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CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

William Woodman

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: Watts, Los Angeles, April 22, 1919.

Education: Jordan High School.

Military Service: United States Army, 1941.

Spouse: Jean Pillow Woodman, 1935; Vernetta Cartwright Woodman, 1954; 4 children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Played brass and woodwinds with:

Woodman Brothers Biggest Little Band in the World, 1934-39

Happy Johnson, 1943

Fletcher Henderson, 1944

Cee Pee Johnson, 1944

Maxwell Davis, 1945

Bill Jackson, 1947

Ollie Jackson, 1949

Joe Liggins, 1951

Bumps Myers, 1953

Jake Porter, 1959-66

Salesman, Sears Roebuck and Company, 1967-83.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Steven L. Isoardi, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Political Science, UCLA; Ph.D., Political Science, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Woodman's home, Los Angeles.

Dates, length of sessions: May 22, 1990 (78 minutes); May 29, 1990 (64).

Total number of recorded hours: 2.5

Persons present during interview: Woodman and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series designed to preserve the spoken memories of individuals, primarily musicians, who were raised near and/or performed on Los Angeles's Central Avenue, especially from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. Musician and teacher William Green, his student Steven Isoardi, and early project interviewee Buddy Collette provided major inspiration for the UCLA Oral History Program's inaugurating the Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project.

In preparing for the interview, Isoardi consulted jazz histories, autobiographies, oral histories, relevant jazz periodicals, documentary films, and back issues of the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Woodman's childhood and education in Watts and continuing on through his career as a jazz musician. Major topics covered include fellow musicians, musical styles, desegregation of jazz groups, and the rise and fall of Central Avenue.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation,

paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Whenever possible, the proper names of nightclubs were checked against articles and advertisements in back issues of the California Eagle. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Woodman reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Cline also prepared the biographical summary and interview history. Steven J. Novak, editor, prepared the table of contents and the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MAY 22, 1990

ISOARDI: Okay, William, into your life story. Why don't you begin by talking a little about where you were born and what the area was like and your family and all that?

WOODMAN: I was born in Los Angeles, and I was raised in Watts. The environment there was almost all races, and we all got along very well. My family consists of three brothers: Coney [Woodman], Britt [Woodman], and George [Woodman]. I went to Grape Street Elementary School, which was right next door to where I lived, which was 111th Street.

ISOARDI: That's pretty convenient.

WOODMAN: I graduated from Jordan High [School] in 1936. Of course, my best friends at that time were Joe Comfort, Charles Mingus, Buddy Collette, [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely, and Bumps Myers.

ISOARDI: Bumps Myers came out of Watts, too?

WOODMAN: Well, he was almost a native, anyway. He played with the Les Hite band. You remember the Cotton Club? Oh, boy, that was in the fifties.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you. You mentioned that there were all races in Watts.

WOODMAN: That's right.

ISOARDI: Do you remember some of the nationalities?

WOODMAN: Yeah. There were Mexicans, Orientals, and Jewish people. Especially, now, at Jordan High, there were these same races. There were whites, Mexicans, Orientals, Jewish people. That's why, at that time, I didn't really understand about prejudice after hanging out all over the world, that is, all in the United States, as I was told. I said, "How could that happen? Right here, we get along so beautifully, all of us together." Everything was beautiful. The environment was great.

ISOARDI: So Jordan was pretty mixed?

WOODMAN: It was really what you'd call an integrated school, quite different from most all the other schools.

ISOARDI: When were you born? What year?

WOODMAN: I was born April 22, 1919. And my musical beginnings-- I suppose you would like to know that. My father [William B. Woodman, Sr.], being a trombone player and a musician, he gave all of us brothers music.

ISOARDI: Was he a professional musician?

WOODMAN: Oh, yes. See, my father, he played trombone, and he played with various bands, but the latest band that he played with was with the Teddy Buckner Dixieland Band. He was with him for quite some time.

ISOARDI: You know, I remember hearing a story--or maybe I read this in a book somewhere, I'm not sure--that your father was asked to join the Duke Ellington band at one

time. Was that true?

WOODMAN: That was possible, but, see, I was very young. Yeah, I think it was so, but, see, he was just like myself: He never wanted to travel, period. He loved the home, and he never did want to travel.

ISOARDI: Yeah, with four kids--

WOODMAN: Yeah, he did very well at home. He worked at the-- I guess you've heard of the Follies Burlesque Theatre, which was one of the main burlesque houses on Main Street. He worked there for about seven years, and he did well there. As a matter of fact, he provided for all of the family, a very, very wonderful provider. He was never out of work.

ISOARDI: How far back does your family go in L.A.?

WOODMAN: Oh, ever since-- Well, my father and mother [Irene Woodman] came out here around about 1930.

ISOARDI: So you weren't born in Watts, then?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I was born here when they came out. Yeah, I was born here, yeah, when they came out. See, my oldest brother, Coney, was born in Mississippi.

ISOARDI: That's where they're originally from, then.

WOODMAN: Right, originally from Mississippi. When they came out here, I came along, and then my brother Britt came along.

ISOARDI: Did they ever talk about why they came out to

Southern California?

WOODMAN: Well, the opportunity. They had-- Let me see. My mother's sisters had come out here. It was about five sisters. They all had come out here and wrote and told them how beautiful and how great it was out here, and, naturally, they wanted to come out. Because, at that time, you know, prejudice was going on, and they were what you call sharecroppers. You know how they--

ISOARDI: In Mississippi.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And they wanted to get away from that. So they came on out here and have been out here ever since. Beautiful. They enjoyed this weather. Everything is so different out here from what it was back there in Mississippi.

Also, the musical environment that inspired me was listening to records of the big bands and going to dances where big bands played, like the [Hollywood] Palladium and places like that. That's what inspired me. And, of course, the instruments that I played and the teachers who taught me were like-- I first took piano lessons.

ISOARDI: How old were you?

WOODMAN: I was about seven years old when I started playing piano. I took from this German teacher. I didn't know her name.

ISOARDI: Did you want to play then? Or did your father

sort of say, "You're going to play piano"?

WOODMAN: No, we were always enthused. We wanted to play. We were very happy to play. My father asked each of us which instrument we'd love to play. I said, "I want to play trumpet." Britt said, "I want to play trombone." So he said, "Well, I'm going to give all of you piano lessons first. Then that will be the fundamentals, the foundation." So I chose the trumpet. And you know Lloyd Reese?

ISOARDI: I know of him, certainly.

WOODMAN: Well, see, he was a good trumpet player, so I took lessons from him. And then I took clarinet lessons from Marshall Royal's uncle [Ernest Royal]. I forget his name, but-- You know Marshall Royal, don't you?

ISOARDI: Sure, sure.

WOODMAN: Well, see, his uncle was a good clarinet player. I imagine his uncle taught him clarinet, also.

ISOARDI: So this is when you were just about ten years old or something like that?

WOODMAN: Yeah. See, I took piano lessons when I was seven, and then trumpet-- I played piano for two years. Then he gave me trumpet lessons, which I took from Lloyd Reese for two years. Then he decided that he wanted me to play clarinet, so I took clarinet from Marshall Royal's uncle for two years. Then, after two years, I took up

saxophone. And saxophone, now, I just-- Well, with the clarinet and trumpet, well, it was easy for me to be self-taught as far as-- That was the easiest, easier than the rest of them.

ISOARDI: You must have come up to L.A., then, to study with Lloyd Reese.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. Right.

ISOARDI: What was he like? Do you remember much about him as a teacher?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. He was a great musician, one of the finest trumpet players at that time, yeah.

ISOARDI: What kind of a teacher was he? What was his style like?

WOODMAN: Well, he taught you out of the book. No kind of memory or this, but intervals and scales, chords, such as that, which, by me learning these chords, scales, and all those things, well, eventually, I turned out to be a better musician. And I learned to read well. All these things helped. Whereas, so many musicians, they don't study chords, they don't study scales, they don't study intervals. Well, naturally, they go by what their ear tells them to, which is great. Sometimes I wish I had the ear that some of these musicians had and couldn't read one lick, because it seems as if so many musicians like Erroll Garner and Louis Armstrong, so many of these musicians,

most of them became stylists because what came out of their head was so great. But I thank goodness that I did learn.

My early influences of different musicians were like Chu Berry and Coleman Hawkins and Don Byas and big bands like Benny Goodman and Roy Eldridge. Those were my idol musicians, each one of those.

ISOARDI: Did you have a chance to see them? Or was it mostly records?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Yeah. I didn't see Chu Berry, unfortunately. He died very young, you know, in a car accident. But, now, he was my idol on the saxophone.

ISOARDI: What grabbed you about his playing?

WOODMAN: I loved his style, and I loved his tone. I loved his style. That's what attracted me most to him; it was his style. Of course, we know that Don Byas and Coleman Hawkins, they had great styles, also. As a matter of fact, why I liked Chu Berry's style, before I ever heard Chu Berry and knew who he was--I never saw him--but when I heard a record of him, I said, "That sounds just like me." [laughter] And everybody that heard Chu Berry said, "Man, hey, Brother"--they called me Brother--"You know who you sound like?" I said, "Yeah, Chu Berry." They said, "Yeah, you sound just like Chu Berry." That's one musician that I haven't heard one saxophone player try to copy after, but you have exact copies after Lester Young and Ben

Webster and Coleman Hawkins. But nobody I have yet heard played like Chu Berry. He was my idol. He was something else. Too bad he left us so early.

Now, I was telling you about me, as far as the instruments I played. Now, my brother Coney played piano and banjo. At that time, banjo was very popular, because as far as the guitar, guitar wasn't very popular, because no one actually-- You remember Charlie Christian?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

WOODMAN: Now, he was the first one that actually started playing solo on the guitar. And later on you begin to hear musicians who played the guitar. But there weren't any guitars around at that time. I didn't know of anybody who played guitar. Banjo was the main string instrument. [laughter] And my brother, Britt, now, he played--

ISOARDI: But Coney stayed with the piano, then.

WOODMAN: Coney stayed with the piano, right. But at this time now, he's not active at all. He's Christian. He's playing in the church, but he's not playing out in the clubs anymore. Now Britt's the only one who's active in playing clubs and with various bands. He's the only one out there now. Like I say, he took piano lessons for two years, and my dad gave him trombone lessons for two years. My daddy gave him trombone lessons because my daddy was a trombone player. Then he took clarinet lessons, and

the saxophone self-taught, because, naturally, when you play the clarinet or trombone or any other instrument, the sax is the easiest instrument to learn.

ISOARDI: After clarinet, boy, it seems easy. Sure.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And then Britt finally stayed with trombone.

WOODMAN: He stayed with trombone.

ISOARDI: And then your fourth brother?

WOODMAN: Oh, well, now, unfortunately, he was-- We had what you call the Biggest Little Band in the World at that time. We were recognized because we were the only musicians who doubled on three instruments. You didn't hear of anybody doubling on brass. Now, Benny Carter played trumpet and reed instruments. He's the only one that I heard who doubled. But all of us brothers, Britt and myself, we doubled, like I say, on saxophone, trumpet, clarinet, and all those things. It was phenomenal, because everybody was amazed to see us. All the musicians said, "How do you do it, man? How can your embouchure change from a brass to a reed?" I said, "Well, you just practice and get used to it." [laughter]

ISOARDI: This is your family band, right? The Woodman Brothers band?

WOODMAN: It was called the Woodman Brothers Biggest Little Band in the World.

ISOARDI: When did you guys start playing together?

WOODMAN: Around about 1934. See, Britt was about fourteen, and I was fifteen. Coney was seventeen. We started playing professionally.

ISOARDI: At that age.

WOODMAN: At that age. That's why we were considered so great. My father did all our arrangements. He arranged our music for us.

ISOARDI: Did he urge you guys to form the band?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was like our manager, and he did all the bookings. Now, with our little orchestra at that time, Jessie Sailes-- I don't know whether you know him or not. He's a drummer. He played with Teddy Buckner out at Disneyland for about fifteen years.

ISOARDI: What did he play?

WOODMAN: He played drums. And Joe Comfort was our bass player. Now, you talk about something unique, he played trumpet, and he could play every one of Roy Eldridge's solos.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

WOODMAN: He could pick up the trumpet and play all those high notes.

ISOARDI: All those high notes.

WOODMAN: Yeah, really! I said "Man, how do you do that?" He had a terrific ear, and he had a good embouchure

on trumpet. But he never played trumpet as far as playing it out or anything. He just picked up the trumpet and started playing it.

ISOARDI: Oh, man.

WOODMAN: Amazing, isn't it? Because bass was his instrument. Of course, he was a great bass player.

ISOARDI: But he never really-- Bass was his number-one choice.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. That was it.

ISOARDI: But in your band he played trumpet, as well?

WOODMAN: Well, every now and then, he'd pick up his trumpet and play a solo, some of Eldridge's solos, yeah.

ISOARDI: That must have knocked people out.

WOODMAN: It did. It did. And with him in the band, and then Ernie Royal, Marshall Royal's brother, played trumpet with us.

ISOARDI: He also played with you?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he played with us. So we really had a terrific band. Oh, we played everywhere, like clubs. We played for clubs, dances all over the region of Los Angeles. We played at the Elks hall on Central Avenue, the Masonic temple on Fifty-fourth [Street] and Central. We played in Bakersfield. We played in Arizona, San Diego. There's a place called Leaks Lake Ballroom. That was a big ballroom. We were real young. I was about sixteen, my

brother Britt was about fifteen, Coney was about eighteen. That was a great-- It really was something where we enjoyed ourselves playing.

ISOARDI: Where was that at?

WOODMAN: Leaks Lake was out there about 116th [Street] right off-- It wasn't right on Central. It was right-- Somewhere out there in Watts. [laughter]

ISOARDI: That was a big ballroom, a big dance hall?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. It was. Oh, yeah, it was something else. And also we played at this little club called the Brown Sisters. Now, this particular little club, there were three sisters who owned it. And Fain happened to come out at that particular time.

ISOARDI: Who?

WOODMAN: Elmer Fain. You know--

ISOARDI: Oh, the business agent from [American Federation of Musicians] Local 767?

WOODMAN: He was the business agent of 767, and he was very strict on-- Man, some of these musicians, he would pull them off the job if they didn't have their card or weren't paid up. He came. He was going to pull us off that job, but my father talked him out of it, so he gave us a chance. We weren't even in the union. My dad didn't put us in the union, and he found out we weren't, so he caught us out there. [laughter] That was funny, but my daddy got

kind of angry because he wanted to pull us off. My daddy said, "Well, just let them play and I'll make sure they're all put in the union." So he went down, and he put us all into the union. As a matter of fact--

ISOARDI: Really? The whole band?

WOODMAN: Not the whole band. I think, at that time-- See, Joe Comfort and my brother Coney were around about the same age. As a matter of fact, I don't think Joe Comfort was in the union. I don't think any of us were in the union at that time, so everybody had to get into the union, and if they didn't, they couldn't be playing. I imagine he was checking on us wherever we played. So, anyway, we all got into the union, and we've all become life members. I am a life member, my brother Coney is a life member, Britt's a life member, so we're all life members.

ISOARDI: You must have been a life member a while ago, right? [laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, quite some time ago. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, joining when you were fifteen, sixteen?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And that was the Woodman Brothers orchestra, which was really great. And, as I said, our father, he did all our arranging.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you a couple of questions about the band. What kind of a book did you have? What kind of arrangements? Was it kind of big band stuff written for

you?

WOODMAN: Well, my father, at that time, he wasn't what you'd call a great arranger, but the way he arranged it, tunes that we did were standard tunes at that time. Like he'd arrange for the trombone and the trumpet to play maybe a chorus of like "Sophisticated Lady" or whatever. Then we'd set our instruments down, pick up our clarinets, and we'd play our clarinets together. Then we'd put down our clarinets and pick up our saxophones and play them.

ISOARDI: So he really wanted to show you guys off. [laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. We really were something. I have to admit that we really were outstanding. And we kept working. At that time, times were-- You know, like $3 a night was good money at that time. And my daddy would book us at, like, a dance-- We would play at least three dances a week. There's three of us, so that's $9 a week that we would bring in. And we didn't value money; we didn't know what it was all about. My daddy would give us an allowance, all three of us brothers. Every Monday night, he'd put a quarter on the dresser. Monday, we'd be looking for that quarter. That was our allowance. He'd made $9, and he'd give us a quarter. [laughter] But we were so happy to get it. We didn't-- We were really just nonchalant. We didn't know what the value of money was. A

quarter? Boy, I was glad to get that quarter. With my quarter, I'd go buy me like a dozen glazed doughnuts, and the doughnuts at that time were real large. [laughter] That same doughnut now costs you around fifty or seventy-five cents in some places, and I used to buy a dozen for five cents. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, maybe he figured if he gave you $9, you'd buy a mountain of doughnuts. [laughter]

WOODMAN: I used to buy-- I used to love peach pies. Pies would cost ten cents, a big old pie. Oh! We just had fun with that little-- And we'd use it. Like, every Saturday we'd go to the show, and the show was five cents. We'd go see Buck Jones, and the series would continue next week. We'd be ready to go to the next week show on Saturday to catch up with Buck Jones and Tom Mix. Oh, we had some fun. It was really great.

ISOARDI: You know, you'd probably love-- There's a place near where I live out in the Pasadena area called the Cobbler Factory. They make the best peach cobbler around.

WOODMAN: Yeah. [laughter] I don't need to go out there. I'm fat enough. I've got to cut down. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Let me ask you, too, you mentioned some of the guys I guess you met as kids as you grew up. You mentioned Joe Comfort and Mingus. Maybe you could talk about how you first met some of these guys.

WOODMAN: Well, they all lived out there in Watts, and we all went to school together.

ISOARDI: Grammar school?

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, mostly Jordan High. Joe Comfort and--

ISOARDI: That's where you met Joe Comfort?

WOODMAN: Yeah, and Buddy Collette and Charles Mingus. All of us, we were brought up in Watts, reared out in Watts there. So, naturally, we were all-- Big Jay McNeely and--

ISOARDI: Do you have any unusual memories of meeting any of these people for the first time?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: You just sort of met them in the course of going to school and all?

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, see, like Charles Mingus, see, he used to play cello. He took lessons. He carried that cello right on his arms to school. And we used to rehearse over at a little apartment I had, that I lived in. We used to rehearse over there. We just had a lot of fun. As you know, Charles Mingus turned out to be one of the finest bass players, one of the finest musicians.

ISOARDI: Great composer.

WOODMAN: Bless his heart. The only thing about Charles Mingus, he thought himself above other musicians, which was a very bad attitude that he had taken. He caused a lot of musicians not to like him, and he lost a lot of jobs

because of his attitude, and that was pretty sad. He and I were the best of friends, because we went around together to different places, went to shows together and all that. He had a very mean temper.

ISOARDI: Even then, when you first knew him?

WOODMAN: Right. Well, at that time, he wasn't like he became because he wasn't great. He was just learning, you know. I mean, he was learning. He finally began to play the bass, and, as he grew older and people began to know who he was, he began to write music. He had a great ear, and he had real imagination in playing music, and that's when he became as he did. His attitude changed, and he felt that nobody was like him, as great as he was, which was very sad. He and I were both born the same April the twenty-second, and I was just opposite of him. I was what they call real quiet, nice, and kind. But he was mean, in a sense. I don't know. It was just pitiful how he was.

ISOARDI: He had kind of like a chip on his shoulder or something?

WOODMAN: Well, he acted like that at times, but I don't know what brought that on. I really don't know what brought his attitude, the way he was. Nobody really knows. He didn't go into the service. That could have affected his mind or something, in that sense. But he just was-- I don't know.

ISOARDI: Did he play with the band, with the family band?

WOODMAN: He played with us on occasions, but after he became great so quick, he began to play with different name bands and different people who were great, and he left here and forgot about me, his best friend. [laughter] He came out here a couple times and he didn't even come to see me. But that's all right.

ISOARDI: Who were some of the other people who played with the band, the family band? You mentioned Joe Comfort, you mentioned Jessie Sailes. Anybody else?

WOODMAN: Well, yeah, Buddy Collette.

ISOARDI: When did Buddy play with you guys?

WOODMAN: Well, Buddy didn't play with us too much. Buddy was a little younger than me. I can remember one incident that happened-- He would play with us-- At different dances, he'd play with us, too, because, at that time, the Woodman Brothers band-- I played tenor, and we needed an alto player, so we used Buddy Collette. I played tenor, and he played-- And at that time, also, you know, when they had the music-- What do they call that? The arrangements that you could buy.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. Stocks.

WOODMAN: Stock arrangements. We used a lot of stocks, and the stock arrangements at that time were really something, just like the bands played them. You know, Glenn Miller

and Benny Goodman and even [Jimmie] Lunceford. Those arrangements. We played them just like the arrangements because we all could read very well. Britt and I were what you call sight-readers. Anything we put up in front of us we could read.

ISOARDI: By the time you were fifteen, sixteen, you were sight-reading with no trouble?

WOODMAN: Right, right. We really read real great. And he can still do it. He can transpose, like, trumpet parts-- He can transpose that just like playing the trombone part. And myself, I learned to transpose. Like, I could play the alto part on my tenor, which was just like playing the tenor part. We were very musically inclined.

ISOARDI: So you had Buddy with you off and on?

WOODMAN: Off and on. Now, he played with us in San Diego. I might have told you this incident that happened. My father had bought a yellow '37 Packard, bright yellow. As a matter of fact, I believe he was the first person who bought the new '37 Packard. I used to be the driver, and I used to pack all the instruments in there. I packed them up, and I did the driving. This particular night we had an engagement in San Diego, so we all left--Buddy Collette and, of course, Joe Comfort and Jessie Sailes--all those who played with us. When I was driving all the way to San Diego, this car was coming the

opposite way, of course. Buddy Collette says I'm the one who hit him, but that car hit me, sideswiped me. But Buddy Collette claims, "Hey, you like to fool around driving. You like to see how close you can come to cars."

ISOARDI: Did you?

WOODMAN: Well, in a way, I did. [laughter] But this time, this car sideswiped me. So I stopped, and I was waiting for them to come to see what damage was done or what damage was done to their car because I knew it was their fault. But they never came. There wasn't that much damage, just a sideswipe. The paint or something, probably, came off of my car and probably same with his. As we approached San Diego, I saw these cops down in the middle of the road flagging down cars.

They stopped us and said, "Did you just have an accident?"

I said, "What kind of accident?"

"Did you just sideswipe an automobile?"

I said, "No, I didn't. They sideswiped me, and I stopped and waited for them to come to see what damage was done to their car."

"Well, I'm sorry. They said that you sideswiped them."

I said, "Well, where are they? They're not around."

"Well, we're going to have to put you in jail."

ISOARDI: So they locked you up?

WOODMAN: They locked me up for that night, and I didn't even make the engagement. But next day my daddy bailed me out, of course. [laughter] I missed our engagement. I meant to ask Buddy Collette, because I did all the solo work, and to this day I've never asked him. I said, "Man, did you take my place to take the solos?" [laughter]

ISOARDI: You know, he told me a story like that. I think he's still nervous. [laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah, I made them all nervous. [laughter] I made them all nervous. Yeah, I used to drive pretty rough. [tape recorder off]

As I said, the Woodman Brothers played all over Los Angeles. Of course, then our band broke up about-- I'm the one who caused the breakup. Like a fool, I got married.

ISOARDI: Why did that cause it to break up?

WOODMAN: Well, you know how that is. I don't know. It's just one of those things, and it just happened that way. I got married. Well, it didn't break up right away, because, see, when I got married, I got married at sixteen years old. Ain't that sad?

ISOARDI: Sixteen.

WOODMAN: As a matter of fact, I have two children [William B. Woodman III and Beverly Woodman]. As a matter of fact, my son is fifty-five years old.

ISOARDI: No kidding!

WOODMAN: I'm just sixteen years older than my son. [laughter] Anyway, I got married at sixteen, and at that time my ex-wife [Jean Pillow Woodman] was sixteen, also. We had what you called the Woodman Brothers Studio, and we lived right there at the studio. My wife and I lived-- Well, no, we lived with my mother and father. We lived up on top of the garage in my mother's home in Watts at that time. Then, on 111th [Street] and Wilmington [Avenue] was what you called Woodman Brothers Studio. It was really something else. We could play there every Saturday night, and it cost, I think, fifteen cents admission, and people from downtown used to come down there. Saturday night was a big night for everybody. It was a little place, maybe no bigger than this whole space here.

ISOARDI: And you'd give performances when you didn't have a gig somewhere else?

WOODMAN: Well, every Saturday night, that would be reserved for a dance. My daddy put on that and made this into a little dance hall.

ISOARDI: You had your own club!

WOODMAN: Yeah. And my daddy made it-- Well, he made money that way. [laughter]

ISOARDI: He was a good businessman.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Different people from Los Angeles would come down there. Every now and then, you know, in Watts

and Los Angeles, some of the fellows, they'd get in fights. You know how that happens. At that time the fights were clean--no knives, no guns. They used to get outside there and fight each other. The best man wins, shake hands, that was it. [laughter] Every Saturday we'd expect a fight. But they didn't tear up anything. They went outside like gentlemen, you know, and they fought. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Wild.

WOODMAN: But it was still good days. We had good times then. We had that studio there for about three years, and it did very good business. My grandmother [Henrietta Jones] owned the property around there. She owned about four or five homes within that block, and the Woodman Brothers Studio was within that block, also. We really had some good times at that time.

ISOARDI: You guys were doing okay.

WOODMAN: Then, after we broke up, then I started playing, and Britt started venturing out with different bands and with different orchestras, like he played with Buddy Collette and Lucky Thompson at the Downbeat [Club] at that time.

ISOARDI: You broke up, then, when you were--

WOODMAN: When I was about eighteen years old. I was about eighteen years old when we broke up. No, about twenty. I was about twenty when we broke up.

ISOARDI: It was about 1939.

WOODMAN: Yes, something like that.

ISOARDI: But you guys were together, then, as a band for something like four years, five years?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. We were together. See, we played just about every club in Los Angeles, about every club in Los Angeles. Elks club, Masonic club. We played for different clubs and organizations. We played for all of those people. Because everybody knew who we were, and everybody got a kick out of wanting us and listening to us as young musicians. I have to say, we were really great. After we broke up, as I said, I started playing with various groups. My first-- You might not remember Maxwell Davis.

ISOARDI: I know the name.

WOODMAN: He was a great musician.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's what I've heard.

WOODMAN: He arranged very well. I started playing with him. I played trumpet and baritone with him.

ISOARDI: What kind of a band did he have?

WOODMAN: He had a swing band, more or less a swing band.

ISOARDI: Really? Based in L.A.?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Central area or Watts?

WOODMAN: We played Hollywood, we played in San Diego. We traveled around mostly in the Los Angeles area.

ISOARDI: Where did you play in Hollywood? Do you remember any of the names of the clubs?

WOODMAN: With him, I forget the name of the place that we played there. But, now, I played with-- Do you remember Cee Pee Johnson?

ISOARDI: You were in that band?

WOODMAN: Cee Pee Johnson. See, I played with him. And Teddy Buckner was with him and-- I forget some of the other musicians. Anyway, we played at Billy Berg's. Remember Billy Berg?

ISOARDI: Yeah, he had a lot of different clubs. Which one was this?

WOODMAN: Billy Berg's on Hollywood [Boulevard] and Las Palmas [Avenue]. No, Billy Berg's was on the Strip.

ISOARDI: It was on Sunset Strip.

WOODMAN: Yeah. We played there. And we also played at another one of his clubs called the Swing Club. That was on Vine [Street]. No, that one was on Hollywood and Las Palmas, that one was.

ISOARDI: The Swing Club?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, both of those clubs were very outstanding clubs, and that's where most of your big shots came, because he had big-time musicians there, like, at one of the clubs-- Who was the blind piano player who was--?

ISOARDI: [Art] Tatum?

WOODMAN: Tatum was featured at Billy Berg's. We were there at that time with Cee Pee Johnson.

ISOARDI: Did you ever have any dealings with Billy Berg? You know, what was he like?

WOODMAN: At that time, like I say, he was-- He must have been okay with everybody. But what happened with him, I think he got in trouble, because I found out he was diluting that whiskey.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: I think he finally was diluting the whiskey, and I don't see why he would have done that. Now, this is what I heard, and that hurt him, too, you know. But he must have made good money. He must have gotten rich, because Billy Berg's was one of the most outstanding clubs there in Hollywood. Billy Berg's. Everybody knew about Billy Berg's.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you a little bit about what the music scene was like. I mean, you guys must have been the heart of the music scene in Watts, down in that area.

WOODMAN: Yes.

ISOARDI: What else was going on? Were there any big clubs down there or any other clubs going on?

WOODMAN: Well, the most important club there in Los Angeles was the Club Alabam, which was the most outstanding club in Los Angeles. The Club Alabam. Musicians from all

over would come there, and you'd take most of your people in Hollywood-- Hollywood used to come down there, people from Hollywood used to come down there all the time. It was a place where you had all kinds of big bands that were there and entertainers. I worked there with-- I don't know whether you've heard of Happy Johnson. He was a trombone player. I worked with him. And Curtis Mosby-- I don't know whether you've heard of him.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I have.

WOODMAN: Curtis Mosby owned the Alabam at that time. And at one time, after-- Some of these guys who own these clubs, they forget to pay the musicians. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, they "forget." [laughter]

WOODMAN: They took him to the musician's union because so many musicians had complained about him owing them. So, you know, he had to pay. I got a part of that money. He paid out a lot of money to musicians who put in a complaint that he didn't pay, and they got that money, too. Well, see, he had to close that club down.

ISOARDI: Is that what he was--

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was when 767 was in operation, of course, at that time.

ISOARDI: So Curtis Mosby was running the Alabam. Any other memories of Curtis Mosby? What he was like? What kind of guy was he? I mean, aside from the fact that he

was always trying to get a little bit extra.

WOODMAN: Well, he was an okay guy, because at that time I didn't hear any bad things about him. I heard nothing bad about him. He was all right because he treated everybody well. He had to, because they had people coming from Hollywood. Most of the clientele were white people from Hollywood.

ISOARDI: At the Alabam.

WOODMAN: They came to the Alabam because they had good entertainment. Of course, it began to decline because of the environment. The environment changed and they had people that-- I hate to say this, but some of these people would rob the people, and all that kind of stuff began to happen. So, naturally, it just stopped the people coming out here from Hollywood. That really messed up the whole thing, and they eventually had to close it down, because people from Hollywood were what kept it going, because just a regular class of people, middle class, they didn't support it. It was actually the people from Hollywood who were supporting the Alabam.

Another club that was doing very well was the Downbeat. I played there with Lee Young, you know, Lester Young's brother. We had a nice-- But I was doubling on trumpet and saxophone at that time.

ISOARDI: Trumpet and tenor?

WOODMAN: Yeah, at that time.

ISOARDI: When were you playing at the Alabam? Do you remember? Was that before World War II?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was before World War II. Oh, yes. At that time, World War II, I was in the service for about eleven weeks, and I came out of that because I didn't want to be in there in the first place. I told them to let me out because there was too much prejudice going on, and I complained and everything.

I figure I told you this, but I had what you call narcolepsy. It's a sleeping sickness that-- When I was around about fourteen years old, I used to do quite a bit of exercise, see, on the bars, and I fell off the bars and fell on my head, and I must have-- I thought I had broken my neck, but it wasn't that. I went to the doctor. I began to sleep a lot, and I think that's why they let me out of school. That's how I got out of school, because I slept through school. I didn't do any work. They said, "This man's sleeping. Let's let him out. It beats keeping him in here." [laughter] But, anyway--

ISOARDI: But that got you out of the service, then?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that's how I got out of the service when I was inducted. I told them that I had sleeping sickness, but they didn't listen to me because there so many soldiers at that time, people who were inducted, who tried to get

out and talked about they were crazy. They all had different excuses. They thought I was goldbricking, some of them, but I was telling the truth.

ISOARDI: So they took you first, then.

WOODMAN: They took me. While I was in there, I would be standing up in the middle of the road and fall asleep, and the jeep would be coming down, and the captain would say, "Hey, soldier, wake up! What did you do, go to sleep?" I'd wake up. We'd be going through our exercise--you know how you exercise--we'd all be lined up and bending down like, "Up, down, up, down," and I'd go down and stay there. "Hey, what's wrong with him? Wake him up!" I wasn't asleep. I was just pretending like I was asleep at that point. But most of the time, I was asleep. I'd stand up and go to sleep. Pretty soon they felt, "Well, this man probably does have sleeping sickness." So they put me in the hospital. I stayed in there about three weeks when I should have been out. That's when I really got it, because I got mad with everybody and said, "Why did you put me here? Let me out! I don't want to be here." So I broke out windows and got in fights. They said, "This man's going crazy. We better let him out." So I got an honorable discharge. [laughter] Then, as I said, they wanted to keep me in there at that time. I brought my saxophone, and a captain or one of them said, "Hey, why don't you start a band here?" This was in

North Carolina. I was in the engineering--

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: I said, "No, I prefer not." I said, "I have sleeping sickness, and I prefer not starting a band." If I had started one, I would have been asleep most of the time. I couldn't have gotten anywhere with the band. [laughter] Yeah, well, when I came out of there, I started working with the various bands and various-- I worked with, like, Cee Pee Johnson, Maxwell Davis, and Jake Porter. You remember Jake Porter?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

WOODMAN: I worked with Jake Porter at different places. We played at different places. As a matter of fact, the last place I played with Jake Porter was at the Largo on the Strip. It was one of the most outstanding burlesque places on the Strip.

ISOARDI: I remember, yeah.

WOODMAN: It was it. I worked there with him. And what happened there, I worked there for five years.

ISOARDI: Five years?

WOODMAN: Five years.

ISOARDI: Long time.

WOODMAN: And Mr. Stern, I think, was his name. And--

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ISOARDI: You were saying about working at the Largo.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I worked at Largo for five years with Jake Porter. And pretty soon the owner, Mr. Stern, he came up to me, and he said, "Brother--" They called me Brother.

ISOARDI: Why did they call you Brother?

WOODMAN: Well, that seemed to have been the name that-- My father and mother, they called me Brother, so that name seemed to be the name everybody started calling me.

ISOARDI: That stuck.

WOODMAN: Anyway, so he came to me, and he said, "Brother, I've got some bad news for you."

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "I'm going to have to let you go."

I said, "Why?"

He says, "The girls"--which were the stripteasers--"they got together and said I'm going to have to get rid of you. I certainly hate this, Brother, because I'm the one who hired you. I heard you in the club, and I wanted you because you played well."

What happened, the girls conspired against me, and they wanted to get a white man in there. That's what it was, see.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

WOODMAN: He said to me, "Woodman, I hate to let you go, but, see, the girls are what makes my living, the girls, not the band. But I like live music. You played well and I liked you and I hired you. I can use a juke box and probably do just as good a business."

I said, "Oh, well, if that's the way it is, that's the way it's got to be."

So he said, "I hate to let you go" and gave me a week's notice and that was that. That was the last place I played.

See, after that, that's when my memory began to fade, because the narcolepsy had affected my memory. It affected my music. I wasn't able to comprehend tunes. I wasn't able to remember well. So that all happened for the best. That's when I left there. And Charles Martin-- I don't know whether you've heard of him. He was a piano player. He got himself a job at Sears Roebuck [and Company], which used to be on Slauson [Avenue] and Vermont [Avenue], because it closed down. It eventually closed down. He called me up one day and said, "Brother, hey, man, there's an opening here for washers and dryers. Come on down, man." I had been out of work for about six months. I was drawing unemployment. I was just-- Believe me, I was going to get some kind of job, but I wasn't qualified for anything else. I said, "Oh, Lord," I said,

"Thank you, Father. This is just the Lord opening a way for me." I went down there and, sure enough, just that quick, I was hired. And I worked for Sears. That was in 1967, and I worked sixteen years for Sears. That was from then on until I retired from them, and that's when I started drawing social security at the age of-- I was sixty-five years old when I left Sears.

ISOARDI: So the narcolepsy just sort of gradually increased and made it impossible for you.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I couldn't have stayed out there and played music because, to be a great musician, you've got to comprehend tunes, be able to have a good ear and grasp tunes, remember tunes, which, at one time, I could do. I had perfect pitch. I was born with it. Hear any note, any sound, I could tell that's C, B, G, that's a C chord, an F chord, whatever. And I knew that I was going to be one of the greatest saxophone players, which I would have been, but when this happened to me--

I believe that it was only God's will. I look at it in this way. Because I believe that if I had not had this sleeping sickness, and if I had been in the service, I wouldn't have gotten out, period. At that time, I was very bitter against prejudice, because at that time prejudice existed. I know I probably would have gotten hurt, because I heard that down South the blacks couldn't eat in the

restaurants. I said, "Why?" I heard that even the prisoners, soldiers, German prisoners, could go eat anywhere they wanted. Here I'm fighting for my country, and I couldn't go in there. Well, all this really registered on me, and I said, "Lordy, I couldn't take this. I wouldn't be able to take it." So it just happened that because I had this narcolepsy I got out.

And then I also believe that if I had kept on and not had this narcolepsy and was playing in these different clubs all over, I might have gotten to the place where I might have gotten myself in trouble in the sense of not being thoughtful and not taking care of myself. I might have gotten into dope, I might have gotten into anything, you know. But I got out of it, and I believe that it was only God's will that it happened this way. But I was pretty cool while I was in there. I didn't do too much drinking, I didn't dissipate, I didn't run after women, and that's why I feel as well as I do now. Physically, I feel great.

ISOARDI: Yeah, you look great.

WOODMAN: Really, I feel great. Thank God for that. But I believe there was a reason for this to happen to me, because there's no telling what would have become of me. But I prayed. I'd just say, "God, give it back to me. Just give me what I had. I'll take care of everything.

I'm not going to do anything wrong." [laughter] But, anyway, I guess God doesn't work like that.

But I enjoyed myself when I was out there. Let me see, I played with-- I don't know whether you remember what's his name-- Well, anyway, he passed. We were the first trio that played in Anchorage, Alaska. You know, at that time, there was prejudice also existing-- That was in '49 or maybe '50, something like that. We went to Alaska and played at-- I forget the name of the club.

ISOARDI: Who was in the trio?

WOODMAN: Bill Jackson was the drummer, and Ollie Jackson was the piano player. He was the one-- You'll probably know of him. We got some little arrangements together and went up there and did very well. We were up there for about two years, and we did very well. And then, when I came back home, that's when Joe Liggins-- You've heard of Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers?

ISOARDI: Oh, the Honeydrippers, sure.

WOODMAN: He had been wanting me to go with him all along.

He called me Brother. "Brother, why don't you come and go with me?"

I said, "Joe, I'm not going with you." I said, "You're going down South and all those places. I'll get you guys killed." So I just declined. So this particular time, when I came from Alaska, he was rehearsing at [Local]

767, which was, you know, the black union. So he heard that I was home.

He called me and said, "Brother, I need you."

I said, "Oh, yeah?" I said, "Where are you going? You going down South?"

He said, "Yeah, but don't worry about it. We're only going to play at the black clubs."

I said, "Yeah?" I said, "That's all you're going to play at? You're sure? Because if you play at any of the other clubs, I'm liable to get you all killed."

[laughter]

ISOARDI: Did you go with him?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I went with him.

ISOARDI: Any problems?

WOODMAN: One incident. When I went down to rehearse with them, the woman I'm married to right now, she was singing with them. Candy. Her name is Vernetta [Cartwright Woodman], but Joe Liggins changed her name to Candy [Rivers]. She was originally with the band to go with them on the road, and that's where I met her, and that's where we got together, and, boom, boom, later on we got married.

ISOARDI: So it's a good thing Joe Liggins kept after you.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah, because she's a wonderful woman. We've been together for thirty-six years.

So we traveled the biggest portion of the South. On

our way back home-- I was with him about two years. On our way back home, we stopped at this little suburban town, somewhere out of Tuskegee, Alabama. I forget the name of it. It was a little suburb. Anyway, we stopped off to get gas. This attendant came out, and Joe said, "Fill me up, sir." So he started filling him up. And the drummer-- What was that drummer's name? He was funny. He was a funny guy [Nathaniel McFay]. Monk. They called him Monk. Anyway, he asked the guy, "Sir, may I use your restroom, the men's room?" So he directed him where to go. Evidently he got mixed up in directions. He was born there in the South, so he knows the difference between a white man's restroom and a black man's restroom. So what happened, when he went into this restroom, evidently he must have known he was in the wrong restroom. Guess what happened? This gas station attendant, he noticed him. He saw him going in the white man's toilet. You know what he did? He dropped the hose, went into his station, and got his gun.

ISOARDI: Oh, man.

WOODMAN: And, like I say, Monk must have known and felt something. By the time he came out of the restroom, he was on his way-- He was about from there to Monk with the gun.

ISOARDI: Where? From the TV?

WOODMAN: Yeah, by the TV.

ISOARDI: So about fifteen feet?

WOODMAN: Yeah, with the gun. Monk saw him with the gun, and, naturally, he ran, because he knew how things were down there. He ran across this big empty field, and we picked him up clear down the road. We tease him to this day. It wasn't funny then. The guy came back, started pumping the gas, "He'd better have run." I was looking for him to say, "That nigger better have run," but he didn't even say it.

Anyway, I said, "Joe, now, had that been me, I wouldn't have run." I said, "I would have been just that stubborn. And I don't know what would have happened." I said "Do you have a gun?"

He said, "No, Brother. We're not supposed to have no guns down South. If we get caught with a gun, they'll put us in jail."

I said, "You don't have nothing to protect yourself? That man could have killed all of us!"

He said, "Yeah, but--" [laughter]

That was the only incident we had. And my wife-- You know women get away with murder down South. Men can't. She happened to want a drink of water. You know, the fountains, they had whites or we had blacks. They didn't call it-- What did they have on there? "Negroes." So she started drinking out of the fountain that said "white."

And we're all-- We said, no. She's-- "Oh." You know, we're looking at her, and we said "Oh, she's doing that wrong. She's in trouble."

So this man walked up and said, "Girl," to her, "what are you doing drinking out of that white fountain? You know you're supposed to be drinking out of the colored fountain."

When she came back, my wife said she said, "I don't like colored water." [laughter] That's what she told the man.

But she, being a woman, she could get away with that, see.

ISOARDI: He didn't react to that?

WOODMAN: No, he didn't react to it. She just left and came back to the car. [laughter] But we enjoyed ourselves down there. We had some good times, played at most all the clubs down there. Yeah, we did well.

ISOARDI: And you traveled with Joe Liggins when? Was this the late forties, fifties?

WOODMAN: No, that was in the fifties.

ISOARDI: Fifties?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, the place that I enjoyed playing most was the Melody Club in Glendale. Now, there was prejudice going on at that time. Of course, you know, prejudice was going on all in the fifties and the sixties. His name was

Perry. Perry-- I forget his first name. He owned the club. That's when we had a group down there, and most of the group that was there was what you call a jazz group. We jammed. There was Bumps Myers, myself, Poison Gardner-- I don't know whether you've heard of him.

ISOARDI: I've heard the name.

WOODMAN: He was the piano player. He was a little short guy. He could play. Bob Harvey was the drummer. And I think Ralph Hamilton-- Yeah, Ralph Hamilton. He played with Teddy Buckner for a long time. He was a good bass player. Anyway--

ISOARDI: You know, I think a couple of weeks ago, Bill [William] Green showed me a photograph from there.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: With you, he, and Bumps Myers on stage, three tenors.

WOODMAN: Right. See, various musicians would come down. Monday night was jam session night, and it was packed. But it was open every night. That place was packed every night.

ISOARDI: Were you playing there every night?

WOODMAN: We were playing there every night. Every night. It was off on one day; I forget what day it was off. I think it was Sunday we were off. Anyway, that place was packed every night.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Because all we did was jam every night. We didn't have no music. We just jammed, period. We played just about any tune anybody wanted to hear.

ISOARDI: When was this?

WOODMAN: This was around '53 to '58.

ISOARDI: Four years you played in that club.

WOODMAN: Five. About '58.

ISOARDI: A steady gig.

WOODMAN: Oh, it was a good gig. It was a good gig. Yeah, it was a really good gig.

ISOARDI: I mean, a bunch of you guys from Central would go up to Glendale every night to play in this club?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, Bumps Myers and myself, we were regular, period, because it consisted of Bump Myers and myself, two tenors, and, of course, the rhythm section: piano, drums, and the bass. We were there every night. Every Monday night was jam session night. But other nights people would come in, too, because everybody heard about the Melody Club. And Bumps Myers and I, we were both good tenor players, you know. All we did was ad lib everything we played, you know, everything we played.

ISOARDI: What kind of an audience was coming into this club?

WOODMAN: Oh, mostly young, young, young, young people,

around eighteen, and some older people around eighteen to maybe forty years old. The clientele was a good clientele.

ISOARDI: But that was Glendale.

WOODMAN: That was Glendale. At that time, prejudice was existing then in Glendale, because blacks-- If they caught a black man on the steet after midnight, they'd throw him in jail when nobody was doing nothing.

ISOARDI: So did you guys ever have any problems?

WOODMAN: No. See, the police knew us. After we got out, we just went on home. They knew us because we were there every night. But the other clubs around there were jealous of Mr. Perry. We had all the business. Even the fire department gave him trouble and tried to put in an exit over here and an exit over there where it really wasn't necessary. So they were giving him a hard, hard time. He finally closed up because of them giving him a hard time. He was Italian, too, and they didn't care particularly about the Italians, either. [laughter]

ISOARDI: I wonder how much Glendale has changed. [laughter]

WOODMAN: So that was that.

ISOARDI: To go back a bit, say, before World War II, what was Central Avenue like just in general?

WOODMAN: Well, Central Avenue before the war, it was almost, you would say, like Broadway in New York [City].

It was just that great. People from all over would come down on Central Avenue. Like I say, the entertainment was great, and they even had after-hours spots. Let me see. I even had some of the after-hours spots named here. People from all over would come down to the after-hours spots. What are some of those places? Oh, yeah. You've probably heard of some of these places. They had an after-hours spot you've probably heard of. Did you ever hear of the Memo Club?

ISOARDI: Oh, Memo?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Memo Club.

ISOARDI: Yeah, but not much about it. Can you tell me what it was like?

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, that was one of the main hangouts for musicians on Central Avenue. And the Rigg Club, which was an after-hours spot, musicians from all over the world would come there. And Honey Murphy's on Central Avenue. That was another after-hours spot.

ISOARDI: The place was called Henry Murphy?

WOODMAN: Yeah. It was called Murphy. No, Honey Murphy's. That was another spot where all the musicians came, musicians like Art Tatum, Illinois Jacquet, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Charlie Parker. We'd come up there and jam. Another place called Brother's, that was another after-hours spot on Adams [Boulevard]. All these were

after-hours spots where all the big, great musicians would come and have great times after hours.

ISOARDI: Were these sort of regular clubs? Or were they just places like bars with a bandstand that got going later?

WOODMAN: No, well, they had whiskey after hours, you know, one of those things. You bring your own bottle and all that. But it wasn't a regular club. Only after all the other clubs closed down, they would all go out to these clubs.

ISOARDI: Did you hang out in any of them?

WOODMAN: Not really. I was still a young man. I didn't really-- I would go and hear these other great musicians play. I never did do any playing at these clubs.

ISOARDI: Who did you hear in any of these clubs? Do you remember any of them?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Art Tatum, I remember him. Illinois Jacquet, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Charlie Parker.

ISOARDI: You got to see them all?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I saw all these musicians.

ISOARDI: Do you remember anything in particular about any of them? Any nights that they were--

WOODMAN: All I know is they were all great. [laughter] They could play, yeah. Speaking of the Melody Club, Clora Bryant-- You know Clora Bryant?

ISOARDI: Sure. Yeah, we just talked to her.

WOODMAN: She would come out there every Monday night and even through the week. It was amazing just to hear a woman play like she played. At that time, you didn't find too many woman trumpet players. You don't find too many now.

ISOARDI: How did you guys react when you first saw Clora?

WOODMAN: Oh, we just couldn't believe that a woman could play that well, you know.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. She surprised all of us. You know, she was good.

ISOARDI: Was she accepted?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, definitely so. Yeah, because she was different. Then everybody accepted her.

ISOARDI: Still going strong.

WOODMAN: Still going strong. Let's see, what else have we got going here? Now, any questions you want to ask me?

ISOARDI: Yeah, we've got a lot. Anything else you remember about Central in the thirties? Let's see, those were some of the clubs, the after-hours spots. What about during the day? What was Central like during the day back then?

WOODMAN: Well, during the day, there wasn't too much happening. They had quite a [lot of] businesses just like anywhere else. They had--

ISOARDI: So it was kind of a shopping center?

WOODMAN: Well, not really. Like, on Central Avenue they had a mixture of all races at that time. They had clothing stores and barber shops and grocery stores and restaurants, hotels, and doctors offices, just like any other little town would have. My father had a beauty-and-barber supply shop during that time. I used to go down there day after day and help him.

ISOARDI: Where at?

WOODMAN: That was on-- As a matter of fact, that was right across from the Alabam.

ISOARDI: Across the street from the Alabam?

WOODMAN: But the Alabam had closed up around that time. That's when things began to decline and, like I say, the atmosphere, the environment became different, and people stopped coming to the Alabam. It actually closed down.

ISOARDI: So you're talking--what?--early fifties? Something like that? Later? Before that?

WOODMAN: I don't know exactly when the Alabam closed down. I think it closed in the fifties, didn't it?

ISOARDI: I'll try to remember. I think early fifties, but it may be even late forties.

WOODMAN: Maybe even a little before that. So after that, well, my father, he had a beauty-and-barber supply shop right across from the Alabam, because I say the Alabam was

closed. He did good business, and I would go down there day after day just to help him out. I'd take my saxophone down there and practice while I was waiting on people.

ISOARDI: Well, if he was across from the Alabam, then you're right by the Dunbar [Hotel], you're by the Downbeat, you're by the Last Word [Cafe]. You're right in the middle of it.

WOODMAN: Right, right. What else?

ISOARDI: Well, you went into the service for a little while.

WOODMAN: In about '41, yeah.

ISOARDI: Right. And you went to North Carolina. What was Central like during the war?

WOODMAN: During the war, that's when Central Avenue was jumping. That's when it was jumping. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Why? What changed?

WOODMAN: Well, what changed after the war?

ISOARDI: No, during the war, what made it start jumping?

WOODMAN: Well, like I say, during the war, people wanted to go places, and Central Avenue was the place to go. That was it. The Alabam-- Everybody knew about the Alabam. People wanted to go to a place that was-- Well, especially a place where blacks were entertaining, and, you know, they enjoyed black entertainment. All kinds of people from Hollywood, stars would come out there. I don't remember

any of the names of the stars who would come out there, but they did come out. They're what kept the Alabam open, really.

ISOARDI: So the Alabam was kind of expensive, then, I guess.

WOODMAN: At that time, I would assume it was.

ISOARDI: So the avenue changes, then, when the war comes on in the forties. It gets a bit more lively.

WOODMAN: Well, it changed. Like, during the war it was doing great, and after the war, that's when things began to change. People from the South, blacks from the South, I mean, they came down there, and the environment just changed. And then a lot of the Mexicans began to what you call migrate. Right now there's nothing but Mexicans down there more than blacks, I believe. They're taking over, really.

ISOARDI: Jackie Kelso told me a while ago that he went back to Jefferson [High School] a while ago, and he was surprised. He said when he was going to Jefferson, or back then, as he remembers it, it was very mixed. But now it's primarily Hispanic.

WOODMAN: Well, most of the schools, like in Watts at that time, were mostly Mexicans and blacks, like at Jordan, because Watts consisted of more blacks and mixed, and we were all integrated there. We all got along wonderfully

together, though. It was all right.

Like you said, the Downbeat and the Last Word and the Alabam were the most outstanding clubs on Central Avenue during that time.

ISOARDI: What was the appeal of the Downbeat and the Last Word? What were they like? Do you remember?

WOODMAN: What were they like?

ISOARDI: What were the clubs like?

WOODMAN: Well, it was like-- Well, what's that place in New York that everybody went to? It was just a small club. It reminded me of that. I never--

ISOARDI: A jazz club?

WOODMAN: Yeah, what's the name of it?

ISOARDI: Village Vanguard?

WOODMAN: Whatever club that was in New York that was packed-- It was a small club, but it was packed with all the great musicians. It reminds me of that. Musicians would come into the Downbeat and the Last Word. It was just a small club, but it was packed every night. And they had different groups there. Like I said, Buddy Collette had his group there, and I played with Lee Young and his group there, and then there were other little name groups that came in.

ISOARDI: When did you play with Lee Young?

WOODMAN: That was in the forties, because I was with him

at the Downbeat in about '40, in about 1939, around that time. We also went to San Francisco during the war. That's when I had just gotten out of the war, gotten out of the service. Around about '41 and '42, I played with him at what was called a-- What's the name of that club? It was a theater restaurant [Theatre California Restaurant]. It was a very noted club. It was one of the outstanding clubs in San Francisco at that time.

ISOARDI: Who else was in Lee Young's band then? Was Lester Young out here then?

WOODMAN: I think, at that time, that's when he was with Count Basie. Count Basie was going strong, you know. It was just myself and this trumpet player [Bates]. I forget his [first] name. It was just the trumpet player and myself and the rhythm section. Lee Young played drums, and a bass player. I doubled on trumpet with him at that time. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Why don't you tell me what you were doing when you first came back from the army? You had an honorable discharge from North Carolina, and then you came back here, and then you started looking for work then right away as a musician. Who'd you hook up with then? Was that when you hooked up with Lee Young? Or was that before the war?

WOODMAN: Maxwell Davis. I hooked up with him. He was one of the first-- Well, he actually played with the Woodman

Brothers.

ISOARDI: Maxwell Davis did?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he played with the Woodman Brothers. That's right. He played with us. After we broke up, then he organized an orchestra or a band, I joined him and we started working together. We worked in San Diego, around town, Hollywood.

ISOARDI: Was it a big band?

WOODMAN: It was a small band about-- Let me see. Three saxophones: Maxwell on tenor; I played baritone and trumpet; and they called him Fat Boy, he played alto.

ISOARDI: Who was Fat Boy?

WOODMAN: He was an alto player. I forget his name [Gerald Grant]. We called him Fat Boy. He was kind of fat. [laughter] Yeah, he played nice alto. And Jessie Sailes played drums, Ralph Hamilton played bass, and that's about that.

ISOARDI: How long did you stay with Maxwell Davis?

WOODMAN: Oh, I worked with him about two years, almost two years. We played around Hollywood and different places. We had a nice little band.

ISOARDI: You had pretty steady gigs throughout your career.

WOODMAN: Oh, I-- As a matter of fact, I kept working. I never was out of work. Never, never was out of work. I

always worked. Yeah, I made my living playing music, and I did very well. I never did want to travel. I could have gone with various bands. Not Count Basie but-- What's his name? Oh, I can't think of it. I can't remember my-- Anyway, I was approached by different musicians, but I told them I didn't want to leave town, because I knew if I left town-- Because musicians would tell me they'd go out of town with groups-- All they'd do is spend their money and what they made. They weren't making that much money. I could stay home and make $300 a week, period, where on the road, they made $500 a week, and, if they're married, they couldn't send home $300 a week. That's why I didn't want to go traveling. I did very well at home. I did better at home than I would going abroad. So I didn't want to go traveling. No. I never did want to go traveling. Lionel Hampton, he wanted me to go with him.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: He wanted me to play trumpet with him. That's when I was playing trumpet and playing trumpet real good. As a matter of fact, I loved Roy Eldridge, and that's who I more or less was playing like, copying Roy Eldridge. I loved his playing and Chu Berry on tenor. Those were my favorites. Yeah. It was something else.

I guess they asked you about the unions, the amalgamation and all that. You've got all that down.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you want to talk a little about that? You were around here when they were amalgamating.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: It took a few years to pull it off. Were you involved in that at all?

ISOARDI: Well, I wasn't involved in the amalgamation, but the personalities who were involved in that were Buddy Collette and Marl Young and Bill [William] Douglass. Those were the three main persons who got this thing rolling. The amalgamation came, really, through them, because they were something. Finally we amalgamated, which was a good thing that it happened. Everything is going along smooth and beautifully now.

ISOARDI: So you were a supporter of the movement, then?

WOODMAN: Oh, yes. You know Bill Douglass. He's the treasurer of the union [American Federation of Musicians Local 47], and Buddy Collette is on the board of some kind. And Marl Young-- They're all doing well.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the reasons why you supported it back then? Why you were in favor of it?

WOODMAN: Well, like I say, all of us felt that segregation was a terrible thing. We're all here as human beings and musicians. And particularly musicians, we're supposed to be like brothers and sisters. They say music is the greatest language in the world, so why are we separated?

It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense. We knew white musicians, and they used to say the same thing. "Hey, man, why are we separated?" Most of them were for the amalgamation, too. And it came about. Everybody seemed to be very happy about it and got along beautifully together and so--

ISOARDI: I guess there was some opposition to it in Local 767, though, wasn't there? Were some people opposed to it?

ISOARDI: Oh, well, you know, they're always going to have oppositions of some stupid person who says, "We're doing all right," like even Elmer Fain did once.

ISOARDI: He opposed it? Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was one who said, "Well, we're doing all right." You know why he opposed it?

ISOARDI: Why?

WOODMAN: See, he was getting off-- In movies, like, there were different pictures, and they would call the musicians union for different ones to come out there. We'd usually pose, you know; it wasn't really playing.

ISOARDI: Oh, to recruit people for the movies.

ISOARDI: Yeah. They would call 767 and say, "Send three or four musicians out to the studio." He would go out on all those gigs himself.

ISOARDI: You're kidding!

WOODMAN: Yeah. So naturally, he was doing great, man.

Here's Fain up there. There's a picture, "Hey, what are you doing in that picture?" Everybody knew he couldn't play, anyway. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, no!

WOODMAN: And he'd get all the studio gigs. So naturally, he opposed it. [laughter] Yeah, yeah. Like I say, there were maybe a couple more who opposed it just because they wanted to keep it segregated. No, that time is passé. Segregation, let's do away with it. It's not supposed to be in the first place. So they finally worked it out beautifully. Everybody's happy now.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WOODMAN: I know you wanted to know something about recording sessions. You remember Jake Porter?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WOODMAN: Okay, Jake Porter, now, he had a record company called Combo Record Company.

ISOARDI: He owned the company?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he owned the company. It didn't do too well, but he put out a few records, some of his own. It never did do too well. I heard that he's making a comeback on Combo Records, so I don't know--

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WOODMAN: Some of the old tunes he's bringing back on Combo. It seems like he's going to do all right on that

label.

ISOARDI: When did he start doing that?

WOODMAN: Oh, that was-- He started about '36, '37. That's when he had his little studio in his home.

ISOARDI: That early?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He was recording.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And I recorded with him. I've got some records that I recorded on, and I'm with him on some of those records. Maybe some of these times you might even hear them, Combo, with Jake Porter. I think he's making a comeback, and he probably might do all right.

And I played with Cee Pee Johnson, and he made a few records with Capitol Records.

ISOARDI: Capitol, really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was with Capitol. Cee Pee Johnson, he played the tom-toms, and he was very popular with the tom-toms. You know, tom-toms in that day weren't too popular, but he was one of the only musicians who played tom-toms, because you didn't hear--

ISOARDI: I can't think of anybody else who ever did.

WOODMAN: No. He was very popular, and he got work. Like, I worked with him, like I said, at Billy Berg's and the Swing Club. He worked very steadily and all that, but he messed himself up because he was the kind of guy who chased

women. He was a woman chaser.

ISOARDI: Cee Pee Johnson was?

WOODMAN: Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: So what did he do?

WOODMAN: And at that time-- Of course, bless his heart, he's gone now. I can talk about him. [laughter] At that time, smoking tea--they called it weed--nobody thought anything much of it. All the guys smoked tea at that time. You could name-- You'd probably know some of them. But they were all great guys, fine, we all got along together, hug each other. "Hey, man, what do you know?" Go and smoke their little weed. But at that time, like I say, smoking weed wasn't like a misdemeanor. If they caught you, well, they'd probably reprimand you, give you maybe a couple days in jail. [laughter] Oh, Gene Krupa, you know, he loved his weed. Gene Krupa, [Louis] Armstrong, all those guys smoked weed, man. But, like I say, they were all wonderful personalities, great guys. But now it's a different trend. All these young musicians dying with the hard stuff, cocaine and all that. When I was coming up, you probably didn't hear-- "Cocaine? What is that?" All those kind of drugs that they use now-- The only thing, like I say, that I heard of the musicians using, we called it weed.

ISOARDI: And that was it.

WOODMAN: That was it! And nobody really thought too much of it. Everybody was smoking weed. Not everybody, but if they smoked it, nobody thought nothing about it, because all the musicians who did it, they were all nice guys. They didn't get out of line. But the stuff they do now, man, it makes them think they're great and makes you do all kinds of crazy things.

ISOARDI: You didn't notice many people using smack as much, then? Heroin?

ISOARDI: No, they didn't use it. In that day, if they used it, it was very, very expensive. The only guys who could get ahold of that were the people who had money. You never heard of them using it, because they had the money. It wasn't very popular among just regular people. But now, you can get it for little or nothing. It's terrible now.

ISOARDI: What about-- I mean, you talked about some of the guys that you grew up with down in Watts. What about some of the guys from the Central area? Did you ever get to know any of them? People like, I guess, Dexter Gordon or Chico Hamilton?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, see, I can't remember because my memory is bad. All those guys, see, we all played together at various times. Chico Hamilton, oh, yeah, I played with him, Dexter Gordon, all those musicians. Remember Jack McVea?

ISOARDI: Oh, yes.

WOODMAN: Jack McVea. We all played together. Oh, a lot of musicians. Eddie Davis, tenor player.

ISOARDI: I don't know that name.

WOODMAN: I can't even think of the musicians' names, but all of them that you-- Red Callender and anyone that you would name, I played with, any of them, all of them.

I remember Red Callender. We played on a gig. When I saw him, I said, "Remember, Red, when we played together?" He said "Yeah." "Remember the name of that place?" He said, "I don't remember the name of that place." [laughter] Marl Young, we played together. My wife used to sing with him. She used to sing with him, and they had a trio, Marl Young, and my wife, and-- You remember Fletcher Henderson?

ISOARDI: Oh, sure.

WOODMAN: Well, Fletcher Henderson had a brother named Horace Henderson. Well, I played with Fletcher, and there was another Henderson I was thinking about when I called his name, Fletcher. I played with him out at the-- Remember the Plantation [Club]?

ISOARDI: The Plantation was down in Watts, right?

WOODMAN: Now, that was where all the big bands played. That was in Watts. That was a real fine place. All the big-name bands played out there. That's where all the

blacks would come, and the whites. It was a fine-- I played with Fletcher Henderson at that time.

ISOARDI: Fletcher Henderson had an orchestra?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Fletcher Henderson had a beautiful-- Now, all the arrangements he played, he arranged for Benny Goodman. If you notice all the arrangements that Benny Goodman played, Fletcher Henderson arranged half of the arrangements that Benny Goodman played. He was a great musician.

ISOARDI: Right. What was the Plantation like?

WOODMAN: Oh, it was like a big, big barn. It had sawdust all over the floor. It was really something to see.

ISOARDI: You could really jitterbug there.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, it was fine at that time. Everybody loved the Plantation.

ISOARDI: Who were some of the bands that came through there?

WOODMAN: Well, like Jimmie Lunceford, all the big bands.

ISOARDI: Basie?

WOODMAN: Basie. All those big bands came through there because it was the place. Like the [Hollywood] Palladium, of course, we know that all the big bands have played there. You know, at one time, blacks couldn't play at the Palladium. You remember that, don't you?

ISOARDI: When was that?

WOODMAN: Basie was the first band, I believe, to play at the Palladium. They didn't allow it. That was when prejudice existed so bad, even bands like Lunceford, Basie, Duke Ellington-- Wasn't that stupid? But they finally broke that.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MAY 29, 1990

ISOARDI: Back to Central Avenue. Let me ask you a couple of questions that occurred to me after our session last time. The first one is going back aways. Before there was a Woodman Brothers [Biggest Little] Band [in the World] down in Watts, and when you were just a kid growing up, were there any other bands that were prominent around then that you might have listened to or followed or anything like that? Is there any band that you can think of, or bands, that caught people's attention?

WOODMAN: Not any name bands, no.

ISOARDI: So as far as you--

WOODMAN: There was a band-- Of course, you're saying before, this is before we--

ISOARDI: Before you guys got together.

WOODMAN: No, no.

ISOARDI: You can't think of anything, really.

WOODMAN: Well, there was a band called Dootsie Williams. Dootsie Williams, a trumpet player, had a band. And the Irving Brothers had a band. They were before us. Irving Brothers and Dootsie Williams, those are the only two I can think of who were before us. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: I know Dootsie Williams, I guess, went on to fame with--

WOODMAN: Dootsie Williams, he had a recording company right up there in Watts.

ISOARDI: Was it Dootone?

WOODMAN: Yeah, what's the name of it? I think it is. Did someone tell you about that one?

ISOARDI: Well, I knew of Dootsie Williams because didn't he write "Earth Angel" or produce it? That big song in the fifties?

WOODMAN: I think so. Yeah, he did. He had a couple of pretty good hits, and he went on from there. His mother was pretty wealthy and left him quite a bit of money. So that's why he opened up this record company.

ISOARDI: I see. But he had one of the bands then that--

WOODMAN: Yeah, he had a band. He was a trumpet player. So the Irving Brothers and Dootsie Williams are the only two that I can recall.

ISOARDI: Nobody's mentioned the Irving Brothers. Who were they?

WOODMAN: They didn't? Oh, they were very popular at one time in Watts, there. The Irving Brothers, yeah.

ISOARDI: How big was the band?

WOODMAN: Oh, they had, I think it was, three brothers and the rhythm section. I think it was about seven pieces.

ISOARDI: Who were the brothers? What instruments did they play?

WOODMAN: I think one played bass. I know one played bass and one played saxophone. And I can't recall what the other ones played. That was before my time. Like I say, I was only about fifteen years old when I started playing. My brother Britt [Woodman] was about fourteen. So, actually, we didn't know too much of what was going on, and we didn't go anywhere. We just got started on our music lessons, and our father started us. After we got going, then I heard of the Irving Brothers and Dootsie Williams, who were going all along. When we started getting pretty popular, they were still going, too. But we were the most popular of anyone who had a band, period. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Did any of those guys ever have a musical career, as far as you know? Any of the Irving Brothers? None of them?

WOODMAN: No, they just--

ISOARDI: The local band, mostly.

WOODMAN: Yeah, just local. That's about all. Nothing great. Mediocre.

ISOARDI: I see. Let me ask you a couple of other things from last time. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about what they-- I think you talked last time about your studio, the Woodman Brothers Studio down there. You gave a lot of concerts. And, of course, the Plantation [Club] was a big club, big place to go down there. You talked about that

last time.

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: You just mentioned a couple places. Maybe you could talk a little more about them. The Brown Sisters you said had a place.

WOODMAN: It was just a small club. It was around the same size as the Downbeat [Club].

ISOARDI: Which is about-- How many people could it fit?

WOODMAN: Oh, I'd say about-- Well, if you fill it up, I'd say about 150 people, something like that.

ISOARDI: So more a little bandstand, a lot of small tables, and things like that?

WOODMAN: Right, right. Weren't too many people who could fit in. But it was very popular, packed all the time, one of those kind of clubs, you know, that's packed all the time.

ISOARDI: What kind of music?

WOODMAN: Oh, just like the Woodman Brothers. They would have similar to what we were.

ISOARDI: Where was it at? Do you remember the location?

WOODMAN: I don't know the location. It was out there on-- Brown Sisters. Let's see if I find it. I think all I did was just put it in Watts and that's about all. I didn't remember the location. So many places where-- I would never know where they were located. My memory is so bad,

anyway. No, I don't remember the location. It was, I would say, about 116th Street. Something like 116th, around out that way, because the Plantation was around 108th Street, and it was just a little farther out.

ISOARDI: Was it an after-hours place at all?

WOODMAN: No, it was--

ISOARDI: So it had regular groups.

WOODMAN: Yeah, regular hours.

ISOARDI: A standard show. What about Leaks Lake Ballroom? Was that a bigger place?

WOODMAN: That was a real huge place.

ISOARDI: So there was a lot of dancing?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. That was what it was. Dancing. It was a real huge place, and that's all they did was just ballroom dancing. That's all it was for. Yeah, it was really a large place.

ISOARDI: Were there sisters called the Brown Sisters who ran the Brown Sisters?

WOODMAN: That was their name, the Brown Sisters, three of them.

ISOARDI: Really? Do you know anything about them? I mean, how did three women in Watts start running a club?

WOODMAN: That's unusual, you know. At that time, like I say, we were so young that I didn't know anything about how people got started and all that. But if I think about it

now, that was very unusual for three women to have a club. But they did very good business. They did good business.

ISOARDI: Did you ever have any dealings with them when you played there?

WOODMAN: No. All I can remember is I think they were pretty stout sisters, heavyset. I can remember them being three heavyset sisters, you know, on the heavy side. [laughter] Yes.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you a little bit about some of the some of your early friends back then. No one's really talked about Joe Comfort, and I guess you met Joe Comfort when you were very young. Maybe you could talk a little bit about him.

WOODMAN: Well, Joe Comfort--

ISOARDI: He played with your band.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was a bass player, very popular, real wonderful bass player. Of course, you know, he played with Harry James. He played with most all the big bands.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he had a great career.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. He was a very nice, wonderful person. Very nice. See, we went to school together. We went to Jordan [High School].

ISOARDI: Was he born in Watts?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was a Watts-- There were about three

brothers and a sister, and he was the only one who was really musical. The others tried, but there was nothing happening with them. But he was really an outstanding musician.

ISOARDI: Was he with your band the whole time?

WOODMAN: He was with the Woodman Brothers until he ventured out, actually, and he started playing with big bands.

ISOARDI: You could tell then pretty much right away that the guy had some talent?

WOODMAN: Oh, yes, he had it. And he played with the trio-- He died. Oh, you know who I'm talking about. I can't remember. My mind just can't think of it. This narcolepsy's sure got me. King Cole. He played with Nat King Cole a long time.

ISOARDI: Oh, right, that great trio.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. He played with Nat King Cole. He played with everybody: Lionel Hampton, most all those big bands. He was just that good until he died with cancer.

ISOARDI: He died just a couple of years ago?

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: Last time, you talked a bit about Charles Mingus, how you guys were best friends and spent a lot of time together when you were young.

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: I guess he was pretty much into his instrument when you knew him and when he was playing with you guys, perfecting the bass and all. At what point did you notice Mingus sort of developing as a composer, coming up with a lot of different ideas and really--? Was there any time you sort of sat back and said, "Boy, this guy is doing some different stuff"?

WOODMAN: You know, it didn't happen while he was in Watts there when we were all associating together, friends. It happened after he left Watts and he went to New York. That's when his popularity really started coming up and everybody began to know who he was, and that's when he began to compose and all the things that he did. It really all happened in New York. Out here, he didn't do anything as far as writing, composing.

ISOARDI: You never knew him out here, then, so much as a composer?

WOODMAN: No, no. It seemed like-- It was amazing, though. Everything that happened happened all at once, as far as his ability. All at once, all I heard was a man composing, and I didn't even know he had all that ability. I knew he was a good musician and he could play, but I really didn't know he had that great mind as far as-- But I know he used to get on the piano, and he would play the piano. I mean, not just soloing, but his ear was so

great! He never took piano lessons. He could just chord tunes, just chord them and play the right chords. Boom, boom. His ear was just that great. Yeah, he was something else. He was really a tremendous musician. If he had just not let his attitude get the best of him.

ISOARDI: Were you around when, I guess, Buddy Collette and a few other people got together, including your brother Britt, and they organized a group that many people talk about, the Stars of Swing, that lasted a very short time?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, that's when they were very popular when they were at--

ISOARDI: I think they were at the Downbeat in '46.

WOODMAN: The Downbeat, that's where they actually started together as a group. They had a real nice group.

ISOARDI: Did you ever hear them play?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: What were they like? Because they were never recorded.

WOODMAN: No, they never did.

ISOARDI: No recordings exist, and they didn't last very long.

WOODMAN: They didn't last. Lucky Thompson was the tenor player. He was a very outstanding tenor player, great, but he was very young, and he was underestimated. He had a very peculiar attitude, also. He was--

ISOARDI: Really? In what way?

WOODMAN: That's what really messed his popularity up, as far as the musicians were concerned. He had an awful attitude.

ISOARDI: Just hard to work with?

WOODMAN: Yeah, very hard to work with.

ISOARDI: What did that group sound like? Do you remember going and hearing them?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I heard them. They sounded good. It wasn't, I would say, the jazz that you hear now. It wasn't that type of jazz like-- It wasn't that type. It was just more or less, I would say, like [Count] Basie style, you know. Just playing good, listening-- Swing. More or less swing, I would call it.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no bop.

WOODMAN: No, it wasn't on the jazz kick like bebop. Bebop, at that time, was pretty popular. They called it bebop. They changed the name to jazz. All great musicians in the band, though. They were all good.

ISOARDI: And I think--what?--Mingus played with them?

WOODMAN: Mingus, yeah, Britt, Buddy, Lucky Thompson, and-- I don't know. Who played piano with them? I can't recall who played piano with them. Buddy will have to tell you that when you interview him.

ISOARDI: There was another person you mentioned last time

who we don't know a great deal about. Maybe you can talk a little bit about Maxwell Davis.

WOODMAN: Well, Maxwell Davis, I think he came out here-- I can't recall what year. It was in the thirties. Yeah, in the thirties. That's when we had the Woodman Brothers Studio on 111th Street, right on the corner of 111th Street [and Wilmington Avenue]. We were going real strong. He came out here, and he was a very homely looking fellow, very homely looking. He and a trumpet player came out here--the trumpet player wasn't that good--and he came out to the Woodman Brothers Studio. Somebody must have told him where we were. He was trying to get in contact with musicians because he didn't know anyone, and, of course, everybody had heard of the Woodman Brothers. So he came out there, and here his saxophone looked raggedy, a raggedy saxophone. It was all painted different colors. I said, "What--?" [laughter] He'd come out there with his saxophone. It was before the dance started. It was before we had the dance that night. He came out in the daytime, but we were all there. So he came out, and we met him. Maxwell Davis, he met all of us. That's when we all were doubling, my brothers, Britt was doubling. At that time we played those-- What do you call that music that was already written?

ISOARDI: Stock arrangements?

WOODMAN: Stock arrangements, yeah. That's what we were playing at that time. So he played tenor, and I was playing tenor. My brother Britt was playing alto. At that time, they didn't have two tenor parts. I was playing the tenor part. They had the first, second, and third, alto, and tenor. I don't think they wrote two tenor parts.

He said, "Well, give me the alto part."

We looked and said, "Man, you're going to have to transpose. How are you going to play that?"

He said, "Give me the alto part."

I said, "You mean you're going to transpose that?"

He said, "Oh, yeah, yeah."

ISOARDI: He just transposed it on sight?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. He transposed that like it wasn't nothing. [laughter] We all looked at each other-- I could do the same thing. But, like I say, he looked so homely, we looked at him saying, "He can't play, man, the way he looks--" Judging him, you know. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, you learned a good lesson.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he taught me a lesson. So I said, "You want to play something, man? What do you want to play?" He said, "Well, how about 'Sophisticated Lady'?" So he played that as a solo.

ISOARDI: Sight-transposing?

WOODMAN: No, no.

ISOARDI: He took a solo on it.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was going to play this, man. [sings improvisation on melody of "Sophisticated Lady"] We looked, "Man, what was--?" [laughter] Man, this cat was blowing and transposing. And we all said, man-- After he played with us when we were rehearsing, he played some more solos, boy, after that, we were glad to meet him. "Great, man, you're something else." We were all admiring his playing, how great he was. He was a good saxophone player. He studied music. We didn't know he could arrange like that. Later on, I started playing with him. He knew I could play. I was playing trumpet, doubling. That's when we, the Woodman Brothers, had broken up, you know. He was arranging for different orchestras, and he wanted me to play saxophone with him, which I did. He did all the arrangements, and he was a good arranger and everything. That taught me a lesson, my brothers and all. We said, "See that, man? From now on, we'd better not judge people because of how they look and if their instrument is all beat up." He could play. So that taught me a lesson, "Judge not, for ye shall be judged."

ISOARDI: Yeah, no kidding.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was something else.

ISOARDI: How old was he when you first met him?

WOODMAN: Oh, let's see. He must have been-- See, I was

only about seventeen at that time. He was maybe about twenty-two. Yeah, a little older than the rest of us. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay. Then Maxwell Davis, I guess his career took off pretty much and he became the leader of some bands?

WOODMAN: Well, he never became the leader of any band other than his own. And, you know, he passed-- It was quite shocking. He passed young.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I don't even know what caused his death. We were all very shocked to hear of his passing.

ISOARDI: When did he die?

WOODMAN: Well, it must have been in the sixties, yeah. Around in the sixties, yeah. Yeah, he was young when he passed.

ISOARDI: Let me mention some of the clubs I guess you talked about a little bit last time. Maybe most of these were after-hours joints. But maybe you could talk a little about what they were like. The Memo [Club].

WOODMAN: Well, most all after-hours clubs, you know, they're similar to each other. Musicians would just leave their regular clubs that they played, and musicians would come to these different after-hours spots and jam. That was all it was more or less for. That's what they were,

after-hours clubs, and they did very well. There were about three of them there on Central Avenue, and they all did well.

ISOARDI: Which ones were those? The Memo?

WOODMAN: Let me see. The after-hours were-- Honey Murphy's was one after-hours spot. And Brother's that was on Adams Boulevard. Where was that other one? Yeah, the Rigg Club. That was an after-hours spot. The Rigg Club, Honey Murphy's, and Brother's.

ISOARDI: Did certain kinds of musicians go to different clubs? I mean, could you identify different musical styles in different clubs?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: Nothing like that? It was a pretty mixed bag?

WOODMAN: No, because the style that we played mostly, all the musicians played that same style.

ISOARDI: So you could pretty much go from club to club?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. It wasn't anything where you said, "Well, I can't go in there because I can't play that." [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, right. We've talked a little bit about styles. Maybe you can talk a little bit about the different kinds of sounds you heard on Central, the different kinds of music that were there.

WOODMAN: Well, actually, at that time, everything was like

swing and blues. That's about it, blues. Because, at that time, blues was very popular. I mean that low-down blues like-- Have you ever heard of [Big] Joe Turner?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, sure.

WOODMAN: Well, that style, yeah, singing that style of blues, and that's about what it added up to be.

ISOARDI: Were there any clubs that were blues clubs? Or would you find blues and swing in the same clubs?

WOODMAN: Well, anywhere you go, you're going to find the blues. You're going to have to play the blues. [laughter] You've got to play the blues. Yeah.

ISOARDI: Right. Any other blues men that you saw singing down there? Or women?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. What's his name? Oh, boy. He was very popular. It was around the same time as Joe Turner.

ISOARDI: Singer or instrumentalist?

WOODMAN: No, no he sings-- Most of these fellows sing the blues. You don't have anybody who would just play the blues. What-you-call-it was going pretty strong at that time. He's still going strong. Who's that guitar player?

ISOARDI: T-Bone?

WOODMAN: T-Bone.

ISOARDI: T-Bone Walker.

WOODMAN: Now, he wasn't a great guitar player. He sang the blues. He was noted for singing the blues. But he

played guitar, see, and he was a showman. You know how, at that time, he would sing the blues, and he would do the splits while he's singing, you know.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: One of those things. Yeah, he was very outstanding singing the blues. There were a couple more fellows--I can't even think of their names--who were very much outstanding, singing the blues.

ISOARDI: What about a little later on? Did you ever hear any New Orleans jazz being played anywhere? Or was that sort of old-fashioned for you?

WOODMAN: No, at the time, there wasn't too much going on. Dixieland came in later on, but there wasn't much Dixieland going on at that time, like at the Alabam and in those days. Dixieland wasn't too popular. But it got very popular around the sixties. Around the sixties, it became very, very popular, and it was going very strong. Everybody seemed to like Dixieland. It was good. I liked it myself. I really did. Teddy Buckner was one of the outstanding Dixieland bands here in Los Angeles. My father [William B. Woodman, Sr.], as I told you, played with him. And Jack McVea, who was from Los Angeles. Jack McVea was a good tenor player and clarinet player. He was very good. He played with Teddy Buckner for a long time. See, they had a job out there at Disneyland for about fifteen

years. They stayed out there for fifteen years straight. They were doing real good. Jessie Sailes played drums with them, who was playing drums with the Woodman Brothers at the time we were very popular.

ISOARDI: Do you remember when bop came in?

WOODMAN: Oh, boy. Bop came in when I was just a kid. Yeah, that came in pretty strong around the late thirties. Yeah, it had to--

ISOARDI: Well, mid-forties, early forties.

WOODMAN: Late thirties, yeah.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the first time you heard some of the Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker stuff?

WOODMAN: Yeah, let's see. You know, at that time, when they came in, it was very strange even to musicians, especially musicians that didn't play that. They couldn't understand it themselves, because those guys who played that type of music, they had great minds and were very knowledgable in music. They had to be to play that style of music. And bebop, that name was kind of the type of name that they figured-- They changed it to jazz, you know. Bebop, it didn't sound right to them. I guess they said, "This sounds like it's for people who take drugs and things," you know. So they changed the name to jazz, and it became one of the most outstanding types of music going. But they got to the place where everybody seemed to

understand it, and they began to make a little change in it so it wasn't so difficult. Because when it first came out, that music was so difficult that nobody understood it. Even the people listening, pretty soon they got to the place where they seemed to play it where everybody could understand it. Musicians began to understand it, and it was good. It's still going strong, you know. Dizzy and Charlie Parker and all those guys who played that, all great jazz men. Yeah, they were great, great guys.

See, I never could really play that type of music, not play in the hard style that they use. They used those real weird chords and all that. I could never do that. But I could play anything, the tunes. It wasn't the tunes I couldn't play, it was the changes that they had themselves. They'd take a tune and change the chords. That made the difference. I didn't know the chords and the changes that they made, how they changed it. I couldn't play it. But just the tune itself with its original changes, I could play any song. It wouldn't make any difference. And as far as the music itself was written, as far as the chart, I could read anything that was written. That was no difficulty. But the style that those guys had, I didn't have that type of style, because I couldn't play that style. I had my own style, just like the old-time musicians who played swing, they couldn't even play it

themselves. Even Coleman Hawkins, as great as he was, never did play that style. He had his own style. That's the way that went.

ISOARDI: I think while we were talking a while ago, you mentioned a drummer named Jessie Price.

WOODMAN: Yeah, Jessie Price.

ISOARDI: Tell me about him.

WOODMAN: He was a good drummer at that time. He was what you call one of those loud drummers. He was loud. He had a good beat, but he was loud. He didn't play with any particular name band, but he was what you call just around here, just played around Los Angeles. He was good. He played with any and everybody around here. He always worked, because they'd always call on him as a drummer. He was an outstanding drummer, so he was always working. As you know, I told you I worked with him in several places. The place that I worked with him, I had told you, out there at the Melody Club. That was out there on Slauson [Avenue]. That's when we played with what's-his-name who died. Sammy Davis [Jr.].

ISOARDI: Sammy Davis?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He and his father, you know, his uncle and his father, they always worked together. He was just a little kid.

ISOARDI: They had a name. The Will Mastin Trio?

WOODMAN: The Will Mastin Trio, that's right. And that was the first time I had the pleasure, because, at that time, he was just a young kid, and he was real great then. Of course, nobody really said, "He's going to be--" Well, we all said someday he's going to be great, but nobody took it as just at that time he was going to be great, but we all just felt that way. We wondered about, "Well, how is he going to leave his father and his uncle?" But he finally ventured out. They even said that he could, because he had such great talent, and they were holding him back. His talent exceeded them so much. All they were doing was this old-time dancing, which was real good at that time. Everybody really enjoyed them. What they did was good.

ISOARDI: They were a dance team, then.

WOODMAN: A dance team, right.

ISOARDI: A trio of dancers.

WOODMAN: Right. Eventually he ventured out, and all you'd hear was "Sammy Davis, Jr. Sammy Davis." He got popular. Boy, he was really something.

ISOARDI: Where did the trio perform?

WOODMAN: Oh, now, at that time, like I said, I was there, and it was Jessie Price, and they were the mainly-featured [act], the Will Mastin Trio.

ISOARDI: This was at the Melody--

WOODMAN: It was called the Melody Club.

ISOARDI: The Melody Club in Glendale.

WOODMAN: No, no. That was another Melody Club. This was a Melody Club on Slauson at that time. I told you about what happened there. That was when the prejudice was existing.

ISOARDI: How so?

WOODMAN: That was before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., liberated us. [laughter]

ISOARDI: What happened at the club then?

WOODMAN: Well, as I said before, I wasn't used to prejudice. I just didn't see how it even existed, because, like I said, I was born in Watts, and, at Jordan High, there was a mixture of various races: white, Mexican, Oriental. We all got along wonderful together. I heard about the South, how prejudiced they were down there, but it didn't really-- And here, even in Los Angeles. But I never went anywhere as far as going here, out in Glendale, out at that time, when things were prejudiced, all over the different little towns, you know.

As I said before, we played there at this Melody Club. The people were coming in, the place began to pack, and they had "reserved" signs on almost all the tables. I wondered about that within myself. White people would come in. You know, it was packed every night. Then the blacks would be coming in, and they'd turn them away. And that

really-- That got next to me. I'd heard about prejudice, and I said to myself, "I wonder why they turned those black people away?"

So I went to Jessie Price. I said, "Man, did you see those--?" At that time, they called them colored people. I said, "Man, did you see those colored people?"

"Yeah, man. I don't like it, either, but there ain't nothing you can do about it."

I said, "Well, man, why don't you talk to the man and ask him what's happening, man?"

"No, man. I can't do that. That's just the way it is."

I said, "Well, I'll talk to him." So I spoke to him. I forget his name. He was a Jewish fellow.

So I asked him, I said, "Why is it that the colored people come in here, and you're turning them down, and these reserved signs on the table surely aren't reserved for everybody? But the reason why you've got them reserved is because it seems like you just want to make the colored people think that all these tables are reserved."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Woodman, that's just the way it is. That's the way it is, and there's nothing I can do about it."

I said, "You can do something about it."

He didn't like it when I said it to him. He told

Jessie Price to fire me.

Jessie said, "Hey, Woodman, you shouldn't have talked to the man like that. Man, I'm going to have to let you go, man."

I said, "Man, you big old Uncle Tom." I said, "You should have talked to him."

"No, man, I told you first, that's the way it is."

"Okay."

ISOARDI: So he let you go.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. I wanted to hit him in the mouth, but I couldn't do that.

ISOARDI: So this was the Melody Club down on Slauson?

WOODMAN: Right, right.

ISOARDI: That was just about an all-white audience then.

WOODMAN: Oh, that's all. That's all it was. They wouldn't allow any blacks in there, no colored people. That wasn't the only place. There were many places like that.

ISOARDI: Which other ones?

WOODMAN: No, I was just saying that there had to be others like that. I would assume so.

ISOARDI: Do you remember exactly where that was at? Was that near Central? Near Slauson?

WOODMAN: I really can't recall just the locality. I remember it was on Slauson, and that's about it.

ISOARDI: Geez. Amazing story.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was. You know, I never saw Sammy Davis in person thereafter, because, if I had, I would have mentioned that to him after he'd grown up. He was just a kid. I would have confronted him, and I would have said, "Sammy, you remember when you and your uncle and your father performed there?" I would have said this to him. I'm not quite sure, he being as young as he was-- He was maybe ten years old, eight maybe, around that age.

ISOARDI: This was at the Melody Club?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He performed with you guys.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I would have confronted him. He would have said, "Oh, yeah." And I would have brought it up. I would have said, "You know they wouldn't let the blacks, the colored people in at that time." He was so young, he probably didn't even realize what was going on. Of course, he came through a whole lot of prejudice himself, which he broke up, you know. He did a lot of things to break up prejudice himself as he grew older and became popular, you know. Yeah, that's what was happening at that time.

ISOARDI: Amazing. I guess R and B has always been a part of the music and a part of the scene, but it seems like, I guess by the late forties or so, it was getting more visible or more popular in a lot of ways, I guess.

WOODMAN: What exactly did you say it was?

ISOARDI: What is now called rhythm and blues.

WOODMAN: Rhythm and blues is still going strong. They just call it rock and roll. That's about the same difference.

ISOARDI: Right. But was there a time in the mid- or late-forties when it was getting a lot of popularity? People like [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely were doing things and cutting a lot of records.

WOODMAN: Yeah, rhythm and blues. What-you-call-him started that.

ISOARDI: Who did?

WOODMAN: I mean, he was very popular. What's his name who died? The white fellow. One of the greatest. Played guitar and sang. You remember, he was on the Ed Sullivan Show? You remember that? Oh, you weren't around. He was shaking his--

ISOARDI: Oh, Elvis [Presley].

WOODMAN: Elvis.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. I've seen clips of that. They wouldn't shoot it.

WOODMAN: Right. They wouldn't shoot it. They thought that was sort of vulgar.

ISOARDI: Yeah, they wouldn't shoot him from the chest down.

WOODMAN: They knew he was good, but pretty soon they got around that. That didn't make good sense. But at the time, that was kind of vulgar to the on-lookers. [laughter] Yeah, see, he was playing rhythm and blues, rock and roll, way back there. He was one of the first who was very popular in rock and roll. Very, very, very popular. And now that has taken over, rock and roll. That's where all the money is.

ISOARDI: Did you ever play in that kind of a style?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: Did you ever walk the bar or anything like that?

WOODMAN: Well, see, I was an entertainer myself when I played. Whoever I played with, I was the main attraction, because I played my sax-- As a matter of fact, I was similar to Big Jay McNeely, see. Big Jay McNeely, he was the type who lay on his back-- You know how he used to lay on his back and get up on the bar, lay on his back. He'd walk outside, and people would follow him. He'd walk down the street, they would come on back. I did the same thing. I was doing the same thing, and everybody was crazy about me, too. I used to get up on the bar and lay on my back. [laughter] What was so funny, I was playing-- This was when I was playing in Glendale, when we had Bumps Myers and the jam sessions and all. Everybody would come out to see us. And during, like, the weeknights, I would go

outside and start playing.

ISOARDI: Outside the club?

WOODMAN: Outside the club, yeah. But they didn't put me in jail. The police weren't around to put me in jail. See, but Big Jay McNeely, he was playing this club, and he was walking outside playing his horn, and the people were following him, and somebody must have called the police. They stopped him and put him in jail, thought he was disturbing the peace. [laughter] The owner had to come and bail him out of jail. The people were waiting for him to come back. "Where's Big Jay?" [laughter] Somebody said, "The cops picked him up. Disturbing the peace." [laughter] That was funny. [laughter] Now, you know, they didn't have to do that, but, at that time, like I say, they just wanted to do anything to--

ISOARDI: Harrass.

WOODMAN: --harrass them, yeah. That was--

ISOARDI: Let me flip it over.

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ISOARDI: I had heard somewhere that Big Jay got a lot of that from you.

WOODMAN: I don't know whether he did or not.

ISOARDI: Did you ever teach him or anything?

WOODMAN: No, I never taught Big Jay. But he was inspired by me, most likely. Big Jay and some of the rest of them were inspired by the Woodman Brothers.

ISOARDI: When you guys were playing in the Woodman Brothers band, were you very much entertainers then? Were you doing things like that?

WOODMAN: No. See, I wasn't doing any of that entertaining myself until I got on my own and the Woodman Brothers broke up.

ISOARDI: When did you start doing things like that? Do you remember what made you do it or why you started doing it?

WOODMAN: Well, it was in me to be pretty lively all the time as a saxophone player. I was always moving and-- I don't know. It just happened, and I started to just-- I'll tell you what song I used to play that I used to run around with, that song. And that song everybody knew-- [sings fragments of melody] What's his name? Illinois Jacquet made it very, very popular. [sings another fragment of

melody]

ISOARDI: "Flying Home."

WOODMAN: "Flying Home." That was my featured number where I would go out and lay on my back and I'd be playing. [sings melody] Just blowing, you know. Blowing. That's what I featured myself on and everything I was doing, entertaining in that-- You know. Yeah.

ISOARDI: You don't do that in church now, do you? [laughter]

WOODMAN: No. You know, Big Jay, he quit playing music for a while. Did you know that?

ISOARDI: No.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He quit playing and became a Jehovah's Witness.

ISOARDI: I knew he became a Jehovah's Witness. I didn't think he stopped playing, though.

WOODMAN: And he started working at the post office.

ISOARDI: He stopped playing? He never played then?

WOODMAN: No. He worked at the post office. Well, he might have maybe played some gigs at night, but, I mean, as far as him having his own group-- Well, he might even have it, but he didn't-- Music was just secondary for him. But after a while, I heard Big Jay's back to playing, man. He quit the post office and--

ISOARDI: He's going everywhere now.

WOODMAN: He's going stronger now.

ISOARDI: He's in Europe.

WOODMAN: He's going stronger now than when he first started, when he was popular. Isn't that something?

ISOARDI: You see his records all around now.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he's really popular. I heard him for the first time in person when the Woodman Brothers were together. After I left the band, when the Woodman Brothers broke up, a little bit after that, he was very popular. And the second time I heard him in person was when he played at a concert. You know Clora Bryant? Trumpet player?

ISOARDI: Sure.

WOODMAN: She got all the musicians for this concert.

ISOARDI: Oh, last year.

WOODMAN: Yeah, this was held outside.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I was there.

WOODMAN: Were you there?

ISOARDI: Yeah, at the [John] Anson Ford Theater, the "Central Avenue Revisited" [concert].

WOODMAN: Well, you heard Big Jay?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. He had Hadda Brooks on piano.

WOODMAN: Well, see, he sounds better now than he did then. He's got something going now with the big band sound, with that instrument he uses. What do you call

that?

ISOARDI: Yeah, he's got an electric hookup. He uses an electric pedal on it.

WOODMAN: Yeah, with like a big band behind him.

ISOARDI: Yeah, attached to the saxophone.

WOODMAN: It really is good.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he had the audience going crazy.

WOODMAN: Well, he was more accepted than anybody out there.

ISOARDI: Just about.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I think the most outstanding out there was Gerald Wiggins and Big Jay and Buddy Collette. Those were the three most outstanding ones.

ISOARDI: Did you stay to hear Art Farmer play?

WOODMAN: Yeah, with--

ISOARDI: Frank Morgan?

WOODMAN: Frank Morgan, yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Farmer is a beautiful player.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, he's a great trumpet player. But they didn't go over as well as Big Jay.

ISOARDI: Oh, Big Jay had people standing and yelling.

WOODMAN: See, they love him, because any time he comes out in that audience, see, that's what the people love. People love all that. And Big Jay, he got something started, and he's making a lot of money off of that. Yes, he is.

ISOARDI: You know, I was backstage I guess before the next set. I think Gerry Wiggins was coming out with his trio. I was standing with Bill [William] Green. I remember turning to Bill, and I said, "Boy, how is Gerry, with this little trio, just bass and drums, how are they going to follow Big Jay McNeely?" But they did. Those three guys just knocked that audience out.

WOODMAN: Well, see, Ernie Andrews-- Like I say, the blues always is good. And Ernie Andrews was singing the blues with Gerry-- What's his name?

ISOARDI: Gerry Wiggins on piano, Paul Humphrey on drums--

WOODMAN: See, they had a good trio. I mean, they could play.

ISOARDI: Oh, they just swung like crazy.

WOODMAN: People know good music when they hear it, so naturally they were very much accepted. They were very outstanding. They were--

ISOARDI: They were marvelous. Maybe Big Jay gave them a little push, too.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, like I say, they kind of changed the trend, and people loved what Big Jay did. See, a lot of musicians down Big Jay. "Oh, he's playing that music, man, he can't play, just playing the blues." I said, "Well, whether he can play it or not, if people like you and you're making money, you must be able to do something

if they accept you. And he can play.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he can. Well, I think Buddy Collette told me that around 1945, '46, before Big Jay was playing that style, he was in one of the best bebop bands on the avenue. So he could play whatever he wanted to play. He was playing with-- There was a group with him and Sonny Criss and Hampton Hawes on piano. And they were this great, young bebop band. But then, a little while later, I remember one time Big Jay told me he said why he stopped playing bebop and started more rhythm and blues.

WOODMAN: Wasn't no money.

ISOARDI: Well, he said that was part of it. He couldn't get jobs. But he said, too, that he felt that he could get more out of them, more emotion, more soul, playing rhythm and blues.

WOODMAN: He said that? To you?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WOODMAN: All rhythm and blues is what he's playing now. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, definitely so. You know, that's what's in him. He can play that rhythm and blues. Bebop-- He wasn't that good at bebop. Have you ever heard him play bebop?

ISOARDI: No. I just heard stories about what he was like back then.

WOODMAN: No, no. He wasn't a saxophone player that could

execute and play like me. He couldn't play as well as I could. No, I could outplay him any day. Don't put it on tape.

ISOARDI: It's running. [laughter] You're going to have to cross out what you said about Big Jay. [laughter] Jay may read your book.

WOODMAN: Oh, I think he'd admit that he can't play like me. [laughter] I mean, I'll play anything, man. But he wasn't that great of an executionist and playing all kinds of tunes and all that. Not that he wasn't good. I mean, he was good at what he was-- Put it this way: He was good at what he did. He was very outstanding, and he was very well liked. You can't take it away from him. He was all right. Yes, he was.

ISOARDI: Okay, let's see. What else have we got? Well, let me get to a couple of real big questions. I guess by the mid-1950s, Central Avenue was kind of declining.

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: It wasn't what it used to be. Why did it start declining then? Why did that happen? Do you know?

WOODMAN: Well, I'll tell you the reason, what the most outstanding reason was. I wrote a notation here that Central Avenue changed, a change of environment, the crime rate rose, and that's what really stopped the people from supporting the clubs. And clubs had to close down because

of this.

ISOARDI: So there was a higher rate of crime growing down in Central Avenue then.

WOODMAN: Oh, yes. That's what really stopped the people from coming out and supporting the [Club] Alabam and other clubs. This clientele of people-- You know how that happens. I don't know where they come from. But they started hitting people in the head, robbing people, and all these things, so people were afraid to come out. You couldn't blame them. So that's what really did it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How about our other big question here? How would you evaluate the importance of Central Avenue in two ways? First off, how important was it for you in developing yourself as a musician? And then, secondly, how important would you say Central Avenue was, say, in the history of jazz and of American music? What did it give?

WOODMAN: Well, it was a showcase for talent. That's really what it was. It was just that great. A place of entertainment, a melting pot, that's what it was, a melting pot for all races. And it had very much to offer for the young kids coming up. Things were really nice, and no violence and no crimes. It was just a wonderful place to come and even to see. Central Avenue was really a great place at one time, just like Watts itself was a great place to live until other people came in and the environment

began to change and it just began to be a different Watts altogether. People moved in who were robbers. And then, you know, when the-- Who was that that burned that place down? That did it. It changed abruptly after that. It was just a different place altogether. When I was coming up, Watts was a very wonderful place to live. Everybody was getting along wonderfully. There wasn't any crime. There wasn't any shooting and killing and all that. All they did was maybe once in a while you'd hear of somebody getting in a big fight. They would fight, but you didn't hear of any shooting, cutting. Those things didn't happen. But overnight, boom, just an abrupt change. Just like now, it's amazing, these youngsters, drive-by shootings and all this unbelievable stuff is happening.

Drugs began to be very prominent. At the time when I was coming up, I didn't even have any drugs. The only thing I heard of was weed; they called it weed. That's about all I heard of. Even the kids in school, you didn't hardly ever see anybody smoking. Every time you would see somebody smoking, they would hide, because if they caught them smoking, boy, that was a felony. And drinking, you'd better not catch anybody drinking. We would slip and maybe roll up some paper and light it and smoke it. [laughter]

No, it was just something good. Watts was a great place at one time. Central Avenue was a great place. It

was really a wonderful place to behold. It really was. So that was that.

ISOARDI: Well, William, we've about run through the list. Do you have any other things you want to bring up or anything we overlooked?

WOODMAN: Well, I think you covered just about everything. Yeah, just about everything. I told you the story of the Woodman Brothers. You got all that. And you have about the union, the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians Local 767]. You got all that.

ISOARDI: Yeah, we talked about that last time.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So you just about got everything. Yeah, I think you've covered just about everything. I'm glad you came and got in touch with me and I could give you the information that you wanted to hear.

ISOARDI: Thank you. Valuable. Finally, we get one of the legendary Woodman brothers.

WOODMAN: If the Woodman Brothers had stayed together, we still would have been one of the greatest little bands, because, even now, I don't know of any musicians who double on brass instruments as we did. Carter, Benny Carter, he was the only one, even at that time, who was playing trumpet and saxophone. And he was a fine trumpet player, too. He could play trumpet pretty good, too.

ISOARDI: Nobody else.

WOODMAN: But you don't hear of anybody doubling on almost all your reed instruments, playing flute.

ISOARDI: Yeah, flute, clarinet.

WOODMAN: All the reed instruments, flute, whatnot, clarinet, boom. But you don't hear of any of them playing brass instruments. We were great; I have to admit it. Britt [Woodman] was playing trombone just like he's playing now, and, believe me, Britt was playing the sax as well as some of the guys playing now. We were just amazing. It was just-- I think back on how great we were. At that time, we were just nonchalant. We didn't think anything of ourselves. We didn't even think about how we could play that good, but we were good. I think back, and we were great. That's why so many people used to-- Buddy [Collette], of course, now, being as great as he is, he could tell you how great we were.

ISOARDI: Oh, he has. Everyone talks about the Woodman Brothers. The people you had in that band!

WOODMAN: Yeah. We were great. And I think about-- If we had stayed together and continued on, doubling like we were, we still would have been different from anybody else.

ISOARDI: With the different kind of arrangements you would have had.

WOODMAN: I remember we played in-- Remember the Lincoln Theatre?

ISOARDI: Yeah, sure.

WOODMAN: See, we performed there, and that was really something, too. That's when the Lincoln Theatre was pretty outstanding and big bands played there. We played there. And my brother Coney [Woodman] and Jessie Sailes and myself were the trio, like remember Benny Goodman's trio? Clarinet and drums and piano. That's all. At first, that's all he had until he added the other guys. And we were invited out. Jimmy Dorsey's band was playing at that time, playing at the [Hollywood] Palladium, and we were invited out there. They introduced us as the Woodman Brothers Trio. And I was playing-- I was playing good clarinet. I was playing like Benny Goodman. We were playing some of those things that he did. Remember that one that he did? [sings rhythm] What was the name of that? The trumpet player would come in. It was like--

ISOARDI: It begins with the drums? Like, "Sing, Sing, Sing"?

WOODMAN: "Sing, Sing, Sing." And I played one tune that I like that he played, "Lady Be Good." He played that. Then he would change the tempo, and it went to a minor key. [sings melody] And I was playing, I was really blowing. I was playing the clarinet real good. I was thinking about putting down all those instruments and just keeping the sax going.

But you know what happened to me, also? What caused me to put down all those instruments? I made a big mistake. I heard Benny Goodman out at the Palladium, I believe it was. Well, he was always naturally great, one of the greatest, naturally-- Well, the greatest clarinet player, I would say. When I saw him, his teeth were so smooth, and I said, "Man, that's why he plays so good and gets that beautiful sound." And I was playing good. My embouchure was all right, but once you establish your embouchure, don't be changing it, because-- If I had realized that one of my teeth right here, this one right here, was a little longer than the others, a little piece of it--

ISOARDI: And that threw it off?

WOODMAN: And you know what I did? I went to the dentist and asked this person, "Now, do you think this will affect my playing?" He said, "Oh, no, it isn't going to affect your playing." Do you know something? I had that tooth filed. I went home, and, do you know, I could hardly play!

ISOARDI: You'd gotten so used to it the other way.

WOODMAN: Sure. I had to start all over and develop another embouchure.

ISOARDI: Oh, man.

WOODMAN: But it wasn't like the first one. I couldn't play as well as the last one. I really got disgusted with

myself, and I put down the clarinet and the trumpet-- I couldn't hardly play it, and I put it down to a certain extent. But, see, I played trumpet with Maxwell Davis's band when the trumpet player that he had, some woman threw some lye in his face and blinded him.

ISOARDI: What?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We were working in San Diego at that time. I was playing tenor, because we had two tenors. Maxwell was playing tenor, I was playing tenor, and Fat Boy was playing alto. He [the trumpet player] didn't die. He couldn't play no more, though. So Maxwell asked me, "Hey, Brother, how about playing trumpet?" I said, "Man, I haven't played trumpet in I don't know how long." But I could still play. I could play the arrangement. I had to more or less force myself. I couldn't play real easy like I used to. But I played those arrangements, and I sounded good. So I doubled on baritone and trumpet.

ISOARDI: Oh, geez.

WOODMAN: I think about that way back then, and I say, "Man, I was doubling on trumpet and baritone?" I was playing good, though. But finally I got to the place where I just put those instruments down and just stayed with the tenor, and I had to develop a new embouchure on the tenor. You know, to this day, I haven't developed the embouchure I had before. Because at the time before, I

could play so easy and, boy, I could just-- See, embouchure is actually-- If your embouchure isn't working, I don't care how fast your fingers are, you still aren't going to be able to do it to alternate together. It ain't going to work. You could have a good embouchure, and if the fingers ain't working, it still ain't going to work. [laughter]

ISOARDI: That's right.

WOODMAN: They've got to work together.

ISOARDI: That's right.

WOODMAN: So it really affected my playing, and I had to really force myself to play until I kept playing and it got a little easier for me. But, to this day, my embouchure is not what it ought to be. I can't play as easy as I used to. Man, that was the most disgusting-- Oh, boy, that dentist, I wanted to kill him, man.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Oh, man. Were you playing with Maxwell Davis when this woman threw lye in the trumpet player's face?

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: Why?

WOODMAN: We were working in San Diego, and he was going with this girl, and evidently-- Of course, we don't know what he was doing. I know he was going with this particular girl. Evidently, he must have been cheating on her, and she found out. We were all living in this

house. It was one of those rooming houses for musicians. One morning, she came to the door. He opened the door and she threw the lye in his face. Boy, that was a horrible thing to do. They say he screamed. I said, "Oh--"

ISOARDI: God.

WOODMAN: I don't even know-- He could be living now.

ISOARDI: Maxwell Davis?

WOODMAN: No, it wasn't Maxwell Davis whose face the lye was thrown in.

ISOARDI: Oh, who--?

WOODMAN: It was his trumpet player. See, I took the trumpet player's place.

ISOARDI: Oh. He was in the Maxwell Davis band, but he was a trumpet player in the band.

WOODMAN: Right. That's what that was.

ISOARDI: So that's why he wanted you to start playing trumpet.

WOODMAN: Yeah, trumpet. So I played trumpet with him about over a year.

ISOARDI: Well, okay, William. Thank you.

WOODMAN: Yeah, it was sure nice. This interview was very uplifting. I enjoyed it very much.

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