

A TEI Project

Interview of Melba Liston

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 12, 1992

ISOARDI

Okay, Melba, let's begin with your recollections of your early years on Central Avenue. Maybe you can take us back to the beginning, where you were born and your family and your upbringing, your musical interests, all that.

LISTON

I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, but I was raised between Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. My grandparents were in Kansas City, Kansas, and my mother [Lucile Liston] was in Kansas City, Missouri.

ISOARDI

So you shuttled between the two families?

LISTON

Yeah. I got my trombone when I was seven years old.

ISOARDI

Seven years old?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

A regular-size trombone?

LISTON

Yeah, that's the only kind I know about. [laughter] I don't know anything else still.

ISOARDI

I thought they might have smaller student models or something. You probably couldn't reach many of the positions.

LISTON

Well, I reached to-- I was tall then, but I didn't reach to sixth and seventh position. I used to have to turn my head and--

ISOARDI

Turn it sideways--

LISTON

Yeah, and do that for the-- My mother, well, she wasn't around too much, because I was living mostly in Kansas. But my grandpa [John Prentiss Clark] used to take me out on the back porch and let me play for him.

ISOARDI

Nice. So they really encouraged you.

LISTON

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Were they musicians?

LISTON

No, no. Not really. But they admired it, and they listened to music all the time.

ISOARDI

What kinds of music? Do you remember?

LISTON

Well, pop--

ISOARDI

Popular music of the day?

LISTON

Uh-huh. Everybody had the soul bands, I guess you could call them. They would listen to them whenever they came over on the radio. So that was nice. But anyway, I wasn't playing jazz and all that type; I was playing classical or-- Was it--?

ISOARDI

Like band kind of trombone?

LISTON

No, that other thing. [sings melody of "Battle Hymn of the Republic"] You know.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, those kinds of popular songs then, like the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and those things.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. Well, not that one. I was thinking that, but I wasn't playing it.

ISOARDI

You mean like church kind of music?

LISTON

Yeah, and classical-- You know, I can't even think of it.

ISOARDI

Rag?

LISTON

No, no, no. It was in between classical and rag. I mean, it was something-- I can't think of it now.

ISOARDI

But it was popular music or not?

LISTON

Sort of popular. It was like [sings melody again]. I mean, that's the only thing in my head, but that's not it. But it was like those things, you know.

ISOARDI

You were seven years old when you got your trombone.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Was that your first instrument? Had you studied music before then?

LISTON

No. I was playing on the piano, though, before that.

ISOARDI

Just on your own? Or was someone teaching you?

LISTON

Well, let me see. I was playing on my own, but I had a pumper on there, and my aunties [Mary Miller, Thelma Stattion, and Anez Newman] would have me pump, and they would dance and stuff, you know. So that was a long time before I even got my trombone.

ISOARDI

So you were playing music when you could just barely walk.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, your grandparents saw something.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

They got that trombone for you.

LISTON

Well, my grandma [Virginia Prentiss Clark], I don't know if she did or not, but my grandpa did. He stayed in Kansas and we went out here for a while.

ISOARDI

Do you know much about his background? Where he came from?

LISTON

I used to know. It was Mississippi or somewhere. But he wasn't a slave. I don't know how he maneuvered that. My grandma-- I don't think they were slaves. They moved to Michigan a long time ago before I was born, two or three years before my youngest aunties were born. They were up there. So I don't know if they were a part of the underground or some movement, but they moved up there many years before I was born, and I was born in 1926. So I don't know.

ISOARDI

Maybe the time of World War I or even earlier than that.

LISTON

I can't remember. So that's it.

ISOARDI

So you're playing trombone at seven.

LISTON

Well, I was trying.

ISOARDI

You're learning, you're trying.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. But I was playing on the radio when I was eight years old.

ISOARDI

You were playing on it, performing?

LISTON

Yeah. You know, doing those things I was telling you--

ISOARDI

Oh, that kind of music, you mean.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Okay.

LISTON

But that was the influence I had before I left Kansas.

ISOARDI

When you got the trombone at seven, did you have a teacher?

LISTON

Well, I had one, but he wasn't right. I realized that he was no good. He was an old soul brother. I guess my mama found him somewhere. And he wasn't right. I just knew he wasn't right. I don't know how I knew, but I knew. So I said no, canceled, and I just went on my own.

ISOARDI

You taught yourself to play?

LISTON

Well--

ISOARDI

For a while, anyway?

LISTON

Yeah. And my grandpa and all-- I mean, I was always good in my ears, you know, so I could play by ear, I guess.

ISOARDI

Really? So even as a young kid you could pick things up?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Just play them on the trombone?

LISTON

Well, I had a piano, too. So that's how that was.

ISOARDI

Do you remember how you got on the radio at eight or nine years old? Was it because you were playing in school or something?

LISTON

No, I wasn't playing in school. I don't know how I did it. I mean, they heard me or something, and they said, "Come on," and I said, "Okay," or something like that. I don't know.

ISOARDI

Was it a solo? Or were you playing with a group of people?

LISTON

No, solo. Piano and trombone or something like that.

ISOARDI

Wonderful.

LISTON

I mean, that was nothing. I mean, little solos. I can't think of the name of them, but they were little solos. They're no big thing, you know. So that's all of that. So then I came out here in 1937.

ISOARDI

Let me ask you, before you get on to L.A. then, when you were seven or eight and you were playing trombone, did you have an idea that that's what you wanted to do back then? I mean, were you really sort of--?

LISTON

I think I was on the way to that. I didn't think of anything else.

ISOARDI

But playing the trombone?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did you play it in school then?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. I played all over. I went to junior high school when I was-- I mean, when I was there, I was in grammar school. When I went to junior high school, that was in the summertime or something, or winter. I don't know. But anyway, I would go over there and play with the seniors and stuff.

ISOARDI

Really?

LISTON

Yeah. I did that for a year or so, I guess my later year in grammar school.

ISOARDI

Wow. Pretty good. So you then came to L.A. when you were not very old. You were about twelve years old or something like that?

LISTON

Ten.

ISOARDI

Ten years old. Do you remember why the family moved out here?

LISTON

They were planning it early. My grandma and two daughters came out way before we did and set up housekeeping or something, and then we came out later.

ISOARDI

They just wanted a better scene or better weather or--?

LISTON

No, it was the scene. I mean, there was nothing there for us, you know. Environment, work habits, everything. It was better here than in Kansas in those times. I think it is already here today; it's already better out here than there. So that's the way that was. So I came here, and I took a test. My mother said she lost my papers, and I took the test--

ISOARDI

Your school papers showing how much you-- I see.

LISTON

And then I passed for the ninth grade or something. But they wouldn't put me in there because I was too young.

ISOARDI

That's right. You were only ten years old. You should have only been in the fourth or fifth grade.

LISTON

No. I was already past the sixth grade in Kansas.

ISOARDI

So you were a very good student.

LISTON

Yeah, I was pretty good. I didn't try to be. I was just--

ISOARDI

Natural.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You had a lot of natural ability! [laughter] Was there anything that didn't come naturally for you back then?

LISTON

You know, a lot of little personal things. Those things were always nice. So they put me in--what?--the--

ISOARDI

The ninth grade?

LISTON

No.

ISOARDI

No, they wouldn't put you in the ninth grade.

LISTON

The eighth grade, yeah. They put me in there.

ISOARDI

That's still quite a jump from where most people of the same age as you were were at.

LISTON

Yeah. But I wasn't thinking about that at all. I didn't think about those things.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

LISTON

Uh-uh. I can't think about no age. So my teacher in McKinley Junior High School--

ISOARDI

That's where you first went?

LISTON

Yeah. He was really nice. He rode home with me and asked my mother could he adopt me or something. My mother said, "Well, I don't know," and all that stuff. I said, "No" and all of those things. I wanted to stay with my mom.

ISOARDI

Why did he want to adopt you?

LISTON

Well, he said he wanted to further my music. He was a music teacher. Yeah, that's all.

ISOARDI

So he thought you were very gifted and wanted to spend more time with you.

LISTON

Yeah. And he wanted to send me off to some teachers and everything.

ISOARDI

Do you remember who he was?

LISTON

Donnadio.

ISOARDI

Is that his last name? Donnadio.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

It sounds Italian.

LISTON

Maybe. I don't know. But he was Mr. Donnadio. That was the first time I thought about it in many, many years. Oh, dear. But that was his name.

ISOARDI

So what did you think about him? Was he a good teacher?

LISTON

He was nice, you know, but he knew some people that would be better for me. But I didn't go. I just went on--

ISOARDI

Studying with him at school? Why didn't you want to study with these other teachers?

LISTON

I mean, I didn't not want to. I just wanted to stay home with my mom.

ISOARDI

You mean that studying with all these other teachers would have meant you moving out?

LISTON

Yeah. So that was all of that. I didn't even think about it. I said, "No, I'm not going to leave my mom."

ISOARDI

I suppose he probably wanted to train you classically. Was that--?

LISTON

Yeah, I think so. But anyway, I didn't know what I wanted to do at that time. I was going with the classics or anything--

ISOARDI

Do you remember what your favorite music was back then? You're ten, eleven years old, you're here in L.A. I guess you're listening to the radio. Did you have any records around the house?

LISTON

Yeah, but I didn't buy them. I mean, my aunties bought them, but I didn't buy them, and they weren't my favorites. I don't even remember whether I had favorites or not, you know. When I would hear Duke [Ellington] or Tommy [Dorsey] or someone on the radio, I guess I was listening then. I don't know. I would listen to that music, but my whole family did. So I don't know if I was impressed or not at that time. I imagine I was, though.

ISOARDI

Did your family go to church?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah, all the time. Oh, dear.

ISOARDI

Did that influence you at all?

LISTON

No, no.

ISOARDI

You didn't like going?

LISTON

Yeah, I did, but not my horn thing. I didn't like my horn at the church. But I did like going and all of those things. But I didn't like my horn there. I would play with my friends, like once in a while, a thing-- You know, when they would have a--

ISOARDI

Oh, like a social function or something?

LISTON

Yeah, something like that. Yes. That was all right.

ISOARDI

What kind of music did you play? Popular music of the day?

LISTON

Not popular, that thing I was talking about.

ISOARDI

Right, not that. [laughter]

LISTON

I can't think of it. Sorry. So I was all off at Central [Avenue] and everywhere.

ISOARDI

All around here? Your friends, were they friends from schools, then?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

From McKinley?

LISTON

Yeah. And then, when we went on to-- I started at Jefferson [High School], but I didn't remain there because Miss [Alma] Hightower, my teacher, sent me to Poly [Los Angeles Polytechnic High School].

ISOARDI

Can I back you up just a minute?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You mentioned that you were studying then with Miss Hightower?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That's Vi Redd's aunt, isn't it? But she was a private teacher, wasn't she? Or did she teach at one of the schools.

LISTON

No, she was an orchestra teacher. I didn't know who was taking private lessons. She was leading an orchestra.

ISOARDI

At McKinley?

LISTON

No. At the playground.

ISOARDI

Oh. Like a community-- Oh, I see. So she wasn't teaching for the schools. It was something for the city, maybe?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see.

LISTON

Because she would be in the playground thing from two [o'clock] to something or other, and then she would carry on with us when that was over. Then she would carry on with us in the nighttime.

ISOARDI

Great. So she would just teach the kids and organize local community bands and groups like that? How wonderful. What an opportunity. People don't do that anymore.

LISTON

No. They wouldn't. They'd done that since-- I don't know. But I started with her in, let's see, 1938 or something--

ISOARDI

So you're about twelve, thirteen years old when you started with her?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And that's when you're just about to begin high school or--?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did you meet her, I guess, down at the park, then?

LISTON

No. Some of my friends, they were going to school with me, and they said, "Come and meet Miss Hightower," and that was it.

ISOARDI

Wonderful. And what did you think about her? What was she like? Maybe tell us what she was like as a person and then what you thought of her as a music teacher.

LISTON

Oh, I didn't see anything about her personally. I mean, she was very good, and that was it. I don't know. No personal stuff. But she was okay as a music teacher. And I loved her. I would stay with her from time to time and all of

that. So she was all right. When I got [to be] sixteen, I joined the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767], and then I went and told her.

ISOARDI

Why? Would that have surprised her?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Why? Because you were so young?

LISTON

No, she was adamant or something. You know, I mean--

ISOARDI

What, that you shouldn't do that?

LISTON

See, she wasn't ready for me to join the union because the band hadn't joined the union at this time.

ISOARDI

Was her band going out working, playing concerts around there?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

So she wasn't crazy about that. [laughter] Did she let you know?

LISTON

Oh, she let me know. Anyway, I went on and did it, and then I joined the band at the Lincoln [Theatre].

ISOARDI

Before you get into that, it sounds like Miss Hightower, then, was your first music teacher that you had that you thought was pretty good.

LISTON

Yeah, I think so.

ISOARDI

She was the first one that you really thought you could get something from and you were making progress with.

LISTON

Yeah. Maybe, I don't know, five years, four years, or something like that.

ISOARDI

That you were with her?

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

That's quite a bit of time.

LISTON

Yeah. We went to Sacramento and played the fair there.

ISOARDI

With this community band?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Really?

LISTON

And we worked all kinds of churches and everything.

ISOARDI

How big was this band? Do you remember how many?

LISTON

About fourteen or fifteen or something.

ISOARDI

Quite a big band. Would she play with the band?

LISTON

Yeah, she played drums and piano and all those things. You know, if the drummer wasn't there, she would play drums. If the piano player wasn't there, she would play.

ISOARDI

Talented lady.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

What kind of charts did you have? Was it standard big band material?

LISTON

Well, at that time they were selling charts in the music stores.

ISOARDI

So you could get big band arrangements?

LISTON

Yeah, and all those things.

ISOARDI

The real thing?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, great.

LISTON

Tommy Dorsey and all of those.

ISOARDI

You could buy a complete arrangements for a big band.

LISTON

Yeah. I don't [know] if they do it now or not. No?

ISOARDI

No. The music stores that I've browsed through, I never see big band arrangements. Maybe you can special order them, but I don't see much. It seems that everybody I run into who works with a big band, or has a big band, it looks like everything is written out by hand on their scores almost. It's too bad. So you're the first person, I think, that we've talked with who spent some years working with her and studying with her, so it's good to hear something about what she was like.

LISTON

Yeah, she was all right.

ISOARDI

Was there an age limit in her band? When you got to a certain age, did you have to leave?

LISTON

No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

ISOARDI

When you were in the band, was it girls and boys? Or just girls?

LISTON

Yeah, boys.

ISOARDI

Boys, also.

LISTON

Yeah, predominantly.

ISOARDI

Really? How many girls were in it with you?

LISTON

Alice Young, Minnie Moore--who was her daughter--Vi Redd, and me.

ISOARDI

So you had about four or five girls and about ten boys?

LISTON

Yeah, or something. And later girls started joining, but I wasn't there.

ISOARDI

You mean more girls?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You had moved on. You had joined the union. [laughter]

LISTON

You dig? Yeah. But I know Lester Young's younger sister [Irma Young]-- I mean, you know--

ISOARDI

Lester Young and Lee Young's sister?

LISTON

She joined the band.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

LISTON

When I wasn't there.

ISOARDI

You had already left?

LISTON

But I don't know how many girls joined the band after I was gone.

ISOARDI

Do you remember where this park was? Is it still here?

LISTON

Yeah, it's over on Forty-first [Street]. It's over past Jefferson High School.

ISOARDI

Just off Central Avenue.

LISTON

No, it's beyond Jefferson.

ISOARDI

Was it in a ballpark?

LISTON

It is a ballpark.

ISOARDI

Oh! It was at the ballpark.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. I can't think of the name, John or something or other. But at the ballpark.

ISOARDI

That's around Forty-first, a couple of blocks east of Central.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

On the other side of Central.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. It's a couple of blocks past Jefferson.

ISOARDI

So you're sixteen years old then, and you joined the union. So why do you join the union?

LISTON

Oh, I had planned that all the time. I mean, you know, you've got to work. You've got to join the union. That's that. So I just joined the union.

ISOARDI

Did you just walk in one day and say, "I want to join?"

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That's what you did?

LISTON

Yeah, and I filled out my application and everything. I had my mother's signature. I had to get that. And that was it.

ISOARDI

Did you have to audition for them or anything? Or they'd just take your word for it?

LISTON

No, no, no. At that time you had to read a little bit and everything.

ISOARDI

Okay. So you had to prove you were really a musician.

LISTON

Yeah. But now you don't. That's the bad thing about it now. But anyway--

ISOARDI

Who were the people you dealt with in the union when you first got there? Do you remember? Did you have anything to do with the officers there or anything like that? Or was it just--?

LISTON

Not at first, you know. But I went on to prove my eligibility, and then I had lots to do with staff and everything.

ISOARDI

Oh, good. Well, we'll get into that later. Okay, so you're sixteen then, and you want to work, and you want to work more than Miss Hightower wants you to work. So you get your union card. Did they give it to you right away, as soon as you show that you're a musician?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

And you can go out and get work right away? There's no waiting period or anything like that?

LISTON

Yeah, but I didn't go right away. I went over to that school that I was telling you about.

ISOARDI

You mean Jeff?

LISTON

No, the junior college.

ISOARDI

Oh, Los Angeles City College.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. And they didn't have anything for me, so I went back to Polytechnic.

ISOARDI

Why did you go to LACC? Were you looking for music classes?

LISTON

They didn't have the things I wanted.

ISOARDI

I thought they had a big music department. But they didn't?

LISTON

Yeah, but they didn't at that time--not the jazz and all those things. They just had the classical.

ISOARDI

Boy, that changed.

LISTON

Yeah. They had told me that they changed and everything, and they wanted me back. But I was working and everything. It's too hard.

ISOARDI

So instead of going to LACC, then, you went to--

LISTON

To my high school, Polytechnic.

ISOARDI

Now, let me ask you, where were you living then? Where was your family living?

LISTON

I guess on Forty-eighth Street between Avalon [Boulevard] and San Pedro [Street].

ISOARDI

Okay. Well, you're not that far from Jeff.

LISTON

No, I know.

ISOARDI

And they have this amazing program, too. So how did you end up at Poly?

LISTON

Well, Miss Hightower told me to go when I was in the ninth or twelfth grade or something or other. And I liked my teacher there. My band and orchestra teacher were nice, and my harmony and those kinds of teachers were nice. I mean, it was just marvelous, you know.

ISOARDI

Really? This was all at Poly?

LISTON

Uh-huh. So I went on back there and stayed another year. I was seventeen by then, and then I went to Lincoln.

ISOARDI

The Lincoln Theatre.

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

But had you heard about Sam [Samuel] Browne at Jeff and that program there? Or did you know anything about it?

LISTON

I knew a little bit about it. I didn't know much, but--

ISOARDI

But Poly was so good that--

LISTON

And she was down with the school, Poly, so I didn't question her. She was always Poly, you know. So that was that.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO SEPTEMBER 12, 1992

ISOARDI

Okay, Melba. You're seventeen years old now. You're at Poly, I guess, as a student for a little bit.

LISTON

Yeah, the whole year I was seventeen. Well, you know, my birthday is in January, so it's give and take.

ISOARDI

And then you get a job.

LISTON

Yeah, at Lincoln.

ISOARDI

A regular gig.

LISTON

Uh-huh. I was with Bardu Ali.

ISOARDI

He had the band there?

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

And this was the house band? Was it a house big band?

LISTON

Yeah. They would have a movie, and then the show would take over.

ISOARDI

What was the show like?

LISTON

It was a lot of girls, a lot of acts, Herb Jeffries and all of those people. Let me see. I think it was one night a week on the weeknights and two shows on Saturday and three on Sunday. And the music changed once a week. We had rehearsal, I don't know what day, but--

ISOARDI

So they'd have a new show every week, more or less?

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

But you played the same show, then, for a week, and then you'd switch, and then a whole new-- I see.

LISTON

Dusty Fletcher, he was there all the time. And Pigmeat Markham, he was there all the time.

ISOARDI

He was pretty popular.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

What did Dusty Fletcher do?

LISTON

He was the comedian--

ISOARDI

Same kind of--

LISTON

Yeah. Pigmeat was the main thing, and he was the alternate. So he was doing things like going up the ladder and all those things. [laughter] That was terrific. So I don't know. They had me up doing some stuff, too, now and then.

ISOARDI

Like what?

LISTON

Putting on the girls' costumes and singing on the stage and everything.

ISOARDI

Really?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did you like singing?

LISTON

I didn't mind it.

ISOARDI

Were you any good?

LISTON

You know, I'm all right for singing in the group, but that's all. Whatever was on stage, I didn't mind it all the time.

ISOARDI

It was just fun being there and--?

LISTON

Yeah. I'm getting paid for it. I mean, I will never do nothing for fun. [laughter] I was writing music by this [time] for different acts who would come in and didn't have their music. I was writing music.

ISOARDI

You were already doing arrangements?

LISTON

Yeah. Well, that was when I was back in school, because he set me up. I did know about the horns and the things, but I didn't know to set them up on the score paper. And he told me, "Well, the reeds are first and the trumpet next," and you got it. [laughter] And I just went on from there.

ISOARDI

Had you done any arranging before that? Any writing before that?

LISTON

No. I had done some things, but not writing. I mean, I wrote, but it wasn't orchestral writing. So I had to learn how to do that. And he's with me, you know, today.

ISOARDI

Really?

LISTON

I mean, you know-- Yeah. I think he's dead now.

ISOARDI

What was his name?

LISTON

Oh, dear. Let's see. He wrote to me down in Jamaica. He heard that I was down there. Stanley? I can't think of it right now. I'll think of it later.

ISOARDI

He was one of your teachers at Poly?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Marvelous. So you were arranging when you were seventeen, as well. That must have been exciting, especially at seventeen, being able to hear your arrangements. So you're writing for the band there.

LISTON

Well, I didn't know about exciting and all of that stuff, because I had to do what I had to do, and I just went on and did it. I didn't know about excitement and everything, you know. I don't know about it today, because, whatever, you have to write, so you write. That's it.

ISOARDI

You're a natural. You just do it because you have to do it. That's who you are. Marvelous. So you're seventeen, then, you're playing on Central Avenue at the Lincoln Theatre. What did--?

LISTON

That's Twenty-eighth Street or--

ISOARDI

Twenty-third [Street] and Central?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Do you remember, maybe, if you have any thoughts about what Central was like then? Do you remember the first time you saw Central Avenue at night or how the boulevard struck you then?

LISTON

I don't--

ISOARDI

What the action was like?

LISTON

I was there. I don't remember when I saw it. I was there morning and night, and it was home to me. I don't remember how it was because it was like home.

ISOARDI

Right. Well, most of your time, obviously, I guess, was at the Lincoln. Did you have a chance to go to other places then and see what was going on?

LISTON

No, no. When I was there I didn't have-- Well, I didn't want to. I mean, I didn't know where everything was and all of those things, and I wasn't attuned to those things at that time, you know. When I joined Gerald [Wilson], and we spent maybe a year or so together, then I got wind of Central and all of those things.

ISOARDI

But not at seventeen.

LISTON

No.

ISOARDI

So you'd do your gig and you'd go home.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. If the band was going to do something, well, I would do whatever they were doing. But other than that, I was just a homebody.

ISOARDI

Do you remember who else you played with in that band? Is there anyone who sticks out in your mind?

LISTON

I've got pictures.

ISOARDI

You have pictures of that first band?

LISTON

Uh-huh. I have pictures of my trombone section, anyway. Wait just a minute here and let it go, because I can't remember what-- [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI

Okay. So at this time, then, playing at the Lincoln Theatre is pretty much what you're doing.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And maybe doing a little bit of schoolwork, that's all. You're finishing that up?

LISTON

No, to finish the schoolwork, I mean, he told me how to do everything.

ISOARDI

How to arrange?

LISTON

Yeah. So that was that. And I went onto Bardu and started writing for them-- I mean, I didn't write for the band per se; I just wrote for the acts that came in and didn't have their music.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. Did you want to write for the band?

LISTON

No, I didn't.

ISOARDI

You didn't ask them if you could do it?

LISTON

No, I didn't even think about it. I just wanted to do what was necessary. So that was the way that was.

ISOARDI

So how long were you at the Lincoln in Bardu Ali's band?

LISTON

About one year, I guess.

ISOARDI

Did that pay pretty well?

LISTON

Yeah, it was all right then. I don't know what it was paying, but it was a hundred and something a week. It was nice. Yeah. I can't remember the wherewithal, but it was nice.

ISOARDI

And you were living at home.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You were living with your mom and your aunts?

LISTON

No, just my mom and me.

ISOARDI

And your mom was working, I guess.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So between the two of you, you're doing okay, then.

LISTON

Yeah. I guess about a year, and then we finished. But all the time in that year there was Valaida Snow. I remember her name. And comedy girls. And me with, I mean-- You know, the other guy. They would all be so funny.

ISOARDI

Oh, they were the girls who would be with the comedians on the stage?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So the comedians would sort of use them in their acts, and they were straight, but they were very pretty, probably.

LISTON

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

And she was one of them? Valaida Snow?

LISTON

No, no, she was an artist. She was a singer and a trumpet player. I don't know if I got the name right.

ISOARDI

You know, I think you did, because I know I've seen that name. Isn't she from Chicago or--?

LISTON

I don't know, but--

ISOARDI

For some reason she really sticks out. But she played on stage, then, and not with the band. She sang and played trumpet on stage.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Was she good?

LISTON

[She] was very good. But once a week we'd have different-- The ladies and men, they came in-- I mean, I can't even talk about them because there were so many. We had the Sweethearts of Rhythm band.

ISOARDI

That's an all-girl band.

LISTON

Yeah. Oh, oh, oh.

ISOARDI

What? What?

LISTON

They wanted to take me with them. I hid. [laughter] Oh.

ISOARDI

[laughter] Why? Why did you hide from them? They were pretty well known.

LISTON

Yeah, but, boy, the other thing--

ISOARDI

They liked girls.

LISTON

Oh, lordy. [laughter] Shit. When I heard that, boy, I had to run off and hide. Shit.

ISOARDI

You know, that's funny. I was talking to Clora Bryant.

LISTON

Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

She said she came in town when she was only eighteen years old or something, and she was playing, I think, somewhere where they were playing. It was Internationals or one of those groups. And she said backstage she noticed her first night there that they were all touching each other. She said she was so naive, she didn't know what was going on. She went back and told her father, and her father then insisted every intermission, between sets, she had to get on the bus and come home. [laughter] He wouldn't let her stay backstage.

LISTON

Yes, indeed. Oh, Lord. That's awful. I was riding with two of them or something, and they got to carrying on as-- I mean, not carrying on with each other. They were talking to--

ISOARDI

Looking at you?

LISTON

Oh, Lord. And I said, "I'll be back" or something or other, and I went and hid. And they went on, and then I went and told my mother. And the next night I went back to the band that I was working with then. I was supposed to be

fired. I mean, I wasn't supposed to be fired, but they had already let me go because I was going with the girls.

ISOARDI

With the Sweethearts.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, you were going to go with them.

LISTON

Yeah!

ISOARDI

Oh, boy. So you quit the band, you were all set to go with the Sweethearts, and then you found out that there was a little more involved.

LISTON

Yes, indeed. And I went on back. But they didn't hire anybody anyhow, because they knew I was coming back. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Bardu Ali knew but he didn't tell you?

LISTON

Yeah. [laughter] No, no. Shit. They knew I was coming back. I said, "Oh, Lord have mercy." [laughter] Oh, dear. I didn't know that. I didn't know anything about freaks and anything. Oh, dear. But there were some good girls in there and all of that, so that's all right.

ISOARDI

As a musical group, they were pretty good? They could all really play.

LISTON

Not as good as we were, but, you know-- [laughter] They couldn't solo and stuff as well as the boys, but they were good.

ISOARDI

Did you have any problems when you were in the band? Were you the only girl in that band at the Lincoln?

LISTON

Well, there was one girl. The piano player [Alice Young] that was with Miss Hightower, she came with the band for a while, but then she went. But that was it.

ISOARDI

So it's pretty much you. Were there any problems, the fact that you were the only--? The guys treated you okay? You didn't feel any kind of discrimination or anything?

LISTON

I don't know, because I was with Bardu and heading and all of that.

ISOARDI

So they knew you had it.

LISTON

Uh-huh. But after Gerald's band and all the rest of them, they had things about me that couldn't be resolved or something. Yeah. Shit.

ISOARDI

Well, on the whole, it sounds like a pretty good experience, then.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Not only musically, but you grew up a little bit. [laughter]

LISTON

Yes, indeed. Oh, yes, sir.

ISOARDI

Maybe you can tell me a little bit about the Lincoln itself, what kind of place it was, what the audiences were like. Were they mixed audiences at all? Or was it mostly people from the black community?

LISTON

No, black, yeah. They just had a marvelous time. When the picture was on they clapped and everything.

ISOARDI

So they'd show movies.

LISTON

Yeah. And then, when the stage show came on, they clapped and everything. They were a nice audience.

ISOARDI

Was it a big place?

LISTON

Yeah, it was two-story. I mean, one and a--

ISOARDI

Oh, like a balcony upstairs.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So it holds a few hundred people.

LISTON

Uh-huh. I don't know if it's still there or not.

ISOARDI

There's not much, unfortunately, that's-- I don't know the last time you were down there, but there's not much left.

LISTON

I haven't seen it in beaucoup years. I don't know anything about it.

ISOARDI

The Dunbar [Hotel] is still there. And I think they're going to preserve it as a landmark.

LISTON

Oh, okay.

ISOARDI

But there's nothing else. I think there's a warehouse or a women's lingerie factory or something where the union used to be. There's an empty lot where the [Club] Alabam used to be. Where there was the Gaiety-- then it was called the Jungle Room--it's just a lot. Most of the places were burned in '65.

LISTON

Oh.

ISOARDI

And the other ones you just wouldn't know. You wouldn't know anything. When I saw Art Farmer I guess about six, seven months ago, when he came to town, he went and took a ride. He hadn't seen it in a long time. So before we did the interview, he wanted to take a ride to refresh his memory and see it. And I think it shook him up a bit, because afterwards he said-- He hadn't been down there in years. And he said, "You know, there's nothing left. I wonder if my childhood was an illusion, because nothing's left there that I recognize, that suggests that I had all these great times and this is where I learned to play and everything else." It's too bad. Sad. So they are going to save the Dunbar. And I think they've got a museum now, or they're starting one, on the first floor of the Dunbar, a Central Avenue Museum. I know the union building isn't there anymore.

LISTON

I don't like-- I mean, that's all right. The union building. [laughter] That's all right. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Too many memories of Elmer Fain? [laughter]

LISTON

I mean, besides all of that, there was nothing there. But next door used to be Lester--

ISOARDI

The Young family.

LISTON

Yeah, Lester Young.

ISOARDI

They had a house next door to the union.

LISTON

Uh-huh. All the Youngs lived way down-- I don't know what their names were, but the one that joined Miss Hightower's band was I guess maybe fourteen or something like that when I was maybe seventeen. I don't know when they dispelled this thing, but it was '45, '46. I mean, in '45 they were still there. I don't know when. But anyway, that was that.

ISOARDI

So, okay, you're at the Lincoln Theatre for a year, and then you moved on.

LISTON

Yeah, I moved right on to Gerald's band.

ISOARDI

Gerald hires you from that.

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

Wonderful. Gerald Wilson had his big band put together then?

LISTON

Well, he was getting the big band.

ISOARDI

This is his first one, I guess, after he left [Jimmie] Lunceford?

LISTON

Yeah. So I think he did us at the musicians union for a long time.

ISOARDI

You rehearsed there?

LISTON

Yeah. He got the group together there.

ISOARDI

I see. So how did he hire you?

LISTON

I don't know.

ISOARDI

He must have heard about you somehow.

LISTON

Oh, I think he already knew or something, you know, because it was just a matter of "Be there at such and such a time" and everything.

ISOARDI

That was it.

LISTON

Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Well, he knew what he wanted.

LISTON

But some people out of the same band that I played with at the theater went with his band, so it wasn't just me, you know.

ISOARDI

Aha. So he took a few people from that band at the Lincoln.

LISTON

Yeah, because we were all breaking up. You know, the band was breaking up from the Lincoln.

ISOARDI

Oh, it was. Why was that happening?

LISTON

Because they didn't have any more shows in there.

ISOARDI

Oh, they were stopping it?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Was it going to be all movies? Is that what they were going to do?

LISTON

Yeah, I guess. I don't know. I don't even know what happened after that.

ISOARDI

So you were about eighteen then, and Gerald hires you to play in his new big band. You played trombone. Does he expect you to do any writing for them, any arranging? Or does that come up later?

LISTON

That's later.

ISOARDI

That's later. So he hires you because he knows your reputation as a trombonist.

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

And then what happened? What happened with that band?

LISTON

Well, they rehearsed and rehearsed, and we would go to work at a place on First Street. It was owned by Japanese, but they had to go off somewhere. The Japanese had to go.

ISOARDI

Yeah. I guess they locked them up in the internment camps.

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. And it was nice there.

ISOARDI

So that was your first gig. Gerald's first gig with his big band was downtown. Were you playing mostly, I guess, his music in that band? Or were you playing some of Lunceford? Do you remember that? I know that's reaching quite a bit.

LISTON

I don't know. I know much of it was his music, but I don't know if all of it was. And we had shows up there, too.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

LISTON

Leonard Reed and all of those things. He was in charge of the dances or something and all of those. I can't remember. But it was groovy then.

ISOARDI

Aside from you and Gerald, do you remember any of the other people in the band? Were you the only woman in the band?

LISTON

I guess so. Yeah. You know, I didn't think about that. All the time I don't think about being the only-- Because I had my work to do, you dig? I don't ever think about [being] the only female.

ISOARDI

That's probably just as well.

LISTON

I guess. I don't know what question you asked me.

ISOARDI

Oh, yes. If you just happen to remember any of the other people who were in the band then-- Anyone who sticks out, maybe, or not?

LISTON

Snooky [Young] was with the band, but I don't know if it was then or later. I can't remember. But he was with the band for a long time, Snooky Young. I can't think of the 'bone players' names, but I've got them over in my suitcase. I'll look at them before I talk to you. Oh, I can't--

ISOARDI

You can see who it is but you can't think of the names?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, we'll get it next time. So you guys began, then, playing, I guess, around the avenue, and then did you travel a little bit?

LISTON

Not on Central--

ISOARDI

You played downtown more or less.

LISTON

Uh-huh. So, yeah, we traveled. We had hard times out there.

ISOARDI

Where?

LISTON

Out on the road.

ISOARDI

Everywhere?

LISTON

No. But once in a while we would get stranded and all of those things. And we had to get our parents to send for us.

ISOARDI

Now, how did your mother react? You're eighteen and you're about to go on the road with all these guys?

LISTON

She was-- No. That was all right with her.

ISOARDI

Oh, it was. No problem.

LISTON

No, it was all right, because I'd been that way since I was ten or so, so--

ISOARDI

So she knew it was coming. It was just a matter of time.

LISTON

Uh-huh. So she supported you pretty much for your being a musician and playing--

LISTON

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, dear.

ISOARDI

So with Gerald, did you travel all across the country?

LISTON

Uh-huh. We went to New York and played right behind Jimmie Lunceford.

ISOARDI

Really?

LISTON

The Apollo [Theatre]. We played the following week after he played.

ISOARDI

No kidding. What was that like, playing at the Apollo?

LISTON

It was all right. We did really good. Yeah. And we played the theme song over there, we played it as a band number. It was terrific. You know, that was his arrangement and everything, so that was terrific. So they said they weren't ready for us to be playing that for a band number, because we were supposed to be playing that for-- And it went over so good, you know. Yeah, it was all right. But we circled around and came back to Chicago, and we got stranded there. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Tough place to be stranded.

LISTON

Yeah, well, you know.

ISOARDI

How did you get stranded?

LISTON

Well, you run out of money.

ISOARDI

Oh, boy. Were guys not paying you? Was that what was going on?

LISTON

Yeah, or something, I don't know.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. So how did you get out of there?

LISTON

Well, I had money, because I--

ISOARDI

You had been saving. [laughter]

LISTON

Yeah. But I had some relatives there, and I was staying with them, and they stole my money.

ISOARDI

Your relatives did?

LISTON

Yeah. I mean, somebody's relatives, because they weren't my relatives, but-- Anyway, I packed up and went off to the hotel with the other guys. I don't know how we got out of there, but we-- [laughter]

ISOARDI

Somehow. [laughter]

LISTON

Yeah. Oh, Lord have mercy. I have not thought of these things. Oh, dear.

ISOARDI

They sound like a lot of great memories.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

When you were on the road-- Again, you don't think about it much, but you're the only woman now in a very successful big band. Any trouble on the road with them, with the guys? I mean--

LISTON

Yeah, yeah. All of that. Yeah.

ISOARDI

What kind of trouble?

LISTON

Rapes and everything.

ISOARDI

That kind of stuff?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

But not from the band itself.

LISTON

Yeah. So that's that.

ISOARDI

Whoa. Hard dues.

LISTON

I've been going through that stuff for all my life.

ISOARDI

When stuff like that would happen, could you go to Gerald, any of the--?

LISTON

Go to the doctor.

ISOARDI

That was it?

LISTON

Go to the doctor and tell him, and that was that.

ISOARDI

Nothing else you could do?

LISTON

Uh-uh. Anyway, that's not-- I don't even want to hear about-- I mean, I don't want to talk about that. It was all right. When I started going with Gerald I was okay.

ISOARDI

Oh, you were going with Gerald?

LISTON

No, at that time I wasn't.

ISOARDI

Oh, with the band. Oh, you mean it was better with him, with that band?

LISTON

Yeah, because I had support.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. For a minute I thought you were talking about his band.

LISTON

Yeah, I mean, when I started going with him, then it was better, because I had his support. So I didn't have to worry anymore. And I think after that I didn't have to worry. But then I left in '55, and I went back to Dizzy [Gillespie]'s band, and it was the same thing all over again. Yeah, well, you know, it's a broad, and she's by herself. That's that, you know. But anyway--

ISOARDI

Yeah.

LISTON

That's that. But the older I got, the less it happened. [laughter] I don't know how old I was, but it stopped altogether.

ISOARDI

It probably wasn't too long ago.

LISTON

No, it was--

ISOARDI

You were kind of a knockout when you were young. [laughter] That picture is amazing.

LISTON

That was when I was in Jamaica. I came back here.

ISOARDI

Yeah, but even that one is amazing. Wonderful.

LISTON

Thank you.

ISOARDI

Hard times on the road. Boy. How long were you with Gerald, that first band, then, when--?

LISTON

About five years or so.

ISOARDI

Five straight years? Long time. So throughout pretty much the war [World War II] years, then--

LISTON

I guess, yeah.

ISOARDI

--you were with Gerald. And that's traveling all the time with that band, I guess?

LISTON

Oh, when we came back from-- Well, we were on the road, and then we came back-- Let me see. Gerald and I went with Dizzy's band in '50 or I don't know when, and then we went to Lady Day [Billie Holiday]'s band. He put a band together for her.

ISOARDI

Did you have a part in that?

LISTON

Yeah. We went down South with her.

ISOARDI

South with Lady Day?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, boy.

LISTON

That was something, or nothing. I don't know.

ISOARDI

Well, that was sometime in the fifties, then.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Had you been down South before with any of the bands? Was that your first real trip to the South?

LISTON

We had gone down the East Coast, yeah.

ISOARDI

That was pretty much it? You never swung through--

LISTON

No, no, no.

ISOARDI

--Alabama, Mississippi?

LISTON

No, no, no. [laughter]

ISOARDI

But it was probably bad enough just going to the East Coast.

LISTON

Oh, Lord.

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ISOARDI

Okay, Melba. Let's pick up where we stopped off last time, down South with Lady Day [Billie Holiday].

LISTON

Yeah, we got stranded down in South Carolina somewhere.

ISOARDI

How did you get stranded?

LISTON

No money.

ISOARDI

People not paying you again?

LISTON

Yeah, or something. I don't know. Gerald [Wilson] was the bandleader, and I was only a portion of the band. But, I don't know, I guess Lady didn't have any more gigs or something, or she ran off and she didn't do her gig or something like that. And we were on the bus day and night, you know. So Gerald would pull out money, our money, and do with the fellows and tell them to go get something to eat and everything for about three or four days or so. I got sick of that and I said, "Man, come on. We had enough to get to Kansas City." And I said, "We've got to go," because my money was in there too, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, sure.

LISTON

So we got to Kansas City. And we had money out here, in Los Angeles, so we sent for it, and it was two days getting to us. So we had oatmeal--

ISOARDI

Three times a day?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, boy,

LISTON

But we saw the baseball games and stuff. It was all right, because we knew that we were going to get straight, you know. So that was how--

ISOARDI

So you just made the best of it--

LISTON

So we came on back. I think I quit the band or something, and I went to work for the [Los Angeles City] Board of Education.

ISOARDI

When you came back to L.A., then? This must be the forties, the late forties or so?

LISTON

Yeah, '50, I guess. And I worked there for three years or so.

ISOARDI

Did you stop playing music altogether?

LISTON

Well, I did for a while, and then I picked it up again. I was just too disgusted, so for about two years I didn't do anything, and then I started getting back into it, you know. And I worked a couple of movies, and I--

ISOARDI

How did you arrange that? What kind of movies?

LISTON

I didn't do it. I mean, when they had musical parts they had musicians, so I did some musicals.

ISOARDI

With which studios did you--?

LISTON

MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] and I can't remember.

ISOARDI

Do you remember who hired you?

LISTON

Yeah, it's-- Oh, it was for The Ten Commandments .

ISOARDI

Oh really.

LISTON

It was a band. You know, we were playing in the-- But I don't think we see it now.

ISOARDI

You mean they cut that scene?

LISTON

Yeah. I mean, the music is heard, but I don't think-- And that one was with Lana Turner, where I had a long thing with her. I mean, I followed her around and played the musical harp, but I don't see that anymore.

ISOARDI

What movie was that?

LISTON

I can't remember. Oh, shoot. [laughter]

ISOARDI

Gee, you should try to get a copy of the movie, if you could, the original movie.

LISTON

Yeah. I know, but I don't see it, and I don't hear about it or anything, you know. And I can't remember the name of it, so that's that. [The Prodigal]

ISOARDI

In the late forties or so, before you stopped playing, did you play in any of the other clubs on Central Avenue? Are there people you played with down on the avenue that you might remember or stick out in your mind?

LISTON

Well, I mentioned Gerald's band.

ISOARDI

Yeah. That was your first job after the Lincoln [Theatre], right?

LISTON

No, I mean that was the big band, but the small band--

ISOARDI

Oh, you went with a small group, also.

LISTON

Yeah, we worked on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI

Where at?

LISTON

At Forty-first [Street] and Central at the-- I don't know.

ISOARDI

The Downbeat [Club] or the Last Word [Cafe] or--? Is it one of those?

LISTON

No, it was not-- Let's see. I can't remember. But it was on the corner and a thing in back of a restaurant or something. A little bitty place in back of us, and we used to live in there or something. But I can't remember.

ISOARDI

So you played with Gerald quite a bit, then.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Did you stay with the small group for a while?

LISTON

We stayed together for, I don't know, one or two years or so.

ISOARDI

Quite a while. And you played regularly.

LISTON

Well, we played there for many years, meaning off and on, off and on for I don't know how many times.

ISOARDI

Yeah, quite a bit. Steady. Did you ever go to attend any of the jam sessions or the after-hours clubs?

LISTON

Yeah, but I can't remember. I can't think of who they are. I try to, but, I mean, you know--

ISOARDI

Do you remember any of the sessions or what you got out of the sessions or what your feelings about them were?

LISTON

Well, it was nice. I mean, it was not profound or disheartening or anything. It was just nice.

ISOARDI

A chance to keep on playing?

LISTON

And it was a chance to see the other people whom we didn't see in your rounds. So that was the most part. I didn't pick up on anything moral or

amoral or something like that. No, it was nice to say hello to the people and all of those things.

ISOARDI

Right. Did you get a lot musically out of those jams?

LISTON

No, no. You just happened to say hello and everything, that's all. You don't get much from the jam sessions.

ISOARDI

You don't pick up other ideas from people or anything like that?

LISTON

I don't, anyway. I don't know if anybody else does, but I don't.

ISOARDI

You remember the Lincoln Theatre, obviously, very well. You spent I guess a year in that band, and it seems like you did quite a bit there. Were there any other places that you played in down there? Were there any other places at all that you remember, that stick out in your mind for one reason or another?

LISTON

I don't know about it, and I didn't go there, but I used to hear about-- Let me see, I used to hear about them all the time, but I didn't go there.

ISOARDI

Which ones did you hear about? Anything stick out in your mind?

LISTON

I know the musicians that worked there, and I can't think of their names either, boy. It's across town. I mean, it's a boozy joint, I mean, whites and stuff joints, you know. I can't remember.

ISOARDI

That's okay. Did you make any close friends when you were on the avenue? Who did you hang with? Did you have friends who were musicians also? Or did you have friends who--?

LISTON

Oh, yeah, I had all of the friends, musicians, you know. The rest of them are not my friends. They were all musicians. Yeah.

ISOARDI

Who are some of the people? I guess Gerald you certainly saw a lot of down in the avenue.

LISTON

Yeah, but, you know-- I mean, musicians, that's all. All of them. I don't know. I mean, the guys, that's one thing, but all the guys in the bands all over the place. They were my friends

ISOARDI

Can I throw some names at you--

LISTON

Okay.

ISOARDI

--to see if you get some memories? Dexter Gordon.

LISTON

Yeah. Well, I was friends with him since we were on the same record-- Well, before Gerald and I were together.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You were on the recording session with him?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Wow. Was that when you were playing at the Lincoln?

LISTON

No. I guess I was with Gerald, but we hadn't made any records.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. How did you get picked for that? Did you know him?

LISTON

I knew him from all the years back from school.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. Do you have any other memories of him? How did he strike you way back then?

LISTON

He was a friend, you know. I mean, it was a friend, friend, friend. That's all. I didn't know anything about no special or anything like that. That was all.

ISOARDI

How did he strike you musically?

LISTON

He was great! Yeah, he was great then and all the time.

ISOARDI

Marvelous performer. And a pretty good actor, too, as it turned out. [laughter]

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Let me throw some other names at you. Charles Mingus. Did you know him?

LISTON

Yeah. I mean, all the guys--

ISOARDI

Okay, no matter who I say you're probably going to know them, right?
[laughter]

LISTON

Yeah. Well, I worked with him in New York, but I knew him all the time when he was out here.

ISOARDI

Oh, there was a band that I've heard a lot about, and people say that it's one of the best jazz bands that was never recorded. It was a group that lasted only a short while in 1946 called the Stars of Swing, with Mingus and Buddy Collette and Lucky Thompson and Britt Woodman. And I think they played for four or six weeks at the Downbeat--

LISTON

Oh yeah--

ISOARDI

And that was it. Did you ever see them?

LISTON

I don't think I saw them, but I knew them one by one, you know.

ISOARDI

Really? Each one of them?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

Lucky Thompson. Did you ever play with him?

LISTON

Yeah, in a group, but not individually.

ISOARDI

You know, when I first started doing this, I started putting together a list of all the musicians that came out of Central Avenue, and it's a long, long list.

LISTON

Yeah, we all came from there if we were out here.

ISOARDI

But there were just so many good people. People talk about other cities-- Chicago, New Orleans, Kansas City, New York, and all--but L.A. produced. The list is just as long as any other place.

LISTON

Yeah. I'm so glad to be doing this, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, the thing that struck me is when I found out how amazing the scene was in terms of the quality of the people and the musicianship, and no one knows about Central. You know, the books have been written on all these other cities, but no one sat down and said, "Look at what came out of Central Avenue."

LISTON

That's very nice of you.

ISOARDI

Oh, well, it's a way of thanking you and all of your friends from years of great music, and preserving that so people know about it. It would be terrible to lose that. Did you notice at all during the forties--? I mean, I guess Central Avenue changed quite a bit. By the late forties, early fifties, it wasn't what it used to be.

LISTON

It was the same during the forties. It got to be strange I guess around '49 or '50 and all of that stuff, but--

ISOARDI

What do you mean strange?

LISTON

I mean it just changed. But it was about the same in the forties all the time.

ISOARDI

When it started changing, do you have any thoughts on why?

LISTON

No. You know. Whitey.

ISOARDI

Did what?

LISTON

Decided it was going to change, so it changed.

ISOARDI

Shut it down?

LISTON

Yeah. That's all.

ISOARDI

Now, I've heard stories about the police coming in and really harassing people and trying to drive customers away from the clubs.

LISTON

I don't know.

ISOARDI

Did you ever see anything like that?

LISTON

No, I don't know about those, but I know the businesses failed and all of that, you know. They moved west. Western Avenue did it for a while.

ISOARDI

Had some clubs there and places to play? But was it like Central at all?

LISTON

Not really, but it was trying. But it wasn't like Central. You know, it was trying to be progressive and all that. So I don't know.

ISOARDI

Earlier we talked a little about the union [American Federation of Musicians]. You joined when you were very young and started working right away. Were you active at all within the union itself? I know by the late forties there was a movement to amalgamate the two unions [Local 47 and Local 767]. Maybe you could talk about that, how you felt about it, if you were active in that, if you thought it was a good thing or bad thing.

LISTON

I guess I didn't know whether it was good or bad, but it was going on, so I had to go along with it. It was good for getting us out of the place over there on Central Avenue. But it was bad for a lot of reasons, too. It was good and bad. The thing is, you've got no place in this white world. So that's the other side of it, you know. You get a place, and then you just make it. I mean, some make it and some don't. It's hard, and you have to try to make it, but it's-- I can't say it.

ISOARDI

It seems to me that--tell me if I'm wrong-- you're suggesting that it was good because you want more opportunities, and by joining the 47 it will open things up.

LISTON

Yeah--

ISOARDI

On the other hand, you had a place of your own, and you lost that.

LISTON

Yeah, and the reason they had us there was because they wanted us there, but they didn't want us there-- I mean--

ISOARDI

You're talking about Local 47, the white union?

LISTON

Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI

So they really didn't want to have you there, but they wanted you there so they could control it. Something like that?

LISTON

Yeah. Anyway, some of them did and some of them didn't. But they didn't want us to share in their glory at all.

ISOARDI

So even after you amalgamated, it was still tougher than ever getting the work, getting the jobs. And then you didn't even have your own place to back you up.

LISTON

Uh-huh. But that wasn't the place, anyway, old--

ISOARDI

Old 767? It didn't do such a good job of supporting you?

LISTON

No.

ISOARDI

It's always a fight.

LISTON

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Do you remember any other places down on the avenue? Maybe not clubs or anything, but were there any--? Because we're sort of interested in not just the clubs and the music, but anything you might remember about the avenue at any times. Places you went to eat that you thought were pretty good or unusual characters down there that you might remember. Anything like that. You know, somebody once told me, too, that you had a parade. Was it every year? There was a parade down Central Avenue?

LISTON

Yeah, I guess.

ISOARDI

Do you remember any of that?

LISTON

No. I think they had one, but I didn't participate. I didn't want to, you know. I was only interested in my big-time music by then.

ISOARDI

You were focused, weren't you. [laughter] You were really focused. You mentioned that, I guess, when you were working at the Lincoln Theatre you first started doing some arranging for some of the other groups that came into town. When did you start arranging for big bands and things like that? Was that when you were working with Gerald that you started doing some arranging?

LISTON

I did it for the Lincoln.

ISOARDI

For the band at the Lincoln Theatre, also? Oh, I see.

LISTON

Because when they had no music, well, I had to do it.

ISOARDI

So Gerald also gave you a chance, then, to arrange and to--

LISTON

Yeah, after a while.

ISOARDI

Once he was a little bit sure about you, I guess.

LISTON

Yeah, I guess.

ISOARDI

And knew what you were doing. Okay. Was Gerald a good bandleader to work with?

LISTON

I think so, but some of the guys don't think so.

ISOARDI

Why was that? What did they not like? Was he too tough or too strict? Or was it too hard to play his charts?

LISTON

No, no, nothing like that. He was all right. I don't know, because that was male to male, and I'm a female, so I don't know about that. But we had hard times all the time. All the time.

ISOARDI

Do you remember any other women musicians down there at the time?

LISTON

Oh, well, Alice Young was the piano player at the Lincoln for a while. She had something wrong with her back and all of that, so she doesn't play anymore. Vi Redd and Vi Burnside. I don't know where she plays and all of that, but she had it for a little while. I mean, she does things now for I don't know who and everything.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I think she's still playing. I know a couple of years ago I think there was a Central Avenue concert at the Shrine [Auditorium] or something, and she was playing alto [saxophone].

LISTON

And Vi Burnside, she plays, but I think her mother died or something this year, so she-- But she plays bass.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

LISTON

Uh-huh. She went back wherever her mother was, but she's out here, and she plays all the time. But I think it's for a girls band or something.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see. So throughout this period, then, you're pretty much with Gerald during the forties, in his band and in his small group. And you stayed with him pretty much until you decide to call it quits for a few years? So you took a job with the board of education.

LISTON

Uh-huh. I had little jobs in between I guess the third year or so, when I started leaving the board of ed. And then Dizzy [Gillespie] came out here, and I wrote

a couple of charts for him, and he told me to get ready, because he was going to send for me when he got the new band. So I did.

ISOARDI

And that's what got you back to playing again. And then you pretty much stayed with music then.

LISTON

Uh-huh.

ISOARDI

Melba, but let me ask you, summing up, getting toward the end, in looking back, what would you say you got out of Central Avenue?

LISTON

I got a lot. I can't remember all the things that I used to remember, but I was pretty thrilled about Central at the time. I don't remember why or anything, but it was nice, you know.

ISOARDI

A lot of excitement, I guess.

LISTON

Yeah. It was nice. It was exhilarating or something. And it was a peak above. It was not ordinary; it was a peak above that, you know. It was all right.

ISOARDI

So it contributed a lot to your musical growth?

LISTON

Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. I'm sorry I don't remember, but it was all right.

ISOARDI

That's okay. Do you have any final thoughts or comments you'd like to put down about that whole experience?

LISTON

Well, let me see. I don't know. I don't expect anything to stay the same all over the world, but Central Avenue was great, and, I mean, that's that, you know. That's the way it is. That's all.

ISOARDI

Okay, Melba. Thank you very much.

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