

A TEI Project

Interview of William Ernest Green

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE APRIL 29, 1990

ISOARDI

Okay, Bill, shall we start at the beginning? Where you were born?

GREEN

Well, I'll think back to I would say five years of age when my mother first took me to school.

ISOARDI

Where was that at?

GREEN

The kindergarten in Kansas City, Kansas. And I'll do as much as I possibly can, you know, straight through.

ISOARDI

Okay.

GREEN

This was in Kansas City, Kansas. My mother [Sarah Grant Green] would take me to school right along with my sisters [Lillian and Doris Green] and brothers [Thomas and Herbert G. Green]. I'm from a large family. I have two sisters and two brothers, two older and two younger. I'm the middle of the family.

ISOARDI

Brothers are older or sisters are older?

GREEN

I have an older brother and an older sister and a younger brother and a younger sister — and I'm in the middle — so we had it pretty rough from the very beginning. It's always been tough, as everybody would say. But my father

[Thomas Green] was kind of good at drinking. I can always remember that. He had a habit, but he made a living, a very basic living. I didn't ever really get to know my father because he wasn't around.

ISOARDI

What did he do to earn a living?

GREEN

He was kind of like a mechanic and just did little odds-and-ends jobs, but he did have a steady job. At that time \$20 a week was quite a bit of money, seemingly.

ISOARDI

When was this? What year?

GREEN

Oh, this goes back — If I'm sixty-five and I was five years old — I was born in 1925, February 28 — that would mean 1930 that I could start relating to my livelihood and so forth. So in 1930, if you want that particular year, all of this started in my mind's eye. I can remember a few years maybe prior to that, like before going to the kindergarten and the first grade and so forth. But it all started there in my mind's eye. My father, even [when I was] at the age of five years of age, was able to play the saxophone. He played a few songs, and that inspired me. I liked the sound of it. So many years passed — I would say about five years. I was ten years of age. I took a stab at taking the horn out of the house, because we were all offered an opportunity to study music at the Dunbar Elementary School in Kansas City. So I asked Mom if I could take the horn out. She said, "Yes, but your father had better not find out." And I did, I sneaked it out. It was so heavy. I was such a little guy at my youthful age.

ISOARDI

Was it tenor or alto?

GREEN

It was alto. Later on he found out that I'd been blowing it, because the reed was wet. I had never thought that that would be a giveaway. He said, "I knew somebody had been blowing the instrument, but it's okay." He said, "You take care of it, and it will be okay." I was happy that we got that behind us. In the meantime, my lessons were quite strange. They were like ten cents an hour, and there were about sixty people who would stand in line for this one teacher to teach individually.

ISOARDI

Was this a private teacher or at school?

GREEN

A schoolteacher. He would only come once a week, and I'd take a lesson for ten cents and maybe get to see him twice. The time that I spent with him was a few seconds, because he was trying to get around to sixty people or more in the one

hour with all of the instruments that everybody plays. So he knew quite a bit. He was good. His name was Carl Brown. I'm sure he's long gone. But it was kind of nice and fun. I was lucky. On the way home from school, about three in the afternoon, there was a WPA [Works Progress Administration] organization — band members, older guys, adults. It was more or less a work project they had in this little church house on I think it was Fifth Street, Fifth and Cleveland [Street] in Kansas City. This big band of people would be playing, and I couldn't stand it, I had to nose my way in. I opened the door to this church, stood in the back room. Nobody said anything to me. I had the horn in my hand, in the case, naturally. And no one said anything. I'd stand there maybe an hour. I had to get home, but I'd just stand there listening, hanging around. So one day, after about a week or so, the conductor called me up. He didn't know my name, but he wanted to get my attention, so he gave me a nickname. I won't state the nickname. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Why not? [laughter] Why not?

GREEN

He said, "Come up front." So I did. He gave me a name, and from that day on my name in Kansas City has been that name that he called me. I can't get out of it. Even now certain people who knew me when I was a child call me by this nickname. And I won't reveal it to you. [laughter] Anyway, he told me, "Go over there, take your horn out. Sit with that fat fellow over there." He was speaking of a fellow by the name of Virgil Hill. Virgil was good enough to make a living at it. He played in nightclubs, and he was in this band just doing a little reading. I could tell it was mediocre, but he was able to make the project band. There were about forty members in this band, by the way. They had tuba, a bass fiddle. They had two or three French horns. They called them peck horns at the time. They were actually mellophones. That was more popular for that kind of a band.

ISOARDI

What kind of music?

GREEN

All kinds. Concert, we had pop, opera music, we did some Puccini. We did a whole bunch of things. Carmen. I remember playing that back there. We did mainly marches like "Semper Fidelis."

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, [John Philip] Sousa marches.

GREEN

We did all those marches. "Washington Post" and "Bourbon Street Parade," all kinds of songs of that nature. But I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to sit with this fat fellow, Virgil Hill. And he said, "Just look over my shoulder.

Take your horn, and when you feel you know your way around, just start blowing." So I learned something there, just watching the notes. And I would take the music home. They'd let me take it home and practice it. I was so busy and interested in it that I didn't learn to play football or basketball or baseball

ISOARDI

This was really your life?

GREEN

I did a little bit of it, but not enough to really get to like it. I was pretty strong also. I could wrestle very well. I could lick anybody my age. My oldest brother [Thomas] would be helping me out, and I got pretty strong.

ISOARDI

So nobody was going to tease you for not playing football. [laughter]

GREEN

Yeah, I didn't learn to play football. Made jeeps. I flew kites, and wagons. Mainly, my thing was bicycling. I became quite a cyclist. I could stand on a bicycle going down the street with no hands and actually steering it with my foot hooked around the seat in back — The foot was actually on the fender and leg hooked around the seat in front, the left foot in between the two designed bars up front right behind the handlebar. And I was able to stand and cycle without any hands. I could turn it, and I never fell.

ISOARDI

Great sense of balance.

GREEN

No hands, you know. But I wouldn't dare think of doing that now. [laughter]

That's impossible. I don't know how I ever came to doing such.

ISOARDI

Yeah, you know no fear back then.

GREEN

Anyway, it was kind of nice. I was able to do such as I'd show off to my friends. I was quite athletic. I learned how to do a backward flip in the air, and I could leap over twelve of my friends side by side on their knees on concrete. I'd take a running — You know, a run and leap over all of these guys and tuck my head under and roll over to a stand. But I was into that kind of thing. And then, to get on with the story as it unfolds, that is, about the age of twelve I ran into Louis Whitworth, who was in this big band, the WPA band. He was playing first clarinet and had been studying with a symphony player in Kansas City, Missouri. He was quite good. He was the best around on clarinet. So that whole band, knowing that I was interested in playing clarinet — I'd learned how to play the saxophone part in the band, and I didn't think it was challenging

anymore, so I asked if I could have a clarinet. They all chipped in without any question and bought a clarinet for me.

ISOARDI

Really? Everybody in the band?

GREEN

Everybody in the band. They willingly did it, knowing how much progress I'd made with the saxophone in such a short time reading, because I'd take my part home. I came back, and I was getting stronger all the time with that. So Louis Whitworth, who is now here — In fact, I played a job with him just yesterday.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

GREEN

We had a ball, you know, going back years in thought. It was just a pleasure. But he's not working anymore. He's retired. He's about seven years my senior. Such a nice guy. Beautiful. He's taken good care of himself. I thought of him as being my father. I idolized him and tried to pattern my life after him. He was quite athletic. He could walk on his hands. Naturally, I had to learn to walk on my hands. [laughter] So there came a point where I stopped trying to be like Louis Whitworth. Louis had begun to play with knives, and he would take two very sharp knives and throw them up and juggle and catch them by the point. He had gotten pretty good until he cut a couple of his fingers. In the meantime, I'm studying clarinet with him and had gotten pretty good. And I've learned the part, the first clarinet part. This was when I was around thirteen, close to fourteen. He had cut his fingers and couldn't play. Now, there was nobody else who could play the part. I had been sitting with him, and they gave me that chair while he was recovering from his knife wound. I started playing the cadenzas and all and doing a very fine job of it, I must say. I really enjoyed it. But, like I said, all the time I would be practicing the clarinet now. No saxophone. I put that aside. I just stayed with the clarinet, Louis Whitworth, and playing "Poet and Peasant" and all of the overtures and cadenzas that were required. And they started paying me a salary out of their pocket.

ISOARDI

Wow.

GREEN

I wasn't old enough to be affiliated with the WPA association, but they gave me a salary. They chipped in each month out of their pockets, and that really was complimentary. Well, when that ended I must have been about fifteen. So I only had about a year of pay with them. We'd play in the parks, Big Eleven Park, which was the main one in Kansas City. And then there were a few other little spots we played in, playgrounds around Kansas City, Kansas, only. I think once or twice we played in Argentine, Kansas, there, and then Rosedale

[Kansas] once. [tape recorder off] So after playing in these parks and the termination of the WPA network or company, whatever, at the time — the government-issued program — a living still had to be made. My brothers and I chipped in together, and we all bought bicycles, because we knew how to ride them and decided to work for different drugstores, or the same, if possible. So two of us, I and my oldest brother [Thomas], worked at Curt Cundiff's drugstore for three or four years, while my youngest brother [Herbert] worked in Kansas City, Missouri, on his bicycle. He'd have to take that long drive to Thirty-first [Street] and Main [Street] to just get to work, which was, I would say, roughly fifteen to twenty miles just to get to work. That's one way, so that's a lot of cycling. And after he'd gone to work, he put in eight hours. Eventually, I went over with him and had to do that. But I stayed with Curt Cundiff a few years, about three or four years. I ended up working behind the counter, as opposed to delivering ice cream, drugs, pharmaceuticals, and so forth. But I had many experiences with that drugstore too. I'll tell you a few. One, since I'm on it, one night there was an attempted robbery. I was going to be burglarized or actually robbed. I left the drugstore. The manager told us all not to carry over a certain amount of money. This was Sunday, the big night. I had about \$75 on me. Now, \$75 — My salary was only \$6 a week, and to pay \$75 back would be like working for eight weeks or so, even more than that. So I decided — When this guy approached me, I was coming out of my delivery from, say, an upstairs apartment, and I came down, snow was on the ground. I had my bags filled with articles to deliver, and this big guy came up to me and said, "Hey, fellow, give me all the money you've got." Well, at that time, I just wasn't going to give him the money. I told him, "No, I don't have any money." He said, "Don't give me that." And he came towards me. That's where he made his mistake. I jumped up in his chest with my head and knocked him down. Well, I was so good with the bicycle, I could make way with the bicycle like Tonto and the Lone Ranger with their horses.

ISOARDI

So you took off. [laughter]

GREEN

So that's what I did. I took off. He's trying to recover from the ground, from the fall, you know. And I jumped on the bicycle and rode down the hill. I was close to a hill. It was on Third [Street] and Quindaro [Boulevard]. So I got away from that, and my heart was beating fast. I never did that again, you know, with a lot of money. I'd always turn the money in. Around six o'clock, after working from twelve noon up to six, you would have quite a bit of money. I took this chance at the time. So I never did that again. I always turned the money in after a certain amount of time, and I wasn't robbed anymore. You know, that was the only time. But I had a friend who stole from my bicycle. I went upstairs with

the package, and, when I came back, another package that had ice cream in it had been stolen, [laughter] And years later I found out it's one of my classmates and my next-door neighbor, a friend of mine. He said, "Bill, do you remember that night?" I said, "Yeah. It may seem funny to you now, but it still isn't funny to me. "

ISOARDI

Oh, no! [laughter]

GREEN

"Why would you do that? I wouldn't do that to you," I told him. Well, that goes on and on, but you see how people are. You learn a little thing here. Anyway, I had a nice life in those days, considering all. I didn't mind working. My oldest brother didn't mind. We just knew we had to do it. In fact, working together like that, pooling our moneys together, made for a very tight relationship in our family, which still holds well. There's hardly any arguments. In fact, now we just laugh and have fun together. Even the sisters, you know, we all pulled together and really made it work.

ISOARDI

You mentioned you first heard your father playing saxophone when you were five. Were there any other musical influences then?

GREEN

My mother would sing in the choir at church every Sunday. She would go to rehearsals on Wednesday night and sing in the choir on Sundays. She was pretty good. She'd be singing some of the songs around the house. That was nice exposure. And my older sister [Lillian] was studying piano, so she learned to play well. Now she plays in church and she has quite a talent. If you start singing, she'll know how to back you up, no matter what key. She's got that unusual thing going, just play the song. So I was exposed to some music. My father wasn't very good; he just played a few songs. Never did any marches or anything to the degree that I immediately became familiar with. But he could play such as "My Blue Heaven." That's the first song I learned, because he played it. He had about three or four songs that he could play, but it wasn't a serious thing with him. He had an old Buescher. It was a good horn at that time. He spent a little money to get that instrument. Buescher at one time was the better instrument, even over Selmer .

ISOARDI

Really?

GREEN

Yes. It was like Selmer is now. So I kept the instrument, but I didn't play it for about seven or eight years. And when I became seventeen, or actually eighteen, I graduated from Sumner Senior High School. That's when I worked at the drugstore, all through junior high school, and I did some other work too. I

worked at Fred Harvey's, you might say as a busboy and dishwasher, from twelve midnight to late in the morning, rushing to school after that, sitting up in school half asleep. But I managed to get through it. I did as much studying as I could, while, after school, trying to get some sleep before going to work at midnight, the books and all things going. I also lost a clarinet while working at Fred Harvey's. I was around sixteen. I had a clarinet. I took it to work with me, because I played in the high school band. Naturally, I played the lead clarinet, solo clarinet. But, to back up a little bit, at the age of fourteen, I was doing all the cadenzas, taking Louis Whitworth's place. He came back, by the way, and we both played together. But some lady came up to me and asked me if I would teach her son. At the age of fourteen, I said yes. I had learned my scales, I was playing very well and could play these overtures. So he was failing. He was getting like F's, you know, in the band, playing clarinet. She said, "Would you teach my son?" His name was Harvey. I don't remember the last name, but Harvey comes to mind. So I would go over to his house once a week, and, in about a couple of months, he started getting better grades. And his mom said, "Harvey is doing swell. He made some C's this month." I said, "That's great." But that's the beginning of my teaching career, really.

ISOARDI

Fourteen years old.

GREEN

At the age of fourteen.

ISOARDI

Did you like it?

GREEN

I took time with him, I really enjoyed it. So I've been teaching since I was fourteen.

ISOARDI

Sheesh. That's fifty years of teaching.

GREEN

Oh, yeah, fifty-two years. That's approximately fifty-two years. And one student brought another student. Naturally, if I helped him, he'd send another couple of guys. So even at that age, I was able to teach, clarinet especially. And at the age of eighteen, I was drafted after graduating from senior high school. Right like the next week after getting out of school I was drafted into the service.

ISOARDI

So that's 1943, '42?

GREEN

Let's see, 1942.

ISOARDI

Let me ask you, just before you go into the service and get drafted, were you that aware of what was going on across the river in Kansas City [Missouri] in all the clubs there?

GREEN

I never had a chance to go out as a youngster, I'm sorry to say. I'd heard about Charlie Parker and all, but I never had a chance like most kids. They could hang out. I never did that.

ISOARDI

You never had a chance to go to the Reno Club to hear the [Count] Basie band?

GREEN

I did go to the municipal auditorium, where they had big bands. That is one thing I did. And I learned to dance well with my sister. We could do steps. We took over the floor. [laughter] We'd have a circle of people around us, because we'd been practicing dancing at home. Oh, I don't know how I found the time, but I did. I learned how to dance and do what is called the jitterbug. And my mom — back to her — really, I didn't know how great a cook she was, but she really knew how to cook. It just spoiled me rotten. I still haven't found anyplace that I like to eat at as well as her cooking. [laughter] It's amazing. But my taste buds are really attuned to real good food. I went to the service. It took me a long time to be able to eat that food. [laughter] And I didn't like the manner in which they served me. They'd throw it at you, you know, "flop" on the plate, see. And that took the taste out of it.

ISOARDI

What a comedown, what a comedown. [laughter]

GREEN

But, you know, you get hungry, you learn how to eat whatever is available.

ISOARDI

Let me ask, just about this time, when you finish high school, what are your tastes like in music? What are you listening to?

GREEN

Well, actually, I was into more classical, semi-classical, as opposed to jazz, even then.

ISOARDI

What players did you admire?

GREEN

I liked everything I heard of Charlie Parker's, and then Lester Young. I had seen Benny Carter at the municipal auditorium. All the big bands came there. And Erskine Hawkins I met. You know, I heard the sounds of his band. You know, Benny Moten was around. I never did see him. I never did see him, because he may have performed at the municipal auditorium with all of the giants, but I missed that. I caught Count Basie when he first started, Lester

Young, Herschel Evans, and all of the guys who were with that band. Duke Ellington's band. And John Kirby, I was very impressed with his band. Louis Jordan came to town, and I saw him. I met Jackie Kelso in Kansas City with Lionel Hampton's band. He was hired to just play clarinet. And since that was my instrument, I was flabbergasted to note that there was someone who played jazz clarinet like that. He was only a few years older than I, but I went backstage and I made a point to meet him. [laughter] He remembers that. So we both were kids. And that really seems like yesterday. It really does. It seems like yesterday when these little smiles were matching up backstage. He was an excellent player. He sounded great. He'd go all up into the high register like he does now better than anybody, if you just really listen to him. He really is not heard of like he should be. He's unsung, really. Great, great clarinet player. It seems like it's his second arm. I think he plays more clarinet than he does saxophone, even now. But that was a nice relationship. I saw him later after the war. I met him out here in Los Angeles, and we met at the Downbeat [Club]. We're getting up to the Downbeat in a hurry, aren't we. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, we'll go back.

GREEN

Up on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Did he remember you? Did he remember you?

GREEN

Sure, he remembered. And we were — I'll go back to my service days, some things that happened to me there that were a benefit to my career. I was in the navy, and, by being drafted, I had to take what was given; I had no choice. I was pretty good in mathematics — in fact, excellent. Mathematics was my easiest subject. So on the test that was given in the service, I made a high score. They decided to send me to service school, but for machinist mate. I told them I was a musician and I wanted to be a musician. "We don't have any openings, so you'll have to take this mechanics — "

ISOARDI

You weren't in the musicians union in Kansas?

GREEN

No, no. It wasn't necessary with the WPA project. That's a different organization. But a lot of them were affiliated with the union, the players. There were some great players there, too, as I recall, in that band, the WPA band I'm speaking of. But I went to the service and made a high score in mathematics, and then I was sent to service school up in Great Lakes [Michigan]. I stayed there nine extra months in service school, coming out as a third-class machinist mate. I just learned the rules and I passed a few tests. I

didn't get any actual experience with machinery. But that's the way things are. That's the way they're done. So after that, I was shipped down to San Diego by train.

ISOARDI

From Great Lakes?

GREEN

From Great Lakes, that's right. I liked it out here. California. Warm. I'd been used to all of that cold weather. It was so cold in Chicago that you could be going down a street and decide you wanted to go to the right when you got to the top of the hill or at the corner, and when you got to that corner the wind would be blowing probably the opposite direction. You would go with the wind. [laughter] This is true. You'd find another way to get to wherever you were going.

ISOARDI

Oh, God! [laughter]

GREEN

The wind would turn you around. It was cold. It was cold up in Chicago. Even now it seems to be a grizzly kind of coldness. Kansas City was cold also, but not as much. So I guess the Great Lakes, where they had the cool, the chilly —

ISOARDI

Oh, the wind coming off the water.

GREEN

And the wind, yes. So —

ISOARDI

So San Diego was nice.

GREEN

We're down in San Diego, and I like the climate. It's like you could sleep outdoors. You didn't need a roof. [laughter] After leaving Chicago — But I liked it. And on weekends I would try to come to L.A. Also, I learned to play pool very well in Kansas City as a youngster. So that came in handy, my techniques on the pool table. Money was scarce; I needed money. I could go down to the pool hall as a sailor and win some money to have some money to spend, you know, before the checks came. I remember walking into a pool hall on Imperial Avenue downtown in San Diego. I walked into the pool hall. and these guys were playing nine ball. I decided to join them, and I ended up with about \$9. They didn't like my quitting after I had won, but that was quite nice. [laughter] That was fun. I was happy I had learned how to do that. But pool didn't have a nice feeling about it. If you walked in a pool hall, you were inviting yourself to trouble. The bums would hang out there, the wrongdoers, the dope peddlers. You heard foul language. It wasn't a clean game, you might say, because of the attraction that pool would bring. But I got away from that

and started taking my liberty time going down to the navy field, where every weekend they would have dances. The band at navy field would play. At first I went down to just dance. Then I decided, "I'd like to play with these guys." So I walked up to the bandstand and talked with Floyd Acklee. He was the lead alto man. On one of the breaks, I asked him if he needed someone to just sit in once in a while on sax. He said, "Do you play?" I said, "Yeah. I'd sure like to have a crack at it." Would you believe, he says, "Well, we'll try you out on baritone. Just come over to the barracks where we rehearse." I did. I went over there and I sat in the band, and they liked me very much. I could read the part and everything. So I started a new career, you might say. You were given like three days liberty in a row, and one day you had to stay in — three on and one off. That was the routine. I managed to have a friend let me have his pass on the fourth day so I could be free all days to travel or go out into town and play with the guys and make the rehearsals too. It ended up one fellow after another — The tenor player, he wanted to take off. I said, "Well, fine, I'll play tenor." [laughter] I just wanted to be a part of it all. So I got pretty good at playing either one of the chairs, not knowing that that was going to be a very beneficial attribute later.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

GREEN

So I'd play. I'd go down one night and ask who wanted to take off. The tenor player says, "My wife's in town, I want to — Okay, you got it. Bill." I'd play tenor that night. Next night it would be maybe the baritone man. "Fine." Next, second alto man, you know, and so forth. I just had a ball in learning all the charts at the same time and all the parts. So, naturally, solo work was improving, ad-libbing better all the time. And that lasted for the duration of the war. I had a nice job and was developing friends and getting more popular all the time with my instrument.

ISOARDI

You said when you were in Kansas City you weren't playing jazz so much as classical and popular things and marches.

GREEN

Mainly pop music, that's right. Hardly any jazz.

ISOARDI

So when do you start getting interested in it? When do you start getting interested in improvising?

GREEN

Actually, I was interested from the very beginning. It was just a matter of exposure, which I didn't really get. Some was presented in this WPA band. They would have some pop songs where guys could take a little solo work, you

know, and that aroused my interest, naturally. But I wasn't led in that direction until I got, say, into the service. I went to the service, and then I was exposed to jazz. And then, to top it off, right after the war, which was 1945, I was released, possibly in '46. Yes, in April of '46 I was released from the service. That's around VJ day, after VJ. I went back to Kansas City, my hometown, and stayed at home with my mom and had some more of that good cooking. [laughter] I even learned how to cook a little bit watching her, knowing — I said, "Goodness, I sure miss your cooking," you know. And I stayed six months. But in the whole period I was there after the service, getting out of the service, I got a job playing in a nightclub, Eighteenth [Street] and Vine [Street], which is now still a popular spot, you know, just to relate to. We were playing at Scott's [club] with a four-piece group. I have a picture of it. I'll show it to you.

ISOARDI

That's Kansas City, Missouri.

GREEN

In Kansas City, Missouri, right. And that was fun. I started learning how to play bebop at that time and being exposed to Willie Rice, who was a great trumpet player and also pianist. Oh, he really was responsible for my understanding. He had like an open house every day for all musicians who wanted to come. He would teach you a song a day. His thing was to write and experiment with his writing with the various people who came. Excellent musician. You may have heard of him. Willie Rice. Trumpet player. Excellent. I really enjoyed that part of my life. For six months I'd go spend most of my days from, say, at least twelve noon. I'd take the bus over to Kansas City, Missouri, every day from twelve noon until six or seven that evening and have a job that night from nine until one in the morning.

ISOARDI

At the same club? You had that pretty steady gig?

GREEN

Same club. They loved us.

ISOARDI

Jeez. Nice gig.

GREEN

And only two horns. I was playing mainly alto sax at that time. On trumpet Nat Ratler, with Bobby Stafford on drums, and Willie Rice at the piano. I think once in a while we'd have a bass player, but mainly four pieces. And we just kept it going. Lots of fun. We played all of the popular songs of that period. "Red Top." It was like [sings fragment of melody]. We did that. It was funny. In fact, yesterday we played it, and it just brought back all of those years. But a lot of nice little tunes. Charlie Parker, by that time, had taken over.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE
FEBRUARY 16, 1991

ISOARDI

Okay, Bill, picking up the story, last time I think it was about 1945, '46. You've come back from military service. You're back in Kansas City, back home, and you're playing in a club with a group. I guess it's at Scott's club.

GREEN

That's right. It's on Eighteenth [Street] and Vine [Street] .

ISOARDI

And you've got a group there. Can you pick up the story from that point?

GREEN

We had four pieces: Willie Rice, as I said before, Bobby Stafford, Nat Ratler, and myself. We were playing every night — I think off on Monday nights. I did that through the summer, say from June through August. And at that point I decided to come out here to go to school. Now, Nat Ratler and John Smith had already left Kansas City a couple of weeks before. They called me and told me that they had found a place for me to stay.

ISOARDI

Out here?

GREEN

Yes, out here. And it was around Forty-first Street on the east side. So I moved in, came to town in I think it was the first part of September before school started.

ISOARDI

If I could ask you, what was the appeal of Los Angeles? Why did all of you guys want to come to Southern California?

GREEN

Well, at that time I liked it out here because of the climate. I had a choice to go to New York, anyplace I wanted to on the G.I. Bill to study. So we decided to come back out here and study because of the weather mainly. And things were happening here too. Not as much as in New York. Charlie Parker and others had gone to New York to do their thing, but we decided to come out here. So I'm happy that I did. When I arrived in town here, they met me at the airport, and I came back to the hotel or to my room, which was on Forty-first Street. I heard a saxophone in the background, in the backyard, being played. It was a guy living on the same property. He had a room, just one single room. I found out a couple of days later it was Sonny Criss.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

GREEN

He lived in the back house, you might say, of this place that we were renting. So I stayed there I would say about three months. We got started in the L.A. [Los Angeles] Conservatory of Music. It was kind of crowded, three of us sleeping in maybe a small area, a room. We had three beds, staying in the same room and going to the same shower and what have you, so we didn't stay there too long. I found a place, and John went one direction, and so did Nat, and we all separated. While going to school, John had finally bought a car, as I recall, a little cheap car, something to get around in. And I owe it to John, teaching me how to drive in this car. It was a De Soto. It's amazing. Nat never did learn to drive. As long as I can remember, he never had a car. He never did. But Nat, I think, was the best musician of all at an early age. He was a trumpet player. I learned quite a bit from him. He was able to hear chord changes without the need of any instrument. He had nearly perfect pitch, and he wrote well. All of his compositions in the conservatory were really outstanding. He spent like all day just writing. If he was given an assignment to bring in, he would write, say, twelve hours, much more than needed. When we were told to bring in one or two compositions, say, maybe twenty-four bars each, he'd bring in at least a dozen. And the teacher was very impressed. He made all A's, but for some reason he never really learned to play the trumpet well. He said his mind was set for what have you. But, anyway, I liked him the most. He really helped out in matters, such as I was playing at a nightclub on the beach in Long Beach from, say, nine thirty to one [o'clock] every night making a salary such as \$7 a night. That was reasonable money at that time for a guy to make in a nightclub. Only four pieces. This is while going to school at the L.A. Conservatory in the daytime. At night I'd take this job. In fact. Buddy Collette got the job for me; he recommended me to El Herbert, who had a four-piece group. El was a trumpet player who took out after Louis Armstrong. He kind of sounded and looked like him when he performed.

ISOARDI

Gosh, it must have been nice to work with him.

GREEN

He used all of his expressions, and it was beautiful. His playing was reasonable. He couldn't read a note, but his ear was pretty good. I had some nice times with him on the pier at Long Beach there. The place was called the House of Rhythm. So I worked there really quite a while making money, enough to live on, because the G.I. Bill hadn't paid off. It took about six months after I'd arrived here and started in school. I had to make out however I could. I was going to school and making \$7 a night. I had two friends, but neither one was working. I was kind of supporting them until they got their check, the same as I, waiting for it. Meantime, their bill is running way up, like John owed me something like \$400 and Nat about \$250, \$300, something like that. Neither of

them were working, so I helped out and gave them carfare, bus fare, and so forth, because I had a little money and I could pay the rent. That's what ran the bill up so high. Drinking milk and eating bread — milk and bread, that sort of thing — and making out however we could. We had a few friends around who would cook and invite us over, and that helped some. But I really know what a bean tastes like. [laughter] Slim pickings.

ISOARDI

I know.

GREEN

I've seen some very hungry days, like Thanksgiving. All three of us were together. I would practice all the time. So I would have my lessons prepared for school, the L.A. Conservatory, with Ben Kanter. And we just had a class reunion a couple of weeks ago.

ISOARDI

Really?

GREEN

Ben Kanter was there, and he remembered the incident. But I'll get to that as I go. Anyway, working at the House of Rhythm was fun. I stayed there quite a while. I don't remember how long, but we had many weeks together. The drummer. Spoons was his name — Ernie Freeman, by the way, played piano with us.

ISOARDI

Really?

GREEN

Yes. Let's see. El Herbert and I. We made it, and there was dancing. We did a lot of jazz things and kind of show tunes too. [singing] "Please don't talk about me when I'm gone." [laughter] We were playing such songs as that. El Herbert was the singer and also the trumpet player. Sometimes we'd get a request. I remember one time we had a request to play some song. The bridge was strange. I managed to find a good note in a certain part of the bridge, and every time we got to that spot El Herbert would jump on that particular note and tell me to get another note. [laughter] "This is my note! You get another one." I should say at this point, Ernie Freeman was very helpful, too, on that job. He'd bring in little short arrangements. I would play for El Herbert, and he would learn the part. We kept going quite well. So one thing led to another with El Herbert. We had another player come in to add to the group: Johnny Randolph, as I recall. And we started playing different clubs around town. There was a place called Cafe Society on San Pedro [Street] and Jefferson [Boulevard].

ISOARDI

What was Cafe Society like?

GREEN

San Pedro and Santa Barbara [Avenue]. That's where it was. And that was, say, about 1949.

ISOARDI

What kind of club was Cafe Society?

GREEN

Oh, people, just drinks and a little small club. Shows, dancing, and what have you, audience participation. And we had a chance to play. I moved around quite a bit with El Herbert till we finally broke up. One thing led to another. I'm still deep in the conservatory with my training and all. I would say a couple of years went by. In the meantime, naturally, Central Avenue was jumping. That's mainly what we're talking about. Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Well, let me ask you. Bill, when you hit L.A., when did you first go down to Central and how did it strike you?

GREEN

The very night that I came to Los Angeles, we all went up on Central Avenue, and, oh, it was jumping. The Last Word [Cafe] had someone playing there, Emma "Ginger" Smock, a lady violinist, played jazz. She was a good looker too. I ran into Benny Carter at the Club Alabam, maybe not that particular night but one of the nights in that period of time, you know, when I first came here. The Downbeat was jumping. I had never heard so much music, and all in, say, one block between Forty-second [Street] and Forty-third [Street] on Central Avenue. There were about four clubs, maybe five. Redd Foxx was around during that time, and he would practice on us.

ISOARDI

What do you mean practice?

GREEN

He'd tell jokes and see how they took with us before he would go up on stage. [laughter] That's the truth. You know, and try them out on the audience. But I can tell you Redd Foxx was quite a guy. He was always practicing. He kept a crowd around him. He'd come in the pool hall, and right away he was number one. They'd stop shooting pool just to have him talk. And he loved it because he was like between — On his intermission from the Last Word or wherever he was performing, he would come down and practice a couple of lines, thoughts that had come to mind, and see how it would take. Just beautiful, really. It seems like there was so much talent around during that period. Johnny Otis was on the scene then also. He knew how to get things going. He'd be playing probably at the Club Alabam, but he managed to get around to all the clubs, even the Downbeat, with some kind of a group. And Johnny Otis was a good talker. They loved him. He played vibes, and he just hung around everybody and decided to get his own band. There was one big theater on Central Avenue.

I think it was around Twenty-sixth [Street] and Central Avenue. It was called the Lincoln [Theatre]. It was a theater and movie house. They would give shows and all kinds of benefits there where a lot of people could come. I think now it's a church.

ISOARDI

Oh, really? The building is still there?

GREEN

Yeah. They converted it into a church. I hardly go over in that vicinity now that I've been living on the west side. I guess once you get away from it, you don't go back. And there's nothing really over there happening. There's a good eating house still over there I visit once in a while. But Central Avenue is just like blah, nothing. One time there was — what was it called? — the Bird in the Basket [Jack's Basket]. We used to go down to that place. Did you hear of that?

ISOARDI

A little bit. How do you remember it? Can you describe what it was like in there?

GREEN

Well, it was a little small club and always packed, and it had some great jazz players to participate. I think a lot of the clubs would use the Downbeat as their gauge and guide to getting musicians to play in their clubs.

ISOARDI

You mean, if they made it at the Downbeat — ?

GREEN

If they were good and popular at the Downbeat, then they would hire these people to work for their club and what have you. There was the Jungle Room right near the Lincoln Theatre, which was around, say. Twenty-seventh [Street] or Twenty-eighth [Street] and Central Avenue. That didn't last too long. But a smoky dive, joint, you know, really. Nothing fancy. But people were having fun. And the jazz made it.

ISOARDI

All these clubs.

GREEN

Yeah, really, jazz made it. If a guy had something going, a nice group, it was just worth being there to hear the music if nothing else was happening. Sure, a lot of drinks being sold and all, but it was mainly the music that held things together, the jazz. Wardell Gray was on the scene at the time. Dexter Gordon, Teddy Edwards, Lucky Thompson, who I thought was the greatest of all on tenor sax .

ISOARDI

Really?

GREEN

Man, if you heard him, I think you would think the same. He was smooth, fast, and a beautiful tone. Nothing ever went wrong with his playing. It was just unbelievable. He said he practiced every day, mainly scales, just eight hours a day. Eight hours, nothing but scales, and he did that many, many years. Excellent player. I'd never heard such smoothness. But he had an attitude. That's what killed him. He never got going because he couldn't get along with anybody. But Lucky Thompson, if you heard some of the records that he's on — He did some work with Bird [Charlie Parker]. He's on some of those old records.

ISOARDI

Right, right.

GREEN

So you could look him up.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I've got a later record he did called Lucky Strikes, I think.

GREEN

That's right.

ISOARDI

I think it was in the late fifties, something like that.

GREEN

Yeah. Great player. I liked him better than [Paul] Gonsalves.

ISOARDI

Really?

GREEN

Yeah, at one time. I think he did play with Duke Ellington for a very short while, but, like I said, he couldn't get along with anybody, and so he didn't make it.

ISOARDI

Was the first time you heard Lucky Thompson when you were on Central? Or had you heard — ?

GREEN

That was the first time I had heard him. Coleman Hawkins sort of paved the way for tenor players, and Lucky Thompson was like an offspring of Coleman Hawkins. He used that style, but Lucky was smoother, much smoother than Coleman Hawkins. "Body and Soul" with Coleman Hawkins really set the pace for tenor players. [laughter] And it's still the greatest, isn't it? Just listen to it. He really put some music into that song.

ISOARDI

Yeah. That must be a favorite of yours too, because you play that now with the [John] Clayton-[Jeff] Hamilton Orchestra.

GREEN

That's right. I think if you hear that and you play tenor saxophone, you'd have to want to play it. Ben Webster was a stylist along during that period too. He was known for "Cottontail," that selection, the way he played it. But back to Central Avenue, I really enjoyed — In fact, every night I'd have to go up on the avenue. I moved around about two blocks from Central Avenue so I wouldn't have far to go, because I knew I had to be there. [laughter] That's what I was out here for was to learn how to play music, you know, and that's where it was.

ISOARDI

Where were you living? Do you remember?

GREEN

I lived on Forty-first [Street] and Naomi [Avenue].

ISOARDI

And that was right off Central?

GREEN

The Downbeat was on Forty-second, so a block, two blocks exactly from the Downbeat.

ISOARDI

Couldn't get any closer. [laughter]

GREEN

Yeah, that's true. And I stayed there, say, at least a year. This room that I had was like a front porch to someone's home. They leased it out to me for \$6 a week. I only had a room, and I had to go around to the back to the restroom and to take a shower. But I even taught in that little room. Just enough room for me, really. [laughter] And in the closet I had a hot plate. That was it. And a bed. So I stayed there, and I even did some teaching. Guys who were going to the school, Jefferson High School, which was a block away from Naomi and Forty-first — it was on Forty-first and Hoover [Street], only a block away — they'd stop by. I'd be practicing, and I picked up a few students right there. They'd stop in, wanted to study with me, and I started my clientele. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Is that where you started teaching, then?

GREEN

More or less out here, that's right. And then I left there and moved over to Forty-second Street just east of Hoover. I was still in the same vicinity near Central Avenue. It was walking distance, just maybe another block away. So I stayed there quite a while. And John Smith was trying to keep up with me, moving next door. You know, we kind of stayed close together. John decided to quit the L.A. Conservatory after a couple of years. He went into upholstery and interior decorating, which he did very well with. He stopped playing music because he didn't feel that he was making the achievements that he had set out to make. Buddy Collette went to the conservatory too. Did he tell you?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

GREEN

For maybe a couple of years. I don't know why he quit. He got busy with Chico Hamilton and went out on the road. I decided not to do such. I stayed with the conservatory until I got a bachelor's degree, and then I went on to a master's degree, mainly on clarinet, spending most of my time on the clarinet. I got some very good jobs out of doing it. I studied with Mitchell Lurie, and he sent me on a couple of shows he was playing on when he couldn't get back on time from other events that he was involved with. Like he would teach in Santa Barbara, and maybe either traffic would hold him up — He'd call me, and I'd go in and sit in for him at The Donna Reed Show . Now, that really reaches back — I don't know what year--but that's in the fifties. And it was ingratiating when I walked in. My name was on the music stand, a big light. There's no excuse for missing, you know. [laughter] This is the first time I'd been involved in such a professional relation in music. Your name would be on the stand, on the music, and the big light, you couldn't miss, so clearly written and all. You had your own microphone, and it was just beautiful. I enjoyed doing that. But these are still the Central Avenue days. I think every Monday night was jam session night. I sat in quite often.

ISOARDI

You mean in general on the avenue?

GREEN

No. Some Monday nights I remember going down sitting in just because that was jam session night. There would be so many guys up on the stand, trumpet, any instrument you could name; they were on the bandstand at the Downbeat. And it wasn't a very large bandstand, either. But it seems like guys can make room when it comes to jamming, if they can get a part of it. [laughter] And especially if he hears a song he feels he knows. "I've got to get a little bit of that song," you know. He takes his horn out and runs up on the bandstand. "Let me have a chorus or two," see. It was fun. Really, it was unbelievable, those days. I told you I met Miles Davis during this period, too.

ISOARDI

How did you meet him?

GREEN

He was over on San Pedro and Vernon [Avenue]. There was a club there. I don't remember the name of it, but Miles Davis and, I think, Dexter Gordon were playing with a rhythm section at this club. I walked up to Miles Davis and asked him, "Miles, how could you help me understand what to do with jazz? How would you describe it?" He said, "Well, Bill, I take one note that I like, and I add another and another — " He started walking off. "And another and

another — " Until he disappeared, [laughter] And that was it. And, truthfully, that is the answer. [laughter] That's what he said.

ISOARDI

I like that.

GREEN

Keep adding a note that you like.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's good.

GREEN

Dexter still owes me some money.

ISOARDI

What?

GREEN

Dexter Gordon.

ISOARDI

What does he — ?

GREEN

Oh, he was on the bum one night. He'd come out ringing wet from playing on the bandstand. He said, "Bill, could you loan me \$3? I'll give it back to you." That was the end of that. [laughter] I haven't seen it since, you know. But, also, many little fine incidents happened such as that.

ISOARDI

Do you remember, these Monday night jams at the Downbeat, I guess they must have run all night?

GREEN

No, the Downbeat had its limit. It would close at two o'clock. Maybe one thirty or two o'clock. Most of the clubs did. There was a club called Lovejoy's — that's at Central Avenue and Vernon — that would go like from anytime, from twelve o'clock midnight until six, seven the next morning. That is where we also went to jam. And there was quite a bit to learn and was learned there. You'd walk up this hallway, up the stairway into the hallway, into this little room. You'd always hear maybe a little piano tinkling. Somebody's playing. And a drummer might come. And then that place started building up a nice clientele. People would look forward to going after hours to Lovejoy's to just listen and sit around the bar, you know. That was like a training ground that we don't have these days. You could go anytime and jam.

ISOARDI

Of all those jams that you went to, are there any that are especially memorable? Do you remember any particular nights that stand out in your mind for any reason?

GREEN

Not especially.

ISOARDI

Or any particular people?

GREEN

I played at all of the places. I played at the Dunbar [Hotel] with a guy named George Washington, a trombone player, many times. He had a seven-piece band, and I was only playing alto at that time. I wasn't playing tenor. It was when I became involved in the studios that I started playing tenor sax, and I liked it very much. I had to find a mouthpiece. Then I left the Central Avenue scene to go to Glendale to sit in with "Bumps" [Hubert] Myers. This was in the early fifties.

ISOARDI

Glendale? What was in Glendale?

GREEN

Glendale, a place called the Melody Club. Bumps Myers and William Woodman were the two tenor saxophone players that I joined after the Central Avenue thing kind of slowed down. I don't know how to describe what really happened. It just kind of slowed down a little bit. Central Avenue. I don't know what the reasons were. Maybe you got some explanation from Buddy Collette or somebody.

ISOARDI

Well, everybody's got different theories.

GREEN

Is that right?

ISOARDI

Yeah. There are two things that come up most often.

GREEN

What's that?

ISOARDI

Two arguments people seem to mention more than any others. One is the fact that once they struck down the housing covenants, people could move.

GREEN

I see.

ISOARDI

So people started moving west, and you had, I guess, Crenshaw [Boulevard] or Western [Avenue]. You had other areas popping up.

GREEN

Right.

ISOARDI

And then a number of people have also talked about this chief of police they had back then, a man named [William H.] Parker, who started cracking down on all the clubs and driving the white patrons away.

GREEN

Ah, okay. Now I understand.

ISOARDI

So those are the two things that most people seem to mention. I don't know if

—

GREEN

Okay. Well, in any case, I had to keep blowing my horns, especially now that I'm taking up the tenor saxophone. I had to really get a chance to learn how to play it. So I went over to the Melody Club in Glendale and sat in with Bumps Myers and William Woodman. And they'd bounce me around like a rubber ball. [laughter] They're such great players. [laughter] I loved it. I kept going downtown to buy a mouthpiece that would just come halfway up to their volume level. [laughter] You know, every day I'd say, "Oh, I know this will do it." You know, I was in the shop and it sounded loud enough to me. I'd go on the bandstand that night with William Woodman and Bumps, it wasn't nearly loud enough. [laughter] You know what I mean? But it was fun doing this, you know, back and forth. And every night they would let me sit in. So, evidently, I must have gotten pretty good, because the manager hired me to be the third saxophone with them.

ISOARDI

So you had three tenors up front?

GREEN

Three tenors up front. And I got up pretty good. I learned the songs and the riffs and really was an asset to the group. It got so they relied on my showing up. So I said, "Well, I've got to get some money for my work that I'm doing here." And I was hired. In fact, that's the way Herman got a job with me down at Marty's when I had the job for eight years.

ISOARDI

Herman Riley?

GREEN

Herman Riley kept coming, visiting, and sitting in, and they loved him. Then it came to a point where the manager just had to hire Herman Riley because he was there very consistently.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

MARCH 10, 1991

ISOARDI

Bill, last time you were talking about your gig up at the Melody Club up in Glendale.

GREEN

That's right.

ISOARDI

Do you want to pick up the story there?

GREEN

That was a nice job. I learned quite a bit playing with Hubert "Bumps" Myers and Bob [Harvey], who was the drummer and leader. But we left there by means of a drummer who had sat in with us on Monday nights. His name was Tommy Stewart. Tommy was a little short fellow, Caucasian, and he did all the wrong things: he drank a lot, he smoked all the time, constantly, very high-strung. I always felt that he was going to have a heart attack on the bandstand. But he didn't have it on the bandstand; he had it much later. But, in the meantime, he was forming a group of guys to play a job in El Monte.

ISOARDI

Can I ask you how you ran into this guy, how you met him? How did you meet Tommy Stewart?

GREEN

Tommy just sat in with the band over at the Melody Club.

ISOARDI

He just started sitting in with you guys.

GREEN

Yeah, and he asked a few of us to play his job on like Sunday afternoons. This meant from four o'clock in the afternoon until one o'clock or maybe two Monday morning. I think anybody who plays eight hours on a job of that nature, where you're constantly wailing, you become punchy after, say, about six hours. You forget the tunes that you had played and the ones that you might play. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Or the one you're in the middle of at the time. [laughter]

GREEN

I'll tell you, it was really something. We worked hard. Every song had to be a knockout. So we put our hearts into it.

ISOARDI

This was a club in El Monte?

GREEN

He took us to a club in El Monte. One was called 49er, the Club 49er. This was really a bad place to play in, because the guys who hung out there, they were always ill-tempered, and fights would break out and beer bottles would be thrown. I tell you, that was the worst place I'd ever played in. Forty-niners: it

lived up to its name. [laughter] So that taught us all not to ever get so soulful in your music that you close your eyes. [laughter] You learn not to close your eyes when you play your horn in a club like that. This is true. It really happened.

ISOARDI

What were the people like who were in this club?

GREEN

Well, they were nice, seemingly, to the musicians. You know, everybody has a spot in their hearts for entertainers, because they need you. And you need them as an entertainer, because you wouldn't pour your heart out to tables and chairs. We still were playing, and it was fun. They would buy you drinks and what have you if you needed it. Mainly the applause. I think an artist really thrives on applause from people. For some reason, that is nearly as good as money. If you didn't have to pay bills, that would be enough, you know, really, if you just come to think about it.

ISOARDI

Was it mostly a white audience? Was it a mixed audience at the 49er?

GREEN

Oh, it was mostly white. Maybe one or two blacks would come in, but always it was mainly white. And it was a bunch of rough guys. They'd be fighting, they'd break up the bar like the Old West. The stories really came to life right there at the 49er. And this, by the way, was before my friend Plas Johnson came to town. I met his brother down the street. That's why I mentioned Plas. We were playing at another club in El Monte called the Pioneer Club. It was about a block away from the 49er. I also worked there a few nights. But that's when I met Ray Johnson. Ray, who was our pianist for one night, asked me if I knew his brother. "Have you ever heard my brother play saxophone?" Well, at that time I felt I was as good as anybody ever. I was playing with Bumps and William Woodman. I really was hot and had the energy and the spark that one has at a certain time in their life. Mainly, you need energy to do anything. That's what you start losing after a while in your life is the energy to do something. I have many subjects I can stray away to. The years I think I did the most in my life were 1969 through 1971. I still can't believe that I was taking oboe, bassoon, karate, and teaching, naturally, every day. I don't know where I got the time from.

ISOARDI

Plus all your studio gigs?

GREEN

And I learned to ride the unicycle during that same period. I don't know how I got the time to do it all. And I was doing very well on everything.

ISOARDI

Plus you were presumably working in the studios as well.

GREEN

Still working jobs too.

ISOARDI

Jeez, amazing.

GREEN

But, just looking back on that, I must have been like superhuman. I know that I didn't need more than five hours of sleep, and I never slept any more than that during that period in my life. So I'm just, you know, capturing thoughts as they come to me. During the while I was at 49er, I think about Richard Kline, who was a very fine saxophonist. He was also studying with me. At the time I was still teaching at the L.A. [Los Angeles] Conservatory [of Music]. Richard had taken a few lessons from me. I didn't know he played as well as he did until I met him at the 49er. He knew a little bit about the sax, and he could hardly read, so I started teaching him to read. [tape recorder off] Richard Kline was a better saxophone player than I realized. When I was teaching him at the conservatory, I would take him through all of the scales and just elementary things. So we got on the bandstand one Sunday afternoon, and the battle started between he and myself. It was a knock-down-drag-out. He could play. He sounded quite a bit like Bumps Myers. He was a tall, nice-looking guy. Yeah, we just had a ball. So we went from one job to another, just the two of us, because we could put on a little show with the tenors. And Richard — I wonder what happened to him, because he was very talented.

ISOARDI

You lost contact with him?

GREEN

I don't know what really took place. He may have just quit. Somehow music, playing an instrument, if you don't make a living at it, you have to do something. And if it doesn't keep flowing, you find yourself not playing. You're just kind of like forced out of the business because of economy. So the same thing happened, I think, to Richard Kline. Excellent musician — I don't know anyone better — but Richard never became studio quality. That was my saving grace. I had studied in the conservatory and that really saved me. I learned to play flute and the clarinet and how to read the classical music and play it as well as the jazz. So whenever they needed something in the studio that needed just a little touch of classical, the background, I was ready and prepared. Especially with Motown [Records]. All of the stars that had something, you know, they needed a little flute that had a touch of classical touch in it. I remember one day H. B. Barnum called me for a date. It was eight o'clock in the morning. I didn't know what it was all about. When I got there, it was a Bactine commercial. I had to play the Flight of the Bumble Bee on clarinet. I

was certainly happy that I had studied that, because that would have been over my head.

ISOARDI

That would have been hell to sight-read.

GREEN

Either you know that or you don't. And I was prepared. I guess he knew that I could do it, so that's why he called me. I was the only instrument other than violins, four violins and a clarinet. It was a commercial, and I was so happy that I had that training. So that's just to show you how things work out for you. Whenever you study something, somewhere or another, it's going to pay off for you.

ISOARDI

At the end of the war, you come to L.A., and I guess with the aid of the G.I. Bill, you enroll in the L.A. Conservatory to study at the time.

GREEN

That's right. I mentioned that.

ISOARDI

When you arrived at the conservatory, were there many blacks in the conservatory? Or were you kind of a pioneer?

GREEN

Always a few, scattered. I would say out of the four or five hundred, there were no more than fifteen to twenty, at the most, black.

ISOARDI

But you knew then you wanted to get this kind of formal training.

GREEN

Oh, yes. All the time I knew I wanted to study someplace .

ISOARDI

You were pointed toward the conservatory.

GREEN

I had a choice in a toss-up between New York and Los Angeles, but I think the weather and the climate brought me out here. You know, I had been stationed in San Diego, and I liked it there. You know, the weather, you could go without a coat. I couldn't believe it, because, originally, being from Kansas City, where it really was cold, it was like nearly as cold as in Chicago. I told you about the wind in Chicago right off the Great Lakes there. My goodness! You could be going down the street and the wind would change your mind as to which direction you were going to go. I can remember that really happening. I didn't have any place in particular in mind that I wanted to go. Maybe I was looking for a USO [United Service Organizations] place to stay that night. I'd be walking down the street, I got to a corner, and the wind blows. "This must be the way." [laughter] I'd go along with the wind. [laughter] It was beautiful.

ISOARDI

That's good.

GREEN

Well, anyway, back to the playing jobs. I did a lot of work with Gene Page. In fact, most of the work that I did for Motown was through Gene Page. There were other leaders, but Gene had a good hold in recording because he was so unique in his writing, and he was endless with ideas. And when Gene was hot, he was really hot. I think he's still hot. He just doesn't have the opportunity now for some reason, but Gene is one of the most talented musicians for writing arrangements and scores for anybody, even now. I don't know whether he has any habits or whatever, but if I had anything to do with it, he'd be working now doing movie backgrounds. He could do anything. He had his manner of getting to a job. Like, oftentimes he wasn't right on time, but most of the leaders and producers would put up with him, he was so good. I don't know whether he wore himself out in that manner. I sure liked the guy, and I still talk about him because he did so much for me. I did a lot of background work for Richard Pryor. He had a day show for children. That hasn't been too long ago. Gene got the job for me. He called me and said, "Bill, there's a spot for a tenor saxophone player on this show with Richard Pryor. All you have to do is go and take the audition." I went over, got the job, worked — I think that show lasted only thirteen weeks. It was like a half of a season. And it was fun to do. Richard had to pantomime my solos, and he did a nice job, naturally. You know he would; he's a great actor and really, basically speaking, a nice person. I think he hides behind his forward thrust as a comedian with a bad mouth. He hides behind that, but underneath he's meek and afraid of it all. [laughter] A very talented guy.

ISOARDI

Yeah, really.

GREEN

So that's one of the jobs that Gene gave me. I also did some vocal work because of Gene. I did a couple of commercials with my voice.

ISOARDI

Really? Singing?

GREEN

No, just speaking.

ISOARDI

They wanted that basso.

GREEN

Yeah, a couple of things I did: "That's no bird, that's Superman." It was something of that nature in the background to a record. And then, "The Rock." I had to say a couple of words, just something like that. I saw a commercial the

other day about the Big Mac. It said, "Things are going down." I said, "That's a perfect commercial for me." The voice that was saying it said, [in high voice] "And things are going down, and things are going down." I said, "They need my voice." To myself I said, [in very low voice] "Things are going down." [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, that reminds me —

GREEN

If I didn't have a cold — I'm a little hoarse now — I could really dig it out, you know. But that would be a nice commercial for them. So right now I'm doing a lot of teaching, so much, to such a degree, that I have to just take a couple of days off and not teach. The hardest part of my job is talking. If you've ever taught, you teach four hours; that's plenty of talking to do. So if you had more, well, whatever your discipline, you're making it harder. It is harder. So that's why I need a couple of days off. When I finish teaching, usually I'm quiet. I don't do too much talking. But using the voice is kind of hard on you.

ISOARDI

Bill, now you're considered one of the master of master teachers now. And one thing I found out about Central in talking to so many people already is that there was just a handful of great teachers back then. Buddy [Collette] and Jackie [Kelso] and everyone talk about a couple of people who were just so instrumental. People like Sam Browne, people like Lloyd Reese.

GREEN

That's right.

ISOARDI

Caughey Roberts taught people.

GREEN

Sure.

ISOARDI

Vi Redd — Was it her aunt, I believe? Miss [Alma] Hightower was a teacher.

GREEN

Hightower, yes.

ISOARDI

Now, you seem like sort of the continuation of this tradition. Maybe you could talk a bit about when you started teaching back then, who you taught.

GREEN

Oh, actually, yeah. I could do that, but actually I didn't really associate with any of these people other than Lloyd Reese. I went over to his studio one day. In fact, he called me over and asked me if I wanted to teach at his studio. He'd heard the good I'd been doing, and he wanted me to join with him. And when I found out what he wanted to pay me, I said, "No, I think I can do better on my

own, and thanks a lot for the offer." He seemed to be a nice guy. He had an attitude of really making all of his students unusually good. I liked that spark, and I tried to use that theory in my teaching. If I teach, I want you to really know what you're doing and be as good as anyone possibly can be. But, as you live and learn, you know that most of what you say must be worked at by the student. If it isn't, well, it won't flourish. It's like watering a plant. If you don't put water on it, it won't grow. You have to apply yourself as a student. No matter what you study, it's mainly left up to the student. We all know this. Talent, sure. That means how fast, how well do you catch on to whatever it is you're studying and how much interest you have in it to pursue and to continue learning. But Lloyd Reese, he impressed me the most. I still didn't meet, say, Miss Hightower. I've heard of her, but I never met her. [tape recorder off] But Caughey Roberts, I knew of him because I played in a band with Caughey. He was the clarinetist with Millard Lacey, who was the conductor of like a park concert band. We played the various parks in town here in Los Angeles. South Park: I just passed that park a few weeks ago. I hadn't been in that area in many years. Also MacArthur Park when they built it. And others: Hollenbeck, which is over on the east side. We were just all around Central Avenue. Buddy Collette used to play in one of the bands. Before Millard Lacey, we had McDavid, Percy McDavid.

ISOARDI

Percy McDavid, yeah.

GREEN

Did he mention him?

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah.

GREEN

He was a nice man. He had great influence on all of us. He emphasized finesse in music. He was really into reading and dynamics and little things, tuning. I still admire his playing. I didn't know anyone with the same touch that he had when he played. He had gone to school in France and so forth, but he was a bandleader out here. Back to Caughey, Caughey was a clarinetist with Millard Lacey. I didn't know of him as a teacher, but I know that he did teach Jackie Kelso, and he did a wonderful job with him. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, really. He really did. Buddy has talked, when I interviewed him, about something called the Crystal Tea Room.

GREEN

Oh, yes. That was the building — In fact, that's in the vicinity of South Park there around Fifty-eighth [Street] and San Pedro [Street], in that neighborhood. Avalon [Boulevard], that was the street, yes, where it was located. On Sunday

afternoons they'd have jam sessions. You'd walk in and the house would be jumping. People were just on top of each other. You could hardly walk. It was jammed like Sunday afternoons. There were always drinks available, but mainly the musicians were there to play their horns. It seems that we don't have days like that anymore. People were seemingly less criminal minded, you know. But we have so many things going on these days.

ISOARDI

What prompted you and Buddy to organize? Why did you and Buddy organize?

GREEN

Why did we organize it?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

GREEN

Actually, we had to have someplace, and this place was available to us. You have to have someplace to perform, whatever you do. But we didn't really have an organization. It was kind of like a group of guys who would meet there, a rhythm section, and the horns would come and bring their instruments. Nobody really appointed. But somehow it took place. It didn't last long. I don't know why, but possibly the rental of the building or whatever. It's usually finances that bring about an end or a beginning to anything. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, really. So you had many of your students, I guess, coming to these things, then?

GREEN

Yeah. Well, I had one student, Walter Benton. Walter Benton was one of the best saxophone players ever at that time. He played tenor sax, and he sounded quite a bit like Lucky Thompson. He was studying with me. [tape recorder off] A very interesting point is how does one know what to practice to play at a jam session. Well, mainly, you have to know what tunes are popular at jam sessions, so you have to attend jam sessions to know that. You could even take a notebook with you — you should — and note the tunes that are being played. Make sure you learn all of those tunes. It was like "You Stepped Out of a Dream." When that became popular, everybody jumped on that and was playing it. [sings fragment of melody] "Whispering." Now, you remember when all of the fellows jumped on that. When I came here, a very popular tune was "How High the Moon." And it still is popular. Believe me, I just came back from Japan with Benny Carter, and that was our first number. Everybody had to take a solo, two choruses at least. So we'd start out maybe with the main, basic line, and then start — From the right hand in, Herman Riley would play. And the next guy to me, you know, Danny House, and then my time, and the next one was Mel Martin, and right down the line to [John] Stephens. Then another

ensemble chorus would come in with the whole band playing. Then we'd start at the end with the trombones, you know what I mean. We had Thurman Green and so forth and so on. And then go up into the trumpet section; then they would have a battle. But this is all on "How High the Moon." So that took me back many years, you know, when I was in the Central Avenue days. It's kind of good to remember some things, because they never change. Some things never change. Like that song has changes in it either you know or you don't. I think a musician starting out today should learn "How High the Moon" or he really hasn't gotten his feet wet, you might say, in jazz. The changes are very nice. You kind of learn to live inside of them. There are so many ways to approach your subject. I was just thinking about the chord changes of that song. You could even write out your own solo, if you wanted something outstanding, but then you'd have to be well trained in reading to play some of the things. So it's one thing or another. I was fortunate enough to have the ear training, solfeggio, for a few years. That really enabled me to transcribe off records whatever I heard. I was very gifted in that. It's hard on your patience. You have to be patient with yourself to sit there with a pencil and listen to it played back and back maybe two or three times. But we do have machines now that can make it easy for you, slowing down the music and so forth. All of this is very interesting and good that we have it. Like I said, at the Crystal Tea Room — back to that — I don't remember, but it didn't last very long. The guys weren't appointed, but everybody wanted to be where the happenings were. I'd say the session started at noon and maybe until four [o'clock]. Well, if there was nothing else going on, naturally everybody would be there. And that's the way it was on a Sunday afternoon.

ISOARDI

About when was this, Bill? What year was the Crystal Tea Room?

GREEN

Oh, actually, I would say in the late forties, just before the fifties, because it was before I had graduated from the conservatory. I was at the conservatory until 1952 as a student. Then, after that, I stayed on for ten more years as an instructor or a teacher at the L.A. Conservatory and had my own classroom and so forth at the conservatory.

ISOARDI

You mentioned Walter Benton. Are there any other individuals who you remember who learned from those jam sessions?

GREEN

Yeah, Pee Wee Johnson, very good, and Hadley Caliman, who's doing very well up in San Francisco now. In fact, he's teaching school somewhere in the north there. He was a saxophonist at the time. In fact, Dexter Gordon was his idol, and he just hung on to Dexter's coattail. He learned how to play the tenor

like that, and he learned something . It seems like all of the young fellows who had the inspiration, who were inspired to play, really learned how to play. They would hang out together. They'd go over to each other's houses, play a little note here, would learn this. It kind of rubs off on you. It's like the thing you're doing right now. You're learning something. It depends on what the subjects are. If you guys decided you were going to play jazz and do some reading and you decided you're going to start making your own music — Somebody decides to bring a bass or have a bass player come in and somebody with drums — A piano player who knew a little bit about his chords, he could play a little song and start something going, the bass player's going, and you're trying to learn how to get something to go with what you hear — that's the way jazz was born. I was just showing a student today, if you just take the basic notes of a song, place them at the right time, and you start thinking of what would you do, using your own imagination — Still, you know, the timing — What most of us don't realize is timing is more important than the music itself. If you get that down, you're over halfway home. I keep going back to my teaching, but back to my history. After the Crystal Tea Room days and park concerts and Marty's, I went into the studio. And, really, I've done so many things in the studio, I'm happy to say, that it seems that I miss the studio the most, although it was the most taxing. And I think it was the most rewarding financially. Monetarily so, it's most rewarding, but other than that, what you learn there isn't very useful when it comes to practicality in your musicianship on stage, being out front as a leader or a guest artist. You don't need the studio; you need emphasis placed in the jazz world, where you learn how to play on your own, by yourself, and make music. That's what really counts. What you learn in the studio is just a little elementary music. I think Cannonball [Adderley] said the same thing. Because you can forget how to play an instrument in the studio. You may learn how to hold a note still and fade and swell and play it in tune, but you're not playing your music, you know, not really from the heart the way you're capable of. You want to reach and dig inside yourself rather than something that's set up for a background setting for some episode.

ISOARDI

How did you first get into the studios. Bill? Those jobs must have been tough back then.

GREEN

Always word of mouth. I've never really pushed myself into advertising what I'm capable of. I just let it happen, but with enthusiasm. I've always been enthusiastic in my work. I wanted to do it as well, if not better, than anyone else. Even in my playing, I've always had that attitude. Mainly, just being able to play whatever I wanted to play. That was the thought.

ISOARDI

Well, if you weren't pushy, how did they discover you? How did somebody come up to you and say, "We want —"?

GREEN

Well, you have an attitude — Whenever you have a good attitude, one that's helpful, with helpful thoughts all the time, just naturally you're selling yourself. Everyone hears about that. If you're honest in what you're doing, you'll be rewarded, being a reasonable person, you know, one that you can get along with and talk to. You don't have to worry about your future; you'll have one. Of course, everybody likes to be around a person like that that inspires others. And that's what we should all become, an inspiration to somebody. Now, however you do that is left up to you.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE AUGUST 8, 1991

ISOARDI

Okay, Bill, I think we're down to the last few items. Perhaps you can begin by talking about the importance of Central Avenue to you.

GREEN

As I look back upon the Central Avenue days, I feel that I achieved quite a bit mainly through exposure to the great musicians. And I was able to play with them, such as Dexter Gordon, I'm speaking of; and Wardell Gray, who's gone long ago; "Big Jay" [Cecil] McNeely was on the scene, as I said before; Lucky Thompson; Sonny Criss was around at the time. And there were others such as Gene Montgomery, who also passed shortly after the Central Avenue days. He was a fast liver. He did many things wrong; he was drunk all the time, drinking and smoking, naturally, and doping it up. So he didn't last very long, but a great player. He sounded and sort of looked like Lester Young. He was admired greatly by the audiences in the clubs, the Downbeat [Club]. That's where most of the musicians hung out. That was considered the place to be to hear the greatest of jazz. Kind of like [radio station] KLON, that radio program. But I would take out my horn and sit in once in a while with the guys. Even Benny Carter would play there sometimes, and I'd sit in with him. I even have pictures when I was sitting in with Benny Carter and Warden Gray on this bandstand at the Downbeat. Those were wonderful days. I guess, if you take it to mind, you'll find that yesterday is always a better-looking day than, say, today. It's the way our minds perceive. The time has lapsed, and it's gone beyond, and you're out of that jungle, you might say. But looking back upon those days, it seems very nice. There was much freedom. I don't remember any restrictions on Central Avenue. You could go in any club. I think the Last Word [Cafe] had

begun to charge at the door. You could go into most clubs for a little of nothing.

ISOARDI

Really? Most places didn't have cover charges?

GREEN

At the Downbeat there was no cover. And that just started, say, in the fifties, where they started charging you to enter a club. Even the club where I worked for eight years, there was no cover charge and hardly any minimum drink. If you sat down, you know, you were expected to buy at least a couple of drinks.

ISOARDI

How did they make any money?

GREEN

People were like that. They paid and didn't mind paying, especially to just be inside. There would be bouncers to see that the right people came in. So it was that nice. And no more. Those days have ceased. So what I gained, mainly, as I said before, was the exposure to these great players and attitudes that were taken by them with their instruments. And the kind of music they played — They had a certain repertoire that they would warm up on and play every night. "Back Home in Indiana," at the time, was a hot one. "How High the Moon." "C-Jam Blues" has always been good. Many others. "Cherokee," and a lot of Charlie Parker's works. That was the era in which everybody was latching onto the more modern sounds of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. So that's the Downbeat days.

ISOARDI

Was that typical for most young musicians then? Or were you kind of an exception? Did most young musicians have a chance to play with people like that?

GREEN

That was the way it was. The average musician could get up on the stand if he felt he was good enough to. There was a fellow by the name of Sweet Pea [Robinson]; he was reasonably good. He'd take his horn out and get up on the bandstand and play, and he sounded good. During that period, Eric Dolphy came along too. He'd take out his horn and wasn't so good at the time. And they would let him sit in. And then, shortly after that, say. Central Avenue days, Frank Morgan came on the scene. In fact, he was a part of that Central Avenue setting. I remember seeing him in one of the clubs. It was the Club Alabam. That was my first time hearing him. He was an unusual talent. He learned fast at an early age of sixteen, seventeen. They let him in because he could play.

ISOARDI

Boy.

GREEN

But I really enjoyed that period of my life. I was going to the L.A. Conservatory [of Music]. I didn't have a car. I was walking everywhere. So I lived right around the corner from Forty-second [Street] and Central Avenue. I lived at Forty-first [Street] and Naomi Avenue, so it was about a block and a half away from —

ISOARDI

Right on the hot corner. [laughter]

GREEN

Yes. And I walked down to the bus stop which was at Forty-first and Central Avenue, and I'd ride to Park View [Street] and Seventh [Street] to the L.A. Conservatory for my classes and private lessons. So at night I would take all of my evenings, after having dinner, if I had the money to buy dinner — Oftentimes it was only chili and beans or chili and rice or chili, rice, and beans, you see. [laughter] I'll never forget. It cost thirty-six cents. That was my dinner sometimes. But I still would like to have a bowl of that chili. It was the greatest! If I had that recipe, I'd be a rich man right now. That little Chinese fellow who had this corner store, you might say — he called it a restaurant — but he had about twelve stools in there, and he'd cook. It was the greatest chili ever .

ISOARDI

Where at?

GREEN

Oh, that was about Fortieth [Street] and Central Avenue. Everything was very near, only two blocks away. There were a lot of eating houses.

ISOARDI

What was the name of it? Do you remember?

GREEN

I don't remember. Just the chili parlor. And all of the guys would drift in. You'd see anybody there, any name. Dexter Gordon had eaten there. Oh, great chili. And you had the oyster-type crackers or the square — Whatever. But it was rice and beans and chili, and that's it. You could have it any way you liked. [laughter] Just plain chili. It was in the bowl. It was thirty-six cents. They also served a pie, coconut cream pie, and that was it. You didn't need anything more. [laughter] I developed a skin condition from eating that way. I had to take many treatments for my skin. I was pimples, you know, with acne, and it cost me a little money. And then I found a friend who went to the library and found out how to cure my ailment of the skin. It had gotten so bad, it had pockmarks in my skin like Nat [King] Cole at the time, from eating the chili. My diet wasn't right. When I changed my diet, it never came back again. But I was going through what you might call a late adolescent stage. [laughter] So those were rough days but good days, fun all the way. The music made it all

like a dream. To learn a song is fun. It still is fun, especially if you know you're going to get a chance to play it. You wanted to learn it well and as many licks as you possibly could on each chord and learning your instrument better. I wish I knew then what I know now about what it really takes to do all that you'd like to do, but I guess that's where time pays off. It takes time to learn all of those things. And you need someone who has the experience. It's good to be around experienced people who can help you out and make your life easy, because they've experienced what they know you need to know. It's like some of the things I'm teaching you there. For the most part, I know that you need that to improve. That's what I'm trying to teach right now: what I know will make you improve. So that about closes it up for me with Central Avenue. I moved from there to the west side on Van Ness [Avenue], because the person I was renting from had bought a new place on the west side of town, which was Van Ness and Venice [Boulevard], in that vicinity.

ISOARDI

When was this? In the early fifties?

GREEN

Early fifties, before I graduated from the L.A. Conservatory. So it was about 1950. I had gotten my bachelor's degree then, and I can remember staying there through my master's degree in this one little house. It was like a garage apartment. But I was moving up then. I had bought a car and was getting all sharp. You know, I was just really beginning to make it. So that went on into other facets. I'm sure you're only interested in the Central Avenue breakdown. It was a great street. I can remember having-- I was dressed sharply. I wore a suit all the time. I had about three or four suits that I had bought. I had no money in my pocket, but I was looking good, you know, as if I had a lot of money. I'd seen a lot of hungry days. There was a place on Fifty-ninth [Street] and Central Avenue. I might be wrong, it may be Fifty-first [Street]. It was a soul food place. I wish it were still there. The food was so good. You could go in, and they had corn sticks, you know, corn bread. I just loved those. I had to order an extra order. You get two with your meal, but I needed two more. You know what I mean? They were so good. [laughter] And some people can cook black-eyed peas like nobody else. They know just how long to cook them and what to put in. It's like, if you cook macaroni, you just throw it in with some cold water, it never works out. It's got to be hot. The water has got to be hot before you put macaroni into it. And then it turns out nicely. So it's like some people know how to cook black-eyed peas and make them taste good. Corn bread and black-eyed peas, tremendous. Throw a little collard greens on the side or just regular greens. That sounds like I'm hungry, which I am. [laughter]

ISOARDI

You keep going on, you're not going to be able to control it. [laughter]

GREEN

So we'll check out with that.

ISOARDI

Okay, Bill. Thanks very much.

GREEN

My pleasure.

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