

A TEI Project

Interview of Curtis Amy

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Transcript

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 16, 2000

ISOARDI

Okay, Curtis, let's begin the journey through your life with your very beginnings, where you were born and when you were born and

AMY

Oh, okay. I was born in Houston, Texas, October 11, 1927, at [Memorial] Hermann Hospital.

ISOARDI

Which ward was that in Houston, do you remember?

AMY

That's on South Main [Street]. It's not a ward, it's actually like in It's a beautiful area of Houston where this hospital, Hermann Hospital, is situated, on the way to the Astrodome from downtown. I lived in Third Ward. My first cognizance of life was really like [Count] Basie, [Lionel] Hampton [Isoardi whistles] Seriously. No kidding, that's my first cognizance. And Cab Calloway.

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

Cab Calloway was actually my first, because my first grade teacher My mother started me in school early, so I was five years old. My first grade teacher was a friend of my mother's they lived around the corner from us and she and her husband took me to the city auditorium to see Cab Calloway.

ISOARDI

At that young an age?

AMY

At that young an age.

ISOARDI

And you appreciated it? You dug it?

AMY

Oh, dig After the concert because she was a beautiful lady, you know, so I could understand Cab's thoughtfulness, you know? [mutual laughter] she took me back to the dressing room, and we went in, and I sat on Cab's lap.

ISOARDI

What a wonderful memory.

AMY

It was so hip, it was You know? And from that day on Like I could be around the corner from my house and the radio was always on in the house and if Cab came on the radio I'd come running and start doing my head like this [imitates Calloway's mannerisms]. [laughs] Sincerely. And it never diminished from there.

ISOARDI

What about your family? Who were your parents?

AMY

Well, my father was a. In my early age he was a head porter for a chain of theaters, four theaters.

ISOARDI

What was his name?

AMY

Paul, Caurie Paul Amy. My mother was Emma [Robinson] Amy, and she was a pianist, beautiful voice, gorgeous voice, and she was a choir director at

the church, large gospel choir. She had the gospel chorus, and then they had a senior choir. She started when she was sixteen as the choir director.

ISOARDI

Talented.

AMY

Yes, she was.

ISOARDI

What church was this?

AMY

St. John's [Baptist Church] on Bastrop [Street], Reverend [N.C.] Crain. And he was a very intuitive man, evidently. You know, I didn't realize what was going on then, but he had a band in the church, and he seemingly The arts were really an appreciative factor for him, and every Sunday there was a lot of music. Good music, good singers, good players We had about almost thirty pieces in the church band.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

And the band director was the one who gave me my first music lesson. His name was Mr. [Charles] Richardson.

ISOARDI

How old were you?

AMY

I was four.

ISOARDI

Oh, my goodness. So you were meant to be a musician, weren't you?

AMY

Yeah, evidently. That's why my first grade teacher took me to see Cab, because I started the year previously going into school playing clarinet. My feet were

ISOARDI

You were trying clarinet at four years of age?

AMY

I was playing clarinet at four. I was playing in two weeks. [laughs]

ISOARDI

It's hard to imagine a four-year-old getting his fingers around that keyboard

AMY

Right, and my feet wouldn't touch the floor. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Fortunately they didn't have to.

AMY

Right, right. But he was a beautiful man and a very patient man and a loving man. To be in that position, he was Everybody loved him. All the church members loved him, all the people, all the musicians in the band loved him. He was just a great guy.

ISOARDI

How far back can you trace your family?

AMY

I can only go as far as my grandmother.

ISOARDI

On which side?

AMY

On my mother's side. I never met any of my dad's relatives. But my mother was really an Indian.

ISOARDI

Do you know which tribe or nation?

AMY

Cherokee.

ISOARDI

She was Cherokee? Full-blood Cherokee?

AMY

My great-grandmother was full. My mother was derivative, my grandmother [Viola Perry] was derivative, but my great-grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee.

ISOARDI

Cherokee.

AMY

And it was this magnificent. They were both [great-grandmother and grandmother] beautiful people, you know?

ISOARDI

Was there any music in the previous generation?

AMY

No, no one.

ISOARDI

So your mom was the first to really.

AMY

My mom's the first, right. I think her father was a barber and a gambler, and he left somewhere during her childhood.

ISOARDI

Did she study music formally?

AMY

Yeah. Oh, yeah. She went to school. She finished high school, and then she went to Houston College for two years.

ISOARDI

Studying music?

AMY

Yeah. But she was, Oh, she was brilliant. Her voice was melodious. I mean, it was just. And on Sunday mornings, after. Let's see. I don't know what period this was. It may have been I think I had become a teenager, and I would go upstairs and sit next to the piano when the choir would sing. And oftentimes she would lead, you know, to sing, and I would just cry. [laughs] She was beautiful, man. She was Oh, let me show you my mom.

ISOARDI

Yeah, hang on a minute. [tape recorder off] So your mom had you when she was about sixteen?

AMY

Sixteen. Yeah, she got pregnant at fifteen. Babies having babies. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Literally, yeah.

AMY

That's like the beginning.

ISOARDI

Although I've always thought that back then people must have grown up a little quicker. I don't know.

AMY

More than likely.

ISOARDI

Because she had to get a job and probably survive early on?

AMY

No, she didn't have to.

ISOARDI

Oh, she didn't have to.

AMY

No, my dad. They married I think when she got pregnant. My dad was in his twenties, and he always had a good job. Let's see. I remember when I was nine years old, I was in my room and asleep, and about ten o'clock he came in and woke me up, and my eyes You know how when you're really sleeping hard I guess probably I hadn't been asleep too long, and he woke me up, and my eyes were burning and they were running water, you know, that kind of feeling. Have you ever experienced that?

ISOARDI

Something like it.

AMY

So he woke me up and said, "Get up. Put on your clothes." He said, "You're going to work with me." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

I was nine, man. That was the beginning. And I've worked ever since.

ISOARDI

What did he have you doing?

AMY

Oh, cleaning up the theater.

ISOARDI

Sweeping and mopping?

AMY

Mopping, running the vacuum, cleaning the toilets [laughs], everything, man. It was.

ISOARDI

You weren't going to be a slacker.

AMY

No. Well, eventually I grew to really appreciate it, because it drew me closer to my dad, and we just became really, really tight, you know?

ISOARDI

Oh, that's nice.

AMY

So it was a gas.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

But I was working my butt off. [mutual laughter] We had four theaters that he had to be responsible for.

ISOARDI

Did he have you working year round, even during school?

AMY

No, no, during school.

ISOARDI

During summertime.

AMY

Yeah, the summer and holiday periods. But I was getting paid. You know, I wasn't working for nothing. I was getting a salary. I was getting everything everybody else was getting.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

So it was cool, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah. You probably had more money than any of your friends.

AMY

Right. I'd go to school in the morning, I'd have all these bags of candy and Shit, you know? [mutual laughter] Yeah, it was a great experience.

ISOARDI

Describe the part of Houston you were in when you were a kid. What was the neighborhood like?

AMY

Well, my neighborhood was excellent. [shows Isoardi a photograph] This was in our house here. My mother and them bought.

ISOARDI

The piano that your mom.

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That photo of her at the piano was in the house?

AMY

In the house. It was a beautiful house. I mean, for that time period the neighborhood was excellent. It had brick veneer homes, and all the homes were nice. Our home was wood, but there were homes in the neighborhood that made the neighborhood excellent. You know, it was really a great neighborhood and great people in the neighborhood. It was like a village. You know, like Hillary [Rodham Clinton] says, It takes a village. Well, that's what that neighborhood was; it was a village. And if you messed up you got your butt whupped by anybody. Serious, you know?

ISOARDI

[laughs] So all the neighbors looked out for each other and the kids?

AMY

Yeah, it was like one big family.

ISOARDI

What did most people in the neighborhood do? How did they make their living?

AMY

We had railroad porters, schoolteachers, waiters.

ISOARDI

Probably must have had a preacher or two?

AMY

In the next block there was a preacher. In fact, our preacher lived in the next block. But it was really a very nice neighborhood. I really enjoyed that neighborhood.

ISOARDI

Great. Nice place to grow up.

AMY

It was a wonderful place to grow up. And when my mother and father divorced, that's when I moved into the, I moved with my daddy; my mother moved out here.

ISOARDI

Oh, when they split your mom came to California and your dad stayed there?

AMY

Yeah, yeah. My dad stayed there and remarried. He had two more kids.

ISOARDI

How old were you then?

AMY

I was twenty-one. He said, "I wanted to stay until you were grown." I think I was twenty-one. Let's see, '47 C

ISOARDI

So this would be 1948?

AMY

Yeah, I might have been eighteen or nineteen. That's when it was, because, Yeah.

ISOARDI

So just after the [Second World] War?

AMY

The beginning of '47, that's when it was.

ISOARDI

Oh, okay.

AMY

Because I went to the service in '46, and I got out of the service in '47 and Yeah, they were still together. And then when I got out of the service I must have been nineteen or twenty, right at that age, and they broke up, and he said, "Well, I wanted to stay until you got grown." Because they had problems from when I was three or when Yeah.

ISOARDI

Well, they were married awfully young.

AMY

Yeah, and they were fiery. You know, she was very fiery. To be a talent like she was, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

She was very fiery.

ISOARDI

Why did she come out here?

AMY

She remarried. She married a preacher [Cullen Jackson].

ISOARDI

In Houston?

AMY

Yeah, in Houston.

ISOARDI

And then they came out?

AMY

They came out and they started their own church. But the bad situation that happened with them was they got here. They had saved up their money. They had a very popular gospel quartet, my mother and three singers. They were called the WMA Singers, and they would play every Sunday morning on the radio, and you could hear them all. You know, like as you go through the neighborhood.

ISOARDI

Everyone's got it on.

AMY

Yeah, everyone had it on. They were beautiful. It was just a great group.

ISOARDI

Your mom's singing and her music was strictly coming out of the church, right?

AMY

Church, yeah. She and Lena Horne to me were parallels in their beauty and their ability, you know? So I kept trying to, I said, "Mom, why don't you go right out and sing?" But she wouldn't do it. So this company, I forget the name, the Mesner brothers?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, the Mesner brothers [Eddie Mesner and Leo Mesner].

AMY

Yeah. You remember them?

ISOARDI

They started a record label out here called I think it was Philo [Records], and then they changed it to Aladdin [Records].

AMY

Right. Well, they came to my house to interview my mother, and they were going to sign my mother's group.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

But this preacher You can tell I don't [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Yes.

AMY

I guess he was trying to be the great entrepreneur. So what they did was they put a studio in our house, and they were cutting their songs, and I guess he was trying to peddle them.

ISOARDI

Did he do them all himself?

AMY

Yeah. So they turned that deal down, the Mesner brothers. They had come out here, and they had a little storefront church over on Central [Avenue]. But they had planned to build a large church in the, Then it was called Sugar Hill.

ISOARDI

Yeah, around Adams [Boulevard] and Western [Avenue].

AMY

Right, right. But the realtor that they got involved with took their money. They gave him something like \$20,000

ISOARDI

Oh, man, he just split with it?

AMY

He took all the money. They were supposed to have land out in Palmdale and there was no land, man. This guy

ISOARDI

Oh, just robbed them.

AMY

Chad ripped them, man. But if he hadn't have been such an asshole he would have gone and accepted that deal from the Mesners. Everything was built in, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

But he's trying to be slick, and he's going to get all the money.

ISOARDI

Did he start his own label or something?

AMY

No, he didn't start anything but a little storefront church, and he eventually.

ISOARDI

Too bad.

AMY

Yeah, he was a bad guy.

ISOARDI

Not that those little independent labels paid much, but Aladdin had a reputation.

AMY

Oh, yeah. See, I was working with Amos Milburn, and Amos was on that label. So I worked with Amos.

ISOARDI

Well, we'll get back up to that point, I think.

AMY

Okay, all right.

ISOARDI

But before we go back to Houston. You mentioned that they had a storefront church on Central. Do you remember where that was on Central?

AMY

That was between the forties and the fifties, you know, Forty-first [Street] through the fifties. It was

ISOARDI

Well, not far from the Club Alabam and the Dunbar Hotel?

AMY

Let's see. The Alabam. Well, it was probably close to the Dunbar, but on the other side of the Dunbar, south of the Dunbar.

ISOARDI

Right. Where did you go to school?

AMY

I went to school at Jack Yates High [School] in Houston.

ISOARDI

And grammar school?

AMY

Douglas Elementary [School].

ISOARDI

Douglas Elementary. What was Douglas Elementary like?

AMY

It was cool. Well, there was strict discipline, you know? There was no bull. Everything was straight-ahead.

ISOARDI

Physical punishment if you got out of line.

AMY

Yeah, yeah. But the goodness of this is it was a great school, it was a nice facility, it was a clean facility. They had a lot of land. And we had a large vacant lot behind the school that they kept clean and the grass mowed and all, and that's where we used to play our football and baseball and softball in the evening. And also and I don't know if all elementary schools [did this]; I've never spoken to anyone about this during the basketball season the high school basketball team would play a couple of games in our gym.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Which presented us with the basketball program. So that's when I got into basketball, and I've been in basketball all my life. I mean, I'm a rabid fan, you know?

ISOARDI

[laughs] So between the clarinet and basketball, that was it?

AMY

Right, right. Well, all sports, really, because I was an only child, so

ISOARDI

Yeah. Houston at that time was pretty segregated, wasn't it?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Horrible.

ISOARDI

Hardcore?

AMY

Hardcore.

ISOARDI

Yeah. How old are you when you start becoming aware of the racism around you?

AMY

Nine. When I started working with my dad.

ISOARDI

In the theater?

AMY

In the theater.

ISOARDI

Is there any one incident? Or was it just kind of that gradually as you moved about you got the sense or did your dad have a talk with you one day? Or?

AMY

No, he didn't have to talk about it. It was so obvious.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

You know, it was really obvious. See, at night we would go to work at. We were supposed to be there at eleven [o'clock], but if there were good movies I would go see the movie all the movies. We had all the great ones. Humphrey Bogart

ISOARDI

All the first-run stuff?

AMY

Oh, yeah. It was magnificent. These were great theaters. The owner's name was Horowitz. And in fact, he was sentenced for tax evasion. They got him for tax evasion. But he loved my dad, man. This cat I don't know. You know, they had a great relationship, and he just turned everything over to him in regards to the cleaning and taking care of the theaters.

ISOARDI

But these four theaters were all in the community, the African American community?

AMY

No, these were downtown. These were white theaters.

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

These were not black. Blacks couldn't go to these theaters. That's why I became aware of it. So when I would go to see the movies at night, I'd have to go. You know, right on the side of the projection room were some stairs, four stairs, and then you could go into the projection room. But that door always stayed locked. The main entrance to the projection room was on the other side. So I would sit on these steps, in this corner on these steps, and watch the movies. And then to show some kind of, I guess, manhood, I thought, when people would be coming out of the movie I'd stand up, you know, "You'd better not mess with me." [mutual laughter] I mean, that kind of ideology. But it was stupid. You know, they could have wiped me out, man. It wouldn't have been anything.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Plus, those dudes were rough, a lot of them, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

They were young, not rough you know, just youngsters, teenagers and college kids. Then you had more mature [people], but the ones that were upstairs were mostly the youngsters with their girls and You know.

ISOARDI

Right, right. So the way those theaters were set up, it was in a white area, there was white ownership, but the people who worked in them were overwhelmingly black?

AMY

No, just the cleanup [crew]. Everybody else was white.

ISOARDI

But your dad didn't have any control over them, did he?

AMY

Oh, no.

ISOARDI

So he just handled the cleanup and that kind of thing in the four theaters?

AMY

Right, right. But my dad was. He was so cool, he was just. He was a great man, man. You know, to be able to sustain the way he did and go through all that stuff that he was going through maritally, it was just. To be able to keep an even, cool head. He never lost his temper, you know, except on me. He whupped my butt. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Trying to keep you straight?

AMY

Yeah, he did, he kept me straight. But I loved him. I really He was

ISOARDI

You had a great relationship, then?

AMY

Yeah, he was a beautiful man. Very good dresser. And he was very calm. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke. He was just a great guy.

ISOARDI

What was his attitude towards your interest in music?

AMY

He wanted me to be a doctor, but he never really said it. Here's the way he would do it: We would be talking, and he would say, "You know, son, such-and-such is a doctor," and he might take me by his house and show me his house or something, you know? And then we had an area, a Jewish area, called Riverside in Houston.

ISOARDI

Where was that? Near your area?

AMY

No, it wasn't. Well, it wasn't too far, but it was really magnificent. It was just a gorgeous area, you know? So what he would do on the weekends and maybe sometime during the week, he would take me riding to show me these houses, to enhance my appreciation for the better things.

ISOARDI

Did he ever tell you this is where the doctors lived?

AMY

Well, he didn't have to. It was just so obvious that this was where the money was, you know? So we'd do that. I mean, we did that all through my life, my life with him. We would go riding, he would talk to me. But what he did also was show me the better way of life. My mother was the one that I think really wanted me to play the instrument, but my grandmother was the one that bought me the clarinet and paid for my lessons. And then when I started playing and appreciating jazz and the blues, then my mother took a, It turned my mother off completely.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

She was just focused on the church then?

AMY

Yeah. she never did. [laughs] I mean, up until.

ISOARDI

Did she live to see some of your success?

AMY

Oh, yeah. [She died at] eighty-three. She just died in '96, '95.

ISOARDI

Was she reconciled to it by then?

AMY

Well, she, No.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

She never did, she had no alternative, but I'll say the last until reconciled three years of her life she tolerated it. She didn't take me through the changes that she had taken me through all through my life. Because all the time through my life, "You're out there playing them blues." [laughs] Oh, man, it was horrible, you know? I couldn't practice in the house. I'd have to go out in the garage and practice.

ISOARDI

But did she at least think you played them beautifully?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Well, see, I would play "Amazing Grace" with her in the church, and the people would all start shouting.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

We would do that maybe once a month.

ISOARDI

And when was that happening?

AMY

That was I guess around nine.

ISOARDI

That early?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

Because I started playing when I was four.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

So I would say that by eight I was in the church band.

ISOARDI

And it's clarinet the whole time?

AMY

Right. And I was also in the school band. I would play at little programs at school. And then when I got to high school. Well, actually we went to high school in the sixth grade, so when I got in the sixth grade I was in the high school band.

ISOARDI

Gee, with all the older kids, the teenagers?

AMY

Yeah. And I didn't realize that this was what it was, but all the kids were older than me, and they'd pop me upside my head. And I'm trying to hit on

the little girls, and they were older than me. So it really gave me an inferiority complex. That's what it did.

ISOARDI

Well, that probably changed when you got to be a junior, senior in high school, though.

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Then you were pretty much top dog.

AMY

Well, after I got out of high school I became popular. I was cool in high school, but not with the girls, because all of the girls all the way through school were older than me, two to three years older than me, so. And I'm trying to hit on them and buying them Valentine candy and giving them little brooches, and they're giving them to their boyfriends. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Oh, no.

AMY

But it was cool.

ISOARDI

What high school were you at?

AMY

I was at Jack Yates. It was a very good school, too.

ISOARDI

What was the music program like?

AMY

Great.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Great. We had two band directors that were just magnificent. They really could play themselves, and they exhibited it where we could see what was happening. The first one, his name was Abner Jones. Man, this guy was exceptional. And the band program we had, we were playing symphonies, you know? After the football season we would practice symphonies,

[Overture], all those kinds of things which actually improved our appreciation artistically and musically.

ISOARDI

So you sort of had one band, and during football season you were the marching band, and then during the off season you were the concert orchestra, that kind of thing?

AMY

Concert orchestra, right, right. We would have the drummers to turn the bass drums over and put them on a holder and convert them to.

ISOARDI

Just like a timpani or something?

AMY

Be like a timpani, yeah. But it was good music, good musicians. Houston I think any kid that could have grown up in that environment during that period would have loved it. It was just music everywhere. Houston is an ardent lover of music from when I can remember on up to now. I mean, music is the predominant thing in Houston and always has been and sports, you know.

ISOARDI

Did you make any friends when you were in high school that you've carried on through your life?

AMY

Yeah. A friend of mine [Louis Collins], Wednesday night we went to the [Hollywood] Bowl. He had two tickets, and he called me.

ISOARDI

Oh, for the Louis Armstrong thing.

AMY

Yeah. Did you read the review on that?

ISOARDI

No, I didn't.

AMY

That was a great show, man.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Great, just extraordinarily great. Roy Hargrove

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Jon Faddis

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Nicholas Payton

ISOARDI

Oh, he was out there too?

AMY

Man, he was smooth.

ISOARDI

Yeah, he's a great player.

AMY

It was me and then a friend of mine A friend of mine yesterday I don't know if you know this cat or not. His name is Jack Lewis. He was at the head of Columbia [Records] at one time, he was at Universal [Pictures] at one time, and he was in New York. He had his own label in New York, and he was Flip Wilson's manager for about twenty years, so he's heavy I mean, knowledge with the whole situation from the beginning on. Because he was with Basie, he I mean, I think he managed Basie in the early years, and he lived across the hall from Duke [Ellington]. So he knows. Yeah, we were talking yesterday. We talk every day, because he's in his seventies. And he's had some medical problems, but he's still very cool. I think he's trying to do something with Bill Holman

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

because Bill is rehearsing out at the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47] every week, Tuesday or Thursday. But the man, he's doing some things. I think he wants to produce them on an album, because I went over there two or three weeks ago and listened to the band. When Bill Holman [laughs] But he was saying that. Is it Heckman that does the review for the [Los Angeles] Times?

ISOARDI

Don Heckman.

AMY

He said he gave the show a horrible review, man.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

And look, I sat there at the end of my seat all night. The band sounded excellent. I've never heard Faddis sound that great.

ISOARDI

No kidding? Gee, maybe it's Hargrove and Payton that pushed him a little bit?

AMY

Well, no, this is, I think this is [his] time, man.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Because this was no accident. You know, previously, the times that I've heard him play, he would slide into those high notes. He doesn't do that anymore. Bing!

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

And his solos were excellent. He used to be kind of helter skelter, you know? Shit, he sounded perfect, man. It was just a work of art. And he did the dialogue of [Louis Armstrong]. He did his dialogue. Man, he sounded just like Pops. Seriously. So Jack was saying that the review said that it had no relation to Louis Armstrong. That's bullshit, man. They had the Preservation [Hall Jazz Band] orchestra there from New Orleans.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

It was beautiful, man. I don't know how they could have done it, but it was magnificent.

ISOARDI

Great.

AMY

We've gotten well away from. Take me back. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's cool. I guess in high school you're dealing with your dad wanting you to be a doctor, and you're playing sports a lot, and you're playing the clarinet a lot, too. When do you sort of decide that you want to do music?

AMY

Oh, I knew from the beginning. The sports was just physical activity. It had no significance.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

None.

ISOARDI

And the doctor thing was never a serious thing with you?

AMY

No. You know, when I was around fourteen or fifteen my dad was a friend of this Jewish guy who was a pharmacist. He had his own pharmacy downtown. So my dad talked him into hiring me to be his delivery, do all the delivery on my bicycle. Now, this is another channel into medicine, see what I mean?

ISOARDI

Expose you to it a little bit.

AMY

Right. Well, what happened, I enjoyed delivering the prescriptions, I enjoyed the people, because all of the people were very nice that I would take them to. It was in the white area, but they were all very nice, so I

ISOARDI

Never had any problems?

AMY

No problems there. But I had made a delivery one afternoon, and I was riding My bicycle was my main thing. I was a bicycle ace, seriously. So I had made the delivery, and I was on my way back to the pharmacy. I was riding in the street by myself, and all of a sudden about six white guys pulled up on the side of me, and they had one of those billy clubs with the steel in the side of it.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

It was about six maybe. It could have been more. But they surrounded me, and they pulled up alongside, and one of the cats hit me with this club. He hit me, and I saw stars.

ISOARDI

Hit you on the head?

AMY

On the head, man. I saw stars, and I almost went, but I gathered myself and my bicycle I had an eight sprocket. I don't know if you.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Yeah. I like the cycle, too. I still do. [mutual laughter]

AMY

So I had an eight sprocket, which meant that bicycle was fast. I pulled off and left those cats, man.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

I left all of them. I just took off, man.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

So that experience. And then I did something stupid, but it was the lesson that I had to learn. There was a pretty, shiny I don't even know what it was for, but it was about that high, a container, and it was chrome. And just for some. It attracted my attention, and I took it.

ISOARDI

From where?

AMY

From the pharmacy. And the next morning when I came in he fired me.
[laughs]

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

But that taught me a lesson, and I've never had that problem after that.

ISOARDI

Yeah. How old were you then?

AMY

Probably fourteen, thirteen or fourteen, something around like that.

ISOARDI

Was there a lot of music in your high school curriculum? Could you take a lot of music classes? Were you taught harmony or anything like that?

AMY

No, no harmony. All we had

ISOARDI

Was just the band class?

AMY

Just the band, right.

ISOARDI

Okay. What about the other parts of your education? Did you learn much of black history when you were in high school?

AMY

I'm sure we did, because we always had important people. Langston Hughes and all those people always came to our school.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

And read poetry, and we always had those type of people to come and speak to us. So we learned. It was a complete curriculum. However, my own interest was music.

ISOARDI

Yeah, yeah.

AMY

I wasn't a bad student, you know.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

But my interest was really music.

ISOARDI

Are you playing outside of school at all? Do you have any bands together by the time you were a teenager?

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

You have your own bands or you're playing with other bands or anything like that?

AMY

Well, yeah. Yeah, I would say about the tenth grade we started having groups, and I started sneaking out and going downtown to hear Hamp [Lionel Hampton] and Jimmie Lunceford and Louie Jordan and Count Basie, the Duke.

ISOARDI

So your real interest then is jazz?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Well, that's what I remember. My first cognizance of music of music was Basie, Hamp, Duke

ISOARDI

Cab Calloway.

AMY

Yeah, Cab Calloway. That was my first cognizance. I don't remember anything before that. And Mr. Five by Five. You remember him?

ISOARDI

[laughs] Yeah, Jimmy Rushing.

AMY

Jimmy Rushing, right. It was beautiful, man.

ISOARDI

Is there any awareness on your part of sort of the more country blues? Does that interest you at all?

AMY

Oh, yeah. See, I played with Amos Milburn.

ISOARDI

Well, later on, but I mean when you were younger. Or is it just kind of the swing bands you heard on the radio and?

AMY

Well, during that period I was into all the music, you know? I'm just trying to think of Buddy Johnson, Louie Jordan What's the cat's name from New Orleans that sang? He was kind of a fat guy.

ISOARDI

From New Orleans?

AMY

From New Orleans. He was one of the

ISOARDI

Rhythm and blues guy?

AMY

Rhythm and blues, yeah.

ISOARDI

Fats Domino?

AMY

Fats Domino. And that whole Ruth Brown and all of that whole set, I loved all of that.

ISOARDI

Yeah, R and B [rhythm and blues] stuff, I guess.

AMY

Yeah, I loved everything.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

It was just music, and music during that period was good, you know? And Lightnin' Hopkins lived in an alley a block away from my house.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

I'd come home from school, and I'd come through the alley, and Lightnin' Hopkins and all his guys would be out on his front porch.

ISOARDI

Playing?

AMY

Playing. Every day. They'd be drunk, man. [mutual laughter] But, I mean, you know, it was practice.

ISOARDI

Did you listen?

AMY

Yeah. But I was a sophisticated guy, you know jazz. I was into bebop, you know. [laughs] So he called Someone told him that I played, because I was playing with Amos Milburn.

ISOARDI

So this is a few years later?

AMY

This is around '46 I would think.

ISOARDI

Just after you get out of high school?

AMY

It might have been just after I got out of the army. '47, '48, around in that period. But it must have been previous to that, because when I was coming home from school I'd come through there and they were playing. I was a young cat. I was afraid of them, you know, because of all of that alcohol, all of that whiskey and stuff. They'd be drunk and cussing and You know what I mean? But the music would be. Man, it was heavy to hear those cats.

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ISOARDI

You were going to tell a story about Lightnin' Hopkins?

AMY

Oh, yes.

ISOARDI

When you were with him in [inaudible]?

AMY

Right, after I came Well, after I started working [inaudible] and I started recording then. This was '48. No, it might have been '47. A lot happened in '47.

ISOARDI

Seems like it, yeah.

AMY

My appreciation for Dizzy Gillespie occurred in 1947, and Bird [Charlie Parker] You know, I got to the point where all I was listening to was Dizzy Gillespie, Bird, Billy Eckstine, Hamp, Basie, Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb

ISOARDI

All the Texas tenors.

AMY

Yeah. During that period they had a big band. I can't think of this cat's name, but it was a big band. It had Russell Russell Jacquet had a big band during that period.

ISOARDI

Yeah. He did some recording in L.A. right after the war with the band.

AMY

Right. But prior to that, when we were in high school, we would see Illinois Jacquet and all these guys They would be going to rehearsal, and they'd be clean, man. They were just

ISOARDI

Sharp.

AMY

Perfect role models, you know? Because they were always practicing, they always had their horn, and they were always clean. We would see them, and that's what we would see, and that's what all the guys adopted, that kind of a lifestyle. Because these cats were playing. They were playing their instruments. There were no ifs and ands; these cats were bad, you know? All of them. And this big band [Milton Larkin big band], they played at this club called the El Dorado. It was upstairs. It was like a half block long and a half block deep.

ISOARDI

Massive.

AMY

Yes, upstairs, and that club would be like this

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez, like sardines.

AMY

every night, every night. What's this cat's name? [Milton Larkin] I recorded with him. Joe Turner, all of those cats. Lowell Fulsom, Joe Turner

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

All of these cats came through there with bands that would just knock your socks off. There was no bull. You know, these were Earl Bostic and all those cats. I mean, these were consistent, every week. These were the kinds of people that we were exposed to.

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

And to see these cats as conscientious as they were, like Jacquet and all those catsC But this big band Damn, I'm trying to think of the name of this big band. It was a marvelous band. This was in the thirties.

ISOARDI

Well, if it occurs to you later we can get it down.

AMY

Okay. But I would sneak and go on the weekends, because I was too young. So what I would do. On Sundays they would play a matinee. This is how I started going to this club. On Sunday afternoons around three o'clock they'd have a matinee with a big band. And this one particular alto [saxophone] player, his name was Gus Evans. He was sharp, man, and he could play. And all the girls, they were after Gus. So I would stand out at the entrance every Sunday and wait until he would pull up in his cab. Well, see, these cats, these musicians in Houston, were very extraordinary men. They were very talented, very hip, you know? And just cool. They were very cool guys.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

So I'd stand there at the entrance and wait until he'd pull up in his cab, and when he would pull up and the cab driver would get out to get the horn out of the trunk, I would take the horn and take it upstairs for him, open his case, turn his music [laughs]

ISOARDI

Are you kidding?

AMY

No, I'm serious, man. Every Sunday. See, because the big band The saxes were on the floor, and he sat on this end. [indicates] I don't know how this alto was sitting on this end. I don't know if it was because he took all the

solos and he would be [there to] have access to the mike or what, but he would sit on the end. And, man, I was in heaven. This band, it was on the same level as Basie and Duke. Oh, man, good writing, good musicians, you know? It was mean, man. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

I'm serious. So that's what I grew up on, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

All the time.

ISOARDI

So you had a run-in with Lightnin' Hopkins when you were with Amos Milburn?

AMY

Well, during that period I was at home one afternoon, and this guy came down from Lightnin's house and said, "Hey, Lightin' wants to talk to you." I said, okay. So, you know [laughs]

ISOARDI

How old are you then?

AMY

I don't know. I must have been eighteen, nineteen.

ISOARDI

This might be right after high school?

AMY

Right. Well, this was right after I got out of the army.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

So the guy came down and said Lightnin' wanted to talk to me, and I went down, man. I didn't You know, I said, "Shit, I don't want to play with no Lightnin' Hopkins, man. I want to play with Bird and Diz [Dizzy Gillespie]. [mutual laughter] So I went down, and the cat offered me a job. They were coming to Los Angeles, and he asked me would I go with him and make this

tour with him, and I gave him some kind of excuse about my mother or something. [laughs]

ISOARDI
So you didn't do it?

AMY
No.

ISOARDI
Oh, jeez.

AMY
But it was Now I realize But no, it wasn't the right step. It wasn't the right move at that time.

ISOARDI
For what you were doing?

AMY
No, no.

ISOARDI
Let's talk about that. I mean, before you finish high school, have you switched to saxophone at all?

AMY
Yeah.

ISOARDI
When do you switch and why?

AMY
The last year.

ISOARDI
What made you?

AMY
I wasn't playing sax in the band or in the school orchestra.

ISOARDI
Not at all.

AMY
I was doing it on my own. In fact, I taught myself how to play the tenor [saxophone]. You know, I was playing clarinet.

ISOARDI
After the clarinet, the saxophone keyboard must have seemed a lot easier.

AMY

It was.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Yeah, absolutely. The clarinet's a hard instrument, man. It's a very, very intricate instrument.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it's not very forgiving.

AMY

No. But I played clarinet, and I went to Wiley College in '43.

ISOARDI

When did you graduate high school?

AMY

In '43.

ISOARDI

You graduated high school in '43, and then?

AMY

And then the December of '43 I went to Wiley College. I went to the second quarter; that's when I went to school. Because I finished high school during the summer. I went to summer school and finished high school, and then December was the next quarter.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

I was working in the post office. I started working in 1944. Yeah, I was sixteen when I started working there, because it was during the war.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

The government passed a law where sixteen-year-olds could work in the post office, so I went in as a carrier.

ISOARDI

Yeah, while the eighteen-year-olds were in the army.

AMY

In the army, right. So I went out and I started carrying mail, and I was also working with my high school band director. He had a group, six pieces:

trumpet, alto, tenor, piano, bass, and drums. And seems like we may have had a guitar, so it may have been seven pieces.

ISOARDI

Was it kind of a society band? Or were you guys doing swing?

AMY

Oh, no, we were working clubs.

ISOARDI

It was the swing stuff?

AMY

Yeah. And he sang like Louie Jordan, so a lot of the arrangements we had were Louie's arrangements. But, I mean, it was good music. No shuckin' and jivin'. It was magnificent. He was a great cat. And he eventually moved out here and he had a hit record. His name was Calvin Boze. He had a hit record, and then

ISOARDI

So you went to Wiley, then, after a couple of months of gigging?

AMY

Wiley Wildcats.

ISOARDI

Why Wiley?

AMY

It was a wild school.

ISOARDI

Was it really?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Magnificent school. It was a Methodist college, but it was a great school. I mean, they had a great football team, great basketball. During that time I played because they didn't have a music department.

ISOARDI

Why did you go there, then?

AMY

I thought they did. And in the catalog it said they did.

ISOARDI

Oh, no, you're kidding! [mutual laughter]

AMY

But when I got there there was just one dude who was the dean of the dormitory teaching some music.

ISOARDI

And that was the program? [laughs]

AMY

That was it. So we had a collegiate group of fourteen pieces, and I was playing clarinet in that. And that was a very good little band: three trumpets, probably four reeds, four rhythm, and a singer. So it was cool. We got a chance to play all of the Duke and Basie things, so it was

ISOARDI

Tolerable.

AMY

Yeah, it was cool, it was cool.

ISOARDI

How long are you there?

AMY

Let's see. I stayed the first year, and by them not having a music department I'm that young, I'm sixteen, you know, and first time away from home. [laughs] I was insane, man.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

You know, I wouldn't go to class. I was just wild, man. I wouldn't do anything, so One of the football players We were in the dining hall, and they served home style in the dining room.

ISOARDI

What does that mean?

AMY

You sat down, and they had waiters to bring the plates. Like your plate would be here, they would bring the dish with the food you know, bread or whatever so it was up to you to get your rations. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Oh, no.

AMY

So everybody would be sitting there when the waiter would come acting like they didn't know when the waiter was coming

ISOARDI

And then everyone went for it.

AMY

Man, when that food hit, bam! [mutual laughter] This one cat got stabbed in the hand with a fork. [laughs] But this one guy, he was a football player. His name was Tiny Tennon. He was from Dallas. He weighed three-hundred-some odd pounds. I was sixteen, and I imagine I must have weighed about maybe ninety pounds. During the whole school year all the guys called each other gal. No one ever was called by their name. They'd say, "Hey, gal" or "Gal, will you do this?" This was just what they did, you know? And it was hip.

ISOARDI

Well, Lester Young used to do it. Didn't he call everybody lady?

AMY

He did? Oh, cool. Well, that's the way this was. All the guys, all the campus, every guy on the campus, no one ever called anybody by their name, everybody was gal.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

There was another football player there, his name was Woody Culton. He played end. He was tall, graceful. He was like a deer. He was dark as that right there [points at something for comparison], but he was beautiful, man. He was a beautiful cat. Very graceful. And when they'd throw the passes he would reach out and catch the pass like that. We all sat together, and this guy Tiny Tennon.

ISOARDI

He got whatever he wanted to eat? [laughs]

AMY

Right, right. But there was a phenomenon at this school. Everybody played the dozens. You know what the dozens is?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Everybody played the dozens.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

So this cat Tiny says something to me, and I dropped him in the dozens. I talked about his mother. Man, this cat got mad, he started steaming. You could see Man, he got

ISOARDI

So you were really good at the dozens?

AMY

Oh, yeah. I'm a little guy, you know? [mutual laughter] So I dropped him in the dozens, and he got mad. I saw he was getting mad, and he reached to grab me, and I took off. But he was a football player, man, this cat was fast, so he took off behind me So say like this is the cafeteria, and back here was the dormitory.

ISOARDI

Okay, a ways behind the cafeteria.

AMY

Right. So I ran out of the cafeteria and ran to the dormitory. And, you know, this is a big cat, and I run fast, man.

ISOARDI

Especially when you think your life's threatened.

AMY

Right. And I was on it, and I look around, and this cat's right behind me.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

And I couldn't shake him. So I hit the stairs, and I ran up to the second floor. I lived right on the corner of the second floor, but I couldn't get in my room because he was right behind me. So I ran on up to the third floor, and this cat was still behind me, man. I ran to the end of the hall, and I was getting out of the window to the fire escape when this cat reached up with a dirk.

ISOARDI

A what?

AMY

A dirk.

ISOARDI

What's that?

AMY

You know, a hunting knife.

ISOARDI

Oh, my God.

AMY

This cat came up with this dirk, and he was coming, and Woody Culton hit him in the head with a pair of pliers, and that's the only thing that saved me, man.

ISOARDI

He was going to

AMY

He was going to kill me, man.

ISOARDI

Whoa.

AMY

So like I said, I wasn't going to class, and I wasn't doing anything, so After that incident everything was cool. We never had another incident after that. Because Woody knocked him out, man.

ISOARDI

Gee.

AMY

So if there was anybody he had to deal with then it was Woody, but they were on the football team together, you see what I mean? So we went on through the school year, and in May we're getting ready to go into finals. I may have gone to one class. I think I went to algebra because I liked algebra, I liked the teacher. That was the only class I was going to was the algebra. So we were getting ready for finals, and we went to the library. Tiny and his roommate and my roommate and I, we were all sitting at the same table. I had planned this, you know, all sitting at the same table. It seems like there was a girl with us, and we took the girl to her dormitory, my roommate and I, and we walked back to our dormitory. Tiny knew that we were in the library with him, so he didn't suspect anything. We [laughs] This is horrible, man. [laughs] I don't know about We may strike this, because this is pretty low.

ISOARDI

That's all right. You're a kid.

AMY
College pranks.

ISOARDI
Yeah, I've done those.

AMY
So we went back to the dormitory and went up to the second floor. We all lived on the second floor. My roommate and I lived at this first room, and Tiny and his roommate lived three doors down, about the third room. Yeah, the third room down. So we were in our room, and he was still in the library, and we went in his room and tore his room up and [laughs]

ISOARDI
And?

AMY
We shitted in his bed and turned the covers up. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI
Oh, no. [laughs] Oh, man.

AMY
Wiped my butt on the pillow case. [laughs]

ISOARDI
Oh, man.

AMY
Man

ISOARDI
What happened?

AMY
So finally he came up to his room, and me and my roommate were in our room, and we were waiting to hear, because we knew we would hear

ISOARDI
Oh, yeah.

AMY
This cat, he must have sat on his bed or he must have turned his bed back, and he said, "God damn!" And everybody in this [laughs]

ISOARDI
Everybody knew what was going on?

AMY

Yeah, everybody knew but him. And I'll show you what happened by us being with him. You know, I don't think anyone else knew; it was just my roommate and I. But when he made that big sound we fell out, but he didn't know we [had done it], you know? So starting that next week they started having discipline. You have to go before the discipline committee. All the guys in the dormitory had to go before the discipline committee to be interrogated to see if they did it.

ISOARDI

Man.

AMY

Nobody knew who had done it except my roommate and I. Because we were in the library with him they didn't figure that we had anything to do with it, so we were the last two to go. My roommate went first, and he gave it up.

ISOARDI

You're kidding?

AMY

Gave it up. They sent us home.

ISOARDI

They threw you out?

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

They sent us home, and I couldn't go back to school until the second quarter of the next year.

ISOARDI

So it was like a suspension?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Gee, is that when you ended up going into the service, then?

AMY

I went into the service in '46. So that was '44. In '45 I went to school

ISOARDI

You went to a different school?

AMY

No, I went back to that school.

ISOARDI

So you waited out a suspension period and went back?

AMY

Yeah, I went back. Yeah, because that would be '45. I started working in the post office in February of '46. Was it February of '46? Wait a minute. No, I started working in the post office before then [1944], because I went into the service in February of '46 and got out July '47.

ISOARDI

What made you go into the service?

AMY

In '48 I went to Kentucky State College [now Kentucky State University] in Frankfort, Kentucky. That's where I got my degree. I became serious then. I really went to school, and we had an excellent music department. The head of the music department [Harry S. Baker] was from Oberlin [College]. He had studied at Oberlin, and he was a great pianist, great composer. He was just magnificent. And he was a great teacher. The professors were very good, and they had compassion, you know. I mean, it was really a good situation. And then I came home that summer, '48, and I went out to the post office where I had been carrying. I was going out to see the guys, you know? And the superintendent of that particular post office, his name was J. Guy Sherrell, and he loved us. You know, it was two of us that went out there and worked with his department that were sixteen, but we learned every route in the station, could case every route, and he appreciated that, because he could always depend on us. Somebody didn't come to work, "Take such and such," and we would do it excellently; wouldn't be no shuck and jive. So I came home from school that summer, and I went out to see the guys and the superintendent. When I walked in he said, "Take that route over there." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

He sure did, man. I said, "Well, I haven't been downtown yet." He said, "I'll take care of everything. You just go ahead on over there." I worked all through that summer, and I started recording, and that's

ISOARDI

Well, before we get too far past it, why did you go into the military?

AMY

Well, see, that was during when they were drafting.

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

So I got my notice that I was going to

ISOARDI

That was around '46? Okay, so you were going to be drafted then?

AMY

Yeah, I was going to be drafted. So I went to take my physical. That's what it was. I got my notice to come take my physical, and I went to take my physical, and I said, "Well, shoot, I may as well just go ahead and get it over with now." So I went on and volunteered, and that was a good move, too, because I was sent to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, which is right out of Washington [D.C.]

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

and Washington was on fire.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah. It was during the war. You know, they had this I think it was like eight or ten to one girls. [laughs] You know? And we had a band; the band was just burning. We had a big band, and we would play every Wednesday night at the service club, and we would play in town on the weekends in D.C., and it was just a good situation. This was when I got hip to Pres [Lester Young].

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

Yeah, man. Pres was

ISOARDI

Why then? I mean, you heard the Basie band, didn't you, when Pres was with them?

AMY

Yeah, but see

ISOARDI

Or was he striking out on his own then?

AMY

This is when he was on his own. I was aware of Pres, and I knew that he was a gas but I loved Illinois Jacquet, man you know, Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb, and all those cats out of Houston. Man, these cats. You know, tenor players down there were just [whistles], man. I mean, everywhere you'd go there was an excellent tenor player. There weren't many good bass players, and some of the drummers and the piano players weren't too cool, so we didn't really have a good rhythm unless you were in with the top groups.

ISOARDI

So you got all these tenor players that could really play the blues.

AMY

Man, they could play everything. Arnet Cobb, Illinois Jacquet, those cats were bad, man.

ISOARDI

When do you discover bop?

AMY

In '47 with Diz.

ISOARDI

Was it a recording?

AMY

Yeah. And then he came to Houston and he brought the big band. Billy Eckstine. Billy Eckstine, man

ISOARDI

This is when he was in Eckstine's band?

AMY

No, this was after Eckstine.

ISOARDI

Was that when Diz had his own band?

AMY
Yeah, when he had that band in '47 that was featured in Esquire [magazine]. Did you ever see?

ISOARDI
That must have been his first big band.

AMY
It was. [gives a long whistle]

ISOARDI
That must have really turned your head around, though, because that's something really new.

AMY
"Things to Come." Remember that?

ISOARDI
Yeah.

AMY
Man. I heard that, man, and that was the end. You know, that's the reason I never did appreciate Pops until maybe a few years ago, because Pops didn't like bebop.

ISOARDI
No, he didn't.

AMY
And he would put all these articles in Downbeat and Metronome about what a drag bebop was and what a drag these cats were. So I turned against Pops, you know?

ISOARDI
Yeah. It was a tough time.

AMY
But I eventually saw the light. [mutual laughter] Pops was the man.

ISOARDI
He was fabulous.

AMY
Yeah, he was the man.

ISOARDI
So did you become a bopper right away?

AMY

Yeah. Immediately.

ISOARDI

That's what you wanted to do?

AMY

I didn't want to play anything else. But I would play the rhythm and blues to work, you know? This cat who I started recording for And I would record for this cat every day. He just took me under his wing.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

I can't think of that man's name, man.

ISOARDI

Well, maybe it will come to you.

AMY

Kale. His name was Henry Kale.

ISOARDI

What company was he connected with?

AMY

I don't. And he was beautiful man, because he taught me He would take me in the control booth, and I would do the arrangements for all the groups and

ISOARDI

Oh, had you gotten into arranging at all before?

AMY

You know, I had written some things, but no. I didn't have any training. It just happened, you know?

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

They would be head arrangements, too, see, so we didn't have to write them out. When we'd get in the studio I'd just get the cats to riff, and we'd play the riff, you know, that kind of thing.

ISOARDI

Yeah, right.

AMY

But he would take me in the studio during the playback, and certain things would take place, and he'd say, "Now, this shouldn't be this way. You should do it this way." You know? And I learned.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

And I used that philosophy. I've used it all the rest of my life in the studio in approaching how to do solos and how to do backgrounds and all those things.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

He was a great guy.

ISOARDI

So you hooked up with him after you came back from the service, right?

AMY

Yeah. Because I got back from the service in '47. I was working with Amos Milburn. Well, I worked with Amos previously, too, because we

ISOARDI

How did you hook up with him?

AMY

We were raised in the same church. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

So you've known each other a while?

AMY

All our lives.

ISOARDI

Oh, from little kids?

AMY

From little guys, man. He was gay, you know, but he never hit on me.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

He never did, man. I mean, we worked all through Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas New Orleans. This one particular time we were in Lake Charles, and we were staying in a hotel, and we had worked the concert

the night before, and the next morning a knock at the door, and it was the waiter with our breakfast and a bottle of champagne. [laughs] I said "Wow," you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

AThis is the way it should be.@ I did that once with my wife [Merry Clayton]'s group. We took a group out, and we got to Columbus, Ohio, and we had worked all the way from Chicago. We worked Chicago, and we worked somewhere else, and then we went to Columbus. And when we got in the hotel, the next morning I sent the guys breakfast and some champagne.

ISOARDI

Very nice.

AMY

Because I really appreciated that. You know, I thought that was first-class.

ISOARDI

Yeah. You weren't playing bebop when you were with Amos Milburn, were you?

AMY

Oh, no. I was playing rhythm and blues.

ISOARDI

Yeah, pretty much. So you were into bebop but you also kept your foot in R and B and C

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

Playing it all?

AMY

Yeah. Well, we were walking on the bar. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Were you doing some of that shit?

AMY

Shit yeah, man. We would walk the bar, walk the tables. [mutual laughter]
That was a great period.

ISOARDI

So a little bit of touring around Texas and in the South a little bit?

AMY

Yeah. Arkansas, yeah.

ISOARDI

I think at one point when we were talking a while ago you mentioned to me that you came out to Central Avenue. Were you at Central Avenue around this time?

AMY

Well, that was prior to that. That was in '47.

ISOARDI

So that's when you're in the service?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

How does that happen? Because you've never been out here until then, right?

AMY

Well, my mother was here, see? So I was on furlough. What happened was, I was stationed at Fort Belvoir. We had this beautiful situation there. I was on the cadre, and we played in the band. I got my promotion, and all I had to do was take care of the mail go get the mail and call the mail and the rest of the time all I had to do was play. We would practice and

ISOARDI

So you were in the military band?

AMY

No, I was a mail clerk.

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

I was on the cadre and

ISOARDI

And since that didn't take much time you could play your music on the outside?

AMY

Oh, we'd practice two or three times a week.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

But I went to D.C. this particular weekend and came back on the bus. It must have been about twelve or one o'clock. And just before I stepped off. This fellow was in the front of me was getting off. We got off right in front of the PX [post exchange]. He was a white guy. And when he stepped off of the bus he disappeared, man. Cats grabbed him and Man, they were having a riot. What had happened was a young black soldier who was in training This was training camp at Fort Belvoir.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

This young black guy was going to the service club. Instead of going to the main road and walking or taking a bus to the service club, he walked through all of the battalions. And he was walking through a battalion, and this white battalion, they jumped on him and beat him up bad.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

That started around eight thirty that evening. At midnight, man, it was in full force.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

Yeah, man. So when I stepped off the bus and I saw what was. I only had two barracks to go to get to my barracks. I ran to my barracks, shit, and got in the barracks. But the next week, man, they sent all the black soldiers overseas.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

Shit, that was it, man. Broke up our. We had the best situation in the world, man. They sent us overseas. So that's when I went home on my furlough.

ISOARDI

Just before going overseas. They did give out some time?

AMY

Right. I think it was maybe ten days or something. I went home, and I came out here because my mother was here. I spent maybe a week with my dad, and then I came here to spend a week with my mother. And I wanted to come out here anyway because of Sonny Criss and all those cats, man Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray.

ISOARDI

So you had heard about what was happening?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Gerald Wilson. So I got here, and my mother. Wait a minute. My mother hadn't gotten here yet. My aunt [Dewilla Hill] was here, and I had my cousin [Harold Howard], and my aunt and they lived out in Watts. Watts was nice then, you know, but they lived out in the projects out there. So that night I went up Central, and I went to the Elks [auditorium], and Gerald Wilson's big band was there.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

And he had Dexter, Melba [Liston], Wardell I mean, it was all the cats. So at the intermission they had all the musicians gathered below the stage in a large dressing room. It's a big room, man, as big as this house.

ISOARDI

Was it a dance place?

AMY

No. It might have been some kind of conference room or something. But they had like a shelf about this high from the floor. It went all the way around.

ISOARDI

About four feet or so?

AMY

Yeah, about three or four feet high, all the way around the room, and all the guys were sitting

ISOARDI

Con the shelf?

AMY

Everybody. All the musicians, all the cats, were sitting down below the stage, and we were all on this shelf shoulder to shoulder, and everybody was just. It was hip, man. I couldn't believe it. And then to go back and hear Gerald's band, you know? And then I just went from club to club, and I ended up, like I told you, at the Barrelhouse.

ISOARDI

Oh, down in Watts?

AMY

Yeah. That's where.

ISOARDI

Johnny Otis used to have his club.

AMY

Oh. I don't know.

ISOARDI

The Barrelhouse was the club he set up in Watts.

AMY

It was? Well, that's where I saw Slim Gaillard. And Dex [Dexter Gordon] was working in there that particular night.

ISOARDI

Was it the Barrelhouse or the Plantation [Club]?

AMY

No, the Barrelhouse.

ISOARDI

It was the Barrelhouse. The Plantation was 108th [Street] and Central.

AMY

It was? I didn't ever get to the Plantation. You know, this was. The Barrelhouse was around 103rd [Street] and Was it Central? It may have been.

ISOARDI

I can't remember exactly what street it was on.

AMY

Yeah. But that's where I ended up.

ISOARDI

Wow. So you went the whole length of the avenue? [laughs]

AMY

Oh, man. Shit, it was beautiful, man.

ISOARDI

That was in what? the middle of '47?

AMY

Yeah. Billy Eckstine was down there.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

It was cold, man. It was just. It was hip.

ISOARDI

It was happening then.

AMY

It was happening, man. And then the palm trees, the clean yards, and Shit, I got back out of the service, I went home, and I said. You know, I always kept it in my mind, Los Angeles.

ISOARDI

Wow. What did Watts look like when you were there?

AMY

Watts was cool during that period. It had nice houses. My cousin Like I said, they were living in something like a project, but it was nice. All the people were cool, you know? There was not all that violence and all that shit. It was really cool. So I fell in love with it, and C

ISOARDI

So you're only out here about a week, then? Something like that?

AMY

Something like that, yeah.

ISOARDI

And then you went back to Washington and then overseas?

AMY

No, I went to Camp Stoneham. It's here in California. It was a port of embarkation.

ISOARDI

And then where did they send you?

AMY

Japan. We docked at Yokohama, and the camp we were sent to was I know the name of it. I can't Kyoto.

ISOARDI

Near the city of Kyoto?

AMY

Yeah, it was. I think it was Kyoto. We stayed there, and we had a little band, and we would play around that situation. And then they set up this battalion that was supposed to be a special battalion from the standpoint of education and that type of thing.

ISOARDI

You mean people with a certain educational background?

AMY

Yeah, that's what they did.

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ISOARDI

Okay, as you were saying, Curtis

AMY

They were choosing this special outfit, so they called in me in and they interviewed me. When I filled out my papers when I came in, they asked you how much schooling you had, and I had been at Wiley [College] two years. But, you know, that was bullshit.

ISOARDI

Well, they didn't know that, did they?

AMY

No. [mutual laughter] So I put on there "Two years, Wiley College, majored in music." So they chose me to lead the battalion band.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

They sent us to the southern Honshu Nara, Japan. It's in the southern part of Japan. And they had this beautiful outfit. The way it was laid out was like going into a resort, you know? They had the cafeteria, the dormitory

ISOARDI

Tough duty, eh?

AMY

Oh, it was cool, man. I mean, it was really, really nice. So we had to go through another basic training for that, because this was a field artillery unit. They assigned us to our duties, but we still had to go through the training, yeah. They chose me to be the leader of the battalion band, so I

had to go to Osaka, to the twenty-fifth battalion, where they had the band, where these cats were assigned to the battalion band, and that's all they did was play music. But with us, we were assigned to the service unit, so if we went into war we would be the weapon carriers, you dig?

ISOARDI

Yeah, you'd put down your horns

AMY

We would be the first motherfuckers to die, you know what I mean?
[mutual laughter] So we went through all this, and everything was cool. I loved the unit, I loved the situation. But I didn't like Japan.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

No. Because this was during the period when they had the honey buckets. Are you hip to the honey buckets?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

And, see, that's all you smelled.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

You know, these people would These farmers, you'd see them. Maybe every fifty feet or every fifty yards there would be one of these dudes. We called them the honey drippers.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

And they'd be carrying this

ISOARDI

Yeah, the shit. Literally.

AMY

That's what it was.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

They would go into the sewer, take up the shit, and put it on their products, their plants and shit. I wouldn't eat none of that shit. [mutual laughter] These cats were going and buying their fruit, and I said, "Oh, no, man, I ain't eating none of that shit." [mutual laughter] But the Korean War broke out. This was

ISOARDI

Korea?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

When you were over there?

AMY

Yeah, right at

ISOARDI

Well, that broke out in 1950, the summer of 1950.

AMY

Right, but, see, this was. No, the shit started before then. They started sending troops over there before then.

ISOARDI

Well, in terms of us getting involved in it

AMY

Yeah, but, see, this was '47.

ISOARDI

Well, we had I think [General Douglas] MacArthur had an occupying force in Korea. There were United States troops there, but the war hadn't broken out yet.

AMY

Yeah, but they knew. Evidently they must have known [that it would], because what happened was I got my discharge papers, and two weeks after my discharge papers came through they would not allow anyone else to get out.

ISOARDI

Oh, man. You got lucky.

AMY

I was. Man, let me tell you, I was extremely lucky, because, dig, the lieutenant colonel called me in, and he We were tight, you know, because he was a pretty regular guy. I mean, he had to sustain his authority

ISOARDI
Right.

AMY
but he was a nice colonel. He called me in. "Curtis," he says, "if you re-up [re-enlist] I'll make you a warrant officer." [laughs] I said, "I really appreciate that" I forget his name now. I said, "But I want to go back and finish school." [laughs]

ISOARDI
Good timing.

AMY
Man

ISOARDI
You would have ended up in Korea.

AMY
Man, hey, that You know, my unit was one of the first units that went to Korea.

ISOARDI
Oh, man.

AMY
They were completely wiped out.

ISOARDI
You're kidding. All the guys you were with?

AMY
Just about every one of them.

ISOARDI
Wow.

AMY
Seriously. I've met one guy that I was over there with since that time, and he was in Detroit.

ISOARDI
Jeez.

AMY

Man, I was so glad I didn't take it. Because if it hadn't have been for the honey buckets I would have taken that job.

ISOARDI

Really? The situation seemed that good?

AMY

Warrant officer, man, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

That's an ultimate desire for everybody that wants to be an officer in the service, you know?

ISOARDI

Man.

AMY

So that was really a lucky decision on my part. And I went home. I came home, and I went back into the post office. That was when I went to see the guy.

ISOARDI

Right. So that's the end of '47?

AMY

July '47 I came back. I went back in the post office somewhere maybe a couple of months later, and I stayed in there till a friend of mine The cat that I went to the [Hollywood] Bowl with the other night [Louis Collins], he was already at Kentucky State [College, now Kentucky State University], and he was the leader of the [Kentucky State] Collegians. He played trumpet. He had already got nine cats out of Houston to come to Kentucky State to be in the orchestra, and they needed another alto player, so he called me, and I said yeah. And the next thing [laughs] I had a stack of war bonds like that. So I went out to the post office the next morning and explained to Mr. [J. Guy] Sherrell what the situation was, and he understood. You know, he was glad I was going back to school.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

So I told him I had this stack of war bonds, and I wanted to cash them so I could go and get my wardrobe and have money to make off for school because I was going to get my GI.

ISOARDI

Yeah, you would have had the GI Bill.

AMY

Yeah. So I got the seventy-five dollars a month and the tuition. He called me and offered me a scholarship to come to Kentucky State, so I had a four-year scholarship, and I didn't have to pay a dime.

ISOARDI

Oh, how cool.

AMY

I didn't have to pay for my books, I didn't have to pay for anything.

ISOARDI

Jeez. How long were you there?

AMY

Four years. I got my degree.

ISOARDI

All right. So there wasn't much from Wiley College to transfer over, eh?

AMY

Yeah, well, I had some credits, but it was like starting over. There may have been a couple of courses that I didn't have to take because of Wiley, but basically it was [inaudible]. But that first year at Kentucky State was horrendous. I lost my scholarship because I went there trying to do the same thing I did at Wiley, you know?

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

I'm shuckin' and jivin', not really into it except for a couple of courses that I really liked and the music courses, and the other shit, I said [makes a sound of dismissal]. And then at the end of the year I lost my scholarship, man, for that first semester of the next year, and I had to fork over that money. And it wasn't the same, man, you know? So I got serious.

ISOARDI

All right.

AMY

But as a result of that I wasn't able to pledge until my junior year. It took me that long to bring my average up to where the. You know, to get into a fraternity [Omega Psi Phi].

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

I was able to get my scholarship the second. I think we went to a semester system in my second year at Kentucky State. The first year we were on a quarter system, the second year we went into a semester system. So the first semester I didn't have my scholarship, the second semester I had my scholarship, and then I started building my grades up, and then in my junior year I built it up enough to where I could pledge. I pledged in my junior year, and then in my senior year I went through, went into the fraternity. But I didn't get the full value of the fraternity, because when I was going through the fraternity I was doing my practice teaching.

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

So I really didn't get the full extent of the fraternity. I'm really sorry that I missed that.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly.

AMY

Yeah, because that's an integral part of college life.

ISOARDI

When did you graduate?

AMY

I graduated in '52, June of 1952.

ISOARDI

So by this time what are your plans for the future? What do you want to do? Do you want to be a music teacher?

AMY

I wanted to teach, yeah. So I My professor [Harry S. Baker], the one that finished from Oberlin [College], he had taught at this college in Jackson, Tennessee, Lane College. He had taught there prior to coming to Kentucky, so he knew the people in Jackson. But my first offer came from Cincinnati,

and that's where I should have gone, but he told me, "Curtis, I know you want to take the job in Cincinnati, but I have a job offer from Jackson, Tennessee. They've never had a band director there before. If you take this job, then you'll know exactly how capable you are." So I said okay, but I really wanted to go to Cincinnati.

ISOARDI

Why?

AMY

Because Cincinnati was hip.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah, man. They had clubs in Cincinnati.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I guess compared to what you probably found in Tennessee.

AMY

Oh, nothing, you know. But Tennessee, now, Tennessee was great. The people were beautiful. This town. They just embraced me, man. You know, it was magnificent. And I did a great job. I'm not, you know

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

I did a great job.

ISOARDI

How long were you there?

AMY

I went there in '52, September, then '53, '54. And that's when I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

ISOARDI

After three years in Tennessee?

AMY

We were at home the previous summer, my wife [John Evelyn Edwards] and I, and this fellow sold me some weed, and I took it back to Tennessee with me. But it wasn't any good. And instead of me throwing this shit away, I put it in my den under the couch and forgot about it. This cat who

was the bootlegger in the town, he was also the snitch in the town. He told these people, to get the heat off of him. Now, he was the bootlegger.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

He told those people downtown that I was bootlegging.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

All I was doing was playing. I had a group. I had an eight-piece group, we played every weekend. Let me show you what I had done. I had a feeder system set up in the school system.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

We had three elementary schools that took the kids to the eighth grade maybe the seventh grade. I think they came to high school in the eighth grade. But I caught them, say, three years before they were coming into high school to set up a feeder system where all the kids were taking music. And as they came to high school, then, they could come right on into the band, the junior band or the senior band.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

So I had a junior band and a senior band in high school. I had the feeder system within the three elementary schools. I had to walk everywhere because I didn't have a car. I was making \$287 a month, but my rent was only \$30. I was gigging, you know, so it

ISOARDI

It was all right.

AMY

It was kind of cool. I made some mistakes like from the standpoint of credit you know, buying furniture and shit. I could have just been cool and saved my money, but you know how it is when you're a young guy.

ISOARDI

First job and all.

AMY

Yeah, thinking that this is the epitome. I'm a schoolteacher, you know? So the cops went out, and they found this shit, and they didn't know what to do. They had never had a case like this in the town.

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

AMY

Seriously. So to my good fortune they called the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and they charged me with a federal [offense] instead of a state.

ISOARDI

To your good fortune?

AMY

Yeah, man. You don't want to go to no state prison in Tennessee.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, that's true. [mutual laughter] Right.

AMY

So I went to a federal correctional institution in Texarkana [Texas].

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. So what did they do? Did they find you guilty? Or did you just plead guilty?

AMY

Oh, man, this FBI man. That's when I found out that the FBI was full of shit.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

Now, we don't have to put this in. This is okay?

ISOARDI

Sure.

AMY

Because I want more young people to know that this was a hell of a mistake, man, you know?

ISOARDI

Exactly, exactly.

AMY

But what I did as a result of this. The FBI man in court. I had two attorneys, two attorneys, a white attorney and a black attorney. They never opened their mouths, man.

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

AMY

I'm telling you.

ISOARDI

Where did you get these guys?

AMY

In Jackson.

ISOARDI

Did you know them at all or?

AMY

Well, the black attorney, his son sung in my band.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

Man, them suckers So the FBI man got up in court, testified, and said that I told him that I had smoked weed with the kids.

ISOARDI

Oh, my God. Oh, my God.

AMY

I had never had any kind of criminal record, never had been in any kind of trouble in my life, and he told the judge that. The cat in front of me had two priors, had been to prison twice. I forget what his charge was, but it wasn't any good charge. He gave him probation, man. Gave me two years.

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

AMY

Seriously. But, you know, everything has a reason. See, because Now, here's the way I rationalize about this situation. What I had done was that I had taken on too much for one person. I had had my jazz group; we were rehearsing every week, we were playing every weekend. I had the three elementary schools, I had the high school with the band and homeroom and all of the football games, all of the basketball games, and the concerts.

See, I did the same kind of thing that I did in high school; after the football season I converted it into a concert orchestra and. And two or three weeks prior to that I had started my string section, and I'd have them to come to my house on Saturday.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

It was about twenty kids, and I had them all get their violins, and we started out on strings. I was going to add strings into the orchestra. The week before this happened, my friend [Ernest Golden], who was the trumpet player in my band. His dad was a rich dude in the city. For a black man he was rich. He had property all over the county. He had a big house in the city of Jackson. So he came over to the house one night and asked me to take over the church choir. So I said okay, and I was supposed to start the next week. So what I had done, I had overloaded myself.

ISOARDI

Really.

AMY

I was just exhausted, man. The night when they busted me. They busted me in a club. We were playing at the club, and I saw these people, these cats, walking up to the stage [laughs], and we're playing, man, and the cat came up and said, "Are you Curtis Amy?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Well, we found something out at your house." I said, "What?" And he took me down, man, and he didn't tell me until the next day what it was.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

I didn't know what it was, but I was so exhausted, man. He took me to jail. Shit, I went to sleep, man, and I slept until they came the next morning and hit the door and woke me up, and that's when he told me. Now, you've often heard that phrase, "That cat scared the shit out of me." When he told me what I was there for, man [laughs]

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

CI immediately went to the john. I had to go.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

So the cat gave me two years.

ISOARDI

Did you do two years?

AMY

No, I did five or six months. But here's the way I handled it. When I got there and went through the quarantine, they assigned me to the school as a teacher, you dig?

ISOARDI

Yeah. Was this a minimum security place? You said it was a correctional facility.

AMY

Oh, yeah, it was minimum.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

And it was like a resort, you know, dormitories, I had my own room, I wore a white shirt every day, I ate good, and I worked two hours. I taught school from one to three [o'clock] every day. And I was doing good, because here were these illiterate men from Mississippi, could not read or write. White guys. You know, I had never experienced this.

ISOARDI

And you were teaching them?

AMY

I was teaching them. And I taught them how to read and how to write. The cats started on the weekends. Man, they were so appreciative. Like a couple of them wrote their first letter home, you know?

ISOARDI

Oh, man, nice.

AMY

So they fell in love with me, man. You know, it was great. So like I said, everything happens for a reason, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

So they would come on the weekends, man, and bring me boxes of candy and cigarettes just for appreciation. These cats, man, I know that prior to this experience they cared less for a black man than anything, you know what I mean? Because they were illiterate men from deep, deep Mississippi, man. I knew how it had been. When we ended there, man, it was love, you know?

ISOARDI

Good experience, then, in some ways?

AMY

Yeah, it was magnificent. I got a chance to write every day. I practiced every day, eight hours, man. I would practice four hours in the morning, four hours in the evening. We would practice with the group in the evening, maybe an hour or two, because by me having the connections that I had, I could get a room downstairs where we could practice every day. So it was cool. What I did was I took some courses myself in accounting and bookkeeping. I read philosophy. I read everything I could read, man. I went to church every Sunday, I joined all of the clubs that were an advantage to me, and when parole came, when the parole board came

ISOARDI

Feels like graduating.

AMY

CI was gone, man.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Beautiful.

ISOARDI

So this was during, I guess, '55, something like that?

AMY

This was '55. I went into '55, yeah.

ISOARDI

Okay. How did the experience? I mean, you've just been talking about some things that you were doing in there. Is there one thing you can point to or a couple things that were changed in you because of this experience?

How did this affect your thinking about things? Or did it? Or did it just make you want to be a little more careful about things? Can you say it affected you in one way or another?

AMY

Oh, yeah. I mean, overall When I came home, man, I wouldn't even go to a club. I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to play anymore.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

So I came here with my mother [Emma Amy Jackson], and I movedC My mother had a

ISOARDI

So you moved out to L.A. in '55 then?

AMY

Yeah. I came here from prison and stayed with my mother. I started playing solos and things in the church. I went around to various churches trying to get a job, and none of them would give me a job.

ISOARDI

As a musician?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

In church?

AMY

In church. I mean choir director, whatever. That's what I wanted. Or teaching in the church. And none of them would give me a job.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

So the only job I got was from Melba Liston.

ISOARDI

No kidding. And that was the beginning of your L.A. experience?

AMY

That was it. [laughs] And we never looked back.

ISOARDI

Maybe that's a good thing.

AMY

It was cool, you know? But, see, psychologically what it did for me was I tried to go the way my mother wanted me to go, you dig?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

But it didn't work, you know?

ISOARDI

So was she telling you she was right all along or something?

AMY

Oh, yeah, but she never put me down. My mother was beautiful, man. You know, the only thing she just couldn't reconcile with was playing the blues.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

But as for her love and her motherhood, man, she was the greatest mother a person could have. She was just extraordinary.

ISOARDI

So you came back sort of focused on the church, then, and that's what you were kind of building your life around, right?

AMY

Yeah, right. That's what I was going to do. But Melba called me [laughs], and we started

ISOARDI

Things changed.

AMY

Right. I had this group I was working with Did you ever hear of Don Johnson, a trumpet player? He was with Johnny Otis for a long time.

ISOARDI

I don't think so. He's somebody you hooked up with early on?

AMY

Well, Melba was playing with Don. So Melba was doing all the arrangements, and he would do maybe one or two periodically. But Melba was doing all the writing, so, man

ISOARDI

Wow, what a writer, eh?

AMY

Oh, shit. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Well, maybe we ought to take it up there next time, then.

AMY

Okay.

ISOARDI

Let's begin with Los Angeles and Melba Liston. She was such aC

AMY

Sweetheart.

ISOARDI

Not only a great writer, but what a wonderful person she was.

AMY

A great person. Her mother [Lucile Liston] was the same way. She was just a by-product of her mother. Her mother was beautiful.

ISOARDI

Oh, you knew the mom?

AMY

Yeah, I knew the whole family. She was just great, and she was. You know, when I first came here in '47 she was married to Gerald [Wilson].

ISOARDI

No. They were never married.

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Melba Liston and Gerald Wilson?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

[laughs] Neither of them mentioned that to me.

AMY

If they weren't married they were living together. Oh, they lived together a long time, man. In fact, Gerald was the one that [inaudible] Melba. [laughs]

ISOARDI

I'll ask Gerald about that next time I see him. [laughs]

AMY

Okay, yeah. This is for real.

ISOARDI

I know when she was very young she was in his first band. I guess she was about sixteen.

AMY

That was his lady.

ISOARDI

Yeah. And I think she was even arranging for that band as well.

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

What a talent.

AMY

Right. She was marvelous, man, and a marvelous person, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah, real sweetheart.

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ISOARDI

Okay, Curtis, last time we stopped in the mid-fifties. But before we get there, let's go back a bit. You mentioned in our previous session a wife, and we never talked about that. So would you like to fill us in on it?

AMY

Right. Okay, I met this young lady. Her name was John Evelyn Edwards. She was from Columbus, Mississippi. I met her in my junior year. She was in her freshman year at Kentucky State [College, now Kentucky State University]. We went together that whole year, and it may have been around April or May of '51 we got married. We went over across the line in Indiana, right across from Louisville, and we got married. But we had to keep it secret.

ISOARDI

Why?

AMY

Because they didn't want you to slip off and get married.

ISOARDI

You mean the college had

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

So they controlled a lot more of your social life, then. Or they tried to.

AMY

Oh, yeah, they controlled it all. During that period, during the time when you were an under classmen, you had no privileges.

ISOARDI

So the college administration was like your parents?

AMY

Right, right. So we got married, and then she went home, and she became ill, and then she had to go into the hospital in Alabama. So she didn't come back to school the following year, and she stayed home and recuperated after she got out of the hospital. Then I graduated that June of 1952. I got my B.S. degree, and she came back. She and my mother [Emma Amy Jackson] came for my graduation. Then she came to Los Angeles with my mother, and she stayed Well, she was here approximately a month and a half by herself with my mother, and I went on and worked in Cleveland. I took a group and worked in Cleveland, and I worked a club in Louisville. First we worked the club in Louisville. It was called the Top Hat Club. It was really a very popular club, and all the musicians that came there were just magnificent. Benny Bailey, you remember him?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Benny Bailey came in there. I think he came in the previous year, in '49. We went to school in '48. So I was in school '48 through '52. And we would go into Louisville to this club to hear the groups and so forth they had. Every group was magnificent. They had very talented people. I don't know if you know the bass trumpet player. He was from out of Ohio. Bass, his name was Bass.

ISOARDI

No, I don't know him.

AMY

Man, extraordinary. We would drive all the way from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Dayton to hear this guy.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

We would do that maybe once a month, because he had a great group. It was a little club in Dayton, a little club, and we'd drive up there. And we'd drive to Cincinnati periodically because [Eddie] "Lockjaw" [Davis] would be there. Gene Ammons would come in. It was just Everybody was excellent musicians, and the clubs were great, so we were exposed to really good music.

ISOARDI

Truly, truly.

AMY

So then my wife and I stayed married until '54. We got married in '51, and we separated in May of '54.

ISOARDI

You guys really hadn't had a chance to spend any time together, had you?

AMY

Yeah, we were together in Jackson when I started teaching in '52.

ISOARDI

Oh, and she joined you then.

AMY

Yeah, she was there. We left Los Angeles and went to Tennessee together, and it was pretty nice. We were both young, you know. I was young and I was working exceptionally hard, and she couldn't adjust to that. See, I'd get home about four o'clock. School was out at three, and I'd get home around four, four thirty. When I'd get home I'd be tired, you know, because I had walked. I had to walk everywhere. I had to walk to the schools. Remember, I told you I set up the feeder system in the elementary schools. So I had to walk to the various elementary schools from the high school, which was quite a distance. Sometimes I'd catch the bus. But you still would have a long walk, because the bus wouldn't go near the school. So I'd really be exhausted. Plus, I had the group we were playing every weekend; whenever we had the gigs we would play and the high school band. And I

was wild, you know, so It was just one of those bad situations. So it ended in '54 when I went to prison. That's when it ended.

ISOARDI

Yeah, so not long after that you make it out to L.A., right?

AMY

Yeah. I went to prison. I stayed in prison till March of '55. Then I got out and I came to Los Angeles. And, let's see. We went through that, didn't we?

ISOARDI

Well, you started talking about. Yeah, you initially came out, and you talked about hooking up with your mother and focusing on church for a while.

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

But then you started moving out from that. You'd met Melba [Liston], I guess.

AMY

Right, right, during that period, yeah.

ISOARDI

Okay. Before we get into that, let's go more into your becoming part of the music scene in L.A. What was L.A. like? How did it strike you? I mean, you'd been in and out of it a few times, so you knew a little bit, but now you're coming back for a long stretch.

AMY

I loved it.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah. I had never experienced anything like Los Angeles.

ISOARDI

How so?

AMY

From the standpoint of music, the landscape, the cleanliness of the city. There was a more positive attitude in the city during that period, in '55, '56.

ISOARDI

By that you mean racially?

AMY

Well, I didn't run into any racial situations.

ISOARDI

You never had any difficulties?

AMY

No, not per se. Except I think I told you about the judge [Judge Redwine] you know, that thing. I got a lot of tickets.

ISOARDI

Oh, no. You didn't mention that.

AMY

I didn't?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

I got a lot of tickets during that period. See, I was living in the [San Fernando] Valley, and I'd have to drive into the city. I was working in Maywood at the Chrysler Corporation as an assembler. And, you know, it just shows what happened that I had to go in that direction. I really didn't have to. If I would have been smart, if I would have used my mind What happened I got out, and my mother had spoken to someone about a job, getting me a job. So she was working for this man who was in that church. She would do bookkeeping and that kind of work for him. He couldn't read or write, so she took care of all of his business. And when that fell through I went to work out at Chrysler in Maywood. It was during that same year, during that period. But this man had spoken to my mother, and I went and spoke to this counselor, and he sent me to the Red Cross as a driver. And the man knew that I had been in prison, but for some reason or another, when I got to that question I couldn't answer it. You know, it was just I could not answer that I had been in prison. So I said no. And when he got to that he just said, "Okay, that's it." He cut me loose. So I didn't get that job. So I went on out and got this job at Chrysler as an assembler, which was really a hard job.

ISOARDI

Oh, working on the assembly line?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Tough job.

AMY

Cars were going sixty cars an hour. And it was rough, you know? But I handled it. I never had any problem adjusting to work, so it was no problem.

ISOARDI

So you were working at Chrysler up in the Valley?

AMY

No, out in Maywood, right there on Eastern [Avenue] and Slauson [Avenue]. So I stayed there three years, I think.

ISOARDI

So that was how you got by economically when you first got to L.A., right?

AMY

Right, right. See, because I was working at Chrysler and I was working gigs at night.

ISOARDI

Jeez, that's tough.

AMY

Yeah, but I did it. Let's see. I'd go to work at Chrysler I'd have to get up and leave the Valley. I couldn't leave any later than five thirty-two. And I'd drive. And they didn't have the freeway, so I wouldn't be able to hit the freeway until I got into Glendale. Eventually I found a way shorter than that. I'd leave home at five thirty-two, and I'd hit the clock at six thirty. That was an hour from the city of San Fernando to Maywood. That was an hour. Then I'd have to drive back. I'd get off at three, and I'd drive back to the Valley. I'd get there at four, four thirty, something like that. I'd get into bed and take me a nap from that time until about six thirty, and then I'd get up and eat and take my bath and everything and get ready to come to the gig. I was gigging in town. So that was six nights and five days.

ISOARDI

Man.

AMY

I know, but I wanted to buy a house.

ISOARDI

The things you can do when you're young, you know?

AMY

Yeah, right. Well, I had been doing that all my life. I did that even when I was working in the post office. I'd be at the post office in the morning at six or six thirty. I'd play the gig from eight until eleven. In Texas, you know, the clubs didn't stay open past eleven or twelve. So that was good in that way, that I could get home early enough to get me enough sleep to go to work the next morning, you know?

ISOARDI

How long were you living out in San Fernando?

AMY

Three years. Three years seems to be my increment until I got here. Now, we've been here since 1969, in this house.

ISOARDI

That's a long time.

AMY

Yeah, thirty years, thirty-one years.

ISOARDI

Jeez. So you come to L.A.. You get hooked up with work. The church gig doesn't work out. You start moving in other directions. How do you meet Melba? You said she was the first person you really had contact with.

AMY

Right. I don't remember exactly how. Oh, a friend of mine was singing with Don Johnson. See, that's the band; it was Don Johnson's band. Melba was doing all of the writing, but it was actually Don Johnson's band, who had been with Johnny Otis for a long time. [tape recorder off] So Leonard was a very good singer. He was out of that Billy Eckstine bag. He's a little cat, but he had that big voice and that type of phrasing that Billy

ISOARDI

Smooth baritone?

AMY

Yeah, yeah. He had been with them quite a while. He told Melba about me and also Don, I think, and they asked him to bring me to the rehearsal. So I went to the rehearsal and played, and we just stuck. I must have worked with him until '59 or '60.

ISOARDI

A few years, then?

AMY

Yeah. Yeah, we stayed together a long time. But we were only working like casuals, you know, club dances and those kinds of things.

ISOARDI

What was the scene like in L.A., the jazz scene in the fifties, when you got here?

AMY

When I got here Oh, it was magnificent. "Dex" [Dexter Gordon] and Wardell [Gray] were playing here at the California Club.

ISOARDI

On [Santa Barbara Boulevard]C Oh, well, now it's Martin Luther King Boulevard.

AMY

Right, yeah.

ISOARDI

What was the California Club like?

AMY

It was beautiful then. They let it run down, but it was really nice. It was the spot, the Monday night spot. Monday night was the night that they had jazz, so they would have

ISOARDI

They'd have a set band, a house band?

AMY

No, it would be Dex and Wardell, Frank Morgan, Carl Perkins. Whew! It was mean.

ISOARDI

Oh, really great musicians.

AMY

That's right. Frank Butler, Curtis Counce. That's what the scene was when I got here. Harold Land. Who else? Well, they had the big band, they had Gerald [Wilson]'s big band. And then all of the bands were coming in, all the groups were coming here.

ISOARDI

At the California Club?

AMY

No, this was like
ISOARDI
Just around town?
AMY
Right. Jazz City. Are you aware of Jazz City?
ISOARDI
Where was that located?
AMY
On Hollywood Boulevard just before you get to Western [Avenue]. There were three other clubs, too, when I first got here, where [Count] Basie and Duke [Ellington] worked. I just can't think of the name.
ISOARDI
Up in the Hollywood area?
AMY
Yeah, it was on Sunset [Boulevard]. I think it was on Sunset. I can't think of the damn name of the club.
ISOARDI
I know there were a couple of clubs along Washington Boulevard, the La Brea [Avenue] area.
AMY
The It Club.
ISOARDI
Was the It Club going when you got out here?
AMY
Oh, yeah. Well, it came to be after I got here. And around the early sixties the Parisian Room became
ISOARDI
Now, where were they located? Do you remember exactly?
AMY
The Parisian was on the corner of Washington [Boulevard] and La Brea [Avenue]. The It Club was three blocks east of La Brea and Washington on Washington, A very good club.
ISOARDI
What were they like inside?
AMY
Well, you know, they weren't architecturally. You know?

ISOARDI

But it was more than just a table and two chairs and things like that?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Nice bar, nice atmosphere, good clientele. Then they had the Metro Theatre. It was an after-hour theater right across from the front of the It Club. That was where the first after-hours sets started, like from two o'clock until six in the morning.

ISOARDI

Really? Just jams?

AMY

No, groups. There weren't too many jams. We were at the first club that was out on Manchester [Avenue] and Main [Street]. It was called the Trocadero. I was working with this organ group. This was after I had gone through the scene, so I'm jumping ahead a little bit. Maybe we should go back

ISOARDI

Well, okay. We'll get back to the Trocadero, though, because I'd like to know more about that.

AMY

Okay. The Trocadero was a club where this friend of mine he's a good friend now; he lives up in Washington played organ. His name was Louie [Luis] Rivera. This was a pseudonym. I mean, I never did know what his real name was. He looked Latino, but he wasn't; he was black.

ISOARDI

Now, where was the Trocadero?

AMY

On Manchester and Main.

ISOARDI

Okay. And when you go out here it was already going? Or does it emerge a little bit later?

AMY

It emerged later, but when I first became aware of this club it was like a supper club where you would go in and you would put your steaks on the grill and cook your own steak. That's the kind of club it was. It was pretty, it was nice. This cat [Joe] Langford, he hired Louie, and Louie Well, I had been

working with Louie, because we had worked at Marti's. Did you ever hear of Marti's?

ISOARDI

Yeah, my old teacher Bill [William] Green used to play at Marti's.

AMY

Right, right, right.

ISOARDI

But he had never told me much about it.

AMY

It was a great club. It was just a small neighborhood bar.

ISOARDI

Where at?

AMY

On Broadway and Fifty-Eighth Street just before you get to Slauson. And they had jams in there all the time.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

It sounds like there weren't many places that did have jams anymore.

AMY

No, they had plenty.

ISOARDI

But they did at Marti's.

AMY

Oh, yeah. Marti's. They had a club here on Western. Mostly all of the clubs you could. You know, if you could play and the cats knew you, you could play anywhere

ISOARDI

You could get up?

AMY

Yeah, and play. But Marti's That's where I started with Louie was at Marti's. We worked there maybe a little over a month. And he got this gig at the Trocadero. We went there, and they started this early morning set on Sunday mornings starting at six o'clock, going till twelve.

ISOARDI

Who's going to show up at six o'clock there?

AMY

Hey, man!

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

When we would get to the club at five thirty. If you didn't get there at five thirty you couldn't get a seat.

ISOARDI

Wow.

AMY

And it was a large club. It was like the width of this house and the depth of probably out to the wall back there.

ISOARDI

Well, maybe something like thirty feet wide, something like that? Maybe a hundred feet back, something like that? Or maybe forty feet?

AMY

Yeah, it was a large club, a nice club. But the way it was decorated, it didn't look as large as it really was. But it was really a nice, nice club, you know?

ISOARDI

This is a place that people who had been out all night would head toward at five thirty, six in the morning.

AMY

Right, right, the players, you know, the night lifers and hipsters and so forth. I remember one Sunday morning we were playing and Thelonious [Monk] came in.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

And I got a chance to spend about three hours with Monk by himself.

ISOARDI

Oh, how beautiful.

AMY

He came in the club. He was acting all weird.

ISOARDI

Do you remember when this was?

AMY

Yeah, this had to be '58 or '59.

ISOARDI

He was almost at the peak of his powers then.

AMY

Oh, he was at the peak. And he was clean, you know. He had this suit on; it was just gorgeous. It wasn't pressed and all that, but you could see the quality of the material. Yeah, you could see it. He was acting all strange with everybody. You know how Monk is.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I've heard so many stories.

AMY

Yeah, he was out. So I told him, I said, "Hey, man, come on. Let's go for a ride." And he said, "Okay." I went and got in the car, and when he got in the car he was a different man.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Totally. He made so much sense. He talked so brilliant. You know, it was like he was a different cat. "This is Monk? No, man, this couldn't be Monk." He made so much sense, and he talked so knowledgeable and hip.

ISOARDI

Jeez, it's like there was a public Monk and a private Monk, then, eh?

AMY

Evidently. Because there was no vernacular, no jive, or none of that. We were talking straight life, you know? It was beautiful. I enjoyed it.

ISOARDI

What a great experience.

AMY

Yeah, it was beautiful. I enjoyed that morning. And then I came back. When I came back and we walked in the club, he went right back into that old shit. It was amazing.

ISOARDI

Wow. So the Trocadero was going when you came out here, and then it changed

AMY

No, no. We made the transformation.

ISOARDI

Oh, really? You guys really turned it into a jazz club?

AMY

Right. Well, it was like

ISOARDI

Kind of like a supper club before then?

AMY

Yeah. The jazz we were playing was the organ jazz, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah, the organ trio stuff that was getting popular.

AMY

Right. You know, Jimmy Smith and

ISOARDI

[Jack] McDuff?

AMY

Shirley Scott. That was the kind of groove. And then we recorded. Well, this was afterwards, because we stayed at the Trocadero for almost two years.

ISOARDI

Jeez, a long time.

AMY

Every Sunday morning. So then we left there, and that's when I came to Dynamite Jackson's. Louie didn't have the gig at Marti's anymore, so it must have been maybe two or three weeks where we were. Yeah, maybe two or three weeks. I had a little apartment then on Victoria [Avenue] and Adams [Boulevard]. I was working out in North Hollywood, and when I'd come in from my gig I'd go to Dynamite's with Plas Johnson and Freeman.

ISOARDI

Ernie Freeman?

AMY

Ernie Freeman and I forget who all was there, but that was the set. It was a good set.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Where was Dynamite Jackson's at?

AMY

On Adams a block and a half west of Crenshaw [Boulevard]. So when I first got the gig. See, after we left Marti's I went to work over at Dynamite's on Central [Avenue].

ISOARDI

That was still going then?

AMY

That was when I worked there. For the last two weeks that the club was in existence there on Central, I worked it.

ISOARDI

And this was late fifties?

AMY

Yeah. I'd say '57, '58, somewhere like that.

ISOARDI

And they just closed it up?

AMY

They closed the one on Central and she opened this club on Adams, but what she wanted was a high-society club.

ISOARDI

Who is she?

AMY

Dynamite's wife. So what she stipulated was that she wanted me to play, but she didn't want the people to not be able to hear themselves talk.

ISOARDI

She wanted some background music.

AMY

Right. So that's what we were playing, you know? I knew what the requirements were when I took the gig, so I said okay. We were playing these old, tired songs and

ISOARDI

Not much hard bop.

AMY

No. So the waitresses started complaining.

ISOARDI

About what?

AMY

They said the customers didn't like that kind of music. So I said, "Well, go talk to her. That's what she wants. I'll play what she wants. She's paying me." So about the third night

ISOARDI

She realized [laughs] That's good.

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

Score one for the audience.

AMY

Right, right. So I put this group together with Art Hillery

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Jimmy Miller. Wait a minute. Was it Jimmy Miller? No, it was "Tosh." I don't know if you ever heard of him. It's El Deen McIntosh. He was a drummer from my home. We all went to the same high school. He could really play, too, man. So it was Art Hillery, Tosh, Roy Brewster, and myself. We had some nice charts, and the band was just beautiful. We were playing some very interesting things, some very good music, and everything was going. You know, people started coming into the club, and we were burning, man. One night. This was around the summer of '59, and normally before the club would fill up. That first set we were just burning. You know, we would just play things that we really liked to play, and no holding back, just play. Then we would go in When the club [began to fill up] about the second or the third set, we would start playing some more commercial types of tunes interspersed with the jazz tunes that we were playing, you know?

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

So this particular night I looked down, and the cat said, "That's Dick Bock." I said, "Oh, yeah?" So we played, and it was a beautiful first set. I mean, it was just burning, man. So he sent the waitress and asked if I would join him. So I went to the bar, and we talked, and he liked me, and I liked him.

He was cool. So he gave me an appointment for the next day, and I went out the next day and I signed with Pacific Jazz [Records].

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That was the only time he'd heard you as far as you know?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

All right.

AMY

Yeah. But that was a great night, though. We were on fire, man. It was beautiful, man. But here's what he did. He didn't want to use Art Hillery on the organ. He wanted to use Paul Bryant on the organ, and Paul had Jimmy Miller on drums. So what he did was he compromised with me. He let me bring Roy Brewster, and he let Paul bring Jimmy Miller on drums, and it became the Curtis Amy-Paul Bryant Quartet.

ISOARDI

Ah, and that led to that LP you did on Pacific Jazz with Paul?

AMY

Right, right. We did two LPs, two or three, yeah. But I just always wonder how we would have gone musically if Art would have been able to stay in the band.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Why did he want Paul as opposed to Art? Was Art just not well enough known?

AMY

Well, that and he wasn't an exciting type of cat, you know? Art was that laid-back, more

ISOARDI

Paul was more flamboyant, I guess.

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

Still is, I guess.

AMY

Right, right. I haven't seen him in years.

ISOARDI

Oh, he's still around. He bills himself as Mr. Central Avenue now.

AMY

Why?

ISOARDI

Well, I think because there's been all this interest in Central, so I guess he's capitalizing on that. Do you think the recording would have been stronger had you been able to go with Art?

AMY

I think musically, yes.

ISOARDI

Musically it would have been more interesting?

AMY

But the recordings that we made I enjoyed those records. We did good, but there were some things that we could have taken advantage of, I think, musically had we been able to continue with Art, because we were growing with Art. We stopped growing. And I'm not putting Paul down, you know? I love Paul. Paul's a great guy, but we stopped growing, and when you do that, then

ISOARDI

Well, you guys, I guess, had a chemistry, too. You had been playing together for a little bit, hadn't you, you and Art?

AMY

Oh, yeah. See, we had been playing almost a year, and we were having fun. I mean, we were playing good, and we were playing good music, and we were having fun. We were growing and You know, we were burning, man.

ISOARDI

Did you ever have a chance to record with Art?

AMY

No.

ISOARDI

Too bad.

AMY

Never did.

ISOARDI

That would have been good.

AMY

Yeah, because he's a great guy, and we had great chemistry. We really did. It was a good group, man. It hurt me when that cat said. But, you know, what are you going to do?

ISOARDI

Yeah. What kind of a deal did you have with Bock? Was it for a couple of albums? Or did he just ask you to come in and sign to do an LP?

AMY

Well, let's see. The first one I think was two albums. Then we re-signed and All total we did about eight.

ISOARDI

You did a total of eight for Pacific Jazz?

AMY

I think five to eight, something like that.

ISOARDI

Yeah. You did a couple with Paul.

AMY

Right. That was The Blues Message, Meetin' Here. Yeah, and then Dick Bock did two albums called This Is the Blues. The tune "This Is the Blues" I wrote, and we recorded it with the same quartet. And he did two albums, compilation albums, I would guess you know, with various artists.

ISOARDI

What was Dick Bock like?

AMY

Dick was a very interesting, deep man.

ISOARDI

Really? Deep in what sense?

AMY

From the standpoint of life. He was the first man that ever spoke to us about yoga and Indian society. Ravi Shankar, he brought him here.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

AMY

The night that he introduced him. He had a party for him, he and the cat that played sitar with him, and we went up to this doctor's house there in Hollywood, right in that vicinity. Do you know where that church is there on Franklin [Avenue] and La Brea [Avenue], where you go into that curve and that big church is sitting there?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Well, it seems like the house was behind there, right in there.

ISOARDI

Gee, before Ravi Shankar became an international star. Bock was already onto him.

AMY

Oh, yeah. He brought him here. That's why I say he was really deep into life, and he hipped me to yoga. Just watching him, he was a soft-spoken and soft kind of a man. He was firm. There was no. But he was a great guy.

ISOARDI

Yeah. So in terms of the contract and the way he related to musicians, it was all pretty positive, then?

AMY

Well, I didn't say that. [laughs]

ISOARDI

Because that would really be a rarity if that was the case.

AMY

No, I didn't say that. I didn't make any money.

ISOARDI

Really? But you had a royalty deal, but it wasn't much? You just never saw much? You just never got the checks, yeah.

AMY

I never made any money. I don't think many people. Well, the Crusaders probably made money, and Les McCann.

ISOARDI

Oh, God, I hope so with the kind of profile they had.

AMY

Yeah, I'm pretty sure they made money. What's the alto [saxophone] player's name? I don't know why I can't ever think of his name. Along in that period with Art Pepper. An alto player.

ISOARDI

You mean Sonny Criss?

AMY

No, no. White.

ISOARDI

White alto player. From the L.A. area?

AMY

Yeah. And he was on Pacific Jazz. He's a prominent altoist.

ISOARDI

Herb Geller?

AMY

No, but I love Herb. I met Herb when I was with Ray [Charles]. We'll talk about that later. But I love Herb. Herb was a sweet guy, man, beautiful player. What's this cat's name? Wait a minute.

ISOARDI

Joe Maini?

AMY

No, but I loved Joe, too. Joe was a sweetheart.

ISOARDI

Who else was playing alto around here? Med Flory? Was he around out here then?

AMY

Yeah, he was here, but not him. Oh, you know who I'm talking about. Let's see.

ISOARDI

Well, it will probably come to you later on and you can get back to me.

AMY

No, it won't, because I often try to think of names, and I can't ever get his name.

ISOARDI

Well, you've got me thinking about it now, so I'll probably go back and Who did he play with?

AMY

He played with everybody.

ISOARDI

Everybody. [laughs]

AMY

Wait a minute. Let me see if I can find this guy's name. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI

Bud Shank. All right. Well, I'd like to get back to that a little bit before we get too far away from it. Let me ask you about Central Avenue. I mean, you saw it in its heyday when you came out here for that brief week in the late forties. I guess by the mid- to late fifties you helped close down Dynamite Jackson's on Central Avenue. By that timeC1957, I think you said it was what's Central Avenue like?

AMY

It was gone.

ISOARDI

All of it's gone?

AMY

It was gone. Totally disintegrated.

ISOARDI

So there's nobody coming out?

AMY

No. It had become dangerous.

ISOARDI

Really? By then? It's a place you wouldn't go for a walk at night?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez. What was the neighborhood like? Was it just kind of run down? Desperate people around, that kind of thing?

AMY

Seemingly, yes. It was completely gone. The Dunbar Hotel was gone.

ISOARDI

That had closed by then.

AMY

Right. If it wasn't closed it was

ISOARDI

Nobody was knocking on the door to get in?

AMY

Right. It was just gone. It was sad to see that, you know?

ISOARDI

God. And you weren't gone all that. It was only about ten years and it's a night-and-day difference.

AMY

Yeah. The first time, when I came in '47 and went down, all you could hear was music and happy people and pretty cars and pretty clothes. You know, that's all I saw all up and down there. But then in '55, when I came back, my mother and them had a You know, I told you they had opened a storefront church? And there was nothing there.

ISOARDI

Were there any clubs left? Anything going on?

AMY

Not that I know of. No, not where you could really get into music. There was one other club, and I can't think of the name of that club, either. [Club La Criss] It was over on Avalon [Boulevard], where Sonny Criss and Earl Anderza and all those cats used to go over and play.

ISOARDI

Was that by the ballpark [Wrigley Field, now the Gilbert Lindsay Community Center Park]?

AMY

Right across from the ballpark.

ISOARDI

The guy who owned that, he later had the place that was Memory Lane. Was it Larry Hearne?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

But I can't think of the name of that place.

AMY

I can't think of that first club, either. But that's where

ISOARDI

That was going strong.

AMY

Yeah, that was the club, right during that period.

ISOARDI

What kind of a club was it?

AMY

A jam club.

ISOARDI

That's what it was, it was a musicians' club?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

Did anybody get up and play?

AMY

I think so. You know, I never went there.

ISOARDI

Why not?

AMY

Maybe I may have gone once. I'm not a jam musician, and it was kind of frightening over there for me. There was so much bad stuff happening.

ISOARDI

I think Horace [Tapscott] told me once about that place. He said you'd walk in there, and you'd have the junkies on one side and this crowd on the other side, and if you didn't belong to one crowd, you know It was a tough scene it sounded like.

AMY

Yeah, so that's why I never went in there. I never did. But I was working every night all the time during that period, so I think that was one of the main reasons why I didn't go. I was always working, and the people would leave there and come to the club where I was working, so it wasn't necessary for me to go there to get that experience, you know?

ISOARDI

Where had all the people gone? I mean, was there any kind of place that you could say was You know, people had left Central, but now they were here? Is there anything like that?

AMY

Oh, yeah. They were all over town.

ISOARDI

So the community had just kind of spread out, then?

AMY
Right. It had gone west. See, prior to the close of Central, I don't think the clubs on the west had become prominent yet.

ISOARDI
By west, what are you referring to?

AMY
I'm saying west of
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AMY
I'd say west of Western, because the nightlife Western almost became the street.

ISOARDI
Yeah, it wasn't quite what Central was, but there was some activity

AMY
Yeah, there was some nice activity. Ye Nightlife, which was owned by Gertrude Gipson [Penland]

ISOARDI
What was the name of the place?

AMY
Ye Nightlife.

ISOARDI
Gertrude Gipson. That name rings a bell.

AMY
Yeah. She was the entertainment reporter for the [Los Angeles] Sentinel.

ISOARDI
Was it the Sentinel or the [California] Eagle?

AMY
The Sentinel.

ISOARDI
Sentinel, okay.

AMY
Right. The bass clarinet player, Eric Dolphy. That's where I met Eric.

ISOARDI
At that club?

AMY

At that club. His mother was a good friend of Gertrude's. See, Eric was out. I mean, not personally, but musically he was out, you know.

ISOARDI
So you met him about when? This is in the late fifties?

AMY
Yeah.

ISOARDI
And his music then. So it was just before he left to go to New York, then, that you met him?

AMY
Right, right.

ISOARDI
And his music then was pretty adventurous.

AMY
Oh, yeah. He was out. He was out.

ISOARDI
Really?

AMY
But if she hadn't been a good friend of his family he wouldn't have had that gig. That's how out he was, you know? But he was clean-cut, very intelligent, a nice person. So I really dug him as a person; he was a great guy. I didn't know he was messing around. I never knew that. It was a shock to me.

ISOARDI
What do you mean messing around? [Amy mimes shooting drugs] He was? I never heard anything.

AMY
That's what I heard.

ISOARDI
No kidding?

AMY
Now, I don't know this. I don't know this, so I really wouldn't like to be quoted on this.

ISOARDI
Yeah, yeah. Of course, of course.

AMY

But when he went to Germany. See, what happened was Melba [Liston] wrote this chart for Diz [Dizzy Gillespie]; it was called "Flamingo." He was recording it for a record club, and she had rehearsed this, and Eric was supposed to play alto on the session.

ISOARDI

This is, again, late fifties?

AMY

Yeah. And we rehearsed maybe a week or two with Eric, and I forget who else was on there. Melba and So Diz was coming in, and the day before the session everything changed. They dropped Eric and they called [Harry] Sweets [Edison]. Sweets was on the date, and somebody else in the rhythm section. I forget now who it was but everything changed, and I was really disappointed, because I wanted Eric to be there. We had it down, you know?

ISOARDI

Really? So you two had hooked up?

AMY

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I would go down to the club. Every chance that I got I would go to the club to see him and to hear. And I think I was working, like I said, out in North Hollywood and all those places, so I would come in town, and I would go on over to the Nightlife and catch maybe the last set and just groove around a little bit. So then right after that Eric moved to New York, and I never saw him again.

ISOARDI

Most of the stories that I've heard about Eric is that he was a pretty straight-laced sweetheart of a person.

AMY

He was, man.

ISOARDI

I think Buddy [Collette] told me one time that there was one session that he showed up to that they were doing once, and he was kind of smiling and laughing the whole time, and Buddy thought maybe he had had a little taste of something, but for the most part that he wasn't that kind of guy. Maybe he dabbled here or there every once in a while, but nobody really That never seemed to be a problem with him, or never seemed to

AMY

Right. He was clean-cut, he was well dressed, well educated.

ISOARDI

Yeah, certainly committed to the music.

AMY

Right, very definitely.

ISOARDI

I guess he had connections to get the Nightlife gig, but how did the audience react? Was he going that much outside on the bandstand?

AMY

Well, see, what was happening was it was like a house band, and I think what she would do was bring Seemingly, if I remember correctly, there would probably be an artist a singer or a comic or something in conjunction with the band. So the plan was that they had to do mostly backup, I think. I'm not really saying. It's been a long time. I don't really remember. It seems that's the way it was. But he was out. He was playing out then, and I would look and I would laugh, you know, and sometimes you'd hear the people kind of say little strange little things. But it didn't matter, because he was tight with her.

ISOARDI

Yeah, right, right. A lot of times when I listen to Dolphy's music, and as far out as he sounds sometimes it seems that he's always staying with the chords. I mean, he's doing different things with them. He's stretching them about every way you can, but he's not completely throwing all that out.

AMY

No, he was correct with what he was doing. He knew what he was doing.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

And he was doing it. Obviously he knew what he was doing, because when he got to New York A Trane [John Coltrane] wouldn't have embraced him the way that he did. Because he was playing, man.

ISOARDI

And you said he was on bass clarinet.

AMY

Well, when he was working this club he was playing alto.

ISOARDI

Just alto?

AMY

Uh-huh. I don't think he started playing. For some reason I don't remember the bass clarinet until later, but it's not a surprise in my mind that he was playing the bass clarinet, so it may have been that he was playing it during that period, too. But his main instrument during that time was the alto.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What a tragedy losing him so young.

AMY

I remember that day when I heard about it; we were in rehearsal or something. And they had his funeral out in Watts. I know I went out to the funeral, and after the funeral somebody told me he got too much honey. So I thought they were talking about he had ODeD on regular honey.

ISOARDI

Well, in a sense, yeah. I can tell you what Buddy told me.

AMY

What?

ISOARDI

And Buddy has this in his new book. Buddy said that when he went to New York He and Eric were very close, and when Buddy was back there, they were together every day. He had gotten into this eating routine, he and John Coltrane, where they were only eating what they thought were health foods. Buddy said in the time he was back in New York he never saw him eat a regular meal once. Instead they were having a lot of juices and organic kinds of things, and he said he and Coltrane were eating jars of honey because they thought to do these marathon practice sessions, and their sets were just C They were just taking all this in. They claimed it gave them the extra energy to do that. What Buddy told me was that when he was in Europe he started feeling bad when he was in France, and he went to Berlin to perform, and he got up onstage, and he was feeling terrible, and he passed out. By the time they got him to the hospital he was in a coma, and he died shortly afterwards. And they I guess on the autopsy or whatever realized he had been a diabetic, and he went into a diabetic coma. And looking back, it could have been all of that honey that they were taking in then. And he didn't even know that he was diabetic.

Apparently Buddy asked his parents. None of them knew he had diabetes, which makes it even more of a tragedy.

AMY

Yeah, well, that's what the cat told me, and I went from that day until maybe a couple of years ago before someone said what really was going on.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it wasn't drugs or anything like that, it was just that the poor guy was diabetic and didn't know it.

AMY

You know, he had a big knot somewhere on his head.

ISOARDI

He had a bulge here. You can see it on some of the films. Apparently it was a benign tumor that was removed at a certain point.

AMY

It wasn't removed before he left here.

ISOARDI

No, I think it was removed back East.

AMY

Yeah. But he always had that, and I often wondered what that was.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it was a tumor, but it was benign, and they removed it. It wasn't any big thing. The tragedy was not knowing that you're diabetic and thinking you're doing all this healthy stuff and all the while it's killing you.

AMY

Yeah, right. That's what I was telling you about with my mother.

ISOARDI

It's sad.

AMY

Nobody ever told me, and I never knew, and I'm taking her candy and ice cream to make her happy.

ISOARDI

Well, she may have wanted it anyway. Some people don't want to give something up to it, and they figure "If that's the result, I'm going to enjoy myself while I'm here."

AMY

Well, I don't think if she would have realized

ISOARDI

Oh, she would have altered her habits?

AMY

I think she would have, because I got her to stop smoking. She smoked for a long time. I stopped smoking in '68, and shortly afterwards she stopped.

ISOARDI

What else was happening along Western? You mentioned Ye Nightlife.

AMY

Let's see. Western

ISOARDI

Were there some other clubs that people were playing in?

AMY

Yeah, there was a club that I think John T. opened this club, the cat that opened the It Club. There was a club down on Western

ISOARDI

John T. McClain, right?

AMY

Right. It was a club on Western, somewhere around Forty-Fifth [Street], Forty-Seventh [Street], or something like that on Western, and they brought Wild Bill Davis.

ISOARDI

Oh.

AMY

Wild Bill was the first one that did "April in Paris," remember, because Basie took his arrangement of "April in Paris" and made it for the band, you know? So he was there. Now, John T. I think opened that club. It didn't stay open long. They did good business when Wild Bill Davis was there.

ISOARDI

Was the Oasis on Western?

AMY

The Oasis? Yeah, that's the club that became Ye Nightlife. The Oasis.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

AMY

Right. The Oasis was cool. All those clubs were cool. There was What else was on Western? The Rubiyat [Room] was right on the corner of Western and Adams. And that's where Kenny Dennis [was playing] and the bass player who was with Diz in the beginning. He released a Damn, man.

ISOARDI

It's all right.

AMY

Tall cat. [Al McKibbon].

ISOARDI

So there was some action. There were a number of clubs around from Adams south along Western, but it wasn't anything like the kind of street scene they used to have on Central?

AMY

No, no.

ISOARDI

So people would pull up and go into the club, and that was pretty much it, then?

AMY

Right, right. See, the scene became. Well, along with Jazz City and these other clubs the Largo, Peacock Alley, and there were three clubs down on Hollywood Boulevard. The Renaissance Do you remember the Renaissance? Where the House of Blues is?

ISOARDI

Is that where it was?

AMY

The Renaissance was there. That's where Miles [Davis] and everybody worked. Okay, then he moved it from there up to where. It may have been. Not Ciro's [but] the club across that had been a very popular nightclub, supper club for the stars. It was in the same category as Ciro's, Mocambo, and those. Well, anyway, he converted that club, that room, into the Renaissance there, and he brought Miles down there, also.

ISOARDI

Oh. There was another club down on Washington, I think; it was the Hillcrest [Club].

AMY

Yeah, the Hillcrest was right on the corner of Hillcrest and Washington. I worked in there, yeah. After we left the Trocadero with the Sunday morning scene I came over to the. What was that club? The Black Orchid.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. That was along there. Where exactly was that at?

AMY

The same club, I think. The Hillcrest became the Black Orchid. Yeah, I think that's what it was. It was right there on that corner.

ISOARDI

The Hillcrest seems to be still in our consciousness today because Ornette Coleman played there. He joined Paul Bley's band and

AMY

At the Hillcrest?

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you remember that?

AMY

No, I don't remember that.

ISOARDI

Did you ever encounter Ornette when he was out here?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

How so?

AMY

I met his wife.

ISOARDI

Jayne Cortez?

AMY

I'm not sure what her name was, but they had a child, and I remember going to their house. But I really didn't meet Ornette. I met Cherry, Don Cherry. We became kind of tight. He would come to the club all the time. He would sit in and play.

ISOARDI

Which club?

AMY

At Dynamite's.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

AMY

Yeah. He would come like on Saturday nights.

ISOARDI

Was he playing the pocket trumpet?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

He was? He was playing it that early on?

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

What did you think of this thing?

AMY

Well, because of the association with Ornette, I accepted it.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What kind of reception was Ornette getting out here? Were you ever in the same room with him or?

AMY

No, because once he left here and he went to New York he really never came back.

ISOARDI

That's true, yeah.

AMY

He never played here.

ISOARDI

So you never heard him play out here?

AMY

No. He may have played UCLA or somewhere, but I don't really remember him coming back and playing a club. Don Cherry came quite frequently, but

ISOARDI

It seems like the music scene out here was kind of. It strikes me as kind of wide open. I mean, the people we've talked about make quite a range of artists of very different styles and attitudes.

AMY

Oh, yeah. And don't forget the Lighthouse. See, the Lighthouse was burning. I mean, you'd walk in. And, see, the Lighthouse was the type of club to me that I always wanted to have. The Lighthouse was a club where when you walked in it it was like you were going into a fantasy. You know, when you walked in there was like this glow all the way across the room. Did you ever notice? I don't know if I was the only one that ever noticed that.

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

But it had a feeling of fantasy. And when I first moved out here I went out, because I wanted to go out and hear [gestures how impressed he was] Shit. [laughs] Damn, Conte [Condoli] was playing out there then

ISOARDI

Was Art Pepper out there?

AMY

I don't think he was there during this period.

ISOARDI

Bob Cooper?

AMY

Bob Cooper, Howard [Rumsey]. Shelly [Manne] may have been playing.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, could have been. I know Max Roach even played out there for a

AMY

Max was there when I first got there.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I was actually going to ask you about that. The Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet Did you see them?

AMY

Man, yeah. I loved that group.

ISOARDI

Where did you see them? At the California Club?

AMY

No. Let's see. I didn't see them anywhere out here, because what happened was I was in Tennessee, and Miles's attorney [Harold Lovette] was from Jackson, Tennessee, and his dad passed, and he came home, and this friend of mine brought him over to my house, and we hung out. I can't even think of his name now. He's died. But he was an attorney. He was Miles's man. He stayed with Miles for years.

ISOARDI

I know who you mean.

AMY

You know who I'm talking about?

ISOARDI

I know who you're talking about. I can't think of his name, either. It's like on the tip of my tongue.

AMY

Right. Flamboyant guy, but he was very hip.

ISOARDI

Oh, God.

AMY

He went to sleep over there in the music room. He came here, and we were really tight. We got to be real tight. When he got to Jackson. I had been busted, and I was waiting to go to trial, and he came and he said, "Well, I wish I would have been here in time, because I could have cooled it all out." It was too late then, because I had already. I was waiting to go then to trial. So he came over, and we were listening to music. We sat down, we ate, and we were listening to music. We hung out for two or three days, and he had to go back to New York. So he said, "Have you heard Clifford Brown?" I said, "No." He said, "You haven't heard Clifford Brown?" I said, "No." The next week I had boxes of Clifford Brown. Man, let me tell you, that was just I had never heard anyone sound like that. And, see, the school that Clifford went to, he went to Maryland State [College, now University of Maryland Eastern Shore] in. Well, I can't think of the city now [Princess Anne, Maryland]. But anyway, he went to Maryland State, and he had had an accident.

ISOARDI

Oh, there was a car accident, yeah.

AMY

But not the one that killed him.

ISOARDI

Right. He had been in an earlier one.

AMY

Right, and he had to convalesce for over a year, and he sat in his room with his horn. That's where he got it all together, while he was convalescing and got it together. And he brought me these albums. "Man," I said. "Whoo-hoo-hoo!" I couldn't believe that. It was just amazing.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly.

AMY

You know? Clifford, Harold [Land], George Morrow. In fact, I used George on one of my albums. In fact, he worked with me for about a year. And Richie Powell and Let's see. George Morrow, Richie Powell, Max. Yeah. That was Man! Shit.

ISOARDI

You can't get any better than that.

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So there was quite a bit going on in L.A., then, it strikes me. There were so many different kinds of music, too.

AMY

Yeah, every night.

ISOARDI

I just sort of had the impression. I mean, there were all sorts of stories about Ornette having a tough time because of his approach, etc. But it just seemed to me that L.A. was a place that was kind of wide open then. You could be different and you could survive.

AMY

Well

ISOARDI

You don't think that's true?

AMY

I don't know about the survival, but there was all kinds of good music being played and accepted. You had big bands: you had Gerald, you had Onzy [Matthews]. I worked with Onzy's big band.

ISOARDI

When did you hook up with him?

AMY

In 1960 or 1961. He started coming into the club, and we started talking, and we became very good friends. We became such good friends that we would watch the [Los Angeles] Dodgers over the phone. He'd be at his house, I'd be at my house, and we'd watch all nine innings on the phone. You know, we really became very tight. And then he organized the band, and then we did four albums. We did two with his band and two with Lou Rawls.

ISOARDI

You were on both those Lou Rawls albums, both sessions?

AMY

Yeah. I did all the solos.

ISOARDI

Yeah, he was a busy man. He was doing a lot of arranging it seems.

AMY

Onzy?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

But he couldn't get it together. God damn it, man. It was just unbelievable.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Unbelievable.

ISOARDI

Just in general? To get a focus on life?

AMY

Well, I don't think he ever got a focus on life. But he got a focus eventually on his music. When I first joined him, his writing left something to be desired, but he kept working. He kept working at it, and we would rehearse every week, and the band got better and better and better.

ISOARDI

Now, is this his band?

AMY

Yeah. Bobby Bryant was in that band. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI

Okay, Onzy Matthews. When does he come out here? Do you know anything about his background?

AMY

No. I know he was from Dallas.

ISOARDI

Was he out here when you came out here?

AMY

I don't know. I think he probably was, but he was probably in the joint, because he was stretched out, you know? And he never could get it together.

ISOARDI

Was that the big problem that he faced in terms of getting it together?

AMY

That was his problem, right.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

Because Capitol [Records] embraced him.

ISOARDI

Yeah, he just seemed to be. For that period of time he's everywhere.

AMY

That's right. They took him and they gave him \$150,000 budget for promotion. He went out all over the country. They recorded the album. They were fixing to promote the album, and he got busted.

ISOARDI

Just as they were going to start promoting it?

AMY

Yeah. They'd given him this money. He'd been all around the country on a promotion tour, and he was going to do something else, and he got busted. That just killed it. So then I got a deal with Tutti Camarata. Do you remember Tutti Camarata?

ISOARDI

Yeah, sure. I know who he was.

AMY

Tutti was a great guy a great musician, great person. So he was associated with London Records, and also he was associated with Walt Disney. The album that I did, I did the theme song from Goldfinger. I got the chart from the session, the score, and I did "Goldfinger."

ISOARDI

Oh, was this the album that you did, the Sounds of Broadway, Sounds of Hollywood?

AMY

Right, right. That was Tutti. And all of those tunes were top tunes right out of the box. I did that tune from that Kim Novak picture. It's called "senior moments," and I'm having an extended one. [mutual laughter] Shit. But all of those tunes from Mary Poppins, Goldfinger, the Kim Novak film. I loved her. She was just I was glad to get that opportunity to record that tune, you know?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. I understand that.

AMY

Of Human Bondage.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, sure. When you put that album together, I think you used a small group on one side. What? A quintet, I think?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

And then you had a big band or an orchestra on the other side.

AMY

Strings, strings. That's what Onzy was to do. The whole album was going to be with strings. Onzy comes in C You know, I called him and told him I had this deal for us and that he could do the charts. He never came to my house to rehearse. He never came to find out what I wanted to do, and I'm trying to offset Tutti and trying to deal with him, and they've got me in the middle. So then when we got into the session I had to read everything, and it was obvious. The summer before he died he came. Let me show you

what happened. After everything fell through here he moved to New York, and he started

ISOARDI

Right. That was what? the seventies, wasn't it?

AMY

Right, early seventies. So a friend of mine was associated with Dick Griffey. Have you ever heard of Dick Griffey?

ISOARDI

No, it doesn't ring a bell.

AMY

He had the label and I can't think of the label [Solar Records] through RCA, and he just sold records. He became super rich. In fact, I think he's rich now. But this friend who was his right-hand man, I turned him onto Onzy in New York. And he tried to do something with Onzy, but I think Onzy was so far gone it was just

ISOARDI

Well, didn't he do something with Duke Ellington back in New York also?

AMY

Yeah!

ISOARDI

I mean, he really had some shots.

AMY

He had all the best shots, man, and each one of them, he'd burn them up, because he would do something to you, you know what I mean? Oh, man. But how I got a chance to cut him into this cat was that Merry [Clayton, Amy's wife] and I were going to see Valley of the Dolls, and we were staying right off of Central Park Avenue. Do you know where the Sherry-Netherland Hotel in New York is?

ISOARDI

No, I don't know.

AMY

It's right on the corner there to the entrance of Central Park, in that top part there, where all the best hotels are.

ISOARDI

Oh, sure.

AMY

Okay. We were in the hotel three doors down, a nice hotel. So I think we played Carnegie Hall with my wife. After we left we had a few days off, so we were going to see Valley of the Dolls. We left the hotel, and she and I were walking down the street. I went to the box office to get the tickets, turned around, and there was Onzy.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

So I said "Wow!" Out of all these people

ISOARDI

Yeah, it's a big city.

AMY

There was Onzy. So I took him and I said, "Come on, man. We're going to the movie. Come on." So we went into the movie. And the next day I cut this cat into him, and nothing happened, and he didn't get it together. He was doing all these things with Duke and everybody around him. They had embraced him, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

So years later, like the year before he died, he came to the house. So we went over, and we were looking at the TV and listening to some music, and he pulled out this tape of his band that he'd had over in Europe. He had been in Europe, in France. He stayed over in France, and I think he was in

ISOARDI

Yeah. He had his own band over there for a while.

AMY

Right, a big band. Sweden, Germany. But anyway, he came on back home.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

So he came to the door, and we went over, and we were talking, and he says, "Yeah, it would really have helped if the guy you hired to arrange for you would have given you some rehearsals." I had never said anything to him, but it was still on his conscience. It had to be. And that's what he said. And the next message I got, he was dead.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

But we had. I don't know if you knew Nik Venet. Have you ever heard of him?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

He was a producer at Capitol. He was the cat who was the original producer for the Beach Boys.

ISOARDI

Oh, so he had some money. [laughs]

AMY

He had big dough, man. But what happened was he was going to put us in a movie, the three of us. He loved Lou, Onzy, and myself. You know, I was on every solo on Lou Rawls's album Black and Blue.

ISOARDI

Yeah. On both albums?

AMY

Both albums.

ISOARDI

Tobacco Road I think was the other one.

AMY

Tobacco Road, right. I did all of those. I wish I could get those albums.

ISOARDI

I have them both.

AMY

You have?

ISOARDI

Yeah. I got them at a place called the Record Collector on Melrose [Avenue]. He found them for me. I mean, they cost. The guy isn't cheap. I think he was charging like \$30 or \$40 each for them. I can make you a tape.

AMY

Will you, please?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. I'll put them on cassette for you.

AMY

Okay, yeah.

ISOARDI

I'll be happy to. I mean, I went hunting for them, because at that time I was working with Horace Tapscott on his book. Remember, I came by to see you?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

So I was trying to find those things, but Oh, actually, they're available on compact disc. Oh, no, those aren't. The Lou Rawls aren't. I'm confusing them with something else. Sorry. But I was looking for those, so I went up to this guy, and he's the one who had both those, and I think he had that album of yours that you did with Horace, Sounds of Broadway, Sounds of Hollywood.

AMY

Oh, right, right.

ISOARDI

I think he had that one, too. That's where I got all those. So they're around. They just cost a little bit.

AMY

I really want those.

ISOARDI

You want both Lou Rawls, right?

AMY

Yeah, both.

ISOARDI

I'll put them on tape for you.

AMY

Do you have the Onzy, the Black and Blue?

ISOARDI

Yeah, I've got both Lou Rawls. I'll put them both on tape. The album that you put together then, it was supposed to be all strings. It was going to be all Onzy-arranged, I guess, then. But it didn't work out that way. But the small group that you used, I guess, on one side. Or you used the small group on both sides, I guess, right?

AMY

I used the rhythm section, yeah.

ISOARDI

You used the rhythm section, strings, and then on the other side you just had the small group?

AMY

Right. It was trombone, trumpet, myself, and three

ISOARDI

Oh, so you had a sextet.

AMY

Right. And, see, we were going to do the whole album, but Onzy came in, and Tutti had his assistant who took care of all the business for the label. Her name was Dixie, and she was a sweetheart, man, just a sweetheart. And Onzy went in and pissed this lady off.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

So when he pissed her off, Tutti got mad. So after we did the first set he said, "Well, we'll just use the smaller group after that." I was hurt, man. So he just messed up my whole project. And we never did do anything with it, you know? We got some play, I think, in Phoenix, at KMPC Do you remember the disc jockey that was at KMPC? The one that had the deep voice? Kind of a young kid. He was kind of young then, but he was a great deejay, at KMPC. [Johnny Magnus]

ISOARDI

Well, I'm curious. Let me ask you in particular about the group you put together. That's how you hooked up with Horace, especially on piano, because he was kind of in a transition then. I mean, he's played piano all his life, but professionally his start had been on trombone. I know he was having some teeth problems on trombone. He was trying to get into piano more, I think.

AMY

Right. What happened was I had Let's see. How did this happen? I had been working with Onzy, and I think that Horace was playing trombone in the band at one period.

ISOARDI

He's on one of those Lou Rawls albums. He's on trombone.

AMY

Yeah. And I think that's where we kind of hooked up, during that period, right. But, see, Lester Robertson. Do you remember Lester Robertson?

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Well, see, Lester and I were really tight. I really dug Lester, you know. When I went with Gerald's big band, then Lester had been a staple in that band. He had been in the band ever since the beginning.

ISOARDI

A long time.

AMY

Yeah. Gerald really loved Les. So I told Lester, I said, "Well, dig, I'm going to put a group together," because I always wanted to use trombone in the sextet setting. Roy Brewster was playing valve trombone, and the sound wasn't the same, you know. It's a great sound

ISOARDI

Yeah, but different.

AMY

But it wasn't the same as the regular trombone. And I liked Lester, so I said, "I'm going to put a group together with trumpet and trombone and tenor and rhythm. So he said, "Okay." I said, "Well, I'm going to start rehearsing." So we started rehearsing I think it was at Lester's I forget whose house it was, but we were rehearsing over on the east side. We would rehearse almost every day. And we had Warren Gale. Are you hip to Warren Gale, a trumpet player? He was with [Stan] Kenton for a minute.

ISOARDI

I know the name, but that's about it.

AMY

He lives up north now. Anyway, he was just phenomenal a young trumpet player. He lived out in Long Beach. His dad was one of the trumpeters at Disneyland you know, one of those Dixieland types? So this little cat. And he played excellent. He was young, and he was just a really sweet young man. So we rehearsed every day. The group was cool. And that's when I started using Horace on piano. So out of that rehearsal came this session

with Tutti. He made all of the rehearsals, so we just used that group, you know. And it was a nice group.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly.

AMY

Yeah, I enjoyed that group.

ISOARDI

Yeah. This was done, then, a little bit after the Lou Rawls, right?

AMY

Oh, this was '65.

ISOARDI

Lou Rawls was '63.

AMY

Yeah, '62 and '63, right around there.

ISOARDI

Now, did you and Horace play elsewhere? Did you have any gigs together at any clubs or anything like that?

AMY

Yeah, Horace it seems like. See, Dynamite Jackson sold the club, and it then became Mr. Adams.

ISOARDI

That was the name of the club?

AMY

Right, after Dynamite Jackson. And it seems like I used Horace in there for a minute, because the cat didn't want to rent an organ, so he gave me a chance to use the sextet on a regular gig, you dig? So we put a big old upright piano on the stand. It seemed like Horace may have worked it a minute, but Thompson, John Thompson, piano player, is on one of the tracks, on this tune. He's on "24 Hour Blues."

ISOARDI

That's off Katanga!, right?

AMY

Right. But the original album was Way Down. That's what "24 Hour Blues" and "A Soulful Bee, a Soulful Rose" [are on]. Do you know who that was written for, "A Soulful Bee, a Soulful Rose"? Did you ever meet Tommy Bee, the disc jockey?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

You never did?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

His partner was Jack Rose, and his name was Tommy Bee. So I wrote this tune, and I called it "A Soulful Bee, a Soulful Rose" you know, the correlation of the bee and the rose.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 23, 2000

ISOARDI

Well, it's good to get some of the information on Onzy Matthews.

AMY

He was such a talented young man. He could sing. Beautiful voice, beautiful voice. You know, it was disheartening for him to not ever get it together.

ISOARDI

Truly.

AMY

It's just like Frank Butler.

ISOARDI

Oh! What a I mean, Frank Morgan told me stories. Here's another one who has gotten it together over the last fifteen years. But so many wasted years. He told me when he was in San Quentin in the sixties that they had a prison big band, and Frank said he and the other alto saxophone that played in the band ran it; it was Art Pepper. The drummer was Frank Butler.

AMY

Right, right. They had a hell of a band up there.

ISOARDI

Can you imagine? You would almost want to go to San Quentin!

AMY

Right, until they said "San Quentin." Shit. But Dex [Dexter Gordon] was up there.

ISOARDI

He was in San Quentin?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

I knew he was out in Chino. I didn't know he'd done time in Quentin.

AMY

Yeah, I think he It seems to me that Dex was up there. Dupree [Bolton]. All those cats were there, man. And all of them were just monsters.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's the thing. You think of the wasted years, the wasted opportunities and talents.

AMY

Man, let's see. The first sextet album I did on Pacific Jazz [Records] was with Bobby Hutcherson, Carmell Jones

ISOARDI

Gee, young Bobby Hutcherson.

AMY

His first album.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

Bobby Hutcherson, Carmell Jones, Frank Strazzeri, Jimmy Bond, Frank Butler, and myself.

ISOARDI

Strong.

AMY

Yeah, man. [Julian] "Cannonball" [Adderley] came in the studio while we were recording, and I saw him when he came in the control booth, and he was just dancing. It was burning, man. This band was burning. So after that

ISOARDI

That was the first one you did for Dick Bock?

AMY

That was the first sextet. First I had done the two

ISOARDI

You had done the Paul Bryant ones?

AMY

Yes, I had done one of those, I think it was. I had done the first Paul Bryant [The Blues Message]; and then I did the Groovin' Blue. That was with Frank and all. And then we did the second Paul Bryant [Meetin' Here]. But, man, that band was burning. I mean, it was just magic. So then I took them into the Renaissance, and right after then. We did the Renaissance, and Billy Mitchell and Al Grey stole Bobby and took him back to New York. Broke my heart, man. Broke my heart. I'm telling you, man. Oh, getting back to where we were talking about Frank. So I took Frank, and I tried to corral him, because he's so bad. I said, "Man, come on, just hang with me. We'll be tight." But he was I think he was married, and every morning he would go to the house, so I would try to cut him off to keep him from going to the house. And every morning I'd get up at seven [o'clock], seven thirty, get up and go try to cut him off. I'd get there, and I'd be too late.

ISOARDI

His habit was that bad.

AMY

Bad, man. So we had a gig at the Black Orchid. Remember the club I was telling you about, the Black Orchid? We had a gig at the Black Orchid this particular night. And I really think that Cannonball was interested in me, because he came to the session and he dug what was happening. He really enjoyed it.

ISOARDI

I think he would have loved your sound. It would have been a nice, good fit, eh?

AMY

But what happened was we had a gig this Monday night at the Black Orchid, and I had got to Frank late, so that afternoon, to try to keep him together, I got with him and took him to the house. He ate, fooled around, and he wanted to go take a colonic, because I think he had to go for his probation or his parole.

ISOARDI

They were going to check him.

AMY

They were going to check him the next morning. So I went to the place and took the steam. I didn't take the colonic [mutual laughter], but I took the

steam, man, and we got out of the colonic place about six that evening. The gig was at nine. By the time I got to the gig I was so worn down from the steam that I couldn't get myself together. Here's Cannonball and Nat [Adderley] sitting there. So it just messed my evening up, man.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

Horrible, man.

ISOARDI

Does it ever get frustrating? I mean, you tried with Dupree. We don't have a lot of time today, but I'd like next time to get into Dupree Bolton some. I mean, you tried with some guys and it just didn't happen. Did you have any successes? Some guys that?

AMY

Well, I've had successes all the way through, you know, but I've never had the success that I wanted to have. I know that if I could have kept it all together and if these young men would have listened to me or would have accepted me for being the square that I was. That has a bearing, you know, when you're dealing with cats, because if they're looking at you one way, not realizing what's happening, then there's nothing you can do, you know? That's half of the battle. And once it comes to that, you can't get beyond that, because these cats have a society of their own.

ISOARDI

That's tough.

AMY

Yeah, it's really rough, really rough. But I don't regret anything. I don't regret any of the associations, the music, or any of that. It's just one of those hazards, you know?

ISOARDI

Truly. What about Earl Anderza? Did you ever?

AMY

We didn't get a chance to work [together]. We had a good relationship.

ISOARDI

Didn't you record together?

AMY

No, we never recorded together. I think he's on that compilation album, This Is The Blues. That's how that came about. But he would come down to the club and play with me. He'd come to the session when I'd record. We had a good relationship. It was like the family within the recording company, you know.

ISOARDI

Yeah, because he recorded for Dick Bock also, didn't he?

AMY

Right, right. Monty Alexander during that period was there.

ISOARDI

Yeah. What kind of a player was Earl then? What do you remember him as?

AMY

Oh, I remember him as this wild cat, you know, wild player, good player.

ISOARDI

Was his playing a little outside in his approach?

AMY

Yeah, you could say that. Not as out as Eric [Dolph], but in some facets there would be some outness that you would encounter.

ISOARDI

Do you know whatever happened to him?

AMY

No.

ISOARDI

I think he did that one LP and then

AMY

After that year Around that period, maybe a year or two After that I never heard any more from him.

ISOARDI

Just disappeared then?

AMY

Gone. I think he went up north.

ISOARDI

Yeah. I've heard rumors that he's living in Chicago or that he died ten years ago. Don't know.

AMY

Well, he was wild.

ISOARDI

In his lifestyle?

AMY

[nods] But I never went into his environment, so I can't really give a description of what was really happening with him. But I liked him. He was a good guy, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah. You know, when you sit down and you just sort of list everybody, there was the nucleus of a hell of a scene out here. There were a lot of great players.

AMY

This scene was magnificent in all areas. The only thing that I would say that kind of turned me off was when they went into the West Coast/East Coast idiom, where it became a separation, you know? I never did like that, because all of these cats, to me and a lot of people, I think. When they reissued this album, they gave this thing out at [the] Capitol [Records Building] that I told you about.

ISOARDI

Oh, your album, Katanga!?

AMY

Right. They gave a reissue party for the whole reissue series that they did, and the lady from CNN [Cable News Network] asked me what did I think about West Coast jazz, you know? Well, I never embodied West Coast jazz from the standpoint of embodiment, you know, from the standpoint of a definition like that. I never embodied it like that. Because all of the cats that were playing Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Shorty Rogers all those cats were playing, man. Art Pepper, Conte Condoli, the Condoli brothers, Maynard Ferguson, all of those cats who were the essence of West Coast jazz. It made it a separation from the standpoint of these cats and these cats when it shouldn't have been that way, because the cats were all recording together. They recorded with Miles [Davis], they recorded with Max [Roach], they recorded with Sonny, the piano player. What was his name? He worked out at the Lighthouse. Sonny Clark. Yeah, all those cats. You know, these cats came into town. The trumpet player. He died. What's this

cat's name? He worked with Shelly [Manne]. Kind of a short, brown-skinned dude. Good trumpet player.

ISOARDI

Oh, Joe Gordon?

AMY

Joe Gordon.

ISOARDI

Yeah, great player.

AMY

See, when Joe died He died in a fire. Did you know how he died?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

We were rehearsing for an album that I had written. I had written a suite [Shaker Heights] , and I was talking to Dick about recording. This was right at the end of my stay with Pacific Jazz. But I had this one project that I wanted to do, and I was using Joe as a trumpet player. So we were rehearsing. I was going to use Joe, Ray Crawford, Jack Wilson, and I forget who I was going to use on bass and drums. Probably I was going to use Doug Sides on drums. But we were rehearsing every day. I'd go pick him up. He was living out on the beach in Venice, and he had this apartment, and the apartment had been condemned, and I had found him an apartment on the next street from me. I tried to get him to move that weekend, and he was going to move that Monday. Everybody else had moved out of this place.

ISOARDI

But him.

AMY

But him. So I took him to his gig. He was working out at [Shelly=s] Manne Hole with Shelly. I took him to the gig. And that night he got Well, he hung out. They had been out drinking, and I think he was drunk. And he went home and I don't know if he took his clothes off, but he went to the bathroom, and he was smoking a cigarette and fell off to sleep, and in some kind of way the cigarette caught fire and burned him up.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

Burned him up totally. Only two days and he would have already had his apartment. Does this show you the kind of luck I was having with those cats?

ISOARDI

Really. [laughs]

AMY

It was mean, man. But like I said And I recorded that tune One of the movements from the suite I recorded on Verve [Records], on that Mustang album that I did. It [the suite]'s called Shaker Heights.

ISOARDI

But you didn't have a chance to do the whole suite?

AMY

I didn't get a chance to do the It was a monster, too, man. And dig what happened. We recorded the whole suite out at the studio for Dick so he could hear it. And this cat who worked out at Universal [Pictures] I was trying to get on at Universal to score films and things. So this cat asked me to take the tape so he could let somebody hear it, and he never brought it back to me.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

I haven't seen it [since], and that was the only [copy]. Oh, it was magnificent. It was a wonderful piece of work, man.

ISOARDI

Frustration.

AMY

That's right, man. So I never did get a chance to do that.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 28, 2000

ISOARDI

Okay, Curtis, we resume again after a bit of a hiatus. Before we carry on in the sixties with your career, let's go back a bit and cover some other areas that I think it would be good to spend some time on. I know you recorded pretty extensively with Dick Bock at Pacific Jazz [Records], and you've talked a bit about that before, but I'd like to ask you a little bit more about that. Maybe first off a general question in terms of, how much artistic

control did you have? You were the leader on a number of sessions for Dick. Artistically, was it a good situation to be in?

AMY

Oh, yes. I had complete control in actuality. All of the tunes that I wrote, we did them without any question. The only thing that Dick ever entered into was me playing soprano [saxophone]. He suggested that I play soprano. Two weeks before we did the Katanga! album he called me in, and we sat down, and we were talking about it. He said, "Well, I think you should play the soprano." I said, "Cool." So I went over to Stein, M. K. Stein's music

ISOARDI

Stein on Vine?

AMY

Right, Stein on Vine. And Maury [K. Stein] and I were very good friends. We started out as enemies.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Well, I mean from the standpoint of when I first got here I had a bill over there and I wouldn't pay it.

ISOARDI

Well, that will do it.

AMY

Yeah, really. So we had a confrontation. We had a rough confrontation, but after that we became very good friends. Every time I'd see him we'd hug. He'd kiss me, I'd kiss him, you know, so it was really a beautiful situation. So I called him and told him, I said, "Maury, I need a soprano." He said, "Well, I have just the horn that you need." I said, "Okay." He said, "I'll put it aside for you. You come on." So I got over there, and he gave me this horn. And it's the same soprano that I have now.

ISOARDI

No kidding?

AMY

I don't want to play any other horn. This was like '61.

ISOARDI

So it's a Selmer?

AMY

No, it's a Buffet. Look, when I got the horn Maury told me, he said, "The last time that this horn was repaired or padded was in 1939." This was in sixty something.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

And I still have it.

ISOARDI

Had it been in a closet for thirty years or something?

AMY

I don't know where it was, you know? But I took it over to "Mac" [Mick McLaughlin] and let him

ISOARDI

A Little Mac?

AMY

A Little Mac. He cooled it out, and the next week we went into the studio and we recorded Katanga! and "Native Land."

ISOARDI

You're kidding.

AMY

No, I'm serious. See, but I started out on clarinet. I had played clarinet all the way through the first college I went to, all the way through high school, elementary school, church.

ISOARDI

But I thought on those early sopranos it was a little tough to keep them in tune.

AMY

Yeah, well, if you play clarinet your intonation is pretty good. So we went in, and it turned out that was the best selling album I had.

ISOARDI

It was a wonderful album. It still is a wonderful album.

AMY

Yeah, it's still. So it was just one of those things. So that was a little of his insight to see that, because I hadn't seen it. I was just so enamored with the tenor [saxophone], because When I was in the service, the sergeant

over the big band that we had I was playing alto [saxophone] in the section, but all of my solos I'd take on tenor, and he was angry because he played tenor too, and he wanted me to play alto. But I would only play it in the section. I loved playing first alto. First alto is really I think one of the prettiest parts in the band. But I just loved playing the solos on the tenor.

ISOARDI

Beautiful.

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

So artistically it was a good experience? And there really weren't any problems of what went on the albums? It pretty much reflected what you wanted?

AMY

Right. But I'll tell you what coming here not as knowledgeable as I should have been in the studio had I known, some of the results would have been much better, because I would have been there for the mix. But I didn't know that I had that prerogative to be there to mix and determine the sound. Some of the sounds would have been much, much better. But I didn't know, so I didn't go. And I didn't become aware of it until Gerald Wilson signed to Pacific Jazz. Everything that he did, he was there with Dick. But, see, I didn't know that.

ISOARDI

So the post-recording he was really in the booth.

AMY

Right, right, and I should have been there, too.

ISOARDI

Do you think he would have let you?

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

It wouldn't have been a problem?

AMY

It was up to me, you know. I just never mentioned it because I wasn't aware that I could do it. I just thought that once I had done my part in the studio then his part was to do the postproduction work. So if I would have

known it would have been much better. It wasn't too bad, but Dick would make some cuts that were really obvious, you know. But overall it wasn't designed to hurt. He was doing the best that he could. But if I would have known I would have The same thing with Mustang. I was so sorry. But, see, what happened was we only had one night to record, because we were with Ray Charles, and we were leaving the next morning. Joel Dorn was the producer, and he was

ISOARDI

Joel Dorn?

AMY

Uh-huh, and he was working on a shoestring. This was his first situation; this album got him with Atlantic [Records]. This is the album that gave him the credence to go to Atlantic, because originally this is where he told me he was going to place the album, was Atlantic. But he placed it with Verve [Records]. I really wanted to go with Atlantic. [Julian] "Cannonball" [Adderley] and Yusef [Lateef] and all of them were there during that period. So it would have been a nice association, you know. But that album, the Mustang album, I wasn't there, and I didn't know what You know, when we got through with "Mustang" I had two more tunes to do, but he didn't have enough money to pay for any more time, so that was the last tune that we did. So what he did was. We had done "Mustang" with a short ending and with a long ending, but we just played our I jammed on it. It was really nice. So what he did was he put "Mustang" on the album twice.

ISOARDI

Short version and long version?

AMY

Short version on one side and long version on the next to make up that time. So when we were walking out of the studio they were playing "Mustang." It was such a groove. We were just dancing out of the studio, seriously. That's the way we were going out, Merry [Clayton] and I and Melba [Liston] and all of us. Of course, Melba did one of the arrangements on the album that Merry, my wife, sang on. So I said, "Oh, this is going to be cool." I get home This was in '68. So we left New York, and we finished the rest of the tour with Ray. I got home, and I was coming into town I don't know why I was coming in, but that was when the distributors were

up on Pico [Boulevard], so I went past the distributors. I may have stopped in at the distributors and talked to them, because I knew the people in the distributing company. I left, and I had KBCA on, the radio station that played all jazz. That was the first all-jazz station we had here. They were playing it, and then the cat said, "Oh, and we're going to play Curtis Amy's new release, Mustang ." And when it came on I cried, man. I pulled over and cried.

ISOARDI

Oh, what did he do?

AMY

He lost all the bottom. In some kind of way they lost all of the bottom, so all we had was the top.

ISOARDI

Oh, that's terrible.

AMY

And it was shrill. I cried, man. I pulled over. I couldn't go any farther. I just cried, man.

ISOARDI

Oh, what a disappointment.

AMY

Oh, it was horrible, man, because it really was

ISOARDI

Did you ever talk to him about it?

AMY

No. In fact, I didn't talk to him again until last year when we were in New York, in May of '99. We went back for a friend of our son's bar mitzvah. And during that period I called him, and I was inviting him for something that was going on, but he was kind of You know, you get that feeling that there's a little leeriness that was in his voice, so he's aware. I didn't say anything about any of this, because I never received a royalty statement. I never got a call from him. Nothing. You know, it was just ridiculous, man. So I didn't talk to him again since that time until last year, and I was calling him to invite him up. No, this was in '98. Merry was working at the Rainbow [Room] in the Rockefeller Center, up on the sixty-fifth floor. Have you ever heard of the Rainbow?

ISOARDI

No, I haven't. I'm assuming

AMY

It was right across from RKO [Radio City Music Hall].

ISOARDI

Yeah, I know where Rockefeller Center is, but I didn't know about the Rainbow.

AMY

Yeah, right. The Rainbow is a room up on the sixty-fifth floor [of the General Electric Building]. It's top of the line. It's magnificent. So I was calling and inviting him to come to hear Merry, because Merry was playing the Rainbow with Darlene Love and Marianne Faithfull.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

That was the group. It was Merry, Darlene, and Marianne Faithfull, and they were sold out for the whole month. And the opening day was when they had that blizzard. Do you remember that bad blizzard that they had in New York in '98? That was going on, the blizzard. I looked out, and all you could see was just snow. All this, and the room was packed. And it stayed packed every night until the end.

ISOARDI

Amazing.

AMY

It was just beautiful. But that was the last time that I talked to Joel, and he sounded Oh, no, I know what he said. I said, "You know, Merry's playing at the Rainbow." He said, "Oh, yeah?" You know, he had this big, deep voice. I said, "Yeah. I'd like to see you there." He says, "Will there be tickets in my name?" [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Just deduct it from the royalties. [laughs]

AMY

But I didn't say anything, because I've been that kind of cat. I've never I don't know. I should have been a little more business oriented to the extent where I really should have pushed for it, you know? But I've always been the kind of cat that I wouldn't to that extent, because I always felt that if a person respects you you don't have to ask. You know?

ISOARDI

No, you don't. You really don't. And if you have to ask, the odds are you're going to need a lawyer. It's just a question of whether it's worth it or not, I think, sometimes.

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

If you think you're going to get that much out of it.

AMY

Well, I've pursued all of this, and nothing has happened yet, so

ISOARDI

Oh, you have recently?

AMY

Yeah. So we'll see.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Why don't we talk a little bit maybe about Katanga! , and especially Dupree Bolton.

AMY

Okay.

ISOARDI

How did you meet Dupree?

AMY

Dick.

ISOARDI

Through Dick Bock?

AMY

Through Dick, yes.

ISOARDI

He thought you guys would go well together?

AMY

Yeah. He introduced me to Dupree, so I immediately embraced him. You know, I brought him in, and we went and got his horn, got his wardrobe

together, got him a car. I didn't pay for it. I mean, he paid for the car, but I set it up for him to get it.

ISOARDI

Was he new in town then?

AMY

Well, he was new to me, yeah. I think he had been here before, but I think he was just getting back in town. So Dick got him a horn.

ISOARDI

When was this?

AMY

This was '62, '61-'62. So Dick got him a horn, and some kind of way that horn disappeared, so they got him another one, the same kind, brand-new. And then we went into the studio and we did the album.

ISOARDI

Now, you hadn't heard him play much before that?

AMY

No, I hadn't heard him. Well, he came down to the club. I think the night that Dick introduced us he came down to the club and played and just blew everybody away. This young man was so talented. But there was a degree of cockiness that defeated him, because he thought he was the king of the world, and when you think that you're not open to relationships or associations. You know, if you think that you're the king, then you're the king. In his mind that's what it was, so he had no respect for anybody else, no one. He didn't have any respect for them. But, I mean, when you run across a talented person like that it doesn't matter. If he does what he's supposed to do, that's all you can ask from him. That's all I wanted out of him was to play his horn the way he played. You know, you don't have to kiss me down or anything like that or be my friend. If you don't want to be my friend, cool. You know, that's the way life is. But he didn't get along with anybody, and it's really unfortunate, because he To me, now I mean, this is a hell of a statement I'm about to make. But to me he superseded Miles [Davis]

ISOARDI

Whoa.

AMY

from the standpoint of playing.

ISOARDI

Oh, technique?

AMY

Yeah, his ability to play. You know, not the beauty. By not having love and beauty in his heart, see, he couldn't compare with Miles, with the beauty and the love that Miles put out, even though Miles had that attitude where people said he was, you know

ISOARDI

Yeah, he could put people off.

AMY

Right. But deep down Miles was a great, beautiful man, and I think the reason why he assumed the attitude that he did assume was because he didn't want to get hurt anymore. See, these cats Like when I hung out with Paul [Chambers] and Wynton [Kelly] and Jimmy Cobb When they [Davis s group] were here, they were doing a series of clubs and a couple of concerts. So Paul and Wynton and Jimmy and I, we hung out. One Monday we just hung out the whole day. We went to the golf course, played some golf. Paul had his violin. We went and had breakfast, and then we went and played golf. That week before Miles had bought everyone uniforms. You know, I think it was a sport coat and pants. These guys, they messed those jackets up, man. The cat came to the club with the jacket and some old pants and a different shirt, no tie. You know, it was a mess. But judging from that little interplay with the cats that were in the band and the reactions from Miles, he let me know that he was really a compassionate cat, and you couldn't be compassionate and you couldn't play the way that he played without having love and beauty, because there was too much beauty in his playing. You know? That was my conclusion about Miles, that he was one of the great men that ever played and a beautiful cat.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly. And Dupree never had that?

AMY

No, no. And he had all the love Everybody loved Dupree, everybody all the cats, all the girls. Like Ray Crawford, the guitar player, [although] he didn't want him to play when he played.

ISOARDI

Why?

AMY

He just didn't want him to play. And he didn't want me to play the soprano.

ISOARDI

He didn't want you to play at all?

AMY

No, he didn't want me to play it on the session because it was on the same timbre as the trumpet, and that would throw him off, you know? But we got it together; you know, he went on and played. But by that time Ray was completely off. He didn't even want to talk to him.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I'm sure.

AMY

So it was just one of those bad situations in life that could have really been extraordinary, you know? Because we could have taken that band on the road. That band

ISOARDI

Did you do anything after Katanga!?

AMY

No. We didn't get a chance.

ISOARDI

In a club? Did you take the band into a club?

AMY

Yeah, well, that. You saw that. We did that after-hour theater.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Which theater was that again?

AMY

Metro [Theatre].

ISOARDI

And that was across the street from the It Club?

AMY

Across the street from the It Club. What I was doing during that period, I was playing at Dynamite Jackson's club, and I was using an organ trio. We had Paul Bryant on organ, Roy Brewster on trombone, Jimmy Miller on drums, and myself. Then at two o'clock, when we got off, I would go to the Metro, and I would use Dupree, Ray Crawford, and I think Doug Sides was on the drums. [looks at photograph of the group playing at the University

of Southern California.] That's Henry Franklin on bass. I don't know who the drummer is. I can't see him back there. It may have been Jack Wilson on piano. No, it probably wasn't Jack. I don't know who it was on piano. It might have been this little cat here, Phil Moore. You remember

ISOARDI

Phil Moore Jr.?

AMY

Yeah, this is Phil Moore Jr. That's him there.

ISOARDI

On piano?

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I've certainly heard a lot about his father, too.

AMY

Yeah, his father was great, a great arranger.

ISOARDI

So the Metro club was just kind of a small after-hours place?

AMY

It was a theater.

ISOARDI

It was a theater?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

That went after hours?

AMY

Right. You know where the Ebony Showcase [Theatre and Cultural Arts Center] is up here?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

That was the Metro Theatre, and at the end of the run of the Metro was when I forget this guys' name that bought it; he's an old comedian, an old movie actor, too [Nick Stewart], that bought the Metro and converted it to the Ebony Showcase.

ISOARDI

Oh, I see.

AMY

But like I was saying, when we would leave Dynamite's I'd take the sextet into the Metro, and we played from two [o'clock] until six, and then at six we'd go across the street to the It Club and play from six to twelve. This was Saturday night and Sunday morning.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

I'm serious.

ISOARDI

It was like a Sunday brunch at the It Club?

AMY

No, there was no brunch. It was just music and drinks starting at six.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Right, starting at six.

ISOARDI

Man, you've got people in there drinking at eight in the morning?

AMY

Five thirty, man, that club would be packed. You remember, I told you about the original club. I think it will be back in there the original club where we started at, with Louie [Luis] Rivera, we started the six to twelve sessions on Sunday mornings.

ISOARDI

Oh, that's right.

AMY

If you weren't there at five thirty you could not get a seat. It was just amazing. Well, the same thing. The [inaudible] came to the It Club and the Black Orchid. In fact, we did it at the Black Orchid before we did it at the Metro and the It Club.

ISOARDI

Where was the Black Orchid at?

AMY

It was right up the street from the It Club, east, about two blocks east.

ISOARDI

Was that the place that became the Hillcrest [Club]? Or was that?

AMY

Right, right.

ISOARDI

Or vice versa was it? Was it the Black Orchid first? Or was it the Hillcrest first?

AMY

It may have been the Hillcrest first, and then

ISOARDI

Then it became the Black Orchid, yeah. Is that after Dupree played with you, when you were at the Metro? Was that sort of the end after that? How long did you play there?

AMY

Well, evidently we did a series. I'm not fully aware how long it went on. It wasn't long. But then I got Tuesday nights at Shelly's Manne Hole. And the weeks before then I had used some other people, and everything was going good, and we had good crowds on Tuesday night. Our night was Tuesday night, and it would be packed. This particular Tuesday night I used Dupree and the band that we had played with on Katanga! We played the first set, man, and it was just burning. It was just. Whew, man! You know those unforgettable evenings that you have musically that are rare? Well, that's the way it was the first set. We took intermission and I never saw Dupree again.

ISOARDI

That was it? Oh, man!

AMY

I didn't see Dupree again for years. And finally one afternoon I was getting ready to leave, and the phone rang, and he called.

ISOARDI

How much later was this?

AMY

Oh, this was years.

ISOARDI

Decades?

AMY

It could have been a decade.

ISOARDI

God. What did he want?

AMY

He wanted to put a group together again. But I couldn't. I couldn't go through that again. Because he wanted to cut me. We did an afternoon benefit up on. This cat was a [Los Angeles] Laker [basketball player], [Dick] Barnett. I don't know if you remember.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. I know who you mean.

AMY

And he opened this club up there, right there on Exposition [Boulevard] and Crenshaw [Boulevard]. It was a brand-new club, beautiful room. He opened it, and we went in there to do a benefit either for CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] or something like that. I think we played a set, and everybody was out in the back of the club, Jack Sheldon and all the cats. He knows a lot of cats there. In some kind of way an argument ensued, and he got angry, and the next thing I knew he was coming at me with this long knife. So after that, that was it for me. I said, "Well, now, I can't put up with that anymore." So that was it. I never saw him anymore after that. It's just sad, too, man. I mean, this cat is such a great cat. His father was a music teacher in Oklahoma, so all his fundamentals and everything were right on it, you know. Yeah, it's sad, man.

ISOARDI

You mentioned a number of clubs, places like the It Club and the Metro Theatre and the Black Orchid. What were the audiences like? Who was coming to hear you play?

AMY

Jazz audiences. See, during that time, KBCA was really a strong [radio] station, and [disc jockey] Tommy Bee was tough. They had Rick Holmes, Jay Rich, Chuck You know, the cat that's on KLON.

ISOARDI

Oh, he's in the late afternoon.

AMY

Yeah, right.

ISOARDI

Chuck Niles.

AMY

Chuck Niles. Well, all those cats were there, and it was a strong station, very strong station. It had a strong listenership and loyal listeners, and they would cater to all of the affairs that they advertised. So their club was exceptionally strong.

ISOARDI

Was it a mixed audience, though? Was it white and black and Latino? Or

AMY

Well, not too much Latino at that time, because there wasn't that big of a Latino [presence] in the city at that time. But Rodriguez, the trumpet player

ISOARDI

Bobby Rodriguez?

AMY

Bobby. Bobby used to come down to the club where we were. Tito Puente, he would be out. See, all the cats at the Dynamite Dynamite Jackson's all the cats would come. You know, sometimes I'd get off the set and go out in front and it would be Billy Higgins and all these cats, you know what I mean? Just a whole group of wonderful cats, you know, they were there.

ISOARDI

Was it more younger people? Or was it kind of a mixed?

AMY

It was more younger, but it was mixed, too. I mean, it was more younger, but no one was deleted. We had older cats and ladies and things come in.

ISOARDI

What's happening by the early to mid-sixties or so within the African American community? I mean, this is a time when civil rights struggles had been going on for over a decade in the South, but certainly by the early sixties, middle sixties, the struggles were expanding way out of the South. Have you seen the community in Los Angeles change very much? Have these struggles had much of an impact here?

AMY

I would have to say yes, because I think just due to normal progression that there has been a progress that has taken place. But now I would have to

say yes, but still it's inC I don't want to say something that's misconstrued as

ISOARDI

Right, sure.

AMY

You know, but

ISOARDI

Well, you can always edit the transcript.

AMY

I will just say that there has been progress made, but there still is a lot of room for much more progress, I would think. And I don't put this in a prejudicial way. I just think that overall people have made progress, but they still haven't made progress. I don't know how you can interpret that. I just think that if there were a closer association with all people that this whole situation would be much better, you know? But until we're able to sit down and really concentrate together and present these problems and be able to accept everyone's interpretation of the problems and then go forth. Then we'll actually have the amount of progress that we're really seeking, you know? But at this time, I just don't think that it's really to the point where Or during that period either, you know? The CORE movement was a good movement. It was taking You know, and I think they've done some, but And the Urban League and all those situations were coming up at that time, and they were working hard at different projects to bring about racial harmony and those things. But I think they reached a certain point, and that's where it stopped. I don't know what the reason is. I don't know if there was a wall. It could have hit that wall and couldn't go any further. Because if you don't have money. And, you know, there's always been a lack of money in the black community. There is money in the black community, but there's not a collaboration of people to put those moneys together to work. One man can have money over here, but if there isn't a correlation between that man and other men, then there's nothing that's going to take place. One man can't do it by himself. One bankroll can't do it. It doesn't work like that.

ISOARDI

In terms of your experience. Well, maybe we're getting ahead of the story a little bit, but what's it like getting work, say, outside of the clubs, in the

studios, things like that? The unions [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47 and Local 767] were amalgamated in 1953, and the hope certainly was, in Los Angeles when that happened, that it would open up opportunities throughout Hollywood and in the studios and things like this for African American musicians. I mean, by the time you start moving in that direction it's. Well, you're playing in bands in the early sixties, I guess, and so on. Does it seem like things are opening up? Are there opportunities there, do you feel?

AMY

Oh, I think there are opportunities there. There's still a clique that exists, you know? But you had cats like Buddy Collette, William Green, some trumpet players Bobby Bryant. Let's see. There were a few musicians Plas Johnson. The drummer

ISOARDI

Earl Palmer? Is that who you're thinking of?

AMY

Earl Palmer and the other cat that played with Lawrence Welk, a drummer. God, I just heard his name. They just called his name on the radio. I can't think of it. [Paul Humphrey] But it opened some doors. And through the efforts of people like Buddy Collette You know, he got me in. He got me in at NBC [National Broadcasting Company] on the Loman and Barkley Show.

ISOARDI

How did that happen?

AMY

He called Al I forget. The contact at NBC was a little guy, Al. He called him and suggested that he You know, I think maybe Al may have called him looking for a sax player, and Buddy thought that I would do okay, so he recommended me, and I went in, and as a result Stan Worth and I became very good friends. So I got a chance to do that show, but I didn't get any other shows.

ISOARDI

Just that one?

AMY

But we were there almost two years.

ISOARDI

Jeez, really?

AMY

Every Sunday night. So it worked out nice. In the beginning Conte Condoli was in the band, Slide Hide, a cat that had played with Lawrence Welk for many years. He played bass sax and baritone sax. He played everything flute. He was a very good musician, an excellent musician. So we really had a lot of fun in that band, and as a result of that That was as far as I got, but at the end of that was when I met Lou Adler, my

ISOARDI

The producer, record producer?

AMY

Yeah. [points to a photograph] That's Lou over there.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

So what had happened was Now we're up to '68, which is when I went to I was on the Loman and Barkley band, and I was just playing gigs because I had left Ray Charles. We left Ray Charles in '68. We'll go back to that.

ISOARDI

Yeah, we'll go back to that.

AMY

Okay. In November of '68 I left Ray Charles, and I had been with him three seasons. So at the end of '68, November of '68, I got a call from Paul Rothchild. Do you know Paul Rothchild? He was the producer for the Doors. So he called me and asked me to come to do a session for the Doors. And they did this song "Touch Me" that became a super hit.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's a big hit.

AMY

Okay, well, the sax solo at the end of "Touch Me" is me.

ISOARDI

That's you?

AMY

Yeah. So we did that, and when it came out. Let me tell you what this cat did. Paul And I was sick. I had the flu; I had 103-degree flu. I was in the bed.

ISOARDI

You got up to do that?

AMY

Yeah, man. [laughs] Shit, I had to go do that. So he called me that evening, and I went over to Elektra [Records] up on La Cienega [Boulevard]. I walked in, and they had all of the cats that were in. See, they used a big band.

ISOARDI

It was a large orchestra for that album.

AMY

Right. But at the end I went into my solo, and it was just. It felt so good. It was just.

ISOARDI

[laughs] I've always loved that, Curtis.

AMY

Oh, yeah?

ISOARDI

Since I was in high school. [laughs] That's great.

AMY

Oh, yeah? Cool. Well, that's great. So after they had mixed it I was laying up at home, and Paul called me and said, "Hey, come over to the studio. I want you to hear something. So I went into the studio, and they had all of these Oriental rugs in the studio. All of the floors were covered with Oriental rugs, candles, and incense. So he took me. This was the control room here, and he took me and stood me right here and turned me to the speakers and said, "Stand there." And they turned the solo on. Man, it just blew me away, man, the way they had mixed it and how they got that sound and everything. I said, "Whoa!" So then he asked me would I do the Forum and Madison Square Garden with them. Just as we were getting ready to do that they got a call to do the Smothers Brothers show, and we did the Smothers Brothers show, and I have a tape of it. They put me up on this tall pedestal. I was way up, you know. The tune was pre-[recorded]. They used the album, you know, so all we had to do was play, too. So I didn't have to do an actual solo, just play. So we went into rehearsal after that to go do the Forum and Madison Square, and that was when I met Jim. And we were cool. Jim Morrison was a great guy. He was a sweetheart, man. So we were in rehearsal, and we were out here at It was a studio that starts with a "C." [Conway Studio] I can't think of it right now. We were rehearsing there.

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AMY

We were rehearsing at this studio right there around Wilcox [Avenue] and Fountain [Avenue], right in that area right in there. So we took a break, and Jim said, "Come on, man, I just got this Lotus." He had just bought this Lotus. He said, "Come on, let me show you my new car." So we went out, and we got in his Lotus, and Jim was doing eighty miles an hour. Now, you know how those little streets are right in there? He was doing eighty miles an hour in there and making those curves. Man! That cat scared me to death. After we did rehearsal and we got everything. What they wanted to do was use violins with I think we used the trombone and a trumpet and three violins. Everything was miked, you know, amplified; the violins were amplified, my horn was amplified, the other horns were amplified. And I wrote the arrangements for the horns, and we did it, you know? We did the Forum, and it was just. I had never seen anything that spiritual.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Really. You know, when they went into "Light My Fire" and all the people lit the candles all through the house, it was just amazing, man. It was just spirit, you know, the beauty from the audience coming to the band. There were no scenes, nothing. It was just peace and love. You know, you could feel it. And the same thing when we went to New York, the same thing. However, the usage of the instruments. The way he programmed the concert, it didn't blend as well as it would have if it had been, I think, scoped a different way. But he started out with "Touch Me" with the band, and I think he should have built to that. He started out with "Touch Me," and that killed "Touch Me," because, you know, you hadn't established a groove yet. And it was a big hit then. I mean, the hit had already happened, so why start with your hit? I told him. I said, "Don't start with that. Start with something else." But Ray [Manzarek] wanted to start with that. The reviews didn't come back as good as they wanted with the instruments, you know, so I think what he did, he defeated the instruments by doing it that way. I always thought that. But we went to New York, and we did Madison Square, and I was very. I was in the Hilton Hotel about on the

fortieth floor. I went to New York early, because I got Melba and some other musicians to play the concert.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

So I went in and rehearsed them, and we rehearsed a couple of days before the concert. So I went in maybe a week before and we got everything together. It gave me a chance to spend a week in New York, which was cool.

ISOARDI

Were you arranging for all their tunes to use these horns? Or was it just?

AMY

Oh, just the ones that they were going to use the horns on. I think it was three or four tunes or something like that. I did those. And I think Melba did one or two.

ISOARDI

The arrangement of the horns?

AMY

Yeah. So after the concert in Madison Square Garden we went to dinner. They had booked us at this Oriental restaurant, and they had the table as long as from the front of the house to that wall back there.

ISOARDI

Oh, my God. Fifteen or twenty yards or so.

AMY

Yeah. We had all the family and all the people: the PR [public relations] people, the managers, the lawyers, and their wives and the guests and the cats and their girlfriends and so forth. So when we got out of the cab, they had girls six deep all around this restaurant, six deep all the way around. This restaurant was a block long that way and a half a block wide, and I'm telling you, six deep in girls. So we got in. I'm going to tell you what happened in the hotel I was about to tell you that in a minute. But we went in to eat. So Jim and I were sitting together and we were talking. Six deep in girls all around. Jim turns to me and said, "Let's go find some girls."

ISOARDI

"Let's go find" [laughs] All he has to do is open the door.

AMY

And that's the last time I saw him [that night].

ISOARDI

He just took off?

AMY

He took off right after I said, "Man, I don't want to find no girls. There are all the girls in the world right out there." But what happened when I first got there Like I said, I was there a week before they got there, and I was up on the forty-second floor of the Hilton, and I was laying in my bed looking at TV, and I had ordered my dinner, and I heard a little tap-tap-tap-tap on the door, And I opened the door, and there were five chicks out there. But they weren't after me.

ISOARDI

Looking for Jim.

AMY

They were trying to get Jim. [laughs] And they were all black chicks, you know. And I said, "Wow." They came on in, and this group of babes, they were not interested in me at all. It was just amazing. That was my first association with the phenomenon. I've never been within that type of

ISOARDI

Yeah, they were very big. Jeez.

AMY

It's unbelievable.

ISOARDI

It's quite a change from Ray Charles, isn't it?

AMY

Yeah, well, you know, it was similar, but it wasn't to the degree. The reception and the appreciation were the same, but this was only on another level, a higher level of acceptance. But Ray Charles was unbelievable, the amount of loyalty and the amount of people. We never played to a weak house. The houses were all strong, and top venues all over the world. Everywhere we went it was the top. It was never no little jive club or anything.

ISOARDI

Now, how did you hook up with Ray Charles?

AMY

Onzy [Matthews] was going to be Ray's musical director, so Onzy asked me if I would join the band.

ISOARDI

And this was '65?

AMY

It was '66, but I think he approached me in '65.

ISOARDI

Onzy did.

AMY

Yeah, around the fall of '65. He asked me would I join the band. He said he was going to be in a band. We were real good friends. So I said, "Yeah, I'll come along." Because jazz had hit the skids, you know. In '65 it was just horrible.

ISOARDI

The local scene had dried up?

AMY

Oh, yeah. It was horrible in '65.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Was that about when it really started to?

AMY

Yeah, that was it. That was really it.

ISOARDI

So all these clubs that you were used to playing, were they just gone?

AMY

Yeah, Dynamite's was gone, the Adams West Theatre was at the end, the Metro was gone, the It Club was leaving. The Parisian Room was starting right about then, and then the Parisian got a nice boost because it was just about the only one that was really

ISOARDI

That was it. The It Club was gone, the Black Orchid.

AMY

Oh, the Black Orchid had been gone.

ISOARDI

For a while?

AMY

Yeah. What was the other club? Oh, Shelly's Manne Hole was operating. I don't know how much longer it operated. And the Lighthouse was operating. But everything was at a much lower grade of acceptance.

ISOARDI

So you don't really have a sextet then, do you?

AMY

No, I was working with a quartet. Do you know Clarence McDonald?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Clarence McDonald. Who else? I had Wilton Felder playing bass, and I forget who the drummer was. And myself. We were working a little club over here called the Casbah, over on Vernon [Avenue], and they brought in King Pleasure. And we were good in there for quite a while. During that time I was working and doing the Loman and Barkley Show, so Sundays we would tape. As soon as we would tape on Sundays I'd come to the Casbah and work. Because I was working three nights a week or something like that. But there wasn't anything really happening.

ISOARDI

So really '65 is the watershed year then, eh?

AMY

Oh, yeah, it's horrible, like you said. In '65 Onzy hit on me about going into Ray's band, and then I think he had already spoken to Ray about using me, and Ray had said yes. But then Onzy got in trouble and he left. He was gone. So I got a call from Joe Adams.

ISOARDI

He was Ray Charles's manager then.

AMY

Right. So he offered me the gig, and I took it. We started rehearsing on I think it was the twenty-first of March in 1966.

ISOARDI

And you were playing saxophone?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Okay. You're just a member of the band then, right?

AMY

Right. When we went back the next year he offered me the musical director job, so that was very hip. And it gave me a chance to get close with Ray, because I would have to meet with him every night before the show to work out the show and everything. And we became pretty tight. On Sundays when we were at home I'd go over to the house and we'd play chess. So it was nice. And that's when I met my wife.

ISOARDI

Oh, because she was a Raelet?

AMY

She was a Raelet.

ISOARDI

It was a good experience, then, with Ray Charles?

AMY

Oh, man. I had fun with Ray, man.

ISOARDI

Great music and

AMY

Right, every night. I looked forward to going to work every night. You know, it was like, say, four or five o'clock and I'd start getting antsy. I loved working with Ray. I loved Ray. See, what a lot of people didn't understand about me is See, I love music, and I love musicians, so my association with musicians that I really care about. I overextend myself to them, and they take it as weakness, you know, so as a consequence I never really got the respect from cats because I gave so much to them that it defeated me. You know? I don't know if that makes sense.

ISOARDI

Yeah, it does. It does.

AMY

But I've always loved, from when I was a little boy, my introduction Because my mother [Emma Robinson Amy] introduced me to the best music, you know? I started off Like I told you, the first that I really was aware of was [Count] Basie, Duke [Ellington], Lionel Hampton, Dizzy

Gillespie, Billy Eckstine. This was the music that I was listening to Illinois Jacquet, Lester Young, Roy Eldridge. Just the best cats, you know? So I developed a love for entertainers. I love all entertainers. I love actors, because my dad [Caurie Paul Amy] loved Clark Cable and Humphrey Bogart. That was his bag. So I embraced all that affinity within my system. To a great degree it didn't help me with my relationship with cats.

ISOARDI

What were your responsibilities as the Ray Charles music director?

AMY

I would write the show, the first half of the show.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

That was my responsibility. I'd write that half, and then I would go in and he would give me his half.

ISOARDI

So in the first half he wouldn't be out there? It would be the band playing?

AMY

No, he wouldn't be there the first half, the first half hour.

ISOARDI

Right, it would be the band. Did you have kind of free reign over what you were going to do? [Amy nods] Really? Nice.

AMY

I did. I rehearsed the band, I rehearsed the girls

ISOARDI

So you had at your disposal a big band for half the show to do with what you want?

AMY

Right. It was great.

ISOARDI

And guaranteed an audience.

AMY

Right, and guaranteed their audience [mutual laughter], you hear what I'm saying? I didn't have trouble with my personal dealing with the cat. The cat was great, you know? So as a result I could demand the excellence that I wanted. So that's what we got, the best. It was a monster, man.

ISOARDI

For Ray's part of the show, did he pretty much handle all that music himself? Or did he have you do any arranging?

AMY

No, during that time. I forget the cat's name who was doing all of his arranging during that time. He was doing all of Ray's things for his recordings. So the things we were doing were things that he had in his book for years. I did one arrangement, which I didn't get paid for. [mutual laughter] I did two arrangements. But I got them when we left. He gave me the arrangements back. But as far as having control, I had it. And we had a great band. I have a tape. The next time you come I'll show you this tape, when we did the Ed Sullivan Show. It was bad. The band was bad, man.

ISOARDI

Isn't that true? Just about every band that man ever had, I mean, everybody talks, no matter what period his career, that the best band in town was the Ray Charles band.

AMY

Well, he makes that essential, that the band is perfect, because he has a perfect ear. You can be playing, man, and if the second trumpet player over there hit the wrong note, this cat will hear it. He'll know it. He's just a phenomenal talent.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

We were in Australia, and he called me over. Because he was in the Hilton and we were living in a hotel right across the street, a nice hotel. We had a room where we could look out over the bay and see the [Sydney] Opera House. We would wake up and just look out and there it was. It was just. Shit, man, it was. Well, he called me. He said, Get some manuscript paper, a score pad. I'm going to write an arrangement.@ So I went over, and he dictated this arrangement. And every note. He dictated everything. He dictated the bar, the time, the cleff sign, the rests.

ISOARDI

Every note of every part?

AMY

Every note, every part. He dictated it. Every note.

ISOARDI

Was he working it out on the piano at all? [Amy shakes his head] Or he was just off the top of his head?

AMY

Every note, man. A whole arrangement for eighteen pieces. We rehearsed after we had had the arrangement copied. We went to rehearsal, and there was not one note wrong or anything.

ISOARDI

Oh, jeez.

AMY

Just amazing, beautiful. It was amazing. So to be associated with talent like that, you have to love him. You know, what can you do? And I figured that He had some idiosyncrasies. Well, who wouldn't have if they were blind?

ISOARDI

Well, yeah, sure, sure.

AMY

So I never His little idiosyncrasies were nothing to me.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly. How long were you with him?

AMY

Three years. We worked '66, '67, and '68.

ISOARDI

And around the end of '68 is when you left?

AMY

November of '68.

ISOARDI

Why did you leave?

AMY

Money and What had happened, we were in New York. We were doing the Copacabana, and we had hired this trombone player in Chicago. Do you remember Keg Johnson?

ISOARDI

Oh, I remember the name, certainly, yeah.

AMY

He was Budd Johnson's brother. He had been with the Duke and Basie.

ISOARDI

Yeah, he had a great career.

AMY

Oh, he was a great guy, great, great guy. We got to Chicago, and we stayed in Chicago for a week or so. Ray took the Raelets and went to New York to do. It might have been Mike Douglas.

AMY

The Mike Douglas Show?

ISOARDI

I think it was. He went to New York or Philly [Philadelphia] and did the Mike Douglas Show . We stayed in Chicago. So while we were in Chicago I was rehearsing the band. I was rehearsing the sections, the different sections. So the day before we did the brass, the trumpets and the saxes. The next day we were doing the trombones. So I called the rehearsal, and all the trombone players were there and set up, and Keg wasn't there. And that was really unusual, you know? I went up to his room, and the door was locked, so I got the manager to come up and open the door and walked in, and Keg was laying in his bed dead.

ISOARDI

Oh, no.

AMY

That really hurt me, because he had taken me like a son, you know. When we first got in the band we were in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, there at the Latin Casino, and he came up to my room and he told me, "You're new out here. I'm going to take care of you. Come on, let's go to lunch. I'm going to just school you, you know. So it was just a good association, a good friendship.

ISOARDI

Very nice.

AMY

So when I went up and found him dead, it tore me up, man. We got him taken care of. I called his son in, and we got everything taken care of. But in the meantime we needed a bass trombone player. So we hired this cat, and he came in and played the part. It was beautiful. Everything was cool. We did the tour into New York. We were in Chicago. We had a number of dates, and then we went into the Copacabana in New York. Saturday night it was packed.

ISOARDI

You bet.

AMY

What's the trumpet player's name that was the head of the Tonight Show band?

ISOARDI

Doc Severinson.

AMY

Doc Severinson. Doc Severinson was there. All the great musicians were there, all the actors. It was just beautiful, packed. The band was burning, I mean seriously. They were really burning. So this cat was drunk, and we're up on the bandstand, and he has his hat, you know He's doing it on his head, taking the back and forth on his head as if it was his horn, and laughing and doing it all the time. So I said, "Hey, man. You don't do that on the bandstand, man. Be cool." So I think he said "Fuck you" or something like that to me. So I didn't say any more to him. But when we went back in the dressing room I had taken off my uniform, and when he walked in I almost knocked him out. I knocked him down, because I love music, I love musicians. I loved Ray. Oh, I know what it was. I turned around and I said, "Hey, man. Ray You don't want to make Ray look bad." He said, "Fuck Ray, that blind motherfucker."

ISOARDI

Oh, you're kidding.

AMY

And then I said, "Oh, man!" So when he walked in I cold cocked him, man, and he fell out. And the next day we were on the Ed Sullivan Show. This cat, he had to play his horn on over here. But, now, when Ray called me in to ask me why did I do that, I told him. I said, "He was acting all crazy on the bandstand, and I told him. I said, 'You don't do that. You're playing with Ray Charles.' And he said, 'Fuck Ray Charles, the blind motherfucker.'" I said, "When he said that, I went off on him." This cat fined me \$125, man.

ISOARDI

Ray did?

AMY

Ray. Because that was the rule. If you had a fight you had to pay a fine of \$125. You know, he fined me.

ISOARDI

And nothing happened to this other guy?

AMY

Well, he fined him, too. But he was fired. He was fired, but You know, I just couldn't conceive So I just stayed on until the band We went into the Cocoanut Grove, and we played the first night, and the place was packed, and the band was burning. So I submitted my notice.

ISOARDI

In New York?

AMY

No, here.

ISOARDI

Oh, when you got back here?

AMY

We were at the Cocoanut Grove. We all submitted our notice. We were going to finish the engagement at Cocoanut Grove, but Ray said, "You don't have to play anymore," and he cut all of us loose that night. After we submitted our notice he said, "Well, that's it." But, you know, I understood. It's his band and it's his rules. Those were his rules. But at that time, see, I was making \$287 a week. I had to pay all of my room and my board. I had to pay for my clothes. I had to pay for my room.

ISOARDI

Everything when you were on the road?

AMY

On the road. I had to pay for my cleaning, my personal cleaning, Ray took care of the uniforms. But we had to pay for the room and board and cleaning and any entertainment or whatever we did. We had to pay for it out of that \$287 a week.

ISOARDI

Oh, my God. That's expensive. That is so expensive.

AMY

Oh, man. [inaudible] end up playing for Ray.

ISOARDI

Yeah, if you're paying already for all your expenses.

AMY

So we decided that we were going to leave. So we gave him the two weeks notice. He said, "Well, that's all right. We'll pay you for the two weeks and you can just split." So that was it. But when it came down to the final analysis, he was giving us profit sharing, and we had had only had it C I think we got it that year. At the end of our business with him I got a check for almost \$4,000 from the profit sharing. Merry got almost five as a Raelet. So if we would have known that it was to that extent Because no one had ever experienced profit sharing. We didn't really know

ISOARDI

But it's odd they didn't really tell you about this or go into it.

AMY

They explained it. They gave us the papers and all, but we still didn't know. We didn't know what he was doing [in profit]. So that could have been better, but it was just time. We had been there three years; you know, it was time. But I enjoyed every minute of it. I really did. Did you see that picture with Ray?

ISOARDI

I don't think there is one in there with Ray, is there? [tape recorder off] Actually, since we're sort of backpedaling a bit, let me go back to. Just to shift gears a little bit to this whole East Coast/West Coast thing. I guess it was more prominent in the fifties, but to a degree it still shapes the way a lot of people think and talk about their music, etc. What do you think about this, that whole West Coast cool versus East Coast hot kind of thing?

AMY

Well, I never looked at it. Like I think I may have mentioned to you before, the East Coast/West Coast really meant to me separation. You know, it was like another degree of segregation. That was the way I interpreted it, you know, because it said Like the cool versus the hot, and all of these cats to me were the same. You know, Art Pepper, Richie Kamuca, Conte Condoli, Jack Sheldon, that whole period of Zoot Sims and Stan Getz, the trumpet player All those cats. I love them, all of these cats. Stan Getz I loved all of them, you know? When I was in school in Kentucky State [College, now Kentucky State University] Stan Kenton came to Louisville, and we drove from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Louisville just to hear the concert. All the way to Louisville on the highway I was saying I want to be there when Art Pepper takes his horn out of his case, you know.

ISOARDI

He was in the band then? In the Kenton band?

AMY

Yeah. The trumpet player Maynard Ferguson. You remember the album that Stan did where he named all the tunes after the cats?

ISOARDI

Oh, right, right, right. Yeah.

AMY

You know, but he named all of the tunes after the cats. I loved that band. And for them to put these cats in competition with one another from the standpoint of Not music, but from the standpoint of association and location, I didn't approve of that. I didn't adhere to it, so I never addressed it.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

So when they reissued Katanga! and they did the reception at Capitol [Records] last year, the people from CNN [Cable News Network] asked me the same question, so I know I gave them an answer that they didn't like. You know, I said, "To me there is no difference. Music to me is the same." The music was great, and that's all you can ask for. If you put it in a separation situation then you're adding another connotation, and it doesn't have anything to do with art. It has to do with definition, and that's not cool.

ISOARDI

Yeah, and marketing.

AMY

Yeah. We're not dealing with. Well, the marketing is cool. I appreciate marketing, but I don't appreciate marketing from the standpoint of deletion, you know, to the extent where you're going to say this music is. Eventually it's going to come to which is inferior and which is "ferior." [mutual laughter] You see what I mean? You know, there has to reach that point of definition to the standpoint of, Okay, this is West Coast? Well, West Coast is better than East Coast. Or East Coast is better than West Coast. Like when we were in New York to do the Ed Sullivan Show and we

were working the Copacabana, a cat called me to do a session with the Lovin' Spoonful. Do you remember them?

ISOARDI

Yeah, of course. A lot of hits.

AMY

Okay, yeah. So I went in, and all these cats were there: Jerome Richardson, Virgil Jones, Thad Jones

ISOARDI

For the Lovin' Spoonful?

AMY

For the Lovin' Spoonful. The whole room was all of these cats

ISOARDI

Wow!

AMY

When I walked in they said, "Oh, we got a West Coast!" It was all in jest, you know? But still, there it was, you know? West Coast. So that meant, "Okay, well, we're going to check you out, West Coast. " [mutual laughter] It was cool. We had fun, but still, there it was. You see what I mean? So I can appreciate, as you said, the marketing extent of it. It was used as maybe a marketing tool. But it also, to me, took something away.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I definitely agree with that.

AMY

Because it was good music all these cats were playing. Miles, when Miles came inC Well, Miles came in and he did Birth of the Cool. Max Roach. All those cats came in. Sonny Clark, you know? And these cats were all from the East Coast, but when they came in and recorded with these cats they fell into the definition of West Coast jazz, you know? And I didn't appreciate that. But that's just a personal thing. I've never labeled the situation, and I've never even taken a stand.

ISOARDI

Well, the more I have found out, too, about the history of jazz in Los Angeles, especially if you look at the period from the late forties through the fifties and into the early sixties, there's such variety. There's such incredible variety out here. You've got everybody from [Charles] Mingus

and Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy to the Lighthouse guys. It's just impossible to pigeonhole it.

AMY

Right, right. And everybody was playing. They were playing great. The Lighthouse All-Stars, that was magnificent music. Stan Kenton, magnificent music, you know? But Basie, on the other hand, magnificent. You know, Dizzy Gillespie, magnificent. [Thelonious] Monk. All of them, you know. So why create a situation? That's how I felt.

ISOARDI

Let me ask you about another West Coast bandleader, Gerald Wilson.

AMY

Gerald Wilson is the dean. I'm serious. For me Gerald Wilson is the dean, because he came from Jimmie Lunceford. That's when he started was with Jimmie Lunceford. So to me, everything came from Jimmie Lunceford to Basie. It's just like Paul Whiteman. They all came through those channels, you know? Louie Armstrong, all those channels. This is where all of this stuff came from. Lionel Hampton, you know?

ISOARDI

When did you hook up with Gerald?

AMY

Probably in '61. We were neighbors.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah, so

ISOARDI

Where were you living?

AMY

He was three doors down from me, over on Brynhurst Street.

ISOARDI

Oh, Brynhurst, the place he's still at.

AMY

Right. We lived four houses, I guess it would be, west of his house. So in the morning we would meet and have a cup of tea and sit down and talk, because my lady would go to work, and I would be home by myself. So he'd walk on up, and we would have breakfast tea and some toast or

something and sit and talk. Every morning. In fact, when I first got to L.A. I was going out to the music store [Stein on Vine]. The music store then was on Melrose [Avenue] and Vine. You know, that corner where you go down and you go on up to Melrose to get to [the] Capitol [Records Building]?

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

Well, if you turn right on Melrose off of Vine, the first building past that little mini-mall was a music store and rehearsal studio. I was going out to get some reeds, and I parked across the street, and I walked in to get the reeds, and I was buying them, and I heard this band. And I went around the corner, and it was Gerald. Man, those cats were burning.

ISOARDI

And this is what? '61?

AMY

No, this was maybe '56.

ISOARDI

Oh, okay. Much earlier.

AMY

Somewhere around like that. And Bobby Hutcherson's sister [Renee Hutcherson] was singing. It was a tune. Her boyfriend had produced this session for her with Gerald's band, and the tune was "It's Clear Out of This World." Man, this cat was. That was probably '55 or '56. So the latter part of '56 I moved over here, right off of Washington [Boulevard], on west Twentieth Street. I had a little bachelor apartment, and it was really nice. And down at the beginning of the street there was a court, and Gerald and his wife and maybe one kid. I don't know if he had two or not at that point, but Gerald lived in that first unit of those courts there, and I was living down [from him].

ISOARDI

You're on Brynhust together.

AMY

So, you know, it was just destiny.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly. So you started playing with him in '61?

AMY

Yeah, I started playing with him in '61 or '62, after he had done all those hits as a jazz artist.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

His albums were really accepted.

ISOARDI

Well, you recorded a lot for Dick Bock's label in the sixties.

AMY

Right. And like I said, by him taking a hand and going in there, he got exactly what he wanted.

ISOARDI

Oh, the right sound.

AMY

Everything he wanted. He was a very particular cat.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Do you play with Gerald pretty much till you go on the road with Ray Charles?

AMY

Right. I did.

ISOARDI

You did. So about '61 to '65 or so you're playing with

AMY

It may have been '62. Oh, you know what it was? I'll tell you. The night that I started with Gerald was the night that [John F.] Kennedy got killed. The day that Kennedy got killed

ISOARDI

November 22, '63.

AMY

Right, in '63. That was my first gig with Gerald, at the L.A. Breakfast Club. We almost didn't play the gig. Yeah, that was my first time, and I played with him until the latter part of '65.

ISOARDI

So about two years.

AMY

I enjoyed that, too. He's just a marvelous. He has a marvelous harmonic ear that he has structured, you know? It's beautiful. He plays those new harmonics and those sounds, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah, I'll bet.

AMY

He was an amazing young man.

ISOARDI

I saw him just recently conducting at the Music Center [of Los Angeles County]. They had a Central Avenue night, and John Clayton's band [the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra] has that gig up there. And at one point Gerald came out and took over the band and conducted it in doing a special piece of his. It's amazing how different the band sounded.

AMY

You see how he did it.

ISOARDI

He'd just sit there going. You know, as much as you like John Clayton and all, when Gerald was in front of that band, wow!

AMY

He's just marvelous, man. You see it. You feel it. You know, he gives it to you, and he feels it in his face. You know, it's just. You see it. I enjoyed playing with him. It was really a treat to work with him.

ISOARDI

What were the arrangements like? I mean, as somebody who also spent time arranging, how did his charts strike you?

AMY

Oh, the harmonics are just beautiful. The different structures that you hear John Clayton has that, too. You know, John Clayton is an amazing arranger, but I think that the degree of excitement is possibly a little different. Now, not taking anything away from John.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, right, because I think he's a wonderful arranger.

AMY

Yeah, magnificent.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly, truly.

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ISOARDI

Another thing you wanted me to ask about was the Norbo Club.

AMY

Oh, yeah. The Norbo was a club downtown. It was really on skid row. I don't know how to explain that.

ISOARDI

Like around the Greyhound bus station? Fifth [Street] and?

AMY

Sixth [Street] and Crocker.

ISOARDI

Okay.

AMY

East of San Pedro [Street] on Sixth Street.

ISOARDI

Okay.

AMY

You would go down, and you would see all of these. You know, these

ISOARDI

Yeah, a rough area.

AMY

Yeah, well, you see these derelicts, you know not particularly rough, but there were derelicts.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

So that means you could possibly encounter anything, but we never did, because the club was owned by Mickey Cohen's brother.

ISOARDI

Huh.

AMY

And it was amazing, this little club.

ISOARDI

The Norbo Club.

AMY

The Norbo was sitting there, and the clientele was ritzy. You know, it was upper-class, the pimps, the whores, and the gangsters, and the doctors, lawyers, and regular people, people who worked for the city. That was the type of clientele. The typical jazz clientele, that's what they had. And then various Sunday evenings Mickey would come in and bring his entourage. He'd come in two cars with his bodyguards, and he'd put a bodyguard on the front door and a bodyguard on the side door, and he would take up two tables.

ISOARDI

When was this?

AMY

It was '58, '59. Wait a minute. It might have been '57.

ISOARDI

I know at some point he goes to prison for a while.

AMY

Who? Mickey Cohen?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

I don't know. It may have been after that.

ISOARDI

Later on?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

And this was a place where you had a regular gig?

AMY

Yeah, six nights a week. Paid good. Good club, good clientele. And we had fun. I was working with Perri Lee. Do you remember Perri Lee?

ISOARDI

Pianist?

AMY

No, organist.

ISOARDI

Organist. I've heard the name.

AMY

That was one of the best gigs for me at that period.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Because the music that we were playing was very good music, good tunes, and she was an accomplished musician, a great organist. We had a little problem. Her boyfriend was the drummer, and they always fought, so it created dissension and bad feelings on the bandstand. But we were able to somewhat overcome that feeling, and the band was burning, man. When he wanted to play, man, this guy could play. I'm not going to call his name. But he could play, he could really play. But when they would have a problem it would be hard. You know, my stomach would be tight, because I couldn't get into their business. This was his lady, so I'd be stupid to say anything. How are you going to get into somebody else's business? So I'd just sit there and take it in my stomach. [laughs] We had a great band. I have a record around here somewhere that we did.

ISOARDI

With that band?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Wonderful.

AMY

We played good tunes.

ISOARDI

And Mickey Cohen and gang were in the audience?

AMY

Yeah, particularly Sunday nights. I don't know if they were there to hear the band or if they were just slumming or what, but

ISOARDI

Ever have any encounters with him?

AMY

No. See, those bodyguards were very [Isoardi laughs] And seemingly, when they got there nobody could come in the club. If you weren't already in the club

ISOARDI

They'd just close the doors?

AMY

Yeah. But his brother was the greatest. His brother was a great guy.

ISOARDI

What was his name?

AMY

Buddy. It seemed like his name was Buddy.

ISOARDI

Buddy Cohen?

AMY

I don't know if it was Buddy or what, but he had been in prison a long time, and he got out. You could see he was prematurely gray. But he was a beautiful man. He was cool. I really dug him. And after they closed the Narbo he bought a club right over here at the end of Adams [Boulevard], right there at Adams and Fairfax [Avenue]. There was a club right there on that corner. Now, when you go and you make that turn and go on the [Santa Monica] Freeway and go east, well, right on that little corner and it's vacant now was this club. And he had Sam Cooke in there.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

Just prior to Sam getting killed. Sure did. But I dug him. He was cool. He was a great guy to work for.

ISOARDI

Yeah. In the course of talking you've mentioned a few women jazz artists Perri Lee, I guess, and Melba Liston, certainly, you've talked about. Were there any others who stick out in your mind who were pursuing a career?

AMY

Vi Redd.

ISOARDI

Vi Redd of course was around.

AMY

Clora.

ISOARDI

Clora Bryant was around.

AMY

Let's see. I think that's it.

ISOARDI

Around town, yeah. I know you mentioned a couple of cases of individuals with really serious substance abuse problems and things like that. And of course, the fifties were for jazz a horrible time in terms of drugs. From your angle, what did you see, and when does it? Does it start easing off a bit as you head into the sixties or?

AMY

No, I don't think the sixties eased off. I think it got worse in the sixties.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Well, see, like I said, in '65 I got with Ray [Charles]. Ray was clean. You know, he had been through that situation back in Boston, you remember? I think he voluntarily went to. What do you call those places where you go?

ISOARDI

A rehab [drug rehabilitation] place?

AMY

I think he volunteered and went to a rehab place. It wasn't in Canada. Somewhere back east. But when he came out he had his mind made up. I was right there. I was there every day and every night with him, and I know that he didn't do anything, and I don't think he has since. You know, I know from '65 to '68 he did nothing. Nothing. He would take a case of Kahlua that He would take that, and that's what he had every night, you know. He'd have a glass of that, but he would take his own. They would load it on the plane, two cases of Kahlua. And that's all he did. It was amazing. I was just overwhelmed that he was able to do that and still burn. He got it together, so I was really happy about that.

ISOARDI

It was so widespread for a while. Is it just attributable to that fact that this is an occupational hazard you know, when you're in the entertainment business you've just got stuff all around? Or in the case of the jazz world, is there something else?

AMY

Well, you know, during that particular time it was attributed to jazz musicians. But I don't think jazz musicians were the ones that had serious

problems, because they didn't have the serious money, you know? I mean, these cats right here were struggling and scuffling and trying to maintain their habits, but not as much as You take your Rolling Stones and all of these cats. It started with the jazz musicians, obviously. It started with Bird [Charlie Parker], because he was the most famous, and Billie Holiday. So I don't know how to really address that as to whether it's an occupational hazard. I just think that we go like sheep, you know, just like Frank Morgan said, that the night that Bird died they all went on intermission and took a hit for Bird.

ISOARDI

Yeah, the thing that killed him.

AMY

Right. And then he said, "when we should have been thinking of a way to stop." You know, this was Frank Morgan that said that. So not having embraced any part of that I smoked some weed, you know?

ISOARDI

How did you stay away from it? Why do you think?

AMY

Because when I went with this band C You remember I told you I was in school working on my credential, and I went with this band Well, it wasn't a band; it was a show. And I don't know if you remember. This was back in '47. There was a group called the Cats and the Fiddle. They were a singing group that accompanied themselves. They were a self-contained group. It was four cats who sang, but they played the bass, the guitar, and the drums. I think the extra cat was the piano player, and they were called the Cats and Fiddle. They had a monster hit, so this was the headline of this show that this cat brought from New York. He rented a whole railcar for the show, and instead of them having to get off the train to change, they would just change the car to the next train. He brought them to Port Arthur, Texas, and that's where we met them. So this show. All of these cats in the show, the singers and the dancers and parts of the Cats and the Fiddle, were all strung out.

ISOARDI

Oh, man.

AMY

So I was going to Texas Southern University [during the summers of 1949 and 1950]. And the promoter of the show, producer of the show, called a musicians union {American Federation of Musicians} in Houston and said that he needed three cats; he needed a tenor [saxophone], a trumpet, a piano, and a drummer. So the cat came over to Texas Southern and got the four of us. There was a trumpet player named Joseph Bridgewater, a drummer I can't think of his name now and a piano player. I can't think of his name either. There were four of us all going to school. So we took the gig, and we drove over to Port Arthur for the rehearsal, and when we got there we were downstairs, and we were rehearsing and everything, and after the rehearsal See, the cat that owned this club it was a beautiful club on the top of the club he had a hotel where his entertainers could stay. But there were so many entertainers in the show he didn't have room for the piano player and myself, so we lived in the hotel around the corner. When we got through with the first rehearsal we were going upstairs in the hotel to hang out with the cats. When we got up there And, I mean, these girls, [these dancers in the show] were beautiful, man, just gorgeous. I'm going to show you. I'm going to find some pictures and I'll show you. They were gorgeous. And when we got upstairs they were shaking and trembling like snakes, man. You know? So I said, "What's wrong?" The cat took me downstairs, and he said, "Those are junkies." And that was all I needed to see, man.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

I saw it. Before I even had a chance [to try drugs], I saw it. Man, did you ever see people that look like snakes, and they're going through all that haggag, and they're wringing wet, you know, and? Oh, man, it was It was a blessing.

ISOARDI

Yeah. You drew the right lesson from it.

AMY

A blessing, man. So that's why I didn't get into it. Oh, and you know what also happened? That first night of the show These cats were merchant marines, young cats from Detroit. And they were nice looking cats clean-cut young men, you know, dressed real good. They were then on a ship.

But they were merchant marines, young cats, nice-looking. So we did the first show, and the piano player Like I said, we were staying around the corner at this hotel. So we went around. These little cats said, "They look cool. They look like college cats, man." So we said, "Well, come on. Go around with us." We were just going around smoking marijuana. We went around to the hotel room, and we got in the room, and these cats pulled out this little bag with these little white pills. And then they pulled out the needle and the spoon. Man! So the cats said, "Do you want some?" And I said, "No, I don't want any," and so did the piano player. So they went and hit themselves, and what happened was the cat shot up and he thought that he didn't get enough, and he shot up again and he overdosed. But he didn't die. But he went into all these seizures like that, man, and I'm sitting there and looking at all this, you know, and I saw all that. That was my revelation.

ISOARDI

That was your education, eh?

AMY

That's right. And I was so glad, man. Because I have never The only thing I've ever done in my life was smoke some weed, and that's it.

ISOARDI

You got lucky.

AMY

I really was, man. A blessing.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Jeez.

AMY

Because that was the worst. That was the worst of I couldn't have seen it any worse. This cat almost died, and these people around there were wriggling like snakes because they couldn't get any. Man. Shit, man.

ISOARDI

Yeah, in a bad way.

AMY

Oh, it was mean, man.

ISOARDI

Curtis, let me ask you, you come back from Ray Charles, and you've talked about some of the important rock gigs that you had. Does your career from this sort of move away from the jazz scene?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

To survive, then, you move pretty much into popular culture. Do you miss the jazz scene?

AMY

No, because I saw another picture. I'll always love jazz till I die. That's the only thing I listen to. That's the only thing I really get into, but it affords me a depth in pop music that I wouldn't have had had I not been exposed to jazz. But my appreciation for pop music is an equal appreciation from the standpoint of playing it. Not all of it I can really listen to, but I can appreciate it. If I put my mind to it I can appreciate any facet of the music today, any facet rap, pop, classical. I love classical music. I mean, every facet of music I love. There's not a Gospel music I appreciate, you know? So no, it didn't take away.

ISOARDI

Moving into that sphere, did you have any problems? Or was the situation such that, with your musical background, it was pretty easy to get work? The pop scene, etc., was pretty much. Do you think it was free enough of prejudice that you could make a career of it? Or did you have battles to wage?

AMY

No, I didn't have any battles. Like I said, see, I had played with rhythm and blues musicians in Texas. You know, I played with Amos Milburn. I played with this first guy, the producer [Henry Kale] that I told you how we would record every day. We were recording various rhythm and blues artists, local hit rhythm and blues guys, in Houston. Joe Turner recorded with him. Amos Milburn. So I maintained that degree of involvement, I'll say. So it wasn't a hard transition for me to go from one to the other, because I always maintained jazz in my life. As much as I could play, that's what I played. But if I had to play a rock and roll gig or a rhythm and blues gig it was no problem, because I can appreciate any of it, and I can get into it. So that helped.

ISOARDI

Yeah, really. Okay. Well, Curtis, have we missed anything that we should be talking about from that period of the fifties and up to the mid-sixties?

AMY

I think we'll recapitulate maybe the next time and go back from the beginning and come back, because I think musically I haven't expressed the affinity that I have for music and that I've maintained all my life. You know, I've been totally involved in music. If you see those pictures, you'll see in all of the pictures. That was in the beginning of my career, and music was right there, where I showed you those clubs with the four horns and the big, funny music stands. So I've been involved all my life. I've never not been involved in music, even though I was with [Los Angeles] County for fifteen years in the welfare department [Department of Public Social Services]. I was always involved. I've always been involved.

ISOARDI

When were you with the welfare department?

AMY

Oh, I started in 1975 to 1988. I retired from the county. But still music was the essence. I mean, that was the means [mutual laughter], but music is the essence.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly. Well, thanks very much.

AMY

Thank you. We'll recapitulate, and I'd like to go back and just really stress the music from that beginning on up to Because I don't think we've really gotten into it, and I'd like to discuss that, too.

ISOARDI

All right. Very good.

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ISOARDI

Curtis, I think last time we pretty much followed your career through the late sixties and the Ray Charles years, and afterwards you talked a bit about your involvement in the welfare department [Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services]. But let's go back now and talk about the music and how your own approach to music maybe changed from your early years of being a bopper up through the period of the late sixties.

AMY

Well, let's see. I think we could go back to, say, 1947. I think that's when everything really came to fruition in my mind from the standpoint of the approach. I've always appreciated jazz, and, like I said in the beginning, my first experiences were with Duke [Ellington], [Count] Basie, and that idiom. So in '47, when I heard Diz [Dizzy Gillespie] and Bird [Charlie Parker]

ISOARDI

Was that live or on disc?

AMY

No, it was on disc. I guess it was Yeah, '47. Because that's when I first really really got into Diz. And I was listening all day, all night. You know? It was like I had never experienced anything like that. It was just amazing. And during that period also I heard Fats.

ISOARDI

Fats Navarro.

AMY

And the arranger from Cleveland.

ISOARDI

Oh, Tadd Dameron?

AMY

Tadd Dameron, yes. The approaches that they were using were so complex but so interesting and so pretty, you know? Tadd was just amazing in his approach. Diz was just the ultimate to me. I had never heard anyone able to play to that extent. And Bird. At that point I was playing alto [saxophone], and when I listened to Bird consistently I came to the conclusion that Why should I try to play the alto? [mutual laughter] It really didn't make sense. He made quite an impression. And when I played the alto I could sound a lot like Bird, but I just figured in my mind "What's the point?" You know, here was a man that was I didn't know the degree of degradation that had taken place within his world, but from the standpoint of music there was no equal in my mind, no one that really could equal his play. So I went to the tenor [saxophone]. I concentrated on the tenor at that point, and I came up with two or three groups during that time, and I started to write. And I hadn't had any training in writing. The tunes came. I saw this picture What was it? I think I mentioned it. Rita Hayworth,

Tondelayo Do you remember that picture [White Cargo] where she [Hedy Lamarr] played Tondelayo?

ISOARDI

No, no, I don't.

AMY

It just gripped me.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah, it was great. I was a little cat, you know? So a man had a business up on the corner from my aunt it was a record store [Sam's Record Shop] and his name was Sam, and he did a lot of promoting, and he sold all the records. His record shop was the most popular record shop in our vicinity. So he approached me to manage me. I was playing clarinet, and he wanted to manage me, and he wanted to start off with me doing a radio show in Houston. I think it was KPRC or something like that. We did the show, and I wrote this tune called "Tondelayo" and that's where we started out. It had a strong rhythmic feel, and I think that may have impressed into my mind at that point I didn't remember when I started writing things like "Native Land" and those types of tunes, but it was the same type of approach then. And that was my first tune. What happened was we started off with "Tondelayo." It was a nice groove, and when we got home from the station everybody was complimenting us. But Sam didn't like it because we started out with a medium tempo. See, it was like a groove, you know. But he wanted us to start off with something fast and exciting.

ISOARDI

For the beginning of a show?

AMY

Right, right. But it was cool. I mean, I thought it was cool, and everyone that I spoke to thought it was cool. So as a response to that he wanted us to play this nightclub [the El Dorado], a very popular nightclub, where I was telling you about the big band that used to play every Sunday and I would meet them on Sunday and take this alto player [Gus Evans]'s horn up. Well, he wanted us to play up there with my group. But he wanted us to wear a uniform that had Sam's record company on the back.

ISOARDI

Oh, very uncool.

AMY

I said, "No, man. I don't know, brother. We can't do that."

ISOARDI

Good for you.

AMY

So he gave me the contract, and he had it in the contract. I went and I found my dad [Caurie Paul Amy]. My dad was in the cab business, and I went and talked to my dad about it, you know? And my dad more or less said You do what you think is best.@ So I never went back, because I didn't think that was You know, I had never seen a band with somebody's Like a delivery man, you know, with Sam's record company on the back.

ISOARDI

Oh, terrible.

AMY

It was horrible, man. [mutual laughter] So needless to say, that didn't work out.

ISOARDI

Truly, truly. At what point does your style start changing? I mean, the fifties is a time when jazz is branching in a lot of directions, from cool to hard bop, from progressive to third stream. How are you negotiating through all this?

AMY

Well, I think what had happened was, see, I had started out playing rhythm and blues with Amos Milburn and various groups in Houston, but I tried to maintain. Because I was really listening to Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt and Illinois Jacquet during that period, so I was trying to pattern after these guys. And then, let's see. I had been in the army, and I had been exposed to Pres [Lester Young] in [Washington] D.C. In fact, that's all you heard was Pres Pres and Bird. But I had chosen to play more like Illinois Jacquet. I was playing with the growl and, you know

ISOARDI

There were a lot of close connections to R and B [rhythm and blues] in Illinois's sound.

AMY

Oh, yes, absolutely. Well, you see, Trane [John Coltrane] played rhythm and blues. I think he played with Earl Bostic and some of those guys. I was reading an article last week where Booker Little had played with Amos Milburn.

ISOARDI

Oh, no kidding?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Oh, I didn't know that.

AMY

So I had been through that same type of But I hadn't really Let's see. 'Fifty-five, that's when I came here. But previously to '55, when I was in Tennessee, I had a band with four horns, because that's what Gene Ammons and Stitt maintained. It was the four horns: trumpet, trombone, baritone [saxophone] and tenor. So I had that front, and I loved that sound. That was just a wonderful sound. So I used that, and my playing was within that groove, because it was something that you could play for appreciation but also play for achieving and arriving at a finer point of playing. So I was able to do that and maintain that level of play and still be able to earn a living. But then when I got here, like I said, I met Melba [Liston] and she introduced me to a finer degree of arranging.

ISOARDI

Is that why you liked having that variety of horns?

AMY

Yes, to get that sound.

ISOARDI

I mean, your harmonies could just be so rich, then?

AMY

That's always been my real deep passion, writing and sound. Arrangements. That's why I loved Horace Silver and Tadd Dameron and Diz, because of the writing.

ISOARDI

You must have enjoyed Gerald Wilson's charts, too, because his harmonies are soC

AMY

Yeah, it's just different, you know? And I don't like convention per se. You know, I like to be on the edge, a little out, because I don't know if I mentioned it in these interviews, but when I would practice at home I would have to practice out in the garage. [mutual laughter] One day I was practicing, and I went so far out, and I had never heard this. This was before I had heard Trane or any I mean, I was out, you know, and it scared me.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

It really did. I put my horn up and went in the house, man. It scared me.

ISOARDI

Why? Because it kind of made sense to you?

AMY

Oh, I dug it. I dug it, but I had never heard this, and I said, "Wow." You know, it was really intriguing. And each time when I would go in it. If I wanted to go into it I could go into it, but I didn't really pursue it per se. I just went on and tried to adhere to convention.

ISOARDI

When you came out here and, well, I guess through the sixties, who were the people who were sort of pushing the boundaries out here in L.A.?

AMY

Everybody.

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

It was that kind of a feeling?

AMY

Oh, man, it was cold. Harold Land, Gerald, Teddy Edwards, Shelly Manne, Paul Horn.

ISOARDI

It's interesting. I just recently looked at Paul Horn's autobiography [Inside Paul Horn: the Spiritual Odyssey of a Universal Traveler].

AMY

Oh, yeah?

ISOARDI

It came out many years ago but I had never looked at it till recently. And he says somewhere in there that when he got out to California I guess it was in the mid-fifties or so, maybe around the same time you came out here. He had come from back East, and he said it was the most free environment he'd ever encountered artistically.

AMY

Right.

ISOARDI

There were just so many different things happening, and people weren't judging you too much. He said back East you felt so constricted.

AMY

Oh, yeah?

ISOARDI

Yeah. He said he got out here and he couldn't believe how wide open it was and how free he felt as an artist to go any direction he wanted to.

AMY

Right. It was really happening. Everywhere. Everywhere you would go it was just cats that you hadn't heard that were burning, just burning. Like Eric, Eric Dolphy, you know?

ISOARDI

Yeah. Did you ever hear him play when he was out here?

AMY

Uh-huh. We used to hang. We used to hang out. You know, I was working a gig out in the [San Fernando] Valley, and when I would come in I would go over to Ye Nightlife. I told you about that place.

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah, that's right.

AMY

I=d hang out with him and listen to him, because I liked his groove. He was playing out then, but, like I told you, the lady who owned it, Gertrude Gipson [Penland]C

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah. She was a columnist wasn't she? for one of the papers at one time?

AMY

Yeah, right, for the Los Angeles Sentinel. Well, his parents were good friends of Gertrude, so he was able to get the gig and maintain what he heard and what he wanted to do. They were playing convention, and what was happening was they would bring in a singer. They were the house band, and they would play behind whoever the star was that came in, and then he would get a chance to play, too. So in that process he was able to play but not be judged to an extent, because it wasn't him that was drawing the people. So he could do what he wanted to do.

ISOARDI

Right, right.

AMY

So it was very interesting from that point on.

ISOARDI

Do you remember who else was in his band then?

AMY

No, I really don't. And there were some good cats, but I don't remember who was in that band.

ISOARDI

Was Lester Robertson playing with him?

AMY

No.

ISOARDI

Not at that time.

AMY

I don't think Lester He may have.

ISOARDI

I know earlier they played together.

AMY

Yeah, he may have. It could have been. I loved Lester. Lester was a great cat, you know, and I don't know what happened to him. I heard eventually he died.

ISOARDI

Yeah, I think it was in '91 or somewhere around there. It was in the early nineties, I think.

AMY

It seems like I heard that he moved out to San Pedro, and I never saw him again. He played with me for two years when we were with Gerald. You know, we kind of started hanging together, and I put together this band, and I had three horns. I had Warren Gale. Have you ever heard of Warren Gale?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

He's now up in San Francisco. Warren was a youngster just getting out of high school. He was living out in Long Beach, and I think his dad was the trumpet player out at Disneyland. And he could play, man. This cat could really play. And with Lester we had a great group. We had Stanley Cowell on piano. Mathis I can't think of his first name. He was on bass. And I also used Victor Lewis on bass, and Mel Lee was on drums.

ISOARDI

Oh, he's still

AMY

Burning, man.

ISOARDI

Isn't it amazing?

AMY

I heard this cat, man

ISOARDI

And he looks like he's about forty or fifty.

AMY

Yeah, right. Right.

ISOARDI

He's been around forever.

AMY

He lived right around the corner here.

ISOARDI

Oh, really?

AMY

Yeah, that's right. And he moved. I think he hit the [California State] Lottery.

ISOARDI

You're kidding?

AMY

No, I think he did hit the lottery, and he bought a new car, and he bought another house, and they moved.

ISOARDI

Good for him.

AMY

But about a month ago, man, I went out to the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47], and this big band was playing, and I was going in to hear Bill Holman. So in the process of going to that rehearsal room, I passed by this room, and I heard I stuck my head in, and Mel Lee was in there with this big band. Man, this cat I mean, he was burning. Same way on Gerald's new album, the tribute to Monterey [Theme from Monterey].

ISOARDI

Oh, yeah.

AMY

Man, this cat is He's burning, man.

ISOARDI

Yeah, he's incredible.

AMY

So after that band. No, that was in the sixties. That was about at the end of the run. But I was talking about when I left the Valley and I'd go and hang out with Eric after that. I used the four horn band here. You remember Clare Fischer, of course.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Well, Clare Fischer's brother. Did you ever hear of his brother?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

He has a brother that's named [Stewart] "Dirk" Fischer. He's sensational. In fact, I think he's a professor now at a college, one of the colleges here somewhere [College of the Canyons]. But he was doing all the writing for me. Man, he was just tremendous, just a tremendous talent. And Jack Nimitz was playing bari[tone saxophone].

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah, this was about '56.

ISOARDI

There's another guy who's still playing.

AMY

Bad, man, bad.

ISOARDI

Still.

AMY

And a beautiful cat. I mean, he's just warm. You know, there's never any bad vibes. You never get anything like that from him. It's just music. He's just a great player.

ISOARDI

Very nice.

AMY

So we had four horns. And I don't remember who the other cats were, but I remember Jack. But I used a four-horn front again that I had been using in Tennessee, and I was using the book, and I was updating the book with things that Horace had written, like "Room 221" and all of those things during that period that he had. I had arrangements on all of them. And then Dirk was bringing some very interesting, intricate things, and we were playing those things. And that was prior to me going into these little clubs, you know. I started, I think, out in Gardena and North Hollywood and the club that I was telling you about on the corner of Western [Avenue] and Hollywood Boulevard, right across from the Jazz City Bronze Peacock, something like that. Something Peacock. He changed over and started bringing top jazz groups in, so he opened up with Diz, and Diz introduced Lee Morgan. Lee Morgan was eighteen [years old]. That band was on fire, man. And I think during that same period Miles [Davis] was at Jazz City.

ISOARDI

A lot of the people that you mention as big influences, it seems like most of them are trumpet players.

AMY

I loved the trumpet. Well, see, I wanted to play the trumpet, but I was four years old, so the cat told my mother I was too small. My feet wouldn't hit the floor. But I loved the trumpet. I just really loved it. I loved the tenor, but the horn of choice for me to listen to, really, is the trumpet. But I listen to the tenor because I have to, you know.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

But that's always been my favorite. Since I couldn't get the Bird, you know, I left and went otherwise. When I left [the four-horn group]C That period, I think that was when After we had played all of those clubs and I had been playing those various gigs, you know, just really developing, was when I got a call from Perri Lee. I think I told you about it. Now, she did more for me musically than any situation that I've ever been in.

ISOARDI

No kidding.

AMY

I think it was because of the tunes that we played and the approach. She played right. She played correct, you know? There was no shuckin' and jivin'. She was playing, you know. We were playing excellent tunes, standards, so it gave me a chance really to get into good music and to delve up into my horn, you know, consistently, every night. Not playing any blues or any of that, you know. We would play two or three things that could be called commercial, but it still had a degree of complexity, I'd say.

ISOARDI

Yeah. Are you writing much now?

AMY

No. I have an album written, so IC When we did that last album, Peace for Love, the amount of tunes that I wrote was too many, so I have enough for another album. I'm holding off until either I get another opportunity to record I try to do it then rather than just bank a lot of things, because I like to write with purpose, and if I don't have anything to write for, then the writing seems to be not as good or not as depthful as it would be if I got a call and said Well, next month, we're going to do this. Then it gives me a purpose, and then I can You know, everything just comes like that. So it's not a problem.

ISOARDI

You mentioned that there was that one time that you were practicing in your garage and you got very outside. Did that change your playing at all? Did you follow that up?

AMY

No, but I never forgot it. But it didn't [tape recorder off] So from a writing standpoint, I didn't really do any serious writing until I met Dick Bock, and then we started to write. Then everything came together from a composition standpoint, and things just came, you know. It was amazing.

ISOARDI

So you were pleased with the work that developed with Pacific Jazz [Records]?

AMY

Oh, absolutely.

ISOARDI

Do you think it represents your best work?

AMY

No, not really. I think my best work was done on that album there.

ISOARDI

The Lou Rawls? Was it Black and Blue?

AMY

Yeah, that series of things. Even the Onzy Matthews big band, Blues with a Touch of Elegance? Did you hear that?

ISOARDI

I know of it. I haven't heard it.

AMY

You haven't heard that?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

Really? Yeah. I really appreciated the writing, and it gave me a chance to go back into the big band. You know, that's where I came from. In high school we always had a big band, in college we had a big band. In fact, both colleges In Wiley [College] we had a big band, and in Texas Southern [University] we had a big band. So that was really where I felt comfortable. I guess it's because you sit back and you've got all of that behind you. It just

propels you, you know? So I think that was it until we got to Katanga! I really like that work. And I wrote another suite to follow that up. That was when we came to the end, because everything just fell apart around '65.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's what you were saying. So you never got a chance to record the suite [Shaker Heights]?

AMY

No.

ISOARDI

Too bad.

AMY

But what we did was. Dick let me come out and put the whole suite on a tape, and he gave me the master.

ISOARDI

Oh, you mentioned that.

AMY

And I loaned it to this cat out at Universal [Pictures], because I was trying to get to write for some films, you know, and this cat I never got my tape back. And it was a master. The whole suite with Joe Gordon. And Joe played it so

ISOARDI

Oh, he was great. He was such a great trumpet player.

AMY

Jack Wilson was on that, and Doug Sides. I don't remember who the bass player was, but it was And Ray Crawford.

ISOARDI

Your guys.

AMY

And I was going to use. Oh, yeah, and Joe Gordon and myself.

ISOARDI

Oh, man. You mentioned last time, and you just mentioned again, that '65 was really the turning point for jazz in Los Angeles and the music scene in a lot of ways. Why '65?

AMY

It just seemed that it had run its course.

ISOARDI

Right. So what was it? All of a sudden clubs were closing and gigs weren't there?

AMY

People either.

ISOARDI

Was it rock and roll coming in or? Was it the Beatles and rock and roll?

AMY

I think it is. That was when the Beatles When did the Beatles hit?

ISOARDI

I think they came here for the first time in what was it? early '64. They were on the Ed Sullivan Show.

AMY

Oh, yeah. Well, see, from that time on it seems as though jazz hit the skids, you know, because rock and roll did make quite an impression. The Beach Boys. All those elements moved into play.

ISOARDI

A lot of people I know in response to that left town. Some even left the country. Did you ever consider going somewhere else?

AMY

No, I love it here. The two cities that I really love I love this city, and I love New York, you know, and I don't think there's any place in the world that will equal these two places. I enjoyed London, and I enjoyed Paris, and I'm quite sure that if I would have gotten into it that I probably could find enjoyment there.

ISOARDI

What is it about L.A.?

AMY

The beauty, you know, the creation. I think Hollywood and that facet intrigues me. The creative juices that run through this city from the standpoint of You can run into a dude in the supermarket and he produces scripts. You know what I mean?

ISOARDI

It's true.

AMY

I mean, you talk to a dude, and he listens and says, "I heard your record, but do you know in the second bar so and so" I mean, that's exaggerating a

little bit, but, still, that is the situation that's here and in New York. I don't know. I like modern living, you know. I like to live good, and that's what I experience in this city, is that you see good living. I'm not to that degree of living that I would like to be, but you see it, and it's there, and it's obtainable if you work hard, you know, or if you get a good break. You can always make a move. But in those countries in your European countries and in other countries there's a degree of economics that is controlled, so it doesn't appear as though you really have that opening to progress to the extent that you want to progress. Maybe you never will obtain it, but at least if you can see it and you see other people getting it it's inspirational to that point, you know? So that's really why I like this city.

ISOARDI

How does '65 affect you when Watts explodes and then it spreads throughout so much of this city?

AMY

Watts?

ISOARDI

Yeah, the upheavals of '65. How does that affect you?

AMY

It didn't affect me at all. You know what I did? Let me tell you what I did. I know this is It's not that I've always been an advocate of equal life for all people. I've never been daunted in that perception in my life at all. Never. I've always maintained that, and I've always really been ready to work for equalization for all people. That's in my being, you know. So I don't even have to worry about it. I know that that's the way I feel. But when the riot went down, Onzy and I See, I told you that Lou Johnson, who was playing left field with the [Los Angeles] Dodgers I had tickets at Dodger Stadium every game. [Lou Johnson and I met at Kentucky State College, where Johnson was a basketball star. When Johnson joined the Dodgers, we were very tight and would hang every day.]

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

Every game. All I had to do was go to the will call [window] and get it. So every night during the riot we went to baseball games. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

Are you kidding? You and Onzy? Amy added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

AMY

Onzy and I, we were riding out to the freeway going to Dodger Stadium. [mutual laughter] You could see fires and stuff, you know?

ISOARDI

Amazing. You didn't get hassled or anything?

AMY

No, it was cool. We'd be clean, you know. We would dress up every night and go to the game. It's not that I don't feel that that achieved anything, because in some ways it possibly did achieve something, but See, I love peace. And today That's the reason that I wrote that song and that tune, "Peace for Love." Have you ever listened to that tune? That's the reason why I wrote that song. It was because the world was going through all types of hate and anger. In the Mideast there were problems. There were problems here. There were problems in Oklahoma when that dude [Timothy McVeigh] blew up that building [the Federal Building in Oklahoma City]. Same thing in New York [the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center]. All those things really distress me, you know? So I could never participate in any violence, in any type of activity that C Because I don't think that's the answer, you know? I just don't think that's the answer.

ISOARDI

Where were you living?

AMY

I was living right over on Redondo [Boulevard] between Adams [Boulevard] and Jefferson [Boulevard], right straight across over there.

ISOARDI

What's been your association with Local 47?

AMY

Oh, I've been in Local 47 since '56.

ISOARDI

So when you came out here you transferred your union membership to out here?

AMY

I think I just joined outright here.

ISOARDI

Oh, you hadn't been a member before?

AMY

Yeah, I had been a member in Houston, but I hadn't been active in Houston because I went to school. I think around '49 I became a union member in Houston, so when I left and went to school for four years and then went down there [to Jackson, Tennessee] and taught for three years, I wasn't active. So when I came here I just went out and C I don't know who sponsored me or if anyone sponsored me. I don't know what it was, but I got in. I had a gig, and I got in.

ISOARDI

So you're a lifetime member?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

A while ago, I guess, eh?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Yeah, really. Well, maybe we can talk a little bit about your experience in Local 47. Has it been pretty uneventful? Or has it been a positive experience? What have you gotten out of being a member of Local 47?

AMY

Oh, it's been positive, and it's been hectic at points. You know, when I first came in I didn't want to pay my work dues, and I'd have to go out there, and we'd fight and go

ISOARDI

And then you'd go across the street and fight with Maury [K.] Stein?

AMY

Right, with Maury. Well, see, Maury was downstairs then. He was in the parking lot, because he was all in His store [Stein on Vine] was connected to the union.

ISOARDI

Oh, it was on that side?

AMY

On the parking lot. And we were fighting, man.

ISOARDI

You were doing a lot of fighting when you first came out.

AMY

Those cats would call me up and I would get suspended and everything. But eventually I grew up. I became a mature individual, so I adhered to those laws and started But in the beginning it was quite hectic. We had a representative up there that handled all of the clubs that mainly I was working at. He was the rep, the business agent, Jimmy Clark. I don't know if you ever

ISOARDI

I met him once just a couple of years ago.

AMY

Yeah. And you saw how he looked, man? You wouldn't think that this cat was ninety years old.

ISOARDI

No, no, although he's apparently had a lot of memory problems.

AMY

Oh, he's been sick. He's been really sick.

ISOARDI

Yeah, but you would never guess that.

AMY

You know? I mean this cat is ninety, man. That meant that he was much older than me during that period, but he looked like he was a youngster, you know? But he took care of business for them, and he kind of embraced me, and that helped me a lot with the union, to get around and then in my working and so forth.

ISOARDI

Wasn't he like the first African American business agent there or something like that?

AMY

No, it was another cat there before him. I almost thought of his name. He was a chicken shit dude, though. Excuse me.

ISOARDI

It's okay.

AMY

He was absolutely the worst, but

ISOARDI

Really?

AMY

Yeah, but I can't think of his name. He's a big tall dude, but everybody hated him. What was that cat's name?

ISOARDI

Was he an older guy?

AMY

Well, during that period he was right along with. He may not have been, but it seemed like his hair was gray.

ISOARDI

There was a guy I've heard so many stories about from the older musicians on Central Avenue, when they had the black local [Local 767]. There was a business agent named Elmer Fain.

AMY

That was him.

ISOARDI

That was him?

AMY

Chickenshit, man. Bad.

ISOARDI

It was Elmer

AMY

Elmer Fain.

ISOARDI

Oh, everybody's got an Elmer Fain story.

AMY

Man, that guy was cold, man, cold, a cold dude. Shit, man, and he didn't care. You know, he'd talk to you like he had something on you.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

Yeah. He'd pull you off a gig.

ISOARDI

Yeah, that's the stories I've heard. People would come running into a club, and one would say Fain just pulled up outside, and they'd take off.

AMY

Right, right. This cat was cold, man.

ISOARDI

How long was he around?

AMY

You know, I had forgotten about him. He didn't last too long into the sixties.

ISOARDI

I guess he was probably getting up in years then.

AMY

I don't think he made it to the sixties. I don't think.

ISOARDI

He really is a character, you know, somebody whose name just pops up over decades, decades. People remember this guy.

AMY

Right. He was cold, man. Let's see. After I left Melba I went to Perri Lee, and then I went with Louie [Luis] Rivera. I think I've

ISOARDI

Yeah, you've mentioned it.

AMY

Now, that period was good, but it hurt me from this standpoint: coming from Perri Lee, playing all of these great songs and great tunes and we had great arrangements and coming to Louie Rivera (and I think I was with him almost three years), he only played in one key and one set of changes, and, man, he would burn this room up.

ISOARDI

Amazing.

AMY

I mean, the groove was just Whoa. So actually coming from Perri was like coming from an excellent conservatory going to Louie Rivera to a jam session. So that went on every night.

ISOARDI

So you sat through both ends, just absorbing from both sides?

AMY

Yeah. You see, if I could have come from Perri Lee to Dick Bock, I think musically it would have been more interesting. But coming from Louie

Rivera to Paul Bryant and that organ group. It hipped me to the groove, you know, so I can't put it down. I mean, it was

ISOARDI

It's important.

AMY

Yeah, very important. But it did hurt me from that standpoint of not playing tunes and changes and so forth. It did hurt.

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AMY

But actually, all of the periods that I experienced, from the forties up until Dick Bock, were very important, in my opinion. And there was a lot of music. There was music every day. I don't know of any days passed when there wasn't music really involved. So my life has been all music. After we started recording for Dick it was still I don't like to deal in the negative, but when we were playing I think I told you about this gig where we would start at six o'clock in the morning out at this club it was called the Trocadero with Louie Rivera. All the cats would come and say, "Oh, man, you really can play, you know. You know, it was that type of acceptance. But as soon as I did my first album, that psychological I don't know what it is that takes place within I don't know if it's artistic jealousy or what, but everything changed. The first album we did was called Blues Message, and it played I mean, every hour almost it was being played here. And in Detroit, the lady that owned the largest record store in Detroit. It was selling till the distributors went out to the stores to see. They couldn't believe that it was really selling to that extent, you know? But after that, then the negativism started, you know, the behind-your-back things.

ISOARDI

Jeez, you mean jealousies?

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

Jeez.

AMY

So it really. You walk above it. You know, you do your best to walk above it, but it affects you. I guess it's inevitable. You can't let it, you know, but it does affect you.

ISOARDI

Yeah, truly.

AMY

So it made a difference. Because like I was telling you, my affinity for musicians and actors and singers and so forth is immense, and I show it. And I still show it. I just can't help it, because I love music, and I love people who do the same things that I do. And I show it. It's too bad if you can't show how you feel, you know, but that's seemingly what takes place, I mean in my instance. I don't know, I guess it may be me. I don't know what it really is, but it seemingly always happens.

ISOARDI

At this point in your life, Curtis, what would you like to see happen musically? What would you like to do if you could have your druthers?

AMY

If I could have my druthers? I'd have a big band. That's what I would have, a great big band.

ISOARDI

All right. Would you record the suite, maybe?

AMY

It's a possibility. It's so far gone, you know? I only remember one movement.

ISOARDI

Oh, you don't have the charts?

AMY

I don't have the charts. You know, everything burned up here. And that's the one that I recorded. I recorded that. That was on a Verve album. It was called Shaker Heights , but the original title for the suite was Africa Running Wild , because it was right during that period of all the riots and all that. So I wrote this suite, and that's what I called it. But when we got to New York and we were recording it I had just left Cleveland and the suburb of Shaker Heights. Have you ever been to Cleveland?

ISOARDI

No. I'm going to be there around Christmas time. My wife's family lives just outside of Cleveland.

AMY

Well, please go through Shaker Heights and just check it out. Man, my wife [Merry Clayton] and I, we were there with Ray Charles, and we were leaving that particular morning. Some guys that I went to college with at Kentucky State [College, now Kentucky State University] were now engineers with Westinghouse [Electric Company]. These guys had these big houses, man, out in Shaker Heights. They invited us for breakfast. Another friend of mine that went to school at Kentucky is a cop. He was a cop; I don't know if he's still on the police force now. So he came and picked us up from the hotel and took us out to Shaker Heights to this cat's house for breakfast. It must have been around seven [o'clock] or seven thirty when we rode through the gates. They have these gates that you go in. So when we rode in the fog was just lifting, and I saw all these guys, these men in their shirts and ties and the suitpants and so forth, walking out to get the paper or bringing the trash out. But it was really nice to see this neighborhood, you know, to see how these people were living and how cool it was. So when we got to New York and we recorded I changed the name of Africa Running Wild Shaker Heights, because it was a different degree of attainment. It was a ride, but it was a different ride, you know what I mean? It was really hip to see that. It's a mixed neighborhood, Shaker Heights, but I saw cultured black men and women and cultured white men. You know what I mean? And all these people were living right there together, and it was all equal. You know, it was really So I say, "Shit, I mean, this is Africa Running Wild."

ISOARDI

Yeah, very cool.

AMY

So that's why I named it Shaker Heights.

ISOARDI

Well, Curtis, we're there.

AMY

We are?

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

We're at the end.

ISOARDI

We're at the end, I guess. Anything you'd like to mention before we finish?

AMY

Yeah. I'd like to mention my association with Lou Adler.

ISOARDI

Oh, yes, please do.

AMY

You know, I think along the way I had mentioned that I could never do the things that I really wanted to do because of my affinity with and my appreciation for the arts and the people that I was associated with. So I never levied a degree of control, because, like I said, I like freedom. I like people to be free and to be happy. And that's the environment that I want to work in. You know, I don't want to work in an environment where I have to sit and say, "Well, you've got to do this and you've got to do this and do this and do that." If we're musicians and we're all working for the same goal, you know what to do. You've been trained. You've studied. So when I met Lou Adler, it fell into a different degree of power, and we could do what we wanted to do without any hesitation or without any reservation, you know. It was a cat that I instantly fell in love with as a man, a brother. You know what I mean?

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

So as a result we went right to the top with no hesitation. Whatever was on the board to do, I knew what I had to do, and he knew what he had to do, and we did it.

ISOARDI

How long did you guys work together?

AMY

From 1969 to 1973.

ISOARDI

What were some of the projects you worked on?

AMY

We did the Monterey Pop Festival, and we recorded that, and we redid the takes from the original Monterey that had Jimi Hendrix and

ISOARDI

Yeah, it was '67, I think.

AMY

Yeah. Well, we redid that. We remastered and reissued that. And Carole King We did all of the Carole King albums, which were just marvelous. We did Merry. Her projects were great.

ISOARDI

What's Merry's last name?

AMY

Clayton. Merry Clayton. See, when we left Ray Well, we were with Ray Charles from '66C I mentioned all that.

ISOARDI

Yeah, you talked about that.

AMY

Okay. So we left Ray in '68. In '68 I recorded with the Doors. In '69 I went to work with Lou Adler at A & M [Records]. After we had finished Merry's projects we did Tommy [by the Who]. Merry was the original Acid Queen, the one that Tina [Turner] played in the movie.

ISOARDI

Yeah.

AMY

Merry did it in London with Rod Stewart, the Who Oh, there were so many. Let's see

ISOARDI

So what was your position with regard to Adler? Were you like a music director?

AMY

A and R [artists and repertoire].

ISOARDI

You were his A and R person?

AMY

Right. So, you know, that degree. That's the way it really It was beautiful. We did a movie that Robert Altman directed, Brewster McCloud. We did that, and Merry was in that.

ISOARDI

That was a busy period, a good time.

AMY

Oh, excellent. I mean, I said, "Here, I've"

ISOARDI

What a range of projects, too.

AMY

Right. I said, "I'm in heaven." I'd come home, man. I'd leave here in the morning, say about nine thirty, and I might get back the next morning at three. [sings] "A lot of dancing." A lot of times I'd come home early, but the majority of times we would be sixteen, fourteen hours.

ISOARDI

Why did you leave in '73?

AMY

Well, let's see. In some ways I really don't know. You know, it just happened.

ISOARDI

It's just one of those things.

AMY

Yeah.

ISOARDI

You left on good terms with Adler, though?

AMY

Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI

You didn't have any kind of problem or anything?

AMY

Oh, no. He's a great guy, man.

ISOARDI

All right.

AMY

Herb [Alpert]. Herb, the same thing. I mean, it was just. To walk on that lot Did you ever go in [the] A & M [building on La Brea Avenue]?

ISOARDI

No.

AMY

Man. See, that was the old Charlie Chaplin studio.

ISOARDI

Right.

AMY

When you walked in there you could feel the creative juices. You could just feel it. It was just automatic.

ISOARDI

Did you have any dealings with Herb Alpert?

AMY

Oh, yeah, but not musically. I wasn't in on any of his projects, and he wasn't in on any of our projects. We would listen to some of his things. He would listen to some of our things and offer his critique and vice versa. But no, it was just Man, it was just great, man. I mean, it was just You know, to be in that kind of environment, man, is the ultimate. It really was.

ISOARDI

Well, that's probably a good note to

AMY

End on?

ISOARDI

You think?

AMY

Ultimate.

ISOARDI

Any final thoughts for us?

AMY

Ultimate. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI

The ultimate.

AMY

The ultimate.

ISOARDI

All right, Curtis. Many thanks for your time and reminiscences.

AMY

My pleasure. And thank you.

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