player. When we had that earthquake in the sixties, he left here. A lot of people left. He's the one who played the solo on— Was it "Blues after Hours"? No. It's a famous solo just like "Flying Home," the solo on "Flying Home." Everybody plays his solo on this song, and I can't think of it right now. ["Honky Tonk"] But a very good musician, very good musician. But he couldn't handle his women. I told him, "Tell that bitch I ain't no bitch." [laughter] You know. And I'd get a lot of flak, you know, calling guys for rehearsal and stuff. But I hurry up and let them know who I am and why I'm calling. I found that out. That's what I have to do is say, "Look, tell them that Clora Bryant, the trumpet player says so-and-so," and they kind of cool it out. But I've been through some stuff with women, really.

ISOARDI

What was your book like with the Queens of Swing?

BRYANT

It was all the songs of the day. We played nothing but standards, you know, and we played blues. We didn't have any originals. It was all standard tunes. But we played some bop things.

ISOARDI

Did you? Did you improvise a lot?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

All of you?

BRYANT

Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had to. Everybody improvised. I even took a solo on the drums. [laughter] Yeah, I loved to play "Caravan." I had a thing going, you know. I'd be playing

drums, and I had that mallet going around there. Yeah, I could do it. I'd worked it out. It was a challenge, you know. But it got to be a pain because I'd have to be worried with taking those drums around. I started telling them where we were playing. Like we played Eureka up here in Northern California. We played Idaho. We played Butte, Montana, and Missoula, Montana. We played all the country places. [laughter] It was— Oh, oh.

ISOARDI

Did you guys have trouble getting—? You didn't have that much trouble getting work, then?

BRYANT

Oh, no. No.

ISOARDI

You guys were always busy, pretty much?

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

How do you explain that? I mean, because there wasn't a lot of work in the late forties. I know a lot of people have said it was times— It was scuffling.

BRYANT

No, there was a lot of work in the forties. Well, in L.A. there was. Because just before Central closed, everything was moving that way and to Western and on out to Hollywood. There was a lot of work in the clubs down on Fifth Street, First Street. After Billy Berg left his club out in Hollywood, he opened that Waldorf Cellar down on Main Street. I worked there with groups.

ISOARDI

So you guys didn't have much trouble, then.

BRYANT

No, it was no trouble. During the forties, the late forties, and the early fifties was— Yeah, I had no problem in the fifties because I went to Canada a couple of times. I moved to New York in—what?—'54. 'Fifty-three or '54. And then I played Hackensack, New Jersey, after I got my union card. I told you how I got my union card.

ISOARDI

No.

BRYANT

Well, I was playing— I'd go down and play at the— I was trying to tell you and I couldn't think of the name of this club down on the—

ISOARDI

In New York, when you—?

BRYANT

Yeah, the New Orleans— The Metropole. It was the Metropole.

ISOARDI

Yes.

BRYANT

And with Henry "Red" Allen, Higginbotham, and Big Chief, the Indian trombone player, Milt Hinton, bassist.

ISOARDI

Boy!

BRYANT

And Charlie Shavers used to come in. You know, everybody would come in. It was a session. Everybody came in and

played on the sessions, you know. So Milt Hinton and Charlie Shavers were the ones who instigated me getting my [American Federation of Musicians, Local] 802 card, because I had found an agent that wanted to book me, and I needed a card. And I had been there, but I hadn't put my L.A. card in. So Lucky Millinder was on the board or something. He was some bigwig with the 802. And Milt and Charlie Shavers talked to him, so they arranged where I was supposed to be Lucky Millinder's girlfriend— You know, Lucky was a bit très gay. [laughter]

ISOARDI

No, I didn't. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yes. So I pawned—

ISOARDI

So nobody believed it. [laughter]

BRYANT

Well, the people down at the union, the president, they didn't know he was like that. But I pawned my mink coat and my mink stole to get the money, because I had to grease the palms of the president and the treasurer, and I gave Lucky some money so I could get my union card, so I wouldn't have to wait out that probation period. They call it—

ISOARDI

That was a long wait, wasn't it? Six months or something.

BRYANT

Yeah. I think it was supposed to be six weeks, yeah.

ISOARDI

That's a long time to go.

BRYANT

Yeah. But I was able to pay my way into it, so I got a job immediately over in Hackensack, New Jersey. And the emcee was Manhattan Paul. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, gee.

BRYANT

It was at a place called Leon's in Hackensack, New Jersey. And also, Ralph Cooper had a TV show, so I did his TV show. It came from Hackensack. You know Ralph Cooper?

ISOARDI

I don't.

BRYANT

Yeah, he was a black matinee idol in the black films. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][He was our black gangster George Raft.] He was just at Sarah Vaughan's funeral talking about her, because he was like the emcee when she did the talent show and won the contest. [laughter] At that time, Nipsy Russell was a— You know, actually, he wasn't as big as he is now. The emcee was really a guy named Manhattan Paul, who was a very funny guy, and Nipsy would come in because they were— I don't know if a lot of people— A lot of people don't know that he's like that. But that was his old lady.

ISOARDI

I didn't know.

BRYANT

Well, most people don't, because you never hear anybody say anything about it. But this must have been '53 or '54, when I was in New York. So he'd be there. You'd think he was the

regular emcee because he was there to see this guy. But he was with a girl named Rose Marie— What was Rose Marie's name? She wrote a lot of hit records at that time. She and another guy were writing. They had an office in the Brill Building, and I used to ride to work with her. Rose Marie McCoy. Her name was McCoy. I think she and her partner wrote that "Tweedle-ee, tweedle-ee, tweedle-ee dee." They wrote hit songs like that. But she was a singer, too, and she was the star of the show. She was like a blues shouter, very good. This Leon's was one of the major show rooms. I was doing an act at that time, and that was one of the major rooms where they had shows. This agent that I had gotten also booked Stump and Stumpy, a dance duo. I don't know if you've ever heard of them.

ISOARDI

I've heard of them, yeah.

BRYANT

Yeah, because, see, one of them was the one who knocked Dizzy's horn over that night and bent it.

ISOARDI

That's where I heard of them. [laughter]

BRYANT

Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Okay, I've heard that story.

BRYANT

Well, now, when I went to New York— My cousin, Joyce Bryant, had me come back there. I told you that I went back there to be on the Chance of a Lifetime show.

ISOARDI

To New York? Is that what you said?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

No, I didn't know.

BRYANT

Yeah, well, that's why I went, to be on that show. I stayed with my cousin, Joyce Bryant. She had an apartment right there on Columbus [Avenue] and Amsterdam [Avenue]. It was a hotel, but they'd made it into apartments, you know, little apartment things. So I was staying with her. I went to do the audition for the Chance of a Lifetime show, and they liked me. But, at that time, Diahann Carroll was— They told me she was going to win for six more weeks. I think I told you that.

ISOARDI

That's right. I think you did. That Diahann Carroll would win, that's right. And the whole thing was fixed.

BRYANT

It was fixed, yeah. But after I did Leon's, I worked a place up in Harlem that— What was the name of it? The 125 Club. Then I was supposed to have done a challenge thing with this girl, trumpet player Norma Carson at Birdland. She's a trumpet player, a good trumpet player.

ISOARDI

What do you mean, "challenge"?

BRYANT

Well, they were going to— You know how they—

ISOARDI

Pit you against each other?

BRYANT

Yes. And, I don't know, something happened where she couldn't do it or something, so we didn't do that. It was going to be at Birdland. So this guy booked me in Canada. At the time I had my family with me. So I went to Canada, and I stayed up there a year—

ISOARDI

You liked it?

BRYANT

Doing a single. There was so much work, you know. Traveling from out of Montreal, there were so many clubs in Canada at that time that had shows. Every little bar had a show. Trois Rivières and Toronto— So many little places that you could just catch the train and go to and then come back to Montreal. So I stayed there a year the first time, then I came home and stayed, and then I went back and stayed a year and a half the next time. Then I came back through Chicago, and I stayed there a year. I worked at a place right down from the Blue Note. It was right on the corner of Randolph and Clark— What are those streets? But I'd catch the elevated out there. I lived out on the South Side. I'd catch the elevated out there, and it would be a subway when I got downtown. And I'd come up from that subway, and that wind would whip the— Oh! [laughter] It was cold, boy! I'm telling you.

ISOARDI

Winter in Chicago.

BRYANT

Yes, yes, yes, yes. But I had a guy who wanted to be my manager there. And he had me play with Stan Kenton. He changed my name to Patt Dennis. I had forgotten about that. There was a play at the time, and the guy who was the regular producer or something— [laughter] This is weird. This man's

name— He changed it— He gave me a feminine version of it. I've got to remember what that was. The play was playing there in Chicago, and it was a friend of this guy who— [Patrick Dennis wrote Auntie Mame.] I've even forgotten his name, who was my manager [Bob Cahill]. This was in '58, I think it was. But, anyway, I played there about six months. I had my daughter, April Stone, with me, because I had sent— My son, Charles Stone, had gone home with his grandmother, April Goff, and I kind of got stranded there. I called Lionel Hampton to send me some money, and Howard Rumsey sent me some money so we could get home. [laughter] Because the lady that I was staying with, Emily Crawford, had gotten sick, and I had to find another place to stay, and everything was so high, it was time to move on. And I didn't have the money at that time to get home. So Howard Rumsey wired me some money, and Lionel Hampton.

ISOARDI

Now, you had played for Howard Rumsey out down at Hermosa [Beach, California] before, right?

BRYANT

Yeah. That was in the early fifties when I was at the Lighthouse.

ISOARDI

Was that a regular gig for you down there?

BRYANT

No, it wasn't a regular. Teddy Edwards was really the— It was Howard's group, but Teddy was really the front man. And I'd go every— You know, he'd hire me on the jam session night. I would get paid.

ISOARDI

While you were playing out at the Lighthouse, was that where you played with Bird [Charlie Parker]?

BRYANT

No. After I played there, that's when I got the job right next door at a place called the High Seas. Yeah. That Lighthouse job led into this High Seas job. The guy who was the leader was a saxophone player. He later married Mahalia Jackson. His name was Sigmund Galloway. We were playing the High Seas, and Max [Roach] was playing at the Lighthouse with Howard Rumsey.

ISOARDI

At the Lighthouse?

BRYANT

At the Lighthouse. And this was just before Max sent and got Clifford [Brown]. In fact, when they offered Max to get his own group, that's when he sent and got Clifford.

ISOARDI

So this is about '52, '53, something like that?

BRYANT

Yeah. 'Fifty-one or '52. Those pictures, that's when it's from. Before Max left the Lighthouse, that's when Charlie Parker came by to see him. They tried to get Charlie to play with them, and he wouldn't do it. But he came next door where we were. I think Dizzy had told him about me. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][But I had met Charlie through my husband Joe because he hung out with Bird. He was on dope too.] And at intermission I'd go over there. So he came over and then took this guy's tenor sax. Sigmund had just gotten a new Buescher sax. I think it was a new Buescher or Conn saxophone—tenor. Charlie took that tenor and blew, and it emptied the Lighthouse. Everybody came over there.

ISOARDI

Word got around that Bird was blowing, and everybody—

BRYANT

Hey, it was right next door! [laughter]

ISOARDI

So they heard him. [laughter]

BRYANT

That's right. I think one or two persons ran back and told them he was over there playing, and they couldn't get him to play at the Lighthouse with Max, you know. He didn't want to play.

ISOARDI

So you guys played that night?

BRYANT

That afternoon. It was a Sunday afternoon. You'd start to work at two o'clock in the afternoon and play till two in the morning. It was fun, though. It was fun. Those were some fun days down there. Like I said, there were three places: the High Seas, the Lighthouse, and the Hermosa Inn. You had the New Orleans music in the Hermosa Inn with Matty Matlock and Joe Davensborough. You had the straight-ahead West Coast jazz at the Lighthouse with Howard Rumsey's All-stars at the Lighthouse. We were kind of in between bop and swing at the High Seas. So you had a variety, you know. People would walk from one place to another. And on Sunday afternoons, you'd have that long day. You'd have a lunch break. You'd have your dinner break at eight o'clock, and had to be back to work at nine. In between, the kids would go down on the beach and have blanket parties. They'd be rolling from one partner to the other. It was wild. It was madness during those years, really. Sunday afternoon, for the jam session, they'd come in in their bathing suits because they'd be out on the beach, you know. They'd be having beer parties. They'd pour beer on each other right there in the club, at the table, because you had on your

bathing suits and stuff. It didn't matter. It was fun. There were some wild days. My trumpet teacher at UCLA had just gotten out of the service. He remembers me from being down there. He remembered some of the wild times too. Yeah. It was fun. It really was.

ISOARDI

Were there any other girl groups that you played with down there other than the Queens of Swing?

BRYANT

No. Like I told you, I played with the Sweethearts [of Rhythm] one week at the Million Dollar [Theatre].

ISOARDI

That was when you first got into town? Was that the one?

BRYANT

Yeah, it was a year after I arrived in L.A., 1946. It was the next year, because that next— Let's see, I got here in January, and I couldn't get registered, so I registered in September. I was going to UCLA at the time. But this was during the summer of '45 that I played. No, it was '46 when I played with them. So it was the next year after I got here. It was 1946. But, anyway, my dad wouldn't let me travel with them on account of how I saw the girls patting on each other and feeling each other's boobies. [laughter] I went home and blabbed it to my daddy, and he said, "No way. No way." The guy who rehearsed the band, Maurice King, I think he's still living. He was the musical director for a rock group called the Commodores. That group was the one that this guy came out of that wrote the song "Lady" and all those songs. [Lionel Richie] King was their musical conductor for years. But he was the one who rehearsed the Sweethearts. He was our musical conductor at that time. And then Tom Whaley was— Remember Tom Whaley? He was an arranger and copyist who kept Duke Ellington's library in order in the fifties, sixties, and

till Duke died in the seventies. Tom Whaley. He was also with the— I don't know what his position was with the Sweethearts then, but he was backstage with us. But Maurice King was the musical director. Because Anna Mae Winburn directed the band out front, but King would do the rehearsing and taught you the charts and stuff. I've got to think of his name too. But the other girl groups, there were the Darlings [of Rhythm], like I said, at the Plantation [Club]. The Queens of Swing are the ones that I stayed with the longest. And when we did the TV show [The Hollywood Sepia Tones], they changed our name to the Hollywood Sepia Tones.

ISOARDI

I think you talked about that last time.

BRYANT

Right. And after that, I started working. I got so fed up with girl groups because there was so much confusion and so much bullshit going on with them.

ISOARDI

What do you mean?

BRYANT

There was always one, "You said this," and the other one's saying, "You said that," and just petty stuff. I didn't have time for it, like I don't have time for it now. Because I get into my music or whatever— I didn't have time for all that. But there was always one who would keep some shit going. And I found out it wasn't just conducive to women's groups; it was with men too. As soon as I started working with men, I found they're the same way. There's always somebody going to keep some stuff going. But I found that I had outgrown— You know, I wasn't— There was no challenge. I couldn't— You get so far, and nobody's challenging you. You find yourself playing the same thing. There was no inspiration there. So I just stopped working with girl groups.

ISOARDI

Is that when you pretty much started working as a single, then, and getting your own—?

BRYANT

Right, yeah.

ISOARDI

Aha. And when you quit them was when?

BRYANT

It was in 1954. Because my first job doing a single was at the Oasis [Club]. And then what's-his-name had the band— Eric Dolphy. Eric Dolphy had the band.

ISOARDI

He was leading a band then?

BRYANT

Yeah, it was his band. He also had Harper Cosby and Vernon Slater, tenor sax. Because, see, Maynard Sloate and his father owned the Oasis at the time, and that's the way I got my record date. It would have to be in '52 or '53. In '53, I think.

ISOARDI

Oh, this is quite a bit later, then. Well, you had been a single for a while, then, by that time, by '56 or so, '57?

BRYANT

Well, wait a minute. Yeah, '53. When did I start my single? Yeah, well, because it's when I left and went to New York. It had to be.

ISOARDI

And you went to New York as a single, right?

BRYANT

Yeah. It must have been '52 or '53. It must have been '52 when I was working down there, because right after that what's-his-name went to New York too. Eric went to New York. He left the Oasis and went to New York.

ISOARDI

I think it was shortly after that. I guess he went to—what?—join Chico Hamilton?

BRYANT

Yeah. And before Chico went to New York, he sent for Paul Horn. I picked Paul Horn up at the airport when he came in to join Chico, he and his wife, and brought them to my house and let Chico pick them up over there.

ISOARDI

What do you remember about Eric Dolphy? Did you know him before this gig at the Oasis? Do you remember him in younger days—?

BRYANT

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Sure. I knew him. Sure. You know, we hung out together at the jam sessions. I never went over to his studio at his home, but there was a place down on Western called Glen's. Anybody ever mention that?

ISOARDI

No, no one.

BRYANT

This man and his wife had this place. It was on Western just south of Adams. It was a restaurant, but you went up a few stairs and there was a little room. There was a piano there. People like Carl Perkins or Gerald [Wiggins] played there—Piano players would play there. And you'd go and sit in. Mostly singers would play and sing. But you could go in there and sit with a cup of coffee, and he wouldn't heckle you to buy or

whatever. And when we got off, that was one of our places that we hung out after we got off. You could always see whoever was in town or whoever was working. That's where you congregated. There always was a place, a central place that we met, you know. And that was one of the places, Glen's on Western Avenue. My cousin, Joyce Bryant, used to go in there and sing all the time. I'd go in there and sit and listen to the piano players who were working there. So we'd hang out there or whatever the common place was to meet. Norm's on La Cienega and Washington [Boulevard] was a common place for a while. And at the Chinese restaurant on— It's a bowling alley [Holiday Bowl] but they had a Chinese restaurant there on Crenshaw [Boulevard] around the 3800 block of Crenshaw or something, right down from Boy's Market there on Crenshaw. There was a Chinese restaurant there. It's a bowling alley, and the restaurant is a Chinese food restaurant. We hung out there sometimes. Then there was a place over on Figueroa [Street] we hung out. It was a Norm's. It was another one of those, you know. Just wherever the common place was is where we hung out. And we'd talk. Eric would come to my house and we'd listen to records. Just before he went to New York, he came by to tell me he thought he was going to go to New York. He was going to make the move. He said Gerald Wilson had told him he should do it. He wanted to know what I thought about it. That's the kind of friends we were. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][Eric was a very shy, inhibited person, very caring and loving.] And then, when I got to New York in the sixties with Billy Williams, we were playing the Latin Quarter. And we were going on the road. I had a lot of junk, because we stayed on the road all the time. We were going up to the Catskills, and I had all this junk. So I went up to Eric's loft. He let me leave my stuff, my record player, radio, extra seasonal clothes, hats, etc. I carried all that kind of stuff with me, hot plates and stuff. [laughter] I went up to his loft and left my stuff there, my summer hats and stuff. He

let me leave my stuff there. And he would practice. You know, he'd start practicing his stuff. He and I were very good friends, very good friends. He was a couple of years younger than I was, so it was like I was his big sister or whatever.

ISOARDI

What was he like?

BRYANT

He was very shy, and he wasn't that talkative. But when he did talk, he had something to say. I was just looking through my records. I collect old 78's [rpm records]. I've got a record. It was his record. I bought it.

ISOARDI

Really? I didn't know he recorded anything that far back.

BRYANT

No, this was his collection.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see, from his— Oh, oh.

BRYANT

Yeah, yeah, one of his collection. I have two records of his, 78's. But I was just looking through some of my 78's, and it has got his name on it in his handwriting. I think it's a Dizzy record. Either Dizzy or Charlie Parker. It was so weird when I bought— I go in and buy these records, and I get home and look at them and there it was. I was so surprised. And I got a little warm glow, you know, just thinking about him. He was nondescript, really. He wasn't a person that you could say, "Oh, man, he was this and he was that." Anybody would have a hard time really telling you how Eric was, the type of person he was. He was a good-hearted person, a warm person, but he just wasn't outgoing. He was into his music, and that was that. He wasn't like the rest of us, you know, out there having a

good time and finger-popping and all that stuff. They said at his house he was a little different, but, like I said, I never went there.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What do you remember about his musical development? Do you remember when you first heard him play and what he sounded like or—?

BRYANT

Yeah. It wasn't like he was when he went to New York.

ISOARDI

It wasn't?

BRYANT

No. No, he wasn't into that kind of outside—

ISOARDI

Yeah, really. I mean, in the early sixties, he's one of the three or four major figures in the avant-garde.

BRYANT

Yeah, right. But there in the fifties, he wasn't. That developed when he got to New York. That might have been where he was heading all the time. I think after he got with Chico, that's where that started. But at the Oasis, no, because his was a house show band, and he played for the shows. I was doing an act. They had a dancer on the show and singers. They had Dinah Washington and people like that playing. So he wasn't playing that kind of stuff.

ISOARDI

Any other particular individuals that you remember from the forties or early fifties on Central who stick out in your mind? Any particular players or—?

BRYANT

Well, like I told you, Frank Morgan.

ISOARDI

Yeah. I think you mentioned Frank last time. You mentioned Billie Holiday.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You gave a very nice portrait of her.

BRYANT

And Wardell Gray was in the band at the Alabam with me. And then, before that, I was up in Frisco [San Francisco] at a place, the California Supper Club, and he used to come by the club. He had eyes for this girl bass player, a friend of mine, Doris Jarrett. He'd come by the rooms there. He'd get in bed, and I'd be on one side and she'd be on the other.

ISOARDI

You're kidding!

BRYANT

Yes, yes. [laughter] [tape recorder off] Now, where were we?

ISOARDI

So Wardell Gray was not shy. [laughter]

BRYANT

No. Oh, no. No, he was not. You know, I had forgotten all about that till my girlfriend reminded me of that happening, because I'd forgotten about it. [laughter] He sure did. He'd crawl in— But, you know, he was on the needle, and he was out. He might not have even known where he was. But those

were some days, too, in San Francisco. We played— Well, it was with the girl group, the Queens of Swing. And we played down— We played the— They called it the International Settlement. We played at a place called the Arabian Nights. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][At the Arabian Nights, in the International Settlement, they had a lady singer who sang risqué songs. It was a "B" bar, i.e., they expected all of the females to order drinks. They would serve you soft drinks, but charge the customer for the price of liquor. I never did drink, and we got into a big argument with the owner because I wouldn't order a drink. I'd order a Coke or 7-up.] This was in '47. We were up there about six months or longer. And this place we played, California Supper Club, had little shows too. We'd play for a dancer, "Zelda." And then there was a girl that— Her name was Faye Thomas. She was a one-man show. She could play the piano. They'd pull this little spinet out on the floor and she'd entertain. She was very good. I think I showed you a picture of us at this club. We were sitting in this club.

ISOARDI

So there was a lot going on up there?

BRYANT

Oh, yes.

ISOARDI

There were a lot of clubs, a lot of music, after-hours jamming, and—?

BRYANT

Yeah. There was Bop City.

ISOARDI

That was the place to go? [laughter]

BRYANT

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes, there was Bop City. And then you had the Long Bar in Oakland, and was it Leon's in Oakland? I think it was a Leon's in Oakland too. And a couple of other places I was looking at on my list of clubs were up there. And everybody was there. You know, everybody played there. Miles [Davis] and Dizzy and Art Blakey and Max. Everybody played. Everybody was coming through there. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][Jimmy Heath, Milt Jackson, Percy Heath, Dizzy, Kenny Dorham, Hampton Hawes, etc.] Dexter Gordon. That's who I met when I first got here, too, you know.

ISOARDI

How did you meet him?

BRYANT

I met him at Doris Jarrett's house. He used to come by. He had gone to school with this girl that I was living with, Doris Jarrett Meilleur. I was living with her family then. They lived right off of Central, on Forty-fifth [Street]. And he would come by to see Doris and her sister, Jackie [Jarrett], because they went to high school together. And that's when I met him. Then when I'd see him at the jam sessions, you know, we'd talk. Then he found out I played trumpet. So we became very good friends. So who else? Lucky Thompson. In the early fifties, I played jam sessions over in Glendale at a place that was called something, Percy's Melody Room, in the alley. At that time, you know, blacks weren't really welcome in Glendale.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, if this is the same place, when I talked to Bill [William] Douglass, he said there was a club in Glendale he used to go to to play, he said, but you didn't wander anywhere outside.

BRYANT

No, you didn't.

ISOARDI

And the minute you were finished, you left. He said they used to call that Glendale area "Little Mississippi."

BRYANT

Yeah, that's right. That's right. The club owners usually had to put your name down with the police department so that if they stopped you they knew that you had a reason for being there.
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Wow.

BRYANT

Yeah. And I was working with Bumps Myers. The man who had the session, Poison Gardner, he was the piano player for—I don't know if I mentioned this before—Al what's-his-name, the gangster. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][He was also a bookie.]

ISOARDI

Al Capone?

BRYANT

Yes. In Chicago.

ISOARDI

He was Capone's piano player?

BRYANT

Yeah. Yeah. And a very good pianist. A little short guy. Poison Gardner. And those sessions were famous too. Everybody went over there. Conrad Gozza lived in Glendale, so he used to come in all the time—the trumpet player who was the first

trumpet on the Dinah Shore Chevy Show and all those big TV shows.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

He wouldn't rehearse. He'd just walk in and cut the show down. He wouldn't have to— You know, just give him his cues. He was that kind of trumpet player. And Manny Klein, trumpet. Who's the guy who would play the accordian who was on the Spade Cooley show, but he liked jazz too? Tommy Gumina.

ISOARDI

Gee, I don't know that name.

BRYANT

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So this was a good place to go jam.

BRYANT

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

What, once a week?

BRYANT

Yeah. Once a week. That was one of the places to jam. This was in the fifties. You had to go around in the alley and come through the back. There were places in— I worked a lot in Whittier and Rosemead. What's that other place? The Pioneer Club was in Norwalk, out that way. Anyway, they used to have good sessions there. William Woodman, tenor player, would be playing there. And, of course, they were a very big part of Central Avenue and the L.A. jazz—

ISOARDI

The Woodman Brothers [Coney, Britt, and William Woodman]?

BRYANT

Yes. And the father, William Woodman, Sr.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (April 18, 1990)

ISOARDI

Let me ask you, Clora, in looking back, how important was Central Avenue in your development as an artist?

BRYANT

Oh, it was the—

ISOARDI

What did it give you?

BRYANT

Everything.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

It gave me the motivation, the inspiration, enthusiasm, the desire, joy, you name it. Central Avenue was it for me. It started in Texas, but that was my fulfillment. When I got to Central Avenue, it was like I was where I was supposed to be. At that point in time, I was where I was supposed to be. And at that point in time, that was the place to be. Because, see, when we played the Apollo [Theatre] in New York [City], we were staying at the Cecil Hotel, where downstairs was Minton's. So where you're supposed to be, I've been there.

ISOARDI

The two centers.

BRYANT

Two or three times, you know. I couldn't go in the room, naturally, but the embryo was forming right there at that time, in 1943 and '44, when I was there.

ISOARDI

So Central was really important in giving—

BRYANT

Central was— Hey, Central gave me the stamina. It gave me the wherewithal that I needed to take that step. That's where I really took the giant step to get into my music, because when I wasn't on the avenue, I was at home doing what I had heard on the avenue. It extended over into— Central Avenue became— I just breathed it in like osmosis. Central Avenue was my thing. It really was my thing. And when Central Avenue shut down, I still carried Central Avenue to Western Avenue, to Glen's, and to the Oasis [Club], over there on [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] Boulevard to the California Club, where Max Roach and Clifford Brown started. Central Avenue was the name. The street was over there, but it was all over L.A. Central Avenue was all over L.A. Wherever we congregated, that was our Central Avenue. It became more than a street, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah. It was real spirit.

BRYANT

That's right. It was a spirit. It was your goal. It was my life, really. It really was. That's where I found out who Clora was and what Clora wanted to be, really. It's something I can't really tell. I can't put into words what Central Avenue really was to me. It was everything. It started everything. It's like that song, "The Start of Something Big." Central Avenue was. I knew it the minute that I walked onto the avenue, the minute

I rode there and my brother [Melvin Celeste Bryant] was showing me all these places that day from the streetcar, the "U" car. I knew. When I walked up to that union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767], I knew. I got off the streetcar and walked up the street to that union, approached that wooden frame building. There was an aura. There was a feeling. And it's something that I think only people who are really in tune to whatever— No matter whether it's music or if you're a clerk or a steel mill worker, when you get around certain things, it's something that you— If you're really into that and you feel it, you know that this is where you're supposed to be. You know, it's just a feeling. It really is. And now I can get my Central Avenue in a lot of different places. Like when I'm around Count Basie's band and they're swinging their butt off, that's Central Avenue. You know, it's held over into my genes now, my whole being. That Central Avenue is there. That's how deep Central Avenue is to me. I was in Russia and I heard some music. That was Central Avenue. I take it with me. I didn't leave it over there like they did. Central Avenue is a part of me. It's in Clora Bryant. It's in a lot of people and they probably don't even know it. They've shut it off. But I never closed it off. I carried it with me. I've had it in New York, sitting there listening. And Birdland? Hey, they thought that was New York, but that was Central Avenue. There's a Central Avenue in every large city or any city that had a black congregation where they started their music. Kansas City has a Central Avenue. It might be called Main Street or whatever, but, you know, like 125th [Street] was a Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

It's just— What's in a name? By any other name, it's Central Avenue to me. And that's how deep it is with me. It's me.

Central Avenue, to me, is me. That's how much a part of me it is. It started my whole thing. Well, it was a continuation of the things that I felt when I would hear music in my hometown. And I knew I was reaching for something. I knew there was something there. It's just like being pregnant. You know you've got a baby, but you don't know what it is till it comes out. [laughter] That's what my hometown was. I knew I was going for something. It was in me. But when I got to L.A. and to Central Avenue, I knew that baby was it. It was Central Avenue, it's me. It's part of me. It's just that deep. I don't know if I'm really putting into words exactly what I feel about it or what it has meant to me, but it's still there. Central Avenue closed down, but I didn't feel any distress or any sadness because, by the time it stopped going, we'd moved on over here, and Western Avenue became Central Avenue. Then Crenshaw [Boulevard] became Central Avenue. Vine Street was Central Avenue. Central Avenue was— It's history. There's another word I'm trying to think of that really says what I feel about Central Avenue. Central Avenue could be my heaven on earth. Really. I was in heaven when I was standing outside of that Downbeat Club. Many a day when I was sitting in the Downbeat Club or I was sitting in the [Club] Alabam or I was in the Last Word [Cafe] or Lovejoy's, or wherever, I could be— At that time, we had drive-ins. There was a Stan's drive-in up here on Crenshaw and Jefferson [Boulevard]. And they used to have a— Larry Finley used to have a radio broadcast from there, right there on Crenshaw and Jefferson. And then the broadcast from Bill Sampson from the [Jack's] Basket Room. That was Central Avenue. That was Central Avenue, but that was my Central Avenue. This being a part of all these things. Even Hermosa Beach was a Central Avenue. I'd sit there and listen to those sounds, you know, I'd be just absorbed with it. It was just— Oh! And that's kind of strange. I've heard a lot of guys say that's strange to hear a female say that, because they think they're the only ones that are able to experience those kinds of things. But I did, because that's how deep the

music had gotten into me. And like sometimes my kids say, "Well, Mom, why don't you—? Why do you sit around—?" I'm sitting around listening to music. They don't understand. I'll play some records and I'll be sitting there just so absorbed in it. "Mom, why don't you get out and do something?" It will be a Saturday night or Friday night, and my kids are going, "Why don't you get out?" I said, "I am doing something." They don't understand it. But I was absorbed. I was lost in that music because it brought back things that had happened, you know, and feelings I'd had before. That's how much it is. I can sit here and play my 78 [rpm] records or some of my old albums—hey, it's back to the fifties and forties. It's something like— I'll tell you what it's something like. What's that show? There was a guy who died from— He was an addict. What was the name of that show? The Twilight Zone.

ISOARDI

Oh, Rod Serling's show?

BRYANT

Yeah. It becomes like that sometimes when I'm listening, you know. I relate back, and things become vivid. I can see things. A song might make me remember something that I heard when I was sitting listening to Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges was playing, you know, or "Sweets" [Harry Edison] was playing or Cat Anderson was playing. All these people I knew one on one. You know, that's what makes it so indelible in my mind. It's because I hear this stuff and I knew those people. Paul Gonsalves. Oh, man. Willie Cook. The two Franks [Frank Wess and Frank Foster] when they were with Basie. Those sounds. You never hear them again. But I play the records, and I can hear it like it was live when I heard it sitting looking at the guys. And I go to hear the Basie band out here at Disneyland. They always like for me to come out there, because, boy, I'm very vocal. I'll be sitting there at the ringside and they'll be— I try to tape the band— I can't use it,

because all you can hear is my mouth. [laughter] And somebody, "Yeah, yeah! Come on, blow!" You know, "All right!" I'm humming this solo right along with them or something. I don't even know the song half the time. I can hum the riffs. Frank [Foster] will say, "How did you know that? I just wrote it. We just played—" It's something I can just follow. It's just an instinct. You know? It has become that deep into me. And that's the way it is. And now, like, when I went to hear John Clayton's band that night. Remember, I was in heaven.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

BRYANT

That's the way I am. That's it. I was sitting there. I'd never heard his arrangements before, and I was humming right along with them, making all those breaks and accents with them. It's just like I know what's written on that music before they play it. That's just how much it's— That was Central Avenue night.

ISOARDI

Oh, there was a feeling at the Grand Avenue Bar [and Grill] that night that was just fantastic.

BRYANT

It really was. It really was. And that's the thing that was at Central Avenue all the time. Can you imagine that feeling every night? From club to club? Can you imagine that?

ISOARDI

No. All I feel, especially after hearing so many of you tell these marvelous stories, is a sense of loss. People don't—

BRYANT

Yeah, it is.

ISOARDI

There's nothing like that where kids can—

BRYANT

It definitely— That's why I try to make my kids sit down and listen, and I try to explain to them. But they'll never understand.

ISOARDI

No. It has to be real in your time.

BRYANT

It has to be felt and lived. You have to live it. And I'm so glad that I did, you know. But I want to leave something where the kids can understand that that's the way it was. It's not about— Today there was a rap song on, and my son, Kevin Milton, has been listening to some old songs in from the seventies, and there was a tune called "Release Yourself." He wants to cover it. I said, "All you've got to do is just put the modern beat to it," you know. So when the thing came on TV today—a rap-like thing came on—I had him come in and listen to it. I hummed the song "Release Yourself" and showed him how the two fit together. You know. That's what I want to do. I've got to get into showing the evolution, how we came from gospel music. You know, like the people in the Baptist churches would be down on you about—I was Baptist—they'd be down on you about going to dances and listening to that music. But I heard it in my church! They'd forget that that's what they were doing. [sings] "Going to lay down my sword and shield—" They're supposed to be shouting, you know, and the tambourines would be going. That ain't nothing but swing and jazz or whatever name you call it! That's what it was! But the preacher would be talking about sinners like a dog, you know, out there listening to the devil's music. And it was right there in my church. I'm up there singing it, you know. "Amazing Grace." You can soul to death on "Amazing Grace," you know.

[laughter] I mean, we had a preacher that could sing the blues better than Ray Charles. But he'd be talking about us going to dances and playing that devil's music. But I want to show how it correlates. How it all— You know, the same rhythms that I hear coming from Africa, how it moved on into this, what we have now. How the blues went on into swing, because the blues is in everything we do. There's no doubt about that. But to show where it cut off here and then became something else. That's what I want to do. Since I have lived through a lot of that, I want to do that. I was explaining that to a master class that I did over at USC [University of Southern California], and John Thomas said, "Well, when you decide what you're going to do, let me know. I'd like to know what it is." He said, "I've been trying to explain it too." I said, "You can't unless you've lived it and you really feel it." A little trumpet player over there who used to play with Basie.

ISOARDI

Let me ask you about something a little bit different but very important, because Central set the pace in another way, in amalgamating the black [musicians] union [Local 767] with the white union [Local 47].

BRYANT

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

That hadn't been done before. And some of the musicians of Local 767 took the lead in bringing that about.

BRYANT

Right.

ISOARDI

You were around, I guess, during the amalgamation.

BRYANT

Yeah, but I wasn't a part of it.

ISOARDI

You weren't interested in that or following it or—?

BRYANT

No, no. Well, you know, they weren't looking for any females to be a part of that.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

No. We weren't a part of that because that was the male part. That was the male thing. They didn't have women's lib. It was the ones who had the desire—like Buddy [Collette] and Marl Young and Benny Carter and all those people—who wanted to be a part of the studio scene. And, like I said, nobody was knocking the door down to record women. Melba [Liston] had gotten in on a date with Dexter Gordon simply because he made her or insisted. You know, he really almost had to pick her up and take her to do it. But at that time they weren't knocking the door down to record women.

ISOARDI

Let alone get a studio gig.

BRYANT

Right. There was no push for us, for women, to do it. And the men were trying to get themselves in, so they definitely did not want that kind of competition. And when they did it, listening to both sides of the coin, like, the older guys who were in—like Vi Redd's father [Alton Redd] and the president of the local [Leo Davis] and the treasurer [Paul Howard] and all of them—speaking about some of the minuses of amalgamating the union. We lost money, we lost— There was a little prestige there that you could never capture over at the

white local. And it's become even less than that, than it was when we first went there. Now there's no— Oh, they treat you like a piece of dirt over there now. There's no pride. You had a pride. You had somewhere to go and see your peers who were on the same level with you and could talk about the same things you talked about. When we first went over to the white local, all the guys weren't for it. They weren't for the amalgamation. So you met a little hostility. The people who had been working at the black local, they threw some crumbs at them, gave them positions that were way below their intelligence. So there were— There were some minuses. And I wasn't really for the amalgamation at first, because—

ISOARDI

For the reasons you just said?

BRYANT

Yeah. Because we did lose— I mean, as late as two years ago, I called the New York local [802] to try and find out what did happen to all the money that we put over there. They said, "That was just absorbed into Local 47." They didn't have to give an account of nothing. And there was quite a bit of money over there. We lost— What is that you have when you have— A title or something like that, you get— It's not called a title, but it's something like a deed or something that you get when you— A charter. You lose that, and that's kind of a prestige-type thing. It's the same way, to me, as integrating the schools. You lose some of your roots; you lose some of your togetherness. I know when I was teaching out in the [San Fernando] Valley and they were busing the kids from Watts and Compton out there, that's when we lost the kids. We've lost a whole generation of kids, and going on two generations of kids, because that was the seventies. So the seventies, the eighties, and now the nineties, they'll never get it back, because those black kids were coming out there, and the white

teachers didn't understand what they were saying. They had to take a class called ebonics.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

Yeah. They paid them. They would get another pay-raise level, like, if you—

ISOARDI

For taking this class?

BRYANT

In ebonics. That's what they call black language, ebonics.

ISOARDI

Ebonics?

BRYANT

You heard me.

ISOARDI

E-b-o-n-i-c-s?

BRYANT

That's right. Ebonics. They would get paid to take this class, because they said they didn't know what the kids were talking about. They were talking all that hip stuff. And then— [laughter] Yeah, I laugh at that one. I thought it was so sad then. But the kids would come to school, and by the time they got there— You know, they had to get up at five o'clock to get on the bus to be out there in the Valley at eight o'clock or eight fifteen. They didn't want to be bothered with school. Most of them had been either smoking pot or dropping pills. When I was at Taft High School, they didn't want to be bothered with that. So the teachers didn't want to be bothered

with them. They would just send them to the office. Do you know that half of those kids that went out there, they got F's straight across their card? F's, straight F's. I said, "How can you make straight F's?"

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's hard to do.

BRYANT

They didn't care. I said, "What are you going to do?" "I don't care." I said, "What does your mother—?" "I don't care. She doesn't care, either." They'd have the open house at school. They'd send the school buses out to Watts to pick up the parents, and they'd come back with one or two people on them. Ten buses. Lost. Lost. The teachers didn't know how to handle it. And that's why I can't stand Rita Walters now, because she's the one who pushed on that, you know. There were other ways to integrate these kids besides busing them from way out there. I think it was a conspiracy. I really do. And it was the same way with this, the locals. There were some musicians who wanted and needed— There was a need for blacks to be in the studios, but there should have been another way to do it, because we lost something that we'll never get back, and that was a togetherness. Central Avenue was a togetherness. We'll never have that again. You know, like, every culture should have their own space—not being segregated—but just have a space where you feel free to do whatever you want to do. It doesn't mean that you don't want nobody else in there, but just have a space where you can— Like you have your own home. You have your home where you can come in and do what you want. My friend from Russia [Alexander Belousova] is gone, and now I feel like I have my space again. While he was here, there was a certain routine that I had to go through. But now I can just be Clora. This is my space. It's the same way with that local over there. You'd walk in there, and there would be Basie's band upstairs

rehearsing or Duke Ellington's band or Benny Carter or Nat King Cole, you know, or Lloyd Reese would be rehearsing those kids on Sunday upstairs. There was a thing. But we go out here, and the minute you walk in, you feel a coldness, you know, because there are so many people there who don't want you there in the first place. Even now that it's been integrated for thirty-some years, it's getting a coldness there again. You know, when they fired Jimmy Clark—

ISOARDI

Who is Jimmy Clark?

BRYANT

He was the last black business agent we had up there.

ISOARDI

When was this?

BRYANT

Two years ago? Two or three years ago they fired him. Two years, I think, it's been. Over two years. They fired him because he'd been there longer than anybody else. You know, he was making more money than the president [Bernie Fleischer]. He was making more money than the vice president [Vince de Barry], who had been there forever, but Jimmy had been there longer than he had. Jimmy had been there, I think, under about four presidents. Vince de Barry didn't like him at all, and I think he was the one behind them finally getting rid of Jimmy. But when Jimmy told me that they were asking him to resign, I said, "Don't do it." And I called guys together. I called I don't know how many guys. We were meeting over here at Carl Burnett's club. The drummer.

ISOARDI

Carl Burnett?

BRYANT

Carl Burnett has a place over here on Leimert [Boulevard] in Leimert Park, and we'd meet on Saturdays. I was telling them, I said, "We've got to unify and go up there and stand up to those people and tell them we want Jimmy to stay." So we met for about three or four Saturdays. I had to go out of town. One week I went to Denver. When I came back, it was time to go up to the union there, because Jimmy was about— They had coerced him into signing a paper saying that he'd retire early, take an early retirement. So I went up to the board meeting. And there was a bunch of us. There was me, Gerald Wilson, Al McKibbon—who else were some of the biggies?—Larance Marable, Buddy Collette. It was about thirty of us went up there. We filed into the boardroom. Well, they knew we were there because there's always a spy. [laughter] The spies told them we were downstairs and we were coming to the meeting. So when we got up there, they knew what we were about, which I was trying to keep secret till we got in there to hit them with it, you know. But we get in there. So Bernie Fleischer says, "Well, what's the problem?" I'm the only girl, you know, and I'd organized this shit, so I'm waiting for somebody to say something. You know, Gerald or somebody. So I said, "Well, we want to find out why you're insisting that Jimmy Clark retire." And then Gerald Wilson said something. And somebody else— Who else was there? Then Bill [William] Douglass, who had just been elected treasurer, he was trying to take up for what they'd done. You know, "We didn't do it. Jimmy just decided he wanted to take an early retirement." So I said, "Well, why don't we bring Jimmy Clark in here?" So they brought Jimmy in. Jimmy's kind of laid back, you know. He had been to some of our meetings over here in Leimert, and we'd told him exactly what we wanted to do, and he was for it. But he got up there and he just said, "Well, they told me that I had to retire." Right there, he made them out of a lie. So Jimmy went out, and I started asking the president some questions. They said, "Well, we'll be in the red." It was almost time for the fiscal year or whatever, and they would be in the

red. And Jimmy's salary was this and that, and it was throwing them in the red, and blah, blah, blah. I said, "Well, I understand that, in the last Overture, you want to paint the building, and you've got this thing in here where you can come in and video[tape] your group." I said, "That's costing money." I said, "You could cut out some of these other things and keep Jimmy on." "No." I'm asking all these questions. So finally, Bernie said, "I don't have to answer your questions." I said, "You're the president of the local, aren't you?" He said, "Yes, I'm the president, but I'm not a slave." Now, he looked around the room and saw all these black people. All he could think of was the slavery time. So I said, "Neither am I. What's that got to do with it?" You know? And he said, "Well, Jimmy's out, that's it. What else do you want to discuss?"

ISOARDI

Boy!

BRYANT

And when he said that, I'm standing there waiting for these black guys to say something.

ISOARDI

Nobody said anything?

BRYANT

Nobody said nothing. I was so pissed, I didn't know what to do. So the next day, you know, after he said that, I was ready to go, because I was fixing to really become a nigger. [laughter] I was about to get off. I was ready to go. But the next day, I went up to his office. I went in there and I told him, I said, "Bernie, as long as your ass points to the ground, don't you ever say anything about a slave to me." And I walked out and slammed the door. I had to tell him, you know. I didn't want to not act like a lady, but I had to tell him. And that was as much like a lady as I could tell him and let him know exactly what I felt. The next time I saw him, I just knew

he wasn't going to say nothing, but he comes over, "Oh, Clora, how are you doing?" Everybody knows me up there now, though. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Or about you! [laughter]

BRYANT

But those were some of the reasons why I have felt like— Sometimes there are other alternatives. What they did, it made history, and it was good for some people. But now those same people who instigated that, they're out here in the mainstream trying to get a job just like me, you know. It only lasted—what?—twenty some years, thirty years, if that long. All of them worked. You could name them on two hands, the ones who really profited from it: Earl Palmer, Bill Green, Buddy Collette, Benny Carter, Marl Young—Marl, after the Lucille Ball show, *I Love Lucy*, his thing went down—Red Callender. Bohanon came in later, George Bohanon. With the TV thing, you know, Benny Powell and Jimmy Cleveland, etc., were on the Merv Griffin Show when they came out here, and Snooky [Young] was on the Johnny Carson show [The Tonight Show] when they came out here. But you can name them on two hands, the people who really benefited from that, as far as the studio work is concerned. And that is what it was all about.

ISOARDI

The studio work.

BRYANT

The studio work. So, to me, I don't know if it really served a good purpose. I really don't.

ISOARDI

When you joined, were there many women in [Local] 767?

BRYANT

Yes. There were— Let's see. There was "Ginger" [Emma] Smock, a violinist. [Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][Vi Redd, Minnie Hightower, Elyse Blye, Ann Brown, Nellie Lutchter, Betty Hall Jones, Hadda Brooks, Marie Coker, Martha Davis.]

ISOARDI

Could you count them on one hand?

BRYANT

No. No, there were more than that. There were about— what?—fifteen? I think there were about fifteen women that I know of. I'm not sure of the number.

ISOARDI

In the local?

BRYANT

Yes.

ISOARDI

Out of some—what?—three or four hundred members?

BRYANT

Yeah. Because, see, the singers didn't have to belong.

ISOARDI

Ah. So you were just instrumentalists who were in the—?

BRYANT

See, the singers belonged to AGVA [American Guild of Variety Artists]. But we were about fifteen or twenty. And some of those came and went, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Did you attend meetings at 767 regularly?

BRYANT

Not too many, no. No, no. That wasn't my bag, either. The union, to me, was— They had fish frys, they had barbecues, rehearsals. It was a meeting place. Not for meetings per se, but it was a congregating [place], where you go and socialize or get a job. There was a clique there. There were certain people who they always called for certain gigs or background studio work, you know, extras and stuff like that. But there was a camaraderie. There was a camaraderie, Steve, that you can't— You can't replace it. There was a camaraderie that musicians had then that they'll never have again, because now we're pitted against each other. You know what I mean? Like, Quincy [Jones] never comes over on this part of town. Benny Carter never comes. Those people who made it in the studio, they— Buddy just began to come over. Bill Green came often, you know. They all hung out in Hollywood that way. That's where they made their money. Earl Palmer— Who else? There are some more. Gerald wasn't really into that studio work, either. Gerald always wanted to have his own band, and that was it. He didn't care nothing about mixing with the other stuff, you know. But you could name them on two hands those who really made it on the— I said Red Callender, eh?

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah. [tape recorder off]

BRYANT

It was good for some, but for the majority it hasn't been that good.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Let me conclude by asking you a couple of big questions. You touched on it earlier. Why did the avenue decline? What brought it about?

BRYANT

In my— In my opinion— [laughter]

ISOARDI

I did say it was a big question.

BRYANT

In my opinion, it was on account of harassment.

ISOARDI

Harassment by—?

BRYANT

[Los Angeles] city hall, which meant the police—

ISOARDI

Beginning in the late forties, early fifties?

BRYANT

No, it was in the late fifties when that started.

ISOARDI

Late fifties?

BRYANT

Yeah. Well, not late fifties. No, it wasn't. It was around the middle, I guess. I have to really— I don't want to say it exactly, because I don't want to put out nothing that's wrong. In the fifties, I'll say, they found out that there was more action on the avenue than the clubs were getting out west— out northwest, you know, Hollywood. See, there was too much money being dropped. All the movie stars were coming over and dropping a lot of money. All the white playgirls were coming over and dropping a lot of money with the black guys. It was a political thing, really, in my opinion. Because— I mean, there were good times being had over there, you know. A lot of money.

ISOARDI

What kind of harassment was taking place?

BRYANT

They would stop the women and pat them down and call them nigger lovers and all that kind of stuff.

ISOARDI

All the white women?

BRYANT

Yeah. And the men, they would do them just as bad.

ISOARDI

The cops.

BRYANT

You know, you'd be up against the wall spread-eagled, and they'd be taking your pictures and all that kind of stuff. And they'd catch you over there, and you'd better not have a ticket out or something. You know, the least little thing and you were going down.

ISOARDI

So they'd drive people away by doing that.

BRYANT

Exactly.

ISOARDI

Even if they didn't arrest them, they'd think twice before coming back down to the avenue.

BRYANT

Right, yeah. Exactly, exactly.

ISOARDI

And without that patronage, the clubs on Central were—

BRYANT

Sure. The money wasn't flowing. That was the whole point, to close them down. It was the whole point. I mean, they started closing up one by one by one. And you can understand that. You know, if your source dries up, and you've been used to a certain income to keep your club going, and then all the sudden it dries up, that's it. Well, time was passing. I guess it was time to move on. But that helped to close it up. To me, that's what it was. And I've heard people say, "Well, the streetcar. They took up the what's-the-name streetcar." I said, "Maybe the musicians who lived out there were riding the streetcar, but not the people who were spending money. They wouldn't be caught dead riding on a streetcar with their diamonds and furs and shit on." That was the whole point, to come down there and flash what they had: their clothes, their furs, their diamonds, their big cars, you know, with their chauffeurs. Hey, the streetcars had nothing do with that, besides the musicians, maybe. But not the people who were spending the money. Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner and all those people coming down there. Ava Gardner. Uh-uh [negative]. They probably have never ridden on the streetcar before. That sure wouldn't have stopped them from coming down there.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (April 18, 1990)

ISOARDI

Okay, then. One final big question. You talked about how important Central was to you and your development.

BRYANT

Right.

ISOARDI

In looking back, now, sort of at the whole thing— and not just you—but how you evaluate the importance of Central overall?

I mean, it can be socially, economically, culturally, but also—and perhaps more directly to the project—musically.

BRYANT

Musically?

ISOARDI

In the history of American music, what would you say Central Avenue contributed, what its importance was?

BRYANT

I'm elated and overjoyed that they are finally realizing that Central Avenue in L.A. was here during that time, because, before, [if] you'd mention that, it didn't mean anything. And that hurt me all these years that there had been no recognition of the fact that Central Avenue was there. Then, when they did start to recognize Central Avenue, I was getting pissed because they weren't really recognizing some of the people who were there—like me. So Central Avenue, to that whole era, of that whole branch of the music, from bebop and swing and the blues— There was a lot of blues then, a lot of swing going on. There was a lot of swing and blues going on before I got here in '45, but '45 was the main year. Like I said, I was here at the right time. From 1945 on up to the fifties was hot. 'Forty-three and '44 was jumping, music-wise. You know. But after Bird [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy Gillespie came, and then with Roy Porter, Howard McGhee, and Teddy Edwards— Teddy got here in '45, too, I think. With those people coming along, they stamped, and they put Central Avenue on the map. And it's very, very, very important. It's a very important part of the jazz history that has been overlooked. It's sort of like jazz itself. Central Avenue in L.A. was like a stepchild. And that's the way jazz is in the scope of music, as far as the people are concerned. We're stepchildren. Like they had this thing over there for [Nelson] Mandela in London. It was a pop thing. Now they want to have a pop thing here. I said, "Why not a jazz

thing?" You know. Hey. But that's the way L.A. was. It was a stepchild. Anytime there was something to be said about bebop, it was when Charlie Parker was in New York. It was New York. It was Fifty-second Street. And all that has a lot to do with who is in control of the media, the different facets of the media: newspapers, magazines, the radio, and the television. That has a lot to do with it. See, until they put a handle on West Coast jazz, with Shorty Rogers and supposedly being the ones that— They called it the "cool jazz" or the "West Coast jazz," or whatever, which it wasn't. You know, if you're going to play jazz, you're just playing jazz. Well, they were capable of having the same firey, heavy shit that they had going on in New York. To me, it didn't matter. To us, it didn't matter, because they were all over on Central Avenue anyway. You know, they were playing what they thought was happening on Central Avenue, which was the same thing being played in New York. But when they took it and went out to the Lighthouse and different places, they said it was "cool jazz," because the ones in control have to put a handle on everything. That's what I'm saying about calling it rock and roll. The white media has taken it and stamped it all-white. It started long before the fifties. So what they're talking about is not true rock and roll. They should have given it another name, because it has become something else besides rock and roll. That's not rock and roll that's being played now. It should have another name. Since they're going to put a handle on it, they should change the name. But now they call it hard rock, or the— What is it that the kids are doing now? The English kids there. They have a name for their kind of acid rock. You know, it doesn't mean rock and roll. Just go on and give it another name. That's what I think they should do, because, like, with bebop—when was that, one year— around '78, I think— Dizzy told me that they'd been telling him he should have named the music something else besides bebop. I said, "Are you out of your frigging mind?" I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Why should you have to change that

when that's the only way you can be identified? That is your route to history. Bebop led you into the history books, and you're going to change that?" He looked at me and scratched his head and didn't say nothing else. But they had seriously been telling him that. And Dizzy's the type of person, he'll sit and listen to this guy. That's the way he gets swayed in a lot of things. And it pisses me off. I said, "Why don't you think sometimes?" He said, "Damn, Clora, you sound just like Lorraine [Gillespie]." I said, "So?" [laughter] I'm glad I sound like somebody! Oh, man. But I can remember the time that he was on the— I don't know if I told you or not about Sammy Davis [Jr.]'s show [The Sammy Davis Show].

ISOARDI

No, you didn't tell me.

BRYANT

It was supposed to have been a jazz show. Sammy had Dizzy, Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, and Count Basie. That was the show that day. And Dizzy was going to do two numbers, one with a small group and one with George Rhodes's big band. He had some swingers, some cookers in that band. You know, the elite of the jazz players out here were in that band. Basie came from the Bahamas, and he was just going to play with the band, you know. He was going to do two numbers, Dizzy would do two, but Sarah and Billy had carte blanche. I don't know how many tunes they did. But, anyway, it just so happened that, that day, Bob Hope was doing a show in another studio. He was out there for some reason, and he stopped by to say hi to Sammy, not to be on the show. But nothing would do for Sammy but to interview Bob Hope for about five or six minutes. So Darlene Chan, who was the coordinator or whatever you call it, came to Dizzy's dressing room.

My brother [Melvin Celeste Bryant] and I were sitting in the dressing room with Dizzy, and she said, "They've had to cut

one of your numbers." [laughter] The big band number. "Oh, shit." The band guys were walking around there and cussing like sailors, and I'm there in the dressing room. I said, "Dizzy, don't let them do that to you." Dizzy's just sitting there, and he's not saying anything. My brother gets up and walks out of the room, and I really performed then. I said, "Why would you let them?" I said, "You don't get a chance to be seen and heard on television too often." At that time, Dizzy wasn't doing that much, you know. It was in the late seventies. Dizzy wasn't doing anything. When he came out here, there wasn't a lot of people coming to see him. He played the Playboy Club in Century City. I went to see him, and we'd come out of there, there wouldn't be anyone there. He wouldn't do a second show because there wouldn't be anybody in the audience. He'd come out there and it would just be him and me. I'm walking with the trumpet, and he's walking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Back to the Sammy show. I said, "This is your time to shine." I said, "And there's a generation of kids who've never seen you direct a big band playing your music." He said, "I know who I am, and I don't care," and blah blah blah. I got mad. I bitched and carried on, and Darlene came in, and when I'm showering down on Dizzy she says, "Please don't make trouble. Oh, don't get upset. Oh, no, no. Don't start anything." So I said, "Start my ass!" I carried on, Steve. She said, "Don't start anything, because we're trying to keep it cool around here." I said, "Cool, my ass." I said, "Dizzy, don't let him do that to you." So Dizzy said, "Yeah!" He finally woke up. He said, "Yeah, that little black motherfucker!" [laughter] "I'm going to tell that little son—" I said, "Yeah, go tell him." "Oh," Darlene said, "oh, no, don't you—" Darlene says, "No, no, no!" Dizzy went flying out of there. They didn't put the song back, but Dizzy had gotten satisfaction when he told them about it. But that's just the way it was.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

BRYANT

He kept Bob Hope's five or six minutes on the air, and Dizzy played one number with his small group. I said, "That's not right."

ISOARDI

Who the hell's Bob Hope? Who's Bob Hope going to be in ten years?

BRYANT

Really! Bob Hope's on TV every time you turn around! I said, "These young kids have never seen you." I said, "This will pump you up for the next time you come out here to play. Maybe there will be some people in your audience because they heard you play on TV." Basie flew in. He was living in the Bahamas. He flew in from the Bahamas. He did one song, too. But after I talked to Dizzy, I didn't go to say anything to Basie, because he's laid-back like Dizzy too. He'd just say, "It's okay." I mean, he's a historian walking around. I mean, all that heavy history walking around in his shoes, you know? But that was Central Avenue going down the tubes. [laughter] That was. That was a waste of Central Avenue talent there, really. But what was the question? I got off.

ISOARDI

No, I was just asking you for your assessment of, you know, how—

BRYANT

Oh, how it closed up.

ISOARDI

The importance of Central Avenue.

BRYANT

Well, see, that's some of the shit that would close it up too. Like, when you branch out from there, and somebody will suck you off the wrong way and won't let you do what you know you can do. That's part of it too. Because when we moved off of Central Avenue and moved west, we still carried the essence of Central Avenue with us. Like the California Club over here on [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] Boulevard right off of Western [Avenue]. Then Marla's Memory Lane— That was still run by a white guy, only it wasn't Memory Lane. You know, we weren't in Memory Lane— Then we moved to Western. That used to be— The Oasis was a country and western place.

ISOARDI

Really?

BRYANT

And right down the street, north of where the Oasis was, there was Mike's Waikiki until he sold it to blacks. Then it became the Tiki. And this guy, this man, he was prejudiced till the end, till he sold the place. He had this thing where he'd turn this machine on. He did this rainstorm, you know, cracking the thunder and lightning and shit. He had to do that every hour. So when you'd go on your intermission, he'd do his rain thing. He had these sound effects and the lights flashing and shit. He let black people in, but he was very nasty to them. You know, he wasn't courteous at all. And then a black guy bought it, and it became a part of the black music scene. The white owner was hiring black people, but everybody was treated like dirt. I wouldn't work in there for him. I only went in there three or four times while he had it, you know, before he sold it. And then we moved on over to Crenshaw by the sixties. We had the Basin Street West, which was right there on Twenty-ninth [Street] and Crenshaw. I don't want to leave out the Milimo on Western Avenue.

ISOARDI

Oh, you talked about that.

BRYANT

Yeah, I talked about that. The Basin Street West was right there on Twenty-ninth and Crenshaw. They had a band, and then they had a show. You know, I worked in there behind Billy Daniels. I was in a house band when Billy Daniels was in there. And, see, when we were in San Francisco, we also played in Oakland at Slim's. It was Slim Jenkins in Oakland. After Billy Daniels recorded "That Old Black Magic," and it became a hit record, this girl group that I was with played behind him on his first California date. And it was at Slim Jenkins or the Long Bar something. What was it called? It's an old club. And this was in the fifties. But, anyway, that was his first date on the West Coast after he recorded "Ole Black Magic." And he had just married this white chick from Canada. He stayed married to her. You know, he had his kids by her. She had a funny name. [Peri Daniels] You know, they were married until he died. She was a pretty girl, tall and striking, I remember. But we played behind him on Crenshaw at the Basin Street West.[Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][The two men who owned the club were sent to jail for torching their own club.]And what else was going on? It had mostly moved farther west and north by that time.

ISOARDI

The more it was moving— I mean, as you said earlier, it's still alive in a lot of ways.

BRYANT

Yeah, it is. It is. Now our Central Avenue is on records. We don't really have a place where we meet to pass on the history because none of the places are conducive— Marla [Gibbs] can't have jazz all the time. Very seldom. And when you go to the other places, like the Biltmore [Hotel], Donte's—when Donte's

was out there—or Carmelo's or Alphonse's, it wasn't the same feel. You could not get that same feeling. That wasn't the environment.

ISOARDI

Well, those were just clubs. They weren't a whole social scene.

BRYANT

That's right.

ISOARDI

Outside the clubs as well as in.

BRYANT

Yeah. That's true. The camaraderie wasn't there. Like, when the white guys were coming over on Central Avenue— Oh, yeah. I left out Washington [Boulevard]. Washington was another source of a lot of clubs. The Hillcrest [Club], the It Club, the Cricket Club and the Parisian Room. The guys were hanging out. The white guys were hanging over here. There was a camaraderie between those guys when they were coming over here and playing and learning. But then, when it got out there, and the blacks started going to the white areas, it became something else. They lost that warmth, that sense of camaraderie. Because, see, that's why I still have a camaraderie with Bob Cooper and the two Condoli brothers [Pete and Conte Condoli] and Bud Shank and Marty Paich, you know. They were coming over on the avenue. And then at the Lighthouse, you know, there was Stan Levey. There was a camaraderie. But there became a separation. We were amalgamated in the union, but there was still a line of demarcation that separated us. And that line is still there, because what they're trying to do now is they tried to make the Valley the source of jazz or the beach areas or Orange County or Cucamonga. You cannot do that. I mean, Bill Berry's [L.A. Big] Band or Frank's band [Frank Capp-Nat Pierce Juggernaut] would play down there, and they didn't really

want any black people to come in the clubs. You know.
[laughter] So that's just like plugging up the source of your oil. You put a derrick over something that's been plugged up
[Note: Bryant added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript.][The last question that you asked—
"How do you evaluate the importance of Central Avenue overall? More directly, musically?"—is one that I want to readdress and elucidate from a different perspective. Musically, Central Avenue contributed: music, musicians, clubs, theaters, and hotel show rooms that were just as important as contributors or contributions to the history of jazz as New York City's 125th and Fifty-second Street, Chicago's Sixty-third and Cottage Grove, Kansas City's Eighteenth and Vine, Memphis's Beale Street, New Orleans's Bourbon Street, or any other city that has been duly documented as a contributor to the history of jazz. There is a new book that came out in December 1992, written by Tom Reed. This book epitomizes the true history of L.A., and the book has tons of authentic pictures to validate Central Avenue's place in jazz music as well as some of the other facets—i.e., blues, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, swing, ragtime, New Orleans jazz, religious, etc. The book also delves into the importance of Central Avenue socially, economically, and culturally. You must get this book and read/explore every page. There isn't another book around that covers black music in L.A. as thoroughly as Tom's book. The complete title is The Black History of Los Angeles[—Its Roots: A Classical Pictorial History from 1920-1970]. Now, back to your question: What would I say Central Avenue contributed and what was its importance? First, let me state that Central Avenue was a "hot bed" of jazz! It contributed many seeds for the growth of the tree of jazz along with the seeds from New Orleans, Memphis, Kansas City, Saint Louis, Chicago, and New York City. All of these diverse seeds commingled and evolved into the roots of the "tree" of jazz, bringing forth the many branches that spring out from the single trunk. Six of the cities mentioned above have been recognized through much documentation—

i.e., books, films, videos, television, recordings, essays, etc.— as the breeding grounds of America's musical and cultural legacy to the rest of the world, but at last Los Angeles is getting its proper place in the history books of music all over the world. It's necessary to address the fact that Central Avenue was the hub of the black community, which means that most of the blacks in L.A. lived and owned property around Central Avenue and the businesses thrived. However, the restrictive covenants held many blacks in the overcrowded ghetto in and near Central Avenue. In the twenties, the music and entertainment went on almost twenty-four hours every day, what with the house parties, clubs, churches, etc., but especially with the big, flashy floor shows. It was in 1918 that Jelly Roll Morton came to L.A. and brought some of his New Orleans musical culture (ragtime), and he is considered the "first great composer of jazz." He was quick to tell everyone and anyone, including Ripley of "Believe It or Not," that he invented jazz. Morton lived, recorded, and played on Central Avenue as well as in other parts of the city until his death in 1941. A musical, cultural contribution from New Orleans via Los Angeles to the world. The Dunbar Hotel, with its Club Alabam and Turban Room bar, was one of the major contributors to Central Avenue's musical and cultural legacy. The Dunbar Hotel was the place where all of the big black entertainers, politicians or sport figures stayed and played. The Club Alabam, the show room of the hotel, was the big, plush room that played the top black professional entertainers. It also was the place where a lot of the top white movie/show business stars of Hollywood came to show off their furs, diamonds, and big, fine chauffeur-driven cars. It was the same as in New York City up in Harlem. The Alabam also had Sunday jam sessions where the musicians were getting together and sharing their ideas, hot licks, etc., and would try to out blow one another. The small piano bar, the Turban Room, in the hotel, was where the piano duos played. The likes of Art Tatum, Gerald Wiggins, Nellie Lutcher, Hadda Brooks, etc.,

kept the crowd happy while they drank. The Downbeat Club that was right next door to the Club Alabam was also a major contributor and a very important one to the bebop musical history of Central Avenue. In January 1945, when I arrived in Los Angeles, the Downbeat was the hub of the "hot bed" for the perpetuation of the new style of music that was being created and played on the East Coast. All of the young white guys came to the Downbeat Club on the avenue and "hung out" in more ways than one. The Downbeat was a very special part of Central Avenue's contribution to the West Coast jazz history's music and musicians. The Last Word, the Lincoln Theatre, Jack's Basket Room, the Elks auditorium, the Jungle Room all were great contributors. Jack's Basket Room's jam sessions also hyped up Central Avenue's important contributions. There were many memorable historical jazz challenges played there between Dexter Gordon, Teddy Edwards, Wardell Gray, and even Al Killian and Clora.

(Clora challenged Al on who could go the highest, ha! ha! ha!) The Elks auditorium was the place where the infamous recording of "The Chase," with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, was recorded live. The Last Word had many good jam sessions and top-rated floor shows with stars such as "Li'l Miss Cornshucks." There was just too much beautiful, swinging, red-hot, bluesy-blue music being played on the avenue from blues, rhythm and blues, swing, and jazz to bebop. Central Avenue opened the door for the evolution of black music to flow through on the West Coast. Without Central Avenue there would have been no continuum of the black music coming from New Orleans, Memphis, Kansas City, Chicago, or New York City. Without Central Avenue, there would have been no Teddy Edwards, Sonny Criss, Roy Porter, Charlie Mingus, Lionel Hampton, Hampton Hawes, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Frank Morgan, Melba Liston, Clora, Gerald Wilson, Eric Dolphy, Larance Marable, Clifford Solomon, extended Charlie Parker, Marshall and Ernie Royal, Woodman Brothers [Coney, Britt, and William], Joe Comfort, Buddy Collette, Buddy Woodson,

William Green, Red Callender, Marl Young, Red Mack, Johnny Otis, Harper Cosby, Monk McVea, Oscar Bradley, Lorenzo Flennoy, Stanley Morgan, Dusty Brooks, Joe Stone, J. D. King, Joyce, Bill Douglass, Bill Hadnott, Lester and Lee Young, Irma and Martha Young, Joe Liggins, Nellie and Joe Lutcher, Dootsie Williams, Jack McVea, Helen Humes, Ernie Andrews, Ray Milton, Helen Andrews, Maggie Hathaway, Pee Wee Crayton, Ivory Joe Hunter, Oscar and Johnny Moore, Charles Brown, T-Bone Walker, Joe Turner, Wynonnie Harris, Trevier Twins, Geechie Smith, John Ewing, Bardu Ali, Mabel Scott, Leonard Reed, Jimmy Clark, Paul Howard, Baron Moorehead, Alma and Minnie Hightower, Frances Gray, Doris Meilleur, Marie and Henry Coker, Vi Wilson, Irving Ashby, Phil Moore, Nat Cole, Johnny Williams, Sammy Davis Jr., Buddy Banks, Les Hite, Vi and Buddy Redd, Alton Redd, Teddy Buckner, Chico Hamilton, Jennell Hawkins, Scatman Crothers, Earl Grant, Hadda Brooks, Oscar McLollie, Earl Bostic, Sweets Edison, Sir Charles Thompson, Thelma Lewis, Elsie Smith, Ann Glascoe, Willie Lee Terrell, Ivan Whittaker, Vernon Slater, Vivian Fears, Floyd Ray, Peggy Brashears, Fletcher Smith, Floyd Turnham, Jack La Rue, Gene Montgomery, Lady Will Carr, Sammy Yates, Clarence Jones, Frances Nealy, Willie Smith, Jimmy Burns, Chico Hamilton, Clyde Dunn, Kid Ory, Betty Hall Jones, Paul Quintechette, Sweet Pea Robinson, Lester Robertson, Caughey Roberts, Eddie and Charlie Beal, Perry Lee Blackwell, Benny Myers, Ceele Burke, Dorothy Broil, Alice Young, Curtis Counce, Benny Carter, Art and Addison Farmer, Mills Brothers, Big Jay McNeely, Leon and Otis René, Cee Pee Johnson, Snake White, Parr Jones, Earl Hyde, O. C. Smith, Jackie Kelso, Billy Preston, Sunshine Sammy, Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland, Betty De Quincy, Carl Perkins, Amos Milburn, Aland Dixon, "Ginger" Emma Smock, Dick Hart, Dorothy Donegan, Jackson Brothers [Harold and Billy], Gene Phillips, Jesse Price, Bill Gaither, John Anderson, Jake Porter, Henry McDade, Sammy Franklin, Peppy Prince, Gladys Bentley, Ivie Anderson, Billie Holiday, Curtis and Esvan Mosby, Bixie Crawford, Herb Jeffries, George Reed, Slim

Gaillard, Tiny Brown, Percy Mayfield, Poison Gardner, La Von Tyus, Walter Benton, Jimmie Tolbert, Lorenzo Holden, Robert Ross, Clifford Burnton, Jackie King Glenn, J. T. Gibson, Harvey Brooks, Pignite Markham, Jim Wynn, Maggie Hathaway, Effie Smith, Judy Carol, George Van, Sylvester Scott, Louis Jordan, Cleanhead Vinson, Sandman Sims, Ernie Freeman, Charles Norris, Estelle Edson, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Brooks, Alton Purnell, Redd Foxx, Slappy White, Maxwell Davis, Happy Johnson, Floyd Sr. and Edythe Thurnham, Frank Palsey, Gene Phillips, Dorothy and Vivian Dandridge, Charlie Drayton, Valaida Snow, Rene Hall, Joe Houston, Ulysses Livingston, Teddy Bunn, Monette Moore, Nina Russell, Mel, Iron Jaws [Wilson], Calvin Jackson, Andy Blakeney, Barney Bigard, Mike Delany, Red Robinson, Sammy Yates, Little Willie Littlefield, Patterson and Jackson, Harold Mayburn, Bill Ellis, Camille Howard, Mickey Champion, Cecil Grant, Ed Moutoutie, Louis Armstrong, Nina Mae McKinney, John Collins, Lloyd Glenn, Ted Brinson, Art Maryland, Joe Alexander, Benny Booker, Paul Gayten, Little Willie Jackson, Lawrence Brown, Lloyd Reese, Joe Wilder, Vernon Gower, Travis Warren, Rudy Pitts, Ed Thigpen, Bill Gaither, Ray Charles, Damita Jo, Deek Watson, Robert Farlice, Robert Morgan, George Morrow, and so on, and so on.]

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