

Texas Jazz Veterans: ***A Collection of Oral Histories***

Sterlin Holmesly

Editor's Note: *More than twenty-five years ago, Sterlin Holmesly conducted numerous tape-recorded interviews of jazz musicians in and around San Antonio. A city newspaper reporter at the time, Holmesly undertook the project with great passion and a sense of urgency, completing most of the interviews in 1980. Now the transcripts of these interviews are housed at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio.*

We have published some of the transcripts here in order to encourage researchers, educators, and students of jazz to make greater use of the much larger collection of oral histories at the Institute of Texan Cultures. Included here are interviews with Don Albert Dominique, Ann Neely, Gene Ramey, Bert Etta Davis, Dude Skiles, and Jim Cullum, Jr.¹

This is a collection of diverse people talking about their lives in jazz. The project was inadvertently inspired by Don Albert Dominique one rainy spring night in 1977. Don Albert, as he was known, joined the architect O'Neil Ford and a few others for drinks and dinner at my little rented house in San Antonio. Don and O'Neil started spinning recollections about the 1930s. "Somebody needs to get this down on tape," I told myself, and eventually I did. O'Neil Ford declined to be interviewed, saying he didn't want to be a legend before he died. Almost three years later, I sat down with Don Albert and taped some of his story before he became ill and died. I dedicate this collection to his memory.

As a lover of old jazz, a "moldy fig," I knew several players around San Antonio, and they agreed to talk. Then they vouched for me to other players and so on. I did these interviews²

sporadically, for I had a demanding day job at a daily newspaper at the time. I did not write down questions ahead of time, but used a basic reporter's approach. I asked them about their families, backgrounds, how they got into jazz, who influenced them musically, how they defined jazz, the difficulties of the night life and how it impacted their families, how they dealt with drugs and alcohol, racial animosity, segregation, and the influence of the Ku Klux Klan. From this, we winged it, with answers leading to more questions and expansion of themes or events. While the musicians had much in common, there is a great variety of experiences in their stories.

A number of San Antonio jazz venues also appear in the interviews, including the Eastwood Country Club, some of the downtown hotel ballrooms, Shadowland, Don Albert's Keyhole Club, the Lil' Hut (a Sunday jam session joint), and Jim Cullum's Landing, now in its third location on the River Walk.

Although the interviews were done in San Antonio, many of the players have lived and worked elsewhere throughout the country and around the world. Don Albert Dominique came to San Antonio from New Orleans in 1927 to play trumpet in the Troy Floyd band. Under his stage name, Don Albert, he then started his own band, and later opened the Keyhole Club, the first integrated nightclub in Texas. Ann Neely sang in Texas and California with such notable musicians as pianist Peck Kelly. Bert Edda Davis, who had performed with the all-black, female Prairie View A&M Co-eds during the 1940s, went on to become the lead saxophonist for singer Dinah Washington. Bassist Gene Ramey, a native of Austin, was in Kansas City during the great jazz years and performed alongside Charlie "Bird" Parker and Jay McShann. Dude Skiles, born in Missouri but raised mainly in Texas, was a multi-instrumentalist who worked with Jack Teagarden, Fred Waring, and others. Jim Cullum, Jr., built San Antonio's "Happy Jazz Band into the Jim Cullum Jazz Band, which has played for over a decade on more than 100 International Public Radio stations, bringing alive the history of jazz to a worldwide audience. All of these musicians, and the dozens of others whose interviews are housed at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio, made important and lasting contributions to the Texas music scene and to the larger musical history of this nation.

I admit to scholarly shortcomings in the collection, but, at the time, I wasn't after scholarship. I wanted these people to tell their own stories in their own words. And they did.²

DON ALBERT DOMINIQUE

When I was a kid, eight years old, I was a singer, and I used to go to the clubs, private clubs in New Orleans.

My dad would take me, and I'd sing with the full orchestras and play the trumpet whenever I

watched an old trumpet player named Nelson Jean playing. And I started learning under him and I couldn't get any sense out of him, so I quit.

I finally went to Mr. Milford Peron, who was a finished musician, one of the ole' professors. I learned the basic parts of the cornet with him. There was Lorenzo Tio, the ole' man, Papa Tio. Then there was his son Lorenzo, Jr. The old man was a genius from Mexico. He was a finished clarinetist who played in all the symphonies. He was an artist on top of it. And he taught most of us kids around there like Barney Bigard, my cousin.

In those days, the kids who wanted to learn music learned from their friends. It was a family affair from the beginning. All a kid had to do was say he wanted to learn something and one of the friends was going to teach him. Those fellas like Jelly Roll Morton were just a little bit in front of me. I don't quite remember them vividly, but they were there. After I learned to play the horn, then I played in New Orleans on the riverboats and on the boats that ride Lake Pontchartrain. Most of that was Sunday gigs. The President, and the Capitol, those were the big steamers from St. Louis that spent the winter in New Orleans.

I came to San Antonio in 1927 to play trumpet in Troy Floyd's band. We played at Shadowland and also at another nightclub out on Fredericksburg Road. I stayed with Troy for a couple of years, then a friend wanted me to start my own band. And he financed me with about \$1,500. In those days, that was gobs of money! I started out with nine musicians out of New Orleans. In those days, people who were good enough in New Orleans left. They might go to Kansas City and mostly Chicago. Wasn't such a thing as going to California. It was too, too far.

We went straight to Dallas for the State Fair. That was the first gig I had, and from there I came back to San Antonio to play at the Chicken Plantation. That was in 1929. My father-in-law to be didn't believe that I was going when I left New Orleans. He said, "Oh, no, you just like these other ole' Creole boys. You're gonna stay. You're not gonna leave." I say, "Well, you just watch. I got my ticket already."

Well, I left with a little band out of three pieces I organized in New Orleans, an alto player and a banjo player and myself. We were goin' to join another little group that was already organized in Dallas and left on the train with a band out of Waco, Texas. Herschel Evans was playing alto sax in those days. I had to play, blowin' my horn all night on the train. The guys couldn't understand how I could get such a pretty sound out of my trumpet. I had to play for 'em and play for 'em. And finally when we got to Dallas, Herschel left, and I went up and got this little job up there on Main and Elm Street, upstairs in the worst part of the city. I stayed up there for six months until Troy Floyd picked me up.

Raul Estes had the place. We worked with Raul Estes for about six or seven months and closed down. He went to work

at Shadowland as a gambler, the head gambler. So, he was in the know, and he was in with Mr. **Barnett** and the rest of the guys that owned Shadowland and that way he got me in. And we stayed there, first time for eighteen months. That was during Prohibition and gambling was illegal but it was wide open at Shadowland. I started off with ten pieces all together, in my band. There was Don Albert and His Ten Pals. Louis **Cottrell** was in that and Herb Hall was. We brought Herb here. I picked him up from New Orleans. He was out of a little town of **Reserve**, Louisiana. The whole family were musicians, but I only used him out of his family. He played the alto and the baritone. See, we had the Duke Ellington sound. And we copied the baritone like (Harry) Carney played with Duke. You hear my album and you hear the sound.

We stayed around here and we stayed at Shadowland. There wasn't any other outlet. We had gotten to the peak where we

we left New York in '32 or '33, I think it was. I don't exactly remember the date. Then we come back south where I could book the band myself on one-nighters.

Yeah, Rocky Mountain, North Carolina. There used to be dances in the Carolinas they called it June-Germans, and they started late at night and go early in the morning. And my band was always picked out to play these big dances. And we were booked at Rocky Mountain, North Carolina, and we couldn't find any accommodations. We had to stay in the bus or with some colored families that we'd known. So, we come on into the town and we went right to the hall and instead of trying to get places, we stayed in the hall to rest.

And I had a fellow who always was surveyin' and researchin', Fats Martin, the drummer, and they all were sittin' out on the porch, some of 'em in the bus. He come to me, and say, "Say, Ole Man," he say, "Come here, and let me show you what I

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could get so far as the music was concerned, so I wanted to venture and I wanted to travel on the road so the first time I left I got as far as Kansas City. And they called me to come back. They couldn't get a band to fill my place at Shadowland. So, that happened on three different occasions. The last time I just said, "Well, this is it. I'm gonna leave this town. I'm not coming back." And that's when I went to New York. But most of the time it was a road band. We played all over the United States.

New York was great. I was right at the top of the ladder. Most of it was concentrated in the big ballrooms like the Roseland Ballroom and the Pollard Theatre and the Savoy Ballroom. But just when I got my big break, I had gotten the band up to about sixteen or eighteen pieces, and the bookers wanted to cut my band once and set three of my men on the side, and go ahead and let me get to the top. But I had an idea that those guys started with me and I just wanted them to reap the benefits of what we were really going to get into this big time.

So, I disagreed with puttin' 'em on the side. Well, that's one of the big mistakes. When you go back and you wonder and you say, "Now, what the hell did I do this for?" And it would have been just as simple to let them sit in the background and go right ahead and play. We wouldn't have missed them. The arrangements were good. One man could drop and somebody take his place. I couldn't get the bookings and basically, I was holding out for big money for my band. Well, I say big money. In those days, 300 to 400 to 500 bucks a night, which today is nickels and dimes, but in those days it was big, big money! So

found." He was always, always callin' me the Ole Man. I was twenty, twenty-one, or twenty-two years old, but I was the boss, so they called me the Ole Man. So we go into this place and here where you hang your clothes, a clothes closet, the white robes are stacked up to the ceiling and the hoods, the cross, and the by-laws, rules, and regulations of the Ku Klux Klan. I said, "Lad, come on out of there. What are you doin' looking up all this junk like this? Let's get out of here!" So, the band that I had was a band that didn't never play a request. A set book, go from top to bottom. So, that night didn't anybody get refused of any kind of a request! They come ask for some of the most ungodliest names you ever heard. We made music to that and played — gave it the song, the music, the name, and everything else. If we didn't know it for 'em, we played it, but we got out of town right quick! We left right away! That was the fastest the bus ever was packed.

Then there was the night we were on the road when we came into New York City and everybody was asleep and the bridge was up. We had left West Virginia, 700 and some miles and we come into New York to rehearse for a stage show with Ralph Cooper, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holliday. And we were coming in to do this around '34 or '35, maybe. When we come into town, there was a place for buses to go, trucks to go and automobiles in different lanes. And at the top of the George Washington Bridge were two little clearance lights, red lights, that was for the airplanes. Well, we didn't know this. We's just country boys out of the South and this guy got to pumping on

his brakes and the piano player was sleeping and got up. He said, "The bridge is up! The bridge is up!" And everybody in the band woke up then. See, they thought the bridge was up and the bus was gonna go over this bridge! So, the poor driver, he was scuffling to pump the brakes so that the bus would stop. Well, he finally got it stopped. We stopped on the very tip top of the George Washington Bridge. Well, we could see that we were lost. We weren't going over the bridge but we just missed the bus route. The driver never drove anymore for three months!

I kept the band until 1940. The war was coming on and things were getting tight. Musicians weren't acting right. I had some dopies in the band. And things were scarce and far and few between. I decided, well, I got to try something else. I got to get us security for me and my family. I left the band here, and I went to New Orleans. I didn't stay there too long. I came here and I went to work in 1941 at Kelly Field and retired in 1974.

I continued my playing. I had two nightclubs, Creole nightclubs. I opened one in November of 1944 out on Highway Street. I closed that one down in January or February

either sing it happy, sing it sad, or sing it bad, one or the other.

The best single jazz musician I ever heard? Well, there's no comparison with Louis Armstrong. He is outstanding. The fellow's dead, but the awards that were given to him, he deserved 'em. Put a thousand trumpet players in a room and you could distinguish his notes from the others. Sidney Bechet was a great, great reed man, which he was, but it's the difference all together in him and in Louis. Louis reached everybody from the kids on up. Bechet was just an ordinary good, great musician, not in the same vein as Louis Armstrong. I knew Louis. We were close, close friends.

But now Duke Ellington is a man that reached everybody in the jazz field. He knew what to do with his men, he knew how to place them, he knew how to write for them, consequently, he made it something outstanding that no one else could imitate. Count Basie hasn't contributed what Duke Ellington has. Ellington was a composer, writer and an artist.

This so-called modern jazz, I didn't think too much of it 'cause it was a bit over my head. I couldn't understand what they

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of '46. I opened this big one the Keyhole Club out on Poplar Street, Easter Saturday 1950. And I kept it until I sold it in 1964. I had wonderful success. I had the first fully integrated club in the United States! We had trouble with the police. They didn't go along with the integration. That was the whole crunch of it, but I won the case in the courts. Was a judge named Judge Sanders and this lawyer here, he's still active. That's Henry Archer. That's his boy that's on the City Council. We won the case. They tried all kind of ways to close it just because of the integration. And they used every subterfuge that they could.

Jazz, I've always described it as a happy feeling, and it's something that makes you feel glad all over and you want to slap your hands and clap your hands, stomp your feet and you just want to have a good time, shake your body. The blues are jazz in a way, yes. It's a basic part of our jazz. What they're playing, they still use the form of different changes, the B flat change, the C change, and the G change, and that's what it's built around. And blues were built from that and then the tempo is the thing that changed around from the slow blues to the jump tempos. The blues came out of the souls of the slaves.

That's a known fact, because they sung just how they felt. That's about the only way they had to vent their feelings. You can

were doing. The average person didn't, but they had to accept it. There was nothin' else around. That was forced upon 'em, just like rock n' roll. People don't like it. They hold their ears. They do everything! What else are they gonna listen to? They're tryin' to bring the big bands back, but it's almost an impossibility.

How does a jazz musician form his own style? It usually comes to you natural and by association with others. It just comes natural. I'm just a straight jazz trumpet player, strictly to the lead like the old musicians done it when I was a kid. Just beat around the lead just a little bit, don't get too far away from it, mostly feel what you're playing. You have to have control of your horn, your lips, and your thoughts. See how good you can make it sound to the other person and at the same time make it **pleasin'** to you as you **playin'** it. That's what we call working around, **beatin'** around it. Yeah, that's what we call it.

My best friend? Well, that covers a lot of territory. Well, Duke was one of my favorites. Earl Hines was for awhile. And, of 'course, Jimmy Lunceford. Not too many people remember Jimmy, but he was a great, great friend of mine. Talking about my band members, talking about Herb Hall, Louis Cottrell, Fats Martin. Those were regular members of the original band, and those were great musicians. Herb was in last week. He

comes in two or three times a week, he and his wife. He's goin' to North Carolina on a gig next week. He's 73 years old, he is. He says, "You lived!" And I guess I did. I really lived. Got no regrets.

Traveling with the bands usually was real tough in the Southern states and that's where we were concentrated on. I've seen lynchings in Mississippi and Texas, right here in Columbus, Texas. Two boys, sixteen years old were lynched the day we came in to play the dance. We didn't play. We had to leave town. And the same thing happened in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. We used to see these kids on the chain gang with the big balls chained to their legs in the hot sun all day, sunup to sundown. Being as light as I was, they all thought that I was white, and I got the better part of everything. The band would get hungry, I'd stop in some café in some little town, pool our money, go in there and get a bunch of sandwiches and bring it out and give it to 'em. They'd eat in the bus, and sleep in the bus!

Playing a dance in some small Southern town was always a 70-30 deal, and the band would get 70 percent and the owner would get 30 percent. Sometimes we'd split \$200 or \$300 for the band. That would go for the whole group. Bob Crosby and the Bobcats were up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. They were on the road and they stopped. We stopped with 'em. We had sandwiches, and we had other things in the bus. We shared with the Bobcats.

We played against Glen Gray and the Casa Loma band. Gray had a real big one, real good band, and he was concentrated in the area of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Glenn Falls, New York. We were up there in the wintertime. We'd turn around and get the hell outa there right quick! It was too cold for us! So we got a gig in Detroit, at the Plantation Nightclub. They sat us down for four months. Brother, that was the height of the winter. So we spent that in the nightclub in Detroit, Michigan. It must have been around '35 or '36.

We recorded our albums here in San Antonio, at the old Bluebonnet Hotel on the Vocalion label. As far as we knew, the sales were good, but we had no jurisdiction over the sales. We sold outright. If you wanted to make a nickel in those days, you needed it! You'd do anything to sell out. Like anything else, it's just like we played in Chicago for Al Capone and Ralph Capone. Now, those guys paid us good money! All the gang wars were going on. I've seen 'em come right into Detroit, Michigan, with the shotguns right where we were playing. They were looking for somebody in the club. And the manager told us, "You just go ahead and play and don't worry about nothing". If they find who they looking for, they'll take him out of here and they won't do nothing in here."

That also happened here in San Antonio when they raided the Riverside Gardens down there on Houston Street. It was during the holiday season, and they come and raided the place for gambling there. They had mixed drinks in those days and

the Rangers, two of 'em stand at the front door and they scattered the others throughout the nightclub. And they locked all the doors so nobody could get in and out. I never did stop playin' one piece for twenty-five minutes, man, until they finished raiding the place! Customers, and the roulette wheels, the cards, the dice, you name it. They had all that packed up in the wagon, tearin' it up! The same with Shadowland, they closed it down and locked all the instruments in there, the Rangers did. We had to get a citation from downtown to go out there and get our instruments out of there. Otherwise, they'd be there yet! No, those guys were all the big time gamblers like Red Berry. They were all in cahoots. They raided 'em and they paid their fine and would be back in business again the next night. And we were back playing the next night.

In Chicago, you just played your music and that's it. Your money was fine. Your money was always there. Always in cash. It was beautiful! It's just like Jack Teagarden and I, we played together in Indianapolis, Indiana, in a snowstorm. We were two old Southern boys, and I had a gig in a nightclub, a colored nightclub up there, and they were workin' at a theater, so Jack came on and he say, "Don" he say, "get your horn, man! Let's go to play somethin'. It's snowin'!" And man, I say, "I don't see no snow!" He say, "Get the horn!" So, we got the damn trumpet and we go outside and man, snow is fallin' down a mile a second, and damn fools out there playing their horns! Playing in the snow. He was a great guy! I played with him just once in awhile. We weren't in the bands together. The guy pumped some trombone!

In New Orleans, I played the horn in four different brass bands. Yeah, I played those long years ago, it wasn't as bad as it is now. The lower element has taken it over. And it's more of a mockery now than it was. In other words, they were trying to show you that there's a lot of sadness there when a person dies, but still in all there's happiness in the end. That's what it's trying to tell you.

Ours was a musical family. My grandfather was a singer; my grandmother was a singer. And I had an uncle who played the violin, one played the trumpet and the cornet. In those days his name was Wilson, and we had Uncle Natty Dominique, who was a trumpet player and another was a violin player. Barney Bigard, the clarinetist, is my cousin and we grew up as kids together. We studied together. You name 'em and you find he's been there. He's been in demand all over the world.

The Creoles were the finished musicians in New Orleans and they had a lot to do with teaching the blacks the techniques, the crafts and the two came together through intermingling. The Creoles were more fortunate because of their color and of their background, their roots. All of them played music, sung, danced or done something in the art world. And Negroes as a whole have always been able to capture somethin' from somebody else, and it was no problem for them to get in with

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these Creoles and play with 'em. Manuel Perez was a Creole, but he played with all the blacks and, what we call black. I despise the name black, but I have to go along with, it's the modern term they use today. I would rather say a colored fella. You don't know what to say!

I've done so much for the Negro that it would take months to record the things that I have accomplished and the things that I have been involved in and the things that I have done for the black race. 'Course I'm in the background. I don't push it, because I'm not too interested in them referring to me as "The Black," because, actually, I am NOT black. And I resent that, because years ago, I remember when I was young and I would call a fellow black, he was ready to fight! Today, that same fellow wants me to address him as a black, so where am I going? So I just stay in the background and the things I have done, they're recorded. Someday they'll come to light.

I won that Keyhole Club case. I had disturbed the State of Texas when I won that case in 1954. And when I won the case, it was the decision that the judge handed down. He said there's no law in the State of Texas that prohibits the congregation of people regardless of race, creed, or color. And then I was in no violation of any laws. Case dismissed. So, consequently any place that wanted to accept the people as I accepted them, whites, blacks and all that, whoever wanted to enter the doors. It was acceptable then after the decision was made. That was a great thing. I'm not interested in the black race, the white race, and the blue race. I'm interested in the race of people. And I've gotten along.

ANN NEEL

In 1933 there was a contest put on by the manager of the Gunter Hotel and Mack Rogers, the leader of the orchestra in the Gunter Cave. Mack Rogers' band was in the Caveteria. It was actually a cafeteria and called caveteria. It was decided by the manager of the hotel to try and locate a girl singer to perform in the Cave with Mack. Approximately 150 girls answered the call, so auditions started. It took weeks to eliminate all but thirty. Then to six. Each sang at the noon broadcast each day on WOAI. I was the last to sing, and I won. The audience and Mack did the judging. So, I had a two-week job at \$10 a week at the Gunter Hotel. I worked with Mack for a year and a half. I came on the air each day at noon singing "Bye, Bye, Blues," and we signed off with the same.

I graduated from old Main High School in 1929, so I was twenty years old in '33. I sang in the high school glee club, and while in junior high school, I sang in operettas, in which I took the lead. I did love to sing, but really did not have but very little training. While with Mack we did some barnstorming over the state of Texas. He thought nothing about jumping from San

crazy – but it was fun. You know in those days there wasn't any money. We worked on a commission basis most of the time.

While at the Gunter they allowed me a room, which I utilized for changing clothes. When I left Mack and the band, I joined the Red Mill's and George Hill's band, a dance band consisting of eleven musicians and myself. I joined the band in Houston. We worked at a gambling club and we were there all summer. There I was, the floorshow, and will have to admit I was very nervous. Lots of people sitting out there. In later years the club burned to the ground.

The next move was to Corpus Christi. It was another gambling club located just across the causeway. We were there for the summer. Enjoyed that job very much. Met so many nice people, also. In those days, the cotton buyers from England spent the summer there. I might add they loved to gamble. At the end of that engagement we toured a while and then back into Houston. The Rice Hotel and the Lamar Hotel hired us. We worked noon and dinner sessions at both hotels, and to finish the evening we worked a dance. Of course, these were separate jobs.

It was hard. While at the Lamar Hotel I worked the Majestic Theater, in the pit, for a week and it was during Thanksgiving. That was something new for me and must say my limbs were shaking. I had four shows a day at the theater, a noon, dinner session, and dance at the hotel. I lived in the evening gown and heavy makeup for the theater job. While working at the Rice Hotel, the Carlone band played in the ballroom. It was an Italian group and the man singer was none other than Perry Como. At that time he was not married and not known. Enjoyed his company at mealtime and he was a super person. You know the rest; he climbed the ladder to the top. After about six months in Houston we went on one-nighters again. Red used cars but finally purchased a Chevrolet bus. And who drove? I did most of the time.

Ironed on the floor or turned a drawer over and ironed my dress on it. I carried a small iron with me. Believe our next engagement was in McAllen, Texas. Another club, privately owned and the name "McCalls." We picked our own grapefruit for breakfast. Met many nice folk from the Valley. I worked a year or more with the band and then decided to quit. After a brief period had a call from a saxophone man, Dave Matthews, from Waco. Joined his band in Waco. He had all Texas musicians as I recall. Good people, and he was excellent. He acquired an agent so we were off to Cincinnati, Ohio. The agent said he had booked us at some club in Illinois. We rehearsed daily. That went on for five weeks. We were told the job did not materialize. The musicians were getting restless and running out of money, so, one by one, they would take off either by bus or hitchhike. Finally, five of us, including Dave's wife had to make a decision. Wouldn't you know, just at that time the job came

through. There was no way to locate the musicians. What a heartbreak. The band was excellent – fourteen pieces.

The trombone man had enough cash for two bus tickets back to Dallas, so I left with him. Must go back a bit and tell you this story. While in Cincy we didn't have much money so Essie (Dave's wife) and I cooked a huge meat loaf each day plus a dishpan full of potatoes. That was daily, and, believe me, it tasted good. Dave had excellent arrangements, some were his and some Harry James'. When Harry and Louise Tobin were married, I met him, and when I went to California, I saw him. Louise was from Denton, Texas. She was a very fine girl singer and sang with the best. She and Harry had two boys. She is now married to "Peanuts" Hucko, a clarinet great.

When I moved to California, Dave Matthews was out there working with a known band, plus Harry was with the band. I visited the club every night with Essie Matthews. The floor show was three blacks (male) dancing with Dave and Harry doodling on their respective instruments which turned out to be "Peckin,'" if you remember that tune. The two decided to put it on paper

me the job, the salary, what I would get like room and meals, etc., she said no. That no girl would go with him. If any girl went, she would go. That settled that and they had a small spat. So I walked out. Betty Grable with those beautiful legs did me out. That job was in Colorado and would have been a wonderful job. He had a very good band. He had some Texas musicians in there.

In 1938 I returned to Texas – Dallas, worked with Durward Cline and his well-known band. We played often at the Shreveport, Louisiana, country club. That was a fun job and such great people. Few times hit Mississippi. Most of the work in Dallas. Met Garner Clark at that time and many others. Dallas was a hub for good talent in those days, and many of them went into big time eventually.

If only I could have had an agent, I'm sure I could have earned much more and would have had the opportunity to work with known bands. My decision one day, "Oh, this isn't for me." It was too much road. However, I had fond memories of California, where I met many fine artists. Met a few movie

When we'd go out on the road, here I was standing with a huge megaphone, not a dainty one, but a great big one, Tone came out very well, but the people couldn't see my face and I had to learn to hold it with one hand so I could wave with the right hand or something.

and it sold, but the bandleader put his name to it.

I went to California in 1936, after the Ohio thing fell apart. Joined my mother and sister in Los Angeles. Jobbed up and down the coast, auditioned often and worked a nice spot in Pasadena, namely, The Huntington Hotel. A beautiful place and a good combo to work with. A group of ex-Jimmy Dorsey's band. It was five pieces, maybe seven. Can't remember but excellent musicians.

I won the contest with "Baby Won't You Please Come Home," so it has to be a favorite. "Say It Isn't So," "Sweet Sue," and I loved to sing "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," plus many, many more. Eleven tunes were goodies in those days. At the Gunter we had no public address system, so I had to use a megaphone. For broadcasting on WOAI, I used a microphone, but on jobs it was the megaphone. When we'd go out on the road, here I was standing with a huge megaphone, not a dainty one, but a great big one. Tone came out very well, but the people couldn't see my face and I had to learn to hold it with one hand so I could wave with the right hand or something.

Going back to my time in California – I must tell you this story. I had an audition with Jackie Coogan. He said fine, you have the job. His wife, Betty Grable, was there. After he offered

stars, Joan Crawford and Franchot Tone. They were married at that time, and I joined their table at the Ambassador Hotel, where the Coconut Grove is. Yes, and there was another place I enjoyed and saw many movie stars. The Trocadero, which was forsaken years ago.

I met "Red Norvo, terrific vibe man. He was playing in a small club in Studio City. He was great. Of course, he was younger then and could hear. They had huge jam sessions when I was out there. I went to many, but one was on top of one of the hills looking over Los Angeles. Both Dorsey bands were there, Phil Harris band, Ted Weems also. Just can't remember them all right now. Just listened. No females participated. They just let those great musicians jam. It was something, and I had never heard anything like it.

I went back to Dallas. Pounded the pavement looking for work. It was tough, those were hard times. I was not prepared for office work, but I decided to take a fast typing course. How fast? One month and, believe it or not, I was sent to Love Field, which was the Air Transport Command, and began my Civil Service Career. That lasted twenty-eight years. The good Lord was kind to me. I worked hard and learned plenty. I began in Dallas, then to Barksdale AFB, from there to Goodfellow at San

Angelo, Texas, and then into Randolph. While at Goodfellow AFB, I was the Cadet Club hostess for a period of time.

Let's return to San Antonio. Back in the '20s and '30s many name bands came to our city. Then we had the open-air roof at the Gunter Hotel, the Plaza roof which was the Plaza Hotel and the St. Anthony roof at the St. Anthony Hotel. Henry Busse (trumpet), Isham Jones, Earl Burnett, with him was Spike Jones, who later put together a band in Los Angeles and became famous until his death. Earl Burnett died in San Antonio, as I recall. Then there was Louis Armstrong who came to our then Shadowland, now the Roaring Twenties. Many more but the names do not come to me just now. Don Albert owned the Keyhole Club, which I went to several times.

My favorite singers? Helen Forrest, Edith Wright, Ella Fitzgerald, and can't forget Ethel Waters. Then there was Sarah Vaughn and lots more. In those days we had no TV, so I would

once a year or every five years, you are not going to be in tune. You hear what you want to do, but you are not getting it out. You're not pulling the diaphragm, in other words, not using it properly. To get that foundation one has to work, work and more work. It also takes money to pay for all that.

When I was singing with Red Mills and George Hills we had a piano player named Peck Kelly. Peck was the greatest I had ever heard. Very different from others. He was a genius, and don't let anyone ever tell you that he wasn't. Very creative. Let's say, he was born with a super talent. He was very patient with me. You learn from an artist. He would be all over the piano but brought me in just beautifully – you just could not miss. He did a lot of fill-ins, but then that was a big thrill. If I could have had Peck as my accompanist through the next eight years or so I could have reached substantial heights. We had long intermissions at the club in Houston, and he would coach me

I was called a "torch" singer and was nicknamed "Torchie."

listen every night to the radio. Tuned it in to Chicago, where I could get the Trianon Ballroom. It always came on late and would keep it low so as not to disturb my family. Oh, how I loved all that and just to realize we could get Chicago on the radio. Some of the singers just did not appeal to me, but some phrased so well and had a good voice. Knowledge of music helps. Tone placement, correct breathing very important, plus good looks. That always helps.

I can read music. I took piano when I was a youngster and just wish I had continued. But all I could think of was get outside and play. I did like to sing and later I was a nut about singing in tune. I was told by musicians I had perfect pitch. Even now when I hear anyone singing sharp or flat, it makes my spine crawl. Believe me when I say Ella and Sarah sing in tune and perfect pitch. Helen Forrest was always good. Phrased well. If you have the natural ability, it is more appealing. All have their own styles and all are different.

I was called a "torch singer and was nicknamed "Torchie." So it was more of torch singing, if you can define that, I never could. I sang on the beat and did not try to fiddle fiddle around. Now, if I do sing, I can put a little more into it. I think it's because of being calmer and having listened all these years. I sang at my high school reunion. It was fun. Had Tony Rozance, Gene McKinney, and Curly Williams behind me, and, of course, they are all pros.

My problem is trying to remember lyrics. Gene and Curly cued me, which helped. Don't think I was in tune all the time, and that upset me. When you don't use the vocal chords but

the entire time. In those days clubs remained open to three in the morn. We had Peck for one year. He would never leave Houston but he agreed to come with us to San Antonio when we played at the Plaza Hotel.

My lowest point was when we were in Austin at a club for a few weeks and they raided it. That, I had never experienced. I took off but fast, with permission of course. I stayed away until the next night, so it was just a brief locked doors situation. Another job, in Kilgore to be exact, another strange happening. The boys came on the bandstand, I came out and sat in my chair. The customers were filing in, I happened to look at the ceiling. It was absolutely covered with scorpions. Just a mass. I had never seen anything like that before. In a short period of time the caretaker had everything under control.

Another crazy story. I was with Mack Rogers when this happened. Driving down the road going south of San Antonio, suddenly saw a sea of black in front of us. I asked what that was. As we approached, it was a mass of tarantulas crossing the road. Never had I seen that before nor since. We rolled the windows up and drove right through them. It must have been at least twelve feet wide. They were called the Mexican tarantulas. I don't recall whether that is the one that eat the cattle or not, but mercy, they said they could jump as high as the fender.

You must realize that in those days you would drive miles and miles before you would see another small town. Great experiences and I learned a lot. Another time – this girl singer had to sew buttons on many musicians' shirts. They were good fellows. In fact, they kept an eye on me so I wouldn't walk into someone's trap,

When I retired from Randolph AFB, I went to work for Jim Cullum, Sr., at the original Landing on the San Antonio River downtown. Liquor by the drink came along, so he wanted me to be the cashier. I needed one more year of work so I could get my Social Security when it came time. So, instead of working one year, I worked four. When Jim passed away, Jim Jr., moved The Landing across the river, and I continued working for him. Didn't get away from there until three, four or five in the morning. This is ridiculous. Isn't good for anybody's health.

I knew Ernie Caceres when we were sixteen years old. He worked in the pit at the Texas and the Majestic Theater as a saxophonist and clarinet. He was a terrific musician. His brother, Emilio, was also a great musician. Ernie went to New York early. In fact, his career started there. He worked with Paul Whiteman, Glen Miller, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Dorsey, Jack Teagarden, and many more. Emilio worked a long while with Gary Moore on a TV show. Believe it was 1963 when he returned to San Antonio. Like many musicians he squandered his money and drank heavily through the years.

He came back from Las Vegas but ill. He had been out there and working with Johnny Long. Came back to San Antonio after that engagement. He learned he had diabetes. Then the cancer appeared in his throat. He was dead in a year. Jim Cullum Sr., put a tribute together prior to Ernie's death. It was huge, and people came from everywhere. After his death, mail came in from all over the world, England, Germany, and elsewhere. Want to put it this way, Ernie was a genius, and so was Emilio. Did you know he and Ernie were half brothers?

Memories are great, and it all was fun, but if I had it to do over again, I would not choose show business. I will say, if I could have had a teacher (voice) plus an agent, I might have developed into a performer who could hold her own and made some money. Will never forget Connie Boswell telling me, "You've got it, go after it." The Boswell Sisters were the greatest. Also, Peck Kelly would say, "Torchie, you are going to be big someday – you have a natural!" I loved it, but it all came to an end. I learned a lot through my singing years; met wonderful people and some lasting friendships. I just enjoy and like good folk.

GENE RAMEY

I was born in Austin, Texas, April 4, 1913, three blocks from the State Capitol, down on 13th Street. Music seems to've been a family tradition. My family was singers. I understand my grandfather was a violin player. One of those hot violin players of the late 1800s and the early 1900s. We was one of those entertaining violinists.³

My mother used to always tell me that I got the habit of patten' my foot like that from my grandfather. That's something that I tried my best to break, but I couldn't. I had lots of

instruments. I think I could pinpoint it most by saying that first was the tempo blocks. And then I had a trumpet, and a baritone horn. And I played drums in the Boy Scouts with the marching band. I just picked it up. I taught myself till I got to the bass horn, and then I had some music in school. I sang in a quartet in school. I had my basic teaching, but after I found out I couldn't play anything else, I – I played the ukulele pretty good. And then I got ahold of the bass horn, a tuba, and that turned out to be my thing.

I switched to string bass after I got to Kansas City. I went there to college, to Western University in 1932. Actually August the 18th, 1932, I entered Western University. They had a band there and I got a partial scholarship. So I went there. Although I had been playing music in Austin for a couple of years.

I played with three different bands in Austin. My permanent job was with the Moonlight Serenaders. We had a social club and the cost of the band was so much that we got together and bought our own instruments. That's where I worked with Herschel Evans, the tenor sax player who later wound up with Basie. At the time I think he was with Troy Floyd. I met Herschel there. He was playing saxophone. I think it was tenor. Might have been C melody. That was a popular horn then. And very few musicians played the tenor sax. But I think Herschel was playing tenor. And then I played with George Carley.

We bought music at a place in Austin. Reed's Music Store, which is still there. You could buy a whole orchestration. I remember we got that thing, Duke Ellington's "Ring Them Bells," and we had lots of stocks of —some of them they had 'em in off keys, they'd give you as a sample. We got lots of those. I remember we had that "When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain," and "Should I?" and "Dream a Little Dream of Me," and, oh I can't remember all of them. We improvised. We very rarely used the chart, except for the first and last chorus. And that was the general idea of most of the bands from Texas, all that we encountered. That was about '30, '31, and early '32. And then I went to Kansas City. They had a place called the Potato Ballroom, and, on a holiday, every holiday, they had a battle of bands. And they had Alfonso Trent, Bennie Moten, Walter Page and his Blue Devils, Georgie Lee's band, Clarence Love's band, Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy.

Most of the people stood there and watched those bands battle. 'Cause they'd just take turns and each one'd play about three tunes. I can still remember Georgie Lee and Jimmy Rushing each singing in that big, big hall without a microphone. They had those megaphone things. And this is the thing that amazes me now is that you hear these guys can't hear each other or can't hear you, you know. And a much smaller room.

Well I didn't just get out there, and play although I had been offered jobs. Somebody by the name of Sergio Rome had come to Austin and tried to get me to go. And several of those

minstrel shows had tried. But I was set on saving enough money to go to college. I finished school in January of 1930, and I was shining shoes and playing music on the side and doing everything I could to make, save enough money to have something to go to college with.

It's a funny thing. This was a black school that was co-sponsored by the state. And some kind of problem was involved there and the church pulled out. The church had all of the high degreed teachers. I mean teachers with the master's and the doctor's degrees. They broke off and the school automatically dropped down to a two-year college. And so I got my certificate. But I got there just in time to witness the downfall of it. I got a two-year certificate. And I went there for electrical engineering 'cause I couldn't get that in the state of Texas. In those days Prairie View was the only school there, and they didn't teach anything like that. A friend of mine who was the drummer in the band, he went there first, and he was to graduate. After he graduated then I was —and I got one year in

the complete overhauling. In those days it was a lot of money, especially for me.

My uncle was a roofer in Austin, and so about that time I started doing a little painting around Kansas City and I established quite a little trade. I did about sixteen or seventeen houses inside and out. Had one fellow helping me. So I managed to get hold of some money to pay for it. I didn't pay my tuition and that. The second year I didn't have to pay anything anyway. But I had already met Walter Page and Lester Young, and so when I started to playing with a little band in Kansas City, the Hot 'n Tots. And the nine of them were high school seniors in Kansas City, Kansas. And my school was in Quindera, Kansas. So somebody told them about me and asked me to come and join 'em. In the meantime, I'd been workin' with two Kansas City, Kansas, bands. And so I said, "Well I got nothin' to do. I'll go down if you wanna come pick me up."

So I started first to practicing with 'em with the bass horn. And I got my bass fiddle and they had enough patience with me

I got a bass violin book, and inside they had folded up a whole chart of the fingerboard, And all you had to do was take that and tape it on your fingerboard, And with that you could find out where all the positions were that you knew on your bass horn,

and then the school collapsed. I transferred over into what they called—it was *nothin'* but a *printin'* course, but they called it journalism. So I took two years of that.

While there in school, I switched to the string bass. There's another thing that happened. They had a great band there and they had lots of students. And when the school, broke off, the state had supplied the school with all sorts of instruments. I remember there was four bass violins, and oh, I guess about ten first, second violin cellos and everything, and saxophones and everything. They had a big band. So I happened to see that they were taking those bass violins and tying 'em up to the ceiling in the storeroom. And I noticed that all of 'em had cracks from that heat up there. I mentioned it to the man who took care of the thing. He said, "Well let me call Topeka, Kansas, and see what they want to do about this," he said, "'Cause they're just gonna fall to pieces up there." And they sent word that you could have what you wanted.

So I took two of the bass violins I wanted to have at home and one for me to play on. The one I had at home — I was gonna try to find out how to fix it myself. I just tore it all to pieces. Both of 'em were cracked but the other one, I took it to a music store in Kansas City called Jenkins Music. And they overhauled it and fixed it for me. I think it cost about \$20 for

to learn how to practice and learn. Walter Page was really my teacher. What I did, you might say, to transpose, I got a bass violin book, and inside they had folded up a whole chart of the fingerboard. And all you had to do was take that and tape it on your fingerboard. And with that you could find out where all the positions were that you knew on your bass horn. So I had that down pretty good, but I just didn't know what to do, you know, playing bass violin. It was a whole new thing for me.

So I started with that, then I met Walter Page, and he told me, said, "Well if you ever feel like coming over I'll teach you." And now this was in '34 when I first met Walter Page. By the way, when they gave us those instruments, I took—that first saxophone that you saw with Lester Young playing sideways. That silver horn? Well that was one of the school's horns. And I took that and I gave it to him. Lester Young is three years older than me, so he was about twenty-two. You know Lester Young was an alto player before, that's why he got that tone that he had.

So in the winter of '35 this band got a job at the place called Frankie's and Johnnie's in Kansas City, Missouri. So we make it across there every night with our instruments *playin'* this nightclub. Well, first of all the club wasn't that well advertised, and secondly, the band was strictly a rinky-dink band. We were just school kids. We would split a note 'cause the reed section

didn't hit together, you know. It was just a school band, and it was just practically amateurs. So that lasted about six weeks. In the meantime, I had taken a job at Western University as assistant engineer. So I had the double-duty of trying to take care of my job at Western University and playing that music. And in '34 I had gotten married too, you see. And after that Frankie and Johnnie's thing went down then, a girl, a pianist in the band—they called her Countess Johnson—she took Mary Louise's place with Andy Kirk. We decided to organize a little thing, had six pieces. And we got a job at a place called the Barley Due, which was two blocks down the street from the Reno.

And now this job was extremely hard for me. It was from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., and you couldn't quit. Those jobs there, when you took a job there, and you decided you wanted to quit, some mysterious voice in the distance would tell you, "You don't quit here." I got a dollar and a half a night. I also had the job at the Western University and that was 8:00 (a.m.) to 5:00 (p.m.). So you know what I did on the day shift. I slept all day. I had three hours in the afternoon and three in the morning. It sure isn't much. Especially traveling all the way from Missouri to Kansas. And I lived over in Quindera, which is just on the outskirts going to Leavenworth.

By the way, that school, Western University, was that site where John Brown had rescued the slaves. And at the bottom of the hill on that campus was lots of brick cuts that still stand there. They're in shambles, but they still stand there where he'd go across the Missouri River there and bring the slaves across. And so a monument was built there. And that school originally was named Western University, and that was the first black school west of the Mississippi River. And it was like a landmark. In fact, they still have those monuments as a kind of a tour section like that. But there's no school now. I think it's a senior citizens' home or something there now.

Well I stayed at the Barley Due about a year. I just had to get somebody to help me at the school job. The school job only paid me \$40 a month, anyway, and room and board, you know. I had a wife and a baby at that time. I didn't have a wife when I first started workin' over there but shortly after I married in '34 and the baby came in '35.

By this time Bennie Moten had died and Basie had taken over. You probably heard the story of that. When the band broke up, when Moten died, the band broke into two sections. One of 'em was run by Gus Moten, Bennie Moten's nephew, and a guy named Prince Stewart, or Dee Stewart. He was a trumpet player. Now, they seemed like they had the inside shot on everything. They was heirs to all of the territory that Moten played. But the band was nothing. They got the job at the Reno, and Basie went out on the road. And as far as I know, they went on a tour and they got to Little Rock and they got

'em and finally gave 'em enough money to get back to Kansas City. They came back straggling.

I know that he got back and "Prez" (Lester Young) became my closest friend. We used to talk about that all the time. And that was the first time they ran across Buddy Tate. T. Holder's the name of the band I was trying to remember a while ago. He was the first owner of the Andy Kirk Band. And he still lives in Muskogee. And "Prez" said that the first time they ran into Buddy Tate was there. He might've been with some of those Oklahoma bands. But I do remember, I played with him in Austin with Sandy Holmes' orchestra.

And they managed to get back to Kansas City and this man, Saul—I can't think of his last name—who owned the Reno Club, he was just completely dissatisfied with Gus Moten's band. They weren't drawing anybody. The band didn't swing or nothin', so he had Basie to get his nine pieces. And Walter Page had been the owner of the band called the Blue Devils. And he had a great alto player named Buster Smith. And they both had come over with Bennie Moten anyway. And Hot Lips Page. These was all Texas musicians, too. Well, Page was from western Oklahoma.

And they had a swingin' little band. And on top of that they played the type of music that didn't knock everybody's ears out. They took over the job at the Reno and immediately after that the radio station liked it so well that they came and asked if they could put a line in there. And so I was glad to have it. So every night at 12:00 they would come on. Now at that time the Pendergast scandal was full blown. And so we had Sunset Terrace was further out. It came on at 11:00 and had a guy named Ellins that sang in the band and played on that. So this same radio station made themselves something like a chain of nightclubs, like NBC and CBS were doing. And they switched from this station, and they'd come up to the Reno. And they had another thing at the Playmore Ballroom.

I would say the beginning of the Count Basie band taking form. Before that, naturally, they evidently were doing good but nobody knew 'em. So their bookings fell off and everything. But I would say that the Reno was really the thing. And there was such a great understanding between the owner of the club and Basie. And he was just crazy about Basie. I always called him Basie. I tell you, we used to call him something else. Well, he always had holes in his pants. But everybody called him "Holey." That gave me a chance to go up there in intermission and get a few free lessons from Walter Page. Then in his intermission he'd come down and check to see what I was doing. That also made a strong relationship between the two of us. And there was — the lady piano player that I worked with—Lester Young fell in love with her. So he was down every evening at intermission. Or she was up there every intermission. So we hit together. We were like the baby brothers and sisters of Count Basie's band.

Now that place finally was shut down, and I guess that's the only thing that caused us to leave. This club, the Barley Duc closed up. The Reno was a little bit more sophisticated. So they didn't have all the things that these other clubs had. Like we had the nude girls. One place we played they had an act with a horse. So evidently they had something else going on then, because one night after we left — it must've been in the morning; it wasn't day after we left, but, anyway, there was a shoot-out between the owners of this club and the FBI. And there was supposed to've been drugs involved of some kind. And one FBI was killed and two of the owners of the club. That was the end of that. Then and there. So the Barley Duc was short-lived in that respect. But we had the most business, naturally, because all that kind of attraction.

We had another place we went to, the Wilby Chateau. This was out in the ritzy neighborhood, like the White Plaza out in the quiet neighborhood. It was more like residential. And we

sophisticated rich lived in Kansas City on the Plaza. It's somethin' like a Hyde Park. And then the other union didn't like the idea of us being out in that neighborhood, so they tried to zone it off. We had a segregated union too. And so the thing went to James Petrillo [President of the American Federation of Musicians], and he broke the back of it right away. He said, "I'm here fightin' this and here you are tryin' to create it. So those guys're gonna play any place they wanna play."

So, we were all an instant success there and they had the colleges. Right away we started playing the University of Missouri, University of Kansas. All the nearby colleges and everything. So we had lots of the college kids that followed us all over. Had a fan club, you know. And that same year, I was supposed to've been the first black to join Charley Barnett in October of 1938. They called me in and told me that Charley Barnett had been looking for me all day. So, I rushed over to the union and come to find out he had contacted Jay McShann

So, we were all an instant success there and they had the colleges. Right away we started playing the University of Missouri, University of Kansas. All the nearby colleges and everything, So we had lots of the college kids that followed us all over. Had a fan club, you know

played out there. We had a radio broadcast at a place called the State Line Tavern. This was a club that straddled the state line. Now in Missouri, Truman had passed a law there during his regime that all clubs had to close at 1:00, which was a sudden shock to the people. Been stayin' open till five. And so to counteract this, this man had this State Line Tavern, and then in Kansas you could stay open till Doomsday. So they had a bar over here and a bar over here. When they closed in Missouri, they just walked to the other side of the room and kept on playing.

It was shortly after that I joined Jay McShann's band. I'm gonna work with him this Friday in Chicago. In fact, we never severed our relationship, although I stayed in New York and he went back to Kansas City. After we broke the band up and I came with Jay McShann then I managed to get all the rest of 'em in the band. The reason the band broke up was Countess was called to take Mary Louise's place with Andy Kirk. Countess is the one Lester Young was in love with. Her name was Martha Johnson.

Then I stayed with McShann. Now there was a funny thing on that situation, too. I joined this band on a two week stint to fill in for a guy who was gonna come in two weeks later. Now he didn't want to come in until his favorite drummer was available. Now Gus Johnson had been workin' in Lincoln, Nebraska. Gus came on with the band. And so we immediately

and Jay had taken me way out in the country. So I missed that job. But, anyway, we gained popularity. And that year Jay and I won the New Star Award.

By this time we had gotten Charlie Parker. We had trouble with him. I met him in '35 before Jay McShann came into Kansas City. The band that I was with, the Hot 'N Tots, played a battle of bands against their high school band. And that's when I first met him. And he was—what's the word—adamant? He didn't speak to you. He'd just sit over there and sulk. But I guess he was thirteen or fourteen or so. I was twenty-one or so, you know. Then in '35 he was workin' across the street from the Reno where we'd see each other every night at the jam sessions, and he'd come down to our club, and we became very close friends. And we started to go out in the parks and find places to jam, he and I and a couple of the other musicians that was interested.

I think he was just getting hooked on something. Usually I had my car, so I'd drive the guys. And usually I'd keep his horn and his jacket, 'cause if we didn't, it'd be in the pawn shop. I don't want to say it was drugs, 'cause I never in my life saw it, and we became very close. I never saw him shoot a line. But I do know this much, that he was an experimenter. We used to call him the pharmacist. He'd go to the drugstore and try to find anything that he could use to get him high.

Charlie Parker joined McShann in '38. And we went to do this thing in Chicago in February of '39 when we got the reward. And we were supposed to stay two weeks, but they really liked us, and so we stayed six weeks. And when we got back, Charlie Parker had gone. So we left the band there at the Martins on the Plaza in that exclusive club there. And we got back, Charlie Parker was gone. When we got to Chicago, one night the guys called and said, "You know what?" Said, "Your alto player was in here." He told McShann, "Your alto player was in here tonight." Said, "He blew out everybody." He was just going around looking for alto players and chop 'em up. And so we just thought maybe he was in and gonna come and see us. Next thing we knew, he was in New York. So he was dissatisfied, I guess, because we won the award and he didn't, so he left. Anyway, he went on to New York and we came back to Kansas City. They got another alto player before we got back.

Then McShann began to prepare to get a bigger band, because the union laws. We had seven pieces, and certain ballrooms you had to have maybe twelve or fourteen. So then McShann and his manager began to enlarge the band. And that was late '39. And '39 we were brought to Chicago. That was just before the big band came in, still seven pieces. But we were supposed to do our first recording then. The man put us on the bus and brought us up there. And we hadn't gotten permission from the union to go into that jurisdiction. So we got there and they put us in our rooms in this fabulous hotel down in the loop there. And about two hours later we went to the recording studio and as soon as we got there, the union broke in and said, "All right, just put those instruments back and I give you twelve hours to get out of town." So they sent us back to Kansas City, and we got the big band, twelve pieces.

We had two male singers. We stole Al Hibler from this territory right here. We got him outta Boots and his band, Boots and His Buddies band. Right here in San Antonio. And then we had a great ballad singer name of Bill Nolan. And so we started playing the circuit then. We came down to Texas, down here and went back there. That's how we happened to see Hibler when we came down here, and McShann was attracted to him. Didn't sign him on, just took him. And Hibler said, "I want to go with him right now." And Boots said, "All right." He's in New York, now. He's actually livin' just across the river in Jersey. And he's got a nice house there. His wife—he and his wife broke up but he's got that big house and he's been takin' care of it nicely. So we were on the tour, Texas tour, with the big band. '40 was the first time. And then we did it on up until '44 when the band broke up. We had a home base in Kansas City, where we went back to a place called the Century Room in a hotel there.

I think of Charlie Parker as a guy who could've been talented, I wouldn't say genius, but could've been talented in any field he tried. He was a nice, considerate guy and we had like a nice

family, as far as the band was concerned. He loved to jam, and I loved to jam. I had a fourteen-piece band at Western University. And so the trumpet player who was really the first bebop trumpet player was in my band at Western University. Buddy Anderson, he's the one that Miles Davis has always raved about. And so I brought him into Jay McShann's band. So now we, in '38 and like that, just the three of us used to go in and jam, the trumpet player and Charlie and myself. We were the only ones that took an interest in jammin'. The rest of 'em was out chasin' the chicks or somethin' else. So we used to go and sometimes when we got off work and stay out to daylight, sometimes 9:00, 10:00 jamming.

Lester Young as a person, I'd say, was one of the nicest guys in the world. His favorite word was "no evil spirits." And he was just like that. He married interracially, and when he was inducted into the army and he was somewhere in Alabama, I think, or somewhere in Mississippi, Alabama. Anyway, he brought his wife down there. And right away they found a reason to put him in the brig. He liked to talk about how every night they'd come out there and have target practice on his head. They whipped "Prez" so badly that if you notice that when he came out of the army, his whole thing different and everything.

What was my absolute best experience as a musician? A guy named Eddy on drums and a piano player from Minneapolis. And we had a groove there one night. It was in the summertime and they had the front door open. And we looked up and all of the musicians from all of the clubs out there at the bar. Somebody had gone and told 'em, said, "You should get that groovin' that the guys are playin'." And it was so exciting that after that I started to teaming with Sid Catlett until he went with Louie Armstrong. He decided that he'd rather work with me than the bass player that he had. But it was one of those things you can hit from time to time when you hit it and hold it. But we hit one and held it for the whole night.

In '44 I had taken over Jay McShann's band, on several occasions, many occasions. When he was sick or when he was out when he had all those battles with induction and everything. And so it was agreed that I would take over the band and keep it intact until he got back from the service. Now the bookin' agent, and the manager and McShann had agreed that I was to take it over. But it was supposed to be the Jay McShann band under the direction of Gene Ramey, featuring Walter Brown. We played that last night in Kansas City, it was in May '44, and at 12:00, the army MP's came and took McShann off the stand. This was his last goodbye, you know. So we shook hands, and it was agreed then that I'd take it over.

But as soon as he left the agent told me that they had decided to keep down complications, not to use Jay McShann's name. It would be Walter Brown and his band under the direction of Gene Ramey. Well I immediately told them "No." Now they

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had booked a lots of things ahead, you know. When I told 'em, "No" the whole band said, "No, we're not goin' either." So, this broke the back of the band right then and there. I might have got myself in bad permanently with the agencies for that. I didn't think of it. The only thing I realized, the way I felt, was that if they're gonna do this, they might use me for trumpet player for three months and then kick me out.

So, I just decided not to take it. So, I went to work for Saul at the Reno. I stayed in Kansas City and went to work for Saul at the Reno for about five weeks. I was right at home in Kansas City, but I wanted to get back to New York 'cause I had my house there and everything. And I stayed with him five or six weeks at the Reno. And Louie Russel's band came through. He asked me if I could leave right away and I said, "Yeah. I will leave now." And so I went back to New York with Louie Russell. I stayed with him from about the middle of July until October. And then Hot Lips Page asked me why didn't I come on down to 52nd Street with him. So I said, "OK." I had to go and apply for a union card before they would let me work. They had a thing there where you had to be on six months probation before you could become a regular member.

I've recorded with McShann, Count Basie, and Louie Russell, Earl Hines. Individuals: Dizzy Gillespie, and Sarah Vaughan, Stan Getz, Thelonius Monk. George Shearing, and Lennie Tristano, Billy Taylor, Sir Charles Thompson, Buck Clayton, Jimmy Rushing and Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Buster Gary, Eartha Kitt. I went into the Chase Manhattan Bank, the loan department there. And the day that I took that job at Chase Manhattan I got a letter from Joe Morainian tellin' me that Joe Glazer wanted to see me right away, wanted me to join the band in two days. I thought I'd go on and take it. I said, "No." I said, "If I do I'll be right back on that alcohol thing." I was seeing myself becoming an alcoholic. I spoke to a friend of mine and he told me, he said, "listen, the only way you're gonna get away from alcohol is get away from the environment." He said, "well it's gonna be hard but it's your choice. Now if you wanna break it, that's the way you're gonna have to do it."

I played from 1930 up until 1966. I continued to play but I played in country clubs, and I played mostly with the Dixieland musicians and the country club. But I only play like one or two nights a week. I think I played every country club in the New York area. I think it saved my life to tell you the truth 'cause I look at my friends who've gone on, all from alcoholism. "Course Prez had already died. But Red Allen, we were in that same boat together. Buster Bailey, Coleman Hawkins, Jimmy Webster, Don Byars. Everybody ended up with that liver thing. Coleman Hawkins kept a half-gallon of whiskey by his bedside everyday. I used to go get him and take him fishin' to try to get him away from it. He'd say, "Well I got to bring my old lady with me." I'd say, "Man, we're goin' fishin'." He'd say, "I'm

talkin' about this ole lady." I recorded with him. As I said, it's gonna be hard for me to recollect.

BERT ETTA DAVIS

In a native San Antonian, and a graduate of Phillis Wheatley High School. Actually we started with a jazz band at Phillis Wheatley. We organized a jazz band out of the marching band. My mother and father were dance fanatics. And being an only child, in those days we didn't have baby-sitters. So I went with 'em, and I was exposed to music. I even went to hear Don Albert's band when I was a little girl. And there was another one, Troy Floyd. They had the library auditorium, which is called the Carver Culture Center now. All the functions mostly were there. And they would carry me and I'd sit up on the stage most of the time, just sit and listen to the band. And I always was fascinated with the saxophone. That's what I always wanted to play. And that's what I've played since seventh grade.⁴

I became a professional when I was in Prairie View College, and that was during the war. All the male musicians were drafted into the service, and so the band director there decided with one, which was me, to organize an all-girl group. He phoned the high schools of Texas during the summer to try to find girls who were interested in Prairie View to entice them to come and organize a band. Our communications at Prairie View at the time were writing messages with crayon on the sidewalk. Up under the bed somewhere in the dormitory, you know, "come tonight we are gonna organize a band," and you'd be surprised to know how many girls had brought their instruments from home. Well, they were pretty good; we were able to organize a band. We played at college, and then we went out and played at different towns. Around in Houston, Dallas, small towns, just starting, and then we did that throughout the school year and then next year, next summer we went on the road. All-girl band, dance band. In between we played jazz and we did the army camps during World War II. It was a big salary of \$9 for one night. And my salary was \$13 but the rest of the people it was \$9.

After the first year, and well during this first summer, we went all the way to the Apollo Theater, in New York, and when we got there my picture was on the placard, advertising me as a college coed. I was seventeen. I just went out and played my alto and everybody received me so well. We stayed only that week, and then we had the whole big salary of \$90. Yeah, we were playing at the theater that week that was the scale, but when we first left here, we all joined the Dallas local so we were all union musicians.

And then we left for New York and we played at the Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Howard Theater in Washington, D. C., and then we did a one-nighter tour all the way down the East Coast to Florida and across, and we ended up back in

Texas, and we had a week's vacation. The biggest problem we had was no place to stay other than homes, unless there was a black hotel. And in a town where they didn't have any hotels, we would have to stay in people's homes.

Then school for the next year, started the band again, and then, during the next year, the band got better, because there were girls who came out of high school and kept going, and we ended up in Houston and seven of us stayed together as a small band, and we got a booking agent and the agent set up one-nighters. I've tried to get back to college ever since but something has always stopped me. I did go for one semester and my father got ill and I had to come back home so that broke that up and I had to stay because my dad was in the hospital.

We played in Detroit, and then we left Detroit and went to Peoria, Illinois, and there was a musician. I don't recall her name. She wanted to go out on her own. Her name was pretty big, and she came to Peoria and asked us if we'd come with her. And so I stayed with her for a few years. It worked very good. We worked 51 weeks out of the year. We would stay a week or two weeks at

been, we played together in Chicago.

I was just running around ahead of myself, because, after being with Diana, I went to Europe and there was a girl from Stockholm, Sweden, who came to New York, and she had been sent over by an agent from Stockholm to see if she could find the best jazz girl musician in the states and see if they would go over there. And in the states she ran into J. J. Johnson, the trombonist, and he told her about me. They called me long distance to see if I was interested in going to Europe. We played nine months. They had the advertisements you know, the best clubs, and they drew large crowds. It makes you wonder why you have to go to Europe for people to hear you. They do, they have a different feeling toward music over there. We would always have a crowd, and it's nothing to go on an hour show on the radio and you know do television.

Jazz is the main thing in my life, yeah. I couldn't ever give it up because it's a part of me. It's a shame that being a jazz musician and knowing jazz as I do, that I would have to take another job to support myself. In the manner that I want to

The biggest problem we had was no place to stay other than homes, unless there was a black hotel. And in a town where they didn't have any hotels, we would have to stay in people's homes.

a place. We wouldn't do any one-nighters, mostly the clubs, and then we all went to the Caribbean. And we played Canada all the time, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec, and others.

I think when I was twenty-five, I decided to organize my own band. I used all males. I got another booking agent out of Chicago. And they kept us working. And then I came back. I was living in Chicago then, and then after that I went with Diana Washington. I was a featured player with her.

Charlie Parker was my idol as a saxophonist. We were very good friends. I knew the Bird, and we used to practice. He had a group in Washington, D. C., and I'd go to their rehearsal and then I would go to the hotel with him, and we'd sit up there in the hotel room and practice. He always admired my tone. And I admired his too, and he said, "I wish I had your tone. If I had that, I'd really be something." And I said, "Yeah but I can't think as fast as you can." He never forced me in anyway of anything and even on the drugs or nothing. I was excluded, as far as that's concerned. You know he only treated me as an assistant. No, he never even mentioned the drugs, and I would sit in the room with him and practice and play, and some of the different things and that was never brought up. You see all the band members they always treated me like a sister. Yeah, I was very good friends with the Bird (Immer Young) We had to have

play jazz, but I wouldn't even work on another job, if I was able to leave whenever there was a time that I was able to play. I've got a new boss at the Salvation Army, and I explained to him that, if I have a job out of town, that I'm going. But I never miss a day's work, going to work, but if it's anything pertaining to music I've got to go. That's my life, and I gotta go.

When I came back from Europe in '64, by then Parker was dead, and Prez was gone and Diana Washington died the next week. The tour was over, and I came back and people thought I came from a funeral, but it was just that it happened at that time. I like Billie Holliday, and she was always friendly to me. As a matter of fact, if she was playing some place and I walked in, I would play in the band. She would play with me all night, and she'd say, "Oh, I know how to put it together," and she'd open the case and put my horn together. She said fans taught me how to put a horn together. Charlie Parker's impact on me as a saxophone player was the greatest.

Then I stayed two years on the job in La Salle, Illinois, with my all-girl band. The job just kept me in flashes really, because I played everything in which I have learned to play everything. Here in San Antonio I play country and western jobs, jazz jobs, any kind of jobs, you know. I play. It doesn't make any difference now. It was just one club, in La Salle, Illinois, when

I had my group. This was before Martin Luther King. And we were booked into La Salle but at a different club, and they wouldn't let us live in the hotel and there was no place to live in this all-white town, in '60s early, no this was in the '50s the first time. And we had to live in a town called Ottawa, which is seventeen miles and commute back and forth every night. I went back to that town ten years later and actually stayed at the inn. On my days off, I would have to go to Chicago but there then I would get invited out. I could get all the credit I wanted.

Diana Washington changed my name to Ladybird. Ladybird. Charlie Parker wrote a tune called "Ladybird." She thought that would be appropriate. Nobody knows me down in San Antonio by Ladybird. You know it's a funny thing about your home town. Yeah, people recognize you more away from your home town than they do here in San Antonio.

I went back to Chicago, and I was gonna try to go to school and my father passed. He got sick and I came home and left my mother by herself, and I stayed another year in Chicago and came home on visits. I could see her thyroid, because she had had a thyroid operation when I was still in high school, and it looked like the thyroid had grown back. I came back home. She called me one day, which was very rare, it had to be something really bad for her to make a long-distance call. And she told me that her doctor wanted me to call him, and I said what is wrong, and he said that the goiter had grown back, and she almost died. I made a promise to God that I wouldn't leave her. She died last year. I came back to San Antonio.

DUDE SKILES

Well, now let's see, I'm sixty-five now. I would say I've been **hackin'** at it on music for over fifty years. My dad and mother were active in music and played dances all around San Antonio for twenty years. I was born in Joplin, Missouri, 1915. My folks were out of Kansas City at that time, and my daddy had the pit bands on a tent show. And they played the Southwest on weekend stands, really. They were just typical tent shows that played the circuit.

They took the bands out every summer with three or four tents, and Daddy stayed with the main tent, which usually made Texas, all the Southwest area. My dad and mother played San Antonio or in towns outside San Antonio, like **Floresville**. They got acquainted with San Antonio in those years, and in about 1927, I think it was '26, my Dad came down with a big band. It was a twelve-piece band that he had put together in Kansas City and called it The Kansas City Monarchs.

I don't remember he came into San Antonio in about '25 and booked a series of dances around the area; Poteet, Poth, Pleasanton, had 'em all booked. All he had to do was play 'em.

got a hold of all the guys in his band - they were livin' in a downtown hotel - and told 'em if they went out and played in the band, they were subject to a fine and suspension and everything they could do to keep 'em from going. So when it came bus time, **only** one guy showed up. So, Daddy just said, "we'll just go on down and play it anyway." Went down and played it with his violin, his mother and a banjo player and a bass player. And they got through the night.

I started out on drums. And I played drums with my dad and my mother and we played such things as the Tourist Club in the early '30s. Over the years we were the band, and I **played** drums, and my mother played piano and Jack, my brother, **played** the banjo. And we **played** on one of the first radio stations in San Antonio. It was KONO, and later we had an early morning program at 5:30 in the morning, six days on KTSA. I've got a brochure on that, The Skiles' Music Makers.

And Daddy played all these homemade instruments. He made a pitchfork fiddle, and we did a lot of schoolwork. We'd go all around the auditoriums of the local schools, and he would play cigar box fiddle and give out directions on how to make all these instruments to the kids. And the school systems liked it, and he continued that way all while I was **goin'** to junior high school, Nathaniel Hawthorne. I went there and finished there, and then I went from there to Main Avenue in 1930 and finished there. I owe a great deal to Otto Zelle. He was a band director around here in both Brackenridge and Jefferson. I was in the band at Main Avenue, and Otto needed a bass player real bad, and I had started on trumpet prior to that.

In fact, I was playing trumpet in the band. He needed a bass player, tuba. I had a knack of playing jazz on anything with three fingers on it, and he heard me toodlin' around on bass one day, and convinced me that I gotta play toodle for him. I was never much of a reader to begin with, but I had a pretty good ear. Even when I went with Fred Waring, I couldn't read a lick.

That was 1937. I went as a trumpet player. Brother Jack and I were musicians out on the West Coast not working steady or anything. MCA were booking all the stuff that we did and wanted to know if we would like to go up to San Francisco and audition for Waring. He needed a jazz trumpet player. And that's all I was doing then. Jack and I drove from **Los Angeles**, where we were at the time, to San Francisco for this audition. I sat in the group and we played a couple of things there, and I got through it, not being able to read very well, and Waring thanked me and I was on the way out and I said, "Would you mind listening to my brother on guitar?" and Jack came in and Waring just went for it.

All during high school and all during junior school, Jack and I were playing an average of three nights a week with my folks, dances. He would book 'em and, in those days, during The Depression, and we would play on commission. I guess ~~we~~

played every little town that there was! I played Goliad, and I can remember playing Goliad out on a square, or a dance hall that was not too far out of town that was built for dancing with the big open windows that would open, so it would be halfway cool.

And there was a young man with the WPA came in there one night, and we were playing with an all-girl band, The Battle of Music. During the dance, he was sitting next to the band, and that was back in the days when families came to the country-dances. They'd have babies on the pallets sleeping back underneath the corners. It was real different than it is today. So, when this elderly man came in and walked up to this twenty-year-old boy leaning against a post of a chair and asked him, he was about ten feet from me, and asked him if he was the one that was dating his daughter. And boy, I don't remember his answer, but the old man pulled out a gun and shot him five times, right there at the dance. All the people kept on dancing around. They laid him out, and the coroner came, and took the bullets out and I'm the guy that held the Coke bottle that he

playing rhythm without any keys. Well, the keys without any hammers on the piano!

The only colored people that I had anything to do with, who worked out at Shadowland, for a long time, Boots and his Buddies. And I knew this trumpet player, the guy from Louisiana that just passed away, Don Albert. I went in and sat in at his club. He had a club in those times. I used to go out there and play drums and bring along my trumpet. The way I started on trumpet, my Dad gave me a shopworn, one I think he paid twenty bucks for it. They had a pawn shop on Houston Street across the Texas Theater in those days, and my dad made the rounds, and he gave me a trumpet. And I would take that trumpet to work with us on the three or four nights a week that we were playin' dances in these various halls around here. It took me quite awhile. My dad showed me the fingering, and he was familiar with I'd say, all musical instruments, and I finally mastered "Dark Town Strutters Ball."

And, of course, Jack was on banjo and switched over to guitar

I remember one night I went up and sat in and I played with Louis Armstrong at the Foggy Bottom, about '27 or '28, and he came through with the band,

dropped the bullets in. He was shot through the lung and left a great big splotch of blood right next to where he was layin', and we just kept right on playing, and then the people were starting to go home. They were afraid. There used to be loud backfires on almost every car when they started because it was halfway cool and racin' engine. It would sound like gunfire, and it held up the people leaving because some of the smart alecks out there were doin' it on purposes.

My dad was very lenient with me, and any time I wanted to go sit in with somebody I could do it. There were all kinds of bands coming through. I remember one night I went up and sat in and I played with Louis Armstrong at the Foggy Bottom, about '27 or '28, and he came through with the band. I just couldn't get enough of him, ever. I was about a nineteen-year-old kid, and I was up there.

I knew the colored guy who had an instrument repair place downtown. Its name was Morton Rhythm. He had an old piano with no keys on it, and it didn't make a sound. I'd go down there and sit in. All the guys who played jazz would go sit in. He had a shop right downtown pretty close to the Nix Hospital up on the second floor, and there's a typewriter place underneath it now, and he was there for years and all the guys would go down there. Seriously, he would make enough noise on that piano so that late got a good one going, he was just

along about then. He's always a pleasure to play with. The guy who really knocked me out was Jack Teagarden. Just killed me, you know. I followed Teagarden and right along that time, I was just doing so-so on the trumpet, not workin' at it too hard. Paul Whiteman came through and played the Texas Theater. And the guy in the show got up and played "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," and it just fractured me. Bunny Berrigan, and he just killed me! But from then on I couldn't practice enough. I was takin' lessons from Erwin Scott, a trumpet player around here for years and years that played the Texas Theater when they had the pit bands. He was not an exceptional trumpet player, but he was very patient and could read like a fox.

Jack and I drove to Chicago first, and I got awful sick while I was in Chicago. It would have to be in about '36, I think. We went with Waring in '37 so it would have to be in about '35 or '36. We arrived there, and I don't think we had \$10 between us. So we went to the YMCA, and we got a room, and they're pretty cheap. It was bitterly cold then, but we would go into a bar and ask if it would be all right to come in there and play and take our instruments. They'd say all right, and we would go in there and play at the bar and for tips and with a little cigar box and made real good money for them. It was right in the middle of The Depression.

Chicago was a real eye-opener. I went to the Three Deuces

and sat in with Art Tatum. I didn't believe it when I heard him! I had caught amoebic dysentery and went to St. Luke's. I was a guinea pig; tried the sulfa drugs and it looked like horse pills. Whatever they did, cured me. When I got rested up and strong again, we decided to try it again. So, we went out to the West Coast this time. We had an ole' Willis Knight, burnt more oil than gas! But we made it, and we got set up out there and went by and auditioned for MCA, Music Corporation of America. And they set us up for an audition at the Biltmore Hotel, and we got a job there playing intermission. It was Jack and me, that's all. We did quite a lot of singing then, the two of us. We were really doing a great job there, and somebody came by and asked us how old we were, and I was nineteen and Jack was fifteen and a half. They convinced this owner that we were too young to be playing in a bar, so we had to quit.

Fred Waring was the disciplinarian, just a Boy Scout, Eagle Scout. He was the most strong-minded man you could possibly imagine, and there wasn't an original note that came out of his show at all. It was all Waring. He conducted it, delivered it and it was packaged to his specifications. And he paid us just a subsistence salary. On the road, it finally got up to where I was making \$300 a week, which was considered the tops at that time. Waring and I had many words, you know. I was pretty smart-alecky. But he taught me more about the department and show business than I could have learned any other place.

After I left Waring, I was kinda stomping around looking for something, I went with Jack Teagarden, which was quite a switch there. Freedom was the name of it. Most band leaders that I had anything to do with and with very few exceptions, they were bastards. They were just tough as nails. Goodman, in particular, that guy was somethin' else. I auditioned for his band and didn't make it. He pulled out a thing on the audition called "Waltz and Swing Time." He put me on first, and I botched it. But he was just generally, just real rude. In New York language at that time, he was a schmuck! Yeah, but boy, he could play!

Then I got a chance to go with Johnny Green, and that's the best band I was ever with, by far. We were doin' shows and CBS stuff. I was with him two years. I can't say anything bad about the musicianship in New York. They got more guys out of work up there. The last time I heard anything about it, there's about 30,000 and 20,000 are out of work.

And as far as respect for musicians, among the general public, I think the only thing lower than the musician on a credit rating, is a barber. There's just no way that you can walk in and say, "I'm a musician. I'm a trumpet player, and I have played with somebody," and they wouldn't loan you a dime!

JIM COLLUM, JR.

I was first exposed to jazz by my father's playing and Garner Clark. And there was a clique in Dallas; they were active there. Interesting musicians and interesting characters, fiercely independent players who starved to death in Dallas mostly during the '40s is when he was doing his thing. My dad went to SMU (Southern Methodist University). He went to SMU in the early '30s, and wanted to play football as an athlete. He was ineligible for football, and his other love was playing jazz music. And after he'd had a couple years doing that, he went to Sewanee. Sewanee is a university in Tennessee. He went there, and I don't think he was much of a scholar. Mostly, he was interested in just playing his alto saxophone and practiced all the time. And generally was a nuisance to the faculty and some of the other kids, because he was always practicing. Or at least that's the impression that I always got.

And he came back to Dallas, and when he found that he couldn't play football there because of the transferring - eligibility and so forth - he heard that they were organizing the first SMU band. Hadn't been a band there. I think, if I'm not mistaken, this is 1933. He went over there and he knew Garner Clark, and Garner Clark was in the band as a ringer. He was not really enrolled at SMU, but he was playing in the band, a cornet player. And he played hot jazz choruses, and dad played clarinet choruses. And they had one or two other guys that could kinda play hot take-off jazz. The band was about thirty, thirty-five pieces. They were not well organized. They played about ten tunes, all jazz tunes. And they had the riffs worked out, and they would play the riffs behind the soloist. And that put the band into its first college jazz band. But that just solidified his burning desire to continue to play jazz.

And along the way, fortunately or unfortunately, however you want to look at it, he met my mother, which kind of slowed down his jazz career considerably. That's the unfortunate part. But he dropped out of SMU after one year and got married. Went to work in the family wholesale grocery business and really put away all his horns and didn't try to play very much. Just occasional things, but didn't try to play much. Worked hard at the grocery business and studied under his father's instruction and became an accountant in night school. Kind of a flash in business.

So, in 1936, when Benny Goodman came along, he was very fascinated by the turn that music was taking. He had enough years to think about his life and so forth. And it wasn't too many years until he decided to drop out of the business in the early '40s, about the time that I came along. And he went into full time music career sometime during World War II years. They used to have terrific jam sessions at our big house there in Dallas.

Garner Clark slept there a lot on the sofa. One of my vivid memories as a kid was going downstairs and in the living room,

Garner would be stretched out on the floor in front of the fireplace which had a gas grate. It was one of these things where the gas burns under the wood to ignite the wood. Well, the wood had long since been gone and the gas was burning to keep Garner warm, and he was in front of the fireplace just stiff like a corpse. He would lie so straight and still that he wouldn't mess up his clothes. And the next morning, he'd get up and he'd look completely neat. Didn't look like he'd been sleeping in his clothes at all. He slept there either on the floor in front of the fire or in better weather, he slept on the sofa. I was a little boy, and music used to wake me up and I'd go down and sit and listen and make a nuisance of myself. That's my first memory of jazz.

As time went on, 1946, '47, we went to Venezuela. My father, by this time, beat around by the music business quite a bit and decided to go back into regular business activity. Took a job with a Rockefeller organization in Venezuela. So, we went there for two years. And upon our return—fall of 1949—Garner Clark was forming a band and they were playing about one or two nights a week. This is the same clique of Dallas

he wasn't paying too much attention to me at that time. I discovered the Louis Armstrong records first and I listened to those things, and I just loved 'em. It was wonderful.

There were all kind of Louis Armstrong records. There were a few Hot Fives and Sevens; there were also Louis Armstrong playing with a lot of big bands. Louie in the '30s when he'd become a high-note player. I just thought that he played great. And then my tastes broadened a little more and I started discovering offshoots of this. And the next passion that I had became the Bix Beiderbecke records. Within a couple of years I'd gotten to where I knew Beiderbecke choruses by heart. I could sing 'em, too. I could whistle. I couldn't play anything on any instrument.

One day my father discovered me whistling one of these choruses. He didn't realize it was a Bix chorus. I didn't even know he was paying attention. I'm whistling away, and he said, "Say, that's pretty good. That's pretty good. You ought to take up some kind of a horn like a trombone or something. That sounds pretty good." It was a Bix Beiderbecke chorus; it should

I discovered the Louis Armstrong records first and I listened to those things, and I just loved 'em. It was wonderful.

musicians of which there were probably about thirty and maybe another ten or fifteen on the fringes. But the guys who were in the hard core of this thing were fiercely independent about their music and were very apt to go and tell the band leader, "Don't call me again for your lousy, crummy band." And they did that a lot, and so they didn't work. Over the next few years, somehow, that embedded in my consciousness about there was something special about the music.

We moved to San Antonio in '53, and I didn't like it a bit. But, the funny thing about it, I went and I would sit and brood in my room about what a terrible thing this was. Write long letters to my friends in Dallas and my cousin, Mary, who has nothing to do with the story at all, except that she became my pen pal for about a year and I'd write her and tell her how terrible it was. But the thing is that my father's 78 record collection was in there, and I listened to a few of these records. And little by little, in this period I went through, a year or so, being very unhappy about being in San Antonio, I would listen to these records, and I got to where I started developing an ear for the music and a feeling for it. At that early age I had not played any instrument or had any instruction. And my father was so preoccupied at that point with his own business activities trying to kind of make up for all the years that he messed around having a lot of fun being an eccentric in Dallas, and he come on and started on whistling and I did very well, but

have been pretty good. So he encouraged me. Said, "Why don't you take up some kind of a horn. That sounds pretty good. You probably have a pretty good talent for jazz. Sounds pretty good. What are you whistlin'?" He said something about playing a trombone. Trombone looked to me like it wouldn't be so hard, you know. You just slide.

We had this grocery business, and I was always working there; from the time we came to San Antonio I was kind of put to work, every day in the summer. I'd go down there and do anything they wanted me to do. Sweep or stack things or weigh up pinto beans. Anyway, sometimes they sent me out as a helper on a truck, and help unload. And in those days they had tarpaulin trucks with open backs, and they were designed for two men. So one man would stay in the truck at all times so that nobody would steal anything. They didn't have locking closures, doors, on the back of the truck. One day I'm there and we pull up on Houston Street to a little café that's right where the Frost Bank is now. And across the street there's a pawn shop and there was a cornet there and kind of fitted the image of what I had in my mind about the Beiderbecke thing. Wow, look at that old cornet. It was really quite an early model, I'm guessing it was early 1900s model. It's a very short one. Had the original case and it was such a clever looking little thing.

And so I went in and the guy wanted \$12 for it. And we haggled around. We haggled around for a couple of days. I went

back, and finally I bought it for \$7, and I went to the San Antonio Music Company and bought a book for \$1 on how to play a "C" scale, and from there I started playing tunes and playing along with records. And little by little learning to play, teaching myself how to play. And my dad'd come home and he'd say, "What are you doin? You ought to practice, take some lessons, practice." I didn't want to take lessons. I didn't want to learn to read. I just wanted to play. I'm not certain, but I think it was about '56. I was about a sophomore in high school and I must've been about fifteen years old when I started. Within about a year, I'd gotten to where I could play a little bit. Within a couple of days I learned two tunes. And every afternoon I'd go home and play along with records mostly. Did that for a while. Drove the neighbor crazy. But that's how I got started.

I was going to Alamo Heights High School. We had a band there, a little band. A guitar, drums, and one of the kids played clarinet and myself. Four people. First we just had guitar and clarinet player. This one fellow was always hanging around and he'd say, "Wow." He liked it. And we're trying to learn this tune, trying to learn jazz and the blues. Pretty simple, basic tunes. So he'd always stand around and clap his hands on the off beat. "I think I'd like to play with you guys. Take up the drums, maybe." So he kept talking about it, and so we borrowed a snare drum. Got him some drumsticks and practiced up for a couple of weeks, you know. He could keep kind of a beat there. So, little by little he became the drummer.

And we went down to another pawn shop. See, I'd had this great success with the pawn shop. So we went down and Sunset Loan Company on Commerce Street had a big ol' bass drum in there. "Oh, look at that. That's what we need." Had a scene painted on the front. Part of this stuff fitted my image of early jazz bands and what they were supposed to look like. Well, we got that old drum; fixed it, redid it a little bit and worked on it. We made a homemade pedal out of wood and door springs and things. It didn't work too good. We used it for about a couple of weeks and finally we went down and bought a real pedal. And we still have that drum. It's at the Landing. We finally put new heads on it, but it's basically a very good instrument, you know. Good drum. But anyway, we used that old drum and the snare drum and we got a cymbal or something. This guy didn't have any technique but he had a pretty good beat. And so we played and all kinds of things.

Dad would come up once in a while. He's kind of interested in what was going on and interested in what we were doing. So he played saxophone. He'd go sometimes down to Mayfield's and borrow a saxophone, a baritone or a tenor, because we didn't have a trombone and play a third harmony part. We played some jobs; we actually booked some jobs and played those jobs with our band. Dances and things. When we got out of high school the band broke up. They went off to college

except for me, and I had gotten married, following in my father's footsteps, at the tender young age of eighteen. So I went to work on the grocery business and started going to SAC. And I started working right away. And so I didn't get to play very much. After a while, I'd complain to my dad. You know this bothered me. "I never play. I never play. All I do is work in this damn grocery business, you know. Just grinding away here. And I'd like to be able to play a little music once in awhile." So we started having Sunday afternoon sessions.

And my father was in Alcoholics Anonymous and he went to one of the A.A. meetings and came back and said, "You know, I met this guy at the A.A. club. Banjo player. He's a real good musician," I said, "Well, did you hear him play?" He said, "No." "Well how do you know?" He said, "Well I can tell by talking to him." I couldn't quite figure that out, you know. But he knew. Later on I got to where I understood that, where you could tell sort of by how the guy acted whether he could play or not. But it was Benny Valfre. So Benny comes around right away, and he's a wonderful guy, real good musician. So right away we had the first ingredients of the band. Somehow we stumbled on to Willson Davis, and Chuck Reiley was coming around occasionally. And pretty soon, it didn't take too long, this thing started sounding like a band. Then another thing that had a kind of influence on me, was that Dad made those records with Don Albert on trumpet and Chuck on trombone. And I went and listened to those things.

Some of 'em were very good. They had Cliff Brewton on piano and Junior Edwards and a bass player named Chief, Chief Acosta. And Don Albert, of course, who was playing very good then. Kind of worked his chops up and got himself in good shape and he sounded pretty good then. Some of those things are excellent. Some of 'em are not so good. They had Paul Crawford arrangements. So, Paul came over to see what they were doin' with his arrangements. I met him and he really fascinated me. We had a session one time that I just thought Paul played wonderful. He was a trombonist from New Orleans.

So we took some of these guys and had Paul come back again another time. And we had this rhythm section that I particularly liked which was Bill Case on piano and Valfre and Benny and Harvey Kindervater on drums and Crawford and Dad and myself. And that was the first time we played, and it was the Happy Jazz Band. It was those guys. We played for the San Antonio Jazz Club. I think it was 1962. We played at the Roaring '20s. Might of still been Shadowland. I had another cornet by then. It was a real antique-looking thing and it had an old mouthpiece. Those things were hard to play. The band sounded pretty good. They taped it, and, boy, it sounded terrific. I enjoyed it a lot, so we wanted to play every Sunday. Dad and I went out and we went to beer joints looking for places to play on a Sunday afternoon.

What we wanted to try to work out was to play to the gate, you know. We finally went to Rex's. We went to a couple of places and they said, "Naw." They didn't want to do it. But we went to Rex's and somehow the guy liked us or something. Can't remember exactly. But we started going out there. We played on his patio. It was in the summer. And we played there about six months and we would take a dollar cover charge. And that was what we took. And usually, if we were lucky, we broke even. Sometimes we lost a little bit paying the other five guys. We continued like that there at Rex's for about six months and we were discovered, sort of, by people.

And Bill Case didn't wanna play. That was another thing that happened. In those days Bill Case played great. He was a great rhythm player. He was really good. He didn't want to play because he didn't want to play for money. He'd had bitter experiences and he didn't want it. So pretty soon we came up with Cliff Gillette. I can't remember how we learned about him.

By the time we got to the Landing in April of '63. 'Bout six months after we started, maybe nine months after we started

La Serena, which was located where the Bwana Dick is now. And those were the only two places on the river. There were no clubs. There were no hotels. There was no *nothin'*. We never had intended to play except on weekends, you know. We brought Cliff Brewton down here from Dallas to play piano in the band, and he was supposed to play with a couple of other guys on weeknights to make about a five-night a week deal. And it didn't work at all, 'cause the weeknights would just fall flatter than a fritter. Nobody would come down there; on the weekends we would be jammed. So it gradually worked around to where we were just open on weekends. We were still in the wholesale grocery business. I would work hard in that grocery business and I wouldn't touch my horn from Saturday to the next Friday a lot of times. Wouldn't even touch it, and that's no way to play the trumpet. Go down there and struggle, go crazy trying to play, and sounded terrible, and you know. Never had any chops.

After a couple of years it began to change. The audience became a little different. It became less a toy of these wealthy investors and more of a place for the tourists gradually. At first it was all San

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the band and we first went to Rex's, along the road we met Jim Hayne. And boy, Jim Hayne was an inspiration 'cause he was a pure, dyed-in-the-wool tailgate trombone player from the word "go." And there was no mistaking it. Boy, I just thought he was the greatest thing. So he said, well, he wanted to put together this club on the river. And he came and talked to Dad and said, "We want you to play. Will you play, and, if so, for how much?" And Dad said, "Well, we'll play on one condition, that you'll play trombone." I know, looking back, that Jim probably had no intention of staying in it very long. But he did it for awhile. He played great, too.

Jim was the one who put the investments together to open The Landing. It was in the basement of what they call the Nix Annex, which was a four-story building that butted up to the Nix. And it was a parking garage. But the basement was open, and most people when they were in there thought they were in the basement of the Nix. And we had about twenty to ~~twenty-~~ twenty-two guys put in \$1,000 apiece, and it was a very elite group of investors. They were all very monied people, well thought about. That had a lot to do with the success in the early days.

When we went there, only Casa Rio was there on the river. Had been there since the 40s. I think. And there was a gift shop,

Antonio people. But little by little it started changing. Within a short time, a couple of years, the Poco Loco opened next door. And the two places together had a sort of an attraction. But little by little it changed. And by 1968, of course, they built two big hotels for HemisFair. And all these out-of-town people started coming, and convention facilities were built in '68.

The thing is that I'm playing this music that flourished mostly in the '20s or at least had its origins there. It's got a timeless quality and it's just as viable in the '90s and it was in the '20s. It's a classical form. And it's the same thing with classical music if you go in and you hear the symphony play a symphony that's 300 years old and it sounds just as beautiful, today, as it would to people 300 years ago. It becomes a classical thing. That's the way I view the early jazz. So, I can't see that a great hot chorus by Kenny Davern in 1980 is a thing that has less integrity than a great hot chorus by Johnny Dodds in 1930. And I can't really see what the difference is or why one's right and why one isn't.

When you've got a group that's just playing together two nights a week, regardless of how they need the money, or whether there's a job they have, it's very easy to be compatible with someone that you just spend two days a week with. It's much harder to be

compatible with someone that you spend day after day, like there's somebody that's right at the next desk—sometimes you just get to where you can't stand the guy because people have a natural tendency for their personalities to rub when they're forced in close. But that's a problem in the jazz band business.

The reason that the band was so stable for so many years were several. Number one, we only played on Friday and Saturday nights and an occasional other thing so we were not thrown together where our personalities got to be where people got so when they couldn't stand each other quite so bad, you know. And it was a very pleasant arrangement. We'd go down there and play on weekends and it really was a very happy experience. The band was aptly named, and, despite the fact that we weren't all as polished as we could have been individually, the band always had a very good, usually had a very good sound and feel in those early days, and had a lot of fire.

But as we went along the main thing that happened was that we got into liquor by the drink in 1971. And it happened all of

I don't think it's gonna happen. So go ahead and stay in there." Then he got killed in a plane crash. And so the other people that ran the thing, well they were very nice to us, too. But we got down to a month-to-month deal. And we just didn't have any lease there. This was all going on about the time my father got sick. And they came to us and told us that we were going to have to get out of there.

Then, on top of that, the state came in and audited our books. We had a practice, set up in the early days of the Landing, we did not pay admissions tax. In those days there was state admissions tax of ten cents on the dollar. Well, what we did was we charged a fifty-cent admission and up to fifty cents is exempt. At fifty-one cents the tax starts. So you could come in for fifty cents, stand at the bar. You were admitted. That was admission. Fifty cents, exempt from tax. But if you wanted to purchase a table, that cost another dollar and a half, see. So most people just flew on through. And to be very honest with you, it was stretching things quite a bit, because most people

I live at night, or rather, work at night instead of in the daytime. That one thing in itself is going to cause me to have a different kind of life,

a sudden. We had not made an exact, elaborate plan, except that we knew that liquor by the drink was coming. And it was unclear exactly when the law would be enacted. And, I'm a little fuzzy about these details, but we weren't exactly sure it seems like to me. And we had put the application in knowing that it was gonna happen, and we wanted to start selling liquor by the drink. It was very hard in those early days without liquor by the drink. It was just impossible to operate on weeknights. And the only way the Landing could do any good was by being just packed on the weekends. And the weeknights, there was no way to pay for a seven-piece band or even a four-piece band.

When the liquor by the drink started, we had the first license in town. Dad pulled that thing out, going back to his days as an accountant and he'd gone out there and made a couple of trips out to see the Liquor Control Board people, and gotten us on the top of the list. And we were given the first license in town, and opened a day or two before anybody else. Or at least a day before anybody else, and scooped everybody. We were on the front page of the paper and a woman was taking a drink saying "at the Landing." And there was a big write up in the paper, showed me carrying in a case of whiskey.

The original Landing had no lease. David Brooks, the landlord, had told us they would give us the one-year lease, because they didn't know what they would do. They might tear the Nix Annex building down, and, if they did have to tear it down, they didn't want to be hurt with us. But, he said, "But

that came and paid the \$2 cover charge didn't know what the system was. Although there was a sign there that said, "Fifty cent entry," admission. "Table charge, dollar and a half." And sometimes somebody'd just stand at the door, and then we'd just charge 'em fifty cents. But that was very few. So we didn't pay any admissions tax.

Well, it'd been standing up under scrutiny of the state auditors and stuff, who'd come around and check bars all the time. And it'd been standing up until this one eager beaver cat that came and got hold of it. Said, "Oh no." And they went back for six years, something like that and they came up with this enormous tax that was owed. It seems to me like it was \$60,000 in tax. And dad's dying of cancer. The state is after us for \$60,000 in old admission taxes and the lease is up.

We'd just been evicted. And we've got a Full-time professional band sitting there that costs a lot of money, and I just didn't know how in the world I was going to work the thing out. But what finally happened was, I nosed around and trying to find out a place. And I went here and I went there and it just didn't look like I was going to be able to find any place to go to work. And there was a guy named Roger Ridings who had been with the Chamber. And he was working for the Stockman Restaurant. He was the manager.

And they were having a lot of trouble there. They had lost a lot of money. I don't know what all their problems were, but they were getting' ready to reorganize and sell out or

something. And he said, "Jim, I strongly suggest that you call David Strauss and see what kinda deal you can work with him. I think that really maybe you can lease some of this building." So I chased this thing all the way down and it went on and on and on. Man, it was the toughest negotiation. Anyway, we finally agreed on this place. And they had to do a lot of work on it. And it kept taking longer and longer. They had to pour a slab to be part of our ceiling and the floor for the restaurant, which at one time the thing had been a two story room, and they were going to divide it in half. Put us in the bottom and the restaurant at the top. And they had to do that and everything took longer than it was supposed to.

And I went back to the Nix people. I said, "Fellas, we're gonna have to have another month." And they just screamed bloody murder and said, "Can't do it. You're messing us all up. We've got to have this space." And so Jim Hayne went back with me and they finally agreed to give us another month or three weeks. As it was, we were about a month or six weeks with no place to play for the band. We went and played at officers' clubs at the air bases, and we hustled all around and got funny little jobs, went to West Texas for about three or four days.

I didn't see how we were possibly going to meet the payroll. Nobody's making enough money to pay the rent. So we got over there and we got the thing open, and it just took a super human effort. Now in the meantime we worked on that tax thing. Once in awhile I've thought about leaving town and getting away from here and starting over where I can just be a musician and not trying to be into all this stuff. But I don't want to do that. If I did that I'd have to play some music I didn't like and stuff. And this way I can play exactly what I want and the band is great. So it suits me and it's worth it.

For one thing it's very hard to get seven people—and, we're just talking about strictly musically, and leaving all the business and stuff out. It's very hard to get seven people who want to all go exactly the same way. And you might be able to get seven guys who will go out and play casual and listen to each other and bend their styles and blend, and sound pretty good. But to have a continuing professional and, they're personalities there—their musical ideas come to the surface, you see. And a guy who's a very good player, he's got some musical ideas of his own that he wants to express his own thoughts. And it's hard to get seven guys whose basic thoughts, when they all surface, are gonna go the same way.

I have not done any of this like a typical businessman. I have not done it, because I expected to make a lot of money, although I sure wouldn't mind it, you know. But I haven't done anything because I thought it was the smart way to make money or that it had a great, bright future, or that it was gonna bring me fame and fortune. And I really don't care as much about prosperity, great tremendous success or anything. I'll be

very satisfied with a modest degree of success and to be able to keep the band together and have a full career and do this. I will be very satisfied with that kind of result from this activity.

George Nash, my cousin, says that I'm an anachronism. I don't really feel that's the case, and I'm not trying to live in another era at all. I knew a couple of strange characters who liked to pretend that they were Bix Beiderbecke, and try to just do things just for the sake of sort of being eccentric. It's an effort for them to do it, but they do it, because they want to be that person. And that's not my scene at all. I'm just intense about trying to do what we've been out doing it for so many years and it turns my life kind of upside down a little bit. So I live a different life style than most San Antonians. I'm sure it's quite different than yours or most other people around town.

I live at night, or rather, work at night instead of in the daytime. That one thing in itself is going to cause me to have a different kind of life. I don't know that the rest of my activities are too much different than any busy professional. I'm real interested in a few things, and I tend to kind of concentrate on those few things and I don't have a great deal of variety in my life. Sometimes you don't much feel like going to work. But that's not significant with me. I feel real lucky to be in a position that I'm in and to be able to do what I do when I see so many others who would like to do this sort of thing and are not able to do it for a variety of reasons. So I feel pretty fortunate and I basically most of the time get a lot out of it and my playing is up and down. According to how well the band performs and how well I personally perform. And that goes up and down a little bit.

Let me just say that the whole situation over the years was up and down and some years. But in difficult years, it was awful hard for us and it was awfully hard, it took a lot of determination and a lot of commitment and was an uncomfortable thing economically. The patoff for me was that I enjoyed the playing and I also had a legacy at doing this. I kept on doing it even though it was pretty uncomfortable some of those years. ★

Notes

1. Other scholars have relied on Holmesly's interviews, including: Christopher Wilkinson, who wrote a biography of Don Albert Dominique entitled *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. (University of California Press, 2001). Don Albert served as the main source of inspiration for Holmesly's interviews.
2. Sterlin Holmesly would like to thank the Institute of Texan Cultures at the University of Texas, San Antonio, especially Esther MacMillan, for help in archiving these interviews.
3. For more on Gene Ramey, see Cameron Addis, "The 'Baptist Beat' in Modern Jazz: Texan Gene Ramey in Kansas City and New York," *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2004, 8-21.
4. For more on Bert Etta Davis and the Prairie View A&M Co-ed band, see Sherrie Tucker, "Uplift and Downbeats: What If Jazz History Included the Prairie View Co-eds?" *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 2002, 30-38; See also Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "AII-Girl" Bands of the 1940s*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000).