Central Avenue Sounds: Anthony Ortega Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi
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None.

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Photographs

- Anthony Ortega, 1992
- Ortega (far right) with the Jordan High School Junior Hep Cats, 1947
- Ortega playing with Lionel Hampton (left), 1952

1. Tape Number: I, Side One (September 10, 1994)

Isoardi

Let's begin the interview by going back to pretty much as far back as you can remember-where you were born and what the area was like.

Ortega

Okay. I was born in Watts on 1784 105th Street on June 7, 1928. And I believe it was in the front room at that time-

Isoardi

You were born in your home?

Ortega

I was born in the house, yeah. I was born in the house. We all were. My brother and sister, we were all born in the house there on 105th Street. I'm not certain, but I- Well, it was either the bedroom or the front room. But anyway, yeah, I was born in Watts there on 105th Street.

Isoardi

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Ortega

I've got a brother and a sister. I'm the youngest. My brother's name is Jimmie [James Ortega]. He also went to Jordan High School. We all went to Jordan High School. My sister's name is Katherine [Ortega Lopez]. I'm the only one who went into the music as a career, so to speak.This is neither here nor there, but when I used to practice- I started the very first day I got my saxophone, February 6, 1943, when I was about fourteen years old. My sister had already

started taking piano lessons. We lived in Watts there. And the piano teacher used to come by the house and give her lessons-Mr. Murray was his name-he used to come by on a bicycle. I was the oddball, because I used to play the sax and made a lot of noise. So they used to make me practice in the garage. [laughter] I used to have to go in the back and practice in the garage. My sister got to practice in the house, you know.

Isoardi

Somehow, even when you're playing the saxophone soft it sounds loud.

Ortega

Yeah, especially when you're just starting.But anyway, I went to 102nd Street Elementary School there.

Isoardi

Actually, before you get into your grammar school, Tony, let me ask you about your parents' background.

Ortega

Oh, yeah, okay.

Isoardi

How much do you know about your family background and where they were from?

Ortega

My father was born in La Paz, lower California there, Baja California, and his name was Genaro [Ortega]. He died when I was nine years old. My mother is still alive, and her name is Amparo [Araujo]. She goes by Grace now. I mean, she is eighty-nine [years old] now. She is still going strong.

Isoardi

Amazing.

Ortega

Anyway, she was born in El Paso, Texas, but they're both of Mexican descent. My father's father-in other words, my grandfather-was a general, General Felix Ortega, during the revolutionary war there in Mexico or whatever was going on. But he was kind of a bigshot there, General Ortega.

Isoardi

Which side was he on?

Ortega

I guess he was on the side that was trying to gain back whatever it was that they were fighting about, Pancho Villa's army. [laughter] I don't know. But, yeah, he was pretty heavy I hear.

Isoardi

Really? I guess you never knew him.

Ortega

I never knew him, no. In fact, I didn't really get to know my dad much because- Well, unfortunately he and my mom got a divorce when I was about seven. My bigger brother stayed with my dad, so he got to know my dad better. But my sister and I went with my mom. He died when I was nine, so unfortunately I didn't really get to know him.

Isoardi

How did he and your mom end up in Southern California? Did they meet in Southern California?

Ortega

You know, I don't know. I'm going to have to check that out. I'm going to ask her one day. I never really found out how they met. That's a good question.

Isoardi

Do you know if they knew each other before they got here?

Ortega

I don't think so. Where they met? Gee, I don't know. But anyway, later on she got married to another man whom she remained with. He died about seven or eight years ago. He was really a nice guy. His name was- Well, we used to call him "Cuc." You know, it sounds funny, "Cuc." It's Cuco, which is an abbreviation for Rejugio, Rufus. Rejugio Maldonado Araujo. It goes on down there, you know, in the line. But he used to pick oranges in the Orange County area many years ago. I was just a kid and up in the groves out there, man. I used to go out there with my BB gun and hunt for little rabbits, just shoot at them. I wouldn't ever hit any or anything, anyway. But in other words, the point is that there was so much- It was different then at that time, of course, many, many years ago.But getting back to the childhood thing, when I would start going to kindergarten- During the divorce period- Or was it during the divorce-? No, it was before the divorce. We lived in Highland Park for a while, so I started kindergarten at Garvanza [Avenue Elementary School] in Highland Park.

Isoardi

So you moved from Watts when you were about four years old?

Ortega

Yeah, something like that. We moved to Highland Park for a while.

Isoardi

Why did you move? Do you know why your mom moved?

Ortega

I have no idea. I have no idea. All I remember is that we had a nice, pretty backyard with loquat trees, man. That was my favorite, loquats. It was a nice little two-story house, and it was near Avenue 33 or Avenue 29 or somewhere around there. Anyway, then that's what it was. Then that's when they got the divorce. That's when my mom moved to Watts and my dad- I don't know what-

Well, actually he stayed there. He ended up staying there, and he died from- He went to the hospital and had an operation. In [Los Angeles] County [General] Hospital at that time, in L.A. County Hospital, I guess the surgeons weren't very good or whatever.But anyway, soon after that I was going to 102nd Street School there in Watts, right in downtown Watts, around 102nd Street.

Isoardi

What was the neighborhood like?

Ortega

In Watts? Oh, it was fine. It was fine. There were a lot of Mexican kids, a lot of black kids, and quite a few white kids at the time, you know. And it was pretty well integrated. Pretty good.

Isoardi

Really? I mean, I wasn't-

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

You didn't have sort of the blacks in one section and then the whites in another section and the Hispanic kids on the other?

Ortega

No. It was all integrated pretty well from- Well, the school was. Well, what happened, I guess at first it was mostly whites in Watts. Actually, I think it was a lot of Japanese people there at first. Then the whites moved in. And then little by little the Mexicans moved in, and then here come the blacks, and like that, you see. So after a while it was integrated pretty well. But at that time it was so low-key that everybody was getting along, I thought, very well at that time. It was in the- Let's see. That must have been about-

Isoardi

Early thirties?

Ortega

Early thirties or so. I was born in '28. That must have been, gee, about 1934 or in there somewhere. I don't know.

Isoardi

So as a kid growing up in Watts then, you pretty much got along with people?

Ortega

Oh, yeah.

Isoardi

You weren't aware of the racial problems in the country and things like that?

Ortega

No, no. Everybody got along fine, as far as I could- Now, after I started going to junior high at Jordan there, they used to have a few little gangs, like mostly Mexican gangs. I don't think there were any black gangs at that time that I can

remember. It was like the Mexican gangs. There was one part of Watts called La Colonia, and it was strictly all Mexicans.

Isoardi

Do you remember where that part was?

Ortega

You go down to 103rd Street until you get almost to Alameda [Street]. We used to live on Juniper Street. Well, later on we moved to 102nd Street. But anyway, if you go straight to Juniper Street from 103rd Street, you would run right into La Colonia. There was a church there, and it was strictly all Mexicans there. That's why they called it La Colonia. And they used to have these things called "Jamaica." It's like a celebration type of thing where everybody would be playing Mexican music or swing music. At that time, this one called the "No Name Jive" by Glenn Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra was very big. It used to go [sings segment of melody]. It was almost like Woody Herman doing the "Woodchoppers Ball." It was along that line, you see. And then "Frenesi" was big at that time with the Artie Shaw orchestra. They used to play a lot of those things over the loudspeakers and mic[rophone]. Then, of course, they would play a lot of Mexican *ranchera* songs and stuff like that, polkas and stuff like that.But anyway, getting back to that gang situation, there used to be some gangs, but the area was so much lower-key than it is now. I mean, maybe they would just have fights with each other, or some guys from La Colonia would have a fight with the guys from 103rd Street or something like that. But it was low-key. It was nothing like it is now.I had a friend who started Jordan High School at the same time I did. Maybe I'm jumping the gun here, but it just brings to mind this gang situation. His name was Jess Ruiz, Jesus Ruiz, but we always used to call him Chuy Ruiz. He used to play the drums, but he was also a member of one of the gangs. He used to say, "If I hadn't started playing music, I probably would have ended up in the penitentiary or shot or something." Because all his friends ended up in jail or getting shot. They used to hide behind a car, or maybe a car would drive by and they would shoot this shotgun at him or something. They thought it was fun or whatever. [laughter] But this was a long time ago. They used to do stuff like that. But anyway-

Isoardi

How big were the gangs then? Were most kids around them or in them? Or was it just a small fraction of the kids that got involved?

Ortega

No, it was a small- No, it was low-key. It was pretty low-key. In other words, it was the kids who didn't have anything else to do with themselves, just to hang out and maybe go steal cars or something. It wasn't like killing and all that. They used to have fights, you know, like that. Also, come to think about it, East L.A. used to have gangs, and sometimes they would fight with some of the

guys from Watts-"Mara" or something, some of the guys from East L.A., "Mara." And where else? "Clanton." You may have seen that movie *Zoot Suit.*

Isoardi

Yes.

Ortega

I played on the soundtrack of that-not in the movie, but when the play ran downtown in Hollywood there I played on the soundtrack, which is neither here nor there.

Isoardi

Was there much connection between the Mexican community in Watts and that of East L.A., though?

Ortega

Not that much. In other words, they were kind of like rivals.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah. They were kind of like rivals. In other words, if you were from Watts, you'd better watch it if you go to East L.A. or vice versa. But that's speaking along the gang terms. If you were an individual, you could go wherever you wanted and nobody would really know that much difference.As a matter of fact, my cousin Ray Vasquez was playing trombone at the time, and he's the one who also had a big influence on me starting on the saxophone. He told me to take lessons from Lloyd Reese. I'm sure you've heard of him.

Isoardi

Oh, yeah.

Ortega

He taught Eric Dolphy and some of the guys. He used to live on Maple Avenue, downtown there in L.A. I used to catch the streetcar from Watts. There were two red streetcars from Watts: one was the regular local, "Watts local," and the "big red." They used to call it the express. You know, it would only stop a few times, but it cost like five cents more if you wanted to get on that one.

Isoardi

Did that go up Central [Avenue]?

Ortega

No. It used to go down to downtown L.A. to maybe the middle of the town, Broadway or Main Street. Then I would catch a bus and go to Lloyd Reese's house on Maple Avenue and- I can't remember the other street there.

Isoardi

Were the people in Watts pretty much the same kind of socioeconomic background as the people in East L.A.?

Ortega

I would think so.

Isoardi

I mean, if you could afford to live say in Watts, you could afford to live in East L.A.?

Ortega

Yeah, it was about the same.

Isoardi

It was pretty much interchangeable.

Ortega

Yeah, it was about the same, I would think. However, East L.A. was practically all Mexican people. There were hardly any blacks-I don't know about now-or whites even. It was primarily all Mexican in East L.A. And they used to talk all this pachuco lingo, you know, like "Hora ese" ["Hey, man"] and all that. Well, they still do.

Isoardi

Sure.

Ortega

After all these years it's still in vogue. [laughter] That's funny.Anyway, let's see. Getting back to the 102nd Street School there-

Isoardi

All right. So you start there at kindergarten.

Ortega

No, I started at Garvanza in Highland Park.

Isoardi

And then-

Ortega

And then, by the time we moved to Watts- Maybe I was in the first or second grade or something. I don't remember. You know, everybody was getting along fine. And then I had no inkling at all that I was ever going to play an instrument.

Isoardi

So you were about six or seven years old, and you were not thinking music at all then.

Ortega

No.

Isoardi

But your older sister is playing piano at this time?

Ortega

Not quite yet.

Isoardi

Not yet. So no one in the family is really doing anything with music?

Ortega

No.

Isoardi

Your older brother?

Ortega

No. He used to like guitar, but he never did really take it up, so to speak. Let's see. How was that? He wasn't exactly a pachuco, but he used to run around with a lot of the guys who were wearing the pegged pants and the thick brogue shoes. And they used to go to dances, but he never- He was lightweight. He never got into fights and all that, but he used to like that style, like the dress and everything.The guys at that time, the dirtier your pants were the hipper it was. Like you would buy a new pair of Levis and wear them for maybe two or three or four months without washing them.

Isoardi

Oh, jeez.

Ortega

And they would get so stiff. [laughter] They would practically stand up by themselves, you know.

Isoardi

You'd have to put hinges on them.

Ortega

Yeah. You know, that was the thing. That was the thing.

Isoardi

Oh, man.

Ortega

Because if you washed them, then they would be sagging, like-

Isoardi

How could you be in the same room with them?

Ortega

Well, you know, they would be like-

Isoardi

Probably like a miner coming out of a coal mine. You could hear them-

Ortega

Yeah, they would get shiny. But that was the thing. It was "in" with a lot of the guys. [laughter] And then maybe on the weekend they would wear their creased pachuco pants or-what did they call them?- drapes. They used to call them drapes. They used to be choked at the ankle, and then it would come way out with the thick shoes, you know.

Isoardi

Did you ever go for a month?

Ortega

A little bit. You know, I wore a couple of those pants. Yeah, I liked that sometimes. Yeah. But not too much.Anyway, so then- Let's see. I went to 102nd until the fifth grade, and then I started going to Jordan High. But of course, you see, Jordan High was a combination of junior high and senior high. In other words, you'd start there in the sixth, seventh, eighth grade, and then ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, whatever it was. But it was divided like that.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

So you stayed in the same school until you graduated from the twelfth grade. So it was about- Let's see. I was about fourteen, thirteen or fourteen. I started getting interested in music. I used to hear these bands on the radio or the "Jamaica," like I had mentioned earlier-like Glenn Gray or Artie Shaw or some of those guys. So I thought it was nice, the clarinet, the way Artie Shaw was playing it, and this and that, Tommy Dorsey, or whoever. I wasn't that hip to [Count] Basie or [Duke] Ellington at that time. So about this time was when Ray, my cousin, started playing trombone. He was a few years older than me, but he was living in East L.A. So he used to- Well, my nickname is "Naff," because my brother- When we were kids in Highland Park, this little girl next door-her name was- What was her name? Yvonne. Yvonne Tennis was her name. She couldn't pronounce Anthony. "Naffony." "Can you come out and play, Naffony?" [laughter] So then my brother started calling me "Naff," you know.

Isoardi

[laughter] And it stuck.

Ortega

It stuck pretty good. Yeah, Buddy Collette knows that name, too. And a lot of the kids in school, they used to call me "Naff" in school. And of course, later on they changed it. But anyway, then it became Tony or whatever. But where was I now? Let's see.

Isoardi

So Ray started you thinking about playing.

Ortega

Yeah, he got me thinking about it.

Isoardi

Are you at Jordan yet?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

You're at Jordan. You're in the sixth grade now.

Ortega

Yeah, I was about in the sixth- No, actually I was in about the seventh. Yeah, I was in about the seventh grade or so, like that. And he said, "Hey, Naff, why don't you take up the alto?" I liked the tenor saxophone, because he used to play these solos of Chu Berry or Coleman Hawkins or somebody. I used to like the tenor. So I would go start bugging my mother, you know, "Ma"-I used to call her Ma; I still call her Ma-"can I get a saxophone?""Well, what do you want a saxophone for? You'll just play it a week or two. You're not going to-"I said, "Oh, yeah, I will. I will. I'll practice." I wanted a tenor, but the tenors cost a little more than the alto, you know."Okay. Well, I'll get you the one that costs the least, but you'd better practice."We got it on credit at Lockie's Music Store downtown. I remember the price: $103 for a Conn alto. It was used. [laughter] I don't know if the salesman was conning us, so to speak-not conning us, just saying his sales pitch or whatever-but he said, "Oh, this saxophone here was played by one of Glenn Miller's saxophone players." Maybe it was true, but maybe it wasn't.

Isoardi

Or maybe he was in the store once and he fooled around with it.

Ortega

[laughter] Yeah, it was something. So I don't know if it was true or not. But my cousin Ray said, "Yeah, I know this guy. He's a good saxophone player. His name is Seymour Simon." Seymour Simon went down to Lockie's there, and he tried out a few altos. So he said, "Yeah, this is a good one." It was a good Conn alto sax, and it was only $103, as I mentioned. The date was February 6, 1943. So I think my mom paid not very much down and so much a month for one year, and eventually it was paid for. It was a nice little horn. It was used, but, you know, what did I know? It was a Conn saxophone.So then I took it home. I didn't have any music books or anything, but I just took it home, and I started fiddling around with it. I couldn't really get much out of it, just a few toots here and there, you know. I didn't know what I was doing. So then I started taking the band class at Jordan. And of course, I'm sure thatBuddy has talked about Mr. [Joseph Louis] Lippi. He must have-

Isoardi

No, actually not a lot.

Ortega

No?

Isoardi

No.

Ortega

Oh, okay. Well, Mr. Lippi, he was the band teacher there.

Isoardi

Is this sixth grade?

Ortega

It was seventh, I would say. Seventh or maybe eighth.

Isoardi

Okay.

Ortega

Maybe eighth grade. J. Louis Lippi. His primary horn was trumpet. I don't think I've ever heard anyone play as loud as he could play. [laughter]

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

An old Italian man.

Isoardi

Whose background was probably classical, I suppose.

Ortega

I don't know. But he had a heck of a loud sound on the trumpet.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah, big. I mean, strong chops. But anyway, he had a good sense of humor. He used to kid around with the kids. Sometimes if one of the kids was messing around he would chase them around the room with a ruler or something, and they would make fun of him. He had a good sense of humor. Sometimes we'd show up to the band room- You know, all the kids were playing their horns like [sings random notes]; everybody's trumpets and violins or whatever were making all kinds of noise and everything. And then Lippi would say, "All right. All right. Quiet up. Quiet up. Okay. Du Barry-" Oh, one of the kids' name was Du Barry. He played trombone. "Du Barry, save it for the garage." [laughter] He told him to save it for the garage, you know. In fact, that was one of his lines.

Isoardi

Yeah, good line. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. I use that line today. [laughter] In bands like Benny [Bernardo] Hollman's, the band I play with there sometimes in San Diego, some of the guys have caught on to the line. Because, say we're going to have a rehearsal or we're going to do a show or whatever, and some of the guys are warming up their horns, I say, "Hey, save it for the garage!" Because we were going to have a rehearsal for a singer or whatever. So it became quite a thing. You know, some of the guys, even Benny, said, "Save it for the garage."

Isoardi

That's good.

Ortega

Until this day, in the nineties. You know, it's funny. So that's one line that stuck.Anyway, it was a class thing. Mr. Lippi, I guess he knew a certain amount about each instrument, so he would teach a little-

Isoardi

Yeah, at least enough.

Ortega

Yeah, at least enough to get the kids started on the saxophone or clarinet or whatever. And I still have my elementary method book. It's called *The Modern Way Method.* It's a little book like this. I still have it. And I still have my first march book. The first march-and I think it's called "Success"-we used to play that.

Isoardi

How big was the class?

Ortega

Oh, gee, about twenty kids maybe, something like that.

Isoardi

Now, this was something that wasn't required? The kids who were interested in music would sign up for it?

Ortega

That's right. The ones who wanted to learn how to play took up band.

Isoardi

Was that the only music class? You would take band year after year?

Ortega

No. Well, they had band. Yeah, they had that. Plus, they had choir. Mrs. [Martha C.] Abbott, she used to have the choir, which was a darn good choir. They used to sing all the spirituals, you know. My sister was in that. She used to sing pretty good, come to think about it. She used to sing pretty darn good. My brother was in it, too. In fact, my cousin Ray-that's right-he was in it. He went to Jordan for a while. He had a beautiful tenor voice. Then later he moved to East L.A. That's right. But they were all in that choir, Mrs. Abbott's choir, which was a very good choir from the lowest note to the highest note. They had all this bass and the sopranos and whatever. In fact, Mrs. Abbott said, "Anthony, aren't you going to-?" See, because my cousin Ray and my brother and my sister were all in the choir, so they assumed that I was going to be in the choir. She assumed, "Well, aren't you going to be in the choir?"I said, "No, I'm going to play the saxophone."She said, "Are you sure? Don't you want to be in the choir?""No, I want to play the saxophone." [laughter] So I was kind of like the oddball-not oddball but different.

Isoardi

Were there any other classes you could take for music? Was there any music theory or harmony class or anything like that?

Ortega

No, not at that time. However, this brings to mind- They had two swing bands called the Hep Cats.

Isoardi

At Jordan?

Ortega

At Jordan. The Junior Hep Cats, which was started like maybe eighth or ninth grade or whatever, and the Senior Hep Cats, which started in the ninth to the twelfth or the tenth to the twelfth or whatever. So they had two sets of Hep Cats. We used to do assemblies, concerts, so to speak, assemblies. And they had a nice little auditorium there at Jordan. They had a nice auditorium with good acoustics, and the seats and everything were pretty nice. The Junior Hep Cats and the Senior Hep Cats would maybe perform right after each other, or maybe sometimes they would just have one assembly of one performance and that was it.But anyway, it was around this time that- No, I don't want- Yeah, well, I don't know if I had started taking lessons from Lloyd Reese yet. But after I had taken the saxophone there for maybe a year or so is when- Maybe even before that is when Ray told me, "Naff, you should go to a private teacher now, because you can only learn so much in the class at school." That's when he told me about Lloyd Reese. So that's when I used to go downtown, catch the streetcar, and this and that.

Isoardi

So did he set that up with Lloyd Reese?

Ortega

Well, he gave me his phone number. I called him and made an appointment and started setting up lessons. At that time the lessons were three dollars for one hour. Eric Dolphy used to take lessons, also. Eric Dolphy used to cut Lloyd's grass or do the work around there like washing dishes or chores. He used to do chores for his lessons.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Although I think his parents could afford to- Whatever. But anyway, he used to do that.

Isoardi

So he was taking lessons while you were as well?

Ortega

Yeah, at the same period. Yeah. Because he went to Dorsey High School. Eric Dolphy went to Dorsey High School, you know.

Isoardi

So you had never met Lloyd Reese before. You heard about him from Ray.

Ortega

From Ray.

Isoardi

So you called up, you set up the appointment, and you took your first trip uptown.

Ortega

That's right.

Isoardi

And then what was he like? How did Reese strike you first off?

Ortega

Oh, first off I was kind of nervous.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

He wore a suit and was very meticulous and would look you straight in the eye. He wanted to know what your accomplishments were at the beginning. And he soon found out that my accomplishments weren't very much. So then he started me in the *Universal [Method for] Saxophone* [by Paul de Ville] book and also this Italian book. I can't think of the name of it. Oh, yeah. It's called *Rhythmical Articulation* by Pasqual Bona. *Rhythmical Articulation,* a little book like this, and it had all of the offbeats and this and that, six-eighths and all these different exercises and things like that. At first he started me out with embouchure, very strict embouchure like this [indicates], like your chin pointed downward and your cheeks in like that. Which later on, after I started playing gigs and I went with Hamp [Lionel Hampton] and this and that, that all went- I just started blowing naturally.

Isoardi

Sure, sure.

Ortega

But anyway, he was pretty strict. He was also almost in a sense a psychiatrist in this weird sort of way, because he could kind of read your mind. Or he would ask you a question, for instance, "Did you practice much this week?"I said, "Yeah, I practiced.""How much did you practice?"I'd try to maybe lie a little bit, you know. I said, "Oh, about fifteen minutes a day." Because he could tell right away when you came in to play your previous lesson if it was that much improvement or not or if it had stayed still or what. So I remember at this point- At one time my brother used to play football pretty good. Sometimes I wanted to be like my big brother and play football, so I took up football. It didn't last

long, maybe a month or two. As I took up football practice, my practicing saxophone went down the drain.

Isoardi

So Lloyd knew.

Ortega

So he knew. He said, "What's the matter?"I said, "Well, I've been going out for football."And he said, "Well, look, you want to be a football player or a saxophone player?" You know, not only that, he said, "Don't you realize that you could injure your fingers for the rest of your life if-?" Which is true, I mean, if a cleat hits you or whatever. And I started thinking about that. I was never that kind of a rough guy, anyway. My brother was a little rougher than me, anyway.

Isoardi

You know, it's funny that you mentioned Lloyd Reese the psychologist. When I first started studying with Bill [William Green], I thought he was psychic.

Ortega

He's kind of like that, too.

Isoardi

I mean, it's incredible. He'd sit there, and I'd be doing an exercise. He would look at me and go, "You're thinking this, this, and this, aren't you?" And my jaw would just drop. I would look at him and say, "How the hell did you know that?"

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

It was just really strange.

Ortega

Yeah. They both had similar approaches.

Isoardi

Yeah, I'll bet Bill got some of that understanding from Lloyd Reese, then. I wouldn't be surprised.

Ortega

He could have. I don't know. Did he study with him or-?

Isoardi

I know they were friends.

Ortega

Well, they knew each other.

Isoardi

Yeah. I know he admired Lloyd Reese very much.

Ortega

Yeah. I'm sure they, you know-

Isoardi

It's so funny to hear you say that. I know exactly what you mean.

Ortega

Yeah, he was quite a man. And one time- I would say I was maybe about sixteen at the time. I had probably started going to him- Wait a minute. I probably started going to him when I was about fifteen, because I started band in school at fourteen. So I probably started going to Lloyd at around fifteen until I was maybe twenty years old, for about five years. So maybe I was about seventeen or eighteen at the time. I was getting pretty fluent with these exercises. I was getting pretty good at double-tonguing. And then, of course, we would go through all the major, minor chords, and this and the sevenths and all that stuff, and practice all that stuff. At that time, sometimes some of these older men-to me they were old, maybe thirty, thirty-five, maybe even forty years old-would come in for their lesson. I was still a teenager. Then Lloyd one time said, "Do you see the man who just left?" He said, "Do you know that you're playing these exercises much better than he is?" Of course, that kind of- "I am?" You know, that kind of went to my head.So I started getting a little big-headed just about that time. Because I started practicing with the Charlie Parker records, and I started getting the runs pretty good. [indicates by humming] You know, a little bit of this and that. I started getting the licks down pretty good. I would play the records. I had one of these old wind-up Victrolas. I'd put the old 78 [rpm record] on there, and if a run was real fast I could just slow it down.

Isoardi

Oh, sure.

Ortega

I could slow it down. It would be in a different key, but I could get the intervals. [indicates by singing the notes] So consequently I thought that I was developing a real good ear, you know.So one time Lloyd Reese, we were playing some things or whatever. I forget what it was. But maybe he could sense that I was getting kind of big-headed. I don't know what it was. So he said, "Anthony, do you think you have a good ear?"I said, "Yeah, I have a good ear."

Isoardi

Walking right into it. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, yeah. And then he said, "Okay." So he walked over to the piano. "What note is this?" And he hit a note on the piano.I said, "Is it a B-flat?""No, it's an A-flat" or whatever. So I was off.So he said, "Okay. Well, what note is this?"We went through that procedure. Every note that he hit, I couldn't guess what it was. I was guessing, but I didn't hit it right, you know. [laughter]He said, "Okay, now you walk over here and you play a note."So I played a few

notes here and there.Every time I played one he'd tell me exactly what it was, whatever it was.

Isoardi

Gee.

Ortega

No matter what range it was-B, B-flat, E, E-flat, or whatever it was, A-flat, whatever.So he said, "Okay. Now play some kind of chord. It doesn't matter what."I knew how to play a couple of little chords on the piano. So I played a chord, and he told me exactly what it was, what the notes were.He said, "Now, take your elbow and play some notes."So I got my elbow, and I played a few, you know, like this, whatever it was, black or white keys or whatever.And he said, "Okay, those notes are so and so and so and so."

Isoardi

Oh, incredible.

Ortega

After that was over with, he said, "Well, do you still think you have a good ear?" [laughter]

Isoardi

Jeez.

Ortega

[laughter] I've never forgotten that. I think I felt about this high after that.

Isoardi

What a lesson.

Ortega

Man, that was like a lesson in whatever you would call it-maybe not getting a big head or never thinking that you were going to learn, that you know too much or whatever it was.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

That was one lesson I never forgot. No matter how good I got or whatever, I always remembered that.And then I remember him also saying- A couple of times I would say, "Oh, that's easy." He said, "Nothing is easy." In other words, if you look at a whole note- Now, this is along the lines of Bill Green, too. You look at a whole note. You play that whole note. You can play it, but there are different approaches. It's either going to sound completely correct or maybe a little off here and there or a little flat or a little sharp or the tone quality, whatever. But the point is that- Like, say a little exercise of maybe half notes or something, it's got to be exactly correct in every phrase. And that reminded me of Bill, too, because he pulled some of those stunts on me. After we were grown up-I mean after I was grown up-he used to give me some studio work,

him and Buddy Collette. It's thanks to them that I started getting into the studios pretty good for a while. Buddy used to hire me as a sub[stitute] on the *Flip Wilson Show*.

Isoardi

Oh, yeah.

Ortega

And Bill Green would hire me as a sub on this and that or sent me in on a record date to get my foot in the door. But he used to get together with me on the flute maybe, mostly on the flute. Well, you know, the least little thing would make a big difference. And this was after I had already been with Hamp. I'd been with him way later.

Isoardi

Jeez. That's funny, yeah.

Ortega

But, I mean, anyway, getting back to Lloyd Reese this and that, about this time, when I was maybe- I was in the Junior Hep Cats when I was maybe fifteen.

Isoardi

When you were about eighth, ninth grade, then?

Ortega

Eighth, ninth grade, or something like that.

2. Tape Number: I, Side Two (September 10, 1994)

Ortega

Okay. I've just got to insert this real quick before I forget. Getting back to the pachuco-Mexican incident, I used to ride my bike, my balloon-tire bike, which I'd painted myself, and I was so proud of it. One time I parked in front of the five-and-ten-[cent] store. I was going to go there in downtown Watts to buy some flea soap for Sampson, our dog. I was going to give our dog a bath. I was in there three or four minutes. I came out and my bike was gone. Somebody swiped it, you know.But before that, what I was going to say is I used to ride my bike all through the alleys and all over Watts. At that time, even like now, the Mexican guys, the gangs or pachucos or whatever, they would write their name like "So-and-so-"

Isoardi

Oh, graffiti.

Ortega

Graffiti-type thing, see, like "So-and-so de Clanton" or "So-and-so de Mara." That was East L.A. But like say Watts area, "Largo"-which means long, but that was his nickname-"Largo de la Colonia" or- Let's see. What were some of the other names? A bunch of weird names, Mexican names.

Isoardi

So they were staking out their own territory with graffiti back then.

Ortega

You know, it was funny. This is what I'm getting to now. I used to see all these guys write their names from different places. So I started writing "Naff del World." [laughter] "Naff del World" or "Naff de Mars," you know. [laughter] And then later on I found out that some of these guys- "Who the hell is `Naff del World' or `Naff de Mars'? Who is this guy?" Later on I found out that these guys wondered who I was.

Isoardi

I'll bet.

Ortega

Because one of the guys who used to hang out with these guys started playing trumpet- Rudy Loara, a Mexican guy, he started taking up trumpet in the band there with Mr. Lippi. So one time it came up that- My name was Anthony. But one time Chuy, my friend, the drummer, he called me, "Hey, Naff-" And then Rudy says, "Are you Naff? Are you Naff? `Naff del World'? Man, everybody's been wondering who you were," this and that. [laughter] That was funny, man.

Isoardi

You used just ordinary paint to tag your names up?

Ortega

Crayons or anything.

Isoardi

Anything you had?

Ortega

I didn't have a spray can, just crayons or anything, yeah. Because I got kind of tired of seeing- It got to be so stock, as it were, like "This so-and-so is from this gang. So-and-so is from here." You know, I said, "Man, let me put something different. `Naff del World,' man." You know, why should you just be from one place? Or "Naff de Mars" or something like that.

Isoardi

Tony, you could have been one of the first graffiti artists.

Ortega

Yeah, man. As a matter of fact, this guy in France, a fine alto player, Thierry Bruneau-Buddy Collette knows him-did an extensive interview and film on me and, as a matter of fact, a biography-type thing on Eric Dolphy. I met him when he was here doing the thing with Eric Dolphy about Eric Dolphy's background.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

At the house, Eric's parent's house in L.A. They did that film you were talking about that you had.

Isoardi

Oh, yeah. But it was Swedish, I think. Wasn't it?

Ortega

Those people were from Holland, yeah, but he was in with them.

Isoardi

Oh, he was working with them.

Ortega

He was working with them from France.

Isoardi

Right. I think it's *Last Date*. I've got it.

Ortega

Something like that, yeah. Anyway, that's where I met him. Then he set up some gigs for me in Paris. In the meantime, he was trying to do the same type of situation with me with my life history, so to speak, talking with me, you know, similar to this. But anyway, I remembered because it came up, "Naff de Watts." [laughter] See, it was either "Naff de Watts" or "Naff del World" or "Naff de Mars." So he actually filmed me when I was in France a few years ago. They got me a spray can, and there was a big wall under one of these bridges.

Isoardi

In Paris?

Ortega

And they actually filmed me writing "Naff de Watts." [laughter] Yeah. This was about three years ago.

Isoardi

That must have been a kick.

Ortega

Yeah, it was a kick, man. Like I finally got a spray can. [laughter] I graduated to a spray can, you know. So that just brought that to life. But the whole graffiti thing, of course, in those days it wasn't nearly like now. I mean, I don't understand what it is now, you know.

Isoardi

Well, it's easier with spray cans, too. You can cover a lot of ground.

Ortega

Yeah, they cover a lot of territory. Okay, that was that.But anyway, getting back to the Hep Cats now, we started playing some of the [Count] Basie stock arrangements. At that time they cost seventy-five cents for an arrangement for the whole little band.

Isoardi

No kidding.

Ortega

Yeah. [Number] 720 in the book. [humming] Or [humming] "Johnson Rag."

Isoardi

Were the stocks any good?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

They were fine?

Ortega

Yeah, they were good, pretty authentic. Of course, some of them weren't that good, but some were pretty darn good. Anyway, I played with the Junior Hep Cats. We used to put on little assemblies. Oh, and during this time, of course, like I mentioned earlier, "[Big] Jay" [Cecil] McNeely was one of the big saxophone players at Jordan. Everybody knew who he was at Jordan.

Isoardi

But he was a little older than you?

Ortega

He was older than me. Also James Jackson, who was with Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers. They were a little older than me. They were maybe Buddy Collette's age or whatever. They were in the Senior Hep Cats, and they could really play, man-the tenors. They were playing the tenors. Big Jay used to carry his tenor around in this gunnysack around Jordan High. And James Jackson, he didn't carry his in the gunnysack, but he used to play solos with the Senior Hep Cats. And of course, I'm sure you heard that Charles Mingus went to Jordan, too, but that was way before me. It may have even been before Buddy Collette. I'm not sure. Maybe they were the same- I don't know. Charles Mingus-

Isoardi

I think he might have been a year or two younger than Buddy, but pretty close, I think, yeah.

Ortega

And he was also a heck of a football player.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

He was a rough guy, Charles Mingus.

Isoardi

I guess he was pretty stocky, wasn't he?

Ortega

Oh, yeah. Charlie Mingus. Nobody messed with him, man. Of course, you heard that years later if he got bugged with somebody he would knock them down. Like [people] in his band, the tenor player or whoever.

Isoardi

But was he already gone from Jordan, he and Buddy, by the time you got there?

Ortega

Oh, yeah. By the time I got there Buddy was gone and so was Mingus. Big Jay was there, and James Jackson was there, but they were getting ready to graduate pretty soon.

Isoardi

When you first got there, I guess eighth grade, you were in the band class, and you were with Mr. Lippi.

Ortega

Right.

Isoardi

Then, when you started playing in the Junior Hep Cats, was this a separate class for the Hep Cats that you took? Or did you stay in the band class all the way through?

Ortega

Well, it was a separate class. Yeah, it was a separate class. However, Mr. Lippi had both classes. They were at different times.

Isoardi

So you went to two music classes, then?

Ortega

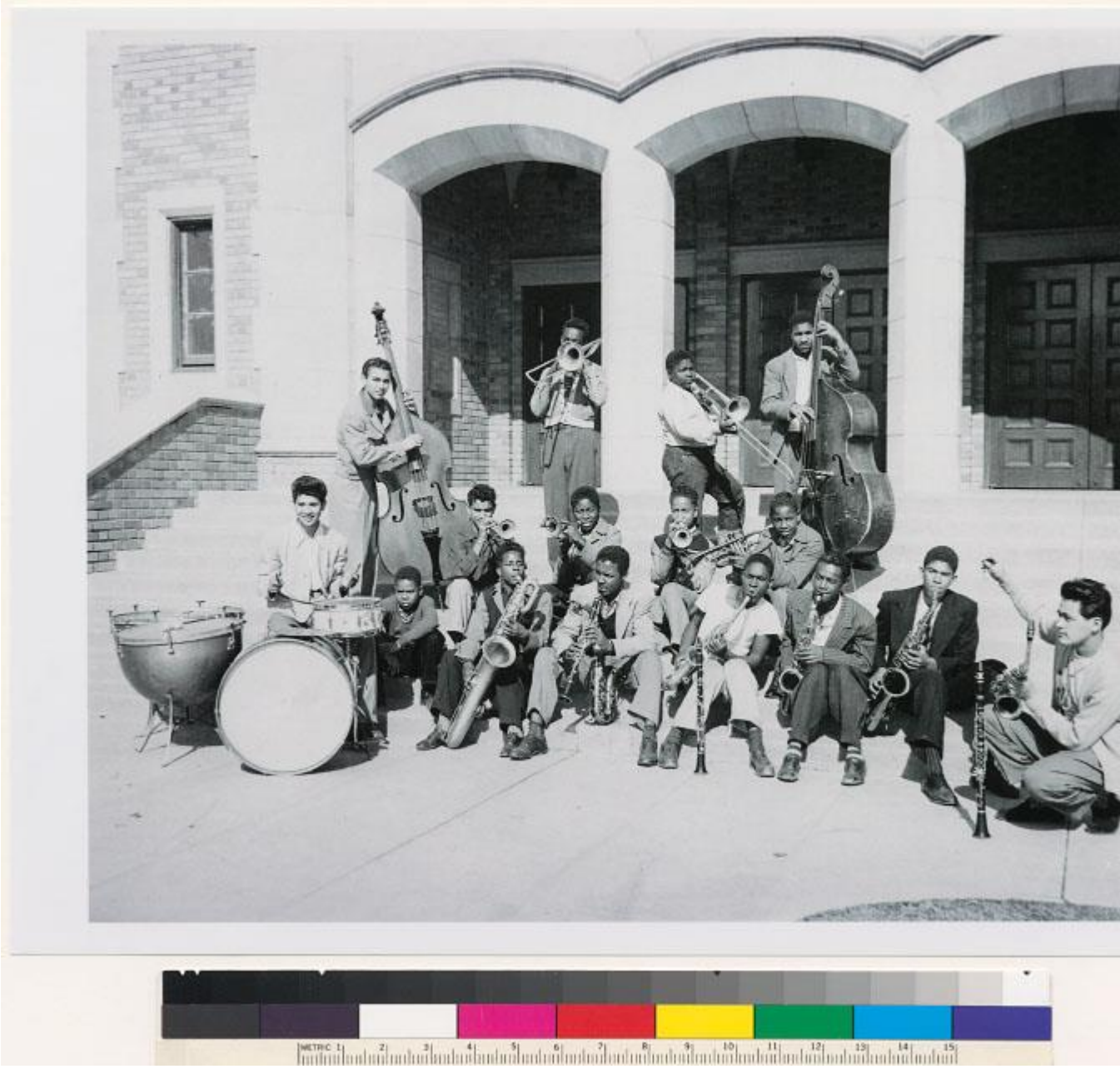
Two music classes at that point, if I'm correct. I'm not real positive about that, but I think so. And we had the concert and the marching band, or the band that used to play for the football games. And all we had was caps. For our uniform we just had caps. Also, come to think about it, there was another man named Mr. [Vern] Martin who had this- At first he had the Senior Hep Cats, and then later on, for some reason or other, he left and went to another school. So then Mr. Lippi ended up with both Junior Hep Cats and Senior Hep Cats.

Isoardi

So you had two or three music teachers.

Ortega

Two or three music teachers. But then it ended up that Mr. Martin left. And Mrs. Abbott was the choir teacher.



Anyway, around this time, when I was- Maybe I was still in the Junior Hep Cats. There was a guy, a black kid named Albert Elam. I'm sure that- Well, I'm not sure, but I think maybe Buddy Collette would remember him. His name was Albert Elam, and he had a fine, pretty tone. I remember I used to kind of be envious of him because he had this beautiful, brand-new Conn alto with a neck with the key like this [indicates], you know, like the Selmer. And it was kind of two-tone; like it was silver and gold and beautiful dark gold, a beautiful instrument. He played a Brilhart mouthpiece, black and white. He used to get a beautiful tone and very lyrical, along the line of Johnny Hodges, I would say.

Isoardi

Really? What ever happened to him?

Ortega

I don't know what ever happened to him.

Isoardi

When did you lose track of him?

Ortega

After I graduated. I've never seen him since.

Isoardi

That was it? Gee, no one has ever mentioned his name.

Ortega

Albert Elam. But listen to this: He was the big honcho on the alto in the school at that time-the Senior Hep Cats. So one time Mr. Lippi had the Hep Cats. The Senior Hep Cats were rehearsing, and I was just there listening. I don't know why I was there. I just happened to be there. And at just about that time, "Mairzy Doats" came out. You know, [sings part of melody]. And Mr. Lippi had an arrangement on it, one of the stock arrangements. So he passed it out. It was kind of a corny number in comparison to Basie or whatever.

Isoardi

Yeah, really. Sure, Ellington-

Ortega

The guys you wanted to play. So Albert Elam said, "I'm not going to play this. I'm not going to play this." And he refused to play it. [laughter] He refused to play "Mairzy Doats"; he wouldn't play it. So Mr. Lippi said, in back of his head, "I'll show him." "Okay. Anthony, get your saxophone." We used to keep our horns right there in the same bungalow, you know. "Get your saxophone out."

Isoardi

Oh, jeez.

Ortega

So I was kind of- I went and got my alto. So that was my first big break, so to speak, with the Senior Hep Cats. Because he was getting ready to graduate anyway. Albert Elam was getting ready to graduate.

Isoardi

So you took his chair.

Ortega

So I took the lead alto. I got the lead alto chair. [hums "Mairzy Doats"] [laughter]Anyway, not long after that we did an assembly. Maybe Albert had graduated. I forget which- Maybe it was still the Junior Hep Cats. I can't remember. But it was my first solo on stage. But it was a tune- What was it? What was the name of that tune? I think it was "9:20 Special." [sings part of melody] No, it was "It Must Be Jelly 'Cause Jam Don't Shake Like That."

Yeah, I'm almost certain it was that tune. But anyway, I remember that my solo was in the key of B-flat, and I was a little nervous because it was my first solo on stage with a band. So I walked out to the mike. I was losing track of my licks because I was kind of nervous. So one thing I remember is that I was taking B-flat and I was riding on the note. [indicates] I kept riding on that note. And even at that time, man, when I was riding on that note, the kids- It broke up the house.

Isoardi

They loved it. [laughter]

Ortega

The kids in the audience, when I went [sings note], they all started clapping. They all started clapping. I broke up the house with that one note. The only reason I did one note was because I was nervous.

Isoardi

The birth of rhythm and blues.

Ortega

Yeah, yeah. And I was trying to think of some licks, but I was nervous. First of all, it was the key of B-flat, and I was nervous.And it's a funny thing. After that one time of being nervous and breaking up the house, you know, I was never nervous again in my whole life when it came to the stage, to performing on stage or anywhere else. Maybe in a studio session I might be a little nervous once in a while if it was something that looked difficult. But, I mean, as far as playing a live jazz solo or with jazz groups or anything, I was never nervous anymore after that. It was weird. It was almost like a weird lesson. In other words, if I- Now, if they wouldn't have liked me, I guess it would have been reversed; I would have been nervous after that again. I don't know. But anyway-

Isoardi

But, I mean, it kind of shows you that sometimes you can sort of forget what you wanted to do and it still could come out okay.

Ortega

Yeah. It was weird. But anyway, it was around this time that Gil Bernal, this kid that- Jay McNeely couldn't remember his name. Actually his name was Gil Rodriguez, Gilbert Rodriguez. He used to be in the talent shows, but he wasn't playing an instrument yet.

Isoardi

The talent show at school?

Ortega

Yeah, at school. We used to call them the talent shows.

Isoardi

How often would those happen?

Ortega

Oh, maybe twice a year or something like that.

Isoardi

Pretty wide-open? Any kid could get up and do whatever?

Ortega

Yeah, any kid could get up and do whatever they were going to do. They used to call them assemblies, they used to call them talent shows, or whatever. And that's when the Junior Hep Cats would perform or vice versa, the Senior Hep Cats, or both, or whatever at given times. And then other kids who figured they had talent would come on the show. They would sing a certain number that was popular at the time or maybe play a piano solo or whatever they had talent to do.But Gil's talent was imitations, you know. He was just a young guy. Man, he was about thirteen or something.

Isoardi

Was he your age?

Ortega

He was a little younger than me.

Isoardi

Okay.

Ortega

He was about thirteen or so. He used to go out there and imitate whoever, I don't remember. But he was very good at it. Comedians, actors, singers, or whatever it was, he was good at doing imitations. So we got to kind of know each other. And then at just about this time Woody Herman's "Apple Honey" was pretty popular. [sings part of melody] Or the other one with Bill Harris [sings part of melody], "Northwest Passage." Also "Bijou," arranged by Ralph Burns. It was Bill Harris, the trombone player with Woody Herman. Anyway, the point being is that Gil- We started being pretty good friends. So he used to come by my house and watch, you know, and I used to play some of these records for him.

Isoardi

Swing records?

Ortega

Swing records, like Woody Herman and "Apple Honey" and some of these, and he would imitate the solos note for note-by voice, though.

Isoardi

No kidding. Great ear.

Ortega

Yeah. Like Flip Phillips or like Bill Harris [humming], whatever. He would imitate the sound, or get their inflections by voice. He had good rhythm, and he could hear the intervals. And I said, "Hey, Gil, man, why don't you take up the

sax? I'll show you how to play. I'll show you."And he said, "You think so?""Yeah, yeah." This and that and the other."So he started bugging his mother to get him a saxophone. And she did get him a tenor. He wanted a tenor, so his mom bought him a tenor. So I started teaching him how to play the tenor, like a few scales and this and that, from the ground up. And of course, then later he started taking it in school, too. So between the school and me showing him, he learned pretty darn good-very talented, very quick, and musically inclined. So here I'm jumping the gun a little bit again. In the meantime, after I had- Well, I won't get to that yet, but you remind me. He's the one who got me on Lionel Hampton's band. But anyway, getting back to the high school situation-

Isoardi

Let me ask you who your friends were then. Were you hanging out with kids who played, other musicians who played?

Ortega

Yeah, yeah. Just about that time, yeah. I was hanging out with Chuy Ruiz, the kid who said that if he hadn't taken up drums he would have ended up in the penitentiary or whatever, and also Walter Benton. Have you heard of Walter Benton?

Isoardi

The name has come up.

Ortega

Yeah. We both started in the class at Jordan at the same time. He later on took up tenor, but he started on C melody saxophone.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Because his dad [Virgil Benton] used to play C melody. So his dad let him borrow the horn and take it to school, and he learned how to play on C melody. Also, Clifford Solomon was going to school at the time. And he started on one of these metal clarinets.

Isoardi

Oh, like the old Albert system, silver clarinet?

Ortega

Well, it was a regular system but it was metal. Or maybe it was Albert. I don't really know, but it was a metal clarinet. Later on he got a tenor. Later on he was with Hamp, also.

Isoardi

Yeah, a fine player.

Ortega

And then later on he was the musical conductor or straw boss for Tina Turner, Ike and Tina Turner. After he left Hamp he went with them for a long time.

Isoardi

So he was at Jordan then, also?

Ortega

He went to Jordan also. Clifford Solomon.

Isoardi

And all of you guys lived right in that area? You lived in Watts.

Ortega

We were right in there. Yeah, we all lived in the same area. And right next to me was a kid named Reyes Gaglio, who took up the string bass, but he unfortunately got killed in an airplane crash. Because he joined the navy, and he was in the navy band, the Washington, D.C., navy band. No, no, he was- I forgot where he was. But anyway, they were going to go play for the president. The whole navy band was going to play for the president, and the plane crashed, so the whole band got killed. But anyway, he was my neighbor there in Watts. He played in the Junior Hep Cats and the Senior Hep Cats for a while, also.

Isoardi

Is Gaglio Italian?

Ortega

Gaglio. Well, Mexican, actually. But I guess he was half Italian. I think his dad was an Italian or whatever. He was half and half, Mexican and Italian.

Isoardi

And Chuy Ruiz was a Mexican?

Ortega

Chuy Ruiz was all Mexican, yeah. And Gil Bernal- Gil's name was Rodriguez, but he didn't dig that handle, Rodriguez, so later on he took his mother's maiden name, which was Bernal, and then he went by Gil Bernal.But anyway, that school situation went on well. I liked the Hep Cats. And I was still taking lessons from Lloyd Reese and this and that.And then, in the meantime, Lloyd Reese used to have some of these rehearsals at Ross Snyder [Recreation Center] playground downtown there or uptown, wherever it was.

Isoardi

Where was that at?

Ortega

Ross Snyder playground, somewhere near the vicinity of where he lived in that Maple Avenue area. I don't really know.

Isoardi

It was an outdoor playground with a shell or a band center?

Ortega

It was a playground. However, there was a- We used to rehearse inside. What was it like? A place where they could play tennis or classes for I don't remember what. But we used to rehearse inside. We used to have swing rehearsals there, swing band rehearsals. And it was during this time that I met some other Mexican musicians my age from Los Angeles per se, like East L.A. or-what was the other area?-Lincoln Heights. This one kid's name was Ray Lugo, and the other kid's name was Maurice Vendrell. They were from the Lincoln Heights area, you know, Lincoln High School.

Isoardi

And you guys all met in Lloyd Reese's band?

Ortega

And we all met in Lloyd Reese's band there at the Ross Snyder playground, because they were taking lessons from Lloyd Reese, also.

Isoardi

Jeez. So people came from all over to study with him.

Ortega

Yeah, from all over to take lessons from Lloyd Reese.

Isoardi

When did the band meet?

Ortega

Oh, in the evening, like say maybe on a Monday or Tuesday night.

Isoardi

One night a week?

Ortega

Yeah, about seven o'clock or whatever at night for a few hours. And by this time I had my driver's license, so I was able to borrow my mom's car. That's when we used to meet. My point was, that's when I met these guys.This is one guy who had a- His name was Maurice Vendrell. This was kind of odd. In other words, by knowing him- He was not an influence but a stepping-stone in my life which would make things different. Because we got to be pretty good friends, and we got to be where- We were both about twenty years old at this time. And right before that, they had been having the draft. They were drafting a lot of guys. I had to register for the draft when I was about eighteen.

Isoardi

So this is just after World War II? Just at the end of the war?

Ortega

Yeah. This was about-let me see-1948, I would say, '47.

Isoardi

Okay. So you were about twenty years old, nineteen, twenty, and you got-

Ortega

Yeah, something like that. So Maurice said, "Hey, Naff." He said, "Hey, man, why don't we join the army over here in Pasadena?" It was a medical army band in Pasadena. He said, "All we have to do, man-"I said, "Are you crazy? Join the army?"He said, "Well, man, if we don't join they're going to draft us, and we might get sent overseas to fight or whatever."So I said, "Oh, man. You're crazy."And he kept coaxing me about it, so I thought about it a little bit. He said, "You're going to be in the army band, man, right here stationed in Pasadena. And that way they can't draft you. You're already stationed here, right in L.A., man," you know.

Isoardi

[laughter] And they pay you to play music.

Ortega

Right. He said, "All you have to do is audition."So I said, "Okay, man. Okay. Why not?"So we went to the band there. It was a medical band. There was a medical army band, whatever it was, in Pasadena. And we auditioned for the bandmaster. I think I auditioned on clarinet and he auditioned on the tenor. So the guy put a few marches or a few little things in front of us to read them. No sweat, we read them. And he said, "Okay, you boys passed fine. Okay, I'll tell you what we're going to do now." He said, "You go down to the recruiting office and sign up, and then after basic training they'll send you back here. We'll just write a letter for you. They'll send you back here, and you'll be assigned to this band."So we thought, "Oh, yeah. Great." We thought that was cool, you know.So then we got sent to basic. After basic, however, then we had to go to band training unit school, which was the army band training unit. They called it BTU, band training unit. So we had to go there. Basic training was eight weeks, and then band training unit was sixteen weeks-like four months or whatever. Both were at Fort Ord, California. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][Also during my stay in BTU I made quite a few friends who were aspiring young musicians. One in particular was a Japanese saxophone player from Sacramento whose name is Tadashi Funakoshi. One day we were shadow boxing and horsing around in the chow line, and he accidentally broke my left thumb. We didn't realize it at the time, but I came home on a weekend pass and had it x-rayed by a civilian doctor, and he set it straight. I had to wear a splint for two or three months. Tad and I have remained friends all these years. He's one of the friends I'm still in contact with after all this time. He later invented some musical instruments, notably "pipes-o-funo," an educational instrument for people of all ages.]So then in the meantime, while we were at band training unit, all this time we were thinking we were going to get sent back here.

Isoardi

Oh, no.

Ortega

In the meantime we got a letter notifying us, or we found out some kind of a way-I don't know how we found out-that everybody in that band got shipped out.

Isoardi

The Pasadena band?

Ortega

The Pasadena band. Everybody in that band, including the band director or whoever, got shipped out, because I guess they figured they didn't really need the band there anymore. [laughter]

Isoardi

Oh, no.

Ortega

So that's when I told Maurice, "Oh, man, see what you did, man? We're in the army now, man." He said, "Oh well, man, how did I know?" But we were still fortunate, because he got sent to New Orleans, which was pretty lucky. He got sent to New Orleans, and I got sent to San Antonio, which really wasn't too bad-San Antonio, Texas. It was the headquarters of the Fourth Army Infantry. But I got stationed in a really good band. It was really good. I had it made there. We used to rehearse in the morning, and then sometimes we played a parade downtown or sometimes we played concerts on the grass there in front of the generals.And we had the weekend off. We could wear our civilian clothes. So we had it made pretty good. Like in the morning, man- At that time it was kind of segregated in Texas, you know. But I had it made real cool, because on the weekend, maybe on Saturday or Sunday, I would go down to the Mexican section of San Antonio. I had my chorizo and eggs and beans and whatever, a big Mexican breakfast, really cool. And then in the middle of the afternoon I'd go downtown to the white section and go to the movies in a nice air-conditioned theater and everything in my civvies. I had civvies most of the time. And then at night, man, I'd get hip, and I'd go to the black section and go sit in with the black cats in the black section of the town, man.

Isoardi

You were going around the world. [laughter]

Ortega

Because San Antonio at that time-I don't know how it is now, but this is 1949 or 1950-had the white, Mexican, and black section, you know, so I could go to either place, man. So I used to have it made.

Isoardi

Yeah, really. You could take the best of all worlds.

Ortega

Take the best of all worlds. And I used to go to this place called the Keyhole, this black club. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][Sometimes I would take Max Robinson, my friend from the Fourth Army band with me to the Keyhole to jam. He was from Kansas City, and he was a very good tenor player.] Incidentally, this was where I first met Clifford Scott. Clifford Scott later on was playing with- Who's that guy? He played the tenor solo on- Gee, what's the name of that? It was a big hit. Maybe I'll think of it later. But anyway, I met him when I was in the army. Later on, when Hamp's band went through San Antonio, Hamp picked him up, and he joined Hamp's band. Clifford Scott. I met him when I was in the army.But anyway, getting back to Gil Bernal there, after the army thing Gil and I used to write letters. We were pretty good friends.

Isoardi

So he didn't go in?

Ortega

No, he didn't go into the service. He was a little younger than me, and he just never- He got married, then his wife Harriet [Bernal] got pregnant. But anyway, we used to write letters back and forth. I was stationed there in San Antonio. I got a letter one day saying he was with Hamp's band and that he had auditioned for Hamp as a vocalist and a tenor player both. He used to do "Babaloo," you know, like Desi Arnaz.

Isoardi

Oh, really?

Ortega

Yeah. He had it all down. [sings part of "Babaloo"] He had all the showbiz antics down. Plus he could really play the- He used to play a lot like Wardell Gray or Teddy Edwards, either one.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Take your pick. He could imitate those guys real well.This reminds me. I used to have these albums. I used to buy them, like bebop. They used to say "bebop on Savoy [Records]" or "bebop on Dial Records" or whatever. One time Clifford Solomon came by, and he wrote on one of the albums, "Li'l Dex was here." [laughter] He used to like Dexter Gordon. "Li'l Dex was here." So then Gil saw that. So he wrote on the bottom, "So was Li'l Teddy." "So was Li'l Teddy," because he used to like Teddy Edwards a lot too, you know. "So was Li'l Teddy."But anyway, we used to write back and forth. And then he said, "Hey, Naff, I'm with Hamp's band, and I just recorded `September in the Rain.'" On the other side was "Everybody's Somebody's Fool" by Little Jimmy Scott or "Hamp's Boogie." It was either "Hamp's Boogie" or Little Jimmy Scott singing

"Everybody's Somebody's Fool." I'm pretty sure it was "Everybody's Somebody's Fool." But anyway, man, I thought that was the greatest thing. So I went out to a record store there in San Antonio, and I found the record, a 78.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah, a 78. Lionel Hampton featuring Gil Bernal on the vocal "September in the Rain."

Isoardi

No kidding.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

That must have surprised you.

Ortega

Yeah, it surprised me. And I was kind of proud because, you know, I was the one who got him playing the sax. However, it was a vocal. So he sang and played with the band.Anyway, after I got out of the army in, let's see, '51 I think it was-three years- I got extended, incidentally, because we enlisted for two years, Maurice and I. We enlisted for two years, but then the Korean conflict had started, so they extended everyone one year, which was just as well, because if they hadn't extended me and him we would have had to serve another five years in the National Guard or something, which kind of hangs you up because you can't leave town for that long or whatever.

Isoardi

Yeah. You've got monthly meetings or something like that.

Ortega

So actually it was better off in the long run that we got extended. But anyway, I made it to the rank of corporal.

Isoardi

Did it do you any good playing in the army band?

Ortega

Oh, yeah.

Isoardi

Were your experiences good for you?

Ortega

Oh, yeah. Of course, I learned how to play my instruments before that, but I think it did me good as far as the military music. Because we played a lot of marches and concert-type music. Not heavy like symphony, but nice, concert-type sounding stuff. So I think it really helped my musical career, so to speak. And then we had swing bands in there, too, and we used to play for dances and

stuff. One time we even backed a musical show. We played a show, a little tour, in the army. I forget the name of the show we played. We played a little tour around somewhere, at other army bases. I remember now. The show was called *Anything Goes.*But anyway, I had just gotten ready to get out of the army, and I came home to L.A. So Hamp's band happened to be in town, and Gil and I contacted each other. He called me or whatever. He said, "Hey, man. Hamp's looking for an alto player because Jerome Richardson is getting ready to leave the band. You've got to try out."And I said, "Yeah, man."So he said, "Yeah, okay, man. We're going to rehearse here" or "We're going to do a gig here," or whatever it was. They were in California at the time, and they were doing one-nighters like San Jose or Santa Ana or whatever. They were moving around, you know. And then they did the Million Dollar Theatre downtown or the Orpheum [Theatre], I forget which. So then Gil said, "Yeah, man, so come down." Anyway, Hamp liked me, I think, because he used to let me take some solos. So this went on for maybe a month or however long they were around town doing things. Finally they were getting ready to go back East, and I still didn't know if I was in the band or not.

Isoardi

All he did was tell you to show up night by night?

Ortega

Yeah, gig by gig. Like we're going to here, and, you know, "Show up."

Isoardi

I guess he was feeling you out and seeing how-

Ortega

"Show up on the bus," you know. Yeah. Or the manager or whoever- I don't know. It was very loose, you know. I didn't know if I was hired or what.

Isoardi

You probably should have asked Gladys [Hampton].

Ortega

I guess so. What it was also, I think, Jerome- That's right. Jerome hadn't really left yet, so we used to double up on parts. Or Bobby Plater was playing lead and Jerome was playing second alto. It was very loose. Sometimes he would have as much as six or seven or eight saxophone players in the band. He'd pick up a guy in this town in Ohio, and then the guy would drop out somewhere. So at the time Jerome and I were both playing the same parts, or sometimes Jerome wouldn't be there. It was just very loose. But finally Jerome was going to stay in L.A., or he was going to leave the band in San Francisco, I forget which.

Isoardi

Yeah, he was from up there, I think. He's from Oakland or something?

Ortega

Yeah, from Oakland or something. So finally I said, "Well, am I in the band?" "Yeah. Yeah. Gates, you're in the band." Hamp usually called everyone "Gates." "You're in the band." He said, "We're leaving town. We're going to be leaving" whenever, you know. "Yeah, you're in the band." Because all I knew was every time the bus was getting ready to leave town somewhere, I'd show up and I'd get on the bus. We'd come back to L.A., and I'd go back home to Watts until the next gig. And then we'd get on the bus and- You know, in the meantime, the other guys in the band were staying in a hotel somewhere. I don't know where they were staying, but Gil and I were- Gil would stay with his mom, and I would stay with my mom in Watts or whatever. Finally we left town, and that was my big thing on the road.

3. Tape Number: II, Side One (September 10, 1994)

Isoardi

Okay, Tony, before you head off on the road with Lionel Hampton in the earlier fifties, let's back up to the time at Jordan [High School] when you're getting to be one of the older cats around the school and you take- Was it Albert Elam's chair?

Ortega

Albert Elam, right.

Isoardi

You became lead alto then of the Senior Hep Cats.

Ortega

That's right, also the director of the Junior and Senior Hep Cats.

Isoardi

Okay. Maybe we'll take it from there. And also, then, what it was like around Watts then to be a teenager playing-probably pretty well known for playing saxophone-around Watts?

Ortega

Yeah. As a matter of fact-

Isoardi

Where did you go outside of school?

Ortega

Well, first of all, in the school I became known as- In other words, I was kind of popular. No matter who the big guy was at the time he was always popular from playing the saxophone: "Big Jay" [Cecil] McNeely, James Jackson, Albert Elam. I'm sure when Buddy Collette was there in the-

Isoardi

So the saxophonists- The guys got all the girls.

Ortega

The guys got all the girls, yeah. And some of the other guys, the regular guys, sometimes were jealous, you know. But the one thing about it is that- Like I was talking about these pachuco guys. You know, sometimes they would line up and bug other guys, but they always had respect for me. I'd be carrying my saxophone case. Maybe they wanted to start a fight with some of the other guys or whoever. I'd be walking home from school. But they all knew who I was because I used to perform on stage or whatever, or I was carrying a saxophone, or-

Isoardi

Celebrity.

Ortega

So that's pretty cool. That's kind of cool, you know. They had respect at that time.But anyway, like I was mentioning earlier, there was this record store. I can't remember the name of it, but it was right there on 103rd Street in Watts. And the man who ran the record store- His name was Pete Kynard, and his wife's name was Ruth [Kynard]. He used to be a tenor player many years before that, and he used to sound something like Coleman Hawkins. But he was a really nice guy. He used to get in all the latest Dial [Records] records. Just about that time the music was transforming from the traditional to more like bebop. And he used to have a lot of the older records with Chu Berry, Johnny Hodges, and some of these guys. But then he started getting in the Bird's records, Charlie Parker. Anyway, Pete Kynard said, "Yeah, man, have you heard so-and-so? He's on the kick now," like the bebop kick. "Yeah, he plays on the kick." That's the thing they used to say, "He's playing on the kick," you know. But anyway, Chuy [Ruiz] and us guys, Walter Benton, those guys, would go down there and buy these Dial records when they came out or the Savoy [Records] releases when they came from back East, you know.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

And Sonny Stitt and some of these guys.

Isoardi

Do you remember when you first heard bop and what your feeling was?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Because you grew up listening to swing, right?

Ortega

Yeah. I remember when I first heard it. I think the first record I heard was "Shaw 'Nuff," the one that goes real quick.

Isoardi

Dizzy Gillespie?

Ortega

Yeah. And it was way beyond me. Truthfully, I didn't like it at first, because it was too hard to understand, you know. [sings part of melody] It was beyond me, and I couldn't grasp what it was at first. And Charlie Parker, at first when I heard his tone, I said, "Well, gee, that doesn't sound like an alto that I'm used to hearing, you know, like Johnny Hodges."

Isoardi

Johnny or Benny Carter. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, or Benny Carter or somebody real pretty like Albert Elam. But little by little I started liking it. I think the one that I liked the most at first was either "Billie's Bounce" or "Now's the Time," because his solo was- First of all, the riff was easy. [sings part of melody]

Isoardi

Yeah, "Now's the Time."

Ortega

"Now's the Time." Or the solo. [sings fragment of solo] You know, pretty easy to grasp.Anyway, my house was kind of like the popular place for the guys to come by, because we had a great big front room. So Chuy and Walter and all the guys used to come by. For a while we had a little group called the Frantic Five: Walter Benton; the kid next door, Reyes Gaglio; Chuy Ruiz on drums; Walter's cousin Jimmy O'Brien on piano; and myself on alto. We used to call it the Frantic Five. Sometimes we used to go down to the Streets of Paris, a nightclub down there in Hollywood. The Gene Krupa trio used to play there, and some other guys used to sit in around there or jam. Once in a while we would go down there. I remember the first time we saw our name in the paper, "So-and-so was there, the Gene Krupa trio, and the Frantic Five." And we thought, man, we were all-

Isoardi

Serious.

Ortega

Yeah, yeah. We thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened.

Isoardi

How did that happen?

Ortega

Well, there was a reporter who happened to be there on that day or something at the Streets of Paris, so he mentioned our names and the Frantic Five. This was in 1946 or whatever it was.

Isoardi

But how did you get on the bill?

Ortega

Well, the guy was there, and I guess he got our names. We were a set group of teenagers. I guess they thought that was a novelty at the time.

Isoardi

Right. But you guys didn't have a manager or anything like that?

Ortega

No. To tell you the truth, I don't know how we got on there, because we all showed up with our horns and everything. Maybe we just asked-

Isoardi

Just to see if you could sit in, maybe?

Ortega

Yeah, something like that.

Isoardi

Gee.

Ortega

It really is kind of amazing that-

Isoardi

Really, when you consider who Krupa was.

Ortega

Yeah, right. So we got on the bill, and they put our names in the paper. I probably still have it somewhere at home.But anyway, we used to practice all the time, and we started doing a few little gigs here and there. Also at that time, come to think about it, this guy-what was his name?-Al Jarvis used to have a radio show. I don't know if you've ever heard of him, Al Jarvis. He used to have a radio show.

Isoardi

From what station?

Ortega

I don't know. But he used to call it the- What did he call it? *The Make-Believe Ballroom.* Oh, this guy named Harry Schooler used to have big bands playing at the Lick Pier in Santa Monica or something, Venice or Santa Monica or something. It was called the Lick Pier. This guy Harry Schooler used to have bands there. And Al Jarvis- And that's about the time when Frankie Laine was starting to come out a little bit, trying to get some gigs, him and- What's his name? [sings] "Cement mixer, putee putee-"

Isoardi

Oh, was it Slim-?

Ortega

Slim Gaillard.

Isoardi

Slim Gaillard.

Ortega

Just about this time these guys were getting kind of big on the strip there, on Sunset Strip or Central Avenue or wherever. They were getting kind of popular. And then they used to have the battle of bands. Walter and I and Chuy used to be in some of these bands that were maybe playing at the Lick Pier. And a guy named Melly Glen, a black guy, would play drums. He was from L.A. somewhere. Anyway, this is neither here nor there, but the point is that there was a lot of musical activity for younger musicians wanting to play in orchestras and bands. There was a lot of activity around L.A.So in the meantime, aside from that, we were still going to high school. We used to go down to Central Avenue to primarily listen and maybe sit in if they'd let us, like at the Downbeat Club or the Crystal Tea Room, which is on Central Avenue there, and a place called the Bird in the Basket [Jack's Basket Room], which was after-hours. It was hard to get in there because you had to be really- Well, at the other place you were supposed to be twenty-one anyway, but they were pretty loose. So we used to just kind of sneak in anyway and jam, you know, get up on the stand and-

Isoardi

So there were jam sessions at all these places?

Ortega

Yeah, there were jam sessions at all these places. The one that sticks out in my head the most is the Downbeat.

Isoardi

Why does it stick out the most?

Ortega

Because all the greatest guys were there: Teddy Edwards, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Criss, Wardell Gray, Howard McGhee, Lucky Thompson, Roy Porter, and some of the guys who maybe never made that big of a name-a guy named Benny Bailey, who was an excellent trumpet player. I think he lives in Europe now. Benny Bailey recorded one record with Teddy Edwards. Did you interview Teddy yet?

Isoardi

No.

Ortega

Mory Rappaport recorded one record or maybe more than one record for Teddy Edwards on the Rex [Records] label, "Out of Nowhere" and- What was the name of the other one? Was it "Steady with Teddy?" No, "Steady with Teddy" was on Dial. I can't remember the name of the tune. But if you ever interview him he'll remember. I remember now; it was called "Rexology."Incidentally, my cousin Ray Vasquez had got us on a recording session with the same label. It was on the Rex label. This was in about 1947.

Isoardi

Your group, the Frantic Five?

Ortega

The Frantic Five. We recorded on the Rex label.

Isoardi

That must have been a thrill.

Ortega

Yeah, man. I was only about sixteen years old. I wrote this tune based on the "East of the Sun [and West of the Moon]." I called it "The Clutching Hand." The reason I called it "The Clutching Hand" is because many years before I even played the saxophone I used to go to these serials. You know, they used to have serials every week in the movies like "The Shadow" or all these different- Like "Batman." And in this one incident there was a real bad guy, and he was the Clutching Hand. [laughter] He was the Clutching Hand. If he got ahold of you, man, you'd had it. Anyway, I named this tune "The Clutching Hand." It was based on "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." I really liked that tune ever since I was a kid when I first heard Tommy Dorsey play it and Frank Sinatra sing it, which was one of my early influences, in a sense, hearing Frank Sinatra do all these early things with Tommy Dorsey. I was very impressed with his singing.Anyway, Ray Vasquez got us the date for Rex label. The guy's name was Mory Rappaport who owned the Rex label.

Isoardi

Where were they based?

Ortega

They were based in Hollywood there.

Isoardi

Small independent record company?

Ortega

A very small independent label. They only did a few sides. But it's funny, too-it isn't so funny-there was a record ban at that time. None of the musicians- They were having contract hassles with the money situation. I think the-

Isoardi

This wasn't during the war, then? Was that the wartime record ban?

Ortega

It probably was. It was 1946, I think.

Isoardi

'Forty-three, '44? Oh, no, afterwards? There was another ban after the war, as well?

Ortega

Yeah, something like that. Whatever. I don't know when it was. However, you weren't supposed to record. See, there was a recording ban, but Mory

Rappaport had a nonunion label or whatever it was, and we didn't care. We just wanted to play.

Isoardi

To record.

Ortega

We thought it was great to do a recording. So we did that one, "The Clutching Hand." On the other side was Walter Benton's tune called "Home Run." It was a blues in F. At that time Walter Benton had written an introduction like a whole tone scale. The introduction was- [sings part of introduction] And his cousin Jimmy O'Brien would play like an augmented eleventh chord on the piano. [sings] But, you know, we were pretty cool for our age. We were only teenagers, you know. But anyway, we did the record, which I still think I have a copy of at home. So that was my very first recording, and it was nonunion and the whole bit. I'd never done anything like that.

Isoardi

Did you ever have a chance to hear it on the radio? Ever get any airplay?

Ortega

Possibly. Possibly. They may have played it a little on the radio once or something. I don't know. But it was called Ray Vasquez and his Beboppers, and Ray wasn't even on it. He didn't play nothing. But he got the session. You know, he got the recording session. And we didn't get paid or anything; we just did it. It was called Ray Vasquez and his Beboppers. It didn't have any of the guys' names or anything. That's all it said, "Ray Vasquez and his Beboppers."But anyway, in the meantime we used to go down to Central Avenue there, and we used to be able to hear all these great players like Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon. And one of the emcees there was-because there were a couple of different emcees-Wild Bill Moore. He used to play tenor. And Gene [Eugene] Montgomery. Have you ever heard of those guys?

Isoardi

Gene Montgomery I've heard of.

Ortega

Gene Montgomery.

Isoardi

Was he a sax player?

Ortega

A saxophone player. And he used to hold his horn like "Pres," like Lester Young.

Isoardi

Really? A forty-five-degree angle?

Ortega

Yeah. He used to hold it up like that and played a lot like "Pres." And one of his big numbers that he used to play was "Tea for Two." He used to play that riff. [sings] That was "Tea for Two." And then Wild Bill Moore was kind of- He kind of had a mean look in his face. We were kind of afraid of him. We were just young kids. He used to emcee the session sometimes. And he would hardly ever let us sit in, you know. But Gene Montgomery was a little bit more lenient. Sometimes he would let us sit in a little bit after everybody played, or maybe they were tired, Teddy Edwards, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, and Lucky Thompson. Walter Benton took lessons for a while from Lucky Thompson, also. He used to play along Lucky's style. But anyway, these guys used to lock up, man. They would play like "Cherokee," or the big thing then was "I Got Rhythm" or "How High the Moon" or maybe blues in B-flat. But at that time the thing that a lot of the guys used to do- All the bebop guys, including Bird, would write riffs on standard melodies like "Sweet Georgia Brown" or "How High the Moon." [sings] Bird didn't write that. Who wrote that? A little trumpet player. He died later on. He wrote that, but I forgot his name. He wrote "Ornithology." His name was Benny Harris. But Bird used to write a lot of songs. A lot of these guys used to write tunes that were based on standards, you know, riffs.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

But anyway, it was very impressive seeing these guys like Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray and these guys. They would play like thirty-minute solos, and then here comes Dexter, and they would just lock up. We were all impressed. We'd be waiting around there, waiting to see if we could finally sit in or sneak in and sit in or something, just hanging around there. And then we'd see maybe Dexter pull up in a cab, a couple of chicks on his arm, you know, with his big hat on. And man, then he was putting out records.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

"Long Tall Dexter," these things were coming out.

Isoardi

He recorded a lot for Savoy, I guess, back then in '46, '47.

Ortega

Yeah, he did. Right. He'd been back East, but he was from the West Coast originally.

Isoardi

Right, right.

Ortega

But I think his father was-

Isoardi

Wasn't he a doctor or something?

Ortega

A doctor, I think, yeah. He came from a well-to-do family.

Isoardi

A dentist?

Ortega

Yeah, Dexter did. And he was always real sharp. But anyway, we used to see him coming out of the cab, and we thought, "Oh, man, these guys are really big-time, really big-time." And we thought, "They're recording on records and everything." And the thing is that later on, when I was with Hamp, I realized that, you know, so what? You make a record and you still aren't rich by any means.

Isoardi

No kidding. No kidding.

Ortega

But anyway, I remember us being so impressed. And around this time was when Eric Dolphy used to come around, too. In fact, Eric Dolphy was also in the band that Lloyd Reese used to rehearse. Remember, I told you that the Mexicans guys-

Isoardi

You guys would go to-

Ortega

You know, Eric Dolphy. It wasn't one set band. Different guys would come in, and Eric Dolphy would be among them. I can't remember anybody else of note that was there, but-

Isoardi

Do you remember anything about Dolphy's sound then?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

I suppose it was pretty typical, standard?

Ortega

Yeah, it was typical. However, at that time it was like- To us it was kind of far-out.

Isoardi

Even then?

Ortega

Even then, yeah. Because we couldn't quite understand what Eric- We used to go to the session, and then Eric would be- Walter Benton used to call them bird

calls, you know. A few years later I saw Walter, after I got out of the army. I said, "How's Eric?" "Oh, he's still playing bird calls." [laughter] "He's still playing bird calls," you know. The guys used to kind of laugh at him.

Isoardi

He must have been a cat who just heard things differently.

Ortega

Right. He just heard things differently.

Isoardi

Just from the beginning he had a different-

Ortega

Yeah, from the very beginning, a completely different concept. Sometimes he sounded a little like Bird, but, I mean, he had his own completely different concept.

Isoardi

Did you ever get to play at the Downbeat? When you guys would go hang out there, did they let you up on the stage?

Ortega

Yeah, they used to let us up there sometimes. Yeah. Like I'm saying, when the other guys would get tired, or maybe it got so darn late, then maybe it was starting to thin out or something, so they'd let us up there. And Hampton Hawes was a very big figure there. He was only about a year or two older than me or us guys. But he was a very talented young man. And I understand he could hardly read music.

Isoardi

You're kidding. I didn't know that.

Ortega

No, he could hardly read music. I didn't know that until Art Farmer told me. Art Farmer told me that Hamp Hawes could hardly read music. But he was just such a genius, so to speak.

Isoardi

Oh, yeah. He would have to be.

Ortega

In order to catch all these tunes and play the changes and all that.

Isoardi

Jeez. Extraordinary.

Ortega

So he was a big man there. He used to let us sit in from time to time. And he used to let us sit in a lot more at the Crystal Tea Room, which used to be on Sunday afternoons.

Isoardi

That was the jam session time.

Ortega

That was the jam session. I used to see Bill Green there a lot. We used to call him Professor Green, you know.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

So he was teaching then?

Ortega

Yeah. He was teaching then and forever after. I think he hadn't been here from Kansas City that long, you know. They used to call him Professor Green, Professor William Green. And he was a very studious-looking guy with his glasses and everything. And at that time I don't imagine there was any black musician in the studios yet. But he and Buddy Collette were a couple of the first guys to get in there and to have remained in there. Other black guys got in there later, now, whatever. But he sounded, and maybe still does sound, along the line of the Benny Carter era or style. But nothing could hang him. Whatever tune it was, he could play it. Or whatever piece of music they put in front of him, he could play it. I mean, they used to call him Professor Green.And then there was this place that I had mentioned, the Bird in the Basket, which was after-hours. They wouldn't allow any kids in there. I think a couple of times we snuck in there. But it was like what you would look at now as a dive, like real dark in there and maybe a couple of junkies here and there, whatever. And then, speaking of characters, though, there was one guy who used to hang around the Downbeat Club all the time, and he had long, processed hair. He always used to have a bunch of records with him, and they used to call him "Bebop."

Isoardi

Did he carry all bebop records?

Ortega

Yeah, all bebop records. He used to peddle bebop records all the time, just to the customers.

Isoardi

Oh, he'd sell them.

Ortega

He used to go around in the club. He'd have all the latest albums and would maybe be peddling a few other things too that we wouldn't know about. But he was peddling albums, all the latest Dexter or whoever. So that was one of the characters there who used to hang around. He was always at all the sessions.

Isoardi

That's funny. As far as you know, that's all he did was peddle the records and whatever else he had?

Ortega

That's all, yeah, and whatever else he had. He was always real sharp, and he had long, conked hair. Let's see. Who else could I think of?

Isoardi

That's funny. I guess you were pretty young then, but did you ever hear anything about who owned these clubs and who ran these clubs? Who was behind them?

Ortega

No. No, I didn't. However, way in later years, after I had left Hamp and got married and everything and had kids and settled back in L.A. for a while and this and that, I was playing on Central Avenue with a couple of organ trios. This was like, say, about 1958, 1960, in that area. And Luis Rivera-I don't know if you heard of him, an organ player-

Isoardi

No.

Ortega

I played with his trio for a while.

Isoardi

Where at? On Central?

Ortega

Oh, at a place called Marty's. Marty's. It used to be there. In fact, Bill Green played there for many years.

Isoardi

He had the house band there.

Ortega

He had the house band there, yeah.

Isoardi

What kind of place was Marty's?

Ortega

Oh, Marty's was a swinging club.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

It was really swinging, yeah.

Isoardi

Where at?

Ortega

It was on Slauson [Avenue] and I can't remember. Western [Avenue]? I can't remember. Somewhere in there. It was a swinging joint. It was owned by a

Mexican man, and I'm sorry to say that he ended up being prejudiced against his own kind. Because I worked there for a long time with Luis Rivera, and somehow or other I got fired because I wasn't black.

Isoardi

You're kidding. You know this for a fact?

Ortega

Yeah, yeah.

Isoardi

Jeez.

Ortega

And it may have been from complaints from the customers, I don't know. That was really one of my first blows from the prejudice scene.

Isoardi

Who were the customers? Were they mostly black customers?

Ortega

Mostly black customers, yeah. But it was owned by a Mexican man, and his son [Ronnie Zuniga] used to run it.

Isoardi

Do you remember his name?

Ortega

Martín. His last name was Zuniga. They called it Marty's. Yeah. That was one thing there.But anyway, at a later day-or maybe it was around the same area-then I played at a place called Dynamite Jackson's, that famous boxer from the thirties and forties.

Isoardi

Oh, he was a heavyweight, wasn't he?

Ortega

A heavyweight boxer, champion. Dynamite Jackson. He owned a little club on Central Avenue called Dynamite Jackson's.

Isoardi

Where at on Central?

Ortega

Not sure. I don't remember now, but it was down there in the swinging area there. This was way later. But I worked there with Perry Lee, this girl Perry Lee, and Johnny Kirkwood, the drummer. She used to sing and play the organ. I worked there for a couple of years. Dynamite Jackson was a black guy, and he treated me very nice. He was always very nice to me.

Isoardi

And he owned the club? It was his?

Ortega

He owned the club. He was always very nice to me. I'm sorry to say that this other guy was a Mexican and it was a thing there where, you know- The only complimentary thing that his son ever told me was that it was- It was primarily a black club. And the only thing he ever told me was, he said, "Well, you're the only one," meaning that I was the only Mexican who could play with the blacks or something. That must have been what he meant, see, which was complimentary, but yet-

Isoardi

Was it true?

Ortega

It was a thing like, well, an odd situation. I don't know what he meant, but that's the only thing that I remember that he told me. In the meantime, his dad had fired me, you know.

Isoardi

But you were hanging out and playing in high school with other Mexican musicians, weren't you?

Ortega

Yeah, yeah.

Isoardi

Did they ever play on Central?

Ortega

But, see, the thing is-

Isoardi

Since you went to jam sessions.

Ortega

Yeah. But now, the thing is, as far as I know Gil is the only one who ended up pursuing it as a career- Gil Bernal. The other guys, like Ray Lugo, one of the guys who was playing, ended up being an engineer in computers or whatever. It was before computers. I don't know, whatever. And Maurice Vendrell, the guy who talked me into joining the army, ended up working for the telephone company, see. He's retired now. They're all retired, I guess, by now. So am I supposedly. But, yeah, I'm the only one, as far as I know, who ended up pursuing music as a career. Also, come to think about it now, there was a guy named Paul Lopez who was a friend of Ray Vasquez, my cousin. For a while Ray Vasquez, when he moved to East L.A., started going to Roosevelt High School, and he met Paul Lopez and a trombone player who was later a disc jockey, Lionel Sesma. He ended up being friends with them. But Paul Lopez- What I mean to say is that he is the only one who ended up staying in music as a career, also. He walks on crutches. And he is still in the music business.

Isoardi

So when you were hanging out on Central, when Central Avenue was in full swing, there weren't many other-?

Ortega

Latinos?

Isoardi

Yes, playing other than yourself?

Ortega

Not that I can recall. Not that I can recall.

Isoardi

I guess there probably weren't many white musicians down there either?

Ortega

Well, there were a few. There was this guy- What was his name? Tommy Mackigon. He played tenor. He used to really like the way Teddy played. He used to kind of imitate Teddy, Teddy Edwards.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Tommy Mackigon.

Isoardi

Where did he play down there?

Ortega

Well, he used to come down to the session. And then later on, on my first tour out of town going to Texas in July 1948, my first tour out of town with Earl Spencer- It was an all-white band, but Tommy Mackigon was in that band. It was my first trip out of town, and I thought it was all great. We went to Fort Worth, Texas, and played one gig and for a few nights at a casino ballroom. And then they had problems with money and this and that, so the gig was over. On the way back the bus broke down. [laughter] My first road trip.

Isoardi

But that sounds typical. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. But my first road trip-

Isoardi

It's like it happens to everybody.

Ortega

But the bus broke down. Anyway, his name was Tommy Mackigon. Also the trumpet player who was in the band used to come and sit in there all the time. What was his name? A white guy. He played pretty good trumpet, and I can't remember him. He was in the band, with that same band. What was his name? Oh, yeah, Kenny [Kendall] Bright. Anyway, there were a few white guys who

used to come around there at the sessions, a few white guys. But I didn't see any Mexican guys. No.

Isoardi

What about women? You mentioned Perri Lee playing organ.

Ortega

Perri Lee. I didn't meet her until way later, way after I was married and everything. She happened to call me one day, and she needed a tenor player. I don't even know who recommended me. Somebody recommended me.

Isoardi

What about even going back to like Jordan? Were there any girls who were playing in the Hep Cats?

Ortega

Yeah. There was a girl who played piano. Her name was Joyce something. A little short girl. Joyce Alex. And then there was another girl, but I can't remember her name either at all.

Isoardi

What instrument?

Ortega

Piano.

Isoardi

But only piano? You never saw any girl trumpet players or trombone players or sax players?

Ortega

No, not that I can recall. Not that I can recall. But anyway- Let's see. Go ahead and ask me something else here now.

Isoardi

Actually, one thing just popped into mind. You mentioned when you made your first recording for Rex Records.

Ortega

Right.

Isoardi

Well, you guys were young then. You were still in high school.

Ortega

Right.

Isoardi

So you didn't have the union [American Federation of Musicians] asking you to join up?

Ortega

No, no.

Isoardi

At what point does that happen?

Ortega

In fact, we weren't even in the union yet.

Isoardi

You weren't even union members?

Ortega

We weren't union members yet.

Isoardi

Well, you weren't playing regular gigs anywhere, were you?

Ortega

Oh, just like- Our first gig was like for the USO [United Service Organizations] in Watts there, the USO center, playing for the sailors during the war [World War II]-maybe 1945, '46, playing for the sailors or soldiers at the USO club. We used to get five bucks apiece. We used to call it the five-cent gig. [laughter] Later on, we graduated to ten-cent gigs. [laughter] So we were all just nonunion when we did that recording, actually. Those were our first gigs.

Isoardi

So when did you join the union?

Ortega

In '48. Let's see. Yeah, '48, right before I joined the army. Because I graduated from high school in '47, and then right before I joined the army in '48 I joined the union. By that time it was all one union. Before that it was the black union [Local 767] and the white union [Local 47]. Elmer Fain was the big man in the black union, and then later on he went in with the Local 47. Buddy [Collette] had a lot to do with-I'm sure he had mentioned-getting the two unions together.

Isoardi

The joining of the two unions together.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

But if you joined around '47, '48, then you joined Local 767?

Ortega

No, I joined the white union, 47.

Isoardi

Oh, you joined 47.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Now, why 47 instead of 767?

Ortega

I don't know why. Let's see. Because I think it was considered a stronger union, and it was bigger.

Isoardi

Yeah, it was bigger.

Ortega

Yeah. And I just figured, "Well, I'm going to join the one that's biggest," you know, whatever.

Isoardi

Right. Were there other Latino musicians in Local 47?

Ortega

Oh, yeah.

Isoardi

So Latino musicians would normally join 47, then? They wouldn't join 767?

Ortega

No. I doubt it. Maybe there were a couple in the other union, 767.

Isoardi

Yeah, the one on Central Avenue.

Ortega

There might have been a couple in there possibly, but I don't know.

Isoardi

So you joined 47.

Ortega

I joined 47. And I've been a life member now since a long time.

Isoardi

I guess you probably weren't around then when they were trying to unify the two unions? You were in the service? Were you involved in that at all?

Ortega

No, I wasn't involved in it at all. I just heard it through the grapevine a little bit, because I- As a matter of fact, I didn't even care about joining any unions. But I think finally Ray, my cousin, said, "Hey, you'd better join the union." He had joined the union, because he had been working with a band called Phil Carreón, pretty much a Latin band. However, Lennie Niehaus was doing a lot of arrangements and playing alto with the band at that time. He was a very impressive player at that time, also.

Isoardi

Pretty young, I guess.

Ortega

Pretty young. We were both the same age at that time. He was about seventeen or whatever. But he comes from a musical family. All his family were musicians.

Isoardi

Oh, really?

Ortega

Sisters and everybody. His dad and everybody were. So he came from a musical family since he was that big. Consequently, by the time he was a teenager he was writing arrangements.

Isoardi

He knew it all.

Ortega

Now he writes music scores. He wrote for *Bird*, the movie, and everything.

Isoardi

He made some fine recordings in the fifties, too, as I remember. Some excellent stuff.

Ortega

Yeah. Yeah, man.So let's see. By the time I went into the army I was in the union. It was cool then. You didn't have to pay dues. When you were in the service you didn't have to pay your dues. As soon as you came out, I mean, you were automatically-

Isoardi

You took like a leave of absence or something?

Ortega

Yeah, like a leave of absence type of thing.

Isoardi

Let me ask you-I mean, just to go back to Central for a second-

Ortega

Okay.

Isoardi

You mentioned some of the clubs that you liked to hang out at, the Downbeat and [Dynamite] Jackson's, the Bird in the Basket, and the Crystal Tea Room. Were there any places you'd hang out to meet friends or eat or any other places on Central that were interesting? Any favorite spots?

Ortega

No, not really. That was the whole thing. The only other favorite spot aside from Central- Some of us guys used to go downtown to the Million Dollar Theatre or the Orpheum Theatre.

Isoardi

So those were still going pretty strong even in the late forties?

Ortega

Yeah, they were going strong in the forties: Gene Krupa's band, Stan Kenton, Lionel Hampton, and I think even [Count] Basie and probably even Duke Ellington. So we used to go down there, Chuy and I. Most of all we used to go down there. We used to take our sack lunch, and it didn't cost much to get in. Once you were in there you could stay all day. So we'd catch two or three shows and sit there all day and eat our lunch or whatever and then see one

movie. Then the stage show would start again. It wasn't Central Avenue, but it was one of the hangouts that some of the kids used to go to to listen to the musicians.As a matter of fact, even before the jazz situation, one time there at the Million Dollar Theatre I saw this little band that was performing behind a singer. The singer was the main guy there; his name was Charlie Kraft. But Ray took me over there. We were listening to the little band play behind the singer. That's one of the first times also that I was very intrigued with the saxophone, because I saw this guy playing the saxophone, and I said, "Gee, I wonder how he knows what buttons to press to get the right note." [laughter] I was very intrigued. So after the stage show they came out around the outside there, and I said, "Excuse me. How do you know"-it sounds kind of dumb now-"what note to press?"He said, "Well, you've got to study it, kid" or something.And I said, "Yeah, well, I'm thinking of taking the saxophone up, and I want to be a musician too."He said, "Take my word, kid. Don't do it." [laughter] How right he was.

Isoardi

You didn't listen.

Ortega

Yeah, I didn't listen. He said, "Take my word, kid. Don't do it. It's a rough life." And I wouldn't listen. But that was another thing that I never forgot.

4. Tape Number: III, Side One (September 24, 1994)

Isoardi

Anthony, before we move on with your life story let's go back and fill in a bit. I had a couple of additional questions, and I know you've got a few things to add. Let's go back to Jordan High School in Watts. We talked quite a bit last time about the music program at Jordan in all of its aspects, but maybe you could talk about what else Jordan had to offer kids.

Ortega

Okay. Now it's probably very unknown at this time or maybe never even thought about before in the past, but Jordan had some really nice programs for the boys that would be valuable to them in their later life. I don't know about the girls. I guess they had sewing classes or whatever. I don't know what the girls had, but I know that the boys- We had a class like wood shop that Mr. Rung taught. We used to make beautiful wooden tables and chairs and all kinds of things that would be helpful in the house. We could make them at school and then take them home, and the family members could use them. So that was really nice not just for that, but it showed the guys an interest for their future life. Probably at that time they didn't realize how helpful it would be.Then I was very intrigued with bow and arrows ever since I was really young, so I had

an inkling to make a bow and arrows. [laughter] So I asked Mr. Rung, "Mr. Rung, can I make a bow and arrow?" He just looked at me-he was a really nice guy-and said, "Well, sure. I'll tell you what we're going to do." He said, "I'm going to get some- I can't get it now, but I'm going to order-" We had to get some hickory wood, some really nice hickory wood. Then he put it on the lathe, and he made like the outline of it first. And then we had to sand it down or whatever to get it nice and rounded off like it was supposed to be. Then he had this wooden lathe that could do all kinds of things with wood and everything. Then I think he called it wooden dowels. I don't know if they had dowels at that time. But anyway, it ended up that we ended up making a really fine bow and arrow. And when some of the other guys saw it, they said, "Oh, man, I've got to get one of those, too." So it kind of caught on. And after a while a bunch of guys were making bow and arrows. Anyway, that's just one aspect there.And then also there was electric shop with Mr. Boyer. He taught all the kids- [tape recorder off] We used to make a lot of nice electrical things that were very useful, such as hot dog cookers or- Not only that, you learned a lot about electricity that you wouldn't ordinarily know about, like grounds and- Of course, I've forgotten a lot of it now, but I know better than to stick my finger in a light socket. [laughter]

Isoardi

Was there enough of a training in these kinds of wood and electric classes so that kids when they graduated could go out and get work?

Ortega

I would say so. Especially if they were interested in it. Because if they showed a real interest, then the teacher would go out of his way to help them.

Isoardi

So they really were getting a trade, then, as well as a general education.

Ortega

Oh, yes, they did. And in auto shop, also, these guys used to dismantle motors and axles or whatever. They used to be able to put a car together and make it run or whatever. That's auto shop, you know. I never took auto shop, but these guys, I'm sure that some of them went into mechanics, to be a mechanic or something, like a trade.And then they had horticulture, like gardening. That was Mr. Carver who covered horticulture. We used to learn how to plant all kinds of different vegetables or useful things like that, which a lot of ordinary kids wouldn't- I mean, a kid ordinarily wouldn't think of hassling with gardening.

Isoardi

Certainly not today at all, no.

Ortega

Especially now.

Isoardi

So back then your education was more than just the three R's. You were taught a lot of very practical things.

Ortega

Yeah, a lot of practical things. I skimmed by on the scholastics as well as I could, but I learned a lot of practical things. [laughter]Now, one thing I'd like to mention here also is that- I told you a story about the alto sax. Mr. Lippi used to tell us at school that if you're going to be in orchestra playing the saxophone, you've got to learn how to play the clarinet or flute or something in order to double.

Isoardi

So you've got to double.

Ortega

To play with the big bands or whatever. So anyway, my mother bought me the alto sax in 1943. So then I got myself a job in a bakery working after school for a while.

Isoardi

Where at? Do you remember?

Ortega

I don't remember. Probably Lynwood or somewhere near Watts there in a bakery. I can't remember. It may have even been downtown. I don't remember, but it was in a bakery cleaning out these big bins. That was my job, cleaning out these big bins. They used to bake a lot of stuff in these big bins, and I would clean them out. But I just worked there long enough so I could save enough money to buy the clarinet, and then I quit. And then a year after that I bought this Nuernburger flute from Lloyd Reese. It wasn't the greatest flute in the world, but it was a good enough flute to just kind of start learning on.And then I remember once in one of the talent shows that we used to do with the Hep Cats and different talented kids-

Isoardi

What do you mean talent show?

Ortega

Well, an assembly-type thing for the kids.

Isoardi

So it was a school assembly, and different kids would get up and perform?

Ortega

Yeah, and do their thing-sing or whatever they did. Also I mentioned that Gil Bernal used to go there and do his imitations of different people who were popular at the time, and then later on I paved the way for him to start playing the saxophone. But anyway, at one of these talent shows, Teddy Edwards- I think he had just arrived from Mississippi.

Isoardi

So this is about '45, then?

Ortega

This is about '45 I would say. He had just arrived from Mississippi, I think, and he came by the talent show. And him and some other guys- I can't remember who they were. I think it was a professional group that came to perform for the kids. And we were all really impressed with these guys who were professional musicians.

Isoardi

What were they playing? Do you remember?

Ortega

They were just playing maybe a couple of standard tunes, but in the bebop style.

Isoardi

So it was a new music then.

Ortega

Yeah, it was a new music. Oh, yeah. And then also "Big Jay" [Cecil] McNeely, who wasn't later recognized at all as a bebop tenor saxophone player, I must say that he was about the first guy that I really heard-well, in person, anyway- play like really heavy bebop tenor saxophone.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

[sings fragment of a bebop-style melody] You know, stuff like that.

Isoardi

Really? And this was at the assembly? This was in the talent show?

Ortega

This was at the assembly.

Isoardi

No kidding.

Ortega

Or even walking around the school. He would walk in the hall and play.

Isoardi

No kidding.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

And he was that fine of a bebop player.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. Well, to me he was. At this stage of the game- I don't know if today-

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

Man, I thought he was really good. A funny guy, always in good spirits, always laughing and everything.And then there was another guy, James Jackson-I may have mentioned him before-who later was a tenor player with [Joe Liggins and] the Honeydrippers.

Isoardi

And he was a student there?

Ortega

He was a student there, also. He wasn't that much of a bebop player, per se. He was more like, I would say, almost toward the Coleman Hawkins school, because he could play "Body and Soul" note for note like Coleman Hawkins and like that, nice, big tone and everything.And this other kid, Albert Elam, was playing the lead [alto] chair in the Hep Cats, but then he graduated and I took over for him. Anyway, they used to call him the nickname "Flat Top." I don't know whatever happened to him, but he was a fine alto player.And then I remember that one time there was a big band performance in downtown Watts on 103rd Street at the Linda Theatre, which at that time was a brand-new theater.

Isoardi

Was it a movie theater as well as a performance theater?

Ortega

Yeah. Basically it was just a movie theater, but then later on they did a few little stage shows, a little bit once in a while. The one that was built before that was called the Largo Theatre. But the Linda Theatre was a newer theatre. They used to have a few stage shows with some of these guys like James Jackson, Albert Elam, and this other trumpet player that I had forgotten to mention before. His name was Donald Johnson, like the actor now, you know, Don Johnson, only he was a trumpet player. [laughter] He was pretty good, too. But these guys, I don't know whatever happened to them.

Isoardi

Yeah. But they were among the better musicians then that were coming out of the Watts area?

Ortega

Yeah, out of Jordan High School.

Isoardi

Interesting. I know you were also playing on the side, and you guys-you and Chuy [Ruiz], I guess-had a group, the Frantic Five. Were you sitting in or playing with any other groups around town or in Watts?

Ortega

Me or-?

Isoardi

You.

Ortega

Let's see. Well, I would just say that basically I was sitting in with-not around Watts-my cousin Ray and this Phil Carreón orchestra where Lennie Niehaus was writing the arrangements.

Isoardi

This was a big band?

Ortega

This was a big band, Phil Carreón. They used to play downtown a lot at the-What's the name of that ballroom there? Oh, it was a ballroom downtown. I forget the name of it. Avedon [Ballroom], I think it was. I'm pretty sure it was the Avedon Ballroom.

Isoardi

Where was that at?

Ortega

Right at downtown around Broadway or somewhere down in there. Lionel Sesma, a fine trombone player, Paul Lopez, trumpet, and Lennie Niehaus, who was also arranging for the band.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Fine arrangements. At that time he was only about sixteen, seventeen.

Isoardi

Lennie Niehaus.

Ortega

Yeah. He was writing beautiful arrangements.

Isoardi

I was unaware that he was from Southern California.

Ortega

He went to Roosevelt High School.

Isoardi

He went to Roosevelt in East L.A.? Is that where he was born and grew up, in East L.A.?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

I didn't know that. So was this band, Phil Carreón's band, mostly guys from East L.A.?

Ortega

Primarily, yeah, I think so. I'm pretty sure.

Isoardi

So about '45 or so they were organized as a big band and playing downtown professionally.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

But these guys couldn't have been very old either, right?

Ortega

Well, some of them were older. But I'd say Lennie was probably the youngest one in the band-a very talented, young guy. Some of the other guys were older. I mean, all of them were older, but some of them were quite a bit older. Some of them were just like in their early twenties. Most of them were in their early twenties, I would say. But Ray was probably only about, gee, maybe nineteen or twenty.

Isoardi

Yeah. They were young.

Ortega

Lionel Sesma and Paul Lopez were around the same age, I think.

Isoardi

And most of them lived in East L.A.?

Ortega

Uh-huh.

Isoardi

So you'd go out there to sit in and practice?

Ortega

I'd go out there to sit in and practice. See, my cousin Ray lived in- First he used to live in Watts, and then he moved to East L.A. So I used to go to East L.A., and we used to practice. We used to go on this big mountainside there, and then we would practice out of a book. I would practice the alto, and he would practice the trombone. But we'd read off the same music. I would just eliminate the sharps or add a sharp or whatever it was at the time, I forget which. So a lot of what I used to practice was the trombone music, you know. [laughter]

Isoardi

Well, it made you a good sight reader, I'll bet. You could transpose. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, man. It kind of helped that way.

Isoardi

Was Lennie Niehaus playing first alto in the band?

Ortega

He was playing third alto. A guy named Ray Ramos was playing- It just came to me now. Ray Ramos. I don't know whatever happened to him. He used to

work days at Sears Roebuck down there in East L.A. But he used to play lead alto in the band, see, whereas Lennie was still going to high school.

Isoardi

And most of these guys went through Roosevelt High, I guess?

Ortega

Yeah, I think so.

Isoardi

Do you know anything about their program at Roosevelt? Did they have a big music program also?

Ortega

I think they probably did. I don't really know. I think they very well could have, because there were some very good musicians who came out of there.

Isoardi

Yeah, it seems like it. Did the band stay together very long? Do you know?

Ortega

I think so. I think they stayed together quite a while. I mean, the guys would come and go, but the nucleus stayed together pretty much. In those days there was quite a call for big bands to play for functions- weddings and dances-in the different ballrooms and stuff like that.

Isoardi

All the society gigs.

Ortega

Which brings to mind, I saw my mother [Grace Araujo] the other day, and I asked her, I said, "Hey, Mom, where did you and my dad [Genaro Ortega] meet?" Because you had asked me that.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

And I said I didn't know. So I said, "Well, if I see her, I'm going to ask her.""Oh, we met in a dance hall. Me and my girlfriend Maria used to take the red streetcar there in Watts, and we used to take it all the way downtown to the dance hall. For ten cents we could ride all the way downtown, and we'd go to the dance." I don't know what it cost to get into the dance. But anyway, that's where she met my dad. And she said, "Then he asked me if I could dance, and he didn't let go of me all night." [laughter] Before you know, they were dating. Anyway, that's how they met, in the dance hall.

Isoardi

Good story.

Ortega

So anyway, what else?

Isoardi

Well, let's fill in a little bit. We've certainly talked a great deal about Jordan and your early years. What was Watts like then? For instance, what was sort of the main strip in Watts? Where did people go to shop? Was there really any nightlife? You just mentioned the one theater.

Ortega

Of course, I was pretty young, but I don't think there was a heck of a lot of nightlife. The one big market at that time-a supermarket like today's standards, almost up-to-date but not quite up-to-date standards of course-was called Smith's Market.

Isoardi

Where at?

Ortega

Right down at 103rd Street, right in the center of town. And then they had all the little stores like Gallenkamp Shoe Store and a five-and-ten-[cent store] and this and that, and a pet store, just little things downtown, you know. It was just a small community on 103rd Street there.

Isoardi

So that's pretty much where all the business part of Watts was, on 103rd?

Ortega

Yeah, at that time. Yeah. And then the Largo Theatre was on one end of 103rd. And then the Linda [Theatre], they built it brand-new closer to the other end of the town there. I forget the name of the street. That's where Pete Kynard had his record store, too.

Isoardi

By the Linda Theatre?

Ortega

Near the Linda Theatre, yeah.

Isoardi

Were there any small clubs or places you'd go to hear music?

Ortega

No, not that I can recall. Not in the Watts area there that I could recall. One of my first gigs was in a little tiny bar, and it was called Bailey's Bar. I think it was me and Chuy and Walter Benton and Jimmy O'Brien on piano. I think that was about it, maybe four or five of us. I was all excited. I told my stepdad, Cuc [Rufus M. Araujo]. I said, "Hey, Cuc, we're going to play at Bailey's Bar." He said, "Oh, you are? Oh, okay. We'll go down there and listen to you." So we were all excited. We were going to play at Bailey's Bar. So we played, but there was hardly anyone there. [laughter] I think there were a couple of guys drinking a beer at the bar. So he used to always kid me about Bailey's Bar. That was kind of like my first gig in Watts.

Isoardi

Your debut.

Ortega

Yeah, my debut. And nobody was there. But, I mean, they were just little bars around there. As far as I know, there wasn't much musical activity. All the musical activity centered more toward Central Avenue further towards town, you know, like towards Main [Street] or Manchester or out that way. I don't know. As far as the center of Watts, as far as I know there wasn't that much nightlife so to speak.

Isoardi

Right. For the most part, the Mexican American community in Watts, what did most people do in terms of living?

Ortega

Oh, just real labor jobs.

Isoardi

Mostly that.

Ortega

Just real labor jobs like- Gee, I don't know. Just any labor type of work like digging ditches or carpentry.

Isoardi

Were there many shop owners that you were aware of?

Ortega

No.

Isoardi

So mostly working people, working-class people.

Ortega

Yeah. I don't know who owned the shops. Probably the Jewish people at that time. I don't know. I can't really remember at all. In other words, I don't think any minorities had any as far as running the shops and things. The only guy I know was Pete Kynard, who had his record store, but of course that's all I was interested in anyway. So there might have been venues where they had owners who were Mexican or black or something.

Isoardi

Oh, there was one other thing I wanted to ask, Anthony, about Jordan. I think earlier you mentioned to me an all-city band. What was that?

Ortega

Well, you know, I had forgotten about that until we saw this little article. But I vaguely remember that they picked a few different players from the Los Angeles schools.

Isoardi

Who is "they"?

Ortega

Well, the city or whoever was in charge of the all-city band.

Isoardi

So this was throughout L.A., then?

Ortega

It was throughout L.A., yeah.

Isoardi

It was like an all-star-

Ortega

Yeah. This was like an all-star, so to speak, so they would audition different kids from the different high schools throughout L.A. As a matter of fact, I think Eric Dolphy was picked from Dorsey High [School] amongst some of the other musicians at Dorsey High, whereas myself and Chuy and a few other guys were picked from Jordan. And then what happened, when they ended up picking everybody after auditioning them, then they would put the ones that they had picked all together for a performance, for an all-city high school concert.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

It was called the All-City Band Festival Program, Friday, May 10, 1946, at the Shrine Auditorium. So it was kind of nice. We got to meet the different kids from all the different schools who were supposed to be the boss players, you know.

Isoardi

Like the all-Americans.

Ortega

Yeah. Like the all-Americans, the all-stars, or whatever. As far as I remember, it was only one time. It may have happened more than once, but I can just recall the one time. So that was that situation. I don't know if they still have that anymore, but they might.

Isoardi

You know, it's funny. Thinking how important music was and how big a role it played in kids' lives then in terms of how it was so much a part of your school-

Ortega

Yeah, it's really amazing. So many years ago- Now, I can't say the same for every school, but I bet that a bunch of schools were on the same kick where they used to have bands or perform assemblies or talent shows, so to speak.

Isoardi

Yeah. It's wonderful. Wonderful. It's too bad that so much of that is lost. I mean, with all the economic cutbacks and everything else, schools just don't have these kinds of opportunities now.

Ortega

Now, Jefferson High School, too, I understand they had a really good swing band there.

Isoardi

Yes. Under Samuel Browne they had a wonderful program. And now you've told me also that Roosevelt certainly had a fine program. It must have.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Something that has been lost. Too bad. I don't know if you want to talk about this now or not, Anthony, but maybe before we get too far away from it, the issue of racial problems, say especially during the mid-early forties, the period of the Zoot Suit riots and things like that. Do you want to get into that at all now?

Ortega

Well, yeah, sure. It didn't affect me that much, but they used to have- Like during the war [World War II], I remember one time some sailors, a bunch of sailors, rode down 103rd Street in maybe three or four or five cars-I don't remember-but they were looking for a Mexican guy to beat up. And then also it worked reversed, because Mexican guys would look for sailors to beat up. So it was a thing, you know. It was too bad. That was throughout the L.A. area.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Not only Watts but East L.A. or wherever they could find some Mexicans. And I don't know what the problem was. I guess it was just a racial hatred situation where the Mexicans wanted to beat up the sailors and the sailors wanted to beat up the Mexicans. But all I could remember is that one time they went to Watts in a bunch of cars looking for Mexicans.

Isoardi

Really? A number of cars full of sailors just looking-?

Ortega

Yeah, to beat up guys. But that's all I can remember about that particular thing.

Isoardi

Were you that aware of the Zoot Suit thing when it happened?

Ortega

Not really. You know, I'd hear of it, but-

Isoardi

So it was something that was going on downtown. It wasn't really happening in Watts.

Ortega

Yeah, it wasn't really happening, like confronting me, so to speak. Because I know these guys like Chuy- Like I said earlier, Chuy used to be one of the gang members, but he told me later, of course, that by getting into music it kind of saved his life, so to speak, because he got away from that environment. But anyway, it was much more low-key at that time. I mean, I guess some of the guys had knives or they would beat each other up or have gang fights, but very seldom- You wouldn't hear of anybody killing each other or that and stuff. As far as the basics are concerned, I guess it was kind of like a territorial thing, which is even today like turfs, so to speak. You know, if you're out of your territory you'd better watch it, you know, like that. But actually it didn't affect me that much. It was going on, but it didn't affect me that much.I remember lots of times that when I used to go to East L.A. to visit my cousin Ray the cops would stop us. They would just stop us. They'd put on the red light, and then my cousin Ray would say, "Oh, there goes that funky red light again." [laughter]

Isoardi

You would just be driving around East L.A.?

Ortega

Yeah, just driving around East L.A., and they would stop you and search you and the car. So one time I remember- The cop used to shine the light in your face. Maybe at nighttime, of course, he would shine the flashlight at your face, you know. So one time Ray happened to have a flashlight in the glove compartment-

Isoardi

He flashed it back at them?

Ortega

He flashed it back at the cops. [laughter]

Isoardi

Oh, man.

Ortega

He flashed it in the cop's face. And I thought, "Oh, man, now we're in for it." But the guy just kind of got surprised, and he just bugged us a while and let us go. I was afraid he was going to take us in or something after that.

Isoardi

I would think some cops might have beat the hell out of you.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. But Ray, sometimes he would rebel. He didn't want to take any of that stuff, you know. [laughter] He flashed the light in the cop's face. But anyway, aside from that-

Isoardi

But that was pretty common?

Ortega

Yeah, it was pretty common. Now, aside from that, as far as the musical aspect of things, I have encountered that racial prejudice. Now, here we go on a different side of the spectrum, because like by being Mexican American or whatever, sometimes maybe the blacks wouldn't accept me. For instance, in this one case in point-which was the biggest case in point-I wasn't really accepted that well at Marty's, which was owned by a Mexican man. I don't know if I had mentioned this before.

Isoardi

Yeah, you did. That's an amazing story.

Ortega

You know, Martín, Mr. Zuniga. He owned Marty's. Later on he was Marty's on the Hill. But anyway, I was fired from that gig because of my racial background, which was weird, because he was Mexican. In other words, what I'm getting at is the blacks were bugging him. I guess they were saying that they wanted to see a black saxophone player instead of a Mexican guy. And when I think about it now, they were right in a weird sort of way, because there were a lot of black guys who could play, and why didn't they have the gig? In a weird sort of way I can kind of see it now that I'm older, whatever. But at that time that really bugged me. Anyway, that was one point there where I was prejudiced against by the blacks. But that was about the only time I could think about offhand.But then, from the white musician's standpoint, especially in the studio work, it was very limited for Latinos or Mexican-descent musicians to get into the studios, because, you know, you kind of get stamped automatically as a Latin player. They figured, well, "The guy probably can't read" or "The guy doesn't have a very good tone" or "He's going to be late," you know. "He's going to be late because he's-"

Isoardi

"He's lazy."

Ortega

Yeah, he's lazy, or a number of things along those lines that are stereotyped or whatever. But thanks to a few other guys who were liberal, like Nelson Riddle-he was a very liberal guy-and a few other guys- And then thanks to guys like Buddy Collette and Bill Green-I'm speaking for myself-who opened some doors for me first of all by calling me as a substitute for them- And then eventually they saw that I could do the job or something; they would call me back on their own or stuff like that, you know. Like later on Nelson really liked me, and he had featured me on a couple of albums.And then, let's see. My first dealing with Lalo Schifrin I think was- Let's see. Who recommended-? I think Quincy [Jones] had recommended me to Lalo Schifrin. The first movie call I did for Lalo Schifrin was *Sol Madrid.* Shelly Manne and I were playing a

complete freedom type of introduction for the movie, *Sol Madrid.* I think Clint Eastwood was in it. Who was the other guy? McQueen, Steve McQueen.

Isoardi

Oh, Steve McQueen.

Ortega

Either one of those guys. It was Steve McQueen. But anyway, at the beginning of the movie it was a complete free improvisation, Shelly Manne and myself. I was playing tenor, and we were just doing a completely free thing. But my point is that that's the first time I had met Lalo. So Quincy had recommended me to Lalo, and then Lalo in turn had recommended me to Bill Conti. Because one time Bill Conti called Lalo and said, "I need a saxophone player who can do some like really creative things like-" I can't express the word. To express a lot of emotion, you know. "I need a guy like that. Who would you recommend?" So Lalo Schifrin recommended me to Bill Conti. But anyway, my first kind of, I would say, break, so to speak, was in the studio there, at Universal [Pictures] studios with Quincy. Because he wrote the music for *The Pawnbroker* with-

Isoardi

Rod Steiger.

Ortega

Rod Steiger.

Isoardi

So this was the early sixties?

Ortega

This was, I would say, about 1965 maybe or something like that. Anyway, I was playing soprano [saxophone]. It's a funny thing-not funny-but I didn't own a soprano at the time. So I called Ruben Leon, this guy I had mentioned to you-not on the tape-one of the Latin musicians who was a very fine musician. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][He played lead alto with Earl Spencer on my first road trip to Fort Worth, Texas, and also worked with the Charlie Barnet orchestra for a while. He also formed the Black and Brown Brotherhood Band with Buddy Collette in the 1960's.] He is now a professor at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Los Angeles] over there. Anyway, he had a soprano. So I borrowed his soprano to do the recording on *The Pawnbroker.* In other words, what I'm getting at is that *The Pawnbroker* was one of my first stepping-stones to get into the soundtrack type of recording with a couple of guys here and there and stuff like that.

Isoardi

Now up until this time- This is a period I guess in the later fifties, early sixties, that you start getting studio work. What about up until that time, I guess, say,

during the earlier fifties? Are there other Mexican American musicians who are getting studio work? Or are you sort of the first one?

Ortega

The only guy I ever heard of was Raphael Mendez.

Isoardi

The only one you heard of who'd gotten-

Ortega

That I'd ever heard of, you know. Of course, he was fantastic. You could hardly help but give in, as good as he played. [laughter] They had to, man. He was under contract, I think, with [Walt] Disney [Productions] studios. He was really heavy, big. I mean, he was something else. I can't say that all the other Mexicans played as good as him. No way. But he was exceptional. They had to accept him, you know.

Isoardi

Right. So it is only about the late fifties when you start getting into that?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Up until then there really is not much-?

Ortega

Up until then it was pretty rough. Like, see, I left Lionel Hampton's band in '54-

Isoardi

Actually, Anthony-I'm sorry to interrupt-could we back up a bit?

Ortega

Sure.

Isoardi

Because I know last time we ended when you went on the road with Hamp. So before we carry that forward, let me throw one or two other things at you, okay? Just to wind up this earlier part.

Ortega

Okay.

Isoardi

Actually, to go back even further, you had mentioned some of the gangs in Watts. Do you know if during the Zoot Suit upheavals of the World War II period, were they involved in those? Do you know if the gangs were getting into the middle of the rioting?

Ortega

Oh, you mean like from Watts?

Isoardi

Yeah. As far as you know.

Ortega

I think so. I would guess so, yeah. But, see, the only thing is- Well, see, now, East L.A. gangs and the Watts gangs, they were like rivals too, you know. And then they had different gangs in East L.A. Because East L.A. was primarily all Mexican. There weren't any blacks or whites that I know of, per se, that were living there. So that was all primarily Mexicans there in East L.A. So they had gang rivals like the Mara gang and the Clanton and maybe a couple of other ones I don't know. But if you were from Watts and you were a gang member who went over there, you'd better look out. You might get into trouble. Or if some of those gang members from East L.A. came to Watts, they'd better look out. I'm talking about Mexicans now, just all Mexicans against each other, which was really dumb, but that's what they did. I don't know if they still do that or not or what. I guess all gangs are free-for-all now. But anyway, that's the way it was at that time.

Isoardi

I wonder if they had a truce during the Zoot Suit riots.

Ortega

They may have. They may have.

Isoardi

And worked together, even.

Ortega

Maybe. They may have. Possibly.

Isoardi

Oh, the other thing I meant to ask you: Did you notice back then if there were any Mexican American cops?

Ortega

Yeah, a couple here and there. In fact, I remember one guy- I can't think of his name, but he was bugging us one time. We were riding in the car, and he stopped. And afterwards we were thinking about it. "Well, this guy is a Mexican guy. It should seem like he would have been more on our side," you know, my cousin and I. Now, I remember his name was Chavez. We saw his badge, you know.But on the other hand, now, I just remembered that when my bike was stolen there was one cop in Watts there, a white cop, the nicest guy that you'd want to meet. He used to drive my cousin and I around in his squad car to look around for somebody who had maybe stolen my bike. A really nice guy. He would go out of his way. He went out of his way and drove us around. Of course, we never found the guy who stole the bike, but, I mean, that was one nice guy. I can't remember his name or anything, but that was unusual. So there were a few nice-

Isoardi

It was more the exception than the rule.

Ortega

Exception, that's right. That's right. But there were a few nice ones, you know.

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Ortega

Okay. I'll get back to some of this studio work, per se.

Isoardi

Well, maybe we could cover that when we get up to it, because that doesn't come up until the late fifties, I guess.

Ortega

Okay.

Isoardi

There's just one other thing I wanted to ask you before we get on with your joining Lionel Hampton and then going on the road, and that is- I mean, here we're talking about the mid- to the later forties or so. What about the drug scene? Is this something that you're aware of then? Or are kids in high school aware of this now?

Ortega

Well, you know, a lot of the pachuco guys, they would be smoking pot.

Isoardi

That was pretty common then, right?

Ortega

It was pretty common, yeah. At that time it was pretty common, but it wasn't- Just a few of them. It wasn't that much. A few Mexicans guys would smoke it. And as far as I know, the Hep Cats, maybe some of them did, but not that I ever knew of. Maybe they did.

Isoardi

So it was something you really never saw around high school.

Ortega

I never saw it around high school. No, I never saw it. But I'm sure it was happening. I guess if you were a gang member you would get into it pretty good. But as far as the other, like the heroin and all that, well, that came in really heavy in the fifties with all the musicians, you know.

Isoardi

But up till then you really didn't notice it at all?

Ortega

No, I didn't notice. As a matter of fact, when I was in the army these guys would be smoking pot once in a while in the barracks there or something, and they'd say, "Come on, Naff, have some." And I said, "No, man." I'd just say, "It's all in your mind. It's all in your mind, you know." So this guy who was passing the joint- So I said, "Okay, I'll try it one time." So I tried it one time,

and I didn't feel anything. I tried a couple more. Finally I did feel something. The only thing I felt mostly was it gave me a big appetite. [laughter] You want to eat. You want to eat and eat and eat, eat, eat. But I remembered that Lloyd Reese had spoken to me about the drug situation, so I'd heard of that, man. [tape recorder off]

Isoardi

So the drugs weren't a major kind of thing or very much of a presence?

Ortega

Yeah. Like I said, in the army these guys had me try some pot, but I had remembered- Well, Lloyd Reese was set against that kind of stuff. He said, "It's all nonsense. All it could do is to hold you back," and this and that. And even at that time I wasn't aware of what was going on, but he knew all about it. Of course, he had been with different bands and had been around a long time. So I just let it go like that. I said, "It can't do you any good." So that was the end of that situation.

Isoardi

But Lloyd Reese would make a point, though, of talking about drugs or pot with his students?

Ortega

Oh, yeah. He would cover all aspects. Like when I had gone out for football for a month or two or whatever, he said-I said this before-but he said, "You want to be a musician or a football player? You can wreck your fingers or break your bones" and this and that. One thing I forgot to mention is that I sold my football shoes. When I quit, I sold my football shoes and I bought a pair of suede shoes for a change. [laughter] That was a nice change there.

Isoardi

I mean, it sounds like Lloyd really taught you not only music but he taught you about living.

Ortega

Yeah. I mean, he was such a strong influence in my life from being a teenager. He had such a strong impact. He would just stand there and look you straight in the eye, and you just kind of went under what he said. You had to go by what he said, of course, if you were interested to continue into the music and everything. Then, of course, he would talk about other things besides music. So he was like a philosopher-type guy. I mean, he was great.

Isoardi

I know he was a fine player in his own right. I guess he played in the Cotton Club orchestra and all that. But do you know anything about his roots, where he came from? He never talked about it?

Ortega

I don't know. No, he never talked about it. I know he played with Les Hite's band, and I think Gerald Wilson played with Les Hite, too, so maybe Gerald might know about his background, or Benny Carter or somebody like that.

Isoardi

He never talked about it or anything?

Ortega

He never did talk about it, no.

Isoardi

Okay. Well, Anthony, I guess we'll get up to your years with Lionel Hampton in the late forties, early fifties. I think last time you talked a bit about how through your friend Gil [Bernal], Hamp [Lionel Hampton] started hiring you initially to fill in, I guess, and to see how you would blend with the band probably.

Ortega

That's right. But before you know it, they were going to leave town.

Isoardi

And this is about 1950-

Ortega

This is '51. 'Fifty-one I think it was, the beginning of '51, in that area. Because I joined the army in '48. Yeah, it was '51, because I got out of the army in '51. And right after that, in the same year, in '51, I went with Hamp's band. I've already said how that went down.So then I left L.A. It was really a great experience, because I got to see- I was a young guy, and it was all such a big thing to me to see all the different states and different clubs. And at that time there was a lot of segregation in the South, you know. We would play at these ballrooms or places, whatever, and they would have the white section in one spot and the black in another. However, the band was performing for everybody- the whites up here, and the blacks here, whatever. There were a few cops around guarding the place, but as far as I could see there were never any problems, any racial problems or anything. But they were segregated, some of the crowds-not every place we played, just primarily in the South there, like Mississippi and some of those places.

Isoardi

So this was your first look at the South, then, and that kind of segregation, I guess?

Ortega

That kind of segregation, yeah.

Isoardi

How did it hit you?

Ortega

Oh, I mean, it was kind of hard to believe. It was kind of hard to believe.I don't know if I had mentioned this, but one night after one of the gigs, Gil and I and a few of the guys in the band, we were walking down the street in the South-I forget which state it was, Mississippi or somewhere, Arkansas or wherever-and here comes this black and white patrol car, and they see us walking. So they stopped and they shined the lights on us and everything. They were looking at us with the flashlights, and then they had turned the flashlights on Gil and I. We were more light-skinned than the black guys. So then he says, "What are you doing with these niggers? What are you white boys doing with these niggers?" Either Gil or I said, "We're Mexicans." So then the other cop says, "Oh, that's same as a nigger. Let them go." [laughter] "Oh, that's the same thing. Let them go." So they just let us go. They didn't bug us. They said, "Oh, that's the same thing." So that was just that one little experience there. But that's about the only thing that kind of stood out in my mind as far as I was concerned in the segregation bit there.But the guys took it all in stride. They were used to it. The guys were used to it. When they left New York they would encounter these situations. So that was that.But everything went fine as far as performing in these different cities. But in other words, getting back to the beginning there, that was the first time I had really encountered that kind of really heavy-duty stuff like that.

Isoardi

What was it like going on the road?

Ortega

It was great, because I had been in the army right before that, and I was boxed in. In other words, in Uncle Sam's army I couldn't really do what I wanted to do, but I felt free. I was able to really play my horn and really do what I wanted to do and make my living, so to speak, as a musician. Because in the army, of course, you get your monthly paycheck, and I was in the army band, which was really nice, too. But this here was like you're on your own, not just for the country in the armed forces. But I got a lot of support, especially from Bobby Plater, the lead alto player at that time.

Isoardi

So you were playing second alto?

Ortega

I was playing second alto. I had taken Jerome Richardson's spot there. But Bobby Plater was such a nice person. He showed me a lot. For instance, we would play a show like maybe at the Apollo Theatre, we would back up an act or something. And I remember, I was turning over the music for one of the acts, and he said, "Anthony, do it this way. Just turn over the music backwards. Just turn it over backwards, and then when it's all through it will be at the very beginning again," which is very simple, but, you know, I didn't really realize

that. I would turn it over and get things all mixed up. That's just one little thing. He was really a supportive guy. And I remember him telling me that I had my own style, that he really liked my style, which really, coming from an older guy like that who had been around- Instead of getting a thing like maybe a put-down or maybe a trace of jealousy or anything like that- I didn't get any of that from any of the guys from the Lionel Hampton band. And it was really a supportive thing. It really gave me an inspiration to improve myself, to really keep playing and try to improve myself.

Isoardi

Pretty exciting.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

I mean, because you hadn't played professionally that much in Los Angeles-

Ortega

No, the first-

Isoardi

You hadn't played much out of L.A. aside from the army, and then all of a sudden-

Ortega

That's right, that's right.

Isoardi

-you're in the saxophone section of Lionel Hampton's big band, and you're traveling the country.

Ortega

Yeah, and it was great. It was great.

Isoardi

What was Hamp like?

Ortega

Hamp was like a little kid. I mean, he was like a little kid. He was very enthusiastic, and yet sometimes he would get mad at the guys and have a meeting. One night he had a meeting, and he was really mad at the guys, calling them this and that and the other. I won't mention what he called them, but you can guess. He was calling them a bunch of different names and getting real mad at everybody. And then after he would give his big speech and everything, at the end he said, "Good night, boys." [laughter] "Good night, boys." And then we all went to our rooms and went to wherever. That was it. His mind would be in one place one minute, and the next minute-he was like a little kid-like his mind would just change. But once he started playing the vibes, man, that was it. He was great. He still is great, I guess. But one of the compliments he gave me, he said, "Well, there are two clarinet players: you and Benny Goodman." He

told me because he used to give me the clarinet solos. He said, "There are two clarinet players: you and Benny Goodman."

Isoardi

Really? High praise.

Ortega

Yeah. That's a pretty good-

Isoardi

So you took clarinet solos with the band.

Ortega

I used to take some clarinet solos, yes.

Isoardi

On what numbers?

Ortega

"Air Mail Special."

Isoardi

Oh, jeez, yeah.

Ortega

Basically that one and maybe a couple of other ones here and there.

Isoardi

Which you always played up, up, up.

Ortega

Yeah. [sings] So yeah, that was- He really liked my clarinet playing-so he said. And then he gave me a lot of solos. He used to give me a lot of solos. I guess he liked the way I played.

Isoardi

What did you think of him as a bandleader?

Ortega

Well, that was his whole life, you know. Some of the guys used to get mad at him because he would call a rehearsal. Maybe we would have a long gig, and he would call rehearsals after the gig a lot. He would call a lot of rehearsals primarily because he just loved to play so much himself. Because I'm sure that the guys could have read the parts, or maybe he wanted to iron out a few things that he wanted to change or something. But he could have just done it by a few words and said, "We're going to do this here and there," or whatever, before the gig or anything. But he used to like to call rehearsals a lot, and that used to bug a lot of the guys, especially if they were traveling, especially some of the old members who had been in the band a long time and were kind of tired of traveling anyway. Then he would call a rehearsal. It didn't bug me that much. I didn't care because I was new. Well, Gil was there long before me, but it didn't bother me that much. But it used to bother some of the other guys. But anyway, like I said before, he used to pick up different saxophone players or trumpet

players along the way in different cities. Sometimes he would have as many as five or six trumpet players and five, six, seven saxophone players. And then maybe another time he would drop this guy and pick up another guy. Primarily it was five saxes and five trumpets and four trombones. Primarily it was a pretty big band, but then sometimes he would add a guy here and there. Maybe somebody would sit in in a little town, and he liked the way they played, so he would pick them up and take them in for a while on tour. So that was his whole life, I mean, just his band. So yeah, anyway, it was a great stepping-stone.

Isoardi

How long were you with Hamp?

Ortega

I was with him about two and a half years or something like that.

Isoardi

It was all traveling for two and a half years?

Ortega

Basically traveling, just a few locations once in a while: maybe Philadelphia or Cleveland, Ohio, or maybe New York, the Apollo Theatre or something like that. But it was basically traveling.

So we went on his first European tour, which happened in 1953, I think. I'm sure it was 1953. That was his first European tour. And he had Clifford Brown, Art Farmer, Quincy Jones, Jimmy Cleveland on trombone, Clifford Solomon-another one of the guys who went to Jordan-on tenor sax, and Clifford Scott, whom I had met when I was in San Antonio, a tenor player. He was in the band also. He had picked him up in San Antonio, Texas. Clifford passed away not very long ago. But he was with Bill Doggett, who made that famous tune. I can't recall-

Isoardi

"Honky Tonk."

Ortega

Yeah, "Honky Tonk." He did "Honky Tonk." [sings] Yeah, that was Clifford Scott. But anyway-

Isoardi

Clifford Scott?

Ortega

Yeah, that was Clifford Scott.

Isoardi

Not Solomon.

Ortega

Not Solomon. Clifford Scott was from San Antonio, Texas. That's where I first met him, when I was in the army. And then after I was out of the army I was with Hamp. We went through San Antonio, and he came to sit in with Hamp. Hamp liked him, so he hired him. So he joined Hamp's band along with the other tenor players or whatever, and he remained. And then we went to Europe in '53.

Isoardi

That was a hell of a band you went to Europe with.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. That was a hell of a band. Anyway, that was Hamp's first European trip, and all these guys were in there. And then we did some recordings. Those were some of his recordings that became kind of famous years later. Clifford Brown and Gigi Gryce and Quincy and-

Isoardi

You had Gigi Gryce playing alto, as well?

Ortega

Yeah. When the band went to Europe, Bobby Plater dropped out, and I was playing lead. And then Gigi Gryce was playing third.

Isoardi

So you had three altos?

Ortega

No. Bobby Plater didn't go to Europe. He had dropped out of the band for some time.

Isoardi

So it was you and Gigi Gryce playing alto.

Ortega

Yeah. And then Clifford Solomon and Clifford Scott [played tenor]. Oscar Estelle from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was playing the baritone.

Isoardi

A powerful band.

Ortega

Yeah. It was a good band.

Isoardi

Jeez. And you guys recorded some when you were over there?

Ortega

Well, we recorded, yeah, but off the record, because Hamp didn't record. But some of them, Clifford Brown and Quincy and Gigi, organized this recording session for the Vogue [Records] label over there in Paris. So I was on some of those recordings, not primarily as a soloist, just mostly in the band. I had a couple of little solos, but it was featuring Clifford mostly and Gigi secondly and then Art Farmer and Jimmy Cleveland and some of these guys.

Isoardi

Another all-star band.

Ortega

Yeah. It was a great band.So anyway, after we made the whole European circuit there, the different countries and this and that, we were in Norway. That's where I met my wife Mona [Ørbeck Ortega].

Isoardi

Oh, during this trip.

Ortega

During this trip. I met her there in Norway. There was a jazz club that was called the Penguin Club where some of the musicians went to go sit in.

Isoardi

Was this in Oslo?

Ortega

In Oslo. That's where I met Mona.

Isoardi

So you were sitting in and-

Ortega

I was sitting in, and she was there just being there. She played a little piano, but she didn't know how to play jazz. She liked jazz, but she didn't know how to play jazz much at the time. She was playing mostly classical music.

Isoardi

So improvisation was not quite-

Ortega

Improvisation was not quite- She liked it, but she didn't know what to do or much about it. But anyway, we met, and we took a liking to each other and everything. So I taught her a few basic fundamental chords, like major, minor, a few of these chords, and then later on she learned how to voice them herself. Anyway, we were writing back and forth to each other, and then I called her a few times.

Isoardi

Did you go out together when you were in Oslo?

Ortega

We didn't really go out, per se. We just met at the concert, and then we went to the Penguin Club where this jam session was. And the second time we came to Oslo, then I saw her at the concert again. So then we went to Randi Hultin's house, who was a jazz journalist who used to have all the musicians from [Count] Basie's band, Hamp's band, or whoever's bands were coming through Oslo at that time in the early fifties. We used to have jam sessions at her house. That's when I got to know Mona even better. So then I proposed to her and said, "Well, let's get married." I called her from Germany, because Hamp was traveling through the whole circuit there.

Isoardi

What year was this?

Ortega

This was in '53. So then she said, "Well, I'll have to ask my parents, or I'll have to-" [laughter] "My parents have to meet you. I can't just marry you-" She wanted to marry me, but she wanted me to meet her parents. So I said, "Well, okay." [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][In 1984, thirty years later, Jan Horne, a TV executive in Oslo, Norway, sponsored a jazz TV show, "Jazz i Gartnerveien" honoring Randi Hultin, "the princess of jazz," for her many contributions supporting jazz and jazz musicians. They had compiled thirty years of material for this show with musicians from Basie's band, Louis Armstrong, and all the jazz players who came through Oslo. Mona and I were at some of the early jam sessions in 1954. Consequently we were invited to appear as guests and perform on the show- Mona on vibraphone, myself on alto saxophone, Einar Eversen on piano, Ivar Børsum on bass, and Arnulf Neste on drums. It was a thrilling experience, plus it gave us an opportunity to visit Mona's parents while we were in Oslo.]So after Hamp's band disbanded, we went back to New York. After that European trip we disbanded. So everybody went their individual ways. I went back to California and Quincy stayed in New York. A lot of the guys stayed in New York. Some of the other guys went back to their hometowns or whatever. So in the meantime, Mona and I were still in contact by writing mostly, maybe a phone call once in a while. But at that time it was a big deal to make phone calls overseas, you know. You had to call an operator, and then you would hear "do-do-" You know, like this and that. Now you can just dial direct. But anyway, I ended up going back to Oslo on my own from California, because I left Hamp's band and went back home to California. And then I ended up going back to Oslo.

Isoardi

When was that? How much later?

Ortega

This was not much later, a few months, just a few months after I had left Hamp.

Isoardi

So you didn't know Mona all that long before you proposed, did you?

Ortega

No, no, I didn't. But it was a likeness that we took to each other. It was so fascinating to me to meet someone from Europe or Norway who seemed to be like someone who didn't like-what would you say?-objects, when you like material objects, material things. One of the first things I noticed about her when I'd seen her, she had like a wristwatch, just a real plain wristwatch, you know, as opposed to- Maybe most of the American girls would wear a nice, fancy wristwatch or maybe dress real fancy with a lot of makeup. But she wasn't dressed that fancy and didn't have any makeup. She had a regular wristwatch. I just thought it was kind of fascinating and different, you know. So anyway, we took a liking-

Isoardi

So you went back.

Ortega

Yeah, I went back, and then I met her folks [Gunnar and Belle Ørbeck]. And then they liked me and everything. They were classical musicians. Gunnar was a famous violinist, soloist, and concert master. But anyway, they liked me.

Isoardi

Both of them were classical musicians?

Ortega

Yeah. And it was just a coincidence. She had taken classical piano lessons, but she didn't know that much about any chord structures or anything. One time she told me that she told her dad that she wanted to learn how to play jazz, so her dad said, "Okay, well, I'm going to take you to this guy, this teacher, who knows about jazz." He put a piece of sheet music in front of her, "Body and Soul."

Isoardi

Oh, with just the changes.

Ortega

Not even the changes. Everything was written out, you know, like the bass clef and treble clef. He said, "Okay, just practice that and you can learn how to play jazz." That's all. So there weren't any teachers, per se, to show anyone how to play jazz, especially if you were a girl.

Isoardi

So everything was written out note for note.

Ortega

Everything was written out note for note. [laughter] So that didn't work.

Isoardi

No, that's not jazz.

Ortega

It wasn't jazz. So she heard Oscar Peterson when the Jazz at the Philharmonic came through there, and she heard Louis Armstrong.

Isoardi

Oh, jeez.

Ortega

But Louis Armstrong was more the older style, you know.

Isoardi

But she must have been knocked out by Oscar Peterson.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. She said she heard him playing "Tenderly" and she cried, it was so beautiful, you know.So anyway, we got married and everything.

Isoardi

Over there?

Ortega

Over there in Norway. Just a small, little wedding. And then we stayed there a few more months. I did a little tour there with Norwegian musicians. And I did a radio broadcast, which her younger sister taped over the radio, this Norwegian rhythm section and myself.

Isoardi

So it was a quartet.

Ortega

It was a quartet. And what ended up happening- I had the tape, so when we got back to Los Angeles- We were married, and then we came back to Los Angeles, and I had this tape, so I took it to this label. It was the Vantage [Records] label. They had only one other record that they had put out; it was a ten-inch LP at that time, and it was Hampton Hawes. So I went to them with my tape, and I asked them if they would be interested in the tape. They listened to it, and they liked it. They put out the Anthony Ortega Quartet. I still have it back there, with the Norwegian musicians. But what's so funny about it is that it was taped directly from the radio with just a tape machine.

Isoardi

Jeez. But the sound was still pretty good?

Ortega

But it sounded pretty good. You couldn't hear the bass all that well, but whatever. I mean, it came out all right. So they put an LP out. So that was that.

Isoardi

Great. What was it like? Did you have any trouble finding work in Norway? Or was there plenty of work for you?

Ortega

No, I didn't. There was a lot of work there for me, because I was kind of known for having been with Hamp's band, you see, and I was kind of like a star in a way. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][I also recorded one 78 record while I was there, "I Can't Get Started" and "Blues for Ortega" on the Musica label. It was hailed as the best jazz record of the year in Norway for 1954.] But I didn't want to stay there because I missed California, you know, like a dummy. [laughter] I missed California.So then we came back. Then I had a hard time finding work. And I was pinholed again into the Latin bands or whatever I could get. I worked there at Olvera Street for a long time making about seventy-five dollars a week. And then that's when we were going to have Tony Jr [Anthony J. Ortega Jr.].

Isoardi

Where did you live when you came back?

Ortega

When we came back we lived in El Monte with my mother for a while. We were struggling.

Isoardi

And you were getting jobs on Olvera Street?

Ortega

Yeah, I had a steady gig there on Olvera Street.

Isoardi

Where at?

Ortega

Playing right on Olvera Street in the La Golondrina. It was one of the big restaurants there.

Isoardi

And you just had like a jazz combo?

Ortega

Oh, no, it was dance music. Armando Laredo was the bandleader and piano player. A very nice man.

Isoardi

Oh, strictly sort of Latin dance.

Ortega

Latin dance music, yeah. It was not jazz. But I had to take whatever I could get.

Isoardi

Yeah, true. What were you getting paid then?

Ortega

About seventy-five dollars a week.

Isoardi

That was your take-home, seventy-five dollars?

Ortega

Yeah, that was my take-home. You know, I had to take whatever I could get. And there was no way I was going to get any studio work.

Isoardi

Was it right away that you shopped the record around, tried to get the record deal? Was it Vantage?

Ortega

Yeah. That was pretty quick.

Isoardi

It came right away?

Ortega

But it didn't mean anything. When the record came out, I thought, "Oh, yeah, man. Now I've made it, and now I'm going to really get into it as a star" or whatever. But it didn't mean anything. Well, it might have meant a little something, but it didn't really- It wasn't a stepping-stone by any means to start getting booked by an agent or anything throughout the country or anything like that. You know, even though I had been with Hamp, I wasn't really internationally known or anything.

Isoardi

Yeah. Now, you said Vantage put that out. Who was behind that?

Ortega

Oh, Vantage was just a little company that didn't last that long. A guy named Jack Andrews. He's passed away now. But the other guy, his partner, who is still around I think, is a friend of Howard Rumsey, but I don't remember his name. But it was a little company that didn't last.

Isoardi

Were they like a white ownership?

Ortega

Yeah. They were nice guys and everything, but they didn't have the proper facilities for- Later on I learned that you really have to have distribution and the PR [public relations] work and whole thing.

Isoardi

Marketing and distribution.

Ortega

Marketing. Anyway, we were struggling quite a bit in Los Angeles.

Isoardi

What was Mona doing?

Ortega

She wasn't doing anything. She was just taking care of- She was pregnant, and she had to take care of the baby. And she was new in the country. She was only eighteen. I was twenty-five and she was eighteen. Well, by the time she was

pregnant she was nineteen and I was maybe twenty-six or something. So we were just struggling, living with my mother at home, and I was doing the best I could working on Olvera Street there. Then this guy René Bloch, whom I had mentioned, who had played the lead alto with Johnny Otis, the popular record "Harlem Nocturne" and all that, was doing the contracting at that time for Perez Prado, this Latin bandleader guy.

Isoardi

Yeah. He had a number of hits, didn't he?

Ortega

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Isoardi

A very big name.

Ortega

Anyway, René Bloch called me and he said, "Hey, Perez Prado is doing some auditions. He needs a tenor player, and I think you'll really fit into the band." And I said, "Okay, I'll go audition."I went to the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47] to audition. He liked me and everything, but, see, Mona had just had Tony Jr., so I didn't want to travel. I couldn't travel. I could have, but I didn't want to leave her alone. So I said, "I'm sorry, man, I can't. I've got this gig at Olvera Street, and I can't leave. I can't leave town now."René said, "Well, you've got to think of your career, man. You can get a gig on Olvera Street anytime, but how often are you going to get to go with Perez Prado?"I said, "I know, man, but I'm sorry. I just can't go." Anyway, I couldn't go, and I didn't go.So later on, after that Olvera Street gig, that's when I got a gig with Luis Rivera. He had a gig on Central Avenue. This was maybe about- Incidentally, I met Luis Rivera in San Antonio when I was in the army, and he used to get gigs around there. A piano player who later on started playing organ. So he had this organ trio gig on Central Avenue.

Isoardi

Where at?

Ortega

Where was it? What was the name of that place? It wasn't Marty's, and it wasn't- Oh, I think it was Dynamite Jackson's. Before Perri Lee worked there he had the gig there. It was Dynamite Jackson's. So I worked with him for a while in the organ trio, which was kind of nice because it was more like jazz stuff, not Latin like I was locked into on Olvera Street. We played there for quite a while.And then all of a sudden he booked a tour back East. Luis Rivera booked a tour back East. I was reluctant to go, but Mona said, "Well, go ahead. Just go ahead. Tony Jr. and I'll stay here with your mother." This was in July of 1955. Anyway, I went back East with Luis Rivera. We played a few clubs like in Philadelphia, a few places in Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland;

Atlantic City; and a few places here and there. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][In the meantime, Mona had flown back to be with me, and Tony Jr. stayed with my mother in El Monte. The gigs didn't last very long. Soon after that Luis didn't have any more work, so he left the East Coast and went back to L.A. I put in my transfer from Local 47 to Local 802 in New York City. A transfer member had to be a resident for three months before he received a union card. Things were really rough. I pawned my clarinet, gave blood a couple of times for five or ten dollars. Soon after that, Quincy Jones set up a recording session for me with the Herald Records company to record my first album as a leader in New York City, *A Man and His Horns*, with Hank Jones on piano, Addison Farmer on bass-Art's twin brother-andEdmund Thigpen on drums, his first recording session in New York City. Luckily, before I recorded the album, the record company gave me an advance and I was able to send Mona back home. She soon returned to New York with Tony Jr.]

Isoardi

This is about 1955?

Ortega

Yeah, in about that time.

Isoardi

Actually, before you talk about New York, Anthony, let me ask you about Luis Rivera. Was he from Southern California?

Ortega

Well, originally, I think he was from- Actually, he's from Ohio, I think, Columbus, Ohio. And I first met him in San Antonio, Texas, in the army in about '49.

Isoardi

Right. So when he came out to Southern California-

Ortega

Then he came out to the coast and stayed around in L.A.

Isoardi

And he got the job at Dynamite Jackson's on Central. I see. Okay.

Ortega

So anyway, I ended up staying in New York in 1955. I just got this one little room. It wasn't even an apartment room; it was just one room and had everything in it. A kitchenette and the bath was down the hall. Just a little room. But I felt good about it, because I felt like I had a start again. Quincy was there, and Nat Pierce was there, whom I had met when he was traveling with Woody Herman. He was traveling with Woody, and I was with Lionel Hampton, so we met through passing a couple of times.

Isoardi

That was before Nat Pierce subbed for Basie, then?

Ortega

Yeah. So I had a few little connections, you know.

Isoardi

Yeah, good ones.

Ortega

Good ones. So I started doing a little bit of recording with Quincy and Wild Bill Davis, the organ player.

Isoardi

So you were just sitting in on their recording sessions? Was that it?

Ortega

No. Here's the funny thing: I think when I first got to New York after I had traveled there with Luis, I was really struggling and things were rough. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][One day I went to Local 801 union floor and a drummer, Jimmy Dee, hired me for his trio-tenor, piano, drums-to play behind strippers in the Club Lido on Fifty-second Street.] Let's see. What else happened? Another time I was passing out pamphlets. [laughter]And then we had this little phone in the room, and I called Mona. I said, "Well, Mona, are there any messages? Have I gotten any calls?""Yeah, this guy, Wild Bill Davis-"

Isoardi

Oh, yes.

Ortega

"He called, and he wants you to do a recording session with him on tenor."I said, "Really?" I said, "Okay. Well, I'll be right home."I got the phone number and got the information. In the meantime, I'd been with some other guys. We were passing out pamphlets. So I dropped all my pamphlets there. I left all the pamphlets there. This guy said, "Where are you going?"I said, "I've got to go. I've got to go. I have something important to do. I've got to go." So I left all the pamphlets there. That was the end of my pamphlet career.

Isoardi

A good thing.

Ortega

So then, Wild Bill booked a few one-nighters in some of the eastern cities out of New York. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][To get back to that album (*A Man and His Horns*), I overdubbed all the saxophone parts like a saxophone section. I did the lead alto, second alto, third and fourth tenor and baritone parts, plus clarinets, flutes, and bass clarinet on a couple of ballads. Nat Pierce did all the arrangements. It was recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in New Jersey. I didn't have any money at the time. I had a little change in my pocket, but the Herald label, the record

company took care of me.Soon after that I was doing a little better. I started getting some calls from Quincy to do some things. Nat Pierce also set up some recordings for me with the Bethlehem [Records] label as a sideman for Johnny Hartman, Ernie Wilkins, and as a leader for my own album.]

6. Tape Number: IV, Side One (September 24, 1994)

Ortega

Okay. I just happen to recall this. Aside from Dynamite Jackson's, Luis Rivera had this gig for quite a little while at a place called Memory Lane after we had returned to L.A. from New York.

Isoardi

The place that Marla Gibbs took over later on?

Ortega

Yeah, she took over later. But it used to be called Memory Lane.

Isoardi

Was that always in the same place?

Ortega

It was always in the same place.

Isoardi

So that used to be-what?-Santa Barbara Avenue?

Ortega

On Santa Barbara Avenue and whatever that other street was there.

Isoardi

Right. It's now Martin Luther King [Jr.] Boulevard.

Ortega

Near the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum, yeah, near the Coliseum.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

And the guy who owned it, his name was Larry Hearne. I don't know if Marla still has it or what. Anyway, Luis Rivera used to have a gig there for quite a while, which was pretty nice, you know. Anyway, let's see. Where was I now?

Isoardi

Well, let's see. You got the call from Wild Bill Davis for a recording session.

Ortega

Yeah, for a record session. And then, luckily, right after that he had some gigs also. He liked the way I played and all that, so he took me out on some gigs in the immediate East Coast area there.

Isoardi

What kind of a recording session was it? Was it a small group?

Ortega

It was just a small group. I can't recall what we played or anything, but it was probably some blues or some groovy stuff or- "April in Paris."

Isoardi

Maybe a quintet?

Ortega

No, it was just like a trio, I think. Chris Colombo was playing drums. Chris Colombo and Wild Bill Davis and myself.

Isoardi

Oh, just the three.

Ortega

A trio, yeah. I think Chris Colombo is Sonny Payne's father, if I'm not mistaken.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

I'm not sure about that, but I think so. But anyway, we did some gigs around Philadelphia and Atlantic City, you know, East Coast gigs around there, which was really nice.So then I started doing some recording sessions with Quincy [Jones], Dinah Washington, and Billy Taylor, that *My Fair Lady Loves Jazz*, a tentet. And I remember Gerry Mulligan on that session, *My Fair Lady Loves Jazz.* He was a pretty big star, you know, a baritone player. So Quincy says, "Gerry, you want a solo here? Or you want a solo-?" "No, man. I don't-"

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah. For some odd reason, I don't know why, he didn't want any solos.

Isoardi

Gee, that's the only time I ever heard of him turning down solos.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

I thought he just ate that up.

Ortega

Yeah. I don't know why. So then it ended up being more solos for me, you know.

Isoardi

Great. [laughter]

Ortega

Which was okay. I had a few tenor solos and a few alto solos. But it's a funny thing here. Like thirty years later I see this reprint of *My Fair Lady Loves Jazz,* Billy Taylor or whatever, "featuring Gerry Mulligan." [laughter]

Isoardi

Was he on one solo in a whole album or something?

Ortega

He didn't have any solos.

Isoardi

Oh, gee.

Ortega

And it kind of bugged me, man, because I had the most- Of all the saxophone solos, I had the most solos. And it didn't say my name, "featuring" me on there.

Isoardi

Well, maybe people will buy it and they'll realize they're not hearing much baritone, and they'll go, "Who's playing alto and tenor on those solos?"

Ortega

Maybe that's Gerry Mulligan playing tenor. [laughter] Oh, man. Weird, you know. But anyway, that's another misfit there but-

Isoardi

Was the money okay on these sessions?

Ortega

Well, it was scale.

Isoardi

That's what you were getting, scale?

Ortega

Which was great at that time. Maybe forty bucks a session or forty-two at that time was great, you know.

Isoardi

So you guys were able to make it, then, with the regular session work?

Ortega

Yeah, we were able to make it. As a matter of fact, after we stayed in that one little room for a while, things were picking up. This old buddy of mine that I had known in the army, Joe Burnett, a trumpet player- He wasn't in the Fourth Army band that I was in, but he was in the Lackland air force band. We knew each other from jam sessions when we were in San Antonio in '48 or '49, whenever it was. He was with Maynard Ferguson, who was starting to play Birdland pretty regularly. He had formed his band on the West Coast after he left Stan Kenton.

Isoardi

Maynard Ferguson formed his first band on the West Coast? Oh, I didn't know that.

Ortega

I think so. I'm pretty sure. And then they went East. And then Joe Maini or whoever it was dropped out or whatever and all that. Anyway, they were auditioning guys for the band, so Joe Burnett set up the audition for me. At Birdland they were going to audition some guys. He auditioned me, and he liked me, so he hired me, and I got to play Birdland quite a bit there with Maynard Ferguson.So that led to some other Birdland gigs for me, like on Monday night jam sessions. They used to have Monday night jam sessions at Birdland. The guy who used to run it-Oscar Goldstein, I think was his name, who handled the hiring there-he always treated me really nice. Oscar Goldstein was always very nice to me. I don't know why, but he was. So I said, "Oscar, could you hire me for a Monday night jam session?" "Sure." I guess he saw me with Maynard or whatever. So every time I'd ask him, he'd hire me.Now, here is the odd thing, man. One night- I don't know if this is getting off the beaten track or not. Our daughter Kim [Ortega Backus] was going to be born. This was 1957. She was going to be born. We were living in Long Island-Astoria, Long Island-at the time. We were doing a little better. We had an apartment in Astoria, Long Island. So that particular night, May 7, I was booked into Birdland. It was a Monday session night, and I had the gig. I had Nat Pierce on the piano and I forget who else on bass and drums. And so that particular night, Mona [Ørbeck Ortega] had to go to the hospital to have Kim, our first daughter, so I had to take her to Flushing. Flushing, Long Island, was where Kim was born. I had to take her to the hospital. So in the meantime, I was going to be late to my gig, you know. So I called in. I called Nat at Birdland and said, "Nat, man, you guys just go ahead and do whatever you can. I'll get there as soon as I can" or whatever. In the meantime, I had taken Mona to the hospital. I was coming back, and I was running late. So you know how at the train stations there in Long Island, underneath the train, the subway, there are little streets where you can turn and drive with the traffic or whatever?

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

Anyway, this was way out in Long Island. I had this little Hillman car, a convertible. It was just a little old car. So I looked, right. It says "No left turn." It said "No left turn." So I said, "Oh, man. I'm late. I don't care." I looked around, and I didn't see any cops or anything, so I made a left, and I turned. As soon as I turned, here comes this little red light. Here comes this red light right in back of me.So the cop pulled me over. But he was a fairly nice guy, which brings to mind- Whatever cops I ran into in New York seemed to be nicer than the cops in L.A. But anyway, he pulled me over. He said, "Let me see your driver's license. Didn't you see that sign back there, `No left turn'?" So I played

dumb.I said, "Well, no, I didn't see it." But it was the truth. I said, "Well, I'm real nervous right now because I'm late for a job at nine o'clock at night.""What kind of a job is that?"I said, "I'm a musician, and I'm going to play at Birdland, and if I'm late they'll never hire me again."

Isoardi

Yeah, make it dramatic.

Ortega

Make it dramatic, you know. "They'll never hire me again."So he said, "Well, wait a minute." So he was looking at the license, because he had asked me to see the driver's license. All it was was a California license which had expired.

Isoardi

Oh, gee.

Ortega

So I didn't really have a New York driver's license. I was just driving around with a California license. I bought the car from this drummer, Jimmy Dee. So he said, "Well, this license has expired." But, you know, he was a pretty nice guy. He didn't even give me a ticket. I guess he believed me when I told him that- He said, "Well, what hospital was it?" So I told him it was at Flushing, Long Island, or whatever. So he must have believed me. I guess he kind of felt sorry for me, because I told him, "Well, they'll never hire me again if I'm late." So anyway, he let me go.

Isoardi

Nice.

Ortega

He let me go. He said, "But you've got to get your driver's license," whatever.

Isoardi

Yeah, really.

Ortega

He let me go. So I got to the gig and finally got there late and everything. But the gigs there ended at four o' clock in the morning.

Isoardi

Yeah. As long as you got there before midnight.

Ortega

Yeah. So I was able to do the last whatever sets or whatever it was.Anyway, what was I saying before that?

Isoardi

Well, let me ask you a little bit just about being in New York. You were in what has become the jazz capital of the world. What was it like? I mean, you'd really hit the top. I mean, you were playing with the best musicians, and you're playing in Birdland.

Ortega

Birdland. Now, in some categories it was tops, and in the other categories, as far as to get to do recordings as a leader with- Like the Riverside [Records] label was big at that time, which [Julian] "Cannonball" [Adderley] was with. I had met Cannonball during some of my excursions with [Lionel] Hampton, and Cannonball had actually recommended me to Orrin Keepnews, who was the head of Riverside, to record me. But, now, there again, I don't know if it was because I was Mexican or if he had never heard of me or what, I don't know what, but he wasn't interested.

Isoardi

You never know, because Orrin Keepnews certainly had an eye for new talent. I mean, he was always interested in new people.

Ortega

But whatever the reason was, he wasn't interested in me at all. And the other person that I had recorded for, the Herald [Records] label, like I said, they weren't primarily a jazz label. So they put out my record, and it didn't sell much. So they went back into rock and roll. Rhythm and blues at that time was-

Isoardi

Well, I don't think you mentioned- What did you record for Herald?

Ortega

A Man and His Horns, when I dubbed all those things with Rudy Van Gelder and all that. Hank Jones, Ed Thigpen, Addison Farmer.

Isoardi

Oh, okay. Were there any other Mexican Americans playing jazz then in the clubs? Were you running into anyone else?

Ortega

No, no. Not that I know of.

Isoardi

It was just you?

Ortega

I'm the only one that I can recall.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

Well, especially in New York. Maybe in L.A. there may have been a couple here and there.So in the meantime, right after my Herald recording, *A Man and His Horns* and all that, Nat Pierce recommended me to this Bethlehem [Records] label, which was on the West Coast and the East Coast. They were pretty big for a while, but they overrecorded themselves and they went out of business or whatever.

Isoardi

They did? They recorded a lot, a lot of good stuff.

Ortega

They recorded a bunch of guys, lots of stuff.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

But anyway, he had recommended me. So they signed me to do one or two albums, whatever it was. I ended up only doing one, because pretty soon after that they went out of business. But in the meantime, this other label, Corral [Records], which was a subsidiary of Decca [Records]- The guy's name was Sonny Lester. He was very interested in me to sign up with Corral, who was recording Hal McKusick at the time and some other New York guys. It wasn't really a heavy jazz label, but they did record a little bit of jazz. They were interested in signing me, but I was signed with Bethlehem. I had signed a contract with Bethlehem.

Isoardi

Right, and they had released the one record you did.

Ortega

Yeah, just one record.

Isoardi

Titled-?

Ortega

Actually, they hadn't released it, because by the time I signed with them they were getting ready to go under.

Isoardi

So did it ever get released?

Ortega

It got released like three or four years later.

Isoardi

It wasn't even by Bethlehem, then.

Ortega

It wasn't even by Bethlehem. Who put it out? Wait a minute. King [Records] bought the label, but it did- Let's see. What label was it? I think it was Bethlehem, but King had taken it over. Yeah.

Isoardi

King was mostly rhythm and blues, right?

Ortega

Yeah, right. They had taken a real nice photo of Nat Pierce and myself, because it was called *Jazz for Young Moderns.* It was supposed to be like an interpretation of jazz in two forms: like traditional with a regular rhythm section and two or three horns-myself and a trombone and trumpet or whatever- and the other side was supposed to be more like classical-jazz-oriented-type

stuff with the cello and just the bass, no drums, along that line. In other words, this guy Bob Zieff had written arrangements for that classical side, and Nat Pierce had written the more standard-type arrangements. So we took a picture in a boat, in Central Park on a boat, the three of us. That was supposed to be on the cover of the album. By the time the album finally came out, three or four years later or whatever it was, we had moved back to California. By that time King had contacted me and said, "Well, send us your background so we can write some notes on the album." So I thought, "Oh, great, man. They're going to finally put the album out." Finally, when the album came out, it was a picture of two kids I'd never heard of or seen in my life on the cover holding an alto saxophone, and it said *Jazz for Young Moderns.* I don't remember if that was going to be the original title or not, but that's what they called it. And they had a picture of these two kids that I never- At least they could have put my kids on there. [laughter] And then the notes were exactly word for word what I had written back to them for the notes.

Isoardi

Cheap production.

Ortega

Yeah. So it made it look like I was bragging about myself, because I had written all the things that I had done.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

And then at the end it said "Anthony Ortega." So it made it look like I was bragging about all the things I had done, which is very amateurish or non-professional. In the meantime, they reviewed the record in *Down Beat* and it really got racked up. Bad cover, bad notes, bad music, everything. They really racked it up. It really bombed. It was a complete bomb in every phase or direction from my standpoint as far as the way it was put out-way late and bad notes and the whole bit.Okay. My first LP was the ten-inch one, *Anthony Ortega Quartet* on the Vantage [Records] label with the Norwegian musicians. The second one was *A Man and His Horns,* where I dubbed all the horns. The third one was the Bethlehem one that kind of bombed. And then finally I did that *New Dance,* which was kind of a bomb, too. That one, *New Dance,* way years and years later was released on CD.

Isoardi

Yeah. I mean, musically it certainly wasn't a bomb.

Ortega

No, it wasn't a bomb that way.

Isoardi

But, I mean, the free jazz in the sixties was never wildly successful, but was musically very important. Great music.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

But when did Hat Art [Records] release that? Just recently, right?

Ortega

In '91.

Isoardi

In '91 they released it?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

And that first came out in the late sixties, right?

Ortega

Yeah, '67 or something.

Isoardi

But I think that's an important album, an important part of the free jazz movement.

Ortega

It was a good step, you know.

Isoardi

Yeah. It's not the kind of thing that's going to make you a lot of money but-

Ortega

It's just an artistic-

Isoardi

Exactly. It's an artistic contribution.

Ortega

As a matter of fact, it won the artistic award in Switzerland for the best jazz album of that year, in '92.

Isoardi

No kidding?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Outstanding.

Ortega

Yeah. It also won the artistic award for that year. It wasn't recorded that year, but it won the award for that year. It was released from Hat Hut [the parent company of Hat Art] or whatever.

Isoardi

It was rereleased then, yeah, on Hat Art. That's great. It certainly deserves it.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

It's the kind of thing where as the years go by it will probably get more and more popular. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, yeah.

Isoardi

So your grandkids are going to get all the royalties. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, yeah, something like that. But I don't know. It's crazy, you know.

Isoardi

Yeah, truly. [tape recorder off] So where are we at? You're still in New York now.

Ortega

I'm still in New York, and I was quite busy doing different things. But in the meantime, my son Tony [Anthony J. Ortega] Jr. had a pretty bad accident with his throat. He was jumping on the bed, and he jumped on like a little plastic whistle or something, and he seriously injured his throat. I was in Boston with Maynard Ferguson's band. So Mona called me, and she was very upset and everything. So I told Maynard, "I'm sorry, man, I've got to get back to my son, because it's pretty critical." So then he said, "Well, okay. We'll hire Don Lanphere," who lived in Boston at the time. So Don Lanphere took my place. I went back to New York there. And my son was sick for a week or so, but then he was okay. But after that, it put a scare into me about traveling around with Maynard anymore, and I said, "Gee, Maynard. I'm sorry, man. But, you know, I'm going to have to hang around town. I can't be leaving town anymore."But Maynard said, "Yeah. But, you know, we really want you. We really need you in the band."And I said, "Well, gee, man, I'm sorry" and this and that.So anyway, it ends up that Maynard started auditioning a lot of different guys in the New York City area there to take my chair. He was auditioning guys after guys after guys. He was so used to having me there that he- Because sometimes I would play something kind of far-out but yet not always. And me and this guy Jimmy Ford, who was from Houston, Texas, we used to get a good thing going like in the solo sections and stuff like that. So Maynard had a real hard time finding a guy to replace me. Finally he did replace me with this guy Carmen Legio, who was around the New York area at the time.In the meantime, I had gotten a call at the apartment there from Marty Napoleon, the piano player with the Gene Krupa trio. He said, "Tony, we need a tenor player. We're in Chicago. Can you join the trio?" I said, "Gee, Marty, I'm sorry, man, but I promised my

wife I wouldn't leave town anymore" and this and that. So I missed that gig too just because I wanted to stay with the family. Later on I thought about it: "Gee, I should have gone with the Gene Krupa trio for a while." But anyway, that's all over with. It's all over with.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

So we stayed around New York for a while longer, and we really started getting homesick for Los Angeles at that point.

Isoardi

And this is about 19-?

Ortega

This was in May of 1958. Finally we just- By this time I had bought a '51 convertible Ford which was really in top shape. We paid about $300 for it, and it was really great. The neighbor was going to trade it in on a new car. He gave me a chance to buy it if I wanted to buy it, so I bought it. So we drove all the way back to California. I couldn't get it through my head that- Like I said, "Well, every time I come back to California it's a disappointment, because I couldn't get enough gigs" and this and that. But finally it was a little bit better then.But it was still a struggle. I started getting a few gigs here and there but nothing really to speak of. I was trying to get some gigs at some of the jazz clubs, but here we go again. They really wouldn't hire me that much.

Isoardi

It's tough after you go from leaving Norway where jazz is considered so much-

Ortega

And I'm a big star and everything.

Isoardi

Yeah. In New York you were playing with all these greats.

Ortega

New York- We were doing okay, you know. And then I come back- Once again, L.A. with the stifling thing.

7. Tape Number: V, Side One (October 15, 1994)

Isoardi

Anthony, when we broke last time, you were on your way back to Los Angeles I guess after spending most of the previous ten to fifteen years throughout the world and doing all sorts of things. Why don't we begin today with how Los Angeles looked to you coming back? Because by this time Central Avenue undoubtedly had changed a great deal. The club scene had probably changed, and I guess even the styles of music had been changing. Maybe you can talk

about the changes from the period of the mid-forties to the way L.A. struck you when you were back in the late fifties.

Ortega

Okay. From what I recall, Steve- From the early days, what really stuck out in my mind was the intense jazz situation. Like from the early forties, I mean, it was just a situation where these guys were really trying to create something- Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray and all these giant musicians. So by the time I had left high school and went into the service and came back shortly thereafter- After my return from the service in '51, shortly thereafter I'd joined Lionel Hampton, as I mentioned before, and then I was touring with him for a couple of years, then went to Europe, and then got married and went to New York. I came back to Los Angeles. But I imagined that by this time the Downbeat Club and all these places were having all of these really great jam sessions and everything where everybody was really getting into the hard-core jazz, improvising and everything. By that time that had kind of slacked off, and I think some of the clubs that were around the Central Avenue area had gone toward rhythm and blues.And then a lot of it, from what I recall, as far as the jazz situation, had gone into, instead of quartets, quintets and sextets, things like that. Things had reverted to the organ trios. The organ had become quite popular in jazz: Bill Davis, Bill Doggett, and some of these guys. Of course Jimmy Smith came along later and really transformed the organ into really a more inventive type of a jazz instrument, even more so than the other musicians before him. But I think that by this time also a lot of vocal groups had entered into the picture. In other words, music became more of an entertainment form, I would guess. This is my guess; I'm not saying that I really know. I'm just guessing that it became more of an entertainment. Instead of an art form it became more of an entertainment form. I think I had mentioned also that I had worked with some organ trios there with Luis Rivera, Perri Lee, and I'm sure there were a few other organists working around there that I don't know about, like at Dynamite Jackson's club. By this time I think the Downbeat had- I'm sure that by the early sixties the Downbeat was no longer there. That sticks out in my mind more than all of the other ones because it was such a mecca for all of the inspiring musicians who would come around and really blow. I mean, they weren't messing around; they would really play. In other words, the whole scene, as far as I could tell, had changed. Musically it had gone, say, more of a commercial direction, if you want to use that word. But like I say, it was vocalists and things along that line, maybe even some revues, I'm not sure, maybe some musical revues with dancers or something like that.

Isoardi

So when you came back there was no place in town then that featured the kind of a hot-house atmosphere that the Downbeat had in the forties? That really wasn't the scene anymore?

Ortega

No, it wasn't like that, as far as I know, anymore. There may have been a few little obscure clubs here and there, but they could never really get it off the ground like it was previously.

Isoardi

When you came back, was there anything left on Central? Do you remember?

Ortega

Well, not that much that I can really say sticks out in my mind. There were maybe a few little clubs here and there. By this time, actually, some of the things, as I recall, had moved toward maybe Western Avenue. It wasn't the same, like the hard-core jazz. By this time maybe Memory Lane-where I also worked with Luis Rivera's organ trio- They hired a few other little jazz bands there, but by this time a lot of it was with vocalists and more entertainment. Marty's on the Hill came after the original Marty's, where Bill [William] Green had worked with his group for quite a few years. He really built it up into quite a little jazz house, and he used to feature different artists at some point. One time he featured Mona [Ørbeck Ortega], my wife, on vibes and me on the same bill as guest artists. And then he featured other people on the weekends, other known musicians around the city. And then later on Marty's moved up to the hill where they called it Marty's on the Hill, which brings me back to the point that I brought up about a lot of the things having moved toward Western Avenue and that direction.

Isoardi

Oh, really? For people who really wanted to play serious jazz it was Western?

Ortega

Up that way more, I think.

Isoardi

What were the clubs on Western? Do you remember any of them that were the main places to hear jazz and play?

Ortega

Well, I would say that Marty's was one of the biggies there. And then near Western, like I say, Memory Lane. I can't recall, but I'm sure there were some other ones along there. I can't recall right now.

Isoardi

So the scene was kind of moving west, away from Central?

Ortega

Yeah, I would say so. And then I think some of Central Avenue was deteriorating more by this time. People were losing interest in creative jazz and

stuff like that. It was just like going backwards as far as that type of music [is concerned]. And then maybe a lot of the clubs discontinued music altogether, maybe just went into jukeboxes, or they would hire a little group, per se, on the weekend or something. I don't know. It had gone backwards.But I think that Western was going pretty good for a while. O. C. Smith- I can't remember the name of the place where he was appearing for quite a while there on Western, but I think O. C. Smith- He was a real fine vocalist. I can't remember. There were a couple of other spots around Western there; I just can't recall the name of them. Clora Bryant was working in one of them. I can't remember the name of it, but I'm sure she would. Anyway, I guess that's about all I can recall about that.

Isoardi

Did you ever play on any R and B [rhythm and blues]?

Ortega

I had made a few R and B gigs, but just out of necessity and just as backup playing, like backing up singers or like that. I remember one time a guy hired me on tenor, and he didn't keep me long because he said, "Oh, well, your tone is too pretty. I need somebody who can really-" [laughter] He was right for what he wanted, to get the raunchy sound. "I want a raunchy sound" and all that. So I didn't last long on that gig. Of course, I needed the money, but I just couldn't get that raunchy sound that he wanted.

Isoardi

Yeah. You were sort of the opposite side of that sound-wise, because you do have a very beautiful sound.

Ortega

Oh, thanks. About the closest I could get was Gene Ammons. I love his sound, a bluesy sound, but that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted the growly, raunchy sound.

Isoardi

Yeah, it's funny. A little while ago I had one of your CD's on. A friend of mine came by, and he did a double-take. He said, "Is that Lee Konitz?" [laughter] And I said, "Why do you think so?" He said, "Well, the sound is pretty. It reminded me a lot of-" So yeah, you are very much away from that kind of R and B growl. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. Well, Lee Konitz, he is one of my favorites, or used to be in the early fifties. I admired him a lot along with Art Pepper and Charlie Parker, you know, these guys.

Isoardi

When you were in New York, did you have much contact with Konitz or the [Lennie] Tristano crowd at all?

Ortega

No, not at all. I didn't have any contact with those guys at all, no.

Isoardi

You also mentioned a person who has been a personal favorite of mine for a long, long time, and that's Art Pepper. Did you have any dealings with him? Because he came through Central Avenue as well, I guess. He's one of the few white musicians who really got his chops on Central.

Ortega

Yeah. This fellow who just died recently, an old friend of mine, Al Leon, a piano player, used to tell me stories about Art Pepper. He used to hang out with Art Pepper and these guys. They used to get into this big car. I forget what kind of car it was, maybe a 1950 Chevy or whatever it was. They all used to pile in there and ride around to the different places and look for sessions, look for places to play. They'd all be drinking beer in the car and doing whatever and getting loaded in the car and driving around Central Avenue and whatever. I didn't know Art Pepper then. But that's what this fellow Al Leon told me about Art Pepper.I met Art Pepper a little bit before I had gone into the service, which was in 1948. I met him in the latter part of 1948 or the middle of 1948, right before I went into the service in September. But anyway, he was one of my early idols. I loved his sound. He had heard me play a little bit. And one time I saw him in San Antonio, Texas. He was going through with Stan Kenton. This was about 1950, I would guess.

Isoardi

So you were in the service in San Antonio when he came through?

Ortega

When he came through there. The musicians were coming out from backstage there, and he said, "Oh, hi, Naff. How are you?" And we talked a little bit. I remember he said, "It is good to see you. And keep up the way you're playing." He said, "Keep up the way you're playing." He said, "You're doing good." In other words, don't be sideswiped by different, other styles or whatever. Keep up with what you're trying to do. I thought that was very nice to say that.Actually, it was a little after that, I think, that I had come home on a furlough. I don't know how he knew I was in town, but I was home on a furlough from San Antonio. It was right around the New Year, and he called me to do a sub for him. I guess maybe he had a better gig on New Year's or whatever. So he called me to do a sub for him on this- He had a steady job somewhere with this band. So I was just thrilled that he called me to do a sub. I didn't care what it paid or anything, you know. So I did the gig for him, and then he paid me way later or maybe mailed me a little check or gave me the money. He only gave me about fifteen bucks or something for the New Year, but I didn't care. I just thought it was great that he called me to sub for him. "Oh, I'm subbing for Art Pepper,"

you know. I thought it was all great.And then- Oh, yeah. Let's see. Well, of course this was many years later, I recall, in San Diego. This was the last time I saw him. This was about 1970, I would guess, around 1970. I was working with Gabor Szabo, I believe, on a gig in San Diego. It was an after-hours session or something. So we went to the session, and Art Pepper happened to be playing. And then Art said, "Man, I meet you in the strangest places." [laughter] "I meet you in the strangest places, man."Oh, no. Then I saw him one more time. The last time I saw him was a concert-I'll get to the day later, I have it written down here-at UCLA ["Jazz Alive!" Central Avenue concert, Sunday, September 27, 1981]. That was the last time I saw him. But it was Art Pepper, Zoot Sims, and Billy Taylor was emceeing it. But at this point he had been through a lot of stuff. He had a big operation on his stomach, and his stomach was protruding, you know. He was in bad shape.

Isoardi

Was that shortly before he died?

Ortega

Shortly before he died, yeah.

Isoardi

Was Bill Green on that gig?

Ortega

No. No, Bill wasn't there. But Gerald Wilson's big band was there.

Isoardi

So that must have been late seventies, early eighties, maybe?

Ortega

Yeah. I have it written here somewhere.

Isoardi

Okay. He must have been looking pretty bad then, I guess.

Ortega

Yeah, he was looking kind of bad then. As a matter of fact, I felt kind of bad that I didn't- I should have called him before that, because I read his book later. You know, he wrote this book called *Straight Life.*

Isoardi

I've read that, yeah.

Ortega

And I wished that I had gotten an autographed copy from him, but I didn't think about it. But, you know, that's one of those things. But that's the last time I saw him. In fact, I have the tapes of that concert where he was playing with Zoot, and there's one section in there where all of the musicians are playing on this one, cool blues that "Bird" [Charlie Parker] wrote. [sings part of melody] But anyway, that's the last time I saw him.

Isoardi

It's sad. Within a few years, I guess by the early, mid-eighties, both he and Zoot were gone, two of the most wonderful players.

Ortega

Influential and wonderful players, yeah.

Isoardi

Also, when I think of one of the things that I've always enjoyed most about Pepper's playing, too, it's that he strikes me as one of those few people who was just a marvelous improviser. He could just create beautiful things.

Ortega

You know, as a matter of fact, later on I heard him playing, and I think he had been influenced by [John] Coltrane or someone, and he started getting more like frantic, you know. But I preferred his other, his original style, the way he used to play before he was influenced by these other guys. Because it was so original in his own beautiful sound that he had. He still had that, but he was trying for a harder, more modern approach, so to speak. But his original sound was really what I thought was the best, in my opinion.

Isoardi

Yeah. I think that was his strength. I know there was a period, I think-I guess this was around the mid-sixties-where I guess he'd come out of prison, and I've got a CD of him on a- I think he was on a television show in San Francisco, and I guess he had- Around the mid-sixties, of course, Coltrane was everywhere, and he was playing more in that kind of style, and I guess he did maybe up until the mid-seventies or so. And then I think he got beyond that in a sense and found his own groove again, but he did go through that period.

Ortega

One thing I'd like to mention here, Steve-I may have forgot-is soon after I had left Lionel Hampton in the end of '53 I had come back to Los Angeles for a short period, and I did a gig for a few weekends, a jazz gig, with my own quartet in a place called the Red Feather. And I can't recall if that was on- I believe it was on Western, but it was so long ago that I can't really remember. And I had Carl Perkins on piano.

Isoardi

Oh, jeez.

Ortega

A really fine piano player.

Isoardi

A beautiful player.

Ortega

And Chuck Thompson on drums, whom I had met in Hamp's band, and Monk Montgomery on bass. Now, during this time Monk had been experimenting for Fender [Musical Instruments], the Fender company, at that time, who was just

starting with electric bass. I would guess he was the first one who was a jazz player to play the electric bass. He was experimenting for them. They gave him some instruments and this and that, and they used his name for advertisements and everything like that. But anyway, Redd Foxx was also on the same bill. He was the comedian, of course. He was the comedian between our jazz sets. It was a heck of an enjoyable experience. I just thought I'd mention that.

Isoardi

What was Foxx like then?

Ortega

Oh, man, he was funny off stage as well as on stage at all times. [laughter] And you know how blue his material was. We don't even have to talk about that. [laughter]

Isoardi

Well, I think I got some of my early education as a kid by listening to Redd Foxx's records. That's how we learned about the world. [laughter]

Ortega

Oh, yeah. He was something else. I had first met him back in New York when I was with Lionel Hampton. They used to play at the Apollo Theatre opposite Hamp's band when we worked there or whatever. At that time he was doing a partner thing with-what's the name?-Slappy White. One of the opening lines was Redd Foxx would ask Slappy, "Are you white?" And then Slappy would say, "Are you kidding?" [laughter] You know, it was kind of silly. I mean, they had all kinds of lines going, but that was one I remember that kind of stuck out.

Isoardi

There is an interesting connection too-again, to go back to Pepper-because two-thirds of your rhythm session at the Red Feather, Chuck Thompson and Carl Perkins, were Art Pepper's favorites.

Ortega

They were?

Isoardi

Well, I think some of Pepper's best recordings from the fifties that he did for Aladdin [Records] were with Carl Perkins on piano.

Ortega

I didn't realize that.

Isoardi

And Chuck Thompson played with Pepper a lot, too.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. Well, it was a good rhythm section.

Isoardi

Interesting connection there. Perkins was another one who died pretty young, I think, didn't he?

Ortega

Yeah, yeah.

Isoardi

Didn't he have kind of a different style of playing the keyboard?

Ortega

Yeah. He used to play with his elbow a lot.

Isoardi

You mean he hit-

Ortega

He played a lot of bass notes with his elbow.

Isoardi

So he'd kind of play a cluster note? He couldn't hit an individual key, right?

Ortega

Yeah. He had his own unique style, yeah.

Isoardi

Interesting.

Ortega

And he was another guy like Hampton Hawes who didn't read much music; he was just the natural type.

Isoardi

Really? So like Erroll Garner, then. He didn't know much music by reading.

Ortega

Yeah, just reading. Well, I guess he knew what the chords were and all that, but he was a natural player, from what I recall.

Isoardi

Are there any other names? We began, I guess, by talking a bit about Art Pepper as one of your major influences. Is there anybody else from the forties that you sort of admired greatly and maybe kept in touch with over the years?

Ortega

Well, there were a lot of guys I admired, but I didn't really know them that well. I thought a lot of Teddy Edwards's playing. We crossed paths a few times, mainly with just Gerald [Wilson]'s band. And of course, I've crossed paths many times with Harold Land. He wasn't in Los Angeles at that time, but I admired his playing a lot. A lot of these guys whose playing I had admired I really didn't know them that well, you know. Basically I admired tenor players more than alto players, like Charlie Ventura, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Teddy. Well, some of the older guys I admired a little bit but not so much, like Ben Webster or some of these guys-Sonny Stitt, Johnny Hodges, some of these guys. But of course, I'd never even met most of those guys. However I did meet Sonny Stitt and Charlie Ventura on a few occasions. So I would say that really I

hadn't any more contact with those early people whom I met or was fortunate enough to meet except, of course, Buddy Collette and Bill Green.

Isoardi

You certainly played a great deal with Gerald Wilson later on. Did you have any contact with him back then? Because his band played around Central.

Ortega

No. I'm going to talk about him later, too. I never met him until after I came back from New York in about 1958 or so. I had met him there around Hollywood and this and that. I never knew him, no. In the forties I never knew him. But Buddy Collette has told a few stories about him. They all used to live in this one house, helping each other out a lot. I guess Buddy mentioned that they used to help each other out with the different bills and writing music. And [Charles] Mingus was there, I think, and some of these guys, but I wasn't in on any of that. Anyway, I didn't really know Gerald until about '58.

Isoardi

Well, why don't we get to your coming back to L.A., then? What happened to you then? [tape recorder off]

Ortega

Okay. Shall we talk in around 1958 or so, like that?

Isoardi

Yeah, when you come back to L.A. now and what happens to you. I guess we've been talking about what the whole scene was like. Well, actually, Anthony, another thing just occurred to me, although you may want to get into this later. I don't want to disrupt your own narrative. I guess by the time you came back here there were some places that were going, like the Lighthouse, and there was this thing that people were calling "West Coast jazz" going on. Did you notice much about this?

Ortega

When I came back?

Isoardi

Yeah. Did you have any contact with these, quote, unquote, "West Coast jazz" people playing out at the Lighthouse? I don't know. Unless you want to get to that later in your narrative, we could-

Ortega

Yeah. But okay. You remind me, but I'm going to make a note of that. But okay, all right. Yeah, as a matter of fact, that's one of the first things that I'm going to say here.

Isoardi

Okay. When you first came back here, where did you and Mona and I guess Tony Jr. [Anthony J. Ortega] and Kim [Ortega Backus] settle?

Ortega

When we came back from New York, to begin with, we moved in with my mother [Grace Araujo], who was living in El Monte at the time. So we stayed there for a while until we could get on our feet. This was about 1958. I remember one of the first gigs that I had was subbing for Bob Cooper at the Lighthouse.

Isoardi

Oh, really?

Ortega

Yeah, for Howard Rumsey.

Isoardi

How did you know Bob Cooper?

Ortega

I really didn't know Bob Cooper, but I had met him in passing. But Howard Rumsey was the one who was running the whole operation. To tell you the truth, I don't know how he happened to call me. Maybe I went and sat in a couple of times or something. I don't remember, but he ended up-

Isoardi

Maybe Art Pepper told him. [laughter]

Ortega

I don't know really how it happened, but he called me to substitute for Bob Cooper. I believe it was for Saturdays and Sundays, because I think Bob was there during the rest of the week or something. I really don't recall. But anyway, that was one of the first jazz, per se, jobs that I had coming back to Los Angeles after being in New York. I enjoyed it and everything. I thought it was fine. It just wasn't the same as New York. I mean, it was- Of course, as you know, New York is more hard-core, and they really like dig down into playing jazz and everything-not to say that the West Coast wasn't, but it just was different. And I had been used to being back there with Maynard [Ferguson] and some of the heavyweights back there. Anyway, so I remember one night Howard Rumsey telling me not to take so many choruses. I guess I kind of wanted to stretch out.

Isoardi

You knew this wasn't New York. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. When I heard that, I knew it wasn't New York. He told me, "Anthony, don't play so many choruses, because I think that people might get too bored" or something. So I got kind of bugged about it. But thinking back on it, I guess he was probably right, because he was a good businessman. He figured, "Well, you don't want to bore the people. You want the thing to keep moving," which is true in a sense. I mean, if you were doing a thing for entertainment, so to speak-because it was entertainment to a degree- Of course, the people went

there to listen to jazz, but of course all of them didn't know that much about jazz. And to listen to one guy playing on and on- I mean, he was right in that sense. Anyway, I remember him saying that.

Isoardi

It sounds like he was trying to strike a balance somewhere between serious jazz and entertainment.

Ortega

Right. And I remember Frank Rosolino was playing on the gig for a while. He was always cracking jokes and a real funny guy. But anyway, I had written this tune called "Scalewise." It would start out in F major [sings], and then it would go to A-flat major [sings], and it would go to- In other words, all major chords, but they would- Like maybe F, A-flat, B-flat to C, and then the bridge went right directly to A [sings], and then maybe D or whatever, like all major chords.

Isoardi

It's a workout.

Ortega

The whole tune. Yeah. So like on the out chorus I'd go [sings], and then the trombone would go [sings], coming down, you know. Anyway, it was kind of like a creative type of a little composition, so to speak.Anyway, I asked Howard, "Can we try this, Howard?"And he said, "Well, yeah. How is it?"I said, "Well, it's just some major chords. It probably might sound pretty good." We had never played it or tried it or anything. I just had it in my mind. I had written it out for the trombone and everything-myself and the rhythm, you know. So I passed the parts out and everything. And there were a few people in the audience.Somehow or other, the tune, it just fell apart. I don't know what happened to it.

Isoardi

Oh, no.

Ortega

It didn't click at all. I mean, it sounded so weird in comparison to what I thought it would sound like. I guess if we had worked it out it would have come out all right. But that was the first and last composition that I had ever tried there in the Lighthouse. I mean, that was the first and the last time. After that we never tried that tune again.Let's see. What else happened there that was not too great? The guy who owned it, Levine-his last name was Levine; I forget his first name-one time I needed some extra money or something, and I tried to get an advance from him. He must have thought I was on drugs or something, and he refused to give me an advance. Soon after that they let me go. They didn't hire me anymore.

Isoardi

No explanation?

Ortega

No explanation. I think it was some kind of lame explanation that Bob Cooper was coming back, but I don't think it was true, whatever it was. But I thought it was very unfair, kind of. In other words, if I hadn't asked for an advance I don't think they would have let me go. I think that maybe he thought that I needed it for drugs. I needed some money to pay some extra bills. Whatever it was, I don't know, but I thought that was kind of strange. Of course, later on I worked there with Gerald Wilson and everything, but that was the end of my stay there with the so-called All-Stars, Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse All-Stars.

Isoardi

How long did the gig last?

Ortega

I'd say I was there about maybe three months, four or five months, six months, you know, a little while, weekends. It was okay.

Isoardi

It was just weekends? Two nights a week?

Ortega

Yeah, a couple of nights a week and a Sunday matinee, and then Bob Cooper would do the rest of the gig during the week. I guess he had some other better-paying jobs on the weekends at that time.

Isoardi

Yeah. I mean, you mentioned that these guys could have been wondering about the drug situation. Was there a drug situation when you came back? What was it like? Did you notice the change when you came back? Was it all of a sudden that there were drugs around much more or anything like that?

Ortega

Yeah, I guess they were around quite a bit. However, I would say that the East Coast was much more involved, especially with heroin and hard drugs like that.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

And I think as far as the West Coast, as far as I know, it didn't seem that bad. I guess it was, though, in some cases. I know Hamp Hawes had a problem, and Art Pepper had a problem for a while, and some of the guys.

Isoardi

You mentioned Art Pepper's book *Straight Life.* I remember when I started reading it being surprised.

Ortega

Yeah. I was very impressed with that book, all the things that he had done-I mean, going to prison and this and that. I had no idea that he was that strung-

out in all that type of stuff that was going on. Which is too bad, because, I mean, he was such a talented guy.But anyway, let's see. Okay, that was '58.

Isoardi

If you were just playing a couple of nights a week at the Lighthouse, were you playing during the week at other places?

Ortega

I was trying to get some other gigs during the week and actually going down to Hollywood quite a bit. Because, as I mentioned, I was living in El Monte for a while until we were able to get to our own place. So it ended up that Howard Rumsey, before I left the Lighthouse he had given me some advice. He said, "Anthony, why don't you move to Hollywood? Because that's where all the activity is as far as recording and different things like that." So I said, "Well, okay, maybe you're right." So we did end up moving to Hollywood. We just rented a little house there on Waring Avenue, right down the street from the Desilu studio. Mona and I used to make jokes like, "So close, yet so far." [laughter] You know, we were so close to the studios, but that was about it. You know, I couldn't get past the door for one reason or another or whatever.

Isoardi

When you came back here, did you run into any other Mexican American jazz musicians? Had that changed at all?

Ortega

Well, no, that was about the same. The only guy who I ran into was maybe Gil [Bernal]. But of course, by this time Gil was- As a matter of fact, he left Hampton's band before I did, and he was doing very well for himself. Like I think I mentioned before, he labeled himself "sex on a sax." He was a good-looking young man, and he took advantage of it and called himself "sex on a sax." He used to sing and was quite an entertainer as well as a very good jazz player. So he knew what the people wanted, and he knew that venue in which to follow in order to make some good money. He worked for a long time around L.A. and made a very good living. Anyway, I ran into him a little bit.

Isoardi

But he was moving more into a popular vein.

Ortega

Yeah. He was moving into the popular vein, right, the commercial vein. And Chuy [Ruiz], my old friend from school days, was working days for a finance company and also doing weekend jobs with this Mexican band leader, Lalo Guerrero. As a matter of fact, he recommended me to Lalo. So Lalo called me for a few gigs, which were a lot of fun playing. He was playing this Latin music. We used to go up north a lot in this big station wagon all cram-packed full of bass drums. And there were about two saxophone players; an alto player, Bart Caldarell, who was in one of Stan Kenton's first orchestras, a fine player

and nice person; and myself on tenor; and the whole rhythm section, plus Lalo. In other words, the station wagon was jam-packed.

Isoardi

Piled on top.

Ortega

Yeah, piled up. These guys were funny, though. We used to crack up telling jokes on the way up north. And they never got tired of riding in the car. We would ride all the way to Fresno or wherever up north. We would be sitting around, and maybe we got there a little early, so maybe the conga player would say, "Hey, I'm getting bored. Let's take a ride." [laughter] After we'd driven like I don't know how many miles for hours and this and that, "Hey, let's take a ride." Anyway, it was a lot of fun.

Isoardi

What kind of music?

Ortega

Just strictly Latin music, you know, cha-chas and cumbias and boleros. Nice. It was good music, good, authentic Latin music. As a matter of fact, the bass player, his name was Manuel Lechuga, and he had graduated from Jordan [High School], also. He had gone to Jordan. He used to be one of the early members of the Hep Cats there. I mean, before I was even in the Hep Cats, he was like maybe- I'm sure Buddy Collette would remember him.But anyway, I didn't really run into too many Latin musicians except on Latin gigs-in other words, not in the jazz vein, just on Latin jobs. Well, I did a number of Latin band jobs with one guy named Johnny Ricardo. I think it was just a fake name. I think he called himself Johnny Ricardo because of Ricky Ricardo, you know. I can't recall now, but there were quite a few little Latin bands I used to work with. But it wasn't that much fun. It was just playing music to make a few bucks for the family and everything.

8. Tape Number: V, Side Two (October 15, 1994)

Isoardi

So then you moved into Hollywood.

Ortega

Into Hollywood, yeah. Also around this same time, 1958, or maybe it was '59, Red Norvo happened to call me for a job to go to Las Vegas with his quintet. Let me see if I can find that here. [shuffles through notes] Let's see. Anyway, I'll just say it as far as I can remember unless I can run across it here. Oh, yeah, here it is. Okay. Red Norvo called me for a gig. It lasted about six weeks at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. And it was a good quintet: Jimmy Wyble on guitar, Red Wooten on the bass, Karl Kiffe on drums. It was really nice. So I took

Mona and the two kids with me-we only had two at that time, Tony Jr. and Kim, our oldest daughter-and Mona's younger sister, Mette [Ørbeck Rodriguez]. She's the sister who had recorded the Norwegian broadcast directly off the radio when she was fourteen years old in 1954, the ten-inch LP that I had mentioned for the Vantage [Records] label with Norwegian musicians.

Isoardi

So she came with you?

Ortega

She came with us, yeah, because she was visiting us at the time in Hollywood there. So anyway, getting back to the group with Red Norvo-I just want to mention that my son Tony had learned how to swim. It was so hot there, we used to go into the pool every day, and that's where he learned how to swim. He was about six years old, five years old, or whatever, but he learned how to swim. But anyway, the group was a pretty good little group.So I found myself taking advantage of the freedom in the group and going into quite a few atonal passages during my solos. So every once in a while Red would give me a funny little look, like a kind of a strange little look. He had little beady eyes anyway, looking at you real funny like. So one night I think he was testing me. He called "Sweet Georgia Brown," for which the original key is A-flat. So he started off "Sweet Georgia Brown" in the key of A. He started out the melody on the vibes and everything. He took a few little choruses and everything, and then he looked over to me like, "Do I want some?" you know, so I say, "Yeah." I knew he was trying to trick me, because he used to hear me go into these far-out passages and kind of wonder, "Well, I wonder if he knows what he's doing?" So he was kind of testing me, I know he was. Well, of course, it was only a half step up, but the Lloyd Reese thing with that Roman numeral system came in real handy. Because the first chord in "Sweet Georgia Brown" is a six-seven chord-you know, on the sixth of the scale you build a seventh on that. So that's the Lloyd Reese numeral system I would call it, a Roman numeral system. For instance, the first chord in "Sweet Georgia Brown" is a six-seven, the second chord is a two-seven, and the third chord is a five-seven, which throws you into one again, and so on and so forth. So in other words, by using that system you couldn't miss, because you would take those Roman numerals in whatever key it was in, as long as you knew your scales.Then, the same night, on a break we had a little cat-and-mouse conversation about playing far-out. I think he dug it, but yet he wasn't quite sure if I was sure what I was doing or whatever. So we just had a conversation about it. I figured he wasn't too crazy about it, but he didn't say anything more about it after that. Everything went fine, the gig just continued for six weeks, and that was the end of it. However, he never called me after that for any more gigs. He started using a young Mexican saxophone

player by the name of Modesto Briseno, who was never heard of again because unfortunately he died in an auto accident.

Isoardi

Just about that time?

Ortega

Just around soon afterwards, yeah. But he was a very talented, young Mexican player coming up.

Isoardi

Really? Did you know anything about his background, where he came from?

Ortega

Oh, I think he was from Texas or something.

Isoardi

He just showed up in town?

Ortega

He just showed up in town and as a very excellent young player coming up: flute and clarinet and saxophone. But he was around so short of a time that he didn't get a chance to establish himself and make a big reputation or anything. But anyway, Red started using him. And then shortly after that I think he started using Sam Most, too. In other words, the point was that he never did call me anymore.But anyway, it was an enjoyable job there. We remained good friends and everything like that. I mean, we never had a hassle or anything. It was just a mutual thing. He never called me anymore.

Isoardi

What was happening to your music then? I mean, were you getting pretty experimental? Were you getting far-out?

Ortega

At that time?

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

Yeah, I think so.

Isoardi

Now, when did that start? When did you start it?

Ortega

That started, I would say, maybe around that time. It was just a thing where I started hearing- For instance, the major seventh in the key of D would be a C-sharp. In another case it would be a fifth in the key of F-sharp. So I just kind of started trying to link these things together to see where they could meet, so to speak, kind of practically trying to weave the whole keyboard into one key, so to speak. However, you can maneuver it in half-tones or octaves or whatever. Sometimes it would work, and sometimes it sounded too weird. However, if I

had a piano or someone who thought along the same lines, it would be okay. It would come out okay. Sometimes it would clash and sometimes it wouldn't. But I couldn't pull it off all the time, because sometimes, like I say, it would work and sometimes it wouldn't. By playing with Red Norvo, it was quite a freedom thing there in a way, because Red, his chords weren't real big chords, like when he would comp on the vibes. Plus he had a guitar player, so-

Isoardi

He didn't have to.

Ortega

So they wouldn't get in each other's way. They would just comp, and sometimes maybe Red wouldn't comp that much or he would throw in a couple of little notes here and there, and the guitar player, Jimmy Wyble, would comp. So like in the background I would hear all these- "Gee, I can do this and it fits pretty good." And although even Red used to look at me a little funny, most of the time it used to fit pretty good. But I would say it was around that time that I really started experimenting quite a bit with an atonal type of approach.

Isoardi

About this time-we're talking about the late fifties-there is a lot of experimentation going on, I guess, throughout the jazz world. How conscious were you of things that other people were doing? Like in New York I know Cecil Taylor was breaking through. There was all this far-out stuff happening.

Ortega

I really wasn't- It just came to me out of the blue. I wasn't influenced by anyone else, for instance. Like I've had other interviews in France; you know, they thought maybe I have been influenced by Coltrane or Ornette Coleman or someone. I said, "No. It may just have been a coincidence." These things just came to me as a thing where I had finally gotten to a point playing jazz that after a while things kind of just started to sound the same, a repetitive type of thing, like these certain bebop licks or the certain chord structures and things like that. It was a natural thing. I kind of wanted to break out of that restricted mode and try to just pick notes here and there. Like I said, sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. But it was just a natural turn of events, I think, that it came about like that. And as a matter of fact, a lot of guys used to kind of put me down about it. They thought I was kind of like not nuts but kind of like trying to just be different for different's sake or something. But anyway, it was just kind of a natural turn of events.

Isoardi

I think in the history of jazz, whenever new approaches are born, it's never just one person and then everyone copies this person. I mean, even with bebop, "Bird" [Charlie Parker] might have been one of the most prominent people, but

so many other people were hearing different sounds then, too. It wasn't just Bird. It was all sorts of-

Ortega

A combination of guys.

Isoardi

Yeah, yeah. It makes sense.

Ortega

I think it was just kind of a turn of events with the whole musical world or something. Some guys were trying to think along those lines. Like I didn't know anything about Cecil Taylor or some of these guys. But anyway-Oh, yeah. That reminds me that about this time also was when I- I forgot about it, but in fact, when I first got back to the West Coast-it was '58-I met up with Paul Bley.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah. He was playing at the- What was the name of this club? It was quite a little jazz club there that he had gotten going, and I can't recall the name of it [the Hillcrest Club]. But I believe it was on Western Avenue, also.

Isoardi

I didn't know that Paul Bley had lived down here.

Ortega

Yeah. And he had Charlie Haden on bass, who was very young at the time.

Isoardi

Oh, right.

Ortega

Dave Pike on vibes, and Lennie McBrowne from the San Francisco area was playing drums. Of course, he was living in L.A., but he came in from San Francisco. So it ends up some kind of a weird way that I went to sit in with Paul Bley. He just had a quartet. Maybe I'll think of the name of the club later, but anyway, he had a quartet. I remember now. I had just arrived in town from New York. In fact, that was even before the Lighthouse thing. But anyway, we ended up playing some tunes, and he was pretty far-out. He used to play pretty far-out. So we hit it off right away. He was quite impressed. So he asked the club owner, Joe, if he could add me to the group, and the club owner went for it.And I remember Paul Bley also had everything, all the aspects together, because he had the business sense together, plus he was very advanced musically, playing original stuff. He had the business end of it down, because I remember one of the first things that he told me when I joined the group was, "Okay, Anthony, you've got to get a suit." We all went to Zeidler and Zeidler. Well, they had already gone to Zeidler and Zeidler, to this clothing place, and

got these suits, summer suits, really nice little gray summer suits, so I had to go over to Zeidler and Zeidler and get fitted for a summer suit. In other words, it was a uniform. We were all dressed the same, which was- He was thinking along the visual aspect, too. See, we all wore ties and this suit. And I remember Cuc [Rufus M. Araujo], my stepdad, used to kid me about it, my Paul Bley suit. But yeah, that was quite a musical experience.Now, it's a funny thing, also. Right around that time Ornette Coleman had been around there doing some things and this and that, and somehow or other he got connected up with Paul Bley. I don't know how it happened.

Isoardi

Well, Charlie Haden was playing with Ornette Coleman then, wasn't he?

Ortega

Well, not quite yet. Charlie Haden and Ornette Coleman got together after this. I mean, I think it was right after this. See, what happened now was one night on a break Paul Bley and Coleman- I think Coleman and him had been getting together, talking it over, playing together. I don't know how it happened. All of a sudden I was out of the group. One night Paul Bley and I were just taking a walk down the street on our break from the gig. On a break he said, "Anthony, I've got something I want to tell you. I hope you don't take offense to it too much or anything, but I'm going to let you go, and I'm going to hire Ornette Coleman."And I said, "Oh, okay. Well, man, if that's what you want to do. I said, "It's your group," you know.He said, "Man, you're the coolest cat I know." Paul Bley told me, "You're the coolest cat I know," because he thought I was going to get all upset. It upset me a little bit, but I figured, "Well, that's what he wants to do." It didn't really matter to me, because from just being back from the East Coast, I was still fired up with all this energy, and I thought to myself, "Well, man, that's cool. Go ahead and hire Ornette, and I'll just go ahead and get my own group and get some gigs," which turned out to be harder than I had anticipated.But anyway, I think it was soon after that maybe Haden and Ornette had started their collaboration together and whatever they did after that. I don't know what happened. I lost track of those guys at that point. However, I did stay with Paul Bley for quite a little stretch. But I think Ornette had come to town from Texas, and I guess he was creating a little stir there and whatever the case was. But anyway, that's the way things happened.

Isoardi

Well, I guess he'd been around town for a while on and off since around 1950. I don't think he ever had any gigs, but I think they had a garage band, a rehearsal band, with Bobby Bradford and-

Ortega

Well, maybe Haden was with him at the time. I really don't know.

Isoardi

See, that's what I can't remember.

Ortega

I really don't know. I don't know what happened there. All of a sudden I knew I was out and he was in.

Isoardi

Yeah, yeah. Had you heard Ornette Coleman at all? Did you know who he was?

Ortega

I had heard of him. I really hadn't heard him.

Isoardi

So you hadn't heard him play?

Ortega

I hadn't heard him or anything. I just heard about this guy. He had this white plastic alto when he was around town, and that's all I knew about him. So I didn't know much about him or anything.

Isoardi

It's interesting, the more you find out about jazz during the fifties in L.A., how much of the new music that exploded in the sixties really came from musicians working in L.A.

Ortega

Around the West Coast, yeah.

Isoardi

I mean, Coleman and Bradford and Haden and all these people, and you also, who go on in the sixties to create this wonderful music. People don't think of L.A. that way, but a lot of what they called the avant-garde or free jazz, whatever one's preference, L.A. produced a lot of those sounds.How long were you with Paul Bley at that gig?

Ortega

I would say about, oh, maybe four or five months or so, something like that.

Isoardi

It's quite a while.

Ortega

It lasted a little while.

Isoardi

So I guess that was a period, then, of musical growth for you, of stretching and experimentation?

Ortega

I would think so, yeah. I would think so. Because the further out, the more Paul liked it.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Yeah. I mean, not all that, the more far-out, but, I mean, it all seemed to gel well because he played such extensions and everything. And then I was getting off into some things. I wish I had some recordings of it, but I don't.

Isoardi

There is no recording, no private tapes or anything?

Ortega

Not that I know of. He may have some. I don't know.

Isoardi

Too bad.

Ortega

It's too bad. There were some very good musical moments there.

Isoardi

Do you remember where that club was at? Western and-

Ortega

It was on Western and- Darn it. I wish-

Isoardi

It wasn't in Hollywood, was it?

Ortega

No, it wasn't Hollywood. I believe it was right on Western there. I remember now. It was called the Hillcrest.

Isoardi

Do you remember if it was above or below Wilshire?

Ortega

It was below Wilshire, I think. Yeah, it was called the Hillcrest. It was a good musical experience.So anyway, also around this time, maybe by '59 or so- I don't know if you remember Gil Fuller, but he used to write arrangements for Dizzy Gillespie. He was quite an operator. Anyway, he was around L.A. at that time, and he seemed to take a liking to me. He had this record company called Orovox [Records], and he had already put out one album by Marv Jenkins, the piano player, and he wanted to record me. So he recorded me with my quartet.

Isoardi

Is this with Perkins and Thompson?

Ortega

No, this is a different group. By this time we had moved to Hollywood. See, this was about '59 or so. Mona was in my group at the time playing piano and vibes, and when she would play vibes I would comp some chords on the piano. We would just go back and forth. Primarily she played the piano. And I had Bill Plummer on the bass-he was a very young man at the time-and a guy I had met when I was in San Antonio in the service. His name was Dallas Medieras, but they used to call him "Pluke," a pretty good drummer. That was it: yeah,

Pluke the drummer, Mona on piano, and Bill Plummer on bass, and I was playing alto and some tenor and some flute. Anyway, the point I'm leading up to is that Gil Fuller recorded our quartet. However, he didn't care for Pluke's drumming, so he said, "Well, Tony, I want to get a different drummer." And I was desperate to record.I said, "Well, who do you want to get?"He said, "I want to get Stan Levey." He knew Stan Levey from New York or wherever it was.I said, "Well, okay." So we had one little rehearsal, and it was twelve original tunes that I had written, twelve of them. And I had worked very hard for this. And for some reason or other he never did release the record. He never released it. For some reason or other- It was some lame excuse that the tapes got lost or- He'd even taken pictures, and the pictures had gotten misplaced and this and that and the other. So that was a big disappointment. He never released that album.

Isoardi

Too bad. Do you have copies of the tape?

Ortega

No, I don't. I may have some copies somewhere. If I look it up on some of these reel-to-reels I might have some. But it was unfortunate that- There were some pretty good originals on there, I thought. But anyway, they never got released.Anyway, all this stuff was going on in '58 and '59. Also I have a note here that I got a call around that time. It was either before or after my little stint with Red Norvo-I believe it was afterwards-in Hollywood. Quincy Jones called me from New York, and he was forming his band back there. He was rehearsing, and they were getting ready to go into Pep's Lounge there in Philadelphia. He had Phil Woods on alto, and Joe Lopes was playing the second alto chair. They were just rehearsing. Jimmy Cleveland, trombone; Benny Golson, tenor sax; and Oliver Nelson, tenor sax.

Isoardi

Wow.

Ortega

And Freddie Hubbard, trumpet. Really heavyweight young players in the band. [laughter] So he called me and said, "Hey, man, you've got to come back here and join the band." I had left New York, and I figured that I would never go back.And I said, "Well, I don't know, Quincy."He said, "Oh, man, come on. You've got to come back and join us at least for this gig here."And I said, "Well, how's the bread on it?"He said, "Well, I can give you a yard and a half." I think it was about $150 at that time a week.So I said, "Well, I don't know. I'm doing a few things around here in Hollywood but not that much." I said, "Well, I'll go back and try it for a little while and see what happens." So in the meantime I had just bought this 1947 Buick, convertible Buick. It was one of these kinds where when you pressed the windows, the windows went up-you

know, automatic windows. It was kind of luxurious for a '47. You press the button and the top goes back.

Isoardi

A Southern California car.

Ortega

It was a big, monstrous car, you know, a '47 Buick.

Isoardi

Like a tank.

Ortega

Real luxurious for that. So I said, "Well, man, okay. I want to go get the car fixed up a little bit, tuned up."So it ended up that I piled the family in there, the two kids, my oldest kids, Tony and Kim, and Mona. So we all got in the car, the Buick. Fortunately we still kept our little house there in Hollywood on Waring right down the street there from Desilu. So we drove back to Philadelphia. It took us- Man, it was practically day-and-night driving, like just drinking a bunch of black coffee, staying awake practically twenty-four hours. It took about maybe four days of straight driving, practically all the way, to get back to New York or Philadelphia.So I rehearsed with the band a little bit, and then so we opened up at Pep's Lounge there. But I didn't feel right. I felt uncomfortable in the band.

Isoardi

Why?

Ortega

Well, basically because I didn't get enough solos. Phil Woods was getting all the solo work. Once in a while they would throw me a little solo here and there, once in a while, like maybe on the bridge of Benny Golson's "Along Came Betty" or whatever. It kind of bugged me, and I said to myself, "Well, I'm not getting enough solos." Plus, aside from that, after living in this little house in Hollywood, which was a comfortable little house and had a little yard and everything- It was very comfortable, and back there we were just living in this rat trap, like a little apartment, a little room, and I had the kids with me. It was rough. It was like a starting-out-all-over-again type of situation, you know. And I thought to myself, "Well, I'm hardly getting any solos, and this really doesn't seem to be leading anywhere." It was a good band and all that.So after a couple of weeks there at Pep's or whatever it was, Quincy and I both had a mutual agreement that I wasn't that happy in the band-he could sense that I wasn't that happy in the band-so he gave me some severance pay and enough money to get back to Hollywood and this and that. So we parted friends and everything. Everything was cool.So we just drove all the way back in the Buick. We had car trouble, I think, by the time we got to New Mexico or something. We had some car trouble, and we had to stay there for a day or two to repair the car and

everything.But anyway, when we finally got back to Hollywood after living in that rat trap back there in Philadelphia, we were so glad that that little old house looked like a mansion or something. [laughter] Like it was great to be back, you know. Trees and- So I said, "Oh, man, I ain't never going back to the East Coast again if I can help it" or whatever.So it's a funny thing, too. Just around that time I had gotten a call from Stan Kenton. He had heard about me, so he was auditioning some alto players for his band. He had auditioned Gabe Baltazar and myself and a couple of other guys. So a day or two later, after the audition, he called me. He said, "Anthony, I would like you to join the band. I think I picked you out of the players."And I said, "Well, gee, that's-" They were just going to go to Mexico City for about ten weeks. And I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, Stan. I've got this bright idea. I'll join the band." The most he could pay me was $225 a week, so I had this bright idea. I said, "Well, if you can give me $1,000 in advance- Because I got the bright idea to send Mona and the kids to Norway to visit her folks while I went on this ten-week tour to Mexico or wherever it was. I thought it was a good idea, a fair idea. If I could get that advance, they could go take a trip while I was on the gigs.And he said, "Oh, no. My manager would flip if he heard that." He said, "No. Gee, I'm sorry. I can't do that."Because I didn't want to go for ten weeks and leave them alone in Hollywood all that time all by themselves, I said, "Well, gee, Stan, I'm sorry. I guess I can't go, then." So that's what happened. I didn't go.So he ended up hiring Gabe Baltazar, which I heard was a very successful trip, a very good trip. I wished I could have gone, because it was Mexico, and me being of Mexican descent, I would have been heralded as a big whatever, you know, hero type of thing.

Isoardi

Yeah. You never know what could have come out of that, too.

Ortega

But that's the way it went down, so I didn't do it.

Isoardi

You didn't want to bring them to Mexico City with you, the family?

Ortega

Well, I don't think I could have. It was a road tour for the band, so I don't think I could have done it.

Isoardi

Had you been down there before at all? You hadn't been there, had you?

Ortega

I've never been there. [tape recorder off]So that was just a couple of things there that happened in '59. Let me see now. Oh, yeah. There was another thing that happened around the same time that I want to mention, and I hope it's not

in too bad taste. I got called to join the house band for a while there at this place on the Sunset Strip called the Cloister.

Isoardi

Where on the Strip was that?

Ortega

Oh, it was right where they used to have all these big signs. Let's see. Where was it? On the Sunset Strip where they used to have all these big entertaining clubs there.

Isoardi

So it was the main part of the Strip?

Ortega

It was the heavy part of the Strip there where all the Hollywood celebrities used to come out and dance. It was quite an eventful place, you know.

Isoardi

So they asked to you join the house band?

Ortega

They asked me to join the house band. The name of the leader was a guy named Geri Galleon, a very nervous-type guy, a piano player. But anyway, he had the gig, so he called me. I don't know why he called me, but he called me. [laughter]

Isoardi

Was this a big band?

Ortega

Oh, it was like maybe three saxes, two trumpets, one or two trombones, a nice little-sized band.Anyway, this one particular week or two-weekend or whatever it was-Sarah Vaughan was going to be the star act. I thought, "Oh, man, this is really going to be great backing Sarah Vaughan, one of my early vocal idols" and everything. Because she had been with Dizzy [Gillespie]. I remember her singing "Lover Man" on these old Dizzy records. Sarah Vaughan, "Oh, boy" and everything, you know.Anyway, there was an arrangement in the book that called for my alto part to answer one of her scat vocals, like maybe eight bars at first, then maybe four bars. She would scat, and these little answer solos were written down on the arrangement. And most of the little answering parts were kind of like little ditties, like nursery-rhyme-type little licks, you know. So I kind of looked at the licks, and I thought to myself, "Well, man, these little licks ain't really saying anything, and since she's so down-" I'd heard about her like being a musician, so to speak, playing piano and really like having been with Bird and everybody. I thought, "Man, I'm going to really try to create something here. When she starts into her scatting and it comes to my turn for the fours or eights, I'm going to get into it." [laughter]Anyway, she did a few little licks, and I just-lightly at first-did a few little licks, and as it kept going I

got deeper and deeper. And maybe I even got like atonal or maybe a fast lick here and there or whatever. So she kind of gave me a funny look, but she kept on going. But apparently she didn't go for it too much, because on the second show the conductor passed my part over to the other alto player, whose name was Gene Merlino, who later primarily became a singer for commercials. He was a very good singer, and he could read and everything. He ended up doing more commercials for advertising or whatever. So it kind of brought me down. But later on, I guess, she kind of knew what she was doing. Actually, it was not a jazz setting; it was a commercial setting there on the Strip. I guess she was thinking along those lines where why should she keep too jazzified or whatever. She wanted to keep it more along commercial lines. Because actually maybe she was looking toward her future more along the lines of maybe selling more commercial records with violins or- I don't know what the story was, but anyway, that was the end of that situation.

Isoardi

But it certainly wasn't new sounds that they wanted.

Ortega

Yeah. It was not what she wanted. But, you know, it was one of those things. So I was disappointed, but at least they didn't fire me. [laughter] They just switched parts with me. But anyway, that was one point there.

Isoardi

How long did you last on that gig?

Ortega

Oh, I would say that the gig lasted maybe six months or something. It lasted a little while.

Isoardi

So you were finding work pretty steadily?

Ortega

Yeah. I was finding work pretty well, yeah, after I'd moved to Hollywood like Howard Rumsey advised. Even if they fired me- [laughter]But anyway, let's see. Now we're maybe down to about 1960. If I missed something there, I'll go back. Around this time maybe- Actually it was 1961, but if something occurs to me between that, I'll go back.My cousin, Ray Vasquez-whom I had mentioned earlier, who had helped me start on the alto sax-he played trombone. However, at this time he did a lot of singing, and he landed this job up at Lake Tahoe. This was about 1962. He had landed this job up in Lake Tahoe as the emcee and also the vocalist between the star acts on the stage there.

Isoardi

This is at one of the casinos?

Ortega

In one of the casinos, at Harrah's there.

Isoardi

Was that the South Shore Room?

Ortega

The South Shore Room, yeah. Leighton Noble was the leader, the bandleader, at the time. So my cousin-we used to call him Junie, but anyway, Ray Vasquez-he either called or came by, I forget which. He said, "Hey, Naff, I've got to get you on this gig over here, because some of these musicians over here aren't really up to par. They could really use you here. Plus, I know you can use the gig."And I said, "Yeah. Really?" I said, "Gee. Well, what kind of gig is it?"He explained to me it was a show band backing all the big acts like Polly Bergen and Sammy Davis [Jr.] and a bunch of different star acts who would come into Tahoe for a week or two engagement, and then they would change the star act.So I said, "Okay, man. I'll go."So it ended up that we moved. We left Hollywood. We left the little house. This time we let the rental go, and we moved up to the South Shore. And it really was a good feeling, because it was a beautiful place. Ray found us a little house to rent right close to the gig there, right on the borderline there of California. Harrah's was right on the side of the border there in Nevada, and it was five minutes away. The gig was five minutes away, and it was a dream gig as far as like security-you know, a steady paycheck every week. And Mona loved it because it snowed there like Norway, you know.

Isoardi

Exactly. She probably felt at home.

Ortega

She loved it. And I loved the security of it, like a steady paycheck every week. I was playing lead alto and this and that and the other.However, I had in mind-See, this Leighton Noble was not a jazz player by any means, but I think he had had a swing band at one time, but more of a society-type orchestra he'd had maybe in the old Hollywood days or whatever. Anyway, he had landed this steady job up there as a leader in Harrah's. So when I first appeared there with the band and everything, I was playing lead. But he didn't go for my vibrato. He told Ray, "I don't know. He's a good player, but he's a little too jazzy." So I thought to myself, "Well, I can't blow this gig. I've got to conform to what he wants to do." So I changed my whole approach to playing. I thought to myself, "Well, for the time being this is like a very good steady job, so I'll play ball." So I changed my approach. I changed my vibrato. I changed everything. And I started thinking, "I've got to stop thinking of jazz." So for the next couple of years I threw jazz out of my mind as far as- You know, I didn't throw it out of my mind altogether but just thinking along jazz terms. I said, "I've got to think in just show terms." Everything. Phrasing, everything's got to be big band show stuff. Of course, some of the people came and had some swinging charts, and I

would play them accordingly. But like as far as laying back or doing anything out of the ordinary, I kept everything strictly like commercially thinking, see.

Isoardi

So he was pleased then?

Ortega

So then he was pleased and everything was fine. Everything went fine for a couple of years.

Isoardi

You were up there for a couple of years?

Ortega

Yeah, two and a half years.

Isoardi

A long time.

Ortega

So some of the guys in the band had heard of me as a jazz player, and they used to call me at the gig to say, "Hey, Tony, when are we going to have a jam session? When are we going to have a session?" And I said, "Oh, man, I don't know." I said, "One of these days." I didn't want to get into that thinking. I wanted to exclude that from my thinking, because I didn't want it to get back to him that I was influencing these guys too much along the jazz line. I didn't want any trouble. I didn't want anything interfering with that.

9. Tape Number: VI, Side One (October 15, 1994)

Ortega

I was saying I was afraid to venture off into jazz type of music in any shape or form. I just didn't want to jeopardize that good, steady job. So the players, some of the guys, couldn't understand it. "What do you mean? How come you never want to jam?" So I kind of explained to them. I said, "Well, man, you know how Leighton [Noble], man, he doesn't go for any of this stuff, so I'd rather just pass on that for now." So they understood, and everything just kind of blew over.Here's another thing that I wanted to bring up just for a quick moment. One time Barbra Streisand was the opening act for the Liberace show. Liberace was the big star; however she was just the opening act, and she was not that famous at the time. She was just kind of starting out as far as being publicly known. She had recorded this album, I think it was entitled *Happy Days Are Here Again,* and that's when she sang "Happy Days Are Here Again," a very slow ballad. It was beautiful. It was arranged by Peter Matz. Anyway, she showed up on one of the shows there. Liberace was the main act. We rehearsed his show, got it out of the way, and then we rehearsed her part of the act. And I said, "Gee, I can't believe this singer. She's fantastic." I thought to myself,

"She's really great. I know someday she's going to be a big star." I thought it to myself, you know. Anyway, I was very impressed with her singing. During one of the shows, on a break or whatever it was, I asked her, "Barbra, my name's Tony." I said, "I'm in the band. I guess you've seen me in the band." I said, "Do you have a photo or an extra album that you might be able to autograph for me?" And she said, "Sure, sure." She was real nice, you know. So she autographed this album. She signed on there, "To Anthony, may all your days be happy ones," which was kind of from her title.

Isoardi

Yeah, a play on it.

Ortega

And I thought, "Oh, boy, that's great." So that's about all the conversation I had with her. That was it. I thanked her, and that was it.Then, years later, maybe in 1970 or whatever, after I had been long gone from [Lake] Tahoe, I ended up doing a job for her. I approached her, and I said, "Barbra-" It was during a break of the rehearsal from the show that she was doing with a large orchestra. Anyway, I approached her. It was no long thing. I just approached her, and I said- My son Tony [Anthony Ortega Jr.] had been composing a few tunes at this time. He was pretty talented. He was taking piano lessons, and he was doing pretty well. He had written a few songs which I was pretty impressed with. This one song was called "If I Knew a Song." It was about a love story. And there were a couple of other songs on there. But anyway, I approached her, and I asked her if I could give her this tape with these songs that my son had composed, hopefully thinking that she could listen to them and possibly maybe record them or something. And she just looked at me real funny. I don't think she remembered me, because she was a big star by then.

Isoardi

Sure.

Ortega

She looked at me real funny and said, "Well, give it to-" There was a man over there. I guess he was like her manager or something. "Give it to" whoever it was. She kind of just brushed me off. I felt kind of bad about it. I said, "Oh, okay." So I gave it to whoever, and that was the end of that. I never heard anything more about it or anything. I was just kind of surprised, but actually when I think back on it- Can you imagine how many other people had approached her by this time about doing a particular favor or whatever?

Isoardi

Hundreds.

Ortega

So, you know, it didn't make any difference, but I just thought I'd bring that up. Because I was very impressed with her at the time.

Isoardi

She must have been very young when you saw her at Tahoe.

Ortega

Oh, yes, she was very young. I imagine she was about twenty-two years old at the time. It was in 1961 or whatever it was.

Isoardi

Yeah, yeah. So you guys left Tahoe, then, around '63 or '64?

Ortega

About '65.

Isoardi

'Sixty-five?

Ortega

Yeah. We ended up staying there until the end of '64 or so, or the beginning of '65 or whatever. I had finally gotten tired of doing show band stuff. And for a little while I worked with Billy Eckstine's group. He had a small band. I was playing tenor, and he had a guy named Joe Bonati, who was out of the Las Vegas area, playing alto and baritone sax. And then he had a trombone and trumpet player and the rhythm section. Bobby- What the heck's his name? His conductor of many, many years. What was his name? Tucker, Bobby Tucker. That was his conductor. Anyway, I did some gigs with him in the lounge there, the Harrah's lounge, with Billy Eckstine. It was pretty nice. He used to give me a few tenor solos. So I kind of got interested in playing jazz again a little bit, you know.And around this time also I had gotten a call from Dick [Richard] Bock, the record producer there in L.A.

Isoardi

Pacific-

Ortega

Pacific Jazz. Dick Bock. Let's see if I can find that. Anyway, he called me around this time to maybe possibly do a recording for Pacific Jazz with this young trumpeter who was coming up at the time named Dupree Bolton. Let me see if I can find that.

Isoardi

Had you had any contact with Dick Bock before? Had you done any recording with Pacific Jazz?

Ortega

No.

Isoardi

Not at all?

Ortega

Not at all.

Isoardi

But he knew of you somehow?

Ortega

I think the reason he knew of me was from the producer who had produced *New Dance* in 1967, Bill Hardy. Bill Hardy knew him.

Isoardi

And you had known Bill Hardy earlier?

Ortega

I really didn't know Bill Hardy yet, but Bill Hardy knew of me for some reason.

Isoardi

Oh, I see.

Ortega

I don't know how he knew of me, but he had told Dick Bock about me. So Dick Bock called me. This was about 1963, I think. I hadn't left Tahoe yet. Anyway, he called me about the possibility of doing a recording for Pacific Jazz with Dupree Bolton. And at this time he was putting out some West Coast things like-

Isoardi

Yeah, for quite a few years.

Ortega

Bill Perkins and Art Pepper, I guess.

Isoardi

Chet Baker I think he recorded. Sure.

Ortega

Chet Baker-

Isoardi

Maybe Gerry Mulligan.

Ortega

Gerry Mulligan, Bud Shank, and some of these guys. Anyway, I went into the studio there. I got kind of fired up. I said, "Yeah, man. I'm going to write a few originals." So I wrote some originals for this particular session that I thought was going to happen. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][They were kind of like harmony-type instrumentals complementing each other, trumpet and alto. Anyway, we ran through a few tunes there for the session we were going to do hopefully. One of the tunes was called "Eastside," which I later recorded for the Jazz Chronicles label with Mona [Ørbeck Ortega] on piano and a Los Angeles rhythm section. I played amplified alto, soprano [saxophone], and flute, all with echoplex, where I was able to repeat notes in succession, and a multivider, an electronic device that allows you to play an octave or two higher for effects. On the title track, "Adelanto," I played amplified bass clarinet. Also, another original tune on flute called "Capricorn," composed for our youngest daughter, Mona-Lisa

Ortega. The album was recorded in 1973.] One of the other tunes was called "Hidin' Out," which I later recorded in 1978 for the Discovery [Records] label [on an album] called *Rain Dance*. I played amplified bass clarinet on the title track on this also, with Mona on vibes and a San Diego rhythm section. That record I gave you.But then Dick Bock didn't seem to be too impressed with them. He said, "Well, Tony, I'll tell you what. I don't think that these are very salable. They don't have very salable content." And it's a funny thing. But Shank happened to walk into the studio, and he and Dick Bock were very good friends. I don't know if he had anything to do with it, maybe a competition thing or what, I don't know, but all I know is that Dick Bock backed out of the whole thing. He didn't want to go through with the recording. I thought it was pretty good. Dupree Bolton thought they were pretty good, too. But nothing ever came of it. That was the end of that. So it was almost a recording session with Dick Bock, but it never materialized.Anyway, I went back to Lake Tahoe at that point. I made a special trip into L.A. for this, because I thought maybe it would be a recording session. I wasn't doing the steady house band thing anymore. I was doing a thing here and there with Billy Eckstine and maybe a couple of other little lounge acts at the time. I had left the house band at this point. Anyway, I got kind of dismayed about that, but I still kind of had the urge to start playing jazz again at this point. This was about '64 or so. I thought, "Well, maybe I'll give Gerald Wilson a call." Because I knew that he had just started to do some recording for Dick Bock. At this point I said, "Well, I think I'll call Gerald." So I called Gerald, and Gerald said, "Yeah, Tony, I can use you." He said, "Yeah, we're going to open up in a couple of weeks at the Lighthouse." And this was way after I had already worked with [Howard] Rumsey.

Isoardi

Now, how did Gerald know you?

Ortega

I had met Gerald like around '58 when I first came back from New York, see-casually, though.

Isoardi

So you hadn't played together, but-

Ortega

We had played together on a couple of little gigs.

Isoardi

Oh, I see.

Ortega

He had a couple of little jazz gigs around town. I remember one of them that Dexter Gordon was on. Just a couple of little gigs around town, but he didn't have much cooking at the time. He hadn't started recording yet for Pacific Jazz.

This was in '58. I don't think he started with Pacific Jazz until around '59 or maybe a year or two later. I don't know. Anyway, I had lost contact with Gerald, but I had known him a little bit.So I called him around '64. I wanted to try to get some things going in L.A. again, and I wanted to leave Tahoe by this time. So Gerald said, "Yeah, I'm going to open at the Lighthouse for a couple of weeks, and then I'm going to do a new album, another album. So I can use you on that." So I said, "Oh, great."Then we all moved lock, stock, and barrel, back to L.A. at this point with the family. By this time our third child had been born, Kathy [Katherine Ortega Herington]. She was born in Carson City, December 2, 1963. They didn't have a hospital in Lake Tahoe at this time. I remember we had to drive down the mountain there to go to Carson City, Nevada. So she was born. Then she was maybe a year old or so or not quite a year. But anyway, we moved back to L.A. at this point.So Gerald was very congenial, and he featured me on a lot of solos.

Isoardi

You were playing second alto in this band? Or playing lead?

Ortega

I was playing second to start with. Jay Migliore was playing lead. But soon after that, Jay started doing a lot of studio work, so then Gerald put me over on lead soon afterward. Then he gave me a lot of solos. We recorded this album called *On Stage* for Pacific Jazz. That was my first recording with him on Pacific Jazz. And one of the solos that sticks out in my mind as one of my best on record was a slow number called "El Viti." He used to dedicate some of his compositions to the matadors, you know.

Isoardi

Yeah, yeah.

Ortega

So "El Viti" was one of the matadors. Anyway, it was a slow, beautiful number with very dissonant harmonies in the background, and it felt really free to play on, so consequently it became one of my favorite solos on record. It ended up being a really good musical experience, working with his band for about the next ten years doing a number of albums and concerts around town.

Isoardi

It's interesting to me that- I mean, here you are with Gerald, and given his love of Mexican culture and music and matadors, here you are finally in a jazz setting with one of the great jazz performers, conductors, composers, and you're also playing Mexican themes, as well.

Ortega

Yeah, matador themes, so to speak. And it was-

Isoardi

Did you have a sense of things kind of coming together in a way with Gerald's band?

Ortega

Yeah, yeah, very much so. Things seemed like they were just kind of coming together finally in a good musical background setting. And yet, it's a funny thing. Just around this time also, like say 1966, Quincy Jones had just come to L.A. He'd left the East Coast and moved to L.A., and one of the first jobs he called me for was a thing called *Hey, Landlord.* It was a little TV sitcom. I'll show it to you later. It came out in the *Down Beat* [magazine] that Quincy Jones was using just about all jazz men in this new sitcom called *Hey, Landlord*- Tony Ortega, Jack Nimitz on baritone, Earl Palmer on drums. Let's see. Who else? Well, I have it written down, and I'll show it to you later. But anyway, soon after that he called me to do*The Pawnbroker*-which I have mentioned already-to play soprano.

Isoardi

Is this connection with Quincy Jones, the gigs with him, the first time you went into the studio?

Ortega

Just about, just about, yeah. Because I'd had a hard time getting into the studios with like some of the big contractors or what have you, leaders or whatever.

Isoardi

You had tried, then?

Ortega

I had been trying, but I couldn't get to first base.

Isoardi

How do you try? How did you go about doing that?

Ortega

There used to be a lot of rehearsal bands at the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47] around this time, and I used to make a lot of rehearsals. Because Howard Rumsey used to tell me, "Well, you know, Tony, you've got to get into some of these rehearsal bands. Some of these leaders, they do recording sessions. They'll help get your name around." But it didn't seem to help much.What really finally started helping was that Quincy called me in on a few little things. And this guy named Bobby Helfer, who was the big contractor at Universal [Pictures] studios at the time- By Quincy calling me in on a few things, then he started calling me. And then also Lalo Schifrin started calling me, because Quincy had recommended me to Lalo. So little by little some of these guys, from having performed with them, recommended me to some other leaders or contractors. So it was around 1966 that I was finally getting into the studio recording things. I had done *The Pawnbroker* with Quincy. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the

transcript.][Soon after that our fourth child was born, Mona-Lisa Ortega, born December 29, 1966, and we were finally able to buy our first little home in Azusa.] Bobby Helfer was the bigcontractor at Universal at the time. Bobby Helfer was a very hard-nosed contractor that I had heard was very hard to get along with. From a lot of musicians I'd heard he was a very difficult guy to get along with, but for some reason or other he took a liking to me. I don't know, he seemed to like me for some reason or other. I don't know. He never bugged me. And he started calling me for a lot of different soundtracks and things there at Universal studios.Also around this same time, '66 or '67, Ben Barret, who was a big contractor for a lot of rock dates for vocalists like Marvin Gaye and some of these guys-

Isoardi

You mean studio work?

Ortega

Studio work, yeah. And then also I was starting to get a reputation as a soloist, like a different type of jazz soloist. It didn't do me that much good at first, but little by little it started trickling out that I did a different type of jazz solo. And this one guy, his name was Bob Thomson- On the recommendation of Dennis Budimir, this guitar player who was starting to do a lot of studio work who really liked the way I played, who also did some things for Revelation [Records] in later years- Anyway, he had recommended me to Bob Thomson, who was doing some commercials for the Chrysler [Corporation]. They were doing this commercial on TV for Chrysler with a soundtrack. The date was September 11, 1966. Bob wrote out a little theme. It called for some kind of a far-out alto solo, so he called me on that. I would say that was the first commercial-type thing where my style had come in handy, so to speak. This far-out sort of approach was finally kind of coming into vogue, so to speak, so it kind of started leading me into a few commercials and things.

Isoardi

Yeah. Before we get too far away from that, let me ask you if you could describe briefly what these contractors did? People like Barret and people with the various studios.

Ortega

Well, their thing was the big connection with the big record companies or even little record companies. I'm saying like the ones who did rock dates. Their connection was like with Motown [Records] or the record companies who were doing rock recordings at that time. And then the other contractors in the studios- Like, say, Bobby Helfer was the big contractor for the movies that were being made with the guys who used to write the musical scores for the movies.

Isoardi

So would one studio, say Warner [Bros.] or Universal, would their music department have one contractor who would be in charge of getting the musicians?

Ortega

Basically I would say so, yeah.

Isoardi

Is that how it would work?

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

So they were really key people? They decided who would work and who would not work.

Ortega

Yeah, right. That's right. They were really key people, yeah. If you got an in with some of those, you were doing okay. It's very difficult to get an in. But if you've got an in with them, then they would start calling you on pretty much of a regular basis. On the other hand, they would contract for leaders-I can't think of any offhand-who maybe didn't know you from Adam. But if they recommended you, the leaders would also use you just on their recommendation, or maybe even on a political basis. I don't know how or why or what.But I started being called more with some of these leaders that I didn't even know. Like a guy named Frank Comstock, I didn't know him from Adam. But Bobby Helfer called me in on some of his things and this and that and the other. Also, Stanley Wilson, the musical conductor at Universal, used me on several of his soundtracks.Anyway, Lalo Schifrin had heard of me through Quincy. He wanted a far-out saxophone for this intro. I probably mentioned it. I'm sure I did mention it before. For this movie called *Sol Madrid* he just wanted tenor and drums for the introduction. It was Shelly Manne and myself playing completely free for the introduction of this movie *Sol Madrid.* So that was my first connection with Lalo Schifrin. So he ended up calling me on a few things. [tape recorder off] So I started getting quite a few calls from these different contractors and things.And then around 1967 or so, Bill Green-our good old friend-called me to sub for him with Nelson Riddle. Nelson Riddle had a job in Las Vegas, and Bill Green couldn't make it, so he called me to go in and sub for him. And Nelson didn't know me, but he was cool. He accepted it and everything. After that he seemed to take a liking to me, my playing and also to me as a person, I guess. So that led to quite a number of casual engagements and a little recording once in a while, but more casual engagements, like playing for dances, because he used to do quite a bit of formal affairs and everything like that. The more I worked with him, the more he took a liking to me. Sometimes I would be playing a tenor solo, and then he

would walk up to me, and he would go like this on my hair, on my forehead, like this.

Isoardi

He'd rub your forehead?

Ortega

While I was taking a solo. [laughter] He would go like this when I was taking a solo. I would just keep playing, you know.

Isoardi

[laughter] Why was he doing that?

Ortega

I don't know, just to be funny. I don't know. [laughter] And Joe Comfort, this bass player, lots of times he was in the band. Incidently, I think he graduated from Jordan [High School], too.

Isoardi

Yeah, he came out of Watts.

Ortega

And he used to say, "Tony, man, when you're playing a solo-" I wouldn't look at Nelson when he was rubbing my hair like that on my forehead. I wouldn't look at him. I would just keep playing. He said, "Man, he be lookin' at you like `What are you playing, man?' You know, he be lookin' at you like he's digging it, you know, but like `What are you playing?'" [laughter] And then it ended up that Joe used to end up calling me "Cochise." "Hey, Cochise." He started calling me "Cochise." Yeah, funny man. So anyway, he [Riddle] ended up featuring me on a couple of albums and this and that.Also now-I'll leave that for a second-it was around this time that Bill [John William] Hardy had called me to do this completely on-the-spot improvisation album, *The Revelation,* that he ended up entitling *New Dance.*

Isoardi

Oh, yeah.

Ortega

He thought up the title himself on that. On the bottom right-hand corner it reads "Free-flung self-expression by a giant of the alto sax."

Isoardi

Actually, maybe that's a good stopping point for now, Tony, because I'd like to spend some time getting into *New Dance* with you.

Ortega

Okay, okay.

10. Tape Number: VII, Side One (November 26, 1994)

Isoardi

I think last time I stopped you just as you were about to get into how *New Dance,* in many ways your innovative and path-breaking album, was recorded, how that happened in the late sixties, which I guess is especially important because it has just been re-released, and it has won awards-what?-twenty-five years later in Europe.

Ortega

Yeah. It won the grand prize award in Switzerland for being the jazz album of the year in 1992. However, it was recorded in 1967, I believe. But anyway, that came about through the idea of maybe some of the different musicians: Dennis Budimir, who was a very good friend of Bill Hardy [John William Hardy], and John Horwich, who were the comakers or coproducers or whatever, the creators of Revelation [Records], a jazz label in the late sixties who recorded a number of different guys, Warne Marsh and a few different guys.

Isoardi

Where were they based?

Ortega

Actually they were based in Pasadena [California]. However, they didn't really have a studio, per se. They had a certain place that they would go to record when they got the opportunity. They just had their own equipment, you know. It wasn't like a real full-on studio like with all the big equipment and everything. But anyway, Bill Hardy- To tell you the truth, I don't know how he had heard of me. He must have heard of me through Dennis Budimir and Gary Peacock, but I can't recall if he heard me play. But anyway, I think those guys had set up a gig for Dennis, myself, and Gary Peacock to play at this place where there was going to be some entertainment. So Bill Hardy went along, and I guess he was very impressed. Therefore, he wanted to record me along with maybe Bill Goodwin and Chuck Domanico on bass, maybe just a trio type of thing.

Isoardi

This is Bill Goodwin who has played drums with Phil Woods for so many years, right?

Ortega

Uh-huh. That's the same guy. So anyway, it was very impromptu. He called me and said, "Would you like to record?" And I said, "Well, sure." You know, I wasn't signed with anybody or anything, and I hadn't done anything in recording since I had left New York. The last album I had done was the Bethlehem [Records] album called *Jazz for Young Moderns,* which incidentally was released way after it was recorded. I think I had mentioned that before.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

But anyway, we'd just go to the- It wasn't a real studio; it was an actual home. It was somebody's home up there in the hills in Pasadena. In fact, it states on the back of the album the exact spot and location. I can't recall at the moment. So we recorded like a few standards and a couple of things-the run-of-the-mill type of situation that jazz players would generally record going into a studio. But then after a while it started to sound a little kind of like trite. So I guess we all kind of felt like, well, let's try something a little different or something.So I kind of told Chuck, the bass player, to go ahead and set a little pattern, you know, set some kind of a pattern. So Bill Goodwin, the drummer, joined in on the pattern. So then there wasn't any key signature. We said we were just going to start playing, you know. So I decided, "Well, heck, I can start my low B on the alto and think like primarily in the key of B for myself," which would be D concert on the piano. So I just started kind of improvising along around that one particular key of B for the alto. I started on my low B [humming] and did that for a while, just like a warm-up type of thing. The rhythm kind of kept pulsating and just working up. [humming] And then little by little it started taking form. So as I worked around that key of B, consequently I started going maybe half steps up, half steps backwards, and so on and so forth. Before you knew it, the whole thing was getting almost like an Eastern, Indian type of effect. It wasn't really meant to be that way, but it kind of started going in that direction. And before you knew it, it went into all kinds of directions. However, that same pulsation was there most of the time during this one particular number.So I would say that that was a standout as far as the free improvisation was concerned on that particular album, because it just- I felt very free to just go any direction I wanted to and go into scale type of situations or honks and hollers or whatever, screams, or whatever you might want to call it. But actually it was like a thing of emotions, you know, stating your emotions, how you felt: soft, loud, angry, happy, sad, those type of different emotions. It just jelled out pretty good, you know. Then it faded out. And I think Bill Hardy said, "Well, don't stop. Keep going," or whatever. So we just kind of continued on again with it. So consequently it came out like "*New Dance* Part I and Part II," you see. And I would say, maybe, as far as the improvisation, that was kind of like the highlight of the whole album.Other than that, the other parts of the album, there were some things on there where I wanted to play some blues. I called it "Conversation Piece." It covered the blues like, say, for the whole twelve steps, you know,like from A to A on the piano-I mean on the saxophone-going up in half steps. On the piano it would be C to C going up in half steps. In other words, we went through the blues in every key which in it ended up happening. So I ended up calling that "Conversation Piece." It was just improvisation on blues. It was nothing- It hadn't been worked out and everything.And I can't recall now- I should have had the album here in front of

me. I've got it back there. Then there were some standards, a couple of standard tunes on there, I believe. "The Shadow of Your Smile" was done in a very slow context with no actual meter. It's usually sung or played with maybe a Latin type of beat, very kind of bossa nova-ish, or maybe a beautiful four-four type of feeling or whatever. But since the chords were very well constructed and beautifully put together, I wanted to delay and linger on the chord. And of course, we didn't have piano anyway, so Chuck Domanico would play some bow. In fact, it was just the two of us on that one; there weren't any drums on that.And anyway, all together-I don't have to go lingering on with all the tunes on the album-the whole thing as a whole was a very free type of improvisational type of thing. We were just trying to express our emotions and portray these different songs, whatever they were, original or standard, in a very thoughtful manner to really get all we could out of each note, out of each melody, to try to get all we could out of it without overdoing it one way. We may have overdone it in some ways, but anyway, that was the way that album happened.And then after that, I think maybe the following year, we did another similar album which was called *Permutations.* This time Bobby West was on bass. Bill Hardy, he had a good knack for titles, because with each one of these two records that I did for them they said, "What will we call them, Anthony?" I said, "Well, call them whatever you want." So it ended up that they entitled the first one *New Dance,* which is kind of neat, and the second one was called *Permutations.* I didn't even know what the word meant, but it sounded good. Later on I looked it up, and I think it means a combination of all kinds of artistic things, to build something together, like a picture or whatever. I think that's what it means. But anyway, I liked the sound of it.Anyway, that was *New Dance.* I had mentioned already that Hat Art [Records] purchased that. Had I mentioned that before?

Isoardi

No.

Ortega

Okay. As I mentioned, these two albums were recorded about '66, '67, in there somewhere, and here in 1991 this Hat Art Records from Switzerland- Years later they were very interested in these two recordings, and they were buying a few master tapes from Bill Hardy around this time in 1991. They also purchased one of Warne Marsh's sides that he had done for Bill Hardy. So I was very surprised, because-I don't know if I had mentioned-the records, neither one of them sold hardly at all, I mean, because they just didn't have any salable things for the public to go after. There wasn't any piano there, and a lot of it just sounded like- It didn't make any sense to a whole lot of people, you know. Maybe a few musicians might have liked it. Anyway, it had just been laying there for years, and it had done nothing. So I was really surprised and

really happy, though, that Bill Hardy called me in 1991 and said, "Hey, Anthony, guess what? Hat Art in Switzerland really wants to buy the masters for the tape for *New Dance* and *Permutations.* What do you think?" I said, "Oh, really? I can't believe it," you know, blah, blah, blah. So anyway, they ended up buying it, and I ended up getting some good money, which I had never gotten when we did the recording. [laughter] No, I didn't make any money.

Isoardi

You were just ahead of your time.

Ortega

Yeah. I was just ahead of my time.

Isoardi

You may still be. In another ten years you'll enjoy a bigger success. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, maybe so. So anyway, that was that. I was very happy about that. And consequently that led to some jobs, and it revived a new interest in me in Europe, basically in France. Because I had been in France-I may have mentioned it in the other interview-in '53 with the Lionel Hampton band, and we had done some recordings with Clifford Brown and Quincy [Jones] and some other guys. I didn't have that many solos. However, I was still on the records, and I was known a little bit from that. And so years later some of the people who still remembered me revived their interest to maybe hear me again, especially since the new release of *New Dance* on CD had come out in Europe. Consequently they booked a few things for me over there. So now I have been going there every year since '91, once or twice a year, and now I'm recording for the Evidence [Records] label over there. Anyway, that's how that came about. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][The first CD was recorded in 1992 in Paris. The title is *Anthony Ortega on Evidence.* It has four of Mona's original tunes, one of which is called "Tyler" after our grandson. I wrote two originals. One is called "Little Lou" after our nephew. The second CD was recorded in 1994 in Paris with five added horns. The title is *Neuff,* which in french means "nine" or "now." It has four of Mona's originals and four of mine. I'm playing alto, soprano, and flute on both of them. In 1994 I also recorded an alto solo and duet CD with Thierry Bruneau, *Seven Standards and a Blues,* on the Serene [Records] label, also in Paris, France.]

Isoardi

When you finished the session for *New Dance,* even after *Permutations* as well, what was your feeling? Were you pleased with the work?

Ortega

Yeah. I was pretty pleased. I was pleased, but I was a little bit like wondering, "Did I go overboard?" To myself I was wondering, "What did I do, lose my nut

for a minute and kind of just like go overboard?" And "What are you trying to prove?" type of thing. But then later I thought about it. I said, "Well, what the heck. Who cares?" That's how I felt at the time. In a sense I was kind of tired of hearing the regular bebop clichés at that point. By that time I had been playing them for so many years. I said, "Oh, what the heck. I'm not sorry." First I was a little- I thought, "Well, what am I doing?" But later on I thought, "Yeah, well, I'm glad I did it, and I'd do it again!" [laughter] If I had the opportunity. So anyway, actually I thought about it later, and I was pleased with it. I did actually figure that, "Well, this is not going to sell much." But I figured, "Well, I've never sold anything before anyway, even when I tried to do something within the realm of being understood, more along the basic lines of what people are used to hearing." Actually, when it boiled down to it, I was pleased with it. Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And Bill Hardy was very pleased with it. And the musicians, the couple of musicians who were on it, were pleased with it.

Isoardi

It was certainly different. Did you feel any sense of finally you can play what you want? Because I think, as you said last time, you had spent time up at Tahoe. You'd been playing a lot of show stuff. You'd gotten away kind of from your roots and your passion for jazz. And was this a feeling of finally you were on your own and you could do what you want?

Ortega

Yeah, I think so. And I think there was probably another reason that I may have really gone to extremes, so to speak, because I felt, "Well, I'm free now, and I'm going to play whatever I feel whether anyone likes it or not." So it was a release, I would say, for my musical capabilities. I would try to stretch them as far as I could, you know. Like there were some very high notes there and a few squawks here and there and some very fast runs. And I tried to cover a few keys, so to speak, during the improvisation and tried to run the things together without any real set pattern. So yeah, I think it was kind of like a breakthrough for me. I think so.

Isoardi

Yeah, a real artistic statement. I mean, we're talking about the mid to late sixties period. And there are certainly a lot of new sounds in jazz by this time. Jazz is going off in all sorts of different directions. I guess by the time you were recording *New Dance,* Ornette Coleman and [Eric] Dolphy and [John] Coltrane, of course, had been doing things for a while. But then you've got [Albert] Ayler and [Pharaoh] Sanders and people like these also getting very far-out. Were you influenced by any of the avant-garde or free jazz that was also being played? I mean, were you sort of aware of any of this stuff? Or was this just sort of where it was something that you had always wanted to do? Were these sounds that you'd had with you for a long time?

Ortega

It's just something kind of that came out of me, my own self. Really I hadn't really listened to any of the other guys, because as far as listening to Eric Dolphy- Well, heck, we kind of grew up together and everything. So he was just one of the guys and I was one of the guys. Like I would hear guys talk about Eric. I'd say, "Oh, yeah, he can play" and this and that. I'd hear these young guys say, "Hey, man, have you heard Eric Dolphy?" I'd say, "Yeah, I've heard him." And these other guys like Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman- It was just like in passing, you know. I hadn't really sat down to really listen to any of these guys. After having been married and struggling just to make a living in music, period, in whatever form I could-jazz or Latin or commercials or dance music, anything I could-just to play my horn to make some money to support my family, I really didn't have time to go all out jazz-wise and listen to every record that was coming out, the newest guys, and this and that and the other.

Isoardi

Sure.

Ortega

I was busy trying to survive. So it was just coincidental that maybe we kind of went along the same paths as some of these fellows that had made quite a name for themselves. And actually I hadn't really made a name for myself. I was just kind of in the obscure background. So it was just kind of like that.

Isoardi

It's interesting. I mean, I think you had also referred earlier to times years before when you would play things differently. I mean, you would hear different sounds, and you'd go outside sometimes. You were always conscious of exploring and-

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

But that was always sort of a part of your musical and artistic makeup.

Ortega

Well, I think it was, but I found that it wasn't being too well accepted. So really for many years, especially on gigs, I tried to keep things within the realm of the thing where people were used to hearing. Because if you explored too much, after a while they'd think that you didn't know what you were doing, you know, that you were just like maybe playing- "What the hell is this guy doing?" And I didn't want to risk all this and that, because I had to work and support my family and everything. But later on I got to the point- I think especially after having played so many commercial jobs and shows and the Tahoe show bands and this and that, I finally figured, "Man, it's time for me now to try to do just

whatever I can to really create what I feel that I want to do, because time is running out." I think I also mentioned-I'm sure that I mentioned-that after I left Tahoe I joined Gerald [Wilson], and it was really something to be able to start exploring again. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][Around this time, Frank Butler, the excellent jazz drummer, called Mona to do an after-hour jazz gig in Compton at Clem's. Frank left after a few weeks, and Mona took over as leader, playing piano and vibes. She added me onsaxophone, David Bryant-also a Jordan High School graduate-on bass, and Bart Hall on drums. It turned out to be a very good venue for exploring quite a number of standard songs that a group may not ordinarily play. It lasted about two years every Sunday.]

Isoardi

It's interesting. Many people say that there is a tendency, I guess, when people look back in any music period to focus on just a few individuals. Like they'll focus on "Bird" [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy [Gillespie], [Thelonius] Monk, and bebop, and then they'll look at free jazz and they'll look at Ornette Coleman and Eric [Dolphy] and maybe [Archie] Shepp and [Albert] Ayler or whatever, Pharaoh Sanders. But it's so interesting when you get a broader picture of the musical community as a whole, of how many musicians. It wasn't just a handful. When a new approach emerges, a lot of people are thinking differently, are thinking in new directions and playing things differently and pushing things. It's just not one or two people who create these things. They may be the best known and maybe have incredible abilities, etc., but it's so many musicians who are hearing different sounds and creating that it's almost a communal thing. It's not just a handful of individuals.

Ortega

Yeah. That's a funny thing.

Isoardi

But it's funny, too, because when you hear people-especially when the musician gets very far-out or very experimental, say- You know, I still hear today, "Oh, what is that you're playing? That's just a bunch of noise." And I say, "You think that's a bunch of noise? You think that's all it is? You try and play that!" [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, yeah.

Isoardi

I don't think people appreciate the artistic demands to play free jazz.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

It's very hard.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

So at this period, then, you've hooked up with Gerald by this time.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

Does that sort of set your path for quite a few years then, playing with Gerald?

Ortega

I think so, yeah. Let's see. I started working with Gerald pretty steadily around '65, '66, until about '75. Yeah, for about ten years. Well, we moved to Encinitas [California] in '74, '75, so for about ten years. And in the meantime, by getting into the mainstream of things with Gerald, it really helped, because I started getting some studio calls a little bit. I started meeting a lot of the guys who were in the active business there in Hollywood like, of course, Buddy Collette and Bill [William] Green. But they were in a better position by this time to help me, also.

Isoardi

Sure. By this time I guess they were first-call musicians, weren't they?

Ortega

Yeah. By this time, they were really into it. And Buddy used to take me to NBC [National Broadcasting Company] over there. I may have mentioned this. He used to take me over there with him on *The Flip Wilson Show*, and I used to hang around there with him. I got to meet Al Lappin, the contractor over there. I knew some of the musicians anyway, but by being around there and being seen a little bit- Al Lappin got used to seeing me and Buddy, of course, and recommended that I could go in to substitute for him from time to time. So consequently Al Lappin started calling me for some other things, too, which was really nice, like a few specials: a Don Knotts special, an Elvis Presley special-what else?-*The Tonight Show*. I subbed a few times on there. Of course, I think I had mentioned that I had written a letter to Doc Severinsen. I think I mentioned that before.

Isoardi

No, you didn't.

Ortega

Oh, okay. One day I walked into Al Lappin's office. I knew that Doc Severinsen was coming to Los Angeles for *The Tonight Show* with his whole band. Well, not his whole band. In fact, they were going to use West Coast musicians, but he was coming out as the leader. Well, he was going to bring some of the guys, Tommy Newsom and some of the guys.So I walked into Lappin's office, and I said, "Al, I sure would like to get on that *Tonight*

Show band," you know. But I said, "You know, I think that I'm being held back because of being a Mexican American." I said, "Everywhere I look I don't see any Mexican Americans in any of the studio bands, and I know in my case that I'm capable to do whatever they are going to be doing-backup. I've done a lot of shows in Tahoe and this and that and the other. Do you think you could put in a word for me with Doc Severinsen?" He said, "Well, I'm sure that Doc knows who he wants to use" and this and that. I said, "Well, okay."So I ended up writing a letter to Doc Severinsen myself, anyway. I wrote to the studios in New York, at NBC in New York or whatever, and I never got a reply from him. But I mentioned to him in the letter that I felt that I was being held back to get a position such as this in *The Tonight Show*band but that I'd had all the prior experience that it would require. I'd been in different bands-you know, Maynard Ferguson's band and Lionel Hampton, Quincy Jones-and I'd done a lot of recording and played a lot of shows in Tahoe and this and that. "Would you please consider this?" and everything. I never heard anything from him.But I did meet him very shortly one time when I was called to substitute. I did get called a few times to substitute. Like maybe Bill Perkins or whoever was there, Bud Shank or whoever, couldn't make it. Once in a while I got to substitute on *The Tonight Show*. I mentioned it to Doc, and he was real cool. He just said, "Oh, I got your letter. I got your letter, yeah. I couldn't do anything about it" or something. And that was the end of that. However, aside from all that, it was a beginning for me to start getting into some of this studio work there, thanks to Buddy and Bill Green.

Isoardi

At that time, then, when you were starting to get a foot in the door in the studios, as far as you could see there were no other Mexican American musicians playing?

Ortega

No, not as far as I could see. Maybe Hal Espinosa. Of course, he played not in the studio much, but maybe [because of] the fact that he had been with Les Brown's band for many years, he may have gotten an occasional call to work in the studios, maybe. I don't remember seeing him, but he may have. And the only other man I can think of-I think I mentioned also before that they couldn't deny him because he was so fantastic-is the trumpeter Raphael Mendez. He worked for [Walt] Disney [Productions] studios. He was such a fantastic trumpeter that they had to let him in. But aside from that, I-

Isoardi

I guess it must have been somewhat frustrating for you in the sense that you had a background that probably a lot of the people you saw who were getting the work couldn't touch.

Ortega

Yeah, that's right. That's true.

Isoardi

How many guys who were playing in the studios then could say that they played with Maynard Ferguson, with Quincy Jones, with Hampton?

Ortega

Yeah. It was really frustrating. Yeah, it was.

Isoardi

I mean, you started getting your foot in the door then. You were meeting people. You were subbing. Thanks to Bill and Buddy you were getting introduced around. Did any regular gig come out of this at any point? Anything in the studios in the way of steady work?

Ortega

Well, let me see. The only steady ones I had were a couple of TV shows: with Nelson Riddle, Julie Andrew's show *[The Julie Andrews Hour]*-this was in 1972-and also *The Bobby Darin Show*, and *The Redd Foxx [Comedy Hour]* show. Gerald Wilson was the musical conductor on this show. Now, this was his variety show; this was not *Sanford and Son.* But they were steady in the sense that they were weekly. However, they didn't last that long. The series only lasted maybe thirteen, twenty-one weeks, or whatever it was. They didn't last that long. I think I had mentioned that Bill Green had sent me to sub with Nelson Riddle. So that led to quite a few other good jobs, like recordings.

Isoardi

With Nelson Riddle?

Ortega

With Nelson Riddle, a lot of good jobs with him. I'm not quite sure. Didn't I mention that before?

Isoardi

I don't think so. We didn't get into this a lot.

Ortega

Yeah, we didn't get that far. I see.

Isoardi

Well, that must have been satisfying, though, because Nelson Riddle had to have been one of the most demanding people on the scene in Hollywood.

Ortega

Oh, yeah. And he really took a liking to me. He featured me on a couple of albums *[The Bright and the Beautiful* and *The Riddle of Today]*. On one of them *[The Bright and the Beautiful]* I'm playing flute and tenor. He featured me on tenor, but for some reason or other, I- Well, I guess Bill played mostly tenor with him, so he sent me to sub on tenor. I ended up mostly just working on tenor with him, but I didn't care, because I liked to- I was just happy to do

those jobs that he had. He also hired me for a Frank Sinatra TV special. And around this time also I had started studying the oboe.

Isoardi

Really?

Ortega

Uh-huh. This was about 1968, I would think. I think that was my first job with Nelson Riddle. Anyway, around 1968, Shorty Sherock, one of the trumpet players in the orchestra, said to me one day, "Hey, Tony, you're great on the horn there, on the tenor and alto and clarinet and flute and everything. You should start studying some oboe. That way you'll secure more studio calls." I said, "Okay." So I purchased an oboe and started taking lessons from Joan Elardo and then Earl Dumler, whom I had met with Frank Zappa. And then Bill Green helped me, also. And then after I started doing the Julie Andrews show I bought an English horn. I pursued it for quite a while, and then way later, about 1980 or so, I stopped playing them because it was too much. It took too much time and effort. And by that time I was living in San Diego, so it wasn't really in demand or called for.But I'm sure that I mentioned that I had done the Eskimo on *The Lucy Show.* Didn't I mention that? Oh, okay. Marl Young called me one day. He said, "Hey, Tony. How would you like to play an Eskimo on *The Lucy Show?*"

Isoardi

You mean an acting position? [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. "What do you say?" I was thrilled but yet insulted at the same time. [laughter] I was thrilled and insulted at the same time. "Yeah, man. You called me to play an Eskimo? All right! But wait a minute. An Eskimo?" [laughter] So I said, "Oh, yeah. Sure, man. I'll do it." Anyway, it ended up that I'm playing an Eskimo. I had a few lines in there. But Phil Harris was the guest star. His big thing in that particular thing that I was supposed to take part in was "That's what I like about the South." You know how he does his routine, [sings] "That's what I like about the South," you know that one. So I had my lines. And there was another guy playing a Mexican poncho-type guy with a sombrero, you know, and he really was a Mexican. But anyway, he was there. Henry Miranda; that's his name. Actually he lives in Carlsbad [California] now, too.So it ended up that we walked into the studio to do the prerecording, Henry Miranda, who plays a Mexican guy, myself-I played Ooka Lanooka the Eskimo-and Phil Harris and Lucy [Lucille Ball]. We were all walking in to do the prerecording, and here sitting in the studio in the sax section was Jackie Kelso [also Kelson] and Ted Nash. [laughter] They were looking over at me and they were really getting a kick out of it. They were laughing. But I felt pretty good about it,

because I'm walking in the studio with Lucy, and we were going to go into the booth, you know.

Isoardi

Hey, you're an actor now.

Ortega

Like I'm an actor now, man. So they were smiling. The guys in the section, they were smiling. And I was wearing my combat boots, man. I almost stepped on Lucy's toe in the booth there.Anyway, after the thing was over she gave me a kiss on the cheek, and she said, "Oh, you did a good job." She said, "I must tell you, though, when I first saw you I thought to myself, `Where in the heck did they find this guy?'" That she thought to herself. But then after the whole thing was over she said, "Well, I must say that you did a fine job. And I hear that you are a very fine saxophone player." I guess Marl Young had probably told her that. So anyway, that was that thing there, which was-

Isoardi

Well, that's right. Marl Young at that time was doing the music.

Ortega

He was the musical conductor.

Isoardi

That's right. That's the connection, yeah.

Ortega

See, by that time her show was- I think that was her final episode. I mean, she had a few series, different types of series: *I Love Lucy* and *The Lucy Show* and *Here's Lucy.* I think this was her final series, so I got in on the tail end of that, you know. But that was a real kick. In fact, I still have the script in there, the whole script, "Lucy and Phil Harris Strike Up the Band," January 9, 1974.

Isoardi

Do you have a tape of the episode?

Ortega

No, I sure wish I did. I don't have that. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.] [I would like to mention at this time that I toured Japan on three different occasions as featured soloist, with Percy Faith, 1971, Quincy Jones, 1972, and the Benny Carter big band, 1992. It was a wonderful experience. The Japanese are a very appreciative audience.]

11. Tape Number: VII, Side Two (November 26, 1994)

Ortega

Okay. Oh, yeah. I think I had mentioned working with Frank Zappa, didn't I?

Isoardi

Right. You didn't talk about it, but you've got to now. [laughter]

Ortega

Okay. It was around 1971, '72. This bass trombone player, Kenny Shroyer, called me. He said, "Hey, Tony, Frank Zappa is organizing this group, this big band with all kinds of different weird instruments." He said, "Would you like to get involved with it?" He said, "He's paying for the rehearsals. You might have a gig or two, but he's going to pay for the rehearsals." And I said, "Sure, man." So I thought to myself, "Hey, this is going to be a snap. We're going to go in there and play a little rock and roll and get paid for the rehearsal."

Isoardi

Little did you know. [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah. "Cool," you know.So I got over there, and, man, here I see all these black notes. I could have dropped dead. All these black notes for the clarinet. He said, "Well, he wants you to play clarinet and alto with electronics, you know, with the hookups." I said, "Okay." So I had the hookups and everything. I was never so surprised, seeing all these different notes. It was very difficult, the clarinet part. All the guys had to take their parts home to practice them. You know, that was my whole different, new viewpoint altogether on Frank Zappa. [laughter] Because I wasn't familiar with him. All I knew was that he had a rock band, the Mothers of Invention. That's all I knew about him.

Isoardi

People are always understimating him.

Ortega

Man, I'll tell you. I figured he's just a drugged-out guy who's just going to come up with some easy old stuff. "Man, this is going to be cool."

Isoardi

Three chords and that's-

Ortega

Yeah, that's it. And I figured, "What can he do with a big band?" You know, "What's he going to do?" But I found out, man, that he had such difficult stuff there that some of the other musicians- Like one guy, I forget what he played-I think it was guitar or trombone or whatever, I forget what the guy, what his part was-he said, "Hey, Frank, this is impossible to play." Frank said, "No, it's not." He played it, man. In other words, whatever he wrote down he could play. He could play it, man, whatever he wrote down. And I thought, "Man, this guy is a genius." Like, I couldn't believe it. I almost went out to go buy some of his records, but I didn't go that far. [laughter] But I said, "Man, this guy is something else." So that was a whole new respect for him.He had a European tour that was going to come up. He was going to go to London. But just right at

this time, that's when Nelson Riddle got this Julie Andrews show. Harry Klee, a very fine altoist who had been with Nelson for many years, said, "Oh, Nelson, you've got to get Tony on this show." Of course, Nelson probably would have called me anyway, but Harry Klee really pushed it. So consequently I was on the show, I got on the show. So I told Zappa, "Well, I'm sorry, man. I would have liked to go out on the tour, but just right now I'm going to do this TV show. I've got to stay in town, because how often do I get a TV show?" So that's what happened. I ended up doing that TV show with Nelson, but that's basically- Well, I did one album with Zappa.

Isoardi

Do you remember which one?

Ortega

Darn it. I can't think of what it was. I'll make a note of it.

Isoardi

Was this with the big band?

Ortega

Yeah, with the whole orchestra. I'll make a note of it.

Isoardi

We'll get it later.

Ortega

Yeah, get it later. We'll get the name of it. [*The Grand Wazoo*] Okay.

Isoardi

So you're pretty much working on and off, then, sometimes getting some TV shows, some regular work in the studios, for how long?

Ortega

Yeah, well, a few TV shows here and there, but not as many as motion picture calls.

Isoardi

Oh, really?

Ortega

Well, I'm quite sure that I mentioned that in '65 the first one, the biggie, that I had done was *The Pawnbroker*.

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

I mentioned that. Okay. And then that led to some things with Lalo Schifrin.

Isoardi

Right.

Ortega

I'm quite sure I mentioned that. In turn, Lalo Schifrin mentioned my name to Bill Conti. I had done quite a few of the big ones with him, notably *An*

Unmarried Woman, Uncle Joe Shannon, and *I the Jury.* Maynard Ferguson also played on *Uncle Joe Shannon.* That's the first time I had seen Maynard since the old days in New York. I remember on *An Unmarried Woman,* after one of my ad-lib solos the entire string section stood up and applauded, which was really something. And one of the biggies that I was given screen credits for was *Gloria,*the John Cassavetes film.

Isoardi

It was the Gena Rowlands film?

Ortega

Yeah, a Gena Rowlands film. Bill Conti introduced me to Cassavetes, Gena Rowlands, and Peter Falk, "Columbo," on the soundstage at one of the recordings. They were very congenial, and I really felt accepted as an artist. And I got screen credit on that one, which was very big in France. They were very impressed with that in France, and that kind of revived my name a little bit over there, too, from having done that soundtrack on *Gloria.* Oh, this didn't happen until '78.Incidentally, '78 was quite a busy year. I ended up working on some film calls with Bill Conti, and then I was doing the [Universal] Amphitheater for a couple of weeks there, or one week anyway, whatever it was, with Frank Sinatra and Sarah Vaughan. She was the opening act for Frank Sinatra. And this time she announced my name, because I had a few solos on the set.

Isoardi

Did she remember you from your previous-?

Ortega

I don't know if she really remembered me. I kind of doubt it. But since I had solos there, at that time- this was quite a few years later-she did announce my name, "And Tony Ortega on the tenor solos." And she was very nice, much more congenial then she had been the other time at the other scene that happened at the Cloister on Sunset Boulevard.But anyway, that was quite a big year for me. I did a lot of work that year. Plus I was doing a lot of work here in San Diego with the other Bill Green here from San Diego and Benny [Bernardo] Hollman. I also recorded the *Rain Dance* album. Did I mention that?

Isoardi

No.

Ortega

In 1978 for Albert Marx, who-

Isoardi

That was Discovery [Records]?

Ortega

Discovery, yeah. I played amplified bass clarinet on the title track, "Rain Dance," and I had Mona Ørbeck, my wife, featured on the vibes, and she did a couple of originals, "Sweet Is the Wind" in 3/4 time and "Kathy Walk," named for our second daughter [Katherine Ortega Herington], in 5/4 time, which I played flute on. In fact, I gave you that album.Oh, yeah. I had also recorded the background for *Zoot Suit,* which ran on Sunset Boulevard there, which was really neat, because they used the recording on the sound-track right there at every night's performance, and I got a royalty from that. I used to get a monthly check on that, and I didn't even have to be there. So 1978, that was a good year as far as a lot of work and everything.Anyway, I ended up doing that album for Albert Marx, and I thought it was a good opportunity to use some San Diego musicians and kind of give the unknown guys a little bit of a break, you know. And the only drawback on that one was I think that I overrehearsed for that. We ran over these original tunes of mine and Mona's. We kept running over and over them. By the time we got in to record them, I think that some of the spontaneity had been lost a little bit. But it was okay. And Albert recorded in his house, which was a mistake. It should have been done in a studio. So those two things were a little bit of a drawback as far as the album having sounded better. But that's one of those things. [tape recorder off]

Isoardi

So then, by this time, though, I guess you were getting some work, but you were also in San Diego. Did you start sort of pulling away from Los Angeles then?

Ortega

Well, I'll tell you what really pulled us away. I kind of jumped the gun there. But really what pulled us away from Los Angeles- It was 1973 or so. Right after the Julie Andrews show folded, this guy Bobby Rosario- Tony Orlando and Dawn, their piano player and musical director Bobby Rosario, who used to live in Las Vegas, I saw him one day at the union, and he told me, "Hey, Tony, be expecting a call from Red Mandel for the Tony Orlando show [*Tony Orlando and Dawn*]. We're going to do a series" or whatever. And I said, "Oh, great," you know, blah, blah, blah.In the meantime, I didn't hear anything. When the call finally came out, I heard that the call had gone out, so I said, "Well, is Red Mandel contracting?" "Yeah," he said. So I called Red Mandel, and I said, "Hey, Red, how come you didn't call me? I thought my name was on the list." He said, "No, no. Your name is not on the list," and this and that and the other.So I really got bugged and mad and whatever, and I told Mona about it. Oh, she flipped her lid. She called him up, so there were heated words over the phone. She was calling him a bigot and prejudiced against Mexicans and this and that and the other. So it really got to be quite a heated thing over the

telephone. So he said, "Well, the best I can do is Tony can sub on there when one of the other guys can't make it."

Isoardi

Do you have any idea why?

Ortega

No. I don't have any idea what happened there, really, because as far as I knew Bobby Rosario was Tony Orlando's conductor and piano player, and I never did-I asked Bobby, I said, "Hey, Bobby. What happened, man?"He said, "Well, I don't know." Maybe some political game there that maybe he wasn't empowered to- I don't really know. To tell you the truth, I don't know what happened. All I know is they didn't call me. He said, "Well, I appreciate you speaking up about it." He said, "It's out of my hands."So I said, "Well, okay, man. I'll see you there once in a while when I sub or something."Anyway, after that, we said, "Oh, man, this is it." I said, "Let's move to Encinitas [California]." You see, by this time we had bought some property in Encinitas. We had bought an empty lot, and we ended up putting a house on it. And since I was making some real good money with the Nelson Riddle thing- And a few years before that, things were going pretty good. So we invested all our money into the Encinitas property. So I said, "We'll just sell our house here in Azusa and go ahead and move to Encinitas." So it ended up happening. By having another house as a rental, we were able to take a chance and move to the San Diego area without worrying too much. I mean, we would have some kind of an income, but of course I had to still try to get some jobs. So we sold the house in Azusa and bought another house in Encinitas to live in. The first house we put on the empty lot was paid for and became the rental. Because I had done all right with some of the other calls and stuff, that's how we ended up- Like I said, "This is it. Let's move." So we ended up moving. First we were going to move to try to maybe- Well, Mona wanted to move towards the beach. We were going to try to maybe move towards Manhattan Beach or something. I said, "Well, that's still too close to L.A. Let's go all the way out towards-"

Isoardi

So you were looking for a break.

Ortega

Yeah, for a break, to get away. Anyway, that's how we ended up in Encinitas.So after we moved, things were a little weird. You know, I had to start getting around to try to meet different people. I met Benny Hollman and Bill Green from San Diego and a few other people who hired me for some different types of dance band jobs and things. And then Mona and I ended up getting a steady jam session here at the Fish House West in Cardiff by the Sea-which is ten minutes away from home-on Sundays. That lasted, give or take, about ten years, like every Sunday, you know, jam sessions. And I was able to

run it. After a while there were so many guys sitting in and everything, it ended up like I was just almost like a host and played a little bit once in a while, like an emcee type of thing, which was good, too, because as far as being not an entertainer, so to speak, but a host, being able to talk- I even sang a few songs like "I Can't Get Started," "Tangerine," etc.

Isoardi

Get out front.

Ortega

Get out front, talk to people, present the other musicians, and try to be congenial with the people and this and that. So anyway, that was nice. I didn't get called to do *An Unmarried Woman* and some of those things until we had already moved here, you see. Because we moved here in '75 or so, and I didn't do *An Unmarried Woman* until '78 and the album *Rain Dance* until '78. So a lot of these things hadn't happened until after we moved here, you see, which was kind of odd.In fact, when they called me for *Rain Dance,* that album, Albert Marx said, "Well, would you like to record for us, Tony?"I said, "Well, gee. I don't know, Albert." I said, "I don't even live in L.A. anymore. I'm kind of out of the picture, out of the scene."He said, "So what? You can drive over here" and blah, blah, blah, and all that. So that's how that came about.And then I got a call. Lalo Schifrin had recommended me to Bill Conti, because Bill Conti called Lalo and said, "I need a saxophone player who's able to do some outlandish type of things or more out of the run-of-the-mill type of jazz licks." So Lalo said, "Oh, yeah. Well, there is one guy in town." Of course he said, "There is only one guy in town I can think of." Of course, I was in this town, and they were in that town. But he said, "There is only one guy in town that I can think of at the moment, and that's Tony Ortega." So that was really neat, because I didn't know Bill Conti.In fact, when I first met him, we didn't really click off as far as- When I saw the music, the melody went [sings part of melody], and I thought-

Isoardi

"What do they need me for?" [laughter]

Ortega

Yeah, "So what did they need me for?" It almost reminded me of *Charlie's Angels.* [sings] But actually, after he said, "No, no, I want it more like Gato Barbieri or more like-" So I thought to myself, "Well, gee, I guess he wants it more intense." He said, "Yeah, make it more intense." "Oh, okay." So I made it more intense. And then there were some spots in there that required me to play more intensely than the actual visual scene. So anyway, that's how we kind of got a good thing going after a while. Then we understood each other, and it really worked out to be a good partnership type of thing.But anyway, as far as all these other years living in San Diego, like coming up to date more, things

are kind of like more low-key except for the fact that now I get to go to France every year, which is really great. So now at this point in my life things have come to a good medium. I'm not worried anymore about finances. I'm getting my pension, and I'm working enough to enjoy myself. I have some students; I teach a little bit. So right at this point of my life things seem to be really like- After all these years it seems to be that they've come to a pretty good- Not a conclusion yet, but, I mean, it's going nicely.

Isoardi

Yeah. It's worked out.

Ortega

It's worked out all right.

Isoardi

Let me ask you: By the time you were sort of pulling away from L.A. and the studios and all that scene, had the situation improved at all for Mexican American musicians? Was there anyone else coming up? Was the next generation producing musicians?Can you think of anybody who was moving into it?

Ortega

No, I don't think so. After all these years, the only one that I know of who has a studio job, a steady one, is the trumpeter with Branford Marsalis on Jay Leno's talk show *[The Tonight Show]*. What's his name? The Mexican guy who plays trumpet.

Isoardi

Oh, I can't think of his name.

Ortega

You know who I mean, don't you?

Isoardi

Yeah.

Ortega

What's his name? Damn. It bugs me.

Isoardi

Sal Marquez.

Ortega

Sal Marquez. He's the only one that I know of. And of course, that's not just the regular studio job, but it is a studio job, per se. Come to think of it, he was with Frank Zappa, also. He's the only one that I know of at this present time who has a job like that. But as far as being a person on call to go in to do this call and that call and any other call, there might be some guys, because I haven't lived there now for a long time, and I hope so. I haven't lived there in a long time, so I don't really know, but I hope there are a few guys. Maybe there are. But when I was there, there sure weren't.

Isoardi

I don't know. I chatted a while ago with Ann Patterson. I don't know if you know Ann or not. She's a fine alto saxophonist. For fifteen years or so now she has led a big band called Maiden Voyage, an all-woman big band.

Ortega

Yeah.

Isoardi

She's awfully good. In fact, sometimes Bill Green will call for her to-

Ortega

Substitute.

Isoardi

-to sub, yeah. She's very fine and can play anything.

Ortega

But yet they won't call her on her own.

Isoardi

She says she doesn't know- After so many years of being around and doing so many things, she cannot get a foot in the door of the studio scene and still just scrambles day to day to pick up what she can. More than ever, she says, it seems to be- You know, it's almost like a handful of white, middle-aged and older males from the [San Fernando] Valley who get all the calls.

Ortega

Yeah. Well, so things haven't changed, then.

Isoardi

Yeah. She says that in the years that she's been around-you know, fifteen, twenty years or so-if anything, she says, it's probably gotten worse. There just aren't any women.

Ortega

Yeah. Because actually now there are even fewer calls for even the guys who are doing it heavily, I think, because of the electronics.

Isoardi

Yeah, I suppose that as well.

Ortega

So I guess things really haven't changed as far as that's concerned.

Isoardi

It's a tough scene.

Ortega

[Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][Speaking of women musicians, one night I worked at Donte's with the Tommy Vig big band. Terry Gibbs and Emil Richards were in the club. Tommy called them on stage, and they started taking eights and fours. Mona couldn't resist and went up to join them. It broke up the house! Leonard Feather

was there, also, and wrote about it the next day in his jazz column of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper:

> There was a touch of spontaneous fun when Ortega's wife Mona Ørbeck and the mercurial Terry Gibbs took part in a four-way vibraphone battle with Vig and Emil Richards.

On another occasion, Leonard reviewed my quartet when we performed on a Sunday (October 13, 1970) for the Pilgrimage Theater fall jazz series:

> Miss Ørbeck is a remarkable musician. Her vibes solo on "Misty" and her piano in a couple of ethereal compositions by her husband reveal a talent worthy of wider recognition.]

But anyway, this was one of the smartest moves that I made, man, just moving out here. The only thing is, I still don't get called for any jazz things, per se, but I'm used to that. And I'm just very happy that I do get called to go to France. I'm really glad about that.

Isoardi

Unless there is anything else you want to bring up, I can ask you a couple of big questions. [laughter] We can look back.

Ortega

Okay. Now, did I-? Well, I'll give you that about the address and where I was born and all that stuff later. Okay. Go ahead and ask me something.

Isoardi

Well, maybe I'll take a few minutes to look back now and ask you a few things. One is, as a Mexican American looking back now on this whole scene, do you have any thoughts from that standpoint, from an ethnic standpoint, from a race standpoint, looking at jazz and looking at the music scene?

Ortega

Well, let's see, now. I didn't really realize, of course, when I started playing music, that it was going to be so difficult or that there were going to be so many racial barriers, but looking back on it, I don't know if I would have approached it in a different way. You used to hear about, well, "You've got to socialize, invite people to dinner" or stuff like that, but, you know, are you going to serve beans and tortillas or what? [laughter]

Isoardi

I'll come!

Ortega

Yeah. Well, nowadays, in fact, it's in vogue. The whole thing, breaking it down- Like I was an oddball because, first of all, being of Mexican descent, how many Mexican American kids are going to want to go into music as a

career? Because most of the Mexican kids that I know, they like to do things with their hands or maybe creative-artist-type stuff. But there again, I guess it's very difficult in the artistic vein of things to get ahead-well, for everybody, as a matter of fact, not just Mexicans. So in other words, I was in an odd situation. Like my brother [James Ortega], he's into another thing. My sister [Katherine Ortega Lopez] is into another thing. Here I want to be a musician, and a jazz musician on top of that. And then, of course, if you want to be a musician, and then if you label yourself as a jazz musician, that also especially in the old days, for anybody, if you were labeled as a jazz musician you weregoing to have a heck of a time getting into the studios, because-Like in the old 20th-Century Fox [Film Corporation] days or something, giving credit where it's due, these musicians, they didn't play jazz, but they were heck of players, like string players or whatever. But later on things just went to more of a jazz trend with the jazz flavor. So it was a combination of jazz and classical, so to speak, and then all of this different emotional type of background music. But the point is that the whole scope of music as a career involves so much more than I would have ever thought it did. If I had really known how much it involved, I may have been scared off. I may have tried to do something else.As a matter of fact, say maybe around 1960, right in there, after we had come back from New York- We had been back from New York for a couple of years. I had worked with Howard Rumsey and this and that a little bit at the Lighthouse. But we moved to Hollywood. He suggested I should move to Hollywood. As a matter of fact, I thought to myself, "You know, I think I'll go to real estate school." So I did enroll in Anthony Real Estate School for a very short term, maybe three or four weeks or something, because I thought, you know, that's a good career. But after I started reading and going through the orientation and realizing that, "Wait a minute. This is a whole other spectrum here. What is this? Like mortgages, this, that, and the other?" And you had to learn all these different things in order to just get your real estate license. So I didn't last in that long at all. And then I also considered going to barber school for a while. I never did do it, but I considered it. But my point is that things got very rough in music for awhile, and I tried to consider other options at making a living, but I just never could really get myself to do it. And that's how I stuck with the music and doing whatever jobs that I could-Latin jobs here and there.So anyway, it's a long story, but eventually it ends up that here I am. So that's about it.

Isoardi

Let me ask you about Central [Avenue], just to get back to our starting point.

Ortega

Okay.

Isoardi

Maybe just your thoughts, looking back, on how important Central was and what it gave you.

Ortega

Well, Central was very, very important as far as any jazz musician who had been involved with that situation there during those years. Of course, at the time-I'm sure you've heard this before-none of the guys or myself really realized how important. It was just a thing where guys would go to have a place to play, and it didn't seem that important. But where else were you going to play jazz where some people would be listening and paying attention and appreciating it? The blacks were the creators of jazz, and they're also the most receptive as far as listening and appreciating it as a whole. Of course, there is a mass audience today, but at the time, in the early Central Avenue days, that was the only spot that I know of where it was started, pioneered. In other words, it was a very important phase of my life and like the backbone in the start of- If it hadn't been for that, I don't know what I would have grasped onto to try to go in a certain direction, jazz or otherwise. I mean, you just couldn't buy anything like that. It was just something there. It was a God-given thing, and I'll be always grateful for that.When I stop to think back of all the different characters and the laughter and the yelling and the violence and the excitement, all these different things- And of course, I and the other young people that I was hanging around with, we just looked up to these musicians with the greatest respect. Of course, we thought they were rich. They were making records, you know, Dexter Gordon and some of these guys, and we thought they were rich! "Gee, they're making records. Oh, boy, they have a lot of money." Of course, they weren't. Later on Idiscovered that. I discovered that when Lionel Hampton used to borrow money from the guys. [laughter] He used to borrow a couple of bucks, and the guys would- Gladys [Hampton] would give him his allowance. He'd blow his allowance, so he would borrow money from the guys. Oh, man. But it was really something.It's something that I guess I was born to go into in this lifetime. I can't imagine in this lifetime what else I would have done. Like when I was a little kid, my mother [Grace Araujo] would ask me, "Well, Anthony, what are you going to be when you grow up?""Oh, I want to be a fix-it man." Because when I was a little kid these guys used to go around from door to door with their little suitcases, and they called themselves fix-it men. Nowadays there is no such thing. In other words, like a repair man, they would repair different things, whatever needed to be repaired.So she said, "Well, what are you going to fix?""Oh, just things. Just things." So that was my first thought of maybe trying to be something in this life, be a fix-it man.And one of my dreams was I wanted to be a cowboy. See, I used to go to the movies and see like Ken Maynard and Bob Steele-well, Tom Mix was a little early, but I still saw a few of his films-and Tim McCoy, some of theseearly Western heroes.

Oh, boy, I wanted a pony so bad. I still never got a pony, man. Maybe I'll go get one now that I can afford it.

Isoardi

Yeah, now you can do it.

Ortega

Now I can afford one, but there is no place to- Well, I'll put it in the backyard. But I've kind of lost the inspiration for riding by now.But I don't know. These childhood dreams- You know, you just imagine. I guess I always was a kind of dreamer ever since I was little, you know, very small. I remember the first day going to kindergarten, or maybe it was the first grade, I forget which. But I was on my way to school. Then it was in Highland Park there [Garvanza Avenue Elementary School]. There were all these squirrels running around in the little forests there right before you get down to the main street or whatever. I was so interested or just so- I can't find the word, but it was like I was in a dream world, and I wanted to play with the squirrels all day or just be with animals. So a couple of days I missed school. I didn't even go to school. I lost track of time. I filled the squirrel holes up with acorns and waited for them to come out and tried to feed them and maybe threw some up to some of the mockingbirds, just kind of like get all involved in this nature thing. I don't know. I've always loved nature a lot. And I loved to be way out in the desert, way out in the forests, or just completely like hearing the birds.So that was one of the things that really- Mona and I decided to come back to Los Angeles. Because I was doing okay in New York. I had started to do okay. I was working with Maynard and this and that and the other. And I said, "Well, you know what, Mona?" I said, "And I think you'll agree." I said, "I like it here as far as the work, and there are some things. There's a lot of activity. You know, here is where it's at as far as creativity and jazz and everything. But I don't want to raise my kids here. I want them to have experienced some of the things that I did being raised in California. Of course, in those days there weren't any freeways or anything when I was raised. And I said, "I want them to experience some of this nature, more nature-trees and this and that and the other." And so that was actually the main reason we moved back to California.And of course, after I got back to California it hit me like a sledgehammer. I was doing pretty well in New York, you know. It started to get to the point where I was doing okay. In fact, Nat Pierce and a lot of guys told me, "Hey, are you crazy? What are you going to do, pick oranges when you go back to L.A. or what?" I said, "Oh, I don't know, man. I just have to go." So I'm not sorry now, but at the time it may have been a mistake, because I'm sure that I would have been doing much better there musically than I did as soon as I got back to L.A. Because I got back to L.A., and the same old thing, the cliques. I couldn't get into any studio gigs and the whole same old thing that we've already been through.Anyway, I backtracked

there about twenty years. But getting back to the present, I guess that's about it. That's another reason we live in Encinitas. It's kind of like that, you know.

Isoardi

Do you have anything that we haven't covered or anything you want to add as a way of summing up? Any general thoughts?

Ortega

Well, I would still like to maybe do a few jazz concerts, so to speak, maybe in a few big cities like Los Angeles or Chicago, maybe New York or some other- In other words, what I'm trying to say is that I'm known in the States from some recordings. For instance, when you hear of some of the guys touring- Of course, nowadays I don't think many guys are touring anyway anymore, but that's my final- I guess I'm still dreaming, you know. My final outcome here is that I wouldn't mind doing a few more jazz-concert-type things. However, it's not a burning desire anymore, because I'm perfectly satisfied with going to France because I'm received so well over there. As a matter of fact, the Selmer company [Henri Selmer de Musique] gave me two instruments. The head of Selmer, Patrick Selmer, gave me a Selmer alto and a Selmer tenor as gifts.So anyway, in the final outcome here, I'm just content the way it actually is. I have my grandson, our second daughter Kathy's son Tyler [A. Gebbie] here, who lives close, and I've got twin grandsons, our first daughter Kim's twin sons [Michael W. Backus and Gary A. Backus], who live in North Carolina, whom we visit. We only visited them once, but we're going to visit them again soon. [Note: Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][I would like to say a few words about our four children. We're very proud of all of them.Our son, Anthony Jr., is very talented. He has composed and arranged for a big orchestra. He is also a classical pianist, but he chose to be a doctor of dentistry by profession and is a graduate of UCLA, class of 1980.Our oldest daughter, Kim [Ortega] Backus, played flute for many years but chose to be a homemaker and have a family.Our second daughter, Katherine Herington, is a professional vocalist and is also studying the tenor saxophone. She is presently performing with San Diego's most popular musical group, the Mar Dels, who work consistently in and out of town.Our third daughter, Mona-Lisa Ortega, is in the medical field as a profession. However, she also loves to play music-guitar, drums, and electric bass.]And I'm thankful to all the guys who have helped me along the road: Buddy Collette, Bill Green, Harry Klee, Nelson Riddle, Quincy Jones, Lalo Schifrin, Bill Conti, just to name a few guys. And I'm happy that my health held up all these years to be able to do all these things where- And even though I never did make a big name in jazz, the most important thing is to have your health, you know, because, of course, a lot of the guys who did make big names aren't here today. They've passed on. So I'd rather be here like it is. [laughter]

Isoardi

We're glad you are.

Ortega

Thank you. Thank you, Steve. So I guess that's probably about it, I would say.

Isoardi

Anthony, thank you very much.

Ortega

You're welcome, Steve. I'm really happy that I was asked to do this, and I'm very proud of it, so thanks again.

Appendix A Index

Notes

*. Ortega added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.
