

# AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER DAVIS, JR.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK  
For KCRW-FM  
January 30, 1982

© Bob Rosenbaum 1982, All Rights Reserved.

Information: [transcripts@bobrosenbaum.com](mailto:transcripts@bobrosenbaum.com)

---

*An interview with pianist and composer Walter Davis, Jr., conducted at the home of drummer J.R. Mitchell in New York. Portions of the source audio were subsequently aired over public radio station KCRW-FM in Santa Monica.*

*The interview was conducted in two distinct sessions, over the course of a single day.*

*Interviewers are differentiated as follows:*

[BR] – Bob Rosenbaum

[ER] – Eric Ross

[JRM] – J.R. Mitchell

---

## SESSION 1

[BR] YOU PLAYED WITH BIRD [CHARLIE PARKER]. WHEN WAS THAT?

That was the late '40s. Let me see. I was 16 or 17. It was interesting. Late '40s.

[BR] HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Well, it started outside of New York I guess, in Newark. I was part of a group over there while I was in high school. The group was called the *Sound Masters*. Al Armstrong played trumpet, Willie Wright played tenor, Lloyd Turner played drums and Al Cotton played bass. And we were getting a lot of the figures right from Bird, you know, by way of Al Armstrong, the trumpet player, who was very close to Bird. So we had all the Charlie Parker figures correctly

spelled out for us, you know. And this was a very interesting band, a real be-bop band.

The leaders of this group started producing concerts. Every week, they'd feature a star from New York City, you know, like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, JJ [Johnson], Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, Bud Powell, whoever, you know. And they would put a local group around it. I wasn't the only pianist, but I was the one that they would put with guys like Charlie Parker, you know, and Max. It was very nice. So we had done some concerts that way. And we had known each other through this period, and through hanging out in New York also, but that group was the working entity.

***I wasn't the only pianist, but I was the one that they would put with guys like Charlie Parker and Max Roach.***

So the night I worked with Max Roach, he was so enthused over the group, he said, 'Wow, this is my group. You guys are working with me from here on out.' And I said, 'Oh, yeah. Oh, sure, Max. Sure, Max.' So, he said, 'Matter of fact, we're opening at *The Parlor* next week.' At the Parlor Bar on 125th Street. And I said, 'You're kidding us.' And he said, 'Oh yes we are!' So I said, 'Okay.' And when I get to the gig, you know [Laughs] it turns out that Bird is the

leader. [Laughs] And this is a beautiful gig. We had all the piano players in New York – it looked like in the world – lined all up around the wall. All these giants, you know? Duke Jordan, Walter Bishop Jr., Kenny Drew, everybody man! Johnny Acea, Sadik Hakim. And I said, 'Wait a minute, what is this?' you know. And Bird came over to me and said, 'Man, you just play, just play. I know what I'm doing.' [Laughs] And when I finished playing that evening, that set, all the piano players came up to me and traded phone numbers with me and everything! You know, it is very interesting! They accepted me.

***And I said, 'Wait a minute, what is this?' And Bird came over to me and said, 'Man, you just play, just play. I know what I'm doing.'***

And on this gig that's when I also met Jackie McLean. Because Sonny Rollins and I were already tight, and Walter Bishop, and Bud Powell. Sonny, we used to talk all the time, I used to call him up anytime of day and ask him changes and things, you know. And Sonny had been telling me about this guy, he said, 'Man, you're going to love this guy, he's just like you man, always smiling and whatnot, and he loves the music!' So I said, 'Yeah, okay, let me meet him, great!' And he brought this guy down and it turned out to be Jackie McLean. You know, we looked at each other and man, it was instant love, you know? [Laughs]

It was a good period for me, a very good period. Because that was the music that I was really into, and these guys became my regular everyday friends, you know. I was around Max and Bird like every day. Thelonious Monk, I'd go by his house and get him, you know? And Bud Powell. Very interesting. It was a good period for me because when I got into Bud

Powell he would use me as a guinea pig, you know. He showed me his music, and I would play it while he walked around the room and listened. If there was something he wanted to change, he'd run back, lean over me and say, 'No, play this right here!' Playing, you know, he'd say, 'Do it again like this,' and whatnot. So I got to learn these tunes, like "Glass Enclosure". I was around when he was writing "Glass Enclosure", you know, so I was really at the beginning of that. And "Un Poco Loco" and those kinds of things. He really showed them to me, and 'guinea-pigged' me. [Laughs] Which was very interesting. I was so glad about that later on, you know, as I saw the history unfold. I knew that Bud was very important. I knew this when I met him.

When I first heard Bud Powell, he was the only person that I ever heard who could outplay Charlie Parker! [Laughs] And this is strange to say, but those who heard it know exactly what I'm talking about. Bud Powell could do that – he was the only one I knew who could do it, though. Nobody else could deal with that.

[BR] WELL, HE WAS ONE OF THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO COULD REALLY RIDE THAT...

Exactly. People really aren't even aware of Bud Powell, not even today, you know. They're not really aware of Bud Powell. Because if they were aware of him, they'd go back there and try to learn some music with Bud Powell! Because Bud played total piano. He was a classicist. And he was very good. And through his father, whom I became close with also, his father introduced me to Bud's teacher, and told his teacher to teach me for a while, you know? Take me on, because they were so hurt that Bud left when Bird came along. They really didn't like that idea, you know. So, I said, 'Hey man, teach me!' You know? 'Teach me!'

[BR] WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY SAYING 'BUD LEFT'?

Bud stopped going to his teacher. They were working very hard on him, grooming Bud for the concert stage, you see. So there you go. And here I come. And I liked it, man. I really needed it too. I used to do a lot of playing with Bud. We used to rip these tunes up, tear 'em up inside

out and redo 'em, whatnot, and renovate them. [Laughs] Renovate the tunes!

[BR] WHEN WAS IT THAT YOU STARTED PLAYING?

Who me? Oh, I started very early, because my whole family was into music. My father sang in quartets, you know, and my mother sang in a chorus, the *Orange Majestic Singers* – which only broke up maybe 10 years or so ago. This group was fantastic. So, my first few music teachers came out of the *Orange Majestic Singers*, which is very interesting.

[BR] HOW DO YOU SEE THAT INFLUENCING YOU AT THE TIME? I MEAN, WHAT DIRECTION WERE YOU HEADED IN? WERE YOU HEADED IN ANY PARTICULAR DIRECTION BEFORE YOU PICKED UP ON—

Well, I just liked music. At that time I liked a lot of music. I liked the [Nat] King Cole trio, let's see, Louis Jordan, the *Symphony Five*, and Joe Liggins and the *Honey Drippers*. I liked the groups and of course I like the big bands. You know, the big bands moved me. How Lionel Hampton had his thing going, then I got into Dizzy's band and Billy Ekstine's band. Hey man, I knew exactly what I wanted to do then! When I heard them bands, I just thought these musicians were phenomenal. You know, anybody who played with Billy Ekstine's band, I mean, Jesus Christ.

[BR] THAT WAS THE START FOR SO MANY CAREERS. Yeah, that's it. Sure.

[BR] AND THEN YOU WERE IN NEW YORK, PLAYING WITH MAX...

Right. Well, we had a group with Max. We had a group at the same time that we hit. We were working with Charlie Parker. We worked with Bird down at *Birdland*. And the *Downbeat Club* on 53rd Street – no, 54th Street near Eighth Avenue. And then there was the *Gold Door* downtown, in the Village, the *Pad* down on Seventh Avenue. There was *Chateau Gardens*, a dance hall down on Second Avenue. And *Houston Street*, which is now a parking lot, and has been for years. Then there was, naturally, the uptown places you know. There was *Hunts*

*Point Palace*, the *Audubon* where we used to have sessions, *Rhythm Club*, different places. And out of this group, you know, in talking with these guys each and every day over at Max's house, we were developing another group of Max's. We used to rehearse at the *Putnam Central Club* in Brooklyn. And that was very interesting. We'd leave there and go to the *Kingston Lounge* and have a session, you know, after every rehearsal. And it was very interesting. A lot of great musicians were in that band, you know?

***Later on Charles Mingus came in from California. We were saying 'Ah, here's this bass player from the symphony orchestra in California. Man, let's get him!'***

[BR] THAT WAS LIKE THE EARLY '50S?

Yes, very early, like '50, '51, right in through there. And Leon Comegys played trombone, Ernie Henry played alto, and of course, Hank Mobley was playing tenor. And Franklin Skeete was playing with us. He was the bass player. And then later on [Charles] Mingus came in from California, you know. We were saying 'Ah, here's this bass player from the symphony orchestra in California.' [Laughs] You know, 'Man, let's get him!' So he and Max got together and they formed Debut Records, you know. And they did the session up there in *Massey Hall*, and split the money amongst themselves.

[JRM] WHAT YEAR WAS THAT?

I don't know.

[BR] 1951? [CORRECT YEAR IS 1953]

[JRM] WE WERE TALKING ABOUT STARTING RECORD COMPANIES, AND MINGUS, WASN'T HE ONE OF THE FIRST?

That was with Max. That was Debut Records.

[JRM] OKAY.

Yeah, we recorded on that label. We recorded things like "Glow Worm". Max wrote a tune called "Sfax" – I named it Sfax, which sounds like Max. You know, it's a town in Africa, with a 39,000 population, Sfax. And I said 'Use that!' You know? Yeah. Okay. Max's Sfax! [Laughs] So he liked that. And he naturally he did a few recordings of the 'Drum Conversation', you know. Bidi ba laboo boom, bidi ba la ba la baa boom – it was beautiful man! I don't know, I feel like we were playing classical jazz at the time, because the things that we were doing were the first time it was done, you know? [Laughs] And it wasn't as crowded as it is now. You get an idea, you go out there and do it, you're the first! But now, you don't know. You don't know now. But then it was like that – everything was so brand new. You know?

[BR] YOU COULD TELL.

Yeah, you could tell, sure. The newness was there.

[BR] YOU COULD TELL BY PEOPLE'S REACTIONS.

Right.

[BR] YOU CAN DO THINGS NOW AND PEOPLE – IT SEEMS TAMER, SOMEHOW. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A TIME IN THE MUSIC TOO, REALLY, WHEN NO ONE HAD EVER HEARD ANYTHING QUITE LIKE WHAT WAS GOING ON BEFORE.

Right. Now, it's more or less like copying now, you know. But at the time we were all in classical studies, and we were trying to find other expressions for the music, you know, with some feeling. And without having to play classics, you understand? But it was the fluidity of the classics, or the techniques of the classics, that we were trying to break away from, you see. Because I was going toward the concert stage, and it was a whole different kind of thing, you know. So we tried to incorporate that into

our music without being obvious. That was the whole idea. I don't know what – it's a different story now. But that was the idea then.

[BR] ALSO TRYING TO GET IT TO LARGER HALLS?

Oh, yeah. Larger audiences. But we weren't really audience-conscious on that kind of level, in numbers, as we were just getting the materials together. We just figured it would grow out, you know. And we always tried to initiate new musicians or new persons into the music. To try to show them what we were trying to say. And try to develop this and let it grow out. You see.

*We always tried to initiate new musicians. To show them what we were trying to say. And try to develop this and let it grow out.*

So the minute you heard something, you didn't want to do it that way again, because was already done. So we just did the heads, and after that we'd just keep going on with something else, you know? And if you played something like one night, somebody might hear that and say, 'Oh, wow, that's great!' And the next time you did that, 'Oh man, come on man, you said that!' So you couldn't come in with these patent lines and licks. They wouldn't work but once for you – after they heard it once, 'Hey, later!' You know.

So was a very interesting period, because I got close to my idols. Which were Bud, Monk – Bud, I keep saying him because he was one of those that was hard to get to musically, you know. But he accepted me and shared a lot of interesting music with me, I guess, because I was his guinea pig. And I used to revolt and throw chords back at him and say, 'No, what about this way, Bud?' I'm looking back at it now. I guess that's why he liked me. I'd like a

guy like that, you know. Because I didn't eat up everything that Bud did, like a lot of the cats were doing. [Laughs] Yeah, I'd say 'What about this? You played that chord last set, man. Let's do it this way.' And he said 'Ohhh.' And Monk was very interesting.

[BR] THESE WERE THE PIONEERS.

Oh yeah, they had their own way of doing it. And they were the first, so it's very interesting. You get caught up in that, you know. You've got to be aware of what other people are doing to notice, when you do it, that it's the first time that you're doing it, you see. So you've got to keep aware, and keep abreast of what's going down with the music, you know? Because we used to have different, like, neighborhood ways of playing tunes, you know. Like in Brooklyn, they were playing a tune a little different from the guys in downtown New York. And uptown it was quite different, you know. And you get in a session and play, and they can tell exactly where you came from – by the way you would play, by certain cut-ins you would use and certain little tags. It would tell them what neighborhood you come from, if in New York at all.

[JRM] [LAUGHS]

[BR] COMPARED TO THAT TIME, WHAT'S HAPPENING TODAY. DO YOU STILL SEE DIALECTS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF TOWN?

Not as much, because they're not exposed on the same kind of level. See at that time, there were more places to come out and play. You know, at night, where you didn't have to be working. There were so many places to play. You would go hunting in clubs all night trying to find one musician to get them on the bandstand and have a 'fight' with him, you know. It was very challenging.

If somebody outblew you tonight, you wouldn't wait until next year or not even a month or next week to get him. The very next night, you've got to go out to all the clubs until you find him, 'Ah, gotcha! All right, let's go up here and play.' And you'd been working out all kinds of new things during that very next day to hit him

with, you know. Because, you found out his style and found out what he can't do, and you'll get up on stage and call one of these tunes that he don't know, and take him through it. So we used to do that. And so consequently, if the guy happened to do the same tune, we would change keys on him, you know, maybe playing in a different key every chorus. And up the tempo, and little things like that. [Laughs]

It was more like, competitive calisthenics – you know, it was very interesting. It was fun. Because you'd have to know all the keys, because the guys would trick you and say, 'Hey man, do you know so-and-so?' And I'd say 'Yeah, OK.' And you get to play it, you know and it would be in another key. And the guy would say, 'I thought you knew that!' And you'd be embarrassed very badly. [Laughs] So by being in the rhythm section, it was good for me because I would hold down the different keys, you know. So it was really good. Like when the guys challenged me, it was quite easy for me to change keys on them. Sometimes we'd get nasty and change the keys in the middle of the chorus. you know? Whatever, if we did it, the guy would have to be able to hear it and jump right in it. If he couldn't, he didn't know what was going on. [Laughs] It was funny, you know. But it was very interesting period - it was very trying.

[BR] KIND OF INTERESTING, BECAUSE YOU HAVE THE ABILITY, YOU HAVE THE PERSPECTIVE THAT A LOT OF MUSICIANS DON'T HAVE. A LOT OF MUSICIANS PLAYING TODAY ARE YOUNGER, AND THEY JUST HAVEN'T HAD THE EXPERIENCE.

Well, we were serious. We were more serious, I think, about the music. At the time, we didn't wait for nighttime to come to play. We played in the daytime, wherever we could. Where we could find a piano instead of some drums and a bass player, and get into it. But at that time, you know, when Juilliard was uptown on Claremont Avenue, Miles [Davis] was going to Juilliard, and a lot of guys like Ricky Porter, Wilbur Hogan, different guys, used to stay up there in the Claremont Hotel. And this place was jam-packed with musicians, you know. We used to go over to the school, to Juilliard, to use the

rooms, to practice and whatnot. And man, guys really developed some nice things up there, meeting one another, you know. And there were always different ways to try to make music.

***You couldn't just play something with no grounds. It had to have some force and reason.***

A lot of guys were writing and arranging and really getting into it, you know? And everybody was so serious, as to this music and how it went. Everything had to be grounded. You couldn't just play something with no grounds on it. I mean, it had to have a reason, it had to have some force and reason – the whole thing to do with it, you know? Because guys would ask you. You'd be playing some music [Makes musical sounds] and they'd say 'Hey, write that out for me. What was that?' [More musical sounds] 'Never mind that, write it out for me! Let me see all the notes you just played.' You know? [Laughs] Oh, yeah. You couldn't just play 'Whoop!' or something like that because they would call it out on you, to be able to write, note for note. 'Show me exactly what you did, what chord was that on? Hey, man, that don't fit in that chord, what are you playing man?' It was very interesting.

[BR] STRUCTURE.

And Thelonious Monk used to speak to me about economics, you know, in the writing system. I would write chords a certain way and he would comment on it and tell me to write it another way which was more simple. You know, to think in terms of, for playing.

[BR] IN WHAT WAY?

Well, when there's a lot of altered tunes in a chord. Where he would rename it, give it another name from another bass point or

another tonic, where altered chords would be part of the scale. You see. He would name it without all the alterations, you know, by using a different tonic. And he made it very simple, you know. And you could read it and play it quicker.

And it was very interesting – he used to always take my music from me, out of my hand, 'shoop!', open it up, read it and say, 'Ah, what do you say this for?' And, 'Oh, that's nice.' He would always give me these comments on my music, which was very great. Because I loved Thelonious. Everything he said in music, I just ate it up, man, because Monk was such a giant to me. You know? He gave us our harmony system, in this music, you know. All the hippest–

[BR] HE OPENED IT UP.

Yeah, all the hippest sounds and changes came from Thelonious Monk. Harmonically. You know, they really did.

[BR] WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH PEOPLE TODAY, MUSICIANS, DO YOU FIND THAT PEOPLE TAKE THE MUSIC AS SERIOUSLY AS SOMEONE LIKE THELONIOUS MONK? I MEAN, LIKE THE ALBUM YOU JUST DID – YOU'RE PLAYING WITH TWO YOUNG GUYS...

Well, first of all, it's a different kind of seriousness. It would be jive for me to say that the guys today are not as serious. That's not fair to say. It's not correct. You know? When I say serious, I'm talking about the focus, the creative focus, and the creative force was so alive in guys like Bud and Monk and Bird. I mean, this is proven by their music, by their music today – how strong they were, you see.

Their strength was in their focus, and where they put their focus at in the music. And the things that they developed, you know, which turned out to be crutches for some of us – a lot of us – that people don't even, they just take for granted now.

But there was a time when guys weren't playing 'ting-tinka-ting-tinka-ting' on the cymbal, you know? [Laughs] There was a time! There was a time when the guys weren't taking solos on

their instruments; everybody was playing together, you know? [Laughs] Or ensembles, they were just doing a lot of ensemble work. I mean the music really has made positive changes, you know? In the setting up of the drums, and even the use of the drums – especially the cymbals. The music has really changed a lot, has been changing, you know, by these little things, little instances. So everybody's important, you know.

I think today, you have to have a stronger focus than you did. Because first of all you have to try to find a place to put your focus, that's important. And realize that you're supported only by something that somebody else has focused on. You know what I mean? Which reminds me of a drummer – I won't mention his name – he was playing a thing with all of these drummers, these creative drummers who have brought so much to the instrument. And he's playing, and he was embarrassed to find out that he had nothing to play of his own. Everything he played had to do with these other drummers. Every time he'd go to hit the drum, it drove him crazy, 'Oh man, I don't have anything of my own!' You know, he was just realizing that nothing was his. And everybody else is [Makes musical sounds] playing all of their things, you know, and he couldn't play anything. Because everything he was playing was there. Yeah. And he just blanked out. He just couldn't handle it. And he felt so small, you know?

This is what I'm talking about, you know. You have to create something of your own that can survive. We seem to be living in a glass-bottomed boat, you know what I mean? [Laughs] It's really strange. We poke out our chests and talk about this and that. And if certain people spoke up and just took their boats from us, we'd be in trouble! [Laughs]

Because we've clung to so many things that we just take for granted, that we thought were already here all the time, you know? You know, we haven't always had sidewalks. We sit in a nice warm home – it wasn't always like that. We used to have to sit there, at some time, I guess people had to sit around fires, you know, out in the cold, before they started building shelter for

themselves. Music is the same way. We've taken a lot of these things for granted. And we don't even realize where they've come from, and how recently they've been given to us – or lent to us. I don't know, everything seems to be so Darwinian, you know, coming from one thing to another. There's no way to get to three and four without coming through one and two. That's just the way it is, you know, mathematically speaking it's just the way it is! Yeah!

***Music is the same way. We've taken a lot of these things for granted. We don't realize how recently they've been given – or lent – to us.***

[ER] TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FUTURE PLANS.

My future plans and goals? Well, I want to do I want to do more experimenting with the piano, and then I want to write it up for larger groups. I want to do more work like that. But I want it to all come from the piano.

[ER] HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT A SYMPHONIC, DRAMATIC TYPE OF SITUATION? A CONCERTO GROSSO OR A SUITE TYPE OF SITUATION?

Yeah. You know, I thought that way when I was in high school. I used to write up things like that, you know. I would expect to make that a reality. I've thought a lot about it, you know, over the years. I don't want to just use it for another voice. I think the idea would be to use different voicings of instruments, you know. I would like to do that. But, since our music is a classical music, I have even thought of writing up just that way, you know, for the symphony orchestra – on that kind of level. But it doesn't excite me that much, because it's not a new idea. So I'm not really flattered by the idea. It's already being done, you know.

[ER] HOW ABOUT ELECTRONIC INSTRUMENTS, ELECTRONICS. HAVE YOU THOUGHT TO WORK WITH THEM, OR ARE YOU FOCUSING ON THE PIANO RIGHT NOW?

Well, I like the acoustic things. I like to have the control in my hands, you know.

[ER] I FEEL THE SAME WAY.

Yeah. I lean to the acoustic thing. See, my thing musically, if I went into computers – I'm a Virgo, you know – if I went into computers, I don't know that I would use it for music. Because there's a lot of other instruments, a lot of information rather, that I would like to trap, through these instruments. I would like to gain some other kind of – I would like to use them to trap information, rather than to try to play music.

Because I don't think they can play the music that I would be happy with now. Because, I experimented with the Moog synthesizers and whatnot, and I couldn't get what I wanted, what I felt comfortable with. It would make me think very deviously about music, because there are other things that you can bring into play that I didn't like, you know. That has to do with the nervous system and whatnot. When I realized what you could do with sound. And I didn't like that, you know, because it was too evil. I mean, you know, it's too easy to do the evil side of it, rather than to raise it.

See, it's like experimenting. You know, we try to heal wounds for instance, right? And if we don't know what we're doing, then most times we will make it worse. You see? So, we need a little more feedback from these instruments and the experimenters. And then we have to analyze our findings before we can find out whether we're going forward or backwards with this thing! Because a lot of things that we hear that we call music is *not* music. A lot of it affects our brainwaves. A lot of it affects our nervous system, which affects the whole thing, you know? And that we're not aware of yet, you know? There are so many sounds – sound is so important. You know, there's certain areas that I wouldn't like to play with.

Acoustically, a sound doesn't last forever, so you can have a choice about it. But with an electronic instrument, you can find a note on there and just play it forever. And my G-d, I mean. I'd say it might be doing something we don't even know about, that we're not aware of. You know, we look up and all the flowers have died. You know, things like this. Sounds are strange, and sounds have the power to be beings because they have vibrations, strong vibrations. That's the only reason we hear them, is because of their vibration. And vibrations work on several levels. Mathematically speaking, we might hear a tone, and we have such things as overtones, right? These overtones could be creating entities in sound that we're not even aware of, that we don't even hear, you know, that could be harming our lives, or a life cycle outside of us, around us, in our environment, that we're not really aware of, you see.

***Sounds have the power to be beings because they have strong vibrations. That's the only reason we hear them. And vibrations work on several levels.***

So it's something that I used to think a lot about, because I knew some very heavy experimenters. They were dealing with sound before the synthesizer. And they were strange, you know. I had ideas myself about that, but when the instrument came into being, that changed my idea. I don't know. It was making the whole idea so common, the idea was not a secret anymore to me. Plus, we haven't even found it yet – find out what the real deal is yet with the sound. Yet, we have this instrument that can shoot out these piercing sounds, you know. We're not realizing or understanding what these things can do to us. I think electronic



instruments right now are very, very dangerous on levels that we don't know about. You see. It might sound funny, but this is the way I believe. And only in time will what I'm saying prove out, you know. Just like we did with the thalidomide. Oh, it was great, then. But then 20, 30 years later, you know, we're saying 'Oh my G-d. Look at what we've done!' Yeah.

[ER] YEAH, BUT THERE'S A GOOD SIDE TO ALL THAT. IT CAN HAVE VERY POSITIVE, SOOTHING, AND VERY IMPORTANT BENEFICIAL EFFECTS.

Yeah. Well everything can have beneficial effects, but I'm saying is we're putting it out at the point where it's not even worked at – the companies that make the instruments don't even know that much about the sound. You know that yourself, right? They don't know what they're doing. They're trying to make money, and they vibrate a signal, you see? And I'm only saying what I'm saying because I've checked it out. You know, I've checked out the instruments and I've done a lot of technical reading on synthesizers and electronic music, and the production of them – the wave shaping and everything. And when you understand that – like you should – you have to be aware of the possibilities of what you're doing.

Of course it can be positive, you know, but what I'm saying I think we're raping the idea, because we're using it without even understanding really what we're using. Like, I understand Yamaha paid all this money for the [Vladimir] Horowitz piano, so they could duplicate his sound with an electronic instrument. See, we've got to remember what 'synthesizer' means – know synthetic sounds, right. That's true, isn't it? It's a signal. It's an electronic signal.

[ER] IT'S AN ELECTRONIC SIGNAL. A TONE GENERATOR. IT MAKES SOME OF THE MOST INTERESTING SOUNDS WE KNOW...

OK. See, what I'm saying, man, is that we haven't really gotten it together yet. We've got a long ways to go with that. And I left the instrument alone because I couldn't, because the instrument didn't do what I thought an electronic instrument should be big enough to do. It's such a baby, you know? It doesn't do

anything but make a signal and you can shape it in a certain way. Yes, you process it.

***Think about the sound of the heartbeat, the exactness of its beat. Its attack and delay, and whatnot. These things have to do with the life of the structure that houses it.***

But think about the sound of the heartbeat. And the exactness of its beat, you know, the way it falls. You know, its attack and its delay and whatnot. And these things have to do with the life of the structure that houses it, you know. Things like this. It's very indigenous to that particular beat or that particular heart, you know. Everything has a reason, this is what I'm saying.

We can clutter ourselves with all kinds of sounds. I can go along with electronic instruments when it's more developed, and we know more about sound, I think we should learn more about sound. I think we'd really be learning something, rather than to just create entities or instruments to make the sounds through – you see what I'm saying?

[ER] I UNDERSTAND THAT.

But, you know, like a knife doesn't mean anything until we have meat or bread to use it for, you see. Then it's just a knife sitting in the sheath. The sheath will wear, but it might sit there forever, until we have a reason for it, you know? So when I picked on the word 'synthesizer', I'm saying that we already have flutes, oboes trumpets, trombones, you know, all of these instruments, clarions – we already have these instruments. Let's find, let's do something else with this electronic instrument. We can do other things with sound, you know.

Why not get our bodies together, so we don't have to sit around like we do, and try to figure out what the next move is. You know, thought has a vibration. We can use these machines to step up these vibrations, or bring them into us, to tune our auras – what some people would call healing, on another level. But things like this – these are the things that are more real to us, you know. And then that's scary to even mention, because there's a positive and negative aspect to every thing.

[ER] THERE'S THE DUALITY.

Exactly. But it's only duality when it changes.

[ER] [LAUGHS]

[Laughs] That's the only time it becomes a duality. But we have to remember the percentage of the positive that's in everything. And when we realize that, and realize where we've come from, you know, I think then we really have something to look forward to. But I mean, we can't take nature for granted, you know? Or even our intelligence or the things that we come upon by luck, so to speak. I mean, we can't do this.

[BR] YOU'RE SAYING THAT, THAT EXPERIMENTING WITH SOUND FOR SOUND ALONE, FOR SOUND'S SAKE, WE'RE KIND OF IGNORANT ABOUT IT. IT'S KIND OF A BLIND EXPERIMENTATION. DO YOU THINK THAT THERE'S THAT THERE'S A DIFFERENT WAY TO EXPERIMENT WITH SOUND? IS THERE A PARTICULAR WAY THAT YOU WOULD PURSUE IT?

Yeah, sure! There are a lot of ways to do it, you know? See what I'm what I'm saying is that we put these instruments out to make money. Right? Everything else, they work on it first, they develop it first before they put it out. But here, you know, they can't wait. [Laughs] 'We've got to put it out right away and make the money!' You know, there's so much that we can do with sound, because sound can neutralize gravity. Sounds can do a lot of things!

[BR] IT HAS ALL THAT POTENTIAL.

Sure it does. Because everything is vibration.

[BR] IT SEEMS THAT YOU'VE NOT SO MUCH DEVOTED YOUR EFFORTS TO CREATING SOUND, AS MUCH AS TO CREATING MUSIC.

Well, yeah, that's a difference too. We've got to define music, even.

[BR] YEAH. YOU KNOW, MUSIC IS SOMETHING THAT HAS A COMPLETELY HUMAN QUALITY THAT'S DEFINED BY THE PEOPLE THAT MAKE IT.

Oh yeah. Sure.

[BR] YOU'VE WORKED IN A LOT OF DIFFERENT CONTEXTS. HOW IS IT THAT YOU THINK OF – WHEN YOU SIT DOWN AT THE PIANO, HOW IS IT THAT YOU THINK OF WHAT YOU'RE DOING THESE DAYS?

Well, it's all opinion, you know. What I think about what I'm playing? I mean –

[BR] BUT YOU HAVE THE KIND OF PERSPECTIVE THAT PEOPLE PROBABLY WOULD BE INTERESTED TO HEAR.

Well, I'm trying to go forward, you know, and I'm trying to pull in information so that I can find exactly where I'm at and try to shape my way for the future. That's all. I want to do more writing in the future. You know, I never stopped writing, but I want to write more, because there's other expressions I want to put into the music...

[BR] YOU CONTINUE TO ENGAGE OTHER PEOPLE IN WHAT YOU DO, AS WELL.

Oh, yeah, you got to do that. Because we don't know it all. We have to pull in other entities, you know? Because this just makes it better. Because you can't play everything yourself, you know? And then, a lot of times you do need help. You might have to tell them how to do it, or what perspective to put it into though. But once you do that, you know, that should be all you have to do. Then they should just hook it up and go straight ahead with it, you see? Right. Otherwise, there's something not valid about it, you see what I'm saying?

You've got to be true to your own self. If I can't pull you in on my trip, you know, where you can play with me and we march along on this road together, then there's got to be something

jive about the trip, you know? Unless we become robots and say, 'Okay, when you hear me play daaa-da, then you do this', you know, something like that. This is another kind of thing, you know. But we're trying to create a situation where we can react upon what we feel, you know? And what we feel, we've got to make sure that what we feel is valid. This is where we have to meet on what we feel.

The fact that I smack you on the back of your hand is not what we're talking about reacting to, you know. We want to react, when we feel something in our bodies, you know, that's doing something. Then we say, 'Oh, yeah, this is it.' Then we want to, you know, change our mode there.

It's like the law of sevens, you know? Everything moves like that – music and everything else – nature is created that way. You have half steps and whole steps, you know. And this is a law you can't break. So you want everybody to come in and meet at one. You know: 'What's your name, what's your name? So this is what you play, this is what you play, OK.' You know. And then the second step is what we're going to play and how we're going to set it up, and whatnot. And we're going through this, and by the time we understand where we're going, then we can create a whole lot of worlds.

Everybody has the power to create, once we understand what the tools are, and what we're creating and why we're creating it. A lot of things come into creation, once you realize them. Then you begin to create automatically, But if a man is not aware that there is such a thing as tofu, [Laughs] you know, he'll come up with tofu and say, he's the first. And he hasn't done anything, you see what I'm saying –

[BR] YEAH, YOU HAVE TO GO OUT THERE AND SEE...

We have to realize, you know, it just like the wheel. The wheel is a very important thing, you know. But before the wheel, they had logs. You know, an elongated wheel. I mean, we have so many forms of whatever we need already here. You know? And it's almost like saying that we can't judge the future, but only by the past.

Because everything is already here. The substance of the future is here now. You see, they speak about the men of the future, they say they are going to be made of plastic and metal. I mean, what? Now, hey, listen, you know, I don't want to [Laughs]...

***They're almost saying that man is going to burn himself out. But you can believe me, as long as there's metal and plastic, man is here.***

[ER] WE GOT INTO THIS YESTERDAY...

Right? I mean. It's so Darwinian. They're almost saying that man is going to burn himself out. But you can believe me, as long as there's metal and plastic, man is here. You know, he's got to be here. I mean, that's just the way it is, you know? I don't believe in any other way. Because there's such a thing as a time limit. That's what they're using, you know, as a backdrop.

They're saying, 'Well, you know, the machines will outlast man'. Right? As long as the machines last, they're only a product of the human mind. If they last billions of years, you know, they are evidence of the presence of the human thought. You see? So like, so there's no way they can outlast man, mathematically speaking. So we have to realize what context we're speaking in, and what context we are acting in with our music, the same way, you know?

We have to play something that means something. We just don't sit at the instrument and fiddle around and whatnot, we have to be serious about this, you know? To take people's time to listen. We have to really think about this. You just don't take it for granted, and just sit at the instrument and doodle around. I mean, you know, you have to say something. You have to make statements.

[BR] ISN'T IT TRUE THAT ONE PERSON'S DOODLING IS ANOTHER PERSON'S EFFORT? YOU KNOW, THAT SOMEONE CAN BE FOOLING AROUND AND DOING SOMETHING THAT IT WOULD TAKE ANOTHER PERSON YEARS TO DEVELOP?

Well, it all depends on what role you've been playing, whether that matters or not, you see. Whether you're going to be the doodler or the listener. [Laughs] You know what I'm saying?

[BR] WELL, YOU'VE GOT TO BE AWARE OF THAT.

We've got to know where we're at. We can't be sitting in the audience to say we're the performer. Because we are! [Laughs]

[ER] THERE'S THE EXCITEMENT THERE AS A MUSICIAN, THERE'S A CHALLENGE THERE, THERE'S A REAL STIMULATING – THESE CATS ARE HIGH!

Exactly!

[ER] MUSICALLY AND ARTISTICALLY, VERY HIGH STANDARDS.

The standards now have gotten lower, I say lower, because of the commercial aspect being higher now. You see. And this is a reality that happens because art is what it is.

Art has always been at the opposition of the money. So when the commercial side goes up, you know, the art goes down. You see? When the art is high, the commercial value goes down. You don't *care* whether it'll sell or not, as long as you're playing the right music! When we used to play Bebop downtown, you know, everybody would come around, because this is the music that they wanted to hear. And it grew into a sellable product. You see? Because it was such a strong music. It was strongly motivated. When you think non-commercially, you know, your art has to get stronger.

[BR] IT'S OPPOSING FORCES.

And when you think commercially, without being artistic – I wish I could say the same thing there too. Because you can make an art out of being commercial!

[BR] YEAH, IT'S AN ART IN ITSELF FOR SOME PEOPLE.

Right. There's an art to living. I think art is like, the top of line style, of everything, you know?

[BR] WELL, IT'S THE WAY TO BE.

I believe that, I really believe that. We're a product of art, you know? Our bodies, you know, the way we think and everything.

Man, I mean, look at the skeletal structure with the organs in it and the brain and the muscles, everything. I mean, are you telling me the human body is not artistic? And the human body can create art! And can judge art! I mean, hey man, you can't beat that with a stick! You know?

***Everything seems to fit until we put the commercial aspect to it. Then everything fits kind of weird, and you have to fill in all the cracks with dollar bills.***

Everything seems to fit until we put the commercial aspect to it, you know. Then everything fits kind of weird, and you have to fill in all the cracks with dollar bills and whatnot. You know what I'm saying? Now I'm not speaking against money, you know? But you know, you've got people with so much money, man – I mean, I don't know, it's just another world to me!

[BR] YEAH.

But of course, if somebody is 'gonna write me out a check for a couple of billion dollars, I mean, I wouldn't turn it down at all, you know? I would just open up some nice schools for music, and arm all the kids with music. If you would arm all the kids with music, they wouldn't have time to think about all this other trivia, you know?

Because music will make you like yourself, make you like your environment. It'll make you try to do things better, through the aspect of music! Because you begin to understand the music around you, you know? There's music around you all the time. There's day then there's night, there's day, there's night. What other rhythm is there any better than that? Up, down, up, down – everything is music, you know? Summer, winter, spring, fall! You know what I mean? Rain, snow, sleet, hail. It keeps going, man, it's beautiful! I mean, all these different things that are weaving in and out of each other all the time.

How can we not really understand music, you know? Alright, so we've listened to it, but then I think the next step is to play it. I guess I'm envisioning a world where everybody's either a listener or a musician, a creator, you know? And they graduate from being a listener to a creator.

[BR] YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE THAT STEP.

Yeah! Because you can't play until you listen some.

[BR] THAT'S RIGHT. IT SEEMS THAT AS A HUMAN BEING YOU HAVE TO GO IN BETWEEN THE TWO AND LISTEN FOR A WHILE BUT THEN IT'S GOT TO BE INSPIRING–

And then you have those who are standing between the stage and the audience, you know, and they call themselves agents. And they got their hands going both ways!

[JRM] [LAUGHS]

[BR] AND THEY DON'T LISTEN OR PLAY!.

Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme, you know?

[JRM] THEY DON'T LISTEN!

So the audience wants to tell them to sit down, and the band wants to tell him to sit down, 'Get out of the way!' And they're the ones that walk out with the money.

You find out they're the ones that own the concert hall. They're the ones that own the recording studio. They're the ones that own the

printer, the print shop, you know, that printed up all the paraphernalia that even told you that the gig was happening. You know, so they've become the third spoke in the wheel. I don't know, man. They've made themselves important, because both parties need them in some kind of way.

[ER] IT'S SUCH A–

[BR] THAT'S THE WAY IT'S SET UP.

Mick Jagger, you know, I remember him talking about that. I remember in London, we had a whole bunch of these rock stars talking, and the main conversation was about these agents! We were talking about how the agents get in the way, you know, and this and that – and they were really serious about this thing. It was strange. I was kind of surprised. You know, we were talking about how the musicians, the artists should do all of what the agent is doing.

[ER] YEAH, BUT IT'S A TIME THING. LOOK, YOU'RE TRYING TO DO YOUR MUSIC, YOU'RE TRYING TO PLAY AN INSTRUMENT. YOU KNOW, YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE A PHONE IN ONE HAND AND A PENCIL AND THE OTHER. YOU KNOW, YOU'VE GOT TO STILL HANDLE–

[BR] IT'S A SURVIVAL THING.

Yeah! You've got to pay rent.

[ER] IT'S TIME THING.

Yeah, it is a time thing.

[ER] YOU MIGHT YOURSELF NOT HAVE THE PERSONAL HOOKUPS THAT THE AGENT HAS. LIKE WHO THEY MIGHT CALL TO PLUG YOU IN TO THIS SCENE...

Yeah, because that's what he does. He spends his time doing that. I don't spend my time in them clubs, you know? I could care less, until the time comes for me to present some of my art there.

And actually the club is not my particular cup of tea, you know? I like concerts. Clubs are okay for those who like clubs. I paid my dues in clubs, I've played enough clubs. I wouldn't care if I never played a club again. Because people

don't come into clubs to hear music, they come in there to socialize. That's what it is. They come in to find a man or woman, you know, somebody to go to bed with, or some dope. Yeah, that's all they want. You know, the music is there to keep them occupied in the meantime, until they can get a table and sit down and eat and talk to their woman. And then they go tell the band to quiet down! 'I can't hear the conversation!' Because that's what they want.

And I agree with them! I'm saying yeah, sure, go ahead and talk. And then here comes the boss and says, 'Hey, man, go back up there and play.' And I say 'Hey man, why? You don't need no music in here!' Hire somebody else, I'm not going through that shit.

***I like concerts. I've played enough clubs. I wouldn't care if I never played a club again. Because people don't come into clubs to hear music.***

[ER] THATS—

Because I realized that the club is not the place for me. Now if we're going to be in a serious concert hall – I'd even rather play a dance hall where people are dancing and feeling good, you know? Just to stick me in a club, or bar, you know?

And your friends come in there and they can't even wait until you come off the stage, because the waiters and waitresses are all over them trying to pour liquor down their throats.

[ER] I KNOW.

I was in a club playing downtown, and a young lady came in to see me. And I went over to the table to talk to her and she was drunk. She said, 'Walter, I don't drink! But man, these people keep forcing all this liquor on me.' I said, 'You don't have to drink this stuff!' But she was so

intimidated, she didn't want to make no waves. And while we're talking, here comes the waitress again. And I said, 'Please get out of here, will you?' So uptight. 'Get out of here – just go!' I didn't try to be nice about it, I just said, 'Go, please.' There was no time to feel nice now. The woman was drunk! It was ridiculous, man. She was a nice singer. She just didn't want to be disturbed and hassled, you know.

[ER] HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT EUROPE OR JAPAN. HAVE YOU TOURED JAPAN?

I feel alright about all the countries, but what I feel bad about is home! You know? Why should we have to travel all over the world just to make money? That's what it gets down to.

Now if we were going over there to play music. Okay. We are going over there to play music – to *get paid*. But if you understand what I'm saying, the European entrepreneur is looking at us, and he's saying 'Oh, why these poor jazz musicians from the States!' You know, the money is getting less and less because they think that you have nowhere else to go to make money!

[BR] EVEN THERE IT'S KIND OF DIFFICULT TO—

Listen, money rules the world, man. Well, it rules the business world. In fact, that's the only world it rules. I say it like that because the jazz musicians sure don't have no money, and they're playing their behinds off!

[ER] THE PRODUCERS OF THE ART ARE NOT THE ONES WHO GET THE MONEY. IT'S THE MARKETERS.

Exactly. Yeah, I hear you. It's such a funny thing. But however negative the business part of it can be, I'm glad that I'm on the artistic part of it. You know, I thank my lucky stars for that. [Laughs] I'm really glad. Because I'd feel pretty dumb being someone not having no money who can't play either! [Laughs] You know what I mean?

So like, I can look at my albums, you know, and think about some of the history that I've had to do with. And that makes me feel good. That's a different kind of payment, you know – for me – even when they don't want to give me what I've

asked for. They'll give it to somebody else. They'll give them 20 times as much. But I can't even let that bother me anymore, you see? Because I have to live my own life. I can't let the outside world affect me inside. This is what I'm saying. Because I have to keep creating, I have to keep playing and appraising this thing. I don't want the money thing to get so important, you know, that my judgment gets lopsided. I can't allow that to happen, because I'm too aware of the money side of it.

[BR] IS THAT SOMETHING YOU'RE STILL DEALING WITH? IS IT HARD TO SEE THE DIFFERENCE? WHEN—  
I don't have any trouble telling the difference between art and money. And I've come up with some nice business ideas to make money. But the artistic part of it just doesn't – if the artistic part isn't strong enough, I'm not interested, to tell you the truth.

I come up with commercial business ideas all the time. But the art isn't strong enough for me to really get involved. You see? I need a motivation more than the money. Because when I get out there in the middle of the stream, somebody's gonna be saying, 'Walter, what are you doing?' [Laughs] 'Well, I'm trying to make \$2 over here!'

***I need more. I work from inspiration and feeling. On some levels, you might call me a child because of that. I have to feel a reason. Otherwise it's just bullshit to me.***

But man, I don't feel that I want to – I need more. I need inspiration. I work from inspiration and feeling. I'm sorry, this is the way I am. Other people can do other things, but maybe, on some levels, you might call me a child because of that. But that's the way I

operate. I have to have a reason, I have to *feel* a reason. I have to be motivated to do something. Otherwise it's just bullshit to me.

[BR] THERE YOU GO. AND THAT'S WHY YOU'RE DOING WHAT YOU'RE DOING. THAT'S WHY THE MUSIC THAT YOU'RE DOING IS, AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN, UNCOMPROMISING.

Oh, man, once you compromise your music, you're in trouble. You are in trouble, man! Because that's your bottom line. You know? And you see how it goes, man, if you don't believe me. As soon as a guy compromises his music, they make him compromise everything else. And he does it so easily, without even realizing it, you know? It's kind of easy if you have something commercially that they want.

[ER] OH, YEAH.

They will do that and give you plenty of money! They'll just buy your life, you know? And that's why these people always have to have a bunch of cocaine, or a bunch of ladies or people around them, so they don't have to think about themselves and what they're doing.

[ER] THAT IS EXACTLY RIGHT.

You see? Hey, man, listen, I can walk around alone, I can sit alone, I can sleep alone. I don't have to, you know, worry about them calling for me, 'Hey, man, come over here and hang out with me!' Uh uh, no, man. Because I can sit alone and hear music. Grab me a piece of manuscript paper and write it down, you know. And I'm happy, man, to sit at the piano and play it. And every time I play my own compositions, I'm, it's like a practice. Because my compositions are like etudes, man.

[ER] RIGHT, RIGHT. AND YOU KEEP GETTING CLOSER AND CLOSER TO THE PERFECTION OF THE IDEA.

That's what it is. Every tune I write. I think I explained it. Etude.

[ER] YEAH. A STUDY.

The more I play it, the closer I get to something that I need, that I figure I need. Yeah, man,

when I really want to stay in shape. I just play my own music man. I get it together quick!

[ER] I HEAR A LOT OF INTERESTING THINGS. THIS LAST ALBUM WAS GETTING TO DIFFERENT SCALES, A LOT OF DIFFERENT MELODIC CONTENT, AND HARMONICALLY YOU'RE BRINGING ALL THE ELEMENTS INTO PLAY—

Do you know what you're hearing? I'm trying to play more than one song at one time. That's what I'm doing. [Laughs]

[BR] SAY THAT AGAIN?

I'm playing more than one song at one time.

[BR] HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE THAT? I MEAN, IS IT BETWEEN THE HANDS OR IS IT JUST THOUGHTS?

Harmonically. You know, some of the changes are F, it might be an F, and then, for instance, I've got two sets of changes running concurrently with each other.

[ER] SO THAT'S A CLASSICAL TYPE OF TECHNIQUE, ALMOST A FUGAL TYPE OF TECHNIQUE. A STRETTO TYPE OF TECHNIQUE.

I don't know, I didn't get it that way, you know. I didn't come about it that particular way. It's just that I wanted a different flavoring for my tunes, so I flavored them by running another tune side-by-side with it. That's all. You see what I'm saying?

[ER] I THINK SO, BUT WHEN I LISTEN TO YOUR MUSIC, IT SOUNDS LIKE ONE.

Right. Okay, right. But the sound is the other song. [Laughs]

[BR] I LOVE IT. YEAH, THAT'S BEAUTIFUL.

[ER] AND HOW DID YOU APPROACH THIS?

Well, I want a sound. You know. I want a particular sound, I want a definite sound and I didn't want to be flaky about it. I wanted to know that the sound was there. You see. Just like Monk said, without having to use altered tones in the chord, you know? Because the altered tones are a scale in itself.

[ER] THAT'S RIGHT.

This is what I'm saying. So as I'm playing the song, one song, I have another song running on the side. So this gives me the shape – a definite shape. Because the other tune definitely goes a particular way. And they're in sync. Sometimes they're in sync and sometimes they're out of sync. But I understand how they work all the time. I know where they're coming from and where they're going, so that way I can stay on top of them.

That's why my rehearsals are usually a little difficult, until the guys catch it. When they catch it they jump up in the air and they say, 'Oh, man it's so simple. I didn't realize...' He had to go around the barn to get there, you know. And once they get it man they never forget. Like Kenny Washington, this guy never forgets, man. He never forgets because it's so simple to him, you know?

When I had that group together, that trio, I used to rehearse with them every day, like 50 tunes a day. Just run through all these tunes, you know, and I'd say, 'Because I don't ever know what I'm going to play! So I just want to give you a backlog, a repertoire, so you can just follow me. These will be the tunes that I'm coming from.' So I give them these tunes by composers and idioms. Like, for instance, 'Here's some Tad Dameron, here's some things from Dizzy's band, things from B's [Billy Ekstine's] band, which was all integrated together.' You know, a lot of guys forget, 'Trane [John Coltrane] was in Dizzy's old band. [Laughs]

Anyway what I'm saying is that you have all of these different parts, and you throw all of these things together. And I have to do it my own way and be definite about it, because of the way I came up, you know? So it's a strange situation. But that's the thing, you've got to be definite.

[ER] THE RESULT IS EXCELLENT.

Thank you. I'm glad you like it!

[ER] I DO, VERY MUCH.

Because I really – that's another thing too – when you do something that you think is



genuine, a lot of guys forget that it has to be tasty too. [Laughs] Right? You know, how some guys say, 'Hey man. Let's do so-and-so-and-so.' 'Why do you want to do that?' And he says, 'Because it's weird.' 'Oh, yeah, far out.' Is that really what's happening? You also want it to sound dynamite! You know? Right? And you also want certain people to understand what you're saying, You know, certain other artists, right? You understand? Like when Bird [Charlie Parker] came on the scene and played his things, man, everybody was saying, 'Oh, wow! I sure can identify with that! That's pretty!' And you know, they could just imagine themselves playing Charlie Parker on whatever instrument they were playing, you know?

[BR] AND THAT'S—

Saxophone players play Bud Powell things and come off, you know? But if there's somebody that they can identify with like that, he might be as good on some levels, but he wouldn't be accepted in that way, because they can't use him for their solos. You know what I'm saying?

I don't know, it's about use I guess, a lot of times. Can a guy use it? [Laughs] Like a saying we used to have. 'Can you use it?' [Laughs] Right? Can you use it in your business man, with what you got to do when you go out on the bandstand. Somebody says, 'Hey man, let's hear it!' You know, 'Can you use it?'

It the same way you pick a set, when you're on the bandstand. You come in, you see a nice crowd. And you see certain people there you recognize, who really know about the music — really understand and really know how to ride that trip. Certain tunes come into your mind, 'Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping.' Right away, man. And you go up there and hit them tunes, you know, and make them scream. And they in turn make you scream. Because you scream in the music. And it's a good tie, you know, with the audience, when you can do that. Just by the tunes.

That's what I like about composing, you create these 'sound images'. That's what they are, they're sound images, that tell the body to react a certain kind of way, or the person. This is like,

how we program each other. You know what I mean?

[BR] THAT'S—

It's really interesting.

[BR] THAT'S PART OF THE TRIP TOO.

Oh, yes. It's a very valid part of the trip, you see. Because, I mean, you become a personal friend of mine if you give me something like that, you know. I guess that's what fan clubs mean. They say, 'Oh boy, this guy, we really want to be a friend of yours, man, because you've given us some nuggets of sound that really carried us through the hard periods.'

People, you know, go through all kinds of — that's why the Blues are so heavy, man. Because guys could cry in their beers and everything, you know. That was the way of letting it out. And then there are other ways to let things out too, besides crying. You cry a thing out for a while, and then you've got to do something else with it, before you can turn it around to be a good positive. You see? You can't keep crying and muddling over it. At some point, you have to rejoice that you realize what's going on, and too, that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get behind it, you know?

***You cry a thing out for a while,  
and then you've got to turn it  
around to be a good positive.  
You can't keep crying. At some  
point, you have to rejoice that  
you realize what's going on.***

You know, you'll hear artists, that might play a whole dynamite set for you. But some artists, they'll play one good tune and another bad tune, and a couple of good ones and whatnot.

Let's be real about it. A lot of groups that you are going to hear, man, some of the tunes don't really get off. So you have to look forward to certain moments in their music, you know? You just look forward to moments – you don't look for a whole tune to be out of sight. Because there might just be a moment in that. That might be the saddest tune the guys play all night, but it will be the most memorable moment in that tune. Somewhere in there, something will happen between the drums and the bass, or any other two instruments or any three – or maybe everybody might crystallize and build a pyramid of sound for a second. And that might be the whole thing that you will remember forever, you know?

***Something will happen between the drums and the bass, or everybody might crystallize and build a pyramid of sound for a second. And that might be what you remember forever, you know?***

This is what has made some groups, particular groups come to the fore. Like you speak about Miles' [Davis] '55 band, you know, with Paul Chambers, Philly Joe [Jones] and Red Garland. There were things they used to hit like that. Every group that you can think of has happened because of this, you know? They have given us a nugget.

You know, a lot of times we have been sold a nugget! [Laughs] Right? In other words, they'll push it down your throat so much – they've got enough money to buy the air time, you know, and whatnot. And you say, 'Hey man, this is it!' And somebody else is going to show you something and say 'No man, that ain't nothing!' So you say, 'Because I'm hearing br-br-br-br-br-br-br...' And then they say, 'Yeah, that's because

you've been hearing br-br-br-br-br-br-br every day!' And it has changed your whole take. You're saying, 'Oh man, I don't want to take no bath no more, I want to take a shower!' Hey man, wait a minute, you know?

[JRM] LIKE A CHANGE-UP.

Right. Until you don't even recognize your own self when you look at yourself in the mirror, you know? And then that's really bad.

[BR] BUT THAT HAPPENS.

Sure it happens! Yes, it happens. But that's why I like to write, you know, because this is the only way to keep in touch with yourself on that kind of level, you see.

[BR] YOU WRITE? DO YOU WRITE WORDS? YOU SHOULD.

Yeah, I've written some words, you know. But my words don't knock me out that much. They knock me out for a minute, but they're, but they don't hold – they don't complete all the levels that I want, sometimes. I don't hear what I really like to hear in them all the time. You know? I wish they did knock me out more, but they don't, they really don't. I guess in time they could, because I hear a way that I'd like to hear lyrics, coming from myself. But they're so far from that. [Laughs] So I guess that tells me that it's something that I could work on, because I do have a concept of how it should be – I really have a definite concept.

[BR] SOMETHING IN THE LONG TERM.

Yeah, I'd have to work on it, exactly. I have to, you know, really work on it.

[BR] COLLECT THOSE MOMENTS.

Yeah, I guess so. [Laughs]

[BR] PUT THEM ALL TOGETHER, IF YOU CAN.

Yeah, if you can. If you can.

[BR] JUST A LITTLE MOMENT, EVERY NOW AND THEN IS ALL YOU NEED.

Yeah. To ride off. That's what it's really about, you know, musically. We come up with these moments that we can ride on.

[BR] WELL, THIS HAS BEEN AN EDUCATION! [PAUSE] YOU KNOW, IT'S HARD FOR ME TO ASK ABOUT PEOPLE THAT YOU'VE BEEN WITH, BECAUSE A LOT OF THE PEOPLE I'M ONLY SO FAMILIAR WITH. BUT ALSO THERE'S SOMEONE LIKE JACKIE MCLEAN, WHO HAD SUCH A-

Jackie, oh man, he's incredible! Jackie is so beautiful, man. Jackie is just a beautiful big hearted, big feeling, robust person, that loves the music. You know? I mean, Jackie is just a beautiful individual, man. I really, really love Jackie, man. He's so beautiful. I mean, he is so - he loves the music so much, man! He really does. He really loves the music! And you can tell in his playing that he loves the music. You can tell, yeah! The music is important to him. And all that I remember about Jackie, is his dedication to the music. You know? He's always been right there. Always been right there with me. As far as I'm concerned, you know, Jackie is right there.

[BR] IS THAT A DIFFICULT THING?

Well, with some people, yeah. Because like we were saying before, you have to live you know. You have to pay rent, you have to eat, and you have to buy other things too! [Laughs] But I mean, on that ground I say it can be hard. But if that's what you are, that's what you are!

But that's what I think of Jackie McLean, that's just where he's at. I mean, if he didn't have any money, you know, to eat or whatever, I think he'd still be on the music, man. I know that, because the music would bring him through that! [Laughs] Jackie knows about that, you know. Music has taken Jackie to a lot of planes, you know? The music has brought Jackie to us! Really. So I give Jackie a thousand stars. Jackie is so beautiful. I love him very much. I always have loved Jackie!

[BR] DO YOU KEEP IN TOUCH WITH HIM?

Not that much. But I know wherever he is, he's on the music! You know? You just know that about some people.

***Art Blakey is an institution. So many guys came into him, and he straightened them out and sent them out on the path. And on the right path!***

[BR] THEN THERE'S ART BLAKEY, WHO IS - THE POWER THAT THE GUY HAS! PLAYING FOR WHAT 40, 50 YEARS?

Oh man, Art Blakey is phenomenal, man. He's, he's an institution! That's what Art is. Art Blakey is an institution. So many guys came into him, and he straightened them out and sent them out on the path. And on the right path! You know, there are times that he talks to me, you know, gets on my case. But I respect him for it, you know?

[BR] HE'S STILL HERE.

Oh yeah. And he knows what he's talking about too. I love talking with Art, because he knows me that well, to say good things to me. You know?

[BR] HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN YOU WERE PLAYING WITH HIM? EARLY '20S?

Well I've known Art for ages. I've known Art from the late 1940s.

[BR] IS THERE ANYBODY WHO IS LIKE, NOT SO MUCH A MUSICAL FOUNDATION FOR YOU, BUT A SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION? I MEAN, IN TERMS OF HELPING YOU KEEP GOING, WHEN TIMES WERE TOUGH?

Oh, well, I would speak about my family for that, you know. My family was OK. They didn't

hassle me. Because if that's what I wanted to do, that's all they cared about.

Now Bird was also spiritual. He made a lot of things real for me. I was studying yoga at the time. And Bird came to me and said some things, you know. I don't remember telling him that I was studying, but I remember he gave me some information that took care, you know, that made a lot of things very real for me at that time in my life. When I really needed it. He just spoke some words to me and made something very simple for me, that I could work on, you know?

But my parents also helped me a lot spiritually. My family. Yeah, they told me I was a child of the king, you know? And I had to go along with that! [Laughs]

[BR] I'D GO ALONG WITH THAT...

[Laughs] It's a strange trip, you know, but you have to just say 'Well, that's the trip that you're on!' And stay with it, just keep on with it, you know? And it'll be alright.

[BR] MAKE IT THROUGH.

Yeah. But you see our trouble is we don't realize when we are making it. You don't have to make a million dollars to be making it. [Laughs] But we just have to understand more about who we are, and what our trip is supposed to be you know. Then we can, that will give us the energy to keep on trudging with it. Because that's what it is. You know, you have to lay with it, and keep doing it.

Because music is as old as the Universe, you know? Music has to do with sound. So sound was here. The Universe, the Earth and everything was created through the medium of sound. That's the only way you can create anything.

[ER] THAT GOES BACK TO WHAT THE HINDU PHILOSOPHY...

The Hindis, well I'm talking about way before them! [Laughs] Sound even made them!

[ER] YEAH, BUT SOME OF THE OLDEST WRITTEN MATERIALS THAT WE HAVE, THAT EXIST TODAY—

Yeah, well they say some things like that in the Vedas and the Sutras and whatnot. Sure.

[ER] I THINK THEY CALL IT VOTA? THEY SAY THE BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE WAS A SOUND.

Well they knew what they were talking about. But we've been so—

[ER] THE BREATH.

Everything has been so disguised and so painted over nowadays, that you're not supposed to see it. That's why the Yogis keep trying to tell us to 'still your mind' – let some of that fast stuff just keep on going! [Laughs] So that you can see what truth is!

But it's strange, man. You know, life has always been like that, I imagine.

*Everything has been so disguised and painted over, you're not supposed to see it. That's why the Yogis keep telling us to 'still your mind' – let some of that fast stuff just keep on going!*

---

## SESSION 2

[Talking about Art Blakey] Right away, on the first tune, he'd say, 'We'd like to feature our piano player, Ladies and Gentlemen...' [Laughs]

[JRM] [LAUGHS]

I'd tell Art, I'd say, 'Man, oh man. Wait. I'm not up to it, man.' [Makes verbal humming sound]

And he'd say, 'Yeah.' [Laughs] And next thing I know, man, he's putting me on and all I see is coat tails in the wind! Everybody's getting off stage. He leaves me up there by myself. Every time: 'We'd like to feature our pianist.' Yeah, there's a lot of ways to grow man. A lot of ways to grow.

[JRM] THAT WAS A WAY FOR PEOPLE TO GET TO SEE YOU, MAN. LIKE, YOU WERE JUST GETTING STARTED.

Yeah, but you know, you're going to get out of it, if you can!

[JRM] BUT I GUESS THAT HE FIGURED THE BEST WAY TO BRING YOU OUT OF IT IS TO GET YOU OUT THERE IN THE LIGHT.

But it's very interesting, you know.

[JRM] OH YEAH.

Because the minute you grab a piece of it, you find yourself in a new, brand new world! New brand new! [Laughs]

[ER] THOSE GUYS [ART BLAKEY'S JAZZ MESSENGERS] PLAYED SOME FANTASTIC TEMPOS...

Yeah, well tempos again. You know, tempos, the faster they are, the slower they are, you know? We just have to understand that about the meter. When we understand that, you know, then a ballad is like a fast tune, and vice versa.

[BR] YEAH, YOU SET UP DIFFERENT CONTEXTS. WITH A BALLAD YOU'VE GOT TO BE PLAYING FAST, IN DIFFERENT PARTS IN A WAY.

Well, a ballad you play faster than you do a fast tune. A fast tune you're playing slow.

[JRM] A BALLAD IS HARD TO PLAY.

A ballad you play 10 times faster than you do, when you're playing a tune fast. Because when it's fast you can't keep up with all of the pulses. But you can keep up with them when they're slow, you see?

[JRM] YOU HAVE TO!

[ER] THEY ARE THE HARDEST THING TO PLAY.

You see? Every line you play, man, when you're playing slow, you're right on all the pulses. But when that thing is fast, you can't keep up with it. So consequently it's slower. Right? It's just *sounds* faster, right? I'm talking about the rhythm pulses.

***A ballad you play 10 times faster than when you're playing a tune fast. When it's fast you can't keep up with all the rhythm pulses. But you can keep up with them when they're slow.***

[JRM] RIGHT. YEAH!

Yeah, when you got to play as many fast tunes as I play, you find a way to do it! And the guys, when they would solo man, the solo was like, for a half hour – it wouldn't be bars or choruses, man. It'd be like time on the clock! [Laughs] You'd play man, and the whole set would be one tune. But then, we wouldn't come off the bandstand, we'd stay up there and keep on playing.

[JRM] WELL, THE ENERGY LEVEL WAS UP THERE. YOU'D HAVE TO WORK ON RECREATING THAT AGAIN.

[ER] RIGHT.

That's why it's easier to come off the bandstand from a fast tune.

[JRM] UM-HMM.

Because it's a slower tune! When you get up on the bandstand, you hit with a bang. But you

can't go up there and really hit with a bang – you hit with a bang sound-wise. You hit with a slower tune and build up to the ballads. [Laughs] You dig it? You build up to the ballads!

[JRM] RIGHT.

You've got to get your thing together before you sit down and play a ballad, man.

[JRM] BALLADS ARE THE HARDEST TO PLAY. YOU CAN SKATE THROUGH AN UP-TEMPO. I MEAN, YOU KNOW, THE SHIT BE GOING BY SO FAST. BUT ON A BALLAD, YOU SET A PULSE THERE AND YOU GET RIGHT WITH THAT PULSE, MAN. AND IF NOT, IT REALLY STANDS OUT!

That's why you can't play a ballad too slow. You hurt yourself.

[JRM] YEAH.

It's funny. See because the two extremes meet in the middle – like a pyramid again, you know? The fast and slow, they're on the same level. And as you come up, you notice, it's strange, man. As the fast tunes get slower, they meet with the slow tunes that get faster. And then they're both the same. Like, [sings] "I like the look of you..." The tempo is like that, it's kind of in the middle, you know, "Da daaa deee daaa". But it's also a ballad and a fast tune at the same time. And when they meet like that, you've got three tunes on the same level, a fast one, a slow one and a medium one. They all meet right there, on the same pulse.

[ER] [LAUGHS] I UNDERSTAND IT AS A MORE OF A TIME CONTINUUM. BUT YOU'RE RIGHT, IT'S ALL – IT'S NOT JUST MOVING FROM X TO Y, IT'S ALSO MOVING LIKE, FROM A TO B.

Yeah, right.

[BR] IT'S LIKE A SPIRAL.

Yeah right, right.

[ER] IT'S MATHEMATICAL, IT'S LIKE A HELIX-TYPE SHAPE.

And see, the guys, we'd have so many choruses to work with it, you know. And Max is kicking

your behind on time. It's not just straight 1234, 1234, 1234, 1234, you know? He's kicking, [sings rhythmically] boom, bap, boop, baaap, bannng! So you can't think of it, you know –

[BR] HE WAS MAKING IT HARD FOR YOU.

Well, he was kind of making it easy for us, the real way to come from.

[ER] RIGHT.

If you play, [sings and claps rhythmically] d-d-d-d, d-d-d-d, d-d-d-d, d-d-d-d, d-d-d-d. I mean, you end up sounding like that! [mocking the rhythm in a catatonic way] [Everybody laughs]

By taking something like: diiiiing dong bop pring la dap tinnng dong... [fast broken beat, while clapping in steady time] And doing something slower [sings similar sounds but off the beat and slower], there you are into the ballad. See?

[JRM] I THINK THAT'S THE HARDEST THING FOR A DRUMMER TO DO.

Yeah, it's not very easy to do. But Max has talent. [Laughs] Max Roach has talent running all out of his ears. Max is just a big talent.

[BR] HOW ABOUT SONNY ROLLINS. TRYING TO LEARN ABOUT SOMEONE LIKE SONNY ROLLINS, YOU HEAR SO MANY DIFFERENT THINGS. WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO–

You mean from people?

[BR] YEAH. FROM OTHER PEOPLE, OF COURSE.

Yeah, you've got to talk to Sonny to find out about that.

[BR] YEAH. IT'S TRUE. I'D LIKE TO.

Well, Sonny is very complex, you know. He's very simple too, but he thinks heavy, you know?

[ER] WHAT IS THE THING THAT YOU LEARNED FROM HIM. WHENEVER I MEET A MUSICIAN, OR HEAR ANOTHER MUSICIAN, I TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEIR APPROACH IS, WHAT THEIR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE MUSIC IS. I TRY TO DISCOVER THAT. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WAS HIS APPROACH OR HIS PHILOSOPHY?

That covers a large area, you know? Because I've known Sonny for a lot of years, you know. His concept and his feel has always been very strong in my mind. He is such a good, articulate musician, change-wise and scale-wise. He's so articulate that he always speaks his peace. And he does it the way he wants to.

[ER] RIGHT.

Sonny Rollins is one of those who can play as much as he wants to play. Because he's really got the head for it. He's fantastic. I love his concept. His choice of notes and rhythms. And his articulation is right on it for me. I used to put a lot of tenor players on him, years ago, that weren't really sure, you know. I'm speaking of a couple of guys I know. I don't need to mention names, but a couple of saxophone players, you know, when I first met them, they came to me talking about somebody else, 'Oh man, listen to this guy!' And I said, 'Wait a minute, I've got a record you've got to hear!' [Laughs] And I put Sonny Rollins on, you know. Good G-d Almighty, man, they never looked back. That just opened them up, you know, it was so nice to see. Trane [John Coltrane] was into Newk, you know. Trane was into Sonny.

[BR] THEY SHARE A LOT OF SPIRIT.

Yeah, that's a good word, spirit. That's a good word. A very strong word. And it's very important. You can have concept and no spirit. [Laughs] You know?

[BR] IT SEEMS TO BE A BASIC ELEMENT OF JAZZ, BECAUSE OF WHAT IT IS. SPIRIT.

Yeah, but I guess there are a lot of ways to skin a cat though, too.

[BR] FOR SURE.

But we're not 'skinnin' cats, we're playing jazz, you know? That's the funny part about it. Why don't we just play music? Something so simple, just to play music and let the truth come out. Instead of so many gimmicks, you know, just to be remembered by people.

***There's all kinds of ways to attract people. If you don't do it with the art that you love, then that's something else. But when you get your art to the point that it does that, then you're doing something.***

[ER] [LAUGHS] OH WOW. I HEAR YOU. BECAUSE THAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE.

That's the easy route, man. That's the easy route for me. You know that's called attracting people, that's all. You can attract people with all kinds of things. There's all kinds of ways to attract people, man. If you don't do it with the art that you really love, or your art doesn't do that, then that's something else, you know. But when you get your art to the point that it does that, then you're doing something. Because your art becomes your leading hand.

Bird just opened up and played, man. That did it all! That brought everybody, 'Oh Bird!' He took care of all of his problems like that, you know? And they remembered. Everybody doesn't make such a lasting impression.

[ER] BUT, LIKE YOU SAY, MAYBE THAT ISN'T THE IMPORTANT THING. THE IMPORTANT THING IS THE SELF, THE REALIZATION THAT CAME WITH IT.

Yeah!

[ER] THAT'S A LIFETIME THING THAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT. AND BEYOND. WHO KNOWS, UP TO THIS POINT, I CAN SEE THE WHOLE DARWINIAN THING, EVOLUTION AND BEYOND. THAT THE ONE IS REPRESENTED IN THE MANY, THE MANY IS REPRESENTED IN THE ONE.

[Laughs]

[ER] YOU'RE APPROACH TO MUSIC IS A VERY SPIRITUAL TYPE APPROACH. I REALLY LIKE THIS STUFF – WHERE CAN WE BUY ALL THESE ALBUMS?

[Laughs] Well, that's another trick that I'm hung up in, you know?

[ER] I'VE SEEN YOUR PRODUCT OUT THERE–  
Well, they're imports, first of all. Every one of them is an import.

[BR] THE BLUE NOTE STUFF IS–  
Well, my things–

[ER] THESE ARE OUT OF PRINT.  
Yeah, it's like this item. You can buy it. But it costs a pretty penny, which I don't get. [Laughs]  
To coin a very popular phrase. But they're imports so consequently, they cost more money. You know what I mean?

**Bob Rosenbaum** has photographed and documented the art and lives of eminent musicians and artists for over 35 years. He has worked as a jazz programmer, host and producer at U.S. public radio stations WSKG-FM, KPFK-FM and KCRW-FM.

Find more interview transcripts, program previews and artist images at:  
<https://www.bobrosenbaum.com>

You are welcome to send inquiries regarding this and other site materials to:  
[transcripts@bobrosenbaum.com](mailto:transcripts@bobrosenbaum.com)