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BENNY GOLSON
NEA Jazz Master (1996)

Interviewee: Benny Golson
Interviewer: Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
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Brown: Today is January 8th, 2009. My name is Anthony Brown, and with Ken Kimery we are conducting the Smithsonian National Endowment for the Arts Oral History Program interview with Mr. Benny Golson, arranger, composer, elder statesman, tenor saxophonist. I should say probably the sterling example of integrity. How else can I preface my remarks about one of my heroes in this music, Benny Golson, in his house in Los Angeles?

Good afternoon, Mr. Benny Golson. How are you today?

Golson: Good afternoon.

Brown: We'd like to start – this is the oral history interview that we will attempt to capture your life and music. As an oral history, we're going to begin from the very beginning. So if you could start by telling us your first – your full name (given at birth), your birthplace, and birthdate.

Golson: My full name is Benny Golson, Jr. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The year is 1929.

Brown: Did you want to give the exact date?

Golson: January 25th.

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Brown: That date has been – I’ve seen several different references. Even the *Grove Dictionary of Jazz* had a disclaimer saying, we originally published it as January 26th. Then, when I’m looking at the liner notes for the Mosaic collection, they list it as January 29. Was there a reason why all these discrepancies came into play?

Golson: I have no idea.

Brown: Not on your doing.

Golson: Unless it’s just our usual imperfection.

Brown: If you could tell us the names of your parents and if you know where they were from.

Golson: My mother was Celadia – C-e- l-a-d-i-a – York. She was from Mobile, Alabama. My father was Benny Golson. He spelled his name B-e-n-n-i-e. However, I changed mine to a “y,” legally.

Brown: Why?

Golson: I was having trouble with passports, because it was spelled one way, and the passport was another way. They started to say, “Wait. What’s going on here?” So I legally changed a few years ago to a “y.”

My father, he was from Orangeburg, South Carolina.

Brown: So both from the South.

Golson: From the South. But they met in Philadelphia, in a church. She was on the choir, and he was on the choir. I forget the name of that church. I’ve long since . . . but it was Philadelphia.

Brown: Did you have siblings, or do you have any siblings?

Golson: No, no brothers or sisters. I was a lone wolf. Being poor, that had its advantages. Didn’t have to share anything.

Brown: Do you remember, or is there a record of, what house you lived in and where you were first – where you spent your childhood?

Golson: I was born – I don’t remember the address – where they were living when I was born was on 19th Street, just off of Columbia Avenue in north Philadelphia. I’ve long since forgotten the address. But soon after we moved to 1709 Lambert Street, just off of

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Columbia Avenue. Then later, 1800 North Bouvier Street. Much later, 1617 Page Street. That's when I got started with the saxophone.

Brown: Let's go back, and let's talk about the neighborhoods that you grew up in. Can you talk about the demographics, perhaps any economic details?

Golson: Yes. I didn't become aware of anything like that until we were on Lambert Street, because before that, I was just an infant. On Lambert Street, I was just pre-age, five years old. The only thing I had on my mind then was playing. I was always out in the street, playing with the kids, one thing and another. Only when I looked back in retrospect did I realize that we didn't have very much, but neither did anybody else. It seemed normal to me. What did I have? I didn't have anything to retrieve as a way of a memory of what could be. I didn't have that kind of experience. So the area that I was in, economically, was quite normal to me. Holes in the shoe. Eating day-old bread. That was normal. I was happy.

Brown: What was your father's occupation? Also, did your mother work?

Golson: My mother worked as a seamstress, off and on. My father worked for the National Biscuit Company – Nabisco. In the beginning he worked there. I remember, because he used to bring cookies and things home that were day old, or old. Then after that he went to work for the Philadelphia Gas Company. Much later, they divorced. So it was just me and my mother in those years when I was a budding musician.

I didn't start as a saxophone player, though. I started as a piano player. I fancied that I was going to be a concert pianist. I was about nine then. That got quite a few chuckles in the ghetto. A concert pianist. Everybody's playing the blues.

Brown: Let's go back. You gave two very important things: how you got started on the piano, and you referenced your neighborhood as the ghetto. Was it a predominantly black neighborhood? Was it exclusively a black neighborhood?

Golson: It was 99½% black, because I remember I had a white friend that lived down the other end of the block. He was the only one in the neighborhood.

Brown: What about the schools that you went to?

Golson: The schools were just about half and half, believe it or not, the elementary schools that I went – wait a minute – yeah, the first school I went to – the very – Caine. Yeah, that was a mixed school. I didn't go there very – that was pre-school. Caine School.

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Then the school that I remember where I really began to learn things was the Allison School. [North] 15th and [West] Norris Streets. How do I remember that? It was a mixed school. Then that school – there was a fellow named Steve Davis. We started together from kindergarten. He wound up being a musician too, playing bass, and he wound up playing with John Coltrane.

Later, we moved – I was about eight years old – we moved to – I don't remember these addresses – 2303 Van Pelt Street, just off of [West] Dauphin Street. I went to a school [North] 22nd [Street] and [West] Dauphin called the Arnold School. The whole school was black. All the teachers were black, and the principal was black. That was the only time I ever ran into anything like that. It wasn't particularly a ghetto. It just happened to be demographics.

I learned so much in that school. In third grade, I remember – the things that I learned in third grade, when I went back to the other schools that were mixed, I didn't get until I was in the sixth grade. I went back years later and took a picture of that school. It's indelibly printed on my mind, what happened there. Mr. Broad was the principal.

Brown: You started piano at nine. What was your inspiration to do so?

Golson: My uncles – my mother's brother and her brother-in-law – the fellow who married my mother's sister – they played piano, and I thought they were geniuses. Only did I realize later, they were terrible. I used to hear them play the piano. One uncle, my mother's brother, he'd play popular tunes of the day, after a fashion. My other uncle was trying to play operatic things and things like that. I marveled at what they could do at this instrument, with these keys, how they could touch these keys and make the music come out. So when nobody was around, I was trying to pick out little melodies. I got pretty good with one finger. My mother saw that. She said to me, "Would you like to take piano lessons?" I never thought of it, piano lessons. "Yes." So she – there was a fellow down the street that was taking piano lessons. So she went down and talked to his mother. "Who's the piano teacher?" "Jay Walker Freeman," who wore pinch-nose glasses. The whole time I was studying with him, I was waiting for those glasses to fall off. They never fell off. He was very proper. He was like Ichibod Crane in – what was that . . .

Brown: *Sleepy Hollow.*

Golson: *Sleepy Hollow.* He reminded me later of Ichibod Crane. What did it say? His arms dangled a mile out of his sleeves. He talked very proper. And yet he was black. That was an aberration. 75 cents a lesson. He would come every week. We'd have an hour. I didn't realize what was going on. I knew he came one week. I remember my mother taking him out of the living room into the dining room. Then they came back, and we resumed the lesson. What she had done – I found out later – she didn't have the 75 cents. We were hard-pressed for money during that time. One time, I remember she didn't have

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5 cents to buy a bar of soap, and she was crying. She had the washboard and the tub. I asked her what was wrong. She said, nothing. But years later I found out, she didn't have 5 cents to buy a bar of [?] soap, for [?], the wash. She didn't have 5 cents to buy a bar of soap. I went back to school, happy as a lark. I didn't know anything. But that's the way it was on the welfare. Eating corned beef hash, the white label with the black printing. Corned beef hash. It was horse meat. That's what it was. I loved it. They'd give you free beans. You'd get butter. Green food, like rice. You never got any meat or anything, other than the corned – the horse meat. That's what we had. This is the way we lived.

Brown: Both your parents are working, and they still could not provide for basic . . .

Golson: No. My father had gone by then. It was my mother.

Brown: Your father left home when you were how old?

Golson: Elementary school. When I went to school, we always knew who was on welfare, because they gave us clothes too. The clothes – the pants that they gave us, for the kids, they always reminded me of pallbearers pants, with the stripes and everything. It looked like everybody was going to a funeral, because we're all wearing the same – so we knew what it was. We knew it was on welfare. We're wearing the same clothes. Those were the lean days. Oh boy. When we got off welfare – things had gotten a little better. That was the time of the WPA and the PWA and the NRA and all those things like that. What is it? CCC camps – construction camps for the young boys. We'd go and do things. My cousin went there. I was too young.

Things got better. We got off welfare. That's when we moved to Page Street. It was a three-story house, but we didn't need all those rooms. So my mother used to bring roomers in. \$10 a week, or whatever it was like that. She was working. So the beds had to be made. I was the chambermaid. I had to make all the beds. On the weekend, I had to clean the – scrub the floors and whatnot. But we were making it, and things got a little better.

I got my saxophone then. It was a summertime, and all the windows were open. It drove my neighbors crazy. "That Golson kid. There he goes again." I was practicing in the living room, right on the front of the house. But I knew I was getting better when my mother would go to the store, and they'd put in requests. "Does he know how to play *Embraceable You? Don't Blame Me?*" Then I was getting an audience. I knew I was getting better.

Brown: Okay. We've progressed a bit. When you were taking piano lessons, there was a piano in the house.

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Golson: There was always a piano in the house. It seems like everybody in the neighborhood had a piano. But nobody played them. They put pictures on it, doilies, and all kind of things on the piano, but it was never played.

Brown: So it was a piece of furniture.

Golson: Piece of furniture. But our house was different. I had two uncles that played. My uncle's name was Robert – Robert York – but everybody used to call him Buster. Sometimes they'd have these house-rent parties, where they serve food and drink and stuff, and make the money – generate money to pay the rent. They used to hire people to play sometimes. They used to hire him to play. I can't understand why. He played terrible. Piano music by Buster. He had a reputation. Wherever you saw Buster's name on the flyer, you said, "Oh. This is going to be great." They would serve pig feet and chitlins, potato salad, cole slaw, and beer. Be playing the records with the lights down dim. It was fantastic. I remember those days.

Brown: Do you remember anything about the piano lessons, any of the books or what he was teaching and how long you studied?

Golson: Oh yes. The book I remember, to help you with your scales and your velocity, Czerny – Czerny studies. Spelled C-z-n-e-r-y, I think. And then the Hannon studies. Then you had the etudes. There was a magazine that came out – I'd never remember the name, but it used to have songs in it that students could play. Then you brought these magazines. I would play the songs out of these books. They were etudes. Not for performance, but just to play to get used to playing the instrument.

I got pretty good. I was really serious about it. We used to have recitals. He used to give recitals whereby the parents and friends would come and hear the students play. It was just, I guess, the parents knew they were getting their money's worth, that kind of thing. I remember I had a number I was going to play called *The Bumblebee*. It wasn't *Flight of the Bumblebee*, but it was *The Bumblebee*. But it was fast. I couldn't get that thing up to speed. I got it close. It was the night of the recital. I'm sitting there. This – you have to experience this – the fear of God go through your body when you hear your name called. "And now we'll hear from Benny Golson." I'm going up to the piano. I can't even remember how it starts. I don't have any idea. Oh, what is my mother going to say? I'm going to embarrass her, my teacher. So this is how it ends. I sat down, and I put my hands – it came back. I was so scared I played that thing at speed. I'll never forget it.

Brown: About how long did you study? Do you remember how many years?

Golson: Yes. Five years. From 9 to 14. That's when I heard Lionel Hampton and heard Arnett Cobb play *Flyin' Home*. The piano paled that afternoon. I'd never heard a big band play live. When that curtain opened – well, they started to play before the curtain

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opened. So the anticipation was really high. When the curtain started to open slowly, I saw the bright lights shining on all these golden instruments. The drummer was playing, and the bass player's – I'd never seen anything like that in my life. They were playing *Flyin' Home*.

Earl Bostic was the saxophone player in the band at that time, too. They played this thing, and they played the interlude. This fellow got up, stepped out in front of the band. I said, I wonder what the heck is he going to do? The microphone came up out of the floor, and he started playing *Flyin' Home*. Oh, my goodness. I never heard anything like that. I was going crazy. Oh. If I could play the saxophone.

So, when I went back home, what I would do at night, after homework, I would turn the radio on and wait to hear saxophone solos. My mother noticed I was doing that too. She said, "What's going on?" "I heard this man play the saxophone, and I'd like to hear some more of what they do. So I'm listening for the saxophone solo." During those days, it wasn't like playing a chorus or two. He'd have maybe eight bars here, something like that. Glenn Miller, whatever the band was. She said, "Would you like a saxophone?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "What about the piano?" Because she was always saying, "I want you to learn the piano, so you can learn to play the organ, and then you can play in church like Mrs. Conley," who played the organ. I love the organ. That's the only thing I got out of church in those days, listening to the organ, especially when she played the low notes and the rafters would vibrate. Oh man. If I could play the organ like Mrs. Conley. "Yes, I'll continue to play the piano too. Yeah."

But the saxophone made the piano subliminal after a while. She became concerned about my being a jazz musician. She said, "I don't know about this saxophone, because all jazz musicians take dope." I said, "Mom, I'm not concerned about any dope. I want to learn to play the saxophone. I'll never do that." She said, "Well, all right."

So then I went to college.

Brown: Can we back up? While you were taking piano lessons, or playing the piano, did you at any time start to improvise or start to use the piano as a vehicle for you to express your own music?

Golson: Oh yeah. Absolutely. As a matter of fact, after I met John, we both would be in my living room, trying to figure out what the heck was going on. I'd play piano, after a fashion, while he played – tried to ad lib. Then he'd play the piano, which was worse than mine, while I was trying to ad lib.

Brown: I'm talking about, before you got to the saxophone, before you made that transition, had you started to use the piano . . . ?

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Golson: Oh, no, no. After I got the saxophone, then that's when I began to explore the writing, and reproducing things that I heard or imagined. It happened after I got the saxophone. Before that, I was like the typical classical pianist. I just played what I saw. No improvising. So I wasn't thinking like that.

Brown: Did you actually play the organ as well?

Golson: No. I never got to the organ.

Brown: So that should be corrected. We'll tell Barry Kernfeld about it. Because they have you listed as playing the organ.

Golson: Oh, no no.

Brown: So we'll correct – that's one of the things we want to do, is correct the record.

Golson: No no. I never got to the organ.

Brown: So, you pick up the saxophone because – what venue did you see Lionel Hampton performing at?

Golson: The Earle Theater – E-a-r-l-e – [North] 11th and Market Streets.

Brown: Was that a matinee performance or an evening performance? Was it a double bill? Triple bill?

Golson: No no. I guess the show started around 11 or 12 in the morning. I guess they usually went until 9 or 10 at night, which meant that they had about three or four shows a day. It was an ongoing thing. Week after week they'd have whatever band was popular. Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, anything. Charlie Spivak, Claude Thornhill, Tommy Dorsey. Any band that was popular, they would bring there. It was an ongoing thing. Count Basie, Duke Ellington. They all came there.

The reason I went is because I was in high school – Benjamin Franklin High School. The kids were coming back and says, “Oh man. You got to go to the Earle Theater and hear Lionel Hampton. You got to hear him play *Flyin' Home*.” Blah blah blah blah. So one day I didn't go to school. I went there. That's when I heard him. That's when my life changed. That's when I heard Arnett Cobb.

Incidentally, years later – many years later – it must have been 50 years later – I happened to see him in Nice, France. I said, “You're the reason that I play the saxophone.” He says, “I never knew that. Really?” I said, “Yes.” He had tears in his eyes, because he knew who I was. I said, “I hear you play, and that's when my life changed.”

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Brown: How did you get a saxophone?

Golson: I thought it would never happen, because we were poor. We didn't have anything. So, if I got one, I thought it would be from the pawn shop, second hand. She never said anything. She went to work that day. I know she didn't carry any case with her. She carried her lunch like always. I happened to be sitting on the steps when she came home that evening. I saw her approaching me. She had something in her hand, but I was looking straight on. So I couldn't see the length of it. When she turned across the street, I saw it was – and my heart started to pound. I said, it can't be. It looks like a saxophone case, but it can't be. My heart started to beat as she got closer. When she got closer, she said, "I got something for you, baby." I almost fainted. She opened it. It was a brand new Martin saxophone she had bought from Wurlitzer's. You know, a dollar down and a dollar forever. Brand new. I opened it on the couch, and immediately I became depressed. Why? I didn't even know how to put it together. I thought it all came together. It had a neck to it. It had a mouthpiece and a ligature and reed. I didn't know what that was. I'm standing there looking at it, and I didn't know what to do. So she said, "You know where we used to live on Bouvier Street. Tony Mitchell, his mother bought a saxophone for him, and he plays the saxophone. So we went around to Tony's house. Tony had been playing a little while. So he showed me how to put it together. Then I said, "Can you play something?" So he put on – I'll never forget it – he put on the old 78 records, *Cottontail* by Duke Ellington. When Ben Webster's solo came up, he had copied it. So he started playing the same solo with Ben Webster with my horn. I'm looking at him playing my horn, these sounds coming out of my horn. I'm sitting there just bedazzled and amazed. He said, "Now you try it." Of course I couldn't play. Sound like a mule being led to slaughter, when I put it in my mouth. So I said – my mother said, "I guess I better get you a teacher," because nothing was happening. So we did. She went back where she bought it. They had teachers there. I happened to get a good teacher, Ray Ziegler, who played with Charlie Barnet, but he had decided that he wanted to come back to Philadelphia. He wanted to settle. He was tired of being on the road. What's ironic is that where I heard Lionel Hampton at 11th and Market, one block was Wurlitzer's, where I got the saxophone. Then years later I came back and I played on the stage in the Earle Theater as a performer. My teacher, he was so proud.

Brown: What did your teacher start you on? What were your lessons?

Golson: Just the basics. I had to learn where the notes – I knew what notes were, playing piano, but I had to find out where they were on the saxophone. So I had the chart. G, you've got three fingers, and the low C, three fingers. Started like that. Basic. Then you begin to play melodies. I didn't have to start from the bottom, because I knew what music was – quarter notes and half notes and so forth. He taught me that. He taught me about sight reading, playing things you'd never seen before. Of course you had to know what you were doing. Syncopated things.

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Things just accrued. After a while, I got good enough that I could play in a band. When I'd been playing about four months, somebody knocked on my door one day. It was a fellow. He says, "You Benny Golson?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I hear you play saxophone." I said, "Yes." A very quick "yes." He says, "I have a band" – a small group. He says, "I'm interested in having you play with us. Would you like to take an audition?" So I took the audition. None of us were really doing anything that great. He says, "Yeah." It was a trumpet, he played alto saxophone, and tenor saxophone – it was a sextet.

Then he called me a couple of weeks later. Said, "We have a job coming up." Oh my goodness. After four months I've got to have a job. He says, "At the Wharton Settlement at [North] 22nd [Street] and Columbia Avenue [now Cecil B. Moore Avenue]." What they'd done, they'd made about – out of four houses, they knocked it out, and they called it a settlement house for youths. So to keep them out of trouble, they'd have a place to come for arts and crafts, and music, and things like that. He said, "Yeah, pays four dollars." Fantastic. I didn't care if it paid anything.

I kept that \$4 for about two years. I didn't want to spend it. It represented something. Then from there, I think that I went to another local band, Mel Melvin. I got put out of that band. I wasn't good enough.

Brown: Let's talk about the kind of repertoire you were performing at this time. What . . . ?

Golson: All stock arrangements. *One O'Clock Jump* by Count Basie, *9:20 Special*, Count Basie, *Take the "A" Train*, Count Basie. Then there was a fellow named Spud Murphy and Van Alexander, that they wrote a lot of stock arrangements. So we were playing a lot of Spud Murphy stuff and Van Alexander stuff. They didn't print them like the old stocks, which is on small paper, about half the size of that. It was like real professionals used. But they were printed of course. But it looked like you were a professional, and it looked like it was hand – oh man. It was great.

Yeah, I got put out of that band. It was terrible, because on the last rehearsal – was at his house – I'm there playing my heart out trying, and he was saying, "What about this other tenor player?" I'm saying, what, is he talking about me? He was talking about me. "When do you think he can make it?" Then at the end of the night he said, "Look, kid, I know you mean well, but you're not ready yet." Oh, my heart was broken. But years later after I – I used to write for him, and I would work any time I came to town with him.

Yeah, I got better. Then, the next band was Jimmy Johnson. By then, I knew John Coltrane. We were playing at all the jam sessions together and playing every day, trying to make out what this music was.

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When I met John, I was in high school. I was 16. He was 18. John was playing alto. A kid came to school one day. Said, “Benny, a guy moved into the projects today. Boy, he plays alto just like Johnny Hodges.” That was before Charlie Parker. The barometer was Johnny Hodges and – I forgot the other saxophonist’s name. I said, “What? He plays like John?” He says, “Yeah. He sounds just like him.” I said, “Think you can bring him by the house?” He said, “Yeah.” Next day, the bell rang. Howard came in – Howard played alto saxophone too. This country bumpkin is standing on the sidewalk with a saxophone. So they came in. Howard sat down. This country bumpkin just stood in the doorway, holding his horn. I didn’t know what to say. I just said, “Play something.” He took his alto out and started playing *On the Sunny Side of the Street*. I said, just like Johnny Hodges. Wow.

My mother, who was upstairs. Nobody ever saw her. Nobody knew what she looked like. We’d be down there, having our jam sessions. Well, they weren’t jam sessions. We were into “j” later. They were more like “am” sessions. We learned the “j” later. She never – nobody ever heard anything from her. This stranger comes in and starts playing *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, and then a voice from upstairs says, “Who’s that?” Her son is there, every day. Never said a word. Hurt me so bad. The stranger comes in, and I get a peep out of her. Said, “It’s a friend I just met named John Coltrane.” Of course, we’d never heard the name Coltrane. So we used to call him freight train, box car, all kinds of things like that, because of the name.

He joined our little coterie of musicians. He was loyal. He was there all the time. John – Ray Bryant was 14 years old, the piano player. That guy was a genius. Any tune he knew, he could play it in any key. A genius. In school he got “A”s in everything. He went to an academic high school. I remember we were out one night at a luncheonette. A girl was sitting across from us and having trouble with her Spanish. She had the book upside down, so she could read it. Upside down – he translated from Spanish into English, reading upside down. This guy was a genius. People don’t know about Ray Bryant. That guy was a genius.

Anyway, Steve Davis was the bass player, I told you. Later he joined John Coltrane. Never had a cover for his bass. He painted around the edges white, so it would look hip, and carried it under his arm in the street. We had a drummer, Sylvester Tillman. There were about six of us here, I guess. A trumpet player. We decided, look, we’re going to learn to read like a professional. So I went out, and I bought a stock arrangement of *9:20 Special, Take the “A” Train*. Said, “Let’s learn “A” Train.” We got it down perfect. But yet we said, it doesn’t sound like the record. Stupid kids. Duke Ellington had 15 musicians. There were three horns. We had one alto, one tenor, and one trumpet. He had four trumpets, three trombones, and five saxes. We couldn’t figure out why it didn’t sound like the record. Dumb kids. Incredible. We laughed – John and I laughed about that stuff later.

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We joined – John and I joined, and Ray Bryant, Jimmy Johnson and his Ambassadors. Being ambassadors, when you perform, you have to perform in a tuxedo. John and I didn't have a tuxedo. So each time we worked, we had to rent a tuxedo. The tuxedo was \$4 for the evening. Okay. The job paid 8. So for the whole evening we had \$4. But we wanted to play. It wasn't about money. We wanted to play.

We used to play these gigs. Thank goodness they were always on Friday, Saturday, when I didn't have to go to school. This Friday, Jimmy Johnson – we didn't have telephones, couldn't afford telephones, John or I – sent his son by my house to tell me that the gig was cancelled, the coming gig that we had for that Friday night. Evidently he went and told John. He lived in Philadelphia, but it was on the other side of Broad Street. That was on the east side. So he came over to my house. We sat in the living room like we always do. But instead of playing records, we were just drug, because we wanted to play, and the job had been cancelled. So my mother came down. She saw us. She said, "Why the deadpans? What's wrong?" "We had a job, but it was cancelled. Jimmy sent his son over to tell us that it was cancelled." She said, "What time did he send his son over?" "He got here about 6:30," John said. A little later at my house. "Yeah, but what time was the gig?" "It was at 8:30." She says, "Nobody cancels a job two hours before you start to play." She says, "I'll bet you they're playing without you." I can remember John in all of his naivete, he says, "Oh no, Mrs. Golson. They wouldn't do that." She said, "Huh. If it was me, I'd go up there and see." I looked at John. John looked at me. He said, "Let's go."

It was only about six blocks from my house, 21st and Columbia Avenue, American Legion Hall. We got about a half block, and we heard this band playing. John said, "Benny, they're playing our music." I said, "John, we got to be sure, because there are other local bands." I said, "And everybody plays the same stock arrangements. It might be another band." So we went to the door where you pay – get your ticket and go down. When the door opened, we could really hear them then. But we couldn't see them, because you had to go down the steps and across the ballroom floor, and they would set up against the wall. So we couldn't see them. The next time the door opened, we fell on our stomachs. People looked at us like we were crazy. There was somebody in my chair, and there was somebody in John's chair. Our careers were over. What careers? We went back to my house, opened the door. My mother said, "What happened?" John said, "You were right, Mrs. Golson." We stood in the middle of my living room floor, I remember, not knowing what to do. I was so hurt. I really wanted to cry. I knew John wanted to cry. But we were too hip to. We couldn't cry in front of each other. So we stood up there in pain. My mother looked at us. I guess she felt sorry for us. She came in, and she put her arms around both of us and squeezed us. I'll never forget it. She said, "Don't worry, baby. One day you'll be so good, the both of you, they won't be able to afford you." We didn't believe it.

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Then, years later, John and I were playing at the Newport Jazz Festival. He had put together his quartet. He had just recorded *My Favorite Things*. Art Farmer and I had just put the Jazztet together. We had just done *Killer Joe*. There we were up at Newport. We were warming up in the same tent. He's warmed up on the soprano, and I'm warming up on the – all of a sudden he took the soprano out of his mouth and started laughing. I said, "What? what?" He said, "Remember what your mother told us, that one day we'd be so good, they wouldn't be able to afford us?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well we're at Newport, and those guys are still in Philadelphia." We laughed. Oh man, we laughed.

We had a lot of laughs over the years at things that happened when we were playing. Play jobs and then [not] get paid. I remember we had a job in the projects. The fellow – it was like an auditorium. So the people in the community – the projects – would come. The fellow wanted to hire us – I don't know why – to play. He says, "I can't afford to pay you, but you'll get everything that comes in on the door. All the money that comes in on the door you can have." Man, a bonanza. Yes. I think about three couples showed up. But we had a ball playing. We didn't care. When I went home that night, my mother said – she used to always ask me – "How did it go?" She was talking about the money, and I'm thinking about music. "Fantastic." "How much did you make?" I said, "15 cents." The jargon was, 15 cents was 15 dollars, because a cent was a dollar. Somebody had a gig for you, and it pays 5 cents, it's 5 dollars. She said, "15 dollars. Great." I said, "No. 15 cents, a nickel and a dime." She said, "What?" So I felt I had to defend myself. I said, "Mom, I don't care about the money. I'm concerned about the music. I want to play things. I don't care about the money." She looked at me and she said, "I'm taking care of you now." "I'm feeding you," she said. "You'll change." She was right. I love the music, but I had to make some money. Oh yeah. We went through a whole bunch of crazy stuff like that.

Brown: So your mom was completely supportive.

Golson: My mother would have gone to the wall for me. She held me by my head when the water got high. Oh yeah. We had to have that. Without that, there's nothing.

When we heard – John and I, when we first heard Charlie Parker and Diz[zy Gillespie] – I told you he was sounding like Johnny Hodges – our lives changed that night. We had never heard any music like that. Never. We were screaming like these Beatles groupies, when they used to hear the Beatles. They played this Latin tune. We never heard any Latin tune like that in our lives. The Latin tunes that we played were like *Lady of Spain*, the stock arrangements, *My Shawl*. But this Latin thing, we had never heard it. Then they played an interlude, and they made a break, and Charlie Parker made a pickup by himself. Usually it was two bars, but he did it four bars, double-time. We were going crazy. We almost – of course we were up there with the cheap seats – we almost fell over the balcony. It was *A Night in Tunisia*. We never heard that before. Oh my goodness.

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So after – let me see – Dizzy Gillespie – Don Byas was on it too. But somehow Charlie Parker was playing so different that I was taken by him. Slam Stewart was playing the bass and slapping. I think Zutty Singleton was playing the drums. Al Haig was playing piano. But their styles had not matched Charlie Parker and Dizzy. They were the forerunners, and the rhythm sections had not caught up with them yet. Of course we didn't know what was going on.

After the concert was over, we went back stage, Academy of Music, Broad and Locust, Philadelphia. We got Dizzy Gillespie's autograph, Slam Stewart. Charlie Parker was going out of the doorway. I said, "John, John, Mr. Parker's going out the door." He's going up Locust Street. "We got to catch him." So we caught up with him.

What was happening, after the concert – the concert was, like, 4:00 to 7:00. It was an evening concert. That night he was scheduled to work at the Down Beat Club with a local rhythm section. The local rhythm section was waiting for him: Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland, and Nelson Boyd. So that's where he was going. It was about five blocks away. So he was walking. We said, "Can we walk with you?" John was on his left. John said, "Can I carry your horn, Mr. Parker?" He let him carry the horn. John didn't do much talking. I was always the one that was talking. So I said to Mr. Parker – I had to find out, how does he – what is he doing? How does he do it? So – crazy – "What kind of horn do you play?" Made a mental note of it. "What kind of mouthpiece do you use?" Made a mental note of that. "What kind of reeds do you use?" Note of that. "What number reed do you use?" Okay. We got to the club. We were too young to go up to the club. It was on the second floor. So John gave him the horn. He said to us – I'll never forget it – "Kids, keep up" – because he knew we were aspiring musicians – "Kids, keep up the good work and maybe one day I'll hear about you." So he went upstairs.

I know the next day I had to go to school, but I said, whatever Mom said at night, she's going to have to say or do it to me, because I'm staying here. So from 9:00 until 2:00 we stood outside and listened, because we could hear them. They're right upstairs. When they finished the end of the night, we were just as tired as they were, because we were there. We were following every note and saying, "Man, could I ever play like that? What do you think?" Blah blah blah. We never had any money. The club was in south Philly. We both lived in north Philly. So walk – we had to walk. We're walking back. We were going through these dreams. Do you think one day we could do this? Maybe one day we could play like Charlie Parker? Do you think we'd be able to play with Dizzy Gillespie? Do you think? What could this – you know, just dreaming together.

Two weeks went by. We had phones then. I didn't see him. We used to be together every day. For some strange reason, he didn't come over. But two weeks later he called me. He said, "Benny, did you try that stuff Mr. Parker – the horn, the reed, and the mouthpiece?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Did anything happen?" I said, "No." He said, "Me either." We

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thought if we could get the mouthpiece and the reed and everything, we could play like that. No, that wasn't it. Absolutely crazy, incredible kids. Crazy kids.

We did a lot of dreaming in those days, and a lot of those dreams came true. But during that time, we never knew. John never knew he'd be who he was. I never knew that I'd be accepted into the National – we didn't know. People talk about Benny Golson, songs he wrote. They don't know about the dogs I wrote. For example, *I Found My True Love in Mexico*, *I'm Finger Popping and Hip Shaking*, *The Maharajah and the Blues*. It was – we used to have rehearsals down in my basement, 1617 Page Street, where John and I used to get [?]. But we were wearing out the living room carpet. So my mother told my stepfather, Leroy, see if you can fix up something in the basement. Pick the piano down in the basement. They can go down there.

So we fixed up everything. When he tried to get the piano down – he had some fellows that helped him – he got it halfway down, and it wouldn't go, and he couldn't get it back up. It was stuck. What to do? He went and got a saw and sawed the leg off the piano. Then he got it down there. How's he going to get it back? He nailed it back. We used to go down there. We used to play. And I wrote – I remember *The Maharajah and the Blues*. Percy had gotten out of the army – Percy Heath – and he was learning to play bass. He learned to play quickly and left Philadelphia and was playing with Coleman Hawkins. We were still there. But he was at the rehearsal. He'd come down and he'd play. I had written this *Maharajah and the Blues*. He said – he used to call me Golson – he said, “Golson, you haven't got a tonic in this thing at all. If it's a B-flat chord, the B-flat should be in the bass. You've got F or E-flat or some other strange” – I didn't know what I was doing.

But it was a learning process. That kind of thing. John was always there. After we heard Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, he didn't sound like Johnny Hodges any more. He was starting to lean towards Charlie Parker.

Brown: What year was that?

Golson: This was in – let's see. Figure it out now – 1945. That's when we met. 1945. Then I guess by 1946 he was beginning to make the transition from Johnny Hodges to something else more modern. Then the tenor came much later. By default, the tenor came. He was playing – oh, he was playing great. He joined a band from Oklahoma. Nat Towles was the name of the band. Nat Towles. They used to travel around in what used to be a van to carry horses. They changed it into an accommodation with beds in it – sleeper beds. It was like a tractor-trailer type thing. They traveled from city to city and state to state in the Midwest. He did that for a while. They wound up in California. He was at a jam session – he was playing great then – and Charlie Parker was there. I asked him, “Did you tell Charlie Parker we were the kids that got the autograph?” No, he didn't tell him.

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But when he came back, he brought songs back. I [?] one, *Relaxin' at Camarillo*. We played it down in my basement, in the cellar on Page Street. [Golson sings the opening phrase of the tune.] It sounded offbeat. Never played anything quite like that. He was getting into all that stuff. Then he came back to Philadelphia. He was showing us, they did this here, they did that there. Blackbirds in the nest with their mouths open, waiting to be fed when he'd come back. He said, they did this, they drop a little bit there. Picking them up. Trying to learn as you go. We're grabbing everything.

Jimmy Heath. Jimmy Heath seemed like – Jimmy Heath was a little ahead of us in his ability. It seemed like Jimmy somehow – I don't know how it happened – he knew these guys. Coleman Hawkins would be down having dinner at his house, and Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Naturally, when they would come, we'd be, "What did they say?" Like these little chicks in the nest. Feed us.

I'll tell you what happened. We were so hungry. We wanted to move ahead so bad. John and I hired an aspiring alto saxophone player who had a car to take us to New York. "If you take us to New York, we'll pay for your gas and give you a little money." He was willing to do it, because he was a musician too. The reason we wanted to go to New York: we wanted to see some of our heroes. We thought if we went to New York, we'd just see them walking down the street. Everybody knew we were going to New York now. They were going to wait for us to come back and tell them what was going on while we were in New York, because they weren't there.

We went to New York, go up and down the street, didn't see a soul – nobody. I thought I was going to see Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and Coleman Hawkins walking down the street. That's crazy. I said, "John, everybody's expecting us to tell them all these great things. We haven't seen a soul."

I said, "Let's go to the Apollo Theater, backstage." We went to the Apollo. It was a rhythm-and-blues show. Oh man. 126th Street backstage. I said, "We come over here and waste our time. We haven't seen a person, not a soul." I happened to look down Lenox Avenue. I said, "John, look! Is that who I think it is?" He says, "Is that Thelonious Monk?" "Yeah, that's him. He's coming up this . . ." "What are we going to say?" "I don't know." But I knew he wasn't going to say anything at all. I was always the spokesman. So here was Thelonious Monk. He got just about close to me. I thought I had to be hip. I dropped my right shoulder. Start swinging my arm like I was hip. "Mr. Monk. Can you tell me what's going on?" He looked at me and looked at John, and he said, "You kids too young to be messing with dope." I said, "Oh, no, no. I'm not talking about that. We came over to see some of our – the people. Coleman Hawkins and Charlie . . ." He said, "You're not going to see anybody. Everybody's asleep. In the daytime, they sleep. You're not going to see anybody." That was it. We got in the car and went back. They wanted to know what happened. "We were hanging out with Monk." When John

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started to work with him, I said, “John, did you ever tell him that we were those kids that talked to him?” He says, “No.” He wasn’t going to say anything. Monk loved him. He wound up playing with him.

Brown: Let’s go back to you guys in Philadelphia, because earlier you had mentioned that – when I was asking about piano – that you guys – that he would play, or you would play. Talk about what you guys were trying to work out amongst yourselves, and if – did you work out of any books or particular lessons?

Golson: No, no, no. All the above. Mostly it was a blues, because that was an easy form. It was nothing involved, because we couldn’t play changes that well. But in our own way we were trying to improvise. I wasn’t very good. John was worse. But all we had was each other. There were no programs in high school. I was in high school. There were no programs. What we did in high school was always after school, and it was on a very low level. There were no jazz schools. There were no jazz books – transcribed solos. Nothing. Only thing we had were those 78 records.

As I think about those records – let me tell you what happened. I’m jumping around. I know. But I’m still in high school. In science class one day, the teacher said, “We’re going to discuss sound today.” She brought a tuning fork. She hit it and put it on the desk. [Golson sings a note.] I said, “That’s interesting.” Then she said, “Now I’m going to strike it” – I happened to sit in the front row – “I’m going to strike it, and Benny, put your head over it.” She put it over my head. I heard it inside my head. I said, get out of here. Wow. That’s fantastic.

During those days, there were no sophisticated tone arms for – you bought a package of needles. You got about ten plays out of it, and you turned the screw, took it out, and put a new one in. What would happen if I put that needle in my teeth and put my head down to the phonograph record? Would I hear the sound in my head like I did in the classroom with the tuning fork? So I put the needle in, turned it – put my head down like that. Wow. I heard the sound in my head. I said, this is fantastic. The problem was, you couldn’t stay still, because needles had to go like that. I had to learn how to sync up. So I had to lean my head at the right speed. Otherwise it would jump out of the track.

I told John about it. I said, “Man, this is fantastic,” because, before then, to try to really put yourself inside the orchestra – you put the record on and get down on the floor and put your ear right up to the speaker, to try to imagine that you were in the band or the orchestra, but this way, you were right in there with them. I told John, and I guess a few other people learned. You could always tell who had done it, because they came on the scene with smudges on their nose from the record. You could always tell who’d done it, because they didn’t look in the mirror. That was wild. I think I came up with stereo.

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Brown: Before we began the interview, I talked a lot – we talked briefly about the history – the rich history of Philadelphia. You came up at a time when – we haven’t mentioned Jimmy Oliver, Bill Barron. You did mention Jimmy Heath.

One thing – before we discuss those gentlemen and that milieu – that very rich musical milieu – did you ever go over to Coltrane’s house? Did you get to know his family as well? Was his mother as supportive as your mother?

Golson: Yeah, I did, but John lived in an apartment, and it was smaller. The reason he was over at my house was not because it was better or anything, but it was just more room. When you mentioned going over to his house – when I went over to his house, it was always to wake him up. We would go to the jam sessions, and we were supposed to – I’d meet him at a certain time. Mostly when I went there, he was always in the bed. “John, you were supposed to be – get up, man – we’re supposed to be . . .” He was slow. He’d get up. He’d put on one sock. Then he’d wait. He’s sitting there. Put on another sock. “John. Come on, man. We’re going to miss . . .” “Okay.” I was trying to get – it was a slow start. That was always what was going on. That’s what usually happened when I went over there. I didn’t spend much time. But all the music that we listened to and whatnot, in my house. I’m not even sure he had a record player. It was a small apartment. He lived at [North] 12th [Street] and [West] Master Street. I lived at [North] 17th and Page Street, right near Diamond Street, one of the major streets. So he had to come about six blocks to get to my house like that. Yeah, we did that.

Brown: Again that whole rich – Marian Anderson. We talked about Jimmy Oliver. We talked about what that was like. You gave us the microcosm, but the big picture of it.

Golson: Let me go into detail. Let me tell you about Jimmy Oliver. He was short, very dark, ebony like. He was called Satin Doll. I said, if I could just be good enough to play like Jimmy Oliver, I’d be satisfied. Because Jimmy could play, and his horn was almost as big as him. He had so much soul and feeling when he played. He worked all the time, but locally. I think Philly Joe got him over to New York a few times, but he just wanted to be in Philadelphia. It was comfortable there. He didn’t want to venture out, move to New York, and do all that.

Jimmy had a good sound, and he always played with good musicians: Butch Ballard on drums, Stanley Gaines sometimes on the bass. I can’t remember who played bass. Fats Wright. But these guys could play. At least I thought they could, because I didn’t play so well.

At the same time, Jimmy Heath put a big band together. Jimmy was 19. He started on alto, and at that time, he was still playing alto saxophone, and he was trying to play like Charlie Parker. Charlie Parker was known as Bird. Jimmy was short. They used to call him Little Bird.

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He had this big band: four trumpets, three trombones, five saxophones. I was playing fourth tenor. Not so many solos. Sax Young was playing the second tenor. He had most of the solos. John was playing third alto. Jimmy was playing first and leading the band. The band was pretty good. Everybody wanted those seats that we had, all the saxophone players. John and I were in the band, and certain other guys. But there were a lot of other guys that wanted to be in the band that couldn't be in the band, because it was five musicians [saxophonists].

The band had a pretty good reputation. Tadd Dameron found out about the band. Tadd wrote a couple of arrangements for the band. We were in heaven. Tadd Dameron wrote something for us? Then we had a local arranger there named Leroy Lovett. He wasn't as known as Tadd Dameron. He was more like pop. He wrote some things for us. Then there was another arranger, piano player, and trumpet player named Johnny Acie. He wrote some things. Then Jimmy was writing a lot. He wrote things. So we had a repertoire. We even had a singer. I can't remember his name.

There were a few of us who were trying to write. We used to have rehearsals at Jimmy Heath's house. Jimmy moved the furniture all back, wearing out his house. The way we did it: we would write one chorus, just to see what it sounds like, and rehearse, to see what it sounds like. If it's okay, then you go on and write some more until you finish it.

I'd written one chorus. I'd written one chorus on this tune, whatever it was. This local arranger, Leroy Lovett, happened to be at the rehearsal, and he heard it. He says, "Benny, that's fantastic. Why don't you finish it? That's great." You know, as a beginner. I was so encouraged. So I went home and I finished it. He was there the next week. I'm waiting for the compliment. We played it. I went up to him, to see what he was going to say. He said, "What happened?" It took a dive. That was a learning experience. I was so appalled. It was terrible.

But learning – trying to learn. All those crazy tunes I wrote, I didn't throw them away. I just wanted to remind myself where I come from, how bad I used to be. Nobody will ever hear those things. They're terrible. People say, "Benny Golson, he wrote all these beautiful . . ." – they don't know about the dogs that I wrote. They only know about the nice ones. They don't know about the recent [one] I wrote for Count Basie. When I saw Frank Wess, he says, "Here's your music back." Some of the parts were missing. I was watching. He's on a t.v. show – Count Basie. Saying, "When are they going to play my arrangement?" Said, "Here's your music back." Learning, learning, learning.

Brown: Let's go back to Philadelphia, because all the families – you've got the Heath family. You've got Jimmy, Percy. You got Tootie. Then you got the Barrons. I'm talking about the Barrons. But you also mentioned Ray Bryant. What about Tommy?

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Golson: Tom Bryant. Yeah, he was the same. I think they were – Ray was 14 when I met them. Tom was 15. These guys, they were exceptional. That’s all I can say. They were exceptional. So as a result, they played with the grownups, I guess you would call them – guys 35, 40 years old. We called them the old men. They were in junior high school. So as a result, their father used to have to take them to the job in that 1937 Chevy and pick them up and bring them back. They would play with us too, but they were playing with guys that we couldn’t play with, because we weren’t that good. They excelled. They were unusual, both of them. Same thing. Anything that Tom knew, he could play in any key. It was amazing. He started to work with Jimmy Oliver. Tom Bryant. These guys worked all the time. They were high-school – junior-high-school and high-school students, and they worked all the time. Incredible.

Vera, their sister, she plays gospel piano. That’s the mother of the fellow that does the Jay Leno Show.

Brown: Kevin Eubanks.

Golson: Kevin Eubanks. That’s Ray’s nephew. That was Vera. Oh boy, Vera, what a beautiful girl. I tried to talk to her. I didn’t exist. She’d just go out of the house. That’s Kevin Eubanks’s mother. Kevin and his brother’s name I forgot – Robin – Robin Eubanks. But they didn’t exist then, of course.

We used to rehearse up there too, make noise up there in that house. But when – let’s see – so many things I can tell you. I’m going off. I can tell you how John started to play tenor.

Brown: We’re going to take a minute or two. So when we take a break we’ll come back, talk about that. I’d like to also talk about the Barron brothers. I want to make sure we get that.

Golson: Yeah. It was all about Bill. Bill was our mentor. Bill Barron was something. People don’t know.

Brown: But they’re going to know now, because you’re going to tell them.

Golson: Yeah. Bill Barron. This guy.

Brown: All right. On that note we’ll come back.

[recording interrupted]

This is tape two of the Benny Golson oral history interview. When we last left off we’re still in Philadelphia. We haven’t got out of Philly. We don’t need to get out of there. No

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rush. We're talking about some of the families that are still closely associated with this great city. We were talking about the Heath brothers. Then we were talking about the Barron brothers. So if you can help the next generations to understand just how important these people were to this music.

Golson: I met Bill Barron before I met Jimmy Heath, actually. When I joined the band Mel Melvin I told you about. He had been there, but he was gone, but he was still in Philadelphia. The thing about Bill, Bill was always forging ahead in his playing and his writing. He was always writing something. He wasn't – how can I put it? He wasn't content with serving the same warmed-over dish all the time. He wanted to do something different. So his music was a little different. His music was different than the music of the day, so to speak. He was an adventurer, doing things that weren't usually done.

Brown: You say different. What . . . ?

Golson: The style, his style and concept, his way of approaching it, is a little different. So the people would say, "His music sounds a little funny." That funny means it's different, different than what they're used to hearing. It doesn't mean – from my viewpoint, it didn't mean it was invalid. It was just different. But then you could have different bad, you could have different good. But to me it was different and good. And the way he played. It wasn't like the other fellows. You didn't hear vestiges of anybody else, like Pres. Like when I played, you could hear a little bit of Coleman Hawkins, a little bit of Don Byas. You could hear Charlie Parker in John Coltrane at that time. Different ones. But he didn't sound like anybody. Of course he was a little older than us. He was a hero. He was one of the ones that I set my goal to. If I could be like Bill Barron – not exactly what he was doing, but in moving the head and the music like him – he was that kind of a person. He came to New York for a while, but it seems like it never really took. He was there, and he did things, but not in a way that was significant, overwhelmingly consequential. Only a few people knew about – like a cult, almost – only a few people knew he existed and what he was doing. Then he died. That's a pity.

During the time that I knew him, didn't know anything about Kenny. Must have been – he's younger than me, so he must have been a kid. I didn't know anything about Kenny Barron. Kenny – I met Kenny later. As a matter of fact, how I met Kenny: I knew Kenny was in Philadelphia, and we needed a piano player – the Jazztet. I told Art [Farmer] about Kenny, and Kenny came over and joined the group. I feel bad about this, because Kenny only stayed with us about two weeks, because here's what happened. We were playing Birdland, the old Birdland. Harold Mabern came in. We never had anybody sit in, because it's not a jam session. But he wanted to play, and play the music. So I said, yeah, come on up. He played a set. What he was doing was so close to what Art and I was hearing, I looked at Art, and Art looked at me. I guess we were thinking the same thing. We've hired Kenny, but Harold has really got what we want. So after the set, I said, "Man, that was really something." I said, "But we've hired Kenny." He said, "Yeah, I felt

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the same thing too.” He said, “For the sake of the music, we’re going to have to go with Harold Mabern.” So I had to tell Kenny, “Kenny, I’m sorry. Harold has got really what we want. We’re going to give you two weeks’ salary, but we’re going to have to let you go, because Harold happens to be [?].” That was that.

I always felt bad about that. About three years ago we were somewhere. “Kenny” – and I brought it up. I said, “Kenny, I’ve always felt bad about hiring you and then letting you go.” He didn’t even remember it.

Brown: Vindication.

Golson: He didn’t even remember. I said, “Fine.” Now, Kenny Barron’s the guy. You can hear him every day. Kenny Barron.

Brown: What about those Heath brothers? You talked about meeting Jimmy after meeting Bill Barron.

Golson: Yeah. The thing about Jimmy, used to amaze me – I still tell – I said – still to this day – I used to be in the big band. So I still call him Boss. Whenever he picks the phone up, I say, “Boss.” He knows it’s me. “Hey, Boss” – I never heard him make a mistake. He – when we were trying – John and all of us – trying to improvise and play something meaningful on the chords, we could play the chords, but basic, playing it safe, staying close to what sounds right, acceptable. But Jimmy was playing the other things that went outside of that. Yet it made sense with the chords, because he understood the chords so well. He’d get the tune. I’d hear him say sometimes, “Yeah. It didn’t sound right on that chord.” I’m saying, “How could he tell?” I couldn’t tell. He knew – he was ahead of us with that.

When he put the band together, I thought it was a real privilege for me to be in that band, playing with somebody like him, because I could learn something from him. He was ahead of all of us, I think, with his knowledge, including John. Of course things changed later.

Yeah, it was an experience in that band. We always had new music. We weren’t playing a lot of gigs, but the gigs that we played were significant, I thought. But then that broke up, and he went to New York. He started – he already had contact in New York. As I told you, he knew all these people, and when they came to Philly, they always come to his house. So it wasn’t too hard for him to get started in New York when he decided to actually go there and make his roots there.

The thing about Percy that’s so phenomenal – Percy was enamored with the Tuskegee Airmen, the black pilots. When he came back to Philadelphia, Percy was about 27 or 28 before he even embraced the bass. But he moved ahead so fast. He started out, learning of

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course, and then he played with a trio called the Hollis Hoppers. Bill Hollis was the piano player. I don't remember who the – guitar or trumpet. I'm not sure – but he was the bass player. Then soon after that, he went to New York. When he went to New York, he was recording with Coleman Hawkins. We were still in Philadelphia. I said, this guy comes late, gets the bass, boom, he's gone, and he's a star, and we're still here. He was – boy, he learned quick. He did all those gigs as time went by then. He became a member of the Modern Jazz Quartet. He played great.

I remember one night, he came down to the Five Spot after we'd finished playing. Whoever was playing there – who was playing bass with us? Jimmy Garrison, maybe. He said, "Look at the bass." He started playing something. Then I started humming. The two of us – he was playing, I was humming. It got into it. He's playing some nice stuff. I'll never forget that. I was humming, playing the way I would think if I were playing my horn. It had a thing. I'll never forget that. Just the two – me humming and him playing the bass. He played nice stuff.

Then we all went our separate ways after that. But he's predominantly with the Modern Jazz Quartet. I remember we did a thing at the University of Pittsburgh once. He had stepped out of the Modern Jazz thing. It sounded good. It sounded very good.

I think I learned a lot from Jimmy, not academically, but that sort of a priori process. You hear it, and you absorb it. Part of not even analyzing – you just hear it, and I guess you imitate it, after a fashion. Yeah, I learned a lot from Jimmy. When I tell him, he says, "Aw."

It was fertile, very fertile there. There were people like – what was Shuggie's name? a bass player – Shuggie Rose, I think, A bass player. Mutt played tenor. Bobby Burton played bass. There were a lot of people that you never heard of. Some of them died from overdoses. Some of them just didn't pursue the career.

Red Garland came there from Dallas, I think it was. The thing about Red – Red was late for everything. I remember I went by to pick him up for a gig once. Time was right. If I got there and he came out and got in the car, everything would have been fine. I waited for 15 minutes. No Red. Then, his girlfriend comes out. She's going somewhere. I don't know where she's going. I'm sitting there waiting. Then she comes back with his clothes on a hanger from the cleaners. I said, oh my goodness. So I know he's not ready. She goes in. Then about another 15 minutes, he comes out. Now Red has a thing, a psychological thing he used to do. He's a half hour late, and when he comes out with, "Come on. Let's go. Let's go," like he's waiting on you. "Come on. Let's go." Never – he's late, and he makes you feel like you're late. But he could play. Red had a thing there, and he had that block-chord thing that Miles liked. He used to tell him on the bandstand, say, "Lock it up, Red." Going to the block-chord thing. "Lock it up, Red."

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Red was something else. He used to be a boxer. Red used to play boxing. But I never saw any hint of that. He never intimidated anybody and never got in anything like that. But I knew he was.

Brown: You talked about that rhythm section that Bird was going to after that gig. You said . . .

Golson: Red Garland . . .

Brown: . . . Nelson Boyd . . .

Golson: . . . Nelson . . .

Brown: . . . and it was Philly Joe.

Golson: . . . and Philly Joe.

Brown: So let's talk about those last two, the rest of the rhythm section.

Golson: Face. That's what we used to call Nelson Boyd. Face. "Hey, Face." I don't know where it came from. Nelson, he was from Camden, New Jersey, which is right across [from] Philly. He was the premier bass player in Philadelphia. He had a certain style, and it attracted a lot of people.

Philly was so unorthodox he could play anything. And Red. When they got together, they would lock it up. So they had that gig down at the – what was that called? what was the name of the club – the Down Beat Club, on [North] 11th Street, between Market and Chestnut, between the Earle Theater and Wurlitzer's, where I took my lesson. They were right in the middle.

Let me tell you what happened. You're not going to believe this. During the time when there was a riot in Philadelphia – I don't know if you remember that. They were having some riots in Philadelphia.

Brown: Was it after the war?

Golson: Oh yeah. For a while they had a policeman on every street car, stand up at the front with his gun and stuff. It was so bad. During that time – because they said, you don't have any black motormen and conductors on the streetcar – Philly Joe got a job. Do you remember that? He got a job as a motorman, driving a streetcar. Route number 23. The longest route in Philadelphia, from south Philadelphia, all the way through north Philadelphia, all the way through Germantown. Max Roach used to come over and ride a route with him, and talk.

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Philly Joe's route came right up 11th Street, where the Down Beat Club was, on 11th Street. Philly came up one night, stopped the car in front of the Down Beat, opened the doors, got off, and went up, and took a club. Now all the people on the streetcar, they're going crazy. He goes up into the – no, he's not going to stay and hear a set, but he went up to do something. When he came back, boy, they were irate. He got on the streetcar and started up like he did – never heard it – like this was a matter – who would do something like that? Stop a streetcar and get off and go into a club, and everybody's on the streetcar, waiting. Only Philly Joe would have done something like that. Only Philly would have done that.

Incidentally, in those days, he wasn't Philly. See, he was known, during the time we were playing together, [as] Joe Jones. But there was Papa Jo Jones from Count Basie, you see. Now, when we did that album – the 10-inch LP with Tadd. What was it called? I can't remember what it was called – Philly was the drummer, but his name was Joe Jones. Tadd said, "You really should be known different from Papa Jo Jones." He says, "So do you mind if I call you Philly Joe Jones?" He says, "All right." Up to that time, it was just Joe Jones. We worked with Bass Ashford, a left-handed bass player. He was Joe Jones, singing and playing the drums. 1953, he became known as Philly Joe Jones. It stuck so well that sometimes people didn't even call him Joe. Just, "Hey, Philly." That's what it was, through Tadd – because of Tadd Dameron.

On that particular – what was the name of that thing we did, that 10-inch LP we did? Ah, I can't remember. But on there was Clifford Brown, Idrees Sulieman, Gigi Gryce, Benny Golson, Cecil Payne I think, a trombone player I can't remember, Percy Heath, and Tadd Dameron. I don't know – it was Prestige Records too. I don't know what happened, but this was the smallest studio I'd ever seen. It was the kind of studio where you expect a fellow to go in and dub just words about something, commercials or something. It was so small that Clifford's mike was beside me, on my right side, so that when he stood up to play a solo, his trumpet was almost resting on my shoulder as he's playing into the mike. All during that session, right here, there was a trumpet. We finished that set, I told Clifford, I said, "I know everything about you now." Because that trumpet was right in my ear all day, right there, six inches from my ear into the microphone. We were all bunched up like that. I'll never forget it. What a small studio that was. *Dial B for Beauty*, and one of the tunes I think was *Philly J[oe] J[ones]*. I can't remember the other tunes. *Choose Now*. That was the title.

Brown: The title of the 10-inch.

Golson: Not the title of the CD. Those were the tunes: *Choose Now*, *Dial B for Beauty*, *Philly J J*, and others, but I can't remember. But I can't remember the title of the album. They were albums in those days. I remember we recorded all day, and Clifford played in my ear all day.

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Brown: You were talking about other musicians who are from Philly and that had stayed. When I saw Philly come out – he came out to the West Coast – he brought Bootsie Barnes. Of course Odean Pope has gone on to make quite a name for himself. This is the generation – are they contemporaries, or are they the next generation after?

Golson: Odean Pope and I were in high school together. I didn't know Bootsie then, but Bootsie was playing. Yeah. We were contemporaries. Odean, as you know, played with Max. I don't know if he still – what am I talking about? Max is gone. But he played with Max right up until the end I think – Odean did.

Bootsie mainly still stayed in Philadelphia, I think. Odean ventured out. But Bootsie – I haven't spoken to Bootsie in a while. We e-mail each other from time to time. Yeah, Bootsie's a good friend. I like him. Bootsie's a good guy, plays well.

I know more about Bootsie – Bootsie was playing at that time more than Odean, locally. Odean was doing something, but not like Bootsie. Bootsie was playing more. I was surprised when he joined Max Roach, because I wondered, how did Max hear him? But I guess he did, and it seemed to work out okay. And the trumpet player . . .

Brown: Cecil Bridgewater.

Golson: Cecil Bridgewater. That's right. I did some things for the group. I remember one of the tunes I did – I don't remember other things – only one I remember was *I Remember Clifford*, I think. Then he did his group with the string quartet.

Brown: Right. With his daughter.

Golson: Yeah. They called it – somebody called it . . .

Brown: Uptown? Was it the Uptown.

Golson: . . . the Uptown String Quartet. But he had a name for the whole thing. I can't remember. Then he did something . . .

Brown: Double Quartet.

Golson: Yeah. That's it. Then he did something with Boom.

Brown: M'Boom.

Golson: Yeah. He was doing different things. Max was creative.

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Brown: So, Philadelphia again. I'm not going to leave it alone, because all the great – some many greats came out of – you mentioned, again, in Harold Mabern, but of course McCoy Tyner was early on.

Golson: Oh, let me tell you about . . .

Brown: So what is in the water in Philadelphia? My goodness.

Golson: Let me tell you about McCoy. Oh, this is funny. How I met McCoy – see, I told you. There was a group that used to put on concerts on Sunday afternoon. One of the groups is the one where I heard Clifford Brown and Fats Navarro. Another group was uptown at the Tioga Theater, where I had to play with a local. The piano player was McCoy Tyner. I was diggin' him. I said, boy, this guy can play. Then I played something in a key that we don't usually play in. He played in it with ease. I said, boy, this guy is something. He was 19 years old.

I thought no more about it. Then Art Farmer and I decided to put together this sextet. I called him with the intention of using him as my trumpet player. When I told him, he started laughing. I said, "What the heck are you laughing?" He says, "You're not going to believe this, but I was thinking about putting together a sextet, and I was going to call you for my tenor player." So I said, "Come over by the house and we'll talk about it." "Okay." "So, who we gonna get?" He got Dave Bailey, the drummer, because they played together with Gerry Mulligan, and he got his brother, his twin brother, Addison. I used to confuse them in the beginning. I got Curtis Fuller, and I mentioned McCoy Tyner. I didn't get him. I ran it by him first. He said, "Can he play?" I said, "Oh yeah." He said, "But I never heard of him." I said, "Yeah, but take my word." He says okay.

So I called McCoy. It was like McCoy had been sitting by the phone all those weeks, waiting for me, because when I called him, I said, "Are you interested in joining Art Farmer and me in a group." "Yeah." Later I said, "McCoy, we're going to be rehearsing every day. Philadelphia's 90 miles from New York. Are you going to be able to make that 180 miles every day?" He said, "I really want to move to New York." So, to make a long story short, Art and I found an apartment for him. He and – I can't think of his last name now. He had a fellow to bring him over. They came over very light, because they came with everything they had in this Chrysler this guy had.

I got a call on the phone. He was coming over that day. Ring. "This is McCoy, Benny. We broke down on the Jersey Turnpike. Can you come and get me?" I said, "McCoy, I don't have a car." I said, "Wait a minute. Call me back in a half hour." So I called a friend of mine. "Can you come over? The piano player we hired broke down on the Jersey Turnpike." So he came over. We went out and picked him up. And until this day, I'm wondering, did we pull off and leave that guy with that broke-down car. That would be terrible. Did we help him, or did we just drive off and leave him? I can't remember.

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Anyway, he came to Philadelphia – I mean, to New York and joined us. Years later, this fellow that took me out there to pick him up stole him away from me for his band. It was John Coltrane. I said, “A fine friend you are. You take me out to pick up my piano player and then you steal him.” But it was friendly, because what John was doing – McCoy was better suited for what John was doing, because what we were doing was tame to what John was doing. So we didn’t fall out about it at all. McCoy told me. He said, “John was hesitant about hiring me,” because of the friendship that he and I had. I said, “No, that was the right move.” No, we didn’t fall out about it, but I joked to him about it. I said, “Fine friend. Then you stab me in the back. Take me out to pick up the guy and then you steal him.” That’s how that happened. McCoy Tyner. So when people want to interview him and get into his life, he’ll always tell them to call Benny Golson. McCoy’s done fine for himself.

Brown: In the chronology, you’re still in Philly, so we haven’t even left to go to Howard yet. So you’ve got to back – what kind of student were you in high school? We understand that you were quite inventive, quite resourceful, putting a needle in your mouth. Obviously you had your own concepts.

Golson: In high school, I will tell you, I was not an “A” student. I know that. I don’t remember what student I was, but I knew I was not an “A” student. But I might have been a “B,” “B-,” “C+,” somewhere around there. My favorite subject was English. I had to go to summer school for physics. I failed that, and I went to summer school, and I failed the summer school. That was not my metier. Chemistry, I had a hard time. But English – I always liked English. That was my best subject when I went to college.

What happened musically when I was in college was always after school. There was no program. After school, in what they called the canteen. Some kind of room they had. We’d get there. Some kind of music we had. We were coming along, but so-so. But we enjoyed it. That’s all we had, and we wanted to learn. So that’s what we did, after the school – not every day, but when we wanted to do it, the school let us do it. We stayed for an hour or so after school.

I remember – we still have the picture. We took a picture of what was supposedly a band, and the music teacher had nothing to do with it. He’s in the picture with a baton, like he’s leading us.

Brown: When you say, there was no music – they wouldn’t allow you to play jazz. Is that – did they actually have any music programs at that time? Because a lot of black schools may have had a chorus, some kind of emulation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Golson: They had glee clubs and things like that. No jazz.

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Brown: So not as part of the curriculum. Was music part of the curriculum, though?

Golson: We had music, but it wasn't jazz. It was singing songs and things like that, which I found boring. But no, no music programs where it was devoted to jazz per se. No, no, nothing.

Brown: That was not uncommon, back in the day.

Golson: No.

Brown: So how did you get to Howard? Can you talk about finishing up high school? How did you decide to go to Howard?

Golson: This friend of mine – I told you when the first gig I had, he knocked on my door, asking could I join his band, and my first gig was \$4 – he was a little older than me – he went to Howard, and he was telling me how it was. He said, “Here are the guys, in music school, what they’re doing.” I said, “Really?” I said, “Maybe I ought to try to go there.” He said okay. So I applied, but I had to take an entrance exam. I went down there. I had to play before the teachers. I got up on stage, and I had my saxophone. They said, “Wait a minute.” I said, “What?” “Where’s your clarinet?” “Clarinet?” I had a clarinet, but I was giving the clarinet bad names. I didn’t have the clarinet. So they did saxophone.

It was music education. I had to continue the piano, because piano’s mandatory for two years. Everybody. So I couldn’t stop. I had to keep playing the piano, after a fashion. I entered. Sure enough. We started. It was kind of basic. I said, hmmm. The stuff we’ve been doing was like four-part harmony, but it’s like a church chorus, and I’m hearing other stuff. I said, hmmm. So I started – this is when I became a pill – I started asking a lot of questions and define the rules. Oh, they hate to see me coming. We get an assignment. They give you a cantus firmus, like a bass line. You have to put the stuff in. Classes were small, like eight people in the class. What she would do, she’d play the assignment at the piano – because it’s only four voices – every morning. She’d play – picked it up and she’d play. “Oh, Mr. Brown, I like your Neapolitan sixth you use here.” She’d get the next one and put it up. “Oh, Mr. Kurtzfield, I like that deceptive cadence.” Then she got to mine, played a couple of chords, and that red pencil came out. Choot, choot. Played a couple more. Choot, choot. It was like Zorro with the whip, and every time she slashed it, it would bleed. I’m so disgusted. I’m sitting and watching her. Finally she didn’t even finish. She says, “Mr. Golson. What have you done?” I was so belligerent. I was so drug. I stood up. I wanted to be as obnoxious as I could. I put my hands in my pocket, turned my head, and I said, “That’s the way I heard it.” Well, that broke all the rules. I broke the rules, but I got what I wanted. She says, “Mr. Golson.”

Another time, we were doing something. “Mr. Golson. You didn’t come back to the tonic chord from the dominant.” I said, “Why do you have to come back to the dominant –

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from the fifth?” “Oh the rules, you must” – when you approach the dominant – I mean the tonic, you must come from the dominant, which is a fifth. I said, “Why?” She said, “That’s the rules.” I said, “Somebody made the rules. Can’t they be broken to accomplish what you hear?” *Killer Joe* comes back to the tonic from the sixth position.

Fifty years later – now you’re not going to believe this – they brought me back and honored me and offered me a teaching position. About fifty people they had there that was in my class, and when they all stood up – I didn’t see them – when they stood up, I almost cried. From fifty years ago, retired, pharmacists, dentists. They all stood up. Oh man. I had to fight back the tears. That was really something.

They call it the Benny Golson Scholarship. Every year they send me the name of whoever won it. Jimmy Heath got it. Eddie Henderson got it. So it’s not always attending students. Now they’re giving it to surgeons and everything, the Benny Golson. Incredible how things can change, because when I was there, I never dreamed anything like that would happen.

I remember the clarinet. I really had no love for it. I wouldn’t practice. I would go to my lesson. I hadn’t done anything, and struggled the same way I did when they gave it to me. C[?] would say, “Get out. Get out.” I’d go out. In band practice, I didn’t do something, he’d throw the baton at me. Oh man.

I used to have to practice – they said when I went there – now this was the key – when I went there, if you get caught playing any jazz, you’re going to be expelled. I said to myself, what am I doing here? My mother’s saying, you might not make it as a musician. In case you don’t, go to college, get an education. You’ll have something to fall back on, to teach. So I was there. That’s what they were preparing me for, to be a teacher. But I’m saying, somebody taught them, they teach me, I teach somebody else – when am I going to use this stuff? And they told me if I got caught, I’d be expelled. So I got a job down at 7th and T playing at night. I had to come over the wall, coming back at night, because the door was closed. I had to come over the wall. Incredible. What am I doing here?

One night I went to play my first set. Got up on the stand and turned around. At the first table is Mr. Sterling, head of the theory department. I got to play. I cannot leave. I guess I’m through. Played the first set. Came off. Walked by his table. He said, “Great set.” That’s all he said. I said, Sterling, he’s cool. He’s cool. I’m not expelled.

Another time, I was in the practice room. Now they assign you to a practice room a certain hour at a certain time of the day, but at 7:00, that’s when you started to practice. Nobody went to the practice room at 7:00. What we all did is went to whatever room is free. So I would get there 7:00 when I’m composing my jazz stuff, so nobody would hear it. Across the hall from my practice room – I went all the way up to the top room – across the hall was the office of the head of the violin – the string department: Louis Von Jones.

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That's where the office was. Nobody's going to be there 7:00 in the morning. I'm doing this stuff. I'm writing this song. I get up to the bridge, and I don't know, what can I do for the bridge? I don't know how to get into the bridge. So I get to the bridge, and every time I got there I stopped. I'd start off and stop. Start over. I heard this door open. Louis Von Jones's door – because my door was closed – I heard his door open. I said, uh-oh. He's going to come over here. Then my door, not only did it open – it burst open. He had heard me with this jazz stuff. I said, oh man. He walked in the room and said, "Resolve it! Resolve it!" and went out and slammed the door. I said, oh, Louis Von Jones is cool. He's not getting me expelled. He got tired of hearing me, because it never finished. Yeah, that was something.

When I – after I left, I played a club there. [?] was on the front row. He's throwing the baton at me and told me to get out of his office. Then I went up to school to see him. Now I'm hearing a different thing. "Yeah, Benny Golson was here. He was [?] students," like I was some icon or something. "Oh, he was" so-and-so. Now, when I was there, "Get out – in the practice" – bam. Now I'm a hero. Incredible.

Brown: When you were doing gigs, you were working with – according to the record – Charlie Rouse, Leo Parker, John Malachi.

Golson: Um-um. None.

Brown: It's wrong again.

Golson: No.

Brown: The record is wrong again.

Golson: Charlie Rouse is a tenor player. He was working – he was more advanced than I was – he was working at the Club Ballet and the Public Gardens and places like that. We looked up to Charlie Rouse. John Malachi was there, but we never played together. Leo had gone. I knew them, but we never played together. There were others there, like Harrington Visor, a tenor player; Carl Drinkard, who played piano and trumpet. He went on to become Billie Holiday's pianist. Who was [on] bass? I can't remember the bass player's name. Local talent, but none of those fellows. Gipp, a piano player. What was his real name? I can't think. No, there was a lot of musicians there, but none of them. Tom Moltry, a bass player; Streamline, a drummer. But I never played with the names mentioned there. Charlie Rouse and I never played together, and I knew him very well. We were just never thrown together. John Malachi, I used to hear him play. He played for Al Hibbler, Sarah Vaughan, I think. Leo, I never – I didn't really know him. I don't know how they got that.

Brown: I don't either. But I thought I better ask about it.

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Did you finish? Did you earn your degree there?

Golson: No, I left after 2½ years. I wasn't really getting what I wanted. The English was great. Let me tell you about that English. This guy, Mr. Carroll, I'll tell you. It was a nightmare, because instead of – most teachers would say, do page so-and-so. This guy would say, "Do chapter 16 and chapter 17 and chapter 18 and chapter 19 for tomorrow." I'd finish the other homework in a couple of hours, stay up all night doing his homework. But I learned so much from him. So when they sent me – when that quarter was over, everybody said, later for him. Me, the crazy fool, I took him again.

Brown: A glutton for punishment.

Golson: He says, "You're back for more. Okay. I'll give it to you." But I learned so much from him. Oh yeah. That guy, Mr. Carroll. He was so stiff, when he'd tell a joke, you'd have to try to figure out, was it really a joke. He was so stiff. That's really the only thing that – psychology and some of those other classes – oh, and the only class I ever failed, R.O.T.C. – Reserve Officers Training Corps. We had to go out with – we had our uniforms. We got map reading, rifle range, marching. I said, I'm music. I'm not about no guns. So that's the only course I failed.

They had me – you know the way you give out the orders. I'm standing there and tell them, "Order arms" and so – I didn't know crap. The guy on the front row was telling me what to say to them. Never did – map reading – I didn't know crap. What is this? The rifle range. I couldn't hit doodly. I flunked that. That was the only course I flunked.

I became disenchanted, because I was hearing other things, and they were just preparing me to be a teacher, to teach the basic things, the elements. I wanted to go beyond that. I wanted to find out what [Krzyststof] Penderecki was about, and [Edgard] Varèse, and some of the other ones. What's Duke Ellington about? And I wasn't getting it there.

So I left. When I left, I went back home and was working locally, working with Jimmy Preston, a local alto player, entertaining group. He drank too much all the time. I walked the bars, and I want you to know, I never tipped over a drink. Yeah, we were doing that.

Later, who'd I work with? Tiny Grimes, who used to play with Art Tatum. I thought – Ray Bryant got me the gig, because he's a piano player. I thought, this guy played with Art Tatum. I'm going to learn some stuff. But he had gotten into another bag, kind of an entertaining bag. It was Tiny Grimes and his Swinging Highlanders. So I had to wear the kilts. I made the mistake the first night – just put my regular underwear on. When I got up on the bar to walk the bar, the ladies started pulling my kilts up. I had on my boxer shorts, and sometimes it would pop out, on the side, while I'm trying to play and not knock the

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drinks over. The guy said, “You got to wear a bathing suit, a tight bathing suit. You can’t go out like that.” I didn’t know. They got me the first night.

Then I thought I was going to be a nervous wreck in that band. He used to play with Art Tatum. He was playing certain tunes, but we didn’t know what key the tunes were going to be in. Whatever key he felt, that’s what the tune was, and we never knew. He would always give us a little intro, de-din-din, de-din, to let us know what key it’s going to be in. Sometimes I hear the piano player, “Oh!,” because it’s in some strange key. I thought I was going to the booby-hatch, trying to – didn’t know what key we’re going to play the song in.

Okay. I went through that. Where did I go after that? I went back to Philly. I got married. I went back to Philly. I worked locally again. But I never told you this. Early on – I’m trying to think of what period. One of those periods I went back – I became a truck driver, picking up and delivering furniture. That’s what I was doing. I had a helper. I did that for a while. Then I got another truck-driving job, a little bigger truck, where we picked up glass. Glass is heavy. You can see the truck lagging. I used to have to install these big mirrors. I had a helper. I got good at it. I could put those mirrors up in ten minutes. The day that I came in and told those people – I says, “I’m giving my two weeks notice. I won’t be back.” Then they asked me, “What are you going to do?” I says, “I’m going to be a jazz musician.” They started laughing. They said, “You’ll be back.” I never went back. Thank goodness. Horowitz Mirror Company. I never went back.

That’s when I started – because I was playing locally. I was driving a truck, but working Fridays and Saturdays, when I got a gig. By then I was married, and I had a couple of kids. The kids didn’t want to know about the blues in B-flat. They were ready to eat every day. So I had to drive the truck.

After that . . .

Brown: Can we go back? A couple things. You mentioned that when you left Howard you were – you said you wanted to know about Varese and Penderecki and folks like that. In Philadelphia you had some very avant garde musical figures. You had Leo Ornstein, and then Dennis Sandole. Of course you took training under his wings. Was that influential? Then . . .

Golson: No.

Brown: . . . Isadore Granoff and folks like that?

Golson: No. Granoff had that school. Ornstein I didn’t know. Dennis Sandole I didn’t know then. We came together. I knew him and – what was his brother’s name? Dennis and – I can’t think of – but I knew both of them. Dennis was an intellectual. Dennis had

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something special going. But I didn't hook up to him until much later. I was really into my career then. I met him in Philly, and then he came to New York. He came to my house. Dennis had some special stuff going. He died much too soon.

The names you mentioned, no. I learned a lot of those things on my own, looking at scores, trying out this and trying out that. If it doesn't work, you back up and you try something else. People think that I'm some kind of a genius, but I made a whole bunch of mistakes. I wrote a lot of bad stuff on the way, trying to learn. And I was slow. It didn't happen overnight. I was a slow comer. I wasn't doing anything consequential until I was almost 30. I was slow.

Now it happens fast, because they have so much material from which they can draw. But we didn't have much then. We didn't have the schools. There were no musicians coming in and making appearances like they do now, giving clinics. We had nothing. All we had was each other. And the jam sessions were like a school, because what I didn't know, you knew, and what you didn't – vice versa. We learned, like iron sharpens iron, that kind of thing.

Brown: When you were composing, were you composing at the piano? Or did you start composing using your tenor?

Golson: Mostly at the piano. I didn't do much – some things I did on saxophone. But the piano's more convenient, because when you look at the piano, you're looking at the whole orchestra. Everything is there. The saxophone, you have to imagine, because you don't have it in front of you. Then sometimes I wrote things without anything. They were kind of strange. It was a long, arduous journey. Today, I'm still learning. I'm still exploring. I still consider what I do an adventure. When I wake up each day, intuitively, I think, what can I do today better than I did yesterday? What can I discover in the realm of tomorrow that's awaiting my discovery of it? Sometimes they jump out and say, "Here I am." But sometime you have to search for them. Sometimes they're on my doorstep, metaphorically. I find that it's an adventure. It's something to live for. The good thing about it – our life span at doing what we do far surpasses that of a football player or a boxer or a basketball player. My teacher – one of my composition teachers – he said to me – I talk to him. He's in Santa Barbara. He says – he was 92 then – he said, "I'm thinking about writing a book. Do you think I should." I said, "By all means." There's no football player at 92 years old. Duke Ellington, for example. He didn't have any time limits. And his music lives past his time. That's another earmark of greatness. Charlie Parker's music lives past his time. John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Gil Evans, Miles Davis. There's some guys that do what they do, and when they're gone, they're gone. Who knows about Larry Clinton? Larry Clinton was big when I was coming up as a kid in the '30s. You mention Larry Clinton – who? But if you mention Duke Ellington, comes from the same period, yes, everybody knows. You mention

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Marian Anderson, everybody remembers her. But if some other singers, you mention their names, nobody would know.

The thing is, you never know what's going to be the outcome of what you're doing as you pursue it. But you don't pursue it – or you shouldn't pursue it – with the idea of making money. I don't think any real artist thinks about that when he's in those budding years, when he's trying to get things together, about how much money he's going to get or if it's a jazz musician, how many women can he get by doing what he's doing. I met some like that. Oh yeah. They want to play so they can get the women, playing on the bandstand and wink at them. Uh-um. And it's not necessarily about fame, because John and I were playing together – we had no idea about fame. We just wanted to learn the music. Fame never came to our minds. The closest it ever came to us, I think, was, “Would I be good enough to play with Dizzy Gillespie?”, if that's fame. Money – like I told my mother, I didn't care about the money. I mean, I care about the money now. I'm realistic. But it's about the music. That's your – that desire, that's your engine.

It starts out with curiosity – everything – curiosity, which gives birth to imagination. As you try to give it life, these things that you imagine, then you're into the realm of creativity. So it's curiosity, imagination, creativity. If a person does something, and he has no creative – I'm sorry – no imagination in his mind, it's not going to be so consequential. It's going to be rather like platitudes. You know what I'm talking about? It's there, and so what? But if the imagination is working, all sorts of things can come out. Look at the new cars we got. Every time I fly in an airplane, I think about the Wright brothers. Would they have ever believed this? That desire to give. The future will always have an indistinguishable face, but that desire to give it a face of your own making, and the future is under our mutual windows, waiting to see what you're going to do in the future. What are you going to do? The future's a great thing, because it always gives you something to shoot for. Everybody can see what's in front of them, but how are you going to see tomorrow? You can only [use] imagination. So your imagination has to come into effect.

I tell you. I imagine all kinds of things. I've done all kinds of crazy things in music. Some of it works. Some of it does not work. But it's an adventure to see if it's going to work. We're in that symbolic maternity waiting room, to see how it's going to turn out, that is, when they play it, when you give birth. What happens when that baby drops? Is it going to be squealing and alive and vital, or is it going to be born dead? You know what I mean? Symbolically. That's what it's like. That's what it's like the first time.

I remember we did a project. Quite a few musicians. We had some of the Philharmonic and the New York Opera Company. That music was so involved. I was doing something by Johann Sebastian Bach, transposed some things and bring them together with jazz, but not with the jazz in it – transitions and things, and I had to eviscerate his music to understand what he was doing, so I could make my thing sound like an extension of him,

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even though it was jazz going into it, so it would be seamless. A lot of notes, and I added female voices, which he didn't have. When you have your hand up like that, and it's getting ready to come down, boy, you're almost shaking. When I bring my hand down, what's going to happen? It was fantastic. It happened. That was so involved. Bach was involved. Then I'm trying to do something that's on a level with him, sort of makes sense. You've got these professionals there, the first clarinetist with the New York Philharmonic. They're looking at you. Bam, disaster. But it was – it came out great.

Things like that. You have trepidation. People say, "Are you nervous when you perform?" Never, never. "Why?" I can't tell you. I'm just used to it. I love it. I love to play before people, and I love to talk to people. I remember that I love to talk so much that when I – a university hired me not as a musician, but as a lecturer. I went there, and I lectured about creativity. I think some of the students were going to sleep. But after the lecture, one of the professors approached me. He wanted to know – his partner wasn't there – he says, "We're doing a lecture tour on the very thing you're thinking about – talking about today, and it's sort of what we're talking about. Would you be interested in joining us in a television lecture tour?" I said, "Let me think about it." I thought [about] it for about a week. I told them no. I'm a performer. Why get involved in something like that?

Then William Patterson College hired me to give the commencement address. Then they wanted me to give a lecture to the physiology students, and I did. Then they wanted me to do it again. Nothing to do with music. I said – when then president asked me to do the commencement address, I said, "How do you know that I can do that?" He said, "Because I've heard you talk." I said, "Okay. All right." Yeah. I love that too. But I don't want to do it as a profession. Music is what I do. That's why I wouldn't do that tour. I love my music. I love to talk, but I don't want to try to make a living talking. I want to play, not talk. But that's an adventure too. Oration. That's an adventure too.

Brown: Let's go back to the period of time where we jumped in – the chronology where you had been forced, due to your situation, to abandon music, to be a truck driver for the glass company. You had gotten married. Could you talk about when you got married, where you got married, whom you married?

Golson: Ummmm.

Brown: Okay.

Golson: That was one of the worst times in my life. That seven years – whoo. I had made a big mistake. It didn't work out. I got married. I had to get a job as a truck driver. I wasn't making money. I couldn't say, "I haven't got any gigs. So you don't eat today." I had to do what I had to do. I don't regret it. Nothing wrong with hard work. But I'd much

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rather be doing what I'm doing. There's a certain joy. I wasn't getting any joy out of driving a truck. It was a need for it.

The marriage didn't work out. I had three boys. Two of them died. Two of them are dead. They died as men – cancer and this other – which was a drag. But I married again, and I have a daughter who's almost – she's pushing 50 now. She's 47. She's a delight, and this the woman I married – here, the woman you saw – a dream.

Brown: Bobbie?

Golson: Yeah. She's a dream. When I met her, she was an inspired ballerina, but there wasn't many opportunities. What black ballerina do you see? She's not Maria Tallchief or [?] – never make that. So she came over and just devotes all her time to supporting me in what I do. She supports me. She does everything for me except breathe. Sometimes it's embarrassing. She's great. We're having our fiftieth anniversary in March. So I told her. I said, "I think I'll keep you." Yeah, she's great. That's the difference.

Brown: So you stopped driving the truck. Is that when you took up with Bull Moose Jackson?

Golson: Just about after that, yeah. I forgot Bull Moose. In fact, the first job I had after the truck driver was Bullmoose Jackson. What happened – he was looking for a saxophone player when he came through town. Somehow somebody told him about me. I went to audition. We were in the hotel room, him and the road manager who played alto with the group. So they put the music up, and I played the music. After that they said, "He doesn't wear glasses for nothing," which meant that I could read the music. That's when I joined them. That's when I met Tadd Dameron, because Tadd Dameron was the piano player. Now about – that was a complete aberration, because – what happened – Bullmoose's name was Benjamin – Benjamin Jackson. They grew up together in Cleveland. Bull Moose knew that Tadd was at liberty, which means he wasn't working. So he said to him, "Look, until you find what you're going to do, why don't you come and make some gigs with me? I need a piano player." So Tadd said – he said, "When you get tired, you just go and leave, and I'll get another piano player" – so he said okay, and he joined the band. Shortly after that is when I joined the band, and I was there. Then I met him, and he heard me play. He says, "Oh boy. I'd like to take you to Europe next time I go." Well, he never did. But now, after I joined the band, he says, "I need a trumpet player." I said, "I recommend Johnny Coles." And he needed a bass player. Well, Jymie Merritt, I do – I recommended him. Now he needed a drummer. I recommended Philly, and Philly became the drummer.

We've got this rhythm-and-blues band – we're in this rhythm-and-blues band. Its claim to fame is *I love you, yes I do*. He had a great voice, but he wasn't very handsome. We playing that music . . .

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Brown: I guess that's important, huh.

Golson: Yeah.

Brown: To be – that you thought of him not being handsome.

Golson: He wasn't handsome. Let me tell you. We played a place, and he was giving out his 8x10 pictures that night to all the people. When we went and finished the gig, all the photographs are laying on the sidewalk outside. Does that tell you how he looked?

Anyway, we were playing that music that he had recorded. That was the reason we were out there. He wrote that. But Tadd had some of his arrangements in there, and we were playing that too, which is pretty hip. I'm learning from Tadd, and I started to write, and I'm sounding like Tadd. Tadd was proud of me. He came to me, tongue in cheek. Said, "What a drag. Play your arrangements. People come up and tell me, 'That was a great arrangement, Tadd,' and you wrote it." But he was just tongue in cheek. He was – and I guess I was writing like him.

It wound up that we had two different kinds of people coming to hear us when Tadd was in the band. The people that hear that, and the jazz performance, because when we play that, Philly played a different way, and Tadd was – then people came to hear Bullmoose sing and play those songs. So we had – I remember St. Louis – we had two different audiences in the same room. That's when the band was at its peak. It was great. But like all things, that came to an end.

Brown: What were the circumstances?

Golson: Yeah, that came to an end. He kept it a little while longer, but after that he didn't do much, Bullmoose. Faded away. Then we went our separate ways. Then after that, that's when Philly Joe joined Miles. If you had heard him playing with Bullmoose, he might not have hired him.

Brown: Then is that when you went with Lionel Hampton? Or was there some other intermediate gigs?

Golson: Lionel Hampton, no. Like I told you, I met Tadd with Bullmoose in '51. Tadd hired me, because he got the gig in Atlantic City. During the summer, there was a Club Harlem. It had like a revue – chorus girls, a comedian, and a singer, this and that. Larry Steele had that group at Cafe Harlem – whatever it was – every summer. Another club on the other side, the Paradise, this guy was going to do the same thing in his area – called the Paradise. It wasn't Larry Steele. It was Clarence Robinson who was putting a revue together. They hired Tadd to do the music for it. Tadd hired me, Clifford Brown, Johnny

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Coles, Cecil Payne, Jymie Merritt, Philly Joe Jones, and a trombone player. I've forgotten his name. We were playing music for the show.

Lionel Hampton came through town. Lionel didn't come, but Quincy and somebody else from the band came to see the show. They heard Clifford. They heard me. They heard Gigi. We didn't know each other's name. He went back and told Lionel – he says, "Lionel, you ought to try to get Clifford Brown, Benny Golson, and Gigi Gryce." So – we were under contract – so we told the guy – the owner, "Lionel Hampton would like for us to join the band. Is it all right if we go?" He said, "No. I'm concerned about my show here." It was about three weeks before the end of the season. So I said, "Okay. Can you do this? Let Gigi and Clifford go. I'll stay here and make sure the new guys play the music as it should be." He said okay. So they left, and I stayed there until the end of the season – Labor Day in September. Then I went. I joined them in Greenville, South Carolina – somewhere in South Carolina. That's when I came into the band.

The band – that's when I met Art Farmer. He was in the band. Art Farmer was in the band, Jimmy Cleveland, Alan Dawson. Quincy Jones was playing fourth trumpet. And some of the other guys that you wouldn't know. I joined the band. When I joined the band, we had to talk money. I'm talking money with George Hart, the road manager. Gladys [Hampton], who really controlled everything, his wife – she wasn't there. Lionel, I guess he didn't have anything to say about anything. He just played the vibes. George was – the guys were getting \$19 a night when they did one-nighters. 19. You know, me and myself, my principles. I said, "George, I can't play for \$19 a night. I've got to get \$22 a night, or I can't make it." So he promised me. He said, "Don't tell anybody." Okay. \$22 a night, which wasn't much anyway. So everything was all right. We played a few gigs. We got to Columbia, South Carolina, and Gladys came on the scene. She found out he was paying me \$22 a night. She says, "I'll not hear of it. \$19 a night." The next gig was Washington, D.C., the [?]. I said, "Bye." I left. The next week they came to New York and played that venue right next to Birdland. It was – what was the name of that? I forgot the name of it. It was like a bird, only it was different. I can't think of the name of that place. After that two weeks they went to Europe. Got a postcard – I quit because I wasn't getting \$22 a night – got a card from Quincy. "I'm sorry you didn't make it. We are doing so many record dates over here." I said, me and my principles. Lionel hadn't want them to do it. They were sneaking out the hotel windows.

During that time, the guys had to pay for their own overweight. They had to pay for their own overweight. They were checking out one day. They saw this guy come down. He looked like Gigi Gryce, but this guy was fat. It was Gigi Gryce. He didn't want to pay the overweight. So he had all of his clothes on, instead of in the bag. He had all of his clothes on, so he wouldn't have to pay the overweight.

[recording interrupted]

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Brown: We're onto tape three of the oral history interview with the great Benny Golson. We just talked about you and your brief tenure with the Lionel Hampton band. But we hadn't really at this point discussed your recording career. Bullmoose Jackson is your first recording? Was that your first date?

Golson: Yes. He was recording for the King label, out of Cincinnati. What had been happening – when Bullmoose would record, they would use studio musicians. They wanted to be sure they got exactly what they wanted to get, that would sell. But we were of the mind, if we are the band that's playing with him day in and day out, why shouldn't we record. So okay, they agreed to do it, which meant that we had to also sing. So the first thing – the only tune that I remember from that date that we did – and that was my first time I'd ever recorded – *I'll be home for Christmas*. All of us had to sing the song. We did and played the music. That was my first recording. Tadd was on it too.

I'm trying to remember the next time I recorded. I can't remember when it was. I don't remember if it was my date or whether I recorded with somebody else. It's a little hazy. But I know my first record date as a leader was with Contemporary Records in Los Angeles. It was Les Koenig who had the Contemporary label at that time, where I was the leader. On that date we had Paul Chambers, Wynton Kelly, Charlie Persip, Gigi Gryce, Art Farmer, Shahib Shihab. Yeah, that's what it was. And Julius Watkins on trombone – uh, Jimmy Cleveland on trombone and Julius Watkins on french horn. That's right. That was my first date as a leader.

Brown: That was Benny Golson: *New York Scene*?

Golson: Right. I thought I'd struck it rich. They paid me \$500.

Brown: We're leaving our chronology. Let's go back to after leaving, again, your very, very brief tenure with the Lionel Hampton band, Johnny Hodges – working with Johnny Hodges.

Golson: Yes. What happened – Al Sears had been the tenor player with Johnny Hodges, and he left. They had just recorded this *Castle Rock*, and that was pretty hot. [Golson hums the opening phrase.] Then Johnny Hodges hired John Coltrane. I couldn't figure that out. He replaced Al Sears, who was a boot-'em-up tenor player, with John Coltrane. I said, I don't understand that. Anyway, Billy Eckstine decided to put together a show, a touring show. In the show was Ruth Brown, the Clovers, a fellow that sang with a harpist – I can't remember his name – and Nipsy Russell, the comedian, and Johnny Hodges. Johnny Hodges only had a sextet or a septet. So he had to enlarge it to play Billy's music. John told Johnny to hire me as a tenor player. So that's how I came on the scene. We did the tour with him.

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Johnny – the whole time I was with him, Johnny Hodges never pronounced my name right, never. One day I was Gosome, or Goosome, or Goldstine. I had a variety of names. He never called me Golson, never. I didn't understand. I didn't correct – I never corrected him. I just – but this guy, he could play. I said to John, "John, did you ever tell him that he used to be your hero? – when I first met you, you used to sound like that." "No." I didn't never – he never said anything about anything. "No, I never told him." "I told him." Johnny Hodges. Boy, he could bend a note from here to there. Play out of the side of his mouth and be looking over here. He was a character.

Brown: How was he as a leader?

Golson: Good, easy, easy to work with, during that time. Lawrence Brown was also – in fact we were seatmates. Lawrence Brown was playing trombone with him, because they had played together with Duke. Lawrence was easy to get along with. Lawrence was okay. I enjoyed that. It was only like a three-week tour, something like that, but I got to know – oh, I've got to tell you something. I got to know Johnny pretty good. John and I liked sweet potato pies. When you go down South, you're always going to find a sweet potato pie somewhere. We were somewhere down South. We went in this restaurant. They had these single sweet potato pies, these six-inch pies. I guess they had about a dozen of them there for sale. I bought two. John bought the other ten. We got on the bus, and from where we were going, John ate all ten of those pies. About half an hour after that, the bus had to stop every 15 minutes for him to find a toilet.

Brown: The bus [?] sugar and molasses. They know how to make those pies down South. Ooo-whee.

Golson: Yeah. It got to him.

Brown: So that was very brief. Only three weeks.

Golson: Three weeks. Something like that.

Brown: You were based in New York at this point. Correct?

Golson: During that time – I was in New York.

Brown: It was about '53. Where were you living in New York at that point?

Golson: 116th [Street] and Seventh Avenue, Graham Court, with my aunt. I had a room and a second-hand piano that I bought for \$50 in the corner. That's what I used to use to write. That was it. But I'll tell you. I had a big window – one big window – and I'd put that window up. On the weekend, you could hear everything socially that you wanted to

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hear: automobile accidents, gunshots, pimps berating their ladies, friendships being broken up. You could hear everything from that window.

Brown: *Harlem Air Shaft.*

Golson: Yeah, and I said, ah, inspiration. Yeah, *Harlem Air Shaft*, Duke. Nothing like New York, and I was a new boy in town then. Not many people knew who I was. When I first got there, of course, nobody knew. But – who was that bass player? Can't think of his name. He played with Lockjaw. He says, "I'm going to take you up to Birdland on Monday night." It was the off night, the jam session night. "I'm going to take you up there, and I . . ." He took me to Birdland. He said, "Go on up there and play," and I did. That's how I got started. A few people heard me there, and then he was telling people about me. I started to get calls and things like that. Because when you go to town, nobody knows who you are.

One thing led to another. I used to play the Apollo Theater with Reuben Phillips. He had the house band there. I would play the shows there with him and various other things, various kinds of gigs. There was that Rockland Palace uptown, where they had lots of concerts. The Savoy Ballroom I played, where they had two bands. That was a trip. Those bouncers looked like King Kong. You never wanted to get in trouble up there with those guys. They're waiting to hurt you. Those guys – in tuxedos – these guys were bruisers. Never had any problems up there. We played up there just before it all came to a close, the Savoy Ballroom. That was great.

Brown: Did you join the union? Did you have to join the union?

Golson: I'd already joined the union in Philly, but yeah, you had to join the New York local. I knew somebody who knew somebody. So I was able to do it without waiting, because usually you have to wait a month or so before you could wait. But while you're waiting, you can't work. I knew somebody. I remember I went there. I had to do the same thing here, but I knew somebody here and I could work right away. That's kind of antiquated. You got to wait a month before you can work. I don't understand that.

Yeah, I was a member of Philadelphia, New York, and here. I'm a member here and New York. Philadelphia, I don't think I'm a member anymore. I haven't been there so long.

Brown: How about trying to pick up the chronology – Earl Bostic? Or is there still some other significant engagements?

Golson: Earl Bostic. Earl Bostic came after Bullmoose, I think it was.

Brown: According to this chronology, Bullmoose was in '51.

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Golson: Right.

Brown: And then Lionel – then, of course you met Tadd. So you were working – were you working in Tadd’s band for . . . ?

Golson: Only for the summer, 1953.

Brown: Then there was Lionel Hampton. Then there was the Hodges. Then, according to this chronology, Earl Bostic.

Golson: Earl Bostic is ’55, I think – somewhere around there.

Brown: That was an extended engagement, though.

Golson: I was with him for about a year and a half. That was the only time I’ve ever been – well, other than when we were amateurs in Philadelphia when John Coltrane and I got put out there – but as a professional, that was the only time I got fired. I deserved – I’ll tell you what’s happening. The reason you’re hearing that. The mayor lives two blocks, and they have the planes always going over, checking everything. That’s why, day and night, that thing. I maybe should move.

I joined that band. He liked the way I played, and he hired me to play in the band, but when I got in the band, I didn’t really play too much. It was all Earl Bostic. He’s playing these tunes, and we’re just standing there and playing a chord on the end. We had some tunes we played, and he let me write a couple of things, but there was really no musical activity or exploration there. So after about a year and a half, I guess, I started doing absurd things on the bandstand. When we’d go down South, he’d pull out his guitar. He played guitar after a fashion. He was a saxophone player though, really. [Golson hums a few notes (*Easy Living?*)] We’d take intermission. We played dances primarily – some clubs – mostly dances – and would take a half-hour intermission. I’d go back on the bandstand, tighten some of the strings and loosen some of the strings, and go back off. So when we’d go back, he’d put the guitar up. He knows it’s in tune. He doesn’t have to tune it. That thing, man. It’s embarrassing for him, I guess. “What the heck is wrong? What is wrong with this guitar?” I kept doing it. “What the heck is wrong with this guitar?” The guys were onto it. One night he did it. They looked at me and started laughing. He looked at me. I had to stop. I stopped that.

Okay. He’s playing another concert. People are dancing, but some people are standing on the edge of the stage, watching him play. He’s playing. I’m standing there doing nothing as usual, waiting for him to finish, so I can play the chord on the end. Says, I think I’ll do what I saw Illinois Jacquet do. Yeah. I went back behind the drums, where the drums was, so I could have a good running space. I took my horn off the strap. I started running toward the audience and took my horn like this guy’s going to throw it. Everybody

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standing there was ducking like that while he was playing. So it took attention away from him. He didn't like that. "You do what you want to do in the solo. Don't do that on my solo."

We got up to Seattle, Washington. Nobody ever sat in. What he's going to do, he does it – an Earl Bostic group. A friend of mine was there, and he had his saxophone with him – a good saxophone player. He said, "Do you think that Earl will let me sit in?" I said, "Yeah. Get your horn out." So Earl's playing, and when he finished, this stranger steps up and starts playing. "Who the – what . . ." "Benny told me I could . . ." That was it. He gave me two weeks and said, "Sorry partner. I have to let you go. Can't stand no more."

Brown: Can't stand you no more.

Golson: Can't stand it any more. You're killing me. So I got my money. I'm catching my flight from Seattle back to New York the next day. But early that morning, I got a call from Quincy Jones. "Benny. Ernie Wilkins is leaving the band, because he" – he's going to write for Tommy Dorsey and all this stuff. "Do you think you could join the band?" I said, "Yeah." "How soon do you think you could make it?" I said, "Today." So I went, and I joined him at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. No rehearsals. Just sit down and join the band. That was it. I never heard Diz close up like that, that proximity, in that situation. He was standing right in front of me, just six feet, playing. He was playing so much trumpet.

One of two things can happen when you hear something like that. You can be overly inspired or depressed. He was playing so much. I said, I can never play like that. I got so depressed. He was firing up. When the show's over, the curtain closed, the lights dimmed, and somehow we two happened to be the last two off. I said, I've got to say something to him, to let him know how he affected me. I probably said the corniest thing I ever said in my life. I said, "Diz, you sure did blow." Aw. I wanted to grab the words back. But he was so humble. He turned around and stuttered and said, "Uh. It was nothing." It was everything. He was so humble. It was fantastic, what he was playing. He said, oh, it's nothing. Incredible. That guy was a phenomenon. Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker both changed the face of jazz. I'll tell you. It's true. The rest had to catch up with them. The rhythm section – when I heard them, the rhythm section hadn't caught up with them. That came later. Max Roach came later. Tommy Potter and others came later. They were out there with that, exploring. We kids tried to imitate them. The older guys – we were like 20, 21, 22 – the older guys were putting us down. "Where's the bass drum? Where's the melody? You guys play like you got a mouthful of hot rice." I didn't care. They can say what they want. I was trying to get to that new music. When I heard him play after all those years and sound like that – oh man. You have no idea what it does to you inside, to hear that. It's something that you never forget. You're moved tremendously. It's like hands reaching out and touching you, when you hear that. That's the way I felt when I went to Max Roach's rehearsal in Philadelphia with my tune, and

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Clifford Brown, sitting on the bandstand, put the music on the stand. His trumpet was right in my face, listening to him play. It was like somebody was touching me and doing that to me. I never felt that like that. He was playing right in my face. It was like a physical experience. You don't experience that very often. Incredible. It can affect you like that sometimes.

Brown: You got to play with one of your heroes. What you used to – you said earlier that you and Trane would sit around and say, do you think we'll ever play with Dizzy?

Golson: Yeah, be good enough to play. When he broke the band up, the big band, he formed a sextet, and I was the tenor player, and a trombone player out of Atlanta, Silly Willy. He only had one lung. Could play his brains out. He died, much too soon. That was his sextet.

Brown: Who was that?

Golson: Silly Willy, from Atlanta. I don't remember what his real name was. Oh, that guy could play. Had one lung. Silly Willy. Wooo. Never recorded, I don't think. Then he died, much too soon. Silly Willy. I'll never forget him.

Brown: So you're in Diz's band. Had you been keeping in touch with Trane? Because he had played with Diz earlier, back in the late '40s. He already played with Diz. Had you and Trane still been keeping in touch? Or was that just an occasional running in . . .?

Golson: No, just by happenstance. Sometimes we'd run into each other. Sometimes – I remember, when I played in Birdland, he came just to see me. I remember him saying after the set, "If you'd drink, I would buy you a drink." Then later he came to the Five Spot, when they moved to St. Mark's Place – when they moved to the newer place. I was staring out during intermission. I saw him get out of the car and come over. He'd put on some weight and was smoking a cigar. I said, "John, you put on – you're a little thick there." He says, "Yeah, I don't understand it." He says, "I'm taking that pill." Metrocal, they had then, I think it was. He says, "I'm taking that Metrocal. I'm still putting on weight. I don't understand it." I said, "Yeah. That's strange." Then I happened to say, "How are you taking it?" He says, "I have my meal, and then I drink the Metrocal." I said, "No. You're supposed to drink the Metrocal instead of the meal." He said, "Oh." He's drinking it like a milkshake with the meal.

Oh, he was a funny boy. He used to have an expression. He was concerned about the feet. He said, "When the feet hoits, mind hoits, everything hoits." He was – when your feet hurt, boy. I remember it happened to me one time. I got off the Subway at 116th Street, broad daylight. I had to take those shoes off. I could care less about the people. My feet were killing me. I took those shoes off. I gave those shoes away. When you're feet hurt, you're disrupted. You can't function.

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Brown: So you're with Diz now.

Golson: Diz, yeah. He let me write some things. What did I write for him? *Stablemates*. *I Remember Clifford*. We were going to play Newport Jazz Festival. Other music we'd been playing a long time. I had just written *I Remember Clifford*. We'd only been playing it for about a month or so. Somebody forgot and left the music wherever we had come from. We got to Newport. We had no music that we had to play at the festival. No music for the band. So, let's see if we can remember it. We've been playing it so much. Did pretty good. Everybody remembered. He said, "Let's try *I Remember Clifford*." I said, "Diz. You sure you want to do that? We haven't been playing that long. I don't think everybody can remember." He said, "If it doesn't work, we can just wind up, let the piano and bass play. Just continue." But we played it, and everybody remembered his part, to the note – every note. And it was recorded. They recorded it, too. That's why I said, "Diz. Are you sure you want to do that?", because they were recording. It's recorded. I listen to it from time to time. We remembered it. Miracle. A miracle.

He gave me a lot of opportunities to write, and he always introduced everybody who played a solo. At the beginning he'd talk – so-and-so and so-and-so. He used to feature me on *A Night in Tunisia* and a couple other things. But Billy Mitchell was the primary soloist, and I had a couple things that I played on. But he would always announce us, and if I wrote something, he would say it was written by me.

Lee Morgan joined the band. Lee was only 18. Now Diz never had anything to prove. His feature was *A Night in Tunisia*. He gave it to Lee Morgan. I said, that's really something, for him to take his featured number and give it to Lee Morgan, because Lee was just getting started. Blue Note wanted to record him.

As a matter of fact, when I wrote *I Remember Clifford*, it was right out here, Hollywood and Western. It was called the – I can't remember the name of the club, but we had a two-week engagement there. It hadn't been too long after Clifford's death. I said, maybe I can write something to help people remember this fantastic trumpet player that died at 25 years of age. So I set about writing it. It took me the full two weeks to finish it, the longest amount of time I've ever spent on any song. Usually I write a song in a day, a couple of days, something like that. Sometimes I write two or three of them – a couple of them dogs. When he came into work one night – he came in early, and I was there – I asked him, did he have time to listen to something? He said yeah. He put his trumpet down on the table. The bartender's washing glasses. We're the only ones there. So I started to play. About eight bars into the tune, he took his trumpet out. I said, oh, this guy doesn't know it. He's going to try to play it. Maybe he likes it that much. But then he fooled me. He took out a plastic flask of kerosene that he used to clean his valves. I'm playing this song for him to listen. He starts putting kerosene on his valves. Then he poured it down the horn and blew up into the horn – kkkkkkkk. The kerosene got all over

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me and the piano. I said, oh, man. But when I finished it, he says, “Oh, that’s beautiful. What is it?” I said, “I don’t have a title yet, but I’m thinking of calling it *I Remember Clifford*.” I told him *I Remember Clifford*. He said, “I’ve got a record date coming up with Norman Granz in about a month. Can I record this?” Dizzy Gillespie’s asking me, can he record my song? He didn’t know that in Philadelphia, when I was in high school, I had his picture on the wall at the foot of my bed. Every morning I’d wake up with that dream. Would I ever be good enough to work with the likes of Dizzy? Of course I had Coleman Hawkins and other people there. Would I be able to work with this guy? He’s asking me, could he record my song? Man, inside I was bungee jumping and sky diving, but I had to be cool. I said, “Yeah.” I was cool.

Brown: You and Oscar Brown.

Golson: Yeah, man.

Brown: But I was cool.

Golson: I was cool.

Lee Morgan was in the band, and Blue Note was hot to record him. He had his date coming in two weeks, and he wanted to record it. Lee was the first one to record it. Diz was the second, and a fellow name Donald Byrd was the third. I thought it was a trumpet piece. But then Sonny Rollins did it, which surprised me. Wow. Then, after that, other people started to do it, and Jon Hendricks put lyrics to it. Then Carmen McRae did it. Dinah Washington did it. Other singers did it too. As the years went by, the Manhattan Transfer did it. They did a great job on it. I said, wow.

When we went to Japan – I went to Japan about five years ago with Ron Carter. I went with his group. The Japanese are a punctilious people. They dot every “i,” cross every “t,” and if they’re a jazz fan, they know everything about it, just like going to college. You could walk up to them and say, “Who played third alto with Benny Goodman in 1939?” Bam. They tell you.

This fellow approached me and said, “Mr. Golson. Do you know how many recording there are on *I Remember Clifford*?” I said, “No, I don’t.” He said, “There’s 334.” I said wow. I never knew it was recorded that much.

When I wrote *Killer Joe*, my wife said it would never work. It was too monotonous. That thing has gone on and on. Everybody plays *Killer Joe*. Quincy recorded it twice.

Yeah, I’ve been fortunate. I’ve been fortunate because I didn’t let anybody hear the dogs I wrote. See, if they heard the dogs, I wouldn’t have been anywhere.

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Brown: The diamonds are going to shine through.

The first person to record your music – was that James Moody?

Golson: James Moody. *Big Ben*. Yeah. People think it was Miles, but Miles was the second. James Moody did, because he had that sextet. Was it a sextet or septet? He had that together. It was a nice group. He recorded that. I did some other things that he didn't record, but he recorded that one.

Then the second person was Miles Davis with *Stablemates*. That's what really got me started, that one.

Brown: How did that come about, that Miles recorded that?

Golson: Because John took it to him.

Brown: Okay.

Golson: See . . .

Brown: John Coltrane.

Golson: I wrote *Stablemates* by default. I was getting divorced from my first marriage I told you about. We played – I was with Earl Bostic. She lived in Chester, which is 15 miles from Wilmington, Delaware. We were playing Wilmington. We were in the throes of a divorce. She came to a dance that night that we were playing, with a couple of her girlfriends. She was waiting for the intermission, so she could talk to me. I didn't want to talk to her. So I stayed on the bandstand like I was busy, so busy. I started writing this thing. It was the beginning of *Stablemates*. I started writing, and that's how it came about. She's responsible for it. The next night, wherever we played, I put the bridge to it.

Anyway, like I told you, when John left – when Hank Mobley was leaving Miles Davis, Miles asked Philly [Joe Jones] to recommend a tenor player from Philly, and he recommended John Coltrane. When he said, John Coltrane, of course Miles had never heard of him. So Miles said, "I never heard of him. Can he play?" Philly said, "Um-hmm." That was an understatement. So he left our little coterie of musicians and whatnot, and he went to join Miles.

I saw him about a week later on Columbia Avenue, one of the main streets in North Philly where we lived. I said, "How's it going?" He says, "It's going fine." He said, "But Miles needs some music. Do you have any tunes?" Did I have any tunes? I had tunes and dogs and everything. So I said, "I got this one oddball tune I'd written, because the

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structure's a little different. Rather than sending a bunch of tunes, let me send this one tune." So I gave him that one tune.

I didn't see him for about a month. When I ran into him, he didn't even say hello. He said, "You know that tune you gave me?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Miles recorded – man, he dug it." I said, "You're kidding me." He said, "No man. He dug it." Sure enough, when it came out – *Stablemates*, Benny Golson. All these people I'd been giving lead sheets to, nothing happened. They must have gone back in the trash or under the rug, wherever they had them, to see, yeah, that's the same name, Benny Golson. They said, if Miles recorded stuff, he must be into something. So Miles validated me, and after Miles recorded *Stablemates*, people started recording my stuff, bam, bam, bam, bam. So I owe it to my dear friend John Coltrane, who took it, and Miles, who recorded it. When I saw Miles, he said, "What were you smoking when you wrote that structure?" Yeah, everybody plays that now. Boy, incredible. You never know. Never

Brown: Yeah, you don't know. I was telling Ken that when Art Farmer came – I was at Rutgers University. Art Farmer was artist-in-residence. So I got a chance to play with him. He called *Stablemates*. The structure – I had never played it. So I'm reading through, and I was going, the structure – this structure is tripping me up.

Golson: Yeah, it's 14 bars . . .

Brown: 14 bars. It'll trip you up.

Golson: . . . and then the 8-bar bridge, and then 14.

Brown: Not 12, not 16, but 14.

Golson: Right.

Brown: That's why Miles asked you, "What were you smoking?" But it is a classic. So then you've got Diz, right?, recording your stuff. You've got Lee Morgan recording your stuff. Then you finally get your – you mentioned earlier – your first date as a leader, 1957, with Contemporary Records.

Golson: Yeah, Sonny Rollins started recording. Everybody started recording. Incredible. This fellow that does all the music for Clint Eastwood. I can't think of his name. He used to be an alto player. He wasn't doing anything like that. He recorded my things. It was almost a dog. Called *411 West*. He recorded. What is his name? [Lennie Niehaus.] He does all of Clint's pictures. I haven't talked to him recently. *411 West*, he recorded it. Then some of the people out here – he got Bob Cooper, who's dead; Shelly Manne. He recorded some of the stuff. Some of the guys out here, and all over. In Europe they started recording it.

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Brown: Is this starting to become a lucrative or at least a substantial source of income for you?

Golson: It's not becoming. It became.

Brown: I mean, at that point.

Golson: Oh yeah, at that point. Oh yeah. I tell you. I joined ASCAP, the collecting agency for your performances. My checks used to be, like, \$10, \$20. Then one year I got a check for over \$3,000. I couldn't believe it. \$3,000. I didn't even put it in the bank. I had a clothes bag hanging in the closet. I cashed it and put it all in the clothes bag. I was just going in there and buying stuff. Yeah. That was incredible. But it got better. It got better and better and better, people recording more and more and more. So I was fortunate, because it didn't have to be like that. It didn't have to be like on commission. In fact I got a commission now from Harvard University for next October, and I got a commission from Miami University, which is in Ohio.

Brown: Right, right. That's such a trip. Miami in Ohio.

Golson: Last year I did a commission from Juilliard for their hundredth anniversary, which worked out well. It's been good.

Brown: So what about – you mentioned of course your classics, *I Remember Clifford*, *Stablemates*. What about *Whisper Not*?

Golson: *Whisper Not* I wrote up in Boston. There was a club up there called Storyville. It was in the downtown area. What was the name of that hotel? Whatever the hotel was. On the ground floor was Storyville. Stan Getz used to play there. It must have been three times a year. He played there all the time. Dizzy had an engagement there. We had a week there. During the day I used to go to the club – because nobody was there, and that's where the piano was – and see if I could write something. *I Remember Clifford* took me the longest time to write, almost two weeks. *Whisper Not* – I knew it was nothing. I said, this tune is nothing. I wrote it in 20 minutes. I said, I know this tune is nothing. But Diz heard it, and he wanted to play – he played it. Art Blakey played it, and other people started to play it, started recording. I said, you never know. I said, 20 minutes. This can't be worth anything. There you go. *Maharajah and the Blues*, I put a lot of time on it, and that was a dog, where it didn't mean a thing.

Brown: What were some of those other titles that were dogs, again?

Golson: *I Found My True Love in Mexico*, *I'm Finger Poppin' and Hip Shakin'*. Oh man. I still got the music to it. It's still in my catalogue. Nobody's ever going to record it.

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Brown: Just do retrograde inversion. It might sound great.

If we return to the chronology – you’re still with Dizzy’s band. Your music is starting to get performed, recorded by other people. You’re starting to get a name for yourself with Diz. The *Great Day in Harlem*, that photograph . . .

Golson: That was made while I was with him.

Brown: That’s what I’m saying. In ’57 you get called for that. So now your star is on the rise. People are starting to recognize Benny Golson, performer, composer.

Golson: We did – we made that picture. Nat Hentoff, he’s a political writer now, but he was a jazz critic then. He called me and asked me, could I come up to take that picture? I didn’t know – on that picture, I knew Art Farmer, Dizzy Gillespie, Johnny Griffin, and Gigi Gryce. That’s the only people I – because I’d just come to town. When they called me to be in the picture, I didn’t know what was going on. So I went up there. I just stood up there. When I got up there, I was surprised. Here’s all these – my heroes up here. Wow. Dizzy Gillespie, Lester Young, Sonny Rollins, and Hank Jones, and Chubby Jackson on the bass, used to be with Woody Herman. Man. Nobody knew who I was. As it turns out, there are only six of us left right now, I think. Incredible. Six of us left. What was that guy’s name that played the piano, with the cigar?

Brown: Willie “the Lion” Smith.

Golson: Willie “the Lion” Smith. He’s not on that picture, because what happened – it was 126th and Lenox or Fifth Avenue – somewhere. During the break, everybody would go to the bar and come back. Go up and come back. He stayed at the bar too long. He didn’t get back for the final photograph. That’s why he’s not on it. But he was on all the other photographs. Willie “the Lion” Smith. He missed it.

Trying to get the picture taken – I remember the fellow – I can’t remember his name – who took the picture – “Oh, man. How’s [?]?” “I haven’t seen you in so long.” This is going on, because everybody hadn’t seen each other. They’re all together at once, that many musicians. So he had to overcome that. It took us a half hour to settle down for him to click the camera each time, that kind of thing. I remember that day. It was really something.

Brown: Did you see the movie of that – the making of that?

Golson: Oh yeah.

Brown: With Diz – “I got to go. Lorraine called. I have to go.”

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I just want to talk – talk about the people that you knew. Art Farmer, Gigi. When you went with Diz – I’m going to switch gears with you, but it’s going to involve these people. When I interviewed Art Farmer, he talked about how, at this time in the early to mid-’50s, that jazz musicians started to come up with the idea of getting their own publishing rights. When Art told me, he said it was Gigi.

Golson: That’s right.

Brown: Recently there was an interview with Quincy, and Quincy credits Billy Taylor with hipping him. So I don’t know. Let’s get . . .

Golson: Different ones.

Brown: Different perspectives on this. So if you could help – because obviously this has turned out to be a very lucrative circumstance for you. So if you could help set the historical record straight about how that came to be, because obviously you benefited greatly.

Golson: With me it was Gigi Gryce too. In fact we became partners in the publishing business for a while there. Because what was happening – and it happened with Diz and Bird – the record company would record them and automatically take the publishing. Didn’t even ask. You just thought, that’s the way it went. Then Gigi got – became a rebel, I guess, and I guess I joined him. Why give it to the record company? If I wrote it, why can’t I publish it? So he delved into the nature of what publishing’s all about, how you go about it, with the E form, Library of Congress, and so forth and so forth. We would hire an attorney on Fifth Avenue, which didn’t do anything. Yeah, we got into it. Once we got started with our things, then we started to handle other artists as a company. We got Jon Hendricks, *Comin’ Home Baby*. What was that guy who wrote – the bass player? We had several people’s tunes in the catalogue. Gigi – how can I say it? – he didn’t trust very many people. It got so bad that he and I split up, because I wanted a record of something, what I’d done, and there was all of the information on there, and when he sent it to me, he had cut it out, like in prison. This was cut out, and cut out. It looked like paper dolls that you cut.

And what happened? Oh, one day I was at his house. I just happened to see two people. They were checking on the address, to see where this information on a letter – material – was coming from. They were across the street, walking and looking. They didn’t see me, but I saw them – from the record company. They were checking out, what is this Gigi Gryce doing? Who’s at this address? It was his apartment. They were checking that out. Then he got afraid. He said, maybe the Mafia’s involved in this.

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Anyway, he and I split. Then he went on with the company, and I got my own company. Later on, he just got out of the music business. He was teaching school over there in Brooklyn, I think. Then he moved back to Florida. That's where he died.

Then what I did – what I wisely did – oh yeah. Then you find people taking advantage of you. When we had the Jazztet together, we had a manager. She liked us so well, she never charged us or anything. But then she fell on hard times. After the fact, I found out that she had taken \$50,000 of my money out of the company. She had been so good to me. She had done so many good [things] for me and my wife that I couldn't come after her. Because at one time, she was engaged to the vice-president of Pepsi-Cola – I was out of town – Herb Barnet. Bobbie was sick. He came by in his limousine, picked Bobbie up, and took her to the hospital. Things like that. So I wouldn't come after her. I said, well, this is nothing but money. But I said, give me my music back. It was in her company. She didn't want to do it. So what I had to do, I had to get a lawyer from here, because I was here. He – I had to pay him to go from here to New York to take care of business. Finally that's how I got it back.

Brown: Is that Kay Norton?

Golson: Yeah. It cost me a pretty penny, but I got it back, and he's still my attorney. At that time, he was Liberace's attorney. So he knew the business. He's still my attorney and we . . .

Brown: What's his name?

Golson: Joel Strote. He's on it.

Brown: Strode?

Golson: S-t-r-o-t-e. Strote. Joel Strote. He handles anything. The telephone rings, that the people use. He's on it. He handles Chick Corea too. He's the man. He handled Liberace's stuff, his estate in Los Vegas, up until about two years ago, I think. Because he's got a company out here in Los Angeles. He's the guy. Nobody mess with me now or with him.

Brown: Did Quincy Jones at any time own any of your publishing?

Golson: Oh yeah. But I decided – Quincy had *Silhouette* – I decided, why don't I get things back under my own umbrella? With him it was no problem. I got those things back. No problem with him. We were friends. We used to live in the same building together. I was fourth floor. He was sixth floor. And we were boys. We used to be roommates. So there was no problem.

Brown: Was that in New York?

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Golson: Um-hmm. Not in New York. Traveling with Dizzy’s band. It was always two to a room. Now it’s one to a room. But it was two to a room then. That two to a room, we got to – I can’t talk about that. Quincy Jones. My man.

Brown: I know that when I interviewed Al McKibbon, he talked about rooming with Chano [Poza], touring with Diz’s band. So there’s a long history and legacy with two . . .

Golson: . . . with the two beds. One wants to do something – yeah. Those were good days though.

Brown: So you leave – what were the circumstances with leaving Dizzy’s band?

Golson: Disbanded, in Rome.

Brown: Okay. And then you went with the sextet too?

Golson: Yeah. We did just a couple of gigs with the sextet. Then that was it. Because I think he was losing money. He bought a bus that we would – a second-hand bus – we would travel in the bus. He was trying to make it work, but it was an uphill thing. The music was fantastic – nothing wrong with the music – but the surrounding circumstances weren’t always what they could have been, I think.

Brown: So it sounds like Bu [Art Blakey] was right around the corner now. Or do you want to . . .

Golson: Right after that.

Brown: How we doing with time? We good? Because when we get with Bu, that’s . . .

Golson: That’s a whole scenario right there. We got time?

Kimery: There’s 15 minutes left on this.

Golson: Oh yeah. I can do it.

Kimery: We have tomorrow too. So we don’t want to push you.

Golson: Why don’t we do this and finish it up with Bu then?

Okay. After I left Diz, I was “at liberty,” which means, I was unemployed.

Brown: I like that euphemism.

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Golson: “At liberty.”

Brown: Ad libitum. Ad lib. I was ad lib.

Golson: I was staying over at 116th in Graham Court with my aunt. I got a call one day. It was him. He says, “Can you come down” – what was the name of that club? It was in the Village. Cafe Bohemia – “Can you come down and sub?” I said, “Yeah.” I didn’t [?] sub. So I came down. Just a one night. At the end of the night, he said, “I’m having problems,” because Jackie McLean was ill. He said, “Can you come tomorrow?” I said, “Okay. I’ll come there tomorrow.” First time I’d ever played with him. Oh, what an experience. The best drummer I ever played with in my life, in my entire life. So I said, “Yeah. I can come tomorrow.” I went down and played the second night. I got a double dose now. He said, “Look. I’m having problems. Can you finish the week out?” “Oh yeah. Sure.” Because now, two nights, I’m really ready.

During the end of the week, before we got to the end of the week, somehow this green guy nobody knew of said to him, “Art Blakey, you should be a millionaire the way you play.” He said, “What do you think I should do?” I’d played with him almost a week. I had the audacity, the temerity, to tell him, “Get a new band.” I said, “Tell them they’re fired.” Now I’m subbing. I said, want me to go out and tell them they’re fired. Who am I? What are you talking about? He looked at me, “So what should I do?” I said, “Get a new band,” because I – the piano player was nodding, and certain things were going on that just – it really wasn’t up to par. I said to him – I remember during that week. He said, who the heck am I? Who is this guy? I said, “Art, I’m not used to this.” the guy’s [?] . I’m not used to this.

So that week was up – almost up. He said to me, “Can you join the group?” I said, “Art, I’d love to,” and I really would. I mean, playing the week with him. Oh. I said, “I’d like to, but I’ve just come to New York, and I want to establish myself, doing radio and t.v. commercials, writing for singers, for bands, my own group. I want to establish myself here, because nobody knows who I am. So I’m afraid I can’t.” The week ended. He said to me – I didn’t know he was a closet psychologist – then he said to me, “I know you don’t want to leave New York, but it wouldn’t hurt you if you were gone for one week, would it?” Now I had a week under my belt, and I’m really digging it. I’m thinking, one week is not going to – “I got a week in Pittsburgh at the Crawford Grill. Can you make . . . ?” “Yeah, I can make that.” Just a week.

That week got near the end. He said, “Didn’t you used to go to Howard University?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “I bet you know a lot of people there, don’t you?” I said, “Oh yeah. It’s like a second home.” He said, “I bet you they’d be glad to see you, wouldn’t they?” I said, “Oh yeah. I know.” He said, “I got two weeks there. You think . . . ?” Now I’ve got two weeks under my belt, and I’m really digging playing with him. “You can

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live the two weeks?" I said, "Yeah, okay." That was the last I said. I was a Messenger and didn't know it. And that's where I met her, my wife, during that engagement. So I'm glad I went.

Later on he said – I was telling him, Art, you should do this. You should do that. You should . . . He said, "What should I do? How can I make it?" I said, "Do everything I tell you to do." He said, "Okay." So we got a new band. He said, "Who we going to get on trumpet?" I said, "A young fellow from Philadelphia who used to play with Dizzy Gillespie." I said, "He's 19 now. Named Lee Morgan." He said, "Can he play?" I said, "Oh yeah. He could play." "Where is he from?" "He's from Philadelphia, my home." "Who have you got in mind for piano?" I said, "A fellow who used to play with Chet Baker. He could play hip. He could play funky. He's great." He said, "What's his name?" I said, "Bobby Timmons." "Okay. But where's he from?" I said, "Philadelphia." "Okay. What about a bass player? Who you got in mind?" I said, "A fellow who used to play with Bullmoose Jackson, and he used to play with B. B. King." "B. B. King! Oh no, man. We don't want no bass player with B. B. King." I said, "No, Art, he can play." "Can he do what we do?" I said, "Yeah, trust me. He could play." "All right. What's his name?" "Jymie Merritt." "Where's he from?" "Philadelphia." He said, "What is this Philadelphia" so and so and so? So I reasoned with him. I said, "Art. You're from Pittsburgh. We're all from Pennsylvania." He said, "Golson. You're a salesman."

Then after that, I said okay. I wrote *Along Came Betty, Are You Real*. We're sitting there talking one night. I said, "Art, you're doing what every other drummer does. Play a drum solo at the end, when everybody's tired." I said, "You need something where you're playing from the beginning, like you did on *Straight No Chaser* with Monk. It started out with just you on the drums. One hand, another hand, one foot, another foot – you had four different things going at once." I said, "But you can't repeat that." I said, "You've done everything there is to do." I said, "Except play a march." We both started laughing. Oh, ha ha. Then I stopped. I said, "Wait a minute." He said, "You got to be kidding. Nobody plays a darn march, except when they're going to a funeral in New Orleans." I said, "No, I'm not thinking of the typical military march. I'm thinking about" – I said, "Have you ever heard that black college in the South, Grambling? Have you ever heard them play marches?" I said, "It's got grease and soul and rhythm in it." He said, "It'll never work, Golson." That's what he used to call me. "It'll never work, Golson." I said, "Why don't you let me go home tonight and see what I can do."

I'm still living at Graham Court. I put the window up. Got my inspiration of gun shots and the pimps and everything. I said, yeah, now I can write. I sat there, and I wrote this tune. The next day I came into the rehearsal. We were working up at Small's Paradise in New York. He said – I said, "Let's try it." He said, "What do I do?" I said, "You start it off." He said, "What should I play?" I said, "Play what you used to hear when the drum and bugle corps would come through your neighborhood with the bugles and the cymbals and the bass drum." I said, "When the bugles stop, the rhythm took over. The snare drum

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and the bass drum and the cymbals.” I said, “Do something like that.” He said, “How will you and Lee know when to come in when I’m through?” I said, “Play a roll off.” He said, “What’s a roll off?” I couldn’t play the drums. So I had to do it with my mouth. I said, “Play [Golson sings the rhythm].” He says, “Oh man. You got to be crazy. It’s not going to work.” I said, “Try it. At least you – try it. Come on.” So he did it. Lee and I played. Okay. I said, “Now, when we go to work tonight, I’m going to give it a big buildup.”

We went to work that night. I like to talk, anyway. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we’re about to play something that’s quite unusual. It’s an aberration to the realm of jazz.” I said, “But our drummer here is going to lead us all in a march. It’s not typical of what you expect to hear, and you’re going to let us know, by your reaction, what you think of it.” We went into that thing, boy, and he put that shuffle thing on it, man. There’s no dancing up there. Got those little round tables, just enough for your drinks. They got up, started drinking [dancing], knocking the drinks over, and bumping. He’s playing. He looked over at me, and he said, “I’ll be damned.” He didn’t believe it. And he played it right up until the time he died.

The thing about Art Blakey: he had his group together 46 years. His first group was Horace Silver, Kenny Dorham, Hank Mobley, himself, and the bass player was . . .

Brown: Was it Watkins?

Golson: No. I could never think of that guy’s name. I can’t think. Curly Russell. No. Something like that. That was his first group.

When we had the group together, sometimes we went out as the Messengers and the All-Star Jazz Messengers. What that was – that was a combination of his current group and three people from the earlier groups, which was Jackie McLean, Curtis Fuller, and me. His current group would open up. Then the old Messengers would come out and play. Then his finale, we played together. That was called the All-Star Jazz Messengers.

Okay. I’m talking so much, I forgot what my point was. Where was I going? There’s so much about Art Blakey. I spoke with Alfred Lyon at Blue Note. Alfred didn’t want to record Art Blakey. He says, “I recorded him so much.” I said, “But Al, this is a new group. We got a terrific new trumpet player. He’s coming on the scene: Lee Morgan,” and blah blah blah. We were playing somewhere. I said, “You’ve got to come and hear this group.” He did come. After the set was over, he said, “When do you want to record?” That’s when we did the *Moanin’* album.

Now, I come into the picture with myself. “Al, I want you to put this picture on the cover.” Somebody had taken a picture, a fan, and I had the negative. “Put this head shot of Art on the cover.” “Al, I want you to call this album – I want you to call it *Moanin’*.” Okay, he’s going to do that. When I told Art about uniforms, buying uniforms, he said,

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“Aw, we’re a jazz musician. We don’t need no . . .” I said, “Art, people see you before they hear you. We’ve got to let them know, when we step out on that stage, what we think of ourselves, first, before they hear a note.” “Okay.” So we did that. Various things happened like that. “If we take an intermission, Art, you’ve got to be back on time.” I’d pick him up to go to work. When it’s time to come back, I said, time to go back – come on, because otherwise that 20-minute intermission would be an hour, sometimes, and that doesn’t work. I said, “Art, this is a business. You’ve got to approach it like a business.” So we did that. It was successful. Nobody here had never been to Europe. I called a booking agent. “Why hasn’t Art ever been to Europe?” He said, “He never asked.” I said, “I’m asking. Let’s go.” So we went to Europe, a successful tour over there. We did recordings over there, too. It was great. It was great acceptance.

Down the line, I felt, “Now I got to get back to my career. Art, I’m going to have to leave. But continue to do what I told you to do. It’s a business. Don’t be late. Don’t be messing up.” So Wayne Shorter took my place. I said, “Keep doing the same thing.” After I left – and people didn’t understand that, because sometimes he would tell the audience I was the one that got it started, but I was the epochal. I wasn’t the beginning. I came at a certain era, a certain junction, when he shifted gears and went to the uniforms and on time and playing good arrangements rather than the jam and jive arrangements. That’s what he was talking about. So yes – after I left the band, the people who don’t know that, whenever something would come up, he’d call me and say, “What should I do?” I said, do this, do that, and do that. Then, by that time, he would listen. In the beginning, he resisted. But he saw it was paying off, and when I was handling the money, the money came up, up, up. Everything started to come up. He saw it paid off, so he didn’t challenge it anymore. No opposition. Anything I said, he would do then. When so and so and so was happening, “What do you think I should do?” I said, do this and do this and do that, and it was right on the money. That’s what he did, and it paid off.

When Wayne came, Wayne brought his stuff, which was great. Then Freddie Hubbard took Lee Morgan’s place. So he never went down. Then Wynton Marsalis and those guys, and Bran[ford], Terence Blan[chard]. It was always up. He was on his way then, and the money was way up, because when I joined it wasn’t [?]. I would get the money – collect the money and pay the guys. Before I came there, the guys would go to work, and Monday night, “Can I draw \$10?” The next night, “Can I draw \$15?” I said, “You don’t want to do that, Art. That makes you look cheap.” So when I took over, what I’d do, when we go there, I’d make a chunk draw. “Give me \$500.” Boom. That’s it. So they draw from me, instead of going to the owner every night. It just takes away from who you are. That kind of thing. He learned to do things like that and keep the music at a high level and watch out for the drugs and all that stuff. Of course Lee and Bobby got into that.

But he went on up. Right up to the very end – I’ve never played with a drummer better than Art Blakey.

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Brown: When you say that – you grew up in Philly, and you played with Philly Joe Jones. What is it specifically about Art Blakey’s drums?

Golson: Whew. His – have you ever heard people say a piano player had a good touch, a certain touch? A drummer can have a certain touch. When Art Blakey sat down – I don’t care whose drums it was – it sounded like Art Blakey. It sounded like him. You could turn your head, I could hear a recording, I know it’s him. It’s just something about him, about that cymbal. Somebody could sit down and play his drums, but when he sits down, it sounds different. It’s that thing that reaches in and touches. It touched my heart. That’s what I felt about him.

Freddie Hubbard and I were playing somewhere with him on a tour. We were standing in the wings and listening. We didn’t have trouble with his ears, because he had two hearing aids in. We were standing there listening to him. I said, isn’t that something. He just had that – you can’t give it a name. So we go, he had that thing about him. This man did not know how not to swing. He didn’t know how not to swing. Sleepy, come from Europe on the Concorde for a record date, no sleep, come in, swing you to death. We were on one of these tours – the All-Star Jazz Messengers. He had had an abscess back – he had a tooth pulled. His jaw was out like this. Curtis and I were downstairs. The first group was up there playing, with the current group. Said, “Man, he must be having a terrible time. Let’s go up and see.” Went up and looked, at the wings, and his jaw’s out – swinging his brains. Incredible. Nothing can stop him from swinging.

He started out as a piano player. Incredible. Couldn’t read a note. Gil Evans hired him to do a session with him – make it two. The last tune was the syncopation of the tune, 32 bars. He couldn’t get it. He says, “Tomorrow.” He called me up, came by the house, and said, “Hum this to me.” I hummed the whole rhythmic thing. “Hum it again.” I did it twice. He says, “Hum it again.” The third time. Went back the next day. They say he played it perfect. He remembered. 32 bars of rhythm. Incredible.

He was like an institution, like a college. I got my Ph.d. there.

Brown: Are we going to end? Because I – when we pick up, I’m going to ask you where you got all your business acumen that you passed on Bu?

Golson: I could tell you, yeah.

Brown: We’ll take it up tomorrow.

Golson: All right.

[recording interrupted]

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Brown: Today is January 9th, 2009. I'm Anthony Brown. With Ken Kimery we are conducting the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with composer, arranger, tenor saxophonist, and raconteur Mr. Benny Golson in his home in Los Angeles, California. This is day two of the interview.

How are you doing? How are you feeling this afternoon?

Golson: I'm feeling better than before.

Brown: Great, great. In continuing this very enjoyable journey, I wanted to look back on some of the things that we had covered yesterday, but maybe fill in some of the blanks or the lapses that we had. For example, when you were talking about when Art Blakey re-formed – got the Jazz Messengers together, pre- and post, there was some question about the bass player. I threw out Watkins, but I believe it was Doug Watkins. I went and researched it. Was he the bass player, the original bass player?

Golson: Not when I was there.

Brown: Okay.

Golson: A little known fact. We had a bass player for a short while who played with Earl Bostic when I was there, named George Tucker, the late George Tucker. He was there for a short while. Then Jymie Merritt came later.

Brown: But Doug Watkins was the one that was with Horace Silver when Horace Silver was there.

Golson: Oh yes.

Brown: Because he left with Horace.

Golson: Yes.

Brown: Okay. I wanted to make sure that was clarified. You also said when you were in North Africa, you had been to Morocco, and we were trying to identify the other country. I believe it must have been Algeria?

Golson: It was up in the north. It wasn't a country that we – that I didn't know by name. It was strange, because they spoke Spanish. You leave that country, and you're right out on the ocean. It was really the tip, north, right in the middle. I can't think of what the name of that place was. They spoke Spanish, which was an aberration.

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Brown: I thought maybe Algeria, because when I was looking at the map this morning, you got Morocco here, and then Algeria's the next country, and it's below – of course we know the French had gotten into Algeria, but it was below Spain too. So I tried the fact that maybe that was it, but we need to go further west on the Africa continent to identify where the country was at.

Golson: Yeah. It was small, a very small place.

Brown: Okay. Then, as today is January 9th, it is Klook's [Kenny Clarke] – it would have been Klook's 95th birthday.

Golson: Isn't that something. I didn't know that.

Brown: Yeah. He was born 1914. So, in honor of Klook – we left off talking about Klook yesterday, when we were concluding the interview. You were talking about Klook and your impressions of him. So maybe we can pick up right there in honor of his birthday and then continue on with the chronology.

Golson: I became aware of Kenny Clarke when he was playing with Dizzy Gillespie. I didn't know much about music too much then, but I knew that he had been one of the drummers. There were other drummers, of course, but his name became quite prominent to me, because after he left Dizzy Gillespie, he did many other things and wound up with the Modern Jazz Quartet. But that wasn't his particular cup of tea. He left, and he went to Europe. He became an expatriate, and he remained there. I didn't become – I didn't really get to know him until I went there with Art Blakey in 1958. That was the first time Art or any of us – Lee Morgan – or any of us had been there. That's when I met him. He was such a friendly guy. We didn't know anything about Paris. He was taking Lee and Bobby Timmons and me. He was showing us this and showing us that – sort of like a tour guide. This was the great Kenny Clarke. It was great.

Then, we were playing on the Left Bank at a place called – what is it? near the Notre Dame Cathedral. I forget what that club was down in the basement, but I remember those Gauloises cigarettes almost knocked me out. They were so strong.

Brown: Was it the Club St. Germain?

Golson: St. Germain. That was the name of the club. The owner of the club somehow decided to put together Art Blakey and Kenny Clarke with the Messengers. We just added Kenny Clarke to the Messengers. We played a couple nights in the club. It was paradise. Both of these drummers, and they complement each other. When one was active, the other took a lesser role, and vice versa, so that you could hear each one of them clearly, whereas if they were doing the same thing, it's scrambled eggs. Then he

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decided, this is so good, let's take them into – what was that theater that Josephine Baker . . . ?

Brown: The Olympia Theatre?

Golson: Olympia Theatre. Boy, you must have been there. We went into the Olympia Theatre with Art Blakey and Kenny Clarke. It was fantastic. These two drummers. Oooooo boy. I'm telling you. You live for things like that. Both of these guys. You want to stop playing and just listen to them. It was great.

Kenny Clarke. As I told you yesterday, he recorded with Miles on Prestige. Jay Jay Johnson, [Thelonious] Monk, and a few other people – Lucky Thompson. He played an eight-bar intro on *Blue 'n Boogie*. When drummers ask me, "What do you think I should listen to?", among other things, I say, "Listen to Kenny Clarke's eight-bar drum solo on *Blue 'n Boogie*." Beautiful. I don't know if you remember it. Oh man. It was great. Yeah, Kenny Clarke and Art Blakey. Same ilk.

Brown: Both from Pittsburgh.

Golson: Yeah, and I didn't know that. Same ilk, from Pittsburgh.

Brown: Must be something there too. Must be in the coal mines or something.

Golson: Pittsburgh turned out – people usually think of Philadelphia and Detroit, but Pittsburgh turned out quite a few. You remind me of the Turrentine brothers, and Erroll Garner, and you had mentioned . . .

Brown: Billy Eckstine.

Golson: . . . Billy Eckstine, the singer.

Brown: Mary Lou Williams.

Golson: Yeah. I didn't know about that. Incredible.

Brown: Strayhorn.

Golson: Billy Strayhorn?

Brown: There you go. Yeah. Definitely.

Golson: From Pittsburgh?

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Brown: Absolutely.

Golson: I didn't know that. Incredible.

Brown: Something in Philadelphia – I mean in Pennsylvania.

Golson: In Pennsylvania.

Brown: There must be something. A mother lode or something.

Golson: Like I told, when Art said, “What is this Philadelphia stuff?” I said, “We’re all from Pennsylvania.”

Brown: Right.

Golson: It’s all embracing.

Brown: Since you were talking about your first trip to Europe and being in Paris – a French director, [Edouard] Molinaro, had you do a film? *Des femmes dis[paraissent]* – forgive my French. I can’t speak French – and your compositions were adapted for that film? Do you recall any of that?

Golson: Yeah. In English it was *The Disappearing Women*. That’s what it was. We were playing every night at the club. We finished [at] one o’clock – something like that – and we did the recording after we finished playing. So we recorded until the morning hours. Art contributed some things, but it was only in a sonic way. He played some things on the drums. He watched the picture, and he was playing the drums. I remember one scene, the fellow was about to be killed, and he was giving his interpretation of what was happening. It took that rather well.

Then I wrote some things right on the scene. We came every night and looked at the – what is that that they made of the picture? Boy, it’s like I’ve forgotten the English language. And I don’t know German too well – the Movieola. We looked at the picture on a Movieola. It was a little screen like that. Then I said, what can I write? I came up with those melodies that’s on there. I think – I can’t remember whether or not we recorded *Whisper Not*. But it was constructing this thing as you go, night by night. It wasn’t like going home and writing a score and come back and everybody plays it. It was a little bit each night, according to what we saw. That was kind of like a musical invention.

Miles had just done something else over there before we got there. So that was like a followup, a jazz thing.

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Brown: That's right.

Golson: He did *Ascension to the Gallows* [*Ascenseur pur l'échafaud*].

Brown: That's it.

Golson: Yeah, he did that thing. It was the same kind of thing. He didn't sit down and compose it or anything. That was rather nice. I enjoyed it.

Brown: So that was your first trip to Europe.

Golson: That was my very first trip to Europe.

Brown: Now you spend half of your life – half your time – half the year there.

Golson: Oh, I've been there so much. I know the streets and people.

Brown: Duke Ellington is famous – I guess we get it through Ben Webster and maybe through Quincy Jones – as a jazz musician, the thing that you can do is, when you go to another culture, eat their food, learn some of their words and their language.

Golson: Yes. If possible.

Brown: Right. You're not going to learn much Hungarian – and that will serve you well. Did I . . . ?

Golson: There's one other thing.

Brown: Go ahead.

Golson: Count the money.

Brown: Count the money.

Golson: Learn how to count the money. The food, yeah. Count the money. The very first thing for me, when you're in the airport, find out what the money – count the money, because you've got to get in a cab or something. Then you go to the restaurant. The food. Then you pick up the other things.

Brown: Obviously they treated you well there, because you now spend half the time there – half the year there.

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Golson: Yeah. They treated us particularly well. Being the first trip there, and Art Blakey being such a recording star – they’d only heard him on the records – open arms, man. Every concert was a success. Just the five of us. It was a success. They loved it.

But I’ll tell you what happened. We went – the first time we went to Paris, we came in the train station, and we saw these people coming up with the cameras ready to record. We started doing that, and they ran right past us. Maria Callas was getting off the train in the next car. We thought they were coming for us.

Brown: Your tenure with Art Blakey was in that year of 1958.

Golson: ’58. That was the hallmark of it. It lasted about a year, maybe a little bit more – about a good year. Then, as I told him, I wanted to stay in New York. I’d gone on and on and on with him, but I didn’t want abandon my plans. So I told him – he’d gotten started, and he was doing well, and I was going to leave – just to keep doing the same thing and move forward, because then he’d started to come up. The money was getting much better. I said, keep doing that. Then I wanted to pursue my own career, writing for television and the movies and things like that. So I took my leave. But we always had contact. We kept in contact right up to the very end. “What do you think I should do? What do you think about this?” I loved that guy. As I told you before, he was the best drummer I’ve ever played with in my entire life.

Brown: And you played with all the great ones.

Golson: Oh yeah, but him – he and Kenny Clarke – something special. I can’t give it a name. I can’t tell you why. I can’t really describe it, only that it happened. Whenever he played, it was like magic. It was like a physical hand reaching out and grabbing you.

I remember when I first joined him, I was playing very mellifluous, flowing, soft, caressing. I joined the Messengers. I noticed sometimes he would play these press rolls going into a new chorus. This particular night, he started to press roll, like, eight bars before we got to the next chorus and got so loud that I found that I had to stand there pantomiming. I still didn’t get it. He was trying to tell me something. Then we went on, and he played the press roll again, and I disappeared. And then into the chorus he gave me a loud crash, CRASH! ding ding-da ding. CRASH! This man is going crazy. What is he doing?

Finally, in desperation, he hollered over at me while I was playing, “Get up out of that hole!” What I was playing didn’t really – I needed more fire. So that’s how I started to play a little more aggressively. I happened to mention it to Freddie Hubbard. I told him. He said, “You too?” That’s what happened to him. We had to bear down to play with this guy. I mean, he played loud, but he could bear down hard, and you had to bear down with him, or you would just – you would pantomime. So yeah, I had to learn how to get out of

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that smooth flowing – I learned other things from him too. Like I told you, he was didactic. He was a teacher and didn't know it.

Brown: The Smithsonian Institution, several years ago, put together what is called *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*. It's basically the recorded history of jazz. It's now the canon for the study of jazz in all universities and schools. They're actually updating, revising, and reissuing it, and I was chosen to write the liner notes for *Moanin'*. I just want to read to you what I wrote about your solo. I could . . .

Golson: Oh my goodness.

Brown: I just say, *Moanin'* – it was only 500 words, so I'm just going to – I'll just jump to it. "The solos are archetypal in their inspiration and influence, capturing the range of emotive expression from jubilation to contemplation in this music that would become marketed as soul jazz by 1960. Blakey provides his trademark rock-steady shuffle beat to accompany the eight-bar bridge of the tune and the soloists, cueing their entrances with his signature crescendo press roll, even using it to boost Timmons's second solo chorus. Lee Morgan launches his solo with a brash, bluesy swagger showcasing a sophisticated funkiness and earthy surety in his trumpet tone, phrasing, and timbral exploitations." Now – "Benny Golson two-chorus saxophone solo is truly a study in contrasts, beginning with the measured lyricism of a stately gentleman, building and modulating his cadence and intensity in the second chorus, as if emulating an inspired preacher delivering an impassioned sermon." Did I capture your solo correctly?

Golson: Boy, I'm telling you? I didn't know I was doing all of that. What did you mention? Lee Morgan – swagger, you used. Yes indeed.

Brown: [Brown sings three notes, imitating Morgan.]

Golson: Yes. Almost impudent. But thank you for revealing what I was doing there.

Brown: Was that conscious in your mind?

Golson: No.

Brown: Because we listened to it before coming. I played it for Ken. We're going, "Damn." So it made me reflect, *Moanin'*, a preacher, because I played it for – talking to a friend of mine, Leonard Brown, who's a saxophonist. He says, "Yeah." He says, "He's preaching."

Golson: A homiletic sermon. What was conscious – Lee ended his solo with *I Want a Big Fat Mama*.

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Brown: [Brown sings the phrase.]

Golson: And I picked up – I said, oh my goodness – I picked it up. That was the only conscious thing that did – we did that. I tell you something I’ve told a few people. I’ve played with many trumpet players. Lee Morgan and Benny Golson were unique. I’ll tell you why. I wasn’t made aware of it until Bruce . . .

Brown: Bruce Lundvall?

Golson: No. An attorney. Bruce. He’s a judge in New York. I’ve forgotten his name. Bruce Wright. Art Blakey took him along with us. I don’t know why. Bruce and I were roommates. He later became a judge. One night we were playing at some venue. He said to me, “Do you and Lee rehearse, so that you sound like one person when you play?” I said no, and I wasn’t aware of it. He said, “When I listen to you play, you articulate the same. You breath the same. Everything is the same.” “No, we never did it that we were aware of it.” So we went back and played the next, after the intermission. I said, umm, that is something. Lee Morgan and I played together like one person, and we obviously thought like – we never rehearsed anything. Breathe here. Tongue this. Make this long. Make this short. Play this a little softer. We intuitively did it. We thought alike. I never did that with Art Farmer. That doesn’t mean that was a failure. It just wasn’t on the level of Lee Morgan and me as playing one. What’s that German word? Zusammen. Together. We played together intuitively. I played with Diz. I’ve played with Freddie Hubbard, Art Farmer, what is it? – all the new trumpet players. But not like Lee. You listen to *Moanin’*, the way we played it. Nobody ever played it exactly the way we played it – exactly the same. There are other recordings of it. They played it. But never like Lee Morgan and Benny Golson. It was all intuitive. It was like miraculous – extra-sensory perception or something. I never had that with – and I wasn’t made aware of it until Bruce mentioned it. I said, really? Then I became aware of it. Incredible.

“Swagger.” You know, that guy, he was arrogant. He mellowed out, but when he came – first came on the scene, he was arrogant. But he could live up to it. Like Freddie Hubbard. He was arrogant, but he could live up to everything.

Yeah, Lee Morgan. He was something. Never had problems with his chops. Never, never. When he recorded *I Remember Clifford*, I made the mistake – that was stupid – of having him play that whole chorus of the melody right into a whole chorus of a solo. Should have been broken up. He had no problems with it. He had rather large lips, if you can remember. He used to say, “I’m the only trumpet player could play the trumpet with a tuba mouthpiece.” When he played, he used to have to tuck his lips in.

Brown: They used to denigrate Louis Armstrong, saying that he can’t play like that, or he only can play those notes because of those big lips, or something. So, hey, it turned out to be a plus.

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Golson: Those big lips didn't get in the way at all.

Brown: I wanted to ask you. I know that you talked about the influence of church and that your mom had hoped that you might play organ. So can we talk about your church background? Did that have any effect on your musical sensibilities at all? And maybe if you could reveal the denomination of your church?

Golson: Yeah. We were Baptist background. My mother used to sing in the choir. Not the particular time when I was going to church, but when she met my father, that's what she was doing. Yes, the thing that enthralled me was that organ that Miss Conley used to play. The sermon, what he was saying, went in one ear and went out the other. I couldn't wait for time to go home. But when she started to play that organ – and she'd always start with a drone. Finishing up – when he's finishing up what he's doing, and before – I've often thought it was a signal for the collection plate to go out, like a commercial. He'd start talking and backing off, taking his glasses, and she'd start this drone under him. Then when he'd finished, it'd come up, and she'd go into this stuff. When she went to the low notes, oh man, it just – it was like heaven. It was amazing. So my mother said, "Why don't you play piano? Then you can play in the church like Miss Conley." I loved organ. I said, "Okay. I'll do that," until the saxophone interrupted all of that.

I can't say I had any religious background. I was in Sunday School, and I would take my grandmother to church. But it was something I had to do. I didn't have to take a particular interest. I didn't follow anything. I didn't know anything about the Bible. But the organ – the organ got me. Yeah, the organ got me. And I still – this thing has an organ thing on it. Sometimes I turn it up in here and close the windows, and I think I'm in church.

Brown: So it is in the foundation of your music.

Golson: Yes.

Brown: That church experience.

Golson: Melody. And somehow, maybe that's how I've come to love melody so much, and that's why I've come to love Chopin, Brahms, and Puccini. Melody is so important to me, even when I write things that have a faster tempo. To me, I always felt like it should have some melodic content, something that's memorable, something that the possibility of living past my time, i.e., Duke Ellington – I was telling you – John Coltrane. That's the greatness of it all. That's the test of time.

The future will always have an indistinguishable face, but sometimes we can give it a face of our own description, from our talent. But in the end, it's the people who tell you what they think of you and what they think of your music. I could sit here and write

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things and say, it's great, and record it, and people say, "Pffttt. Nothing ever happens. It's going nowhere." And I thought – *Whisper Not*, I thought, this is nothing, and the people said, "Oh yes it is." I'll take it. I'll accept it.

Brown: You finished up in the chronology with Art Blakey. Before we get into the Jazztet, which is obviously a watershed in your career, I want to go back and look at some of the recordings that you made after you got – from '57 up until the Jazztet. You had several – you're quite prolific.

Golson: That's when I started to really record.

Brown: Right. I've got a few titles here of albums that might jog your memory. Here's one called *The Modern Touch*. Benny Golson sextet, right? Jay Jay Johnson, Kenny Dorham, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and on drums, Max Roach.

Golson: Max Roach, who was called Spider Maxwell, I think, on this, because he had a contract with some other company

Brown: Right, because this one's on . . .

Golson: Spider Maxwell.

Brown: This one's on Riverside, produced by Orrin Keepnews. Any other recollections about this particular – I'm going to go through several . . .

Golson: Oh, I remember it all. The thing I remember about it most – I was the only one on there not known, and it was my date. I asked Max Roach, years later, why would you agree to record with this no-name guy? He said, "Oh, I heard about you."

Brown: Then again in that year, '57 – and these are all from the fall or early winter. I'm trying to get the chronology here. Here's one from October. This one that I just mentioned, *The Modern Touch*, was from December. Here in October '57, also on Riverside, was Benny Golson's *New York Scene*. Here it looks like you've already got a precursor of what – of things to come. First of all, this one has – it's got several cuts that have an expanded orchestra. You've got Julius Watkins on french horn. You've got Sahib Shihab. So, a larger ensemble – that seems to be something that you've favored throughout your career, writing for larger ensemble? You're versatile, writing for a variety of formats. Any recollections about this particular album?

Golson: Yeah. You speak about a format. That was so, because it permitted me to write, to explore the writing possibilities as well as the playing. That was my very first one as a leader. What was it? *New York Scene*?

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Brown: Yes. Benny Golson's *New York Scene*.

Golson: On it, Ernie Wilkins wrote a couple of arrangements. I didn't want to have just me, somehow. I think he wrote a couple of arrangements. I'm not sure – yeah, Gigi Gryce. I think he wrote one or two. Then I wrote the rest. I think we did a couple of quintet things too.

Brown: Yeah. They're doubled up. You got Art Farmer on there, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, Charlie Persip.

Golson: Yeah, Paul Chambers. We got to the last tune of the session, which was *Whisper Not*. They usually bring in sandwiches and some alcohol – beer and stuff. Paul had a little too much. We got to this last tune. We started recording it, and he stopped playing, right in the middle. When I turned around and looked, he was looking at the music like, "What the heck is this?" I said, oh my goodness. "Let's start over again." We started over again, and he stopped again. He was looking at it like he didn't understand what – I could see he had had too much. He'd been under the influence. I begged him. I said, "Paul, please, please. This is my" – we tried it again. He stopped again. Then he put his bass down. He was on a little riser. He laid down, like he was through for the day. I said, "Paul, please, please, get up. Please, Paul. This is my first record date." Then he got up, and he made it. That was *Whisper Not*.

Brown: The life of a jazz musician.

The third one that I'd like to interject here is one that's entitled *Walkin'*, Benny Golson and his Orchestra: Freddie Hubbard, Bill Hardman on trumpets; Curtis Fuller and Grachan Moncur on trombones; Eric Dolphy, alto sax; Wayne Shorter, tenor sax; Bill Evans, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Charlie Persip, drums.

Golson: Yeah. I didn't play on that one. I just did the writing. That's strange. That's half of what that concept was, the way that turned out. Tom Wilson, who was the producer, joined Audio Fidelity Records. They were making records for a short while. He decided that since they'd embraced the stereo concept, he wanted to have one orchestra on one side, which is that one, and another orchestra on the other side. The other orchestra, which is not heard there, was woodwinds – flutes, clarinets, french horns, and things like that. What we did – we did tunes where they jibed together. We did *Walkin'*, and on the other side was *St. Louis Blues*, that was playing at the same time. We did – oh my goodness. Horace Silver's – [Golson hums the melody.] I can't think of the name of it.

Brown: *Quicksilver*.

Golson: *Quicksilver*. That was *Lover Come Back to Me*. So it was *Quicksilver* on one side – *Lover Come Back to Me*, but I did it in a way that they kind of jibed. *Moten Swing*

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with whatever tune we did. I can't think of what it was. We did tunes like that. We did *How High the Moon* and . . .

Brown: *Ornithology*.

Golson: . . . *Ornithology*. So that's what it was. I guess it didn't sell too well. So they said, forget this side, and they just put this side. The rhythm section was in the middle, see. So they said, forget the woodwinds and stuff, and they put it out like this and called it *Walkin'*.

Brown: Great. We got the rest of the stuff on that. It was wonderful.

Okay. Let's pick up from your departure from Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, because this is that, and then we're transitioning into the Jazztet, chronologically.

Golson: Yeah. After I came back to New York, like I told him, I wanted to establish myself as a writer, writing for this and that, whatever the situation was. During that time, I can remember I did things for Dinah Washington, and I did lots of commercials for all kinds of products, and other things I've probably forgotten now.

Then I got a desire to play with some kind of a group. I'm thinking, quartet is common. Quintet is pretty common. But there's not so many sextets, and it would help me to explore possibilities in my writing. So who am I going to get for a trumpet player? Art Farmer, because I love the way he played. So I decided to call him after a few days of thinking about this concept, putting together what the possibilities could be. I didn't have a name for it. I called him up and told him what I'd like to do. "I'm thinking about putting together a sextet, and I'd like for you to be my trumpet player," and he started laughing. I don't know if I told you this. I said, "Why the heck are you laughing?" He says, "I was going to call you tomorrow. I was thinking about putting together a sextet, and I wanted you to be my tenor player." I said, "Why don't you come on by, and we can talk about it?" So he did. He – I got two and he got two. He used Dave Bailey, who had been the drummer with him with Gerry Mulligan, and his twin brother [Addison Farmer] on bass. I got Curtis Fuller and an unknown piano from Philadelphia named McCoy Tyner. That was the first group.

Now we had to come up with the name. I couldn't think of a name. All of the names that were coming up were pretty lame. Curtis Fuller said, "It's a sextet. We're playing jazz. Why don't we call it the Jazztet?"

[a brief passage is missing]

. . . in New York at the Roundtable, and that's the name we started to use there – the Jazztet – and it stuck.

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We recorded a few albums. We broke up for a while. We came back together. Then we separated for a long time, like 20 – over 20 years. Then we came back again for about a year or so and did a tour of Europe together.

Brown: That was from '59 to '62. That was the tenure of that.

Golson: That, and we came back years later for a short while.

Brown: What happened after the Jazztet?

Golson: After the first time?

Brown: Yes, the first time – '62.

Golson: We went our separate ways, Art and I and all of us, doing this and doing that. We figured out we'd done what we wanted to do with the Jazztet. It was not earthshaking. It didn't change the cosmic balance of the universe or anything like that. So we went our separate ways. But years later, we got the taste again. Maybe we can do something a little different this time, and we did. We got together again. The front line was the same: Art Farmer, Curtis Fuller, and me. But the rhythm section changed then. So much time had gone by. Sometimes we used Ray Drummond as a bass player, Rufus Reid as a bass player, and different ones – the piano player. But we wound up with Mickey Tucker, because Mickey Tucker was so talented. This guy could read anything. I'd be writing the parts. As I was writing the things for the Jazztet, my mind was going wild. I was just writing. I'd look, and I said, boy, I'm glad I don't play piano. We'd get to the rehearsal – get ready to rehearse. Never played it before. He said, "Just a minute." He'd sit there and look at it. "Okay" – and play it.

Brown: Just sight read it.

Golson: Incredible. He – his room was so vast that at one point I started to feature him playing some of the classical things. People never expected to hear that. Those jive jazz musicians. I said, "Now he's going to play an original piece by an Israeli composer, [Jabos Jacalalian?]" – whatever his name was. He played the heck out of that thing. Then he played something by Bach in B minor, and I fashioned it into – we went into a jazz thing. It was incredible what we did the second time out. He was one of the key people, because he was something else. Then eventually we broke up. Now he lives in Australia. He moved back where his wife is from. They moved back to Australia.

Brown: I fortunately was – I was fortunate enough to have caught you with that configuration – I believe we talked about it yesterday – at Sweet Basil's. You guys were pretty much there a lot.

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Golson: That's right. They used to pile in.

Brown: You had Smitty Smith on drums.

Golson: Yes, and he was something else too. Oooo, that guy.

Brown: I just saw him on t.v. last night. He's pretty hefty now.

Golson: When we played here – we played here about five weeks ago – he came by. I said, “Ooooo, you've gotten thick.” What is the German? Dick? You're thick – you're dick – my ff[?]. I said, “Stay on the job, and then you'll have to hire me to go to the bank with you.” That guy was something though. He did his homework. This is one of the guys that could come close to Buddy Rich. His technical ability was fantastic. Nobody knows about that. You'd never know it from the Jay Leno show.

Brown: Yeah, but we all knew him when he came to New York with Jon Hendricks, and then he just took off quickly. But he landed that money gig. What can you say?

So, the Jazztet '62. At this point you're making your living as a composer-arranger.

Golson: And gigging.

Brown: And gigging. The next thing that appears was the tour to Japan with Jackie McLean in '65.

Golson: Yeah.

Brown: I see that big smile on your face.

Golson: That was something. Kenny Dorham, Freddie Hubbard, Jackie McLean, Benny Golson, Cedar Walton, Reggie Workman, and Roy Haynes. Boy, that was something. But Kenny was – Freddie was playing so much. I said, oh, I feel sorry for Kenny Dorham. Boy, this guy. It was unreal. And Roy Haynes, the consummate drummer. The chronology means absolutely nothing to him. I said to him, “Where do you hide your portrait?”, like Dorian Gray. The portrait gets old, but he doesn't get old. I went to hear him at the Blue Note in New York about three years ago. He's 80-something then. He played like a high-school kid. Yeah, I didn't mention him: Art Blakey, Kenny Clarke, and Roy Haynes. Incredible. He can tip.

Brown: What was your reception like when you went to Japan?

Golson: The first – the very first time?

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Brown: Um-hmm.

Golson: The very first time we went there – the first thing I discovered, that those Japanese who are jazz fans, they’re fans to the hilt. I kid you not. They can tell you the history, who played with Benny Goodman in 1937, blah, blah blah, who was on this recording, who was on that recording. They were there. Years later, like the Blue Note, in our money, \$100 entrance fee, expensive stuff. The place is packed every night.

You want to take a break now?

Brown: Okay. Let’s take a break.

Golson: That way you don’t have to tip.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: We were back in Japan with Jackie McLean. You were talking about the reception, about how astute the Japanese aficionados there are.

Golson: Every venue we went to, there was a crowd waiting. We pulled up in a small version of a – small bus. We got out. They were all there with pencils and pads, wanting autographs. The police thought they were doing us a favor. They were trying to keep them back. But they were insistent. What the police started to do with the clubs was to indiscriminately hit them. Bam. You know what. They were impervious to the blows. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life. Bam, bam. I grabbed his hand, and I said, “No, no. Don’t do that.” He said – we signed all the autographs before – hey, these were fans who wanted to hear us. They came to hear us. These – we were their heroes, and they were seeing us for the first time. They didn’t want to be deprived of that close-up contact. We afforded it to them. We thought that that’s what we should do.

Most of the venues were packed. This is the first time we’d been there like that. They called that tour Jam Session. That was the name of the tour, about ’65, ’66 – something like that. We played large auditoriums. We played small venues. They weren’t nightclubs. But evidently for a select people – maybe about 200 or 300 people. I assumed it was like that. They paid to come there to be a select audience. It wasn’t big auditoriums.

It was a successful tour. Freddie Hubbard played his brains out. Boy, I’ll tell you. And Roy Haynes, he tipped through the whole tour. He just tipped. They kept you on your toes.

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Let me tell you what happened. We were groovin'. The band was playing. Close your eyes like this. I'm standing there with my eyes closed, digging it. I happened to open my eyes, and I saw all these microphones. I said, wait a minute. I had the audacity at the concert to stop everything. I wasn't the boss. I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. Whoa." It took about a minute, because everybody was into it. I said, "They've got microphones up there." I said, "We can't continue until you take those microphones down." What were they going to do with it? I didn't know. But that was three-quarters of the way through the concert. They took the microphones down, and we continued on. That was '65. Jackie McLean called me from Hartford about 20 years later. It was right around – he heard this group playing. He said, that sounds like me. It was from that concert that we did. He called the radio station. He says, "Where did you get that recording?" He said, "A friend of mine sent it to me from Japan." They had recorded it, and they put it out. Nothing we could do. That doesn't happen too much now, but I've had them try to do it before. I've had people – you see the light on, from the recorder in the audience, and I stop. I say, "You've got to turn that off. You can't do that." They come in, and they put the tape recorder on. I said, "No, you can't do that."

Then the photographers. I remember I was playing one place one time. Just as I opened my eyes, he was right up in my face, bam, and I couldn't see a thing. When I reacted to it, he ran out the door with his camera. Things like that. People smoking, right there in the front row, cigar, blowing it up. You're coughing. Things like that. Those things happen. I don't know why I went off into that. But that's what happened. They had a lot – they must have had ten microphones up there, and they got the concert. They got three-quarters of it, anyway, and they put it out. So I'm leery about that.

Usually, now, mostly they'll come and ask you, can they do this or do that, and I'll say yes, or no, you better not. Things like that. It's incredible. All kinds of the things that happen.

Japan, after that, I went over many, many times. That was one of my favorite places, because of the way the musicians and their music was accepted. It was nice, a good feeling. And I got to like the food, too, the sushi and whatnot.

Brown: I'm going to break the chronology and go back a bit. I overlooked the fact that there was a note here that you had studied with the composer Henry Brandt. Can we talk a little bit about that, and who he was?

Golson: Yes. What happened was I had started to – when was it? – no, before I came to Hollywood. There were some of us interested in learning some different things about the music, orchestrationally and compositionally. Jimmy Owens, a trumpet player in New York, said there's a fellow who is willing – he knew certain of us wanted to study – who is willing to teach us as a class. If we come together and pool our money, then we can study with him as a class. So, yeah, Tom McIntosh, me, Jimmy Owens, and some others,

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we joined his class. I think he was teaching at Bennett [Bennington] College up in Vermont then – a girls college. I think it was a girls college. He used to come home on the weekends, Saturday and Sunday. So we studied with him. I think we had just – only two sessions. Then it fell apart. It fell apart somehow, but I wanted to keep going. So I went to study with him privately. I started studying with him privately. Every Sunday morning I'd go to his house over in Brooklyn for an hour. I think I had about three or four lessons.

Then I got a call to do a film in Europe – a German film. I accepted it, and I went there. There was a fellow there, what they call fixers, who picks the musicians. So this fixer put the orchestra together – some of the London Philharmonic. It was a good orchestra. I did that film. It was about skiing. The score I wrote, I think is forgettable. I learned a lot after that.

Let's see. What happened after that? Where am I? I came back, and I continued to study with Brandt. Then I decided, I've got this technique. I can't use it here in New York, writing commercials and Count Basie-type music. The only place I could use it is Hollywood – pandiatonic writing and symmetrical chords. Nobody writes that. So I came here. Quincy [Jones] had come out prior to that, a couple of years before I did. Then Oliver Nelson had been out about a year. Then they both were saying, Benny, you ought to come out. Come on, come on. It was like Horace Greeley. Go West, young man.

I played it safe, though, because I was established in New York. What we did – my wife and I came out. We checked into the Beverly Hills Hotel. We rode all around Los Angeles. We met different composers and different musicians. Quincy said, "Why don't you come on out?" His agent was Percy Faith's son, Peter Faith. "Peter's willing to take you under his wing." Yes. We went back to New York, and we moved out, came out. [?] pretty good.

The first thing I did, I went to work at Paramount – at Universal Studios. They put me on a new series, *It Takes a Thief*, Robert Wagner. I started to work on that. Then I went over to Paramount. I went to work on *Mission Impossible* and *Mannix*. Twentieth-Century Fox, I went to work on *M.A.S.H.* and *Room 222*. Then I did some independent things too. So I was working, working, working.

I was turning down work as a saxophonist, because I didn't want to be known as a jazz musician. I wanted to be a film composer. I didn't want to orchestrate for this composer or that composer. I'd never be able to get started as a composer. So I turned down those things.

I got an offer from Gordon Parks – he was going to do his first picture, *The Learning Tree* – because I knew him. He wanted me – no, no, no. Henry Brandt used to orchestrate some things for him, and he wanted Henry to orchestrate his new picture. Henry said, "I

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can't do it, but one of my students is out there" – me. I didn't want to do it. I really needed the money. So I called Tom McIntosh, who had also been one of his students, and he did it.

What happened after that? I did it. It took me a while to get started, though, because when I came out here – when I first came out – “Who is Benny Golson? What has he done?” I hadn't done anything. But I was well established in New York. So for the first year or so, my nest egg felt like an elevator out of control. I could have, any night, taken my pillow and a blanket to the pawn shop, because that's where all my stuff was – my horns, my camera, her jewelry, her furs. Everything was in the pawn shop. I said to myself in the beginning, so, this is how it ends.

Then it started to pick up. I told you, working on these different things. It didn't happen right away. “Who is Benny Golson? Who the heck – I never heard of him.” But that – I soon overcame that. Then I felt that I was set. I was set. I wasn't playing any more. Then, lo and behold, after 15 years or so, I got the itch like I wanted to play again. What the heck is this? I'm set. I'd given away my flute and soprano saxophone and clarinet. I was turning down these offers to play festivals and things. I would say, maybe I'll try it. So I did a concert. They set up a concert for me back in New York. Man, it was like getting over a stroke. Everything had gone – concept, and my chops, the corn on my thumb. It was like a piece of plumbing from under the kitchen sink. Now I'm going to play again. So I had – it took me quite a few years to get comfortable again. Then I started to play again.

Then I got disillusioned about the thing that I thought I was going to do for the rest of my life, and that was writing, out here, for television and movies. My good friend Oliver Nelson, he died. He was doing *The Six Million Dollar Man*. So they said, “Would you like to pick it up, take over *Six Million Dollar Man*?” I said okay. We were doing it for Universal, the biggest studio out here, bigger than all the rest of them put together. I was doing this episode of *Six Million Dollar Man*. I noticed, while I was doing it, it was so hard for me to do it. I said to Bobbie – I said, “Bobbie, do you know what? I don't feel like I have it any more – like I don't really want to do this any more.” I said, “You know what, Bobbie? I think this is going to be the last thing I do. I don't want to do this any more.”

When it was time to record, I went to Universal. Universal, to me, was so big, and they were disloyal. One of the things that disillusioned me: the people in the copy department – you write the scores, you turn it in, and they copy it, and the musicians have their individual parts. This guy had been there 25 years. He had to go to the hospital for an operation. That was the end of his job. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

So okay, I felt like my time was up. So I – on the recording stage, I could say anything I want, because I didn't risk being fired. I'm going – so I went into this speech. “Universal

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Studios” – and the bigwig is sitting behind me – “Universal Studios, they are meat merchants. They don’t give a darn about us. They killed my friend Oliver Nelson.” The reason I said that – when you’re home, trying to get the thing, and they’re calling you, “Have you got reel two ready yet?” and they’re ready to send the people to pick it up, and you’re looking at the empty page and trying to get the music done, and you’re staying up late at night and drinking, trying to get the music out. Went home one night, and he was so tired he couldn’t even drive his car. He had to get the bass trombone to bring him home. His wife said, “Your bath is ready. Take your bath. I got dinner ready.” He got in the bathtub and never got out. I said, “Yeah, killed my friend, and you’re disloyal, what they did to the fellow in the copy department.” I said, “We’re nothing more than pieces of meat.” Man, they didn’t like that. When I finished, everybody was applauding. That was it. I knew I was through then, and that was the end of it.

I started playing again. It took me a while to feel comfortable again. But I said, okay. Like the expression is, I’ve been there and done that. Now I’m ready to go back to what I really love, and that’s playing. I’m so glad I didn’t sell my mouthpiece and one of my favorite saxophones. I almost – I said, no, I better keep it, and I’m still playing on it. I got back into playing and writing.

Brown: You obviously have been able to share with us the rigors and basically the almost maddening pace of doing that. What was – was there any particular dynamic that came along with being one of very few black people involved in this? Or was it already starting to become more integrated?

Golson: There were a few. Before I got out here, Benny Carter, he was writing, and Quincy Jones. He came in – Quincy was doing well. Then Oliver came. The three of them, and then, with their bidding, I came. Then there were four of us. Then Benny faded away, started doing something else. Then Quincy got into other things, and Oliver died. Then I left. There was a fellow. Jésus something was his name. He tried a couple things. Denise Nicholas, *Room 222*, a friend of hers, who was a composer, and she asked me, would I let him come out and do one episode of *Room 222* to get his feet wet and see could he get a start? I said, “Yeah, let him come out.” I can’t remember his name now. That didn’t last. A few of them came out, but they didn’t last. They came out. They went back. They came out. They went back. But the four of us were able to stay out here. Then the four were gone. Let’s see. Gerald Wilson. I don’t think he did anything. I don’t think.

I don’t think it was a matter of black and white. I think it was a matter of whether they wanted to do it and whether they were in a position to do it by what they do. Some of them were up to it, and some of them weren’t, obviously. There’s certain things that had to be inherent to you. Aside from writing the music, you had to be able to deal with that timing. This has to hit there. This has to hit there. You have to learn how to read those streamers coming across the stream, and when it hits to the right, you get a white flash, and whatever is supposed to happen, is supposed to happen. You can use the click track,

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which is mechanical, and you don't have much feeling, or you do it by simply watching a big clock they have for you, that goes around. You got the tempo, you're watching the clock, and you're waiting for that streamer. It can be a long streamer or a short streamer. You wait for that punch, which is the punch on the film. It shows up as the flash, because the light's behind it. It's got to hit there. But that way, you can get emotion to the music. You can slow it down, and if you want to make it dynamic, where it's picking up speed, then you watch the clock and watch the streamer, and you pick up the music and make it hit. Or you can do the reverse, slow it down and make it hit. That way you get more emotion into the music. So I started to use that. I didn't use the click track at all. They were so impressed at Twentieth-Century Fox, because this is what the oldtimers did, Dimitri Tiomkin and so forth. That's what I – because I felt I could get more feeling out of the music, rather than click, click, everything's right there in time, but you've got no feeling. So I learned to do that. But with all of that, I was ready to go.

Brown: Also, in broadening your experience, you were writing. Did you actually do conducting?

Golson: Yes, I had to conduct everything.

Brown: What other tasks did you – you conducted everything that you were writing?

Golson: Oh yeah. Everything. You had to have that together, because they're looking at you.

Brown: So where did you get that together, conducting?

Golson: You get it together.

Brown: Make it up as you go along.

Golson: I had one lesson with Henry Brandt, because he was a good conductor. I had one lesson. He made that – he had a little stick. It was like that thing was floating in his hand. But basically, I'm 1-2-3-4. It might have been crude, but sometimes – you don't make your strokes broad, because that's confusing. You make them shallow, like that. But when you want the music to come loud, then your strokes get broad, because you're – but when it's soft, you're right there, like that. You get all those nuances and things like that. Everyone's looking at you. You're the only one that can see the screen. They have their backs to the screen, because the screen is behind them. So they don't know what's going on. They're only watching me. I'm looking at the picture and directing what they do. By what I see, I'm transmitting to them. It's fantastic.

Brown: We recently – last month, in fact – conducted an oral history with Van Alexander.

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Golson: This guy, he's a legend. I never met him.

Brown: He's still alive. He's still here.

Golson: This guy, everybody played his music. I can't tell you. Everybody played his arrangements. Van Alexander and Spud Murphy, those two guys. They had it covered. A legend. Is he still – how old is he?

Brown: 92. Still very lucid.

Golson: I'd like to say hello to him sometime. I played a lot of his music.

Brown: I'll give you his phone number. You can call him up. "Van" . . .

Golson: I'll call him. I'll go out and see him.

Brown: He's right over in Century – where is he? He's in Wiltshire – right over in Century City.

Golson: Isn't that something?

Brown: Just right here.

Golson: We all played his music, all of us. Oh my goodness. Take a picture with Van Alexander. He was a legend.

Henry Brandt, for example – I never took a picture with him. I lament about that. He's gone now. He was 92 the last time I talked with him. He died. I think it was about '94. Never took a photograph with him. Never took a photograph with Clifford Brown or John Coltrane. Somebody had done a picture where we were talking. He was fixing his reed, and I was talking – bent down talking to him. Never took a picture. You don't think about that. Never took a picture with Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie. Me, I was in the band. You don't think about that. Never saved any of my recordings. I'd record and bring them home and listen and listen and listen, and then give them all away. As a result, I have almost nothing that I recorded.

Brown: The only reason I was able to bring so many of your recordings here is by the good graces of a good friend named Charles Robinson, who has an extensive library. He was a staff photographer at the Monterey Jazz Festival. So he allowed me to be able to research you properly before I came here.

Golson: Now I'm going to have to go buy all these things on line.

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Brown: We'll go ahead and take a break now.

Golson: Okay.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: This is tape two of the second day of the jazz oral history interview with Benny Golson at his home in Los Angeles. Benny, I just wanted to fill in a few more blanks. One, referring back to yesterday's interview – we were talking about Dennis Sandole. I did look up his brother. It was Adolph Sandole.

Golson: Adolph. That's right.

Brown: Tenor saxophonist – I mean, a saxophonist. So I want to fill that in. Also, before you resume your career back in New York, I just wanted to mention that there was mention of a video: *Benny Golson and Tubby Hayes*. Do you recall that? 1966.

Golson: Yeah. I do remember it. It wasn't just the two of us, though. It was an array of musicians. He was one of them, as was – what was the other tenor player? He had the club in London.

Brown: Ronnie Scott?

Golson: Yeah, Ronnie. Ronnie was still playing then. He was the other tenor player. Then some of the others – guitar player, piano player, ones that I knew. Tubby was prominent, because he was very active then in recording, because that's why they mentioned the two of us. It was a thing that I did for BBC 2. They have BBC 1 and BBC 2. I guess BBC 2 is more the creative artsy things. I think that's what it was. Yeah, we recorded that, and it's on – I don't even have that video, come to think of it. It was black and white. 1966 it was, huh? That's right . . .

Brown: That's what they say.

Golson: That's about right, yeah.

Brown: Where we left off in the chronology, you had left the wilds of Hollywood, returning back to New York City. Where did you move back into? Do you remember what – your address, and what the circumstances were upon your return?

Golson: When I came back, we moved to – prior to going there, I lived on 92nd Street, between Central Park and Columbus. Coming back, we moved to 90th, between Columbus and Amsterdam, right in the same neighborhood. We had an apartment there

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in a place called James Tower. It was a new building. We were the first tenants, because they were filling up with new tenants. We stayed there for a few years.

What happened was, during the time I was out here in Hollywood, I'd meet this one, I'd meet that one. Sometimes I'd see somebody that I used to do commercials for. I started renewing the friendships. So when I came back, I didn't have to do too much scrambling, as it were. I just picked up the phone and said, "I'm back." Then I started to work again here, doing some of the things that I did – not exactly the same, but some of the same things that were similar, playing and writing and things like that. Didn't do too many commercials. After I had moved – I had my own commercial thing set up out here for doing commercials, but when I came back East, I didn't bother to pursue that. It was just playing and writing and whatnot – and touring.

Brown: I'm going to digress, because you mentioned commercials. I know you winced yesterday, when I pulled this out, but it is part of your extended discography. So I had to – it caught my eye. It's still available. *Tune In, Turn On to the Hippest Commercials of the Sixties*. Benny Golson. On the cover is this very psychedelic-looking t.v. set. Some of the personnel on this album – a very, very impressive lineup – we have Benny Golson, arranger, tenor sax, conductor, with orchestra including Art Farmer, Eric Gale on guitar, Richard Tee, piano, James Tyrell, bass, and Bernard "Pretty" Purdie on drums, Warren Smith on percussion. Recorded in April 1967. First track: *Music to Watch Girls by*. Two: *Wink*. Three: *Disadvantages of You Going on Down*, including *The Swinger*, *Magnificent Seven*, *Cool Whip*, *The Golden Glow*, *Fried Bananas* – that's Dexter Gordon, I believe – and *Happiness Is*. Would you like to talk about this particular project, Mr. Golson?

Golson: Yes.

Brown: Let me hand it to you, so it will refresh your memory.

Golson: Somebody said, there are a lot of hip commercials these days. *What Shape is Your Stomach In?* and things like that. *The Magnificent Seven*, you mentioned. Said, "What would happen if we did an album" – because that's what they were called in those days, not CD – "what would happen if we did an album with a sort of a jazz influence, extend these tunes?" He said, "Do you want to do that?" I said, "Let's try it." That's how it came about. This album came out the same time I was moving from New York to Los Angeles. The same time. '67. That's when I came out here. I said, well, it's kind of commercial, if you've heard it.

Brown: I couldn't resist.

Golson: We had girls on there singing. We had all kinds of stuff.

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Brown: What caught my eye is the drummer. You see Bernard Purdie playing some of these – then you’ve got Richard Tee.

Golson: I did a lot with them. Not just this here. That realm of rock-and-roll, rhythm-and-blues. We did a lot of things, Bernard Purdie and Richard Tee. What was the guitar player?

Brown: Eric Gale.

Golson: Eric Gale. We did a lot of stuff that people wouldn’t associate with Benny Golson. Here, let me give this to you.

Brown: Let me put it back over here.

Golson: We did a lot of stuff like that.

Brown: What was it like working with those guys? That’s not really in the genre or style that’s most associated with you.

Golson: They were good at it. So the level was so good – excellence is excellence, no matter where you find it. So it was great working with them. I never recorded playing with them, because that wasn’t really my cup of tea. I didn’t know how to do that too well. But I wrote the stuff, they interpreted it, and it always worked out great. That Bernard Purdie, he could do anything. He used to have his stand that he would bring. He had a sign made. Whenever he played, he’d set the stand up and put the sign on it. The sign said, “Pretty Purdie, the Hitmaker.” On every session, he’d set the stand up and put the sign on it.

Brown: Facing out to everybody?

Golson: So they could see it. Sure. “Pretty Purdie, the Hitmaker.” You get the alliteration there?

Brown: Oh yeah.

Golson: “Pretty Purdie.” But he could – oh, he lived up to it. That guy – he had that stuff down.

Brown: Still does.

Golson: With Eric Gale and Richard Tee – those guys. Yes indeed.

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Brown: Now you're back in New York. You'd left there. That was ten years later. Now you're back in New York, living on the west side again. You're starting to get back in. You picked up your horn, and you're getting back into it. So, picking up – doing recordings. I have a few recordings over here from the late '70s going into the '80s. So you're – then, of course, you re-formed the Jazztet.

Golson: For a while, yeah. That's true.

Brown: How did it feel to be back in New York? It felt like just fitting back into a pair of old shoes? Feel real comfortable?

Golson: We used to visit New York, but we'd always come back here. Every time I visited New York – made a visit there – I felt like, oh boy, this was so good. I didn't realize how good it was, because I was there all the time. But when you leave and come back – for example, one of the trips back, we went up to the Empire State Building. Never thought of doing that when I lived there. Now we come back like tourists.

When we finally moved back there, we kept this place. We moved back there. It was like a fantasy, because we were back into the place that I loved so much. It was a good feeling to be back in New York – a breath of fresh air [?]. Like I said, we stayed here for about 20 years, but then we finally came back here.

Brown: In order to get back into the scene, did you have to get an agent? Did you have to – what facilitated you getting the business back up?

Golson: When I came back, I began to get busy in Europe. So I got an agent. I didn't only get one agent. I got 1 – 2 – 3 – I got four agents in different locales. In Germany it was Gaby Kleinschmidt. In Spain it was Jordi Sunol. I had another in Spain, too – Enparra. What was the first name? Last name was Enparra. Then I had a couple in Italy: Massimo Faraò and Antonio Ciacca, who's now a big man in Lincoln Center. He's got a position there. He moved his whole family over – five kids and his wife – about a year ago. It's amazing. The oldest kid was 10 when they came. The youngest was an infant. Inside of a year, those kids were speaking English, except the baby. I couldn't believe it. Bobbie called one day. They picked the phone up. Says, "Can I speak to Giusi?" That's Antonio's wife. The girl said, "I'm sorry. She's not here. She'll be back later." Last time I saw them, they didn't speak a word of English. It's amazing.

Anyway, yeah, I had a few agents. Sometimes the agents would pop out – they'd come up with something and ask me, did I want to do it? – who wasn't my agent. They just had to do something. So I became very busy in Europe. As it turns out, even now I work more in Europe than I do in the States. That's why we stay over there five or six months out of the year, from June to about October, November.

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Brown: When did you secure your place there? You mentioned Friedrichshafen in German.

Golson: Yes, about 12 years ago. The reason we settled there – because our daughter had moved there, which surprised us. When she graduated from high school, we were going to give her a trip. “Where do you want to go?” She went to Europe – wants to go to Europe. She was 18, but we didn’t feel so secure about that. But we had people in Germany. We had people that we knew in France, and so forth. So she stayed with these people when she went. But when she went to Germany, one day she got lost. She didn’t know what the heck was going on, the trains – she didn’t know where she was going. It seemed like everybody she met didn’t speak English. She finally found her way home. When she came back, she says, “I’m going to learn German. I’ll never get stuck there again.” So that’s what she did. She had studied French before. As a matter of fact, when she was six years old, her French teacher we had at private school, she called and said, “Mr. Golson, I want you to know: your daughter speaks French with no accent.” She’s got absolute pitch. She did the same thing with the Spanish, with no accent. But she didn’t know German.

One day she called us. She was studying German at the school, whatnot. She says, “Dad, I’m moving to Germany.” “You’re doing what? Where are you going to stay?” “With a friend of mine in Markdorf.” “Are you sure? Why are you moving to Germany?” She says, “I think that’s the best way for me to learn the language, instead of the school.” “All right.” Then, a couple of months [later], she moved from Markdorf to where I was – Friedrichshafen. We moved there only because she was there. She was there. We used to finish a tour, and we’d go spend a couple of days with her and come on back home. After a while, we’d spend a week, two weeks. I said, “Since she’s here, why don’t we get a place?” We found a place right up the street from where she lives, and we settled in. Now a few years have gone by – about six or seven years. When we settled in, then she moved back to the States. But she had gotten a pretty good hold on the language by then, and while she was there, she taught English at a [?] school they had there, and she taught it out at the BMW plant, to the engineers, believe it or not. I said, “See if you can get me a discount.” Then she finally came back. She’s got the language down. That’s her best language, German.

Brown: Her best language, next to English.

Golson: A little Spanish and some French. When she went to Japan, she was picking that up. She doesn’t really speak it, but she could – but German is her best language, other than English. She’s at home with it. I’m not.

Brown: But you enjoy it. You enjoy it while you’re there.

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Golson: I love the German people, and I love the food. Those Germans cook like black people from the South. When I tell them that, they just smile. But it's true. They cook like black people from Mississippi and North Carolina, South Carolina.

Brown: German soul food.

Golson: Yeah. When they bring the schwein out and the schweinebraten, oh man, I'm home. They're so proud of it. Say, "Wirtlich?{Truly]" "Yeah." It's fantastic. I love that German food. Those sausages lay me out, and their bread, and their milk, and their cars. We bought an Audi there, which my wife totaled a week before we came back. I got to get another one.

Brown: I see you got a Benz out there in the drive – in the garage out here. I see you got your Benz out here in the garage.

Golson: There's another one, the '72. I was going to have it restored, but it's so old. I think I'll just sell it – somebody might want to restore it – and get a new one. But later. I'm not worried about it. We've got to fix this house first.

Yeah, the Audi's gone, gone. I took a picture of it. It's all . . .

People say to me, why did you move to Germany? I said, because I love it. They expect me to move to Paris or Rome. No, I'm in Friedrichshafen. We love it there.

Brown: Back in New York, it seems like you picked up and played with a lot of folks. You started fronting your own group again as well?

Golson: Yeah. As it turned out, yeah. I had a quartet. When I came back – who did I have in that quartet? Kevin Hayes on piano, Dwayne Burno on bass, and Carl Allen, drums. Then that began to change from time to time. Sometimes Geoff Keezer on piano. For a while it was Mulgrew Miller and Peter Washington and Tony Reedus. The jazz thing changes, and it's different when [?]. Then we put the Jazztet together for a short while. Then that died. I thought that was the end of it, that we'd never see the light of day anymore. But I told Eddie Henderson – I said, "Eddie, if we ever get the Jazztet together again, you're going to be my trumpet player." But I didn't foresee it. But it happened, and he's my trumpet player. Steve Davis, trombone. Who. Are you aware of him? He's a devotee of Curtis Fuller, but he's like – where Curtis was, he went further. That guy is something. If you hear our new album – new CD, *New Time, New 'Tet*, you'll hear him play on there. He's incredible.

Brown: Does he have the same mute as Curtis?

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Golson: That soul, that sound that Curtis has. And he can read. I can write anything for him. He can play like – push my buttons. And Buster Williams and Carl Allen and Mike LeDonne, who used to be Milt Jackson’s piano player. When Milt was alive, he was playing with both of us. I used to say, “I wonder what would happen if we both had a gig on the same night? Who’s he going to play with?” He would probably play with Milt Jackson, because he was his piano player. But then, when Milt died, he was totally mine, and he is really an asset.

All of this happened after I came back to New York. I didn’t foresee any of this while I was here. In fact I was telling you, I thought this was it and I was going to spend the rest of my life writing for movies and television. I had my own production company for the commercials. I was comfortable.

Brown: Was it lucrative?

Golson: Very. Very. But I got that itch to play again, which surprised me. It was a struggle coming back, because I’d been away for eight years. Everything was gone. But it slowly came back. I feel – after about ten years, I feel comfortable, really comfortable. I don’t have much time left now, but I’m enjoying myself. I enjoy whatever I do. Because in the early days, I told you, I used to be a truck driver, driving those trucks. This is so much better than driving trucks. I can’t tell you. Not that there’s anything wrong with hard work. Yeah, this is so much better. I love this.

Brown: Off mic, when we had the visitor from the other musician, Ray Brown, you mentioned being a draftsman, because he was talking about your penmanship. So what was that about?

Golson: Yeah. When I was 14 – I’d just started to play the saxophone – I fancied – after fancying that I wanted to be a concert pianist – that maybe I wanted to be a draftsman. My mother bought me my little tools to – things – I went at it very hard. They were sticklers about printing. When you make the blueprints, your printing had to be almost like a printing machine, just so. Everything had to be just so. It was after that that I abandoned script. Everything I do now is print. I told them, when I have to write anything, I feel strange, and my handwriting is lousy. The printing was perfected. So when I make up a lead sheet and put the title on it, he says it’s almost like it was printed. He said the script is so clear. That was Henry Brandt. He insisted on that. If you’re going to write, write so its understandable. That’s as important as the music that you’re writing. You want people to develop. That’s got to be clear. So I got that from the draftsmen and him. Took my lead sheets. Some people said, wow, it looks like it’s printed, but that’s because I devoted the time to it. The more you do a thing, the better you get at it. That’s that.

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Brown: So you resume off and on in various configurations the Jazztet, but you also get back with Art Blakey again, who you helped to get on the track. You did several reunions.

Golson: He stayed on the track, too. He really did. The money stayed up. He presented the group in a good way. He learned how – when to take the intermission, to come back. It was so messed up before. When he was playing Small’s Paradise before I joined him, he would play – an intermission was 20 minutes, and he would be gone an hour, an hour and a half. They said they never wanted him back in there again. So when I took the group over, I said, “We have to set goals for ourselves. One of the goals – one of the first goals is going to be that Small’s Paradise asks for this group.” He said, “Oh, no. It’ll never happen,” because he had messed up so bad.

We got the group together, got our repertoire together, recorded. Bobby Timmons, I got him to finish that tune he thought was no good, *Moanin’*. *Blue March*, CD – 45 came. It was on all the jukeboxes in Harlem, *Moanin’*. Ring. “This is Small’s Paradise. Is Art Blakey available?” He says, “I don’t believe it.” I said, “That tells you we’re moving in the right direction.” Because you have to set goals for yourself, to know where you’re going, landmarks.

Brown: According to this chronology, you were with Art Blakey again in ’83 and then again in ’89. He passed in ’90. What was it like coming back, working with Art Blakey? He still had that same fire, that same magic?

Golson: Coming back to a drummer swinging like that was like paradise. It’s like going to get another gourmet meal. That was – when I came back, it was as the All-Star Jazz Messengers: his current group, plus Jackie McLean, Curtis, and me. That’s what that was, those tours. It wasn’t just the regular group. The last time we did it, I think it was Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison. They were in the group then.

Brown: By this time, coming back to New York, shortly thereafter, is the arrival of the Marsalis brothers with Bu. Do you recall what kind of impact that was having in changing the course of jazz? Or did it? Was it even ostensible at that time?

Golson: It wasn’t changing the course of jazz, because Wynton did that progressively, when people began to realize who he was and what he could do. He’s a very erudite young man. Smart. He knew what he was doing. He did his homework. He could play the classical literature and jazz. That Haydn concerto for trumpet, he could play it. He could do all of that. He recorded classical things. On the classical station, I remember you’d hear this trumpet with the orchestra and everything, and that was Wynton Marsalis. He doesn’t do that any more. But he had done his homework. You heard more of him than you did his brother Branford. Branford came on a little later. He came on with a certain impact. It didn’t happen overnight. It was cumulative. It went along. People began to hear

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this name, this name, and he began to take bigger chunks out of that pie, that thing. It became his metier. This is what he was all about. People began to hear about Wynton Marsalis.

Now, today, he's a wealthy man. He shares what he does, these concerts about the music. He loves Duke Ellington. I went to hear him in Germany at the – what was it? Durchhausen, I think, or somewhere like that. He wasn't playing just the straight-ahead jazz. He was playing a variety of things from this period and that period. Even though it was old stuff, he was playing it authentically. It sounded fantastic. The people loved it.

Then he began to write other things, orchestral things. *Blood on the Fields* is one of the things. He got a Pulitzer Prize for that. He's writing other things now, I understand. Why shouldn't he? Why not, if you can do it? So he's made a [?] now on it. Believe me, he has.

Unfortunately, as he was doing this, some people didn't ascribe to it. Jealousy, envy. Who is this young upstart, coming on the scene and zooming up like that, and we've been here all this time? They couldn't zoom, because they didn't have the properties to enable them to zoom like he was doing. He came prepared. He had done his homework. He was serious. He was smart. He could zoom. Others could only think about things. He earned where he is and the way he was going. Some of the others couldn't earn it, because they didn't – couldn't do it. It's like crabs in a barrel: the one trying to get out, and they pull the one back.

Brown: Have there been any others in his generation that have inspired you, that you feel [are] worthy of mentioning?

Golson: Sure. Ron Carter.

Brown: I consider him the generation before Wynton's.

Golson: Carl Allen, businessman, who now heads up the jazz program at Juilliard. These are people – great musicians – but they've got a business mind too. They're not – they don't have any prescient power, that is, to see into the future, but they use common sense. So they have a certain perspicacity, because of what's going on now, what the possibilities are tomorrow. They draw from that and use their imagination, like you say, which is inherent to creativity. Creativity without imagination is nothing. It begins – you have to have that imagination to bring about life to the things that you imagine, which is your creativity. Those kinds of people, they have that ability to look ahead. They don't have a glass ball. If you can put two and two together – syllogistically reasoning. This goes with that. Then that can possibly grow out of that. You get your syllogistic thinking together, and then you can forecast and bring things into existence that had no prior existence. That's what they're able to do.

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Brown: You mentioned having business acumen and having foresight. You obviously demonstrated this when you were with Art Blakey. You were the one who completely reshaped his career. Where did you get that – where did you develop or cultivate that business acumen, that savvy?

Golson: Old Southern people used to say, mother wit. That means you just observe what's going on around you and, putting two and two together, seeing how that situation works, and intuitively documenting it. You memorialize it. Then you see something that's going on over here. Intuitively – and it's after a while, and sometimes it's just mother wit, common sense. If you're going to want to keep a job, you're going to want to be on time. You can't be late every night. I mean, just common sense. And when you're going to play before people, you want to look presentable, which shows that you think something about yourself. If you're coming with overalls, with dungarees with holes in the knees, and sneaks, thinking it's hip, and tee-shirt hanging out – hey, that's not business. It's just certain things that's inherent to success, if it can happen. Those are the tools, and those kind of tools are just as important as the instrument that we play. If you want to be a master of your trade, you have to have the proper tools and know how to use them. So that's what that's all about, and it works.

Brown: Another thing that happens throughout the progression of this music over the last, say, 50 years or 60 years – as you were saying, when you were coming up, there were no – didn't have any classes that you could take in the university or a college. But now jazz is part of the education curriculum. You've seen this complete evolution of it being accepted into the academy. Obviously with the generation – the Marsalis generation, or maybe a couple generations before that – you see it starting to gain greater prominence. You yourself took on the role as educator as well. What do you think about the inclusion or the nurturing of jazz within the academy? Do you think that has an effect – impact – on the music itself?

Golson: Yeah. It's about two things. It's about time and talent. Like I just said, the more you do a thing, providing you have the axiomatic talent, it's a matter of time before it gets better, doing it over and over again. We call rehearsals here rehearsals. In Europe, it's more practical. They call it repetition. What time is the repetition? – not the rehearsal. What time are we coming together, where we can repeat what we're trying to learn? So it's about time and talent. The expression is, time tests the hulls of ships and the souls of men. That's what it's all about. We realize those things with the talent that we have, but it takes time and patience. You have to have a votive determination. That is like an oath in what you're trying to succeed or excel at, without any arrogance – I'm not talking about – because that fouls the air we breathe. But that votive determination, day in and day out to stick with it and to do it, that Spartan-like practice which John Coltrane had, day in and day out. He practiced like a person who had no talent. He had all talent, but he just kept at it, and look what happened. You have to have that kind of determination – like I said,

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without the arrogance – to go ahead. If you’ve got the talent, you can parlay that talent. But it doesn’t happen overnight.

The other element in the equation – you could have all the talent in the world – the other element in the equation is opportunity. If you don’t have opportunity, it’s academic, it’s a moot point. If you don’t have that opportunity – nobody knocks on your door – you could spend the rest of your life playing in your bedroom or in the kitchen, in the dining room – I go in and practice without the furniture in there. It’s got a nice sound – I had the opportunity. I had a lot of knocks on my doors, but without those knocks, nothing’s going to happen. But if you’re anticipating the knock, before that knock comes, do your homework. Be ready when that knock comes. When that knock comes, you say, “Give me a couple more weeks.” When that knock comes, you got to be ready. The longer it takes for the knock to come, the more you’re going to be into what you’re doing, the better you’re going to be able to do it.

I had a friend of mine. He’s 50 years old. He hadn’t recorded. He says, “I feel like it’s a waste of time.” He can play. I said, “When somebody knocks on your door, you’re going to be more than ready.” Because a lot of people are not ready and getting an attitude, because the knock is not coming. “Man, I don’t know anybody doesn’t call me.” Practice your horn. Practice what you’re doing. Nobody’s not going to hire you because you’re black or because you’re somebody’s friend. You got to be ready. It’s inherent on you.

Brown: As they say – actually, I think it was Jimmy Jam, who is now president of the recording academy – he said, “I wasn’t waiting for opportunity to knock. I was preparing for opportunity to knock.”

Golson: That’s right. That’s what – he’s absolutely right. That’s what we’re all doing, intuitively we were doing that, trying to best ourselves each day, and that desire to move ahead with a certain forward motion, making time your confederate. What’s the advantage of making time the confederate? Time only moves ahead. It doesn’t back up for guilty consciences, for regrets, or for things that you forgot. It moves ahead without hearing anything. If you can become in tandem with it and become its confederate, then you’re going to be on the cutting edge of things, as they come up. You can’t lay in bed dreaming about things. You have to get active in doing those things, this and that.

Brown: Let’s go back to the impact that having jazz in the academy has had on the art form itself. What are your impressions about that? Do you see a tangible change in the way the music has moved, if it – in its progression, in its evolution? Has it had a . . .

Golson: You mean in the academic approach?

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Brown: Yeah. Now that jazz is being taught pretty much across the country, internationally, has this had an impact on shaping the direction of the music, at least ostensibly from your perspective?

Golson: Not in the beginning, but now, to a certain extent. It's not a totality. Because in the beginning, when they started to have these schools, when – it started to happen when the men came home from the Vietnam – um . . .

Brown: After World War II, right?

Golson: Yeah. That was it, because my own . . .

Brown: Because with all the big bands . . .

Golson: Then they opened these schools. That was to make money. The Twentieth-Century Schools in Washington, D.C. . . .

[a brief passage is missing]

. . . stiff. It didn't have any skeleton to it. It was just limp flesh. You know what I mean. But later, as the music began to develop, then they got teachers there who were not only expert in theory, but who could do and play the things that they were teaching. So they would pass this on to the students.

Now, the only thing – you can have the best schools, the best teachers, and everything, but the thing that you cannot teach is experience. You can only prepare one for the experience. But they learned to prepare the students better for the experience which was going to come. Like – what's that school in Texas? North Texas State. Yeah, see, okay. They were preparing them to play that music, do everything, but in the beginning, the solos were not so good. They could play the notes off of the page, but their ability to improvise was so-so. That came later. So where they are today was accumulative.

Now the schools that teach or have a jazz program are much more meaningful than those schools that came up a generation ago. You got people in there like Carl Allen. Juilliard had – they wanted me to teach, but I didn't want to teach. So I come, and I teach on an irregular basis. I give clinics here, now and then. They have people – not only me – other people: Terence Blanchard, Steve Turré, Mike LeDonne. Maybe a Buster Williams will come. They get that experience firsthand. So now it's better than it was before. Now they're cooking.

But then success doesn't necessarily depend on the school. It depends on the musician. What is he going to do with his talent. What has he got that's going to enable him to do or to aspire to what he wants to do or what he wants to be? It's totally up to him. And

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again, it's that element of opportunity. No matter how you [?], you have to get the opportunity. Otherwise, nothing's going to happen. You're going to stay in your house, playing. So you've got to get out there. They don't have many jam sessions anymore. People want to know – the jam session: how much does it pay? That's changed. But get out – you've got to get out and get around. People have to hear you. You can't . . .

Brown: Again, you said that the critical element in this equation is experience. You do the preparation, but the experience is the key factor. Before jazz was in the academy, the experience was, you were on the gig, as your life portrays so cogently. You start off young. In high school you're starting to play. You're playing. You're getting these gigs. Your other good example is Lee Morgan. He's 18, 19 years old. He's brash, but he can deliver. But he only got that because he came up playing. He was in, and he was having a direct contact, standing side-by-side or behind or in front of all these other musicians who had the experience. So there was a whole other academy that went along with the profession that may not be the same – obviously is not the same – as being in the academy. Do you see this having a particular effect? A lot of us would say, they don't get the essence of the music. They don't get the soul, the experience – you say experience – the soul or the real meaning of the music, because it's not going to come in from the academy. The academy is not going to teach you about the spirituality of this music that we know as jazz. Do you have any comments?

Golson: Yeah. The music is the same, but the comprehension is varied. When you talk about people like Lee Morgan and where he went from as a student to an international musician, that success that Lee had was [?]. It was unavoidable, because of his talent. Sometimes people make it, and you don't understand how they could make it, because they don't have the talent. So it become ineffable. You can't explain it. Or you can explain it, like Kenny G is successful. I wish I made as much money as him. But I was through with him when somebody interviewed him and said to him, "Have you taken up where Charlie Parker left off?," and he said, "Yes." I was through with Kenny G. I won't decry what he's doing, but when you put it on that level, "I'm taking where Charlie . . ." – no, no, no.

Brown: Let's use that as the example. Here's a guy who was basically an accountant, but he learned through academic – he didn't come up through what we call the old school, the school of hard knocks. So I think this is a primary example of perhaps the pitfalls of coming through the academy. Now there are definitely some advantages to that. You don't have to come through that school of hard knocks. But that school of hard knocks has some other lessons that are going to inform that music.

Golson: I know. For example, you have some people that can't read a note, and they can sometimes play as good or better than the one that's trained academically. Jimmy Oliver is an example, back in Philadelphia.

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Brown: Art Blakey is another example.

Golson: Art Blakey. Art Blakey couldn't read a note and could play better than a lot of drummers. So the academic thing – although it's desirable, if you're going to be a professional, it's not something that's a prerequisite to success, because there are a lot of people that are successful – they can't read. They do what they do. But I wouldn't say that because that exists, you should avoid the academies. I wouldn't say that. I left Howard University, because I wasn't getting what I wanted. But I wouldn't say that everyone should just circumvent that and go another route. I feel that even though I was there, I wasn't getting what I wanted, I got other things that helped to frame me to be the kind of person I am and for me to set up an infrastructure on which would rest the rest of my life. I think I got a good infrastructure by going that route, so that I'm prepared for all sorts of things – not everything, but all sorts of things. I can solo. I can read. I can write. I can talk to people. I know the English language fairly well. So I don't feel that it was a total waste of time, even though I abandoned it.

Brown: There are certain experiences that prepare you for life. When you talk about the academy, again, Howard University, you have two examples of musicians who have gone through both. We've done both – the academy, and tried to get as much experience in the old school as well. But there are certain things that are going to prepare you for certain other things. So when we look at the academy – I've gone through as far as you can get. When I look back and I look at somebody else, I know that they have had to go through the hoops that I went through. I know the experience. So I have perhaps another level of trust in their ability, because I know what they've been through. I know that's the same in the jazz field, too. “Did you play with” so-and-so? “Did you play with” so-and-so? They can gauge what level of preparation they believe you have by the experiences that you've gone through. So let's look at your role as having been also on the dual path. You went through the academy, not necessarily to complete your music education, but it prepared you for certain things, to handle the challenges of life there after that. Now you've gone back into the academy. You've helped try to – and as you said – talk about creativity, or lecture on creativity. What are the things that you feel are important to impart on these students, to convey to these students, who are probably just coming through the academy? They don't have the experiences. We don't have those jam sessions anymore. We don't have those – what we call the neighborhood or the street academy anymore. So how do young students nowadays make up or somehow complement the absence of that – the experience, the essential experience of this music that's going to get them to understand the history – not just the academic history, but the real history of the music, so they can express themselves, they can get out there and solo and say something while they're soloing? What can Benny Golson say to these young students?

Golson: First thing – they have to learn that there's more to music. As a social people, we have to deal with one another. You have to learn how to treat people. People don't usually talk about that. Not to think too much of yourself, because when you think too

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much of yourself – and that’s the way the ego works. It thinks outside of itself – but we have to learn to think inside of oneself, so that you’re not thinking too much of it. It’s better to think that the other person is better than you, because then you’re going to be like Avis. You’re going to try harder. The greatest hindrance to knowledge is thinking you already have it. So it’s a shutdown, and you’re like a man that’s fallen overboard, and the ship sails off, and you’re treading water as long as you can until you sink into obscurity and the ship goes on, picking up knowledge, more knowledge. And you must be aware that no one person knows everything there is to know. That means, all through your life, there’s always the possibility that there’s more to learn. I talked to Jay Jay Johnson. He felt just like that. He could play everything. He says, “I’m still learning.” And we are. I’m 80 years old, and I’m still learning. Things come to light that I had no awareness of. Trying to attach yourself to those things and realize what it is, and to be able to express yourself within the milieu of that thing, is a goal that intuitively we should set for ourselves. That means that you’re a good listener. If you talk all the time, you learn nothing. You have to learn to be a good listener. And listen to the lowest denominator sometimes. What is it Charlie Parker said? He said, “Everybody has something to say.” Now, that’s saying quite a bit, because you can go from the Ph.d. down to the illiterate. He said, “I learned something from everybody.” He would go sit in so-called jam sessions and play – “What is he doing playing with these guys?” He’s playing with them. John Coltrane said, “I was playing with a guitar player, and he could hardly stay in tune, and he’d lose the meter where he was. The only way I could figure to keep him to where he was, to get him to repeat certain things.” He said, “That helped me to come up with a tune called” – what was that tune? He sold it to Miles Davis. So Miles Davis’s name is on it. [Golson sings the melody].

Brown: *Weird Blues.*

Golson: *Weird Blues.* That was John’s, and that grew out of this guy who couldn’t play or keep up. He said, yeah, you can learn something from everybody. It’s better to have that attitude than, “I know everything.” Because if you figure you know everything, you’re going to level off and everybody goes right by you. So you have to be a good listener. You have to bring into realization – you have to – the things that you hear and the things that you conceive, if you’re going to be a performer. You have to be able to do it. Talk is cheap. You know what I mean? There’s some guys that talk their way through things. I ran into a guy like that in Miami, years ago. He was white, and we were black. In Miami at that time, during the break we had to sit out there where the waiters were, with the drinks and trays and stuff. He would come by, and he would bring his practice pad. He had great hands. He was talking this and that. We used to have the jam session on Saturday. He wanted to know, could he sit in? I said, this guy, he’s going to be something else, because he’s back at – the way he’s talking, and what he doing to us – this guy’s going to be – we hit the tune off. 1, 2, 1-2- chuck chuck-te-chuck chuck. I said, oh, no.

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So you have to – it's not a matter of what you say. It's a matter of what you do. All of that. And you have to be able sometimes to just be quiet and listen to what somebody's saying. Maybe you might not agree. But like when you go to the market to shop. You see that cantaloupe, and you hit it. Naw, that one's not good. Yeah, I like that one. When you listen, that's what you're doing. Listen. What can I use from what he's saying that's going to benefit me in some way? When we start out, we're eclectic. We're drawing from all sources, indiscriminately. Then when we learn, we're not drawing from so many sources any more. We're becoming more discreet at what we do and what we hear. So when people talk, I listen. Sometimes I hear crazy stuff. But let's hear him out. I want to know how that first egg tastes, the first – I want to feel what he first tasted when he ate that first hen egg, looking like that. I want to be like that. Let me hear it first. Let me experience it. Then let me decide for myself, based on what I already know, so that I can add to what I already know, but the possibility of what I'm going to hear. How can I bring the two together? Things like that.

That's the way it is. It's not always the same with each person, depending on your personalities, and it doesn't happen with the same frequency or the same speed – in a couple of months, or a year. I always said, Gil Evans was a slow writer. But I said, so what? The end product, the way it sounds, is what counted. Nobody's going to say – we sit down and listen to that great music – “I wonder how long did it take him to write that? Did he write that in a year, a month, or two weeks?” They're going to say, it sounds great, or it sounds sad. Because some people sit down and take a lot of time to write music, and it sounds sad. So the amount of time it takes somebody to do something, unless there's a time constraint on it, is irrelevant. The end result is what counts. How does it sound when you – how does that house look when you finish building it? Is it a monument? Is it something to behold? Or is it just quotidian, I mean, something that occurs every day? Is it something that's going to be set aside from other things? That's what it's about. That's what makes it so exciting. We don't do the same thing. We don't do it the same way. We have different personalities that come into the music, like anything else. That's what it's about. That's what makes it so exciting.

If everybody wore blue shoes and ate spaghetti every day and had sex the same way and wash their face the same – man, it would be what automatons – like robots. The Polish got that word together, robots. I don't understand why, but they did. I looked it up. Robot. That came from the Poles – they would be robots. We don't want to be robots. We want to be individuals.

That's why I decry a musician who's copying to the tee somebody else. There's so many doing that with John Coltrane. It's a testimony to John Coltrane. I hear them. They've got facility. They're trying to play just like John Coltrane. I hear that. I say, I wonder, what do they sound like? I hear they sound like John Coltrane, but what do they sound like?

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You have to learn how to be yourself. When we talk, linguistically I'm not trying to talk like you or him. I'm talking natural ways, like me. I don't try to imitate anybody.

Some people do. I remember we had a disc jockey here. He had – it was Ray Charles's manager – he had that sort of English accent. This man was born in the South somewhere, with no shoes on. Trying to talk with an English accent. I shouldn't have said that, because then everybody's going to know. I said it was Ray Charles – I wish I could take that – take that out. We want to be who we are – realistically who we are.

Brown: Isn't that the *raison d'être* of jazz? As Miles would say, find your own voice, or sound like who you are? Again, maybe that's one of the pitfalls of the academy, is because they set up a standard. We know there are two – generally speaking, two different sensibilities involved with jazz, which is an improvisatory art form, and the Western art tradition, which is basically a fixed tradition. The standard has been set, and you aspire to replicate that, which is antithetical to the spirit of jazz. But in the academy, it's the former – of replication – of trying to achieve that level of excellence, that become the mark of your ability, the mark of your excellence, or even measurement of your talent. So, again, here we have these two dichotomies working against each other, and one gets valorized over the other, so that you do have all these Trane clones – that you don't have somebody who may not be truly in the spirit of jazz, finding his or her own voice. That's a hard thing to reconcile. Any insights into that?

Golson: That was my problem when I was in college. It was pathetic. Everything was the same from one teacher to the next teacher to the next teacher to the next teacher. My qualm with them was that, with all of these rules, why can't you set up new rules or break the old rules when the time is right, and when it makes sense and the ear will accept it? That was my big qualm with the system that was set up. They were saying, no, you have to adhere to the rules. Did Thelonious Monk adhere to the rules? My goodness. Did John Coltrane adhere to the rules? Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie? When they came with this new approach, they changed the whole face of jazz. They weren't following any rules. They were setting up not rules, but they were breaking ground, discovering new things, unearthing things, things that came into existence, that they had to finally try to give it a name, bebop, which was crazy. They came up with new things, and the old traditionalists were putting it down every step of the way. Be that as it may. But what happened? They're not doing those same old things. It doesn't mean the old things are worthless, but we're moving these old things on the shelf, making room for the newer things, because as time went by, the newer things became older things, and there were yet more newer things. So what we're doing is, we're getting more things on the shelf. We have a wealth of things from which to draw. That's all it means. It doesn't mean we throw Louis Armstrong away, because he was vital in what he did, and he was consequential.

There's always room for new approaches of doing things. They don't make houses the same way they did anymore. They don't operate like they use to operate, with a big score.

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They make a little hole, they go in with the thing, and it's a little scar left. Things are being changed all the time. We look around, and we see it everywhere else, and when it comes to something that's music, oh no, you can't change. That's crazy. Changes are inherent to creative things like music.

That was the only qualm that I had when I was there. They weren't ready for changes. They're trying now. They're coming along. But there's room for them to go further in the academies, yes. This is not set. It's not set in concrete. It shouldn't be set in concrete. Whenever I talk to them, I talk along those lines. Be adventurous. Don't break the rules just for breaking the rules. When you break the rules, it has to have some meaning behind it that's going to develop and bring forth something that's consequential and beneficial or enjoyable to the person. People can break rules, and it's terrible. If you're just going to set out as an iconoclast – just break rules – that doesn't make sense.

Brown: That's anarchy.

Golson: That's right. That doesn't make sense.

Brown: Let's look at the progression of jazz. We had modern jazz – what became labeled as “bebop.” Then we had the post-modern, which is your era. Then we've had the progression of music that's gone beyond that, which got labeled “avant garde,” or as Trane, “the new thing.” There seems to be some that's accepted and some that's not. Let's look at the progression of jazz, say, from 1958 or 1959 on through the '60s. It underwent a tremendous evolution and revolution, if you want to look at it that way. Some of those things – some of those approaches have been denigrated. Some of them have been accepted. I know you, having been so close to John Coltrane, have talked about – he got into a certain area. He was searching. He was stretching some areas that you personally may not [have] felt like you were going that direction or . . .

Golson: No, I wasn't.

Brown: But yet he was, and there were others also. But they were in many respects perhaps staying true to the spirit of jazz in trying to keep going beyond the boundaries, keep going beyond what is now. Some have been successful. Some haven't. From your position, you've seen this progression. You lived through it. Any thoughts about some of the directions jazz has taken?

Golson: Has taken? Yeah. There are many different routes that I saw. Some wasn't particularly my cup of tea, but like Voltaire said, I disagree with everything you say, but we'll fight to the death for your right to say it. You can't put people down just because they're doing something that's not your cup of tea. We have some of the modernists, avant gardists, and otherwise, and when they do what they do, I say, why not? Who's to tell them, they have no right to do that? Who is to tell them they have no right to do that?

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Creatively, they have every right in the world to do it. I hope no-one comes and tells me I have no right to do what I do, because this is what I feel, and that's what they feel. Why not? So you have many approaches to it: heavy metal, hip hop, rap. I would have never thought that anything like rap would be so big, never in a million years, even when King Pleasure came along with the words, "There I go. There I go. There I go" [*Moody's Mood for Love*]. That's a novelty. Somebody parleyed that, got a whole thing in the rhythm, and the words became more important than – incredible. But why not?

Brown: You may have been an inadvertent precursor to hip hop and rap with the introduction – original introduction to *Killer Joe*.

Golson: *Killer Joe*. Boy, that was the worst thing I did in the world. That was so sad. I wish I – when Symphony Sid used to play it, he never played the intro. Thank him. We wanted to get – it was a famous radio announcer that we really wanted to get to do that. I forget his name. Very prominent. It didn't work. So they said, "Why don't you go ahead and do it?" I sounded so lame. Talk about lack of conviction. I don't know what I sounded like – I was gay, like I was a milktoast. It just – it was horrible. "We'd like for you to meet a friend of ours that goes by the name of Killer . . ." – oh it was so lame. It just did nothing. No, I don't think I was institutional in rap. Not with that.

But yeah, it became – somebody hired me once to come and do something and to play – they wanted me to play like King Curtis. I don't know if you remember King Curtis.

Brown: Absolutely.

Golson: I couldn't play like King Curtis.

Brown: *Memphis Soul Stew*.

Golson: Man, he had that – whoo – *Soul Serenade*. I couldn't play like it. So I told – "Look, I can't play like that. You don't have to pay me anything," and I left. If they wanted somebody to play that King Curtis, they should have done a little research, instead of just calling a saxophone player. There's certain things I can't do. I realize it. That King Curtis wasn't my – and I loved him. Junior Walker, I love. But I can't play like that. I don't think like that.

Brown: But you used to walk the bars.

Golson: Oh, but I walked the bar. He might have turned over some drinks, but I never turned over a drink. I never tipped a drink.

Brown: A refined bar-walker.

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Golson: Yes. Hey look – I caught my boy John Coltrane on the bar. When I opened that door and stepped in, and he was on that bar ready to turn where I was, he took his horn out of his mouth and looked at me and said, “Oh no,” and I fell out laughing.

Brown: Do you know where that tradition started?

Golson: I don’t know where it started. It didn’t start with the jazz artists, per se. It started with one of the entertainers. An entertainer’s plot is to do or to second-guess what the audience wants to hear. Yeah, I got involved in that. I did some crazy stuff when I was doing all that stuff. You do what you think is going to entertain them. It’s going to bring acclaim to what you’re doing. Yeah, what’s more ridiculous than getting up on the bar where the drinks are and start playing your low B-flats no matter what key you’re in, just honking. We call that honking and stepping. They’re applauding. Ain’t nothing happening. Stepping over those drinks.

Brown: You mentioned – like you said before – lowest common denominator.

Golson: That’s what you get.

Brown: That is what got the audience riled up.

Golson: I’m telling you. Clifford Brown was playing with a group like that, but when he played the solo, it was Clifford Brown. So it was an aberration to what was going on in that group. The people didn’t understand what he was playing from the jazz point of a jazz aficionado, but they knew what he was doing was great and unusual, and they accepted it, even though they didn’t under[stand] – because what he was – the things he was – this has got to be phenomenal, what this guy is doing. It had nothing to do with Chris Powell and the Five Blue Flames that were rocking it up and whatnot, and swaying from side to side. When he played, he played like Clifford Brown. It was like two different things. It’s incredible. He never compromised. I never heard him try to do anything else. He may be good at it. But every time he put that trumpet in his mouth, it was Clifford Brown, totally.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: This is tape three of the second day of the interview with Benny Golson at his home in Los Angeles. Just before the break, we were talking about – maybe we were off mic. I can’t remember now – but we were talking about drummers not listening. You always come back to talking about drummers. You’ve had the great good fortune to have played with perhaps virtually all of the greatest drummers that have ever lived. But also – what we were talking about when I rejoined the conversation during the break – talking about listening, and about it’s what you do, not what you say. The other drummer you said came back in and chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk. That always makes me think of one of

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the maxims that one of my former teachers – God rest his soul – Max Roach said: deeds, not words.

Golson: That's right.

Brown: You had a chance – we talked about the recording date that you did with Max, but you haven't talked about Max at all. Is there – is this a chance to talk about Max?

Golson: Max Roach. When Diz and Bird came on the scene, the drums, piano, and the bass were behind. They hadn't caught up with them. They were playing stride and hi-hat, chik-ka-chih, Kaiser Marshall. One of the first drummers to get in tandem with them was Max Roach. And Curley Russell, yeah. I don't remember the piano player they had. Clyde Hart, for a minute. I don't remember who – Bud Powell, I guess, is locked into it.

Brown: Bud Powell, Al Haig . . .

Golson: Al Haig

Brown: . . . was on some of the recordings.

Golson: Yeah. He was a character.

Max Roach always stood out in my mind. During those days – Max was younger, and he had that heavy moustache. I don't know if you remember that. Heavy, almost like Graucho Marx. I used to say, boy, that guy is so hip, the way he looked and the way he played, and the way he was able to play with them so that it made sense. It was like having a sixth finger or something. I always admired him.

Then I met Tadd Dameron, and through Tadd, I met Max. Then I got the chance to talk with him. The way he talked, I could see that he was an adventurer. He wasn't afraid of stepping into the darkness of the unknown. He never played it safe, in the light of reality. He went beyond that. His concept and reaching – in doing that, you have to be careful that your reach doesn't exceed your grasp. He was onto that. Nights you'd go listen to him play. He did a lot of technical things. I never really knew if he was academically trained, and I never asked . . .

[a brief passage is missing]

. . . We wrote the drum stuff out, and he played it. Max was a good drummer. He was a nice friend. I never really played with him. I only did that recording. He did it with me. I forgot the name of it now, but it was for Riverside. It was Kenny Dorham, J. J. Johnson, Wynton Kelly, and Paul Chambers. He was the drummer. He had to go by the name of Spider Maxwell, because – but that was the only time we actually played together. When

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I played with him, then I got the sense of what he was doing, because I was leaning on that while I was playing.

He was an excellent drummer. He did things that you didn't always expect to hear. So his mind was always in tune with the future, I say. He had one foot in the present and one foot in the future, and he had many ways of expressing himself: the double quartet; what was that? the Boom? . . .

Brown: M'Boom. Yeah, we did talk about those yesterday.

Golson: Something like that. And he had other things, with voices. You know what I mean?

Brown: Always stretching.

Golson: Yeah, stretching.

Brown: Just as a footnote – that title was *The Modern Touch*, Benny Golson sextet. Here you are, laying out on the sofa, holding your glasses, pen. It looks like you're just notating your latest score. You've got the saxophone over the back. This is a classic cover. I'll tell you.

Golson: And it looks like a pretty nice apartment, doesn't it?

Brown: Oh, it looks like a great apartment.

Golson: That was somebody else's apartment. I had a room uptown.

Brown: Let's return to Max, because for me, Max, obviously a very prodigious musical talent, but also a man of great social conscience.

Golson: Oh, definitely.

Brown: You came up in that whole era of the '50s. It's the beginning – the beginning of that decade is the nascent period of the civil rights movement. Max took it to heart. It obviously had a deleterious impact on his career, his ability to continue as a musician, because of his outspokenness. It was uncompromising. As he called it, no compromise. *Freedom Now*.

Golson: I remember that well. I thought maybe that one might make it a little hard for him, but it didn't. He got notoriety out of that, but it didn't take anything away from his drumming skills. That was still extant, and he went on past that, doing other things. He was an adventurer. He was, on both levels.

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Brown: When we look at that whole era of civil rights, changing, America changing, significantly changing. It took a while, and it's still progressing. Here we are – say, if that was 1950, he recorded *Freedom Now* in 1960.

Golson: When was that?

Brown: It was 1960, because it was Coleman Hawkins. He had Abbey Lincoln. He had Olatunji. He was bringing in a strong African identity. Let's jump ahead. That's 1960. Now we're in 2009. What's going to happen in less than – today's the 9th – in 12 days, we're going to have a new President. Did you ever think you would see . . . ? – thinking back in the 1950s, how things were when we had de rigour segregation, to now, where we have – we're going to have – the first African-American President.

Golson: No, I never thought it, even though, at the end of the 18th century, there were some blacks in Congress and whatnot, but that was short-lived. That died out. No, I never thought I'd see, in my time, a black President. Although there was a film that came out with that in mind. James Earl Jones played the President. It was supposed to be a t.v. thing, and they decided to make it a theater feature. It was called *The Man*. I don't know if you remember that. He was the first black American President. More recently, there was a series on, a couple of years ago, and that fellow that does the good hands with Allstate . . .

Brown: Dennis Hasbrook.

Golson: Is that his name? He was playing the President.

Brown: I think it was 24. Is that – yeah, 24 is the name of the series.

Golson: And I said, yeah, this is great fiction. Now the fiction has come to life.

Brown: Life is stranger than fiction, right?

Golson: Now everybody's waiting to see what he's going to do. Obama might be all right, but no President, not even Obama, is going to change the cosmic balance of the universe. To have a world peace, everybody's got to sing the same lyric to the same song with the same goals. Other than that, you're going to have varied opinions, and sometimes the one that's stronger is going to impose his will on the weaker ones, or misuse it. The only way you can have true peace or lasting peace, everybody's got to think the same and aspire the same. I don't think it's going to happen from within the realm of mankind. It's got to happen from somewhere else. Where would you think?

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Brown: Oh, you're going to ask me. I always think about things, because I come up in the military tradition. I saw the impact through my father, who was a military – a career man – the phenomenon of common threat, that here – what forced the integration of the military was that they had a common threat, that they were no longer enemies with each other. They had a common threat that was greater than them, that brought them together.

Golson: That usually happens.

Brown: What I'm – my view of this is that mother nature, as we were talking about – we got the Santa Ana winds come blowing through here in January – that we have abused our host, the planet, and it's going to take perhaps the threat of our very existence that's going to make us come together at the table and say, okay, we've got to put aside our differences. We've got a greater threat than ourselves among each other, that we've got to come together to reconcile. It's unfortunate that my experience through my life – that that's what I feel it's going to take. But it's going to have to take something that – as it did in America. We look at how Obama got here, how he got in the place, because the previous administration has gutted the economy, gutted the Constitution. People saw beyond black and white and just started seeing the absence of their green, meaning that the economy and that their own livelihoods and that – just last month, 600,000 people lost their jobs. How much longer can we maintain this kind of downward spiral? So that has, I think, brought us at least together to rally behind Obama. Now what's going to take a universal – I think it's going to take perhaps everybody – I don't know why you asked me – but it's going to take everybody to come to realize that, regardless of your religious denomination, there's only one golden rule, and all religions go by that. If we all come back to that, and treat others as you would like to be treated – basic humanity is, I think, the only saving grace that we have, or at least that's a good starting point. Let's at least start there.

You mentioned this: respect. How are you going to play jazz correctly? You've got to respect. You've got to have respect for others. You've got to listen to others. These are just basic lessons. They seem to be common sense, but common sense is not so common, as we know.

But I'm asking Benny Golson. Benny Golson's got a few more years on this planet and a hell of a lot more experience than I do. So I'm going to appeal to you for the wisdom that comes with your age and your experience.

Golson: I read that book, *The Death of Common Sense*. It's incredible. But you see, what happens – you talk about goals and the golden rule, be to others as you want to be, but it doesn't happen. It happens to some extent, but not totally. When I asked you – when I said to you, it doesn't seem like it's going to happen within the realm of mankind, where do you think it's going to happen then? If it doesn't happen within the realm of mankind, obviously the only other way is to happen without the realm of mankind. That takes us to

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the highest order. It takes us to God. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Let Your Kingdom come. Let Your will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven." When people pray that prayer, without their being aware what they're praying for, they're praying for the demise of this system, and a system by Him, a government.

What is politics? Politics is the science of government. What is war? It's politics by other means. Once we're aware of those things, and that mankind has not the ability, because of imperfection, to direct his own steps, then he has to depend on that for which he's praying for. Let Your Kingdom come on Earth, as it already is in Heaven. There's no wars there.

That's science fiction. That's H. G. Wells. But it's not, because if you become aware of the Bible and Bible chronology and things that's happened – if you go – if you really learn the Bible, it's like a newspaper, right up to the present day, telling you things that's going to happen. Not naming Obama or President Clinton, but the things that are going on during this era.

He says that he's going to straighten out all things. If we pray for His Kingdom, and it comes, do you think this present system is going to have anything to do with His system? What happens when you go into a dark room and turn the light on? The dark disappears. The two cannot exist together. So if one is praying for a Kingdom by God, he's praying for the demise of this system, because when that Kingdom, it far surpasses this one. It's like turning a light on. This can't exist anymore. So it's either one or the other. Where do you want to be? That's what it is. I'm a Bible scholar too.

Brown: I've come to understand that.

Golson: That's the way it is. It makes common sense that you can never have peace in this system with imperfect men walking the earth, never. Why do I say that? Because all this happened generations before. In fact, things haven't gotten better. Things have gotten worse. When I was a kid, we didn't need bars on the windows. You could go to sleep with the door unlocked, leave the key in the car. Twenty-five years ago my aunt, who was 67 years old, she left her window up, a hot summer's day, and somebody came in and raped her, a 67-year-old woman. Guard dogs. Things like that. Alarms for your cars. We had none of that stuff. That shows you where we've come. What was that playwright, did *On the Waterfront*? Paddy [?] . He says, "We've come a long way down." What was the guy that wrote *On the Waterfront*? Paddy something.

Brown: I only know the movie. I'm sorry.

Golson: That's true. It's worse now than when I was a kid, and it's even worse than when my mother was a kid. It's come down, down, down. Who would have ever thought about identity theft and how long it takes you to get out of it? "I'm the real Benny

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Golson.” “Get lost.” Who would have ever thought of that. Somebody got my daughter’s social security number, when she went to the social security place. She saw somebody looking. She didn’t pay any attention. Then she got this bill. You owe this money. She said, “Where did you – I never got a bill. Where did you send it?” So and so and so “Detroit.” She says, “I live in New York City.” That’s what happens.

But there are still honest people around. I lost my passport in Zurich. Talking about panic. You have no idea what that’s like. I hadn’t even gotten on the plane yet, and I went to reach for my passport, and it was gone. I had lost it somewhere in the airport. In a quandary – I was ready to go to the insane asylum. The loudspeaker came on. There’s a passport lost. Benny Golson. Somebody picked it up, and I got it back. Somebody could have taken my picture off and – anyway, I didn’t mean to get into all of that.

Brown: Okay. I’m going to look at this picture of Benny Golson here on the cover of the January 2009 issue of *Down Beat*. You’re being celebrated and fêted, and rightly so, all praise due. It’s a very extensive – well, I better not say extensive, but there’s a very revealing interview in here about certain things about your career. Do you have any reflections on this particular interview? Or do you want to talk about this being your 80th year? Let’s see, in 20 days, less than three weeks – you will cross that milestone.

Golson: I don’t think they vetted me so much. They were just talking about what I had done. They weren’t testing me to see what I was up to.

Brown: No, I meant to say fête, to celebrate you this year, not to vett.

Golson: Oh, I thought you said vetted me.

Brown: F. I know, the German, right? The F and the V can sound the same. You are being celebrated in our world this year, in your 80th year.

Golson: You have no idea how much I appreciate that. To have done something for so long, and people like it and remember it and want to memorialize you in some way. To me, that’s the ultimate honor, something like this, that somebody’s going to remember you in that way. I’m completely humbled by this here.

Brown: You’ve received a Guggenheim fellowship. You received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement award. You received the NEA Jazz Masters award. These are very, very significant awards. What do they mean to you? What does the Jazz Masters award mean to you?

Golson: It means that I’m going to try even harder as the days come. That’s fodder for me to go further into the future.

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Brown: You have your concert coming up at Kennedy Center to celebrate.

Golson: Yeah. I'm defying my age.

Brown: Do you think the music keeps you young.

Golson: Yeah, of a sort, of course, because I look forward to it every day, just like breathing. Yeah, I do. Although I don't know how to do – somebody told me once, when I said, "I don't know how to do anything else" – he said, "You can dig ditches." I said, "Yeah, you're right, but I'd rather think the other way."

Brown: Go back to driving a truck.

Golson: Yeah. It's a privilege for me to be ensconced in what I'm doing, and that's music, creating music and playing music, thinking about the future. I'm not satisfied with today. I want to know more about tomorrow. I want to be a part of that too. So it's an honorable position for me to be able to do what I do and make a living at it, to do what I love and get paid for it. You have no idea what that's like.

Brown: I hope I – I'll strive for that. That's my goal.

Golson: Yeah, to love what you're doing. I didn't love driving the truck. I got paid for it. But I'm doing this, and I love it.

Brown: What about when you were writing the film scores? Did you love it then?

Golson: I did in the beginning. Then I became disillusioned, seeing all the stuff that goes on, the surrounding things that go on around it.

Brown: But you can always come back to jazz though. You can always come back to playing this music.

Golson: I came back to my first love. This is what I want to do. I guess, intuitively, I wanted to do it all the time. I took a hiatus for a while, to my disadvantage, because it took me a long time to come back and feel comfortable.

Brown: Like you said, you had to leave New York to really appreciate it. You had to leave playing to really appreciate it. A really dear friend of mine and colleague, Dr. Leonard Brown, who teaches at Northeastern, who also . . .

Golson: Oh, Chicago, Illinois.

Brown: No, that's Northwestern.

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Golson: Oh, that's upstate. Up in Massachusetts.

Brown: This is Boston. He's responsible for co-founding the John Coltrane memorial concerts, the 31st year. He asked me, when I told him that I was going to interview you – he's a saxophonist – tenor saxophonist – I said, “Do you have any questions for Benny Golson?” He said, “Just ask him, what does music mean to him?”

Golson: Music to me means everything at this point, because I don't know how to do anything else and I'm doing what I like to do and I've chosen to do. So it's everything for me, other than the spirit and the gift of life itself, from a Bible viewpoint. That comes first, because without life, you've got nothing. Once I could appreciate the gift of life, I could appreciate anything else that's consequential to me, beginning with life and then what I'm doing, music. So when I say it's my life, it's like the plus in algebra. The life that I've got is understood. You don't have to write – you don't have to express it. Everything comes after that. When we say, music is my life, we know it comes after life itself, because music occupies my life.

Brown: What are you looking forward to? You're going to Kennedy Center. What's your schedule now when you leave here? When are you leaving L.A.? What's your schedule look like? Rehearsals, performances, tours.

Golson: I'm leaving here Monday, the 12th of January. I'll be in New York, play some things. I'm trying to get my chops together, because I haven't playing this thing here. I don't want to have to apologize on the 24th, because I can't play. So I've got to get my chops in shape and write a couple of things. Then we start rehearsing. Oh, wait a minute. The 21st is an outreach program. I go to the Duke Ellington school there, do a thing at the high school. Then on the 23rd we have the rehearsal. At the rehearsal, Max Roach's daughter is going to play with the Uptown String Quartet, and this girl's going to play *On Gossamer Wings*. We're going to play – the new Jazztet is going to perform. We're going to play a couple of numbers from our new CD. Al Jarreau's going to sing *Whisper Not*, which he recorded with us on the new CD. We have a reunion of fellows that came to New York around the same time, 50-some years ago. That would be Curtis Fuller, Cedar Walton, Ron Carter, Al Harewood, and me. We'll play a couple of . . .

Brown: Al Harewood's still?

Golson: Um-hmm. That is a swinging drummer, that Al Harewood. He doesn't do too well with the faster tempos, but if you put him in that medium groove, he'll kill you. Curtis and I call him Alee Walee. Nice guy.

Brown: Betty Carter. I remember hearing him play with Betty, recordings, not live.

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Golson: Ooo, I didn't tell you about Betty Carter. Boy, that girl. Let me tell you.

Brown: Tell me about Betty Bebop.

Golson: She was Betty Bebop Carter when I met her. She had just come from Lionel Hampton. We worked together. When I told you that I was in Atlantic City with Clifford Brown, Tadd Dameron, Philly Joe, and all those – she was the singer on the program. That's when I met her. She was Betty Bebop Carter. But she really mellowed out. She became even broader in the ensuing years, so that within the last 20 years or so, whenever she would come in sometime and I would ask her to sing a song, Betty Carter would come up to the bandstand, and it was like asking a trumpet player or saxophone player to come up. She was that way. Betty Carter did something that no singer that I've ever known or worked with or recorded with, did. Usually, when you say to a singer, okay, you want to do something, "What key?", they'll tell you the key. Say, "What do you feel like you want to sing, Betty?" She says, "*Sometimes I'm Happy*." "What key?" She said, "oh, any key." Any key. We picked any key, and she sang the heck out of it. No singer could ever do that. Betty thought like an instrumentalist.

Betty Carter was special. I said to her at one point – I went to see her at one place. It was – the bandstand wasn't too high. I was so taken by it, I went up in front of everybody, put my arms around her, hugged her, and pulled her off the bandstand. I said, "Betty, we go all the way back." She said, "We go all the way back. Nobody knew who the heck we were when we started out." They didn't know who I was. They didn't know who she was.

During those days – I got to tell you. You don't know it – Betty Carter had a body to kill for. During the rehearsals, she was in these baggy pants and everything. We opened that night, and she came out in that satin gown, and she stretched – she used to always like to stretch her legs out, and that gown tightened behind her. We were playing the music, and the wrong notes – you could hear the wrong notes, because everybody was looking. The wrong notes were just boomeranging. We had to memorize her music so we could look at her while she was performing. Boy, she had a body. I'm telling you. I told her that. She didn't know it. I said, "The reason the music got messed up the first night, everybody was trying to look at you." She fell out. She was my sweetheart. I loved her.

Brown: We've lost so many. We just lost Freddie just recently.

Golson: Yeah. We did so many things together, Freddie. We went on a tour of Japan, and he played like a crazy – a wonderful crazy man.

Brown: How about when Art passed?

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Golson: That broke my heart. Art had – what attracted me when I first saw him and heard him was his sound on that trumpet. It sounded like he was playing flugelhorn in 1953, when nobody was playing flugelhorn. The sound was so big.

Then his concept of intervals when he played. You get the most benefit out of intervals when you play a ballad, because it comes slower. The intervals are nothing more than intervals between one note and another note. A series of them, you call a melody. Art Farmer – when he brought his intervallic knowledge into play during his solos, many beautiful things were unearthed. Not the typical things that you hear. That’s what made him so unusual. That’s what made him the greatest ballad player I’ve ever heard. Nobody could touch him on a ballad, nobody – Diz and Miles, Freddie Hubbard, Wynton – nobody could. He was a master of the ballad, which is not to say he couldn’t play the other things. But his knowledge of those intervals – he came up with some stuff you wouldn’t ordinarily think of. When you play a ballad – a ballad is what proves your mettle as a musician. Not how fast you can play – how slow you can play is what proves who you are. Dizzy Gillespie said, “Play a song slow enough that you could eat a sandwich in between each beat, and you’ll find out where everybody is.” That’s right. When you slow it down, there’s nowhere to hide. When you’re playing *Cherokee* at the speed of light, nobody’s going to say, “That third bar, in the third beat, the upbeat, was that note right?” So many – how can you tell? But when you slow it down, they hear every note, and if it’s a mistake, they hear every mistake. You play with, symbolically, all your clothes off when you play the ballad. Everybody hears it. You’re totally exposed. That’s what proves how great you are. Some of the fellows can play the keys off a horn, but when you slow down a ballad, they’re playing double-time and triple-time. You just got finished playing all those notes on *Cherokee*. Now you’re playing a ballad. This is a different animal. You’re going to do the same thing on the ballad? [Golson sings two held notes.] It’s here, and you say, [Golson scats sings a fast-moving line]. Hey, it’s a different thought going on now. That’s what proves the mettle, how slow you can play, not how fast you can play. It took me a long time to learn that. I thought you had to play *Cherokee* at the speed of light. Most people can do that now. But not most musicians can play a ballad as a ballad, as a singing thing.

Brown: As a what?

Golson: A singing thing. To sing through your horn. Not to explain, but to sing. It’s different. Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan. You’re singing when you play a ballad. In the old days, the musicians used to know the words to the ballads. Ben Webster was playing one night. He stopped – he was playing a ballad – he stopped in the middle and just stood there. Then he resumed later. When he finished, they said, “Why did you stop?” He said, “I forgot the words.” He’s got the words going, which gives you the feeling. You get the feeling. You broke my heart. You left me for another man. You’re playing. This affects your heart, that seed of motivation. This determines what you’re going to do. That’s the old school.

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Brown: Let's talk about the converse, the other side of that coin, when you have a melody, a beautiful melody – *I Remember Clifford*, for example – and people put words to it. Do they – obviously we've talked about this earlier – about perhaps you are very disturbed if somebody does that and hasn't talked to you. Forget the permission, but have they even consulted with you to find out what it was you were thinking? Or say, *Whisper Not*, which . . .

Golson: Leonard Feather did come to me. But some people – some person in Chicago, they put other words to *Whisper Not* and recorded it. I had to get them taken off the market. You can't – I said, "You can't do that." Somebody put words to – Kevin Mahogany – words to *Five Spot After Dark*. He recorded for a German company. That's how I met him. Said, "You got to take that off the market."

Brown: You actually toured with him, right? Didn't you play with Kevin Mahogany? With James Williams?

Golson: No, I recorded.

Brown: Oh, it was just a recording?

Golson: I recorded with him, but I didn't . . .

Brown: Okay, but not tour.

Golson: That's how I met him. He put words to my song. That should have been a falling out before it happened. You can't do that, just put words to a person's song and then record it, you don't say anything. I supposed to think this is an honor? No. Tony Bennett wanted to put words to a song I wrote called *Sad to Say*, but he wanted to do something about Bill Evans. I said, "I'm sorry. That's not what I had in mind."

Brown: But at least he came to you to ask about it.

Golson: Yeah. I put my own words to it. The last few years I've been writing my own words. In fact, two tunes that Shirley Horne did with my lyrics – my tune and my lyrics.

Brown: Let's talk about that album. This was the latest album I was able to find: *One Day Forever*, where you have the two selections from Shirley on here, and then you have your other – actually, you've got Art Farmer on here.

Golson: No, I did two after that. But that to me was memorable because of her. She was my favorite singer. Whenever I wrote a ballad, I thought about two people, one vocally and one instrumentally. I thought of her vocally and Art Farmer instrumentally.

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Whenever I wrote a ballad, I thought about those two people, because they were masters of the ballad.

Brown: You played with Dizzy just before he passed. I imagine that must have been . . .

Golson: Yeah. It was disturbing, too. He had two weeks at the – I think two weeks at the Blue Note in New York, and he had a different group each night. The night I played, it was David Sanchez – the tenor player – me, and Dizzy of course, and I don't remember. Louis Nash was the drummer. That's right. I don't remember who the other people was. We played that night, and then he played the other nights with somebody else. He wasn't the Diz that he was when he was at his peak. He was ailing. That's the last time I ever played with him. Shortly after that – a few months – is when he died. Of course I was very sad about that, because this is the man, with Charlie Parker, who changed the whole shape of jazz. He brought – when we played a tune, for example, like *I Got Rhythm*, and you get to the last two bars, if you're in B-flat, you used to play a B-flat for the whole two bars. Didn't even play an F to take you back to the B-flat. Just B-flat. I remember that. He came along, and he said, no, B-flat for two bars [two beats], G for two bars – two beats – C for two beats, and F for two beats, and back to B-flat. That was revolutionary then. Now nobody even thinks – everybody plays that. Nobody plays a B-flat chord for the two bars. That's crazy. They don't know where it comes – the new ones don't know where it came from: Dizzy Gillespie. That's right. And the minor seventh with the flatted fifth. He did all of that. Flatted ninth in the chord. That's commonplace now. Nobody thinks about it. Dizzy Gillespie.

Brown: What about Monk's influence?

Golson: Monk. He was known as that crazy guy that plays that funny piano and writes those crazy tunes. Now there's a Thelonious . . .

[a brief passage is missing]

. . . ditties. They have no meaning to me. [Golson hums a phrase.] He wrote the most profound ditties I've ever heard in my life. I accept his ditties. Thelonious Monk was clever. He was clever. I got to know him. I got to really know him. He gave me a lift uptown one night, and his box of cold Chinese food, while he's driving that Buick. He was always kind of spacey, talking out in space. This night, it was just like you and me. I said, oh, this is different. I said, I wonder which one is the real Monk? Next time I saw him, he was out in space. That was the only time he was down to earth, that night when he gave me a lift home. He was something else. He had his own way of doing things. When I first heard him and didn't know who he was – because my uncle was bartender at Minton's Playhouse, and he took me there – I didn't know what the heck was going on. He was playing stride piano. That was before he changed, before he was Monk.

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Brown: What was your uncle's name?

Golson: Robert York.

Brown: That's right. You did mention that yesterday.

Did you see Coltrane playing with Monk? Did you go see it when he was playing with the group?

Golson: Oh yeah. I said, "Did you ever tell him those two kids that was talking to him backstage at the Apollo?"

Brown: Did you think it was a good – what did you think of that dynamic?

Golson: It was great. Johnny Griffin played with him too. So did Charlie Rouse. But John Coltrane was the one. Monk loved him. He'd get up at the piano, start dancing. You know that little dance he used to do. He would holler, "Coltrane! Coltrane!," which meant it's time to blow. John was something. Yeah, they had something going.

Brown: Did you know John was sick before he passed?

Golson: Yeah. I really don't like to get into that. But yeah, he was having problems, which I'm sorry about. I feel that so much was at stake. Why endanger that? He should have still been here. If he'd still been here, he would have been 82. He would still have something to say. I know it. Like so many of them that left us so early. Clifford Brown, 25 years old. He would have been close to my age. He would have still had something to say – 75 or 78 or whatever. He would have still had something to say. My goodness. Now Freddie Hubbard's gone. Horace Silver, I'm hoping he can hang on, because he's not doing too good. I heard he was in a rest home. He had a home out here. He moved from New York here, and then he moved back from here. I don't know his son Gregory. So I can't get in touch with him. So I really don't know what his health is, but I doubt whether it's getting better. With that in mind, how long will he be here? Any day I'm expecting to hear something about him, which I don't want to hear, because we all – we go back there together in those days. Everybody was healthy.

Brown: You look pretty healthy. You feel healthy?

Golson: I'm hanging on, because I've got long fingernails.

Brown: And you've got a very good wife.

Golson: Yeah, she babies me.

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Brown: Bobbie is very special.

What happened to your – what was the problem with your leg that you just recently . . . ?

Golson: I'm a diabetic, and when you get scratches, you have to be careful. I got a scratch down there. I put on some workman's boots, because I helped out a construction thing, and it exacerbated it. Then, instead of getting well, it got worse and worse and worse. So I finally had to go to the doctor. I said, I would like to go back to New York, but it got so bad, I had to go to one here. He says, "I think you're going to have to minor surgery." He said, "When I operate, I'll make a culture of it" and blah blah blah. But he didn't – I thought he was going to take the scab off and take a culture and do something. This guy – like you plug a watermelon, take a chunk out to see what it's like – he took a plug out of my leg. When I took that bandage off, after – to put on the second bandage – I saw that hole. I could put my finger down in it for a quarter-inch. I couldn't believe it. Then he didn't give me any pain pills. So for the last eight days, pains – it's paining right now – pains all the time. There's a rest sometime. Sometime it pains so much it feels like a hot poker's in there. But I guess there's a reason. Because I take so many other medicines, I guess maybe he didn't want that to – but it's better now. I can walk without a limp now. So it is getting better. But when he operated on it, he said, "This goes a little deeper than my expertise." So he recommended me to the head of plastic surgery at Cedars-Sinai. You're not going to believe this. I don't know if I told you. This is the head of plastic surgery at Cedars-Sinai. When he gave my name, he told him he was going to recommend that I see him. Bennie Golson. He said, "Is that the guy that was in *The Terminal*?" He said, "I think so." He says, "Oh, I'm a fan of his." Instead of my going to see him, he makes house calls. He comes here and charges me no money.

Brown: Your name's got some cachet. How did that come about, that you became a character in *The Terminal*? Were you approached about that? Did you find about it after the fact? I hope not.

Golson: No. I was in Europe. The office called me one day and said, "Steven Spielberg called today and wanted to know if you were interested in a speaking role with Tom Hanks?" I said, "Oh, don't believe that. That's nothing." I said, "Woody Allen called a few times, and I went there first couple of times. I got there, and it was a cattle call. They never did pick me." I said, "No, he probably chose a bunch of people." He said, "No. He wants you." I said, "Really?" So I said, "Yeah. I'll be interested." She got back to me and said, "He's going to send you the script." I didn't know him. I didn't know Tom Hanks.

When I got back to New York, I saw the script. I had to go downtown to take a screen test in New York and use these words. So I did. Everybody else said, that's great. But I had certitude about me. I guess they could see it in my physiognomy. They said, "What's wrong." I said, "A musician wouldn't say it quite like that." They said, "No?" Said,

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“Why don’t you do it again and say it” – now I’m going to add – do it the way you – so I did it, and they sent it back to him. He said, “Perfect.”

Then he said, “We’re going to record in Montreal.” I had already done something up in – I can’t ever think of the name of that town – Palmdale, somewhere up there. They’d shot something up there. Catherine Zeta-Jones was in it. But they were going to do my part in Montreal. The reason they wanted to do it – the picture was called *The Terminal* – they had rented an abandoned place that used to be an airport. So they had all the space. It looked like an airport, but it was abandoned. They refurbished it for the film. Then I got a call from him. He said, “We’re going to make a nightclub scene for you.” In the picture, it looks like a real club, the Ramada Inn. He said, “We’re going to get a piano. What kind of piano would you like?” I said, “A 12-foot Steinway.” When I got there, it was there.

We were having dinner in the restaurant of the hotel. I still hadn’t seen him. We’re eating. Bobbie says, “There’s Steven.” But he had an entourage of people with him, the secretary, this and that. So I sat there. She said, “Why don’t you go . . . ?” I said, “No, no, no, no. He’ll probably take me [?]. I can’t do that.” After a couple minutes, one of the girls got up. She came over and said, “Are you Bennie Golson?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Steven wants to speak to you.” So I got ready to get up. She says, “Oh no. He’ll come over.” When he came over, there was no chair for him. So he just knelt on the floor on one knee and started talking. He started talking like we were old friends. Started telling me about his mother, this delicatessen she has, and he can’t get her to give it up. She’s still – I said, wow. I still didn’t know what was going on, what the sting was. We got on the set the next day, and I found out what it was. It was based on this photograph, *Great Day in Harlem*. In the picture – that’s when I met Tom, too – in the picture – Tom’s father had been a jazz fan, and he had gotten everybody’s autograph on that picture except Bennie Golson. His father died, and he had all these autographs in this coffee can. So Catherine Zeta-Jones said to him, “You keep carrying this can around. What’s in that can?” The first time she asked him, he said, “My father.” Time went by. “What is in that can?” He said, “Jazz.” Then he took the top off. He pulled this folded up picture out and opened it. It was *Great Day in Harlem*. He said, “My father got everybody’s autograph on this picture except Bennie Golson.” So the camera came in on me. He pointed to me. He said, “I’m going to get his autograph to make the whole thing of autographs complete in this coffee can.”

His goal was – he was in some Third-World country, an Eastern-bloc country – he was going to come to New York. Meantime, while he’s in route, something happens. The country goes to war or something happens, and they won’t let him out of the airport now, because he’s a questionable character. Everybody’s in the john, taking a leak, and he’s in it with a bathrobe, pajamas, shaving, because he’s limited to the airport. Certain things happened while he’s in the airport. He eventually gets out of the airport, and he comes to the Ramada Inn, where I’m playing. Our scene together is where he approaches me in this Third-World suit with the short coat, and it looked like burlap-bag material – I said,

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“Tom, where’d you get that suit? I got to get one just like it” – so he comes up to me, and he’s speaking with this accent. After the scene, I said, “You sound just like Dracula.” He wanted my autograph. He was reticent to talk to me. The band started to vamp *Killer Joe*. I said, “I got to play now, but when I finish, I’ll give you the autograph.” That was the last scene. Then when I gave him the autograph – Steven had gotten me to sign my autograph on a piece of paper, and he used that. I was supposed to sign that there. Then he got in a car, and he rode off into the – that was the end of it, that he finally got my autograph.

I found out that Steven Spielberg used to come and see me when he was a college student. He liked me. He made up that story and put me in it, because he used to like the way I played. Tom Hanks – I think Tom plays clarinet. I’m not sure. They’re both jazz fans, and they know everything that we’re talking about. They’d know all of that. I said to him – because I knew – I say, “I bet U.S.C. is sorry the day they rejected you, said you didn’t have any talent.” He says, “Oh no. I’m on the Board of Regents, and I decide who gets money every year.” I started laughing. He’s a character. He sent me a letter. He says, “Josh is taking piano lessons now.” He adopted two black kids. Quincy is so crazy. He said, “Can you imagine Steven going to the ghetto with two black kids to get a haircut?” But he’s a nice man. He’s a nice man, and so is Tom.”

I read an article once and it had – about him. I just happened to see it – about his wife or something. I said, boy, it sounds like me and my wife. He knew Bobbie, because he was talking with her a while. He said, “Yeah, we got better than we deserved.” During the sets, Mike LeDonne and Bobbie were talking with him. He was shooting the scene. So we said to Bobbie – Bobbie, somehow, when people want to take a picture of me and tell her to get in it – “Naa, naa.” So he said, “Oh, come on, Bobbie. Sit at the table here. Look like you’re part of . . .” Naa, naa.” “Stop it.” So she’s in the picture, too, when the camera goes by.

He’s a great guy. When I told him Quincy and I used to be roommates, he – everything came to a halt. Stop the – turn the cameras off. He got on the phone. He’s going to call Quincy. Quincy wasn’t home. So he said, “I’ll call him later.” When I got back to New York, Quincy called me. He says, “Steven” – I said, “When you call – when you talk to Steven [*sic*: Quincy], refer to him as ‘Tack’ – T-a-c-k. Call him Tack, and watch what happens. So when I got back to New York, Quincy called me. He says, “Steven called me and told me what you all were doing.” He said, “And Steven called me Tack, and I said to him, ‘You must have been talking to Bennie Golson’.” Because Quincy and I call each other Tack. It’s a thing that we knew about when we were in the band. We called each other – it has meaning behind it. But Steven didn’t know it. He just said it. When he calls me up now, “Hey, Tack. What’s happening?” And I call him “Hey, Tack, or Boss Nail,” something like that.

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Steven is a down-to-earth guy. He looks you right in the eye. None of that stuff. And Tom. Humble. If you didn't know who they were, you'd just think it was another guy. Incredible. I love him, and what he does. Tom Hanks has come a long ways. And Thelma Hopkins, who used to be in *Bosom Buddies*, where he got his start – Thelma Hopkins and him. The two guys played – masqueraded as women.

Brown: Right, to keep that apartment.

Golson: [?] used to live across the street. So I mentioned it to Tom. He says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell him – we get together every year. We have some kind of reunion – tell him I said hello.”

Brown: You've never talked about your rooming experiences with Quincy for this interview yet. Anything you want to share.

Golson: Some of the things I can't talk about.

Brown: That's okay. Let's talk about what you can.

Golson: When we went to South America, for example, we had to be careful of the water. When we went into the bathroom, we saw the toilet there, but we saw this other thing. We couldn't figure out what the heck that was. When you turn the water, the water squirts up. “What the heck is this for?” He says, “I don't know.” He said, “I think I know what it's for.” He took his clothes off and went and stood over there and washed his butt. But it was a bidet for the women. Yes indeed. And the women were after him when we were in Buenos Aires. They were after Quincy. I said, “Quincy, you stayed out all last night. What happened?”

Brown: Quincy's another survivor.

Golson: Yeah. I wrote a song called *Along Came Betty*. I don't know if you . . .

Brown: [Brown sings a few notes.]

Golson: Betty Purchase. She was my girlfriend. But what you don't know – she had a girlfriend, a white girl named Phyllis. I had Betty. He had Phyllis. And he was married. He came to my mother's house with me to have dinner. The first time he came there, he had Phyllis, because his wife was in New York. Phyllis was there. I said she's a white girl. The next time – my uncle happened to be there. Quincy said, “Nice to meet you” – the next time we came, he came with his wife, who is also white. When he went to introduce, he says, “Oh, I met you before when you were with” – and his wife said, “It wasn't me.” He said, “Tell your uncle I'm going to kill his songs.” Quincy is something.

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Brown: When you talk about Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks being down to earth, that's the same way Quincy is too.

Golson: Absolutely. He built this new house. I haven't seen it yet. He said, "I got a room for you and Bobbie." I haven't been out there yet.

Brown: So life has been good.

Golson: Yeah, life has been good – really been good – very, very good. I've been fortunate, because it didn't have to happen like this. Without those knocks on the door, those opportunities, everything would have been academic. But I did have them. Some people don't get them. There are guys in Philadelphia that are still there playing, never got that knock on the door. It's terrible. Then there's some guys that wanted to play in the worst way – didn't have the talent. So that was academic. They wanted to play in the worst way, and they just didn't have it. They couldn't comprehend. They couldn't come up to it. They didn't come above a certain level, and it never happened – just stayed there. That can happen too. It could have happened to me, but I was fortunate enough that it didn't. I was one of the fortunate ones. Not everybody came out of Philadelphia. There's still a lot of them there. They never came out. A lot did, but there are a lot that didn't. So we were the fortunate ones, your Ray Bryants and Stan Getz, Red Rodney, Jimmy Heath, Coltrane, Philly Joe, and those guys. They made it. Gerry Mulligan and Bud Powell up in Willow Grove. We were the lucky ones. But I guess it wasn't just luck. I guess we were ready when we got the knock.

Brown: I think that's probably the best note to end on.

Golson: Yes, I appreciate it, and I can never be arrogant about it, because I remember being on welfare. I remember those days, going to school with holes in my shoes. Cut the cardboard out of shirts and put it in there, and when it rained, the cardboard became like a blob, so you learned to walk on the edges of your shoes when it rained. I remember that. Eating corned beef hash, which was horse meat, wearing the clothes and everybody knew – I remember those days. How can I be arrogant?

Brown: Same thing with Quincy when he talks about his days in Chicago. You go from zero to hero.

Golson: Right. I like that. Yeah, I could never be arrogant. She's the same way. We both came from the same background, had nothing. She got a scholarship. That's how she got the ballet thing. They gave it to her. We had nothing. Our families had nothing. So neither one of us could ever be arrogant. She's got everything she wants now. But it doesn't mean anything. Well, it means something, but we're not carried away by it. Our daughter never saw the inside of a public school. She went to school with all the movie stars. She knows the Hilton family chain, and the guy that used to be on – Carroll

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O'Connor – what was . . .? Carroll O'Connor's son used to help her out with her science, who died of an overdose. And Tatum O'Neal. People like that. She went to school with these people. It doesn't mean anything to her. She's not carried away with it, and I'm happy about that. She's just normal. It didn't affect her in the worst way. Nobody ever knows, because she never talks about it. She knows these people.

Brown: Benny Golson, you are my hero, and I'm so glad to have been able to have conducted this interview. So I just want to say – unless you have anything else to add – and it's never too late – I just want to say on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, on behalf of Ken Kimery and myself, Anthony Brown, we are just so privileged, honored to have been able to be here, to have you share your life and music with us.

Golson: Vielendank. Das ist alles. [Many thanks. That's all.]

Brown: Wir danken ihnen. [We thank you.]

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

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