



Helen Oakley Dance

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When I first came to Chicago and I came from Toronto and I knew very little, but I was expecting everything in the world because I was in love with jazz and I knew I'd come where to hear it. And I was very surprised to find out that in Chicago in that time, in the early 30s, jazz musicians were looked on very poorly. All the regular musicians played with early in on bands and they made the money and jazz musicians didn't and they weren't thought anything of, even their wives didn't think very much of them. And I thought this was very shocking and it was a matter with the union, too. They didn't have any weight. Anyway that was how I found it in the 30s, 33, it was. And it pretty soon improved because there were broadcasts from Benny Goodman on the "Camel Hour," and they were coast to coast. And everybody heard this. And we hadn't ever heard anything broadcast, at especially a band and it was terrific and so they were coming. And it gave us an idea. I met a man, a wonderful man, he was called Edwin Ashcroft, "the Squirrel" was his nickname. And he lived in Evanston and he knew everybody. The family had been there forever. And he and his friends had all gone to Princeton in the same years and they'd had all the great musicians up and they were very keen and very knowledgeable and so Monday nights at the Squirrels was well known, it was even the cover of "Saturday Evening Post" at one time. Every time anything good came to Chicago on Monday nights, which was night off, everybody went out to Squirrels. And so it occurred to me that I should do something with Squirrel. He would be the one. And I was free-lancing for the Herald Trib, for the Chicago Herald American. And I'd done a bit of other writing so anyway, I thought, well the thing to do would be to make certain that Goodman was a a big hit in Chicago. He was, he flopped from coast to coast until he got near LA. A a terrible flop. The worst. And then when he got to LA and I think it was, I've forgotten, Palladium, or something that he played, they'd all heard the broadcasts. And the band thought something was wrong 'cause they they were mobbed and there was line outs and everything so they were very thrilled. And then I said it's very important that when they get to Chicago then it shows up the same way. So we thought we would put on a concert, such a thing had never been done. But I knew it could be done in Europe. And so, we had all these gals, Debbie Johnson, everybody on the

corners, fill it, selling the tickets so that this would be a big success, the concert. And it was. It was sold out.

Tell me more about this concert about Benny Goodman

Well, before I can tell you about the concert, I have to tell you about how peculiar Benny was about it. I knew his brother Freddy and he took me upstairs to Benny's room, and Benny received me in a rough and gruff fashion, and said "What do you want?" And I said, "I've got something to sell you, a very good idea. Something that will do you a lot of good. We've thought a lot about this. We've got a lot of people behind us. We want to put on a concert." "A concert? Who ever heard of playing jazz concert?" "Well we think it would really be meaningful and we think that's the kind of jazz we ought to be hearing." So that didn't go down at all well. And when I said, "Of course there is the question of money," and so on and we thought it better be a benefit for the union and have the union behind us. Well that didn't go down well either. But finally when I said, that the manager of the Irvin's Room and so on thought it was a good idea, he'd okayed, it was fine. So, when we came to the performance. And all these debs and whatnot were on the door and people were flocking in and we were oversold by any amount and everybody was sitting on the dance floor, 'cause there's to be no dancing it was to be a concert. Well even Benny was a little impressed. And he really did blow very well and the band was very good. Gene Krupa said it was the most, biggest thrill he'd had so far, for people to listen to them and be thrilled and the applause was tremendous. So that was a success and *Time* magazine picked that up and thought it was absolutely marvelous and that was all very good. So we followed that up with other very good concerts 'cause we followed it up with Duke and the band, which of course, was more, even more meaningful from the point of view of music. And then we had Fletcher Henderson and of course that, that's the daddy of all great bands. So we did that. And then we decided when it came to the following year, Easter Sunday, that we had to do something special for Benny. Course Benny didn't think that was too important but we ought to. So I said why don't we bring in Teddy Wilson? The wonderful piano player who eventually showed up in the trio. And Benny had played with Teddy at Mildred Baileys, the girl singer with Paul Whiteman. And and they'd done some wonderful work and I'd heard some of it. And so, I said let me bring Teddy in, that'll be a tremendous attraction. And so Benny said, "I'm not such a fool. I'm making ahead here and I'm making good, this is gonna be my career. I don't want to wreck everything to present a black talent in the middle of everything. And so, I don't like the idea." So I said if I'd pay for Benny, if I paid for Teddy, rather to come out, how about that? "Well," Benny said, "Well, it's your, that's up to you, if you want to pay for him, pay for him." And he wouldn't go any farther. So I got it up to Benny, Teddy, and I brought him out, and so, and of course, one thing about Benny Goodman, any musician that was terrific was terrific with Benny. He didn't have any color bias. It didn't exist for him. Only bias he had was music bias. And if it was played music, that's all, he didn't even think about it, wasn't in him, thank goodness. And after it

was swell for Benny to be there, for Teddy to be there, and so I persuaded the Congress Hotel that what we'd do is, Benny would offer the first half of the program and after intermission we'd clear the floor a little bit and putting down the piano and the drums, Gene, Benny and Teddy, and they'd have a little concert. Well, that was the Benny Goodman trio. And it was tremendous, it was a very big thrill to everybody, to Benny, too. And also, *Time* magazine thought that was absolutely marvelous and it was, *Time* said that it was the first time that a jazz concert, had ever been presented, an American jazz concert had ever been presented, a concert, music. So that was very attractive, that was a very good thing.

First time that a name like Benny Goodman with a black talent like Teddy ?

It was the first public inter-racial presentation. The very first. And, of course, it didn't do Benny any harm, whatsoever. It was excellent for Benny and it led right into Lionel Hampton, Charlie Christian, Cootie Williams and all the people that Benny subsequently presented.

As a journalism observer of the American scene at this time. American public liked this kind of collaboration?

Well they liked it because everybody was thrilled. It the music was thrilling. So the public understood that it was thrilling, that was wonderful. That was probably the the beginning of the heyday of that kind of jazz, of swing music, because it was irresistible and and everybody loved it so not even the public had have any thoughts about inter-racial troubles of any kind which was quite a wonderful thing.

Tell me what sweet music was.

Well, sweet music first of all was Wayne King. Was very very sweet and the tempos were waltzes and it was lover music. And there was Guy Lombardo who played every New Year's Eve, coast to coast. Well that was sweet music. Romantic music that you could be romantic to, with, or whatever. And so that was something different altogether. I mean there were other bands like um Ben Berney and bands like that that had good musicians in there. And they played good music, but it was just ordinary dance music. So there were three levels.

American public came to see swing music as jazz.

That's right.

Did the musicians think of swing music as jazz?

Oh no, no no. For us, for the musicians, we just think of that as the way to play music. As Duke said, "I don't like that term, jazz." Anyway, it's just

good music. It's good swinging music. And it's very musical, it's not easy to play. And so that's how we all, musicians and everybody thought of it. It's good. As Duke always said there's good music and bad music.

Were you a good dancer?

No, I wasn't a wonderful dancer because I used to dance on my own, privately, but I was always over in front of the bandstand. The bands always liked to see me there because I knew what they were playing. And if it was wonderful, I was rather thrilled, they were thrilled. They always had an interaction, they liked the good dancers. And they got something from the good dancers. And so that's really how it was for me.

People who stand around the bandstand. Alligators?

Oh, yes, but alligators were fans, you see. And and the rest of us who were standing in front of the music, in front of the bandstand. We were mostly musicians or qualified, we knew what was happening. The alligators were kids, mostly, thrilled, sent, but fans. There's a big difference.

First kind of jazz music you heard?

Soul, and he played marks? Well, and that was really my best introduction. I I've felt, of course, that Jess belonged in Benny's band. John Hammond, very well known.

Talk about the records that you were producing, difference between Chicago music and Dixieland.

Oh, do you want to know what records I made?

Is there a story that goes along with them?

Yes, pretty fair. Harry's New York bar was a small bar on the uptown in Chicago and Paul Morris was from New Orleans, a trumpet player, a wonderful trumpet player and it wasn't Dixie, it was what we called Chicago. It was swinging music, it wasn't Dixie; it's not where they paraded in New Orleans and do all that. But it's really good music. And actually it was called Chicago music because swing music came out of it. It was first in Chicago.

There was wonderful music in Chicago. It wasn't, there weren't a great many musicians that played it, but they were all good. All of them. They were well known too because, they were all at Austin High together they were called the Austin High gangs that came into New York afterwards, and some of them were black. And I was lucky, I had a contract to do, I think it was with Brunswick in those days, the first time I had ever recorded. But anyway, I could see what was going to be good to be recorded and I used to go to Harry's New York bar where Paul Mars was a trumpet player from New

Orleans and he had Jess on piano and Boyce Brown, he was a very delicate-looking guy, almost totally blind, beautiful alto saxophone player, he never was outdated, he was wonderful. Funny enough in the end, he joined the Catholic church and he was a brother in something. It's funny. He was very soulful. And then he had a good New Orleans trombone player and so on. And so it was a marvel. George Wettling was on drums who was excellent, typical Chicago. So they played every night and I used to get up on the balcony office and then I could enjoy myself every night listening to this, it was marvelous. And they never ran out of things to play and it wasn't New Orleans music and it certainly wasn't Dixieland music. It's what music had become, what they could do in music. Everybody could take choruses and everybody fell in together and it was marvelous. So I managed to get a contract and I recorded them. And those records are still available. There were four sides and they were very good. And then there was a guy called Levere Johnson had a big band and I did that. We had Zooty on drums, his name will come to me in a minute, but everybody knew him. He was with Louis.

First time you met Duke...

Yes. Well that was prior to then because I first met Duke in Detroit. I'd finally managed to wean myself out of Toronto. And I'd come to Toron to Detroit where, things happened in Detroit. There was the Graystone Ballroom. And those bands and it was good. And I was very green, I'd been in England, funny enough Stanley and I had both been at Ellington's concert at the Palladium. And I'd just been back about three months and I knew perfectly well that Duke was thrill would be thrilled with England. He'd, first time ever he'd been taken seriously. everything had been written about him and he and he'd done another terrific concert. So I thought to myself, you have to break in somewhere. You've got to make you've got to break in that's all. So there was very well known guy in London who was a good musician and a very good writer, so I used English stationary and the letter said, that I was knowledgeable and knew all about Elling was a great fan of Ellington's and so on. And it would probably profit Ellington to meet me. And so, I go backstage for the first time in my life and I hand the letter in and it gets sent up. And and so and then Duke says, "Show the young lady in." And he was with his gal at that time, his companion at that time, very nice girl. Mildred Dixon, and they were very, very sweet to me, very nice. So Duke, who never let any occasion get past him. He had a tremendous appetite for life. Everything would pay dividends. So he, and it did because he put himself into it and it always paid off. And so he said, "Well Mildred and I would like to serve afternoon tea tomorrow if you would come backstage." And I said, "Well how very kind of you. I certainly will." And back I came, and I was shown upstairs and I saw my letter up on the mirror above his his dressing table. And dumb as I was, I knew my letter shouldn't still be sitting up there. He must have had a lot of fan letters, and he was just bringing me out, asking what I thought of this, that and the other thing. And I remember telling him that I really didn't think that Barney Bigard the clarinetist, marvelous as he was, I

really didn't think he fitted right into the band. I was telling Duke. And then I looked at this letter, and so I said to him, "I guess I shouldn't have forged it, huh?" And he said, "I'm very glad you did." And we became fast friends from there on. He went backstage and said to the whole band, "Lay off. She's family." And I was family from then on. I still am family.

What did you wind up with the Duke there?

From there on, I was always there. Everything that Ellington did. I was, the band used to say, "We're not gonna to start 'till she's in the wings," and they used to say, "We fine you if you're late for the first show." And I was like their first big fan. And that was marvelous, of course, 'cause I just loved them. And it was marvelous to have them as family. They were all family to me, and still are. Those that are left, few enough. But anyway, so the back, the band manager was a nice man, and he said, "Well, we're going to Chicago and we leave, train leaves at such and such an hour, we expect you on the station" And I used to make the dates with them. Which was absolutely marvelous. So it was my tremendous introduction to everything. I just, wherever the band appeared that it was possible to go I was there. And so I was like that with Duke because he, I was just in his corner absolutely, and he knew I had lots of ideas.

You have a story about the beginning of *Downbeat*?

Glen Burrs was an old-time saxophone player, probably shouldn't say he was old-time. He was a capable saxophone player that would play with the band, Bernie's. But not marvelous, and so he had the sense to think he'd put out a little sheet for the musicians. It was four-sided. And he was palming it off on people on the corner of Randolph Street. And he'd called it *Downbeat*. And I, so I said to him, "Well, Glen, where's the jazz?" And he said, "You think it should be there?" And I said, "Of course it should be there, it's nowhere else. It's, absolutely should be there." He said, "Well, who's gonna to write it?" I said, "I." So he said, "All right." So I, this was the beginning of *Downbeat*. They opened the office and Carl Collins came in and I was, I wrote every month for them, whatever it was. And it was wonderful. That's when I wrote about that Benny was coming and that everyone should get out and hear him. I used it as a sounding board, you know. And I wrote for them for years. And at that time, girls hadn't caught on. There weren't girl singers. Martha Ray could sing. And she was just beginning to sing. But people didn't realize that that's what she was singing. And Mildred Bailey was a very good singer, but she'd been presented with Paul Whiteman and she was the rocking chair lady. And she was already established, so she wasn't going to make any waves. So, I was alone in my field, I was alone. And of course it worked to my advantage because everybody said, "Oh, well, we'll talk to her, she seems to know what she's doing, and we'll talk to her." So I got to know everybody and that's when I made those records.

Then girl singers came in. They called them canaries, didn't they?

Canaries. Exactly. But they didn't come in until, actually I was always, I felt Benny did very poorly. I mean, at last he got Peggy Lee. And when he had Peggy Lee, he had a jazz singer. But before that he had good girl singers. They didn't really swing. They were all right; they were better than the rest. Helen Forest and those girls, they sang, they were all right. But Peggy was a jazz singer. Which was very good. But shall I tell you about Benny?

Yes, of course.

The thing about Benny was. I mean Benny got such a bad name for himself. He built up the "ray", off which offended everybody terribly. But what people didn't realize about Benny was he was a very strange person. He'd been God-given his gift. He never to his dying day realized that other people didn't have that gift. He was inconsiderate. He looked to everybody to find everything simple the way he did. And it really, he wasn't conceited. He didn't know what to be conceited about.

Because I would like to justify Benny. I would like to justify Benny. People didn't realize. It didn't occur to people that he couldn't help himself. He didn't know. He turned the "ray" on the guys in the band. He didn't know it was the "ray." But he would simply turn his eyes on you, and look at you as though, "Are you real? Did you really do that? You don't really, couldn't you have done better?" And they withered. His guys were terrified of the "ray." But until he read it, he didn't know that he had it. And, of course, he made use of it in the end. But the thing was with him that, and it was wonderful about him because that's why he loved black musicians. They were the only ones that could outplay him. Nobody else could. But they could. Not always. Basie, they were all close friends. But, I mean, they were the only ones that Benny would take seriously. And I think that an awful lot of the musicians that worked for him didn't give him credit for this. He couldn't help himself. He was gifted that way. And he wanted the best. And when he had to make do with less than the best he wasn't very happy. And it brought out the worst in him. And he was, he was caustic. And he didn't understand. That's the trouble. If he'd realized, he would have been more human. He was human, he always went to all the funerals. When he went to the funerals, he could get with the guys, you know. But, so, I like to say that about Benny because he has a bad name that is not totally deserved. I think that as he went on and got bigger, for instance, when he went to Russia, and so on. He probably let it go to his head, and and that was bad. But in essence, as his wife Alice knew, he was really a very fine person. And he really valued the musicians who could play. And that's not brought out on the whole, is it, so it's worth bringing out. So telling you about Benny makes me think about telling you about Duke because he he was a wonderful person. He wasn't at all like, people, I think, are are over-awed by Duke. Even the good musicians. Everybody's a bit over-awed. He's the biggest thing we ever had. And and as as he believed, he was blessed from birth, and I'm sure he was. I would like to tell you about his death, I don't know whether that will be done or not,

but, anyway, before that I'll talk about how he was. In those days, he was probably six or eight years older than I. And he was a strong, healthy, full-of-life, he drank, he smoked, he ate ice cream by the quart, and he loved the ladies, but it hadn't become a thing, he just loved them. And he was, he wanted to enjoy life. He knew that life, that life mattered. Everything in life mattered. What I thought was wonderful about him - he knew that everybody in life mattered, that they had anything in them. People that, later jealousies arose, and people used to say, "Well he's snobby. He likes Kings and Queens and Presidents and things." He liked them for what they were, he was very interested. But he was just as chubby, chummy with the Harlem cab drivers. He knew every one of them by name. They all joked and and that's how he was. He just felt that, I mean, I was lucky, so that's why he was nice to me. He saw something in everybody and not many people do that and not only did he see it, but he could bring it out of them. All those singers and everybody, he saw what was in them, more than they did, the musicians, and he brought it out of them.

Tell me some of your favorite stories about him.

I don't know that I have many that I can call up right away, it was just his way of being, I mean, he, he would he, well we had the racial thing together. I was there in Chicago and I could be useful to him. Some black poets used to want to see him and he used to say, "Is he all right?" And I used to say, "Maybe, I'm not sure, yet." And all of that that's useful, it became very useful in New York afterwards. He was very, he never made a thing, about he never said that, about Martin Luther King, he never said that he was a champion of the race or anything. But he did so much for the race. He cared so much. He felt so much about it, about the church and the South. I mean, all of that was in him and it would come out at times when you didn't expect it. If you knew him it came out. But he never played it, or he didn't let people get close close to him. You have th heard that, I'm sure. I mean, Clark Terry probably meant it mattered. He didn't exactly erect barriers, but you never got in there unless you were lucky. I was lucky because I knew him early.

Recall experiences about him mad and angry.

Stanny's better but one thing I did, I do remember. He was terribly careful. Extremely careful about situations. He never got into situations. He always found out about situations first. And that's where I was handy. Because I knew, and I would find out. And when he came to New York and began to be big, and he'd have all kinds of invitations, he didn't want to be patronized. He didn't go to parties or anything like. that. He would do things if they were worthwhile and Charlie Barnet was a great musician, had a great band, adored Duke. He based his band on Duke. He played all Duke's songs. This is this is a tale I can say. So he was playing the Famous Door and the Famous Door weren't all that wonderful in those days. 52nd Street was not all that wonderful. They were making all their money on black talent. But they

weren't all that wonderful. And so, they had told me that they would be very pleased if Duke Ellington would come one evening. They'd have a table ready and so on. And it was enough and and and I knew that Charlie was dying for him to come so it was enough for me to encourage for Duke to come. And what he used to say to me, he just used to say, "Is it all right?" And I would have to put my neck on the line because, on the block or whatever, because he meant it and if it didn't work out right, I'd better be careful. And so I told him, "Yes, yes it was." And it was all right. They received him at the door and they had special table and Charlie was in seventh heaven and everything. And Duke was very Dukish and never never altered his expression, listened to everything. And after a while he said to me "Hmm." They kept playing all his numbers just like he did. And he looked at me and said, "Hmm. They even fluff where we do." Which I had to tell Charlie Barnet. But he always had. He always had things to say that were right to the point. He was a very funny man.

Why did you say he wrote the alphabet?

Talking about Louis, which of course you have to talk about when you're talking about jazz because I think you might say the way he created it. What I do say about Louis and I don't think anybody can contradict that. I say he wrote the alphabet. He found out everything that you could play and what you used to play it with, and so that everybody, including Wynton Marsalis and everybody else that came after, everybody has to use some of Louis' alphabet. And very often I'm listening to things, and Stanley Dance is listening to things and we say, "That's Louis." Because it obviously is. What it is is was first played by Louis. It may be played a little differently now, but the feel and everything is all there, and Louis was the soul of jazz and, of course, people some people criticize him because he acted the fool and he did all these things. But he was full of, like Duke, he was full of energy and love of life and he had this huge talent for music. And of course, it came out that way. But I think just to say that uh, who else could you say wrote the alphabet? I mean, nobody that followed, not Dizzy, nor Charlie Parker nor anybody because they're all using the original alphabet. Because Louis wrote it.

You were going to tell me how important family is, and talk about Duke.

One thing that is very important as far as Duke is concerned, and that is family. And it's a characteristic of black people, anyway, of colored people. Family's extremely important, how many cousins people have. But, that's understandable, isn't it? ... that in a world, that you don't have as many as you should have. That's important. So, Duke, the best example, I think, of, of that, probably is Duke's feeling for his mother. Not so much because she was family, of course, but she was a wonderful woman, a very beautiful woman, and totally devoted to Duke, and had, as it's known, said that never let that until he was six years old, she'd never allow his foot to touch the

earth, touch ground. And, of course, she occupied an enormous place in his life. And, she was more than a queen. He was very religious man, and his mother always said to him that, from the beginning, "You're blessed. You are blessed." And he believed it, because, after all, I think it was true. And so did he. And all his life he believed it. And, and of course, she played an enormous role in his life. And one thing I think I'd like to say about that is, Duke is known, has been known as a womanizer, and so on, and so on... And I don't look at that too seriously because the whole point was, had a great appetite for life, he loved beauty, and everything was enchanting. So he loved women. That was quite understandable. And they loved him. However, his feeling about women was not what people think, because his feeling about women was influenced by his feeling about his mother. Now his mother, you might say, was Woman, as far as he's concerned. And no other women came anywhere near that. He had total respect for his mother. And that was not the case, otherwise. And it was a very, very big difference. And because of that, I mean, that, when Duke did lose his mother, that was an enormous loss for him. Far more than just losing your mother. It's everything she represented. In his life.

He stopped writing. He stopped writing for about a month. I think he continued to play, or he let the band go out and play for a week or two. But, he himself stopped composing. He didn't operate when his mother died. He was very upset when his father died, but when his mother died, he was totally shattered. Like the end of the world.

You said he was very religious and you had a story to tell about your daughter, Maria.

Stanley and I had four children. We lived in England, and we had the last baby, we called her Maria, which I thought was very significant myself, that I called her Maria. And, Duke thought that was lovely. And, so, he took a fancy to her right away. And he wanted a picture, so we sent, a photo, a baby picture. And by the time she made her first communion, he wanted that picture, all in white, with a veil and everything. And he kept that in his breast pocket, for as many years, I think, as I knew him. He, evidently, had a superstitious feeling about it, and Maria was very special to him always. And when he died, she was only about sixteen, but she did realize that Duke was everything that was important in our lives, really. And, and so, there came the time that, I remember Duke calling me one day. he was extremely brave man. He never whined. And he was, they always called him a great hypochondriac because he had a huge basket of pills and he used eat handfuls of pills. But, he never whined, and one time, I remember him saying to me on the phone, I said, you've heard that he was a great telephoner, whether from Beirut or wherever it was, the phone rang, maybe at four in the morning, and you used to hear p-p-p-p-p... That's the Ellington Four Kisses, and you knew who it was. And, and he'd tell you different things. And so, this time he called, and I knew by his voice he, he wasn't himself. He was in New York and I said, "How are you?" And he said, ... he sounded quite

angry and he said, "How would you be if you only had a half a lung?" I didn't know what to say, 'cause it was so unlike Duke, I couldn't possibly imagine. I had a good idea that he was ailing, but we didn't know, and he didn't talk about it, you know. So, anyway, Mercer Ellington, his son is a great friend of ours, too, and they, Duke continued on the road with Mercer and ... Not until he literally couldn't, couldn't sit at the piano, or stand up and make the announcements, that he quit and he went straight into hospital. And he was really dying then. And, they'd had, funnily enough, all three guys had had an examination for cancer of the lungs about nine months before, and all of 'em had it! The whole band had it. But these guys, I think it was Paul and Harry, I think, and, and Duke, and anyways... So Duke was dying and we visited him. I've never, ever heard him say a bitter word, or regret. I mean, that man wrote music 'til the moment he died, practically. And if he'd lived another ten years, we'd have had marvelous Ellington music and, he surely could have regretted it and said so. How unfair that he should die now, but he never did. He never said a word, and so, it came to the night. We knew that he was dying, and it came to the night that he was dying, and we came with Maria, and we sat in the ante-room outside in the hospital, and the current lady beckoned us in, said, "The Maestro wants to see Maria." And so, we went in and he couldn't see and he was lying down, he couldn't see, but he raised his hands and said, "Maria!" And she took his hand, and he was very pleased, and said, "Stanley, Helen..." And, and we left. That was that. That was the last time. But, to have died like that, and my feeling about it is, that he's very religious, and he may well have thought it was very odd of the Lord to want to take him so early. But, he was going to heaven, and he was going to join his mother. And it was going to be very wonderful there. There'd be plenty of good music. And that was the change that was called for and he accepted it like he accepted everything in life. I think that's rather remarkable.

You were going to tell me something good about Basie.

Yeah. Oh, I didn't tell you about that wonderful party he went to, where, when I decided to go with Irving Mills, instead of Duke, instead of Benny Goodman? So, Irving Mills made me the director for Variety Records, a second label of his things, which was my dream-come-true, of course.

You've got to, you've got to start over. Because you've got to tell me who Irving Mills is.

Ah, yes. Irving Mills has a, I shouldn't say, enjoys a bad reputation. I don't think Irving really cares; he's dead now, anyway. But, a lot of people, claim that Irving Mills took advantage of Duke and was a song-plugger that put his name on everything that he didn't write and so on. And some of that is true. But, the point was, it was all done in those days. And, for instance, John Hammond fought with him because he wished Duke to break with Irving and, to show that he knew better and he wasn't going to be used like that. And

Duke said, "I need an Irving Mills. That's just exactly what I need! I need this cat that's going to make a big thing of me. Who else knows how to do it, with style?" And, and so, Duke knew perfectly well what was going on. It suited him; it was the right thing for him. And Irving was a very talented person, really, I mean he did a lot things probably that he shouldn't have, but he was very talented. And, and so, where I came, was concerned...

The first thing that happened to me when I went to New York and worked for Irving Mills. Irving had decided to start a record company, and of course, like everybody else, one's biggest wish in the world is, was to make records. That's the closest to being a musician if you're not one. And so, he said, "We'll give a party. You're the host, and you ask everybody you want to, anybody you can think of." And they made the record studios available to us. So, I asked absolutely everybody and Basie was coming from Kansas City. And I'd been waiting to see Basie and Lester and Buck and those guys for a long, long time. And they kept, they were con artists, too, and they kept telling me, "We read all your things. We know all that..." "Here's this girl that writes these things", and down they'd... "We've been waiting to meet you", and they came on with all this story. So, anyway, they came. To my mind, that was the best of the party. But, I had everybody, and there's a picture taken. It's quite a well-known picture. It's Duke at the piano, Artie Shaw on clarinet, Chick on drums, and everybody else that's all around. And then all of the fans are... Stanley's there, funnily enough; he came from England. And this was very wonderful, and it was a wonderful party. And from there, then, Irving said, "Okay. The Variety Records is yours." It was the second label. The first label was Master Records, and that had to be ... Raymond, "Twilight in Turkey", and such like, splendid sellers. And my things are not going to sell, you know. My swing artists are not going to sell money. They're going to be well reviewed, but they're not going to sell. And so, I'm the, and I had a wonderful time. So, I took Shoeberry and Frank Newton and all kinds of people, and made records. And so then, to make my, to earn my salary, I said to Irving and the board of directors and the lawyers, I said, "Why can't Duke make small bands?" And they thought, well, she ought to know; she did the Benny Goodman Trio, and so on, and so. They said, "Well, maybe..." And I said, "Just talk to Duke about it. He'll see. Why, that band's full of musicians that can make records." And so, of course, Duke thought it was a wonderful idea. And so, we, we began. It lasted about three years. And we made the small band records under different names. But, I always was waiting for Johnny Hodges, the alto saxophone player, and Cootie Williams, the big trumpet player. They made me wait a year and half before I could record those... They recorded all the first ones, you know. But I finally got those, and the funny thing about it is, that those records, sixty years later, are just being re-issued by Sony, Columbia and Sony. And they're doing very well. They're, they're, it's critical acclaim for the small... The Ellington Small Bands, sixty years later. It shows you what kind of musicians they were.

Let's go to Basie. You had something significant to say about out Basie.

Shall I tell... let me ask you something.

Shoot.

I left Mills, in the end, when I saw that I couldn't make good records anymore. And I chose to go with Chick Webb. Not that he could pay me. I, I was paid fifteen dollars a week. But I went with him because for ten years, that little hunchback drummer had had the most wonderful band, just like Fletcher Henderson's, and never got anywhere. But he was absolutely just in love with music. And I thought it's time that, that Webb came into his own. And I thought, 'Now, do it.' I could do it. And Webb thought I could do it, too. But, in the meanwhile, he'd got Ella. And of course, when you're up against a girl singer, and she's the best that ever was, the band comes second. And that's what happened. So, that's what happened, and what I did, one of the things I did with him, which was perhaps a naughty thing... I had Benny Goodman come up and we're not rolling are we?

Just keep going.

And, when Goodman came up, they got the Mounted Police out, the people were so thrilled. It was at last some swing music. And so then, I said to the office, "Now, we're going to pitch Webb against Goodman. No, against, against Basie. Because against Goodman he'd make out alright. He belonged in the Savoy, and he had this terrific drummer; he'd go bom bom on the bass drum, and the whole Savoy ballroom would come to life. So, but, Basie was turning out be the greatest swing band that ever was, and it was. And so, Chick never wanted to admit that anything could defeat him, ever. So he said, "Sure, I'll play Basie. Sure I will. I'll tell Basie what's what." And so, I booked Basie in. And it, and it was the night of the big concert at Carnegie Hall, the Goodman concert. And they all came up. And everybody came up to that. And, of course, I do have to say that Basie cut Chick, because he out-swung him. Ella was there, and she sang, and the people didn't really know. They didn't know which was which. They loved Chick, and they loved Ella. And the newspapers have down-beaten all those things. They all said, " It was hard to chose between the two." But, it was a fact. And Chick knew, and the whole band knew. And that week, they called a meeting, and they said, "We want you to let her go. She did that on purpose to us. She showed us up, and we want you to fire her." So, that was, that was the end of things as far as Chick was concerned. But, I wouldn't stay anyway. Because I couldn't get where I wanted to.

Start over again with Chick.

Chick Webb was the finest drummer that we'd ever had. Gene Krupa used to go up to listen to him; everybody did. Chick was the top. And he had tuberculosis, and he was a sick little guy. All the time. And he always worked, but he used to faint when he'd do a five show, at the Paramount, or

something like that. He was really a sick little guy. And I'd quit, but I loved him dearly, and I think it was reciprocated. And so, he went and he played a steamboat ride at Baltimore. And he was so sick that they took him off the ship. And they put him in the Johns Hopkins, I think it was. And the doctors said, "This is the last time this guy's coming in to hospital, because he's had it." And so, they told the family and so on. He's, dying, he'll be dead in a day or so. And that Chick would not die! And he lived five more days. And he was sick and all the people were there at hospital and finally, he rolls up in bed and he looked at his mother and he said, "Well, I'm sorry but I gotta go.", and he laid down and died.

Talk to me about Billie Holiday. She was a friend of yours.

Yeah. Well, Billie, of course, has never been beaten. The greatest girl singer of all. And, entirely different from all girl singers. Girl singers, there are girl singers that try to copy her style, but Billie's style just came naturally. Billie was the most natural person in the world, and she didn't care whether it was good for her, or bad for her, or whether she had a career, or any... Billie was just Billie. And she always said how she felt, which didn't go down very well. And she was a wonderful singer. And I had a marvelous experience with Billie, because when I came to New York, I met her because we'd done this business. I'd had given her the dress, and Irene Wilson, Teddy Wilson's wife was another wonderful gal. And she wrote these things like "Some Other Spring."

But wait a minute. Was there a story behind giving her this dress?

Yes, that's how I first met Billie.

Well, tell me that story.

Well, it was funny. I had just come to Chicago, and I was pretty green myself. And, and Billie was just making it. I think she'd made one record with Benny. Anyway, Fletcher said to her, "Come and open at the Grand Terrace for me." And I learned this and I went, and Billie said, "I don't, I ain't got nothin' to wear." And I said, "Well, I do." Cause I've just come from home and I got a whole lot of things. And we, and we can wear the same clothes. So, she took my things and she wore them, for that engagement. And, of course, we were very close after that. And I came to New York, and Billie told Irene Wilson, "This gal is fine." And, and I went up and the three of us used to get together all the time, and that's when we got together with Basie. And so, life was wonderful. Billie was in love with Freddie Green, the guitar player. She should have, that should have done it. As it was, it was the only good guy she ever loved. After that, she, she went for all these snazzy guys, pimp sort of guys because she'd grown up with absolutely nothing in Baltimore.

This was a particular time in Basie, in Billie's life that was a very happy time. It's how she really was. She and Irene Wilson, who wrote wonderful numbers, "Some Other Spring" was a big one. Billie always sang all her numbers. They were very close, and I was fortunate enough to be a third member. And, this was a wonderful time, and we used to go down and hear Basie every night and then, Billie started singing with him. And, of course, it was wonderful. And it's just too bad that it wouldn't last for Billie, 'cause her relationship with Freddie Green wouldn't last. He was married. And from there on, her, her career took a different course. But this was a very happy time. And, it makes you think about Basie. That was a very marvelous time. They were on the air, oh, almost every night, I think that Basie band came on. And they were terrific. And Basie had developed this, when I first saw Basie, he'd come to the Roseland at the time when I came to Mills, and he was presented in the Roseland. And he was so green, and the whole band was so green, I think Lester's saxophone was tied with string. And, Basie had his back to the band at the, in this ballroom. He was afraid of the people. And he's, and he had the piano turned so that he played piano with his back to the band. And that was very funny. And he'd caught on. And so now, he was at the Famous Door and it was very wonderful. And he'd sort of built, a new sort of personality. They called him the Holy Main. The band called him the Holy Main. And, he had this reputation for being so easy going. He wasn't easy going at all. And he knew exactly what he was doing, and he's, he didn't want anyone coming to rehearsals... but he gave this different impression. And so, the whole band was the most happy-go-lucky band you ever heard. You were in seventh heaven when you went and listened to them, 'cause they were all wonderful, and they were all just closely knit and it was absolutely wonderful. They were wonderful guys in the band... And probably the best guy of all was the most peculiar guy, and the most wonderful guy: Lester Young. He was a total individualist. And he was a wonderful person. He was a very spiritual, soulful sort of person. Very soft-hearted. Not big-time at all. Misunderstood all the time, because he, he introduced the new music. I mean bop came from Lester. And Lester lived in a world of his own. And so, the whole band sat there and Lester turned his horn to the left; he was the last man in the line. And he'd, and he'd poke his horn up in the sky, and he'd blow these marvelous choruses that he blew. Totally different from everybody else. Not at all like... Coleman Hawkins. It was very melodic and very gorgeous sound and it flowed over the barlines. And he and Billie thought exactly alike. They were very close friends. And it was a whole new music being introduced. And Lester, I used to, I was almost afraid to talk to Lester because he was so talented and he was so marvelous. And I came to find out that Lester had no great opinion of himself at all. And if you wanted to talk to him, he'd just talk to you, just like you were anybody. And he talked in that funny way he had; he made his own language, and you had to know what he was talking about. And as I told you, he rang the bell on people that weren't good or if somebody in the back line made a mistake on his horn and you would see Lester just going like this. And this poor guy would be shriveling up there. And he was a very wonderful guy.

But he changed after his military experience, didn't he? Did you know him after that?

Yes.

Tell me.

His military experience was criminal. It was dreadful that they took a man like that. They had no right to take a man like that. Had no health, lived in another world, didn't know what kind of a world he was living in. And...and, and simply couldn't understand people being horrible, and so, wouldn't... he never cooperated at all. But they thought he was being difficult, and he wasn't being difficult. He just didn't know what kind of a world he was in. And they treated him like an ordinary person, and they were, they did the army bit on him. And it really broke him.

What did he sound like after this army experience?

Well, he went on doing the same, but he wasn't the same inside. He didn't have the beauty, the love of beauty, and the beauty that he'd had before. Or his feeling for human beings. He was horribly disillusioned, and he was never the same again. And in the meanwhile, everybody had copied him, and there were Lesters all over the place. And he didn't understand that. He didn't think it was right that you did a thing and then everybody went out and did your thing. And he was, he was broken, really.

What do you remember about Billie's death?

Well, I wasn't seeing much of Billie then. I'd just come back from England and, and I knew she was in a terrible mess. And I knew, as everybody that loved her knew, she was just headed, she was headed downhill. And it was going to end one way. So, I was very depressed about Billie, in every way, and very, very sad when her life came to an end. She loved dogs, you know. She always had. She had a tiny dog, she had a great big boxer. And, dogs were right for Billie. They didn't criticize, they loved you totally. She had a very wonderful thing about dogs. She always had dogs.

What do you have to say about jazz, and the nature of this music, in terms of, and its meaning to America, and American life? What is it?

I'm an optimist, and the spirit of jazz persists everywhere. Wynton Marsalis is a good example. He's silhouetting it. He's showing that it didn't ever need to die. Bop, a lot of people thought, was a wicked thing. It wasn't. Music has to develop and grow, and grow different ways, and some of the ways are good. Some of the ways are not so good. And the world, and bop became fashionable, and it was very bad, when bad musicians were boppers. But, bop itself, was a great advance.

Okay. You were going to talk about this world.

Yes, there were two worlds, really, you know. Going right back to Louis. Because, there were always heavy drinkers, naturally. Guys with a lot of energy and spirit, and so on, they were heavy drinkers, were many of them. But there were many, many others who were the smokers, the pot smokers. And they lived in a different world. It was a quiet world. You didn't ... exchange words, you didn't ... lay down the law at all. Every... it was a world, was shared by the smokers, and it was a very happy world. And it wasn't a bad, evil world at all. You very seldom heard any ... this was long before dope came in, and caused all kinds of havoc. And guys went on to hard dope, and, and died and all those horrible things. But that was much later. That was post - bop, or anyway around then. But, prior to that, there were two things. Either they were guys that drank, or they were guys that smoked.

Did any of the musicians who got hooked on heroin and hard drugs later on, did they ever rationalize to you why?

No, but it seems quite obvious. I mean, everybody wanted the, the ultimate, and the poor guys mistakenly thought the ultimate was different from what the ultimate turned out to be. Because it was bad for everybody. And it poisoned them, I mean they were the worst possible friends ... It destroyed their characters. It was very sad.

Sort of helped destroy the character of the music, too, didn't it?

Well, I think, I don't think it helped it.

The End