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GEORGE AVAKIAN
NEA JAZZ MASTER (2010)

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Sneed: I'm Ann Sneed. We are in Riverdale. We're interviewing George Avakian. There's so many things to say about you, I'm just going to say George Avakian and ask you first, why jazz?

Avakian: I think it happened because I was born abroad, and among the things that came into my consciousness as I was growing up was American popular music, and then it drifted in the direction of jazz through popular dance bands, such as the Casa Loma Orchestra, which I heard about through the guys who were hanging around the home of our neighbor at Greenwood Lake, which is where we went in the summers. We had a house on the lake. Our next-door neighbors had two daughters, one of whom was my age and very pretty, Dorothy Caulfield, who incidentally is responsible for Holden Caulfield's last name, because J. D. Salinger got to know her and was very fond of her, named Holden after her family name.

These boys came from the Teaneck area of New Jersey. So it was a short drive to Greenwood Lake on a straight line between New York and New Jersey. They had a dance band, the usual nine pieces: three brass, three saxophones, three rhythm. They loved the Casa Loma Orchestra and started playing records of the band. I heard them on the radio after a while, when I discovered that they were on the air about 11:15 every Saturday night, and sometimes in the middle of the week, after the news.

They also had a program. I guess it was the Camel Caravan already at that time. I'm not sure. Through that I got to listen to other unusual pop music. I put it that way, because it wasn't Bing Crosby or Russ Columbo or the ricky-tick pop bands. Very quickly I discovered, through the radio basically, Fats Waller. Then I ran across the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, which impressed me as being a lot freer and more exciting than the Casa Loma band. It was hard to get their records, but I finally found one at Macy's and bought it and didn't show my parents the label, because the title was *Hotter than 'ell*, on Decca, which was sort of a godsend, because those records were 35 cents each and three for 88 cents at Macy's. Everything else was 75 cents – 69, I think, at Macy's. And see, my mother had a Macy's charge card. She'd take me down shopping. I'd head for the fifth floor and start hanging around the record department until she let me buy anything from one to three records. So that was how my consciousness came about, through . . .

Sneed: So really, through a woman, Miss Caulfield.

Avakian: Yeah. Yes. Right.

Sneed: Wonderful.

Avakian: Dorothy is still living. She's a widow now in Connecticut. We don't see each other as often as we should.

Sneed: We owe her a lot.

Avakian: I owe her a lot, because if she wasn't there, those guys wouldn't have been hanging around, and I might not have discovered jazz so quickly.

Sneed: And you wouldn't have bought all those records. Do you remember the Fats Waller?

Avakian: Which one?

Sneed: It's a 78, obviously. *Christopher Columbus* and *Us on a Bus* on the other side. I never – I don't think it's ever been redone.

Avakian: I'm surprised, especially since . . .

Sneed: I can't find it.

Avakian: It must be in a collection somewhere. I bet I have it in a reissue that was made in Europe. I will copy it for you. I'll put it on a . . .

Sneed: Wonderful, because mine has a nick.

Avakian: Oh, well I'll take care of that. I'm sure it's there, because it said it was complete Fats Waller.

Sneed: Was there music at home too?

Avakian: Yes and no, because my parents had brought a few records of Armenian music with them. We didn't have a record player until a cousin of mine from Belgium came over to study at Columbia University, and he brought a hand-wound phonograph that he had bought in London. I still remember the Columbia logo with the two – I guess it's two sixteenth notes. I can't remember now. Yes, it is.

Once I got hold of that – he only had two records – I started playing my parents' records. Eventually we got a very nice phonograph, and that's the phonograph on which I played my first records. It was a big cabinet model with a crank that went into the side.

Sneed: And the top lifted up?

Avakian: The top lifted up, yep.

Sneed: I remember.

Avakian: It was a wide top, not the Victrola type, which was tall and narrow.

Sneed: Do you remember the [K?] that came later?

Avakian: Yes I do, but the one I loved was the Ansley Dynaphone. I bought an Ansley Dynaphone, which was a beautiful cabinet, very modern, very simple. It was, I think, one of the best machines that one could afford in those days. I bought it from Avery Fisher, who had a record, phonograph, and radio shop. I remember how nice Mr. Fisher was to me. I was a freshman in college at the time. But that was a heck of a machine. I kept it until well after the war, when it finally fell apart, broke down. I don't know what I got after that. But that was one on which all those early test pressings got played in the rooms at the Yale campus.

Sneed: And remember all the radio shows late at night, when you could hear bands.

Avakian: Those were very influential in increasing my interest in American pop music. I put it that way, because I didn't think of it as jazz yet.

The first real consciousness I had of this music being called jazz had to be, I guess, the Benny Goodman orchestra, which broadcast late at night on NBC, the famous "Let's Dance" show in which the third of the bands – 1, 2, 3, third – was the Benny Goodman orchestra. I stayed up late every Saturday night to listen. Of course, that's the great story of how the band was so popular on the West Coast, but in the East and the rest of the country, people weren't listening to it, because it went on so late. People didn't stay up late in those days they way they do now.

Sneed: I did.

Avakian: Well, you're naughty. I used to turn the radio on and catch things like the rebroadcast of the Casa Loma orchestra, which happened because in different parts of the country the programs were on at different times, and that was because these programs were put on electrical transcription discs, which were 16-inch aluminum discs that played for 14½ minutes on each side, So there was time for the station to turn the record over and have an announcement in the middle of the program.

That was also the kind of philosophy that I personally developed when I was in charge of the pop album department at Columbia and LP came along, because Columbia engineers invented it. I had to convert so many pop albums to 10-inch LPs and then create new ones. So the idea behind the creation, as well as the sequencing of the material, was always, think of a half-hour program. Have a good opener. Have something that makes the person turn the record over and listen to the second half, just as they ended the first half of a half-hour program with something that would make you hang on through the one-minute commercial.

Sneed: The thing that I think will surprise people who are younger than we, is that you are talking about pop music, and that's what jazz was.

Avakian: Yes, it was. There was no separate category anywhere in the press and so on. There was almost no press, in fact. *Down Beat* was operating at the time. So was *Metronome,* which was an older magazine. But you had no things – no references to jazz or even really to pop music as a separate category in the ordinary day-to-day press. This really started to break open through Benny Goodman, because he became so popular so quickly. He was sort of a special phenomenon. People did not write articles about Bing Crosby, for example, as the most popular singer, or certainly not the Guy Lombardo orchestra, which was the most popular band. But they did start writing about Benny Goodman after he came to New York in 1936, and the word "swing" became a part of the American language.

That was also the first time that I met a jazz musician. Benny Goodman was the very first, because I was editor of the *Horace Mann Record*, the weekly paper of the Horace

Mann School for Boys. It's just a mile-and-a-half away from here. I never thought I'd live up here, near the school, but I became very found of Riverdale when I went to Horace Mann.

The way that came about was that – of course I had gotten quite a few Ellington – well, I started to think about how the Ellington band grew out of – in my consciousness – out of my interest in Casa Loma and Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson. But that's something we'll come back to later. The interview with Goodman came about, because I was collecting his records and so was a classmate, Charlie Miller, whose mother was in the Democratic Party in some fairly high position, and she knew the man who owned the Pennsylvania Hotel, where Benny opened in 1936, in the fall. She arranged that Charlie and I would be able to go, and I would be able to interview Benny, which I did at the end of the evening. I wrote an article which was all about the music. I found out from Dwight Chapin – not related to the Dwight Chapin of the Watergate scandal – Dwight, I should explain, was the all-around, right-hand, band boy, script writer for the radio broadcasts, everything for Benny. Benny told Chape, "I like this piece, and these are nice kids. Let them come any time and listen to the band. They can stay for rehearsals," which took place on Saturday nights, after the last show. It was the only time that the band had to rehearse new tunes for their radio program, which I think was on Tuesdays. It's worthwhile checking that out sometime.

So it was a marvelous experience. All through the rest of my senior year at Horace Mann, I remember spending as many Saturday nights as we could – which our parents made sure were not too many – listening to the rehearsals and having marvelous experiences like Gene Krupa or Harry James or Ziggy Elman saying, "Hey, kid, get me some coffee and tell the cook to make me a ham sandwich."

Sneed: What a thrill.

Avakian: Yeah, it was.

Sneed: But now, that's such a nice positive picture of Benny Goodman. That's something – that's a nice story about Benny Goodman.

Avakian: I know many people think of Benny as a very rough, tough guy who was not very considerate, and I saw that side of him, but not at that time. But I didn't ever have a bad experience with Benny, and I think part of the reason is the same thing that when I was working with Miles Davis, a journalist would say, "How can you work with Miles? You're the only white person that we ever heard of that he doesn't" – I shouldn't say dislike – doesn't rough up in some fashion. I had a very simple answer, which I think was true all the way through with Benny and every other musician. I never did anything

which was other than good for them. So they had no reason to take anything out on me. It's sort of pollyannish, but I look back, and I realize it's true.

The closest was when – we'll get to this later – when I was in the Soviet Union with Benny. He was very nervous about that trip. After the first night that – I didn't get there until the second night. The Russians made sure of that, because they kind of wanted to sabotage the recordings. We'll tell something about that later, too. He said that he didn't know if it was such a good idea to record after all. Why don't we go back to New York? I didn't know how to take that, but I could see that he was in his nervous state, which was kind of recognizable. He'd even turn a little red. I think maybe he would get an allergic reaction when his jitteriness came to the fore.

Next morning, that was all forgotten. But he really was worried about that tour and got more worried later, I know. It was because he took it so seriously. He realized that he was doing a very important thing. It was a lot of responsibility. He wanted everything to be just perfect, and it wasn't particularly the way he wanted at the beginning, because the band was still a little on the rough side. But we'll talk about that later.

There is of course the classic series of articles written by Bill Crow in *The Jazzletter*. I was present for most of that, and Bill has it right. But it's also all one side of a story, and that's kind of tough on Benny. But on the other hand, he would make things hard for himself.

We've really gotten into Benny and gotten away from . . .

Sneed: Yes. So let's jump . . .

Avakian: Steer the way you want.

Sneed: I think that we should mention Armenia.

Avakian: Yes, definitely. People sometimes think I was born in Armenia, because I speak Armenian still, but actually I was born in Armavir, which is in the southern part of Russia, east of Rostov and on the north side of the Caucasus Mountains. Armenia's on the south side. That was because the Avakian family had lived for many, many years – my father has said that it was probably before the 1800s. That's as much as he knew about it – in the northwestern part of the country, on the shore, the west shore of Lake Urmia, which is almost the Turkish border at present. But it was all in Armenia. That village, which was called Salmast, which was completely an Armenian village still in 1914, when the family realized they better get out of there, because they thought the Turkish armies would come through to attack the southern part of Russia, which they did. But by then, the Avakians and most of the other Armenians had gotten away. They

finally ended up, by way of Tabriz and Tehran, going into the Caucasus, but not directly into Armenia. My father and his brothers were in Georgia for a good deal of the time. They went up into the other side of the Caucasus Mountains, which is why I was born in Armavir. My father met my mother in Georgia, as a matter of fact, in Tiflis, which is now called Tbilisi – T-b-i-l-i-s-i. But we always think of it as Tiflis, the old name.

My sister was born there after me. My father managed to get to America to try to recoup the family fortune. Do you want to hear this story? It's . . .

Sneed: Yes, I do.

Avakian: Okay. It's very curious. It sounds too melodramatic to be true, but I know it's true, because the punch line that I'm going to come to is one that I experienced quite directly.

What happened is that the Avakian family was in the cloth business. They weren't in oriental rugs yet. But they got into oriental rugs in this fashion: a Persian citizen had a – a Persian businessman had run up a debt and couldn't pay it, but he wanted to. He couldn't pay because of the currency restrictions between Persia and Russia. So he notified my father and his older brothers, whose company was called Avakian Brothers, that he was sending to New York, care of the Guarantee Trust Company, 96 bales of oriental rugs in the value that was equal to his debt. He instructed . . .

Sneed: 96 . . .

Avakian: 96 bales. Goodness knows how big the bales are. That could be – you could probably pick up most of them, but maybe some of them you couldn't.

The way he did it was to tell Guarantee Trust that these are the property of the Avakian family and if any member of the family comes to claim them for Avakian Brothers, they're entitled to do so.

It wasn't until 1922 that the brothers were able to scrape together enough money to get my father passage to New York. He came as the 200th citizen on the Persian quota of 200 Persian citizens being allowed to come into the United States in a given year. Well, he would have gotten in the following year, but you never know, because the conditions were pretty tough, as you can imagine.

He came. He had the name and address of one of his close friends, but he spoke no English. He took a taxi in a snowstorm on January 2nd and went out to Brooklyn. The driver was very accommodating, unlike today's cab drivers. Went into the house where

the address was for his friend, found out from a lady that spoke Armenian and English that the man had moved out some time ago and she didn't know where.

He was pretty enterprising, and he knew that there were two Armenian churches around 30th [Street] and Lexington Avenue. So he took my father there. Through the snow, my father saw a sign in Armenian characters – Armenian restaurant. He motioned for the driver to stop there. He walked in, and at the front table was his friend, having dinner.

Now that sounds pretty impossible to believe, and he had never mentioned it to me until I found out about it one night after I was engaged to marry Anahid Ajemian. Her father, Dr. Ajemian, and my father and I decided we'd go out and have a three-man bachelor dinner at our favorite Armenian restaurant at 30th Street and Lexington. At the end of the meal, the waiter, whom I had already gotten acquainted with, because he was my favorite waiter there – his name was Misach – handed the check to my father, and Dr. Ajemian protested and said, "I want to pay." He said, "No, no, Mr. Avakian's going to pay." So after my father paid, he said, "Misach, why did you give me the bill tonight?" He said, "That's because" – let's see, what was it? say, 22 years ago exactly – or 24 years ago? – "you walked into this restaurant and found your friend, and I was the waiter at the table," and he remembered it. So that's how I found out about the story. Of course I asked my father for the details after he made that remark, which made no sense to me whatever. So it's kind of incredible, but true.

Sneed: Isn't that a nice story.

Avakian: You say that to people and wonder, will they really believe me? But it's true, and I found out – because my father wasn't one to tell stories. Well, once and a while he would, but he kept things to himself. He'd gone through an awful lot. There had been epidemics, wars, revolutions, goodness knows what in his life, and finally he found peace in America, and through the good fortune of being able to claim those rugs, and his friends set him up in the corner of an office that was run by a man that was in the oriental rug business. From there he sold the rugs, and he cabled to his brothers and told them how much prices had gone up. They said stay there. We'll find some way of getting back to Persia, and we'll ship you more rugs. That's how the Avakian Brothers business became an oriental rug business.

Sneed: Isn't that interesting.

Avakian: Yeah. It was founded originally in 1887, and it lasted for about 103 or 104 years. I can't remember when it was sold, but some Persian bought it after the family decided that's enough, everybody's spread out. And now it's completely gone. We sold the name. I say "we." I had already gotten out of the business with my brother and sister earlier. There's no more Avakian Brothers oriental rug business.

Sneed: It started with a debt that was paid with 96 bales.

Avakian: Bales of Persian rugs, right.

Sneed: Very interesting.

Avakian: Yep, and kept on going for quite a long time. I even went into the business for a while myself. But we'll come to that later.

So, you see, you ask a simple question about me being Armenian, and you get two or three stories. I think it's really interesting.

Sneed: I think it's interesting. Looking at the – as I was saying before – at the history of Armenia, I think – my father had a theory about biologic memory, and I think that peoples who have had to overcome many things, that it does somehow steer your life.

Avakian: It did, I think, in my case, because I went from listening to records of Armenian music to realizing that there was something rhythmically a little different in some of the American pop music that I heard. I think that rhythmic element is what probably got me interested in the artists that I told you about.

Getting back to the business of having listened to those records and gotten interested in collecting records of that type before I knew that the word to be applied was "jazz," I had started to branch out. One of the early artists that I heard was Louis Armstrong, again through the radio. But these were the Decca Armstrongs. I had no idea that he was a great virtuoso. He just sounded like a guy who couldn't sing, but played a nice trumpet.

The way I discovered that Armstrong was a very great musician was again through the Horace Mann School classmate route. Julian Koenig, whose family seemed to sprout judges everywhere – there were at least four Judge Koenigs that I remember hearing about. Luckily the New York Giants gave them passes. So Julian would take me and other friends to the Polo Grounds to see baseball games for free. They were great seats. It was just general admission to the boxes upstairs, but we could sit in any one of them. The crowds were not the way they are these days.

That's another thing, discovering baseball, which I never even heard of until I was walking home. We lived on East 76th Street at the . . .

[recording interrupted in mid-sentence]

Back up, then we'll pick up – it was the Hunter College Model School that – oh, I know. I was going to talk about how I found baseball.

Sneed: Oh yes, you were just mentioning baseball.

Avakian: It's kind of funny. So let me tell it, okay?

One day, walking back home from the Hunter College Model School, which was a lucky break for me, by the way, that we lived in the area where I could go to what turned out to be one of the very best schools for young kids. I learned English just by sitting in a classroom.

I saw a headline in the newspaper which said, "Babe smacks 26, 27." I wondered, what is this? I asked one of my friends. He said, "Oh, that's Babe Ruth, the baseball player," and I said, "What's baseball?" I actually bought the paper. In those days, I think the afternoon papers might have still been two cents. They later became three cents, and the morning papers were two cents, including the *New York Times.* There were so many papers in those days, but we won't go into that. That's a different kind of history.

So I found out about baseball and didn't start playing until we moved up to Washington Heights. But once I got into baseball, then I discovered football and basketball and stopped practicing the piano, much to my parents' distress. I wish I had kept it up, but at least it gave me a rudimentary knowledge of music. It was enough to be able to follow scores in the control room and so forth, and even write simple sketches if I had to. But that's the one thing I have regretted. But somehow I never had time, once I got going, the rest of my life. But that was part of the business of Americanization, you see, in which the music came in also.

Sneed: They certainly go hand in hand. If we're looking for that which is purely American, it's jazz and baseball.

Avakian: That's really very, very true. I'm sure that I never would have gotten this interested in American music if I were born in America and exposed to it from the beginning.

Sneed: Really?

Avakian: Yeah, because I got interested in the unusual aspects of what I heard and kept following them.

I started to say, a little while ago, about my discovery of Louis Armstrong, which happened at the end of my senior year at Horace Mann. The classmate that I mentioned,

Julian Koenig, had a brother, Les Koenig, who is known to jazz fans who remember this far back, as the founder of Contemporary Records. He recorded the first big, successful, jazz version of a musical comedy score, which was the famous *My Fair Lady* album with André Previn, Shelly Manne, and Red Callender.

Les was at that time at the Yale Law School and an avid jazz collector. He told Julian to bring me over to the house and he'd play me some good jazz records. The ones that floored me were Louis Armstrong. I had thought of Armstrong as kind of a show-off trumpet player too, because they actually did play a few of the old – when I say old, this is 1936 and '37 – they played some of the 1931 and '2 OKeh records, in which he had spectacular solos. I remember, particularly, *Tiger Rag.*

Sneed: I knew you were going to say that.

Avakian: Just because it's *Tiger Rag.*

Sneed: That's my favorite.

Avakian: It was the one tune that I knew. I didn't know much about the others.

So Les played me more Armstrong and played me some of the Hot Fives and Sevens, which I found awful primitive sounding. I wasn't used to listening to an acoustic recording. I didn't like them all that much, but it did open my ears to the fact that there were people I had brushed off as being kind of shallow, maybe. Imagine thinking Armstrong was a shallow performer when you first heard him, but that was because I didn't know better and I didn't hear the right records.

I haven't mentioned Ellington, but Ellington was the band that really turned me upside down, because after having been exposed to Casa Loma and Goodman, and to a lesser extent Fletcher Henderson, because you couldn't get his records and you didn't hear him on the radio very much, except on records . . .

Sneed: Why?

Avakian: Because the band was not popular, and people didn't know – when I say people, disk jockeys. Martin Block, for example, was one disk jockey I listened to while I was in high school. It was a very commercial program, but he did play Armstrong, for example. He probably played Fletcher Henderson. He certainly played Fats Waller.

Sneed: Were the other bands – was it easier for the other bands to be heard because they were white?

Avakian: Oh yes, definitely. I remember that Ellington was very seldom heard on the radio. All of these black musicians were not heard much.

I got into Ellington because of the popular songs that he wrote and recorded. I remember one of the first ones that I ever bought was *Sophisticated Lady*, on Brunswick. The path led, of course, into other Ellington music. By the time I graduated from Horace Mann, I had quite a few Ellington Brunswicks.

My freshman year, maybe about a week after I got there, I started to go to the David Dean Smith record shop, which was the record shop at the edge of the campus, and I met a classmate named Jerry King, who became my closest friend, along with my eventual roommate, Ray Fuller. King and I got along because we quickly found that we were both collecting the same kind of records. But he was ahead of me in one regard. He was a great Ellington fan. He told me that what I had and what I was listening to was okay, but I should go back into the earlier Ellington band music. I remember particularly that he loved *Misty Morning* and *Saratoga Swing* on Victor. I told him, "Oh, that's kind of clanky. Listen to that banjo. He's right on top of the microphone, and it's so monotonous," and all that. He said, "Keep listening," which I did. It took maybe about a week or two for me to realize that there was more to Ellington than the current records that – or relatively current records that I had already bought.

But the greatest break of all, at Yale, came through the fact that just off the campus, at 20 Lake Place, in a cozy apartment lived a graduate student named Marshall Stearns. Jerry had already gone to Marshall's house right away, rung the door bell, and gotten invited to come any Friday night, because Marshall held open Friday nights for jazz fans, and there weren't many of us. Actually, the list is very short. I quickly found that, among undergraduates, there was only Jerry and myself. Somehow no Yale undergraduates seemed to have read Marshall's columns in *Tempo* magazine and occasional articles in *Down Beat.* But Jerry and I had already gotten into that in our senior years at our respective high schools.

Marshall was terrific to us. As I say, every Friday night we were invited. He had what I think had to be one of the best record collections in the world at the time. It wasn't gigantic, but it certainly was quite across the board. He would get new records every week, because he was reviewing for *Tempo.* He made Jerry and me his Brownies – that's what he called us – to sit down and affix these Dennison labels, the corner of the green stock envelopes, the heavy paper cardboard envelopes, and write down the catalog number vertically and the two titles and the artist's name on them. Today I go to the Rutgers Institute of Jazz, which Marshall started with his record collection, and I see my handwriting and Jerry's handwriting on these old records of his that we used to listen to.

Sneed: That's wonderful.

Avakian: It's a wonderful thrill. The great thing also about Marshall being there at that time was that as he got deeper into getting his Ph.d. in English literature, he wanted to stop doing so much writing. In the middle of my freshman year, Marshall was supposed to cover a Christmas week battle of the bands between Basie and Goodman at Madison Square Garden, but he didn't want to come into – from New Haven, and he sent me a telegram saying, "If you can go, your name is at the door. Introduce yourself, and write a review of the evening, and send it to Charlie Emge," the editor of *Tempo.* I think he enclosed an envelope with a 6-cent airmail embossed stamp in the corner. These were small envelopes, not the long kind. He said, "Use this, and they'll pay you something."

So I did. I sent it in, and that was my first byline in a national publication. They misspelled Avakian as A-v-a-r-k-i-a-n. It's fun to look at it again and see how enthusiastic I was, just like the Benny Goodman review – or interview, I should say.

Sneed: So Marshall Stearns launched your literary career, with the review.

Avakian: He sure did. Not long after he said, "I think I'll just keep reviewing records," which I was sorry to hear him say, because I wanted to get free records. But he said, "Why don't you do all the other stuff?" Get the New York news to him once a month and write the "Collector's Corner" column. He said, "At this point in time, you know enough to be able to do it." He was right. I'd done other things that helped my background in that, but I'll cover that in a moment.

So, having inherited those two things from Marshall, I became more and more involved with record collecting. Of course, with Marshall's collection I got an encyclopedic knowledge that I couldn't have gotten anywhere else. I think the only other collector who really had a terrific collection was Hoyte Kline, who lived in Cleveland. He was in the grocery business, quite wealthy. Jerry had looked him up. We all became good friends.

Sneed: So you really had educated listening too.

Avakian: Oh yes, very much so. The guidance of Marshall was terrific. Incidentally, I mentioned Les Koenig. Marshall invited Les to come a few times. Les was pretty busy getting his law degree. I remember one night that Les would never forget. Marshall made a remark about – I guess Les said, "You must know all your records." Marshall said, "Oh yeah, I've listened to them all. I think I'd recognize any one of them." That was a challenge to Les. He went into the closet where the records were kept. The records were kept in an alcove which was really a kind of a long, narrow closet. They filled the entire wall of this not too large closet, ceiling to the bottom, and even more of them spilling out into the living room. He spent, I would say, a good half hour in there. Finally, he came out and he said, "I've got a record that I don't think you'll recognize." We all laughed,

because he'd been gone so long. He put it on, and Marshall spotted it right away. As I recall, it was Curtis Mosby and the Louisville Jug Blowers, something like that. Does the name sound familiar?

Sneed: Not to me.

Avakian: Well, it's in the books, but barely.

Sneed: Did Marshall know it?

Avakian: Oh, Marshall spotted it right away, yeah. That broke everybody up. I'll never forget that.

I mentioned the other people that came over to Marshall Stearns were not students. Mainly it was two people. One was Sammy Goodman, who was a local tenor saxophone player who admired Bud Freeman and Lester Young. The other was Carl Bellinger. There was still another. Carl Bellinger was the nephew of Mildred Bailey. He's the one whose drum set was in Mildred and Red Norvo's house when Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson were visiting. There are many versions of the story, but basically, Benny and Teddy decided to play, and Carl joined them on drums, and that was the foundation of the Benny Goodman trio, because Benny liked what happened so much that he decided, we'll do this with Gene [Krupa] on the drums. That's how Teddy Wilson got started with Benny Goodman, through the excitement that Benny and Teddy felt at Mildred Bailey and Red Norvo's house that night with Carl – who sometimes had the odd nickname of "Belly" – playing drums.

A third person was a young man who I think had succeeded in flunking out of Yale. He was a son of a very wealthy carnival and tent show promoter in the middle West. His name was Bob Sun, and his father was Gus Sun. In those days, comedians – Jack Benny, Bob Hope – would drop a remark about the Gus Sun Time, and that meant the circuit that Gus Sun had for entertainers around the middle West. It's forgotten now, but he really was quite a person in that kind of entertainment.

The interesting thing with Sunny – gee whiz, I'm really wandering into stories, but I might as well tell it – was that in the summer of 1939, Marshall had graduated, and he wanted to get his car, which was a Ford Phaeton with a canvas top that you took down by hand, four-seater, and which is the car that Jerry King and I always borrowed to take our girlfriends out. We really came close to getting in a lot of trouble thanks to Marshall's willingness to let us do that.

Marshall wanted to drive the car out there. His wife Betty was pregnant, and she wanted to take the train. So it gave me the great opportunity of seeing the United States at an

early age at a time when it was very unusual to go cross country. The other attraction was that one of my cousins had moved out to California, in Pasadena, and married a California girl. So I could visit there also. As a kind of a by-product, I became the godfather of their little girl, who had just been born a little while before.

Anyway, the trip to California by car with Marshall was really wonderful. I was surprised my parents, who really sheltered me as much as they could – I guess jazz broke things down a little . . .

Sneed: How did they feel about your connection with jazz and jazz artists?

Avakian: They didn't understand it. There was no real connection with jazz artists yet, in the high school days, of course. But starting about when I was maybe 14 or so, maybe 15, they saw that I was getting interested in this unusual kind of music and they figured it wouldn't hurt me.

Sneed: Fortunately for us.

Avakian: Well, they weren't going to forbid it or anything like that. They didn't make any remarks about it or anything. They recognized it as part of the scene that I was growing up in. When it came to going across the country with Marshall, I guess the fact that he was an older graduate student helped out there, because I really didn't think my parents would let me do that. But they thought it would be very good for me.

I mentioned a cousin who had brought a phonograph over when he came from – I guess it was London originally, or Belgium, because he went back to Belgium after he graduated. I think he – it was he and two other cousins of mine – three, actually – who got into a touring car and drove across the country the year before. So that helped break the ice.

The experience with Marshall was really marvelous, because all I knew about the United States geographically came out of books, and a very important part of getting to know America, as I grew up, was *Life* magazine, which was a weekly at the time and covered the country quite thoroughly. So I was able to see what I had read about and seen in photographs come to life as we drove along. This was definitely blue highway time, because we never really saw a four – no, we never saw a four-lane road going across in 1939. It was usually two lanes. In a few places they would have a passing lane in the middle, but that was very rare in those days, even in the East.

Sneed: And no motels.

Avakian: No, we didn't stay in hotels. We stayed in tourist homes.

Sneed: They had – and cabins there.

Avakian: That's right, but we didn't stay in those. We usually stayed in a tourist home, which meant that a family would rent out a room upstairs overnight to . . .

Sneed: Which has now bed and breakfast.

Avakian: That's right, bed and breakfast, except they didn't give you breakfast. So that was nice, because we got to meet people in every state.

The interesting thing about the trip also was that Marshall, who knew America very well of course, knew where to make little side trips and find Mark Twain's home and things like that. He routed us so that we went through Emporia, Kansas, and dropped in on Mr. White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette.* He was a very influential editor at that time, and a liberal, which I guess is pretty unusual for Kansas. All these little things broadened my horizons enormously. Marshall was a great mentor.

We stopped in Chicago, where I met Muggsy Spanier and so many musicians for the first time and set up what ended up being the first jazz album that anyone had ever recorded as an album. That was the *Chicago Jazz* album for Decca. We'll come to that. My God, I'm really getting so longwinded.

Sneed: No.

Avakian: You don't mind?

Sneed: No. This is what I wanted to hear.

Avakian: It's interesting. I tell you. I love talking about it too, because my – I must say, my memory is remarkably clear, because it was such an experience that you absolutely can't forget small details, like having lunch in . . .

[telephone rings]

Let's let the phone get answered. Shall we stop for a moment?

[the recording resumes in mid-sentence]

. . . America that I couldn't have known otherwise. We stopped over somewhere in Illinois to have lunch, a little roadside place. We left. As we got into the car, the waitress came running out waving to us, "Stop, stop, sir." She said, "You left" – whatever it was – "40 cents on the table." She had it in her hand. Marshall said, "No, that's for you." She

couldn't quite grasp that she was receiving a tip, which I guess is indicative of what was happening in the Depression years in these little roadside restaurants, you see? That was quite a surprise to me. Anyway, that's just one of the many things of Americana that we picked up.

Another big thrill was to go through Kansas City. Count Basie had come to New York. So I knew all about the Basie band. My great favorites were Buck Clayton and Lester Young and Hershel Evans. When Hershel died, oh, that was a terrible blow, because he was a nice man and such a beautiful player, so different from Lester. The Basie band was really quite a bit better than the records. Everybody always says, "Oh, you should have heard the band in person. It was better." No doubt about it, because Decca did not record the Basie band unusually well.

The best Basie performance that I know of is on a performance that lasts, I think, about a minute and 30-odd seconds. It's been picked up on a Columbia collection of Billie Holiday. It's Billie Holiday singing Buck's arrangement of *Swing, Brother, Swing,* which is much better than the record that she made. The extraordinary thing about it is not only Billie, but the swing of the Basie band. That is the one track that demonstrates how the Basie band could swing. I won't try to go beyond that, but just listen to it. It's rather subtle. I've played it for people who say, "Yeah, it's nice." But it's more than that.

Sneed: Why that swing?

Avakian: I don't know. The arrangement is very simple, the band is in a rocking – I hate the word – groove, but that's what it is, and the recording is not good, because it's just monaural pickup, probably with one, maybe two microphones, done from the – I guess it was from the Savoy Ballroom. I'm not sure. I think the announcer's voice is even on that. But it just captures the swing of the Basie band in a way that I don't think was ever captured in a studio.

Sneed: It seemed to me that – and this is almost a contradiction – but the discipline of Basie in film and live, it would be, he would just give a look. The control which . . .

Avakian: That's right. He conducted with his face and eyes and his shoulders.

Sneed: Yeah, and that's almost a contradiction, because the freedom of the swing was a result of that eye.

Avakian: I think that's true. I remember watching the Basie band at that time in action. I started going really to hear the Basie band in college, because up to that time, I wasn't allowed out of the house for long hours particularly. But freshman year, Jerry and I started going into Manhattan whenever we could and listening to Ellington and Basie,

particularly. I don't want to say by then the bloom was off the Benny Goodman rose, but there was no doubt that once I caught onto, I guess first Ellington and then Basie, those were the bands that I really followed.

The business with tracking Ellington down was not that easy, because he didn't play in New York, as far as I can remember, particularly, except at places like the Savoy Ballroom. He did play at the white theaters down in Times Square. There were several of them, by the way. People think of just the Paramount, but the Strand had bands.

Sneed: The Capitol.

Avakian: The Capitol had bands. That's right. There must have been one or two others, but I can't remember. Leave it to the historians who have written this up, or pseudo-historians like me who can look them up if they take the time to do it. But I find it increasingly difficult to find things that I want, because the best books are often with no indexes to speak of, or bad indexes, and I haven't got the patience that I once had.

In any event, the great, great night of Duke Ellington – well, there were two great nights that I remember Ellington in the late '30s. One was a few days after graduation at Horace Mann, which would be in June of 1937. One of my classmates lived in Westchester. He, like all the other kids in school, or faculty, knew that I was crazy about this kind of swing music and the Ellington band. He said, "My parents would like to know if you'd like to come hear Duke Ellington at our country club. He's going to play in the evening at the poolside." I said sure.

I just will never forget this evening alongside the pool with subdued lights. I was sitting opposite the Ellington band on the other side of the pool, just entranced, all evening, listening to them play. About maybe six months later he played two successive weekends at the Savoy Ballroom. Jerry and I wouldn't miss that for the world. So we went and spent the evenings listening to the band there. I don't think it was ever any better in that period. That is really my most favorite – "most favorite" – "mostest favorite" – beyond that – Ellington band of all.

Sneed: Who was in the band then?

Avakian: That was the band just before Ben Webster came in. It was Cootie . . .

Sneed: Johnny Hodges?

Avakian: Oh yeah, Hodges, Carney, and Bigard. The usual rhythm section with Freddie Guy. I guess at that time it was only Billy Taylor on bass. I think Wellman Braud had left, but I remember the band with the two basses, which by the way was a terrific sight,

to go to a theater and see the band come up on the elevator, literally, stage, which would rise out of the pit. The first thing you'd see in the dim light would be the two bass players at the opposite ends. Even then I wondered, gee, how can they keep together? Sonny Greer was usually on the left side as you looked at the band. But there were the two basses coming up first, and then this ghostly band would come up, and they'd be playing *East St. Louis Toodle-oo.* It was terrific. The spotlight would finally come on Duke. He'd be at the piano, the usual thing. His personality was just the same then as it became later, as I saw later.

Sneed: This is interrupting your sequence, but I wonder, that kind of an experience for young people and for those who – everyone wasn't young – but that's missing today, isn't it?

Avakian: I think it is, because . . .

Sneed: Or are they – or is the kind of hero worship or idolatry that we had, has that been moved over to something that . . . ?

Avakian: I think that young people just don't think of jazz musicians as people that they idolize. They get so thoroughly exposed to rock music that those are the heroes that they and their contemporaries pay attention to. Peer pressure, I'm sure, has a great deal to do with it. I saw it with my children, for example, who all survived successfully. But in my time, there was really no great peer pressure to be a Benny Goodman fan, even though the Benny Goodman orchestra got huge publicity, and of course it spilled over to Tommy Dorsey and later Glenn Miller. They all sort of had their turn overtaking Goodman in public popularity. But Goodman was always there. Artie Shaw had a period too. And Jimmy Dorsey, finally, with *Amapola* and blue – what was the other thing? Something eyes. *Green Eyes.*

Sneed: Oh gosh yes, with Helen O'Connell?

Avakian: Yeah, Helen O'Connell and . . .

Sneed: Bob Eberle.

Avakian: Bob Eberle.

That was the equivalent of the way kids respond to rock music, you see. You notice these are practically all white bands. The Jimmie Lunceford band was not all that popular. The Basie band was more popular than Lunceford, but even Basie, I think, as far as the public was concerned, was way behind these other bands, Larry Clinton and so on and so on. They're the ones that got the air play and the attention from the young fans.

So at all times, people like myself and Jerry King and the older Marshall Stearns, we were kind of strange outsiders, you might say, in our taste, because we were not in the mainstream of what the American public was listening to in the better grade of popular music.

The singers were popular, but not as much as they became later. Except for Bing Crosby and, before him, Russ Colombo, who was, like Crosby, a radio phenomenon, they became popular through bands. Crosby of course had been with Paul Whiteman, but I never knew that, because Whiteman wasn't on the air and all that. Crosby, who became known really through his films, to the point where he had a 15-minute radio program of his own every night. I think it was at about 7:15. I used to listen to it. Just before him came a 15-minute program called "Merton March," which was about a mother and her daughter who were in show business. I don't remember anything particularly about them except that I would listen to them every night and follow the story. But that was the prelude to hearing Bing Crosby, which was a lot of fun, because I knew who he was and I liked the pop songs of the time, which leads me to something else that I'd like to mention. It's Russ Sanjek, who was the key man in terms of quality popular music, and that means every kind of popular music, at BMI when it got started, which was – I guess BMI must have been started about 1938, because that's when – or '39, because that's when I met Russ. He was a neighborhood acquaintance in Washington Heights, because that's where we moved to after East 76th Street. He told me about this organization that was being formed to combat ASCAP. I thought, oh boy, not a chance, because I knew enough to know that ASCAP was pretty powerful.

Russ made a statement at a convention of the – I think it was the International Association of – I can't remember. One of these big organizations, at Lincoln Center – in which he said, "Standards were the popular songs that George Avakian liked when he was growing up." He put it in a context that there were really no such things as solidly established standards, except for a handful like *Night and Day* and *Stardust*, until LP came along. I was really the pioneer of the popular LP catalog development. I had to fill up the LPs with songs that were not *Mairzy Doats* and other novelties. They had to be songs that were sung by people like Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, and instrumentalists like Percy Faith and André Kostelanetz. So that's where I simply reached into my memory, with all the songs that I remembered which were not popular at all at the time, *Where or When* or *What a Difference a Day Made*, nice ballads. We just poured those out, one after another, on these LPs, which when we went to the 12-inch format, meant twelve songs that had to be compatible. That's how the pop catalog at Columbia Records became a huge seller, because there was a bigger market for that than there was for the pop singers of the day, who would have an LP come out because they had a hit record. You'd put the hit and a couple of other of their successful records on the outside of the LP, on each side. If they had enough, you could basically fill up the LP, but otherwise you had to fill them

in – fill in the empty spaces with something else. That's where Russ's statement came into play, that these songs, which sometimes the singers didn't even know, kept getting recorded again and again, and they became standards. Now that's perhaps a slight exaggeration, but I felt very good about Russ making that statement to a group of people from all over the country and from Europe.

We're getting into the creation of the pop LP catalog at Columbia, which is way down the line. Let's get back to – gee, we're still stuck in the '30s, aren't we?

Sneed: Let me see. We never got back from – you were in Emporia, Kansas, talking about the editor.

Avakian: Right, talking to Mr. White, William Allen White.

Sneed: What did you do in California? Did you get there?

Avakian: Oh yeah, we got there all right and stopped off at the Grand Canyon on the way, by the way, which was an incredible experience. I met a nice young girl about my age on the one evening that we spent there. The two of us parked under the stars in Marshall's car while Marshall was in bed already, I guess. I remember trying to think, what would happen if I put my arm around her? We were listening to the radio. It was interrupted with the news that Warsaw was being bombed by the Luftwaffe. That put an end to the evening, because it was pretty depressing. We were all worried about something happening in Europe, but we didn't know what would happen. That was the night that the war broke out in Europe.

In California, that was basically a family time. Marshall went on to Honolulu, and I didn't see him again for, I guess, a year. He taught English at the University of Hawaii, his first job.

Sneed: What did you do? Drive back alone?

Avakian: No, I came back on the train with my Aunt Lucy, who didn't speak English. It was a very interesting experience, because this time I got to see the country in a different way, through the windows of a train. It took – I guess it took something like two or three days. I can't remember. I ought to look that up, because it's part of Americana that I've lived through, and I should know just how long it took.

My particular . . .

Sneed: Did you keep a diary?

Avakian: No, I didn't. I wish I had. In fact, when I left – well, all through my working life, I didn't keep my daily calendars and all that. I used to, but it just piled up. I had so much paper. And of course I don't want to put the onus on my wife, but she was right. "Don't save so much, because it's getting out of hand." You see? Having spent over 50 years in the music business, you could imagine. This room could have been filled with papers, and I mean filled. You wouldn't be able to walk through the room. You'd be walking on top of papers.

Anyway, I have a certain amount, but not nearly as much as I wish I had.

Sneed: Did you save letters?

Avakian: Not many. It's terrible. I threw away letters from people like Louis Armstrong.

Sneed: I was going to say, his letters are famous.

Avakian: I know.

Sneed: He was a great letter writer.

Avakian: He was. When I say threw away, I guess it just kind of got lost in the shuffle over the years. But I have a few. Where they are, I don't know. That's why the basement is a mess. I have boxes that I haven't opened in – sometimes . . .

Sneed: You and Milt Hinton.

Avakian: I guess in maybe 40 years. It will be – things were opened when I came back out of the Army, but even so. I don't want to even think about that, because I have to have the time to attack this, and I just don't have time. Life continues to be terribly busy, even though I'm supposed to have been retired for many years. But it's busy in different ways. We'll get to that too.

Let's go back to 1939, because I've left out one thing that had already started before the trip to California, which took place right after my sophomore year ended. Toward the end of my sophomore year, I'd been exchanging letters with a friend of Jerry King's from Youngstown, Ohio, his home town, a young man named John Trudley, who was a record collector and had been Jerry's close friend, an older person who knew more about records than Jerry did, as he was growing into this, as I did back in New York. Somehow in the three-way ideas that we would kick around, which included daydreaming – gee, what if somebody could do this? – along came the idea, which John and Jerry encouraged me on very strongly, of gee, there should be some jazz albums, because there were no jazz albums at all, up to that time, except reissue albums. There had been two in the United

States. There was the *Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Album* on Victor and the *Bessie Smith Memorial Album* on Columbia. In England there had been three on British Brunswick. They were devoted to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band – wait a minute. I'm not so sure about that, but let's set that aside for the moment. But definitely the King Oliver jazz band and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings – that's right. No Original Dixieland Jazz Band – and the Bix Beiderbecke early career, meaning the Wolverine and Bix and his Rhythm Jugglers and a couple of other items like that.

So, the three of us talking to each other came up with the idea – I don't think it was entirely mine – of, there should be jazz albums, and particularly since I had started to get involved with the Chicago musicians who had come to New York: Eddie Condon, Pee Wee Russell, Jimmy McPartland, Bud Freeman. They were basically the nucleus always of the band down at Nick's in Greenwich Village. I used to go down to Nick's a lot. I got to know them. Among the things that really impressed me, apart from the fact that I liked the music and it was not quite the same music that I had learned about through the UHCA [United Hot Clubs of America] reissues of the Chicago Rhythm Kings and the McKenzie-Condon Chicagoans – but it was it close – the biggest impression that I had about what's going to happen with these people was that they were going to die off pretty soon, because Bix had died young, and he was part of that group, but never recorded with them, which was the greatest tragedy of his life, I think – and ours – and Frank Teschemacher had been killed in an auto accident in 1932, I guess it was. But these guys were drinkers like I had never seen before. Knowing that Bix had had an alcoholic problem, I thought, boy, they're going to start dying of alcoholism. I'd never imagined people could drink like this, although Eddie Condon later told me, after I met Bill Davison, that if I thought that he and his guys could drink, I should observe Bill as the greatest drinker and the one who could hold his alcohol the best, and he's the one who lived the longest, because he quit when he was 70-something. He lived to, I think, 83.

So the idea developed that there should be a *Chicago Jazz* album in which these musicians were asked to go back to the style that they had created out of listening to King Oliver and Louis Armstrong and, interestingly enough, Jelly Roll Morton also, although there was never any close tie to that connection until you realize that many of the things that Morton did were the same as what the Chicagoans did, those explosions at the end of a chorus, rhythmic shifts and so forth. Where did the Chicagoans get it from? They must have heard Morton. Yet they never talked about it the way they talked about Armstrong and Oliver.

Sneed: Did you know Morton?

Avakian: Slightly, yeah. I'll cover that in a bit. Unfortunately I didn't do anything about it. I was in awe.

So the idea came about to make not only an album of Chicago jazz, but also New Orleans and Kansas City. I proposed that in a long letter to Decca Records, which was the company that started putting together reissue albums way ahead of everybody else. They did it in the form of six 50-cent records in a six-pocket, ten-inch album. They charged 50 cents as a premium to cover the cost of the album, or maybe they charged 50 cents more for the album.

They did it this way. Bing Crosby did a movie called *Blue Hawaii.* They recorded – they had recorded other Hawaiian songs with Bing. Maybe they recorded a couple more. They had a Bing Crosby *Blue Hawaii* album. He did *White Christmas.* They had a Christmas album. Guy Lombardo did *Auld Lang Syne.* He had a holiday album. Otherwise, these other record companies would just put out topic albums without any thought to the value of the artists, which was kind of strange, but that's the way they thought. For example, I remember Columbia had an early album simply called *Viennese Waltzes.* That's all the cover said. I don't think they even credited it on the cover, but they might have – of course they did in later editions – Marek Weber and his orchestra. Marek Weber was a radio conductor. Nobody knew who he was, but he was there. He had the arrangements, and he managed to get himself the job of doing this album and others.

So this package idea I worked out in the following format: it would be three different groups of musicians, each doing one session, and there would be no duplications between the musicians. They would do selected repertoire that fit the period that I wanted to recreate in that original style.

Decca wrote me and said it sounded very interesting. "Come in some time. We'll talk about it." That was a postcard from Jack Kapp, the president of Decca Records, who had been the president of Brunswick Records and therefore in my mind was connected with the Chicago Rhythm Kings and all the great recordings of the early Brunswick period.

The curious thing to me was that they wrote me on a penny postcard. That's how much postcards cost in those days. It was a printed postcard with Benjamin Franklin imprinted, a one-cent stamp in the corner. I realized, Decca has to save money, because they were selling records so cheaply, and you could hear it in the grooves too. They practically used sand for pressings.

I went in. Jack Kapp was there with his brother Dave, who later founded Kapp Records, and their recording director. There was no title such as A & R – artists and repertoire producer – in those days. The man who handled most of the day-to-day sessions was called the recording director. That was Bob Stevens.

They asked me some questions, and I began expounding at length, elaborating on my letter. Finally Jack Kapp, possibly in self defense, turned to the others and said, "We're

not too sure what this young man is talking about, but I think we should do it." He turned to Dave and Bob and said, "Help him out. Whatever he wants, set it up. Bob, you go in the studio with him and show him how it's done." I'd been to two or three record dates. So I had a vague idea of what happens, but of course that was going to be a really new experience for me. That's how it came about.

I didn't say anything – that was in June, just before I went with Marshall to California. I had never thought of suggesting that I be paid for this. So when it was finally finished, which was completed in January 1940, I had written by then an extensive booklet, the first booklet ever which wasn't in connection with a classical album. Mainly opera albums had booklets. I said to Bob Stevens in New York one day – or he asked me, "When do we go on to the next one? Which one do you want to do?" I said, "I never said anything about getting paid. I'd like to know what I'm going to get paid." He gazed up at the ceiling and after a pause said, "How about six bits?" He never took his eyes down from the ceiling. I said, "Six bits?" He said, "Yeah, 75 bucks. Is that okay?" I quickly thought, for about eight seconds, maybe I can ask him for $100, but it doesn't mean anything. I've gone to Chicago and spent my own money and so forth. I said okay, fine. That's when he brought his eyes down. Bob was a very nice guy, but I'm sure he was under strict orders to – "Look, this is an enthusiastic kid. Don't spend any more money than you have to." So that's how I got paid.

Sneed: That covered your expenses and everything?

Avakian: Supposedly, yeah, everything.

Sneed: I see.

Avakian: And of course it was a non-royalty album. You can imagine. Everything was very, very inexpensive for the company. It never went out of print, I guess, until after Decca was sold, and even then it came out on a Brunswick LP reissue, and I believe it's going to come out on an MCA reissue soon.

Sneed: So you too have been had.

Avakian: Oh, believe me. You have no idea. We'll talk about some of that, maybe.

The next thing, which he didn't bring up that day – I think it was later. I used to drop in and visit people in the music business on Saturdays, partly because I was still writing for *Tempo* and I wanted to get the news. I'd send in reports like, Louis Armstrong did a session with some songs from a motion picture that he was in, that kind of stuff. There was even funny stuff, like I would go to GAC, which was General Artists Corporation, a big booking agency, and MCA, and find out which bands – because this had to be not just

jazz, but pop music – which bands were opening at what places. I turned in a report that Ben Bernie and his orchestra were opening at McGinnis of Sheepshead Bay, a new place for music and dancing and so on. I discovered to my horror that what he did was simply play at the opening of a restaurant in Manhattan which was named after the original restaurant, McGinnis of Sheepshead Bay. That shows how much I knew. That was one of the gaffs that I made. Happily there weren't very many. I think that was really the only one. Charlie Emge, who was the editor of *Tempo*, was very nice about it.

By the way, I got paid by *Tempo* – that first article that I wrote covering the battle of bands at Madison Square Garden – $5. And he sent me another 6-cent airmail stamp and said, "Marshall tells me you're going to cover New York news and so on. This is what I'd like." That's how I worked out the formula of visiting these sources of information about what was going to happen in New York in the music scene. So every month I got a check for $5 and a new 6-cent airmail stamp. That was my career as a . . .

Sneed: The stamp came with it.

Avakian: Yeah, the stamped envelope came with it. It was always the same orange 6-cent stamp, airmail, you see, in those days. By the way, that 6-cent airmail rate continued right through the war for soldiers overseas, because I would write home with that kind of an envelope. They had a special rate for soldiers. I don't know what the rate was for ordinary people.

Wait a second. I think maybe we got to write free from overseas. I think we did.

Sneed: I think you did. I think I remember that.

Avakian: Yeah, we did. I remember that. But I remember all through the Army sending those 6-cent envelopes to my mother and that sort of thing.

Sneed: You were in the South Pacific.

Avakian: Yeah. We'll get to that too. I don't know when we're going to get to it. Good Lord. I've got to shorten things. But I'm having a good time. I know you are. This after all is pretty amazing. Who else has memories like this in this day and age? And they're certainly part of the formation of my life, my career, which in turn is the career of many recording artists.

Anyway, let's resume. We're at Decca Records and all that.

Sneed: You could just go in there and hang out, and you could see people, whereas today . . .

Avakian: No, you can't do that today.

Sneed: Impossible.

Avakian: For one thing, I had the cachet, which was not very important, of having a column in *Tempo* magazine, in addition to the "Collector's Corner" column. It wasn't really a column. It was just news briefs. I would say the total amount of news that I submitted would have filled, let's say, less than a column in the format of the columns in *Down Beat* magazine. It wasn't . . .

Sneed: The old *Down Beat,* when it was a tabloid?

Avakian: The present one.

Sneed: Oh, the present one.

Avakian: Even the present *Down Beat.* In other words, not more than a few inches of type. But sometimes it was much longer, because there would be a feature which I would write, which would still be small, because *Tempo* was a smaller format publication than the old *Down Beat.* It was the size of a *Metronome* and not nearly as many pages. They didn't have advertising. *Tempo,* by the way, got bought up by *Down Beat* eventually and absorbed by them.

I was coming to the point of what happened with the Kansas City and New Orleans albums. Bob – I don't think in that conversation about the $75 – said, "How about the other albums?" Maybe – in fact he did say it at the end of the conversation. "What about the other albums?" I knew immediately what my answer was going to be. I said, "Bob, I just can't do it. I'm falling behind in my work at school, and I'm there to get an education. So let somebody else do it. You can keep all the information I gave, and they can use it in any way that they want. It's yours." What else am I going to say? I'm going to say I want $25 more for the ideas? Ridiculous. Luckily, my family was in a position where I didn't have to think about making any money myself.

So what he did was have the New Orleans album made by a very good choice, Steve Smith, who had the Hot Record Society, which was similar to UHCA reissue program that Milt Gabler and the Commodore Music Shop had. Beyond that, the HRS Society also had a monthly sale and bulletin-type news- – not a newsletter, but actually lists of records offered for sale to collectors, similar to what you see today. The source of supply was essentially this: Bill Russell, who is in my opinion the great underrated – no matter what anybody thinks of Bill Russell, it's not high enough. Bill Russell is the great all-time record collector and historian, the man who knows more about New Orleans jazz than the

New Orleans musicians themselves do. Bill died about 14 months ago. I remember I was up at our house in Maine when it happened. I was stunned when I saw it in the paper, although he was – what? – 85, 86 years old, and it had to come, because he'd been in bad health for 20 years.

Bill traveled through the South and picked up records anywhere he could. He traveled the back roads, where record collectors never went and which was of course the heartland of the black record buyers. He'd send the records back in boxes to Steve, who would classify the condition and everything else and put them in that bulletin. Now why did he travel through the South? He had to have a reason to be able to afford it. Bill was the orchestra for a Chinese mime group called the Red Gate Chinese Art Players. I have a photograph which shows – and again, I don't know where it is. I've seen it sometime since we moved up here to Riverdale – which shows the way the troupe worked. They worked behind a cloth – a sheet on the stage, and you saw just their shadows. Off to one side was the orchestra. That was Bill Russell, seated on the floor, legs crossed, playing Chinese flutes, gongs, what have you, and he wears – so that it shows up on the silhouette – he wears a black skull cap with an artificial Chinese pigtail down the back, and he's dressed in a black robe. He was the orchestra.

Sneed: For heaven's sake.

Avakian: Bill Russell – I hope that somebody writes a book about him. I don't know who's going to do it. Bill Russell was a classically trained violinist who became, or tried to become, a contemporary classical composer. I don't know how much he wrote, but he went into a branch, which we'll get into in a second, which was extraordinary.

His name was Russell Wagner. He changed his name to William Russell because he didn't want to sign his scores "R. Wagner." Bill turned to something which he was inspired to do by discovering jazz, and particularly early New Orleans jazz. He began writing percussion music. Now we know there are so many composers who do percussion music, classical types, but he was the first. He was even ahead of Henry Cowell, who became quite well known as the earliest percussion composer, and of course ahead of John Cage, who did the remarkable thing of creating the prepared piano, so that he had a percussion ensemble at his fingertips at a keyboard.

I got very close to that after the war, because the musician who first performed John Cage in a regular concert, an ordinary – not ordinary; rather extraordinary piano recital – was the lady – I was about to say girl, because she was younger than me – who became my sister-in-law, Maro Ajemian. She was the contemporary classical pianist of her period, immediately after the war. In fact in 1942 she performed the first performance of the Khachaturian piano concerto in America, which was the first time Khachaturian was ever played in this country, simply because, being of Armenian descent and being asked by

Juilliard to perform a Russian concerto at a program at the Juilliard School put on for Russian war relief, she had the very interesting idea of not performing the Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff or Prokofiev concertos, one of them, but instead find a new composer who was more representative of the spirit of that program, which was to solidify the Soviet and American fight against Fascism and Hitler. She came across the name Khachaturian, looked up the concerto, and saw, wow, it's really fine. He's Armenian. Great. I'll play it. So that's how Khachaturian got started.

The first concert I went to when I came back to America was her piano recital at Town Hall on April 14th, 1946. That's the day that I met my wife by going backstage to congratulate Maro. I knew about Anahid's existence. I was told by my parents, who knew her parents, that she had gone to the Juilliard School, as Maro had done. Maro in fact was the youngest student ever admitted by what became the Juilliard School. It was originally the Institute of Musical Arts, with Dr. Frank Damrosch, Walter Damrosch's brother, as director. They entered her in the school at the age of six. Nobody ever came into the school, or will again, that young. So she holds that remarkable honor.

At that concert, she not only played Khachaturian, including the *Sabre Dance,* which Woody Herman picked up very soon after, made a hit record, but Paul Bowles, John Cage of course, Alan Hovhaness. I guess there must have been one or two other contemporary pieces, a very unusual program. The second half was all contemporary. It got great reviews. Virgil Thompson covered it and so forth.

That evening, after going backstage and meeting Maro and her sister – we believe, Anahid and I, that we had never met before, because she was just a little kid when Maro came over to our house and [?] would like to practice on the piano, but Anahid didn't tag alone. We all went out to dinner that night with Hovhannes and Cage and William Masselos, who became, with Willie Kapell, the two great pianists of their generation. Willie got a lot of breaks – in fact he made his debut playing the Khachaturian piano concerto, which he heard Maro play and asked, "Do you mind if I play it for my debut with the Philharmonic?", because he had just won the Leventritt award, which included a performance with the Philharmonic. That launched his career. Willie was simply terrific and a wonderful person. He was killed in a plane crash, very young. I don't think he was – he wasn't 30 yet. He was coming back to San Francisco, and the plane ran into a mountain in a fog. Willie was a very close friend of Anahid and Maro's and Billy's, of course.

Billy went on. He never made as big a public impact as he should have, again because he played too much contemporary music, really. He was very shy and diffident, a wonderful man. He contracted Parkinson's, and for at least the last 10 years of his life, Anahid took care of him. He was all alone. He was of Dutch and Greek descent. He had no relatives in America. Never got married. She did an incredible job.

Anyway, within a short time of the completion of the *Chicago Jazz* album, an unexpected development took place, which was the beginning of my association with Columbia Records. In early 1940, there was a substantial amount of public interest in the form of things like a spread in *Life* magazine, which was the magazine of the time, covering a kind of history of jazz. It surprised all of us by having pictures of people like Bix Beiderbecke and so on.

There's that famous big photograph that was taken on a Harlem street where the stoop of this building is absolutely flooded with jazz musicians, some white as well as black. I've always wanted to have a copy of that picture, and I've never gotten around to buying it. It can be bought. But it's a wonderful picture. I saved that for years, that issue of *Life*.

This commentary about the history of jazz came to the attention of Ted Wallerstein, the president of Columbia Records. He was a veteran of the business. He had been president of Victor Records before RCA came into the picture. RCA came in, I think, after the war. Mr. Wallerstein knew that Columbia Records controlled a vast amount of recorded material by having been involved in the absorption of record companies. I won't go into that, but it was not even the Columbia Record Company per se that did this as American Record Corporation, which was still the official name of the company that had the Columbia label when the red label Columbia started coming out in 1940.

Working on the staff in New York was John Hammond, whom I had met through Benny Goodman and Dwight Chapin, whom I mentioned, Benny's right-hand man in the Hotel Pennsylvania days in '36. In fact Chape – that was his nickname. Everybody called him Chape – was living in John Hammond's apartment on – oh, what is that street in the Village? This is terrible. I know the street so well. It's the one that I always take to get to the Village Gate and so forth. Well, it's unimportant. So I met John in his own apartment, because I was visiting Chape with Charlie, listening to John's records, which Chape said we were free to do when we were there, and John said, "Sure. Come back any time," and all that.

Mr. Wallerstein suggested to John that the catalog should be investigated and some reissues should be put out. John told him quite honestly, "This isn't my forte." He wasn't a researcher or anything like that, really. "But," he said, "there's somebody who's going to Yale, 18 miles away from the factory at Bridgeport, who can do it," because he knew about my column, and he had met me, early in my listening to the Benny Goodman band, as a senior at Horace Mann. But we hadn't seen much of each other in between.

So John arranged for me to go up to Bridgeport and talk to Mr. Wallerstein about this, which happened on Washington's Birthday in 1940, which was a Thursday and no classes that day, but Columbia Records was working. During the conversation, the plant

manager had said something like, “Yes, we had a letter from somebody suggesting some specific reissues that we ought to put out.” It turned out, when he pulled out the letter, that it was the letter that I had written several months before. I guess it was the early fall of 1939, or maybe even earlier. I have a way of finding out when it was, because I got an answer from the plant manager, and I happened to save the answer and came across it a few months ago. The date is right on there. The answer is kind of interesting. It’s very brief. It says, “Thank you very much for your suggestions, which we found quite interesting. We have turned them over to our advertising department, because they’re in charge of that activity.” Can you imagine? “You will hear from them shortly.”

Well, the answer is that I never heard from them, but he had my original letter. I wish I had it. In those days, I didn’t tend to make carbon copies of my letters. I used to write prolifically at the typewriter. Sometimes I made carbons, and sometimes I didn’t.

But it was funny. He pulled out the letter and said, “My goodness. It’s from you.” I should have asked him right then and there, let me have it as a souvenir. Never thought of it. So that’s lost in the archives long ago, I guess.

The upshot was that Mr. Wallerstein asked me to come to Columbia once a week. I would get paid $25 for researching – a week – for researching the material that they had and getting test pressings and deciding what to put out. The program he wanted was a series of four-pocket albums and single records to be put out periodically. The title of the series would be the Hot Jazz Classics. This was marvelous, because it was just what I would love to see happen, and it was an outgrowth, really, of the same kind of thinking that produced the *Chicago Jazz* album and provided the idea for the next two albums.

The way it worked out was quite good, because Thursdays did turn out to be a day in which I had only one class – wait it minute. That was senior year that I’ve managed to make it one class. I think I had two only on Thursday morning in my junior year. My roommate, Ray Fuller, had a car. So I’d drive his car to the factory, do what I could in the late morning, early afternoon, and drive back.

The plant manager was Herb Greenspan, who kind of liked jazz. He had an assistant, Jimmy Sparling, who was a very enthusiastic swing-band fan. So Jimmy especially was thrilled that this was going to happen. They are the ones who steered me into the factory and helped me find all these masters.

The program was the first reissue program ever that included albums as well as singles. There had been just these sporadic reissue albums that I told you about, two in America, three in England. Singles had never been per- – the word isn’t periodically – never been systematically handled in any country except in England, where Parlophone had what they called the Rhythm Style Series, in which they numbered in a separate numerical

listing – in addition to the catalog number, they listed each side as Rhythm Style Series number 1 and 2, on one record, 3 and 4 on another record. They put out a lot of these records, but they had some bizarre couplings. They would couple Miff Mole and his Molers with Louis Armstrong on the other side. The periods also seemed to jump around. Nevertheless, this was one of the sources of my getting collector's items at a time when there were very few reissues available in America. A lot of records were cut out very quickly, because the record companies were not involved in a big business, and if there wasn't a lot of volume, they would cut the records out fairly soon.

But in England it was different, and in France also, because France had some sporadic reissue programs. I found rather quickly in my freshman year at Yale that I could get in touch with collectors in England and France and exchange records with them, equal value on each side. What they wanted was the new jazz releases, which weren't put out abroad for sometimes a year or more, and what I wanted were the records that had been cut out in America which kept on in England, because there – and France – but especially England because of that Parlophone series. HMV also did the same sort of thing.

The reason the records stayed on in Europe was that the market there was not so much a case of hit records – and when I say hit records in America, it was very small. Benny Goodman once said that people told him, oh my, you must have sold millions of records, and the answer is no. He got his royalty statements. He knew what they sold. A record that sold 10,000 was a big hit. That was back in the '30s.

The fact that these records stayed on in Europe also meant something else. The Europeans listening to American records, which got released periodically, had no interest at all in the American popular artists, but it was the jazz artists that did capture their interest. They captured interest in such a way that the very first book on jazz was written by a Belgian, Robert Goffin, and the second book, which was substantially better, was written by Hughes Panassié.

[phone ringing interrupts recording]

I wish I had kept the first announcements that were in the form of the promotional materials that Columbia put out, because they did a lot of promotion for this. There were big sheets which the record stores put up on their walls, in which they listed the first four albums and the first group of singles. Then periodically they would put out smaller sheets. Of course I received them. I don't think they survived the period when I was away in the Army and so on, although I saved a lot of stuff, and my mother kept it for me. But then, after I got married and all the sort of – life got complicated – things like that disappeared. I don't know any collectors who have them, which is a shame.

Incidentally, if a collector hears this and knows where they are, I'd love to get copies made, because they were really quite attractive, and of course they meant a great deal to me. I have a photograph of myself that my roommate took of me in our room at Yale in which you can see part of a – what do they call it? A poster on an easel. What did they call that? There's a name for that kind of thing – which is a reproduction of possibly the first announcement, or maybe one of the later promotional materials that they put out. But the original ones were quite large. They were too large. But I had one that I kept folded up.

The business of doing this was wonderfully exciting, because it meant that I would use the information that I already had and use it to launch other explorations into the paperwork of cards and sheets of paper and artist files, and legal files as well, at Columbia, to search out master numbers that I didn't know about. The most exciting thing of all was that I found masters that had never been released and which still existed.

Before I talk about that, I should explain why this background work was relatively easy for me, beyond being the guy who ran the Collector's Corner column for *Tempo* magazine. In my freshman year – as a matter of fact, this began in my senior year at Horace Mann – Les Koenig told me about the book that Hughes Panassié had written in French. It was called *Le jazz hot.* He had a copy, which he had imported somehow. I don't recall how I got Panassié's address. It was of course not in the book itself. But maybe Les gave it to me. Somehow I got his address, I wrote him a letter, and he sent me a copy of his book. It's autographed. I still have it.

The good thing about it, in terms of it being in French, was that I had taken French as my principal language, German secondarily, at Horace Mann, and I did frankly quite well in both languages. I don't know if the fact that I spoke Armenian and had an affinity for foreign sounds and a desire to learn had much to do with it. But my French was pretty good, and I was able to read the book fairly easily with the help of a dictionary, because a lot of it, of course, was about music, and there were a number of terms which were either already English or close enough to it.

So that was an exciting thing. I started marking up the book with notes about records that I had, and how could I get them, and all that. That book contained the catalog numbers of the European editions of some of the great jazz classics. That immediately inspired me to find out how I could get them. There was no way that you could import records in the United States. No record shop was interested in placing an order for a foreign record. But again, through the grapevine of record collectors who were known to each other – and I'd gotten to know a number of collectors other than Marshall, and Marshall here was directly helpful, because he received letters from record collectors all over the world – I set up record exchanges with collectors in France, principally Panassié – in fact, only Panassié himself – and in England with two collectors, and in Australia with somebody

else. That was where these jazz classics were still available. I would send them recent releases on Decca or Brunswick or Victor, and they would send me the classics that I wanted. I got most of those catalog numbers originally from Panassié's book. Then they would send me catalogs that I saw, to my great pleasure, that the Parlophone series had gone way beyond Panassié.

So, that is why I had a head start on what jazz classics existed beyond just what Marshall happened to have. In other words, there were records mentioned in Panassié which Marshall didn't happen to have, because nobody except a few fanatics like Hoyt Kline thought in terms of getting complete collections. Kline, for example, had the greatest Armstrong collection of the time, in the world. When you look at what he had – and of course you can't look at it, because nobody knows any more – but I know that he was missing a lot of records, because I would hear from Bill Russell, for example, that there was a certain record, and when I went to see Hoyt in Cleveland, I'd say, "Gee, I'd like to hear this record which Bill Russell told me about." He said, "What? No, I don't know about that one." That's the state of collecting in the late '30s.

So, with that head start, I was able to really get into an effective use of the Columbia files to locate masters and then discover unknown ones. The most interesting discovery of all was one that I wrote about in an article which was published by the *Jazz Record,* which was published by Art Hodes, a Chicago pianist living in New York, a very good magazine, very good for collectors too. I guess there must be a complete file at the Institute of Musical Art [*sic*: Institute of Jazz Studies]. I mention this in case anyone listening to this wants to dig into what was going on in that period. You don't do it by reading *Down Beat* or *Tempo.* You do it by reading magazines like the *Jazz Record, Jazz Information,* which was published by Gene Williams. There you will find a real treasure trove of what was going on at that time in jazz, as well as interviews with older musicians, some of whom would have been forgotten if it weren't for those particular interviews.

The way the most exciting discovery of all came about was that I decided to spend the night in Bridgeport, because I was in the middle of really putting on a push to get a release together, and I decided to cut classes on Friday. I stayed in a little hotel. There was no expense account. So it was my own money. As it happened that day, I had gone to Bridgeport without my wristwatch. When I woke up in the morning, I was wide awake, it was daylight, and I didn't know what time it was. So I decided, I'll just go to the factory, and if I'm early, I'll get some work done before the other people come in.

That's what happened. I got into the factory with nobody there but the night watchman. It was broad daylight, because it was late spring. Immediately went to some files that I had never bothered with before, because of the things that were more pressing. Began going through them. These were artists files in the legal department. One of the first I picked

out, of course, was Louis Armstrong. As I went through it, I found two sheets of paper listing recordings for which Armstrong was paid in 1927 and '28, and I didn't recognize some of the titles, but the master numbers were there, and the master numbers in several cases were quite unusual, because they were all by themselves. Usually a session would be, say, four sides, and there would be four consecutive master numbers. If collectors already knew about three sides, and one of the interior numbers was missing, that was a signal that I assume would possibly produce an unreleased master. Many times it worked like that. Sometimes I'd find a title, but the master was destroyed. Another way of finding masters was to find a session with three consecutive numbers, and because four was the usual number of sides recorded, I'd ask for the factory to press up the number before and after that block of three, and sometimes something came up.

Anyway, with clues like that, I had found some unreleased things. But with Armstrong, several of them were orphans. Why, I've never known. He may have recorded just one side in those days, or it may have been that the numbering sequence got broken up, because that happens sometimes too. The long and short of it is, I think it was 11 unknown Armstrong Hot Fives and Sevens which came to light in one day. By the way, the article has a title. Art Hodes thought it up. The title is, "I Didn't Know What Time It Was," which of course is a reflection of my forgetting my watch and also the name of a standard tune that I've always liked.

About the same time I also found unreleased material by Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and many others. Well, you couldn't put everything out at once. But over a period of time, which includes after the war – because the series did get cut off for a reason which I will explain – I was able to get most of these unreleased things out. There are very few that never came out. They weren't by major artists. I'm thinking of Roy Palmer, a New Orleans trombone player who was in Chicago, a very obscure musician, made two sides and I still have the test pressings, but it was never really worth putting them out. I wanted to put them in some kind of a collection, but it never happened. There were a couple of sides by Willie "the Lion" Smith which were – the masters were lost, but I've got the test pressings. They're not that good, but it's a curiosity.

Another thing that came up was that there were a lot of second takes – I started calling them second masters – which were not used at the time, because the way they recorded was this: they would – I better describe the recording method, because it's very different from what people know today. Most people don't know about it. This is typical, for example, of the way the first Chicago jazz album, the first jazz album ever, got recorded. It was done with the recording being cut on a large wax cylinder which looked like a big, fat cheese. The performance would be taken down on the top of this cheese, which revolved on a turntable. It revolved in a very unusual way. Electric current was not so steady in those days, and apart from the fact that, as many collectors know, old recordings sometimes were recorded at 78 and a fraction revolutions, or 79, and maybe

77, but it was never exactly 78.6, or almost never exactly 78.6 in the old days. In fact, the standard I understand one time was something like 80, so that you'd hear music in the wrong keys. Even classic Armstrong records have been re-pitched as researchers have done what I never did, which was to carefully check the key in which the reproduction sounds as you play the record.

I started to say that electric current was not reliable for the speed of the turntable. So how did they do it? They had a pulley system in which the revolving gears were governed by the slow descent of a large round stone that had a hole in the middle. The rope, which – I knot, it's funny – the rope, which was part of this pulley system, was passed through the center of a stone and then a big know made on it. So the engineer would pull on the system of ropes and get the big stone up near the ceiling, and when the time came to start a take, in the control room the producer would say, "All right. We'll go on two," which meant that when – the studio clock had a second hand that kept going all the time. When it reached the two on the clock, that was when the musicians should start playing. So there were no announcements as you get now on tape, you know, "Master number" so-and-so, "take 1," and the musicians start playing. You had to time it so that the revolution of the turntable was up to speed at just the right bracket of, give or take, two seconds, let's say, so that when the musicians began playing, the grooves would be in the right place on that circular wax cylinder, which was the source of the actual pressing through a series of stages of negative, positive, negative, and then finally the positive, which was the finished pressing. Those were done by coating metal surfaces, which I'll describe again in a moment.

What would happen if there was a fluff or something went wrong, other than the musicians making a mistake which disqualified that performance, one would stop – the turntable would be stopped. The second engineer would take a big metal spatula, and he would literally scrape off the grooves that had been cut in the way. Crazy, isn't it? I had seen this before, because I had gone to record sessions, but I remember it very, very dramatically in the Decca studio.

Finally, if there was a performance – sometimes it happened very quickly, which was considered satisfactory – the whole wax cylinder would be taken off and set aside and put in a kind of a big hat box to be plated and saved as a master.

We'll come back to this in a moment.

[phone ringing interrupts recording]

Sneed: It's like Rube . . .

Avakian: Rube Goldberg?

Sneed: Yes, Rube Goldberg

Avakian: It sort of was. It looked that way because of the pulleys, more than anything else.

Sneed: No electricity involved?

Avakian: Not in the turntable revolving.

Sneed: I'll be darned.

Avakian: That was done entirely by gravity. I don't know what formula they used to come out to – 78.26, I believe, is the standard speed – but that's something that I could still find out about, because I have an old photograph of the man who became the head of the engineering department at Columbia Records when I went to work for them after I got out of the Army. His name is Vincent Liebler. Vin, I understand, is still alive. He must be pushing 90. This photograph shows Vin as the principal engineer in a studio at the old Brunswick Records building at 1775 Broadway. The second engineer is Cecil Bridge, who was in the engineering department all during the time that I worked at Columbia. Cecil, I think, is dead, but Vin is still alive. I must ask him questions about this system, because there are things that I don't know about it, and I've never asked why, because there was too much to ask and no time to ask it. It's like you mentioned, did I know Jelly Roll Morton? Yeah, I listened to Jelly Roll Morton in the back room of Steve Smith's HRS shop at 827 Seventh Avenue when he had no place to go. He was lonesome, he was sick, and he sat and talked to an audience of one, which was me. Steve was outside, taking care of customers.

Sneed: I want to know what he said.

Avakian: Ah, I want to know what he said, too, because I remember basically that he talked about how he was unappreciated. He told me anecdotes about the hard times that he had. I didn't ask him questions, because I was there listening in awe to this great man I never thought I'd meet. That was stupid, because I was, what?, 19 years old at the time. I should have been brave enough to say, "Mr. Morton, I'd like to ask you something." I didn't ask him one single real question. I just let him talk.

Sneed: But you heard him.

Avakian: There's no recording of it, and I can't remember what he said, except it was depressing. Isn't that sad.

Sneed: Bill Gottlieb is the only other person I know who met him and talked to him.

Avakian: Yeah. Nesuhi Ertegun met him in Washington and recorded him, actually.

Sneed: Well, of course, Alan Lomax.

Avakian: Alan Lomax is the classic research job, you might say.

[recording interrupted]

We just stopped for a bite of lunch. We were talking about the way records were made in the old pre-historic days of 1939, for example. This also relates to the second masters that I talked about, which were different takes than those that were issued. Sometimes, of course, two different takes got issued under the same catalog number, but that was usually because something would go wrong with the first choice master. They had to go to the next one, because that's all there was in those days. You couldn't go back to a tape. No tape.

What happened is that in the studio, once the hat box came out and the . . .

Sneed: . . . cheese went it.

Avakian: . . . cheese went into it, that would be designated by the engineer as the master number and a dash after the master number. It would be –1 or –A, depending on the system that was used. If there were two or three takes made that all seemed to be good, the engineer would mark the preference by calling the one they thought best –1 or A. The next would be –2 or B, depending on what system the company used. Sometimes there are as many as four takes that were marked and saved, but those usually came in the form of remakes, where the first session was finally considered not satisfactory. They went back, used the same master number on a different date, and then they would call it –3 or 4, or –C or D. As a result, there are some very interesting multiple versions of certain jazz performances. We won't go into details, but you can find them yourself if you're diligent enough.

What I did was compare many of the alternate takes that had never been used. Where I found that one was as good as or almost as good as, and interesting enough in terms of variant solos, I would release the alternate version. I would call that a second master and put it right on the label. To this day, people do that. It's gotten way out of hand, because you can buy, say, a Charlie Parker album – CD today, LP formerly – and you might have one side of nothing but 30 different stabs at *Salt Peanuts*, some of which last 4 seconds. That really is carrying it overboard. The excuse given, of course, is this is documentary, it's history, and so forth, but I have often felt that people don't really want that. Once

they buy it, they think to themselves, oh goodness, what a waste. I don't really want all these breakdowns and so on. Sometimes there's some very bad fluffs by the musicians, which is embarrassing. So I've always been very selective in that regard, and it has paid off.

I'll also jump ahead to a story about – when the word got out that tape was now the medium of making masters, and George Avakian is making splices – I'm one of the first people who ever did it. As a matter of fact, when we started using tape at Columbia Records, we were told – the engineers were told by their bosses and even, I think, the manufacturers, that you shouldn't splice unless you absolutely had to. You might create clicks, or the performance might be damaged by the imperfection of the splice. But I quickly found that that wasn't really so. So I made splices which the engineers kind of mind-boggled at, but it worked. The word got out. A well-known writer-reviewer who – I won't name him, because it's not a putdown or anything, but maybe he wouldn't want it to be known – said to me, "George, how could you dare edit the Dave Brubeck album that you just put out? I hear you made quite a few splices." I said, "I wanted to get the best possible performance for posterity." He said, "Yeah, but it's not a true performance, because he didn't play it that way." I said, "I think it's better, because you wouldn't want it the way it was done without splices." He persisted a little bit. I said, "Look, I'll give you Dave's phone number. Call him up, and ask him what he thinks." So I gave him the number. About ten minutes later, the phone rang. He said he spoke to Dave. I said, "Great. What did Dave say?" I'll censor the answer a little bit. He said, "Dave said that George saved my [blank blank dash]." So that was the end of commentary on that.

We now know about how second masters got to be preserved, because they were saved for as long as the company deemed necessary as a backup in case anything happened to the first one. Why would it be bad if something happened to the first one? The reason is this: they plated the original cylinder wax. That gave them a negative. That was known as – I have to stop and think, because I didn't think about this before. Was that the "mother"? We'll follow it through. Let's say that was the mother. Then they made a reverse on a thin metal plate, and that was the – no, wait a minute. The first was the master. Then came the mother, which was a positive. You could actually play it, but you would be risking damage to it. They would then make another process so that the mother was preserved as a mother that could produce more children later on.

The new reversal was called a stamper. The reason it was called a stamper is that that's what you stamped in a pressing machine onto the compound which people would call "hot wax." Instead it was really a hot resinous substance which, when cooled, preserved the grooves perfectly in a form which could be played. So that was the finished commercial pressing. This would be literally stamped by a device that looked like a waffle iron. That was the pressing machine. The workman would either pull a lever which brought down the top onto the biscuit – and they did call it a biscuit. It was placed

in there with two labels, one for the bottom of the disc and one for the top, placed on spindles. The pressing would be literally pressed like that.

As you watched this process – and the room was very hot, and it was kind of odorous, because you had all the smells of this compound as well as heat and all going on, presses side by side. Some of the pressmen were working in their undershirts, it was so hot – the excess stuff would come out of the sides, like a waffle or a pancake that had too much batter put in. The man who was doing this would have a stick in his hand, and he'd knock off the excess as it cooled. Then he would take the disc out. It still had some excess stuff and rough edges. He would mount it on a spindle which revolved the disk rapidly, and he would literally, not sandpaper exactly, but use I don't recall what kind of emery to smooth off the surface – the edge, I mean. That was the finished record. That would . . .

Sneed: Each one? That much . . .

Avakian: Each one, one at a time.

Sneed: Wow. Imagine.

Avakian: One at a time. So if you had a million-seller 78-rpm record – which nobody had, because they didn't sell that big – but if you had a 10,000-seller, 10,000 individual disks had to be made like that, practically by hand once they came out of the machine. They were placed on a cardboard resting thing with a belt that took it to the lady – it was always women – who sat next to the chain, or rather, the belt. As the records came off, she would check them by eye to make sure that there were no little flecks of materials stuck in the grooves. They used to hold it up to the light like this, holding the edges of the record. Possibly that person also did a finishing job at the edge, a couple of swipes with goodness knows what. I don't know any more. Then it would go into a paper sleeve, and that was the record that you would buy.

That's a quick explanation of what 78-rpm's were like and how they were made. If nobody ever said anything about this to the Smithsonian, I'm very happy to have had the opportunity to do it with possibly some small elements that I haven't got quite right. Somebody else can correct them. I'm not going to.

So we have now covered the aspect of these lost masters that I found. Did I say that I had not only the book by Panassié, which had catalog numbers of European releases, but Panassié had also sent me an early edition of Charles Delaunay's *Hot discographie.* That book went through at least, I think, three editions in France. I ended up getting all of them at one point. The last one came out during the war. It was impossible to get in America, but Charles Delaunay brought it with him and gave me a copy when he came to the States

in 1946 to discuss with Criterion Publishing Company, which was really a music publisher, the idea of bringing *Hot discographie* up to date.

What was *Hot discographie*? That was a book that Delaunay prepared laboriously, which contained all the jazz records that he could find out about. It contained the records in the form of being organized by subject and artist. It listed the personnel, as much as he could find out, for each record; the date, approximate, sometimes exact, or hopefully exact; the master numbers; and the release – catalog numbers, the American release, the French, German, whatever. This was an absolutely extraordinary work for a man to do in the middle and late ’30s, because information was very hard to come by. I still don’t know how he did it. When I asked him and Panassié how they were able to operate, they said a lot of the information came by visiting American musicians, who were few in number, but we have to remember that in the 1930s, Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter came to Europe and stayed there for quite a while. They answered questions, which helped formulate the first discography of Delaunay and also gave material for Panassié for his book, *Le jazz hot.* The other musicians who came from time to time included the Duke Ellington orchestra, Louis Armstrong’s orchestra in the early ’30s, or Louis Armstrong himself. He recorded in Europe with European musicians.

The Frenchmen, who seemed to be the leaders in doing the research, and were, never actually came to America until after the war, but you wouldn’t know it, judging from the work that they did. This documentation was so invaluable that, without it, I couldn’t have done the Hot Jazz Classics reissues the way I did.

There’s a little something which I felt hesitant about, but I’m going to tell the story. I’ve told it before. An unpleasant thing happened, which should have taught me a lesson in terms of avoiding something like this later, but never did. After the first release of the Hot Jazz Classics came out, there was a lot of excitement. The publicity was mainly within music circles. But it was considered quite a remarkable thing, which it was. When it came time for the second release, I prepared the material the same way, including picking out the sides for four more albums and writing, of course, the liner notes, which were pasted on the inside of the flap of the album itself.
When the second group came out, I was shocked to find that the notes were not exactly as I had written and that instead of my byline as it appeared on the first one, there was a big, long streamer across the whole top of the section where the notes were, saying, “BY JOHN HAMMOND, WORLD’S GREATEST JAZZ AUTHORITY,” in big capital letters. My byline had been small, like a newspaper byline.

The next time I went to New York, I saw John. I said, “John, what happened?” He said, “Oh, I don’t know. All I know is that the advertising publicity people felt that since I’m working for the company, my name should be on it.” He didn’t go on to say, “I had nothing to do with it.”

Sneed: Was it still your copy?

Avakian: Not entirely.

Sneed: But some of it?

Avakian: It was paraphrased. Some of it was the same. Some of it was not. John, for instance, took some swipes at Duke Ellington, whom he never liked. As a matter of fact, I learned early on that Ellington and Armstrong were the musicians who wouldn't talk to him, because he was a very opinionated person, and as everyone knows, even back then, he was kind of a self promoter. I am not going to talk more about that, but there are some classic stories which collectors used to tell in those days.

So John, who on the surface was very friendly, bubbly, and so forth, was really a strange person, very eager to grab credit and so forth.

Sneed: Insecure?

Avakian: Yeah. It was amazing. Here he was . . .

Sneed: He had no reason to be.

Avakian: . . . a multi-millionaire and in a position of great power, where he was able to get the Count Basie band to New York and to get them booked by – oh gosh, I can't think of his name. Willard Alexander, who was an agent at that time, I believe with Music Corporation of America. I may be wrong about that. He ended up having his own agency. Willard had also booked the Benny Goodman orchestra. John later became Benny Goodman's brother-in-law, as everybody knows. So it was to Willard that he suggested the Basie band be booked in New York.

But there was something peculiarly self-centered and insecure about John, and he never lost it. So John said, "I'll take care of that. It won't happen again." The next edition came out, and the album credit, although the notes were mine, said by either George Avakian and John Hammond, or by John Hammond and George Avakian. So I realized, oh, to heck with it. Who am I, a college student? John Hammond, big man in jazz and records that does this. What am I going to do, complain to somebody? Of course people up in New Haven – Jerry King, Ray Fuller, Marshall Stearns – knew. We all kind of shrugged it off – well, that's John – because we knew what he was like. So I've never complained about that, although many people have pointed this out to me when I explain what happened. So I think there were a total of five albums with a joint byline, which was

undeserved, because he had absolutely nothing to do with them, and four that had the huge John Hammond paraphrased liner notes.

At that point, the series stopped, because World War II was rolling along. The Japanese captured Singapore, which was the great port for the outlet of Malaysian shellac, which was the most important ingredient for phonograph records. The record business started to get scrap drives to reprocess materials for the pressing of future records. That instituted a period in which a lot of collectors' items were lost, because before then – like Bill Russell going through little towns in the South, Jerry and I, for example, would spend afternoons scouring the various neighborhoods of New Haven, looking for records.

We had one funny experience. We would go into Salvation Army stores, Goodwill Stores, and all the music stores, anything. The records usually were sold for something between a penny and five cents, never more than five cents. There was one place, which was a jukebox operator's place on Grand Street, on the other side of the tracks, literally in New Haven. I forget the man's name. He was a surly guy who put up with us because we poured over records one at a time, and then we would say, "We're going to take these." We'd take 10 records, and they would cost us 20 cents, you see? Finally – most of them were not jukebox records. He just seemed to get scrap records somehow. I found great stuff there, early Armstrong, Lil's Hot Shots, which is Lillian Armstrong – Hardin Armstrong – fronting the Armstrong recording group on OKeh, but under her own name, because it was on Vocalion, those wonderful rectangular yellow-label Vocalions.

Some of the jukebox records were unplayed on one side, because there would be a hit side. Very often, we were glad to pick up the other one – the records that way, because the other side was the one we were more interested in. But mainly there were out-of-print collector's items.

One day we made a transaction with him. He said, "What you have there are special records." I said, "Really? What special records?" He said, "I'll tell you after you've picked them." So from then on we spent five cents instead of two cents for records that – Max. That was his name. Max is a jukebox outlet. So now you know something about what record collecting was like in those days.

Sneed: You could have presented Max with your bill as the selector. So isn't that . . .

Avakian: He was kind of a goofy guy, but that's all right. We got a lot of good records from him.

During that time, the Hot Jazz Classics faded away. I was still writing for *Tempo*, and I had my own radio program, which the David Dean Smith Music Shop let me do for half an hour over a New Haven station. I could play anything I wanted, which was wonderful,

because I thought Mr. Smith would say, “George, I want you to play Glenn Miller” and so forth, because that’s where he’s selling records. But he just did it as an institutional thing. The theme song I chose was side two of the four sides on 78 of Duke’s *Reminiscing in Tempo,* which opens with a beautiful Art Whetsol trumpet solo. That theme really drew quite a response. I used to get phone calls at the station, and people wrote post cards to the station – not letters – penny postcards. So maybe I did do some good by using the Duke Ellington theme and telling stories about jazz records as I played them.

Along came the war, and I got drafted right after graduation. Jerry went into the Navy as a naval ROTC graduate, as an ensign. He came out of it as an admiral and ended up being the executive officer to Admiral Thomas Moorer, who was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff after the war. He ended up being the commander of the naval forces toward the end of the Vietnam War, which we never discuss, because I think he knew how I felt, and I knew how he felt. But he’s a wonderful friend who always remained just that. When we see each other or see Ray – Ray Fuller, who ended up a major in the field artillery – it’s just as though we hadn’t been apart. That’s the kind of friendship which is worth everything in life, and to a little extent at least, jazz and records had something to do with that.

I myself came out as a second lieutenant. I got a field commission in the Mindanao campaign. I was in New Guinea and the Leyte invasion and Mindanao, the Army of Occupation.

Sneed: Leyte?

Avakian: Leyte, yeah, the first landing. I was in on the second day, which was very fortunate, because the first day was very tough. The second day was cloudy, and the Japanese air force didn’t show up. So we got ashore without being disturbed. On the third day they bombed the beach and we were already inland.

Sneed: Was it Leyte in the photograph that was in *Life* of the – was it three American bodies on the beach?

Avakian: I don’t know.

Sneed: Do you remember that?

Avakian: I don’t think I ever saw that. No. Remember, I was overseas.

Sneed: I have it.

Avakian: I might have seen it later. Leyte is, of course, where General MacArthur landed, further down from where we landed. We landed in Red Beach, which was to the right, near the Tacloban airport. About the third day, I drove a jeep with some of the other fellows in my unit. I was a master sergeant by then. Somebody came running toward us, waving his hands frantically. We wondered, what's going on? It was an American soldier. He was yelling. When we stopped, we could hear his voice saying, "You're going into a mine field." It hadn't been marked yet. So there were some . . .

Sneed: You put on the brakes.

Avakian: We put on the brakes, and we backed up very carefully.

After the Army . . .

Sneed: Excuse me. That just – that was maybe one or two minutes about something that today's generation doesn't know anything about.

Avakian: I guess.

Sneed: They really don't. In the schools now, one of the mandates is to teach young people about World War II, because they can't believe that it really existed, the same way the Holocaust is pooh-poohed.

Avakian: Wow. It existed all right.

Sneed: And you were really in the thick of it, because the South Pacific . . .

Avakian: Yeah. I didn't go overseas for quite a while, but when I did, I missed the New Guinea campaign, but the American Army being the way it operated with decorations, I got a medal of it, because I was there in time for the period of the official closing of the New Guinea campaign to stop. That was almost embarrassing.

It was an experience.

Sneed: Were you in the jungle?

Avakian: Yeah, in and out, you might say. But it wasn't so awful, because I wasn't – I was in the infantry, but I was at the rear and went on patrol a couple of times and came back okay.

In any event, with the end of the war, I got back home in late February. I guess it was March by the time I reached New York, because I stopped off to see my sister, who had

gotten married to a friend of mine who was a Californian, and she was living in California.

When I got home, almost the first thing that happened, of course, was, “What are you going to do now, George?” I said to my dad, who always wanted me to go into the family business, “I’d like to go back into the record business,” because Mr. Wallerstein had said to me, when I was going overseas – was drafted, rather, not overseas – he said, “George, when you get back at the end of a year” – we all thought at that time, because that’s what the draft stipulation was, not 4½ years – “when you get back, if you decide not to go into your father’s business, you’re welcome to come to Columbia.” I was very pleased to hear that, because that’s what I really wanted to do.

My father was a very family-oriented man. That’s why the family managed to get to America and prosper. He was also aware enough that I had gone off into a direction of my own and that I should perhaps be encouraged just for the sake of keeping up initiative. He said, “If you want to go into the record business, that’s fine. Then when you decide you have had enough of it” – he didn’t say, “when you want to get serious,” but I guess that’s what he meant – “you can always come into the rug business. That’ll be fine.”

I never did until many years later. I’ll never forget. One of the things that he said to me – I think this happened in my senior year at college. Yeah, because he was well aware of the Hot Jazz Classics series and all that. One day, I went down to the office on a Saturday. They always worked a half day Saturdays before the war, perhaps even after. We went out to lunch. He said, “Tell me about these records. How much do they sell for?” I told him. He said, “What is the markup between the distributor” and so forth, and then, “What does the manufacturer really get?” It turned out that it was somewhat less than half of what the public paid. He said, “Okay. These records can break.” “Uh-huh.” “They get scratched, right?” “Uh-huh.” “And when you manufacture them, some of them are defective, and you have to throw them away.” I said, “Yes, Pop.” “And the dealers might have the privilege of returning them.” “That’s right.” “And they have to be packed carefully, going and coming, and so on. So the manufacturer ends up with a few cents per record to pay all his bills.” I said, “That’s right, Pop.” He said, “Remember that man who was on the floor, looking at rugs, before we went out to lunch?” I said yes, I do. He said, “That man bought one rug, and that rug will pay for half of your tuition this year at Yale.” I got the message.

Anyway, as I say, he was very good about it, and I did go back to work at Columbia. This time it wasn’t just $25 a week for one day. It was five days a week, and I got paid $50 a week, which is a good salary for that time. I should say that $25 for a week was not a bad salary before the war, and I got it for one day, essentially.

I was the lone man on the recording staff, which consisted – apart from the classical department and two people who did the what we now call country-and-western and blues records, the popular staff consisted of Joe Higgins at the top; Morty Palitz, who was his musical director, you might say, because he also arranged and conducted; and myself. There were only three of us. Later on, the staff was expanded to one more person. There's no sense going into names or anything, because they're not important in terms of this project. But the big thing was that there were some dates where people were busy or out sick or on vacation. So gradually I started doing sessions, pop sessions. In that way – and also of course at the beginning I went to sessions to observe how Columbia recorded – in that way, I almost accidentally got to record people like Frank Sinatra, say, and there was also the opportunity to do a session now and then with an artist like Harry James, who of course didn't remember me from the time that I was a kid, and Basie. Not Goodman, at that time, nor Ellington. I missed them in that particular period.

Then around 1947, I guess it was, the company had a man come in who was in charge of the international department. When he left, there was nobody in New York to run the international part of the operation, and I was asked to do it because of a strange reason. I was the only one who spoke a foreign language in the whole New York office. That consisted of French, German, and Armenian, which did me no good. I'd also spoken Russian, I'm told, even better than I spoke Armenian, back in my childhood days, but my parents stopped speaking Russian when they came to America, because they were more interested in our preserving the Armenian heritage of the family, and they also felt that if Mary – my sister – and I both continued to speak Russian – she was much younger, but she did speak some Russian – it might be confusing. It would be better that we concentrated on Armenian. I know that's true, because I know other Armenian children who came to America as immigrants, and their Armenian was also mixed with, say, Turkish, because they lived in the Turkish part of Armenia, and sometimes I never knew which word was right. So my Armenian isn't that pure, but it stayed with me, for which I'm very grateful, even though it's not very useful, except when you're in Armenia.

So there I was, running the international department, with the factory end, which was really more important than my end, being run by two people, the head of the operation, which involved mainly contacting directly to South America, a big market. That was Sandor Forges, who became the head of the international department at Capitol Records and which led to the beginning of a pre-Columbia Records friendship with Jim Conkling, who became the president of Columbia and the president of Capitol. Mr. Forges told him good things about me. So when Jim walked in, I was the one person that he knew somewhat. Ralph Alarcon was his assistant. Ralph was Mexican. He knew the Spanish market inside out. So I wasn't alone in doing that.

It was a very interesting department. I used to get records as samples, to consider for release in America, from all over the world, through EMI, which was the Columbia

affiliate abroad. Electrical and Mechanical Industries was the name of the organization. Along with His Master's Voice, it was the most powerful record organization in the world.

The connection of Europe and all led to my having credit for two million-selling singles, one of which I shouldn't really – I didn't really take credit for. One came about with a domestic recording. The international department put out records in – I think it was something like 20-odd languages, most of which I didn't know. I didn't have to. But we also put out English-language vocal records with an international slant. One of the – in fact the foremost artist in that category was Frankie Yankovic and his Yanks, which was a five-piece polka band from Cleveland. Frank was – let me think. I think he was Croatian. I think of this because Yugoslavia was just as mixed up then as it is now. In fact, we had a separate catalog called Serbo-Croatian. The big polka band there was the Skertich Brothers. These names don't mean anything to anybody, but I want to give a flavor of what I was doing, because it wasn't just jazz. In fact there was very little jazz at the beginning.

The musicians union declared a recording ban – they couldn't get a satisfactory contract with the record companies – around 194[x] – the beginning of '48, I believe it was, and it wasn't settled until December '48.

Sneed: Was that [James] Petrillo?

Avakian: Petrillo, right. There were a couple of such periods. During that period, the final solution to getting songs by – new songs by Frank Sinatra and people like that was to use a big vocal chorus behind them, no instruments.

When the ban ended – by the way, we put out some strange kinds of reissues, because that's all we could – either put out stuff that was already in the catalog and cut out, an example being the hit song *As Time Goes By,* which was in the movie *Casablanca.* Nobody could make a new record of it at that time. So you scrambled around to put out a reissue by anybody. The other thing was to find something that had never been released and which might be popular now. Columbia had a huge surprise hit record. I don't recall if this went a million copies. It may have. It was an unreleased instrumental by Les Brown, which was a throwaway side at the end of a session, the song *I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm,* a beautiful, tender arrangement. It's one of the things that I was involved in putting out without having any idea if it would sell. It was a runaway seller, the biggest record in the country for weeks. Why? Nobody knew. It was pretty. That was all. But there wasn't a lot of fresh stuff coming out, and that happened to hit.

The Yankovic thing was a real live recording that I did which sold a million copies. I had no idea what was going to happen, because when the ban was over, Frank called me from

Cleveland. We hadn't met. He said, "I understand you're in charge now. I'm going to play in New York. I've got four songs ready to record, and you'll be producing them. So I just wanted to tell you that I'll be in New York on" these dates. I said, "Fine. I'll book the studios." So we arranged that over the telephone. He came in, and I produced my first polka-class record, which really meant polkas and waltzes, because you always tried to put a waltz on the other side of a polka. That's what the public wanted.

He came in, and he did a song called *Blue Skirt Waltz* and said, "Be sure now that this is the first one you put out, because I'm playing it and everybody loves it." "Fine. I'll put it out." Bang, it goes up like a skyrocket and outsells everybody in the business. Why? Because that segment of the public knew the song from the public performances that Frank had made, and they hadn't been able to buy a record, or new record at least, by Frank in so long. They flocked to buy it. So I was a sudden hero in an area that I never expected.

During that time, immediately before, I did some original jazz recording, but not much. Like, Sidney Bechet was playing in New York. I loved Bechet and had been so sorry that at the age of 20 I could have recorded Bechet and Armstrong, whom I adored, but I turned it down because of that contretemps with Decca. In recording him, I got a special kick, because Bob Wilber and his high school friends had formed Bob Wilber's Scarsdale Wildcats. They had already made one session for a small company. I don't recall who it was. It wasn't Commodore, I don't think. Anyway – oh, wait a minute. Maybe it was one that I made myself. I'll have to check it out, because Harry Crawford, who was working in the Commodore Music Shop, wanted to record them, and he'd gotten some money together, but not enough. Since I was in the shop all the time, he said, "Listen. Why doesn't Columbia record them?" I said, "Don't be silly. Columbia is not going to record 17-year-old high school boys." So he said, "Look, I've got some money. Have you got some money? Let's . . . " "I know how to get pressings made, and Columbia won't mind." They surely didn't. I mentioned it to Mr. Wallerstein. He laughed and said, "Go ahead and do it."

So we put out six sides on a label that we called Ramparts. Crawford himself drew the ramparts, like military ramparts. The Ramparts, of course, was a New Orleans street name. We put out four sides by the band and two solos with rhythm section, by Dick Wellstood. I think we sold something like, oh, maybe 75 copies at the best. I wish now that . . .

Sneed: I wonder if Bob has a copy?

Avakian: I don't think anybody has them.

Sneed: Really?

Avakian: I don't have them. I have the metal masters myself here.

Sneed: Oh, you do.

Avakian: I sold the rights to Orrin Keepnews and his partner, the one who died. I can see his face before me, with the glasses and everything. They had a company that they called – oh gee, isn't that terrible? I can't remember the name of it. Could it have been Riverside, even then? Later it became Riverside, because they had their office in the basement of a building near Riverside Drive on LaSalle Street, at the corner of Morning- – not Morningside Drive. It's the street parallel to Broadway between Broadway and Riverside Drive. It's the street that the old Juilliard School is on.

Sneed: Claremont?

Avakian: Claremont – Claremont Avenue. So when they really got going, they called the label Riverside. That's how it got the name. At that time, Anahid's family was living on Riverside Drive at number 550, at the end of LaSalle Street. After we got married, her parents were lost in a plane crash over Lake Michigan on their way to see Mrs. Ajemian's sister. Anahid and I gave up our apartment in Peter Cooper Village and moved in with Maro in the Ajemian apartments. So I used to see a lot of Bill Grauer. That's his name, Bill Grauer and Orrin Keepnews, forming a friendship that lasts to this day with the surviving member, Orrin Keepnews. He has a very nice son named Peter who is a writer and pretty prominent in music writing circles.

The band, the Bob Wilber band, ended up recording anyway for Columbia, because not long after I had suggested to Sidney that he use them on a record date. He was very happy to do it. We made four sides, and we used three of them, plus five of Sidney, for a Sidney Bechet album. I guess that may be available somewhere in the world today. But it's a remarkable thing, because it was the first time that kids that young had recorded jazz since the Austin High School Gang, so called, in Chicago, which included Jimmy McPartland as the youngest member. Jimmy, I think, might have been 17 or 18, anyway, when he recorded the McKenzie-Condon sides on OKeh, which also happened to be the first sides ever made with a bass drum, because a full set of drums was absolutely taboo in the recording studios. The engineers felt that this is impossible to record. So they simply banned them outright. But Gene Krupa brought in his bass drum and a full kit, which was not very full, of course. You can hear that on the first two sides that were made, as well as the second two made a week later, *China Boy* and *Sugar, Liza* and *Nobody's Sweetheart.*

The recording of jazz, as I say, was very unimportant, because there were no sales to speak of. Sidney Bechet's sales were not very good, and I couldn't keep him very long. I

did an album with Kid Ory with the help of Nesuhi Ertegun, who was living in California and knew Ory really well.

I met Ory in an unusual way. On that trip in 1939 to California, Marshall and I went to the – well, the word then was "negro" – the negro musicians union, because the musicians union in many cities, including in Los Angeles, were divided into white and black. While we were there, we met some old-time musicians. I believe Ory might have taken us there, because that's when I met Kid Ory. The musician that I remember meeting was the subject of a conversation that I had with somebody. I don't know who it was, but it was an old-time musician who was sitting there. I said, "I wonder what happened to Mutt Carey? He came out to California." The man turned this way and pointed and said, "There's Mutt Carey sitting in that chair." So I got to meet another one of these heroes that I had never heard in person and never did hear until years later, because he wasn't playing at the time.

Sneed: My list of artists I want to ask you about keeps growing, but what about Kid Ory, a name that everybody knows, but I never talked to anyone who . . . ?

Avakian: You mean, why was he Kid Ory?

Sneed: No, what was he like?

Avakian: Oh, he was a really nice guy. He was a quiet, gentlemanly sort with a happy smile most of the time. I saw him when he was serious and troubled and so on, but his face relaxed in a way where you felt that this was a man who was basically happy within himself. It showed in his conversation. He was a very polite guy. I hate to say "guy," when I think of him as being very much older than me, because I would never think of him that way before, just as I would never call Mr. Wallerstein "Ted."

Sneed: I noticed that. He's always "Mr. Wallerstein."

Avakian: Oh yeah, yeah. He was an austere man, nice man, but he was always "Mr. Wallerstein."

Sneed: But you were a kid when you . . .

Avakian: Yes, I was. I was 27 by the time I came back out of the Army. You see, there were no young people in the record business in those days. So I was very, very much the junior. I remember using the word "junior" when I mentioned that I was the junior man on the staff. You didn't just ask for a job or go through any – God knows, there are no training programs. I just fell into it because of my background and the luck of having produced the one album and then the series of reissues, so that I was acceptable. Anyone

coming in off the street and applying for a job like mine wouldn't have gotten it, because, first of all, I wasn't really needed, except I guess at that point they did really want an extra man on for the future. But I got on because I had been an enthusiastic young person who had found himself a niche, and then, as the business grew, as you see, they needed an international department. There I was, with the qualifications, and by then Mr. Wallerstein knew that I had the interest in the international side of everything to be able to run the department.

I was also later still put in charge of the popular album department, because they didn't really have a department, but they decided they might as well call it that, because I was doing some packages that fit the album category. It really became important when the LPs were – LP method was invented and popular albums really had a place of their own.

Sneed: When did the first LP come out?

Avakian: 1948.

[phone ringing interrupts recording]

They were marketed partially because they had developed to the point where they were good enough to market and there had been this lull in recording. So it was a good time to make a switch like that. It caused quite a sensation. I remember the photograph of Peter Goldmark, the CBS engineer who was in charge of the project, which was an interesting thing. This project was not entirely in the hands of the recording engineers of the Columbia Records division, but it was in charge of Peter Goldmark, who was an experimenter, inventor, a real scientific type, a theoretical person, you might say. There was this famous photograph – it was published again in *Life* magazine – of Peter Goldmark with a collection of 78-rpm's that extended up over his head, and then, at his feet, the same thing on LP, a dramatic demonstration.

When that happened – this was just about the same time, as I recall, as recording Frankie Yankovic's million-seller hit – the transferring of 78-rpm albums to LP was not a priority, because this was essentially a project aimed at the classical market – for obvious reasons. I have no need to go into it – and pop albums were secondary. So it was a slow start. It didn't get really big until much later, when we switched to the 12-inch format, but that's a separate story. Do you want me to go into it, or is it too technical? But it does relate to jazz.

Sneed: I'm interested in – I think everybody is interested in the market, and jazz and the classics, and why things . . .

Avakian: Why things happen.

Sneed: . . . why things happen, and why is the music – has always worked in Europe and not here.

Avakian: We talked a little bit about that when I mentioned how the 78-rpm jazz records in Europe stayed in the catalog, but not here, because there was a more serious view, you see, of American jazz. To back up again to that point, I didn't mention this, but consider, in America, all kinds of pop records – real junk as we all know – came out: dreadful house bands, dreadful singers, dreadful songs. But in Europe, only a very few American records came out, and they were mainly the most interesting ones, because I would say half of the more popular Louis Armstrong records came out. When they did, for example – or Ellington – when they did, they were not just one out of hundreds. They were one out of maybe 20 records that came out from America at a given time period, or less. Therefore, they got exposure and more people were interested in them than could possibly be in America in terms of the entire market for purchasing those records. Therefore they weren't buried, and therefore they also stayed in the catalogs. Here, they were gone pretty fast, because they were not big hit records, big hit in the sense of what was big at that time.

Sneed: But jazz never had the acceptance here that it did in Europe.

Avakian: That's true. It stood out in Europe, and it did not here, partially because there was less competition for jazz in Europe, even though it was an American product, and partly because I think the European record buyers and listeners were more discriminating than the Americans were. They weren't spoiled by the trash.

Sneed: That must be one part. Were they also less prejudiced by the creators?

Avakian: I don't know that there was really prejudice in the United States, except that – there was nothing like race prejudice, because I don't think that most Americans knew that what they were listening to might be played by black musicians, and they couldn't care less. But the music was relatively raucous compared to the pap that was being dispensed by the commercial dance bands and the commercial studio bands, and therefore it shook people up more. I'm sure that there must have been clergymen ranting about *Tiger Rag* or something like that. I don't know, because I didn't experience any of that.

I haven't read enough about the social history of American popular music. There are people who have made quite a study of it, like Jim Marr, for example, who is still working on a book which will talk about American popular music of World War I and on into the Twenties on a level beyond – before World War I – on a level beyond anything that I think has been published that I know of. He's quite an expert in that area.

[recording interrupted]

As the 10-inch LP catalog grew slowly, very much in the shadow of the classical LPs, which were 12-inch, some opportunities came along. I did a few 10-inch jazz LPs per se, but the main thing was that we developed a series of dance party records which were aimed at teenagers, whose tastes were a little different in those days, of course. That's where bands came in, and some singers could be included in that.

The most interesting series of all, I thought, was the piano series, which came about because a study had been published, I think in the *Wall Street Journal*, that American homes had more pianos in them than phonographs, which amazed us. The sales department put 2 and 2 together and said, hey, this must mean that people want to hear piano music, but they aren't playing the piano any more, because people don't take lessons. They don't stay at home. They go to movies and all that. The automobile takes them out of the house. So we should have a series of piano records, all types, to play in the phonographs that are in the house along with the piano that isn't played.

That was great, because it gave me a chance to produce albums by jazz pianists that I liked who were not very well known. I used them right and left. I remember using Ralph Sutton, for example.

Sneed: Oh my. Did you do that, the Suttons?

Avakian: Yeah.

Sneed: The 10-inch LP?

Avakian: Right. I think there were two of them.

Sneed: Yes.

Avakian: One was unpublished Fats Waller songs. Or did I do that with Joe Sullivan? That was Joe Sullivan.

Sneed: No, you did it with Sutton.

Avakian: Sutton was the unpublished Waller? No, I think it was Joe Sullivan.

Sneed: Really?

Avakian: I think it was Joe Sullivan.

Sneed: There are two Suttons that you did.

Avakian: Yeah, that's right. At least one of them was possible because of a series. It may say "Piano Party Series" or something like that on the covers. I don't remember. I don't have so many of them anymore, because you can't save everything and sometimes you don't want to. I mean, not putting anybody down, but when you're in the record business and you're grinding out records day after day such as I was . . .

Sneed: That was in the '50s. That was 1950-who?

Avakian: That would be very early '50s, yeah.

Wonderful things happened, like I got a chance to make an album with Jess Stacy and my great idol of my extreme youth, Earl Hines, which I never expected to be able to do.

That series also led to the signing of Erroll Garner, which came about in an odd way. I just want to back up a little about Erroll and me personally, because I came out of the Army in early 1946. My brother, who was 7 years younger than I, had gone into the Navy after graduating from Yale and going to the Columbia midshipmen's school at Morningside Heights, which was great for my mother, because she knew when they were going to have reveille and the – not taps, but the retreat at the end of the day, army style, navy style, and she would come down from Washington Heights on the subway and go stand with the people at the edge of the big square in front of Low Library and tell people, "That's my boy in the second row."

Mom was very, very proud of us kids. I remember a funny thing happened once when somebody asked her, "What does George do at Columbia Records?" She didn't know how to say in English "department head," and so she said in Armenian, "He's something like a president," not realizing the president was absolutely the top of the whole thing. So we got a big kick out of that. I had occasion to tell Jim Conkling that story when Jim was president of Columbia Records, which was during the LP era, the great expansion period of Columbia, the most fun I ever had in my life.

I got a letter from Europe. As sometimes happened, people didn't know exactly how to address me, because at Yale I used to get letters addressed to Professor George Avakian, 724 Yale Station, and all that, because they thought, surely this erudite man writing in *Tempo* magazine and elsewhere must be a full professor. So I got a letter one day addressed to President George Avakian, Columbia Records. I took the – I had opened it. It was from a fan in Europe or something like that. He thought I must be president. That's why.

Sneed: Probably heard your mother.

Avakian: Maybe so. So I gave it to Jim, and I said, "Jim, I think this is for you." He glanced at the letter and said, "That's pretty funny." Then I told him the story that my mother had said, "he's something like a president." He said, "She may be right. You may be executive vice president one day," which I never was.

We got to talking about Erroll Garner. I want to back up to still one other thing, which was my first experience in hearing Charlie Parker, which possibly was the second, because Marshall Stearns and I weren't sure, but we thought that we heard Charlie Parker playing in the section of the – saxophone section of the Jay McShann band. But I do remember that practically all the solos were played by a very good tenor saxophonist named William Scott. So the chances are that Parker, who was not necessarily featured at all with the Jay McShann band, as we know from the Decca records that came out after – about a year later, I guess, Jay McShann was signed by Decca – it's possible that Parker either wasn't in the band then, or he was just playing third alto.

Coming out of the Pacific in late February 1946, I stopped off, as I said, to see my sister in Los Angeles. Ross Russell already had his Dial Record shop, and he started the Dial record, and he was recording Parker and Gillespie. Ross said he'd take me to Billy Berg's, because Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie had just opened with their band, which I recall included Dodo Marmarosa on piano. I can't remember who the drummer – probably whoever was recording on Dial at the time with Parker, including Gillespie.

I was flabbergasted. I hadn't heard this kind of music while I was overseas. I told him frankly I found it rather puzzling. Ross gave me some verbal explanations of what I had missed, because it was a big jump from having heard Dizzy Gillespie with Cab Calloway's band.

I'll tell a little story about Dizzy that Marshall fell into. One day Marshall – this was about maybe 193- – it had to be not later than the summer of '39, because he had gone off to Honolulu by then. So I guess it was about '38. Dizzy was already introducing some pretty unusual phrases in his playing. When he came to visit in New Haven, Marshall asked him, "Dizzy, this phrase that I've heard you play," and he sang it. I don't recall what the phrase was. "I hear you do it every now and then. What's the significance of it?" Dizzy said, "Oh, you mean this one?", and he scats a phrase, he laughed, and he said, "Oh, I just thought it would be commercial." Isn't that cute? But that's the way Dizzy was. He didn't take himself as a terribly serious person that should be analyzed and he was creating a great trend or anything like that. He was just blowing what he was blowing.

Sneed: He really was as happy as he . . .

Avakian: Oh, he was like that, from the first time that I met him with the Calloway band before the war. I must have met Milt Hinton, but I don't remember him. Milt doesn't remember. He says, "Oh yeah, we played New Haven lots of times." That's where I first met Benny Carter, for example, when he came back out of his long stay in Europe, where he became music director of the BBC.

Sneed: What you said before is interesting, because it reminded me of something that Eddie Heywood said. When you came back after the war and heard this new music, that's when Eddie said he felt that the war was really responsible for the sudden void, the step backwards for jazz, because there was no transitional period for the public, that it . . .

Avakian: That's pretty true, and there was a recording ban which contributed to that in some ways too. Also, the big bands were destroyed by the fact that it was impossible to go touring, no gasoline, and the New York City tax, which I think kept on after the war, prevented people from hiring bands, because if you – wait, how did it work? There was a special tax.

Sneed: The cabaret?

Avakian: Cabaret tax, but I can't remember the details anymore. Isn't that funny? I used to know it inside out.

Sneed: Was that the one – I wanted to ask you too, because you conducted some – the first jazz classes for NYU.

Avakian: Yes, that's right, in '46, at Cafe Society Downtown. Yeah, I went right past that. Let's talk about that right now, because that's a pretty interesting thing. Here's what happened. There was a man named Milton Stern who was in charge of extension courses, adult education courses, at NYU. He was something of a jazz fan. He thought that jazz was a very important historical and musical phenomenon which was worthy of attention by NYU. He made some inquiries. He talked to John Hammond, who said essentially the same thing that he had told Ted Wallerstein when Mr. Wallerstein wanted to start a series of reissues. He said, "I'm not so big on jazz history." A little unusual for John to admit anything, but he did now and then. "But the man you want is working at Columbia Records."

So I got together with Milt. We became very good friends, and we set up this course. Since John was still a person who was writing for various papers, *New Masses* and so forth, and better known than I was, just a kid coming back from the Army, John was the person who made the opening speech at the first class and then turned it over to me.

Although he was listed as teaching the course also, he really didn't do any of it to speak of. But that was . . .

Sneed: He introduced you.

Avakian: Yeah. It was like the other story.

Jim Marr, the man I mentioned who was so knowledgeable about American popular music and jazz, happened to take that course, because he thought it was interesting. He remembers it well.

Sneed: Was it for credit?

Avakian: It was not for credit. It was just an extension course for people who wanted to take the course. There was a modest fee, a very modest fee. I got paid nothing for it. I was glad to do it for nothing, just for the interest and excitement of doing it.

I still have one transcript that one of the female students offered to make. She took shorthand for herself. She made shorthand notes. She told me that she had done that. I said, "If you ever transcribe it, I'd love to get a copy." I think I have a copy somewhere. It's interesting to read, because I sound like the way I don't think I sound, probably just the way I sound now.

Sneed: What's that?

Avakian: Rambling on.

Sneed: No.

Avakian: No? I speak in – I feel sometimes in disjointed sentences, but I don't say "er" and "ah" as much as I used to years ago, which my wife always teases me about.

It's interesting. I did something like this for the BBC. When was it? Two summers ago? Gosh, it can't be. Or was it last summer? Ian Carr and Derrick Drescher at the BBC, the producer, came over. We spent a couple of days talking like this. They went back with the tapes and edited a series of eight programs with musical illustrations. It's interesting to listen to them, because I don't realize what I sound like talking, because I never listen to myself. Anyhow, that's beside the point. I'm going to enjoy listening to these tapes. I guarantee it.

We were talking about . . .

Sneed: . . . your NYU course, because it probably was the first.

Avakian: Yes, it was the very first, but it was not the first that gave credit. The first that gave credit was done by Nesuhi Ertegun at UCLA. I believe that came about maybe two or three years later. When I went to one of the conferences of the – the annual conference of the IAJE, International Association of Jazz Educators, I made a remark to some of the officers when we were having dinner together, "You guys don't realize it, but I'm the grandfather of you all. I gave the very first course which opened the doors for you all." They looked at me a little strange, because some of them were so young, they had no idea what I was talking about, but a couple of the older ones laughed and said, "By God, you're right. We should make you an honorary chairman or something." But they don't think of it that way, I guess, and it's not the same thing, because the jazz educators are literally that: they're educating young musicians in jazz, and it's a performance – and compositional secondarily – but primarily a performance course, whereas mine was a history course.

I gave that for two years at the Cafe Society Downtown.

Sneed: Was Barney there?

Avakian: Barney? Oh Barney, yes, Barney Josephson. He only came to a couple of them, because, as he put it, "This is a lot of fun, but I live it every day. I can't stand more."

The third year was done at a classroom building at the east end of – at the NYU campus, on one of the upper floors. At that point, Marshall Stearns had settled into New York. I talked to him about expanding this, because I said, "Look, this is fun, to give informal talks, but I can't really get into it too deeply, and I think the university wants something more profound." So essentially he took over the course. I still appeared as a star guest lecturer, but it was his show primarily. He did a much better job, because he organized everything much better than I did, went into more depth, and he brought in a couple of musicians to speak, which was not the easiest, because the musicians didn't know quite what to say. There was no piano there to demonstrate. But it was nice.

Then it was dropped, after – I think maybe it went four years. Then it was dropped and essentially got picked up again by the record academy, the New York chapter of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. That was done with the chairmanship, you might say, of George Simon. I was like a co-chairman. Then we divided it up into various elements which covered phases of the music business. So it became, in the second year of the Academy's sponsorship of it, kind of a course on the music business, not just jazz. In fact, the first year was generally a pop course.

That grew into a regular NARAS course at NYU. Finally, Dick Broderick, who was an associate of mine when I was with RCA in 1960, ’62, left RCA and joined the NYU faculty and ran a course within the music department which included engineering and so forth. My son took it and became a rather good engineer and did – what do they call it? Not apprentice work, but – what’s the word? It’s like a . . .

Sneed: Intern?

Avakian: Yeah, intern work for NYC, which he enjoyed greatly. He wanted to become a recording engineer and finally decided, no, he wasn’t going to, because he didn’t care too much working with some of the people that he would be working with. He liked rock and so forth, but he decided, no, this is not for me. He didn’t care too much for people who ran recording studios and so forth. So he dropped it, which disappointed me, because I thought, gee, it’s great to have a son who’s a recording engineer and interested in the business, because my girls, his older sisters, were interested in music, and one of them still plays the piano and has her own little ensemble that plays for folk dancing, Morris dancing, country dances, and so forth, in the Pittsburgh area. She’s a very good pianist in that vein and wrote a pretty good rag, which I sent to Turk Murphy, but unfortunately Turk never got to playing it before he died.

Sneed: Maybe Dave Jason would be interested. Do you know Dave Jason?

Avakian: No, I don’t.

Sneed: He’s written books on ragtime and written a lot on the music. He teaches. He’s a professor at C. W. Post. He’d be interested.

Avakian: No kidding. I’ve got a copy somewhere. Maro has a copy. I’ll ask Maro to send it to me.

Sneed: I counted. That’s two daughters and one son?

Avakian: Yes, that’s right. The oldest girl I named after my sister-in-law Maro. The second daughter I named after my wife Anahid, which caused quite a bit of confusion in the family. Then my third child – our third child – is Gregory. I just picked the name because of St. Gregory, who was the Armenian churchman who created the Armenian alphabet. Armenian is a completely unique language. People say, oh, is it anything like Greek or Russian or something? I say no, the alphabet is totally unique. It was created by St. Gregory to enable the Armenians to read the Bible in their own language with their own alphabet, which was a nice reason for inventing an alphabet.

Our church, I should mention, goes back to the early 300s. I think the actual founding date is something like 307 AD. It's the oldest national church in Christianity, which means essentially that no nation adopted Christianity as a state religion until the Armenians did. They've been paying the price ever since.

Sneed: Is that why your family left Armenia? Because of all of the – looking at the history of the country . . .

Avakian: No, no. We were not in Armenia. As I say, my mother's family came from the corner of Georgia. There are many, many Armenians living in Georgia still. In fact, Tiflis – Tbilisi, the capitol of Georgia, was the largest center of Armenians in that part of the world.

Armenia itself used to be very big. It covered a good deal of what is now Turkey, Persia, and virtually all of the Caucasus region, which means south of the Caucasus Mountains between the Black Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east. But it got chipped away over centuries. Sometimes there were pockets, like the pocket everybody knows about now, Nagorno-Karabakh, which is inside Azerbaijan, but it's completely Armenian. It's very close to the border of Armenia, but there's a separation of, I think, about 20 kilometers. That finally exploded into quite a situation when the Azerbaijanis began deciding that they should wipe out the Armenians, which is a little habit that their close cousins, the Turks, developed in the late 19th century and brought to a really expert position in 1915, when the rest of the world was involved in the war and set a nice precedent for a man named Adolph Hitler, who decided they could do the same thing very efficiently with the Jews inside the borders of Germany and elsewhere where he went. He did a terrific job. He outdid the Turks, I must say.

Our family, both on my mother's side and my father's side, were not directly affected, my father's side of the family not affected because they got out of the border area between Persia and Turkey just before the Turkish armies came through, which I mentioned earlier. On the other hand, my wife's family came from western Turkey, which was, again, originally Armenian. They were living in Istanbul. Yes, that's right, both the mother and father. I guess they had a good life, because Dr. Ajemian, being a doctor, was a man of some position. The way Turkish society was, the most prominent people in the professions in the arts and in business were Armenians, because that was the way the Armenians could really make a living. They – it sounds a little chauvinistic, but they had the drive and the educational background and so forth to go into the professions and arts to a degree to which the local populace did not have. I guess part of the reason why the Armenians got into so much trouble in Turkey was that they got to be too big, too important in too many places.

The same sort of thing happened in my mother's family in Georgia after she came with my sister and me, a year-and-a-half almost – yeah, a year-and-a-half after my father came by himself. She left behind two brothers, one of whom had become the – for some years, the head of the tobacco industry in the state of Georgia, which was by then a Soviet state, just as Armenia became a Soviet state in 1920, when the Soviet government overthrew the Armenian Republic that had been formed after the war. In 1933 Stalin, who himself was a Georgian, decided to purge the dangerous elements in Georgia, as he did elsewhere. Some 300,000 people were swept from their homes, I'm told, in one night, which sounds incredible. They included people like my uncle Garigen, who was the head of the tobacco industry but was Armenian. Maybe he would have gotten it in the neck anyway if he had been a Georgian, but that's what happened. His entire family disappeared, every one of them. My wife had no – my mother had no idea what had happened to them.

A couple of years earlier, maybe a year earlier, a family friend, who had come to America to study a Columbia University and settled here, kept going back to Tiflis and would look up her family and bring reports, exchange presents, and so on. After his last trip, he said, "The family says, don't write any more. It's getting a little dangerous. But we'll let you know when this blows over. Don't worry." Never heard from them again.

The next word we had was just about a year and two months ago. My brother's daughter, Alexandra, who's a rather successful photo-journalist. In fact, in the current issue of *Time*, she has a photograph of Arafat, because *Time* sent her over to Tunis to cover the story on Arafat. She flew on the same plane to Washington with him, and so forth. She's over in Armenia right now.

She was living, actually, in Moscow for a while, doing a great deal of freelance work in the whole area of eastern Europe as the governments began to crumble. She covered the fall of the Berlin wall, for example. I don't know if you ever saw the 50th anniversary issue of *Life* magazine. The inside cover is a flap that opens up. One of the 50 – one of the great *Life* photographs of the 50 years of *Life* magazine is my niece's double-spread photo of the Berlin wall being knocked down. There's a guy holding a sledgehammer, and he's about to slug the wall. You've seen it, I'm sure, here and there. It's been republished. The whole crowd of people, and there are flecks of rainwater in the photograph, because it was raining at that time.

The long and short of it is that over the years, as my wife and I on separate trips – we never got to the Soviet Union together, but she took two tours with her quartet – we would try to find out something in Georgia, when we were in Tiflis, about the family. Nothing ever was possible to discover about them.

Alexandra, my niece, had gone a couple of times also, and she had failed. This last time she went was to photograph [Eduard] Shevardnadze when he went back to become president of Georgia. By then he knew who she was. She said to him, "I'd like to find out about my mother's family." She said, "It's the Avedesian family. The brother was the head of the tobacco industry," etc. "They disappeared in '33." He turned to one of his aides and said, "I think it's possible to get information at this time. Help this nice girl out." It didn't hurt that she's a stunningly beautiful girl.

Sure enough, this assistant came up with an Avedesian who seemed to fit the description she had given. He took her to talk to this man and his family, and he interpreted for her. He answered various questions. "Yes, I had an aunt who went to American, and her name was Maro[?sha]," and so forth, and "Yes, there was an uncle named Garigen and a younger one named [?Horen]. We don't know what happened to them."

What had happened to him was that he was born the year of that purge. He was told about all of this by an aunt of his who took him and his two brothers with her when the family was sent to central Asia. He said that some of the family was executed. Others were sent to Siberia. Lost track of all of them, except his aunt and his two brothers, who are still alive. Finally he said, "Are you doing an article about this woman that you asked me about?" "No, it's my grandmother." Wow. What an experience. Out came the champagne and everything. So we found a member of the family at long last. I went to see them a year ago, in early November.

Sneed: That must have been very emotional.

Avakian: It was terrific. The editor of the Armenian language newspaper in Tiflis interviewed my niece and then interviewed me when I got there about a month-and-a-half later. He wrote a very nice article about the finding of the family. I could go on more about it. This is a digression which is beside the point.

Sneed: I think it's part of – I don't think so. I think it's part of George Avakian.

Avakian: Well, it sure is, all the way, and of course we haven't even touched upon all my activities with using music to bring people in the Soviet Union and America together.

Sneed: We should talk about that.

Avakian: And the bizarre business of getting the Order of Lenin. Wow.

We were talking just about . . .

Sneed: And knighted by Malta.

Avakian: Yes, that's right, before that. We'll talk about it, maybe. You coming back tomorrow?

The business about LPs and how I was able to sneak jazz in, because essentially that was what happened. I was about to tell about the signing of Erroll Garner for this piano series. Erroll came into it in an odd way. He was managed, as he always was, by Martha Glaser. She saw that there was action going on with Columbia and piano. It hadn't occurred to me to approach Erroll, because I figured he was under contract. Apropos of Ross Russell telling me to just listen to Dizzy and Parker and I would catch on to what they were doing, when I got out of the Army, my brother got out of the Navy later. When he came out of the Pacific – we never crossed paths, unfortunately – one of the things that we started to do together, which we had never done before, was to go listen to jazz together, because he was seven years younger than I and he was too little to go out with me then, although, interestingly enough, another student at the Horace Mann School did take him down to Greenwich Village and to Harlem and so forth. That was a fellow named Jack Kerouac. Isn't that weird? Jack Kerouac spent one year at Horace Mann preparatory to getting into Columbia. He needed some extra credits, and there was a certain connection between Columbia and Horace Mann. He went in on an athletic scholarship, broke his leg running a kickoff back for a touchdown, and never played again. But he was the star of the Horace Mann football team, and my brother was the – I guess you could call him the star lineman. So they picked up on each other. Kerouac was interested in jazz, and he knew who I was, although we had never met. Eventually – let me think. Yeah, before he graduated. That's right. In that year, we did meet, because my brother Al, whose name was really Aram Albert Avakian, but we called him Al at home – Aram said, "Jack Kerouac, who's a kid in our school who writes for the paper now and then, would like to interview you. He loves jazz," and so on. I said okay. One weekend I sat down and talked to him. The files and records of the Horace Mann archives contains not only George Avakian's interview with Benny Goodman, but Jack Kerouac's interview with George Avakian.

Sneed: What goes around comes around.

Avakian: Yeah, that's right. So, getting back to Aram and Erroll Garner, because he is the key here. He told me that when he'd been going along 52nd Street with Kerouac while I was away, he had greatly enjoyed Erroll Garner. I said, "Erroll Garner. I heard his records when I came back. He can't keep time. Listen to him. He doesn't have any time at all." Al said something which he later said about other people too. He said, "George, just listen." So I did.

So here I was, an Erroll Garner fan. What happened was that Mitch Miller was recording some pop artists in Chicago. Mitch was in charge of the pop singles, and I was in charge

of the pop albums. Martha Glaser approached him about recording Erroll, because she was very anxious to have Erroll make singles, so that he'd get on the air. There wasn't that much airplay on jazz, because jazz at that point was not really on singles. It was on LPs. Very little airplay for LPs.

So Mitch signed Erroll and I believe did maybe two sessions with him in Chicago before he came back. I was delighted that Erroll Garner was signed to the label. So I decided to put him in the *Piano Moods.* That was the series, *Piano Moods.* I put him in that, and we hit it off immediately. I'd never spoken to him before. I'd heard him in a club. You don't go up to a musician and say, "Hello, I'd like to introduce myself." At least I don't.

From that day on, we – and I include my brother in that – were the closest of friends. Erroll loved my brother, and I know he loved me. The three of us hung out a good deal. We used to spend an evening in his apartment on 57th Street, which was right – it was sort of above the – a big restaurant – Russian Tea Room. It was in the adjoining building, which was torn down. I think they had a parking lot in there, a narrow parking lot, for a while.

Erroll's apartment was very strange. It actually was in two buildings, side by side, with a wall broken through. That was obvious, because you'd go down a hallway, then you'd have to walk up a little ramp, and then you were in the level of the next – the rest of the apartment. It was like the studios in – Carnegie Hall studios. You've been there. I can see that you're nodding there, Julie. It was a fun thing. Erroll would talk about how he'd be drinking, and he'd forget that he's going to go downhill all of a sudden in the apartment, and he'd stagger, "Where am I? Where am I?"

Erroll, incidentally, enjoyed – I mean, he wasn't a heavy drinker – he enjoyed Otard cognac, and so did my brother. I didn't like it. It was too sweet for me, and I couldn't take very much of it. After a while, visiting Erroll, it would be a case of Erroll breaking into a big smile and saying, "I guess it's time for the Otard."

That's the level that I enjoyed so much with these musicians. Most of them were really friends. That was it more than anything, and I got over being in awe of them after a while, got to be 30, 32 years old.

Sneed: Your memories of Erroll Garner are particularly precious, because Martha said that he did not give interviews.

Avakian: That's right. I never interviewed him.

Sneed: So that the rest of us don't know much about him.

Avakian: Yeah, that's true. I never realized that until I saw a reference to that, and Martha mentioned it again years later. I didn't realize that, that there were no interviews published about Erroll. As a matter of fact, I never knew that much about Erroll until the book by James Doran came out, which was apparently a pretty good biography. He did a lot of interviewing of people who had known him.

At the same time, you didn't really have to know facts beyond that he was just a kid who couldn't read music, from Pittsburgh, who heard a lot of good jazz musicians, played with them, and all that. Erroll was not just a jazz musician. He was just a wonderful person.

Sneed: Was he?

Avakian: Oh, what a personality. He was charming. My wife adored him.

Sneed: Sense of humor?

Avakian: Oh yeah, wonderful sense of humor. One of the things I deeply regret was one night my wife and I came back from visiting her relatives on Long Island. We drove to Basin Street. At that time there was just one Basin Street, on 51st [Street] between Seventh [Avenue] and Broadway, a tiny block that's the length of this room. Erroll was closing that night, and I had to talk to him about something before I left town the next day. Our daughter Maro was with us. Maro at that time must have been about maybe four years old. She'd been sleeping in the car as we drove in from Manhasset. So she was wide awake when we went into the club. I asked Ralph Watkins – and Phoebe was there too – if it was all right to bring her in. Ralph said, "That's okay. Nobody's around at this hour." So we sat there. Erroll just finished his set, or was about to finish it, and my wife and I were about to order, when Erroll came over to the table and immediately took up a conversation with little Maro. He said, "What do you want to drink? How about some milk?" She said okay. So Erroll waved to the waiter, who brought drinks for Martha and me – I guess Erroll didn't have one at that time – and two glasses of milk. Martha, when the order was placed, ran out to the kitchen, where Phoebe was at that moment, and said, "Phoebe, is your photographer still here?" Phoebe said, "Oh no, she's gone for the night." Martha went out to see if there was a photographer at Birdland, and there wasn't. She came back just so disappointed, because she said, "My God, imagine, if we could have had Erroll drinking milk with Maro with one glass of milk and two straws." She was right. That would have been a great – that would have been a classic picture, completely unique in the history of jazz.

They'd have been so cute together, because Maro at that time wore glasses. She was very little, but at the age of one, one of her eyes began to cross. Finally it was corrected

through, I guess, growing up and exercise and so on. But she wore glasses and looked quite studious, cute as a button, of course. She and Erroll made quite a pair.

I thought of that years later when Erroll and I were talking backstage in Stockholm after one of his concerts. Somebody took a photograph of us as we were talking head to head. When I saw the photograph, I said, "Gee, this looks just like you and Maro talking to each other with two glasses of milk. Instead all we have is our noses and profile." He said, "Yeah, but my nose is better than your nose." I love that picture, because both of us have hooked noses – mine is not as hooked as his was – and it makes a great combination.

Sneed: You did his *Concert by the Sea.*

Avakian: I didn't actually do it. I'll tell you the story of it, though. You did say, did I do *Concert by the Sea*?

Sneed: Yeah.

Avakian: No. Here's what happened. Erroll had actually gone over to Mercury Records for a while. I can't remember now what the dispute was. I hate to say it, but I think Martha had had a fight with Mitch, because Mitch didn't want to put out singles by Erroll, because they didn't sell. She wanted them out, because no other pianist had them out. You know Martha. She thought there would be more airplay. She was probably right, but it wasn't in Columbia's interests to do that for no great reason, because we were doing so well in the sales anyway, and the jockeys who were playing the albums appealed to the audience that was buying Erroll. So we thought, okay, that's all right. So Mitch refused. I think it was really over that that she jumped to Mercury for a while. She was unhappy there. She may not say so now.

I got a call from her saying, "George, I did something last night which I think is fabulous." Erroll played a concert at Fort Ord, California. They have an internal radio system for the soldiers in which the barracks are wired for the Fort Ord radio station – the soldiers' station – and one of the soldiers asked permission for his radio unit to make a recording of Erroll to be broadcast – not broadcast, but sent over the wires inside the barracks and the rec rooms and so forth, for the soldiers who couldn't get to the concert. She said, "Okay, but under the condition that you give me the tape and I can do anything I want with it afterwards."

So that's how she acquired the tape. I said, "Good. Is it stereo?" "No, it's just the monaural" – it was done on a Wollensak, a very good but very heavy German machine that tore your arm off when you tried to lift it. It looked like a chunk of lead, because if you ever saw one, it was all silvery. She said, "I'll send it to you, because I think it's the

best thing Erroll ever did." I said okay, fine. I said, "How about your contract at Mercury?" "No, it's okay. We're free." "Good," I said. "Welcome home."

She sent it to me and called me a couple of days later and said, "How do you like it?" I said, "You're right. It's magnificent, but the recording is terrible. I hope I can fix it up." I said, "We'll do it, because I don't think he'll ever play that great for a whole night again." I'm sure he did, but it never got caught on records.

I sweated with that 7½-inch-speed tape and did all kinds of tricks with equalization and boosting this and boosting that and throwing a little echo on here and there. The one part that I thought was totally impossible was in the middle of a piece where he hit the piano chord so hard that the microphone went dead for a fraction of a second. It just simply knocked everything out. It came right back on again, but you have this gap which must have been – well, I actually measured it to see, can we do anything? Can we make a splice and bring it together? It was probably about a third of a second, because I think it was about 5 inches long, which even at a fairly fast tempo, where the feeling goes rushing by, it leaves a heck of a hole in your ears when you listen.

I managed to throw enough echo on it and disguise the echo, so that it sounds as though the chord rings, and I don't know where that chord is anymore. I tried to find it, listening on the CD version, which I picked up some time ago. I can't tell where that chord is. I know more or less which one it has to be. But I can't pick out that chord. That's how well we were able to mask it.

That album ended up being the biggest selling jazz album up to that time, with the exception of the Benny Goodman Carnegie Hall concert, which we'll get to, maybe tomorrow. By the way, what are we going to do? I'm talking too long, and you've got to go. Do you have to stop at a certain time? You probably don't have enough tape.

Let's dive into the 12-inch LPs, which is, after all, the medium that really made popular albums what they are today and of course made jazz albums permanently all-time etc. important in the music industry. This came about in the following fashion: everything in pop LPs was 10-inch for quite a while. I believe it was 1951 that companies – especially Capitol. I think they were the first – began to put two 10-inch LPs back-to-back on a 12-inch LP, 24 songs – sorry, 12 songs, 6 on each side – sorry, 16, because there were 8 songs on a 10-inch LP. 16 songs was a case of having to pay a statutory rate for copyright royalties of 2 cents per song. When you paid 32 cents out just for copyrights, that's a pretty big bite.

Columbia Records was reluctant to do that. We went for a 12-inch LP with six songs on a side. We were charging $4.98. I believe that Capitol and other companies – not much following of Capitol, but some – were charging $5.98, which was the classical price. We

felt that even $4.98 is too much, because we were ready to cut, and I believe we did cut, about that time, the Masterworks price down to $4.95. Not $4.98. I don't know why, but the tax worked out that way at that time. We wanted to have a $3.95 LP. We did it with the copyright problem being solved in terms of Jim Conkling, the president of the company at that time – and by the way, I think a terrific guy for that period, because there was a matter of expansion and fresh thinking, and he really had it. I know Goddard Lieberson gets all the publicity, but Goddard was still the vice president in charge of the classical department. I believe he was also made the executive vice president, in addition, at that time. Later became president, when Jim left.

Jim's idea was to go to the publishers, the big publishers who published most of the standard music which was going into the pop LP catalog, music of Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jerome Kern, and so forth – a few publishers controlled most of that music – to persuade them to grant a 1½-cent rate for at least a year, in the hopes that we would be able to sell enough more volume, with a lower price and be able to invest the money saved by the 6 cents per LP into the expansion of the catalog, and therefore they would make more money than they would otherwise.

All the publishers – and this appeal went to all of the publishers – all the publishers except the biggest, which was Music Publishers Holding Corporation, which controlled most of Gershwin and these composers, went along. Herman Starr, the president of Music Publishers Holding Corporation, which also had several other subsidiary names under it, said no. "If you want my music, you pay 2 cents." So okay. Jim said, "George, record as little of Herman's music as you can. I know you can't avoid it, but we've got to go with this plan. So let's do it."

I tell this story, because that's the way we stole a march on the rest of the industry with a $3.95 price, later $3.98, six songs on each side. Nobody could figure out how we could afford it. In fact, I used to get kidded when I'd go into Lindy's, the big music business restaurant of the time, on Broadway. They'd say, "Boy, George, how long can you keep that up? You're going to have to give it up, and that's when we'll get you. You're number one now, but you can't stay that way for long, because you're losing money, right?" I'd say, "No, no, we're all right." They didn't realize what we were doing. The word hadn't gotten around. Why? The publishers did not want to start cutting prices to other people.

We actually managed to make a go of it. The volume went up surprisingly well. It was enormously helped by the fact that we had the Columbia Record Club, which was the first mail-order club of any consequence. That improved sales of the department hugely. We even had a jazz division with that, but I'll go into that. By the way, a year later, Jim and I were invited out to lunch by Herman Starr, and he said, "I want to talk about that whole thing with you." We thought, hey, he's going to give in. Instead he had a printout.

This was before computers, but these machines still ground out these accordion-pleated papers. He said, “I just want to show you the royalties that I got from you this year compared to last year.” He said, “I got more money this year when you said that you weren’t going to record my music than you did pay me before, and I know why, because you had to pay more royalties on fewer recordings because your volume was so big. So I win.” He was right. So gradually that got phased out. We could afford it by then, because of the volume.

The importance of the volume was this: this made a new opening for jazz, and I jumped into it with both feet, with the blessings of Jim and the sales department and the promotion people. The first thing that we decided was we should take advantage of the longer playing time, that we never really took advantage of before, with the 10-inch LP. Let’s have longer performances by jazz musicians. There was another advantage to that. The 2-cent statutory rate, at that time, was applicable even if a composition went on for a long time. It didn’t have to be a 3-minute composition. So that saved on royalties there.

Also, RCA Victor had come out with the extended-play 45-rpm record, which was a small 7-inch disc geared, they said, to the most popular classical music of all, which was overtures and arias. The playing time of 4½ minutes or so was perfect for that 7-inch 45-rpm side. Although, when I went to RCA in 1960, I said to the guys, “Hey, tell me the truth. How did you come up with 45-rpm, claiming it was the best speed and all that, because there’s no reason to think that it’s the best speed.” One of the guys said, “You were putting out 33s. We didn’t want to copy you. So we took 78 minus 33, and it came out 45.” I said, “Come on. That’s not really true.” “Yes,” he said, “it’s really true.” So I asked around the table. Nobody could really confirm or deny that. But it’s a good story, and to this day I don’t really know the answer. I don’t think anyone at RCA really knows. Maybe they don’t want to spoil a good story, or maybe they don’t want to admit it. It’s one or the other.

We began first by making the counterparts, because we had to put out 45s. There was such an entrenchment by RCA in the market that we had to put out 45 counterparts. We began making 6-minute performances by jazz musicians. Basically we concentrated on Erroll Garner, because he was a pianist, that was easy to do, he was available, he was here, and he was prolific. This sounds unbelievable, but I found when I was recording Erroll that one take was all you ever really needed with him. The only time I made a second take of a performance, out of an amazing figure which I think has been written up somewhere: something like 68 or 86 different tunes. Only once was there a second take necessary, and that was because Erroll himself stopped at the beginning of a piece and said, “I didn’t like that. Let’s do it again.” As far as I was concerned, all of them were worth releasing.

There was a dispute later on, which if we have time, we'll touch upon, which ended up with Erroll leaving Columbia forever, long after I left, I'm happy to say. I would have hated to have seen him gone a second time while I was there.

The first Erroll Garner 33-rpm album was the one that we just called *Erroll Garner,* because we wanted to establish him as a star. We wanted concentration on his name. That's the one that contains the six-minute, more or less, performances. They are incredible. *Will You Still be Mine?* and *Caravan.* Name any one of them. They're all great. My personal favorite is *Will You Still be Mine?*

That went into doing more long performances. There still weren't too many opportunities to do them, because it implied artists who went in for long improvisation. The most obvious thing, I thought, was to put a jam session on a record, because that had been done through Norman Granz taping – making acetates, actually, before tape, of his Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts. I thought, why not do it right in the studio, where you can really control the sound and get it to sound good, because some of those Granz recordings were not well recorded, because they were done on the run, you might say. I don't want to put Norman down, but he was not exactly meticulous with technical details and so forth. He was just having a good time recording what he liked.

That came to the point where I decided to use Buck Clayton as the centerpiece for a series of jam session recordings. Here, I'm sorry to say, we get into John Hammond again, because John said in his book, at the end, that he was the producer of several Buck Clayton performances, which he lists. I think he lists four of them. They're spread over three different LPs. Why didn't he claim the others? I think he just adlibbed it. He was grabbing credit in his usual way. There was a little legitimacy to his making that claim. It appeared to be solid, because at the time of the Clayton recordings, John had had trouble with his wife, and he was sleeping on Irving Townsend's couch. Irving was a fellow that I brought into the company to work in the advertising department, writing copy and so forth. He really wanted to get into A&R, but I had no budget. I snuck him in later on, by getting somebody else to replace him, which was the same way that I got my first assistant, Cal Lampley, by stealing him from the engineering department, where he was listening to tapes that had been marked – scores that had been marked by the classical producer that afternoon. That night, Cal would make the splices as indicated on the score. The next morning, the producer would check them. I found out about him, and I managed to get him into the pop A&R album department as my only assistant, and I replaced him with Teo Macero, who was looking for a job and was a fine musician. I had heard him with Charlie Mingus, and I heard his recordings. So Teo got that job. That's how he eventually got into A&R after I left and after Cal left.

So, now we're in the jam session recordings with Buck. We picked the personnel, and because I felt – Irving and I both felt so sorry for John, I said, "I'll invite him to come to

the sessions." He came to the second session, which turned out to be very good, because at the first session, I made a discovery, that it's very difficult for Buck to run the jam session out in the studio all alone and play, while I'm in the control room. So, once we got it balanced, I told the engineer, "Chappie" [Harold Chapman], "let's do this. You're all set. You don't need me in here. I'll go out, and I'll help Buck call the takes and so forth. We'll have a much easier time," which turned out to be the case.

The second session, I told John how we were going to operate, and I told him, "You stay in the control room," and I invited him to write something on the notes about it, because I wanted to do something to get him out of the doldrums. I mean, he looked like the wrath of God. He was so upset, losing weight, which at that time in his life John couldn't very well afford. So what happens is, years later, he claims that he produced the records and doesn't mention me in the book at all, which amazed me, because . . .

Sneed: You didn't even get honorable mention?

Avakian: No, no, no. Forget about the records. He never mentions me in the book, which shocked everybody.

Sneed: Not at all?

Avakian: Not at all, which shocked and amazed people, including me, because the big thing – I told you that people used to make jokes about John and his credit grabbing. I might as well tell this story. What the hell. He had two clichés, which all the record collectors of the time – there were very few of us – knew about. One of them was, "I was in the studio at the time," and the other was, "and then I discovered." So if you wanted to get a joke – a big laugh out of a collector you hadn't met before, if he said something and you wanted to emphasize that what you were saying was absolutely so, you'd just say, with a straight face, "I was in the studio at the time personally when I discovered," and you couldn't finish the sentence. There'd be a huge guffaw. "Yeah, that's John."

So I thought that means that when John writes his book – and I heard from Irving that he was writing it, because he talked to Irving, and Irving wrote the book – I thought, so John's going to talk about how he discovered George Avakian and got him this job and all that as a student, and he might take some credit from me doing at Columbia a much bigger job than he ever did. He never said a word.

I never said a word to Irving. By then I was long gone out of Columbia Records, and I wasn't even in the record business at the time, except in a way of whenever I felt like it. But one day I went out to California and talked to Irv. He had retired in California. He was not well, and he had to retire early. He died, unfortunately, not long after. A wonderful guy, and a good clarinetist, by the way. Loved Benny Goodman and sounded

like him. I said, “Irving, what happened? I thought surely John would say, ‘and then I discovered George Avakian’.” He said, “No, no, he didn’t want to talk about you.” I realized why. Why? I had ended up doing far more than he ever did.

Sneed: The ultimate compliment.

Avakian: Yeah. He should have been proud that he had picked somebody who was – I guess I was a teenager. No, I was 20 when I got the job with . . .

Sneed: But that’s back to his insecurity.

Avakian: Yeah, that’s right. Unfortunately, another thing happened. When Buck Clayton was writing his book, as it happened, John talked to him, and I didn’t. John planted the thing in Buck’s head that it was his idea to record the jam sessions, and Buck said so at the beginning of a chapter. “One day John Hammond called me up,” and so on. Buck mentions me also. But it’s as though it was John’s idea, which is not true.

So when the book came out, I saw Buck, who was still a very close friend. I said, “Hey, Buck, how on earth did you come to say that?” He said, “I was talking to John, and John told me about it, yeah.” I said, “But you know it isn’t true. I had already signed you to a contract, and remember, we did other recordings as well.” Buck said, “Yeah, that’s right.” Then he paused and he said, “But you know that John, he’s so darn convincing.”

Sneed: That’s the perfect story.

Avakian: It is. You know John. You knew John. So you know that’s exactly what happens.

Sneed: And also Buck.

Avakian: Right, and Buck too. I said, “Gee, Buck, it’s a shame you and I weren’t in contact at that time. He said, “I never thought of it.” He said, “Next edition, I’ll fix it. Don’t worry.” But there was never another edition, and when they put out the paperback, they refused to change anything, because it was too expensive. But Buck always said, “There’s going to be a next edition. I’ve got to fix that.” But now out comes the series on Mosaic, and at least Dan Morgenstern, who wrote the notes, says in it, “produced by George Avakian, assisted by John Hammond.” But John wasn’t even in the studio for any except the second and third sessions, and he did nothing on the third session, because we had the system all worked out. He just came because I invited him. I was being nice to him.

Sneed: It seems to me that this is the place for a comment, that everyone that . . .

Julie [?Burstein]: We're almost out of tape.

[recording interrupted]

Sneed: Something that you were just saying about Buck. It makes me think that everyone that I talked to about you has had just nothing but, "Oh, George Avakian. He's a wonderful person."

Avakian: I'm leaving the room.

Sneed: No, everyone. That's most unusual in – that's from artists and people in the music business. Maybe that's why this kind of thing –these omissions have happened, because George Avakian is such a nice guy that you have not been as aggressive about pushing yourself as some others.

Avakian: That's true. I didn't want – but not only that. I never wanted to go to John and say, "John, how on earth could you do this?" He knew what he had done.

Sneed: It was done.

Avakian: But that went right back to when I was 20 years old and he pulled that "John Hammond, world's greatest jazz authority" line on me. At that time, of course, I had no security whatsoever in the music business. I was just a college student.

Sneed: But you said something about family, when I asked you about this before, that it's the way you were brought up.

Avakian: That's certainly true. In my family, you were always polite, especially to elders, and you didn't do anything like get into controversies and so forth. That didn't mean that you were a pushover. But we were really brought up in a way which you don't see very much of anymore.

Sneed: I'm afraid that you're right. Something else that we're interested in . . .

Avakian: I always get up when a lady comes in the room.

Sneed: Yes.

Avakian: Even today.

Sneed: And I know women that will hit you for doing that. That's what's terrible.

Avakian: I know. It's unfortunate. I've actually gotten a look from someone who doesn't know me, as though, "What are you trying to do? Make me feel I'm a woman?," and the answer, yes, why not?

Sneed: Is there something wrong with being a woman?

Avakian: It's wonderful. To me, that's the greatest thing about the human race. Good Lord, if it was all men, it would be terrible. It would be dull as a . . .

Sneed: Julie and I agree with you. I think that we were talking too about sexism, chauvinism in the – have you seen women artists have a harder time?

Avakian: Oh my, yes. My wife is an example, and my sister-in-law. I think if Anahid had been a man, she would have had a much, much bigger career. Here she comes down the stairs and I have to be quiet. I was talking about you, honey. That's all right.

[recording interrupted]

I've seen that first hand with my wife and her sister. I'm proud about one thing, that Gloria Steinem once told somebody that George Avakian was the first women's lib husband, because I supported my wife in her career so thoroughly.

I met Gloria Steinem the first time in my own home when Paul Desmond brought her up for dinner on the night that he was going off to London after we had finished an album at RCA with Bob Prince having written string arrangements for settings for Paul's improvisations. The album was completed on the eve of his – Prince went to London to conduct his ballet for Jerome Robbins, which was called *New York Export: Opus Jazz.* It was Robbins's most successful ballet worldwide. It went around the world twice. Bob was the conductor of the orchestra on both world tours.

I had originally recorded three tracks of a five track, one side on an LP by Bob of original music. On the other side I had commissioned Teo Macero to write one side of an LP's worth of original music. Some interesting things happened with this album. It's called *What's New?* It's never been reissued on CD. These two completely unknown composers wrote this music, and here's what happened: Robbins selected three of Prince's five sections and had him add two more new ones to the – what's the word? Not prescription, but to the direction. That's still not the word. To the type of music he wanted for the rest of his ballet. I ended up recording it at Warner Bros. around 1959 or '60 and then again at RCA in '62, which is the eve of Paul going over there.

There's a reason beyond Gloria Steinem when I'm going to talk about this. God, these long stories that I get into. But I think they're interesting. I really do.

The other side of that *What's New?* album yielded two things for Teo. One was that Leonard Bernstein heard it and liked it so much that he commissioned Teo to write a concerto for six-piece jazz band and symphony orchestra, which he debuted a year later with the New York Philharmonic. It was the first such work by an American composer. The only previous one, I think, was by Rolf Liebermann, the Swiss composer, and frankly it's not all that good. Teo's is better.

Then, later on, when my brother directed his first movie, *End of the Road,* which got nine pages in *Life* magazine when it came out – It was a big [? succés destin ?], an underground hit with a small but devoted audience – we used parts of Teo's music as parts of the soundtrack, and Teo wrote the rest of the music for the soundtrack. So a lot came out of that one album that never meant much to most people. It was an experimental music thing.

To get back again to Gloria Steinem, etc., at that time she was just another girl that Paul brought to my house. As my wife observed many years later, Paul Desmond never brought the same girl to our house. She was always very beautiful and young. That was true of all of Paul's girlfriends. He had an enormous appeal to young girls, and yet I always thought Paul was one of the homeliest men that I ever knew. Like Alan Hovhaness was anything but a good looking man, and he ended up with, I think, five or six wives.

The curious thing about Paul going to London: he never made it that night. We had such a good time that we kept on talking and he missed his plane. The next day he called me up and said, "George, I think you saved my life." I said, "Why?" "By making me miss the plane." Because the next day was Guy Fawkes Day in London. There was a party which was like Marshall Stearn's Friday nights. A rock artist manager named John Kennedy – whose clients included that young kid who had purple hair. I forgot his name now. It doesn't matter. A rock singer who finally disappeared – he threw a party at his house up the river on the Thames where it's quite narrow, sort of like a country stream, every Sunday, and he invited show-business people to come. On Guy Fawkes Day he had a lot of fireworks in the center of his living room. They were going to go out afterwards, when it got dark, and shoot them off. Some idiot lighted a Roman candle and threw it into the pile of fireworks. Can you imagine? The house exploded. A couple of people were killed and some people seriously injured. Paul said, "You saved my life. I would have been at that party."

He did tell me to look up John, because he was a nice guy and threw interesting parties with interesting people. So I had a standing invitation when I went to London to go to his

house. I went there on a Sunday, and oh my. This was when I was trying to get into the Soviet Union for the first time. I'm not going to tell the whole story, but I did get in, and it was through having met the guy who was the naval attaché to the Soviet embassy in Washington – in London – who said, you should keep on trying. I had failed so many different ways that I won't go into. I'm going to write the book, and it will be in there. But I thought that you'd really get a kick out of knowing that this guy really meant it when he said, keep trying and you'll get in, because I did manage to get a visa when I was in Paris a week later, having failed in London. This guy had given me a phone number and written his name on a napkin which I kept. I still have it.

Years later – not too many years later – I was going home on the subway and I picked up the *New York Post* as I often do, to read on the subway on my way home. I looked at the front page, and this guy's picture's on the front page. The story is the Profumo scandal breaking. He was the guy who was setting up John Profumo. This girl that he was with, and who I sort of tried to – I danced with her and talked to her and so forth. I said, "Do you want to have dinner." She said, "No, I can't. I'm with this man." It was Mandy Davis, who is not the other girl that got most of the publicity. Who was the other girl? There were two girls. One of them was Mandy Davis. The other was – well, it's in the history books. So, can you imagine? Connections with Paul Desmond, [?], Gloria Steinem, and finally I get a visa through this guy who undoubtedly reported back to London, this man's been trying to get into the Soviet Union. He's interesting. He has some ideas about bringing his sister-in-law and Aram Khachaturian together to do a concert in Moscow.

The concert, by the way, was finally scheduled as part of President Eisenhower's visit to Moscow, which didn't happen. The day that the performance was scheduled, Frank Sisco, who was in charge of East-West relations in the State Department, called me and said, George, everything is all set. It's on the agenda. General Goodpaster, who was the aide-de-camp to Eisenhower, has a place for the second day that Eisenhower's there, and he'll be in a box seat with Khrushchev and so forth. Maro will play, with Khachaturian conducting.

Next morning – they used to deliver the mail very early in New York – the next morning, I open the door as usual, before I have breakfast, to pick up the *New York Times* and my mail. There was the *New York Times,* the mail on top of it. I pick up the letters, and the very first one, I see, is from Frank Sisco, because we had overnight mail delivery, and he said, "I'm writing you about this." As I pick up the *Times,* there's the headline, U-2 shot down. About an hour later, the phone rang. It was Frank Sisco saying, "George, have you heard the news yet?" I said, "Yeah, I saw it in the *Times.*" He said, "Don't tell – it's all off, but don't tell anybody yet, because President Eisenhower is holding a conference at noon today. He'll announce it then." He said, "I'm so sorry. It was a great idea, but it's impossible."

God, look at all of the connections in my life. It's incredible. Let's get back to Buck Clayton and the jam session series. That was a terrifically exciting thing. We ended up doing them in terms of my going out in the studio and directing the musicians and just improvising the sequence of solos, because Buck said, "Look, you handle it. I've got enough in my hands working out the backgrounds ad lib and playing my own solos."

That was first real exploitation of long-playing records in the studio. It just hadn't been done before, because I guess nobody thought of doing a jam session in the studios.

The series was quite successful. It didn't sell an awful lot, but the two that I put out first, which were *Robbins Nest* backed by *The Hucklebuck*, they came from the second session, because that was better than the first session. They really created quite a stir at that time.

For Buck and me it was great, because we'd always talked about working together, but we hadn't except very casually, in terms of I'd record the Basie band and he might or might not be in the brass section, and I think I recorded – yeah, I recorded the Basie sextet, and he was in the sextet.

We went back to the Count Basie softball team, playing in Central Park before the war. I was a freshman at Yale at the time and hanging around the Basie band every chance I could, weekends and in the summer. All the bands had teams, especially the Harry James band, which carried its bats and gloves on balls on the bus and used to stop when they saw a field, play for a while.

The reason I got into it was that Buck was the right fielder, and he didn't care too much for baseball. After two or three innings, he'd toss me his glove and say, "Go on, George, take over." So I ended up being the permanent non-starting right fielder of the Count Basie softball team, which was great fun. The pitcher was Lester Young. He wouldn't play unless he could pitch, and he was a terrible pitcher.

The shortstop was Jack Washington – no, he was the second baseman. He was really the best player. Buck tells me he'd been a semi-pro baseball player. Hershel Evans was the shortstop. I really should have checked up on who else played what. I should find out from Phil Schaap where the first saxophonist, lead alto, Earl Warren is, because Earl is out in the Midwest somewhere. He'll remember, because he was on the team.

On into more of the use of long-playing in jazz. It was about this time that I got a chance to record Dave Brubeck. It came about this way: my wife's sister Maro lived in Berkeley, California. Her husband was an engineer with first Tidewater Oil and later Beckton in California. Anahid would go out and prepare the concert programs for the year with Maro during the summer. I would take a vacation or get some excuse to go out to California, so

I could be with her. Our first two children were born in the summertime, and they were delighted that they could have their birthday parties at Auntie Maro's house, because they had friends in the neighborhood, and it was more fun than New York. So I got to not only sign some musicians – Turk Murphy lived in San Francisco. We were old friends from my seeing him when I went overseas and he was just about to go into the Navy with the entire Lu Watters band, which had to break up because of the war closing down business. Plus they got drafted. They all went into the Navy together. I had Wally Rose make some ragtime piano recordings.

But the person I was most interested in out there, once I got out there a couple of times, was Dave Brubeck, because he was not known in the East, but he was creating quite a stir. He'd never played east of, I guess, California, really. Dave had started a record company which was called Fantasy Records. People don't remember that, but he began the record company with his own money to record himself, because nobody else would record him. Then he took in partners and ended up selling his shares eventually.

The contract he had was for three years, and it was about to expire that fall. Because Dave lived nearby in Oakland, I used to see him socially. He'd come over to Maro and Lisle's house for dinner with his wife, that sort of thing. Dave was a big family man. So I could relate to that, and he could relate to me that way, because he had several children. I don't recall how many there were at that time.

When he came East, it was the time when he was going to be finished with his contract and we could talk seriously about a contract. At the same time, he was getting enough publicity so that *Time* magazine was planning to do an article on him. After he came East, they decided that they would make him the subject of a cover story, because he represented something new in this new cool jazz, West Coast jazz. It was a good decision.

So here we are. Dave is about to be interviewed by *Time* for a cover story. I've already discussed a recording contract. It sounds like he's going to sign with us. He came East. He appeared for the first time in New York at Birdland. The people at *Time* wanted to interview him, and they suggested that perhaps I could arrange for the use of a studio to make a tape. The interviewer was Carter Harman, who was an old friend of ours, a classical composer as well as a very good writer on music. I suggested, let's do it in my home. It's much more relaxed and comfortable, and Dave will be more relaxed. So that's the way it went.

We sat down, and they did the interview. Came the part where Carter said, "Now, how did you come to decide to sign with Columbia Records?" I love the answer. I still have the tape downstairs. Dave said, "Every company in the business was after me by then. One company" – I won't mention the company – "one company asked me, 'How many

albums have you sold on Fantasy so far?'" When Dave told them, they said, "We'll sell that many in Sweden alone the first year." Dave didn't believe them. Another company gave him another exaggerated idea. But he said, "George offered me the least, but I signed with him." Carter said, "Why?" I don't know if Dave told this part of the story, but the amount that he wanted was $6,000 to pay the mortgage on his family's ranch. You see what a family guy Dave was? He wanted to do that as a gift to his parents, because he was so grateful for what they had done through the years, sending him through college and letting him be a musician and all. He said, "George, do you think you can get me an advance of $6,000?" I said, "Yeah, I'm sure I can do that. I was very confident of that." Then came the meat of Carter's question. What Dave said really impressed me, because he had never said that to me before, but he said it on the tape. Unfortunately, *Time* didn't use it. I wish they had, because it was very deserving of the people that he talked about. He said, "The thing that really made up my mind was that I had met and heard Maro and Anahid Ajemian out in California, and I decided that if George was smart enough to marry Anahid Ajemian and have Maro as a sister-in-law" – and then he paused and laughed in his inimitable way – he said, "I decided, that's the guy," and he threw his arm up in the air, with a fist, and laughed, and there it is on the tape. *Time* didn't use it. I thought it was a great story, and I wanted . . .

Sneed: That's a good picture of him and you.

Avakian: It really is, and it also is important to me, because it gave a picture, outside of the classical world, of my wife and what she meant to a musician like Dave Brubeck, and of course my sister-in-law, which was very . . .

Sneed: And you.

Avakian: Yes, and me. That was very important to me, because this was where I lived, you see?

So, it didn't get in there. Have to wait for my book.

Oh, sad thing. Columbia Records never told me that they were doing a big package on Dave Brubeck. I said, "I've got some conversation things with Dave." I suggested, "Look. You want to hear the story of how he signed with Columbia? Let's put it in the album?" They said, "It's too late. It's all finished." The sad part is that nobody at the company thought to ask me anything about it until it was too late.

Sneed: Don't you find that's the way it is today, so much?

Avakian: It sure is. I'm a consultant to Columbia now. I just finished remastering the original mono version, four CD of *Miles Ahead*, which was the keystone album in

Miles's life. That was the first time that Columbia had asked me to do something since I left. I think it's kind of dumb. But Nesuhi Ertegun made a very interesting remark when I went independent and left RCA, which was the third corporation that I worked for. I made an independent production deal with RCA for the artists that they didn't know what to do with, like Paul [Desmond] and Sonny Rollins, Lambert, Hendricks, and Bavan, and Joe Williams. It was non-exclusive. I said to Nesuhi, "This is great. I can record just the people that I want with different companies." He said, "Don't jump to conclusions like that, George." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Think about it. You approach somebody – not me – and you can do an independent production for him, but what will his boss think? He'll start thinking, I don't need this guy. I'm paying him a salary. I'm paying him – pay his secretary. I pay for his medical coverage, life insurance, telephone calls, travel, and so forth. Heck, I can get George Avakian on a piecemeal basis anytime there's a project that he wants to do. Why do I need this guy? He'll get fired."

There's one company that I did a production in which it's the only album in which the producer's name doesn't appear. I won't say who it is. I had photographs of the session which I produced and which was sold by the artist to this person. I didn't make the sale. There were session photographs that were quite good. For example, that photograph that you saw of Gunther Schuller and my wife and Maro, that was published in the *New York Times.* It's a picture that I took when they were rehearsing. My brother was the real photographer. You've seen famous pictures that he took of Miles, Mahalia [Jackson], Louis, Erroll, and so forth, but usually he wasn't credited. It was always "Columbia Records photo." So he was the real photographer, but I learned a little bit from him.

He refused to buy the session pictures from me, even when I said, "You can have them for nothing," but he didn't take them. Instead, he went out and purchased individual photographs of the four musicians who are on the album. They're published, and it's kind of ridiculous, because each one is in a totally different context. One is grainy. Another one is slightly blurred. You can see that they weren't together, the different backgrounds, different clothes. Instead he could have had some very nice session pictures. That's the way things go. But it's gone and finished.

Further about the LP and what it meant. I passed by one thing, which was the Benny Goodman broadcast recordings, which are called *Benny Goodman Jazz Concert No.2, 1937-38,* the worst title in the history of the business, but the sales manager wanted it.

That was a follow up to the Benny Goodman *Carnegie Hall Concert* album, which I really had nothing to do with, because as people who know about Benny's life know, the recordings were made by the producer of his radio show as a souvenir for Benny. Then he forgot all about them. They were found much later. He took them to Columbia. He didn't bring them to me. He was smart. He brought them to Ted Wallerstein, president, and said, "I think these are pretty good." Ted turned them over to Bill Bachman and his

assistant – oh gosh. It's terrible to draw a blank at this moment, because this guy was such a close friend and has always been. I'll think of it. He's married to Helen Ward now. Bill Savory. Bill started cleaning up the metal, 16-inch, 33-rpm discs. Wait, I think these were big 78-rpm discs. I don't remember. Whatever. We'll straighten it out when the book gets written. Ted said, "George, would you listen to these records and tell me what you think, because Benny thinks they're great." I went upstairs and listened, and came down and said, "Mr. Wallerstein, they're fantastic. Let's buy them." I spent a few days listening, not participating in the cleaning up, because that was technically over my head. But I'd take time away. When I say "few days," an hour or two over several days, every chance I could get, because this was my youth back to me, because it was 1937. That's the band Benny had, more or less, when I interviewed him in '36 and which was such a great experience for me.

That ended up being the biggest-selling jazz album up to that time. When Bill Savory came up with some more acetates of radio broadcasts, we put out this next album, which was musically even better. It didn't sell quite as well.

It also took advantage of long-play with the way we were able to exploit it with the Goodman performances on the *Carnegie Hall* album, which had many long performances. Although I never again made any long performances with Benny, I began more and more to stress long performances with people like Dave Brubeck and others that I signed up.

The Brubeck story, by the way, is very interesting in terms of the first release that we made. Dave had conceived of a remarkable idea. He started to play a few concerts up and down the coast in California, and he and his wife Iola conceived of the notion of sending an announcement to all the colleges that were at all sizable in the United States, announcing that the Dave Brubeck Quartet, which has played successfully at Cal State and USC and so forth, is available for concerts at your college. To do this, they took the *World Almanac,* which was originally published by the *World-Telegram and Sun.* It always listed all the major colleges and universities in the United States, including the size of the student body and the name of the city it was in. That's all you needed to write to a college.

They sent out – I don't know – maybe 100, 150 letters, and Dave got a half a dozen, 10, concerts the first year, and the second year he got more. When he attracted the attention of Joe Glaser's booking office – Joe, of course, was the manager of Louis Armstrong, and he had a company called Associated Booking Corporation, which specialized in jazz and blues artists – they signed Dave up and took advantage of his entre in the colleges to start booking their own concerts – their other artists there. That's how the college concert circuit really was created. It was created by Dave Brubeck and his wife, sitting down with

the *World Almanac* on their kitchen table and duplicating letters and mailing them out, licking the stamps themselves. Something nobody knows about Dave, but it's true.

Sneed: They're a remarkable family.

Avakian: Very. His kids were great fun. I used to spend time with them over at his house. He had a beautiful Japanese-style house, with a rock that was on the property in the middle of his living room. The architect built it around the house that way. He kept it, I guess, waterproof and mice- and other rodents-proof, somehow. It was great to see this natural rock sitting there.

Sneed: This was in California.

Avakian: Yeah, in Oakland.

Moving onto other artists, we should really get into Miles.

Sneed: You mentioned Jess Stacy.

Avakian: Yeah. That was only in terms of one album, the piano series, but I wanted so much to record Jess, because I remembered him as a very kind gentleman when I was a young kid, teenager, at Horace Mann. When the concert at Carnegie Hall came out, like everybody else I was floored by the solo that he took on *Sing, Sing, Sing,* which is absolutely extraordinary on two levels. One is that Jess never played a solo on *Sing, Sing, Sing.* On the concert – at the concert, Benny just happened to point to him to take a solo. Jess told me about that. I can't remember the exact story. I should get it straight. There had been something of a little conflict going on on stage with Benny, which so often happens. I think Benny did it partly to maybe show up Jess or something, but I shouldn't say much about it, because I don't remember the circumstances any more. I'll have to write Jess and ask him to tell me once again exactly how that happened, because there is something like that. It was unusual and an unusual thing which happened at the concert which made Benny point to him. I don't think it was because he thought Jess was playing great that night, but it might have been. That's the sad part. I've forgotten the story.

Sneed: But he took the chorus.

Avakian: He took many choruses. He took the long solo, and he ends it in the most extraordinary way. Everybody who's listened to this should listen to it if they haven't heard it, and they should listen to it many times. He ends very quietly with one high note at the end, and the audience goes crazy.

[phone ringing interrupts recording]

Sneed: Your story about – now I have to go back and listen – Jess Stacy, that one-time solo on – that's very important to me, and I think it's very important to everyone, that we hear some of your stories about the artists some more. Things you said about Garner, I didn't know. Who did you like the . . . ? Of all the artists you've known, who's the one that personally . . . ?

Avakian: I hate to say it's easy, because it sounds as though I liked other artists less, because I'm going to say that the one who is my great, total favorite of all was Louis Armstrong, because Louis was the most warm-hearted, genuine person. He was a sweet man. He could be salty, but I never really saw that side of him. The main thing was that he was a kind human being, and it shows in every phase of his life. It shows how he chose to buy a house in the neighborhood that he liked, where he had many friends, in Corona. He stayed there. As I like to tell people, he could have had a house in Beverly Hills. He could have had a house on the Riviera, Swiss Alps, anywhere in the world. He could afford it. But that's what he chose. People used to ask him, "Why do you want to live there?" "I just want to be there with my friends."

Every Sunday afternoon, especially if he was home, but even if he wasn't, Lucille would open up the garden in the back of the house to the neighborhood children. If Louis was there, he would barbecue the hot dogs and the hamburgers himself and serve the Cokes, etc. That's just the kind of a person he was. He behaved that way in all the contacts that I had with him or saw him have with anybody. I don't really know anybody who ever disliked Louis for any reason whatsoever.

Sneed: I never heard anything.

Avakian: No. Just impossible.

Sneed: He was really – what you saw and heard was what he was.

Avakian: That's it. That was Louis. He wasn't a compromising sort of person. I suppose he could have been more commercial than he was. People used to put him down sometimes for being overly commercial, but that was Louis's . . .

Sneed: When he was *Blueberry Hill*-ing and things.

Avakian: Yeah, but Louis was out there to entertain people as well as play beautiful, great music.

Sneed: And when he was doing those, is it so that he had reached his – he felt at least he had reached his peak, and his trumpet, he wasn't able to do then what he did before?

Avakian: I never felt that way. He never said anything about it. Because after all, when I recorded him in the middle ’50s, I thought that he was at the absolute peak of his powers.

Sneed: Really?

Avakian: Oh yeah. For instance, Wynton Marsalis tells people that the recordings I made were the greatest that Louis made in his life after the 1930s, early ’30s.

Sneed: That *Tiger Rag* that you mentioned . . .

Avakian: The flamboyant one on OKeh Records.

Sneed: Yeah. What he does on that is . . .

Avakian: Many things are very, very spectacular. Louis admits that he was doing that for – well, commercial reasons, I guess, would be it, but that’s what he felt and his manager – first, it was this mysterious guy Collins, Johnny Collins, who nobody seems to know much about, but he was evidently connected somehow with gangsters, possibly in New York. I don’t think Chicago. His manager Joe Glaser, who took over after Collins in the – when Louis came back from Europe, was an employee of the Capone mob.

Sneed: I didn’t know that.

Avakian: Oh yeah. I thought it was known. Otherwise I wouldn’t really have said it. But they met because Joe was managing the Sunset Cafe and the Lincoln Gardens. The Lincoln Gardens is where King Oliver went to play and Louis joined him up there. Joe had a piece of the action there in the South Side [of Chicago]. I know a couple more things about Joe which I won’t say. Joe was a strange guy. He was very tough. He adored Louis and I think took very good care of him. Louis himself always said that in those days, a black man needed a white guy. The expression was, “I’m his nigger.” I heard Louis actually use that expression, and I sort of reared back. Louis said, “I don’t like to hear people use that word, but that’s the way the talk was at the time.”

Sneed: He could say that.

Avakian: Yeah, just as I found it difficult to start saying that someone was black instead of a negro, because a Negro with a capital was the thing. I was appalled when one day I realized with a shock that in failing to read proof accurately on some liner notes, I had written – the word negro came out with a small n. It’s on the back of one of the Columbia albums. It’s buried in small type, because I wrote as long-windedly as I talk. The edition was changed, but I still have one copy that has a small n.

You were going to say something.

Sneed: Just a comment on that. There have been many changes in a relatively few years. It's surprising to look back and see how our own language and thoughts and attitudes have changed.

Avakian: That's it. I remember writing "colored musicians." That became something that you didn't do 5 or 10 years later.

Sneed: What was the most glorious moment musically?

Avakian: There were certainly – maybe three. I'll put it that way. One was absolutely listening to the Duke Ellington band at Newport playing *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, which was a very surprise thing. I've written about it in the liner notes. So I'll just say very briefly that this was not expected on the program. Duke threw it in at the last minute. Paul Gonsalves didn't remember that he had played it once before, and he was of course the centerpiece of the whole thing. He blew into the wrong microphone, after I told him, "Blow into the microphone that has the handkerchief tied to it." In those days, you couldn't split the sound from a microphone into the sound system for Peabody Park and the recording equipment. So we had two microphones up, and he blew into the wrong mic. So I had to do equalization in the studio, starting the next day, practically, to salvage that super great performance.

But listening to that happening was very, very moving, because I realized that it was exactly what Duke said to the musicians beforehand. He called them together. Duke was not given to this sort of thing. He said, "Fellows, we've worked very hard. We've rehearsed the *Newport Festival Suite*," which was a suggestion of mine, to write a new piece. By the way, I remember seeing a film on television in which George Wein talks about, he didn't want Duke to play the same old pieces again and again, and he suggested that he write a new piece, the *Newport Festival Suite.* But that isn't the way it happened at all, because that was what Duke and I talked about as the centerpiece of the performance, that this would be a historic moment, the first time anyone had recorded at a music festival of any kind, and let's commemorate it with a new composition. So that's what he planned.

At the end of his little talk where he said, "We've all worked very hard, and George has stuck his neck out," because Duke knew the story of how Goddard [Lieberson] decided, "We shouldn't go to Newport and spend all that money. Let's forget about it. Just record in the studio." The sales department backed me up, luckily, and pointed out, this will be history. "So let's just do the best that we can, and let's also have a good time." He said, "I want to do something that you don't expect, and maybe it will help everybody relax,"

because apparently the band was pretty tight about the difficulty of the composition, which was not an easy composition. That's when he said, "Let's play something we haven't played in a long time. Let's play *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue.*" That's when Paul said, "But I don't know the piece." Duke said, "You've got the solo on this." "What?" Yeah, "We'll just bring you in for the key change, and I'll take you out. That's it. You just keep blowing the blues in between."

Another fantastic moment was after I had recorded in Chicago – it was just the week of Louis's birthday that year, 1955 – the *Armstrong Plays Handy* album, which was the first time that anybody had recorded an album of Handy's music, other than his niece [daughter] Katherine Handy having done it for Moe Asch's company on 78-rpm, three disks, 10-inch singles put together in an album, I mean.

It was so great, but what surpassed it was in New York, about maybe – I don't recall – a few months later, we did the Fats Waller album, because I wanted him to do those two composers, Fats having been a close friend of his and was responsible for Louis going into the *Hot Chocolates* show both at Connie's Inn and on the stage.

He played *Blue Turning Grey.* Wow, what a performance. In the middle of that performance – I think it was that one – I told my brother, who was photographing the session – Al had become very friendly with these musicians. He and I used to go out to Louis's house the way we would go up to Erroll's apartment or hang out at Miles's house on West 74th Street – he was photographing the session. I told him, "Al, don't take pictures during a take. When I've announced a take, don't take it. Wait for a rehearsal, because I hear the click of the camera." In the middle of this magnificent take, which was the master, and I'm sure it was *Blue Turning Grey*, I hear "click." Al has taken a picture. I think – I'm not sure, because I haven't listened for this in years – I think I was able to clip it out without disturbing the music, or I couldn't get all of it out without making a jump sound in the sustained notes of Louis's horn, because he was playing at the time. So if it's there, that's great. It's a little memory of Al's presence with Louis, which was really warming, because I felt so good when I could sit down with my own brother, who understood the musicians as I did and loved them as I did, and they felt toward him as they did toward me. It was great.

That performance was a real tingler. Another time was when Mahalia Jackson was recording. Now, which one was it? I was moved to tears on this one, not that I wasn't moved to tears with Louis. Duke was something different, because it was excitement.

I can't remember which one it was. It might have been *Move On Up a Little Higher*. There was an electric feeling in the studio. I think Cal Lampley was with me on that date, because Cal loved to come to dates when he didn't have to do anything, just to hear the music. I'll have to ask Cal.

Those I think were the three where I was deeply, deeply moved.

Sneed: What was it? Her own passion for the music?

Avakian: Oh yes, yes, yes. Mahalia herself was practically in tears during the performance. She was just so carried away, and it sounds on the record. Why can't I remember exactly which one? Because I haven't thought about it in many, many years. We're talking about the 1950s.

Sneed: It probably doesn't matter as much as the emotion of the moment.

Avakian: That's true. So Mahalia and Louis were the two artists who could really move me to tears in a studio, and they did.

Sneed: One of the things that I have noticed about so many of the artists I have been fortunate to know is such a marvelous sense of humor. Who made you laugh more than anybody?

Avakian: It might have been Erroll or Louis. It had to be one of the two, because both had a magnificent sense of humor, and both were like pixies. Erroll looked like a pixie. Louis looked like a big pixie. But both of them were capable of doing that. Now don't ask me what they said.

Sneed: But they could break you up?

Avakian: They could break me up, and did, many times. I wish I could remember the details.

Sneed: Of the artists you worked with or have known, who – is there any sense of waste that you have with any . . .?

Avakian: Waste. In which way?

Sneed: In the artists . . .

Avakian: I failed to . . .

Sneed: No. The artists never really realizing their own – his or her own potential?

Avakian: That's a really interesting question. I don't know that I can answer that, because I was very lucky to record artists who I think did fulfill their potential. But there

had to be disappointments. I guess my mind doesn't remember them, because I don't like to remember them.

Sneed: See, that's what we were saying before.

Avakian: Yeah, absolutely.

Sneed: That we only remember – which is good.

Avakian: I can't answer that. I'd have to think long and hard and hope that I could dredge up something, because that's a disappointment, and I don't remember particular disappointments.

Sneed: I don't know that there is – if nothing comes to mind, I think that's good. I wouldn't even think about it again.

Avakian: I'll tell you one kind of disappointment. This is my fault. The first huge disappointment I had is that I never talked to many of these artists. I could say every single artist I knew. I never talked to them as much as I should have and asked them questions.

I can't say offhand what should I have asked, because I did ask many questions. For example, the day that I met Louis was when I was a junior at Yale and I'd just discovered those unreleased sides. One of them was by what turned out to be the Carroll Dickerson Orchestra, with which he was a member in the pit band and everything. I wasn't sure of who I heard on there, other than Earl Hines and Zutty Singleton. I could recognize them. I took the test pressing to Louis, who was appearing at the Apollo Theater and found that he was around the corner, in the Braddock Bar. I walked in and asked where he was. Somebody said, "He's in the back room with a couple of friends." I said, "Fine. I'll wait here until he's free."

That's how I met Putney Dandridge, which was very funny. I never recorded Putney, but he was kind of a Fats Waller-ish entertainer who sang. He was standing at the bar, holding forth. He was wearing all white clothes: safari shirt with short pants, black socks up to the knees, safari boots, a pith helmet, and I think he was carrying a riding crop.

Sneed: When was this?

Avakian: This was in 1940, probably in the spring of 1940. I got to chatting with him. I don't remember what we talked about, but he was a very amusing guy. He made a series of records on Vocalion, 35-cent specials – not specials, but 35-cent pickup dates like

Billie Holiday and Fats Waller on Victor and so forth, except Fats had a permanent band, because he was a star.

Then, when Louis's friends left, the bartender or somebody said, "Louis's alone in the back, and he knows that someone wants to see him. Go back there." I walked up to him and introduced myself. Wow, what a moment. Wow, Louis Armstrong, the man that I had heard as well as bought records of, and now I was prepared to tell him, "Louis, here's some things that you did when you were young, you don't know about, and I'm about to tell you." I brought this disk with me, a test pressing, and he said, "Good. I've got a record player in the dressing room. Let's go." So we listened there. He picked out Honoré Dutrey and John Lindsay on bass, as I recall, and Boyd Atkins. I can't remember, but he got most of the personnel, just by listening to it. He said, "That's a Jelly Roll Morton composition." I didn't know that, because all I had was *Chicago Breakdown* as a title and no publisher or copyright information. That composition is not listed anywhere in the books. He was right. ASCAP confirmed that there was a registered composition by Jelly Roll Morton that had never been recorded, apparently.

How did I get into this?

Sneed: I want you to talk about the artists. Fats Waller.

Avakian: Oh, by the way, I must tell you one thing more about Louis. On another day I went to see Louis. It was the evening. He was playing again, I think, at the Apollo, although it might have been the Savoy Ballroom or something. He said, "George, let's get some ice cream. I'm going to take some ice cream to my darling." I didn't know who that was, but it turned out to be Lucille. We went to Lucille's mother's apartment and parked the car. We'd bought a quart of vanilla ice cream. Louis was acting like a little boy. His eyes were sparkling. He was practically dancing, toe dancing. I could see he was in love with this girl.

I'd met Alpha before, because I think they had not yet broken up, but this occasion, whatever it was, was my first meeting with Lucille. Lucille was charming. Her mother was charming. We had a great time. Louis finished about three-quarters of the ice cream. He loved ice cream. Then we had to go. I guess it must have been between shows. I'm not sure, because he had to go back. When he left, I went to the car and turned around. Louis was on the stoop of the building, and he was pirouetting with his arms out, and he was saying, "Oh, my darling, my darling." He was talking about Lucille. I thought, oh gosh, isn't this beautiful. This man is in love.

Sneed: What a beautiful picture that is.

Avakian: On top of which, he's expressing himself to me, a relative stranger, just somebody who had discovered these records and turned out to be a fan of his, neither of us ever dreaming that I would ever be his record producer and that we would become fast, beautiful friends, see each other abroad, be with our wives and all that, having dinner, etc. That was a marvelous relationship.

I haven't even talked about the relationship with Duke, which is different, because Duke was . . .

Sneed: With Duke, and Miles.

Avakian: Miles was a very personal relationship. With Duke it was not so much like visiting one another's homes, because Duke was never at home. He was always traveling. I saw him in his apartment when he was in town and we had to talk about something. The wonderful thing about Duke was that I first met him on that night went I went to the swimming pool in Westchester. I wish I knew which classmate it was, because I'd like to find out just where that place was and look into it.

Sneed: Was it a private party?

Avakian: Private party. I met Duke for the first time by going to the men's room and discovering that coming up behind me was Duke Ellington. There's an empty urinal.

Sneed: That's unique. I don't suppose many people could say that.

Avakian: No, I guess not. It was an impressive meeting, I want you to know. I later saw Duke standing stark naked in a dressing room, and that was an impressive sight, not only because he was well endowed by the powers, but he was also a well-built man. He was not extremely muscular, but he had a strong upper body, not like Miles, who was built like a boxer and worked out, exercise. He had a boxing – what do they call those? – punching bag in his basement. He tried to teach me how to punch a bag and make it come back so that you could hit it again. I couldn't do it. One punch, missed, because I couldn't time it. He said, "You'll never make a fighter." I said, "When I need you, you're there." He said, "Okay, I'm there, but boy, you need help."

Incidentally, Miles was a very good boxer and very handy with his fists. There was an incident when he was living at 881 Tenth Avenue. In the same building was John Lewis and Max Roach and I don't know who else. One night, he and Roach had an argument out on the sidewalk, and he actually, I'm told, beat Max pretty badly and injured him. I never saw Max afterwards. I've never mentioned it to him. I shouldn't have even said it on this tape. But then everybody in the business knew about it. When I say business, all

the fans and people who knew Miles and Max. We never mentioned anything to Max, because I would not want Max to take a punch at me.

Sneed: That makes sense.

Avakian: I mean, here is a guy who is strongly built, looks like a boxer, but he was no match for Miles.

Sneed: Miles worked at it.

Avakian: On that first meeting with Duke, I had to think of something to say.

Sneed: That little piece you gave us will live.

Avakian: Yeah, that's true, for a different reason, but this lives for a different reason, because this was Duke. He exposed himself – ooo, what an expression to use in a bathroom – he exposed himself to me in a way which was absolutely Duke. I said, "Mr. Ellington, I'm so glad you're bringing back your old compositions," because he was recording a new *Black and Tan Fantasy*, new *Birmingham Breakdown.* I said, "I've heard the old records. It's wonderful to have them come back. I hope you'll do more," and I did specifically mention *Misty Morning* and *Saratoga Swing*, which Jerry King convinced me were great recordings, but at the time, frankly, I didn't think so so much, because of the close-up banjo recording and the archaic sound. He said, "Yeah, we're planning to do more, but I'm not concentrating on anything like that, because there are a lot of young bands coming up, and I've got to keep moving to stay ahead." Even at that time – I had just turned 18 – I realized, wow, Duke Ellington feels he has to keep moving to stay ahead and not look back? Which reminds me of the famous quote, years later, from Satchel Paige, the baseball pitcher, who said, "Never look back, because you never know who's gaining on you." But Duke already had that philosophy in 1937 – June 1937.

Sneed: If you were teaching a history of jazz course, you probably could almost do it just with Ellington music, starting with the *East St. Louis Toodle-oo.*

Avakian: Oh, of course. That's right. The whole history of jazz is right there in Duke's development from the earliest times, when he made records which sounded quite ordinary – let's face it. I'm not talking about his own compositions, but some of the compositions that he had to do, I suppose, because the company wanted them recorded, songs that never made any impression on anybody.

I haven't had a chance to talk about Duke, but he was an extraordinary man and a very warm, likeable man. He taught me a couple of things, like, when you're traveling, always order eggs. Don't order meat. Because you don't know about the meat, but you can sure

tell about the eggs and refuse to eat them if they're bad. He said, that's safe. I would never have thought that. The other thing that he preached – he did this with everybody, like Louis with his Swiss Kriss – was, when you had dinner, start with half a grapefruit, which he always did. He says it's good for the system, it's good for you, it opens up – I don't know what. He didn't say it opens up the pores of your stomach or something like that, but he believed in grapefruit as a great starter for a meal, and he loved steaks. I had – I shouldn't say many a steak dinner, but I remember steak dinners at the Hickory House, where Joe Helbock, the owner, would pick a prime piece of meat for Duke and his friends. That's what he believed in, grapefruit and steaks.

I'll tell you another thing about Duke and the question of race. Jerry King, as the super Duke Ellington fan, suggested that we invite Duke to dinner when he came in our – I guess it was our sophomore year. Yes, it was, because Marshall was there. Maybe it was freshman year. Since Duke didn't remember me, of course, from a casual meeting as a kid, but Marshall knew him, Marshall made the arrangements, when Duke was between shows at the New Haven sports arena, for Duke to come and have dinner. Jerry arranged to have Duke and some of his musicians eat with us at the Timothy Dwight College dining room. He lived in the residential – the residential places were called colleges. He lived at Timothy Dwight. I lived at Jonathan Edwards, a couple of blocks away. But Timothy Dwight had a larger dining room. So we decided to do it there.

We walked in with [Johnny] Hodges, [Harry] Carney, Cootie [Williams], and I don't know who else. But I remember those three, largely because King remembers it so well. When we walked in, there was a hush in the hall. We sat down. Somebody who I remember not by name – but Jerry remembers his name, and he said, "I'm not going to tell you who it was. It isn't worth it" – stood up – he was a tall, very WASPy looking guy with glasses, looked like right out of Boston or the Main Line in Philadelphia – and threw his napkin down on the table and loudly announced, "I don't eat with niggers." His friend – he had two friends, I think, with him at the table – they got up and they walked out, just the three of them, nobody else. I didn't dare look at Duke, but I finally did. Duke didn't bat an eye. Nobody said anything until Duke said, "Well, let's enjoy our dinner." As Jerry, who also remembers it exactly, because you don't forget things like that – as Jerry said the last time I mentioned it to him, he said, Duke had been through it all, and that guy wasn't going to bother him. He wasn't worth – well, I won't tell you what Jerry said, but it was very effective. He wasn't worth anything. Duke was not at all disturbed. The rest of us – at least I was just appalled.

Something like that happened with Mahalia. It was after I'd left Columbia. I was out in California. I called up Irving Townsend, who had transferred to the California office, largely because of his health, because he had some lingering neurological ailment in which his head and his hands shook slightly. This was back almost at the time that I first

hired him at Columbia, and it continued. It may or may not have contributed to his death. I never asked.

I said, “Let’s take Mahalia out to dinner,” because I would look up Mahalia if I was ever in a town where she was. We went to this very fine restaurant that Irving knew about. It was a little on the early side. I don’t recall why we went that early. The maitre d’ asked if we had a reservation. I said no. He said, “I’m sorry, but we’re fully booked.” I said, “But the place is empty.” He said, “I’m sorry, sir. All the tables are reserved.” I turned to Mahalia and Irving. Mahalia cut in and said, “Gawge” – she always said “George,” G-a-w-g-e – “I’d like to eat at the hotel. Let’s go to my room and order room service.” I started to protest, and Irving sort of pulled on my coat jacket, and I realized, Mahalia’s been through this. She said, “Look,” when we got outside, “I go through this all the time. It doesn’t bother me. But I can see you’re upset. Don’t worry about it at all. These people will never change, but that’s the way it is.” So we had a nice steak dinner in Mahalia’s room.

I called Paul Weston, who knows a lot of people in that town, and told him about it. He said, “George, this is the most notorious place for that.” I said, “Can’t anything be done? I’d like to file a complaint.” He said, “I don’t think you have to.” They were going to go out of business, because people in town who had the money in the music business had stopped going there. And they did. They failed about six months later. Paul told me over the phone one day. “I think you’d like to know this.”

Another thing that happened with Mahalia: I met her quite by accident in Houston, Texas, when I went down to record Bob Newhart on his first job that he ever had. That’s a different story. We’ll have to get into that. But I was riding in Mahalia’s limousine. She always had a limousine provided by the local church for her. I don’t recall why I was with her. We were going somewhere. I don’t think we went to dinner or anything like that, because I didn’t have time. A policeman on a motorcycle stopped us. He looked in the door. In fact, I think he opened the door and looked in. He didn’t say a word. I was sitting in the middle between Mahalia and Mildred Falls, her pianist. That was quite a middle, because if you remember Mahalia, Mildred was even bigger, these two enormous women with me in the middle, waiting for this cop to say something. He closed the door. I don’t know. He said something or another, but it wasn’t anything, and Mahalia had told me, “Don’t say anything,” when the cop came over. So I let out a sigh of relief. Mahalia said, “Well, Gawge, if he had talked to you, what would you have said?” I shrugged and said, “Mahalia, I was going to say, ‘I’m just passin’.’” She broke up. That was the biggest laugh I ever heard Mahalia give.

So, where were we? George and his long stories.

Sneed: No, no. Nobody else is going to know them if you don’t tell them.

Avakian: That's true. I've got to put them in a book.

Sneed: Yes, yes.

Avakian: You ought to send me a tape of this.

Sneed: Where is my list of all of the – Sarah Vaughan.

Avakian: I never really knew Sarah Vaughan. I only recorded her twice. Each time it was – no, the first time, I was just filling in for a singles session in the period before Mitch came there. The second time might have been the same. The second time she was doing an album and her husband, George – her husband was – wait. Was she married to Tadd Dameron then? Or she was married to George somebody [Treadwell].

Sneed: I don't know.

Avakian: I'll have to look it up. Sorry. But you'll see quickly why I forgot. He had written arrangements with strings, because it was the period when all the jazz artists wanted to do albums with strings. I think Charlie Parker had just done one on Verve. The real thing was, oh, I've got to record with strings. Her husband wrote the arrangements. He didn't know how to write for strings, and he wrote them all out of register. So the musicians came over to me. In fact they spoke to me when I came out to listen to a playback. I didn't know what to do, because I knew what the problem was. I said, "This is impossible. God knows what the other arrangements are going to be like." I said, "Fellows, what can you do? Can you change octaves or something?" These were solid pros. As it happened, Anahid was on this date, because there was a violinist who couldn't come. The contractor was trying to reach him. He said, "George, your wife's a violinist. I know her, Anahid Ajemian. Call her up." I never put Anahid on my own dates, because I knew that some day, somebody was going to say, "Look what George Avakian did. He isn't making enough money?" I sure wasn't making enough money. You'd be appalled if you knew how badly salaries were in those days. So Anahid came down and did the last three sides of that session and then the next four sides. She was appalled too by what she saw. But the musicians covered it up. The copyist was late, because the arrangements were late being made. We just managed to get the last side of that session done, because we waited for the copyist to arrive with the parts, and he came in just in time to do maybe three takes. So I'm sorry to be so negative about it, but that experience with Sarah clouded things, and I didn't have an opportunity to record her again, but I would have done if it was a small, free group, instead of that string session which is what she wanted to do on that album.

Sneed: It was the thing, I know. Everybody had to go through it, the strings.

Joe Williams?

Avakian: Joe, I felt, is the greatest male singer of all time, after Louis Armstrong. I always have to put Louis first, because he's in a class by himself. He's the daddy, like Billie Holiday. "I'm as close as I can get to Louis Armstrong," she would say.

Joe was the absolute professional all the way. It was a delight to record him. We recorded him in two contexts at RCA. One was studio dates, with Jimmy Jones, his favorite arranger. Those sessions went off beautifully, because everything was totally professional. We never had to make more than two takes. Then the other was, I decided to go back to Newport and record RCA artists. Joe said, "Great. I'm going to do it with my rhythm section," which he always used anyway, "and some guest horns." He got Clark Terry and Booker Ervin. I can't remember who else. But the album is there, *Joe Williams at Newport.*

Sneed: Is that the one, *& Friends*?

Avakian: Yeah, *Joe Williams & Friends.* They didn't really rehearse that, but the preparation was such and the friendship among the musicians was such that everything went off as though we had rehearsed for days, or a day, let's say. That's all you'd need. Less than a day. Joe was fantastic. We didn't have to change a note. No editing. Didn't have to drop out a tune. The program was planned as an LP, and that's the way it went. The only thing I did was to reduce the length and volume of the applause. He got the greatest applause I've ever heard anybody get at Newport other than Duke Ellington in his set, the first Newport recording, when he did *Diminuendo and Crescendo,* and everything broke up. There was a girl dancing in the aisles and so forth. We couldn't use her picture, unless her face was covered by her elbow, because the legal department said, "She could sue us. Who is she?" I said, "I don't know. Nobody knows." I asked around afterwards. "Who is she?" She disappeared. However, a year or so later – the next year, I guess, she was there, and she came up and introduced herself. I said, "You don't have to tell me who you are, except I don't know your name. Thank you so much. You got the crowd excited. It helped Duke," and so forth. Her name was Anderson. What's her first name? She was a housewife. She looks like a cute kid, possibly 21 years old, but she was older, with platinum blond, white hair, and she could sure dance. Kicked off her shoes and danced in the box seats.

Joe was a delight to record, because there were no problems whatsoever, and he was a wonderful person. I hate to keep saying these people are wonderful, but they were and they are. Joe was a neighbor. I lived at 285 Central Park West. He lived about two or three blocks away. I don't remember the number. He and his wife Jillian became good friends. We'd get together with our wives.

Sneed: It's been interesting to me to meet artists like Joe and Max Roach and how the word professional just really . . .

Avakian: That's it, absolutely.

Sneed: No nonsense. Straight ahead. Yeah, it's refreshing.

What about Lambert, Hendricks, and Bavan?

Avakian: This was a little bit unusual, because, first, I was a big – of course, like everybody else – Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross fan, especially because Annie Ross was a friend of my brother's in London when he was living abroad. Al lived for five years in Paris, right after the war. He went over in '47 through '52. He learned French so colloquially – I won't go into the anecdote about Erroll and him in Paris and what a manager tried to do to Erroll.

Sneed: Why?

Avakian: Well, I will tell it.

Sneed: Go ahead.

Avakian: Because I've talked too long, the tape is running out, and we haven't covered enough. All right. I'll quickly tell it. Martha Glaser asked Al to go over with Erroll when Erroll made his first trip to Europe. It was basically to play at the Olympia Theater in Paris, which was the place, like the Palace Theater in vaudeville in America. The man who ran the Olympia was a notoriously tough gangster type named – oh gosh. Bruno Coquatrix. Al had learned French perfectly when he was studying at the Sorbonne and hanging out with French musicians like Django Reinhardt and Bernard – well, so many.

On this occasion, after Erroll had played for a couple of days at the Olympia, Coquatrix called Al and Erroll into the office and said through a – he didn't speak English – said through an interpreter, "Mr. Avakian, I guess you know about Erroll's concerts outside Paris, which he's also going to play for me." I believe, as Al told me the story, it was to play without additional payment. The contract covered it. He didn't know that Al spoke French, because Al decided to play it cool, because he knew about Coquatrix's reputation, and he figured, I just better play the dumb American manager/friend/photographer, because his mission was also to photograph the tour, which he did. That's the *Paris Impressions* album, and a lot of unused photographs are in that box. My niece found them and gave them to me to go through, which I haven't done entirely.

Coquatrix explained this through the interpreter. Al said, “I’d like to see the contract.” Coquatrix said sure, handing it to him, because he knows this guy doesn’t speak French. Al glances quickly through it, takes a deep breath, and, as Erroll loves to tell the story, he let loose a blast, an absolute blast, of gutter French gangster slang such as Coquatrix couldn’t imagine any American would know, but which Al knew. He laid Coquatrix out, called him everything in the book, including a cicatrix, which means a scar on the face of humanity. Coquatrix turned all colors, including pale, and admitted no, Erroll didn’t have to play these concerts without getting paid extra.

I don’t remember if Erroll played the concerts and got paid extra, or didn’t play them. I think he didn’t play them, because at this point Erroll didn’t want to play them, and Al didn’t want Erroll to play them. So that must have been the way it happened. But I don’t remember exactly, to tell the truth. That was, I think, the thing that made Erroll feel that Al was his friend for life, because if Martha had been there, goodness knows what would have happened. She may have found out, but it couldn’t have been handled in a way which would shut up Coquatrix for good. That’s one thing that Erroll never, never forgot.

Now, back to Hendricks, Bavan, and so forth. I was a fan of the group, because I knew all about Annie Ross and my brother, and I knew that her aunt was – oh, who was that woman? Ella, a musical comedy star. Ella Logan.

Sneed: Oh yes. *Finian’s Rainbow.*

Avakian: Who I had met casually and liked.

So, when [Yolande] Bavan replaced Annie, because Annie went back on junk – everybody knows it. So I don’t mind saying it – it wasn’t quite as good. But Jon [Hendricks] came to me, because he knew I was a fan of the original group, and said that they were available. He liked this girl, she was different, and he’d like to make a deal. I said sure, because he and Dave [Lambert] were old friends. I didn’t know quite what would happen. I’d heard the group in person, and she was a little shaky. But when she started to record, she really worked, and the guys supported her. It was very interesting. They didn’t exactly cover for her, but I could see in the studio, at all times they were worried about her. They wanted to carry her.

She was great. She was very eager to please, and I don’t mean that in an obsequious way. But I noticed that every suggestion that she got from Dave or from Jon, she worked. She was exhausted at the end of the first session, but at the end of the first session I had a great deal of respect for her, and we became very good friends.

The most exciting records they made were one at Newport and the other at – we decided to do live recordings if we could, because that's where the excitement was. We did one at Newport, we did one at the Village Gate, and we did one at Basin Street. At Basin Street it was a lot of fun, because Anahid's niece, a very beautiful young girl, who had gone to – or later on, went to the Antibes festival with me when I took the Charles Lloyd Quartet over there. Everybody got so, "Wow, look at George with this gorgeous girl." "It's my niece." "Oh yeah. Wait until Anahid finds out." But it was really my niece.

The same thing happened when she came to the sessions, because she was a jazz fan. All the young kids in France were at that time. This 16-year-old girl who doesn't talk to anybody but me, because she didn't speak Armenian or English. So we spoke in French. Again, they were buzzing. "Jesus, look at George with this young chick. Wow. What's going on? We thought he was very straight with his wife."

But that was another superb recording that they made for me.

Sneed: What happened to Bavan?

Avakian: She was an actress, originally. She was an actress in London and not a singer. Lambert and Hendricks heard her in a play in which she sang a song. They thought that her voice might fit with them. That's how she joined them, because she wasn't really a professional singer when she started out.

Sneed: Jon Hendricks is brilliant, isn't he?

Avakian: Oh, terrific, and Dave was also a brilliant guy. The two of them got together, it was just written in the stars, because I never would have thought of it, Jon with his rather hoarse voice, Dave with his more musical voice, but what they did was fit each other so beautifully, and their personalities were that way too. What a tragedy that Dave had to go in the ridiculous thing of changing a tire on the Merritt Parkway at night. Some driver didn't see him and hit him. He should have gotten off the road more, I suppose.

That's one of the sad things in my life, that so many of my dear friends, great artists, are gone. I feel kind of lost, because those who remain are still wonderful and all that, but think of the people that I've worked with and been such good friends with and who are gone. It leaves a hole in your life, you know?

Sneed: Weren't we talking before about feeling very lucky?

Avakian: Oh, absolutely.

Sneed: What was it that you were talking about?

Julie [?]: Lou Gehrig.

Sneed: Lou Gehrig.

Avakian: Oh that's right. I guess I didn't say it on mic, but I'll say it. I've often thought of Lou Gehrig in his farewell speech at Yankee Stadium, which has been on film and so forth, so many times, dying of the disease that was named after him and saying, "I'm the luckiest man on the face of the earth." I feel that way. I'm so grateful that so many of the artists are still around. Of course, eventually what happened is that artists started to be younger than me, instead of 10 years or more older than me.

Sneed: How much time do we have? Because I want to ask . . .

Avakian: Oh sure.

Julie [?]: We have about 35 minutes.

Avakian: Thank God. I just wanted to say, a guy younger than me, like, say, Sonny Rollins, it's wonderful that he's around, because we became extremely good friends on a level that had nothing to do with music, and we always will be.

Sneed: He's an artist I've never met, which breaks my heart, but I hope to.

I wanted to ask you how important you think it is, and why, if you do, for young – for the music that we've been talking about – you've been talking about – to be heard? I don't know that – I'm not sure that everyone – young musicians and young people – never mind musicians. Just young people. They have never had a chance to hear the music that you've been talking about.

Avakian: It exists if they'll seek it out, but there's no real way in which they can do it, it seems to me, for these reasons. First of all, radio – which every young person gets hooked on – and now MTV pays no attention to jazz. They're not going to stumble into Jazz 88 on FM unless it's an accident that grabs them, because they're too busy turning the dial, and they can hear every other kind of popular music. The other thing is, where do they get to hear it? They can't go into the clubs. Not that I was able to go into a club, because I first heard a sort of jazz in terms of the Benny Goodman orchestra, Casa Loma, and so forth, at theaters. I went with my mother, actually, because she enjoyed going to movies, and I started to steer her to stage shows that featured bands. I first heard Lucky Millinder about eight blocks from our apartment on – nine blocks away from our apartment on Washington Heights, at the RKO Coliseum Theater.

Then, when I was old enough to go out by myself, I didn't really start doing it, because of the kind of family that I was in, until I was college age. That's the first time that I went down to Greenwich Village, for example, and heard the band at Nick's with Condon, Freeman, Pee Wee Russell, and so forth, Dave Tough, and then on 52nd Street. So I didn't start doing that until I was 18. And then kids don't have any guidance in terms of their own peers, their older brothers and sisters, just as I had guidance from Les Koenig, the older brother of my classmate.

Sneed: That's probably it, isn't it, that the parents of today's generation, did not – at least your children and my children had the opportunity to be exposed to the music, because even if they didn't . . .

Avakian: My daughter Anahid just called me and told me about the sale of the horse that we [?] . . .

Sneed: You have to talk about your horse.

Avakian: All right. We will later. If not, I'll make a tape and send it to you.

Her great favorite musician is Sonny Rollins. She fell in love, when she was a little girl, with the track, *If Ever You Should Leave Me* [*If Ever I Would Leave You*] on the first Sonny Rollins album, *The Bridge*, which of course was called *The Bridge* because I had the idea of signing Sonny when he came out of retirement, where he was heard playing in the upper reaches of the Williamsburg Bridge among the cable wires and all. I thought, gee, Sonny has worked out what he said were problems that he wanted to work out in his own playing. What problems?, I thought. No problems. So Sonny thought there were problems. So this would be the bridge between the old Sonny and the new Sonny, after he works out whatever he wanted to work out. Also it was a bridge between his earlier career and his career to come. Let's see. I had another image about the bridge. What could it have been? Oh, it was a bridge for his public, because they hadn't heard him playing live until he came back and played at the Jazz Gallery for two weeks.

Incidentally, I have tapes of those performances. Of all things, Nesuhi Ertegun made them. He was interested in signing Sonny. For some reason – I don't know why – I think he decided, no, he wasn't going to sign Sonny. He told me about the tapes and said, "You should listen to them." He gave them to me. He said, "Keep them. Maybe they're good enough to release or something." But they really weren't, because they were okay, but the same group sounded better in the studio and better in the live recordings that we made.

So that was the situation with Sonny. Our friendship began because Sonny would talk to me when I would be in the room when I went to hear the Clifford Brown–Max Roach Sextet, which I couldn't record them. They were under contract, a long-term contract

with Mercury. But Sonny I guess might have known who I was or something, or he saw Brownie and Max talking to me or something, and somehow, each time I went, there would be a time during the evening when Sonny would sit, during the intermission. We'd just talk. I found that he was a much more interesting person than just the average musician. That made it very easy, when I decided to go after a contract with him, to talk with him.

The contract, by the way, was done in an unusual way – not as unusual as the Miles Davis contract, which I haven't talked about. He had not earned money for a couple of years. It was December. He was getting some pretty big offers from people who thought, as I did, gee, Sonny's the guy to record now, because he's making his comeback, a lot of publicity possibilities. He signed with me because I proposed a very large advance. For jazz musicians, it was the biggest advance ever paid. I'll say what it is. It was $90,000 against royalties.

Sneed: That's big.

Avakian: Yeah, unheard of. But we were talking a three-year contract, and I had a kind of – two aces in the hole, which people didn't think about, especially people not in the music business. One was that clause in the statutory rate at the time, for publishers to license copyrights at 2 cents regardless of length. I knew there would be a lot of long compositions and our copyright overall for each Sonny Rollins package would be much lower than the average and, that way, the company would be making money which would help pay for the large advance, so that Sonny's artist royalties might be long delayed because of the heavy advance against the standard 5% on 90% of list price of records sold, which was a clause used throughout the industry then. And yet, even though his royalty account as an artist would be down, the company would not be suffering financially if it took a long while to recoup the expenses.

The other one was to suggest to suggest to Sonny and his manager, Monty Kay, who was a good friend of mine, that he not take the money immediately, that we split it, because he had two tax years, the current year, where he had no income, and the next year, when he would start getting more income and yet he would need money immediately to get rolling again and all that. I don't know if he was in debt. I didn't even ask him. He didn't tell me. So we divided that, and he got a terrific tax break, which was fine for RCA too. RCA didn't care when he got the money. Of course a lot of people said, "What are you doing, giving him $90,000? He isn't worth it," and all that. They made out just fine.

Another thing about Sonny that I must talk about: he was a very interesting person – he is – and he was interested in all kinds of things. He was a Rosicrucian, for example. I told him one day about how my son Greg, who at that time was – let's see. I guess this was about 19- – it was after I left RCA and I was recording. I was an independent producer

for RCA – I told him that my son had announced to Anahid that he was going to visit Auntie Mary this afternoon. That's my sister, who lived in New Jersey. She said, "Really? She hasn't told me about it." He said, "Oh, no, no. She's going to call you, and I'm going over there to spend the night." My wife thought, all right, kids have imaginations. About half an hour later, Mary calls. She was over at my mother and father's apartment on Riverside Drive. She said to Anahid, "Would it be all right if I took Greg home with me? I'll just keep him overnight. I'm coming tomorrow. It would be nice to have him come." Anahid said sure, okay. Then she called me at the office and told me about this, because we had talked about the fact that Mary was coming in and we were going to see her that night if she stayed in town. She told me this story. I told that to Sonny. He said, "Children have an extra sense that we don't know about, which we all had, but we lose it." He went into a thing about how Greg was in tune with something in the cosmos, and he understood that Auntie Mary was about to call his mother later, and he might as well tell his mother that he was going, and all that. Scary.

Sneed: Oh, you mean this wasn't prearranged.

Avakian: No, no. It wasn't prearranged at all. No, Mary was coming into town. We knew that. We were thinking that we would have dinner with her while she was in town, but she told Anahid that instead of staying for dinner, she was going to take Gregory back with her.

Sonny never forgot that. I also had an odd experience with Sonny. We were doing a recording – which one it was, I don't know – in studio B, one of the smaller studios which we always used for the quartet, that had a better sound in it than a big studio for the RCA recordings that we made. The drummer – I guess it was Elvin Jones. I'm not sure. We used different drummers – hit a rim shot, and Sonny stopped playing. He said, "Did you see that?" I said, "Yes, what did you see?" He said, "I saw a flash of light, the rim shot go across the studio." I swear I saw it too. I'm not one to believe in anything. I'm a very down-to-earth person. I don't believe particularly in ESP and so forth. But at the instant that that rim shot came, I saw, through the control room, and Sonny saw, a flash of light go across the studio. Well, Sonny had a number of explanations, none of which I really bought, that there are elements in the air, the atmosphere, vibrations from the rim shot, and so on, and yet we both saw it. I often think to myself, did I really see it? But he asked me, "Did you see that?", and I said yes, without knowing what he was going to say, because I had seen it, and then he described it. A little scary.

Sonny was a big baseball fan. By the way, you know he's called Newk – N-e-w-k. That's his nickname.

Sneed: No, I didn't.

Avakian: It's because he resembles Don Newcomb, the Dodgers pitcher of that time, who was big like Sonny and had a face more or less like Sonny, with a nose and profile like Sonny and a fairly strong jaw. I never knew why he was called Newk until he told me that himself.

He loved baseball. I got tickets for the World Series between the Pirates and the Yankees that year. We went to the stadium for two games. It was delightful, because I had never known a musician who was a real baseball fan since, say, Harry James. I never went to a ball game with Harry James. I think I mentioned that James always had bats and gloves and baseballs in his bus, going across country. The musicians told me that if Harry would see a field, he'd say, "Hey driver, stop. All right, guys, come on. Let's play a game for an hour." He was crazy for it.

Incidentally, Harry and I have the same birthday. I went to record Felicia Sanders in Chicago. I was doing a live recording with her in a club, because I believe in live recordings, ever since I started doing them. Very often, with certain artists especially, you could get a better performance, hopefully. I was always ready to take chances. I knew Harry was playing somewhere. I don't remember where, but there was a restaurant attached to it. I decided I'd go have dinner there. So I did. I told the waiter, "It's my birthday and Harry's birthday, but he doesn't know that we have the same birthday. Bring me a small cake with one candle on it, when Harry comes over to the table," because I knew he would, when he saw me. It worked out perfectly. The waiter brought it over, and I said, "Ah, Happy Birthday cake." Harry said, "Gee, I didn't know you knew it was my birthday." I said, "No, it's my birthday, March 15th." He said, "That's mine, too." I knew it, but I didn't let on. He got a terrific kick out of that. He was a very amusing guy, and what a trumpet player. He could play anything.

Al Hirt reminded me of Harry James when I went to RCA and we signed Hirt. We really beefed up the catalog with him. Bob York, who was my boss at RCA, was in charge of the entire A&R department. I was in charge of the pop A&R department. He believed in categories for albums, artists, as album artists, should each fit into a slot, and that's the philosophy that Jim Conkling had, which we developed at Warner Bros. Records when we started the company. So when I got there, the first thing Bob and I did when we sat down is to discuss what categories we should fill. One of them was a jazz instrumentalist with personality. That ended up being Hirt. Another was a pop pianist. I'll come back to that in a second. Another was a folk-singing group. That became the Limelighters. We signed them.

The pop pianist was an invention. We had both heard a young pianist who occasionally did studio sessions named Bernard – Bernie Nierow – N-i-e-r-o-w. He was playing at Jilly's, the club on 52nd Street run by Frank Sinatra's great pal. I talked to him about recording and said, "Frankly, we think you should change your name, because Bernie

Nierow doesn't exactly stack up as a commercial name." He was quite amenable. He understood immediately. I said, "The Nierow part is okay. We'll spell it N-e-r-o, but Bernie Nierow doesn't sound like the kind of pianist that we want you to be, very sophisticated, suave, playing show tunes and the usual thing." I'd had an incredible success with Liberace at Columbia, but that was really Paul Weston's story. That's a great story, which I hope we have time to tell, because Liberace was signed – no, I'm not going to tell the story. You've found already, my stories have stories within stories. They hang together.

Sneed: Do you want to finish with Bernie?

Avakian: Yeah. With Bernie, the question was, what kind of name can we get? Then I thought about the classic thing that everybody did in doing takeoffs on Bette Davis. They always had that line about, "Peter, Peter, come here. Peter," and so forth.

Sneed: Petah.

Avakian: Yeah, Petah. Bette Davis had told me that she never did a movie in her life in which there was anybody named Peter, but this is the thing everybody picked up on. But I thought, Peter Nero. This has all the sophistication that you connect with Bette Davis and show people and so forth, and it worked beautifully. So, end of story.

Sneed: What about Liberace?

Avakian: Oh gosh. Paul Weston came to one of our national meetings and conventions in which we would meet with sales people all over the country. At that time we would present the fall product. It was always done in the summer. Paul said, "I'm going to sign a pianist, but you're not going to quite believe why." So I said, "Why?" Paul had come in. He was in charge of recording on the West Coast. I split titles with him. I was the director of popular albums, and when he came in, we wanted to give him a title. So I suggested, "Let Paul be East" [*sic*: West] "Coast director of popular albums" – because I didn't want any infringement with Mitch, big ego. We got along fine – "and I'll just be the East Coast director of popular albums." It didn't bother me. I was in charge of the whole department anyway. So that's what Paul's title was.

He said, "I'm signing this pianist because he has a 15-minute television show in the middle of the day. He's on every day." I said, "Well, so?" He said, "His sponsor is a bank." "Well?" "The bank reports that they have had an enormous increase in business, and it consists of old white-haired ladies in tennis shoes cancelling their deposits at other banks and bringing them over to this bank, because of him." I said, "So what does he do?" He said, "He talks to the audience as he plays. He dresses very foppishly, like a 19th-century dude. He has a candelabra on his piano. And he whispers sweet nothings to

the audience, like, “I’m so happy to be with you again today, and I’m so glad that you are there once more. I’m going to play a lovely song for you which is one of my favorites, and my mother loves it too.”

I thought it was pretty funny, but I said, “Okay, let’s sign him. Zow. Biggest-selling piano artist in the history of the record business.

Sneed: Is that how that came about?

Avakian: That’s how I signed Liberace. Yep. Well, I shouldn’t say I signed him. Paul signed him.

Sneed: The business of music.

Avakian: The business of music, yeah. I think that until Roger Williams came along and surpassed him, he was the biggest thing . . .

Sneed: Lou Werts was his name [Roger Williams].

Avakian: Is that true? I didn’t know that.

By the way, when Paul Weston and Jo Stafford did a comedy thing that they had been doing at private parties, Darlene and Jonathan Edwards, they did it at one of these Columbia conventions about maybe a year or two years later. We all cracked up and told Paul, “You’ve got to make records of this. He said, “Okay, but jeez, we can’t put our names on it.” So Jim Conkling said, “Remember when Jo did something like Cleopatra J. Stump.” It was a comedy record of country music. Jo was tremendous. Only Jo could sing sharp out of tune, because singing sharp out of tune is very difficult.

So we all decided, all right, let’s think up a name for Paul and Jo. I said, “Hey, I’ve got the beginning. It’s going to be Jonathan Edwards.” They said, “Jonathan Edwards? Why?” “Roger Williams is a big-selling pianist, and Roger Williams was the name of the governor of Massachusetts at the same time that Jonathan Edwards was possibly governor of Connecticut. I don’t remember. But he was the other big clergyman of the Puritan days. So what would be more perfect?” “Fine. Now what about Jo?” Paul came up with Darlene. He said, “Darlene, because she is the one who is very prissy and very careful with her clothes and her makeup. Her fingernails are just right. She goes to the PTA meetings, and she’s the chairman of the bridge club, and so forth.” Perfect. Darlene it is. So that’s how they got the names.

Sneed: That’s how Darlene and Jonathan were born. That’s wonderful.

Avakian: Yeah, exactly.

Next. What would you like?

Sneed: We have 15 minutes, and we better talk about another little window into George Avakian.

Avakian: Which?

Sneed: The harness horses.

Avakian: Oh boy. I thought you were going to say the classical music side.

Sneed: That's my last.

Avakian: All right. The harness horses is – I'm going to tell this story. My daughters loved riding horses, once they discovered that these horses that went past our house on Central Park West and into the park were stabled a block-and-a-half away, down 89th Street, the only stable in Manhattan. When they were old enough, in turn, they began riding. Of course the little one, who was four years younger, started riding, I think, almost immediately after the older one, when Maro started to ride. Both of them went to horse camps. Both of them became counselors at horse camps. Maro took charge of the horseback riding at the Armenian General Benevolent Union's camp for Armenian kids, in upstate New York. When Maro graduated from Kirkland College, which a year later was absorbed by a brother college in Clinton, New York, which was – oh boy . . .

Sneed: Hamilton.

Avakian: Hamilton. I couldn't remember it for a minute. She stayed that summer to continue piano lessons with her teacher. She studied serious piano. She wasn't good enough to ever be a concert artist, but she loved playing, loved music. Because, like all my kids, she didn't want to ask Mom and Dad for any allowance money, she took a job with Montgomery Ward running their pet department, because she loved animals. She applied for the job, and they gave it to her. She got a little tired of parakeets and goldfish. When she saw that across the street from where she was staying with this couple – he was the editor of the local newspaper, and she was active in music – she asked the man, because he had two horses in his yard and a stable in back of the house, could she ride the horse now and then?, and she would take care of them for him, as long as she got a chance to ride, because she wanted to ride. He said, "No, I've got somebody doing it, but I have a friend who has a racing stable at Vernon Downs, 7 miles away. Do you think you could be a groom at the racing stable?" She said, "I think I could." So she went there and

got a job with the Jay [?] stable, which raced at Vernon Downs until the winter season started and then he went down to Pompano Raceway in Florida, near Miami Beach.

We now come to the second daughter, who is a sophomore at Western Washington State, studying oceanography. Decides she doesn't want to major in oceanography and she wants to get away from her boyfriend from New York, who had gone out there with her, and she wants to – that's an unkind thing to say, because he's very nice, and we always liked him, and she always liked him, but . . .

Sneed: It was time to split.

Avakian: It was time to split. He was getting very possessive, and she felt that a change was necessary. She decided also she wants to major in psychology, and they didn't have a psychology department that was worth it at Western Washington State. So she decided to come home at the end of the first semester. On the way, she found she could get an air ticket to San Francisco and talk to Uncle Lionel, Maro's husband, who could advise her about what courses to take and what university. She also discovered that for $5 extra she could stop over in Miami and see her sister on the way home. So as long as she was quitting school for a while and spending the next six months checking out and preparing for a psychology major, she'd stop off and see her sister, which she did.

The next morning, before the plane was due to leave that evening, she went out to the racetrack. Boy, what a wonderful life. A neighboring stable needed a groom. She applied for it, got the job, and called that afternoon and said, "I'm staying here to work as a groom for the next six months or so."

Sneed: Both of them.

Avakian: At different stables. She kept her ticket to New York.

This is so dangerous. You ask me a question. I'll try to make it fast. She ended up going to Michigan with a stable and getting a job with a better stable. This was with Doug Ackerman, one of the best trainers in the country, who gave her the best two-year-old filly that he'd ever had, because he saw that this girl is inexperienced, but she's college educated, loves horses, is great with horses. She'll learn better if she has a first-class racehorse. That horse was the winner of the first Countess Adios, which is a big, important stakes race now worth six figures in purses. The first race was at Meadowlands, a $25,000 purse. The horse won after being behind 8¾ lengths at the end of the last turn.

Got me hooked, because the owner was a man named Ed Friedberg, a very wealthy California lawyer. When we got to know each other through this horse, Jess Super[?], he

said, “You’re having a lot of fun.” He happened to have a pacer named Whata Baron, who became one of the sensations of the year. He broke the record for miles under 1 minute, 55 seconds. No horse had ever paced the mile in a minute, 55 seconds, more than three times. He did it seven times in a row.

Ed said, “I’ll find you a nice mare through my trainer, Lou Williams,” who happened to be the only black trainer of any consequence in the business. He’s a superb driver too. For me, that was kind of nice. A black trainer. Wonderful. Other people in the business would look at him. Wait, oh, what’s that? Me, heck, I’ve been dealing with black artists all my life, and “I know how to get along with them,” right? Oh, what a horrible clichéd statement. But Lou and I hit it off. I bought a nice mare that Lou picked out in Ohio, his home area. After I found that she wasn’t going to be a great racer, I bred her to Whata Baron.

My daughter meanwhile went to Michigan State, because she decided it’s time to go back to school, after a year-and-a-half with Mr. Ackerman. She loved Michigan. She started working weekends with a trainer, a local trainer there, and spent a summer with him after spending one summer with Lou Williams as a groom.

When she graduated, she got three degrees, including psychology, announced that she wasn’t going to use any of her B.A.’s. She wanted to be a trainer. She went to Florida, to Pompano, with one horse. A trainer suggested that maybe she might like to buy a 10-year-old gelding whose racing days were still pretty okay, but he hadn’t won in two years. She said, “Dad, would you buy him for me? It’s only $2,000,” which is not much for a race horse. I did. This girl was so good, that immediately this horse, [?Carstones], won three of his first four races and finished second by a nose in the fourth.

Sneed: Was she the driver?

Avakian: No. At that time she was warming up horses and training them, but not driving in a race. She never drove in a race until a couple of years later with one of the foals of Whata Baron, bred to my first mare, [?Easy Kay].

Sneed: So now, is there the Avakian stable?

Avakian: There was. That’s the unfortunate story. The Anahid Avakian stable grew. She got – owners and other trainers and drivers helped her get good horses. She ended up getting I Marilyn, who ended up earning half a million dollars when we retired her. She was one of the really rising women in the business until she got in this ridiculous accident where a guy bumped into the back of her car on the Long Island Expressway, because he hadn’t realized everybody had stopped, dead stopped traffic. You know what it’s like? She didn’t realize that she was injured at all. She got out, saw there was no damage,

yelled at the guy, got his name, etc. At the track, she said to one of the other people there, "I had this ridiculous accident. This stupid guy. I've got a pain in my neck, darn it." This person reported it to the track doctor, who came over and said, "Anahid, I can't let you on the track. The insurance won't cover you if anything happens." Anahid said, "I'm all right." He said, "Nope. Gotta take you to the hospital and check you out in the emergency room." There she was told, maybe she has whiplash. A few days later, it turned out that she did have whiplash. A couple of months later, when all this pain persisted and she was having trouble working and all, they discovered that she had cracked a vertebrae. At that point she realized she's going to have to give up racing. She had two grooms who were able to carry on pretty well. That was when I Marilyn finally ended up passing the $500,000 mark. We decided to retire her and not go through with our plan of having all the foals raced by Anahid. We would sell them. So, after adventures with the first two attempts at breeding, the third one ends up being Presidential Ball, which has so far, at the age of three, earned $2,600,000. That could have been my daughter's horse. She would have been the most famous woman trainer in the business.

Sneed: That's a sad . . .

Avakian: Yeah, but we had a lot of fun racing with many different horses, and that made up for the fact that I was fed up with the record business and did very little work in it.

Finished? Five minutes. Go.

Sneed: I want – I don't know if I dare ask this, because I'm not – I think it might be unfair.

Avakian: I'll try to be short. Go. Ask.

Sneed: Classical music and jazz.

Avakian: Oh, no problem. I'd already started getting interested in – of course, I'd studied piano, but I never got better than playing a version of *Für Elise* by Beethoven which was unique in the annals of classical music. I never heard another pianist play it the way I played it. I don't think any other pianist would want to hear it.

While I was in college, I got interested in contemporary music, because I knew Bix [Beiderbecke] was a fan of modern music. I loved Debussy. I heard more and more [Igor] Stravinsky, [Frederick] Delius, and so forth. I started buying those records. I even bought a record of *Octandre* by [Edgar] Varèse, which was done in England, a 10-inch single which had been put out by EMI and reissued here by Columbia.

Contemporary classical music really hooked me. One of the big thrills, I remember, was going to Boston, when the Army sent me to Harvard to study in the Army student training program. We got free concerts to go to hear [Serge] Koussevitsky conduct the Boston Symphony. Stravinsky came as guest conductor, and he did his own version of *The Star Spangled Banner* on Friday afternoon, the performance that I went to. The next day, I got a ticket again, because I wanted to hear him on Saturday and see if he'd repeat it, because it got the headlines in all the papers. The chief of police announced that he would arrest Stravinsky if he played his version of *The Star Spangled Banner*, because it was blasphemous. He did not play his own version. He just conducted a straight *Star Spangled Banner*. I felt very depressed by that. There has never been a recording made of that version of *The Star Spangled Banner*. He did record it once, but it's a straight version, which is a crime. I tried to find out from the guy who runs his music, Robert Kraft, about that. Did it ever get performed again? Is there a tape of it? He ignored my request. So I never pursued them, but I will again one day.

With all this stuff of collecting certain composers, [Leopold] Stokowski's performance of *The Sunken Cathedral* by Debussy, which really impressed me so deeply, I already had a running head start on contemporary classical music. So when I heard Maro Ajemian's concert at Town Hall – April 14th, 1946, all this contemporary music and such an unusual thing as the music of Alan Hovhaness, which was based on Armenian and Near Eastern systems and themes. No harmony. Everything is linear. John Cage, who created his own percussion ensemble with prepared piano – that was no surprise to me.

It was a delight to find that the first girl that I ever really wanted to marry was Anahid, who played the violin. I remember the first notes that I ever heard her play.

Sneed: She was the first girl you ever wanted to marry.

Avakian: Yep. I never proposed to anybody else.

Sneed: And you did it.

Avakian: I did it.

Sneed: Aren't you lucky?

Avakian: Oh yeah, the luckiest thing that ever happened to me, because she's the most marvelous person I've ever known, in addition to being a magnificent musician and a magnificent wife. She's even a magnificent cook.

The fact that I was familiar with the general idea of certain phases of contemporary classical music made our marriage, I think, even better, because I began to know more

about straight classical music through Anahid. Now my favorite form of music is violin and piano sonatas, and string quartets, which is very pure music. That's why I didn't hesitate to suggest recording Cage's music and Hovhaness's music. Columbia didn't want to do it, but I told Mr. Wallerstein my friend Moe Asch would do it on his little label. He said, "Sure. I don't care. We're not interested in that." I said, "Would you mind if I signed the album notes in Armenian characters with my name? Because I'd like my name to be associated with these debut recordings of these composers." He said, "No, not at all. Sign your name. Let me look at it." I did. He said, "No problem." So that's what happened. The very first recording of Hovhaness and Cage has my signature at the bottom in the Armenian alphabet.

Later on I made more recordings with them and helped get many more recordings. Hovhaness particularly is a very prolific composer. But it was Maro who really did wonders for him. Sad to say, today he doesn't mention her anymore, because the last two wives he had are intensely jealous women who would really not allow Maro's name to be mentioned in their presence. I found that out through interviews. It's unbelievable. But it's very unfair to Maro, who didn't give a hag. She knew who she was, and it didn't bother her. But old friends like Betty Gregory, who was his first supporter in Boston, had been very unhappy about it. But we never talked to him about it. Anyway, some people have problems, and his problem is being under the thumb of very domineering women, two in a row, at least. Although his second wife was terrific. I must tell you a story about his second wife. It has nothing to do with music, really. She was a 17-year-old girl from Boston, a very strict Italian family that didn't want him to marry her, because he was 33 or so. Helen asked me, "What state can I get married in without the consent of the parents?" I said, "I don't know, but I'm sure that we can find out at the office. They must have a copy of the *World Almanac* or something like that." So I asked the girls at the switchboard, "Do we have a *World Almanac*? I want to find out what state a friend of mine can get married in without the consent of the girl's parents." They said, "No, but we'll find out. We'll ask people around." Within an hour I heard that there was a rumor that George Avakian is crazy about this 17-year-old gorgeous Armenian . . .

[The interview ends in mid-sentence.]

[transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld]