TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

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ISOARDI: Okay, Britt, we get together at last after a couple of years of trying to get together.

WOODMAN: Yeah, how about that. You've been trying together for about—

ISOARDI: Well, yeah, about three thousand miles kept us apart, but I'm glad we're doing it.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Let's begin with your life as far back as you can go, where you were born and what it was like.

WOODMAN: Well, this I can reply very easily to tell you that I was born June 4, 1920, in Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Gee, well, happy birthday. You had your birthday just a couple of days ago. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh yes, right. [Laughter] I was born in Los Angeles on Fourteenth Street, I think it was off of Hooper [Avenue], and I had— At that time it was two brothers.

ISOARDI: Two older brothers, then?

WOODMAN: Two older brothers: William [Woodman Jr.], who was one year older than me, and my older brother was three years older. He was born in Mississippi.

ISOARDI: And that's Coney?

WOODMAN: That's Coney Woodman. And I believe— Well, I'm quite sure that my parents moved out here in 1918.

ISOARDI: Do you know why they left, why they came out here?

WOODMAN: Well, I don't know for sure, but from what my dad [William B. Woodman Sr.] was saying to other people, he was a musician, and there wasn't any work there in Mississippi for him. And also he got an offer from Washington [D.C.]. He had such a beautiful handwriting, and [there was] some type of job that he could have been gone to. He was a college graduate.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: Yes. But he loved music. So that was one of his main reasons for coming to Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Where did he go to college? Do you remember?

WOODMAN: He graduated from the college—Alcorn.

ISOARDI: Alcorn State [University], Mississippi?

WOODMAN: Alcorn College, Mississippi, yes.

ISOARDI: Do you know much about your grandparents or how far back you can trace your family?

WOODMAN: Well, of course I remember the South. I can recall that my mother [Irene Woodman] took William and I to Mississippi to see my grandmother and

grandfather.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? So you knew them?

WOODMAN: Yes. I met them when I was real young. Can I tell you this little story about what happened?

ISOARDI: Go ahead.

WOODMAN: Oh, well, the people who lived right next door, had a little old crazy boy.

ISOARDI: This is back in Mississippi?

WOODMAN: Back in Mississippi. I was six years old, and my other brother, William, was seven years old, and he used to throw rocks at us. But the main thing that happened that scared my aunt, Ruth Bingham— About five little white boys passed us—my brother and I were standing by the fence in the front yard—and they said, "Look at the niggers! Look at the niggers!"

ISOARDI: These are the little white kids saying this?

WOODMAN: Yeah, they all pointed. And we got rocks and threw them at them. And my aunt said, "Oh, don't throw the— Oh!" They got so frightened. Nothing happened but they were so frightened that the kids would tell their parents and they would come by and give them trouble. So they told us, "Don't do that anymore." They were scared to death. We didn't realize—

ISOARDI: You didn't know what was going on.

WOODMAN: No, we didn't realize how dangerous it was. That was an experience that I'll never forget.

ISOARDI: Was that your kind of first experience with racism?

WOODMAN: Yes. Right. Oh, of course we had heard about it, but experiencing how frightened people are from just little kids— But the one thing about it [was that] my family were very well known in Mississippi, so if the kids said anything to them, well, they probably said forget it, because they were well known.

ISOARDI: Why was your family well known?

WOODMAN: Well, I'll tell you. For one reason, they had seven daughters and seven sons. There were fourteen of them.

ISOARDI: No kidding. These are all your aunts and uncles?

WOODMAN: All my aunts and uncles. And whoever it was, the people with the money, they let them farm their own farm, do their own farming. So they worked for themselves. Naturally, they had to give some percentage, some money to the people that owned the land, something like that, but they never had to really work for the white man. They did their own farming and—

ISOARDI: Gee, that's a huge family.

WOODMAN: And I'll give the credit to them, because I strongly believe in the Bible. They were very good Christians, and so believing in God and believing in the Bible and what it says is true. They were real Christians, so God said he would provide for

them and take care of them like he said he would. They weren't in poverty; they lived good and everything.

ISOARDI: And your grandparents were able to send your father to college?

WOODMAN: No, not this one. This is on my mother's side. ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: No, this is on my mother's side. Now, my grandmother on my dad's side, she— Well, naturally at that time she was working for the white man. I think they were Jewish. But during that time, the Jewish people couldn't say they were Jewish because they would be—

ISOARDI: All the prejudice against them.

WOODMAN: Against them, too.

ISOARDI: Is this also in Mississippi, your father's family?

WOODMAN: Also, yes. Now, my grandmother wasn't living in Jackson, Mississippi. They were living in Canton, Mississippi. Anyway, my father's mother, sent him to college.

ISOARDI: Was he the first one, as far as you know, to go to college in the family?

WOODMAN: Yes. She only had the one son, and that was him.

ISOARDI: Did he study music in college, do you know?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he did, because he could arrange, and he could read music very well. When we moved to Watts, that's when he started working at the burlesque theater. We called that the Follies [Burlesque] Theatre. So he worked there and raised us until

we were grown. I'll tell you a little story about that a little later on.

So I'll get back now to when my dad decided to let us play music. Now, the reason why he wanted us to be musicians I don't know, but I know that he would say that musicians would have a better life, a better chance to make money during that time. He noticed this—that kids that were able to go to college, black kids, or to a university, whatever they majored in they never got any jobs, so they had to refer back to the post office. So he figured that being a musician—if you're on top, you have a better chance to make a better living.

ISOARDI: At least you've got a skill.

WOODMAN: You've got a skill, see. I believe that was his reason that he wanted us to be musicians. So we all started on piano.

ISOARDI: Now, how old were you when this—?

WOODMAN: I was seven years old.

ISOARDI: So were you still living up in L.A.?

WOODMAN: No, we moved to Watts when I was six.

ISOARDI: Okay. And up until then, then, you hadn't studied music?

WOODMAN: Oh, no, nothing.

ISOARDI: Were you attracted to music? Was that something that you want to do? Or did you not even think about it?

WOODMAN: I didn't think about it. At that time, it was my dad's idea. I'll tell you

what, I didn't want to practice on the piano, but I had to. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, you're seven years old—

WOODMAN: Yeah. I can remember practicing on the piano— about thirty-five minutes, I said, "Well, I'm tired, man." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Before you moved down to Watts, do you have any memories of L.A. up there? What were the big streets up there? Do you remember anything like that?

WOODMAN: The only thing I can remember is when I was going to grade school.

ISOARDI: And what grade school were you—?

WOODMAN: That was kindergarten. Lafayette [Elementary School]. I can remember that we had milk to drink in the morning. I remember that. And I'll never forget on the corner was an ice cream place, Star Ice Cream factory, so that stayed in my mind. The school and that stayed in my mind.

ISOARDI: The ice cream factory.

WOODMAN: I never forgot— It's amazing, too—after, now, five years old—that I can remember Lafayette [Elementary] School and this ice cream factory. And we all remember that. I guess it's just something that happened in your life that you just couldn't forget, I imagine. And what was surrounding Los Angeles, or what street—I don't remember going anywhere but school and home, because we were right across the street from the school. So I don't remember anything else during that time.

ISOARDI: What was your dad doing at this time? Do you remember that?

WOODMAN: Now, that's something. I was wondering, did he start at the burlesque theater when we were living on Fourteenth Street? Now, that I can't recall. But I know that when we moved to Watts that he was working at the—

ISOARDI: Where was the burlesque theater at?

WOODMAN: On Main Street. Around Sixth [Street] and Seventh [Street] on Main. That was one of the popular theaters. I'll tell you about that theater. I'll get to it. I'll try to get back to the piano. So when I was seven—

ISOARDI: Was he teaching, do you remember?

WOODMAN: No, we had teachers.

ISOARDI: So he wasn't teaching you.

WOODMAN: Not on piano.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: It was a white German teacher. I'll never forget—

ISOARDI: So this your first teacher that you had?

WOODMAN: First teacher, yeah. We had to put pennies on our hands so your hand would stay—

ISOARDI: You put it on the top of your hand?

WOODMAN: On top of your hand, see, and that's the form. That's the way you're supposed to play. So she taught us correctly on that, see. And from there we went to another teacher called Professor Grey.

ISOARDI: Now, how long were you with this German piano teacher?

WOODMAN: About a year.

ISOARDI: Oh, actually, before you get to that teacher, let me ask you, Britt, why did he move to Watts? Do you remember why you moved down to Watts?

WOODMAN: Well, now, that I don't know. I don't think any of us know.

ISOARDI: Where did you move to?

WOODMAN: To 111th Street, right next to the grade school that we attended. It seemed like we'd always be right next to the school. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] They didn't want much in between home and the school.

WOODMAN: The name of the school was Grape Street [Elementary] School.

ISOARDI: Grape Street?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Grape Street School. So I remember the big, vacant lot, and also remember we'd play softball there. Also, they said that it was a Japanese garden that was planted, because we could pull up potatoes [from] underground.

ISOARDI: Where you used to play ball?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We'd see the leaves and dig and pull up potatoes there. So they say the Japanese had a garden planted there once.

ISOARDI: They did a good job. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What was your image of Watts? Do you have any memories of what it was

like then or what kind of people were there?

WOODMAN: Well, at that time we moved there, I know we were the only house on a dirt road.

ISOARDI: Oh, it wasn't even paved.

WOODMAN: No. Oh, no. And my dad dug a cesspool in the back, because at that time the county [Los Angeles County] didn't have any toilets or anything.

ISOARDI: So it was all outdoors.

WOODMAN: Outdoors, see. Sometimes it would flood. You'd see it come up. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, man.

WOODMAN: We also had a well back there.

ISOARDI: For your water?

WOODMAN: Yes.

ISOARDI: So you'd have to go out and pump when you wanted fresh water.

WOODMAN: Fresh water. And we threw cans down there. We plugged it up. We knocked that off. [Laughter] I never forgot that. I never forgot the backyard. We had all kinds of trees in the backyard: peach trees and plum trees and grapes. Oh, we had a big grape [vine] there. But some fellows trimmed the trees and killed every one of them. I don't know how it could happen, but that's what happened.

ISOARDI: They didn't know what they were doing.

WOODMAN: No, evidently. So my dad had all that dug up. Then we had chickens and geese.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I'll never forget the time when—

ISOARDI: It was just like being on a farm.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, naturally, they were born on the farm, so they hadn't gotten it out of their soul yet. [Laughter] I'll never forget that this chicken had little chickens, and I went to reach for one, and she jumped on me, man. The wings, man. I didn't know that that would happen. I said that taught me a lesson.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Protect your young.

WOODMAN: Well, in the meantime, we are practicing on piano. Finally, there was another teacher called Professor Grey.

ISOARDI: So this is the one after your German teacher?

WOODMAN: After, yeah. We had to go up to Los Angeles then.

ISOARDI: Now, all you guys are playing piano at the same time?

WOODMAN: Yes.

ISOARDI: Your father starts all of you?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. And we all went up to Los Angeles to play piano with this Professor Grey.

ISOARDI: Who was he?

WOODMAN: A great black teacher that not only taught piano, but he taught harmony and theory.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So later on we took theory from him. And you know, Steve, all during that time I didn't want to play piano, I didn't want to take theory, but I did remember all the things that I was taught. In later years it sure helped me a lot, especially when I went to Westlake College [of Music] to study arranging and other forms of music.

ISOARDI: So you got a lot out of it.

WOODMAN: I sure did. So when I was seven years old— after seven years old, going on eight—he gave me a trombone, the instrument that he played, he was a trombonist' and William, next to me, a trumpet. Coney stayed on piano, and he gave him a banjo. So my dad taught me trombone, and one of the teachers at the Follies Theatre taught my brother the trumpet, and one of the teachers at the Follies Theatre taught Coney on the banjo. ISOARDI: Really? Gee, your father had it all lined up.

WOODMAN: Yes. And I'll tell you, after playing the Follies Theatre—which I'll tell you about— They talk about how the black musicians couldn't read; all those musicians were superb. I don't know where they got their training. Just like my dad could read very well. So after three years—I was ten—three years on my trombone, he gave me a sax, a tenor sax, and my other brother, William, alto sax, and Coney, guitar.

ISOARDI: Jeez, he's taking you through everything.

WOODMAN: And Steve, I can't remember: sometimes I think my dad taught us the sax. I can't remember anyone else teaching us on the saxophone.

ISOARDI: Now, what age are you when you get these horns?

WOODMAN: Now, I was ten years old on the trombone. I was eleven years old when I got the sax.

ISOARDI: How did you handle trombone at ten years old? You couldn't make all the positions, could you?

WOODMAN: Actually, no, I couldn't reach the seventh [position]. But generally, when you teach a young kid, you just sort of tell them that that's the seventh. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: It's out there. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: That's just the way it is. So when I was thirteen, he gave us the clarinet—me the clarinet and William the clarinet—and Coney just stayed on the guitar and banjo and piano. Now, our first lesson on the clarinet, who taught us was Marshall Royal's uncle, Ernie Royal.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

WOODMAN: That's when I met Marshall and Ernie. I was thirteen years old.

ISOARDI: So I guess your father knew his family?

WOODMAN: Yes. And he was a terrific teacher. Now, he taught us about eight

months or six months or seven months like that. Then somehow or another, my dad went to another teacher, a German teacher, that played in one of the symphony orchestras here in Los Angeles, and so he taught us the remaining year or so. That's when I learned certain technical things about the clarinet: how you're supposed to play it and all the breathing and so forth. That he explained—which was a big help to me.

ISOARDI: Now, you're thirteen, fourteen years old. You've been studying, it sounds, pretty intensely since you were seven years old. I mean, how many hours a day would you work on this?

WOODMAN: Well, I know that on my trombone, my dad would come at 12:30 from his show. His first show would be around ten. My recess would be from twelve to one.

ISOARDI: From school.

WOODMAN: From the school. During my recess I'd have to— Not every recess, but some recesses I had to come home and wait for him to see how I was doing with my lessons.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

WOODMAN: I know one time I didn't practice too good, so he hit me on my forehead, "You didn't practice!" [Laughter] He really was disgusted with me.

ISOARDI: And then when you go home after school, I guess, you go home to practice?

WOODMAN: Practice. We'd do our practice first, then we'd go play. And you know,

during all that time, Coney would be on the piano practicing, my brother in the other room—the screen porch—and I'd be in the bedroom, and we'd be practicing all together. We didn't think about that until we got older, how our mother could stand all that noise. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: What about the neighbors? Oh, that's right, you didn't have any neighbors. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: There weren't any neighbors at the time. We were the only house that was on the—

ISOARDI: Maybe that's why your father moved out there. It was going to rough for a few years. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah, maybe so. But they started building houses across the street.

ISOARDI: You're playing a lot and you're learning a lot.

WOODMAN: Now that was just during grade school. Now, I went to high school when I was fourteen.

ISOARDI: So you go to—?

WOODMAN: —fifteen. So that's when we started playing professional, at fifteen. We were very apt on the instruments; we were learning them so fast. I played music in the high school band and orchestra, and sometimes I would play the clarinet part when the clarinet player wasn't there. And the teacher was so amazed. And my other brother played clarinet. I decided not to take my trombone, so I learned to play the baritone,

because I didn't want to take my trombone.

ISOARDI: Why not?

WOODMAN: Because it's too much trouble carrying it. [Laughter] And they needed a baritone player, so that's why I learned to play baritone.

ISOARDI: Okay. Now, where are you? This is high school?

WOODMAN: This was Jordan High School.

ISOARDI: So you're a freshman at Jordan High School.

WOODMAN: Freshman, yeah.

ISOARDI: And you're taking a music class. So do they have—?

WOODMAN: No, not a music course. I signed up for the music band.

ISOARDI: Okay, so they had a band that you'd sign up for.

WOODMAN: Yeah. We'd played for the football [games] and things.

ISOARDI: Oh, so it was kind of a marching band really.

WOODMAN: Marching band.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see, okay.

WOODMAN: Then, orchestra too, which is signed up for. They had strings.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? So they had a marching band there plus a big orchestra with strings.

WOODMAN: Orchestra too, yeah. So I was in the junior orchestra, but finally they put me in the senior orchestra, because I could play so well and read the music.

ISOARDI: Now, in the senior orchestra, though, you played trombone or baritone?

WOODMAN: Well, my first year signing up for the music, I played trombone. Then after a year, I started playing the baritone. I didn't want to take it. But I would carry my mouthpiece. Anything that the trombone had or some other trombone player couldn't play, then I would take it and play it on the trombone. All my solos that I would play or perform were Arthur Price's. He was first trombonist with [John] Philip Sousa's band. So he had written more than three concert tunes, so I would play one of the three of those works in the program. So my daddy taught me how to double tongue and triple tongue and all that, and I was very fast on the trombone.

In fact, Mr. [Joseph Louis] Lippi was the musical director. So he told my dad, he said, "Britt could be a virtuoso on the trombone, and I can recommend him to one of our noted teachers here that plays with the symphony orchestra." And so my dad, which I regret today— I wish my dad had accepted that suggestion. But he told him, "Well, there's no future for Britt to play that type of music. He can't get into the symphony orchestra, and I doubt—" But, you see, it was wrong thinking. At that time—

ISOARDI: It might change.

WOODMAN: Yeah, but still, the thing is not realizing that I stayed in the book more so than I did jazz, playing exercises and playing the trumpet part and all that. He taught me how to transpose from the trumpet part and the tenor part and the clarinet

part, because my range was very high, so I didn't have any trouble playing high.

ISOARDI: So you sort of wish you had had that kind of classical training?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Because I was gifted. My dad had never told me how to form my lips or anything. Like when you teach someone, you have to tell them how to form your lips, and this and that and about your breathing, and so forth and all. When I picked up the trombone, I played a note, just—

ISOARDI: The first time.

WOODMAN: First time, just played the note. And pretty soon I was playing just higher, altissimo B-flats and all that, just so easy. In fact, I know I'm talking a musical term now, but there's a B-flat above the staff on the trombone, then there's another B-flat way up above that. Well, that B-flat I could make. At that time, it sounded so big and round that you wouldn't think that it was an altissimo B flat.

ISOARDI: You're kidding. You were playing altissimo notes right off the bat?

WOODMAN: When I started, after developing my chops, my embouchure and things, it was just natural. I wasn't told how to play it and things. When I started teaching, I tried to find out what in the world did I do to make high notes, because everybody wanted to play high notes, and I didn't know how I made them. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: You could just do it without even thinking about it.

WOODMAN: So I had to think about it and say, "What happened?" But it was just a natural thing for me. I was just gifted. In fact, we were all gifted, Coney on the piano

was playing all the Chopin, all those heavy things on the piano, and "Brother" [William Woodman]—

ISOARDI: Well, just let me ask. Did you ever have a chance to play in a symphony orchestra?

WOODMAN: Yes. I guess Buddy Collette told you about the symphony orchestra they formed here.

ISOARDI: Oh, at the time of the amalgamation [of the American Federation of Musicians Local 767 and Local 47]. Was that the one?

WOODMAN: No, no. It was during that time. It was during that time of the big ten. I don't know if you ever heard of the big ten?

ISOARDI: Well, we can get to that later. But you did have a chance, then, to actually play some classical.

WOODMAN: Well, I'm surprised that Buddy didn't tell you about that. He might have.

ISOARDI: He might have, yeah. That was about four years ago.

WOODMAN: All this was in the forties. So they formed this for the minority musicians to get the experience.

ISOARDI: Oh, was this the orchestra that played in Humanist Hall? Was that the one? I think he might have.

WOODMAN: In the forties?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Late forties?

WOODMAN: Late forties? Could be. Well, anyway, I was the librarian. I had to go to the library to get the music, the old works and different things. So every week—every rehearsal, which was every week—they had a different conductor so that we could get familiar with different conductors and things.

ISOARDI: Oh jeez, and their styles and—

WOODMAN: Yeah, their styles. So I had that experience. But see, the way that I was taught also with my dad, I was taught to approach the symphony music and band music at the school, because there was a different approach on that than jazz. So I didn't have much trouble when they were playing symphony music and this and that, because I had that training. See, the wonderful experience was playing under different conductors. See, that was the beautiful thing, because if you play the same overture, they still have their conception of what they want, you see.

ISOARDI: And you've got to be able to react to it.

WOODMAN: And react, yeah, to them.

ISOARDI: So your father wouldn't give you that. He turned it down.

WOODMAN: No, he turned it down.

ISOARDI: He figured you wouldn't have any opportunity to use it.

WOODMAN: Opportunity. At the time, I didn't realize, but after I got older, I said, "Boy." Because I stayed in my book more so than I did jazz. I could play from an exercise book practically everything in there, just from the top to the bottom. In fact, I

could play "Flight of the Bumble Bee" on the horn. I could play that fast. And I didn't double tongue; I single tongued. Most of the fellows, trombone players, when they play that they double tongue.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it's the only way to get through it for most.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So I had such speed with my—

ISOARDI: Jeez, thirteen, fourteen. It sounds like you could do it all.

WOODMAN: Well, see, I didn't think anything of that, me playing that. It was so easy. The things I was doing— the music I could read. It was just easy. Because staying in my exercise book and playing different things, which—I never did—I wish I had—read books. Because it's the same thing with reading books. To read fast, you've got to read about three or four or five paragraphs ahead of time. Well, the music is the same way. You're looking at the music, but at that first bar I see the next three bars.

ISOARDI: Really, just like that?

WOODMAN: It's just there. Therefore, I see it. Before I get to it, I see it. So that's what you call first sight-reading; that's the way you have to approach it, see—in that way.

ISOARDI: That's fantastic. You must not have been doing anything else, then. You didn't play football or baseball?

WOODMAN: My dad was all right. My mother didn't want us to go play any sports.

ISOARDI: None?

WOODMAN: None. They called my brother William "the rabbit." During gym they played touch football, and my brother, he could move along, man, they couldn't touch him. So they started calling him "the rabbit." The coach wanted him to play on the football team, but he couldn't. And I was pretty good playing football. I wasn't too fast in the track, but "the rabbit," William, could run real fast and all of that. But dig this, Steve: Now, we couldn't play football, but every Saturday, Brother would play on a field that had glass and everything, no helmets or anything, and play football. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: I take it your parents didn't know about that. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: No. And he would run through those cats like nothing. So we couldn't participate. I love sports. I specialized on the rings and bars and Ping-Pong and basketball. In fact, that's where I taught Charlie [Charles] Mingus all that, see.

ISOARDI: You taught him how to play all those sports?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Ping-Pong and basketball and horseshoe. In fact, we had a little team. There was two of us. We'd go to different playgrounds. We called it twenty-one. I don't know if you know about basketball.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah.

WOODMAN: Well, you add up to twenty-one, you know, and whoever gets twenty-one first wins the game. So we had little different team things. We'd throw the ball, you know. He had one thing that he would always— Fellows couldn't get him.

He'd run like this and throw the ball over his head.

ISOARDI: Mingus?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he had that down. And I had one down with my left hand, because everyone shoots with their right hand. So I would go ahead, and I'd put it over there with my left hand. The only trouble we had was the tall fellows. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: I guess neither of you guys were too tall.

WOODMAN: No. Those tall kids, we had to work like the devil to beat them.

ISOARDI: Gee, you mentioned Mingus. I mean, now you're a freshman at Jordan. Who were your friends back then? Who were you hanging around with? I guess Mingus was one of them?

WOODMAN: Well, see, now, with Mingus—he's about two grades below me. In fact, he and Buddy Collette were around the same age.

ISOARDI: So they're about two years younger than you?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. Mingus was playing cello at the time. In the senior orchestra they didn't have any cellos. He was playing in the junior orchestra, so Mr. Lippi the next semester arranged it so he could play with the senior orchestra.

ISOARDI: Play cello with the senior orchestra. Was that when you first met him?

WOODMAN: That's when I first met him. And, boy, he was bow-legged and shy. The kids used to make fun of him.

ISOARDI: Shy?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Oh, man. The kids used to make fun of him.

ISOARDI: I never think of Mingus as a shy person.

WOODMAN: Some of the kids that graduated from grade school to high school, those same fellows were there. They used to take his lunch from him; they used to tease him.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Boy, did he change.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, I think I changed him. I'll tell you about that. [Laughter] But anyway, that's when we became friends.

ISOARDI: Well, how did you guys hook up? How did you click?

WOODMAN: Well, when he was playing there, I just started talking with him.

ISOARDI: Just started chatting on the practices.

WOODMAN: Chatting and things. So he asked me to come over to the house and so I went with him to his home, met his mother. And he had two sisters, Vivian and Grace that were older than I. One played the piano; one played the violin.

ISOARDI: What were his parents like?

WOODMAN: Beautiful.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Their father was pretty strict, though.

ISOARDI: He was a military man, wasn't he, or something like that?

WOODMAN: No. He was pretty strict. They attended the Baptist church, which was right on the corner, and I belonged to Christ Temple. But I went to their church a

couple of times. And I had eaten over his house, and I took him to my house to eat. So he'd come over to my house and eat. Now, I'm trying to think, pinpoint this. I think by '37, I guess— It's kind of hard to remember just when all this took place.

ISOARDI: You're not a freshman? Or is this your freshman or sophomore year?

WOODMAN: I think I was a sophomore then. I had—

ISOARDI: You're about fourteen, fifteen?

WOODMAN: Fifteen.

ISOARDI: If you were born in 1920, it's about 1935? Something like that?

WOODMAN: Yeah, about '35, yeah, or '37, around there. And that's when we were going on a playground playing Ping-Pong. I remember playing him with my left hand. I learned to play with the left hand because he never could be a Ping-Pong player. He'd get mad at me. "Why don't you play with your right hand?" [Laughter]

ISOARDI: So he was pretty shy, and he didn't know how to do any of this stuff, right?

WOODMAN: No, no. Oh, at that time, no.

ISOARDI: So you showed him the ropes.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So in the meantime, there was a fellow that was teaching my other two brothers and I how to fight, see. So we put up a big bag in our garage, punching bag, one of those big bags, and that's when I— When Charles was over one time for dinner with me, I said, "Charles, come on over to the garage. I'm going to show you something that I was taught." And I showed him one, two, three, that big

thing. One, two, three, the one-two-three-punch.

ISOARDI: A little combination.

WOODMAN: Little combination. So I was telling him to punch, jab. So he liked it. So off and on he'd come into the garage and punch the bag. Meantime, he was kind of getting out of the shyness thing. Now, all this was happening before he met Buddy Collette. See, all this was— We were like brothers. We were going to the playground— Oh, another thing, too. You may not believe it, but I could chin twelve times with one hand.

ISOARDI: What could you do?

WOODMAN: Twelve times with one hand.

ISOARDI: What? Chin-ups?

WOODMAN: Chin-ups. And nine times with my left.

ISOARDI: Just one-handed chin-ups.

WOODMAN: One-handed chin-ups. And I would go all the way down, because that's what they want; you've got to go all the way down. And as soon as I'd bring myself up this much like this, I'd chin myself up.

ISOARDI: Jeez, you were good. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: We would win money. We would bet. I would bet with my left hand. I'd say, "I can chin five times with my left hand." "Two bits says you can't." Then what would I do? I'd chin times with my left hand. [Laughter]

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WOODMAN: Now, this was happening going up to my last year in school. Also, basketball we played for a little money.

ISOARDI: Your parents didn't mind you doing this, then.

WOODMAN: Well, they didn't know what we were doing. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, what about the punching bag in the garage?

WOODMAN: Well, she knew about that, but she didn't think anything about that because it's just like exercise.

ISOARDI: Okay. And you're home; you're in the garage.

WOODMAN: So we'd go to different playgrounds doing that. So now in 1938—

ISOARDI: Just about the time you graduate.

WOODMAN: Just about. My father made arrangement with the principal for me to go to school half the day so I could play at the Follies Theatre. Now, he wanted me to get the experience of playing all types of music, those segues, so many things that they do—

ISOARDI: So this is your senior year at Jordan or something like that?

WOODMAN: Yeah, senior year.

ISOARDI: And your father's cutting a deal with the principal so you can skip half the

day?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So the principal said as long as I do my lesson and have my lesson ready for the exams to graduate, it was okay.

Well, during that time at the Follies Theatre, I found out that the main comedian was [Joe] Rooney, Mickey Rooney's father. Mickey Rooney came by one day and introduced himself. I didn't think about it. I knew his name was Rooney by Mr. Rooney, but I didn't know that it was Mickey Rooney's father. He was a great comedian.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Boy, he was—the jokes he would tell, I would learn them, and I would teach them to Charles Mingus. So during recess, boy, the kids would gather around and we'd tell them these jokes. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: You and Mingus doing stand-up comedy.

WOODMAN: Comedy. Now, this is all before he got connected with Buddy Collette. Now, the bottom line— Charles said, "I should like to play trombone." I said, "Okay, I'll bring my trombone to school, and I'll go by your pad, and we'll see," which I did; I went by his pad. And he'd always take his cello home every day. So I said, "Oh, let's play out of the cello book for a while." He said, "Okay." So we started playing in unison, you know, in unison. We got to one note, B-double-flat. I said, "Charles, why did you miss that note? That's B-double-flat."

"Yeah, okay, B-double-flat." He'd miss it.

I said, "Charles, you know what key you're in, don't you?"

"No."

I said, "You know what the note is?"

"No, you said B-double-flat."

I said, "Do you know your line space?"

"No."

Now, this is unbelievable. I said, "Come on, Charles."

"No, the teacher said—

I said, "Well, how do you read the music?"

He said, "Well, the first note, when it says go up like that, I hear it, I just play it and—"

ISOARDI: All by ear.

WOODMAN: By ear. I said, "Oh, I see why you didn't know this note is." I said, "Now, I'm going to tell you this, but it's more than this. You're in the key of F. The F is B-flat. This note, when it's on that line, is flat already; it's B-flat. So it has another flat attached to that note. Well, that brings that note a half step lower, and it becomes A. So that's called a double B-flat."

"Yeah."

So I told his mother. I said, "Mrs. Mingus, I don't know, this teacher that's teaching

Charles, he's not teaching him correctly."

ISOARDI: So he had been studying with a teacher?

WOODMAN: Yes. He had a teacher, yeah.

ISOARDI: What the hell was this teacher showing him?

WOODMAN: I don't know. He could play to fool the teacher. But the thing about it—I told his mother, "The main thing is he doesn't even know the foundations of the music, the first thing he's supposed to know, the lines and spaces and so forth and all that. He doesn't even know what the clef is, that he's in the bass clef." So Charles said, "Man, I don't want to play no cello, anyway; I want to play bass."

Well, see, during that time, Jimmy Blanton was playing for Duke [Ellington]. I mean, he inspired everybody on the bass during that time. So all the bass players, everybody, man—

ISOARDI: Wanted to play like Jimmy Blanton.

WOODMAN: So Charles, he was crazy about Duke anyway, you know. "I want to play bass." So I told Mrs. Mingus, "Well, Mrs. Mingus, he has a good ear." I said, "He'll be a very good bass player." And Mrs. Mingus said, "We ain't got no money to buy no bass." His father was never in most of the time. I guess he was at work in the post office. I didn't get a chance to talk. But I talked with his mother.

So in two weeks, Charles called me, "Britt, I got a bass."

I said, "Yeah?" So I went by his house and helped him take the bass to school.

ISOARDI: How did he get it? His mother somehow came up with the money?

WOODMAN: Came up with the money. Somehow or another his mother arranged that he could get a bass and convinced her husband, Mr. Mingus, to buy him a bass. Now, this is when he got contact with Buddy Collette. And there were some other fellows at that time, the Bledsoe brothers—twins.

ISOARDI: You mean they were all in a band together?

WOODMAN: All in a band.

ISOARDI: I see. And Mingus was playing his cello with them, I guess.

WOODMAN: See, now, Buddy Collette wasn't playing in the orchestra.

ISOARDI: The school orchestra?

WOODMAN: No. Only Charles and the tuba players were playing in the band. They're the ones who marched for football, see—which I did, too, when they had the football games. And so at that time, the fellows were jamming— Buddy Collette, the Bledsoes, I think Bobby McNeely, and some others were jamming two songs: "I'm an Old Cowhand from the Rio Grande," And the other tune was "The Music Go Round and Around and Come Out Here." Two numbers. It was almost like [sings one-six-two-five quarter-note bass progression]—you know, that cadence, see. And Charles took his bass just flat-hand, just here: [sings progression again]. Right there.

ISOARDI: From the top?

WOODMAN: Just like that, yeah.

ISOARDI: He could just hear it.

WOODMAN: Just hear it. He still didn't know the frets or anything on the bass. He just played it.

ISOARDI: Gee. Well, the notes must have been wrong, but was he playing the right—?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was he playing some of it right.

ISOARDI: Somehow he was hanging in there and making it sound okay.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, this is almost my last year, in '38.

ISOARDI: So Mingus is your age?

WOODMAN: Oh, no.

ISOARDI: He's a couple years younger.

WOODMAN: He's couple of years younger. So I graduated, and— in the meantime— All this time, now, the Woodman Brothers [Biggest Little Band in the World]—we were still playing on the weekends, playing for Mexican dances.

ISOARDI: Oh, you haven't talked about that yet. When did you guys get together as a band?

WOODMAN: Well, we started when we were going to high school. When I was fifteen, that's when we started playing professionally.

ISOARDI: When you were fifteen years old, your father put you guys together as a band?

WOODMAN: Yeah, together as a band. He arranged that. We started. I was in the band and playing.

ISOARDI: Initially, it was the three of you guys, right?

WOODMAN: It was three of us.

ISOARDI: Was your father playing with you?

WOODMAN: No, he didn't play. He arranged the numbers. We used stock music [stock arrangements], the last chorus of the stock music, because we always had charts that were swinging, see. So he would use some of the stock up in front, the melody, but then he would arrange different things so that we would change—be able to show the flash. In two bars we'd change and play the saxophone. I'm on the sax, then I'll jump on the trombone, and William—we called him Brother—on the trumpet, you know, then change to sax.

ISOARDI: So he'd take the stocks and he'd arrange them and for all different instrumentation so you guys could just—

WOODMAN: So that we could switch around—plan it and things.

ISOARDI: [laughter] He knew how to show you guys off.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Our first drummer we had was a drummer that played in the school band called Martin Hurd. Well, he didn't stay too long with us. Then there was another drummer named George Reed. Now, he played with us for quite a while until he graduated. Then he left us and went with Horace Henderson, Fletcher Henderson's

brother. In fact, he married his daughter. He stayed with him for years. Later on with the band he started singing and he became a real beautiful singer, something like Nat King Cole. Then the other drummer we had was Jessie Sailes. He didn't have a drum. My dad bought a drum set for him.

ISOARDI: You mean he'd never played drums?

WOODMAN: He played drums, but he didn't have any drums.

ISOARDI: Oh, he didn't own a set.

WOODMAN: He didn't own a set—yeah, put it that way. He didn't own a set. So he bought a set for him. So in the meantime, now—

ISOARDI: So you've got the three of you guys, and you've got a drummer.

WOODMAN: Then Joe Comfort, bass and trumpet. So now, all that happened around '36, '37 with Jessie Sailes when the band was really tight.

ISOARDI: So you've got Jessie Sailes on drums; you've got Joe Comfort on bass.

WOODMAN: Doubling on trumpet.

ISOARDI: And doubling on trumpet. Coney's playing piano and guitar and banjo.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And the other brother—

ISOARDI: And William's—

WOODMAN: Alto, trumpet, and clarinet. I'm on tenor, trombone, and clarinet. So my dad named it the Biggest Little Band in the World.

ISOARDI: That was the name.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Good name. That was appropriate. It fits.

WOODMAN: So we played in weddings, dances, and homes.

Doctors would have house parties for their kids, and we'd play for the kids, the dance in their hall. They'd take off the rug in there and all— The doctor's the only one who can afford to pay us, you know. [Laughter] They'd afford it for their kids. So we'd play for them. And we'd played down at the Elks.

ISOARDI: You played the Elks hall in Central Avenue?

WOODMAN: Yeah, we played there.

ISOARDI: That's a big auditorium.

WOODMAN: I know it. We played there. But there we enlarged our band. Ernie Royal was with us for a while.

ISOARDI: As well? Playing in your band?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And there's a fellow by the name of Terry Cruise who played just clarinet; he was a star with George Brown. George Brown had one of the big bands very popular in Los Angeles, from Pasadena. George Brown.

ISOARDI: He was based in Pasadena?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He's the one that I think Buddy Collette— Did he tell you the story of Illinois Jacquet?

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

WOODMAN: Well, maybe he did. But I know for a fact that something happened where the tenor player couldn't make this gig with George Brown. So Buddy Collette knew Illinois Jacquet; Illinois Jacquet was playing alto sax at the time.

ISOARDI: With whom or where? Just around town?

WOODMAN: Around town. So Illinois Jacquet borrowed a tenor sax from Collette and played with the band. And he stayed now, that's when he stayed on tenor sax.

ISOARDI: Ah, that's when he switched.

WOODMAN: That's when he switched. He stayed on tenor sax. Now, Dexter Gordon was with him at the same time too, but I don't know if Dexter Gordon was playing alto. They were both from Houston, Texas, as you know. I can remember so well that we played the Dunbar Hotel, and there was a room called the Golding Room, where they had the dances. There was a room just for dances and other affairs.

ISOARDI: At the Dunbar?

WOODMAN: At the Dunbar Hotel.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. See, the Dunbar—

ISOARDI: So it wasn't just the Club Alabam.

WOODMAN: No, they had—

ISOARDI: How many rooms did they have?

WOODMAN: Well, the main room was a ballroom, that ballroom, and the Club

Alabam was a club—a stage and everything. So it was noted as one of the biggest hotels on Central, and it was the Club Alabam that made the Dunbar hotel very popular all over the world. It had about twenty-five rooms or more.

So we were playing, and I remember so well when Illinois Jacquet and Dexter Gordon were standing in front of us, looking at us.

ISOARDI: While you guys were playing at the Dunbar?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah, playing that. Well, everywhere we played, at the Elks, people would stand in front of us amazed because we were switching horns as we played, which we didn't think anything of. Sometimes we had one bar. [Mimics frantic switching of instruments] [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, man. You were just a bunch of teenagers, and you were doing all that.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. And we played up in the hills for actors. I remember so well we played for— Joe E. Brown was there at the time, and John Wayne.

ISOARDI: You mean playing at parties up in the Hollywood Hills?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Jeez. You guys must have been making some money.

WOODMAN: Well, at that time, money was— Well, if you made a dollar and a half a night, well, you know, at that time that was big money! [Laughter] Big money.

ISOARDI: You must have been making more than a dollar and a half a night.

WOODMAN: Well, playing up the hill we made a little bit more, but regular dances

were a dollar and a half. Because milk was three cents. You know, things were so cheap. And dig this: All the money that we made, we gave it to our dad.

ISOARDI: All of it?

WOODMAN: All of it. We had a piano right by our bedroom. When we'd go to school—we were going to high school— Coney and Brother would have fifteen cents. I'd have ten cents because I was younger. Every day now we had this. Shoot, we were the rich kids at school, man, with that kind of money.

ISOARDI: Because I got a dime every day.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And fifteen cents. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: But you were making a couple of bucks a night!

WOODMAN: I know, but he kept the money. [Laughter] This is going to kill you. This is going to kill you. Now, I didn't tell you. My younger brother is seven years younger than me, so when I was fifteen years old, he was eight, I think.

ISOARDI: So there are four of you guys?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Four brothers. What was his name?

WOODMAN: George Lawrence Woodman. So my dad— See, this is very important, if I could think of the name of this instructor, because he taught some of the name dancers to dance, tap-dance. So my dad sent him there to tap-dance. He learned a routine. And my dad had a drum set, play drums, made for him. So we start giving—

When we played a dance, we would put on a little show. My brother was our main—

ISOARDI: So he would dance? Tap-dance?

WOODMAN: Tap-dance. Then we'd get on the drums and [mimics drum riffs] on the drums. And we were getting paid. For him, they threw money out on the floor. He made twice as much money as we did. And he wouldn't let us pick it up. He would say, "I'll get it! Get off the top of those nickels. I don't need your help!" [Laughter] Oh, man.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, jeez!

WOODMAN: But he gave it to my dad, though. When he got home, he gave it to dad. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: You guys were doing okay, then, weren't you? The family—your dad was doing— [laughter]

WOODMAN: Well, see, truthfully, the money didn't mean anything to us. Because that fifteen cents going to school, I mean—

ISOARDI: —covered everything you needed.

WOODMAN: And if we wanted to go to a show, he'd give us the money. I mean, a show was ten cents. So the money actually didn't mean anything to us. Because, like me, I enjoyed the playground and things.

Actually, you know what, Steve? At one time I really wanted to be a playground director.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I said the only thing about that—I'd have to go college or something of that sort. But, man, I used to teach kids and be with kids then. I was very apt in all sports, and I could tell them little things—you know, the art in it—because everything you do is the art in what you're doing, see. So I loved it. In fact, I almost loved it more than I did music, because music— I just was practicing, and just I had to play because— You would never know I was a musician at the time, really. We never talked about it. We never talked [about] jobs that we played or where we played. Kids never did know that we played for movie stars and things. And we played for the Dandridge Sisters [Dorothy and Vivian] before Dorothy Dandridge became an actor. Well, two were sisters, and Etta Jones danced with them. They would sing and dance, and we were playing at this club—the Woodman Brothers and the three Dandridge Sisters in the floor show. When they were really young, we played for them.

ISOARDI: Well, they were a little younger than you, I guess, a few years younger?

WOODMAN: Dorothy was younger than me.

ISOARDI: Were they good? Were they all really talented?

WOODMAN: Really talented, yes.

ISOARDI: Where were they from? The Dandridge family?

WOODMAN: Well, as far as I know, from Los Angeles. I don't know if they were born here or not.

ISOARDI: Were they living in Watts?

WOODMAN: Oh, no, uptown.

ISOARDI: Up in L.A.

WOODMAN: Up in L.A., yeah. Vivian and Etta were around brother and Coney's age.

ISOARDI: What about some of the other guys? You mentioned when you met Mingus. What about some of your other friends? Was Joe Comfort a childhood friend of yours?

WOODMAN: Well, he was more friends with Coney. He's around that age. They were kind of—

ISOARDI: So he was a little older.

WOODMAN: Yeah. They would hang out together. We played dances, and they would talk to the chicks if they could.

ISOARDI: Well, when you're that age, one year is like ten years, you know.

WOODMAN: Well, naturally we knew his father [George Comfort] and mother and his sister [Laurel Comfort]. He had two other brothers, George and Frank.

ISOARDI: Where were they living?

WOODMAN: I think they were on 114th Street in Watts, it was in Watts. I think his father was a barber. But they were a nice family and everything.

ISOARDI: Anybody else? Any other friends you had then that might be worth mentioning?

WOODMAN: Well, let me see. Steward Hamilton, Teague Johnson, Edward Adams,

and Joe Adams at the time was a friend. I left him playing the snare drum in the junior band. When I left here in 1940 with Les Hite's band around the last part of November— I was drafted in New York, my brother Coney, in 1942. When I came home to be inducted, and during those ten days home, that's when I looked— Joe Adams was one of the first black disc jockeys in Los Angeles. He became very popular. Eleven o'clock, everybody tuned in to hear him playing the Ink Spots, you know, and different groups that were very popular groups at that time. His studio was in Santa Monica.

ISOARDI: Well, do you remember what station that was that you used to listen to? I know— [laughter]

WOODMAN: Yes, KGFJ. See, those were the better parts, but you didn't think about it.

And Charles Mingus. This fellow was playing so much bass! [Laughter] Oh!

ISOARDI: You mean when you came back.

WOODMAN: When I came back.

ISOARDI: He had improved that much?

WOODMAN: That much. First, Red Callender taught him. Then he went to another teacher—I don't know who he was, the other teacher. But man, he had it correctly.

ISOARDI: He had it all.

WOODMAN: Yeah, man. [Mimics facility on the bass]. Oh, man. But I can say this:

The last part, when he got his bass—about three months after his bass—he started fooling on the piano.

ISOARDI: Really? He never played piano before? He just started to get into it?

WOODMAN: Yeah, on the piano, listening to Duke's playing, he could hear some of those chords. He could play it on the piano. So I said, with his ears, he's going to be one of your great musicians, you know, which he came to be, because with that kind of ear and liking Duke— That's why his writing was similar. He had Duke in mind.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I was going to say, really from the beginning he was attracted to Ellington.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. And Buddy Collette—I remember him so well.

ISOARDI: How did you guys meet? How did you meet Buddy?

WOODMAN: Actually, I met Buddy Collette playing with Charles Mingus. He and I played with Charles Mingus.

ISOARDI: You guys were just sort of hanging out practicing, that kind of thing?

WOODMAN: Yeah, with Charles Mingus— In the forties— Let's see now. Well, I'd known Buddy Collette before then. Let me see. How was I connected with Buddy?

ISOARDI: Were you at Jordan High School at the time?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, we were, but we weren't connected then.

ISOARDI: Not at all?

WOODMAN: No, not at all, no. At that time, all of them—Buddy Collette will tell

you—all of them were inspired by us.

ISOARDI: Yeah, they all talk about you guys.

WOODMAN: Inspired, that they wanted to be musicians.

ISOARDI: Buddy never played in your band, then?

WOODMAN: He played, yes. He played with—

ISOARDI: So he played in the Woodman brother's band.

WOODMAN: Yeah. But, see, when I left the band and started on the trombone, then Buddy played with William. He kept the band—

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. He came in when you left, or after you had gone.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He kept the band going, so Buddy and Charles had certain gigs that they would play with my brother and them, see. And I don't know who the others were. I think Jessie Sailes, drummer. And I think Jessie Sailes's brother, named Ashley Sailes, played piano. I think he took Coney's place when Coney left, ran to Chicago. [Laughter] But after a while, then Brother put down all the instruments. Then he started playing with different other groups. Sometimes he played double on sax and sax. I think he put down the clarinet altogether. So then I was—

ISOARDI: So you guys started playing. By the time you graduate from high school, then— I guess it's around 1938 you graduate from high school?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Coney graduated in 1937. In 1936 I think Coney graduated. I graduated in '38.

ISOARDI: Thirty-eight. Okay. And you had been playing the Follies, I guess, your last year, then. You were going half and half.

WOODMAN: Right. Because they let me do my lessons; then I passed. I think the teachers passed me because they knew we were musicians doing—

ISOARDI: Right. So while you were doing that, is the Woodman Brothers band still together? Are you guys playing gigs, also?

WOODMAN: Yeah, we were still together then at that time.

ISOARDI: Okay. So you're still together, you're still playing around town. And you're playing everywhere it sounds like.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Coney had left the band, but the Woodman Brothers were still going.

ISOARDI: In 1938?

WOODMAN: In '38.

ISOARDI: Coney had left?

WOODMAN: Yeah. That's when he had to leave town.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, that's when he took off, about '38. [Laughter] We'll let him talk about that. As much as he wants to talk about it, we'll let him talk about it. Okay, so the band keeps going with just you two guys, but also you've got Joe Comfort playing then, and Jessie Sailes is on drums?

WOODMAN: Jessie Sailes, yeah.

ISOARDI: And you're playing everywhere, I guess. You're playing in the Hollywood Hills, you're playing on Central Avenue, you're playing in Watts.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Your father is getting gigs for you every weekend? Are you guys busy all the time?

ISOARDI: Well, my dad— When they had different affairs, they would call us and ask are we available for this Saturday night or Friday night or Sunday, you know, things of that sort. So every weekend we were working.

ISOARDI: What experience.

WOODMAN: We had so many dances for the Mexicans—Montebello and places and weddings and things. We knew this: when we played for a Mexican dance, we knew they were going to fight.

ISOARDI: It used to happen all the time?

WOODMAN: Every time. Sometimes it got so bad we'd have to cut the gig, shorten it up, because they couldn't get them together. A lot of time, when they'd start fighting, then we'd have to start playing and keep playing long so they'd break it up. But they'd be fighting their cousins and things. They'd get juiced and they'd just start fighting, throwing chairs. So we'd know. We'd say, "Well, we've got this gig, we know that in an hour and a half they're going to start fighting." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: I hope you got the money up front. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, we got our money. See, we know that that's one thing. But I'll tell you what. This all reminds me. My dad was playing with somebody—I don't know who it was—playing a dance or something. So he was playing on [?], and my dad said he got fifteen cents, hardly anybody came to the place, and he got fifteen cents. And we laughed, we laughed. So Warner Brothers had a gig playing on?, and we didn't get nothing. Nobody showed up. We didn't get nothing. So we laughed at him for his fifteen cents. [Laughter] And we played to get nothing. [Laughter] We were playing so well—a political affair, you know. We were supposed to play a half an hour before the speakers start. So we were playing. We saw people leaving. So we got a note saying, "please stop the music; the people are leaving." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, no! Why were people leaving?

WOODMAN: Well, they thought on account of us. That's why they told us to stop playing because people were leaving, you know. So I don't know if it really was. It was kind of embarrassing to say "stop the music."

ISOARDI: What kind of a crowd was it?

WOODMAN: Well, the same political people that come to hear a person speak for—

ISOARDI: Was it sort of a white, uptown kind of an audience?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. For the mayor, you know. [Laughter] I never forgot that.

ISOARDI: Jeez. They didn't want to hear popular music.

WOODMAN: I guess so. What we were playing, I guess maybe they didn't dig it.

ISOARDI: Oh, stuffy.

WOODMAN: All we know was we got that note. That note came down, "stop the music; the people are leaving." [Laughter] That was funny.

ISOARDI: What did you guys charge? What did you charge for a gig?

WOODMAN: Well, I know much of those gigs, it was a dollar and a half or two dollars.

ISOARDI: So it would be a dollar and a half for each person in the band?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So your father would charge— If he had five guys, he would charge seven and a half bucks for a night?

WOODMAN: Yeah, something like— Yeah.

ISOARDI: Something like that?

WOODMAN: Yeah. My dad put the price, whatever it was that we charged, because at that time— At the Follies Theatre, during all those years my dad raised us, he was getting twenty-one dollars and something a week.

ISOARDI: That was pretty good money then, wasn't it?

WOODMAN: I know it. And we went there to play, that's when I found out what he was getting. Twenty-one dollars.

ISOARDI: You didn't know?

WOODMAN: No, I didn't know. Twenty-one dollars and something. And that's when

I had to apply for social security. That's why my social security was 57101. It's kind of low down there, 57101.

ISOARDI: So I guess when the Woodman Brothers band were playing earlier than that, your father were handling whatever taxes or whatever there was.

WOODMAN: Yeah. We weren't in the union or anything.

ISOARDI: With the Woodman Brothers band? Didn't you get any pressure for it?

WOODMAN: Actually, there weren't any taxes during that time.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: There wasn't any tax. That's why the movie stars and things—

ISOARDI: But social security and all that.

WOODMAN: Social security had come up during that time, because that's when I first got my social security card, playing at the Follies Theatre, 1939.

ISOARDI: Jeez. So you were a senior at Jordan, right? You're eighteen years old, and you're getting twenty-one bucks a week. That's good money.

WOODMAN: I know it.

ISOARDI: Did your father take it all?

WOODMAN: Yeah. [Laughter] He got that. That was his. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: He still kept giving you ten cents?

WOODMAN: Yeah. [Laughter] No, he gave me a little bit more; he gave me a dollar.

ISOARDI: He gave you a dollar. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Well, see, actually we didn't need the money for anything. At the time, he brought all our clothes and stuff, and we weren't going to school. We weren't doing anything as individuals to be somewhere or to show something, you know what I mean. Because most of our thing was we had the clothes and everything and our dances, so we didn't hardly go anywhere. We went to a show on Saturdays, matinee, for these Saturday thing, and went to church every Sunday. I can remember my mother taking us to church, all three of us to church, every Sunday. There was Sunday school, and we had to stay for the sermon.

ISOARDI: Since you can remember, that was the routine for you every Sunday.

WOODMAN: Every Sunday.

ISOARDI: Was there music in church?

WOODMAN: Yeah, we played in church.

ISOARDI: Did you?

WOODMAN: In fact, yeah, I played trombone in church. I'm so glad that I was raised up in church, man, because I had the chance to hear the truth, and that's why I've been free all my life. See, certain things in the Bible, you know, it's true. The truth will make you free. So I learned part of the truth when I was young. Because the main thing is don't hate. Hate is one of the worst things in the world. And I learned that people are people. There are ugly people in every race. So all those things I learned, see.

So when I was segregated in the South, things they did, little things, it hurt, but

I know that that's what life is. Those are things that you heard about and it's true. You're not supposed to hate the person, you're supposed to hate what they're doing, because God loves everybody. So that's the thing you were taught. So in Christianity, things that you have to play that you love— Because the thing— It's like you do something to me and I hate you for it, then you ask for a glass of water, "I won't give you no water, what you did to me." Well, see, that's the thing that, if I didn't hate you, you ask for a glass of water, I'd say okay. Now, giving you that glass of water might make you change your whole opinion. "Why would he do that after what I did to him, and he gave me a—" I mean, you could be helping somebody by your attitude.

So all those things I was taught. So that's why that I've been free all my life. No envy.

ISOARDI: Back then, growing up in Watts, were there many racial problems in Watts?

WOODMAN: Well, no. See, in Watts here, you didn't run into it in Watts. In fact, we didn't run into it in Los Angeles because we didn't go anyplace. But my dad took us to the department stores, and if they had a hot dog stand on the street, he might let us have a hot dog, get us a hot dog. But we never go into restaurants or a club or anything. We didn't know. We weren't allowed in there; we didn't know it. We didn't ever go, so we didn't run across it. But we knew the outside, Inglewood, Bell, all those—

ISOARDI: South Gate, places like that?

WOODMAN: South Gate. Now, we knew they were prejudiced, see. We knew Long Beach was prejudiced, we knew Compton was prejudiced, we knew San Diego was prejudiced, all those places, see.

ISOARDI: What was Watts like as a community?

WOODMAN: It was beautiful.

ISOARDI: Different kinds of people there? Or was it—?

WOODMAN: There were no slums in Watts. There were no slums. And we had friends— My friends never were being popular; they were just being successful as a family person, but not in a musical [way] or doing anything. Like Joe Adams became very popular, being a disc jockey. Also, now he's managing Ray Charles's band, did it for years, you know. He's been in pictures and things. Well, you know about all this. But a lot of my friends were just good friends that we visited.

ISOARDI: People got along?

WOODMAN: They got along, and everybody was beautiful. Now, the Mexicans were beautiful.

ISOARDI: There were Mexicans living in Watts then?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Mexicans were like us in a sense, minority. You know, you couldn't go across the track over there, because that was the white neighborhood. Now, they went to our school, but we couldn't mingle over there, you know.

And one incident when we were rehearsing, the Woodman Brothers were

rehearsing in our home, some of the white fellows asked if they could come and listen. So we said sure. So one of them made a statement—I never forgot it—"Britt and Coney," he said, "I sure wish you could meet my mother and father, but the neighbors, they'd resent it, you coming over there."

ISOARDI: Where were they living?

WOODMAN: In the white neighborhood.

ISOARDI: Where was that at?

WOODMAN: Let me see now. Jordan was on 103d Street. They lived on about 102nd [Street] right off of Wilmington [Avenue].

ISOARDI: So in Watts.

WOODMAN: In Watts. Just like the Japanese, the Japanese lived off of Compton [Avenue]. And the Chinamen, they had a little community where they lived. It was all divided. You know, the Japanese had the grocery stores in the neighborhood where the blacks were go. But they were going to our school. I'll never forget this Japanese chick sat in front of me in the history class. Oh, I hated history. Anyway, she felt me looking over her shoulder. So what she did, she pushed her test over here, you know. She was smart. That's when I realized Japanese were always smart. [Laughter] So I wouldn't dare answer all the questions correctly, because I know she would get a 100 percent, so I would miss three or four of them, so I would get around at least 76 or 70 [percent]. [Laughter] I'm copying. [Laughter] I didn't know the answers. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: But she got you through. [Laughter] That's good, that's good. Two things I wanted to ask you just popped into my head. One is, was there a main shopping area where people went to in Watts? People could always go all the way up to Central Avenue, right? Or I mean up to L.A.? Where did people hang out?

WOODMAN: Well, on 103d, you had a shoe store there and a little store where you could buy little things, but—

ISOARDI: It wasn't much of a shopping area?

WOODMAN: Not much of a shopping area, no. The market's there and two theaters, the Largo and the Ango. The Ango had mediocre pictures. But the Largo had the main— Cowboys, Tim Tyler and all of them, all those cowboys. Mickey Mouse was the main comedian then. Mickey Mouse. So a fellow made a statement, he hollered out in the theater. There used to be rats running across your feet.

ISOARDI: Rats?

WOODMAN: Yeah, across your feet in the theater.

ISOARDI: This is the Largo?

WOODMAN: It's the Largo. So one cat said, "Oh, man, that rat was so big it scared Mickey Mouse off the screen." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: That's good.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was a good one.

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ISOARDI: What about clubs? Were there any clubs people could go to in Watts to hear music?

WOODMAN: No. Well, when you consider Watts at the time had expanded—I can't remember the section, but—around a 115th Street, where the clubs— T-Bone Walker was the main star at one of those clubs there.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I think the club was owned by what they called the Brown sisters, and it was one of the popular clubs where people from Los Angeles would come down there to see him.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Do you know who the Brown sisters were?

WOODMAN: Well, they were sisters that just owned the clubs.

ISOARDI: Was that the Little Harlem?

WOODMAN: Little Harlem, right. That's it. I was trying to think of it all the time.

ISOARDI: All right! Every once in a while my memory kicks in.

WOODMAN: I know somebody might have told you about it. Because that's when I first— You've heard of Scatman?

ISOARDI: Scatman Crothers?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He played down there. And the trumpet player that was with him—

ISOARDI: What do you mean he played?

WOODMAN: The trumpet player that was playing with Scatman.

ISOARDI: Scatman played something?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he played the ukelele, you know.

ISOARDI: No, I didn't know.

WOODMAN: Oh, no? Well, he was a comedian and played the ukelele. And the trumpet player was in the service with me. So that's how I happened to go down there to hear him and to see him and Scatman. Scat was very popular, too, at that time, an entertainer, you see.

So we were playing at this club, the Harlem club, the Woodman Brothers [Biggest Little Band in the World]. We had at the union [American Federation of Musicians], [Local] 767, a walking delegate that used to go round to different clubs—his name was Elmer Fain—to ask for your union card.

ISOARDI: He was the one who checked up on everyone.

WOODMAN: Check on everybody. If you don't have a union card, he'd chuck you off the stand or something. "You can't play here." So he comes down there. My father [William B. Woodman Sr.] with us at this club, you know, because we were playing in a club, not for dance, but just a club, and this Elmer Fain, "All right, I want to see your

cards." We weren't in a union then.

ISOARDI: So this was with the Woodman Brothers band. And how old were you then?

WOODMAN: Oh, I guess I was around about fourteen or fifteen.

ISOARDI: So this is just after you'd started the band that got together, right?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So my dad was active in 767, you know.

ISOARDI: So he was a member in good standing.

WOODMAN: They wanted him to be vice— But he didn't want to be an officer or anything, because he was very well-known in the music, you know, being the Woodman brothers' father. And my father, "What the hell, asking for these cards. Get out of here!" [Laughter]

ISOARDI: He told Elmer Fain to get the hell out?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. "These are my sons here." "Oh, I didn't know. Okay." He walked— [laughter]

ISOARDI: Really? [Laughter] Your father must be one of the few people who could have made Elmer Fain turn around and walk out. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. So I never forgot that incident.

ISOARDI: So when you guys had the family band, then, you were never in the union?

WOODMAN: No. We finally got in there, but later on.

ISOARDI: Well, didn't they put any pressure on you? Because you guys were playing

all over town after a while.

WOODMAN: No, no. My dad, after we— I think I was seventeen or sixteen. After my dad was— I think it cost us seven dollars each to join the union, I think, which was twenty-one dollars. So my dad put us in the union then.

ISOARDI: And that's when you were about seventeen?

WOODMAN: Yeah, around seventeen. Because, see, when I was at thirty years— The union, for you to be a life member, I think it's around thirty years, something like that. So Ernie Royal and I got the cards at almost the same time, being in the union, because he joined around the same time we did.

ISOARDI: So about '36, '37 you guys joined?

WOODMAN: So we both got our union cards of being life members. I don't have to pay any more dues. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, I guess when the unions merged all that time was just added on, right?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Now during that time—this was in 1940, early '40—Ernie Royal got a chance to play with Duke [Ellington] overseas. So he had to go and get his passport. Now, at the time he had to have someone to go with him, so he called me to go to let them know that he was Ernie Royal and that I knew him and so forth.

ISOARDI: Oh, when he applied for the passport you mean.

WOODMAN: Applied for a passport. At that time, that's what it required, see. And I

forgot that he went there. See, he becomes as a family, too, playing with us and rehearsing with us and things.

ISOARDI: So he went from playing, then, with your family band into Duke Ellington?

WOODMAN: No, just for this gig overseas.

ISOARDI: Overseas, he went with Duke.

WOODMAN: Yeah, went with Duke, just for overseas. And then, after that, when he came back, then he went with Lionel Hampton when he formed his band in 1940. And, oh, Ernie when to Jeff.

ISOARDI: Right, Jefferson High School.

WOODMAN: Yeah, Jefferson. So when he came in our band, he wasn't a good reader. He couldn't read too well. And the last chorus of the chart, of the stop, that's when we found out he couldn't— Those charts were [sings snappy, syncopated brass phrase], you know. But I'll tell you, in no time, in no time he caught on, man. He came to read. That's when he began to read fairly well, playing with us.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, he probably could read okay, but he just couldn't read as well as you guys. [Laughter] You guys were great.

WOODMAN: Well, at the time, see, he didn't have a chance to play any jazz music or things that show— The Charleston and things of that sort.

ISOARDI: So you were really his first regular gig, playing with your band.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right, with us. That's when he really first started playing jazz, see, with us.

ISOARDI: You said at your house you'd fixed up a rehearsal area where you guys used to practice?

WOODMAN: Oh, we had what we called a studio on Wilmington [Avenue]. We lived on 111th [Street], but the studio was on the corner of 111th and Wilmington.

ISOARDI: Oh, you had a separate building?

WOODMAN: Yeah, a separate building that my dad— I don't know if it was already there, but anyway, he made— In the back it had some rooms where we could teach, and also in the front a small, very small place for the dancing. A platform.

ISOARDI: For dancing?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, you guys had a club?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, it was combination club and you taught in the back?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And was the name of it?

WOODMAN: The Woodman Brothers Studio.

ISOARDI: The Woodman Brothers Studio?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I think we charged fifteen cents to come in. Well, that place would be like this.

ISOARDI: No kidding, packed?

WOODMAN: Packed like this. Once a week we played—

ISOARDI: Sardines.

WOODMAN: Sardines. And we had a little old platform made for us. I can remember us playing Tommy Dorsey's "Indian Love Song." [Sings melody] Because sometimes they would ask for that.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So we had that going. That's why if you ever mention the Woodman brothers to Illinois Jacquet, "Yeah, Watts! The Woodman brothers in Watts!"

ISOARDI: Boy, he'd go down there to catch you?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. He came down to catch us playing down there. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: I guess that must have been the late thirties, then?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was the late thirties, yeah.

ISOARDI: Geez. I didn't know he'd spent that much time around Central Avenue.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, he was there around, I guess, '38 or '39. Lionel Hampton, when he organized his band in 1940—See, he organized his band soon after Les Hite left Los Angeles. See, Les could have gone back east with the band. They were playing

in Culver City at the club there.

ISOARDI: The Cotton Club?

WOODMAN: No, it was another club. They called it— Because he was the only black band that was broadcasting.

ISOARDI: In L.A.?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And they heard him back east. They heard the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, you're kidding.

WOODMAN: It was the only black band—

ISOARDI: It went across the country, then?

WOODMAN: Across the country, just like Benny Goodman and Paul Whiteman and those other bands that were playing those hotels, well, they could hear him all over the country. Because most of the big bands were playing in hotels at that time, see. They had many big bands. You could tell by the first thing they played who they were. But anyway, so 1940 when Duke— He met a rich manager, who was a lady, and she had quite a bit of money. So she's the one who said, "Hamp, I'll manage the band. Let's go back east." So none of the fellows wanted to go. Marshall Royal didn't want to go, and—

ISOARDI: This was Les Hite.

WOODMAN: Les Hite. Marshall and Bumps Myers and all those fellows didn't want to leave. So he got Floyd Turnham, and Floyd Turnham had some his band that he had

and some other bands and called me. So we organized, rehearsed, and we left.

ISOARDI: So you joined Les Hite's band then?

WOODMAN: Yeah, in 1940.

ISOARDI: In 1940?

WOODMAN: Around November, December. And we were in Middlewell, Texas, and we were still in December. Ernie Royal sent a telegram to me: "Britt, come back. Lionel has organized a band." So he called all the names, all the cats that I knew: Jack McVea, Ernie Royal, Marshall Royal, Dexter Gordon, and Illinois Jacquet, and some of the other fellows, popular cats around Los Angeles. So I told him—I wrote a letter—I couldn't leave Les Hite. I was playing first [trombone] and just had started out with the band. I just couldn't jump like that and leave the band out there in the cold.

So it's one of those instances that you always remember so well, just by when, because it was the last part of December, and we went to Fort Worth, and T-Bone Walker was singing in some club in Fort Worth, and our manager and Les Hite dug him and asked if he'd join our band. They said we were going to New York. He said yeah. We jumped from Fort Worth, Texas to New York in a blizzard, the first time I'd seen snow, you know. It was cold, a blizzard. And we arrived there around January something, January. And there's another ballroom in Harlem called the Golden Gate Ballroom. Well, you know the Savoy was very popular. Well, this was another ballroom. The Golden Gate Ballroom became very popular. So we arrived there about

ten o'clock in the morning. At one o'clock we had to rehearse, because we were opening up that same night at the Golden Gate Ballroom.

ISOARDI: Oh, man, what a schedule.

WOODMAN: Now, see, all of us were pretty young, so we didn't really feel the pain or the stress because we were so excited. "New York! We're here!" The snow was way up here over our heads, piled up on the curb. Dig who was playing there: Coleman Hawkins had a big band.

ISOARDI: At this ballroom?

WOODMAN: At the Golden Gate. Teddy Wilson had a big band. And Harlan Leonard—

ISOARDI: Harlan Leonard and his Rockets?

WOODMAN: —had a big band. Well, Harlan Leonard had a big band.

ISOARDI: So it wasn't the Rockets? It was another group?

WOODMAN: Yeah, a big band. And then there was a trio called Milt something, Milt trio or something. So we didn't have to play any more than a half an hour, and we went over very big, especially with T-Bone, because T-Bone, he had a little name, too. The blues singer. He's singing and goes down on the floor and does the splits and comes back up.

ISOARDI: Guitar behind his head.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Elvis Prestley kind of got some of his things from him, you know,

a little bit, a little things there. But anyway, we went over pretty big. But Teddy Wilson had a heck of a band, like a society band. Helen Humes was the female vocalist, and I said, I said, "Oh, man, this sure sounds beautiful." She sure had a beautiful voice, velvet voice. And Coleman Hawkins, he had all the big-name cats.

ISOARDI: Oh, he was playing great then.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He showed us, man. So just think. We were jumping at this age from Los Angeles—

ISOARDI: And you were twenty-one year old.

WOODMAN: Twenty-one and jumping there amongst all those great musicians. And you know that they knew about me, the Woodman brothers?

ISOARDI: [laughter] I told you everybody I talked to talked about the Woodman brothers.

WOODMAN: Also they knew that [?] a great trombonist, and I said, shoot, with these cats blowing, I didn't know what they mean. [Laughter] That's solos in jazz. But playing the horn, I felt I could compete with any of them, playing the horn, music and that stuff. In fact, I know I was doing so many things on the 'bone that trombones weren't doing at that time, playing high and fast, you know. Trombone wasn't playing it fast and playing high like I was doing which was natural, like octaves and things. [Sings while octave leaps] I was just doing it. I didn't think anything of it. You know, when you do something like that, you don't think— You'd just be doing it. So another

person seeing it, it's amazing.

But that was a thrill. I never forgot that, being with those great musicians. I remember we were staying at the Braddock Hotel.

ISOARDI: The Braddock?

WOODMAN: The Braddock, yeah. It was a very popular hotel. And we would have jam sessions down in the basement. But the jam sessions were just beginning to kind of quiet down. In the thirties, musicians would tell you that after they'd get through from work, they'd jam all up until morning. Benny Goodman would come down and jam. Some of the white cats and black cats, you know, they'd get together and jam. But it was kind of slowing down in the forties; they didn't have that many jam sessions.

But I'll never forget, it was— This was still during the winter months, now, I was at bar. I think I ordered a ginger ale or something. I wasn't smoking or drinking at the time. And this chick comes up and says, "Are you staying at the Braddock?"

I said, "Yeah." I was a very shy person, too. I said, "Yeah, I'm staying at the Braddock." [Laughter] The weather was bad out there.

She said, "I don't know how to say this, but I live in Brooklyn. Are you alone?"

I said, "Yeah."

"Do you mind if I stay with you tonight until tomorrow morning?"

I looked at her. She looked pretty good. I said, "Yeah, okay." [Laughter]

Because I was shy in high school, man. Man, all these little young chicks were sending notes: "Britt, I love you." I got so many notes.

ISOARDI: [laughter] And you didn't do anything about it?

WOODMAN: No, I didn't do anything. I was scared. But the thing about it, I'll tell you the reason why. I was shy, but if I'd go with this girl, I'd say I'd make the others feel bad. [Laughter] They all liked me, so I didn't— I finally made one chick near the playground, you know. I did make it with her, but the others, man, I— [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, missed opportunities.

WOODMAN: Well, you know what? I'm glad.

ISOARDI: So did this chick spend the night in the Braddock Hotel?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, she approached me. Things just automatically happen, you know. But if she hadn't approached me or anything, I'd have just laid there and gone to sleep. [Laughter] I wouldn't have made anything, though.

ISOARDI: Yeah, New York was something on your first visit.

WOODMAN: First visit, yeah. I remember my boy lit off— I had a room— A tenor player, Quedellis Martin from Minnesota. And you know, it gets twenty-one degrees below there. It's real cold.

ISOARDI: Very, very cold, yeah.

WOODMAN: So he said, "Britt, you ain't got no long johns?"

I said, "No. I'm all right."

"Man, you're going to catch cold."

So I went out and bought some long johns. [Laughter] So we were somewhere, and we had worn these things, you know. So we had a couple of chicks. He said, "Britt, come on. Let's go in the bathroom and take them off." [Laughter] But I got the worst cold with those long johns, man.

ISOARDI: With them on?

WOODMAN: After I took them off. After a while I said, "Shoot, I'm going to stop wearing them," and I really caught a cold. Because I really didn't need them in the first place, because I generally don't catch cold. They felt good, though, but after I really took them off for good, I really caught a bad cold. But I never forgot that instance. They were so— They could almost stand up by themselves. [Laughter] We hadn't taken them off for so long, we didn't want the chicks to see us any longer.

ISOARDI: Yeah, right. [Laughter] It isn't the most romantic mood with a guy there in his long johns. [Laughter]

That's good, that's good. So while you were playing with Les Hite then, what was Les Hite like? We don't know that much about the guy.

WOODMAN: Well, he had a leader personality.

ISOARDI: So he was good out in front of the band, standing out there.

WOODMAN: His alto [saxophone] was on, but I don't think he never did play it. But I'll never forget how he knocked off his numbers with his stomping.

ISOARDI: Stomp them?

WOODMAN: That's the way. I never forgot how he'd knock—That's the way he'd knock off the number.

ISOARDI: Didn't they used to do that in New Orleans? They would go [stomps foot in time], that kind of thing?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. So he had a nice personality out in front of the band. There were some beautiful fellows in the band, a very good experience of brotherhood we had. And the lady was very wealthy. In the winter months in Chicago, that was our first delay. We were supposed to do some one-nighters, but the weather was so bad—So for four weeks she paid our room rent and went to a boarding place where they gave us some food. She also gave us $25 dollars a week.

ISOARDI: No kidding. She had bucks. Who was she? She was from L.A.?

WOODMAN: Yes. Well, actually, she was liking Les Hite, and she was— Her husband left. She had interest in ABC [American Broadcasting Company]—

ISOARDI: She was a white lady.

WOODMAN: A white lady, yeah. And she had property. Every three months, she would get a check around about eighteen thousand dollars.

ISOARDI: She had all these investments. She was getting interest or something.

WOODMAN: Investments, yeah. She was very wealthy. So she bought stands for us, man. Everybody, when they found out, everybody wanted to join our band to see how

we were living. Twenty-five dollars a week at that time, man, and all that not working. So during the summer months, we organized a team, because different bands were playing softball. If you were a town, the same place, you would get a game going. So she bought the bats and balls and gloves for us and everything, a jersey, a shirt for us.

ISOARDI: Uniforms for everybody?

WOODMAN: Uniforms, a Les Hite jersey.

ISOARDI: You guys were probably treated better than any other band around.

[Laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh, that's right, I tell you. And we had these bow ties, and she looked with this— If it wasn't straight, she'd get another one, man. And we'd be sure that our shoes were shined. And Les Hite had three changes; he would change, you know. Oh, we were living like kings. Everybody, they couldn't believe it, man, how we were living.

In New York the weather was bad and we stayed there about six weeks and didn't work. She paid our rent and someplace that we would go to eat—the lady prepared food for us, a one-day meal. And she still gave us $25 dollars a week. Cats said, "Boy, you cats sure are lucky, man."

ISOARDI: Not bad, not bad.

WOODMAN: As a musician, I've been very fortunate in this career.

I know Buddy Collette told you about the band we had in '46 at the Downbeat [Club].

ISOARDI: Oh, the Stars of Swing.

WOODMAN: The Stars of Swing. So I don't need to—

ISOARDI: Well, when we get up to there, I'd like you to talk about it, too, because Buddy, I guess, of the people we've talked to, Buddy is the only one so far. But you were also part of that. And we've read so much about that band and how good it was, so it would be good for you to talk about it, what it was like, when we get up to—

WOODMAN: Have you talked with Teddy Edwards yet?

ISOARDI: No. We asked Teddy, but he'd already been interviewed a few times, and he was just tired of interviewing, I think.

WOODMAN: Because he took Lucky Thompson's place in that.

ISOARDI: Did he? In that band?

WOODMAN: In the band, yeah. That's when I began to know him, what type of musician he was, too.

ISOARDI: Well, when we get up there, I'd appreciate you talking about that, because everybody says how important that band was. And we got a glimpse of it a few years ago when you guys recreated that at the [John] Anson Ford Theatre.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. That was kind of— That was nowhere near— [laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, I know. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: But it's just the thought of it, see. Well, I told you that in '42, that's when my brother Coney was playing with the band and—

ISOARDI: You're still with Les Hite then, in '42? So you're still on the road, you're still traveling—

WOODMAN: Yeah, I was in New York.

ISOARDI: Okay. So you were out of L.A. from about '40 to '42 in there. You're traveling with Les Hite, end of '40. Before we get out of there, before we get into the forties and all and the war and the aftermath, let me ask you about Central Avenue. What's happening on the— I mean, during the thirties, you're around there, you see Central Avenue. What happens on Central Avenue then?

WOODMAN: Well, during that time, now, when I quit my family band and just started on trombone, my first big band was with a fellow by the name of Dootsie Williams, a trumpet player. He was very popular around that time.

ISOARDI: He had his own band?

WOODMAN: Well, at this time, he had like a rehearsal band. We were rehearsing. I met one great alto player there, Kurt Bradley. He had just quit Jimmie Lunceford's band. He sounded, after years, like Marshall Royal. He had that kind of leading the sound, that leading tone and—

ISOARDI: Where was this rehearsal band at?

WOODMAN: It was on Ninety-seventh [Street] and Wilmington, in his home there, on Central.

ISOARDI: That's where Dootsie Williams was, in that area?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And that's where I met Fletcher Smith, the piano player.

ISOARDI: He was playing? He was the pianist in that band?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Floyd Turnham. You've heard me speak of him. I wish he were living so he could give you— Oh, a lot of things happened on Broadway and the different places. Because all those, along with Marshall and Jack McVea and all them, they had been on Broadway long before I came on the scene. [Laughter] And a trumpet player by the name of Snake White. A tenor player by the name of Red [Mack]. I remember Fletcher Smith and Red, they would always tease each other. I think they were from the same home—I don't know where it was. But the main thing, that was my first experience playing with great musicians that could improvise. My reading was equal to them or maybe better than some of them, but jazz-wise, if you don't improvise, well, you're not a jazz musician. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: So with the Woodman Brothers Band, you guys weren't improvising much? You were mostly playing your father's charts?

WOODMAN: No, Coney was doing it. My dad, he wrote most of my solos out, because at the time I couldn't improvise at all. Now, William had a very good ear, so he started improvising and playing things. So I didn't do much. Most of mine was reading, you know.

So, well, getting back, that was my first— A fellow by the name of Phil Moore, in those days, had a band.

ISOARDI: Phil Moore.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He taught Lena Horne dramatics and— He coached her. Lena Horne. He became a very big man at coaching, well known all over the United States, Phil Moore. I remember playing with his band.

ISOARDI: So he had a big band. Where were you guys playing?

WOODMAN: Well, now, to tell you— Where we were playing, I don't know. It seems like most of these things were like rehearsals. I don't remember him playing— I think he played at the Masonic. It was off Broadway, a Masonic hall that was a very popular place there. A lot of musicians were Masons, you know. I know my dad was a Mason one time. And we played there, too. But all I know is that Phil Moore, I played with him. It was a good experience with him. Then my first club job was at the [Club] Alabam with Baron Moorehead, a trombone player. He was one of the deligates at [Local] 767 at the time. He was the leader of the band. And I can remember the dancers well, the High Hats, Pot, Pan, and Skillet. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: That was the dancing group? Pot, Pan and Skillet?

WOODMAN: Yeah. They were from New York, were very popular so they settled out here. And the High Hats were a dancing team.

ISOARDI: And these were all different acts at the Alabam?

WOODMAN: Different acts, yeah. Now, I can't remember who the comedian was, but they had the whole bit there: the comedian, the chorus line, chorus girls and everything.

And I don't know if the emcee was Curtis Mosby. I know he managed the—

ISOARDI: He was the guy who was running the Alabam then?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So I can't remember all that time. But I can recall this: During the period of playing there, Stepin Fetchit came by with Mae West in his Rolls Royce.

ISOARDI: He had a Rolls Royce? He showed up in front of the Alabam with Mae West?

WOODMAN: With Mae West.

ISOARDI: People must have been talking about that for a long time. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: I'll tell you what happened. It was such excitement, and at the time we weren't playing, so everybody went out to the front door to see what was going on. [Laughter] And that's when I first saw this car, a yellow car, too. At that time, a lot of movie stars would come to the Dunbar [Hotel].

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: You'd see white movie stars?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Of course, man. Naturally. Central Avenue was like 125th Street in Manhattan.

ISOARDI: L.A.'s Harlem.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Of course, it was a fabulous show, and dancing, and chicks are dancing.

ISOARDI: Was it expensive to get in there?

WOODMAN: Well, at that time it was a little expensive. An ordinary person, working person, really couldn't afford it, because it catered to people with money and things like that, like the movie stars and things. It drew that kind of clientele.

So that was a beautiful experience there, playing there, seeing all the action and things.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. Where else, other than the Alabam? Now this the period we're talking about now, the mid to late thirties. Where else do people go on Central Avenue? Where were the hottest spots? What places did you go to?

WOODMAN: Well, we had the Lincoln Theatre, see. They had shows there. It was very popular. At the theater, ordinary people could go there, because the regular prices were—

ISOARDI: Were much lower.

WOODMAN: —for pictures and things that you'd see. And then the Elks [hall]. A lot of bands would play there at the Elks. For instance, when Floyd Ray came out there in 1939 and played the Elks, man he upset Los Angeles. He had with him three sisters called the Brown sisters. They were with him, singers. And he was [sing fast two-beat riff] with his derby. [Resumes singing] "Three o'clock in the morning—" That was his theme song. Oh, man, it was an upset, man. He had a flashy band. He's a little old short fellow out there in front.

ISOARDI: Going like crazy.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: The Elks was a big auditorium?

WOODMAN: Yeah, big.

ISOARDI: How many people could you fit in there?

WOODMAN: At least five or six hundred people.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Dancing and—?

WOODMAN: Dancing, yeah. They had three floors. The second floor could hold dancers and different things; another floor in a smaller rooms. Yeah, the Elks was a very big thing.

Then we had another hotel called the Clark Hotel down further, not too far from the Lincoln Theatre.

ISOARDI: So it was going toward downtown L.A.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Pullman [porters] used to stay there when they came to town.

ISOARDI: Oh, the porters, you mean train-car porters.

WOODMAN: Yeah, car porters, yeah. I said Pullman porters. [Laughter] Yeah, the porters, they were staying there. It was a little cheaper than staying at the Dunbar, but it was a very popular hotel.

ISOARDI: Did they have music at the Clark? Was there any kind of room in there where they would have live music?

WOODMAN: No, there wasn't any— Just straight hotel, yeah. And we had eating places there.

ISOARDI: Oh, where did you go?

WOODMAN: A place called Finley's.

ISOARDI: Finley's?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Finley's, on Central.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

WOODMAN: That's around about— Let's see. The Downbeat was on about Forty-second [Street]. That must have been about Forty-third Street.

ISOARDI: So just a block or two from the Alabam in that big block where everything's at.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: What kind of food?

WOODMAN: Oh, hot dogs, tamales, malted milks, and sandwiches and things of that sort. Down by the Elks they had a chili place, Coney Island. Boy, that chili was just—

ISOARDI: The best chili?

WOODMAN: Spaghetti and chili, chili and rice. And musicians, everybody, would hang out and eat there. And then, where the musicians really would hang out was a place call the Fifty-fourth Drugstore on Fifty-Fourth Street and Central.

ISOARDI: What was special about that?

WOODMAN: Just where the musicians would hang out, just as a place—

ISOARDI: A spot.

WOODMAN: A spot. It served sandwiches and malts and stuff. But it was just where musicians would hang out and meet after the gigs.

ISOARDI: What was it like inside? They had a bunch of booths kind of like a coffee shop or something?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. No whiskey sold there; they maybe brought their own whiskey. But in the back room they had a couple of slot machines, one-armed bandits.

ISOARDI: Slot machines in the back of this place?

WOODMAN: Yeah, in one room. So William, that you interviewed, I know he didn't tell you about this, but—

ISOARDI: I don't think he did. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Every time we played a gig somewhere we were going to stop there. But if we stop at Finley's, then we'd stop at the drugstore, because we'd see some of the fellows who had a gig on Saturday night, too, who would be there. So this is when Brother [William Woodman] would go back— Now, we got about two dollars or two-fifty for the gig. Now, he'd go back down there and spend all his money pulling that one-armed bandit.

ISOARDI: You're kidding. Everything he got from the gig?

WOODMAN: Everything from the gig. So we said, "Hey, Brother, man, you know

those machines are tight. You can't win anything on them." We said, "Why do you like to spend your money?" "Well, I like to see the wheels go around." [Laughter] Oh, we died, man. Oh, boy that was something. [Laughter] He likes to see the wheels go around.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Was there a lot of gambling going on? I mean, this place had a couple of slots, but did a lot of other places have—?

WOODMAN: No, no.

ISOARDI: Just that.

WOODMAN: Yeah, just this place.

ISOARDI: How did they get away with it?

WOODMAN: I don't know.

ISOARDI: They must have paid somebody somewhere.

WOODMAN: Well, I'll tell you what. The Downbeat was owned by— Do you remember a gangster called Mickey Cohen? ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

WOODMAN: He owned it.

ISOARDI: The Downbeat?

WOODMAN: You know how we knew?

ISOARDI: No.

WOODMAN: The checks were signed by him.

ISOARDI: You're kidding. You mean your payroll checks?

WOODMAN: Our payroll checks were signed by him.

ISOARDI: Mickey Cohen?

WOODMAN: Mickey.

ISOARDI: When was this?

WOODMAN: This was in '46.

ISOARDI: Oh, when you guys were there with the Stars of Swing?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We want to get back to that.

ISOARDI: Yeah, we'll get up to that. Mickey Cohen owned that!

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, see, I was saying that because we think that the drugstore was owned by—

ISOARDI: So it was mob—

WOODMAN: Mafia. See, they could get away with that, those things, see.

ISOARDI: Was there much mob influence down on Central? I mean, you mentioned Mickey Cohen and the Downbeat and the slots? You think there was any more?

WOODMAN: Well, during that time, the mob owned practically all the clubs the musicians played in. That's why we were treated so well, because they wouldn't let anything happen. Nobody would bother us or anything. When we played for them, the owned most of the clubs. But, see, there weren't any other clubs in the forties that I can remember until the war broke out. Then a lot of clubs came in there, small clubs. Jack's Basket [Room] down further, the Memo [Club].

ISOARDI: And those weren't there really before 1940 so much.

WOODMAN: Yeah. There were quite a few clubs that opened up during the war. But in the late thirties, before the war, it wasn't— The Dunbar was the biggest thing there, and the Elks Theater, and those eating places.

ISOARDI: And those were about it, then.

WOODMAN: And the Fifty-fourth drug was the biggest thing down there.

ISOARDI: So you think it was sort of the war, then, that really produces this kind of explosion there. All of a sudden more places started to open.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. Now, there were other places on Central that people would go to, but, I mean, musicians and things hang out differently, as we know. It wasn't clubs. I just can't place— Because all I know is that I went to the Elks, the Lincoln Theatre, Coney Island—the chili place—Dunbar, Fifty-fourth Drugstore, Finley's. Now those are the places that—

ISOARDI: The main ones in the late thirties.

WOODMAN: That I went to, and mostly you'd see the musicians there. It's just something about the Central Avenue before the war— It was still Central Avenue. Well, the Dunbar made Central Avenue, actually. The Dunbar Hotel, the Alabam that was the talk of Central Avenue. That was the biggest place because you had names, acts coming in there and a chorus line and things. Big people from Hollywood would come. So that's the attraction that made Central Avenue.

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ISOARDI: Okay. Gee, anything else about Central in the thirties that sticks out in your mind? Any characters? Any unusual people or places?

WOODMAN: Now, that's the thing that I can't—

ISOARDI: Or events? Although let me ask you about— We talked about the night scene. During the day, Central Avenue was sort of the shopping area, the business area, for the black community then?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I know they had a funeral parlor there that was owned by a black on Central Avenue that was very, very popular.

ISOARDI: You mean most of the business weren't black-owned then? I don't know if you'd be able to—

WOODMAN: Now, that I don't know. Because during the day, I wasn't—

ISOARDI: You were sleeping.

WOODMAN: I was home in Watts. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: So you were still living out in Watts then?

WOODMAN: I was still in Watts and going to school and so the only time— On Sunday sometimes I would go up to the Lincoln Theatre but during the week there wasn't too much of anything for me to recall—

ISOARDI: Yeah, to get you down there.

WOODMAN: To get me down there in the daytime, see. That's a good question to ask. Have you interviewed Marshall yet, you say?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

WOODMAN: Well, he should tell you quite a bit about Central Avenue during the day and night, because he used to hang out, all of them, at the— See, the union was very popular.

ISOARDI: Why don't you tell me about that. Were you around the union much in the thirties? You guys joined, right, in—

WOODMAN: Yeah, but— In fact, I was about the only one at the union—mostly my brothers. I can remember they had a rehearsal rooms. They had two rehearsal rooms, and it was ridiculous. You were rehearsing, and you could hear the other band rehearsing over there.

ISOARDI: Oh, thin walls.

WOODMAN: Thin walls. And musicians played pinochle; that was their big game, pinochle, the cats. I never did learn that.

ISOARDI: So a lot of people would hang around. It was kind of social gathering.

WOODMAN: Yeah. At that time, yeah. A lot of cats, musicians, would hang around there at that time. Most of the time I would go up there would be for rehearsal. I'm trying to think who it would be with, rehearsal. Or to pay my dues or something. I

never did hang out because, see, all those musicians were older than me, see. We didn't have anything in common, actually.

ISOARDI: You were pretty young and—

WOODMAN: Yeah, I was, see, so I just wouldn't be hanging out up there socially.

ISOARDI: Right, right. So I guess, then, you go with Les Hite. You go into Les Hite's band, you're with Les Hite through 1942?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And then you come back to L.A.?

WOODMAN: That's when I got drafted in New York.

ISOARDI: They caught you in New York.

WOODMAN: Yeah, both of us, my brother and I, they sent our greetings.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Coney's with the band?

WOODMAN: He's with the band, yeah. So we both come back to Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: How did they catch you in New York? Did you get a telegram or something?

WOODMAN: Well, it was a regular letter at the office that she [Hite's manager] had there. It came there. So that's sad news there.

ISOARDI: So what did you do? Come back home?

WOODMAN: Come back. Oh, the band was rehearsing at a place called Nola Studio on Broadway.

ISOARDI: What studio?

WOODMAN: Nola.

ISOARDI: Nola?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was a very popular place for bands to rehearse at that time. So when I left the rehearsal, Dizzy [Gillespie] had just come in, joined the band, Dizzy Gillespie.

ISOARDI: In which band?

WOODMAN: Les Hite.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Because they were rehearsing. So they needed a trombone player, and I don't know who the piano player was, but they needed a piano player. But anyway, on my way out, I was walking down Broadway, I saw this trombone player that was very popular at the time. While I'm talking I might recall his name. Comegeny. His name was Comegeny. And I said, "Comegeny," I said, "I just left the band rehearsing. They need a trombone player. Why don't you go up there and see." So anyway, he went up there. Now, I didn't see him until years later when he told me that "Britt, boy, thank you man. I got the job; they hired me." [Laughter] Because, see, what happened was, as soon as we got our greetings, we made arrangements to leave as soon as possible, the next day, to come on home, see, come here, so I didn't get a chance to hear Dizzy at all in the band, but—

ISOARDI: Too bad. When you were there, I guess if you were in New York in '42, were you aware of the new music that was happening at Minton's and Monroe's or anything like that? Bebop coming in?

WOODMAN: Well, they hadn't quite come in yet.

ISOARDI: But they were jamming in these clubs, weren't they? Were you aware of that?

WOODMAN: No, they were jamming but they— It was around '43, actually, when I left, when they started, because Dizzy— I'm trying to remember the date that Dizzy quit Cab Calloway's band, when he cut Cab. Cab Calloway blamed him for spitting the spit ball and hitting him, but it wasn't him. It was Tyree Glenn. So they blamed— So Cab got on him, and with Dizzy's temper— He cut him in the back there and said that was it for him.

ISOARDI: He cut Cab in the rear?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, that's when Dizzy settled in New York, and that's when he started making those jam sessions. Now, I can't finger what year that was. It seems like it was— I was with Lionel Hampton in '46; I was in New York in '46 with Lionel Hampton. But it seems like it was before then when Max Roach, [Thelonius] Monk, and all those cats were doing this new thing at Minton's, see. It might have been '42 or '43, around that time.

ISOARDI: So you just kind of miss it in a way when you come back.

WOODMAN: I kind of missed it, yeah. I kind of missed that scene. Because I know that in the service I heard Boyd Raeburn's band, and it was very modern, and I said, "Whoa, what's—" He had some black cats playing with him, too, at the time. But the band, man, it sure did sound good. We always said, "Man, you'll dig this band." I had no idea I was going to be playing with it later on. But that was one of the modern bands and things where we heard the music changing. Also, I know Dizzy when he was first blowing, even with Cab and [when he] started jamming, he just had one cheek out.

ISOARDI: Really? Just one?

WOODMAN: Just one.

ISOARDI: Man that seems hard to do.

WOODMAN: Well, a lot of cats play with one—

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: So somehow or another, when he realized the freedom of the flowing air into execution, blowing like that, with both his cheeks out, the articulation, whatever it was would come out easier. That's when he started using both his jowls. It wasn't that big at first. They just got bigger and bigger, bigger and bigger.

ISOARDI: So you come back in 1942?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What part of the year? Do you remember?

WOODMAN: How could I forget that? April.

ISOARDI: April '42. And you come back home and you go down to the draft board. Then what?

WOODMAN: That's when I was shipped to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And Coney was— I don't know what camp, but we got separated. We wanted to go to the same camp, but they didn't let us go. I know he went overseas. I never did go overseas. Like I mentioned sometime ago, I carried my trombone, and the cats said, "Man, they ain't going to let you take the trombone into the army." I carried it, anyway. I got by with it and carried it in the army.

ISOARDI: So you didn't go into a band?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. First you have to do your twelve weeks, thirteen weeks basic training.

ISOARDI: Right. So you were in North Carolina doing basic training.

WOODMAN: No, no, I was in Camp Walters, Middlewell, Texas.

ISOARDI: Okay.

WOODMAN: So on my seventh week there, just about— Well, every evening I would practice, take my horn out. After we finished our training, I would blow my horn; I would just be blowing the horn. So this particular evening, two fellows from the band came up and said, "Look, I don't want to interrupt you, but we've been hearing you blow your horn for the past three weeks. Who'd you play with?" I said, "I played with

Les Hite's band." "Yeah?"

So the next day they came by and said, "We told our sergeant about you. They might need a trombone player when you finish your basic training. How would you like to join the band?"

And I said, "Yeah!"

So they said, "Well, when you get a chance, come down to the barracks and meet him."

So I came down and met him. So when I finished my basic training, well, my entire company left, and I was the only one left in this one room that they had in the barracks. So I had to wait one day for the papers and everything for me to go to the band, transfer to the band. So that's when happened. I was in the band.

ISOARDI: Good deal.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So I was there in the band for about a year and a half.

ISOARDI: In Texas?

WOODMAN: In Texas.

ISOARDI: Same camp?

WOODMAN: Same camp, playing— Of course, there were some other troops there, too. We were playing for them. After about a year and a half, then I was transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and I remained there until I was discharged.

ISOARDI: For the rest of the war pretty much?

WOODMAN: Rest of the war, yeah. In fact, until the end of the war. I was playing in the band, so I didn't have to go overseas.

ISOARDI: Good deal.

WOODMAN: Yeah, man. I had a good time. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, I guess if you played in the band during the war.

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, you know how in a band how chicks look at musicians. At that time, see, musicians, were looked up to like the rock and roll musicians. Chicks were waiting for them. If you just had a case, they— [laughter] “Who are you playing with, honey?"

ISOARDI: You may not have anything in it, but if it looked like— [laughter]

WOODMAN: They'd wait for it.

ISOARDI: Well, were you still shy then?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I wasn't too shy there because under the different conditions and the way the chicks were— Now, like in Middlewell, Texas, we'd go to Fort Worth or Dallas. So if you wanted to Fort Worth, bus depot, it would be the same as the Dallas depot. There would be about twenty chicks waiting for you to unload, black chicks I'm talking about. So at the window you'd look and see— "Oh, I see what I want." So you'd kind of scoot by these to get to that one down there, you know. And they'd take you to their homes. They wanted to take you to their homes. Well, see, at that time, all those chicks were looking for soldiers to marry, because that was security if they'd

marry a soldier, you know. So I had a little, young chick. I didn't know she was that young. And I didn't do anything. She was too young, though, man. But in town, the little town, Middlewell, man, the chicks there, man.

ISOARDI: You guys were kings.

WOODMAN: Oh, kings, yeah man.

ISOARDI: See, we could stay out late and come in for reveille in the morning, being musicians, see. But the soldiers, they had to be there by nine o'clock in the camp.

ISOARDI: What were your duties, then? Just blowing reveille and blowing taps?

WOODMAN: Yeah, we blow— In the morning, reveille, we had to be out there for our name call. They'd call our names early in the morning. Then, after that, around seven o'clock, eight o'clock, we would go to the officers' barracks and play for them, play a couple of tunes, three tunes for them. That was our job.

ISOARDI: That was it?

WOODMAN: That was the job for the band. Well, for the morning. [Laughter] Then in the afternoon, we were supposed to rehearse. We were supposed to be doing something, rehearsing in the band.

ISOARDI: Tough war duty, eh? [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah. On Saturday nights we'd play dances for the officers club, played for them on Saturday night. We were getting a dollar and a half.

Oh, I've got to tell you about this, though. This was a wonderful experience.

This was with the Woodman brothers orchestra, getting back to that. I should have mentioned that before, but speaking of this army camp reminded me of this. We had a gig in Tucson, Arizona. Some promoter heard about us and wrote my dad to say that we could play at this club and so forth, how much money we were going to get, and a place for us to stay and everything. So we drove down there. My dad let us use his car; he had a yellow Packard. So we drove his— Joe Comfort put it on top of the car, you know, tied it up.

ISOARDI: Tied his bass down?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So now, I'm not sure how many was in this car.

ISOARDI: Well, your dad wasn't going. This was just you guys.

WOODMAN: Yeah, just our guys. Let me see now. Coney was driving, my other brother I think was in the front seat, Jessie Sailes— No, wait a minute. Did we have two cars? The drums— It seems like we had two cars. So the drummer—

ISOARDI: Maybe you borrowed a set of drums in Tuscon.

WOODMAN: The drummer, and we had another fellow by the name of Terry Cruise, who just played clarinet. He used to play with the George Brown orchestra. He was a very exciting clarinet player, a showman like. I think we all, drums and everything, got in this, in the back, in the rumble seat, piled up in there and everything. Oh, no. What it was, the bass he would hold on the side of the car.

ISOARDI: So it would be sticking out?

WOODMAN: On the side, at that time, the car had—

ISOARDI: Like a running board?

WOODMAN: A step, like a running board.

ISOARDI: So he just put the bass on the running board and he grabbed it all the way to Arizona?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And the drums were up top. We had that up top. So all three was, the rest of the fellows, Joe Comfort, Jessie Sailes, and Terry Cruise were in the back seat.

So when we got to Tuscon, Arizona, we met this promoter. He said, "Fellows, let me drive your car."

ISOARDI: What?

WOODMAN: Yeah. It was strange. So Coney got in the car, and I sat on his lap in the front seat, and now he's driving the car around town, to town, a small town, shopping. You know how those small towns are; you go around the block, you're out of it. [Laughter] So he's going to show this and that, waving at the people.

So we played that night. We played the club. And after we got through, we asked, "Where is the man at?" "What? Oh, he's gone." He skipped with the money.

ISOARDI: The promoter?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We drove all the way there, and this cat did this with us. So my brother, at the time, he met this lady, and this lady was a housekeeper for some

wealthy people, and the people had gone to Florida for a vacation or something for a couple of weeks. They had about four bedrooms. So she invited us, took us to this pad, and we slept there, and the next morning she cooked breakfast for us and everything. Now, getting into the main story— That's one episode that was a drag but that turned out to be pretty good. And we were still kids, so things like that— See, if this lady hadn't let us stay, all we had to do was call my dad, you know, things like that.

ISOARDI: Sure, he would have sent you the money.

WOODMAN: And everything. So during that time, we got somehow or another— Fort Huachuca wasn't too far from Tuscon, Arizona. That's the army base up there. So they asked us to come up there to play, which we did. We got paid for that. But I met quite a few of the musicians that were soldiers that were in the band there. I didn't think anything of it.

Now, getting back to Camp Walters, after I got in the band and got situated, well, I started talking with the master sergeant, at that time, and tech sergeant. We didn't have W.O., we didn't have a warrant officer. So the master sergeant, his name was Master Sergeant Brown, if I remember right, yeah— He was asking, of course, about me, I said yeah, we had a family band called the Woodman Brothers, and we played Huachuca. He said, "What? Did you play in Huachuca in '38 with all the fellows who were doubling on all those instruments?" I said, "Yeah, that was my brothers." He said, "What?" He said he joined the army when he was sixteen, he

put his age up to eighteen or something like that. So he had been in the army for a hundred years. So when the war broke out they made him master sergeant. And the cat played clarinet, played very good clarinet, the tech sergeant. So the tech sergeant would conduct the band. The master sergeant, all he did was just sit down; was hardly doing anything. [Laughter] Well, he's the one who had us to play for the officers on Saturdays for a dollar and a half and all we could eat. Well, we didn't think of it then, but it's just like I told the fellows, since I had a little experience playing out before most of the fellows in the band, before I came into the service, I said, "You know, I know we're in the service, but playing for the officers, it seems like we should get more than a dollar and a half. Because Saturday night is the night for us to really have a ball, you know, and we're playing for them." They said, "Yeah, that's the way the say—" Well, I went on and played until later on we finally we got a W.O.

ISOARDI: A W.O.?

WOODMAN: Yeah. A warrant officer was called a W. O. Warrant officer. So he came in, and the master sergeant was very jealous of him, because he lost authority. He could say no more. Well, the tech sergeant, they still let him conduct the band and certain things, but the warrant officer was a conductor, and he arranged everything. Being a warrant officer, you have to know how to arrange a little and go through that procedure of conducting. You conduct and arrange, see. So he let the tech sergeant conduct a few things, and he conducted everything. So master sergeant he was so

jealous, he quit. He resigned and went and stayed in town. I understand that he got out of the service, just got his pension, and stayed in the little town, Middlewell. Later on, the tech sergeant he married some little old young chick. The tech sergeant was around thirty something; he married a chick about sixteen or seventeen years old. So finally he quit.

Well, I was a corporal, and so— Well, I had studied a little conducting and things. I knew a little something about the conducting. And me playing the trombone so well and everything, he said, "Britt, I'm going to arrange for you to be tech sergeant." So he had to go to the [?] and the staff sergeant and things, you know, step by step. So he made me tech sergeant. So I became a tech sergeant, I conducted marches and things. See, with the marches, I never forgot that in high school, in Jordan High [School], [John] Philip Sousa's band played for us in the auditorium.

ISOARDI: Played for you guys?

WOODMAN: Yeah. I never forgot that. And the way he conducted, I said, man, I sure like his marches. [Sings march while imitating Sousa's conducting style] So that was my style of conducting. [Laughter] But I'll tell you what—

ISOARDI: Well, they must have liked it.

WOODMAN: The cats, they never enjoyed playing a march. I said, "When we get to the trill, when I do this— When we get to the trill, when I say drop, I want you to drop this like I'm cutting the band off. I want you to say [sings forte phrase followed

immediately by sudden pianissimo phrase]. And I also had to show them that— Because the warrant officer didn't tell them the approach, that it's different than jazz. When you play a march, you play an eighth note like a sixteenth. [Demonstrates more clipped phrasing] So I had to show them. To the trumpets and the horns, I said, "That's how I want you to approach that. And the trill, when you come down to the trill, make it soft." [Sings whole phrase]

ISOARDI: How did they like all that?

WOODMAN: Oh, they were crazy about it. Because they could see the beauty. It's the beauty in a march. Because when Philip Sousa played his marches I said, "Oh, man, beautiful, man." So I did that for them. They got a big kick. They really liked it, see. So I enjoyed that.

ISOARDI: Did you have much free time when you were—? You had your responsibilities, right? In the mornings you had reveille. You had to play something for the officers.

WOODMAN: Yeah, we had a lot of free time when the W.O. came in.

ISOARDI: So nights, you could take off, do what you—?

WOODMAN: Take off, yeah. You see—which we understood—the master sarge and the tech sarge, they were raised up in slavery, so they had a fear of officers, of a white person. So they were scared to say anything that they could say for us. They were scared to say it because they didn't know— Not to say too much, you know.

So when they W.O. found out, "What? You get a dollar and a half? That's ridiculous." So he gave us three dollars. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Not a bad jump.

WOODMAN: Three dollars we got. And he said, "Look, also, you fellows, if any of you don't want to play Saturday night, you don't have to play." Now, see, the master sergeant made you think you had to play, you know, that kind of thing. So when we played Saturday night, Monday morning the jazz orchestra would have it easy. We'd have a leave for half a day, you know, to do anything. We could go to town; we'd get a pass.

ISOARDI: Did you play much off base? Were guys going into town and playing in clubs?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Some of us would play in clubs. We'd play in Fort Worth and—

By the way, Floyd Ray was in the service there with me, but he was called—It's another name they have when a person isn't required to do military drills or anything. Special service. He was special service. So what he did, he and I got together. He got permission with the commissioner to let me off during the drills, during the day, to have a program in the recreation building, because he wasn't a good arranger. Since I had studied theory and things when I was a kid that applied to harmony, you know. I knew a minor third and major third and how to build a chord and so forth, you know. One, three, five. [Laughter] So little things he'd play on the piano or something, I'd

write it down for the horns. So we put a show on at the recreation building for the soldiers, so that got me out of some of the field work. And with him, with the army band, the orchestra that we had, he being known from the thirties and early forties with his band, he'd have some gigs in Fort Worth and Dallas to play. So we'd go up there and play and on the weekends.

ISOARDI: Not bad.

WOODMAN: No, it wasn't. We had a ball, a real ball in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in Fort Bragg. It's an all-girl college just about then across the street there, and, boy, on Sundays they'd be loaded in the USO [United Service Organization], where the soldiers hang out. And one of the fellows in the band was married, so he had a pad, rented a pad there in town. So he would rent a room out. I could have been just like— What was that cat that had so many chicks? Overseas and— I could have had as many chicks as I wanted to. Like I could take this chick to the room, I'd come back, I'd just take another one. But I didn't do that. Some of the cats did. I didn't do that. One chick, this chick, I had her; I'd just take her when I'd see her. Sometimes I stayed in camp because I didn't want to be bothered. But some of the cats, they liked to do that and hide, you know, hide from the chick. He's looking for her because meanwhile he takes this other chick out, see, so— [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, man. So Fort Bragg was kind of the same setup as the previous one? You had—

WOODMAN: Well, Fort Bragg was the main one I'm talking about.

ISOARDI: Yeah. But, I mean, you still had a lot of free time, you still were doing a lot of writing with Floyd Ray and—

WOODMAN: Yeah, I was— Now, Floyd Ray wasn't in Fort Bragg.

ISOARDI: Oh, so he was in Texas at the other place. At Fort Bragg, you had sort of the same routine, pretty much?

WOODMAN: Yeah. It seemed like we had more freedom in Fort Bragg.

ISOARDI: Even moreso?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Because all we had to do was play for the officers. Because, see, you have to remember always, the South— The army was prejudice, you know. So the black troops were here— Now, Fort Bragg was paratroopers. And over here were where all the white military and the soldiers were. So we had to march over here playing for the officers in the morning, to wake them up in the morning, play for them, for about a half an hour and march on back to where we are. And we could play softball on certain days. Also, in our barracks we had pool table and a Ping-Pong table. So it was much better in Fort Bragg, the living. It was a little bit better.

ISOARDI: Not bad duty.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So that was pretty much the war for you, then.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was—

ISOARDI: You're keeping good chops, doing some writing.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And chasing girls at the girls' college. I mean, what a set up.

WOODMAN: Oh, man, three of the fellows married while they were in the service. I almost got married. In fact, I built a little house for her, man, in back of my mother's house. But things were shaky, man, so I realized, I said, "Man, there's something wrong." So I wrote this chick a letter. I said, "I'm sorry, but will you please send me back my engagement ring?" I said, "Now, I haven't received a letter from you in eight months, and it seems like there must be someone you're interested in. Please send me back my engagement ring." Man; she wrote back this, "Man, if I didn't intend to marry you and didn't love you, I would have sent you back your engagement ring. If that's the way you feel about it, I'm sorry." I said, "That's good." My mother, she felt sorry for me because I built the house back there for her, you know. She was a schoolteacher. She had graduated, and I was trying to get connections for her to teach out here. But I found out that she was going with some other cats there. So I felt that, because her letters, three months, five months, didn't hear from her, six months, seven months, I said, "Shoot, we're supposed to be in love and engaged, man—" And the letters never did sound like they were a love letter. I said, "Well shoot, the best thing for me to do—" So my mother thought I was hurting. She felt sorry for me, you know. I said, "Mom, I'm glad this is over. I'm glad this happened."

ISOARDI: You found out when you did.

WOODMAN: When I did. I said, "No, shoot." I said, I've got plenty of time to get married. I met her in the service, see, and I dug her. So she was trying to do something for herself, wanted to be a schoolteacher and everything. But I can understand that, being away, and so many cats there and things.

ISOARDI: Pretty unstable times.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Okay, Britt.

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ISOARDI: Okay, Britt, before we carry on from where we left off last time, are there any things you want to go back to and get in that we might have missed?

WOODMAN: Well, we can go back, if you wish, to when I was in the service.

ISOARDI: Yeah, or you mentioned some musicians even before you went into the service.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, that's when I was with Les Hite's band.

ISOARDI: Okay, so we're talking about '39, '40.

WOODMAN: That was in '40, early winter, January. That's when I got a letter from Ernie Royal telling me that Lionel Hampton had organized a band and to come back, because it was going to be a great band with Illinois Jacquet, Dexter Gordon, Marshall Royal, Jack McVea, and all the great musicians. In fact, I wrote him and told him that I couldn't because I just joined Les Hite's band. I was playing first [trombone], and in an isolated place, it was very hard for him to get a first trombonist. I wish I could have gone, but I enjoyed myself with Les Hite.

So in the meantime, when we played the dance in Middlewell, Texas, well, three musicians—there was a trombone player, a drummer, and a bass player—asked, "Is there anywhere that we can go jam?" He said, well, yes at the [?], it has a piano

there, so the fellows might blow. They knew where it was, so they came by. And we were just getting out your horns to start playing, and they got their horns out, and two big, tall, redneck cops came in and said, "What? What the hell are you doing here playing with these niggers? Get out of here!"

ISOARDI: So these were local white musicians who wanted to jam?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Buddy Harper was the trombone player, and I can't remember the other two. But he became a very noted musician here when he came to Los Angeles. Buddy Harper. I think that was his name.

ISOARDI: Gee, I recognize that name.

WOODMAN: Yeah. It so happened that years after that, while I was here— I have to jump, skip a lot of things. I'm just going to tell you about this incident in '47 when I played with a recording date and Buddy Harper was on the date. So we just automatically started talking about the South. So I told him, "Yeah, I was in the South. It was pretty rough there because we had a hard way to go. We couldn't go into downtown to eat, certain things of that effect." And I said, "In the meantime, three musicians were at the dance that we played with Les Hite's band. They asked us about a jam session, and we told them the restaurant that we knew didn't have a piano, so they came by. And I said, "Buddy Harper was one—" Now, this was before I was even introduced to Buddy Harper in the session. And Buddy Harper—

ISOARDI: He was one of the guys you ran into seven years earlier?

WOODMAN: Buddy Harper said, "Britt that was me! I was the trombonist. I didn't know things like that. I didn't know that we couldn't play with the colored musicians. That's why I left. That's why I'm here."

ISOARDI: No kidding? Because of that one incident?

WOODMAN: That one incident. He said he didn't know that it was that bad.

ISOARDI: So he wasn't from around there, then.

WOODMAN: I think it was his home.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So I guess the cops drove him out that night.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. They told him, "Get out of here. What are you doing—" He said he told the police that he didn't know that musicians couldn't mix. He told us that's the law; black and white are not supposed to mix. So they didn't arrest him; they let him go. So that's why he said he didn't know that that existed. So I never forgot that incident. Getting back now—

ISOARDI: You mentioned some other musicians, too, who jumped ship in Los Angeles, who jumped from their bands to stay in L.A.—Al Morgan and these guys.

WOODMAN: Now, that was— Yeah. Now, I know for sure that when Cab Calloway came out here in around '39, Al Morgan quit the band. In fact, I wouldn't have known that he had played with Cab Calloway, because I never did come in contact with him

until he joined Les Hite's band. When Les Hite formed up his band, Al Morgan was the bass player.

ISOARDI: Oh, with you guys, when you joined. He was the bass player.

WOODMAN: He was the bass player in the first band to travel.

ISOARDI: So why did he jump Cab Calloway?

WOODMAN: Well, also Eddie Barefield left the band. I believe he was with Jimmie Lunceford. But I can recall that they were saying that with every name band that came out here, they'd always lose one or two musicians. Which was true. All except Duke [Ellington]. When Duke came out here, he didn't lose any. But mostly big bands that came out here. When Floyd Ray's band came out here, quite a few of them stayed.

ISOARDI: Really? Why?

WOODMAN: Because of the slow pace, of the climate, different things.

ISOARDI: It just seemed a better way to live.

WOODMAN: Most of the fellows came from the South, too, you know, so out here, it's what you'd call a big country town, and the weather and so forth— It was a better chance for them to make a living than the hometown that they were [from]. Also they didn't want to travel anymore, so that's another reason, too, that they would stay here. That was always to say that the name band that comes here, they were going to lose one or two men.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Gee, Britt, right before we carry on, let me ask you one other thing,

also: if you want to talk a bit more at all about what it was like being in the army in the South during the war. Because you spent I guess about three years, then, in Texas and in North Carolina in the military.

WOODMAN: Yeah, three and a half years. Well, in Middlewell, Texas, the experience that we had with the white policemen and the white M.C. going to Fort Worth or Dallas— On the weekends we'd go to Fort Worth or Dallas. Most of the time we'd go to Fort Worth because it's a little closer than Dallas and, secondly, coming back, the bus, the back seat, the long seat, the back seat and the row seats next to the back, it would be that only about ten of us could sit back there. It was all right going, but coming back, we'd stay around till one o'clock. Well, we wouldn't get back to camp to till around about four [o'clock], because there would be so many white soldiers, we'd only have just the back row. So that keeps us waiting until the next bus to come and the next bus and so forth and so on. So therefore we, especially the musicians, didn't want to go through all that hassle. Also, I can recall the case of one musician—I can recall his name because he was a musician, Pete Lowe—he just couldn't stand being treated or being called out of his name. So he was standing waiting in line to load the bus and the M.P. [military police] told him, "Look, you get back. You get in the back."

He said, "Well, I've been standing here for about five minutes."

"I said get back or—"

He said, "I'm not going to get back."

"Oh, you're a smart nigger, eh? Where are you from?"

He said, "I'm from San Francisco."

"Yeah, I thought so," and hit him over the head with the club.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And he reported it to the company commander. I think it may have been force of habit to punish the M.P. I don't know if they did or not, but they said they did. So that was one bad incident we had.

ISOARDI: I guess there you didn't see any blacks who were M.P.s or officers or anything like that.

WOODMAN: No, the black M.P.s were in the town that we could go to, our little—

ISOARDI: Oh, really? So there were some.

WOODMAN: Yeah, where we were, that we could go.

ISOARDI: But nowhere outside.

WOODMAN: Oh, no, no. They couldn't arrest a white soldier. No, no. [Laughter] They were for us. But I've got to tell you this incident. This same fellow, Pete Lowe, there was another fellow in the band who was very tall, we called him "Killer." He played drums. Pete Lowe played alto sax. So they went to Dallas, and they were walking down the street. Well, you can imagine, here's a tall black cat, and Pete Lowe was kind of short, about the same height I am. So an old man said, "Look at that tall

black nigger."

And Pete Lowe said, "What did you say?"

"I said look at that black nigger."

"What do you mean calling me—?"

The old man said, "Look, boy, I've been calling you niggers all my life. I'm not going to change now." And Pete, he said he had to laugh at what the man said. What the man said, the way he said it, he had to laugh. So we all laughed, too, when he told us what had happened, because this old man said, "I'm been calling niggers all my life, and I'm not going to change now." So I could see that if he laughed—

ISOARDI: You've just got to wait until they die. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah. If he laughed it had to be— There's no way you're going to hit an old man who calls you a nigger. When he said, "I've been calling you nigger all my life, and I'm not going to change now," well, he said he had to laugh. The bitterness left him, you know. So I got a big kick out of that, because I was glad that the hate— You know, I could not hate the old man. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, you just sort of realize he's an older generation. Nothing's going to change him. He doesn't—

WOODMAN: But I'll tell you another incident going to Fort Worth. Well, you know there were Yankees. Well, we kind of knew they must have been from the north because of the way they would turn around and talk to us. The whites. We called them

the white—

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Oh, the Yankees.

WOODMAN: The southern whites called them Yankees. So they were talking to us, where we're from, boom, boom, boom. And about three or four southern soldiers come. "What the hell are you all doing laughing and talking with these niggers?" And the white soldier said, "Because we want to. So what?" And we thought there was going to be a fight there, you know. But they didn't fight.

ISOARDI: What happened?

WOODMAN: Well, I guess when the white kids—there were about six of them—said, "Well, we'll talk to who we want to, so what," that kind of cooled it, you know.

ISOARDI: Crazy.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Then one of them said, "Yeah, they're Yankees." Something like that. So that's one incident. Another incident happened in Fort Bragg. See, now, musicians we had a barrack of our own.

ISOARDI: Right. And you were an all-black band.

WOODMAN: All-black band, yeah. Oh, naturally. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: In Texas you're not going to find anything else.

WOODMAN: So in Fort Bragg, North Carolina— Oh, that's a huge camp.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it's very big.

WOODMAN: Mainly for paratroopers, you know. So we're over here, so we had to

walk about six blocks, because this was the beginning of the white barracks and things. Although we had to play for the white soldiers in the morning, reveille. But the point I wanted to say about Fort Bragg, the mess hall, we ate with the officers.

ISOARDI: The officers?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Well, naturally, we were separated; we're over here and they're over there. Also we had black soldiers, tech sergeant and sergeant that worked in the office. So they would eat with us, too. So one day we walked in there, and there was partition, a big old curtain dividing us—

ISOARDI: The office was divided in half?

WOODMAN: In half with this big curtain that they had put up. So a couple of the very intelligent fellows, black [?] that worked in the office, they went directly to the commanding office and told him and he come down there and "What? Take that down! What you have you—?" Telling the officers to take that partition down. "What do you think this is?" They had to take it down.

ISOARDI: So who put it up there?

WOODMAN: Those officers that were from the South. See, most of the officers that trained us were from the South. Some of them were from West— What do you call the officers school?

ISOARDI: West Point?

WOODMAN: West Point. And dig this: They didn't know how to march.

ISOARDI: Officers from West Point didn't know how to march?

WOODMAN: No, keep in step.

ISOARDI: Oh, man. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: They had a colonel. He was drilling them, and they were— So he said, "What is this? You're from West Point and you can't keep time? Left, right." [Laughter] They couldn't keep in step, man. I'll tell you one thing, too, that was beautiful to see. Those officers from West Point, they were green. All they knew was the book, but out in the field they didn't know anything. So we had corporals that were training us how to assemble the guns that were able to do it blindfolded and all that. So they had to also learn how to do that also from the corporals, to—

ISOARDI: The officers did?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: What the hell were they showing them at West Point?

WOODMAN: Well, these guns, they didn't have them at West Point, these automatic guns and things. And so they had to teach the officers the assembling and everything to know about the guns. Another thing, in Fayetteville, too, — Well, we could go downtown, walk downtown in Fayetteville, but there was no place for you to eat. But you would be surprised. At that time, they had German prisoners. They were marching

them somewhere. They wanted to go into a restaurant for something, and they let them go in.

ISOARDI: But you guys couldn't.

WOODMAN: We couldn't. Now, here's a prisoner— So many things like that. You saw that we had the uniform on, still fighting for this country, especially the ones overseas dying, and then we're still segregated in the United States Army suits. They say you're supposed to respect the suit. The officers, you're supposed to respect his bars; that's what you're saluting, the bars. So they couldn't respect the suit.

ISOARDI: How did you and your friends react to that, seeing these German prisoners going into this restaurant?

WOODMAN: That was the hardest, one of the hardest things you had to swallow. So many things that you had to swallow in the forties, you know. It was worse in the thirties, when your parents would tell you about things. We wouldn't go into that, but how bad it was.

But I've got to tell you this. This was in Terre Haute, Indiana. Oscar Bradley was our drummer with Les Hite's band. As soon as we got in town and got our room, well, we'd always take a walk and go window shopping, and whatever place we can go in, we'll buy something. And during that time, even in Terre Haute, don't you touch anything, don't you pick up anything. Anything you pick up you've got to take, whether it's too small or too big.

ISOARDI: It doesn't matter. You touch it, you buy it.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So we were walking down the street, and here's a water faucet, a public water faucet. So my boy, Oscar Bradley, started drinking. He was drinking, and here comes a tall, redneck, white cat with a big hat on, a cowboy hat. He stood and folded his hands and said, "What is this world coming to? This nigger is drinking out of this faucet." Now, we didn't know that we weren't allowed to drink. It was for white people, not for us.

ISOARDI: Terre Haute. Was Terre Haute segregated then?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Oh, everyplace in the South. Every—

ISOARDI: But Indiana was north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

WOODMAN: But there were some parts. Like in New York State, some parts of it were segregated.

ISOARDI: So they didn't have the sign over the water faucet. You just shouldn't do it anyway?

WOODMAN: No, they didn't. Yeah, of course, we're strangers, and strangers didn't know that they couldn't. And so we left. I couldn't drink, so we left.

And we saw this theater showing this picture. "Oh, Britt, that's the picture that we wanted to see." So they gave us the tickets. And we didn't have to go in a side entrance there like some other theaters. Like in Dallas, they had a special entrance, in Fort Worth, for you to go into the theater. And you had to sit up way up high, see, in

the theater. But this theater, we bought our tickets, we walked in, it was dark, and in big row of seats there you could see right at the edge it was a black person sitting on the edge. So, "Oh, nobody's here." So we sat down right on the edge, just sat down. All of a sudden, we looked up, here was a white man in his overalls passed by, didn't say "excuse me," just walked past us in the same row. Next thing we know, the manager came and said, "I'm sorry, but there are no seats for you to sit in." He said, "You can stand up and wait a while." Something like that he said. But the thing about it, now—

ISOARDI: But you saw a black man sitting there, right?

WOODMAN: Yeah, but this row I thought was empty, because the back row was all filled up with blacks.

ISOARDI: Ah, so it was only that row that you could sit in.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So this farmer was in his overalls smelling, and we were dressed. We were always dressed neatly and everything. And he passed. The next thing we know, the manager is saying, "I'm sorry, but you can't sit here." So we said, "Can we get our money back?" He said yeah. So we got our money back and left. Now, just things like that— Now, he's way in the corner over there, and we're sitting right here on this end. Now, he couldn't sit with us in a corner, you know. It would be some different. His elbow was close to us. But to show how they feel toward the blacks. Today, I never did know why they hate blacks so bad there. I just didn't understand

why they— But one thing I realized that the people with the money, that's the way they had the blacks in control, because they let the poor white man use their justice on us. Like certain things, walking down the street, "You'd better get off the side, or "You'd better say 'mister.'" You'd better say "mister." And if there's a boy sixteen or fourteen years old, you're supposed to say "mister." And if we're ninety years old, we're still "boy." "Hey boy." So they felt grand and proud, though, to say that, and they didn't realize that they—

ISOARDI: How poor they were.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that the millionaires were keeping they down. They couldn't make any money, but it kept them being so proud that they were white, they'd keep us down. So a lot of them didn't know that until someone went into the service and someone— When Dr. [Martin] Luther King [Jr.] went with his project that he went through, someone realized that, "Yeah, I'm not free. I can't even go the way I want to go, either." They couldn't mix with the blacks, some of them wanted to, you know. So—

ISOARDI: The old tactic of divide and conquer.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So the people with the money can just keep making more, because they keep working at keeping poor people at each other's throats.

WOODMAN: That's right. That's right. So a lot of the poor people realized that. It

helped them to make them kind of free to realize what was going on. But that's one thing, too, though. You take a prejudiced white person, and he finds out the truth, that all blacks not the same and this and that, he's one of your best friends after he realizes. He's one of your best friends. See, like in the North, we didn't know. See, like everyone will tell you in the South, we know where we're supposed to be. You know what's happening there after you're there for a while. But in the North, the white man will pat you on the back, man. You thought he was your friend, man, and then he's the one who's deceiving you, man. He'll do you in, see, because you were fooled all these many years in the North.

So getting back now, the main thing, I had a ball. Outside of all those little incidents I was talking about in the service, I was in a band playing for the dances and playing—

ISOARDI: Beats being in a foxhole in Italy. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. So you were recognized as an artist with the chicks, man, and things. At the service club, they would send for women from Dallas and Fort Worth to come for the soldiers, and we played for them. We had a barrack to ourselves. During the intermission sometimes, we take the chicks, take them to our barracks.

ISOARDI: Oh, geez. Loose.

WOODMAN: Now, Fort Bragg, North Carolina was it.

ISOARDI: That was even better?

WOODMAN: Oh, much better.

ISOARDI: Much better than that? [Laughter]

WOODMAN: They had a college there called State Teachers College.

ISOARDI: Was that allgirls?

WOODMAN: All girls. And the USO wasn't too far from the college. On the weekends, oh, man, all these beautiful chicks, it's hard to pick who you want, man. [Laughter] Now, we're all had experience in the band see that we can stay out late and come in just before curfew and things. But we had a lot of privileges that the regular soldiers didn't have.

ISOARDI: So from there to the end of the war, you're at Fort Bragg.

WOODMAN: Yeah, Fort Bragg, yeah.

ISOARDI: And when did you get out?

WOODMAN: Around March in '46.

ISOARDI: March '46?

WOODMAN: Yeah, somewhere around there, in '46.

ISOARDI: A little ways after the war ends. Actually, before we get you coming back, did you have a chance to travel or go up to New York or anything like that while you were in North Carolina?

WOODMAN: Oh, no, no.

ISOARDI: So you were pretty much just there for the two or three years or whatever it

was?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: And then was it March '46?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, in '44 I took my first furlough. I came home to Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? For how long?

WOODMAN: Well, let me see. Well, I was supposed to have two weeks. Actually, you travel by train, so I had about five days here to get back.

ISOARDI: You'd been away for a while.

WOODMAN: Yeah, see, '42 to '44. Now, between that time, when I came back in '44, Charles Mingus was one of the greatest bass players and—

ISOARDI: And he wasn't when you left in '42. But in '44 he had become.

WOODMAN: Yeah. See, he graduated in 1940. So Oscar Pettiford, well, he was noted as one of the fine bass players, you know. He played with Duke. And Charles Mingus was faster than him. Oh, his hands were just like he was— Well, he did study from some symphony bass player. Red Callender—

ISOARDI: Herman Rheinshagen taught him, I think.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Yeah. And man, you're talking about—

ISOARDI: Jeez. Did you talk to Mingus about this? What did you say? What did you say to him?

WOODMAN: I said, "Man, I knew you were going to be a great bass player." I knew that, you know. He said, "Man, yeah, you said that. I'm so glad you told my mother that I wanted to play the bass, you know." At that time, too, he started writing. He was writing.

ISOARDI: So what did he tell you he'd been doing over two years? Just woodshedding like crazy?

WOODMAN: Yeah, woodshedding. He and Buddy Collette had some little gigs they would playing, and they were together playing then, see. And that's when he and Buddy got real tight because of the different gigs. And he started writing. Do you know that he could play piano?

ISOARDI: I knew he did later on.

WOODMAN: He might have recorded. I think he did a recording—

ISOARDI: Yeah, he did record an album of piano, I think.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And he almost sounded like Art Tatum. In fact, he played "Body and Soul." Art Tatum would like go up a half step. [Sings melody as it modulates up a half step] And he on the piano— Oh, man, it's unbelievable, man, how he was playing that piano. He sounded almost like Art Tatum.

ISOARDI: Mingus had gotten that good that fast on the piano?

WOODMAN: That fast.

ISOARDI: He was just picking it up?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was just— Well, when a person has a natural ability, when he finds what it is— When a person is what you can say that everything that he does is him, no copy, it's easy for him to go ahead forward and to do it, because everything is him. What he wants to do, what he feels to do, he'll do it. So he had that type of talent, gift of talent.

ISOARDI: So during this time when you were away and he improved so much, is he just practicing all the time and doing occasional gigs and not doing anything else?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. He practiced to get where he was advanced on his bass. Oh, he said he practiced— And that's another thing. When a person is dedicated to something, it's easy for them to practice two and four and five hours.

ISOARDI: And they don't even think about it.

WOODMAN: Don't even think about it. It's something that they want. Buddy Collette used to do the same thing. I remember when Schillinger— That's a system of writing. [Joseph] Schillinger, that's the name. So he bought three volumes of that book of arranging. So that's how he started to learn how to arrange, from Schillinger. Because in the forties, that was a very popular arranging thing. Colleges and things used to use him.

ISOARDI: So Buddy bought the books and taught himself that.

WOODMAN: He taught himself, yeah, from the books.

ISOARDI: Was Mingus doing that, too?

WOODMAN: No. See, the thing was Mingus was so natural, what he heard, he could write. So Buddy Collette told him, he said, "Why don't you study instrumental harmony so you'll know the difficulties of the alto [saxophone] and trombone and so forth and know them." Because he would write so hard— For example, if I'm playing first [trombone], I've got low B-flat in first position, I've got a B-natural, which is called in the seventh position. So if you're going to write eighth notes, I've got to stretch my arm. So if there's two 'bones playing, if you know it's difficult, you give the second 'bone that B-natural and give me a D or something that I can reach comfortably, see. But, see, he didn't know the difficult— Also, for the sax, too. That was his thing. He had trouble with people playing his music. But other than that, his ideas and creativity were just as great as Duke.

ISOARDI: Jeez. And early on, then, in 1944, he's playing the hell out of the bass and he's starting to compose then, starting to write his own stuff. Did you hear any of his compositions? Did he play anything for you?

WOODMAN: I heard one tune that he wrote that was called "Kiss of Death." He wrote the lyrics, and he wrote the background music for it, and he made a home recording of that. He was crazy about Orson Welles. And he sounded just like Orson Welles saying this, this [adopting deep voice] "Kiss of Death." [Laughter] So that was— All the things like that, man, that the man—

If he had disciplined himself, refrained from the outbursts and things of that

sort— If someone disagreed with him, the first thing, he'd want to strike. He'd want to fight, want to strike, you know. But most of the time, though, when he'd strike a person, it had a background to it. The person to him was prejudiced, or the person, one of the musicians, claimed to be [great but] he didn't play his music right. He's supposed to be so great, and he didn't play it right, so the person would say something to make him angry, then he'd want to hit him, see. And so he would say, "You're a jive musician. I thought you were supposed to play anything." And then also, if a person is prejudiced, then he'd want to fight. Because people think that he hated white persons. They called him the angry man, you know. If you'd go to his pad, that's all he had surrounding him, white people. The blacks were the ones that couldn't understand him. He never had any black friends. Just his musicians that were with him: Eric Dolphy and Ted Curson and them, his drummer.

ISOARDI: Dannie Richmond?

WOODMAN: And Dannie Richmond. They all knew him. But other, outside black musicians, they don't— All they know is, "Oh, man, Charles Mingus, that cat, he wants to fight, man. He's crazy." They don't really know him, his heart, how beautiful a person he is. So at his pad, if you'd go in his pad, there's white cats and white chicks. So he didn't hate white people. He hated prejudice, and that's when he'd get angry. Also, I played with him about two months— More than that. In fact, he wanted to be part of— In fact, I was a part of the band with Eric Dolphy and Ted

Curson and the drummer. Of course, he stayed with him a long time.

ISOARDI: Yeah, many years.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And— But see I didn't like that showman that— When people came to see him, he'd be playing, and he'd stop the band. "Look, you keep quiet and you'll get an education about what music is like! Quit that talking! I don't hear all that talking!" [Laughter] And a man might say something, and then there would be an argument between him and the man in the audience. Well, see, a lot of people would come just to see that. But, I mean, that's— There was a club on Third Street in the Village [Greenwich Village], on Third Street there, upstairs. Now, we were the house band. We played there for six weeks. A nice little gig, you know. The seventh week, we came in, and Charles said, "We're not playing." "Say what?"

"Well, the manager, he don't want to give me no more money, and we had a big argument, so that's it."

We said, "Well, Charles, you're telling us this here, that you're quitting like that, and you didn't give us two week's notice or anything? I mean, just quit?" "Well, that's the way it goes. I'm not going to take all that stuff, what this man's doing."

There was another club called the Five Spot there, around Tenth Avenue, a very popular club where well-known musicians would play. So he said, "Britt, I'm opening there. I'm the house band there." I made an excuse. I said, "Oh, man, I wish you had told me. I'm going out of town for a while. I don't know when I'll be—" I

made an excuse.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You just didn't want to go through that.

WOODMAN: Oh, no. That kind of stuff, no, I— These young cats—they were younger than me—just to blow their horns, what they were doing, they could take all that. So he was at the Five Spot. Within three weeks, the word got out, Charles Mingus broke the piano. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: He broke the damn piano?

WOODMAN: Broke the piano at the Five Spot. He got into an argument with the manager or somebody.

ISOARDI: And he smashed it up?

WOODMAN: Smashed the piano. Well, I'll tell you what. Doing that barred him from playing in New York for over a year. He couldn't work anywhere.

ISOARDI: The club would fire him?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He couldn't work anywhere in New York for over a year.

ISOARDI: Is this the late fifties, I guess?

WOODMAN: No, this was in the sixties. This is when I quit Duke's band. This was in the sixties. Of course, see, in all the fifties I was with Duke.

ISOARDI: Oh, right, of course.

WOODMAN: So this was in— Although, I did work a few gigs with him in the fifties. Duke took a job, some kind of festival there, and you had to be [American Federation

of Musicians Local] 802. At that time I wasn't an 802 musician. So he got a couple of fellows, so I couldn't work. All I could do, I could sub if one of the 802 musicians took off. So at that time, I did some work with Charles. We played some gigs. Let me see. Eddie Burt was one of the trombone players, Eddie Burt and I, and these other musicians that were—

ISOARDI: What you think of Mingus's music when you were playing with him in the sixties? You know, you followed his development.

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, I liked some of the things; some of the things I didn't. But the thing is that, whether I liked it or not, I had to admire him, his voicing, his ideas, his things that he had written. I always said this, that his compositions, it was just like him, kind of frustrated. You could make almost three or four tunes within that composition, because the melody write there, that eight bars, well, man, there's a tune, and you could go from there. Then he'd go into something else, to another motif or idea or— Like Duke, see, they said Duke was a thief. They said, "Watch what you play, man, because Duke will steal it." Because so many things that cats warm up with and things, well, Duke made a song out of it. Like "Sophisticated Lady." I think Harry Carney used to do say, [sings melody]. So Duke heard that [sings melody], so that's where he got his ideas and things, from things like that, see. But Charles Mingus had so many creative ideas that— He wasn't disciplined like that, to take this eight bars and make one composition, tune, out it and go from there. Because he'd have so many

beautiful little things in there. But I told him one time, I said, "Charles, that eight bars you had there, man, it seems you ought to have stuck with that and made something out of that. But you went into another—" He said, "Well, that's the way I think it's supposed to go." So that's the way he thought, the way he would write, see.

ISOARDI: Did you play with him after the sixties, after the late sixties?

WOODMAN: No, because I left New York in '69 and came here. And that's the time that he— He called me around '77. He said he was making this last recording date. He said he wanted me to be on it because he needed four or five 'bones. So I told him, "There's no way in the world that I can come, Charles, and do that." But soon after that, that's when he got sick. He got deathly sick. That's when he went to, I think, Texas somewhere. Some lady was supposed to heal him there.

ISOARDI: Oh, when he went down to Mexico?

WOODMAN: Mexico. This lady was supposed heal that case that he had.

So those days in the forties— Well, you know, in '46, that's when we organized the Stars of Swing.

ISOARDI: Actually, let me ask something else about this furlough. You come back in 1944, you've been away for two years, and you see some changes. I mean, you see Mingus playing the hell out of the bass. Anything else? Did Central Avenue change? Did Central Avenue look different?

WOODMAN: Oh, man, Central Avenue was— Words can't explain how bright—

Everything was— They had so many clubs there, you know, little clubs, after-hours clubs.

ISOARDI: Just over the two years that you've been gone, it's changed that much?

WOODMAN: Just that fast. Because in the forties, when I was going uptown—

ISOARDI: You mean in the thirties? Early forties.

WOODMAN: In the forties. That's when I started— Before I left. Because I didn't leave until around December or November with Les Hite. But I started working uptown around the forties, see. And the only thing that was happening on Central Avenue, the big thing, was the Dunbar Hotel with the [Club] Alabam. They called it the Alabam but it was the Dunbar Hotel, having the shows, chicks dancing, the comedians, and different acts and things. And restaurants and things, Finley's, and a place called Coney Island that sold chili, and the Fifty-fourth Drugstore. Well, a lot of musicians would hang out there. And then the Elks [hall] and the Lincoln Theatre. But, now, when the war broke out in '42, well, that's when a lot of these clubs, Jack in the Basket—

ISOARDI: Jack's Basket Room or something?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Basket Room, the Memo [Club], and some other little clubs they had entertainment in there and so forth and on. And bright lights, man, and people on the streets at around two and three o'clock in the morning. It looked like Broadway, you know.

ISOARDI: So did during your few days on furlough, did you go around sampling what was happening?

WOODMAN: Well, I know Charles Mingus was working in some place on— It wasn't on Central. Some club that I went by. He was playing with some group or another. Although another big place was happening then called the Plantation [Club]. It was on Central, but it was located down south in Watts, around a 110th or 111th or 112th [Street] in Watts. And they had name bands and everything there.

ISOARDI: What was that like?

WOODMAN: Oh, it was great.

ISOARDI: Did you go inside?

WOODMAN: Yeah, there was a fellow, a friend of mine I went to school with—he was older than me, but he was closer [in age] to my oldest brother [Coney Woodman]—named Tucson Moore. Well, he was a big shot at the time, man.

ISOARDI: At the Plantation?

WOODMAN: No, not at the Plantation, but a big shot—

ISOARDI: Oh, in the area?

WOODMAN: In what was going on. He was where the money was, the pimps and all that. He had the chicks and things working for him and things. Because that was going, man. That was the big thing in all the clubs. So he gave a party for me at the Plantation, and Jay McShann's band was playing there at the time. I didn't know any of the

musicians, but I introduced myself and told him that I knew a couple of musicians that played with the band, and he remembered. So he said, "Did you bring your horn?" I said, "No, I didn't bring my horn." But my boy threw me a big party at the Plantation. That was the biggest place. That was bigger than the Dunbar.

ISOARDI: It was bigger than the Alabam?

WOODMAN: Yeah, the Alabam, because it drew the dancing people.

ISOARDI: Oh, serious dancers.

WOODMAN: Yeah, the dancers, the jitterbugs and so forth.

ISOARDI: So there's a lot of room. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: A lot of room there. Of course, the Alabam, it had another clientele, you know, for floor shows and—

ISOARDI: People mostly watching shows and—

WOODMAN: Yeah. The ordinary person that went to school and graduated, they didn't care anything much too much about that, you know.

ISOARDI: But dancing's serious. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: The Plantation, yeah. And it was really jumping, man. I saw a lot of—

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ISOARDI: So you saw a lot of old friends at the Plantation?

WOODMAN: Yeah, from school. Comrades, young cats.

ISOARDI: What did it look like inside? I guess there was a big area to dance.

WOODMAN: There was a big area. It's a regular dance— Have you ever been to Roseland in New York?

ISOARDI: No.

WOODMAN: Well, they had the tables and things.

ISOARDI: Tables around the sides?

WOODMAN: Around the sides and things, and the big dance floor, you know. A regular scene where you could sit and drink. I think you could bring your own food in there, I believe.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

WOODMAN: Yeah, one of those things. So that's the type of place it was.

ISOARDI: Now, when you left to go with Les Hite a couple of years earlier, the Plantation wasn't there?

WOODMAN: Oh, no. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Oh, no. There was nothing happening on Central Avenue when the war broke out in '42 and '43. Oh, no. But Central was still noted as being like 125th Street in Harlem because of the Apollo Theatre. And then they had some clubs there, too, Baby Grand and— So Central Avenue was the place. Well, every city had a main street, you know, in New Orleans, Bourbon Street. You know, there's always one street that's the happening one in every city. Then finally, during the decline of Central Avenue, they started having clubs on Western [Avenue]. Of course, what happened, as far as I saw, the policemen started harassing the people standing out in front of the clubs, and you know that most of these clubs, the little smaller clubs, most of these are hustler's pimps, and prostitutes. There's another name besides prostitutes. I hate to call them that name.

ISOARDI: Call girls.

WOODMAN: Call girls. Well, okay, you can call them call girls. There's another name. Call girls are the ones that they have set up in a hotel or something and someone calls them. [Laughter] But some of them, the police would start getting people off the street, going in and arresting people and things, maybe because they found people were selling dope and all that stuff.

ISOARDI: When is this happening? In '44?

WOODMAN: No, this is starting around '47, '48.

ISOARDI: They hadn't been doing this as much before that?

WOODMAN: No. See, in '46, the street was booming, because that's when we had the Stars of Swing.

ISOARDI: Oh, right. Yeah, that's right. We haven't gotten there yet.

WOODMAN: Oh, Buddy Collette told you about that, though, didn't he?

ISOARDI: Oh, right. Yeah, he told us about that. Sure. But so we're going to hear you talk about it, too. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: So that's '46 and—

ISOARDI: So during the furlough, then, you're really knocked out by Central. I mean, you probably can't wait to get back.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I didn't want to go back. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: You didn't want to go back to North Carolina after seeing that. The place was jumping.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Oh, man.

ISOARDI: But you only have a few days. You've got less than a week, right?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. I have about—what—five or six days, I think it was. Six days. Because for the traveling on the train, you know, going took about four days, and coming back took about four days. So I didn't have too much time to spend there.

ISOARDI: Who were you staying with? Your folks?

WOODMAN: I was staying with my folks in Watts.

ISOARDI: Still the same place?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, wait a minute, wait a minute. Let me see. 'Forty-four. No. I was on Forty-Ninth Street between Main [Street] and Broadway. But I was staying with my folks. But my grandmother lived in Watts. So when I went to the Plantation, when I got out of there, it was around three o'clock in the morning, so I went to my grandmother's and stayed over there for the night and slept in the house with them, because they were still living in Watts.

ISOARDI: So your parents had moved back up?

WOODMAN: Yeah, my parents had moved back to Forty-Ninth Street, 200 West Forty-Ninth Street. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Good memory! So did anything else happen on this trip? Or then you get on the train pretty much and you head back to Fort Bragg?

WOODMAN: Head back to Fort Bragg, yeah. No, there I was still in Camp Walters. Wait a minute, wait a minute. Let me see, now. Yeah. I think I was still in Middlewell, Texas.

ISOARDI: Oh, maybe at the end of your basic training they gave you some time off and you were able to come home.

WOODMAN: Oh, no. See, in '42 I finished my basic training. It was the last of '43. That's when it was. I was still in Middlewell, Texas because when I transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, my next furlough I spent in Chicago. I didn't go home.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: So I remember that, yeah. Yeah, so that's when it was.

ISOARDI: So then you come out here in '43, and then you don't come back until you're out of the army, then?

WOODMAN: Right.

ISOARDI: So that's a couple of years later.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So in '46, then, you finally get your discharge.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And you hop on a train and come back?

WOODMAN: Yes. Now, the way it happened, in '46, they were discharging people from the army according to some kind of number that you were supposed to have. So quite a few of the fellows that were in the band before me, they left, so I was almost the last one to leave. So the band had broken up. I was just there waiting for the call to get my discharge. I forgot just what it was, but they went by some kind of numbers or something that soldiers were being discharged by.

ISOARDI: I guess based on how long you've been in.

WOODMAN: I guess so, yeah, something like that, see. So the war was over in '45.

ISOARDI: So you had to hang around for a few months.

WOODMAN: So I had to wait till '46. That's when I got my discharge, March '46, in March or April of '46. So in April, Charles Mingus was still in town. I got with him.

We were doing little things with Buddy Collette.

ISOARDI: As soon as you got back, you hooked up with Mingus?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. And then, I don't know, I guess it was Buddy Collette's or Charles Mingus's idea to organize the group, which we did. We started rehearsing. Lucky Thompson was with us.

ISOARDI: So there are the three of you guys.

WOODMAN: The horns were— John Anderson was the trumpet player that. We used to work together. He was an arranger, too. And he had a little group, arranging, with some little gigs. John Anderson trumpet, Buddy Collette, and Lucky Thompson, and yours truly, me. That was the front.

ISOARDI: That was the front line.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Charles Mingus, Oscar Bradley—the drummer that was with Les Hite with me—and Spaulding Givens, piano player. Now, his charts, you'd have to really play his charts about four or five times really to get in it, because they were— I don't know. Something was deep about them. You'd play it once and you'd say, "Oh, man, this is nothing," you know. But we saw something. So we played it till we could really feel it. And it made the band sound all together in a different sense than the other charts that we had, even with Charles Mingus's charts and also with Buddy Collette's charts and Lucky Thompson's charts.

ISOARDI: Gee, a lot of you guys were writing.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I had one number that I wrote, but it was mostly Charles Mingus and Buddy Collette.

So we rehearsed about five weeks. And [Elihu] "Black Dot" [McGhee] was a well-known on Central Avenue. He was managing the Downbeat [Club]. Also, he was managing another club on Jefferson [Boulevard] called Copacabana. So Buddy Collette and us, we approached him and said that we had an orchestra. When you have an opportunity, we'd like to come in. We'd like for you to hear what we've got. So he came by rehearsal and heard what we had. He said yeah. Now, he knew me from the Woodman Brothers [Bigglest Little Band in the World]. He knew Buddy Collette and Charles Mingus because they had gotten popular with their playing.

ISOARDI: He certainly knew Lucky Thompson, I'm sure.

WOODMAN: Especially Charles Mingus. He was playing so much bass that everybody knew him. And like I say, he knew us from the Woodman Brothers. And he said, "Yeah, okay." So we set a date, we came in there and played. And we brought a different clientele in there: people that spending money.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We had a band that we didn't realize how good it was ourselves, because we didn't even record it, didn't make a home disc or anything. But, man, people would come to hear this and were so killed by it, years after, when I went to New York, musicians that were coming in and out of town in different bands and

heard us said, "Man, you cats, boy, you cats had a group there, man, that was something else." Although we knew we had a good group, we didn't realize how good it was.

So Lucky Thompson left the band—

ISOARDI: After how long?

WOODMAN: About three months or four months.

ISOARDI: How long were you in at the Downbeat?

WOODMAN: I'd say about five months.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Long run.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You guys were called the Stars of Swing, right?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, the Stars of Swing. So Lucky Thompson quit, and Teddy Edwards took his place. And he gave it another flavor because of his style and things. In fact, his style fitted right in with what we were doing.

Now, we were getting at the end of our contract. We were supposed to be there for five months or something like that. So Eddie Heywood came by, came to the club, and he left word he wanted to see me. So I talked with him. He said that "Vic Dickenson is sick. I'm going to San Francisco. He won't be able to make my show, and I'd like to see if you could join the band."

ISOARDI: In his band, Eddie Heywood's band.

WOODMAN: In his band, yeah. Henry Coker was the other trombone player in there. He was in, too. I said, "Well, I'll have to let you know. I couldn't tell you right off."

So in the meantime, some lady approached us. We hadn't closed. We had about a week more at the Downbeat. This lady had a club in Culver City and said, "I've been here two or three nights to listen to you. You have a terrific band." She said, "Now, if you would get a vocalist, I'd like for you to come to my place indefinitely." Charles Mingus said, "That's it! Every time we get a band or something they want to have a vocalist in there!"

So I said, "Well, Charles, man, there isn't anything wrong with having a vocalist."

"Oh, no, no."

So nobody else said anything. They didn't say anything to Charles or, "That's all right, man, Charles," or backed me up. Buddy Collette, nobody said anything. Charles was going out there, "No, we'll just keep this band; the band will get a chance to blow."

So in the meantime, now, we had about four more days before we closed, and Heywood wanted to know. I said—

ISOARDI: Now, you guys didn't have another gig lined up then, right?

WOODMAN: Not now, since he—

ISOARDI: Since he wouldn't go for that.

WOODMAN: Since he wouldn't go for this.

ISOARDI: But there was nothing else.

WOODMAN: No. So I said, "Well, look, you're not going to take this job this lady offered you, so now what are we going to do?" "Well, we'll get something." So, I said, "Well, look, man, I have a chance to go with Eddie Heywood's band." I said, "Now, if you don't have anything before we close here, man, that's it." So anyway, I went with Eddie Heywood's band.

ISOARDI: So nothing turned up?

WOODMAN: Nothing at all. That was it for—

ISOARDI: For the band?

WOODMAN: That was it. That was it.

ISOARDI: Too bad.

WOODMAN: So I went to San Francisco for a week, played, I think, the Million Dollar Theater up there for a week. Boy that was the easiest gig. We played fifteen minutes. I learned all the tunes by memory on the train, because didn't use any music. I learned it just by memory. I played fifteen minutes or twenty minutes, and I got a $125. Now, that was the first band where I never got that much for playing that little, but after playing with the other band, we had to play with shows, do all this— Shoot. So we did that, and we came back, and we opened up for Billy Berg. Billy Berg was a very popular man in Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Actually, before you get into Billy Berg, just let me ask quickly, Britt, before we get too far away from the Stars of Swing, you guys were in the Downbeat for a few months, it was a good steady gig, and your music is developing all the time, all you guys are writing, and you only have one personnel change? Teddy Edwards takes Lucky Thompson's place, other than that, you guys were all together.

WOODMAN: That was it, all together.

ISOARDI: Why did Lucky Thompson leave?

WOODMAN: Well, I didn't want to go into that, but— [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, it's one of those stories.

WOODMAN: I have to go—

ISOARDI: Did he get somebody pregnant or something?

WOODMAN: I have to start back at the beginning. I skipped all that. We had a sign, see. We all printed our sign: "The Stars of Swing," featuring the names all right there.

ISOARDI: Oh, each of your names was on this thing? Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: So the opening night, we came out— "What's that?" "Lucky Thompson," featuring the cats in the band.

ISOARDI: He put his own sign up there?

WOODMAN: So we went to Black Dot and said, "Black, what's going on here, man? What's that sign up there?" "Yeah, so what. Lucky Thompson said that that's what you all wanted and had the name changed, so I told him to go ahead and do it." We

said, "No, we don't—" He said, "What? That—" He called him some kind of name. Because he was crazy about us and everything. He knew us better than he knew Lucky Thompson. Lucky Thompson had a name, though, playing around.

So what happened, now, in the meantime, he kept me with Boyd Raeburn's band at the time. At that time, we were only rehearsing. So we were supposed to start at nine o'clock, we got through rehearsing at eight. Lucky Thompson, after we took the sign down and put our original sign up there, well, he started losing interest. Because I used to go by and pick him up and take him to rehearsal. So I said, "It's eight-thirty, man," I said, "You know, we start at nine." "Okay, Britt." You know, he would fool around. So we'd get there about 9:15, 9:20, almost every night. So I told the fellows, I said, "Look, man," I said, "I don't know, it seems like my boy isn't that interested."

So somehow or another we had to take him to the union. We took him to the union and the president. Mr. [Leo] Davis was the president of the [Local] 767 at the time. And during the conversation, you know what Lucky Thompson said to Mr. Davis? "Well, I changed the sign because I have more prestige here in Los Angeles."

And Mr. Davis said, "You have what? I've been known the Woodman Brothers since the thirties, and Charles Mingus and Buddy Collette, everybody knows them. You mean to say you've got more prestige? What?" So he said, "Well, fellows, what do you want to do?"

We said, "Well, the best thing is to let him go."

He said, "Do you want to press any charges?"

"No."

So we let him go, and that's when we got Teddy Edwards. So that's—

[laughter]

ISOARDI: Boy, the ego sometimes, eh?

WOODMAN: Oh, man.

ISOARDI: What surprises me is I would have thought that Mingus would have killed him. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: No, well, Mingus was cool at that time, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. I guess later he would have killed him. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah, I guess so. [Laughter] Because he told the cats off at [Local] 47 when we went down there. Charles asked them, "Why can't blacks join the union? Willie Smith, he's in the union." Willie Smith wasn't white, you know.

"Well, he lives close to the union, you know."

So Charles Mingus said, "You don't [let us] join because you're just prejudiced, that's all. You don't want any blacks to join the union—"

So they said, "No, we made a general agreement with the blacks in 767, and so—"

So when they found out that we had gone there, they summoned us, Buddy

Collette and myself and Charles Mingus to come down to the office to talk to Mr. Davis. So we told him what was happening. Because we were connected with a symphony orchestra. They formed it during the time of what they called the big ten. The Jewish were having trouble, the big ten, during that time.

ISOARDI: What was the big ten?

WOODMAN: They call them the communists, because the Jews were trying to break down their prejudice because they couldn't get into lot of things that they were blocked out of. So they formed this orchestra for the minorities for us, Buddy Collette and Charles and other musicians, for the experience of playing under different conductors and playing symphony music.

ISOARDI: So these were some of the musicians from Local 47?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And you guys got together with them.

WOODMAN: They were the ones that hipped us and said, "Well, do you know that in our clubs, we get more money than you. When you play that club, we get more money than the blacks." "What?" So we found all that out.

ISOARDI: These are like Hollywood clubs?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So then we found that out. So the musicians that were playing in this orchestra, symphony orchestra, well, after we told them what was happening, that we couldn't get any jobs or anything out there and our scales were low, then they were

for it, so amalgamate the two unions.

ISOARDI: When did you start this orchestra?

WOODMAN: That was in '49. I was the librarian. I went to the library and—

ISOARDI: You kept the orchestra book?

WOODMAN: Yeah. And they would write down overtures get, and I'd go there.

ISOARDI: Okay, we're up to about '49, then. This is how amalgamation begins, with this orchestra, I guess.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: But let me— Oh, God, there was another thing that I wanted to ask you before we got off the Stars of Swing. Can you put into words at all what the sound of the band was like? What made it so different?

WOODMAN: Well, I'll tell what. Now, if I could think of the band— The bass player was the leader of the band.

ISOARDI: Mingus?

WOODMAN: No, in New York. John [Kirby]—

ISOARDI: For the Stars of Swing?

WOODMAN: No, this is in New York, a famous band there, and the leader was a bass player. [Russell] Procope, and there was an alto player—

ISOARDI: I can't think of who it might be. Are you saying that you guys sounded like that?

WOODMAN: Something like them, yeah. Because they used to play pretty hard music, and they had almost like the same instrumentation that we had. It was a small band. And the way that the things that we were playing and the way that we blended and everything, you know, it seemed like we'd been together for years.

ISOARDI: In a way, you guys had, though, because you'd grown up together.

WOODMAN: Yeah, we grew up— Yeah.

ISOARDI: At least some of you did.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that's right. So all that made it close, yeah, the impact and the way the people felt.

ISOARDI: It's too bad that band was never recorded.

WOODMAN: I know. Buddy— We said the same thing. We should have made a home recording or something, invest it, but—

ISOARDI: I guess there were no radio broadcasts from the Downbeat or anything like that?

WOODMAN: No, nothing. No.

ISOARDI: Man, too bad. It was one of the great jazz bands that never got documented.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Do you still have any charts from that? Were the charts you guys played—

WOODMAN: Buddy Collette has some, and the trumpet player, John Anderson—he died, though, years ago—he had some.

ISOARDI: So some of the charts are left, but that's about all.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Where they are, I don't know.

ISOARDI: Too bad you didn't do a rehearsal recording or something, just anything.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. We regret that, too. Buddy said the same thing, that we wish we had just—

ISOARDI: You mentioned that after the Stars of Swing you go north with Eddie Heywood, and then you come back, and you go into Billy Berg's.

WOODMAN: Yeah. They had closed Billy Berg's on account of— I think it was something— The policemen, I think— A racial thing, the blacks were going with the whites there.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right, because Billy Berg fought the segregation.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He had an integrated club.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Oh, and the cops didn't like that.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So he opened again.

ISOARDI: This is Billy Berg's on Vine [Street]?

WOODMAN: On Vine now.

ISOARDI: Right, that's where Bird [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy [Gillepsie] played when they were here at the end of '45?

WOODMAN: No, no, they played another place in '45, some other place on Main Street or somewhere, first down in a cellar, where he made his name. Billy Berg.

ISOARDI: So what club do you open for?

WOODMAN: Oh, the name's still Billy Berg's.

ISOARDI: It's called Billy Berg's.

WOODMAN: Still Billy Berg's club on Vine Street. So we were the house band, supposed to be the house band. So we stayed there about two months with Eddie Heywood's band. I said, "Well, this is great, man." Because I didn't want to leave, go anywhere.

ISOARDI: You weren't looking to get with another band and travel?

WOODMAN: No, I wasn't thinking about going on any road or anything. I wasn't thinking Lionel Hampton's band. Because I turned down Boyd Raeburn's band, with him.

ISOARDI: He wanted you to go on the road?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he wanted me to go south. I said no. [Laughter] The only black in the band; I knew what would happen there.

ISOARDI: Oh, that would have been hell.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So about the third month, in the third month, Eddie Heywood called us into his room one by one, and he said, "Britt, I'm leaving because I asked for more money for you all but he didn't want to pay it. So I'm going back to New York,

and I'd sure like to have you come back with me." And, of course, three of them, the drummer and the trumpet player and the alto player, were all from New York.

ISOARDI: Oh. So he's not taking the whole band, just a few people he wants to bring back?

WOODMAN: No, he wanted all of us. He wanted [Henry] Coker. He had already talked to Coker, and I didn't know that Coker had refused. I didn't know it. And the bass player named [Ernie Shepard] Shep. He played with Duke later on. So when he called me in, he said that he wanted to give me $125 a week. If he had offered me $300 I don't think I would have taken it, but $125 a week, I said no. I told him I didn't want to travel. I wanted to further my education.

ISOARDI: So in '46, '47, $125 a week, is that not-so-good money?

WOODMAN: It was pretty good.

ISOARDI: It was okay for then?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. That was pretty good for a week during that time. Because— Let me see now. If I say fifteen dollars a night for six nights, how much is that? For seven nights.

ISOARDI: Fifteen a night for seven nights, $105.

WOODMAN: Okay, now, I'll tell you, that's what Hamp [Lionel Hampton] was paying some of the musicians a night. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: At that time?

WOODMAN: At that time, that's right. [Laughter] So anyway—

ISOARDI: That is how he got rich. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yeah, I'll scan over that.

ISOARDI: He didn't pay any money. Or Gladys [Hampton] wouldn't let him pay. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: That's right. Gladys is the one. So I told Eddie Heywood I couldn't make it. So when I came out, Henry Coker seemed like he was waiting for— "Did you accept that offer?" I said no. So evidently he must have offered him the same amount of money he offered me. Because I think that $125, I know it was offered to other cats, because Coker had been with the band a long time. He said, "You'd better not." He wanted to get with somebody. I said no, I told him I didn't want to leave Los Angeles. He said, "Good." So that was that for that.

ISOARDI: For Eddie Heywood. So then what did you do? You started looking for work elsewhere then, right?

WOODMAN: Well, actually I didn't start looking for the work. It just so happened that— We're still in '46. So many things happened in '46. All this was happening in '46. Boyd Raeburn's band, Eddie Heywood's band, the Stars of Swing. So soon I got a call from Curly Hamilton. Curly was a big man in Lionel Hampton's band. In fact, he was going with Mr. Hampton, and she was— All the time, I found out it was a business deal with Hamp and his wife, Mrs. Hampton, just a business deal.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So Curly was the big man. He's the one that— So they were playing at the Million Dollar Theatre, so he asked could I come by and bring my horn. I said yeah, okay. So one of the shows, Hamp asked me to sit in. So they had three 'bones; this would make it four. The number he called was "Air Mail Special."

ISOARDI: "Air Mail Special"?

WOODMAN: Yeah. It's a fast number.

ISOARDI: Oh, very fast. What, did he want you to solo?

WOODMAN: Yeah. [Laughter] I didn't know. I thought he wanted to see me reading. He said, "Britt Woodman, come on down."

ISOARDI: He called you that in front of the band?

WOODMAN: Yeah, man.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, what a surprise.

WOODMAN: You see, now, the only thing that "Air Mail Special," for four bars they had a diminished [sings descending phrase], that kind of threw me off a little. But the rest of it was just like in C. You just run a C scale. Everybody's on that, you know.

So I got through it. So after the show, they said, "Gladys,"—her name is Gladys—"Gladys wants to see you." So I go into the office, and there was Curly there. And dig this. In the meantime—now, you may not believe this, but this is true—I had just gotten in the office, and here comes Hamp off the bandstand, and he

comes in the dressing room, and Gladys says, "What you doing wearing that coat? You're not supposed to wear that coat on stage!" He had a sportcoat on. "Take that coat off!" [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, poor guy. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: In the meantime, he said, "Okay, Gladys, I want to use the car." "No, you can't use the car. Curly has to use the car." Now, before they said anything to her about me, did I want to join the band. They liked me, and would I like to join the band and leave town. I think they were leaving town the next week. Which I did. I left, got ready and left with them. I think about September '46, somewhere around there.

ISOARDI: So you took their offer.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I took their offer and left with them. I stayed with him for a couple of years, you know.

ISOARDI: It was clear who was running things.

WOODMAN: Now, in the band at that time was Arnett Cobb and Jimmy Grissom.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Kicking band.

WOODMAN: Oh, man. And little Johnny Griffin, man.

ISOARDI: He was in there, too?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was around about fifteen years old, and he broke it up. Those little young chicks would all line up for him. I found out, man, I came in the band, you know what I was getting? Twenty-two dollars a night. And I found out that Arnett

Cobb was getting sixteen dollars a night as a tenor player. A trumpet player, Morris, a fine trumpet player, he was getting around fifteen dollars. But nobody was getting under sixteen a night. Now, this is the honest truth. Forty-six.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

WOODMAN: Well, Arnett Cobb was the straw boss. When Hamp's not there he takes over the band, see. Evidently, they must have found out how much I was getting. Well, I played at the Apollo Theatre; I played eight shows a day, because the people were lined up four and five blocks. So they showed a cartoon just to get people out of the building so the other people could come in. And theaters, we'd get scale for it. Naturally, playing eight shows, nine shows, we'd get a little bit more money for that, you know.

ISOARDI: So the other guys were upset when they found out?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Pretty soon after playing all the— We played practically all the theaters that were in every city that was very popular. They had a theater in every city like the Apollo Theatre, every city had a name theater, you know, and we would play that. But after that tour—

ISOARDI: Britt, let me ask you. You were happy in L.A., you didn't want to leave. Why did you take the job with Hampton to go on the road?

WOODMAN: Well, Hamp—

ISOARDI: It was a good deal?

WOODMAN: It was a good deal with him. Actually, nothing was happening. There wasn't any work for me to blow my horn there, so I took that. And being in the band—It was very popular at the time, see, very popular. I had a ball— We had a ball with those cats there.

ISOARDI: How long did you stay with him?

WOODMAN: Two years, less than two. I signed a contract for two years. It was on a piece of paper, you know. But after— Things got so bad. Hamp, the way he ran the band— We used to have things— We had white gloves and things. We'd have to clap our hands, you know, and little things. So, when somebody didn't clap their hands or do something, now, he'd see who it was. Now, we're playing nine shows, man. Now, he'd call around the fifth show or something, "Look I want to see everybody in my room." Now, he saw who the fellow was that didn't clap his hands. Now, why didn't he just call that fellow to come in. Now, the little time that we had off, now we would have to go in his room. And he made this statement one time, and I'm not lying: "Look, I want you all to know, my band is three-fourths Tom and one-fourth play, and whoever don't like it can get out right now." That's what he said. But, see, I know what he meant by "Tom." He meant if you want to call it Tom, you know, because these things that we had to do and in the band and all these gestures and things. But of his ignorance, that's how he'd say things, you know, in that sense, and that talk. So he did that.

ISOARDI: Now, "three-fourths Tom"?

WOODMAN: Yeah, and "one-fourth play."

ISOARDI: Oh, man.

WOODMAN: So "My band is such that you're supposed to act like I tell you to act and grin and smile." So after a while, man, I said, this is supposed to be the top band? I said no. That made me realized something. So it was in Oakland, when we were playing this club. Gladys was in the coat room. We were supposed to quit at one [o'clock]. It was 1:15; we stayed up late. He'd always play overtime. At the theaters, man, we were supposed to play an hour, and in order to stop us, the people at the curtains would tell him, "Hamp, Hamp, Hamp!" And he'd still play ten minutes over. But getting back to this here club, it's 1:15, and I was tired, too, man. It was 1:30.

ISOARDI: Half an hour over.

WOODMAN: I jumped off the bandstand. I said, "No, man, these cats, man, I'm sorry, man, I just can't take this anymore." I'm going through all this stuff, the way he acts. I said, "This man—" So he comes in the dressing room, "Who don't like the way I run my band?" I said, "I don't." [Laughter] That stunned him. He couldn't say anything. He couldn't say anything.

Now, we had a manager there called George Hart.

When I joined the band, there was a white manager. See, they called Gladys a black Jew because of the way she worked and maneuvered the money and everything and

dealt with the Jews and things. I played more benefits than I ever played in my life, because she was dealing with the Jews and all that. But we had to suffer from it. But they called her a black Jew. So this white manager was stealing a lot of money, thousands of dollars a night. We'd play a dance— You'd be surprised, Steve, a big table like this, and bills, dollar bills. They would always say they'd play for a certain amount of money and play for a percentage.

ISOARDI: Of the gate.

WOODMAN: Of the gate, because they know they're going to draw. The promoters know they're going to make the money. So she realized this white manager was stealing so much money, so she got rid of him and hired the black cat, George Hart, knowing that if he steals, he'll only steal about a hundred dollars.

ISOARDI: And the other guy was stealing thousands.

WOODMAN: Thousands, yeah. [Laughter] Most of the time—I'm not going to say the average black—but a lot of blacks, when they have a little authority they get out of hand. They're not used to knowing how to handle finances and psychology with the fellows and different things, you know. So he thought that he was supposed to protect Gladys and all that.

ISOARDI: Sounds like Gladys could take care of herself. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Evidently— I still don't know. Somebody must of told George Hart or Gladys that Britt and Hamp had a big argument. Britt jumped off the bandstand.

Something. They got the word that fast. And George Hart comes in and says, "Britt, Gladys wants to see you." I said, "Gladys doesn't have anything to do with me. What does she want to see me about?" I walked over, and Gladys was in the cloakroom there. I looked at her, and passed her, and went on out, went to the hotel. And what I did, they were supposed to have a recording session—which I made, made only one recording session—I wrote my notice. I said this is it. And I made a recording session with them. That's the tune that was very popular. [Sings melody] "Sunset." Something like that.

ISOARDI: And then you were gone after the recording session?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So during the recording session, Hamp said, "Hey, Britt, are you dissatisfied with the trombone section?" Because actually there were four bones in there. [Mitchell] "Bootie" Wood [Jr.] and I were the only ones that were really taking care of business. The other two trombone players would get juiced. One liked to try to be a pimp; he had pretty hair, you know. They could play, but they didn't try to have a good section. But that didn't bother me, because the band's having a ball. I said, "Oh, no, Hamp," I said, "No, I'm not leaving on account of them. I just want to go into music college to further my studies." So when Gladys found out, she said, "Britt, I understand you're really leaving. But I want you to know, you are a gentleman. And any time you want to come back in this band, you're welcome." That's what she said to me.

ISOARDI: Nice.

WOODMAN: Well, I know why she said it.

ISOARDI: Why?

WOODMAN: Right up to today. If you hire me to do something, I'm going to do it whether I like it or not. I'm going to be on time and do it and do my best every night. I try to do better every night.

I didn't draw any money. During the week you could draw money, you know, draw night. Well, the band was working so much, man, I had plenty of money. We didn't have any nights off! So these cats would go to clubs and gamble and drink and lose all their money, but me, they would come and borrow money from me. I had pockets full of money! [Laughter]

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ISOARDI: Okay, Britt; as what you were saying.

WOODMAN: All right. I've always respected the leader no matter what. You know, you play with a lot of leaders who don't know anything reading and the music, but they had a business mind to get the jobs. So I respected him. As long as we were working, I respected him. I never forgot the first statement, being with a professional band, Les Hite's band. When we were playing a dance, Les Hite would play the same numbers every time, the same numbers.

ISOARDI: You mean every night.

WOODMAN: Every night. So one of the fellows said, "Hey, man, Les Hite, could you change up? I want to play something else, man." So he said, "When you get your band, you can call the numbers." [Laughter] I never forgot that. I never forgot that. That stuck with me.

ISOARDI: He knew who was boss. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: "When you get your band, then you can do what you want to do." I never forgot that. But he said it so cool, you know. So that's the thing with the band, with him. When I don't like it, I leave. So that's what I did. And that's what I did with Hamp [Lionel Hampton].

ISOARDI: So you left him up north and—

WOODMAN: I put in my notice, yeah. Because they were coming here to record, see. And during the recording, that's when my two weeks was up.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. You gave him a two-week notice, and it was up after the recording was finished.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So I just stayed here and—

ISOARDI: This is 1948?

WOODMAN: First part of '48. Now, in the meantime, during this part of me putting in my notice, they needed a— Joe Comfort was the bass player in the band. He quit.

ISOARDI: With Lionel Hampton?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So they needed a bass player. So I told Curly Hamilton, I said, "I know a great bass player, Charles Mingus." He said, "Yeah, I heard that name." He said, "Have you any album of him?" I said, "Yeah, I have an album." So I drove my car up to his pad, Gladys [Hampton]'s pad, where they were, and they played it.

ISOARDI: What album?

WOODMAN: A number that he recorded, "Bass Hit," that he wrote.

ISOARDI: And he recorded it?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, I think it was a home recording or something.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

WOODMAN: "Two-bass Hit" or something like that. Anyway, he did a recording with

Lionel Hampton's band, same number. But anyway, he said, "Yeah, man." I gave him that. So he called him, and he got the job.

ISOARDI: Mingus and Lionel Hampton?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. So Mingus said, "Well, Britt, I'm leaving." I said, "Look, I'm going to tell you, I was in the band almost two years. If you write anything in that band, you're not going to get any money." I said, "Because some of the cats have gone to international trying to get their money, and they never did for their written numbers." And he said, "Oh, yeah, okay." So he writes this number for the band, "Bass Hit," featuring him. And so when he— I think he didn't stay too long. About almost a year.

ISOARDI: He lasted a year with them?

WOODMAN: Yeah, about a year. So he—

ISOARDI: I can't see Mingus doing all that "three-quarters Tom and [one quarter play]."

WOODMAN: Well, no. But you know what? He did throw the drummer down off the bandstand. He had a fight with the drummer. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: About what?

WOODMAN: I don't know.

ISOARDI: And he threw him off the bandstand?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. So you never know what he's fighting about.

ISOARDI: Man, life is never dull around Mingus.

WOODMAN: So he got some lawyer in San Francisco to fight Gladys to get his money, because he didn't get any money for writing this tune. And I said, "Man, I told you about that, not to write." Now, to this day, I forgot to even ask him if he ever got his money about it. I don't think he did. [Laughter]

So then in '48 and '49 I played in Gardena for about a year there.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And what kind of a gig was that?

WOODMAN: It was a floor-show gig, a nightclub.

ISOARDI: So you're in a big band backing it?

WOODMAN: No, it was only five pieces. They had a tenor [saxophone], alto [saxophone], trumpet, and trombone, and a rhythm section—piano, drums, and bass. The business was getting kind of slow, so they said, "We'll have to let one of the musicians go." What was the name of the club? You can't remember that?

WOODMAN: They had one name star there. I can't— I know Oscar Bradley and Gerald Wilson were in the band. I knew that.

ISOARDI: Good band.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And I can't recall the tenor player. But they said one had to go. I said, "Well, this is it for me." To my surprise, they fired the tenor player and kept

me.

ISOARDI: Why were you surprised?

WOODMAN: Because tenor—

ISOARDI: Over the trombone.

WOODMAN: Over the trombone. You know, tenor men are essential people. But then I figured this: the most important thing they looked at was playing for the shows. They, of course, had a [chorus] line and a comedian and a name act. I forgot the name of it. So I guess what the two brass for that show, it gave it a little more force, a little more liveliness to it, see, because for the dancers, you know, you can play one horn or two horns for dancing, you know. The band is swinging. So I assume that's why they kept me. [Laughter] I don't think it was because I was great or anything. [Laughter] So I was very fortunate to be there for a whole year.

Then I thought about it, man. Playing there, I wasn't doing anything during the daytime. I was loafing. So it dawned on me in '49, I said, "What am I doing?" I told Hamp that I was quitting the band because I wanted to further my knowledge in music and to go to and take advantage of the G.I. Bill. So it dawned on me, man. That's when one day I went down to Westlake College [of Music], and I filled out the papers and showed them my discharge and everything. It was on a Thursday. So they told me to come back Monday to start. So that's why I went to school, started in Westlake, 1949. I was there in '50.

Well, during that time, 1949 and '50, that's when Buddy Collette was the first black to play in the studios with Groucho Marx's show. ["You Bet Your Life"]

ISOARDI: He got hired for Groucho, that's right. Where was Westlake College?

WOODMAN: It was uptown near Alvarado [Street], somewhere in—

ISOARDI: They had a big music program that you could—?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. It wasn't an accredited school, just all music, all courses.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was an all-music school?

WOODMAN: Yeah. All the music that applied to jazz. Ear training, dictating. It had a concert band, jazz band, small jazz band, and everything that pertained to jazz. They had the training there that you could participate in. Because I didn't want to go to L.A. City College where they had the credit.

ISOARDI: Why?

WOODMAN: Because I didn't want to study math and English. See, there you could get credit where you could teach. You'd leave there with a degree, see that you could teach in high school. But I didn't want to go through all that.

ISOARDI: You just wanted the music.

WOODMAN: I just wanted the music, see. I used to go there because Bill Green, a tenor player by the name of William Green, a very noted tenor player—

ISOARDI: Yeah, I studied with Bill.

WOODMAN: You did? Well, he was going, so he told me, "Britt, they've got a nice

orchestra that plays opera music." So I would go there just to play the music. And they asked me, "Britt, why don't you join?" I said, "No, I don't want to." I wasn't too bright, anyway. I hated history. [Laughter] So I said no. So I just stayed in the music college.

ISOARDI: How long did you stay there?

WOODMAN: Up until Duke called me in '51.

ISOARDI: So you were there a few years studying music.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What were you focusing on? Did you have anything in particular? Or were you just taking everything?

WOODMAN: I was focusing more on the solfeggio, ear training.

ISOARDI: I thought you had a great ear.

WOODMAN: No, man, no. My brother next to me, he's the one that had the ear. He took after my daddy [William B. Woodman Sr.]. I had an ear, but it wasn't— I needed a much better ear for jazz.

ISOARDI: So that's what you were working on.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So that was one of my main courses. I had two classes of solfeggio, you know, and arranging and two classes of concert band, playing my baritone horn on it, and the jazz band.

ISOARDI: What were the students like at Westlake? A mixed bag of people?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We had some great cats come out of Westlake College. Some of them were in Stan Kenton's band, did the arranging for his band.

ISOARDI: Like who? Do you remember?

WOODMAN: Almost all the fellows in the band did arranging. Stan hardly did any arranging because most of the fellows all graduated from some music school. And one of them, Bill Holman, he was one from Westlake College. And there were some other— Robertson was his last name. Man, that cat— We had an instructor from Germany. Man, you're talking about great, boy. He couldn't figure out Americans, though. "I can't figure out Americans. You mean you say you don't have an ear. What are you taking up music for?" Because, see, back there they teach the kids in grammar school ear training. ISOARDI: Solfeggio when they were young?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So there they had what you call the fixed "do." C is "do," no matter what phrase of the chord you have. Like in F, C is the fifth, that's "do" there. The fourth of G is C. Here he taught moveable "do." E-flat is "do," A-flat is "do," so it's moveable. But he said that kids from grade school, they were taught ear training. So he said, "You play music, you're supposed to have an ear first." Now, he's right. A person who plays music, especially jazz, you're supposed to have an ear. So I know that to express myself, no matter how many scales you know or theory— Theory I know pretty well. You write the chords, I can just blow them, because I'm familiar with the chords. But the thing is the chords are not important. Hearing them is what

creates the melodies or a song or a tune. So you forget. You know, you hear something, you say [sings phrase], you don't even think about a chord. You hear that sound, so you're going to say [sings phrase] because of what you hear. And that's what creates some of a person's style. Because if you use your mind, well, then you'll be technical, you see. But hearing, you're playing from the heart, the soul, in other words. So that's what I know about playing jazz.

ISOARDI: So you got quite a bit out of going to Westlake.

WOODMAN: Oh, yes. When I left, I didn't stick with the solfeggio, but it helped me a great deal. It gave me a little more confidence in my hearing, see, by just that little bit. To learn an interval, you learn a tune, like [sings] "Here comes the bride." So you hear those intervals, tunes by the intervals. Solfeggio is called association pitch. Perfect pitch is that you hit a note on the piano, "C", "E." But association pitch is when you hit C, well, from then on you know what's next. You hear another note, so you know from the sound what it is. You find a lot of persons that have perfect pitch. It hurts them, because if the piano is not [A] 440 it hurts the ear. They say they'd rather have associated pitch. I said, "Man, if I had perfect pitch it wouldn't hurt me." [Laughter] So my brother has perfect pitch, see.

Now, getting back to the instructor, he would do this on the piano with his—

ISOARDI: Is this the German instructor?

WOODMAN: Yeah. With both his arms—

ISOARDI: He'd put both forearms down on the piano?

WOODMAN: Yeah, and he said "boom," and he'd call each note. "A, B, F, E, G—" He could hear every note he played.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

WOODMAN: He would demonstrate how far your ear could develop that hearing, see.

ISOARDI: Amazing. Good class.

WOODMAN: And I'd take private lessons from him at that time—now, this is in '49—$35. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: For one private lesson? For how long?

WOODMAN: Well, long as it takes until you get it, I guess.

ISOARDI: I mean, for an hour? Is that—?

WOODMAN: Yeah, for an hour. Now, see, the government would pay part of that, but you had to pay the rest of it. But that's what he charged.

ISOARDI: You know, that's a lot of money by today's standards.

WOODMAN: I know it. But, see, the thing about it, if I had spent that money one way or another, I'd have had good ear training, or he would say, "Look, it's no use for you. You might as well forget music. You can never get an ear." That's the type of teacher that he was. So I know with him, shoot, in six months, what he'd teach me and to practice on and with the piano and everything, I would have to. Because when I had the class, in the class, he would play a major third and call on somebody, "What is

that?" At first he'd say, "A major sixth." "Can't you hear? Do, re, mi—?" He would get so mad, boy, that you missed the simple thing like that, you know. Know—

ISOARDI: Well, you confuse the third with the sixth. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: That's why he made the statement. "See, I can't understand you coming wanting to be musicians. You don't have an ear. You can't hear a major third chord or a minor third." You know and so.

ISOARDI: What was this guy's name? You said it was Williams—?

WOODMAN: Dr. Severinton, something like that. He was a great teacher, though.

ISOARDI: Tough, but you learn from people like that.

WOODMAN: Oh, we had some great teachers in that school. But I think he about one of the greatest because other private teachers— Like my trombone teacher would only charge me ten dollars, you know. He would teach a lot of the studio musicians and things. A lot of times a musician would come in there if something happened like some fault or something. He'd tell him, "Oh, yeah, you're not breathing right." I mean, that type of teacher. He was a good teacher.

ISOARDI: You're going to school at Westlake in the late forties, Britt. What about Central Avenue, now? I mean, the last time you talked about it, it was 1943, the place was just jumping like crazy, there were clubs everywhere.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What happens when you come back? I guess you come back in 1946.

WOODMAN: Well, it was still jumping.

ISOARDI: It was still jumping in '46?

WOODMAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. The clubs were still jumping.

ISOARDI: So it looked pretty much the way it looked in '43?

WOODMAN: That's right, same way. Like we were at Downbeat [Club]; it was still jumping. And the other clubs across the street were having name comedians and different things there.

ISOARDI: Which clubs were those?

WOODMAN: The Memo [Club] and Jack's Basket Room. Buddy Collette knows the name of that. He probably told you what it was, because Charles Mingus and I and Buddy, we played there. [Leafs through papers] I had written a name of Clarence Moore who owned the Memo Club and—

ISOARDI: Who owned the Memo Club?

WOODMAN: Clarence Moore owned the Memo Club. Well, Curtis Mosby was the manager of the Dunbar [Hotel].

ISOARDI: Oh, so he had the [Club] Alabam in '46, '47. That was his place.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He was a big man on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: What was he like?

WOODMAN: Oh, he was okay. And his son was nice, too. I met his son. And I said that [Elihu] "Black Dot" McGhee was a very big man, of the Downbeat and of the

Casablanca.

ISOARDI: Oh, the Casablanca. He ran that one, also?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was the manager of that. But you know who owned that club, the Downbeat? Mickey Cohen.

ISOARDI: Oh, Mickey Cohen.

WOODMAN: Mickey Cohen. He was a big gambler, yeah. We didn't know it until we saw the name on the check.

ISOARDI: He actually signed your checks?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Because we thought it was McGhee that owned the club.

ISOARDI: He was just fronting.

WOODMAN: He was just fronting, yeah.

ISOARDI: Did Mickey Cohen also own the Casablanca?

WOODMAN: He might have.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Who knows what he owned.

WOODMAN: See, they didn't have any musicians there. It was just like a club or an after-hour club, you know, drinks and things of that sort, one of those things. I was there one time. Billie Holiday was there and the trumpet player, Willie Cook, that played with Duke. He was kind of pimping. He was with her at the time. He came out here with Benny Carter's band once. No, I thought he came out here with Dizzy [Gillespie]'s band, with Dizzy, yeah. Dizzy's band came out here in 1949.

ISOARDI: His big band.

WOODMAN: Big band. Boy!

ISOARDI: Kicking band.

WOODMAN: Oh, man. I tell everybody today that Stan Kenton changed the name. You see, Dizzy had a bebop band. Dizzy and bebop. And Stan Kenton, he changed the name and said "progressive jazz." He was modern because the young cats in the band were writing, see, writing modern, you know, mixed things, so he called it progressive jazz. So that that knocked Dizzy's band out of popularity. And naturally, Stan Kenton would have the opportunity to play in hotels and broadcast do and everything else, where Dizzy didn't get a chance to do any of those things. So he came up with the progressive jazz, like he started the modern thing. [Laughter] Yeah, that was—

ISOARDI: So the place is still jumping in '46. What happened between, say, '46 and '49.

WOODMAN: 'Forty-six, '47, '48?

ISOARDI: Yeah. What was happening on Central then?

WOODMAN: It's still jumping. Around about '49, the last part of '49, clubs started folding on Central Avenue. Things started moving. Clubs started moving onto Western Avenue. Like a club called the Oasis. They had floor shows there. I remember Buddy Collette's wife was dancing at the club.

ISOARDI: At the Oasis?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And that was on Western?

WOODMAN: Yeah, Western. Oscar Bradley and John Anderson and Buddy Collette, we were all in the band. Now, I don't know who had the band, but we were in the band playing for them. And then it was some other clubs, the Waikiki, I think where Johnny Moore, a guitar player, had a trio in there.

ISOARDI: And that was on Western, too, the Waikiki?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah, the Waikiki. That was on Western. ISOARDI: So people were starting to move then, I guess.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I think on Avalon [Boulevard] there were some clubs. So things were leaving Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: People were moving away.

WOODMAN: Yeah, the clubs were moving, see. And when the people moved, the clubs were moving. Because the [police] officers started breaking it up, as I said before, harassing people.

ISOARDI: And when did the cops start coming down there?

WOODMAN: Around in '47, '48.

ISOARDI: That's when they really started coming down there and harassing?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah. You know, at times they would stop a car, look in and see who's driving, and stop the car and search the car to see if there was any dope.

ISOARDI: They'd just pick out cars?

WOODMAN: Pick out a car, a nice looking car to see if there were blacks driving it, and they'd make you pull over and start with their flashlights and— They were doing a lot of things during that time, yeah.

ISOARDI: Do you have any idea why this started happening around '47, '48?

WOODMAN: Now, that I don't know. All I know is that they started with the people standing out in front of the clubs around one o'clock, you know, and said, "Get off the street" and things. Because most of the pimps and hustlers were hanging around most of the clubs.

ISOARDI: But then they started going further.

WOODMAN: Yeah. See, because there wasn't no crime or anything going on, but the dope was getting kind of big. I guess maybe that was it, trying to clean up the dope. Anyway, that's what happened, and things that—

ISOARDI: So Central started shutting down.

WOODMAN: Yeah. The after-hour clubs. There were still after-hour clubs off of Central that were happening, that people were going to, but no music. Just, well, you can drink, you know, and—

ISOARDI: And hang out.

WOODMAN: Hang out, and chicks and things.

ISOARDI: These are on Central?

WOODMAN: No, off Central.

ISOARDI: What places? Do you remember any of the names?

WOODMAN: Well, there was a fellow during that time who could tell you almost every after-hour place, because he was in the business there with the chicks and pimps and things. These chicks would be hanging out in all those after-hour [clubs].

ISOARDI: So he knew where everything was.

WOODMAN: Yeah. At that time, I didn't hang out at any after-hour spots; I just knew they were there. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: So I guess if the cops were coming out in strength now and they're starting to harass people, they're driving people away.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right, sure. So naturally people are going to stop going to the clubs, supporting the clubs, so the clubs had to close. And a lot of the clubs, a few clubs, opened down on Fifth Avenue where Eddie Heywood's band played, where Charlie Parker and—

ISOARDI: Miles Davis?

WOODMAN: No, McGhee.

ISOARDI: Oh, Howard McGhee, of course.

WOODMAN: See at that time, he and Lucky Thompson were up north around Fifth Street, somewhere around there.

ISOARDI: So they're downtown.

WOODMAN: They're downtown. Yeah, I would say downtown, yeah.

ISOARDI: Downtown L.A.

WOODMAN: Yeah. [Tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay, Britt. Let's see. I guess we're up to the amalgamation [of the American Federation of Musicians Local 767 and Local 47].

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And you offered a few comments a little while ago, but why don't we start from the beginning again and how it got going with the orchestra or whatever.

WOODMAN: Yeah, okay. Well, during the time of them forming the symphony orchestra for the minorities, Buddy Collette and myself and a few other musicians—

ISOARDI: How did the orchestra get started?

WOODMAN: Oh, now, that's a question—

ISOARDI: Where did the idea come from?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that's a funny thing. Sometimes things happen that you don't really remember just how they happened. I know it started from some musicians that we were connected it with.

ISOARDI: Were you in town when this began? Were you here?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. This is '48, '49. As I said, in '48 and '49 I was playing in Gardena.

ISOARDI: Right, okay. So how did you guys get it going?

WOODMAN: So, let's see, '49, that's when they organized the symphony orchestra and wanted to give us the experience of playing not only the music but the experience of playing under different directors. Because every week they had a new director for—

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You'd get a different classical conductor who would come and lead you guys?

WOODMAN: Yeah. So we'd get familiar with different conductors, how they conduct, and different things. So during that time, like you said, how we organized—

ISOARDI: Who came up with the idea to begin with?

WOODMAN: Now, that's the thing. Now, Buddy Collette, if you ask him, he might tell you who it was, because at the time, I don't— There was another fellow that was with the band, too, Jimmie Cheatham. He lives in Long Beach. He and his wife have got that blues band together. I was close friends with him going to music school, Westlake College.

ISOARDI: Jimmie Cheatham was going to Westlake, also?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. So, well, during that period we were invited to some of the musicians' homes and just talking about music, generally, about the conditions. The first time I went fishing was with some musicians.

ISOARDI: From [Local] 47? Some of the white musicians?

WOODMAN: Yeah, 47. In Long Beach somewhere we caught them and fried them right on the sea right after we caught them. Now, that's how discussing about scales and different things, Buddy and them would be saying that blacks don't get any calls for studio work. So the white musicians said, "Yeah, I know that the contractors say they figure that none of the blacks can read. They don't know." So we said, "Yeah, that's it." So that's why it seemed like the unions should be one. So that's when the thing started. And that's when we found out that the clubs, the white clubs, we played in, the 47 musicians' scale was higher than the 767. We found out all that, see. So when Buddy Collette, Charles Mingus, and I went down to 47 to talk about the issue, why can't black musicians join 47? And they said, well, that was the agreement with 767, that the blacks stay in 767 and white in 47. So Charles Mingus said, "Well, I understand that Willie Smith is a member of the 47." Well, at the time we were saying "colored." You know what Jim saying. "He's colored."

ISOARDI: Was he a member of 47?

WOODMAN: Yeah. That's why Charles brought it up. He knew it.

ISOARDI: How did he get into 47?

WOODMAN: Well, he passed. He looked like a white person.

ISOARDI: Oh, so he didn't tell anybody that he was black.

WOODMAN: I don't know if he did or not. Although he was living in a different section, you know. So they said, well, he lives in a different section than where we did.

You know, we lived on the south side, he lived on the north side, Westside, somewhere. [laughter]

ISOARDI: They didn't know, in other words.

WOODMAN: So that's what Charles Mingus said. You're just prejudiced, that's all. All of you are just prejudiced. You don't want blacks to belong to you." "Oh, no, we had a general agreement with 767," all that kind of stuff. So anyway, evidently, we knew that they called the president of 767. So they called us in and asked us why we went down there.

ISOARDI: That was Leo Davis who was president?

WOODMAN: Leo Davis, right. So I didn't have to say anything because Buddy and them were saying, "We went down there because we've been connected with the orchestra, and the white musicians were telling us that 47 clubs' scale is different than 767. The blacks work the same clubs, but you have a different scale."

So they said, "Well, that's the agreement that we made." They said, "Why is it like that? Why should it be that? We should get the same scale that they have." And I think Charles said, "Well, the thing about it, I think the unions should be joined together. We should be just one union, I say." So they asked some of the musicians, and they said, "No, we want 767 to be like it is."

So they sounded Benny Carter. Now, the time they start getting some of the white musicians that were for the unions to be as one and called Benny Carter, well,

Duke called me. That's when I left them discussing that. I left in '51. And so they just had—

ISOARDI: They were just getting it going then.

WOODMAN: Getting going with Benny Carter and some of the other musicians, the white musicians, that was for the amalgamation. I heard about it when I was on the road. And it took a little while before they got together, because 767 had to give up its charter completely.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

WOODMAN: Well, you know all that.

ISOARDI: When you started the orchestra going, which was the first step in this, who were some of the musicians from 767 who were playing in that? There was you, there was Buddy, there was Mingus. Was Jimmie Cheatham in there?

WOODMAN: Jimmie Cheatham. And Marshall Royal played with it at times and I think Bill Green at times. See, Buddy Collette and me and Cheatham, well, we were there every week.

ISOARDI: And you guys played one day a week?

WOODMAN: Just rehearsed one day a week, yeah.

ISOARDI: When was that? What day?

WOODMAN: Thursday or Friday. I don't know for sure. But I know that I was the librarian, I used to—

ISOARDI: You kept the book.

WOODMAN: Yeah, they let me know. The day before, I'd go down to the library and pick up the music and everything. ISOARDI: And who were the guys from Local 47 whom you were playing with and working with on this? Do you remember any of them?

WOODMAN: I know there was a trumpet player and— I think Mel, I think Mel Lewis? That was— No, Mel is the drummer that had a band in New York.

ISOARDI: Right.

WOODMAN: See, I can't remember those fellows names, no.

ISOARDI: About how many people were playing total? How big was the orchestra?

WOODMAN: Regular orchestra. Strings—

ISOARDI: They had a string section, too?

WOODMAN: It was a symphony orchestra.

ISOARDI: Full symphony orchestra?

WOODMAN: Yeah. It was a full symphony orchestra.

ISOARDI: Damn. So there was a lot of support. There was a lot of interest in this.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that's why I say the music was the music that a symphony orchestra played: Bach, Stravinsky, and things, and strings and horns and basses, trombones, trumpets. A regular symphony orchestra.

ISOARDI: So you guys are taking the lead and are fighting to unify the two unions.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What kind of opposition are you getting from the leadership of 767? They don't like the idea.

WOODMAN: No. Oh, no. But, you see, when Benny Carter and some more of the 47 white musicians that were fair and looked at the situation, they figured that they would benefit more if blacks would be there because they would still get more money.

ISOARDI: Because the scale wouldn't go down.

WOODMAN: No, wouldn't go down, no. So they found out the raw deal that the blacks were getting, and they were the ones that were helping us for our own benefit organizing the symphony orchestra for us to get the experience playing that type of music under different conductors and things. I know one time that they eventually said— They knew I was going to church on Sundays. They said, "Britt, I'd like for you to— I've got some"—what they call them?—"flyers to take to the church." And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, my church, they don't participate in outside activities."

[Laughter]

Although, also, you know, at the time, Paul Robeson came here during that time.

ISOARDI: Really? Did you see him?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I went to—what was it?—Wrigley Field, the baseball field. Shoot, frankly it was all Jews and a few blacks that were there. And man, he made a

wonderful speech for everyone to hear, man.

ISOARDI: Oh, I believe it.

WOODMAN: Something like he said, "I love this country. I just want it to be fair." You know, justice. You know. But, see, now, that was all during the time of the big ten. They called the big ten, because the Jews in the arts, in all the fields, and movies—

ISOARDI: Yeah, the ones that were being attacked for their politics.

WOODMAN: Yeah, so they called them the communists. Because that was J. Edgar Hoover who said anything that you do, the Jews and the blacks— Just like Dr. [Martin] Luther King [Jr.] when he was in the South demonstrating against segregation, well, that was Hoover who said that. Because the Jews were connected with what was happening, they'd say that they were communists, you know. So that's what they did with Paul Robeson. So they scared all the blacks. The blacks didn't want to come and hear him speak, because they—

ISOARDI: At Wrigley Field they didn't come to hear him?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Hoover said that he was a communist, you know, connected with communists, so they believed what he was saying. If they'd only go listen to what the man was saying, he wasn't saying anything against the country. He was just saying what was happening and that he loved—

ISOARDI: That it's got to be changed.

WOODMAN: That it could be changed, because he loved this country.

ISOARDI: That must have been 1949, then, late forties?

WOODMAN: Yeah, that was '49. And that's when he was getting so big, they deported him. He had to leave and to go to Russia. They banned him because he was getting too powerful, you know.

ISOARDI: Great man.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was one of our great leaders, but, see, at certain times, no matter how great you are, it just wasn't the right time to get results. Because he was just as great as Malcolm X and Dr. King as far as being a leader. In fact, I mean, we were saying that he's— Because the man could act, sing—

ISOARDI: What couldn't he do?

WOODMAN: What couldn't he do? Sports and everything, he was—

ISOARDI: All-American.

WOODMAN: All-American. So he was actually one of our greatest leaders, but you would never know it because they never— The kids never know it, because they never—

ISOARDI: That's a real great crime that most black kids don't know who Paul Robeson was.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I know it.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

JUNE 13, 1993

ISOARDI: You know I've got a recording of Shakespeare's Othello with Paul Robeson, and it's just— I think he did it on Broadway in 1943, somewhere in those years, and it's just fantastic. I still listen to it a lot.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that baritone voice.

ISOARDI: It's just— Oh, jeez. And they even say that if there hadn't been such prejudice and segregation then that he would have been a great opera singer, too.

WOODMAN: Right, of course.

ISOARDI: What couldn't he do?

WOODMAN: What couldn't he do? Well, I'll tell you, Steve, those are things that during my career, livelihood, all that to me was connected with Central Avenue. Because being part of Central Avenue, playing, and Paul Robeson's speech, hearing him speak, [being] connected with the symphony orchestra, getting experience playing with all that, well, all that was really a treasure, an experience of things that I'll always treasure in my life, being connected with. Especially different clienteles of people. How some of the whites feel, saying that what we do is a shame, and they are the ones that really did so much for us. Because a lot of times a black person himself wants to do something. If he doesn't get help from the opposites, then. You need it, see,

because—

ISOARDI: It's always nice to work together.

WOODMAN: Right. So that's— Like that— But amalgamating the unions together, there were a lot of whites that realized how unfair it was, you know. Because a lot of whites didn't know it either, that 767's scale was lower than 47. They said, "What?" They couldn't figure out how the union would let that go, let it be like that and things. So that's the thing that was so disgusting. When we have people in our union who accept things like that, well, they shouldn't be in charge. So something had to be done with it. So that's why they fought it, really fighting. That's when I left to go with Duke, see.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe we can talk about that a little bit now. You're not around when the unions finally amalgamate.

WOODMAN: No, I wasn't, no.

ISOARDI: Because you get a phone call.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I heard from Overture and different things that I get from 47— No, at the time there was no Overture from 47. It was another paper that I'd get. And the cats were telling me what was happening and everything. So it was a big day when they gave up the charter. And they hired a few of the people from 767 that worked in the office there. They got jobs at 47 for quite a while. Yeah.

ISOARDI: But you're not around for that.

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: Not at all.

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe you could talk about why you're not around.

WOODMAN: I was with the big band.

ISOARDI: The big man. When did he call you?

WOODMAN: Now, what day? It was '51. Let's see. I think it was August.

ISOARDI: August '51.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So were you surprised?

WOODMAN: Yes. Well, not exactly. "Tricky Sam" [Joe Nanton] died around '49, so they needed a trombone player. But that wasn't the time for me. People thought I was going to be called. I was called in '51 when Johnny Hodges, Al Sears, Sonny Greer, and Lawrence Brown— In fact, they had gone. And I found out that [the one] who recommended me was the manager of Boyd Raeburn's band. I forgot the name. But he was the one who recommended me.

ISOARDI: So they wanted you earlier.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He recommended me.

ISOARDI: Duke knew who you were.

WOODMAN: No, he didn't know. He didn't know. No.

ISOARDI: He didn't know you?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: I thought he knew your father or something? He didn't know you guys at all?

WOODMAN: Oh, no, no. Duke didn't. He just happened to be in town. I was working in an after-hour place with Red Mack. So he called the house—I was staying with my mother, naturally—and when I got home at about five o'clock—

ISOARDI: So Duke's in town.

WOODMAN: Yeah, he's in town. And when I got home, my mother said—no, it was about four [o'clock]—my mother said, "Duke Ellington called and said no matter what time you come in to call him." She gave me the phone number to the hotel.

ISOARDI: You had no idea what was up.

WOODMAN: Well, yeah, I had a feeling.

ISOARDI: You had an idea?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, I had a feeling. I got nervous right there. I said uh-oh. So he called and said that this fellow with Boyd Raeburn's band recommended me—I forgot his name—and said, "I'd like you to join the band." I wish I could relay how this conversation went down, because it would kill you, man. Because I didn't realize myself how I said this.

He said, "Would you like to join the band?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, how much do you want?"

I said, "Well, twenty-five dollars a night." See now, I was getting twenty-two dollars with Hamp's band.

ISOARDI: Oh, right. And that was a few years earlier.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So twenty-five dollars, well, I would think of saying twenty-eight or twenty-nine [dollars] if that's what Lawrence Brown and those cats were getting, you know. I know they were getting more than twenty-five, you know.

And Duke said, "Well, I don't know," he said, "I don't know about that twenty-five dollars." He said, "Well, could you leave tomorrow to come to San Francisco?" He said, "I'm flying to San Francisco tomorrow and could you—"

I said, "No, I couldn't come with you at that time, because I'm playing with a fellow after hours, and I've got to give him at least a week's notice for—" Now, I didn't have to give him a week's notice.

ISOARDI: You were just being a good businessman. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: Yes. Well, actually, I really didn't care whether or not I work with the band.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: No. I was scared to death, man! [Laughter]

Because all those cats are great soloists in there, man. I knew I couldn't compare to

solos like those cats. And at the time, I didn't know I was taking Lawrence Brown's place, either. Because I knew that Tricky Sam had died. So, I said, "Well, Duke," I said, "I don't know if I could leave right now. I've got to give this fellow—" So the way that I was talking to him, I know why Duke asked me this question. He said, "By the way, how old are you?" [Laughter]

ISOARDI: He thought you were a kid or something.

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, after I thought about it, that's what I sounded like. I'm talking to him like a kid and most of the people that talk to him feel in a way that— I was scared, but still I was talking to him like a kid, see.

He said, "Well, can you come?"

I said, "I can let you know the next day."

He said, "Well, I'll be in San Francisco. I'm leaving tomorrow morning, and I'll be there in two days. You give me a ring. Here's the phone number." So in the meantime, I'm calling, asking everybody, "Say, man, Duke called me to be with the band." "What? You're going, aren't you?" I said, "Well, I don't know." "Oh, you fool!"

ISOARDI: Who was this?

WOODMAN: Well, all the cats, my buddies, you know. Because I think I called Buddy Collette. So I called Red Mack, my leader, and I said, "Say, Red, Duke called me and wanted me to join the band."

"Yeah? Oh, Britt, that's wonderful, man. You deserved that, man."

"Well, he told me to call him today or tomorrow, if I want to come, and meet him up in San Francisco."

"Well, that's great, man. I'm so glad you get that break." Well, I knew in the first place that I could have dumped that job I had, but— So I called him and told him I'd be there.

ISOARDI: What about the money?

WOODMAN: Oh, well, about the twenty-five dollars he said, "Well, okay. Maybe it will change my luck."

So the first day, we were supposed to give a concert in San Francisco. So Lawrence Brown was still there. Now Johnny Hodges had left, Al Sears had left, and Sonny Greer had left. So Lawrence Brown had another week to go, five more days. So he was there. He was on the bandstand, and he was getting the music out for the concert, because he didn't look at the— You know, he knew all the music like the rest of the fellows, he didn't read any music, because they played the same numbers over again. And he got the numbers out, the ones they were going to play for the concert. So we were talking and— We were supposed to start at eight [o'clock]. He was on the bandstand, it was 8:15, nobody had showed up. At 8:20, he said, "Wait a minute, Britt. Let me see what's going on." So he got off the bandstand—

ISOARDI: You're there by yourself?

WOODMAN: Yeah. He came back and said, "Britt, the concert is called off because they didn't get the deposit for the concert, so it was called off." So we jumped in the bus from there to Oakland to play— This was a concert in San Francisco. Also, now, in Oakland there was supposed to be a rehearsal there for the new alto player that's from Kansas City to take Johnny Hodges's place.

ISOARDI: Oh, who was that?

WOODMAN: Some cat they said sounded like Johnny Hodges. I'll tell you a story about that; it will kill you, too. I don't know what the number was. He was so nervous, he couldn't read, man.

ISOARDI: Oh, poor guy.

WOODMAN: Yeah, man, he was so scared. See, every musician knew about the band, because they said that if you don't look right or don't sound right, the cats are going to kill you. They were scared; they were scared of them. So he couldn't play. So they had to send for another fellow by the name of Floyd Turnham, from Los Angeles the fellow that was with Les Hite's band, played first alto. He was a noted alto player here, very good, could read. I found out Duke didn't like his sound. But reading the music and everything, he was capable of doing it.

But anyway, the first number he threw on me was "Harlem," a pretty hard number. I read that through without making a mistake hardly. And everybody clapped, all the cats.

ISOARDI: All right. Was this a rehearsal?

WOODMAN: Yeah, a rehearsal.

ISOARDI: All right. Congratulations, yeah. It must have felt good. Were you nervous?

WOODMAN: No. Not for reading. I didn't have any solos. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: That's what you were nervous about. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: I really got nervous when I found out I was going to take Lawrence Brown's place. So at the concert—no, this was a dance we played in Oakland—Lawrence Brown was getting the music out. I said, "Well, Lawrence, let's just get the music that we're going to do tonight." I said, "I don't need all that."

He said, "Britt, I'm leaving tomorrow. Duke said you can handle it."

"What?" He had five more, four more days to go but Duke said I could handle it, so he let him go. Because I wanted to listen to him play, you know, and ask some more questions.

So we played the gig, and we jumped from there to Las Vegas. Let me see. What's the name of the hotel we played in? Anyway, I know it was segregated at the time. You know, at the time, blacks—

ISOARDI: In Vegas?

WOODMAN: Yeah. We had a back room we had to go in. They gave us a big room like this for us.

ISOARDI: You had a separate dressing room?

WOODMAN: Yeah, with slot machines inside the dressing rooms. So the alto player, Floyd, he played the four weeks in Las Vegas.

In the meantime, during that second week, Duke asked me, "Britt, do you know 'Sophisticated Lady?'"

I said, "Yeah."

So he called, "Britt Woodman from the conservatory of music now will play 'Sophisticated Lady.'" So I played [sings melody]. Second chorus, I said, [sings embellished melody].

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah!

WOODMAN: After we played the concert, somebody said, "Duke wants to see you in the dressing room." He said, "Britt, I'm sorry I called that number. Look, I want you to play yourself, you know, your solos."

I said, "Oh." I said, "Well, Duke, I'll tell you what, all I knew was what Lawrence Brown played on that song," I didn't know anything else to blow on that.

So he said, "Well, what number do you like to play?" I said, "I know 'I Surrender Dear.'" [Sings fragment of melody]

So the next night, the reeds just had the chords up there. I played the first chorus, [sings]. So the reeds came in, whoa! "Those aren't the chords I heard!" [Laughter] Because I didn't know that he changed the inversions and added notes of those chords, man, so it sounded altogether different. So I was scared to improvise

because I was afraid I'd make the wrong notes. [Laughter] See, I didn't know that I could have the changes that I knew, play those changes, and they would fit right into the chords that he rearranged. Because he always reinvert the chords, you and everything, see, so it makes it sounds more full. But if I had known, it would give me more opportunity; I could do more. But I was scared, because I didn't know he had all of those substitute chords changed on there. So he didn't call that anymore. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, God! Did he call you in again?

WOODMAN: Well, no, he didn't call me. He wrote something for me, something else, though. [Laughter] But during the rest of that two weeks, I didn't have a solo to play. I had solos to play that were on the chart, but nothing to feature me.

So from there we went to Saint Louis to play a dance. And that's when Juan Tizol made an agreement with Duke. He brought in Louie Bellson and Willie Smith from Harry James's band. They were playing with his band at the time. They all three came in together joined in Saint Louis.

ISOARDI: Gee, that changed the band a bit.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. And I'll never forget, Louie Bellson, I was sitting right next to him, and he was reading off my charts, because they didn't write for the drums because most of the drummers didn't read. They might have a sketch or something, but he was looking at— So a week later, Clark Terry came into the band. He was playing with Count Basie's small combo.

ISOARDI: That's right, the big band had broken up.

WOODMAN: Yeah, broken up. So he was playing with the small combo. Buddy De Franco was in the band. So that's when he came in, a week later.

ISOARDI: Geez. It's a different band in a month or two.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Later on Duke started writing things, you know, because Louie had the two bass drums, you know.

So he didn't start really writing, because we did about six weeks of what you called the Big Show of '51. I don't know if you've heard of it. Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughan.

ISOARDI: Where at?

WOODMAN: We traveled all back east. They called it the Big Show of '51. A lot of bands were traveling like that with different name stars. So they called us the Big Show of '51 because we had all those name stars in there: Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Stumpy and Stumpy, popular dance team in there, Peter Jackson, two big cats there, fat cats, who really danced. And Marie Bryant, who was a dancer. She was the first wife of a trumpet player—we had Cat Anderson, Harold Baker, Clark Terry, Willie Cook—Ray Nance.

ISOARDI: Oh, Ray. Really?

WOODMAN: That was his first wife, Marie. Then he married a white girl after that, see. We did about six weeks of the Big Show of '51, then he started writing for the

band, different things and— That's when "Satin Doll" came out, and other things.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, I guess it was great that he was even able to keep the band together then, because that wasn't a good time for big bands.

WOODMAN: No. Well, every band was breaking up. Well, Basie's band broke up because he got from under [Irving] Mills contract. Mills a promoter, he had almost all the black entertainers under contract: the Ink Spots, Jimmie Lunceford's band, Duke. Duke didn't get out from under him until 1954.

ISOARDI: So it was Basie's way of breaking up the contract.

WOODMAN: Yeah. That's why he broke the band and started— Yeah. But Duke kept going from his royalties and things that he had in the band. And I never forgot, I was at the office, his office down on Broadway, and he came out— Because we would go up there to have our income filled out and everything. So he said, "Britt, I'm free at last. I'm out from under the contract now." That was '54 or '55. Because '56 was that Newport [Jazz Festival] thing, wasn't it?

ISOARDI: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that one.

WOODMAN: It was '55.

ISOARDI: He got just in time.

WOODMAN: Just in time, boy. He made the money. He sold more albums that he ever sold before. That's when he started making a little money, because he— Because if you look at all the songs in the fifties, up until '54, Mills's name was on the records.

He was getting part of all the money, you know.

ISOARDI: So you're with the band a few years. And I've got to ask you about Newport '56. It's just one of the legendary dates in jazz history. And one of the reasons for that, I guess, is also Paul Gonsalves. [Tape recorder off]

WOODMAN: Let me go back a little bit to bring you up to this point. We played the South, the band would really swing, moreso when we played up north.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: I don't know. I guess because of the reaction of people.

ISOARDI: What do you mean? The people were getting more into it?

WOODMAN: Yeah, the dancing and things, you know. So we the band really feels good and swings. So this particular night, the band was rocking, man, and I started—

ISOARDI: And where are you at?

WOODMAN: Somewhere in the South. I forgot. I started clapping. And the whole reed section well, three of them—[Russell] Procope—

ISOARDI: Harry Carney?

WOODMAN: Harry Carney and Johnny Hodges, "We don't do this in this band. We don't do that in this band," clapping.

ISOARDI: They'd turn around and tell you?

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah, because I was clapping. I said, "Okay." I said, "Oh man, these old deadheads." Now I come up to the Newport, because the reed section—

I've still got to go up a little farther. We played overseas. ISOARDI: When was that?

WOODMAN: In '58.

ISOARDI: Oh, so you're going past Newport. Okay.

WOODMAN: Well, maybe I should go back to Newport right now.

ISOARDI: Well, Paul Gonsalves joins the band in the early fifties?

WOODMAN: Fifties.

ISOARDI: Early fifties, he joins.

WOODMAN: He was there.

ISOARDI: Well, he wasn't in there when you joined it, was he?

WOODMAN: Yeah, he was there.

ISOARDI: He was already in the band?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Okay.

WOODMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. I'm trying to think of who took Al Sears's place. Maybe it was— You know what? Come to think about it— Let me see. It seems like he was in the band when I joined the band. Yeah. He was in there. Yeah, right. [Laughter] Sure he was. Yeah. So the concert, the Newport concert.

ISOARDI: Yeah, 1956 Newport Jazz Festival.

WOODMAN: Duke somehow or another knocked the number off, "Diminuendo [and Crescendo in Blue]," because on every concert we'd play that.

ISOARDI: That's a classic. He wrote that—what?—in the thirties.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. But it would always be up at like this tempo, all fast, you know, this and that. So he knocked it off this time at like what I call a pulse tempo, you know. [Snaps fingers] Just a beat like this. So when it's time for Paul to play his solo, he played two choruses, and Duke said, "One more," then five, "one more," six, seven, eight, "one more," nine, ten. Now, by about the tenth chorus, I was stomping my foot on the platform. [Mimicks stomping sound] And pretty soon, surprisingly, the reeds started moving. They started moving. Telling me, "Don't clap your hands" when I came into the band. "We don't do that." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: So they're really getting into it, then.

WOODMAN: Yeah, the music got to them. For the first time in the whole nine years—

ISOARDI: Since you had been there.

WOODMAN: Because after that they went back in the same groove again. But on that particular concert evening, man, they were rocking, smiling—

ISOARDI: Clapping and stomping their feet.

WOODMAN: Jo Jones was out in front with a newspaper.

ISOARDI: Jo Jones? Oh, he was watching.

WOODMAN: Yeah, with a newspaper. He was going, [Mimicks Jones's grooving to the music]. And the people started dancing in the aisles out there and everything. It

was an outdoor thing, you know, Newport. But that was some— Now, I'll tell you what. What made this so powerful and the force so great, before we came on, Miles Davis and the others were playing that cool music, that real modern music, you know. No tempo, all that obligato stuff. So it was a very dead first set, you know. Everybody's looking, admiring, because they're great artists, you know, but there were no movement or anything. So as soon as we hit the first number—

ISOARDI: Was "Diminuendo" your first number?

WOODMAN: Oh, no. As soon as we hit the first number, the people started, you know—

ISOARDI: They were ready.

WOODMAN: They were ready. And then when he called the "Diminuendo" and Paul started playing those many more choruses and the tempo and everything, it got to everybody, man.

ISOARDI: What did he go? He went on for something like twenty-seven, twenty-eight choruses?

WOODMAN: Yeah. Yeah, it was something, man. It was a really—

ISOARDI: Yeah, I listen to that recording over and over again. You know and although you just— You know, it was a live recording outdoors, but you just hear this audience, this wall of noise getting louder and louder and louder, and the people are starting to— By the time he's toward the end of his solo, they're going crazy.

WOODMAN: That's right. My first time in '58, [I towed overseas with the band we] went by boat. Duke wasn't flying at the time, see. So there were about five of us on a boat, family, with Duke, [Billy] Strayhorn, Clark Terry, Quentin Jackson, Jimmy Hamilton. So we're playing a concert in London. We played this concert, just a big auditorium where everybody played, the big bands and things. And I read the paper the next day, and the critic of the paper said, "That band's an amazing band, the soloist and things. And it was just amazing that the reed section, they all look like they've got their robes and slippers on looking at T.V." [Laughter] But when they come out to play their solos, oh!" But now, that's the way they looked! [Mimicks their lack of movement]

ISOARDI: [laughter] Just very still, like—

WOODMAN: So Paul has got his head down.

ISOARDI: Like he's nodding off or something.

WOODMAN: Well, he is nodding. He's asleep. Jimmy Hamilton's first solo, he points at him, and gets up and blows. [Laughter] Now, that's what the critic said about the band. I wanted to tell, that's the way the reeds looked. Before that, that's the way they looked, then after the concert, the '56 Newport concert, that's the way they started back looking again. The way he described it, it looked just like they were in their living room with their slippers and robe on, some looking like they're looking at TV.

ISOARDI: Almost like they're bored to death.

WOODMAN: Like they're bored to death. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Jeez. Then he gets up and plays twenty-seven choruses.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: Too much. When Gonsalves sat down, I mean, was this anything different for him? Or did he just sort of sit down and—?

WOODMAN: He said, "Boy, I don't know—"

ISOARDI: Did he say anything afterwards?

WOODMAN: No. Oh, no. Like another day, like he hadn't done anything. He's amazing, an amazing musician. He played guitar; his first instrument was guitar.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: And, boy, he was the type of musician, man, that no matter what it is—what key, what song—he hears it once and he's gone, man. Terrific ability that he had. You know, he just destroyed himself. It was a shame. Beautiful family. He invited us to his home, his mother had dinner for us, had beautiful brothers and mother.

ISOARDI: Too bad. It was booze?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: That's sad.

WOODMAN: Yeah, well, the needle and—

ISOARDI: Oh, that too? That's unfortunate. Great artist.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He died in London, in Europe, just before Duke died. They didn't

tell Duke. Duke was very sick. Duke was in his dying days, too, in '75, '76. Because Duke loved him like his one of his sons. And Willie Cook, unfortunately, he was under influence of the needle, too, and also Paul Gonsalves. And what Duke would do, he'd have the manager— His name was Selly. He was half-blind then.

ISOARDI: Selly?

WOODMAN: Selly was his name. He had Selly, every week to send Paul Gonsalves's wife money and Willie Cook's. Because Willie Cook had two sons.

ISOARDI: So they'd spend it all.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Willie Cook had two sons, and Paul had one son. So he'd send them about five dollars a day or something like that.

ISOARDI: That's good.

WOODMAN: Yeah. They had to.

ISOARDI: They took care of them.

WOODMAN: Yeah, sure. Because that's they were good artists and things, and, you know, Duke was a family man, and he knew that they would spend that money on dope, so that's what he had to do. But, he really loved Paul.

ISOARDI: So when Duke was dying, they didn't tell him.

WOODMAN: Oh, no, they didn't tell. No, no, he didn't know.

ISOARDI: That's good.

WOODMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, at least he got a lot of good years in, Gonsalves.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Oh, yeah, he did. He was a beautiful person, man. Money didn't mean anything to him. He never felt responsible as a man, never grew up. Man, whatever he had in this pocket he'd just spend it, you know.

ISOARDI: Do you have any other memories you'd like to talk about regarding the Ellington band? You were with them until the sixties, mid-sixties.

WOODMAN: No, nine years, '51 to 1960. Nine years, yeah.

ISOARDI: Long time on the road. That band's just traveling all time.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah, sure, I've been on the road.

ISOARDI: You must have been around the world a few times.

WOODMAN: Well, not too much, because at that time he wasn't flying.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Duke had a thing about flying for a long time.

WOODMAN: Yeah. He didn't start flying until around '62. He went to a psychiatrist, as I understand, and—

ISOARDI: Oh, to get past this fear.

WOODMAN: To get past this fear. Because you know that he had to go to South America, Africa, and all those places, so he had to fly.

ISOARDI: Or you're going to be on the road for years.

WOODMAN: So I missed all of those beautiful countries and things that he— He had written things about the countries, man.

ISOARDI: Do you have any other memories of the years with Ellington or any specific things you would like to get down?

WOODMAN: Oh, well, one incident—would you call it an incident or episode? Well, it was on the bandstand. We played a medley, see. We'd go into "Mood Indigo," and each tune was whatever tempo he'd go at. So when he'd get to "I Don't Get Around Much Anymore," whatever the tempo was he'd go [sings melody and then shifts suddenly into new tempo], that tempo. So Butter [Quentin Jackson] and Harry Carney— There was bass clarinet and Butter, trombone, and me, trombone. So I'm in the middle. So Butter would get up, Harry Carney, I would get up, and I would rush to get up in front. So I guess Duke got tired of me running like a rabbit, so one time, passing by him—like you're on the piano there playing, and I had to pass him—he said, "Britt, you were in the service, weren't you?" I said, "Yeah." "You know cadence, don't you? You remember cadence?" So I didn't give it a thought till after I sat down. "You were in the service, and you know cadence." Well, he was referring to the tempo, cadence, one two. So he'd want me to go out and walk in the tempo to the tune, because of showmanship, all that show presentation. So I didn't realize until— I said, after, "oh."

ISOARDI: If you rush out of tempo with the music, it would look as if—

WOODMAN: Yeah. So he would wait till I'd get up there, you know, me walking to the tempo, and he'd wait; he'd vamping until I'd get settled up there. So I never forgot

that. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: That's good. The guy thought of everything.

WOODMAN: Oh, man, he was a man of wisdom. There were so many things. I remember a time we were playing somewhere. In some of the clubs, the places we'd play, the tables would be right up near the bandstand, people. So in this particular town, the cats knew quite a few people in front of the band. Clark Terry and— They were sitting at the tables talking with the people. So the 'bones, John Sanders and Quentin Jackson and myself, when he said half-hour intermission or fifteen [-minute] intermission, well, we were on the bandstand. We were there. And they used to call us eager beavers because we— [laughter]

Now, this particular time— Let me see. Who was playing drums? He hadn't shown up yet. And the bass player hadn't shown up. Nobody was on the bandstand but just we three. So Duke was playing the piano, vamping and he's looking down at the— That's the first time I saw him really get angry. Because at other times, when the cats don't make time, he doesn't see them. They're backstage somewhere, you know. But he saw them, looking at front of him playing the piano, knowing that it's time, and they're still out there. Pretty soon they started walking on there. When they got up on the bandstand, the fellows— Now, I don't know if the fellows really dug what he was saying. He said, "I want you fellows to know that you're supposed to be men, and I'm not going to be here always." That's what he said. Now, if they didn't get it—

Because, "You can't do that with anybody what you're doing to me. You're supposed to be men. I gave you the privilege of being a man. Come on, now. You're going to sit there seeing me on the piano, and now you're going to ignore me? If you were with another leader, you wouldn't be able to get away with that." So that's the way he put it. It was true. We all were looking at those— "What's the matter? They see Duke on the piano. Why don't they come up on the bandstand?" Damn. Don't take advantage of the man's lenience. Because that's the only thing I didn't like about Duke.

ISOARDI: You think he was too lenient?

WOODMAN: Oh, man, yeah. But, see, after I realized the thing about it, after a period of years, I overlooked it.

I guessed I overlooked it because one time the bus was supposed to leave at twelve. Butter and me, we'd be there at twelve—big time, you know—and the bus doesn't get away until two o'clock. Cats are always late, never [on time]. So on that particular time, Duke was on the bus. Because he'd generally ride with Harry Carney. Harry Carney had a car, and always he'd always ride with him. But this particular time, he was riding in the bus. So Butter said, "Duke, man, I'm sick and tired of this band. I'm always here on time, and these cats, we're supposed to leave at twelve, and, man, here now it's almost two." And Duke said, "You've been late before, haven't you?" [Laughter] Boy, now, that's powerful. That's something, isn't it?

ISOARDI: He was a guy who could handle everything. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: That's right. He's not going to say anything about anybody, no matter what it is; he's not going to talk about against another person [or tell] another person what it is. That's what he never did do.

So he made that statement. I think that's what made me realize. I said, "Now, what am I getting mad about? We leave at twelve o'clock. They're not going to leave at twelve, so I'll be there at one or 12:30. Because he's going to be late. They're always an hour and a half or two hours late." So I just learned not to be— Because if he says twelve o'clock or one o'clock, I know they're not going to there until 2:30 or something. So it's not for me to be here at the time that he called. For the nine years, they had never been there on time, whatever the time they called. So I learned just to go along with the way it was. He'd say one o'clock, and I get there at 1:30, I'd still be there for another hour. It's better than to being there at one. [Laughter] But I just could never wait like those cats, you know.

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ISOARDI: As you were saying, Britt.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Now, one thing that I could not understand: how the fellows think and do the same thing often. Being late most of the time, you don't have a chance to eat. Sometimes you didn't have time to check in because you're late already. So we'd have to go right to the concert hall or dance hall, wherever we were playing. So they'd have to have somebody bring us some sandwiches when we had intermission. And they're grumbling, "Man, we've got to eat!" Well, you leave so late. If you'd leave on time, you'd have time to check in and have a good dinner. But they'd do it to themselves, and they'd get mad because they didn't have time to eat, being late. But they would do it every time, never be on time, never be on time, for the whole nine years. [Laughter] That's right, whole nine years.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So in 1960, why did you decide to leave Duke?

WOODMAN: Well, I decided to leave in '59. We went back overseas in '59. Duke [Ellington] still wasn't flying. So in '59, John Sanders had left. Bootie Wood had come into the band. And in '59, that's when Quincy Jones with his orchestra, there was a show that they were producing overseas, to do some one-nighters overseas. Clark Terry and Quentin Jackson were supposed to join them when they came overseas. So

anyway, Duke knew about it, you know. So Clark left the band, Quentin Jackson left the band, John Sanders left the band, they left my section with Bootie Woods and Matthew Gee. And a trumpet player by the name of Mullins, John Mullins, he took Clark's place. He wasn't considered a good trumpet player. It seemed like Duke—

ISOARDI: Tough shoes to fill, though, Clark Terry.

WOODMAN: Yeah. See, at the time, it looked like Duke— I guess maybe he didn't want to pay musicians to come in there. But they weren't qualified. Well, Matthew Gee was qualified for the jazz, but he wasn't a good reader. He would get juiced. Some of my sections got pretty bad. And I did something in the band that never had happened during the period of Duke's career. It was in Las Vegas. I had to rehearse the [trom] bone section.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WOODMAN: Because, see, Duke wrote a lot of things that the 'bones were involved in, beautiful things. Bootie Wood was okay, but Matthew, he would get juiced. I think he would get juiced just to cover up because of the reading. So I had to rehearse. It didn't do much good, though.

But anyway, I went into Duke's dressing room. I went in there to ask for a raise, not because of rehearsing them, but I had planned on asking for a raise, anyway. Because, see, my wife was with me practically the entire nine years.

ISOARDI: Traveling with you?

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

WOODMAN: Yeah, so actually I wasn't really making any money, because at that time I had to pay my hotel bill and the food. So in different places I had to pay for her. I had to pay for her, too. The bus was free, but if I went overseas and she was with me, I had to pay for her plane fare and train fare, see. So I needed a little more money, so I asked for a little more money. Because in Las Vegas, we were jumping here to Los Angeles. In fact, it was my last recording date, the Nutcracker Suite they had to recorded here. So Duke said, "Britt, I'm glad that you came by. I want to thank you for what you did, rehearsing the band. Can I buy you a shirt or something?"

I said, "No, Duke," I said, "I've just come to ask for a raise." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: Surprise. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: So he said, "Okay, Britt. When we get to Los Angeles, we've got three days recording there, and I'll talk to you about it."

"Okay."

So the first day— Well, he added on some 'bones. Lawrence Brown—

ISOARDI: Lawrence Brown came back?

WOODMAN: Yeah, for this recording date. And I think Juan Tizol for this recording date. And sometimes I wonder, did he call Lawrence Brown to scare me or something? Just about asking for the raise. I don't know what it was.

The first day, that's the control room, see, and here's the bandstand. So I'm generally the first one to leave no matter where we are, to pack up, and I'm out. So I'm packing up my things slowly because I'm waiting for Duke to come out of the control room so I can meet him on his way out. So I saw him leave the control room. I said, "Okay, Duke."

"Yeah, Britt, I'll see you tomorrow."

I said, "Okay."

The next day, I see him, he's looking at me. I see him in the corner of his eye looking at me, see. He comes down. I say, "Duke—" "Okay, Britt, I'll see you tomorrow."

So what I did, I told my mother. I told her what happened, I said, "Look, I think I'm going to have to leave the band. I asked for a raise and I don't think I'm going to get it." So my mother said, "Well, you've been in the band long enough anyway." And Lawrence Brown me that, too. He said, "Britt, never stay in a band too long." He said, "I stayed in the band too long." He stayed over fifteen years. He said, "Never stay in a band too long." I never forgot that.

ISOARDI: You get stale?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. So I—

ISOARDI: Even in the best band, I guess.

WOODMAN: Right, of course, sure. So I wrote this notice out, the one I sent to

[American Federation of Musicians, Local] 802. I didn't have to mail it to 802, but I did the procedure. And the last day, he did the same thing. Well, I had the notice. So the next day, the day after that, we're leaving. We're going to jump from Los Angeles to I think New York. So I handed the notice to the manager. I said, "Here's my notice," you know. "What?" I do know this. We played at a concert in New York in the park, Central Park, and we had big trailers for a dressing room there. Well, Selly had, in the meantime, given the notice to Duke.

So Duke comes into my dressing room. The first thing he asked me, "Britt, why did John Sanders leave the band?" That shocked me.

ISOARDI: He asked you that?

WOODMAN: I said, "Duke, I don't know." I said, "I would like to know myself. He left, I didn't get a chance to say goodbye or anything. I understand he left; I don't know why." And I said, "Well, Duke, we're supposed to play Minneapolis, and I know I've got four more days. I can recommend a trombone player to you, because I don't want to go to Minneapolis." And you know, he never did ask me why I was quitting. He never asked me—

ISOARDI: Nothing?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: Just said okay, goodbye?

WOODMAN: That was it. Yeah. He didn't say anything about the money or ask me

why I was quitting.

ISOARDI: I guess he just didn't want to give you the raise.

WOODMAN: I guess that was it. It was obvious.

ISOARDI: Were the finances tight then? I thought after Newport [Jazz Festival] the band was doing pretty good.

WOODMAN: Yeah, it was good, but bandleaders just hate to give you raise, man. They just hate to see, give you a raise. And what I would asking for, man, I still wasn't getting as much as some of the other fellows with their raises.

ISOARDI: So then you came back to L.A.?

WOODMAN: No, I stayed in New York.

ISOARDI: You mentioned you had been married. When did you get married?

WOODMAN: Yeah, I got married in '52.

ISOARDI: 'Fifty-two. So you were with Ellington, then, when you got married.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. See, '52 to 1960, that's when my wife traveled almost the nine years with me.

ISOARDI: Jeez. It was no problem for her doing this?

WOODMAN: Oh, no, she loved it.

ISOARDI: I guess it must have been a thrill traveling with the Duke Ellington band.

WOODMAN: Well, see, we played a lot of locations, too, and that made it easier for her, you know. Because at that time, we'd stay in a club for four weeks, like in Chicago

we'd go to the Blue Note during the winter, work five days a week there, and Toronto, there was a club there, we stayed four weeks.

ISOARDI: So you stayed for a while. It's not like on the road every day.

WOODMAN: Las Vegas for four weeks. So the one-nighters, there would be maybe a week of one-nighters. She would travel, and then we would go to another location for two weeks, you know.

ISOARDI: So a little stability.

WOODMAN: But she loved it.

ISOARDI: Who was she?

WOODMAN: Her name was Clara. Just a girl I met.

ISOARDI: She wasn't a musician or—?

WOODMAN: Oh, no. She tried to sing, though. She had a good voice, sounded like Billie Holiday. She could have been a good singer if she really wanted to, but she really wasn't into it.

ISOARDI: It wasn't her thing.

WOODMAN: She knew a lot of musicians, though. One thing about her, she knew what kind of life I lived.

ISOARDI: So she knew what she was getting into.

WOODMAN: Yeah, right. Because she was with a lot of musicians and things, in that environment, so she knew it, you know.

ISOARDI: That's important. Was she from L.A.?

WOODMAN: No, she's from Chicago. She was born in Mississippi, but she went to school in Chicago. From there she went to New York when she was young, seventeen, and that was—

ISOARDI: That's where you met?

WOODMAN: That's where I met her, yeah.

ISOARDI: Great.

WOODMAN: Yeah, so I was very fortunate, because she was wonderful.

ISOARDI: Well, I suppose it makes being on the road easier, too.

WOODMAN: Yeah, oh, yeah. Because, see, some of the cats would be on the road for two or three months, man, and their wives— There was somebody in the band—and I think we all knew who it was—who would call and tell his wife about the cats, who they were going out with, you know, some chick.

ISOARDI: Oh, man. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: We knew who it was, who did it, you know. And when my wife's with me, so— Ray Nance's wife was on the road quite a bit with him.

ISOARDI: There was no problem with Duke Ellington about that? He didn't mind if the wives came along?

WOODMAN: Oh, no. He had made arrangements for the wives to be insured in the bus.

ISOARDI: Great. I guess it was probably smart, though. He figured if the wives were there, the guys would be more stable.

WOODMAN: Well, I don't think—

ISOARDI: No, he didn't that at all?

WOODMAN: No, I don't think— He's just that type of person.

ISOARDI: Nice.

WOODMAN: Yeah, just nice, beautiful cat, you know. Just like I said, his lenience, to let the cats get away with too much, that's the only thing I just— I didn't know how he could stand it. I said, well, being Duke, I guess his ways of looking at things, that's what made him great, because nothing disrupted him from doing what he had to do. As long as you produce and do that things that you're supposed to do when it's required for you, that's what he looked at. Your personal life is you. And the way you are, actions, temper, being late, you know, he would accept it like, "It's okay, then."

ISOARDI: So you stay in New York, then. You get off the Ellington bandwagon in New York, and you stay there for a while. When do you come back to L.A.?

WOODMAN: 'Seventy-nine. Now, let me tell you about that.

ISOARDI: 'Seventy-nine? So you're in New York for almost twenty years?

WOODMAN: Not '79, '69. Because I stayed nine years, yeah. I left in '79 to go back to New York.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So you're in New York till around '69, then you come back to

L.A. And then in the late seventies, you go back to New York.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Okay.

WOODMAN: See, now, what happened, I hadn't planned on staying in New York that long. I told my wife, I said, "Well, I'll stay here in New York a few years and—" Because I understood, getting back to what Lawrence Brown said, he said, "Don't stay in a band too long." Well, it's almost the same, surprisingly, like in the service, being away, and you come back in normal life, how things have changed since being in the service. You have to adjust. No matter, you might have been on furlough, but actually to get back in the groove of things— Well, in the band, staying with the band, traveling, things are happening differently.

ISOARDI: Yeah, after ten years, you have to adjust yourself.

WOODMAN: Yeah like, in the music, the approach, the studio, phrasing and everything, it's a different thing. You're playing one style for nine years, then you're going to jump out and try to revert yourself to play a different style, a different approach, and you feel like a stranger with the cats. So I could understand. So me leaving the band in '60. I told my wife, I said, "I'm going to stay here about three years, get adjusted back, get in the groove and things, the way the cats are now doing, their phrasing and ideas and what they're doing. So I got connected with the Broadway shows and things. The work wasn't too good. The Broadway shows that I had, they

would close or last for three months, four months. I never did have a hit show. So in '65 I was doing [a show] with Tommy Steele, Half a Sixpence. He was a British actor, Tommy Steele. So I told the conductor that I had to go home and see my dad [William B. Woodman Sr.], and so forth. So he let me take a leave for a month. So I told my parents, I said—it's now '65—"I think I'll be home in '66. I'm going to leave." So in '65, the show lasted up until '66. Then I started getting more work. In '66 I started playing at a place called Westbury, and then I started playing for the horse show and the ice show. And in '67, I've worked a year now, year in, year out.

'Sixty-eight, I got so that I didn't have to take the ice show and the horse show. That's hard work, a lot of playing there, continuous playing. Like the first trumpet has to have two trumpets playing the lead, because there's so much work and things. So in '68, I started getting work so that I didn't have to take the ice show, and I started working at a place called Long Beach. It's on the water. And Guy Lombardo would play there every year.

So they'd have one of the old Broadway shows play out there. And this one was The Sound of Music. Guy Lombardo would conduct, then after the Broadway show, Guy Lombardo's band would play for dancing out there. So they advertised his name and the Broadway show for people to come out, you know.

So in '68, I told my wife, I said, "Look, I've got to leave here." I said, "I'm going back. I'm not going to play in Long Beach again in '69." So the affair would

end after Labor Day, see. So in '69, while I was out there, I said, "Look, sweetheart, I'm going to ship all my furniture to Los Angeles. Just leave the couch here, and we'll sleep on that." She said, "Okay." And I bought me a car. All the time I was there I didn't need a car. So I bought a car to travel, because I knew I'd need one here. So this was a Sunday; we ended. So we said we were going to leave the next Tuesday.

So when Monday came, I said, "You know, Clara, what are we waiting on? There's nothing holding us back. Let's just leave now." So we packed the car, what was left in there, little things, packed them in the car. I wasn't telling anybody that I was leaving. So I left. But in the meantime, getting back to Long Beach, the contractor—Morris Stanzak was his name, he was very popular, had almost all the Broadway shows there—he said, "Britt, I've got a good show for you this time. I know that my shows I've been giving you haven't been running too long, but I've got a good one, No, No and Nannet. I said, "Oh," I said, "God, I want to let you know that I sent my furniture home. I'm leaving. I'm leaving the coming Tuesday."

"Oh, Britt, oh, I'm so sorry, man. But could you recommend—?"

I said, "Yeah, I'll recommend another trombone." And so that's when I pulled up and I left, boom. That was when I came here.

ISOARDI: So you haven't lived in L.A., then, in almost twenty years. It's been a while, right?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right, right.

ISOARDI: How did things seem compared to the early fifties?

WOODMAN: Well, I'll tell you what. When I got here, they had—

ISOARDI: I mean, when you left L.A., Central Avenue was still there, although people were moving a little bit. So what was it like in the late sixties?

WOODMAN: Well, it was kind of sad. They had about three TV shows that were still going. Flip Philip had a show, Quincy Jones, Della Reese had a show [the Delb Reese Show], and the Tonight Show, [the] Merv Griffin [Show], and Carol Burnett had her show [the Carol Burnett Show]. And another show was there. So I used to sub. In '71, '72, I was subbing in the Merv Griffin Show for Jimmy Cleveland. And some other shows, I subbed. Then around '73, all the shows folded, all except for the Tonight Show, Merv Griffin, and Carol Burnett. And in the meantime, I wasn't doing too much.

ISOARDI: I mean, your work down here is mostly in the studios like that?

WOODMAN: I was doing mostly subbing.

ISOARDI: Yeah, right. And then the jazz world and the clubs, there's not much happening?

WOODMAN: No.

ISOARDI: No clubs? It's just not happening?

WOODMAN: No, no, not happening then. So I got connected with— Bill Berry had a New York band playing Duke Ellington's music.

ISOARDI: Yeah, the L.A. Big Band.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Frank Capp and Nat Pierce had their band.

ISOARDI: The Juggernaut.

WOODMAN: Juggernaut. So I was playing with them. But they were—

ISOARDI: But that was irregular work. [Laughter]

WOODMAN: They were only getting twenty-five dollars a night when you did work.

ISOARDI: Scale?

WOODMAN: It wasn't even scale. I guess it was scale, but it seemed like it was— No, I don't think it was scale. Because it was an off night, you know.

So I finally got connected with Nelson Riddle. He was working a little bit, but he wasn't doing too much. He wasn't doing too much studio work because he had a lot of new cats coming out writing for the TV things, the pictures and so forth. So he would go overseas for about three months and write over there and come back. But I was a member of his band whenever we worked there. But I still was existing.

In the meantime, my wife, she said, "Britt, I don't care if you make a million dollars, I just don't like Los Angeles." [Laughter]

ISOARDI: That's right, she wasn't from California.

WOODMAN: No. It was the weather and so forth, you know. It wasn't mainly because my work. It was because— The people here, she couldn't get with the people. They were a different type of people, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah, definitely different from the East Coast.

WOODMAN: And then the weather, she hated the weather. She loved the cold and the change in weather, too, see. And so—

ISOARDI: So you moved back.

WOODMAN: Yeah. What I was doing— Every black show that came out here, I did, when it would out here. So I decided to leave here around July.

ISOARDI: What year?

WOODMAN: This was '79. So what happened— Oh, I did a few gigs— I went to Japan in '78 and '79 with Benny Carter's All-Stars Band.

ISOARDI: It seems like he goes every summer.

WOODMAN: Yeah. I went there twice with him. So I was planning on leaving here. So Buddy Collette called me. He said he was contracting a show with Lena Horne called, Pal Joey. He said, "Britt, it will go for three months." It's September. I said, "Okay, I'll take it, because that will enable me to pay all my bills and everything so when I arrive in New York, I won't owe anything." Because I didn't have any work or anything. I was going to go there cold. So I stayed here until November. That's when I moved back.

ISOARDI: And you've been back there ever since.

WOODMAN: Ever since. In '79, '80, I was living in Brooklyn. I put in an application to where I'm staying now, at the Riverview Towers.

ISOARDI: You're up on Riverside Drive?

WOODMAN: Yeah, 626 Riverside Drive, called Riverview Towers apartment building. But I was staying in Brooklyn at the time, in '79, '80. It was an apartment house. I forgot the name of it. It was a baseball, and I they put an apartment in one of then—

ISOARDI: Near Brooklyn?

WOODMAN: Yeah, in Brooklyn. It was a baseball field and they built an apartment building there.

ISOARDI: Oh, where it used to be? You mean the old Dodger ballpark? Ebbetts Field?

WOODMAN: There you go. Ebbetts Field. So '81 is when I moved into New York, the apartment building.

ISOARDI: Were you overlooking the Hudson River? Is that where you were at?

WOODMAN: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: I lived in New York for a couple of years in the early eighties, and, yeah, I know where Riverside is. Nice place. Nice view of the river.

WOODMAN: Yeah, oh, yeah. So I had a gig at Carnegie Hall playing for Sarah Vaughan. I didn't know it at that time, but George Wein— You know, he produced those—

ISOARDI: Yeah, big producer.

WOODMAN: Big producer there, you know, Newport concert thing. So he saw me. He was producing this. He said, "Britt, where have you been?"

I said, "I've in Los Angeles, my hometown." He said, "Why, I've been asking about you." He said, "Well, look, I'm sending out a repertory band, and would you like to play with it?" This was '81.

I said, "Yeah, okay."

So they had all the top musicians. It was a repertory band. We were playing practically all the old music: Louie Armstrong, Duke's music, Jimmie Lunceford. And we had all the top [players]: Ernie Royal and Joe Newman and Joe Wilder. A lots of those studio cats were there playing in the band. So that was my first getting in the groove.

ISOARDI: Getting back in there. That's a good way to go.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So in '81, still in '81, [there was a] Broadway show called Sophisticated Lady.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I was in New York then.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Mercer Ellington was conducting. So they called me to do that. That lasted a year, a year or two.

ISOARDI: Wow, nice.

WOODMAN: Now I can tell you from there. From '81 to '82, the next show I did was My One and Only. No, Singing in the Rain. No, no, not Singing in the Rain. It was

another one I did. The Sound of Music.

ISOARDI: Really?

WOODMAN: Again. They brought it back. They thought maybe—

ISOARDI: Well, you're getting all the top shows.

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. Well, the contractors knew me, see.

ISOARDI: Was this the same contractor as previously? When you'd left?

WOODMAN: Let me see. No.

ISOARDI: A different guy.

WOODMAN: This cat, Morris, he had left. It was another contractor, Mel—

ISOARDI: What was the other guy's name?

WOODMAN: Morris Stanzak. He was the most popular one that— Like now, they've got two contractors there, Ray Press and Mel Rodney. Now they've got most of the Broadway shows all locked up. In fact, Ray Press is the contractor of Jelly's Last Jam, the one I'm doing now.

So I did this Sound of Music. It lasted about three or four months. They thought it was going to be a hit, you know. Then after that I went to My One and Only, Honi Coles and Tommy Tune. That lasted about a year.

ISOARDI: Pretty good.

WOODMAN: Yeah. Then I went into Singing in the Rain. That lasted about a year. And then, from there, I went to Black and Blue, an all-black show.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Wonderful.

WOODMAN: And that was a year, Black and Blue.

ISOARDI: You're on a roll.

WOODMAN: Oh, wait a minute. I'm skipping. Singing in the Rain lasted almost a year. So the same contractor that's contracting Jelly's Last Jam, well, somehow or another, he made an arrangement, told Mel Rodney that he'd like to use me in a Broadway show called "Big Deal." Because they knew that Singing in the Rain was going to close, see. It only had about four weeks to go. So I went in there and rehearsed about three months, and the preview, we did that. And during the time I was doing that, three months, Singing in the Rain closed. So two more weeks, we were doing a preview where the critics panned it, so they closed in a week. So that didn't last.

ISOARDI: You still had a pretty good record.

WOODMAN: My record still kept me working after Singing in the Rain closed. Then, I was out not to long when Black and Blue came in. So that lasted a year. Then, in the meantime, Ain't Misbehavin, the trombone player was leaving that band to go into another show. So the same contractor, Ray Press, he asked me— Because Black and Blue was closing. So when it closed, he said "Do you want—" So I did that. He said, "You can play this show, because I want you to do Jelly's Last Jam." So I played Ain't Misbehavin' until Jelly's Last Jam opened. I left there to come into— Because,

see, for Jelly's Last Jam, they had to kind of pick the musicians for that, you know.

ISOARDI: And now, you're in the middle of Jelly's Last Jam.

WOODMAN: Yeah. So when I go back— I'm supposed to if it hasn't closed. [Laughter] Because Gregory Hines has left, you know.

ISOARDI: But that's been doing well, though, hasn't it?

WOODMAN: Oh, yeah. So I—

ISOARDI: It's going to be going.

WOODMAN: Yeah, I think so. So that's—

ISOARDI: You had good luck back there.

WOODMAN: Eversince I left here, man, I've just been working like this. [Snaps fingers]

ISOARDI: Yeah, and great music, too.

WOODMAN: Yeah, it is. And I wouldn't want to live here, because there's no life here. It's very dead. The only time when I come back here is when I'm not able to play too much. But as long as I'm working, my health, I'm going to be in New York, where there's some life, where I can see some people, hear some noise, and see some bright lights. At two o'clock in the morning, if I want to go to the store, it's right on the corner. I can look out to see the filth. [Laughter]

ISOARDI: And it's moving! [Laughter]

WOODMAN: It moved!

ISOARDI: Yeah, New York is something.

WOODMAN: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, Britt, we've come to the end. Let me just ask you a big question now. Let's look back to Central Avenue. In looking back on Central now, and in terms of music history in this country and jazz history, how important was Central Avenue? What did it contribute?

WOODMAN: Well, at that time, I think musically, it was one of the greatest eras in jazz, during that period. Because for about seven years, all the musicians, the great musicians that came out there, Central Avenue was the place for them to be, to hang out different places there. Because that was noted all over the country, Central Avenue, like 125th Street was in Harlem. So when it declined, it was a very sort of depressing sort of a thing for not only musicians but the people themselves that loved music. It was really pitiful.

Change has never been for the better, so far. In some cases, for the musicians, it's been better, because they get more money and things of that sort. But speaking as a jazz musician, in some instances, it's still such that they have to leave the country to make a living, because if you stay in this country, you would have to have a day job for you to live if you want to live to a certain standard because there's no way you could work steadily here or get a pay check coming in every week anywhere. There's no place for clubs to have a big band or certain types of musicians and things. So six

months out of the year, seven months, musicians are overseas where they're appreciate jazz. They're paying good money, too, now, getting the they should get. Of course, they get more money there than they do here. They still don't want to pay the musicians the money, you know. But that's been good for the jazz musicians, for them, because it's so happy. Because you can imagine all those great jazz musicians, if it wasn't for Europe— Like Coleman Hawkins went over there, Chu Berry went over there, a lot of others, Johnny Griffin. So many musicians realized the living over there and the freedom— See, you forget racial things.

Now, that's another thing, too, that's amazing. When I first went overseas—

ISOARDI: When was that?

WOODMAN: In '58. After a while, you forgot about racial things. Because in this country, an honest person will tell you, certain places, you look and see, "I guess it's all right to go in there," you know, because you've been treated so bad. You've seen the resentment that even in places that you know that you're supposed to be able to eat in, you see the resentment, that they don't want you in there, but they have to have you in there. You feel that, see. And you're not being sensitive. It's a thing that is there. You can see the attitude, the way the waiter or waitress looks at you or the way they take time getting to you. And all those little things you see. So overseas, you forget. You feel like a human being. Your mind says, "Forget about all that. The people treat you so nice, especially when they know that you're an artist. [Laughter] So that's why a lot

of musicians stayed over there.

ISOARDI: A liberating feeling.

WOODMAN: Yeah. And so—

ISOARDI: Did you ever think about staying over there?

WOODMAN: No, I felt like— See, I'm not a partying type. See, there, you've got to hang out. People enjoy—They want you to go here with them, you want to do like that. I'm a homeboy. [Laughter] I'm a home-type boy. When I get through playing, I want to get home, relax, and things. See, last time over there, I let my wife hang out with the fellows.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Yeah, right.

WOODMAN: "Here, you go on out. I'll go to my hotel room." I just—

ISOARDI: Well, Britt, do you have any final thoughts? Anything you'd like to conclude with or say?

WOODMAN: No. All I can say is this: that I was so happy in my career to play with Duke, to play with a man that is great. You read a history book, it tells how great a person is, what they said about how great he is. You have to go by what they say. Like they say about our first president, how great he was, he never told a lie, he cut down a cherry tree, that's the only thing you said great about him? He never told a lie? Now, you believe that? [Laughter] But, now, getting back to Duke— [laughter] Truthfully, getting back to Duke, though, you can see what the word means, "great." Because we

call a lot of people great. Dizzy, "great," Count Basie, "great," Jimmie Lunceford, "great," but the word great has a definition, man. Like what a man really stands for. If you're really a man, well, you look at things that a man stands for, all the qualities: responsibility, to do what is right for your wife and kids and community and so forth. Like Duke had all those qualities of being a great man. He had reached a potential that he knew what he wanted to do at any moment, at any time, under any condition. It works, it goes off, it works no matter what it is. He knows. I always said, you could take one thing of Duke and capitalize on that one thing of Duke, and you'll be great with just that one thing, capitalize on one characteristic that he had. Like I've heard people talk about Duke, especially the ladies, and each one will give you a different definition of how great he was. Duke's personality was always— He greets them the way that they are. "Oh, my pretty lady," "I love you madly," or something that he would— And each one would get a different impression of him and describe what they see in him. Well, he had all those kinds of qualities, you know. And one thing, too, about the people, communicating with the people. Now, that's one great thing that a musician, a leader, should capitalize on, the people. Make the people really know that you love them, that you're here to play for them. And one of the happenings with the fellows in the band—

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WOODMAN: Well, this one thing that I'm going to say will qualify particularly everything that I'm saying about how great that man is. One night we were playing a concert. And it was in Paul Gonsalves' hometown. It was true, he was really participating; he really drank. Sometimes he would drink a lot; if he drank he wouldn't do other things. And Duke called him to play, and he couldn't get up. You know what Duke said? "Ladies and gentlemen, I just want to say this, that Paul, this is his hometown, and he has so many beautiful people that he was socializing with and things, that he was just under the weather and couldn't make it." People did this. [Applauds]

ISOARDI: Nice.

WOODMAN: Isn't that something? Almost a chill goes through you, the way that— Because, see, the thing about it, people understand human beings, the things they say. But most leaders, you do things, man, they get so out, they don't know what to say, they get mad and disgusted and show it, you know. But all those little things, no matter what happened, Duke would always make an excuse, and people would applaud, man.

ISOARDI: Beautiful.

WOODMAN: I tell you man, he was— To be with him— And I'll tell you another

fellow that I enjoyed being with, I made a tour with Dizzy Gillespie's band.

ISOARDI: When was that?

WOODMAN: I think it was '72 or '72. He made a trip in Japan. Not '72. About '86.

ISOARDI: Just after you got back to New York?

WOODMAN: Yeah, about '86, somewhere around there. And that trip with him, being with the master of jazz, you know, his humor. He knows what he wants, and the Latin music and everything, what he's doing. He knows just what he's doing with the music. So being with him and his personality, pleasing the people—they'd enjoy his humor and things— At the airport, well, some of those airports, the waiting room has windows, you know. So he sees some kids, and he stops at the window and put his nose against the window. [Imitates a face being pressed against the glass] And the kids, they laughed. But little things like that he would do, you know. So just being with him, his personality, and being with a master, it was an honor for me just to travel and to be in that environment, see. That was a thrill in my life.

ISOARDI: Well, Britt, for us it's an honor to be with a master like you.

WOODMAN: Oh, sure.

ISOARDI: Thank you very much for participating.

WOODMAN: Oh, well, my pleasure to.

ISOARDI: An invaluable contribution.

WOODMAN: There are so many things I wish I had been aware of in that

environment when I was young, to listen, man, because I was with some very important musicians at the time, great musicians.

ISOARDI: Just a who's who of jazz.

WOODMAN: Yeah, all those cats. Because as the Woodman Brothers [Bigglest Little Band in the World], like I said before, reading music, well, we were superb, because most of those jazz musicians couldn't read like we could read. But, see, in jazz, the thing about it, at that time, after you play it down twice, you've got it, but the main thing is improvising. That's what you call a great jazz musician, improvising. And that's what, at that time, being amongst those people, they were admiring me because of my reading ability with all those instruments, but they don't know how happy I was to have the experience and say, "Man, I hope I'll be able to play like that." We had some great Los Angeles musicians here. They just didn't want to leave. They want to go. They stayed right here to play. And they were qualified to play with any band if they wanted to go.

ISOARDI: It was a great scene.

WOODMAN: Yeah, it was a great scene during that time.

ISOARDI: Well, hopefully through interviews like this, we'll preserve that memory of what came out of Central Avenue, what you guys contributed.

WOODMAN: Yeah, that's why it's important that— The cats were called by different names in that time, those that had made Central what it was. Musicians that never did

branch out, but they contributed all this. Like the drummer Pepe Prince, he played with most all the cats, you know. Fletcher Smith played with everybody. And so many other musicians that was here at the time that— Like Marshall Royal know, because he was in that environment, knowing and playing with those cats. I just played with a few of them, but he played with all of them, you know. Well, okay.

ISOARDI: Britt, thanks again very much.

WOODMAN: All right. Okay.