CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

Gil Bernal

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

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

CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: February 4, 1931, Los Angeles.

Education: Jordan High School, Los Angeles City College.

Spouse: Harriet Daniels Bernal, married 1950; five children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Vocalist, tenor saxophonist, Lionel Hampton, 1950-53.

Freelance tenor saxophonist-vocalist-bandleader, 1953-present, including recording sessions for Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller with the Robins (later the Coasters) and the Dominoes; recordings with Buddy Bregman, Ray Charles, Ry Cooder, Duane Eddy, David Rose, Dan Terry, and Big Mama Thornton; film scores and recordings for Quincy Jones and Henry Mancini; and six years of touring with Spike Jones.

SELECTED RECORDINGS:

Lionel Hampton, "September in the Rain."

Leiber and Stoller, "The Whip."

David Rose, The Stripper.

SELECTED FILM SCORES PLAYED ON:

Banning (featured vocal on "The Eyes of Love").

In Cold Blood.

In the Heat of the Night.

The Last Man.

Rock Pretty Baby.

The Split.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

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

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Isoardi's home, Pasadena, California.

Dates, length of sessions: February 8, 1998 (51 minutes); March 15, 1998 (96); May 3, 1998 (129).

Total number of recorded hours: 4.5

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

In preparing for this 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 Bernal's childhood in the Watts community of Los Angeles and continuing through his early training in music at Jordan High School, his employment as a vocalist and saxophonist with Lionel Hampton's orchestra, and his later career as a saxophonist in the commercial music industry. Major topics discussed include influential musician friends at Jordan High School, experiences touring with Lionel Hampton, nightclubs and jam session spots around Central Avenue, the decline of Central Avenue and the music scene in Los Angeles after its decline, and the contrast

between Central Avenue musicians and Hollywood musicians during the fifties.

EDITING:

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

Bernal reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made extensive corrections and additions.

Alex Cline, editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history. Daniel Ryan, 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

FEBRUARY 8, 1998

ISOARDI: Well, at last, Gil. [laughs]

BERNAL: Yeah, it's been a while. It's been a while. I'm glad we finally got together.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly, truly. Well, let's begin.

BERNAL: First of all, if I may interrupt you for just a second—you're going to find out finally what a rude person I am, because I probably will interrupt forever—but I've got to say before we start that I'm very happy, I'm very proud, that you would consider me for this kind of an interview. I'm just delighted, and I'm only sorry that I've put it off for so long, but it couldn't be helped, as you know, from things that we've talked about. That's one thing I want to say. I want to thank you and the other gentleman—

ISOARDI: Dale [Treleven].

BERNAL: Dale, yes. Thank you both for considering me.

The other thing is that I really don't know what I could possibly contribute here, because I feel that there's very little— I don't belong in the same place with some of the giants that are in your book [Clora Bryant et al., Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998)]. I'm honored, yet I just don't know what I'm going to say or what I have to add here.

ISOARDI: Well, from what I know you have contributed a great deal and I know will contribute a lot to this series as well. So thanks in advance. And I'll be interrupting to thank you, as well. [mutual laughter]

BERNAL: Well, you're very welcome.

ISOARDI: Why don't we begin at the beginning, where you were born and what the

environment was like, and then to the extent that you can I want to talk about maybe your family and your family background, if there's any music back there or whatever.

BERNAL: Okay. I'll do the best I can as briefly as I can. I hope in some way it's relevant.

I was born on a very rainy night in February, as a matter of fact.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Was it an El Niño situation?

BERNAL: I believe so. People don't realize how hard it used to rain in the old days. We had our storms then. As it happens, I was just reminded by my dear aunt that she was there at the time of my birth and was telling me how the streets were knee-high in water.

ISOARDI: What was your aunt's name?

BERNAL: My aunt's name was Carmen, Carmen Escobar, my mother's sister. I lost my train of thought here.

ISOARDI: Oh, I'm sorry.

BERNAL: No, that's quite all right. It's my age; it's not you. [laughs]

ISOARDI: You were talking about how the streets were flooded with water.

BERNAL: Anyway, I brought it up. I was trying to be facetious at first when I said it was a dark, rainy night, because that's what we're having now. It was sixty-seven years ago, because today is—what?—the eighth of the month?

ISOARDI: February 8.

BERNAL: And my birthday's on the fourth.

ISOARDI: Nineteen thirty-one?

BERNAL: 'Thirty-one, yeah.

ISOARDI: So, you were born at home?

BERNAL: Yes, I was born at 2104 East 112th Street in what became Watts. Then it was an outlying area of L.A., actually between L.A. and Compton—between L.A. and Willowbrook, I guess. I guess it was an unincorporated part of the county and then it became a part of the city ultimately. I lived there with my mother [Rose Maria Bernal Cruz]; my grandmother [Maria Figueroa Bernal], my mother's mother; my mother's sister, my aunt Carmen; and my mother's brother, William Bernal. He was the patriarch of the family and acted like one.

At that time they had been here in this country about six years from Durango, Mexico. They came here obviously looking for a better life. My grandmother had been— How can I put this? She had been pretty well off in her youth. Her parents were merchants, and they ran several businesses that went under for whatever reasons. She married an older man, a business associate of her father's. That would be Bernal, whatever his first name was. I don't remember at this time. She had these children, and he died, I couldn't say prematurely because I imagine he was already in his sixties when they married—well, fifties.

ISOARDI: This is in Durango?

BERNAL: Yes.

ISOARDI: He never came to the States?

BERNAL: No, no, he never came.

ISOARDI: What was their business there, do you remember?

BERNAL: I don't know. I think it was clothing.

My uncle always maintained in a half-kidding, half-serious way that his father came from a family of Jewish merchants. I used to hear him

tease my uptight Catholic grandmother "I know about my father, I know about his family. They converted. Why don't you admit it?" He would go on and on. I was five or six years old at the time, so it meant nothing to me. Now, sometimes I remember and wonder.

ISOARDI: It's possible, then, that the family was Spanish Jews who emigrated to Mexico.

BERNAL: Maybe, maybe not.

Interestingly, I've found out in recent years that the name Bernal, which is of Basque origin and I always figured was a, quote, "Christian" name, is shared by people who happen to be of the Jewish faith, not only from Spain and France but even from England and Ireland—e.g. John Desmond Bernal from Ireland, who was in the English parliament, I believe, in the 1950s,

My mother, I don't know when or where, met my father. Paul was his first name. Forgive me for not offering more information, but I have my reasons.

ISOARDI: Was she born here?

BERNAL: No, she was born in Durango. She came as a teenager.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. She came in the mid-twenties or so, right, Gil?

BERNAL: She came here as a young teenager and met my father somewhere along the line. They never married. They lived together for six years. He, from what I understand, was, like, quite a lady's man, a Sicilian lady's man. I mean, that's what I heard through my early life.

I was not exposed to any facts. I wasn't told anything. It was all sort of hush-hush, his full name, his background. And you know, I guess I really didn't care. He deserted me, or so I thought. He didn't

exist for me.

ISOARDI: Did you ever meet him?

BERNAL: No, he was gone before I was born. They broke up early in her pregnancy. They had broken up before, but the first time he came back and they got back together. Let me explain. They were together for six years, then they broke up, and then he

came back. They supposedly were going to get married. Then my father, the playboy, pulled one of his old stunts, and she said "No more." The whole family got involved, and he said, "I'm out of here, I'll never come back to this house again. So if you want us to be together you'll have to join me." She somehow thought that he might pull something again and maybe take her son. She was not a citizen at the time, and I don't think she was aware of a lot of things—legalities, etc. Nevertheless, they never reconciled, and I grew up with my mother's family and took their name. They settled I think in the southern part of L.A. because it was economically feasible.

ISOARDI: It was an area that was expanding quite a bit, then. A lot of people were moving in there, weren't they?

BERNAL: Well, I don't know what it was like. I don't know what it was like before I was born or when I was born. I only know, growing up there, to me it was just a neighborhood.

ISOARDI: Yeah. But you're growing up in a pretty big family, though. You have a mother, a grandmother, you have an uncle there.

BERNAL: But no father, no brothers, no sisters.

ISOARDI: So, you were by yourself. You didn't have any siblings?

BERNAL: No father, no siblings.

My uncle was my foster father. He was my godfather, my surrogate father, and my uncle. I owe a lot to him in that he exposed me to art, museums, and classical music, opera. Very little American music. He loved opera. He loved Italian opera. He and my father had been best friends at one time until the breakup, at which time my uncle proceeded to right-cross my father. That's when it was over. That's when my father walked out of the house and never came back, except to meet with mother on occasion and discuss the future.

The first four years of my life I was told that this was my daddy—my daddy was my uncle William, Guillermo—and my other daddy was coming. He was away, and he was coming soon. At the age of four I find out it wasn't going to happen, and my mother gave up completely. She had been in touch by mail. I don't know where he was or what he was doing—doing well, from what I understand. But she heard that he had started another family somewhere, and that broke her heart, and that was the end of that. But she carried a torch, I think, till the end of her life.

ISOARDI: She never remarried?

BERNAL: She did. She did twice. Well, I'll just tell you, the second man [Ralph Cruz], I relate to him, because I knew him very well. I was a teenager at the time they were married. Although I wanted her to get married so that I would have more freedom—because she watched me very closely—I felt that I lost her because part of her attention was focused elsewhere. But I loved the man, and I only wish—he's gone now—that I had been closer to him when he was still alive.

Anyway, earlier, as I said before, we were living on 112th Street—112th is nine blocks south of 103rd Street, which was the main stem in Watts. Wilmington [Avenue] and 103rd were the main cross streets until the riots

of '60 or whatever.

ISOARDI: 'Sixty-five.

BERNAL: It was a thriving little street with many businesses, stores, markets, and what have you.

ISOARDI: Was there entertainment along there, too?

BERNAL: Two movie houses and an Elks hall. There was the Watts local [train], which was a few blocks over from Wilmington. I lived between Grape [Street] and Croesus [Avenue], I believe, which was about one long block east of Wilmington and about two or three west of Alameda [Street]. I may be off a little bit, but that's about as good as I can do right now. I was just south of what then were the Santa Ana tracks where the big cars ran to Santa Ana [California]. They crossed the area diagonally.

In any case, 112th was mostly Hispanic. There were mostly Mexican families, and there was a South American family and a Central American family, and there were two or three black families on the block on both sides of the street.

I went to Grape Street School just down the street one block. I was not aware that this was the breeding ground for some great jazz players. I didn't know this until later. I don't mean 112th Street necessarily but the area in general.

ISOARDI: Yeah, certainly. Gee, well, you mentioned Grape Street School. I think the Woodman brothers [Britt Woodman, Coney Woodman, and William "Brother" Woodman Jr.] went there when they were little kids.

BERNAL: That's quite possible. Later on I went to Jordan [High School]. Some of the fellows that later became professional musicians were at Jordan.

ISOARDI: How did Watts strike you then in terms of different ethnic groups?

You mentioned 112th was mostly a Latino area, although still some mix, some black families there. What about Watts as a whole? Were there some Anglo families there?

BERNAL: Yeah, in the area. Not on my block, but there were some in the area. Watts in those days— I mean, I moved from there when I was ten—

ISOARDI: From 112th to—

BERNAL: —from 112th I moved up to 102nd [Street]. I was ten years old. The reason we moved was because my grandmother died, and the family kind of dispersed. My uncle got married within a year. He had been a confirmed bachelor, and he was already I guess forty years old or so. He finally married, and I went to live with my mother and so forth. So things changed.

But the first ten years I thought—I didn't know any differently—people were just people to me, you know. There was one gentleman that stands out in my mind to this day who was black. There was a black family that lived two doors over. I think Ford was their last name.

ISOARDI: Was this on 112th?

BERNAL: Yes, two doors over from me. He was like the grandfather. He was the old guy. I don't know what the kids— I think later on, as I became a little older, seven or eight, I played with, I believe, one young boy that was a couple of years older than me, and there was contact. But other than that there was just this old gentleman. He would walk every day in one direction and then walk back an hour or two later. The old-timers were mostly Mexican, I suppose. There were two or three of them standing around talking about this and that. Then they would say, "Here comes Mr. Ford. How are you doing, Mr. Ford?" And he would say, "Pretty soon, pretty soon!" This is all that ever came out of this man's mouth. [mutual laughter] That's all he chose to say. Now I think I understand what

he was talking about. [mutual laughter] That's all—I swear to you—I ever heard him say. And he said it with a bit of a grin on his face in a very matter-of-fact manner. He would walk in one direction. "How are you doing, Mr. Ford?" "Pretty soon." Two hours later, three hours later, he's coming back the other way. "Yeah, you're finally getting back, eh?" "Pretty soon, pretty soon."

ISOARDI: Had he said anything more you probably wouldn't have remembered him as well. [laughs]

BERNAL: I still remember it as if it were yesterday.

Now, my first ten years I was not exposed to music.

ISOARDI: So you weren't playing anything your first—?

BERNAL: Oh, no, no.

ISOARDI: No one in the family played anything?

BERNAL: No musicians. I had heard that my grandmother loved to sing and that she had been at a couple of parties at Grape Street School before I was born and did some singing. She was asked to sing a song or two. Not a professional singer; it's just that she liked to sing. And I guess she had an okay voice. I really never heard her. Other than that I don't know of any musicians in my background.

ISOARDI: Was there any kind of music program at the school or anything like that?

BERNAL: At Grape?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Was there a course? There was nothing like that?

BERNAL: No. Grape was strictly what they called then a grammar school, kindergarten and grammar.

ISOARDI: With your uncle, though, he's playing music. There's music around the household? I mean, you didn't play the radio?

BERNAL: I'll talk about that in a moment. But first I wanted to say that my whole family, my uncle and my mother and her sister Carmen—my mother's name was Rosa, or Rosie, as we called her later—and my aunt and uncle all worked at a cannery for years. This was a cannery where they canned fruit and vegetables, depending on the season. So they worked all year round.

ISOARDI: All things grown locally that would be processed in this canning company. Where was it at?

BERNAL: It was located on Graham Avenue. It was the street where the Pacific Electric [Railway] tracks were located. The big red cars ran on that street. There was a section in the middle. There were two sides to the street, going and coming. The tracks really belonged to one of the railroad companies, and we would often stay and would have to wait until the trains got out of the way. They were cargo, not passenger, trains. But I think the Union Pacific [Railroad] owns them to this day.

The big cars were on the inside tracks and the Watts local was on the outside tracks, and that's the one I rode on. The cannery was on that street, and whenever I went to visit I'd take the car there. I went there about three or four times as a nine- or ten-year old. I'd jump on the streetcar and get off there right down the street from the cannery and walk over. You know, this cannery was a whole different world. It was fascinating to me.

ISOARDI: What was the name of the company, do you remember?

BERNAL: Oh, God. At this point I don't remember, Steve, but if it comes back to me, I'll let you know.

I remember there was an equal number of Hispanics and Sicilians and other Southern Italians. As a matter of fact, cross-cultural

friendships were formed there and went on for years. The foreman was Italian; his name was Frank Buono. Isn't it funny that I should remember his name? He was married to a Mexican lady, and they had four kids. Later on they got a divorce and he went with an Armenian lady, which really annoyed the Hispanic community within the cannery.

But the cannery people were wonderful people. I knew many of them. They had been friends with my father, and they remained friends with my mother and my uncle. So I got an insight into my father and his background through his friends. I can remember how my uncle and Dominic and Pietro and Pasquale and other friends gathered several times a year to make their beloved "Dago Red" wine in one guy or another's basement while Verdi and Puccini records blasted in the background and a conglomeration of English, Sicilian, and Spanish were all going at once. It was something.

Anyway, we moved from 112th when I was ten, as I said. What I was going to

say about them working at the cannery is that because of the long hours my mother was seldom home. I was raised by my grandmother pretty much, except for weekends and so forth. My uncle, who became my guardian, as busy as he was, also gave me a lot of his time. When he could he would take me to museums and concerts. He loved classical music. He loved Italian opera. I actually saw a real honest-to-God opera before I was eight years old.

ISOARDI: Jeez. What did you think of it?

BERNAL: I was fascinated.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: Fascinated. I think most kids would not be.

ISOARDI: They'd think it was torture.

BERNAL: I mean, I was emotionally stirred by the drama. I think it was Rigoletto [by Verdi] of all things. I mean, of all operas, it's pretty heavy.

ISOARDI: It is. Also very tuneful and musically wonderful.

BERNAL: But the arias I never forget them. It was fantastic and he loved it. He exposed me to art, and he exposed me to music, and, of course, my grandmother kept the radio going all the time, but it was mostly Latin American music, which was totally different in those days.

ISOARDI: In what way?

BERNAL: Not totally but different. Well, I didn't hear what they call the mariachi-ranchero music a lot in those days. I'm talking early in the mid-thirties as I was growing up. There was some, but a lot of it was called—unless it was the station that she listened to—tropical music based on the rumba and what they used to call then the bolero, which is not to say the kind of Bolero that Ravel wrote. This was kind of an offshoot of the rumba—slower, more romantic. The bolero. And there were certain singers, certain artists that did this kind of music, and this is what my grandmother played on the radio. She had her own disc jockey that she listened to and so forth. I still remember some of the melodies to this day—not the words but some of the melodies and some of the names of the artists, even. I was exposed to that right up until I was nine or ten years old.

It wasn't until I started listening to comedy programs on the air that I switched over. By now, of course, I'd been in school, and I wasn't listening so much to Spanish-related things as I was to English. So I started listening to whatever I could find that was interesting to me,

including Bob Hope—the Bob Hope radio show, the Red Skelton radio show, you name it and I was—

ISOARDI: You were attracted to comedy, then?

BERNAL: Yes, I was. I was. Very much so.

ISOARDI: More so than anything else?

BERNAL: Well, I liked music, but I had not been exposed to American pop music and certainly not jazz at that time. I had heard a little bit of blues. There were homes that had radios going on inside, and sometimes as you walked by you'd hear the music coming out. There were black families in the neighborhood. Also there were a couple of bars across the street from the little Watts depot that was located between 103rd [Street] and 102nd [Street] on Graham Avenue there in Watts. That was at the end of the Watts local, the end of the line there. The cars went on to the car house from there. Of course, the bigger cars, what they now call the big red cars—people talk about them now—went on to Long Beach [California], San Pedro [California], and Santa Ana, and they split up right at Watts. The car house was just about a block away where they stored some of the smaller cars mostly. It was like a barn, I guess. It was a car barn or— I don't know what it's called. It was about a block from the Watts Towers. And I remember seeing Simon Rodia working on the towers, because my uncle's barber was just down across the street from where he was working. We could look out the window from the barbershop and see this man building the towers. And at the time they were no more than ten or twelve feet tall.

ISOARDI: Were there any towers then?

BERNAL: No. Well, he was working at it.

ISOARDI: Just the beginning?

BERNAL: Just the beginning. It was, I guess, the first two or three years that he was working on it. Everybody at the barbershop would say, "Look at that man. There's old whatever his name is. He's a crazy old fart." You know, whatever. I'm sure he sure knew what he was doing. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Did you ever talk to him?

BERNAL: No, I never went over there. This is like from a block away and across the street.

ISOARDI: You must have seen some evolution there, some growth over those years.

BERNAL: Oh, yeah, over a period of about a couple of years I think I watched, and then I switched barbers or whatever, and I think I lost track, and then my interests went elsewhere.

But in answer to your question about the music, the exposure I got was from the radio. I have to jump ahead a little bit. I don't know if my grandmother was still alive at the time, but I remember going to a restaurant with my mother. I think it was a Mexican restaurant. It was on a Sunday, and we were going to a movie. Occasionally she would take me to a movie on Sundays. That was her only day off.

ISOARDI: She worked six days a week?

BERNAL: If that. Sometimes they worked through Sundays, perhaps not the whole day, depending on whether they were working on spinach or tomatoes or whatever.

But I remember the jukeboxes. Do you remember the old jukeboxes that were in interchangeable colors and so forth? I heard a piece of music that absolutely floored me. I must have been about ten. It was either right before or right after my grandmother died. I heard what

I found out later was Harry James playing "You Made Me Love You." I tell you, it did something to my insides. It just touched the heart of me. I don't know why. From that time on that became my favorite piece of music in the whole world. I found out it was Harry James, and I became his biggest fan. I even got into a fistfight at school later on, by now in junior high, because somebody said that Harry was dying of tuberculosis, and I said, "He is not!" That led to a fight in the cafeteria. It was crazy.

I told this story to Betty Grable once quite by accident. My wife and I happened to be sitting at the Flamingo [Hotel] in Las Vegas, and he was appearing there in the lounge. Harry was alternating for just that one night with Count Basie's band, which he had arranged personally because he had some say there for some reason.

ISOARDI: Jeez. But he had his big band then? He had a band at that time.

BERNAL: Yeah, a big band. We were sitting at the back, and for some reason Betty Grable was just sitting by herself having a drink and watching the band. There were two seats, and we sat next to her. Eventually we got into a conversation, and we ended up talking for an hour—a beautiful woman, gracious and lovely—and I told her the story about the fight, etc. Well, she got such a kick out of it she told Harry. And I met Harry later, and he remembered.

But that changed me, hearing that piece of music, that tune. After that I started listening to anything and everything of Harry James. And I guess it was—

ISOARDI: Had you listened to much swing stuff by that time?

BERNAL: Never.

ISOARDI: So this was going from opera and the music your grandmother

had on the radio, and the next thing was, wham, Harry James.

BERNAL: Yeah, I think. Now, I could be wrong about that, but that's the way I remember it. This probably happened after my grandmother died, because it was just a short time between then and the time I was buying his records, so I imagine I was old enough then. I just remember a particular Christmas. By this time I was exposed to all the other big bands, and I was listening to [Frank] Sinatra singing with [Tommy] Dorsey at the time. I remember I must have been eleven at the time. So that's about when it happened, ten or eleven.

But Harry [James] was my number-one man. I wanted to play trumpet in the worst way. I just knew that if I could pick up that horn, out would come "You Made Me Love You" sounding just like Harry. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: It's still a beautiful song.

BERNAL: Maybe three years later he was appearing in a place that later became a theater on Vine Street in Hollywood. It became the Huntington Hartford [Theatre], and I think it's the Doolittle [Theatre] now. I think they used to broadcast the Lux Radio Theatre radio shows from there with Cecil B. DeMille. At certain times of the week Harry would broadcast for Chesterfield [cigarettes]. He'd do a radio broadcast from there three times a week. It was forty-five minutes if you went to the studio, and of course the broadcast is only about fifteen minutes long. But I began to hound my mother saying, "We've got to go! We've got to go!" Because they would advertise tickets. I sent for some eventually, and I went, and I was just like in heaven.

ISOARDI: This was a year or two later?

BERNAL: Yeah. By now, I guess I was about thirteen or fourteen. But my very first exposure to a big band was the Orpheum Theatre in downtown

L.A. I talked my mother into taking me down there to see Gene Krupa's band, because I had heard that he was fantastic. Some kids in the classroom told me that. When I heard the music, it was the second time in my life that I had been just literally knocked off my feet—not literally knocked off my feet, that is to say virtually knocked off my feet, because the excitement was so great I couldn't contain myself. I wanted to jump out and go running toward the music. And my mother had to really hold me back. The curtains opened, and there was Gene and the band, and the thrill was just incredible, incredible. Roy Eldridge was with the band at the time.

ISOARDI: Oh, my God!

BERNAL: And Anita O'Day.

ISOARDI: Oh, my God!

BERNAL: Dear, sweet lady whom I worked with years later.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: Yes. When it came time for Roy to do his thing I thought, "There's more than Harry James." Roy was incredible to me, just incredible. I said, "Now I know I'm going to play the trumpet if I have to kill my mother, somehow run away from home, do whatever I have to do I'm going to play the trumpet." They wouldn't let me. My mother wouldn't let me. My uncle wouldn't let me. They'd vetoed it.

ISOARDI: Why?

BERNAL: Lifestyle. It's bad for the lungs. It didn't matter that the guy would have come to the house and settled for twenty-five cents a lesson.

ISOARDI: Oh, a teacher?

BERNAL: Yeah, a teacher from the local playground. I think he taught at the playground—well, the clubhouse or whatever it was that they had

there. Because I asked him to come. I said, "I want you to come to my house. I'll try to get my mother to sign up." It was only a quarter or fifty cents per lesson, and after so many lessons the horn, which must have been worth all of five or ten dollars, became yours. They would give it to you, make a gift out of it. My folks wouldn't go along with it. And I was so brokenhearted, I just couldn't wait to be able to do it on my own one day. You know, that's how I felt.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

FEBRUARY 8, 1998

BERNAL: Well, needless to say, I continued to go downtown to see the bands as they came in, and of course I was buying records at this time. I could converse with other kids who were a little more knowledgeable than I was about the big bands. You know, the big bands were the big thing still at that time, although they were on their way out. I listened to other bands, and I had my favorites. I then wanted to play drums since I wasn't allowed to play the trumpet, but my interest wasn't really there.

ISOARDI: They must not have been too thrilled about the idea of you playing drums. [laughs]

BERNAL: I wasn't that interested, to tell you—First I got a little interested, and lost interest, so I didn't pursue it. I didn't pursue it. I was going to take a beginning drum class at school, and then I changed my mind. I still wanted a horn. By now I was at Jordan [Junior High School]. I was about twelve, thirteen years old.

ISOARDI: So you're in the eighth, ninth grade? Something like that?

BERNAL: Well, yeah. It was between the seventh and the ninth grades that I was at Jordan Junior High, and then I went to the tenth grade at Jordan [High School]. I remember the ninth and tenth grades especially, because I began to be exposed to the kids who were studying music, picking up music and playing in the bands there at Jordan—the marching band, and then they had a swing band that was directed by Mr. [Joseph Louis] Lippi, who was the teacher.

I became involved in the talent shows. You asked me about comedy before. Well, I used to see the comics along with the big bands at the

theaters—

ISOARDI: [laughs] So did you take their material?

BERNAL: So I would see myself as a stand-up comic. I don't remember some of the people there, but some people I never heard of again and some went on to have a certain amount of fame or success. Well, doesn't matter. I wanted to do what they were doing.

The talent show came along at Jordan—that was in the seventh grade—and I signed up to do it. I had no material other than what was in my head, and I signed on as a comic, as an impersonator. And I had a routine doing the usual Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Jimmy Cagney, and three or four others. They were probably very bad, but the kids got such a kick out of it, because here was this little twerp— I was still a little guy. My voice hadn't changed yet. [mutual laughter] I'm doing Humphrey Bogart up there with absolutely no stage fright or shame or anything. I just got up there and did it. It was such a feeling of fulfillment to see all the kids breaking up—I mean all of the kids, from the twelfth grade on down, because Jordan was—

ISOARDI: It was a combined junior and senior high.

BERNAL: Yeah. So I became a little celebrity in school after that with all the groups—the black groups, the Latino groups, and the Anglo groups, the few that we had. When I say groups I mean the people, the kids. From seventh grade to twelfth grade I became one of the celebrities.

The swing band played the music. They were on stage for the whole performance. That's how I met Anthony Ortega.

ISOARDI: He was in the swing band?

BERNAL: He was in the swing band. He had been studying for some time with a very well-established and respected teacher by the name of Lloyd

Reese.

ISOARDI: Oh, yes.

BERNAL: So after a while I guess Anthony thought I was a pretty gutsy little guy or something, and he took a liking to me. He was a couple of grades ahead of me, and maybe a couple of years ahead of me, so I don't know, whatever difference in grades. But he began to befriend me to a degree. So I got to know all the guys and started hanging out with them.

ISOARDI: This must have really been status as a seventh grader. [laughs]

BERNAL: Oh, I loved it. I loved it. As the semesters passed into years I became more involved with them and with the show. I never wavered. I was still doing my impressions. You know, I would change this and change that, but basically I was doing the same old crap. [mutual laughter] Probably getting worse as my voice began to change.

I remember I was about fifteen at this particular time that I'm going to tell you about, and I was walking down 103rd Street going to the cleaners and ran into Anthony Ortega. He said to me, "You know, I notice you're always whistling." We were right outside the cleaners talking. He said, "You're a good whistler. You have a good ear. I'll bet you could play a horn." And I said, "Naff"—we used to call him Naff—"Naff, I told you before I wanted to play, but my mother wouldn't let me. I used to want to play trumpet." He said, "Well, think about the saxophone." And by now I had been aware of the saxophone, because I remember during the assemblies and during the stage shows when a good tenor player came on and did his thing—low, sweeping notes. We saw the Honeydrippers with Willie Jackson. I think his name was Willie Jackson. He had an alto player by the name of Willie Jackson, and he had a tenor player, and I don't remember the tenor player's name. But the kids all flipped out.

And I thought, "Boy, maybe I should consider the saxophone." So when Anthony said, "Consider the saxophone. If you can get a saxophone I'll get you started. I'll teach you," that's all I needed. From that point on that's all I could think of day and night. They used to sell those little toy plastic trumpets at the five-and-dime store, and they cost twenty-five cents, and you could get four notes—you know, every opening exposed or one, two, or three covered. So that gives me four tones. But I used to fool around with getting different tones with them by switching my fingers. And then I went to what they call "the potato" something or other. You play that with two hands, and you had about seven notes. I had a ball with that. I was getting ready for my saxophone, which I knew I was going to buy. During the summer I took a job making deliveries for a hardware company downtown on Eighth Street, and I saved the money. I told my mother, "Now, look, I'm going to work in the summer. I'm not going to take any money out of your pocket. And besides, I'm contributing ten dollars a week toward the household." I was getting fifty, sixty bucks a week. I put all the money away. I used to give her a little something just for a token, and she very graciously took it and made me feel like I was really accomplishing something.

ISOARDI: How old were you at this point, then?

BERNAL: At that point I was sixteen—no, fifteen. But I saved. I got the saxophone. Maybe I was sixteen, I'm not sure. But by the time I got back to school I had already been initiated by Anthony, although he only gave me one lesson. [mutual laughter] Although we had many jam sessions later.

ISOARDI: But he showed you the fingering, anyway.

BERNAL: He showed me the fingering, gave me a book, showed me some chords

on the piano, basic chords. I don't know if this was all done at the same time, because I used to hang out at his house quite a bit as time went on.

But I did buy the saxophone. It cost $185, and I got started. I went into the garage with Charlie Ventura records and whatever else I could get ahold of.

ISOARDI: Where did you buy it?

BERNAL: There was a record shop on Compton Avenue which was next door to Saint Lawrence Church, which was my church. The record store was owned by an old trumpet player. He was retired because he had a lung problem, if I remember correctly. His name was Pete Canard, and his wife was Ruth [Canard]. We were just kids, and I just loved them dearly. They gave us so much attention, especially me, because I was the youngest. And they would say, "Listen to this latest Lester Young record" or whatever. "Listen to this latest—" I remember when I first heard "Bird" [Charlie Parker] and "Diz" [Dizzy Gillespie] together. I didn't understand them. It sounded like Chinese music to me. But the more I listened the more I became fascinated.

ISOARDI: What kind of a horn was it?

BERNAL: My horn? My horn was a tenor, a Buescher.

ISOARDI: It was a Buescher tenor?

BERNAL: Tenor, yeah. Used, of course, and one of the cheaper models, because they had different models. I guess it was a student model, I don't know. It was the cheapest thing they had.

I forgot to mention one thing. Prior to the purchasing of the horn, prior to Anthony talking to me, I had another friend that was a great jazz fan. He was about my age, maybe a year older, and he was not a musician,

he was just a fan. At that point in time, in that area that he lived in, I think it was just really a phenomenal kind of a situation that he knew so much about jazz at the time. When he first started talking to me about it I was about twelve. He was the first one to expose me to Lester Young and to radio programs that were playing that kind of music. In fact, there was a station in Tijuana [Mexico] that you'd pick up late at night, and they played nothing but jazz.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Do you remember this guy's name?

BERNAL: Yes, I still know him to this day; his name is Eddie Morga. He's pretty much retired now, but he was a public accountant. When we first met, he belonged to one of the junior gangs in the area. His brother was a full-fledged member. They had gangs even then, although they were not like today.

ISOARDI: What were the gangs like? Were there a lot of them?

BERNAL: Not a lot.

ISOARDI: I know that people weren't going around shooting each other.

BERNAL: No. I guess there were about four gangs in all of the Watts area. Seldom did they fight each other, but occasionally they did.

ISOARDI: But those are just kind of fistfights or maybe some occasional knife?

BERNAL: Fist fights and occasional— Maybe not a baseball bat but boards or something like that, and once or twice a knife. That's how it was at that time, at least in my area, the Watts area.

ISOARDI: Which were the four? Do you remember?

BERNAL: I remember one that the kids that I knew belonged to because

it was the closest to the school. They called it the Colonia, the Colony. They had the big brothers, and they had the little kids like ten, eleven, twelve years old. They wore zoot suits or modified zoot suits or the equivalent thereof. Even if they couldn't afford the good ones they would drape their pants. Morga was one of these. He was one of the younger kids. To my knowledge he never did anything bad, but he liked to think of himself as one of the tough guys.

So he befriended me, and he started telling me about this music.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the other three gangs at all?

BERNAL: No, I don't.

ISOARDI: Were they divided ethnically? Or were they mixed at all?

BERNAL: There were no black gangs at that time, not in my area, and to my knowledge none at all.

ISOARDI: So these four gangs were four Latino gangs?

BERNAL: Yeah, they were all—

ISOARDI: What kind of stuff were they into?

BERNAL: Just raising hell and fighting each other. It was always a territorial thing, I think. It's always that way: "Come into my neighborhood and I'll beat the shit out of you."

ISOARDI: I remember that as a kid. Same thing.

BERNAL: But it was nothing tremendous or really extraordinary. It was just the bad kids and the good kids, and I was one of the good kids. But I was befriended by some of the bad kids because—

ISOARDI: Why?

BERNAL: Well, I guess by the time I got into this I was in the seventh grade. I was exposed to these kids, and by now I was kind of like a celebrity, as I told you, in school.

ISOARDI: Oh, oh.

BERNAL: Everybody liked me. They all liked me. The bad kids liked me, the good kids liked me, the teachers liked me. I had it pretty easy. If I had wanted to join a gang I wouldn't have known how, but if I had wanted to they would have said, "Sure, come on!"

Anyway, Morga turned me on to some music as a very young kid, so it was between Eddie Morga and Anthony Ortega. They were the ones that really turned me on until I was able to start picking up on my own—you know, picking up and meeting other people and listening to music on my own.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MARCH 15, 1998

ISOARDI: Before we get back to your story, Gil, let me ask about the names of the few people you mentioned last time that we didn't get down. Your grandmother, whom you did talk a bit about, what was her name?

BERNAL: Her name was Figueroa, I remember that.

ISOARDI: That was the last name?

BERNAL: That was the last name, yeah.

ISOARDI: First name?

BERNAL: I'm not sure. It may come to me, but I'm not sure.

ISOARDI: Not surprising in any way. I don't remember my grandparents by their names at all. They're always Nona and Nanu. How about your father's name?

BERNAL: Well, that's the deep, dark secret there. That's the one—

ISOARDI: Okay, you'd rather leave out?

BERNAL: For now, anyway. I shy away from that.

ISOARDI: Okay. You referred to your mother's last husband. Do you want to get that name down?

BERNAL: My stepfather? His name was Ralph Cruz.

ISOARDI: And your mother's name?

BERNAL: Rose Maria Bernal.

ISOARDI: Okay, good.

BERNAL: She became Cruz, of course, later.

ISOARDI: Jordan High School. You're starting to play saxophone at Jordan?

BERNAL: Well, I started there. I started at that time, and I did take a Beginning Instrument class before I left Jordan.

ISOARDI: At Jordan High School?

BERNAL: Yeah. But by this time in the eleventh grade I came into Jordan. As you know, there was a junior high and high school together. I came into Jordan in the seventh grade and became friendly with some of the musicians in the swing band that was directed by Mr. [Joseph Louis] Lippi, who everybody kidded about.

ISOARDI: Why did they kid about him?

BERNAL: Oh, because he was a character. He gave the impression of not knowing that much. Bless his heart. In retrospect I don't know what he knew or what he didn't know. But the only class I took from him was in the eleventh grade, and it was Beginning Instrument.

I started playing rather late by junior high and high school standards, because the other guys had all been playing since either grammar school or early junior high, what they call middle schools today. Lippi was the teacher there. I remember "Big Jay" [Cecil McNeely] used to come in there and take the class over once in a while, and he would come in and help Mr. Lippi out.

ISOARDI: Really? So he had graduated by then? Or was he—

BERNAL: He had gone to another school. I think he had gone to [Los Angeles] Polytechnic [High School]. I think he left Jordan at, my guess is, about the tenth grade, and he was quite well known, because he was one of the star players in the swing band. He left either in ninth or tenth grade and went on to the other school. But he would come back occasionally and visit. I don't know if he had left school or if he had graduated or what the deal was.

I remember during one of the talent shows they held at night he walked on stage in the middle of a performance by the swing band, and this was

not expected. He had broken his leg—I'm sure Jay remembers this—and was on crutches, but he hobbled on stage playing the solo that was meant for somebody else on the arrangement, and Lippi turned different colors. He was livid. There had been a little friction prior to that time between Lippi and Jay, but what was he going to do? He was on stage and everybody saw it, and the guys who knew him said, "Hey, Jay!" and they applauded. And he proceeded to take a solo and very nonchalantly walked off stage. [mutual laughter]

I wasn't playing at this time. I hadn't started to play yet, but I'll never forget that. It's a very vivid memory, and I was thinking at the time, "Why would he do that? Why would he go against the teacher's wishes?" You know, goody-goody me. Then the more I talked to the other kids the more I got a kick out of it, and I said, "Well, sure, why shouldn't he be? He used to play those solos."

"Naff" [Anthony] Ortega was in the band, and he was one of the stars of the group, and a fellow by the name of Walter Benton was in and out. I don't remember exactly what the circumstances were, but he stayed on at Jordan, and after Jay left he was the main player.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: The main tenor saxophone soloist, if I remember correctly. Walter was into a Lucky Thompson thing very heavily, which is kind of a spinoff from Ben Webster. And I thought he played beautifully then, and I still do. Unfortunately he had some health problems later on.

ISOARDI: Is that what prevented him from having a—

BERNAL: I believe so. I don't really know. I wasn't close to him years later. We went our separate ways. But also a fellow by the name of Paul Madison that I thought played pretty exciting for the time, for my young

ears. He was featured on tenor. Later on I heard he went to Hawaii or somewhere. I think he became a professional musician. And of course, I crossed paths with Clifford Solomon quite a bit. He used to come in and do things with us from time to time. But Clifford, I believe, was going to L.A. [Los Angeles] High [School] at the time.

ISOARDI: He was from Watts, wasn't he?

BERNAL: Well, yeah. He lived in Watts, and we knew each other there. Another tenor man, they used to call him "Boogie"— Jesus, what was his name? We all knew him as "Boogie," and we never called him by his— William I think his name was, Bill Daniels. In any case, "Boogie." When I started picking up on the tenor sax, frankly the reason, as I told you before— I was really hung up on the trumpet. First it was Harry James, and then Roy Eldridge just knocked me on my butt when I saw him with Gene Krupa down at the Orpheum [Theater]. I told you about that, right?

ISOARDI: You mentioned that, yeah.

BERNAL: And so it went until I heard Dizzy [Gillespie] through Ortega and through [Eddie] Morga. I heard some of those records.

ISOARDI: The early Dizzy? The early bop thing?

BERNAL: Yeah, the early bop. And it just threw me for a loop. I didn't know what to think then. You know, I heard [mimics Gillespie's style of fast, facile melodic soloing], and I said, "What the hell is that?" Here I thought I was so hip digging Roy Eldridge.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Rude awakening!

BERNAL: Of course, Roy, Roy Eldridge, to this day is still my favorite trumpet player, because he would bring tears to my eyes even as a young man or an old kid. [laughs] In my late teens, early twenties, he touched me like only Harry before him, and then Roy. But Dizzy, I mean, I was

amazed at the technique and the ideas that he

was playing and everything, so that was a whole different thing.

Trumpet is, I would think, a more difficult instrument than saxophone or the reeds. Now, I could be wrong, but I still believe that.

ISOARDI: I could believe it. Especially at that age.

ISOARDI: I believe that. So we didn't have any stand-out trumpet players, per se, but I thought we had some stand-out saxophone players in and out of Jordan. As I said, people like Walter and Big Jay, of course, who at the time was Cecil McNeely. His friends called him Jay. Then there was Clifford Solomon and Paul.

ISOARDI: You mean Clifford, then, when you were talking about—

BERNAL: Clifford Solomon, but Paul was the one that stayed at Jordan. And "Boogie," I don't know if he ever went to Jordan. They were all in and out, in and out somehow in the talent shows and so forth that I told you I had been involved with. Did I get into that?

ISOARDI: You mentioned it briefly. I think in seventh grade you went on stage as a young kid?

BERNAL: Yeah. I thought I was a comedian and an impressionist and this and that, and I did a little act. The kids got a big kick out of it. And I continued to do that through junior high and into the tenth grade, actually, until I left Jordan after the eleventh grade, I think.

I left Jordan and I went to Huntington Park [High School]. They had a larger music department there, and I had another friend, a drummer by the name of Jess [Jesus "Chuy"] Ruiz, and a good friend of Ortega's. He became a friend of mine—not as close as Anthony but also a friend. He was the drummer with the band at that time. He took over from another

kid, a black kid. I don't remember his name anymore. By the time I became really interested in the music and in the talent shows Jess had taken over the drum chair. I continued to do my little comic bits and what have you.

When Anthony graduated they had a post-graduate program of some kind over at Huntington Park, so he was the first one to go over there and continue playing in the bands and taking harmony and so forth. He convinced Jess to go over there, and then they both convinced me to go over there. My last year was at Huntington Park.

ISOARDI: Huntington Park High School?

BERNAL: Yes. By this time— I forget the teacher's name. He was pretty sharp. I forget his name now. He put me on the marching band, and then I played in other school-related bands there. I remember making a trip to other schools, including to San Diego [California] or somewhere where I actually traveled with the band. It wasn't the official Huntington Park band, but it was made up of kids that belonged to that band. And of course, I was in the marching band. I played for the football games, which gave me a chance to sort of refine my reading abilities, which were at a beginning phase. I had had one semester of beginning saxophone with Mr. Lippi at Jordan, and I was still very, very basic. I was already working gigs with Anthony and Walter and some of the other guys around Watts.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BERNAL: There used to be a USO [United Service Organizations] at the time there that put on dances on weekends. Servicemen would come.

ISOARDI: A military thing, yeah.

BERNAL: They would dance. I don't know if they had girls— What do you

call pay for a dance?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, a dime a dance kind of thing?

BERNAL: I don't know if that was what it evolved to, but I know they had these

dances. I played one or two gigs with them at this USO in Watts, which was about a block away from the Watts depot.

Then, of course, there were other gigs, parties and whatever, and I started playing. We used to get five, six, seven bucks a night, and I thought it was big money. I was younger than the other kids: I was much newer with my instrument than they were with theirs. As I told you before, Anthony had talked me into playing the saxophone. Then I watched the effect that the saxophone had on the girls, because we had some fairly good saxophone players, as opposed to some probably mediocre trumpet players. So when the sax would come up to the microphone and go [sings low, swooping note] the girls would all scream, and I thought, "I don't know about the trumpet." [mutual laughter]

I remember there were some very popular recordings at the time by the Honeydrippers, and they had a saxophone player. They had an alto sax. I remember his name was Jackson. I don't remember the first name. There was another Jackson that played tenor. I think his name was Jackson. That's the one, of course, that I was interested in, because I saw that the tenor had more of an effect on the ladies than the alto. Well, it was a consideration anyway.

ISOARDI: Certainly. [laughs]

BERNAL: Then with Anthony's encouragement, I went ahead and switched the horn, and then I found that the distance between Anthony's house and

mine was too much of a barrier for me to be going over there every day or every week or whatever. So I guess the tutoring that he promised me turned out to be a one-shot or a two-shot deal, not because of him but because of me. I just didn't get over there to his house anymore. It was too far away. He lived at that time on the border of that neighborhood that I told you was the "Colonia," and it was very close to Jordan. It was just south of 103rd Street. Jordan was on 103rd near Alameda [Street]. It was that area that was known for whatever reason as "La Colonia."

ISOARDI: But you hadn't been playing for very long then. Just literally months when you were playing and making money?

BERNAL: Well, my first one was a little less than a year, I think. I just went in and played what I could play.

ISOARDI: What did you do? Did you play B-flat for an hour and a half? [laughs]

BERNAL: Well, there were certain tunes that I could play, and I guess that was about it. Then when I started playing the dances and parties with Ortega I used to listen to records all the time. I had this huge, old-fashioned Victrola, they used to call them, and it was in the garage.

I was living "uptown," one block north of 102nd Street School, which I switched to from Grape [Street School]. One Hundred Second Street was one block north of the main stem, which was 103rd, and we were like about a block from the Largo Theatre and all the big-time spots—you know, the cleaners, the drugstore. We had a [F.W.] Woolworth [Company department store] there on that street, and we had a couple of cafeterias and three or four grocery stores, a big market. It was a thriving little community, which of course changed at the time of the riots in whatever year, '63 or '65.

ISOARDI: 'Sixty-five.

BERNAL: But at this time, which was the forties, when I moved there and started attending 102nd Street School— The war was still going on, of course, so '41, '42, '43, right in there. I was living on Wilmington Avenue, which borders the 102nd Street School and is one block north of the school itself, right off of Century [Boulevard]. That's where I was living at this time. I would walk from the school— Actually, I went to the school before I even moved, because there were some changes going on in my life. My grandmother died, and that upset the whole applecart. I changed schools to 102nd Street School, and I used to walk to it for a while from 112th [Street]. Then we all moved to Century and Wilmington [Avenue].

I brought that up for a reason, but I lost my train of thought. I'm just going on and on, getting on these tangents.

ISOARDI: Well, you were talking about the difficulty getting to Anthony's place because of the distance.

BERNAL: I started to tell you where we were located so you'd get an idea of the way things were situated there. For me it was another neighborhood and too far to walk to.

I used to have a Victrola in the garage that we'd inherited from my grandmother, and I had these records. I had a limited amount of records. "Dark Eyes" was one of the first ones, with Gene Krupa and Charlie Ventura, and I learned that son of a gun note for note. That was the way I learned to play the saxophone, listening to these records and trying to play with them—and getting into the exercise books, of course. But I didn't do any actual playing until I started working these little dances with Ortega and Jess Ruiz and some of the other kids there. At Jordan I just took

the beginning class. Jay used to come back and sometimes take the class over. But it wasn't until I got to Huntington Park that I actually got into playing with the band and reading the music and so forth.

ISOARDI: But you were only there for a year?

BERNAL: Yeah, just my senior year. Then I went to [Los Angeles] City College for a year.

ISOARDI: Actually, before you get to City College, let me ask you, what was the Jordan student body like ethnically? How was it?

BERNAL: Well, it had changed a little bit by the time I graduated. That is to say, by the time I left Jordan—which was in the eleventh grade; I started there in the seventh, so that's four years—it changed a little bit. But it had been— I couldn't tell you accurately. I can only tell you what I remember, and I seem to remember that it was roughly 50 percent Hispanic or Latino, mostly Mexican American. There were a few kids from Central America, but just a handful, one or two Orientals, a handful of Anglos, and I'd say about 45 percent African American. I think by the time I got to the eleventh grade it was about 50 percent or maybe 60 percent African American and about 40 percent Mexican American. Pretty much that was about it.

In fact, one of the most popular guys in the school was a fellow by the name of Larry Fuester, who was Anglo, and he was into everything. He was a very outgoing guy with a sense of humor and no inhibitions whatsoever, and everybody loved Larry, I mean everybody.

I had a short history of basketball. They used to have varsity B, C, and D. At the time, I think in my ninth grade year, or maybe it was the tenth grade, I'm not sure— Ninth grade would have been junior high and tenth grade the first high school year. But I played in the

D team. I was just a little fart, and I played in the D team. Larry was in the varsity. He wasn't a big guy. He was probably five [feet] ten [inches] or five [feet] eleven [inches tall], but he was first-string varsity, and all the other guys were black. At that time Jordan belonged to the eastern league, which consisted of six or seven other schools all comprised of primarily Anglo kids. So when we went to the other schools to play, Larry would invariably get into fights with the Anglo kids of the other schools. I think there was some resentment there, so they would pick on him more. By the same token, he would show them who was boss. He would say, "Hey, you don't push me around like that. I'm playing with the stars of the league."

Actually, at that time Jordan didn't have the best team in the league. You know, they were so-so. It wasn't until I left the school that they started— They had excellent track teams and of course the football team, even when I— There was a very famous player that later on was a runningback for the San Francisco Forty-Niners. His name was Joe Perry.

ISOARDI: Oh, Joe "The Jet" Perry?

BERNAL: Joe Perry was just sensational.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. I remember him.

BERNAL: It was like a man playing with boys, the rest of the people in the team. He was outstanding. He was all-city anyway, in spite of the team.

ISOARDI: I remember seeing him as a kid in Kezar Stadium.

BERNAL: Anyway, Larry was going to show them that he didn't care, and he was going to show his teammates that he didn't care that these kids were white and he was white. It didn't mean anything to him. He was one of the boys, one of the guys. What I'm trying to say is that he was

if not the most popular guy in the school— And that included, like I said, everybody. He was with the black kids and the Mexican kids and the few others that were there at the time. If I remember correctly, his girlfriend was a Filipino girl. That's what I remember. I think for two or three years or so that was his girlfriend, and that's how that went. That has nothing to do with anything, but you asked me about the ethnic makeup.

ISOARDI: Yeah, exactly. What about Huntington Park?

BERNAL: Huntington Park was 99 percent Anglo.

ISOARDI: Did you have any problems living over there?

BERNAL: No, I didn't have any problems. There were no problems. There were no problems at Jordan, and there were no problems at Huntington Park. I was accepted, and that's just the way it was.

I got into the marching band. By this time I had grown a little bit and I was in the B team playing basketball. I was in the Latin language club; I took Latin. They used to call it a college course, academic course, whatever. I picked Latin, none of which I remember, and yet I got A's and B's in that class.

ISOARDI: How was it musically?

BERNAL: They had a good band. They had more money.

ISOARDI: Did you have classes?

BERNAL: What intimidated me was that they were miles ahead in every way. Scholastically they were ahead, musically they were ahead. There was more money there. These kids were what today you would consider upper-middle-class. The girls all wore bobby socks, saddle shoes, they wore sweaters and skirts. The sweaters were usually—What is that expensive material?

ISOARDI: Cashmere?

BERNAL: Cashmere quite often. Not always, but quite often. They were not all upper-middle-class, but a lot of them were. That was the mood of the school. What would you say? The mode or the atmosphere?

ISOARDI: Yeah, mood is a good word.

BERNAL: If I remember correctly there were mostly Anglo. When I say that I mean there were few Italians, almost no Hispanic names. A few Italian, a few Jewish, but very few. Names like O'Brian, Richardson, Turner, and— You know.

ISOARDI: Johnson.

BERNAL: I was just going to say Johnson. But that's my memory. Those are my memories of the mood of the school, the atmosphere. But it was a happy time.

ISOARDI: By the time you leave Huntington Park, what do you think you've gotten out of it musically? Was it a good move for you going there?

BERNAL: I think so. Yeah, I think so. Playing in that marching band was not only fun, but it helped me develop my reading, so that when I got to City College I was able to play in that band and in their swing band. After I graduated I went to City College for two semesters. Although I was trying to major in journalism, I was so distracted by outside activities, that went nowhere. By this time I was playing more.

One night that last year while I was attending Huntington Park High School, Anthony picked me up. We lived, as I said before, on Wilmington right off of Century. My mother remarried, and I was very fond of my stepfather, but they watched me pretty closely. However, I had the back bedroom, and I was able to slip out the back door over the backyard fence to the alley and out to Anthony's waiting "whale," which he called his old, beat-up Buick or whatever it was that he had. He called it the "whale."

It always needed oil. He and his cousin, who was working professionally in music— His name was Ray Vasquez, and he played trombone, and he was a wonderful singer. He played with a band at what they then called the Avedon Ballroom on Spring Street.

ISOARDI: Downtown?

BERNAL: Downtown. Ninth [Street] and Spring, where Spring begins, so to speak. It separates from Main [Street], and two streets go their own way, and the Avedon Ballroom was located on the Spring Street side right at that intersection. They used to play there. To me he was a star. He was working professionally with a professional band two days a week. It was a local band.

Anyway, he was something like twenty-two or twenty-three [years old] at the time, and Anthony was about nineteen—maybe twenty, but probably nineteen. The drummer, "Chuy"—Jess Ruiz—was a year older than me, so the two of us were definitely minors. Off we go to hear these guys that I'd been hearing on records. They had been playing Teddy Edwards records for me. "Oh, this guy, he plays down here at the Last Word [Cafe], and he plays down here at the Downbeat [Club]." Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray.

ISOARDI: Oh, my God.

BERNAL: I flipped out when I heard these guys. For some reason Teddy was number one for a while, then Dexter [Gordon] and Wardell [Gray] all became one and the same to me. I just admired all of them. I think possibly by this time I had already been to the Downbeat. I was at the Downbeat on Sunday afternoons, because they used to have Sunday afternoon sessions.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

BERNAL: The tenor saxophone player by the name of Gene—

ISOARDI: [Eugene] Montgomery?

BERNAL: Montgomery used to run these sessions. They had guys like Dexter when he was in town, Teddy Edwards, the Farmer brothers—

ISOARDI: Oh, Art and Addison Farmer?

BERNAL: Bass player Addison, and Art Farmer when they were in town. I think Addison was kind of like the house bass player there for a while. Let's see. Iggy Shevack was a Jewish fellow that played the bass. I don't know how good he was. He used to come down and sit in.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? I never heard of that name before.

BERNAL: Iggy Shevack. It's funny, I haven't thought of him for years. He just came back to me. Well, I won't even go into some of these other people.

ISOARDI: So when you first got in touch with these clubs, though, in the heart of Central, escaping through the back of your house and getting in Anthony's car and getting taken down the avenue—

BERNAL: This was at night. I had already been down there on Sunday afternoons. They would let you in if you paid a dollar or something. They had what they called—and which later I discovered at Birdland in New York [City] years later—a listener's section. You just went in and sat there.

ISOARDI: Oh, so no matter what your age, then, you could just—

BERNAL: Yeah, you could just sit there. Especially if it was in the daytime.

ISOARDI: When did you go down there for the first time?

BERNAL: I don't remember the very first time. I just remember sitting there and listening and watching. It amazed me, because I had heard these guys on record. Some of them, of course, weren't there at the same time,

so some of them I didn't get to hear, and I was disappointed. Whichever guy was playing my very first time— For some reason I don't remember, but whoever was playing tenor I know impressed me tremendously.

At that time I was listening more to Charlie Parker and more to the bebop guys than ever before. And while Dexter and Teddy Edwards and Wardell weren't exactly bebop, they were very bop influenced and very Bird influenced. Dexter and Wardell were still offshoots of Lester Young, whom I didn't discover until later.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BERNAL: Not completely. I didn't start really getting into Lester until just after that time, maybe a year or two later. I had heard him, but I was so impressed with Parker, with Bird, and then first-hand listening to Wardell. I loved Wardell. I loved Teddy and Dexter, and then Wardell became very special to me. I never met these guys personally.

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MARCH 15, 1998

BERNAL: Let me tell you this incident that happened there at the Downbeat the very first time that I did this. Actually, it was my first and last time that I went there at night.

ISOARDI: Were you by yourself?

BERNAL: No, I went with Anthony and Ray, his cousin, who was of age. I don't know how we all got in that car, but we did. And Jess, the drummer. Somehow Ray and Naff—Anthony Ortega—left before we did, or at least left the room. Jess and I were leaving, or maybe Jess walked out before I did, and maybe we were walking out separately. We walked out, and I was stopped by a vice cop. And he said, "Why are you here?" I was sixteen.

ISOARDI: It was about 1947, '48, or something like that?

BERNAL: Well, it was before '48. It was '46 or '47, and he says, "What are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm listening to music."

He said, "Well, you're in big trouble, young man, because you're not supposed to be here. You're obviously underage. Who did you come with?"

I pointed around the room, and the guys were gone. For some reason they were not there. There was a good reason for them not being available or accessible at the time. I don't know what it was, but it was a pretty legitimate excuse or reason. I don't know how old Anthony was. I think Anthony was either nineteen or twenty. I guess he was still underage. In those days the legal age was twenty-one, but I don't know if he would have gotten in trouble. But I got in trouble.

They picked me up. They found Jess, who was somewhere in the vicinity. I think he was outside the club waiting for his brother to pick us up. I think that the other two had left early for whatever reason. Jess called his brother. The brother was on his way to pick us up, so I think Jess was waiting. They picked up Jess here, and they picked me up there, and they took us down to Newton Street Police Station, and they said, "Where do you live, and what's your phone number?"

"Well, I don't have a phone." I didn't. The people next door were my aunt and uncle and their kid, and I said, "Well, I don't know them. I don't know who they are." They had a phone, and luckily the cops didn't call. They said, "We want to get in touch with your parents. Do they know that you're here?"

To make a long story short, Jess's brother, who was over twenty-one, came to pick him up. They released him to the custody of his brother with the understanding that Jess was to come back the next day with one or both of his parents. They had to fill out some forms and so on and so forth.

Now, they let me go because I lived in the same neighborhood. I lived maybe about two blocks away from Jess, so the deal was that I was supposed to report the next day and come back with my stepfather or mother.

ISOARDI: Did you?

BERNAL: No, I didn't. I didn't know what I was going to do.

I woke up early in the morning. Well, I don't think I slept that night, actually. Mind you, coming back from the police station I had to go by way of the backyard, over the fence, etc. I said three "Our Fathers" and several "Hail Marys" and walked in the back door. I could hear them snoring slightly from the other room, so I was not discovered

that night. The next morning I woke up and they had left. They would leave early for work. They were gone by six thirty or maybe seven. So I stayed. "What the hell am I going to do?" I ended up calling the station. By this time my voice had changed enough so I could get away with a telephone voice, and I said, [adopts deep voice] "I am Gilbert's stepfather, and I would like to know if I could sign the report, if you could send me this by mail. It's very difficult for me to take off work" and this and that. And they said, "Well, we just want you to be aware of where he is and what he's doing. So watch him at night" or whatever. They sent the forms by mail, and I watched for the mail and took them out and forged their names and did whatever I had to do. I was never discovered.

ISOARDI: You were lucky.

BERNAL: They never found out. Bless their hearts, bless their souls to this day. They're gone now, but they never knew. None of my relatives—aunts, uncles, whatever—nobody ever knew. The only people that knew were Jess and Ray and of course Naff, who was the main instigator—Ortega. That was one of my first experiences at the Downbeat. Maybe that was why I can't remember who was working there that night.

ISOARDI: Yeah, really.

BERNAL: But subsequently I know I went there on Sunday afternoons, and I saw all the people that I mentioned before plus Hampton Hawes, Roy Porter, Larance Marable, who was on the scene even then. He's around today and is still playing his butt off. Roy Porter I think just passed away.

ISOARDI: Yeah, about two months ago.

BERNAL: I never knew these fellows at that time, but years later I got to meet and know some of them.

In the meantime I was playing all the time. And there were other

places that I would go to that weren't quite as advanced. The company was not quite as advanced as the Downbeat or the Last Word, which was directly across the street at Central Avenue, right down from the [Club] Alabam and the Dunbar [Hotel]. I started bringing my horn around. There was a place on Avalon [Boulevard] which was right down the street from the Los Angeles version of Wrigley Field in Chicago. It was owned by [William] Wrigley [Jr.], and it was the home of the L.A. [Los Angeles] Angels, who were the minor league team here before the majors came out.

ISOARDI: Pacific Coast league team or whatever it was called then.

BERNAL: Exactly. So this was right down the street from there. It was called the Crystal Tea Room on Avalon. They used to have different guys, some of the same guys from the Downbeat but some of the lesser-known people, including Eric Dolphy.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: If I remember correctly. And Frank Morgan.

ISOARDI: They were all jamming at this place?

BERNAL: They were not as advanced naturally or not nearly as well known as the other guys. So I was able to sit in there and actually had some of the people say, "Yeah, man, blow! Blow!" So I thought, "I'm a mother—" etc. Because if these musicians accept me— But there was never any doubt in my mind, it's just that they were confirming what I thought I knew. [laughs] You know, "I'm really hot stuff." Of course, I didn't know shit, but they encouraged me. Although I didn't know these guys. I didn't know them well. I would show up, and they'd say, "Yeah, get your horn." And with the people who ran the sessions, the people who went there all the time, I got to be a fixture at these places.

There was another one on Central—I don't know what it was—and we

would go there after the Crystal Tea Room and after the Downbeat let out. I didn't go back to the Downbeat session. Well, actually on Sundays I did. I take it back. That's what it was. It was after Sunday afternoon at the Downbeat or at the Last Word, and there was this other place down the street near Vernon [Avenue] somewhere.

ISOARDI: Near Vernon and Central?

BERNAL: Yeah. And we'd play there. I remember Eric [Dolphy] played there.

ISOARDI: What was his sound like then?

BERNAL: Oh, God, I couldn't remember. I couldn't begin to tell you. I just recognized the name years later, along with Frank Morgan.

Oh, another fixture at the Downbeat, of course, was Sonny Criss.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: Yeah, Sonny.

ISOARDI: I didn't know he spent that much time there.

BERNAL: Oh, Sonny was very much a part of the Downbeat and the Last Word and the action up and down the street. A very famous recording at the time, a popular recording with jazz people, especially local jazz people, was or were records that had been put out by Ralph Bass. I think he was part of that. They had been recorded at the Elks [hall] right down the street, right by the Lincoln Theatre.

ISOARDI: Oh. These are live performances?

BERNAL: Oh, yeah. Dexter, Howard McGhee was another one, although I didn't get to see very much of him. But this particular thing that I'm thinking of came out on 78 [r.p.m. records] and had an orange label. They recorded several things, and there were several people on it. I think I still have one of the 78s that I didn't break.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: Wardell Gray, Howard McGhee, Dexter Gordon. But the one that I remember the most was Dexter and Wardell doing kind of a battle of the saxes type of thing.

ISOARDI: Was that "The Chase"?

BERNAL: "The Chase," exactly. Later on they recorded something on Dial [Records] or one of those labels that was kind of along the same line except they called it— It wasn't "The Chase," or maybe that was "The Chase" and the other one was "The Hunt" or something else. I don't know. But it was fantastic to my ears in those early saxophone-playing years. Actually, I was so new at it, and I heard these guys playing— I mean, it would really make an impression. And of course, I would try to play these licks and get that feel, and it came easy. It really came easy—that is to say, to get the feel of it and to be able to keep the time. Just that alone, to get a certain sound. I didn't master the horn immediately. I still haven't mastered it for that matter. But I did make quick progress from the marching band at Huntington Park High School and those five-dollar gigs to the Central Avenue thing and being able to sit in.

I remember one afternoon— Gene used to run the sessions, and for some reason the horn players walked off the stand. I don't remember who the piano was. I don't know if it was Hampton Hawes. It might have been Hampton Hawes and maybe Roy Porter on drums. I took my horn with me, and I had been with someone who left. I was there by myself in the listening section. I was eighteen years old at the time. I guess it was during my [Los Angeles] City College years, or maybe it was my senior year at school. I don't remember. Anyway, it was a Sunday afternoon. The horn players walked off the stage. I took my horn. I think Dexter was working. The horn players were the usual giants; it was either Teddy or Dexter

and Wardell or somebody. I took my horn out and said, "I can do what they do." I thought I could hold my own. So I got up there and played, and then Gene, I think, came back on the scene, and he looked. There I was. I just started playing with the rhythm section, whatever they were playing, and I took umpteen choruses of whatever it was they were playing. You know, they used to have the usual tunes. They always did "S'Wonderful," some blues, "Now's the Time," and "Billie's Bounce," you know, whatever. There was a handful of tunes that everybody knew. So I said, "Hey, I know that." I got my horn, and there I went and played for as long as I wanted. Nobody bothered. Gene didn't say a word.

ISOARDI: Jeez. A great rhythm section.

BERNAL: Yeah. Whoever was there was playing some good stuff. And I went up there and played, and I got a little hand when I got through. There was just a handful of people there on a Sunday afternoon—half a room, maybe. I played one or two tunes and got off, put my horn away, and walked off and thought I had walked off into the sunset, so to speak, you know, thinking I had really made history. "I told them I could do it. Wait till I tell Naff. Wait till I tell Chuy. Wait till I tell Walter Benton." Walter was the tenor saxophone player that I got to know personally. I got to know him best, more than Clifford at the time and more than Jay or the other guys. Jay was, of course, older. But that was the only time I did it that way.

The next time I did it I was asked to play, but that was quite a while— It was two or three years later. But I still continued to go into the lesser sessions.

Now, during this time I started going to sessions across town over the hill in Hollywood. I met a fellow by the name of Jim Smith, who was

a friend of Carson Smith, the bass player, who was a friend of Monty Budwig. Maybe it was through these gigs that I got into the Majestic Ballroom on the Pike in Long Beach my last few weeks in high school. In fact, the day that I graduated I went to the gig in Long Beach, and it was the first band that I had ever played with. Chuck Gates was the guy's name. They had four saxophones, three trumpets, three trombones, and a rhythm section.

ISOARDI: A good size.

BERNAL: And Monty Budwig was the bass player. My friend Jim Smith had been in and out of the band, and I think so had Carson Smith. Chuck Gates was a trombone player that played excellent trombone, and he was missing two or three fingers. I always remember his playing. A very nice guy. I don't know what happened to him, but he went into Dixieland for a while. Of course, I haven't seen him in years and years and years. But that was my first band. I sang a little bit. I sang a few tunes with the band, and I played during the summer months before going into City College.

But what I was saying was that I started hanging out with guys that played at sessions in the [San Fernando] Valley, places that I don't remember now. But then there were people like Art Pepper. Art was already an established headliner. He had been with [Stan] Kenton.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: In those days Kenton used to have different editions of his band, his orchestra. There was the early swing band, there was the stereophonic band or what have you, different versions. Art had played with him several times. Also I was very close to Vido Musso, who had played with Stan. Later he became my compare. He christened my youngest daughter years later. But I knew these people. This was like a different world. And

I would play with Art and Chet Baker. Chet Baker hung around these sessions. This was, of course, before Gerry [Mulligan], and I think Jack Sheldon came on the scene around that time.

ISOARDI: Where were you meeting these guys?

BERNAL: In the Valley, but I don't remember the names of the clubs. I wasn't real close to them. I hung with Art to some degree and a bass player by the name of Hershey Himmelstein. There was kind of a little clique of guys. I don't remember. Zoot Sims's brother, Bob, I think, who played cornet. I think his name was Bob or Bill or something like that.

I didn't hang out a lot, because I didn't have a lot of freedom. I was still living at home, and my mother used to watch me. From time to time I would get out and go to these sessions and play. I got to know these guys very well at the sessions. Some of them I'm sure forgot all about me, but I never forgot about them, because they went on to make names for themselves, some of them. You know, Claude Williamson and Jimmy Rowles. I couldn't begin to remember all the people that I ran across then that I either played with or who were maybe playing another set before I got up to play. That was an experience.

Oddly enough, I think I adjusted my style when I went over the hill. Instead of a more aggressive, harder-hitting style of playing, I mellowed out a little bit so as to fit in with what they were playing. This is what I thought. There was a kind of a competitive thing there that wasn't out in the open: "This guy plays too white," or "This guy plays too black," you know, from the opposite teams, so to speak. This was when we had two locals [American Federation of Musicians, Local 47 and Local 767]. I don't know, thinking back on those early years, I enjoyed doing both,

and I could fit into both. I mean, if I could jam with Art Pepper and Chet Baker—Art was farther along than Chet. If I could be accepted even in a jam session setting I must have been doing okay.

ISOARDI: [laughs] More than okay.

BERNAL: They were all very much into "Pres" [Lester Young], whereas the black musicians by this time were very much into Dexter and Wardell and of course Bird and all of the people that came out of Bird, the Sonny Stitts and so forth.

But that taught me a lot in that I was able— How can I put it? I was able to absorb different atmospheres and slightly different approaches to jazz. I guess when I really let my hair down was when I came over to what I used to consider my side of the hill—Hollywood, South L.A., Long Beach, Southgate, Inglewood. I remember Bird played in a club in Inglewood at one time, and they recorded some things there that I heard years later. I was still too young to go to these places. I could only go when there were jam sessions and once in a while if I could sneak out of the house or get permission to go out.

ISOARDI: So when you were in high school or even at City College, you may have been going to clubs to hear some music, but that was all you were doing on Central Avenue. You weren't hanging out on Central.

BERNAL: Well, I was jamming. I was jamming. Well, I was hanging out to a point, but not all night and that kind of thing. I mean, there were places that I never saw that I had heard of since I was a kid—the Plantation Club, which I think was on 108th [Street] and Central.

ISOARDI: It was down in Watts, yeah.

BERNAL: Well, it wasn't Watts then; it was far west of Watts. Watts I think ended at about Compton Avenue, and then there were fields of green.

I don't know what was there. Central was almost like a different world, and yet it was all part of the overall larger picture. But it wasn't like my neighborhood. The club was there, and I had heard of it for years, but I never saw it. There was another club—I forget what it was called—Jack's Basket Room was another after-hours club.

ISOARDI: They used to have a lot of tenor battles there, didn't they?

BERNAL: Well, I think so, but I remember hearing talk of some of the great piano players in town. When Art Tatum would come into town he'd go over there, and then the other piano players would say, "We're out of here. We'd better move on. God just walked in." And that piano would be deserted.

ISOARDI: Who would presume?

BERNAL: I remember Milt Buckner told me that story years ago when I was with [Lionel] Hampton, because he would go there and hang out sometimes. They had a piano, and the piano players would go— Either that room or another one like it were after-hours places. At least at that particular place in time it was a piano room, and piano players would go there and show what they could do. I never saw that.

ISOARDI: There were a lot of rich musical opportunities. Is this where you more or less learned your instrument, then, is going to the sessions?

BERNAL: Well, it was a combination of listening to records, watching and listening to the players, playing in a marching band, hanging out with these people, just absorbing the atmosphere. When I say hanging out, I was too young to be out with them all day and night.

ISOARDI: You never had a private teacher, then, did you?

BERNAL: No, I didn't. I did not study, much to my detriment and much to my regret. That's why I went directly to the tenor. I didn't start

on clarinet like most of the guys I knew; I just wanted to get the tenor. "Hey, let me play for the chicks. I don't want the clarinet." So I thought, "I'll pick it up later," and I never did. I went from that within a period of two years. From the time that I graduated high school to the time I joined Hamp [Lionel Hampton], I mean, it was exactly two years.

ISOARDI: Jeez. And you didn't start playing till you were—what?—eleventh grade?

BERNAL: Early eleventh grade.

ISOARDI: So in four years' time you go from scratch to playing with Lionel Hampton's band?

BERNAL: Yeah. Of course, I was hired as a singer, but it was during this time that I was hanging with both sides of the hill and absorbing whatever I could and occasionally meeting some big shot musician. This is about the time that I started thinking in terms of "What do I do next? What happens next?" I told you the story of sitting in and thinking that I was good enough to play with some of these heavyweights at the Downbeat. I just went up by myself and played with this big-time rhythm section. I was getting pretty nervy. I wasn't arrogant but maybe cocky. You know, I was cocky enough to think that I was good enough to play professionally with professional people.

I had a teacher at Jordan who was an English teacher that had been in show business by the name of Thelma Brown. She was an English teacher that went to teaching after her show business career. She was a part of an act called the Brown Sisters. Yeah. And they're in some of those books.

ISOARDI: Do they have a club in Watts?

BERNAL: I don't think so, but I never knew about that.

ISOARDI: Maybe a different group.

BERNAL: They had traveled in shows with Lionel Hampton, with Louis Jordan, and with other people.

ISOARDI: Big names.

BERNAL: So she would tell us some of these stories from time to time when she got inspired or when things were dull, and we all loved her. We loved her for her personality and who she was, and she was a good English teacher. She took care of business, but she loved show business. She loved music and played the piano and occasionally would get up and do something during the talent shows. Of course, we loved that, and I was very friendly with her.

After I graduated, after I was out of school, when I was going to my second semester at City College, I just got this wild idea. I found out her telephone number by calling the school, and I talked to her, and I said, "You remember me?" etc., etc. I said, "I am now a singer and saxophone player"—you know, I should have added "in my block, and I happened to be thinking about you and the stories that you told and your association with some of these stars," show business stars and jazz stars and so on. I said, "I was wondering if you couldn't introduce me to somebody. I wouldn't disappoint you, and I think that I could impress them enough to maybe get hired." She said, "Well, how long have you been doing it?" and so on and so forth. I virtually talked my way into it. She never heard me. Why she believed me I don't know. I mean, I owe a lot to this woman to this day. She's long gone, but she has always remained one of my very favorite people.

To make a long story short, she arranged for an audition with Lionel Hampton, which came months later, because he came into town and was gone.

Louis Jordan came into town and was gone. I had forgotten all about it when one day the phone rang. This was at least three or four months after I had talked to her. And she said to me, "Gilbert? Do you remember our conversation? Are you still interested?" And I said, "Oh, yes, Miss Brown, more than ever!" She said, "Well, I talked to Lionel Hampton about you." [taps chest to imitate pounding heart] Boom, boom, boom, boom—there goes my heart. She said, "They're up in Portland [Oregon] or somewhere, but they'll be here next week to start an engagement at the Million Dollar Theatre. I told him that you are a great singer and a great saxophone player, and you'd better not let me down!"

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: I said, "Don't worry about a thing." [mutual laughter] "I've got it covered."

ISOARDI: Confidence.

BERNAL: I went down there two weeks later. She called me up and said, "I want you to go down, take your horn, go backstage, tell the people who you are. They'll let you in, and you wait until you're introduced—until they tell Hamp that you there—and he'll talk to you. You go from there." I said, "That's fine. That's fine with me."

The engagements, if I remember correctly, would start on Tuesday, so it was either opening day or the following day. Whatever day she told me to go, I was there.

I think it was during the first show. I got in. I was backstage. I stood around and waited until the show was over. And then when Hamp came off the stage, I stood in his path. And he said, "Oh, you must be so and so. Miss Brown told me about you." Well, actually I introduced myself. He said, "Oh, sure. I was expecting you." I thought, "Oh, it's

for real." You know, I wasn't sure up to that point. He said, "I'll tell you what, Gates,"—Hamp could never remember first names, and he called everybody "Gates"—"you wait here. I will put Buck on you." He said, "That's Milt Buckner. He's the pianist." Milt was noted for—what did they call it?—"Hamp's Boogie Woogie." It was Milt's tune, and he was featured throughout on the piano. Milt was the originator of the block chord style of playing, from which everybody took, including [George] Shearing and other people, who gave him credit, much to their credit. They always gave him credit. Block chords, of course, is where you play the melody with ten fingers, you know. You play the chords behind the melody. He was fantastic. Anyway, he also happened to be about five [feet] four [inches] and quite heavy. So they sometimes would advertise him as "Mr. Five-by-Five." And he had a great personality, a great personality. Wonderful guy.

Not to get ahead of myself, but a year later when my wife [Harriet Bernal] came out of the hospital in New York City after the birth of our first child, that's where she recuped. They used to keep people in for four or five days at the time. She came back out, and she stayed with Gladys [Buckner]—Milt's wife. I made arrangements through Milt.

ISOARDI: Nice.

BERNAL: So I owe a lot to Milt. She had one distant relative close by and eventually went there for a while. But I owe a lot to Milt and his wife.

But of course, this was three years prior to that. And he said, "Gates wants me to hear you." I was still waiting around, and they were playing the movie in the meantime on the screen. If you remember, the screen would come down, the curtain would close, and then the movie would

come on.

ISOARDI: The band would get a break.

BERNAL: He came up and introduced himself and said, "Gates wants me to hear you."

I said, "Okay."

So he said, "Just come follow me."

We went down to the basement, where they had a rehearsal room. This is at the Million Dollar Theatre, Third [Street] and Broadway. They had a piano down there. And he said, "What do you want to do?"

I said, "Well—" I put my horn on the side. He was on his break. He was ready to eat lunch or whatever, so he was giving his time. Just he and I. So I said, "Well, what about, 'I Only Have Eyes for You'?"

So he said, "What key do you want it in?"

"C."

"Okay, that's the original key."

So he went into it with a very flowery intro[duction], and I started to sing.

He heard about three-quarters of the way, and he said, "That's great, that's great. You know what you're doing. That's fine."

And I'm just thinking to myself, "When does Hamp hear me?"

I was very foolish in those days, and I guess most young people are. I knew that I was going to be in the band, I just knew it. I mean, I had envisioned this whole thing two or three years ago watching other bands. They were watching Hamp. That was the band that I really wanted to be with, because they were such an exciting band. And I saw most of them. I saw Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman. Glenn Miller I didn't see at the time. This was a little beyond Glenn Miller's time.

I saw Gene Krupa. Well, of course, I had been watching the bands in the theaters since I was in junior high, but I saw most of the bands. Hampton was the one that excited the people the most, and they had some great players. Illinois [Jacquet] had been with the band, and Arnett Cobb. Very exciting players. *[Also in the early days of the band there were Dexter Gordon and Johnny Griffin.] I had visualized myself up there playing saxophone and singing at the mike with this band behind me, and that's the honest-to-God's truth. When it came to be, it's something that I had already in a sense lived through.

I got Milt's okay, and he said, "That's great, Gil. Let's go up and talk to Hamp." As a matter of fact, that's how he introduced himself. He said, "I'm Buck, Milt Buckner. I'm the piano player, and Hamp wants me to hear you. He tells me you're great." Those were, honest to God, his words.

ISOARDI: Yeah, nice.

BERNAL: He had never heard me, and of course, I was not great. I was barely competent, but that's the way Miss Brown introduced me to them by way of the telephone. She told Hamp about me, and that's what Hamp told Buck. So Buck heard me, and he said, "Everything's great. You're great. I'll tell Hamp." So he told whatever he told Hamp. I continued to stand there. They went into the next show. Hamp said, "Just wait a while," and he went out and did the first part of the show. To me it seemed like an eternity.

ISOARDI: I'll bet. I'll bet.

BERNAL: This is the second show, and the girl singer went on, Irma Curry from Baltimore. He was carrying three girl singers at the time: Janet

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

Franklin, who sang a couple of ballads, including an Italian song, "Come Back to Sorrento"—

ISOARDI: Oh, she did that Vido Musso hit, had a big hit with that.

BERNAL: She would sing that. I don't know why. She had taken some classical voice lessons, I suppose, so she would sing this song and another song. And then there was Irma Curry from Baltimore, who sang the ballads. She was a good ballad singer and a sweet girl, and so was Janet. Everybody was very nice. Janet was the glamour girl, though, and Irma just sang. She was like the friend of the band's. You know, for Janet, that was a little below her. The other one was Betty Bebop, who later became Betty Carter.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BERNAL: Yes. She would come out and sing one song, and that was "Lady Be Good," like Ella Fitzgerald. Ella had recorded that. So Betty Bebop sang that one song for the whole time she was in the band.

ISOARDI: That's it?

BERNAL: While I was in the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, God! [laughs]

BERNAL: But they would come out and do their thing, and then somebody else would do their thing. In the theaters it would be kind of like a variety show. I think she probably sang other songs at dances and nightclub gigs, which were few and far between.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: Mostly one-nighters and occasionally a theater and then occasionally a nightclub. Betty Bebop.

Irma was singing a song—she did two numbers—and one with just the rhythm section. Hamp knew what he was doing but nobody else did. Before

the end of the first chorus he told Milt and the rhythm section to segue into "I Only Have Eyes for You"—in a different key of course—and Irma, of course, knew nothing about this. So he goes to the wings, and he takes me literally by the shirtsleeve. He said, "Come on, Gates, I want you to sing the chorus of this song." And I said, "But I don't have a jacket." He said, "Don't worry about it."

ISOARDI: Man!

BERNAL: We walked out to the mike, and Irma is standing there and wondering what's going on—

ISOARDI: And who were you?

BERNAL: And why are they going into another key, into another song. And he comes behind the two of us, and he puts his arm around Irma, and he's got his arm around my shoulder, and he says, "Go ahead, Gates," when it's time to get into the song. He tells Irma to do some doo-wop—not doo-wop but something like that, you know.

So she started doing the obbligato, as we used to call it. I sang eight bars by myself, and she started going [sings] "Oooh, oooh—" Whatever. Before you knew it, I was through the first chorus, and he says, "Go ahead, Gates, we're going into the bridge" or whatever. Irma's eyes got this big—you know, "What's going on here?" So I sang the song. We both finished the song, and obviously it went over; we got good applause. Nobody was giving us a standing ovation, but they were applauding and pleased, and everybody was smiling, at least the people in the first few rows that I could see.

I ran off stage, and I said to Irma, "Hi, my name is Gil. I'm sorry. I didn't know he was going to do that." And she said, "Oh, don't worry about it. That's 'Gates'." As I found out, he would do things like that.

Bless his heart.

ISOARDI: So you got the gig with him?

BERNAL: Well, it was not quite that quick; it took a couple of days. But after the show he said, "That was great. I want you to do that again." In the meantime, my horn is over in the corner gathering dust. I didn't even say, "Hamp, I also play saxophone." Nothing. I was so caught up in the momentum of the moment that I didn't think to say it. [laughs] "I'm glad to be here."

I had a buddy waiting for me that had given me the ride that brought me there, and I was anxious to get back out to him. "How did I do?" I went out there, and he said, "Hey, man, that was great! I didn't think you were going to get on!" So I said, "He wants me to stay. Can you wait for me?" "Oh, shit, yeah!" [mutual laughter] He didn't think I was going to get to sing or perform.

So we did another show.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

MARCH 15, 1998

BERNAL: I joined him [Lionel Hampton] for the last two shows, and then he asked me to come back the next day and sing for his wife, Gladys [Hampton], who was not to be confused with Milt [Buckner]'s wife, whose name was also Gladys [Buckner].

ISOARDI: Right.

BERNAL: This is Gladys Hampton who was the boss. She was the—

ISOARDI: The money lady.

BERNAL: Yeah, she took care of the business, and she was the manager, and she was the boss. She did the actual hiring and firing, although years later I heard that Hamp wasn't as away from the nuts and bolts part of it as he appeared to be. Gladys took the criticism and the raps and so forth, and she didn't care. She was a tough lady but a smart lady, a smart lady. Very attractive. She had been a showgirl in her younger years.

In any case, I came back the next day and did the same thing again. I walked on stage, only this time I was wearing a jacket and maybe a tie. But I did the same thing with Irma [Curry], "I Only Have Eyes for You," and then I came off stage. And each time I got a little more applause, and Hamp was getting more and more excited. I guess he was thinking of possibilities, whatever.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: Then Gladys heard me. So at the end of the second day, which was when Gladys heard me, she said to me, "We're going out of town. We've got some recording to do. Would you like to join us for a trip up north?"

Again, I didn't know they were going up north again, but they were. I think they had already been up north. I found out that when they came from the East, when they came out here, they would work Los Angeles, and then they would work surrounding areas like San Diego, San Bernardino, and so on. Then they would go north and hit all the little towns between here and San Francisco—not all the little towns, but three or four places between here and San Francisco and Oakland—sometimes the theaters and sometimes one-nighters and sometimes nightclubs. [tape recorder off] But Gladys said they were going on the road in a couple of weeks, and would I be interested in joining them for at least that tour, and we'd see how things went.

ISOARDI: All right.

BERNAL: I said, "Fantastic!" Incidentally, this was like on a Wednesday, Wednesday or a Thursday. The previous Sunday I had eloped to Yuma [Arizona] and had gotten married.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez! This is a big week for you.

BERNAL: Oh, it was indeed.

ISOARDI: What a week!

BERNAL: I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. In reality, I didn't really know. I was living at home with my mother [Rose Maria Bernal Cruz], and my wife [Harriet Daniels Bernal] was living with her sister. She had come out here from Ohio and had been here two or three years, and we met at [Los Angeles] City College. When we decided to get married, I said, "Well, I have this career that I'm going to get into. You watch and see." When her older sister found out, she said, "What are you kids thinking about? What are you going to do? How are you going to support her? How are you going to support yourselves?" I said, "Well,

I have this audition with Lionel Hampton on Tuesday"—or Wednesday, whenever it was—and I said, "I think everything is going to work out." She said, "Oh, Gil! You're dreaming!" But it worked out for me.

ISOARDI: Unbelievable.

BERNAL: It worked out.

ISOARDI: So, a couple of days later you produced a job. [laughs]

BERNAL: I did, and everybody was just like astounded, everybody that was close to me, my family and her family.

ISOARDI: What was her name?

BERNAL: Harriet. Harriet Daniels.

Where was I? Oh, yeah. I told Mrs. Hampton that I would go. They offered me seventeen dollars a night, unless we worked theaters or nightclubs or something like that. Yeah, basically theaters and nightclubs. They had their own scale.

ISOARDI: Six nights a week or something?

BERNAL: For the one-nighters it could be seven, it could be six, it could be five. The theaters, if it was one week would be seven days, unless we were working Chicago and New York, where you would work two weeks or three weeks.

In New York it was my first time on Broadway. It was my first and last time at the Capitol Theatre, which is no longer there, on approximately Forty-ninth [Street] and Broadway. We did three weeks there, and it was a fantastic experience. Of course, I had already worked the Apollo [Theatre] with Hamp by then. But I'm getting way ahead. I'll just finish this up quick.

So Mrs. Hampton, "Well, let's try it." I finished the engagement with Hamp, and then we were in town for a few days. I did a couple of

school appearances. And I remember the football player Kenny [Kenneth] Washington—the original! I mean the guy that was all-star at UCLA—was in some kind of community service work or something. I remember that he kind of served as my security or something when I was working these schools with Hamp, because there were a lot of screaming little teenagers. And I thought, "Boy, if this is the way it's going to be, fantastic!"

ISOARDI: Now, when you went on the road with Hamp, did your wife come with you?

BERNAL: No, not right away. Well, she came to our first location job after I left town.

First, let me tell you that we went into the studio. Sonny Burke was the A and R [artists and repertoire] man. Sonny Burke was a very well-established musician and composer, I guess, songwriter. In fact, he co-authored "Midnight Sun" with Hamp. Sonny heard Hamp playing a solo on "How High the Moon." Hamp played the melody of "Midnight Sun" on the first eight bars of "How High the Moon" [sings melody], then repeated again based on the first two chords or the first four chords of the tune. Whatever. I don't remember exactly. Sonny heard this and proceeded to write an entire song, and of course they both received writer's credits. But Sonny worked with it, and it was a great song for Hamp instrumentally. Later on someone added lyrics, but much later. Well, Sonny was the A and R man at the session, and he was the one that worked with me. I was scared to death.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: They had me record. They must have had some faith in me. By this time I was beginning to lose some of that confidence, you know, because I thought, "My God, I'm going to the studio!" I said, "I can do it, but—"

There was a part of me that was scared.

ISOARDI: You were—what?—nineteen or twenty [years old]?

BERNAL: I was nineteen.

ISOARDI: You were nineteen years old then.

BERNAL: Yeah, I was nineteen. We did "September in the Rain." As it turned out, it was the B side of a semi-hit record that Hamp had, which wasn't released, of course, at the time. When the record came out, the A side was "Everybody's Somebody's Fool," which featured Little Jimmy Scott.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BERNAL: Now, Jimmy was no longer with the band at this time. Jimmy was back in New York somewhere, but they had recorded previously. They had recorded this tune, and it hadn't been released. So they put me on one side, Jimmy Scott on the other. Guess whose side was the hit? You know, and I'm singing "September in the Rain." [sings melody] A beautiful arrangement. I mean, I hear it to this day and I cringe, I absolutely cringe. But it was released, to my great regret. Unfortunately, maybe that was the reason I didn't record any more vocals, although I continued to sing with the band. If I recall, he wasn't recording very much around that time.

But I recorded the tune, and he took me around to the agency. He was with ABC [booking company] at the time with Joe Glaser, although I didn't meet Joe Glaser. I remember the guy that worked with Hamp was fairly well known in Hollywood. He used to have an office on Sunset [Boulevard] on the strip, and I remember going up there. It was a whole new world to me.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: And we did a few things locally like the school appearances and so forth and the recording, and then we hit the road. I told my mother I was going on the road. Mind you, I was still living at home. This is just maybe a week or ten days after I joined the band. We went on the road. And that was a whole other thing. Another life opened up for me there.

Now, the whole time nobody knew I played saxophone.

ISOARDI: You hadn't played it yet, right? Just sung.

BERNAL: I hadn't played it yet. I guess we'll get into that maybe another time.

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. Maybe next time, then, we can take off from the years with Hamp.

BERNAL: You know, I'm awfully long-winded here. You've got to stop me if I'm overdoing this, really.

ISOARDI: Oh, no. You craft stories so well.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

MAY 3, 1998

ISOARDI: Okay, Gil, before we get back to your days with Lionel Hampton, let me ask you a couple of questions from the previous times. One I don't know if we got into very much, but your reactions to bebop. When you became aware of bebop, when that came in, how did that seem?

BERNAL: Well, first of all, at that time I was not really involved in music per se. I mean, I was listening, though. I was hanging out with a couple of guys that were involved in music playing in the school band and so forth, and I was just beginning to take an interest in it. I guess I was more into the big bands of the day, which were [Count] Basie and Woody Herman's First Herd with Neil Hefti and Flip Phillips and Bill Harris and those guys. I just loved their music. And then I guess jazz at the Philharmonic had started up, and I heard some of that music and thought it was very exciting. My friends played these bebop records on Savoy [Records] from Dizzy Gillespie and "Bird" [Charlie Parker], and I think Miles [Davis] was on some, and it was a little too complex for me at the time. I couldn't digest it, because I was just beginning to get comfortable with the sounds of the swing people—you know, the better swing players, of course. But "Bird" and "Diz" were like high school, and I was still in junior high or something like that. So I continued to listen over the next couple of years, and the more I listened and the more I heard about it from my friends I became a little more interested. I made some attempts at trying to play the music and decipher it a little bit. I was just learning to play, really. I wouldn't even say that I considered it a challenge. I was more interested in having a good time with what

I knew at that time at that particular point since I was just really getting started. I probably had been playing a year or two. I was probably more interested in just learning to play the horn than to go into areas that didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. It wasn't until I'd been playing for a while that things began to fall into place, and I began to make an all-out attempt at actually playing some of that music and incorporating it into what I was playing. But that didn't come for a while.

ISOARDI: Let me also ask you, you talked a bit last time about going to LACC [Los Angeles City College], and I wanted to ask you a couple of things. First off, why LACC? Why going to college?

BERNAL: Well, I didn't know what else to do at the time. I thought I was faced with a choice. By that time I had decided that more than likely I was going to be involved in music. However, I was thinking that perhaps I should have a backup, something to rely on, just to fall back on. LACC was accessible. I mean, it was in the center of town and it was inexpensive, very inexpensive—practically free. So that's the reason I went there. As a matter of fact, my so-called major was journalism. And actually, I really wanted to get into creative writing, and for some reason I ended up in journalism. And I thought, "Well, that's odd. It's a good foundation for any writing that I many do."

ISOARDI: Interesting. Why creative writing?

BERNAL: Because I thought of myself as a possible writer. I used to like to write.

ISOARDI: You have an artistic bent in many fields.

BERNAL: Well, I think a lot of people do that, do one thing that's not just the one area; they're creative in others. I mean, look at guys like Tony Bennett and Anthony Quinn.

ISOARDI: Yeah, true. Right.

BERNAL: You know, many that do sketching. I also—

ISOARDI: Miles Davis was a painter.

BERNAL: I used to like that. I don't do much anymore, but I used to like to draw and sketch. I was fairly good. And the writing— I never really wrote anything of any consequence, but I used to write essays in school, and I won a couple of high school awards for my essays, which I don't remember much about now. But I was inspired enough to think that possibly I would want to do some writing after I got out of school. That was why I chose writing. Somehow I got sidetracked into journalism, which I enjoyed to some extent. I wrote stories in the school paper, in the LACC paper. I wrote a few stories for them. It was fun.

But by this time 90 percent of my life was involved with music. My interests and my direction and my motivation and everything was toward jazz. I would go to every jam session that I could find on weekends, and I would work jobs at night. Getting around meeting this musician and that musician, I eventually met people like Art Pepper and Chet Baker and the guys that hung out with them. They kind of took me in, and I would join them and change my style, mellow it, just enough that I would fit in what later was called the West Coast school. Then I would play on the other side of town, here, and I would just go right along with the sounds and the feel, and I would become more aggressive with perhaps a harsher tone, more into the bebop things. It was almost as if I didn't have a purpose. I wanted to fit in, but I wanted to fit in with the music. You know, when I went to the [San Fernando] Valley and sat in with the guys that were playing in those sessions, the groove was mellower. It was softer. So I wanted to fit in that genre, although I didn't call

it a genre then, of course; I just wanted to fit into the pattern of the groove. The other guys were playing pretty and cool, so that's how I was trying to go on. Of course, this is in the very early days of my development, if you can call it that. It was only maybe two and a half years after I had started playing.

But getting back to LACC, there wasn't much musical activity there. I had a couple of classes there.

ISOARDI: So you did take some music classes?

BERNAL: Yes, I did. I took voice and I took theory. I ended up in the band, although I don't think I signed up. I can't remember how that came about, but I remember I made a couple of trips with the swing band out of town. I think we went to San Diego, or maybe it was Arizona, or maybe it was both.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any of the guys in the band, the people who played in the band?

BERNAL: Well, I have a friend today that has been an insurance broker; his name is Chris Pontrelli of the famous Pontrelli brothers here in L.A. Their uncle owned the old Pontrelli Ballroom over on Figueroa [Street] or someplace downtown for years. A very thriving place. You know, this of course is years ago. And Chris, I guess, stayed in music for a while and then he went into insurance, and his brother Fidel Pontrelli. He and I are neighbors. In fact, the three of us are still neighbors. But as far as names that you might recognize today that were heavily associated in music or in jazz, I can't think of any offhand, although I'm sure there were some there.

ISOARDI: Did you make any acquaintances that were useful in your later career or became friends?

BERNAL: Well, that's still up in the air. I met my wife [Harriet Daniels Bernal] there.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Oh, that's right. Well, you were married.

BERNAL: Yeah, I was married.

ISOARDI: Not long after.

BERNAL: We were on vacation at that point during the summer break. I just attended for two semesters, and I never went back, because we were out in June. On July 9 we eloped to Yuma, Arizona. Someone gave us a ride, and we came back to town. She went back to live with her sister; I went back to live with my mother and stepdad. I didn't tell a soul. This is on Sunday.

Now, on Tuesday or Wednesday is when I went down to the Million Dollar Theatre, having been sent there by—I think I told you this before—Thelma Brown, who set up the appointment for me to meet "Hamp" [Lionel Hampton], and that was it. They didn't hire me the first day, but on the second day I became one of the many band singers. And I was too timid to say that I also played saxophone. They didn't know about that until we went on the road, which was shortly after that.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you. I read somewhere that it was at LACC that you met Mike Stoller.

BERNAL: That's right. I was going to bring that up. A couple of dear friends of mine I met there, and Mike was one of them. The other one became one of my very best friends, who stood up at my religious wedding, which took place a few years later, and he christened one of my boys, he and his wife [Stella Magnifico] and we christened and one of theirs. The other one was Mike Stoller. We used to bum around, the three of us, along with Harriet and a couple of other kids. My other friend's

name was Larry Magnifico. He wanted to play jazz and eventually got sidetracked. He came out here from upstate New York. And of course Mike. Mike was my age or possibly six months to a year younger, and he had been to Belmont High [School] here in L.A. He was from New York, also. He had only been out here a short time. I don't think Mike had met Jerry yet, the fellow that became his partner, Jerry Leiber, but we hung out together and had a great time.

ISOARDI: He was playing then, right? Was music his focus then?

BERNAL: Yeah, he played a little bit. He played piano. He used to play some gigs. I think we even played a couple of gigs together around that time. But then, of course, it was a very short-lived situation, because I was on the road shortly after that. But we always remained friends, to this day.

ISOARDI: Well, not long, I guess, after you've come back from the road, you leave Lionel Hampton, and then you guys hook up in a big way.

BERNAL: Yeah, within a year, I think, I was recording for Mike and Jerry.

ISOARDI: Well, we'll get back to that, but maybe we should go on the road now with Lionel Hampton.

BERNAL: Okay.

ISOARDI: Now you're in the band.

BERNAL: Okay. The band would come out to the West Coast every year and spend most of the summer months—maybe late spring, early summer—and they would spend the rest of the summer months here on the coast. Of course, we would work out of L.A. and make trips up the coast to nearby states—Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Washington state, Arizona, and so forth—but would come back to L.A. At the end of the summer and then halfway through the fall they would head back to New York playing one-nighters along the way, and

then work out of New York the rest of the time.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

BERNAL: It would be about seven months in New York and five months out here, give or take one or two months. When they worked New York, of course, they would go up north to Canada and all the eastern seaboard, right on down through the South, and then back up to New York. Out here at that particular time, they had been here at the town when I first spoke to Thelma Jones, my ex-teacher. They had been here like in May or June and then had gone out of town for a period of time. When she called me this was July now, and they were coming back in to go to the theaters. After the theater engagement they spent about two or three more weeks in town and worked some one-nighters out somewhere in San Bernardino and places like that and used to work a lot of civic auditoriums. Then we recorded and did some transcriptions for [the] Snader [company]. I don't know if this was exactly the same time, but it was right around that time. At least it was the first year that I was with Hamp. The transcriptions were meant to go into jukeboxes, but I guess it never happened. The kind of machine that would take the transcription was like a video—

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: —if I could compare it to anything. I guess what they had envisioned was putting a quarter in the slot, and then up comes this thing on the little screen, on a converted jukebox or something.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Do any of those things still survive?

BERNAL: Yeah, sure.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: They're around. I've got one—the tape, I mean.

ISOARDI: No kidding!

BERNAL: We did some of those. I remember just as clearly as it can be, just as if it were yesterday— I was in the studio area. I had come in, and I was going to the soundstage where we were going to film the transcription. I passed another soundstage and saw Lucille Ball coming out of it with her sleeves rolled up. It was the middle of the afternoon, and she was moving stage equipment or the stuff that they use for visual backgrounds on her own. The show was just about to get started then. It was right behind the musicians' unit. I forget what that studio was called. It's still there. Anyway, I thought that was very interesting. I had no idea what was coming, because these were the very early days of television. It was not a big deal as far as I was concerned. I'll never forget that I barely recognized her because she was without makeup, and I said, "My God, who is this redhead with all these freckles? That's Lucille Ball!" But anyway, that happened while Hamp was still here in town that first time. I'm quite sure it happened then.

Then we went on the road. We started hitting places like Santa Barbara, Oxnard, Ventura, Santa Maria. And there were a couple of army camps along the way; I don't know what they were. We played there.

ISOARDI: I think there was Camp Roberts up there, Fort Ord by Monterey.

BERNAL: You're right. Right, we hit that one. And during this time I was singing.

ISOARDI: They still didn't know that you played saxophone then?

BERNAL: Hamp didn't know. I had been auditioned by Milt Buckner—I think I mentioned this before—and the song that we used was one that I called "I Only Have Eyes for You," in the key of C. And I was still doing that song and continued to do it for a long time after that. Eventually we got into the song that I had recorded, because we had the arrangement

by now, so I sang that. That was "September in the Rain."

The guys, Jimmy Cleveland and Benny Powell, both trombone players, were closer to my age. I was the youngest one in the band but not by much. Benny is like a year older. Cleveland—"Cleve" we called him—was I think a couple of years older than me. They heard me practicing one afternoon. I took the horn out in some hotel room. So they insisted that I go to Hamp. I was still a little leery. You know, so much was going on. I mean, this was still, at that time— And this was the very tail end of the big band era. As a matter of fact, for all intents and purposes it was gone. We played dances, but it was also a show band. We put on a show. I mean, so much was happening that I didn't know that I would be able to cut it. So I thought, "Let me learn and see what's going on before I— Give me a couple of months and I'll be ready."

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: But only a few days went by, and the guys told Hamp. So the very next night he put me in the section doubling on fourth tenor. "Get your horn, Gates. Get your horn."

ISOARDI: He hadn't heard you?

BERNAL: No, he hadn't heard me. So the first chance he got he pulled me out in front. You know, we would be playing some blues or something, and then there would be spots for the solos. When the time came for the solos, he might say, "Go on, keep blowing! Keep blowing!" And that's what he did with me. He said, "Yeah, I like it. I like it. I like what I hear." From that point on I was the second fourth-tenor man. I'm sure that didn't go over too well with the other fourth-tenor man, but everybody was very gracious, including him.

ISOARDI: He had that many tenors in the band?

BERNAL: Well, he had two tenors; he had second tenor and fourth tenor. And every now and then he would pick up somebody else, and they would double a part, such as what I was doing.

ISOARDI: Who were the saxophonists in that band? Do you remember?

BERNAL: Sure, I remember clearly. The lead sax was Bobby Plater, who had written "Jersey Bounce" years before and years later he went with Basie. He took Marshal Royal's place. Second alto was Jerome Richardson, who made quite a name for himself.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. From the Bay Area.

BERNAL: Yeah, right, Oakland. Second tenor was Johnny Board, who was out of Chicago. He wasn't as well known. He didn't become as well known as the other saxophone players that I mentioned. Johnny had played alto with Coleman Hawkins, and when he came with Hamp, Hamp wanted him to play tenor. So he was playing second tenor. Curtis Lowe played fourth tenor. Curtis was out of Oakland, also.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I remember the name. And then in baritone?

BERNAL: The baritone was a fellow for maybe six months— I believe his name was Lonnie Shaw. He was out of Philadelphia.

ISOARDI: I don't know him.

BERNAL: Lonnie Shaw. He was replaced by a fellow out of Kansas City by the name of Ben Kynard, who was the sweetest guy in the world and played wonderful baritone. That was the sax section. Then, of course, I was the second fourth-tenor man. When the chance came and Curtis left, I took over the fourth chair. And then when Johnny Board left on second tenor, I took over second tenor for the last few months that I was in the band.

ISOARDI: Great. How about the trumpet section?

BERNAL: Well, that underwent some changes, too. When I first came into the band the first trumpet was Walter Williams out of San Diego. Do you notice how I associate the city with the guy, linking the guy with the city?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: Walter Williams. We used to call him "Suede." I never knew why. "Suede Kid," maybe because he likes suede. He was a little bit older than the other guys and kind of a father figure. A fellow by the name of Duke Garrette out of New York—he was a very outgoing, boisterous guy but very sweet. When I say boisterous I mean he loved a good time. He was with the band for maybe a year, Duke Garrette. Then Benny Bailey, of course, from— I don't know where Benny was from, but Benny ended up in Europe years later as a fabulous bebop player. Benny Bailey. I guess he was playing third or fourth. And then Leo Shepherd, who they called "Whistler" because he played those screaming high notes. Another fellow by the name of "Moon" Mullens. They called him "Moon"; his name was Edward Mullens. He came in, and then Garrette went out eventually. So we ended up for a while with five trumpets and then eventually settled with four. Through the years it varied a little bit. Quincy Jones came in and played fourth trumpet. I don't remember who he replaced. Benny Bailey left the band. Duke Garrette left the band. Walter, the lead man, stayed the whole time, and so did Eddie Mullens, who used to also arrange. He did some beautiful arrangements. He did some beautiful arrangements. He did the arrangement for Little Jimmy Scott on "Everybody's Somebody's Fool," which was the sort of semihit that was on the backside of the song that I recorded.

ISOARDI: Oh, right, right, right.

BERNAL: Which most people never heard, thank God! But that was the A side. I was on the B side.

ISOARDI: Quincy Jones came in while you were still in the band?

BERNAL: Oh, yes.

ISOARDI: Well, he must have been just a kid then.

BERNAL: Oh, yeah. He was seventeen or eighteen when he came.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: We were in Boston, and he was coming around backstage. He was attending Berklee School of Music at the time, if I remember correctly. He was hanging around backstage. By the time we got back to New York, he was in the band, and we became roommates, and we became the best of friends.

ISOARDI: Wow. How nice.

BERNAL: We were very close in age. I'm a year and a half older than him. He then became the youngest cat in the band, and I became almost one of the old-timers. [mutual laughter] But we had a blast. We had a wonderful relationship. We considered each other best friends for the longest time. In that group there were cliques: there were the older guys, the in-between guys, and then there were the young guys. The young guys had their own little thing going there. We had a tendency to hang out together more than anybody else. Quincy, Benny Powell, and Jimmy Cleveland, and I were the youngest, and we pretty much hung out together.

ISOARDI: Good band, though.

BERNAL: Yeah. And it always was. It always had some great people. And through the years, as I keep saying, other people would come in and give it fresh blood.

ISOARDI: Well, it seems like it was such a training ground for younger

musicians. It was like boot camp or something or basic training with Lionel Hampton. Then you're ready to take on anything.

BERNAL: That's certainly what it was with me, that's for sure.

ISOARDI: Well, you went from jamming and playing with small groups into one of the most popular big bands in the world.

BERNAL: Yeah, that's true.

ISOARDI: That's a big jump.

BERNAL: That's true. I used to picture that when I used to see the band. The first time I saw Hamp was, I guess, in about '46 or '47 at the Orpheum Theatre. Someone had told me, "Well, if you want to catch a great band—" Because I would try to catch most of the bands, and I hadn't seen Hampton. Of course, the kids were impressed that there was such showmanship. You know, they entertained us well. They would come off that stage—Hamp would walk around the aisles of the theater throwing the drumsticks up in the air, and the horn players would blow.

ISOARDI: Were you doing things like that?

BERNAL: Well, eventually. Yeah, sure. When I first saw them doing that I was very impressed also and got a real charge out of it.

Then I would picture myself up there playing with them, though I was at this time just beginning to play or not even playing yet. This was, as I said, '46 or '47. When I saw them, I could picture myself at the microphone doing what the guy up there was doing. And what do you know, a few years later, that's exactly the way it happened.

ISOARDI: Maybe that's it. If you can see yourself doing it, it might happen.

BERNAL: I was never a believer in that kind of thing, but it just happened to work. When we came back from that first trip that I took with Hamp

on the road we went up north, and we— I'm sorry if I'm digressing and turning it around, but it all ties in.

ISOARDI: Oh, no, it's fine.

BERNAL: We had played the Million Dollar Theatre here in L.A., and I had sung with the girl singer [Irma Curry]. That was the extent of my contribution there. By the time I came back I was actually playing. So after having been to San Francisco, Oakland, and a week in Portland at one of the theaters, and a week in Seattle at one of the theaters, and honeymooning with my wife, my bride—

ISOARDI: She went with you?

BERNAL: She joined me. She joined me in Portland, and then we spent two weeks at a place call the Cave in Vancouver, which was fantastic. It was just seventh heaven. I got to really become established with the band.

Then he started publicizing me, because he thought it would be a nice gimmick.

ISOARDI: Was he calling you anything in particular? Or just a boy singer?

BERNAL: No, he wasn't. He wasn't calling me anything, just "Featuring Gil Bernal." Later, at one point, he tried to change my name to Gil Roland.

ISOARDI: You mean which ties in with Hollywood and the actors?

BERNAL: Yeah. The spelling was slightly different, but maybe that's what inspired him to do that. But that only lasted a short time. We went back to Gil Bernal. When we came back to L.A. we worked the Million Dollar Theatre. Excuse me, we had worked the Million Dollar Theatre. We worked the Orpheum, which was really at the time a better theater.

ISOARDI: Why?

BERNAL: Well, it was newer. It was a little more luxurious. It may have

been the same promoter or the same booker that had booked both theaters, but sometimes one theater would book for a year and another theater would book for a couple of years, and once in a while they overlapped, and they were booking attractions at the same time. By this time all my old school friends and so forth knew I was there, and they came out to see me. It was quite an experience for me.

ISOARDI: Nice.

BERNAL: I was singing but I wasn't playing because I didn't belong to the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians].

ISOARDI: Oh, so of course you could sing but you couldn't play the horn yet.

BERNAL: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh. So then you had to join [Local] 47.

BERNAL: Yeah, 47 eventually. [mutual laughter] But I was playing on the road on those one-nighters and having a blast.

ISOARDI: Sure. Was it tough picking up the charts?

BERNAL: No. I had been playing charts with bands prior to doing that. Some of them were a little trickier than what I was accustomed to, but it wasn't too bad. Aside from the fact that I practiced on my own before I did anything at all—as I used to say, "I hit the books"—I had no direction. I had no instruction. I didn't have a private teacher. But when I went to Huntington Park High School I joined the marching band, so I made the transition from beginning student to band member in a very short period of time, and those marches helped me to pick up reading very quickly. We had a wonderful teacher there whose name escapes me at this time, so that helped me. So from the marching bands to what we used to call stock arrangements—you know, the Glenn Miller and the Tommy Dorsey

arrangements and so forth and so on—then the other groups that I played with around that time.

On my graduation day, I was starting a job in Long Beach at the old Pike. They had this ballroom that was called the Majestic Ballroom. They had dancing there five days a week or maybe six, and I went to work there with a fellow known by the name of Chuck Gates. That was a good experience, too. That was my first regular gig and my first gig playing in a big band on a regular basis. So by the time I went with Hamp I was fairly familiar with the big band charts.

ISOARDI: No problem.

BERNAL: The promotion that he did, I guess, paid off. He started taking me around with him quite a bit. We went to high schools, and of course the little girls would scream and holler. When I'd come out and sing, I would do this to my head, and my hair would fall over on the side.

ISOARDI: [laughs] And they'd go nuts?

BERNAL: Yeah, I guess. I once had Kenny [Kenneth] Washington, the great football player that made UCLA and [then Los Angeles] Ram history— He was working with the schools. He in some way was helping out. He took me around to a couple of schools and was kind of like a bodyguard. Kenny helped me out. He got in front of the screaming girls who were pulling at my hair. He got the biggest kick out of it. Kenny Washington.

Then also—I remember this very clearly—Steve Allen was doing a radio show out here. I think it was original talk radio show because it was in the studio here at CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] radio in Hollywood, and he would interview people from the audience, and he worked it alone. He played the piano and told silly stories. That guy was so sharp. He was a young man. Occasionally he would have guests, so this one time

Milt Buckner, Hamp, and I went in and did a thing on his show. Years later, when I was singing and recording as a singer, I did a spot on Steve's TV show. He used to telecast out of a theater on Vine Street right next to what used to be the farmer's market. I meant to talk to him. I didn't get a chance to say "Do you remember" such and such. In any case, that was something that was rare. A lot of people don't remember that's how Steve started when he first came out from Phoenix. That was on that radio show. I guess he was on that for a year or two, and then he went on to bigger and better things.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. When Hamp started featuring you, did you get a salary increase?

BERNAL: No.

ISOARDI: Did you ask for one?

BERNAL: No, I did not.

ISOARDI: [laughs] I've heard so many stories about Gladys [Hampton].

BERNAL: They're notorious.

ISOARDI: But you were still pretty young then. I suppose for you the money was probably good.

BERNAL: I was pleased at the time, and I thought, "I'm not going to make waves here." They would compensate by giving me scale when we worked the big places, the theaters. As a matter of fact, we saved enough money to provide for the birth of our first child from the Capitol Theatre in New York. We worked three weeks there and put everything that we could away. We paid that bill at the hospital and the doctor and everything. Whenever we worked a theater I got scale, so I was making probably twice or three times as much as I would make on the road. But on the road it was not good money. But again, I was learning and having a good time.

I was making a living, because we worked pretty steadily. My salary, I believe, was eighteen dollars a night less taxes. Of course, we stayed at cheap places. Quincy and I would find the cheapest place we could find—you know, $1.75, $2.50, $3.00, that was tops—with the light bulb hanging from the chord in the middle of the room.

ISOARDI: Yeah, bare bones.

BERNAL: And that's where we stayed. We really couldn't afford to spend any more or stay anywhere else. And in the South in those days—

ISOARDI: What happened when you went through the South? I mean, you were an integrated band.

BERNAL: Yes. There have been so many changes, Steve, in the last three or four decades socially and culturally. What was then one thing is something else now. As an example, I mentioned in background earlier— Well, I have always been classified as Caucasian. Well, now I might be classified as Hispanic, depending on who's doing the classifying and what their agenda is.

You know, I really don' t give a shit. Actually, sometimes I think I'm black! I go from black to Hispanic to Italian and so on. It's the weirdest thing, but it's how I've grown up, how I've lived, how I think, and most important, how I feel somewhere in the back, because that's how I grew up.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BERNAL: I don't usually discuss these things with anybody. I thought it was a very private thing.

ISOARDI: Right.

BERNAL: In any case, what I was getting to was that— Jeez, I lost my point.

ISOARDI: When you hit the Deep South with Hamp's band—

BERNAL: Making the first trip we had a Japanese fellow that was with us, Paul Higaki from San Francisco. He was a trombone player along with Jimmy Cleveland and Al Grey, my man Al Grey. Who was the other trombone player?

ISOARDI: Benny Powell? He was still there?

BERNAL: My friend Benny Powell!

BERNAL: Jeez, what a section.

ISOARDI: Benny stayed on for another year or year and a half after I came on the band. Those were the four trombone players when I joined the band. Paul left after about six months, so I don't remember if he was with the band when we went south. Actually, I did two or three tours with the band down South.

The first southern state that we hit, the first city— The bus would go right into the black, African American, section of town, and if it was a small town we'd go straight to the boarding houses. They had boarding houses. The manager, George Hart or Mrs. Hampton or somebody, would say, "You and you and you and you. Gil, you and Quincy," and so forth, "try Mrs. so-and-so's down the street here. Just over there, that red roof," and whatever. That's the way it was. That night we would eat at the local restaurant there or maybe right at the house itself. Then we would head for the dance, which was usually a black dance. We worked in an auditorium. A couple of times we worked at tobacco warehouses. We played dances there. They allowed a white audience, if there was a balcony, up in the balcony in those days.

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ISOARDI: But as far as you were aware, there were no repercussions about you being in the band? I mean, Hamp never got any grief from local police or anything like that?

BERNAL: No. Questions were asked, and they were explained; how I don't know. Everything was pretty much taken care of. I remember we worked the University of Mississippi, which a few years later was in the news—James Meredith and that whole thing at the beginning of the civil rights movement. Well, when we played the school we did what we wanted there. There were no restrictions for us whatsoever. You come from a different place when you're in it because you're so insulated with it. It's a different life. So that whenever I would see or experience something—maybe somebody would tell a story of something that had happened last night or something—I was always sort of surprised. We were in our own little world. I mean, I wasn't shocked, but I was surprised: "Oh yeah, that happened? Good Lord!" A few years later, during the civil rights movement, I realized the impact was much greater, because I realized that all of those stories had been for real and were still for real. The little bit that I had experienced was just a small part of it. I would go into restaurants on the road and get food for the band or the bus driver or both of us. Several places where they had to stay at a hotel—a black hotel, of course—when the guy wouldn't take me because he didn't want to risk any problems, I would become very upset. Here I go catching a cab going across town or something. I wanted to stay with the guys.

ISOARDI: Sure.

BERNAL: Anybody would have done that. It's not a big deal, but I went through that. I'd head back to the bus. The bus would take us to that ballroom that night or the auditorium. We'd play the dance, and on most occasions you'd see the white audience in the white balcony. Sometimes they had to divide it with a rope, if you could believe that—half of the auditorium or a third of the auditorium for the spectators. They would go under the rope or come down from the balcony and start dancing. Then the police would chase them off. They'd kind of good-naturedly chase them off the floor. Now, this is before the civil rights movement began, so segregation was a way of life. Of course, the guys, every time we got ready for a southern tour, especially the older guys, would say, "Damn, we've got to go back down to—" you know. But for the most part they lived it. They just took the bad with the good and made the best of it. They did what they were going to do and got the hell out and went back up north.

ISOARDI: Was that the roughest part of being on the road, having to shift around sometimes—sleep in another hotel and go to another part of town?

BERNAL: I suppose it was in retrospect. It was new to me. I was with the band for about three years, and there were a lot of one-nighters on the bus. That eventually caused me to come down with a bad back. You know, to this day I have problems with my back. I mean, it probably was inherited, but riding on those buses didn't help. Quite often we'd sleep on the bus. We would hit a town and take off right after the dance, maybe at three or four o`clock in the morning. We'd finish at one [o'clock], get something to eat, pull out, and go to the next town. Maybe after two or three nights we'd hit a place where we could actually lie down and sleep. Oh, was that a luxury.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Punishing.

BERNAL: That physically was difficult. But I was young, strong, and foolish. For the most part, I enjoyed it. I loved it. We'd always be looking forward to something. You know, we're going to hit New York next week, or we're going to hit Chicago, or we're going back to L.A. Whatever it was, there was always something to look forward to. Each year they would say, "We're going to Europe this year. I heard Mrs. Hampton. She's out shopping for clothes." You know, these rumors started flying, and it never happened while I was in the band. My wife gave birth to our first baby [Gilbert Bernal Jr.], so after that I started planning to stay home more or less.

ISOARDI: So you joined Hamp in the summer of 1950, then?

BERNAL: 'Fifty, right.

ISOARDI: And you're with him until '52?

BERNAL: I don't remember that date, exactly. It was probably late '52 or early '53. I didn't do a lot of recording with the band, but I did some. There's still a couple of things out there where I did an eight-bar or a twelve-bar chorus of something, some blues or something.

ISOARDI: Did you do any vocal recording other than that one?

BERNAL: "September in the Rain." No, that was it.

ISOARDI: That was it?

BERNAL: That was it. Actually, in general, Hamp did not record very much during that period of time.

ISOARDI: It was such a down period for bands in general, I suppose. Just the fact that he kept it going was amazing.

BERNAL: Yeah. He didn't want to cut the band down. He didn't cut the band down for maybe five years after that, and then he started working with smaller groups. At the time that I left the band they started making

preparations to go to Europe on a tour. Within six months to a year they went. I also avoided, by leaving when I did, a very serious bus accident that they were involved in.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

BERNAL: I think the bus driver was killed.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BERNAL: I know one person lost his life, and some of the others were seriously hurt. Most of them were not seriously hurt, but two or three of them were. It was very tragic.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: It happened in New Mexico, I think. So I missed that by a few months.

ISOARDI: Why did you leave?

BERNAL: Because of my wife and baby.

ISOARDI: It's time to be at home with the family.

BERNAL: Yeah. I wanted to be close to them. Actually, there were some temptations offered to me. People from time to time would say, "When you leave the band, come and see me. We're doing to do this and that for you"—a couple of agents, a couple of guys that had bands. My dear compare friend, Vido Musso.

ISOARDI: Did he still have his band then?

BERNAL: Well, he had a small band. He had left [Stan] Kenton by then. He said, "Yeah, we can get us a two-tenor group." At the time Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons had a thing going, and I said, "That sounds great." But it never happened. It never materialized. Joe Adams, who was a big disc jockey here at the time—he's been Ray Charles's manager for many years—he didn't promise me anything, but he would give me ideas. He'd

say, "You could do this, you could do that." Many people, musicians and a couple of club owners and a couple of agents have said that, and I thought, "Well, I won't have any trouble working. I'll be okay." But the main reason for my leaving was that I wanted to stay home with my wife and baby.

ISOARDI: So when you do leave Hamp, you settle down back here. Where are you living when you come back?

BERNAL: We were living with my mother [Rose Maria Bernal Cruz]. She had bought a home. She had lived in Boyle Heights for a while. They moved from Watts, originally, to San Pedro. My stepfather [Ralph Cruz] was a veteran, and he had government housing down there. They lived down there for a year or two, then they moved to Boyle Heights because they found a place that was owned by a relative and that was reasonable. They were saving to buy a home, and I lived there until I went on the road with Hamp. It was just a little tiny apartment in Boyle Heights, which incidentally was 90 percent Jewish at the time. I was there the year that it snowed in L.A.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. [laughs]

BERNAL: Some people might remember that. I remember we took snapshots. The snow actually dropped and fell on the front lawn. What I'm trying to say is that it dropped and then it melted quickly. I said, "Quick, quick! Take it!" While I was on the road they bought a home on 104th [Street] just one block east of Broadway, which would be right on the corner of Spring [Street] and 104th Street. So when I came off the road we lived there for a short time, my wife, baby, and I. Then we got our own place on Thirty-ninth Street, near the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum—Thirty-ninth and Normandie [Avenue]. We were there for a year

or so.

ISOARDI: When you come back, I guess this is the end of '52, early '53, is there much happening on Central Avenue then? Or is it pretty much over with?

BERNAL: It was pretty much over as far as I could tell. I mean, there was always something doing, but the Central Avenue that I remember, the little bit that I remember and loved, was no longer there. By this time a place came into being called the Five Four Ballroom. You see, the music was changing all the time—what was popular, what appealed to the masses. They were going heavily into R and B at the time. The so-called Five Four Ballroom on Fifty-fourth and Broadway became the big thing in that part of town. The action was shifting even while I was with Hamp. It was shifting west and to other places.

ISOARDI: So people were moving away then?

BERNAL: From Central, yeah. The big club became the Oasis on Thirty-ninth and Western. We worked there.

ISOARDI: Was that mostly a jazz place? Or did they have R and B and pop?

BERNAL: Mostly jazz. As far as I can remember they had people like George Shearing. I think [Stan] Kenton worked there. You know, whatever attractions they could put together.

ISOARDI: Do you know who was behind that, the Oasis, or who owned it? If it was a black owner or a white owner?

BERNAL: As far as I can remember it was a white owner. I don't know if he was a manager, but I think he was the owner. His name was Jerry Fine.

I came to work one night and Jerry said, "Come here, come here,

come here. I want to talk to you." I said, "What? What happened?" He said, "Rita Hayworth was in last night." I said, "I know. I saw her." "Well," he said, "she's very interested in you."

ISOARDI: [laughs] Really?

BERNAL: "She wants you to call her." As it turned out, it was the guy that she was with that was interested. Well, I don't know. "Call this number."

So I called the number, and it was Charles Feldman's office. Charles Feldman at the time was a big agent-producer. He produced A Streetcar Named Desire with [Marlon] Brando, and he had one of the most powerful offices in Hollywood at the time. He represented stars, big stars, the biggest. I would say he was one of the two or three top agents in town. You'd always read his name in the columns. Anyway, that never developed. Over a period of time they had me going. They were going to sign me up to be a new movie star. They were going to send me to school and so forth. This was the time of Tony Curtis and people like that, John Derek. You know, I always thought I was fairly cute, but I never thought I was a movie star type. [mutual laughter] So they had me going, I tell you. I went out to his home in the canyon.

ISOARDI: Laurel?

BERNAL: Not Laurel, the other one.

ISOARDI: Coldwater?

BERNAL: Coldwater. Every time I go by that house I remember.

ISOARDI: Jeez. You never signed anything with him?

BERNAL: No, I did not sign. They were, I guess, in the process of discussing, and I was being interviewed. And this one would come out to see me at the club; the next night another one would come out to see me at the club.

Of course, I was excited—not scared but excited. When you're young you don't scare easily.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: Well, I guess you do. Sometimes you scare easily, but about some things you don't. I think when you're young your self-esteem or your self-confidence is foolishly very high for whatever reason.

In any case, that didn't take place. So we left town, and the final message was "Don't call us, we'll call you," that kind of thing. "Let us kick it around a bit more." So nothing ever came of that. That was my first big disappointment in the business.

ISOARDI: When you first come back from Hamp, well, you said a number of people had said a lot of things to you. What happens? What do you do when you come back?

BERNAL: Well, nothing. I made a few calls. Vido had a few commitments, but he said, "Let's see what happens down the line." In fact, everybody said pretty much the same thing. There was a fellow that was working the Oasis on weekends. By this time they didn't have name bands anymore at the Oasis. He called me, and he happened to be the son of a famous songwriter back in the thirties—I can't think of his name—that wrote for Sophie Tucker. "I'll be out to get you in a taxi, honey" and those things. Oh, my God. I can't think of his name. I was at this home. That's how I met his son. In any case, his son called me up, and I did two or three weekends with him. His son played piano. No great shakes; it was just a gig. Then I lined up some guys and went to work at a place in town on Vermont working three nights a week.

ISOARDI: What place?

BERNAL: Well, it was called the Friar's Room or the Friar's Inn or Bar

or something down on Vermont near Seventh [Street] and Vermont.

ISOARDI: So you put together your own band?

BERNAL: That was my group, yeah.

ISOARDI: What did you call yourselves? The Gil Bernal Quintet or something?

BERNAL: "Formerly with Lionel Hampton."

ISOARDI: [laughs] Of course.

BERNAL: We had a few people. I was getting out to sessions and trying to hang out with a few musicians that I knew. I went out to Long Beach one Sunday and Anita O`Day was working over there with a group for just the afternoon.

ISOARDI: You mean with your band? Or just by yourself?

BERNAL: No, no, no, no. She was working there for this fellow Morley Turner, who loved jazz and loved her. At night, of course, he had just a regular nightclub with dancing and so forth, and he had a regular group that worked there. So I went in there and sat in with the group. He liked me so well that he offered me the job fronting the group.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: So he let go of a couple of the people and kept a couple of the people, and I became the one in the front. I don't think that went well with the other frontman.

ISOARDI: I'm sure not.

BERNAL: There was a rhythm section, a trumpet, and a saxophone. He let the saxophone player go. He let the piano player go and brought me in with another piano player. How we got ahold of this guy I don't remember, but his name was Al Haig. He was a very famous jazz musician.

ISOARDI: Yeah. He played with Bird.

BERNAL: He was out here, and I think he wasn't working, so he took the

job I guess just to work. We worked together for six weeks out in Long Beach. That was a kick. I mean, it was a good little group, but we weren't trying to make history.

ISOARDI: Right. Who did you have in that first group you put together on Vermont? Do you remember who was in that band?

BERNAL: No. At this point I have no idea. But I remember the second group which was in Long Beach. That was Al Haig, Bobby White on drums—Oh, we brought in another drummer, that's right. Bobby I had known for a little bit. Bobby White, Ed Mihelich, who is a little older than us—about ten years older. He was a veteran from the big band days. He'd been with [Gene] Krupa, he'd been with [Harry] James. He's still playing. He plays at the Queen Mary with a band on Tuesday afternoons.

ISOARDI: Oh, my God. How wonderful.

BERNAL: He's the sweetest guy in the world, Ed Mihelich. And Art Roby was the trumpet player, and he sang and did comedy stuff. So we worked together for the six weeks. The boss got mad at me about something. He mistakenly— Well, he was very jealous. I think his girlfriend was talking to me in the club. I mean, I was not trying to hit on her or anything, nor do I think she was trying to hit on me. He just imagined something or other. I found out about that. He told me about that years later, but at the time I didn't know what happened. He wanted me to leave. I said, "Well, I've got a two-week notice coming. If you want me to leave I'll leave, but I have a contract." In those days the union carried some weight in clubs. This was the Long Beach local, but still. So I finished the engagement, came back, and went to work right on Sunset [Boulevard] with my own group. I sat in. The guy said, "Come in." The guy now has one of the biggest drum companies in the world, Remo Belli.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez! Yeah, no kidding.

BERNAL: You know Remo? Well, he was playing drums for the group, and he was heading the group at the time. The guy that had the job before him, George Redmond, did the rounds. Remo used to be a jazz musician, and he liked to play jazz. He was heading the group for a short time, and then he came in and said, "You take over. You're doing the singing and the playing up front." So I was there for almost a year. The place was thriving. Sunset and six blocks west of La Brea [Avenue].

ISOARDI: What was the name of it?

BERNAL: It was called La Madalon in those days. It didn't last much longer. Within three years the building was gone. They built a Pioneer Chicken there in its place. While the club lasted we used to get write-ups in the paper.

ISOARDI: What kind of a club was it? It wasn't a nightclub was it?

BERNAL: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was a nightclub. Dancing. It was the home of—I swear these characters came right out of Guys and Dolls. I mean, I'm not exaggerating, Steve. I'm not exaggerating. There were a lot of players.

Mickey Cohen used to come in from time to time, yeah. Stompanato, who had that situation with Lana Turner, used to come in there. Gamblers used to come in, and guys that had girls on the side, you know. The girls—the hustlers—came in. Quite often we'd get starlets. So there was a lot of action there six nights a week. On the seventh night they had a Latin band or something on Tuesday nights.

ISOARDI: So this is your main thing for about a year now?

BERNAL: That became my big thing, yeah. And of course, there was a big sign outside, and celebrities would come in, like Liberace. I got to

know Liberace. One time he even offered me a job, but by this time I had signed with Spike Jones. But I thought "Lee" was a good connection to have. He had been doing television, and he continued with things, you know. *[Of course, at the time I didn't know about his, well, lifestyle, you know?] And Marlon Brando used to come in. Of course, the owner would then put an ad in the paper the next day saying, "Marlon Brando says, 'The best show in town!'"

I might add that before I went there, while I was still in Long Beach— Morley, the owner that I had the disagreement with, was a very bright guy and actually a fairly nice man. Years later he came in, and we became friends. He just started coming in to see me. We became friends, and then he said, "We should have done this, we should have done that. That was my fault, and I'm sorry about what happened."

While I was there in Long Beach, we were working something like a piano bar, and the stage was surrounded by a little bar that had been built around it. People would sit there—mostly girls—I would go through my routines. I came to work one night, and there was a sign out in front that Morley had put up: "Now featuring sex on the sax: Gil Bernal and his quintet." So I went running to Morley thinking, "My wife is going to kill me!" He said, "Oh, we're doing this just for promotion. It's all in fun. Don't worry about it." Well, that became a real thorn in my side. You know, I got to enjoy it for a few months. I thought it was novel and it would attract attention. There were girls from all over the place. Who cares about seeing sex on the sax? I was just playing the damn horn and doing an occasional night train with a little bump and grind, you know. But that followed me around. Every time I'd go to a

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

club the owner would use the slogan.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BERNAL: I would ask that this didn't happen, but I had to keep working. My family was growing. Eventually I had five kids. This is before Las Vegas and before Spike Jones. So they played up that "sex on the sax" thing quite heavily. So by the time I got to Hollywood, the first night it was out in the front along with a great big picture of me playing saxophone. "La Madalon, featuring Mr. Sex on the Sax." Eventually it was. They went to "Mister Liberace says, 'Blah, blah, blah.'" "Mamie van Doren says, 'Blah, blah, blah.'" That was quite a year. And I met a lot of people during that time.

ISOARDI: Are you doing any recording? This is '54 or '53?

BERNAL: That's around the time that I started with Leiber and Stoller.

ISOARDI: How did that hookup come?

BERNAL: Well, they were in the club one night—

ISOARDI: The club on Sunset?

BERNAL: At the La Madalon, yeah. They came specifically to see me. Of course, we embraced and everything. We hadn't been out of touch.

ISOARDI: But this was the first time that you had met Jerry?

BERNAL: I believe it was the first time I met Jerry. He said, "We've got this thing going." They had just formed a small label.

ISOARDI: Was that Spark Records?

BERNAL: Yeah. And I did some demos for them. They had written some songs. Then they said, "We want you to do a date." So we put together some tunes—probably not very good.

ISOARDI: Original stuff?

BERNAL: Well, mostly riff things. You know, there was a blues tune and something I put together that was— You know, I don't remember. I don't think it was too good. Only one thing came out of that session that was exciting enough, really—at least they thought so—and that was called "The Whip."

ISOARDI: Well, that got some attention. That was released.

BERNAL: Oh, yeah. Well, they all were released, but that one was the one that got airplay and that was all over the world, as a matter of fact. I got paid for the session, of course, and it was not a big seller or anything like that.

ISOARDI: Was that with you and your group from the club?

BERNAL: No. Well, two of the guys, excuse me. Two of the guys were from the club: the piano player, Bob Harrington, who had been there at the club before I got there working with Remo, and Shelly Manne. They had Shelly on drums. Shorty Rogers on trumpet to set the riffs. Charlie—who was it?—a rhythm and blues guitar player. He was quite a player.

ISOARDI: Good?

BERNAL: And my regular bass player, Eddie Mihelich. It came off fairly well for what it was. I remember Shelly telling Shorty—I overheard—"Well, for that kind of playing he's the best." You know, it hurt my feelings. There weren't too many guys playing that strong, aggressive style. They hadn't been heard in mainstream L.A., except for maybe a couple of black players that were playing along those lines, certainly [Cecil] "Big Jay" McNeely. He and my other buddy Joe Houston were about the only ones that I can remember. Now, I wasn't totally into that groove, but I could get raunchy like that from time to time.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

BERNAL: So when I did that kind of stuff in Hollywood or in other places, "Wow! What is that?" It attracted attention if nothing else. And of course, all of the cool musicians hated me, and I gave up on that. I thought, "Well, screw it. I'm out here to make a living." I had stayed in New York, and my friends back there, Quincy Jones and some of the other people, said, "Why don't you stay with the band a little longer? We may go to Europe. We may settle in New York." I said, "No, I don't want to settle in New York. My family is out here." They said, "Well, it's the only way you're going to get your name out there." Benny Powell, trombonist, had left Hamp and gone with [Count] Basie. A sax player was leaving that band. He said, "We'll get you an audition." Well, I probably wouldn't have made it, but it was nice to think that I had turned down the opportunity for an audition with Basie.

ISOARDI: And that band was incredible.

BERNAL: They were, I think. Because that's when Joe Williams came in the band. I mean, it was really happening. Marshal Royal was lead alto [saxophonist].

But my point is that I felt that— I hadn't stayed in New York to try to make it as a jazz player because I was afraid that I might have a problem. By this time I had a family, and I wanted, first of all, to support my family. I had a home and so forth and so on. So there were two roads. There was the strictly jazz road, and there was a more commercial road, which could have gone just about anywhere—polka bands or whatever. But mostly it was playing for dancing and singing, doing shows of one kind or another. I used to do impressions and stuff, probably very bad, but I did them. I used to enjoy everything that I was doing, you know, a little showbiz shtick and it kept me working.

I always felt that as long as I didn't compromise my playing— Most of the time, when I wasn't playing the bumps, then I was okay. Well, of course, jazz musicians didn't see it that way. They didn't take me seriously. That's why this time around, during the last few years, I've tried to stay pretty close to jazz, because there's really nothing more satisfying than to be accepted by your peers. Now they will often say, "Where have you been? You should have been doing this all along. It sounds great" or whatever. And that has given me a lot of fulfillment. Nevertheless, I was having a ball in those days. I was just doing my thing.

ISOARDI: "The Whip" was a pretty big song, though.

BERNAL: Well, it was not a big, big hit. It just got a lot of radio play. It was the one thing on which my name got around, and I heard that it had been played in Europe. You know, I didn't make any money behind it. But that started my association with Leiber and Stoller.

Subsequently, I did a lot of sessions with them backing this singer or that singer, this group or that group. Of course the main group that I became sort of affiliated with was the Coasters, only they were called the Robins then.

ISOARDI Yeah. How did that happen?

BERNAL: Well, because Jerry and Mike were recording them, and they brought me in to record with them. So I did several dates with them. I did my very first gig in Vegas backing the Robins. I remember Terry Gibbs had a group, also. It was at the Royal Nevada Hotel, which is long gone. In fact, we opened it. It was around the time of the opening of the Riviera [Hotel]. It opened about two weeks before the Riviera, if I remember correctly.

There was a big gambler in town. They used to call him Nick the Greek. Not the Nick the Greek that was on TV years later; this was a gambler, a big gambler. In fact, in those days, do you remember Confidential magazine?

ISOARDI: Vaguely, yeah.

BERNAL: It was the big trash—

ISOARDI: Men's magazine?

BERNAL: Yeah. Well, not just men's but gossip. What do you call those? Trash rag. The story was in there of how he was downtown when they used to have these little clubs downtown on Freemont. He went down there, and he broke one, closed it up. Then he proceeded to the Royal Nevada, which was brand-new. He came there. He spent close to twenty-four hours there on the tables and lost it all.

But I remember coming into rehearsal in the afternoon, and there was activity, because it was just opening to the public. It was the first day or the day before the first day. But they were in there playing at one of the tables. I could remember the crowd around this one table, and there was nothing else in the rest of the room. Anyway, we played several weeks there. I played a few tunes and then backed the Coasters.

ISOARDI: Right. You recorded quite a bit, though, backing the Robins, right?

BERNAL: Well, I did quite a few recordings with them. I imagine I must have done about four or five sessions. In those days you would go in and do three or four sides.

ISOARDI: So it was quite a few sides. I guess the first one that hit really big was "Riot in Cell Block Number Nine."

BERNAL: I'm not sure how it happened, but I was very much a part of them

on record and in Vegas, but I wasn't on the road with them or anything like that. I wouldn't leave L.A.

ISOARDI: Ah.

BERNAL: Oddly enough, when the show Smokey Joe's Cafe—

ISOARDI: Oh, that was another big hit.

BERNAL: —started out here— It was a few years ago. This is years, years later after that thing in Vegas. Well, I got a call to play the saxophone parts, and I would have been playing my own solos, because they were doing the music exactly like the record, including the solos.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Well, it was probably one of those songs that people just knew so well. It was a pretty big hit, wasn't it?

BERNAL: Well, all of them. I mean, all the solos.

ISOARDI: Everybody just knows all those things, so if they tried to change them or do the songs without the solos it would never work.

BERNAL: Probably. I mean, they knew what they were doing. This is before they went to New York. I didn't take the job. I had committed to something else at the time, and I didn't want to get involved in doing the same music over and over again for who knows how long. As it was, I think they ran about six months here in L.A. Except for one number, I think, the band was behind the curtain. Instead of the pit— It was like the pit band was what it was, but—

ISOARDI: They'd be all onstage behind a curtain.

BERNAL: Right. And I didn't want to do that.

ISOARDI: I suppose when you went into the studio and you were doing those sessions with the Robins, there wasn't anything worked out ahead of time, was there? Leiber and Stoller had the songs but—

BERNAL: Well, no, no. That's not true. There were no elaborate

arrangements or anything like that, but Mike would put together some charts, some little lead sheets and stuff, and of course those would be subject to change. They'd say, "Why don't you try this? Why don't you do that?" It was very imaginative and creative right there in the studio. They would add things, and Jerry would come up with crazy ideas, and we'd try them. Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't. When I say charts or arrangements, they were pretty basic. The groups were small with usually just a rhythm section and one or two horns. Barney Kessel, the great jazz guitarist, did quite a few of those sessions.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: And he would play in a more rhythm and blues style, if there's such a thing—simpler and more accessible, very bluesy and very down-home. Barney could go in any direction.

ISOARDI: Did you have fun during those sessions with the Robins?

BERNAL: Yeah, very much.

ISOARDI: They were fun songs. They're still fun songs. Forty years later they're still a great deal of fun.

BERNAL: I couldn't always tell what they were singing—sometimes there was a screen between us—but the ambience in the studio with these guys, with the musicians and the singers and everything, was always fun. And then, of course, I would get to do a little solo here and there. That was always fun.

ISOARDI: You mentioned earlier the Five Four Ballroom. Did you ever play there?

BERNAL: No, I never did.

ISOARDI: Did you ever go there to listen and check out the acts?

BERNAL: No, I was never there. I'm trying to think of this particular

time that we had been talking about when so many things were going on with things changing from what I had been accustomed to growing up in this town.

BERNAL: Oh.

ISOARDI: Places closing and whole neighborhoods changing. Central Avenue just died. It just died—all of the clubs, the restaurants, and the theaters. We used to have— Of course, you know this, so I don't have to tell you—

ISOARDI: No, please do.

BERNAL: There was a theater called the Lincoln Theatre. My wife worked there for a short time—

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: —as an usher. In fact, I think she was working there just for a very short time when I met her. From time to time they had big stage shows, I guess, going back to the thirties. By the time the fifties rolled around, there wasn't much action there. They used to have big dances at the Elks hall, which is right down the street from the Lincoln. There was an historic recording made there—well, historic to some of us jazz lovers here in town. It featured possibly the two best-known tenor saxophone players here in L.A. at that particular time, Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray.

ISOARDI: I think they called it "The Hunt" or something like that.

BERNAL: That's right.

ISOARDI: That was the live recording from that club.

BERNAL: I think I still have those 78s.

ISOARDI: Really? Those were old Dials, I think, weren't they?

BERNAL: Dial Records.

ISOARDI: Oh, priceless.

BERNAL: Well, actually, I don't know what label they are.

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ISOARDI: Ross Russell was the guy who had Dial [Records], and I think he did a number of recordings of "Bird" [Charlie Parker] in L.A. that he issued.

BERNAL: Roz?

ISOARDI: Ross Russell, I think.

BERNAL: Oh, was it Ross or Roz?

ISOARDI: Ross.

BERNAL: Oh, Ross. Yeah, you're right. Ross Russell. Well, I don't know.

ISOARDI: You're covering a lot of musical territory—a little jazz, a little pop, R and B. Especially given your upbringing, I was wondering—I guess Latin jazz just starts emerging in about the late forties and fifties out of New York with people like Machito and his band. Tito Puente starts emerging.

BERNAL: I saw Tito Puente at Birdland in New York when I was with [Lionel] Hampton.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: He was a young man playing vibes, playing timbales, and fronting his own group. He was very hip way back. This had to be '51, '52, just shortly after I had seen Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie get together for a reunion engagement at Birdland right there on Broadway. I was enthralled with the presentation of Tito. Tito did a great job, and the music was pretty okay.

ISOARDI: Right.

BERNAL: A lot of it to me seemed repetitious. At that time, I was into

things that were more melodic. Every kind of music has its strong points. I've learned to enjoy it. I've always enjoyed Latin music, but I was never really into it like I was with jazz.

ISOARDI: Was there anything happening in L.A. when you came back here and settled down?

BERNAL: Well, first let me tell you— You mentioned Machito. Let me just mention a little bit about him. I didn't see Machito. They used to work at a place called the Palladium back there on Broadway just down the street from Birdland. I had never got to see him, but the guys all talked about him. He had a really strong, hip band, and Bird had recorded with him. I heard a lot of those records, and I was impressed. I liked what I heard but it was still way down the road from what I really enjoyed, from what really thrilled me. I would enjoy the music, but it did not thrill me, let's put it that way.

As far as when I got back to L.A., what was happening was the cha-cha-cha. I mean, that was the big thing. Because every club that had regular—American-type—dancing also featured a Latin band. This was the case with the La Madalon, which I mentioned before. They used to have it one night a week. We would work six nights, take off one night, maybe a Tuesday or a Monday or a Thursday or whatever, and they would bring in a Latin band. And most of the stuff they played was cha-cha and mambos.

ISOARDI: Dance music.

BERNAL: Right, absolutely. And occasionally what they used to call boleros. You never heard the word salsa or even merengue, but cha-cha-cha was very big. They used to give lessons. I think even Arthur Murray got on the bandwagon for a while. I could be wrong. But I knew these people who had been to dance schools. You know, they had their own little way

of doing the cha-cha. Oddly enough, the guy at the head of the Latin band on that Latin night in Hollywood at the La Madalon was a fellow that sang and also did acting. I don't remember his name, but he played a character, the second or third male lead, in the series with Walter Brennan which was on for a while, a popular series. Grandpappy Amos was the character's name.

ISOARDI: Oh, The Real McCoys or something?

BERNAL: The Real McCoys. And this guy played the hired hand, Pepe.

ISOARDI: Oh, God! That's right!

BERNAL: Then years later I saw him singing, playing the part in Man of La Mancha of not Don Quixote but—

ISOARDI: Poncho Sanchez? Is it his sidekick?

BERNAL: No, no. Poncho Sanchez is the bandleader.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Yeah! Oh, God! What was his name?

BERNAL: I know it as well as I know Poncho Sanchez, but I can't think of it either. [laughs] Anyway, he played that role and played it very well. That's what was happening with the Latin music in this town. I met and liked René Tuzet, who was recording a lot of cha-cha-chas at the time. As a matter of fact, I worked opposite him in Vegas at one of the hotels at one point. They were doing a little show or presentation doing just Latin music, and they were all wearing shorts. I don't know if you remember it. It was popular for a while—tall socks and shorts. I thought it was the weirdest combination. I still have a photograph with him in front of the hotel standing out there in these long shorts and tall stockings. But I was never musically affiliated with these bands or even musicians. It just worked out that way.

ISOARDI: But as far as you know, there wasn't much of a Latin jazz scene

around?

BERNAL: Latin jazz per se did not exist as far as I know. I could be wrong. Incidentally, anything that I say is strictly my opinion and my memories.

ISOARDI: Oh, of course.

BERNAL: So, I could be totally wrong about everything I've said thus far, except a couple of things about myself! And even then I'm not too sure. But that's all I can go by. What I remember, out here Latin jazz was nonexistent. What Latin jazz there was came out of New York, as far as I can remember.

ISOARDI: Since you mentioned it earlier, and that's Central Avenue and how much things have shifted, moved, and dried up, do you have any thoughts of why it declined? Why the scene just changed so much?

BERNAL: Well, I'm far from being a sociologist or understanding the principles, but I think it's a rather common occurrence, I'm just guessing. If I were to make a study of it, I think I would prove to myself that that's exactly what happened here, because it's happened in other neighborhoods and in other cities as a place where, as the people become more affluent they move to more affluent areas. Even if it's only two or three blocks away it's just a different neighborhood. Upward mobility in a sense. When that happens, I think that it changes the complexion of the entire neighborhood. I think it started to happen in what is now called the east side, which is Central Avenue and the areas surrounding it. It's one of the oldest sections in L.A. and one of the most modest—you know, two- or three-bedroom bungalows. Don't get me wrong, there are some nice neighborhoods, but these are the least expensive neighborhoods in town that I'm speaking of. So I think little by little people moved

away, farther west. I mean, at one time Western [Avenue] was way out there and La Brea [Avenue] was like another world.

ISOARDI: [laughs] I mean, you'd plan vacations to Santa Monica.

BERNAL: I'm telling you, that was a totally different world. So I think that has a lot to do with it.

For a while things centered on Western. Now there were clubs on Western. Businesses flourished on Western and other main streets. But you could actually say that between certain streets—let's say between Slauson [Avenue] and Vernon [Avenue] or farther north maybe—the main street became Western. Vermont had some action there for a while, but I would think farther south near Manchester [Avenue] near Inglewood. Still, to this day, there are a lot of stores down there, but they're not thriving like they were at one time. Excuse me, when I said "near Inglewood," it's not in Inglewood at all; Vermont is several miles from Inglewood. But at one time there was a theater right on the corner, if I remember correctly, and many, many businesses. Most of that has diminished quite a bit or is completely gone. Then it was Western that had a lot of the action. Then it became Crenshaw [Boulevard]. I mean, we're talking most of the heart of the African American community.

ISOARDI: Certainly Crenshaw is still today.

BERNAL: You'll find that a lot of people will consider certain areas still their home. Even if they don't live in the area, it will be the life blood of the community or some such thing. Say, for example, Chinatown or Little Tokyo. You don't find thousands of Chinese living in Chinatown anymore or thousands of Japanese living in Little Tokyo, but that's kind of like the heartbeat of "their" city or "their" part of the city, in a manner of speaking.

ISOARDI: Yeah, historic center, certainly.

BERNAL: And still a lot of business is there. It didn't happen with Central Avenue. They moved. I mean, the center of things moved. The action moved. Crenshaw has remained somewhat that way. But I'm thinking again strictly in the black community as it was once known in the Central Avenue area: the theaters, the nightclubs, the businesses.

Now, I don't know if that should have been. I mean, a city should be a city, a nation should be a nation, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way. You know, you've got your groups here and your groups there. For whatever reason, some groups prefer it that way. Others don't.

ISOARDI: Yeah,

BERNAL: I like to think of things as a big mishmash, you know, of city. You go to a city, and you find everything. New York is something like that, or it was the last time I was there several years ago. If you go downtown now there are businesses and people living everywhere. You see a lot of Puerto Ricans, you see mainstream Americans, and then you see the Chinese coming over from the Chinatown part, the Lower East Side. You know, you see it all happening in what appears to be in harmony. I could be wrong, but that's the way I see it. That's the way I've observed it, or at least maybe that's the way I wanted to observe it.

I think L.A. has always been sort of segregated, like some of the cities back East—excluding New York in the last twenty years. This is your Irish section, this is your Hispanic section, this is your Italian section, and so forth, and so on, and never the twain or the whatever shall meet. Quite often there are problems because of that, the barriers. I just don't think there should be barriers.

But getting back to Central Avenue, I came into the music scene

and onto the Central Avenue scene, if you will, what was left of it, at the very end—the periphery of it, because I was not there all of the time, but I was there a little bit of the time and involved with some of the people from time to time and continued to be in some way, if not close, at least somewhat associated with some of these people from time to time.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about another thing that was happening around then. I know on April 1 of '53 the unions [American Federation of Musicians] amalgamated.

BERNAL: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: [Local] 767 essentially dissolved, and they all joined [Local] 47. Were you around here then? Were you aware of what was going on? Did you have a position on it?

BERNAL: Oh, yeah. I went along with Bill [William] Green, Buddy Collette, and all the rest of them. Yeah, definitely. I thought it was a nuisance the other way around. Early on, when I didn't even belong to the union. I had both agents checking me out or checking the musicians I was using. Like we would pick up a few bucks working at someplace called the Clover Club somewhere on Manchester just off of Main [Street]. The guy from the black local would be there, and he'd say, "Are you paying dues to 47 or what? What's going on here?" Scatman Crothers was working there. You know, there were two or three other black musicians, and this club didn't belong to the union. And the other guy would come in from 47. I didn't even belong. I didn't belong to any local at that time just before "Hamp." But I thought, "What is that shit?" I mean just one local representing all of the musicians, and that's the way it should be. I don't remember all of the work that went into it and all of the bullshit and everything that people had to go through at that time, the people

that were most closely involved, such as Benny Carter, I think, and certainly Buddy Collette, Bill Green, and many others. It was a great thing when it happened. You didn't have to worry about who belongs to what, and if you were going to call someone on a gig— Oh, man.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So how long did you spend working with Leiber and Stoller?

BERNAL: Leiber and Stoller? Well, it wasn't a long period of time.

ISOARDI: Was it more than a year?

BERNAL: Probably three years all in all. And this was not constantly.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

BERNAL: I might have a gig with them every now and then. In the beginning, there was a lot of work with the Coasters and a lot of other groups. I don't remember who they were.

ISOARDI: So Leiber and Stoller head to New York in about '55, '56, or something like that?

BERNAL: That's right.

ISOARDI: They relocated at about that time?

BERNAL: That's right, at about that time. I guess I don't know exactly how that happened, whether they took the Coasters with them. I guess they called them back to record, and that's why they called them the Coasters, because they were from the Coast.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I think there was a kind of split, wasn't there? They took some of the guys from the Robins, so they had to come up with another name or something?

BERNAL: Yeah. Because of the move, I guess, they couldn't keep the same people. They didn't want to relocate. Maybe that was it. I'm guessing. In any case—

ISOARDI: You did a lot of important work with the Robins and the Coasters

and who else? What other sessions did you do? What other people did you work with for Leiber and Stoller?

BERNAL: For Leiber and Stoller? Oh jeez, I'll probably think of them later, but I did many groups.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: It's all jumbled in my head now. One thing ties into something else. There's a lot of overlapping, so I don't know which ones Jerry and Mike were connected with, but—

ISOARDI: Who else were you recording with? Do you remember any?

BERNAL: I worked with the Ravens, I worked with two or three of those kinds of groups aside from the Coasters, but I don't think I recorded with them. Clyde McPhatter was still in one of those groups. The Dominoes, I worked with them. On record I was doing all kinds of things.

ISOARDI: Really?

BERNAL: It was when I recorded with Buddy Bregman, who had a big band out here. He had a recording band, but not a traveling band. A fellow by the name of Dan Terry, who had a big band, also had some good charts. He did a few gigs, but I didn't work with him, I just recorded with him. I guess he was out here for three years. I also recorded with Dave [David] Rose and his orchestra. I did <u>The Stripper</u> album with him.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? You were on that song? It was a big hit for him.

BERNAL: Well, I wasn't on the original tune, but based on that tune he did a whole album of suggestive, sensual kinds of tunes.

ISOARDI: Right. Well, they needed the Mr. Sexy Saxophone man, didn't they? [laughs]

BERNAL: Well, they didn't know what they were getting, but I still have

some solos on those. I mean, of course the solos are there when I recorded on that session.

ISOARDI: Well, it sounds like there were a lot of recording opportunities that are happening then. It sounds like you were getting busy in the fifties.

BERNAL: Yeah. I did some things with [Henry] Mancini. I did a movie, Rock Pretty Baby. I was on that soundtrack. And quite a few others which I don't remember. Of course, I always kept my group at night, my "sex on a sax" group. [laughs]

ISOARDI: So you're working six nights a week, and then you're doing a lot of recording during the day?

BERNAL: Well, not a lot. I wouldn't say that. I remember guys that were working the studios, especially at the height of the recording era, guys would be on two or three dates in one day.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

BERNAL: I was never in the studios per se. I was never a studio musician per se, but I did a lot of specialty stuff, and I've done a lot of backing of singers. And I did an occasional jazz-flavored solo here and there. Sometime in the early sixties Quincy [Jones] came out from New York, and he settled here. Prior to that period he had been what they used to call an A and R [artists and repertoire] man at— What was that label that recorded so many jazz people? Dinah Washington was on that label.

ISOARDI: Mercury?

BERNAL: No, it wasn't Mercury? Was it Mercury?

ISOARDI: At one point she was with Mercury. I don't know.

BERNAL: Billy Eckstine was on that label for a while. In any case, that's what he did for some time. He would write arrangements, and his band

would record. They would record people like Billy, Dinah, and countless others. So by the time he had come out here he had pretty much earned a reputation. So when he came out here he looked me up. He gave me a call, we got together, and we became close friends again—that is to say, we renewed our closeness. We had always been friends, but we hadn't been in close touch. So I did some things with Quincy. He called me, and I did some movies with him. I don't remember what movies. I did In Cold Blood. I was on that. I don't know if you remember that.

ISOARDI: I think they just actually did a remake of it a couple of years ago.

BERNAL: They did.

ISOARDI: But I remember the first film. I remember reading the book when it first came out.

BERNAL: In Cold Blood, and what was the other one? In the Heat of the Night.

ISOARDI: Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger.

BERNAL: Yeah. I did two or three with Sidney Poitier. I mean, I was on the soundtrack. I didn't do it with Sidney! Altogether I did seven or eight movies. That was great work, because it went for two or three days. In the Heat of the Night we recorded right over on Washington Boulevard in Ray Charles's building's studio, because he was on that soundtrack.

ISOARDI: Did he do that title song to that?

BERNAL: That's right. I played the title song, the melody. I think I played at the beginning, and then he sings it in the middle, and then he does it in the end again. Something like that.

ISOARDI: God. Nice.

BERNAL: When the statement is first made I think it's the saxophone playing.

Well, I'm trying to think of my credits but I can't. You know, I did a lot of work with a lot of different people.

ISOARDI: But that's the direction that pretty much you took. You were able to pretty successfully then maintain both your own group at night and gigs as well as picking up various recording work and studio work. And you worked with Spike Jones for a while.

BERNAL: Yeah. I went into the Slate Brothers, which was a big club—it was a little club physically, but it was a big happening, because it was an upscale supper club type of place. The Slate brothers are ex-comics and actors. It was on La Cienega [Boulevard], right across the street from where the Beverly Center is now, I should say—across Beverly [Boulevard] or up La Cienega just a little ways. Years later Redd Foxx took it over and he called it Redd Foxx's, I guess. At one time it had been the Slate Brothers, and it did very, very well for a long time. It would get all of the celebrities in there, anybody that was anybody.

The first night Lenny Bruce was there. He was not getting enough attention, so he used very blue material, a very blue joke, I should say—not blue, it was dirty. It was the kind of thing that he had started to do in those days. They had the strippers and the comic, and the comic could say just about anything he wanted. Five or six guys out in front were watching and waiting for the strippers, anyway; they weren't paying attention. And Lenny would do some wild stuff. He and a group of musicians played these places, and they all hung out together and became great friends. Herb Geller, Joe Maini, Jack Sheldon I think was in that group of guys for a while, and of course Lenny.

ISOARDI: Did you know Lenny Bruce?

BERNAL: Yes, I did. We opened that night together at the Slate Brothers.

We opened the club, and Lenny got fired the first night for throwing that joke out there. Actually, it was kind of like a mutual thing, because I don't think he wanted to stay. That first night especially was madness. There were people from the Friar's Club, to which the Slate Brothers belonged, so they had all the people there. George Raft I think was there, Milton Berle, all these names.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

BERNAL: It was like [mimicks sound of straining to get through a dense crowd] in a small room built like a train car, you know. It was long and had seats on both sides, and the stage as you walked in was like an "L." You walk in, and there's the bar, and to the left is the stage. Anyway, Lenny didn't like the attention that he was not getting, and he told the story and got off the stage immediately, and that was his last performance.

Don Rickles came in the next night and became the talk of the town. That was his first exposure to Hollywood life. Pretty soon he had every star in town in there. I worked with him for about six weeks, and then my friend Vido [Musso] took over for me. That much I remember.

You know, when I'm away from you sometimes I think of stories and anecdotes and things that have to do more with the things that you've been writing about. These things have very little to do with that period or that life.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe for the future, though. Do you have anything we might have skipped over or overlooked that you would like to add?

BERNAL: I'd have to think about that for a while. Right now I'm running out of ideas. I'm running out of memories. The ones that I'm thinking of, there's no direct connection to Central Avenue or the musicians that

played there.

ISOARDI: Any final thoughts?

BERNAL: You mean this is it?

ISOARDI: It doesn't have to be.

BERNAL: Well, I think, if I may do this, if I may think about it a little bit, and if there are things that I've left out that I would like to include or, as you say, final thoughts, I'll make a note of them and be in touch with you. We only got to the sixties, but after that my life went into a different direction.

ISOARDI: In what way?

BERNAL: Well, musically. I mean away from the jazz and rhythm and blues roots and more into mainstream and commercial ventures and what have you. Years later I came into contact with a lot of musicians again here and there, a little bit at a time. Now I'm at the point where I'm playing occasionally with people like "Wig" [Gerald Wiggins] and getting their approval and their respect. God knows they had mine.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I was just looking at a tape of the first "Central Avenue Revisited" jazz festival. I think it was two and a half years ago.

BERNAL: Was that the first one?

ISOARDI: Yeah. It was the first one they had, because the third one is coming up this summer. You were playing there with Ernie Andrews.

BERNAL: In fact, I'm working with Ernie either next week or the week after. And I worked with him a few weeks ago. I go back with Ernie since he was with Harry James's band at the Flamingo [Hotel] in [Las] Vegas.

ISOARDI: How so? What do you mean? What's the connection?

BERNAL: Well, I was working Vegas, and we kind of hung out.

ISOARDI: Oh, okay.

BERNAL: Ernestine Anderson and Clora Bryant.

ISOARDI: You guys were all back there at the same time?

BERNAL: We were all in town together, yeah sure. Ernie, Clora, Ernestine—I'm sure there were others. I was hanging out at the Flamingo quite a bit because that's where Harry James's band was playing. And Harry arranged for [Count] Basie to come in for one night, so they played back to back.

ISOARDI: Oh, wow.

BERNAL: That was great. And Harry was on a real Basie kick then. He was playing Neal Hefti charts that were written mostly for Basie's band. So that was interesting. Ernie was singing with Harry; Joe Williams was singing with Basie. I remember Ernie was a nervous wreck that night. He was all over the place.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Oh, I'll bet. I'll bet.

BERNAL: Nervous. I mean, he was taking care of business himself, but Joe was, I guess, in different ways about the hottest singer in the business outside of the very top commercial singers that were better known.

ISOARDI: That was the late fifties?

BERNAL: Yeah. Unless it was the early sixties.

ISOARDI: Okay.

BERNAL: I'm running out of juice.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Well, let's wrap it.

BERNAL: I wish that I could have offered you more, and if I think of anything that you might find interesting I think I'll call you and I'll tell you about it, and if you want to go into it we will.

ISOARDI: Yeah, make some notes.

BERNAL: I would probably like to say that through all of that I've now come back to this. Here I am back with my friends where I first started.

ISOARDI: That's nice.

BERNAL: Well, like I just said, I get to work with people like—

ISOARDI: Wig and Buddy and Ernie.

BERNAL: Once in a while.

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