

## A TEI Project

# Interview of Art Farmer

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## 1. Transcript

### 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, (SIDE ONE) NOVEMBER 22, 1991

ISOARDI

Okay, Art, we'll begin our Central Avenue recollections. But perhaps since you came to Central Avenue in your teens, maybe you can begin talking about your beginnings, your roots before L.A.

FARMER

Yeah. Well, I was born in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in August 1928. And my family moved from Council Bluffs to Phoenix, Arizona, when my brother [Addison Farmer] and I were four years old. And then when we were around the age of sixteen we came to Los Angeles on a summer vacation, and there was so much musical activity here that we just decided to stay here.

ISOARDI

No kidding. That's what did it?

FARMER

Yeah. We had one more year to go in high school, which was fortunate. And we just didn't want to go back to Phoenix, to Phoenix High School, because we knew that we wanted to be professional musicians, and this was where it was happening.

ISOARDI

How did your music start? At what age?

FARMER

My music started before I started to go to school, actually, because my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] used to play the piano for the — My grandfather

[Abner Stewart] was a minister, and she used to play the piano in the church. We lived in the parsonage, and I used to go to the church with her in the afternoons when she was practicing the coming week's hymns. And after she would play, well, then I would get up on the piano and I would try to play, too. I thought all you had to do was just put your fingers on there and music would come out. [laughter] So that was my introduction to music.

ISOARDI

So this was early. You're just a few years old.

FARMER

Yeah, maybe three or four years old or something. And then when I started elementary school, then I started to study the piano. A piano teacher would come by the school once a week and give the kids lessons. That was my first study.

ISOARDI

Was that something you wanted to do then? Your mother didn't have to force you into it?

FARMER

No, no. She never had to force me. I don't know why; there was just something that seemed very attractive about music. She never had to say, "Come and practice your lessons," no.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

No. I never felt it took that much. It wasn't a chore. I didn't realize how much work it actually took. It was just fun to me.

ISOARDI

Was Addison also playing then —

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

— and as interested as you?

FARMER

He wasn't quite as interested as I was, but it was the — Actually, in reality, it was the tradition of black, what we would call middle-class or some kind of middle-class families to have a piano. Well, not only middle-class but almost — There was a piano in houses in the United States. This was before the days of television, you know. Most houses had a piano, and somebody could play something on the piano.

ISOARDI

People had to entertain themselves then.

FARMER

Yeah, right. Yeah, that's the way it was. You'd play the boogie woogie, somebody'd play the boogie woogie. And always some kid had to practice piano. You heard about that. "Practice your lesson, now." [laughter] So it was common. But I think I was the most interested at that time. And then later on, a few years later, somebody — We had an extra room that we rented out, and there was a man who just happened to have a violin in his trunk. And he said, "Well, I have this violin here. Maybe you might like to have it." And I said, "Sure, thanks."

ISOARDI

He gave it to you?

FARMER

Yeah, he gave it to me. It had a little hole. A rat had gnawed a hole in it by the F hole for some reason, but that didn't mean anything. [laughter] And this was during the time of the WPA [Works Progress Administration], so the WPA had all kinds of people employed, you know. Teachers teaching people — I remember going to an art school where you could learn how to sculpt and paint.

ISOARDI

You did?

FARMER

Yeah. In Phoenix.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

And there was a man teaching the violin. I had lessons from him. He was in the neighborhood, and he gave me lessons on the violin. So I played that for about a year, maybe a little longer. And I also studied in the public school, the violin. I remember when our class graduated from grammar school, I played the march for the students to march in.

ISOARDI

On violin.

FARMER

Just me with my violin. [laughter] So that was the first instrument. Then there was a church there, a Catholic church, that had a very active priest, and he organized a marching band in the church. And I wanted to be in the band. I couldn't play the violin in the band, so I wanted a horn, but there were no horns available. The only horn that was available was the bass tuba. So I said, "Okay, I'll take that one."

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

And I played that for about a year. Then Pearl Harbor came, and guys started being drafted, and other horns became available, so I shifted to trumpet. Actually I shifted to cornet at the start, because that was open, and it was in the same key as the tuba and the fingering was the same. So that's how I —

ISOARDI

So it was kind of a pragmatic choice, then.

FARMER

Yeah. I played that for maybe a couple of years. Then I bought a trumpet and started playing with a little school band around Phoenix, Arizona, and going out and listening to the dance bands when they came through on their one-nighters and got to meet some of the people.

ISOARDI

What kind of music were you interested in then? I guess probably in your early years it was probably formal training?

FARMER

Well, formal training —

ISOARDI

And church music?

FARMER

Well, church music, but my main — That was — I realize that the formal training, like everyone who starts on the instrument — If you have any kind of teacher, you start with the same things that the classical players start with. But my main interest at that time was swing music, you know, the big bands, dance bands. That was what really grabbed me.

ISOARDI

Who did you like?

FARMER

Well, what we heard on the radio the most was Harry James and Benny Goodman. We heard quite a bit of Duke Ellington and heard Stan Kenton and — let's see — Jimmie Lunceford. As far as the trumpet, Harry James had the most exposure. And I certainly liked him; I thought he was a great player. I hadn't heard Louis Armstrong at that time.

ISOARDI

Not at all?

FARMER

No.

ISOARDI

No records?

FARMER

Well, no, I hadn't. I hadn't heard any records when I was in Phoenix, and he didn't get any exposure on the radio like other people did for one reason or the

other. Harry James, of course, was a very fine player, so he was the first one that I was really made aware of. But then, let's see, Artie Shaw's band came through on a one-nighter, and Roy Eldridge was working with him.

ISOARDI

Oh, boy.

FARMER

I met him, and he was a wonderful person.

ISOARDI

Were you playing cornet then when you — ?

FARMER

Yes. He was a wonderful guy. He came by — No, no, what happened, the band came in town a day early. I was playing in a little club, and he came by there, and he sat in on the drums first. And then he went to his room and got his horn and brought his horn back and played. And then the next night, well, at the dance hall, the Artie Shaw band played the first dance from nine to one, and then our band played from like two to five, because there was a thing then called the swing shift, where there would be a dance held for the people who were working on what is called the swing shift at night — where they would get off at midnight. They would get off from work at midnight and then they would go to a dance. So we played then. So the guys from Artie Shaw's band, they stood around and listened to us.

ISOARDI

You guys must have been the best band in the area.

FARMER

We were the best because there wasn't any other one. [laughter] Of course, we really thought that we were great, you know, but we didn't know. But these guys were standing around listening. At that time I thought they were listening in awe, but when I look back on it I figure they were listening in shock.

[laughter] But Roy was a great person, you know.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah. In fact, a lot of guys — When the bands came through, we would go to where they were staying and introduce ourselves and ask them if they would like to come by our house for a jam session.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

And some of them would, you know, and they were very kind and gentle and helpful. There was never any kind of stuff about "Oh, we're tired and too busy" or something. They would come by.

ISOARDI

You can't imagine something like that happening today — some of the finest musicians being in a neighborhood and just sort of-- I mean, the opportunities don't seem to be there as much.

FARMER

Well, no, but the bands don't exist anymore. But there's a certain kind of community inside the jazz area, jazz neighborhood, that's international. And there's a lot of mutual help going on. There always has been. This is what's kept the music alive until now, because it's been handed down from one person to the next. And as long as a young person would show that they were sincerely interested, nobody would say, "Hey, go to hell," you know, "I'm busy!" I never had that kind of experience with anyone.

ISOARDI

Wonderful.

FARMER

So these guys would come by the house and they would give us whatever help — You know, if you knew what questions to ask, you would get the answers. A lot of times you didn't know the questions. But whatever you'd ask, they would help you. And there was an army camp that I was working in after school. Of course, they had an army band and they had the marching band, and part of the marching band was a swing band. I met some of the guys in the band, and they would come by the house when we had a rehearsal. One of the guys would write arrangements for us to play. He's still active back in the East.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah. So it's another case of people being helpful.

ISOARDI

Was Addison playing in the band then?

FARMER

Yeah, he was playing bass then. And through that type of exposure to people in the jazz world and hearing the music and loving it so much, we came over here on a vacation because we wanted to hear more music. And then we saw what was going on and we just couldn't see ourselves going back to Phoenix.

ISOARDI

You and your brother came out by yourselves for vacation?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

So there was nothing like that in the Phoenix area? There were no club scenes?

FARMER

No, there was just this little club that we were playing in. It was like a little what we call a "bucket of blood."

ISOARDI

Was that the name of it or your nickname for it?

FARMER

No, it was our nickname for it. [laughter] It was just a place, you know, a little bar where you would go in and play. I don't know what we got paid, but that wasn't important, you know. Maybe five bucks a night or something like that. But then there was so much happening over here, we just couldn't go back. And the center of it was Central Avenue. You know, there was like — If you come from Phoenix — Phoenix still had wooden sidewalks in some areas downtown, you know, like in the Western movies. If you come from that to Los Angeles, to Central Avenue, well. Central Avenue was very exotic. It was like going into a bazaar. [laughter] It's like you're going directly from Idaho to Baghdad or someplace. [laughter]

ISOARDI

So how did you get out here? Did you guys take the bus? Or did you go by train?

FARMER

Well, my brother came first, and then I came over with another guy who was coming over here on a vacation. He had a car, so I just came over with him. My brother already had rented a room in a house, you know, because a lot of people rented rooms, so I just stayed with him.

ISOARDI

Where was that at? Do you remember?

FARMER

Oh, that was — let's see — around — It was right off of Central Avenue, say, around in the fifties somewhere, around Fifty-second Street, I think it was.

ISOARDI

Okay, so I guess you were near Lovejoy's or — ?

FARMER

Oh yeah.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Not too far from the big corner.

FARMER

Right. I can remember pretty well the first day, that evening, I went to Central Avenue. That block where the Downbeat [Club] and the Last Word [Cafe] and the Dunbar [Hotel] — all those places — are, that was the block. And it was crowded, you know. A lot of people were on the street, you know. Almost like a promenade. [laughter] I saw all these people. Like I remember seeing Howard

McGhee; he was standing there talking to some people. I saw Jimmy Rushing, because the [Count] Basie band was in town. And I said, "Wow!"

ISOARDI

So they were just hanging around.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. Of course, you heard there was a place called Ivie's Chicken Shack. Ivie Anderson?

ISOARDI

Right.

FARMER

There was Lovejoy's and the Downbeat, the Last Word, and this big club — Alabam. The Club Alabam.

ISOARDI

So you're walking down the avenue on your first night. What's the first place you went into?

FARMER

I think the first place I went into was the Downbeat. Howard McGhee was there with Teddy Edwards and another tenor player by the name of J. D. King. And Roy Porter was playing drums, and the bass player was named Bob Dingbod.

ISOARDI

You didn't have any trouble getting in. I guess you were only sixteen then.

FARMER

No. Well, I was sixteen, but we were tall for our age. And it was crowded, so we just sort of walked in and stood around and stood up next to the wall.

ISOARDI

Now, I guess they were playing bebop then.

FARMER

Yeah. As far as I know, that was the first organized band out here that was really playing bebop. Dizzy [Gillespie] and Bird [Charlie Parker] hadn't come out here yet at that time. I think Dizzy had been out here with other bands, but he and Bird hadn't come out with the quintet yet.

ISOARDI

So those guys were playing bebop before Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker came out here.

FARMER

Absolutely. Certainly people were playing bebop. We were playing it; we were trying to play it before Dizzy and Bird got here.

ISOARDI

When was the first time you became aware of it? Was it through records in Phoenix?



FARMER

Yeah, I guess the first time I became aware was when I heard a record by Bill [Billy] Eckstine's band.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

FARMER

Because he had these guys in the band. That was the first time I became aware of it. But I didn't actually hear any records with the quintet until I got here, and then one of the kids played me a record with Dizzy Gillespie. Oh, I'd heard Charlie Parker on the record with Jay McShann also. But then the real concept of the music I didn't become aware of until I heard a record with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and the quintet on something like — I don't remember the name of the label, though.

ISOARDI

Savoy [Records]?

FARMER

No, it wasn't Savoy. I think it was Music Craft or something like that. It was Guild. I think it was Guild. They had tunes like "Hot House" on it. So that was the first thing.

ISOARDI

Well, it must have been a shock in a way, then, musically walking into the Downbeat and hearing that group.

FARMER

Well, it was a shock, certainly, but it wasn't a — It just sounded good to me. It didn't sound like — I didn't have to ask myself, "Gee, what is this? Do I like it or don't I like it?" because my mind was completely open at that time. I still hadn't even heard Louis Armstrong, but I hadn't heard anything that I didn't like. Everything I heard I liked. But it was just — At this time was the beginning of, let's call it, at the time, the bebop era, but it was also the beginning of the rock era in a certain sense, rock-pop, instrumentally. Across the street from the Downbeat was a place called the Last Word, and Jack McVea had a band over there. There was a guy in Los Angeles by the name of Joe Liggins. He had a group called Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers.

ISOARDI

Right, wrote that great song.

FARMER

So you'd call this — I guess you might call this like a jump band, a jump group.

ISOARDI

So they were going on when you got there?

FARMER

Yeah. Well, they had this very popular record called "The Honeydripper," and it was very, very simple music. It didn't have any of the harmonic complexity that bebop had to it, but it was very popular. So while the bebop thing was going in one direction, which was musically complex and has some quality to it, I would say, well, this other thing was going in a completely different direction. Very simple, and people could — The average person could get something out of it without any effort, you know.

ISOARDI

Right, right.

FARMER

So that's where things started going in a different direction.

ISOARDI

So you sort of see it as the music being sort of one, say, swing up till that time, and then sort of splitting off like that.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. Well, that kind of music didn't have any interest to me.

ISOARDI

Not at all?

FARMER

No, not at all. Because my attraction to music basically was the swing era with the big bands — Jimmie Lunceford and Count Basie and Duke Ellington — and that was a high level of music to me. It had a lot of things going on. And things like "The Honeydripper" — It was just completely watered down. It's like TV; it's watered down to the lowest common denominator, something that's made for idiots, you know, for morons. That's what the whole pop music has become. Now we're at what we call rap, which has less music in it than any music of all time. You know, a very well known classical composer and teacher named [Paul] Hindemith has a book called — what is it called? — Elementary Training for Musicians. And it begins, he says, "Music has three elements rhythm, melody, and harmony, and they are important in that order." But if you take rap music, it only has one. That's rhythm. Now, the guys are saying their little speech, their poems, in a monotone. There's no melody there. There's no harmony. It's just that rhythm and the words. So that's what it's become.

ISOARDI

But it almost seems — It strikes me, too, that in a way it makes sense, because music plays much less of a role in the school systems now, it seems.

FARMER

It does.

ISOARDI

So they don't have the instruments, and they don't have the Sam Brownes, and they don't have people encouraging them to develop musically and play. So in a

sense they're producing what music they can with what they've got, which is essentially just their voice without any —

FARMER

Yeah, well, there's a lot of these kids — A lot of school dropouts never cared about anything anyway. But anyway, they're looking for a means to express themselves. They have that, so I can't blame them. They're dealing with what they have to deal with. But the music that I liked was more complex. The big band music had a lot of depth and profundity to it to me. So it was a natural movement from big band to bebop as far as I was concerned. It really pleased me. Plus the fact that at the end of the war [World War II], big bands started fading away because of one reason or the other. And one of the reasons was the music became too complex for the audience, for one thing. The economic situation was against it — the cost of moving a band around the country. Plus the fact that the record companies and the promoters thought that they could make as much money with five pieces as they could make with sixteen or seventeen. They could put a singer in the front. Until then, well, the singer was just someone who would sit up there on the bandstand and smile and got up and sang one chorus on a song every now and then. That goes for Frank Sinatra and whoever else was up there. They would just get up and sing one chorus and sit back down again. But then they became more and more popular and salable. So the big bands faded away. And in order to stay in music, you had to be able to work in the small group. To work in a small group, you had to be able to play a decent solo. My first ambition was just to be a member of that sound in a big band. I would have been very happy just to be a second or third or fourth or first trumpet player, whatever. At that particular time, I would say it was beyond my dreams that I would ever become a soloist. I would be very happy just to be in it, at least to start off with. But then in order to stay in music I had to be able to play solos, so one thing led to another.

ISOARDI

So let me take you back then to that first night on Central. Did you spend the whole night at the Downbeat? Or you cruised down the avenue a little bit?

FARMER

Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. I was going from one place to another.

ISOARDI

To see what was there.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did any other places strike you other than the Downbeat in terms of what you heard that night?

FARMER

Well, I didn't really go into the Alabam, but I passed by there. I heard the big band sound coming out. That was a place where you had to buy some kind of ticket to go in. I couldn't buy a ticket, you know. And I went into the Last Word and listened to Jack McVea, who had more of a sort of a jump band entertainment type of thing, which wasn't as interesting to me as what was happening with Howard's group. Plus, Howard was a great trumpet player. That's about my only memories for the first night. And there were a lot of people our age hanging around. One thing led to another; we would meet guys. But that was the heart of it right there.

ISOARDI

How were you and your brother surviving?

FARMER

Well, we would get some jobs, but that first summer — Well, there was still work available, because the war was winding down. We got jobs doing other kinds of work. I remember me having a job in a cold storage plant. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, for the summer that might not have been so bad. [laughter]

FARMER

Stacking crates of fruit and vegetables. We were kids, you know; we didn't take anything seriously. A lot of the time we didn't have any money, and we got thrown out of rooms and things. We got fired from that job because we started throwing these potatoes at each other. [laughter] Me and my brother and a couple of other guys, we just had a little fight in there. [laughter]

ISOARDI

What did your folks think about all this?

FARMER

Well, they — My mother — My father [James Arthur Farmer] was dead then. We were living with my mother in Arizona. She said, "Well, if you want to stay over there — Well, I wish you'd come home, but if you're going to stay there you have to go to school and get your high school diploma." So we promised her we would do that. So she said, "Okay." So that was in the summer. When school opened, well, we went over to Jeff [Jefferson High School] and enrolled, which was — I'm glad we did. [laughter] A lot of good players were still in the army, and there were still some big bands around getting some shows. I think the first job that I got in Los Angeles was with Horace Henderson. Horace Henderson was the brother of Fletcher [Henderson]. I don't remember how I met him. I think that he came by Jeff one day, and I was out on the playground. He said, "Come over here." I walked over there, and he said, "You're Arthur Farmer?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, I got a band. I need a trumpet player."

ISOARDI

Whoa. So who hipped him to you?

FARMER

I don't know how that happened. You know, looking back, I can't remember now. But something like that came up. And I got some work with him. And one thing leads to another, and I would work with Floyd Ray. These were the two people that I worked with in that first year.

ISOARDI

So you were able to pay your way, then musically?

FARMER

Well, sometimes. [laughter] It wasn't that easy.

ISOARDI

You'd have to move fast.

FARMER

It wasn't that easy, because sometimes we would work and wouldn't get paid, you know. Things started getting weird. I remember I went down to San Diego with Horace Henderson and didn't get paid. And I remember working somewhere around here with Floyd Ray and didn't get paid. That would happen sometimes.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

The club owners were skipping out?

FARMER

Club owners skipped out, or the people who would put on the dance, they skipped out. That was part of the business, and it still is. But it didn't take much to stay alive. Rent was very cheap, you know, and food was cheap. If you could get a gig every now and then, you could make it — if you didn't have any habits. We were too young to have any bad habits. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Did you notice bad habits — people with bad habits? Or was it something you just never crossed?

FARMER

That first year, I didn't notice. I heard about it, but I didn't see any of it. I didn't see anybody doing anything.

ISOARDI

So what was Jeff like?

FARMER

Well, Jeff to us was a great school, because we had gone to the schools in Arizona which were totally segregated then and very limited, which I never will be able to overcome — the handicap that you get from that kind of

education. Because I wanted to study music. There was nobody there that could teach me. I never had a trumpet lesson.

ISOARDI

In high school in Phoenix? There was no music at all?

FARMER

No. In the high school that we went to, there was one lady, and she was teaching English and home economics and music. She could play piano, but she didn't know anything about trumpet at all. And one thing she told me one day I never will forget. She said, "Boy, you played more wrong notes than anyone I ever heard in my life." [laughter] That was the only thing I ever learned from her. And she meant well, but she just didn't have the knowledge, you know. She couldn't tell me what to do. I developed bad habits. And when you develop bad habits at an early age, and playing the trumpet is a physical thing, it's hard to overcome that. You know, if a guy starts off from the ground floor with the right type of teacher, he's really at an advantage. But if you're in that kind of environment and it — The system wasn't the only thing at fault, but we didn't like living in a segregated environment where — There were no professional people in this environment other than teachers and doctors and preachers and things like that. No one said, "Well, look, if you want to be a musician, you have to take lessons." I never knew you had to take a lesson. I didn't go out and — If I had known that, maybe I could have found some white person that might teach me for a couple of bucks or something, but I didn't ever feel that was necessary.

ISOARDI

Really? So you taught yourself cornet?

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah. Bad habits. Like pushing the horn into my mouth, you know, pressure and all, when your teeth get loose and you get holes and sores on your lips. Well, I had to pay for that later on.

ISOARDI

Geez. You know, when I started studying saxophone a while ago with Bill Green, the first thing he said to me was, when I was going to go pick up this horn, he said, "Don't even open the case." He said, "Don't touch anything." [laughter] And he said, "No bad habits."

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. So we came over here and it was a whole new world, this big school there with all kinds of white people, black people, Chinese, Mexican. Everybody was in this school.

ISOARDI

Jefferson is completely integrated.

FARMER

Completely integrated. They had classes where you could study harmony. They had this big band. You could sign up for the big band and go in there and learn how to play with other people. It was just completely different for us. And you'd meet people your age who were trying to do the same thing, and we would exchange ideas, of course. So it was great. And [Samuel] Browne was a nice guy. I think one of the things that he — Well, first of all, I ought to say that he was really ahead of his time. To my knowledge, this was the only school in the country that had a high school swing band.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah. Back in Chicago, there were two schools there that a lot of great jazz players came out of. One was this school called Wendell Phillips [High School] that Lionel Hampton went to and other people his age, and a school called Du Sable [High School]. Like Johnny Griffin went to Du Sable, and a lot of other guys. You know, these schools — people like Ray Nance went to these schools. Numerous people. But I think that they had marching bands. I don't think that they had swing bands. I might be wrong.

ISOARDI

Gee, that surprises me. New York, no swing band?

FARMER

No.

ISOARDI

Extraordinary. It just seems to me —

FARMER

Well, see, this kind of music wasn't regarded as serious music in the education system. In Texas, at North Texas State [University], they have a very good musical program there, and I think they started early there. But this was in college. In colleges, like in the southern part of the United States — like in Alabama in the black schools — you had swing bands. Erskine Hawkins, who became popular, brought a band from the school, Bama State [Alabama State University]. There was one. And then there were some other schools like — Let's see, Jimmie Lunceford was a schoolteacher in Tennessee.

ISOARDI

That's right. That's right.

FARMER

He brought a band out. But these were colleges. To my knowledge, this was the first high school that had anything like this going on, where they had an organized thing that was part of the curriculum. So we would play — We'd have an hour every day, I think. We would play in this band. We would go around and not only learn to play in that type of a setting, but we would have

exposure to audiences also, because we would go around to other schools in this area and play concerts.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah, during the school day.

ISOARDI

Extraordinary opportunity.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So you would take, I guess, an hour of big band which Sam Browne conducted.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And there were other music courses, as well, you could take.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

A full program.

FARMER

Yeah, right. Right. So I was sorry that we came here on the last year. If we'd been here earlier, it certainly wouldn't have hurt. [laughter] But when we were in Phoenix, we didn't know anything about this.

ISOARDI

Well, how much of your school day, then, was devoted to music? It must have been a few hours at least.

FARMER

Oh, maybe a couple of hours a day. But I just remember big band and harmony — I would say harmony and theory. But other guys were studying arranging, also. Some of the students were making arrangements for the big band.

ISOARDI

Geez! What a place!

FARMER

You know, guys who had been there for a year or so in front of us — they were at the level then that they could write arrangements for the big band. And they could hear their stuff played then. So they were really at least thirty years ahead of the rest of the United States.

ISOARDI

Was he the only one teaching music?

FARMER



No. No, there were other people teaching music. Sure. I was in the class of a woman that was teaching harmony and theory by the name of Mrs. Rappaport. There were other music classes which were —

ISOARDI

What was Sam Browne like?

FARMER

He was a very quiet person. He kept order by his personality. He never had to shout at anyone. He never had to say, "Do this or do that" and you didn't do this and you didn't do that. Somehow you just felt that you should do it. Otherwise you just felt that you were in the wrong place. This was a serious thing. And everyone who was there really wanted to work. They wanted to do what — They wanted to play music, otherwise they wouldn't be there. So he didn't have any problem with the kids.

ISOARDI

I saw a photograph of him, I guess it was in the old California Eagle, when I was going through the old issues. It must have been in the early thirties. In fact, I think it was about the time he'd been hired or something like that. And it was a very young Sam Browne, but his picture was — I don't know if I would say he was austere, but certainly serious.

FARMER

Yeah. Well, he was — Here's his picture. I guess this was taken —

ISOARDI

Oh, this is from yesterday's memorial service.

FARMER

Yeah. Well, he was a quiet guy. You know, like some people do things, and they put their name in front, say, like "Sam Browne, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and they become well known, you know. But he never did seem to be going out for that kind of publicity. You know, he loved music, and he wanted to help kids.

ISOARDI

So music was always first for him.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. He wasn't like trying to blow his own horn, let's say. And he would bring other people — Like if somebody came into the town that he knew, he would go around and tell them to come around and talk to the kids.

ISOARDI

Some of the musicians?

FARMER

Yeah. He would get the people to come around and play what we'd call an assembly for the whole student body-- free, of course — and then talk to the

band. Leave themselves open, like you could ask them any questions that would come to your mind.

ISOARDI

Wonderful experience. Do you remember any guys that you saw who came out to school?

FARMER

Well, during the time I was there, there was Slim Gaillard and a bass player named Bam [Tiny Brown]. They came by one day and played. They were very popular at that time. And then there was an arranger named Wilbur Barranco. He came by one day and played a record that he had just made with an all-star band. It had Dizzy Gillespie on it and other people like that. And he explained to us how it came to be and things about getting these people and the trouble it would cause everybody to come to be available at the same time.

## **1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, (SIDE TWO)**

**NOVEMBER 22, 1991**

ISOARDI

Do you remember who some of the guys were at Jeff that you played with there, who were in the band?

FARMER

Sonny Criss was there. I guess he was the best known. Ernie Andrews, the singer, was there.

ISOARDI

Really, when you were there?

FARMER

Yeah, I saw him yesterday. He was in our class, summer of '46, the Helvetians — you know, every class has a name. There was a drummer by the name of Ed Thigpen, who was the year under us.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

Yeah .

ISOARDI

He was a Jeff man? I didn't know that.

FARMER

Yeah, he was. But he was in the class under us. There was a tenor player named Hadley Caliman, who is now a teacher at a conservatory up in Seattle, Washington. Another tenor player by the name of Joe Howard. I don't know what happened — I think he's dead now — but he was writing very nice arrangements by then. Alto saxophone player named James Robinson. We

called him "Sweet Pea." He was a very good player. He's not alive anymore, either. Let's see. These are the people that I remember who played very well. There were others around there, and their names don't come to me right now, though.

ISOARDI

Did any of you guys form your own groups or rehearsal bands? Or was it mostly you going out — ? By this time you were out playing in commercial bands?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

It was mostly that, eh?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That must have been a bit tough. I mean, you're going out playing gigs at night, and then you've got to come —

FARMER

[laughter] The worst thing I remember was hanging out all night-- Of course, the clubs would close around one or two o'clock, and then the first class was physical ed.

ISOARDI

Oh, no! [laughter] That's brutal.

FARMER

And I remember one thing that really — The lowest thing to me was trying to climb a rope.

ISOARDI

Probably like — Oh, no.

FARMER

Yeah. And I didn't have the build for it anyway. I remember one little guy would scamper up that rope like a monkey, you know, and I'm there trying to — [laughter] I couldn't get up there to save my neck. [laughter] And, well, I was starting to work and get these jobs, and I had to go out of town sometimes for a week or two. Well, my brother and I, we were living by ourselves, so [when] we couldn't go to school, we would just write our own excuses. I'd say, "Please excuse my boy today because he has to do such and such a thing." And sign it "Mrs. Hazel Farmer," you know. Because the school didn't know we were living by ourselves.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

You know, they didn't know what we were into.

ISOARDI

So you applied forging your mother's name on all the documents.

FARMER

I don't remember forging her name as far as applying, but I remember forging her name on these excuses . So we didn't have any trouble. We'd go out for a week or two, go to San Diego or San Francisco or whatever, [laughter] Come back and go back to school, everything is okay. Then I got this offer to go on the road with the Johnny Otis band and the school year wasn't out yet. And my mother had told me I've got to get that diploma. So I went to the principal and I told him, I said, "Look, I have this chance to go on the road with this band. This is the beginning of my career and I really don't want to lose it. I really need this. If my work has been okay, I would like to be able to get my diploma. I would like you to please consider this and write a letter to my mother to that effect." And the guy was nice enough to do it.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

And he said in his letter, he said, "If all the boys were like your two boys, this school would be a better school." And I said, "Would you put that diploma in the safe just in case you're no longer here?" And I went back there ten years later, and that diploma was in the safe.

ISOARDI

Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER

It was more than ten years. It was more than ten years. I came out here with Gerry Mulligan's group like around '58. This was in '46 when I left. I came back in '58, and that diploma was in the safe, and I went over there and got it. The principal was gone. Sam Browne was gone. He was at another school. But the diploma was in the safe. And I got it.

ISOARDI

[laughter] Well, that's good. Any other thoughts on Jeff that come to mind and we should know about?

FARMER

Well, Jeff always had a great track team. You know, Jeff's track team was feared throughout the whole Los Angeles school system. And somebody at this funeral yesterday said the swing band was just like the track team. It was held in just as much awe as the track team — going all around the schools playing, you know. Because none of the schools had anything like this band. And the track team was beating everybody up. But I remember about Jeff, like, the saying was if one of the schools came to Jeff and won, they would have to fight

their way home. [laughter] If they won the match, they'd have to fight going home.

ISOARDI

[laughter] That's good. That's good.

FARMER

But it was a nice thing. It was a pleasant memory. Of course, we were, let's say, operating at a handicap compared to the rest of the kids, because we just couldn't go home and tell our parents that we needed money to buy the class ring or the class sweater or something like that. But that was a minor nuisance, you know, compared to — I'd still rather have been here than have been in Phoenix at that time.

ISOARDI

Yeah, once you got out of it.

FARMER

You know, meeting these guys and exchanging ideas was just a great thing. Big Jay McNeely was there. "Cecil" we called him.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you have any memories of him?

FARMER

Yeah. I think he was in the class in front of us, but — Was he? Yeah, I think he was in the class in front of us. But I was in the harmony class with him. And my memory is not so clear, but somehow the story is there that he asked the teacher, "Well, how much money do you make?" And the teacher told him. And he said, "Well, I already make more money than you. How do you think you can teach me anything?"

ISOARDI

[laughter] Oh, no, really? Oh, geez ! [laughter]

FARMER

But he wasn't in the band. He wasn't in the swing band.

ISOARDI

Why not?

FARMER

I don't know. Maybe he didn't want to be. Maybe he felt he didn't have to be there. Maybe he felt he was too hip for that. [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] Gee, you know, I think I remember him telling — I think he bounced around from school to school, because he started — I think it was at Jordan [High School] in Watts.

FARMER

Yeah, Jordan, yeah.

ISOARDI

And then he just bounced around, I guess, looking for different teachers. Well, that's a funny story. [ laughter ]

FARMER

But he had his little group, and he was working around town. He was getting jobs and things, you know. The scale was sixty dollars a week, you know, for a sideman. Sixty dollars. And that was big money.

ISOARDI

That was in the top bands?

FARMER

Yeah, well, that was the union scale like if you were working at the Downbeat or someplace like that.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's good money.

FARMER

Yeah. So he was getting that much, because the union was strong then.

ISOARDI

[laughter] I like that story. Oh, geez.

FARMER

Let's see, I'm trying to think if there was anything else.

ISOARDI

Well, we can stop it there.

FARMER

Yeah, that's all I can think about Jeff for the time being.

ISOARDI

Okay. We'll resume tomorrow, then.

### **1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, (SIDE ONE)**

**NOVEMBER 23, 1991**

ISOARDI

Okay, Art. I think we stopped yesterday with your year at Jefferson High School.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

What comes after Jeff, then?

FARMER

Well, there was a band at the [Club] Alabam. Johnny Otis had a big band that was sort of styled after the Count Basie band: you know, five reeds, four trumpets, four trombones, and four rhythm.

ISOARDI

Were there charts like Basie?

FARMER

Yeah, well, actually Basie sent him some charts that Basie didn't want to play. You know, Basie would buy arrangements and play them, and if he didn't like them for one reason or another, he would put them in the back of the book or send them to Johnny Otis or Billy Eckstine or somebody like that, you know. So they had been working at the Alabam steady for some time. I don't know how long, but when I came to L.A. they were working there. But when they got ready to go on the road, some of the guys didn't want to leave, so they left an opening in the trumpet section. He sounded me and asked me did I want to go, and I said certainly. So that was my first chance to go back East.

ISOARDI

How did he know about you?

FARMER

Well, I'd been playing around with various other bands in the area — like I said, Floyd Ray and Horace Henderson. I don't know who else. It's not a very large community of people, so word gets around. Just like Horace Henderson sounded on me when I was still in school.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

I don't remember exactly how it happened, but it seems to me like he just — I was on the playground, and somebody said, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" you know, and sounded me.

ISOARDI

Well, you must have been damn good by then; the word was getting around.

FARMER

I wasn't very good, but you see, the war was still on really, and a lot of the good guys were still in the army.

ISOARDI

Yeah. But up to this time you hadn't had much formal training on trumpet.

FARMER

I hadn't had any on the trumpet.

ISOARDI

Completely self-taught?

FARMER

Yeah, completely.

ISOARDI

Extraordinary.

FARMER

Yeah, but I paid for it later, you know.

ISOARDI

[laughter] Well, some people would find that hard to believe listening to your albums. [laughter]

FARMER

But anyway, he sounded me, and I said yeah. In fact, I went in — I was — With the confidence of youth because I was still about sixteen or seventeen or something like that, I asked for a certain price, and I got what I asked for. It turned out that I was getting more than some of the other guys were getting, which I paid for later on, too. [laughter] But anyway, that was the beginning. That's how I happened to have left California. And of course, as I told you yesterday, I went to the school and told them that this was my chance to get started and I really needed to take it, and they said that they understood. We had this agreement that they would — The principal wrote this letter to my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] and said he would put the diploma in the safe.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, and hold it for you forever.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

What was Johnny Otis like as a bandleader?

FARMER

Johnny was a fine guy. I didn't have any problem with Johnny at all. Johnny loved music. He loved to swing. You know, he was really into jazz then. Later on he got into this what we called "barrelhouse." He had a place in Watts called the Barrelhouse, which was really a rock and roll type of thing.

ISOARDI

That was his own place?

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah. At this time he was really into swing. But when the big bands went by the wayside, well, then he went into rock and roll.

ISOARDI

With still a big band setup but doing rock and roll?

FARMER

No, no, with small groups, like six or seven pieces with whining guitars and screaming tenors. And he had—

ISOARDI

A lot of honking.

FARMER

Yeah, a lot of honking. He had success with that, too. He couldn't make it with the big band thing because the time was just past for big bands. So he changed. And, let's see, I lasted with Johnny for a few months.



ISOARDI

All on the road?

FARMER

Yeah. Well, we went from New York directly to Chicago, and we worked in a club there that was owned by Earl Hines called the El Grotto. We worked there for about three months. Then we went to New York City and worked at the Apollo Theatre. And at the Apollo Theatre he gave me my notice, my two weeks' notice, which he was required to do. You know, like if you want to fire someone, you have to give them two weeks' notice. And the reason why he did that was because he said, "I hope there's no hard feelings, but when I hired you I hired you as a first trumpet player, but you are unable to do the work, so I have to get someone who can." And the people that were coming out of the army were more competent than me. Now, what happened — This is when I started paying for my lack of training, because I was playing with bad habits, and it hurt my lips, and I couldn't hardly play the parts anymore. You know, I developed a hole in the lip, and it just wasn't happening. So he was perfectly right to do what he did. So I decided — My final week was in Detroit. Then I went back to New York, and I was talking to some other trumpet players--some pros who really knew what was going on. They recommended a teacher that I should go see. And I went to see this teacher, who was very nice. He said, "Well, what are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I don't have any job anymore so I guess I'll go back to Los Angeles or back to Phoenix." And he said, "Well, I think you should stay here and get your playing in order before you start talking about going someplace else. What good is it going to do you to go back to Phoenix or to Los Angeles?" So I could see the point. So I started working as a janitor in order to pay for my keep and pay for my lessons. I did that for about a year or so, and then I got a job with — Or about at least two years. My brother [Addison Farmer] — see, I had a twin brother — was playing with Jay McShann's band, and an opening came up in that band, and he got me in that. And that's how I got back to Los Angeles. This must have been around 1948 or something like that when I came back to Los Angeles .

ISOARDI

How long were you in New York?

FARMER

Oh, I was in New York doing this study period for at least maybe two years. Yeah, from November of '46 until, let's say, around the spring or summer of '48. Yeah.

ISOARDI

And a lot of woodshedding, I guess, working as a janitor and then woodshedding like crazy?

FARMER

Yeah, sure and spending a lot of time listening.

ISOARDI

Oh, geez, back then you must have gone out on Fifty-second Street.

FARMER

Yeah, Fifty-second Street was still happening. And I remember at one time I was working as a janitor at the Radio City Music Hall. And, you know, you could get a janitor job just like that. It only paid twenty-eight dollars a week, you know, and there was a lot of turnover. Your work started around midnight, so if I was working at Radio City — I remember working at Radio City Music Hall, which was like on Fiftieth Street, a couple of blocks from Fifty-second Street. I got to work late one time too many at the Radio City, so the guy fired me. So I went right across the street to the RCA building and got a job over there the same night. [laughter] Of course, Dizzy [Gillespie] was there with his band, and Charlie Parker and Miles Davis were there also, so there was just too much to hear, you know. I would get absorbed and be late. It could happen.

ISOARDI

Now, you had a jolt when you came to L.A. from Phoenix and you saw Central [Avenue].

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

After having spent a few years in New York, that was an amazing scene on Fifty-second Street then.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

But how would you compare, say, the Central Avenue scene and the New York scene?

FARMER

Well, the New York scene was more intense because these real, true giants were right there in one little small area. Here there was like — When I first came to Los Angeles, Howard McGhee was at the Downbeat [Club]. Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker hadn't come out yet. We'd heard about them, but Howard McGhee was the major nationally known jazz star that was living and playing in Los Angeles at that time. So they had the run of the whole town. If you went to New York, well, you had Dizzy here and Charlie Parker here, and Coleman Hawkins across the street. Art Tatum next door. You know, it was much more happening.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

And then you could go uptown to Harlem and go to the Apollo Theatre and sit there all day long just like you could do here. You could pay one admission and sit there all day long and listen to whatever band was there. So there's a lot to absorb. But I met Charlie Parker and Miles Davis when they first came out here.

ISOARDI

Before you'd gone back there?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

How did that happen?

FARMER

Well, there was a tenor player named — Well, the tenor player with Howard McGhee, Teddy Edwards, I met him, and there was another tenor player named Gene Montgomery who was a close friend of Teddy's, and he used to run the Sunday — They had Sunday afternoon matinee jam sessions at the Downbeat on Central Avenue, and he was what we would call the session master. The club would hire one man to coordinate the session to see that there weren't too many guys on the stand at one time and keep things moving along. So I met him. He was a few years older than we were. But his house was — It was off of Central Avenue. It was east of Central Avenue around Wadsworth [Avenue] or something like that, around Vernon Avenue.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

But anyway, on the way home from school in the afternoon, well, we just got in the habit of stopping by his house on the way to where we lived at the time, which was Fifty-fifth [Street] and Avalon [Boulevard]. And I met Charlie Parker over there. He was a very nice, approachable person. You know, to me he was not really a monster at all; he was just a nice guy. I went by there one day, and he told me, he said, "Hey, you know the trumpet player — " No, Charlie Parker didn't tell me this, but Gene told me, "Hey, a trumpet player named Miles Davis came by here today. He was looking for Charlie Parker." I said, "Oh, yeah?" "Yeah." Well, we knew Miles because he had made some records with Charlie Parker — "Now's the Time" and "Billie's Bounce" and things like that. And he said, "Yeah, I came out here with Benny Carter's band because I know Charlie Parker came out here, and I'd go anywhere where Charlie Parker was, because you can learn so much." He said, "I would go to Africa." Well, our image of Africa at that time was people with bones in their nose, you know. Nobody would have thought about going to Africa. He said, "I would go to Africa if Charlie Parker was there because you could learn so

much." And then where I actually met him was at the union, [American Federation of Musicians Local] 767. I guess he went there to file his transfer or something, because you had to file your transfer if you were going to work on what we'd call a location job, like to work in one place for a week or two or something. And Benny Carter was working at some ballroom somewhere. So Miles was there, and he was talking. The first time I saw him, he was talking to maybe a few guys. They were asking him questions about what's going on back East. There was a trumpet player who came out here with Tiny Bradshaw named Sammy Yates, and Yates knew Miles from back East. And they were asking him about various aspects of this new music, which was still new to a lot of people. That's when I first met Miles. And like I said, I met Charlie Parker at Gene's house. Charlie Parker was a kind of a nomad. This was after Dizzy left, because Dizzy fired him and gave him his fare home, gave him his ticket. He cashed the ticket in and spent the money, so he was sort of stranded here. And eventually-- Well, my brother and I, we had a sort of a large room on Fifty-fifth Street and Avalon, and eventually Charlie Parker was over there staying with us sometimes. Like we had two twin beds and a couch, so he was sleeping on the couch. He left there and he went someplace else. Eventually he was working with Howard McGhee's band in what we called Little Tokyo. He had just had a nervous breakdown, and somehow the bed caught on fire in the hotel room, and he went down to the lobby with no clothes on. The next thing, he was in Camarillo.

ISOARDI

State hospital.

FARMER

Yeah. But my memories of Charlie Parker were all very positive. I remember we used to — We would walk the streets on Central Avenue. One night we went up to Lovejoy's. He always had his horn with him. And he went up there. There was one guy playing the piano like what we would call an old-timer, playing music that would fit the silent movies — stride music, or stride piano and stuff. And he just took out his horn and started playing. After that, well, then we were walking back to the house, and I told him, "Hey, you know, you really surprised me playing with somebody like that."

ISOARDI

He just fit into the guy's style?

FARMER

Yeah. I said, "You really surprised me playing with somebody like that," because Charlie Parker was regarded as the god of the future, you know. And he's playing with this guy, what we would call like, you know, just an amateur. And he said, "Well, you know, if you're trying to do something, you take advantage of any occasion. Go ahead, ignore that other stuff. That doesn't mean

anything. You have to concentrate on what you're trying to put together yourself." So I always kept that in my mind. And none of us had any money. My brother was working sometimes because the bass players would get more work than trumpet players, you know, because many little places would have a trio. So sometimes Charlie Parker would say, "Loan me five dollars" or "Loan me ten dollars. I'll pay you back tomorrow." He always paid him back.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Always. You know, he developed a reputation of being a sort of a swindler and borrowing money and never paying people and all sorts of negative things like that, but that never happened. And I remember one night we were walking on — We would walk on Central Avenue and go to one of those movie theaters, like Florence Mills or something like that, until the last — Like, it was a double feature. Well, you wait until the last feature had already started and then go to the doorman and say, "Hey, man," you know, "we don't have any money. Why don't you let us in to see the end of the movie?" [laughter]

ISOARDI

Did it work?

FARMER

Yeah. [laughter] Yeah, it worked sometimes, [laughter] So there was the great Charlie Parker, who didn't have enough money to buy a ticket to go in a movie. But he was a human being, you know. He was out here just like everybody else. He was still in his twenties. I guess he was about maybe ten years older than we were then. The musicians, they recognized him for his talent and his ability.

ISOARDI

Before they came out — Dizzy Gillespie and Parker and their group — musicians were aware of bebop on Central?

FARMER

They were certainly aware.

ISOARDI

People were listening to it?

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah. I remember one day — There was a drive-in there in that area on Central Avenue and they had a jukebox, you know. And one day I was standing there listening to this record, and he walked by and he said, "What are you listening to?" I said, "Oh, this is your record. This is 'Cherokee.'" He said, "'Ko-Ko.'" I said, "No, it's 'Cherokee.'" He said, "'Ko-Ko,'" because he put the name of it on as "Ko-Ko." So he called it "Ko-Ko." [laughter]

ISOARDI

And you were arguing with him. [laughter]

FARMER

Yeah, because I wasn't concerned with this new title. But the real [name] of the piece was "Cherokee," you know, and that was really his number. You know, that was his "crip," we called it, because he could always deal with that very well. Let's see, what else about him?

ISOARDI

Did you hear them when they first played at Billy Berg's?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

When they first got in town, were you at the first session?

FARMER

Yeah, I was there the first night. And some nights we were able to get in, and some nights somebody on the door would say, "No, you're too young." You know, they had a rope there.

ISOARDI

What was the response? I mean, was the place crowded during that — ?

FARMER

It was crowded at the opening, but then it kind of fell off, because the music was too far advanced for the general audience. And Billy Berg's, the club, had two other acts there also — Slim Gaillard and a guy named Harry "The Hipster" Gibson. And they were very, very entertaining. Billy Berg decided to give this new thing a chance, but when he saw the audience reaction, well, then he — I think that he actually cut the engagement short a couple of weeks. I think he paid them off or else gave them a notice or something. So Dizzy went back east and Charlie Parker stayed out here. Oh yeah. I remember one time Howard McGhee had this — He was like a part owner of a place called the Finale Club in the Little Tokyo area. Howard McGhee worked there with his band, and Charlie Parker worked there one time with his own group, which Miles was in. Miles was working with Benny Carter and Charlie Parker. Benny Carter had a job at some dance hall or something. So there was a lady named Althea Gibson, I think. She was working for a weekly black newspaper called the Los Angeles Sentinel, I think, or something like that. And she came and checked out the group and wrote a review in the paper. Her boyfriend was a swing-type trumpet player named Dootsie Williams, so he told her what to say and she was very negative. She said, "This group has this saxophone player who carries himself with the air of a prophet, but really not that much is happening. And he's got a little wispy black boy playing the trumpet who doesn't quite make it," you know. [laughter] Her boyfriend is telling her all this stuff. "It has a moon-faced bass player with an indefatigable arm," speaking about my brother. She didn't have anything good to say about anybody. Well, I

saw that paper, and I went over there to where "Bird" [Charlie Parker] was staying at Gene's house and woke him up, you know, and said, "Hey man, wake up!" [laughter] I said, "Wake up, man! You have to read what this bitch is saying about you, man!" You know, he's still laying in bed [laughter] Well, we couldn't get him to move unless you —

ISOARDI

He probably didn't care.

FARMER

No, no, it got him. You'd give him a joint. We'd give him a joint to get out of bed, you know. You'd have to baby him. Anyway, he read this. He said, "Well, she's probably all right. Just the wrong people got to her first." And then he got kind of in a self-pitying mood and he said, "Well, Dizzy left me out here, and I'm catching it." You know, "Dizzy got away, but he left me out here, and I'm catching this from everybody." You know, he felt for — That really brought him down, you know, because he really thought his music should be — He didn't see nothing strange about his music. His music was very melodic. And for somebody to say something like that — You know, he was proud to get good reviews. He liked that. You know, he would send reviews to his mother.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah. You know, if somebody said something like that, that hurt him. It was sad. So first of all, he tried to take it as "Well, she's probably okay." He didn't say, "Well, she's a dumb bitch," you know, "and she doesn't know what she's talking about." He said, "She's probably okay, but the wrong people got to her first." Then it went deeper to him, and he said he was "catching it," catching hell, in other words. So that's how that turned out. So let's see. That was my introduction to bebop. So when I went back east with Johnny Otis — When I left, I think he [Parker] was already in the institution.

ISOARDI

When you left with Johnny Otis?

FARMER

Yeah, or else he went in shortly after that. And the next time I saw him was when he first came back to New York City, and he hadn't even started at Fifty-second Street. But someone had fixed a job for him, a one-nighter up at a place called Small's Paradise in Harlem. So I went by to see him. He said, "Hey, Arthur Farmer, we're in New York, man. You can get anything you want in New York!" [laughter] He was so happy to be out of California. [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] I'll bet.

FARMER

So everybody streamed up there, up to Harlem, to hear the first appearance of Charlie Parker after his adventures in California.

ISOARDI

Which I guess everybody knew about.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I would see Miles, you know. I would run into Miles. He was always very friendly.

ISOARDI

Did you ever run with him at all. Miles Davis?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. We used to hang. Well, years later, you know, after I met Miles out here, well, then I always considered him to be like a friend, you know, sort of like an older brother type of thing. And I would see him in New York sometimes. Years later he actually fell upon hard times, and he used to borrow my horn, which I would turn into rental, because after I left Lionel Hampton's band in '53 and I was living in New York in '54, I didn't have that much work and he didn't have a horn. And sometimes he would have a job and he didn't have a horn, so he would come around the hotel I was staying in, and he would say, "Let me use your horn. I'll pay you ten bucks." So I said, "Okay." But I would go along with him, because if I didn't go along with him he would have taken it and pawned it.

ISOARDI

Geez!

FARMER

So we were always friends. But then one time he came by and he said he would like to borrow the horn, and I said, "Well, I can't let you have it tonight because I have a job." He said, "Well, I'm paying you for the horn, man!" [laughter] And I'd say, "I know. I know you're paying me, but I want to play too." And he'd say, "Yeah, but I'm going to pay you." And I said, "Look, man, I'm not in the horn rent business. I want to play!" You see. So there was a moment of silence, and he said, "Man, I didn't know you were like that."

ISOARDI

Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER

You know, as if I was really a creep. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, just because you wanted to play.

FARMER

Yeah. And then later on I was working with [Gerry] Mulligan, and by that time he was really straight. You know, this was like in the late fifties. I was working with Gerry Mulligan, which was a good job. I had made some records. And



Mulligan came out here to do a movie called I Want to Live. I can't remember her name, an actress. Susan Hayward. She won the Oscar for that. Anyway, it was a big movie. So I saw Miles a couple of months later, just ran into him on the street, and he said, "You know, man, I fixed that job for you, because they asked me to do it, and I told them I wanted \$10,000. I only did that because I wanted you to have a chance to make some money." [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] Was that true? Do you know?

FARMER

I don't know. You know, he probably asked for \$10,000. I wouldn't put it past him. He might have asked for \$5,000. I wound up getting \$1,500, which was big money at that time.

ISOARDI

Well, maybe by the late fifties he thought he could command \$5,000.

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah, sure. He always had the sense of self to ask for a big price. So like I said, I'd run into him from time to time.

ISOARDI

Were all you guys pretty simpatico musically down on Central, I guess when you were — ?

FARMER

Yeah, sure.

ISOARDI

Pretty much?

FARMER

Almost 99 percent of the younger guys really loved this new music. The disagreement came with the older guys, some of the older guys, who were more firmly entrenched in the swing era, and they just couldn't see anything else happening .

ISOARDI

Well, I've talked to people who I guess were from the older generation. They were in high school in the thirties and they went in the service, and so many of them have said they came back in 1945 —

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

And the way they described their reaction when they first heard bebop is just incredible.

FARMER

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

It just turned 180 degrees. You either throw the instrument away or you start over.

FARMER

Yeah, absolutely. That's what happened. Well, you see, our minds were open because we didn't have this other influence so firmly entrenched in us. And as it is, you know, when you're very young, first you go for the thing that's most popular at that time. It happens now that kids, they come into music and the first [thing] they go into is pop. And then later on they find out that the pop isn't giving them enough of a challenge, enough satisfaction, so they gravitate towards jazz. But for us, well, we went towards bebop. But I have to say that my first attraction wasn't bebop because bebop didn't exist then to my knowledge. I just loved the big bands. But bebop was an outgrowth of big band, because all those guys had worked with big bands. and they went into bebop because they were able to play more. It presented more of a challenge to them. If you played in a big band, you didn't get that much chance to really play. You know, you jumped up every now and then and played a short solo. But if you were working with a small group, well, you had much more time to play, and you could play different kinds of tunes that were more challenging. There was more flexibility than in a big band. But there were sessions, jam sessions, on Central Avenue, I guess which you've heard about.

ISOARDI

Some, yeah. You're talking about after-hour jams?

FARMER

After hours, yeah. Of course, they had the Sunday matinees.

ISOARDI

Like the Downbeat?

FARMER

Yeah, the Downbeat and Last Word [Cafe]. Monday night was the off night, so there was always a session on Monday night in these clubs. Then the after-hour clubs were — Lovejoy's was an after-hour club. And then there was a place called Jack's Basket Room, which was farther north. Say, that was somewhere around in the twenties or thirties. And that was a big session place. And farther north from that, there was a little place called the Gaiety. I don't know if anyone ever told you about that.

ISOARDI

It's come up a bit. Was that just a regular club? Oh, that's the one that became the Jungle Room, or vice versa.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. No, that became the Jungle Room. At that time it was called the Gaiety, when I first came here. There were some sessions there sometimes.

ISOARDI

Where would you hang out? Or would you just go from club to club?

FARMER

We'd go from club to club. And the police started really becoming a problem. I remember, you would walk down the street, and every time they'd see you they would stop you and search you.

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

FARMER

I remember one night me and someone else were walking from the Downbeat area up north to this Jack's Basket Room or the Gaiety or some other place like that, and we got stopped two times. And the third time some cops on foot stopped us, and I said, "Hey, look, you guys are going the same way. Do you mind if we walk with you?" [laughter] We'd been stopped so many times we were getting later and later. [laughter] So they said, "Okay." But we didn't have anything. It would be insane to be carrying some stuff on you on Central Avenue, because you'd get in trouble. You could get put in jail. You didn't have any money for a lawyer. If you had one marijuana cigarette, you could get ninety days.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

FARMER

Yeah. And if you had one mark on your arm, you'd be called like a vagrant addict. I don't know if that still exists or not, but that was automatic: ninety days. So you don't want to throw away ninety days for something stupid.

ISOARDI

Well, you weren't there earlier, but was there like an increase in police harassment after the war or had this been going on?

FARMER

I think it was — Well, I wasn't aware of it until after the war, because I came here — When I came here, it was just a few weeks before the atom bomb fell. And as you know, when that fell, the war was over in a week or so. I remember seeing this newspaper with this big headline, you know, about bombing Hiroshima and stuff. I had just been here maybe a few days, actually. But then the whole thing started falling apart, and the police were, as I said, very obnoxious around there.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I suppose it was mostly white policemen.

FARMER

Mostly, but it wasn't just whites. There were blacks, too. With the place we were staying there on Fifty-fifth and Avalon, we had a room, and down the hall from us was a police officer. He was a young black guy. He might have been in his late twenties. So he was a bachelor, had a room there. He said, "I would arrest anyone who was breaking the law. I would even arrest my own mother."  
[laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] Hard case.

FARMER

To us, we just laughed at him, because there was a community icebox there where the tenants would put their food. He'd put his food in there — we'd steal it and eat it because, you know, we didn't have that much money sometimes.  
[laughter] Sometimes we were hungry. We'd just go in there and take whatever.  
[laughter] I don't know if he knew it or not, but anyway, we didn't take him too seriously. [laughter] One day we're in there, and we heard a gun go off. Pow!

ISOARDI

In his room?

FARMER

Yeah. He was cleaning his gun. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh man! [laughter]

FARMER

He was lucky he didn't kill anybody or something.

ISOARDI

Or himself.

FARMER

But there's Charlie Parker in that place, and there he is, too. He didn't know about that. Charlie Parker was supposed to be a drug addict. Well, at that time he didn't have any drugs, you know, and he was in pretty bad shape. I remember one night there was an incident, and he was about to have a nervous breakdown. We were on the second floor. There was like a French window, a window from the ceiling to the floor, and he opened it up, and he was standing there like he was going to jump out. And before that he'd been taking off, putting on his clothes, and taking them off and putting them on, taking them off. He was just going off, you know. So I took him out of the window and I said, "Let's go for a walk." So he put on his clothes and we went right across the street. It was Avalon Park. We went and walked in the park. And he had a bad cold, you know, really, like his lungs were falling apart. I said, "You ought to do something about this." I said, "What are you going to do about this cold?" He said, "Not a goddamn thing!" And he was just — I mean, he was really

down. We took him back to the room, and he finally went to bed, and that was the end of that. But he was having a hard time. And then when we went to Lovejoy's or when we went in the movie, he was starting to come apart, because he had nervous ticks. You know, he'd be like [mimics Parker's movements], you know. He'd be playing his horn —

ISOARDI

Snapping his neck?

FARMER

Yeah. You know, his nerves were really shot. I guess it was just what we'd call stress from the withdrawal, because he didn't have any drugs at that time, but he had had drugs before. When he came out here he was strung out. But then he just ran into hard times. And he wasn't working. No money. But these jam sessions were a great part of the life, you know, because that's the way you learn. That's one way of learning how to deal with that kind of situation, because in a big band-- A big band was much more disciplined. Everybody had their solo written. If it was the time for the trumpet — When the trumpet solo comes, well, he can only play the time that he's supposed to play, and then he's got to sit down and someone else takes a solo. But on a jam session, you'd play as long as you wanted to play.

ISOARDI

Do you remember any in particular? Any stand out in your mind?

FARMER

No. I don't remember any that stood out in my mind, really.

ISOARDI

No? I guess they were usually well attended.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. They were well attended, and they were part of the — It was still a part of the — I would say the music was still a part of the ordinary people's community. You know, people would come into the jam session. They liked music. You'd go into a restaurant and you'd have the jukebox there. You know, if you sat in a booth, well, they'd have a little thing there where you'd pick the numbers. There would be bebop tunes on the jukebox and tunes by swing bands and things. So we still hadn't reached that gap where the general audience sort of lost interest. So it was a different thing, you know, because now the average person doesn't know anything about jazz at all, or they know very little. So, yeah, we hear about it, but they're really not that interested. They go to a place like the Playboy Jazz Festival, Hollywood Bowl for the spectacle. Because the Playboy Jazz Festival will hire whoever is the big star, and that's what really brings the people in.

ISOARDI

A friend of mine went to the — I don't go to the Playboy Jazz. I just don't like that kind of a throng, and half the time you can't hear the music.

FARMER

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

And this friend of mine went, and I told him, "Look, it's going to be a circus. Why spend all that money?" So he went there, and he came back and he said, "You're right." You know, he told me during one number that was soft, people started doing the wave. You know that thing they do at football games?  
[laughter]

FARMER

[laughter] Yeah. That's the way jazz festivals are. I played one in New York at a place called Randall's Island years ago. Every attraction was given a bulletin about what to do and what not to do. It said, "No ballads." [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, no! Really? [laughter]

FARMER

"No ballads."

ISOARDI

Oh, man. [laughter]

FARMER

So that's jazz to many people. They might go there, and they figure — And then this Hollywood Bowl, that holds a few thousand people.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

But if there's something really big happening, the Hollywood Bowl can hardly take care of it. They have to go to the [Great Western] Forum theater or something, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Weren't you saying yesterday, I think just before I left, that a lot of the cops down there were from the South?

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah, sure. Sure. That's still happening. You know, L.A. has this Rodney King [police beating] case. A lot of these guys are either [Ku Klux] Klan or Klan sympathizers or something. They don't have any empathy for minority races at all. And even the blacks in the police force — they know that, and they have trouble inside of the police force. Mayor [Thomas] Bradley used to be a member of the police force himself, and he wouldn't say anything different from that. That's just a fact of life.

ISOARDI

Did you encounter any kind of Klan-related activity back then around Central?  
FARMER

No. No, I hadn't. I heard nothing about any Klan at all. Nothing like that. My only experience with the police was like I told you. But I heard indirectly — I remember working at a place some years later — Say it was somewhere in the fifties on Main [Street] or Broadway, like that. It was a nice club, what we would call black and tan, because black people and white people went there too. I was working with a band that was led by Teddy Edwards. It was maybe about a seven-piece band. It was a successful place, you know. People went in there, and we could have stayed there a long time, but then the manager said we had to go, because the police said that they didn't want this racial mixing there, and if the club didn't change its policy there was going to be trouble.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Yeah. So they could have certainly made trouble.

ISOARDI

About when was that?

FARMER

This was like in the late forties or the early fifties, say, like '49 or '50, '51, something like that.

ISOARDI

Had you noticed anything like that earlier when you first came out here? Where cops were going in and really trying to break up the integrated atmosphere of the clubs?

FARMER

No, I hadn't actually seen it. I couldn't say that, because I wasn't aware of it when I first came here, and I was hanging out in the Downbeat and places like that. I heard that the police were around and were thick in the neighborhood because they wanted to abolish people smoking marijuana. And the story was like some of the guys would take a walk on their break and walk around, take a walk off of Central Avenue on a side street, and they might light a joint or something, and the police would jump out of a tree. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, man!

FARMER

I don't know if that was an exaggeration or not.

ISOARDI

Well, from what I've heard of Chief [William H. ] Parker, it probably wasn't!  
[laughter]

FARMER

But at that time those guys thought that marijuana was something that you should be put into the jail for, which is nothing compared to what came later.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

You know, like when you think about these guys — Like these rock and rollers, like the Rolling Stones and things like that, say, "Yes, yes, we smoke pot. So what?" [laughter] It was completely harmless compared to what's going on now: all this crack and all this murder. It's just awful.

ISOARDI

Did you notice hard drugs as much down there?

FARMER

No. They were available, because Charlie Parker was a junkie, of course. That was the only — At that time, in the forties, he was the first guy that I heard of that had a narcotics habit.

ISOARDI

Really? So it was mostly grass.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. But all the younger guys I knew, there was nobody that was into hard drugs in the forties, at least at that period when they first came out here. But it happened later, certainly.

ISOARDI

Did you ever — I guess you did with Floyd Ray and Horace Henderson — play in areas of Southern California away from Central Avenue?

FARMER

Yeah, we played San Diego. I first went to San Diego with Horace Henderson. And my brother and I and another young guy, we walked across the border to Tijuana. Then we looked at the clock, and the time told us it was time to get back. And then we crossed the border again, and we saw there was a difference in the time. We still had another hour to go, so we went back again. The second time we crossed over, the customs people said, "Hey!" [laughter] They gave us a thorough search.

ISOARDI

[laughter] Yeah, I'll bet. I'll bet.

FARMER

I remember that very well, because they made us take off all our clothes and everything. They thought for sure that we had gone back that second time to pick up something, you know, but we didn't have anything. We were young, but we weren't really that stupid to figure you could go over there and buy something. We figured that the Mexican that sold you might turn you in and get a couple of bucks that way, you know.



ISOARDI

That's right, and maybe get his stuff back. [ laughter ]

FARMER

Yeah, right. [laughter]

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FARMER

And we played some other places, like of course San Francisco, San Jose, El Centro, and other places in —

ISOARDI

What kind of clubs were you playing?

FARMER

Well, it was not really clubs. Well, in San Diego I played a club with Floyd Ray called the Black and Tan [Club].

ISOARDI

So it was an integrated club in San Diego?

FARMER

Yeah. It was mostly dance halls, because people were still dancing to swing bands at that time. So that was the main thing. Some years later I played some clubs. I played a club with Jay McShann in San Francisco. But with Horace Henderson, Floyd Ray, Benny Carter, and Roy Porter, we only played dance dates. The concert thing hadn't even started then. You know, like now you play concerts in a concert hall.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

The Roy Porter band was important to us, to the younger guys. Roy Porter was the drummer who had played with Howard McGhee when I first heard Howard McGhee on Central Avenue at the Downbeat. Then later on Howard McGhee went back east again and Roy Porter organized a big band. And of the big band, the members were younger guys like myself mostly. A lot of us had gone to Jeff. And this was more a rehearsal band than a real ongoing commercial band. We would get together and rehearse maybe two or three times a week at a place on Vernon Avenue. It was off of Central Avenue near San Pedro [Street], I guess. Every now and then we would get a job, and sometimes we would get paid and sometimes we wouldn't get paid. But Eric Dolphy, who became a very well known jazz figure, was in the band at the same time I was in the band.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

There were other good players, but they didn't get the prominence that Eric and I got. But they were good. So that was like a training ground, also. After leaving high school, well, then that was the next period for me where I really got to learn something.

ISOARDI

What were the charts like? Was it just swing? Or was it — ?

FARMER

Well, they were patterned after Dizzy Gillespie's big band.

ISOARDI

It was, aha.

FARMER

Because by then Dizzy Gillespie had come out to California with his big band, and that was the next earthquake. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah. So you guys were pretty progressive.

FARMER

Yeah, sure, sure. Absolutely. Well, some of the kids that had gone to Jeff who learned how to write arrangements at Jeff were writing arrangements for this big band. And we made some recordings for a company called Savoy Records, which was located back east and was one of the main record companies as far as recording jazz. They used to record Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and people like that.

ISOARDI

And they recorded this band of Roy Porter's?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

With you and Eric Dolphy?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

Absolutely. You should talk to —

ISOARDI

Did they release the records?

FARMER

Yeah. They've come out now in an album called something like Black Jazz in California or something like that. You haven't spoken to Roy Porter?

ISOARDI

No.  
FARMER  
Yeah, well, maybe you could talk to him.  
ISOARDI  
Yeah, he's on the list.  
FARMER  
Yeah, yeah.  
ISOARDI  
No question. His autobiography [ There and Back: The Roy Porter Story] just came out.  
FARMER  
Yeah, yeah. I read it a couple months ago. Yeah. And it's truthful. You know, he has his own opinions about things, but there were no lies in there.  
ISOARDI  
Yeah.  
FARMER  
And nothing that to me — Everything I read in there, that's the way it was.  
ISOARDI  
What was Eric Dolphy like?  
FARMER  
Oh, Eric was a prince. You know, he was an angel. He really lived for music. He lived for music and he loved music. Twenty-four hours wasn't long enough for him. During this time I remember that he had a Model-T Ford. [laughter]  
ISOARDI  
In the late forties? [laughter]  
FARMER  
[laughter] In the late forties he had a Model-T Ford.  
ISOARDI  
Oh, boy!  
FARMER  
The guys, you know, we all had these old cars. They were going along with prayer. We had a mutual aid society. You know, like if one car stopped you would have to call up your buddy and say, "Hey, I'm stuck over here at so and so," and we would all come to each other's aid. Eric was always a very enthusiastic guy, but he was one hundred percent about music. He was a nice, nice, friendly, warm person, but he just loved to play.  
ISOARDI  
Yeah, I heard some stories about him I guess in New York — the intensity of his concentration, his practicing, was phenomenal.  
FARMER

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he was one hundred percent. Because like during that time I didn't feel it was necessary to spend all that time playing. I figured it would just come naturally. [laughter] I figured if I spent a couple of hours on it, why, heck, that's great. Somebody like Eric would practice all day long. All day.

ISOARDI

Did you have a chance to talk with him much about musical ideas? Or did you notice in his playing at all any indication of the direction he would go later?

FARMER

Well, at that time, no, no. At that time he was very much involved with Charlie Parker. He was very much under the influence of Charlie Parker, as all the young guys were. Then later on, when he went back east, I think he got involved with Charles Mingus and I think Mingus broadened his boundaries. It wasn't that he didn't stop loving Charlie Parker, but he started being interested in more of a less structured type of music thing. He used to imitate the sounds of birds and things.

ISOARDI

Eric Dolphy? On his horn?

FARMER

On his horn, like on his flute. He'd listen to bird calls and play them, do things like that. But, you see, some guys that got involved with what we called the avant garde, it was like a — To them it was like a way out, because bebop music was more difficult to master, so they got into that, where they could say, "Well, we are the avant garde. We don't have to pay attention to the rudiments of music." But Eric wasn't like that. No, Eric was really firmly founded. He had a foundation of the elements of music, the elements of music which would be recognized and respected by anybody, regardless of where you were, regardless of whether it was jazz or whatever it was. He had studied with good teachers and studied at [Los Angeles] City College. So when he went into this less structured thing, well, he had the musical background. He was serious about it. It wasn't just a way out to avoid studying or avoid learning.

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah. Right.

FARMER

He got hooked up with John Coltrane, and John Coltrane was the same way. It was like his wife said: he was ninety-five percent saxophone. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah. I heard stories about the two of them having marathon practice sessions that would go around the clock.

FARMER

Yeah, they were really kindred spirits.

ISOARDI

Did you ever bump into Mingus on the avenue at all?

FARMER

Yeah, well, I bumped into Mingus back east, sure. I never played with him in California. Never.

ISOARDI

Oh?

FARMER

I knew him. That was the first bass player that I heard of when I got here. They said, "Yeah, there's a guy here named Charlie Mingus. He's got a bad temper, too." [laughter] They said, "Last week he took his bass stand and chased the vocalist off the stage with it."

ISOARDI

You're kidding! [laughter]

FARMER

That was the first I heard of him. He must have been nineteen years old or something.

ISOARDI

Why did he chase the vocalist off? Do you know?

FARMER

He didn't like the way she was singing, [laughter] He was a bad boy. [laughter] So nobody messed with Charles Mingus. Everybody was afraid of Mingus. I never played with him out here. But then when I got back to New York, boy, I started playing with — I developed a reputation of being able to play anything that anybody put in front of me. So there was a certain group of guys back there who were getting — The music was getting very difficult, and they were stretching out. I mean, they were venturing into areas where it wasn't just ordinary jazz, you know. And I developed a reputation that they could call me and I would really give it an honest effort. That's how I happened to have hooked up with Mingus out there, because that's the way his music was. You just couldn't play it the way you played everything else. You really had to work with it. You had to have the time to give it, which I did, because I wasn't working all the time, anyway. So I met him and played on some jobs with him. I remember one night he came into a place where I was playing. He had this fearsome reputation. And he was sitting in this club, and he hollered up to the stage, "Hey, Art Farmer, play a C scale!" And I'd say, "Oh, man." I didn't want to get any stuff. And I hollered back down, "I really don't know how you want it played." I got out of it some way. And then I found out later that he had told some people there with him, he said, "This guy here, he can play a C scale and make it into music," you know. But at that time I was very, very apprehensive about it. And I played with him on other jobs. But the main thing, my main musical experience with him-- There was a school in Massachusetts called

Brandeis University that had a music festival one year. They commissioned three jazz writers and three contemporary classical writers to write music for this festival. And they had a small band to play it. I was one of the members of this band, maybe about ten pieces or something. And Mingus wrote a piece for this event called "Revelations." And it was a great piece.

ISOARDI

Subsequently recorded, I think.

FARMER

Yeah, it was recorded. One of the classical composers was a guy named Milton Babbitt, who was really highly ranked in contemporary classical music, which is a far cry from Mozart and Beethoven, for sure.

ISOARDI

A far cry.

FARMER

Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

It's usually for academics, I think.

FARMER

[laughter] Right, yeah.

ISOARDI

[laughter] It's so removed.

FARMER

Absolutely. But that's the kind of stuff we played. And you really had to be able to go for now and forget about everything that you ever knew. You had to look at that music, and this guy had this vision. It's like playing with blinders: you know, like you see a horse, and it's got these blinders on so he doesn't see what's going on on the side? You had to have blinders on your ears, because if you listened to the guy sitting next to you, you'd get completely confused. You had to play and concentrate on exactly what's on the paper. And it seemed like one thing didn't have nothing to do with the other. And I remember he said, "I'm counting on you guys to put the soul in it,"

ISOARDI

Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER

He was a nice guy, you know. He was a nice guy.

ISOARDI

Well, he was being honest.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Much of modern classical doesn't have any.

FARMER

And there was a guy named Harold Shapero and some other guy there. But anyway, Mingus wrote a piece and — Let's see, the conductor was a very highly respected guy named Gunther Schuller, who was doing a series of concerts based upon a long, extended work Mingus wrote that they just found a few years ago.

ISOARDI

"Epitaph."

FARMER

Yeah. So that was my main experience with Mingus. But I'd appeared on some records with him. I remember one record was a Quincy Jones record called This Is How I Feel about Jazz, and Mingus was the bass player on that. And we were on some other things with some other people. We did a TV show, the Steve Allen Show, one night, things like that.

ISOARDI

When you finally got back to Central, I guess that must have been the late forties then?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Were you here for long before you were off on the road again?

FARMER

Well, I got back around sometime in '48, and I stayed in Los Angeles until '52, when I left with Lionel Hampton.

ISOARDI

For a while, then.

FARMER

Yeah. So during that time, that's when Central went into history.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

I remember the Alabam was still going, and I heard Josephine Baker there one time.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

"Sweets" [Harry] Edison was the musical director.

ISOARDI

At the Club Alabam?

FARMER

Of her show.

ISOARDI

Oh, of her show.

FARMER

Yeah, he was touring with her. That was probably one of the last big events at the Club Alabam — that I was aware of, anyway. And things were just thinning out generally.

ISOARDI

What was that doing to you? Where were you playing then?

FARMER

Well, I was working with Gerald Wilson or Benny Carter or whoever had a job. Dexter [Gordon] or Wardell [Gray] or Sonny [Criss], Frank Morgan — people like that. You see, the downfall of Central Avenue was more than anything else economics. When the war ended, people didn't have money to be going out into clubs, you know. There was a period in the forties when this war was going, everybody had a job. And this was before the days of television. So when they got off from work, they wanted to go up and have some entertainment. But in the forties when television came into being, and people didn't have the money that they had during the war, they would go home and watch TV. So these clubs would become — The attendance became sparse and they eventually had to close. And also there was a migration from the east side to the west side. See, we would call Central Avenue the east side. The people who had work and had some kind of equity and property in that part of Los Angeles, they made a step up the ladder and moved to the west of Los Angeles, say, around Western Avenue or Normandie [Avenue], places in that part of town. And what was left on the east side were people who didn't have the money to move.

ISOARDI

So the area was changing quite a bit.

FARMER

Yeah, it was changing.

ISOARDI

It was no longer, I guess, the commercial business center then in the black community either.

FARMER

Yeah, right. That's right.

ISOARDI

Other places to go to shop and —

FARMER

Yeah. Because, see, the people who were able to, they were buying houses in what had until then been exclusively white neighborhoods. And there were a few key cases that opened the thing up. There was something out here called a restrictive —



ISOARDI

Covenant.

FARMER

— covenant, yeah, and that sort of was eventually beaten up, so people were able to buy in other neighborhoods. And they got out of that neighborhood there. Then there were some clubs opening up over there on the west side, like there was a place called the Oasis on Western Avenue and some other smaller clubs.

ISOARDI

But still not the same as Central?

FARMER

Oh, no. It was nothing like Central Avenue, because Central Avenue was more compact, you know, in this little area between Vernon [Avenue] and Washington [Boulevard]. That's where everything was going on. The real center was located around where the Alabam and the Dunbar Hotel and the Downbeat were. Yeah, that was the real center. But then after that, as Los Angeles is, you have one place here and another place thirty miles over there, so there's nothing like Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Did you do any studio work at all? Because then it was starting to open up a little, wasn't it?

FARMER

Yeah, it was starting to open up, but it was far out of my range. You know, the only guys that were doing studio work were like Lee Young, who was a drummer — the brother of Lester Young — and Buddy Collette was in there. But they were the main ones. And some others got some work. But the only time I went in the studio was like I went in the studio with Jay McShann's band playing some backup music for a singer. And I went in the studio with Roy Porter, as I said before. This was like in the late forties. Gerald Wilson got a job on [KTTV] Channel 11. There was a series that lasted for thirteen weeks, I think it was, and the band was fronted by a guy who had a radio show — named Joe Adams — at that time. He was like the band- leader. He wanted to be a singer, you know, where he was part of — Without him in the front we wouldn't have been there, anyway.

ISOARDI

So it was thirteen weeks on TV?

FARMER

Yeah. And they would bring in stars. Like one week I remember they had Stan Kenton, and one week they had Nat King Cole — you know, that kind of thing. But it was strictly a local show, so you probably couldn't see any of that anyplace now.

ISOARDI

Right, right. Well, before I bring up a couple of other things and get too far from Central, I wanted to ask you, do you remember what some of those clubs looked like?

FARMER

Yeah, well, they were not large. The Downbeat and the Last Word were the main small clubs there. They were not large. They might hold maybe a hundred people at the most, at the most. I would say the Last Word might have held a hundred; the Downbeat might have held around seventy or eighty, something like that.

ISOARDI

Gee, there doesn't seem to be much room for an audience once you put in musicians for a jam session.

FARMER

No. Well, see, that's why they'd have the session masters, so there wouldn't be too many guys trying to cram themselves up on the stage at one time, you know. No, these were small places. And the stage might hold six, seven at the most.

ISOARDI

Including the rhythm section?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. And they had a bar. There was no dancing in these little places.

ISOARDI

Just tables?

FARMER

Yeah, just tables. So they would call them a lounge, the Downbeat lounge.

ISOARDI

Were most of the clubs like that, kind of on that order? I guess except maybe for the Alabam and the Plantation [Club], which I guess were a lot bigger.

FARMER

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

But most were clubs like that.

FARMER

Yeah. I guess this place out here, Billy Berg's, might have held around 150, something like that. But there wasn't anyplace any larger than that as far as I recall. And the clubs, they started at nine o'clock, and they went until one. But then after they finally realized that the war was over, well, then they allowed the clubs to stay open until two o'clock.

ISOARDI

For economic reasons?

FARMER

Yeah, well, they had the clubs closing at one o'clock for some reason to do with the war or something. I don't know what it was all about. And there was a 10 percent entertainment tax that the U.S. government had on clubs, and they lifted that finally. They hoped that that would keep these things alive, but it really didn't help that much, though.

ISOARDI

They would have to pay a 10 percent tax on their gross to the government?

FARMER

Yeah, entertainment tax to pay for the war, because, you know, it took a lot of money out of the United States in one way.

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah.

FARMER

But see, the population of Los Angeles generally was — There was a gigantic increase in population, as you probably know from the history. When this war came, all the people from the South came in, and they brought their racial prejudices with them. And that's why we've had the problems here. You know, these people come from Texas and Oklahoma and Alabama and wherever. And as customs were at home, well, that's the way they wanted to keep them here. And this mixing thing, this thing about white women and black men, was really a hard issue.

ISOARDI

I guess I've read stories about — I think Howard McGhee's wife was white.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And they just had a real rough —

FARMER

They were hounded. That would be the word, hounded, you know.

ISOARDI

By the police?

FARMER

Yeah, by the police. And then there was a lot of prostitution going on. There were some cases where black men were pimps and the white women were prostitutes, and the police, they would rather kill somebody than to see that happen. And every time they saw an interracial couple, that's what they thought was going on, which was not the case.

ISOARDI

They assumed it was prostitution?

FARMER

Yeah, sure. Yeah, you know, because these white women, they would have a period in their life of what we would call sowing wild oats. They would come out and do what they wanted to do, and when they had enough of it, they'd go back on the other side and get married and raise a family, you know. [laughter] But it was just something that — It was a phase that they went through. But the police, as far as they were concerned, the only thing they saw anytime they saw any interracial thing going on was crime. This was a crime. If it wasn't a crime on the books, it was still a crime as far as they were concerned. So their main worry was this interracial mixing, because it was a crime leading to prostitution and narcotics. You know, they weren't worried that much about robbery, because that was — Like everybody worries about getting mugged or something like that, but that wasn't the problem then, because people were working. The economic picture was better then than it is now. The people had a chance to get a job, but now it's —

ISOARDI

It's not even possible.

FARMER

It's not impossible to get a job, but it's different, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

FARMER

And more people had what we call the work ethic. You know, people would rather get a job that they were overqualified for than not to work at all. You know, things have changed now. There's a lot of people that have second-generation families that never have had a job. That wasn't the case then. Things have really changed. The members of the black community felt more than that it was a disgrace not to have a job. That was just something — And to stand around like you'll see people standing around now, "Have you got any change?" — you didn't see anybody like that. You didn't see anyone like that. This just came here in the past ten years or so. So there's a whole different outlook on it now. But the social thing then was everybody had a job, everybody was working, and if they were working they figured that they should be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and that would include entertainment, you know, going out. There were no TVs. TV came into being, say, like around '47 or something like that. But until then, the clubs were thriving. So, you know, like Johnny Otis's band would go into the Alabam and stay there for months. [laughter] At Joe Morris's Cotton Club [the Plantation Club], well. Count Basie would come out and Billy Eckstine would come out. These were big stars, you know. And they were supported by the community. Some white people would come in, but the white people were not enough to keep this going. They were really the fringe. It was the black audiences that supported

these places. You know, you might have maybe two or three white people in the place, but everybody else would be black. And they were there because they were able to afford it. So now if you go into it — Well, you can go into these discos; you have black people in there. They're working. But you go in the jazz club, you hardly see any black people at all. You see maybe 10 percent who are black; the rest of them are white. They say, "Yeah, I like jazz, but I can't afford it. The cover charge is too high," you know, all that kind of stuff. But jazz has always been sort of treated in a strange way by the middle- class blacks, as I told you. You know, I think I mentioned that the —

ISOARDI

In what way?

FARMER

Well, when I was still in Phoenix, the principal at my high school one day said, "Don't be a barnstormer like Louis Armstrong." My family is mainly back east — like I have a lot of relatives in Chicago and Detroit, and they're all very middle-class people. Like I said, it was a custom that there was a piano in the house. Well, these people studied music, you know. They learned to play. One cousin of my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] was like in charge of the music department in the city of Chicago at one time in the grammar school system. But their attitude was always, "Well, study music but play for your own personal pleasure. Don't make a career out of it, because it's a stupid thing to do." You know, "Do something else. Be a doctor."

ISOARDI

Because they perceived you wouldn't make money at it?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You couldn't make a livelihood?

FARMER

Yeah, right. "Be a doctor or be a lawyer or a minister or a schoolteacher." And that's what they are. I have a cousin in Chicago who is a surgeon. When I have to have an operation, that's where I go. [laughter] He can sit down and play Chopin and Mozart and anything like that. He doesn't play any jazz.

ISOARDI

None at all?

FARMER

No. And I have one in Detroit. She's the most energetic woman that I ever saw in my life. She has a pathology lab that employs about eighty people. And she teaches at a university there. She works for Wayne County. She also sits down and plays classical piano. There's one guy, the only one other than me and my brother that became a professional, a man in Chicago who used to play

trombone with Earl Hines's band. And he did that until he got through college, and then he became a teacher. He just retired a couple of years ago. No, longer than a couple of years ago — he's eighty-five now and he still gets an occasional job playing the trombone. And when I go to Chicago he always comes by. But he was playing with Earl Hines's band like in the thirties or the late twenties or whatever.

ISOARDI

Did they at least listen to your albums?

FARMER

Yeah, sure. [laughter] But the attitude was that jazz was something that — It's like the attitude that middle-class people had about entertainment, about show business. You know, like actors and — These people are supposed to be immoral.

ISOARDI

Right.

FARMER

You know, that kind of thing. Like if you were an actor, then you were just a step above being a whore, [laughter] So there's just the idea about the thing.

ISOARDI

Let me ask you about the union. You mentioned it a couple of times; we haven't really talked about it yet.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I guess you joined [American Federation of Musicians Local] 767?

FARMER

Yeah. Well, see, I joined the union in Phoenix first, and I even had a problem getting in the union in Phoenix because of race. The local number was 586 or something like that. And when me and my brother and other guys had this little band and we were getting jobs, well, we decided we wanted to be in the union. You know, we figured that's part of being a professional musician. So we went there and told them we wanted to be in the union, and they said no. There were no blacks in the union.

ISOARDI

So it was a completely white union.

FARMER

Yeah, in Phoenix. So we wrote to the headquarters.

ISOARDI

In New York or — ?

FARMER

In Chicago. That's where "Caesar" [James C] Petrillo's office was.

ISOARDI

"Caesar" Petrillo? [laughter]

FARMER

Yeah. We wrote there and told them that they wouldn't let us join the union, and they straightened it out. They said they have to let us join the union. So we joined the union there in Phoenix, because the federation told the local that they had to let us in if we were qualified. So we got in. Then, when we came over here, well, then we — In order to work with these bands, you had to be a member of the union, so we transferred to Local 767.

ISOARDI

Were you surprised that there were two unions?

FARMER

No. [laughter] No. In our life, there was always two, black and white, you know. We had gone to a completely segregated school system there.

ISOARDI

But there must have been other black musicians in Phoenix. They were simply nonunion?

FARMER

There were no local black musicians in Phoenix when we started playing. There were guys who came there to play in a lounge or something, but they came from back east or something, or from here.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

But there were no local black musicians making a living as professional musicians.

ISOARDI

So the question of a separate union didn't even arise.

FARMER

Didn't exist, no. Didn't exist. So we came over here, and we joined the union here. The first time I heard Gerald Wilson was at — See, they had this house there. It was the second floor, and the rooms up there were used for rehearsal rooms.

ISOARDI

And the union offices were downstairs?

FARMER

Yeah, they were downstairs. And the union executives were very nice people, as far as I remember. There was a guy named Paul Howard — he used to play saxophone many years ago, like in the twenties or something — a guy named Elmer Fain, and another one named Baron Moorehead. And there was a lady named Florence Cadrez. When the unions were amalgamated, well, then these

people went to 47 and they kept their jobs there. But at first they were kind of apprehensive because they thought they were not going to be able to keep their jobs. But the whole union thing, the whole amalgamation thing was — A lot of credit should go to certain people that were really involved with it. Benny Carter was very involved with it, for one thing. Buddy Collette, because he was working with a guy named Jerry Fielding, and Jerry Fielding was a studio band. And Buddy was on that band and they were involved with it very much. There was an organization called the humanists which played a big part in this. It wasn't the communists but it was called the humanists and I've heard this name in other places.

ISOARDI

Oh, that was the orchestra that they put together? Was that the one?

FARMER

I don't know.

ISOARDI

Because Buddy told me that they had an orchestra. They decided to create an integrated orchestra [Community Symphony Orchestra] to play Humanist Hall.

FARMER

Okay.

ISOARDI

And this way they thought they could get the black and white musicians together, because they figured if they called meetings nobody would come.

FARMER

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Okay, because you know what happened — by that time things had moved kind of west, and there was a place at Jefferson [Boulevard] and Normandie which was like a dance hall, and they had these rehearsals there. And white guys from the Hollywood area would come there and we would play classical music, like try to play symphonies and things like that with a conductor. And I never had had any experience like that. That was a —

ISOARDI

Oh, so you were playing in the orchestra.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, I was playing there. Yeah. And that was the first time I ever played with a conductor without somebody in the front saying, "One, two, one-two-three- four." Instead of that, you have the guy out there with a stick saying [gestures], and you had to play. [laughter] So that was my introduction to that. These guys would come out of their part of town and come down there and give us a new perspective on music. They opened up new avenues to us. And they also said, "If anybody wants to study, well then, we have teachers." They assigned me to a teacher for which I didn't have to pay one nickel.

ISOARDI



Who did? I mean, was this — ?

FARMER

This orchestra, this whole thing.

ISOARDI

The orchestra as a group?

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

Yeah. And they assigned my brother to a teacher. And you could study, I mean, get some — This was my first real teacher in the West.

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

FARMER

I could get some classical training. Otherwise we were scuffling trying to keep from starving, you know. We couldn't have any money. At least we didn't think we had any money to be paying for lessons and things. So it was really a completely beneficial thing. And I never heard anything about — Well, what they would call it now, they would say, "Well, certainly this was a left-wing organization," you know, but I never heard anything about that.

ISOARDI

As Buddy told the story, it was a way of getting musicians from the two locals together to begin building the base for merging the two unions.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. Well, that's the way it started.

ISOARDI

Did you play with them the whole life of the orchestra? Was it a couple of years?

FARMER

No, no. I remember going over there for a few rehearsals, but I was in and out, you know, working with bands, going here and there and whatever. So it wasn't a thing where you — I wasn't there for years or anything like that.

ISOARDI

Right. During the time of the amalgamation, were you involved in that at all?

FARMER

No. When I left here with — I left here finally in the fall of 1952 with Lionel Hampton, and the amalgamation hadn't really happened then. It was moving in that direction, but certain people were putting obstacles up on both sides. But it really hadn't happened.

ISOARDI

You were supporting it?

FARMER

Certainly I was supporting it. Everybody from a certain age group was certainly — They didn't see any reason not to support it. Because it was a matter of territory, also. You see. Local 47 had the larger part of Los Angeles. It was like — I don't know if it was written or — It was kind of official. There were certain territories that were allotted to each local. And we figured if we were all in the same local, then we would be able to play anyplace in town. And this whole studio thing, like the movie studios — that was the Local 47 territory. In order to work in the studio, you were supposed to be a member of Local 47. But if you were black, then you had to be in Local 767. So you had guys like Lee Young. There was a guy named Barney — I remember reading in Down Beat --Barney Bigard who used to play clarinet with Duke Ellington. He was from New Orleans, where he was what we called Creole. You know, he was a very light-skinned guy. So in Down Beat magazine I remember the big headline, "Barney Bigard says he is not a Negro, he says he's a Creole."  
[laughter]

ISOARDI

Was he trying to get into 47?

FARMER

Yeah, yeah. [laughter] He was trying to get into 47, you know. Because, you know, like with Floyd Ray's band there were black people and white people — black, white, Mexican, whatever. The white people could come and work on Central Avenue, but the blacks had trouble coming to work in Hollywood. They could work in some places, but there would have to be some kind of special dispensation or something I think, you know, to work like at Billy Berg's or a place like the Swing Club or whatever the club's name was in this area.

ISOARDI

I know some white big bands, for instance, played down on Central Avenue in the clubs. But do you remember any sort of young white musicians, young kids, who would hang out on Central or anything like that or participate in jam sessions?

FARMER

Well, there was a trumpet player named Kenny Bright, and he used to be much involved with the black groups, because we worked together with Dexter Gordon's band and he was on the scene a lot. Kenny Bright. And then there was a trombone player named Jimmy Knepper who lives back east now, and he was around.

ISOARDI

I didn't know he was out here. I guess he must have hooked up with Mingus probably when he was out here.

FARMER

Maybe so, maybe so. I think Jimmy's from out here.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

I think so. But he was one of the first white guys that I met. There was a piano player who became pretty well known named Joe Albany that was playing the piano with Floyd Ray at the time I was playing with him. In the Johnny Otis band there was an alto saxophone player named Rene Block, who was the lead alto player. I think he was a Mexican kid. And with Floyd Ray's band there was a Mexican trumpet player named Ruben McFall, and there was a trombone player named, I think, Chico Alvarez or Chico something or other, who eventually got his own radio show — a disc jockey.

### **1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, (SIDE ONE)**

**NOVEMBER 23, 1991**

FARMER

I remember, getting back to Central Avenue, one time — About jam sessions, one night I was in the Downbeat [Club], and Big Jay McNeely, Cecil McNeely, was working across the street at the Last Word [Cafe]. And part of his thing was going out in the street with his horn.

ISOARDI

So he wasn't playing bebop anymore.

FARMER

[laughter] No, no. He had made the big jump. He came out in the street with his horn and came all the way across Central Avenue and walked into the Downbeat with his horn, you know, playing it, honking —

ISOARDI

While you guys were playing?

FARMER

No. Well, it was on the break, on the intermission. He walked in there with his horn [mimics McNeely 's playing] honking, you know, whooping and hollering. [laughter] And the little owner, a little guy, he must have been about seventy years old. I think he was an immigrant, European Jewish guy, you know, with a heavy accent. A little small, bald-headed guy. He said, "Get the horn! Get the horn! Someone get the horn! Get the horn!" [laughter] It was like the Wild West, you know. [laughter] Like, "You've got to shoot this guy down!" [ laughter ]

ISOARDI

Oh, that's great!

FARMER

[laughter] That was the funniest thing, [laughter] Because the Downbeat was the bebop club that night, and this guy — he was like the enemy! [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh, boy. Well, it sounds like Jay certainly wasn't bashful.

FARMER

Oh no, he wasn't at all. Not at all. [laughter] I remember working with Dexter [Gordon] and Wardell [Gray] — Well, Jay, part of his act was complete, total abandon, you know. It was like somebody who had become completely possessed by the music. He throws off his coat and throws that down, then he jumps on his back, and he's playing the horn, he puts his legs up in the air, you know, and he's playing all the time. So there was a place called the Olympia Theatre where he would play on Saturday night, a midnight show. I'm working with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray — they had a band — and these are highly respected jazz stars, you know, and I was working with that band. So we got a job there one Saturday night, and we figured, "Well, gee, this is a step up." [laughter] And so Dexter, he decides that he's going to pull a Big Jay. So he's up there, and he's playing his thing, and all of a sudden he starts to come out of his coat, and Wardell had to help him out with the coat. So Wardell takes the coat and very civilly takes it and folds it and puts it on his arm. And there's Dexter, and he's honking a la Big Jay, and he finally gets down on his knees a la Big Jay.

ISOARDI

Oh, no, really?

FARMER

And then the people in the audience, these kids, these teenagers, are looking up there like, "Gee, when is he going to do something?"

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

FARMER

[laughter] He stayed down there so long like that. He stayed down there on his knees like he's praying, like he didn't know what to do then. So he finally got up off his knees and the show went on. But later on — See, I played with Dexter a lot in Europe, so I would sort of rub it in. [laughter]

ISOARDI

You reminded him regularly about this? [laughter] It was probably the only time he'd ever done something like that.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He did it kind of tongue-in-cheek, too, with Warden holding his coat and all that. I remember one time Dexter said, "You know, like, you have the nerve to give me a hard time about that, but listen to some of those funny records you make for CTI [Records]," you know. [laughter] Because I made a couple of crossover records for CTI.

ISOARDI

Right, right.

FARMER

He said, "I don't see how you've got the nerve to say anything to me."  
[laughter] But that Big Jay, he was something else.

ISOARDI

You know, I saw him just — gee, I don't know — six months ago or something like that. It was down at the Long Beach Jazz Festival, jazz and blues. Jay gets up and he starts wailing away, and you know, with those portable mics now, you can go anywhere. [laughter]

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, right, right. [laughter]

ISOARDI

And he takes off. I don't know how old he is now, but he takes off, and he's just going through the audience, and he finds this rather large older woman, and he sits down on her lap.

FARMER

Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

And he's just blowing away.

FARMER

And he whips the people into a frenzy.

ISOARDI

Oh, geez.

FARMER

He always got them. He always got them wild.

ISOARDI

Nobody can believe it.

FARMER

Yeah, he always got them crazy.

ISOARDI

But he's still doing it.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, he's still doing it. Still doing it. Yeah, Big Jay. Well, see, he and Sonny Criss had this group together — Sonny Criss the alto player — called the — I don't remember the name of it. Something about bebop.

ISOARDI

It was a bebop band?

FARMER

Yeah. Quintet.

ISOARDI

Really?

FARMER

When we were in high school. And he was getting gigs then. But then his brother came back from the army and told him that he was going in the wrong direction. So that's when he—

ISOARDI

By playing bebop?

FARMER

Yeah. He said he wouldn't be able to make a quarter playing that. He was always kind of a — He never had any real balance. You know, it was either one thing completely — Because when he was playing bebop, everything was — It was extreme. You know, it was either everything had to be the hippest or the most corny with him. We called him "Bebop" because everything he played sounded like bebop, like he didn't give a damn about any other aspect of music other than that, you know.

ISOARDI

Oh.

FARMER

So he changed. He made a radical change.

ISOARDI

One hundred and eighty degrees, then.

FARMER

Yeah, right. Yeah. But Sonny was strictly a jazz player.

ISOARDI

Fine player.

FARMER

Yeah. But the trouble with Sonny is that he never really studied. You know, he took some lessons from Buddy Collette, I remember that, but he never really learned how to read that well. You know, he never learned how to read good enough to play with the big bands and things like that.

ISOARDI

That makes it tougher.

FARMER

Yeah, he figured that he shouldn't have to do that. He said, "I shouldn't have to do that. I'm a jazz player." So that just closed down a lot of possibilities, because if you play jazz, well, a lot of your income is going to be from making

records. And you go into a studio, you have to be able to play whatever is thrown in front of you. You can't take time because time is money. If they call you one time and if you hold up the thing, they're not going to call you anymore regardless of how great a solo you play. So that was one of the things that really was a great handicap to him. It didn't have to be that way, but he just felt that he should be able to — And then another thing: Most saxophone players double. They play flute or clarinet or something. He said, "Well, I'm an alto saxophone player." Well, you know, that's it.

ISOARDI

That's all he ever played, then, yeah.

FARMER

"Why should I have to play flute? I'm a saxophone player." So he didn't get as far as he should have.

ISOARDI

Recently I saw you play with Frank Morgan, and you guys have cut an album.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I guess Central Avenue Revisited is the album, in fact.

FARMER

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

So you must have met first on Central, then.

FARMER

Yeah, around then. When I first met Frank was in the late forties, and I guess Central Avenue was on its way down, but there were still some things happening then. Frank was about sixteen years old. Frank went to Jeff [Jefferson High School] also, as you know. He was about sixteen years old at the time, and his father was a professional musician also, who now lives in Hawaii. So we were quite close. But then, when I left here in '52 with Lionel Hampton, after then, well, then he started getting involved with narcotics and really got too deep into it, you know, and spent a lot of time in the prison. So when we made this album. Central Avenue, that was the first time that I'd seen Frank since 1952.

ISOARDI

No kidding. That's the first time you guys have gotten together?

FARMER

Yeah. Because every time I came out here he was in prison.

ISOARDI

Geez. Well, it must be nice to see him with the way things are going now.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah, it is nice. But, you know, the tragedy is that a lot of guys didn't survive this narcotics thing. Too many. You know, between narcotics and the prejudice thing and I don't know what — The prejudice thing might have led to the narcotics in some cases, you know, just feeling like the avenues are blocked anyway, so we might as well get high, you know, that kind of thing.

ISOARDI

You know, there was a film I saw on Louis Armstrong, a documentary, and somebody — it may have been Dexter Gordon when they interviewed him — was saying that Armstrong smoked pot every day of his life, and he said it was the only time he could escape from the prejudice.

FARMER

Yeah, it might be. But anyway, the pot didn't kill you, but there's other things. Guys spent years and years in the prison, and then they're just out of the music thing completely. Or else they take an overdose and they're dead, you know. So a lot of guys didn't survive. Of the students who went to Jeff in [Samuel] Browne's band, when they left there a lot of them got hooked on narcotics, and they just fell by the wayside. Talented people.

ISOARDI

Yeah, so much wasted talent.

FARMER

Yeah. Frank, although he spent years in prison, he's finally out now and able to — He's still playing. He's still playing. But the narcotics killed white people, too, some white talented people. Like, for instance, there was a saxophone player named Art Pepper. I used to make some gigs with Art Pepper sometimes. We'd work like in the Latin bands around Los Angeles sometimes. We'd wind up in the same band playing montunos and things.

ISOARDI

I know he wrote some things like "Mambo de la Pinta."

FARMER

Yeah, [laughter]

ISOARDI

Things like that that were Spanish.

FARMER

Yeah, well, he got hung up in narcotics, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, sad. I read his autobiography [Straight Life: The Story of Art Pepper] .

FARMER

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Sad reading.

FARMER



Yeah. Yeah, it was sad because he said, "I'm a junkie, and I'll be a junkie till I die." You know, that's it. That's the reality.

ISOARDI

Yeah, whether it's smack or methadone.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Bill Green told me that he played with him at one of his last gigs. I think it was out at UCLA, in fact. And he said he saw him backstage, and at one point he rolled up his pants or something, and he said his legs were so discolored and he looked so terrible. When he got out on stage, though, and he had the mouthpiece in his mouth, he was transformed. But other than that, for a man who wasn't even sixty yet — he was in his fifties — he looked so bad.

FARMER

And Chet Baker is another one, too. I met Chet and guys like that in coming into this part of town to participate in jam sessions, you know.

ISOARDI

So you'd met Chet much earlier on?

FARMER

Yeah. I met Chet in the forties, too, in the late forties.

ISOARDI

Did you know Art Pepper when you were on Central?

FARMER

Yeah. In the late forties or early fifties, before I left here, that's when I met Art Pepper. Art Pepper used to hang on Central Avenue years earlier. But then when he worked with Stan Kenton and Woody Herman and people like that, well, he wasn't hanging on Central Avenue then. I met him after he left those bands, at a period when he was living here and working casual jobs. That's when I met him, on some one-nighter playing with a Latin band. That's when I actually met him. But these guys, they got hung up on drugs. It was a scourge. And it was a thing that didn't have that much to do with — It had to do with luck in a certain sense, you know, because it's like if you do the wrong thing too many times, you'll just get hooked. And some people were able to break the habit, and a lot of them couldn't. They'd get hooked and they'd get arrested by the police. You go to jail, you come out, you have a record, and if the police want a promotion, then they arrest other people. They know who to come to. Like if they want to put another star behind their name, they look down the list and say, "Oh, here's so-and-so. He's been arrested before. Well, we'll go see what he's doing." And sometimes they might even manufacture some evidence, because you already have the record. So if you go before the judge and you've already been arrested for narcotics and the police say, "Well, we found such

and such a thing in his pocket," the judge is going to believe the police before he believes the criminal who has this record of being a narcotics offender or whatever. So guys started going in and out of jails. And the next thing they know, it's all over, because the music is highly competitive, and you have to be able to do what you're supposed to do. It's hard enough then, you know. But if you lose a year here and a year there, it's just impossible. So Frank — I give him credit for at least being able to survive somehow, because he was a rare one from California.

ISOARDI

To come back like he has after thirty years is remarkable.

FARMER

Yeah. Absolutely.

ISOARDI

Well, we're hoping to interview him. I did a sort of pre-interview meeting with him about a year ago out here, and he told me that there were something like three studios negotiating for his life story or something. So good things are coming in bunches.

FARMER

Yeah, they are. They are. Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

At last.

FARMER

Yeah, but he's got scars. He's not without scars from all the stuff he's been through. It's changed him. Because he's not the sixteen-year-old kid that I used to know. You know, after you spend some years in San Quentin [prison], you develop something else.

ISOARDI

You get a lot taken away, I suppose, that you never get back.

FARMER

Yeah. He's hardened. He has hardened a lot, which I guess you'd have to do in order to survive. But he still plays very well, though. He plays very well.

ISOARDI

Yeah. There's a lot in his music, a lot of feeling in his music.

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I know a lot of people who study saxophone and are students. I mean, they would much rather hear a Frank Morgan than any Marsalis record just because of the feeling in it and what the music says. It doesn't sound like it's just come out of a music school. There's something more in there than just the technique.

FARMER

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

So I think he's got a lot to give that way.

FARMER

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, well his experience has given him more of a certain kind of resonance, a certain seasoning, flavor, to his music, which is — I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Those are heavy dues for a little seasoning. [laughter ]

FARMER

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, there are two big questions that I always ask at the end, and you touched on one already, and that was why Central Avenue declined. But the other big one is, looking back, what was the importance of Central Avenue both for you as well as for American music and jazz? What would you say Central Avenue gave?

FARMER

Well, to me personally. Central Avenue was the neighborhood place where I could go and hear people play and meet people. If they were playing in Hollywood at Billy Berg's or at the Orpheum Theatre — I wouldn't think about going backstage to meet somebody at the Orpheum Theatre. I went to hear Count Basie there, and I heard Duke Ellington at the Million Dollar Theatre. I wouldn't think about going backstage and introducing myself and saying, "Hi, I'm trying to learn how to play," or something like that. But on Central Avenue these people were more accessible. So they were part of the neighborhood. And I got to meet people there and got to hear them play, and I could go there any night and stand around and listen and see what was going on. As far as importance in jazz overall, I would say it would be this possibility that for me existed — for other people as well — and that was the importance that I could see. Other than that, I know that Dexter Gordon used to work on Central Avenue, and other people, they got experience there, too. There was one place I didn't mention called the Elks — We just called it the Elks.

ISOARDI

The Elks hall?

FARMER

Yeah, Elks hall. And big bands used to play there sometimes. It was a matter of getting experience, too. Learning, listening, playing, experiencing — Yeah, learning and listening and playing. And you could get that on Central Avenue more than you could get it anywhere else in this area or in this part of the world. Central Avenue was the main thing for Los Angeles. After you left Los

Angeles, you had a long way to go to go to Chicago or New York City. By the time you got there, you were really supposed to be ready. But here you could start off. At least that's the way it was to me; it was a way to start out. I think Central Avenue was important also to groups that were really not regarded as jazz groups — say, like Roy Milton, blues groups, things like that — because they had a lot of work. I wouldn't want to give the impression that Central Avenue was just a jazz place, because it really wasn't. You had Roy Milton and Pee Wee Crayton and T-Bone Walker and Ivory Joe Hunter, Big Joe Turner. You know, bands like that were playing in these lounges, also. And they were much more successful than the jazz was, without a doubt. [laughter] This was their happy hunting ground. [laughter] But you see, groups like that had jazz players playing with them. Jazz players would take a job with them if they had no other resort. But they didn't use too many trumpets. They used mostly tenor saxophone and guitar and piano and drums, bass. But that was certainly a big part of the street. But that's about all that I can think of.

ISOARDI

Well, do you have any final thoughts or anything else you want to say or bring up that maybe we haven't touched upon?

FARMER

No. My final thoughts would be more like this Ernie Andrews thing [Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue] . It was kind of sad, because when you go there now, I feel like I'm stepping into a graveyard. It's very emotional to see something that played such a large part in your life, and now there's nothing left there. Nothing would give you the impression that this place had ever been anything other than what it is right now. And you have to stop and ask yourself, well, is it all an illusion? Is it all an illusion? And that's the big question. You know, I'm sixty-three years old, and when I first went there I was, say, sixteen or something like that, and what happened then at that age has influenced me until now. But if I look at that street now, what could have influenced me? What was there? There's nothing there that would influence anybody now. Nothing at all. Not one brick. I mean, there's no sign of anything ever happening of any value or importance to anyone in the world.

ISOARDI

It's a tragedy. It's a loss for the community for the next generation who doesn't know what —

FARMER

It is. It's a loss, because the kids come up and they don't have any idea. All they know is crack and shoot somebody, you know, that kind of stuff. Basketball. Basketball is okay, but there's more to life than basketball. You know, everybody can't be six, seven feet tall and make a million dollars playing basketball. So the kids come up, and their role models are so limited that they

don't see any alternative to what's before them. And what's before them is almost totally negative, almost totally negative, in the black community. That's the pity. That's really the pity. And not enough is done to make the people aware of what could be, of what was and what could be, you know. If you don't live in the United States, you live someplace else, you come back here from time to time, you see the way people live, and people feel this is the only way it can be. But it doesn't have to be this way. But they don't get any input on any other possibility, or very little. They're much more aware of the negative things, you know, of the dope dealers and the robbers and all these kinds of negative things. Because at this period — well, we didn't worry about crime. We didn't worry about people breaking in your house or stealing your car. I'm not saying that crime didn't exist, but it certainly was no comparison to now. There have always been gangs in L.A. Before I even came over here I heard about gangs, you know, like the Sleepy Lagoon case, that type of thing. In fact, I was going to come over here a year earlier, but this whole thing came up.

ISOARDI

Oh, the Zoot Suit Riots?

FARMER

Yeah, the Zoot Suit Riots came up, and my mother said, "No, not now, not now." [laughter] So that has always been a part of the scene here. Watts was a real middle-class place. You know, everybody in Watts had a job. When I worked with Horace Henderson, he was living in Watts. He had a very nice little bungalow, and I went out there and talked to him. We didn't rehearse there, but I talked to him about rehearsal and jobs and things like that. Sonny Criss was living in Watts. A lot of guys lived there. But it was regarded as — Nobody said [adopting horrified tone], "Watts — Man!" It was just another neighborhood. But things come and go. There's ups and downs in societies as there are in people. About the only thing you can be sure of in life — well, life is change. Whatever exists today, you can be sure it's not going to be existing forever this way. You know, things change, and we can't anticipate what's going to bring it on. Sometimes it takes a movement, but a movement is usually led by one person or a few people, and we don't know what's going to happen or who's going to do it. But we can be sure it's not going to stay the way it is. And you can't live in the past, of course. You can't take things back to where they were. Things move forward for better or worse. And it's worse now, but it won't stay this way. Whatever is going to happen in the future, I don't know. People bug me a lot. If they don't know anything about jazz, they usually wind up asking me, "Well, where do you think jazz is going anyway?" [laughter] They don't even know anything about where it is or where it was, but they worry about where it's going. And I know everything is going somewhere, because that's life. It's change. Without change, there's no life. There has to be

change. So we go ahead and do what comes to our minds and do it the best we can, just like you do, you know, musically or anything else. And one day the things that happened here will be looked on with more interest than there is now. But the people who did it will be long gone. But that's the way the world goes. So you just have to live with it, accept it, and do the best you can do. That's all. Some people make a contribution, like [Samuel] Browne made a great contribution. He is a good example for others to live by, to try to do something to pass on some knowledge to people who didn't come in contact with it. And that's about the best thing that we can do.

ISOARDI

Art, thank you very much.

FARMER

Well, thank you.

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