BEYOND CENTRAL

Don Preston

Interviewed by Steven Isoardi

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Los Angeles

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CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: September 21, 1932, Flint, Michigan.

Education: Cass Technical High School, Detroit.

Military service: United States Army, 1950-53.

Spouse: Rowena Blincoe, two children, divorced; Tina Carver Preston.

CAREER HISTORY:

Keyboardist-vocalist-bandleader-composer, 1952-present.

Played keyboards as a bandleader or coleader with:

AHA (Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage)
Akashic Ensemble
Ant-bee
Crayden-Preston Ensemble
The Don Bunk Show
Don Preston Trio
The Grandmothers
Loose Connection
Ogo Moto
Raw Milk

Played keyboards and/or vocals as a sideman or guest artist with:

Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band
Bobby Bradford
Carla Bley
California EAR Unit
John Carter
Eugene Chadbourne
Nat King Cole
El Monte Art Ensemble
Geronimo Black

Gil Evans
GTOs
Arthur Jarvinen
Amy Knoles
Robbie Krieger
John Lennon, Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band
Elliot Levin
Michael Mantler
Meredith Monk
Ivo Perelman
The Residents
Bob Smith
Frank Zappa/Mothers of Invention

SELECTED RECORDINGS:

As a leader:

Vile Foamy Ectoplasm (Muffin Records, 1993)
Hear Me Out (Echograph Records, 1997)
Transformation (Cryptogramophone Records, 2001)

With Ant-bee:

With My Favorite "Vegetables" and Other Bizarre Music (Divine Records, 1994)
Lunar Muzik (Divine Records, 1995)

With Aurora:

Aurora (Nippon Columbia, 1989)

With Carla Bley/Paul Haines:

Escalator over the Hill (Polygram, 1971)

With Bobby Bradford/John Carter:

Comin' On (Hat Hut Records, 1989)

With John Carter:

Dance of the Love Ghosts (Gramavision Records, 1987)
Shadows on a Wall (Gramavision Records, 1988)
Fields (Gramavision Records, 1990)

With Eugene Chadbourne:

Ten Most Wanted (Chadbourne Products, 1993)

With Gil Evans:

Where Flamingos Fly (A & M Records, 1989)

With Flo and Eddie:

The Phlorescent Leech and Eddie (Reprise Records, 1972)

With the Grandmothers:

Grandmothers (Line Records, 1981)
Lookin' Up Granny's Dress (Rhino Records, 1982)
Who Could Imagine (Munich Records, 1994)
Eating the Astoria (Obvious Music, 2000)
With the GTOs:

Permanent Damage (Bizarre Records, 1969)

With John Lennon, Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band:

Sometime in New York City (Apple Records, 1972)

With Michael Mantler:

Alien (ECM/WATT Records, 1985)
Live (ECM/WATT Records, 1987)

With the Residents:

Eskimo (Ralph Records, 1979)

With Frank Zappa/Mothers of Invention:

Absolutely Free (Verve Records, 1967)
We're Only in It for the Money (Verve Records, 1968)
Cruising with Ruben and the Jets (Verve Records, 1968)
Uncle Meat (Verve Records, 1969)
Burnt Weeny Sandwich (Bizarre Records, 1970)
Weasels Ripped My Flesh (Bizarre Records, 1970)
Fillmore East, June 1971 (Bizarre Records, 1971)
Just Another Band from L.A. (Bizarre Records, 1972)
Roxy and Elsewhere (Discreet Records, 1974)

With Frank Zappa:

Waka/Jawaka (Bizarre Records, 1972)
The Grand Wazoo (Bizarre Records, 1972)
You Can't Do That on Stage Anymore, Vols. 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 (Rykodisc, 1991, 1992)
Playground Psychotics (Rykodisc, 1992)
The Lost Episodes (Rykodisc, 1996)
Mystery Disc (Rykodisc, 1998)

SELECTED FILM SCORES:

Android
The Being
Believe in Eve
The Blob

Blood Diner
Eye of the Tiger
I, Madman
Night Patrol
Pucker Up and Bark Like a Dog
Sawbones
Shattered Spirits
Silent Witness
The Underachievers
Was Black

SELECTED MUSIC FOR THEATER:

Black Hole in Space
The Coyote Cycle
The Dream Coast
Finale Orders
Hell's Kitchen
I Hate
The Kid Takes a Shot
Mimzabim
My Crime
The Other
The Promotion
Swim in the Danube
Tarantula
Taxi Dance

SELECTED AWARDS:

Dramalogue Award, sound design, *My Crime*.
Dramalogue Award, sound design, *Taxi Dance*.
LA Weekly Theater Award, sound design, *Black Hole in Space*.
LA Weekly Theater Award, sound design, *I Hate*.
LA Weekly Theater Award, music writing, *The Kid Takes a Shot*.

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: Preston's home, Los Angeles.

Dates, length of sessions: September 8, 2001 (102 minutes); September 18, 2001 (87); October 7, 2001 (88); November 10, 2001 (93).

Total number of recorded hours: 6.15

Persons present during interview: Preston and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is part of the "Beyond Central" series, which extends the UCLA Oral History Program's "Central Avenue Sounds" series and preserves the spoken memories of musicians who were active in the jazz music scene in Los Angeles from the 1950s to the 1970s. The series includes a broad range of interviewees, some of whom are well known and others who may be less known, who were chosen to document their specific point of view, contribution, role, or experience. Particular areas of focus include the African American musicians' community and the development and emergence of the so-called jazz avant-garde in Los Angeles.

In preparing for the interview, Isoardi consulted jazz histories, autobiographies, oral histories, and relevant periodicals, listened to recordings, and viewed personal archival materials when made available.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Preston’s early years in Flint and Detroit, Michigan, continuing through his early years as a pianist, bassist, and composer, and focusing on his years as a pioneering keyboardist in the areas of jazz, new music, electronic music, and music for theater and film. Major topics discussed include important musicians in the jazz avant-garde in Los Angeles from the late fifties to the present, venues for creative music in Los Angeles, multimedia expressions in art, and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of

Invention.

EDITING:

Victoria Simmons, editor, 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.

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

Alex Cline, senior writer, prepared the table of contents and biographical summary. Simmons assembled the interview history. Tina Bhaga, 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

SEPTEMBER 8, 2001

ISOARDI: Don, can we begin your story with your own beginnings, where you were born and when?

PRESTON: Okay. I was born in Flint, Michigan. I think my parents lived there at the time and right immediately after I was born— My dad was a musician, and his name was Don also. [laughs]

ISOARDI: But you're not Don Jr.?

PRESTON: No. His name was Donald Goodrich [Preston], and mine's Donald Ward.

ISOARDI: When were you born?

PRESTON: In 1932, September 21. So he got a job. I mean, he had a band. I think he grew up in Flint, and he had several bands when he was growing up. So at this time he joined a band, and all I remember is that I was on the road until I was about four and a half or five years old.

ISOARDI: Those are your earliest memories? Being on the run?

PRESTON: Yeah. [mutual laughter] Slept in dresser drawers, you know, in hotel rooms.

ISOARDI: Like the band mascot? [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: Yeah, well, I don't know. I do vaguely remember conducting several of the bands when I was about three or something.

ISOARDI: What kind of bands were they?

PRESTON: They were dance bands pretty much, like the thirties jazz-oriented dance bands, you know.

ISOARDI: More jazz oriented? Or sort of in the Lawrence Welk direction?

PRESTON: Oh, yeah. No, they weren't into that. It was that upbeat kind of [sings an upbeat, swing-style melody], all that kind of stuff.

ISOARDI: Did your dad play? What instrument?

PRESTON: Well, it's strange. My dad started out playing sax[ophone] and clarinet, and then somewhere along the line he took up the trumpet. I remember he was offered the lead trumpet position in Tommy Dorsey's band.

ISOARDI: Gee.

PRESTON: I was just becoming school age at the time, and he got another job as a staff arranger-composer for NBC [National Broadcasting Company]. So he took that instead, because he wanted to be in one place. He didn't want to be traveling all over when I was in school.

ISOARDI: This must have been around '37 or so, around there?

PRESTON: Yeah, '38, somewhere around that. Yeah. So we settled down, he bought a house, and he worked for NBC for about twenty years.

ISOARDI: I guess your memories of Flint aren't that strong?

PRESTON: Oh, I wasn't even there, you know. I was just born there. But after that I was gone completely.

ISOARDI: What about your mom?

PRESTON: Well, my mom was a— I guess she was cute, and she sang, you know, although she never did anything professional.

ISOARDI: She never sang with the bands or anything like that?

PRESTON: No, she never did. I don't know why, but she just never did.

ISOARDI: What was her name?

PRESTON: Her name was Mabel, although I think her middle name was Virginia, and everyone called her Mabel then, but she changed her name to Virginia after a certain point, in her middle age.

ISOARDI: What was her maiden name?

PRESTON: Johnson.

ISOARDI: Was her family from the Flint area?

PRESTON: Yeah, let me see. Yeah, I think they were in that area. Yeah. And she was Danish. My father's family was English.

ISOARDI: How far back can you trace the family?

PRESTON: I actually have some records that trace our family back to England, where there was one Preston that was a guard in the royal palace or something like that,

the palace guard. And of course there's a town there called Preston, and they probably actually go back to that town, which at one time was all Prestons, you know, like a clan. Then they came over here to the United States. They almost immediately went to Michigan, and they were involved in—

ISOARDI: When did they come over?

PRESTON: I believe it was like the early 1800s, and they were pretty much running around Michigan trapping and doing stuff like that. And my grandfather formed a business there. It's a little town called Ossineke, which is pretty far up regular [lower] Michigan. He formed a business making furniture out of trees. You had this big building where inside there were all these different kinds of saws, and they were all run by this one big motor, and there were these belts going all over the place, running everything. I also found that kind of interesting. I mean, considering he built the whole thing himself, by hand almost.

My father had two brothers, and the other two brothers were totally into the business. They were chopping down trees and making lawn furniture and stuff. That's what they did. And I think they actually had a contract with the state for those roadside tables and those kinds of things.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

PRESTON: My father, for some reason— Although my grandmother was musically inclined. She wrote a bunch of music. You've got to realize that back in those days

they didn't have radio, they didn't have television, and the only way to get to hear music was to play it. So a lot of people could play and sing music then. It was just the way you did it.

ISOARDI: You entertained yourself.

PRESTON: Yeah. So my dad, I guess, took after her, and even as early as fourteen or fifteen he had his own band in high school and played. I have articles that— Donn Preston and his Rialto Boys, I think that was his band. [mutual laughter] So yeah, he had a career doing that, and that was all he did. That was all he could do.

ISOARDI: Would that description apply to you, also? I mean, you were inundated by music from day one.

PRESTON: Yeah, to a point. To a point, yeah. Although nowadays you have to be a little ambidextrous. I do all the graphics for the Grandmothers and even myself, although I didn't work on the last album at all. But most of the other albums I've done. Like all those up there [points to albums on wall] I've done all the graphics for.

So I grew up in that musical atmosphere, because my dad worked at home. And even when he would take a vacation— For instance, we would go to Lake Huron for like two weeks to be on the lake. There was swimming, and they would have a tennis court where the little cottages were. And he would bring this portable organ that he had, which looked like a suitcase, and it all opened up, and there were foot

pedals on it and stuff. And he would keep working during the whole of our vacation. He would just be sitting there on the porch and writing music, writing all this music he had to turn in to the station. Because they had two or three— Now, this is NBC in Detroit.

ISOARDI: Oh, I had assumed it was New York. But it wasn't New York you guys went to.

PRESTON: No, no, no. This was Detroit.

ISOARDI: Oh, okay.

PRESTON: So he had to write for these shows, these live shows—coffee shows, early morning shows—and then there was something in the afternoon, but I don't remember it, though. So we'd be out there swimming around, and he'd be in there playing the organ and writing all this music.

ISOARDI: I guess he was writing for a studio orchestra?

PRESTON: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: Where did he get his musical training?

PRESTON: I don't know. He didn't study music, you know, per se.

ISOARDI: He went to high school and then a career as a musician? Is that pretty much it? So he must have just picked it up on the road?

PRESTON: Well, I mean, he always could play the piano pretty well. And I think he chose some of these other instruments because, first of all, he was the frontman in

the band. It was his band, and it's hard to be a frontman if you're behind the piano, you know what I mean? It's very difficult to do that. So he used these other instruments. But then when it came to orchestrating or writing music, the piano was his instrument. And I can remember my mother telling me that at one point he was performing "Rhapsody in Blue" by Gershwin, which is a pretty hard piece for piano. So he was fairly— I mean, he wasn't in the concert variety at all, but he could play. And then later on he became— let me see—a resident composer for the Detroit Philharmonic Orchestra.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: And he wrote, and would turn in a piece to them once a year or something like that.

ISOARDI: What kind of pieces was he composing? Major symphonies?

PRESTON: Yeah. Yeah, sure. I don't know where he got his training.

ISOARDI: That's kind of extraordinary.

PRESTON: Much like myself. I've had no formal training, but I studied composition and orchestration and everything on my own.

ISOARDI: Really? Not even a private teacher?

PRESTON: Oh, no. What's the point? [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: I don't know.

PRESTON: I mean, you read what needs to be read in a book. You don't need

somebody to check up on you. That was my attitude anyhow. [mutual laughter] I went to Michigan State [University] because I thought, "Well, gee, you know—" Well, first I went in the army. We should start there.

ISOARDI: Well, actually we should get back— You settled in the Detroit area when you were about to begin school, right?

PRESTON: Okay, I'm in the Detroit area, and I'm growing up. That's pretty normal. I have to say—I mean, I don't like to say it, but I just have to say—that I had a severe problem with authority, and especially with the school system at that time, which was, I thought, very militant and verging on Naziism, if you will. [laughs] I mean, just the way they made you obey the rules and punishment and that whole thing, I just rebelled against it completely. So I had a lot of trouble in school.

ISOARDI: Even in grammar school, elementary school?

PRESTON: All of the schools.

ISOARDI: All the time? [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: All of them. I finally left school in the tenth grade. I quit. I couldn't take it any longer.

ISOARDI: When you hit sixteen?

PRESTON: Something like that, yeah.

ISOARDI: Where did you go to school?

PRESTON: Well, the major school that I went to that counted was Cass Technical

High School. They had a serious music department.

ISOARDI: Yeah. A lot of musicians came out of there, a lot of jazz musicians.

PRESTON: Yeah, there were, even later. They finally disbanded the music part of it, and I thought that was stupid. [laughs] But— Oh, one other thing. Before that I went to several Catholic schools and studied piano in the Catholic school system, and I attribute improving my career, in a sense, to these nuns that used to beat my hands with a ruler when I would make a mistake.

ISOARDI: How so?

PRESTON: In making me like atonal, dissonant music. [mutual laughter] And also it prevented me from being able to read music very well, which also enhanced my career in the sense that I would have probably been a studio musician if it hadn't been for that. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, I had the nuns. I got pinched a lot and had to kneel down and pray for myself a lot.

PRESTON: Oh, yeah. That's probably why you like jazz. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah. I think there's something there. So you had a combination, then, of public as well as Catholic schools?

PRESTON: Yeah. I wasn't Catholic, but my parents wanted to get me out of the house and get me some place where it was even worse than the public schools. [mutual laughter] But I actually liked it better. I don't know why. I sort of fell in

love with the whole regime of the mass and everything.

ISOARDI: The pageantry and all that stuff?

PRESTON: Yeah, the pageantry of it, the whole ritual. So I just had to point that out, because that's like a major factor in my career, how it influenced it.

ISOARDI: What was Cass like? Do you have any memories of Cass?

PRESTON: Of Cass? Gee. I remember I was in the choir. Not the choir but— What do they call it? Singing, you know. I was singing [in the glee club]. One thing is that at that time, even though my preferences were listening to jazz, [it was] mostly popular stuff. Like Woody Herman, George Shearing, that stuff was on the radio all the time. That was on pop radio. Stan Kenton. I was really into Stan Kenton, you know. But I could not play jazz. I mean, I could imitate it, but I didn't know how songs were constructed. I just didn't pay attention to it. I wasn't really serious about being a musician at all. I mean, I could play the piano pretty well like, say, when I was sixteen or seventeen, but I didn't know what I was doing at all, and I had no contact with any other musicians.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: Yeah. I didn't know anybody that was playing music. I just had my own childhood friends that I grew up with, you know, and school friends. Cass, I just remember that even though Cass— I mean, it was another one of these schools that to me were a lot of trouble. God, I feel like this is a therapy session now. [mutual

laughter] Things are starting to come back.

ISOARDI: It could be any number of things.

PRESTON: Is that why I had all those dreams lately about failing in math? [mutual laughter] Gee, I just realized that. Mr. Frye, that was his name. Yeah. Thank you. [mutual laughter] How much do I owe you?

ISOARDI: It's a perk. It's a bonus.

PRESTON: So yeah, I had a crush on this one girl. She was so cute. And one time she offered me a joint and I [said], "What's that?" [mutual laughter] You know, I had never heard of marijuana before.

ISOARDI: Being around all these bands when you were young, etc., you never saw anybody light up?

PRESTON: No. My father was completely straight. But I also fell in love with this other girl, and that was a torrid experience for several years, or a year and a half or something like that. What finally happened was that I quit school and I joined the army.

ISOARDI: This is when you dropped out after tenth?

PRESTON: Yes. I think I had failed a couple of courses, so I wasn't sixteen. I was seventeen. I got my parents' permission to join.

ISOARDI: Were they fearful for your future?

PRESTON: No. They thought it was a good thing. [laughs] “Straighten him out.”

So it was during the Korean War, and I was just lucky when they were passing out assignments. They were saying that like every other person went to Korea, and the other people went to Trieste, Italy. Well, I lucked out and went to Trieste, Italy.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

PRESTON: And when I got there, one day I was sitting in the PX [post exchange]—the PX is a store for soldiers—and I was playing the piano in the back room, just playing what I knew how to play, which is just kind of like faking everything—

ISOARDI: Standard style, right?

PRESTON: And this guy came up to me, and he says, "Hey, my name is Herbie Solomon. Why don't you come down? I'm in the band here, you know, the army band," he says. "You should come over there and audition. I'll set it up for you."

So he set it up for me. I went down, and there was like a dance band set up in this big kind of dance room—whatever it was, I don't know, rehearsal room. And there was a piano there. And the first thing the conductor does is put "Slow Boat to China," like an arrangement in six flats. [mutual laughter] So I sat down and I played. They go, "Okay, one, two, one, two, three," and I played along with the band. I got about three bars into the song, as far as reading goes, and then I just went on autopilot. After it was over, the chief warrant officer, who was the head of the army band, said, "Well, I know you weren't reading the music, but you did such a good job

of faking it I'm going to have you come in the band." And Herbie Solomon actually turned out to be Herbie Mann.

ISOARDI: No kidding!

PRESTON: Yeah. So Herbie and I played— I mean, the army band was really great because it was so diverse. You'd wake up in the morning, and you would go to concert band rehearsal. And the concert band— I mean, we never rehearsed the marching band, hardly ever, but the concert band played a lot of classical music, just classical pieces that were kind of converted to concert band. Instead of strings we had clarinets and stuff like that.

When I first got in the band I played— What did I play? I don't know. I think I played clarinet, because I knew how to play clarinet. [laughs] I don't remember why I knew, but I think at one time I did learn how to play the clarinet. And then I switched to alto clarinet, because nobody else could play it and there was only one instrument available. [laughs] So I tried playing that thing, and I actually could play it, and the parts were easier too. You didn't have any runs, and you were just kind of playing rhythmic figures. And then I remember at some point I played timpani. I loved to play timpani, and that was a lot of fun. The timpani parts were a lot of fun, and crash cymbals, all that stuff. I had to read all of that too, and I did okay. It wasn't like I was doing badly. I think in the marching band I played bass drum. That's what I remember. I actually have pictures of that. And then, like in

the afternoon after lunch, they would have big band rehearsals, and that didn't entail everybody in the unit.

The unit, we lived in this whorehouse that the army had taken over. It was on the grounds of this incredibly beautiful castle down on the Adriatic Sea, which we were on the edge of. You had to go through the castle grounds and go by the castle and wind your way up through these gardens, and finally, way, way, way in the back of the castle grounds you came to a road, and you drove up that road, and you came to our place, which was kind of a villa. And it had been a whorehouse at one time. And you could see how, because it had all these rooms for all the whores to do their jobs, and it had the main room, which was like a dance place, and that's where we rehearsed, and it was perfect. And they had a bar, and we kept the bar going, and a little room over here to relax— Well, we didn't have TV, of course. Then there was like all kinds of different things. We had our own tailor, we had our own barber, just local people that would come. That was fine with them. They made lots, you know, tons of money.

ISOARDI: It doesn't sound like the army was especially rough. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: No, it was great. I mean, you still felt like you were in prison, and you were counting the days, but no, it was great.

So in the evening after we ate— [interruption] Where was I?

ISOARDI: Well, you were talking about how it wasn't exactly a hard time, but you

were still counting the days.

PRESTON: Yeah. It was very nice, and I was learning. I was learning about music. I didn't finish that, though. In the evenings various little groups would jam and just play jazz. So that's where I really learned, because at the time I didn't know what a bridge was in the song. I really didn't. And I was learning. And it's funny, you know what I mean? I was almost there when I got there, because I could play songs, but I didn't know the order of what was in there. I just never paid attention to it. [laughs] So I just started learning all about that.

The other thing was that I started learning my own brand of orchestration. In other words, I would go to Jimmy over there, who played bassoon, and I would say, "Well, what's the range of the bassoon, and what are the hard transitions?" Like on clarinet, if you play a clarinet, the transition between A and C is very difficult, because it's a jump, and you have all these funny little keys up here you have to play. Every instrument has its own idiosyncracies, and I would just ask everybody what their problems were with their instruments. Also I would listen to— When we were playing with the band, it was so much easier to hear the orchestrations than if you were sitting there playing alone. So I learned so much, and I started writing a lot. I started writing chamber group pieces, various kinds, because I had all these musicians at my disposal, so I could write a piece and then hear it. You know, much like today— You can write a piece and hear it on your computer, but then you couldn't do

that, so you had to have real people. And I had them.

I even started conducting, too, because I wanted us to play *The History of the Soldier* [*L'histoire du soldat*] by Stravinsky, and nobody wanted to do that except me. [mutual laughter] I actually took the score and had all the parts written out. You could just go in town and get the people there that do that. That's all they did for a living, and really cheap. I could pay ten dollars or something and get the whole score done. And ten dollars was—what—five thousand lira.

ISOARDI: And this was post-war Italy, also.

PRESTON: Yeah, sure. You've got to realize this was only—what?—six years after the war. So, I mean, there was still a lot of— You know, there weren't anti-American feelings. It's funny, the Italians are funny. They don't hold a resentment because they're so used to arguing, [mutual laughter] and they go with whatever is happening. So we weren't looked down on at all. The people were very friendly and everything, but on the other hand, we could never get laid because we were soldiers. So unless you got a prostitute or something— Which is another story. [mutual laughter] So, yeah. That's what was happening every day. It was playing music all day.

ISOARDI: Well, you were becoming a serious musician.

PRESTON: Yeah. I was becoming very serious. Well, it depends on the individual. Most of the people there were already serious musicians, you know. I

was just a beginner [laughs], learning. So that was my life in the army pretty much.

ISOARDI: Was it an integrated band at all? Were there any African Americans in the band?

PRESTON: Oh, no, no.

ISOARDI: Because the army was just starting to really integrate at that point.

PRESTON: Yeah, there was no— Actually, we had one guy that was gay, and openly gay, I mean.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: Yeah. And he said, "Well, I tried to get out of the army by being gay, but they wouldn't let me." But he was never a problem. He never accosted anyone. Yeah.

I can't think of anything else other than the jam sessions we used to have. Herbie was there, and he was always great. And before he left he said, "I'm going to win the *Downbeat* [magazine] jazz poll, you watch." And he did. He did.

ISOARDI: Did you spend your entire hitch over there?

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, I mean, except for the basic training and all that stuff.

ISOARDI: For almost two years you were in Trieste?

PRESTON: Two and a half, yeah. And it was great. There was a lot to offer there. The food was fabulous. I used to go in town like once or twice a week and just have dinner by myself in a nice Italian restaurant. I used to snorkel in the Adriatic Sea.

[mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That sounds like a vacation.

PRESTON: Well, it wasn't too bad. I mean, the guy I grew up with, he went to Korea and got shot. It wasn't a serious wound, but still, getting shot, you know— So, yeah, it wasn't too bad. And we used to go to Venice every two weeks or something, because that's where Diane's was. That was like the most exclusive whorehouse in Europe.

ISOARDI: What was it called?

PRESTON: Diane's.

ISOARDI: Really? And that was *the* spot?

PRESTON: Oh! Man. Yeah, that was incredible. I happened to lose my virginity there. That was really great.

So, yeah, I don't know if I can add anything to any of that. So after I got out, I went—

ISOARDI: That was in—

PRESTON: In '53. My mother had moved to Texas, so I went down to Texas and then hated it there.

ISOARDI: Where at in Texas?

PRESTON: Houston. I think it was Houston. I couldn't stand it. Houston is pretty tolerable right now, but back then it was really ugly. So I moved back to

Detroit and started finding musicians to play with.

ISOARDI: What's your thinking? You wanted to make music your career?

PRESTON: I didn't know yet. All I really knew was that I could play now.

Oh, the other thing was that while I was in the service— Oh, I have to tell this story. [mutual laughter] One day I got a hold of some— It was like one of these Benzedrine inhalers. It was Italian. Now, the Italian inhalers were three or four times stronger than the American inhalers. You know, you take this cotton out, and you just chew it, and I started doing that. I got pretty wired from that, and I said, "I think I'll go into town." So I started walking, and it was like eight miles to town. So I walked into town without a thought—you know, it was just nothing—and I went into this bar, and there was a band playing in there. It was still pretty early in the evening, and there was a bass leaning against a wall, and nobody was playing it, and I said, "Hey, can I play the bass?"

ISOARDI: Had you ever played bass?

PRESTON: No. Never touched the bass in my life. The guy says, "Yeah, come on up here." I was so stoned, [mutual laughter] I didn't know, and I played bass for about six hours, and I played it all good, too. And nobody complained at all. The band said, "Oh, yeah, good, man." [mutual laughter] And I didn't even get a callous on my finger. I'll never figure that one out.

ISOARDI: No blisters?

PRESTON: Nothing.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Man, you were just born to play music.

PRESTON: And then I walked eight miles back to my place. And from that day forward I could play bass.

ISOARDI: Without the inhaler.

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, then I took time to learn what the notes were. [laughs] I didn't know what the notes were. Yeah, I learned the bass, and I asked a few other guys that played bass in the band how you play it, the positions and everything, so I started playing bass. Because a lot of times bass players weren't available. And there were a couple other pretty decent piano players in the band, too, way better than me. At this time— I mean, I could play, but I still needed a lot of help. [laughs] So I would play bass with various people, and that would extend my ability every time I could play. And I found, strangely enough, that when I played bass for a few hours I could play piano better. It made all of my muscles strengthened, and it gave me a lot of strength in my piano playing.

All right, back to getting to Detroit. When I got to Detroit— The reason I told that is that I said, "Okay, now I can play bass and I can play piano." So I met with some people. I don't know how I met them. I really don't. You know, Detroit was so prolific in terms of jam sessions everywhere. Like there were so many places and clubs and stuff. Sometimes you would see a sign "jam session every Thursday" or

something, and I would go and hang out in some of these places and sit in and get to know people. And I got to know people.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any of the places?

PRESTON: Not at the very beginning, no. But there was one thing that's probably one of the most important events in my life. At this time there was a place called the West End Café, and I went there, and there was a group playing there, a nice little group: Yusef Lateef, Tommy Flanagan, Ali Jackson—who is Milt Jackson's brother—on bass, and Elvin Jones.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: So they're playing. And they take a break. So I just got my nerve up, and I went up to Ali, and I said, "Can I sit in?" And the guy says, "Yeah, I've been playing since six o'clock this afternoon." And he says, "Go ahead, play, man." So I went up and played.

ISOARDI: Wow. Sandwiched between Elvin Jones and Tommy Flanagan.

PRESTON: Yeah. And of course other people would come and I'd sit in, too, but most of the time it was with them. And they didn't mind, that's the thing. I did a good job, you know, and they kind of liked me. And I went there every weekend, Friday and Saturday night, at like three [o'clock] in the morning, and we played until six or seven, I think. Every single weekend. I did that for two years.

ISOARDI: Long time.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What a good school.

PRESTON: I remember stories. Like one time this piano player sat in, and we were playing some tune. I don't even remember the name of the tune, but it was like [taps out a brisk tempo] that fast, and we're playing away, and the piano player started to play wrong changes. Elvin turns around, and he's saying, "E-flat seven." While he's playing he's telling this guy the changes! [mutual laughter] I mean, let alone he's doing something completely different with every member of his body. And instead of going— He always does that. He does a rhythm with his voice too that is like completely different than everything else. So he's calling out the changes.

So I managed to do that, and that helped me. I mean, you can't help but learn from those people, you know.

And another thing that happened during my stay in Detroit there was that— I was on my own, of course, and I had to get a job. I got a job at a record store, and the other guy working with me was Pepper Adams. I don't know if you know him.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Yeah, I know who he is.

PRESTON: And Pepper was great. He was pretty young then, and we were making like thirty-eight dollars a week or something like that.

ISOARDI: But this is long before he becomes pretty well known.

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, sure, he didn't get known until he was in New York, and

this was in Detroit. But he still played the same. He didn't play any differently. I mean, he was ferocious. And I went to a number of sessions with him where he was a monster. I mean, even in the black community they accepted him in a second. And there was a difference then, there was a big difference, between the black community and the white community. It was like they didn't intermingle too much.

ISOARDI: Except on places like the bandstand?

PRESTON: Yeah, but I'm saying if there was a jam session it was either all black or all white.

ISOARDI: So there wasn't even much mixing among musicians?

PRESTON: Not very much. I mean, there were exceptions like myself [laughs] or Pepper, but—

ISOARDI: Were you the only white musician sitting in at this place?

PRESTON: Mostly. Mostly, yeah. Once in a while there would be somebody else.

ISOARDI: Did you have any problems?

PRESTON: Never. Never a problem. I never in my life have had a problem. But it could be that I never saw what the difference was. I never saw any difference in black people and white people, and probably that energy is a very powerful force.

ISOARDI: I'm sure people probably sensed that in you.

PRESTON: It could be. I don't know.

So that was like Detroit. And there were a lot of— I made friends with some of the white contingent there, too.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 8, 2001

PRESTON: And we had that thing that was going, also. I think we had a clique of certain musicians, and we used to jam in various people's houses. We were just enthralled with the idea of playing music then. It was so much fun. And all those incredible albums were coming out—the early Miles [Davis] albums—and it was just so exciting, you know, so exciting.

ISOARDI: How did you hook up with these guys?

PRESTON: I don't know. I really don't know. It must have been like meeting them at sessions somewhere, and that's kind of the way things worked then. There would be jam sessions, and you'd meet all these people and give them your phone number, and they'd call you up. It just worked like that.

ISOARDI: You must have had the sense of living in two worlds at that time, I guess, right? Going from one place to the other?

PRESTON: Well, I didn't really feel that way, because some of these guys, they would come down— I'll tell you one thing that happened that I thought was very interesting. Here's the thing: with the white guys I always played the piano, and they didn't think that I could play bass because I played piano. How could I play bass if I played piano? And the black guys always thought I played bass, and I couldn't

play piano if I played bass. And today that's not an issue anymore, because people do it all the time. I mean, look at Stevie Wonder; he plays everything. And I know a few other people just like him. So I remember one time sitting in at the West End and playing piano, and they were like, "Oh, God, what's he doing?" [mutual laughter] "Don't do that." And of course, I would play bass with some of the other guys, the white guys, and it just never got accepted. Never. But of course, I was like, "Gee, here's a new form of prejudice." But, you know, who cares? It still all worked, and I was having fun.

ISOARDI: If you were almost the only white artist playing at the West End, then did you ever have a black artist playing with the white guys?

PRESTON: I don't recall that, no. But the thing is that most of the sessions with the white guys—if you want to put it that way [laughs]—were at their homes.

ISOARDI: Oh, it wasn't in a particular club or something?

PRESTON: And it wasn't an open invitation thing. Whereas at the West End, whoever was sitting in the audience could— And there would be white people there, some spectators, even, you know. So it was pretty open. But the other things were very private.

ISOARDI: You were in Detroit for a couple of years?

PRESTON: Well, let's see. I got there, well, around the end of '53, the first of '54. Then I went to Florida during '55 and spent about nine months there. I was like the

fraternity mascot. [mutual laughter] They brought me there and put me up in their fraternity, and I played piano at their parties.

ISOARDI: What school was that?

PRESTON: University of Miami. I actually went to a lot of classes there, too. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Just sitting in?

PRESTON: Yeah, just went there and sat in there. And I fell in love with this girl who had a twin sister. That was very strange, because when I broke up with her I dated her twin sister [mutual laughter], and it was like, wow, that was the weirdest thing in the world. It was like a completely different person. I mean, they are. They are completely different, twins are, even though they look alike. Even Alex [Cline] and Nels [Cline], they're completely different. I don't know if you've ever met Nels.

ISOARDI: Yeah, but I don't know him nearly as well as Alex.

PRESTON: Oh, man, he's like this totally relaxed, loose guy who just— I mean, this is not a— Well, I don't know. He's just— Not that Alex isn't relaxed or anything; he is. But he's like more—what's the word I'm trying to use?—organized. Alex is more organized in everything.

ISOARDI: Got that, Alex?

PRESTON: Alex, I'm trying to be nice to your brother. I mean, they're both

incredibly creative and geniuses at what they're doing, but they're so different. So different. Amazing.

ISOARDI: So you were in Florida for a year?

PRESTON: Not quite a year, but long enough. Long enough. I enjoyed myself there, and I was playing music here and there, and I didn't work very much. That's one thing I remember, I didn't work too much. Or "too much"—hardly at all. But then I went back to Detroit and resumed going to the West End and doing all that kind of stuff. So pretty much things went on the same way in Detroit until 1957. At that time I moved. I got an SOS call from my mother, who was living in California now.

ISOARDI: Where?

PRESTON: In Whittier. She's still living with the same guy [Charles Jarvis], and they're both alcoholics, and they're going through all that garbage. Anyhow, she needed support, so I grabbed all my stuff and moved to— Oh, wait a minute. [laughs] Wait a minute! I will say one more thing about Detroit. That last year, '56 to '57, a bunch of us musicians got together and we decided, why should we be paying high rent here and there and everyplace else when we could have something really nice? And there was this one guy who was kind of pulling us all together. I can't remember his name, but he was a strange guy. He had a Ph.D. in music, in Theosophy, and something else, science or something like that. He got kicked out of the Catholic church because he wrote a paper exposing their financial system. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That could have bought him a bullet.

PRESTON: Yeah, really. So he pulled us all together and said, "Okay, let's rent a house." So we found this really nice mansion in Grosse Point, Michigan, which is the expensive area, and we rented it, and it was incredible. It had an elevator going from the first floor to the second floor, there was a fountain in the dining room, and every room had its own fireplace.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: So that was really living it up, I'm must say. So we all lived there, and it was really fabulous, and the rent was really cheap, really, really cheap. So it was fantastic living there and having all that stuff. And we all liked each other. There were three different piano players there, and another guy who played bass also, like myself. So that was really incredible, living there like that.

ISOARDI: I guess by this time you'd have a bass too, right?

PRESTON: I don't remember having a bass. No, wait, I did have a bass, because I remember this guy borrowed my bass, and he went to Cleveland to play a job, [laughs] and I drove all the way to Cleveland, and I said, "What are you doing with my bass in Cleveland?" So I got my bass back. I waited until he finished the job and then took my bass back. Yeah, I must have had a bass then. But I must have sold it, because I didn't take with me to L.A.

I moved to L.A. and got here and started meeting some musicians, and I got a

call from a guy, one of the musicians I knew in Detroit, saying that he had moved out here also. He was in this band, they needed a piano player, so would I come and join, like go on the road with this band? And it was a big band. It was called Hal McIntyre. And the arrangements were like Count Basie, but it was an all-white band. But it was very good. It was extremely good, good band. So I toured with them for about a year, maybe a year and a half, all in four cars, all around the entire West, even Montana and places like that. We'd go to little towns, Last Chance Gulch or something like that, and play a dance somewhere, you know. It was incredible. Once again, it was a great learning experience.

Two of the guys were from Detroit, from what I remember. One of them [Jerry Galler] was a guy that I played with quite a lot, but he was a diabetic, and he was drinking three fifths of gin a day, so you can imagine what that would be like. I'm sure he's dead now. He's got to be dead. The other guy [Louie Ciotte], who called me from Detroit, he lived here, and we made this album. I don't know where it is up there [indicates wall]; it might not even be there. But we put out an album. Anyhow, we toured for a year and a half with that band, and later on he died. He was one of these rare cases. His body blew up. He was like a serious alcoholic, and he fell asleep and— Somebody had a recording that they recorded from the police band [radio], where they're talking about running in there, and his body had burned up in like ten minutes or something. It was incredibly fast, probably because it was totally

saturated with alcohol. Totally.

I was playing bass a lot. Right at that time Paul Bley and Carla Bley came in town. I had met Paul in Miami when I was down there, and we became very close friends.

ISOARDI: This is late '58, '59?

PRESTON: No, this is— Well, '58, maybe early '58. Even though Paul was using Charlie Haden at the time on various gigs, I played bass with him a number of times and gigs when Charlie couldn't do it for some reason or other. Also Carla would get a job here and there, and I would play bass with her. And they would come over to my house, and the three of us would play. Paul would sit down at the piano and play two choruses of blues, and then Carla would sit down and play two choruses of blues, and I'd sit— Without stopping, though. We would just slide over and continue playing— Or some other song. And it was so interesting, the differences between each of our playing. It was very interesting. Although Paul was aeons ahead of me at that time harmonically, and so was Carla. I mean, Carla didn't have the chops so much, but her mind was really out there. She was writing all this atonal jazz at the time, and she was—what?—like twenty years old, if that. But, you know, once again I'm learning my ass off here with these really great musicians.

ISOARDI: But musicians who are doing something different. Had you been really exposed to the avant-garde movement?

PRESTON: No. Not really. In fact, my exposure to Carla was probably the first time that I started— Well, that's not totally true, because when I was in the army my roommate was Buzz Gardner, who was Bunk Gardner's brother, and he started turning me on to Bartók. And I knew Stravinsky, because in the movie *Fantasia* that section was my favorite section. But I hadn't heard much more of Stravinsky than that—you know, *The Rite of Spring* [*Le sacre du printemps*]. And I think my dad had the whole collection of *The Rite of Spring* on 78[-rpm records]. So I started listening to all kinds of music then. Most notably I had a recording of Bartók on one side and Schoenberg's 5 Pieces for Orchestra [*5 Orchester-Stücke*] on the other side, which I didn't like at all. It all sounded too sterile to me or something. But when you're stuck in Trieste, Italy, with only so many records, you're going to listen to this other one because you haven't heard it twenty million times, which I did, and I got so I liked it. So then I started getting more music by Alban Berg and other people that were in the atonal realm.

So when I heard Carla's stuff I recognized immediately that here was a way of applying that technology to jazz, although I was really sorry that she discontinued that style after a certain point. When she got back in New York she started writing more like Kurt Weill than Schoenberg.

ISOARDI: Interesting. But out here she was doing that kind of stuff?

PRESTON: Oh, yeah, sure. Well, two songs on my last album [*Transformation*]

are her songs, and they're both atonal pieces more or less. They're not really atonal, but they're dissonant.

ISOARDI: Where were they playing around town? Where were you playing with them? Do you remember?

PRESTON: Oh, gosh, yeah, vaguely. I remember there was this place in Manhattan Beach that Paul had, and I played there with him a bunch of times. And one time he couldn't do the job, [laughs] and I had to go there and take his place. And I played that piano— I couldn't fucking believe anyone could play that piano! There were like twenty notes missing all over the piano, and you had to know which they were in order to play it. Boy, that blew my mind. And Carla— I know we played several places, but maybe some coffeehouses, because they were starting up then, like along Sunset Boulevard. I think we played some place like that. Pandora's [Box]? No, they didn't have a piano. I don't remember.

ISOARDI: Was it around '59 or so that Paul had a band at the Hillcrest [Club]?

PRESTON: Right. Well, I think in late '58 he had a band at the Hillcrest, or it might have been some other place right around there. Paul, Dave Pike playing vibes, Charlie Haden, and Lenny McBrowne on drums, and that was the beginning of the band from the record *Solemn Meditation*. Because later on he got another gig. He didn't use Dave anymore, and he got Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, and Lenny was still playing drums then, and Charlie. I don't know why, but then they changed

drummers after that. So that's how the Ornette Coleman— I even have a recording from that club from that time.

ISOARDI: I was wondering, was this a private recording of theirs?

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, I mean, somebody gave it—

ISOARDI: Because I know they put out a disc of Paul Bley, of that band's recording at Hillcrest.

PRESTON: They did?

ISOARDI: I haven't been able to find a copy, but I know it's out.

PRESTON: Well, I know Paul used to record a lot. He had a beautiful Ampex, one of those that looks like a Samsonite suitcase, and you open it up, and then there's an Ampex recorder inside. It was like the consumer Ampex, but it was a great machine, and it took ten-inch reels. But it was mono[aural]; that was the one problem with it. But he got some good recordings from it. I mean, he used to record all of that stuff.

ISOARDI: When did you meet Ornette Coleman?

PRESTON: When they started playing there I used to come down there occasionally and listen, so I'm sure I met them. Actually, Ornette came to Georgia Lee's Caprice. I haven't brought that in yet, but there was a place called Georgia Lee's Caprice in El Monte that had jam sessions every weekend starting around two o'clock on into the morning, and everybody used to go there. Ornette went there. I don't remember seeing Don Cherry there, but all the L.A. musicians would go there.

ISOARDI: People who were inside as well as outside?

PRESTON: Yeah. Oh, well, no, it wasn't outside.

ISOARDI: It wasn't an avant-garde gathering?

PRESTON: No, it was just a place to play. And I wouldn't say that I was doing anything outside at that time. I was still kind of like taking it all in, you know. I liked what Paul was doing very much, but I felt he was— Later on I think he could have gone further out than what he was doing. Although I will say there was one album that he did—I can't think of the name of it now—he and Steve Swallow and a clarinet player (I can't think of his name right now [Jimmy Giuffre]), but it was fantastic. That was really fantastic. That's some of the best stuff ever.

ISOARDI: How would you describe what he was doing?

PRESTON: Paul? Well, Paul had an extremely strong lyrical sense to his playing, and Paul is very, very intelligent, you know, so he combined that. Plus his technical abilities were very strong, especially back then, very strong. He quit practicing about five or ten years ago, so he has to kind of warm up on the gig, you know. But all of those things combined— I think that the lyrical sense that he has, which is beautiful, interferes with his being able to go into unknown places unless that's what's called for. And if that's what is called for, then the sky's the limit for him; he can do it. I think he just doesn't choose to; I don't know for what reasons. I think he wants to be known as much as Chick Corea, if you will, or something like that. I mean, there are

some commercial considerations— Which I gave up a long time ago. [laughs] I just decided at one point that I have to do what I want to do no matter what it is. And that's not necessarily a putdown. I'm not putting that down. I think that if you do have that strong a lyrical sense, why not use it, you know? It's beautiful, what he does. It's great.

ISOARDI: How about Ornette at the time?

PRESTON: At the time? Well, Ornette was still developing quite a bit when that was happening, and on that recording that I have you can hear his conceptual ability, even though most of the compositions are Paul's. In his playing you can hear the direction he's going and everything, but I don't think that he had gotten to that point yet that he reached when he got to New York.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: I don't think so.

ISOARDI: And when they were together they were mostly playing Paul's tunes, not Ornette's?

PRESTON: Oh, sure. It was Paul's gig. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Of course.

PRESTON: Sure. That's the way it works, you know. Like when I play with Bobby Bradford, it's Bobby's tunes [laughs], not mine, even though I'm a composer. But I think that's one of the reasons why they broke away from Paul, because they

wanted more control.

ISOARDI: I would think so, because Ornette was writing and playing his own music before he got to L.A.

PRESTON: Yeah. Not to say that— They did play his music, though. It's not like they didn't play it; they did. I mean, one of the things that Paul has had a problem with throughout his career is composing music. That's why he's always had a wife that could compose music. [mutual laughter] When he and Carla broke up, he grabbed Annette [Peacock], and she started composing right away. She did a pretty good job, too, for someone that sort of just fell into the job. So he's always kind of looked for other's people's music in some sense. That's probably why you hear a lot of Ornette's compositions during that time, more so than anyone else's other than Paul's. I mean, Paul has written music, you know. It's not like he hasn't written anything.

ISOARDI: Were there audiences?

PRESTON: Oh, yeah. Sure. It wasn't that far out then. I mean, it was far out, but you know what? The technical—

ISOARDI: Not far out compared to what comes ten years later, yeah.

PRESTON: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: Or a few years later.

PRESTON: It was far out, but people didn't think of it as far out that much, I don't

think, because the melodies were pretty down to earth, and— That's not even correct. I don't know what it was. I think the technical abilities and Paul's ability to stay lyrical—you know, at least during his portion— Of course, it's been a number of years since I've listened to that tape. I don't even know where it is. It's in there somewhere.

So that was that scene, yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, who else was around that scene? Who was sort of pushing the boundaries? I mean, you also mentioned Charlie Haden.

PRESTON: Yeah, but Charlie was not— I mean, he wasn't doing anything there other than playing bass. He hadn't gotten to that point yet. In fact, it took a few years in New York before he got to a point where he asked Carla to write some music for him and started that Liberation [Music Orchestra] scene. To tell you the truth, I can't think of anyone at that time that was pushing the boundaries. I can't think of anyone then that was doing that.

ISOARDI: I guess Bobby Hutcherson was around then?

PRESTON: Yeah, but he was pretty straight-ahead.

ISOARDI: I met a saxophonist who told me that he played with Paul just before Ornette. Anthony Ortega.

PRESTON: "Batman"! Yeah, "Batman." He is a very fine musician, but he wasn't in that category with Ornette by a long shot. Only in the sense that— You

know, I played with him a few times, and he is really, really good, but he doesn't stretch the boundaries at all, I don't think. I can't think of anybody that did that like Carla or Ornette.

ISOARDI: So from what you're telling me, it's really them. They were the ones.

PRESTON: And I think Carla influenced Ornette quite a bit, too.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: Quite a bit. I mean, I don't know what Ornette's personal listening habits were at that time. But when you think about it, what was there then— I mean, there was Thelonious Monk, who did do some interesting harmonic things.

ISOARDI: Had you guys heard anything by Cecil Taylor by then? Or was he still sort of—?

PRESTON: I hadn't. The first time I heard Cecil Taylor was with the Jazz Composers Orchestra, and that was pretty much because I had reestablished my relationship with Carla, and her husband then, Michael Mantler, was the head of that whole thing.

ISOARDI: I think that for a brief while Charles [Brackeen] and Joanne Brackeen were around L.A. Did you ever—?

PRESTON: Yeah. I knew Joanne. Grogan I think her name was, something like that.

ISOARDI: Was she playing much in those days?

PRESTON: Yeah, but I don't think that she was doing anything unusual harmonically either. There was another Joanne, Joanne Grauer, who at that time people would get confused because their names were so similar. Charles Brackeen—I can't remember hearing Charles very much. I remember Joanne because I heard her a bunch of times, I think. We knew each other then. I don't know what she is doing today at all. But then? Nothing stands out in my mind. Because that was my quest in life, I would have remembered something about that.

ISOARDI: Right. You mentioned kind of the separation that there was in Detroit, certainly, within the communities. Was the same applicable in L.A.? Were there jam sessions to go to? And were they mixed jam sessions?

PRESTON: Well, nothing compares to Detroit in terms of quantity. But yeah, there was, as I mentioned, Georgia Lee's Caprice. And then like every Sunday morning there was the Digger. I think that was the name of the place that—oh, now I'm really grasping for straws here; hopefully I'll remember his name later—an alto [saxophone] player [Ray Graziano] ran early in the morning. It was like taking over. In other words, you would go to Georgia Lee's Caprice from two to six [o'clock] in the morning, and then you would go to the Digger and play until about eleven [o'clock].

ISOARDI: Where was the Digger?

PRESTON: It was also in the East L.A part. I don't know if it was as far as El Monte, but it was in that general area. It wasn't far. It took me only about five or

ten minutes to get there from Georgia Lee's Caprice. And the real die-hard jazz musicians would like keep going.

As far as the racial situation, it was definitely much lessened than those years previous to that, much lessened. And anybody could— I mean, people tend to stay with their own. I mean, it's true today. It is still true. Even though there's like hardly any prejudice going on, people still tend to stay within their own boundaries or whatever. It just depends on what the situation is. I have been in a lot of black groups where I was the only white guy, and I've been in a lot of white groups where there were some other black people involved. I think it's lessening every day, you know, the whole racial thing. I mean, there are always going to be idiots that keep that thing going because of their own hate, which is probably instilled in them with their upbringing.

So yeah, the music scene then— I'm trying to think of what happened after that, if there's something of note.

ISOARDI: How long were Paul and Carla there?

PRESTON: No. I'll tell you what happened is that I left I got a job in Detroit playing at a strip club, no less, in 1960. So I moved to Detroit. By that time I had a family, I had a job, and a child.

ISOARDI: Oh, you got married?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: When did that happen?

PRESTON: Somewhere along the line. [mutual laughter] I was playing in a coffeehouse, and I met this girl there. The way I met her was that I was playing there. [Preston's wife Tina Preston walks in to give him a message] It wasn't her. [mutual laughter] I met this girl [Rowena Blincoe]. I was playing in this coffeehouse, an upright piano, which means you're facing the piano and you can't see anything else, and I turned around, and there was this very interesting looking girl behind me. And I played another forty-five minutes, and I turned around, and this girl is still staring at me, sitting there. The only person in the room, right? So I played another forty-five minutes, and I turned around, she's still staring at me. So I turned around and introduced myself, and she said, "What's the most important thing in your life?" And I said, "Well, I guess that would have to be music." She said, "Can I come home with you?"

ISOARDI: Really? [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: Something like that. So then we were together for about eight years. So we went to Detroit together, and I had this job playing with some of the guys that were living at that house and stuff.

ISOARDI: Is that how you found out about the job? They got in touch?

PRESTON: No. Well, that's possible. I'm not totally sure. I don't know how he got in touch with me. And the guy that I was playing with, his name was Bob

Pearson. He was a

really great musician. *[Also bassist Beans Richardson and an Australian drummer, Don Varella.] We had a few jobs after that. That one lasted for six months or something, and then we had a few more jobs. So I stayed in Detroit for quite a while.

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

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 8, 2001

PRESTON: I'm just trying to think. Oh, one thing of note is that when we first moved there we got a flat over a barbershop on a main street. My wife, my then wife, her name was Rowena [Blincoe], and she was like the first hippie ever in the world. She was like a hippie. She was born a hippie, you know. She was like one of these extremely unusual people that had her own life path going, and that was it. I mean, it was completely different than anything else, than anyone else. And she decided she wanted to have jam sessions at her house. So we had a piano there—I don't know where the piano came from—and I sent the word out, and musicians started showing up. Like I think it started around—the same deal, you know—two [o'clock] in the morning and went until six [o'clock]. Sometimes it would start at eight at night and go until like six in the morning and every night of the week, every single night of the week, seven days a week, if you can imagine that. [laughs] I mean, yeah, there would be fifteen, twenty people, maybe thirty people there, some listening, some playing, every night of the week.

ISOARDI: Man.

PRESTON: It was like a party, an ongoing party. It just never stopped.

ISOARDI: How long did this last?

PRESTON: It lasted about a year. I think it was at least a year.

ISOARDI: Jeez! [laughs]

PRESTON: Maybe longer. I mean, I don't remember, but I know it was at least a year. Then we moved from that place.

A couple of things of note then. I had a trio of my own and we would play occasionally, and I had two of the greatest drummers that ever happened. One drummer was Frank Isolo—I don't know how great he was, but he was really good; he made a lot of records with various people—and Art Martigan, who is one of the greatest drummers I've ever played with. He recorded with Woody Herman, he played with "Bird" [Charlie Parker]. But I've never played with anybody who had the most incredible touch and swing and everything as him.

ISOARDI: At this point in your career, how would you describe your own music? What did you like to play?

PRESTON: That's what I was about to broach on. At that time— Now, this is when I really started getting into more experimental jazz and stuff.

ISOARDI: When you were in Detroit?

PRESTON: Yeah, during this time. I had a set of vibes, and there was a place in Detroit, a coffeehouse called the Cup. I don't remember what street it was on, though. I had a gig there, and it was totally out. I remember that very explicitly, that the music that we did— I devised all kinds of methods of playing music, you know, and some of it had poetry in it. Some of it was just— I guess the word experimental is

the best word that describes it. It was very experimental music. And the people I had playing with me were very sensitive to that genre.

I think at that time also I became exposed to John Cage and Morton Feldman and other people in that category, Pauline Oliveros. That was the kind of music that was not— The instrumentation was not like any normal instrumentation. And it was like you could do things musically with instruments that were junk or were like altered instruments of some kind. So I was kind of carrying all of those ideas into my own playing and my own compositions. The reason I remember the coffeehouse so vividly is because that was probably the first time I had really utilized all of that stuff. I mean, it wasn't jazz, it wasn't like experimental jazz. It was just experimental music, and it was trying to carry a lot of those ideas and those concepts into the music world. And then from that point on, that's what I became the most interested in.

ISOARDI: How long were you in Detroit?

PRESTON: I was there for two years. And I remember one time I was traveling on the road or something. I went out with a Dixieland band and traveled all around, and we got stuck in Chicago. Somebody raided our— [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: So you were playing with a Dixieland band?

PRESTON: Yeah. I thought that would be an unusual experience, to do that. It was fun. There were some important players in the band, people from New Orleans and stuff. But it was a way of making a living. I mean, you had to do that too, you

know. So we got stuck in Chicago. Somebody ripped us off, and this guy, you know, he put us up. A black guy came along, and he said "What's wrong?" and we told him. He invited us to the church that night, and they took up a collection for us.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: And he put us up in his house, made his mother move out of the room and sleep on the couch. I mean, it was quite amazing. So I stayed in Chicago for a whole year. I didn't work a lot, but my wife was working. She was a model, you know, an artist's model. She did that for a living. She was actually a fine artist herself, very, very excellent artist. I sat in with Sun Ra a bunch of times and met a lot of the local musicians and played various places.

ISOARDI: When you sat in with Sun Ra, were you playing bass?

PRESTON: No, I played piano. I don't know why they let me sit in, but they did. I guess one of the guys in the band heard me in another situation and said, "Come on, Don, you should sit in with the band."

Then we went back to Detroit.

Oh, you know what? I just remembered another thing also that— When I was in Los Angeles, before I went to Detroit, I had gotten to know Lenny Bruce really well, and Joe Meany, who is a sax player. He and Lenny were really close and— I just can't think of this alto [saxophone] player's name. [Ray Graziano]

ISOARDI: L.A. alto player?

PRESTON: Yeah, who ran the Digger jam sessions. Anyhow, Joe was at his house, and he thought there was a toy gun on the table, and he says, "Oh, I think I'll kill myself," and he killed himself. It was a joke. I mean, he was always doing things like that. One time I got busted for marijuana, and he came over to give my wife some money, and he took the money out, and two joints fell on the ground while he was handing her the money. [mutual laughter] And he probably did it on purpose, you know, because he was that kind of person. That's why he and Lenny Bruce were so tight, because he was a very, very funny guy—and a great, great saxophone player.

ISOARDI: Who were the other alto players in town then?

PRESTON: Oh, gosh, I can't think of his name. Damn it all.

ISOARDI: I mean, Art Pepper was around. Frank Morgan was around.

PRESTON: No, no.

ISOARDI: Lennie Niehaus?

PRESTON: No, it wasn't anybody like that. You wouldn't even know his name.

ISOARDI: Oh, really? Oh, I see.

PRESTON: It may pop in there at some point, but— Anyhow, why did I bring him up? Oh, and the other person I met at that time was Lord Buckley.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

PRESTON: When I was in Chicago, Lenny was playing somewhere, and we went out and had dinner and talked for a long time. We talked for a long time, and we

talked about Lord Buckley, and I think I also ran into him there in Chicago. Later on he let us stay at his house in [Las] Vegas. He lived in Vegas.

So anyhow, we were in Chicago, and we decided to finally move back to L.A. It had to be around '60, the end of '61, somewhere around that time.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 18, 2001

ISOARDI: Don, before we resume where we left off last time, which I think was when you returned to L.A. at the end of 1961, there are a couple of things I wanted to ask you a little bit more about, if that's okay.

PRESTON: Sure.

ISOARDI: First of all, the Caprice, Georgia Lee's Caprice club. Could you talk a little more about it? First off, its physical appearance.

PRESTON: Okay. I remember a very dark kind of nightclub.

ISOARDI: Traditional nightclub setup? Tables—

PRESTON: Well, yeah. I remember it being very dark. And I remember there was a stage area that was of course lit a little better, with some kind of minimal lighting for that kind of thing.

ISOARDI: About how many pieces could you fit on that stage?

PRESTON: The stage was fairly large. I think you could get seven or eight guys on there. Well, horn players, anyhow, and bass and drums. And I think— Well, of course, there had to have been a piano there. I think they had a grand piano. It was very comfortable, a very comfortable place. It was pretty large. I seem to remember it being pretty large.

ISOARDI: How many people could it accommodate?

PRESTON: Two hundred, something around that area. But most of it was chairs—You know, booths and soft chairs and tables and that sort of thing for serving drinks.

ISOARDI: Do you remember the location of it?

PRESTON: Well, all I remember is that you got off at El Monte. [mutual laughter] If you were going out the San Bernardino freeway [Interstate 10] you'd get off at El Monte. And I don't even remember the direction, but it was not far from that exit. It was like ten or twelve minutes from that exit.

ISOARDI: Do you have any idea who ran the place?

PRESTON: Probably Georgia Lee. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Do you know who Georgia Lee was?

PRESTON: No. Not at all. I've been trying to remember the guy's name, the musician who ran the gig. His name was Fred, Freddie. It might pop into my head, you know, but I don't remember his last name right now. [Freddie Gruber] Every once in a while I'll run into somebody that remembers that place, because it was very popular.

ISOARDI: You mean in terms of audience? Or in terms of the musicians? Or both?

PRESTON: No, not audience. Most of the audience were musicians that came down there either to listen or to sit in. Some of the musicians were very amateur, and some of them were really great musicians.

ISOARDI: Were these musicians sort of from all over L.A.? Was it white musicians, black musicians, Latino?

PRESTON: All over. All over. And there were some black musicians there, but not very many. Like I said, Ornette [Coleman] sat in there a few times, and possibly Don Cherry did. But, I mean, it was people from Laguna [Beach] and all the area in between there, and also people from the [San Fernando] Valley. I mean, it was the place to go.

ISOARDI: Was it like the only place? Because it's a ways to go for most people.

PRESTON: For a while it was the only place, yeah—I mean on those nights, the weekend nights, those Friday and Saturday nights.

ISOARDI: How long did it last? Do you have any idea?

PRESTON: I think it was going for about seven years or something like that.

ISOARDI: Into the mid-sixties or so? Or late sixties?

PRESTON: Yeah. Maybe not that long. Maybe five years. Quite long, though, for that type of thing.

ISOARDI: Yeah. At one point last time we did talk about people who were around town, especially some of the more, shall we say, adventurous musicians. I know Gary Peacock was out here for a while. Did you happen to encounter him?

PRESTON: Sure, I knew Gary pretty well. He was one of the more— There was a bunch of guys that did experiment a lot with time signatures, you know, and those

people finally became the nucleus of Don Ellis's orchestra.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

PRESTON: Like Emil Richards and Gary Peacock. And also there were a couple of drummers. I can't remember their names now, but— There was one unfortunate incident with one of his drummers over in France. They were waiting for an elevator to come, and he was looking down to see when it was coming up, and it was coming down, and it chopped his head off.

ISOARDI: Ugh!

PRESTON: Yeah. God, that was really sickening, especially for the people standing around waiting with him. God.

ISOARDI: Yeah, needless to say. Whew.

PRESTON: But Emil and I formed a group called AHA, the Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage.

ISOARDI: Okay, but this is after you come back?

PRESTON: Yes, this is when I came back. That's true.

ISOARDI: I do want to get into that soon, actually. Let's see. We've talked about a number of musicians who were around L.A. then. I've asked you about [Charles] Brackeen and a lot of others. Are there any names that we haven't talked about that we should know about? People who were promising or who took the music seriously and maybe didn't have the career or whatever? Any other outstanding individuals

that you could think of from that time?

PRESTON: Well, actually, yeah. There were several people then. [begins looking through record collection] I have to—

ISOARDI: Do you want me to stop?

PRESTON: Yeah. [tape recorder off] Well, actually— Will this [microphone] reach?

ISOARDI: Sure, there's plenty of cord.

PRESTON: [looks through a collection of CDs] I'm just looking for something that would help the interview. Is this jazz? The trouble is, I can't see the damn— I can't read those little letters inside. I'm looking for this album by someone I was just going to discuss, Tommy Peltier.

ISOARDI: [reads off album cover] "Tommy Peltier. Featuring Roland Kirk." It's called *The Jazz Corps*. Don't know that at all.

PRESTON: Well, Tommy grew up in L.A., so he was here during the thing that you did before [referring to the UCLA Oral History Program Central Avenue Sounds interview series]. So he was here during that time. He was a trumpet player. Still is. Well, he doesn't play trumpet anymore. But he formed a group called the Jazz Corps, which was playing around that time, and he was going to Georgia Lee's with various people. The people in the Jazz Corps were Lynn Blessing, for one, who was a vibes player, played very good, died about six or seven years ago. Maurice Miller,

a drummer also. This was like a very adventurous group that played a lot of really wild stuff for that time. And Bill Plummer, who was like a fantastic bass player and played sitar, and he also played in Don Ellis's band.

ISOARDI: Can I see that?

PRESTON: Oh, sure.

ISOARDI: [inaudible]— features Roland Kirk.

PRESTON: Roland wasn't in the band, but they got him to play with them. He liked the band very much; he thought they were really great. And they were.

ISOARDI: They did the *Salmon 66* for Pacific Jazz [Records].

PRESTON: They played at the Lighthouse for a number of years—I don't know, off-night or something like that.

ISOARDI: I've never even seen this around. I'll have to look for it.

PRESTON: That's a rerelease.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I noticed. Great. What ever happened to him?

PRESTON: To who?

ISOARDI: To Peltier.

PRESTON: Well, Tommy had a serious hernia problem, and the doctor said that he'd better give up playing the trumpet because that was going to kill him eventually. So he took up the guitar and started writing songs. He's put out a number of albums since then, singing and playing guitar and doing MIDI [musical instrument digital

interface] arrangements. This is the last album that he did, which I'm on, actually.

ISOARDI: What's it called?

PRESTON: Its called *March of the Nematodes*.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Nematodes?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: The Plastic Theater Art Band, Tommy Peltier.

PRESTON: Well, one of the things that Tommy got me into for a while was selling bugs at various fairs or these [farmers] markets that they have around town. They are what they call beneficial insects, like ladybugs and nematodes and praying mantises, stuff like that. He's still doing it. He generates a pretty good income with it. I got out of it. I just didn't have the time to do it. So yeah. And this is a compilation of music that he had done for a number of years. Even Robbie Krieger is on this. And it is very, very interesting. He looks like a bug right there. [mutual laughter] That's funny.

ISOARDI: You mentioned that he was one of the more adventurous musicians around town.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I wonder if you could talk a little about what it was to be adventurous then. Part of it was experimenting with different time signatures?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Were people doing other things then? Ornette was clearly doing his own thing, which was very different. Were people being adventurous in any other ways?

PRESTON: I can only speak for myself. Where are we in time?

ISOARDI: We were talking about—what?—late fifties, early sixties, somewhere in there. Before you leave L.A.

PRESTON: I was thinking about it. I don't know if I had gotten into the odd-time stuff yet. I'm not sure. I would have to really think about that. But of course, I was aware of it. I was aware of it before I even got to L.A., because Tito Puente was doing stuff in fives and sevens and everything, and I was totally aware of that. And then, you know, "Take Five." I don't know when that came out, but that was right around that time. So yeah. I was experimenting, or not experimenting but trying to play with that kind of stuff. Also I wasn't trying to change the piano so much, but I was trying other instruments, you know, like playing vibes. I played vibes for a little while right after I left L.A. I took up the vibes, which is a logical instrument, because it's like a piano. It's got the same configurations and everything. I mean, I was pretty much of a late starter in the music world. I didn't even start playing—songs that I knew, I didn't even start playing—until I was like eighteen.

ISOARDI: You were so acculturated into it, though, from day one, weren't you? With the sounds always around you.

PRESTON: Yeah. It was funny. It was like I never thought I was going to be a musician, until at one point I *was* a musician. [mutual laughter] It's like it just happened. I didn't really think about it. That's what my life was. I mean, it started out by going to sessions and going and playing with various people and everything. I don't know, it just crept up on me, and all of a sudden, "Gee, I guess I'm a musician, and I'd better do something, learn more about it." So that's what I started doing. One of the things I started doing in the late fifties was I used to go to the L.A. [Public] Library downtown and check out all the books they had on music, on composition and orchestration and everything. Because I had no schooling, no formal schooling, in that area, and I felt like I needed to do that. So I did, and I learned a lot about it. But it wasn't until many years later that I sort of started to practice.

ISOARDI: How does Ornette Coleman strike you when you hear him?

PRESTON: Then or now? [laughs]

ISOARDI: Then.

PRESTON: I was very excited by his music, very excited by it. I thought he was a true innovator of music. And, you know, all through my life that's been one of the most important aspects of music to me: innovation, carrying on change, you know, like going forward another step [further] than what has been done before and trying to be original. Or not trying to be original but just being original.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: And he filled all those qualifications for me because he was. He was an exceptional player, and his sound was very unusual, and his ideas also were extremely unusual. [tape recorder off]

ISOARDI: Okay. Any thoughts on Ornette?

PRESTON: Well, I never really knew him, you know. I met him a number of times at the Hillcrest [Club], but I was actually a little closer to Lenny McBrowne and Charlie [Haden], of course.

ISOARDI: Yeah, as you mentioned.

PRESTON: Charlie and I worked together.

ISOARDI: What was the Hillcrest like?

PRESTON: Well, what I remember about the Hillcrest is I remember a lot of wood, and I remember the bandstand was like in the middle of the club, so you could sit all around. You could sit behind the band. You know, you could almost sit anywhere. The piano was okay, it was decent—a small grand piano.

ISOARDI: Was it a place where you could get a meal? Or would you just sit and listen to music and order a drink?

PRESTON: I would assume they had food, but I don't remember food there. It was not why I went there. [laughs]

ISOARDI: What about the reaction to Ornette? When you did have a chance to hear him, was there a lot of hostility on the part of other musicians? Or what was

the reaction?

PRESTON: Oh, no. Everybody was very positive about his playing, sure. There wasn't anything like "Oh, he's too weird" or something like that. No, nobody thought that.

ISOARDI: Or "This guy can't play, he's just jivin'"?

PRESTON: Oh, no. No, no, no. No, he obviously could play.

ISOARDI: So people were kind of intrigued? A lot of you, anyway.

PRESTON: Well, the other thing was that Paul Bley, with his organizational abilities, gave the group a lot of credence. I mean, Paul was already known for sort of being on the outside, mostly because of Carla [Bley]'s compositions. But he was able to present the group in such a way that there was a lot of focus on the group, and you listened more. You listened to them, because I think that was one of Paul's best abilities, was presenting something. He really had a unique talent for doing that. And I believe also that Ornette learned a lot from him in that respect. I don't know if he would have been as popular, because that has a lot to do with how people receive you, in other words, how you present what you're doing.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly.

PRESTON: Because there are guys that are great players, but they can't stand a bright light shining on them, they don't like to play on the microphone, and they're kind of introvert, you know, like they're playing all their great stuff in the corner, and

it's presented so badly that they just can't get anywhere. So I think that Paul showed Ornette some aspect of that, of presenting something.

ISOARDI: The other thing that I wanted to ask you—I guess it hasn't really come up yet—and that's the question of drugs as part of the scene.

PRESTON: *Drugs*? [mutual laughter] Well, one thing that I say about drugs is that I must have been blessed in some way, because I've been surrounded by junkies my whole life, and not one single person ever offered me any. Why, I don't know. Maybe I look too innocent or something. No one ever did.

I had people— One guy down in Florida beat himself to death by throwing his body against the walls of the room because he took an overdose. Another guy, when we were traveling with Hal McIntyre, this guy used to die every night, and they would have to revive him so he could make the gig. And one night—I heard after I left the band—they were in a hurry and they didn't have time to revive him, so they just went to the gig, and he died.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: Well, those guys were doing it too, but they were just more careful, you know. He would overdose every night. What I'm saying about that is that it was all around me. I mean, I was totally aware of what was going on.

ISOARDI: Heroin was the drug of choice pretty much?

PRESTON: It depended on the people, you know. There were a lot of people that

marijuana was enough, and there were some people that didn't want any part of any of it. I smoked marijuana when I was— I remember one year in Detroit, I think I stayed high the whole year. I never once wasn't high. [mutual laughter] And I think it's had some effect on my memory or my judgment, that time. Now if somebody offers me some marijuana and I take a hit of it, I just don't like it. I don't know why. I'll tell you why. I do know why. Because over the years cultivation has become such an art form and they have learned so much on how to grow things that marijuana has become like a serious drug, and when I take one hit of something like that, I can't think. I mean, it's way beyond any high I ever had when I was younger. And I think also, being older, you are more sensitive to that kind of stuff, too. That's what I've found. So I don't even bother with it anymore. I remember one time I had a joint or something like that, and I finally smoked it—like a few years ago—but it took me like a whole year to smoke a joint. [mutual laughter] It's not worth it.

ISOARDI: Back then was there any kind of a situation where if you didn't try junk then you were ostracized or anything like that? Was that ever kind of a problem?

PRESTON: Not at all.

ISOARDI: I mean, if you were straight, you didn't smoke, you didn't use junk, it wasn't a problem playing with guys who did?

PRESTON: The only problem that I could say that I felt was that sometimes somebody that was on heroin would develop this superior attitude toward not just me,

but everyone. [laughs] And there might have been some kind of bonding between heroin users, but for the most part that was usually true of people I didn't know. It wasn't true of people I knew. Most of the time I never knew that anyone was using anyhow, because it was too— I mean, they just kept it quiet. I wasn't aware of it at all. In fact, years later I found out people were using I had no idea were using, and that really surprised me. I have never even sniffed it, which really I find strange, you know. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: Especially coming up in the fifties. That's when it was really prevalent. The other strange thing on the subject of drugs was that at that particular time, I remember, cocaine was not addicting at all in the least. It was called “girl” because—

ISOARDI: It was so weak.

PRESTON: It was so easy and weak, you know. I knew several people that were doing cocaine as a pleasure, and none ever got addicted.

ISOARDI: You think over time it has just become much more potent?

PRESTON: I think that they mix other things with it, probably heroin or codeine, I don't know what, but it's not the same, definitely not the same.

ISOARDI: Before you leave L.A. in the late fifties, how would you characterize it artistically? What I have in mind is that a while ago I remember reading Paul Horn's

autobiography, and he talks about when he first came out here—I think it was around '57, something like that—from New York, and he says he was really struck by the fact that it felt very free and open artistically. That you could kind of go anywhere you wanted with the music, and you'd have some opportunities, and there were people to play with, and there wasn't this heavy pressure that he said he felt in New York to be one way or the other way, etc. How do you react to that kind of a sentiment? Does that jibe with what your experience was or—?

PRESTON: Well, I was coming from a little different place than Paul was. I shouldn't say Paul, because I don't know the guy at all, just from his records. If he had an opportunity to be far out, he never used it in my estimation. [mutual laughter] I think a lot of these guys here, in fact— I'm not totally positive, but I think—

ISOARDI: In Peltier's band?

PRESTON: They were in Paul Horn's band.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: And they used to rehearse at Paul Horn's house. And Paul would come in and he would say, "Why are you guys playing that kind of music? It's so— You know, you're never going to get anywhere with that." Something to that effect. He would come in and say that. Which I understand. Paul was a businessman, and jazz was his business. These guys were not businessmen, and jazz was their plaything, you know, and they didn't care if they never got anywhere with it. They wanted to do

something that was really unique and unusual. And obviously they were all great musicians, but he could not understand why they would even bother.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Well, even if it didn't apply necessarily to the type of music he was pursuing, would you agree with that kind of evaluation of the scene?

PRESTON: Yeah, I think so. I mean, it was true in many aspects. The hippie scene was just beginning to start in the early sixties—I mean like 1960—and art was beginning to get a foothold, Los Angeles art. Like [Edward] Kienholz came from Los Angeles, and he was incredible. The stuff he was putting out was amazing, as were many artists at that time. [gestures at picture on wall] Well, the guy that did that never made it to Kienholz's fame, but he was shown in a number of museums.

ISOARDI: Who is the artist?

PRESTON: Gordon Wagner.

ISOARDI: Wagner?

PRESTON: Uh-huh. But, I mean, there were a lot of artists around in '59, '60. That was like the beginning of the L.A. art scene that was blossoming; you know, it was really blossoming. The only thing is that musically the West Coast was of course looked down upon because the guys that were selling records were Chet Baker and Art Pepper and those people. Even Gerry Mulligan I think was out here.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, and that pianoless quartet with Chet Baker.

PRESTON: Yeah. And Carson Smith, Putter Smith's brother. He was on all

those early records. But even though those records are fine and good, they lacked a kind of soulfulness and grittiness that the New York scene had. And I found that was true, I mean for my tastes. I didn't listen to any of those records. I mean, I heard them, but it wasn't in my record collection. You know what I mean?

ISOARDI: Well, would you say they were characteristic of Los Angeles?

PRESTON: No. No, I wouldn't, because there was a lot of stuff going on here that had nothing to do with that, and like we were talking, it was more adventuresome. And Ornette came out of L.A. He was from L.A.

ISOARDI: Yeah, other people like Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, who were certainly—

PRESTON: Yeah. I mean, there was a black contingent here, too, that was a little bit more tame. Even that had its kind of L.A.-ness to it. I'm trying to think of names. They're just not coming.

ISOARDI: Who were the people in terms of who was playing here?

PRESTON: Well, all right. Like Clifford Brown and Max Roach. I mean, that was really good.

ISOARDI: Yeah. They put that great band together.

PRESTON: Yeah. That was fantastic.

ISOARDI: Teddy Edwards was out here. Sonny Criss.

PRESTON: Teddy Edwards is still out here. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Yeah, still going strong.

PRESTON: I knew a girl that was— I don't know if she was dating him or what, but she was this really gorgeous black woman. Just amazing.

ISOARDI: She probably was. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: Yeah, she probably was. I think she was.

ISOARDI: He had a reputation.

PRESTON: Yeah. He was a very debonair— I met him a few times. He is a very debonair guy.

ISOARDI: You mentioned the black contingent. From the guys that you are with, the circles that you were moving in, was there an awareness of what was going on in South Central L.A., of any clubs down there? Or was there not much mixing?

PRESTON: I didn't get in the scene until after the South Central scene. I came out here in '57 and—

ISOARDI: I don't mean Central Avenue. I just mean the black area as a whole.

PRESTON: Oh, that. Well, once again, if you compare Teddy Edwards and those people with the New York scene, it doesn't compare, you know, harmonically or soul-wise or whatever you want to call that. It doesn't hold up. I mean, let's face it, Miles [Davis] changed the whole face of music with what he was doing. And then there are the people that came off of that—Sonny Rollins and everybody. They were monsters, you know. Miles had such a unique take on all that stuff. And he would

associate with people like Gil Evans, and it was like he was always like changing, always changing. And it was always for the better, it seemed like, [laughs] at least until the last ten years before he died. Then people didn't know what the hell was happening with him.

ISOARDI: Okay. Well, let's see, let's take off with when you come back to L.A. I guess '61, right?

PRESTON: When I come back to L.A.?

ISOARDI: Right. I think you were away for a while, right?

PRESTON: I went to Detroit.

ISOARDI: And then you said you returned to L.A. at the end of '61?

PRESTON: Yeah. Yeah. All right. When I got back there was— On the way back— I have to put this in here, because it's very pertinent to the whole story, and that is that I lost a child, and as a result of losing that child my wife at that time [Rowena Blincoe] also lost one that she was carrying. So we lost two children, so that was a very devastating situation for me—not in the sense of carrying on my daily life, but in the sense that I didn't know anything at that time about psychology or, if you will— What I'm saying about that is that I didn't know how to express myself. I didn't express myself. As a result of not expressing myself, I started getting stomachaches and throwing up like on a daily basis. And this went on for, I don't know, twenty years. It turned into an ulcer is what happened, and then that became more agitated.

So from that time on I was fighting that problem.

There's a situation that's sort of humorous, but it shows you what was going on. When we [the Mothers of Invention] played at the Pauley Pavilion with the L.A. [Los Angeles] Philharmonic [Orchestra]—

ISOARDI: Pauley at UCLA?

PRESTON: Yeah. There was another something going on. I think it was Mel Powell; he was doing a piece first. Yeah, something like that. And we were waiting in the dressing room to go back up there. Well, I was still going through all these stomach problems, and one of the things I found that was really good was taking a bath, a hot bath. That really calmed me down, and I could then go about my business. So of course, they didn't have any bathtubs there, and when you get into a situation where you are under a lot of pressure, like playing with the L.A. Philharmonic— [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Really.

PRESTON: —and other things. We were in the dressing room for whatever the group is, the basketball players. So I went into the shower room, and there's like twenty showers all lined up. [laughs] So I just lay down on the flour and had about six showers pointing at my stomach, and I lay there. I'm laying there and really kind of relaxing and everything. Then I hear over the loudspeaker "Donny, where are you? Don? We're going on now." So I jumped up and— Like anybody that has a

bootleg record of that has got that on there, you know. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: What year was that?

PRESTON: I think it was around 1970. We played twice there with the L.A. Philharmonic, and so I'm not sure which one. I think the first one, which would have been 1970. But, you know, I have used all kinds of things, especially when I didn't know it was an ulcer. I used to drink a milkshake, you know, just drink it down, and that would do the trick sometimes.

Anyhow, that's what happened. So I was dealing with all that while also getting back into the swing of things in L.A.

Now, at this time, this was kind of like when I reestablished my contact with Buzz Gardner, who was my roommate in Trieste.

ISOARDI: Oh, right, right.

PRESTON: Okay? And his brother, who is Bunk [Gardner]— I don't know, for some reason— I had lived all this time with Buzz, but when I met Bunk it was like he and I clicked right in together. It was like amazing. So we started having jam sessions at my house when I first moved to L.A. I had a garage there with a piano and a whole bunch of other things— you know, a tape recorder and stuff like that. So we used to jam there, and we got a few other friends. I remember Vic Mio, a bass player, and Jack Lake, a drummer.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

SEPTEMBER 18, 2001

PRESTON: So, yeah. Vic Mio, a very fine bass player, and Jack Lake, a drummer. So we formed this kind of little nucleus of guys. And at that time I met [Frank] Zappa. He wanted me to— You know, he just called me because I was a keyboard player.

ISOARDI: He had heard your name around?

PRESTON: Well, from somebody he did. But he called me to audition at a club in Santa Ana. Anyhow, I went to the audition, and then we rehearsed at his house. And I liked his record collection because it was very similar to my own. I say, "Why don't you come down and jam with us?" He says, "Yeah, yeah, okay." So he actually came down and was with this group I had. Now, we were improvising to films of microscopic life.

ISOARDI: Are you serious?

PRESTON: Yeah. And also other art films that I would get out of the library.

ISOARDI: Were you basically a rehearsal band?

PRESTON: Well, yeah.

ISOARDI: Or there was an intention to eventually look for work?

PRESTON: Oh, well, there would be an intention of performing, you know. I don't know about work. [mutual laughter] At that time there were two things: there

was your work and then there was what you loved to do. And the work usually consisted of playing in what we called then a two-beat band, where we'd play all these songs that were two-beat, like Lawrence Welk or Guy Lombardo or something like that. You know, like [sings "Cecilia" in a characteristic two-beat style]. You know. [mutual laughter] For some reason that's what everybody loved at that time. Except there were some people playing like a form of rock music. Well, it was right about then that the electric bass had been invented. So until that time they didn't even have electric basses, they just had upright basses. You know, I could do that. I could do that kind of music, and that's how I made a living, you know, other than nude modeling, which I was doing at the same time to supplement my income.

My wife then was an artist, and she knew all the art schools, and she actually got an agent, so when there were jobs that she couldn't take, I would do them. It didn't bother me. Nudity didn't bother me at all. I don't know why, but it just never has. So I would just go there and nude model and stare at the cute girls in front of me and try to see how long I could stare at the girl without getting an erection. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: How long?

PRESTON: Not long. [mutual laughter] So I would have to turn away, you know, or think about something else. So that's how one would pass the time while you're just sitting there doing nothing. So we're right around 1961, '62.

ISOARDI: So did Zappa come to your rehearsals?

PRESTON: Yeah, he came down. I wouldn't call them rehearsals.

ISOARDI: Jams.

PRESTON: We would kind of get together and jam on all these different things, playing totally out music. And he even brought some films that he was working on, because he was into making films then. They were just Super-8[-millimeter] films, but I had a projector and—

ISOARDI: Jeez. Kindred spirits.

PRESTON: One thing I neglected to mention in the history was that my father [Donald G. Preston] was a filmmaker. I mean, yes, he was a musician, a composer and whatever, but he was a serious advocate of making films. He was kind of amateur, but he actually opened a business called Telecon Films at one time and did kinescopes, which is a film of a television show. They didn't have tape at that time, you know, so the only way of having a record of the show was to have somebody film it. And he did that quite well. And also J. L. Hudson's in Detroit, which was like the biggest department store in Detroit, they hired him to film their parades every year, which was kind of neat. I mean, they had these huge parades, and they were fantastic. So he would do that. And then he did a lot of other things. And we as a family made about four or five films, you know, like regular movies. Yeah. I'll show you.

[tape recorder off] [goes to retrieve a videotape copy of *Ogo Moto*]

ISOARDI: This is a film, Donn Preston's *Ogo Moto*?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What is it?

PRESTON: Well—

ISOARDI: Starring you and Mary Ann Preston.

PRESTON: Yeah. This is a movie our family made together about this mad scientist.

ISOARDI: "Produced and directed by Donn Preston." Donn with two “n”'s?

PRESTON: That's my father.

ISOARDI: Oh, he spelled it with two n's?

PRESTON: Yeah. It's a mad scientist who tries to create a giant fly and in the process the tremors awaken Fungor the vampire, who comes. And then there's this woman—what was her name?—Bubbles La Treen, who is looking for—

ISOARDI: [laughs] I take it she wasn't a classical violist.

PRESTON: Yeah. She's looking for a buried treasure. And then there's this guy that's some hoodlum of some kind. There are some stills from the movie. Anyhow, she gets captivated by the vampire. Nails, that was his name. He falls into a bottomless pit, and the whole castle catches on fire, and the giant fly saves Myrna. Myrna Sweetbottom, I think that was her name. That was my favorite scene in the movie, where she's standing by the window yelling for help—"Please save me!"—and

then you see the fly's arm come in and wrap itself around her and pull her out of the window. I did that by rolling a furry rug around my body and then just doing it with my whole body. So we had a lot of fun.

ISOARDI: It says *Ogo* was filmed in 1968 for three hundred dollars.

PRESTON: Yeah. It's true. The cost of the film[stock], is what it was.

ISOARDI: And then you've got another film on here, "*Take the 'A' Train*, filmed on the 'A' Train in New York, 1971."

PRESTON: Yeah. That I did myself.

ISOARDI: It says you shot and edited this little film before the [Mothers] *Fillmore East* [*June 1971*] album was made.

PRESTON: Yeah. And also *Forbidden Island* was done when I was twelve.

ISOARDI: Oh, it says filmed by your father, and you played the part of this twelve-year-old English boy?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Was that a take-off on the Walter Pidgeon—? Was it Walter Pidgeon? Oh, no, I'm thinking *Forbidden Planet*. That's right, this is *Forbidden Island*.

PRESTON: That was Walter Pidgeon in *Forbidden Planet*, right.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: No, it was more like an island that no one had ever been to, and there were prehistoric beasts there, and this guy who was doing research had this device I

remember was called the gyro-solidifier.

ISOARDI: Oh, no, not one of those. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: And when the prehistoric animals were all chasing them, he turned it on, and they all turned to stone. And then we had to find our way out of the island going by all these stone prehistoric monsters, which was a park up in Ossineke, Michigan, way up on the top part of Michigan. He used to do things like that. He would get all this footage of the boat going down the river with crocodiles jumping in, and going through the underbrush with a truck and a lion on top of the truck eating something, and he would get all this footage and put it all together and make a story out of it.

ISOARDI: So by '62— I mean, you do have this standing interest in film, then, as well. Kind of odd stuff.

PRESTON: Yeah. Sure. Always.

ISOARDI: So you get the idea of playing kind of these odd films and seeing what kind of music you guys can create with them.

PRESTON: Yeah. That's what we were doing. Not only films but other devices for creating music, what I'm still doing today. Like this thing, you know [referring to a box with a scroll containing a graphic score inside that slowly unwinds].

ISOARDI: Now, who's in the band? Who is playing, rehearsing?

PRESTON: The guys I just mentioned.

ISOARDI: The Gardners—

PRESTON: Bunk Gardner, Buzz Gardner, Jack Lake, and Vic Mio. And then Frank whenever he could make it. At one point some relative of Frank's who worked at [what] I believe was CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] got us an audition there. [laughs]

ISOARDI: For what?

PRESTON: For the band to play and be in some show. I don't know. [laughs] We got down there, and we set up everything— And I had actually shown Frank how to play a bicycle, and he really loved that.

ISOARDI: What do you mean?

PRESTON: Well, for instance, like you can play— All the different spokes on a bicycle are different tones, and you can play them with regular drum sticks. And you can also blow in the handle bars and they create all these weird tones, harmonics. Anyhow, we got there, and we started playing, and all the studio musicians came and stuck their heads out through the door. Like they couldn't— "What the hell are they doing?"

ISOARDI: What *were* you doing?

PRESTON: Well, we were just doing totally out music, you know. I mean, whatever that means. Some of it had compositional elements to it, but we were just excited by creating different sounds that people are not used to hearing.

ISOARDI: Where were your ideas for your sounds coming from?

PRESTON: I don't know. Where does anything come from? Without getting soppy about it, it's been my theory in life that we all have a—I call it—symspirotic being that resides in us. It is like a symbiotic being, except it is not biological, it's spiritual. But nevertheless it's an entity that is with us from the time we're born until we die. And that's where all my creative ideas come from. Because whenever I'm doing something that is creative, I don't think, I just let— I wait and I listen. Or I'm open to what that voice is telling me. And that's just how I've operated ever since I can remember. And it works. Yeah. I used to have a book called *The Creative Process*, and almost every single person in that book, like from Mozart to Einstein to just about everyone, when they are in the creative process they are not thinking. So I think that book, which was introduced to me by my ex-wife a long, long, long time ago, that's where I started thinking that way.

So we had this garage thing, and I don't know if we ever played anywhere, you know? [laughs]

ISOARDI: You didn't get the studio gig, eh?

PRESTON: No, no, we didn't get the CBS thing. They thought we were crazy. Although later on Zappa went on the Steve Allen show [the *Tonight Show*] playing the bicycle, if you will. Another theft. Ahem. [mutual laughter]

So right about that time I met Emil Richards, and he introduced me to Paul Beaver, and Paul was one of the most unusual persons I think I'll ever meet.

ISOARDI: In what way?

PRESTON: Well, for one, he had sex with a dolphin. [laughs]

ISOARDI: I can't say I know anyone who has done that. I— No. I won't qualify it.

PRESTON: No, me either.

ISOARDI: How did he get the dolphin to stand still? [laughs]

PRESTON: No, they're highly sexual beings. They really are. I mean, they're extremely sexual. He was like this— I mean, first of all, he was incredibly brilliant, one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. He was the West Coast representative for Moog synthesizers, although not at that time, because they hadn't been invented yet. At that time he rented organs to various studio things, you know, Hammond organs. He had about ten Hammond organs. He had a pipe organ in his basement that was not put together, and he had a whole bunch of really strange instruments that he made. One thing he made was a chess game for three people, and it worked. It was really amazing.

ISOARDI: A two-dimensional chess game for three people?

PRESTON: Well, it was a board with three things, and it merged in the middle. And you could play two other people. It was amazing. So he and Emil and I put together a group called AHA [Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage].

ISOARDI: That was '63?

PRESTON: That was around '63, yeah. And it was a very kind of esoteric group. I think my wife was in the group, too.

ISOARDI: What kind of group was it?

PRESTON: No, no, it wasn't my wife. I'm sorry.

ISOARDI: Is this a music group?

PRRSTON: Yes, but we had an artist in the group that painted a painting while we were performing, and he was painting to the music. We all had that— [laughs] We were playing to the painting, you know, and he was painting to the music. It was just lots of fun. Now, the premise of the group was that we were never allowed to rehearse, and we were never allowed to play unless it was on a moment's notice. We were not allowed to plan anything.

ISOARDI: So you can't go out and look for a gig?

PRESTON: No. No, you can't. And we only played twice or three times at the most, and one of them was for the Pataphysical Circus, which was kind of the first Renaissance Faire. The other one was for a— What is that thing where everybody dresses up like medieval and—?

ISOARDI: The Renaissance Faire?

PRESTON: Yeah, the Renaissance Faire. It was the first Renaissance Faire, and we performed there.

ISOARDI: How did you guys fit in the Renaissance Faire?

PRESTON: I don't know. [mutual laughter] We didn't really fit in. I think we dressed up and then played our music. [mutual laughter] It was kind of interesting, though. So we only played about three times. As a result of that— The artist that painted while we were playing, his name was Michael Crayden, and because this group would never perform, you know, with all these rules, he said, "Well, fuck that. Let's get our own group and, you know, we can do this." And actually he had studied from Emil how to play the vibes. So he could actually play quite well, but he didn't know a thing about music. He could only play the vibes. He could really play anything. I mean, he couldn't play any melody, but he could really hit those things fast and hard. [mutual laughter]

So we formed a group, and we got another guy in the band, John MacAllister, who was a piano major, a classical concert pianist of some kind. And then there was another guy, Bill Niblock. Bill was a philosophy teacher at Occidental College, and also he could play various percussion instruments and stuff. So we had the nucleus of this group now. And then we added Hagen Beggs, who was an actor and wrote poetry, and my wife—or my now ex-wife, Rowena—who was an artist. And she built this really incredible stand that held all her paint, and she was able to whip a painting out in like a half hour with this stand. [Isoardi laughs] Well, she did. So we did a lot of performing with that group. We got a couple of gigs at Occidental College and a few coffeehouses down over on the Westside.

ISOARDI: What was it called?

PRESTON: Oh, God. I don't remember that.

ISOARDI: So AHA, you have a couple of performances, and you have a few spontaneous rehearsals?

PRESTON: No, this is now called the Crayden-Preston Ensemble.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's what you call this group? But the previous group?

PRESTON: No, we never rehearsed.

ISOARDI: So you only had the couple of performances, and that was it. Oh, okay.

PRESTON: Which there is no record of, because nobody recorded any—

ISOARDI: There's no proof you ever really existed.

PRESTON: Not only that, but half of the group is dead. Because Michael is dead, and so is Paul Beaver. The only ones left are me and Emil Richards, who are both going pretty strong. We're both the same age, and we're both in pretty good health. So that was a very exciting group at the time. We really did a lot of stuff.

It was also at that time that I started building this percussion stuff that I had. I can tell you what it was comprised of. There were two drive shafts, about eight brake drums, and a bunch of pieces of metal that I hung in various ways which were all different pitches and everything. I don't know what else I had. I had a whole bunch of stuff. Oh, there were like different sized oil drums or whatever, you know, like those kind of cans. And, yeah, I had about three or four different sizes of those things.

I had stands, and all the tables, and it was all laid out, and one could sit there and play on that stuff. I don't know if I— That stuff, it was so heavy, and we only took it out a few times. Although I did take it and record at one time. I had to bring everything to this recording studio, and I paid for the recording, and it came out pretty well.

ISOARDI: By—what?—'62, '63, you're moving in a very experimental direction.

PRESTON: Very.

ISOARDI: Yeah. And this is a very big change from just a couple of years earlier.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I mean, can you point to a couple of things that kind of really push you that way?

PRESTON: Probably— Well, I know for a fact that when I was in Detroit, for some reason—I don't know the reason, but for some reason—my wife and I went to see Merce Cunningham a number of times.

ISOARDI: Ah.

PRESTON: He came to Detroit a bunch of times, and every time he came there, there were John Cage and David Tudor.

ISOARDI: No kidding. They were in the pit every time?

PRESTON: Yeah, every time. And I learned a *lot* from that. [laughs] I mean, that was so powerful and so illuminating that who could not? I mean, well, I was very influenced by it, because that was where I wanted to be, and still do.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: I never did get to the point of being a new music person per se, even though at that time it wasn't called new music. I didn't have the discipline or probably the ability to become a classical musician, or, also, the want. I had my hands full just surviving and being a jazz musician. But I knew that that's what I wanted to do. I mean, that was my favorite music to listen to. [tape recorder off] So I'm sure that was the biggest influence.

ISOARDI: Defining moment almost, yeah. Were you familiar at all with Cage before then?

PRESTON: I don't know. But I know that while I was in Detroit I was listening to Cage. I still have some tapes that I compiled at that time of different composers and different— I was listening to African music and Balinese music—gamelan—and also kabuki music, all those things, and also Cage and some of his cohorts, you know, like Luciano Berio and [Luigi] Nano. I wasn't aware of [Krzystof] Penderecki and [Iannis] Xenakis and those people at that time, although I was aware of [Karlheinz] Stockhausen. One time I went to a concert and sat right behind him.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: Because he was in the audience mixing the sound. He wanted quad[raphonic] sound or something like that. So he was there mixing it, and I was sitting right behind him.

So, yeah, I was like really getting into all of that stuff then, and it was having a big influence on my— I didn't know exactly how to approach things at that time, but little by little I started. So what I did was I took my jazz world and tried to convert it into this world, you know. And I was a little successful at it only in the sense that it was unlike anything else, you know. So I was happy to achieve that. I'm just trying to think of what else was going on at that time.

ISOARDI: How long does that group last?

PRESTON: The Crayden-Preston Ensemble? It lasted until 1965.

ISOARDI: So maybe a year and a half or so? Two years?

PRESTON: Yeah, more like two and a half years. The only reason it stopped doing something was that I auditioned with the Mothers [of Invention], and— The first time I auditioned I didn't get the job.

ISOARDI: Why not?

PRESTON: Because I didn't know anything about rock and roll. I couldn't play rock and roll. I had never played it. And after that I started getting a lot of work in rock bands.

ISOARDI: After that?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You mean you went looking for it?

PRESTON: No, people just started calling me. I don't know why. You know,

somebody would call me and, "Oh, I've got a job." "Sure." So I started playing rock with various people—no one famous, just local bands playing in clubs. One was a girl, and we played in a dyke bar for six months or something—no offense to you dykes. So the second time I auditioned with the band [the Mothers] I got the job, and then from then on we were rehearsing eight hours a day, seven days a week, and there wasn't really much time to—

ISOARDI: Do anything else.

PRESTON: Yeah. And I think Michael always resented that a little bit, you know, that I chose to do that instead of—

ISOARDI: To play rock and move in a rock direction?

PRESTON: Although we weren't really getting anywhere at all with the band that we had, although it was lots of fun.

ISOARDI: What were your performances like with that ensemble?

PRESTON: Gee.

ISOARDI: Were they multimedia kinds of things?

PRESTON: Only in the sense of the painting being created at the same time.

ISOARDI: That was a stable element? That was at all the performances? But you didn't use film or anything like that?

PRESTON: No. I mean, of course I had lots of film. No, we didn't really utilize that part like the other band that I had. But it was enough to have the spoken word

and the painting, and then there's four other musicians. Yeah, four. The pianist [John MacAllister] later became Gosling Trauma and worked with Dr. John.

ISOARDI: You weren't playing piano?

PRESTON: Well, we would switch on and off. Sometimes he would play percussion. I made a whole bunch of percussion things besides that. One of the instruments I made, I took a bunch of carpet roll holders, you know, like the cardboard tubes inside of carpets, and cut them in different lengths, and just put drum heads on the top. They are only about this round.

ISOARDI: About four inches? Three or four inches?

PRESTON: Yeah. So I would soak a drum head until it was all wet and then staple it on the cardboard, and then it would dry and shrink, and it would create quite a beautiful sound. And I'd have like about eight of those stuck together.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

PRESTON: And all kinds of stuff. I mean, it was just endless.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: The other thing was that we had a guy that liked the band a lot, and he donated—I mean, they weren't ours, but we could use them—all these microtonal instruments. They were like thirty-two tones to the octave, something like that. Some of them were eighteen or nineteen. The other thing that we were doing in that band, which also AHA did—Emil Richards, that's what he's known for—was odd

times. So almost every piece we played was in some odd time. And that carried over into the Crayden-Preston Ensemble also.

ISOARDI: How odd were the times?

PRESTON: Well 19/8. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Are you kidding?

PRESTON: No. Nineteen eighths. Like 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2 1-2 1-2 1-1-2 1-2 1-2, 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2 1-2 1-2 1-1-2 1-2 1-2, and that would just keep cycling. You get used to it. [laughs] You know, that's the best I can say about it. Later on in the Grandmothers I wrote several pieces in nineteen, but not something we improvised on, you know. But in that band that's all we did was improvise. Since Michael couldn't play a melody, you know, he had to. Just a little side note is that last night at the concert that I'm curating at this concert series—

ISOARDI: Where at?

PRESTON: At the Downtown Playhouse. And last night it was all like old home week for me. That's exactly what it was. It was just like the Crayden-Preston Ensemble. And this guy [Ron George] has created all these microtonal instruments, and he's got a set of vibes that's like this and a marimba that's like this and with all these tubes sticking out the back and everything, and like tons of gongs he has made out of aluminum and just all kinds of stuff. It was kind of interesting. And it was all improvised, everything, the whole evening. I don't really particularly like that,

but—

ISOARDI: Too much improvisation, you mean?

PRESTON: Yeah. I find that there's a lack of form and a lack of— Written music is just a bit more— More what? Organized. It's just more organized. And I was telling this friend of mine that helps me with the theater, "Well, you know, we are right in the middle of Virgo right now, and it's got to be organized. If it's not organized, then I get real critical, because that's the other aspect of Virgo, critical. And organized." And I am a Virgo. [laughs] Anyhow, I was being a little critical last night [adopts cranky tone] because it wasn't organized. And a lot of the stuff I do is improvised, like this piece here, but I've made it so that it's organized even though it's improvised. And actually I built this box right around '62. I built the exact same box as this with the scroll and everything, and when I said I went to the recording studio with this group, with Bunk and myself, that's what we took. We took this.

ISOARDI: How would you describe that to someone not looking at it?

PRESTON: Well, it's a piece of music that moves. It's a mechanical conductor, if you will.

ISOARDI: With essentially a large scroll, right?

PRESTON: It is a large scroll that is divided into five sections, so that each section represents a player, and there is graphing notation on all the sections, and there is a grid line on the other side. It's right here. And whatever passes in front of that grid

line, as the scroll is moving, being taken up by a motor, the graphic notation, whatever hits that grid line is what the performer plays when it's moving. So it's not only a conductor, it's a— It's a— I don't know what it is. [laughs] Now, there's a lot of graphic notation and has been for the last twenty-five years, but the only thing is, the big problem has always been, how do you explain the time element with your graphic notation? Sometimes they go like this [indicates]; their hand is like a clock. Or they just say, "In one minute go to the next section," you know, stuff like that. I just choose to have it be very clear and like that. And it's for voice, violin, bass clarinet, synthesizer, and percussion. That's the configuration for this performance.

ISOARDI: I guess the next major phase in your life is joining the Mothers, and that is '67?

PRESTON: No, that was in '65.

ISOARDI: You joined them in '65?

PRESTON: Yeah. And as I said, we rehearsed—

ISOARDI: But you weren't on *Freak Out!*, were you?

PRESTON: No.

ISOARDI: I thought that came out in '66.

PRESTON: Well, I joined the band just before it came out.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see. They had already done all the recording.

PRESTON: Or not just before it came out. I joined the band right after they

recorded it, and then it took like six months for it to come out.

ISOARDI: Oh, I see.

PRESTON: So, yeah. I was in the band when it was released, but I'm not on it.

ISOARDI: One of the things we talked about was, since this period of your life is so well documented, not going into it as much.

PRESTON: Oh, there are a few things that you must know about it.

ISOARDI: Yeah, and I think also you wanted to talk about sort of the character of the band and the jazz influence in the band.

PRESTON: Well, that was one of the— One of the aspects of that band was the content, you know, the people in the band. The basic rhythm section, bass and drums, was Jimmy Carl Black and Roy Estrada, who were pure and simple rock musicians, albeit pretty good. They had good time, and the bass was well played. Then the other part of the rhythm section was the guitar, which was Zappa. At that particular time he was just barely able to play the guitar—I mean, I wouldn't say not barely able, but he wasn't very good, you know. He could play, but he was not anywhere near what he became. In fact, he had to hire other guitar players to play solos, because he didn't feel that he could play adequately. So that's the basic rhythm section.

Then they added me and Bunk, who were the jazz musicians that had been playing experimental music quite a bit, and after that they added Billy Mundi, who was another rock drummer, and then he left the band and they added Art Tripp, who

was a concert percussionist who had played with Morton Feldman and the Cleveland Orchestra. You know, he was a quite excellent percussionist and drummer, and he could sit there and play rock drums very well too.

Then they added Ian Underwood, who was actually put in the band so there would be another saxophone, and he was over in Europe playing like Ornette Coleman. He was in a band that was playing avant-garde jazz and probably doing a bunch of Ornette Coleman songs, plus other people's that were like that. And he could play the shit out of it. I mean, he was great. There is this one album where Zappa said he was just talking, and he says, "And Ian Underwood, this guy came in the studio and said, 'I want to be in your band.'" And Zappa said, "Well, what can you do?" and then he plays this [mimics wild playing], you know, I mean this really incredible stuff. But the other part of Ian Underwood that didn't quite get utilized at first but then did get utilized later was that he was also studying to be a concert pianist. Although he didn't really specialize in any new works at all—but not that he couldn't have; he played mostly Mozart. A lot of times you would hear him practicing, and it would always be Mozart, which is not that easy either, but there are certain things on various albums that we put out where he's like playing some really hard atonal shit, and he's sight-reading it, you know. So he was like a spectacular sight-reader. He could sight-read. I saw shit that he was reading that was ridiculous, you know. And Ian was very intelligent.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 7, 2001

ISOARDI: Okay, Don, before we continue where we left off last time with the Mothers of Invention, you wanted to add some things that have occurred to you since, right?

PRESTON: Well, at the time we were talking about the jam session place, this place, Georgia Lee's Caprice in El Monte, I couldn't remember the guy who was running it, the musician, and his name was Freddie Gruber.

ISOARDI: Very good. Did you find anything out about him?

PRESTON: No, he just ran that thing and he— I think that went on for several years, you know. It was his gig. He had a trio.

ISOARDI: He was a musician?

PRESTON: He was a drummer and— In other words, the trio would play a set, and then everyone would come up and play. That just went on for several years. And also the guy that was in charge of the sessions after that, the Digger it was called, where people went Sunday morning and played from six [o'clock] am until two or three in the afternoon, his name was Ray Graziano.

ISOARDI: Like the boxer? Was he a musician?

PRESTON: Yeah, he was an alto [saxophone] player. And one of the stories about him was— I mentioned the sax player Joe Meany, and I think I told you the story

where he picked up a gun and said "I think I'll kill myself," and he really did. He thought it was a toy gun. Well, that was at Ray Gratzianno's house. Ray had just bought this gun, so nobody knew he had it. It was kind of a weird situation. And then it wasn't too long after that that he died—from something else; I don't know what he died from. But the Digger, strangely enough—because there was a lot of dope action going, not anything serious, just people going out and smoking a joint or something like that—was across the street from a police station, which I thought kind of strange. [mutual laughter]

Let me see— All right, since we are before the Mothers, I don't know if I talked about the Unicorn. It was a coffeehouse on Sunset Boulevard. Because it was before the Mothers and here in L.A., and it was also the early sixties. Beginning to be the hippie period, you know?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: So there was a coffeehouse called the Unicorn, and I played there. They had an old upright piano in the other room, kind of. They had two rooms. So I went in and said, "Hey, can I play the piano here on Saturday and Sunday or something like that?" So he said, "Yeah, sure." And the guy who said "yeah" was Herb Cohen, who turned out to be the Mothers' manager. So I went there, and I said, "Gee, who can I get to play bass," you know? So I called a few people, and finally I got Charlie Haden to come down, and he and I played a duo gig there for about a year

and a half.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: And all kinds of— Scott LaFaro would come in and listen, and Jim Hall, the guitar player. They would just come in and sit there and listen for hours, you know. So we had a kind of a neat scene going.

ISOARDI: Where was the Unicorn at?

PRESTON: It was on Sunset Boulevard. It was about two doors west of what now is the Whisky à Go Go. And also I had a quintet at that time that played a couple of more doors down, where there was kind of a sawdust-on-the-floor beer hall. We had this jazz combo, you know. It was like tenor [saxophone], trumpet, piano, bass, and drums. I guess they had a piano in there.

ISOARDI: And you guys were playing pretty much straight-ahead jazz?

PRESTON: Mostly original stuff that I had written, but it was still the straight-ahead variety. Some of it was the stuff I was playing with Charlie that I had rearranged for the bigger group. And it was a good group. I don't remember anyone's name in it at all, not one single person, which is unfortunate, but— That's life. [mutual laughter] That's about all from that era.

ISOARDI: Good. That's helpful. So last time you were talking about the different members of the Mothers and each of their talents and interests and especially, I guess, their avant-garde and jazz backgrounds. Anything about sort of jazz influences in the

Mothers in general? I know the Mothers seemed to draw from absolutely everything. You guys, there pretty much wasn't anything that was outside your radar. To what extent was—?

PRESTON: Well, that probably was a result of the fact that we were so diverse, you know, the members themselves, in terms of— For instance, the bass player, Roy Estrada, and the drummer, Jimmy Carl Black, they were pure, die-hard rock musicians. They really didn't know hardly anything about music. [laughs] They couldn't read a note of music. In fact, Roy, not only could he not read music, he didn't even know what notes he was playing, what the notes were on his bass. After a point he did, but he still didn't go by notes. He didn't learn music by notes, he learned by position, and he memorized positions. The thing about Roy is— I mean, to be so illiterate musically but be so brilliant a bass player. I had Buell Neidlinger once tell me that he thought Roy was the greatest rock bass player there ever was, and coming from Buell— I don't know if you know who Buell is.

ISOARDI: Yes, I've seen him play many times.

PRESTON: I think he was most impressed by Roy's sound, because his sound was so incredible. And today I'm rehearsing with Roy and a few other members, trying to get ready for this tour [with the Grandmothers], and I'm amazed at his amazing abilities, how fast he learns things and how his interpretation is so unique as far as what he's playing.

Bunk [Gardner] and I, of course, by that time were more in the avant-garde music, playing experimental jazz and experimental music. We had been doing that for a number of years by that time, so we kind of felt grounded in that kind of music. As I said before, Ian Underwood had two faces, where he was like an Ornette Coleman over in Europe playing alto saxophone and playing like all this really strange music, and also getting very free on the saxophone, and also he was like a classical pianist, playing Mozart and Beethoven and even Schoenberg and some modern composers.

And then there was Art Tripp, who, I think I said, played with the Philadelphia Orchestra or one of those orchestras back East and also toured with John Cage and possibly Morton Feldman. I mean, he had a very rich contemporary and classical music background along with classical training as a percussionist, and he could play marimba, vibes, and all of the percussion instruments very, very well. He was an exceptional musician. Billy Mundi was also a drummer—before Art—and he was a good reader and a good rock drummer. He didn't really have the percussion ability, but nevertheless he could still fill all those other things.

Now, you may wonder why [Frank] Zappa had so many drummers in the band. [mutual laughter] Because Jimmy Carl Black was a drummer, too, but the thing about Jimmy, as I mentioned, was that he was limited by his reading ability, and the only way to teach him— Although he could play in all these odd times and stuff. I mean, he *learned* to play in all these odd times. But I think Zappa got Billy Mundi

because he wanted more complex stuff. He didn't know if Jimmy could handle that, and he wanted to, and eventually he got Art Tripp, who could play anything. Billy had actually quit the band to join a rock band called Rhinoceros, probably for financial reasons, because we weren't making a lot of money in the Mothers. I don't know if he made a lot of money in Rhinoceros—probably more than we did in the Mothers—but nevertheless that's what happened. So that's basically a picture of that band. *[Also Motorhead Sherwood and Ray Collins. Motorhead started out as a roadie. He had been Frank's friend for a few years before the Mothers–high school. The most interesting fact was that at some time—'68?—Bunk showed him where to put his fingers on a baritone sax, so during a concert he would get the bari and blow into it and wiggle his fingers. This got recorded and put on a record. In '68 he won the *Down Beat* jazz poll for best newcomer on bari sax.

Ray was an R and B singer who didn't know anything about "new music" but had a great sense of humor and went along with everything. Eventually he took a lot of acid and said that everything we were doing was all bullshit and quit the band.]

ISOARDI: Right. You were with the Mothers for seven years or so?

PRESTON: Eight.

ISOARDI: Eight years. During that time, is that pretty much where your focus is?

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

Are you interacting with any of the other avant-garde musicians in L.A.? Or are you familiar with what is going on then?

PRESTON: Well, when we were in New York I met Meredith Monk, and we became very close. We lived together for a while. And she and I performed together on and off throughout those years in New York. We both taught at this school in Woodstock called 212 [Institute of the Arts] and also performed there. Then there was a period where I came back to L.A. and we did whatever, and then I went back and did a whole bunch of performing with Meredith. So that's one of the things that I did. I'm trying to think of other things that would have been happening at the same time as the Mothers.

ISOARDI: How long are you in New York?

PRESTON: Not really that long. Well, we played there, I think during 1967, at the Garrick Theatre, and then we came back in '68. I think we were there for about eight months or something like that. We had a long run there at that theater.

ISOARDI: At this point in Los Angeles, in terms of jazz— I guess by the early to mid-seventies it's starting to— I mean, you've got John Carter and Bobby Bradford in town, and they've done some recording, sort of pioneering the music in a way. Horace Tapscott by this time has had the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra going for a while. He's had Arthur Blythe in his band, and Wilber [Morris] and Butch Morris, and Roberto Miranda is coming around, people like this, etc. Are you sort of aware

of what they're doing or anything like that?

PRESTON: No. Not in the least.

ISOARDI: You haven't met any of them or something? Right.

PRESTON: When I came back— Well, let's get back to the Mothers, though, before we get into that, because there were a few things that happened. Oh, boy. What's the name of the guy that played all the horns?

ISOARDI: Rahsaan? Jazz musician?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Rahsaan Roland Kirk?

PRESTON: Yeah. He sat in with us twice, I remember, one time in Miami, and that was a very memorable experience with him. Of course, he couldn't read music, but he somehow just fit in, and he played with us. We didn't really say, "Okay, now you lay out until we play this song" or something like that. No, he just played.

ISOARDI: New stuff?

PRESTON: Yeah. It was amazing. It was totally amazing. I mean, the stuff was so alien to most of the stuff he'd been used to, but he just did it. It was amazing. I see a lot of blind people that are like that, though. They are so adaptive and so— I know this guy [Ellis Hall], he is kind of like a Stevie Wonder type, where he sings and plays, and he has a fantastic voice, plays incredible piano, plays bass, drums, you know, anything. You just put anything in front of him and he can play it. He's got

computers all over the place, you know. He runs sequencing, he does huge productions at home all by himself. He drives a car. It's just endless.I've seen him drive a car!

ISOARDI: [laughs] My God. I don't know that I'd want to be in it. I would be too nervous, I think.

PRESTON: Well, no, I mean, he doesn't go shopping or something. But like in the parking lot, I've seen him driving around and stuff. It's amazing. But anyhow, yeah. And another time Don Cherry sat in with the band, maybe even twice, somewhat because he knew me, and also I think he liked what the band was doing, especially that band.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I would have thought so.

PRESTON: The early band. You have to realize that that band— I have recordings of that band where we would play for three hours, and we would only do maybe four songs, and the rest would be completely out, improvised music, half of it without even a beat. It would just be free music. I mean, Zappa would conduct everything, and he was very adept and good at that. But also the band was very good at that, because, as I mentioned earlier, Zappa had come to my garage where Bunk and I and these other musicians were playing this free music, and it gave him a lot of ideas of how to do that in a rock band.

ISOARDI: What was his conducting like?

PRESTON: Well, it depends on what perspective you're coming from, you know.

ISOARDI: How about formal?

PRESTON: Compared to a conductor it was crude but nevertheless very effective to be able to get what he wanted out of the band. The way I've been looking at Zappa for most of the time is that Zappa was a contemporary classical composer that somehow got hooked into being in a rock band.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: He was really an artist, and then he was given— "You're like a world-class composer or whatever, but we're going to put you here in this rock world. Now do what you can with it." And that is what he did. Right now I'm going through all this music because we're organizing for this tour and everything, and it is just amazing what I see, how he constructed a lot of these songs. He used so many techniques of contemporary composition, having the bass play a minor second above the chord or even a major seventh off of the chord, just because to him that was really beautiful. And it gave the band a really strange sound. It made the band sound— I mean, a lot of people didn't know what the hell we were doing, but they knew it was really different, and that attracted a lot of people, especially more intellectual people.

ISOARDI: There's a contemporary, actually, who emerged in the sixties in L.A. and in the seventies, partly out of Horace's band, [Lawrence] “Butch” Morris, who's been working on a system he calls "conduction," which is a way of essentially being an

improvising conductor. And he's working out a vocabulary of signals and things which enables him then to essentially use an orchestra in an improvisational way as a conductor. Did Zappa ever have any kind of conducting vocabulary? Or was it very spontaneous and on the spot?

PRESTON: No.

ISOARDI: You just knew him and you knew what he wanted?

PRESTON: Well, there were two aspects. He definitely had a vocabulary. When he went like this—

ISOARDI: [laughs] He gave you the bird?

PRESTON: You were supposed to go [makes squawking sound]. And then when he went like this, you would just put your fist down on your piano or play the lowest note you could on your instrument. And there were just many, many different sounds.

ISOARDI: So a fist going down would be just like playing a cluster of whatever notes he just—

PRESTON: A cluster of low notes, yeah. And there were all kinds of things. He would hold up his hand and go like that, which meant five. 1-2 1-2-3, 1-2 1-2-3, 1-2 1-2-3.

ISOARDI: Ah.

PRESTON: Or he would go like this [gestures], which was 1-2-1-2 1-2-3, 1-2-1-2

1-2-3, 1-2-1-2 1-2-3. And while that was happening he would go like that and start the rhythm section off, then he would point to somebody and they would start playing a solo, and he would point to somebody else and they would play a solo on top of this solo, and then off we'd go. It was just like a constant— And he would involve the audience as well as that, too. He would point to the section over here, and he'd say "Okay, you people all clap once" or something. You know, he would give them some instructions, and then he would point to another section. So while we were all improvising like this, he would point at the audience and make them make sounds. You know, it was like a really incredible orchestrated event.

ISOARDI: It sounds like he was an improvising conductor.

PRESTON: He was, but the only thing is that to the best of my knowledge he never did that again with any bands in the future. It is very possible he did that with much, much later bands, like in the mid-eighties or so. But, I mean, after this band there came the band with Flo and Eddie [Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan]], and they wanted a totally rigid show where all the songs were lined up. See, we didn't have a song list. We never knew what we were going to play. And Zappa would jump up in the air, and when he landed on the ground we were supposed to start playing a new song, and we never knew what it was going to be. And we would all start playing the same song. Now, I don't know how that happened, [laughs] except everyone's reflexes were really fast, but we just did. Or the other theory is that Zappa used to

liken us to the short story "More Than Human" by Theodore Sturgeon, where there was a group and they were all linked together mentally. It was like a Gestält group, and they were all in tune with each other mentally. They all kind of knew what each other were going to do. So that was kind of— The reason I bring all this up is because it was really a new way of playing music, for us and for anyone. It was really a new way of playing music, and, you know, I had to really hand it to Zappa for bringing that out in all of us.

ISOARDI: Oh, in rock that certainly was unprecedented.

PRESTON: Yeah, right. Well, even in jazz nobody was doing that at all. In fact, I remember one time we were playing at a festival, and Miles [Davis] was there playing at the same festival, and it wasn't too long after that that Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea started playing the Fender Rhodes [electric piano] and doing all that stuff. So I know we had some influence on those people, as well as other rock musicians, too.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I've always thought— I mean, a lot of the critics of jazz fusion say that jazz just sort of stepped down and adapted the worst of rock and roll. But it seems like rock and roll, in its more creative aspects— I mean, what the Mothers were doing was utterly unique. It would have had a powerful influence on jazz musicians who were opening up anyway to the avant-garde music that was coming out in jazz.

PRESTON: Oh, and you have to realize that myself and Bunk and Ian were jazz

musicians.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: So we didn't stop playing jazz because we were in a rock group; we just adapted to—if you will—eight notes instead of six, because jazz is all based on triplets, everything is based on triplets, even though they don't write it that way. Still, that's the way it is. So we were "Okay, now we're playing in eighth notes. That's the same as Latin music." [laughs] It's kind of like that. So, yeah, it wasn't a hard change to make, really, but still our roots and everything were jazz. And Bunk's and my roots— Well, even Ian, you know. Yeah, it was jazz, but it was still the cutting-edge jazz at that time. So I'm pretty sure that a lot of people were listening to that that we weren't aware of, anyhow. I mean, when you're doing it you don't think, "Oh, hey, all the hippest jazz musicians are going to listen to this." You don't think that, you know. I mean, one of the heaviest works I've ever done, which is *Apocalypse Now*, when I was doing it I thought "Gee, this is neat. This is cool." I didn't think, you know [adopts excited voice], "God, this is the greatest movie ever made in history" or something like that. Hell, you can't. You don't know. You don't know.

So we didn't know, and I was just having a ball. I was having a ball, and my routine was— There generally was somebody that opened for our group, you know, and I would just go up and sit in the audience and listen to the other band, and when it

was time to go on I would go on. But I would get in this kind of frame of mind where I just loved what I was doing, you know, I really did. I really enjoyed it so much. I think we all did. And that first band, there was a camaraderie, if you will, of the band that I've never seen before or after. I've never seen that. That's why we're still playing. We're still playing together because there was a love there, and when the band broke up it was extremely difficult. It was like splitting up with your old lady or something.

ISOARDI: How did that happen?

PRESTON: Oh, boy. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Well, short version? [mutual laughter] Or is it just hard to tell?

PRESTON: Well, no, it's not— It's short, it's just that there were a number of reasons why it happened, and I don't know if anyone will ever know the truth of what happened or why it happened. Zappa claimed that at that particular time he was paying us a salary, and there were like nine people in the band. And he said, well, he had to break the band up because he couldn't afford that salary. Well, why did he hire that many people in the first place, you know, if he couldn't afford it? Why get that many people, and if you can't afford it, take some of those people you added on and tell them that that's all for them?

ISOARDI: You mean it was an excuse?

PRESTON: I can't believe that reason too much. That was *his* reason. I think that

Zappa was maybe going through a crisis in his life, and he was just really overtired from working so much and everything. I also think that his writing skills had improved quite immensely and that he wanted better musicians to play the music. I don't know if he felt confident in us doing it, you know.

And the singer [Ray Collins] had already quit, so the only singer there was Frank, so he needed some other singer. First he got Mark and Howard, Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan, and then after that he got Napoleon Murphy Brock, who was a pretty great singer. And then after that he got Ike Willis, who was also great. So even though Zappa was pretty good at his own personality coming through his voice—He wasn't a great singer, but you don't really need to be a great singer when you have that much personality in your music and everything. And he knew how to deliver a song. He just didn't know how to sing great, which is fine. Who wants to hear a great singer all the time?

So that's how that all came down. And I have some other explanations which I don't want to go into right now. [laughs] But it was extremely difficult emotionally when the group broke up.

ISOARDI: It's something you didn't want to see happen.

PRESTON: No. No, not at all. We were enjoying ourselves very much, and we had a family. You know, it was like a family. I mean, here Zappa is in control of whether the family is going to stay together. If we were smart we would have said,

"Fuck you. You go somewhere—" But we didn't. We were too stupid. We thought that he was the owner of the band. Which he wasn't, you know. I mean, we didn't have to break up. We were just too naive; I think that was the main thing. But that's the way it came down, and that's what happened.

ISOARDI: Looking back, what would you say—that period and that band—were their most important contributions to music?

PRESTON: Individually?

ISOARDI: Or as a group. What's the legacy?

PRESTON: Oh, I know what you're saying. Yeah. I was thinking about that this morning, actually. I think that one of the things that the Mothers did for music was that it gave a lot of contemporary classical composers and performers permission to not take themselves seriously. I really see that. I see it in a lot of— I just played a CD this morning that I said, "Hey, God, listen to these guys. They're just doing what they want to do, and it's beautiful." Not that it sounded like the Mothers, but it sounded like the freedom that we had to do anything. And that's what we were showing other people, that you don't have to fit into this box or fit into that thing. You have total freedom to do whatever you want to do. And I think that was our legacy to most facets of music.

Along with that, of course, was Zappa's compositional technique and the fact that he tried to get into the classical world, which he did to a certain degree, but

because of his lack of training, I think, and lack of really understanding how music is formed, his contemporary classical compositions don't hold up to, say, [Luciano] Berio or [Iannis] Xenakis or [Krzystof] Penderecki or [Karlheinz] Stockhausen, you know, any of those guys who are heavy duty—[Toru] Takemitsu. You listen to those people, man, that's where it is. And when you listen to Zappa you say, "That's really great, but it's not there. It's not there." It is kind of like light contemporary classical music, you know. [laughs]

And I never understood why he would play some of the early songs— If I had a keyboard here, I would play it for you. But he would play some of the early songs that we were playing and write it for the London Symphony [Orchestra], you know. Why waste your time? I mean, if you're going to write for the London Symphony, man, *write* something, like not [sings opening melody to Zappa's composition "Uncle Meat"], you know, some— Very interesting melody, but it's not interesting in that context. But Zappa was his own person, and even doing that showed his strength of character in the sense of "I'm not going to *not* play this music because I'm supposed to fit into this thing." So, I mean, I don't know.

And one thing I will say, because it's going to go in this book, is that with all his brilliance and with all his ingenuity and freedom, there was the other side of Zappa, where he was a complete crook, [laughs] if you will. I mean, he cheated every single person in the original band out of the moneys that were coming to them, which

amounted to over a million dollars, you know.

ISOARDI: Moneys for—?

PRESTON: Royalties from records.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: Nobody got any royalties. Ever.

ISOARDI: So for the recording sessions you just got session fees?

PRESTON: We just got session money.

ISOARDI: That was it?

PRESTON: Yeah. And, you know, those records sold. A couple of them were top twenty or whatever.

ISOARDI: And they still sell.

PRESTON: And they're still selling. So we did have a lawsuit with him, and we finally got— You know, it took so long for the lawsuit, as a result of the lawyers that we had, that the statue of limitations had run out on him paying us, so the only money we got was for all future royalties. So since we have never gotten any past royalties, we thought, "Hey, better grab this." So we did. And that didn't amount to that much. But nevertheless, not everybody that's that creative is a nice person. Like Miles Davis, you know. I mean, I've heard stories that he can be a nice person, but—

ISOARDI: Under particular conditions. [laughs]

PRESTON: Yeah, sure. Yeah. Let's not even talk about Buddy Rich. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez.

PRESTON: "Hello, is Buddy Rich there?" You know that one?

ISOARDI: No.

PRESTON: Oh, yeah. This guy calls, you know. She says, "I'm sorry, Buddy died a couple of days ago." And then a week goes by and the phone rings, and "Hello, is Buddy Rich there?" She says, "No, he died a week ago." Another week goes by, the phone rings. "Hello, is Buddy Rich there?" "Look, is this the same person? I told you he died—three times already." He says, "I know. I just like to hear it." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: I hadn't heard that.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: The time that you were with the Mothers is an explosive time in America. It's a polarizing time. Politics— Could you talk about a little bit about the relationship between the art, between the music, and the politics? Has it affected you and your work? And also the band's?

PRESTON: Well, for the most part it was a time—and I can only speak personally, of course—where my experience was pretty much one of well being, of being loved by many people, of the whole community feeling this loving feeling of, like, being open and free and whatever that means, you know. I mean, nudity was like "so what?" And people were— I mean, there were people taking acid then, but I don't think in

large quantities. You know, once in a while an individual would do too much of that and wind up with some problems. In fact, Ray Collins, I think that's what came down with him. He took a lot of acid and quit the band because "performing is bullshit." We all know it's bullshit, but we don't care. We love it, you know. Sure, it's pretend.

And then there was the Kent State situation, and Zappa wrote a couple of songs about that. So, yeah, the hippies were kind of scorned by your normal people. I can remember many times going into a restaurant, and the whole crew in the kitchen would come out and see who the hell were these weird-looking people. And we didn't care. It was fine with us, you know. But every once in a while somebody would say, "Cut your hair off, freak" or something like that, because long hair was really looked down on. It was really looked down on, especially our long hair. It was like really long and really bizarre. So there was some of that.

But probably the most important incident that I can relate in that context is this one time we were playing a concert in Berlin at the Sportspalast—which means sports place, I think—and there were a faction of Weathermen there or something similar to Weathermen. I'm not sure now what they were called. But there were these people that were trying to incite unrest or trying to make unrest in the people. So before the concert started or during the concert they asked us to tell the audience to follow us after the concert to the Allied Supply building and burn it down. Well, Zappa wasn't

going to have any of that, of course. So since we didn't do that, they started throwing things at us, tomatoes and eggs and lettuce and just about everything. And they were rioting. So we went behind the stage in the dressing room, and there were like two hundred police back there with guns and armor and everything. So somebody went out there and kind of calmed the audience down and said, "Okay, here's what we're going to do: we're going to have the leader of those people"— the Weathermen or whatever they were called—"come up on the stage and have a debate with somebody else that's not one of them."

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: So they did. We came out and played while they were debating. [mutual laughter] And it all smoothed out, and the police didn't have to come out or anything. But one of the most blazoned images in my memory is our manager, Herb Cohen, the guy I mentioned earlier. He was standing in front of the stage—and he's like this little Jewish guy, right?—and he is fighting off this entire audience. And they were taking the railing that was going around the bandstand and twisting it into pretzels. And he was like kicking them off and pushing them away. He was a tough little guy. He was a little guy, but he was a very tough little guy. And he's Jewish, of course, and he's fighting off all these German guys. [mutual laughter]

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

OCTOBER 7, 2001

ISOARDI: Certainly there were songs and lyrics that reflected what was going on at the time. Is there any way that you could point to the atmosphere, the openness, the political challenges affecting the form of the music or the type of music? I mean, does the music open up more because of social events?

PRESTON: I don't think so. I'll tell you why. Because most composers that are famous, and to me the reason they're famous is because their music is so honest and so true to their own art, are coming from a place that's inside their hearts or their spirit—or whatever, their creative place. And that creative place doesn't give a shit what's going on in the world. It has to be love or forget it. Even your dark music, like Wagner or some of Webern and Stockhausen's music— Although that music had a tendency to be— Well, not Schoenberg, but Webern and [Alban] Berg had a tendency to be too intellectual, and it wasn't really coming from the heart that much. After all, they had this system, you know, where you couldn't repeat a note and all that stuff. But when you listen to Schoenberg's music, it definitely doesn't— I mean, it breaks those laws all the time, and his music is very heartfelt, I think. So my belief is that when you are writing music or even performing, and you're coming from that place, that place doesn't know or care what shape the world's in, what's going on, anything. It has to happen that way, otherwise it's just bullshit. Or it's just not

happening.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you something about a different sociological theme. In Los Angeles— Well, in '65 Watts explodes, and to some extent L.A. had been a pressure cooker that had been building for a while.

PRESTON: Oh, sure.

ISOARDI: During this period, from [the] Watts [riots] through, say, the mid-seventies, later seventies, how do you see race relations in L.A.? And how is it affecting the music, if at all? Or does it?

PRESTON: Oh, gosh, I mean, once again it's the same thing. Those people that are rioting are rioting because of all the hate that they have grown up with and the way their parents have grown up and so on. And that's an excuse, to me anyhow, for them to vent their anger, and it's unfortunate that they have that. Not only that, but they don't have access to other ways of venting their anger, like therapy, [laughs] which probably would solve a lot of problems in the south of L.A. if they had access to it and it weren't so damned expensive— Not to mention alcohol and drugs, which is also a big stimulant toward getting into that area.

But the musicians— Now, if you're talking about musicians, I can't recall a time of any kind of hatred or any kind of animosity coming from anyone. I can't recall any. I can even remember playing in black clubs around that time, you know—not during, but before or afterwards—and I never had a problem. I never had

a problem there. I have never had a problem my whole life with the racial problem, never. [laughs] Well, I have had one problem, and that's that sometimes I get— I went through a period where I had to have a black drummer and a black bass player. Not necessarily because of my own beliefs or anything, but because I was playing at Catalina [Bar and Grill] a lot, and she [Catalina Popescu] demanded that, because she had to have it. Now, why she had to have it I don't know. [laughs] It could be many reasons.

ISOARDI: This is the period of the late eighties or nineties, though?

PRESTON: Yeah. So, yeah, I mean, this isn't way back then. But my problem was that they would sort of— I would get the feeling that they were feeling discriminatory toward me only because there were two of them and one of me. And it's kind of— There's a playwright— What's his name? Oh, I can't think of it now. A real famous playwright who wrote a play about this, about anytime you put three people in a room, two of them are going to gang up on the other one. [Rainer Werner Fassbinder] And the whole play was about that. It was kind of funny, and very interesting, too. So that's what I felt was happening at that time. But back then, no. I don't remember any problems ever.

ISOARDI: I don't know if we're getting ahead or not, but you mentioned— Was it Buell Neidlinger?

PRESTON: Uh-huh.

ISOARDI: And I think you record with him, don't you?

PRESTON: I've only done one recording with him. But we've been playing together since 1975 or something like that.

ISOARDI: Oh, that's when you meet him?

PRESTON: Yeah. A real long time ago.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe you should tell that. It's not long after that, then, that the Mothers split?

PRESTON: Well, yeah, there are a few things that went on before that that we should go into.

ISOARDI: Okay. What are your plans? The Mothers ends—unexpectedly for you, right?

PRESTON: Yeah. So I came back to L.A., and I don't know the exact sequence of what happened, but I do know that— Well, see, my problem is that I have a period of about ten months where I accomplished about three years of stuff. [mutual laughter] And I really don't know how that happened. There must be some wrong points somewhere, because between the time that the Mothers ended, during which I was not married at that time, and the time I met my wife [Tina Carver Preston] and we started living together was about ten months. And I can name you about ten things—well, not ten, but, say, six or seven things—that I did in that space, and they all took about six to eight months each.

ISOARDI: You'd found a way to go without sleep.

PRESTON: I don't know how it was possible. I really don't know how it was possible.

ISOARDI: I had a period of about a couple of years kind of like that, so to a degree I can empathize.

PRESTON: And it's not like I crammed it all. I don't remember cramming anything. It's just that those things happened.

ISOARDI: Opportunities.

PRESTON: Those things happened, and they only could have happened during that time. Anyhow—

ISOARDI: So what were they? Or some?

PRESTON: Well, all right. I was in a play in Philadelphia with Danny DeVito and Judd Hirsch and some other people. We were the band, and the band was onstage. It was like this weird play about— Well, never mind. [laughs]

ISOARDI: But you were performing at the same time?

PRESTON: Yeah, we were performing.

ISOARDI: Danny DeVito played?

PRESTON: No, no, no, no, no. It was a musical [*The Line of Least Existence* by Rosalyn Drexler], and we were the band. It was like a little rock band on the stage, and they could sing and stuff like that.

I went to New York, and I performed with Meredith [Monk] and went on tours with her, performed at the Guggenheim Museum, toured all around New York.

ISOARDI: So that ten months you were back there? Or this is after that ten-month thing?

PRESTON: No, this is during this.

ISOARDI: That was during that long hiatus there?

PRESTON: That ten-month period. I came here and lived in Topanga Canyon with this girl for— It had to be at least six months, because I was studying with Yogi Bhajan, and we went to a big thing in New Mexico and came back and did all this stuff.

So that's another thing. I wrote it down one time. There's like a whole list of things that I did.

ISOARDI: What are your musical ideas at the time? I mean, what do you want to do after the Mothers?

PRESTON: I really didn't know. I was putting together a band called Raw Milk. [adopts stoned-sounding voice] "Wow, man." [mutual laughter] It was all Moog synthesizers except the drums— I think we had drums and bass. But then there were also two other keyboard players besides myself, and we had these big modular Moogs.

This is before I had mine. I remember we used to perform, and there was a review in the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*, and it said, "These synthesizers, nobody is going to ever use those in a rock band." [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Famous last words.

PRESTON: Yeah, really. I should nail that person. I wonder if he's still alive. I'd send that article to him.

ISOARDI: Really.

PRESTON: So one thing I do remember is right at that time I got a call— I think I'm living with my wife now, and I got a call from Carla Bley, and they [she and Michael Mantler] wanted me to help them do their album, the album *Escalator over the Hill*. I don't know if you've ever seen that album.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: You have?

ISOARDI: Yeah. Famous album.

PRESTON: Yeah. It's out on CD now. So I said, "Yeah, sure." I might have been living there in New York at that time. If I wasn't— Yeah, I might have been living there. I'm not sure now. But somehow I didn't need a place to stay for some reason. So I helped them out. I sang on it, and I played the synthesizer and also one of the those little glockenspiels. No, not a glockenspiel. Like a little music—

ISOARDI: Like a celeste? Is that what it's called?

PRESTON: Yeah, a celeste.

ISOARDI: So he was kind of picking things up as they occurred?

PRESTON: Well, that was a big project. That was a huge project. They had

Linda Ronstadt, Jack Bruce, and about eight other singers and fifteen musicians, and the recording session went on for two months or something. So it was like really a serious project. So that was like really incredible, being involved with that. And then later on I went on a lot of tours with Carla, you know. [laughs] I've got to look at the albums now to see— "What did I do next?"

Then I don't know. I came back to L.A., and I was playing with various people—I think. Boy, I don't know. I don't know how I can do it chronologically. I'm trying to think of that.

ISOARDI: You don't have to.

PRESTON: At one point—well, it had to be right then—Gil Evans called me through a friend [guitarist Joe Beck] and asked me to play in the band. So we played around New York for a while, and he put me up in this millionaire's house right in like Thirteenth Street and University Place. And that was— God, that was incredible.

ISOARDI: Nice location.

PRESTON: Big brownstone, you know. And then we went to Europe and toured around Europe for a while and came back. I did one album with him; it's called *Where Flamingos Fly*. [scans shelves] Which I don't see. Oh, there it is.

ISOARDI: What's the scene like in L.A. then? We're talking—what?—about the mid- to later seventies, right?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Was there much—?

PRESTON: Well, you know, for one thing, the sessions that were happening earlier were no longer happening.

ISOARDI: That's pretty much gone then?

PRESTON: Yeah. Or there may have been something happening, but I didn't know what it was. I had no idea.

ISOARDI: So it's getting a little bit rougher for jazz musicians then?

PRESTON: Not only that, but the group I had, Raw Milk, and the next group right after that— I think it was called Ogo Moto. I named it after that thing.

ISOARDI: After the movie?

PRESTON: Yeah. Those bands were trying to play rock. You know, I was trying to carry on that tradition of playing rock and being a jazz musician at the same time, [laughs] you know, or playing fusion or whatever. And none of them were successful in that sense, I mean as far as getting a record deal or making anything happen with them. There wasn't really much interest in me, for one thing, or my music. [laughs] But I kept going with it. And I would form one band, and I'd try to do a lot of stuff with that, and then that wouldn't happen, and I would form another band, and— You know. I had a band with Arthur Barrow called Loose Connection, though we're sorry we named it that. It was all wires. I'm trying to think. I know there was a lot of other stuff happening during that time. Gee whiz.

Well, one of the things that was happening during that time was that I started getting into writing music for film, and I was lucky to be able to do that. I did about twenty films.

ISOARDI: That's a pretty substantial number.

PRESTON: Yeah. And not all of them were great films, [laughs] but one of them was, and some of the other ones were pretty good. That took up a lot of time, doing all that. But it wasn't a career that I liked very much.

ISOARDI: Why not?

PRESTON: It was very lonely. You know, you just sit at home and write the music, and then— In my case I would perform it all.

ISOARDI: What a contrast to that band, to the Mothers. What a contrast.

PRESTON: So that wasn't the greatest thing in the world, although it was kind of exciting being involved with the film world. At that time a guy came over from Germany, and he showed up, he called me up, and he says, "Can I come over?" And I said, "Sure." So he came over. He wanted to meet Don Preston, you know. And I'll never forget, he was wearing these pink overalls. I mean, he looked very hip, you know. And he played some of his music for me that he just had released on a major label. His name was Michael Hoenig. Well, then, later on, he came over and established himself in the film world, built a studio in a loft downtown. So he and I became pretty close during my film stuff, because sometimes I would get a budget

where I could use better equipment. He had a Synclavier there and tons of keyboards and a really huge studio. So I would go there and use his studio to do my film and then pay him a certain fee for the studio.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: So that went on. I would help him with some of the scores that he got. And he was a marvelous producer. He was really, really great. I think that was his calling in life. And he produced a number of things, like Joan LaBarbara, a singer that was married to Morton Subotnick.

So that's the part of my musical career that just was happening, and I felt that I could do it, and I did it. But it took great effort, [mutual laughter] really great, great effort for me to do it, because, like Zappa, I'm not schooled, even though I schooled myself in a sense. I felt a lot of shortcomings in my abilities, and I didn't really think that that was what I wanted to do in the long run. And as a matter of fact, what happened was that I got an agent after a certain period, and I never got a job after that. [mutual laughter] So— Boy. I wonder what that was all about. Before I had an agent I got all these films, and then I never got another one. But I wasn't really unhappy about it, you know.

Let me see. Well, right after the Gil Evans thing I remember also going on several tours with Carla Bley, like four or five.

ISOARDI: About when was that?

PRESTON: Oh, probably starting around '75 and probably through '82 or something like that.

ISOARDI: Are you involved at all with Charlie Haden during this period? Because certainly Carla Bley is.

PRESTON: No, not really. I mean, he and I would see each other occasionally, you know, and say hello. In fact, I saw him at a Charles Lloyd concert at the [Jazz] Bakery. He and I just sat outside and talked for a while. Oh, no, no, no, it wasn't that. It was Paul Bley. He and Paul Bley played a duo concert at the Bakery. And it was fun seeing Charlie again. I hadn't seen him for a long time.

ISOARDI: Then you head into the eighties. And I know at some point into the eighties you're recording quite heavily with John Carter and Bobby Bradford. But what's happening earlier?

PRESTON: Well, yeah, let me tell you about that.

ISOARDI: Oh, are we up to that point, then, when you hook up with them?

PRESTON: Well, yeah. I can't remember anything. I mean, starting at the first part of the eighties I moved downtown into a loft.

ISOARDI: Downtown Los Angeles?

PRESTON: Yeah. And this loft was kind of unique in the sense that there was quite a large space that was suitable to be a theater.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: There wasn't a stage there, but I had theater lighting, I had theater seats, and I made a theater out of it.

ISOARDI: Wow.

PRESTON: So we did a number of things there. In fact, I think even John and Bobby played there too, you know, with me. I did a concert there with John Densmore and John O'Keefe. John O'Keefe is a playwright, a really incredible poet. And all during that time, from '75 to '80, '82 or so, I was performing around L.A. with whatever group I had at the time, whether it be Ogo Moto or Loose Connection. I did a bunch of concerts all around different places in L.A.

ISOARDI: Was it hard getting work?

PRESTON: I don't remember suffering. Before I moved into the loft, though— It was funny. I went to a NAMM show.

ISOARDI: Native American Movement NAM?

PRESTON: No. Music Merchants something. [National Association of Music Merchants] At one of the counters there was a guy there demonstrating this new synthesizer that was connected to an Apple, to a computer, and he says, "Well, you just do this and do that." And he says, "Wait a minute, it's not working." And then I say, "Well, let me try it." So I just [makes the sound of revving something up quickly], and I made it all work, you know. [mutual laughter] This guy didn't know what he was doing. And I knew the Apple computer quite well. I knew it very well, actually.

Why I don't know.

ISOARDI: [laughs] That's really odd.

PRESTON: I obviously bought one for some reason. I guess I bought one because— I had had a computer before that. I bought my first computer in, I think, '77 or something like that, quite a long time ago. So anyhow, I wowed the guy on the computer, and I got a call from him like a week later, and he says, "Hey, you really impressed me on the computer. I might have a job for you writing music for video games." I said, "Oh, sounds good." So they gave me a job at a big corporation writing music for video games.

Of course, back then you had to write in assembly code, which was totally ridiculous. Nobody has to do that anymore. I don't know if you even know what— [Isoardi shakes his head] Okay. Well, don't worry about it. [mutual laughter] Needless to say, assembly code is probably the hardest language there is on the computer except for machine code. So we had to write the music on that. They had to program the games in that language, too. So the programmers had to be really— I mean, all that's taken care of now. Nowadays for music you just give them a MIDI [musical instrument digital interface] file, and that's it. So back then it was like very, very sparse and very hard to do.

So I was doing it, and I was making fairly good money. That's why I moved into the loft, because I was making pretty decent money—for a musician, anyhow, or a

composer. So what happened was that the bottom dropped out of the video game market completely. It just completely folded. All the huge companies folded, and they laid me off, and they laid a whole bunch of the other people there off. Actually I was working for this company called Eddy Goldfarb [and Associates]. He made his millions with these teeth.

ISOARDI: Oh, you're kidding.

PRESTON: The chattering teeth. [mutual laughter] So I had met a few people in the business and everything, and I met this other guy, and he said, "Well, let's start a business writing music for video games for companies that don't know where to go or don't have that." So we did. And he says, "I know these two other guys. One of them is my brother-in-law, who is black." It was kind of strange. "And this other guy is like a fantastic musician. His name is John Carter." I had never heard of John Carter before that. So we formed a partnership, and we were getting some work. We actually got a few jobs and started doing that. Then what happened was that the rest of the bottom completely dropped out, and there was just no work at all, and we had to dissolve our partnership.

But meanwhile I had met John and told him who I was, and he was kind of impressed with the Mothers and all that, and Carla Bley and Gil Evans. So he was thinking, "Gee—"you know, he's been playing for ten years without a piano—“maybe it's time to get a piano player.” So he came over, and we jammed a couple of times,

and he was kind of impressed. I tried to play down to him, and like he picked up on that immediately, and— "No, no, no. No, Don. Don't do that," he said. "Be yourself," and stuff like that. And John was one of the nicest persons I had ever met in my life. He was just a sweet person. He was just beautiful, and his music and everything was just amazing, totally amazing.

So before I knew it I was in the band, and we were going to New York and going all over the place, and playing in Texas and all kinds of jobs. We played the New Music America series a number of places, and it was a real thrill. And doing the albums.

Now, when we played it was just a quintet with Roberto [Miranda] and William Jeffrey and Bobby [Bradford] and John and myself. But when we played in New York, on the album, it was an octet.

ISOARDI: You're talking about parts of the “Roots and Folklore: [Episodes in the Development of American Folk Music”] series.

PRESTON: The series, yeah.

ISOARDI: And there were a lot of New York musicians working.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I think initially the first two in that series were done out here, but you weren't on those?

PRESTON: No, the first one. Oh, wait, maybe it was the first two. I know there

was *Castles of Ghana*. I'm not on that, and I don't know any other that I'm not on.

ISOARDI: Yeah, there is another one. But you were on *Fields* and *Dance of the Love Ghosts* and *Shadows on the Wall*.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What about those pieces? Could you talk about that incredible cycle?

PRESTON: Well, I don't know if it was a cycle. [laughs] To me it was an afterthought in a sense. Although— I mean, I could be wrong about that, you know. I never perceived it as a cycle, let's put it that way, maybe because I wasn't involved with the first two.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: I guess the reason I don't think of the first one is because it was on a different label.

ISOARDI: That's right.

PRESTON: So I wasn't aware of that. And I don't even know if it was done—

ISOARDI: It was Black Saint [Records].

PRESTON: It wasn't even done with that group, you know.

ISOARDI: I think it was called *Dauwhe*.

PRESTON: Maybe so.

ISOARDI: And I think it was done— I know Roberto was on those.

PRESTON: Right.

ISOARDI: It was L.A.

PRESTON: Yeah, it was L.A. guys.

ISOARDI: Yeah. That was on Black Saint, and then they switched to, I guess, Gramavision [Records] for *Castles of Ghana* and for the three that you were on.

PRESTON: Yeah. It's amazing how many of those people are dead now. Jeez. Yeah, the bass player [Fred Hopkins] died, and the trombone player [Benny Powell] died and John died. It's amazing. But we're still here, sort of.

ISOARDI: What about John and John's music?

PRESTON: Well, he had a very unique way of writing. He would write little phrases, and they were like disjointed, and his music was kind of like— It was a little bit like Zappa's in the sense that he would say, "All right, you play this phrase now" or "jump over to this phrase." It was like all these little phrases. And it was like— I don't know, he put it all together in his head somehow, and it was so amazing. I play several of his songs myself now that I just really love—you know, I love those songs—although nothing from the octet series. But gee whiz. That was such an exciting time to go there and play with those guys. Andrew Cyrille was just— [whistles]

ISOARDI: Oh, the drummer on those sessions.

PRESTON: Man, Andrew's a monster. And I always loved his playing. I played with Andrew with Carla also a number of times, so we knew each other quite well by

the time we started recording with John.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: And it was just such a thrill to go there and rehearse and walk around New York and Washington Square. We were walking through Washington Square, and some guy up in a tree says, "Hey, guy, look at these!" and he pulled up his shirt, and he has got two beautiful breasts. [mutual laughter] And I mean, we had never even heard of that before. That was kind of shocking. It was just New York. It's just such an incredible place. It really is. Gosh.

ISOARDI: I guess you meet Bobby when you come around with John.

PRESTON: Of course. Well, immediately I got to know Bobby and Roberto and William. And Bobby's always been— I hate to say this, Bobby, but I think I've told him that he reminds me of my father. He really does. They have the same personality, the same body shape, the same glasses, you know. And of course, my dad played trumpet, also. So there were a lot of similarities, obviously. And I always liked his sense of humor, also. I always get a big kick out of Bobby. He is such a warm person, too.

ISOARDI: I think you also do a live album—isn't it?—at Catalina's with him?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Is it *Comin' On*?

PRESTON: Yeah, Comin' On. I don't know if I should talk about that album,

because there was like a— I would have to get the album out. Let me see. You know, I think one of the things that happened there was, when we were rehearsing— Yeah, Richard Davis was playing bass, and when we were rehearsing we were playing this one tune, and John would stop the band, and he would say, "Richard, no, you have to play it like this: bah-bah-bah-bah," and then we'd start playing again. And then he stopped the band and said, "No, Richard, that's not it yet. You've got to do this: bom-bom-bom-bom." And Richard kept getting madder and madder, because he is like the star of anything he ever touches, you know.

And also I got a really serious feeling that he didn't like me that much. I could have just been imagining that. I don't know. Well, you know what it was, it wasn't that he didn't like me, it was, "Who is this white guy that I'd never heard of before playing in this band with *me*?"

ISOARDI: "With *me*." That's just what I was going to say. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: So one of the things that happened on the recording— If you listen to it, every time it comes to my solo, Richard Davis stops playing time or just completely stops playing. Every single time. There wasn't one time when he would play behind me when I was playing a solo.

ISOARDI: Do you think it was his way of testing you?

PRESTON: Maybe, but that didn't stop me at all, not in the least. "Hey, don't play. This gives me more freedom." I should have said that to him afterwards. "Oh,

thank you for not playing." [mutual laughter]

And then the other thing that he would do was that if we were playing a fast tune he would start rushing and speeding up, speeding the beat up, so that by the time we got to the out chorus of the tune Bobby and John couldn't play the fuckin' melody, you know. Or with a ballad he would start getting slower and slower. And I knew he was doing it intentionally. So we were playing over a period of three days. It wasn't like he had us. One time, at one point when he started rushing, Andrew and I looked at each other, and I said, "No." And both of us said, "This is where the beat is, motherfucker," and we wouldn't let him rush. We just wouldn't let him rush.

ISOARDI: Did he respond to that?

PRESTON: Well, he had to. And then after that it was okay, I guess. But I know some New York musicians, they do test you. Like the classic story of George Shearing when he sat in with "Bird" [Charlie Parker]. Bird says— I can't remember what song it was. I think he said, "Do you know 'All the Things You Are'?" And he says, "Yeah." "Okay, 'All the Things You Are'—in B." [mutual laughter] Or something like that, you know, some really outrageous key. And of course, George could do it anyhow. That didn't stop him at all. But God. That was very trying, do you know what I mean? [mutual laughter] And the thing that was trying about it was not to get angry—you know, just to play the music and just stayed centered with that.

ISOARDI: Now, on *Comin' On* you've got John's music plus Bobby's. I think you've got tunes by—

PRESTON: Oh, they always did that.

ISOARDI: Divided it up?

PRESTON: Actually it was Bobby's gig.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, that's right. He's the lead name on it.

PRESTON: So. Yeah, right. [sings melody to “Comin’ On”] That's "Comin' On." "Encounter," that's the one. That was the one he was talking to him about. Because the bass parts— "Encounter" is a weird tune, because it's— [sings the tune] It's in 3/4 4/4, and 5/4. It's 1-2-3 1-2-3-4 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3 1-2-3-4 1-2-3-4-5, you know. It was like that. And the bass just keeps going [sings the bass line], and it doesn't stop. It's a very hard part.

ISOARDI: That's the one he was rushing?

PRESTON: No, no. That's when John had to stop and say, "No, you're doing it wrong."

ISOARDI: Oh.

PRESTON: "Don't tell me I'm doing it wrong!" [mutual laughter]

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 10, 2001

ISOARDI: Don, last time we finished our session talking about how you met John Carter and Bobby Bradford, and your collaboration with them, recordings you did with them, etc. I suppose we can begin by asking whether you have any comments by way of summation of your relationship with John and Bobby, maybe their importance in the music of—

PRESTON: Well, yeah, I felt that John's music was extremely important, and I was struck by his original way of writing music. He would write phrases, and they would be— Nothing was joined together. There weren't directions and go from here to there and go from there to here, but just random phrases kind of jotted down on a piece of paper. I think they were numbered or something like that. [laughs] So while we were recording he would point at somebody or at a couple of guys and just hold up some fingers to tell them to start playing that phrase and playing another phrase. It was very loose in that sense, but on the record it sounds completely orchestrated.

ISOARDI: Yeah, it does.

PRESTON: And I like that approach. I mean, it's just one more way of doing something like that, and the result, of course, is just phenomenal. I always thought that those were some of the best records I have ever done.

ISOARDI: Jeez. Are you thinking specifically of the “Roots and Folklore:

[Episodes in the Development of American Folk Music"]?

PRESTON: The octet stuff.

ISOARDI: Yeah, the octet.

PRESTON: I mean, the only other album I ever did with them is the one—

ISOARDI: Was that *Comin' On*?

PRESTON: *Comin' On*, yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah, we talked about that last time. How much of a role did they play in sort of avant-garde or experimental music in Los Angeles?

PRESTON: Well, most of the people that are in that area of music know who John was and know his music. Unfortunately, the other faction of music doesn't. He never got that big. [tape recorder off] So, yeah, I thought the music was extremely important, and the recordings were also very important in the mainstream of music. But as I was saying, a lot of the mainstream players—like, I would venture to say, Kenny G or Dave Koz or those people—they don't have a clue. They've never heard— I mean, they don't know who anybody is. In fact, actually Dave Koz was doing a commercial in my loft, when I had a loft, and I asked him about John Carter, and he had never heard of him. He had never heard of him.

ISOARDI: Yeah, different world.

PRESTON: Yeah. It is a completely different world. Well, some of us in music are constantly looking for new expressions in music, and some people are just looking

for how much money they are going to make.

ISOARDI: Paycheck.

PRESTON: And what it takes to make it. So— That's fine. I mean, that's just a whole different type of experience, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: I certainly don't put them down, as long as they don't put me down for my endeavors. And it's amazing that they are successful and they are making a lot of money, which I think is great, because that just helps the whole overall scene.

ISOARDI: How about some of the other sort of musicians whom you worked with in the eighties and the nineties in Los Angeles? I mean, what kind of an experimental or avant- garde or out music scene is there? How would you characterize it? And who were some of the players?

PRESTON: Well, I started playing with Dr. Art Davis. He and I have had kind of a long relationship now, starting in the eighties. And we played at Catalina [Bar and Grill] a bunch of times. And also Leimert Park; I played with groups of his there. In fact, one time I was late. I couldn't get there, and— What's his name? The piano player that just died that you interviewed, the black guy, what was his name?

ISOARDI: That I interviewed?

PRESTON: I think you did. What was his name? Grrr, I hate that.

ISOARDI: Oh, Horace, you mean.

PRESTON: Yeah, Horace.

ISOARDI: Horace Tapscott. Oh, yeah! [laughs]

PRESTON: So Horace, he filled in for me, and it was just kind of interesting— He was up there playing, and I jumped up on the bandstand, or let him finish that song or something, you know.

ISOARDI: How did you meet Art?

PRESTON: Art!

ISOARDI: Davis.

PRESTON: Boy.

ISOARDI: That was after he relocated to Southern California?

PRESTON: Yeah, yeah, of course. I don't know. I think what it was was that I had a job coming up at Catalina's and I needed a bass player. Well, I mean, I was going to say— I hate to say this, but one of the factors with working at Catalina's [laughs] was that she [Catalina Popescu] told me that I had to use black musicians. [Isoardi reacts visibly] Yeah.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

PRESTON: No, I'm not kidding. Well, Catalina, I believe she's Hungarian or Czech or something—

ISOARDI: Romanian.

PRESTON: Oh, she's Romanian. Oh, that's right, I remember now. I don't know,

she has a thing about black—

ISOARDI: But all sorts of musicians played at Catalina's.

PRESTON: Oh, of course, but that was her criterion for me.

ISOARDI: For you.

PRESTON: Yeah. I had to get black musicians. So I started asking people. And somebody said, "Well, get Dr. Art Davis. He's a good bass player." [mutual laughter] So I called Art, and he said "Oh, sure." I think the first [drummer] I used was Sonship [Theus]— a little quirky, and some problems; you had to pick him up, you know, kind of like me now—but nevertheless a good drummer. And then the next time I used Fritz Wise, whom I thought was a really, really fine drummer. Fritz is a great guy, great drummer, reliable.

ISOARDI: Now, these are both drummers that played with Horace Tapscott.

PRESTON: Yeah. I didn't know Sonship did—or I guess I didn't know.

ISOARDI: How did you hook up with Sonship? Somebody told you about it?

PRESTON: Same thing. Somebody said "Here's a list of drummers," [mutual laughter] and yeah, I just called him. So that was good. I mean, it worked out, and the set sounded good. I had to play a bunch of Art Davis's material in order to use him, and that's fine. I didn't mind that. And that's who I was playing with then.

Oh, the other thing was of course the El Monte Art Ensemble. It was a group that consisted of myself, Buell Neidlinger, Marty Krystal, and whatever drummer we

could find at the moment.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: There was never any— In fact, for several years we even used Buell's wife [Deborah Fuss], and she didn't know anything about drums or music or anything. He just said, "Here's some set of drums. Just beat on them" or something. [mutual laughter] Because he wanted something really unique, totally unique.

ISOARDI: Did he get it?

PRESTON: Yeah, she was very unique, and she did a great job, actually.

ISOARDI: Wow.

PRESTON: In fact—I'm looking at a poster here—Peter Erskine played with us, too, and that was really, really good.

ISOARDI: How long were you guys together?

PRESTON: Oh, God, I would say at least ten years. At least. But we never did anything. We never put any albums out. I think we did put one album out, and that was not that group. It was another group with Peter, Buell, and Marty, and then they said I was a guest artist. [laughs] But it was a great album. It was a really beautifully done album, too.

ISOARDI: What was the focus of the group? What were you guys doing?

PRESTON: Well, for a long time we played a lot of Marty's music, and then we started Thelonious [Monk], nothing but Thelonious.

ISOARDI: I remember in the eighties going to a place called the Alleycat Bistro in Culver City that was in this kind of mall, and they had Marty and Buell there as a duo, I think it was once a week, playing nothing but Thelonious Monk.

PRESTON: Yeah. That sounds right. It was very interesting getting to know Buell. Buell is the guy that you love to hate, you know.

ISOARDI: [laughs] In what way?

PRESTON: I mean, he's a very abusive person, but he's also a very incredible musician. Did I tell—? No, I didn't tell that story. Buell was fighting a problem of marijuana addiction. Now, I never knew you could get addicted to marijuana. I smoked it for years and never got addicted. [mutual laughter] But Buell, actually his doctor told him he had to stop smoking. I know about three or four people that are the smartest people I know, and they're also the biggest smokers of anyone I know.

And he had this job. We had a rehearsal, and after the rehearsal he says, "Don, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to drive me downtown." Apparently he had a job playing cello with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra at the Dorothy Chandler [Pavilion], and he was too stoned to drive. [mutual laughter] And he was playing a cello concerto, no less—I mean, not a concerto, but a thing featuring cello with them. And, I mean, they are some of the finest musicians in L.A. So I drove him down, and he played the concert. And I didn't go to it, but I heard that he did fine. It was great.

There are a lot of stories about Buell that are really— I remember one time he

had a concert at the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art]. I believe it was bass, but it was also playing with the California [EAR Unit] or some group like that. And he played a piece by Paul Chihara that featured the bass. It might have been a concerto. And afterwards— He had the music on the floor, and he bent down, and he picked all the music up, and he tore it into little pieces and threw it down and walked off the stage. [mutual laughter] And, I mean, he just does what he feels like and to hell with everybody. But he's a really great musician.

ISOARDI: He and Marty were out here in California until some time in the nineties—right?—when they head back?

PRESTON: Well, yeah. Buell at one point was fed up with the studio musician type work that— He supported himself with studio work and did quite well—I mean *very* well. And he moved out and moved up to Washington.

ISOARDI: Stayed up there?

PRESTON: Yeah. And every once in a while he commutes back to L.A. and does a job or something and then goes back up to Washington.

ISOARDI: Does he play much up there? Or is he kind of semiretired?

PRESTON: I don't know what he's doing up there. We've talked about going up there and doing some concert with him or something like that, but it's never transpired. So that was another era during that whole period of stuff that was happening.

And the other thing is that Bunk Gardner has been kind of like— You know,

we say that we are attached at the hip, because in the Mothers [of Invention] we roomed together pretty much all the time and shared girlfriends occasionally. And then after the Mothers we've been playing all throughout this time.

ISOARDI: And you guys go back quite a ways before the Mothers, as well.

PRESTON: Well, I roomed with his brother [Buzz Gardner] in Trieste, Italy, in the service. He was my roommate. His brother showed me the ropes and turned me on to grass and Stravinsky—well, I knew about Stravinsky, but Bartók and Schoenberg and all the other great composers. He really kind of opened my eyes. And books, too. He introduced me to all the Russian authors. I went into the service right out of high school, and I didn't really know much about literature especially. And I read all of that, all of Thomas Mann and just about everybody, you know, Kafka. And art— Well, I don't know if he turned me onto art so much, but I really got into art. I even studied art over there for a couple of years, and since then I've really followed art very closely in terms of what's going on now.

ISOARDI: At what point do you make contact with—? I mean, it seems like there's a while, I guess it's during the seventies, that a lot of younger out musicians start emerging who are still prominent today. I'm thinking of people like Vinny Golia and the Cline brothers [Alex Cline and Nels Cline], and I guess Eric von Essen's around.

PRESTON: Eric? Yeah, I played a few jobs with Eric, earlier though, much earlier.

There was one guy—I can't think of what his name is—that I played with, and

he wound up— I mean, he was a powerhouse tenor [saxophone] player from the East Coast who came out here, and I hooked up with him right away, and then he moved to Europe. I'll find out his name, because he was great. God, what a great player he was. I can't think of his name, though. It's just one of those— Kind of like, you probably would have heard of him, you know? But going on what I've said already is not even enough to talk about.

I have to say also, along with all this stuff—and I'm sure it fits into the book—is that my wife [Tina Carver Preston] being an actress, I started meeting a lot of other actors, a lot of directors, a lot of people involved with that whole thing, and I started being asked to do music for various things, various plays and everything. And I did, and some of it came out really, really great. I've won like five awards, I think.

ISOARDI: Such as?

PRESTON: What do you mean?

ISOARDI: I mean, which pieces?

PRESTON: Well, one of them was called *Taxi Dance*. It was a play about the dancing where you go in and you pay fifty cents.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Dime-a-dance or something.

PRESTON: Yeah, dime-a-dance— Well, it's gone up, too. [mutual laughter] And the play was just magical. And I started out the play— I did this collage of music that was all these different songs that they play during the dime-a-dance dances.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: And I made another recording of it. So I had two identical recordings. So then I put them in two cassette machines, and cassette machines being what they are—they were not, you know, professional or anything—I would just press start, and they would start together while people were coming in and sitting down and talking and everything. Like I had one cassette be the front speakers, where the stage was, and the other cassette would be the back speakers. And then they would slowly but surely get out of sync, and then—

ISOARDI: Like an echo effect?

PRESTON: It started out like these nice ballads, and then there was a little echo, and then more of an echo, and then it started becoming cacophony—you know, it was just like garbage—and then by the end of the tape it was totally unrecognizable as music. So I always loved that technique. [mutual laughter] It was really fun.

And a whole bunch of other plays. Some plays I really didn't even know why I won an award, [laughs] but I did.

Some of the guys that I worked with were John Steppling— Oh, one story about John Steppling— Now, John, he wanted to be a musician, but he decided it was too hard to be a musician, so he decided then he'd be a writer. So he's a writer and director, because the only way he can get what he wants out of his plays is directing them himself. So we got chosen to do— I say "we." *He* got chosen to do his play at

the Mark Taper [Forum]. They have a thing there called "New Plays" or "New Artists"—I forget what they call it. Anyhow, they don't do it at the Taper anymore, but they used to do it there. So he had this great play called *The Dream Coast*, and I was to do the opening music. And I said, "Well, I want to do this live, John." He says okay. So I got Putter Smith to play with me, who is another person that I go way back with. I knew Putter when he was eighteen [years old]. So I said, "Okay, Putter, just get as far out as you can." So I started playing the piano. I got into my Cecil Taylor mode and started bashing the piano keys and bashing and using my elbows and just like everything I could think of. So during the intermission John comes over to me, and he says, "Don, I hate to tell you this, but that sounded a little too conservative for me. I mean, could you do something further out than that?"

ISOARDI: He wasn't joking?

PRESTON: No. [mutual laughter] No, he wasn't joking at all. And I said, "Okay, John, I'll do it." So I started looking around the theater, and I found some beer cans and a wrench and a screwdriver and—

ISOARDI: Did you disassemble the piano?

PRESTON: No, but I threw stuff at it. [mutual laughter] And I used the beer cans, crunching them all up, and banging the piano with everything I could think of. And he was happy. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: I take it this wasn't a new Steinway grand or something.

PRESTON: No. No, this was an old, beat-up upright.

ISOARDI: Did the work that you did on the plays then lead to scoring for film?

PRESTON: No, I was doing films before that.

ISOARDI: Before that?

PRESTON: Yeah. The film thing was kind of weird, how I got started. I think the first film I did was called *The Being*. And I'm not totally sure, but there was some sort of connection with Robert Downey [Sr.], because Robert Downey had showed the Mothers his first film, which was called *Chafed Elbows*, I think—one of the weirdest films I have ever seen in my life. It was a film of still photographs talking to each other. [mutual laughter] I swear to God. And the whole movie, it was like a two-hour fuckin' movie with still photographs talking to each other. And, I mean, the dialogue was interesting, but we were asleep by the end of the movie.

Anyhow, I got to meet Robert, and later on I think he called me or something to that affect. I think there was a connection through Bunk and myself. And he knew this young Chinese girl director [Jackie Kong]. That's a handful right there. I don't know how he was involved except that she was his friend and she needed some music. And also I'm not sure what happened with Bunk— Somewhere it went by the wayside, and I was doing most of the composing anyhow. So Bunk sort of dropped out of it, and so did Robert Downey. I don't know if you've ever seen any of his movies. All of his movies are completely weird.

ISOARDI: It doesn't ring a bell. I can't think of it.

PRESTON: No? Oh, yeah, he's done a lot of— One was called *Pound*, in which everybody in the movie was playing a dog in a dog pound. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: I would have remembered that one.

PRESTON: And one of the better ones was— I can't remember now. It was a cowboy movie, and I think the second coming of Christ. [*Greaser's Palace*] He came back as a cowboy or something like that. He's very unusual. And he was into drugs and everything. Unfortunately that's probably how [Robert Downey] Jr. got all his problems. Like father, like son, you know. But anyhow, I started working on films with her. She did four films that I did music for, and one thing led to another.

Another film I did was called *Android*. They are still showing it on TV and everywhere. Klaus Kinski was in that and tried to screw every girl on the set.

ISOARDI: In the film or while making it?

PRESTON: Both. Though the people that did that film were friends of mine and my wife's. They knew that I had done several films already, so it was like a logical choice—sort of logical. And that was really fun, you know, to do that. All of them were, all of the films were really fun. Mostly friends of mine would contact me and say, "We're doing this film. Can you do a low-budget film score?" [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: How did you hook up on *Apocalypse* [*Now*]?

PRESTON: Well, first of all, about six months or probably even a year prior to that I had bought a modular synthesizer from a guy up in San Francisco that I heard about. The guy turned out to be Pat [Patrick] Gleeson, who played synth[esizer] with Herbie Hancock. So I called him. We negotiated the price, and I went up there and bought it. It was beautiful. Six cases of Moog synthesizer. Each case had been redone out of plexiglass, so they were all like this see-through, beautiful instrument.

ISOARDI: Oh, God.

PRESTON: And then I met Pat, and since then we've become really good friends. So Pat knew I had this synthesizer, so he told the guy who was producing the score, "Call Don Preston." I guess they had some synth player there that they wanted, but he didn't have a synth, so they said, "Well, call Don Preston. He's got a beautiful, great synthesizer." The guy's name was David Rubinson, and he called me, and he started saying, "And you have a synthesizer? What is it?" and "Blah, blah, blah, blah. And what's your name?" And I said Don Preston. "Not Don Preston from the Mothers!" And I said, “Yeah.” And he says, "What are we doing getting this guy when we can get you? Are you willing to come up here and work on this film?" And I said, "Of course." And he says, "Well, we can't rent your synthesizer since you own it."

ISOARDI: "So we'll rent you."

PRESTON: "So we'll use you."

So I went up there and stayed there for, God, three months, I think.

ISOARDI: Really? Up where?

PRESTON: In San Francisco.

ISOARDI: San Francisco area.

PRESTON: [Francis Ford] Coppola had his little building there with his offices and everything, and David Rubinson owned a studio that was quite good. And my engineer on the film was Leslie Jones, who just happened to be Spike Jones's daughter.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

PRESTON: Yeah. I thought it was just marvelous. [mutual laughter] I always loved Spike Jones. And she was great. And they had like the first automated [mixing] boards and everything, so, I mean, it was really something. So that whole experience was amazing.

And just to carry on a little further with that, at the end of the movie, or towards the end of our working on the film, they were going to have a party that coincided with Coppola's birthday, Easter. And the end of the movie— You know, it was being wrapped up, although it wasn't totally the end, but it was close. So I went up there, took Tina— I said, "You've got to come to this party. " So she flew up there. And Pat was working on the movie too, so we were pretty tight by that time. So we went up there, and we arrived at this place which was— These are vineyards, vineyards that Coppola owns. So there's one kind of not large house in the middle of

this property, and then there's all this other stuff, like the pressing place, and quite a large bit of property.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I've been up on that.

PRESTON: So they said, "Well, go over there," and it was like this glen where these woods were, and in the glen they were feeding everybody sauerkraut and these German hot dogs, and they had a German band playing oom-pah music while they were doing that. Then later on in the winery they had a rock band playing, with a belly dancer, and that was cool. That was very cool, so we watched that. After that, in the area where people were parked and had their sleeping bags and all that stuff, they built this huge bonfire. I mean, it was like gigantic, like two-hundred-foot-high flames. And right close to the bonfire was the boat that they went in in *Apocalypse Now*.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

PRESTON: Yeah, the actual boat. So that was kind of surreal looking, you know. And the next day we got up and, walking around, I came to this pit. It was this long, long pit, and there were like eighty goats being roasted in this pit, because there were a lot of people there, a lot of people. And then the festivities started happening, and there were bands playing one after another. There were like ten bands: Japanese drummers, Coppola's Italian bands that he used in *The Godfather*, and then like— One band after the other, just— The hippie band, you know. And while all that's happening we see a limo pull up, and Robert De Niro gets out of the car and comes

over. And I think he tripped over Tina's shoe or something. Tina's like [mimics gushing fan] "Robert De Niro!" [mutual laughter] That's her favorite actor. And I was wandering around. And there's this little gully kind of thing, and I go down to this gully, and who's down there?

ISOARDI: Not Brando, right?

PRESTON: No, not Brando. Ah, what's his name? He was in the movie. "Zap me with the sirens! Zap me with the sirens!"

ISOARDI: Oh!

PRESTON: Robert—

ISOARDI: No.

PRESTON: I can't think. Jeez, I'm terrible right now with my brains.

ISOARDI: I remember the scene, but I can't see the actor.

PRESTON: All right, he was in *Blue Velvet*. [mimics the character inhaling gas and then speaking in drug-induced stream of gibberish] No? [laughs]

ISOARDI: I saw *Blue Velvet* when it first came out. I can't remember it specifically.

PRESTON: He had this oxygen mask.

ISOARDI: That wasn't Dennis Hopper, was it?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Okay. Dennis Hopper.

PRESTON: Okay. So he's down there smoking a joint and asking me if I want to hit on it. So I took a hit on his joint, and we're standing there talking about what a great party it is and all that, you know. Smoking some grass with Dennis Hopper; [mutual laughter] that's got to be one for the books—or the book.

ISOARDI: There you go.

PRESTON: And these bands are all playing and playing and playing. And then finally I have to get back to the studio, because I still have some cues to do. So I said, "Come on, let's go. It's got to be over now." So we're just leaving, and all of a sudden I notice there's a plane flying up over, and this guy jumps out of the plane and skydives down, almost looks like he's going to die. Then the shoot opens, and he lands like eight feet from Coppola, reaches in his coat, and pulls out a bottle of champagne, and pours Coppola a glass of champagne. So I said, "Well, my God. *That's* got to be the end of the party." So we starting walking out some more. Then all of a sudden the Gay Liberation Marching Band comes walking out from behind his house and plays "Happy Birthday." [mutual laughter] So I think that *was* the end, there. So, I mean, it was like— What a bash, you know. What a bash. And the Tucker [automobile]. He has a Tucker, and that was sitting there.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

PRESTON: Incredible. I mean immaculate. You can't get in the car, but it's just immaculate, sparkling, brand-new.

ISOARDI: Whew!

PRESTON: It's just amazing. And I would be walking by the swimming pool, and this guy says, "That's where we shot the arrows!"—you know, for the sound effects for *Apocalypse Now*, in his pool. So, I mean, it was all really strange stuff like that, just really amazing. So— Okay. [consults his archives] I'm just looking—

ISOARDI: What about some of the other musicians I know you played with? I mentioned the out scene in Los Angeles, with Vinny Golia and the Cline brothers and people like this.

PRESTON: I didn't really know them at the time.

ISOARDI: But you do—

PRESTON: Although I did use Alex Cline on *The Being*, but I hadn't talked to him since then for quite a long time. Another person that—

ISOARDI: But certainly you've played with them in the nineties, more recently, and you guys have recorded.

PRESTON: Oh, yeah, sure. Sure. Emil Richards. I kept a relationship with him after AHA [Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage], and I see there's a poster here where we played at Catalina's. Okay, so we can move down to that. There's a play that— Yeah, it was during that time also that Carla Bley came to town, and we did an opera at the Mark Taper [Forum].

ISOARDI: That was in the eighties?

PRESTON: Yeah, it was, '85. New Music America. And in the opera was myself, Carla, Jack Bruce, and— Who else? Steve Swallow playing bass. Jack didn't play bass, he just sang.

ISOARDI: Just sang?

PRESTON: He was sitting at a table—he was supposed to be Malcolm Lowry—and there was a snare drum. They cut a hole in the table and put a snare drum so that it looked like the top of the table, so he could take a drumstick and hit it and it would sound like a snare drum.

ISOARDI: What was it called?

PRESTON: It was called *Under the Volcano*. Right? *Four Under the Volcano*. Yeah. And we all had lines. One of my lines was, "I know words!" Jack sang in that, and it was lots of fun, lots of fun. Especially the fun thing was seeing—these were called micro operas—the other micro operas.

ISOARDI: So it was a series of them during one evening, then?

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, two or three. There was— What's his name? Oh, here is Joan LaBarbara, so we can check that spelling. Yeah, that's exactly right.

ISOARDI: All “a”'s.

PRESTON: Yeah. Paul Drescher was one of the people that I really like a lot. He was great. Phillip Glass. I don't know if he was there. I don't think he was there. Yeah. Anyhow, that was another thing that was fun.

And I was always putting stuff on at that loft that I had. I had a theater space in my loft, and I was always putting concerts on there or rent parties and getting a whole bunch of comedians that we knew to come down and play. And here's a thing that I did with John Densmore and John O'Keefe called *Song for the Dead*. It was done at my loft. We called it the Bridge because it was under the First Street bridge.

This guy [Gary Lloyd], he installed an ax. It looks like somebody threw an ax, only the ax is seven feet long, and it looks like it stuck in the building. And in the ax he had a radio, a transmitter, and I put in an electronic piece on an endless tape, you know, like a tape loop that lasts about thirty minutes long, in about the fifth floor. It's still there.

ISOARDI: [counts floors as he looks at a picture of the building] One, two, third, fourth, fifth, sixth floor up. This is a high-rise?

PRESTON: No, it's like one of the downtown—

ISOARDI: Old buildings.

PRESTON: Yeah, one of the old buildings downtown.

ISOARDI: Eight stories high. It looks like it's near Ninth Street downtown. And the ax was outside the sixth floor. It was hanging outside?

PRESTON: Yeah, just like it was thrown and it was stuck in the building.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Your range has always been pretty broad, it seems.

PRESTON: I guess so. Not by choice. Well, I guess it's by choice, but—

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 10, 2001

PRESTON: I was just going to say that I think that what you do in life has to do with what has come to you, kind of like what your experience has been in terms of— Well, for me in music. If my dad [Donald G. Preston] hadn't had these 78 [rpm] recordings of *The Rite of Spring* [*Le Sacre du Printemps* by Stravinsky], I probably wouldn't have been so inclined to go towards that dissonant kind of music, because when I heard that music— And also in *Fantasia*, when you see these dinosaurs marching around, you make connections with how dissonance works—you know, as a child, I mean.

ISOARDI: Sure.

PRESTON: Then you become enamored of that, and you want to hear more—and more and more and more. And that's been my whole life: looking for more—you know, newer expressions of music. So in doing that I've been listening to electronic music a lot and listening to new music. And then, of course, in jazz I always loved the Lennie Tristano school of music that was trying to be atonal and some of the Miles [Davis] stuff with [Lee] Konitz, and all of that kind of material. I was always drawn towards that as opposed to Art Pepper and that type of stuff. That didn't really interest me, except that when I was very young I liked Dave Brubeck and— But then it wasn't long before I started liking Bud Powell, you know, [laughs] which is like the other side of the coin, and then Thelonious, of course. I guess I'm so diverse because

I want to do what I like.

ISOARDI: You also have a very kind of integrationist view of the arts, it seems—music and then other arts coming together to express whatever.

PRESTON: Yeah, right. I always felt that was— Well, I've always leaned toward all of it, you know. Like when I used to go listen to John Cage— I would always be watching Merce Cunningham, because that's the only way I could hear John Cage, because he didn't come to Detroit or L.A. by himself, you know; he came doing the music for Merce Cunningham, and Merce was like the one that set up all the tours and everything. So I got to hear John Cage and David Tudor as the means but also saw the dance, and that was like a new experience. Especially Merce, who was just so incredible.

ISOARDI: Yeah. The first time I saw John Cage I didn't know I was going to see John Cage.

PRESTON: Oh?

ISOARDI: It was in New York, a last-minute thing. I saw that "Oh, Merce Cunningham is at City Center!"—I think it was called City Center, around from Carnegie [Hall]—so I went to see that. And I'm sitting there, and I looked down in the pit and saw this heavy equipment, computer equipment. And then I looked more carefully. There were two guys down there, and I go "Oh, my God! One of those guys is John Cage!" [laughs]

PRESTON: Yeah. When I was watching them they didn't have— They didn't even have computers at that time. [laughs] And John was down there pushing a chair around the floor, letting each leg of the chair resonate, you know. So you got four tones out of this chair, and it worked with the dance. Amazing, totally amazing. God.

So that's my answer, anyhow, is that when you come in contact with all that stuff— And for me, I wanted to do what I heard. I wanted to do that kind of music, and my schooling and my reading abilities were not up to playing new music. It wasn't an option for me to play new music. I could play electronic music, because most of electronic music is thought out but it's not notated in the standard notation.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: So I had to organize my writing in such a way that— Like this. [shows Isoardi a score] This is a piece I wrote.

ISOARDI: Oh, jeez. [mutual laughter] Anthony Braxton could read it.

PRESTON: Oh, I'm sure he could.

ISOARDI: A piece called "Vibrations." It's sort of different colored symbols, essentially.

PRESTON: Yeah. And the symbols mean things to me.

ISOARDI: Right, as do the colors, I suppose, also.

PRESTON: Well, in a sense, yeah. That's more an emotional thing.

ISOARDI: Right. Well, it's interesting. One of my former students went back to school at Wesleyan University a couple of years ago, and his adviser was Anthony Braxton. He took a class from him, and he said Braxton would give him these charts that they were going to play, and they were just diagrams. They were these geometric figures and things, and that was it. That's what they would play. And he was teaching him how to play from charts like that. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: That's great. I recently received a chart by Cecil Taylor. This guy that I play with all the time plays in his band, and he just happened to have this piece by Cecil Taylor. [searches for the music] I was just looking to see if it's— Oh, look in that book right there.

ISOARDI: This?

PRESTON: Yeah.

ISOARDI: "Don Preston Retrospective."

PRESTON: No, it's not in there, I don't think. No, that's not the one. Oh, well. It's laying around here somewhere. It's such a mess that you can't— I basically know where everything is. Except that. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: That's pretty good.

PRESTON: Yeah, it's right around here underneath something. But anyhow, it's just letters. It's like hundreds and hundreds of letters going up and down and around, and they're all like in little circles drawn around a group. It's totally

incomprehensible to me. Completely.

ISOARDI: [laughs] Did you ever play at a place called the Century City Playhouse?

PRESTON: Oh, yeah, a number of times. My wife has done plays there, too. Actually— and it's funny—the last time I remember going there, Bruce Fowler played there, and— Oh, jeez, here I go again trying to figure out a person's name. This woman was in the audience, and I think I knew her, and she is this woman that has taken performance art to another level. She started putting records out on either Warner Brothers or some big label and doing performance art to huge audiences and everything. What is her name? She is kind of like— She and Meredith Monk are like very close together in terms of— What's her name? Tina would know. [Laurie Anderson] Anyhow, she was in the audience, and I talked to her, and she said, "Yeah, when you come to New York you could stay at my place," or something like that. And right after that she became really famous.

ISOARDI: How important of a venue was the Playhouse for avant-garde music?

PRESTON: Well—

ISOARDI: Was it one of many places?

PRESTON: Well, it was very short lived, you know. It didn't last too long, but, yeah, they put a lot of stuff in there. I think I played there— I think I did play there. Yeah, I did play there. I'm not sure what context it was, though. [It was with the El Monte Art Ensemble and with Kevin Braheny and Steve Roach] But yeah, Bruce did

some really great stuff there.

ISOARDI: When was that around exactly? Do you know?

PRESTON: Oh, man. That's a tough one.

ISOARDI: Was it in the eighties?

PRESTON: Yeah, I think it was in the kind of early eighties, like '82, '83, somewhere around there.

ISOARDI: Has the scene changed much over the last twenty, thirty years for this kind of music?

PRESTON: Oh, I think so. I think that right now it's at a— I don't want to say peak, because hopefully it will get even better, but I think that right now there are more venues for experimental jazz or out or new music than there ever have been. Well, it depends on if I keep going with my venue, you know, because that was one of the most important ones. But there are clubs— Rocco, they promote new music and experimental jazz. And I'm playing there—

ISOARDI: What about your venue? Could you talk a bit about that?

PRESTON: Sure, the Downtown Playhouse. I started putting concerts on there about two years ago. And at first we went for a whole year without stopping.

ISOARDI: How often?

PRESTON: Once a week. All the experimental jazz guys in L.A. would come there and play, and a lot of new music people would come there and perform as well. It

was kind of a mixture, you know. And sometimes they would use each other in their groups. It was just such a crossover. And we had this woman Susie [Susan Allen] from CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] who played harp, played with Vinny Golia. She was like a classical harpist, played with every major symphony in the country, and then she's playing this job with Vinny, and it was just incredible, incredible just to see the combination. And she got right into it, man. She was like wailing away.

ISOARDI: Wow.

PRESTON: And then another night we would have Nels Cline with two friends [Jim McAuley and Rod Poole], and it was just acoustic guitar all night with three guitar players. They each individually played a composition, and then all three of them played a composition. And I took that idea and went with it and did a concert for three pianos and did the same thing, kind of. Each played our individual stuff, and then we played a piece. Well, actually we all wrote a piece. Each one of us wrote a piece for three pianos.

ISOARDI: Who did you have playing with you?

PRESTON: I had Steve Lockwood—who was a Meredith Monk pianist, and he played with her for years and recorded with her—and Brad Ellis, who works with Daniel Lentz a lot and records a lot of his music and is a very close friend of mine, because I've been working with him with films and stuff over the years. And it came

off really nice, really nice. A friend, another friend, who runs a piano rental company, let us use a piano for that, and there's another upright piano there, so we had three pianos, and it was fantastic.

ISOARDI: So what's going to determine whether you keep this going or not?

PRESTON: Well, the main problem, as with many other places downtown, is downtown. It's hard to get people to come downtown. It's very hard. It's almost like next to impossible, you know. I mean, sometimes it works out if everything is lined up right, including the stars, that we'll sell out a show, one show during one series. But that just doesn't— You know, when you have somebody that like work their butts off to try to get this music all together and everything, and they come down there and then like five people show up, that's really hard. So I don't know if I want to continue doing it there. One of the great attractions for the place is the place, because the acoustics are so good. And also there's a Steinway grand piano there. So that stuff is very important, you know.

ISOARDI: It seems to be a recurring issue in L.A. It's just so spread out.

PRESTON: I think one of the things that may happen as a result of the work that I've done so far— And I just contributed my stuff for nothing; I didn't get paid any money. But a lot of these people, when they call me now and say, "We want to play at the Downtown Playhouse," I give them the guy's number. [mutual laughter] "You want to play there, like call him and set it up. He charges a small amount of rent—" And

they have to do it themselves, you know. And it's still going to happen, but I'm just not going to be there running the whole thing.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: I have to tell you this one little story about when I was running the Bridge Theater, which is only about a block and a half from the Downtown Playhouse, and that's—

ISOARDI: That was your loft.

PRESTON: That was my loft that I was living in. Well, there was a theater called Wallenboyd [Theatre] that went down pretty much for the same reasons: downtown. But they had all these incredibly beautiful theater seats, like the one you're sitting on. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: And I must have had about eighty or ninety of those seats. And I also got a lot of theater lights, too. So we made a theater, you know. We had this one area of the loft was long and rectangular, and it was perfect.

ISOARDI: Jeez.

PRESTON: We put a stage there and put the seats up, and it was a beautiful little theater. So we put on concerts there with, like I said, John Densmore and John O'Keefe. And once in a while I would have John Carter and Bobby Bradford come and play. And then Bunk and I would do something there. And some plays would go on there, too. And they would shoot other things, like commercials or whatever.

So this guy calls me and says, "Hey, Don!" He says, "I want to put this play on," like a performance art evening, and I said, "Okay, good. What's the deal?" And he says, "Well, I got this great performance artist from New York. His name is Joe Coleman." And he says, "Also, there is a *Playboy* centerfold in my part of the thing." "Hey, that sounds cool! Is she going to have to change her costume in my bedroom? Okay, sure." [mutual laughter] So anyhow, the evening approaches, and we're all set up. We've got the stage, we've got all this— You know, everything. And I find out that Joe Coleman became famous in New York for biting the head off of a live rat while he was performing— performance art, right? So he's the guy that's— So another thing that I noticed, not in this ad, but in some sort of description, was that it said that Joe Coleman was Charles Manson's favorite artist.

ISOARDI: So the place must have been packed with all this going for it, right? [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: I opened the door to let people in, and we had this long hallway to the front of the building, and real wide, and it's just jam-packed with people. So they're coming in, they're coming in, they're coming in, they're coming in. There's a line down the street, and they're coming in. Finally I had to stop people from coming in. You couldn't get another person in there. It was just jam-packed.

ISOARDI: Jeez. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: And a lot of them looked like Charles Manson, if you will. [laughs]

ISOARDI: They were probably there to see Joe Coleman and not the *Playboy* centerfold.

PRESTON: Of course. Yeah. [looking through his archives] Oh, yeah. Here are the three things. "Torture Chorus," that's— Laura Richmond was the girl. She was [the *Playboy* centerfold from] September 1989. And Charles Schneider, I don't know who he was. So these two people went on and did their show, right?

And then, toward the end of the second show, the animal regulations people came to our door and said, "We're not letting the show go on."

And I said, "Don't—" I said, "Look—" Or my wife talked to them. My wife's the talker. "We love animals. We have animals, you know. We wouldn't allow anything to happen that would be harmful to animals. He's not going to do anything with animals. Don't worry."

"Okay. Well, all right. We'll trust you." So they leave, right?

So now we come to the intermission between the "Torture Chorus" and Joe Coleman, who we found out is going to blow himself up while hanging from the rafters of the loft. [mutual laughter] We had pretty high ceilings.

Okay, so during the intermission there's another knock on the door. It turns out that one of the people that couldn't get in said, "Well, if I can't get in, nobody's getting in." So there's a knock on the door, and it's the fire department, and the fire department has the building surrounded with their fire trucks, and I think there was

even a helicopter. "You have to close the show. We can't let this go on. Your doors are wrong. They open the wrong way." Everything about it was wrong, and either we shut down or they're going to fine us like $5,000 or something like that.

So I tell the guy who had called me, whose name was Stefan Halman, an English guy, I said, "You have to tell the people that they have to leave. We can't allow— We can't go on any further." So he gets up, and he says [mimics a very effete voice], "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to tell you, but you all have to leave. The fire department is here." And they're going "Get off! We want Joe! We want Joe!" And, you know, everyone was wearing leather and— [laughs] "We want Joe!" He sort of backs down, gets off the stage, and says, "I don't know what to do. They're not going to leave." [mutual laughter] So Tina says, "Well, this can't go on. This has got to stop. We can't be fined $5,000," blah, blah, blah, blah, you know. So she gets up on the stage, and she gets so angry at all these people. And they left.

Before they left, though, Joe made a statement. He came out and he made a statement that he was going to go down to Venice and hang himself from one of the lifeguard stands and blow himself up there. So if everybody would just follow him, it would be all right. So they all left.

ISOARDI: Following him.

PRESTON: And he did. He hung himself from a lifeguard stand and blew himself up. I mean, he had all these explosives taped to his chest and a big metal plate

underneath that. [mutual laughter]

So anyhow, that's one of the stories about my loft.

ISOARDI: When did you have a loft?

PRESTON: Let's see. I think we had it from about '82 to '92 or something like that. Around ten years, '82 to '92. It was just that it got to be too much, because when I moved down there I was working a day job programming music for video games. Did I talk about that?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: So I was making good change there, you know. It wasn't a problem. Also the rent was lower. I think it started out $950 or something like that. Then the rent went up to $1,450, and I didn't have my job anymore. And I mean, we were scraping the barrel. We couldn't afford toilet paper, whatever, you know, and it finally got to a point where we just had to leave. Financially we couldn't do it any longer. We had used up all our friends for rent parties, [laughs] you know, and everything was— It just couldn't happen anymore. So that's when we moved out of there.

And then it wasn't too long after that that I moved to Europe and— [looks through his archives] Jesus. Yeah. What was that? Oh. Then I started playing at the L.A. County Museum [of Art] a lot, you know—not a lot, but twice a year or something like that. In fact, I need to call him for a new date.

ISOARDI: Dorrance [Stalvey]?

PRESTON: Yeah. Oh, you know Dorrance?

ISOARDI: We met once or twice.

PRESTON: He's a great guy. I like Dorrance a lot.

ISOARDI: They supported a lot of out music there.

PRESTON: Oh, yeah. Well, I think I mentioned to you that he started out as a jazz saxophone player.

ISOARDI: Oh, no. I didn't know that about him.

PRESTON: Yeah. And I don't know— He told me why, but I forget now, but he decided to— He liked new music and liked contemporary composition and everything, so he went back to school and studied composition and got degrees and everything. And he's quite a good composer, too.

ISOARDI: Really?

PRESTON: I have a piece by him played by the Arditi String Quartet, and it's very good. Very good. And I think they're the best string quartet happening right now. I think they're the best. So, I mean, they're not going to play music they don't like.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. Truly.

PRESTON: Yeah. I started playing there with a lot of people.

I have to mention one guy, though, that I was playing with before that, before Europe. That's a big kind of change, before Europe and after Europe. Before

Europe, first of all, I was playing around town a lot. I had a trio with this drummer Wally Strick, and Wally was handling all the business and all the go-getting and all that stuff. And the bass player I used was Ken Filiano.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

PRESTON: And Ken I thought was unbelievable. Ken was fantastic. I've done some great things with him, but I've never gotten it on tape. I have one thing on tape, but it's not usable. I then later released all that material with someone else, with Joel [Hamilton], who was great too, but Ken is just magical. He has a real strong sense of contemporary classical music, and he incorporates that in his playing a lot. So I wanted to mention him, because it's very dear to my heart, and hopefully I'll be able to play with him some more soon.

ISOARDI: Yeah. So it's a strong scene, as you see it, today.

PRESTON: Very strong.

ISOARDI: Hopefully not peaking but still growing?

PRESTON: Yeah. I see it. And people are creating venues too, you know, for this.

ISOARDI: So there is some interaction between musicians in L.A.? I mean, are musicians getting together?

PRESTON: Well, we have this thing called the Los Angeles Composers Forum, which is a— It's a— What is it? It's an organization that helps the composers get

their works out, get them played, get grants for people, and get it all happening. So I think that it's a very strong organization. They have one in New York and one in Minnesota, in Minneapolis, which is where it started. And when you go to a meeting of theirs, or like a symposium or whatever you want to call it, there are people like Amy Knoles and Vinny Golia sitting next to each other and all kinds of people like that. And then they present three composers' works at that time. So you get to have a meeting, and also in those things you get to hear some new music and meet people you didn't know existed. It's really good.

ISOARDI: Very neat.

PRESTON: I think it's great.

ISOARDI: Don, do you have any final thoughts?

PRESTON: You think we're done?

ISOARDI: You tell me. [mutual laughter]

PRESTON: Oh, well. Okay. Let me just— We're getting close, aren't we? [tape recorder off] More recently there have been a lot of things happening, I would say. For jazz— After John left, Bobby started putting together bands with his own music, and I've been fortunate to be a part of that, not all the time but some of the time. And we've been playing all kinds of venues also, so that's really great. Along with all that and the trio stuff that I've been working on lately has been my affiliation with the California EAR Unit and some of the members in the California EAR Unit, notably

Amy Knoles and Art [Arthur] Jarvinen. I don't know, I seem to be drawn towards percussionists in my life.

One of the things that they did was the EAR Unit commissioned me to write a piece for them, which I did. It was called "The Bride Stripped Bare" based on the piece called "The Large Glass" by— What's his name? Come on, now. Marcel Duchamp.

ISOARDI: Oh, yes, of course.

PRESTON: And I actually made a replication of "The Large Glass"—or it's actually called "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even"—and made it on glass and also cut some holes in the glass so that it could be used as a percussion instrument. And we performed that one of the evenings that they play, and I was in total heaven, because I wrote myself into it, as well, you know, playing the piano. And I was in complete heaven playing with them. That was like a thing that I had never done before, playing new music with real people that play new music, [laughs] especially people of this caliber. It was just phenomenal. And they did a fantastic job doing it and got a big response from the audience and everything.

And then after that I played some concerts with Amy Knoles, and one of the things we did was that I was also commissioned to do the music for the 1997 or '98 annual dance concert at CalArts. So I once again told them that I wanted to do the music live, that I would not do recorded music for them to dance to. I wanted to be

there and play the music. And it was a three-day concert. In other words, I don't mean it took that long [mutual laughter], but they performed it for three days. And they used the Modular Theater at CalArts, where you can raise and lower any portion of the stage or the audience. So they had this one little section right there at the bottom where we had all our equipment set up. So we were in a position to see the dance, and the audience could see us, and, I mean, it was really beautiful. I had a grand piano there and also a lot of electronic equipment.

ISOARDI: Just yourself?

PRESTON: Well, no, Amy was playing, also. She brought some percussion and some electronic equipment, because she's very good with electronic stuff, exceptionally good. And it was just fantastic. [refers to his archives] This is— No, this is another concert we did. This is Occidental College. So that was great. That was also great. I just love working with her and Art Jarvinen.

So I had a couple of concerts that I did with Art, and then he started calling me for stuff of his. One of them was a twenty-four-hour piece that he had written based on *Gymnopedie*. Who wrote that?

ISOARDI: Oh, Satie?

PRESTON: Satie, yeah. It was based on that piece. But it was like turned inside out a thousand ways, and he had I don't know how many people. He must have had twelve different people performing it on the keyboard or a piano, and each person had

to play for two hours. So it was quite amazing. That was another amazing piece. And different things like that.

One time he had— Amy and I play at a thing in an art gallery where there were like eight or ten other performers all around in different places of the art gallery, and we were to play for two hours—all the time, but allowing one person over here to take precedence, and then they would have to be quiet. Not stop, just—

ISOARDI: Just lower the volume a bit, yeah.

PRESTON: And that was incredible. It was really beautiful. And there were weird things like this one girl, she had a record player playing these records where she had taken nails and she'd driven them into the record, so that when the arm got to that nail it would bump it and bounce back. It was like a tape loop, only done with records. And she had two or three record players going. She would get all these tape loops going. It was really bizarre. [mutual laughter] I love that. It's what we call low-budget electronics.

ISOARDI: Yeah, truly. Truly.

PRESTON: Well, that's been happening. And along with that the Grandmothers are playing, and we just went on an eighteen-thousand-mile tour around the United States. We took three months and saw every nook and cranny in the United States and then some, because our driver kept getting lost just about everyplace we went to.

ISOARDI: You've also recorded recently with a trio.

PRESTON: Yeah, I did this trio album [*Transformation*] with Alex Cline and Joel Hamilton, and that came out superb, I must say—not necessarily talking about my performance, but the recording itself and the performances by everyone. There were a few mistakes, but I didn't let them bother me too much, because one thing I've learned through the years is that there's always going to be mistakes. Or not that there's always going to be mistakes, but there's always going to be stuff that bothers you about that recording. And no recording is ever finished. There's always more to do on it.

ISOARDI: Yes.

PRESTON: So at one point you're going to have to just let it go and say, "Okay, that's it. Take it or leave it," the mistakes or whatever. But this one came out really, really, really great, and I just feel blessed to have been able to do what I've done with that, you know.

ISOARDI: Do you plan more?

PRESTON: Do I plan any more?

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: Oh, yeah, I'm working on more right now. I'm not sure what, but— Of course, I'll always have the trio, because that's very close to my heart, the trio stuff.

ISOARDI: The trio format?

PRESTON: Yeah, the format. So I've got that. And the Grandmothers, we just

went to New York and played for five days. It was heaven, pure heaven. It was just wonderful, everything. I mean, there were some problems, but we worked through them, and for the most part the music came off really good, and the tour came off great. We had so much great help. So I'm just looking forward to more of that. So there's that.

And then the final thing is the electronic music part of what I do. And also my wife and I do electronic music. I mean, she does vocal things, you know, like à la Cathy Berberian or something like that, and she's extremely talented with her voice. That's why she's an actress, you know, because she's so good. And I think that it's all— I just have my focus on those three things, and that's plenty.

ISOARDI: That's quite a bit.

PRESTON: That's plenty. Next time— I'm going to New York over the holidays, and there's a group there called Project Object, and the guy that pretty much runs the group—his name is André Cholmondeley. He and his wife [Sherry Cholmondeley] do concerts of avant-garde music. I hate that term, because I remember Duke Ellington, somebody asked him if he would play some avant-garde, and he says, "What, that old stuff?" [mutual laughter] So we're trying to get together a joint concert, probably at the Knitting Factory or something like that.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 10, 2001

ISOARDI: Do you have any final thoughts, Don?

PRESTON: Yeah, I do. [mutual laughter]

ISOARDI: Good.

PRESTON: I feel like I should say that throughout my career one of the most important things to me— [laughs] All right, you asked for it.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Way to go.

PRESTON: It may take up the tape, you know. I don't know.

ISOARDI: That's all right.

PRESTON: One of the most important things for me has been searching for new and original ways of expressing myself. And one of my theories about music, which is kind of obvious, but I've never heard anyone else say it, is that music has evolved through the harmonic series. That is to say that when Bach was writing music, or Beethoven or Mozart, that they didn't go much beyond the seventh, even if that.

ISOARDI: Right.

PRESTON: And the seventh is one of the first harmonics—well, after you get through the first and fifth. Of course, Bach— I mean, when you play Bach you say, "Oh, yeah, but look at all these weird flat ninths and major sevenths and everything." But that wasn't the focus of the music, and I'm only speaking of the focus. Everyone

did play around with dissonance, but in a very, very limited fashion. And then as you go through time you'll see that the next composer went on to the next harmonic, and the next, and the next, and the next, until you get to Stravinsky, who is like into thirteens and fifteens and stuff like that. And the only problem with harmonics is that after that they become more and more dissonant, you know, they get less true, which brings us to electronic music. Then you start playing music where notes that are in the cracks— Or even Harry Partch, who had forty-three notes to the octave. The reason he did that was just so he could hear perfect intervals—perfect fifths, perfect thirds, perfect sixths—which is totally boring, but thank God he did that and made us hear the other notes.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

PRESTON: But anyhow, now we come to music today, which is like— All the older tones, most of them have been explored, at least the audible ones, and a lot of the in-between notes have been explored, so now where are we? We're in a new place where there's nothing more to go to in the sense of what the old composers did, and we have to find new ways of expressing what we do have. And I think that's one of the reasons why Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, and all those people started doing what they were doing, finding new ways of expressing what we already have.

And even [Karlheinz] Stockhausen started bringing the spiritual aspect into music. "Don't play a note until you're not thinking" and stuff like that, you know.

He would do that. And that's one of the things, like in jazz, that I've felt a very strong necessity of— Like in order to improvise correctly, it's my own theory or feeling that you have to be open to your own spiritual self, or as somebody said in some movie yesterday, "The little guy that's in there." Let that part of yourself, your own spirit, be the one that's playing the music, not your self, not your mind. So it's been my goal for I don't know how long, twenty years, twenty-five, maybe thirty, maybe even longer, thirty-five years of reaching that place in myself where I'm not thinking, and I'm letting the music come from that—from a higher source, if you will. And that to me is the most important thing about improvising, because when you do that, that source has a kind of energy that is beneficial to whoever is listening to it.

It's also important in terms of— In the previous part I was just speaking of going to the next step, going to the next step. It's also going to those steps that influences other people, like architects and mathematicians and inventors, because going to that step is an example, and then they see "Oh, I can go to that next step in what *I'm* doing," you know. It's not a conscious thing, but it's something that's unconscious.

So I guess that's basically what I wanted to say was that I see jazz as being an extremely spiritual thing, and that without that it's not doing its job in a sense, and that that's the most important thing for me in music. That's why I play music, to reach that place in myself. That's it. [laughs]

ISOARDI: Beautiful. Very beautiful.

PRESTON: Okay.

ISOARDI: Thanks very much.

PRESTON: Well, thank you. My God.

ISOARDI: A pleasure.

PRESTON: I can't believe this is over.

ISOARDI: I know. [mutual laughter]