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When you were growing up and you first heard jazz, what was it in the music that appealed to you?

I wish I could answer that question directly, but it was nothing to do with the music. It had to do with the glamour, so to speak. I was living in way I didn't care for. I lived in a sort of, not ghetto, but not happy with where I lived. My father'd left home and I didn't like my life very much. I didn't like school, I didn't like anything. So it was a choice between getting a machine gun or an instrument. Luckily I found instrument. I heard a guy play, and he was surrounded by nice lights and pretty girls and there, it was interesting to me. I thought, "This is the way I'd like to go." So he played a saxophone, so I got a saxophone. I went to work and I bought a saxophone for forty, forty bucks. It was a C-melody. And to my chagrin, after I learned to play a little bit, I could play a couple of tunes and I won amateur night contests, I found that you had to play an E-flat alto. So I played the same tunes with the same fingering and I found that I was a third higher, I didn't know what a third was but I was a minor third higher than the piano. We started playing, she had the sheet music, the people in the pit. And I found out I played a different key. So if you're playing the key of C, I would'a had a play, you know, I'd a played key of A, and that made a lot of sharps and stuff, oh, I can't go through that again, I can't learn that whole thing. I was about to give up at that point. But then I thought, no, I was stubborn. So I decided I would learn to play the alto. Then I got fairly good and I got a job. But it had nothing to do with music.

Somewhere along the way you dedicated yourself to this craft and art form. There was something in the music.

That came later. First came the question of practicality, getting a job, making a living. I mean, I had to do something, I quit school, I was determined that I would play this instrument, so I quit school and I managed to get flunked. I

worked it out so's I got flunked twice in a row, two months in a row, and they threw me out. And despite my mother's pleas with the principal at Hillhouse High in New Haven, they wouldn't have me. So that meant I was free to play. And...

Yesterday you talked a little bit about the first jazz records you heard – Bix Beiderbecke and Tom Bower.

Alright. Well, I was just playing and listening to everybody I could hear. I didn't know good from bad. As a matter of fact I would do things on the job that I thought was knocking the guys in the band out. Instead of which I found out I was making them laugh. And one day the leader of the band turned to me and said, "Cut out that antique crap." The word was antique instead of cornball, which we now call corny. And I was chagrined, I was, it was devastated when I found I'd been a joke to these guys. I was doing things you shouldn't do, but I didn't know who to follow, I didn't know who to copy. And until many, many months later, after I'd been playing months in those days was equivalent to years as I was in a hurry. And finally I heard Bix and Trombauer and I, there's, that's, those are the guys. Being a white guy, I was subjected to white music and I heard Bix and Trombauer and they were the exemplars.

Why?

Something about what they did. We had the words in those days, "He played clean." And they played like they knew where they were going, there was a direction to what they did, there was a definition, a kind of discipline to what they did. And I heard these two guys and I thought, "Oh, boy, that's the way to go." Trumpet and and a C melody. And that went on for, oh, about a year and a half. And by that time I'd become well known. In New Haven I was the guy. And finally I was heard by some people in Cleveland. So I went to Cleveland and there I found out about Louie.

When you first found about Louie, what was the message, what did you find out?

With Armstrong? It was different. It didn't sound like the other guys who were playing. It had its own inner structure. Something about, I couldn't have used words like that. But I knew there was somethin' goin' on there that I had to figure out. And I remember hearing his first record was, the first record I stumbled on was "Savoy Blues." I can sing it for you right now, I can write the whole out, his, his solo. And something about that, I realized I was no longer playing music, I was playing an artform, something bigger than music, and I had to learn what that was all about. I didn't know, it was very, I was in, all of this was inarticulate, very chaotic in my mind.

Where did that come from in him that he could bring you the to idea that this was an artform?

Oh, I, his assurance, he knew what he was doing. I knew that he knew what he was doing. And I knew that it was something I had not heard before. It was like, I remember, who was it, the composer here who listened to Charlie Parker's "Now's the Time." He said, "It was something else." Well, that's what I heard with Louie, something else.

You went to see him in Chicago. Do you remember that story?

Oh, that was later, after I'd listened to Louie for, oh, months and months. And I began to develop a, a style of music, a self-expression if you want to call, I don't think in music I was thinking of expressing something. And interesting 'cause I played clarinet here, I was ????? learning for a trumpet player asked me, people asked me, who I was influenced by. I was influenced by piano players like Art Tatum, and Louie, Louis Armstrong. And none of the other guys, Earl, Earl Hines a little bit too. But anyway, I went to Chicago, I made a pilgrimage, I took a week off and went up to Chicago, had a little car. I drove up to Chicago from Cleveland and I found my way to a place called the Savoy. And I sat on a bandstand which is about, oh, two feet off the ground. And I sat on a rug-covered bandstand and just waited and he came on. And the first thing he played was "West End Blues." And I heard this cascade of notes coming out of a trumpet. No one had ever done that before. And so I was obsessed with the idea that this was what you had to do. Something that was your own, that had nothing to do with anybody else, that I was influenced by him, not in terms of notes, but in terms of the idea of doing what you are, who you are.

Thank you — that is so important.

Good.

I want to talk about the pressures, what it's like to take a band out on the road.

You were a band leader. What did that mean?

Well, if you're running a band, you're really running a traveling show. You're on the road. Most people who are listening don't listen. They're going to be entertained. There's an enormous difference between the performer and the audience he's playing for. Vast gulfs, like the Grand Canyon. You're doing something that has to do with music, and they're doing something that has to do with being entertained. And if they're not entertained, it ain't gonna work. So they're not gonna pay you, they're not gonna show up, that is. And if they don't show up, you're not gettin' paid, you can't pay your band. The basic problem with running a band today, most people playing jazz have never met a payroll, they don't know what that means.

When you were making money, it was still pressure and stressful.

Enormous, enormous pressure. The problem was, the problem was to meet a payroll. You have fourteen to twenty times forty men, and you gotta to pay 'em every week. Now if you make enough in two weeks to live the rest of the year, that doesn't do you any good 'cause you hadda keep a band together. The trouble with bands today is they don't stay together, they're rehearsal bands. They rehearse, they learn the charts and they get out a play somewhere. One night, then they're through, they go about their studio work. In my day, the men were part of an organization, we traveled together, we lived together, and I'm talking about times when hotels were three dollars a night. And we'd double up and get two nights out of a three. We'd come in in the morning and sleep and go to work and sleep that night. So the guys could sleep two nights for one, one. Anyway, that was how we did, that's how we worked it. And we traveled in buses. This is before I hit the big time. Hit the big time, used to make a lot of money. Then money doesn't matter much, 'cause you get so much of it you can pay for it. You can pay for anything. I remember hearing guys like Harry James I wanted in my band but I couldn't pay him. Goodman could pay him. Dorsey hired men that I couldn't get. So I had to teach, I had a peripatetic school. The guys were learning from me what they want to do. I have a letter from a, a, a violinist who worked in my first band, string band, string quartet based jazz band. And he wrote me a letter saying that he had gone through all the conservatories he could think of. And he thought he knew somethin' about music. By the time he joined my band. He said he learned more in the first rehearsal than in all the years he'd been playing violin. Because I was talking about music, not about notes, not about how you play them but where they fit in with the rest of the band. You're playing with other people.

I read somewhere you said how hard it is to get a big band to swing. Can you tell us how to make a big band work together?

Well, a big band becomes very ponderous if you're not careful. And you have to keep them going. It depends on the idiom you're in. Now back when I was doing this in the '30's, you had to keep right on top of the beat. Now you lag a little bit. But it has to be done together. And you gotta get these guys to understand that they are working as a unit and not, it doesn't matter how good you are. How good you are depends on the rest of the men in the section. If you're with them. Like I had a sectional player named Les Robinson. He became the best lead alto man that I think that ever was in any of these bands. And Les calls me now and then, and he asks me, "What did you see in me?" I said, "Nothing. You had a sense of time. I could that you were trying to make it work." Now time is a big difference, thing from, from timing or rhythm. Time has to do with your own time. You set up the thing and it doesn't matter whether the rest of the world is thinking. Your own time is what's mattering. Very difficult to explain this without going on and on and on and it gets too ponderous. But the big bands have that, that, there's a ponderousness. And if you can't keep these guys going in a kind of same direction lightly, the word is lightly, I don't care how big it is. See,

Sousa had a big band. And now and then they would do a march that would swing.

So, a big band is kind of like a family.

I should explain that the point is that nowadays musicians have developed enormous techniques and enormous abilities to read a chart on sight and make it sound pretty good. But in my day, these guys were just learning a new idiom, it was called jazz, it was called swing, it was called, you know, I hate the word swing because if it isn't jazz, if it doesn't swing it isn't jazz. Swing is a verb. So anyway, but you had to get guys and teach them that. And in order to do that you had to keep the band together, forty weeks a year, forty-five weeks a year. And in order to pay them, you had to make a payroll. And there was a problem just to keep them alive to go, it wasn't a matter of keeping yourself alive, you were making a lot of money. When the big bucks came along I made a lot of dough. But I had to pay the men, and had to keep them together. So it was always a chore, it was this millstone around your neck, these guys you had to travel with. So there it was.

Great. I want to talk about when you started to make money in the 30's and 40's. What was the connection that made people go wild about your music?

Oh, all right. Well the minute you became a big, big smash hit, it became very confusing. Nothing in life can prepare you for stardom. There is no way you can be prepared for it. I talk to people who are about to enter that, guys that got a bestseller book. I tell 'em, "Watch out, 'cause now you're gonna be in trouble." Success is a very big problem, bigger than failure. You can deal with failure. It's tough, it's hard, you fight like hell to get, get it going. But success is an opiate and you get very confused. Things happen that you have no preparation for. And money comes in and popularity and people throw themselves at you. And you don't know what you're into. It becomes nuts, it completely, I couldn't handle it, I didn't know what to do with it. It took, it was heady, a very heady dose, it's like getting drunk or getting high, a rush. But after a short while, if you're me, a lot of people love it. Sinatra wouldn't live without it. A lot of people who have it have nothing but that in mind. In my case it was became, it became, got in the way. I, I still wanted to play music and the audience was saying, "Play what you're playing, play the same thing over and over, we like that." And they never could get it through their heads that what they liked was something I was doing on my way to getting better. So it was just once incident, that record that they liked, for example "Begin the Beguine," which became a millstone, it became an albatross around my neck. I loved it originally, I made a good record of it, Porter loved it. And it was the first time a jazz band had played a melody and made a good thing out of it, put a beat to it. But, the audiences didn't understand, I was through with that, let's get on.

That was not my question, but it was a great answer.

My question was why do you think that music became so popular?

It's hard to say why an audience likes something. I don't think anyone on earth can tell you ahead of time what they're gonna like. Who is gonna like "Mares Eat Oats and Does Eat Oats," and what does it mean. Nobody knows what's good or bad, no one knows what's gonna work. I've had people say to me, "Do that one, it's gonna make a big record." And you make it and it drops dead. And another one you don't expect anything from, suddenly goes out and it goes crazy, like a seized cat, it runs. So I don't know the answers to that. I don't think anyone alive can do that. I've told people who tell me that, I'll give you twenty million a year if you can tell me that, 'cause I can make thirty million at a year selling your services.

OK. Let me ask you about Benny Goodman. What was his gift?

Oh, Benny, Benny Goodman and I. We worked together quite a while in radio. I was the lead alto section, he had a sound like a buzzsaw on an alto. And so, you know, we worked together. He was a weird guy, he didn't know very much except that, that's what he knew. And he was always saying, "Come, on, let's have a smoke, Pops," and I'd say, and I'd be reading. And he would say, "Come on." I talked to his brother, Freddie, who ran my band one time, and I said, "Freddie, you grew up with that family. There was first Harry, then Benny, then you, then Erving, and Gene." He said, "Right." I said, "What do you, what was Benny like growing up?" He said, "Stupid." I said, "Oh, come on. He couldn't have been totally stupid, he's, he, look what he did with a horn." 'Cause he was a superb technician. And Fred said, "That's what he did, he did nothin' else." It's like, he's been likened to, not exactly idiot savant, but something like that. It's what he knew. There was nothing else. He once said to me, "This thing will never let you down." Which was a strange thing to say about a piece of wood with some keys on it. I didn't think of it as holding you up. But that's what he saw in the clarinet. And I think it was his life. He focused on that and he did it extremely well. But his problem was he had a limited vocabulary in music. He knew the basic four chords. And after that, he had problem. Altered chords were something beyond his perception. If you listen to his playing, it's superb but it's limited. And I think it's one the reasons the modern guys have given up on him, they don't listen to him, 'cause he's doing the same thing over and over and over.

Tommy Dorsey.

Tommy was a superb musician. Tommy...Dorsey, he was a superb musician, he was a great trombone player. I'm not talking about jazz now, I'm talking about music. Tommy made trombone into a singing instrument. He was the first guy who took it from a bladding instrument, you know, ta da ta da dah, da da da da dah, and he made it into a song instrument. He played melodies on it. His breath control was superb. He was a hell of a player, he had a hell of a band very, very, very underestimated. Tommy never made a bad record, he didn't know how to do that. He was a perfectionist, like any of

the Goodmans. There was three of us, there was Goodman and Dorsey and I, Goodman, Dorsey and myself. We were the three. First was Tommy, 'cause he had a band with Jimmy, then he walked away from that, he wanted to do it his own way. And then Goodman came along, and then I came along. Miller was an afterthought.

I actually want to talk about Glenn Miller separate from the other ones. People tell us he really wasn't a jazz band. What did they play?

Miller was, came after us. I came up in the New England area, guy named Sy ? owned some ballrooms up there and he made a deal with and kept my band alive. And after that he said to me, "Why don't we get some new guys and do it," and one of 'em was Miller. And I didn't like Miller's band, I didn't like what he did. Miller was, he had what you'd call a Republican band. It was, you know, very straight laced, middle of the road. And Miller was that kind of guy, he was a businessman. And he was sort of the Lawrence Welk of jazz. And that's one of the reasons he was so big, people could identify with what he did, they perceived what he was doing. But the biggest problem, his band never made a mistake. And it's one of the things wrong, because if you don't ever make a mistake, you're not trying, you're not playing at the edge of your ability. You're playing safely, within limits, and you know what you can do and it sounds after a while extremely boring.

Tell us what it was like when you took the band overseas during World War II...about the music during the war.

The war years were a nightmare. I got a band together and I was trying to function within Navy stringency's and the Navy is a very straight-laced organization. And they didn't know what I was doing, and it was really like, talk about your square pegs in round holes or round poles in a square hole. It just didn't work. We had a helluva band, but the conditions under which we worked were not human. We're in the jungles, and the instruments would go through dry rot. Pads would fall out of your horns, you had to use rubber bands to hold the instruments together. And we managed somehow, we had the best band in the service, everyone agreed on that. We got prizes for that. But no one ever heard the band, we couldn't record it.

What was it like to bring the music to these troops, in the middle of nowhere?

There were, there were times when it was really very moving. You'd play three notes and, and instant, the whole audience was instantly roaring with you. They heard, they knew the record and you got the feeling that you'd created a piece of durable Americana that was speaking to these people. I remember an engagement in the, on the USS Saratoga, this huge carrier. And we were put on the flight deck and we came down into this cavernous place where they, three thousand men in dress uniforms. And, you know the reverse of the Paramount, where you were on a stage and moved up. Here

we came down and we were playing my theme song and a roar went up. I tell you, you know it, it really threw me. I couldn't believe what I was seeing or hearing, I felt something extraordinary. I was by that time inured to success and applause and all that you'd take that for granted after a while. You could put your finger out and say, "Now they're gonna clap." So, but this was a whole different thing. These men were starved for something and to remind them of home and whatever is mom and apple pie. And the music had that effect I suppose. All I know is that when we played the "Star Bangled Banner" afterwards, it was moving to me. And that's not a very good piece of music, as you know. All I can tell you is it was an extremely emotional experience. One of the few. In the war it was mostly trouble. I remember when it was all over as far as I was concerned, we were playing somewhere and I saw some sailor with tears in his eyes as we played. And I said, "How long you been down here, buddy?" And he said, "Oh, about three weeks." I said, "Why don't you get up here and play for me, we've been here a year and a half." So that was when it was finished.

Great artists like yourself make this music sound easy to play. Can you tell our audience how you make this music the level of art that you do when you play?

Well, what you're aiming at is to come across as a person in charge of what you're doing. And you only approximate it, you can never really hit it. You try, you gotta, it's like looking for perfection, there is no such thing. I remember when I was, make a diversion here, when I was shooting and I was shooting precision shooting and I said to a guy one day, "Why do we do this?" One of the shooters, he was a tool and dye maker, and they're very precise people, and I said to him, "Why in the world do we do this? We trying to spend thousands of dollars to see how little a hole we can make in a piece of paper." And said, "Yeah, well," he said, "why do you think we do it?" And I said, "I think it's our way of looking for perfection." He said, "Well, what would you call perfect?" I said, "Well, five shots through the same hole without altering it." He said, "Well, only God could do that." And I said something about, oh yeah, he said it would take God to do that. I said, well I guess he would if he were shooting, he might be able to do it, but I, anyway, the thing is you're aiming at something that cannot be done. Physically can't be done. So you're trying to play a horn, and here's this clumsy series of keys on a piece of wood and you're trying to manipulate them with the reed and the throat muscles and what they called an ambisire(?), and you're trying to make something happen that never happened before. You're tryin' to make a sound that no one ever got before, or a combination of sounds creating an, a, a, a, an emotion finally. It's like asking a poet how do you get this combination, how did Keats get the words, "And no birds sing." That's a strange con, that's a strange phrase, "And no birds sing." "Oh what can ail thee, Richard White," in ? "Alone and palely loitering, alone and palely loitering." What caused that? He had another line which was, "When my pen has gleaned my teeming brain." Now that's a strange combination of words, everybody knows those words. How did he get that? Well you do that in

music. You're trying to take an inarticulate thing and take notes and make them come out in a way that moves you. If it moves you, it's gonna move others. If you know it's right and you feel this is something I meant, that happens. But very rarely does it happen, and when it does you remember it for the rest of your life. It's most, what can I say, it's the most exuberant experience you can have. It beats sex. It beats great food. It beats anything. When you get it right, you know that's right. That has happened to me now and then, it happens to any great player. If you're not able to say I had that happen, you're not a great player. You can only say I can play an instrument adequately. A lot of players are very adequate. It's like saying it about writers, only trouble with this guy is he, he knows everything except what he wants to say. He, he, he knows how to write, but he has nothing to tell me. Emerson talks about that once, where a man gets up to make a speech and interrupts the proceedings and gets up and finds himself, finds himself unable to say anything. What a terrible predicament. You get so you can play a horn so well that you don't play music anymore. So I don't, it's very difficult to explain. Jazz is a very strange word, it has no meaning at all. If we're not talking about music, I don't know what we're talking about. Why are we talking about it if it's not music. Why do people, so why are so many people in around the world caught up in it. It's musical, it's the American music. We don't play sonatas, we play stomps, we play blues. We don't know from sonatas. We use them. We use those words, we've been for so long influenced by Europe, the European music, it's just like the European literature. Washington Irving, he was a great writer, but he didn't write American stories, he wrote about things in America. Aaron Copeland is a fine composer, but he's a European composer who lives in America. He's not writing American music. If he wants to call it "Billy the Kid" that's his business, but it has nothing to do with America. It's music that is European influenced. Jazz is American influenced. It grew up here. American painters are beginning to understand that. The beginnings of American painting were people like Jasper Johns and, you know, when they started painting people like Ed Rouché(?) they started making American paintings. What's his name, Jackson Pollock, was an American painter. Totally different from anybody else.

I want to talk a little about Billie Holiday, why you brought her into your band.

Well, I knew Billie from my years around Harlem, when I was learning my own trade, when I would sit in with Willie Smith and guys like that and sit in with all the Amer, all the bands, Chick Webb and all these fellas. They were friends of mine. And Billie was a kid around singing, and I said to her one time, "Some, one day I'm gonna have a band, you're gonna sing in it." She said, "Yeah, that'll be the day." But came the time when I had a band and I'd gone through a lot of singers and I couldn't find anybody who matched that band. Found out that Billie was out of work. So I drove down to Harlem one night from Boston where we were playing and I said to her, "Come on, you're gonna join my band." She said, "Oh, come on." And I said, "Yeah, get

dressed, let's go." This is the middle of the night. She got dressed, came with me, she says, "If you want to do it, I'll do it." So she went up and we rehearsed a couple of tunes. The next day she was part of the band. I cannot understand this whole hagiography that's going on now, they're making her into a saint, they're making her into something she wasn't, she was a good singer, you can't say more than that. There aren't many good singers. I'm not talking about modifying the word good. Good.

What was she like as a person?

Well she was very young and healthy at that time. She didn't, she wasn't on anything, oh, now and then, you know, now and then a little marijuana, but that was, everybody did that. But she was never, she was not into drugs or any of that.

But what was she like before all that stuff happened to her?

Oh, she was a very down to earth girl, I would ask her to go out somewhere with us afterwards, after we'd go to some party, the band. She said, "No, man, I can't swim. I'm not going in over my head." She wouldn't hang out with white people very much. She had a great distrust of it. But she was down to earth, she knew what she was doing. All the men in the band knew what they were doing, and they all respected her, she respected them. She was part of the band. We didn't think of her as anything but a singer.

She did have a hard time traveling with a white band.

Oh, we had troubles, lots of troubles, yeah, there's a story that, I've told this story a million times. We played down south and on the way down below the Mason-Dixon line, that mystic line, she said, "You think I should come down?" I said, "Yeah, Billie, I think it's important that you do this." I wasn't thinking in terms of black/white. I was thinking it important that she come and stay with this band. And so we went down and played some gig down there. And everything was fine, they loved her until one night she sang a tune and after the tune was over, some redneck in front of the band hollered up, "Have the n****r wench sing another song." And we were started to play another tune. She sit, going down to sit in the, going over to sit in the crook of the piano where the singers always sat. And he kept saying, "The n****r wench, the n****r wench." He didn't mean that in his own terms as bad, that was his way of saying "colored girl," in those days the word for colored. You didn't say "black." Anyway, tried to cover it up, he kept hollering. And she finally started mouthing at him, she would a hot temper. She, she was a pretty hot tempered girl, and she looked over at him and you could see her flushing under the tan, and calling him a "motherf****r." So, a little turmoil arose out there and I was prepared for it, and I had a couple of cops in the wings, just in case, and they hustled her off into the bus and drove her away. That was the end of that night. But we went to the rest of the tour, it was worked all right. I made her understand that she got to expect anything from

these people. If you can't drink at the same water fountain as another guy, you know damn well you're in a foreign country. So that was what happened. She, Roy Eldridge couldn't handle it either. Hot Lips Page, on the other hand, handled it very well. But Hot Lips Page was another guy, he was a, a more sunny guy.

I'd like to talk about Roy Eldridge. We don't have many people who played with him.

But we're talking about Billie black and white.

I know, now we're switching over to Eldridge because he had a really hard time with that.

Roy had a terrible time...

You could tell us a little bit what that was like.

Well, Roy... We ought to talk about Lips Page first.

Okay.

He was the first black guy in my band. Had a big band, strings and everything else and Lips played trumpet in it. And I remember we had a big expensive, we had a big expensive tour to south, we had never played the south. And my agent came around, we signed all the contracts and we're ready to go. Then he came to me about a week later and said, "Artie, we got a problem." I said, "What's that?" "They says they don't want Lips in the band." So I said, "What do you mean, he's my, he plays in the band. That's my band, they're not gonna tell me how to run a band. If they don't want the band, then fine, cancel the contracts." So my agent didn't want to do that, there was alot of money there. And he said, "No, we'll fix it." So he went back and he came back to me again, he said "We got it solved." I said how. And you won't believe this, but it's true, he said these words, he said, "They said it's okay to have Lips in the band, but he has to sit fifteen feet from the nearest man in the band." I said, "Are you kidding me? You mean the band is sitting over here and Lips is over there in a chair by himself?" "Yeah." I said, "Well, cancel the tour." We never did play the south, not with Lips anyway. So that was that. Now Lips could handle it. Everything that Billie couldn't handle he could do, 'cause Lips still had his, he was a sunny disposition was the song. He had a sunny disposition, he could make it work, he would sluff it off. A guy in the band, he was more diligent about what we were doing than anybody in the band, he was very serious. One of the trumpet players would be screwing around and Lips would say, "Hey man, you f***in' with my livin'." He'd stop him right there. Lips was very serious about it. But on the other hand he handled it. Roy couldn't. Roy was the next black guy in the band.

You used to go to Harlem to learn about this music.

Well back then, this was quite a while before World War II, I'm talking about 1929, 30, 31, 32. You must remember we had another world at that time, there was no television, it was radio. It was the only medium, mass medium that is. And if you wanted to play for a living you had to play (?) music, music was really dreadful. Something that sickened you, 'cause you were selling automobiles, you were selling soap, you were selling everything but music. The music was the way to get an audience to listen, ostensibly, and then you could sell them stuff. That was what radio was about. You needed sponsors to get going, and the sponsors would tell you what they would or wouldn't accept. If they didn't accept it, you weren't on the air, not very long. So I go up to Harlem where jazz was being played. It was a tenement ridden area and we'd play. So I'd go up there every now and then and wander around. I finally found myself in a place called the Patagonia Club on 134th and Lexington, right near the corner. And I heard a piano player, and I heard this guy play, and this is great stuff. So I walked in and said, "Can I come in and sit in?" He said, "Sure." So I put my horn down, we start playing together. And we hit it off. We became very good friends. Willy and I became friends and I played there every night with him, free. Finally they paid me a few bucks. But that was when I began to learn something. Willy was playing ragtime. The area between jazz and primitive music was ragtime. That was the early jazz, and that was what he was playing. But he played it with a hop that had something to do with jazz. And I was playing with him, and I had to get with what he was doing. And I learned a great deal in doing that. But I tried to write this once, and all I did was say he started playing and then there's a space and then I put that when he came down, this is what happened. You can't describe what happens up there before you come down. You're in some realm of your own, and you're trying to do something. You're aware of what you're doing, you're conscious, but you're really letting yourself go. I tried to explain it to once, to a guy one time, it's like jumping off a cliff in the dark. You don't know what you're gonna grab onto. Whatever you grab onto, though, it'll save your life. And if you hit a note, or hit a note that you didn't expect, you take that and make it part of what you're doing. And in that way you find yourself doing things you'd never have thought of before. So you're not planning it.

Exactly. Duke Ellington and his band. They could be great and they could be terrible.

There a lot of people talk about Duke Ellington and his band. Of course, interestingly enough, very few people are talking about Jimmy Lunceford, who had the best black band of all. 'Cause Jimmy had something in his band that Duke didn't have. Duke's essential thing was total freedom. The men could do what they wanted to do, and as a result, when they were good they were good, when they were bad they were horrid. The little girl with the curl in her forehead. The band could be terrible. And other times it could be absolutely great. So there's a great price for freedom. Very difficult to take

fourteen or eighteen men and let them all go their own way. On the other hand, there's that fine line where you go too disciplined and then you end up with Glenn Miller. Jimmy Lunceford was the perfect in-between. The reason I talk about him is you talk Duke, you gotta talk about Jimmy. Jimmy had the same number of men in his band, was highly disciplined, they did the same things and they played and they showed up. Duke's men were a bunch of prima donnas. So when they were together they were marvelous, and Duke made a lasting mark. Unfortunately, people don't seem to understand the mark that Jimmy did. Jimmy left a tremendous mark, Lunceford.

You said Duke was a slicker. What was his attitude toward the whole enterprise?

Well, Duke was a very, very slick guy. The word is slick. He dressed extremely well, he was fascinated by clothes, fascinated by women. And he lived his life in the way he did. He was a big dessert man. I don't know whether you know anything about him, but when he went on the road, he would make desserts. Duke was a sense, sensible, sensual man. And that showed up in the music. When it was good, it was tremendous. But he was a victim of his own ego to a great degree. We all have egos, some of us are in charge of them, some of us aren't. If you're not in charge of your ego, it can do disastrous things for you. And Duke, fortunately the good moments were captured. The good thing about records is you can keep the best and throw out the junk. There was a lot of junk. With Jimmy there was very little junk. Jimmy Lunceford, I keep coming back to that. In order to understand Duke, you have to understand Jimmy Lunceford.

I'm asking to keep them separate.

I'm trying, it's hard.

Strayhorn — what do you think his role was in keeping things happening?

Billy was a big, big help to Duke. Billy was symbiotic with Duke. They became one person at a certain point. They melded into a certain entity, and a lot of the stuff that Billy did became as much Duke as Billy, maybe more so. Duke, Billy used to get pretty mad about that sometimes. So did Jim, Johnny Hodges. Johnny would play a, a solo on a thing like "Once In A While," it came out to be "I Let A Song Go Out of My Heart." He never got credit for that. Duke would just appropriate it and put his name on it. Well, that's how it went, you know, you did what you had to do and you made a living and hoped for the best.

Tell me about the Lunceford band and why they were great.

Jimmy had a great respect for what he was doing, and he infused his men with that respect. And he had a lot of prima donnas in that band, but once

they were in that band, they submerged their personalities into the overall ensemble. And it was a tremendous band. It was always at its peak. I never heard that band make a bad thing. They never did anything bad. Everytime I'd hear it, every man in that band was for the band. Yet, it's like a great football team. There's stars in it, but they all work together. And without the stars, the band is not, has no sparkle. Jimmy's band had a great spark.

What about Basie?

Basie. Basie had a very simple problem in his band: if it swings, I'll do it, if it doesn't swing, I won't do it. Everything he did swang, it swung, it swung. Basie would sit and rehearse a band and he would nod alot when it was good, or he would frown when it was bad. The guys in the band, I'd see 'em rehearse. And the guys in the band would say, "What, what's wrong with that. There's something wrong, he's not likin' it." And once in a while he'd nod, "Ah, keep that." So when, when Bill rehearsed a band, Bill Basie, when he rehearsed a band, if the thing came easy, he used it. If it didn't, there was a lot of problems, he didn't want, take it away, I don't want to look at it. He wouldn't use, for example, an arrangement by Eddie Sauter, like I did ring a record of, of "Summertime," of mine, or a record called "The Maid With The Flaxen, Flaxen Hair." That was the, the, we made a record called "The Maid With The Flaxen..." no, "The With The Flax in There(?)." Basie would never play anything like that. That's another important point to make here, we're not talking about jazz, we're talkin' about music. 'Cause I said earlier, if it's not swinging, it ain't music." If, I mean, if it doesn't swing it's not jazz. So the word swing, the word jazz are misnomers. It's American music, and there's nothing else you can say about it. It's totally American, and it is musical. At its best it's something very important. The world thinks so. It's all over the place. How do you get people to understand this? I've never been able to understand how you can make people understand a foreign language. If you say something very wise in Sanskrit, nobody's gonna know what you're talking about. And that's the trouble. Jazz is Sanskrit to the average person.

The first really great white jazz band, big band that is, was Jean Goldkette. He himself had nothing to do with it. He was a businessman, he put together a band, they played in the Greystone Ballroom and it was composed of more or less fine musicians, but the two outstanding men were Goldkette, were Bix Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer. And Frank is probably the most underrated man that ever was in, in, in music, in jazz. But what can I say, they didn't last long, there was no public for that.

What made them great?

They played loose within a very disciplined framework. They were very loose. If you listen to a record of theirs called "Clementine," it's interesting 'cause Smithsonian put together a record called "Big Band: From the Beginning to

the '50's." And it ended up, it started with Paul Whiteman. Left out Jean Goldkette. I wrote a very angry letter about that.

Tell me why.

Goldkette had, the band had, as I said a looseness within a very strong discipline. The band played loosely within, it's like painting, if you paint loosely within a framework, you have a great painting, if you know what you're doing. This band was composed of fine musicians, and in it, in the mid-twenties, that band was unbelievable. I'm, there still, you listen to records like, let's say "Clementine" to this day, it swings like mad. Bix played a solo on it that was just great. And Trumbauer, when he played was just great. And Joe Venuti in the band. They had some strange, strange combination of men. A guy named Steve Brown played base.

Charlie Parker and bop. What's your criticism of Bop?

Well, I don't like these categories, but I mean you have to use them I guess to get some kind of attempt to, attempt to put together a picture that makes sense. But Bop was a, a new view of the same old riffs, only the chords were altered. You take a, a chord like an A-minor and start with a top note which E and put an E-major above that. And you have an altered chord. And if you play an E, EG sharp and B above an A-minor, the average listener is gonna say, "What the hell is that, it doesn't belong, it's not in the court." Well, it is, it's an offshoot of the court. Bop was that. It was the beginnings of a freedom in getting away from the same old major-minor, 7th and diminish. That's all there was. Bop went into another place. And Charlie and Dizzy did something else. They had a tremendous amount of technique. They added a lot of notes to what they did, sometimes to the, to the embellishment, sometimes to the disadvantage of what goes on. I think there's such a thing as too many notes. It's a good idea to be able to play something simply, and now and then a flourish or a cascade of notes comes at you, but that's not the aim, cascades. If we're doing that, we're an athletic contest. I don't think jazz is a matter of who can play more notes, 'cause that's an Olympic contest, I can move my hands faster than you can. What's that got to do with music? What are you saying is much more important than how fast can you say it, you know. So I don't know how to explain that, but Bop is something the average American person is not used to, and the average European person. They go to it because, one of the worst things that happened to music is the academics. The academics find things and things, you know, they find meaning, there isn't any. We're back to the Emperor's clothes, which is the best metaphor for our time I know. The people are naked, and they're not doin' something. I told Bud Powell one time, he sent me a record called "Embraceable You." And he, I said, "Why did you call it 'Embraceable You?'" He said, "'Cause that's what it is." I said, "No it isn't. You're not playing the melody of the tune. You're not playing the chords of the tune. You're altering the structure. You're even adding notes to the eight-bar phrases." He said, "Well, it would have been cheating not to call it that."

I said, "No, it's cheating to call it that. 'Cause I'm expecting to hear a melody that's part of the culture. And you're not giving me that." Well, it sounds like very Republican again, I'm saying stay with the melody. No. You know, in Decca recording studios, the original one, was on 57th Street, they had a picture, a large picture on the wall right over the studio window where the control man sat. And the picture was of an Indian, an Indian on a horse.

The End