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CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

René Bloch

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

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

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: October 21, 1925, Los Angeles.

Education: Jefferson High School, Los Angeles.

Spouse: Miriam Siqueiros Bloch, married 1963, three children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Played saxophone with the following:

Bardu Ali
Charlie Barnet
Frankie Carle
Harry James
Johnny Otis
Perez Prado
Floyd Ray
Alvino Rey
Gerald Wilson

Saxophonist-bandleader, 1959-64.

Assistant to the president, Local 47, American Federation of Musicians, 1965-79.

Co-leader, Israel's Hope, 1981-91.

Rabbi, Temple Beth Shalom, Highland, California, 1991-present.

SELECTED RECORDINGS AS A BANDLEADER:

Afro-Blues Quintet featuring René Bloch (Mira Records)

Everbody Likes to Cha-Cha-Cha (Hi-Fi Records)

La Pachanga (Capitol Records)

Let's Dance the Mambo (Capitol Records)

Mr. Latin (Atlantic Records)

Mucho Rock with René Bloch (Andex Records)
With Israel's Hope:

Introducing Israel's Hope (Israel's Hope
Productions)

Arise O Lord (Israel's Hope Productions)

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

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

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Bloch's home, Victorville, California.

Dates, length of sessions: July 12, 1995 (81 minutes); July 13, 1995 (92); July 20, 1995 (51).

Total number of recorded hours: 3.75

Persons present during interview: Bloch and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

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

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

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Bloch's childhood in Los Angeles and his education at Jefferson High School and continuing through his career as an alto saxophonist in swing bands and later in Latin jazz bands in Los Angeles and his employment at the American Federation of Musicians Local 47. Major topics covered include Bloch's musical training at Jefferson High School and with Merle Johnston, the evolution of musical styles and venues on Central Avenue, Latin jazz in Los Angeles, and politics in the musicians union.

EDITING:

Rebecca Stone, oral history assistant, edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Whenever possible, the proper names of nightclubs were checked against articles and advertisements in back issues of the California Eagle. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

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

Alex Cline, editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history. Derek DeNardo, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

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

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JULY 12, 1995

ISOARDI: René, let's begin your reminiscences of Central [Avenue] by going back to your roots: where you were born, what your family was like, and perhaps maybe something on your family background.

BLOCH: Okay. Well, going back to the time that I was born-- It was in Los Angeles, of course.

ISOARDI: When?

BLOCH: You want to know the year?

ISOARDI: The exact year. [laughter]

BLOCH: Nineteen twenty-five is when I was born. October 21 was my birth date. And I have three older brothers: George [Bloch], the oldest brother, Louis [Bloch]--he since has died--and my other brother is Bert [Bloch]. And mother and father--

ISOARDI: What are their names?

BLOCH: Louis [Bloch] is my father's name, Caroline [Mathewson Bloch] is my mother's name. And of course, all of us, all of my brothers, were born in L.A. And by the way, we were living in the area of Thirty-eighth [Street] and Maple Avenue, which is the district of Jefferson High School. So all of my brothers went to Jefferson High School, which was, oh, I would say about two, three miles away. I don't know. It

was a long walk. [laughter]

ISOARDI: When did your family come to Los Angeles? Do you know how far back?

BLOCH: A long time ago. We're talking about back in 1915 or so.

ISOARDI: Do you know where they came from?

BLOCH: My father's a French Jew who came from that area in Alsace-Lorraine. My mother was born in an area close to Sonora in Mexico. Her father was a doctor for the Southern Pacific [Railway]. He was working for the Southern Pacific and the gold miners who were digging gold in that area. As a doctor who was trained in San Francisco, he was living in that area, and that's where my mother was born, in that area. So she was able to speak Spanish, as I am able to speak Spanish a bit--not great but somewhat. It was of a lot of use to me to be able to speak Spanish in some of the organizations that I worked with, like Perez Prado's band. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

ISOARDI: Sure, sure.

BLOCH: They call him the king of the mambo. When he came out here I had already been playing with some of the big bands like Harry James and Charlie Barnet and Frankie Carle. But before all of that I got my musical training from Jefferson High School from Dr. Samuel Browne.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you, your father then came to Los Angeles from Europe?

BLOCH: Yes.

ISOARDI: And met your mother here?

BLOCH: Yes.

ISOARDI: Before you get to Jeff[erson High School], was there any kind of musical training or music in the family before high school? When did you first sort of discover music and start playing?

BLOCH: Well, when I was interested in music I used to like Artie Shaw as a clarinet player, and I wanted to be a clarinet player first. [laughter] We didn't have a lot of money, so I took lessons from somebody who rented me a clarinet. That didn't last too long because--

ISOARDI: How old were you?

BLOCH: I must have been around ten years old.

ISOARDI: When you started?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And you began on clarinet, not piano?

BLOCH: Actually I began on this metal clarinet, you know?

ISOARDI: The old Albert system?

BLOCH: Well, no, it was a Boehm system, but it was a metal clarinet. It was a rental, and it was really lousy. [laughter]
It was discouraging, but my heart was still into being a

musician even at that time. But Artie Shaw was one of my favorite musicians as far as clarinet playing was concerned. Later on, of course, I started to get involved with the saxophone. My first saxophone I got from a friend of my brother's who was going to Jeff. His name was Frank DeCaro. He sold me a silver sax for twenty-five bucks. So that was my first sax. At that time I was around twelve or thirteen years old.

My first teacher was John Sturdevant. Did you ever hear of him?

ISOARDI: No.

BLOCH: He was one of the teachers at the Gray Conservatory of Music.

ISOARDI: Gray? Where was that?

BLOCH: On Jefferson Boulevard. Yeah, so that was-- I'm not sure if Lloyd Reese was also one of the teachers there; I can't remember. But I was kind of young at that time. Anyway, my teacher would come to my house and give me lessons.

ISOARDI: So this is before high school that you had just gotten your sax?

BLOCH: Yeah, this is before high school.

ISOARDI: Can you talk briefly a bit about what your neighborhood was like? You were--what?--Thirty-eighth and Maple? You're a couple of miles west of Jeff.

BLOCH: Yeah, we were west of Jefferson, west of Central Avenue.

It was a peaceful area. There were all kinds of people living there, you know, every color. I remember not only Jewish, but there were German, there were Italian, there were Mexican, black. And there was no difference. Everybody was equal.

I can never remember any kind of prejudice at that time. I can never remember anybody putting anybody down for whatever they were. Never did I hear of anything of discrimination of any kind during that time. It was a good time to live, I think.

ISOARDI: Do you think that was kind of a shaping force for you, then, growing up in that kind of scene?

BLOCH: Yeah, because there was no difference in people. People were all the same. As far as our religion is concerned, we kind of strayed away from our religion, as many other people have. A lot of Jewish people have-- You know, they do bar mitzvah and then they forget all their religious training and all that stuff. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't in the mood for any kind of religious-- I knew in my heart that there was a God. That's all I could say about that. During that time my mother was religious and my dad was an agnostic, but--

ISOARDI: Was your mother Catholic?

BLOCH: No, they were Jewish.

ISOARDI Oh, they were both Jewish.

BLOCH: Yeah. So it was a Jewish background, but not anything too conformist.

ISOARDI: So your parents did go to services?

BLOCH: Sure, once in a while. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] The big holidays, maybe?

BLOCH: Maybe. Could be.

After I started learning the sax from Mr. Sturdevant-- I did about, oh, two or three years with him, and then I went to Jeff High School.

ISOARDI: Where were you going to junior high school?

BLOCH: Junior high school was John Adams Junior High School.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

BLOCH: Oh, gosh. I can't remember exactly where it was.

ISOARDI: Closer to home, though, probably, than Jeff?

BLOCH: Well, it was also within walking distance, because you'd have to go past Jefferson Boulevard towards Adams [Boulevard]. It was near Adams, I think. I can't remember exactly where it was, but that was my junior high school. I was in the glee club. As close as I got to any kind of music was singing in the glee club. Then my voice changed, and then they kicked me out.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Did your parents play at all? Anyone else in the family?

BLOCH: No, nobody played anything. As a matter of fact, my mother and father wanted my older brother George to play violin, but he hated violin. You know, they'd try to force him to play, and he'd be crying and practicing his violin. He didn't like it, so they couldn't encourage him to continue. So that was the end of the violin for him.

But as far as my training was concerned, when I started on that clarinet with that-- It was a conservatory that I went to at first. When I was ten years old I went to that place. I can't remember the teacher's name, but it was a group of students, and everybody rented their instruments.

I didn't like that, but that's the way it was. I didn't get the individual attention that I needed to have, so I got discouraged. After a few weeks I just turned in the clarinet.

I didn't like the metal clarinet, anyway. I still continued to want to be a musician. I thought that was my life, to be a musician.

I kept bugging my mother, "I want to get a sax." I kept telling them that. So my brother finally had this friend who went to Jefferson High School who said, "I've got a sax.

It's a silver sax, and it's only twenty-five bucks." So I took it and started practicing on that thing and did as well as I could with it. And with the teaching I got from Mr. Sturdevant-- You can only go so far. But he taught me a little

bit about reading the music and all.

Finally, when I was going to Jefferson I was in their junior band. I remember Mr. [Henri] Bouchet was our teacher.

The senior band, of course, would be the ultimate for that school. But I was in the junior band because I was just beginning.

And then I really, really wanted to continue on this, and I finally started to meet some of the guys who played instruments.

My teacher was Samuel Browne.

ISOARDI: From the first year at Jeff?

BLOCH: From the first year, yeah. And then after that--

ISOARDI: What did you take from him? What did he teach?

BLOCH: Music theory at first.

ISOARDI: Harmony? That kind of--?

BLOCH: Yeah, harmony, music theory, and arranging. During that time I used to fool around and joke around a lot and not take things as seriously as I should have. And I remember Mr. Browne would say, "You know, you're going to be sorry if you continue to--" Because I wasn't the only one. Everybody would joke around and have fun, but he would really try to get us to be serious about everything. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: As you were saying, Sam Browne was warning you guys to be serious.

BLOCH: Yeah. We were just cutups, a lot of cutups, you know.

[laughter] It's sad but true. I remember some of the guys

who were in the class, like John Randolph, Clifford Burton, another guy named Eddie Jones. Britt Woodman's brother was there playing. He played the horn.

ISOARDI: Was that--?

BLOCH: Britt Woodman.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I was trying to think of his--

BLOCH: He played trombone with Duke Ellington.

ISOARDI: Right. His brother William "Brother" Woodman? He was a saxophonist.

BLOCH: No, that was another one.

ISOARDI: Coney [Woodman]?

BLOCH: The younger Woodman.

ISOARDI: George [Woodman]?

BLOCH: I don't remember his first name.

ISOARDI: This was about 1939 or '40?

BLOCH: God, no. I'm not that old. [laughter] We're talking about--

ISOARDI: You were about fourteen, fifteen?

BLOCH: Yeah. I graduated from Jeff in 1944, and I got drafted into the army. I got released three months later. [laughter]

Because I took my sax with me to the army. I was really involved with my music so much. But I'm getting ahead of everything.

ISOARDI: You made a jump from being not very serious and Sam Browne warning you to being very serious?

BLOCH: Well, what happened was that I was learning some of the things, but I wasn't as fast on my reading as I should have been. I wanted to be more technical. At that time I used to love Tab Smith and Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter.

They were my favorite sax players for alto, so I wanted to be able to play that way. I liked Benny Carter's tone, and I liked Tab Smith's execution. And Johnny Hodges, I liked his tone and I liked his execution, so that was a great combination.

But what happened was that I remember I was invited to go to a rehearsal at some place over on Third [Street] and Vermont [Avenue] one time. Some band was rehearsing, and I sat in, and I realized that I couldn't keep up on the reading as I should have. So when I came home I told myself, "I need to get somebody who's really going to teach me how to read, how to really execute on my horn the way I should." So at that time somebody from school told me about a teacher who came in from New York. His name was Merle Johnston. And Merle Johnston, at that time-- We're talking about 1942, something like that. Anyway, I called him up, and I had to take the "H" car, a streetcar, that would take me all the way to his studio.

ISOARDI: Which was where?

BLOCH: In Hollywood. And it dropped me off almost right in front of his place. I remember coming into that place.

Merle Johnston was a real character. He had taught a lot of people in New York, a lot of studio musicians, and I was really interested in the fact that he could have people in the studios playing their horns like they should. So he asked me, "What is it you want to do as far as your playing is concerned?"

And I said, "Well, I want to be able to play like--" I hadn't heard of Charlie Parker yet but--"Johnny Hodges and Tab Smith and Benny Carter."

And he said, "Well, you know, you've got to practice. You've got to do a lot of practicing. If you don't practice, you might as well forget it, because you're not going to make it."

So I got the books that I needed to get. I remember the first book was called a Klosé Twenty-five Daily Studies. Do you remember that? That's what I started on. And then the Universal sax book.

ISOARDI: Paul de Ville's Universal Method [for Saxophone]?

BLOCH: Yeah, right. So I started on that, but it was just-- I studied technique and vibrato--and I mean vibrato. He had the vibrato measured to each beat for-- At first it was three vibrations to each beat. I had to have a metronome. I mean, it was really technical. So I started on that, and I started practicing maybe an hour a day.

So each week I would go over there. It was not enough. He would really get angry if my lesson wasn't the way it was supposed to be--I mean, if I wasn't up to it. And he was the kind of guy who would cuss. [laughter] I mean, really, he didn't hold back any words if you didn't do your lesson right. So I was fearful of him. So I started to practice three, four, five, six, seven hours a day. I started practicing my horn from ten o'clock in the morning sometimes until ten o'clock at night. I'd take a break--

ISOARDI: No kidding!

BLOCH: That's the way it was. And even during the time I was going to school I'd go to school early and go into Mr. Browne's room and practice in his room by myself. And I started to improve a lot. My tone started getting better.

That horn that I had was very pitiful, so I took a job working on Saturdays at a gas station--putting in gas, cleaning windshields, and doing lubrications and all that on Saturdays.

I was getting two dollars a week for that for all day. [laughter] Two dollars a week. But that was enough for my mother to be impressed with the fact that I really wanted to get a sax. So I went to Lockie Music Company, and I bought a Buescher. That was my first sax, a Buescher alto sax. And that to me was really, really good. I paid two dollars a week on payments, but my mother started to help me out to pay it. She was a

seamstress, and it was tough times, but she would help me get my lessons and also to help pay off this sax, which I finally paid off. But that was my first sax, and it was a good horn. I found out Earle Warren had one just like it.

Earle Warren was the lead alto player for Count Basie.

ISOARDI: Right. He played a Buescher, too.

BLOCH: Yeah. So I said, "Hey, this must be a good horn."

So I started to really improve on my instrument a lot.

ISOARDI: And you were probably getting a lot more out of Merle Johnston.

BLOCH: Oh, Merle, he would make me study. And my tone started to get better. He was really seeing the improvement in me.

So, as I said, from 1942 to '44, when I-- I got drafted to go into the army, and I went into the army and took my horn with me, because I didn't want to leave it anywhere. I said, "If you want me, you've got to take my sax." But they didn't want my sax. Nevertheless, I took my horn with me and went into the barracks. I used to practice in there.

I mean, this is crazy, isn't it? But that's what I used to do. Finally I got caught up in the problems of the training exercises, and I went into-- I hurt my foot in one of the marches, and I went into the hospital. They were checking it out, and after a few weeks they decided to discharge me.

So I got an honorable discharge. That was just something that I didn't expect was going to happen, because everybody who was getting drafted, man, they were going in. This was 1944. They were going into either Europe or to the Orient, to the battles over there. Both of my brothers were in the army. George was in the European section, and my other brother, Bert, was in the Solomon Islands and the Philippine invasion, Luzon and all that. They were involved with that.

ISOARDI: Where did you go when you were drafted? Where did they send you?

BLOCH: Camp Roberts.

ISOARDI: Just up here?

BLOCH: California, right.

ISOARDI: Oh. That's convenient.

BLOCH: It wasn't too far.

ISOARDI: That's just above King City, right?

BLOCH: I don't know exactly. I think it's near Santa Barbara, just above Santa Barbara. Anyway, it was miserable. I hated it. I hated the army. Because I thought they were going to put me into a band, which--

ISOARDI: Did you request that? Did you tell them you were a musician and all?

BLOCH: Yeah, sure. That's why I took my horn with me. I was practicing. But they gave me a rifle, and they said,

"No, you're going to march. You're going to do this. You're going to do that."

And I said, "But I'm a musician."

"No, you're not."

So I was really in a real depressed state in that position where I couldn't really do what I wanted to do.

So when I got my discharge I went back to Jeff High School.

There was a sax player by the name of Prince Harrison. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: Prince was a wonderful tenor player. He was playing with Bardu Ali's band at the Lincoln Theatre. So he heard me play, and he heard the improvement, because by the time that he heard me play the first time to the time that I was playing then, he knew that I was good enough to play with Bardu's band at the Lincoln Theatre.

ISOARDI: And because of your work with Merle you could read the charts then.

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. So what happened was that I went and auditioned with Bardu's band at the Lincoln Theatre. Boy, right away he hired me, and I started playing lead alto with the band. And he had me playing solos.

ISOARDI: Right away?

BLOCH: Right away, on the stage.

ISOARDI: Was this your first professional gig, really?

BLOCH: It wasn't the first professional, because the first professional one was a high school band. You know, we went up to--

ISOARDI: Playing in the Jeff band?

BLOCH: Yeah, the Jeff band. Don't forget, in the Jefferson band--I forgot the name of the band--but the leader was Everett Myart. He had a brother. He was one of the Myart brothers.

Anyway, he was this funny guy. He played trumpet. But he had this big band, and we'd play at some of the places. He was a real jiver. [laughter] He had some funny things to say, always saying "mop mop" and all that stuff. You know, he'd slap you on the palm of the hand and say, "Mop mop, man, you've got it. You're playing it."

ISOARDI: Who were the Myart brothers?

BLOCH: Well, one of them played trumpet, Loyal [Myart]. Do you remember Loyal?

ISOARDI: No.

BLOCH: He was one of the trumpet players with Johnny Otis's band, also. They had, oh, three or four brothers who played instruments. I don't know what ever happened to them. In the band at that time-- I can't remember who all the guys were, but I remember Dupree Bolton. He was one of the trumpet players. And Clarence Jones was the bass player. Very good

bass player.

ISOARDI: And everyone was from Jeff?

BLOCH: Yeah. This was all Jefferson High School. And I remember there were a lot of good musicians who had gone to Jeff before us. Dexter Gordon used to go there before; he went to Jefferson High School. And let's see. Who else went before I did? I think Jackie Kelso [also known as Kelson].

I'm not sure. He must be older than I am, because he--
[laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] A few years.

BLOCH: And I don't remember where Buddy Collette went, what school he went to.

ISOARDI: He went to Jordan [High School] in Watts.

BLOCH: Oh, did he? At any rate, I guess they heard me-- Let me get back to the Lincoln Theatre. I was doing pretty well over there, and Johnny Otis and some of the guys from his band--they were playing at the Club Alabam--heard me play, and they thought I sounded like Preston Love. So they were looking for a lead player for their band, and they wanted me to quit and go join them at the Club Alabam. And I didn't want to quit yet, because that was the first real good gig that I had, you know.

ISOARDI: It paid very well?

BLOCH: Not very well. It was \$135 a week seven days a week.

That's not very good. But, I mean, to me that was very good money. Maybe it was less than that. I don't recall. I don't remember exactly what it was. I remember that when I finally decided to go with Johnny Otis, that didn't pay a lot of money either.

But I remember one way we did get paid. Mosby, who was the owner [of the Club Alabam]--

ISOARDI: Curtis Mosby?

BLOCH: Yeah. He would pay us off in cash, in little envelopes, but he had a big gun right next to him. [laughter]

ISOARDI: What? [laughter]

BLOCH: I'll never forget that. I guess in case anybody would try to rob him. But we'd be in line getting our money. That's the way it was.

But, you know, there was no fear of any kind. I used to walk to and from the job. Finally some of the guys would give me a ride. I finally got a ride to the place that I was playing. Like even at the Lincoln Theatre, I used to walk to the Lincoln Theatre. I didn't have transportation.

Oh, wait a minute. There was a trumpet player--I can't remember the names of who was playing in the band--good trumpet player.

Anyway, they would give me a ride every time to the theater.

Man, I wish I could remember his name. Jelly was his name.

ISOARDI: Where were you living at this time?

BLOCH: At 3813 Maple Avenue.

ISOARDI: So you were still living at home when you got back from the service?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. In our home we stay with our parents until we're ready to get married, and then we go.

ISOARDI: So you were doing pretty well. I mean, you'd graduated from Jeff now, you played with the Jeff band. You went on to play with the Jeff senior band?

BLOCH: Yeah, the so-called jazz band. No, they didn't call it jazz band; it was a swing band. Jazz band sounded like Dixieland band. We wouldn't call it jazz; we would call it a swing band, the swing band of Jefferson High School. But it's later on that the people changed with the names. Instead of swing they would call it jazz. It's funny. [laughter]
Things changed.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. When did you start playing with the senior band?

BLOCH: I started playing with them about the second year.

ISOARDI: Your second year at Jeff?

BLOCH: Yeah. You know, I started to improve. I started getting better, but that was before I went with Merle. After I went with Merle I got a lot better. Then I played my first jazz solo, swing solo, or whatever-you-want-to-call-it solo, with the swing band.

ISOARDI: Do you remember what the tune was?

BLOCH: "Honeysuckle Rose."

ISOARDI: Was it?

BLOCH: And, you know, I didn't know what I was playing, but, man, everybody thought I was really doing something great.

I didn't know what it was coming out; it was just coming out. [laughter] It was nice. And then I really started to get enthusiastic about playing solos and stuff like that.

I remember our swing band would be invited to go to different schools, and we went to a junior high school up in-- I forget.

I don't remember. It was a junior high school. The kids really loved the band. I remember my solo was on "Uptown Blues." It was one of Jimmie Lunceford's songs. I used to really get going on that thing. It was exciting for me, because when I started playing the solo everybody would start clapping and screaming. I thought I was a real big star. [laughter]

We were invited to Canoga High School also, our swing band, and we did a date over there one time, and it went well.

ISOARDI: So you guys traveled? That band played around town?

BLOCH: Well, it did play a few places, yeah.

ISOARDI: Was there any other high school band like that around?

BLOCH: Not that I know of. I didn't hear of any other band like that. I remember some of the arrangements were like Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train," and one was "String

of Pearls," Glenn Miller. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BLOCH: They were all stock arrangements. Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump."

ISOARDI: But what wonderful experience and training for a high school player, somebody just coming out.

BLOCH: Yeah, that's true. I don't know if they have that anymore, but--

ISOARDI: It's pretty rare.

BLOCH: Yeah. It's too bad, because things really changed a lot as far as music is concerned.

ISOARDI: So you went from Jeff to playing with the Myart brothers on the side also?

BLOCH: The Myart brothers, yeah.

ISOARDI: The Myart brothers and their band.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And then when you come back from the service-- You graduated from Jeff and you were drafted immediately?

BLOCH: Yeah, pretty much.

ISOARDI: Then you came back, and all of a sudden you have a career.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: People are after you.

BLOCH: Yeah. I went to the Lincoln Theatre. I was there

for quite a few months, then Johnny Otis had invited me to be with his band. I didn't realize what kind of band it was.

It was a Basie-style band. That's the kind of band I really enjoyed. When I really realized what it was, I quit Bardu Ali's band and I went with Johnny Otis's band.

It's amazing. I had played with some band during the summer. It was a band that went up to Spokane, Washington, and Bill Gaither was the tenor player. I tried to get people from Jeff to come along with the bands that I would be playing with. I remember when I was with Perez Prado's band, I got Walter Benton to join the band. I don't know if you've heard of him.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BLOCH: And Frank Butler.

ISOARDI: Oh, fine, fine drummer.

BLOCH: I got him to play in the band, too.

ISOARDI: Both of them went through Jeff?

BLOCH: Walter did. I don't know where Frank went. But it was a good thing. Walter and I used to room together with Perez Prado's band. He was a great tenor player. I don't know what's happened to him. I just thought he was going to be one of the best, because he had great technique and great knowledge of chords and everything. I just thought he was going to be tremendous. But I think he got a little

carried away with drugs or something. Anyway, there were a lot of other guys who went to Jeff who were good players. Sonny Criss went there, [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely went there. After I graduated, Frank Morgan went there.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BLOCH: These are guys who played--

ISOARDI: Wonderful saxophonists.

BLOCH: Yeah. Eric Dolphy-- I don't know what school he went to.

ISOARDI: I think he went to Dorsey [High School].

BLOCH: I know I used to rehearse or play in gigs with Gerald Wilson's band, and Eric would be playing the third alto and I would be playing lead alto.

ISOARDI: Really? With Gerald Wilson?

BLOCH: Yeah. Not steady, but once in a while I'd play with Gerald's band. I think we played the Pasadena Civic [Auditorium] or somewhere. There were a lot of places that I can't remember where we played. But that's where I knew Eric Dolphy and some of the other guys. When I was playing with Johnny Otis's band, Paul Quinichette was one of the tenor players.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BLOCH: Yeah. They'd call him "Little Pres" or "Vice Pres."

ISOARDI: Oh, right.

BLOCH: Because he [sounded like Lester Young].

ISOARDI: He must have been awfully young then.

BLOCH: I guess. He's on that picture there.

ISOARDI: Let me just ask you quickly, René, before we get past Jeff-- What was it like there socially? Was it the same kind of situation as your neighborhood was where everybody sort of mixed with no problems?

BLOCH: Yeah. I never saw any problems there at all.

Everything was always peaceful as far as I could see. I never heard of any fights or any arguments like you see now, where you see people fighting each other and all that. I never saw that. Like I said, I could walk down the streets at three o'clock in the morning with my sax and nobody would bother me. I felt as safe as anyone can be, because it was a great time, I think. As a matter of fact, going back during the time when I was studying with Mr. Samuel Browne-- He was the one who got me into the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians]. It was what they called Local 767, which is-- They called it the colored union at that time. There were two unions. There was Local 47, which was the so-called white union, and then Mr. Browne got me into the union over at Local 767, which was on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Why would you join that one as opposed to 47?

BLOCH: It was cheaper.

ISOARDI: Was that the reason?

BLOCH: Much cheaper. [laughter] Oh, yeah. There was no comparison. But the first day that I joined the union there was so much of a need for musicians that the first night somebody hired me to go play a job during the time that I'm going to school. And I'm not used to playing head arrangements and stuff like that. So I went someplace-- I think it was out in Long Beach or-- It was real far. They picked me up and took me over there, and I played the best I could, but I felt that I could learn a lot with these guys. They were all good players. It was just a trio, but it was too hard on me, because after they got through they would go to a jam session, and they'd be smoking pot in the car. [laughter] And I just wasn't into that, you know. I was so dumb and innocent, I just couldn't-- I didn't even want to breathe the air in the car. And I thank God for that, that I didn't get involved with that, didn't like the smoke or anything like that.

ISOARDI: At that time was there any attempt to--? Well, obviously there were two unions. There was segregation within the structure.

BLOCH: Segregation. I didn't realize there was segregation until I found out that they had two separate unions. I didn't know that. I thought there was only one and that Local 767 was the only union.

ISOARDI: But in 767 they were accepting musicians who were

not black?

BLOCH: Yeah. Another musician who was with us, a guy by the name of Frank Ortega, he was a Mexican piano player, later became pretty good. He had his own band at one of the big hotels, but he was also in the band with us at Jefferson High School. He played his style of piano, like Count Basie style.

But then he joined the union, too. Others who joined the union, too-- I guess Tony [Anthony] Ortega also joined that union; I'm not sure. And a few others I can't remember. But nobody asked you, "Well, what color are you?" Nothing like that. There was never anything like that. I started meeting other so-called musicians, players, and they'd call me a "hebe" and things like that, you know, kiddingly, but I just laughed it off, because I didn't realize a thing like that would be in existence.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: In fact, there was one guy in particular who was really anti everything. He was a good bass player, but he was kind of crazy. But he and this other-- I don't want to mention their names because-- But these guys who are--

ISOARDI: This is some years later?

BLOCH: A few years later, yeah, after I had been with Johnny Otis's band, and I started playing with some of these white bands and started realizing how much-- By that time, by the

way, I was forced to go to Local 47, but you know what? I didn't have to pay the full initiation fee.

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BLOCH: I was forced to join Local 47.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BLOCH: I don't remember exactly. It must have been about 1946. But during that time there was a move for the amalgamation, or getting both unions together. I don't remember the exact year, but they finally formed the one union and--

ISOARDI: It was in the early fifties.

BLOCH: Is that when it was? I don't remember. But I do remember that I was forced to go from Local 767 to Local 47.

ISOARDI: Why? Why did that come up?

BLOCH: Because they said, "Well, you don't belong in that union. You've got to belong in this union." I don't know who it was who forced me--

ISOARDI: Was it someone inside of 767 who told you you had to go to 47?

BLOCH: No, someone from 47.

ISOARDI: From 47?

BLOCH: Yeah. Yeah. So I know that I didn't want to do that, but because I was starting to work jobs I had to do what I had to do, and that was to join the union. And I do remember that I fought against that situation. I thought that was

the most aggravating thing that I could ever imagine, where there had to be two different types of unions. I never wanted to be a part of anything like that. But it meant that I was going to have to do that or be fined or something, I forget.

It was a desperate situation for me. Being as dumb as I was, I didn't know how to fight that or argue that point. But all they did was transfer me from one union to the other. I didn't have to pay anything extra, but all I had to do was keep up my dues. I still have my 1944 musicians union card, when I--

ISOARDI: A 767 card?

BLOCH: No, Local 47. I don't remember the card from Local 767. I don't think I got one. [laughter] All I got was a receipt that I paid my initiation fee; I don't remember what it was. It wasn't a lot of money. I knew it was a lot more money at Local 47. But a lot of things have happened. A lot of things change.

ISOARDI: So when the amalgamation started, were you involved in that? Were you around then? Did you try and merge the two unions?

BLOCH: I wasn't actively involved with it. I did know that people like, I guess-- Was it Marl Young and Buddy Collette? I think they were involved with it. Because Buddy had a chance

to be playing in Jerry Fielding's studio band with Groucho Marx, but--

ISOARDI: The Groucho show [You Bet Your Life]?

BLOCH: Yeah. By the way, when I was practicing and doing as well as I was doing as far as music was concerned, Buddy heard me play, I guess. He wanted to know who I was studying from, and he went to the same teacher, to Merle Johnston. He started studying with Merle Johnston. And then Jackie Kelso wanted to know what kind of a mouthpiece I had. He wanted the same kind of mouthpiece because he wanted to get the same kind of tone. [laughter] It's weird. I know that I liked Willie Smith's tone, so I wanted to get a mouthpiece like he had. It's funny how you get somebody and he says, "Man, if I can get a mouthpiece like that then I'll sound like him," but it's all up to the individual.

ISOARDI: It really is. It truly is. What mouthpiece did you play on?

BLOCH: It was a Brilhart 2 Star, but it was refaced by Merle Johnston. I don't know how he did it. He used to just get it and rub it and open it up. I still have it. It was a real closed mouthpiece, but I-- Oh, when I was with Johnny Otis I recorded "Harlem Nocturne," and I recorded with that instrument, the Buescher, and with that 2 Star Brilhart, and

it came out real well. I even hit the high A on the first take. By the way, you know, that's when they didn't have tapes. You couldn't go over it if you hit the wrong note.

ISOARDI: And splice it or whatever.

BLOCH: You couldn't splice it. So thank God that I hit the high A. [laughter] But I remember later on we did a concert at Wrigley Field--Johnny Otis did--and Woody Herman's band was there also. T-Bone Walker was there. My father saw one of the signs. He said, "Yeah, I saw Johnny Otis's name on one of the postcards, and somebody by the name of Beefsteak Walker is also on there." [laughter] I said, "Oh, that's T-Bone Walker."

ISOARDI: Wrong cut. [laughter]

BLOCH: My dad didn't know anything about music at all whatsoever.

ISOARDI: What did he think about your career taking off like it did?

BLOCH: He was excited. Let me put it this way: When I used to practice--I used to practice a lot--sometimes he'd be downstairs reading. He used to read a lot. I'd be blowing my horn upstairs in this duplex that we lived in, and he'd say, "Hey, it's about time for it to stop. You know, it's ten o'clock at night."

And I said, "Hey, Dad, you want me to be the best saxophone player in the world or not?"

And then he wouldn't say anything, so I'd go back to practicing.

Because I was definitely sure that I had to be the best, you know. I wanted to be the best, because living in an area where there's a lot of poverty and stuff like that, I just wanted to do something with my life. And it was not easy.

So I just took the best road that I could, and that road was to do the best that I could with my horn.

Merle Johnston finally convinced me to get a Selmer sax, so I got rid of my Aristocrat Buescher. But it was a good horn. I wish I still had it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I think Bueschers are wonderful. I love the sound of the old Bueschers. I like the old Conns a lot, too.

BLOCH: Yeah. That was a good one, too. I remember that Benny Carter used to play a Conn, if I remember right. He used to play a Brilhart mouthpiece. And I think Willie Smith also played a Conn. He finally changed to a Selmer. I think Merle Johnston convinced a lot of guys to change over to the Selmer.

ISOARDI: [laughter] I know Marshal Royal also plays a silver Conn that he bought when he was a teenager, I think, and he played it for his entire life.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: It had a wonderful sound.

BLOCH: Yeah. But I think he finally ended up with a Selmer, if I'm not mistaken. Or did he?

ISOARDI: I don't think so. The last time I saw him play was a couple of years ago in L.A., and he still had that silver Conn.

BLOCH: Oh, really? I didn't --

ISOARDI: Maybe he went back and forth a couple of times.

BLOCH: I don't know.

I remember when I had my own band, those were the guys that I had in my band. [shows photograph] It was a Latin jazz band, and we did a concert with Count Basie in San Diego.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BLOCH: Oh gosh, it was during the Freedom of Stars Festival or something like that. I have some of that literature somewhere around here.

ISOARDI: About the fifties?

BLOCH: Yeah, it must have been the fifties, fifties or closer to sixties. Yeah. Closer to the sixties. That's when there was a lot of trying to get things together. I guess that's-- You know, again, I don't realize how much things have changed, but there was a lot of disunity among the races, and it's

a lot better now, but still I think it could be a lot better.

Anyway, I remember seeing Marshal Royal. He is one of my favorite sax players. I saw his horn, or rather his mouthpiece. I think he had the same kind of mouthpiece that I had, Brilhart. I think it was a Brilhart. Anyway, I said, "Well, gee, I can get the same sound that he does." You know, it was the same old kind of stuff.

ISOARDI: [laughter] The games you play.

BLOCH: But I remember that Willie Smith had a mouthpiece called Lelandais or something like that, so I got a mouthpiece like his. But I didn't sound like him. [laughter] I remember I went to go see him one time when he was with Harry James's band, and I showed him my mouthpiece, and he said, "Hey, I like that. Can I buy it from you?"

I said, "No."

He said, "Oh. That's a gift, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I can't give it away, I can't sell it--" But I didn't realize-- By the way, Preston Love, he's another guy that must have liked-- You know what? It must have been Preston Love that also had one of those Lelandais mouthpieces.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. Because he played a Brilhart at first, then he went to this mouthpiece. I would like to get another Lelandais mouthpiece. [laughter] But I still have mine. I messed it up because I tried to open it up. I really ruined it. But I'm sure I can get one somewhere, somehow. I have so many mouthpieces. I'm still back on the Brilhart, you know.

ISOARDI: Let's go back a bit to your years at Jeff and all and talk a little bit about what Central Avenue was like. Do you remember it before the war [World War II] at all?

BLOCH: Central Avenue was-- There were a lot of things going on, you know, besides the Downbeat [Club], which was a few doors away from the Club Alabam. They had all the big stars who would come in there. There was also the Club Finale that was up-- The Club Finale was where Charlie Parker played.

ISOARDI: Really? Do you remember where that was?

BLOCH: That was up in what is now Little Tokyo, there in that area.

ISOARDI: Oh, so downtownish?

BLOCH: Yeah. And as a matter of fact, I played with Floyd Ray's band in that area, in that place.

ISOARDI: So this was the middle forties or so?

BLOCH: Yeah, middle forties. It must have been when Charlie

Parker was here, because I remember that I saw him playing at the Club Finale. And I think Clarence Jones was playing bass with him, if I'm not mistaken, at that time.

ISOARDI: So this is the time that he came out with Dizzy Gillespie to play Billy Berg's?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And then he stayed on for a disastrous month.

BLOCH: Yeah. He must have stayed on for that. I remember he went to Camarillo [State Hospital] or something.

ISOARDI: Did you see him at Billy Berg's when they were there?

BLOCH: Not at Billy Berg's. I never went to the west side.

I stayed in the east side for everything. I never ventured out there very much. Billy Berg's. I never even went into Billy Berg's place.

ISOARDI: Never?

BLOCH: Uh-uh. All the jazz places or places where they had good music was in, like I said, the Club Finale, the Alabam, and the one uptown. There were some other ones. I can't remember all the names, but it was pretty-- Central Avenue, there were a lot of good things going on all the time, and probably other areas too, but Central Avenue was always a pretty lively area. I regret that I don't remember enough of the things I should remember.

ISOARDI: What about jam sessions? Were they going on quite a bit? Did you have a chance to really work out with a variety of people?

BLOCH: Yeah. There were some jam sessions that went on all the time all over the place. Like I said, there was this one place that had a jam session every night. And when I first joined the union, these guys whom I went with, they parked the car, then they went upstairs to this place. I can't remember the name of the place, but they went up there to jam. And there were other places. There were so many that I couldn't even remember them all. But they would have jam sessions on Sunday afternoons in some places. And when I got out of the army, I started to go to as many sessions as I could to try to get around as much as I could. But my main forte was playing lead alto and playing lead in sax sections. I got the opportunity to play with Harry James's band when Willie Smith left and--

ISOARDI: When was that?

BLOCH: When he went with Duke Ellington's band. I was with that band for about four months. You know, we toured up and down California. But, man, there was politics in that band.

ISOARDI: In what sense?

BLOCH: The drummer [Jackie Mills] wanted his guy to play,

so I just left the band at the Casino Gardens. I said, "Hey, get whoever you want."

ISOARDI: You were playing lead?

BLOCH: Yeah. I was playing the things Willie Smith had been playing. But it was just a bunch of cliques, and I just couldn't make that.

ISOARDI: Well, I guess so many people from James's bands at one point or another went off and started their own bands.

I guess it's not surprising in a sense. That must have been--

BLOCH: But with Charlie Barnet's band-- Let's see. It's somewhere here. That's Vido Musso. I played with his band.

And Charlie Barnet's band was there at the Club Oasis. Remember the Club Oasis?

ISOARDI: I've heard the name. Where was it at?

BLOCH: It was on Western Avenue, I believe. Yeah. I think it was on Western Avenue. I forgot. At any rate, we played there for a couple of weeks. It didn't do a great business.

I think that was the last time he did anything. The band broke up. But we had done a tour on the East Coast with that band and then came back, and then I joined Harry James's band.

ISOARDI: Let me go back just a little bit and have you sketch the personalities, maybe. Your first major professional gig, that was with Bardu Ali when you first came back.

BLOCH: That was my major gig.

ISOARDI: Right. It really sort of established you then.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: On the avenue and elsewhere.

BLOCH: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: What was Bardu Ali like? What kind of person was he?

BLOCH: Great guy. Great guy. Great personality. Didn't know too much about music.

ISOARDI: [laughter] So he was sort of the person out in front?

BLOCH: But he was great. He used to front Chick Webb's band.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right.

BLOCH: He used to front that band. And I remember his girlfriend was Tila [Ali], a Mexican lady who had a restaurant right next to the Club Alabam.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. It was a Mexican restaurant. As a matter of fact, during intermission I used to go in there and have a couple of enchiladas and a beer. [laughter] With onions.

[laughter]

ISOARDI: With onions? [laughter] Is this wise for a lead alto player to do?

BLOCH: Not really. I didn't have many friends. But it was

so good. She was a great cook.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the name of her place?

BLOCH: No. But it was two doors away from the Club Alabam.

It was almost next door. Because I knew she was Bardu Ali's lady friend or wife or whatever, but they were very close.

She was a wonderful lady. But I met her when I was at the Lincoln Theatre. Bardu had this-- They had amateur night over there.

ISOARDI: At the Lincoln?

BLOCH: At the Lincoln, yeah. It was very much like-- Have you ever heard Pigmeat?

ISOARDI: Pigmeat Markham?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BLOCH: Well, they had the same kind of amateur show where somebody would blow it. They'd come out and--

ISOARDI: And gong them or something?

BLOCH: Yeah, like the Gong Show. [laughter] I think that's where they got the whole idea, Pigmeat. And as a matter of fact, if I'm not mistaken, Pigmeat was there one time, but they kept that thing going. And they had some big, good, good people who were involved in the amateur show. I think Ernie Andrews must have been, if I'm not mistaken.

ISOARDI: Oh, he was sort of discovered at the amateur show?

BLOCH: I think so.

ISOARDI: Really? Interesting.

BLOCH: And my first recording session, I think, was with Ernie Andrews.

ISOARDI: Your very first?

BLOCH: Yeah. That was "Dream Awhile," before I did anything with Johnny Otis's band. I was working with Johnny Otis's band, and then I did this session with Ernie Andrews. I played the solo on "Dream Awhile." I have the record somewhere or another. It's a 78 [r.p.m.]. It's probably broken by now, but--

ISOARDI: [laughter] What was the company? Who'd you record for? Do you remember? Was it Joe Greene's label?

BLOCH: Joe Greene, yeah. That's right.

ISOARDI: Was his label G and G [Greene and Greene Records] or something? Because I know that Joe Greene discovered Ernie Andrews or something like that.

BLOCH: Yeah, well, that's the guy. I don't know what the label was.

ISOARDI: But it was his--?

BLOCH: It was a white label, you know. I have it somewhere with a bunch of other 78s. They're all cracked and scratched.

ISOARDI: Collector's items.

BLOCH: I don't know who would want to buy them. Maybe. I don't know.

ISOARDI: So was it just the-- You must have recorded a few more sides at the sessions.

BLOCH: Yeah, we did. I did, and I can't remember what they were. But I remember the solo was-- A couple of days later I heard it on the radio, and everybody thought it was Tab Smith. [laughter]

ISOARDI: So you were pleased?

BLOCH: It was me. Yeah. So I felt, well, that's good.

ISOARDI: One of your heroes.

BLOCH: I remember I played this whole [sings part of his solo], "Dream Awhile." Anyway, that's where I first knew Ernie Andrews.

ISOARDI: How did he strike you then?

BLOCH: Just like he does now, a lot of personality. [laughter]

He's a good guy. I wish that we would have been able to do more things together somehow. I remember at the Club Alabam there was the emcee over there-- Oh, gosh, what was his name?

He was a nice-looking guy. [Wynonie Harris] Anyway, he was the emcee for the-- We had a floor show all the time at the Club Alabam. We used to be on the radio too, I think, once

a night.

ISOARDI: No kidding? They broadcasted live from the Alabam?

BLOCH: Yeah, I think so. I think we did. I can't remember.

Either that or somebody else did. [laughter] I remember when I was going to high school they used to broadcast from the Club Alabam. It was too late for me, though. But I can't remember the band that was there at the time before Johnny Otis got in there. At any rate, Johnny was there for a long time.

ISOARDI: I seem to remember that before Johnny got his own band he played with Harland Leonard's Rockets.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: Maybe that was the band that was in there.

BLOCH: No, it wasn't.

ISOARDI: No? It wasn't the Rockets?

BLOCH: No. It might have been that he was there. It could have been. But there was another band there during the time that I was going to school that was playing in there, and they would broadcast. It was a good band.

ISOARDI: Any other remembrances about Bardu Ali's band?

BLOCH: A lot of remembrances. Sometimes we'd back up acts.

And I remember there was one time that it was something that was in 9/8.

ISOARDI: Nine-eight time?

BLOCH: [laughter] He was trying to direct 9/8 time.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, God!

BLOCH: And he couldn't direct 4/4. So it was very difficult, but we got through it.

ISOARDI: You just ignored him. [laughter]

BLOCH: But seven days a week. I don't think I ever had a day off at that place. But there was a good feeling and good time that I used to have with Bardu. He was always giving good advice to me, because he was like the older man who would always give you-- "Stay away from this one. Stay away from that. Don't do this." He was very good at giving good advice to me. He did. He was a father figure, so to speak. And I think he was that way a little bit with Johnny Otis, if I'm not mistaken. Because later on they got together. You know, this is after. They got together and had a little place in Watts called the Barrelhouse.

ISOARDI: Oh, they were partners?

BLOCH: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And I went back and played with Johnny Otis. But this was a different type of band.

It was not the big band. It was rhythm and blues. So that was not exactly the way that I thought I'd be playing. [laughter]

Rhythm and blues. Lorenzo Holden was one of the tenor players,

I remember that. That was the time that "Big Jay" McNeely's style, you know--

ISOARDI: When he started honking and dropping on his back and all that?

BLOCH: All that kind of stuff, yeah. Well, then that was the kind of stuff that you had to do, and I just wasn't able to do that. I'm playing alto. What am I going to do? Play out of my back? [laughter]

ISOARDI: It wasn't for you. [laughter]

BLOCH: So I wasn't there very long. That's when I went with Frankie Carle's band. It was a commercial band. We toured all over the East Coast with that band. And that's when I started playing with the other types of bands.

ISOARDI: You left Bardu Ali after how long? A few months?

BLOCH: It must have been a year or so.

ISOARDI: Almost a year?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So then it's in late '45 or so that you went with Johnny Otis?

BLOCH: Yeah. Because that's when I did-- I forgot to tell you that when I had been playing with this band, this young band up in Spokane [Washington], there was a song called "Harlem Nocturne" that they had an arrangement on. I liked that solo

so much that I bought the arrangement for seventy-five cents at the store, and I brought it over to rehearsal with Johnny Otis. And this is amazing what happened. Bill Doggett was playing piano. The original recording of that was not a big hit. It was done by Ray Noble's band, and he did it fast.

ISOARDI: Up-tempo?

BLOCH: Not real fast, but [demonstrates the tempo]. ISOARDI: Oh, gee.

BLOCH: Something like that. So when we played it, at first Johnny was like, "What is this Ray Noble--? What is this stuff?"

Then when we played it the first time, he played it slow, and he played it with the drum [mimics the drum part]. And then I played the solo. That thing became a big smash. And this was the time that we did recordings with Excelsior Records, Leon René.

ISOARDI: Oh.

BLOCH: Right, and Otis René.

ISOARDI: So that's who you recorded for originally, Leon and Otis René?

BLOCH: Yeah. Anyway, this was actually the background band for Jimmy Rushing, who sang the main songs. So the B-side song was "Harlem Nocturne."

ISOARDI: This was a throwaway side.

BLOCH: [laughter] Yeah. Another one, "Love's Mansion," was on the other side. But the one that became a hit was-- Let me get this for you. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: These are the reviews of "Harlem Nocturne" when it first came out?

BLOCH: Yeah. From Metronome and Downbeat magazines and some other magazine. I don't know what it was.

ISOARDI: Oh, it says here, "'Harlem' is best of the four sides. An interesting original from the pen of Earle Hagen, it features excellent alto sax work. Soloists aren't disclosed but throughout contribute excellent work." [laughter]

Is all you got paid for the session a flat fee?

BLOCH: Forty-one dollars and twenty-five cents.

ISOARDI: That was it?

BLOCH: That was it.

ISOARDI: Nothing extra for being a soloist?

BLOCH: No. No. But the reviews were excellent for that "Harlem Nocturne." As a matter of fact, Johnny got invitations to go to places on the East Coast, you know.

ISOARDI: Just based on "Harlem Nocturne"?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: No doubt.

BLOCH: He wanted me to go, but my teacher Merle Johnston

said, "No, you can't go, because you're not ready yet. You've got to continue to study." Johnny came over to my house and spoke to my dad, you know, and my dad said, "Well, if his teacher says he should stay, then he should probably stay."

I really wanted to go with the band.

ISOARDI: So you never made the trip?

BLOCH: I never made the trip. The El Grotto, it was called, in Chicago. And then they went to New York. But they were all waiting for me, because I played the solo on that.

ISOARDI: Even though you're not mentioned anywhere.

BLOCH: No.

ISOARDI: Here's another one that says, "Mated side features the Otis band showcasing an excellent alto sax man from the indigo mood 'Harlem Nocturne.'"

BLOCH: Yeah. That was amazing, but--

ISOARDI: Gee, it's wonderful.

BLOCH: Everybody knew about it, but so what. Who really cares?

ISOARDI: But that's one of those handful of songs, I think, that just stamps a period, that recording of "Harlem Nocturne."

BLOCH: Yeah, I know.

ISOARDI: I mean, everybody knows that--maybe not as much as "In the Mood," but it maybe runs at a second or third.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And I guess that became Johnny Otis's trademark, that song.

BLOCH: It did as a matter of fact. When Johnny came back from the tour when he went back East, I rejoined the band temporarily, but he didn't have a steady job. We played the Million Dollar Theatre.

ISOARDI: Downtown?

BLOCH: Yeah. And the theme song was "Harlem Nocturne." And some other places that we played at--

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: But it was very interesting as far as my being able to play with his band and do the things that I-- Because with Johnny's band it was the kind of band that I really wanted to play with all along. I always enjoyed Basie's band, you know. I remember meeting Preston Love. I enjoyed his lead alto work very much. And after Preston left, Marshal Royal came on. He was a different style. Marshal had a different kind of a style. But I always enjoyed Preston Love's style because it was such a beautiful tone that he had. Earle Warren was the daddy of them all, though. He was the--

ISOARDI: Superb player.

BLOCH: He was the guy whom I used to want to imitate as far as lead alto was concerned. Then I started hearing all these

other guys.

ISOARDI: Where did you learn specifically how to play lead?
Because playing compositions is not the same as being a soloist.

BLOCH: I think I learned from Earle Warren's style.

ISOARDI: Just listening to that band with Earle Warren?

BLOCH: Yeah. I used to listen to his band and just listen to the way he phrased. There were ways that he phrased his sax that nobody else did. Except Preston Love did the same thing when he-- He started to phrase that same way. And then Marshal Royal, when he did it, he did it a different way, but it was a good way. Marshal had a unique way of playing lead alto. Lead alto is really-- It's just a way of playing where nobody can tell you exactly how it should be done, but it's got to be done the right way.

ISOARDI: Yeah. True.

BLOCH: Because if everybody follows you on lead alto, it's got to be like one sax. I'm not talking about the Glenn Miller style, I'm talking about the Count Basie style.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BLOCH: Because, of course, Glenn Miller had a beautiful style with the clarinet lead and all that stuff. That's great. But the touch that Preston and Earle Warren and Marshal Royal give to a sax section, leading a sax section, there's nothing

like it as far as I'm concerned. I haven't heard anybody else do it like they have.

ISOARDI: Well, I think too-- I remember when I first found some background to the first recordings Basie did in the late thirties or so, somebody told me those were all heads.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: They weren't reading anything.

BLOCH: Yeah, I know.

ISOARDI: So I thought, gee, they must have had a great lead alto. [laughter] That's one of the things that runs through your head. You really need some strong leadership, too, to keep people--

BLOCH: And he was a nice guy.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: I remember meeting Earle Warren when he was with Count Basie. And he used to tell us what to do. There was a kid band that I was with at the time. Actually it's one of these bands here. [points at photograph] It's that band there.

Vido Musso was leading the band, but it was actually Earl Spencer who had the band and--

ISOARDI: This was a local band?

BLOCH: It was a local band. We went to the Orpheum Theatre to hear Basie, and I used to get hints from Earle Warren.

I spoke to him there, and he was really a pleasant guy to talk to. We were playing free jobs because we weren't making any money. The band was a mixed band from Jefferson High School and from other parts of L.A., but it was a mixed band.

One of the first mixed bands that I ever knew of was Earl Spencer's band. But then he started to change and put his own people in there. I remember Tommy Mackagon, one of the original guys. I didn't know any of the other guys.

ISOARDI: This was before you were drafted? While you were still in high school?

BLOCH: Right after I was drafted I went with-- I was just playing with these bands but freelancing more or less.

ISOARDI: So you really honed your skill by listening to your favorite lead alto player, talking to people like Earle Warren when you had a chance?

BLOCH: Yeah. Earle Warren was a great influence as far as my own style is concerned. And listening to guys like him and listening to Preston Love, Marshal Royal-- I liked those guys. They all have different ways of leading, but they're all unique in their ways, so you can get a little bit out of all of them. They all have a different way of playing, but it's great. I remember some of Earle Warren's recordings. He did the lead alto on "Time on My Hands." That was beautiful.

He even sang the song. [laughter]

ISOARDI: That's right, he did sing a number of the songs.

BLOCH: Right. But his lead alto was good. I think Tab Smith was on that band, too. Tab Smith was on that band. Let's see. Who else? The tenor player was Don Byas, and maybe Lester Young. I'm not sure. Or Herschel Evans. But they had some great players.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Incredible band. Jeez. What was Johnny Otis like when you played with him?

BLOCH: Johnny Otis was always good to work with. We played a lot of things different places. Besides the Club Alabam, sometimes we'd play some free gigs. But he was always exciting to work with because he liked the same kind of music, the same style, that I liked. During the time that Basie was here, one time we were playing at the Club Alabam and Basie was playing at the place called the Plantation Club. I don't know if you remember that. That was out near Watts. And Basie was telling the guys, "Hey, you guys, Johnny Otis's band is out-Basieing us."

ISOARDI: [laughter] High praise. Very high praise.

BLOCH: Yeah. So that was nice to hear, especially when it's coming from Count Basie. But there were so many stories about Basie. I don't know if all of them are true or not. I just

thank God that I got the opportunity to meet the guy and to play along with him.

There were some good times with Johnny's band at the Alabam, especially when we did our own songs, the songs that the people liked. And during the floor show I was featured on "Harlem Nocturne." It's weird that of the songs that nobody expected was going to hit, it would be that one.

ISOARDI: It just has to be played right.

BLOCH: Well, that's true. The rhythm section had to be right.

And by the way, that same arrangement was used a lot by stripteasers, you know.

ISOARDI: [laughter] I can understand that.

BLOCH: Because it fit the mood for that. Striptease dancers love that kind of a mood.

But as far as Johnny was concerned, he was a good guy to work with. He was influenced by Basie as much as I was, I guess. And Johnny and his family were very good to me--you know, good people. And I expected more from his kids. Shuggie [Otis], I guess he got messed up. Shuggie was playing very, very good guitar.

ISOARDI: Early on as a kid he was playing great.

BLOCH: Yeah, but I don't know whatever happened to him.

ISOARDI: Well, he still is playing, because I know occasionally

I'll see a Johnny Otis CD that was done--

BLOCH: A long time ago.

ISOARDI: Within the last couple of years.

BLOCH: Oh, really?

ISOARDI: Yeah, and Shuggie Otis will be on there.

BLOCH: Well, I wonder-- I thought he would really make a big name for himself. I knew Shuggie when he was a little kid. And his wife Phyllis [Walker Otis] was-- They were very nice.

At the Lincoln Theatre I got to meet some of the guys from Jimmie Lunceford's band. And the guy who took over for Willie Smith was a guy named Curt Bradford. He's a guy from Hawaii. He played great lead alto. Very good. He had a strange-looking mouthpiece that he got from Phoenix [Arizona].

[laughter] It looked like a duck. But he played really good. And I believe when Jimmie Lunceford's band broke up he moved to San Diego. I don't know what has happened to him since. So many guys have changed.

At any rate, when I was with Perez Prado's band, I became the band manager, and we were able to tour all over the country with the band. "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" was a big hit. "Patricia" was a big hit. We went to Japan, the Philippines, and Korea with the band. When he came back,

the interest for the band was kind of dwindling, so he decided to go to Spain. He took me and two other guys and we started another band in Spain. We were there for about four or five weeks and I decided, "Hey, this is not for me. I want to come back home." I started my own band and I did a few recordings.

Bumps Blackwell-- By the way, that's another one that I should probably tell you about. During the time I was at Jeff, Bumps Blackwell was also a great influence.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JULY 13, 1995

ISOARDI: René, before we carry on from where we stopped yesterday, let me go back, just as a way of review, and ask you a couple of questions that relate to some of the material we covered yesterday. First off, your very early years. You mentioned that you lived two miles west of Jefferson High School. Although you were not brought up in a traditional religious manner, etc., was there any kind of ethnic sense in the community you grew up in? Any kind of Jewish community? Were there any kinds of centers that your family might go to? Or any kind of cultural--?

BLOCH: Actually, it was pretty mixed up. I mean, there was every kind of nationality you could imagine. I mean, it was really mixed up. I've never seen such a wonderful mixture of people as I did when I was growing up in that neighborhood.

ISOARDI: So people were just completely socialized in this way?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: People didn't have their own ethnic centers they would go to or anything like that?

BLOCH: At that time, as a kid, we just hung around together, and my important time was to be used in practicing my instrument, you know. There were gangs and stuff like that at that time.

ISOARDI: There were?

BLOCH: Yeah, there were gangs. They were a different kind of gang.

ISOARDI: But nothing like on today's scale?

BLOCH: Not as bad, not as bad. Like the area where I lived, they were called the Santa Barbara Street gang. And then there was the Thirty-eighth Street gang. And there were a bunch of gangs that-- The Clanton gang, and other gangs that I can't remember. But they had their gangs at that time.

ISOARDI: How big were they? Or what kinds of things did they do?

BLOCH: Well, they'd go and fight with other people sometimes, you know. It was just having fun, I guess. The only thing I could say is that I never hung around with the gangs. That wasn't my kind of stuff. I just heard about a lot of things that happened. One time some of the guys from Santa Barbara went to Dorsey High School and beat up some guys over there, and it came out in the newspaper the next day. And then they came over and did some things over here. It was kind of a dumb thing, but nobody got killed.

ISOARDI: But it wasn't the kind of thing where-- You had no fear about walking home at night or--?

BLOCH: No, no. As a matter of fact, there were no shootings or anything like that.

ISOARDI: Just fistfights and that kind of thing?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: How about graffiti?

BLOCH: You know, I never saw any graffiti. I never noticed any graffiti. I don't know if anybody did that at that time.

Maybe they did. I don't recall seeing anything like that.

ISOARDI: Another thing I wanted to ask you, you talked quite a bit about Merle Johnston, a formative teacher in your experience. You mentioned he came from New York. Do you know anything about him, his status in New York, his career in New York? Or why he came to Los Angeles? Why he left?

BLOCH: Well, I heard many stories about it. The stories I heard were that he wasn't doing as well over there as he should.

But I do know that some of the students in the studios in New York were his-- I don't remember their names because they were a lot older than I was. I was just a kid. But they were fine sax players that he taught. That's the reputation he brought out here. A guy by the name of Vernon Slater, who's a sax player, was the first guy who told me about Merle Johnston.

ISOARDI: Who was Vernon Slater?

BLOCH: He was a sax player.

ISOARDI: From?

BLOCH: From Jefferson also. Gosh, there were so many guys at Jeff who played sax-- I remember Johnny Randolph played real good tenor. He sounded a lot like Lester Young.

ISOARDI: What ever happened to him? That's a name that hasn't come up before.

BLOCH: Johnny Randolph? I have no idea. Then there was also Clifford Burton. They were older than I was, because they went into the army, I think the Tenth Cavalry army band.

Anyway, Clifford Burton went in with that army band, and I think Johnny Randolph did too. I don't know what ever happened to him, but I know he played real well. Then there was

Prince Harrison. He was there at the same time I was there.

He played real good tenor. Good, young guy. He was the one who got me the gig over at the Lincoln Theatre with Bardu Ali's band. But he played very well.

And then there was a wonderful trumpet player by the name of Dupree Bolton--played good, good solos. And before these guys there was Lammar Wright Jr. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

ISOARDI: That sounds vaguely familiar.

BLOCH: Yeah. I think he played with Lionel Hampton, I'm not sure. But he was the high note player. You know, he played real high notes, so that was a big thing for us, to hear a trumpet player playing up there in the high register like Cat Anderson style. Maybe not as high, though.

ISOARDI: [laughter] I remember Clora Bryant telling a story about the first time she heard Cat Anderson. She got all excited. She said, "I couldn't believe what I was hearing." And she got really quiet, and she said, "I wet my pants." [laughter]

BLOCH: Yeah. That was something. It was exciting to hear him play when he was with-- Well, I guess he was with Hampton, and then he went with Duke [Ellington]'s band. He was a great trumpet player. I met him a couple of times after I was at the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47]. Oh, that's another story, by the way: after I broke up my band and started working with the musicians union. That's back in 1964 or '65.

ISOARDI: And you got to meet Cat Anderson?

BLOCH: Yeah, I met Cat Anderson. I knew him before that. And Harry ["Sweets"] Edison would come around. Every time I'd see Sweets Edison he'd say, "When I grow up I want to be just like you." [laughter] That was his favorite thing.

He's something else. Is he around?

ISOARDI: Yeah. The last time I saw him was about three years ago at the musicians union. Buddy Collette introduced me to him. I think he's still around and still playing.

BLOCH: Yeah. Well, Buddy Collette and I did some things together. We used to play duets together. Like I said, I was trying to play oboe and studying oboe, so I'd get together on oboe and Buddy would play flute. We'd kind of play duets together.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BLOCH: This must have been during the time that I was studying with Merle Johnston. Merle Johnston was one of those guys who said you've got to play more than two horns. Just clarinet is not enough; flute is not enough; get into oboe and English horn. I got hung up on oboe and English horn.

I had a wonderful teacher. His name was Henry DeBussier. He was the first oboist at Columbia [Pictures] Studios, and he was a wonderful teacher. I was getting along fine, and then when I went with Perez Prado's band I dropped the doubles.

ISOARDI: So this was the late forties, then? You were studying with Merle?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And he had you learning doubling, tripling,

whatever--

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: This is the time that Buddy started playing flute?

BLOCH: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: So you were working on oboe. Did you play flute?

BLOCH: Yeah, he got me on flute too, and I think Buddy and I studied with the same teacher for a while. Elise Moennig I think was her name.

ISOARDI: On flute?

BLOCH: On flute. She was our flute teacher that Merle always-- He would recommend certain teachers, you know. Like [Socorso] Pirrola was my clarinet teacher that Merle would recommend. And he recommended Elise Moennig. And then for oboe I was taught by DeBussier. As a matter of fact, Bob Cooper studied under him, too--you know, the tenor player.

ISOARDI: Oh, he played oboe, too?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He even recorded, I think--

BLOCH: Yeah. He was doing real well. He was doing very well.

I was doing real well, too, but I didn't keep it up.

ISOARDI: Well, gee, then you had three or four teachers at once, didn't you?

BLOCH: Yeah. Yeah.

ISOARDI: [laughter] That's a heavy schedule.

BLOCH: Yeah. But, you know, studying those instruments, you've got to be on your instruments every-- On oboe-- I mean, that's a lot. That's hours and hours of playing. And I was getting along pretty well with it. I got along so well that I bought an English horn, too, a Cabart English horn. And I had a Cabart oboe. What a waste of money that was for me, because after I started going on the road with Prado's band I never used them anymore. So when I came back I just sold them.

ISOARDI: The reason that you guys were doubling and tripling and quadrupling, was it to get studio work?

BLOCH: Exactly. That was the main purpose. This is what Merle Johnston would pound into our heads: to get into the studios you have to double, play different instruments. So it's not only clarinet and flute, you know; you've got to get into something else, because then you're more valuable.

That's what his intention was. So he brainwashed us into doing all of these things, because he was a very dominant person.

ISOARDI: He sounds it.

BLOCH: Oh, man. He was the kind of person, by the way, who when he taught you he'd have a quart of beer in one hand and

listen to you at the same time, taking a swig of beer. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] This is an unorthodox technique.

BLOCH: Oh, very, very. But he would-- In fact, he would--
Sometimes he'd send me over to the liquor store to get him
a couple of bottles of beer.

ISOARDI: [laughter] I hope it wasn't part of your time.

BLOCH: No, no. It wasn't, as a matter of fact.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Formidable personality.

BLOCH: Yeah, very formidable and very belligerent. I mean,
if you didn't do what he asked you to do he'd get mad. I
remember seeing him get one of his students and he was almost
strangling him. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] He physically grabbed him?

BLOCH: Yeah. Because the guy-- He said, "You're choking up
too much," and he would grab him by the jaws and squeeze real
hard. The guy was trying to blow the horn at that same time,
you know. [laughter] He didn't do that to me, thank God.

ISOARDI: He certainly makes a point.

BLOCH: Yeah. Oh, and another thing he used to do, he used
to stick his finger or his thumb under your chin like this
and tell you to blow. "Go ahead, blow. Blow. Blow." And
you were trying to blow, and you can't.

It's funny how teachers can be. I remember my first

teacher when he used to tell me to hold my lips together tightly.

That was [John] Sturdevant. He said, "You have to hold the sides of your lips like this. Now, if I can talk this way, you can certainly play this way." And I said to him, "Well, I can talk that way too, but I don't like to play that way."

[laughter] That was funny.

ISOARDI: Truly.

BLOCH: He was a good man, though. Good teacher. I mean, he wasn't as pushy as Johnston. Merle Johnston was a pushy guy. I mean, if you didn't put out, he'd tell you, "Don't waste your time." He was that kind of a guy. I don't know if he really meant it, but-- You know, when I first started, I think I only paid three dollars a lesson. Then it went to five, then to seven, then to ten.

ISOARDI: He started attracting so many students, eh?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: That must be the reasoning.

BLOCH: Yeah. And then some of the guys who heard me play after wanted to know who I was studying with, and Buddy was one. He went with Merle Johnston. Who else? I think Frank Morgan went with him, too. But Frank didn't stay with him too long. I don't think he could take the pressure, man.

ISOARDI: Different personalities, from what little I know

of Frank Morgan now.

BLOCH: I know. Yeah. I haven't seen Frank Morgan for years, but I heard he was in town for a little while, a couple of years ago. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: What happened to Merle Johnston?

BLOCH: Oh, man-- Well, I'll tell you what. Buddy Collette told me that he was-- Let me go back a little bit. One time that he was at a bar drinking he got nasty with somebody and I think they kicked him or something. He hurt his foot. But because I think the beer caused him to have diabetes, his leg wouldn't heal, so they had to cut his leg off, and he was that way for a while. And then it just got worse. He started getting blind in one eye, but he was still teaching.

And he had one tooth, you know, but was still playing his horn. But hardly being able to see-- Because when he would play, he'd be transposing the things-- I'd be playing alto, and he'd be playing tenor, and he'd play everything as fast as I could play almost. Finally I got faster than him.

[laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] That's a great day.

BLOCH: Yeah. But that was something that I had to really work on, because to get speed, as far as he was concerned, was really important--to be fast on your instrument. And

the way to do that was to have the metronome and get that clock going faster and faster and faster each day and just going over these same lessons over and over again [sings a flurry of notes] real fast. So that was his technique of making somebody have fast technique.

ISOARDI: Right. Was he a teacher who really focused primarily on mastering the instrument--being technically competent, being a good reader? Or did he teach much improvisation?

BLOCH: No. Improvisation was not his bag at all.

ISOARDI: He was really creating superb technicians.

BLOCH: Yeah, that's what he--

ISOARDI: Command of your instrument.

BLOCH: That's what his bag was. Although later on, after I left, I know that he would get some of the jazz riffs, Charlie Parker and stuff like that, and use them as part of his lesson.

So he started to use that, but still it was not improvisation, because you're reading the solos.

ISOARDI: Yeah, like a chart?

BLOCH: Yeah. But it was good. It was good practice, because-- But I didn't get to do that. I just stayed on the lessons that he would ask me to take. I think I went through about forty different books with him. I still have them somewhere.

ISOARDI: That's a lot.

BLOCH: Yeah. But I went through them each time, and each time it was as fast as you could go. And when you'd start on that lesson, you would start slowly and then build it up each day. And then by the time you got through with the week it was as fast as you can go. So when you'd get over there, he was going to play tenor, and I'd play the alto, and he would keep up with me at that time until we started getting on those Klosé books and playing it in-- Like I think it's lesson number two where I remember we used to go [sings phrase].

Well, that thing went [sings same phrase at a fast, double-time tempo]. That's how fast it went. I went up to-- I can't remember.

I've got it marked on my book, but it was real fast. So he was proud about that. That was fast. But that's what his intention was, to make you a technician.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So no matter what was put in front of you, you'd be ready for it.

BLOCH: Yeah, to be able to read anything. But see, that was my weakness. At one time I went to play with this young kid band, and my reading was just sad. When I went home I said, "I've got to do something with my reading. I just can't make it." Then Vernon Slater at school told me about Merle Johnston, this guy from New York who's now in Hollywood. He said he's a great teacher and all of that. So I took his advice and

looked it up in the phone book and went over there, and that's when Merle said, "Well, what do you really want to do?" "Well," I said, "I want to be fast, and I want to be able to tongue fast like Johnny Hodges and Tab Smith. And I want to have a good tone." So he just listened, and we went from there.

ISOARDI: How long did he live? Do you know what happened to him?

BLOCH: Okay, let's see. What happened is that Buddy told me that he was in a sanitorium in Hollywood. I went to go visit him, and he didn't recognize me. This was about 1978 or so.

ISOARDI: Oh.

BLOCH: Yeah. Buddy told me that he would go and visit him, but he wouldn't recognize you. All you could do was talk to him and there was no response. I mean, he was just-- He didn't last long after that.

I remember his studio. He had all kinds of machinery in there. I don't know what he did with it. He had all kinds of sound equipment and all kinds of things. He used everything that he could, but the machinery, I don't know what the heck he did with it. But his office and his studio was just a junk pile of stuff that he had all over the place, all dusty, all dirty. But that was Merle Johnston. Empty beer bottles

all over the place.

ISOARDI: He sounds like a New Yorker. [laughter]

BLOCH: Yeah. He was a character. He was a real character.

But, you know, he was the kind of a guy who would direct your life. Once he got ahold of you he would tell you when you could go anywhere and when you couldn't go anywhere.

That's why I couldn't go on tour with Johnny Otis, because he said, "No, you're not quite ready. You're not quite ready."

To me it was-- I would never be ready. Because he wanted you there. No matter what, he wanted you there. I don't care how good you were, he wanted you there. So you'd never leave that place until you decided to. Finally I got this job with Frankie Carle and I left. I finally stopped listening to him telling me I wasn't ready yet. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] How long did you study with him? When did you finally leave?

BLOCH: I'd say 1943 till about 1955.

ISOARDI: That long?

BLOCH: Yeah, yeah. It was a long time. It was a good ten years. It was 1943 when I started with him, 1954 or something like that when I stopped.

ISOARDI: Did you ever encounter Lloyd Reese at all?

BLOCH: No. I knew of him. I knew of some of the people who

studied under him, but I never had any-- I knew of him very well because "Doc" Samuel Browne thought he was a good guy, too. But the studio that I went to was the Gray Conservatory of Music. Mr. Gray was the owner of that place. And that's where Sturdevant was one of the teachers. They had a lot of teachers in there too. Lloyd Reese was not too far from there, but I didn't study with him. I wish I would have. It would have been a good experience, I know.

You know what? There's somebody else that I should talk to you about: Mrs. [Alma] Hightower. Did I talk to you about her?

ISOARDI: You didn't mention her at all.

BLOCH: Well, this is where-- She had a lot of students.

ISOARDI: She was another private teacher?

BLOCH: She was a private teacher, but she had students like Melba Liston and Elvira ["Vi"] Redd and Prince Harrison--he was the tenor player--and some of the others. I remember I started going to her to be part of their band.

ISOARDI: What band?

BLOCH: She had a sort of an orchestra or something that would go out and play at different places.

ISOARDI: Oh. A swing band?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BLOCH: But you know how it happened? It was in-- I don't remember. I didn't go a lot with them, but I remember that one time I did the solo for "Daydream," a Johnny Hodges solo, you know. Somebody played the introduction; I played the solo. And then the audience would have to know, "Well, who is that supposed to be?" And then people would say, "Is that Benny Carter? Or is that--?" Somebody would finally say, "Oh, that's Johnny Hodges." [laughter] You know, people were well educated at the places we were going to, so they knew the musicians. They knew who was who. And I remember Melba Liston playing trombone at the time. She was a wonderful gal that I-- She played with Gerald Wilson's band, too. And Elvira Redd, I knew that her father was Alton Redd. We were friendly and all that, but I never worked with her on any jobs or anything.

ISOARDI: You just mentioned three prominent women, though. Mrs. Hightower?

BLOCH: Mrs. Hightower, yeah.

ISOARDI: And Elvira Redd and Melba Liston. Are there other women musicians--? This sounds like an unusual band. It's led by a woman, right? And you've got two prominent women players, at least.

BLOCH: Yeah. That I remember.

ISOARDI: That you remember. And you don't remember--?

BLOCH: Oh, there was a piano player by the name of Alice Young, I believe. She was a pianist, and I think she was with them. I can't remember for sure. But you're right, there were a lot of women in there, but there were a lot of guys, too. I can't remember all the guys. Dupree Bolton was one of the trumpet players.

ISOARDI: This was some band. This was a good band. [laughter]

BLOCH: Yeah, it was. It was a good band. Good musicians.

ISOARDI: Yeah, very good.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any other--?

BLOCH: We were kids, though, you know. Dumb kids. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, but jeez, what a lineup at any age. Do you remember any other women playing around?

BLOCH: No. They were the only ones I knew of as far as musicians are concerned. I didn't know any others that I can think of.

ISOARDI: None when you were at Jeff who were playing in the band?

BLOCH: No. No.

ISOARDI: It was all guys?

BLOCH: Yeah, all of the guys were guys. And like I said, I wish that we would have taken Mr. Browne a little more seriously, because he was trying, but sometimes we would be the jokers.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Sounds like with Merle Johnston you did your penance.

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. I'll tell you what, it was a lot different with Merle Johnston. He wouldn't take any guff from anybody.

[laughter] [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Any final thoughts on Samuel Browne?

BLOCH: Well, I know that he graduated from USC [University of Southern California] and--

ISOARDI: He got a degree in music, I assume.

BLOCH: Oh, he had a doctorate in music.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. We used to call him Dr. Browne just for kidding. [laughter] But he had a doctorate. But he had a lot of background as far as music is concerned. He played very well. Technically he was excellent. And he knew a lot.

If anybody would listen to him, they would get a lot from him. There was a guy by the name of Caballero. I don't know if you've ever heard of him. I think he was a Spanish guy that Mr. Browne started to help. And this guy took Mr. Browne

seriously. And this guy went to school. He went to USC, graduated-- He's a teacher now. Caballero. I can't remember his first name.

But when Mr. Browne died he called me to tell me about it, but it was too late for me to get all the way over there to the funeral. I know that he told me that Mr. Browne used to-- He was pretty old, you know. His wife had died. He used to wake up at four o'clock in the morning. He'd go out and pick up the newspapers for neighbors and take them to their-- You know, the newspaper guy would drop them on the street or something, and he would go and take them to their doors.

He was such a wonderful man. Oh, man, he was a beautiful person. And he was so helpful.

If you would do what he wanted you to do, you would really do tremendous things in music. But you had to really take him seriously. There were too many jokers around and too many guys that were trying to be funny. Yeah. You know, when you have about twenty or twenty-five guys that are trying to learn and a few guys that are trying to break up in saying some jokes or something, it kind of makes it tough, so you're not going to learn too much. I learned a little bit--you know, music theory, harmony, and we were starting to get into arranging. I wanted to get into arranging because he was

a good arranger. He could teach, but if you didn't know the theory and harmony and all that stuff that he wanted you to learn first, then he said it was harder for you to learn arranging.

ISOARDI: When he left USC, did he go right to Jeff?

BLOCH: Well, he had a tough time getting a job, I heard. It wasn't easy for him to get a job.

ISOARDI: Because he was black?

BLOCH: I guess so. I think so. I'm not sure. All I know is that I think that when he was finally able to latch on at Jeff-- I think he was at another school for a while, but then he got the job at Jefferson and was able to finally get into that school. And when he did, he started to show what he could do as far as teaching is concerned. He was a good teacher.

ISOARDI: Were there any other black teachers at Jeff?

BLOCH: I'm sure there were, but I was only close to Mr. Browne. Samuel Browne was like a real close, close friend, not only a teacher but a close friend. And I tried to keep in touch with him after I left as much as I could. Once in a while I'd call him and see how he was doing, but he was on the other side of town, and I was all over the place. I couldn't really keep track of him. But people who were able to keep in touch with him-- Like Caballero was able to stay in touch with him

until the end, until he died.

ISOARDI: Which wasn't too long ago, right?

BLOCH: No.

ISOARDI: About three or four years ago?

BLOCH: That's right. I've got the paper somewhere around here that Caballero sent me and told me about the funeral.

It must have been a real good funeral. A lot of guys must have been there. I wish I would have been there. I should have been there. But I think it was-- By the time that I knew about it, it was too late. You know, up here in the sticks I'm over a hundred miles away from where the funeral was going to be, and it was just one day too late. I'm just sorry I missed it. I'm sorry that I didn't get a chance to really be with him. He sent me this picture [pointing at photograph] just for remembrance at the time that we would--

ISOARDI: The one on top there with the trio?

BLOCH: Yeah. That's Samuel Browne there.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Samuel Browne on the left, and you're in the center, and that's Clarence Jones, the bass player.

BLOCH: Yeah. Teddy Lupaey was the drummer. He wasn't in there at the time, but that was his bass drum look. He had ugly, big drums. [laughter] But that was Teddy's drums.

We were going to go and play a gig somewhere and somebody took a picture. Maybe it was Teddy, I don't know. But it was nice to have and good to have a picture of Mr. Browne.

ISOARDI: When was that? Around 1943, '44?

BLOCH: Yeah. It had to be around in that time, '44, because I was sitting on my sax case, as you see.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: I never wanted to get away from my horn. I was constantly practicing and all that stuff. I guess there was a reason for it.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about changing styles of music. You grew up full of enthusiasm for swing, the big band.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Then bop comes.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: Do you remember when you first heard bop?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. I was with Charlie Barnet's band, and we were in New York. I heard Charlie Parker at Birdland. Man.

Whew! That wasn't the first time I'd heard him, but, I mean, you want to change your own style when you hear somebody like him play. I mean, he was fantastic. I first heard him at the Club Finale, which was in what they call Little Tokyo.

ISOARDI: Little Tokyo in L.A.?

BLOCH: Yeah. That was on First [Street] and San Pedro [Street], I think.

ISOARDI: Do you remember your reaction? Had you heard any of the records or anything before?

BLOCH: Yeah, sure, "Now's the Time" and all of those things that he did. In fact, one of the first times I heard him he had played with Jay McShann's band. I had the record.

I know there was a solo that he did. There was Charlie Parker, you know. I just was really thrilled with the way he played.

Then I started to try to play some of the licks that he did.

But you're influenced by him, but then you're influenced by others, too, so you just have to do what God gives you.

You're only as good as the talent that God has given you.

So as far as playing solos, whatever you can play, let the Lord give it to you. That's what I was able to do, do what God gave me, and I was able to use it. You know, in my music I started to use it. Even to this present time-- But that's another story as to how I got to the point where I'm at right now.

ISOARDI: What about R and B [rhythm and blues]?

BLOCH: The closest I got to R and B was with Johnny Otis at the Barrelhouse. That was funky music that was nice, you know, but it just wasn't fulfilling as far as music is concerned.

I really wanted to play jazz. Charlie Parker was very influential at that time. You know, everybody wanted to play like Charlie Parker.

As you know, Dean Benedetti was one of the musicians whom I had worked with in a band that he was playing with.

I think he was playing tenor on the band, but he was--

ISOARDI: Which band was it?

BLOCH: Ken Baker's band. We were playing up in Big Bear.

And there was a guy named Steve White also playing on the band. And Dale McComb was playing trumpet. Dick Rolfe was playing drums, and Dick got busted. Dick Rolfe finally was sent, as far as I know, to Camarillo or something. And then he became a priest. [laughter]

ISOARDI: No kidding? What did he get busted for? Drugs?

BLOCH: Drugs, yeah. And Dean Benedetti and Dale McComb-- It was the influence again of Charlie Parker. That was because if he could do it, you could do it. It's too bad, but that's--

ISOARDI: How did Dean Benedetti end up out here from New York?

BLOCH: I don't know. All I know is that I met him out here.

But when I met him out here, I remember we were talking about Count Basie's band, and Preston Love had just started playing lead alto in the band. He told me how nice Preston sounded.

So he appreciated the Basie band, too. But, you know, things got carried away, and he went his way, I went my way, and I never saw him again too much. There was another guy who played on the band, a trombone player. I can't remember his name. He's in New York now. I can't think of his name. [Jimmy Knepper]

ISOARDI: Benedetti became such a disciple of Charlie Parker.

BLOCH: Yeah. It was sickening almost, because he painted-- He changed to alto sax, he painted his sax black. I don't know why. I don't know how he did it, but he did. [laughter]

And I don't know what he got out of it. All I know is that everywhere Charlie Parker went, he was there. As a matter of fact, some of the things that he recorded I believe have been commercially released.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I read a story-- I think he died in the later fifties of something.

BLOCH: Dean Benedetti did?

ISOARDI: Yeah. He went back to Italy and he died.

BLOCH: To Italy?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: Oh. I didn't know that.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I read an article in Down Beat [magazine] a couple of years ago. Because everybody had wondered what

had happened to all these recordings he was making of Charlie Parker playing, and no one knew. Apparently a couple of years ago they were found in his brother's garage, all of these old wire recordings that Dean Benedetti had made of "Bird" live. I think it was Mosaic [Records] or some company that reissued them all.

BLOCH: Yeah, that's right.

ISOARDI: I haven't heard them yet.

BLOCH: I haven't either. I've been wanting to get them just to have them, but I don't know where to get them.

ISOARDI: I think from Mosaic, which means they won't be cheap.

[laughter] And I think it's a massive-- Like a ten-LP set. I don't know how many CDs.

BLOCH: Oh, they're all CDs.

ISOARDI: I don't know if they're on CD. There may be LPs and CDs. I'm not sure. Mosaic is a small kind of specialty--

BLOCH: Where is Mosaic at?

ISOARDI: It's located back East. In fact, if you want, I can try and get the--

BLOCH: Yeah. I'd like to get that stuff.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: Just to have. I'd like to see-- I know that some of the stuff that he took down must have been terrific stuff.

Charlie Parker was everybody's idol, I guess. He's the one who really changed music. I don't know of anybody-- I mean, Dizzy Gillespie was a great trumpet player and all that, but Charlie Parker was really the influence in this so-called bebop.

ISOARDI: And nothing ever was the same after Bird.

BLOCH: No. That's right. Bebop was it. But I remember when Johnny Otis's big band came back from the East Coast and the guys were-- I was back with the band for some gigs that they were playing. And I was phrasing the stuff like Earle Warren, you know [sings an example], you know, stuff like that. And I remember the tenor player said, "No, we don't play it like that no more." [laughter] I must have been dated, so I had to change my style. But that's the way he'd play it. That's the way Earle Warren used to phrase. I had to start listening to Preston and Marshal Royal and how they played, and then I did it my way.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: I missed playing with a sax section. That was really a wonderful time. Being able to play with five saxes, that's something I really would like to do again one of these days.

But who knows? I don't.

ISOARDI: There are still a few big bands playing around.

BLOCH: I don't know where. Not up here in--

ISOARDI: Not in Victorville, no. [laughter]

BLOCH: And I'm not going to go all the way down to L.A. to play with a big band. It's too far. No, I'm too busy doing what I'm doing now, anyway. Anyway, let's go from here.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I wanted to ask you-- I guess when you left Bardu Ali's band you joined Johnny Otis at the Club Alabam.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: Playing there night after night.

BLOCH: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: I wonder if you could sort of describe a typical night at the Alabam?

BLOCH: I was a real square, to tell you the truth. I was really a square. And because I was still tied down to Merle Johnston, all I would do is get over to the gig, play a--

ISOARDI: What time did it start? What time did you get there?

BLOCH: I'd say about eight thirty [p.m.]. I think it would be about eight thirty. We'd go till about two o'clock in the morning.

ISOARDI: So you'd start playing at nine o'clock?

BLOCH: About nine, you know, I'd warm up and get ready. But I was there because I enjoyed playing what I was playing. The music was really something I really liked. Some of the

things that we played were real Basie-style things. Everything was Basie style. And Bill Doggett was doing some of the arrangements. He's the one who doctored up the arrangement of "Harlem Nocturne" and filled it in. He filled in the rest of the parts that had to be filled in. But we played it in the style that we played it, and that's what made it so good--the slower, moody style.

ISOARDI: Yeah, right. You wouldn't play continuously from nine to two, though?

BLOCH: No. We'd take intermissions. Wynonie Harris-- Did you ever hear him? Do you know who he is?

ISOARDI: Yes.

BLOCH: He was the emcee on the floor shows.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BLOCH: Wynonie Harris. I tried to remember his name. But he was a funny guy. He was a real funny guy. I remember-- As far as playing at the Alabam, we'd play forty-five minutes then take off fifteen or twenty or a half hour sometimes, depending on how many people were there. But that's when I used to go to-- During intermission I used to go to Tila [Ali]'s restaurant.

ISOARDI: To get something to eat?

BLOCH: Get some enchiladas with--

ISOARDI: With a lot of onions.

BLOCH: With a lot of onions, and a cold beer. [laughter]

And I'd be smelling my saxophone up the rest of the time.

[laughter]

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BLOCH: The guys who played on the band with Johnny Otis at that time-- Well, besides Paul Quinichette there was Bob Harris, and Leon Beck was playing baritone [saxo-phone].

ISOARDI: Bob Harris was playing--?

BLOCH: Bob Harris was playing third alto. He was like an old man, always giving me advice. He was a nice guy, a really, really sweet guy.

ISOARDI: I got a chance to meet him.

BLOCH: Yeah?

ISOARDI: When I first started this project.

BLOCH: Did you?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BLOCH: Well, I'm sure he still remembers me. And then there's the other tenor player. I can't remember his name. [Vaughn Von Streeter] We had five saxes. But Paul Quinichette would be sitting next to me, and I enjoyed-- He had a sax that was so beat up, you know, with rubber bands and stuff holding it together.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, no.

BLOCH: Some kind of paper to keep it from leaking in certain

places. But he played that horn really well. You know, he really did really well, but the problem was that after playing with him for quite a while with Johnny Otis's band-- I remember I was on the road. I was in New York, and I bumped into him near Birdland. I was going to go see Charlie Parker. I saw him, but he didn't recognize me. I don't know what was going on with Paul, "Vice President." I don't know. Maybe he just changed, I don't know. But he didn't acknowledge me, and I said, "What's wrong?"

ISOARDI: What year was this? Do you remember?

BLOCH: It must have been about 1954, '53, somewhere in that line. But I think that's when Charlie Parker was there. When did he die?

ISOARDI: 'Fifty-four, I think. 'Fifty-four or '55, maybe '55.

BLOCH: Well, that's when I saw him. I went to Birdland. But then I saw that the Modern Jazz Quartet was there, and Charlie Parker was there with his little group. All we had to do was sit down and listen to him play, sit down right above the bar, right on the floor. I used to just listen to him. He played great.

ISOARDI: I heard he had an incredibly big sound in the club that sometimes you can't appreciate from the records.

BLOCH: I don't know. It was just-- I could hear him anywhere because he played so well and-- I don't know. I saw that movie that they made, Bird.

ISOARDI: Clint Eastwood's thing?

BLOCH: Yeah. That was okay, but I don't think it really described what he really was like.

ISOARDI: I thought that movie really left out the music.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: It dwelt so much on his lifestyle, and you didn't get a sense of why he is important musically.

BLOCH: I know that they doctored up the music. I think Lennie Niehaus kind of-- Which is probably a good idea. They tried to mix it with modern musicians, but it was his solos.

ISOARDI: Yes, that's exactly what he did.

BLOCH: But something was missing as far as the music is concerned. I was hoping to see more. It was a kind of depressing movie.

ISOARDI: It was. I think there were only two scenes in the entire film where there was any sunshine, too.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Everything was so dark.

BLOCH: Depressing. I bought the video, and I've seen it once, and I just don't want to see it again. It's kind of depressing.

I didn't want to see it that way. I remember him and how he played and just try to continue to remember him the way he played. But-- I don't know. Anyway--

ISOARDI: So to get you back to the Alabam, you'd play, you'd have intermission. You'd play maybe for an hour?

BLOCH: About an hour, yeah.

ISOARDI: And take half an hour off?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah--fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, a half an hour, whatever.

ISOARDI: And you'd go till two o'clock like that?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. We had a floor show in the middle. Wynonie Harris was the emcee. I think we used to do a broadcast. I'm not sure. I think we did a half-hour broadcast on some station. But that was kind of fun. It was a late broadcast. But that's what it was. I remember they had the floor show, the dancing girls and all that stuff.

ISOARDI: You guys would play behind that, behind them?

BLOCH: Oh, yeah. We'd play all of our background and all. Sometimes Johnny Otis's band would go play for maybe some USO [United Service Organizations] type of thing, you know, a freebie type of thing, which was okay, because it was still during the war [World War II], still 1944. In 1945 the war was over. Was that when it was? In '45 it was over, right?

ISOARDI: 'Forty-five.

BLOCH: Yeah. That's about the time when we recorded the sessions with Jimmy Rushing. I think it was '44 or '45. Anyway, when the war was over my brother came home from the Pacific, and I told Johnny I was going to quit the band because I wanted to spend some time with him.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BLOCH: Yeah. I wanted to spend some time with my brother.

ISOARDI: Is this the brother who was in the South Pacific?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Is that Bert [Bloch]?

BLOCH: Bert, yeah.

ISOARDI: This means then you're playing six nights a week at the Alabam?

BLOCH: Yeah, I was. Yeah.

ISOARDI: You had one night off.

BLOCH: One night off. Monday night was off.

ISOARDI: Every other night from nine to two, that's where you were?

BLOCH: All the way through, yeah.

ISOARDI: So you didn't have much time for family?

BLOCH: No. And besides, I was getting tired of it. So I left for, oh, I guess about a month or so. I gave Johnny

some idea that, well, I've got to go far away, so I'm going to take off. He didn't want me to go. But then he hired Ken Pope to take my place. And when I came back, he said, "Well, yeah, you can come back, but you guys will have to split the lead." I said, "No, forget it." I had an ego problem at that time. [laughter]

ISOARDI: You had two brothers. You had another brother [Louis Bloch] --

BLOCH: I had three brothers. My older --

ISOARDI: Two were in the service, right?

BLOCH: Yeah. One was in the European -- That was my older brother George [Bloch]. And Bert was in the South Pacific.

ISOARDI: Did they both see combat?

BLOCH: Yeah, absolutely. That was part of the scary thing, you know, especially the one in the South Pacific. That was horrible, the things that he went through. He had nightmares when he came home.

ISOARDI: You know, that's one of the things that I guess we know in association with [the] Vietnam [War], but I think the government did a pretty good job of covering up at the end of World War II how many GIs were so affected traumatically by the battle experience.

BLOCH: Yeah, I know. And that's one of the things I hated, this war situation. I just felt it was such a useless thing the way they treated you like that, like nothing. And I was really wanting to get out of there, and I just didn't-- I wanted to play my horn. I wouldn't have minded if I would have gotten into the band, but they said, "No, you've got to carry a rifle around." I said, "I'm a musician." They don't care. "Maybe somewhere along the line you'll get into a band." But I didn't want that. I said, "No way. I can't make it. I've got to play." And at that time, I mean, I was carrying that horn around everywhere I went. So when I started making some of those marches and stuff like that, I hurt my foot, and I just couldn't make it anymore to some of those training things. So I went into the hospital, and after a couple or a few months I was discharged. Thank God I was. Then I got back into what I wanted to do, and that was to play.

ISOARDI: So you were able to spend some time with your brother, which was what you did when you left Johnny Otis's band?

BLOCH: Yeah. Then I spent some time with him and tried to enjoy some time with him, because he had gone through some really horrible times. So we enjoyed our time. We went to different places. He enjoyed being together with me, and

I enjoyed being together with him again. Finally, when I came back and Johnny was still at the Alabam, I thought, "Well, maybe I can get my job back," you know, but I didn't want to split the lead, so I said, "That's okay." So that's when I started working with other bands. I did some work with Floyd Ray's band.

ISOARDI: Who was Floyd Ray?

BLOCH: Well, he had a band. I can't remember the lady who was kind of with him. I can't recall her name. She was somebody who helped him-- He was a little guy, you know, but he had a big band. Floyd Ray.

ISOARDI: From Southern California?

BLOCH: Yeah. Floyd Ray. And I remember we played the Club Finale with his band.

ISOARDI: It was a big band?

BLOCH: It was a big band. So it was during that time that I worked with his band I think I saw Charlie Parker at the Club Finale. And I think Clarence Jones was playing bass with him at the time. And there was a drummer too, also from our school--I can't recall his name--who was playing drums with Charlie Parker at the time. I can't remember his name.

I can picture him, but I can't remember his name. He played good drums. I wish I could remember his name. But that was

the last time I saw Charlie Parker, except in New York.

ISOARDI: At the Birdland gig.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So Floyd Ray-- Did this last very long?

BLOCH: Floyd Ray just didn't do a lot of jobs. He did the Club Finale and he did a couple of other things, but he didn't do any steady gigs. So then I was looking around for other jobs.

I started rehearsing with other bands. That's when I started to go into other bands that I thought I could get into and make some money. Because that's what I was trying to do, earn a living playing my instrument. Perez Prado came over from Mexico, and I played on his band for ten days. It was a tour up and down--

ISOARDI: That was in '50, '51?

BLOCH: 'Fifty-one I think it was.

ISOARDI: But before then you played with, I think you said, Frankie Carle?

BLOCH: With Frankie Carle. I think it was 1953.

ISOARDI: Oh, that comes much later, then. When did you hook up with Charlie Barnet?

BLOCH: Also '54.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's later on.

BLOCH: 'Fifty-three. Yeah, '53.

ISOARDI: Okay. I see. I'm way ahead of you.

BLOCH: And then Harry James was after that. After Charlie Barnet it was Harry James.

ISOARDI: What about this period, then, from Floyd Ray until 1950 or so? You've got about three years here, four years.

BLOCH: I started playing with some society band. Because I was playing at the Cinegrill for about two or three years.

ISOARDI: At the Roosevelt Hotel?

BLOCH: Yeah. The band was a Mickey Mouse band, but I was making some bucks, and that's what I needed to do. The Cinegrill was-- Well, this guy, his name was D'Varga. His real name was Johnny Anderson.

ISOARDI: He called himself D'Varga?

BLOCH: D'Varga, yeah. We played the Cinegrill. We also played the Morocco. We backed up Frankie Laine and Kay Starr.

Those are people that I can remember. But Frankie Laine was there. Carl Fischer was his piano player at the time. I remember that Frankie Laine was becoming very popular because he had just recorded a song called "That's My Desire."

ISOARDI: Oh, yes.

BLOCH: So that was a big hit. So I thought, well, I'm making some money with this guy, I might as well stay on with him.

So I was with him for a couple of years. The guy was a little strange.

ISOARDI: In what way? Sexual preference?

BLOCH: Yeah. So there was a kind of a strange situation there.

It was funny. I remember when we were at the Morocco, within the group there was about seven pieces. There were three saxes, I think. I played alto, and we had two tenors and drums and bass, and D'Varga playing piano. And, well, we had a quartet within the group that sang. I'm the world's worst singer.

ISOARDI: And you were one of them?

BLOCH: I was one of them. [laughter] But the funny thing about it was that we would be doing some singing, and we would break up and start laughing.

ISOARDI: In the middle of singing?

BLOCH: Yeah. All it would take is for one guy to look at me, and I'd look at him and we'd start laughing. There weren't a lot of people there, but it was enough to be embarrassing to the leader. Finally he said, "You guys are fired!" But he just had to take it, because he couldn't get another band.

[laughter] But the so-called singing quartet was really lousy.

I mean, I was the world's worst. But I was faking my harmonies as much as I could. But that was one of the funny incidents.

I was able to buy a car at the time. Playing with this band I bought a new car. So I started to do things that I wasn't able to do before.

Then that's when I-- The first band that I went with was Alvino Rey. Have you ever heard of him?

ISOARDI: Yeah, vaguely.

BLOCH: He had that singing guitar. We went on tour. I was having a tough time getting a job, so I was working at a music store, Fife and Nichols. Bill Trujillo came over to the store and said, "Hey, they're looking for a lead alto player with Alvino Rey. Would you be interested?" I said yes. I quit and went on the Southwest tour with Alvino Rey's band. I think you remember the King Sisters?

ISOARDI: I remember the name.

BLOCH: Okay. Well, he was married to one of the King Sisters. So one of the girl singers was one of the singers from the King Sisters. At any rate, it was a good band. It was nice.

I remember some of the guys who were in the band. We would go out on some of the towns like El Paso and Juarez, and it was a lot of funny stuff that went on. But playing the gig we were able to tour the whole Southwest and come back.

And then I had the opportunity to start working with Frankie Carle's band, and we went on tour again. We went

back East. We did a long tour back East. We did--

ISOARDI: Before you get into that, how was Frankie Carle?

BLOCH: He's a pianist. He's the guy who wrote "Sunrise Serenade," and that's the one that Glenn Miller recorded that was so popular.

ISOARDI: He was with the Glenn Miller band?

BLOCH: No, but he wrote the song. And he was a very good pianist, a very good pianist.

ISOARDI: Is he from L.A.?

BLOCH: No. Well, he lived in L.A., near Hollywood somewhere, or out in the [San Fernando] Valley. But the band was first-class. We flew to the East Coast and did a lot of jobs back there.

ISOARDI: Big band?

BLOCH: Yeah, a big band. We played all over the East, the Midwest. And then from there I went with Charlie Barnet's band.

ISOARDI: Okay. Now, when was this? The early fifties?

BLOCH: Yeah, early fifties. And then from there I went with Harry James's band. And then from Harry James's band I went with Perez Prado's band. That's the one that-- He was the king of the mambo.

ISOARDI: Right. You'd mentioned that you played briefly with

Prado earlier, right?

BLOCH: Yeah, right. That was for ten days in '51. But that was just at a time that he was testing the waters. He had a band--

ISOARDI: That was a real tough time for big bands, wasn't it? Around '50, '51, they all died.

BLOCH: Yeah. Very, very hard.

ISOARDI: Even Basie disbanded for a while.

BLOCH: Big bands were on a decline. Ballrooms were closing all over the country. And, you know, as it is now, there are no big bands that can go anywhere to work like they used to. The only time you hear of a big band is when the guys get together to play one gig here, one gig there. That's it. That's not a way to make a living. But I don't know.

Harry James was tough to work with, as far as I was concerned.

ISOARDI: Why?

BLOCH: Well, leaving the band that I was with, with Charlie Barnet, I thought it was going to be a lot of fun with Harry James's band, but there was just a lot of politics in the Harry James band, a lot of politics. When I got to rehearse with the sax section I tried to phrase like Willie Smith because Willie had just left the band to go with Duke Ellington. So when I got on the band I rehearsed with the sax section,

and everybody said, "Hey, that's great. It's going to be wonderful." I played our first job in Pomona and it seemed like everybody was happy. But the drummer [Jackie Mills] had his ideas as to who else should be there instead of me, so it was going to be a political--

ISOARDI: Someone else playing lead?

BLOCH: Yeah, right. So on that tour we did a recording session with Frank Sinatra.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. I remember one of the songs was "Castle Rock."

I don't remember the other three songs, but we did two records and four sides. So that was the last time that Harry James and Frank Sinatra had work together. But when I did that, then we went in to play a job at the Casino Gardens. The politics were still going on, and I felt that intrigue going on with the drummer at the time and his buddy. He wanted his buddy to play lead alto. So one night I just said, "Hey, this is not for me. Get somebody else." So I just left. I didn't give him a notice or anything, I just left. So I didn't hear anything more from anybody.

ISOARDI: I think it was Ernie Andrews who went with the band in the early fifties, with Harry James. Were you in the band then?

BLOCH: No, I wasn't.

ISOARDI: So he came after you had left?

BLOCH: Yeah. I should have been on the band then, because I know I would have stayed on the band, because the politics wouldn't have been there with Ernie.

ISOARDI: That's too bad, because from what little I know of his experience with Harry James--he was with him, I guess, for quite a while--but I think there are a couple of people who have said that James had him doing material that really wasn't right for him and didn't really use his talent the way it should have been showcased.

BLOCH: No, I know that. He wouldn't. He should have, but he didn't. But Harry James was an egomaniac. I think he just thought about himself. He wanted everybody to do what he wanted and-- He was the king. He was married to Betty Grable, so he was Mr. King. It's good to be the king. [laughter]

ISOARDI: It's good to be the king. [laughter] You're thinking of the Mel Brooks movies.

BLOCH: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Exactly. The one line I remember from that movie. I still say it over and over. [laughter]

BLOCH: So do I. [laughter]

ISOARDI: The History of the World, Part I.

BLOCH: Right, right. Remember Pissboy? [laughter] That's funny.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, God. Really.

BLOCH: But that's what I felt like, Pissboy, in Harry James's band. [laughter] I had to get out of that band.

ISOARDI: So when you did leave Harry James, was that when you went on to form your own band?

BLOCH: No, that's when I went to Perez Prado's band.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. Before that, though, what about Charlie Barnet?

BLOCH: Oh, Charlie Barnet. That was fun. That was fun with that band. We did the tour back East. We did the Club Oasis on Western Avenue here, but when we were on the East Coast we played all over the area. We played the Apollo Theatre, we played places in Washington, D.C, the Howard Theatre, and--

ISOARDI: I know that in the forties, I think, Charlie Barnet's band was one of the few white bands that played down on Central [Avenue].

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So I guess if he had the same kind of book, I would think you would have enjoyed it.

BLOCH: Yeah, it was a fun book. Yeah, it was a fun book.

The guys who were on the band were good musicians. Bill Holman

was on the band. And who else? Lou McCreary was on the band.

A lot of the guys are probably not around anymore. Maybe they are. I don't know.

ISOARDI: Bill Holman certainly is.

BLOCH: Bill Holman still writes--

ISOARDI: Still has his big band?

BLOCH: Yeah, when he works.

ISOARDI: Yeah, once every couple of months.

BLOCH: I mean, that's not a way to make a living. I don't know how he's doing it, but I guess--

ISOARDI: You do other things.

BLOCH: Yeah. But when I went with Perez Prado's band we went back East and recorded "Cherry Pink [and Apple Blossom White], " and that became a real smash. And then we did some television shows, and I became the band manager. We went to Japan. We went to the Philippines, Korea, all over the country. That was from 1954 till about 1959 that I was with that band. And during that time was when the band broke up and he took three of us to Spain and we formed a band over there.

ISOARDI: With local musicians?

BLOCH: Yes. Spanish guys and Cuban guys. So we did some places over there. After four weeks-- Oh, really, during that time I had recorded Mucho Rock [with René Bloch] that

Bumps Blackwell, who was the A and R [artist and repertoire] man for this company--

ISOARDI: While you were in Spain?

BLOCH: Just before I went to Spain I recorded this thing.

ISOARDI: Oh, your album Mucho Rock was recorded just when you were with Perez Prado? He put together an orchestra to do this album?

BLOCH: Yeah. But, see, I was with him, but he had broken up the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. He just took a couple of you to Spain.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So you put together your orchestra, the René Bloch orchestra.

BLOCH: Yeah, that's right.

ISOARDI: And you recorded the album Mucho Rock?

BLOCH: Yeah. And you'll notice in this thing here we've got Count Basie, April in Paris. But that's because I don't know what happened to the original cover.

ISOARDI: But Bumps Blackwell put this together?

BLOCH: Bumps Blackwell remembered me after working with-- Did I tell you that Bumps Blackwell had a band too, and that during that time, when we were kids, he'd try to use more

or less the same people that Mrs. Hightower had? Some of the people-- Bill Gaither was on the band, Dupree Bolton--

ISOARDI: How about Melba Liston or Vi Redd?

BLOCH: No. Frankie Ortega was playing piano. And by the way, Frankie Ortega, he did real well after he left. He was the accompanist to Rose Marie or somebody like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. That's right. She was a singer before she was on TV.

BLOCH: I don't know, but he accompanied her. He did very well with her. But he's another Jeff [erson High School] alumni who did pretty well for himself. I think he passed away not too long ago. But Bumps Blackwell had his brother playing drums, Charlie Blackwell. And we would play small little gigs.

He always had promises. I remember we'd rehearse and rehearse and rehearse. It was a special arrangement called "Moonlight on the Ganges." I remember that he really liked it. We would rehearse that thing and-- Maybe we'd play one gig, nothing else. There was not much-- But he remembered.

He remembered all the stuff that we went through.

ISOARDI: Who was he? Where did he come from?

BLOCH: Well, he came from Seattle, I believe. He knew Quincy Jones and people like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, from Seattle?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Maybe Ray Charles?

BLOCH: Probably. But he became pretty well situated, because he was the A and R man and the manager--sort of the manager--of Sam Cooke, the singer.

ISOARDI: Oh.

BLOCH: And as a matter of fact, with my band, later on we did a recording session--a whole album--with Sam Cooke. They were stock arrangements, but they were pop songs. I never did get a chance to hear what it sounded like.

ISOARDI: Oh, too bad.

BLOCH: But I asked his manager-- I think he was embarrassed because I was with the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians]. I said, "Can I get a copy of that album?" It was nonunion. We did it at the studio, and we just got paid under the table for that. Should I talk about that?

ISOARDI: [laughter] Statute of limitations has probably passed.

BLOCH: Remember this, that Buddy Collette is on the board of directors of the union. Buddy, I'm sure you did the same thing as everybody else did. But I think with Bumps Blackwell we were able to do this recording session. And it was first-class.

The guy who owned the company was very wealthy, so he wanted to do something that was a combination of rock and roll and Latin. So this was the result of it.

ISOARDI: Now, which company is this?

BLOCH: Well, this is Andex, but it was Rex Productions.

ISOARDI: Andex Records?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So this was a rich guy's independent--

BLOCH: Yeah, but also Keen. Remember Keen Records? Whatever company that Sam Cooke was with was the one that was also behind this. They paid for the whole thing, so all the guys who played on this band were good musicians. But it gives you a pretty good idea as to the type of things that we did.

But at any rate--

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about that. Did this happen when you started playing with Perez Prado that you started to play more Latin tunes?

BLOCH: Latin jazz, yeah. That's when I started to play this kind of stuff.

ISOARDI: You really hadn't done that before?

BLOCH: No. But I wanted to mix Latin with jazz, and I thought I was able to do it with the kind of guys we had on the band. The only problem was that Bumps wanted to make it more like

rock, because rock was the thing that was the big hit. I remember that when I did the recording session he used his brother on rock and roll drums. And there was a girl who played guitar, but her name's not listed on here. Maybe she didn't want her name on here. [laughter] But it was-- What was her name? Carol something. [Carol Kaye] She was a [bass] guitarist. Played a lot of rock and roll things. Oh, jeez--

ISOARDI: I think I know who you mean.

BLOCH: Blonde?

ISOARDI: Yeah. You know, I saw her six months, nine months ago. Anthony Ortega. I went down-- He's living in Escondido, I think.

BLOCH: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Down above San Diego.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: I went down to hear him give a concert in a hotel, and she was in the audience. Carol. It's got to be her. Blonde. Older woman now. Sixties or so? Anthony introduced me and said she was one of the finest guitarists in the industry for years and years-- I bet that was her.

BLOCH: Yeah, that was her. That was her. Well, her name is not on here. I guess they neglected to put it on here. All she did was put in a couple of lines, anyway; it wasn't

a lot. In fact, you can hardly hear the guitar on there. Because I really wanted the thing to be more Latin jazz, not rock and roll. But as it turned out, it wasn't a big hit. But they rereleased the thing on CD.

ISOARDI: Yeah, just a couple of years ago, '93, '94?

BLOCH: I don't know, something like that. I don't know what's going on with it, but I--

ISOARDI: Well, you know, there's such interest in Latin jazz and music of all kinds, that could be the reason. At that time when you were growing up, was there much contact with the music of East L.A.?

BLOCH: East L.A.?

ISOARDI: Latin music, yeah. Were there many Latino musicians on Central Avenue that you encountered?

BLOCH: Well, Tony Ortega was one, but we wouldn't call ourselves Latin musicians. We were just musicians. He wasn't what you'd call a Latin player, because I had a much--

ISOARDI: You were pretty much straight out of the jazz scene.

BLOCH: Yeah. Latin jazz is one thing, and Latin music is another.

I finally got a band together when I came back from Spain, and I started working at a club on the east side, East L.A. And from there we went into [Club] Seville, which they later

changed to the Pink Pussycat, made it a strip joint. Then from there we went back to East L.A., and then I started playing jobs at the Hollywood Palladium and things like that. And I recorded other albums like with Hi-Fi Records with Rich Vaughn. There was, again, trying to get commercial rating.

They did a cha-cha album, and then they did some things with Capitol Records like "Let's Dance the Mambo." I've got the album covers here, but it wasn't really what I wanted. I wanted more Latin jazz. That's what the arrangements were.

Finally we did one on our own, and Atlantic Records put it out. It did pretty well, but still it didn't do that great.

In '64 I broke up the band because I got married in 1963, and I had a kid, and I thought it would be best for me to just break up the band. It was just too much of a hassle.

I started to work at the musicians union.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: In what capacity?

BLOCH: I was assistant to the president of the union.

ISOARDI: Really? How did that come about? Had you been active in union affairs up until that time?

BLOCH: No, nothing. But I thought, well, maybe I could get

a job there while I can. So I started to be the casual representative, taking care of the theaters and all of that.

But something happened at the union back in 1971 while I was there. A lot of underhanded things were happening that I probably shouldn't even talk about. But I was able to get a contract. You know, we had a lot of bands coming in from Latin America, and we didn't have them "man for man" like we should have. So I was fighting for that. But there was somebody at the union who was working against what I was trying to do. I was trying to get our "man for man," and I was succeeding in many ways. But the guy who was in charge of my department had some kind of a deal with one of the promoters.

ISOARDI: Oh. So he didn't want to do that.

BLOCH: And he was above me, okay? He was above me. It gets worse. It gets a lot worse. Well, let me just explain that I was able to make an agreement with the musicians union in Mexico because I was able to speak Spanish a little bit.

ISOARDI: That's right. You mentioned earlier that you had a--

BLOCH: So when I was able to do that, I thought everything was going to be great here in the United States. We're going to have the "man for man" like we should. But there were still a lot of things going on. There was one promoter who

used to make deals with this certain person. Should I mention names?

ISOARDI: It's up to you. I think this is sort of for the historical record, so I'd say give as full an account as you can.

BLOCH: Well, this guy was in charge of the department that I was with. He used to work deals with Phil Carlin, who was a promoter at the time. He was the one who was bringing in bands from Mexico, and he would--

ISOARDI: No reciprocity at all? No "man for man"?

BLOCH: No, there was no "man for man," but he used to make deals with this guy. And I said, "No, you can't do that anymore, because he's not in charge of this, I am, and you've got to have 'man for man.'"

So he said, "Well, I used to do this. Why can't I work something out with you guys?"

I said, "No, we've got to do this on the level."

So I used to get contracts, and I used to get deposits and the moneys in front. My secretary would make a receipt for all of this and take it downstairs to the musicians union, and we had receipts for everything. I had contracts for everything. Everything was covered. Okay. This was pretty good for a while that I was able to do this. And the union

paid my way to go to Mexico to make this agreement with the musicians. There were two unions over there. They were called sindicatos. So I got these guys together, and I said--

ISOARDI: Why were there two unions? They had two unions?

BLOCH: They had two separate unions because they were rivals.

They were rivals. I don't remember their names, but they were all a bunch of-- The bribery over there is ridiculous, you know, and it still is, I'm sure. But I'm telling you, it's true. I don't want to give anybody a bad name, but in 1979 I decided I wanted out of the union. I resigned, okay?

So during this time the promoter, Phil Carlin, was being investigated by the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. So he said, "Well, wait a minute. If I give you some names at the musicians union of people who were taking bribes, can I get out of this?" So they made a deal with him. So I was out of the union. I already had resigned, but the guy who took my place had my secretary [Shirley Lamb] fired, because he wanted to take care of everything, right? Okay.

I got indicted. So did he.

ISOARDI: That guy turned in your name?

BLOCH: Which one?

ISOARDI: The guy who made a deal with the IRS?

BLOCH: Yeah. He turned in my name, and he turned in the name of the guy who took my place. I said, "Noway. I have contracts. I have receipts for everything." And I went to the union, to Bob Manners's office, who was treasurer at the time, and I said, "I need to get all the contracts. I need to get all the receipts that were done." The girl who was my secretary had been fired. She had been let go. Well, I'm going to try to make this story short, because it's quite long.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

JULY 13, 1995

BLOCH: Okay. I had made contracts with every band that came in from the Latin countries and from other countries. It was not only Latin countries. But we always required the "man for man." We always required the deposit. And my secretary, who is-- Her name was Shirley Lamb.

ISOARDI: Why don't you just clarify for the record the "man for man."

BLOCH: "Man for man" means for every musician that comes from a foreign country a musician from the [American Federation of Musicians] Local 47 has to be represented. Whether they play or not, they have to be there. But preferably they should play. A lot of these guys didn't play. They didn't want them to play because they wanted these bands from the Latin American countries, because that's what these people came to see. But when I kept pushing this thing--and I still did--there was opposition. I was indicted. I went to court. And I went to the musicians union to get all the contracts, and they were missing. They were missing.

ISOARDI: Just those contracts?

BLOCH: Those contracts for the years that I wanted. And also

the receipts. And my secretary who was there was no longer there. Well, we were found guilty. We were found guilty because I couldn't find the contracts.

ISOARDI: What about your secretary? Couldn't she--?

BLOCH: She was-- I didn't know that-- The treasurer said that they burned them, that everything was burned. I said, "How can you burn them? It was only five years ago." He said, "Well, everything is burnt."

As it turned out-- And I just found this out recently, because all the charges had been dropped on me. All the charges had been dropped. I was not fined. I had been completely exonerated. But I found out-- Because my secretary called me to tell me that the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] came to check with her about other people at the union. And she told me that she was the one who took all the contracts, all of the deposits, and kept them in her house.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BLOCH: So she said that's why they didn't do anything more.

That's why--

ISOARDI: But they initially found you guilty?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So then subsequent investigations revealed your innocence, so they threw that--

BLOCH: Evidently they did. I have not ever gone into that anymore because it was such a hardship on me and my whole family. And I was already out of the union, you know. I was already out. I was not involved with anything with the musicians union, because I'd just had it up to here, and it was just nothing but politics. It's been a self-serving organization for a long time, and I still think it is. I'm sorry, that's my opinion. There are certain people there who have the advantages and certain people who don't. Most of the musicians there who are paying their dues are not getting anything out of it. It's a sore subject with me.

ISOARDI: Understandably, after going through that.

BLOCH: But what happened is that during all of this time I had found my religion, and I started to go to a congregation, a messianic congregation, which-- There are Jews that believe that Jesus is the messiah, is Lord, you know, and I was with them for about two years. And finally I--

ISOARDI: This is in Los Angeles?

BLOCH: Yeah, L.A. This is in Encino where this temple was, Temple Beth Emmanuel. And when I left the union I was still a member of this congregation.

But then I went and started up a business in Bakersfield. It was a franchise. I lasted it about less than a year, then

I sold it back to the company, because my intention was to go to Israel, to go back to Israel and to make aliyah, which means to go back to the land. I was all set to do that. I sold everything we had, our house, and we made the arrangements to go. We were on our way to New York, and we had our date all set to go. And I stopped in Maryland to another messianic congregation, and I still had about a month or so to wait, because our date was August 24 and this was about July 7 that I got there. And what I did was I started to get together with these guys here, Mark Chopinski and Paul Wilbur, and we formed a group called Israel's Hope during this time. So I postponed my trip to Israel, because we started to see that this was very-- You know, I was playing my instruments again, and we were doing some good things that I thought in my body and my spirit I felt were the right things for me to do. We did some recordings with the congregation that became pretty strong with other congregations. The group was called Israel's Hope.

ISOARDI: So you guys have been together for a while?

BLOCH: Yeah, yeah. I just--

ISOARDI: This was in the seventies, wasn't it, when you hooked up with them?

BLOCH: Well, '81, actually. But I just came back from the

Philippines, and we-- This is when I first started. [shows photograph] You see I had black hair. [laughter] This is me now. I've changed a little bit.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Yeah.

BLOCH: How things can change. But then after about twelve years with this group we broke up, and I didn't know whether to go to Israel, whether to go to Chicago--because we were offered a job in Chicago with another congregation--or to come back here. I was going to start a fellowship up here in the high desert, and what happened is when I got here there was another fellowship down the hill in San Bernardino where the rabbi or the leader of the congregation was going to go back East, so they needed somebody there.

ISOARDI: This is a messianic congregation?

BLOCH: Yeah. So what I did was I said, "Okay, I'm available."

I mean, it was only about, well, forty minutes down the hill or so, so I thought I could do it.

So I did. So I've been the rabbi or spiritual leader of [Temple] Beth Shalom since I got up here, since 1991. And I still get together with these guys once in a great while.

ISOARDI: Oh. You don't play that often?

BLOCH: No, no. But in the meantime, in our congregation we have a music ministry within the congregation. So more or

less that is our life. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Busy.

BLOCH: Busy, yeah. But being a spiritual leader of a congregation is a lot more than meets the eye. There are a lot of people who have problems that you have to deal with, a lot of counseling you have to deal with, a lot of finances where people are in trouble and we try to help as much as we can. It's a small congregation, but whatever it is, even within that congregation-- We're renting from the church right now at a place in Highland, but we're getting kind of a bad deal from them right now, so we're looking for another place to go to. But more or less that's what I'm doing. That's this kid from Central Avenue. [laughter]

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

JULY 20, 1995

ISOARDI: René, let's begin today by going back and filling in some things that we didn't cover.

BLOCH: Okay.

ISOARDI: Glancing over in our sessions last week, first off you mentioned that when you were very young you played in Mrs. [Alma] Hightower's band.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: And you talked a bit about that. Who was in the band? Maybe you could talk a bit about Mrs. Hightower as a person, because not that many people have.

BLOCH: She was a very nice lady. She was a teacher, also. She taught everyone who was with her.

ISOARDI: Individually?

BLOCH: Individually, yeah. And she gave everybody a good background as far as music is concerned, as much as she could.

Technically it was up to the individual to be able to do something with their instruments, such as Elvira ["Vi"] Redd, Melba Liston. I don't know how long they studied with her for sure. I do know that they were with her for quite a while.

Alice Young was a pianist. I don't know what happened to

her anymore, but she was a very fine piano player. She would go on these things with us. It wasn't a real large band. It was about seven or eight pieces altogether. But it was mostly to go and to play for maybe USO [United Service Organizations] or homes. I don't even remember where it was that they would go and play. We would play something, and the people would have to guess who we were supposed to be.

[laughter] So I'd play "Daydream"--it was the one that I would constantly do--and somebody would say, "Oh, that's Benny Carter." [laughter] Anyway, I tried to be like Johnny Hodges.

ISOARDI: [laughter] What did Mrs. Hightower play?

BLOCH: I don't remember what she played. I never saw her play an instrument, but she--

ISOARDI: She just led.

BLOCH: Yeah. But she was like the head honcho. She would just be there to direct everything. She was such a very nice lady. Very nice.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything about her background?

BLOCH: No.

ISOARDI: Where did she live?

BLOCH: I know that they lived on the other side of Jefferson High School.

ISOARDI: By other side you mean--?

BLOCH: East of Jefferson High School. I remember there was a park next to Jefferson High School, and I don't remember the address where we used to rehearse, but it was close around in that area. I think that's about the most I can remember.

ISOARDI: Do you know how long she taught or how long she was active?

BLOCH: No, I don't know. I don't know what ever happened to her, either.

ISOARDI: After you moved on you sort of lost contact?

BLOCH: Yeah, yeah. I know that she was around for quite a while. She taught some good musicians. One tenor sax player that she taught was Prince Harrison. I don't know what happened to him. She also taught, I think, Bill Gaither, another tenor player. I can't recall who else she taught. But Prince was a terrific tenor player. I thought the guy was going to really make it really big. I don't know what ever happened to him.

We were going to school at the same time at Jefferson High School. We were on the jazz band together.

ISOARDI: When did you lose track of him? When you left high school?

BLOCH: Yeah, yeah, when I left high school. No, when I left the band at the Lincoln Theatre, because he was still on the

band. And the band at the time was Bardu Ali's band.

ISOARDI: So when you went to the [Club] Alabam, that was pretty much the end--?

BLOCH: Yeah. That's when I went with Johnny Otis. Johnny Otis and some of the guys came over to hear me play. I played a solo during one of the floor shows, and that's when he invited me to join his band, although that would be infringing on Bardu Ali. Later they became real good friends. As you know, they became partners in a little club--I think it was in Watts--called the Barrelhouse. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Barrelhouse, but--

ISOARDI: Some people have mentioned it.

BLOCH: Barrelhouse blues. I know there are a lot of guys who played on Johnny's band at that time. [Leard "Kansas City"] Bell was the drummer at the time besides Johnny. Who else? Well, Lorenzo Holden was a tenor player. I don't know what happened to him. Tolley. Tolley was another guy. Lem Tolley was on that band. And a guy named Pete Lewis, a guitar player. And he had a brother, a twin brother. They used to call them "Pete and Repeat" Lewis. And there were others, but I can't remember who they were. But it was a small group. It was rhythm and blues at that time.

ISOARDI: Rhythm and blues, in a sense, as it began was kind

of a stripped big band with an emphasis on a backbeat?

BLOCH: Yeah, more or less. Yeah, I would say so. From then the rock and roll thing started to come in, you know, more of the playing on your back on tenor sax like [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely would do. Well, Lorenzo Holden started doing the same thing and that kind of stuff. I really didn't want to be in that kind of music. I mean, I wanted to play with the big band. That's what I was really looking for. So that's why, when I left that group, I started to work with the different bands that I--

I did work with and rehearse with Gerald Wilson a few times.

ISOARDI: With the big band?

BLOCH: With the big band, yeah. I think one of the gigs we played was at the Pasadena Civic [Auditorium], that I remember.

But we'd rehearse for it, you know. We'd rehearse every week for something. I think Tony [Anthony] Ortega was also on that band. Let's see. Who else? The alto player--what was his name?--was also on that band. And I think Teddy Edwards might have been on that band. But the--

ISOARDI: Was it a local alto player?

BLOCH: Well, he went to New York after that and became--

ISOARDI: Eric Dolphy?

BLOCH: Yeah. Eric was on that band.

ISOARDI: Whew! Good man.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What did you play when you played with Gerald?

BLOCH: I played lead alto. But Eric was kind of a-- He had a great sense of humor. We'd get along very well together.

ISOARDI: In what way did he have a great sense of humor?

BLOCH: Well, he'd kid around a lot about different things. Just a good sense of humor. It was good to be around him.

As much as I wanted to be around him, he, I guess, headed to New York sooner or later. He was--

ISOARDI: That was about ten years after that, wasn't it?

BLOCH: Yeah, I guess so.

ISOARDI: Mid-fifties, late fifties?

BLOCH: Uh-huh. But he played well then. He played real well then, but he just got better.

ISOARDI: I know certainly he became famous playing very outside or really pushing the edges of jazz. What was his sound like when he was with Gerald Wilson, when you played with him?

BLOCH: He had a good sound. It was nothing I can remember as being a great sound. It wasn't a lead alto sound, it was just a good jazz sound.

ISOARDI: The music itself wasn't that far out?

BLOCH: Gerald's music?

ISOARDI: No, Eric's playing.

BLOCH: No, it wasn't far out at all. He played good. When he played a solo it was just really good.

Teddy Edwards, of course, always played good. I can't remember the rest of the guys in the band. I remember one time there was a guy--I can't remember his name, a trumpet player-- Teddy was on the band. Teddy was explaining something about an arrangement, and this guy who played trumpet-- He was a white guy. I can't recall what his name was, but he was always really spiffy, really with his cuffs, you know, and played trumpet. I remember Teddy was trying to explain something on an arrangement and everybody was just talking, and he all of a sudden blurted out, "Hey, guys, pay attention to Teddy." He said, "Come on." [laughter] Nobody paid any attention to him, either. But I can't remember his name. He was around for quite a while but I can't recall his name. I don't remember. But he was on that band, too.

ISOARDI: Good band.

BLOCH: It was a good band.

ISOARDI: Did you play a lot of Gerald's music? Or was it a mixture of things?

BLOCH: No, it was all Gerald's music.

ISOARDI: Really? What did you think of Gerald as a composer and as a man?

BLOCH: Oh, I thought he was one of the best musicians and best arrangers. I remember when he was arranging for, or working I guess, with Jimmie Lunceford's band. So he goes way back. He's older than I am. [laughter]

ISOARDI: I figured that you're actually one of the youngsters.

BLOCH: That's hard to believe.

ISOARDI: Well when I was interviewing I think both Fletcher Smith and Lee Young, I think both of them at one point essentially referred to people like Buddy [Collette], Jackie [Kelso, also known as Kelson], and Gerry [Gerald] Wiggins, whom I had interviewed earlier, as, "Oh, they're just kids." [laughter]

BLOCH: Yeah, right. To them they were. I think I did something with Fletcher Smith, if I'm not mistaken. I think it was that thing we did with Ernie Andrews. I think he was on that.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. With Joe Greene. I think so. I remember I got a letter from somebody who wanted to know more about Fletcher Smith.

ISOARDI: Yeah? What was Fletcher Smith's role?

BLOCH: I think he was a pianist. I think so. I was working at the Lincoln Theatre at the time when I did the recording

session. Or I think I did. After that I went with Johnny Otis's band.

ISOARDI: What was Fletcher Smith like?

BLOCH: I don't remember too much.

ISOARDI: Just a short, quick session?

BLOCH: Yeah. I think all we did was about four sides. I don't know what happened to the rest of them.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about-- I know you participated in the big event that they used to have at Wrigley Field, big jazz concerts like--

BLOCH: The Cavalcade of Jazz. I think I mentioned that. Yeah, the Cavalcade of Jazz.

ISOARDI: Can you just talk about what those were like? Or how often they happened? And who was there?

BLOCH: Oh, I can't recall how many times that would happen out of the year. But I know that I was on that twice. The first time was with Johnny Otis, and Woody Herman's band was also there. That's when I did my "Harlem Nocturne" and I missed the high A. [laughter]

ISOARDI: At Wrigley Field?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Did anybody notice?

BLOCH: I was trying to show off, you know, and I missed it.

Did they notice it? Man, I'm sure they noticed it. It was something where the climax [sings ascending scale of notes]-- You know, hitting that high note. And I go [sings ascending scale ending in cracked note], and I just finally hit it, but, you know, it was--

ISOARDI: Did Johnny say anything?

BLOCH: No, he didn't say anything. But then he said, "Why didn't you just go after the high E instead of the high A?"

I said, "Well, because I thought I'd hit the high A." I did it on the recording session the first time, and I just didn't think I'd have any problems at the time. That was really embarrassing. I was trying to impress everybody there, you know. I don't think I made too much of an impression after that. [laughter]

Oh, T-Bone Walker was also on that bill.

ISOARDI: These were something. There were a lot of performers.

BLOCH: Yeah. I remember that my dad [Louis Bloch] saw a poster about the Cavalcade of Jazz, and he said, "I saw Johnny Otis's name up there, but there was somebody else there." He said, "A Beefsteak Walker or somebody." [laughter] He knew nothing about that. I said, "Oh, you mean T-Bone Walker."

Then the next time we did that was with Perez Prado's

band, because his big hit record of "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" was real big, and we were just getting ready for a tour to go back East.

ISOARDI: So what year was that?

BLOCH: Boy, what year was that? Probably early fifties. About '53 or '54.

ISOARDI: So the Cavalcade of Jazz, these concerts at Wrigley, they lasted late into the fifties?

BLOCH: I guess so, yeah. I don't know how long they lasted, but after that I-- You know what? I'm trying to think who else was on that thing with Perez Prado. It might have been Woody Herman's band, but I can't remember. I don't know if Woody Herman's band was at the time I did it with Johnny Otis or with Perez Prado, but they had other groups that were there too, and I just don't remember all of them.

ISOARDI: So this is this large outdoor concert that would go for hours?

BLOCH: Yeah, about three hours or so.

ISOARDI: At night?

BLOCH: No, during the daytime.

ISOARDI: And they'd put a stage out in the field or something?

BLOCH: Yeah, in the middle of the baseball field. That was before major league baseball came in. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] Wrigley Field was home to minor league--

BLOCH: The Angels, yeah. The Angels were the Los Angeles Angels at the time.

ISOARDI: How many people would show up at this?

BLOCH: About ten thousand people, I think. I think it was at least that. It was a good crowd. Packed.

ISOARDI: Jeez. How often?

BLOCH: I don't know if they did it once a month or what.

I'm not sure. I don't remember. But I only did it twice with the different bands. But it was fun. Good band.

ISOARDI: Another thing I wanted to ask you about from last time, especially talking about this period, on the downside, one of the things that certainly starts happening in the forties is drugs.

BLOCH: Drugs, yeah. Drugs were--

ISOARDI: From your vantage point, what did it look like then?

BLOCH: I didn't see too much of it, to tell you the truth.

I really didn't. I didn't see it with Johnny Otis's band, and I didn't see it with Bardu's band or Floyd Ray's band.

I started to see it with Charlie Barnet's band.

ISOARDI: In the fifties?

BLOCH: Yeah. And the guys would probably do it just because they were showing off, you know. But I remember even I had

a little box of it that I thought, "Well, if they can do it, I can do it, too." But I never inhaled. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Was this pot? Or was it--?

BLOCH: It was pot. That's the only thing I ever saw at any time. It wasn't until later on that I knew some of the guys were into the harder stuff. But I never saw anything that was really bad. Some of my friends later on went into it.

Like Walter Benton, a good tenor player. I got him into Perez Prado's band. He went to Jeff High School, too, I think. But he played great tenor. But he was a fan of Paul Gonsalves, and he knew that Paul Gonsalves was into heroin, and I think he went into it later. And I have never heard from him since.

I don't know what happened to him.

ISOARDI: It could have been the end of his career.

BLOCH: It could have been, yeah. It could have been. But the fortunate thing is that I didn't get a chance to see any real strong dealings in drugs or anything like that. You know, the one time that I joined the union [American Federation of Musicians] with this trio, the first night we stopped at a place and they were going to go jam up at the-- What was the name of that place over on Vernon Avenue? I can't remember.

But they were smoking pot inside the car, and I was-- [laughter]

ISOARDI: You were shocked?

BLOCH: Yeah. I was going to school, you know, just barely going to school. That was my first introduction to it. I certainly knew what the smell was from then on.

ISOARDI: So you never saw much pot around school or anything like that?

BLOCH: No. I never saw it at all there. Not while I was going to school.

ISOARDI: Do you know where people would get their pot?

BLOCH: No, I don't. I don't remember if-- During the time at school there was none. A guy didn't even smoke cigarettes, really. It was pretty clean-cut. Some of the things that they had at other high schools, like proms and all that, we never had proms. But there were dances that we'd play. Like this band that I was with, Everett Myart's band, we'd go play someplace, and that was about it. But no proms. I could never understand-- I don't know.

ISOARDI: But you would have school dances at Jeff?

BLOCH: We never had a school dance that I knew of.

ISOARDI: Really? What did you guys do for the social life at the school? There weren't any things like that?

BLOCH: I can't remember anything that was like that.

ISOARDI: I would have thought with the bands and musicians at Jeff, you guys would have had dances all the time.

BLOCH: Yeah, I would think so, but the only things we--
We just didn't do it. There were no dances. In other schools
they'd call them hops or junior hops and all that stuff.
We didn't have anything like that.

ISOARDI: Huh. I wonder why.

BLOCH: I don't know. I have no idea. All I know is that
my interest was just in playing my horns and that's it. Dancing?

Forget it. I couldn't dance if I had to. [laughter] You
can ask my wife [Miriam Siqueiros Bloch]. ISOARDI: [laughter]

Let me also ask you about-- You got involved in the fifties
in Latin jazz, playing Latin jazz.

BLOCH: Right.

ISOARDI: How did that come about?

BLOCH: When I started playing with Perez Prado's band, we
toured all over the country. We went to Japan. We went all
over the Orient. He did very well. So during that time, Bumps
Blackwell said, "Why don't you get a band, and I'll record
you?" That's the time that we did a recording session.

ISOARDI: Mucho Rock with René Bloch.

BLOCH: Yeah. I said, "Man, that would be great." So I got
some arrangers that I knew, like Paul Lopez and Bobby Gil,
and I did a couple of the arrangements myself. And he said,
"What we'll do is mix Latin with rock." So that's why they

called it Mucho Rock. It was not real rock oriented, but I thought if we could do that, it would be a big hit like-- Mongo Santamaria was on our band for the recording session.

You know, Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo and a lot of the big-- Teddy Edwards did the first thing with our band, too.

That's when we did "Raunchy," which was a rock and roll song.

"Cha-Cha-Stroll," we did it into rock and roll. If you ever hear that CD, we have those in there, so you'll understand what we're trying to do. Another thing I tried to do was we did a recording of "Frenesi," and I changed it around so that-- I wanted to do sort of a "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" thing like Perez Prado did, only I did it with saxes, with two altos. We did [sings melody while snapping fingers] with a rock and roll beat.

ISOARDI: Right.

BLOCH: When we did that recording, I said, "Maybe something good will happen." And during that time after we did the recording session, Bumps added as much rock and roll as he could. Carol Kaye was a good [bass] guitarist at the time.

I couldn't remember what her name was. And Charlie Blackwell was the drummer, the rock and roll drummer. On the album cover he's listed as the bass player. Plus we had a Latin rhythm section that included Willie Bobo, Mongo Santamaria,

and all those guys.

ISOARDI: Good musicians. Now, you hadn't played Latin jazz until this time. Was it this session, this album, that got you thinking about this?

BLOCH: Yeah, that was it. Plus Perez Prado tried to add a lot of jazz into his arrangements, because we had a lot of good players that played on the band. Like when Frank Butler played drums on the band and Walter Benton played tenor sax on the band, I mean, when they played solos with the band with the Latin rhythm section, it sounded great. I mean, it was really good.

ISOARDI: So this was what got you going in this direction?

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Had anyone else around L.A. been playing this kind of music?

BLOCH: No. I quit Perez Prado's band in Spain, because I had heard that they were going to release Mucho Rock, and I should be back to see if I could do some things with it.

So Bumps sent me out with some of the rock and roll groups, and I didn't do anything but listen to what they were doing.

And nothing happened. We did do something with the band.

We backed up Chuck Berry's band with my band.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. Bill Sutton was the promoter on that. I don't know if you've ever heard of this guy, from San Jose. Well, when we did this, we got stuck, and we didn't get paid all our moneys, so I had to take the guy to the union. Bill Sutton was a promoter. Chuck Berry was also there, but I guess he had nothing to do with it. But we backed him up, too. Our band backed Chuck Berry, you know, with his little duck walk and all of that. [laughter] We played our music--the one I thought was going to be a hit, you know, like "Cha-Cha-Stroll" and all that stuff--but it didn't make it with the people who came to see Chuck Berry. [laughter]

ISOARDI: This is tough. This is tough to follow.

BLOCH: Yeah. So we finally, somewhere along on this tour-- We weren't getting paid, so we had to go home. So I just took the guy to the union. All they did was put the guy on a "do not perform," but we didn't ever get paid for it. I mean, we got paid a couple of weeks, but they owed us at least two more weeks, and we didn't get it. Chuck Berry made the dough; he made a lot of money. I don't know where all the money went, but we didn't get it.

ISOARDI: Was that at all typical? Were musicians always running into problems?

BLOCH: All the time.

ISOARDI: Really?

BLOCH: Yeah. Well, we had a contract, but it didn't do any good. This guy Bill Sutton was a real rat from San Jose, and he just tried to get out of it. I remember putting a claim against him, and they put him on a "do not perform," but so what. We still didn't get our money. So one of the guys in the band sued me, and I had to pay him, but the rest of the guys were pretty cool about it. They knew what was happening. But you live and learn about things like that. That was my first occasion with my band.

Then we came back, and I formed the band again, the same band, and a lot of the guys that I used on the band were formerly with Perez Prado. We worked at a little east-side place in L.A. called the Bolero Inn.

ISOARDI: Where was this?

BLOCH: On Brooklyn, East Brooklyn [Avenue]. We would play there Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Sunday afternoons we'd do a matinee and do a broadcast.

ISOARDI: Who would broadcast you?

BLOCH: KALI. That was a Mexican station. So they used to call us the Perez Prado All-Stars or something like that.

From that gig we got a gig at the Club Seville with the same band. Milt Grayson was also a singer on the floor show.

But we went to this place on Santa Monica Boulevard which was later called the Pink Pussycat, because they couldn't make it with what they were doing so they made it a strip joint. And then from there I went back to the Bolero Inn.

[laughter]

But then the band started getting better. We did the recording session with Hi-Fi Records, Everybody Likes to Cha-Cha-Cha, but again, that was strictly commercial, trying to break into that. Then I got a recording session with Capitol Records. We did Everybody Likes to Mambo and then another one called La Pachanga. Now, that became a semi-hit in L.A., so we started doing the [Hollywood] Palladium dances. Tito Puente would be there, and Machito's band, you know. Our band started to get real good and get recognition all over.

But we did the Battle of Bands with Tito Puente. Tito Puente had an arrangement for two bands to sound like stereo. I remember we were working at a place called the Club Havana over on Sunset Boulevard--2905 Sunset Boulevard, I won't forget that. It was his band and my band. He made the arrangement.

But it was like a stereo thing--you know, his band would play, then mine. It was just a beautiful thing.

ISOARDI: I'll bet.

BLOCH: He had done it with Machito's band before, so he did

it with our band, too. It was exciting. But we also did a lot of Palladium dates. We had Celia Cruz. We used to back up Celia Cruz. Joe Cuba was there. You know, that's the time that we were doing those Latin festival things.

ISOARDI: So the Palladium really became a home for Latin popular music and Latin jazz?

BLOCH: Yeah. [shows publicity for the concerts] As you see, some of the guys who were there at the time were Ray Barretto-- Have you ever heard of him?

ISOARDI: Sure.

BLOCH: Celia Cruz and Joe Cuba. At that time we also did it with Tito Rodriguez and Tito Puente and Machito. So we were constantly there with those different bands. That was our venture into that. But then Latin music became stronger and stronger. That was the band that I had at-- You know, maybe I added a couple of trumpets or something to that band.

The flute player was Rolando Lozano. He's a Cuban guy--from Cuba, of course--and he played the wooden flute and a lot of our solos. A lot of the flute solos that he played were fantastic because he was such a great flute player. And Pat Rodriguez, the drummer, he used to play with Tito Rodriguez.

And Little Joe Terranova, he is now a hair stylist on Sunset Boulevard. [laughter] He does the hair for a lot of the movie

stars.

ISOARDI: Well, he's doing pretty well.

BLOCH: Yeah, he does great. But that was the extent of the Latin band that I had. I was able to get into a partnership for the Club Havana. I became half owner of it. So I knew that my band would be working there. [laughter].

ISOARDI: [laughter] Really?

BLOCH: So we would have Tito Puente's band, Tito Rodriguez's band, and Machito's band would come in there once in a while.

ISOARDI: Where was it located?

BLOCH: Where is it located? On Sunset Boulevard, but in Silver Lake. But that-- To make a long story short, this place-- We weren't doing too well, so my partner wanted to buy me out, because he wasn't making any money. So he got the place, and I went out of it. I went and played at a place downtown, some place next to the Paramount Theatre. I forgot the name of the place. But we started to play there. But then I started to get disillusioned with the band. I was married, I was going to have a baby, and I said, "Enough of this." I think about 1964 or '65 I broke it up.

ISOARDI: That's when you went into the union?

BLOCH: That's when I went into the union. But the things that happened with the band were going downhill, because the

band was doing well. We'd do those Palladium dates once in a while, but it was not enough to keep us going.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I guess rock and roll was really swamping everything in the early sixties, wasn't it?

BLOCH: Oh, that killed us. It killed us. That's when the Beatles came out. And when I came out with those albums-- I did a couple of albums with Randy Wood's company. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

ISOARDI: That rings a bell, but I can't place it.

BLOCH: Randy Wood had a company. I can't remember who he had. [Mira Records] But I did an album called the Afro- Blues Quintet [featuring René Bloch]. I did that because he had an album that did pretty well, Little Joe and the Afro-Blues Quintet. Well, he took Little Joe out, and I came in and did a couple of things with him. But he didn't do too well. The company went out of business and financially they didn't do too well. But, you know, he was involved with the Beatles when they first came out, Randy Wood.

ISOARDI: How so? How was he?

BLOCH: In promoting or something. I don't know. Randy Wood somehow or another-- He had a lot of pictures in his office with the Beatles. So I thought he was doing very well. I don't know to what extent, but he was really involved with

it.

ISOARDI: Last time you talked about, among other things, certainly one of the more painful experiences you had as a member of the union. Just to follow up one point of that, your secretary--

BLOCH: Oh, Shirley Lamb.

ISOARDI: Shirley Lamb. At one point you said that she'd brought home all of these records--contracts and receipts.

BLOCH: Contracts and receipts of the moneys, the deposits and receipts. She brought them home.

ISOARDI: Why did she bring all these home?

BLOCH: Okay, because the guy who took my place-- I had resigned from the union to go into business myself. I'd had enough of the musicians union. I just felt it was a self-serving organization. In 1971 I ran for treasurer against Bob Manners.

And it was nip and tuck, but Jimmy Clark was also running for the same position, so he and I kind of negated the thing.

Our vote was split, so Bob Manners became the treasurer again.

But right after that they tried to fire me, you know, and a lot of the musicians came to the board of directors and they demanded that they keep me on. This was back in 1971.

So immediately the president of the union, Max Herman, says, "Okay, guys. The board has taken it upon themselves to keep

René Bloch on, so please, there are no problems here." I was even interviewed by the television company, and I told them it was politics all the way. There was so much politics, it really-- I don't think even our own musicians know what the politics are at the musicians union and how it's so self-serving and how so many musicians are not equally treated as far as they should. And I tried to do something about it back in 1971. So when they tried to fire me I still stayed on, and I was working towards trying to get more work for the musicians on this "man for man," which is a union rule that for every band that came from a foreign country we had to have a "man for man" [exchange] from Local 47. That was my main concern, trying to do that. So it was always against these promoters like Phil Carlin.

Now, Phil Carlin had made deals with the guy who was there prior to me.

ISOARDI: Right.

BLOCH: Anyway, the guy who was there became the secretary of the union, so I became the casual assistant to Max Herman. So I was really able to do a lot of things for the musicians. Even now I don't know if any of them do appreciate that a lot of work came through that. Because now what is happening with these bands that are coming in, there's no "man for man."

There is nothing going on where there is a representation of the "man for man" as I had worked out a deal with the musicians union in Mexico and our union. We had signed an agreement.

But even with all of that, the promoters-- This Phil Carlin got busted by the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] and he said, "Well, I can turn state's evidence against a couple of business agents." One of them was Hector Rivera, and the other was myself.

Now, Hector would go on Saturdays checking some of these places out, and I would go checking places out. But because I was very firm on the deposits and the moneys to be put in and contracts to be put in for any "man for man," this guy became an enemy, one of the worst enemies of me in every way.

Even though the guy whose place I took said to me, "Take it easy, you don't have to be so tough on these guys--" Because he was still getting cases of booze from them every holiday, you know, for Christmas or whatever. But I said, "Well, no, that's not what we're here for. We've got to help the musicians." That's what my intention was. I don't know. I guess that became a real problem with a lot of the promoters when they had to come up with deposits and contracts for all of these things.

Now, when I resigned from the union to go into business

on my own, this guy Hector Rivera took over my office, and Shirley Lamb was still the secretary. Now, she knew how to make contracts up. She knew how to run the office the way I used to run it by getting deposits, by getting contracts and everything. So when Hector took over, he said, "No, you don't have to do that anymore." So they started arguing amongst each other. He got her fired. So she took all the contracts, all the deposits, because they were investigating the union at the time. They were investigating Max Herman. They were investi-gating the whole union.

ISOARDI: They being--?

BLOCH: The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], because of this situation where this guy was saying that the union was taking bribes in order to allow some of these bands to play without the "man for man," which was not true. And I had the proof on it. They would bring groups to do the [Los Angeles] Sports Arena, but I'd always have contracts for it.

I'd always have the deposits, the full moneys, into the union for these things.

ISOARDI: Shirley was just being really savvy and she was being very cautious? Seeing this going on, she held on to those contracts and receipts?

BLOCH: She held onto it I think just to do wrong to this

guy Hector. Because Hector had her fired. You see what I'm saying?

ISOARDI: She probably didn't trust him.

BLOCH: She probably just wanted to do it to get him in trouble.

But the problem was that it went back to me, too. And all of those contracts and all of those deposits, when it came time for me to find them, I went to the union and I asked Bob Manners for them. He said, "Well, I think we had all those things burned, because I don't know where they are."

They couldn't find them. They weren't in the office. They weren't downstairs where they should have been. And they were supposed to keep those things for five years before they burned them. But all those things were gone, so there was no way that I could find anything. I found some receipts that I had of my own but not enough to cover everything that they were talking about.

So when I spoke to Shirley just recently, she asked me how things were going. I said, "Fine. I'm a rabbi now." She's Jewish herself, so she said, "Oh, really? I've got to go visit you sometime." But I'm a different kind of a rabbi, you know. [laughter]

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BLOCH: She called me not too long ago and asked me how things were going.

I said, "Fine. Even though we were found guilty, the fine and the probation, all of that, was dropped."

She said, "I knew that."

I said, "How did you know that?"

She said, "Because the FBI came over to my house and asked me all of these questions, and I showed them all of those contracts, and I showed them all of those deposits."

And I never knew this.

ISOARDI: Oh, it's only recently that you found out?

BLOCH: I just really-- But all of this had been dropped years ago and I didn't know why. But I wasn't about to ask. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Really.

BLOCH: All I was glad about was that I didn't have to pay any fine. I didn't have to have any-- What do you call it when you serve some kind of a--?

ISOARDI: Like a probation?

BLOCH: Something like a probation, but you have to have to serve some-- You know, for different places. You work for

them and do things. What do you call it? I forgot. Anyway, so I didn't have to do any of that. All of that was dropped. I couldn't understand it. But I wasn't about to ask why. [laughter] All I knew was it was over with and I just didn't care anymore.

I asked Hector after I called him one time to see, "Why did you get rid of Shirley Lamb?" He said, "Well, because she wanted to do everything, and I knew how to do everything." He didn't know how to do anything. He just blew everything off.

And that whole department has gone down the drain. They don't get any moneys anymore for "man for man." All the bands are coming from Mexico or from whatever country, there's no "man for man." Nobody cares. I really don't care anymore.

I'm out of it. But like I told you, all of this stuff happened for a reason. Because I had to get out of there, and I realized that the union was not going to do any good for anybody at that time, because the people who were in charge of it were just not doing anything for anybody.

So it came time for me to start thinking about going to Israel to live. I was going to go to Israel to live. I sold our business that we had up there in Bakersfield, because we weren't making any money. It was a franchise called Pioneer

Chicken. Anyway, I sold it back to the company, and I sold our house and made arrangements to go to live in Israel, because I didn't see anything here anymore for me. I was going to be a teacher over there.

So on my way to New York, I had about six weeks or eight weeks to wait, because we didn't have anyplace to stay. So we went to Maryland, to another place called Beth Messiah, which was a messianic congregation. So when I got there, immediately I met Paul [Wilbur] and Mark [Chopinsky]. We started to rehearse, and we started doing good things as far as music is concerned. So they said, "Why don't you postpone your aliyah. You can always go to Israel. Besides, you can always go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel at another time, because there are a lot of people who are lost, anyway."

[laughter] And there are. Our country's gotten worse. From our society that we live in now, I just see that things have gotten worse, and it's not going to get any better.

ISOARDI: This leads you into yet another direction.

BLOCH: So then we started Israel's Hope. Our first place that we went to was Washington University, and there were about two hundred people there. And we had a lot of opposition from the Orthodox Jewish community because we were believers in Jesus, you know. We call him Yeshua. Yeshua means salvation

in Hebrew. But because of the opposition, it made it harder for us, but we needed to do this. We had to find a way that we could find people who needed the salvation. On that day that we went to Washington University there were about two hundred people, and there were forty people who raised their hand for salvation. So I thought, "This is it. This is what God wants us to do." Back in 1982 this all started. And then we started ministering in different churches, different synagogues, different places all over the country. We went to Israel about seven times and ministered over there.

In about 1991, 1992, we broke up, so I came back to California. I had a choice of going to Chicago with the lead singer, but I said, "No, I'm going to come back to California." I remembered California was a nice place to live then. It's not so nice. Anyway, we chose Victorville because the houses were a lot cheaper. The area was healthy up here, I thought, and we were away from the smog. But the other reason was that I wanted to start a fellowship up here. But instead of starting a fellowship up here, somebody from Colton-- There was a synagogue down there [Temple Beth Shalom] that needed a rabbi down there to take over. So they called me and interviewed me. So I said, "Sure, I'll make a try for it."

I'd never been a rabbi before. [laughter] So I went down there and they interviewed, and with all the studying and all the stuff that I went through back East, they found that I was

adequate enough to be the spiritual leader there. So that's where it all started. I was there in 1991. We moved from Colton to Highland in the San Bernardino area. So we're still there, and we're still struggling, but it's doing well. We have a lot of good people. And our congregation consists of people who are not only Jewish, but gentiles, too. So it's a good thing for anybody who wants to know the Lord. But I think that my main concern was to continue doing the work that God had called me to do. I know that Johnny Otis had a church too, you know.

ISOARDI: Yes, in South Central [Los Angeles].

BLOCH: That's right. So I'd like to talk to him and tell him, "Hey, what happened to you?" [laughter]

ISOARDI: I'll give you his number. [laughter]

BLOCH: Yeah. I'll call him. I've got to call him and tell him what I'm doing. He's going to be surprised.

ISOARDI: Yeah, well, when I get home I will call you. Do you know where he's living now?

BLOCH: He's in San Francisco or somewhere.

ISOARDI: Well, he's just west of Santa Rosa in a town called Sebastopol.

BLOCH: What's he doing over there?

ISOARDI: Jeez. He has a market in Sebastopol.

BLOCH: A market?

ISOARDI: He has a market there. On weekends, I think, they have music.

BLOCH: Is he still a religious pastor or something?

ISOARDI: I don't think he is. I think he's got so many things going. He has a radio program on the Pacifica radio station up in Berkeley [KPFA]. He produces his own products for this market. He grows his own products and bottles them and sells them.

BLOCH: Oh, really?

ISOARDI: Plus he's becoming more and more of a serious artist, his paintings and all that.

BLOCH: No kidding?

ISOARDI: No. He's got so many things going it's unbelievable.

BLOCH: Well, I've got to give him a call.

ISOARDI: Plus he's a great-grandfather.

BLOCH: Is he really? [laughter] No kidding. Well, why not? Great, great guy. Wait a minute, great-grandfather?

ISOARDI: I think he's a great-grandfather.

BLOCH: No kidding. Who's the son?

ISOARDI: I don't know. [laughter] Plus his second book came out last year.

BLOCH: Did he write a book?

ISOARDI: Well, he wrote one in the late sixties, early seventies [Listen to the Lambs], and he just came out with another one.

I think it's called something like Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue.

BLOCH: Oh, upside your head rhythm and blues. Oh, well, I remember that he was a [Count] Basie fanatic at the time that I knew him, but things do change.

ISOARDI: You can see he's busy as ever.

BLOCH: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Just always going. I will call you up and--

BLOCH: Yeah. I've got to call him and let him know what I'm doing. I know that it would be a good thing for us to get together sometime, because he was--

ISOARDI: He doesn't get down here very often, unfortunately.

I think out in Pomona once a year. I think it's around the end of August. Maybe next month. He has this big festival that he's been doing for years.

BLOCH: Well, he'll do it again.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So he'll be down here maybe Labor Day weekend.

Anyway, I'll get you his number.

René, let me ask you in conclusion a biggish, reflective kind of question. In looking back, why was Central Avenue important? Why should Central Avenue be remembered? What did it contribute?

BLOCH: A lot of good musicians, a lot of good people. As far as I can remember, everyone whom I ever knew had something to offer musically, and it was just a good thing all the way around. I learned a lot. That was my best time; I think it was when I was on the avenue playing at different places, and I enjoyed it so much. I enjoyed the guys, the musicians, you know. I enjoyed the music. I don't think it's ever been the same, because even playing with the Latin jazz type of band it was not what I really wanted, because I always thought Basie was the type of music that I really wanted to play. But it was a joy. Central Avenue has a lot of history, a lot of good things there. That musicians union that they had there that I first joined, it was a good thing. It was in an old, beat-up house, but it was a union. [laughter]
Local 767.

ISOARDI: What do you mean when you say it was a union?

BLOCH: Well, I thought everybody was good, and they treated you really great. I mean, I remember Florence Cadrez was

secretary at the time. I can't remember who else was there, but-- Paul Howard, I think, if I'm not mistaken, was president of the union. But he was always good to me.

And I'll never forget Samuel Browne as he tried to guide all of his people. He tried to help everyone. I mean, he really tried. And if anybody didn't pay attention to him, it wasn't because he didn't try. Because there was too much egotism, I guess, where people didn't take him seriously enough.

But he had a lot to offer. He had a lot to offer. Central Avenue should have a big space for him, because he developed a lot of good players, a lot of good musicians, and a lot of good quality as far as people are concerned. Some of them not so good. Some of them fell by the wayside. But it wasn't his fault, because his advice was always good. His advice was loving. I loved the guy.

ISOARDI: Thank you very much.

BLOCH: Amen.

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