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CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

Joseph Bihari

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

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

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CONTENTS

Biographical Summary.....	ix
Interview History.....	xi
TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (March 4, 1995).....	1
Family background--Bihari is sent to live in the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans--Introduction to blues music at age fourteen--Early experience as a musician--Leaves school to go to work--Listens to big band music during the swing era--Growing up in New Orleans--Old records Bihari received from his brother Lester Bihari--Rejoins his family in Beverly Hills, California--Attends Beverly Hills High School and works three after-school jobs.	
TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (March 4, 1995).....	24
Bihari helps his brothers in the jukebox business--First independently produced hit record, "I Wonder" by Cecil Gant, inspires Jules Bihari to produce a record by Hadda Brooks--The Biharis stock jukeboxes and sell records out of their own shop--Producing the Biharis' first record--Helps create the first distribution network for independents, Independent Record Distributors--The Biharis found Modern Music record company--They maintain an office and a warehouse in New York City.	
TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (March 4, 1995).....	51
Reorganizes Modern Music's New York office--Central Avenue in the 1940s--The Biharis' jukebox business--Mickey Cohen, former tenant of an apartment building once owned by Bihari.	
TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (March 11, 1995).....	62
Bihari's siblings and his children--More on the Biharis' jukebox business--Mamie Waters--	
Independent record labels during the mid-forties--Blues artists record for independent labels without exclusive contracts--Artists on the Modern Records label--Recording studios the Biharis used--Artists whose records for Modern sold well--	
Promoting Modern Music records to radio	

stations--Hadda Brooks's audience.

TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (March 11, 1995).....85

More on Brooks's audience--The Biharis expand their business by buying a pressing plant in 1947--Japanese employees at the plant--Modern Music's various locations--Division of responsibilities among the Bihari brothers--Lester Bihari and Meteor Records--Bihari travels to Memphis to record B.B. King--Discovers Ike Turner and hires him to scout talent for the record company--Turner arranges a recording opportunity for Howlin' Wolf.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (March 11, 1995).....107

More on hiring Turner--Bihari is nominated to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame--Begins to record blues artists--A contract dispute over Elmore James--Encounters with racism in the South--Modern Music expands into subsidiary labels--Records B.B. King's hit record "Every Day I Have the Blues."

TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (March 11, 1995).....126

Modern Music records "The Thrill is Gone" long before B.B. King's hit with the same song.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (March 25, 1995).....128

A fruitful business relationship with Stan Lewis in Shreveport, Louisiana--Music venues in Los Angeles in the forties and fifties--Reasons for the decline of nightlife on Central Avenue during the fifties--Los Angeles area artists recorded by the Biharis--An early opportunity to foster the career of Paul Anka--Tension between Bihari and his brother Jules over the question of whether to sign a contract with Anka--West Coast blues artists outside Los Angeles--The decline of music venues on the Sunset Strip--Competition in the music marketplace--Major labels back their own "independent" labels--Disc jockeys who were helpful to Modern Music--Bihari's relationship

with disc jockeys and the beginning of payola--Modern Music survives a federal audit.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (March 25, 1995).....161

Bihari suggests that disc jockeys open record shops to receive free records from his company--Alan Freed--The decline of country blues' popularity--Modern begins releasing vocal groups on its Flair Records label--Modern eventually begins releasing LPs on Budget Records.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (April 1, 1995).....170

Vocal groups on Modern's labels during the mid-sixties--Latin music released by Modern--Modern diversifies beyond music-related products--More on Modern's vocal groups--Modern's contracts with its artists--American Federation of Musicians involvement in contracts with artists--Los Angeles area musicians hired to play on Modern Music recordings--Records a Benny Carter album in the Biharis' living room.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (April 1, 1995).....194

Lester Sill--Modern brings in outside producers for its pop music albums--Bihari's responsibilities are limited to producing compilations for Budget Records--Mounting conflict with brother Jules leads to Bihari's departure from Modern in 1978--Bihari makes a large profit selling his Beverly Hills home to the president of Gabon--Jules sells Modern Music shortly before his death--Overseas re-releases of blues records from the Modern catalog--The power of the blues.

TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (April 1, 1995).....214

A 1995 recording project with Ike Turner--Bihari's own contributions to the music he recorded--More on Los Angeles area artists recorded by the Biharis--Bands Bihari recorded during his travels through the South--Bihari is interrogated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Alexandria, Louisiana, in the early fifties--How Bihari found some of the talent that he recorded in the South.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (April 22, 1995).....228

More on music venues in Los Angeles during the forties--Hadda Brooks's recording of "That's My Desire"--Influential disc jockeys who played African

American music in Los Angeles during the forties and fifties--Disc jockeys around the nation who were playing and selling African American music--African American disc jockeys--Bihari's lack of fear during his travels to African American neighborhoods--Hadda Brooks--Leon and Otis René--Bandleaders in Los Angeles--Joe Greene--Johnny Moore and Charles Brown--Leo and Eddie Mesner of Aladdin Records--Howlin' Wolf.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side Two (April 22, 1995).....263

Leonard and Phil Chess of Chess Records--Bihari's close relationship with B.B. King--Bihari records Howard McGhee in the forties--Bihari's ongoing relationship with Ike Turner--Tina Turner--Sam Phillips--Bihari's relationship with Earl Warren's daughter Nina Warren--Richard Berry and Etta James--John Lee Hooker--Maxwell Davis--Bob Geddings's and Dave Rosenbaum's independent labels from the San Francisco Bay Area--Johnny Otis.

TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (April 22, 1995).....297

Jesse Belvin--James W. Cleveland--Art Rupe of Specialty Records--Imperial Records--Big Joe Turner--Jay McShann and Jimmy Witherspoon--The Bihari's restaurant, the Cheese Box--Jack Lauderdale and Down Beat Records--Lowell Fulson and Arthur Lee Maye--Young white listeners' enthusiasm for blues music in the forties and fifties--Modern Music purchases masters of Lightnin' Hopkins recordings from Gold Star Records.

TAPE NUMBER: X, Side One (May 13, 1995).....319

Stores near Central Avenue that sold records during the forties--The evolution of record production from the forties to the nineties--Independent record companies' influence on music in the United States--Early blues recordings' continuing influence on musicians throughout the world--Different blues performers' individual musical styles--Racial issues in music during the forties and fifties--The quality of musicians in Los Angeles--The blues as a genre and its roots in an African American tradition.

Index.....347

Index of Song Titles.....	354
---------------------------	-----

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: May 30, 1925, Memphis, Tennessee.

Education: Isidore Newman School, New Orleans; Beverly Hills High School, Beverly Hills, California; Hamilton High School, Los Angeles.

Spouse: Marilyn Mayer, married 1956, divorced, three children; Doreen Kline, married 1975, divorced 1984, one child.

CAREER HISTORY:

Co-founder, co-owner, record producer, Modern Music (Modern Records, RPM Records, Flair Records, Kent Records, Budget Records, Discos Corona), 1945-78.

Co-founder, Independent Record Distributors, 1946; vice president, secretary-treasurer, 1940s-50s.

SELECTED ARTISTS PRODUCED BY BIHARI:

Johnny Ace
Paul Anka
Jesse Belvin
Richard Berry
Bobby "Blue" Bland
Hadda Brooks
Charles Brown
The Cadets
Benny Carter
James W. Cleveland
Pee Wee Crayton
Floyd Dixon
Earl Forrest
Lowell Fulson
Roscoe Gordon
Cornelius Gunter
Coleman Hawkins
Roy Hawkins
Smokey Hogg
John Lee Hooker
Joe Houston
The Ikettes
The Jacks
Elmore James

Etta James
Don Julian and the Meadowlarks
B.B. King
Saunders King
Little Richard
Marvin and Johnny
Jimmy McCracklin
Howard McGhee
Jay McShann
Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers
Matt Murphy
Johnny Otis
Little Junior Parker
Little Esther Phillips
The Queens
Teen Queens
Ike and Tina Turner
Joe Turner
Johnny "Guitar" Watson
T-Bone Walker
Jimmy Witherspoon

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEW:

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: Bihari's home, Los Angeles.

Dates, length of sessions: March 4, 1995 (63 minutes); March 11, 1995 (79); March 25, 1995 (48); April 1, 1995 (67); April 22, 1995 (108); May 13, 1995 (37).

Total number of recorded hours: 6.7

Persons present during interview: Bihari 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 from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. Musician and teacher William Green, his student Steven Isoardi, and early project interviewee Buddy Collette provided major inspiration for the UCLA Oral History Program's inaugurating the Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project.

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

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Bihari's childhood in New Orleans and his move to Los Angeles and continuing through his involvement in the founding of the Modern Music record company and his career as an independent record producer of African American music. Major topics include music and musicians on Central Avenue in the 1940s and 1950s, independent record labels and producers in the 1940s and 1950s, Bihari's experiences searching for talent throughout the country, musicians on Modern's record labels who became top recording artists in the blues and rhythm and blues genres, disc jockeys and their role in the expansion of blues and rhythm and

blues music's audience, and changes in the music business from the 1940s to the 1990s.

EDITING:

Rebecca Stone, oral history assistant, edited the interview.

She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Whenever possible, the proper names of 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.

Bihari reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made a number of corrections and additions.

Alex Cline, editor, prepared the table of contents and biographical summary. Rebecca Stone assembled the interview history. Loren Colin, 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

MARCH 4, 1995

ISOARDI: Why don't we begin at the very beginning, as far back as you can remember, where you were born and what it was like.

BIHARI: Yeah, I can remember where I was born. [laughs]
I was born May 30, 1925, in Memphis, Tennessee. And at the age of six, I believe, I was sent by my mother [Esther Taub Bihari] and brothers [Lester, Jules, and Saul Bihari] to a home called the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans.

ISOARDI: Before you get to that, let me ask you-- You mentioned your mother and brothers. How big was your family, now, in Memphis?

BIHARI: Eight. I was the youngest of eight.

ISOARDI: Eight kids?

BIHARI: Yes. Four boys and four girls.

ISOARDI: And you were the fourth boy?

BIHARI: I was the fourth boy and the last child.

ISOARDI: The eighth child. How did your family end up in Memphis, Tennessee?

BIHARI: My father [Edward Bihari] was from Hungary, the old country. My mother was born in Philadelphia or Hungary, I'm not clear. My father was with Kraft or General Foods [Corporation] at one time, and then also with a salt company,

and was sent to St. Louis, I believe. I have two brothers [Lester and Jules] and two sisters [Florette Bihari and Serene Leavenworth Felt] who were born in Philadelphia, and one brother [Saul] was born in St. Louis, one sister [Rosalind] in New Orleans, and one sister [Maxine Bihari Kessler] and myself were born in Memphis. Besides that, my father was a traveling salesman. [laughs] They ended up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the family did. He had opened a wholesale grain and feed business in Tulsa, and that was during the Depression.

ISOARDI: He moved around.

BIHARI: And he died on October 18, 1930, when I was five years old.

ISOARDI: So he met your mother in Philadelphia, then, I guess?

BIHARI: Yes, he met my mother in Philadelphia.

ISOARDI: Do you know what brought him to the United States or how that happened?

BIHARI: His father [Joseph Bihari] and mother [Serene F. Bihari] brought the children over when he was about nine years old. They were all brought over from Hungary.

ISOARDI: So that was just before the turn of the century?

BIHARI: In 1893.

ISOARDI: Do you know what they did over there?

BIHARI: I have no idea.

ISOARDI: You probably still have cousins, then, maybe.

BIHARI: Oh, I have cousins all around. I have a tree that a cousin [Edwin Taub Richard] sent to me from my grandfather on my mother's side [Isaac Taub] and grandfather on my father's side. It's an interesting tree, I guess. The Guggenheim family from the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim Museum--

ISOARDI: Yes, in New York.

BIHARI: Yeah, they were married into the family.

ISOARDI: Where? At what point?

BIHARI: I don't know, but I can go check it and see. I'll let you know.

ISOARDI: Okay. [laughs] Interesting.

BIHARI: I think they were married to my mother's brothers. Two sisters-- I don't know. It's so confused. But there were I think two Guggenheims married into the family, or maybe just one. I'd have to look at the family tree that was sent to me from a cousin in Denver.

ISOARDI: Big tree.

BIHARI: It's a very big tree, yes. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Do you know why they settled in Philly? I guess they went through Ellis Island, maybe, or through--

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. I'm sure my father went through Ellis-- You know that family went through Ellis Island, yes.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: And my mother's family came over from Hungary, also.

My mother's family settled in, I believe, Philadelphia, and my father's family in New York at that time. They met my mother either in New York or probably in Philadelphia.

ISOARDI: Probably one family visiting the Hungarian part of New York or Philadelphia?

BIHARI: Probably. I don't know that story at all.

ISOARDI: You know, it kind of makes sense, because I know my mother and father came from Italian backgrounds: my father in Northern California, an Italian area, my mother in San Francisco. And all the Italians would always go back and forth. Much more ethnically closed communities, I guess.

BIHARI: You know, I really don't know that part of my family at all.

But anyway, my father died when I was five years old.

ISOARDI: Do you have many strong memories of him?

BIHARI: No, just a few memories of my father. My mother couldn't handle eight children--you know, the oldest was fifteen--during the Depression.

ISOARDI: Wow.

BIHARI: So one sister [Maxine] and myself were sent to New Orleans, to the Jewish Children's Home, where we had a wonderful education and a wonderful upbringing. And that's where my music training or my music interest started, when I was fourteen years old.

ISOARDI: So you had been in the school, then, for about eight years, ten--?

BIHARI: I left in--I just figured it out--1942, December of 1942, from New Orleans and came to California, where my brothers and mother and sisters had moved.

ISOARDI: So you still maintained close contact with your mother and your siblings?

BIHARI: Did I at that time?

ISOARDI: Yeah, when you were in the home.

BIHARI: Not very close contact. I saw my mother once in eleven years that I was there, and I saw my sister [Florette] once.

I didn't see my brothers. I saw one sister [Serene] and her husband [Randy Leavenworth] once. There was correspondence, though. Not a whole lot of it.

ISOARDI: Yeah, and I guess people didn't travel as much then, especially during the Depression.

BIHARI: They couldn't afford to travel.

ISOARDI: Exactly, yeah. What did your father die of?

BIHARI: He had rheumatic fever when he was a youngster, and he had a leaky valve that he died from.

ISOARDI: Oh, weakened the heart?

BIHARI: Yes. Weakened heart, yes.

ISOARDI: So you were a pretty young kid, just six or so, when you went to New Orleans?

BIHARI: I was six. When he died I don't know how long it was before I was sent to New Orleans. But in New Orleans I had a wonderful education. I went to a private school. It was a wonderful upbringing. It was a home with both boys and girls, and we went to a private school called Isidore Newman [School].

ISOARDI: Isidore Newman?

BIHARI: Yeah, Newman School. I still keep contact with--

ISOARDI: It's still going?

BIHARI: Oh, it was founded in 1903. It's one of the top private schools in the country.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. And I've taken my daughter [Nicole Bihari] to visit there, and she sat in on some classes last spring break. She really enjoyed it. She thought the school was fabulous.

ISOARDI: Wow. When did you start there?

BIHARI: In the first grade, when I was six years old.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. And then you just went straight through it.

BIHARI: Straight through, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Where did you stay when you were there? Was it boarding?

BIHARI: Well, there was the Jewish Children's Home that was only three blocks from the school.

ISOARDI: I see.

BIHARI: And it's an interesting thing that most of the kids from the home were the top students and the top athletes in this school.

ISOARDI: [laughs] How do you account for that?

BIHARI: I don't know. Maybe motivation more than anything. And I still keep in contact with a lot of the kids who were in the home and who were not in the home but were schoolmates of mine.

ISOARDI: No kidding. That many from that far back?

BIHARI: From that far back, yes.

ISOARDI: Pretty close bond.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Well, I guess you came to see yourselves as sort of your family in a sense?

BIHARI: Oh, everybody surely was the family, absolutely.

But anyway, my music interest in blues started when I was fourteen years old, at the home, from one of the maintenance men, Matthew Causey, who lived right on the property. He had his own apartment on the property, played guitar, and played blues. I used to go to his apartment and listen to some of the old blues singers: Memphis Minnie, Blind Lemon

Jefferson, and Doctor Clayton.

ISOARDI: Yes. Did he have any Robert Johnson blues records?

BIHARI: Robert Johnson, "Dust My Broom." Oh, I'm telling you. He used to play-- And in the summertime especially I'd go down and listen for hours and hours.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Now, before then, at school, you didn't study music or take--?

BIHARI: I played in the band. I played clarinet and saxophone in the band.

ISOARDI: When did you start that?

BIHARI: I think it was in the seventh grade, seventh or eighth grade.

ISOARDI: That was your first--?

BIHARI: It might have been the eighth grade, yes. I played in the band. Then I left school when I was fifteen, when the [Second World] War broke out, and went to work in a shipyard.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about your blues influence before that. Now, you had been playing music when you meet this guy, then, for a few years--

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Did you want to be a musician?

BIHARI: Not particularly.

ISOARDI: You just enjoyed music and you enjoyed playing and the band?

BIHARI: No, I enjoyed playing in the band. You know, you played simple things. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Just for school concerts? Or did you guys take your act out in the streets?

BIHARI: No, no. We only took our act out on the streets once. [laughs] In New Orleans they had what was called the Turkey Bowl--

ISOARDI: Turkey Bowl?

BIHARI: Yeah. Every Thanksgiving the two best sandlot football teams played, and we took our band to the sandlot football game. [laughs] And of course we were written up in the paper because of that, because no other bands would do that. We were a bunch a rogues, really. [laughs] We had no uniforms or anything. We didn't even have jeans in those days. We dressed in whatever we had. [laughs] Yes, we got written up in the paper because of the band.

ISOARDI: Was that a thrill?

BIHARI: It was funny in New Orleans.

ISOARDI: Do you remember anything about New Orleans? Were you able to go out at night and sample some of the music?

BIHARI: Oh, yes, absolutely. We didn't go to nightclubs, at all, you know.

ISOARDI: Sure. You were too young, I guess.

BIHARI: But during Mardi Gras we had a truck, we had a band on the truck--it was usually a Dixieland band or a blues band--that would drive all around the city during Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras day.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BIHARI: Yes. And it was a lot of fun.

ISOARDI: So you were on this truck sometimes.

BIHARI: The kids from the home were on the trucks, yes. They would drive along a ways and then stop, and the band would be playing, and people would come up, and everybody would start dancing. It was just a big party that whole day. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Oh, how wonderful.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. There were certain restrictions. You know, we had a routine all the time. We were very restricted as far as routine. We had a job to do, we had studies at a certain time, lights out at a certain time. And we went away every year to a camp in Mississippi, on the Gulf Coast. I mean, I had a wonderful upbringing.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: A lot better than my family, I'm sure. [laughs]

But anyway, I quit school. I just left. I was still living in the home, and I went to work in a shipyard. And I went to Delgado College at night and welding school after

work.

ISOARDI: You were fourteen, fifteen?

BIHARI: I was sixteen.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: I guess with the war starting.

ISOARDI: This was '42?

BIHARI: 'Forty-one.

ISOARDI: End of '41?

BIHARI: 'Forty-one, yes, the summer of '41.

ISOARDI: Was the U.S. in the war at that time?

BIHARI: Yes. It was after Pearl Harbor.

ISOARDI: So it would be '42, then?

BIHARI: Yes. I went to work in the shipyard, and I worked there for the summertime. I think I worked the summer. I worked daytime in the summertime, and nighttime I went to electrical school, Delgado College, to become an electrician after the war had broken out. I worked in a shipyard on patrol boats as an electrician's helper. In December I moved to California and went back to school at Beverly Hills High School. Then I graduated.

I was in business when I was nineteen years old. I did the first recording when I was nineteen. Actually, the first recording, Hadda Brooks, was done in maybe early '45 or late '44.

ISOARDI: Okay. So even then you were still pretty young.

BIHARI: Oh, I was eighteen or nineteen.

ISOARDI: Yeah, really. Let me ask you, before we leave New Orleans, actually when you first started listening to music you mentioned one of your influences was hearing this marvelous-- One of the workers around the home--

BIHARI: Oh, yes, played guitar and sang blues.

ISOARDI: And played you records. And I guess you were listening mostly to country blues then, which was what was around there from the Delta and all, Memphis?

BIHARI: Yes, exactly.

ISOARDI: Any other kind of music you were listening to?

BIHARI: Oh, sure. I always listened--

ISOARDI: Were you listening much to the swing era?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, all the big bands also.

ISOARDI: Did you have any favorites then?

BIHARI: All of the good bands. [laughs] You know, [Benny] Goodman, [Glenn] Miller, Charlie Barnet. Well, [Harry] James didn't have his band then. Harry James didn't come along, I think, until a little later. And of course, [Duke] Ellington.

I'm not even sure if [Count] Basie's band was formed at that time.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BIHARI: It was Bennie Moten.

ISOARDI: Bennie Moten's band. Yeah, Basie was around by that time.

BIHARI: Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway. And what we did, because we couldn't have the radio on-- There was one radio in each dormitory or each floor.

ISOARDI: At a certain hour it had to go off?

BIHARI: We had made our own crystal sets, so we would listen at night to the big bands on the crystal sets. And I remember listening to the bands from the Blue Room at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, where the big bands played.

ISOARDI: Was that the big place?

BIHARI: Yeah, that's where the big bands played in New Orleans. And I think we could pick up--what?--Palisades, New Jersey--

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: The big bands there. It was crazy things that you could pick up on these cat's paws, unless they were, you know-- They would play there, and they were in those days maybe at a network station, and you would pick it up at the local station, or whatever. I think out here in California they had the Palomar Ballroom?

ISOARDI: Sure. That's supposedly where Benny Goodman got his real launch.

BIHARI: So that's where we-- I say "we" because a bunch of us were listening to the big bands. And of course, that became

a part of discussion every day, too. "Oh, did you hear this last night on this and that?" But that's where my music really-- Part of my blues introduction was when I was about fourteen years old.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: And his name--I still remember his name--is Matthew Causey. He was the head maintenance man, did all the carpentry and-- Actually, he was one of the two maintenance men who showed us young fellows how to work. We all had a job to do after school every day or before school. It was either taking the laundry out, washing the dishes, painting, you know, keeping everything painted and clean. It was quite a large place. I think at one time there were about 350 kids.

ISOARDI: It's a pretty good size.

BIHARI: It was a good size, yes.

ISOARDI: What was the composition of the kids, the racial and social background of the kids, who were at the school? Was it mixed--?

BIHARI: We were all Jewish.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. You mentioned it was a Jewish home.

BIHARI: It was a Jewish home.

ISOARDI: That's right.

BIHARI: A lot of them were of mixed, that is maybe the mother

was Jewish and the father a non-Jew. Because they had last names like Ogden, Knight, Pierce, Howell, Whitehead. So they were a mixed--

ISOARDI: Right. Were there any mixed Latino or black?

BIHARI: No, not at all, because it was all Jewish.

ISOARDI: Did you experience any kind of discrimination?

BIHARI: Oh, absolutely.

ISOARDI: In New Orleans at the time?

BIHARI: Oh, sure.

ISOARDI: That's what I would have thought. [laughs]

BIHARI: Sure, because, you know, in athletics-- I never played varsity; I was always too small. But I did play junior varsity.

And instead of Newman we were known as "Jewman," the school.

ISOARDI: Commonly called that?

BIHARI: Yes. They would say, "Oh, we're playing Jewman today," this and that. But there was no discrimination in school because the school was nonsectarian. There were no blacks, but-- It was predominantly Jewish, but whoever could afford to go to a private school could pay the tuition.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: And there were some Jews and some non-Jews at the school. It was a small school. I think there were about 400 students from kindergarten through high school--well, maybe 800, 400 to 800 in the school. But it was a fine school.

I had a fine education there.

ISOARDI: Did you have any discriminatory problems outside the school setting?

BIHARI: Whatever it was it was outside the school setting, yeah.

ISOARDI: I mean, outside of the high school setting--

BIHARI: Oh, certainly.

ISOARDI: You know, when you were in town in New Orleans or--?

BIHARI: Oh, absolutely, because there was a section of town called the "Irish Channel" where I guess most of the Irish lived. You know, we ran into fights with kids. But we were always in groups, that I can remember. I would not go alone to some places. Whenever we went out we went out together.

Usually you had three or four friends, or three or four guys would say, "Come on, let's go downtown," or something like that, and we would hitchhike or walk. And there were times where it was more words than any fights. I can't remember having any fights at all. But it was just words.

But New Orleans is-- I mean, it was nothing like it is here today. My God, there's just-- You just cannot compare anything, I mean, the days of then and now.

ISOARDI: In what ways?

BIHARI: Well, you didn't see the kids with guns or anything

like that. You know, if there was any fighting you would fight with your fists. And we did have fights at school, sure. You know, there was always some tension along, but it was not because of racial things. It might have been because playing basketball you were a little bit too rough with this guy and they would want to take you on or something like that.

[laughs] You know, those were normal things that kids did.

But it was always with the fists. And if we had any fights at the home, they would immediately make us put on boxing gloves, and there would be a referee.

ISOARDI: And settle it that way.

BIHARI: Settle it that way. They were very disciplined there.

I enjoyed growing up in New Orleans. I had a good time there.

ISOARDI: You remind me, a while ago I read a book, Manchild in the Promised Land, by Claude Brown. Ever heard of that?

BIHARI: I haven't heard of that.

ISOARDI: A guy who grew up in Harlem in the late forties or so, early fifties. He wrote about his experiences, what it was like, and the gang kind of stuff and the kind of fistfights you would have. Occasionally you might see a knife. So he wrote this book about it. Then about twenty years later the New York Times sent him back in the eighties--

BIHARI: To Harlem? [laughs]

ISOARDI: --to check it out, and he wrote this article. It

was this kind of experience. He said it was just unbelievable--

BIHARI: Unbelievable, sure.

ISOARDI: --what had happened, the amount of violence, the things that one had to do to survive. Staggering.

You mentioned you were playing sports. What were you playing?

BIHARI: I played on the junior varsity basketball and football teams, and I ran track on the varsity.

ISOARDI: All year round?

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh. As a matter of fact, last April, when I took Nicole to New Orleans with me during her spring break, we had lunch with a bunch of the guys, the high school guys I went to school with, and one of them told Nicole, "You know what I remember about your father most? He was the fastest runner in school." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Was it true?

BIHARI: It was true, yes.

ISOARDI: All right, very good.

BIHARI: Yes, I was on the track team. I ran the hundred[-yard dash].

ISOARDI: A sprinter.

BIHARI: That was interesting and--

ISOARDI: Any other remembrances of New Orleans at all?

BIHARI: Oh, sure, lots of remembrances. You mean as a kid

growing up?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: Music-wise or--?

ISOARDI: Either way. Anything that stands out in your mind?

BIHARI: Yes. I can tell you what happened once. My brother Lester, my oldest brother, lived in Galveston, Texas, before the war, and he worked for a jukebox operator. And he used to send me records, 78 rpm. He collected the money for them.

He was a collector. He didn't operate the boxes or anything, he just did the money collecting.

ISOARDI: So he'd go from place to place--

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: --empty out the drawer and put it back?

BIHARI: Right. And he used to send me the used records that he took off the jukeboxes.

ISOARDI: Oh, wonderful.

BIHARI: The old blues records, the big bands, and all kinds of records he would send to me. Because we had a jukebox at the home in the recreation area.

ISOARDI: You must have had one of the best selections in town.

BIHARI: Oh, I just put them all in there. [laughs] Maybe every two or three months he would send me a stack of records.

ISOARDI: Wow. Marvelous. Do you have any of them today?

[laughs]

BIHARI: No, I don't have any of them. But I still remember one of them--and it was probably the most popular one for me at that time--called "Let Me Off Uptown" by Gene Krupa. And I think Anita O'Day was singing.

ISOARDI: Anita O'Day? Fine singer.

BIHARI: And Roy Eldridge was playing trumpet.

ISOARDI: Wow.

BIHARI: That stayed in my mind, because we used to dance so much to that music. At the home we had periodic dances with the girls and the guys in the home.

ISOARDI: It was about equal gender-wise?

BIHARI: Yes, pretty close to equal. And it was well supervised. It was run beautifully, the home.

ISOARDI: Sounds it, really. Did you become an electrician before you left New Orleans?

BIHARI: No. [laughs]

ISOARDI: You were still an apprentice--?

BIHARI: Yes, and I left New Orleans and came to California, went back to school to Beverly Hills High.

ISOARDI: Why did you decide to leave New Orleans?

BIHARI: Well, my family was here.

ISOARDI: So your mother had come out here and settled by then?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. My mother and brothers and sisters had come to Los Angeles and settled down.

ISOARDI: Now, you said there was another sibling with you in New Orleans?

BIHARI: My sister Maxine, yes. But she left a year before I did.

ISOARDI: And came out here?

BIHARI: Yes. When she graduated from school she came out.

If I had graduated from school at seventeen I would have come out, but since I was working and everything was financially all right with my family, it was a matter of could they afford to take care of me or not, since I was still a minor at that time.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: But they could. But not only that, I was going back to school, and of course I worked after school also. In the summertime of the year after I came here, I worked at Douglas Aircraft [Corporation]. During high school at Beverly Hills High I worked three jobs. I went after school--

ISOARDI: You had three jobs after school?

BIHARI: After school.

ISOARDI: That's not possible.

BIHARI: Yes, it is. I worked at Hillcrest Motors, the Cadillac company, on Wilshire Boulevard.

ISOARDI: The one that's still there? Isn't there a Hillcrest still there?

BIHARI: I don't think they are there anymore. I think they went out of business a year or two ago. It was on Maple [Drive] and Wilshire [Boulevard]. I dusted off all the used cars, kept them clean, washed them if I had to. From there, on my way home--we lived in Beverly Hills on North Hamel Drive--I went to the shoe repair shop and shined all the shoes that he had repaired that day. I'd go home, eat dinner, and then work at a gas station at night, do my studies at a gas station.

ISOARDI: You could do that?

BIHARI: Yes, I did that. And I remember one day--And I remember his name. His name was Bill Balkin. He used to come in, and I used to service his car, used to fill him up with gas, and of course he had to have coupons at that time because gas was rationed. I'd check his oil, wash his windows. One day he came to me and said, "How would you like to work this summer at Douglas Aircraft under me?" I said, "I'd love to." He got me a job at Douglas Aircraft, and I worked for him. He purchased all the tools for an experimental aircraft plant--well, a small plant that Douglas owned--on Pico [Boulevard] and Dorchester [Avenue], or just north of Pico on Dorchester in Santa Monica. I had the best job. He would send me to the plant, the big plant in Santa Monica, the one in Long Beach,

the one in San Diego. They gave me a company car to drive.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: You know, I had to go through all the clearances to go into all the departments. I cleared everything. And I used to put the orders in for him for certain tools that he needed for this experimental plant.

ISOARDI: Jeez. This was a summer job?

BIHARI: That was a summer job.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

MARCH 4, 1995

ISOARDI: How did your mother get from where?--Oklahoma--

BIHARI: Tulsa, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: --with you siblings to Beverly Hills? I mean, that's a big step not only geographically--

BIHARI: It was with my brothers, Saul and Jules. They came out. They came out to work in the aircraft factories out here.

ISOARDI: Oh. So this was when the war started.

BIHARI: When the war started, uh-huh. And Jules couldn't get a job, so he started selling shoes.

ISOARDI: So I guess this was '42 when they come out from the Midwest?

BIHARI: Oh, they came out in '40, I think, or '41. Before I did. 'Forty or '41. Maybe it was just before the war.

ISOARDI: Just before the war, okay.

BIHARI: Yes. Saul got a job at Lockheed Aircraft [Corporation]. Jules couldn't get a job. He couldn't pass the physical. He couldn't lift his arm above his head because he had hurt it when he was a youngster. So he went to work selling shoes. When the family lived in Oklahoma, Jules did work for a company operating jukeboxes. So he sold shoes

for about a year or two, and then he got a job operating jukeboxes.

ISOARDI: He was the one who used to mail you the records, right?

BIHARI: No, this was another brother, Lester.

ISOARDI: Oh.

BIHARI: Lester was in the army by then.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. Did Jules take over his route? [laughs]

BIHARI: No, no. Lester lived in Galveston, Texas, and Jules in Tulsa.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right, yeah.

BIHARI: But anyway, then Jules got a job operating jukeboxes, and I used to come down and help him. This was in '42.

ISOARDI: Who was he working for?

BIHARI: He worked for a man by the name of Jay Bullock. I used to come down and help Jules change records, move the machines, collect the money, and I used to go with him on his route.

ISOARDI: Bullock owned or made the machines?

BIHARI: He owned the machines.

ISOARDI: So he would purchase them from a manufacturer and then stock places and maintain them and all that?

BIHARI: Well, at that time you couldn't buy any more machines. You know, it was whatever you had.

ISOARDI: Oh, wartime.

BIHARI: Wartime.

ISOARDI: Of course, of course.

BIHARI: So Jules had to repair them and keep them running and change location to make enough money and move machines around and change records.

Well, one day I went with Jules to RCA [Records] to buy records, to buy blues records for the jukeboxes. They had maybe one blues record in three months, and he was allocated twenty-five records for a hundred jukeboxes.

ISOARDI: Where were the jukeboxes? All over L.A.?

BIHARI: All over Central Avenue and San Pedro Street, Wall Street, all in the black area.

ISOARDI: That was Jules's focus?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Nothing outside of there?

BIHARI: No, it was all in that area.

ISOARDI: So it was all in the black neighborhood?

BIHARI: Sure. San Pedro Street. Everything was in the black area.

ISOARDI: And one out of twenty-five was a blues record?

BIHARI: You got one out of twenty-five blues records maybe every three months from RCA, no more from Decca [Records]--maybe the same from Decca--and also from Columbia [Records] or Okeh [Records], which was part of Columbia, where they had their

blues, on Okeh. Capitol [Records] had just come in. And I remember we could

buy-- Well, it was Johnny Mercer records that he'd put on the jukeboxes. And one day Jules said to me, "Look, Joe, if we can't buy them, let's try and make them."

ISOARDI: But why were they so hard to get?

BIHARI: Why did they want to put out blues records? I mean, they could sell the big bands at a higher price. The blues records always sold at a lower price. They had the blues records on their Bluebird label, which belonged to RCA. Columbia had Okeh Records, and Decca had what was called, I think, Decca Blue Label [Records], which were all cheaper than their regular label records, and they would put the blues records on the cheaper labels.

ISOARDI: So of course they didn't want to distribute them. They wanted to give you their more expensive records.

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: Oh, interesting. So you didn't have much choice in terms of what you put in your machines, did you?

BIHARI: Not at all.

ISOARDI: They pretty much dictated it.

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: Would you buy these records from them?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Is that how it worked? Cash up front? You buy the records?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. You bought them for cash up front right from the distributor. And then a record came out called "I Wonder" on a label called Bronze Records. A man by the name of, I think his name was Leroy [E.] Hurte. He had put this record out by Private Cecil Gant, and it became a monster of a record. He had two presses. He had his own little studio and two presses.

ISOARDI: What, in his backyard or his garage or something?
[laughs]

BIHARI: Just about, yes. He used to be a pressman--pressed records for Allied Record [Manufacturing] Company. That was a pressing plant here that pressed for Capitol Records. And he put his own little presses in, two presses, and put this record out. And the porters used to come in and buy everything--you know, the porters, the train porters. When they weren't from here--

ISOARDI: So they could take them around the country or whatever?

BIHARI: And they would sell them for five, seven, ten dollars, it was such a hot record. He had no distribution. There was no distribution in this country hardly for an independent record company.

ISOARDI: Oh, of course, it was all through the majors.

BIHARI: Only the majors had their own distribution.

ISOARDI: Did the majors--? The distributors that you would meet, were they independent distributors? Or did they work for the major record companies?

BIHARI: I'll tell you about the independent distributors.

ISOARDI: Okay.

BIHARI: So anyway, Jules said, "Look, we can't buy them; let's try and make them."

ISOARDI: After hearing this one--

BIHARI: Yeah, this big record, "I Wonder" by Private Cecil Gant.

ISOARDI: And you figured here is a guy who was--

BIHARI: Here's a guy who just started. So that's when Jules had heard Hadda Brooks playing boogie-woogie in a dance studio.

ISOARDI: She was just--

BIHARI: Yeah. She played for-- I think it was Willie Covan, who was the dance instructor at MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] studios. But he had his own private lessons.

ISOARDI: Oh, she was his accompanist. That's right.

BIHARI: She was the accompanist. And he said to me, "I just heard this girl. She sure plays good boogie-woogie." [laughs]

He said, "Come on with me." And I went with him.

ISOARDI: So you were working for him at this time--

BIHARI: Oh, working--

ISOARDI: Or with him.

BIHARI: --with him. I was getting paid. I was a kid helping him after high school.

ISOARDI: Right, right. You're now seventeen?

BIHARI: Eighteen.

ISOARDI: You're eighteen?

BIHARI: Eighteen, yeah.

ISOARDI: You finished Beverly Hills High?

BIHARI: I went from Beverly Hills and went to Hamilton High [School].

ISOARDI: Were you finished there yet? Or were you still there?

BIHARI: No, I'm still there. I'm still at Hamilton High.

And, you know, after school I'd take the-- What was it? First I'd take the bus and then a streetcar down. I'd take a bus to the station over on Pico. Jeez, I can't even remember what the cross street was. It was next to the Sears [Roebuck and Company] store. They had a station where the bus stopped there, and then you took a streetcar all the way downtown.

I took the streetcar to Fifth Street, then walked from Fifth Street to First Street to First and San Pedro from I think it was Fifth and Broadway or Spring Street.

ISOARDI: Did you guys have an office at First and San Pedro?

BIHARI: We had a little record store. We had a little record store, and we bought used records that came off of jukeboxes

from all over the country.

ISOARDI: So you had your own from your jukebox thing, and then you picked up whatever--?

BIHARI: Plus we picked up everything we could. For a certain price we could select what we wanted, and for another price we bought the whole lot. For the cheaper price we bought the whole lot. So we just bought whatever we could buy in used records and put them all out for sale, and that started our retail part of the business.

ISOARDI: Jeez. So you're stocking the jukeboxes, and you've also got a storefront and you're selling records.

BIHARI: Right. Now, that storefront ended up to be our office and plant.

ISOARDI: Where was it? Do you remember the address?

BIHARI: First and San Pedro.

ISOARDI: On the corner?

BIHARI: 111 South San Pedro Street, I think it was. Yeah.

ISOARDI: [laughs] And you were in high school?

BIHARI: I was in high school, yes.

ISOARDI: Was Jules much older than you at the time?

BIHARI: He was twelve years older than me.

ISOARDI: Twelve years older, okay. So he was a pretty savvy thirty or so.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. He was in his early thirties.

ISOARDI: Okay. Just before you get to it, how were you living in Beverly Hills, though, at this time?

BIHARI: We had a house that we rented in Beverly Hills.

ISOARDI: So it's because Jules is doing well, I guess.

BIHARI: Well, my mother was working, my sisters were working, Saul was working. We all just lived together.

ISOARDI: And you rented a house.

BIHARI: Rented a house.

ISOARDI: The whole family was there?

BIHARI: Yeah, the whole family was there.

ISOARDI: Oh, well, okay, sure, sure.

BIHARI: But anyway, I went with Jules, and he said, "I want you to hear this girl. She plays good piano."

ISOARDI: So he'd heard her practicing?

BIHARI: Yeah. He had heard her there while she was accompanying the students from Willie Covan's dance studio.

ISOARDI: Where was this at?

BIHARI: Oh, shoot. I don't know. It was in the South Central area someplace.

ISOARDI: Around your store?

BIHARI: Central Avenue. Central Avenue, someplace there.

Then we arranged to sign her and record. I don't even think we signed her but just, "Let's go to the recording studio."

ISOARDI: You just walked up to her and said, "You want to

go to the recording studio?"

BIHARI: Well, Jules had had some conversation before. And then I went with Jules to the recording studio, and that was the first record.

ISOARDI: Which studio?

BIHARI: That was Bob Gray Studios. They were located at 416 South Robertson Boulevard. He had a little studio there.

ISOARDI: How did he know this guy? Just because--

BIHARI: Just because he looked up where a recording studio was. Probably in the telephone book he found that.

ISOARDI: Right. So you rented the place?

BIHARI: Just rented by the hour, yes. We recorded her first record there.

ISOARDI: Which was called--?

BIHARI: "Swingin' the Boogie."

ISOARDI: "Swingin' the Boogie," yeah.

BIHARI: See, on San Pedro Street, near our office, our record store and what became our little factory of two presses, there was a little bar and restaurant, and every night a guy would come up to the jukebox and play alto sax. His name was Jimmy Black.

ISOARDI: Just walk up and play along?

BIHARI: Yeah, along with whatever was playing on the jukebox.

ISOARDI: Sure, yeah. That's the way everybody learned how

to play.

BIHARI: That's right. So we put him on one of the sessions, the same session with Hadda Brooks.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Really?

BIHARI: Yeah. He played on the back side of the record, which was called "Just a Little Bluesy," and he was playing alto sax.

ISOARDI: How old was he?

BIHARI: Oh, I imagine-

ISOARDI: Was he just a kid?

BIHARI: No, I think he was in his thirties, maybe his forties. Jimmy Black. He wasn't in the military, but almost everybody had gone into the military, though.

ISOARDI: So you guys didn't know-- Well, I guess Jules must have had-- You knew something about the record business just because you'd been around it.

BIHARI: No, uh-uh. I knew something about blues because I'd been around it so much from the time I was fourteen.

ISOARDI: But from the business end--?

BIHARI: But from the business end none of us knew anything about it.

ISOARDI: Just "Let's go into a studio and make a record"?
[laughs]

BIHARI: Right. So we went in, we made this record, found

out how to get the matrix, the plating from the master, to make the stampers--mother master, master mother, master and stamper, or whatever the sequence is. But there was no place to get the records pressed.

ISOARDI: What do you mean?

BIHARI: There were only two little record plants in Los Angeles.

Allied was tied up with Capitol. You couldn't get in there and have the records manufactured. Leroy Hurte had his little Bronze label. As a matter of fact, Leroy Hurte let us press our first test pressings at his little two-record pressing plant. It only had two presses. He said, "Oh, sure, we'll help you out."

ISOARDI: How many records could you turn out on those presses?

BIHARI: About two hundred a day, maybe three hundred.

ISOARDI: Two hundred a day?

BIHARI: Two or three hundred a day was all. One eight-hour shift.

ISOARDI: Not a lot.

BIHARI: Because you had so many rejects. The materials were so bad and so forth and so on.

ISOARDI: So you'd use a lot more material, but you were only getting two hundred good ones?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. But you could reuse the material. You'd cut out the label and reuse the material.

ISOARDI: Jeez, long process.

BIHARI: But there were so many rejects. It didn't fill, it didn't flow, the heat was irregular. So anyway--

ISOARDI: It just kind of surprises me. I would have thought there would have been more plants because the majors would be in L.A.

BIHARI: The war was still going on.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. We're talking about '44 now.

End of '44, early '45?

BIHARI: Yeah, '44.

ISOARDI: That's right. So materials were hard to get and everything.

BIHARI: Absolutely. Material was almost impossible to get.

So anyway, Jules and I heard about this person who made food machinery for the food industry. He had made those two presses that Hurte had. We went up and met with him. His name was Hank Fine. Nice man. We talked with him for about an hour in his office. He told us about another plant that had two presses all in that same area, the Central Avenue area. It was owned by a fellow by the name of Harold Johnson. He was pressing for Exclusive Records. That was Leon René, when they first came out in '44. Leon was a songwriter. He wrote--

ISOARDI: He had a brother as well.

BIHARI: Yeah, Otis [René]. They had two labels. Otis had

one label called Excelsior [Records], Leon had one called Exclusive [Records]. Now, Leon was a good songwriter. He wrote one in particular that I remember, "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano," which was a big hit. So Jules and I went down to see Harold Johnson, and he said, "Well, I'm tied up with Exclusive Records. I only have two men. I can only run one shift because I can't get any employees to run another shift." He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, Jules.

If you get me two men to run the night shift, I'll let you have the production off the night shift, but I'll charge you more than I'm charging them." Jules said, "That's fine with me." So my brother Saul at night, and my brother-in-law Randy [Leavenworth] at night ran the two presses.

ISOARDI: So his labor costs were low. [laughs] Really. Full shifts at night.

BIHARI: Yeah, full night shift. And what I had to do, I had to pay them cash for that night's production, load the records in my car, go around the city, and sell them for cash so I could get the next day's production.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BIHARI: And that's the way it went from--

ISOARDI: That was with that first record?

BIHARI: First record. It happened to be a hit record.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Where would you go to sell them?

BIHARI: All the record stores, retail record stores, all over the city. I'd go to Pasadena, to Glendale, to Central Avenue, all up and down San Pedro Street.

ISOARDI: Everybody who was interested in the records?

BIHARI: Anybody who had a record store. Music City, you know, on Sunset [Boulevard] and Vine [Street] was owned by Glenn Wallach. I'd have to get cash because we didn't have any money. We had to get the next day's production.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: One day, of course, the war was coming to an end-- Oh, no, let me go back before that. Let's talk about Hank Fine. I mentioned his name. Anyway, when Jules and I had gone to see him, he told us about Harold Johnson. And then we were talking. He said, "You two men look like--" I'm just a kid, and he said, "Nice, honest young guys. I want to take you back into my factory." He took us back, and he had twelve presses lined up.

ISOARDI: He'd been holding out on you.

BIHARI: He said, "See those? They're all sold, getting ready to ship out." He said, "But you look like two nice young men. I'm going to let you have two of them. You don't have to pay me now. Pay me when you can."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Because we don't have any money, but we have this

record that we know is a hit.

ISOARDI: Why is he doing this?

BIHARI: A nice man.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: You know, he was older than Jules, probably in his fifties at that time. He said, "I'm going to let you have two of them."

ISOARDI: You bought them.

BIHARI: We bought them. He said, "Pay me when you can."

We set them up, got two people to run them--

ISOARDI: Where did you set them up?

BIHARI: Where we had the record store. We closed the record store and set it up-- [laughs]

ISOARDI: Oh, you shut down completely? Closed up business?

BIHARI: Shut it down. We put the two presses in and all the other stuff we needed to edge the records, make the edges smooth, and box them and everything.

ISOARDI: This is a gamble. You only have one record now, right?

BIHARI: One record that came out in April of 1945.

ISOARDI: And this happened within a few weeks? You got the presses?

BIHARI: No, we were pressing over here a few months, and I was going around the city every day selling them for cash.

[laughs]

ISOARDI: So this went on for a couple of months like that?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Okay.

BIHARI: Skipping school and doing this and whatever-- [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. You don't have any sleep. [laughs]

BIHARI: So anyway, we got the presses. You know, we had to buy a boiler, and he showed us how to set up every-thing, run the water lines and so on and so forth. And we started running three shifts.

ISOARDI: Three shifts?

BIHARI: Twenty-four hours a day with those two little presses.

ISOARDI: So you hired some people?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. We hired some people to run the presses.

ISOARDI: And demand was enough?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. I want to tell you something. I was the maintenance man and one of the pressers from twelve [o'clock] to eight [o'clock] in the morning, then I would clean up and go sell records during the day. Honestly, that is so true.

I'd load them in the back of my car and go sell.

ISOARDI: Now, for a few months the record was selling. It was this one record, right?

BIHARI: One record, yes.

ISOARDI: And were all the agreements between you and your

brother and you and Hadda and everybody--? This was just a handshake? Or "Yeah, let's do it"?

BIHARI: That's it. It was nothing. And my brother Jules said to me-- Saul was in the army by then. He was in the military. He had gone to the military and been drafted. He couldn't get a deferment any longer from Lockheed. I lost my train of thought. But it was so funny-- Oh, yeah. Jules said to me, "Well, you just hold all the money. When we've got \$5,000, let me know. [laughs] Please pay everything--"

ISOARDI: This is really a bootstrap operation, isn't it?

BIHARI: Oh, I'm telling you, a little cash here, a little cash there.

ISOARDI: "Anybody have any money?"

BIHARI: To pay the employees? What were they making? Probably ninety cents an hour, if that much.

So anyway, a new jukebox came out called AMI. I think that's what it was called.

ISOARDI: So you were still doing the jukebox? Jules was still maintaining jukeboxes? And were you--?

BIHARI: Yeah, he was still working for the jukebox company.

So Jules said to me, "Come on, Joe, come down with me. There's this Jack Gutshall on Washington Boulevard. He's the new AMI jukebox distributor. Let's go down and look at it." So we went down and looked at it, and Jack Gutshall said to us,

"I understand you've got a record now that's selling pretty good." "Yeah." He said, "Why don't you do me this: Why don't you sell me five thousand of them?"

ISOARDI: And you were turning out--what?--four hundred a day, something like that?

BIHARI: Yeah. Something like four, five hundred a day, with the two, three shifts or whatever. And of course, you know, five thousand, we start spinning.

ISOARDI: What did you say?

BIHARI: "Oh, yeah, we'll sell you five thousand." [laughs]
We never bought any jukeboxes. But anyway, he became our first record distributor, and he handled the certain territory wherever he could.

And then we got an order in from a company in Cleveland. It was owned by Paul Reiner, who eventually formed a record company called Black and White [Records]. He had some blues records, and he gave us an order and a distributor called Julius Bard Company in Chicago. So now there are three record distributors in this whole country, right? One in Los Angeles, one in Cleveland, and one in Chicago in the whole territory.

So anyway, when Saul got out of the army-- You know, we, in the business with-- I never went into the army, and Jules didn't either. After a few months, or six months, whatever the time was, I said to Saul, "There's got to be a better

way of distributing records than to have three record distributors for the whole country." I said, "Why don't you and I split up the country and take a trip. Let's go look up the biggest jukebox operator in major cities in each state."

And since we were selling to them anyway, because we'd get orders from jukebox operators around the country, I said, "Since we're selling to them anyway, why don't we go ahead and make them distributors. We can sell them at a cheaper price, and then they can go around to the record stores and sell to the record stores and other jukebox operators. He said to me, "Joe, that's a hell of an idea." So he took the West, from Chicago west, and I took Texas, Louisiana, and the South on up the East Coast. And that's what we did. We founded and started Independent Record Distributors.

ISOARDI: You called yourself that?

BIHARI: That's what started the Independent Record Distributors. We went to the big jukebox servicers: "Now you're a record distributor. You're buying my records for so much money. You can sell them to the record stores for so much money." And they all thought it was a hell of an idea.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: That put them into the record distribution business. Then they got Exclusive, they got-- And eventually, the other

labels that came out, they became distributors of theirs.

ISOARDI: Just by passing the majors?

BIHARI: Yes. So the majors had their distribution and now the independents had their own distribution.

ISOARDI: And these guys would just handle all the independents?

BIHARI: Independents, right. So that's how the independent record distribution started in this country.

ISOARDI: This was on this one trip? It was so successful?

BIHARI: Right. Because we had a hit record, and we had the idea to set them, the jukebox operators, up as record distributors.

ISOARDI: You weren't speaking for any of the other independents?

BIHARI: Oh, no, just for us.

ISOARDI: What were you guys calling yourselves? Modern Records?

BIHARI: Modern Music.

ISOARDI: How did you get the title? When did you get it?

BIHARI: I gave the title to the company, because I remember my brother Lester who worked for Modern Music Company in Galveston, Texas.

ISOARDI: And that's where it came from?

BIHARI: That's where it came from, yes.

ISOARDI: [laughs] When did you decide you needed a name?

BIHARI: Oh, we put out the label. We had the first record.

ISOARDI: Oh, you had to put something on it.

BIHARI: And, you know, there were problems we ran into with labels, because we used silver ink on our first labels. Some of them worked, some-- The ink would pull off on some of them.

The problem was the ink had to be heat resistant because of all the heat, and then the cold that went onto it, and quite often the ink would pull off. So we went back to ink companies. There happened to be an ink company called Gans Ink Company around on Los Angeles Street, just a couple of blocks away from our little two-record plant, and that's where I used to buy the inks. He would mix it up and say, "Try this out." And I said, "No, it pulls off." He'd mix another batch, "Try this out." "No, it pulls off." I'd go back.

"Try this out." He had to put certain chemicals in so that the silver ink wouldn't pull off the red paper. Eventually he got the formula. But then we'd get another batch that wasn't so good and he'd have to start all over again.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: But, I mean, we ran into little problems like that.

ISOARDI: But you were doing your own labels, too?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. We had our own little--

ISOARDI: Everything in your little spot.

BIHARI: We had a little printing press. It must have been

built in 1920 or something. [laughs] An old platen press.

You had to hand-feed it. We'd go up and down, back, you'd pull the paper out, you put it in, go back and forth. And then once you got all of those you'd have to die-cut them around. So you'd have to feed them one at a time, back and forth.

ISOARDI: A long process.

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: At this time the three of you were working on it?

BIHARI: Oh, yes, three of us were working together. Saul was working part-time and going to Woodbury College.

ISOARDI: No one else in the family was connected with the business?

BIHARI: We opened a record store on Vermont Avenue, and two of my sisters ran the record store on Vermont. We had our office there, also.

ISOARDI: Did that come along pretty quickly after your record took off?

BIHARI: Yes. We had to keep them busy someplace. [laughs]

ISOARDI: [laughs] It sounds also like you guys weren't missing a beat.

BIHARI: No, not at all. Remember, we were young and full of a lot of energy. We had to do something with it. There was an opportunity that we just took advantage of.

ISOARDI: Really, it sounds like you just went right after it and you knew what to do.

BIHARI: Well, we learned very quickly. And believe it or not, we started our record company, the record number, with record number 103, not 100 or 101.

ISOARDI: Why not? Oh, I bet I know.

BIHARI: I have no idea.

ISOARDI: You probably did it so it wouldn't seem like this was your first record.

BIHARI: That probably was the reason.

ISOARDI: [laughs] To give the impression you'd been around for a while.

BIHARI: And then we skipped a whole bunch of numbers for the next release. It became number 111.

ISOARDI: [laughs] It's business psychology.

What did your mother think of all this?

BIHARI: Oh, I don't know, because I wasn't very close to my mother. You know, I didn't live with her at that time.

ISOARDI: Where were you living?

BIHARI: We all had an apartment together, Jules, Saul, and I.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Close to the business?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: Where were you living?

BIHARI: We might have been living at home for a while, and then we bought and sold-- We didn't own that home. We rented it, and they sold it, and we bought a home over here on Almayo Avenue. Then we all lived there. I think we all lived there for a while.

ISOARDI: And you guys went out and got your apartment?

BIHARI: Yeah, we did leave there, and then we went out and got our apartment in a new building in Westwood on Wilshire Boulevard.

ISOARDI: And the rest of the family stayed at that place?

BIHARI: Yeah.

And then I went to New York. In 1948 I went to New York. We had an office in New York. I went to a record convention in Chicago in the summer of '48, and Saul said, "While you're there--" Saul and I went. He said, "Why don't you go to New York and check the office?" Because we had an office and warehouse in New York. We'd press the records here in Los Angeles. By that time we'd had-- Oh, God, I'm missing everything in between--

ISOARDI: We'll go back to that, sure.

BIHARI: We'll go back to it. But anyway, Saul said, "Why

don't you go and check the New York office?" We had Gloria Friedman and Bob Duberstein running the office, and we had Hy Weiss and Sammy Weiss who were the salesmen. And he said, "Why don't you take Lester Sill with you?" Because Lester came to Chicago with me. Lester was working for us. We had our own distributing company here also in Los Angeles, and Lester Sill was working for us, running the distributing company. So I said, "Okay, I'll take Lester to New York."

Well, I took Lester to New York, and I said, "Lester, why don't you go check Harlem, the territory there, and see what kind of sales we can get out of Harlem." Because

I had the two other salesmen covering different territories.

So he went out with one of the salesmen to Harlem one day, and I was in the office, and I asked--

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MARCH 4, 1995

BIHARI: Anyway, I was in New York in the warehouse, and I asked Gloria [Friedman] for some scratch paper. She said, "Well, why don't you go look in my drawer in the office." I said, "Okay." So I went and looked in her drawer, and I found a pad, another pad, another pad, another pad of gin rummy scores between her and Bob Duberstein, the two office people. One handled the counter, and one handled the books and sales and the invoice and so on and so forth. So I didn't say anything that day. But the next day I came in the office and called the locksmith, and I still hadn't said anything to either one of them. I changed the front door locks.

Bob came up and said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "I'm changing the locks."

He said, "Does that mean I'm fired?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "What about Gloria?"

I said, "She's fired too." You know, I--

ISOARDI: He must have known that you had seen those things.

BIHARI: Oh, he did ask me why. I said, "I'll tell you why.

Because I looked in Gloria's drawer and I saw all these gin rummy scores." He got red as he could be. He had nothing to say.

ISOARDI: When your brother [Saul Bihari] suggested you go back there, was there a feeling that things weren't going right, that things weren't getting pushed?

BIHARI: No, not at all. He just said, "Oh, you're in Chicago. You're so close, why don't you just go on up to New York. Take Lester [Sill] with you." So I took Lester with me. You knew who Lester Sill [was]? You're familiar with the name?

ISOARDI: Yeah, but I don't know a great deal about him. I certainly know the name.

BIHARI: Okay. Lester just passed away here about three months ago. He became president of Columbia, Colpix Music, Columbia Pictures Music, and then went on to Motown [Records].

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: But Lester ended up my Harlem salesman. And the two Weiss boys who worked for me ended up in the record business with their own labels, both very successful in later years, Hymie and Sammy [Weiss].

But anyway, I spent nine months in New York before I hired somebody to run that office. When I called back to L.A. they said, "When are you going to come home?" I said, "Well, I'm traveling out of New York, anyway. What's the difference if I travel out of New York or travel out of L.A.? When I do more business on the East Coast than you do on

the West Coast, that month I'll come home."

ISOARDI: [laughs] That took you about nine months?

BIHARI: January of 1949 I did more business than they did, and then I came-- I hired somebody anyway, because I knew I was going to be coming home. I hired somebody--his name was Sy House--to run the office, because I wasn't going to stay there forever just traveling out of New York. So that's when I came home, February of 1949.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you, before we get too far away from it, you have a very different view of Central [Avenue]. What was it like? What was the Avenue like when you first went there? Did it strike you any way in particular? Or was it pretty much what you'd been used to in New Orleans?

BIHARI: Not at all. We went down to First [Street] and San Pedro Street. You know, it's two blocks from Central Avenue.

It was where the Japanese had lived, and they were moved out into the camps. We'd go into a building--they were vacant buildings--and we'd find sake bottles. I mean, just hundreds and hundreds of sake bottles, sake wine, you know--

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: --in all these places, in cellars and things. There were a lot of vacant storefronts--

ISOARDI: Controlled by the government?

BIHARI: You know, I really don't know. I never inquired

whether it was or if they had to leave them and they sold them out very cheaply or what. I don't even remember who we even paid rent to for the little storefront that we had.

Across the street from our little pressing plant was a nightclub where Joe Liggins played and Roy Milton played, you know, who were big in those days. And that was on First and San Pedro Streets. There were little juke joints and shoeshine parlors.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the name of the place they played?

BIHARI: No, I don't. Hadda [Brooks] might remember, but I don't remember. Maybe Club Samba. Central Avenue had a lot of shoeshine places. They had the Plantation Club. You know, they had nightclubs there. They had after-hour joints, we called them, where the bands would play. I can't remember at that time if you had to quit serving liquor at twelve o'clock or not. I think it was twelve o'clock you had to stop serving liquor in a nightclub.

ISOARDI: So the big places had closed down?

BIHARI: Yes. But then they had these underground places.

If you brought your own bottle in you could drink. And they had bands playing there.

ISOARDI: A scene. A real scene.

BIHARI: A real scene. And more than one. Lots of them.

And to be honest with you, I used to carry, when I used to

go with Jules at night to collect money or change records or to repair a machine or-- If you had a good location, you were almost on call all the time, because you weren't going to pass that money up. I mean, if the jukebox quit, if you didn't repair it, the next day they had another jukebox in there. They were looking to take your location from you.

If it was making money, they would take your location. They'd turn your jukebox around and you'd find another one in there.

So you really had to give them service to repair.

ISOARDI: So there were different, competitive jukebox companies?

BIHARI: Oh, absolutely.

ISOARDI: Cutthroat kind of competition?

BIHARI: You bet your life. And then when I'd go with Jules at night I'd carry a .45[-caliber pistol]. Jules carried it. He said, "Here, you carry this," while he drove.

ISOARDI: Because after a few stops you're carrying a lot of money.

BIHARI: You're damn right. And it could get rough there, too. Like we had jukeboxes on Fifth Street, Sixth Street, all through-- You know, it wasn't just Central Avenue; it was San Pedro Street, Avalon Boulevard, Florence Avenue, all the way through there.

ISOARDI: Clubs everywhere and places with jukeboxes.

BIHARI: Clubs, shoeshine joints, anything that you could put a jukebox in. Little restaurants.

ISOARDI: Even shoeshine joints might have jukeboxes?

BIHARI: Have jukeboxes and sell records, also.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: Yes. They would sell records and have jukeboxes.

And then there was the Dunbar Hotel, which was a nice hotel with a nice restaurant there. We had jukeboxes in there.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Gee, they were really everywhere, absolutely everywhere.

BIHARI: They had to like you to get a location.

ISOARDI: The people who owned the places?

BIHARI: Yes. And you know, it was an all-black area. But they really had to like you.

ISOARDI: So most of the owners that you dealt with were black?

BIHARI: Were all black. Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: There wasn't much white ownership at that--?

BIHARI: None whatsoever. None whatsoever. But you really had to build up your confidence, or they had to have the confidence in you. They had to like you, and you had to give them service.

Remember, there were no new jukeboxes. You were giving them old equipment, and you had to keep it running all the time.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I guess if it stopped for a night it could really hurt some of those spots, then, from their standpoint.

BIHARI: You bet it could. Surely.

ISOARDI: People are going to go where there's music.

BIHARI: Exactly. And you had to be honest with them. You gave them a fifty-fifty split. If they were a good location, you'd give them sixty [percent] and you'd take forty [percent].

ISOARDI: Yeah. How many jukebox companies are we talking about competing?

BIHARI: I really don't know, but there were jukebox companies all over the city.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: I guess with that many clubs and places that want jukeboxes it would really be a growth industry.

BIHARI: Oh, absolutely. I think we probably had a hundred jukeboxes at one point [and were] operating sixty of them, because you were taking parts from this one, tubes from that one, to keep everything going.

ISOARDI: So you had about sixty going at once?

BIHARI: At once, yes.

ISOARDI: Was that high? Was that a lot for you? Were you a big company?

BIHARI: Oh, I don't know if there were bigger jukebox operators

or not. I really don't know.

ISOARDI: Who owned most of these jukebox companies? Do you know anything about that?

BIHARI: Well, J.W. Seeberg was Seeberg, [Rudolph H.] Wurlitzer, you know, I guess the Wurlitzer Company, those were the two big jukeboxes. And I imagine they're still operating, Wurlitzer and Seeberg.

ISOARDI: Any hint of organized crime behind any of this stuff?

BIHARI: Not in this city that I knew of.

ISOARDI: Mickey Cohen kept away? [laughs]

BIHARI: [laughs] Do you want to hear a story about Mickey Cohen?

ISOARDI: Yeah, if you know one, sure.

BIHARI: Oh, I know a good one. I owned an apartment building on the corner of Chenault [Street] and Barrington [Avenue]--

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BIHARI: Mickey Cohen was my tenant.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Was he a nice guy? Was he a good neighbor?

BIHARI: Always nice to me. Always nice to me.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BIHARI: I sold it in '75. The sixties.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: I'll be darned.

BIHARI: It could have been the end of the fifties and early sixties. Yeah, maybe the end of the fifties and early sixties.

ISOARDI: Funny story: I once asked somebody about who had been around Central, because one of the things you want to know in your research is, well, all these clubs, etc., how much was the mob in there, etc. Most people would say, "Well, this was small-time for the mob. They spent their time up in other parts of L.A.; they didn't care much about Central."

And then finally somebody said, "Oh, yeah, yeah. I think that place was controlled by Mickey Cohen." And I said, "You're kidding. Really? But how do you know that?" Because you want some kind of verification. And he said, "He signed all my paychecks." [laughs]

BIHARI: Now, we never-- You know, at that time there was really nothing.

ISOARDI: You're talking about the sixties when he was renting from you?

BIHARI: Well, we weren't operating jukeboxes then.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, right. Right, right. Well, I assume at that point, wasn't he somewhat retired by 1960 or so?

BIHARI: I would think so. He never left his apartment very often. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Or maybe he wasn't retired then.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Interesting story.

BIHARI: I bought the building just after it was built. From what I understand, he had things built in his apartment exactly-- You know, he took it before it was finished.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So he was already in there when you bought the place.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. He was already in there when I bought the building.

ISOARDI: Did you know he was one of your tenants when you bought it?

BIHARI: I don't think so. I never paid any attention to it.

ISOARDI: Oh, okay. Well, that's good.

BIHARI: But he was very, very nice. He'd always expect me up there on the first of the month, and he'd always pay me in cash. He'd shake my hand, and I guarantee you he'd invite me in once in a while. After I left he went to wash his hands.

He had to be very, very clean. From what I understand, whenever he shook anybody's hand he'd go wash his hands. He must have had some fear of something.

ISOARDI: Yeah, definitely.

BIHARI: But he was always very nice to me. It was always, "Hello, how are you? You're here for your rent?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he'd go in, "Here it is." Always cash.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

MARCH 11, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe, before we continue on from where we left off last time, let me run a couple of questions by you just to fill in some of the material from last time. Could you give us the names of your parents as well as your siblings?

BIHARI: Yes. My father's name was Edward [Bihari], and my mother's name was Esther [Bihari].

ISOARDI: What was her maiden name?

BIHARI: Taub. And my siblings? You mean my brothers and sisters? Or my children? [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, actually, how about both?

BIHARI: My brothers in order of age: oldest was Lester Bihari, then Jules [Bihari], Florette [Bihari], Serene [Leavenworth Felt], Saul [Bihari], Maxine [Bihari Kessler], Rosalind [Bihari], and Joe, me, if that's eight [laughs], if I didn't leave any out.

ISOARDI: And how about your kids?

BIHARI: Michael [Bihari], a son; Lita [Bihari], a daughter; Shelly [Michele Bihari], a daughter; and Nicole [Bihari], a daughter.

ISOARDI: Big family.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Okay, good. I also wanted to ask you, when you were

handling jukeboxes along Central Avenue, did you range much off Central? What was sort of the geographical boundary of your area?

BIHARI: Yes, it went off Central Avenue. It went south of First Street, San Pedro Street, Los Angeles Street--what else is down there at Central Avenue?--Wall Street. It took in, I would say, probably a half a mile east and west--

ISOARDI: On either side of Central?

BIHARI: On the other side of Central. Well, between say San Pedro Street and Central Avenue-- I'm trying to orient myself to east and west. Oh, east, west-- Where am I? San Pedro Street ran north and south, I think. Yes, it runs north and south. So I think within a half a mile north of-- A quarter of a mile west of San Pedro Street and half a mile east of San Pedro Street, in that area. And I think we went as-- Oh, I don't know. We went way out, I would say, past 120th [Street], 130th Street, too.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: So you went outside of Watts.

BIHARI: Yes, yes.

ISOARDI: How often would you restock the jukeboxes?

BIHARI: Not very often, because we couldn't get records.

[laughs] What we would do was, if a machine wasn't doing

well in a location, we'd pull the jukebox back and take the records off and put it in another place. There were some locations that didn't do well, and it wasn't worth your time to go ahead and service that machine. So you'd pull it back in until you found a better location for it.

ISOARDI: Were there any ones in particular that wouldn't do--?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: Just hit and miss?

BIHARI: It might have been a small restaurant. You know, we'd put them in cafés, restaurants, anyplace where there were people going in and out. But there were some that didn't do as well as others. And there were some that did extremely well; I mean, we'd collect a lot of money with them.

ISOARDI: Right. How often would you go pick up new records from the majors?

BIHARI: Probably once about every two weeks, if they had records that we could put on our jukeboxes.

ISOARDI: So it was about every two weeks that you'd change them?

BIHARI: Yes. Well, I don't say that we'd change them every two weeks. We could never get a hundred records of one song, so we-- You had to move around, just change from one location to the other, this and that. They wanted something new or

different, so you'd take it off of one jukebox and put it on another. [laughs] And you'd have jukeboxes that would hold twenty-five records, and some hold fifty records, and the bigger jukeboxes you'd put in a better location. The better-looking ones you'd put in better locations, also.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. In your travels up and down Central, I mean, you undoubtedly met more than your share of characters.

[laughs]

BIHARI: Oh, yes. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Or just people who for one reason or other might still stick out in your mind, whether they be some of your customers or clients or just characters whom you might remember.

Do you want to share any of them?

BIHARI: Yes. One lady, her name was Mamie Waters, she had a newsstand and a shoeshine stand and a record store. They were all in one on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Where on Central Avenue?

BIHARI: Oh, I think it was around the Dunbar Hotel, so it must have been around Washington [Boulevard]. She was a very stern, religious, very righteous, upright lady. And she just impressed me. She was gray-haired and always extremely nice until someone crossed her. She was always very nice to me because I'd sell her records, also. When we were in the record business, first records, and we were out of jukeboxes shortly

after that, she was just a lady that was so very, very nice all the time.

ISOARDI: So even though she was really religious, she still would put the devil's music up for sale. [laughs]

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Yes, she would. I noticed she was always very nice when I went to see her to sell her records, and I'd heard her with people who weren't so nice. She never used any foul language, but she was very-- I mean, she could take care of herself. And I was just a kid then. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So she was impressive.

BIHARI: Yes, she was.

ISOARDI: Anybody else?

BIHARI: Not that I can remember offhand.

ISOARDI: That was a good portrait. Okay. I also wanted to ask you, you talked last time about Jules getting the idea of doing your records because you just couldn't get enough records.

BIHARI: Just couldn't get enough--

ISOARDI: No one was supplying you with blues, even when you could get some.

BIHARI: That's correct.

ISOARDI: And you also mentioned that Cecil Gant's record came out on Bronze Records at the time, which was a small

garage operation.

BIHARI: That's exactly what it was.

ISOARDI: And I think you also mentioned last time that about this time the René brothers had started with their labels.

BIHARI: René, yes, Exclusive [Records] and Excelsior [Records]--Leon with Exclusive and Otis with Excelsior Records.

ISOARDI: Right. Were there any other independents, any others in town producing their own records?

BIHARI: I remember a purple and white label called G and G [Records].

ISOARDI: Who was behind that?

BIHARI: I believe two brothers, last name Greene.

ISOARDI: But they were out there.

BIHARI: They were there. They'd just started. And I think the artist they had was Ernie Andrews.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Could that have been a label with Joe Greene?

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh, that's right, with Joe Greene. Joe Greene was involved in it in some way, because I knew Joe, yes. They may be the two brothers, Greene and Greene. That's where they get G and G.

ISOARDI: That makes sense.

BIHARI: Yes, it does.

ISOARDI: That could very well be. So the indie [independent] market was really just starting with you guys now.

BIHARI: Just starting in 1945, yes.

ISOARDI: And before then, there really wasn't anyone? Just the majors?

BIHARI: Right, that's all. And Capitol [Records] around 1944, I think.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

BIHARI: And Mercury [Records] started-- I don't know if it was '45 or '46.

ISOARDI: G and G was successful?

BIHARI: Not for long, no, I don't think, no. I don't know of any other records besides Ernie Andrews that they put out. They might have had Vivian Green. I'm not sure now.

ISOARDI: This may be getting ahead too much--if so, say so--but did you get any kind of response from the majors? Did they notice these little records coming out that were selling from these small companies?

BIHARI: No, not at that time.

ISOARDI: Just not enough to give them any cause for attention?

BIHARI: No, not at all.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So you didn't have their representatives coming down and talking to your artists or anything like that?

BIHARI: No. [laughs] They were not looking for

our artists. They had their own. We ran into independents a few years later in the forties, maybe '48, '49, fifties, where we'd record an artist and we'd find that somebody else would go and record them also. Or somebody--

ISOARDI: At the same time?

BIHARI: Oh, at the same time, the next day or something.

A lot of contracts were not signed. I know we recorded Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers with Charles Brown.

Well, Aladdin [Records] had recorded them before we recorded them. At that time the label name was Philo [Records]. But I don't know whether they had a contract or not.

ISOARDI: Did they claim that they did?

BIHARI: We never ran into an opposition with them. We put them out, they put them out.

ISOARDI: No sweat.

BIHARI: No. Now, we did have some problems a few years later with Chess Records. We recorded and signed Howlin' Wolf out of Memphis, and they recorded him. We also had B.B. King under contract. He [Leonard Chess] recorded B. B. King. Of course, he couldn't release the record. And you can see what we did with Elmore James. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Truly. So this was still a period when things were still pretty fluid.

BIHARI: Oh, as fluid as they could be.

ISOARDI: And haphazard.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: There really wasn't a structure in any of this, was there?

BIHARI: No, no structure at all.

ISOARDI: Everything was trial and error.

BIHARI: Yes. You're talking about '45, '46, '47.

ISOARDI: So at your facilities at First and San Pedro, you don't have a room full of lawyers upstairs?

BIHARI: No, no, no. We had two presses. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Two presses and good music.

BIHARI: Right. An edging machine to edge the 78 [rpm] records so that they're not rough on the edge when they come off the presses, and we had some boxes and some tape, a couple of tape machines--not recording tape machines, but tape sealing machines. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Sealing tape, yes, for shipping.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. I think it was around 1946 or '47 when we bought the ARA plant on Robertson Boulevard.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe we should segue in now to where we stopped last time, which I guess was just leading up to

this, I suppose. Last time, I guess, Hadda [Brooks]'s first record and your first record had been out for a couple of

months and had been doing well, and you guys had turned your record shop into a plant.

BIHARI: Exactly. Now, after six months with Hadda's record still selling, we recorded some other artists. Another girl by the name of Pearl Traylor, a singer and a piano player, a boogie-woogie piano player.

ISOARDI: Where did you find her? Was it just the same kind of thing as with Hadda?

BIHARI: The same kind of thing. She was playing, or we heard her around playing someplace or something, or she came in. Who knows in those days. They'd come in. They saw a record company, Modern Music, that was it.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Knocking on doors?

BIHARI: Knocking on the door. "Come in." You know, word got around very easily. It was a very small community even though it was stretched out. But you know, a lot of musicians around and a lot of singers or would-be, wanted-to-be singers, and bands like-- In the early forties, when bebop first started, we recorded an artist by the name of Howard McGhee and his orchestra.

ISOARDI: Oh, beautiful trumpeter.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: On Modern you recorded him?

BIHARI: On Modern. I had the first record out that he ever

recorded.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

BIHARI: Surely. Howard McGhee. It was called "McGhee Jumps," I think.

ISOARDI: Great trumpeter.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. The first one was called--as a matter of fact, I have it here--"11:45 Swing." It was an instrumental with Howard McGhee and his orchestra.

ISOARDI: Who was in the orchestra? Do you know?

BIHARI: I don't even remember. Teddy Edwards, I think.

ISOARDI: Oh, that would make sense, because the Howard McGhee-Teddy Edwards Quintet was playing at the Downbeat [Club] about that time, I think.

BIHARI: Yeah. But this was his big band that we recorded.

ISOARDI: Oh, it wasn't the quintet?

BIHARI: No, it was--

ISOARDI: This was a full big band?

BIHARI: It was full big band, yes. And I'm sure-- Let's see what else here-- Well, accordingly, I had Pearl Traylor singing with Howard McGhee's big band, a song called "Playboy Blues," and "Around the Clock, Part One and Part Two," which was the original to "Rock around the Clock." This was a blues version of it back in the forties.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Original composition, with this recording?

BIHARI: And it was different than the Bill Haley "Rock around the Clock," but it was the same "The clock struck one" and this and that, but it was done in a blues form.

ISOARDI: I'll be darned. Was it a pretty straight-ahead swing kind of band? Or was it--?

BIHARI: Oh, it was a bebop band.

ISOARDI: It was a bebop big band?

BIHARI: It was, yeah, a bebop big band. And we also had Estelle Edson singing with the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BIHARI: It was a big band.

ISOARDI: You know, it's interesting, because I was trying to think, you know, you must have recorded one of the first bop big band recordings.

BIHARI: Yes, we did.

ISOARDI: Dizzy Gillespie didn't have his big band then.

BIHARI: No, no, no. This was before Dizzy, I think, before he was known.

ISOARDI: There was Billy Eckstine's band, which had a lot of bop players, but I don't know if they considered that a bop band.

BIHARI: No, Billy even started before. Billy had a hit record

on I can't remember what label. He was a wonderful singer.

I mean early on in the forties, in the early forties.

ISOARDI: Sure. I can't think of a bop big band recording that precedes this.

BIHARI: There isn't any that I know of.

ISOARDI: Wow, that's wonderful. He must have used a lot of musicians from Central.

BIHARI: Oh, I'm sure that he did.

ISOARDI: All Central Avenue musicians.

BIHARI: Certainly. They were all black musicians. Certainly.

ISOARDI: Nice. When was that recorded?

BIHARI: 1946, I think. It's early on in our catalog. It had to be-- It was the eleventh release that we released, so it must have been 1946.

ISOARDI: Now, is this kind of a departure for you from boogie-woogie and your own passion for the blues?

BIHARI: Oh, absolutely, but we were trying a little bit of everything. Unfortunately, the bebop didn't sell well, but we kept trying and trying and trying with the big band, yes.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Wonderful. So I guess the idea, then, for a lot of these artists was that they could record--

BIHARI: And a place to release the records. They could never get on the major record companies.

ISOARDI: So this must have been pretty exciting.

BIHARI: It was. It was very exciting. It was very exciting to them. And I was just a kid. Remember, I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

ISOARDI: So did you have people knocking on your door then?

BIHARI: Well, [there was] always somebody coming in, yes, a singer, piano player, or this and that. We had no audition facilities, either.

ISOARDI: You didn't do your recording there?

BIHARI: No, no, no, no.

ISOARDI: You'd rent studio space?

BIHARI: We'd use rented studios, yes. After Bob Gray Studios, then we started using Radio Recorders for the recording.

ISOARDI: Which was located--?

BIHARI: On Orange [Drive] and Santa Monica Boulevard, 7000 Santa Monica Boulevard. It was a fine recording studio. They had two studios. A really, a good, good, fine recording studio.

ISOARDI: That was around for a while, wasn't it?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: A lot of work done there.

BIHARI: There's still a studio there, but it's no longer Radio Recorders; it's another recording studio [Studio 56].

It's where we recorded the Hadda Brooks records after we recorded the first record "Swingin' the Boogie." Then we

took her to Radio Recorders to record other records of hers.

ISOARDI: So did you guys just audition people on the spot in your plant? Pull them into a corner and if they had a horn say, "Blow it"?

BIHARI: You know, it wasn't even so much that. You'd say, "You sing? Let's go to the studio." We'd call and rent a studio.

ISOARDI: Give them some space and see what they had?

BIHARI: You'd have a band. Of course, there were bands playing around, also: the Russell Jacquet band--Illinois Jacquet's brother--which we recorded in the forties, a small band called Happy Johnson sextet. They were playing someplace, and we'd go and, "Come on, let's go in the studio." And there was a singer that we had in the forties, Gene Phillips, who was a guitar player and singer. We did a lot of recording with Gene. He sold well. A good artist. He just passed away, I think, about two years ago. And then, remember I was talking about Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers with Charles Brown?

Now, they were recording for us and for Aladdin Records too at the same time. [laughs] And there just was never any problem with it.

ISOARDI: So it was going strong now with "Swingin' the Boogie." Were you working the plant? Or were you going out and selling? Or were you doing both?

BIHARI: No, I was selling and recording, and I was doing everything that had to be done. [laughs] I was no longer working the night shift at the plant.

ISOARDI: Okay. You were out moving things and looking for people?

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: When did you re-record Hadda? When did you start turning out more records? Did that come fairly soon?

BIHARI: Yeah, that came-- Well, I think "Swingin' the Boogie" probably lasted six to eight months--

ISOARDI: On the charts that long?

BIHARI: On the charts or, if they had charts, whatever it is. It sold for that long. And in between that we had another record or something. No. What did we have? After the first record, Hadda, then we had another Hadda record, then we had the Howard McGhee. That was his first record. In fact, it was called "Deep Meditation," and "Blues in B-flat" was the other side of it. And then we had Pearl Traylor, and then came back to Hadda Brooks again, and then another artist--yeah, we tried him--Jessie Perry with the Happy Johnson sextet. He was a singer with them. And we had a group out of Chicago that did really well; it was called the Three Bits of Rhythm. There was a guitar player, a bass player, and a piano player. They had a record--it was a fairly good hit--called "I Used

to Work in Chicago." It was a kind of a comedy. It was a comedy record. It was like Slim Gaillard, that type of stuff.

ISOARDI: That type of stuff. Very popular stuff then.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Did that do well for you?

BIHARI: It did quite well, yes.

ISOARDI: How did you determine when to stop pressing so many of a record? Was it just your street sales? All of a sudden people were taking less from you? Is that how you determined when to pull something?

BIHARI: Oh, sure, because there was more competition coming later and since the distribution was set up and there were more records coming out from different labels. And of course, our sales went down somewhat and became, "Do you have a hit record now?" You know, we could sell so many because of our distribution, but after that initial pressing, then it became important to have something that was really a hit record that they wanted more and more and more of all the time. Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers had hit records with Charles Brown for us, Gene Phillips had hit records with us, and of course Hadda was continually selling records.

In the forties there was a disc jockey called Frank Bull. He was on KFWB. He did it as a hobby. He liked Dixieland music.

ISOARDI: Oh, I've heard that name.

BIHARI: And he had an hour show. Now, Frank Bull was the field announcer for the [Los Angeles] Rams football team. He did the announcing on the field for the L.A. Rams.

ISOARDI: At the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum?

BIHARI: At the Coliseum. But he took a liking to Hadda. He would play her records three or four times a night. I was up there at least once a week with him on his show because he liked Hadda so much. He asked her to do a record and if we would give it away. He formed a club called the Bully Woolly Club--the Frank Bull club--and she did a record called "Bully Woolly Boogie."

ISOARDI: Ah, for him.

BIHARI: If they wrote in or called in--I think they had to write in for the record--we'd give them-- They'd join the club, we'd send them a record, "Bully Woolly Boogie." Yes, that was it.

ISOARDI: Was it important to have air time on the radio?

BIHARI: Absolutely. It just became important at that time.

ISOARDI: Just about then.

BIHARI: About then was when it started--

ISOARDI: Was radio pushing out jukeboxes a little bit then?

BIHARI: Oh, no, I don't think they were pushing out jukeboxes at all.

ISOARDI: So it was just another way of selling records?

BIHARI: It was another way of selling records, certainly.

Disc jockeys were coming in at that time, too. Because, let me tell you, in the forties, if you look at some of the old records in the forties, they will say on the label "not licensed for radio broadcast."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: I think it was the time that-- I don't know if there was some kind of fight with ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers] and the broadcasters or what. This was before BMI, Broadcast Music [Incorporated], came in.

ISOARDI: Was this during the war?

BIHARI: During the war, yes.

ISOARDI: Well, they had that ban on recording. The union--

BIHARI: Oh, no. This was before that, before the union ban.

ISOARDI: Oh, so you're talking '41, '42, something like that?

BIHARI: Oh, yes, uh-huh. And if you'll notice, you pick up an old RCA [Records] or Columbia [Records], it will say "not licensed for radio broadcast." Now, evidently it might have been that they did not want their records played on the radio fearing that it would stop sales, because if people could hear it on the radio, why do they have to buy it?

ISOARDI: Exactly.

BIHARI: That might have been it.

ISOARDI: Maybe that's why, I guess, on radio then so much music was live, broadcast from ballrooms.

BIHARI: Yes. That's right.

ISOARDI: Instead of spinning discs.

BIHARI: Instead of spinning discs. So it was live music then.

ISOARDI: That's really interesting.

BIHARI: That makes sense, doesn't it?

ISOARDI: It does. It's a good deduction. History will judge.

[laughs] So was Frank Bull sort of a--? Would he play other of your records? Or was it just Hadda that he was--?

BIHARI: Just Hadda is all.

ISOARDI: Okay. That's what he--

BIHARI: That's about all we had out then. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Were there any other radio stations that you tried to contact?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Well, what stations would play your kind of music?

BIHARI: Yes, there were. KLAC. The disc jockey's name was Ira Cook. He was sponsored by Lucky Lager. And I'll tell you what happened. Frank Bull not only did the announcing--he had this station--he had a large advertising agency called Smith, Bull, and McCreary in Hollywood.

ISOARDI: Oh, so that was his main thing? And that's why the hobby was doing the radio.

BIHARI: Exactly. He asked me one day, "Who's not playing your records, Joe?" And I said, "Ira Cook." I think it was on KLAC. He said, "Well, I'll have to have a talk with him."

ISOARDI: No kidding.

BIHARI: Yes. Because he had the advertising for Lucky Lager Beer--

ISOARDI: And they also advertised at that station?

BIHARI: And that was one of the sponsors on Ira Cook's radio program. He started playing Hadda Brooks records.

ISOARDI: That's known as having a little juice. [laughs]

BIHARI: He started playing my records after that.

ISOARDI: Outstanding.

BIHARI: His name was Ira Cook. His program was very popular.

*[In Chicago there was a very popular black disc jockey by the name of Al Benson. He was from Jackson, Mississippi.

He was a powerful salesman on radio, and his program was overloaded with commercials. He played a lot of my records.

Al wanted to interview Hadda Brooks live and have her play the piano on his program. (James C.) "Caesar" Petrillo was the head of the national musicians union (American Federation of Musicians). If I remember correctly, I had to pay the musicians union in New York, and she was given permission

to be interviewed and play live on the radio that one time.]

ISOARDI: Interesting. In terms of who was buying your records at this time, was it pretty exclusively the black community?

BIHARI: Not with Hadda Brooks. As a matter of fact, the white people did buy Hadda Brooks. Yes. And especially when we came out with the classical piano boogies, like "Polonaise Boogie" with Hadda. And Hadda started singing. She played white clubs predominantly then.

ISOARDI: Really? She wasn't playing much on Central Avenue?

BIHARI: No. When that came in--

ISOARDI: Hollywood or wherever?

BIHARI: Hollywood. She played a club there where Nellie Lutcher played. I think she followed Nellie Lutcher when her engagement was over. And Nellie was a similar type of an artist; she played piano and sang. Hadda played piano and sang.

ISOARDI: I guess Hadda's classical kind of training was what came through.

* Bihari added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

BIHARI: Yes, exactly. She had a classical training. We wouldn't book her, but our distributor in San Francisco would.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

MARCH 11, 1995

BIHARI: Our distributor in San Francisco would set up a personal appearance for free in clubs in San Francisco, and he would have the press there, and she would get written up in the newspapers. And they had radio broadcasts where she would play on the radio at certain nightclubs. His last name was Brame, Al Brame. Before he was in the record business he was a writer for one of the San Francisco newspapers. So he had all the contacts.

ISOARDI: So he really knew the scene.

BIHARI: Right. He knew the scene. He had the contacts for it all.

ISOARDI: You know, it sounds too like "distributor" doesn't really do justice to what these people had to do. They were also like PR [public relations] people, I guess, as well, and salesmen and--

BIHARI: Well, actually we didn't have any PR people or salesmen.

Well, the distributors had the salesmen, but there wasn't-- He was unusual, Al was, because he had all of the contacts, being a newspaper writer before. Al had a partner by the name of Tony Valerio, and between the two of them they ran

the distributing company.

But that was very impressive for me at that time, when I was in my early twenties, when he would call and say, "Can you fly Hadda up and come up? We have this club lined up.

She'll do a personal appearance there." And it was promotion in those days, a different type of promotion, that is, instead of being on-- Although there were radio broadcasts that he would set up, because some of the clubs in San Francisco had radio broadcasts from the clubs. It was very impressive, and it was very good for sales. And they were white clubs.

They weren't black clubs at all. These were all white clubs.

So I guess she broke the color line very early in her career.

ISOARDI: Now, Hadda was doing well, her record, and you were starting to record other people as well, Howard, etc. BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Now, how were your business arrangements set up with the artists and with you and your brothers? I mean, at some point you've got to sit down and you've got to say, "Hey, this is a real business. How are we going to organize it?" [laughs] Jules can't continually turn to you and ask you to reach in your pocket--

BIHARI: For the money. He said, "You hold the money." Finally we formed a corporation.

ISOARDI: How far along was that?

BIHARI: Oh, when we bought the plant.

ISOARDI: So pretty quickly, then, right?

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh. We bought the ARA plant. Yes. That was probably 1947. Because I know the first recording I did in that studio was '47 or, yeah, '48. In that studio it was Pee Wee Crayton, "Blues after Hours," which was a hit.

ISOARDI: So this was about a year or so later, now, that you figured you'd better put some real structure into this--

BIHARI: Yes. We bought that plant, because it went up for auction. They were pressing for different companies, and they had their own label. It was not successful, and it was a fairly large plant.

ISOARDI: Where at?

BIHARI: On Robertson Boulevard in West Hollywood, Santa Monica Boulevard and Robertson Boulevard.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BIHARI: Great location, too.

ISOARDI: Still is. [laughs]

BIHARI: Yeah, still is. That was the first recording I did there, and it was on disc. We didn't have tape then, we had our discs.

ISOARDI: Sure. When you say it was big, big in what sense?

BIHARI: For a pressing plant we had two presses; this one here had twenty-five.

ISOARDI: Wow.

BIHARI: So that went from two to twenty five.

ISOARDI: That's a huge jump.

BIHARI: It was a huge jump, but it was difficult to get people to work on the presses.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: There were so many jobs available. Now, what we did have, when the Japanese were released from the camps--they were in internment camps--we had a lot of young Japanese guys, eighteen, nineteen [years old], who pressed records for us.

ISOARDI: Okay. So these were kids who were coming back from the camps and just trying to get a foothold somewhere.

BIHARI: Right, trying to get a job, trying to get a foothold, yes. We had quite a few Japanese.

ISOARDI: This is a bit off the track, but it's something that just popped into my head: Were they having a tough time getting work?

BIHARI: I think they were. You know, the war was just over and--

ISOARDI: Was there still a lot of lingering resentment or--?

BIHARI: Yeah. I think there was a lot of lingering resentment,

yes. But we found them to be honest and excellent workers.

ISOARDI: You know, it's funny--again, a little bit off--but I was reading a little while ago that apparently during the war, before it was done in California, I think it was the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and the Department of Justice and a number of other federal agencies recommended against California doing this, putting people in the camps.

BIHARI: I think it was a horrible thing to do.

ISOARDI: Oh, unbelievable.

So you had a huge jump, then, in payroll, in staff, in output.

BIHARI: Everything, yes.

ISOARDI: But were the two presses you had before--? Was that where you were doing all your pressing?

BIHARI: Yeah, twenty-four hours a day.

ISOARDI: It must have been twenty-four hours a day.

BIHARI: Yes, twenty-four hours a day.

ISOARDI: So you jumped up to twenty-five. Were you guys nervous about this kind of a leap?

BIHARI: We didn't have twenty-five running all at one time.

You know, we had twenty-five presses that we bought that were all set up to go and everything, and maybe we ran ten, and as we needed more production we put on more. As we could

get more workers, we'd put on more. Eventually we sold that plant to Mercury Records.

ISOARDI: When was that?

BIHARI: In 1950 or '51. And we had our offices on Canon Drive in Beverly Hills. We moved our offices there. Well, I think the building was owned by Huntington Hartford, and that was his office. He left that office, and we rented the office from Huntington Hartford. It was a gorgeous office. That's when we formed our publishing company, also. It was 1950.

ISOARDI: Where were you pressing, then, if you sold the plant?

BIHARI: When Mercury bought the plant they were pressing for us, also.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

BIHARI: I'm trying to think when we started another plant.

We started another plant in Culver City, a small plant. Our lease was up on the Canon Drive, and we moved to Robertson Boulevard in Beverly Hills, and we stayed there a year, and then we moved to Culver City, put a little factory in in Culver City--I think it was about ten presses--and we moved our offices right next to it.

ISOARDI: So you had everything finally in one location then.

BIHARI: Right, and we put our recording studio in. The first recording I did in that studio was "Cherry Pie" with Marvin

and Johnny.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BIHARI: Yes. So maybe the moves were good.

ISOARDI: Well, you must have been pleased with the results of that.

BIHARI: Right. And then from Culver City we moved to La Cienega Boulevard, 1435 South La Cienega. We had our offices there, and we bought a plant downtown, moved this equipment, and bought more equipment for the building downtown, because I guess we were getting bigger and bigger, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah, definitely. How long were you out in Culver City? Quite a few years?

BIHARI: About four or five years in Culver City, yes.

ISOARDI: And you got about ten presses?

BIHARI: We might have been in Culver City longer. I'm trying to think. Oh, no, about four or five years. Yes, we had about ten presses there. And then we moved to Thirty-seventh Place, a big building, and we bought more presses. We were there for two years, and then we bought a factory on the corner of Slauson [Avenue] and Normandie [Avenue]. That was a company called Tops Records. You know, we're going a little further into the late fifties, early sixties.

ISOARDI: Yeah, sure.

BIHARI: And we stayed there until the business was sold in '84.

ISOARDI: Really? A long time.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: How big was that place? How many presses did you have?

BIHARI: Fifty-some-odd presses.

ISOARDI: Fifty?

BIHARI: Yes. Then we did all the album covers. We did the photography, we did the color separation, we had our own printing plant, lithography. We did all the lithography for the album covers and the back liners. We did all of our labels, and we did all of the cardboard lamination for the covers themselves.

ISOARDI: And you had the studio there?

BIHARI: We had a studio, and we had our own matrix making the plating for the record presses.

ISOARDI: Was there anything you didn't do there?

BIHARI: No. We did everything.

ISOARDI: Wow.

BIHARI: Yes, it was a completely contained plant.

ISOARDI: It's a long run.

BIHARI: Yes, it is.

ISOARDI: Up until 1984. Very long run. Forty years.

BIHARI: Forty years, yes. And I'm still in the music publishing business. This is my fiftieth year in the music business, 1995.

ISOARDI: [laughs] You mentioned that you set up a publishing business, I guess, when you moved from the-- Was it the Robertson and Santa Monica location?

BIHARI: Into Beverly Hills, yes, on Canon Drive.

ISOARDI: Now, you hadn't been doing a publishing business before that?

BIHARI: No, we hadn't been doing publishing.

ISOARDI: Why the move to publishing at that time?

BIHARI: I think it was about that time that Broadcast Music, BMI, came in. We became a publisher and writers--we were also songwriters; I was a songwriter--affiliated with Broadcast Music. And that's where the publishing started. Because I think Broadcast Music probably started maybe in 1949 or 1950 or perhaps earlier.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it's around there.

BIHARI: Sometime in the forties or early fifties.

What else do you want to know? [laughs] Where do you want to go? Where do we go from here?

ISOARDI: Okay, we'll pursue a different track. What happened to you, then, after--? I guess we're talking now about late

'45, early '46? Hadda's going strong, you're recording other people, you're signing other artists, and you're spending your time outside the plant now.

BIHARI: Oh, I'm not in the plant at all.

ISOARDI: At all. You're selling--

BIHARI: I'm looking.

ISOARDI: You're looking for artists?

BIHARI: Looking for artists, looking for talent, rehearsing, recording.

ISOARDI: You're not selling so much, then. You're becoming the A and R [artist and repertoire] person for the company?

BIHARI: That's right. When I started traveling around the country, actually, in 1948-- I lived in New York for a year.

I traveled out of New York, recording out of New York, selling out of New York to distributors, and visiting disc jockeys to get airplay on our records.

ISOARDI: Was that the year when you were there? From '48 to '49?

BIHARI: 'Forty-nine, yes. We had an office and warehouse there. They'd manufacture records in Los Angeles and ship them up to New York, to the warehouse, and then I would sell out of New York to the distributors from Chicago east.

ISOARDI: Now, you initially went back to New York to sort

of--

BIHARI: To look at the office.

ISOARDI: Just to check out your operation there, pretty much.

BIHARI: Check out the office, right.

ISOARDI: Well, actually before we get into that, was there anything else from this--? I mean, you became an A and R man in that period. Then, between, I guess, Hadda's first recording and when you left for New York, there was this transition.

Was this something that you really wanted to do, that you're excited about?

BIHARI: Oh, I was excited about the music, oh, yes. And recording and selling, record promotion, and traveling, everything.

ISOARDI: The whole scene. What was the division with your brothers? What responsibilities did they have?

BIHARI: Jules had the factory.

ISOARDI: So he was running production?

BIHARI: Right. Saul was running sales and entertaining. He was the entertainment part of the business.

ISOARDI: Was he well suited for that?

BIHARI: Oh, perfect. The most loved man in the record business was my brother Saul.

ISOARDI: Nice designation.

BIHARI: Yes. He handled most of the entertaining and some sales, also. Everything else was split up. You know, it didn't make any difference if I signed a contract with an artist or if Saul or Jules signed it. The contract was typed up; it didn't make any difference. I mean, we were all together on that.

ISOARDI: Right. It was the three of you as equal partners in Modern Music?

BIHARI: No, no. It was unequal partners. Interesting story about that. We formed Modern Music Publishing Company. Jules, being the oldest, took the biggest percentage, and then he said, "Saul, you get so much, and Joe, you get less." Saul stopped that immediately. He said, "No. I will give up some of my percentage so Joe is equal with me, because he works too hard. He's deserving of it." And that's how my percentage, even though I was minority stockholder, became whatever it was. Saul and I had an equal percentage. I think Jules had 40 percent, and the 60 percent I had 30 and Saul had 30. But anyway, Jules was going to have 50 percent, and I was going to have ten, and it all got changed around.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's good.

BIHARI: And it was the same way pretty much in the record business. I had nothing-- See, being raised in the home--

Jules was the oldest in the business, and he kind of controlled everything. I had to earn my part of the business. I mean, to be honest with you, I felt I wasn't considered by Jules as part of the family. I had to show my way, prove myself.

ISOARDI: Do you think you knew more about music than either of your brothers?

BIHARI: I think so. I think Jules knew quite a bit.

ISOARDI: Your brother Lester was still back in Texas at this time. Did he join you guys at all?

BIHARI: He was in the army, Lester was, all during this time. He was in Italy, in the army there. He came back, I guess, oh-- I don't know. He was discharged in '46 or '47.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So by the time he came back you guys were going great guns.

BIHARI: Yes. He got married in Italy when he was in the army. He married an Italian girl [Amnerias Bihari], and I think he maybe stayed there for a year or something, and he came back. He was never a part of our business at all.

ISOARDI: Oh, not even in the future?

BIHARI: No. Oh, well, let me explain that.

ISOARDI: Well, didn't he at some point have his own record label? Or he was--?

BIHARI: I'm going to tell you how that started. Lester used to work for us in the shipping department, but he-- He was a very, very bright man. He should have never been in the shipping department, but he was annoying to everybody. Talk, talk, talk. Instead of getting work done, he would rather sit and talk with somebody or stand and talk with somebody.

He was one of those people who was very bright but couldn't get it together. So we put him in the shipping department just to give him a job. He was here with his wife--

ISOARDI: He'd just come back, then, from Italy?

BIHARI: Just come back, uh-huh. And after a few years I think Jules, Saul, and I got together and said, "There's got to be some way to get Lester out of our hair without--" You know, we have to tell him nicely.

ISOARDI: Right. Sure, sure.

BIHARI: Lester always liked Memphis, because I was born there, and he was fourteen years older than me, so he knew Memphis, because he had lived there and traveled with my father [Edward Bihari] when he was fourteen years old. So he decided to go to Memphis to live. He had gotten a divorce from his wife, and I think that was an incentive for him to get out of L.A., anyway. And he went to Memphis on the pretext that I would get him started in the record business. So I went to Chicago,

took Elmore James to Chicago, Ike Turner, and recorded Elmore James, and I said, "Here--" Now, Elmore only wanted to be under contract to me personally. If you read that, you will see he didn't want the record company or anything else; he only wanted me. So I took Elmore to Chicago and recorded him and recorded a hit record. And I said to Lester, "Here is a hit record. You're in business in Memphis now."

ISOARDI: You gave him the record?

BIHARI: I gave him the record, yes.

ISOARDI: And that was the beginning of his record company?

BIHARI: I was his silent partner. His record company was called Meteor Records. Eventually it all came back to me anyway, because he couldn't run a record company. He just couldn't do it. He had a lot of records he put out, you know, blues artists and country artists. And the story goes that Elvis Presley went to him, wanted him to record him, and he said no.

ISOARDI: Oh. No kidding?

BIHARI: Before he went to Sam Phillips. I mean, that's the story that I'd heard years and years and years ago.

ISOARDI: From him? From Lester?

BIHARI: From Lester and probably some other people in Memphis in that area.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Don't you want to kick your brother?

BIHARI: Really.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Jeez. Talk about the one that got away.

BIHARI: He never confirmed it or denied it, and I really never did talk about it, because it came out later or something.

But there were pictures taken with him and Elvis.

ISOARDI: Under what circumstances?

BIHARI: I don't know.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Jeez, it's a tough one, because you don't want to deny it; it's a great story. On the other hand, you don't want to confirm it and be the person who let him get away.

BIHARI: Right. Well, listen, everybody let somebody get away, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, that was something I would ask you at some point, of those that got away. And I'm sure everyone, no matter-- I'm sure John Hammond must have a list of people who got away.

BIHARI: I'm sure he does. Did I tell you the story about B.B. King, though?

ISOARDI: No, we haven't talked about B.B. yet.

BIHARI: We haven't talked about B.B.? You know, Sam Phillips, who originally recorded Elvis and Ike Turner with the Kings

of Rhythm considered the first rock and roll record, "Rocket 88"-- We had a deal with Sam Phillips. Whatever he recorded in Memphis, we got first choice if we wanted to buy it or not.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. We had B.B. under contract, but Sam Phillips recorded him. And he had sent him to us and, of course, we put four or five B.B. King records out. They didn't sell well. And "Rocket 88" was just recorded, and he called us and said, "Look, I'm sending you a dub of 'Rocket 88,' something I just recorded with Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston," whatever it was. He said, "I'm sending it out to you. I'll put it in the mail tomorrow." In the meantime, Leonard Chess went into Memphis, Tennessee, and he heard "Rocket 88" at Sam Phillips's studio. He said, "I'll give you \$300 for it" or whatever, \$1,000 or \$500. Three hundred dollars probably.

And Sam said, "Here, give me the cash." That severed our relations with Sam Phillips. So he was no longer recording B.B. King. I called B.B., and I said, "I'm coming in. We're going to record." I had this tape machine now. It was one of the first tape machines that came out. [laughs]

ISOARDI: You're carting it along with you, right?

BIHARI: Yeah. I put it in my car, and drove in, with the

microphones and all.

ISOARDI: That's what was called a--

BIHARI: A Magnechord.

ISOARDI: Magnechord.

BIHARI: Right. I think that was one of the first. That was before the-- Well, Ampex I'm sure was out, but we couldn't afford Ampex, or you couldn't buy them, or whatever it was.

So I rented the black YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], a room in the black YMCA, big room, and had to put up blankets over the windows so you wouldn't hear the noise from the cars outside. You know those heavy, thick furniture-moving blankets?

ISOARDI: [laughs] Jeez.

BIHARI: So I recorded this recording of B.B., and it just-- Nothing was happening. It was just not working. And I told everybody, I said, "B.B., come on, everybody take a break. Take fifteen minutes. Go get a coke or something, and we'll come back." They took a break, and here I hear this piano player, just came in, playing piano on the upright piano which I used.

ISOARDI: He was part of B.B. King's group?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: He just wandered in?

BIHARI: Just wandered in during the break. He had been listening and-- He wasn't the only one who wandered in. Johnny Ace, Bobby Bland, Little Junior Parker, Matt--M.T.--Murphy, Earl Forrest--I recorded all of them the same day.

ISOARDI: You mean these guys just showed up to listen?

BIHARI: Just showed up. They heard that I was recording.

So anyway, this piano player was Ike Turner. I was using a piano player-- I used Calvin Newborn, his father [Calvin Newborn Sr.], and Phineas [Newborn]. Calvin played guitar, his father played drums, and Phineas played piano. Well, I was using the father on drums, I'm pretty sure, and I was using Phineas on piano, but he played jazzy. He wasn't good at blues, or he didn't want to play blues. But he didn't play blues, and that's why nothing was really happening with it. So after the break I paid Phineas, and Ike Turner played piano. That's when I recorded "Three O'Clock Blues." I recorded Bobby Bland, Little Junior Parker, Johnny Ace, Matt Murphy, and Earl Forrest.

ISOARDI: You did them all at the same time?

BIHARI: Same time, every one of them.

ISOARDI: Oh, gee. You must have been reeling at the end of the session.

BIHARI: Oh, God, it was unbelievable. I didn't have enough

money to sign all of them. Bobby Bland was still in the army and was on a furlough.

ISOARDI: Incredible.

BIHARI: Right after that I hired Ike Turner.

ISOARDI: How old was he? He couldn't have been more than a kid.

BIHARI: Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen. I hired Ike. I bought him a car, a Buick Roadmaster. I gave him some of my suits. We were the same size.

ISOARDI: But why would you do this for a piano player?

BIHARI: Let me tell you. I gave him some of my suits, I gave him an expense account and a weekly salary. I said, "You go scout talent all through Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and when you have talent, you call me. I'll come in."

ISOARDI: Why did you think he would be good at that? Sure he can play blues piano, but why would he be good at judging talent?

BIHARI: He was such a nice young man, and I felt that he had that talent. You know, it was just something that hit you.

ISOARDI: In his personality that you thought--?

BIHARI: In his personality, everything.

ISOARDI: A kind of charisma, maybe?

BIHARI: He certainly did. He had it. And I hired him.

ISOARDI: It must have been a pretty good move.

BIHARI: It was. He called me. I got Howlin' Wolf.

ISOARDI: He got you Howlin' Wolf?

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: That alone justifies everything. [laughs]

BIHARI: Clayton Love. Oh, I don't know, it's a whole bunch of them. Sure.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: I said, "You just start traveling and--"

ISOARDI: And that's what he did.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: He just hit all the juke joints and clubs.

BIHARI: I came in--Howlin' Wolf--and I said, "Come on, let's go." We went to Helena, Arkansas, and recorded--

ISOARDI: Had you heard of Howlin' Wolf? Did you know anything about this guy?

BIHARI: I hadn't even heard of him.

ISOARDI: So did Ike just sort of call you up and say, "I got this blues man"?

BIHARI: Yeah. He said, "I think he's great. Come on down."

[laughs]

ISOARDI: So you did.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You got your Magnechord.

BIHARI: No, that time I didn't. No, with Howlin' I flew in, and we recorded him on disc at a radio station in West Memphis, Arkansas. That's right. He wanted me to come in right away.

ISOARDI: Ike did?

BIHARI: Yeah. Because he'd heard that Chess was in town. He said, "You come down." So I caught a plane down and got Howlin' Wolf.

ISOARDI: So nobody had Howlin' Wolf then?

BIHARI: Well, it was a question whether Chess had him or we had him or what.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BIHARI: We finally settled that up. We put him out and they put him out. So that's when I flew in.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

MARCH 11, 1995

ISOARDI: As you were saying, Joe--

BIHARI: Okay. We're talking about Ike [Turner]. Let me read something from the--

ISOARDI: I'm sorry. Just to follow up on the thought, I was just thinking, you hadn't heard this guy. Ike calls and tells you, "You've got to get out here."

BIHARI: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: What did you think when you hear Howlin' Wolf for the first time?

BIHARI: Well, I thought he was big. He looked like a wolf, and a big, big man.

ISOARDI: And that voice?

BIHARI: And I still have the-- The voice, that gravelly voice.

ISOARDI: Have you ever heard of a blues singer like that?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: Because that voice is just-- The first time you hear it, you-- The first note, you'll never forget it.

BIHARI: That's right. I'd like to read you something from--

It's about Ike. It says:

Ike returned to Clarksdale occasionally, commuting the seventy-fives miles back to Memphis on his bicycle--

This was '54 when I hired Ike.
--in search of fresh opportunities. During one of these visits,
he happened upon a B.B. King recording session.

This is the one we're talking about.

The session wasn't going well. During a break, Ike slipped behind the piano and started playing. Suddenly he heard a white man shouting, "That's what I want! That's what I want!" It was Joe Bihari, one of the Bihari brothers who ran the record label Modern RPM [a label of Modern Music]. Bihari hired Ike on the spot to complete the session and afterward paid him \$30, more than he had made off of "Rocket 88." Bihari said, "Man, is there any more talent around here like you?" Ike replied, "Lots of it, all over Mississippi." "Let's meet tomorrow. You take me and we'll get some of the talent." Thus Ike took Joe Bihari throughout the South to record such blues giants as Howlin' Wolf, Elmore James, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and of course, B.B. King.

Impressed by Ike's ear for talent, Bihari bought him his first car, a Buick Roadmaster. And with a portable Magnechord tape machine loaded into the trunk, they continued to record in empty clubs and YMCAs and in musicians' living rooms. When Bihari returned to L.A. with the tapes they had recorded, Ike continued to scout out artists. Twice a week he would receive checks from Modern RPM, sometimes \$100, sometimes \$200, more money than he had ever seen in his life. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Which book are you reading from? I, Tina: My Life Story. Tina Turner with Kurt Loder. So he got that story straight?

BIHARI: Yes, Kurt Loder did. Kurt was a writer for Rolling Stone magazine. He is also the head guy at MTV [Music Television]. He's on TV. He says-- This is January 25, whatever year it was--

ISOARDI: Oh, that is a letter to you from Kurt Loder?

BIHARI: A letter from Kurt. He says:

Dear Joe, very good to hear from you today. Enclosed is the book. Sorry for the delay. I hope it's more accurate than the Rock of Ages: [The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll] version of the events. I've always thought that someone should organize a comprehensive oral history of the postwar music business with firsthand interviews with all the principals: yourself, Ahmet Ertegun, Ewert Abner, Phil Chess, etc. I know there's been some talk about doing this at Ahmet's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame meetings, and I hope it comes to pass. In any event, if there are inaccuracies in my book, please let me know in detail so I can make corrections in future editions. Whenever you're in New York, perhaps a future induction of your own in the Hall of Fame, please give me a call so I can buy you a drink. Thanks again for your assistance with I, Tina. I hope you enjoy it. Best wishes, Kurt Loder.

ISOARDI: Nice.

BIHARI: Yes, it was. Incidentally, I was nominated to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Ahmet Ertegun.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. I have a letter if you'd like to have it sometime.

ISOARDI: I didn't know he had done that.

BIHARI: He did it. But he told me, "Joe, you know, it's a committee who votes on it. I'm not the one who does the inducting." But I felt it was an honor just to be nominated for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, especially by Ahmet Ertegun.

ISOARDI: Well, certainly. But maybe it will happen yet.

BIHARI: It could happen.

ISOARDI: It should. It should happen at any rate. [tape recorder off] So you hired Ike, then, at this point. I mean, you hired Ike because you really wanted to expand then your artists.

BIHARI: Absolutely.

ISOARDI: You really wanted to sort of scour for the people wherever you can.

BIHARI: Virgin territory. There was so much blues talent in the South.

ISOARDI: And you were the only person from Modern?

BIHARI: I was the only one going down there recording. Leonard Chess just started his record company. He was now starting to filter into Memphis and in the South.

ISOARDI: Himself?

BIHARI: Himself, yes.

ISOARDI: And up until this point, then, it was just relying on artists coming in or people you and your brother had discovered in L.A?

BIHARI: Yeah, in L.A. They'd come in, or we'd hear them.

But anyway, this was where our big jump came into the business, when I started recording outside of Los Angeles and finding all of this blues talent. I mean, you notice by the names what it was.

ISOARDI: Actually you may owe brother that in a sense.

[laughs]

BIHARI: Yeah, I probably do.

ISOARDI: For getting you back home in a way.

BIHARI: Yeah. But not only that, with Ike we went into--it's an interesting story about Elmore James--Helena, Arkansas, where Ike had discovered some talent there, blues talent, and really went in to record Sonny Boy Williamson.

ISOARDI: Oh, the second.

BIHARI: The second, yes. I'm not sure if he called himself Sonny Boy Williamson, but the original one was Sonny Boy Williamson.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: He would not record for me. I used him only as a sideman. He would not sing. He played harmonica on some recordings with the other artists I recorded.

ISOARDI: Why wouldn't he sing?

BIHARI: I don't know. He just wouldn't record singing for me. Maybe there was a clash some way, but he just wouldn't do it. But he would play background.

ISOARDI: Maybe he had commitments with another label?

BIHARI: I think he did, with Trumpet Records, in Jackson, Mississippi, owned by Lillian McMurray. Eventually he went

to Chess [Records]. Now, he did record for Trumpet Records on the back of Elmore James's first hit, "Dust My Broom." And in fact, I think he played with Elmore on that.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: He was on the flip side of that?

BIHARI: I think he was on the flip side. It might have been an instrumental. But, you see, Elmore only recorded one side for Trumpet Records; it was "Dust My Broom."

ISOARDI: That was the only cut he did for that label?

BIHARI: That's the only recording he did for them.

ISOARDI: How could they have taken that, just recorded that one song? I mean, you would have thought after hearing that they would have said, "More. Give us more." BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What was her name who was running it?

BIHARI: Lillian McMurray.

ISOARDI: Lillian McMurray, that's right. And they just took one cut from Elmore James.

BIHARI: Yeah, from Elmore James, "Dust My Broom."

ISOARDI: And they had no contract with him or anything, right?

BIHARI: Yes, they did. They had a year's contract. He wouldn't record any more. After he met me he would not record any more.

ISOARDI: For Lillian McMurray.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: So the contract didn't require him to record. But if he did record, he had to record with them. Is that sort of the setup?

BIHARI: Yes, right. But he wouldn't make himself available to record with her anymore. When I went into Helena, Arkansas, and recorded James Peck Curtis, Dudlow Taylor, and other blues [artists], where Sonny Boy was playing harmonica, they told Ike and me where Elmore was. We asked, "Where's Elmore James?"

Sonny Boy said--I think it was Sonny Boy--"Oh, he's down in Canton, Mississippi." So after we finished recording there, Ike and I went to Canton, Mississippi.

ISOARDI: Now, did you know Elmore James just from "Dust My Broom"?

BIHARI: Just from "Dust My Broom."

ISOARDI: Just from the record.

BIHARI: That's all. So we went down to Canton, found him at a radio repair shop. He was working for, I think, his cousin, whatever it was. We went to a nightclub and recorded. He signed a contract with me.

ISOARDI: Now, he just met you, right?

BIHARI: Yeah. He took a liking to me.

ISOARDI: And had Ike known him before?

BIHARI: No. Ike didn't know him before either. So we went in and rented the nightclub. He got a few musicians. Ike played piano, and he got a few musicians together. And we recorded. Well, Lillian McMurray found out about it and threw a lawsuit on me. So she had served me with papers--

ISOARDI: Because it was within the year?

BIHARI: Sure. He was under contract to her.

ISOARDI: He didn't mention that to you?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. He said he was under contract, but I didn't care. [laughs] We put the record out and had to pull it back, because she caught me in Mississippi. When I went down to record again she caught me in Jackson where she was. I was recording another one of her artists, J.W. Walker, in a nightclub.

While I was recording, here comes the sheriff serving me with papers. We finally settled the suit. I think we gave her \$2,5000. Elmore waited for his year. He wouldn't record for her anymore. Then I released that record plus a whole bunch of other ones.

ISOARDI: Well, you get your money back.

BIHARI: Yeah. Funny things went on in those days.

ISOARDI: Really, really. It's almost like the old West.

[laughs] Gunfighters coming to town with tape recorders.

BIHARI: Sure. That's right.

ISOARDI: It really sounds kind of wild and fluid and unpredictable and just a lot of intuition, a lot of instinct, a lot of just moving fast and following things up.

BIHARI: Right. Let me tell you a story about-- Ike had called me, and he said, "I've got all this talent lined up." And his home was Clarksdale. Of course, whenever I'd go with Ike, he'd go back to Clarksdale.

ISOARDI: Clarksdale, Mississippi?

BIHARI: Mississippi. That's where his home was.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? He was from there?

BIHARI: Yeah, from Clarksdale. He was on a radio station in Clarksdale, too. He was a disc jockey at one time.

ISOARDI: I didn't know he was from out there.

BIHARI: So we used to go to his mother [Beatrice Turner]'s.

His mother was a wonderful cook and always said, "You're too skinny. We'll fatten you up." [laughs] So anyway, Ike said, "I rented the old Greyhound bus station," where they repaired their buses. "They don't use it anymore, but I rented it so we can record." So I drove in. I had a red Lincoln, fire-engine-red Lincoln, with a continental kit on back with a chrome spare tire cover, twin antennas, and dual pipes.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Were you just getting into cars at this point

or what?

BIHARI: No. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Was there a reason for this display?

BIHARI: For that display? My sister-in-law [Diane Peterson] went to high school--private school--with J.C. Agajanian's daughter [Joan Agajanian]. I guess they hung out together somewhat. But one day, J.C. Agajanian's daughter came down to my office in Culver City and said, "Can I borrow your car for a little while?" I was young and single. I said, "Sure. You want to take it? Here are the keys." She brought it back. I guess she took it to one of the shops. She had twin pipes put on and dual antennas. [laughs] I had the continental kit with the car on the back. That was funny.

Anyway, I went into Clarksdale with the equipment. I gave Ike the car, so he'd take it. You know, when we were finished I'd just go to the hotel. So he had the car. I stayed there for a week. [When we] finished recording-- And my car was parked uphill in a driveway at the Greyhound bus station, their old bus station, and all the musicians were loading my equipment, microphones and everything, into the trunk of my car. All of a sudden two police cars pulled up and blocked me so I couldn't get out. And they said to me, "What are you doing here?"

I said, "I just finished recording."

He said, "Well, you're paying our"--and they used the "N" word--"too much money. We can't control them."

ISOARDI: No kidding.

BIHARI: And one of them said, "What do you think we fought the Civil War for?"

And I said, "But you lost it."

ISOARDI: Did you say that to him?

BIHARI: Absolutely.

ISOARDI: Did you get a club in the stomach?

BIHARI No. They said, "Do you know where Highway 51 is? We're going to escort you out of town. You do not stop until you cross into Tennessee."

Ike Turner will tell that story to everybody and anybody.

He said, "Joe, you must have been crazy." Well, at that time I was young. I didn't think I'd get into any trouble. My girlfriend was Chief Justice Earl Warren's daughter, Nina [Warren].

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: And I figured if anything happened to me I'd just call up Washington, D.C. I had their phone number with me.

ISOARDI: Actually, if the cops had known that they probably

would have killed you. [laughs]

BIHARI: Probably.

ISOARDI: Yes, they probably would have. "Well, we can't get ahold of the chief justice, but--"

BIHARI: I wasn't afraid of anything.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: Listen, I went with Ike-- He was playing at a gambling joint in the backwoods of Arkansas. The town was called Blackfish Lake, Arkansas. Ike had his little band playing there. I followed him there back in the backwoods. I parked my car, and I walked up, and right at the door was a sheriff, a white sheriff. This was a black gambling joint charging so much to get in. He kept the money, and then they could gamble. And I guess he took a percentage of whatever they gambled some way. And when I walked in, he said, "You can't come in here." And Ike said, "Well, look, he's from California.

He does all my recording," so on and so forth. And finally he convinced him, okay, that I could go in while Ike was playing.

Well, Ike played up front. And the sheriff said, "You sit right here, and don't you move. Don't you go up. Don't you go back. Don't you stand up, anything. You just sit there."

Because after he got everybody in with all the money, he came and sat next to me. It was really a weird situation.

And Ike played, his band played, and people gambled.

ISOARDI: He just didn't want you mixing in any way, shape, or form.

BIHARI: In any way, shape, or form. He thought I was maybe an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] man or something. You know, he controlled the gambling.

ISOARDI: Revealing story. Did you ever bump into Alan Lomax when you were down there?

BIHARI: No, I never did. I never did.

ISOARDI: He tells stories along that line in this book [The Land Where Blues Began] that came out a year or two ago.

BIHARI: He's black, isn't he?

ISOARDI: No.

BIHARI: Oh, he's white? I didn't know that.

ISOARDI: No. He talks about driving through there in his book--I guess around '47, '48--and going out to try to record field hollers and things like this. I think at one point he was talking about just getting people to describe what the work was like. And when he told a friend of his who was a journalist in Atlanta what he'd done, his friend said, "Don't let anybody know that these people have talked to you and that you've got it on tape or you'll never get out of here alive."

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. He probably was right. Yeah. A most nervous ride from Georgia up to back up North.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That was gutsy on your part. Very gutsy. You spent quite a bit of time down there.

BIHARI: Oh, I spent a lot of time in the South, yes. We can go back to some recordings with B.B. King out here.

ISOARDI: Yeah, well, actually, are there any more stories around this time in the South? When you got Ike set up, then-- Well, how are your brothers reacting? All of a sudden you're starting to send--

BIHARI: Oh, they're reacting good.

ISOARDI: Okay. So they liked this?

BIHARI: Oh, sure. They're a bunch of good-selling, maybe not all hit records, but good-selling records, building a catalog of good blues.

ISOARDI: How long did you spend down there, your first trip?

BIHARI: You mean in Mississippi? Or in travels?

ISOARDI: In that area.

BIHARI: Two to three weeks.

ISOARDI: Then you came back to California? Then you went back? So you were shuttling back and forth?

BIHARI: Back and forth all the time.

ISOARDI: And Ike was out there permanently pretty much?

BIHARI: Yeah, right. Ike stayed with us. I brought him to California. He drove to California. I got him an apartment. We were going to do some recording here. He stayed about a week, two weeks, maybe a month. He said, "Joe, I just don't like it out here." I said, "Okay." So he went back and scouted more talent. And he stayed with us for a few more months, and then he formed his band and moved to St. Louis or East St. Louis [Illinois], worked around Memphis, Tennessee, you know, the little clubs. He was doing some disc jockey work, things like that. Then he went to St. Louis and formed his band.

ISOARDI: So he wasn't working for you, then, at that time?

BIHARI: Then he wasn't working for us anymore.

ISOARDI: So he was with you for a year maybe?

BIHARI: Oh, two years at least and longer. Two years at least.

ISOARDI: A productive couple of years for you and Ike Turner.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Very much so, yes. It took him out of that slavery type of element that he grew up with. I feel that it really gave him the confidence to be a person. And you have to have lived in the South and traveled the South to see how badly they were treated. I mean, you can't believe.

You see signs: bathrooms, "colored only." Drinking fountains, "colored only." They can't go in the restaurants. They have to sit and go to their own restaurant. It was horrible. They can fight in the war and everything, and they come back to this.

You want to go into some experiences here?

ISOARDI: Yeah, let's go back-- By the time before you headed out there, you were pretty much established as the A and R [artists and repertoire] person for Modern Music. And then you spent time in New York, and then you spent time in the South during this period.

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: Meanwhile, what was happening to the company? We're talking about the period from maybe--what?--1946, '47, up until the early fifties. What was Modern Music becoming? You were growing.

BIHARI: We were growing. Ups and downs every year.

ISOARDI: You were issuing things under Modern?

BIHARI: Modern [Records], RPM [Records], Flair [Records].

ISOARDI: Now, how did all these subsidiaries come about? And why did they come about?

BIHARI: They came about because of distribution. You couldn't put too many records out on one label because the disc jockeys

wouldn't play that many of yours. They had all the other record companies to play, too. It was a different situation in those days.

ISOARDI: It was psychology, then, mostly?

BIHARI: Yes, it was the psychology of it, and also different distribution. When we had Modern and RPM, one distributor had Modern, another distributor had RPM. So you had two different distributors.

ISOARDI: So theoretically, if not practically--

BIHARI: Yeah, two different record companies.

ISOARDI: Two different distributors could go into a disc jockey or whatever and argue like hell for their records, but they could both be working for you.

BIHARI: Right. Then we formed Flair, and I started recording high school kids: Richard Berry, the Flairs, Don Julian and the Meadowlarks, Shirley Gunter, the Teen Queens, and more.

I took high school kids who sang in groups in Jordan High School, all black kids, in Roosevelt High [School], wherever they were. There was our recording studio in Culver City, and that's where I started recording these young kids.

ISOARDI: So each of your labels had kind of a focus?

BIHARI: Yeah. Flair had that focus of the young kids.

ISOARDI: And before that, your first subsidiary was RPM?

BIHARI: RPM, yes.

ISOARDI: And what was that directed toward?

BIHARI: Well, B.B. King was one of the first blues artists. That was directed really for B.B. King, to do him.

ISOARDI: So Hadda [Brooks]'s records would be coming out on Modern?

BIHARI: On Modern. John Lee Hooker's were on Modern. B.B. King was on RPM. Yeah.

The first record I recorded in California on B.B. King was a song called "Every Day I Have the Blues," which became a tremendous hit. What happened was I'd just hired Maxwell Davis as the arranger for the record company.

ISOARDI: What year was this?

BIHARI: I don't know.

ISOARDI: Early fifties?

BIHARI: No, maybe the middle fifties or late fifties.

ISOARDI: Okay.

BIHARI: Maxwell was doing the arranging for Louis Jordan.

He was on his way back from Florida, driving with his wife back to California. I hadn't hired Maxwell then. He was on his way back from Florida. He had an automobile accident, and he got his face all scarred up from the windshield breaking. When he came back home, I called him.

He'd called me and said, "Look, I'm back again." He'd told me what happened.

I said, "Are you all right?" Maxwell had always done arranging for us independently from working exclusively for us throughout the years, and he played saxophone.

He said, "Yeah. My face is all bandaged, but I'm okay."

"Look," I said, "I have B.B. coming in. Do you want to do the arranging?"

He said, "Sure."

So when B.B. came in, we went over to Maxwell's house, started rehearsing and rehearsing, and then Maxwell did the arrangement. I set a date, recorded "Every Day I Have the Blues" at Capitol Records studios on Melrose [Avenue].

ISOARDI: A big hit.

BIHARI: A big, big hit for B.B. And not only that, it was so good for B.B. because he was crazy about Maxwell Davis.

ISOARDI: Wonderful.

BIHARI: The genius of Maxwell Davis. And I believe he was a musical genius. And that was the first time we used that big a band with B.B. Well, I did in Houston--the Bill Harvey Band wasn't quite as big as that--but this was a little bigger band where we used trumpets and trombones, saxophones, and so forth. It was probably twelve, fourteen pieces.

ISOARDI: That's a trademark song of his.

BIHARI: Yes, absolutely. And of course he did "Rock Me, Baby" here and "Sweet Sixteen" and so many more of the B.B. things.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

MARCH 11, 1995

BIHARI: In the late forties I had a hit record titled "The Thrill is Gone," the original recording by Roy Hawkins, who wrote it with a disc jockey named Rick Darnel. Now, B.B. picked it up in later years and recorded the same song, which became a big hit again some years later.

ISOARDI: How did he pick it up?

BIHARI: I don't know. He probably remembered the Roy Hawkins hit record on Modern Records. B.B. had a habit of buying all the old records he liked, the old 78's, old 45 rpm records and things like that.

ISOARDI: So he would just listen to everything?

BIHARI: He would listen to everything. And of course, he recorded "The Thrill is Gone." But we had a big hit on it, too. We have the publishing on it, also.

ISOARDI: Uh-huh. Nice fit.

BIHARI: Yes. I wanted to let you know about that. It was in the late forties. Roy was from the Bay Area--Richmond, San Francisco, or Oakland.

ISOARDI: How well did that do the first time you released it?

BIHARI: It did quite well. It was a hit record. It was a

chart record.

ISOARDI: It was a good song.

BIHARI: The rhythm and blues was not a big seller unless it crossed over to pop. I mean, you could get million sellers.

If we sold a hundred thousand records we had a hit record in those days. It was a lot of records in the 1940s. I wanted to let you know about that before I forgot. We sold mainly to blues buyers then.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MARCH 25, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe, last time you talked quite extensively about your travels in the South scouting talent, you and Ike Turner--and all of the wonderful talent that you uncovered and proceeded to record. And I know you were shuttling back and forth between the South and the business in Los Angeles, etc. Maybe you could talk a bit about what blues was like on the West Coast. Were you finding blues singers in Los Angeles and San Francisco or other places? And where would you go to find them on the West Coast? In clubs? Or would you hear word of mouth or whatever?

BIHARI: Let me go back to my travels, then I'll get into the clubs and places and things. When I was in Shreveport [Louisiana]--this was in 1948 or '49--there was a little tiny record store called Stan's Record Shop in Shreveport.

ISOARDI: Run by Stan?

BIHARI: Run by Stan Lewis. He would sell popcorn, candy, chewing gum, records. He was a young kid, about eighteen or nineteen, and just started in business. He and his wife [Pauline Lewis] ran the store. And we had a hit with John Lee Hooker, his first record, called "Boogie Chillun."

ISOARDI: Ah, great song.

BIHARI: And Stan had to buy-- He was just a little guy. You know, he just started with no money, and he had to buy everything COD [cash on delivery] or pay cash for it. So I went to Shreveport, and he was such a nice person that I said, "Stan, I'm going to give you an open account." So that way instead of buying ten of this and five of that and twenty of this I gave him an unlimited open account so he could buy five hundred of John Lee Hooker at one time.

ISOARDI: But he wouldn't have to pay up front for it?

BIHARI: He wouldn't have to pay up front. I gave him thirty days or sixty days or even ninety days if he needed it. He was just an honest person. And we have been friends ever since that day--

ISOARDI: [laughs] Still?

BIHARI: And still today.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's wonderful.

BIHARI: Yes. Phone calls at least once a month from him or from me to him.

ISOARDI: And he's still in Shreveport?

BIHARI: He's still in Shreveport, yes. And I'll tell you, it really paid off, because as he grew he started sponsoring shows on radio stations, and consequently I had a lot of airplay with my records. He had a big station in Shreveport. And

of course, in Shreveport and surrounding areas he was called Stan the Man [laughs], and he practically controlled the airplay.

If I wanted a record really hit on and promoted, I'd say, "Stan, can you really help me on this record?" He said, "Sure, whatever you want." And he was quite a record force out of Shreveport. He had a station in Oklahoma City that he also sponsored a program on, and that was a big station. I think it was a fifty-thousand-watt station. It covered a big area, a lot of states. So I wanted to mention him because he gave me a lot of help in the early days.

ISOARDI: Did he stay in the record selling business?

BIHARI: Yes, he still is in the business.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yeah. He has his own labels.

ISOARDI: So he got into producing, then.

BIHARI: Yes, he got into producing. And when we had our factory, we did all of his manufacturing on tape cassettes and also records, 45's and long-play records.

ISOARDI: No kidding. What kind of music did he get into?

BIHARI: Blues.

ISOARDI: Blues also.

BIHARI: Yeah. He had a few rock and roll hits also.

ISOARDI: Any names we'd recognize?

BIHARI: Gee, I don't know the artists he has on his label.

I know the name of the labels. He has three labels: Jewel [Records], Paula [Records], and Ronn [Records]. And he's still going with them. Mostly blues, though.

ISOARDI: Great, great.

BIHARI: To talk about the nightclubs here: there were a lot of after-hour nightclubs. And one of them--I think it was an after-hours club--was called the Barrelhouse, where Johnny Otis and Bardu Ali-- It's when I first recorded Bardu Ali. He had played at that club. I think Johnny Otis played drums in the band, and I'm pretty sure Maxwell Davis was one of the saxophone players--

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: In the Bardu Ali band, yes.

ISOARDI: Wow.

BIHARI: This was in the forties.

ISOARDI: So they played a lot of blues.

BIHARI: Yes. He had a big band. Oh, yes, he played a lot of blues. And there were a lot of after-hour places which I would go to. Even though I was so darn young, I still went in there with my brother Jules [Bihari]. And we were there to listen to music. See, during the [Second World] War, I think they could not serve liquor after twelve o'clock. So

actually what they called the after-hour joints was where you brought in your own liquor--

ISOARDI: So they couldn't sell any liquor, but they might--

BIHARI: They couldn't sell it, but--

ISOARDI: Maybe they'd sell some seltzer or something.

BIHARI: That's right. They'd sell a setup and seltzer.

[laughs] And then right across the street from our little factory, which was on First [Street] and San Pedro Street, was a nightclub [Club Samba]. That's where Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers played. Charles Brown played there. Roy Milton and his band. Camille Howard, when she played and sang with Roy Milton's band. And I think Johnny-- You know, I had mentioned Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers with Charles Brown. So they played quite a few acts. But eventually that club went out of business.

ISOARDI: Do you remember when?

BIHARI: I don't remember when, because we had moved away.

I can't remember if they went out of business before we moved from the First and San Pedro to the West Hollywood plant on Robertson Boulevard. And there was the Five Four Ballroom.

I think it was on Fifty-fourth [Street] and Central [Avenue].

ISOARDI: The Five Four Ballroom?

BIHARI: Yes, where they played all the acts: local and acts

that would come in town from other parts of the country.

ISOARDI: When was the Five Four in its heyday?

BIHARI: I think it was in the fifties.

ISOARDI: During the fifties. Was that like the place to go then?

BIHARI: That was the place to go. It was a dance place, also--I mean, you could dance there. When it went out of business a few years later I rented the Five Four Ballroom to put on a promotion. I had B.B. King, Jesse Belvin, Richard Berry and the Flairs, I think Don Julian and the Meadowlarks. I had the Johnny Otis band.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: It was strictly a promotion. And it was packed. I tell you, we had to have so much police there because people couldn't get in. And it was strictly a promotion, too, you know, for the [Modern Music] labels.

ISOARDI: For the label in general or the business in general?

BIHARI: Yeah. That's all it was for. It wasn't to make any money. The only promotion we wanted was for the artists.

So the money, whatever was taken in, was just split between all the artists after the rent was paid and security was paid.

I'm trying to think. Well, in the early part of the 1940s there was the Cotton Club on Central Avenue. I think that

was in Watts. It was called the Cotton Club.

ISOARDI: Where was that? It was in Watts?

BIHARI: Well, it was-- I think it was on 101st [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI: When was it sort of a place to go?

BIHARI: In the early forties.

ISOARDI: There was a place out there, near there, called the Plantation Club. Was that the place?

BIHARI: Yeah, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Did you ever go out to hear things out there?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: What was it like?

BIHARI: It was just a big club. God, you know, you're trying to get me to remember what it looked like fifty years ago--
[laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, was it the kind of place where everybody dressed to the nines?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Or was there sawdust on the floor?

BIHARI: No, no, no. It was a dress-up place, if I remember.

ISOARDI: So it was kind of a fancy place.

BIHARI: Yes. As a matter of fact, people dressed in those days when they went out.

ISOARDI: Much more so--?

BIHARI: Much more so than today. It was usually coat and tie.

ISOARDI: Maybe a hat?

BIHARI: Yeah, quite often. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah, they really have gone out. People just don't--

BIHARI: Oh, they don't dress anymore. People just don't dress.

But everybody dressed in those days. You went out, and you went out to go dancing, you went to dinner, you dressed.

ISOARDI: So there were quite a few blues clubs in L.A.?

BIHARI: Yes, yes. Dunbar Hotel had-- I can't remember what they had there, but there was a club on Adams [Boulevard] at a hotel. I can't remember, but I think it was the Adams Hotel.

ISOARDI: Adams and--?

BIHARI: At Adams Boulevard, Adams and Western [Avenue]. There was a club there we used to go to quite often. It played acts all the time.

ISOARDI: When was that?

BIHARI: In the fifties.

ISOARDI: The fifties also.

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: I mean, this is Adams and Western and in the fifties.

It sounds like-- Was Central no longer as important then?
BIHARI: No. Central was-- I don't know what happened, why it fell down. Possibly one reason was they merged the black and the white unions [American Federation of Musicians], the Local 47 and the black union [Local 767]. They ended up merging into one union. So consequently the musicians hung out more at the Vine Street hall [Local 47] and they were worked out of there.

ISOARDI: So there was just sort of an opportunity to get away from Central and people took it?

BIHARI: Well, that's what happened. I don't know why it did, but I think they felt there was no reason to have two unions. I mean, especially here, because the bands were mixed anyway, so they merged the two unions.

ISOARDI: Was Western sort of becoming the place where clubs were?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: Or was there really never anything like Central? Once Central died that was pretty much it?

BIHARI: That's pretty much it, yes. Right. There was a club-- Oh, this is interesting: Billy Berg's on Vine Street, which was a club. Every Sunday they had what they called their jazz concert, where musicians came in and just fell in and

started playing.

ISOARDI: Oh, just like a jam session.

BIHARI: A jam session, exactly. And I was there on a Sunday.

Frankie Laine was singing "That's My Desire." I asked him if I could have the lyrics to it, and he said, "No, I'm going to record it." Eventually Hadda Brooks found an old lead sheet. She found a lead sheet on it, and we recorded "That's My Desire" with Hadda Brooks, and we had a very big hit. Frankie Laine was from Chicago, and my distributor in Chicago just knocked him right out of the box with the Hadda Brooks record, because he just promoted and promoted and promoted that record.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: It was very interesting.

ISOARDI: But with Hadda's lyrics?

BIHARI: No, the original lyrics to "That's My Desire."

Frankie Laine just wouldn't give it to me to get it for Hadda Brooks. So she finally found a lead sheet on it or sheet music on it.

ISOARDI: So during this time, then, when you weren't in the South, I guess, as sort of the main talent scout for Modern, were you also then scoping out local talent as well?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Looking for people to sign? Were these clubs the main places you'd find people?

BIHARI: Yeah. But the clubs were gone in the fifties. And at that time, yes, in the clubs you would find a lot of talent.

There were a lot of little places that played bands like Will Rowland, Johnny Alston. Those were local bands. They had six-, eight-piece bands that played around.

ISOARDI: So you'd sort of go listen to them play whenever they were around, see who they had with them, maybe guest artists, that kind of thing?

BIHARI: It wasn't so much guest artists. And then Pee Wee Crayton-- I mean, they all played. In the forties and fifties there were clubs-- I can't remember where I used to see Pee Wee Crayton play, who originally was from Texas but made his home in Oakland in the 1940s. Happy Johnson was another band, the late forties. He had a bigger band; he had twelve pieces. That was a good-sized band.

ISOARDI: Pretty good size for the fifties--

BIHARI: Yes, a pretty good-sized band. Actually it was the late forties. What else can I say?

ISOARDI: Did you find many people? Who were the kinds of people you were finding out here?

BIHARI: Oh, we found the bands at that time.

ISOARDI: These bands you recorded?

BIHARI: These bands that we recorded. But a lot of the talent would come right to us.

ISOARDI: Oh, I guess you were an established name--

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Within a couple of years they were knocking on your door.

BIHARI: To give you an idea what happened, in 1956, Paul Anka--who is from Toronto, Canada--came out on a vacation. His uncle lived in Beverly Hills. He came down to my office and said-- Before that I was rehearsing a group called the Jacks, which was a local group. And an interesting story about the Jacks: they were originally a gospel group. Maxwell Davis and myself got them to convert, but the head of the group would not convert from gospel. He left the group. Of course, the first record was "Why Don't You Write Me," which was a big hit record. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Was the leader also the lead voice?

BIHARI: No, he wasn't.

ISOARDI: Oh, so that was okay.

BIHARI: So it was okay. They didn't mind. [laughs] They became two groups. We call them the Jacks, where there was one lead singer or two lead singers. Ted Taylor, who became

a big artist on his own, was with them at that time, and Aaron Collins. Those were the two lead singers for the Jacks. And Dub Jones. Well, Jones, who eventually went with the Drifters, was a part of the Cadets, which was the same group. But he was the lead singer, and we called them the Cadets. And of course, the first record under the Cadets was a hit called "Stranded in the Jungle."

ISOARDI: Did you ever record any of their gospel?

BIHARI: Not their gospel, no, never did.

ISOARDI: Where were they singing? Do you remember what part of L.A., what church?

BIHARI: I really don't know what church. I did record Reverend James W. Cleveland and his choir.

ISOARDI: Did you?

BIHARI: Yes. Yes, I recorded an album on him. We recorded another gospel group, and I'm trying to think of their name.

If I look here I might find it. I recorded quite a few things on them. Let me see if I can find this gospel group. Now, there was some gospel that was brought to us. There was quite a big hit from Reverend J.W. Killens from Detroit called "Father, I Stretch My Arms to Thee." It was a very big gospel hit.

And it was a sermon is what it was--very little singing. A little bit of singing but mostly a sermon.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Maybe one of the earliest samples of rap.

[laughs]

BIHARI: Could have been. I'd like to find the record of it.

I think if I can get Ace Records in England to release it or send me a tape on it-- Let's see if I can find-- [tape recorder off]

Well, anyway, Paul Anka was here on a vacation and was leaving in a couple of days to go back to Toronto, Canada.

He was sixteen years old. He was in the office. Saul [Bihari] came to me while I was rehearsing a group called the Jacks for a recording session the next day, and Saul said to me, "I've got a young kid out here. He's full of piss and vinegar.

He won't leave. He's going to stay here until I listen to him and sign him to a contract." [laughs] So I said, "Saul, I don't record white artists, but to get him off your hands I'll listen to him."

Well, when I listened to him I knew immediately what kind of talent he had. He was fabulous. I just didn't have time to really go through anything. I said, "Here, learn this song tonight and we'll record it tomorrow."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: "And do it with the Jacks." Yes.

And he said, "No, I won't do anything unless I sign a

contract. I want to sign a contract with you."

So I said to Paul, "You know, I'll sign you to a contract, but it's no good in the state of California. You have to have all minors' contracts approved by the courts."

ISOARDI: And he's sixteen.

BIHARI: He's sixteen, and he lives in Canada. He said, "I don't care. I'm signing a contract. I want a one-year contract."

So I tried to explain that again.

He said, "I don't care. I'm going to sign a contract with you. I'm going to be the biggest artist in the country."

So I said, "Okay."

ISOARDI: Didn't lack chutzpah. [laughs]

BIHARI: No, he didn't. So he signed a contract, and I recorded two songs. And then when he went back to Canada, back to school, about a month later I got a letter from him. He said, "I've written 'Put Your Head on My Shoulder,' 'Diana,'" this song, that song. "Will you please come up and record me?"

ISOARDI: Did he send you lyrics or music? Or just the titles?

BIHARI: No, just the titles. And I wrote him back and said, "I can't come up right now, but I'll see if I can arrange to come up and record you."

Well, Jules took a look at my letter, and he said, "You're not going up to record him. You're not going up anyplace to record him."

I said, "The kid is-- He's got all the talent. He knows he's going to be big, and I know he's going to be big."

And Jules put his foot down. He said, "No, you can't."

Jules and I fell out from that day on. From 1956 we had an underlying undertow of disagreements.

ISOARDI: Why was he so opposed? Money?

BIHARI: I don't know.

ISOARDI: Expense?

BIHARI: Maybe because he was white he was opposed. But that was really not a real reason, because he had recorded himself-- He had a friend by the name of Jimmy Cook who was white, and he recorded him on his own, whose records never sold. Except in one group he did record, a group called Don, Dick, and Jimmy, three white guys, they did have a hit record back in the fifties. But anyway--

And then in 1956 I got married. Before I got married I recorded "Eddie, My Love" with the Teen Queens. And I said to Jules, "Here, this is a hit record. I'm getting married and I'm going on my honeymoon."

ISOARDI: But in the meanwhile you forgot about Paul Anka?

BIHARI: No. That undertow kept going. I kept getting letters from Paul, and I finally told him I couldn't come up. He waited one year. His contract was up, he went to New York, to ABC [American Broadcasting Company], and signed a contract where they recorded "Diana," "Put Your Head on My Shoulder," and from there on hit after hit after hit after hit. This is where it started in 1956, when I recorded "Eddie, My Love," and I said, "Jules, you know I'm getting married and I'll be gone on my honeymoon. Here's a hit record. I expect it to be in the top ten when I get back." He looked at me and he said, "You call that a hit record?" And I said, "It's a hit record." See, we had that little thing that went on with him and me. He was a wonderful person excepting that we had a-- You know, not so noticeable, but it was always underneath.

ISOARDI: Was this so earlier on? Or was it just emerging about this time?

BIHARI: It started emerging in about the middle fifties.

ISOARDI: Nineteen fifty-six, '57?

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Before this you'd never had this problem, though?

BIHARI: Never had the problem, uh-uh.

ISOARDI: He didn't question your judgment on any of the other

people?

BIHARI: No, uh-uh. Not at all. He might have been a little jealous or something.

ISOARDI: What did he say after Paul Anka started hitting? Did he ever say anything about these?

BIHARI: No, of course not.

ISOARDI: And "Eddie, My Love" became a great hit.

BIHARI: Yes. When I came back from my honeymoon I think it was number three on the charts.

ISOARDI: He never said a word about it?

BIHARI: No, uh-uh. He just kept quiet. He didn't say anything.

ISOARDI: Jeez, Paul Anka.

BIHARI: You know, he never said, "Hey, Joe, you were right" or anything like that.

ISOARDI: You know, between Paul Anka and Elvis Presley you guys touched upon some of the leading, leading white artists of the fifties.

BIHARI: Exactly.

Getting back to California and the clubs-- What was I going to say? I wish I could remember the names of the clubs we went to.

ISOARDI: Did you roam much outside of L.A.? Like up the West

Coast?

BIHARI: Oh, yes, up in San Francisco. I picked up several records in San Francisco or in Oakland, that area. One was "The Thrill Is Gone," Roy Hawkins, the original record of "The Thrill Is Gone." I didn't record that--

ISOARDI: You just wanted the song.

BIHARI: But I wanted the master. I bought the master off of a fellow name of Bob Geddins.

ISOARDI: Did you intend to release it?

BIHARI: We did release it, and it was a hit record with Roy Hawkins.

ISOARDI: So you weren't thinking of B.B. [King] then?

BIHARI: Always thinking of B.B. [laughs] But we were out after other ones.

*[There was a young black attorney in Oakland by the name of Thomas Berkley who negotiated contracts for us. One contract that I remember was the Saunders King, whom I recorded.

In 1946 David Rosenbaum, owner of Rhythm Records, had a hit record titled "S.K. Blues, Part One and Two," which we leased and released on the Modern (Records) label. Thomas Berkley also handled the contract of Roy Hawkins, who wrote "The Thrill Is Gone," which became a big hit for B.B. King also.]

Then we picked up another record called "T99 Blues,"

which was a big hit--this was in either the late forties or early fifties--with Jimmy Nelson. And they all played around this area, you know, San Francisco on down, or Oakland, Richmond, that area. Jimmy McCracklin, whom we recorded, had a lot of records. He was from Richmond. I recorded him up there and recorded him down here, also.

ISOARDI: How did you find the people up there? Would you just--?

BIHARI: Go right into the nightclubs.

ISOARDI: That's how you'd do it up there?

BIHARI: Or stop by and say, "Gee, there's a great artist up here. Here's a good blues singer." I'd go up and listen to them. See, I had no fear of going into black clubs. None whatsoever.

ISOARDI: Never had any problems?

BIHARI: Never had a problem, and I had no fear. The only problem I had once was I rented a nightclub in Houston, Texas, and went down and recorded Peppermint Harris. Oh, I recorded

* Bihari added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

it must have been ten or fifteen artists, and somebody pulled a gun, put a gun to my head while I was engineering.

ISOARDI: Why? What was--?

BIHARI: I have no idea.

ISOARDI: Just out of the blue?

BIHARI: Just walked in, just out of the blue. Because the club was open, people walked in, and just out of the blue somebody-- One of the artists there just pulled him off. He must have been drunk or something. That was the only frightening incident I had.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That qualifies.

BIHARI: Yes. And there were a lot of artists who came out of that particular session. I don't remember who they were outside of Peppermint Harris.

Now, I did record-- Let me see. There was a song called "Junko Pardner," which became a hit. I think it was on Sittin' In [with] Records. I gave it to him. Bobby Shad was a good friend of mine. He owned Sittin' In [with] Records. He made mostly jazz, and I tried to help him out to get him into blues.

So I recorded "Junko Pardner," and I gave it to him. I can't even remember who the artist was, but it became a hit record.

Then we get back to L.A.

ISOARDI: What about San Diego, south?

BIHARI: I never did any recording in San Diego.

ISOARDI: Never?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: No blues clubs or anything like that there?

BIHARI: I'm sure there were, but I didn't go down there. I didn't look for any talent there at all. See, so often the talent would come to us.

ISOARDI: That's how you relied mostly on it, then?

BIHARI: Exactly. They would come in when we were on First and San Pedro Street or when we were in West Hollywood on Robertson Boulevard or in Culver City. A lot of talent would come right in, or somebody would bring them in, one of our artists, or something. I brought

B.B. out many times and recorded a lot of things with B.B. out here. And he played the clubs around when he would come out. He'd have a night here, a night there, even though B.B. had had hit records before he became a big performing artist.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

BIHARI: But California really died as far as nightclubs were concerned, where the artists-- Places for black artists to play, they weren't in Los Angeles. In the fifties there were maybe one or two places they could play.

ISOARDI: So Central Avenue was gone. There was really nothing

to take its place.

BIHARI: Really nothing to take its place. It just disintegrated as far as the entertainment.

ISOARDI: Where were people going to entertain themselves?

BIHARI: In the fifties, I really don't know. Of course, you had the clubs on the Sunset Strip. You had the Trocadero, the Mocambo, you had Ciro's--

ISOARDI: Well, yeah, but that's not bringing in the black audience.

BIHARI: Well, they were playing black artists.

ISOARDI: Oh, sure, sure.

BIHARI: You know, Nat [King] Cole played-- But, you know, Nat Cole sold to whites. Ike and Tina [Turner] played Ciro's, you know. And Ciro's went out of business. And then somebody bought it up, and I think they put in a comedy club in Ciro's.

See, the Strip also died. The Trocadero, Mocambo, Florentine Gardens, they were all gone in the fifties. So there was really a transition in the music.

ISOARDI: Everyone was watching their televisions.

BIHARI: I think so. [laughs]

ISOARDI: And not going out. So maybe it's not surprising, then, that you get artists knocking on your door more and more, because they can't--

BIHARI: They had no place to play and to be seen.

ISOARDI: How many would you have to go through before you found a good one? [laughs]

BIHARI: Plenty of them.

ISOARDI: You must have listened to a lot.

BIHARI: And the money was limited. I mean, you couldn't record everything that came in. You had to be selective. Then you'd miss on some of them, also, sure. I recorded Percy Mayfield, but I never-- He went on to Specialty [Records] with hit records, so he never stayed with me. He had a lot of hits, especially a big one, his first one, I think, was "Please Send Me Someone to Love." He was a great songwriter, a much better songwriter than a singer, but he could perform his songs the way he wrote in a manner that didn't take a great singer. He could tell a story.

ISOARDI: Yeah. A key ingredient, truly. Well, at this time, was Modern facing much competition?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Were all sorts of people churning out records, independents springing up everywhere?

BIHARI: All over everyplace. Philadelphia. You know, the doo-wops were coming in. You know, not only the black artists but the white artists were doing--

ISOARDI: All the covers?

BIHARI: --covers and things like that.

ISOARDI: How about in L.A.? What was your competition here?

BIHARI: It didn't have to be L.A. itself.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, right. Sure, because it's national--

BIHARI: I mean, as far as labels, there weren't many L.A. labels. There was Specialty, which was a big label. Very, very good. Little Richard.

ISOARDI: Who ran Specialty?

BIHARI: Art Rupe.

ISOARDI: Did you know him?

BIHARI: Oh, very well. I'll tell you a story about Art. Early on he had a partner, and they had a label called Juke Box [Records], and that went out of business. This was in the forties--

ISOARDI: Just after you guys had started up?

BIHARI: After we had started up. We were successful. We had our plant, our two-record plant, on First and San Pedro.

ISOARDI: Two presses-- [laughs]

BIHARI: And Art came down one evening and sat down with Jules and me, and he said, "I don't know what to do, whether I should go back in the record business or what." And it was with our advice that-- We told him, "Art, this is a baby business.

It's just starting. Go back into the business." So he went back in the business--

ISOARDI: Boy, were you right.

BIHARI: --and started with Specialty Records, and he had lots of hits. Very successful. He ran a very good operation.

Then there was Lou Chudd with Imperial Records who did a very, very, very nice business. He had Fats Domino, Ricky Nelson. So he had both; he had black artists and white artists.

ISOARDI: What was he like?

BIHARI: Very nice person, Lou was. He ran a nice, nice good business too. Then he had good country and western records at Imperial.

ISOARDI: What was that called?

BIHARI: They had Slim Whitman, who was a tremendous artist in country on Imperial.

ISOARDI: Yeah, huge. [laughs]

BIHARI: So he had a good variety. He did very, very well.

ISOARDI: Country sold in Southern California?

BIHARI: Yes, it certainly did.

ISOARDI: Still a lot of people from the thirties and the dust bowl, I guess.

BIHARI: Yes, there are. But you know, it was national. I mean, you didn't depend on California for your living on record sales.

ISOARDI: Right, of course. And were the René brothers [Leon and Otis René] still very active?

BIHARI: No, not at all. They had some problems. Otis never did get very big, Otis René, with his Excelsior [Records]. But Leon did well. Eventually he just went out of business.

ISOARDI: So they didn't survive for many years?

BIHARI: Didn't survive for many years.

ISOARDI: So that's pretty much it? Those other couple of labels were sort of the other big independents?

BIHARI: Right. Now, Leon René did bring some artists to us. One in particular was Oscar McLollie.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: Because he was out of the business.

ISOARDI: Oh, this was afterwards.

BIHARI: This was afterwards. He brought Oscar in. We had a couple of hits with Oscar McLollie, and Leon René was the songwriter on them. So he brought him to us.

ISOARDI: Were the major record companies paying any attention to the independents at this point, by the mid-fifties or so?

BIHARI: Yes, because Jackie Wilson came out on the Brunswick

[Records] label, which I think was part of Decca [Records].

Actually they had independents, like Epic Records, which was part of one of the companies. They started their independent labels, also. Now, whether it was in the fifties or in the sixties I don't recall.

ISOARDI: So they didn't sort of go and try and sort of buy you guys out?

BIHARI: No, uh-uh.

ISOARDI: They would just start up their own labels, their own lines?

BIHARI: Start up their own, right. But we controlled so much promotion in this country because of all the traveling. See, during those days, the disc jockeys who were playing black music--some were black, some were white, who were playing black music--they put their own records on the turntable. They didn't have an engineer or program director to program.

So I would go into a radio station with a disc jockey, whether he was on daytime or nighttime, wherever I was, and I always had a good relationship with them. A lot of telephone calls to them. You know, all the records, before we even released it, we'd send them out copies right away. So when I would travel I would always have a stack of our records, and I would sit with the disc jockey-- It wasn't always with recording,

but I was with disc jockeys, also. I'd sit with them on the set and say, "Here, play this." I'd hand them my records, and they'd never say no. While I was there they were playing my records. If they had an hour show they might have six or seven of my own records on. Now, I'd do that all over the country. Like in New Orleans, there was a disc jockey there called Poppa Stoppa. He needed a theme song. So we had Pee Wee Crayton do an instrumental called "The Poppa Stoppa," and that was his theme song.

ISOARDI: So this guy was indebted big time. [laughs]

BIHARI: Yes. Also in New Orleans there was a big disc jockey called Okey Dokey. They opened up the Lincoln Park, which was a park in the black neighborhood in New Orleans, and he was honored. I flew down and brought him a plaque and a trophy, presented it to him. There were thirty thousand people at the park.

ISOARDI: Jeez, this must have been the most popular disc jockey around.

BIHARI: He was in New Orleans.

ISOARDI: And he spun mostly blues discs?

BIHARI: That's all he played was blues. He was black. His was called Okey Dokey on the Radio.

In Houston they had a disc jockey--it was a lady disc

jockey--called Dizzy Lizzy. I mean, they took these names.

[laughs] She was nice. She used to play my records all the time when I was there. Once she said, "You know what I'd like to have? I would like to have a wig." So on my next trip I brought her a wig. I didn't say anything. But the next trip--maybe I was back in Houston in a month--I brought her a wig.

ISOARDI: Was she obviously hinting at that, though?

BIHARI: No. She just said, "I'd just like to have a wig." Just like that. We were talking. "I need a wig." And I brought her a wig that I had bought for her. [laughs] And she was so thrilled.

I can't remember all the names, but disc jockeys-- Well, in Nashville, Tennessee, Gene Nobles on WLAC, which was a fifty-thousand-watt clear channel station where we had so much airplay. Randy's Record Shop sponsored that, out of Gallitan, Tennessee. He [Randy Wood] sponsored part of the show, and Randy told him what to play, because those were packages of records that he was selling. Then he had his own hour or two where he played whatever he wanted, and he used to give us so much play there in Nashville. And that Nashville station, I tell you, just covered forty states in the United States. And that's what a lot of black people

listened to those days, because there weren't many black records played on radio stations in these little towns. So they would listen to WLAC to hear the black music. *[John Richbourg and Hoss Allen both played blues records on WLAC.]

ISOARDI: Jeez. I know maybe this comes a bit later, but there's that big flap and the brouhaha about payola and that stuff and the problem with deejays. I mean, did you run into any of this? Did you run into deejays who were trying to strong-arm you a bit or this kind of thing?

BIHARI: Never. Not one time.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Was it because of the kind of music, the people you were dealing with--blues artists, blues deejays--as opposed to pop?

BIHARI: I approached it a little differently. I would socialize with them. I would take them out to dinner. I would take them out here, take them out there. If you want to turn that into friendships--

ISOARDI: You built friendships.

BIHARI: Yeah, very definitely built friendships. [tape recorder off] You asked the question.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I asked the question, what about payola?

BIHARI: Well, I think it's pretty well recognized that my brother Saul [Bihari] and myself started the payola in this country.

ISOARDI: Why is it recognized?

BIHARI: Because everybody--not everybody--but most of the companies followed what we did. Only they made a mistake: they wrote checks. We paid cash.

ISOARDI: People would just sit right there and write out checks to so-and-so deejay--

BIHARI: A deejay calls him, "Man, I need some money." And "I've been playing your records. Can you send me \$100?" The other companies would send him \$100, but they'd send him a check. They said it to me, I'd say, "Look," I would tell them, "I'm getting ready to take a trip. I'll come in and see you. I'll take care of you when I see you." That's okay with them. And that's what I did. And every time I traveled they expected something, and I always gave them something. And I'm talking about all over the country.

ISOARDI: Pretty widespread. Everywhere.

BIHARI: Very widespread, yes.

ISOARDI: Was that the way it had been since you guys first got into the business?

BIHARI: No, there was no payola, because there was very little

airplay when we first got in the business.

ISOARDI: When did this start?

BIHARI: It started in the fifties. It started in the fifties when-- There were a lot of black stations that played nothing but black music, and there were stations that had an hour of a gospel program and an hour of blues. So all over the country they eventually came in. And that was our means of promotion. I mean, you could pay for it in advertising in a Billboard magazine or a Cash Box [magazine], but you did that because you had a record on the charts. So you said, "Well, look, you've got a record on the charts. We'd better give them some advertising."

ISOARDI: Yeah. You said that you and Saul started it. How do you know you started it?

BIHARI: Because the guys would say, "The brothers from Modern, they gave us some money." They'd tell them, "What's the matter with you guys?" [laughs] Then it went to Leonard Chess and everybody else, so they all started paying. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Did they first ask you? Or did you offer them some cash? [laughs]

BIHARI: That I can't remember.

ISOARDI: Just trying to get which came first, the chicken or the egg.

BIHARI: No, I think that I just offered it to them. I'd just say, "Here. You've been playing my records."

ISOARDI: So here's a gift.

BIHARI: Right. And then I guess they woke up and said, "Hey, there are a lot of other ones we've been playing, too." [laughs]
So that's what happened.

ISOARDI: Look what you started. [laughs]

BIHARI: So there was an audit. The United States government made an audit of record companies, the major independents, and they audited us. We, from what I heard, were the only record company that did not get a cease and desist order, because we were completely clean, because we never gave a check to a disc jockey. Our payola was always cash.

ISOARDI: You can't trace cash.

BIHARI: You can't trace cash. It was always in cash. [laughs]

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

MARCH 25, 1995

BIHARI: So anyway, the disc jockeys got frightened to take payola, also, after that.

ISOARDI: With that investigation, sure.

BIHARI: Yeah, with the investigation. So I had a list of the major disc jockeys who played my records. We couldn't give them payola anymore, so I got the idea, "Look," I said to, oh, I bet you there must have been twenty-five of them.

I said, "Open a record store. I will send you free records, and you play the records on the radio and you'll create sales for those records." Usually there were some five hundred or a thousand records. Well, that represented \$500 or \$1,000 to them they got for free.

ISOARDI: Yeah, really.

BIHARI: So that was really payola in another way, which was nontraceable, also.

ISOARDI: And you figured, well, the cost of that many records was fine. It wasn't--

BIHARI: Well, a thousand 45's cost us \$100. It was nothing.

ISOARDI: For a disc jockey that's pushing you coast to coast or something like that.

BIHARI: Right. So he sold a thousand-- I'll guarantee you that the other stores around the area-- Let's take Philadelphia as an example, a big blues sales territory. He created enough interest in those records or whatever it was, one or two or five or ten different records, that we sold ten times that much just in that area. It was another way of promoting and making hit records.

ISOARDI: Truly. Did most of the ones you talked to do that? They set up record shops?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Yes. When they sold out they asked for another five hundred records. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Did you keep sending them?

BIHARI: Yeah. Because it just assured us of record play all the time. And that was the main means of promotion, record play.

ISOARDI: Would they go around to other companies and say, "Send us some records"?

BIHARI: You know, I don't know. Maybe they did.

ISOARDI: Because if they opened a record store, they had to have more than five hundred records from Modern.

BIHARI: They also made money if they had to go buy records, because they knew what they were buying. You know, it just

gave them another enterprise--not only as a disc jockey, but they had a business besides.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. The beginnings of payola. [laughs]

BIHARI: Yeah, that's the way it started.

ISOARDI: Do you ever deal with Alan Freed?

BIHARI: Yeah. I dealt with Alan Freed, yes. As a matter of fact, Alan Freed was very fond of my brother Saul, and when my brother Saul gave him \$100, he didn't know what it was for. He didn't know what-- He was in Cleveland, Ohio.

He was a deejay in Cleveland. That's before he went to New York. He was a big deejay there. He called himself Moon Dog.

My brother had spent a week with him, and he paid him. He gave him \$100 the first time they met, shook hands with him with \$100. He said, "What's this for?" Well, you know, he didn't know anything. He said, "I

can't take your money. I like your records. I'm playing--" They became really close, close friends. And when Alan moved to New York, he used our song "Goodnight, My Love" by Jesse Belvin as his theme song, his closing theme. And it was always because of my brother Saul that he did that. I'm sure he could have picked many, many songs to use as a closing theme.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That's nice.

BIHARI: And whenever we had a new release, he always played

it. And when he went to New York, we never paid him a dime.

It was only that one time that we ever paid him.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Why not the other times?

BIHARI: Saul quit traveling. He didn't travel anymore. The friendship was very much telephone friendship until Alan came to California. Of course, I used to go to New York quite a bit. Alan lived in Connecticut, and he had a stepdaughter which, when I was young, I took out. He was trying to get me married off to her. [laughs] Lovely girl, young girl, very, very nice. And you know, it was a Bihari friendship with Alan Freed. It didn't have to-- It didn't involve money after that one time. That was all it was, this once in Cleveland.

Of course, Alan got a lot of trouble from taking payola.

ISOARDI: He probably took the brunt.

BIHARI: Yes, he did.

ISOARDI: Pilloried.

BIHARI: Uh-huh. Yes.

ISOARDI: Did you ever talk to him when that was going down?

BIHARI: No. I never did, because he was let go from the station.

He moved to California, he lived in Palm Springs, and he and Saul were close, close friends. Saul used to go down

and see him quite a bit. He died here in Palm Springs.

ISOARDI: When was that?

BIHARI: I don't know what year it was.

ISOARDI: I can't remember the year he died.

BIHARI: Before he died, Alan's wife [Inga Freed], when he was very, very ill in the last few days, called Saul and said, "Would you come down? Alan hasn't got much more time to live." So Saul went down and spent time with Alan and his wife.

Well, that is payola. And a lot of things-- I could give you an example: There was a disc jockey in Beaumont, Texas. He went under the name of Boy Brown. He used to play a lot of our records. I was in Houston, and I called him.

I said, "Could you come up and have lunch with me?" He came up, and I took him to the Shamrock Hotel for lunch. He had tears in his eyes. He said, "I've never been to a white place to have lunch in all my life."

ISOARDI: And they let him in?

BIHARI: Oh, certainly. Yes, they let him in with me.

Something, isn't it?

ISOARDI: Yeah, really.

BIHARI: I mean, things were-- It's unbelievable.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly.

BIHARI: Really, I'm telling you. It was really, really

terrible there. But, you know, that was after the civil rights movement.

ISOARDI: Well, you came through payola pretty clean, then?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, came off completely clean with payola.

[laughs]

ISOARDI: But the deejays just backed off, though.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, they just backed off.

ISOARDI: The payola wasn't expected, then? They just decided they didn't want to fool--? Even though there was no problem in getting cash? They didn't shift into cash? They just dropped it rather than risking their career?

BIHARI: That's right, yes, because they could have been in real, real bad trouble.

ISOARDI: You mentioned, I think, last time-- Well, actually I wanted to ask you before we get into that, what happened since you were focusing early on so heavily on the blues? Although you did record a wide variety of things, really the blues was the main focus.

BIHARI: Blues was the main focus.

ISOARDI: What happened when R and B hit, rhythm and blues?

Country blues--I mean, because you spent so much time recording all these great country blues artists--what happened to them when rhythm and blues hit? Do you have to--?

BIHARI: The country blues just went down, down, down. During the civil rights movement, for some reason blacks didn't want to be associated with country blues. They wanted to get out of that element and elevate themselves. At least this is my impression.

ISOARDI: Quote, unquote, "elevate"?

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: Also, it was seen that that was more the old ways.

BIHARI: The old ways. They wanted to go into something new.

I mean, this was my impression of why country blues just died. And even B.B. King had some problems selling blues after that. We had a dry period with B.B. where blues wasn't selling so much. And I'm sure that's one reason why we started going into the vocal groups. I went to the high schools to get the vocal groups, because they weren't singing blues, but they were going in when doo-wop started coming in.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: That type of thing. That's why I did Richard Berry and his group, "Eddie, My Love" with the Teen Queens, and "Oop Shoop" with Shirley Gunter and the Queens. Those were all high school kids.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So you weren't recording blues artists, then, anymore?

BIHARI: No. Only B.B. and maybe Elmore [James]. Still Elmore and B.B.

ISOARDI: That's about it?

BIHARI: That's about it. You know, that was in the late fifties.

ISOARDI: Then, when you decided to diversify a bit, you decided to look for local high school talent for the doo-wop groups and things like that.

BIHARI: Right. And then we formed a new label called Flair.

The Flairs, that was the group-- Richard Berry and the Flairs, and that's what we called them, the Flairs. They came in as a different name. And he brought in Arthur Lee Maye and the Crowns, another group. Arthur Lee Maye became a professional baseball player and a major leaguer. He was in I think Salt Lake City or one of the Utah teams or up in that area, and he led the league in hitting. He called me.

He said, "I want to quit baseball and just sing." He was a good singer. He didn't have a hit record, but I convinced him to stay with baseball and not just sing. And I never recorded him again. He stayed with baseball and became a major league baseball player, too. He had led the league that year in hitting. And he was just out of high school. When he recorded for me he was in high school.

And then we had formed another label called Kent, where we transferred a lot of the things that were on Modern [Records] and RPM [Records]. Modern eventually we dropped. We didn't drop it completely. We had what we called Modern Oldies--the Modern label, only the oldies hits that we had had. And we still had the RPM label. We eventually dropped that and put that on Kent.

ISOARDI: So you were going mostly with Kent and Flair, then?

BIHARI: Yes. And even Flair was dropped and was released on Kent. What happened was, business had fallen way down.

And we had started a new business, a new label. It was the record business, but it was Budget Records. They were LPs, and we took categories of records, like we had country and western--we had a lot of country and western--a lot of classical, honky-tonk piano, Dixieland, and many, many varieties, big bands and varieties of music, where it kept me recording constantly.

ISOARDI: Oh, so you really started branching out, then?

BIHARI: Yes. And those were Budget. They sold for ninety-nine cents or \$1.49. We had a very big factory where we did all of the matrix plating, the recording, the printing of covers, the fabricating of covers, and, of course, the pressing of the records. We made our own labels and color

separations for the colored covers. We had our own art department there at the factory.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

APRIL 1, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe, why don't we continue on with the subject we got into a little bit last time, and that is your recording of all these high school kids and this high school talent in Los Angeles that had started emerging in the mid-sixties. I guess this was the time when you were moving away from country blues--

BIHARI: Right, and we were going into more of the doo-wop sound or the group sound.

ISOARDI: There's one thing I wanted to add that I don't think we talked about. I know you mentioned some of them and some of the recordings you made with them, but I wondered if you could talk a bit about where you found these kids and also, maybe, as a way of connecting it to the past, where these kids were learning their music. Because I know when we first started talking about the forties, we talked about Central Avenue, and we talked about all the clubs and all the opportunities. I mean, they had these clubs they could go to and they could play in. And they were also studying music at Jefferson [High School] and Jordan [High School], etc. There was a real kind of network, if you will. What was it like in the fifties? And where did you find these kids? And

what was their schooling like?

BIHARI: They were all well educated, all the kids that I recorded. They were from Jordan High, Jefferson High, Roosevelt High School. I think I mentioned Richard Berry, the Flairs. There was one other group, Don Julian and the Meadowlarks. And there was another girl who Richard brought to me. Her name was Zola Taylor, whom I recorded. She eventually went on to become one of the Platters, the girl singer with the Platters.

ISOARDI: Where did you find them?

BIHARI: Actually, what happened was Richard Berry came in and I auditioned his group. I can't remember the name of the group that he had, but I put him on the Flair label, and we called them the Flairs. And the first record that he had was a local hit. It wasn't a national hit, but it was a local hit in Los Angeles, probably because it got a lot of airplay locally. And being one of the first records with high school kids, it was quite well recognized.

From then on Richard brought me in a lot of the talent. But their talent was not only created in school but in church. All of these kids went to church. They sang in choirs. And that is where they really met and got their groups together.

ISOARDI: Interesting. It's not high school music programs

so much as Sunday in church?

BIHARI: As in church, right. They were all gospel singers at one time. I mean, they sang in the choir at church.

ISOARDI: And these were not so much instrumentalists as kids who sang.

BIHARI: No. They were kids who sang, although Richard Berry did play piano, also. But he was more or less a talent scout.

He brought a lot of the kids to me. So I didn't have to go see them in school in an assembly or something like that, in the school where they would sing. So once I had already gone to the school and listened to the one singing, Richard would bring me the groups. It was easier than for me to go up and interfere with an assembly if I heard something that I liked. So that was the way most of the kids' talents came to us. It wasn't always that I went out looking for talent.

A lot of talent came into us.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I guess once you have the reputation--

BIHARI: Exactly. We had the reputation and the distribution and the airplay.

ISOARDI: So everybody knew.

BIHARI: And we were well known as far as the business went. We specialized in black music.

ISOARDI: You were recording exclusively black artists at

this time still?

BIHARI: Yes. There were some things that we did, country and western fooling around, trying to get into that market, but it never worked well for us. We weren't well versed in the country field.

ISOARDI: What about East L.A.? You mentioned Roosevelt High.

BIHARI: Yes, but that was still-- It was mixed. But there were a lot of black kids. I can't remember what group might have come out of there.

ISOARDI: You never ran across any Latino kids?

BIHARI: Yes, I ran across a lot of Latinos. I had a line called Discos Corona, all Latino music.

ISOARDI: Really? It was a subsidiary of Modern [Music]?

BIHARI: Of Modern, right.

ISOARDI: And what kind of music did you record?

BIHARI: It was mostly mariachis and predominantly Mexican music. It was quite an extensive line of Mexican music.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: What got you into that? Was it just noticing the demographics of Los Angeles?

BIHARI: Exactly, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Was there anybody else? Did you have competition?

BIHARI: Oh, surely. There was competition from Mexico itself, and then there were other labels here that specialized in Mexican music or Latin music.

ISOARDI: Local labels?

BIHARI: Yes, local labels.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any?

BIHARI: No, I don't.

ISOARDI: Interesting.

BIHARI: And then we had a classical line that was purchased out of Europe. To give you an example of what happened, in the seventies, when I was racing motorcycles--the late sixties, early seventies--I was racing a motorcycle called CZ, just the initials CZ. They were the biggest selling dirt bike in the world, and they were made in Czechoslovakia.

They had a problem with replacement parts, supplying them in the United States. So I ended up with a contract with the Czechoslovakian government export company called Motokov, where I made all of the replacement parts for the Western world. I had accounts in Australia, New Zealand--

ISOARDI: You're kidding. [laughs]

BIHARI: --England, yes. England, Belgium, France, the Netherlands. I had accounts all over the world, where I would supply all the parts.

ISOARDI: Modern was branching out into all these different areas, and on top of that you started up a completely new business.

BIHARI: New business, right. It was done right in the plant.

ISOARDI: At Modern?

BIHARI: Having a plant, we could make rubber products. So we made handlebar grips and also the fork boots for the front forks. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Modern was more diversified than people realized.

BIHARI: Yes, it was. [laughs] And then we also had a poker chip business. We had injection molding machines, so we made poker chips in all different colors and boxed them and actually stamped them with gold stamping. We had personalized poker chips for the consumer.

ISOARDI: Gee. You didn't miss a beat.

BIHARI: No. We kept busy.

ISOARDI: Truly.

BIHARI: Oh, I was going on-- From Czechoslovakia I was offered the SupraFone [Records] line of recordings--which were all fine classics--to release in the United States. It never consummated because there was so much red tape doing business with the Czechoslovakian government, because everything was government owned.

ISOARDI: Was that the national Czech label, SupraFone?

BIHARI: Yes, that was the national Czech label. They had some very, very fine classics, and I had access to the complete line at no charge. It was just on a royalty basis. But it never consummated. You know, you go from one person to another, to another, another, another, and it never got out of Czechoslovakia.

ISOARDI: Too much trouble after a while?

BIHARI: Yes, it became too much trouble.

ISOARDI: Too bad. Too bad. I meant to ask you, also, when did you first hear doo-wop as a sound? Do you remember that?

BIHARI: I don't remember. It had to be in the fifties.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I mean, there must have been a point when you sort of heard this kind of sound and--

BIHARI: Oh, I'm not so sure if maybe we were the first ones to do the doo-wops. I don't know.

ISOARDI: Interesting.

BIHARI: I did listen to everybody's records in those days, but my recollection of when doo-wop came in I don't know.

ISOARDI: You mean, it could have been these kids coming up to Modern's front door--

BIHARI: It's very, very possible. Surely, because we did doo-wop music. You know, they created their own sounds. If

you'll remember in the fifties, with the groups, they were singing about girls--"Cindy" and so many different titles of songs. So I had the idea, nobody had been singing anything about boys. So I had Aaron Collins write a song called "Eddie, My Love." This was the first girl song titled "Eddie, My Love."

ISOARDI: Good call.

BIHARI: Yes. Now, it was sung by Aaron Collins's two sisters, the Teen Queens.

ISOARDI: Oh, they were his two sisters?

BIHARI: His two sisters, right, Rosie Collins and Betty Collins.

ISOARDI: What a smash.

BIHARI: Was it ever.

ISOARDI: That's still played.

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: It's just a legendary song.

BIHARI: It's a standard group song today, I guess.

ISOARDI: Yeah, definitely.

BIHARI: Then Shirley Gunter--I think I might have mentioned her--she was another group that came in, Shirley Gunter and the Queens.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You mentioned "Oop Shoop."

BIHARI: "Oop Shoop," right.

ISOARDI: Big success.

BIHARI: Yes, it was.

ISOARDI: Actually, before we get further along chronologically, I wanted to ask you-- I know we talked about this when we were discussing Elmore James during that one session, and that was the question of contracts and arrangements with artists. I guess we talked about other phases of your business and how you set it up and the relationship between you and your brothers [Saul, Jules, and Lester Bihari]. What about your relationship between you and your artists? How did that change over time or--?

BIHARI: It really didn't change. We had a very good relationship with all of our artists. There were times when the artists-- I'll give you an example: John Lee Hooker. He didn't feel he was getting his royalties. Of course, he did get his royalties.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BIHARI: About 1982-83. And of course he sued, and we answered the suit and went into federal court, and--

ISOARDI: You individually? Or sort of everyone you had been dealing with?

BIHARI: No, the corporation. And the judge ruled in our favor,

because we showed where we had paid him. We had all the check stubs, the endorsements. We pulled out all the checks where he had endorsed the checks and so on and so forth. We had an accounting, which he received all the time. And unfortunately it cost him a lot of money--

ISOARDI: Oh, for the suit.

BIHARI: For the suit that he lost. Of course, it cost us money, too. But he lost the suit, and that was really the end of our relationship. Our contract had been up for many years, anyway.

ISOARDI: Right, right. So the relationship, say, going back to day one of Modern Records--

BIHARI: Oh, we had a wonderful relationship with the artists.

ISOARDI: But was there a kind of formal contract where artists would get royalties? Was that done then?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There was a formal contract with everybody that we recorded. I won't say everybody that we recorded. We would put out a record. If it didn't do well, you know, they would be on their way. There were certain contracts that might have been for one record, and if we put the record out it would be for one record or one year with an option. No more than one record. And if the record didn't sell, if we didn't feel that the potential was there with

this particular artist, we didn't pick up the option after a year, and we'd go our way. And unfortunately, some of the artists we should have continued with. I mean, we had Joe Turner early on, and-- Actually, Joe was not under a contract.

We did it one record at a time, this and that. But we could have signed Joe Turner to a contract. He went on to, of course--

ISOARDI: Atlantic [Records], was it?

BIHARI: Right, Atlantic. And then later we signed him to a contract, in the later years, in the eighties. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So you guys even early on were paying royalties.

BIHARI: We always paid royalties. Hadda Brooks had her royalties, Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers. Oh, yes. Charles Brown. Oh, yes, everybody got paid royalties.

ISOARDI: Now, a lot of companies didn't do that, though, right? Or is that not true?

BIHARI: Well, you know what's interesting about contracts?

Musicians' contracts had to be approved--this was in the fifties, in the forties--by the American Federation of Musicians, the main office in New York. There were specific things that had to be in a contract. We'd have to send a copy of the contract, and if they approved the contract they would write you a letter and say this contract has been approved and send you a copy of it back. So as a musician, if you were a member

of the union, your contract, as far as the union was concerned, was null and void unless they approved it. Interesting, wasn't it? Now, how long that lasted I don't know. I think it went out probably in the sixties or after the first strike, the union strike or something like that.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, as many of the claims and the arguments that artists have raised over the last ten, fifteen years about this, I mean, where does it come from, then? Is it certain companies that sort of would just not pay royalties and give people just a studio fee and that's it? Or--?

BIHARI: Yeah, I'm sure that is part of it. See, contracts were written quite differently early on.

ISOARDI: You mean back in the forties they were?

BIHARI: Back in the forties and fifties. They were written-- All costs, that is, recording costs--musicians, whatever-- You know, if it was a band, musicians' fees, album cover costs, so on and so forth, were taken out of royalties before they earned any money. The company recouped its investment before the artist earned any royalties. I'll give you an example.

Say we're putting out a 78 [rpm record]. Let's go back that far before the 45's came in. The contract would be before the artist earned any money, all musician fees. If they cost, say, \$1,000 to record the band or the artist, you had to sell

a certain amount of records before the artist could earn any royalties.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: So quite often you didn't sell enough records to recoup the \$1,000, that is if they were on, say, a 2 percent or a 5 percent of retail royalty. So you had to sell so many records before they received any royalties. But they always got their statement. It showed whether they were in the hole or if they had earned any money. And they got their statement every six months. And if they earned any money, a check went along with the statement.

ISOARDI: I think that's kind of similar in the book business, too, where you have to generate x amount of sales before you--

BIHARI: Earn any royalties.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: So that was pretty standard then? I mean, is that still standard practice?

BIHARI: That I don't know, if it's standard practice any more. Because I think attorneys negotiate the contracts today.

It's not the record company saying, "Here's my standard contract. Here, sign it." The artist will take it to an attorney, and the attorney will say, "Well, I don't want this

in there and I don't want that in there."

ISOARDI: Right. And you guys did not operate that way? You drew up your own contracts?

BIHARI: We drew up our own contracts.

ISOARDI: Did you bring them to a lawyer to look at?

BIHARI: Our attorney drew up our original contracts.

ISOARDI: So you did have an attorney for Modern.

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: From the first day, of course.

BIHARI: Well, not from the first day. Probably the first or maybe the second year. There was a standard musicians union contract, artists contract, or musicians contract.

ISOARDI: And that's the general one you followed?

BIHARI: That was the general one we followed in those days that had to be approved by the American Federation of Musicians.

ISOARDI: Other than the thing with John Lee Hooker, did you run into any other difficulties? Or was that the only one?

BIHARI: No, that's the only one.

ISOARDI: I know B.B. King has said awfully nice things about you guys in interviews. I was looking through Arnold Shaw's book Honkers and Shouters a while ago--

BIHARI: Well, Arnold was a little bit-- I mean, he wrote what he wanted to write. [laughs]

ISOARDI: But there are extensive quotes from you and--

BIHARI: Well, he misquoted, also. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, I hope he wasn't misquoting B.B. King when B.B. King was talking about how much he loved you and Jules.
[laughs]

BIHARI: That I don't know. But B.B. and I, we always had a fine relationship, we really did. He was very fond of Jules because Jules was the one who, when B.B. said, "I need some money," he'd go to Jules, and Jules would give him a check.

[laughs] He was extremely fond of Jules. But I always had a wonderful relationship with B.B., because I flew all over the country. B.B. would call me and say, "I'm ready to record," and I'd fly to Cincinnati or Detroit or Miami or New Orleans, Memphis, wherever it was to record him.

ISOARDI: How many sales would you have to make, say back in your early days, before artists would start getting royalties?

BIHARI: You know, I can't remember that. It was dependent on how much the recordings cost--you know, the recording session.

ISOARDI: Oh, of course. How large the session would be, etc.

BIHARI: Sure. If you used four or five musicians it would be less. If you used a big band, sixteen musicians, it would

be more.

ISOARDI: Yeah, of course, of course.

BIHARI: And there was a musicians scale during those days.

ISOARDI: So the sidemen you'd bring in would get a certain fee for the session, and that would be it?

BIHARI: Yes, right. You would have to pay the sidemen so much for a three-hour session. The leader would get double.

The arranger would get double if there were arrangements.

Of course, you had to pay for all the copying of the written arrangements, also, and those had to be filed with the American Federation of Musicians before the recording session. And a representative from the musicians union would come down to the recording session and be there to check that those musicians whom you reported on the Form B contract, as it was called in the American Federation of Musicians, were there.

ISOARDI: So you'd have a union representative at every session?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. In the early years, yes. But later on, after the strike and the music business started to get very, very big, nobody even bothered that I know of, you know, filing anything with the American Federation of Musicians. As a matter of fact, we didn't pay the musicians directly. We made their checks out and sent them in to the local union.

Then the union disbursed the checks, because they had to take a certain tax out, also.

ISOARDI: Is there anything else on the contract issue that sticks out in your mind over the years?

BIHARI: No. Well, some contracts--

ISOARDI: It sounds like it was pretty trouble free for you.

BIHARI: It was. Some contracts were written on a percentage of the wholesale price, and some contracts were written on a percentage of the retail price. So, of course, if they were written on the wholesale price, you had to sell more records for them to recoup their advance.

ISOARDI: How would you determine which way to go? Was that just about bargaining power?

BIHARI: It was bargaining. That's all it was. It was just bargaining.

ISOARDI: Obviously you would rather go wholesale--

BIHARI: Right, if you felt you really had an artist. You know, there were a lot of things that we recorded-- We knew that we were never going to get real big sales out of country blues. You know, country blues had a limited market. And unless you crossed over or had a big hit in rhythm and blues--and a certain amount of that crossed over to the white sales--you had a limited amount of sales. Consequently, we put out a

lot of releases instead of concentrating or saying, "Well, if this one didn't hit--" And a hit wasn't very big in those days. If you sold fifty thousand records you had a chart record in the early years, you know, the fifties. And if it got on the charts it would last six months. But there were so many of them that you'd sell two thousand, three thousand, four thousand. So consequently we put out a lot of releases.

And a lot of it was just hit and miss, because there wasn't that much airplay. Jukeboxes could absorb a certain amount of records in the early days. And then competition started coming in, also. It was not an easy business. It was a lot of work. It was a lot of work on the telephones. It was a lot of traveling. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about-- We've, I guess, referred to the sidemen, and you've talked in the past about Maxwell Davis.

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: Maybe you can talk a bit more about your relationship with Maxwell and some of the people he brought into your studios.

Because I guess a lot of those people were from Central Avenue.

BIHARI: Oh, they all lived in the area. I mean, there was Jake Porter--let me see if I can remember them--Chuck Hamilton, who played bass; Jessie Sailes played drums; Jesse Price played

drums; Willard McDaniel played piano; Joe Sample played piano; Irving Ashby played guitar; Pete Fox played guitar; Jewell Grant played alto and baritone sax; Plas Johnson played tenor sax; [Hubert] "Bumps" Myers played tenor sax. Of course, we used Ben Webster on tenor sax also, and Vido Musso on tenor sax, Jackie Kelson [also Kelso] on alto sax, Marshal and Ernie Royal, and many more.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. And, God, I can't remember the trombone players. Trummy Young I think we used on trombone.

ISOARDI: This is an all-star band.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. We always had the best musicians. And Maxwell Davis was always the arranger and the conductor, although Maxwell played saxophone on a lot of the records and piano on a lot of the records too, like "Rock Me, Baby."

Maxwell was playing piano on "Rock Me, Baby."

ISOARDI: And I think behind Jesse Belvin at times you had people like Buddy Collette.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. Yeah, Buddy. That's right. I'm glad you remembered we used Buddy. And Buddy also played tenor, if I remember, as well as flute.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Just about anything with holes in it.

[laughs]

BIHARI: Buddy was fine. Matter of fact, I did an album--Buddy overdubbed an album. I think it was with the Don Ralke singers. I'm not sure. And also on bass we used Red Callender a bit, and Leroy Vinnegar.

I've got an interesting story to tell you. When I was doing the [Duke] Ellington band--they were former members of the Ellington band, and why I didn't use Red Callender originally I don't know--but somebody said, "Why don't you use Leroy Vinnegar?" because his name in jazz was quite good.

So when Leroy walked into the session--thank God he was early--and Maxwell handed him the parts, well, Leroy can't read music. He was embarrassed to tell me that he didn't read music. And there were some pretty hard things for a bass player to play on "Jack the Bear."

ISOARDI: This was going to be a session playing Ellington tunes?

BIHARI: Yes, with the big band.

ISOARDI: The local band.

BIHARI: The big band. So I did get in touch with Red Callender, and he did come down. And Red was a marvelous musician, oh, just unbelievable. And he played that bass part, which is a very difficult part, on "Jack the Bear."

ISOARDI: But I would think that somebody like Leroy Vinnegar

probably knew "Jack the Bear" by heart anyway.

BIHARI: He didn't read the music. That was only one of the tunes, "Jack the Bear." It was a difficult bass part. And I also recorded Red Callender's first album where he was playing tuba.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah? Really?

BIHARI: Uh-huh. Yes. Red made an interesting comment. He was playing with Hadda Brooks at a club in Beverly Hills one night, and I went up to see and to hear Hadda. When he came over to the table--my sister Rosalind [Bihari] was with me--he said, "The only Bihari who knew anything about music was Joe."

[laughs] He was very, very nice. And then that's when he told her, "Joe recorded my first album, and I played tuba on it."

ISOARDI: Why did you record that album?

BIHARI: He asked me. Yeah, he asked me if he could record that album.

But anyway, going back to Buddy Collette, it was either playing flute on a-- I think it was ten or twelve sides that I did with-- It was a bongo player. I'm not sure if it was Jack Constanza playing on it. Preston Epps. That's right. It was a Preston Epps album, and he over-dubbed all the flute parts on it. It was jazz. I think it

was Preston Epps, and we had Jack Constanza on it, also.

And of course, the big bands. God, I can't remember the names. I wish I had the files, but it was a very big-name musician in the city. Most of them were in the studios or just recording musicians.

ISOARDI: I mean, it sounds like a who's who.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: I mean, aside from the R and B artists that you were dealing with, this is like a who's who of L.A.'s black jazz musicians.

BIHARI: That's right, and also white jazz musicians, too.

ISOARDI: And you had Jackie Kelson also play in the band?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, I had Jackie on alto. See, I forget a lot of the things. Thanks for reminding me. [laughs] Jackie could probably tell you a lot more of the musicians that I used. But we tried to use pretty much the same musicians.

They were excellent. They read their music. Excellent.

ISOARDI: Yeah, these guys could read anything.

BIHARI: They played with a lot of soul and everything. They played anything, yes.

ISOARDI: I know you mentioned this to me, I think, before we started taping, and I deliberately cut you off so you wouldn't get into it then, but now may be the time. This is the time

I think you said you recorded Benny Carter.

BIHARI: Oh, yes. We lived over in West Los Angeles where the family lived, my mother [Esther Taub Bihari] and brothers and sisters [Florette, Maxine, and Rosalind Bihari]. None of us-- Well, one was married. She didn't live with us. Her name was Serene Bihari Leavenworth [now Felt].

ISOARDI: When was this about, then? Early fifties?

BIHARI: In the forties--

ISOARDI: Late forties?

BIHARI: Late forties, uh-huh. The late forties. And Benny Carter recorded right in the living room. We had a little entry hall. Benny would play in the entry hall, and the band would be in the living room. [laughs] ISOARDI: Really? Why did you do it there?

BIHARI: I don't know. We had the equipment, so we'd just do it there.

ISOARDI: So you figured what the heck.

BIHARI: I mean, we were always looking to save some money someplace. [laughs] We didn't have our own studio at that time. [laughs]

ISOARDI: It's just funny. I have this image of your mother walking around trying to clean things and pushing musicians out of the way.

BIHARI: She enjoyed it.

ISOARDI: What was the context? Was it a recording of Benny?

BIHARI: Yes, it was Benny Carter. Yes, we released records with Benny.

ISOARDI: As the leader.

BIHARI: As the leader, yes.

ISOARDI: Oh, marvelous.

BIHARI: I recorded Jimmy Witherspoon in the house. I don't think I ever recorded B.B. in the house. [laughs] We moved all the furniture. We had a piano in the living room, a grand piano. We moved all the furniture out of the way and set them up.

ISOARDI: What did you use to record them with? What kind of equipment?

BIHARI: It was Magnechord at that time.

ISOARDI: Just your Magnechord again?

BIHARI: Same Magnechord, uh-huh. I think I mentioned something about Lester Sill.

ISOARDI: Briefly, when he worked for you.

BIHARI: Lester worked for me. Before he came to work for me he was selling religious articles door to door. And he had just gotten out of the army. He came back from Europe, was discharged from the army, and he started selling religious

articles.

ISOARDI: Was he a religious guy at that time?

BIHARI: No, uh-uh. That was a job.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO

APRIL 1, 1995

BIHARI: Lester Sill had a wonderful sense of humor, and we became very good friends. I took him to Chicago first, and from Chicago I took him to New York. I had not planned to stay in New York, but I think I reiterated to you earlier that I went into New York to check the office, and I ended up firing the two managers.

ISOARDI: Right, right. But he just initially knocked on your front door?

BIHARI: I think so, maybe selling statues. [laughs] Then we had a distributing company here. We distributed Atlantic Records and some of the other independent labels, and Lester was working in the distributing company, out selling over on Central Avenue and San Pedro Street, in the black area. Then, when I went to New York, I took him to Chicago to a record convention and then to New York, and he ended up my Harlem salesman in New York. He stayed there for about four months; then he went back to Los Angeles. He eventually left us, and he discovered two young songwriters, [Jerry] Leiber and [Mike] Stoller, and I recorded their first song they wrote. I can't remember the title of it.

ISOARDI: Who performed it?

BIHARI: I believe it was Jimmy Witherspoon.

ISOARDI: Where did he find Leiber and Stoller?

BIHARI: I don't know where he found them. I think they were high school kids at Fairfax High School.

ISOARDI: Yeah, they were.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Very young. Maybe sitting in a club or something?

BIHARI: I really don't know where he heard them. And they weren't both musicians. I mean, one of them played piano.

I think Mike Stoller played piano. They ended up good, good writers. On some of the songs-- Even though Richard Berry was under contract to me, when Lester did some producing--I'm not sure if it was for Atlantic Records or who--he wanted to use Richard Berry, and I of course let him use Richard Berry even though Richard was under contract to me.

Then later on Freddie DeMann came to work for us. Freddie is Madonna's manager. He was Michael Jackson's manager after he left our company, and then he left Michael Jackson. He had several other artists, and now he's Madonna's manager.

ISOARDI: Was he doing sales for you guys?

BIHARI: No, he did some producing. He produced a group called Pacific Gas and Electric. And we had a fairly good seller.

It was a chart album.

ISOARDI: It sounds like, too, Modern Records was changing a bit. By the time you were getting into the late fifties, early sixties, you were bringing in other people to produce.

BIHARI: To produce. In the sixties. Not any black music, though. I still produced all the black music. We were trying to get more into the pop music.

ISOARDI: Of all types.

BIHARI: Right, because the blues had fallen down. The sales had fallen, and we were trying to get into pop music. Pop music, it wasn't my forte, so the best thing to do would to be hire somebody who was more knowledgeable on it. Now, Freddie, I think, had managed Pacific Gas and Electric, and they hadn't recorded for anybody, but eventually Columbia [Records] bought our contract, and that was the time I think Freddie left also.

ISOARDI: So this was about when you started branching out quite a bit. Although you were still controlling the black artists, this was when doo-wop actually was fading as well, then, around the late fifties, early sixties?

BIHARI: Well, I think it was more an internal problem as far as the recording was concerned. I was just not allocated the money to record. It all went into plant equipment.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: And at that time, eventually we went into the budget music, that is low-priced retail albums, where we did categories of music--categories of Hawaiian, country and western, and many other categories of music. When the Tijuana Brass hit, we copied all their albums. Consequently I kept so busy in the studio recording stuff that I didn't care for, but it was just copies of this and that and that. A lot of Hawaiian music--

ISOARDI: So you were still acting as an A and R [artist and repertoire] person, then, pretty much.

BIHARI: Right. Oh, you mean at that time?

ISOARDI: Even later on.

BIHARI: Even later on? Yes.

ISOARDI: I mean, you're on the artistic side of it, for the most part.

BIHARI: Right. Absolutely. And not only that, because of an album selling for a low retail price, under a dollar, we had to use so many songs that were in public domain, so we had no song royalties to pay. What we did, we'd take one hit song and title the album that, that song, and then do the same type of music with the orchestra or the band with all public domain songs. And on the public domain songs we didn't have to pay any royalties.

ISOARDI: So you'd still make some good money on those even though they were priced real low.

BIHARI: Right. And then I think it was 1972 when we were voted the biggest selling budget record line in the country.

ISOARDI: Also, in doing those, then, you would bring in essentially sidemen?

BIHARI: Oh, we still had to. Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: There wouldn't be an artist you would pay royalties to, then, right?

BIHARI: No. It was all sidemen. Maxwell Davis would do the arrangements, and I would do the recording, the engineering, and I selected all the songs, and that was it.

ISOARDI: Well, that worked well, then. You weren't paying songwriter royalties, and you weren't paying artist royalties.

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: So even though they were budget, you must have done fairly well.

BIHARI: Well, we did well, yes, but it was not like selling a record for five dollars when you're selling one for less than a dollar. You had to have a lot of production to do that. So consequently the money was taken out of the budget for recording of the regular-priced merchandise to record for budget-priced merchandise.

ISOARDI: Did you like this move?

BIHARI: No, I hated it. [laughs] Because it just took all the creative ability away from me. Just go ahead and record it. Get it out as fast as you can.

ISOARDI: Generic product.

BIHARI: Record four hours and do twelve songs or four hours and ten songs. Just get it out. Fortunately we had very fine arrangements from Maxwell and very fine musicians so that in one or two takes you had it.

ISOARDI: So did this lead to some monumental battles with you and--? Who was pushing this? Was it Jules?

BIHARI: Jules, uh-huh. A lot of verbal undertones. But I had a job to do, and I had to do it.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. So your roles were pretty much the same as they were earlier on, then.

BIHARI: Absolutely.

ISOARDI: Jules was handling the business side.

BIHARI: He was handling the manufacturing, Saul was handling the business.

ISOARDI: And you were doing A and R.

BIHARI: And I was still doing the A and R and the recording.

Well, it wasn't much A and R. It was just-- [laughs]

ISOARDI: Engineering. [laughs]

BIHARI: Right. Engineering and selecting songs and finding-- It wasn't hard to find the hits, because they were on the charts by the time we put them out.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

I guess in a pretty short period of time, then, soul kicks in.

BIHARI: When? Are you talking about in the sixties?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Is this something you were able to jump on?

BIHARI: Well, we tried some things, and I'm sure-- Well, I don't know how you define soul any differently than what we'd been doing--

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly.

BIHARI: I remember recording Prentice Moreland, who was the lead singer of--I'm not sure--the Coasters? One of the Atlantic groups. Before Clyde McPhatter or after Clyde McPhatter left.

ISOARDI: The Drifters?

BIHARI: Drifters, yes. And of course, would you call Jesse Belvin the soul music--? I mean, we were doing that maybe ahead of our time. I think we were the first recordings to use strings in blues, or in soul if you want to call it that.

ISOARDI: But did you get a chance to break away from this

budget kind of routine?

BIHARI: No, I never did get a chance to break away from it.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: From then on, until Modern closed its doors?

BIHARI: Yeah. There were no new recordings. The only thing that I did, I took some of the old Elmore James and B.B. Kings and sweetened them some with strings. I took some, added a band, and released them. That was the only thing that I did back, oh, I guess in the seventies. But after that there was no more creativity at all.

ISOARDI: Jules just didn't want it?

BIHARI: No, he wanted the money for the factory. And of course, he was the majority stockholder.

ISOARDI: Which was more of a guaranteed kind of thing, I guess.

BIHARI: Nothing was guaranteed. [laughs] And we manufactured tapes, you know, eight-track and four-track and cassettes, and LPs and 45's for a lot of different companies throughout the country. But you're working really on pennies--a penny or a half cent, if you're lucky, a record.

But we had so much facilities that he just wanted to keep the plant busy as much as he could. We could have had a third

of what we did and ran two shifts and would have been a lot better off, or maybe half of what we had or a tenth of the manufacturing facilities that we had.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's a danger of acquiring too much plant.

BIHARI: It is. You know, it was quite often that we would just press our own records to stockpile them just to keep the plant running. And eventually we might grind those records up and use the material over again. That happened a lot of times. See, it wasn't easy to let pressmen go, then call them back two weeks later. They were on to another job. And we did not have automated equipment when it came out in the late seventies, so everything was done by hand. A lot of the plants by then had automated equipment. They need one man to run a bank of ten presses. Jules finally decided he was going to buy some automated equipment in the eighties, and he bought ten presses from Monarch Record Manufacturing that they could never get running. And they told him they couldn't make them run. He thought he could make them run, and he could never make them run. I would have loved to have had the \$125,000 to record. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Truly. So when did it finally shut down, then?

BIHARI: In 1984 it was shut down and sold.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: I left the company in 1978.

ISOARDI: What prompted your move?

BIHARI: I couldn't take it anymore. We were having continual fights. And I was in another business. I started buying properties in Beverly Hills, houses, tearing them down and designing new ones and building them. And he [Jules] got very jealous of me because I made more money doing that than I ever made in the record business. One house that I designed and built, I sold it to the president of a country. He bought it for his two daughters to go to UCLA. [laughs]

ISOARDI: This is another world, Joe. [laughs]

BIHARI: And this president was named Bernard Bongo. He was president of Gabon. Interesting story. I don't know if I told you this story yet.

ISOARDI: No, not at all.

BIHARI: Okay. I was living in the house with my wife [Doreen Kline Bihari] and three daughters [Michelle, Laura, and Nicole Bihari], and we had it up for sale. No sign or anything. It was listed with a broker in Beverly Hills. Late the night before--it was October 1979--I got a call from the broker who had the listing. He said, "There's going to be a showing tomorrow at around eleven o'clock, but someone's going to come in and preview the house." He didn't tell us who was

going to preview the house or who was going to look at the house. So somebody came in, rang the doorbell, and then came in. They previewed the house and stayed.

My wife was on the phone. We have a second floor kitchen--one on the first floor, one on the second floor. She was talking on the telephone, and all of a sudden both of us hear through bullhorns, "Everybody off the street." They closed Santa Monica Boulevard, they closed Carmelita [Avenue]. And here are four stretch limo[sine]s. Secret Service in front, Secret Service in back. They're coming to look at our house. [laughs] They had an interpreter from the State Department in Washington [D.C.], a lady interpreter, because he spoke French. Three Secret Service men stayed outside of the house, three went in the house with President Bongo and his troupe of people, the interpreter from Washington, D.C., and whoever else he had with him. He was going through the house, and I was standing downstairs talking to the Secret Service. And one of them said, "I'd like to go out. I don't know how to get out of the house." Well, the entry to the front door, the outside entry, is gated, and you can't just go in and open it up. You have to press a buzzer. And he almost got panicky that he couldn't get out. [laughs] But anyway, this is what the interesting part is: We got a call

later from the broker. He said, "You're to move in twenty-four hours. The house has been purchased by the president."

ISOARDI: Twenty-four-hour notice?

BIHARI: Twenty-four hours. Yeah, he said twenty-four hours.

"And the adviser to the president is coming over. He wants to negotiate with you." Not the price of the house we found out. He bought all the furniture, all of our silverware. We left with our clothes.

ISOARDI: You were happy to do that?

BIHARI: Sure, for the price they paid. And they said, "We have arranged a suite for you and your family at the Beverly Hilton Hotel," because that's where they had a whole floor, "and you're to move there tomorrow."

Well, they were supposed to have a one-day escrow.

ISOARDI: One day?

BIHARI: One-day escrow, which was arranged. It was all finished. But his money was in New York, at a bank in New York. It was Columbus Day, the banks in New York were closed.

This was a Friday--

ISOARDI: So you had to stay in this terrible hotel for how many days?

BIHARI: Yeah. And Columbus Day was a Monday. So we talked to our attorney, and the attorney said, "Don't you leave the

house. You stay until you have your money." So we stayed until Tuesday. The money came in Tuesday morning. We were out. We were all packed. We took our clothes, that was it, and we left.

ISOARDI: Did they pay for the whole thing?

BIHARI: Paid everything, for the whole everything.

ISOARDI: Unbelievable. What a dream sale.

BIHARI: Was it ever. And what a profit. Well, I think when my brother Jules heard about that he wouldn't talk to me again.

ISOARDI: Boy, a lot of older brother jealousy going on.

BIHARI: Oh, was there. Well, it started back years and years ago. Because Jules and myself and my wife would go have lunch.

And even before that Jules and I would be having lunch, and he would say to me, "Joe, I'm jealous of you." And I would never ask him, "Jules, why are you jealous of me?" I never asked him. But one day when he and my wife and myself had lunch, he said it: "Joe, I'm jealous of you." And my wife said, "Why are you jealous of Joe?" And of course he said, "Well, he's smart, he's young, he's got a beautiful wife, he's--" You know, he mentioned a whole bunch of things. Doreen said, "There's no reason for you to be jealous of Joe." But he was jealous because of the money that I made outside of the business. He always felt he was the oldest, that he should

have part of that. Well, it was my home, I lived in it, I built it, I designed it. I don't know if I mentioned this to you. I did say something about when we formed the [Modern Music] Publishing Company--I think it was in 1950--when I was going to get the smallest percentage--?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Your other brother [Saul], I think--

BIHARI: Yeah. Saul said, "No, I'll give part of mine to Joe because he works so hard." And then Jules pointed his finger at me and--still in my mind--he said, "I will always have twice as much as Joe." And he was talking about money. And I think when I sold that house that was it, really. And he didn't live much longer. Actually, it was difficult for him.

ISOARDI: That's a tough one.

BIHARI: It was.

ISOARDI: I mean, something so outside your control. What can you do?

BIHARI: I had no control of anything, because I was a minority stockholder. Jules had complete control. He sold the record company and the publishing company out, gave it away so I would not get it, because we had a buy-sell trust agreement that when Saul-- Well, it was in effect for many years, but when Saul passed away his stock was retired and Jules and I ended up with more stock. Well, the trust agreement was

that if I died Jules would get all of my stock, if Jules died I'd get all of his, so that you'd have 100 percent control of the business. He was sick and dying. He had cancer. And instead of it continuing in the family, he just sold it out for almost nothing, and I got my little percentage of what I owned: 40 percent of the publishing and a 33 1/3 percent of the record company. And it was strictly a spite thing, just so that I would not get it. Not only that, the business was supporting three other sisters besides. What happened was he wanted it for his two children. They were both heavy into drugs. And because I wouldn't just say, "Well, I'm leaving, I'll let you give it to them," he said, "Well, you won't get any; you'll get your percentage," and he just sold it out.

I tried to stop the sale. There was no way I could do it, because he had the majority of the stock. And the companies are worth today--this is ten years later--probably 100 percent more than what he sold it for.

ISOARDI: Undoubtedly.

BIHARI: I don't mean double, but I mean-- I don't mean twice.

Multiply what he sold times a hundred.

ISOARDI: Right. No doubt. Jeez, just on the strength of a handful of your early work--

BIHARI: Absolutely.

ISOARDI: Invaluable.

BIHARI: And all that music has come right on back again. Here it is fifty years from when I started recording these things, and it's renewed itself. It's the only living music that I know of that continues to live.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly, truly.

BIHARI: Although I don't think it's as big here in this country as yet. It has become so big in Europe that a lot of the companies in Europe that are specializing in blues say, "We don't even want to release new blues. All we want to release are the old blues records." I offered to Ace Records, which has the Modern [Records], RPM [Records], Flair [Records], Kent [Records] catalogs for Europe-- They said, "If you will record Ike Turner on blues"--and I mean old country blues like he used to record--"we will release it. But as far as recording the new contemporary things, we're not interested, because

it's not our type of business. We're in reissues of all--" Then they have a tremendous catalog of blues. Of course, all of ours.

ISOARDI: So Ace not only bought Modern, they've got other--?

BIHARI: Oh, they have other master recordings. Yes, they bought up masters from some other companies. Little, very

small companies might have had three or four masters or ten masters or something like that. They've traveled through the South to find these companies.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: Now Virgin Records has it for the United States.

ISOARDI: They're distributing Ace, right?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah-- No, they are manufacturing under the Flair label here in the United States.

ISOARDI: Oh, under the Flair label?

BIHARI: Yes, all the old Modern, RPM, Kent, Flair.

ISOARDI: Oh. I thought they were just distributing for Ace, but they're--

BIHARI: No, uh-uh.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

BIHARI: And then there's a company in Japan, I think it's called Blues Unlimited. I'm not sure. I think that's what it is. For Japan and the Orient.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Well, I know I've seen so many of those Flair-Virgin CDs of B.B. King--

BIHARI: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: They have the Elmore James box set out [The Classic Early Recordings, 1951-1956].

ISOARDI: Oh, right, right. Yeah, that stuff is just a major cultural contribution.

BIHARI: Yes, it is. And in England, especially the company it has in England feels that it's such history that it should never be lost and that it should be written and written and written.

ISOARDI: Truly.

BIHARI: That's amazing, though. Here it happened in the United States, and it becomes big in England and Europe, and it starts to trickle over here again.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's funny. I mean, it's the way it happened almost initially.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: The way it was brought-- So much blues was brought back in the sixties by British groups, and now it's coming back in reissues from British companies.

BIHARI: Yes. Actually I think the British groups started putting their white version into our blues music. What we recorded, they would put the white version into it. They would copy the Elmore Jameses, the B.B. Kings, the John Lee Hookers, but in their way.

ISOARDI: Yeah. There's an album out that musically isn't the greatest, but it's good. It's Howlin' Wolf went to London.

I think it's called Howlin' Wolf: The London Sessions.

BIHARI: I haven't heard it.

ISOARDI: It's around 1970.

BIHARI: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And backing him were people like Steve Winwood,
I think--

BIHARI: Oh, wow.

ISOARDI: --Eric Clapton, Keith Richards. It's like this whole
handful of leading British rock artists. And it's funny,
because at a certain point--I don't know if they're doing
"Little Red Rooster" or what--Howlin' Wolf stops them, and
he goes, "No, no, no. That's not the blues." [laughs]

BIHARI: "That's not the blues." [laughs]

ISOARDI: And finally Keith Richards says, "Well, show us.
Just show us." And it is funny to listen to the master and
student in the studio then. And the differences are kind
of magnified by that.

BIHARI: Well, listen, blues comes from the heart. It comes
from a story of an experience or experiences, and it's sung
that way. I always tried to emphasize not just singing but
singing with a lot of heart, a lot of soul. Cry if you have
to, but bring yourself back to when these things happened
to you. And it worked quite often.

ISOARDI: That's its power.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: That's why I think the validity of it, the way it continues, is not a--

BIHARI: And it's going on-- I mean, still today, when I recorded Ike Turner just in the last six months, there was one song that he's singing with so much soul. And he told me after, "Yeah, it just brought me back to when I

was back in Mississippi, when I was back with you. We were together in those days." He said, "It brought tears to my eyes when I was singing."

TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE

APRIL 1, 1995

ISOARDI: So you've been recording--this is six months ago--with Ike Turner?

BIHARI: Well, I think it was within the last six months. Probably the last time I was in the studio with him was about two and a half months ago. We recorded over at Frank Heywood's studio over on Crenshaw Boulevard, where he did his vocals on a couple of songs--three songs, as a matter of fact.

ISOARDI: Recording them for--?

BIHARI: Trying to get a release on him here in the United States and in Europe.

ISOARDI: Something you guys are working independently on?

BIHARI: Yes. Because he's not under contract to anybody at this time. We hoped to get a release in Europe and here.

ISOARDI: Great.

BIHARI: Yeah, but that's not easy either, because the companies today are scheduled out for a year ahead of the release dates because of the artists that they have and the contractual demands the artists have. So I'm actually working with different companies to try and get a release. Virgin [Records] is one, Polygram [Records] is another.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you also, Joe, I know you were certainly

active not only in finding people and recording people but also in putting some of the music together and composing.

BIHARI: Well, only the writing of-- Not the music itself.

Even though I read music I don't write music. But I do write lyrics. It started early, early on, the writing of lyrics.

When I was traveling with Ike, we'd both write lyrics together as we drove. [laughs] And blues is blues. I mean-- [laughs]

And all through my recording I would contribute to many, many, many of the songs with changes in lyrics, changes in the way they would perform, and things like that. So consequently I became part of the writer on a lot of these songs. Or if I wanted a certain melody, if it was an instrumental, I would sing what I wanted to hear, and the musicians would pick that up and it would be arranged that way.

Quite often songs were sold-- They said, "Look, you contributed to this. If you give me so much money you can say you wrote the whole song even though you only wrote part of it." This did happen quite a bit in the business. Because so many of the artists needed money so badly, and they would sell their songs. One example is Jesse Belvin, "Goodnight, My Love," a song he wrote. But it ended up that he sold his part, or he sold it to George Matola and another person.

ISOARDI: For just a lump sum of money?

BIHARI: Just a lump sum of money, uh-huh.

But there was a lot of contribution that I made lyric-wise and-- Like John Lee Hooker, I would-- He didn't read or write.

So quite often when I recorded John Lee I had to give him a title. I said, "Look, here's the title of this song. You start making it up as you go along." So if I gave him a title, he would start that way.

ISOARDI: Just take off.

BIHARI: Yes. I'd give him the title of the lyrics, and I'd probably give him the first line or something.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So on a lot of these where you were writing lyrics, then, you become cowriter.

BIHARI: Cowriter, yeah.

ISOARDI: So you'd get songwriter royalties on all of these as well, then.

BIHARI: Exactly. Right.

ISOARDI: And how many songs do you think you contributed to over time?

BIHARI: Oh, I don't know. Probably two hundred, three hundred.

ISOARDI: For most of your artists?

BIHARI: Yes, throughout, for a lot of artists.

ISOARDI: But they're not listed Joe Bihari, right?

BIHARI: No. Some of them are, some aren't. I was writing under a pseudonym called Josea, because one of my sisters used to call me Josie. I'd just use Josea. It's Josie with an "a" on the end.

ISOARDI: As your first name or your last name?

BIHARI: Last name. I still used my first name, Joe.

ISOARDI: So Joe Josea.

BIHARI: Right, uh-huh.

ISOARDI: I see. [laughs] Why would you do that anonymously? Was there any particular reason?

BIHARI: No particular reason at all. Like Ahmet Ertegun: he uses Nugetre, which is Ertegun spelled backwards. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Interesting.

BIHARI: But if you want to go into some of the early, you know--

ISOARDI: Yeah. Are there any early groups that you should mention that we haven't yet?

BIHARI: There was a group that came out of Chicago, and they were working here on Central Avenue at the Dunbar Hotel. They were not a blues group. It was a trio called the Three Bits of Rhythm.

ISOARDI: And they were working in the jazz clubs or whatever--?

BIHARI: Jazz, whatever clubs there were. And I recorded-- I think the song ended up in the charts, called "I Used To Work in Chicago."

ISOARDI: But with three singers or--?

BIHARI: Three singers and three musicians, piano, bass, and guitar. They were an Ink Spots type of group. They didn't do the monologue that the Ink Spots did, but it was that type of group. And that record wasn't blues. It was a sort of a comedy and somewhat risqué. If I can remember some of the lyrics: "I used to work in Chicago at a department store.

I used to work in Chicago, I did, but I don't anymore."

Gee, I'd have to listen to the record for the other parts.

[laughs] But it became a little risqué and a little comedy.

But talk about risqué, I recorded a song with a group, the Cadets. It was called "Smack Dab in the Middle." It was the original recording on it. It became a hit by the Mills Brothers. Johnny Otis was a disc jockey on KFOX, and he broadcast from Watts. I brought it down to him to play on his radio show.

ISOARDI: This is the fifties--?

BIHARI: Fifties, late fifties, early sixties. He put it on immediately. It was KFOX from Long Beach, but they had a remote out of a storefront in Watts. And it wasn't five minutes

before he got a call from the owner of the station. He said, "You're not to play that record any more. It's risqué, it's filthy," it's this and that. [laughs] I had the original record, then the Mills Brothers picked it up and had a smash hit with it. [laughs] He thought "Smack Dab in the Middle" was filthy.

ISOARDI: Yeah, right. Too much.

BIHARI: Yeah. So we ran into those things, too, sure.

ISOARDI: Amazing. Who was in the group the Three Bits of Rhythm? Do you remember the names?

BIHARI: I don't remember their names.

ISOARDI: And you recorded them quite a bit?

BIHARI: I think maybe three sessions with them, two or three sessions. We had other things that didn't sell too well.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: It wasn't everything you put out that sold, you know.

[laughs] I mean, we could ship a certain amount of records. We'd get a certain amount back, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah, truly. But you seem to have so many-- I mean, your catalog just reads like a who's who. You could easily fall into the trap that everything you touched was John Lee Hooker or Elmore James. [laughs]

BIHARI: Yeah. But anyway, to tell you-- Jesse Perry. Jesse

Perry was a singer, and he sang with the Happy Johnson band.

Now, Happy Johnson played on the Avenue, on Central Avenue, at one of the clubs, and that was in the 1940s.

ISOARDI: What kind of a singer was he?

BIHARI: He was a Billy Eckstine type of a singer.

ISOARDI: So you were doing this in the late forties with him, early fifties?

BIHARI: Middle forties, late forties. Yeah, '46, '47. Yes.

And the Happy Johnson band. It was a small band. It was a sextet at that time. We did quite a bit of things with Happy Johnson. A good little band.

And then Estelle Edson, who was a singer. She sang with the Howard McGhee band.

ISOARDI: The recording you made of the Howard McGhee band, she sang on it?

BIHARI: Yeah. Estelle was singing on it, yes. She sang with Howard McGhee. It was a big band. It was a sixteen-piece band. And his recordings were all done at Radio Recorders.

We didn't have our studio in those days. Now, Al Wichard, he was the drummer on the Hadda Brooks recordings. So we used him quite a bit in the forties.

ISOARDI: Just as a session man?

BIHARI: As a sideman. Then he wanted to have his name out

front, so we did some sessions with him.

Now, when Hadda Brooks started singing-- "You Won't Let Me Go" I think was the first recording that she sang on.

ISOARDI: As a singer?

BIHARI: As a singer. I used Teddy Bunn on guitar. He was a fine guitar player.

ISOARDI: Yeah, fine jazz person.

BIHARI: Yes. One thing that stood out with me with Teddy: he never used a pick when he played. It was always his fingers. He played very tasty and very beautiful things.

And then we had another band, Will Rowland. You were asked about him. He was playing on the avenue.

ISOARDI: Right. You really tapped people from the avenue.

BIHARI: As much as we could, yes.

ISOARDI: Especially early on.

BIHARI: In the middle and late 1940s.

ISOARDI: I mean, I guess just because of your business you knew who they were and you knew what people you could get and who you wanted to go after.

BIHARI: Right. Because we were right in that area. We were on First and San Pedro Streets when the Japanese were moved out. A lot of the blacks had come in. There were the nightclubs across the street and down the street, and they were all around

there. And the after-hours clubs. So we frequented them.
And they had talent.

Johnny Alston was another orchestra, and we recorded a couple of sessions with Johnny Alston. He had a twelve-piece band.

ISOARDI: Also a Central veteran.

BIHARI: Central veteran, yes.

ISOARDI: Really.

BIHARI: Yes. But, see, a lot of these bands migrated from Texas, Louisiana.

ISOARDI: Oh, during the [Second World] War, that kind of thing?

BIHARI: During the war, uh-huh. I recorded in Texarkana, Arkansas--Texas, Louisiana, wherever it is, it's on the border--in the early fifties, and I recorded a group called Jimmie Lee and Artis [Brewster]. We also recorded a band called the Jay Franks band, which was the most popular band in that area.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. And Ike Turner was with me at the time, in the early fifties. And we had a hit record with Jimmie Lee and Artis. And the interesting thing is, I just got in touch with Artis about a month ago. He lives here. He's a retired

schoolteacher. He's a music teacher.

ISOARDI: And you hadn't seen him in forty, fifty years?

BIHARI: That's right. And I went over to his house and got some pictures of Jimmie Lee and Artis, a guy and a girl, and Jay Franks, and that big write-up that he had from a newspaper article in the fifties, and I gave them to Ace Records in England, because they're getting ready to release the Jimmie Lee and Artis records.

In that band was a young, probably sixteen-year-old, trumpet player, E. Rodney Jones, who became the biggest disc jockey in Chicago on radio station WVON. And he played trumpet on that recording. Interesting thing, he called me when I put out "Rock Me, Baby," and he said, "Joe, you have a hit record on 'Rock Me, Baby.'" He said, "Do you remember me from Texarkana?"

And I said, "Yes, I do, Rodney. You played trumpet for me." I said, "You were just a little, young guy in high school, a little skinny guy."

And he said, "That's right." And he said, "You know, you had to get out of town so fast, I don't know why, but you probably had some more talent to go record." He said, "You failed to pay me \$35." [laughs]

So I said, "Rodney, I'll be in Chicago next week." And

I came in. Of course, I paid him more than \$35. [laughs]

But that was something. After all the years--

ISOARDI: Really.

BIHARI: Then I recorded a band called the Dixie Blues Boys, a band from West Monroe, Louisiana. Did I ever tell you the story about what happened to me in Alexandria, Louisiana?

ISOARDI: It doesn't ring a bell offhand.

BIHARI: Where the police stopped me?

ISOARDI: Was that when you were packing your gear?

BIHARI: No, that was in Clarksdale. I was in the black area looking for talent. Police stopped me-- I didn't tell you this story?

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

BIHARI: Police stopped me. He said, "What are you doing?"

I gave him my card and said, "I'm with Modern Records, and I'm looking for talent. I'm from California." He said, "Well, we can see you're from California. You have California license plates on your car." And they talked and said, "I think you'd better follow us up to the police station." So I followed them up to the police station. They sent me into the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] that was right there.

ISOARDI: There was an FBI agent right in the police department?

BIHARI: In the police department in Alexandria, Louisiana.

ISOARDI: What year was this?

BIHARI: 'Fifty-three, probably. Maybe '52, '53. And they started interrogating me: what am I doing, what am I doing, this and that. And they finally said, "You're a communist."

And I said, "I don't know how you can relate me to a communist."

But it's the same old story down there, that "We can't control our black people here when you people from the North--" And even though I was from the West they called me from the North.

"You come down here and do what you do. You go right into the area where you don't belong."

ISOARDI: "And you tell these people that they have talent."

BIHARI: And they have talent. They can't control them.

ISOARDI: And the FBI was there?

BIHARI: That was the FBI, absolutely.

ISOARDI: One of the things that I really disliked about a movie that came out a few years ago, Mississippi Burning, with Gene Hackman, was the way it tried to portray the FBI as these knights on white horses--

BIHARI: Are you kidding?

ISOARDI: --fighting for the rights of black people in the South. One of the biggest lies in American political history.

BIHARI: Yes. But it was a true, true experience.

ISOARDI: What happened then?

BIHARI: They finally let me go.

ISOARDI: After how long?

BIHARI: A couple of hours.

ISOARDI: They didn't tell you to get out of town? You could go back and do what you wanted to do?

BIHARI: No, no, no. Uh-uh. No. They said, "You should know what you should be doing now," to that effect.

ISOARDI: A threat.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You'd been warned.

BIHARI: "Don't go back in the black area." I never found a piece of talent in Alexandria, because I left and went on to New Orleans.

ISOARDI: Why were you led there in the first place?

BIHARI: Looking for talent.

ISOARDI: I mean, you would just hit towns at random?

BIHARI: Yeah. I was probably going from Memphis to New Orleans and decided to look for blues singers in Alexandria.

ISOARDI: Just pull into places and see what's going on?

BIHARI: Stop in Alexandria and see what's around.

ISOARDI: Wow. Wow, that's fantastic.

BIHARI: That's the way I did one in Monroe--Monroe, Louisiana--down there, just drive around to see where there

was talent. Hey, there were many times when I would be driving down the highway, and I'd see a black person with a guitar strapped on his back just walking down the highway. Many times I would stop and I'd ask him, "Is there anyplace that I could listen?" They'd say, "Oh, yeah." I can't remember who it was, but I have-- I think it happened when I recorded Pinetop Slim in Atlanta, Georgia. I think I saw him on the highway someplace.

ISOARDI: No kidding. Just like that?

BIHARI: Just like that. I brought him right in to my distributor in Atlanta. After he closed I recorded him right in the room where the people would come to the counter to buy records.

ISOARDI: Unbelievable. That is really exciting.

BIHARI: But to remember all these things I'm telling you, it's just like getting flashbacks.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, it's so rich. That must have been hard, that last fifteen or twenty years or so at Modern, then.

BIHARI: Oh, it was very difficult.

ISOARDI: To be away from all this.

BIHARI: It was most difficult. Thank God I had other interests.

You know, I had the motorcycle business, and I had the building business. Because it would be like doing nothing, nothing

constructive at all.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

APRIL 22, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe. I guess we're going to go back in time a little bit as a result of some of your recent travels, seeing some old friends. Your memory has been jogged a bit.

BIHARI: It has, when I went to San Francisco and Sacramento and saw Tony Valerio, who used to be our distributor in San Francisco, who is now with Tower Records in Sacramento. We had a day meeting there and just talking about old times. His wife [Louise Valerio] had just had open-heart surgery the day before we got there. But anyway--

ISOARDI: So this jogged your--

BIHARI: It just brought back memories of the forties--1945, 1946. And it just dawned on me what the nightclub was that was across the street from our little record plant at 118 North San Pedro Street.

ISOARDI: First [Street] and San Pedro [Street]?

BIHARI: First and San Pedro. The nightclub that was there was called the Club Samba. That's where Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers played, Roy Milton and Camille Howard, who played piano with the Roy Milton band. They all had hit records.

Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers with Charles Brown played there. They played all the top black acts constantly.

ISOARDI: Big club?

BIHARI: Big club, yes.

ISOARDI: What was it like inside?

BIHARI: Oh, it was a beautiful club inside.

ISOARDI: Classy place?

BIHARI: Classy place. It had a stage-- Let's see. I can't tell you-- Well, the stage was in one place-- It was sort of a fairly long club.

ISOARDI: Let's take it from where you walked in the front door. What did you see?

BIHARI: Straight ahead, all the way back was where the stage was.

ISOARDI: So it was right there as you went in on street level?

BIHARI: It was on street level, yes. And then there were tables all around. And I can't remember if there was a bar or if they just served drinks.

ISOARDI: Could you order food? Or was it just drinks and music?

BIHARI: It was drinks and music, yes, and food.

ISOARDI: About how many people could it take?

BIHARI: Oh, I would say it probably held about seventy-five to eighty people.

ISOARDI: Yeah. And when you guys set up at First and San

Pedro, was this going?

BIHARI: No, it wasn't going at that time.

ISOARDI: So it opened after you guys set up?

BIHARI: It opened after we got there, yes. And let's see who else--

ISOARDI: Do you know who owned the place?

BIHARI: No, I don't. Of course, there was the Lincoln Theatre on Central Avenue, where they played stage shows. They had stage shows at the Lincoln. They had movies and they had stage shows. And they had an amateur show.

ISOARDI: So like they might show a film, and then there would be a live act?

BIHARI: Right. And I'll tell you who played there. Hadda Brooks played at the theater, and Charlie Barnet and his orchestra played at the Lincoln Theatre on the same bill.

ISOARDI: So you had the biggest music acts playing there as well as--?

BIHARI: Absolutely, yes. What else? They had the Million Dollar Theatre, where they had an amateur show also.

ISOARDI: Where was that?

BIHARI: I think it was on Broadway.

ISOARDI: So this was downtown?

BIHARI: Downtown, yes.

ISOARDI: Okay. So the Lincoln was farther down Central Avenue?

BIHARI: Yeah, the Lincoln was on Central.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You guys were well placed, then, just in terms of not only getting your records out but seeing who was on the scene and who was--

BIHARI: Yeah. And if I remember correctly, I think Floyd Dixon won an amateur contest at the Million Dollar Theatre. It was interesting.

ISOARDI: Was the Million Dollar pretty much the same as the Lincoln in terms of format? Was it all live?

BIHARI: It was live. But I can't remember if they had nudie shows at the Million Dollar Theatre at that time or not. There was a theater downtown that did show strippers, live performers.

ISOARDI: Like burlesque? That kind of stuff?

BIHARI: Burlesque, yes.

ISOARDI: Well, for burlesque you needed musicians.

BIHARI: Right. Strippers. And I know Maxwell Davis played in a band at a theater that had strippers.

ISOARDI: At the Million Dollar?

BIHARI: At the Million Dollar Theatre, yes, where they had the strippers.

ISOARDI: [laughs] It probably paid better than most of the other gigs.

BIHARI: It probably did back in the forties. Lowell Fulson played the Million Dollar Theatre, if I remember correctly, in those days. Bardu Ali had the pit band at the Lincoln Theatre in the early forties.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Bandleader.

BIHARI: Bandleader, yes. I recorded Bardu, also. Let's see what else I can recall. Of course, there was the Five Four Ballroom at Fifty-fourth [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI: Now, that's interesting. The Five Four Ballroom has been in the news again recently, because someone who I think is a professor out of Cal[ifornia] State [University] Long Beach has bought the place and apparently is renovating it completely. He spent a fortune and hasn't opened yet. I mean, he thinks, obviously, that it has a rich history. And its name certainly comes up.

BIHARI: It absolutely does.

ISOARDI: But when did it start up as far as you know? Was the Five Four playing when you guys are doing jukeboxes?

BIHARI: No. I think it came in after that. I don't remember what year--1946, '47.

ISOARDI: Right. What kind of a place was the Five Four in

its heyday?

BIHARI: That I can't remember. But it was busy, busy, busy.

It played top acts all the time.

ISOARDI: All music?

BIHARI: All music, yes.

ISOARDI: Was it jazz, blues? Or was it everything?

BIHARI: Blues and jazz both. But mostly blues, or rhythm and blues they called it in those days.

ISOARDI: I guess in the fifties was it sort of the leading R and B club?

BIHARI: I would think so in the fifties. But even in the forties they had a club called the Barrelhouse. That was on Central. Johnny Otis played at the Barrelhouse.

ISOARDI: That's right. That was Johnny Otis's place. Was Bardu Ali involved in that, also?

BIHARI: He might have been. Let's see what else. There was another one, Ivie's Chicken Shack.

ISOARDI: Ivie Anderson's?

BIHARI: Yes, Ivie Anderson's Chicken Shack.

ISOARDI: So in the forties that was still going strong, then, Ivie's Chicken Shack?

BIHARI: Yes, it was. It was still going strong.

ISOARDI: What kind of a place was that?

BIHARI: You know, that I can't remember.

ISOARDI: Was it just a restaurant? Or was there music?

BIHARI: There was music at Ivie's.

ISOARDI: Live music?

BIHARI: Live music, yes.

ISOARDI: I wonder if she ever got up and sang.

BIHARI: And then I have something that's interesting that just came to me over my weekend up north. On Vine Street there was Billy Berg's club.

ISOARDI: Yeah right, up in Hollywood.

BIHARI: Right. Now, every Sunday they had a jazz concert. Musicians would just come in and play and jam.

ISOARDI: Oh, it was like an open jam?

BIHARI: Yeah, a jam session.

ISOARDI: Wonderful.

BIHARI: Now, Ted Lentz, who was the deejay-- And his radio show was called Hollywood House Party. He was the emcee at Billy Berg's for the jam session.

ISOARDI: What station was he on? Do you remember?

BIHARI: It was KGFJ. At that time it was called the "Hollywood House."

ISOARDI: The station or his program?

BIHARI: The station. His program was called Hollywood House

Party, and the station was called "Hollywood House." I think I'm right on the call letters.

ISOARDI: Would he broadcast from Billy Berg's? Or was he just the emcee for the jam?

BIHARI: No, he was the emcee. Of course, he had his radio broadcast not far from there. The radio station was in a house. I think that's why they called it the "Hollywood House." And the name of his show was Hollywood House Party.

ISOARDI: It was kind of a really independent operation, then, I guess.

BIHARI: It was a small station, yes. And he had a nighttime show. He played a lot of Hadda Brooks; he was crazy about her. But anyway, I was in one Sunday at Billy Berg's, and Frankie Laine--before anybody knew who Frankie Laine was--appeared.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: He sang a song called "That's My Desire," which got a big hand. And it turned out that "That's My Desire" was an old, old song written many years ago.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Had it been well known years ago?

BIHARI: I don't think it was even that well known. So anyway,

I asked Frankie after the show, "Can you give me the lyrics to 'That's My Desire'? Because I want to have Hadda Brooks sing it." He said, "Oh, no. I won't give you the lyrics.

I'm going to record it." So I think Hadda found an old lead sheet of "That's My Desire." There was a music store that sold old sheet music on Sixth [Street] near Vermont [Avenue].

I think that's where she picked it up.

ISOARDI: Had you talked to her about that song? Or did she just do this independently?

BIHARI: Oh, no, she heard it, too.

ISOARDI: Oh, she was there at the club?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So she heard Frankie Laine sing it.

BIHARI: Yeah. She asked me to see if I could get the lyrics.

He wouldn't give them to me. But Hadda got it, and then Frankie Laine recorded it. We recorded it with Hadda. And of course, Frankie Laine is from Chicago. This I think is around 1948.

We had so much airplay in Chicago that we outsold Frankie Laine.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. [laughs]

BIHARI: Although he had the national hit, we had the hit in Chicago. Plus we had a lot of sales all around the country and made the R and B [rhythm and blues] charts.

ISOARDI: It was good for both of you.

BIHARI: It was good for both of us. That was an interesting thing.

Oh, talking about disc jockeys, Johnny Otis was a disc jockey.

ISOARDI: He was everything, wasn't he? [laughs] He was even a preacher, I think, at one time.

BIHARI: He might have been. But he broadcast from a storefront in Watts.

ISOARDI: A storefront?

BIHARI: Yes, the big glass in the front.

ISOARDI: Sitting in the glass? Do you know what store it was?

BIHARI: I don't know. I think it was a record store. I remember I brought him out the first release of a song called "Smack Dab in the Middle"--I might have mentioned this to you earlier--by the Jacks, the group that we had that had that hit "Why Don't You Write Me?" He put it on, and it wasn't five minutes before he got a call from the owner of the station.

It was radio station KFOX. He did a remote from this place.

ISOARDI: Was this a big station? Or independent as well?

BIHARI: KFOX was independent. It's a Long Beach station.

But he had a remote that he did from that storefront. And

the owner read him up and down saying, "That is a nasty record.

The lyrics are nasty. You're not to play it again." It wasn't a week later it came out by the Mills Brothers, and within a month it was a smash hit. [laughs] And of course, Johnny couldn't understand why he couldn't play it. It had no connotation of anything dirty or anything like that.

ISOARDI: [laughs] This owner really had some problems dealing with sex.

BIHARI: Of course, the other disc jockey who was around was Joe Adams, who at one time was Ray Charles's manager.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. I remember hearing that once. He was a disc jockey for who?

BIHARI: Yes, he was a disc jockey in Santa Monica. I can't remember what station that was.

ISOARDI: Now, were you getting radio play pretty much across the board in L.A.?

BIHARI: All the time.

ISOARDI: All stations that did this kind of music--?

BIHARI: No, not all stations. There were stations-- KFAC would not play my records. I can relate something to you about that since you just mentioned that. Frank Bull, who was one of the principals of Smith, Bull, [and] McCreary advertising--

ISOARDI: Right. Bully Woolly.

BIHARI: --asked me one night, when I was up at his show, "Are there any stations not playing your records?" And I said, "Yes, KLAC." And the name of the disc jockey was Ira Cook. He was a big disc jockey here. And I said, "I've brought records to him, but he just won't play the Hadda Brooks record."

He said, "I will see that you get the record played." He said, "I want to tell you something. He's sponsored by Lucky Lager Beer, and I'm the advertising agency for Lucky Lager Beer."

ISOARDI: That's power.

BIHARI: The next week Hadda Brooks records were on KLAC.

ISOARDI: Do you have any idea why he wouldn't play your record?

BIHARI: No.

ISOARDI: I mean, did they normally play R and B records?

BIHARI: No, they didn't. But Hadda Brooks was not only R and B.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. She was really crossover, wasn't she?

BIHARI: Crossover, right. So from then on they played the Hadda Brooks records.

ISOARDI: Right. But pretty much any station that played black music at all would play your stuff? Is that how it was?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely. Surely.

And then Al Jarvis had a show called Make Believe Ballroom.

And I can remember he had on that Make Believe Ballroom Count Basie one time. And he had a Hadda Brooks record, a boogie-woogie, and they were to vote on it, will it be a hit or won't it be a hit. Count Basie voted that it would be a hit.

ISOARDI: That it would?

BIHARI: That it would.

ISOARDI: It probably was. [laughs]

BIHARI: Maybe it was "Swingin' the Boogie," which was a hit.

ISOARDI: Really.

BIHARI: And let me see. Huggy Boy was a disc jockey in the fifties here who played black music. And then-- And I'm not sure if it was Huggy Boy. John Dolphin, who had a record store on Vernon [Avenue] and Central [Avenue] called Dolphin's of Hollywood, he had a radio broadcast from the window there.

ISOARDI: He as well? What station was he hooked up with?

BIHARI: I think it was KGFJ.

Now, I'll tell you an interesting story about Hunter Hancock. Hunter became one of the biggest deejays here for black music. I think he was on KGFJ, also.

ISOARDI: Do you know anything about him? Background? Or

if he was from L.A. initially?

BIHARI: I don't know his background at all. But I can tell you this: he used to buy time. They wouldn't let anybody play black music on KGFJ. Because he was going to strictly play black music. He went out and he bought the time from KGFJ and then had to sell spots to make up for the cost and his salary, whatever he made. And I know I remember him going down Central Avenue and selling a spot to this little place, to that place, to advertise that place. Himself, he did that.

He became one of the biggest disc jockeys. He appeared with me on the cover of Cash Box magazine. It's one of the trade magazines, but it catered more to jukeboxes and vending machines.

But also it was a music industry magazine. He appeared on the cover with me and B.B. King in 1956.

ISOARDI: What were the circumstances behind that?

BIHARI: Hunter presented B.B. a trophy for having seven consecutive hit records. That was in 1956.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that earned the cover.

BIHARI: That earned the cover of Cash Box magazine.

ISOARDI: Wow. Were any of those songs that you had written?

BIHARI: Probably. I don't recall which ones they were. Probably some of them [were ones] that I cowrote.

ISOARDI: Since you mentioned deejays, what changes did you

notice, say, from the forties, when you guys were first going and you were trying to get your records played--? What was it like by the mid-fifties, then, when R and B was certainly hitting big, etc? How did things change?

BIHARI: Well, things changed a lot. There were stations that played nothing but black music throughout the country.

ISOARDI: So it really came in big.

BIHARI: It came in big, yes. Take a station like WLAC in Nashville, Tennessee. It's a fifty-thousand-watt clear channel station. It can be heard in forty-some-odd states.

And they had--if I can remember the disc jockeys--John Richbourg, Gene Nobles, and Hoss Allen. There might have been one other disc jockey who played at night.

They played all R and B music. Now, they were sponsored by record stores in Nashville or outside of Nashville. They all had mail order records. So one of them was Ernie's Record Shop in Nashville. The other one was Buckley's Record Shop in Nashville. And the third one was Randy's Record Shop in Gallitan, Tennessee. Now, Randy's Record Shop was Randy Wood, who formed Dot Records and owned Dot Records. Pat Boone was his first big artist.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: Yes. And what Randy did-- They played nothing but

black music, and they sold them over the radio. They'd write in, they'd feature certain records, they'd have a package of five records, and you'd get them for so much, and this and that. Because of the lack of black music being played around the country--and this station could be heard in forty-some-odd states--black people would order their records from them through mail order.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. They must have made a fortune.

BIHARI: It became a very big business, and a very big business for us. They were somewhat like a distributor. They bought at distributor price, and they sold everything mail order. Plus they had their own record stores, too.

ISOARDI: So at some point, then, they figured, "Why don't we start making records ourselves?" And it's Dot Records?

BIHARI: Randy Wood started Dot Records. He started copying all the big R and B hits with white artists.

ISOARDI: He was the one who was responsible for Pat Boone singing "Tutti Frutti"?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: He's got a lot to answer for. [laughs]

BIHARI: That will give you some history on what happened there.

ISOARDI: He came up with the idea of covering?

BIHARI: Yes, with white artists. He certainly did.

ISOARDI: I recently saw a clip, actually, in the "Video History of Rock and Roll" that was showing on TV a month or two ago, that incredible clip of Pat Boone singing "Tutti Frutti." And I just fell on the floor again watching him.

BIHARI: It must have been a classic. You couldn't believe it.

ISOARDI: And it was really clever, the people who put the video together. Right after it they showed Little Richard's version.

BIHARI: A little different, eh? [laughs]

ISOARDI: The contrast is so jarring, you just--

BIHARI: Then there was another one in Shreveport, Stan Lewis, Stan's Record Shop. He had a fifty-thousand-watt station in Oklahoma City and one in Shreveport where he did the same thing.

ISOARDI: Which came first for him? The record stores or the radio stations?

BIHARI: The record store came first.

ISOARDI: And he branched out from there into this enormous radio station?

BIHARI: Yes. He bought time on the radio stations.

ISOARDI: And did he use the radio station, then, also to

do these mail order kinds of things?

BIHARI: Yes, he had mail order-- That same thing, yes.

ISOARDI: I know eventually he got into recording as well, as he has a number of--

BIHARI: Recording as well, yes.

ISOARDI: Did that come after the radio station?

BIHARI: That came after the radio station.

ISOARDI: It's interesting how they built on that.

BIHARI: It is, isn't it.

ISOARDI: I mean, in a sense they were just later versions of-- Had you guys gotten in the business in the fifties, then, you might have had radio stations and--

BIHARI: Who knows? We were in the record business. They were in retail, and they had to go someplace.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: Stan was a very, very close friend of mine. And Stan gave us so much promotion. Anytime I wanted a record played, he would be the first one-- Without anything he says, "You want it played? It's on."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: It's interesting that when you think back, I mean, the tremendous impact that you guys had-- I mean, the first

people, the independents, who started going out and just saying "Well, let's make a record ourselves" really led to this transformation, not only in the record industry but then maybe in radio as well, in distribution, in all aspects.

BIHARI: I firmly believe that it's true. I think we were the pioneers. We started it, my two brothers [Jules and Saul Bihari] and myself. And as I said, this is my fiftieth year in the music industry, 1945 to 1995.

ISOARDI: Really. So the role of the deejay then, within say that ten-year period of time, if not sooner-- From the time the independent record business really took off right after World War II, within a decade or so the deejays really emerged as a powerful force.

BIHARI: They certainly did. Very powerful. There was one who played our records, his name was Robin Seymour, in Detroit.

I can't remember what station he was on. And there was one--in Cleveland, Ohio, Bill Randle. They were both big pop disc jockeys, but they would play Hadda Brooks. There were times that I would get requests from certain deejays, "Can I have an exclusive on the next Hadda Brooks or the next record of the Cadets or the Jacks or something?"

ISOARDI: I guess if you have a station that's going into forty states or has a lot of something, to get the first play

of some things would really be a coup.

BIHARI: It would. It was important to us, too.

ISOARDI: So you'd set up relationships, then, with deejays who had that kind of juice.

BIHARI: Exactly. And we had very good relationships with deejays. Even if they were on a small station, if they wanted an exclusive we'd give them an exclusive for a week, something like that, in that area.

There was one I remember in El Paso. I believe his name is Chuck Blore. I still hear his name on radio here. He has a radio advertising company. He was a deejay in El Paso, and I remember him asking for an exclusive, which I gave to him.

ISOARDI: In these earlier days, were there black deejays? When did black deejays start emerging, say, in L.A.?

BIHARI: Joe Adams was early; he was black. Of course, there were other ones. Montague. He came from Chicago out to here. He was a big deejay in Chicago and here. Also Jim Randolph came here from Dallas.

Earlier I can tell you this: there was a black deejay in the forties, his name was Al Benson, in Chicago. A very, very big deejay.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: I mean, really big deejay. I remember he was from Mississippi. He used to promote Hadda Brooks. I would send Hadda into Chicago, and she would do live broadcasts for him.

ISOARDI: At the station?

BIHARI: At the station, yes. He was a very powerful disc jockey in Chicago. And how long he lasted I don't recall, but he was one of the first that I can remember in the forties, black deejay. And of course, he was sponsored by Rheingold Beer, which was a big-selling beer then.

ISOARDI: I think it's still around.

BIHARI: It probably is.

ISOARDI: I'm not sure.

BIHARI: But he gave us a lot of play, a lot of airplay. I'm starting to remember back to Chicago, because that was-- It was a big blues town, Chicago was. I know that's 1945, yeah, '45 and '46, '47.

ISOARDI: Did you spend many days--? I know you spent a tremendous amount of time there.

BIHARI: Oh, I spent more time on the road than I did in L.A. during the forties and fifties.

ISOARDI: Really? Maxwell Street must have been something. Did you hang out? Or was it all business when you were in Chicago?

BIHARI: It was all business. I spent a lot of time on the South Side of Chicago. Of course, State Street downtown, Cottage Grove [Avenue], those are streets that I haven't been to in forty years. Sure. And cold in the winter, really cold.

And of course Detroit, I spent time on Hastings Street in Detroit where the clubs were. The Brass Rail was a club in Detroit. Oh, God. I wish I could remember the names of the other clubs. You remember the Brass Rail?

ISOARDI: Well, it was an amazing time, I guess, to be at the center of the blues, because Chicago was just transforming music then.

BIHARI: It was. And you know, I never had a fear of being in the black areas all the time. It just wasn't-- There was no fear. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it.

I mean, there wasn't. But I had no fear whatsoever. I think it's a little frightening, though, [to do] what I did when I was in my twenties, I think it's a little frightening to do it today.

ISOARDI: Yeah, although in the, I guess, six years now, going on six years that we've been doing this project, I've spent probably most of the time down in South Central [Los Angeles] interviewing people. I've never had a problem or an incident.

Some of the people I interviewed were a bit worried for me

and would tell me, you know, avoid certain times, do this, do that. There was one guy who was down in Compton [California] who wanted us to meet nine o'clock Sunday morning because he figured, well, get in and out with no trouble. You know, I'm not saying that obviously there are not problems. And certainly it's much rougher in a lot of ways than it was during your time.

BIHARI: Oh, certainly, yes.

ISOARDI: But even given all of that, I haven't experienced any problem. I think there is a lot of paranoia surrounding it, too, and a lot of hype about it. Not to say it isn't dangerous in spots, etc. I wouldn't want to roam through "rollin' sixties" CRIPs [street gang] territory without knowing what was going on.

BIHARI: No, especially at night.

ISOARDI: On a Friday night or something. But just about everyone I've encountered and had to deal with have been wonderful.

BIHARI: But I just never had any-- There was never a problem. I used to go to Harlem. And there was never a problem in Harlem in New York at the Apollo Theatre. Hadda Brooks played the Apollo Theatre. I remember going when she was playing there. There was never a problem, never had any problems

anyplace--New Orleans, Atlanta, Memphis. The only problems I had were in Mississippi, Clarksdale [Mississippi] and--

ISOARDI: And that from the local constabulary. [laughs]

BIHARI: That's right. And Alexandria, Louisiana, and Houston, Texas.

ISOARDI: Well, Joe, do you want me to start throwing some names at you?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: You want to get into that now?

BIHARI: Surely.

ISOARDI: All right, let's do that. Now, I think as I said, I think it's a good way to maybe wrap it up. And I know you have talked about some of these people quite a bit. I mean, if nothing new comes to mind, fine; just move on, just say so. But I'll just throw them out, and if any memories-- You know, whatever. Well, I suppose we can begin at the top: Hadda Brooks, the beginning of Modern Records.

BIHARI: A fabulous artist, a fabulous person, very talented, originally was a classical pianist. Her training was classical piano. I do know she went to [Los Angeles] Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles. She lived in East Los Angeles on Malabar Street with her mother [Goldie Wright Hopgood] and sister. Her sister was a nurse.

ISOARDI: Family oriented?

BIHARI: Yes, very family oriented. I think her first husband [Earl "Shug" Morrison] was a basketball player with the Harlem Globetrotters, and I think he got pneumonia and died. That was in the forties. She's still playing in clubs and still a torch singer and very-- She's a lovely woman. Never had any children.

ISOARDI: Given her classical background, was she surprised when you said play a boogie-woogie?

BIHARI: No, because I think she was playing some boogie-woogie when she was working at the dance studio. So it wasn't any problem. I think the dance studio was one of Willie Covan's, who was a teacher at MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer].

ISOARDI: A wonderful teacher and dancer.

BIHARI: And dancer and everything, yeah.

ISOARDI: Leon and Otis René.

BIHARI: Leon René-- Otis I didn't know too well. I'd met him several times. He had a label called Excelsior [Records], where he released Nat King Cole's first records.

ISOARDI: Nat King Cole's first recordings were with Otis René?

BIHARI: With Otis René on Excelsior. Leon René, another nice person, had the Exclusive [Records] label. He had Joe Liggins

and the Honeydrippers. He's a wonderful man. In later years, in the fifties, he did some producing for me.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Well, yes. He brought me Oscar McLollie and wrote some of the songs. One of the songs was a hit called "Convicted of Loving You" that he wrote. Of course, he wrote "Someone's Rocking My Dreamboat" years ago and other hit songs.

ISOARDI: Had they gone out of their own business then?

BIHARI: Yes. Leon opened an office in New York. And of course, we followed and opened an office in New York. This was in I think 1947 or 1948. And I don't know what happened. Maybe he-- He had some adversities. He had Herb Jeffries. That's right. He was singing with [Duke] Ellington. He had several good records with Herb, but his business didn't continue. Eventually he went out of the business. But in the fifties he did the producing for us with Oscar McLollie. He brought us Oscar, and he wrote the songs. I did all of the engineering. Maxwell [Davis] did the arrangements.

ISOARDI: As far as you know, were they the first independents in Southern California, the first black record company owners?

BIHARI: I think they were the first.

ISOARDI: Both categories?

BIHARI: Maybe not the first. Maybe Leroy [E.] Hurte was the

first. Leroy owned the Bronze [Records] label, and the song "I Wonder" was his first hit.

ISOARDI: So you think the René labels came just after that, maybe?

BIHARI: Just after that, I think.

ISOARDI: Okay. Joe Liggins.

BIHARI: Joe Liggins. I didn't know him personally. I used to watch his band, terrific band. We recorded his brother, Jimmy Liggins, who played baritone sax and was blind.

ISOARDI: Did he play in his brother's band?

BIHARI: Yeah, he played in his brother's band.

ISOARDI: And you took him as leader for some recordings?

BIHARI: Yes, uh-huh. And I remember one of the songs was called "Shasta." Why I remember it I don't know.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Roy Milton.

BIHARI: Roy Milton, terrific band.

ISOARDI: Did you ever deal with him?

BIHARI: Yes. I bought some masters from Roy. I think they're in the catalog someplace. Yes, I did. He was on Specialty Records, had some tremendous hits. He had a girl by the name of Camille Howard playing piano, and she could sing also. Roy had a big hit called "R.M. Blues." I think it might have been his first record.

ISOARDI: Joe Greene.

BIHARI: Joe Greene. Which Joe Greene?

ISOARDI: Composer and record company.

BIHARI: Oh, I know who you mean. Right. He wrote "Tampico."

ISOARDI: Oh, did he really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Didn't the Andrews Sisters do that?

BIHARI: I think it was Anita O'Day singing with the Stan Kenton orchestra. "Tampico, Tampico, the way to Mexico."

ISOARDI: Yeah, I think the Andrews Sisters recorded that.

BIHARI: They might have. I think it was done by Stan Kenton.

ISOARDI: Huge.

BIHARI: It was a huge record. I knew Joe Greene. I can't recall having much dealings with Joe, though. He was a nice person.

ISOARDI: But early on he--

BIHARI: He had a label called G and G [Records], I think, Greene and Greene.

ISOARDI: That was the one that Ernie Andrews recorded on?

BIHARI: Yes, right. Ernie Andrews recorded with them, that's right.

ISOARDI: So he was in there early, turning out records then as well.

BIHARI: Yes, he was in there early in the forties, '45, '46.

ISOARDI: Was he initially, then, a songwriter? Is that how he sort of--?

BIHARI: I think so.

ISOARDI: As far as you know?

BIHARI: As far as I know.

ISOARDI: Did G and G last very long as a record label?

BIHARI: It didn't. I don't think it lasted over a year.

ISOARDI: A few hits and then out, I guess.

BIHARI: I don't remember the hits. I think they had-- Yes, I think they had another group besides Ernie Andrews that they had a hit on.

ISOARDI: I remember Ernie said once that he had a session with them, and they needed one song, and Joe Greene said, "I'll have it for you tomorrow." So Ernie got there, and it was "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying."

BIHARI: Which was a big hit.

ISOARDI: Yeah, a very big hit.

Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers.

BIHARI: Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers. Charles Brown sang with them. Oscar Moore was a guitar player with Nat King Cole, and they were brothers.

ISOARDI: With Nat King Cole. Oh, really? Johnny Moore and

Oscar Moore were--?

BIHARI: Were brothers.

ISOARDI: Interesting.

BIHARI: Charles Brown was a piano player and sang with Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers and were under contract to Aladdin Records. They had the first hit, which was called "Drifting Blues." Charles Brown was not under contract, though.

ISOARDI: A wedge. An opening. [laughs]

BIHARI: So we signed Charles Brown, and then we used Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers to back them. And at some point I think we called it Charles Brown with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers. Johnny Moore was a nice person, a good guitar player.

In later years he brought us a girl by the name of Marie Jones. She was singing with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers.

Good singer. I can't remember the tunes. I think we had one hit record with her. Oh, yes, we had a song called "Dragnet Blues."

ISOARDI: "Dragnet Blues"?

BIHARI: Yes. I think it was with Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers. I'm not sure if Frankie Ervin was singing that.

I don't recall. I'd have to look back in my catalog to see.

ISOARDI: How long were you associated with them?

BIHARI: Off and on for probably ten, twelve years.

ISOARDI: A long time in that business.

BIHARI: Yes, it was.

ISOARDI: Where were they from?

BIHARI: I really don't know. Charles Brown was from Houston, Texas.

ISOARDI: He's still around, isn't he?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Charles is still playing. A very handsome man--six foot two, very handsome, and still is. We recorded Charles, again, in the seventies.

ISOARDI: Well, actually the next name I had down here was Charles Brown. [laughs]

BIHARI: Good singer, nice person, good piano player. And I think he had a classical background, too.

ISOARDI: Well, you mentioned the next name as well, the Mesners and Aladdin Records.

BIHARI: Right. The Mesners, they owned a record store called Philharmonic Records on Fifth Street between Broadway and Spring [Street] in downtown Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Now, what's their background? Who were they and what's their background?

BIHARI: Leo Mesner was the older brother; Eddie Mesner was the younger one. They may be five years apart. Leo was a schoolteacher with the L.A. Unified School District.

ISOARDI: Were they from here initially? Do you know?

BIHARI: I think from New York, as a matter of fact. Eddie, I don't know his background at all. But I do know they had a good record store.

ISOARDI: How did one of them, anyway, go from being a teacher to being in the record business?

BIHARI: I don't know. I think Eddie handled the recording and Leo handled the business. But I think the record store was very successful. Now, the first label was called Philo, not Aladdin. They had to change it because of Philco, Philco radios. They had to change it because of that, and they changed it to Aladdin Records.

ISOARDI: When was this happening? When did they get going in the business?

BIHARI: Around 1946.

ISOARDI: So they probably saw what you guys were doing.

BIHARI: Oh, yes, because I used to go down and sell them records in their record store.

ISOARDI: Oh, so they also figured, "Why not?" Jeez, amazing.

BIHARI: Remember, the record business was really an embryo.

It was a small business. It's not like today. What did they do? Eighteen billion dollars in records last year? I don't know what they did in the forties, maybe three million to

ten million at the most. That's how much it's grown.

ISOARDI: Well, I guess it was--what?--during the seventies that these huge multinationals started buying up record companies because it became such big business.

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: So the Mesners-- Do you know who they were recording initially on Philo?

BIHARI: Oh, initially I think it was Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers.

ISOARDI: It was Johnny Moore and the Three Blazers?

BIHARI: Yes. It was their first record. Yes. And then they went into jazz, because I think Eddie Mesner had a jazz background.

ISOARDI: You know, actually that rings-- I at one time had some Lester Young recordings on Aladdin from the later forties.

BIHARI: That's right. They did Lester Young. Yes, they did.

ISOARDI: Some good recordings.

BIHARI: Some very good recordings. They certainly did.

ISOARDI: So they were doing a lot of jazz but also what was called R and B, I guess, then.

BIHARI: But I think they forgot their R and B and went into jazz. Now, they had Amos Milburn with some big hits on Aladdin.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: Yes, they sure did.

ISOARDI: How long did they survive?

BIHARI: They had, I think, Peppermint Harris on Aladdin.

Peppermint had a hit called "I Got Loaded." That was on Aladdin and was written by Maxwell Davis. Because Maxwell used to drink very heavily. [laughs]

ISOARDI: It's nice to write about something you know.

BIHARI: Yeah, I think it is. [laughs]

ISOARDI: A lot of veracity.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: How long did Aladdin survive? Or what happened to them? Did they just go out of business?

BIHARI: I think they just went out of business or sold their masters or something. I think it was over in six or seven years.

ISOARDI: Really? So maybe by the early or mid-fifties they were out of it?

BIHARI: They were out of it, uh-huh. Maybe ten years at the most.

ISOARDI: Well, they did a lot of recording in that little period.

BIHARI: Yes, they did.

ISOARDI: Howlin' Wolf.

BIHARI: The story of Howlin' Wolf. This was in the fifties.

He recorded for Chess Records. Ike Turner called me. I flew in. And I don't know if he was under contract at Chess or if we hit him at the same time, but we recorded him. I recorded him in West Memphis, Arkansas, at a radio station. He was a big man--I mean tall and big. And it was his name. He looked like a wolf. His name was Chester Burnett.

ISOARDI: I just can't imagine what his birth was like.

[laughs]

BIHARI: But he had that growly voice, too. You know, I don't know how to explain this, but, you know, a black man in the South, they could not say no to anything to a white man it seems like to me. I mean, as long as I was going to hand him some money, he'd record all day, all night, every day, every night, as long as I paid him--even if he was under contract to somebody else. It didn't make any difference.

ISOARDI: He figured that was something the white people would fight about. As long as he's got his money, who cares?

BIHARI: That's right. Exactly.

ISOARDI: I guess when you grow up there you just think it's another world. That's their business, something you don't get involved in.

BIHARI: Right, as long as they got paid.

ISOARDI: If they want to cause problems for each other it's their business, not his? That attitude?

BIHARI: Absolutely. "They can't do anything to me. I'm so far down anyway--"

ISOARDI: Well, that wasn't so unusual. That wasn't just with Howlin' Wolf. That was pretty much-- Was that the way most artists you encountered from the South operated?

BIHARI: No. I know B.B. King didn't operate that way. No. B.B. was a very loyal person. And it goes to show today. You know, he's class, always was. There were some times when he had some problems. And even though he was under contract to us, I think he was induced by Leonard Chess to record for Chess, thinking that maybe our contract would be out in a few months and he'd record. Well, B.B. re-signed with us. So he put them out, and we had to sue Leonard [Chess]. [laughs]

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO

APRIL 22, 1995

BIHARI: As far as our conflict with the Chess brothers, they put out the records, and we put out the records.

ISOARDI: You know, it seems like during this time you ran into the Chess brothers a lot.

BIHARI: Well, mostly Leonard. Phil [Chess] stayed in Chicago most of the time.

ISOARDI: Well, actually, I had them further down the list, but why not do it now? The Chess brothers.

BIHARI: In the early forties Leonard owned a bar on the South Side of Chicago.

ISOARDI: What was their background before music? Do you know? Well, he was a barkeep.

BIHARI: Yeah, he was a barkeep. And I don't know if-- I think they were from Poland. Leonard was in the record business in the forties, I think around '47, with a man by the last name of Brown. He owned a candy company in Chicago. They had a label called Aristocrat [Records]. It wasn't very successful.

ISOARDI: What kind of music?

BIHARI: I don't even remember. That went by the wayside.

And then Leonard and Phil started the Chess label. We had a corporation called Cadet Records. We gave them permission to use the Cadet name for a label. So they had the Chess, Checker [Records], and Cadet [Records] labels. We always got along. We had our little conflicts, but we were always friendly.

ISOARDI: So it was all in the family despite all these lawsuits or potential lawsuits? [laughs]

BIHARI: Right. Well, the biggest conflict was on--I might have mentioned this--"Rocket 88" with Sam Phillips. Chess ended up with "Rocket 88." We were supposed to have it.

ISOARDI: And that was the end of your dealing with Sam Phillips?

BIHARI: Right. That was when I went to Memphis and recorded B.B. King, "Three O'Clock Blues." That was it.

ISOARDI: So despite the problems, the relations were pretty good with the Chess brothers, then?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. I'm still friendly with Phil and Leonard.

But in that B.B. King recording session, the other artists I recorded were Bobby Bland, Johnny Ace, Little Junior Parker, M.T.--Matt--Murphy, and Earl Forrest.

It's amazing how all of a sudden things come to you.

ISOARDI: Yeah. But what a session that was.

BIHARI: I should have stayed there a week instead of two

days.

ISOARDI: Really. So was it mostly Leonard Chess who was roaming around the South when you were?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: So it was the two of you.

BIHARI: Yeah, we were roaming together.

ISOARDI: Together? [laughs]

BIHARI: Not really together. We had crossed paths.

ISOARDI: So was it mostly a case of when you find somebody, get them down?

BIHARI: Get them down right now.

ISOARDI: And if somebody else had them, you'd sort it out later?

BIHARI: Get them down anyway. Well, it happened with Elmore James. You know, Elmore was under contract to Trumpet Records in Jackson, Mississippi.

ISOARDI: That's right, with Trumpet Records.

BIHARI: Surely. I recorded Elmore. I put the record out.

We got a lawsuit, and I pulled it back. But he would not record for Trumpet Records--Lillian McMurray--anymore. He waited. And as soon as that contract was out, that one-year contract, I went in and recorded him, and then again and again.

ISOARDI: I guess back then it was cheaper--right?--to wage

a legal battle, unlike now. [laughs]

BIHARI: Oh, sure. Of course. I mean, we settled that thing with Lillian McMurray for \$2,500, attorney fees and all.

[laughs] Our attorney who was on retainer here had to hire an attorney in Mississippi to handle the lawsuit.

ISOARDI: Now, today it would be worthwhile to avoid all the legal problems?

BIHARI: Absolutely. You couldn't get an attorney on any case. He wants a \$10,000 retainer just to start with.

ISOARDI: Anything else on the Chess brothers that you might remember in your dealings with them?

BIHARI: I remember meeting Phil in Stamford, Connecticut, at Alan Freed's house.

ISOARDI: First time?

BIHARI: Oh, no. You know, one meeting. I just happened to be in New York, and Alan invited me over to his house, and he invited Phil, too. We were both in New York at the same time. We sat around, had cocktails and dinner, and talked.

ISOARDI: Friendly gathering?

BIHARI: Friendly always. Phil was always friendly. So was Leonard always friendly.

ISOARDI: I would assume that conflicts aside, or disputes over territory aside, you must have shared an awful lot of

interests.

BIHARI: Oh, I'm sure we did, certainly. I'm sure we shared a lot of interests. Leonard did the recording at the early stage. I don't know if he did so much of the recording or if it was handed to him, "Here, you want this?" "Yeah, I'll take that," or this and that. He had an organization where other people really handled the A and R [artists and repertoire] for him.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So he wasn't so much out in the field with the Magnechord?

BIHARI: Oh, no. He never was out in the field with the Magnechord. He would travel, but he would travel and sell, too. He'd load records up in his car and travel down South and sell the records.

ISOARDI: Did you do that as well during your travels?

BIHARI: No, I never did. The only selling I did out of my car was here locally when we first started, because what I had to do was sell the Hadda Brooks record "Swingin' the Boogie."

I was still in high school. I loaded them in the trunk of my car and would go around the city and sell them for cash so we could get the next day's production. Because we paid cash for everything. So I handled all the money, even when I was in high school. Oh, God, it was funny. I used to travel,

of course, Central Avenue, Pasadena, Glendale, all of L.A., Hollywood, all over, selling them.

ISOARDI: B.B. King.

BIHARI: Nicest person you ever met in your life, and still is. A real gentleman, a fine, fine person, the greatest, I think, blues singer and blues guitar player of all time.

There's a million stories I could tell you about B.B. I told you about when I bought his first Lucille [the name he gives his guitar]. It was in Houston, Texas. We were walking down the street, and B.B. had mentioned, "Gee, I'd really like to have a new guitar." We went down the street, and a block away was a guitar store.

ISOARDI: How long had you known him at this time?

BIHARI: Oh, this was probably around 1954.

ISOARDI: So you'd known each other a couple of years?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, three or four years. Yes, I'd been recording him. So I said, "Go and pick out whatever you want." He picked out one guitar. I said, "Go pick out another one." I bought him two guitars, amplifiers, and everything. He told me, "I'll make you hit records tonight." Because we were recording that night in Houston. We sure did get hit records. [laughs]

"Woke Up This Morning" and "Please Love Me."

ISOARDI: All in one session?

BIHARI: All that one session, yes. Four sides. It was with the Bill Harvey band. I signed an artist--he never did do too well, though--Bill Harvey's piano player. His name was Connie MacBooker. I recorded a few sides with him.

ISOARDI: As a leader?

BIHARI: As leader and singer, yes. And B.B. later told my daughter Nicole [Bihari] and myself-- I asked him, "Whatever happened to the first two guitars I bought you?" He said, "You mean my first two Lucilles?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Joe, they were stolen out of the trunk of my car."

ISOARDI: How long after that?

BIHARI: What did he say? About two weeks after.

ISOARDI: That soon?

BIHARI: That soon.

ISOARDI: How long was he with you?

BIHARI: From the middle forties until around 1960, almost twenty years.

ISOARDI: A long relationship.

BIHARI: Yes. I don't know if I told you this--I might have said it in an earlier taping--but B.B.'s contract was ready to run out with us. I don't know how long we had, maybe six months to go, and he wanted to sign a new contract. He came to my office. He came to me and said, "Joe, I've been approached

by ABC[-Paramount Records]. They'll give me \$25,000 to sign a new contract."

ISOARDI: When was this?

BIHARI: I think it was in the early sixties before his contract had run out with us. He said, "But I'd like to stay with you."

So I said, "B.B., let me talk to Jules to see if I can get you the \$25,000."

And Jules and I had a big argument, his hands flailing, "I'm not going to give anybody \$25,000 to sign a contract," just like that.

So I told B.B., "I tried to get you \$25,000. Go with ABC. They'll do a lot better than we'll do for you, because you can hear what Jules's attitude is."

He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, Joe. I have six months to go on my contract with you. Every chance I get, I will call you, and I will record. You come fly in wherever I tell you I'll be, and I'll record and record and record for you until I have to go with ABC."

ISOARDI: Jeez, what an offer.

BIHARI: Yeah. That's what he did. I'd fly into-- I remember I recorded B.B. at King Records' studio in Cincinnati. I arranged with Sid Nathan at King Records to use their studio

that night. He'd call me, I'd record him in Kansas City, I recorded him in Atlanta, New Orleans, everyplace where he had some time--and in Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: What a nice thing to do.

BIHARI: Yeah. He said, "I'll leave you with all the recordings that I can."

ISOARDI: You had a vault of B.B. King when he left.

BIHARI: B.B. Kings, yeah.

ISOARDI: How long did it take you to release that material?

BIHARI: I don't know if they were ever all released. I think some of them might be unreleased. They [Flair-Virgin Records] still find more masters in England, because they have all the recordings. And I think they found some unreleased B.B. King master recordings.

ISOARDI: Jeez, nice guy.

BIHARI: So B.B. is-- And I still see B.B. all the time. I think I told you that he stopped the show at his club [B.B. King's Blues Club] here in Universal City where he was playing not long ago. And he introduced my daughter Nicole and myself.

And he said, "Mr. Bihari produced my first hit record--he owned the record company--and many, many more hits after that.

And I'd like to dedicate this next song to him and his daughter."

It was very nice. And people after the show came up for my

autograph. I said, "What do you want my autograph for?" They said, "Well, if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be able to hear B.B. King."

ISOARDI: Very nice.

BIHARI: That was nice.

ISOARDI: Great. Anything else on B.B.?

BIHARI: Oh, sure. There were a whole bunch of things. I was recording B.B. in Tuff Green's house in Memphis, Tennessee.

Tuff was a bass player and a school teacher. So I was recording, and had a few hits out of that--"It's My Own Fault, Darling."

And there was another big one. He had "You Know I Love You"--Ike Turner playing piano. B.B. was playing up in eastern Tennessee someplace and drove in all night to Memphis. And while recording "My Own Fault, Darling," B.B. actually fell asleep while singing it. After a little coffee he got back, and then we did "You Know I Love You" and then did another take on "My Own Fault, Darling." We had some hit records there. [laughs] I don't know what happened to that master tape. Maybe they'll find it in England.

ISOARDI: Oh, that would be funny. I don't know if he'd appreciate it being released. [laughs]

BIHARI: But he remembers it, because I mentioned something, and he said, "Joe, I remember that." He has a fantastic memory.

He's great.

ISOARDI: Did you tell him it may have survived? [laughs]

BIHARI: No, I didn't. But it might have survived someplace.

ISOARDI: Well, after B.B., what can we follow up B.B. King with? Elmore James.

BIHARI: Well, I think everything is said pretty much in that booklet in the Elmore James box set [The Classic Early Recordings, 1951-1956].

ISOARDI: I guess in that booklet on Elmore James.

BIHARI: In that booklet, yes.

ISOARDI: Anything that didn't get down in that booklet?

BIHARI: I don't think so.

ISOARDI: Back to L.A. Howard McGhee. I know you recorded his big band.

BIHARI: Yes, I recorded his big band, maybe just four sides.

I think on some of the sides there was a girl by the name of Estelle Edson singing with the band. And it might have been that Pearl Traylor might have sung something with his band at one time.

ISOARDI: Was this a band that was performing outside the studio? Or was this a band that he put together to record for you?

BIHARI: Yeah, I think it's a band he put together. He was

one of the originators of bebop, and he was really trying to promote bebop jazz. And his band was a bebop band. It was a big band. I think it was about a fourteen- or fifteen-piece band.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it had to be one of the first bebop bands.

BIHARI: I think so. Nice person. He's a trumpet player. I think that Howard was from Chicago. I'm not sure. I don't know why that came to my mind.

ISOARDI: It seems a little bit of a departure for you guys, in a sense.

BIHARI: It was. But we were trying some things that were a little bit different.

ISOARDI: Early on you were trying different things?

BIHARI: Early on you try a little bit here, a little bit there. It really was a departure. But you tried a little bit here and there.

ISOARDI: Why did you hook up with Howard McGhee?

BIHARI: He came into our place.

ISOARDI: He came walking in?

BIHARI: Yeah, came walking in. The records didn't sell. We always sold something, but they weren't profitable.

ISOARDI: Right.

Ike Turner. [laughs]

BIHARI: You've heard the story about when I hired Ike.

ISOARDI: Yeah, you mentioned that. You mentioned that incredible session when you first found him and hired him.

BIHARI: Found him, right. I don't know if I mentioned that I had another problem with Jules later. Ike was with Juggy Murray at Sue Records in New York. Ike had a lot of hit records with him. And Ike came to me-- I can't remember what year it was. He called me, and he said, "Look, I've got a new contract with Sue Records. But, Joe, I would like to go with you, and of course that means Tina [Turner] also. They're going to give me \$50,000 to sign a new contract."

And I said, "Ike, I had the same experience with B.B. King. He just wanted \$25,000 because ABC had offered him \$25,000. There's no way in the world Jules is going to give \$50,000."

He said, "Well, I'd like you to look over the contract."

I said, "Okay. I'll meet you on the corner of La Cienega [Boulevard] and Sunset [Boulevard]."

We went to a little restaurant or coffee shop, looked over the contract, and I said, "Look, I'd love to have you, but Jules won't put out \$50,000. But I'm concerned about a few things in the contract. Juggy's going to give you \$50,000,

but he doesn't say when or how." So I just said, "I'll write this in. You initial it, and you get Juggy to initial it. The \$50,000 is forthwith, which means right now, and cash or cashier's check."

He did that. He said, "Juggy raised a fit, but he gave me \$50,000 in cashier's checks immediately." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Smart.

BIHARI: And then a little later Ike said, "I'm out of a contract." He was doing his own recording now. So he said, "I want you to produce me and the Ikettes." I said, "Okay."

So I got to his house up in Baldwin Hills, and I started rehearsing with him and Tina [Turner] and the Ikettes. The first record I had was a hit called "Good-bye, So Long." And of course, Jules didn't want to give me any credit at all because that's another one he let go. And then I recorded the Ikettes' "I'm So Thankful," which was a hit. And I did with the Ikettes "Peaches and Cream," which was a hit. And of course, Tina was singing with the Ikettes, too.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

BIHARI: And Jules and I just didn't see eye to eye. So those were things that would slip by.

ISOARDI: Unfortunately.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: But it's nice that you were involved in producing those.

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. And then-- What else happened? In the seventies, when Ike and Tina split, Ike was having all those problems. I think I might have related information earlier today, didn't I?

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

BIHARI: About Ike and Tina? When he was having problems with the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] and American Express?

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

BIHARI: Nicole's mother [Doreen Kline]'s ex-husband [Don Sand] had CPA [certified public accountant] offices around Southern California, and she got him to come down and go through his books and get some payment plan with the IRS and a payment plan with American Express for him and eventually got him out of trouble. We went down-- They had split. They had \$4 million in bookings set for Europe. They had to cancel all of them.

ISOARDI: Why?

BIHARI: They had split. They were having their problems.

ISOARDI: Because of the--?

BIHARI: Ike at that time was so heavy on coke [cocaine]. But finally after, oh, a month, Ike had a library of all the

recordings, all the different artists that he had recorded.

Because he did have his own label at one time, or several of them--a label called Prawn [Records]. But he had a library of master recordings. He said, "Joe, because you have given me so much help, you and your wife, here's my library. It's all yours. You can start another record company, you and your wife, you one third, your wife one third, and me one third." He said, "I don't want Jules involved in it in any way except in pressing the records, that's all." Well, when I went back and told Jules, another flailing of the arms and this and that.

ISOARDI: So you didn't go through with it?

BIHARI: No, I didn't go through with it. It's another one of those things.

ISOARDI: Why would you have needed his agreement? Couldn't you have done that yourself?

BIHARI: Well, I could have. But we had been in business for thirty-some-odd years together. Of course, I was still the youngest one, even though I did the work. He was interested in only pressing records, that was all--manufacturing. So that killed that deal.

So anyway, Ike and I are together again, and I'm still producing Ike. Once again I haven't got a release for him

as yet. I could get a release if he would do nothing but blues. I could get it released in Europe.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. But he doesn't want to?

BIHARI: Well, he does a certain amount of blues. But he doesn't want to do just strictly a blues album. Because I did a lot of recording with Ike singing and playing in Clarksdale [Mississippi] when he used to scout talent for me. He was on payroll. And as I said, I bought his first automobile for him. That's all in the interview, I'm sure.

ISOARDI: Yeah, we talked about the Buick Roadmaster.

BIHARI: Yeah, Buick Roadmaster. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, I had Tina Turner down as well.

BIHARI: Well, Tina was always a lovely person. I felt that Ike had a lot of control over her. I think that he's the one who taught her to sing and to sing the way she did sing. He was a big influence on her. And I used to go to their house and rehearse, and he would work and work and work until she got it the way he wanted her to sing and the band played with the feeling that he wanted them to play with. Tina never complained about a thing. It was at the time that she was just getting into her-- I don't know what her religious beliefs were. She was a Christian, and then she went into the yoga or an Indian religion of some kind [Nichiren Soshu Buddhism].

She was doing her chants at that time, too. Always a nice, nice person, very pretty lady.

ISOARDI: Yeah, still is.

BIHARI: Still is, yeah. Good, healthy mind, too.

ISOARDI: When did they hook up?

BIHARI: They hooked up in East St. Louis [Illinois] in the fifties. I don't know the exact year.

ISOARDI: Was that after he had left the association with you, then?

BIHARI: Yes. That's when he left me and went to East St. Louis, Illinois. That's when he formed his band again, the Kings of Rhythm.

ISOARI: Sam Phillips.

BIHARI: Sam was a nice person. He was in the right place at the right time. Sam used to be an engineer for a radio station. I think even when he had his studio in the forties he was an engineer also in a radio station. He also was associated with a radio station at one time in Memphis called WHER. I think he had all women working there.

ISOARDI: Really? All women disc jockeys and everything?

BIHARI: I think, if I remember correctly. Everything. He was one of the owners, from what I heard.

ISOARDI: Do you know why he did that?

BIHARI: No, I don't know why.

ISOARDI: I'd be curious to know whether he was one of the biggest chauvinists of all time or one of the forerunners of equality for women in the entertainment industry.

BIHARI: I really don't know.

ISOARDI: I saw a clip of him recently in a documentary film, and he sounded like a preacher.

BIHARI: Yeah, he always did.

ISOARDI: The way he talked, it was just like he was in a pulpit.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Was he always like that? Is that how he sounded?

BIHARI: No, I don't think so. He was a youngster. He was a young guy then. He just had the right thing at the right time. There was a multitude of talent around, because it all came up from Louisiana, northern Louisiana and Mississippi and through Tennessee and Missouri and Arkansas. It was all around Memphis.

ISOARDI: It's staggering when you think about it.

BIHARI: It is. Oh, what talent came out of there.

ISOARDI: And it continued for some time. I guess when Stax Records started cranking them out--

BIHARI: Oh, yeah, Stax was there, too. Sure.

ISOARDI: Ten years later or whatever.

BIHARI: Yeah. But you have to give Sam a lot of credit. He recognized the talent. There was a lot of it. And I give him all the credit in the world.

ISOARDI: Johnny Ace.

BIHARI: I didn't know him well. I only did that one session with him.

ISOARDI: That was it? You never did anything else?

BIHARI: Never did anything else. That was the only session.

ISOARDI: He didn't live too long after that, did he?

BIHARI: No. He shot himself playing Russian roulette.

ISOARDI: Just within a few years?

BIHARI: Within a few years, yeah. He had some hit records, too.

ISOARDI: Sad.

Bobby "Blue" Bland.

BIHARI: The same with Bobby Bland. He was in the military on leave when I recorded "Three O'Clock Blues" with B.B. and recorded him at the same session.

ISOARDI: That was your only brush with him?

BIHARI: That was my only brush with him. And I didn't care for his singing. It sounded like he had mush in his mouth. We used to call him mushmouth. [laughs]

ISOARDI: You can't like everybody.

BIHARI: No, you can't.

ISOARDI: Little Junior Parker.

BIHARI: Same thing.

ISOARDI: Same scenario?

BIHARI: Yeah. I might have done a few other things with Junior Parker because he hung around Ike quite a bit. It's possible I did some other sessions with Junior.

ISOARDI: I have to throw this name out just because of this one reference you had that I didn't really follow up on too much at the time. Earl Warren. You were dating his daughter [Nina Warren]?

BIHARI: I was dating his daughter, yeah. She was my girlfriend.

ISOARDI: How did you meet the Warren family?

BIHARI: Saul [Bihari]'s wife [Linda Bihari] and "Honeybear" [Nina] Warren were friends when they were fourteen, fifteen years old, because Saul's wife's father belonged to the Jonathan Club here in Los Angeles, and the Warrens belonged to the Jonathan Club. And that's where they met as teenagers. And they kept in touch all the time. So I started going out with Honeybear. And there was once she invited me back to Tennessee, to Gaithersberg, Tennessee, where they had the governor's

conference. And I met her back there. And then another time I met her in Houston, Texas, at the governor's conference. We went out for a few years.

ISOARDI: Did you ever meet the governor?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. Well, I met Bobby [Robert] Warren and of course the other two sisters, Virginia [Warren Daly] and Dottie Warren. And I met Earl Warren Jr.

ISOARDI: Did you have any impressions of the governor?

BIHARI: Oh, he was a fine man. Nina invited me to Washington, D.C. As a matter of fact, I think I was in Atlanta when I got a call from my brother Saul. He said, "Call Honeybear in Washington. She wants you to come up." Of course, I was driving as usual. [laughs] It was wintertime. I drove up. And it was snowing in Washington when I got there, of course.

ISOARDI: Of course.

BIHARI: Of course. I spent a couple of days and then had to go to New York. Nice person. We used to go out quite a bit, usually to dinner and fancy clubs. And then-- That's right. When I was going out with her, towards the end Hugh O'Brian, the movie actor, started going out with her. That's right.

ISOARDI: [laughs] He must have been one of the heartthrobs of that era.

BIHARI: Yeah. She started going out with Hugh O'Brian. And I'd run into them. I'd be out with another girlfriend and run into them. Then she finally married a doctor here, Dr. Stuart Brian, in Beverly Hills.

ISOARDI: Let's go back to Brown v. Board of Education [of Topeka, Kansas], when all that [the United States Supreme Court decision that segregation was unconstitutional] was going on. Were you aware of the deliberations of that? Did it surprise you or anything like that?

BIHARI: Not at all, no.

ISOARDI: Unaware and--?

BIHARI: I was unaware. Of course, I was traveling. I saw everything that was happening. I was mortified by what happened there. Sure. I was well aware of all that.

ISOARDI: Back to L.A. Richard Berry.

BIHARI: Ah, a youngster still in high school.

ISOARDI: When you first met him?

BIHARI: When I first met him he had the group called-- Well, I don't remember what the group was named. But I changed their names to the Flairs because I started the Flair label. And he had Obie Jessie, whom we recorded, called Young Jessie. In the group, Beverly Thompson, another singer, Arthur Lee Maye, and Cornelius Gunter--they were the four singers--and

Richard Berry.

ISOARDI: Were they all from the same school?

BIHARI: I think they were all from the same high school.

ISOARDI: Which was--?

BIHARI: Jefferson [High School] or Roosevelt [High School], or one of the high schools. I don't recall. Good songwriter, very talented. I worked very closely with him. A nice, nice person, I think originally from New Orleans, too. I think it was the first time that I recall of anybody taking high school kid groups. And from that group Richard brought in to us Don Julian and the Meadowlarks.

ISOARDI: He started as kind of a rep for you guys?

BIHARI: Exactly. We treated Richard and the group very, very well. He brought in Shirley Gunter, who was Cornelius Gunter's sister, and the Queens, where we had the hit on "Oop Shoop."

Richard was on a contract, but I'm trying to remember whether it was the Drifters, the Coasters, whether-- Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller asked if they could use Richard with one of the groups when they were doing some of their songs, a Leiber-Stoller song.

ISOARDI: I wouldn't be surprised if it was the Coasters. They did a lot with them.

BIHARI: Yeah, it might have been the Coasters. Then I think

a couple of our singers went with the Coasters or the Atlantic groups like Cornelius Gunter. He ended up with one of the Atlantic groups, and Dub Jones, who was with the Cadets and the Jacks. The bass singer ended up with one of the Atlantic groups.

ISOARDI: How long was Richard Berry with you?

BIHARI: Five, six, seven years.

ISOARDI: Quite a while.

BIHARI: Quite a while, yes. We used Richard with Etta James on "Dance with Me, Henry."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. He was the man's voice.

ISOARDI: Oh. [laughs]

BIHARI: And then also on "Hey, Henry." Oh, yes, we used Richard on a lot of those things. Johnny Otis played drums on the Etta James record of "Dance with Me, Henry." In fact, Johnny brought Etta to us. I don't know if I told this story about Etta James.

ISOARDI: I don't think so.

BIHARI: Oh. I was rehearsing Etta for about a week, and then I had to go to Atlanta, Georgia, to record. This time I flew.

I think I flew down. Yeah, I'm sure I did. I got a call from Saul or Jules the day before Thanksgiving. He said,

"You're set to record Etta James Thanksgiving night." I flew back from Atlanta and recorded Etta, "Dance with Me, Henry."

There was Johnny Otis playing drums. I know Maxwell [Davis] was playing saxophone. And I believe it was Willard McDaniel on piano and Chuck Hamilton on bass.

ISOARDI: When was that?

BIHARI: In the fifties sometime. And Etta was a youngster. She was only sixteen or seventeen.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I was going to say she must have been a teenager.

BIHARI: Yeah, sixteen or seventeen. Nice girl, too. I mean, she was full of life and really, really nice.

ISOARDI: John Lee Hooker.

BIHARI: John Lee Hooker. What can I say about John Lee Hooker?

[laughs] He was difficult, because--

ISOARDI: To record? I know you had to end up going into court with him, but--

BIHARI: He was difficult to record because he never came prepared when I recorded him.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. I remember recording him in Detroit. He just didn't have any songs, unless he was putting on an act or whatever it was. He didn't read and write, so I couldn't write lyrics down for him as a basis of the blues to write

around it. So I'd have to throw out titles and a few lines to him.

ISOARDI: And then he would just take off and improvise?

BIHARI: He would just take off from that, improvise on that.

And then, of course, later, in the eighties, he sued-- He wasn't under contract to us at that time. He sued saying he never got his royalties. But it went to federal court, and we had all the proof of sales and checks to him. He just lost the case because we had all the proof of his royalties that he was paid.

ISOARDI: He didn't record for you for a long period of time, right? Was it a couple of years, maybe?

BIHARI: Probably three or four years.

ISOARDI: Four years?

BIHARI: Yeah. Three years with an option, yes.

ISOARDI: So he did turn out quite a few sides.

BIHARI: Yes, he did. Quite a few sides I recorded with Hooker.

ISOARDI: Well, I know he was somewhat notorious--is still somewhat notorious--for all the labels he recorded for and all the different names.

BIHARI: Names, surely. John Lee Hooker, for one.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I was going to say, did it make any difference? Did anybody really care one way or the other?

BIHARI: We never bothered with suing anybody. [laughs]

ISOARDI: And then you dropped him when? What prompted that?

Or did he leave you guys?

BIHARI: He probably left, or we just didn't pick up an option, and that was it. He wasn't selling well anymore for us.

ISOARDI: Well, I guess this is the time, then, when the country blues really weren't selling as well.

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: I see.

BIHARI: Then I think he went with Vee Jay [Records], and he had that big hit called "Boom Boom."

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. That's probably his biggest in a way. It's almost a trademark for him, I suppose.

BIHARI: I think "Boogie Chillun," his first one, was still the biggest thing he had. And "I'm in the Mood" was a very big record.

ISOARDI: Well, I know you've talked about him quite a bit, but maybe is there anything else you could add about Maxwell Davis?

BIHARI: I think Maxwell was a musical genius. I felt Maxwell was a little bit lazy. It came too easy for him, music arrangements and rehearsals. He didn't exert enough creativity while rehearsing. The creativity I had to push

into the artists when I would rehearse with Maxwell. Fabulous arranger. I mean, the music that he put down, that he wrote all the time on our records, never had to change that I could ever remember. He always had great music on the records. They seemed to fit. Had he lived and gone with another company that was more in tune to the music than we were at that time, he would have been recognized, even more recognized, than he is today in the blues field. He came out from Kansas as a youngster. He played violin when he came out here.

ISOARDI: How did you run into him?

BIHARI: He was working for Aladdin Records.

ISOARDI: So that's how you first heard him?

BIHARI: Well, I had recorded him with the Bardu Ali band. He was a saxophone player with the Bardu Ali band as a youngster. And then he started doing some arranging for Aladdin Records, or Philo [Records] at that time. And he did some arranging for us, also. The Gene Phillips recordings he did arranging on, playing as well as arranging, playing saxophone. And eventually I just hired him.

He was working for Louis Jordan. Louis Jordan had lost all of his scores to all of the songs, all the arrangements, and Maxwell had to recreate them all. And I think he did it on the road with Louis Jordan. He was on the road with

Louis Jordan for about a year and recreated all the arrangements.

And then on the way back from Georgia he had an automobile accident. He got hit head-on. Of course, he got his face all cut up. And when he came back he needed a job, and I hired him right then. The first session he did was with B.B. King, "Every Day I Have the Blues," recorded at Capitol Records studio on Melrose [Avenue]. And from then on he was with us until he passed away. He died of a heart attack.

ISOARDI: Productive for you guys.

BIHARI: Very productive, very productive, not only for us but a lot of other people in the music business. And as I said, Dmitri Tiomkin used to call him to do some scoring for him at Twentieth Century[-Fox Film Corporation] and also to play when he was recording for movies.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. He was crazy about Maxwell. And I think that Maxwell played the solo on the song "Idaho" with Ray Anthony's band on the recording, if I remember correctly. These things are all coming out of my head after so many years. Where they're coming from, I don't know. It just seems that those are the things that I remember.

ISOARDI: Over this time, I guess from the thirties on, every once in a while I'll hear about people who were brought into

the studios to do a lot of work, in some cases doing a tremendous amount of work scoring and not getting credit for it.

BIHARI: Not getting credit for it, right.

ISOARDI: But who really made massive contributions to the industry's music.

BIHARI: I think Maxwell was one of them.

ISOARDI: What about Bob Geddins?

BIHARI: Bob Geddins-- Only met Bob a couple of times up in Oakland. Nice person, a good ear for talent. Of course, he gave us Roy Hawkins and Jimmy McCracklin and I think James Reed.

ISOARDI: He had his own label going, as well.

BIHARI: Yes, he did. But, see, we had so much airplay and distribution, believe it or not, it was difficult-- We were a major independent at that time, and it was difficult for other companies, or very small companies, to get the distribution and airplay.

ISOARDI: So Bob Geddins, having a small label in the San Francisco Bay Area, couldn't make those kinds of contacts?

BIHARI: That's right. Now, there's one that you don't even know about, and I will tell you now. Dave Rosenbaum in the forties, '45, had a label called Rhythm Records in San Francisco. You don't remember that?

ISOARDI: Never heard of it.

BIHARI: Okay. A big hit called "S.K. Blues [Part One and Part Two]," Saunders King, one of the first big blues hits on an independent label just a little while after we had our label out. Tremendous blues hit.

ISOARDI: How did he get the distribution and the airplay?

BIHARI: We ended up with "S.K. Blues" on our label. We bought it from Dave Rosenbaum.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. So that's the setup you had with Bob Geddins as well up there.

BIHARI: Right.

ISOARDI: Would they just sort of sell you the thing outright?

BIHARI: Yeah, they'd sell us the masters.

ISOARDI: For a fixed amount? And that was the end of it?

BIHARI: A fixed amount. That was the end of it.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: And we would get the artist, also. Now, that was just brought to my attention when I was with Tony Valerio recently. He said, "You remember Dave Rosenbaum?" I said, "Sure, Rhythm Records, 'S.K. Blues.'"

ISOARDI: With Bob Geddins and with Rosenbaum, were they also examples of guys who just started up right around '45, the end of the [Second World] War?

BIHARI: Yeah, '46, '47. Dave had a record store in San Francisco. It was on Folsom Street. It was in a black area.

ISOARDI: But he wasn't.

BIHARI: No, no.

ISOARDI: Whereas Bob Geddins was a black man.

BIHARI: Bob was black.

ISOARDI: Do you know of any other independents up there other than those two?

BIHARI: Let's see. Not out of my head right now.

ISOARDI: Johnny Otis. I know you've referred to him a number of times. Anything else?

BIHARI: Terrific guy. Loved the man. He was nice, talented, used to play vibes and drums.

ISOARDI: Oh, before drums, really?

BIHARI: I think so. Because I knew him playing vibes as well as drums.

ISOARDI: There are a lot of drummers who go-- Lionel Hampton is perhaps the most famous.

BIHARI: Hampton, yeah, right. Johnny Otis had an accident.

I don't know what happened. He cut his hand or something.

I don't know how it happened.

ISOARDI: That's right. He's got a couple of fingers on the left hand, is it? Or right?

BIHARI: I can't remember.

ISOARDI: They're kind of curved in.

BIHARI: Now, Johnny brought us Little Esther [Phillips] in the forties. We recorded her first song.

ISOARDI: Oh, she must have been-- Was she even a teenager then?

BIHARI: She was a teenager then, yes.

ISOARDI: He was a pretty good talent scout himself.

BIHARI: He was a damned good talent scout, because he was in that scene as a youngster when he played with the Bardu Ali band. He was at the Barrelhouse. He was a youngster in that era.

ISOARDI: He's an interesting guy. I remember for years and years growing up I just assumed he was black.

BIHARI: A lot of people did. He's married to an African American lady [Phyllis Walker Otis]. He has a son, Shuggie [Otis].

ISOARDI: Yeah, Shuggie Otis.

BIHARI: Shuggie Otis, whom I've used on guitar.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? You have?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I remember-- It's interesting. I was so looking forward to meeting him when we interviewed him, because

here's a guy who, when I realized he wasn't black, I was curious to talk to him about someone who really in every respect--culturally, intellectually, almost emotionally--is black but genetically is not.

BIHARI: Genetically, no. He's of Greek ancestry. His name is Veliotes. And I think his father [Alexander Veliotes] was a grocer.

ISOARDI: Yes, in Oakland or Berkeley or something like that.

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: A very interesting guy.

BIHARI: He is. And a very nice person always. I can only speak for how nice he has always been with me and to us.

ISOARDI: So professionally you always beautifully--

BIHARI: Always worked well, yes. But Johnny's a person who couldn't stay at one place. He had his own label [Dig Records], too, and had some hit records on his own label.

ISOARDI: That's right.

BIHARI: He had his own studio.

ISOARDI: So with you guys it was sort of an ad hoc kind of thing. You would use him, and you would buy things from him?

He would bring talent to you?

BIHARI: Right. And this was before he had his own label and his own studio.

ISOARDI: Well, you've mentioned Bardu Ali a couple of times.

Anything else on Bardu?

BIHARI: No, because I didn't know him that well. I was such a youngster then. It was early in 1945 at some time that I recorded his band.

ISOARDI: He goes back a ways, doesn't he?

BIHARI: Yes, he does. I think he goes back to the thirties. And I think Bardu was from New York.

TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE

APRIL 22, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe. Jesse Belvin.

BIHARI: Jesse Belvin, a very talented young man. I will start before he was with us. He is credited with writing the song called "Earth Angel." It was on the Dootone [Records] label, I think.

ISOARDI: He was credited with writing it?

BIHARI: He is not credited. He is known to have written it, but somebody else got credit for it.

ISOARDI: The person who founded Dootone.

BIHARI: Dootsie Williams.

ISOARDI: I thought Dootsie Williams wrote it.

BIHARI: No, he didn't. Jesse Belvin wrote "Earth Angel."

ISOARDI: And Dootsie Williams got the credit?

BIHARI: And everybody knows that Jesse wrote it. Jesse had a habit of giving his songs away or selling them very cheaply.

I can't remember what happened to Jesse after "Earth Angel."

A few years later I recorded Jesse with a song called "Goodnight, My Love," which was a big hit.

ISOARDI: A smash.

BIHARI: A smash, smash, smash record. It had the Don Ralke Singers background. They were a white group that we had recorded

before. They had a hit. Don Ralke was part of a group called Don, Dick, and Jimmy. We had one big hit with them titled "Angela Mia." They were a pop group. It broke out in Chicago, and it was a smash all over the country. Then Don left the group and formed his own group. He was doing backup singing with a lot of artists. So I used him on "Goodnight, My Love."

Maxwell Davis did the arranging. And of course, it was recorded in our Culver City studios with strings. And it was unusual for me to have the best take be the first take, and that was the first take which was the best take. I think we did five or six other takes after that.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yeah, and we ended up using the first take. Another song that he wrote he sold to George Matola and John Maralsco, and I don't think they paid him very much money. Then we recorded Jesse, other songs-- Quite a bit of Jesse. Then he went with RCA [Records]. They had a lot of hopes for him and started promoting him, recording him, promoting him. And he started working on the road. He was playing in a club, I think, in Mississippi or Alabama, and after the date was finished they drove-- He had a limousine for his band or his group, or else maybe he had a bus. But he was riding in a car, and he had a driver. Somebody had slashed his tires,

and he was killed in an automobile accident.

ISOARDI: How old?

BIHARI: Maybe twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Maybe twenty-seven. Very talented. Would have been, I think, a top, top, top artist, because he could write, he could sing, he played piano.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he had a wonderful voice that really would have crossed into so many areas.

BIHARI: You know, he sounded a little bit like Nat [King] Cole.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he did. But I think he was different enough that that wouldn't have been--

BIHARI: Right, yes. Right, he didn't have to copy him. He was very versatile. A wonderful songwriter, too. And a nice, nice person. Really nice. Too nice.

ISOARDI: RCA made him sort of an offer he couldn't refuse?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: A little too much money that you guys wouldn't have been able to--?

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: I know you didn't record much gospel, but I know you recorded some. How about the Reverend James W. Cleveland?

BIHARI: I recorded him one night in our studio at 5815 South

Normandie Avenue. I did a gospel album with B.B. King one time, and I think I overdubbed the James W. Cleveland choir or group where he was directing it and singing behind the B.B. King gospel songs.

ISOARDI: Wow. [laughs]

BIHARI: Now, if I remember correctly, it's a long time ago. But I did record James W. Cleveland. Now, I probably did an album besides that.

ISOARDI: Do you have any remembrances of him?

BIHARI: He was a tall man, a very handsome man.

ISOARDI: How about as a musician?

BIHARI: He did the directing. And of course, when he directed he sang, too. He had a powerful voice. That's my recollection of Reverend Cleveland.

ISOARDI: How about Art Rupe in Specialty Records?

BIHARI: Interesting story about Art Rupe. It was about 1946. One night Art came down and sat with Jules [Bihari] and I on a couch in our little factory on First [Street] and San Pedro Street.

ISOARDI: How did you know him?

BIHARI: Art was in partners with somebody else on a label in 1946, a label called Juke Box [Records].

ISOARDI: And that's how you met him? Just because you guys

were sort of bound to run into each other?

BIHARI: Yes, right. Well, he just came down. And he said, "I'm having problems with my partners. I want to get out.

Should I go back into the record business?" Of course we said, "Go right back into the record business." Now, he didn't have any hit records on his Juke Box label, but he went back in. And Roy Milton was the first band he recorded. Had a hit right away titled "R.M. Blues."

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. Art was a little strange. You know, he liked to keep to himself. He wasn't a flare. He didn't stay out front with anybody. He was from Pittsburgh. He had a brother who lived in Baltimore, and his brother was our distributor.

His name was Manny Goldberg, and he had a distributing company called Mangold Distributing Company. He distributed our records. He looked like Art. And I asked him one day, "Are you related to Art Rupe?" And sheepishly he said, "He's my brother. He doesn't want anybody to know it."

ISOARDI: Explain the difference in names.

BIHARI: I think Art Rupe's name was Goldberg.

ISOARDI: Aha.

BIHARI: I think he took the name Rupe. I think it was Art Goldberg.

ISOARDI: For him was it kind of a business, then? Was that his approach to industry?

BIHARI: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: He wasn't so much of an A and R [artist and repertoire] person as more on the business side?

BIHARI: No, he wasn't-- That's right. He was the business side. He wasn't an A and R person. He was the business side.

ISOARDI: How do you explain--? I mean, we certainly have talked about your success. How would you explain Art Rupe's success.

BIHARI: Caring, good people-- Remember, Sonny Bono used to work for Art Rupe.

ISOARDI Oh, really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: As an A and R kind of person?

BIHARI: As an A and R. Sonny came to me and wanted a job.

And I, of course, went to Jules and said, "This kid is looking for an A and R job. He says he has his hand on a lot of talent."

And Jules said, "You're not going to hire anybody. You do all the recording." You know, Jules was very narrow that way.

ISOARDI: He was certainly predictable, wasn't he?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: So Sonny went to Art Rupe?

BIHARI: Art Rupe, Specialty Records.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Well, he must have been good, then, at picking people, because Specialty certainly had a run.

BIHARI: Sure did. I mean, after all, Sonny and Cher did some very good things. I mean, it could have been that with Modern Records, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no question.

BIHARI: Same thing, but I don't know what it was with Jules.

I don't think it was the confidence he had in me. I think it was that he just didn't want to spend any money for somebody.

He'd rather spend it in the factory than recording.

ISOARDI: Any other thoughts on Art Rupe?

BIHARI: Oh, I ran into Art-- Believe it or not, he had just come from Georgia. I think I met Art at the airport in Houston, Texas.

ISOARDI: When was this?

BIHARI: In the fifties. He didn't have a place to stay. He had just flown in, and I had a suite at the Shamrock Hotel.

I was with my brother Saul [Bihari] and Bobby Shad from Sittin' In with Records, his label. And we had a suite. Art didn't have a place, so I said, "You come on and stay with us."

He had to fly out early the next day. He spent the night

with us.

ISOARDI: That's quite a gathering of some heavy independent talent.

BIHARI: I must tell you that we were very friendly with people in the record business. I mean, it was like a big family, the distributors and the manufacturers.

ISOARDI: It's interesting, because there is so much competition going on.

BIHARI: Today?

ISOARDI: Well, back then--

BIHARI: But there was so much talent, anyway. There was not one company that could have taken it all.

ISOARDI: So it seems like despite the competition and the occasional reference to lawyers you guys all got along.

BIHARI: All got along very, very well all the time. Remember, we all had the same record distributors, and there's no way in the world Art Rupe or Leonard Chess or Joe Bihari could have all the talent there was around, all the hit talent. They had theirs that were hits and they had theirs that were misses. We did too.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, along the same vein, Lou Chudd at Imperial Records?

BIHARI: He was another very friendly but a very quiet person.

ISOARDI: More of a business kind of guy?

BIHARI: More of a business guy, yes. He got out of the record business. Well, let's see. His A and R man was Eddie Ray. Eddie used to work for our record distributor here as a youngster. He became an A and R man for Lou Chudd at Imperial Records and did some very good things. He did the Fats Domino recordings. Lou finally sold out-- Now, who brought Ricky Nelson to Lou I don't know, but Lou finally sold out, and I understand that he bought into radio stations.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BIHARI: I did go to a party-- He invited me to a party at his house. He'd just bought a new house in Cheviot Hills on Club Drive. There were quite a few people in the music business there. That was either in the fifties or sixties.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, you mentioned him a few times, but any other thoughts on Alan Freed?

BIHARI: I wish my brother [Saul Bihari] was here to tell you.

ISOARDI: So he was much closer--?

BIHARI: He was much closer to Alan than I was, yes. Absolutely, yeah.

ISOARDI: Shirley Gunter?

BIHARI: Shirley, a nice girl, good singer. She eventually

went blind.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. She was just a little, young high school girl when I recorded her. And, yeah, she eventually went blind, and I don't know what happened to her. I think we did maybe eight recordings with her.

ISOARDI: And that was it pretty much? So it was maybe a year relationship?

BIHARI: Maybe two years.

ISOARDI: Two years. How long did she continue as a performer? Do you know?

BIHARI: Not very long. I don't really think she ever performed out. She just did the recordings.

ISOARDI: Oh, that was it?

BIHARI: That was it, yes.

ISOARDI: Joe Turner?

BIHARI: Big Joe. Closer to my brother Jules, because Jules was the money man. [laughs]

ISOARDI: And certain artists gravitated more toward the money men? [laughs]

BIHARI: They all gravitated towards the money man. I mean, they'd ask me for money, and I'd say, "Well, I'll have to go get it from Jules. I'll have to ask him." [laughs] A

nice person. Of course, a great blues singer. Fabulous.

ISOARDI: I always thought there was an operatic quality to that man's voice.

BIHARI: Yes, he had a strong, strong, big voice. He could really belt out songs.

ISOARDI: Oh, gee, even when I still hear "Shake Rattle and Roll" sometimes, you know, it's like you could see him just filling a hall.

BIHARI: Exactly, yeah. But you know, he sang with, I think, Count Basie's band years and years ago in the thirties.

ISOARDI: Well, I guess he and Jimmy Rushing came out of that Kansas City, Midwest, Oklahoma, that blues shouting tradition.

BIHARI: That's right. Sure was. He had a big hit I think on Decca [Records] called "Roll 'Em, Pete."

ISOARDI: Oh, of course, with Pete Johnson on piano.

BIHARI: Yes, piano.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Oh, that's classic. In fact, I have a tape of early Big Joe Turner stuff. I think "Roll 'Em, Pete" is on there, but there's also, oddly enough, one piece called "Blues on Central Avenue."

BIHARI: Oh, yeah? That one I don't remember.

ISOARDI: When I stumbled across that I almost fell over.

It was about how he lost his baby on Central Avenue one day

in L.A.

BIHARI: I still remember-- I don't know the title of the song. If I remember some of the lyrics, "You're so beautiful, but you've got to die someday."

ISOARDI: Oh, yes.

BIHARI: I don't know what that one is from.

ISOARDI: Oh, yes.

BIHARI: And there's another lyric that he did, "If you want my peaches, you've got to shake my tree."

ISOARDI: You know, I think that first line you mentioned is just-- I've heard Ernie Andrews use that in some of his stuff. It's just a classic line. It may have originated with Joe Turner. Maybe he heard it in Kansas City sometime.

BIHARI: Heard from somebody else, sure.

You know, there's somebody you didn't mention: Jimmy Witherspoon. Interesting thing about Jimmy Witherspoon. Jimmy came out to California with the Jay McShann band around 1946--a band from Kansas City, too. He had a big hit years ago called "Confessin' the Blues" with Walter Robertson singing.

ISOARDI: Right, Jay McShann.

BIHARI: He came out with Jay McShann's band. And of course, I recorded Jay McShann. And I recorded Jimmy Witherspoon.

ISOARDI: When?

BIHARI: In the forties.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: I didn't know you guys had recorded Jay McShann.

BIHARI: Sure did.

ISOARDI: Wonderful.

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: How many cuts did you do?

BIHARI: I don't know. I'd have to look in the catalog. There were probably some we did that weren't even released. They're someplace around.

ISOARDI: Jimmy Witherspoon must have been pretty young then.

BIHARI: He was very young. And you know, a Joe Turner-type singer. And a nice person, also. He was crazy about Jules. The money was there again.

ISOARDI: Well, he spent time in Southern California and performed a lot on Central Avenue.

BIHARI: Yes, he performed a lot around California. I did a lot of recording with Jimmy. The first hit I had with Jimmy was done at a Gene Norman concert. Gene Norman and Frank Bull put on concerts called Just Jazz.

ISOARDI: Like Norman Granz did.

BIHARI: But they did Dixieland and blues in their concerts

and jazz also. So I made a deal with Gene Norman and Frank Bull to release all of their concert recordings.

ISOARDI: Oh, wonderful.

BIHARI: That's where I got "No Rollin' Blues," which was a big hit by Jimmy Witherspoon.

ISOARDI: These were all live?

BIHARI: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, wonderful.

BIHARI: I had the Trenier Twins [Claude and Clifford Trenier] live on a big hit--I can't remember what it was--the Erroll Garner things, the Wardell Gray recordings. These were all from the Gene Norman jazz concerts.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BIHARI: And I made the deal with Gene. Gene was a disc jockey on KFWB. He played jazz. But he played my blues because I used to go up to see him all the time, because I'd see Frank Bull on KFWB. Frank had a show between five and six [o'clock] at night or six and seven, and Gene had a ten o'clock at night show. I used to go up and sit with Gene Norman. We became very good friends, and Gene ended up running around with us.

Because we, the Bihari brothers, were together quite a bit in those days--nightclubs in the early days.

ISOARDI: Well, as young hotshot record producers-- [laughs]

BIHARI: Yeah, we were.

Now, I have something to tell you that I didn't tell you yet. In 1947 we opened up a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard and Crescent Heights [Boulevard]. It was called the Cheese Box. We had a radio broadcast from there.

ISOARDI: With which station?

BIHARI: I can't even remember. We had a disc jockey. He called himself the Sheik. He dressed like a sheik with a turban, white flowing gown. It was a remote broadcast. And of course he played records and interviewed people all over, even on the street. He'd interview people on the street. And we'd pack that place every night. I think we only had the restaurant for maybe about a year and closed it down. We only had the broadcast maybe for six months.

ISOARDI: You were broadcasting all your material?

BIHARI: Yes. [laughs] Why not?

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Another thing, when we were on First and San Pedro Streets, there was a fellow by the name of Jack Lauderdale, a black man, had a record store on First Street right around the corner from our little plant, a retail record store. He had his own label, and it was called Down Beat Records.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Hewas the first one to record Ray Charles. Ray Charles played piano with Lowell Fulson's band, and he was the first one to record Lowell Fulson that I know of. And Lowell played guitar in Ray Charles's band.

ISOARDI: Who was this guy?

BIHARI: His name was Jack Lauderdale.

ISOARDI: And when did Down Beat start?

BIHARI: In '46, '47.

ISOARDI: I'll be darned.

BIHARI: I just remembered and I put it down.

ISOARDI: How long did he survive turning out records?

BIHARI: About four years, I think.

ISOARDI: Really? Jeez. But he got Ray Charles and Lowell Fulson?

BIHARI: Lowell Fulson and Ray Charles, his first two artists.

ISOARDI: But what kind of distribution did he have?

BIHARI: Not very good. Maybe that's why he didn't survive.

ISOARDI: Gee. Well, it sounds like it's probably another guy who saw you guys turning out records and figured--

BIHARI: Right. He was right around the corner.

ISOARDI: Amazing.

BIHARI: It's amazing what you start to remember.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, it's an industry that was just beginning.

There were so many different things, so many things sprouting that--

BIHARI: Exactly.

ISOARDI: Amazing. Did he record Ray Charles and Lowell Fulson much? Was it a couple of years of them or--?

BIHARI: I don't even think that much, maybe eight sides on each of them. I think that was about it. But we were considered for many years-- The Bihari brothers were the pioneers of the independent record industry.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How long was Joe Turner with you? This must have been the late forties, early fifties?

BIHARI: Joe would be with us to do a few sides and then go on to somebody else and then come back. And even probably in the late seventies and eighties he came in and did some more sides.

ISOARDI: So it was on a side by side basis? It wasn't a contract?

BIHARI: Never a contract, yeah. You need some money-- "Joe, I need some money." "Go see Jules."

ISOARDI: How about Jimmy Witherspoon?

BIHARI: Jimmy was with us for quite a few years, maybe five or six years, and then went someplace else and came back. He was on the Supreme [Records] label. He had that big hit

on Supreme, "Ain't Nobody's Business."

ISOARDI: Well, actually the next person I had down was Lowell Fulson.

BIHARI: Lowell was with us and gone again and back again.

ISOARDI: Same kind of thing?

BIHARI: Same kind of thing.

ISOARDI: No long-term contract.

BIHARI: No. But I don't know if it was the sixties or seventies when we had a pretty big hit with Lowell titled "Black Nights."

ISOARDI: I think he's still alive. I think he's living out in Palm Desert, Palm Springs, or--

BIHARI: Yeah, in the desert area I heard, also. Yes. Nice person, Lowell, always very, very nice.

ISOARDI: What type of recording did he do for you?

BIHARI: Oh, he did a lot of things with Maxwell arranging.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Oh, yes. He had also another big hit with us called "Tramp" in the late sixties or early seventies. Jimmy McCracklin wrote it.

ISOARDI: Arthur Lee Maye?

BIHARI: Arthur Lee Maye. An interesting story about him: he was one of Richard Berry's friends, and Richard brought him in. And I can't remember who the Crowns were, but it

was Arthur Lee Maye and the Crowns. The Crowns might have been Richard Berry and the Flairs as the background. Arthur Lee was a nice person. He had a high voice. He was a baseball player. He led the league in hitting. It was the Pioneer League, I think. He called me from Utah one time--he was eighteen years old--and he said, "I want to quit baseball and I want to do nothing but sing." I convinced him to stay in baseball, which he did, and he became a major league outfielder.

I'm telling you, those kids were all just pleasant kids to be around, nice as they could be.

ISOARDI: Earlier on you were talking about Hunter Hancock.

I had him down. Is there anything else you'd like to add about Hunter?

BIHARI: Hunter played a lot of my records, a lot of them. But I had good records, too.

ISOARDI: Oh, gee, that actually reminded me of something else that "Big Jay" [Cecil] McNeely had talked briefly about:

I don't know about a record ban, but a performance ban where rhythm and blues artists couldn't play in L.A. County, couldn't play around L.A. He said that there were spots, some cities, that were banning black artists from playing in some theaters.

They felt it was too incendiary to the white kids, that it was sending them off or something.

BIHARI: You know, I don't know that.

ISOARDI: You don't remember that? Okay.

BIHARI: No, I don't remember that at all.

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, we'll skip that.

BIHARI: But you know, I know one thing, that especially throughout the South white kids played and listened to blues music. They weren't so much buyers as listeners. Maybe it was because they were afraid to bring them home. And I'm talking about in the forties and the fifties. But they did listen to blues music.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Jay said the kids loved it. I mean, they'd just go crazy. But the adults would write letters to the editor that their kids were acting like a bunch of-- He said there was one editorial in one beach community paper that accused him of turning their kids into a bunch of Watusis.

BIHARI: Oh, God. That's awful.

ISOARDI: If you can believe that.

BIHARI: I can believe many things, but not always what they write.

ISOARDI: Okay. The last name I had down was Lightnin' Hopkins.

BIHARI: I never met Lightnin' Hopkins. He was from Houston, Texas. All of our masters were bought from a company called Gold Star Records. This man who owned the company was Bill

Quinn.

ISOARDI: They were a small independent?

BIHARI: Yeah, they were small.

ISOARDI: And they had recorded a lot of his stuff?

BIHARI: Right. He recorded Lightnin', and we bought the master recordings.

ISOARDI: You were just shopping the masters around?

BIHARI: No, I don't think he did. I think because of our distribution he came to us and said, "Would you like to buy the Lightnin' Hopkins masters?" And I don't know how many-- We bought a lot of the masters.

ISOARDI: So it's interesting. It looks like in a very short while some of the first independents, then, were able to grow.

The smarter ones like yourselves hooked up distribution lines nationally.

BIHARI: Yes, because we started the independent distribution in this country.

ISOARDI: Right. And then the next wave, if you will, a lot more independents sprung up without the distributing clout and then started feeding you, feeding the larger independents.

BIHARI: That's exactly right. I didn't mention about the distributors. I said there were only two distributors in the country when we started. There was a third one. There

was Julius Bard in Chicago that I just remembered. It was Paul Reiner out of Cleveland, Julius Bard out of Chicago, and Jack Gutshall out of L.A. Those were the three distributors in the country.

ISOARDI: Interesting. So that's how you got your Lightnin' Hopkins material?

BIHARI: Yes.

ISOARDI: Interesting. You never met him or had to deal with him?

BIHARI: Never met him, never dealt with him at all.

ISOARDI: Was it just a one-shot deal with this company?

BIHARI: I think we bought the first masters, and then Bill Quinn recorded Lightnin' again a few years later, and we bought the whole lot.

ISOARDI: Interesting. Well, Joe, that's my list.

BIHARI: That's your list, eh? [laughs]

ISOARDI: I don't know if there are any other names that I haven't thought of that you think we might bring up, but--BIHARI:

Maybe I'll go through the catalog and we'll think up some other ones.

ISOARDI: All right.

TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE

MAY 13, 1995

ISOARDI: Okay, Joe. I think you had a few additional bits of historical info you want us to plug in from our last conversation?

BIHARI: Yes, or from one of the conversations. We were talking about where we sold records on Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Ah, yes.

BIHARI: And there was [J.J.] Newberry and S.H. Kress, Sears [Roebuck and Company], Dolphin's [of Hollywood] record store at Vernon [Avenue] and Central, Flash Records, besides all the little cigar, cigarette, candy places that sold records.

And there was one particular place called Gold's Furniture--I think it was at Washington [Boulevard] and Central Avenue--that we sold a lot of our records to. They had a record department at Gold's Furniture.

ISOARDI: They had a record department?

BIHARI: Yes. Gold's is no longer there. I don't know when it went out of business.

ISOARDI: So back then you would have stores, I guess, like Dolphin's that were just record stores, right?

BIHARI: Just record stores.

ISOARDI: But you would also pretty much place them anywhere?

BIHARI: Anyplace that could sell records.

ISOARDI: And it sounds like most places would.

BIHARI: Any little place, yes. The restaurants didn't, of course; they had the jukeboxes. But any little place that was selling anything we would place records in.

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, we sort of have come, I think, close to the end. And maybe as a way of concluding, we can go back over the last forty, fifty years of your involvement in music and just maybe tackle some of the big questions and see if you have any thoughts.

BIHARI: Why don't we start right into the recording end of it.

ISOARDI: Yes, how about recording? How has that changed over time?

BIHARI: Oh, has it changed tremendously! In the forties we used to record on wax, beeswax. It was beeswax. It was about an inch thick. And we'd record at 78 rpms right on the beeswax, and it would be the master. That would go in for the matrix processing. And then after that was done, the matrix was done. It was a protection with metal and a metal master and metal stampers. We had the protection, so we'd slice off the beeswax, shave it off so it was smooth again, and record again.

The transition from that went into the lacquer disc. They were sixteen-inch discs that we recorded at 33 1/3. And at the same time we'd record at 78. So if we got a good master we wouldn't have to transfer from the 33 1/3 rpm to 78 rpm to make a master.

ISOARDI: Oh, so in those times of transition from 78 to the LP you'd do both simultaneously?

BIHARI: Well, the 33 1/3 was not an LP; it was a sixteen-inch disc. So we'd make more than one cut. But we'd also record a master at the same time at 78 rpms, and if we had a good cut we'd save that master. If not, that disc was either turned over-- You could record on both sides of it. And if you didn't get a master, you were still doing it on 33 1/3 for the protection on the sixteen-inch disc, and once you got the take that you wanted it was already recorded on a 78 simultaneously. And you had the 33 1/3 for the protection. And it came to a point where the metal during the war was hard to get. It was a lacquer that was dipped onto aluminum. Then they went to glass. Glass didn't last too long, because if you dropped it, it shattered. These were the 78's.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: This was all monaural recording. There was no such

thing as hi-fi [high fidelity] then. It was whatever

it was. And then when the change came to higher frequencies, then it went into what was called hi-fi. It wasn't lo-fi before, it was just what it was.

ISOARDI: Exactly.

BIHARI: It was a recording. And then, of course, from hi-fi then it went into tape, which was one-track tape. And then it went to two-track tape, which was stereo. And it was still, I guess, called hi-fi. But as the frequencies went up, you could get higher frequencies recorded on tape and lower frequencies recorded on tape. The problem with recording on disc with the lower frequencies was that it would cross over. The bass notes would cross over from one line to another, and you'd get a skip in the record. So you had to limit the frequencies on the low end in the original recording. The tape would handle a lot more than the disc would. But you'd still have to worry about distortion on the tape, too, on the low end and the high end. And then from two-track it went to three-track, four-track, and on up to forty-eight or sixty-track, whatever it is today. And of course, the frequencies are much higher on the high end and much lower on the low end.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: So you can see where the transition went, from the recording-- And of course, the records were originally pressed in the forties on shellac. It was a shellac composition mixed with cotton flock as a filler, clay as a filler, lampblack to give it the color. And the shellac gave it the shiny part and the part you could press the record on.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: The shellac would come to the top. Columbia Records had a little different process. They had the cotton flock and the lampblack and the clay in the middle, and they had it laminated with a paper laminate, with the shellac on the paper laminate on each side. It didn't break as easily as the other records because it had the paper laminate.

ISOARDI: The others would really shatter. [laughs]

BIHARI: Shatter. And of course, later it went to vinyl and then from 78 rpm to 45 rpm and 33 1/3 rpm. And there was a battle between whether it would be 45 or 33 1/3 on a small disc, or a seven-inch disc. The 45 for the seven-inch disc won the battle. And then the 33 1/3 became the LP, the long-playing record.

And then, from there, as you know, it went to the CD and to the laser disc. And as far as tape, we had reel-to-reel

tape, which was a seven-inch tape. It wasn't a continuous reel like the eight-track. And it then went to four-track tape with the tape machines for the consumer, and then eight-track. And they eventually went out and cassettes came in. The cassette was just coming in when the eight-tracks came in. And I guess it all ended up with cassette and CD and laser disc.

ISOARDI: Where do you think it's going to go from there?

BIHARI: God only knows. [laughs] I'm sure there will be something else. The changes help keep the business going.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly.

BIHARI: Not only the hardware but the software as well.

ISOARDI: How about relationships between companies and their artists? Has that changed much over the years? Or is it still basically the same?

BIHARI: I think it's pretty much the same. Artists become unhappy with a company, and a company becomes unhappy with an artist at times, certainly if the company has invested a lot of money in the artist. I think one of the big changes-- When we went into a recording session to record, we'd usually record four sides. With the union you had three hours to do the four sides.

ISOARDI: That was pretty standard?

BIHARI: That was standard, right. But today it takes some of the artists a year. And the amount of money that is spent on recording is absolutely, in my estimation, ridiculous.

ISOARDI: Well, some of the studios look like space stations.

BIHARI: I know. And artists seem to live in the studios.

And why they're not rehearsed and don't have what they're going to do before they go in-- Unless they do a lot of experimenting. Perhaps that's what happens.

ISOARDI: Well, I know certainly popular music in the seventies really, I think-- I guess that's when a lot of the big, even nonmusic corporations moved into the music industry and--

BIHARI: Well, I think it was in the sixties.

ISOARDI: Okay. And they started creating these studios where for a lot of musicians it would just be a chance to go in there and experiment and do all sorts of things, and it almost took over. Part of the music in the seventies seems so bloated in a sense with all the technical wizardry, etc.

BIHARI: Well, the changes in music-- There will always be innovative ideas in music. It's only my opinion: I miss the melodies from songs. I don't hear the melodies anymore, very few songs, especially the rock or the alternative music. They do tell good stories, a lot of the songs. The one thing that I don't care for is the keyboard that simulates drums

and every instrument. To me it is so noticeable that it isn't the actual instruments. To me it's not a true sound at all.

When I hear a saxophone from a keyboard, it doesn't sound like a saxophone.

ISOARDI: Not at all.

BIHARI: It sounds like an organ playing a different instrument. But it's another innovative idea.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. Do you think musicians are any more savvy these days? I mean, is dealing with musicians also like dealing with their batteries of lawyers? Has it become too legalized these days? Or do you think not?

BIHARI: No, I think the music business has become too legalized these days. And of course, the big companies that have bought out the smaller companies-- And it's a lot more difficult today for the independent record companies to get started.

It's a lot more expensive. The channels for promotion are pretty well tied up. So it's very difficult for a small company to get record promotion.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Although it's interesting, you know, even given that, there are certain times it seems like where it's the indies [independents] that come out and really make change, produce change.

BIHARI: Well, I think that's what the indies did in the forties

was to produce change in the record industry. Remember, in the forties the record industry was a very small industry.

Today what is it? Twenty billion dollars a year?

ISOARDI: Yeah, massive.

BIHARI: It's a massive industry.

ISOARDI: There really were no indies before then, were there?

BIHARI: Well, there were a few record companies like Commodore [Records] that I remember out of New York.

ISOARDI: Oh, Milt Gabler's label.

BIHARI: Yeah, Milt Gabler. It was a jazz label. And of course, Savoy [Records] had started in the forties, another jazz label, owned by Herman Lubinsky.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: It was jazz and gospel. And then I think the industry really started out here in California.

ISOARDI: Right about the end of the war with you guys.

BIHARI: Yeah, in the forties. Yes.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's right. I think there was one in the early twenties in New York called Black Swan [Records] or something that was initially promoted by a black entrepreneur.

But really you could probably count on one hand, I guess, the number of independents that really preceded this upsurge that you guys created.

BIHARI: Well, see, the major companies had their own distribution. There was Columbia [Records], RCA [Records], Decca [Records], and Capitol [Records] had just started in the 1940s. They had their own distribution. As I told you earlier, when we set up the distribution through jukebox operators around the country, that really started the independent record industry. And it took a long time for the majors to take note of the independents. Although we were very specialized, the independents mainly were rhythm and blues oriented record companies. And I think it filled that vacuum. And then from there rock and roll came from rhythm and blues, and then the whole industry exploded.

ISOARDI: Right. It's interesting, though. I recently saw some documentaries. In the early days of punk in Britain I think there was a company called Stiff Records, a small independent company, and they were recording people like Elvis Costello and all these punkers when nobody else would touch them. And I guess labels like Stax [Records] here much later on-- It seems like at certain key points in the development of music it's the indies.

BIHARI: Well, let me tell you an interesting thing: the Beatles first came out on VeeJay Records in the United States.

ISOARDI: That's right.

BIHARI: And they did not sell many Beatles records when they first came out. They couldn't sell records on them. Of course, they were an R and B [rhythm and blues] oriented record company, and they couldn't sell pop records. So the Beatles-- I think the contract that Vee Jay had with the company in England ran out, and then Capitol took the Beatles, and they ran with them.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Was it a case, do you think, of VeeJay lacking promotion facilities?

BIHARI: Absolutely. They were black oriented. They weren't able to get the airplay that was required. And of course, the Beatles were new on the scene too, and it wasn't easy.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Jeez, that has to be the biggest story of the one that got away. [laughs] That has to rival the one with your brothers [Lester, Jules, and Saul Bihari] and Elvis [Presley]. [laughs]

BIHARI: Those were the two big ones.

ISOARDI: The two "big ones that got away" stories in the history of music.

BIHARI: Exactly. Absolutely. But who knows where music will go?

ISOARDI: Yeah. But it almost seems like you should keep an eye out for the indies you've never heard of if you want to

know which way music is going, because they'll be the ones recording it.

BIHARI: They're the innovators. In my opinion, they're the innovators.

ISOARDI: So if you were looking back, then, and summing up what the indies contributed to modern music, would it be that?

BIHARI: Partially that. I think they contributed mainly to making the industry what it is today. I don't think four companies at the time could have sustained-- There were just too many artists around, and they could not record that many artists. Even when MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer] came in, ABC-Paramount [Records], they stayed for a few years, and then they were out of business, or else they were bought up by other companies. They were called major independents in the fifties and sixties. But the contribution-- I can't say enough what the contribution is to the music industry.

ISOARDI: In a sense it's, I guess, with all the reissues, just as with the reissues of your old recordings, the Modern [Records] recordings and the Flair [Records] recordings and all of these recordings that are coming out now-- I've noticed other boxes of others--you know, the Cobra [Records] recordings, the Fire/Fury [Records] recordings, the Jewel [Records] recordings from your friend Stan Lewis. I think they've issued

a number of Jewel, Paula [Records], etc. You can see them now. You can see how many there were and what wonderful artists were recorded by all these different labels.

BIHARI: And this was years ago.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: And you know, what comes around goes around. Here it is fifty years since we released our first record, and they're on sale again today.

ISOARDI: And you know, the records I was listening to, the CDs this last week, those early recordings you did, the very first one with B.B. [King] and that collection of John Lee Hooker, just for the most part Hooker and his acoustic guitar--

BIHARI: That's all.

ISOARDI: God, they are still the most vital, the most incredible music.

BIHARI: It's amazing, isn't it?

ISOARDI: Oh, there's an immediacy to them that's just extraordinary.

BIHARI: Yes. Now, it's still my opinion that there's that talent all over again in the United States, primarily down South, what we call country blues. And of course it was Elmore James, B.B. King, and John Lee Hooker that most of the British acts tried to copy--Elmore with the slide and B.B. with his

unbelievable guitar playing.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BIHARI: And they admit to it, the Eric Claptons and all of them. Any of the English groups in the fifties and sixties would tell you, "Well, we copied Elmore James. We copied B.B. King. We copied John Lee Hooker."

ISOARDI: Yeah. Muddy Waters, a big influence on them. Yeah, truly.

BIHARI: Muddy Waters was a tremendous influence, and so was Chuck Berry and Ike and Tina Turner.

ISOARDI: Truly. It's wonderful in a way that this incredible contribution that came out of country blues and the black country singers is finally recognized. But it had to go around the world almost before it could be recognized here.

BIHARI: Exactly. Right.

ISOARDI: Any thoughts on this, the racial situation in music in America?

BIHARI: Well, we recorded many times with mixed bands, white and black, even though we were doing black music. It's what musician fit what we felt was the best. Take Maxwell Davis.

When he was playing saxophone in a section of other saxophone players or with a band, and he was replaced-- If he was replaced with another saxophone player that had a different tonal quality

than he did-- I could pick out Maxwell in a section of saxophone players. I could tell the difference if somebody else was playing and Maxwell wasn't in that section.

I think each musician had a quality to their playing, their technique, their sound. Some horns, tenor saxophone players, have a big sound. Ben Webster had a big sound. Maxwell Davis had a big sound. [Hubert] "Bumps" Myers did not have that big sound, but he was an outstanding saxophone player.

He had good qualities on solos. He played tasty things. I've always said about B.B. King, he plays just like he sings.

He plays melodic. If he takes a solo, it means something.

I hear music today where guitar players just play a lot of notes. But to me that doesn't mean very much.

ISOARDI: [laughs] This has been one of my-- Oh, God. One of my gripes recently is that I've had-- One of the things I love about the older jazz, the recordings, in its glory days was that everyone was so distinct. I mean, you'd hear a few notes of a saxophone, you knew who that was. It was right away. It was indelible. And I have spent some nights at Catalina [Bar and Grill], you know, whatever, and seeing the latest quintet, all graduates of the Berklee School of Music, and, God, they all sound alike. And jeez, after a while you feel like you're in a classroom and they're sort

of showing you how many chords they can run.

BIHARI: Yeah. The individuality, I guess, was lost along the line someplace.

I don't want to forget one person. It's Ike Turner. He was so distinctive when he was playing blues. I have never found a piano player to play blues and boogie and up tempo things like Ike Turner when he was playing piano. Everything was tasty. He kept things moving, kept it together. He had a heavy left hand. A lot of piano players hardly even have a left hand. It's true.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Gee, what a handicap.

BIHARI: Right, a handicap. It's there, but they don't use it.

ISOARDI: Yeah, exactly. I noticed too, I was actually a bit surprised in listening to those very early B.B. King recordings, how much boogie there was in it.

BIHARI: Oh, yes, in the up tempo records.

ISOARDI: And I think it's all wonderful. I just think it's-- I love boogie-woogie. But it reminded me of something Little Richard said a little while ago when he was interviewed about rock and roll. He said, "Rock and roll is nothing but boogie-woogie played up." [laughs]

BIHARI: I guess we could go on and on and on on this subject.

It never ends.

ISOARDI: Truly. A while ago-- I think it was Carl Perkins who told this story. I think he was talking-- Maybe it was Little Richard, or Chuck Berry I think he said. He was talking to Chuck Berry, and looking back they said, "We in our records and in what we did probably did more to change race relations in this country than all the marches in the South did."

BIHARI: He's probably right. Because a musician-- They have their own language. I think they're color-blind. I'm sure they are when they play. And I think that they are completely right, that musicians had more to do with good race relations, the admiration from the white musicians to the black musicians and vice versa. And I think that's proven even with the white bands that were big in the late thirties and the forties, like the [Benny] Goodman band when he had Charlie Christian. He had Lionel Hampton. He had Teddy Wilson playing piano. Whether it was in his quintet, sextet, trio, there was a mix of black and white. He picked the best musicians there were. In the black bands there weren't-- I don't know of any white musicians that were in the Hampton, the [Duke] Ellington, the [Count] Basie band going back then, or the Fletcher Henderson orchestra. And I guess I could name more

and more and more if I could remember them all.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BIHARI: Jimmie Lunceford. The black bands had black musicians.

ISOARDI: Although, you know, it's funny. I came across one notable exception to that. Although that changed, I guess, after the war. I know Ellington had some white musicians, of course. But I think around 1940--I noticed this when I was doing some of my original Central Avenue work--Art Pepper, who was a great alto saxophonist, came out of here and played on Central. I think around 1939, 1940, something like that, he was just an eighteen-year-old kid, and Lee Young hired him to play in his small group on Central. And then Benny Carter hired him to play in his big band. So that's the one case that I can think of before that time.

BIHARI: Yeah. Well, of course, Johnny Otis, if you want to go way back.

ISOARDI: Oh, well, yes, truly. Exactly. I know you've mentioned in some of our earlier sessions about some of the incidents that you had in the South, confrontations with the local constabulary, things like this. Was this something you guys--? You know, you're in the business. You're in music. You're making music, recording music, etc. But at the same

time were you thinking about how what you were doing was affecting race relations?

BIHARI: Not really. I mean, I don't think the Bihari brothers knew the difference and whether the person was black, white, or what.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: I mean, it didn't matter. It never entered our minds. It happened to be that we recorded black music, and that was it.

ISOARDI: But did you ever think that what you were doing, especially when you put together mixed bands or something like this, and the way you'd promote black music, might somehow have an effect on the society's view?

BIHARI: I really don't think we thought of that.

ISOARDI: Was it something you guys ever--?

BIHARI: No, I don't think so. We were business people.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Exactly, yeah.

BIHARI: No, that just happened to be what we specialized in and we felt we knew best.

ISOARDI: Right. What about Los Angeles over the years?

BIHARI: In what way?

ISOARDI: Musically.

BIHARI: Oh, the finest musicians I feel came out of Los Angeles.

I had recorded in Chicago with Chicago musicians. I've recorded in New York with the New York musicians. I've recorded in New Orleans with specialized musicians, Earl Palmer the drummer, that group that did a lot of the Fats Domino's recordings, which were fine for what they were doing. Earl Palmer was probably one of the finest drummers for blues and I'm sure for other things, too. He made a good name for himself when he moved from New Orleans to California. But I didn't find the musicians--maybe because I was from California--worked as well with me in Chicago or New York as they did in Los Angeles. New Orleans, they were fine. I had no problems there with them. But I think they resented that I was out from California. And I think they resented Maxwell Davis, especially in New York.

ISOARDI: Really?

BIHARI: Yes. There were good takes where just one wrong note made a good take bad. I remember one of the baritone saxophone players when we were recording the Cadets just had to ruin a fine take with a bad note on the end. But they kind of tested Maxwell. Maxwell was a fine musician, a fine arranger, and they tested him in New York.

ISOARDI: Sounds like New York. [laughs]

BIHARI: Of course, Maxwell could handle anything musically,

anyway. If you'd played the wrong note while you were recording, he'd tell you, "You should have been playing an E-flat instead of a B-flat."

ISOARDI: So looking back, then, you think L.A.'s contribution was on a par if not greater than most other cities in terms of rhythm and blues, popular music?

BIHARI: Musicians, yes, there were fine musicians here. Because in rhythm and blues in those days so much of it was extemporaneous. That is, we'd go into a studio without arrangements. They'd go in and play what they felt, and that was it.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: You could do it here or anyplace in the country. I mean, in Mississippi, when I used one or two saxophone players, they all know the chord changes when you're playing blues. So they were pretty much the standard chord changes. They'd innovate on those with little riffs in the background of a solo or behind a singer. So blues was pretty-- I don't want to say primitive, but it was simple, simple music. And remember, these blues songs have been handed down-- I would think so many of them, or phrases from them, parts of them, are handed down for the last two hundred years.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I've always thought of country blues as oral

tradition, you know, in a different way recorded almost like the way oral tradition a thousand years ago turned into literature, turned into long written epics.

BIHARI: I believe that, also.

ISOARDI: I think of the blues that way, too.

BIHARI: It's America's music. It's, I think, maybe our first music. And then the country and western is pretty much American music, too.

ISOARDI: Do you think there is a strong connection between country western and the blues?

BIHARI: Absolutely. And rock and roll and the blues and country and western. I say rock and roll for this reason: country and western used a two-four beat, where blues originally was a four-four beat. Rock and roll took the two-four beat, and it's been that way all the time. I think once I went back to record Jimmy Witherspoon again. I said, "Well, let's do it the old way. Let's go in without any arrangements, go with piano, drums, bass guitar, maybe a saxophone or two, and let's do it the old way with a four-four beat." And we did. It was blues, and it worked out fine.

ISOARDI: Great. So in your experience too, then, you did have a sense of going back to the roots, of trying different things, of turning the artist loose and letting them go?

BIHARI: Absolutely. You know, they need that freedom. Blues needs the freedom. If they didn't have it anyway, the only place they could get it was singing and playing. And I look at the South more than California, even though many of the blues singers migrated from the South to California. And Chicago was a great haven for blues singers. They migrated from the South to Chicago, and Detroit the same way.

ISOARDI: It reminds me of a statement by Chuck D, the rapper with the rap group Public Enemy. He said something like "Rap is black people's CNN [Cable News Network]." And in a sense what you're saying about the early blues, the way you're describing it, is kind of the same thing.

BIHARI: Same thing, yes. That was one way that they could express their experiences and their feelings and their thoughts, through blues music. And the good blues, the ones that will last forever, are the ones that really tell a story. There are a lot of blues songs that are good blues songs but they get lost in the story someplace. I look for the song before I look for the artist or how he's performing. I've always maintained I've heard a lot of bad singers make hit records and primarily because of two things, I think: the arrangement and the song. Not because the singer was a great singer. But blues singers, many of them were great singers I felt

because they sang in their own way, whatever came to their head and out of their mouth, which again-- A lot of them came unprepared to a recording session, but they would think back, "Oh, I heard this from my great-great-grandfather, and I'll try and put it together." They'd sit there, and they'd fool around with it, and then they'd say, "I've got it, got it, got it. Let's go."

ISOARDI: [laughs] Well, it's interesting in a way. In a way the preparation has been your life, then, and when you get there the artist just thinks back on their life and pulls out one part of it to tell a story about.

BIHARI: And many times, and many in thousands of recordings that I did, I had to give lyrics to it or make some changes here or make some changes there.

ISOARDI: Was that exciting for you when you gradually started getting involved in that process?

BIHARI: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Very exciting. I could say to them, "Well, let's try this. Let's change this word here and see if it gives a little more meaning to it." And "Hey, that sounds great" or "Yeah, that's it!" [laughs] That's what made the business in the forties and fifties and the early sixties a very exciting business for independent record companies. But when the big money started buying up the

companies it became very difficult, and it became strictly down to the bottom line. "So what's at the end of the year?

Did we make money or did we lose money?" When the companies started buying in and buying up the record companies it became very difficult for an independent that didn't want to sell to another company like us. We didn't want to sell.

ISOARDI: Just because of the sheer size of the opposition? Were they doing things to rein you in?

BIHARI: Well, they could get the promotion where we had a lot of difficulty. And remember that a lot of radio stations would not play black music. I mean, blues went kind of out of the way in the fifties and sixties.

ISOARDI: Right.

BIHARI: And the resurgence is in the United States and primarily in Europe fifty years later. My kids say to me, "Dad, I didn't know you did all of those things." I said, "You grew up with it. You're just now, in your thirties, recognizing it."

[laughs] I think it's only the last maybe six or seven, maybe ten years at the most that my kids recognize Elmore James, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Ike and Tina Turner as my productions.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's funny, too, sometimes to point out-- I know with some of my students they'll say-- Like just recently we were just listening to music one day, and they all wanted

to hear Cream. So I put on some Cream tapes. And they were talking about how much they dig "Crossroads" and all this.

And I said, "Oh, really?" And then I said, "Well, look who wrote these." Because I'd been telling them about country blues. "Look who wrote all these songs. Why don't you check out the original ones?" It comes as a revelation.

BIHARI: It's a new education for kids.

ISOARDI: It really is. But this aspect of blues, early blues too, was one of the few outlets, I think, and was so important because it was one of the few ways blacks in the South could express themselves. There's a funny story I read recently.

I think it's in Johnny Otis's latest book [Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue]. I can't remember if it's actually he or the guy who wrote the introduction to it [George Lipsitz]. But it tells a story of a plantation owner in the South who is asked to come on a radio program and respond to accusations that black sharecroppers--black people in general--are treated poorly down there. So he decides he'll go on, and what he's going to do is get one of his sharecroppers to come on and tell people and set them straight.

So he goes up to this old sharecropper who has been with him for a long time, and he says, "I want you to come on the radio program with me and just tell people how everything's

okay." And the sharecropper says, "Oh, I can't talk to people.

I'm not good at that. I can't do that." And the guy is coaxing him and coaxing him. And the guy says, "But there are so many people. There will be millions of people listening, but that's all right. All you have to do is just tell your story." And "I can't do that. I really can't do that." So he finally convinced him to come down there. And finally the sharecropper goes up to the microphone, and he cups his mouth, and he goes, "Help!"

BIHARI: One word.

ISOARDI: One word, "Help!" [laughs] So it was like in front of the microphone was the one chance to say something and speak out.

BIHARI: You know, it's interesting about B.B. King. He worked on a farm as a youngster, and I think today he recognizes that as part of his growing up and becoming a man. He talks about his work on the farm, and he never says anything derogatory about that. And of course, I'm sure he worked as a very young person on the farm in a little town in Mississippi. But he's a very unusual man, anyway. I mean, he is very special.

ISOARDI: Oh, I would think that kind of background certainly gives you a perspective on where you're at now.

BIHARI: I think so.

ISOARDI: I've heard Tina Turner in documentaries talking about picking cotton as a kid, and it's indelible, the image, the memory of it.

BIHARI: I'm sure it is. Because I remember being at Ike Turner's house in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Right across the street was a cotton field, and his mother [Beatrice Turner] said, "I used to pick cotton right there when I was a youngster."

It was difficult. They had it very difficult down South.

ISOARDI: Joe, we're approaching the end of what has been an extraordinary interview. Do you have any final thoughts or anything you'd like to get down, anything we might have missed?

BIHARI: Yeah. I'd like to live long enough to see what the changes are in the next twenty years.

ISOARDI: Oh, yes. Well, that should be no problem, hopefully.

BIHARI: Hopefully. That is really my ending thought.

ISOARDI: And, well, you're still active so--

BIHARI: Yes, I'm still active.

ISOARDI: One way or another you'll probably still be a part of it.

BIHARI: I hope so.

ISOARDI: Joe, thanks very much. It's been a pleasure, a real pleasure.

BIHARI: It's been a pleasure for me. I'm happy that I was able to tell my story. And I'm sure that after all these interviews are over there's a lot that I've forgotten and will come back to me, and I will call you again and say, "Steve, I came up with some other things that I just remembered."

ISOARDI: Well, hopefully this will be an incentive, then, for you to write all these things down and then write an even fuller version of your story, maybe, which would be wonderful.

But the interview has been wonderful. It's an important contribution. You've given us an insight that's really important. So thank you.

BIHARI: You're more than welcome, and thank you.

INDEX

- ABC-Paramount Records, 269,
 270, 275, 330
 Abner, Ewert, 109
 Ace, Johnny, 102, 103, 264,
 281
 Ace Records, 140, 209-10,
 223
 Adams, Joe, 238, 247
 Adams Hotel, 135
 Aladdin Records, 69, 76-77,
 256, 257-60, 290
 Ali, Bardu, 131, 232, 233,
 290, 295, 296
 Allen, Hoss, 157, 242
 Allied Record Manufacturing
 Company, 28, 35
 Alston, Johnny, 137-38,
 221-22
 American Federation of
 Musicians, 83, 135-36,
 180-81, 183, 185
 American Society of
 Composers, Authors, and
 Publishers (ASCAP), 80-81
 Andrews, Ernie, 67, 68,
 255, 308
 Anka, Paul, 139, 140-42,
 143-45
 Anthony, Ray, 291
 Apollo Theatre (New York
 City), 250
 Ashby, Irving, 187
 Atlantic Records, 194, 195

 Balkin, Bill, 22-23
 Bard, Julius, 43, 317
 Barnet, Charlie, 230
 Barrelhouse (club), 131,
 233, 295
 Basie, Count, 239, 307, 335
 Beatles (musical group),
 328, 329
 Belvin, Jesse, 133, 188,
 200, 215, 297-99
 Benson, Al, 83, 247

 Berkley, Thomas, 146
 Berry, Chuck, 332, 334-35
 Berry, Richard, 123, 133,
 167-68, 171, 172, 195,
 284, 285-86, 314
 Bihari, Edward (father),
 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 62, 98
 Bihari, Esther Taub
 (mother), 1-2, 4, 5, 21,
 24, 32, 48, 62, 191, 192
 Bihari, Florette (sister),
 2, 5, 21, 32, 62, 91
 Bihari, Joseph
 (grandfather), 2
 Bihari, Jules (brother),
 1-2, 21, 24-25, 26, 27,
 29-30, 31-33, 34-35, 36,
 37, 38-39, 41, 46, 48,
 55, 62, 66, 86, 95-96,
 97, 98, 110, 120, 131,
 142-45, 152, 178, 184,
 191, 199, 201-3, 206,
 207-8, 245, 270, 274-78,
 300-303, 306, 309, 310,
 312, 313, 329, 336
 Bihari, Laura (daughter),
 203
 Bihari, Lester (brother),
 1-2, 19-20, 25, 45, 62,
 97-100, 178, 191, 329
 Bihari, Linda (sister-in-
 law), 282-83
 Bihari, Lita (daughter),
 62
 Bihari, Michael (son), 62
 Bihari, Michelle
 (daughter), 62, 203
 Bihari, Nicole (daughter),
 6, 18, 62, 203, 269, 271
 Bihari, Rosalind (sister),
 2, 21, 32, 62, 190, 191
 Bihari, Saul (brother), 1-
 2, 21, 24, 32, 37, 41,
 43, 46, 48, 49, 52, 62,
 95-96, 98, 120, 141,

158, 159, 163, 164-65,
 178, 191, 199, 207, 245,
 303, 305, 310, 312, 329,
 336
 Bihari, Serene F.
 (grandmother), 2
 Billy Berg's (club), 136,
 234, 235
 Black and White Records, 42
 Black, Jimmy, 34
 Black Swan Records, 327
 Bland, Bobby "Blue," 102,
 103, 108, 264, 281-82
 Blore, Chuck, 246
 Bluebird Records. See
 RCA Records
 Blues Unlimited, 210
 Bob Gray Studios, 33, 75
 Bongo Bernard, 203, 204-5
 Bono, Sonny, 302
 Boone, Pat, 242, 243
 Boy Brown (disc jockey),
 165
 Brame, Al, 85-86
 Brass Rail (club, Detroit),
 248
 Brenston, Jackie, 101
 Brewster, Jimmie Lee and
 Artis, 222-23
 Broadcast Music, Inc.
 (BMI), 80, 93
 Bronze Records, 28, 35, 66-
 67, 253
 Brooks, Hadda, 11, 29, 32-
 33, 34, 41, 54, 71, 76,
 77, 79, 81-82, 83-84, 85,
 86, 123, 137, 180, 189,
 220-21, 230, 235-36, 239,
 246, 247, 250-51
 Brown, Charles, 132, 256,
 257
 Brown, Claude, 17-18
 Brunswick Records, 154
 Bull, Frank, 79, 81, 82,
 238-39, 309, 310
 Bullock, Jay, 25
 Bunn, Teddy, 221
 Cadets (musical group),
 139, 218
 Callender, Red, 188-90
 Capitol Records, 27, 28,
 35, 68, 327-28, 329
 Carter, Benny, 191-92,
 336
 Causey, Matthew, 7-8, 12,
 14
 Charles, Ray, 311, 312
 Cheese Box (restaurant),
 310, 311
 Chess, Leonard, 69, 101,
 105-6, 110, 111, 159,
 262, 263-65, 266-67, 304
 Chess, Phil, 109, 263-64,
 266
 Chess Records, 69, 111,
 261-64
 Christian, Charlie, 335
 Chudd, Lou, 152, 304-5
 Ciro's (club), 149
 Clapton, Eric, 212
 Cleveland, James W.,
 140, 299-300
 Club Samba, 54, 132, 228-
 30
 Cohen, Mickey, 58-59, 60-
 61
 Cole, Nat King, 149, 252,
 256, 299
 Collette, Buddy, 188, 190
 Collins, Aaron, 139, 177
 Columbia Records, 81, 196,
 323, 327-28
 Commodore Records, 327
 Constanza, Jack, 190
 Cook, Ira, 82, 83, 238
 Cook, Jimmy, 143
 Costello, Elvis, 328
 Cotton Club (Los Angeles),
 133-34
 Covan, Willie, 29, 32, 251
 Crayton, Pee Wee, 87, 138,
 155
 Cream (musical group), 343
 Curtis, James Peck, 113
 Darnel, Rick, 126
 Davis, Maxwell, 123-24,

125, 131, 139, 187-89,
 198, 199, 231, 253, 260,
 287, 289-92, 298, 314,
 332, 333, 338
 Decca Records, 26-27, 154,
 327-28
 DeMann, Freddie, 195, 196
 Dig Records, 296
 Discos Corona. See
 Modern Music
 Dixie Blues Boys (musical
 group), 223
 Dixon, Floyd, 231
 Dizzy Lizzy (disc jockey),
 156
 Doctor Clayton, 8
 Dolphin, John, 240
 Dolphin's of Hollywood
 (record store), 240, 319
 Domino, Fats, 152, 337
 Don, Dick, and Jimmy
 (musical group), 143
 Dot Records, 242, 243
 Douglas Aircraft
 Corporation, 21, 22-23
 Down Beat Records, 311-12
 Duberstein, Bob, 49, 51
 Dunbar Hotel, 56, 65, 217

 Eckstine, Billy, 73-74
 Edson, Estelle, 73, 220,
 273
 Edwards, Teddy, 72
 Ellington, Duke, 252, 335,
 336
 Epic Records, 154
 Epps, Preston, 190
 Ertegun, Ahmet, 109, 217
 Excelsior Records, 37,
 67, 153, 252
 Exclusive Records, 37, 44,
 67, 252

 Federal Bureau of
 Investigation (FBI),
 224-25
 Felt, Serene Leavenworth
 (sister), 2, 5, 21, 32,
 62, 191

 Fine, Hank, 36, 38-39, 40
 Five Four Ballroom, 132-
 33, 232-33
 Flair Records. See
 Modern Music
 Flairs (musical group),
 123, 168, 171
 Florentine Gardens (club),
 150
 Forrest, Earl, 102, 103,
 264
 Fox, Pete, 187
 Franks, Jay, 222
 Freed, Alan, 163-65, 266,
 305
 Friedman, Gloria, 49, 51-
 52
 Fulson, Lowell, 232, 311-
 14

 G and G Records, 67, 68,
 255
 Gabler, Milt, 327
 Gans Ink Company, 45-46
 Gant, Cecil, 28, 29, 66
 Geddins, Bob, 145, 292,
 293-94
 Gillespie, Dizzy, 73
 Gold Star Records, 316
 Gold's Furniture (store),
 319
 Goldberg, Manny, 301
 Goodman, Benny, 13, 335
 Grant, Jewell, 187
 Green, Tuff, 272
 Green, Vivian, 68
 Greene, Joe, 67, 254-55
 Gunter, Cornelius, 285
 Gunter, Shirley, 123, 167,
 177, 285, 305-6
 Gutshall, Jack, 42, 317

 Haley, Bill, 73
 Hamilton, Chuck, 187, 287
 Hampton, Lionel, 335
 Hancock, Hunter, 240-41
 Harris, Peppermint, 147
 Harvey, Bill, 268

Hawkins, Roy, 126, 145,
 146, 292
 Henderson, Fletcher, 335
 Hillcrest Motors, 22
 Hooker, John Lee, 123, 128,
 178-79, 183, 216, 219,
 287-89, 331, 332, 343
 Hopkins, Lightnin', 316-18
 House, Sy, 53
 Howard, Camille, 132, 254
 Howlin' Wolf (Chester
 Burnett), 69, 104, 105-6,
 107, 108, 211, 212, 261,
 262; Howlin' Wolf: The
London Sessions, 211
 Huggy Boy (disc jockey),
 240
 Hunter, Hancock, 240-41
 Hurte, Leroy E., 28, 35,
 253

 Imperial Records, 152, 304
 Independent Record
 Distributors, 43-44
 Isidore Newman School (New
 Orleans), 6-9, 10, 15-16,
 18
 Ivie's Chicken Shack
 (club), 233-34

 Jacks (musical group), 139-
 40, 141, 237
 Jacquet, Russell, 76
 James, Elmore, 69, 98, 108,
 111-14, 167, 178, 201,
 210, 219, 265, 272-73,
 331, 332, 343; The
Classic Early
Recordings, 1951-1956,
 210, 272-73
 James, Etta, 286-87
 Jarvis, Al, 239
 Jefferson, Blind Lemon, 8
 Jefferson High School,
 170, 171
 Jeffries, Herb, 252
 Jessie, Obie, 284-85
 Jewel Records, 131, 130
 Jewish Children's Home
 (New Orleans), 1, 4-5,
 6, 7, 10, 14-15, 19-20
 J.J. Newberry (department
 store), 319
 Johnny Moore and the Three
 Blazers (musical group),
 69, 76-77, 79, 132, 180,
 228-29, 256, 259
 Johnson, Happy, 76, 78,
 138, 219, 220
 Johnson, Harold, 37
 Johnson, Robert, 8
 Jones, Dub, 139, 286
 Jones, E. Rodney, 223
 Jones, Marie, 256
 Jordan High School, 123,
 170, 171
 Jordan, Louis, 290
 Juke Box Records, 151,
 300, 301
 Julian, Don, 123, 133,
 171, 285

 Kelso (also Kelson),
 Jackie, 188, 191
 Kent Records. See
Modern Music
 Kessler, Maxine Bihari
 (sister), 2, 4-5, 21,
 32, 62, 191
 KFOX (radio station, Long
 Beach, California), 223,
 237
 KFWB (radio station), 79
 KGFJ (radio station), 234,
 240
 Killens, J.W., 140
 King, B.B., 69, 100-1,
 102, 108, 119, 123, 124-
 25, 126, 133, 146, 148-
 49, 167, 183-84, 192,
 201, 210, 241, 262, 264,
 267-72, 275, 282, 291,
 299-300, 331-34, 343,
 345
 King, Saunders, 146, 292
 King Records, 270
 KLAC (radio station), 82,
 238

Kline, Doreen (ex-wife),
 203, 206, 276-77

 Laine, Frankie, 136-37,
 235, 236
 Lauderdale, Jack, 311, 312
 Leavenworth, Randy, 5, 37
 Leiber, Jerry, 194-95, 285
 Lentz, Ted, 234-35
 Lewis, Stan, 128-31, 244,
 245, 330
 Liggins, Jimmy, 253
 Liggins, Joe, 54, 132, 228,
 252, 253
 Lincoln Theatre, 230, 232
 Little Richard, 151, 334
 Loder, Kurt, 108-9
 Lomax, Alan, 118-19
 Love, Clayton, 104
 Lubinsky, Herman, 327
 Lunceford, Jimmie, 335
 Lutcher, Nellie, 84

 Mangold Distributing
 Company, 301
 Maralsco, John, 298
 Matola, George, 215, 298
 Maye, Arthur Lee, 168, 285,
 314
 Mayfield, Percy, 150
 McCracklin, Jimmy, 146,
 292, 314
 McDaniel, Willard, 187,
 287
 McGhee, Howard, 71-72, 73,
 74, 77, 86, 220, 273,
 274
 McLollie, Oscar, 153-54,
 252-53
 McMurray, Lillian, 111,
 112, 114, 265
 McNeely, Cecil "Big Jay,"
 315
 McShann, Jay, 308-9
 Memphis Minnie, 8
 Mercury Records, 68, 90
 Mesner, Eddie, 258-60
 Mesner, Leo, 258-60
 Meteor Records, 99

 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 330
 Milburn, Amos, 260
 Million Dollar Theatre,
 230-32
 Mills Brothers, 218, 219,
 237
 Milton, Roy, 54, 132, 228,
 254-55, 301
 Mocambo (club), 149, 150
 Modern Music, 45-54, 68-
 79, 86-88, 89-96, 108,
 121-23, 133, 137-47,
 148, 159, 168-69, 173-
 87, 196-203, 206-11,
 250, 303; Budget
 Records, 169, 197-99;
 Discos Corona, 173-74;
 Flair Records, 122-23,
 168-69, 171, 209, 330;
 Kent Records, 168-69,
 209; Modern Music
 Publishing Company,
 90, 93, 96, 207;
 Modern Records, 168-69,
 122, 123, 209, 250, 303,
 330; RPM Records, 108,
 122-23, 168-69, 209
 Monarch Record
 Manufacturing, 202
 Moore, Johnny, 256
 Moore, Oscar, 256
 Moreland, Prentice, 200
 Muddy Waters, 332
 Murphy, Matt, 102, 103,
 264
 Murray, Juggy, 274, 275
 Music City (record store),
 38
 Musso, Vido, 188
 Myers, Bumps (Hubert),
 187, 333

 Nathan, Sid, 270
 Nelson, Jimmy, 146
 Nelson, Ricky, 152, 305
 Newborn, Calvin, 102-3
 Newborn, Calvin, Sr., 102-
 3
 Newborn, Phineas, 102-3

Nobles, Gene, 156, 242
 Norman, Gene, 309, 310

 Okeh Records. See
 Capitol Records
 Okey Dokey (disc jockey),
 155-56
 Otis, Johnny, 131, 133,
 218, 233, 236-37, 286,
 294, 295-96, 343
 Otis, Shuggie, 295

 Palmer, Earl, 337
 Palomar Ballroom, 13
 Parker, Junior, 102, 103,
 264, 282
 Paula Records, 131, 330
 Pepper, Art, 336
 Peppermint, Harris, 260
 Perkins, Carl, 334-35
 Perry, Jessie, 78, 219-20
 Petrillo, James C., 83
 Phillips, Esther, 294
 Phillips, Gene, 76, 79, 290
 Phillips, Sam, 99, 100-101,
 264, 279-81
 Philo Records, 69
 Pinetop Slim, 226-27
 Plantation Club, 54, 134
 Polygram Records, 214
 Poppa Stoppa (disc jockey),
 155
 Porter, Jake, 187
 Prawn Records, 277
 Presley, Elvis, 99-100,
 145, 329
 Price, Jesse, 187

 Queens (musical group), 285
 Quinn, Bill, 316, 317

 Radio Recorders (recording
 studio), 75-76, 220
 Ralke, Don, 297-98
 Randle, Bill, 246
 Randolph, Jim, 247
 Ray, Eddie, 304
 RCA Records, 26-27,
 81, 298, 299, 327-28

 Reed, James, 292
 Reiner, Paul, 42-43, 317
 René, Leon, 37, 67, 153-
 54, 251, 252-53
 René, Otis, 37, 67, 153,
 251-52, 253
 Rhythm Records, 146
 Richard, Edwin Taub
 (cousin), 3
 Richards, Keith, 212
 Richbourg, John, 157, 242
 Ronn Records, 131
 Roosevelt High School,
 123, 171, 173
 Roosevelt Hotel (New
 Orleans), 13
 Rosenbaum, David, 146,
 292-93
 Rowland, Will, 137-38, 221
 Royal, Ernie, 188
 Royal, Marshal, 188
 RPM Records. See
 Modern Music
 Rupe, Art, 151, 152, 300-
 304

 Sailes, Jessie, 187
 Sample, Joe, 187
 Sand, Don, 276
 Savoy Records, 327
 Sears Roebuck and Company,
 319
 Seymour, Robin, 246
 S.H. Kress (store), 319
 Shad, Bobby, 148, 303
 Shaw, Arnold, 183; Honkers
 and Shouters (book), 183
 Sheik (disc jockey), 310-
 11
 Sill, Lester, 49-50, 52,
 193-95
 Sittin' In with Records
 (record company), 148,
 303
 Sonny and Cher (musical
 duo), 302
 Specialty Records, 150-52,
 300, 302
 Stax Records, 328

Stiff Records, 328
 Stoller, Mike, 194-95, 285
 Sue Records, 274
 SupraFone Records, 175-76
 Supreme Records, 213

 Taub, Isaac (grandfather), 3
 Taylor, Dudlow, 113
 Taylor, Ted, 139
 Taylor, Zola, 171
 Teen Queens (musical group), 123, 143, 167, 177; "Eddie, My Love," 143-44, 177
 Thompson, Beverly, 285
 Three Bits of Rhythm (musical group), 78, 217-18, 219
 Tiomkin, Dmitri, 291
 Traylor, Pearl, 71, 72, 273
 Trenier Twins (musical duo), 310
 Trocadero (club), 149, 150
 Trumpet Records, 111-13, 265
 Turner, Beatrice, 115
 Turner, Ike, 98, 100-105, 107-8, 110-13, 115-21, 128, 149, 209, 212-15, 222, 261, 278-79, 332, 334, 343, 345
 Turner, Joe, 179, 306-9, 313
 Turner, Tina, 108, 149, 274-75, 277-79, 332, 343, 345; I, Tina: My Life Story (book), 108
 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 291

 Valerio, Tony, 85, 228, 293
 VeeJay Records, 328-29
 Vinnegar, Leroy, 188-89
 Virgin Records, 210, 214, 271

 Walker, J.W., 114

 Wallach, Glenn, 38
 Warren, Earl, 117, 282, 283
 Warren, Nina, 117, 282-84
 Waters, Mamie, 65-66
 Webster, Ben, 187-88, 333
 Weiss, Hy, 49, 52
 Weiss, Sammy, 49, 52
 WHER (radio station, Memphis, Tennessee), 280
 Whitman, Slim, 152
 Wichard, Al, 220
 Williams, Dootsie, 297
 Williamson, Sonny Boy, 111-112, 113
 Wilson, Jackie, 154
 Wilson, Teddy, 335
 Winwood, Steve, 211
 Witherspoon, Jimmy, 192, 195, 308, 309, 313, 340
 WLAC (radio station, Nashville), 156-57, 242
 Wood, Randy, 156, 242-43
 WVON (radio station, Chicago), 223

 Young, Lee, 336
 Young, Lester, 259
 Young, Trummy, 188

INDEX OF SONG TITLES

- "Ain't Nobody's Business," 313
- "Angela Mia," 298
- "Around the Clock, Part One and Part Two," 72
- "Black Nights," 313
- "Blues after Hours," 87
- "Blues in B-flat," 77
- "Blues on Central Avenue," 307
- "Boom Boom," 289
- "Boogie Chillun," 128, 289
- "Bully Woolly Boogie," 79
- "Cherry Pie," 90
- "Cindy," 177
- "The Clock Struck One," 73
- "Confessin' the Blues," 308
- "Convicted of Loving You," 252
- "Crossroads," 343
- "Dance with Me, Henry," 286
- "Deep Meditation," 77
- "Diana," 142-43
- "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying," 255
- "Dragnet Blues," 256-57
- "Drifting Blues," 256
- "Dust My Broom," 8, 111-13
- "Earth Angel," 297
- "Eddie, My Love," 143-44, 167, 177
- "11:45 Swing," 72
- "Every Day I Have the Blues," 123-25
- "Father, I Stretch My Arms to Thee," 140
- "Good-bye, So Long," 276
- "Goodnight, My Love," 163, 297
- "Hey, Henry," 286
- "I Got Loaded," 260
- "I'm in the Mood," 289
- "I'm So Thankful," 276
- "I Used to Work in Chicago," 78, 217
- "I Wonder," 28, 253
- "Jack the Bear," 189
- "Junko Pardner," 148
- "Just a Little Bluesy," 34
- "Let Me Off Uptown," 20
- "Little Red Rooster," 212
- "McGhee Jump," 72
- "My Own Fault, Darling," 272
- "No Rollin' Blues," 309
- "Oop Shoop," 167, 177
- "Peaches and Cream," 276
- "Playboy Blues," 72
- "Please Love Me," 268
- "Please Send Me Someone to Love," 149, 215
- "Polonnaise Boogie," 84
- "The Poppa Stoppa," 155
- "Put Your Head on My Shoulder," 142-43
- "Rock Around the Clock," 73
- "Rocket 88," 100-101, 108
- "Rock Me, Baby," 125, 188, 223
- "R.M. Blues," 254, 301
- "Roll 'Em, Pete," 307
- "Shake Rattle and Roll," 306

"Shasta," 253
 "S.K. Blues, Part One and
 Part Two," 146, 292
 "Smack Dab in the Middle,"
 218-19, 237
 "Someone's Rocking My
 Dreamboat," 252
 "Stranded in the Jungle,"
 139
 "Sweet Sixteen," 125
 "Swingin' the Boogie," 33,
 76, 77

 "Tampico," 254
 "That's My Desire," 136-37,
 235
 "Three O'Clock Blues," 103,
 264
 "The Thrill is Gone," 126,
 145-46
 "T99 Blues," 146
 "Tramp," 314
 "Tutti Frutti," 243

 "When the Swallows Come
 Back to Capistrano," 37
 "Why Don't You Write Me,"
 139, 237
 "Woke Up This Morning," 268

 "You Know I Love You," 272
 "You Won't Let Me Go," 220