CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

James Tolbert

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: October 26, 1926, New Orleans.

Education: Jordan High School; Jefferson High School; East Los Angeles College; California State University, Los Angeles; Loyola Law School.

Military Service: United States Army, 1945-47.

Spouse: Marie Ross Tolbert, three children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Concert presenter, Music Town, Los Angeles, 1949-early fifties.

Lawyer, Tolbert and Wooden (later Tolbert, Wooden, and Malone, presently Tolbert and Wooden), Los Angeles, c. 1957-present.

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: Tolbert's home, Van Nuys, California.

Dates, length of sessions: January 2, 1999 (81 minutes); January 9, 1999 (108).

Total number of recorded hours: 3.2

Persons present during interview: Tape I, Tolbert and Isoardi; Tape II and III, Tolbert; Tolbert's sister, Lucille Tolbert Bland; Tolbert's wife, Marie Ross Tolbert; and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series designed to preserve the spoken memories of individuals, primarily musicians, who were raised near and/or performed on Los Angeles's Central Avenue, especially from the late 1920's to the mid-1950's. 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*.

This interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Tolbert's childhood in New Orleans and in the Central Avenue and Watts neighborhoods of Los Angeles, and continuing through his education at both Jordan High School and Jefferson High School, his military service, his earning of a degree in law, and his booking and promoting of jazz concerts at Music Town during the late forties and early fifties. Major topics discussed include his relatives the Young family, particularly Lee and Lester Young; music venues and notable musicians around Central Avenue in the thirties and forties; the former African American local of

the American Federation of Musicians, Local 767; and the decline of Central Avenue in the fifties.

EDITING:

Shelby Sanett, Gold Shield intern, 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. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Tolbert did not review the transcript, but he verified proper names via telephone.

Alex Cline, editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history. Victoria Simmons, 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

JANUARY 2, 1999

ISOARDI: Jimmy, let's begin with your family background before we get into where you were born. How far back can you trace your family?

TOLBERT: I don't know. I don't know because my brother [Alvin Tolbert], who is gone, was one of those— What do you call the people who look up the—?

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, a genealogist. Looking into the family background.

TOLBERT: Genealogist, right. And somewhere around here— I wish I had known you were going to ask this question, because I have the whole chart and everything. But I can only go back to my grandfather. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Who was your grandfather?

TOLBERT: Willis H. Young.

ISOARDI: So this is on your—?

TOLBERT: My mother [Alice Young Tolbert]'s side.

ISOARDI: Your mother's side.

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: I can also go to my grandfather on my father [Albert Tolbert]'s side, and his name was Isaac Tolbert. He was one of those itinerant ministers. He had like five churches in and around, well, mostly out of New Orleans but not too far away. But, you know, in little country towns he had churches.

TOLBERT: Do you know where your grandmother on your father's side came from? Same area?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Somewhere around Thibodaux. That's a little town, little country town about sixty miles, maybe seventy miles from New Orleans.

ISOARDI: And your grandfather on your mother's side?

TOLBERT: Willis H. Young, a really impossible-to-conceive-of kind of guy. Well, I mean, he was a guy who was a professor. He taught a lot of people who became quite well known, especially in the music business. But I don't know how he got so educated. I mean, we're talking now about a guy who, if it all is true, just barely missed being in slavery.

ISOARDI: That's right. He probably was going to school then maybe around the turn of the century or a little earlier.

TOLBERT: Right, right, a little earlier.

ISOARDI: Yeah, maybe only forty years, thirty years removed from it.

TOLBERT: Right. Anyway, he could play every instrument, and he was an entrepreneur. I mean, he had his own minstrel show and travelled up and down whatever circuit that was then. But that's where "Pres" [Lester Young], my Uncle Lester, and Lee [Young] and my Aunt Irma [Young]— They were all part of the show. And one of the things that a lot of folks don't know about Lester Young—that's his number-one son—was that he started off as a drummer. And after the gig he had to load up stuff. So everybody who just played a horn— [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Pull the neck off and the mouthpiece and you're gone.

TOLBERT: Right, right. You know, the ladies who had come who loved the musicians and stuff— Well, you know, whatever was left, he says, "Damn this." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: So he didn't want to take all of his time taking down the drum kit. [laughs]

TOLBERT: So he learned how to play the saxophone. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: So it's interesting. I mean, your grandfather, then, you don't know where he went to school or college. But somehow he became proficient pretty much in all the instruments and—

TOLBERT: He was proficient.

ISOARDI: Did he have a regular teaching position anywhere? Or did he take just private students?

TOLBERT: Well, see, I came into really knowing about the music thing in 1936. That was a world's fair year. And by this time his children were all working as musicians or entertainers, and now the grandchildren, which I am one of, it was our turn.

ISOARDI: To study with him?

TOLBERT: To study with him. I was living in New Orleans with my parents, and they sent my brother, my sister [Lucille Tolbert Bland], and myself to live and study with Papa Young.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. Oh, there were a lot of guys— I mean, most of the big bands— And we lived right next door to the black local, [American Federation of Musicians] Local 767. There were segregated locals here in Los Angeles for a long time. And we lived, I mean, really literally next door. One of the things I love to talk about is how the guy who played baritone saxophone but doubled as the janitor in the union would somehow get himself locked out. [mutual laughter] I mean, somehow this man—

ISOARDI: What was his name?

TOLBERT: Davidson, "Big Boy" Davidson. Yeah, baritone saxophone player. And I could jump from the roof of our house to the roof of the union. There was an upstairs room there where the guys played cards and stuff, and that window was always unlocked. It was never bolted down or anything. So I had to go in that window and then come downstairs and let Mr. Davidson in. And, I mean, this happened, I'm telling you, an average of once a month.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. [laughs] That's funny. As far as you know, of your four grandparents, was Willis the one with the real interest in music? Was there any musical background on your father's side?

TOLBERT: I don't know, because my dad played some sort of bayou piano. You know, forget about chord structure and stuff like that. But my dad had been exposed to a piano somewhere, because he could play—my mom too, for that matter—but

definitely no learning. But they were insightful enough to want us, us being my brother, my sister, and myself, to come and study with my grandfather. By this time Pres, Lester, was just now beginning to make a lot of noise with the [Count] Basie band.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, '36.

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah, their first recordings.

TOLBERT: Well, that's when we came here, in '36.

ISOARDI: How old were you then?

TOLBERT: Ten.

ISOARDI: Okay, so you where born—? Maybe we can go back to that.

TOLBERT: New Orleans.

ISOARDI: New Orleans, in 1926?

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: What day was it?

TOLBERT: October 26, 1926.

ISOARDI: Okay. What was it like growing up there?

TOLBERT: Where, New Orleans?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: A lot of fun for me. I mean, I didn't realize. I think there's a lot of misconception about the deep South, and there are a lot of things that are understated,

too. But like our neighborhood was totally integrated. I lived on Saratoga Street between Jackson and Josephine, and there were as many whites on the block as there were blacks. At each corner there was— The Russos had a store and the Fotos had a store—Italian folks. But New Orleans was a very cosmopolitan town before World War II. I think World War II brought into focus that something wasn't quite right here. Because, I'm telling you, on our block it was just about even.

ISOARDI: Did that affect you in any way?

TOLBERT: Probably, but I don't know how. I mean, it just was a matter of fact. We went through the same sort of scenarios that most young boys especially do. I mean, we roasted potatoes down in the gutter, and there were rocks and stuff. We played football in the street, you know, woofed. I don't know if you know what woofing is.

ISOARDI: No.

TOLBERT: That's like talking about each other and talk about your parents and stuff. "I saw your mama running across the field. You couldn't catch her with an automobile," something like that. [mutual laughter] But, you know, you didn't have a whole lot of money to be going to pay for your entertainment and stuff. And you're talking about the biggest city in the South, which was New Orleans, and it was totally segregated, except that nobody knew it. I mean, except nobody—

ISOARDI: Well on your block it wasn't, so you had no awareness of it.

TOLBERT: Right. Well, you had awareness, because you couldn't go to certain

theaters. There was a theater downtown called the Saenger [Theatre]; blacks couldn't go in that theater—not until, oh, I don't know, after World War II somewhere.

ISOARDI: Was that kind of one of the first things that made you aware of segregation and racism, that you couldn't get into a particular theater? Or was there anything earlier?

TOLBERT: Well, you know, if you're born into it it's just a matter-of-fact thing. I mean, I didn't know anything about civil rights or— You know, we lived good. My dad was a hard worker. My mom and my grandmom were always there. We had a strong family situation. And not bragging, but factually my sister was gifted. She could out-dance anybody in town.

We had a grandmother who went against the grain. She had a sort of a boarding house situation, but even so, she made it a point that the children always ate first, which was— I mean, that sounds like a small thing, but, boy, that was big, a big thing. And so far as we were concerned, she had the insight that we take care of the children first. I mean, usually it was just the other way around, the grown-ups ate, and if there was anything left you could eat. But we were the best-fed kids, certainly, in our neighborhood.

ISOARDI: This was your grandmother on your dad's side?

TOLBERT: Grandmother on my mother's side.

ISOARDI: And what was her name?

TOLBERT: Grandma Martha, Martha Young. Her last marriage— She'd been

married a lot, but her last marriage was to professor Young. She had been a student of his. That's Lester's father.

ISOARDI: Right. What did your dad do?

TOLBERT: My dad mostly was a chauffeur. He drove for Dr. Simon, very nice people who, although in a strictly segregated society, always at Christmas time and stuff they had presents for his children, which included me. I mean, they were really nice people.

ISOARDI: Right. So this was basically a working-class neighborhood, then?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: How about your mom? Was she a housewife?

TOLBERT: My mom was—

ISOARDI: What was her name?

TOLBERT: Alice [Young Tolbert]. She was a mutation, really, way out of synch with reality there. I mean, here we're talking about when people were— I remember the envy of the neighborhood was a guy named Jim Williams. He was making a hundred dollars a month on the railroad or something like that. Rich, I mean rich.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Twenty-five [dollars] a week would be big money.

TOLBERT: Yeah, right. Well, my mom had a just complete disdain for money. It didn't matter, you know. She was very arty. She wrote papers, position papers and stuff that, which she would recite at church. I mean, really, if she came along in today's environment she would be sort of like Maya Angelou or one of those. But in

the wrong time. I mean, everybody just thought she was nuts.

ISOARDI: Yeah. She liked to write?

TOLBERT: Oh, loved to, and recite. She'd write papers, and at church she'd recite them.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Where does she fit in the pecking order of Willis's children?

TOLBERT: She was, I think, two years older than Pres, than Lester.

ISOARDI: So she was the oldest?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Did she play an instrument at all?

TOLBERT: Piano.

ISOARDI: I guess if you grew up in that family you were going to play an instrument. [laughs] So at the age of ten, then, 1936, she decides to send you to the West Coast?

TOLBERT: No, my dad decided. My grandfather had suggested it a few times. And something happened, something that triggered my dad to say, "That's it. You guys are going there."

ISOARDI: Well, let me ask you, had you been playing music at all?

TOLBERT: Oh, no.

ISOARDI: So you hadn't had any lessons then? You weren't playing anything at all?

TOLBERT: Oh, nothing. No, no.

ISOARDI: Was it something you wanted to do?

TOLBERT: I didn't know anything about it. I mean— No, no.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Really?

TOLBERT: I used to hang out at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and play checkers and Ping-Pong. I mean that's— Yeah.

ISOARDI: But your grandfather had the family band when you were a little kid, didn't he?

TOLBERT: My grandfather had always had a family band. Lester was in a family band, my Aunt Irma, and my Uncle Lee. But, you know, they were in California. But they had toured a lot in different—

ISOARDI: Hadn't they toured around Louisiana, through Minnesota, and places?

TOLBERT: Right, right, but they had settled— They had been in Milwaukee for a while as a home base and had like in the late twenties or early thirties settled here in Los Angeles. But I'm talking about like 1936 now.

ISOARDI: Right. So you'd never ever seen the family playing in—?

TOLBERT: No. I didn't even know anything about 'em. [mutual laughter] Really. But my mother and father knew.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: And when my grandfather indicated that, you know, [we were] another generation. But by this time Lester was already with Basie.

ISOARDI: Yeah, '36, right.

TOLBERT: Lee was already doing things in the motion picture industry, soundtracks and whatnot. So the next generation was us. You know, Pres didn't have any children at that time, Lee didn't have any children. Just my mom had children. So we went.

ISOARDI: And I guess your Aunt Irma was still performing then as well, right?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Well, look, my Aunt Irma, see, and Lucille, my older sister, after we got here and we'd been here for a while, my Aunt Irma was so popular— My Aunt Irma was a really good musician, too, but she did a lot of chanteuse. She could sing, she could dance, you know. And she was frequently double booked. Lucille, my sister, whom you met, must have been sixteen, seventeen [years old], something like that in there. A lot of times she would go on the gig that my Aunt Irma— They didn't know the difference, because Lucille could dance and sing and stuff. Right. That was when we were living on Central Avenue, I'm telling you. Because most of the guys who came into town, most of the big bands, black big bands that came into Los Angeles, ended up—exclude [Jimmie] Lunceford, but the rest of them—the musicians would come and take lessons from my grandfather.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: I'm telling you, he could play. I'll give you one example. You know during WPA [Works Progress Administration] days? That's what I'm talking about now. They used to have concerts in the park, WPA bands.

ISOARDI: The government-sponsored concerts and bands.

TOLBERT: Exactly. And I was with my grandfather. We were at some park, and the band had played and come off the bandstand and there was this trumpet player. My grandfather beckoned him to come over to him, and he did. My grandfather was— I mean, every musician in this town respected him. I mean, he was the man. So my grandfather was telling him about his playing, that he had a good ear, but he could tell that he couldn't read and that he was just playing by ear. So that meant that he was always a little behind. And he was telling him that he needed to learn it. It was a comfortable conversation. I'm just standing there with him. He started talking about the care of his instruments. And the bell [of his trumpet] wasn't shined. I mean, he was saying,"You've got to take care of your instrument." And this was a grown man: "Yes, Professor Young. Yes, Professor Young." So just as they were about to leave, my grandfather looked down and saw this man's shoes unshined. Oh, man. [mutual laughter] I mean, he really went off, "What kind of musician are you?" And those were his exact words. I mean, "What kind of musician are you?" You know, I had a long time getting into my head what did he mean. But his shoes weren't shined. I mean, that's how—

ISOARDI: Pride, professionalism.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And my Uncle Lee, I mean, was so ingrained with that indoctrination that even on recording sessions Lee would be the sharpest dude there. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Really?

You come out here in 1936, you're ten years old. What's your first impression of the avenue? How does it strike you? What do you notice? Your family at this time is living next door to the union, right?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So that's the first place you—

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: What's the avenue like? How does it strike you? Any memories of it?

TOLBERT: Well—

ISOARDI: I guess after New Orleans maybe it didn't seem that different.

TOLBERT: Oh, no, no. No, no. It was a different life altogether. I mean, in New Orleans, whatever recognition I had came through athletic type stuff. I was a very good Ping-Pong player at a very early age. So at the YMCA some of the men there who knew how well I could play Ping-Pong would trick guys coming into town and coming through there.

ISOARDI: Play this little kid, right?

TOLBERT: Yeah. [mutual laughter] That kind of stuff. So that was fun. But when we came out here my grandfather was absolutely a task maker. I mean, first of all, there's a certain formality. There was no "Grandpa" this and "Grandpa" that. On the other side, my dad's side, Grandpa Isaac, oh, yeah, he hugged the kids and stuff. Papa Young was very, I mean, aristocratic. Oh, I mean, we're not on the same level at all. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: And you'd better know it. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: You know, like I'm a grandparent now, and I dote on my grandchildren, you know what I'm saying? Oh, man. Papa Young didn't play that mess at all. When you came the routine— First of all, when school is out do not tarry; come straight home. You come straight home, and as soon as you get there you put your books and stuff down and you go knock on his study. He had a study, and you knock on his— You had to have a certain way to announce yourself, because he said, "Yes?" "Professor Young, it's Master Tolbert. May I enter?" And you'd enter, and he'd give you your part. Every day he had— I'm saying every day, certainly weekends excluded and sometimes— But almost every day when you went into that room he'd have your part written. Now, whatever your instrument was, he'd already orchestrated and stuff. Bam, he'd give it to you. He had taught me trumpet. Well, the kind of things that he wrote, I'm not carrying the melody or anything except in some instances, but for the most part I'm just accenting. It's pop, pop. I mean, nothing. You know, it's boring. But a lot of things happened from this, because first of all, when the rest— Now, my sister may have a different, maybe— She played alto [saxophone] and piano, and my brother played trombone. My cousin played piano. So by the time— My grandmother played baritone saxophone. And I'm going to show you how strong this man was. She had sugar diabetes. She had her leg cut off up to the knee, came home—

ISOARDI: This is in like 1937, maybe?

TOLBERT: And she came home from the hospital with one leg amputated up to the knee. And the way my grandfather had arranged things, everybody had to have their part to his satisfaction before we could have dinner. So you got all kinds of pressure, because if you messed around not getting your part you had the whole house mad at you. [Isoardi laughs] And some very valuable things emanated from there. Like that trumpet, a lot of times, man, all you're doing is [sings one note repeated every couple of beats]. Boring. It makes no sense at all until you get with everybody else, and those blop-blops are accenting what somebody else is doing. So you're really getting to a team thing, and you love it when you can hear the whole thing. Well, he could hear it before he wrote it. I mean— [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. He knew what he wanted.

TOLBERT: Oh, he definitely was a genius. And he knew he was a genius and behaved that way. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, he could walk the walk, so I guess he could talk it. [laughs] Jeez. You mentioned trumpet. Is that what you started out on?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, let me ask you too, you had two other siblings that you came out here with?

TOLBERT: My brother and my sister.

ISOARDI: Okay.

TOLBERT: Alvin played trombone, and Lucille played piano and alto sax.

ISOARDI: And were you the oldest?

TOLBERT: No, no. I was the youngest.

ISOARDI: You were the youngest. And all three of you come out at once, right?

TOLBERT: Yes.

ISOARDI: So your parents got rid of all the kids at once? [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: That's one way of putting it. [mutual laughter] Now, my sister, though— My brother's older than I. I mean, she's older than both of us. And she was desperately in love with some dude back in New Orleans, so she wasn't happy here at all.

ISOARDI: And she was—what?—about what fourteen, fifteen? Something like that?

TOLBERT: She must have been about sixteen, seventeen.

ISOARDI: So your parents wanted to—?

TOLBERT: Well, she convinced my dad that we were being mistreated.

ISOARDI: Out here?

TOLBERT: Out here. So we went back to New Orleans. Mistake. I mean, a mistake. Let's see. So that must have been like '38. Yeah, 1938. Forget about child labor laws and stuff, because I wasn't in New Orleans long before I realized that that was a terrible mistake.

ISOARDI: Oh, all three of you went back?

TOLBERT: Yeah. And I got a job at a place called the Sweet Shop. I worked

thirteen hours a day, seven days a week.

ISOARDI: Oh, my God. You weren't in school then?

TOLBERT: I quit school.

ISOARDI: You were only—what?—twelve, thirteen, years old?

TOLBERT: I was eleven. No, no. Wait a minute. That's not right. Yeah, I was— So I must have been twelve by then, yeah. And I saved that little four dollars and got enough money and came on back out here.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. I wrote to my Aunt Irma. She said, "You learned your lesson." I said, "I did." [laughs]

ISOARDI: So when you came out here for the first time and you're—

TOLBERT: For the first time the three of us came together.

ISOARDI: All three of you came together, right?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And you're staying at the family home?

TOLBERT: 1706 south Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Who else is in the home then? Are Lee and Irma still there?

TOLBERT: No, no. Well, Aunt Irma was there sometimes, but Aunt Irma liked to get married. So she— [laughs]

ISOARDI: So she was gone.

TOLBERT: She was gone sometimes. Uncle Lee, he would only come over— See,

you have to realize that my grandfather was really aristocratic. Some things were just so beneath him. Like administering corporal punishment was not something he could bring himself to do. As a matter of fact, he'd have my aunt Maimie [Young Hunter] call, or Mama Young or somebody call Uncle Lee, who was the official whipper. [mutual laughter] That's the way I met him.

ISOARDI: [laughs] By him giving you a beating?

TOLBERT: No, no. My sister came running out in the backyard, and because we didn't know him, she says, "There's a man in there trying to start a fight with Alvin!" Well, Alvin is my brother, so I come running in, and I see this guy. I see Alvin there, and this guy is advancing on Alvin. Alvin's got his fists balled up and stuff like he's going to fight this guy. So, shoot, I just automatically jumped on his back, man, and put my arm around his neck. Mistake. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That's how you met your Uncle Lee?

TOLBERT: Yeah. That's the first time I saw him. The first time I saw him was his back advancing on my brother. Man, I jumped on that sucker's back. Oh, man. He whipped Alvin with me. That's right. I mean, somehow he got me twisted around there and just used me like a thing and whipped Alvin, bam! [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: Well, that's a memorable introduction.

ISOARDI: Really, really.

He started you on trumpet when you got out there?

TOLBERT: Yeah, my grandfather.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Why trumpet? How did that happen? Did you want it?

TOLBERT: Oh, I didn't know anything about music or anything at all. He just looked at me and said "trumpet lips." [mutual laughter] My grandfather could go downtown to music stores and stuff with no money, but somehow he would convince these folks to [give him] reeds and, like in our case, instruments on credit. Yeah. He was really, definitely one of a kind.

ISOARDI: Really. So about the time before you are forced to go back to New Orleans you've been studying with him for about a year and a half, maybe?

TOLBERT: Yeah, yeah. Exactly.

ISOARDI: What do you think about it after a year and a half? Is it something you wanted to do? Did you enjoy doing it?

TOLBERT: Had I had the insight and— I didn't even know that we were going to go back to New Orleans until we were going back. I'm telling you, Lucille, my sister, was so in love with this dude who was still in New Orleans, and she wanted to get back to him. So the only way that came about was that she convinced my dad that we were being mistreated. And my dad—you know, this was when they got the bonus money from World War I and stuff like that—he used all his money and brought us back to New Orleans. But, you know, that's life.

ISOARDI: Where were you going to school when you first came out there?

TOLBERT: Twentieth Street Elementary School.

ISOARDI: And what was that like?

TOLBERT: It was okay with me. A very unusual thing had happened with me when I was like three. My mom was unable to take care of herself; she was mentally imbalanced and was not really hitting on all cylinders. And my brother and sister were going to this day care school conglomerate thing, and they didn't have anyplace to put me, so I had to go with them. And I was just there. But while I was there, I mean, they're teaching, and I'm there, so I learn how to read.

ISOARDI: So you were a couple of levels ahead of the kids your age?

TOLBERT: Well, what happened— I mean, I didn't even know that that was anything. I was just there, you know. This was about, I think it was New Year's 1930, '29 or '30, right in there, you know. And I had these funny papers, and I'm reading the funny papers. And my dad said, "Look at little old James over there making believe he can read." Making believe? Shoot, man, I wallow on over there and, man, I'm reading up a storm. My dad was so flabbergasted. I mean, we're talking about deep South where most grown-up black folks can't read and write with any fluency. Man, let me tell you, my dad would take me around with him, and somehow in the midst of conversation he would say, "Oh, Jimmy. Here, Jimmy. I don't have my glasses. Read this for me." I'm four years old now, so you can imagine.

ISOARDI: Jeez. How did you pick that—? It just came to you? You were a

natural? TOLBERT: Well, no. I had to—

ISOARDI: Oh, because at this early age you were going with them.

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: Oh, God. You were just almost a toddler.

TOLBERT: That's right. So I know that people can learn at a much earlier age than we seem to think.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I guess if you are exposed to it under the right circumstances, yeah.

TOLBERT: So that was a blessing, not just a God-given—

ISOARDI: So Twentieth Street School wasn't much of a challenge to you.

TOLBERT: Oh, no. Let me tell you. There were people— Now, a fellow named Odom Williams loves to tell the story of when I was going to school. You know, they used to put all the stuff on the blackboard, especially like the math and stuff. They would write it out on the board, and then you're supposed to copy and stuff. By the time they got through putting it up I had solved it and got my paper done through, and I'd lay down on the desk and go to sleep. [laughs] This one teacher just couldn't stand it. But there wasn't anything else for me to do. But she taught me how to knit. Now, I never made anything, but I knitted that stuff— [mutual laughter] I mean, there's this guy, we're still friends, I mean since the third grade. This guy named Odom Williams, every once in a while he'll tell folks how I used to drive the whole classroom crazy. It's just I wasn't doing anything special, but I wasn't going to

make believe I couldn't read when I could read. And like math was easy for me. And in those days they used to put the stuff on the blackboard. Well, hell, by the time they'd get through writing it up there I'd written it and figured it out and was through. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Too much. You were living next to the union; you were near the corner of Seventeenth [Street] and Central. What was the area like?

TOLBERT: The neighborhood?

ISOARDI: Yeah, what was the neighborhood like then? Any place that stands out?

TOLBERT: Well, obviously Central Avenue itself was the hub. Now, from Twelfth Street we called the bucket of blood.

ISOARDI: That was a club.

TOLBERT: No, that's a street. Twelfth Street.

ISOARDI: No, I mean the Bucket of Blood.

TOLBERT: No, we just dubbed that corner "bucket of blood."

ISOARDI: Oh, why?

TOLBERT: Because there were so many cuttings and fights and stuff down there. And in those days you could— Newspaper guys selling newspapers, you could ride the streetcar for free, just jump on the streetcar with your papers and stuff and try to sell them to people. So I did a lot of that.

ISOARDI: So you were selling the paper?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What paper?

TOLBERT: Must have been the [*Los Angeles*] *Examiner* or the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*. I'm not sure which now.

ISOARDI: It wasn't the [*California*] *Eagle,* the black paper.

TOLBERT: Oh, no. No, but the *Eagle* was in existence. It's a funny thing. It's amazing how life goes, because I was a journalism major. This was years later, obviously, after the service and stuff. But I was a journalism major, and I got lucky and got some money and stuff, and I bought— Well, one of my heroes—I mean, really, I think not in the same category as my dad, but people who I really admired—one of them is a fellow named Loren Miller.

ISOARDI: Oh, the attorney.

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He fought the restrictive covenants, right?

TOLBERT: Exactly. That's the guy.

ISOARDI: Among many other things.

TOLBERT: Right. Well, Loren also owned a newspaper called the *California Eagle*, and he was appointed to the bench, and he couldn't be— He couldn't have a newspaper and have that job, so he was forced to sell it. I tell you, if there was any compliment that I'd take as really a compliment, because I know for a fact that other people wanted to buy the newspaper that had much more money than I had, he sold me the paper partly because he knew how I felt about social issues and stuff like that.

Loren sold me the paper, the *California Eagle*, when he went to the bench.

ISOARDI: So did he get it from the Bass family? Because weren't they the ones that founded it?

TOLBERT: Bass, Charlotta Bass?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: I think they were partners, but by the time that he was going to the bench he was the sole owner.

ISOARDI: And this must have been the fifties, maybe. Was it the 1950s?

TOLBERT: It had to be later than that.

ISOARDI: Sixties, then?

TOLBERT: Somewhere between— Let me see. Well, I had just started law school. Maybe around '55, somewhere around in there.

ISOARDI: So that's when you got it?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Jeez, I didn't know that about you.

TOLBERT: So you know that was really one of my heroes.

ISOARDI: I mean, I know about the covenants, his fighting against them. What else should we remember about him?

TOLBERT: About Loren? I tell you, I have not a shrine but a little stuff about Loren outside— My wall is sort of a history of—

ISOARDI: Yeah, all those pictures.

TOLBERT: Yeah. And Loren certainly is one of the guys who had a major influence. And Dr. [Claude] Hudson, too. Although I didn't know Dr. Hudson, I was really impressed. And I think they may have been related, Dr. Claude Hudson and Loren Miller. I'm not sure about that. But one of the things that I have woven into my way of thinking was I heard Dr. Hudson saying about the things a decent man should do. Like you can't expect and shouldn't expect to get credit for doing the things you should do. You're supposed to take care of your family. You are supposed to see that your kids get a good education. It's only after you go beyond that that you can start looking for some kind of extra credit or something. Well, I mean, it was such a powerful message when I heard him say it, I've tried to live that kind of stuff. So I have been just really lucky to have just strong men as role models—my father, my uncle Lee, Loren Miller, Dr. Hudson.

ISOARDI: You mentioned that Loren Miller probably sold you the *California Eagle* because he—

TOLBERT: He liked the way I—

ISOARDI: He liked the way you thought on social issues, and he thought you would keep it going in a spirit which he liked.

TOLBERT: Right. Which I should have done. I don't know what happened with that. I got busy with something else. By that time I was managing a lot of talent, show business talent and stuff, and I was on the road a lot, out of the country a lot.

ISOARDI: So you can't run a newspaper that way.

TOLBERT: Right, right. And who did I sell it to? I forgot I even— I'm not even sure I sold it. I may have given it to somebody. I'm trying to think who— Whoever took over didn't have the same ideals and idealistic thing that I felt about Loren and what the role of the paper should be and stuff. If I had any one thing to redo, that's one of the things that I'd jump back into and do it right.

ISOARDI: What were the things about Loren Miller that you admired in terms of ideas or in terms of some of the causes he fought for?

TOLBERT: Oh, integrity. Integrity. First of all, I admire smart people. Loren was smart. I mean, he was well schooled, but he had innate smartness, too. I mean he wasn't just book kind of smart, because he had an understanding and appreciation of other folks' qualities and whatnot. And he was the kind of guy who could do pragmatic things— I mean not just for himself. When he went to the bench, a couple of things happened. There was a guy named Stanley Malone who had been working for Loren and was a good lawyer but not really a good hustler. Like he was a good lawyer and stuff, whereas on the other hand I was a hell of a hustler but a terrible lawyer. So one of the conditions that Loren made was that he'd sell me the paper and stuff, but we had to hire Malone into the company, which was fine. So it was instead of just Tolbert and Wooden, which our firm had been, our firm became Tolbert, Wooden, and Malone. That's the kind of guy Loren was. I mean, Malone wasn't his child or anything, but he cared about him, and he knew with him going to the bench and stuff that he needed a place to hang his hat.

ISOARDI: Right. Do you know anything about Loren Miller's background? Where did he come from? Was he from Southern California?

TOLBERT: He has a nephew. I can't think of his name now. His last name is Miller, a lawyer. And we used to talk about his family. The answer to your question is whatever I did know, it's not clicking in now. So maybe you'll come back around or something like that.

ISOARDI: Sure.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

JANUARY 2, 1999

ISOARDI: Okay, just to go back a minute, you started talking about Central Avenue around '36, '37, when you were out there, and you mentioned Twelfth and Central, which you guys called the bucket of blood because—

TOLBERT: Bucket of blood. That's where all the knife fights and beatings and—Well, a couple of things were happening. The streetcar lines, the U car—

ISOARDI: Went up and down Central?

TOLBERT: Well, at Twelfth and Central you had sort of a miniature hub of the streetcars. The U car, which serviced Central Avenue—

ISOARDI: All the way up and down Central.

TOLBERT: Right. And you had the B car that came around Long Beach [Boulevard] and around up to Twelfth and came across. So at Twelfth and Central you had that transfer station.

ISOARDI: So a big intersection.

TOLBERT: Yeah. And a liquor store here and liquor store there. I mean, I think at one time it may have been all four corners had liquor stores. That's an overstatement, but it was a real transient area.

ISOARDI: Where would the glamour part of the avenue be?

TOLBERT: Up around—

ISOARDI: It wasn't at Twelfth and Central?

TOLBERT: Oh, no. In the other direction, going south. The glamour— Well, they had different little— The Elks auditorium, where most of the dances were, was close to Jefferson High School, which was a big— Almost everybody who went to school went to Jeff. The Elks auditorium was between our house and Jeff. The "affluent"—and I am using affluent in quotes here—most of the folks who had any kind of money, you know, professional people and stuff, moved to the west side.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

TOLBERT: I mean, people bragged about that. As a matter of fact, it was so ironic sometimes. [laughs] Now the west side really means west of Main [Street]; folks who live west of Central Avenue live on the west side. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Just because they wanted to be able to say that.

TOLBERT: Right. [laughs] But you know, that's part of wanting to be in the mainstream of things and stuff.

ISOARDI: Really, really.

TOLBERT: But you know, I was more than just lucky, because my uncle Lee was so popular. And I was sort of like his, not mascot but, valet or something. I mean, for instance, he'd let me load up his drums and pack 'em and stuff.

ISOARDI: So after trying to beat him up and jumping on his back, you guys got along okay after that?

TOLBERT: Yeah, we got along. See, he was the official whipper. I mean, I

didn't know who he was after that first encounter, but I learned it. Because my grandfather was so aristocratic. I'm telling you, he would not administer corporal punishment himself. He'd tell his sister or— [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay, we were talking about how you got to develop a relationship with your uncle Lee.

TOLBERT: Well, after he beat up Alvin with me, I ended up being his sort of personal valet. I'd tear his drums down and put them up and load them up on jobs and stuff, and he would take me with him.

ISOARDI: It must have been kind of exciting. You were—what?—ten, eleven years old?

TOLBERT: Oh, kind of? Oh, man, it was highly exciting. I'll tell you, one night at the Twenty-eighth Street YMCA I was playing basketball with some guys, and uncle Lee and some people from New York were upstairs. There's a balcony up there, and it's dark. I mean, a lot of the old guys would go up there and check out what was happening down on the floor and stuff, but you didn't even know they were there.

So I was playing basketball, and there was a guy on the same team I was on, three on three, who was just a magician with the ball, all-city. He threw me a pass that I never even saw coming; I mean that's how clever he was. He was good. Now, the game preceding the one I'm telling you about, he had been on the losing team. So naturally, since I had the winner, I chose him to be on my team, the best player there.

Anyway, this son of a gun, that ball hit me—bam!—and he is just livid. I hadn't caught the ball, hadn't even seen the ball coming. I mean— [laughs] Well, he tells me to get off the court, you know, "No-playing so-and-so, get off the court!" "Wait a minute. This is my team. I chose you. You get off the court!" Well, I mean, but he was really just irate. And like I'm telling you, he played on the varsity team at Jeff. We all played in the same school, but he was a varsity and I was a C. And, I mean, he was all-city and I wasn't even all-Jeff, you know. [laughs] Anyway— But that superiority was reversed when it came to fighting. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Did you guys start fighting then? [laughs]

TOLBERT: So it soon became apparent if anybody is going to get off this court it ain't going to be me. And to make things even, I mean, another element of the thing, unbeknownst to me, my Uncle Lee and another guy was up in the balcony in the dark. We don't know, you know. A lot of those old guys used to be up there, and this talking— Some guy from New York— Ralph Cooper, that's who it was. And all of a sudden I'm hearing these orders, "Hook! Uppercut! Bam! Bam!" It's Uncle Lee coaching me. [mutual laughter] So the next day they took me over to this gym, bought me all these fancy gym clothes and stuff, and got me a trainer.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

TOLBERT: No. I'll tell you, I must have impressed him, because Uncle Lee was not known for just spending money on you wildly and stuff like that. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Sure!

TOLBERT: Yeah. And I worked out there, and they'd come, Uncle Lee and— Who was this guy? I can't think of his name, but show business folks, you know. They'd take me and get me a malt. You know, that was good enough, and I would be happy. I'd go back to the gym and boom, boom, boom. And one day the trainer, a guy named Smitty, who'd sit around the ring playing checkers— There's this guy up in the ring working out. The guy was named Matthew Oglesby, who was a main eventer welterweight, and here I was a 126-pound amateur. And the trainer calls me, "Hey, champ," talking to me, "you want to work my man out?" "Yeah."

ISOARDI: How old were you when this happened? This is a few years later?

TOLBERT: Yeah, I must be seventeen, sixteen. Yeah, I must have been sixteen, maybe fifteen even. But middle teens. I jumped up in there, and I'm dancing all around, pow, pow, pow!—you know, jabbing quick.

ISOARDI: You're landing some?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah! But I can't hurt Oglesby, man. Oglesby's got his gloves up and stuff. You know, they're just nice. And all of a sudden Oglesby started hitting me. [mutual laughter] Now, usually in the gym the trainer calls time. You know, you're not supposed to just stay there with an open-ended time. Anyway, to make a long story short, when Uncle Lee came to the gym that day, he and— I forgot who he brought with him. I had packed up all that gear. [mutual laughter] I mean, when he came in I gave him his stuff and walked out. That was the end of my fighting

career. And the thing about it was Oglesby wasn't trying to hurt me. I mean, he's a neighborhood guy and he's just working out. But he was hurting me. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: So you knew what a fighter was.

TOLBERT: Oh, man. Bam! Bam! Bing! Oh, lord! [laughs]

ISOARDI: Coney Woodman told me the story about how he was in Chicago, I guess it was around the late thirties, early forties, and he said he was able to survive by getting some money sparring. He always thought he was a pretty good fighter, and he thought, "Well, maybe I'll start out sparring. Maybe something will come out of this," you know. So they threw him in the ring with this one guy, a young up-and-coming fighter. He didn't know where the blows were coming from. He said, "That was it." And you know who the fighter was? This guy named Ray Robinson. [laughs]

TOLBERT: Sugar Ray Robinson, lord have mercy. Probably the greatest boxer ever.

ISOARDI: Yeah, pound for pound, right, the greatest ever. [laughs] That's a hard way to begin.

TOLBERT: Ain't no lie. And see, the thing about it is, they aren't even trying to hurt you. I mean, they're just working out. There's nothing personal. Bam! Bam! Shoot, I tell you. You know, I tell this story about Oglesby. He doesn't know how he changed my life and how grateful I am to him.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Because at this time you were thinking, "Well, maybe there's something here"?

TOLBERT: Well, I mean, let me tell you, Uncle Lee was not known for—

ISOARDI: Yeah, just being frivolous with his money.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: So he was ready to start managing you? [laughs]

TOLBERT: Yeah, I had all that stuff packed up and gave it to him when he came in. I was through with that.

ISOARDI: So you come back to Central Avenue, then, from New Orleans about 1938 or so?

TOLBERT: Let's see. 'Thirty-six, yeah. It may have been early '39, yeah.

ISOARDI: Okay. So you're about twelve, thirteen years old then?

TOLBERT: Yeah. I was twelve but in my thirteenth year, yeah.

ISOARDI: So when you come back you just sort of pick up where you left off?

TOLBERT: Well—

ISOARDI: More or less?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. When I got back I went to live with my aunt, not my grandfather—my aunt out in Watts.

ISOARDI: Which aunt is this?

TOLBERT: This is my mother's sister, Auntie Lillian [Johnson Brown]. She was a rarity in that she was college educated, which was really a rarity in New Orleans at

that time. She had moved to California, and her husband [Buddy Brown], whom she had known in Chicago, had moved out here. So I went to live with them, and I went to Jordan [High School].

ISOARDI: Where did you live in Watts? Do you remember the street?

TOLBERT: 1301 east 112th Street. I remember the address. Yeah, 112th Street. And I went to Jordan.

ISOARDI: Are you in junior high school then, I guess, when you come back? Eighth grade or something like that?

TOLBERT: Well, see, Jordan, it was a great thing, because Jordan had junior high and high combined.

ISOARDI: Seventh through twelfth [grade]? Or it was sixth through twelfth? Something like that, all in the same place?

TOLBERT: Right. Whereas most high schools, ten, eleven, twelve. You could participate in varsity at nine. This is where I met Joe Perry and them, at Jordan. So I was on the same track team as Joe Perry, and I could play decent basketball. But I lettered in three things. I was very quick.

ISOARDI: So you played football, basketball, and you ran track?

TOLBERT: Right. Which—this is an aside—really fooled myself. I was just a natural at fifty yards. Explode out of the holes and— Fifty-yard dash. I mean, the city champion was a Korean guy from Riis [High School] named Dun. My first dual meet, I killed him. Boom! So really thought that I could run. I mean, I really

thought that was something special. Then I moved back up to Jeff in tenth grade—

ISOARDI: But you were still living in Watts?

TOLBERT: No, I came back up into town with— Lucille and I— Where did I live? Well, I guess officially I was living at 1706, but I didn't always stay there. I had a good friend named Johnny Williams. I stayed there at his house a lot. His folks just adopted me, I guess. You know, it was a different kind of world then. I mean, you could do that kind of stuff. You know, your folks know where you are and stuff.

ISOARDI: No problem. So you just transferred to Jeff in tenth grade?

TOLBERT: Right. And the coach there, the track coach— I was okay in football and in basketball. But track, they just thought that I was the man, and certainly coming out of the holes. And that's all they would do then, you know just practice the starts. So that was my forte. Man, I would just blast out of the holes.

ISOARDI: If you're running fifty yards, the start is everything.

TOLBERT: Right, right. Now, there's an inter-squad meet. A guy named Odom Williams—I've known him since the third grade—he's anchoring the second team, and I'm anchoring the team.

ISOARDI: It was like a four [hundred] forty [yard] relay or something?

TOLBERT: Right. And I mean, you see, boy, you're talking about a huge awakening, because I really thought that I was bad. I mean, the cat gave me the stick, and I got the stick running, and I'm hauling, and I hear these footsteps [mimics the sound of approaching footsteps]. [mutual laughter] Four-forty relay, everybody

runs a one [hundred] ten [yards]. I must have had at least five yards when I got the stick. And, man— I mean, you're talking about just impossible, but I hear these footsteps. [laughs] Man, pretty soon Odom went right on by me. I mean, it was a good ten yards difference. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay, you were talking about the end of your days as a track star, the four-forty relay and your friend Odom.

TOLBERT: Well, I mean, I already told you. A hundred and ten yards, I had at least a five-yard advantage and lost by at least five yards. I mean, in a hundred and ten he was ten yards better. Now, you're talking about a sudden and instant realization. Because there was nothing, and I'm telling you. Yeah, I'm talking about Odom. All right. Anyway, that's one of life's lessons.

ISOARDI: Before we get too far away from it, let me ask you. You were down in Watts for only a short period of time, I guess—about a year, two years, maybe?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What was Watts like back then?

TOLBERT: Oh, man. People—

ISOARDI: This is in the late thirties?

TOLBERT: No, let me tell you. We were the envy of the black population here in Los Angeles, excluding the west side. But, I mean, that was a huge step up. I mean, the new houses—

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: No, we bragged about moving to Watts. Yeah, I mean, that shows you how things change. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Yeah. Oh, no. My uncle, Uncle Buddy, was a Pullman porter.

ISOARDI: This is on your dad's side?

TOLBERT: No, my mom's side. Well, my aunt was my mom's sister, and he was her husband. And she was some kind of supervisor at Gold's Furniture Store, which was a big thing in the black community.

ISOARDI: Was that on 103rd [Street]?

TOLBERT: No, 103rd was the big thing in Watts. No, we lived on 112th, but she still worked at Gold's, which is at Washington [Boulevard] and Central. So they drove in, and my uncle was a Pullman porter. So, I mean, for that time they were doing great.

ISOARDI: They were doing okay. Pullman porter.

TOLBERT: A Pullman porter, and she was— And I kept telling you, at one time she was the only female black person I knew that had gone to college. She had finished college, and at church and stuff she'd be introduced as that, I mean, that kind of stuff. So she was very education oriented.

ISOARDI: Yeah. What was the neighborhood like around 112th?

TOLBERT: Single dwelling, upper-mobility folks. I'm telling you, people bragged about moving out there.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Was it mixed, also?

TOLBERT: It was segregated. That's not seeing it as being mixed, though.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

TOLBERT: I mean, for instance, my real tight partner who lived right across the street was Amando Hernandez. Then there were maybe five Mexican families in the whole neighborhood. Watts, when we lived there, was like really high on the hog for black folks. I mean, people bragged about— You had the Blogett tract houses, new homes, and stuff like that. In retrospect it was just that things around Central Avenue were so old and—

ISOARDI: Oh, by this time, yeah.

TOLBERT: Yeah. So it was people who had jobs and stuff. Then when Pearl Harbor came, everything just stopped as far as housing and stuff like that.

ISOARDI: What about Jordan? What was that like, going to Jordan High School?

TOLBERT: Well, Jordan was fractionally, I would say, a third Caucasian, a third Chicano, and a third black. Yeah.

ISOARDI: It was a pretty mixed school.

TOLBERT: Yeah, it was.

ISOARDI: Were there any problems? Did people get along?

TOLBERT: Sure. I mean, a lot of school spirit there. Me, I got in fights all the time. But I think the first day that I was at Jordan they had a game with a football. Whoever had the football was fair game to be tackled. Now, this is out on the

playground—no pads or anything. But you'd get the ball, you'd try to elude folks and stuff like that. And this one guy, Sammy something, he had the ball. I tackled him. That was what the game was all about. And we had some words. You know, I'm the newcomer out there. But I didn't feel like a stranger—you know, just some other dudes. Well, that day after school he—he had a couple of his friends with him, too—accosted me. We're walking down 103rd Street, and he's telling me about, "You think you're halfway smart. You think you're bad now." So I didn't know where he was coming from and stuff, but, you know, I was streetwise enough to know—

ISOARDI: Yeah, what was going on.

TOLBERT: Yeah, right. So, I don't know, I tried to talk him out of it, but it wasn't going to happen. And I could see his henchmen; they're still around there too. And I could see him working into it and stuff. And I said, "Well, man, I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what's happening around here." He said, "Yeah, yeah, you from the city." I said, "Man, shit, I live a couple of doors down." Anyway, I could see these other two dudes getting in position, so I knew I had to do something. So I blasted that son of a bitch right in his eye— bam!—and started hauling, and I left his ass on the ground. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: And by the time they got over the shock you were gone?

TOLBERT: That's right. I left his ass on the ground. [mutual laughter] They couldn't catch me. But I was scared to come out. So some of the bigger guys who

had seen me play football and stuff, they came by my house and said, "You don't have to worry. Ain't nobody going to bother you."

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: That's right. So then I went back, and I saw Sammy again. And I mean, he had that look about him but by now, you know, I know I can kick his ass. [mutual laughter] So I ended up being very popular at Jordan.

ISOARDI: A good experience for you?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What about musically? Was there anything going on in Watts?

TOLBERT: Yeah. I played in the band there for a minute. Some good guys came out of Watts. Mr. [Joseph Louis] Lippi was the bandmaster there. But I was really just a fuck-up then. I mean, because I didn't get in the band. I should have. Because my aunt and uncle whom I was living with then looked down on that kind of stuff.

ISOARDI: On music?

TOLBERT: Oh, man. Musicians were next to sailors. So music went out the window. But then, when I got to the tenth grade—

ISOARDI: At Jeff?

TOLBERT: I came back up to Jeff— I mean, I came back into L.A. See, Jeff started at ten.

ISOARDI: Oh, the high school did, right?

TOLBERT: Yeah—ten, eleven, twelve. So ninth is really a part of high school, but very few schools had the curriculum that Jordan had. Riis maybe had the same thing. But anyway, I was now at Jeff. And a lot of guys I had known from grammar school and stuff [were there], so it was easy.

ISOARDI: When you were in Watts, did you not have any contact with your grandfather? I mean, you weren't going to him for lessons then or anything like that?

TOLBERT: Very little. There were some guys who knew he was my grandfather, like Mingus, Charles Mingus, bass player.

ISOARDI: That's right. He came out of Watts. Did you have any contact with him?

TOLBERT: Well, I just knew that he took lessons from my grandfather. Oh, Mingus was something else. Man, he'd get on the streetcar with that bass, come to my grandfather's for lessons. And they knew that Pres— I mean the guys who were musicians like Donald Johnson, Teddy Lupe, I mean guys who were serious about the music stuff— [Cecil "Big] Jay" McNeely. But he wasn't— I mean, Jay was a mutation. But Jay McNeely. Jay started off just as a nice, good, solid player. He and a guy named Albert Elam and somebody else were the joy of Mr. Lippi's band. Lippi was the bandmaster out there. And Jay stumbled upon a gimmick.

ISOARDI: You mean when he moved into R and B [rhythm and blues]?

TOLBERT: Yeah, and started falling on the floor and twisting and all that kind of stuff. But it was money making.

ISOARDI: Yeah, no question. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: Well, you know. But Albert Elam— And Mr. Lippi was the bandmaster. They expected way more from me than I was able to provide in more ways than one. First of all, the people I was living with, my aunt and uncle, were very disdainful. They didn't really put down my grandfather and that whole set in Los Angeles. But things worked out all right.

ISOARDI: So Big Jay is out there, Mingus is out there.

TOLBERT: But Mingus used to come. I'm telling you, he used to take lessons, come up on the streetcar with that bass to my grandfather.

ISOARDI: Did you have any contact with him at all?

TOLBERT: Who, Mingus?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: You know, he's not out here that much. But I have seen him through the years. Usually when he comes down here he hangs out with Buddy Collette, and I'm pretty tight with Buddy. I did something for Mingus maybe, ten, fifteen years ago. Most of the jazz musicians who had been in legal problems, they'd call Mingus.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I guess he was a couple of years older than you.

TOLBERT: Who, Mingus?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Yeah. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: There's a lot of musical talent down there.

TOLBERT: In Watts?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: I know Mingus was a few years older than you. Did you know him during the late thirties?

TOLBERT: Well, I knew Mingus before he was Mingus. Well, his father worked at the same place that my aunt did, Gold's—

ISOARDI: Oh, Gold's Furniture Store?

TOLBERT: Furniture and clothing store, right. So family-wise you sort of know each other.

ISOARDI: Kind of a connection?

TOLBERT: Right. And then when I tell you he took lessons from my grandfather, and that in itself was a strange sight to see this wild man on the streetcar with a bass. He and Buddy were really tight back then even, because sometimes they'd be having duets on the streetcar. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: You know, it's kind of funny, though, imagining Mingus, who was pretty crazy even as a kid, and your grandfather in the same room. [laughs]

TOLBERT: Well, my grandfather was held in such esteem that even Mingus would—

ISOARDI: He'd watch it?

TOLBERT: Right. You know, Buddy and Jackie Kelso [also known as Jack Kelson] like to talk about their early beginnings and stuff and that the first band that they played in was Al Adams's band.

ISOARDI: Yeah, they've talked about that.

TOLBERT: Oh, you've interviewed them?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Well, let me tell you, Al Adams was one of my grandfather's star pupils. And the way you got recognition that my grandfather thought a lot about you was that he would allow that student to play with the family band.

ISOARDI: So Al Adams played with the family?

TOLBERT: So Al Adams played in our little family band. And Al Adams had a thing for my sister, the one you just met, and the guy had to get a whipping! [mutual laughter] Lord have mercy.

ISOARDI: Okay, let see. Watts, the music scene in Watts. A lot going on. Mingus is there, Big Jay is there. I know you're still just a—what?—ninth grader, but do you remember any places people would go down there to hear music, clubs, things like that? Was there anything like that going on that you remember?

TOLBERT: Yes and no. I mean, like Johnny Otis was on the set here then. And Johnny had—

ISOARDI: Well, not when you were in Jordan, was it?

TOLBERT: Well, yeah. Because, see, Johnny had come out here during the war.

Jo Jones was drafted, Basie's drummer. And Jimmy Witherspoon was working on the trains as a porter.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Yeah. And I'm trying to think who it was who sent word to come— Anyway, they got Johnny Otis out here. I mean "Spoon" was the conduit. Now, I'm trying to think. Yeah, he came out here— Wait. Whose band was it? Johnny Otis came and—

ISOARDI: He played with—

TOLBERT: It must have been Basie.

ISOARDI: I know he was playing at one point with Harlan Leonard's Rockets.

TOLBERT: Well, yeah. Hold on a minute. But no, he came out here because Jo Jones went into the service. Jo Jones was Basie's drummer.

ISOARDI: Oh, and they got Johnny Otis to sit in with Basie's band?

TOLBERT: Right. That's why Johnny came here from Omaha. Yeah. And I said Spoon was the messenger. Okay.

ISOARDI: All right.

TOLBERT: That's all I can do with that.

ISOARDI: One thing we actually haven't talked about yet, but your referring to your aunt and uncle in Watts made me think of it, and that is religion, church. Does this play a role in your upbringing at all in your family?

TOLBERT: Oh, man. My grandfather on my father's side was one of those

itinerant ministers. He had four churches.

ISOARDI: Right, you mentioned that.

TOLBERT: My father was an ordained minister who preached from time to time at the Second Baptist Church in New Orleans. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: The importance of church in your early years. You mentioned your father was a— So you were in church a lot?

TOLBERT: My grandfather was a minister, ordained minister. My father was an ordained minister. I grew up, as a matter of fact, because of that fluke, learning how to read. I told you about my sister and brother having to go, and I was there, and I learned how to read. I used to read the scripture, oh, more often than not. This is like the eleven o'clock service.

ISOARDI: Which denomination was your father?

TOLBERT: Baptist.

ISOARDI: So when you came out to L.A., were you in church a lot then as well?

TOLBERT: Oh, we played— I mean, my grandfather had the band at St. Paul [Baptist Church], and we provided the music. Yeah. I mean, that was every Sunday, babe. [mutual laughter] As a matter of fact, I can tell you a story. When we played at Second Baptist [Church], Reverend Williams was the pastor, and we played there. Then, for some reason, and this was like— I think it was before Pearl Harbor but I'm not sure. But my grandfather got converted to Father Divine. Now, my grandfather was the kind of person, when he was converted, everybody in

the house was converted. [laughs] So instead of playing like on Sundays and sometimes for rehearsals, we are now playing every night in one of Father Divine's temples around here, right around Southern California. And it's the same tunes. I mean, there's "Take all your troubles to your Father Divine and smile, smile, smile," that kind of stuff. Well, my brother played trombone and I played trumpet, and it's boring. I mean, you can just play those same tunes over and over and stuff. And we've got to sit there while they deliver the message and stuff. So I don't know why we did this, but the mouthpiece of a trombone, which is my brother's instrument, won't fit into the neck of a trumpet. The trumpet mouthpiece in the neck of the trombone just wobbles around. But we had traded mouthpieces.

ISOARDI: Oh, God. [laughs]

TOLBERT: And you know how you're messing around, and it's sort of an implied dare. So I got this trombone mouthpiece with my horn, and it won't go in the neck, but I can hold it with my lips so that most of the air gets to it. And I kept messing around, messing around. You know, the temptation is there, but you know the consequences are really rough, so you are not going to do it. You're not going to do it, but you keep on messing with it. And sure enough, I made some kind of sound with the trombone mouthpiece just by pressure on the neck on of the trumpet and [mimics the sound of one loud, ragged note]. My grandfather looked, never said a word, just pointed his finger. "Outside."

ISOARDI: Both of you?

TOLBERT: Both of us. Outside, whipped us, brought us back on in there.

ISOARDI: Huh.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Papa Young was not a man to be messing around with. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Jeez. You mentioned also that he continued the family band playing around town. Were there other gigs that the family band played other than church?

TOLBERT: We played mostly churches.

ISOARDI: It was mostly churches?

TOLBERT: Right. But now Martha [Young], my cousin—she's dead now—was just an exceptional pianist.

ISOARDI: Pianist. I know of her. I know Clora Bryant's talked about her.

TOLBERT: Okay. Well, see, Martha is the only one who stayed with music as the career.

ISOARDI: Among Willis's grandchildren?

TOLBERT: Right. Lucille—you met her, my sister—sort of, because she plays for a lot of churches like in New Orleans and stuff. She plays for a lot of different churches down there and for special events and stuff. But Lucille was a tremendous alto saxophone player. She could mime, she could dance. And I'm telling you, a lot of times my Aunt Irma, we'd get double booked. I told you this.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah.

TOLBERT: And Lucille could do one of the gigs, and nobody knew the difference.

ISOARDI: Was your cousin Martha Irma's daughter, your Aunt Irma's daughter?

TOLBERT: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: So what was the lineup in the band when you were playing around here?

TOLBERT: Martha on piano. Lucille and Martha changed, but Lucille played alto also, so Martha's on piano mostly. My brother on trombone, me trumpet, my cousin "Brownie" [Crawford Brown] on tambourines and stuff like that. Papa Young played whatever instrument he wanted to play. Mama Young, I told you, who had the leg amputated, played baritone saxophone. And frequently we were augmented by some of his students. You know, Al Adams comes to mind. There was a trombone player named Roof or something. I can't even remember his— We're talking about the thirties, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah. [laughs] Really, really.

TOLBERT: So it was fun.

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JANUARY 9, 1999

ISOARDI: I think last time we talked about your years at Jeff [Jefferson High School]. What happens when you graduate from Jeff?

TOLBERT: I never graduated.

ISOARDI: You never graduated from Jefferson High School?

TOLBERT: No. I quit.

ISOARDI: Why did you quit?

TOLBERT: Just fashionable to do. The dudes I ran around with and stuff, that was the fashionable thing to do, just quit. I mean, all those squares and stuff, you know, we was already superior to them. And it was wartime, and most— Things were just loose. I mean, I was almost draft age, almost a lot of things.

ISOARDI: So you were sixteen years old, around there?

TOLBERT: Yeah. And I had been living out in Watts with my aunt [Lillian Johnson Brown] and uncle [Buddy Brown]. And at Jordan [High School] you could do things on the varsity level in the ninth grade, like junior high school and high school rolled into one. Well, Jordan had the whole thing from the seventh through graduation, whereas high schools, you started in the tenth. So I had already been playing football and running track and stuff with guys who were good for there. But Jeff was a different thing altogether, especially in track and field. Because I thought

that I was something special. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Until that race. [laughs]

TOLBERT: I mean, I tell you. I couldn't believe that I could hear these footsteps coming up, because I— The coach thought I was the best, because he made me the anchor man on the A team. So, shucks, when they had this relay, the first time we were really running for good, and I— In fact, this guy is really a good friend of mine now, Odom Williams. Odom was the anchor man on the second team. And, man, I'll never forget hearing the sounds of his footsteps coming up on me [mimics the sound of approaching footsteps].

ISOARDI: When you quit you're in your mid-teens. What did you want to do?

TOLBERT: Well, I don't know if I had any direction or that I quit because of something. You know, it was—

ISOARDI: Just the thing to do?

TOLBERT: Right. You know, I had this disdainful attitude about squares at school and stuff. Just dumb, that's all. You know, you can't make burlap be silk. This is just dumb. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: What did you do then?

TOLBERT: I hung out. I mean, the thing about it is I may as well have been going to school, because most of the activity was around Jeff. I just wasn't going to class, but I'd—

ISOARDI: At all the activities?

TOLBERT: Right. One time I had the crap game going over around the boys' gym. I'd bring the dice. And it's amazing how if you have the right attitude and stuff you can make other folks move out of the way. Now, these were the lunch tables over by the boys' gym. I'd just come up and tell the guy, "All right, move on away from here now. My game is starting." And they'd all just get up and move. So I'd run the dice games, cut the games. So it was no gamble for me; I was cutting the games. I was going to supply the dice and tell everybody else to move. They moved, so fine. I didn't last too long either. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: When did you start doing something? Did you get a job eventually?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Let's see. No, I quit school, and my partner and I, Johnny Williams— They called him "Johnny Bowleg," a tremendous athlete, especially in football. Well, he was from Houston, and I had never been to Houston, and somehow we decided to go to Houston. I mean, there wasn't anybody to stop us. So we went to Houston, and what happened? I'm eighteen now, so I had to be registered. You know, it's still wartime.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right.

TOLBERT: So what happened? I left from Houston— My family is in New Orleans. And I think Johnny—that's my partner—got drafted from Houston, so then I went on to New Orleans. And this is during the heyday of World War II. Now, I mean the war is really going on strong.

ISOARDI: So probably '43, '44, maybe?

TOLBERT: Around in there. And you could get jobs. You know, they advertised if you could do anything with a shovel or a pick or any kind of job, they would pay your way to the job site and then take out from your earnings the transportation to get you there.

So they had this place up—damn—right across the river from Louisville, Kentucky. It's in Indiana. I can't think of the name of the town. Charlestown. Charlestown. That's what it was too; the town belonged to Mr. Charles. [laughter] And it was the E.I. du Pont [de Nemours and Company] power plant that we were doing something with building. Anyway, they were involved in some fashion. And I ran into a guy who was just a gambler. And in these camps you had a lot of folks who couldn't read or write. So I made as much money writing letters and stuff for guys as I did on the job, which was pretty good. Anyway, I had a guy who was a good gambler, and we hooked up. He had some relatives in California, and I wanted to come back home. And as a matter of fact, my wanting to go back home, home being Los Angeles, really escalated when the— You know, we're still talking about during the war. So the guy from the induction center came to the job site and personally handed me— [laughs]

ISOARDI: Your induction notice? [Tolbert laughs] Jeez.

TOLBERT: So I had to report to some central induction center in Louisville, Kentucky, which was right across the river from where I was working. And the guy there was really a very cagey, wise, old man, because I started saying, "Well, what am

I going to do? I haven't seen my family in so long. And I've been—" He said, "Don't worry. We're going to start you off with a thirty-day vacation." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, that sounds good, eh? [laughs] Smart guy.

TOLBERT: That's what happened. I started out with a thirty-day furlough. I had thirty days to report to [Fort] MacArthur. So I went to New Orleans, saw my dad, then on back to L.A., and at the right time I reported to Fort MacArthur, and that's where my army career started.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Let me ask you before you get into that, during your high school years and when you leave Jeff, what does L.A. and Central like then? Were you on the scene much? Were you going in clubs and—?

TOLBERT: First of all, my grandfather [Willis H. Young] was the music teacher.

ISOARDI: And he's still around in the early forties?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. He was still around then. And one of his sons was really already being lionized as a very creative jazz musician. That was Lester [Young]. The other son, Lee [Young], who was sort of my boyhood idol, was on the scene here and was just as much of a pioneer in so far as things like motion pictures as "Pres"—Lester—was in so far as the real world of jazz. But Lee was the guy who does a big movie with Mickey Rooney and them called *Strike Up the Band*. Well, Lee, my Uncle Lee, did all the drumming for that, also tutored Mickey Rooney on how to hold the sticks and how to look like he was doing it and stuff. So right away,

in our community Lee was as big as Lester, maybe even bigger.

And the fact that we lived right next door to the black musicians local [American Federation of Musicians, Local 767] was another thing. Most of the guys, good musicians used to come and seminar with my grandfather, who was just a genius. I mean, he played every instrument, could write.

ISOARDI: He taught everything, then?

TOLBERT: Taught everything. Played everything.

ISOARDI: Amazing.

TOLBERT: Played everything. Oh, yeah. The local number was 767. [laughs] It stayed that way until the amalgamation. Years later Buddy Collette and them came on the set. You know, it doesn't make sense to have separate locals, black locals and white locals. So Local 47 and Local 767 just sort of merged.

ISOARDI: What was the avenue like? Are there any clubs that you could get into when you got out of Jeff?

TOLBERT: I could get into all the clubs, because I worked in them, you know. I mean—

ISOARDI: Worked in them?

TOLBERT: Yeah, but not as a musician or entertainer. No, just whatever labor that needed to be done. Like for instance, the number-one club was the Club Alabam. And Mr. [Curtis] Mosby, and later on— I forgot the people's names now. But like my Uncle Lee was very popular. He always had some kind of group that played

around and stuff. So in addition to being the band's valet—really that amounted to just setting up his drums and stuff—I was always around. So like Mr. Nelson, who owned— Mr. Nelson was the guy who owned— I don't know if he owned the Dunbar [Hotel], but [he was] certainly a big influence at the Dunbar Hotel and I'm pretty sure some of the property around there. I worked for him mostly just cleaning up stuff—you know, just a gopher.

ISOARDI: So even though you are under age, it wasn't an issue?

TOLBERT: No, nobody ever cared about that.

ISOARDI: Didn't Lee have a big band toward the end of the thirties, early forties?

TOLBERT: Well, Lee had several bands. Probably the one, the most well received, was when Lester came out here and they had a band together, the Lee and Lester Young [Band]. And they played places like the Trouville and— Oh, I can't think of the name of the other place. But guys like Irving Ashby, who later on became well known with Nat [King Cole]. Guys like— I'm trying to think. Parr Jones was a trumpet player. But they had a band that worked a lot. And a lot of the movies of that time used them. Like it was almost just automatic that Lee would be on the band in the movie and on the soundtrack.

ISOARDI: Right. I know at one point, didn't he—? I remember reading Art Pepper's autobiography, and he said that when he was just a kid he was playing in one of these bands, which was kind of pioneering in a way, because that made it an integrated band, which before World War II wasn't so common, was it?

TOLBERT: Well, Lee was really way ahead of his time in so far as race relations was concerned, because you couldn't be much more white than Art Pepper. And you had separate locals. You had the black local, Local 767, which we lived right next door to, and Local 47, which was in Hollywood. And Lee had his band, and there's this little white alto saxophone player, Art Pepper. [mutual laughter] Yeah. Art was a— And he could play. I mean, it wasn't just that he was white; he could play.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Oh, he was a beautiful player, jeez.

TOLBERT: And that's what Lee said was "I'm looking for the best talent." You see, Lee was— The history of jazz in and around L.A. really— I mean, Lee deserves a bigger slice of what was happening than he really received.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: I mean, he was one of those first, you know, but it's just all taken for granted like.

ISOARDI: Wasn't he on staff in one of the studios?

TOLBERT: Right. He was the first dude, first black dude that I knew of.

ISOARDI: He was, to get a regular studio job?

TOLBERT: Like all staff— I mean, whether they worked or not, he got paid, which was really almost unheard of.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Yeah. It was Columbia [Pictures], maybe. But yeah, he was definitely on staff of one of the major studios and got paid whether they were working

or not.

ISOARDI: And was the first as far as you know?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah. It's interesting. He's one of these people, too, whose lives— It wasn't just music. I mean, other steps he took really had implications beyond music.

TOLBERT: Oh, he was a very, very big influence to a lot of young boys in the neighborhood. Lee was sort of a frustrated athlete. I mean, he had wanted to be a prize fighter. He was a good basketball player, a good baseball player and stuff, but his father, my grandfather, wasn't going to have any of that. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: You know, it seemed like when I was interviewing him, too, I mean we had to squeeze in the interview sessions between his rounds of golf.

TOLBERT: Okay. [laughs] Now, let me tell you—

ISOARDI: Every day he just is doing something athletic.

TOLBERT: —he is a hell of a competitor. That's right.

ISOARDI: And here's a man in his eighties. [laughs]

TOLBERT: That's right. And let me tell you, it's a lot of those who will tell you that had he wanted to he could have been on the tour. I mean, that's how good of a golfer he became.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

TOLBERT: He's the kind of guy, whatever he gets into he won't stop until he gets to the maximum thing of it. Yeah. I mean, that's—

ISOARDI: Strong will.

TOLBERT: Yeah, very.

ISOARDI: Now, it sounds like he must have butted heads with your grandfather a few times over.

TOLBERT: There ain't no butting heads there. Papa Young didn't take to no butting heads.

ISOARDI: [laughs] No? [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: That's a cinch lose there. [mutual laughter] No, no, no. He had to wait for the next generation before he could assert anything. Shucks. [mutual laughter] Oh, man. I mean, if you're talking about Lee— See, because he wanted to be a prize fighter.

ISOARDI: Lee did?

TOLBERT: Oh! Lee had amazingly fast hands and stuff. I mean, he would have been a hell of a fighter. And he used to slip off and go down— You ever hear of John Henry Louis?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: John Henry Lewis, light heavyweight champion of the world for a good while. And his brother, Cappy Lewis, who was a welterweight, middleweight and stuff, but he wasn't as well known as John Henry, obviously. But wherever they were— See, like this was before they settled in Los Angeles. But Lee would slip off and go down there and spar with them and stuff until my grandfather found out about

it and took his strap, went down there and beat his but all the way back home. [mutual laughter] Yeah. But it's a lot of folks, I mean especially a lot of the musicians, who thought they were tough and stuff who weren't going to mess with Lee. Lee could fight.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: Fast, fast hands. I found out myself, I mean, because I was going to be a prizefighter.

ISOARDI: He also seems to have led in just about any period until I guess he went into the management band side of the business. It seems like every band he had was like an all-star— Were like the best players around.

TOLBERT: Well, his own persona was such that he was almost a snob, I mean as musicians go. I mean, inferior musicians didn't get any kind of action from him. [laughs] And he wasn't bashful about— I mean, every group he had, just look at the personnel and you'll see. Like when he had groups there would be like on guitar somebody like Irving Ashby, you know, cats who were destined to be right up there at the top.

ISOARDI: Yeah, great players.

TOLBERT: Yeah. So, no, he didn't— And the thing about it is, normally the drummer is not, unless you're talking about like Chick Webb or somebody who had— But usually the musicians are the ones who write the scores and write the arrangements and stuff. Because I was the valet for some of his bands. They all respected him as

though he invented music. I mean, he definitely had a good hand on his bands.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: It just struck me. How is it possible for you at about sixteen years old to just quit school when you've got a grandfather like Willis around and an uncle like Lee around? I thought they might have hunted you down. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: Well, I had some other relatives who lived in Watts, so I went— Why did I leave Central Avenue, though? I was mad about something. Oh, no, no. Quite the contrary. I came the other way around. [laughs] Let's see. Well, World War II had something to do with it, because I went to Jordan— First of all, I was more into things athletic than music.

ISOARDI: So Lee could respect that, I guess, right, because—?

TOLBERT: Well, he was sort of torn in that direction, too.

ISOARDI: Right. So he could identify maybe with that.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah, he could identify. And in his own situation he had to dance to Papa Young's music. I told you the time when Papa Young went over to where Lee was working out with one of the great welter middleweights of his time, John Henry Lewis's brother. John Henry Lewis was light heavyweight champion of the world; his brother was Cappy Lewis. My Uncle Lee used to work out with them and stuff. And the last thing Papa wanted to hear about was prizefighting. It was "barbaric," "ignorant." Papa Young was a well-educated dude, played every

instrument. You know, "You're going to be a musician. That's all there is to it." [laughs] But Lee was given to athletics. I mean, although he was recognized as a top-notch drummer and stuff, there were always things like the entertainment circuit so to speak. The dancers would have a basketball team, the musicians would have a— Lee was always in the middle of all that stuff. I mean, like at Ross Snyder Playground—this is back in the thirties—they'd have people with different softball teams. Lee always had a team, softball team, that he was the captain of and recruited guys [for] and stuff. And if you were lucky you could play with the team. I mean, I must have been twelve years old or so, and the big thrill was to go out there and run the balls down that they hit and stuff. [mutual laughter] You know, the Mills Brothers lived around here somewhere, and they played in it and stuff. They had a little league like the dancers against the musicians and stuff like that.

ISOARDI: I seem to remember a photograph, and I think it's Tom Reed's book, of a basketball team, and I think Lee is in it and Charles Mingus and— Or am I—?

TOLBERT: I don't remember Mingus playing, but Lee was always in whatever the athletic thing was, usually the captain. Yeah. And I used to just run behind him all the time. So you couldn't help but have some of that rub off on you.

ISOARDI: When you first came out here you studied with your grandfather a bit, and then when you came back and you lived in Watts you weren't doing that. Did you ever hook up with your grandfather again?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I eventually got tired of Watts and left there and

came back up into town. [laughs] I went to Jordan. Jordan was sort of a country-style Jefferson, because [it was] in the country, Watts. But at that time, you've got to remember, L.A. was a pretty segregated place. So this was new homes, and my aunt and uncle were workers, semiprofessional workers, and moving to Watts at that time was considered a big step up, to show you how things change. One of the good things about Jordan for me was that the junior high and high was combined. So high school really starts at the ninth grade, whereas if you are going to go to Jeff or somewhere you've got to wait till the tenth grade before you can go there. I mean, I think I made like letters in basketball, track, and football almost simultaneously. [laughs]

ISOARDI: As a ninth grader.

TOLBERT: Yeah. But I came back. Well, my grandfather hadn't died and Uncle Lee was still around, so when I got to the tenth grade I came back to Jeff.

ISOARDI: I see, and then you kind of hooked up with him. But you weren't studying with him, though, were you then?

TOLBERT: No. No, no. I don't even know where my horn was during that time. I eventually got a horn, another horn. I'm trying to think what happened. Well, I was sort of focused on being an athlete by this time and was pretty good, I mean good enough to be playing with grown men. They had a [football] team they called the L.A. [Los Angeles] Bulldogs, and they were a semipro team. These were the guys who all made big names in high school and college, and they let me play with them.

So I must have been all right.

ISOARDI: Very good, yeah, really.

L.A. then is very segregated. I guess the housing covenants are certainly keeping the black population along Central Avenue.

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: What's it like during the war? Are there any problems? Because there's certainly lots of servicemen coming in from all parts of the country.

TOLBERT: Well, the war, the influx of a lot of soldiers coming through here, did a lot to change— You had one very famous situation that happened when Nat Cole—I think it was Nat—bought a house sort of like in Hancock Park. Or maybe that's not exactly right, but it's— Was it Hancock Park? And restricted covenants were enforceable.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: And I think that was a landmark case that sort of shot a lot of that stuff down. But yeah, L.A. on paper and in the promo and stuff was great; "everybody is welcome." The truth of the matter is that that wasn't so. I mean, most of the black folks lived right around Central Avenue, one side of the Central Avenue somewhere between Twelfth [Street] and maybe as far as Vernon [Avenue]. And then there's a long way until Watts, and there's black folks again.

ISOARDI: But that area from Vernon, Slauson [Avenue] down to Watts was solidly white, right?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, I'll tell you, Fremont High School is somewhere in that area we're talking about. It was expected when, with like same league but southern leagues— It was Manual [Arts High School], Fremont, Jeff, Roosevelt [High School], and I forgot what else. But when we'd go over to Fremont for a football game, basketball game, or something, it was not unusual— As a matter of fact, you got in the habit of looking up at the flagpole. They'd have a black dummy hanging from their flagpole, Fremont High School. And as a matter of fact— I can't think of the guy's name, the guy who was the superintendent of the high schools. Dr. Stoddard. Fremont was lily white; no black folks at all going to Fremont. But, you know, with the influx, Fremont was the school. And some of the parents said they were going to hold their kids out, because they were not going to school with these black kids. Dr. Stoddard went to the district attorney's office, "I have complaints against these parents and stuff. Put their behinds in jail if their kids don't come to school." That took care of that. And all of a sudden everything was— Not all of a sudden, but it came to be that nobody got killed, nobody got— You know, people got along. But, I mean, the first black kids who went to Fremont, the parents took their kids out of school until the superintendent of education said "You're going to jail if they don't go to school." I mean, that's Los Angeles.

ISOARDI: Jeez! Battle.

So you come back, you get drafted, you're in the army. This is about 1944, maybe? You're eighteen years old?

TOLBERT: I didn't go into the army until '45, but I was registered. But that's when I worked all over the country. They had all kinds of job opportunities—builders and stuff. And I ended up in Indiana working in an E.I. du Pont thing building a power plant or something. But you had to register wherever you were. So when I first left here I went to Houston, where my partner was from, and I was there for a while. Then I went to New Orleans, and I played football and basketball there. And then I moved on to a job— And they used to advertise in the papers and stuff from around the country. They'd pay your way to the job site and take the transportation out of you're earnings and stuff. So I ended up in Indiana at this du Pont construction thing, and that's where I was working when—

ISOARDI: When they got you. [mutual laughter] The guy offered you a thirty-day vacation not to— [laughs] Too much. So about '45 you finally do go in, then?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. So I had to report to Fort MacArthur at a certain time, so it was a lot like a delayed route. I got back here maybe two or three days before going into MacArthur. And then I went on out there, and there were all my old high school cronies and stuff who were now big-time graduates and stuff. Which was a blessing in itself, because I always had, since I was a little boy— I told you my sister and I had an older brother, and my mom was sick so they had to go to sort of like a special school, and I had to go with them. So I learned how to read at a very early age, and it was something that was just natural and stuff. But I didn't have

any special thing about it; I just liked to read.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

TOLBERT: When you'd first go into the service, they'd give you this test to see where they're going to place you— whether you're going to be in the [inaudible] or whether you're going to be in this.

ISOARDI: Oh, right, right.

TOLBERT: And the score was so high it was totally inconsistent with this high school dropout. [mutual laughter] So they called me back in, retested me. You know, "Something's up here."

ISOARDI: They didn't believe it. [laughs]

TOLBERT: I got higher.

ISOARDI: Are you kidding?

TOLBERT: I got higher. [mutual laughter] Yeah.

ISOARDI: Where did they put you?

TOLBERT: Well, I was supposed to go straight to OCS [Officer's Candidate School] on my papers and stuff, but that never happened. But as it turned out, it was really a blessing in disguise. We had a really segregated army at that time, and Captain Lewis— And I guess it was just— Well, I don't know. It just was that Captain Lewis definitely wanted to minimize the lack of education with most black troops, so he wanted to build his company along I.Q. lines. Everybody had their service records there and stuff, and I had the highest I.Q. there, including his. So he put me in

charge of putting this company together. So everybody in the company with any kind of position at all was beholden to me.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: So, I mean, it was definitely my company. [laughs] So what job did I give myself? Oh, charge of the PX [post exchange]. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That is smart. [laughs] Soldiers' favorite place almost.

TOLBERT: Oh, no, no, no! That isn't quite right. A guy who had definitely saved— This guy— He's dead now. I barely knew him, really. But when we were up north at Fort Lewis we had played basketball and stuff in the gym hours, free time, but, I mean, he wasn't really a tight partner or anything. But he really saved me from all kinds of hell in the service, because we were about to go overseas.

ISOARDI: Which way, Asia?

TOLBERT: Yeah. And you had everything you owned on your back. I mean duffel bag, barracks bag, M-1 rifle, side arm, all this. That shit is heavy. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, really.

TOLBERT: I mean, and I had actually thought— And this big old bag I'm carrying here is heavy. And I mean, shit, there ain't nothing I can't take from somebody else. So I threw the damn bag down on the side just in time for this little old second lieutenant to see me. "Soldier!" [mimics the sound of orders being angrily barked at him] So, you know, boy, you have to be lucky to survive some of these things now.

I mean, we're talking about wartime, and this man is telling me to pick up this bag, and I'm telling him what he can do. "You little second lieutenant son of a bitch." Man, I mean, now if he takes his pistol and shoots me it's okay according to army regulations and stuff— You know, a direct order and stuff. This guy whom I just knew but not really well but just played basketball in the gym and stuff at Fort Lewis, I don't know how he sized this situation up so keenly, because, I mean, the man had got his side arm out already.

ISOARDI: Just because you threw down a duffel bag?

TOLBERT: And wouldn't pick it up. So he indicated to the lieutenant that I was nuts. He just was like that, you know, nuts. And he picked up my bag, carrying all his stuff and mine. And I guess the lieutenant was relieved—"Well, I showed him" and stuff— because he went on about his business. And then I couldn't let that dude just keep on carrying my bag, so maybe after an eighth of a mile or so I took my stuff back. But I mean, you know, this is during wartime, and they could have shot me.

ISOARDI: Yeah, really.

TOLBERT: Okay. So you have to be lucky on some days.

ISOARDI: Yeah. How long were you in?

TOLBERT: I was in about two years and a couple of months, something like that. But that was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

ISOARDI: Why?

TOLBERT: Well, when we first went in— See, I didn't realize all this. I had

learned how to read really at an early age and I loved to read. So, you know, you read and read and read and you learn things. But I had never thought of myself in terms of a scholar; I just liked to read. So now this test and stuff, it's a breeze. As a matter of fact, I scored so high they didn't believe it. I mean, "There's something wrong with this"— you know, a high school dropout and stuff. So they retested me and I scored higher. So now, when this man Captain Lewis started putting his company together— And there was this fallacy that black folks were all stupid and stuff. He wanted to minimize his thing, so he's going to build his company according to I.Q.'s. So I had the highest I.Q. there, including his. So he put me in charge of building his company.

ISOARDI: What kind of a company is this? This isn't an infantry company is it?

TOLBERT: No. We're going to be in Korea. [laughs] This is a port company. So obviously I had my own scoring system. I mean, the dude who saved me from being shot, he was automatically a genius! [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, he proved it! [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: So I put him in charge of the PX. This company in almost every important way was my company.

ISOARDI: And you had them all in good positions?

TOLBERT: That's right. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: So you controlled the base, probably.

TOLBERT: You've got to be lucky on some of this stuff, really.

ISOARDI: Really. But that couple years wasn't a bad time, though?

TOLBERT: No. No, no. I had made myself the information specialist. All I did was go to Seoul. I had my own jeep, my own driver. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: As a matter of fact, I almost got messed up. You see, if you score so high on that test they give you when you get in, you have options. So they were supposed to have sent me to Officers' Candidate School right from the jump, but they didn't. But now I have enough points so I can get out. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Out of the service?

TOLBERT: Yeah. I mean, this was during World War II, and you know they weren't going to keep all millions of men in the service.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

TOLBERT: So I opted— As a matter of fact, I wanted to— I was stationed in Korea then. We're occupying Korea at this time. So I was supposed to go to Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. So they sent me back to Fort Benning. But I knew I had enough points to get out, but I wanted to get back into the states first. So when I got to Fort Benning, then I opted to get discharged.

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

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And this was I guess 1946-47?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: How does it look to you when you come back? Did you notice any changes? Pretty much the same?

TOLBERT: Well, you see, I went from Fort Benning to New Orleans where my dad was. The only thing that changed in New Orleans were the people. Everything else was— So I was there—

ISOARDI: You stayed there a little while? Then you came on to L.A.?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: How did L.A. look to you?

TOLBERT: I'm trying to think. Why in the devil did I come back to L.A. at all? Let's see.

ISOARDI: So your parents are still in New Orleans, right?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. Let me see, now. After the war I came back into New Orleans. What happened? Why did I come back to—?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Lifestyle. You couldn't stand New Orleans. It was too slow for you.

TOLBERT: I forgot—

ISOARDI: [laughs] Is this true? You wanted to be a high roller?

TOLBERT: Probably. Yeah. Why did I leave New Orleans? Because that's where— I got discharged and left from Fort Benning, Georgia, to New Orleans.

MARIE TOLBERT: I thought you were just there for a short time and then you were coming back to Los Angeles.

TOLBERT: I mean, that's what happened, because I was discharged then. When I got out of the service— I was at Officers' Candidate School in Fort Benning and got discharged and went to New Orleans. As a matter of fact, remember I told you about that man at the station?—

MARIE TOLBERT: Right. You wanted to be routed through New Orleans—

TOLBERT: I wanted to drive through New Orleans.

MARIE TOLBERT: —on your way here, and then he was reluctant to do that.

TOLBERT: Right. This was the dude at the station, these, whatever they—

MARIE TOLBERT: Ticketmaster. Right.

ISOARDI: Why was he reluctant to route you through L.A.?

TOLBERT: The Deep South and folks there in New Orleans— [laughs]

ISOARDI: That's what it was? Man. But you just visited for a while, and then you came on—?

TOLBERT: I stayed for a while. I'm trying to think. I didn't stay too long in New Orleans, I know.

MARIE TOLBERT: No, you just came out here and hooked up your life.

ISOARDI: More happening on Central Avenue than in the neighborhood in New Orleans? [Marie Tolbert laughs]

TOLBERT: By that time—

MARIE TOLBERT: It had started to disperse, hadn't it?

TOLBERT: Yeah, see, but Lucille [Tolbert Bland] was back in Los Angeles,

because it seems to me that I came, and then the first people I saw were Jim and Aunt Irma [Young]. Old big shot Jim. [mutual laughter] I think I had a quarter in my pocket. [mutual laughter] And Aunt Irma said she wanted a drink or something, and I went and spent my— [laughs] Well, anyway, pretty soon I was back in the swing of things.

ISOARDI: Yeah. This is '47 you come back? Or is it—?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: 'Forty-seven. What do you want to do when you come back? Do you have any ideas about what direction you want your life to go?

TOLBERT: Not really. Not really. But you know, I had some insights into things. See, I had been— Oh, I know. Oh, I'm missing a very, very important part. There was a teacher at Jefferson High School named Hannah Jensen who saw a lot more in me than anything that I had done supported. Because I was mainly just a jock. I mean, at Jeff I ran track, played football, was always in fights, strong-armed the tables out there with folks that were supposed to be eating lunches and stuff. I'd strong-arm them: "Get away from here, now, I'm running my dice game here." I mean, nobody said "You can't do that," so I did it. And then when I had gone into the service and come back, a guy who was recognized as a big brain guy, Cliff Davis, told me that Ms. Jensen wanted to see me. Ms. Jensen was a teacher at Jefferson High School.

ISOARDI: What did she teach?

TOLBERT: Social science and stuff like that. I hadn't finished high school. I

went over to her house, and she asked me what I was going to do and stuff like that. I didn't have any plans what to do and stuff. She says, "Well, you ought to at least get your high school diploma," stuff like that. So she tutored me for like a week to take the—

ISOARDI: Oh, like a high school equivalency exam or whatever they call it.

TOLBERT: Right, right. So that's what I did.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: What a nice thing to do.

TOLBERT: Oh, really. I mean, she was—

MARIE TOLBERT: Then you went to East L.A.

TOLBERT: Yeah, well, a new school was starting out in East Los Angeles, East Los Angeles Junior College, and some of the dudes I had played football with were going to go out there. So I went there and played football.

ISOARDI: How long did it take you to pass that high school equivalency test?

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TOLBERT: Yeah, they had a test, and I took it, and then I could go to junior college.

ISOARDI: That gave you a high school diploma essentially, right?

TOLBERT: I don't know about the diploma, because I don't remember getting one. But I was certainly eligible to go to junior college.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: And they were just starting, and the coach was glad— I could play football. I did, and then I became the director of men's athletics or something like that at the school out there, East L.A.J.C. [East Los Angeles Junior College].

ISOARDI: While you were a student there?

TOLBERT: Yeah. But that's a student position.

ISOARDI: Oh, a student position. I see.

MARIE TOLBERT: Weren't you student body president?

TOLBERT: No, I was vice president of the student body and I was director of men's athletics.

MARIE TOLBERT: And you were a journalism major.

TOLBERT: That's true.

ISOARDI: How does a journalism major happen, though? You're starting to formulate ideas for what you want to do then, right?

ISOARDI: No, I was just sort of halfway gifted in that respect. I always could write and stuff. Like I used to write letters for dudes in the service and stuff like that. I mean, some of it was fiction and—

ISOARDI: So it seemed like a natural thing to major in?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Yeah, it came on into focus. And then Dr. Payne was the journalism guy out there, and he made me some bigwig on the school paper and stuff. So it was just, you know, into my strength area.

I played football out there until I got my leg broken. So that took care of the football career, which was probably a blessing in disguise.

ISOARDI: How long were you at East L.A. city college?

TOLBERT: Two years.

ISOARDI: And then you graduate with an A.A. degree?

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: So this was about '49, then, I guess, or so?

TOLBERT: When was that—? Well, I met you when I went to [California] State [University, Los Angeles]. When was that? 'Forty-seven? No, it must have been later than '47.

MARIE TOLBERT: No, we met in '54

TOLBERT: Oh, that long?

MARIE TOLBERT: Yes.

TOLBERT: Lord have mercy. Let's see, yeah.

MARIE TOLBERT: But there was a job offer that was interesting with the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*.

TOLBERT: L.A. *Times*, until they found out I was black. [laughs]

MARIE TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: What's that story?

TOLBERT: Well, they had a little contest. I mean, they—

ISOARDI: The L.A. *Times* did?

TOLBERT: Yeah. You know, all the schools submitted things and stuff. And Dr. Payne, who was a guy at East L.A.— And I wrote whatever I wrote. And there was a guy named Casey Shorehand who was the editor at the *Times*. Anyway, I was supposed to have the job, and I go up there, and I sit there the better part of a week. I mean, the guy didn't know what to do. And he finally told me that they weren't ready for this.

ISOARDI: The L.A. *Times* wasn't?

TOLBERT: Right. But, see— I mean, I had never even thought about the *Times* being—

ISOARDI: Racist?

TOLBERT: Right. But I found out that it was. But, see, the *Daily News*— There was another paper that went out of business. I can't remember what it—

MARIE TOLBERT: *Herald-Examiner*?

TOLBERT: The *Herald-Examiner* went out of business too, but that's not what I

was thinking about. It was a tabloid. In any event, they didn't know what to do. I mean, finally there's a guy named Casey Shorehand, something like that, who finally— I mean, I sat there every day. I'm waiting to be interviewed and stuff. The cat finally told me that they weren't ready for this, that they had made a mistake, and "sorry."

ISOARDI: Then do you go to Cal State? Or does this happen after that?

TOLBERT: No. This happened between—

ISOARDI: East L.A. and Cal State?

TOLBERT: And Cal State, yeah.

MARIE TOLBERT: Cal State started in 1949, I believe.

TOLBERT: Well, I was there at the start.

MARIE TOLBERT: Right, but you were in and out. You were there during football season.

TOLBERT: Yeah. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: So he was there for the fall semester but not the spring semester? Instead of two more years it was four more years, is that it?

TOLBERT: That's where I met Marie, at Cal State.

ISOARDI: That was a good thing you went there, then.

TOLBERT: Ain't no lie about that.

ISOARDI: It's a good thing the *Times* turned you down. What if you had gone with the L.A. *Times*? [laughs] Things might have been very different.

TOLBERT: Yeah. Yeah, you have to have some luck. But, you know, I was really sort of free spirited. I mean, a lot of things I didn't even realize until much later in life. Some friends of ours—Marie told me this—they thought I was an orphan. They did because I'd stay at their house most of the time. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: And here you're part of probably one of the biggest families along Central Avenue. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: I mean, that was a surprise when she told me. She said, "They thought you were an orphan."

ISOARDI: Funny!

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Jeez. So you go back to Cal State for a couple of years and get your bachelor's then, right?

TOLBERT: I went to East L.A. and got an A.A., then Cal State and got a B.A. And I don't know how I end up in— Oh, law school.

ISOARDI: How do you get to law school? Does that come right away after Cal State?

TOLBERT: No, that's another fluke. But a guy whom I met at State wanted to be a lawyer. I mean, he wanted to be a lawyer. And I didn't even know how folks got to be lawyers. I had never thought—

ISOARDI: You hadn't even thought about doing this, did you?

TOLBERT: Never crossed my mind at all. Then, he said, "But, man, you'd be a good lawyer." He kept on telling me— He'd start talking with her [referring to Marie] and stuff. So fine. And the thing about it, he wanted to go to what he thought was the best school around here, Loyola [Law School]. I mean, they don't mess around and bloppidy, blippidy, bop. So he said, "Well, look. I really want to go, and you can help me." "How can I help you?" He said, "Well, you just sit and answer the things you know you know, and I'll look and see, and I'll copy whatever I don't know and stuff."

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: So I was supposed to help him. I mean, he said,"You don't want to go, fine, but you know—" All right. So we go up there, Father Donovan. We get in there, he tells my man, "You go over there, and you go over there." So there ain't no way that I can help him now. And I don't give a damn; I ain't planning on going anyway. So I didn't have any kind of pressure; I'm sure that's a part of it. I mean, so it was just an exam, and I did good enough, so I was admitted into Loyola.

ISOARDI: Why did you want to go? You figured, "Well, why not"?

TOLBERT: Why not? Well, between Marie and [John Henry] Wooden, I mean— [laughs]

ISOARDI: A little bit of pushing, Marie?

MARIE TOLBERT: A little bit. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: Shucks. And even that was a fluke, because by that time I was

working in the probation department. I had been playground director and stuff at all the inner city playgrounds and stuff, and then I had gone into the probation department as a probation officer, and you're not supposed to work and go to school full-time—very strict and stuff.

MARIE TOLBERT: During the day they had a program.

TOLBERT: Right. They had a program where you could go to school at night and stuff. But I didn't tell them I was working, because it didn't interfere at all. I worked the two [o'clock] to ten [o'clock] shift in the probation department.

ISOARDI: Still, that's a lot of outside work while you're going to school. It wasn't a problem?

TOLBERT: I mean, some things come easy. Some things like that come easy. And Father Donovan was the man at Loyola. Some other dude got two "D"'s, that's what it was, and wasn't going to graduate, [get his] diploma. That's what it was. And in trying to make his case about why he couldn't graduate and stuff, he says— Oh, Father Donovan was talking about "The rules are rules." And they tell him that, "Well, Tolbert, you know you're not supposed to work and go full time, and he's been doing it." Father Donovan called me in. And in the meantime my dad [Albert Tolbert], who is in New Orleans, is on his way here for the commencement exercises. Father Donovan told me, "No, you're not graduating."

ISOARDI: Even though you had done okay.

TOLBERT: There was nothing left in the school left for me to take that I hadn't

passed. And I told him, "That's okay."

ISOARDI: It didn't matter to him?

TOLBERT: That's right.

ISOARDI: Jeez, those Jesuits. [laughs] I tell you.

TOLBERT: Oh. But that was a blessing in disguise, because I think— What did I do?

MARIE TOLBERT: You went to Van Norman [Law School] and you taught for a year.

TOLBERT: Oh, I taught there. Yeah, I taught at Van Norman Law School for a year, and I took the bar and stuff.

ISOARDI: But Loyola didn't graduate you?

TOLBERT: Couldn't. They wouldn't let them.

ISOARDI: Jeez. That's just crazy.

TOLBERT: Yeah.

MARIE TOLBERT: So without going to an accredited university for three years and graduating, then you couldn't take the bar. You would have to go a fourth year.

TOLBERT: Oh, right, right.

ISOARDI: So you graduated from this other place, then, and then took the bar?

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: You know, you would think they would say, "Whoa, that's really impressive. We should give this guy a medal or something." But not the Jesuits.

[laughs]

TOLBERT: Let me tell you, man, some things that you do spur of the moment without even giving it much thought and stuff can get you in the sort of trouble that you don't even expect. I mean, I told you the story about when I got into the service they give you this sort of exam to see where you're best fitted and whatnot and what kinds of jobs you can do and stuff. And on this profile thing one of the things they had was, "In your opinion, make a list, three great Americans." Fine. [laughs] I can't help but laugh when I think about this, but I'd do it again if the situation presented itself. I had FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], Abraham Lincoln, and Albert Tolbert. This man looked at my thing and says, "Who is Albert Tolbert?" I said, "That's my dad." He said, "Are you crazy? List the three greatest Americans, and you've got Albert Tolbert?" I said, "Yeah. It says, 'in my opinion'." [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: I'm telling you, not only did I not get that job— [laughs] They wouldn't take my application anymore. They didn't want crazy people coming here. What was that—[Department of] Water and Power? I know it was a meter reader job.

[mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: I know during this time, because your name has come up in a lot of other interviews— A lot of people have talked about your involvement in music, I guess, during this period of the forties when you come back, late forties, early fifties.

TOLBERT: Well, I had a band— Well, what happened then was I started promoting

dances and stuff.

ISOARDI: Why did you get into that? Was it just something to do?

TOLBERT: Well, it was an easy way to make some money. I could rent the hall, the musicians.

MARIE TOLBERT: I thought you were supposed to be talking about Central Avenue?

TOLBERT: I'm just answering the questions the guy is asking. We didn't know we were going to be censored.

MARIE TOLBERT: Oh, okay.

ISOARDI: We go down different avenues off the avenue. [laughs]

TOLBERT: This was during— Probably the number-one jazz record for a long time was a thing called "The Chase."

ISOARDI: The Wardell Gray-Dexter Gordon thing.

TOLBERT: Wardell and Dexter Gordon. But they used to work from here almost every Friday night at a place called Music Town. And that was part of the hook. As a matter of fact, I can show you outside some of the promo [promotional materials] and stuff. So I did that for, oh, I don't know how long—a couple of years, I guess.

ISOARDI: Do you remember when you started it?

TOLBERT: There will be dates and stuff. When we go outside I'll show you. Because I used to use— Joe Adams was a disk jockey then.

ISOARDI: Right. He was—what?—your emcee or something?

TOLBERT: No, I'd just buy spots on his program.

ISOARDI: Oh, on his program.

TOLBERT: And that would be like the promo. And I put up posters and stuff around the colleges. But, you know, I made money.

ISOARDI: Where was Music Town? And what was it like?

TOLBERT: Normandie [Avenue] and Jefferson [Boulevard].

ISOARDI: The corner of Normandie and Jefferson?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: What kind of a place was it?

TOLBERT: Upstairs place, big hall. They had a little dance band, a bandstand. It's still there.

ISOARDI: And you would have this once a week?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Friday nights.

ISOARDI: Friday nights from when to when?

TOLBERT: Oh, that was part of the hook. We didn't start until like ten o'clock.

ISOARDI: And go till whenever?

TOLBERT: Till whenever.

ISOARDI: Wow.

TOLBERT: See, that way we could— See, a lot of people who were working in on other gigs— For instance, when JATP [Jazz at the Philharmonic] came through here, that was always just a big, big windfall, because a lot of the guys who were on the

JATP circuit would come on over there. They'd work at the Shrine [Auditorium], and they'd be through by eleven [o'clock].

ISOARDI: So they'd come by Music Town?

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: So you didn't have so much a set program? You had people coming, but it was mostly jam sessions?

TOLBERT: Well, no. I usually had a good rhythm section, and I almost all the time had Dexter and Wardell.

ISOARDI: And they'd kind of start things off?

TOLBERT: Right. You know, sometimes Art Farmer.

ISOARDI: Oh, beautiful.

TOLBERT: Frank Morgan. Frank worked a lot with me.

ISOARDI: Oh.

TOLBERT: So yeah. It was always the guys who were in front of the jazz program here, not the really successful ones who were now doing other things. But like Wardell and Dexter had just hit "The Chase." Sonny Criss was still viable. Hampton Hawes.

ISOARDI: Gee, all the great players of that generation.

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Take some of these people. Any remembrances of them? Like Dexter Gordon?

TOLBERT: Well, I remember Dexter not so much from working for me and stuff but from when my Uncle Lee had a band and Dexter was on his band, and we were going down to—I was the valet—San Diego, a place called the Silver Slipper. To show you how square I was, I didn't have any idea what was going on. All of a sudden, man, Uncle Lee put the brakes on his car and was fussing at Dexter and telling him, "Get out of the car. You're lucky I don't punch you out." And I don't even know what's happening.

ISOARDI: He's taking off on Dexter?

TOLBERT: Dexter had lit up a joint. But I'll show you how square I was, I didn't— [laughs] Oh, oh! And Dexter said, "Well, take it easy, Little Pres." He called him Little Pres, which Uncle Lee didn't like anyway. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: It made it even worse. [mutual laughter]

TOLBERT: I mean, now he told him to get out the car. And he finally simmered down. We went on down to San Diego and they played the gig, and we came on back.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Uncle Lee was a square?

TOLBERT: No, no. He was hip enough to know what was happening. I mean, it never crossed my mind. The aroma didn't mean anything to me. But as soon as Dexter lit up, Uncle Lee screeched to the side of the road. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: What was he like at your sessions at Music Town, Dexter?

TOLBERT: Oh, well, you had a lot of competition. I mean, you had guys coming

who could play. A lot of dudes, if they weren't working this week they're going to be working next week. Like Teddy Edwards used to come—

ISOARDI: Oh, you had him coming, too?

TOLBERT: —and work all the time. Rudy Jones, Art Farmer— I told you Hampton Hawes. Clarence— I can't think of Clarence's last name, a bass player. [Clarence Jones]

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Was Al Adams involved in—

TOLBERT: No, Al was— But Buddy Collette. And as a matter of fact, one of the great things that happened, to show you how fate can do things— Man, let's see. It was Buddy, maybe Sonny Criss, and it was either Art Farmer or Rudy Jones on trumpet, and our rhythm section, Chuck and them. And I mean it was just a disaster. The rain came. It was one of those nights when JATP had a thing at the Shrine.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: Which normally is great, because when it ends— Because my thing didn't start until eleven o'clock. So they'd come back to Music Town. This night, I mean just buckets of rain coming down. So now, here I am, no patrons and no money.

ISOARDI: Oh! And—what?—a handful of musicians on the bandstand?

TOLBERT: Man. Eddy Beal was the piano player.

ISOARDI: Eddy Beal was?

TOLBERT: Eddy Beal.

ISOARDI: The guy with a lot of attitude?

TOLBERT: Eddy Beal went crazy, called me all kind of bad names. "You old jack- leg promoters, I'm sick and tired of the—" I mean, he raised so much fuss, I'm telling you. Buddy Collette got the other musicians and himself to loan me the money to pay Eddy Beal. In less than a year— Well, I take it back. A little over a year. But Eddy Beal's situation had deteriorated so badly that he had no place to live, no money, nothing.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

TOLBERT: Guess who he ended up living with for a year?

ISOARDI: Don't tell me. This jack-leg promoter? [mutual laughter] Oh, God!

TOLBERT: That's right.

ISOARDI: Oh, too much.

TOLBERT: But, I mean, he really got on his—

ISOARDI: One of life's ironies.

TOLBERT: Right.

ISOARDI: Really.

TOLBERT: But, I mean, Buddy Collette really—

ISOARDI: What a nice thing to do.

TOLBERT: —went in his pocket and borrowed money on my behalf to pay him off, shut him up.

ISOARDI: Sweet guy, sweet guy. Did any of the younger guys who were, I guess,

going outside a bit show up? Like Ornette Coleman or Eric Dolphy or people like that?

TOLBERT: Eric was there. Eric was a regular.

ISOARDI: Oh, he was?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. Eric worked a lot of times.

ISOARDI: What was he like back then as a kid? He was still young then, I guess, in his twenties or something?

TOLBERT: Eric was really young. I mean, this is before he got wild. As a matter of fact, I saw Eric in New York after he had been in New York like six, eight months, and it wasn't the same guy. [mutual laughter] Oh, but Eric was very studious and very polite and just a gentleman, you know.

ISOARDI: His sound then was pretty straight-ahead bop and—?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. It was developed. Right. I mean, I can— Come on outside. Let me show you something. Because I might have a—

ISOARDI: We're not going to be able to— You want to take this [referring to Tolbert's lavalier microphone] off first?

TOLBERT: Well, take this off for the time being.

[long pause while Tolbert and Isoardi go to see some of Tolbert's memorabilia]

TOLBERT: —Bernie about something, and Chico [Hamilton], big brother, go down to straighten everything out. "Now, look here, James. You can't—" "Man, what the hell are you talking about?" I think Bernie [Hamilton] was saying that David

[Axelrod] hadn't given him his change or something. And for some reason Chico had thought of me as being some kind of slicker. Now, although I am nowhere near where this is happening, he is going to blame me for it. So we almost came to blows. I mean, that's how close it was. "What the fuck are you talking about?" [laughs] So just as we're getting to that point, Bernie says, "Oh, here it is. It's in this pocket." So everybody got cool and everything. But, yeah, we had a lot of times up there.

ISOARDI: A lot of great players across the board. It sounds like you had the best that Central Avenue had to offer of this generation.

TOLBERT: Well, Central Avenue was no longer the hub. I mean, a lot of stuff had moved to the west side. See, this was at Normandie and Jefferson where this thing was.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's right. So you're a ways away from Central.

TOLBERT: Right, right.

ISOARDI: You're closer to the west side.

TOLBERT: We're on the west side.

ISOARDI: You're in the middle of the west side.

TOLBERT: Yeah, right, right. But, you see, part of the Central Avenue thing was the musicians local, which was on Central Avenue. You know, that's before the amalgamation.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: Like the Elk's ballroom was on Central Avenue, the clubs were on

Central Avenue. So it was somewhere between Twelfth Street and before Slauson. Maybe until the middle fifties, most of the action was on Central Avenue, and people lived on one side of Central or the other.

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: Although Main Street is the dividing line between east and west, a lot of folks considered if you're west of Central you're on the west side. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, how do you get set up in Music Town? Was it just a space that was available?

TOLBERT: Well, because it was an auditorium that was already known for dances. I didn't invent it, you know. It was just that I had gone to a lot of dances there, then I just sort of formalized in into a weekly thing.

ISOARDI: Right. I see. You've mentioned Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards, I mean, all these great players—Sonny Criss, Hampton Hawes, Chico Hamilton. Were there players there who maybe had potential, looked like they were going to be something, but never made it or passed too young that we might know about?

TOLBERT: Well, yeah. There was a piano player named Amos, Amos Trice. Amos was the piano player, more talent than any other piano player.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. I don't know what happened to Amos. Rudy Jones, a trumpet player.

ISOARDI: Oh, that you've mentioned.

TOLBERT: Yeah. Rudy and Art were right on the same level.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. Let's see. There may have been— Clarence Jones the bass player. I don't know what happened to Clarence. I think Clarence may have died early, I don't know. But Clarence was certainly a well-thought-of young jazz musician. I mean, you had like, you know, if you're going to have the young turks or the young this and stuff, they would have been Frank and Sonny and Art Farmer and Rudy Jones. I mean, it was a whole bunch of them. Some died, some got busted for something else.

ISOARDI: Yeah, some carried on, some didn't for whatever reason.

TOLBERT: Right, right.

ISOARDI: Yeah. What's happening on the avenue in the late forties? Well, let me ask you a more general question, too. Maybe that's part of it. Why does the avenue decline?

TOLBERT: I think that people who could afford to moved to the west side. If you're talking about Central Avenue, you're really talking about— Maybe two blocks on either side of Central Avenue were houses and whatnot; most of the rest were commercial- type things.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

TOLBERT: Right. So like if you were on Central or Naomi [Avenue] or Hooper

[Avenue], you know, you're only talking about maybe four blocks. And then you go to maybe Twelfth Street to a little bit past Vernon going south. Then there's a huge section where you don't have any black folks at all till after you get to Watts. But all of that sort of filled in. The whole city was changing. Whereas all the black kids, almost everybody went to Jeff. Well, you know, it was sort of a snobbish thing for kids to say, "Well, I go to Manual. I go to [Los Angeles] Poly[technic High School]." Because Poly moved out here to the [San Fernando] Valley. But the hard-core went to Jeff. Now, like some parents who could afford it or had other means and something, their kids went to Manual. All those said, "My aunt lives here. I live with my aunt," something like that. But a lot of parents who could do that did that.

ISOARDI: So you think it was people just starting to move away that sort of did it in? Is that the main thing?

TOLBERT: I think after World War II, when you had a lot of house building and stuff going on, people could afford to move to various parts of town, mostly to the west side. I mean, I can remember when Fremont was all white.

ISOARDI: Oh, the high school.

TOLBERT: Oh, all, all white. And we used to go play them. I remember on two different occasions they had little black dummies hung in effigy from the flagpole at Fremont. [laughs] Now Fremont is all black. I mean, the influx of things— So it's just change. Remember, almost all the black folks lived no more than three or

four blocks either side of Central Avenue. And that went from like Twelfth Street to Vernon. Then there's a big lull till you get to Watts.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: The west side was— [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about a little bit more on Central. Who were the owners? Who owned all these clubs down there? Did you know any of those people?

TOLBERT: Well, Mr. Mosby, Curtis Mosby owned—I don't know if he owned the property, but certainly the number-one place was—the Club Alabam. I mean, that was the place. Now, you have other little things all up and down the avenue, but, I mean, the headliners, and people who worked and had a schedule and stuff, were at the Club Alabam, and that was Curtis Mosby. My Uncle Lee worked for him a lot. Sometimes I think he had the house band and stuff. I worked for Mr. "Mo"; I cleaned up the place sometimes and stuff like that. But that was it. For instance, when they had the Club Milamo and the Downbeat [Club] and the various little clubs, you know, you'd always know about them. "They're across the street from Mr. Mosby's place."

ISOARDI: Yeah, the Alabam or whatever.

TOLBERT: Right. But the Alabam was definitely the place.

ISOARDI: Did you know in general—? I mean, I'm just curious as to who is owning these things. Are these members of the community who own the clubs? Are there white owners of the clubs? Is there any organized crime involvement?

TOLBERT: Oh, no. No, this is mostly— I mean, Curtis Mosby.

ISOARDI: And he was just a local community businessman, more or less?

TOLBERT: I think he had— I know he had a younger brother, Esvan Mosby, who was sort of like the mayor of Central Avenue. I mean, that might be self-proclaimed maybe, but nobody objected.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: But Curtis Mosby was the man who everybody worked for at various times.

ISOARDI: Right. So the most important club on the avenue had black ownership then.

TOLBERT: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: Was that the case with a lot of the clubs? Were these really kind of community-owned clubs? Or was there outside ownership?

TOLBERT: I don't know about community. I don't think Mr. Mosby had any partners.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, right.

TOLBERT: I mean, it was him. And he had folks taking stabs at clubs all the time. I mean, something would jump up in sometimes pseudo-after-hour places. For instance, there was a while when right close to the Alabam you had other clubs that were semi-after-hour places that get the overflow from the Alabam or something. Ivie Anderson had a place [Ivie's Chicken Shack] not too far from the Alabam. It was sort of a restaurant but sort of had [a place] where people hung out. You know,

people talk about Central Avenue as being such a swinging kind of thing. It really wasn't that much. I mean, most of the folks who lived around Central Avenue were just hard- working, everyday kinds of folks. I mean, if you started at Twelfth Street and went past Vernon, you're probably talking about at the most four places that you could consider entertainment places. So you're not talking about Fifty-second Street in New York.

ISOARDI: Yeah. As far as you know— It seems that when you think about a lot of the cities that have a reputation as housing a lot of jazz, like Chicago and Kansas City and earlier New Orleans, people always talk about the importance of organized crime and graft and corruption and all this kind of stuff. Was there any kind of organized crime behind Central Avenue at all?

TOLBERT: I don't think so.

ISOARDI: The club scene, the music scene?

TOLBERT: No, I don't think so. You know, my uncle Lee would probably be as versed in this as anybody who was around, and the fact that we lived next door to the local and the fact that my grandfather taught a lot of folks— I mean, people who had big names would come and seminar with my grandfather when the bands— You know, except for [Jimmie] Lunceford's band. But almost all the other bands, when they came into town, guys would come and seminar with my grandfather. No. You know how you're thinking in terms of mafiosos and stuff like that?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Not really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. That might have been Hollywood or something like that. But in so far as organized crime and stuff dealing on the avenue, no.

ISOARDI: You may have indicated what your answer is to this earlier on, but I'd like to ask you for the record. The amalgamation that happens between the two unions, 767 and Local 47. Do you think that was a good idea? Were you kind of in support of it then?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. Yeah, I thought it was a good idea. And I think that guys like Buddy Collette— I'm trying to think who is in the vanguard of that. Jackie Kelso [also known as Jack Kelson]. Of course, when you talk about Buddy you've got to talk about Jackie, because they're just like Siamese twins almost. But Mr. Paul Howard—I think it was just the time had come. This was just stupid, you know. Like my uncle Lee was sort of a groundbreaker in one sense, because he insisted on bringing Art Pepper into one of his groups. Although they were rehearsing at the black local, Art was right there all the time.

ISOARDI: And there weren't any problems because of that?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. So in a real way— Plus the fact, Lee was one of the first blacks to be involved, I mean, certainly in motion pictures and stuff like that. He was doing a lot of soundtracks and—

ISOARDI: Right.

TOLBERT: See, he doesn't like [he had] that kind of role or anything, but he did play an important part.

ISOARDI: Yeah, a real pioneer.

TOLBERT: Right.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Uncle Lee doesn't like to have it verbalized, but it was definitely a fact. And then, too, remember the union downtown? Members used to come down to Central to practice. They would come anyway.

TOLBERT: Not many. Art Pepper was one of the exceptions, like I just got through telling him. But after a while, when Local 47— But see, like the young— I don't mean the young. But like by the time Buddy, that generation, were becoming the guys, their mind-set and stuff made it like it was time for the amalgamation. I'm trying to think who— Tranchitella might have been president of the union then, John Tranchitella.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah. Somebody told me they used to call him "Tarantula." [mutual laughter] I can't remember who that was. [laughs]

TOLBERT: Tranchitella was constantly a politician.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: And he recognized that it was time. Whereas before a guy would be coming up with all kind of— I mean, the pay scale and stuff was even different. And it seemed like there was some problem with the international [union]. I mean, it wasn't just the local. It seemed like they had some kind of problem. Have you interviewed Buddy?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Because Buddy was right in the middle of all this.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he was. Well, it's funny, though. I've talked to so many people, and everyone has got a slightly different kind of take on it, and they saw it differently from where they were sitting. Marl Young saw it one way, and—

TOLBERT: Well, see, Marl was one of the beneficiaries of the amalgamation, and Marl was not that popular with the rank-and-file black musicians. Marl probably had more training than most, was more independent than most, and was smarter than most. I mean, Marl was well educated. I don't know whether he really was or not, but he certainly gave that impression.

ISOARDI: Yeah. I think he went to law school.

TOLBERT: Well, okay. So Marl was a very important cog in the turning of the wheel into the integration of the unions. Because you could see that could and would cause a lot of problems if you didn't deal with him. [laughs] And it was a nice mixture of things, because like Mr. Paul Howard was still around at Local 767.

ISOARDI: Did you know him very well?

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah!

ISOARDI: What kind of a guy was he?

TOLBERT: Oh, nice man. Very nice. Mr. Paul was gentle. He was—

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TOLBERT: I think Mr. Paul [Howard] was probably the most respected of all the folks from [American Federation of Musicians] Local 767.

ISOARDI: Really?

TOLBERT: Uh-huh. First of all, he had been, in the early days here, a bandleader. He had a band, I forget where, but he was always fair. I mean, I never heard any musician say anything bad about Mr. Paul, which was not the case with a lot of other folks.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's pretty unusual, I think.

TOLBERT: Yeah. I mean, almost any musician you talk with and you mention Elmer Fain, right away they start saying bad things about him. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Why Elmer Fain?

TOLBERT: Well, now, he was a business guy. If you were playing on a gig that you wasn't supposed to be on or hadn't come to a union or stuff, he was the guy who would—

ISOARDI: Bust you.

TOLBERT: Yeah. There was a lady who worked at the union too, Ms. Florence, Florence Cadrez. She seems to have been very influential in things.

ISOARDI: Were there many women in the union? I mean she would probably be

an exception, wouldn't she?

TOLBERT: I think she was. But she wasn't a union member. Like you would have Vi Redd or Clora [Bryant] and them later on. She worked in the union. She was the secretary at Local 767.

ISOARDI: Oh, but she wasn't a member of 767?

TOLBERT: I don't remember her ever being identified as a player or— Although, wait a minute. Some kind of church or something she was involved in. But her main thing was that she was the secretary.

ISOARDI: Well, probably everybody knew her then.

TOLBERT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, because, see, [she was the] disseminator of information.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Let me ask you another kind of biggish question. Looking back now—I mean, we're I guess getting to almost fifty years past Central's heyday—why should we remember it? Why was it important?

TOLBERT: Well, first of all, it was the hub— I mean, almost all the black folks who came here from wherever they came from initially lived two blocks, one side or the other, of Central Avenue. That was just about true from Twelfth Street to Vernon [Avenue], and then they picked up again out in Watts. But that was where almost everybody lived. So it couldn't help but be important. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Really. What about artistically, musically? How should we remember it?

TOLBERT: Well, it was— A lot of special things— You are talking about artistically; I'm thinking just about music. In the thirties everybody was a big case of have-not, you know, so things like public band concerts were very popular. It seems to me there were the McDavid brothers.

ISOARDI: Percy McDavid?

TOLBERT: Yeah, and his brother, but I can't think of the brother's name. [Russell McDavid]

ISOARDI: Oh, I didn't know he had a brother.

TOLBERT: I think they had a brother. I think it was two of them. And one of them, if not both of them, taught school as well as being music mentors.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: And I don't know what my grandfather [Willis H. Young]'s position was, but everybody referred to him as Professor Young. And I think he had credentials from I don't know what school, but some black colleges in the South. And he played every instrument, taught a lot of folks. And he must have known what he was doing, because guys who were already established would come and seminar with him. I mean, like, I'm telling you, [Charles] Mingus used to come there with his bass on the streetcar. Almost all the big bands, certainly the [Count] Basie band, when they came to town they would make it to get some studying done with my grandfather. So I just didn't back then realize what a genius he was.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly.

TOLBERT: Played every instrument, which in itself is awesome. Awesome, you know. He always kept some kind of band going. I loved to hear Buddy [Collette] and Jackie Kelso [also known as Jack Kelson]. They talk about the first band they were in, the Al Adams band. Did I tell you this story before?

ISOARDI: I'm not sure.

TOLBERT: Well, Al used to play— See, my grandfather had it set up so—

ISOARDI: Al used to play briefly—

TOLBERT: Bass.

ISOARDI: Yeah, in your grandfather's band.

TOLBERT: The little family band.

ISOARDI: Yeah. You did mention that.

TOLBERT: Okay. When my grandfather had really thought that you were something special, his students, he let them play in the family band. There was a guy named Pete, a trombone player who played with us sometimes. And, see, my grandfather was not the kind of guy where the majority rules. I mean, he ruled. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: In those matters he wasn't a Democrat, I guess. [laughter]

TOLBERT: That's right. And we played at the church. I told you when we— We used to play at St. Paul's, which was a big church. Well, for some reason Papa Young got to be thinking that Father Divine was God, so, bam!

ISOARDI: Yeah, there you are.

TOLBERT: We no longer were going to these— We played at St. Paul Baptist Church. Our little family group augmented the choir thing. So when I was like ten, eleven years old I was playing in that little church band. But when Papa Young got converted to Father Divine, every night—

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez!

TOLBERT: Every night, man. [laughs] God, every night. Well, almost every night.

ISOARDI: A lot. A lot more.

TOLBERT: Oh, man. And it's always the same songs. I mean, like in regular church you've got the hymn notes and stuff you sing from. But Father Divine, you only had like three or four songs that you sing all the time. And there we were almost every night playing these "Take all your troubles to your Father Divine and smile, smile, smile."

ISOARDI: Incredible.

TOLBERT: I think that's the only time I got a whipping from my grandfather. Did I tell you about the time we changed mouthpieces?

ISOARDI: Yes. [laughs] The trombone mouthpiece on the trumpet?

TOLBERT: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, God!

TOLBERT: Yeah. How long does your grandfather live?

TOLBERT: Shoot, until— Let's see. Papa Young died about— Damn. Late

fifties?

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

TOLBERT: You know, that's a shame I don't know that. But I think it was about late fifties. Let's see. I went in the service in '45, got out.

ISOARDI: That must have been—what?—sixty years of training people to play music.

TOLBERT: Oh, did I show you a picture of my Cousins Boots and Sports?

ISOARDI: I don't know if you did or not.

TOLBERT: Well, that's some of the first. I mean, "Pres" [Lester Young] is— As a matter of fact, they're the young— I didn't show you the young Pres?

ISOARDI: Oh, yes, when he is very— He looks like he's maybe in his early teens or something?

TOLBERT: Yeah. Right.

ISOARDI: Yeah, you did. Yeah.

TOLBERT: Okay. Well, the other people are his cousins.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: Oh, shoot. I don't know how old Papa Young was.

ISOARDI: Did he teach up till the end?

TOLBERT: He had pets, I mean special people that he still— You know, he was a really autocratic guy, so I think he may— I'm trying to think of somebody whom he

really liked who he still would work with. I'm not sure you'd call that teaching still. But a lot of people would come and just talk with him, just talk with him. But I think that his last— Well, my cousin Martha [Young], a piano player— She played alto too, but— Lucille [Tolbert Bland] played piano and alto also. Hey, Lu! When did Papa Young die?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: I beg your pardon.

TOLBERT: Do you know when Papa Young died?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: No, I sure don't. I really don't. I was just about to call Uncle Lee just to holler at him. I'm not going to say anything about you and—

TOLBERT: Anything you want to do, it's okay with me. Well, you interviewed Lee, didn't you?

ISOARDI: Yeah, he's in the book, chapter two.

TOLBERT: See?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: What book?

ISOARDI: *Central Avenue Sounds*.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: No kidding. When is it going to be published?

ISOARDI: It came out last March. It was about my first nineteen interviews, and your Uncle Lee is chapter two. I interviewed— He's in chapter two in the book.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Fantastic.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

TOLBERT: [inaudible] Anyway— [mutual laughter] I say that because he's always full of jawbone. He's always "taking me out to dinner" and we'd never go. [mutual laughter]

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: He's always going to teach me golf and he never does.

TOLBERT: I'll tell you, you must have come at the right time or the right something, because he is not known for sharing.

ISOARDI: Well, he told, when we first met with him— And we met at, I think it was, your [Tolbert's] office on Sunset Boulevard.

TOLBERT: Oh, really?

ISOARDI: We did all the taping there. I interviewed him, I think it was, around '91, '92, something like that. I think it was about '91, '92, and we met in your office, and we did all the taping there. And he—

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: [inaudible]

ISOARDI: Well, he told—

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: He told you?

ISOARDI: He told us about that. He said the only reason he agreed to do this is because it was for the university.

TOLBERT: Oh, okay.

ISOARDI: And it was clear that there—

TOLBERT: Yeah, now he does have a thing for higher education.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Yes, he does.

ISOARDI: Oh, he really respected that. And in the agreement it says this is not for commercial; it's for research and educational purposes. If there's any kind of commercial thing that comes up they'll come back to you and—

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: That's him.

TOLBERT: Okay.

ISOARDI: You know, they have to get your okay and all that. But anyway, he said the only reason he was doing it was for that reason. And while I was interviewing him something came up, and I understood why he was reluctant to give interviews. For some reason he talked to this one person who was writing a biography of Nat [King] Cole, and it came out while we were doing the interview. He was just furious and upset at the words that had been put into his mouth in that biography.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: I believe it.

ISOARDI: She had him saying things where he said, "There is no way I would ever had said something like this." So he showed me all the sections that upset him a lot, and he asked me if I wouldn't mind typing up the letter. So I typed up a three- or four- page letter to send to the publisher about how this person—

TOLBERT: Refuting—

ISOARDI: It was so distorted. But he was so hurt by it, because he said, "All these people now are going to think that I talk this way or I said this thing or Nat Cole and I acted this way." And he said, "It's just a lie." And it hurt him so much that people

might think this. So I could understand him being reluctant.

TOLBERT: Well, he was reluctant before that. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, yeah. But this is from my side; that's what I saw of it. But I've never bought one of this person's books ever since then.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: There was a thing about—what?—three or four months ago? Because I've been hanging around here not four or five months. There was something down on Central Avenue.

TOLBERT: Oh, that's that—

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: That thing they do all the time.

TOLBERT: Yeah, every year.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: There was a lady in the building of the [Club] Alabam, which is now a museum. I said, "You know what? I used to come in this place with my Aunt Irma, and I used to run the restroom upstairs."

TOLBERT: Towels and stuff.

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: The powder room, that's what I'm trying to say. I said, "I sure wanted to be in show business bad. So just being around it was okay." She said, "Well you ought to be the one around here telling some of the stories that go around." I called Uncle Lee and told him what she said. You know what Uncle Lee told me? He said, "Go ahead and do it, pinhead." Well, I wasn't ready for that, you know. [mutual laughter] But I did that. And when I was young, when he'd get ready to go to the games, to watch the— Who were they, Jimmy, because I know he

told you? They were basketball players.

TOLBERT: The Rens or the—?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: Uh-huh.

TOLBERT: The [Harlem] Globetrotters?

LUCILLE TOLBERT BLAND: The Globetrotters! The ones who used to come.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, Globetrotters.

TOLBERT: Yeah, yeah. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Say that again.

TOLBERT: Mr. [Samuel] Browne was a real pillar that a lot of folks revolved around. I mean, he was more than just the music teacher at Jeff. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Jimmy, do you have any final thoughts about Central, looking back?

TOLBERT: Just how lucky I was to be at that place at that time. It certainly gave you a view of life that [you could not get] anywhere else. I mean, to grow up next door to Local 767. To sort of anticipate and know that I'm going to make a dime, sometimes a quarter, to let Mr. Paul in after he locks himself out. I could jump from my roof to their roof. To be on first-name terms with some of the people who are in the history books now and know that I saw history in the making. You know, like people talk about Marshal Royal now and what a great lead alto saxophone player he was. Well, I was the valet carrying Lee's drums and stuff when Marshal worked with him and stuff. I mean, but most of these guys I knew as "uncle" something—you know, pseudo uncles. Because Uncle Lee was always involved in more than just the

music. He was really a community person. He ended up with sponsoring basketball teams for kids who might otherwise have been just out there, softball teams— He had a great baseball team with youngsters. I'll show you how young they were. I was too old to be on the team. So he was always a community guy without announcing anything.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah.

TOLBERT: I mean, it's a lot of grown guys— Now, as a matter of fact— I forgot the kid's name and stuff, but they wanted to give a big thing for him in recognition and appreciation, how he had influenced their lives, and he wouldn't go for it.

ISOARDI: No kidding?

TOLBERT: Yeah. I mean, he definitely— See, he was a mutation in the sense that whereas the drug culture was coming into being bigger and bigger, everybody who knew him at all knew that the thing stops here. There ain't going to be no—

ISOARDI: Don't get on the bandstand high. [laughs]

TOLBERT: Oh, oh! Did I tell you the time, man, I was— Because he used to let me be the valet sometimes. But I didn't know what was happening. Man, on the way to San Diego, and he stopped the car—screech! I mean, he wanted to beat this guy [Dexter Gordon] up! I mean, "How dare you light up this joint!" And the dude was saying "Little Pres." He didn't like that either.

ISOARDI: Too much. Funny.

TOLBERT: He's straight-laced.

ISOARDI: Oh, there was one other thing, a minor thing I wanted to ask you. When you were in Music Town, did you ever encounter Ornette Coleman?

TOLBERT: I don't remember encountering Ornette Coleman. Although, I've— Somehow I lost where this was. It may have been at Music Town, but I don't think so. But when Ornette— Oh, I do know where it was now. It was over at that place on Third Street. I can't think of the name, but it was a club here. Dave [David] Axelrod and I went to see him, and he played one note. [laughs] [mimics the sound of one blasting note] [laughs] [mimics it again] [laughs]

ISOARDI: That's all he did was play one note?

TOLBERT: He played one note and took a bow! [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: No kidding? [mutual laughter] What, do you think he was crazy?

TOLBERT: I didn't think that was normal. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That's great. What a story. [laughs] Was he alone on the bandstand?

TOLBERT: Yeah. [Isoardi laughs]

MARIE TOLBERT: But isn't it kind of sad, though?

TOLBERT: Yeah, it is sad. I mean, yeah. I'm trying to think of who else it was.

MARIE TOLBERT: Trying to perform and—

ISOARDI: Jeez.

TOLBERT: I'm trying to— [Thelonious] Monk didn't— I mean, shucks. [to Marie Tolbert] You didn't show a lot of compassion for Monk when Monk did his little bow and got off the stand.

MARIE TOLBERT: Well, but that was not unusual for him.

TOLBERT: Oh. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Well, any final thoughts before we wrap it?

TOLBERT: No. I think it was a magic time, and you had to be blessed to just be in that set to that extent—I mean, certainly as a kid growing up. First, I had to be lucky to be in that family, lucky to be at that time. Everybody was sort of family.

ISOARDI: You mean in the neighborhoods and—?

TOLBERT: I have friends from the third grade where we still talk about how things were in our neighborhood back then. We still get together and do things together. And we're talking about sixty years. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Jeez. Yeah. I think that's getting less and less common.

TOLBERT: Yeah. Ooo-wee!

ISOARDI: Thanks a lot.

TOLBERT: All right, my man.

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