A TEI Project

Interview of Frank Morgan

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (JULY 18, 1992)

ISOARDI

Okay, Frank, let's begin our exploration of Central Avenue with the years before you came to Central--where you were from and how you first came to the music and ultimately how you got to Central Avenue.

MORGAN

Well, I was born December 23, 1933, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was born to Stanley Morgan and Geraldine Morgan. My father happened to be a wonderful jazz guitarist who loved to play changes for the horn players, which could happen in hotel rooms, you know, acoustic guitar. And I guess I was destined to be a guitarist had I not heard the master, you know, Charlie Parker. But I started playing guitar, I guess, maybe at two or three years old.

ISOARDI

Two years old?

MORGAN

Something like that, yeah. My father said that-- I know that he used to play by my crib, practice for hours when he was home, you know, when he wasn't on the road or something. But he said that when I started reaching for the guitar, that's when he started teaching me. As I had the pleasure of saying in a play in 1987, Prison-made Tuxedos -- I was relating the story that my mother told me that my father, when she was pregnant carrying me, he used to have her hold his guitar, and he would get around behind her and play the guitar against her stomach so the sound would go into me. I don't recall really loving the guitar

that much, because physically I was playing on the steel strings and it was very uncomfortable to my fingers.

ISOARDI

But you wanted to play as early as you can remember?

MORGAN

Well, I think I wanted to do whatever my father was doing or seemed to want me to do. But at six years old I moved to Milwaukee from Minneapolis, and this is when I started-- My uncle, J. D. [James] King, is a tenor saxophone player. He's still living. At that time he was very popular around Milwaukee because he'd been on the road with Andy Kirk's band.

ISOARDI

The Clouds of Joy.

MORGAN

Clouds of Joy, yeah. He was part of that. He was also part-- When we moved to California-- He and my father, they moved to California first, and he was part of the Central Avenue thing, too. But in Milwaukee I started to really get into music a little more with my father, because his home was in Milwaukee, and I moved to live with his mother, because my mother was spending so much time on the road with my father at that time.

ISOARDI

So you had formal teaching then or something like that?

MORGAN

Yes. So after moving to Milwaukee at around six and then going over to Detroit approximately a year or so after that to spend Easter vacation with my father and my mother, my father took me to the Paradise Theatre to hear Jay McShann's band. This is when--

ISOARDI

About 1940.

MORGAN

Yes.

ISOARDI

Oh, "Bird" [Charlie Parker] was with the McShann band.

MORGAN

This is when I heard Charlie Parker. My father told me that when Bird stood up to take his first solo--I think it was on "Hootie Blues" or "Confessin' the Blues," one of those tunes--then I said, "Whatever that is he's playing, that's what I want to play, and that's it for the guitar." [laughter] It hurt my fingers, anyhow. [laughter] And I was taken backstage, and I met Bird.

ISOARDI

Your father took you backstage?

MORGAN

Uh-huh. Yeah. Bird and my father were sort of old friends. Bird used to love to go in the hotel room and have my father play changes with him. They used to stretch out and play "Cherokee," you know, whatever. But the next day Bird was supposed to pick out what I thought would be a saxophone for me.

ISOARDI

So your father took what you said really seriously.

MORGAN

Oh, yeah, he was beautiful about that. When I look back upon the case history of so many people that have been not so fortunate to have a parent that would allow them to do what they wanted to do at that time-- I mean, it was like my father's dream that I was to be a guitarist, I believe.

ISOARDI

It sounds like he was really interested in finding out what really motivated you and what got you excited.

MORGAN

Yeah. I guess the wisdom that he showed was beautiful, as far as I'm concerned. I thank him for it, for the gift of life and music, and then the gift of being able to go to-- Especially-- It's also significant that in later years he became very disenchanted with Charlie Parker.

ISOARDI

Because of Bird's lifestyle?

MORGAN

Yeah, because of Bird's lifestyle and the effect it had on my life. I have an aunt today that no longer has a Charlie Parker collection. She blamed him, chose to blame him for my problems. You know, she says, "Hail, Bird" now though [laughter], I think. She certainly is proud of the turns my life has taken.

ISOARDI

No doubt.

MORGAN

In fact, I'm going to have to find a way to spend some time with her when I go to L.A. this time. It's significant that in Milwaukee, when I did get back to Milwaukee from Detroit, at that particular time I had a clarinet, a silver metal clarinet, that I didn't quite feel real great about. It certainly wasn't what Charlie Parker was playing, and it looked funny, anyhow. [laughter] You know, a silver clarinet? It wasn't even what Benny Goodman had. [laughter]

ISOARDI

A friend of mine saw one recently and said, "What the hell is that?" He didn't know it was a clarinet. So you didn't pick out a horn, then, the next day after seeing Bird?

MORGAN

Yeah, but Bird had sent orders that I start out with clarinet.

ISOARDI

Oh! [laughter]

MORGAN

[laughter] Yeah. No, I didn't pick out the horn. Now, Wardell Gray and Teddy Edwards, they came into town. They were both playing alto [saxophone] at that time. They came in Charlie Parker's place. They were in the band that my uncle was playing in, in Howard McGhee's band in Detroit at that time, at the Congo Club, I believe it was. It was two altos; it was Teddy Edwards and Wardell. They were both playing altos and my uncle J. D. was playing tenor. But I also was told later on that the trombone player in the band was J. J. [Johnson]. I'm not sure. But after getting the clarinet and coming back to Milwaukee, I took to studying the clarinet pretty hard. My father got me into a couple of the good teachers around Milwaukee. When I got ready to go to the saxophone, one happened to be a very fine tenor saxophonist named Leonard Gay. And by coincidence, my first saxophone was his soprano saxophone that he let me use until my folks could buy me a-- Which was a nice transition from the clarinet, you know, right to soprano. But I was quite ashamed of the soprano because it was a long, straight piece. I was kind of like the kid who snuck through the ally to go to his violin lesson. [laughter]

ISOARDI

You were really impatient for that alto.

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, the sound-- But to this day I love the soprano. But in Milwaukee, not too long after the seven years were over, I guess by the time I was ten or so, Willie Pickens and Bunky Green and Al Bartee and Russell Enuls, we had a little band called the Rhythm Kings.

ISOARDI

How old were you then?

MORGAN

I think I was about-- We were all about ten or eleven. But maybe I might be a little-- Maybe I might have been twelve, eleven or twelve, but certainly not thirteen, because at thirteen I went to California for my first time, and I was seriously into the alto by then.

ISOARDI

When you formed this band, you were playing alto, though, right? When you guys got together?

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah. And Bunky Green was a tenor player at the time. And, of course, you know, Willie Pickens is the pianist right now with Elvin Jones, who was a very strong voice in the Chicago jazz scene, as was Bunky Green, too. Bunky is head of the International Association of Jazz Educators. He's a past president.

In fact, this past January George Cables and I played their convention. We did the keynote performance there, and it was great. But we played at dances at the social center. And on my summer vacation when I was thirteen, in June of my thirteenth year, I went to California--which was 1947--to visit my father. My father and my mother had moved to California by that time, and I was living in Milwaukee with my grandmother, my father's mother. At first I was living with my mother's mother in Minneapolis, where I was born. I was never really raised by my mother and my father jointly. There just wasn't time. But I had great-grandmothers.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it sounds like a close family.

MORGAN

Well, you know, they did the best they could for me to make sure I got the music lessons. It was very rough during that time because-- You know, in later years my father became one of the Ink Spots. Things were a lot better then. It became a lot better then than they were when he was playing the changes for Bird and these guys and playing in the starving jazz bands.

ISOARDI

So what was L.A. like when you got here?

MORGAN

Oh, when I got to L.A. in June of '47, first off, my father had a nightclub, an after-hours club, the Casablanca, on San Pedro [Street], actually. It was part of the Central Avenue scene. There were several clubs that weren't actually on Central Avenue. Some were on San Pedro, some were on Avalon [Boulevard]. But my father had I guess maybe one of the real happening after-hours scenes. They served fried chicken and glasses of water, setups for people to bring their own drinks and stuff, whatever, after the club is closed.

ISOARDI

Was it two o'clock when they actually closed?

MORGAN

Yeah, they closed at two o'clock. And my father's joint opened at two, I guess. But my first night in L.A., my father took me to the club, and Dexter [Gordon] was playing, and Hampton Hawes-- That's where I first saw Hampton Hawes. Wonderful. Just everybody-- It was just a constant-- I mean, there were so many musicians that came in and out and played. And then there was, of course, Wardell Gray and the people that I heard on records. But Bird wasn't in L.A. at that time. In fact, I'm not so sure he wasn't in Camarillo [State Hospital] when I was there.

ISOARDI

That was June '47.

MORGAN

No, but I think he'd already recorded it.

ISOARDI

"Relaxin' at Camarillo"?

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I think that might have been-- I think he was back in New York by '47.

MORGAN

He was back in New York, yeah, yeah. But that night I played with Dexter and Hampton Hawes and--

ISOARDI

You got up and played with them?

MORGAN

Oh, yeah, yeah, and every night after that. And not just at my father's club, because there were sessions at the Downbeat [Club]. I mean, there were clubs all over during the regular hours, and then there were sessions in the music stores and some of the clubs even in the afternoons. And there was a place called the Crystal Tea Room, which was actually on Avalon, that I think on Saturday and Sunday afternoons they had jam sessions there outside. I really heard some great players there.

ISOARDI

What was it like getting up--? I mean, you're thirteen years old, and you're getting up playing with all these guys. You just had--what?--a little band in Milwaukee, and then you're on stage with people you'd listened to and heard about. Were you ready for that? Or were you--?

MORGAN

Well, it wasn't just a little-- No, of course not. Neither musically nor psychologically was I ready for it. I think it had a lot to do with my father being who he was and having a club. You know, "Little Frankie is going to get up and play a couple of bebop tunes," but really not on the level of any of those guys. But it's wonderful that it was there for me. But I oftentimes think that it was there for me too much in abundance and too soon. But Central Avenue was like I imagined--and I've heard it referred to--Fifty-second Street [in New York City to be], maybe on a smaller scale, because-- Actually, on Central Avenue, within a radius of three or four blocks, there were maybe four or five clubs that had good jazz happening in them, you know: the Downbeat and the Last Word [Cafe] and Lovejoy's, which was kind of an after-hours spot, too. Jack's Basket [Room].

ISOARDI

Maybe you could talk about some of those. What were those clubs like?

MORGAN

Well, from the perspective-- Remember that I was thirteen, fourteen years old when they were happening. I was able to go in and out of them with my father at night. And on Sunday afternoons I was able to play at the jam sessions at the Downbeat, which was really where the-- That was the heavyweight.

ISOARDI

Really? Those sessions at the Downbeat--

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

What time would they start? In the afternoon?

MORGAN

Well, no, the sessions at the Downbeat were happening several nights a week. But the Sunday afternoon sessions I guess started at two o'clock in the afternoon or something like that and went until eight or nine, before whatever else was happening there at night went on. Because I can remember times when sessions on Sunday afternoons were happening, but during the regular hours at night the [Charles] Mingus band, or the band that Mingus had with Buddy Collette and Lucky Thompson--

ISOARDI

The Stars of Swing.

MORGAN

I'm not sure what they called it at that time. I became a student of Buddy Collette's later. But I knew about his playing. And that was considered one of the good bands, small bands, around L.A.

ISOARDI

Did you hear them?

MORGAN

Yes, yes, I heard them.

ISOARDI

There's a lot of talk about them. People say it was one of the best jazz bands ever to be unrecorded.

MORGAN

Well, I wouldn't doubt that, because-- Well, the personnel in the band-- Britt Woodman was the trombonist, who was a cousin of Mingus. Britt Woodman also had a brother named "Brother" [William] Woodman that is a very fine tenor saxophone player. His son is a friend of mine.

ISOARDI

William Woodman's son?

MORGAN

Yeah, William Woodman's son, William Woodman III, William Baird Woodman III.

ISOARDI

Does he play?

MORGAN

He plays very fine tenor saxophone, yeah.

ISOARDI

We interviewed William last year.

MORGAN

Oh, did you?

ISOARDI

He didn't mention a son, though.

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah. In fact, I just saw his son the last time I was in L.A. In fact, his son and I were in prison together. We played in the prison band together. He's very fine. We played clarinet in the Jefferson High School band. We were together then. But I also played with his father, with Brother Woodman or William Woodman, with Joe Liggins's band, Joe Liggins and the Honey- drippers.

ISOARDI

The Honeydrippers.

MORGAN

Yeah. His dad would fall asleep; William would-- [laughter]

ISOARDI

He warned me before we started. He said, "Now, if all of a sudden I fall asleep, I'm not being rude."

MORGAN

Yeah, he's had that sleeping sickness ever since I was a young kid.

ISOARDI

Yeah, too bad. He said he fell off a jungle gym playing in a park or something, and that's when it started. He started gradually after that losing his memory--you know, at times it would come and go--and then the narcolepsy, the sleeping sickness started developing, and it meant the end of what could have been a great career.

MORGAN

Yeah, because he would do that in the middle of a song.

ISOARDI

Yeah, just go out on stage.

MORGAN

A lot of people thought he was strung out. But no, it was quite untrue. But Lucky Thompson was the tenor player in the band, the main tenor player in that band. Mingus was on bass.

ISOARDI

Who played piano?

MORGAN

Gerald Wiggins, I think.

ISOARDI

He played piano?

MORGAN

I think Gerald Wiggins was on piano, yeah. Bill [William] Douglass was on drums, I think. See, all those guys were from Jordan High School.

ISOARDI

They're the Watts guys.

MORGAN

Yeah, they're the Watts guys. Now Jefferson High School is part of Watts. [laughter] It wasn't before the Watts riots. [laughter] Before the Watts riots, Watts was about two blocks long. [laughter]

ISOARDI

That's right. After the riots it's half of L.A.

MORGAN

Yeah, it went from 103rd Street to 105th [Street], I think, and from Central to-- Something like that.

ISOARDI

Did you enroll in Jeff, then, right away? I guess you got into town--

MORGAN

Oh, no, no, no. Well, when I first came in '47, I only spent the summer. I went back to Milwaukee, and then the following summer of 1948 I was going to go out on the road with a band at fourteen years old.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

MORGAN

Yeah. And my grandmother-- I was rehearsing with the big band-- Well, the bandleader was a cousin of mine, Holder Jones. He had a seventeen-piece band, and it was a great band. It was a wonderful opportunity for me, but it was a short-lived opportunity because my grandmother found a joint in my shirt pocket and called my father up and told him it was time for me to come to California.

ISOARDI

But she was prepared to let you go with the band before that?

MORGAN

No.

ISOARDI

It seems like at fourteen to be touring with a big band, really--

MORGAN

It was the hometown, you know, and my cousin, who was the leader of the band, also taught at the conservatory, and he was considered a very straight person. I don't know whether it would have happened had I not changed my course. But at any rate, I was packed up and sent to California in 1948. And by that time-- I didn't enroll in Jefferson right away. I went to Manual Arts High School. Although I was living in Jefferson's district, my father didn't want me to go to an all-black school. He didn't want me to go to Jefferson particularly, because--

ISOARDI

I thought Jefferson was a bit more mixed, but it wasn't really?

MORGAN

No, no, it was mixed because there were some Mexicans that went there, but I don't think there were any white people, you know, certainly not during the time that I went there.

ISOARDI

No, not back then. The housing covenants--

MORGAN

When busing came in, I don't think they bused them that way. [laughter]

ISOARDI

They'd pick out a couple and send them the other way, and that was the extent of it.

MORGAN

[laughter] "What? Bus me to Jefferson?" No, but--

ISOARDI

Actually, you never know, with Samuel Browne down there, a lot of people probably would have wanted to be bused there. The kids, anyway.

MORGAN

Yeah, well, I didn't know what was happening at Jefferson at the time I was enrolled and sent to Manual, because my father and my stepmother didn't want me to go to Jefferson. And where they were coming from-- Because at the time I came from Milwaukee, I was academically a very, very good student. I was a whiz kid. I was about to graduate at fourteen. I was in the twelfth grade in Milwaukee.

ISOARDI

You're kidding. Fourteen?

MORGAN

In the lower twelfth.

ISOARDI

Jeez. Were you good in sciences and math, things like that?

MORGAN

Not particularly. Not particularly in the sciences or math. Some of the English and spelling--

ISOARDI

It just came easy?

MORGAN

Yeah. But I was also very much into music. But academically-- I think that the schooling system there in Milwaukee was way ahead of California. I mean, it was very similar to a Montessori-type method, where if you could do the work at another grade, a higher grade, they would let you do it rather than have you sit in a class for the next two years--

ISOARDI

And be bored.

MORGAN

Yeah, and be bored to death. Because your age was this, and you should be-- But I had a great deal of trouble when I got to California, I mean a great deal. In fact, I discovered it wasn't hip in California to be smart, particularly at Jefferson. But in Milwaukee it was hip to raise your hand and answer the questions and be looked upon as a good student. That was a factor that was in. You know, it was a different thing.

ISOARDI

So when you got to Jeff you found yourself sort of downplaying that?

MORGAN

Of course. Yeah. But the other part of it was that at Jeff I was able to get more into music. I was able to do more in the course of a day musically being under Mr. Browne. I was able to do more than I might have done in a conservatory.

ISOARDI

What was Sam Browne like?

MORGAN

He was like Charlie Parker or Miles Davis or John Coltrane. He was a demonstrator. He just didn't talk, he demonstrated. He played it. He was in the trenches with the students. He played with them every day. They had the benefit of a heavy mentor who had people coming back to the school all the time that had been students of his and helping out and teaching and playing and sitting next to you in the band and playing with you.

ISOARDI

A wonderful experience for a student.

MORGAN

Sure. Oh, man. And we had a band that was such a crack band that they had trouble keeping us in school. We were always playing concerts at all the other high schools and doing television shows. But it was very earthy. It was certainly a great place for an aspiring jazz musician to be. Because when you

left Jefferson High School, you had been able to get four years of training and of playing in a good big band, and a good background in harmony and piano and writing, if you cared to.

ISOARDI

It sounds like about half of your course work must have been music.

MORGAN

Sure.

ISOARDI

It was? You were taking that many music courses?.

MORGAN

Of course. In my case, too, because I had met all the requirements, I had to sit until I was seventeen years old to graduate. But by the time I was graduated, I was also doomed for some other shit. You know, you could find a lot of mischief to get into when you find out it's not hip to be smart. Which doesn't prove that you're smart; it only proves that you had potential.

ISOARDI

Who were some of your friends at Jefferson? Who are some of the people you met and hung with when you first got here?

MORGAN

Well, Wayne Robinson, a drummer, a very fine drummer; Troy Brown; Robert Collier; Horace Tapscott.

ISOARDI

Do you keep in touch with Horace?

MORGAN

Yeah. Yeah, I just saw Horace last time I was in L.A. In fact, Rosalinda [Kolb] corresponds with Horace and Celia [Cecilia Payne Tapscott]. I hope to see him when I go. I don't know whether I will. We were supposed to do a concert together, the "Central Avenue Revisited," that was cancelled.

ISOARDI

Oh, that's right, the big program with the radio station [KLON], yeah. Too bad.

MORGAN

That's what I'm going down there to do now, I mean to do a thing for KLON. You know, the duo at the Hyatt Newporter [Hotel]? And then I'm doing the thing with Bill Holman's big band at the--

ISOARDI

Oh, that's right. They're advertising that.

MORGAN

At the Hermosa Beach Civic Center. I'm just going to do a guest appearance with them. The deposit was up, and when they canceled out I should have been paid for my time, for the time that was set aside. I mean, that's why the agency gets half the money up front, if someone cancels out. But being that it was--

Well, you don't want to do bad business with anybody. So we kept the deposit and said we were going to work it out-- It worked out better for me. I'm a great deal happier, because I was going to play with a string quartet. The guy who used to write for Stan Kenton--

ISOARDI

Oh, Russo.

MORGAN

Yeah, Bill Russo. I was going to do some of his stuff with a string quartet. And then I was going to play with an all-star band, an all-star group. But this way I'm going to do a duo concert with Kenny Barron--and they're paying him--and then do the guest appearance with--

ISOARDI

Holman.

MORGAN

Yeah. But it's fine to keep the good faith with KLON and everything. I'm glad that things worked out. In fact, I'm going to go down two days early. I'm not playing until the 24th. I'm going down the 22nd, which is Wednesday, and I'm going to stay in L.A. for a couple of days at the Hollywood Roosevelt [Hotel] and rehearse with Bill Holman, make a couple of rehearsals with him, and then move down to the Hyatt Newporter and play the concert with Kenny and then I guess stay down there until I do the thing in Hermosa. But it's great to go back to L.A. to play, particularly to be playing a concert with Kenny Barron, because that's who I want to play with, with Kenny and Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan. You know, one at a time, though. Sure. You can't lose.

ISOARDI

Like that old Benny Carter song, "How Can You Lose"?

MORGAN

Yeah, right, "with the stuff you use." You know, that's true, because the magic is right there. It's at your fingertips. I mean, it's just a matter of how both of you feel. I mean, it's better than playing with someone where the magic is not possible. I mean, when I recorded the album, I'd only played with Hank Jones and Tommy Flanagan before; I'd never played with the other three guys. And then after the record date, I'd only made personal appearances once with Hank Jones and Tommy Flanagan. So when I did the concert with these guys, it was just beautiful, just to be around those guys. And to be able to come from there and do the thing with Kenny Barron--

ISOARDI

Did you play with these guys you mentioned, your friends at Jeff [Jefferson High School], like Horace, back then? Were you guys playing together?

MORGAN

Sure. We were playing every day at the school.

ISOARDI

But I mean outside of school.

MORGAN

No. No, very little. Because outside of school I was playing with Wardell. You know, really, I had a band. When I was in school at Jeff, I had a band that included Wardell and Art Farmer. [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] You're kidding me.

MORGAN

No, because I had all the gigs. I had all the school dances and stuff, all the social clubs.

ISOARDI

How did you have all the socials?

MORGAN

Well, I mean, because I had the band. Because I was working and I was playing concerts and making records and stuff with Wardell and all those guys when I was still in high school.

ISOARDI

So this comes pretty quick. I mean, you're coming to L.A. at fourteen, and by fifteen you've got a band?

MORGAN

Well, not a band per se, but, I mean, I had a band that was Art Farmer's band one day, it was Wardell's band the next, or whoever had-- But we were playing clubs and stuff together. I mean, I was at the Club Alabam while I was still at Jeff, in the house band playing behind Billie Holiday and stuff.

ISOARDI

So you'd play the Alabam at night and then sometimes-- You'd have to do some homework or something. Then you'd have to find some time to sleep and then get up in time to go to Jeff.

MORGAN

Yeah. But, I mean, this was later. This wasn't when I first got there. It wasn't at fourteen or fifteen. This was at seventeen, in my last year. And then, when I graduated from Jeff, I went right into [Los Angeles] City College. By that time I was doing a television show.

ISOARDI

What television show?

MORGAN

The Gerald Wilson-- It was the Joe Adams Show, actually.

ISOARDI

What kind of a show was that?

MORGAN

Joe Adams was the big disc jockey. In fact, now he's Ray Charles's manager. In fact, I graduated from Jeff June 15, on a Friday, and the following Wednesday we opened on a television show with Gerald Wilson's big band. Joe Adams was the announcer, the host of the show. And every week we had a special guest like Nat [King] Cole or Stan Kenton or Sarah Vaughan. Joe Adams had a big radio show at that time. He was a jazz disc jockey, very, very popular. We were on television for thirteen weeks without a sponsor.

ISOARDI

Thirteen weeks without a sponsor? Who carried you? The station carried you for that long?

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Why wasn't there a sponsor?

MORGAN

For the same reason that Nat Cole couldn't get a sponsor when he got his show, which was just a short time after. But I was over there at the television-- I had been on television--

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (JULY 18, 1992)

ISOARDI

You won a Freddy Martin Band of Tomorrow contest?

MORGAN

Yes. Well, I guess I was fifteen years old when this happened.

ISOARDI

Was that your first appearance on TV?

MORGAN

No. Well, let me see. Was it? Actually, it might have been my first appearance on TV. It was about '50-- Yeah. But I'd done-- I'm trying to remember when I did the Kay Kyser show [College of Musical Knowledge]. Whether that was on television or whether it was on radio-- I think it was on radio, though. Freddy Martin was the house band at the Cocoanut Grove--very, very popular in those years. And Merv Griffin was the band singer. They had this television show called The Freddy Martin Show where each week they would have a contest where there were two or three contestants, and the winner of this particular week would win a seat in the Freddy Martin Band of Tomorrow. They were building a band of tomorrow from the contestants that would win each week. The guests were the judges. At the time I was on the show, Stan Kenton was a judge, and Nat Cole was a judge, and I forget who else. But it was a beautiful thing because-- I'm trying to think of the-- Ray Conniff was an arranger for the

television show, and for each contestant they would have him to make special arrangements. And you would perform with Freddy Martin's band. And they had a string section and everything. I remember when I performed, he did a beautiful version of "How High the Moon." He wrote it for me. I played it as a ballad in the beginning with the strings and everything, and then a break, and they would take it up-tempo, you know, and go into "Ornithology." [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] And that's how you won. [laughter]

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

How did you get picked to be a contestant on that? You had to go through a number of screenings and auditions?

MORGAN

Oh, yeah, a number of auditions, sure. I never felt that I should have won, because a young lady that I competed against that night was a masterful violinist. She was much older than I was. I mean, it wasn't just for real young kids. The contest was for people that were going into being professionals. So there were contestants that were thirty years old and stuff. But this lady was from the Eastman School of Music. She played a classical piece. And, you know, what the hell, I played "How High the Moon." But Nat Cole and Stan Kenton-- [laughter] I think the other judge was Ray Noble, who had written "Cherokee," you dig? I wanted to play "Cherokee." [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] That's good. She didn't stand a chance.

MORGAN

Then after that break, you know, when they took it up-tempo-- [laughter]

ISOARDI

All over. [laughter]

MORGAN

But I just kept playing, and with the ballad and the strings [laughter]-- No, you know, shit, I was fifteen years old anyhow.

ISOARDI

So what did it get you? Were you in the Freddy Martin Band of Tomorrow?

MORGAN

A seat in the Freddy Martin Band of Tomorrow. Yeah. Well, the prize was we were to make an album for Capitol Records or RCA [Victor Records], one of the two. I think it was RCA. Yeah, it was RCA. We did a record, and then we were to do a week at the Hollywood Palladium. And I was unable to do the week at the Hollywood Palladium because I was underage.

ISOARDI

The only one in the band underage?

MORGAN

Well, also at that time they didn't have any black bands playing at the Hollywood Palladium either.

ISOARDI

Let alone an integrated band playing.

MORGAN

Right, yeah. Clearly it was because I was black, because my father went before the [California State] Board of Equalization and offered to sit there every night with me. It was one of my first real heavy encounters with racism. I mean, it's different being called a "nigger," something like that, where you see-- I guess the main thing was the impact was so heavy because of the fact that it seemed to hurt everyone else so badly.

ISOARDI

You never had any experiences like that in Milwaukee or any run-ins that affected you like that incident?

MORGAN

No, no, no. In fact, my experiences in Minneapolis and then in Milwaukee, I've always said that they were two of the most liberal cities in the world, as far as I knew of. See, I never knew there was anything such as an all-black school until I went to California. And to win a contest and then be denied the right to receive the full benefits of the contest-- And it became very obvious that I wasn't just underage. It was just the times, you know. Roy Eldridge wasn't able to play there with Gene Krupa until Gene Krupa threatened to cancel out. Willie Smith was able to play there with Harry James's band because he didn't look like he was black. You know, these were things that all came out in-- Of course, this was only a year after they had burned a cross on Nat Cole's front lawn when he bought a house in what is now Hancock Park.

ISOARDI

Right. There was a big case over that.

MORGAN

Sure, yeah. The [Ku Klux] Klan burned a cross on his lawn. Yeah. I mean, it was--

ISOARDI

You know, William Woodman told me that when he grew up in Watts back in the thirties, he said it was very integrated back then. And all of his friends-- And Buddy Collette told me the same thing, everyone was very mixed there. People were mostly working-class and poor, but everything was very mixed. And William said it was only when he went up into L.A. that he discovered racism.

MORGAN

Yeah, I don't doubt. Well, there were so many beautiful things, too, though. I mean, during that time, in later years, when Charlie Parker came to L.A. to play, he was courted like he was a rock star. I mean, really, all of Hollywood turned out. They were all coming out on Central Avenue. That's who really supported jazz, all the movie stars and people-- It was great. It was a great time. Now it's a ghost town. I mean, it was over with before the Watts riots. It's just another era. You know, it's no different than Harlem is right now. I mean, at one time in New York the people would go to Harlem to hear the good music and have a good time. Some of them called it slumming or whatever, but it was a great thing for them and for Harlem. But now it's a different era where people are afraid to go to Harlem. I'm one of them. You might say there's nothing-- I lived in New York for three and a half years, and I've only been to Harlem twice. And each time I was in Harlem, I was there to take some photographs for my album. It's just a different day and age. I don't know whether they're playing any jazz in Harlem. Black people aren't all that much into jazz in this era either. Central Avenue was-- I have mixed feelings about recalling those times.

ISOARDI

Why mixed feelings about recalling them?

MORGAN

Well, I mean, about-- Yeah, recalling them, reliving them. It wasn't all happy. It wasn't all great. There was terrible exploitation taking place. The West Coast jazz scene is a very, very horrible-- You know, it's not good.

ISOARDI

In what way?

MORGAN

I wasn't-- I mean, the people that got credit for the "West Coast sound" and played the "West Coast jazz" weren't the jazz musicians of the West Coast. I mean, the truth wasn't told. The black musicians were strangled in L.A. They were cut off from the-- I was part of a movement when I was graduating from-- Well, I've [been] in the union [American Federation of Musicians] since I was sixteen years old.

ISOARDI

[Local] 767?

MORGAN

Yeah, 767. I was also part of a movement with Gerald Wilson and Buddy Collette to amalgamate the unions [Locals 47 and 767].

ISOARDI

Oh, you participated in that?

MORGAN

Yes, I did, yes. I'm not sure that was good.

ISOARDI

In what way?

MORGAN

Well, there was a place where black musicians gathered and played and created music that they created, and then all of a sudden that place was gone. The base of it was gone. Then the whole jazz scene moved from Central Avenue to Wilshire Boulevard or Sunset Boulevard or wherever. And the black jazz musicians couldn't even-- You know, they starved to death. I mean, they left. They had to go somewhere else to play. Those that prospered in L.A., like Buddy Collette, they went into the studios. They became non-jazz musicians. They played jazz for fun after that, you dig? They would go sit in with somebody when they finished-- Those that could do-- There was just token--

ISOARDI

There weren't that many who got into the studio scene.

MORGAN

No, it was token. In fact, I was doing studio work at seventeen.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

MORGAN

Yeah, you know, studio work per se. I was a student of Buddy Collette's, and I played with him with Gerald Wilson's band, and there were a lot of studio gigs I got through him. But there were also things I got through my father and other people, too, who were doing the background things for movies, just the stand-ins, the sideline, where you're playing in a nightclub scene, but the background has been recorded by some white musicians who made the soundtrack money, and you get the $35 a day for faking to the music. Really, it's the truth. They used the black musicians, but the black musicians didn't record it. I mean, there were great opportunities created, too. It was later that I thought a lot of Central Avenue. But it wasn't-- I didn't share-- I was kind of caught in the middle of a scene where I didn't choose to be a disgruntled, racist, black musician who didn't want to cohabitate with the white musicians, you know, play with them. Like a lot of the guys became bitter, because all of a sudden-- Well, let's speak of one, Art Farmer, who had to stand by and watch Chet Baker get the gig with Charlie Parker. Charlie Parker asked for Art Farmer when he was coming to L.A. to play. The people who had the Tiffany club, they put the band together with Chet Baker playing with Bird, even though it wasn't who Bird wanted. And after the gig with Bird, there was a write-in campaign to Down Beat [magazine], and Chet Baker won the Down Beat poll the same year.

ISOARDI

Because I've heard that story a couple of times, but it's always presented as tending to suggest that Bird really wanted Chet Baker, and Chet Baker won--

MORGAN

No, that's bullshit. Bird had never heard Chet Baker.

ISOARDI

Amazing.

MORGAN

It doesn't have anything to do with Chet's talent. Chet hadn't been able to produce when he got there. But, I mean, he was out of Gerry Mulligan. And then he went into the thing with Mulligan right after that. I mean, he was good, but it wasn't-- Because I was right there with Bird. I was right there with him every night. I mean, after hours we went and played. We went and jammed with Art Farmer, you know, went and played the sessions. We went to Hollywood parties and everything and played all night. Sometimes Chet would be there, but then shortly after Art Farmer went-- He left to go with Lionel Hampton. In fact, I was in the band at the same time, and I chose not to go. And poor Chet, I don't think it did him a lot of good, because he was never able to get right with himself. I mean, Chet and I have talked about it, because he knew that I knew. He was very troubled all of his life.

ISOARDI

Because of that?

MORGAN

I don't know if it was just-- I won't say it was just because--

ISOARDI

One among many things with Chet Baker.

MORGAN

But I'm saying-- I mean, there were some alto players around L.A., Art Pepper and those guys, they couldn't get nothing down with the Gene Cravenses and the Sonny Crisses and--

ISOARDI

God, Criss was a great player.

MORGAN

You know, Sonny Criss blew his brains out.

ISOARDI

I heard a story that he was developing cancer or something.

MORGAN

Well, yeah. But he developed a lot of things. He developed alcoholism, an extreme case of alcoholism. He couldn't get a record contract. He recorded, but not as a jazz saxophonist. He had to record at Imperial [Records] and play to some of the pop--

ISOARDI

R and B [rhythm and blues] background music.

MORGAN

Exactly. You know, Mingus became a very bitter person. I mean, the "West Coast sound"-- I mean, I was caught up in it, but I played-- I had an opportunity to maybe do something about this from the other end, but I was too stupid and shortsighted and too insecure within myself to stand up and be counted.

ISOARDI

Well, you were also pretty young, though, too, weren't you?

MORGAN

Well, but I'm saying when I had an opportunity to do it, I started going to prison when I started to be old enough to stand for something. I got strung out at seventeen years old. I mean, Charlie Parker never made over $1,000 a week in his life, if he made that much. But when Bird died, Paul Desmond was making--

ISOARDI

They were just looking for groups like that, you know, white, cold sounds. They put them on the cover of Time magazine.

MORGAN

Sure, yeah. I was watching Dave Brubeck the other night with the Boston Pops Orchestra. [laughter] It was pathetic. But that's the way of the world. But I'm saying that Central Avenue was no different than New York. Bud Powell died so bitter. And George Shearing was playing half of his solos, you know. The story has it that he walked into Birdland and slapped George Shearing, just slapped him to say, "How dare you?" I mean, just before Charlie Parker died he was barred from Birdland. I'm not saying that he was living right either, but I'm just saying that there's a lot of pain. There was a lot of pain that goes with the Central Avenue story. There's a lot of pain that still goes with the Central Avenue story. It's very painful. I mean, I find it a little difficult to glorify Central Avenue, because the only glory that seems to be able to come to it is during the time when people were slumming. I mean, the Central Avenues and the Harlems of this world, they're not nice places to live in.

ISOARDI

But they produced such creativity. I mean, if there's glory, it seems like that's where it's at.

MORGAN

Well, they don't produce creativity. Creativity comes out of that-- Don't say they produce it. It is by accident; it's not by design. Not a great deal of good on a large scale comes out of those situations. I mean, it was not nearly as nice to live around Central Avenue as it was to go just to hear the music. And even then, the truth is that even the people that live in those neighborhoods weren't able to afford-- They were rarely able to afford to hear their own music.

ISOARDI

Now, I guess the economy of the clubs, about half of it or more was white patronage.

MORGAN

Shit, at least 60 percent of it, maybe more. The prices certainly weren't geared to the people of the local community. You know, $10 and two-drink minimums. It was stickup prices. For the most part, thank God that you could stand outside the club and hear it. And thank God for the fact that 95 percent of the clubs were dives, and they had to open the door or open a window or something to get some air in there so some of the smoke could-- And people in the community were able to hear the music and grow from it. But there's great stuff that came out of there. Well, there's always great stuff that comes out of here, but unfortunately so much of it comes out of human misery all over the world. It's just not Central Avenue or Harlem; it's the cry of people that are hurting all over the world. And I guess that produces-- Out of pain comes beauty.

ISOARDI

When you said you had mixed feelings about the amalgamation of the unions, it reminded me of a line I think Ernie Andrews said in that documentary on him [Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue]. He had been talking about amalgamating and breaking down the housing covenants so people could move into other areas. He said, "Well, we got what we wanted, but we lost what we loved." Because other people have had mixed feelings looking back at the amalgamation and said that in [Local] 767 at least there was more of a social feel, people had a place to go, and you had people who understood your problems and looked out for you. And when the amalgamation came, it was all taken away. It was gone.

MORGAN

Oh, sure, yeah. I mean, you know, it's just-- I don't know. I think we can't blame it on the amalgamation either, because there were a lot of benefits that came out of it. I mean, there are a lot of benefits that I've received. I received a lot of benefits from it.

ISOARDI

It just seems to me the way the system is, when you can achieve a political equality-- You know, you can integrate two unions, but the way the system is, things don't change that much. Even though you've got it down on paper, that isn't enough to change people's hearts and change the society.

MORGAN

Sure, yeah. Well, I watched the jazz scene in L.A. become nonexistent. I mean, at least when Central Avenue was going on there was a real jazz scene, there was a California product, the real California product, see. Because some of the

greatest records that Bird made were right here in California with California rhythm sections and stuff.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. Those Dial [Records] sessions.

MORGAN

Yeah. Exactly, with Roy Porter and some of those-- But it shifted around, and the jazz that was being played out here became Shorty Rogers and Art Pepper. And I, as a person coming up, who was definitely not into that, it had an effect on me. The effect that it had on me was adverse, because I allowed myself to go another way, a destructive way. But, I mean, one thing I don't want to appear to be is bitter, because that's not exactly-- I mean, it's just a matter of what's coming out in talking about it. Because today my life is-- I've gone on to look for the beauty, to look for the similarities rather than the differences, and to understand that the beauty, it has to be inside of me. I can look for the beauty or I can look for the ugliness, and my life today is looking for the beauty of it. Central Avenue was a great lesson. I think that-- Well, I just don't feel that the nightclubs are where the music is supposed to be, anyhow.

ISOARDI

Concert halls.

MORGAN

Yes. With great nine-foot concert grand [piano]s, you know, Steinways that have just been tuned and will be tuned immediately if you need it to be tuned.

ISOARDI

Not a piano with ten keys missing.

MORGAN

Exactly, yeah, yeah. And not somebody getting drunker and drunker and drunker, getting less sensitive to the people you play for. You shouldn't have to play somewhere where it's a threat to your life just to go to work. The music is elegant. It deserves the best listening you can possibly give to it. It requires rapt attention. This is why people don't want to deal with jazz, because it requires you to think. You're not going to turn on automatic pilot and listen to Bird. [laughter] You know, Charlie Parker died feeling very poorly about himself. His self-esteem was very low. Your self-esteem has to be very low to be an addict. You get up every morning and shoot heroin into your veins. I didn't realize until I presented myself to him in the club as somebody who was now ready to really be with him, because I was using since the last time he saw me.

ISOARDI

Oh, you sort of proudly told him that, thinking--?

MORGAN

Yeah. And he said, "I heard about it, damn fool. Stupid motherfucker. You're the one person I thought would have had sense enough to--" He said, "I made

sure that you saw it all your life, what it was doing to me. I didn't try to hide it from you. Fuck, you think I'm going to be happy because another brilliant talent has bit the dust, is about to die. It's all over." And he was right. But all that changed. In the next breath, when I told him, "What am I going to do with all this dope that I brought--?" [laughter] What?

ISOARDI

He joined in.

MORGAN

Of course.

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MORGAN

Yeah, when I was working at the Club Alabam, '51, '52, or whatever--I'm not sure of the exact years--it was dying. In fact, the Club Alabam was the only thing happening on Central [Avenue] at that time, I think.

ISOARDI

Why was it happening? Why was the scene dying?

MORGAN

Well, the times were different. They were changing. I mean, Central Avenue no longer became an attractive place to go. Jazz went to college, I guess you might say. [laughter]

ISOARDI

You're thinking of [Dave] Brubeck again? [laughter]

MORGAN

Yeah. [laughter] Jazz went to college. It wasn't being played by black people, so there was no need to go to Central Avenue. Really, jazz, as most people knew it, became "Take Five."

ISOARDI

This is true, yeah.

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah, sure.

ISOARDI

Well, there was such hype around that group.

MORGAN

Yeah, exactly.

ISOARDI

Although one of the ironies I always think of is that somebody like Art Pepper, who at eighteen was down on Central Avenue playing in Lee Young's band--That's where his roots were.

MORGAN

Sure, yeah. Sure.

ISOARDI

It wasn't in this other stuff he was playing in the early fifties.

MORGAN

No. Because he got caught up in that, too. I mean, Art and I talked about it. We talk about it at length. We were in prison together. We'd always been friends. And he knew more about Central Avenue than I did. I was talking to him about it because he was exposed to it as an adult, and I wasn't.

ISOARDI

I think in his autobiography [Straight Life: The Story of Art Pepper] he says even as a teenager every night he was down on Central. That's where he went.

MORGAN

Yeah, I'm saying he had gone from a teenager to adulthood, grew up, going down to Central Avenue to play. It was on the way out when I moved to California in '48. The jazz clubs became the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach, Shelly's Manne Hole, The Haig, where Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan first-- That was far away from Central Avenue. And for the most part, it became far away from Central Avenue as far as a local jazz musician, a black local jazz musician playing in one of the clubs. The music scene changed. Everything changes. That's [why], like I say, Central Avenue wasn't my idea of a good thing anyhow. I mean, it produced some nice talent and everything, but it also fucked up a whole lot of people, because everybody was trying to out-junkie Charlie Parker. I mean, this is what Bird was so hurt about, all the people that went to drugs because they thought, like I did, this is what he would want us to do, you dig?

ISOARDI

Was there a time you noticed when stuff like heroin was sort of coming into Central? Was there a time when all of a sudden it seemed more prominent than before? Or had it pretty much, as far as you remember, always been around?

MORGAN

Well, I don't know. It was always-- Heroin and those things have always been in the black neighborhoods. They've always been on the Central Avenues or the streets of Harlem. I mean, this is part of the designed destruc-tion. It becomes a big problem when it goes across the other side of the tracks, when the senators' sons and things start-- That's the fact of life, you know. But it doesn't mean that the people that do it in the neighborhoods are any less guilty than those that put it there, because it takes cooperation. It's just like a fact of life that some of the biggest slave traders were black and were the tribal leaders in Africa who were providing the slaves from other tribes to the slave traders that brought them over here. It took the collusion or cooperation of evil people. You know, I have no problem with the Chet Bakers or the Dave Brubecks. I think that Dave

Brubeck was a smart motherfucker. I would love to have that much intelligence to seize the time and get in on the ground floor of something. I'm saying I have a problem with someone like myself who inflicts misery upon yourself because you're too damn lazy to find a way for yourself. It's easier to say, "Look what you made me do" than to get up off your ass and say, "Central Avenue was dead. I don't give a fuck about Central Avenue because it was all nightclubs." I'm not looking for Central Avenue today. That's what I'm saying. I only mean that, for me, it didn't represent where I felt the music deserved to be played at. I've never felt like it belonged in the Downbeat [Club] or the Club Alabam, where the main feature at the club wasn't Charlie Parker, it was whiskey. That's who was starring there, was more distortion and disfigurement and insensitivity. How in the fuck is somebody going to be able to really become more sensitive to the music when you've got a minimum of drinks that they have to comply with to be able to hear the music. And then they've got to have a cash register and interruptions by the waitress and people blowing smoke at you and yelling. Ain't nobody hearing the music. And not one club that was on Central Avenue had an in-tune piano. Not one motherfucking club had a piano that was in tune, you dig, or worthy of anybody playing.

ISOARDI

Gerry [Gerald] Wiggins told me a story. He was playing in the Turban Room one night.

MORGAN

The Turban Room, yeah.

ISOARDI

He said the piano was so bad, he said some nights half a dozen keys weren't working. And he said he was just going through hell one night, and [Art] Tatum showed up, was sitting in the audience, and Gerry said-- They took a break. He went over and started complaining to Tatum, and Tatum said, "Oh, yeah? Let me try it." He goes over there, and Gerry said he just played a concert. He just found a way of playing around all the keys. [laughter]

MORGAN

Exactly. You found a way to avoid all the broken keys. Yeah.

ISOARDI

Gerry said that it was like that a lot with the pianos.

MORGAN

Sure, sure. I mean, that's the history of jazz music in the nightclubs. Charlie Parker told me that it broke his heart, that he felt the only time he was being showcased properly was when he was doing the thing with the strings.

ISOARDI

Yeah, and they took those away from him.

MORGAN

That's what he said. When they took those away from him, "It killed me." He started to die. He said he didn't even want to live. Because he saw what it really was. That's what he felt. They didn't want Charlie Parker to be playing with strings all over the world.

ISOARDI

He knew his own talent, I guess, that he deserved it, as well.

MORGAN

It's not the way of the world, but yet it is. But yet it is. I sit here an example of a person turning their life around and getting all the help in the world from the universe.

ISOARDI

They probably have concert halls in Japan, too. You won't have clubs.

MORGAN

Sure. I don't seek to play clubs right here. I don't play clubs now hardly. I'm going to play the amphitheater in Huntington Beach with Kenny Barron. I understand it's a beautiful amphitheater right in the hotel, in the Hyatt Newporter [Hotel]. This is what they just told me at KLON [radio station]. And at the Civic Center in Hermosa Beach. I just came from playing the biggest concert hall at the Montreal Jazz Festival, the biggest hall. I like what's happening. So there's a great world out here that will-- Especially if you're doing something that's for the good of the universe, I think you get all the help in the world from the universe.

ISOARDI

How about some of the--? Maybe you could talk a little bit about-- I mean, you mentioned a lot of names of people down on the avenue. Maybe if you have any stories or remembrances of some people in particular. Or even people maybe who weren't musicians that stick out in your mind from Central Avenue.

MORGAN

Well, to me my most beautiful memories of Central Avenue were the times that I spent playing with Billie Holiday at the Club Alabam, the six nights a week that I was able to hear her every day for a few months, because she was the headline attraction. I played with her during part of her show, because they added the horns on some of the arrangements. But she had her own trio. Hearing her every night-- And the Sunday afternoon that I spent backing up Josephine Baker at the Club Alabam doing a charity benefit for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] right after she had closed at the Paramount Theatre downtown. The trip she made, the triumphant tour she made of the United States.

ISOARDI

Do you remember anything in particular about either of them?

MORGAN

Yeah, they were just the top of the line. They just gave you that feeling that you were-- Just to be a part of a show with them was the epitome of the art within itself. I look at the nights that I spent listening to Redd Foxx and Slappy White, who were two comedians, that opened the show. You know, all the people that came to the jam sessions. I can recall T-Bone Walker just mesmerizing an audience, making you just feel cold chills running down your back. Or Billie Holiday saying just two words, "my man," like it was "My man don't love me," whatever she was going to say about "my man." It wasn't just a singer; it wasn't just a singer at all. Thank God for Central Avenue, for being there, so that people could do what they do. I remember Roy Porter rehearsing his big band just off of Central Avenue and Vernon [Avenue] with Eric Dolphy in the band, Art Farmer, too, you know. I wasn't allowed to play in the band.

ISOARDI

You weren't allowed?

MORGAN

No.

ISOARDI

Why weren't you allowed?

MORGAN

Well, I mean, I was in school. And they were doing the things that my father didn't--wisely-- I mean, I went to their rehearsals, but I wasn't allowed to be a part of the band and hang out with them on a daily basis. I mean, I was too young and I wasn't ready for that. It was dangerous. It was great music, very little business. Hopefully, there's a better way. With a band with that much talent, it seems like there should be some way where someone should step in and say, "Well, art is art, and this should be heard by everybody in the world," rather than the way things come out sometimes. But there's a way to do things, too, because there are different degrees of talent and different levels of intelligence, where maybe another bandleader could have taken that band and been like Dizzy Gillespie. You know, put some glitz to it or whatever and make it successful rather than just being a group of swinging junkies. I mean, because everybody was trying to-- I think the only clean person in the band was Eric. I think the only person who didn't use was Eric.

ISOARDI

Did you know him well?

MORGAN

Not really. I knew him well, yeah, you could say well. I knew him for a long time. Eric was a few years older than I was, and I never really felt what Eric was-- I mean, Eric never really struck me here [pounds on heart] as a-- I respected him as a saxophonist, as a musician, but I never really looked upon him as a real jazz saxophone player.

ISOARDI

Really? Because of the kind of things he was trying?

MORGAN

No, not because of what he was doing. I mean, I'm just talking about what I felt. I didn't feel it. If it doesn't hit me here-- That's why I prefaced it by saying "I never felt." That doesn't mean that he's not. I'm just saying that I felt that the Eric that I heard around L.A. was not the Eric that we heard later on. That after he became a world traveler, after his exposure to John Coltrane and Archie Shepp in New York, this wasn't the Eric that I heard around L.A. In fact, when Eric was with Roy Porter's band, Eric never played a solo. They had alto [saxophone] players sitting next to him that would kick his ass. Eric wouldn't dare. There was a cat named "Sweetpea" [Leroy Robinson].

ISOARDI

Was he primarily a reader, then?

MORGAN

Eric was a reader.

ISOARDI

That was it.

MORGAN

That's what Eric was was a reader.

ISOARDI

Oh, boy, did he change.

MORGAN

Did he? [laughter]

ISOARDI

Oh! [laughter]

MORGAN

I mean, seriously, at the time I heard Eric, I think Eric was just trying to get away from Bird. But Eric was not primarily a soloist, I mean a jazz soloist. Eric to me was more of-- I've always felt that the Eric that I knew around L.A. would eventually probably have been a studio musician or something. His strength was in doubling, playing alto and bass clarinet and flute and being able to read anything that was written. But as far as playing some bebop-- I mean, Sweetpea--Leroy Robinson--Sweetpea, was the best, as far as I'm concerned. He was personally my favorite of all the alto saxophone players in L.A., including Sonny Criss.

ISOARDI

Really? Better than Sonny Criss?

MORGAN

Yes. Sweetpea.

ISOARDI

You know, I know the name. I've heard people mention him, but that's about it. What happened to him? He didn't go on to a full jazz career?

MORGAN

No, his wife blew his brains out because he wanted to quit his job at the steel mill.

ISOARDI

To play music?

MORGAN

Well, you know, I mean, whatever. He never enjoyed the life of a working musician, a jazz musician.

ISOARDI

What a loss.

MORGAN

Sure. But it's just one of many. There was a cat named Gene Cravens who stayed in and out of the nuthouse. I don't know whether he was in the same [one] as Charlie Parker, Camarillo [State Hospital]. You know, a lot of us went in and out of the nuthouses behind Bird and Camarillo. [laughter] But I came to Central Avenue at a time when Central Avenue was playing out. It was playing out, and for whatever reason I don't really know. And my exposure to it was limited because I was so young.

ISOARDI

Did you notice, even though you were young, what relations were like between, say, Central Avenue and city hall or the cops? Were they sort of down there all the time, on your back all the time? Or did they just sort of ignore it?

MORGAN

No, I mean-- There's nothing-- Anyplace where jazz is played and movie stars are going to be going down there and races are mixing, there's going to be heat. One of the things that helped kill Central Avenue was the police department. I mean, it was discouraged.

ISOARDI

So they were down there harassing pretty regularly.

MORGAN

Sure, of course. I mean, it's the way of the world, man. Any black neighborhood in the world is full of heat. What do they call it, a high-crime area? [laughter] I mean, it's funny, but it isn't.

ISOARDI

That's one of the things a lot of people talk about was the cops down there harassing people.

MORGAN

Sure. Well, they still do it. Nothing has changed. It's just gotten worse. I mean, I look at it and say, "Oh, shit." Many years ago I didn't like to see-- I mean, I've

never dug nightclubs and jazz. But we could say Central Avenue produced, but I don't know what it produces now. I rode up and down Central Avenue many a time looking for the Downbeat, trying to find those lost days.

ISOARDI

Oh, you mean recently?

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

There's not much left.

MORGAN

One time I went back to L.A., and some magazine or something was driving me up and down Central Avenue. I was trying to remember whether it was for--

ISOARDI

The big article? You know, I've got an article where you talk about, I think, Central. It was in Jazz Times . Patricia Willard?

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah, but I don't think Patricia and I talked. No, but this was-- Oh, wow. Someone was taking me-- I went to L.A. one time, I think it was after we moved from-- It wasn't People magazine. KOLB: The L.A. Style thing?

MORGAN

Yes. It was L.A. Style. That's right. Yeah. Because they had someone to drive. I was pointing out-- They wanted me to point out--

ISOARDI

Where everything was?

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

There wasn't much left to point out.

MORGAN

No, I know when it was. It was when Art Farmer and I-- Well, that was the L.A. Style during that time, wasn't it?

ISOARDI

Oh, for the concert, the big "Central Avenue Revisited" thing.

MORGAN

Yeah. Someone from one of the newspapers or something was driving me down Central Avenue looking for--

ISOARDI

I think the Dunbar [Hotel] is there. Not much else.

MORGAN

In fact, it depressed me. It was depressing.

ISOARDI

Yeah. When I talked to Art Farmer, that morning he had gone for a ride just to recall things. He drove up and down Central, and he said, "I couldn't believe it. I had to ask myself, 'Was my youth an illusion? Did it really happen?'" Because there was no evidence that what he remembered was ever there.

MORGAN

Well, this is why to me Central Avenue was very-- I guess it was like an illusion to me, too, because out of all the great music that I heard there, I see so little evidence of that activity, I mean, so little documentation.

ISOARDI

Yeah, very little.

MORGAN

I mean, "West Coast jazz," the connotation is not even that, you know. I don't know. I think that-- I think in some ways I'm kind of at a loss discussing Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

In the sense that you came in at the end of it?

MORGAN

Yeah. And at this point in my life, it just seems way, way, way, way back there.

ISOARDI

I interviewed one guy, a piano player named Fletcher Smith.

MORGAN

Yeah, I knew Fletcher. Is he still around?

ISOARDI

He's still around. He's living-- Well, he keeps two places. His wife has a-- I think he's got a trailer, a mobile home or something, out in Long Beach, and then he keeps another place in Compton. It's kind of a retirement home, but he uses it as an office and as a place to get away and write. And that's where I met him.

MORGAN

Yeah, I played with Fletcher Smith many times.

ISOARDI

It was fun talking to somebody who referred to-- He said, "Well, who have you interviewed?" So I said, "Well, Buddy [Collette] and Gerry Wiggins." "Oh, all those kids? You're just talking to kids! They don't know anything!" [laughter] It was funny. And he said, "Central Avenue died--" I think it was '39 he said, or something like that. [laughter] He said it was never the same when they shut down the town. At two o'clock everybody had to shut down. He said, "It was never the same after that." [laughter]

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah. Wow. Well, he should know. Fletcher Smith. Man, he must be a hundred years old.

ISOARDI

I think he said he was born in 1913, so he's getting up there. What really blew me away was when he told me he was raised by his grandfather who had fought in the Civil War. [laughter]

MORGAN

Wow. Raised by his grandfather who fought in the Civil War, wow. The Civil War.

ISOARDI

Yeah, not World War I.

MORGAN

The Civil War. Damn. Fletcher Smith.

ISOARDI

But he's still going strong. He's got a problem with emphysema. But other than that, he still plays. He's got an enormous book for his big band.

MORGAN

Is that right?

ISOARDI

He's still out there.

MORGAN

Did you ever interview a guy named Lorenzo Flennoy?

ISOARDI

No, no, I don't know if he's still alive.

MORGAN

Yeah, I'm not sure he is either. He was the leader of the house band.

ISOARDI

Oh, when you played at the--

MORGAN

When I played at the Club Alabam.

ISOARDI

His name comes up a lot. He was, I guess, a mainstay down there.

MORGAN

See, Clora Bryant and I were in the house band. In fact, she used to drive me to work and back home every night. I mean, I was her little brother.

ISOARDI

She's a pistol.

MORGAN

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Interviewing her was great. You really got a different view.

MORGAN

Yeah, she's called us-- She wrote a letter to [Mikhail] Gorbachev--

ISOARDI

And it worked! [laughter]

MORGAN

Yeah.

ISOARDI

She told me she also sent a letter to South Africa. Yeah. She said when the times change, she's going to be the first American jazz musician to tour.

MORGAN

She probably will be. Yeah, she still calls me-- Last time I saw her, she sat right in front of the bandstand at Catalina's [Catalina Bar and Grill] when I was playing and talked loud as a motherfucker the whole time: "Yeah, I knew that boy when--" [laughter] And I'm trying to play a tender ballad. I wanted to strangle her. [laughter] Just out of respect-- [laughter] No, she's great.

ISOARDI

This is kind of a detail thing, but do you remember any of the people who ran these clubs, who owned them and ran them?

MORGAN

No. Only the guy, Joe Morris, that ran the Club Alabam, owned the Club Alabam.

ISOARDI

What kind of guy was he?

MORGAN

Very shifty. A very, very shifty guy. In fact, he later went to prison or something for being involved in a banking scandal. But there again, I was so young. I mean, I knew some of the names of some of the people, like "Black Dot" [Elihu] McGhee, who my father [Stanley Morgan] bought the Casablanca from. Or [Curtis] Lovejoy, who owned the after-hours spot [Lovejoy's] down on Vernon and Central where Cee Pee Johnson was supposed to have kicked Ginger Rogers down the stairs or something.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

MORGAN

Yeah. He was a big-time bandleader at that time. And Ginger Rogers was hanging out-- When I first came to California, I saw Ava Gardner hanging out with Dizzy Gillespie at Billy Berg's. And I was mad at Diz for a long time, because, I mean, I was in love with her from the movies. [laughter]

ISOARDI

And Diz wouldn't introduce you?

MORGAN

No, he introduced me. But, I mean, I was just a baby. I just imagined whatever he was doing with her he shouldn't have been doing. She was a princess. [laughter]. But I don't know. I'm kind of tired.

ISOARDI

Well, we've covered I guess pretty much all of it. Maybe-- I don't know. Do you have any final thoughts or comments about--?

MORGAN

Yeah, I have some final thoughts. Please don't let my cynicism about the socioeconomic or the sociological side take away from the fact that Central Avenue was, in its heyday, probably one of the greatest things that L.A. had going for it. But unfortunately it helped to destroy me. I'm trying to find a better way to live and then grow from the past. To me, Central Avenue was a no-no because of where I came from. If I had been strong enough to come through Central Avenue with my values intact and go on about the business of life like I could now, it would be a different thing. I think Central Avenue wasn't good for me or wasn't good for many, many people like me. I don't think it was good for Charlie Parker. Because I think if it had been, then Central Avenue today would show something-- I mean, I think it would have formed a great basis for a community to grow from. I think that anything that is-- For an area to be built primarily and known primarily because of the nightlife, we have to kind of take a look at it, because the nightlife does bad things to-- You know, the drugs and alcohol and the cigarettes and the prostitution and the muggings and the police. There are a lot of dead people that are not alive today because they ventured into Central Avenue to try to hear some bebop and got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because there were all kinds of hustlers and stuff on the fringes of that, you dig, graft in the police department, and racism because of mixing of the races. And I think that those kind of things, those kind of environments are not good for an aspiring musician to have to go there to get his education. I think that, thank God, I can be part of making the world a better place, making a new Central Avenue or something. Someday I hope to have enough credibility so that I can build a school on Central Avenue or something or to do something-- I'm very thankful, grateful now, that I would even be considered for doing an oral history on Central Avenue because I have become somebody-- That I would have enough stature so that what I would have to say about Central Avenue would hold some merit. But there's got to be a better way to live. There has to be a better way to grow. I think that the lesson I want to help to give to the world is that Central Avenues are fine, but the Downbeat or the Last Word [Cafe] shouldn't be the only place that the music is heard, and that the two shouldn't go together--the nightlife and the pimps and the hustlers and the drugs are not the place where the music should hold forth at. I think

there are too many casualties that come out of that. For one thing, I don't think it makes for good musicianship.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (JUNE 5, 1993)

ISOARDI

It's been a while, Frank, almost a year.

MORGAN

Yes, it has. I didn't realize it had been that long until I realized that you hadn't been up to this place since we moved to Placitas [New Mexico].

ISOARDI

So why don't we cover some things that we didn't get to last time and move on to others. First thing, how about going back to your training and some of the teachers you had and talking about them and what they gave you.

MORGAN

Well, I always considered my father [Stanley Morgan]--although he's a guitarist--as my primary teacher. Although I haven't talked about it in terms so much of him being my teacher. Because we spent many hours playing together, just the two of us, playing Charlie Parker tunes, and him learning the chord changes off the records, off of Bird's records, as I would learn the solos, and then helping me to put them in context. But that was just one phase of it. I mean, when I came to California in 1948 to live, I was fourteen years old. This was approximately June of 1948. It would be toward the end because summer school had just ended in Milwaukee, I guess, in mid-June. My father first put me in touch with Benny Carter. I wanted to study with Benny Carter.

ISOARDI

Why Benny Carter?

MORGAN

Well, because I knew of his work. I've always been one to think in terms of a teacher as one who is a demonstrator. To me, the best saxophone teacher would be the one that would play the best. And that struck me-- Not who had the most students, you dig? But that isn't always-- Life has taught me that there are no hard rules to that either. But that's why-- You know, Benny Carter to me was able to demonstrate closer to what I wanted. Benny Carter lived here, and Charlie Parker didn't live here. I mean, if I could have gotten Charlie Parker-- Well, he was my teacher, but in absentia. But I knew that I wanted to study with someone that could help give me the tools to play like I wanted to play, to give me the technique as a means to an end, the technique to be able to take over so that my heart and my ideals could flow without the fear of a lack of technique. You know, I think that as an instrumentalist, a person who plays an instrument or does anything as a professional, you must have the training in the

technical aspects of whatever instrument, whether it be a truck or a saxophone or what, so that you can drive it where you want it to go. So I think that if you're playing-- If you're trying to create, and your technique is not up to where-- If you're still having basic technical problems, whatever you're trying to create is going to be affected by your lack of technique. You're certainly not going to try things that someone who has a greater technique would try because I think the mind will say, "Oh, no, you'd better not try that. You know you're not going to be able to play that." [laughter] So you go to a secondary thought, which is not your original creative thought. So I'm trying to get to that. It's still a work in progress, where I'm trying to get, and it always will be--I understand that now--so that I can get past the technique and past the, "No, you'd better not try that," so that I can go for what I feel at the first point. That first heartfelt idea that you have, I want to be able to go for it.

ISOARDI

So you don't even think about technique, right? It's like speaking. You don't have to think about putting a sentence together; it just comes out.

MORGAN

Well, that's what I've been trying to do. That's the goal. But you never get enough technique, because it isn't just technique. It's daring, and it's being willing to not edit what you do. If we're talking to someone, if you and I are talking, basically whatever I say, I'm going to kind of edit it before I kind of-- I mean, there's some editing going on. Well, I don't want to really edit what comes out of my horn. I want to try to get past that editing point, because I think when you edit you deal with all your fears and all of your lack-ofs and all the things that you're afraid to try and afraid to say, afraid to feel. But I think that there's an underlying honesty in bebop, in jazz, that I'm trying to get to, and it requires non-editing, you dig? It requires that you place yourself-- This is why I do duos today, just me and a piano player, because I'm trying to get that communication. It goes beyond what I'm trying to do on my horn because it goes in conjunction with me working with another human being and being concerned about what they're trying to do. But I'm trying to pick the human beings that I play with where we allow each other to deal with that foxhole honesty, where we just play what we feel, with an eye to the person we're playing with, too, you know, just like you would do hopefully if you were making love with someone. You care about them, so they're in it with you. You know, it takes the two to tango. So I'm doing the duos because the one-on-one communication is important with me. I mean, that's in conjunction with working on communication with yourself.

ISOARDI

Have you done any solos or thought about doing--?

MORGAN

Well, that doesn't really interest me.

ISOARDI

Not at all?

MORGAN

No. That's an ego trip. See, that's not jazz to me, you dig? I don't really feel that I can play jazz by myself. I think the jazz that I'm talking about takes interaction. It's really the interaction between people. So it really takes a jazz artist to teach another jazz artist, I think. I mean, after you get past the point of technique, you go to the teachers. You know, the shit that Wynton [Marsalis] is going through, I mean the chops and everything. You know, he's got great chops, and now he's learning to play jazz, you dig?

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you think earlier on he wasn't as much of a jazz player?

MORGAN

Well, his training was not-- He's just now going to school as a jazz musician. The jazz school is not at Berklee [College of Music]. It's at the Village Vanguard or Bradley's or somebody's house where people are playing, where it's happening. It's not a head thing.

ISOARDI

I've been to Catalina's [Catalina Bar and Grill] some nights, and some people have come through, and they're just out of Berklee, and it sounds like you're sitting in a classroom and they're running exercises for you.

MORGAN

Well, what do you expect them to do? What can they do? What could they do until you start getting a jazz education? I think that Wynton had the right idea: bypass Berklee, go to Juilliard [School]. If you want to play trumpet, learn to play classical trumpet. Get the greatest chops you can get, you know, the greatest focus on technique and learning that instrument, and then you transform that into the study-- Then you go into the study of jazz and self-development and self-expression. You have the chops to do that. That's why he's able to excel so well, because he could play the horn better than almost any other trumpet player around.

ISOARDI

Yeah, technically ferocious.

MORGAN

Technically ferocious, yes. And he's got a great foundation for going further, you dig? Because he's got the great guidance of his father Ellis Marsalis. He's got the fine example that took place right in his home to reinforce what he learned in the school. So the teachers must be reinforced in the home. But you don't get the jazz education at Berklee or Juilliard. See, the true measure of a jazz musician is not how well you solo, it's how well you play with others. You

ain't playing no jazz by yourself. I can do all the solo concerts in the world, and to me it don't mean shit if I can't turn right around and do better than that playing with someone else.

ISOARDI

You know, that's almost a revolutionary idea in a sense, because the emphasis on solos has been so important.

MORGAN

Well, that's a shame. That's a shame, because we're not talking about jazz, we're talking about soloing. And that's right from Bird. The measure of a jazz musician is not how well you solo, because you ain't going to sound like shit anyhow if your rhythm section ain't helping you. If they're playing against you, you're not going to sound very good. So you're not soloing anyhow, even when you think you're soloing. But just getting up on the stage and doing a solo saxophone concert to me is not-- I mean, I love-- One of the greatest years I've ever played in my life was like that. But I'm not interested in getting up in front of the people and trying to demonstrate how good a saxophone player I am. I want them to feel the communication, and I want them to become a part of that. This is what I see. And this is what is tragic about what Central Avenue has become to me. It went from this beautiful training ground and source of community pride and everything to something that I no longer relate to, because for all the beautiful music that happened there, something went wrong, because Central Avenue didn't flourish from that point. The community didn't blossom because of that. But that's the way it is when you're not dealing with self-determination or the ability to make your own self-rule, the ability to expand your own communities. If someone else has to allow you to better your own community, then you're up for grabs to their whim or caprice. But a source of racial pride or whatever, ethnic pride, is lost.

ISOARDI

Yeah, definitely.

MORGAN

But, you see, it's not by accident, because, at the same time, this happened all over. Not just to communities, but I mean the lack of awareness, the lack of-- Why is it the average young black person will tell you, "I don't like jazz"? Something is wrong. Something is wrong.

ISOARDI

Or won't even know what it is.

MORGAN

Exactly. Or doesn't even try to find out anything about it. Because you need to find out something about yourself, because it requires that you know who you are. See, jazz is not the proper thing for the kind of rule that doesn't want you to

think. Jazz is not going to be at the top of your menu. Jazz requires that you think. It teaches you to think. It forces you to think.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it's work. It takes some commitment on the part of the listener.

MORGAN

Exactly. It's a heavy endeavor. And you talk about enlightenment; it is the epitome of enlightenment. And this is what I'm trying to tap into as a human being, to be able to take the mind of a jazz artist and realize that you have the ability to do anything you want to do in the world, because you have that mind. It takes a mind to play jazz. If it takes a mind to listen to it, you know it must take a mind to play it. So you must realize that if you're playing it you have a mind. And there are just no self-imposed limitations. You can limit yourself to how well you want to use that mind, that potential, your potential for thinking, for creating. It takes a lot more to play something, to create it right on the spot right now, for four or five people to create it right now, rather than a group of people sitting down playing what some sixteenth-century composer wrote, and then never changing one note. And you can't even interpret it. It must be played that same way all-- I'm saying to me there's no comparison between the two.

ISOARDI

I think it was Miles Davis called it-- He said it was robot music. You play someone else's notes over and over again.

MORGAN

Well, yeah, but I'm just saying, without pointing a finger at another form of art, I'm talking about the higher forms of-- To me, playing jazz is the highest form of intelligent communication. It's higher than lovemaking. It's where lovemaking should be. When you get a group like Miles Davis's, you know, the five cats doing that shit right now, and it's different every night, and-- You know. Or what I experience when I play with Hank Jones or Barry Harris or Kenny Barron or Tommy Flanagan, Roland Hanna, or any number of people that have the jazz thing in their genes and in their blood. You kind of have to live it. So it's not a Central Avenue thing. It's a kind of a universal thought. That's kind of more what I'm into, rather than-- To me, I think that it would be good for people from Central Avenue or people reading about Central Avenue to be able to see the development of an artist that came from that point and to say, "Well, that was then, and I was a part of that for a time, but something else has come out of that." And the Central Avenues are all over the world. I think something was happening then that doesn't happen anymore. I don't think there are any neighborhoods in the United States where we're allowed to go in and have fun and enjoy ourselves, even though we don't live there, where we can be made to feel comfortable and for us to be able to interact nonviolently. There was a lot of love and stuff that came out of-- A lot of lines that were crossed by

people coming-- You know, because Central Avenue was just another form of Harlem. There's a Central Avenue in every city. You know?

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly.

MORGAN

Sure. Oh, yeah. And it's happened all over. But now the people from outside of South Central L.A. are taught to live in fear of even going anywhere near-- Not Central Avenue but Western Avenue or Crenshaw [Boulevard] or La Brea [Avenue] or La Cienega [Boulevard].

ISOARDI

They don't even go outside-- Even in their own areas they don't have places-- People don't socialize it seems.

MORGAN

Exactly. That's what I'm saying. There's a deterioration that has happened that is-- To me, I think that we missed the boat.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I think it's very-- There's a decline-- People don't attend anything live anymore. People don't go to the theater as much, they don't go to live concerts, they don't hear live music as much anymore. People don't even go to theaters as much anymore. They put VCRs in at home, but they never go outside their home.

MORGAN

And people who are playing music do not interact in a loving way, I mean as a rule, anymore. Everybody's got their amplifier right here, and they're listening to bass players through their amps. They've got their amp right by their ear. The piano players see the monitors-- The whole thing of having monitors on the stage, the individual speakers, is that they are there so that the other musicians can hear the other musicians. But it's gotten to the point where musicians are saying, "No, just put me in that," so all you're going to hear is yourself. Well, when I hear a cat do that, that's the last time I play with him. I don't care how well he plays. See, the duo, boy, a duo would tell it all right quick.

ISOARDI

Yeah, nowhere to hide.

MORGAN

Nowhere to hide. No rhythm section to hide behind, no one else to blame it on. Who the fuck am I going to blame it on if I'm playing with some of the best piano players in the world, and it's just me and them? If it doesn't happen-- [laughter]

ISOARDI

Yeah, this is true.

MORGAN

So I'm on a crash course. Bullshitting is old hat with me. You know, I know how to fail better than anybody in the world, you dig? I'm talking about succeeding, not just your name in bright lights or how much money you make. I'm proud of the fact that I can live here and I ain't worried about getting put out, ain't even worried at all about it, because I believe in me. And to be able to do it just playing what you want to play with whoever you want to play with, only playing wherever you want to play.

ISOARDI

That's a hell of an accomplishment.

MORGAN

Well, it's a requirement for me, because that's the only way I can give my best. And the people that pay to come to hear me play deserve the absolute very best that I can give them.

ISOARDI

That's quite an achievement.

MORGAN

Because it's honest, and it's totally unrehearsed. I don't spend hours rehearsing with any of the piano players that I play with. In fact, I don't rehearse at all with them, because the very nature of the thing that I'm doing is to be able to go on the stage without an agenda that is already preprogrammed and preplanned with what tunes you're going to play. Well, what about how you feel between this tune and that tune? Why set yourself up so that you can't even use your own feelings? You always wanted to be able to play whatever you wanted to play, whatever you feel like playing at the moment. That's what I want to be able to play. So I don't go on stage with a program. The piano players that I play with know--they might not believe it at the beginning--that I'm going to go on the stage and I'm going to play what my heart suggests that I play right then. And it's going to be in conjunction with something-- Most likely it's going to be something that you know. If you don't know it, don't play. I'll play it by myself. In other words, they're not required to play to try to keep up with me whether they know the tune or not. Because I'm not going to give you a list of tunes that I'm going to play when I go on the stage because I don't know what I'm going to play. I don't know what I'm going to feel like an hour from now, what I'm going to feel like playing. I want to be able to play what the people and the ambience and everything makes me feel like playing at that time. If it suggests "Stella by Starlight," then I'm going to play that. I don't play requests. I'm not a jukebox. [laughter] You know what I'm saying? Can you play "Melancholy Baby" for me? Boy, no, I don't play requests, you dig? Because I don't play shit that I don't feel like playing. I'm not going to play it just because somebody requests it. They wouldn't do that if they were listening to Zubin Mehta and the [New York] Philharmonic. They wouldn't jump up in the middle of a tune and

say, "Play 'Melancholy Baby' instead of the next thing that you want to play." [tape recorder off] Yeah, I think that there's sufficient documentation in other places as to the basics, the logistics, of what was on this corner and what was on that corner. I think it's a waste of my time just to speak to that. I think there are some other things that I would like to take this time to do an oral history on, on one who has come out of the Central Avenue thing and who has emerged as another person in a way. My life is in one way unique but in another way a typical Central Avenue thing. Because San Quentin [State Prison] was filled with musicians from Central Avenue when I got there.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

MORGAN

Yeah. I mean, not that San Quentin was filled, but, I mean, there were many fine musicians from Central Avenue in San Quentin.

ISOARDI

So it wasn't unique.

MORGAN

No, it wasn't unique. But what is unique is that I have come out the other end of it alive. And that, unfortunately, is the exception to the rule, because most of the people that went in that door that I went in didn't come out the same door that I did. [tape recorder off] I would like to take the opportunity and speak to some of the things that have made this planet a totally different place to me today than it was during the Central Avenue [time]. My vision was only down to the-- It was kind of like a quick fix. Even though I wasn't a drug addict, I was already being programmed for failure.

ISOARDI

How so?

MORGAN

I mean, I was programming myself. The Charlie Parker syndrome, the drug thing, the whole Central Avenue "Learn your horn, go to jam sessions, get hooked, and fail." I had already bought into that rather than the outlook that someone might have that was in Juilliard.

ISOARDI

Why was that syndrome there? How can you explain it?

MORGAN

Well, I think that syndrome is there because it's part of the same syndrome factory that puts drugs in the ghettos, even though that's the last place it would be manufactured. And that's supposed to be where the poor people are. What is something so expensive doing there? I mean, they don't make it there. I don't know enough to make a predetermined statement as to why that is, but I have a pretty good idea. I know that it's not by the design of the people that live there.

It's a power greater than myself. I don't have the power to change that. I have the power to change my thinking about it. I have the power to say, "Well, I'm no longer going to be an advocate of that," you dig? "I don't buy that. I believe there's something better than that for me."

ISOARDI

Is part of the explanation, when you talk about the syndrome back then, of knowing how good of a musician you were, how skilled, and how much you could contribute, and yet being denied that because of the racism of the society? Is that part of the self-destructiveness?

MORGAN

Well, sure, it's what you do with that. You see, if you allow someone else's thinking to cause you to self-destruct, then you need to examine your thinking, not theirs. If someone else chooses to exploit the Central Avenue musicians and make the Shorty Rogerses and the Art Peppers and those people representative of West Coast jazz or what is good, and if you allow that to cause you to not be your best-- In fact, if you allow that to make you feel like being your worst, you become your worst, then it's your own thinking that you need to examine, because you're validating that other shit by not showing up and representing yourself. And that's part of what I bought into. I mean, it's the most stupid thing that one can do in any given situation.

ISOARDI

Although for a lot of people it's tough to withstand that, because it's a tough pressure, and it's a struggle to get past that.

MORGAN

But you understand what we're saying? We're saying it's tough, it's hard, but life is hard. Man, the hardest thing in the world is to have a habit that requires that you get $1,500 every day. It requires a lot more creativity than it would for you to play that saxophone and use your natural-given gift. So I mean, we're talking about life being hard, you dig, and then you're choosing a life that's harder. So I don't blame it on Central Avenue or on-- Today I could blame it on [William J.] Clinton. Look at what he did with Lani Guinier or whatever, you dig? But that ain't got shit to do with me. I'm going to be alive and well at the end of the day, not have my life be up for grabs depending on what somebody else does. Why not use that to make me stronger? You know, I don't think it was too easy for neither Nelson Mandela nor Winnie Mandela.

ISOARDI

Thirty years in prison.

MORGAN

Can you imagine what it must have been like? Twenty-seven years in prison in South Africa, where you're the most hated person, the most feared person? Can you imagine? If they treat you like that when you're supposedly free, what

would they treat you like when they get you behind those bars and they have to feed you? Can you imagine some of the indignities that man has--? But I'm just saying, out of this a man is able to come out and still be talking about, "No, we don't want to kill anybody. We want to get into self-determination, self-rule. We can all live peacefully. There's enough natural beauty in South Africa for everybody to have," supposedly. I'm just saying as an extreme example. So it's what came after Central Avenue. See, because one of the things I don't like about talking about Central Avenue is it's one of those buzzwords, buzz terms.

ISOARDI

In what way?

MORGAN

What does Central Avenue really mean? What are we really talking about when we say Central Avenue? We're not going to title these talks a chronology on what happened to black people in Los Angeles. We're going to talk about Central Avenue. But it's the same damn thing. So let's cut the pretense. I mean, it's alarming to hear from you, man, that there are no funds for no one in Central Avenue to get a copy of what I'm spending these hours talking about. It's just going to be available to scholars at UCLA. And that's going to be hidden by rules and regulations of who can get to it.

ISOARDI

Buried under budget cuts.

MORGAN

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

There's a protest going on out there now. Chicano students. Some of them are in the eleventh day of a fast.

MORGAN

Yeah, for Chicano studies. If you think that's bad, you ought to listen to Rush Limbaugh talk about it on television: "Those people."

ISOARDI

No, if I watched him I'd destroy my television set.

MORGAN

But you have to watch. I mean, I have to watch some of him and some of Jesse Jackson and a whole lot of David Letterman and a whole lot of Michael Jordan or something rather than-- I'm just saying, in order to get a-- I mean, the only thing great black people are doing on television, for the most part, is playing basketball--when it was in season. And it's a shame, because there's very little good music, real good black music, being shown on television. It goes through me every time Jay Leno cuts off the band [on the Tonight Show]. The comedian cutting off the band, you dig? No, thank you. That's a gig that I never will need. But at the same time, it's great that some jazz musicians are able to

make upwards of $125,000 a year for doing that show. Although I think their pay should be more commensurate with his. Especially when you become a part of the act, too, you know, when you have to be a comedian as well as a bandleader. You know what I'm saying? Which is another thing, too. But I like to cut the subterfuge. I can't get over what you told me, that there are no funds available to have a copy of what I'm saying available to anybody in South Central L.A. If it comes about, it would be because someone like you went out and begged some people for money to do it, when it's not originally set up-- You know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, their sense of responsibility to the community is not a very broad one at all.

MORGAN

Well, then, see, I'm torn between two things. I'm torn between really talking to them about it on the tape or not wasting my time with it. And I have to really think about it, Steve, whether I want to spend any more time with it. Because it doesn't speak to the needs of my people. But it also doesn't speak to the needs of my people if I don't get it said, either.

ISOARDI

Well, there's always a possibility that maybe after--

MORGAN

But I'm saying as a participant I think it's my duty to say I don't like the way it's set up.

ISOARDI

Sure.

MORGAN

And if not me, then who? If not now, when? You know?

ISOARDI

Yeah, definitely.

MORGAN

If not me, who?

ISOARDI

Take the opportunity to tell them.

MORGAN

Sure. That's part of the responsibility I have that I didn't realize that I had other than just wanting to pick up the horn and to get back into being a saxophone player. There's a lot of responsibilities that a person that is currently in vogue or popular has.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (JUNE 5, 1993)

MORGAN

Rather than getting a copy myself, I would like for my copy to be donated to the Central Avenue library, the one on Fifty-second [Street] and Central Avenue, or Forty-seventh [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI

Vernon [Avenue] and Central.

MORGAN

Vernon and Central, yeah, right. I would like for it to be put right in there, you dig, under my name, that I donated it, rather than have it sitting around my house gathering dust. I'm not going to read it. I don't read shit that-- I mean, because I'm just saying, it needs to be said, it needs to be done, but certainly under protest. I'm not going to back out of the project.

ISOARDI

Well, I hope we'll be able to get you some good news. I'll let you know.

MORGAN

Just tell them that this person wants to know why. And the first thing I can do about it is demonstrate the right thing being done by doing it myself, taking my copy and making it available to them, because it don't mean shit if you talk about a copy should be available to them and then you take your copy home and it sits and collects dust. You know what I mean? You know, it doesn't speak too well for me. I mean, personally, it doesn't make me feel too good. But those are things that we can work on. It's great to find out that you are empowered, to really realize that you are empowered to bring about change.

ISOARDI

Part of the struggle is making people realize that they can exercise power.

MORGAN

Sure. Yeah, exactly.

ISOARDI

It's a hard struggle.

MORGAN

Yeah. See, in reality, the only thing that I know I can do is I know I can give them my copy. That's the one thing I don't have to ask anybody else to do. I can do that myself. Anything beyond that depends on the whim or caprice of someone other than me, in a sense. You dig? But, I mean, putting your finger on being able to do something right now, because it is part of a lifesaving process, that one must keep abreast of their own life. See, I don't ever want to be that stupid again to do some of the shit that I've done. I don't ever want to be stupid enough to think that those rules apply to everybody but me, you know, to think that. You're the only one they apply to, because you have to make them apply to yourself. It's one thing I've decided that I no longer want to have happen in my life. I no longer want anybody to love me more than I love

myself or everyone else to love me more than I love myself. I know that feeling. That's nice if you want to be loved, but there's a better way to be loved. I think there's another love other than-- We confuse love with pity or something. I think it would be nicer to have people love you because you're a good human being, you treat everyone good, and because you're a good example of what can be accomplished in life with really trying, the purity of your art or whatever. I just spent a couple of hours or so when I finished doing the concert last Friday night in Dallas signing autographs. But the thing that was different about it this time was most of the people I signed for were black.

ISOARDI

Really?

MORGAN

Yes. Little black kids and everything, signing their T-shirts.

ISOARDI

This was at the [Dallas] Museum of [Fine] Arts?

MORGAN

Yeah, exactly, in Dallas. I mean, really it was very unusual.

ISOARDI

You know, I went to a concert, a Playboy Jazz Festival buildup concert, a couple of weeks ago in Santa Monica. In Santa Monica three-quarters of the audience was black.

MORGAN

No kidding.

ISOARDI

I was really surprised. I'd never been to a jazz concert practically, outside the [Simon Rodia] Watts [Towers] Festival, where there was such an overwhelming majority of black people.

MORGAN

I've played the Watts Festival, and the majority of the people weren't even black. [laughter] The Watts Towers--

ISOARDI

Things change.

MORGAN

[laughter] But it was great to see, but it also makes you a little more aware, too, of what we're doing. It feels great to be in a position where UCLA would send you out to talk with me about this, but it doesn't really feel good to know that-- And I appreciate your saying that, because I think that's the honorable thing to do. If there's something that's going on with the program that you know most likely I probably wouldn't approve of and to not tell me about it would be derelict, in good part, of your duties, I think. I respect you more for telling me. But I don't want to take the easy-- The easy way out of that is to say, "Well, if

that's what is happening, I don't want to be involved," because that's a cop-out. I know that game, too. I sat here and watched myself almost go for that one.

ISOARDI

It's also trying to change things. This is what universities are like, all the other institutions in this society that need changing. This is one small thing that we can try and get them to start doing.

MORGAN

That's why I say, if not me, then who? In this case, as it pertains to Frank Morgan, the Frank Morgan oral history, if I don't say something, then who should say it? I think the people that are involved are the best people to say something, that these things should be available.

ISOARDI

Definitely. And it could set a precedent, because it hasn't been done before. If we pull this off, it will be the first time, as far as I know.

MORGAN

But I'm saying you need the support of the people, especially the people that are doing this part of it.

ISOARDI

The people that I've mentioned this to, telling them this is what we'd like, but we don't know if it's going to happen, we're going to try it, they all think it's wonderful.

MORGAN

Yeah, right. But there's a little more we can do about that than think it's wonderful, too. You dig?

ISOARDI

Exactly, yeah, I do. That's a nice gesture.

MORGAN

I think because it doesn't underscore what you're trying to do if we don't step up and say, "Well, it's my time to say that I don't think it's fair. I think it's based on a premise that is not consistent with what we say we believe in, what we say we're about."

ISOARDI

Do you see yourself now more as someone working for change in many ways? I mean, not simply developing your craft, but as a human being.

MORGAN

Well, I think it's a feeling that I'm getting. I guess you could say it's not a visionary thing, but I'm beginning to feel, and being a feeling person, it's more likely to have a positive effect by me feeling it than thinking that I should feel it. Because I think we who operate on those kinds of feelings, when we find something that grabs us and that we really feel, that we feel involved in or obliged to-- Because it becomes that kind of passion that just comes up. It's not

one that you have to say, "Well, I should." It is, because it's going to bust out one way or another, even if you try to suppress it. I now know that I need all the things to reinforce myself with every day that I can feel better about. Anything that I can do in the course of a day that's going to make me feel better about me, I need to do that. I need some of that. Just practicing isn't going to do that. It's necessary to practice, too. But being able to fire those volleys of clean thought, of better thinking, and things that you live by and the demonstration of those principles, not just the rhetoric. It's something that I need to be involved in. I think the music is all of that. The music isn't just the notes, it's the feeling behind those notes that gives it some substance to me, because the notes are just supposed to suggest the feelings, bring you to the feeling. So if there are just some notes out there, the more feeling that is hanging on those notes is the more I want. I think it's a constant quest to be a better human being rather than just a saxophone player, the same old shithead person. The last thing in the world I want someone to say is that "He really developed as a saxophone player, but he was still a shithead, still the jive motherfucker he always was." [laughter] "He may have been famous, but he's still the jive--" [laughter]

ISOARDI

[laughter] That's good. Very wise.

MORGAN

Yeah. And I know that feeling, too. That's not as good as that feeling that you get when you sign those autographs for those little black kids or little white kids, you dig? Or being able to take a little black kid whose mother and father are standing over there holding him by the hand waiting because he wants my autograph, and another little white kid that's standing over here with his mother and father and asks will you stand here and let me sign his T-shirt on his back, and then he'll do that for you, and then get the mother and father to exchange numbers so maybe their kids can get together and spend a day together like they were acting tonight when they were waiting to get autographs.

ISOARDI

There was a common feeling because at the performance they were sharing.

MORGAN

Exactly. Sure, there's something that's already been shared, and it's just a symptom of how many more sharing things you can do. But it's an obvious fact that they can peacefully coexist. It was a beautiful concert, outdoors. It was one of those things that makes you feel great to be alive. That's what I want to do, Steve. See, I don't think there was enough there for those black parents or those black kids from Central Avenue to have felt good about. You see, the thing that I see that hurts the most is that most of the organizing to celebrate what happened on Central Avenue is done outside of the community. There's very little of the community to--

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's the way it's been.

MORGAN

Nobody in the community is coming to talk to me about it. The Los Angeles Sentinel, you know-- It's like I told the people at Ebony magazine and Jet-- "Where were you people every time I would get busted? I had a big enough name for you to document it in your magazines, and you have yet to document my success in the black magazines."

ISOARDI

Really? You told them.

MORGAN

Sure.

ISOARDI

What did they say?

MORGAN

"Well, we just work--" You know what I'm saying? Well, shit, I didn't expect-- I knew I wasn't talking to Johnson, the head guy.

ISOARDI

It's such a struggle. You look at what Horace [Tapscott] and Billy Higgins are doing with their little performance area.

MORGAN

Oh, have they gotten together now?

ISOARDI

He has that small World [Stage] theater place.

MORGAN

Yeah. I mean, they both got a place together?

ISOARDI

Well, Horace works there all the time. But they've got a little block there where they've got some galleries, some art exhibitions, they've got nice clothing stores. They've got something carved out of that block. But here they're doing it all on their own, and they've got to work like hell to get this. And this should be something--

MORGAN

Where is that? Out at Leimert Park? Still on Degnan [Avenue] or Forty-third [Street]?

ISOARDI

Yeah, Degnan in Leimert Park. In Leimert Park on Degnan. They've got about a block there.

MORGAN

Oh, great, yeah.

ISOARDI

And a lot of kids are getting their training there, not only in music, but they're getting guidance.

MORGAN

Yeah, that's wonderful, yeah.

ISOARDI

And that's the kind of thing that the city should be celebrating, that the community should be celebrating in a big way and supporting with everything they've got. But it's not nearly enough. Like you said, both the community and the city don't get behind things to the extent that they should.

MORGAN

I mean, it's just like this here-- Well, you saw the proclamation I got from the city of L.A.?

ISOARDI

No. Did you get one?

MORGAN

Yeah. It's right on the wall there.

ISOARDI

Did they proclaim a day for you?

MORGAN

No, no. At "Central Avenue Revisited," when Art Farmer and I came down to play--

ISOARDI

Oh, at the concert.

MORGAN

Yeah. In fact, the guy Woo, I liked him. I see he's running for mayor.

ISOARDI

Yeah, Mike [Michael] Woo.

MORGAN

Mike Woo, I mean. Michael Woo, yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, Horace told me, he said, "I'm going to vote for Mike Woo." I said, "Well, you like the Democrats more than Republicans." He said, "Well, I'll tell you. One night Mike Woo came walking down in the middle of the night to Billy Higgins's theater to hear some jazz by himself." And he said, "Anybody who walks down there in the middle of the night by themselves," he says, "is all right." [laughter]

MORGAN

All right, yeah. I was thinking about writing to Mike and seeing if there was anything I could do to help his campaign, just as a gesture, you know. But I'm just saying there's--

ISOARDI

They at least gave you some recognition from the city.

MORGAN

Well, that was enough. The main thing is the city gave me sense enough to get the fuck out of there. [laughter] No, it's not a great place to live. The smog alone, just the air alone, it's suicide. I mean, just that alone, man. Billy Higgins says that's why people act so crazy in L.A., because the air is so bad. [laughter] He said if he wasn't traveling a lot there's no way in the world he'd live there. I'm just saying-- And that's true. The air is the equivalent of smoking three packs of cigarettes a day.

ISOARDI

It's a load. It's the air, it's the traffic, it's a lot.

MORGAN

No, I mean, but just the air is bad enough within itself. [laughter] But it's great, man. I think that the training, the teachers that I had there and continue to have-- Because I consider Billy Higgins and Cedar Walton and Horace Tapscott and Harold Land and those teachers-- You know, those are all teachers of mine right now.

ISOARDI

In what sense?

MORGAN

Well, they teach by their actions. They demonstrate. Just like the involvement that Billy had and Horace still has. This sense of responsibility comes from being around people like that that wake you up to be more responsible, help you to feel more responsible [for your] side of life, for yourself as a human being, rather than sitting around with your chest bloated by your most recent accomplishments. How about putting your finger on your pulse and saying, "What about your responsibilities? What are you doing about those? You can sign all the T-shirts for all the black kids in the world, but if you're going to be high when they see you, fucked up, then what are you doing? Maybe it's better they don't see you."

ISOARDI

A bad example is worse than no example.

MORGAN

Yeah. So there's a number-- I think it isn't what we say, it's what we do that speaks so loudly. And to have the kind of community concerns like Billy Higgins and them, to put the money where their mouth is and to have a place where they can pay the rent and keep the doors open-- Horace has always had that kind of responsibility, from the [Pan-Afrikan People's] Arkestra days. I almost laughed at that kind of thing, because I was measuring it by different yardsticks. UGMAA, he was talking about UGMAA, Union of God's Musicians [and Artists] Ascension, whatever, you know, and I'm measuring

that against Doc Severinsen. I'm measuring it against some Hollywood types, until one day I went to one of Horace's concerts and saw one of my friends' little nine-year-old kids playing trombone in Horace's band, in the trombone section, standing up there getting direction daily, on a daily basis. And it wasn't at the Hollywood Bowl. It was at that church [Immanuel United Church of Christ], a church at Eighty-fifty [Street] and Grand [Avenue] or whatever it was that Horace used to get where they could rehearse and have their performances at. It's kind of a different thing to think about than in terms of how many union gigs you've got. So there's Horace Tapscott, a socially aware, socially conscious person that is--

ISOARDI

That's got to have an impact, too, on your music, if you're going to orient it-- It's going to be different. I would think somehow it's going to change your music, or it may take it in another direction. I don't mean any thing dramatic, but if you change your focus like that.

MORGAN

Well, you are what you eat. Our music is whatever we're thinking, and however significant or minuscule the changes are, they're going to be reflected. They should be reflected in our musical development. Because the musical development has got to consist of constantly keeping our finger on our own pulse, not being overly aware of what other people are doing and being totally unaware of what you feel about your own music, about what your feeling is about it. That's what I'm trying to get in touch with, just what your natural inclination to play is, just what you naturally feel like playing right now. If we never explore that, if we're constantly playing what's appropriate or what we think is relevant or politically correct, it doesn't mean that's what we feel. That's what we feel that we should feel, which has little to do with your natural feeling, different from your natural feeling. And I think that if a so-called jazz musician goes through life never getting down to what we really feel like playing in response to this, are we talking about jazz or are we talking about Muzak? I mean, not to look down on Muzak, because sometimes I wish Muzak would play some of my stuff or whatever, you know, the stuff that's in the elevators and stuff. I remember how flattered I was the first time I found out-- You know, I used to laugh at it, but the first time when Rosalinda [Kolb] brought a thing home and showed me that they were playing my music on Continental Airlines--

ISOARDI

Oh, really? There are channels that you can--

MORGAN

Yeah, yeah. I used to think-- But when it gets down [to it], those are really some things that you might like to have happen with your music. And as a

defense mechanism, we say we don't like that shit, because you really would like to be-- I remember the first time you told me I was on I was flattered. I felt like it was another sense of starting to arrive. So it isn't something that-- No matter how many times I might have laughed at it, laughed in terms of who they did play, all that I really always wanted was for them to play mine. [laughter] To be accepted to that point. I mean, we laugh about Dave Brubeck, but God, boy, I mean, I would like to enjoy that kind of success, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah. From Time magazine to the Boston Pops [Orchestra] to--

MORGAN

Sure, yeah. He ain't swung yet, but he's swinging for somebody. [laughter] Somebody likes him, you dig? [laughter] So, I mean, I want to be accepted. And I guess one of the things that I regret about Central Avenue is that there's nothing there as a continuation-- There's very little there as a continuation of that beauty of all that was.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it's very depressing, the area.

MORGAN

But it's the same thing in Harlem or the same thing on the South Side of Chicago--burning the shit down rather than building. I guess I'd like to be amongst the builders. I've been with the burners, the ne'er-do-wells and shit. So be sure and tell me or whatever. I'd like to--

ISOARDI

They will know.

MORGAN

I'd really like the copy that would normally go to me at that library. But I'd like for them to know that I donated it, too.

ISOARDI

Sure.

MORGAN

I think that would be one of the most responsible things I've ever done for Central Avenue. That's one thing I do feel good about, that I can be looked upon as one of the people that came from that, passed through there, and is still living and can be a source of some kind of pride for some of the kids that live in that area.

ISOARDI

Sure. That's the one thing that Clora [Bryant] talked about when I talked to her, and Horace to a degree also, when I talked about the sense of community back then and people helping each other and an older generation of musicians looking out for the younger generation. They said they carry that with them to this day and that it really shapes a lot of what they do and a lot of their

attitudes. And to a large degree, they said that they carry the good parts of Central Avenue inside of them, and they try to carry that on.

MORGAN

Yeah, sure. I remember the few times that Clora came to Catalina's when I was playing there. And I have mixed feelings about it. Number one, I don't dig people talking loud, particularly artists talking, when other artists are playing, because, you know, it just-- But then I also have to remember back how many times that she was beautiful enough to pick me up and take me home from the Club Alabam when we were working there every night.

ISOARDI

When you were both in the band?

MORGAN

Uh-huh. Every night. Picked me up at home and delivered me to my father and my stepmother. Every night, without fail. "No, I promised Stanley--" No matter where I might want to go or who else might want to take me somewhere, "You can follow me to his front door, and he can get out of the car there, and if he can get in your car from there, that's up to him. But I promised Stanley, and I will deliver him to--" [laughter] That was if it was Billie Holiday or whoever, you dig?

ISOARDI

That's a nice story.

MORGAN

I didn't always like that. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, you were maybe seventeen, eighteen then? [laughter] Who likes to go around with a big sister at seventeen, eighteen? [laughter]

MORGAN

Yeah. You know, and she damn near had some-- Well, she wasn't that much older than me at that time, but she had kids. It was really nice to hear that she was moving to New York. I'd like to really check that out.

ISOARDI

I'll see if I can find anything out about that.

MORGAN

Yeah, please, yeah. That would be so great. It seems like she'd just be perfect in New York. She'd certainly get some things going. I think some of the things that she's trying organize in L.A. she might get off the ground right away in New York, particularly if she learns to dodge bullets and shit. [laughter]

ISOARDI

So I take it you don't miss New York. [laughter]

MORGAN

You kidding? [laughter] Anytime I miss it, I arrange to go there. I can go whenever-- I ain't going to miss it, you know. I tell you what, no matter how much I miss it, I can unmiss it within twenty-four hours. [laughter] Twenty-four hours in New York and I'm ready to give it another year of my absence. They just told me in February they're going to bring [me] into the Tavern on the Green for two weeks.

ISOARDI

Oh, really? Jeez.

MORGAN

Yeah, right in Central Park.

ISOARDI

Brubeck can't be far away. [laughter] That's a pretty upscale place. What kind of a gig is it? Is that a one-night thing, or a week?

MORGAN

Two weeks.

ISOARDI

Two weeks?

MORGAN

Two weeks, six nights a week.

ISOARDI

Jeez. I didn't know they were doing jazz that much.

MORGAN

Yeah. That's what they're doing. They're doing jazz. That's their new policy there now. In Lincoln Center-- We're working a lot of places.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it seems to be.

MORGAN

Carnegie Hall has got a repertory orchestra, Lincoln Center has got one. At first it was just the American Jazz Orchestra. And now the American Jazz Orchestra, the one that had the first repertory, they're going out of business.

ISOARDI

Well, that was always a scuffle for Gary Giddins.

MORGAN

Yeah, a couple of Decembers ago, a couple of years ago, I went and played a concert for him in New York. I really didn't enjoy it. The orchestra was stiff.

ISOARDI

That's how they sound on the recordings.

MORGAN

Yeah, I knew it was going to be stiff anyhow. But it was great. I dig Gary, and I got a chance to meet many of the guys in the orchestra, the ones I didn't know and--

ISOARDI

Good personnel.

MORGAN

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, you'll get a kick out of this. One of the people I work with went up to see some friends up at UC [University of California] Santa Cruz. She goes up there, and a roommate of a friend was doing all this work in his jazz class. They're analyzing your albums. [laughter]

MORGAN

Analyzing my albums? Is that right? No shit!

ISOARDI

Yeah. So this woman that I work with, who is not into jazz at all, she had to spend part of Memorial Day holiday last week listening to your albums.

MORGAN

Is that right?

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah. I think you may have turned her into a jazz fan.

MORGAN

Wow. You know, I just played there--

ISOARDI

Up in Santa Cruz?

MORGAN

Yeah. When was that, Rosalinda? KOLB: February.

MORGAN

February, yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, well, maybe this teacher went and heard you play and wanted to play someone contemporary for the class.

MORGAN

Yeah, in fact, they did have a big class there, because I signed autographs for many of the people that were getting credit for-- Yeah, yeah. I played at the Kuumbwa [Jazz Center], David Williams and I. Yeah. How about that?

ISOARDI

She came in and said, "Do you have any Frank Morgan albums?" I said, "Yeah." "Could you bring them into work?" "Yeah, sure, okay."

MORGAN

Wow, how about that. What did you say, Brubeck can't be far? A long way. Brubeck got more money. Brubeck got twice as much money per night for his quartet as Count Basie got for the whole big band.

ISOARDI

Well, at the time, they were looking for musicians like Chet Baker and Dave Brubeck.

MORGAN

You know, it's funny, because there's a reverse thing in Europe that you run into. A lot of times they don't want to bring in white musicians.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

MORGAN

Yeah. I've experienced that. I mean, I've had them tell me that.

ISOARDI

Not to bring white sidemen or something like that?

MORGAN

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

MORGAN

Yeah. I mean, I would want to use a pianist from France to do some duos with me in Sicily and Greece, and they just-- I asked them to contact him for me, the people I was going to do the concert for in Sicily and Greece, and they sent word back that they would prefer that I would not use any European musicians. But, I mean, they didn't say white this time, but they want American people. But beyond that, they want, in many cases, they'll tell you-- They want the New York cats, the ones they hear on the records, the recognizable names, particularly the Tony Williamses and the Ron Carters and-- But that's funny when shit reverses itself. [laughter] "Sorry, man, I can't take you because you're white." "What?" [laughter] That's enough for now, man. I think I'm--

ISOARDI

All right. Let's break.

MORGAN

Yeah.
