# CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

Minor Robinson

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

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

CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

**Born:** February 22, 1920.

**Education:** Jordan High School.

**Military Service:** United States Army, 1942-46.

**Spouse:** Rose Wilson Robinson, married 1947.

CAREER HISTORY:

Played drums with the following:

Bardu Ali

Thomas "Papa Mutt" Carey

Buddy Collette

Pee Wee Crayton

Floyd Dixon

Paul Howard

Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers

Charles Martin

Wild Bill Moore

Carl Perkins

Floyd Ray

Geechie Smith

Supervisor, street maintenance, City of Los Angeles, 1947-78.

# 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:** Robinson's home, Los Angeles.

**Dates, length of sessions:** June 26, 1995 (93 minutes); June 27, 1995 (81); July 3, 1995 (50).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 3.8

**Persons present during interview:** Robinson 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.

This interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Robinson's childhood and continuing through his career as a full-time and later part-time jazz musician. Major topics discussed include musical training at Jordan High School in Watts, nightclubs and businesses on Central Avenue and in Watts, musicians who grew up in Watts, and changes on Central Avenue over the years.

EDITING:

Kathleen McAllister, editorial 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 the nightclubs were checked against articles and advertisements in back issues of the California Eagle. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

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

Alex Cline, editor, prepared the table of contents and interview history. Rebecca Stone, oral history assistant, assembled the biographical summary. Jeffrey Chow, 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

JUNE 26, 1995

ISOARDI: Minor, let's begin your recollections by going back as far as you can in memory to where you were born and what the area was like, family life.

ROBINSON: As far back as I can remember is the Adams [Boulevard] and Compton [Avenue] area when I was about five years old.

ISOARDI: So here in L.A.?

ROBINSON: Here in L.A., yes. That's as far back as I can remember.

ISOARDI: Where were you born?

ROBINSON: I was born in Port Arthur, Texas.

ISOARDI: Port Arthur. What year?

ROBINSON: [February 22] 1920. About as far back as I can remember is about '24, 1924.

ISOARDI: Well, as far as you know, though, you were born in Port Arthur. So you came out here with your family when you were very young.

ROBINSON: I was an infant when I came out.

ISOARDI: And that was in--?

ROBINSON: Nineteen twenty-one.

ISOARDI: So you weren't even a year old.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I was just barely walking.

ISOARDI: So you don't remember Port Arthur at all.

ROBINSON: No. This is home to me.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Why did your family move out here?

ROBINSON: Better opportunities. You know, for blacks there weren't opportunities in Port Arthur, Texas. My father [James Robinson] didn't want me to grow up under segregation in the South. He wanted to give me a chance, the best chance possible at that time, anyway.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you know why they chose California as opposed to going to Chicago or something like that?

ROBINSON: I really don't know. I imagine because my uncle [Arthur William Minor] was out here. My mother [Clemmie Minor Robinson]'s brother was out here first. He came out earlier. So that might have been the reason.

ISOARDI: So he probably told them some good things.

ROBINSON: Right. And my father had a cousin [Morris Watts] who was out here, too.

ISOARDI: So there was a family base here.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: How early did they come out? Do you know?

ROBINSON: I don't really know.

ISOARDI: How far can you trace your family back in Texas?

ROBINSON: Just to a grandmother [Anna Williams].

ISOARDI: Your grandparents?

ROBINSON: Two grandparents I can trace back, because they

came out to California to visit.

ISOARDI: What did they do?

ROBINSON: I don't know, really. I think they were just-- My grandmother was a housewife, I think, something like that. And my other grandmother [Mary Scott] -- I don't know. I didn't know my father's father.

ISOARDI: How about your granddad?

ROBINSON: I don't remember any granddads at all. I can't trace back that far.

ISOARDI: Right. How about your father and mother?

ROBINSON: My father was in the trucking business. He had bought a truck, and he used to move people from different places around-- At first [when] he came out he was a barbecue cook. He had put up a barbecue business on Twelfth [Street] and Central [Avenue].

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

ROBINSON: Yeah. And due to bad health he went into the trucking business, bought a truck-- The "transfer" business, he called it, moving people.

ISOARDI: Moving and storage is what they call it now, I guess. Something like that?

ROBINSON: Yes, right.

ISOARDI: That's what my cousin is doing. They're in that business.

ROBINSON: But he died very young; he died at forty-two. From 1937 on I was without a father, so my mother had to finish raising the family.

ISOARDI: Was he in the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters at all?

ROBINSON: No. At that time he had his own business.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. He was self-employed and doing it all himself?

ROBINSON: Self-employed, right. He had an interstate commerce license. If he had that now he'd be-- Just the interstate commerce license would be a very-- I guess they're worth about $200,000 now.

ISOARDI: No kidding, that much?

ROBINSON: So I know ten years-- Fifteen years ago, I think I was telling somebody that my dad had an ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission] license. It was worth $100,000 then or something.

ISOARDI: It's probably more now, much more. Did he have a storefront, a business front, then?

ROBINSON: No. At that time he usually worked out of a barbershop. He had his phone. And he would park on Twelfth and Central, around Ninth [Street] and Central. Twelfth and Central was about the hub of everything in the black--

ISOARDI: When you were a kid?

ROBINSON: Yeah, when I first came here. And he was around Twelfth Street, Twelfth and Central. He'd set up at the barbershop, and he'd get all these calls. And he'd give all the guys so much-- Mr. Giles, Herman Giles's barbershop. I'd say that was around 1927, somewhere around back in there.

ISOARDI: So he came out in '21, and he began by setting up the eatery right? The barbecue, diner, whatever.

ROBINSON: Right. The barbecue, yeah.

ISOARDI: Where was that located?

ROBINSON: That was in the Twelfth and Central area, too.

ISOARDI: What was it called?

ROBINSON: I don't know the name of it. Really, I don't.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the food?

ROBINSON: I don't remember the food so much either, because as far back as I can remember he had the truck. The barbecue business I was told about. I have eaten some of his barbecue and sausage and stuff, and I've never tasted any as good or nearly as good. But the smoke was very hard on his lungs, so he couldn't--

ISOARDI: Oh, all the cooking over the barbecue, yeah.

What did your mother do? Was she a housewife?

ROBINSON: She was a housewife. She was a schoolteacher in Texas, and when she came out here she was a housewife.

ISOARDI: How big was your family? Do you have siblings?

ROBINSON: I have a brother [James Robinson Jr.] and a sister [Lois Drayton Robinson], an older brother and a younger sister. My brother passed away in about 1990.

ISOARDI: Where were you living when you first came out here? You said Adams and Compton?

ROBINSON: Adams and Compton area. I don't know the address. But we lived on Adams about two doors east of Compton and went to Nevin [Avenue Elementary] School, which is about two blocks away. Then in 1927 we moved out in the Watts area, an area called Central Gardens.

ISOARDI: Why?

ROBINSON: Well, at that time Watts was considered more or less the country. Kids used to kid us and talk about-- They used to call it "Plum Nelly"--plum out of the city and nelly out of the world.

ISOARDI: [laughs] That was the nickname for Watts? I hadn't heard that before. That's good.

ROBINSON: Yeah. So when we moved out there everybody said, "Yeah, this cat's going out to Plum Nelly." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Were you upset about that?

ROBINSON: No, we just laughed. But actually my father wanted us into a better environment. Around there kids would get into a lot of different things, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh, you mean around Twelfth and Central, in that

area?

ROBINSON: Adams and Compton.

ISOARDI: What kind of things?

ROBINSON: Well, just mischief. I remember kids used to come by the house and throw sand through the window when you were eating, breakfast, dinner, supper, things like that. And Watts was just-- He thought it was more conducive to raising a family, a nice quiet community. And it was at that time. You could go down the street and do something wrong, and if you did something wrong, when you got home your folks knew about it. It was just the kind of community we had out there, a little area called Central Gardens. It's from Ninety-ninth Street to Ninety-second [Street], from Central Avenue to Success [Avenue], a little tract called Central Garden. That's where I met Buddy [Collette] where he lived in Central Gardens.

ISOARDI: When you said tract, does it mean planned housing?

ROBINSON: Well, just-- I don't know. It was planned housing, but it wasn't-- I meant just an area or planned housing; you could say either one.

ISOARDI: Like tract houses? Was it that kind of thing?

ROBINSON: Yeah, right. And everybody there, they were building new homes. When you'd go out you'd build a new home. But it wasn't as congested as some of the way these developers develop tracts now. You'd have a house here, and maybe three

or four lots down you'd see another house, and they'd gradually build--

ISOARDI: A lot of room?

ROBINSON: Yeah, there was a lot of room, but gradually it would fill up.

ISOARDI: Actually, before we talk a bit more about Watts, can you describe a little bit what it was like at Twelfth? Twelfth and Central you said was the hub of activity in the mid-twenties or so. What else was around there? Do you remember?

ROBINSON: I can't remember very much because most everybody was moving south. And then people were hanging around Vernon [Avenue] and Central where all the action was, I'd say.

ISOARDI: So you mean in the twenties it started moving down there?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Say in the late twenties they started moving. Everything started moving south.

ISOARDI: Further and further south?

ROBINSON: Yeah, toward Vernon.

ISOARDI: There weren't any nightclubs or hotels or establishments you might remember from your early years at Twelfth and Central?

ROBINSON: Not that I can remember. I can't remember too much--

ISOARDI: Well, I guess you were--what?--about five years

old when you moved down to Watts?

ROBINSON: Seven.

ISOARDI: So you're seven years old, you're living in Central Gardens, and are you playing music at this time?

ROBINSON: No, no, no. I got interested in music-- It must have been around '29 or '30, somewhere in there, 1930. I remember--

ISOARDI: So you were close to ten years old.

ROBINSON: Yeah, close to ten years old. I was about ten years old. The drummer at the school got angry and quit or something like that.

ISOARDI: Which school was this?

ROBINSON: It was the Ninety-sixth Street [Elementary] School. They wanted somebody to play the bass drum, and I just held up my hand. I don't know what made me do it. I just volunteered. So I was just playing the bass drum. Pretty soon they explained how to read quarter notes and so and so, how to play waltzes. So I'd just sit there and hit my little "one." [laughs] And then I can't remember the guy who was playing snare drum, but he happened to quit, too. So they put me on snare drum and the bass drum. I learned how to play the bass drum and hit with the--

ISOARDI: So move your feet and hands at the same time.

ROBINSON: So I did that I think when I was in about the sixth

grade then.

ISOARDI: Did your father or mother play at all? Was anyone else in the family musical?

ROBINSON: No, I was the only one. I think the girl who used to live in back of me--I can't remember her name--said, "Why don't you try it?" You know how kids do. And I said, "Well, I'll do it, teacher."

And then, when I went to junior high school, for a year or so I was sort of a laid-back person. So finally, I decided to get an instrument class at Jordan High School. And I think I did that to avoid taking a different class. It was wood shop or something like that. I didn't like being around those electric saws and things. So I volunteered to take instrument class, and I started back on drums.

ISOARDI: So when you first start hitting the bass drum and all, there wasn't a music class, then? It was just the school band?

ROBINSON: The school band, yeah. A little grammar school, elementary school band.

ISOARDI: So you'd meet after school maybe every once in a while to practice?

ROBINSON: No, they would allow us time during school. We'd just be excused from class to go down to band rehearsal.

ISOARDI: So maybe once a day?

ROBINSON: No, about once or twice a week.

ISOARDI: And that was about it for maybe an hour or so?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Okay. So it wasn't a lot of intensive music instruction.

ROBINSON: No, it was just so they had some kids-- The most kids that were in the little school orchestra, they called it, was just about five or six kids. But they were taking private lessons, anyway, so they were pretty well-- So they just needed somebody to play the drums.

ISOARDI: Right. So it wasn't any serious thing with you at this time?

ROBINSON: No, not then.

ISOARDI: Did you listen to music around the house? Did your folks listen to music?

ROBINSON: Yes. I remember listening to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington back in those days.

ISOARDI: On the radio?

ROBINSON: On the radio, yes.

ISOARDI: Were they your favorites?

ROBINSON: Yes, yes, indeed. Yeah, I remember listening to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, then Cab Calloway. I didn't mention Cab Calloway's band.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So your folks listened, too.

ROBINSON: Yeah, they listened.

ISOARDI: What were your parents names?

ROBINSON: My father was named James Robinson. My mother was named Clemmie Minor Robinson. That's where I got the first name Minor.

ISOARDI: Where does that come from? Is that an old family name?

ROBINSON: Old family name, the Minors, uh-huh. I have relatives whose last name is Minor.

ISOARDI: Where are they? Texas?

ROBINSON: Texas. And the uncle who came out here, he was a Minor. He passed away.

ISOARDI: So after sixth grade, what school did you go to then?

ROBINSON: I went to Jordan High School.

ISOARDI: So you went from there to Jordan?

ROBINSON: To Jordan, right. Jordan at that time was a six-year school. They had a junior high school and a senior high school. They used the same campus.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So there wasn't a separate junior high school.

ROBINSON: Because it was a small-- Yeah, they had the same campus with the same teachers. They had a junior high administration and a senior high administration, but the same

administrators were doing both classes, because it was a small community then. I imagine it might have been about six hundred.

ISOARDI: Total in the school?

ROBINSON: Total in the school. That's junior high and senior.

ISOARDI: That's small for six grades, isn't it?

ROBINSON: Yeah, it is. Very small.

ISOARDI: Boy. By today's standards--

ROBINSON: Junior high had their lunch during one period, and the senior high had their lunch during another period. But it was good in a way, because we were around older kids, so we were a little more mature than being around just a bunch of small kids. Most of the guys who were in high school and junior high school were good role models anyway, so you'd want to be like that particular person.

ISOARDI: Oh, interesting. That was a good thing, then, wasn't it?

ROBINSON: Yes, for us it was.

ISOARDI: When did you start there, then? That must have been 1932, '33?

ROBINSON: Junior high? 'Thirty-two.

ISOARDI: Okay. Any musical friends then? Or music was still not serious when you started at Jordan, right?

ROBINSON: Well, Buddy Collette was the original friend. He was the one who kind of inspired me to play. You know, he

was kind of a leader type of guy anyway.

ISOARDI: How did you meet Buddy? Do you remember the first time you met him?

ROBINSON: No, I can't. Because it was probably in school sometime, you know, just--

ISOARDI: At Jordan?

ROBINSON: No, no, in elementary school.

ISOARDI: Oh, before that. That's right. Because you were living in the same area.

ROBINSON: Yeah, I lived just about a block from him. I could throw a rock over to his house. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Did you? [laughs]

ROBINSON: No, no.

ISOARDI: You never did.

ROBINSON: That's just a figure of speech. It was just about--I guess a good outfielder could throw one to his house. I couldn't. Roberto Clemente could throw a rock over to his house. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah, easily. [laughs]

ROBINSON: But I think Buddy is the one who just kept me interested in music, because he'd always ask me, "Why don't you play?" When I got out of high school I quit playing. He had an NYA [National Youth Administration] band, and they needed a drummer, so he'd call up, "Man, go get your drums."

[laughs]

ISOARDI: What's an NYA band?

ROBINSON: National Youth Administration. That was one of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's projects.

ISOARDI: During the later thirties?

ROBINSON: Yeah, like the WPA [Works Progress Adminis-tration] for people who were low-salary. People called it the NYA. They payed us about six or seven dollars-- Well, six dollars a month or something like that. We'd rehearse, and we'd play for political rallies and stuff like that. Then I was about seventeen or so, and this lady wanted to organize a National Youth Administration band so as to give the youngsters a chance. So she contacted Buddy, because he was about the best-known musician in our area at that time.

ISOARDI: Yeah. When you began at Jordan, you knew Buddy. Anyone else you were friends with then who would later play music?

ROBINSON: Yes, the Woodman brothers [Britt, Coney, and William Woodman] in particular. Yeah, the Woodman brothers. I met Britt-- Britt and I went all the way through junior high school and senior high school together.

ISOARDI: So throughout Jordan.

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: But you went through different grammar schools?

ROBINSON: We went to different grammar schools. I met Britt when I was about eleven, I guess, or twelve--twelve years old.

ISOARDI: Just as you were starting Jordan?

ROBINSON: Yeah, just at Jordan High School. I'd heard about the Woodman brothers.

ISOARDI: Had you?

ROBINSON: I heard about the little boys who could play--

ISOARDI: Every instrument there was. [laughs]

ROBINSON: Every instrument. And they were well talked about. Because I think the first time I heard about them [was when] my mother had gone to a dance or some affair that they had played for.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

ROBINSON: And she was so impressed with these young boys, how well they played and how small they were. [laughs] They played like seasoned musicians then. So when I went to Jordan I was kind of looking forward to meeting them.

So when I met them, they were really advanced at that time as far as playing.

ISOARDI: At twelve years of age for Britt.

ROBINSON: Oh, they were really advanced.

ISOARDI: Why was that?

ROBINSON: Because I imagine they started early. Their father

[William B. Woodman Sr.] was a musician, and he started them in the right way. But they were just advanced in playing, so I guess they got started at an early age.

ISOARDI: Plus some ability?

ROBINSON: Oh, the ability was there, but also being under the leadership and the guidance of their father who was a musician. He started them down the right road. They played several instruments. In the school band they were outstanding. It was a real outstanding-- In fact, at Jordan there were quite a few outstanding musicians in the band. Joe Comfort was there.

ISOARDI: Joe Comfort also went to that--?

ROBINSON: He went to Jordan.

ISOARDI: Was he older than you? Or younger?

ROBINSON: Joe Comfort is about two or three years older than I.

ISOARDI: Older?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Joe Comfort, George Reed, the Woodman brothers, Eddie Davis, Cecil "Big Jay" McNeely.

ISOARDI: Jeez, one hell of an alumni band to put together. [laughs]

ROBINSON: There was Charlie [Charles] Martin. And I'm trying to think who else. Charlie didn't play in school. He was a pianist, but he never played in the school band. But he played

around with the neighborhood band. You know, we'd get together and play dances and stuff like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Why didn't he play at school?

ROBINSON: I don't know why he didn't play.

ISOARDI: Maybe he thought he was too good? [laughs]

ROBINSON: No, no. I never understood why he didn't play in the school band. He was a pretty good pianist, too.

ISOARDI: Now, a couple of people you mentioned I haven't heard much about. George Reed?

ROBINSON: George Reed was a drummer-vocalist. George Reed played with the Woodman Brothers [Biggest Little Band in the World] just before Jessie Sailes got in the band. And he was a good drummer-vocalist. He worked with Horace Henderson a lot. For years he worked with Horace Henderson. But George Reed worked mostly with combos, cocktail bars and stuff. He worked trios and quartets mostly.

ISOARDI: Mostly around here?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Well, he worked in Chicago a while. When he went back East with Horace Henderson-- He worked several places. Then he worked out in Orange County quite a bit.

ISOARDI: How about Martin?

ROBINSON: Charlie Martin? Well, he was a pianist. He worked around town with a lot of groups. I think he and George worked together some time with the Lorenzo Flennoy group. Also,

Charlie worked with the Ink Spots, Stanley Morgan's Ink Spots. I think he worked at the Hacienda Hotel in Las Vegas for years.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. They really settled in there for a long time.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Well, Charlie was their pianist for a long time.

ISOARDI: A talented group of people. So what effect did this have on you? I mean, you were just sort of beating on the drums--right?--a little bit, but you weren't studying privately. You weren't taking private lessons in seventh grade, were you?

ROBINSON: No, I didn't take-- I never had a private lesson per se. When I was in the service I came in contact with a drummer, and he was the one who started me learning the rudiments and various things like that. James Herndon, Jim Herndon. He lives in Chicago. He was a well-taught drummer by being in an army band. We had to get our cadence and our different things together.

ISOARDI: Well, at Jordan then, did you take music classes? Did you join the band there?

ROBINSON: Yeah. I joined the band, yes.

ISOARDI: But did they have a couple of different bands? I mean, you were a seventh grader. You weren't playing with

the twelfth graders, were you?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: The way it was, they put you in a band according to your ability to play. If you were in senior high school and you had junior high school ability, you had to play in the junior band. They had two bands. [laughs]

ISOARDI: And probably stop playing. [laughs]

ROBINSON: But, no, Britt, he walked right in from seventh grade right to the senior orchestra and senior band. It would have been kind of an insult to put them in junior band and junior orchestra.

ISOARDI: So you had a junior band for junior high school and a senior band--

ROBINSON: Supposedly for junior high school. It was junior high school level more or less. But if you were good enough to play in the senior orchestra, then you played in the senior orchestra. Like Buddy, when he came, he never-- I don't think that Buddy played in the junior orchestra; he went right on into the senior.

ISOARDI: So he and Britt went right up there, and you also?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: Not bad for only a year of pounding a bass drum. And they put you in the senior orchestra.

ROBINSON: I took instrument class one year. See, I took instrument class, which wasn't-- That was lower than the junior band. Instrument class was just like student learning. They put me in this instrument class for one semester. Then I went to senior orchestra.

ISOARDI: So there were a lot of musical courses you could take then at Jordan?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. They had a harmony class, glee club, a capella choir, junior and senior orchestra, and instrument class.

ISOARDI: And these were all different, regular classes you would sign up for?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: You could spend a good part of your day taking music, then.

ROBINSON: The only thing was they'd only allow you-- You only could take a solid and--

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

ROBINSON: One class would be called a solid and one wouldn't be called a solid. So you had to take so many solid classes, like math, English. Those are solids. History. You had to have so many solids.

ISOARDI: Right. Was there a music solid? Was harmony a solid, for instance?

ROBINSON: Yes. But you couldn't just go take harmony, band, orchestra.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

ROBINSON: You'd have to take some other--

ISOARDI: Right. But you might be able to take maybe two classes, maybe harmony and then something else?

ROBINSON: I imagine your schedule would allow you to take two classes.

ISOARDI: Two music classes?

ROBINSON: Music classes. Because sometimes I'd play in the senior orchestra and senior band, see, then the rest would have to be taken up with--

ISOARDI: Yeah, English and math and whatever, right.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: Still, that's pretty good, two music classes a day. I don't think kids have that kind of an opportunity now.

ROBINSON: I don't know what the schedule is now. But then it was--

ISOARDI: And you could do that every year?

ROBINSON: Every year. What you'd have to do is-- You'd have to sacrifice probably study hall, too. See, then you had one class of study hall, but if you'd take two classes of music, then they would eliminate study hall to fill the schedule. You'd have to take English, and math was sort of mandatory,

and science probably, or whatever.

ISOARDI: Yeah, certain state requirements you had to do. It just sounds awfully good. You could take two music classes for six years, then.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: Good training. You really get a foundation. Could you spend much work on your individual technique on your instrument? Or just sort of general harmony or band--?

ROBINSON: The only place that you could do individual practice I'd say would be in the instrument class, and then that was more or less only-- A person who was at a high level, he wouldn't want to go to instrument class. When you went to orchestra or band you had to play regular concert music or band marches, various things like that.

ISOARDI: You said you had a band and an orchestra.

ROBINSON: At school, right.

ISOARDI: So the orchestra was more like symphonic, that kind of thing?

ROBINSON: Violins. And band was mostly brass, see, a marching band, like.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was a marching band kind of. It wasn't necessarily a swing band. It was a more marching band kind of thing. I see.

ROBINSON: No, they got into having swing band just-- I think

my last year they had a swing band. But it wasn't a part of the school curriculum. You had to do it yourself.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was like an extracurricular kind of thing. Too bad. [laughs]

ROBINSON: I think Buddy was sort of instrumental in starting that. We called ourselves the Jordan Hep Cats.

ISOARDI: Really? [laughs] So you were part of that?

ROBINSON: Yes. I think my last year I was part of the Jordan Hep Cats.

ISOARDI: So it was you, Buddy-- Anybody else in the band we should remember?

ROBINSON: Let's see. Vernon Slater.

ISOARDI: Vernon Slater played?

ROBINSON: There was another guy I forgot to mention who played good, a real good player. Let's see. Crosby Lewis, trumpet. Some of the guys I can't remember. But I remember Buddy, Crosby, Vernon Slater.

ISOARDI: Was Britt playing?

ROBINSON: I don't think at that time, no. Britt wasn't in the group. I think Britt was doing stuff on the outside. Britt was working at the Follies [Theatre] and stuff then.

ISOARDI: He was a professional on the outside.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Britt and Charlie [Charles] Mingus worked in the Follies while they were at school, the Follies Theatre.

ISOARDI: Where was that? Downtown?

ROBINSON: It was a burlesque theater downtown on Main Street.

ISOARDI: That was quite a haul then--wasn't it?--from Watts all the way up to the burlesque downtown?

ROBINSON: It was a pretty good haul, but not-- If you caught the Red Car back, then you could make it in fifteen, twenty, about twenty-five minutes.

ISOARDI: I keep forgetting that. There were Red Cars. There was good transportation.

When did you run into Mingus? He was a couple of years younger than you, right?

ROBINSON: Mingus was a couple of years younger. But like I said, it was a six-year school, so we all--

ISOARDI: If you had the same kind of interest you probably--

ROBINSON: Right. The first time I saw Mingus was at what used to be the library. They had a playground in back of it right off-- He was on his skates. He'd been to the library to get some books or something.

ISOARDI: This was the high school library? Or the public library?

ROBINSON: No, the public library.

ISOARDI: How old were you then?

ROBINSON: I must have been about fifteen maybe. No, sixteen.

ISOARDI: So he might have been thirteen.

ROBINSON: He was about thirteen maybe, something like that. The guys were kidding him. I think Buddy and somebody was talking to him and kidding him about getting a bass fiddle instead of the cello, because--

ISOARDI: He was playing cello then?

ROBINSON: Yeah, he was playing cello. And the next thing I knew he had him a bass like that [snaps fingers]. And [he was] just like a fish getting in the water when he got the bass. He just had so much talent, and so quick how he did things. You know, he'd just grab it and take his fingers and run over something so quickly, it amazed you how fast--

ISOARDI: Just from day one?

ROBINSON: Right from day one. Every day you'd see him play you could see that he was better than yesterday. You could just seem him progressing like that.

ISOARDI: Buddy asked him to play in his band? Was that--? To get a bass?

ROBINSON: Yeah, "Tell him to go get a bass. We need a bass player."

ISOARDI: And you were the drummer in that band. What were you guys called?

ROBINSON: Buddy Collette's orchestra then.

ISOARDI: When did you guys organize as a band?

ROBINSON: It must have been 1936, somewhere around '36.

Because we played-- Yeah, '36.

ISOARDI: Because you were--what?--fifteen years old?

ROBINSON: Sixteen years old in '36.

ISOARDI: And you were--what?--a sophomore, junior at Jordan?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: Who else was in the band then?

ROBINSON: Crosby Lewis was on trumpet, and Melvin Korber. We called him "Bunny." Charlie Martin was on piano.

ISOARDI: What did Melvin Korber play?

ROBINSON: He played alto [saxophone]. He never played beyond school. After school he gave it up.

ISOARDI: Was Buddy playing alto then?

ROBINSON: Buddy was playing alto then.

ISOARDI: So you had two altos, and then you had Mingus on bass, and you played drums.

ROBINSON: Yeah. We worked out in Buena Park and Monrovia, places like that.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Played dances and stuff. Buddy had a car at the time. His grandmother gave him a car. He must have been about fifteen or sixteen years old then. She gave him an old Dodge. He used to call it the universal shift. I think first [gear] was up where the reverse is, and then you'd bring it down to second and push it back up. We'd get in that old Dodge,

and we'd go all over playing gigs. And then his dad [Willie Collette]-- I guess after they found out he could take care of a car real well his dad gave him a big Auburn. Have you ever seen an Auburn car?

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

ROBINSON: It was almost like a Cadillac in those days, I mean as far as prestige.

ISOARDI: This is pretty heavy stuff for a sixteen-year-old.

ROBINSON: Yeah. His car must have been about-- His dad had it first. And after he got tired of-- You know, it must have been about seven or eight years old then, the car. You know, it was an old car, but it was new to us. And we were able to go to places like Buena Park and Monrovia. We'd get in that old Auburn, and we'd go. [laughs]

ISOARDI: You guys must have been the hot act in the school. [laughs] So were you guys popular? Were you popular at school?

ROBINSON: In school, yes. And then we also would break down into a quartet--Buddy and Charlie Martin and Mingus and myself--and we'd play house parties. We'd play around when the kids would have a party, a birthday party. A group would have a party. And we'd go to this lady's house; she had a real large home, so she used to rent her home out for parties. Mrs. Foley. We used to go to Mrs. Foley's and jam a lot and

play, make a dollar, a dollar and a half. That was enough.

ISOARDI: [laughs] That would get you a lot further then.

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Who was handling your booking then?

ROBINSON: Buddy took care of that.

ISOARDI: Buddy did it all?

ROBINSON: Yeah, Buddy did all the booking and stuff.

ISOARDI: How did he get these gigs up in Monrovia and Buena Park and places like that?

ROBINSON: I think Mr. Mingus got us involved in Monrovia. I can remember him taking us-- I can remember us going on a gig, and he took us out there one time.

ISOARDI: So you kind of had some of the parents, then, encouraging you, obviously, and helping you line things up?

ROBINSON: Yeah, Mr. Mingus was--

ISOARDI: What was he like?

ROBINSON: He was a quiet person. He was a postal clerk at the time and kind of a quiet guy. But he was very strict-like. He didn't like to tell you anything but once.

ISOARDI: Sort of like a drill sergeant.

ROBINSON: Right. But a quiet type of guy. I know one incident-- Mingus didn't like his bass. So he was backing out of the driveway. And you know how they have these little archways over driveways. He put his bass out and knocked

the neck off, and his dad went out and bought him a new bass.

ISOARDI: He backed a car over his bass?

ROBINSON: No, just stuck it out the window, and when he backed up it got this archway, so it knocked the neck off.

ISOARDI: He told his dad it was an accident? [laughs]

ROBINSON: Yeah. His dad bought him another bass. I said, "Boy, you're all right, man. I couldn't get away with that. I don't think my folks have that much money."

ISOARDI: Jeez, yeah.

ROBINSON: But at that time a mail clerk was considered pretty high-- That's a pretty good job economically. You could do things like that.

ISOARDI: He must have wanted Charles to play, too.

ROBINSON: And Charles had a sister who played and was a very good violinist, too. She just didn't follow it.

ISOARDI: Oh really? What was her name?

ROBINSON: Grace [Mingus]. She played first violin in the school orchestra.

ISOARDI: Some real talent. What was he--? I mean, you've indicated with that story a little bit of what he was like. He knew how to get what he wanted. Was that pretty much what he was like as a kid? Can you think of any other stories about him?

ROBINSON: Well, another story I guess I think about a lot

of times is he had an enormous appetite.

ISOARDI: Back then?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. And when Buddy would pick us up he'd pick Mingus up first. All our parents were crazy about Charles. So he'd run in the house and get a sandwich. You know, "Hello, Mrs. Robinson." Go to Charlie Martin's house and, "Oh, Mrs. Martin--" She'd make him a sandwich. [laughs] That cat would eat every one of them.

So one time we stopped-- We used to stop at Finley's to eat sometimes, sort of like a little better than a hot dog stand, a little spaghetti place.

ISOARDI: In Watts?

ROBINSON: No, this was on Central right next to the Bill Robinson Theatre. There was a place called Finley's where the guys would come and eat, like a chili, spaghetti place. And I was kidding Mingus about eating. And he was telling me how much-- I said, "I bet you can't eat this." "Oh, yes, I can eat this." Pretty soon I started betting he couldn't eat certain things, and he said, "If you pay for it, I'll eat it." I think that guy ate up two dollars of my--

ISOARDI: All at one sitting?

ROBINSON: One sitting. And that's back in 1936 prices. I was buying a malt and spaghetti and all that. He didn't quite break me, but he got about halfway through my

money. I said, "Well, I bet you can't eat this." He looked at me and said, "I've dined sufficiently at your pay."

ISOARDI: Is that what he said? [laughs]

ROBINSON: And walked away. "I've dined sufficiently at your pay."

ISOARDI: Was he a big kid?

ROBINSON: He was a big kid. But I didn't notice him being as large as he was, because at that time I was two or three years older. He was still growing, and I-- But he was as large as I was then. Because I wasn't big like Buddy. Buddy was a large kid, too. Tall. These guys are younger than I, too. Buddy was younger than I, and Mingus was younger than Buddy.

ISOARDI: Did you ever look at that book he wrote, his autobiography, Beneath the Underdog?

ROBINSON: Mingus? Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: He tells a lot of stories in that book--I think it was your band--about a house or an apartment that Buddy had. It was like a crash pad where you guys would have all these wild parties and live the wild life. Was all that true?

ROBINSON: I don't remember that. [laughs] I remember other parties, though, that he didn't mention. I remember once he said he was going to write about some of these parties. I said, "Man, don't you mention about me in that. Don't you

mention my name, god-dog."

ISOARDI: You mean back then he said he was going to write about it?

ROBINSON: Oh, no. This was around in the fifties, I think, when I saw him and he was telling me about, "Man, you remember when we used to go do this and do that?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, I'm going to write about it." I said, "Don't you mention my name."

ISOARDI: [laughs] So when the book came out, did you run and get a copy to see if he'd mentioned you?

ROBINSON: No, he didn't mention me. I told him, "Man, you're going to do all that-- Don't tell what we did, because now I can't face people," you know. The things we did. We did some weird things--wild things, I'll say--for kids. I wouldn't like to broadcast it. Because a lot of things we did we did and got away with, and then people figure that's the right thing to do. So I just wouldn't mention it.

ISOARDI: Not even one?

ROBINSON: But he did mention about the gas thing, about the gas in the car, how we used to get our gas.

ISOARDI: Oh, I can't remember that. What was that?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Well, I won't mention it either.

ISOARDI: Well, he's already written about it. It's out in public, right?

ROBINSON: When we used to go on a gig and we didn't have any money, we'd go around and get a gallon can and go by somebody's car and snipe out the gas.

ISOARDI: Siphon it off? [laughs]

ROBINSON: We called it sniping. "Let's go sniping, man." The amazing part about it, they got caught one night, and I wasn't with them. They just took them down to the police station. I had to go get them. I said, "I told you guys not to do anything without me." That's the way we used to-- That's in the book, though.

ISOARDI: Where was this other apartment, this crash pad? Was that down in Watts?

ROBINSON: Now, see, I don't know about that.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. You weren't around then.

ROBINSON: That's one on me.

ISOARDI: That's one on you, right, right.

ROBINSON: He might have changed that, too, to keep from-- He might have changed that part. Because there was a different version of it. I'll put it that way.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. See, now, it's funny, because when I asked Buddy about it, he said, "Oh, no, that stuff never happened. He's exaggerating all that. That's just Mingus's imagination."

ROBINSON: Well, Buddy might not have known, now. This is

something like between Mingus and me, you know. That's why I said the things that he said he was going to write, this was just between Mingus-- Buddy didn't know this, now. No, Buddy wasn't involved. Honestly, this is just something Mingus and I did. We were the one who had the skeleton.

ISOARDI: Jeez. It sounds like it was fun being sixteen years old and a musician in Watts in the 1930s.

ROBINSON: And what he's talking about, now, the pad business, where he was talking-- This happened in the forties, you know, the things that I told.

ISOARDI: Well, that was a little bit later.

ROBINSON: Yeah. That's why I say he exaggerated that. He changed it around. This was just before he went to New York.

ISOARDI: Oh, so this is after World War II?

ROBINSON: Yeah, the pad that I'm thinking about. Because, now, the other things he wrote about I'm saying evidently he changed it to make it sound thrilling. But we had a little thing going around '47 I think just before he left L.A. That's when I told him, "Don't mention my name, because if anybody hears that they'll want to put me in jail." [laughs] "You want to write about that, you write about somebody else, not me." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, you know, as long as you didn't murder somebody, the statute of limitations has probably run out. [laughs]

ROBINSON: Yeah, but at that time, you know, the position I had in life and all that-- I didn't want-- It wouldn't have been too cool, you know. I'm not too proud of that part of it.

ISOARDI: So you guys hung together for a while after high school? You remained friends? So how long was the band with Buddy going? Did that last for a few years?

ROBINSON: Buddy's band lasted until he went with Cee Pee Johnson. He just moved up to another plateau like.

ISOARDI: So you guys played for a few years together.

ROBINSON: I played up to about 1940, I think, or something like that.

ISOARDI: So a little beyond high school.

ROBINSON: Just a little beyond high school. And then, when I got out of-- I'm trying to figure out-- When I got out of high school I quit playing, and then the NYA band started up. That's what got me back to playing.

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ISOARDI: At what point--I guess it's at Jordan--did you get a full drum kit?

ROBINSON: A whole set?

ISOARDI: Yeah. When did you start playing the whole thing?

ROBINSON: When we decided to get together and have a band.

ISOARDI: It was time.

ROBINSON: Yeah. We wanted to be like the Woodman brothers. You know, the Woodman brothers had a band. These young guys are playing, and they're popular and playing good and everything. A young musician wanted to kind of pattern themselves after the Woodman brothers at that time. So that's what inspired us to get a band. That must have been 1936 or '37.

ISOARDI: So did your folks buy you the kit?

ROBINSON: My father brought home a bass drum once. He was moving somebody, and they didn't know what to do with it. So he said, "I've got a son--" So I think he took that as part of the pay. So he brought a bass drum home. My mother bought me a snare drum. Through selling papers and stuff I bought the rest of the things. I began to piece it together. So that was back in-- It must have been '36, I think. We started out with-- [Ralph] Bledsoe had a band. He had a

brother--twin brothers. Ralph Bledsoe, trombonist; the other Bledsoe [Raleigh Bledsoe] played tuba. They ended up in the medical field. They ended up being doctors, the Bledsoe brothers. We started out with Ralph Bledsoe's band. Somehow we just didn't click with Ralph.

ISOARDI: Personality--?

ROBINSON: Personality-wise or something we didn't click. So we decided to break up from Bledsoe's band and go with Buddy. So we all joined. That happened in about 1936. That's when we went to Harper's Music Store and got our book together.

ISOARDI: Was that the only music store down there then?

ROBINSON: I think so. At that time where you could buy stock [arrangements] and stuff like that, that was the only store. And then Mr. Harper got wise after about a month or so. I guess somebody would come in and find out their music wasn't--

ISOARDI: Somebody would buy a stock, and then they'd bring it back and say, "I'm missing half of it"?

ROBINSON: Yeah, missing parts of it. But we had pretty well gotten our book together then.

ISOARDI: I guess at some point you finally heard the Woodman brothers' band, right? Did you go to see them?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. Their father had rented or bought a building on Wilmington [Avenue]--it must have been around 106th [Street] and Wilmington--and on the weekends they'd

have a dance. The Woodman brothers would play. And it was just for youngsters. You'd pay fifteen cents to get in or something like that, and they would play.

ISOARDI: So the father had the building, he'd stage his own dance, and his kids would be the band.

ROBINSON: Right. For the neighborhood.

ISOARDI: He wasn't missing a beat.

ROBINSON: I think it would be every Friday night. Because they worked other places, too. This was a studio, too, used as a studio to teach music, a music studio. On the weekends they'd have dances for the kids.

And then the Woodman brothers had augmented their band a little bit, too; it wasn't just the Woodman brothers. They had Maxwell Davis, Jewell Grant. They augmented the band. It was a good-sounding band. They did a lot of [Count] Basie stuff, [Jimmie] Lunceford things.

ISOARDI: What did you think when you first heard them?

ROBINSON: Wow.

ISOARDI: Really? They impressed you that much?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Wow.

ISOARDI: Who was playing drums for them?

ROBINSON: George Reed was the first drummer. I mentioned George Reed. And then Jessie Sailes played. The first drummer I heard was Martin Heard. That was the first guy. George

Reed joined them after Martin Heard, and after George Reed came Jessie Sailes.

ISOARDI: There were three Woodman brothers?

ROBINSON: Yeah, Coney, William and Britt, three brothers.

ISOARDI: There was a fourth one [George Woodman], wasn't there?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: But he didn't play?

ROBINSON: He didn't play. He danced. He was a dancer. But he never reached the height that they did in music.

ISOARDI: Anything else you remember about them, about the band? What about the father? Was William Sr. his name?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: What was he like?

ROBINSON: We called him Woody. I always called him Mr. Woodman. Because I had worked with him a few times.

ISOARDI: Professional?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: A good trombonist. Well, we worked with the Metropolitan Orchestra band that played in the parks on Sunday. We played concerts on Sunday in various parts--

ISOARDI: What--?

ROBINSON: The Metropolitan Orchestra.

ISOARDI: This was much later, then?

ROBINSON: Oh, yeah. This was in the fifties, I think.

ISOARDI: Oh. And he was still playing then?

ROBINSON: And then I played with a couple of dance bands around town that he played in. Then we played in the Elks band together and the Shriners band together. He was a good musician, too.

ISOARDI: What was he like as a person, as a father?

ROBINSON: Quiet and stern and all business. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So when those kids were four they were serious probably.

ROBINSON: And a couple of times, when they would have a double booking, say, where they were playing one-nighters but they'd have another booking for the same night or something like that, he would hire Buddy Collette. He'd get Buddy Collette, myself, a few other guys, and we'd be like the second Woodman brothers band. So he'd do that for us about three or four times a year maybe, something like that.

ISOARDI: So after the Woodman brothers, you were it. I guess you guys were the two top bands.

ROBINSON: Way after them. [laughs] But that was it. That was the next thing after the Woodman brothers.

ISOARDI: What was Watts like then? There obviously wasn't as much activity as there was up on Central, but was there

a center? Where would you hang out? Where would you go? Or was there just nothing there and you'd head up to Central when you wanted to have a good time?

ROBINSON: That was just about the size of it. They had two clubs out in Watts, Little Harlem and Manhattan. But the real happening was on Central.

ISOARDI: What were those clubs like, the little clubs out there?

ROBINSON: They featured mostly blues.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

ROBINSON: They were good.

ISOARDI: Do you remember where they were?

ROBINSON: It was south of Imperial [Highway] and east of Central Avenue in Willowbrook, out in the Willowbrook area. There wasn't anything out there but the club. They called it Little Harlem.

ISOARDI: Really? That was it?

ROBINSON: Yeah. There wasn't anything out in the boondocks. You'd have to want to go there, because there was nothing else to see. When you started out there you were definitely headed to go to Little Harlem. There was nothing else in that area. Then they had the Plantation [Club], which was on 108th [Street] and Central. That was a big ballroom type of place.

ISOARDI: Was that going in the thirties?

ROBINSON: They used to call it Jazzland then. It was called Jazzland. It was gone in the thirties.

ISOARDI: When did it start? Do you know that?

ROBINSON: It was there since as far back as I can remember.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: But at that time they used it mostly for private dances. A certain organization would have a party or something and rent the hall. That's the way I remember it. And then during the [Second World] War someone got the idea of using it as a nightclub. When it started it was mostly a rental hall, the Plantation. Then they called it Jazzland.

ISOARDI: Well, first it was Jazzland, then the Plantation?

ROBINSON: Then the Plantation. Right.

ISOARDI: What was it like inside? Was it just a--?

ROBINSON: A big ballroom.

ISOARDI: A huge, open space?

ROBINSON: Well, they had tables and stuff but a big dance floor and tables all around. It was probably like any other nightclub. It was just like a nightclub. At first it was just a big dance hall.

ISOARDI: Right. Do you know who ran these places, Jazz-land or Little Harlem? Who owned them?

ROBINSON: I can't remember. Joe Morris was the one who started

the Plantation. Before then I don't know who had anything to do with that or who was running it.

ISOARDI: Who was Joe Morris? Do you know anything about him?

ROBINSON: No. Only that he was a businessman. That's all I know.

ISOARDI: He wasn't a musician or anything?

ROBINSON: No.

ISOARDI: Was there any kind of central shopping area in Watts in the thirties? You didn't have to drive up to Central just to shop?

ROBINSON: No, 103rd Street was considered Main Street. In fact, Watts was an independent city at one time, and that was Main Street.

ISOARDI: So it wasn't part of L.A. then?

ROBINSON: It wasn't originally, no. I'm trying to think when they did incorporate. Somewhere around in the late twenties it went into the city of Los Angeles. It used to be Watts, and 103rd Street was known as Main Street. That's where all the stores and shops-- Right down from Wilmington to Compton, that was all business district in there. They had shops. They had coffee shops, shopping areas, supermarkets.

ISOARDI: Were there any entertainment venues there?

ROBINSON: Not back in the thirties. I think later on they had a club, the Savoy. It was a club, not a ballroom. That

was during the war.

ISOARDI: On 103rd?

ROBINSON: On 103rd Street. They had entertainment there then.

ISOARDI: I guess during this time when you've got the band together you were traveling around. You had gigs outside of the area. Were you spending much time up on Central?

ROBINSON: Most of the time was spent after gigs. Every-body would go. Everybody would merge to Central Avenue after work.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: They'd either go by Finley's or the drugstore on Fifty-fourth [Street] [the Fifty-fourth Street Drug Store]. It was a drugstore, and a certain section of booths and tables were set aside for a restaurant.

ISOARDI: Oh, the combination--

ROBINSON: Combination, yeah. They had a counter, and there were set about twenty booths, I guess. And they sold breakfast and stuff like that. After work musicians would go there. If you had a date or something you'd go by and see the celebrities come in. [laughs]

Finley's was more like a hot dog stand--a glorified hot dog stand is actually what it was. It had an open front to it. When they closed they had to pull a gate to close it. But it was open-front and a counter. That's all they had

there. If you wanted to get you a quick hot dog or hamburger you'd go to Finley's. If you wanted to sit down and have a nice breakfast or something in a little better atmosphere you'd go down on Fifty-fourth Street to the drugstore.

ISOARDI: So if you had a date you went to Fifty-fourth? Otherwise you went to Finley's?

ROBINSON: Exactly. That's about the best explanation I could give.

ISOARDI: [laughs] You moved down to Watts I guess when you were still a kid?

ROBINSON: Yeah, six or seven years old.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the first time you went back up to Central at night as a teenager how it impressed you? How it seemed?

ROBINSON: Well, I don't think that that was the first time, because--

ISOARDI: You had just all your life--

ROBINSON: Always. Even as a kid, when our folks would take us out sometimes they'd take us to the theater there, the Tivoli Theatre, which was later known as the Bill Robinson Theatre.

ISOARDI: Where was that located?

ROBINSON: That was around Forty-second [Street] or Forty-third [Street] and Central, somewhere around there.

ISOARDI: Oh, so right in the heart of--?

ROBINSON: --of the action then, yeah. So we'd go to movies and stuff. As kids, when we'd go swimming or something like that during the summer, we'd have to go all the way to the Twenty-second Street Plunge, which is near Twenty-second and Central, because the other plunges wouldn't let blacks in at that time.

ISOARDI: So you'd have to go from Watts all the way to Twenty-second?

ROBINSON: All the way to Twenty-second Street to go swimming. So we'd hitchhike. All we had to do was get on the street and start walking and somebody would see you and say, "Hey, come on." So I'd just start walking down Central from Ninety-second [Street]. Before I'd get to Manchester somebody would see me and give me a ride and take me on into Central. And if you'd get to Vernon and Central or Twelfth and Central or anywhere in that area, you'd pick up a transfer. People would get on the streetcar, and if they didn't need their transfer they'd throw it out the window. So the guy at the newsstand, he'd pick up all the transfers and lay them out. [laughs] That's where we got our transportation. Vernon and Central and Twelfth and Central was the hub for that. So you could just go to Vernon and sort of pick up a pocketful of transfers, and you could go downtown and back.

ISOARDI: Not bad. You mentioned that there were other plunges around there but that they were segregated.

ROBINSON: Right. They had one at Manchester [Avenue]. I guess the closest one to us was Manchester and Harvard [Boulevard], somewhere around there, but they were segregated, so we'd go to Twenty-second Street.

ISOARDI: So there was a substantial white community there as well at this time?

ROBINSON: Where?

ISOARDI: Around the Manchester--

ROBINSON: Oh, it was all white, yeah. The Manchester area was all white then.

ISOARDI: So there's a strip, then, from--what?--Manchester, maybe, down to Watts that's white?

ROBINSON: Well, maybe I could put it better this way: in that area the boundaries of Ninety-second Street, Central Avenue, and Alameda [Street] was not segregated. Everything else was segregated housing. And on the east side, everything west of Avalon [Boulevard] was segregated back then. When we moved from Watts we moved on Forty-eighth between Avalon and San Pedro [Street], and we were the second black family to move in that area. Fremont High School was all Caucasian at that time. They even hung a black effigy when the first black person went to Fremont High School.

ISOARDI: Really? Part of L.A. history you don't hear much about.

ROBINSON: I was working one time on Hoover [Street] and Fifty-fourth [Street]. There was a little nightspot there. At that time I was working two jobs, so I had to catch the streetcar. I was working out on Beverly Boulevard near Sweetzer [Avenue], out in that area.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. About what year was this?

ROBINSON: This was 1940. It had to be around '40. I caught the streetcar, and I got off on Vernon and Hoover to get a bite to eat. So I went in there and I ate. It was pretty good food and nothing happened. But I did notice the guy's place was crowded. The next night I went in there weren't many people in there. The third night I went in there was hardly anybody in the restaurant. So the guy came up to me and said, "Man, I don't know how to tell you this. You notice I don't have any customers, and it's all because you're coming in."

ISOARDI: He blamed it on you coming in that one time?

ROBINSON: No, the two nights, about two or three nights. He said, "Now, you can come in here anytime you want as far as I'm concerned, but look what you're doing to my business." I could see what he was saying. He was correct in a way. He was between a rock and a hard place. His moral was, "Come

on in if you want, but I'm losing money." So I said, "All right, man. I understand what you're saying. You don't have to--" So I used to have to take my lunch with me from work and then carry another lunch, because I didn't have enough time--I didn't have a car at the time--to make it home to eat. So I'd just go from one job, catch the streetcar, and go to the other job. And I'd ride home with-- I think Charlie Martin was playing the piano then, and I'd ride home with Charlie Martin. But things weren't exactly right out here back as late as 1940.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It sounds like maybe it wasn't quite as overt here. It was a little more subtle, but, boy, it was strong here.

ROBINSON: It was here. It was here, yes.

ISOARDI: Were there any kind of racial problems in Watts when you were there?

ROBINSON: Not that I know of. And we went to one of the most cosmopolitan schools in the world at that time, Jordan [High School]--with the exception that we didn't have black teachers. We had all white teachers.

ISOARDI: The entire faculty?

ROBINSON: The entire faculty. I grew up in Los Angeles, and I never had a black teacher.

ISOARDI: Not once in all the years you were in school?

ROBINSON: Not once through high school did I have a black teacher. That's how segregated the teaching or the hiring was. At the time I was going to Jordan we had one-third white, one-third Mexican, and one-third black, like somebody just said, "You take one, I'll take one," and divided it up. It was just that equal. Maybe I'll take it back! Thirty-three percent, thirty-three percent, thirty-three percent. The other one percent was Oriental.

ISOARDI: Gee, it was a real mixture.

ROBINSON: And we got along just as well as you could possibly think. Some of my happiest moments were spent at Jordan High School because of the fact that we just didn't-- We just all got along. No fights. Every now and then there would be a fight, but it wouldn't turn out to be a race war.

ISOARDI: Wonderful. Was that pretty much what Watts itself was like? That was the general population?

ROBINSON: That was, uh-huh. Even though you had sections in Watts where it was predominantly white or black, if you want to go over there and live you could go and nobody would say a word. It just happened that these people wanted to live here and these people wanted to live here. There wasn't any restrictions. And when you moved there the people wouldn't say a word.

ISOARDI: I mean, Watts just stands out. It must have been

unusual in Southern California and, hell, in the country then.

ROBINSON: At that time it was a beautiful place to live. A lot of people think of Watts as the riots, and they never know that--

ISOARDI: Unbelievable, yeah, what its past was. It's important to remember that, recapture that important memory.

What income level were people in Watts? Or what type of people were there? What type of jobs did people have?

ROBINSON: Well, actually jobs were limited, too. Different types of jobs were limited, so most of the people who lived in Watts were either civil service employees or domestic workers.

ISOARDI: So mostly working-class people?

ROBINSON: Yeah. But the post office was considered a very good job, and the youngsters whose parents worked at the post office had more than other people. They got more for Christmas. They wore newer clothes and changed clothes more often. They just lived at a different level. City workers, same thing.

ISOARDI: Was it because the pay was better if you were in government service?

ROBINSON: Than working domestic work or doing common labor. That was pretty much--

ISOARDI: And that was pretty much-- Common labor, domestic,

or the government was pretty much it?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: What about Mexican people, Hispanic people, and whites who lived out there? Were they also mostly working-class people?

ROBINSON: The Mexican people were mostly working-class, and most of the whites were working-class in Watts. But they could get jobs at Firestone, General Motors [Corporation], whatever. If a black person wanted a job at Firestone he'd have to get a broom and sweep up the place. He couldn't--

ISOARDI: That was about it?

ROBINSON: That was it, right.

ISOARDI: Do you have a memory of the first time you became aware of the racism?

ROBINSON: Just about the time that guy told me about-- That's the first time I experienced it. I'd read about it, I guess, about the Scottsboro boys. Remember that case? That's when I began to--

ISOARDI: Become aware of the South and how bad it was?

ROBINSON: How bad it was, racism and stuff. When they had the Scottsboro boys, that's-- I used to sell the black newspaper.

ISOARDI: The California Eagle?

ROBINSON: California Eagle, yeah. I used to deliver that.

ISOARDI: Oh, you were a paperboy for the California Eagle?

ROBINSON: And the Pacific Defender. That was before the California Eagle. And the Pittsburgh Courier. See, that was how I made my money. I used to sell those papers all through the neighborhood.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Yeah. I was a California Eagle newsboy.

ISOARDI: When did you start doing that?

ROBINSON: As far as I can remember. [laughs] Yes, the Pacific Defender. I'm trying to think of the guy who used to bring up-- The circulation manager. He was blind. He would bring these papers, and he would say, "You look good today." [laughs] I used to feel so sorry for him, and he was always so happy. "My, you look good today."

ISOARDI: I guess they had the [Los Angeles] Sentinel then.

ROBINSON: No, the Sentinel came later. I sold the Sentinel, too. The Pacific Defender was the leading black newspaper when I started selling. Then the Eagle came in. It was the leading paper. Then the Sentinel started out as a handbill. They used to pass it around, and pretty soon they started selling it. But Leon [H.] Washington [Jr.] started it. It was just a neighborhood paper. They'd pass them around to everybody.

ISOARDI: So that incident you related in that restaurant over on Hoover, that was the first time you really ran into

it personally?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. I never would have gone in the restaurant if I would have suspected anything. Nobody likes to be embarrassed.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

ROBINSON: But this was right on Vernon and Hoover in 1940.

ISOARDI: When you guys were traveling outside of the area on your various gigs, you never had any problems?

ROBINSON: No problems. We knew that a certain amount of segregation existed, but we never even crossed the line or thought about it, because we were so happy doing our thing we wouldn't have gone there anyway. That's the way I looked at it. In fact, that's the way I feel right now. I guess places that could be segregated I wouldn't go to anyway now. But I had no thought of going in the first place. I'll put it that way. Whether it's segregated or not wouldn't mean a thing to me anyway, because I had no thoughts of going there. I didn't want to go anyway. I wasn't missing out on anything. I wasn't losing anything, so I never thought of going that way. When it gets brought on your mind that there's a reason that you can't go because you're this and that, then it begins to work on you a little bit and say, "Now, wait a minute." But still it was so much better here than the South.

I think one of the saddest things I saw was an experience

in segregation when I was in the service. I think the saddest moment I had was in Louisiana on maneuvers. We had a break, so we all would lay back into our area to rest. We discovered a little stream about a half a mile from our camp. The little stream was dammed on one end, so we had a pond. So we could take a swim. We went on down there to the stream to swim, and we were washing our equipment and stuff like that. We noticed these youngsters sitting around on the back watching us. They just sat there and watched us. We didn't pay any attention to that really until finally we all got out but one person, and the captain came down to see us. This was a guy from New York and had told us that he realized that we were down South and he came from New York, where the man with the sharpest elbow got the first seat on the subway--"That's the kind of guy I am," he said. "So if you're late getting back to camp due to not having trans-portation, I won't dock you for it." So I'd stay in town an extra day and tell him I couldn't get a seat on the bus. [laughs] But anyway, we're down there--

ISOARDI: So your captain's white, but you're an all-black unit?

ROBINSON: Yeah. So now I'll just go back to this incident down at the stream. When Captain Hickenbottom came up and the kids went over and talked to him, there was one guy in

there swimming. So he went over and told the guy, "These kids want to get in the pool, and they can't get in until you get out. So you make up your mind whether you want to stay in or come out." Naturally the captain kind of suggested he come out. He came out, and the kids went in, and they took their dog in there with them. That hurt me so much when I saw them swimming. They had to wait until we got out, and then they took a dog in the pool. They were playing with the dog, and they didn't want to go swimming when I was in the pool. So that kind of hurt me a little bit. I said, "Here I am in the war, the United States Army, my country's at war, and they--"

ISOARDI: You may be killed for it.

ROBINSON: [laughs] Yeah.

ISOARDI: I mean, you may die for your country.

ROBINSON: Yeah. And here's a guy going in swimming, and he won't swim with me but he'll swim with his dog.

Well, the guys, everybody, started hollering some shit, you know, like that. So when he got back he called the company together and said, "I know I stink. I guess I made a bad decision." He tried to apologize, but the guys wouldn't accept it. That's the first time I ever heard-- When we were at attention everybody hollered some shit. [laughs] Everybody. The next thing I knew he was gone. But that was kind of an

incident that will tell you-- It's hard to tell how you feel unless you just actually see this and experience it.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

ROBINSON: And having been living in Southern California all my life, it was doubly hard to take.

ISOARDI: Yeah. The way you grew up in Watts was really different.

ROBINSON: It was really hard to take. That hurt me more than the guy on Hoover, that incident on Hoover. Because this guy did give me a chance. He said, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say." I didn't get mad at him. I got mad at his customers because I didn't think it would make that much difference.

ISOARDI: Was that the only time you spent time in the South?

ROBINSON: That's the only time as it was, the old South. The new South is different. I made up my mind I wasn't going back. Never. And I've had chances to travel with other groups--Floyd Dixon's band, Pee Wee Crayton's.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. But it would have involved going through the South?

ROBINSON: Southern tours. I said, "No, sir." I'd starve to death before I'd go down there. I kind of feel like Mingus. Mingus said if all black people thought like him there never would have been any slaves. And he meant that, too. He would

die. I know that. He would die.

ISOARDI: How did he--? I mean, he must have run into some incidents, as well. How did he handle it? Even in L.A. he must have.

ROBINSON: I'll tell you. It bothered him so much that-- You know these little statues they put out on the lawn, the little black guy with the red lips? Mingus got a white paintbrush and went all through the area and painted them white.

ISOARDI: What area?

ROBINSON: Out in Beverly Hills and all these beautiful places. [laughs] He got him a paintbrush and he whited up about fifteen or twenty of those people.

ISOARDI: [laughs] No kidding.

ROBINSON: Yes, sir. That's how much it bothered him. Everyone he could see.

ISOARDI: I love that story. When did he do that? How old was he? He was in high school?

ROBINSON: He was out here just before he went to New York.

ISOARDI: It was after the war?

ROBINSON: After the war, yeah. But that shows you the frustration a person feels, and I guess that's the way he got his off. And I had his sentiments all the way. I just wouldn't do it because I might get put in jail or something. But he-- No, no. He didn't like it at all. And I noticed

right after then that those little statues and stuff, images, they started disappearing. People don't use them. It's not popular anymore to put them on your--

ISOARDI: Well, it's such a symbol of the slave South.

ROBINSON: It's a symbol of supremacy.

ISOARDI: It's like looking at a confederate flag.

Any other memories of Watts back then in the thirties?

ROBINSON: Not really, no. That's all I can think of now off the top of my head. Some other incidents might pop up.

ISOARDI: Sure.

So you spent a very good six years, then, at Jordan?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: A pretty good time. It sounds like you guys probably had plenty of money, too. You were playing regularly. Or were you contributing some of it to the family?

ROBINSON: We didn't have that much money. We had enough money to buy our own clothes, which other youngsters couldn't do. That's contributing to the family; just take yourself off of their back. And I didn't have that much money, because I couldn't afford to go to college, and my mother was-- My father having died when I was young, I had to go out and try to make something, some money.

ISOARDI: What year did he die?

ROBINSON: In '37.

ISOARDI: So you were--

ROBINSON: Seventeen.

ISOARDI: You were a junior, maybe, at Jordan?

ROBINSON: Right. So I didn't think of going to college.

ISOARDI: You were playing in the band, so you're getting some money from that, and you were also distributing the newspapers, as well?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: So you were getting money from that.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: So you were somewhat helping to support the family?

ROBINSON: My brother [James Robinson Jr.] took over my father's job. He was nineteen at the time.

ISOARDI: So he had graduated from high school already?

ROBINSON: High school, yes. He was going to Compton JC [Junior College], and he dropped out and took my father's job. That's how I guess I was able to stay in high school.

ISOARDI: Right. So for six years, then, you studied music the whole time, and you were in the bands?

ROBINSON: I was in the bands, yeah. Six years, yeah.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any of the music teachers there? Are there any of them that stand out in your mind as being especially good or especially bad?

ROBINSON: The one that stands out mostly with me is Mr. [Joseph]

Louis Lippi. He was a pretty good motivator. Some of the guys didn't think he was as good a musician as he could have been, but I thought he was a good motivator, and that was the main thing. He made you feel that being a musician was an important thing and you'd gain a certain status in life if you were a musician.

ISOARDI: So he wanted you guys to take it seriously.

ROBINSON: Yeah, he wanted us to take it seriously. I guess one of the things I remember about Mr. Lippi mostly wasn't really music. It sort of helped me turn my life around in a way. Because one day-- Jordan was on 103rd Street, and they had a lot of traffic going up and down. So I jumped on a soda water truck one day after school. They had these trucks that had their bottles all down the side, exposed. I jumped on the truck, and I was throwing pop to everybody.

ISOARDI: [laughs] How old were you then?

ROBINSON: I was about sixteen then. Showing off for the girls. I'm throwing pop to everybody. I was fast at foot anyway, so I knew the guy couldn't catch me if he stopped. So the next day Mr. Lippi called me into his office, and he said, "Minor, Mrs. Parsley told me she saw you throwing pop off to the kids and all down 103rd Street." I said, "Oh, no, Mr. Lippi, it wasn't I. I didn't do it." He said, "Look, let me tell you. She said she saw a little colored boy with

auburn hair doing it, and you're the only one in school who has red hair. You're easily identified, so you can't be a crook. There's no way in the world you can be a crook, because the minute you do something they're going to identify you right away. But you can take that to your advantage. Like if you were on the bandstand and had red hair and everybody knew you, everybody would come to you and remember you, and it would sell. But you can't be a crook. You remember that. Don't you ever do it again." And I said, "Okay." And from then on I took that advice. I never did anything wrong again. It cured me just like that.

ISOARDI: Too easy to pick out.

ROBINSON: That's right. Too easy to identify. "I know it was you, but I told her I didn't know you." I think Mrs. Parsley knew, too, but they figured, "We'll scare him straight rather than tell on him." But he was a good friend.

ISOARDI: What did he teach?

ROBINSON: Music.

ISOARDI: All areas?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Well, he was in charge of the band and orchestra, junior orchestra. So he had the junior orchestra, senior band, senior orchestra, and the instrument class.

ISOARDI: Who taught the harmony class?

ROBINSON: A teacher named Mrs. Parsley, I think, a female

teacher. I didn't take harmony.

ISOARDI: Oh, you didn't. Why not?

ROBINSON: Well, I guess at that time I really didn't think I was going to be a musician. [laughs] I don't know why. I guess I didn't think at that time that I was going to be able to go out and make a living doing it.

ISOARDI: It was mostly a fun thing to do.

ROBINSON: Right, at that time.

ISOARDI: So Mr. Lippi was really the main teacher, then, during your years there?

ROBINSON: Yes. After Mr. Lippi came Mr. [Vern] Martin. He came the last year. Mr. Martin was the one who introduced--

ISOARDI: He was what?

ROBINSON: Mr. Martin was the last music teacher that I had. I put it wrong. He came there during my last year. I had one year. I was in the twelfth year when Mr. Martin came.

ISOARDI: And Mr. Lippi left?

ROBINSON: No, they had two teachers then. But Mr. Martin was the one who introduced jazz into school.

ISOARDI: In what way?

ROBINSON: He made a few arrangements for the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, this is when you started the Hep Cats? Is that when they started, when he came in?

ROBINSON: Yeah. He was the one who helped organize the Hep

Cats. And I'll never forget, he made an arrangement for the orchestra. It was this song called "Tipi Tipi Tin." [hums part of tune] You know, one of those kinds of things. And right in the middle, I think, he had a break. Britt would take a four-bar break, and then we'd start swinging it. [laughs] And everybody was shocked at this type of music in school. You know, he had enough nerve to introduce swing. That's what started us thinking swing, and pretty soon the Hep Cats started. So he was the one who put that in on us.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JUNE 26, 1995

ISOARDI: So Mr. [Vern] Martin turned things around.

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: I mean, in a sense he expands things a lot. You guys can play swing now.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: In [Jordan High] School.

ROBINSON: And I think he had had experience with a swing band, like Fred Waring or something like that.

ISOARDI: Oh. He played?

ROBINSON: He played. I think he was a violinist. No, he was a reed man. He was a reed man. And he played with Fred Waring or some other swing sort of dance orchestra. We played a concert at Jefferson High School. We played "Tipi Tipi Tin" and started--

ISOARDI: So it began very corny, and everybody thought, "Oh, these guys from Watts!" [laughs]

ROBINSON: And then we started swinging. Pretty soon they started putting swing music in all high school bands.

ISOARDI: But Jeff must have been-- Did they like you at Jeff?

ROBINSON: Oh, they went-- Well, they started the same thing, the same program.

ISOARDI: Well, I know they had a tremendous program, didn't they? So that must have been a hard test, though.

ROBINSON: This was an introduction to it, though. They had never had it until we got there and did it.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

ROBINSON: When they saw us playing, everybody else got on the bandwagon. But I think Jordan, to my knowledge, was the first high school to introduce swing.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: And then others, just the next year they all followed. But until that time-- When we played the assembly at Jeff they went wild, like, "Wow!" [laughs] This was about 1937, I think, '37 or '38. And then the next thing we knew Jeff was swinging and everybody else was swinging.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Great. Now, who was in that, the first Hep Cats? I guess Britt you mentioned.

ROBINSON: You know, I'm thinking-- Britt wasn't in the Hep Cats. In fact, I don't remember myself being part of Hep Cats. That's something that started after we left. Buddy Collette-- Britt was in a swing band. Buddy had his band before the Hep Cats.

ISOARDI: With you guys.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I mentioned earlier that I was part of the Hep Cats, but mostly the Hep Cats started in '39 after I left.

ISOARDI: After you guys left.

ROBINSON: But we had swing. Buddy Collette's band had-- We had a swing band.

ISOARDI: Right, right. Mr. Martin appeared when you were a senior?

ROBINSON: Yes, when I was a senior, the last year.

ISOARDI: Okay. But he didn't put together a swing band?

ROBINSON: The whole orchestra played swing music, see?

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So he didn't start up a new band. He just took the orchestra and gave them more swing charts.

ROBINSON: And gave us some different charts to play.

ISOARDI: Okay. So when you played at Jeff, it was the orchestra who played at Jeff?

ROBINSON: Jordan's orchestra. Everybody was expecting to hear a bunch of long-haired stuff. And we did play our regular program until the last tune, and then with the last tune we played "Tipi Tipi Tin," and that swung 'em right on out. That started a new generation.

ISOARDI: Music teachers must have noticed that, how big that was.

ROBINSON: Yeah, how it went over, because as soon as we start swinging, the way they accepted us and [received] us was just out of sight.

ISOARDI: Wow. Well, Jeff certainly had a lot of players.

ROBINSON: Yes. That's another thing. They have a good history of good players themselves. I guess they start off with Jackie Kelso [also Kelson], Chico [Hamilton], then later Dexter Gordon, Ernie Andrews, and Bill [William] Douglass.

ISOARDI: Tremendous when you think of the number of people who came out of that Central Avenue area in the thirties and forties. A lot of talent.

ROBINSON: A lot of talent. One person I would say who deserves a lot of credit is Lloyd Reese.

ISOARDI: The teacher?

ROBINSON: Yes. You've heard of him. Lloyd Reese, yes.

ISOARDI: What's your connection with Lloyd Reese?

ROBINSON: Well, my connection is, he used to rehearse, have a band. They'd rehearse down at the union [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767] on Central Avenue on Sundays. You'd just go on your own, and he'd have charts there for you to play, and he'd explain to you how it's done and all that. I would go down and rehearse with them.

ISOARDI: Oh, you were a part of that band?

ROBINSON: Bill Douglass was the main drummer. But I could go and sit in with them, get experience. He'd let you sit in. And he had guys like Jackie Kelso, Dexter Gordon, and Lammar Wright [Jr.].

ISOARDI: A wonderful opportunity. Did you learn a lot from

that? I mean, was it a good experience for you?

ROBINSON: A good experience. It helped me read charts, stuff like that. When I wasn't playing I could sit and watch the other drummer who was playing and follow along and read along and get an idea of what the charts were about. So it was a help to me and all the other young musicians around.

ISOARDI: When was this happening?

ROBINSON: This was in the forties, early forties.

ISOARDI: So during the war?

ROBINSON: Just prior to the war.

ISOARDI: Just before the war. How did you hear about Lloyd Reese and this band?

ROBINSON: Well, through Buddy and--

ISOARDI: Word--

ROBINSON: Word, yeah.

ISOARDI: If you played, you knew about this going on?

ROBINSON: Yeah. "Why don't you come down to the union Sunday? Lloyd has got a band he's rehearsing." And whoever will shall come. But I just had to mention that it was nice for a person for no gain at all to himself, other than helping someone to do that, to give up his Sundays.

ISOARDI: So you guys didn't have to pay anything to do that?

ROBINSON: No. This was just something he did on his own. And he was one of the top music teachers and private teachers

in the city at that time.

ISOARDI: So he was doing okay. He didn't--

ROBINSON: Yeah, he didn't need it. He was with Les Hite. He was one of the best trumpet players in the country at that time. And he'd just have the guys-- He'd just help the youngsters.

ISOARDI: Wonderful. What an attitude. What was he like?

ROBINSON: Just a nice guy, just a nice gentleman, nice guy.

ISOARDI: As a teacher was he very effective?

ROBINSON: I never took from him privately, but at the band rehearsal he was informative, nice. He didn't excite anyone or get them nervous. He had a way of communicating to people. So he was just a perfect, well-respected man, somebody I looked up to.

ISOARDI: It seems like you had quite a few role models then.

ROBINSON: Out here we had quite a few.

ISOARDI: Yeah, a lot of people whom you could look up to as kids. How long did you stay sitting in with that band, going to Lloyd Reese's rehearsal band?

ROBINSON: You mean on a daily basis or overall?

ISOARDI: Monthly, yearly?

ROBINSON: Oh, I guess six, seven months or so I'd go by.

ISOARDI: Almost every Sunday?

ROBINSON: Every Sunday.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: You learn a lot in six, seven months.

ROBINSON: And he went on longer than that. But it was just a wonderful thing for a man to just give up his Sundays to come around and help youngsters.

ISOARDI: Yeah, very.

ROBINSON: For no gain, no gain at all. Only that some of the guys were his students. You know, some of the guys in the band were his students. He had a few who would come.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Any other memories of Jordon?

ROBINSON: Well, I just can't reach and pick out anything.

ISOARDI: By the time you were a senior there, were there any other players coming up, younger guys than you who could play that you were noticing? I mean, I guess Mingus was a couple of years younger. You mentioned him.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Eddie Davis, "Big Jay" [Cecil] McNeely.

ISOARDI: Now, who was Eddie Davis?

ROBINSON: Eddie Davis, tenor [saxophone] player. He played with Gerald Wilson. I think he played with Noble Sissle. He had his own group. I worked with his trio out in Orange County for a couple of years. He was very popular out in Orange County. He played a good tenor. I'm trying to think of any-- But I guess Big Jay and Eddie Davis. I can't remember

any other--

ISOARDI: Yeah. You mentioned how mixed Jordan was race-wise. What about Hispanic musicians or white musicians in the band?

ROBINSON: Clifford Mays was a good trumpet player. I don't know what happened to him after school, but at that time he had a good--

ISOARDI: Did he go on and have a career?

ROBINSON: That's why I say I don't know what happened to him after-- I can't remember any of them going on to a career afterwards. But Clifford Mays was about the best one that I--

ISOARDI: He was a white trumpeter? Any Hispanic musicians?

ROBINSON: Rosie [Rosalio] Lechuga, I think his name-- I think his name was Lechuga. I can't think. Rosie. He played guitar. I heard that he had had a career in music playing nightclubs and stuff, more like the type of work I did. Nothing on a national scale. But I can't think of any others.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

JUNE 27, 1995

ISOARDI: Minor, before we resume your story with your postgraduate years from Jordan High [School], let me follow up with one or two things from yesterday that occurred to me. First off, you mentioned that you had a brother and sister. What were their names?

ROBINSON: My brother's name was James Robinson.

ISOARDI: Same as your father?

ROBINSON: Same as my father. My sister was Lois Robinson. She's now Drayton. She married Charlie Drayton, who was a musician, and her son is Leslie Drayton, who is a musician.

ISOARDI: I wanted to ask you one or two other minor things about yesterday. When you were growing up did you ever notice Simon Rodia working on the Watts Towers?

ROBINSON: Yes. I used to see that practically every morning. I was a newsboy. I used to deliver the daily news every morning, and that used to be on my route, and I'd pass by in the morning. This was an early-morning paper, so I had to deliver it at about five. At five o'clock in the morning he'd be out there.

ISOARDI: Did he subscribe?

ROBINSON: No, he didn't subscribe. He was sort of a loner. I stayed away from him because he seemed kind of weird to me.

ISOARDI: How did he strike you as weird?

ROBINSON: Well, I didn't speak with him. Just to be up at night building-- To me it was a contraption that didn't make any sense. "What in the world is that going to be?" I just remember passing by and seeing an old man out there with a bucket sometimes. It was, say, on a scaffold, a ladder or something. It wasn't that high at the time. It was maybe about one or two stories about the time when I was passing by there and looked at it. But I used to see him every morning. And it seemed weird, the designs, the way he put the tile together and everything. It just seemed like a weird cat doing something.

ISOARDI: Was this pretty much everyone's view of him?

ROBINSON: I guess so. I left him alone. I never spoke with him. I'd pass by and look at him. He'd be out there in the morning, early in the morning.

ISOARDI: Every day?

ROBINSON: Just about every day, doing a little bit.

ISOARDI: Did you ever see anyone else over there?

ROBINSON: No, I never saw anyone. All I remember is just passing by seeing this guy with a bucket and mortar.

ISOARDI: Day after day?

ROBINSON: Day after day. I didn't pay much attention to it then. None of us ever dreamed that it would be such a popular

structure or anything like that.

ISOARDI: Yeah, a landmark.

ROBINSON: Just another guy with a weird design building-- [laughs] I had no idea it was going to be a tower or anything at that time. This was when I had my paper route, 1936, around that area.

ISOARDI: Let me also ask you-- We talked quite a bit about [Charles] Mingus yesterday. What was he like musically? We didn't talk a great deal about Mingus as a musician.

ROBINSON: Like I said yesterday, he was amazing because each day you could see that he had made another step higher or took his playing up to another level. He took to it like it was nothing to him to do it. It was easy. Everything was easy for him to do.

ISOARDI: So the first day he showed up to play with you guys, you could tell there was something there?

ROBINSON: There was something different from day one. And each day he was just better. Just about all I can say is that each day he took his playing up to another level, and you could see it every day.

ISOARDI: Was he woodshedding a lot on his own?

ROBINSON: Yes, he'd woodshed. He'd practice every chance he got. But when he'd play things on his bass, it just seemed like it was easy as talking. But you knew he was different.

ISOARDI: You mentioned two people yesterday in connection with the Woodman brothers' band [the Woodman Brothers Biggest Little Band in the World]. I wonder if you know anything more about them. First off, Maxwell Davis. Was the first time you knew of Maxwell Davis when you saw him playing with the Woodman brothers?

ROBINSON: With the Woodman brothers, yeah. Maxwell was an extremely good tenor sax player--reed man I'll say--and also a good arranger. He did a lot of recording around the Los Angeles area. He was well known.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything about his origins? Was he growing up in Watts?

ROBINSON: No, he didn't grow up in Watts. When I first saw him he was a young man playing. He came somewhere from the South. I don't know where his origin was.

ISOARDI: About how old was he when he was playing with the Woodman brothers, when you first saw him?

ROBINSON: I imagine he was around three or four years older than the rest of us at that time. He seemed to be a little more mature than us at that time, so I'd say Maxwell was around twenty-two, twenty-three years old then. That's just an estimate. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: As far as you know, then, he might have come from the South.

ROBINSON: As far as I know he might have come from the South. I don't know. I can't remember exactly. But he was a very good instrumentalist. And he was an arranger. He did a lot of recording during the forties and the late fifties. I know he passed away at a young age; I don't know exactly when. But I think he passed away in the late fifties or sixties.

ISOARDI: What happened--? Did you notice him after--? Did he play with the Woodman brothers for very long?

ROBINSON: I imagine he worked with the Woodman brothers about two or three years.

ISOARDI: Oh. That's quite a while then.

ROBINSON: Yeah. And then he went on his own. He did a lot of recording. And he arranged for different recording dates and stuff.

ISOARDI: You also mentioned Jewell Grant.

ROBINSON: He was another good instrumentalist, good musician. He did a lot of recording around town. He jobbed around L.A. quite a bit with top bands, top groups.

ISOARDI: What did he play?

ROBINSON: He was an alto [saxophone] player. I think the last group I saw him with was with Jesse Price, a drummer. Jesse Price had a group, and he was with Jesse Price. They worked out at Hermosa Beach. That was the last time I saw him. He passed away at a young age, too.

ISOARDI: Was he from Watts?

ROBINSON: No, he wasn't from Watts. He migrated here, too, in the late thirties. I think his only connection with Watts--for both of them--was playing with the Woodman brothers.

ISOARDI: So they probably got into town and were looking for the good bands and--

ROBINSON: And the Woodmans wanted to augment their band a little bit, so they added a couple of people in.

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, let's go up to Jordan High School. I guess it's--what?--1938, '39 that you graduate?

ROBINSON: 'Thirty-eight, yes. I graduated in summer of '38.

ISOARDI: Then what?

ROBINSON: And I went to CCC camp I remember.

ISOARDI: Civilian Conservation Corps.

ROBINSON: Yeah. That was one of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's projects--WPA [Works Progress Administration], CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps], NYA [National Youth Administration]. So I stayed there about nine months. This is a period when I had abandoned playing drums. I'd given up on it more or less.

ISOARDI: Why?

ROBINSON: I don't know. Maybe at that time I hadn't developed enough to make enough money doing it, so I just had given up on it.

ISOARDI: You thought that wasn't the future--

ROBINSON: No future. But then when I got out of CCC camp--

ISOARDI: Let me ask you why you went into CCC camp.

ROBINSON: Money.

ISOARDI: It was a job, essentially?

ROBINSON: It was a job, yeah.

ISOARDI: What was involved in that?

ROBINSON: What in CCC camp? Let's see. It was a work camp for the forestry.

ISOARDI: Oh. So you went out of town?

ROBINSON: Yes. I went up to the national forest up in Elsinore, California. And then from there I went to San Pablo Dam, which was in Richmond, California. And after a while I just decided I wanted a civilian life.

ISOARDI: It was a bit too much like the military in CCC?

ROBINSON: CCC camp was military and forestry at the same time. The army was in charge of you sixteen hours a day. For eight hours a day the forestry had you when you'd go out and work, build firebreaks and what have you, like that. After you'd come from work you'd come back and it was like being in the army then.

ISOARDI: So--what?--nine months or so was enough for you?

ROBINSON: Nine months, yeah. I came home, and that's when Buddy and Charlie Martin and a few guys contacted me and told

me they were getting an NYA band together. That's when the NYA band came in. So I said, "Well, that's pretty good, too." All we had to do was rehearse and work. We played at little political rallies or something like that.

ISOARDI: How often would you play for them?

ROBINSON: We had about one or two gigs a month, something like that. But we rehearsed once a week. As long as we rehearsed, that was part of the thing.

ISOARDI: How much did it pay?

ROBINSON: Six dollars a month.

ISOARDI: Six dollars a month? Not quite enough to survive on.

ROBINSON: Not quite enough to survive, but it was enough to start me playing. And then from there Charlie Martin-- When I got into the NYA band, Charlie Martin was working downtown, at some bar downtown, and we went from there-- The drummer got sick, so he took me. I said, "Man, I can't cut working with these guys. These are pros." But I made it. He said, "Oh, yeah, you can do anything. Come on, come on." So the guy whom I replaced, he was off about eight weeks, working every night for eight weeks. I began to get back into the flow of things. Then I found out I could make money playing, and then my interests-- That's when I turned around and said, "Well, I'd better go this direction."

ISOARDI: What was the job paying?

ROBINSON: The job was actually paying $1.50 a night at the time--and we worked seven nights a week--and tips. We made $1.50 tips, yeah, about $1.50 tips. So we were making around $21 a week or so, which was livable at that time. So average about $21, $25 a week, something like that.

ISOARDI: That was probably all right then, especially if you're young and you don't have too many responsibilities.

ROBINSON: Well, with $100 a month you could maintain your own apartment. One of the guys in the band was married, and he was making it.

ISOARDI: So you figured you could. [laughs] But at this time did you have your own drum set?

ROBINSON: Yes, I had my own set.

ISOARDI: When did you pick that up? Is it the one you pieced together gradually? You still had all that?

ROBINSON: I still had all that. But, see, the good part about this was when the guy was sick I used his set, which was a much better set. When I left the Look [Cafe] I was able to buy a real nice drum set, because the other thing was pieced together. The bass [drum] would be different from the snare [drum], the tom-tom different. It was pieced together. But this time I bought a set. Everything matched. I was doing pretty well then.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So you still hadn't really had any lessons yet, had you? You went through school, and you played in the bands. You played with Buddy and the guys, and you sat in on Lloyd Reese's rehearsal band, but that's no real formal training at all. And yet you're pretty much able to move into this without any trouble?

ROBINSON: I bought books. I think I went over to Bill [William] Douglass's house one day. He saw me playing one night, and he said, "Why don't you come by my house?" I went over to his house, and he started me on the right-- Then I knew what to study, you know, how to study.

ISOARDI: And you were able to mostly teach yourself?

ROBINSON: Teach myself until I got into the army and earned a ticket up to another level.

ISOARDI: What was the name of the place you were playing with Charlie Martin?

ROBINSON: The Look Cafe.

ISOARDI: The Look Cafe? Where was that?

ROBINSON: It was on Fourth [Street] and Hill [Street].

ISOARDI: Just a small eatery?

ROBINSON: It was something like a beer garden, a long beer garden with sailors. A lot of sailors used to come into town.

ISOARDI: Sailors and B-girls.

ROBINSON: Right, exactly. [laughs] That's just about what

it was.

ISOARDI: Where were you living at the time?

ROBINSON: I was still living in Central Gardens.

ISOARDI: At your family's place?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: So you'd take the cars up to downtown?

ROBINSON: Well, I'd ride with Charlie Martin. He had a car.

ISOARDI: So Charlie was in the band, you were in the band. Who else? Anybody else we'd know?

ROBINSON: I can't remember. Personnel used to change. In fact, that was a job where when a guy was out of work he could go there and fill in for a couple of nights and that would tide him over until the next job. It wasn't that desirable of a job. To me it was a start. You know, it was great.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah.

ROBINSON: At least I'm working. So sometimes it would be some good players who would come in and play. But just as soon as they'd get something better, they'd move on and pick somebody else up. So it was just sort of like a stopover. That's what I used it for. The drummer's name was Paul Lewis. I worked in his place for about six, seven weeks. And then every time he'd get sick or something I'd go and fill in if I wasn't doing something.

ISOARDI: I think you said you graduated in '38. You were

gone for about nine months. So this was 1939 we're talking about?

ROBINSON: Nineteen thirty-nine.

ISOARDI: What were the big places? Where were the big clubs? Where would you go on Central [Avenue]? What were the places people were hanging out?

ROBINSON: Well, the [Club] Alabam was doing well then, the Alabam, and then the Memo [Club]. The Memo was doing well at the time.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

ROBINSON: It was around Forty-second [Street] or somewhere. I don't know exactly.

ISOARDI: So right near--

ROBINSON: It was near that-- It was across the street from the Alabam, sort of kitty-corner from the Alabam. It was just about across the street, a little south of the Alabam across the street.

ISOARDI: What was it like? The Alabam was the big club, right?

ROBINSON: Big club.

ISOARDI: There were shows?

ROBINSON: Shows and what have you.

ISOARDI: Had you ever been in there to see shows?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Who did you see at the Alabam? Do you remember?

ROBINSON: I can't remember. I know the groups that worked there. I think they used to have a dance team. I can't remember some of the people.

ISOARDI: When was the first time you went in there? How old were you?

ROBINSON: About twenty years old.

ISOARDI: So it was just about this time that you went in there for the first time?

ROBINSON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What was the Memo like?

ROBINSON: The Memo was-- It had shows, too. They had a bar, a long bar, and it was a special room. The bar was in a special room. So you had to go through another door to get to the nightclub part where they had the tables and the dance and the show and everything.

ISOARDI: So the bar part was out in front?

ROBINSON: Well, no. You'd go in the door, and it was just side by side like.

ISOARDI: Oh, you go one way, you're in the bar; you go one way, you're in the club?

ROBINSON: No, you'd go into the bar, and all this is the bar-- It seems like you're actually walking into a bar. They had a door here, and you could open this door to your left and there was a nightclub inside.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

ROBINSON: You could go to the left and there would be a nightclub. If you didn't go into the nightclub you'd think you were in a bar. They had booths. They had a bar and booths and everything. And you had to pay, I think, a quarter or something to get into the nightclub part where they had a show and stuff. They used to have a four-piece band. Katherine Lamarr worked there a long time. Katherine Lamarr. She was a pianist. It was her band. It had Norman Bowden, "Big Six," and a drummer they called "Juicy," I think. They worked there for about a year. Clarence Moore owned this place.

ISOARDI: Who was he?

ROBINSON: He was the owner of the Memo, Clarence Moore.

ISOARDI: Was he a musician formerly?

ROBINSON: No, Clarence Moore was a businessman.

ISOARDI: Was he a black man? White man?

ROBINSON: A black man. In fact, I saw him about a year or so ago.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: He might still be living. I'm not sure.

ISOARDI: No kidding? Gee, it would be nice to track someone like that down.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I'll try to track him down for you.

ISOARDI: Oh, that would be wonderful.

ROBINSON: We have a mutual friend. I saw him at a party, and we began to talk about the days. He didn't know me. But when I started talking about the Memo and the things that happened there, then he just got-- "Yeah, you were there." [laughs] "You wouldn't know all of this if you weren't there."

ISOARDI: Oh, that's great. We haven't interviewed any club owners yet. They're hard to find. A lot of people weren't even aware of who owned the clubs.

ROBINSON: Clarence, now, he can tell you the story of Central Avenue, about who owned this and who owned that.

ISOARDI: Oh, that would be great. That would be great. As far as you know, though--

ROBINSON: I'll make a call. When we get through talking I'll make a phone call and see if I can run him down.

ISOARDI: Wonderful.

ROBINSON: Because he would be an interesting person to talk to.

ISOARDI: No question. Was he the sole owner of the place then?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: It was his thing?

ROBINSON: Yes, I think he was-- Well, I shouldn't say that. I'll tell you off record. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Ah, please. [laughs]

ROBINSON: But I think he was a gambler or something like that.

ISOARDI: There was a lot of gambling activity going on, wasn't there? I know Ernie Andrews talked about a lot of heavy rollers, Howard Hughes even, going down there--and Don Robie and people like this--to various places to gamble.

ROBINSON: I think he and-- Because he was telling me about different guys. He can tell you--

ISOARDI: You mean the people who came down there to gamble?

ROBINSON: No, the proprietors of Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Oh, great.

ROBINSON: He knew Sonny who had Sonny's Pool Hall. And I think he knew Curtis Mosby personally, who bought the Alabam.

ISOARDI: He owned the Alabam at one point, right?

ROBINSON: Who? Curtis Mosby? Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Now, Clarence Moore, I guess you didn't have any dealings with him, did you?

ROBINSON: No. I just met him afterwards. I knew of him. And I used to go in the club. I used to go in the Memo a lot. But he kept the same group in there for years. They had a sax player, Big Six. I didn't mention him. Big Six was a sax player.

ISOARDI: Who was Big Six?

ROBINSON: He was a tenor player. They called him Big Six.

ISOARDI: Do you know what his real name was?

ROBINSON: No, I don't. [laughs] I could find out. Some of these guys like Norman Bowden, he's still around. Trumpet player. He's still around. He worked at the Memo for years. In fact, that's where I met Norman. I met Clarence Moore about a year ago at a party, so I imagine he's still around. Because I think if he'd have passed on somebody would have told me and I'd have heard about it. But he was very interesting himself, too, very inter-esting.

ISOARDI: Was the Memo there for a long time?

ROBINSON: It was there for-- It was there until I went and-- Yeah, it was there a long time. I can't remember if it was there when I got out of service, but when I went into service it was there.

ISOARDI: So up to that point it was a big club?

ROBINSON: Up to that point, yeah. And during the [Second World] War--I don't know when--they closed.

ISOARDI: Did you ever have any dealings with Curtis Mosby?

ROBINSON: No, I didn't.

ISOARDI: You just knew about him?

ROBINSON: I knew about him.

ISOARDI: Okay. Aside from the Alabam and the Memo, which are both on the block or what became the block, what other places were there?

ROBINSON: The Last Word [Cafe] was across the street from the Alabam, too.

ISOARDI: Now, that was going on in this period, 1939? ROBINSON: Well, around the forties, yeah.

ISOARDI: What was that like?

ROBINSON: It was just another bar similar to the Memo. And the Dunbar Grill, right next to Alabam, they had a bar there. The Dunbar Grill. They had a combo in there.

ISOARDI: Was that inside the hotel itself?

ROBINSON: Well, the hotel building part of it, yeah. Because, see, the Alabam was built right next to the hotel.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was attached to it?

ROBINSON: Attached to it like.

ISOARDI: Could you walk into it from the hotel?

ROBINSON: No, it was just next door to the hotel.

ISOARDI: Just right next door to it. Who played at the Dunbar Grill?

ROBINSON: A lot of different groups played there. I think near the end Gerry [Gerald] Wiggins played there. He and Bill Douglass were there for a while once. Because I was working for the Alabam with the Honeydrippers, Joe Liggins's Honeydrippers. I was at the Alabam, and I think they were at the Dunbar Grill then. Now, this was in the late forties.

ISOARDI: Much later, then, yeah.

ROBINSON: 'Forty-eight, '49, maybe '50 even. I think it was back then. But just some of the good players in town worked there.

ISOARDI: All in that one block almost, too. What about other clubs?

ROBINSON: Then there was Dynamite Jackson. He had a club [Dynamite Jackson's]. A prize fighter. He had a club on Forty-eighth Street and Central. Then he moved down to the fifties, I think around Fifty-first [Street] or Fifty-second [Street], somewhere in that area.

ISOARDI: What was it?

ROBINSON: It was just-- He used mostly a piano--I mean, a piano or little small piano, maybe a piano and bass, something like that.

ISOARDI: So it wasn't a very big place.

ROBINSON: Not very big. In fact, at one time I think I met Papa John Creach at Dynamite's. He worked there years ago when he first came into town.

ISOARDI: It seems like he's been around forever.

ROBINSON: So that must have been around the fifties, I think. Because when Dynamite moved from Forty-eighth, he moved down to Fifty-third [Street], somewhere around Fifty-fourth [Street] and Central. I can't be exact.

ISOARDI: What was the name of his place?

ROBINSON: Dynamite's.

ISOARDI: Dynamite's. So I guess he had the reputation.

ROBINSON: He was a California state heavyweight champion.

Let's see. Further down as you went they used to have a place right there next door to the Lincoln [Theatre]. It was a joint, though. They would have a lot of blues bands in there. It was called the Hole in the Wall.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Yeah. They used to have a lot of blues. That was their thing, blues, strictly blues. You'd find a lot of blues bands down in there.

ISOARDI: Like who? Do you remember any names?

ROBINSON: No, I don't remember any names. But there would be local guys mostly playing in there.

ISOARDI: And the Hole in the Wall was right next door to the Lincoln?

ROBINSON: The Hole in the Wall was, yeah. Well, across the street, yeah. Next door but on the same side of the street.

ISOARDI: Oh, just down a little ways. I hadn't heard about that place. Small, little place?

ROBINSON: Yeah, small dive. Central Avenue sort of extended a lot when I was in the army. It didn't go as far north as it did after the war. See, because Fifth Street became part of that scene during the war.

ISOARDI: Oh, so it was like Twelfth Street was about as far north as it went?

ROBINSON: Yes. Then they started going to Fifth Street. They had jazz groups all up and down Fifth Street. Before the war that was sort of like skid row to me. And then after that they had the Zanzibar and a couple of other clubs down on Fifth Street. There was pretty good entertainment. So then pretty soon all the jazz scene was down on Fifth Street, on First Street, down around Little Tokyo, that area. That all developed during the war. When I came back I said, "Wow, it's begun to spread out."

ISOARDI: Oh, well, Little Tokyo got cleaned out then. All the Japanese were rounded up. Is that--?

ROBINSON: Yeah, that's right.

ISOARDI: And that opened it up then, and people just moved in there?

ROBINSON: They had the Last Word. They had several clubs.

ISOARDI: The Last Word?

ROBINSON: I think it was-- No, not the Last Word. Shepp's Playhouse. Shepp's Playhouse was there, and a couple of other--

ISOARDI: Downtown?

ROBINSON: Downtown, yeah.

ISOARDI: So there was a lot going on. How late were the clubs staying open then, in '39?

ROBINSON: Two o'clock. Always two o'clock.

ISOARDI: Two o'clock was the cutoff?

ROBINSON: The cutoff. Then they had after-hours spots. You'd go to an after-hours spot where they'd serve you setups, and you'd have your own drinks.

ISOARDI: Bring your own or buy it in the parking lot outside. [laughs]

ROBINSON: "We have near beer here and beer near here." [laughs]

ISOARDI: That's good. That's good. What were some of the after-hours spots?

ROBINSON: Well, the Ritz [Club] was on Vernon [Avenue] and Central. That was my favorite spot.

ISOARDI: At this time? 'Thirty-nine or so?

ROBINSON: Well, we'll go back to the forties--'41, around then, before the war, just prior to the war, in '40 and '41. And right down the street from the Ritz they had Jack Lovejoy's place. Yeah, Lovejoy's. I don't know if his first name was Jack or not. Just say Lovejoy's. He had a place that was upstairs. Art Tatum was featured up there at some time.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: That's where I heard Art Tatum and Bill Douglass up there playing.

ISOARDI: Up at Lovejoy's after hours?

ROBINSON: At Lovejoy's, the after-hours spot.

ISOARDI: Wow. What did you think of Tatum when you heard him?

ROBINSON: The very end! [laughs] Some of these people you just can't believe. You know, he was unbelievable. And at the Ritz, if you were lucky you might get a name, a star to come in. Somebody like Ben Webster was liable to go in, or Lester Young.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: I was fortunate enough one night to catch Lester and Ben Webster there.

ISOARDI: Playing together?

ROBINSON: And Roy Eldridge.

ISOARDI: All three of those guys together?

ROBINSON: All three of those guys together.

ISOARDI: Just jamming?

ROBINSON: Jamming. But the norm was local guys would come in and jam. The good local guys, they'd come in and jam. But every now and then-- I remember I saw [Eddie] "Cleanhead" Vinson there. He used to come in when he was in town. A lot of good guys would come in. Bumps Myers.

ISOARDI: Anything you remember in particular about the night those three played?

ROBINSON: Well, one thing in particular I remember was the

pianist-- They used to hire a piano player for the--

ISOARDI: For the after-hours sessions?

ROBINSON: For the session. And they were playing I think it was "After You've Gone," some tune like that. And they were playing way up, and the piano player wasn't playing the right changes. So Ben Webster asked him to get up, and he started playing the piano. [laughs] That's when I found out he was a pianist.

ISOARDI: What was the Ritz like? What did it look like? Was it a small hole in the wall kind of place?

ROBINSON: It was almost like a hole in the wall. But you wouldn't go in the front; you had to go in the back. You had to go in the side through the back door. And it was just a big room with tables and chairs.

ISOARDI: So if you were walking down the street, you might not know it was there unless you were looking for it?

ROBINSON: Unless you were looking for it. The only way you could tell, you could see people coming--you know, the traffic.

ISOARDI: There was no way you'd know otherwise?

ROBINSON: Because it wasn't a speakeasy-type thing, even though it was-- Because they didn't sell liquor; they just sold the setups. Everybody kept their liquor in their pocket, and they'd just tank up and put it back in their pocket. So you'd see people walk in and out, traffic going all the

time. But they used to have some real good sessions in the morning. Around two or three o'clock, four o'clock, it really was getting good.

ISOARDI: And how late would they go?

ROBINSON: Until sunup. I'd hang around there until eight, nine, ten o'clock.

ISOARDI: Really? Did you sit in there?

ROBINSON: Did I? Sometimes. But, see, most of the time-- When I first started going I was just going to observe and trying to observe some of the good drummers and see what I could learn, steal from them. But a lot of times, yeah, I'd sit in.

ISOARDI: Who were the drummers around then who impressed you as you were looking around?

ROBINSON: Well, I guess during that time I'd say Lee Young and Oscar Bradley. Those were the drummers who impressed me a lot. Chico Hamilton. Chico impressed me a lot. Because we were about the same age, and I saw him play-- He came out one night when we were playing a dance with Buddy [Collette]'s band, and he sat in. I was impressed then. And the next time I saw him play he was out of sight. Like how did this guy develop that fast? It just looked like he took off on a ship. Some of these guys-- When he sat in, I didn't think he was as far advanced as I was, and the next time I saw him, wow,

he was playing up a storm. And this all took about a year, a year and a half. But I was impressed with him. He impressed me a lot as a young drummer. Billy Douglass impressed me a lot of the younger drummers. But Lee Young and Oscar Bradley, they were really to me very impressive at that time. That's speaking mostly of local drummers.

ISOARDI: Were there any problems with the cops then?

ROBINSON: Not too much.

ISOARDI: Things were pretty cool for the most part.

ROBINSON: I guess if you don't do wrong-- [laughs] You know, you had nothing to hide. I wasn't a problem, so I guess I-- You know, some people might have had. I always went my own way and minded my own business. So I guess that's what it's all about.

ISOARDI: So then where did you go from the club, the Look? You started playing in the NYA band with Buddy? Is that the next--?

ROBINSON: The NYA band was first and then came the Look.

ISOARDI: Then came the Look. That's right. And you were at the Look for about eight weeks.

ROBINSON: Then after that I just jobbed around town, just different clubs. I'd go here, go there sometimes. But a lot of jobs were in the neighboring cities. I'd go out to Santa Ana, Fullerton, El Monte, different places like that. I'd

get a little jazz group and we'd go out there. And I played at the Elks [auditorium] ballroom.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

ROBINSON: Just around Thirty-sixth [Street], somewhere around there. Thirty-seventh [Street] or somewhere and Central. I played the ballroom.

I worked at the Lincoln Theatre.

ISOARDI: Were these mostly just casuals?

ROBINSON: It was sort of casuals, yeah. Elks was casual. Lincoln was sort of-- They'd have amateur night or something like that. I'd play that.

ISOARDI: How would you get these gigs?

ROBINSON: I guess through recommendations. Some friend would recommend me for a job.

ISOARDI: Somebody would call and say, "Can you do this?"

ROBINSON: "I have this for you." Somebody would hear and say, "You need a drummer? Well, call Red."

ISOARDI: Is that what they called you?

ROBINSON: They called me "Red," yeah. A lot of people don't even know me as Minor Robinson. A lot of people know me as Red Minor, and some people call me just Red.

ISOARDI: By this time were you making your living, then, playing?

ROBINSON: Yeah, I was. Yes.

ISOARDI: So you were committed to that. This is what you were doing.

ROBINSON: I made my living up until about 1940, and then I decided to get a job. For that period, from 1939--well, after I left CCC camp--until 1948, I think it was, I didn't do anything but drums.

ISOARDI: At some point you must have joined the union [American Federation of Musicians] then, didn't you?

ROBINSON: I joined [Local] 767 in 1940.

ISOARDI: How did that come about? Was that something you just thought you should do at a certain point? Or did Elmer Fain come along and--?

ROBINSON: Well, almost about-- What happened-- I was working a taxi dance. Did you ever hear of a taxi dance? [laughs]

ISOARDI: I know what they are. [laughs] Downtown?

ROBINSON: Downtown. And I was working with some nonunion guys.

ISOARDI: And you weren't in the union at this time?

ROBINSON: I wasn't in the union. They wanted to make a change in the band, so they decided to keep me. The union guy who was taking the band, [Thomas] "Papa Mutt" Carey-- You ever hear of Papa?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

ROBINSON: Well, Papa Mutt, when he got the job, he said,

"Well, I'll take the drummer." So I had to go and join the union. And I worked for Papa Mutt for about six, seven months or so. After the taxi dance we went to Bakersfield with a group. Then we worked around L.A. So I worked for him about eight or nine months.

ISOARDI: What was it like working with him? What was he like?

ROBINSON: Well, he was just like a father. He was a typical role model as far as guiding me when I'd make the wrong move or something. If I had a girlfriend I didn't treat a certain way, he'd say, "You dummy." [laughs] He gave me a lot of guidance. I was around twenty, twenty-one, and I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. He used to always kid me, say, "You'll never be as great as I am. I made history. You'll never make history." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Was this supposed to motivate you?

ROBINSON: Well, we're kidding, though. This is not--

ISOARDI: Oh, in a really friendly way.

ROBINSON: "Red, you think you so and so. You ain't going to be that--" I'd say, "Aw, Papa Mutt, you ain't nothing--" That kind of thing. He said, "Oh, man, I made history. Now, that's what you got to do." I'd say, "Okay, Papa." No, he wasn't snotty or anything. No. He just said that as a joke and a motivator, too, I guess.

ISOARDI: So you were playing mostly New Orleans jazz with

him?

ROBINSON: We played probably-- Well, swing type.

ISOARDI: Swing?

ROBINSON: Yeah. In other words-- He said he was going to surround himself with a bunch of youngsters and let them play.

ISOARDI: Smart.

ROBINSON: Yeah. He had Joe Lutcher and myself in the band. You remember Joe Lutcher, Nellie Lutcher's brother? Joe and I, and he had a young pianist. He'd just sit there and he'd let us carry the mail. [laughs] "I made mine, buddy. You guys make it." He was a character, though. He was something. When I went into service he wrote to me regularly and everything.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Nice man.

ROBINSON: Yes, he was.

ISOARDI: Had he been out here for a while? Do you know?

ROBINSON: I imagine he had. He said he came from Chicago, I think, from Chicago to here. He'd write me letters and tell me-- When he was on the Orson Welles show during the war-- He was on that.

ISOARDI: Was he?

ROBINSON: Yeah, with Kid Ory. I think he was with Kid Ory. But he's the one who got me into the union.

ISOARDI: You had to join to play with him?

ROBINSON: If I wanted to keep the job I had to join the union. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So what was 767 like then? This was 1940, maybe?

ROBINSON: 'Forty, yeah, 1940. It was a union, you know. I didn't think anything of it. It was a union. It was after the war that I began to wonder about the we're over here and they [Local 47] are over there situation.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

ROBINSON: Because then to me it was just a union.

ISOARDI: So nothing unusual. You'd pay your dues and--

ROBINSON: Pay your dues and go. But when we came back we'd listen to other guys talk about where the jobs were and all that stuff, and it didn't seem right. So I was in agreement with them with what they were saying. Because the 47 at that time had locked up a lot of the good jobs. They'd sign a contract with a club; they'd use only 47 musicians.

ISOARDI: Were guys starting to talk about the dual unions, the segregated unions when you joined? Were people talking about this in 1940?

ROBINSON: They weren't talking about it. When I came back from service was when they started talking about it.

ISOARDI: So it was only in the mid-forties that people were starting to ask questions about it.

ROBINSON: Yes. And Mingus and Buddy they would talk to me

and different people. So I'd say, "Well, you've got my support." So we'd give little sessions and stuff, fund-raisers and stuff, to fight it, and I was always there.

ISOARDI: So you were with Papa Mutt for how long?

ROBINSON: About seven, eight months, something like that.

ISOARDI: Mostly traveling?

ROBINSON: We worked in Bakersfield. That's the only place. We stayed up in Bakersfield--

ISOARDI: The whole time?

ROBINSON: At one job. We stayed up there for four months or so. We stayed at the taxi dance about three months until he got--

ISOARDI: Downtown.

ROBINSON: He called it a grind dance. [laughs] "Man, let's get out of this grind dance." I said, "Okay, Papa. I'm with you." So we stayed there about three or four months, and then we went to Bakersfield and stayed.

ISOARDI: I've got a lot of cousins in Bakersfield. What the hell did you do for four months in Bakersfield?

ROBINSON: Rode horses, actually. We worked out on Edison Highway. You know where Edison Highway is?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

ROBINSON: There used to be a club called the Rooster Club, and the guy who had the club, he raised game cocks.

ISOARDI: Hence the name of the club.

ROBINSON: Yeah. It's the Rooster Club right on Edison Highway. Right down the street from there was a riding stable, and we used to go ride horses just about every day. That's where I learned to ride.

ISOARDI: Well, there wasn't much else to do in Bakersfield, was there?

ROBINSON: That was it. But, see, they had gambling joints there, too. We used to go up on L Street or M Street, one of those streets, and they had--

ISOARDI: In downtown Bakersfield?

ROBINSON: Yes, indeed. They had the Chinese lottery. Chinese lottery was similar to keno in [Las] Vegas. Same thing. That's where they got keno from, the Chinese lottery. I'd sit there, and we'd play Chinese lottery or play blackjack or chuck-a-luck. You'd just walk right in off the street on L Street. It was L Street in Bakersfield.

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ISOARDI: Where would you stay in Bakersfield?

ROBINSON: We stayed at the club. The guy had some cabins in the back of the Rooster Club. We stayed back in the cabins.

ISOARDI: Because I always had a feeling when I was there-- My aunt and uncle moved there and other relatives I think during the forties and the fifties. When I was a kid going there to visit, I always felt it was like a southern town almost.

ROBINSON: Just about. [laughs] So we just stayed out-- Naturally we met some girls and stuff whom we could go visit on Sunday and date. But other than ride horses, that was--

ISOARDI: That was about it.

ROBINSON: That was about it. But, see, of course, we'd practice. See, I could practice. I'd go right into the club where my drums were set up.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. You were living just behind it, right.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I'd just walk in there and sometimes spend a couple of hours just practicing, sometimes three hours sitting right there. I could practice and wouldn't disturb anybody in the club. I could play as loud as I wanted to. So this

was just ideal for me.

ISOARDI: So it worked out well, that gig.

ROBINSON: Right. So that way I began to develop a little bit better.

ISOARDI: So what happened after you leave Papa Mutt? Why did you leave Papa Mutt?

ROBINSON: I was a draftee.

ISOARDI: Oh. Greetings.

ROBINSON: I'm getting greetings, yes. Actually, what happened, I was 1-B or 2-B at first when the draft came out.

ISOARDI: Oh, you weren't 1-A?

ROBINSON: I wasn't 1-A because my eyesight was bad. But when the war broke out, then I became 1-A. So when the war broke out I was telling all the guys, "Hey, I'm 1-A now." I shouldn't have said that, because [one of them] told Papa, "What are you going to do? Red's going, and this other guy will be going and stuff." So he thought he'd change bands or something. He was kind of leery. And about a month or so after that, I was drafted. So we left Bakersfield in just around the first of '42.

ISOARDI: And you got your notice in February or something?

ROBINSON: In May.

ISOARDI: They don't waste any time getting to you. About four months after the war started, you're--

ROBINSON: Yeah, well, they were in a hurry then. [laughs] So the first thing you know, I was reclassified. Then it was just a matter of time. It was just about four months. So when we came back to Los Angeles, I just jobbed around for about a month or so with a couple of groups, and then it was off to the war for three years, eight months, and eight days.

ISOARDI: A long time. You got drafted into the army. Where did you go for basic [training], then?

ROBINSON: Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

ISOARDI: And then?

ROBINSON: Then Louisiana for maneuvers and desert training and then overseas.

ISOARDI: So you were infantry?

ROBINSON: No. I was infantry division, but I was in the band so I wasn't--

ISOARDI: Oh. How did you get the band? Did you just tell them you were a musician?

ROBINSON: I told them I was a musician. So when they got ready to ship me out, they shipped me to the 93rd Division, which was a new outfit--all-Negro division as it was known at that time.

ISOARDI: So the units weren't integrated then?

ROBINSON: And we had Caucasian officers. Then pretty soon

they brought in a few lieutenants and stuff. But then I spent three years, and half of that was overseas. Yeah, three years, eight months-- Well, a little over-- Yeah, about half of that time was spent overseas, maybe a little more. I spent two years overseas.

ISOARDI: Where did you go?

ROBINSON: The South Pacific: Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Treasury Islands, New Guinea, Hollandia, and the Philippines.

ISOARDI: Jeez. You saw a lot of them.

ROBINSON: A lot of islands, yeah.

ISOARDI: Any fighting?

ROBINSON: Fighting? No. One air raid at Guadalcanal, and that was actually at the other end of the island. That was about our first or second night at Guadalcanal. I could hear the planes going over, but they bombed the other end of the island. That's the closest I ever got to any fighting. We entertained troops; that's all we did. We used to go to the hospital and play for different guys. Then we'd play different outfits. We were far back most of the time because we were in headquarters, so we didn't have to even worry about any type of fighting. We used to go to hospitals and entertain before the movies. They built an open-air theater where they showed movies. We'd play until dark, and then they'd show the movies. Then we'd go out to various naval bases and play.

Then we had a setup on one island where we'd go out and play for the ships that were docked. One ship would flash our number, and that way they'd contact us. [laughs] So we made a little money. You know, it wasn't much, a couple of dollars or so. But that was always--

ISOARDI: In addition to army pay, though, right?

ROBINSON: Yes. And I've seen times when we'd even go to--A guy would want to have a party or something. We'd go to his outfit and play, and we'd just put a hat on the floor. Every time we'd play they'd put some money in there, and we'd walk out with fifteen, twenty, thirty dollars apiece, which was good money.

ISOARDI: When you weren't playing, did you have other duty?

ROBINSON: Only when we changed islands we'd have to help probably make the camps, erect tents and stuff like that. After that was done we'd sit down and--Our duties were practicing. Rehearsals.

ISOARDI: Not bad war service.

ROBINSON: Not bad. We were just so isolated, that's all. How do you think you'd feel if you hadn't seen a woman in two years?

ISOARDI: Is that how long? [laughs] Oh, man. I'd want to fight. [laughs]

ROBINSON: We played for some of the stars who came overseas

like Bob Hope's show and stuff like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, and entertain.

ROBINSON: Yeah. We'd have to back them up. Out of the big band we'd form combos. You know, this group would go and this group, so we had a combo. Carol Landis came over. I think she and Irving Berlin, a group of them, came over. I hadn't seen a woman in eighteen months or so. We started playing and got drunk. We had to go to the officers club afterward and play. And, you know, she's loose, and she was singing, and she was putting her hand on my shoulder, "Come on, let's sing this--"

ISOARDI: Oh!

ROBINSON: I said, "Oh, please--"

ISOARDI: Just pound that bass drum. [laughs]

ROBINSON: "Please get away from me." You know, she was just buddy-buddy. You know, "I haven't seen-- And now you're going to be touching on me, and cute as you are, too." I said, "Oh, my goodness." [laughs] That was a hell of an experience.

ISOARDI: I guess it just didn't occur to them.

ROBINSON: She was just trying to be buddy-buddy.

ISOARDI: Yeah, just friendly.

ROBINSON: Normally, if I had been playing and had been living a normal life I could accept it that way, but not having seen a woman in almost about eighteen, nineteen months then. [laughs]

I told the guys, "Man, don't touch that shoulder." [laughs] "Don't touch my shoulder." It seemed like I could feel that for three weeks.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no doubt.

ROBINSON: It was a sad thing when she came and killed-- You know she committed suicide.

ISOARDI: No.

ROBINSON: That was a sad thing to me, because I could remember how happy she was over there and how she was trying to entertain the soldiers and stuff. And she was such a nice person.

ISOARDI: Do you have anyone else you knew from Central whom you were in the band with or who went down to Fort Huachuca?

ROBINSON: None of the personnel was from Central that I knew of.

ISOARDI: No one else in your band or your unit?

ROBINSON: No.

ISOARDI: Because I'm sure a lot of guys were getting drafted then, right?

ROBINSON: Yes. But it seemed like after I got drafted. And most of them went down to San Diego to some group. Buddy and the group--

ISOARDI: Buddy went to Saint Mary's [Pre-Flight School] up beyond Berkeley.

ROBINSON: Oh, I see. And then Bill Douglass and a group went

down San Diego way. Because most all the guys from 767 went to San Diego someplace. And Britt was in South Carolina, somewhere in that area, because he used to write to me a lot. But he was on the East Coast.

ISOARDI: Most guys got into bands, then?

ROBINSON: Most of them that I know.

ISOARDI: So then you came back when?

ROBINSON: 'Forty-six, 1946.

ISOARDI: Early '46.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: How did it look to you when you come back? You'd been away now for just about three years.

ROBINSON: That's right, just about two years away from--

ISOARDI: Two years. You hadn't seen it at all.

ROBINSON: Yeah. While I was in service-- Well, I'd been away over three years, really, three and a half years, almost three years eight months. Almost four years.

ISOARDI: But I guess you went back on leave before you went overseas.

ROBINSON: Right. I'd been here on leave a couple of times before I went overseas, and I could see the change.

ISOARDI: How did it look when you came back on leave and the war was starting up? Was it changing then?

ROBINSON: It was changing then.

ISOARDI: How was it?

ROBINSON: Because that's when I noticed that clubs were on First Street.

ISOARDI: Oh, of course, after the Japanese were removed.

ROBINSON: Yeah. All in that area it was clubs, and on Central Avenue and up and down Fifth Street they had a couple of nightclubs. The town it just seemed had taken off and spread out a little more.

ISOARDI: Just a lot of action.

ROBINSON: A lot of action.

ISOARDI: And then what about when you come back finally in '46?

ROBINSON: Then, well, a lot of guys working up and down Hollywood Boulevard had more gigs, were scattered out more. A lot of new players were in town playing bebop, and I hadn't heard of bebop before. [laughs] So now I had to learn a new style.

ISOARDI: That's another good question, Minor. You came back, Central Avenue looked different, but what about this music? What did you think when you first heard it?

ROBINSON: I'm telling you, I couldn't believe it. At first I couldn't understand. It was, "What are these guys doing?" Pretty soon I began to listen, and the more I listened to it I said, "Oh, I see. Oh, yes." And they were playing--

You know, everything was bebop, see, and when I left it was swing. So I had to learn new patterns to play and stuff.

[tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay. If you were coming back in early '46, you were hearing bebop for the first time. Did you first hear it on records? Or did you hear it in one of the clubs?

ROBINSON: No, the first time I heard it was at Jazz at the Philharmonic.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? That must have been one of the first Jazz at the Philharmonics.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Charlie Parker and Willie Smith. It was one of the first. And my brother-in-law was a musician, too, Charles Drayton. He was the one who told me, "I'm going to take you out and show you something, man." [laughs]

ISOARDI: So you hadn't heard the records or anything.

ROBINSON: No. I hadn't heard it. You know, "You've been away. I'm--" Actually, I told him I didn't understand anybody but Willie Smith, you know, the way the guy was blowing. He said, "Well, then you just have to get educated." I said, "I couldn't understand--" That was my first time hearing "Bird" [Charlie Parker]. He was playing so much I just couldn't understand him. But it was my first time hearing Bird. Truthfully, he was playing so much he was just over my head the first time I heard him. I think it was the second time

that I began to really appreciate him.

ISOARDI: When was the second time?

ROBINSON: Well, on record, on recordings. Somebody was over at someone's house, and we were playing Bird, and I said, "Wow, who is that?" [laughs] Who was that, man?" "That's Charles Parker." I said, "Wow." But it was just different. It was just different to hear what was going. The drummers were playing different. They weren't playing 4/4 on their bass drum. They were kicking and going on. And we hadn't heard that overseas.

ISOARDI: So was it a big adjustment to playing drums then? What did you do?

ROBINSON: Well, I just started trying to play what the rest of the fellows were playing.

ISOARDI: From what you were hearing, you sat down and you just tried to--?

ROBINSON: Yeah, trying to-- Because I knew that was what the guys wanted. They didn't want that afterbeat all the time. They wanted a strong afterbeat like you do in blues. It's all right in rhythm and blues. Now they're doing it in rock and roll, but then it wasn't--

ISOARDI: Well, I guess with bop you're riding the cymbals.

ROBINSON: Right, and making different accents. So just to make adjustments. Pretty soon you'd find out-- You'd listen

and hear so much, pretty soon you were doing what the rest of the people were doing.

ISOARDI: Did you get a job as soon as you got back?

ROBINSON: Yes. I started working as soon as I got back, really. I was off about a month. I didn't want to work. I didn't want to do anything.

ISOARDI: Gave yourself a vacation for a bit, yeah.

ROBINSON: And I ran into a friend who was working up on Vernon [Avenue], Vernon and San Pedro [Street], and he told me, "Aren't you doing anything?" I said, "No, man, I--" I think it was Bardu Ali. Yeah, Bardu Ali. Have you heard of him?

ISOARDI: He was a bandleader, wasn't he?

ROBINSON: Right. He had a big band, and he needed a drummer. He was working at the Lincoln Theatre. So I started out with Bardu Ali. That was the first job back.

ISOARDI: So this was early '46, then, about a month after you got back?

ROBINSON: Yeah, around June of '46.

ISOARDI: Oh, June of '46. Well, the Lincoln Theatre was still going strong then. That was something that hadn't changed?

ROBINSON: Yes, it was still going strong.

ISOARDI: Actually, before you get more into what you were doing, what did the street look like then, in '46? Were there the same clubs that people were still going to?

ROBINSON: Similar. The thing I noticed was that things had spread out a little bit. So you had Avalon Boulevard. Now they probably had a little club or something going on over on Avalon and something going over on Western Avenue, on San Pedro. It wasn't only Central anymore. It was spreading out a little bit. That's what I noticed mostly.

ISOARDI: But the Alabam was still going strong when you got there?

ROBINSON: The Alabam was still going, yeah, going strong.

ISOARDI: Yeah. The Memo, was that still around?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And then the Last Word was still at the corner.

ROBINSON: The Last Word was still going on.

ISOARDI: And had the Downbeat [Club] opened then?

ROBINSON: The Downbeat was going on too right after the war. The Downbeat was swinging. When I came back it was Buddy and Mingus and Oscar Bradley. They had a group there, the Stars of Swing, with "Brother" [William] Woodman [Jr.] and Lucky Thompson.

ISOARDI: All in the same group?

ROBINSON: Yeah, the Stars of Swing.

ISOARDI: Powerful group.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I think there was a piano player named Spaulding Givens. But they had Buddy, Mingus, Oscar Bradley,

Brother Woodman, and Lucky Thompson. It was a strong group.

ISOARDI: Did you hear them?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: What did they sound like? I don't think they ever recorded anything.

ROBINSON: They were just good. The Stars of Swing.

ISOARDI: Were they doing their own music?

ROBINSON: And John Anderson was playing trumpet, too. John Anderson. Yes, they were playing their own music. And they were playing real soft, real hard jazz but soft, real soft. So it was beautiful. Britt was in that group, too. It was Britt, John Anderson, Brother, Buddy Collette, Charles Mingus, Spaulding Givens. Did I miss anybody? And Oscar Bradley.

ISOARDI: A loaded group. Jeez. And this was at the Downbeat?

ROBINSON: At the Downbeat, right.

ISOARDI: Was there still after-hours activity when you got back?

ROBINSON: Yes. There used to be Jack's Basket Room. And I used to work at a place called, I think, Casablanca, which used to have jazz sessions. That was on San Pedro around Twenty-seventh [Street] or Twenty-second [Street] or somewhere. Twenty-seventh, I think, and San Pedro, somewhere around there.

ISOARDI: And Jack's Basket Room, was that a new club then?

ROBINSON: Jack's Basket Room was around Thirty-third [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI: But that hadn't been around before the war?

ROBINSON: That wasn't around before the war. They used to have jam sessions.

ISOARDI: So there was still a lot going on.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And was everyone playing bop?

ROBINSON: Not really, but modern, not straight-out bop. It had a modern swing-type thing. Like the Stars of Swing weren't playing bop, but it was a modern sound, sort of like today. You know, they're not playing bop now. They have a good, smooth jazz sound. The Stars of Swing were playing mostly a real modern swing style, not straight-out bebop.

ISOARDI: Too bad that band was never recorded.

ROBINSON: It was one of the finest groups I've ever heard.

ISOARDI: How long were they at the Downbeat?

ROBINSON: That I can't tell you. They must have stayed there about two or three months or so.

ISOARDI: I guess you'd been away for a while, a few years. So when you came back, there had to be some new young players coming up. Was there anyone who impressed you from the area who was emerging then? Some of the younger kids?

ROBINSON: Well, Sonny Criss was sounding good. Other than

that-- From the area, Sonny Criss. I liked what he was doing. That was just about all. Then a drummer, Larance Marable, he was playing. He was sounding good.

ISOARDI: He's still going strong.

ROBINSON: Now, he was sort of the-- To me, he was like the new generation and sounded good. Clora [Bryant] was coming in. She was sounding pretty good, too. Wild Bill Moore, he played tenor. We had been in service together. He used to have the after-hours sessions at Jack's Basket Room. He'd be in charge of hiring the guys. So that's how I used to get in with-- But I worked with his group. That was the next group I worked with.

ISOARDI: Was that back in the--?

ROBINSON: This was after the war. Bill Moore and I were in the service together.

ISOARDI: Who was he? Where was he from?

ROBINSON: He was from Detroit.

ISOARDI: And he came out here after the war? Is that it?

ROBINSON: He came out here after the war. He used to get quite a few jam sessions.

ISOARDI: So he had like the house band at the Basket Room? Was that right?

ROBINSON: Just on jam sessions, one night a week, I think.

ISOARDI: So you'd play a lot of those?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Who'd come in to blow, to jam? Was it pretty much everybody around? Was that a real popular place to go?

ROBINSON: I remember one night that I worked there Erroll Garner was there, Slam Stewart, Howard McGhee, Teddy Edwards, people like that. In fact, Teddy Edwards was one of the new stars on the scene, too, who was very impressive to me. Because I think he had been in town about a year or so, you know, while I was away. He was one of the new stars who opened my eyes, because he was really playing.

ISOARDI: So how long were you with Bardu Ali at the Lincoln?

ROBINSON: About a couple of months. Bardu had a big band. Sometimes Floyd Ray would use his band.

ISOARDI: Why would he do that?

ROBINSON: Because Floyd Ray was a bandleader too, see, so Floyd Ray would need a band. So he'd just go and take Bardu's band and play places. So I worked with Floyd Ray for about a month or so. He was working gigs like the Pasadena Civic [Auditorium], things like that.

ISOARDI: Did these pay pretty well?

ROBINSON: He paid pretty well. At one time Floyd Ray had a great big band from the West Coast. He was one of the finest bands from the West Coast at one time. This was in the early forties.

ISOARDI: Really? Who played with him? Do you remember any names?

ROBINSON: Not really. He had Lee Young at one time, Benny Booker. I can't remember some of the guys. They were just a little older at that time.

ISOARDI: So then where after Bardu Ali and Floyd Ray? Oh, you mentioned you were married.

ROBINSON: Yes, I was married. We [he and Rose Wilson Robinson] married in 1947.

ISOARDI: And where were you living when you came back? Did you go back to Watts?

ROBINSON: No, no. See, I had moved from Watts before the war, so I was living on Forty-eighth [Street] and Avalon. And when I came out I bought a home on Forty-ninth [Street] and Broadway with the little money I saved gigging overseas. I bought a home over there on Forty-ninth and Broadway. So I lived over there for about seven, eight years. Then I moved over here this way. I've been living here about thirty-four years.

ISOARDI: Here in this place on Genesee [Avenue]?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: No kidding? Long time.

ROBINSON: Yes. Too long. [laughs] Too long. I just got too old to move now. That's the thing. I got trapped here,

you know. I got to sit down too soon. Yeah, see, I've been here thirty-four years. Time just keeps marching on.

But after Floyd Ray and Wild Bill Moore I just jobbed around town. Then I started working with trios and stuff, working in and out of town, mostly in Fullerton and El Monte and--

ISOARDI: What places would you work there?

ROBINSON: I worked at the Pioneer Club, the 49er [Club], and worked at Carter Bowl in Fullerton and the Palms in Santa Ana. I worked with the Tommy Hearn trio with Tommy on organ and Chuck Thomas sax. I worked at Coda's in Buena Park, different places like that. I just worked cocktail lounges, and I would stay an extensive time, like a year, a year and a half.

ISOARDI: Really? That long?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And they paid well?

ROBINSON: They paid scale. [laughs] Whatever scale was.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It was enough to get by?

ROBINSON: Yes. And I was working two jobs, too. In 1948 I went to the City of Los Angeles. One of the reasons I started there was because the only jobs in music that were paying anything were southern tours, and I didn't want to take any southern tours with some of the rhythm and blues groups.

So I decided to stay home and get a job that had a pension plan. I was looking forward to times like now when I could sit down and have a pension, a livable pension. So I went with the City of Los Angeles, and I put in thirty years with them. In the meantime I guess I was putting in fifteen years playing music, because I'd take a break every now and then. But sometimes I didn't know whether I was coming or going--working. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So, then, in about '47 you got married and you started working two jobs at once.

ROBINSON: Actually, when we bought the home, I wanted to buy furniture. So I said, "Well, I'll just work these two jobs, and pretty soon I'll quit."

ISOARDI: One of them?

ROBINSON: Yeah. So I never did think it would be that I'd stay with that and put music in the background as far as preference as to my profession.

ISOARDI: What turned you?

ROBINSON: I think the money, the regularity of money coming in-- At that time I didn't have any problem finding a job musically, so I could quit any time I wanted and I could go back any time I wanted. And it was always a job, whereas with the city it had a pension plan with it, so I had to stick with it. I had several friends tell me that. I was working

with one group, Paul Howard's group, I think. I was working with his group, and just about everybody in his band had a day job. They all talked to me about that, too. Paul Howard, Ted Brinson-- Ted Brinson is the guy who had the recording studio that used to make all the records around town.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Ted Brinson was playing bass, and Paul Howard was the secretary of the union [Local 767]. They were telling me, "Why don't you just use music as a sideline and get you a steady job so when you get around fifty, sixty years old, you can retire and won't have to work." And I said, "That sounds pretty good, too." So with all that plus the fact that the job I had with the city was pretty easy-- It really didn't hinder me from playing. I could job around any time I got ready. And when I got tired I could quit, and I'd go back any time.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's pretty convenient. What were you doing with the city? What was your job?

ROBINSON: I was in street maintenance. I started out as a truck driver. At that particular time I was a truck driver. In construction during that time they didn't have much equipment, so the guy would load the truck by hand. So I'd pull the truck up, and it would take them about half an hour or so to load the truck. I'd sleep and go take a ride.

ISOARDI: Yeah, kick back.

ROBINSON: Kick back. It was pretty easy. I worked up to supervisor. So that was it, then. I didn't have to do anything but check on the guys. So it was really easy.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. So you wouldn't be exhausted at the end of the day. You'd go out and drum at night.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. You could go home and take a nap. If I was exhausted I'd just pull over to the side in my car. I was in the field. I'd just kick back for about half an hour then get up and start riding again, checking out different crews and stuff. I picked my day very well when I was supervisor. I could do my day like I wanted. Some days I didn't feel like working; I just would put every-thing on the table. The next day out, on a Monday or something, I'd come in and I'd work like mad, get all my paperwork done, whatever I had to do, get it all done and cool it out the rest of the week.

ISOARDI: Well, about this time, then--'47, '48--was Central changing? How were things going?

ROBINSON: I guess around '50 to me is when it started changing. Businesses started leaving. I guess people were moving west, too. Just about all the people who had lived in that area had moved west. Things were moving. Like all the spots were on Western Avenue. All the bars that people would frequent, the crowd, they would go to a bar on Western Avenue, maybe

Vermont [Avenue] or something. But around the fifties I'd say it started slowing down. Businesses stopped-- People stopped going-- Instead of going to Central Avenue they'd go out on Hollywood Boulevard and party.

ISOARDI: So this really hit the clubs, then.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. I'm trying to think of the last job I had in '50. I think it was '50 or '51. I think the last job I had on Central Avenue was either the Downbeat or the Alabam.

ISOARDI: So in 1950 they were still open?

ROBINSON: Still open, but the business wasn't as good. And the clientele was a little different.

ISOARDI: Different in what way?

ROBINSON: I'd say the big spenders--

ISOARDI: Were gone?

ROBINSON: Yes, around '50. People who came in didn't have the money to spend like they did. All these people were going to Hollywood, Billy Berg's and what have you then.

ISOARDI: And the last gig, you can't remember if it was the Alabam or the Downbeat?

ROBINSON: One of the two. When I was at the Alabam I was with the Honeydrippers, Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers. I always tell everybody we closed the place down, because I don't remember anybody working there afterwards. And I worked at the Downbeat with Carl Perkins and his brother Ed

Perkins, and I don't remember anybody doing too much at the Downbeat after then. And when we were playing, the clientele was altogether different. Mostly neighborhood people were coming in. And as big a name as Carl was and as good a player as he was, you'd think people would be coming from all over to hear Carl Perkins, but it was just like a neighborhood bar then. So I know we were about the last group that played in Downbeat.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How did you hook up with Carl Perkins? I mean, he must have been pretty young then, right?

ROBINSON: He wasn't that young. Carl's brother and I were good friends. Carl had a brother. Ed Perkins was a bassist.

ISOARDI: But they weren't from here, were they?

ROBINSON: No. I think they're from Indiana or somewhere like that. I think it's Indiana. I'm not sure.

ISOARDI: Had they just come out?

ROBINSON: He'd been out here four or five years. Because I'd known Ed for four or five years. He and I had worked on several jobs together. And we had two gigs with Carl. One was out on the south end of town. I can't remember exactly where it was. It was just a weekend thing. And then the Downbeat. It was a weekend thing, too, when we were working the Downbeat. It had dropped down to weekends instead of every night.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Big drop-off.

ROBINSON: Big drop-off.

ISOARDI: No jam sessions probably anymore then?

ROBINSON: No, just three nights a week, a little three-night-a-week gig. Sunday night was quiet, so we could cool-- We left at one o'clock. So that shows you how Central had died off. When you take somebody with that name--

ISOARDI: So did you guys go in as a trio, then, at the Downbeat?

ROBINSON: Yeah. We worked there about two or three weeks as a trio.

ISOARDI: What was it like playing with Carl Perkins? I've always admired his music.

ROBINSON: It was fun because he played so well. He was kind of a quiet person, as far as I'm concerned. He didn't talk very much. But he could play. We were just thrilled to be playing with him. And his brother was a nice, solid bassist, too. His brother and I were the same type of musician. We were dual-purpose musicians, because when you work a day job and play-- Ed was a mail carrier.

ISOARDI: It's a different kind of doubling. [laughs]

ROBINSON: Yes. There were quite a few guys doing it, really. You'd be surprised at some of the guys who were doing it.

ISOARDI: Well, from what you just said about what was happening

at Central, that's got to mean that there were fewer jobs, I would think. So you'd have to start looking for something else, I would guess, for a lot of guys.

ROBINSON: And if you need the money-- See, because even I used to see guys who were working musically only, and I couldn't exist on what they were making. I couldn't have existed on the money that I was making in the nightclubs only if I was just doing that. I felt sorry for some of the guys that I was working with on some of these jobs. I couldn't see how they were making it, because it was still a struggle for me with two jobs. Maybe I wanted other things that other people didn't want. Then you find some guys who could make it. The Buddy Collette type, they could make it. But how many guys can go out in a studio and do this, command that kind of pay? So some of the people who hung with it-- I'm glad I went to work, because now I see how they are. They're not making it too well. You've got Buddy and Jackie Kelso [also Kelson], they're doing all right. But there are a few--

ISOARDI: Yeah, there's a handful. But there are so many that-- I know some of the people that I've talked to and interviewed are still just getting by.

ROBINSON: I know. I've had some of them hit me for fifty dollars or so and never paid me back. And to me it wasn't any problem. [laughs] But I couldn't do that if I didn't

have a pension. And all through the years I made it possible. That's what I had in mind when I did that, when I made the change.

But I know a lot of guys who-- I thought I could perform as well as they could. And they stayed with it, but like you said, they're struggling now. I didn't want to be out here seventy-five years old and struggling. [laughs] I love music, but I had made up my mind. If I couldn't make x amount of money out of the music business, I was going to leave it. And I'd go out sometimes and see some of these guys. I thought they were much better than I musically, drummers, much better than I. They were out trying to make it, and they weren't making the money. It's like I say, with music the jobs are just diminished.

I think television had a lot to do with it. People stayed home. If they wanted to be entertained they'd stay home and look at TV. They wouldn't have to spend anything. They'd be entertained all night long, and quality entertainment. But when I first started, if they wanted to be entertained they had to leave home and go out to a club. They had neighborhood bars with music.

I remember working not only on Central but up and down Pico [Boulevard]. Guys would be playing. I've seen guys working up on Pico, and a little girl I wanted to contact

and talk to was in a place. I told the drummer to go next door and work for me and I'll work his gig so I could impress-- [laughs] It was just that close. You could go and sit in for another guy and let another guy work your gig. It was that plentiful. Jobs were that plentiful. I said, "Let me play this set. You go and play my set. I want to talk to this girl. I want to impress her." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Did it work?

ROBINSON: It worked. Yeah, it worked. Smile here, do all that, and get my points through. But there were just that many jobs around. We worked that close together: Downbeat, Last Word, Alabam. You could walk right over from one job to the other.

ISOARDI: Yeah. We're talking about one block.

ROBINSON: Yeah. You could just walk next door. If you took your break a little-- You could go check this guy out on your break. If you didn't break at the same time, you could go check the band out. And people, they were always-- If it was admission and you were a musician, they'd let you in, especially if they knew you worked, like, "We work across the street." "Oh, go on in." You know, one of those things.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

JULY 3, 1995

ISOARDI: Minor, let's begin today with following up on some things that have arisen over our last session or two, and then we'll continue on with your narrative beginning in '47. But first off, you mentioned Clarence Moore who owned the Memo [Club]. I guess we've talked a little bit about [Curtis] Mosby, who owned some clubs, and even Dynamite Jackson, who had a place of his own [Dynamite Jackson's]. And in all of these cases we're talking about black ownership of clubs on Central Avenue. Can you think of any other owners? Was this sort of typical, then, that most of the clubs were black owned and operated? Or were there some clubs that were white owned and operated?

ROBINSON: Well, most all the club owners I knew--in fact, these are about the only three whom I really knew of very well--were black. I think there was a fellow who had a bar--He didn't have any entertainment there. Jack was his name. We called it Jack's Bar. That was right next to the Elks [hall]. A lot of people would go in there and have drinks sometimes.

ISOARDI: Just a bar?

ROBINSON: Just a bar. No music involved. But other than that, I don't know anything about the ownership.

ISOARDI: What about some of the other activities that happened on Central Avenue? We certainly talked, obviously, about the music, which is our cultural focal point. And we know during the day that Central Avenue certainly was the business, if not the social, center of the community. People would shop there. What about some of the other things that went on, some of the maybe shadier stuff or just other activities that people could do other than shop?

ROBINSON: Well, they had movie theaters there. Starting at Twentieth Street was the Rosebud Theatre. Then they had the Gaiety [Theatre]. That was across the street from the Lincoln Theatre. Then they had the Lincoln Theatre. Then they had the Tivoli [Theatre], which later became the Bill Robinson Theatre. And then further down, I think around Fiftieth [Street], they had the Savoy [Theatre]. So they had about five or six movie houses. And there was shopping. That was about all the activity I know. They had supermarkets and dry goods places and five-and-ten-cent stores and drugstores.

ISOARDI: Right. So pretty much everything you wanted you could find on Central.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: What about some of the shadier kind of stuff that was going on? Were you aware of any of that? Bootlegging, gambling, and things like that?

ROBINSON: Well, the only bootlegging that I knew that was going on was after hours at the Ritz [Club]. They used to sell liquor after hours. A guy would bootleg liquor because they had the two o'clock law here.

ISOARDI: No liquor sold after two.

ROBINSON: After two. So you'd find a little going on at the Ritz. But other than that, I don't know about any bootlegging or anything.

ISOARDI: Was this homemade stuff?

ROBINSON: No, real liquor.

ISOARDI: People would just sell it out of the trunk of their cars?

ROBINSON: Right. Real name-brand liquor. They'd almost give you-- [laughs]

ISOARDI: Did you have to pay extra for it?

ROBINSON: Oh, double. It's for double the cost.

ISOARDI: So you'd pay for the setup inside, plus you'd pay double for the liquor out in the parking lot?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: Expensive.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. But when you had a party and, say, four or five people or six people at a table, everybody would put up their little part, and it kind of works out. Split up the bill. [laughs]

ISOARDI: What about gambling down on the avenue? I know the film on Ernie Andrews, Blues for Central Avenue, at one point does refer to some gambling activity. Were you aware of any then?

ROBINSON: Only what I heard. I wasn't aware of it. I know they had bookies and a few things like that. But I never played the horses, so I didn't go into them. I've never been in a bookie joint.

ISOARDI: What about gambling houses?

ROBINSON: I've never been in a gambling house.

ISOARDI: Did you know of any roulette wheels behind a club somewhere?

ROBINSON: No, I didn't know any of that. The only gambling that I was familiar with was Chinese lottery, which is similar to keno that they play in [Las] Vegas now. Most of that was done out in Watts, out in that area. So I knew about that. Chinese lottery. I was too small to go in, but I'd mark a ticket and send it in with an adult, something like that.

ISOARDI: And this was all illegal?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Who ran those kinds of things?

ROBINSON: The Chinese.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Out in Watts? No kidding?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh, yeah.

ISOARDI: As far as you know--I know this is perhaps even harder to get ahold of, but--was the mob at all active down there?

ROBINSON: Not that I know of.

ISOARDI: Organized crime didn't play any kind of role as far as you know?

ROBINSON: No. All I know and heard of is that there was a payoff going on with the police department. And this is what I heard, not what I know. But there was a payoff. Gamblers would get what they wanted, but it was a payoff.

ISOARDI: Oh, you mean like this thing in Watts you were talking about?

ROBINSON: I think the Chinese were paying off, because they was going wide open.

ISOARDI: You could just walk into a--

ROBINSON: Walk right in and play and walk right out.

ISOARDI: During the day, whenever, when everyone knew what was going on?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Because most of the gambling was done-- The lottery, most of the numbers came out during the day. They'd have a drawing about every four or five hours. You've seen keno in Vegas.

ISOARDI: Sure.

ROBINSON: Same principle. That's where the keno in Vegas

got the idea. The only difference was a Chinese ticket, instead of having American numerals on there, was all in Chinese.

ISOARDI: How would you know what you were picking?

ROBINSON: Well, you didn't; you just marked something that looked pretty. [laughs]

ISOARDI: I guess it doesn't matter, right? [laughs] The odds are probably the same.

ROBINSON: Yeah. "I like something over here, and I like something in this corner, and double over in this corner," and mark a ticket. That's the way it was, because actually all the lettering was in Chinese.

ISOARDI: Did people operate this out of their house?

ROBINSON: They'd rent a house in the neighborhood.

ISOARDI: An ordinary house?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh, and set up in there.

ISOARDI: So the police would have to know this. This would stand out.

ROBINSON: Oh, they'd have to. It was a payoff.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How long did this go on? Do you know?

ROBINSON: I imagine it kind of went out of existence here in Los Angeles to my knowledge around 1937. But I know actually-- I used to work for a grocery store, and Mr. [M.C.] Harrison would write numbers for-- We referred to it as "for the Chinaman." You know, they'd say, "Catch the Chinaman."

That was the phrase. [laughs] And he was a writer for those tickets. You'd go in his grocery store, and you could play a ticket. Ten cents, fifteen cents, they'd run something like that. I remember one time I caught a seven-spot ticket. I think it was
twenty cents, a seven-spot, and it paid about thirty dollars.

ISOARDI: Big money.

ROBINSON: And I was rich for-- [laughs]

ISOARDI: You were. That was a couple of weeks' salary.

ROBINSON: Yeah. It was about a week's salary. But I used to work for him. I used to help him stock his shelves and stuff, and then I'd play a ticket every now and then. I guess that's why I'm so fond of keno in Vegas now. That's my favorite vice in Vegas, keno. I run and play keno. I'm hooked.

ISOARDI: That's good. We haven't really talked about this at all yet. What about drugs? Were drugs prominent at all?

ROBINSON: Well, actually I didn't become aware of drugs until around, I guess, just when I got out of the service.

ISOARDI: Mid-forties?

ROBINSON: Yeah, around the mid-forties, around '46. I wasn't aware of drugs, particularly, heavy drugs. I was hip to marijuana in school, but I mean, heavy drugs I--

ISOARDI: What do you mean in school? You mean in high school?

ROBINSON: Well, in high school-- It's about living in Watts. A lot of Mexican guys would bring some marijuana to school and stuff like that.

ISOARDI: So people would take a smoke between classes or something?

ROBINSON: They'd go out behind the bleachers. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Where did they get the stuff?

ROBINSON: They'd just get it from Mexico, in Tijuana.

ISOARDI: And then just bring it over?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. But heavy drugs, I didn't hear too much about that until the forties, late forties, '46. When I came out of the service I'd hear about different guys shooting drugs and stuff and how they got hooked. "Best not to bother with it. Leave it alone." I've known about two or three guys who dealt heavy in heroin and then cured themselves, but I wouldn't want to mention their names either.

ISOARDI: Sure. Well, they were some of the lucky ones then, because certainly a lot of people didn't make it.

ROBINSON: A good saxophonist and drummer, very, very well known at the time, was hooked, and he kicked it. And I didn't realize that until I was on a gig with this particular sax player and we had a discussion about drugs. I said, "Man, I wouldn't even touch it, because once you get hooked you're hooked for life." And he said, "I'll be damned. I was hooked

and I quit." And I said, "You did?" to myself. I've watched him over the years, and he's still around doing well. But he did put it down. So that's only about two people that I know who were hooked on drugs and actually put it down and stayed away from it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You didn't know many people, then, at the time who were doing--?

ROBINSON: On the drug scene? No, I didn't. There were a few that I knew who are not living now, too. I used to hang around a guy's apartment on Avalon [Boulevard] around the corner from where I was living. They're well-known musicians, too. I wouldn't want to mention names, but all of them are dead now, all of them.

ISOARDI: Drug related?

ROBINSON: Drug related.

ISOARDI: Sad. So many went so young because of that junk.

ROBINSON: But I was always-- Well, in school I was always interested in sports and music. Drugs didn't fit into that scene at all. I wanted to be a track star or something like that, and smoking and drinking didn't fit into my plans then, because we were always taught no vice if you wanted to be an athlete, no vice. The guys I was around, we kind of looked down on it and had a "stay away from it" attitude.

ISOARDI: So it's about '45, '46 that you started noticing

it was coming out.

ROBINSON: Yeah. I started noticing and hearing talk about how a certain person was hooked, and this guy--

ISOARDI: Was there any talk about where the stuff was coming from?

ROBINSON: No. I didn't know too much about where it was coming from other than I knew marijuana was coming from Tijuana most of the time. But the heavier drugs, I didn't know too much about it. And I made it known, I guess, to a lot of people what I'd do if they approached me, so people didn't approach me. [laughs] I'd say if anybody would approach me with that stuff I'd blow their brains out. You know, I'd take a violent attitude toward it. So people didn't approach me. "He's a square. Stay away from him."

ISOARDI: A dangerous square. [laughs]

We haven't talked much about women on the avenue, women musicians. Did you play with any? Or did you notice--?

ROBINSON: I worked with Perry Lee. She was an organist, but she was a pianist when I was working with Wild Bill Moore's group.

ISOARDI: When was this?

ROBINSON: This was in '46, 1946. And she was just a young kid then, about eighteen years old. But then she played for years at the Parisian Room on La Brea [Avenue] and Washington

[Boulevard]. She played there for years. She had a drummer and herself. She went into playing organ from piano. Perry Lee. She was very popular.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything about her background? Was she from this area?

ROBINSON: I don't know too much about her background. I met her in '46. She was young then. She was about eighteen, nineteen years old then.

Then there was [Emma] "Ginger" Smock. She worked at the Waikiki for years.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

ROBINSON: On Western Avenue.

ISOARDI: Did she play Central at all?

ROBINSON: I don't remember her playing Central. I don't remember her playing on Central.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything about her at all?

ROBINSON: Only that she was a good violinist.

ISOARDI: She played jazz violin?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Yes. That's about all I can remember. I remember she was from this area, Los Angeles, because I remember her playing in church concerts and recitals at church and stuff like that. Then she went into jazz. Then she worked on the ship from Catalina to L.A. for quite a while.

ISOARDI: Any others that you might--?

ROBINSON: Vi Redd. I remember Vi Redd when she was a kid. There was a lady, Mrs. [Alma] Hightower, who had a kid band.

ISOARDI: Who was Mrs. Hightower?

ROBINSON: She was teaching music, giving private lessons. She organized a band. All her students, they would play on Central Avenue and put a little hat out in front and they'd play for tips.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

ROBINSON: Vi Redd-- Melba Liston was in the band, also. Buddy Redd, Vi Redd's brother, was the drummer. That's about all I can remember. Fifty percent of them turned out to be professional musicians, and two turned out to be great: Melba and Vi Redd.

ISOARDI: Where would they play?

ROBINSON: They were playing right on Forty-second [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI: Right on the corner?

ROBINSON: Well, there was a florist and a gas station. There was a little area between the florist and the gas station. They'd set up their little chairs right there and start swinging. They could play, too. They had about a ten-piece band of kids.

ISOARDI: A ten-piece band just playing out on the street?

ROBINSON: That's right, for tips. They had a little tray.

And after, when they'd take a break, I think Buddy Redd would go around and pass the hat, and everybody would put dimes and quarters in. They'd do that on the weekends. So you'd hear this band swinging. And they could swing, too. They had a lot of [Count] Basie arrangements and [Benny] Goodman arrangements and stuff like--

ISOARDI: No kidding?

ROBINSON: Most of it was playing stock [arrangements] that they played.

ISOARDI: And who was Mrs. Hightower?

ROBINSON: She was a teacher. She taught music. She didn't teach in the school system; she just gave private lessons to kids.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything else about her? Where she came from?

ROBINSON: No. All I know is she was teaching these kids to play, and she'd showcase them every Saturday in this lot.

ISOARDI: Amazing. You know, one thing that stands out from some of the things you've said is there were a handful of awfully good teachers around who as kids you guys were exposed to and whom you could study with. It sounds like that had an impact.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Yes, there were quite a few. And then there was dance school, too. The Covan Kiddies had a dance

studio.

ISOARDI: The who?

ROBINSON: Covan, Willie Covan. He furnished kids for the movies and different things. But those kids could dance, a lot of them, good dancers.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: So it was something for a child to do rather than--

ISOARDI: Go down to Tijuana. [laughs]

ROBINSON: Throw bricks at cars and stuff. There were a lot of other things to do.

ISOARDI: Where was Willie Covan's studio?

ROBINSON: On Forty-first Street over near Jefferson High School. I think it was across the street from Jefferson High School. He had a dance studio, the Covan Kiddies. And I imagine most of the people who worked at the [Club] Alabam, the chorus girls and stuff, were ex-Covan kiddies.

ISOARDI: So he was the man if you wanted to dance.

ROBINSON: There were two. There was a Nash studio and Covan. Nash, he had a studio, too. I don't know his first name. But there were two studios where kids could take dancing.

ISOARDI: Who was Nash?

ROBINSON: He was the same as Willie Covan, a teacher-dancer. He opened up the dance school. That was his business, to teach kids to dance.

ISOARDI: Where was he located?

ROBINSON: I don't know where his studio was. I don't know exactly where. But I just would see some of the kids, good dancers, come out of there. And they would get bit parts for the kids in the movies, too.

ISOARDI: So they must have been pretty respected in Hollywood, then, as well as dance teachers?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Can you think of the names of any dancers who came out of there that we might know?

ROBINSON: No, not any famous dancers.

ISOARDI: I guess at about this time that we've been talking about, after the war, the music started going different directions. Certainly bop is one way. But then, I guess, what comes to be called R and B [rhythm and blues] starts emerging as well. A lot of saxophonists and other musicians started instead of racing through changes taking one note and milking it for all it was worth and walking the bars, and really music started going in another direction with them. How did this affect you?

ROBINSON: Well, actually, I was crazy about all of it, both ways. I could appreciate the artistry of each person doing what they could do and selling it. Because to me, I'd say if it was good commercially it was good. I don't care how

bad they would blow. If it was good commercially, that's another thing. So everybody knew that "Bird" [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy Gillespie and all those guys were playing straight-ahead bop, very progres-sive in other words. If you were on the progressive side and you wanted to go off into a good progressive direction, take bop, because that was the mainstream. Rhythm and blues I thought was more or less like an easier way out for a musician. Just like you said, if you get tired of playing fifteen notes, take one and make a living with it. And that's more or less like rhythm and blues was. I know for myself it was easier to perform with a rhythm and blues band than a bop band.

ISOARDI: Musically it was?

ROBINSON: Yeah. To me it was. Musically it was easier. It was an easier job. The same as being a casual musician-- What I call a casual musician is a musician who works, say, playing dances or wedding receptions, that type of stuff. You work at a country club and you play one night there. That's simple. That's easy. When you have to play a nightclub and go straight ahead, you have to play, practice, and you have to stay on top of your game every night.

ISOARDI: In terms of getting work, which type of music did you play more often?

ROBINSON: For me? After I went to the city, most of my work

was casual work. I did a lot of casual work then, plus working in trios in little, small nightclub spots, which was very easy, too. Because in a trio, particularly out in Orange County and that way, all you had to do is stay up with the top ten tunes and play those. And people, as long as they hear the melody and a good presentation of the song it was-- But in jazz you'd have to do more improvising. And after one guy does so much improvising, you have to come up with a new trick. [laughs] So for me working days it was easier to get in with a blues band that didn't-- You don't have to play as hard. You don't have to improvise as much. I wouldn't have to practice. But if you took a job working in a jazz place, you'd have to go home and practice all week to come up with a new trick.

ISOARDI: In terms of getting work, if you did play straight-ahead jazz, or progressive jazz as they called bop then, was it getting harder to find work after the war?

ROBINSON: I figure that it was harder to make money playing bop than it was rhythm and blues because of the audience that you'd get playing rhythm and blues. You would find more people who could dig rhythm and blues than could understand bop. So bop would sell to a person like me because I have a music background. But the ordinary layman who comes out, he wants to finger-pop and have a good time, and he can understand

the simple [sings] thing, you know. [laughs] So commercially it was easier for me to take the easier road, like rhythm and blues, and work as a casual type of musician. Because in bop you just had to be very progressive and had to work hard at it and keep working at it.

ISOARDI: Who were some of the prominent R and B musicians when R and B started taking off? What places were they playing? And who are they?

ROBINSON: Well, there was the Barrelhouse going on. Johnny Otis had a club out there. The Barrelhouse was going on and--

ISOARDI: Where?

ROBINSON: That was in Watts. He had a club out in Watts. Some of the musicians were Jim Winn. Jim Winn had a band. Big Daddy Crawford. There was Pee Wee Crayton, Floyd Dixon. Those were some of them that I could remember.

ISOARDI: What was the Barrelhouse like? Did you ever go there or play there?

ROBINSON: I never did go there, because I was probably working during that time. So I never would go by. But that's where Esther Phillips got her start.

ISOARDI: Oh, Little Esther Phillips?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. And Johnny Otis. Let's see. Big Mama Thornton. Johnny Otis found a lot of stars. Jim Winn.

ISOARDI: As far as you can remember, was that the first place

where they were really playing rhythm and blues?

ROBINSON: That's about the most prominent place that I can think of. Let's see. Later on, then, the Five Four Ballroom came in existence, and they started having rhythm and blues in there, too.

ISOARDI: What about the Five Four Ballroom? When did that start?

ROBINSON: The Five Four Ballroom started around 1950, around '50 or '51. Before then it was a dance hall. They catered mostly to Caucasian people on Broadway.

ISOARDI: Where was it located?

ROBINSON: On Fifty-fourth [Street] and Broadway. And Billy Berg came in and introduced-- The guy who ran the place was named Nelson, and Billy Berg talked him into turning over and playing a different type of music and catering to people in the neighborhood. Because the neighborhood, as I said, was moving west. Instead of Central they were moving on Broadway and then Figueroa [Street] and so on.

ISOARDI: So this was mostly white, kind of like a Lawrence Welk or Guy Lombardo dance kind of thing?

ROBINSON: That's right. So after then, when Billy Berg came and he started-- Pete Collins was the first band. I remember that because I lived on Forty-ninth and Broadway. So Pete Collins went in there for about two or three months and started

the trend of people coming there. And then after that, that's when Billy Berg got into bringing name stars in, rhythm and blues acts.

ISOARDI: Such as--? Do you remember any particular--?

ROBINSON: Well, he'd bring in Pee Wee Crayton, Calvin Bowes. In fact, Ray Charles even played in there at one time.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. But all the popular rhythm and blues bands at that time--

ISOARDI: So the Five Four really changed, then, from sort of a white society, sedate, Lawrence Welk dance hall to the rhythm and blues capital of L.A. as people started moving west?

ROBINSON: Right. And Broadway then had-- Right down the street there was Bill [William] Green. He was playing at Marty's. That was an uptight jazz group.

ISOARDI: Where was Marty's?

ROBINSON: On Slauson [Avenue] and Broadway or Fifty-ninth [Street] and Broadway. That's where if you wanted to hear some good straight-ahead jazz, well, there's Bill Green. And if you wanted to hear a little rhythm and blues you'd go down to the Five Four. And then further down there was the Brass Rail.

ISOARDI: What was the Brass Rail?

ROBINSON: Well, the Brass Rail was one of those converted clubs. The Brass Rail was almost like a cowboy joint turned rhythm and blues. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Where was that located?

ROBINSON: The first one was on Vernon [Avenue] and Broadway, and then they moved down to Fiftieth [Street] later on.

ISOARDI: And Broadway?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: So Broadway really became, maybe, after Central--?

ROBINSON: After Central. And then Figueroa.

Then they had the Pigaille with Earl Grant-- You know, everything was moving west.

ISOARDI: Where was this place with Earl Grant?

ROBINSON: Pigaille? That's on the--

ISOARDI: Pig--?

ROBINSON: Pigaille they called it. Now, don't ask me to spell it. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Oh, it's one word?

ROBINSON: I think so. Pigaille.

ISOARDI: It sounds like a Creole word or something like that.

ROBINSON: Something, a French word, you know. It sounds French to me. Pigaille. But that was right about a block or so south of the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum on Figueroa. I think they have a big nightclub down there, a Latin nightclub,

now. But he was there. So everything was moving west.

ISOARDI: And the clubs went with it. But these are all R and B clubs, now, right?

ROBINSON: Well, Earl Grant is not-- You wouldn't consider him R and B, and you wouldn't consider Bill Green R and B.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's true. Right, right. Bill is straight-ahead jazz.

ROBINSON: Yeah. He had Donald Bailey with him at one time. And then after Bill there was-- I'm trying to think of the trumpet player. Bryant, Paul Bryant. Paul Bryant? I think so. So you'd go there to Marty's on Broadway and Fifty-ninth. It was jazz. And they had Luis Rivera on organ one time. But William Green is the one who turned it out. I mean, he started it. He started the trend.

ISOARDI: At Marty's?

ROBINSON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So by this time, then, you're talking about--what? --the year '52 or something like that?

ROBINSON: Fifties, right.

ISOARDI: Things were starting to move. People were listening to rhythm and blues, people were moving west of Central, and clubs were going west of Central. So about 1950 then, what was on Central? Was there anyplace to go? I think you mentioned you may have been one of the last groups to play at the Downbeat

[Club].

ROBINSON: That's what I was saying. The Downbeat was there, but it was sinking fast. Because it was just about that time when the Downbeat and everything on Central began to fold. See, because you could go down to Adams [Boulevard]. They had a couple of nightclubs on Adams. And on Western Avenue they had the clubs. They had the Oasis and-- Is that--? My mind slips. And on Santa Barbara [Avenue] just west of Western they had the California Club. Everything was moving west. And on La Brea and Washington they had the Parisian Room. So everything was coming west.

ISOARDI: I seem to remember a place called-- Was it Normandie Hall or something like that? Does that ring a bell?

ROBINSON: They had the Normandie Club.

ISOARDI: Normandie Club.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Yeah, that was on Normandie and Adams.

ISOARDI: And that was a fifties club.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: So when did the Alabam fold up? Do you remember that?

ROBINSON: It folded around the fifties, early fifties.

ISOARDI: So by about what date was Central pretty much shut down in terms of the clubs?

ROBINSON: What year?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

ROBINSON: In the early fifties. I'd say around '53, '52, '53 somewhere--

ISOARDI: So there was pretty much nothing going on?

ROBINSON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I know there's still a club down there, I guess a blues club. Isn't there rhythm and blues--? Babe and Rick's?

ROBINSON: If it is, I wouldn't know.

ISOARDI: I think it's the only one that--

ROBINSON: Because I lost contact after the fifties. After '53, '54, there just wasn't anything up there that I could--

ISOARDI: Yeah.

ROBINSON: It wasn't like it used to be. Everything was west. And I had moved west, too. The trend was to go west. There was newer housing and everything. So as soon as a person got a little successful, they'd move further west.

ISOARDI: Right. So once people were able to do that and they struck down those housing covenants, that was just-- In looking back as to why Central Avenue declined, that would be the main reason you'd point to?

ROBINSON: I would think so. Plus the friendly attitude in white places, too. When you'd go to--

ISOARDI: What do you mean?

ROBINSON: The way people accepted you when you'd go patronize

one. There used to be a time when the only way a black person would feel comfortable on Central Avenue was because they were treated more friendly. But pretty soon the attitude changed, so people started going to other clubs, too. They'd go out to Hermosa Beach and places where they were more welcome to go than before.

ISOARDI: So you'd go to the Lighthouse and hear some music?

ROBINSON: There you go. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Hear Miles Davis on a Sunday afternoon or something, and there would be no problem.

ROBINSON: That's right. So that helped contribute to the fall of Central, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Oh, I meant to ask you, also, looking back, do you remember the parades down Central Avenue? Was there a Central Avenue parade that would culminate out at Wrigley Field? And there would be concerts at Wrigley. Do you remember any of that?

ROBINSON: Well, the only parades that I can remember on Central were the Elks and Shriners. We used to parade down Central when we'd have a convention or something in town. We'd have a Prince Hall Day. Prince Hall were the first black masons. It belongs to the Prince Hall Grand Lodge. If they had a Prince Hall Day or something, we'd have a parade. Years ago they used to have a Labor Day parade, but it didn't go down

Central. I think it went down Broadway or something. The only parades that I knew back then were the Elks or Shriners. They'd have a parade, and they'd take Central and go to about Fiftieth [Street] and then come back up Broadway, they'd take Avalon, and they might stop at Wrigley Field or something like that. But I don't remember any other parades.

ISOARDI: I guess we'll get back to the chronology of your story. You mentioned in '47 you started working two jobs. You have a day job with the City [of Los Angeles].

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: And then you were practicing your art at night as a musician. I think you also mentioned around this time that you were living with [Charles] Mingus, or just before you started working for the city--

ROBINSON: No. No, Mingus and I never did live together.

ISOARDI: Oh. For some reason I thought in '47 or so you guys had a place together, but you didn't.

ROBINSON: No. We had a place where we used to hang out together.

ISOARDI: Like a crash pad?

ROBINSON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh. Do you want to talk about that?

ROBINSON: No, I'd rather not. [laughs] Yeah. I don't think it would be appropriate.

ISOARDI: Well, I won't tell your wife. So you guys remained

friends, then, up until then. I guess he left for New York not long after this.

ROBINSON: Yes. It was the early fifties when he left. In fact, I thought it was '49 or '50, yeah, '49 or '50 when he left. Yeah. In fact, it was like '47 or so when he left--'47, I think. Because I think it was before I went with the city.

ISOARDI: Now, I guess since you'd been away for most of the war you hadn't seen him in a while when you came back to Central. So how did you hook up again, you and Mingus? And what did you notice about him? Had he changed much as a musician?

ROBINSON: He had progressed a whole lot. But we just ran into each other. Los Angeles in those days was such a small area that if you just came into town and walked down the street you'd see somebody you'd know. So we just happened to run into each other. And then we used to go by this place quite a bit. I choose not to talk about it. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Right. But is there anything you could say about him musically after you came back from the war in '46?

ROBINSON: The only thing I could say is he had just progressed so much it was just unbelievable. That he could progress that much-- In fact, it was unbelievable that anybody could play that well, period. I saw him playing--

ISOARDI: He stood out that much?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. I just couldn't believe that another

individual could actually play that well and that easily. He played just as easy as you could talk. It just came out so naturally. That's the thing that impressed me.

ISOARDI: How about some of the other people in this period after the late forties who were playing around the avenue that you remember? Any other names?

ROBINSON: Well, the names that impressed me-- The people playing really well then were, naturally, Buddy [Collette], William Green, Ernie Freeman, Jackie Kelso [also Kelson]. Those were the guys who-- They were just too much. Those were the youngsters who were really playing, real serious playing.

ISOARDI: And after the war--

ROBINSON: Chico was another one.

ISOARDI: Oh, Chico Hamilton?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. Those were the guys who impressed me when I came out. They were taking music up to another level, I'll put it that way. Way up. I said, "Wow!"

ISOARDI: So what happened to you then? It's the end of 1947. You're working two jobs now.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And you're married?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: So what happened from this point on? You were living

just off Central Avenue, you and your wife?

ROBINSON: No, off of Broadway.

ISOARDI: Okay.

ROBINSON: I lived around Forty-ninth [Street] and Broadway. I guess most of it was just working weekends. I turned into a weekend musician. And then pretty soon I'd work weekends--I was off-night drummer on a lot of gigs when a drummer was--Monday night, the band was off. So I used to work the Brass Rail every Monday. Then I'd probably work another club every Tuesday on off nights. And then I'd have my regular three nights that I'd play. So I was working about five nights a week. And that's what I continued to do until I retired from the city.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Did you notice as you were starting to play in the clubs away from Central, as it was starting to move west, were the clubs very different from the kind of clubs that you were used to on Central? Were the audiences different?

ROBINSON: The same situation, same thing, same atmosphere, and everything. It's just a different club.

I imagine the public is fickle, too. All you had to do was open up a new club and they wanted to go see what it was like, and they would forget about this club. They would go wear this one out, and then somebody would open another one and "here we go." But, see, I know Dynamite, he had his

club on Forty-eighth [Street] or something and Central.

ISOARDI: Dynamite Jackson?

ROBINSON: Yeah, yeah. And then he moved. He moved his club to--what do you call it?--the Back Stage. That was on Crenshaw [Boulevard] and Adams. So he moved, just changed locations, moved west with the people.

ISOARDI: When was that?

ROBINSON: That was around '54, '53, somewhere around there. He had Ernie Freeman, Ramon Martinez on drums, Lorenzo Holden on sax.

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ISOARDI: Any other clubs you can think of from the fifties?

ROBINSON: I mentioned the Oasis. I was trying to go down Western. There were a couple of them. The Entemy, that was on Fifty-fourth [Street] and Western.

ISOARDI: The Entemy?

ROBINSON: Entemy. Some of these I may be pronouncing wrong too, but it sounds close to it. Entemy. And I'm trying to think. There was another club right off of Vernon on Western. I can't think of the name of it. It was on Forty-fifth and Western. [tape recorder off] The Morocco, that was on Fifty-fifth and Western. Wild Bill Davis stayed there a while. I think Gerry [Gerald] Wiggins worked there, Eddie Heywood, and--Let's see. Then they had the Waikiki on Western. Western Avenue was the scene then for jazz.

ISOARDI: So by the mid-fifties, maybe?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: Western Avenue was the place to be?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: I know you touched upon this earlier, and that was the amalgamation of the two unions [American Federation of Musicians Locals 47 and 767]. Maybe we could talk a little

bit more about that. You said you supported that, right?

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: And I guess it finally happened in the early fifties.

ROBINSON: Right.

ISOARDI: I guess the battles were waged between '51, '52, and '53, '54.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Did you sort of support it without any reservation?

ROBINSON: Yes.

ISOARDI: You thought it was a positive thing?

ROBINSON: Well, when you have something that's divided and different it wasn't right to me, so there wasn't any question about it. It's like I thought it was wrong to have two different branches of the service, you know, two different armies. All these things have a negative effect on a person. I was never comfortable about it. And I admired some of the people like Jackie Robinson who stood up against it. It's the same with the amalgamation. It just wasn't right to have two different unions. And one union had all the good contracts. So, yeah, I'd support it when they had the jam sessions. They'd have the jam sessions to raise money.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

ROBINSON: Yeah. They'd have a jam session to raise money. I'd participate in that. I would go.

ISOARDI: Where would you have jam sessions?

ROBINSON: It was a hall right on-- This building is torn down now. There was a union hall right on Hoover [Street], just east of Twenty-fifth [Street] and Hoover. There used to be a union hall there, and they'd have jam sessions there on Sunday afternoons--Buddy Collette, Mingus, and a few guys.

ISOARDI: And this was to raise money for--?

ROBINSON: Raise money to fight for the amalgamation and also to show support. And you'd be surprised. Sometimes there would be as many white musicians there as black.

ISOARDI: Really? To participate in--

ROBINSON: To participate, yeah. So there were some guys who had a good outlook on life, were looking in the right direction.

ISOARDI: From Local 47?

ROBINSON: That's what impressed me, that it was-- I won't say it was many, but there was a good representation to let you know it wasn't just one group that was trying to push for amalgamation.

ISOARDI: Right. Well, it must have been important, I guess, in your guys eventually succeeding that it was shared in both unions, or at least among an important core group in both unions, that you should push for this. But what kind of opposition to the amalgamation did you run into?

ROBINSON: That I can't say.

ISOARDI: I mean, I assume it wasn't unanimous.

ROBINSON: There was an opposition, I know, and I don't know what the argument against it would be. But I know there was opposition. But I wasn't that close in the fight.

ISOARDI: Do you know who opposed it?

ROBINSON: No. See, I wasn't that close in the fight. I wasn't close. I just supported it, and that was it. That was during the time I was working. When you work two jobs you have little time for other activity. [laughs]

ISOARDI: This is true. [laughs]

ROBINSON: Yeah. You have little time.

ISOARDI: Minor, were you involved at all in the recording that was being done back then? I know there were certainly a lot of small, independent labels that were recording a lot of R and B and jazz.

ROBINSON: Let's see. I was involved in Geechie Smith's band. He had a Capitol contract.

ISOARDI: With Capitol Records?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: When was that?

ROBINSON: This was in '46, '47. Fletcher Smith was on this-- That's how I met Fletcher was with this band.

ISOARDI: Oh. That's when you met him for the first time was '46?

ROBINSON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: How did he strike you?

ROBINSON: Well, he was a good musician and a comical guy. But if you didn't understand him you'd think he was a real mean, evil guy. But you had to understand him. He was outspoken, very outspoken. Any situation he didn't like, he would just speak out right away. I made a couple of records with him.

Then I was involved with Floyd Dixon. He was in rhythm and blues. I made some recordings with Floyd Dixon.

ISOARDI: What label?

ROBINSON: I don't know what Floyd's label was. This was old 78's.

ISOARDI: And on gigs like this you would just get paid a fee for the session?

ROBINSON: Right. You'd get so much for the session. But that was the only recording. I didn't do any more recording. During that time Lee Young had a pretty busy book as far as recording was concerned.

ISOARDI: Really?

ROBINSON: So what he would do sometimes if he was-- If his recording sessions would overlap, I would come in and record some of the little slow tunes and stuff that were not too involved. I'd probably do that recording, and when he got there he would finish up the session. And he'd just pay me

out of his pocket. And then when I was with Ted Brinson--Ted Brinson used to do a lot of black-market recording sometimes.

ISOARDI: What's that?

ROBINSON: It's just what I call black market. He would have a session for a rhythm and blues person, but they wouldn't go through the union, you know, like nonunion.

ISOARDI: Oh.

ROBINSON: And I'd go over there and fool around in his studio sometimes. But that was about it.

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, we're coming to the end. Let me ask you a big question. In looking back on Central Avenue, how would you sort of assess its importance? Why should Central Avenue be remembered? What did it contribute musically or whatever?

ROBINSON: Well, I think it should be remembered historically for just what it was musically and just as a street where people congregated for entertainment, for shopping. Sometimes we'd go up on the avenue just to see who was there. Really it was to see if you could run into somebody you knew and maybe go into a bar and have a word with them. But it should be remembered because it was part of the culture of L.A. back in those days, particularly black culture. So it should be remembered just as Central Avenue, period.

Then the nightlife above all should be remembered because

it had a good nightlife and good memories. And it had a certain hum to it, I guess, a ring to it. It's like I say, you'd go up to see what's going on. You'd walk down Central Avenue, there's Mrs. Hightower with her group singing, playing and all. On Saturday night you'd hear that, people are shopping, a streetcar's going down the street ringing a bell, ding, ding, ding. So it had a certain hum to it. So I think it should be remembered because all this was going on. And there wasn't too much vice in it, except maybe somebody might have been gambling. But there weren't any holdups or any kind of vice going on during that time. You'd go up on Central Avenue and hang out all night long and wouldn't think a thing about it, go on home and sleep after it's over. But without having television or any entertainment, you'd go up to Central Avenue just to see who was there, maybe have a cup of coffee, have a drink, or go to a nightspot, just whatever you chose to do. Barbershop, you know, go by the barbershop, pool hall, bar. It was a place to go.

ISOARDI: Anything else you'd like to add? Any people you want to mention? Any characters? Anything at all that we might have missed?

ROBINSON: No, I don't think so.

ISOARDI: Nothing comes to mind?

ROBINSON: Not right now, anyway.

ISOARDI: Well, Minor, thank you very much.

ROBINSON: Well, thank you. I hope I have been some help.

ISOARDI: Definitely. Definitely.

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