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FRANK FOSTER
NEA Jazz Master (2002)

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Note: Expletives have been deleted from this Web version of the transcript, and are marked thus: [expletive deleted]. An unaltered transcript is available for use by researchers at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Brower: My name is William Brower, Jr., interviewer. Sitting across from me is Franklin Benjamin Foster, informant, and recording this interview is Matt Watson, directing the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program. It is September 24, 1998. We are in a radio recording facility of the National Museum of American History and about to commence an oral history/life history interview of Mr. Foster.

I'd like to begin by asking you to establish for us the facts of your birth and family. If you would extend from that, talk a bit about your earliest recollections of the community in which you were raised.

Foster: I was born Frank Benjamin Foster the Third at 2:15 a.m., September 23rd, 1928, to Lillian Watts Foster and Frank B. Foster. My mother's maiden name was Lillian Iona Watts. My mother and father were natives of South Carolina, my father from Greenville and my mother from Seneca. My father came north with the idea of

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marrying a northern girl, and he ended up marrying this girl [laughs] from his home state.

Cincinnati was I think the third largest city in Ohio, located in the southwest corner of the state and the hub, the musical hub of what's referred to in that area as the tri-state area—Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. Cincinnati was a very culturally diverse town, principally resided in by people of German ancestry, and I suppose there was a large influx of blacks from the south. Cincinnati has been referred to as one of the gateways to the south.

One of the strongest cultural institutions in Cincinnati is the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, associated with the University of Cincinnati. In the 1930s, during which period I grew up, and the '40s, the Conservatory did not admit African-Americans as students. In fact most areas of activities in Cincinnati were segregated at that time.

I grew up in the midst of a strong musical heritage because it was almost like a sort of crossroads for big bands coming back and forth across the country. There was an establishment called the Coliseum, which was a big dancehall. All the big bands came through and played there, the well-known bands, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Erskine Hawkins, *et cetera*.

Maybe I should backtrack a bit and go into my own personal history before going too much into the history of the city itself.

Brower: That would be fine. How did you come to play an instrument in your own family? Were your parents musicians? Were there musical influences or opportunities for that outlet within your family?

Foster: There were no musicians per se in my family. I had a brother who was six years my senior. My father and mother kept an upright piano. This was a fact of most black households at the time. Most households had an upright piano. A good many of them had player pianos. We didn't have a player piano, but we did have this upright.

My mother started both my brother, who was at the time 11 years old and I was six years of age, she started us both on piano lessons with the same instructor. I took piano lessons for a year.

Brower: Excuse me. Who was the instructor? Do you remember?

Foster: A gentleman by the name of Artie Matthews, who's a very interesting personality. I'll have to go into detail about him very shortly.

Brower: Come back to that.

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Foster: I took piano lessons for roughly six months before I suffered a tragic incident. I was struck in the street by a cement mixing truck. I had to be hospitalized for two months with a compound fracture of the leg. That, along with the rehabilitation period that followed, brought my piano lessons to an end. I didn't resume music lessons until age 11, when I decided to take up the clarinet.

My brother at this time was a teenager. He was listening to the bands of Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, and Duke Ellington, *et cetera*, and he started me listening. In fact at age eight he started me listening to all these bands.

Brower: So this is 1931, '32.

Foster: We're talking about late '30s -- '38, '39, '40. I started taking music lessons, wind instrument music lessons around 1940, but from say '37 on, he had started me listening to the big bands.

Brower: Okay, because '28 -- I'm thinking '28 is your birth, so okay, '38, '39.

Foster: Right.

Brower: Just before we go, what did your father do?

Foster: My father was a postal clerk. He worked -- this is the only job I've ever known him to hold, for my entire life, until he retired in his sixties. He was a postal clerk in the main post office in Cincinnati, Ohio, downtown Cincinnati.

Brower: And how about your --

Foster: My mother worked as a welfare worker. You'd refer to it as a social worker at the time. She was also a teacher. She was a kindergarten instructor, and she founded her own daycare center right in her house. It wasn't called a daycare center. It was called a playschool for tiny tots. In other words, she was her own -- she was a daycare entrepreneur, so to speak. Later she went on to get her Masters degree at the University of Cincinnati, and she went into teaching. She taught English and speech. She did so privately for a number of years. Then she took a position as a professor at Wilberforce University.

Brower: You mentioned your brother. What was his name?

Foster: Charles Amos Foster was his name. He was born --

Brower: Were there other siblings, other children in the family?

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Foster: No other siblings, just --

Brower: So it would be fair to say that -- did your father have a college education also, some?

Foster: No, he didn't. He had a high school education, no college.

Brower: In that period this would be a middle-class family in the black community?

Foster: Yes, it would be a middle class family.

Brower: Where in Cincinnati did -- what was the actual --

Foster: We lived in a suburb of Cincinnati called Walnut Hills. Now that sounds more swank or bourgeois than it really is.

Brower: It wasn't Rockdale or Reading Road.

Foster: That's right.

Brower: It wasn't Avondale.

Foster: It wasn't that far though [laughs]. It was right around the corner from Rockdale and Reading Road. We lived on a street called Stanton Avenue, which is only blocks from Rockdale. Yeah, it would be considered a middle-class family.

Brower: So when you're saying for example that a piano would be typical, it's probably more typical of a black middle-class family to have that instrument --

Foster: Exactly. Yes.

Brower: -- than a general family in the black community or a family not so well positioned, two incomes, professional, semi-professional, whatever situation.

Foster: Exactly, yes. As far back as I can remember there were always two incomes.

Brower: I stopped you at a point to clarify some things about your parents and your background when you were beginning to talk about your first introduction in terms of bands and things that you were hearing around the same time you got into playing wind instruments. Can we go back there?

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Foster: Certainly. I think it's most important to say that at a very early age I discovered that I had a strong appreciation for music, music that I refer to now as quality music. For instance when I was five years of age, I really got off on Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and things of that nature.

I didn't hear any jazz per se until I was about nine years old. It's not that it wasn't -- I wasn't frequenting places where at that age -- I wasn't hearing much on the radio, but I was hearing a lot of classical music and popular music, and my mother regularly took me to what was referred to as the summer opera at the Cincinnati Zoo. They had a pavilion where they had operatic performances every summer. I saw most of the major operas by the time I was ten years of age. I really loved classical music and some of the better popular songs of the day, but I'd like to say that very early I developed a taste for quality music and a distaste for garbage.

Brower: When you resumed music lessons after you had the introduction to piano --

Foster: At age 11 I resumed.

Brower: What made you -- why reeds? Why clarinet?

Foster: That's an interesting story I think. I have a childhood friend whose name is Morrison Bishop. We're the same age. We lived close to each other. We were looking at a daily newspaper one day, and we saw an ad in the paper by Wurlitzer Music Store for music lessons. There was a picture of a clarinet in the ad. On different days they might have a trumpet, or a piano, or a trombone. This day they had a clarinet. So my friend Morris said, "Hey, look at this. I think I'll take up the clarinet." I said, "I think I will too." He didn't make good on his threat, but I made good on mine. I went home and asked my parents if I could have a clarinet. They consented, and they bought me a clarinet.

Brower: Do you remember how much it cost in those days?

Foster: Oh, it must have cost about \$75 to \$100. Actually this didn't have to be paid all at once. The lessons were advertised for \$3 a piece. A dollar and a half went for the actual lesson. The other dollar and a half went for payment on the instrument. So after about six months of lessons, the instrument was paid for.

Brower: From what I've read, you fairly quickly progressed to a point where you were playing in dance bands or some kind of big-band aggregations. How did you apply yourself in a three-year period or so to get that level of proficiency? Just what was going on lesson-wise and practice-wise?

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Foster: I have two people to thank, my clarinet instructor and my father. My clarinet instructor, because he told me after a certain length of time that the clarinet was not a principal instrument of musicians in dance bands, that saxophone was the principal instrument of a reed-instrument player in dance bands so I should move to saxophone. Not just stop the clarinet, but expand my activities to the saxophone, because that was the principal dance-band instrument. The clarinet was a double or a side instrument. I convinced my parents to do this. My father I think --

Brower: Who was -- what was the teacher's name?

Foster: His name was Bud Rohs. He spelled his name R-o-h-s, but pronounced Ross.

My father made me practice. We had a big yard, and the guys used to play baseball in the yard, my brother and his friends, some of our friends. My father would say, "No baseball until you practice that instrument." I'd be inside practicing, watching the cats outside play baseball. I applied myself diligently to practice, and I made a reasonable amount of progress in a reasonably short period, so that after two years I was able to pick up a saxophone and play in a matter of minutes.

Brower: Did you practice every day?

Foster: Yeah, every day.

Brower: An hour? Two hours?

Foster: At least an hour. My father really cracked the whip in that regard, in a very nice way. He wasn't mean or abusive. He just said, "You're going to practice that horn."

Brower: Was that his personality, to try to get you motivated and keep you on track? Was that the kind of person he was?

Foster: Yes, he was. Yes, he was a leonine personality, so to speak. He had a short temper, but as quickly as he became angry, he forgot about it, and all was forgiven. But he really -- he was a strict disciplinarian in a very humane sense. He was never abusive.

Brower: Were you taking lessons every week?

Foster: Yes, once a week.

Brower: Saturdays?

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Foster: I think during the week, not on Saturdays. If it was during the time when school was in session, I would probably go after school in the late afternoon.

Brower: Was there music training available to you in the school system?

Foster: In elementary school there was a piano instructor who came once a week, but I never took piano lessons in school. All my musical activities, lessons, were extracurricular, not having anything to do with the school. Most of the kids who took piano from the piano instructor who came by the elementary school, they weren't really interested. They were just doing to satisfy their parents or whatever.

Brower: Somewhere in here then your brother begins to introduce you to some of the jazz big-band things.

Foster: Yes.

Brower: So I want you to sort of segue into your earliest playing experiences but also talk about, and anywhere you wish, what your early influences were in terms of bands, what you liked about them, and in particular what you liked about individual saxophone players that you were hearing, that represented early models for you.

Foster: Right. When I switched from clarinet to saxophone, which was not really a switch. It was just adding the saxophone to my arsenal of instruments, so to speak, because I always maintained the clarinet as that was a natural double for a saxophonist. I switched to alto saxophone. Most people who know anything about me probably are under the impression that I played tenor sax from the beginning, but I didn't. It was alto.

My brother had introduced me to the sounds of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Jimmie Lunceford. The three alto saxophonists who were principal players in these bands became my idols at the time: from the Lunceford orchestra, Willie Smith; from the Ellington orchestra, Johnny Hodges; and from the Basie orchestra, Earle Warren. Those are my first idols, so to speak, on the saxophone.

After less than a year of taking saxophone lessons -- this would be 1942 -- I became a member of a local dance band. It was in my neighborhood, Walnut Hills. Most activities in Cincinnati took place downtown in the west end area, which was a large black concentration. That's where most of the nightclubs were, the dancehalls, but I didn't have any occasion to go to the west end because of how busy my mother and father were in their respective jobs, and my brother was going to school. In other words, I didn't start hanging out until later on.

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But locally in the Walnut Hills area, which was referred to as one of the uptown suburbs, I became involved with a small dance band, about 12 pieces. I played alto saxophone with the band, and eventually I joined another band.

Brower: Do you remember the first band's name?

Foster: The band actually didn't have a name. The leader was a pianist by the name of Charles Danzi. His house was located in a very strange -- you had to go past the gasoline station and behind the gas station to get to his house. So whenever I told my mother I was going to rehearse with the band, I would tell her I'm going to Charles' behind the gas station, because I never knew his address, actually what street the house was considered to be on. So I guess it was Charles Danzi's band.

Brower: Did they gig? What did they do? What kind of things did the band play or do?

Foster: Every gig at that time was a dance. There was no such thing as a jazz concert. All gigs were dances, either dances or nightclubs. Of course I was too young to be admitted to anybody's nightclub.

Brower: Dances for what kinds of situations, like social --

Foster: Black community social dances in which teenagers and young adults participated.

Brower: Cabaret style?

Foster: I guess we would say cabaret style, but a dancehall sort of context, where it might even be a high school gym or a local small, not auditorium, but in those days we had what they called community centers. It might be the large activity room in a community center or a local dancehall. When you say cabaret style, I'm not entirely certain what you mean, because I get the impression that you might be speaking of tables where people sit and order drinks.

Brower: Have setups or whatever.

Foster: This may or may not have been the case, depending on the place. Some places have that and other places had bars or counters where people could go order drinks or whatever.

But the first band that I got with that had actually a name, and I don't mean a named band per se as we refer to the bands in the industry, but a local sort of territory band,

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was a band under the leadership of a man named Jack Jackson, who was a saxophone player. He had this band called Jack Jackson's Jumping Jacks.

I played with men who were by far my senior. These were grown men. I was about 14 years of age, and I'm playing with guys in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. The only other youngster was a fellow who was about a year older than myself. His name was Matthew Garrett. He was the father of Dee Dee Bridgewater.

Brower: That's interesting how that loops back. Somewhere I did come across Jack Jackson's Jumping Jacks and the name Tom McClure.

Foster: Tom McClure, yeah, was a tenor saxophonist with that band. He's the one who used to always come out with this expression. It gave me a title for one of my songs: *And All Such Stuff As That*. It's on one of my later -- one of my recordings. I forget which one. He used to -- he might have an occasion with some woman, and he'd say, "She was talking about the car and the house and the radio and all such stuff as that." Everything that came out of his mouth would be -- the last thing that would come out of his mouth would be "all such stuff as that."

Brower: So that's sort of like his bass drum.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: He in every paragraph would drop a bomb.

Foster: Yeah, that was his bass drum. "And all such stuff as that." I remembered that from all those years ago, because that was in the early 1940s. This recording was not until -- it was a recording that Frank Wess and I did in the '80s, which I just carried that expression with me all those years.

Brower: This is going left for a second, but that seems to be one of the things that you -- that's typical of how you approach things. You'll take phrases or things that are colloquial in a sense. They have a certain resonance to you, and you bring them -- or you bring them forth as titles to songs. I think that's probably not the only example of something of that type that for some reason -- what does that say about, I don't know, your conception?

Foster: For one thing it gives you something to go on in dealing with the flavor or the character of a song. *And All Such Stuff As That* could be nothing but a blues. It had to be a somewhat funky blues. Titles help you to commemorate certain events, certain personalities, certain romantic affairs, certain parts of someone's body [laughs], whatever.

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Brower: Does it have something to do with -- is this in fact a part of an aesthetic view about what the music is supposed to do? People always talk about you're telling a story so to speak, which is a simple thing to say, but I'm just wondering if for you, that's kind of -- without this, nothing as far as a jazz aesthetic would be concerned, or a conception, or an approach to the music is concerned?

Foster: It could actually be that way -- without this nothing -- a title is supposed to tell a story even before you get into the song. It has a certain rhythm. I always liked for most of my titles to be able to be inserted somewhere in the melody of a song as part of a lyric. Almost every song that I have ever written, its title can be inserted somewhere in that melody as a part of the lyric, whether or not the song has an actual lyric.

Brower: Or not. Do you think that's fundamental to jazz? That's really the question I'm asking.

Foster: It's fundamental to me. I don't consider myself the first or the only one to ever have thought of the idea.

Brower: When you say it's fundamental to you, leads me in another direction. I think of the music as the -- I can't say I think of the music, that wouldn't be fair. It would be fair as one way to look at the culture, jazz as culture, as reflecting the interior kind of intellectual, which people don't often focus on, cultural, spiritual life of the community and the persons who make it. So one approach to this would be, if I said, "Yes," you say, "Yes, I think it's jazz," but you answered that "It's important to me," which gets us away from whatever we call the music. You said, "I like" -- it wasn't the word, but basically good music, great music, quality music was the term.

Foster: Right.

Brower: So for you, is making this music -- on what level is it continuing a tradition, and on what level is it personal testament, personal statement, the means by which Frank Foster speaks about the world as he understands it, whether it's something cosmic or whether it's something pedestrian or small?

Foster: I think my whole persona is expressed in the entire range of musical composition that I've come out with. It goes from the pedestrian to the cosmic, whereas as Dizzy Gillespie has said, to the metaphysical.

Music is life. Every song that I compose relates to some phase, or element, or period, or passing moment of my life, or some association, some relationship with another of either sex in a personal relationship or a romantic relationship. Every song is an expression of something, a trip on a train, or a condition, a hypothetical condition that might arise from being in one place too long.

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Manhattan Fever, that's a song I wrote. Whenever I perform *Manhattan Fever* in public, I say, "This is something that happens to a person who has either been in New York too long or been away from New York too long. Either way you can get it." So there you go. There it is right there.

Brower: Anything you want to say -- we're going back to Cincinnati in a minute, but since you brought -- anything you want to say about this session, about any of the work on this session?

Foster: First of all, that was the first recording session that I was almost satisfied with out of all the ones that I'd done before under my own name. That was the first one that I -- in other words, that smile on the cover is real. I liked that session. I liked my compositions, and I loved the musicians who were working with me. I thought the performance was good. I thought the engineering, the recording was good, and I was basically happy with my own playing as well as the playing with everybody else on there. For a long time I thought of it as my best recording.

Brower: *Little Miss No Nose*.

Foster: That is my daughter. She was about two or two-and-a-half years of age at the time. Somehow my wife and I ran into Nancy Wilson somewhere. My wife and Nancy Wilson had been friends back in Ohio, Columbus, Ohio. Nancy first saw my little daughter, and she said, "Oh, look at her. She ain't got no nose." So immediately the title *Little Miss No Nose* sprang into my mind, and the song.

Brower: *You Gotta Be Kiddin'*.

Foster: *You Gotta Be Kiddin'* refers to a hypothetical situation in which a lover is trying to put some kind of hype on his or her romantic interest, and his or her romantic interest is not going for it. A response to this hype is, *You Gotta Be Kiddin'*.

Brower: *Stamm-pede*.

Foster: *Stamm-pede* is a play on words because of the spelling, S-t-a - double em hyphen p-e-d-e. That was named after Marvin Stamm, the trumpeter. It featured him playing the melody. I wanted to feature him on something, because I was a strong admirer of his playing. This song -- I wanted to -- this was one of my earliest experiments with what I call -- with what I refer to as fourths, that musical interval that became of highly prevalent in --

Brower: With Mac.

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Foster: With who?

Brower: I was going to say with McCoy.

Foster: Yeah, McCoy [Tyner], exactly, exactly. Yeah, he brought the fourth -- he brought fourths to life.

Brower: He hammered them home.

Foster: Yeah, he really hammered, nailed them down for everybody to see. This song represented my first excursion into the world of fourths. I wanted to feature Stamm on it. so that's where the title came from.

Brower: What did you see in him in a trumpet player, because this is in the line of crafting a piece, à la Ellington's approach around a player's particular skills, I would guess? So what is it you were seeing in Marvin Stamm. How did that influence your process in creating this piece of music, crafting it?

Foster: Actually I created the song not so much with his style or concept in mind as well as -- but with my own concept. I wanted to feature him, so I used his name as a part of the title. Having performed with him with Duke Pearson's big band, I became highly aware of his vast talent. As we used to say in the old days, he can play up the trumpet. He had good chops and good sound, great technique, ideas, everything. I knew that this song, being in the tempo it was written, it would be no problem for him with its off-brand harmonic structure, and the tempo, and the angular melody. I knew he wouldn't have any problem with it.

Brower: Good enough. Let's go back to Cincinnati. We were talking about I guess Jack's Jumping --

Foster: Jack Jackson's Jumping Jacks, yeah.

Brower: What were some of the other groups? You can, if you want, stretch into the west end if you have recollection of that.

Foster: Oh, yeah.

Brower: I think we'd be interested for the record of knowing about where the jazz life was concentrated in Cincinnati, and what some of the principal venues were, and what some of the other -- what the pool of bands were that worked the territory. Also what would have been some of the saxophone influences that you could touch in Cincinnati, players that we may or may not know about that guided you, showed you things? What was that process, not just the record process, but the hands-on process?

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Foster: I'll start with the local bands. As I said before, the principal concentration of music, jazz, was in the west end, downtown Cincinnati. One of the bands down there was a band that was rehearsing at what was called the 9th Street YMCA. Now this band didn't have a name, and it never ever played a job, but I went down there to rehearse with this band, and I made connections with Jack Jackson's Jumping Jacks, which were -- their home base was the west end.

Also there was another very good band, Andrew Johnson's big band. It was just called Andrew Johnson's band. Andrew Johnson was a pianist, a very accomplished jazz pianist. He featured arrangements that were transcriptions of Jimmy Lunceford arrangements. There was a trombonist, an arranger by the name of Paul Brown who played with this band, who transcribed several of Jimmy Lunceford's arrangements. That was the flavor of this band. A very good band.

In Jack Jackson's band there was an alto saxophonist named Oliver McClain. They called him Och McClain. He was real professional caliber. He could have gone to New York or anywhere and been one of the cats, so to speak, but he was tied down with a family.

This was during the war. Most of these musicians in Jack Jackson's band worked at munitions factories, worked in the war plants. They were tied down to families and jobs. None of them were able to go on the road with big bands like Basie or Ellington passing through town.

There was an excellent trumpet player by the name of Les Ayres, A-y-r-e-s. He was of that caliber where he could have gone on. Eventually he did move to the New York area, Long Island, but I never heard of him after that. I think he suffered ill health. He really didn't get to get out there, so he never became known.

So there's Jack Jackson's band, Andrew Johnson's band. There was another local band, Tommy Smith. Tommy Smith was a drummer. He had some of the top local jazz musicians playing with his band. He had a trumpeter named Mousey. That's the only name I ever knew. No, not Mousey. Mouse. And an alto saxophonist who was named Otto. His last name I never knew. These guys, they were the caliber of musicians that you see on the scene today, traveling on the road -- were the local good musicians.

The principal venues, and here again we're going to the west end, the Colosseum, which was owned by prize fighter Ezra Charles's mother. It was called Mrs. Charles's Colosseum. She spelled it the same way the Colosseum in Rome is spelled, C-o-l-o-s-s-e-u-m.

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Right around the corner from there was that principal area of jazz music activity in the black community, Cincinnati's Cotton Club. They had a house band, stage shows, comedians, singers, dancers, a chorus line, all that, the whole bit in the Cotton Club. The house band was led by a tenor saxophonist whose name was A. B. Townsend. He would remind one -- in his approach to playing and his sound would remind one of Gene Ammons, the late Gene Ammons. These were the quality musicians that we had around there.

Then in his band was an alto saxophonist by the name of Norris Turney, whom I'm sure you've heard of. He played with my band in New York. He also played with the Ellington orchestra until recently. In recent years he went back to Ohio. He was here in New York for a long time. When I say here, I'm speaking of the New York area. He was one of my first local idols, Norris Turney, on the alto saxophone.

Also Earle Warren, who was from Ohio, from Springfield. After he left Basie's band he came back to Ohio and formed a band of his own and hired me as a kid to play with him for a few months. He had already been one of my idols. Let's see, those are the principal venues that I can speak of.

Now northern Kentucky -- right across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, are the towns of Covington and Newport. Newport was a wide-open town as far as gambling was concerned. They had after-hour clubs that went from like 1 a.m. to 5 in the morning. I had to get my mother's permission to work a job in this club, the Sportsman's Club, with gambling. I was only 14, 15 years of age. I was placed in the care of an older musician, who promised my mother that he would look out for me and wouldn't let me drink or smoke or anything. And these clubs along with certain other --

Brower: What was Covington? Was Covington an open city too?

Foster: No, no, Covington was not an open city. It was adjacent to Newport, but Newport was the open city.

Brower: Was the wicked place.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Just a few things about the Jack Jackson band. What was their repertoire? What were you playing?

Foster: We had lots of stock arrangements that were bought in the music store, and a few special arrangements that were made by one or two members of the band. Not too many. I think I wrote one or two arrangements for the Andrew Johnson band. That's the band I said that had the Lunceford-type approach.

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Jack Jackson's band was more patterned after the Basie band. We had lots of Basie stock arrangements, the book. *It's Sand, Man!*, *Wiggle Woogie*, *One O'Clock Jump*. All those things that were made -- *9:20 Special*. Almost everything that the Basie orchestra became known for back in the late '30s and early '40s, the Jack Jackson band played.

Brower: Did you have costumes or suits? How did the band present itself? When it hit the bandstand what did it look like?

Foster: Dark suits, white shirts. That was the standard.

Brower: And in what area did you work? Just Cincinnati? Did you get to Kentucky with this band?

Foster: No, we worked in what I refer to as the tri-state area.

Brower: So Kentucky, Indiana --

Foster: Southern Ohio, eastern Indiana and northern Kentucky.

Brower: So you got to Dayton?

Foster: Oh, yes.

Brower: And Xenia-- well that's Dayton.

Foster: Dayton, Xenia, Columbus, Chillicothe.

Brower: Springfield.

Foster: Springfield, Portsmouth. We never got as far as Indianapolis. We played a lot of little cities in eastern Indiana.

Brower: In these places, were you playing for black folks, white folks, mixed audiences?

Foster: We played for black folks. There were no mixed audiences in those days. You either played for all black audiences or all white audiences.

Brower: Would there be some white people at the black thing but no black people at the white thing?

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Foster: Exactly, yeah. Some white, only a smattering.

Brower: Were they typically musicians or more hip people? Who were the whites who ventured into the black world to hear this music?

Foster: A lot of them were so-called slummers. You know, “Let’s go slumming tonight. Let’s go see what’s happening,” and so forth. Not particularly hip people but people who -- they may have had black friends who brought them to the affairs, or they may have been people who actually had an appreciation for music and who didn’t know where else they would be able to hear this band, so they would come to this black dance.

Brower: How were you traveling?

Foster: In a series or a caravan of cars. We usually traveled in three cars. Another thing, we usually would work Louisville, Kentucky, on Derby Day. There was always a black dance in Louisville on Derby Day, and we worked there. We’d go to places like Lexington, Kentucky, which is -- Lexington, Kentucky is where I lost my virginity, if I’m allowed to say that on this [laughs].

Brower: Well would you like to talk about it?

Foster: Well [laughs].

Brower: Did you write a little song about it? I’d like to hear it.

Foster: [laughs]. Funny, I never wrote a song about this, but I never forgot the experience.

Brower: Did it have to do with music in a way?

Foster: Oh, yeah. The Jack Jackson band was playing in Lexington. We played a dance, and we went down there by car. Now I’m about 16 years of age I think. No way was I a day over 17. I think I was 16. And at this dance was the young lady, who was like 26 years of age. She was the first --

Brower: You got plucked.

Foster: You’re correct.

Brower: It’s a wonderful thing.

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Foster: The first woman I'd ever seen with a blonde streak in her hair. This was a woman of color with this blonde streak in her hair. She just came up and said, "Who's that one?" like you said. So I ended up at this house in some residential neighborhood with three or four other members of the band, and three or four other ladies that they were with.

These were all the older guys now. These are guys that are at least in their 20s. One's in his 30s. Here I am a 16-year-old kid, not knowing anything about anything but how to play the saxophone. This 26-year old lady -- and I was just fascinated. She was beautiful and she had this blonde streak. I had never seen that before. Four couples were in one room. To hear one of the other gentlemen tell the story, he says, "I finished. Then I just sat back and watched you. And I watched and watched and watched and watched and watched, and finally you finished" [laughter]. I said, "I never -- there's a" -- how much liberty can we take linguistically on this interview [laughs]?

Brower: As much as you want [laughs].

Foster: Okay. This lady said to one of the other guys in the band, she said, "Frank tells me that he is a virgin, that he never went to bed with anybody before." They said, "Yeah, that's right." She said, "Somebody's shitting somebody." [laughter]

Brower: What was the pay like? What was life on the road like? Where did you stay? What did you eat? What did you get paid?

Foster: It wasn't life on the road per se. Every trip was there and back in one day, Cincinnati being the home base. We went to Chillicothe, we came back. We went to Portsmouth, we came back. We went to Lexington and we came back, except this one night I didn't come back and missed school the next day. We went to Louisville and came back. We never went on the road for more than one day. We never went on a trip from which we didn't come back the same evening, so it really was not the road.

Brower: What was this --

Foster: And the pay? I think -- I'm talking about 1943, '44, and '42, somewhere, I made max \$10 a job. Jack would always say, "We're going to Chillicothe, and the job pays \$9." In other words, he was giving everybody a chance to back out if \$9 wasn't enough. I thought that was pretty good.

Brower: What did Jack play?

Foster: He played tenor saxophone. He was a powerfully built gentleman, about 6'2" in height. He had been a local professional boxer before he became a musician. Maybe

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he decided that he would turn to music before he lost his health being knocked around the ring. He was a very good saxophonist.

Brower: Was there a style that could be associated with that region, the way we think of Kansas City style? Or what style was predominant in the region? Did it have its own character, or do you think of it as derivative of something else?

Foster: I think maybe it was derivative of Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges. Most of the saxophonists, the alto saxophonists either emulated Johnny Hodges or Benny Carter or Willie Smith, and most of the tenor saxophonists idolized Coleman Hawkins.

Brower: What about the band styles? Were they -- I think of the so-called Kansas City style as more informal, the eastern style with more composition, more arrangement in it. Where did the predominant feeling -- or was it driven by stocks [stock arrangements]? Was it a matter of this band sounds like Lunceford, this band sounds like Duke, this band sounds like Basie? Or was there something that was typical about the style of the bands of that era working in that territory?

Foster: I think the style of the bands at that time leaned more toward the Kansas City or midwestern flavor than eastern or New York. The style of Jack Jackson's band and probably other bands was largely determined by the available stock arrangements. Since most of the so-called Count Basie song book or repertoire was available in music stores, that determined that his band and other bands sounded a lot like the Count Basie band.

As I said before, the exception to that was Andrew Johnson, who had an in-house arranger who was just mad about Lunceford. He transcribed Lunceford arrangements. I think that made that band unique. I don't think there was any other band in the area that had a Lunceford approach to the music.

Brower: Around this time you've got to be in high school.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: What was the music training available to you there?

Foster: There was the high school band, the high school orchestra, and the choir, and the glee club. I didn't participate in any of them. My extracurricular musical activities didn't leave me time to even be bothered with the school program. I didn't care, because the musical concepts didn't lean toward black jazz in the high school.

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Brower: Often times in these cities there's generally some school that people talk about. Kind of example in Chicago would be DeSable, or Detroit has a school, or L.A. (a) has school. There's usually some band master that's noted in that area for developing young musicians. Even if you didn't participate, were you aware of something like that in Cincinnati, some particular school that was strong, or some bandmaster or teacher through whom a number of players were developed?

Foster: I was not aware, because -- I think that we're going back too far. In the '40s most of the musical organizations in high schools were concert bands and marching bands. If there were dance bands, they would have been patterned after Glenn Miller. If there were dance bands.

Brower: Because that was the character of Cincinnati?

Foster: Yeah, right.

Brower: I think that's something -- because [Capt. Walter] Dyett would have been operating in Chicago at about the same time. I know that he trained guys in high school. Then he also had activity outside of high school that he participated in. Maybe it's peculiar to Cincinnati that that didn't happen.

Can you think of other musicians that we might know of who came out of that same period as you in Cincinnati other than --

Foster: George Russell. That's about the only one. Of course there's Norris Turney, whom I mentioned earlier. But I was going to say, there were no Dyetts in the Cincinnati area. There were no high school bandmasters that trained young musicians in the jazz tradition.

There may have been someone across the river in Covington. There was a school in Covington called the Lincoln Grant School. I think most of these musicians that I associated with from across the river had come out of that school. There may have been a bandmaster there who was aware of current black styles and might have acted as a Capt. Walter Dyett. I don't know.

Brower: Did you know George Russell in Cincinnati?

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Can you tell me about your association?

Foster: There was no real association. I just knew him as passing in the street. I knew that was George Russell. Because he was playing in places that I could only peep in the

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windows. I couldn't go in these places. He left about the time I was really coming of age. He left. I didn't see him again until I got to New York and he was associated with the New England Conservatory. So I didn't really know him that well in Cincinnati.

Brower: When did you start to lead your own bands in Cincinnati? When did that happen?

Foster: In my senior year of high school I organized my own band, a 12-piece band. The unique thing about this band is there were no trombones. I had four trumpets and five saxophones and three rhythm. No trombones, because there just weren't any trombonists. I knew of two trombone players in Cincinnati. One was a guy named Marcus Ware. Another was a young lady. She played with another band, so I couldn't get her. She played with a band called the Sons of Rhythm. We had a battle of bands, and they out-swung us. They were from the west end, and we were from -- most of my guys were from the west end.

But my band was more -- I wrote all of my own arrangements. I didn't buy any stock arrangements, so my band was totally my concept. But I had learned a lot about harmony, taught myself a lot about harmony and theory. But I had not learned to swing yet.

Brower: How did you come by this knowledge? What were you using for your composition?

Foster: The experience of playing in bands that played stock arrangements. I would listen to the various parts, the various sections, the trumpets, trombones, saxophones, and I'd see how they were voiced on top of each other. At one point I thought, "I can do this," and I wrote an arrangement for Andrew Johnson's band. My first ever arrangement was on *Stardust*, the song *Stardust*. By trial and error I came across some theoretical things that are a part of the normal harmony and theory approach to music, and the arranger, whose name was Paul Brown, whom I also mentioned earlier, said, "Man, that was a great arrangement." I wrote a saxophone soli on this *Stardust* chart, and it really thrilled me to have this professional musician who transcribed Jimmy Lunceford arrangements to say -- I don't know if he said it in jest or if he was serious, but he said, "You've got to teach me how to write a saxophone soli."

So actually I was a self-taught arranger and composer, because I didn't study anything beyond harmony in high school. What I learned about music and jazz was from playing in the bands and listening to what was going on around me.

Brower: Did someone ever suggest, why don't you get this book or that book? I hear this. So and so explores this. You might take a look at this.

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Foster: I didn't see a book until after I had got out of college. I didn't even -- not even in college did I refer to texts.

Brower: So your senior year in high school, you've got this band, oddly configured. How did you deal with the absence of trombones?

Foster: I just used saxophones in the place of trombones, and the entire ensemble. You've got nine or ten horns. You can get a fairly large sound. So even without trombones -- I used baritone sax -- no, I didn't even have a baritone sax. My bottom instrument was a tenor sax. So I used the tenor sax as a bass trombone or as a baritone sax.

Brower: How quickly coming out of this are you at Wilberforce? Or is this -- did you go Wilberforce or Central -- ? You went to Central State and Wilberforce? Did you go state side or church side?

Foster: I went state side. It was all Wilberforce University. The split came in my freshman year.

Brower: Which was?

Foster: '46, '47 school year.

Brower: My dad came out in '39.

Foster: '39?

Brower: Uh-huh.

Foster: I'm certain he knew a gentleman by the name of Jimmy Guy who was a trombone player who had been a member of the Wilberforce Collegians. What was your dad's name?

Brower: William A. Brower, Sr. He's from High Point [North Carolina]. Same street as Trane [John Coltrane], which is another thing.

Foster: Is that right? Wow, yeah, okay. That gives you have a little bragging rights there.

Brower: That's right. That's right.

Foster: I brag about having the same birthday as Trane. Where were we?

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Brower: Well we can stop there, because first of all, happy birthday.

Foster: Thank you.

Brower: We should say for the record, this is taking place on the day after your 70th.

Foster: Right.

Brower: And I wondered, and this is a real digression, is there some connection? I mean do you feel a connection with Coltrane? Does the 23rd -- does that day -- does that mean something to you?

Foster: Definitely. I feel a connection -- there's a fact that in although we're two years apart, he having been born in 1926. Before he joined -- was it with Monk first or Miles?

Brower: I think it was Miles first. I think it was Miles, Monk, Miles.

Foster: Miles, Monk, Miles, yeah. Before his first tour of duty with Miles, his style and my style were very similar. This is around 1954, I think, '55. I remember hearing a recording of his and I remember remarking to myself, wow, he sounds a lot like me.

Then he got with Miles and I with Basie, and our paths went in vastly different directions. Trying to fit with the Basie orchestra and being torn between the Lester Young approach, and the Buddy Tate, Don Byas approach, and really being in love with Sonny Stitt, I was all kind of messed up, while Trane, his direction was very definite and intense. Here I -- while I'm trying to fit with this institution, long-standing institution, by veering back and forth between Prez and Don Byas and Buddy Tate, my style became diffused, whereas Trane was pinpointed in a certain direction. Then he left me in the lurch.

Brower: I don't know about that, but that's --

Foster: Because this confusion lasted a number of years until I decided, hey, I'm going for myself.

Brower: I think there was a kind of tension between the kind of obligation to fulfill certain roles in a band that carries the weight of tradition, but at the same time extending that tradition into a modern era, which you're credited of doing, you and Frank Wess and others, of bringing the bebop sensibility, where the horn was going and finding a way to extend the tradition, but almost at the same time, and we'll come back to this in depth -- but you're also recording and playing with important modern players all during this time and some would hear -- hearing you in the different context, hear

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you doing different things. I've read before you characterized yourself as not fitting in. Now you call it -- but do you say confused, because you think that's how it's perceived or because you were confused? Do you think people perceive it as you not having that, or is that what you think?

Foster: That's what I thought, because on the one hand Basie himself, I found that he admired strongly, players who came out of the Ben Webster tradition. I think he loved Paul Gonsalves. There was another tenor saxophonist by the name of Harold -- oh, what's Harold's last name? He played with --

Brower: Ashby.

Foster: Harold Ashby. Harold Ashby wasn't known to be a tremendous reader, but Basie loved his style. So did I, as a matter of fact. It's that old, not too hard -- it wasn't a hard-bop of approach, it was a -- coming out of the Coleman Hawkins school and the Ben Webster school. I consider Ben Webster as important a figure as Coleman Hawkins in this thing. That style, that whole Ben Webster, Paul Gonsalves, that whole lineage, I just -- Basie loved it.

I loved it too, but that wasn't my thing. I came out of Sonny Stitt and Wardell Gray. When I realized that Wardell Gray had played with Basie in '49 and '50 in a small group..and he didn't try to copy Prez or anybody. He just played Wardell Gray. It was a straight-ahead bebop approach. I said, "that's" -- when I remembered that, I said, "Hey, I'm going for myself."

I'm a hard bopper. Once a hard bopper, always a hard bopper. I was coming out of basically -- out of Wardell Gray, Sonny Stitt, and Dexter Gordon school. That's where I decided I would go ahead, while developing my own complete concept that was -- where people would say, "That's Frank Foster playing."

Because Basie wouldn't let me play on ballads, because I knew that he didn't have -- that he considered me not to have a good ballad sound. I didn't have a style like Hawk [Coleman Hawkins] or Webster or Gonsalves or Harold Ashby. That's what he wanted to hear on ballads. Frank Wess came closer to that, much closer than I did.

Another thing that got inside my head during that period was up until that time, up until like say 1956, people were telling me, "Frank Foster, oh, you're bad, you're the badest thing out there. You're bad. You play like Bird. You play like Trane. You play like" whoever. "Man, you sound just like Sonny Stitt. Oh, man you" -- they were pumping my head full of ideas about how bad I was. Suddenly -- not suddenly, but all this came to a halt. This is a source of amusement between me and my wife Cecilia, because I told her this. She's the only other person I've told this. My friends would come around, and instead of saying, "Man, you sure sound good." They would say, "It's

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good to see you, Frank.” I could tell by the tone of their voice, it was just good to see me, but not to hear me, because I wasn’t playing nothing.

Brower: Because they perceived you as role-playing for the band?

Foster: Possibly, or perceived me as having lost it, whereas once I had it -- I hadn’t lost it, it was just -- I mean there was no inspiration.

Brower: I want to come back to that, because I think there’s more in that and the perceptions that were going on about the period in music, but let’s go back to the transition from Cincinnati to Wilberforce.

Foster: Right.

Brower: Did you go there because your mother was there? You said at one point she -
-

Foster: There were a couple of reasons. My mother had gone there. Also I had waited too late to apply for admission at Oberlin. My mother really wanted me to go to Oberlin Conservatory. I have to mention certain other factors here. She really wanted me to go to the Cincinnati Conservatory, which at the time was not admitting blacks. This is 1946, okay?

Brower: Let’s stop right there. If you could, and you hit on it, but I think it’s really important, Cincinnati I think from my understanding of Ohio cities, it’s a bastion of Republicanism. It’s entirely identified with the Taft family.

Foster: Right.

Brower: And I think it’s probably one of the most conservative, and I don’t want to confuse conservative with racist --

Foster: Right.

Brower: But I do want to, if you could, give us some sense of how you might characterize, and I think we’ve hinted at this, Cincinnati in terms of its racial dynamic, the position of the black community within that, and then go back to where we’re digressing from.

Foster: Okay. I looked at Cincinnati as a good place to come up to be raised but there was always a sense of knowing one’s place, if I may use that expression, and knowing where one was not welcome. In high school I got a sense that, okay, the black community is here, the white community is here, and never the twain shall meet. If you

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have white friends, you'll talk to them in the hallways, but you won't leave school together.

Brower: So there were prescribed areas of acceptable interracial activity, areas where it's okay, but also prescribed areas where it's not okay. It didn't require a sign to tell you what the protocols were.

Foster: No, no, it did not require a sign. Right, there were no white gentleman, black - colored men, white ladies, colored women, there were no signs of that, like that. But the ballpark where the Cincinnati Reds played, Crosley Field, was definitely segregated. When I joined the Knothole Club and we went to the games, they had people assigned, designated to lead black kids in one direction and white kids in another. Make sure, all the white kids over here, all you black kids go this way. They didn't even say "black" then. They said "colored."

Brower: Did you like baseball?

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Do you remember the first black player that the Reds had?

Foster: I think it was either Vada Pinson or --

Brower: It was Frank Robinson. [Chuck Harmon was first in 1954. Robinson, 1956.]

Foster: Frank Robinson.

Brower: But that was considered long after your days?

Foster: Oh, that was -- yeah, way after my -- In my high school classes, academic classes were not segregated, but swimming classes were. I have to describe the situation. White kids in the seventh grade swam together. White kids in the eighth grade swam together, and so on through senior year. Black kids in seventh, eighth, and ninth through senior year all swam together in one class, which was the sixth period on Friday, the last period of the week, and for some reason they had the second period Thursday. I don't know why that was. One Friday the pool was in disrepair or something was wrong with it. I don't know what was wrong with it, but the black kids could not have a swimming class. The principal instructed the gym instructors or whoever they were to give us a bat, a ball, and some gloves, and told us to go out on the athletic field and play baseball. I got an idea of how we were perceived by the white community at that time. There were no -- we didn't know from race riots and heavy, heavy tensions, but the principal of Walnut Hills High School got us all, these black kids, boys, and said --

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Brower: And Walnut Hills after all is the most desirable probably high school for blacks to go to in Cincinnati.

Foster: At the time it was, yeah. You had to pass some type of aptitude test in the sixth grade. If you got a certain grade on this test, you went to Walnut Hills High.

He said, "The pool is not suitable" for some reason or other. "It's in disrepair" or whatever." He said, "We're sending you out on the athletic field to play. You just play some baseball. And you'll be noticed by the community." In other words, so don't do anything that would make the school ashamed of you. So what he's saying is, a bunch of black kids -- now we know you guys have -- you people have bad tendencies, but don't go out there and act up.

Brower: Don't act --

Foster: Yeah, right. Don't give the school a bad name by your actions.

Brower: Don't show your color. That's another phrase of that era.

Foster: Yeah, right. These things were -- you know, the N word and all that. It wasn't just tossed around indiscriminately in those days, but we knew who we were. We knew how we were perceived. Whether or not we wanted to stay there, we knew our place.

Brower: Let me ask you this. What about public accommodations, hotels, places to buy clothes?

Foster: Hotels, places to buy clothes, certain department stores were okay. Certain exclusive places were off limits. Nightclubs, certain places where black musicians might be able to play were off limits to black patrons.

Brower: For example? Does anything come to your mind?

Foster: There was a place called The Barn. It was a nightclub in downtown Cincinnati. Another place called The Hanger. These were just nightclubs, not dance halls, but just neighborhood bars. Black musicians played there, in trio or quartet format. Black patrons could not go in these places. The black musicians played there.

One of the better-known dance halls was a place called the Lookout House. That was in northern Kentucky, somewhere near Covington. Black bands couldn't even play in this place. They only had white bands, white patrons.

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Brower: That brings up something. What were some of the comparable white bands? Were you aware of white dance bands, white bands in Cincinnati?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: What were some of those that would be corresponding to Jumping Jack?

Foster: Counterparts of Jack? There was a white band, Jimmy James. He was a clarinetist. He had a good sounding band. Every now and then we'd hear him broadcast live on the radio. Another band was Clyde Trask. Clyde Trask was a bandleader who was an arranger who had arranged for Paul Whiteman. No, not Paul Whiteman. Phil Spitalny. Do you remember that group? Does that ring a bell with you? Phil Spitalny had --

Brower: I'm very familiar with it.

Foster: [laughs] Had an all-girl orchestra. Something like that. I wasn't hearing Paul Whiteman.

Brower: I heard him.

Foster: This guy Paul Trask was a nationally known arranger, had his own band based in Cincinnati.

There was another local band called Barney Rapp, not Barney Rupp. Barney Rapp. These were leading white dance bands in the Cincinnati area. There were a few others whose names I can't recall.

Brower: Was there any level of contact between the white and black musicians in Cincinnati?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: How public was it? Was it after hours? I mean what levels --

Foster: No, whenever it happened, it was cool. Like there was a band called the Rhythm Kings. They met me through my music teacher that I was going to Wurlitzer, to take lessons. Some of these guys, they became aware of me. They invited me to play with their band. I played at a couple, or maybe more than a couple, of white dances with this white band. I'm the only black in the band. Nothing was said. Everything was all right.

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I can't describe it, other than to say it wasn't a rigid segregationist policy, where if one of them is seen over here, we're going to string him up. But it's one where a black musician could be invited to play with a white band in a white establishment where blacks could not come as patrons, and everything was cool. Everybody treated him okay.

Brower: Did the reverse happen?

Foster: Yes. White musicians came to hear black musicians. They mingled and got acquainted. "Why don't you come and play with us sometime?" The same thing. Everything was all right.

Brower: Were jam sessions a feature of musical life as you knew it in Cincinnati?

Foster: There probably were jam sessions at the Cincinnati Cotton Club, but I never participated in any of them, so at that time I didn't know too much about jam session activity/ But I'm sure there were jam -- white musicians always came to the Cotton Club.

Brower: We're going to get back to Wilberforce, but I want to know about any saxophone player in Cincinnati that took you to school, that said, come sit down with me, let me show you this, who helped you develop technically on the instrument. And I'm speaking outside of Wurlitzer.

Foster: Right.

Brower: I'm talking about the musicians that you were meeting in these situations, with Jack, with others, that you went to school with on the horn and what that was about.

Foster: There was a guy named Paul Robinson who played clarinet. He almost sounded like -- if you closed your eyes you would have thought you were listening to Benny Goodman. This is a black guy, and he's a light-skin black.

Brower: What system did he play?

Foster: What's that?

Brower: What system did he play on the clarinet?

Foster: Boehm system. Nobody played the Albert system anymore, who had any sanity.

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Brower: By that time.

Foster: Yeah, at that time. I pick up an Albert system clarinet and I say, “If this is what it’s about, I’m going to take up plumbing.” [laughs] “Okay. Take this thing away.”

This guy Paul Robinson, he was a pretty fair saxophonist. He played tenor, but he was an excellent clarinetist. He would wipe you away on the clarinet. He took me under his wing. He played with -- I can’t remember if it was Tommy Smith’s band or Andrew Johnson’s band. He was a neighbor of mine. He didn’t live too far away. He really helped me a lot, especially, on the clarinet. He would come down on me like an irate parent when he saw how badly I took care of my own clarinet. He’d say, “Hey, man, what are you doing here? You see these posts? You’ve got to keep these screws tightened. You see these rods? You’ve got to keep these rods straight. Look at this key. Look man, the way you’re putting it down on.” He would scold me and almost make me angry the way he would come down on me about my poor care of the clarinet. He showed me how to develop a tone and some things about technique. He was like a mentor to me, Paul Robinson.

Brower: Were there any competing interests for you besides music? You seem like you’ve latched on to this fairly early, had all these experiences. What else was competing for space in your head?

Foster: The only other thing that could possibly have offered any iota of competition was photography. I became interested in photography, but only as a very amateurish amateur, a beginner. I didn’t develop it until later on with the Basie band. Then I got into 35 millimeter cameras and all that kind of thing.

Brower: We’re now going back to Wilberforce and you were sorting out --

Foster: There were girls too. Yeah, I forgot that.

Brower: We ain’t really interested in that stuff. You told us how you got deflowered. That’s enough.

Foster: [laughs] Yeah, okay. All right.

Brower: Until we get to talk about the love of your life. That’s another story.

Foster: Right.

Brower: So you’re sorting through these choices, or at least your mother has a vision and the sort of options. So let’s go back to that. Walk us through that. Talk about the

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Wilberforce experience and particularly the Collegians and what doors got opened for you.

Foster: I'll have to begin with how I got into Wilberforce, because it was already the beginning of the school year. The school year had progressed at least two or three weeks. I didn't get into Oberlin, didn't get into the Cincinnati Conservatory, and I was just floundering out there. So my mother said, "I'd like you to go to Wilberforce if possible." There was a member of the Wilberforce Collegians named Richard Christmas, who was also a Cincinnati. He said, "Come on up there. We'll get you in the band." So they arranged somehow through the president of the college to have me registered and set up in a dormitory weeks into the semester, just so I could come and join the Collegians, because their lead alto saxophonist had graduated the previous year. They didn't have anybody to play alto saxophone, lead alto. So they actually came and just arranged for me to get a late registration to go to Wilberforce. As it happened, I was the principal if not the only arranger for the band. They didn't have anybody to write arrangements for the band. They were playing old music. I had written -- I had a year's experience writing for my own band, which I had in high school. So I began arranging for the Collegians.

Now the school, the state side and the church side together were Wilberforce University, but the state side and the church side were having difficulties with each other. I don't know the nature of these difficulties but the split came in my first year there. The state side floundered around with no name. It was calling itself Wilberforce State University, but that was an unofficial name. When you told someone that you were going to Wilberforce State, that let you know that you weren't --

Brower: On the church side.

Foster: On the church side. The church side retained the --

Brower: Just for clarification, the church is AME?

Foster: AME, yes.

Brower: African Methodist Episcopal.

Foster: African Methodist Episcopal.

Brower: So people will know, Wilberforce is a small town, in southwest central Ohio.

Foster: Right, it was four miles from Xenia and about 15 miles from Springfield, so I guess about -- Dayton was the largest --

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Brower: City near it.

Foster: Yeah, nearby city. And Wilberforce -- the school was the entire community. There might have been a few people, scattered residents, but they all had something to do with the college.

Brower: The school has a strong association with abolitionism and William Wilberforce.

Foster: William Wilberforce. Yeah, right.

Brower: It's named after William Wilberforce, a great force in England, so forth and so on.

The Collegians --

Foster: The Collegians were about 18 pieces, a full-sized dance band. We played for college dances. We traveled to places as far away as Knoxville, Kentucky, and Indianapolis, Indiana.

Brower: Who were some of the players in that band? Was Ernie Wilkins's brother somehow involved?

Foster: Jimmy Wilkins was the bandleader. He was a veteran attending school on a GI Bill, so he was the experienced person.

Brower: Now that's the Detroit connection?

Foster: Yeah, that's the Detroit connection if you will, yet the Wilkins brothers were originally from St. Louis. Jimmy was the leader. The most noteworthy member of the band was a gentleman by the name of H. D. Whalem, who played tenor saxophone and played trumpet and sang. He was one of the most popular gentleman on the campus, because a singer gets all the glory. He sang in the Billy Eckstine -- then he could turn around and play a mess of tenor saxophone. Then he could turn around and play a mess of trumpet. So he was the bop. He was the man.

Brower: What happened to him?

Foster: He settled down in his native -- where is he from? St. Louis. After he left school, he got married and established a family and got stuck in St. Louis. He worked as a musician. He also had what I call a civilian job as an auto salesman or something like that. So he never left St. Louis. He would have been one of the people if he had chosen to venture out in the professional music field.

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Brower: What about Freeman Lee?

Foster: Freeman Lee was a trumpeter in the Collegians. I suppose he was the one that gained the most fame as a member of the Collegians, or after leaving the Collegians, because he went to New York. He did the hip thing. He went to New York. He was a good musician. He and I used to play piano for each other in the music building. In the practice rooms we'd alternate playing piano for each other while we were taking *Cherokee* through the keys. That's how we got a lot of our early experience.

Brower: Your association with him continued beyond the Collegians.

Foster: Yes, as a matter of fact in New York we recorded together with Elmo Hope. We didn't have much of an association beyond that, because our paths didn't cross too much. While I was with Basie, I didn't see him that much, except during the time we did record with Elmo Hope.

Brower: How would you characterize your writing for the Collegians? In what style? Your Frank Foster style, or were you working some particular style?

Foster: I was a strong admirer of Billy Eckstine at the time, his band's approach.

Brower: So it's bebop.

Foster: Oh, it was definitely bebop, yeah. Yeah, it was the bebop. Billy Eckstine, Dizzy Gillespie, that was my model as a big band. It wasn't so much Basie at that time. I had left Basie and gone over to Billy Eckstine and Dizzy.

Brower: Let's talk --

Foster: The split between the schools was a serious thing with us. Wilberforce the church side retained the name Wilberforce University. The state side floundered for I don't know how long without an official name. We called ourselves Wilberforce State, but I suppose -- I don't know when Central State was established as the name, but Wilberforce State had to have been abandoned, because we didn't want any association with the church side to be in evidence, which would have been the case if the name Wilberforce State had been retained. So I assume that the rationale behind changing the name to just Central State was to totally disassociate the school from Wilberforce University.

Brower: Was that still a little creek or something?

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Foster: There was a ravine. I forgot what they called it, a ravine that separated --

Brower: The two places.

Foster: Yeah. We held them in contempt. I suppose they felt the same way about us. We just despised all of the AME bishops. There was one bishop, one old dude. God, he must have been in his eighties. Named Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom. He was one of the most vocal and one of the most antagonistic toward the state side.

I don't know if the state side and the church side were vying for state funds, or just what happened, but one really adverse thing that came out of this was that the school lost its accreditation with what was called the North Central Association. This in effect meant that anybody with a degree of any kind from Wilberforce couldn't go very far with it. It didn't meet -- if the school was not accredited by this particular association, then the degree I suppose was just a piece of paper.

Brower: What was going on in terms of the school's music program? I mean was the Collegians an official thing or --

Foster: No, the Collegians was an extracurricular entity, but we did have a scholarship established in my first year there. This scholarship paid half our board for the school year. In other words, if the entire cost of eating came to \$1,200 for the school year, \$600 of that was paid by the scholarship. So we used to joke about it, a half-board scholarship. We used to think of it as a half-ass scholarship [laughs].

Brower: Bands like this were typical of black schools though, weren't they?

Foster: Yes, yes. Tennessee State Collegians --

Brower: I think Frank Wess played in a group called the Collegians at Howard.

Foster: The Howard Swing Masters.

Brower: The Swing Masters, right.

Foster: Then there was a Lincoln University. I don't know what they called themselves. There's one -- Kentucky State had one. I actually went on the road with them. I had a girlfriend from Covington, Kentucky, across the river from Cincinnati, who went to Kentucky State.

Brower: Which is located where? Where's Kentucky --

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Foster: In Frankfurt, Kentucky. They had a band almost as good as ours, if not -- maybe it might have been a little better. They traveled -- I went down to the campus to visit her, and they traveled as far as Lima, Ohio.

Brower: Which is up near Cleveland.

Foster: Yeah, right. It's closer to Toledo. It's in the northwestern section of Ohio.

Brower: That's my hometown.

Foster: Toledo?

Brower: Yeah.

Foster: You don't know about Lima?

Brower: Well I know about Lima. I know it's up there somewhere.

Foster: Yeah, it's up there somewhere.

Brower: I think from Toledo, we went towards Cleveland to get to it, maybe that's why I think of it, because if you go west from Toledo, you're going to Detroit.

Foster: Yeah, you're going to Detroit.

Brower: So you've got to go east.

Foster: You've got to go east, yeah, right, exactly.

Brower: So to me it's like going -- I'm thinking I'm going to Cleveland.

Foster: Yeah, right. Lima is like southeast of Toledo. It's got to be.

Brower: Okay, maybe, yeah.

Foster: And southwest of Cleveland [laughs].

Brower: Yeah, okay.

Foster: Anyway. the Collegians -- now there was a black college dance-band community. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, the black weekly newspaper, established a Negro college dance-band poll in 1947. The winner of this poll got a trip to New York, a performance at Carnegie Hall on an all-star program, and a performance at the Savoy

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Ballroom, the track. This program at Carnegie Hall was one of those gala all stars. Actually the winners of the *Pittsburgh Courier* music poll -- I don't know if they called it the jazz poll. It probably was a jazz poll -- but such stars as Lucky Millinder, Bill Eckstine, Count Basie, Sarah Vaughan, Duke Ellington.

Brower: You're the second person that really talked about this history with the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Do you know about this history? It's not well talked about as far as jazz history is concerned, the role of black newspapers in something like this. It was a revelation when I heard about it.

Foster: It was the leading black newspaper of the time. I think it was a weekly publication. It was based in Pittsburgh, but it was sold nationwide.

Brower: How did your Collegians fare in that? Did you win?

Foster: We won the first year.

Brower: In '47?

Foster: Right. Tennessee State actually had the best band. They had the most proficient, I mean the slickest jazz musicians in the band. They had the swingiest style. They were overall a better band, but we won because Charles H. Wesley, the president of Wilberforce at the time, gave us a little pep talk. We had had an assembly called, an assembly in the main auditorium, and he said Wilberforce Collegians have got to win this poll because -- my supposition is that it would spread the name of the school in a good light across America.

Brower: So you were the '40s version of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Foster: You might say that, yeah [laughs]. And so we stuffed the ballot box. We had our girlfriends vote. We had the girlfriends urge their friends to vote. We had our parents vote. We wrote letters to everyone we knew.

Brower: So it wasn't a playoff. It was a fan poll.

Foster: Yeah. I don't even know how practical it was, but we had fictitious people vote for the Wilberforce Collegians in this poll, because the president said we must win this poll.

We traveled by a Greyhound-type bus to New York City. They had accommodations in a hotel, but I had a relative in New York who was a cousin, a niece of my mother. She lived in Harlem. My mother accompanied me, because my mother had started to teach

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at Central State. I'll call it Central State, although it wasn't called that at the time, just to simplify matters.

My mother was teaching in the English and Speech Department. She took off to -- actually I suppose to chaperone me. We stayed at my cousin's house in Harlem. The rest of the band stayed at this -- wherever the hotel was. I don't even know where the hotel was.

We played opposite the house band at the -- not the Apollo, at the Savoy Ballroom, the now defunct Savoy Ballroom, which was a great musical landmark in Harlem up until it was destroyed in I don't know when. In the '50s, I guess [1958]. It's replaced by a housing development or something [Delano Village]. I don't who the house band was at the time, but it was just a thrill to me to be appearing at New York's Savoy Ballroom. I was in heaven.

And on stage at Carnegie Hall there were so many artists appearing that our time was very limited. I suppose we had about 20 minutes originally. Because Lucky Millinder got long winded on stage and went over his time limit, they cut us down to about ten minutes. We performed two songs. But it was a high point, if I may, in my young career.

Brower: You say you characterized the band as I guess in a bebop style.

Foster: Yeah, it was --

Brower: Were you affecting the look of the beboppers?

Foster: Yes, I had a pair of horn-rimmed bebop glasses. A lot of my friends wore the beret as Dizzy Gillespie -- I didn't wear any headgear. I hated hats, so I didn't wear anything on my head.

Brower: I want to segue into influences.

Foster: Could I mention that these glasses -- I'm sorry to interrupt.

Brower: No, but I want to go further with this, but as a way to get to influences.

Foster: These bebop glasses, the horn-rimmed bebop glasses, were just windowpanes. I went to an optometrist and said, "I want some glasses, be-bop glasses." He gave me some glass from a Coca-Cola bottle and put it in these rims.

Okay, go ahead.

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Brower: The question really is then, if you can look back and describe why, or what was it in the bebop movement, the combination of the style, the combination of the attitude, and in combination with the musical ideas. Give me some sense of how that was coming to you, how you were absorbing it, how your colleagues, the Freeman Lees at that time and other people, just what did that mean to you? How were you taking it in to the point where I guess you would -- I've got to have this look. Give me some sense of what all that meant to you.

Foster: Up until that time it had been the swing thing. I was at a developmental stage of my life where whatever was going to be new at that time was bound to suck me in. When I first heard Charlie Parker and Miles Davis play *Now's the Time*, and *Billie's Bounce*, in the summer of 1945, that did it. I was a bebopper from that moment on.

Brower: What did being a bebopper mean?

Foster: Being a bebopper meant that you concerned yourself with certain elements of the music, like melody and chord changes, especially the chord changes, and rhythms where instead of the [Foster sings a repetitive drum pattern], the heavy four associated with the swing era, you had [Foster sings a widely varied rhythm], drummers dropping bombs. That became the expression used for the way drummers, Max Roach and Kenny Clarke, *et cetera* played. We liked the idea of playing with drummers who dropped bombs instead of [Foster again sings the repetitive pattern].

Brower: Instead of a steady chug.

Foster: Yeah, right. We liked the freedom that it afforded us, and we became more aware of what chord changes were. The melodies that were created by Dizzy Gillespie and Bird, we emulated these melodies. We analyzed what they were doing in terms of extensions of what -- before we were just aware of the root third, and the fifth, and maybe the sixth, but now here we were hearing the major seventh, the ninth, and the raised eleventh, the thirteen. We were getting into these extended intervals and we really -- we were considering ourselves --

Brower: Artists?

Foster: Many notches above the swing-era people and old heads who said, "Oh, that bebop ain't nothing but a lot of noise. They don't know what they're doing."

Brower: So this was self-conscious. "We're making a break." Did you think of it as an extension or a break? In other words, did you think of what Bird -- the language, the harmonic vocabulary of the way the rhythms were changing, did you think of this as a extending a tradition or making -- and I'm not talking how you see it now, how you saw it then, or as a break, a new school, a new departure?

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Foster: As a cocky youngster plagued by his own immaturity, I looked at it as a break. I look back on it now as an extension with variations, but at that time, we had our chests all stuck out, because we looked and sounded like the Dizzy Gillespies and the Birds. We considered it a break from the old way.

Brower: We're talking about that period in the mid-'40s when you're establishing your identity as a musician and you've had some musical models before, particularly on the saxophone. We talked about them, Earle Warren, Johnny Hodges, Willie Smith, all of the swing style.

Foster: Right.

Brower: Bebop, like jazz, is a culture of which the core thing we're looking at is the music, and the components of music, and their application to a particular instrument. But it's also attitude. It's dress. It is perhaps how at least a particular group within a generation saw themselves in the world and saw what they did, what their chosen focus in their life being music, what the approach to it to be. So I want you to talk us through this as you were experiencing it, as you were seeing it, as you were making choices across the range, musical choices, cultural choices.

If I might inject this, I think jazz is more than -- I've come to understand jazz as really an American phenomenon, but probably the driving force within this American phenomenon being the black community. I think that over time our music, that is music coming out of the black community has been the process of gaining more and more control and definition over itself and therefore providing us with the most profound significant expression, creative expression, more than in painting, more than in dance, more than in literature. We can talk about Ralph Ellison, but we can't talk about twenty Ralph Ellisons. We can talk about twenty seminal saxophone players.

Foster: Exactly.

Brower: I mean we can -- maybe if I go into literature I could come up with more than Ellison, but we simply cannot compare the body of work created by African-American instrumental players at mid-century. It's way beyond the body of literature created, and that's not to put down anything about the literature.

Foster: Right.

Brower: It's a statement of fact. So I'm interested in, as you're forming your sense of yourself as a young man and your sense of yourself as a musician, what did that thing that we call bebop, how was that catalytic in it, formative, seminal, wellspring of it?

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Foster: It caught me at a time when I was able to adjust from whatever I was doing totally to that movement, bebop, and get into it fully. I was at the age when I was most --

Brower: Vulnerable, open, susceptible?

Foster: Right. Yeah, I like to say vulnerable, because we have to consider the fact that I was far from being a mature individual, but I was accomplished musically. I was able to write music. I was able to read music. I was able to arrange, compose and arrange music, and I could play with people by far my seniors. I'd played with men who were, as I said before, in their twenties, thirties, forties, and even fifties, and been like an important cog in this musical wheel. But as a young man, very immature and with not an adequate sense of my own identity, my way of looking at this thing was, this is a break from the old. We are a new generation of bad people. We are the ones who are going to take this thing forward into whatever it is. Yet my associates, my contemporaries and I were just following behind our idols, Parker and Gillespie, you know, Monk, J. J. Johnson and others, Max Roach. Those were our stars that we'd hitched our wagons to.

Brower: In '45 you were aware of Monk?

Foster: Yes, just not as aware of him as I was Bird and Diz, but I had some friends that really stayed on top of it as far as listening to records, collecting records. They kept me abreast of what was going on. As I said, when I heard Bird and Diz and Miles, I was fully drawn into this thing called bebop. But I realized that musically it was very valid, that the people who were at the forefront of this musical revolution so to speak knew what they were about. Harmonically they were aware and ahead of those who had gone before. Melodically they were stretching out into new areas and adding more and more color tones to the melodies. The melodies were much more complicated, to me much more sophisticated than the swing melodies.

For instance, as far as I was concerned, *Ornithology* [Foster sings the first 8 bars of the melody] -- I'm humming it very much out of tune -- was much more sophisticated a melody than, say, *9:20 Special* [Foster sings 8 bars of this melody]. The bebop melodies had more substance to me than the old swing melodies. The bebop rhythms with the drummers dropping bombs, all this was more apropos and more -- I just fell into it, just as a 14- or a 13-year-old now naturally falls into the rap culture. I make a comparison with that. I just fell into the bebop thing, but in doing so I realize that the musicality and the validity of it was all there. When we analyzed Charlie Parker solos or Charlie Parker compositions and Dizzy Gillespie compositions, we knew what these notes were. We knew what the raised ninth was. We knew what the flatted fifth was.

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Brower: Give me an example of how you analyzed this. Were you in a practice room? Where were you when you --

Foster: I might have been at one of my friend's houses listening to the record player and listening to the Bird do *Yardbird Suite* or whatever. When he played [Foster sings a 4-bar improvised bop melody], we knew what each one of those notes represented.

Brower: Did you play it over and over again? Did you slow it down? How did you do it?

Foster: We didn't slow it down. I don't know if we had the facility to slow it down even, but we just -- I did, I don't know if all my friends did, but I personally having a musically analytical mind, I couldn't help myself. I couldn't help but -- even if I wasn't thinking positively of, I'm going to analyze this solo. I'm going to figure out what every note is. My mind just did this automatically. I heard a certain note, I knew it was the ninth, I knew it was the fifth, or I knew it was the flatted fifth, or the raised ninth, or the raised fifth. I knew all this and when people told me, that bebop ain't nothing but a lot of noise, I didn't go into a long thing of explaining to them what it was. I just got bitter and resentful and disagreeable, but I didn't follow it up with all this knowledge that I knew.

Brower: So it's a musical movement that you saw as a break from the past.

Foster: Right.

Brower: With all this new sophistication, was it a social movement, or was it making a cultural -- or did you think of yourself as making any kind of a social statement? Did you already have not only a new approach to music, but a new attitude about being a musician, about carrying yourself, about being a man?

Foster: I had a new attitude about being a musician. I had the conception that this music was taking me forward. It absorbed me so much that I became a lot more passionate about the music, a lot more concerned about knowing what the inner workings of this music was. Before I just performed. I enjoyed, and I listened, but I didn't listen analytically to Willie Smith or Benny Carter or Johnny Hodges. I just enjoyed what they did. Maybe that in itself represented a more mature outlook.

But when the bebop thing came along, I did -- I automatically became more analytical. "Man, did you hear? It was [a] flat five. Did you hear those raised elevenths" or whatever. A lot of our conversations were about, "Man, he sure is playing some great stuff. Did you hear what he was doing?"

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My compositions and arrangements all took on bebop characteristics. My source of resentment was the failure on the part of laypersons to get with this new music. For example, there was one guy in high school who admired me greatly. He used to call me Hodges, for Johnny Hodges. "Hey, Hodges, what's going on? What's happening? Yeah, man, everything's cool." When he heard me emulating Charlie Parker and leading that whole idea, he said, "I don't know, man. I don't like what you're doing now. You're going back. You're digressing or something."

My father, who never knew much about music, but he always had said, "I don't know music, but I know what's good and what's not." He said, "I can't get with that bippy bop you're doing now."

And see girls -- you know, we were at an age when, we were pursuing girls heavily. When girls didn't like what we were doing, we just couldn't take that. I couldn't understand why a girl didn't like Charlie Parker, or didn't like Miles, or didn't like Dizzy. This stayed with me until I was in my early twenties, this inability to understand lay people not getting with bebop.

Looking back, I can see that whereas every gig was a dance gig when I played with Jack Jackson's Jumping Jacks, the other bands of that era -- the dance era was still happening but bebop was not compatible with dance for some reason.

Dizzy Gillespie swung his cakes off. There's just no way anybody, John Hammond or anybody else, can convince me that Dizzy did not swing. When music swings, it naturally follows that people should be able to dance to it, but the dance crowds were going with the R-and-B'ers [rhythm-and-blues]. They were saying, "What you all is doing is way off base. We don't like that bebop stuff." Only the hippest of our contemporaries were able to get with the bebop, but most of the girls just said, "I don't know. I don't like that bebop. Sing me a song like Larry Darnell or somebody. Let me hear, even Billy Eckstine." But the girls couldn't get with the bebop too tough, but that didn't -- oh, and the club owners, they said, "Man, look. You've got to play me some *Hucklebuck*. I don't know. You can play a little bit of that bebop, but don't go too far with it. You come back to *The Hucklebuck*."

Brower: I want to come back to that in a way, but right in through here you make a switch from alto to tenor.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: So you have these models on alto and you have a new model on Charlie Parker.

Foster: Uh-huh.

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Brower: But you make the change, and you have some other models in terms of a tenor that becomes significant.

Foster: Right, right.

Brower: I've heard Don Byas, and I've heard Sonny Stitt over and over again. Sonny Stitt, Wardell Gray, and then maybe a little bit later --

Foster: Dexter [Gordon].

Brower: Dexter. I'm interested in -- that's a switch that Jimmy Heath made from Little Bird --

Foster: Little Bird, yeah.

Brower: Then he becomes the tenor player. So talk if you would, about that "Bird played so much alto that I'll pick up the tenor," if that's the syndrome that you were --

Foster: I was a part of that syndrome.

Brower: Also more about -- and you can just freely walk through the saxophone players that influenced you and what in particular you got from them. You can go in any order, Stitt, *et cetera*.

Foster: Are we coming from the bebop era forward or are we going back to my earliest idols?

Brower: You can go either way. You can go from the earliest idols and talk to the transition if you wish.

Foster: I have to speak of -- yeah, I have to go back to Benny Carter, Willie Smith, and Johnny Hodges, and to a lesser degree Earle Warren.

Brower: Please.

Foster: Earle Warren is not as important in this context as Benny Carter, whose name I neglected to mention at first. Okay, from Benny Carter I got ideas. From Willie Smith I got tone. From Johnny Hodges I got execution and pure artistry, from bending notes to just getting over the instrument in such a miraculous way.

Brower: What do you mean by ideas from Benny Carter?

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Foster: Musical ideas, the melody lines that came out of his horn. He had a beautiful tone but it was Willie Smith whose tone I just adored. Benny Carter, his lines, his musical lines, his improvisations, I really was amazed by those. Willie Smith, not so much his ideas as that beautiful sound and the beautiful way he expressed a melody, just playing a simple melody and of course leading the saxophone section. Johnny Hodges with his stylistic magnanimity or whatever, he could play one run, one arpeggio, and it would just floor me. He played *Don't Get Around Much Anymore*. It was just one thing he did that was just so hip that I never forgot it. It was beautiful.

Now when Bird came along, all these guys just fell by the wayside, every one of them. I couldn't listen to them anymore. Now this is a immature --

Brower: Let's stop, and we'll come back. That's influence on you as a saxophonist.

Foster: Right.

Brower: What about ideas? This is really elliptical, but ideas that will come to you as an arranger about how to use the saxophone. What did -- whether you were conscious of that at that moment or you think you came to draw on later as writing becomes even more important for you, that generation of saxophone players is kind of all of the same generation prior to Bird. What influence do they have? You can go with them individually, on your work as an arranger, as a writer for the instrument?

Foster: At that time they didn't have too much. I wasn't that experienced as a writer. I had the ability to write, but I wasn't thinking too much of a saxophone orchestrationally as --

Brower: But you do later, and I'm wondering --

Foster: Yeah, later on.

Brower: As it becomes more prominent in your life later on, did those players or specific aspects of what they did as saxophonists or I guess as arrangers as well, would [were] those influences that you drew upon later --

Foster: Oh, later certainly, yes, later, as I matured and went back. When I got into my -- I was in my mid-thirties or almost to age 40 before I came back and re-appreciated Hodges, Carter, and Willie Smith, and outgrew just the Bird syndrome. But early in my arranging career, I was influenced by Bird and Diz. I wanted -- everything I wrote was something that Diz had played or Bird had played and I wasn't think[ing] about guys from the swing era.

Brower: Okay, so let's go to Bird and his influence on you as a saxophone player.

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Foster: It seems as though he in one person, he combined what all three of these others had given me, not so much tone as technique, fluidity on the horn, ideas around the corner -- technique and ideas and obvious knowledge of harmony and theory, which just came flying out at you.

Brower: Was that amazing to you that he could -- it's like listening to somebody whose every paragraph is perfectly formulated. No sentence starts the same way. Every statement gets resolved a different way. You're thinking -- I would be thinking, man, this is awesome that somebody could do this.

Foster: Yeah, it was awesome to me.

Brower: So awesome that you would say, "I don't want to play anymore"?

Foster: No, no, no, no, no. It never had that affect on me. However, it did run me away from the alto saxophone eventually. When I found that I couldn't shake the influence -- you see when you're first sucked into it, it's all you want to know about it. You live, eat, sleep, dream, this is it, Charlie Parker's sound, his ideas. I never transcribed a single Charlie Parker solo, but I must have emulated his style and repeated so many of his ideas in in-person performances. I discovered that it was hard to shake Charlie Parker's influence. It's then that I realized that I wanted to become my own man. I'm still a young man. I'm not yet 20 years old. There must have been a realization somewhere inside that, hey, at some point or another, you have to go for yourself. You're tired of people calling you "Charlie Parker" when they see you in public. "Hey, Charlie Parker. Hey Bird."

Brower: That was happening?

Foster: Yeah, yeah.

Brower: So it must have been happening to lots of saxophone players all across the country.

Foster: Oh, yeah. Some who couldn't even blow their nose, but if they played one little bebop phrase, some sucker over here who don't know what's happening, says, "Yeah, yeah, Charlie Parker."

But the necessity for a tenor saxophonist in the Collegians is what brought about the switch from alto to tenor. It was a case of they had an abundance of alto saxophonists, at least enough to have two in the section, and only one tenor. They needed another tenor, so I said, "I'll switch." I was happy to make the switch, because I said, "Wow. Maybe I can shake Bird, finally."

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As soon as I switched to tenor, then here comes Dexter Gordon and -- not so much Wardell [Gray] -- Sonny Stitt. Wardell was a minor influence. I later played with Wardell in person. In my own young immature mind, I thought I blew him away. So Sonny Stitt was my next step and Dexter Gordon. Dexter Gordon then Sonny Stitt. Sonny Stitt was the ultimate.

Brower: Talking about Sonny Stitt.

Foster: So when I made the switch, Sonny Stitt was the first one that really influenced me.

Brower: Was this via records, or did you have encounters with Stitt?

Foster: Records only. Every note was crystal clear. None of the notes slid into each other so, that a phrase became indistinct. When Sonny Stitt [Foster sings a bop melody], everything was right there where it needed to be. Everything, as I said, was crystal clear. No doubt, no hesitation, no, "What was that? Was that" --

Brower: Well how different at that point was Stitt from Bird?

Foster: Not that different. I mean Bird -- I guess Bird was able to elude me with some of his phrases.

Brower: You think Stitt was a little bit more predictable?

Foster: Yes, okay. Stitt was a bit more predictable, but I didn't fault him for that predictability. If I knew where he was going, I wanted to go there in the first place.

Brower: It seems to me that the facility was there the same as Bird or maybe not that much difference.

Foster: The facility was there.

Brower: But maybe something in the spark of the idea, in the melodic things he would create. There's still some slight separation between what Bird left us and what Stitt left us.

Foster: I think Bird was the more creative, more imaginative.

Brower: Okay, that's what I meant.

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Foster: The more seminal. I think Bird was more the source and Sonny Stitt was more derivative but captivating in his style.

Brower: That's certainly the way it comes down as one reads history, that Bird was the seminal source. Was he really as dominant and did he really wipe out the scene as completely for the generation of musicians who came in his wake as history would tell us?

Foster: I think he did, but some may not realize that Bird himself, there were some people that he idolized, that he took things from. There's J. J., not J. J. Johnson. I'm talking about --

Brower: John Jackson?

Foster: John Jackson and perhaps Buster Smith. There were other older -- especially J. J., that I think Bird borrowed from. I think that these people helped where Bird was coming from, but Bird's thing was so strong. He brought enough of his own energy and creativity into it that he appeared to be the source, the absolute seminal vessel. Every now and then somebody alludes to Bird's influences. A lot of us thought that Bird just came totally out of himself. There were no influences. We almost felt as though there were no alto saxophonists before Bird.

Brower: Did you know him?

Foster: Yes, I got acquainted with him.

Brower: Let's digress and talk about your experiences with Bird, such as they were.

Foster: My first live experience was hearing him with strings in Detroit at what's now the Orchestra Hall. It was the Paradise Theater back then. A good friend of mine at the time, Sheila Jordan --

Brower: The singer.

Foster: Why are you smiling?

Brower: She's a lovely singer.

Foster: This is some inside stuff [laughs]. Yes, she's a good singer. She let me know that Bird was coming to town. She was practically a Bird groupie [laughs], if such a term can be applied. I think we were together. We went to hear Bird. I of course had heard his recordings and was happily impressed with his live appearance. I was also

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impressed with his microphone technique. He was on the same program with Ruth Brown. I found out that he could speak as well as he could perform on the instrument, and I gained a new respect for him then.

My next experience with Bird was my first night in New York City to join the Count Basie orchestra, Monday, July 27, 1953. I don't remember too many dates. I remember the day, the date and the year. There again I met with Sheila. She took me to Birdland and persuaded Charlie Parker to allow me to sit in. I had joined Basie's band. I was leaving town the next day with the band. Bird allowed me to sit in. We played *Dance of the Infidels*.

Brower: Bud Powell.

Foster: Yeah, which is normally played [Foster sings the melody at a relaxed tempo]. Bird said he played it [Foster sings the same melody at a fast tempo], whew, but I was able to keep up with him, because I had played that song on many occasions. I had learned it, thankful that I had learned it. I think I made a favorable impression on him, because as we played together he did what a lot of old experienced musicians will do, go into all their tricks. He even went into a little growl on his horn, as if to say, "Hey, youngster, who do you think you are?" You're messing with the high priest.

Brower: Did you chat with him? Did you have a chance to talk with him?

Foster: Only briefly. I was so much in awe and probably in delightful shock that I don't remember what he said or what I said.

Brower: But you were impressed with his presentation, his talking?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: Why? What did you think he was going to sound like?

Foster: So many musicians at that time and even to the present time seem to have much more ability to speak on the instruments then they do verbally. I think this is very unfortunate.

Brower: I want to say -- I will say it -- did Bird's presence, his speaking presence, defy the image of him to you of a junkie?

Foster: Yes, very much so. He did defy that image. It did defy that image. When he introduced Ruth Brown, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, at this time it's with a great deal of pleasure that I present to you the eminent and inimitable" -- and he said it three

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times as fast I just said it, “inimitable Ruth Brown.” I’ve never been able to say it like that. He just popped those words out like they were nothing.

Brower: Have you ever seen that little piece of film, where he and Diz are on a TV show getting an award? I think it Leonard Feather and this other guy. The other guy is clearly not a jazz person. Leonard is there, probably engineered them getting the award or whatever. The gap between this guy’s apparent perception of who these guys were and how to address them, and how they respond, is like you’re on two different planets. I think some of it is racial. I think some of it -- because he calls them boys. If you remember, if you’re familiar with it, he refers to them as “you boys.”

Foster: I didn’t see that. Please, please run that down for me.

Brower: It’s really deep. Who was the drummer? He’s a left-handed drummer named West or something.

Foster: Charlie Smith?

Brower: Charlie Smith is the drummer, right. Yeah, Charlie Smith. It reminds me if you will -- it reminds me of seeing Max Roach shake hands with Jimmy Carter. Max is looking at him like I should be a president, because there appears after all -- they are men of the same age. And black men and white men who come up through the same experience but also understand the different deck dealt with them, often I believe exchange things non-verbally, because there’s a protocol that says there’s certain things that you don’t say but they both know.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: So I look at this piece of film. I won’t say it’s the same, but it’s that same dynamic of trying to get the unsaid that’s going on between this guy and these musicians. Leonard Feather as the bridge between these worlds. He comes off this way, very intelligent. Maybe the guy was so -- I don’t know, that he didn’t even perceive it, but it was perceptible to me. Anyway, I can go on about that.

Foster: Yeah, Joe Smith, American. “You boys.” That says it all.

Brower: Yeah. Don Byas --

Foster: Wait a minute, I’m not through with Bird now.

Brower: Okay, that’s the word.

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Foster: In fact I left out something. That experience at Birdland was in 1953. There was a previous experience. When I went to New York with the Wilberforce Collegians -- please don't forget Don Byas, now because that's another big subject -- when I went to New York with the Wilberforce Collegians in 1947 as the winner of the Negro College Dance Band Poll, a couple of my buddies and I went to hang out on 52nd Street after we were finished performing. We went to the Three Deuces and the Onyx. We saw Fats Navarro. I think we saw Miles, Bud Powell, Tommy Potter, but we were waiting for Charlie Parker. This was going to be our first time seeing Charlie Parker live.

And I don't know if it was the Three Deuces or the Onyx, but we were there. We saw a set. We heard Charlie Parker was supposed to be there. We saw a set with, I guess it was Miles and Bud Powell and Tommy Potter, and I'm not sure who the drummer was, or maybe it was Al Haig on piano. I'm ashamed of myself for my lack of memory in this case, because these were -- I'm talking about giants now.

But Bird was late. Bird didn't show up until time for maybe the third set or maybe the entire night was over. No, no, the entire night wasn't over, but Bird showed up very, very late. He and the proprietor had this big argument about Bird's lateness. We're sitting there just dying to hear Bird. As the argument progressed, the quarrel, Bird reached up behind the bar and took an *Esquire* award that was -- he had received an *Esquire* magazine award for best alto saxophonist I guess -- and he just took it down and walked out without playing a note. You're talking about three disappointed college boys. Our only chance to hear Bird live, and it was ruined by that, by an incident like that. But that didn't change my opinion of him. I just became angry with the proprietor for blessing him out.

Brower: He seemed to be a person of such stature that even if he did wrong, it was like it wasn't wrong, because he was that great.

Foster: I think probably --

Brower: Billy Taylor said to me when I interviewed him years ago, Bird probably was rarely at 100 percent of himself but at some lesser percent, 70 percent, 65 percent, 80 percent, he was still --

Foster: 200 percent of anybody else.

Brower: Of anybody else.

Foster: Yeah, I can believe that. When I saw him in Detroit at the Paradise, when he was on this same bill with Ruth Brown, he appeared to be robust. He certainly was magnificent with the strings. Of course his eloquence, that endeared me to him.

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Then I had met him in Birdland. He was personable. and he didn't seem to be -- there was nothing weird or strange or forbidding about him.

Don Byas.

Brower: I want you to, if you will, talk about the difference between Bird's persona and Dizzy's persona, and how both those things could be under the umbrella of bebop.

Foster: Dizzy of course -- my first thought about Dizzy is his humorous side and how crazy, how silly, how funny, how hilarious he was as a person. But then I have to think beyond that and think too, oh, that was delightful. But I think past that and think his musical side, his creative side, and his strength and power as a musician, as a trumpeter, as a composer, as an arranger, all these things wove their way into my heart.

Stylistically I just thought he was the greatest thing since the wheel on the trumpet. As I said before, he swung his butt off. This bebop was not a thing that was without the element of swing. A lot of the old swingers thought, bebop don't swing, but bebop did swing, good bebop.

There were some people playing bebop who couldn't play before. Then they'd try to play bebop. Certainly they're not going to play -- if they couldn't play when they were trying to swing, what are they going to do with some bebop? So those people we just shove them aside, don't even consider them.

Diz and Bird I thought was just a marvel, Rogers and Hammerstein, or Rogers and Hart or whatever, bread and butter, Mickey and Minnie Mouse. One person that I knew who was a Bird fanatic said that Bird was so modern and so masterful in his technique that he made everybody else around him sound old fashioned, and said that even Dizzy sounded old fashioned next to Bird. Dizzy didn't deserve to be with -- Bird was just the ultimate and no one else could come up to his level. I had to disagree with them, because I said, Diz -- to me, Dizzy and Bird together were the perfect compliment, even more so than Bird and Miles.

Brower: I've heard people say that the band they'd want to hear was Bird and Fats Navarro.

Foster: I could go with that too.

Brower: That would have been the one, Bird, Fats Navarro, and Max. But Don Byas.

Foster: I mean peanut butter tastes as good with bread as honey does.

Brower: Don Byas.

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Foster: Yeah, Fats Navarro, my goodness. Don Byas. Before I changed from alto to tenor I fell in love with Don Byas's style and sound. I thought it was a -- what could be a proto-typical tenor sound and style. It was virile. It conveyed knowledge and years of application building up to this point.

My convictions about Don Byas became even strengthened when I met him in person. I was with Basie's band. We were in Paris. It was this club called the Saint Germain des Pre's over on the Left Bank, I think. Several members of the Basie orchestra when we finished our gig, we went by this place. Don Byas is playing, so we made a beeline to this place. We thought maybe we'll get to sit in. As it happened, we were able to sit in with Don Byas. I was already in awe of him, but I was still a cocky youngster. You know the feeling. You've been young. I walked in here thinking, yeah, okay, Don Byas is one of my idols. Now I'm going to go up here, and I'm going to make him know how bad I am too. So we got on the stand. We were jamming. He played *Stomping at the Savoy* and gave me the saxophone lesson of my life, which I shall never forget. I mean he showed a cocky youngster what the tenor saxophone was all about.

Brower: How, what?

Foster: By the sheer force of his artistry, ideas, relevancy to the music that was going on. When you tell a story on a song, you tell a story of that song. I don't think anybody could do this better than Don Byas.

Brower: Was he a swing player or bebop player?

Foster: He was a swing player that sort of -- I don't want to say converted to bebop. He was one of those players that I don't think needed to try to convert. See bebop players come from a standpoint of, I know the chord changes. Don Byas knew the chord changes before bebop came along or when bebop was being formed. He might have even been a part of the bebop movement up in Minton's in Harlem. So he made the adjustment, if I must use this term. So he sounded at home in the swing tradition or in the bebop tradition by virtue of the broadness of his style, the extent of his knowledge of harmonic principles, and the power of his expression.

Brower: Does he come out of Hawkins in your mind?

Foster: He may have perhaps come out of Hawkins, but not to my way of thinking. As I see it, Don Byas, his formative years were probably in the Hawkins era. Like about dozens or hundreds or thousands of other saxophonists, he might have appeared to have come out of the Hawkins tradition, but he had his own thing as far as I'm concerned,

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because I worshipped him, whereas I could take or leave Hawkins. So there was definitely something there that was his own.

Brower: Moving from Wilberforce and that experience, unless there are other things you want to speak to about that experience, the Collegians, the other musicians, what may have happened to you in that period of time? Are there other things that you think would be relevant for the record?

Foster: Yeah. The Collegians were a popular group on campus. I wasn't the most popular of the Collegians. The most popular was the guy I referred to as H. D. Whalem, who played tenor, trumpet, and sang. He was short in stature, so they called him "Peanut." He was probably more popular even for that fact. He was a little giant. He could do so much and so well.

And there was Freeman Lee. No one else in that group made any big noise nationally or internationally.

Brower: What about Jimmy Wilkins? He did a little something.

Foster: Jimmy Wilkins -- I was going to make some exceptions, a couple of exceptions. Jimmy Wilkins, of course he got with the Basie band and was the mainstay in that band for a few years. Then he moved to Detroit, and he started his own big band in Detroit. He became one of the go-to bands in Detroit for local events. He now resides in Las Vegas. He's retired, but he's still leading a band in Las Vegas, doing pretty much the same thing as he was doing in Detroit. A good solid trombonist. Not a blazing, dynamite soloist like a J. J. Johnson, but he had good leadership. He was a perfect leader for the Wilberforce Collegians and a good front person. Having been a veteran, he was a little more mature than the rest of us college -- there were a few veterans in the band who were going on the G.I. Bill, but Jimmy Wilkins was the most qualified to be the leader.

There was an alto saxophonist by the name of Clarence Johnson, who came from Cincinnati. You might have heard of some people -- if you know any people from Cincinnati, you might have heard them talk of Wobble Head. He was called Wobble Head. He's not nationally known, but he was a good friend of Freeman Lee's, and he had that big time capability. If he had gone on -- if he hadn't gotten married and got stuck in Cincinnati and had gone on the road and pursued a professional career as a world-wide musician, he would have been "one of the cats".

There was a trumpeter by the name of Reynauld Davis who was the other arranger for the group. He was -- whatever ethnic group is referred to as *geechee* -- from South Carolina. Is that --

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Brower: That's one term they used, the *geechees*.

Foster: He was of that ethnic persuasion. Good musician, good solid musician, and he wrote very well. I think he went back to his hometown and became a teacher. That's what happened to a lot of these guys. They return home and become school principals or instructors in college music departments.

Those were the most accomplished musicians in the group. We had a trombonist named Rufus Bond from Baltimore who was a great soloist. I don't know whatever happened to him. He's the first one I credit with introducing me to one of my bad habits, which shall remain nameless. It wasn't really a bad habit. It was just a habit.

Brower: Which will remain nameless.

Foster: Yeah. Nothing to do with dope addiction. Nothing like that.

Brower: But it will remain nameless.

Foster: But it will still remain nameless.

Brower: Okay.

Foster: Let's see. There was another trombonist. He was the Jimmy Rushing of the band. He was heavysset and sang excellent blues and played good trombone. His name was Jennings.

This band had two drummers and two bass players, if you can imagine such a thing. The drummers alternated, but the basses played simultaneously and it worked for some strange reason or another. And a pianist by the name of James Warren, who was classically trained and very jazz able, I'll put it. He's one of the ones who went back home and became a school principal.

The Collegians, that's where I really got my most extensive training as far as playing with big bands and writing for big bands is concerned, because that went for three years. I didn't graduate. I left in my final -- before what would have been my senior year, I left the area to move to Detroit, Michigan. I played with Snooky Young.

Brower: How did you come to know Snooky Young?

Foster: He was a resident of Dayton, Ohio. He had played with Jimmie Lunceford years before. A lot of Dayton area musicians used to hang around the campus. The musicians from the campus would go to Dayton and just sow wild oats. We had gigs in Dayton, so I met him like that.

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Brower: What was the Dayton scene?

Foster: The Dayton scene seemed to be more alive than Cincinnati's. There were more active jazz musicians who were known for their ability from Dayton as far as I was concerned. Dayton was a fast little town that had a lot happening as far as jazz was concerned, jazz clubs, dance halls, what have you.

Brower: Could you briefly, unless there's a reason to go into anything particular, just highlight some places and some musicians that you could recall from the period, if you can.

Foster: It's hard to remember places.

Brower: Meaning clubs.

Foster: Clubs. There was one club in Yellow Springs, Ohio, called the -- now what was the name of this club? It was a club located in the Hotel Guy. I don't know if that hotel was still there when your generation was on the scene.

Brower: I certainly don't remember it.

Foster: It was a little club where they regularly -- it was a cocktail lounge in the hotel. They regularly employed musicians. That's where I came up against Norris Turney, one of my earlier idols. He gave me a saxophone lesson. And Candy Johnson, a tenor saxophonist that you may have heard of who played with some of the older bands and played with Basie for a minute.

And there were places in Dayton that I can't remember. I can't remember the names of them. Places in Columbus that I can't remember the names of.

Brower: Who besides Snooky? What other players might have been around Dayton besides Snooky Young?

Foster: There was a trumpeter by the name of Sonny Turner. There was a drummer named Eddie Robinson, a trombonist named Cleophus Bass. He was one of the real stalwarts on the Dayton scene who played valve trombone. He -- in civil terminology, he was bad. Then an alto saxophonist by the name of Raymond Herring, who was a staunch bebopper, a really good solid player. There was Snooky Young, and there was another trombonist who was a member of Snooky's band. I don't know this trombonist's real name, but they called him "Tizol" and that's all I ever heard them call him. So his real name might have been Tizol, but I don't know if he was related to Juan

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or not. There were several other musicians whose names I fail to remember, but Dayton was alive with --

Brower: Was alive with swing and bebop or alive with -- both?

Foster: Yes, yes, both, yes.

Brower: Both. So typically there was probably a strip with joints --

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: With theater and the whole scenario that would have been typical of black community.

Foster: Right. Dayton had its Apollo Theater, and it had its Cotton Club, and it had its whatever, dancehalls. Even today there's a club called Gilly's where the Basie band performs periodically. All those old musicians come and hear the band. There was another drummer whose name was Joe Collier, an excellent drummer.

All these people that I'm naming, nobody's heard of them but if they had ventured out and gone on the road with name bands and gone to New York, they would have been on the scene. They would be known about.

Brower: How did you get into Snooky's band? Where did they travel? What was their repertoire?

Foster: They had a regular engagement in Detroit. They had a place called the Club Valet. Snooky needed an alto saxophonist. I think he asked me if I wanted to play with him. I said, "Yes," so we got my mother's permission. They had this seven-week engagement in Detroit, which began in August of 1949. I was to go perform with him and then come back so I could do my senior year at Central State.

But while I was in Detroit -- and by the way in his band he had the bassist Slam Stewart, he had an excellent drummer whose name was Dagwood. He had a tenor saxophonist by the name of Charlie White, and he had a pianist named James McCarthy. All these guys, professional, top flight. He had a trombonist named Bill Johnson. Every one of them, top professional ability. Any one of them could have been part of some big band, Basie, Ellington, whatever.

While I was there an unfortunate thing happened. I had an alto saxophone, a clarinet, and a brand new tenor saxophone that my parents had bought me. Rather than carry them back and forth between the club and where I was staying with my aunt, I, along with a couple of other members, left instruments in the dressing room to this club. Two

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days before my 21st birthday I went to work and found that all three of my instruments had been stolen.

There was an MC by the name of Ziggy Johnson. He was a tap dancer and MC and all that, and there was a dancer by the name of Rose Hardaway. I don't know if you ever heard of her. Beautiful girl, beautiful brown-skinned girl. They were all part of the show, and guest artists came in every week. The first week it was Ella Fitzgerald. The second week it was the Mills Brothers.

After the job folded, but I lost three instruments, I used that as an excuse to stay in Detroit rather than go back to Cincinnati. Of course I blew my senior year in college, because I stayed in Detroit to freelance, against my parents wishes.

Brower: There's one other thing, one other experience from your Wilberforce days that you feel is important.

Foster: I feel it's very important, especially because of the connections that were made and the strange way in which it came about. The band, the Wilberforce Collegians was to make one of its more important trips to Indianapolis, Indiana. It was to be at a place called the Sunset Terrace, which plays its part in the history of black music or jazz in the United States. Sunset Terrace was an important venue for big bands in the old days, and Wilberforce Collegians were going to perform there.

I have to give you some information leading up to that. The night before we were to leave for Indianapolis, some of my friends were out -- we were just hanging out on campus and the guys were trying to get me to drink some wine. I was a staunch non-drinker, non-alcoholic. I'm still that way. I have always been repelled by the smell and taste of any kind of liquor. Somehow, one of them did persuade me to take a swallow of wine. They said, "Come on, Foster, take another one," and another one, and another one, and another one." Against my own wishes I consumed a quantity of wine that night. I became so ill that it was doubtful if I'd be able to go on the trip.

There was something else that made it absolutely necessary for me to go on the trip. As the arranger-composer for the Collegians, I did not use what we call the full score. If you're not aware of what a score is, it's a page of music that contains all the instruments on one page. I wrote out all the individual parts for the band without writing a score, a master score that has all the parts. I just wrote each individual part from memory. That's how I arranged. I didn't use the scores. I didn't write my own part, because I memorized it. In other words, the lead alto part was only in my head and not on paper. Everybody else's part was on paper. If I didn't go with the band they would play without a lead alto part. So I had to make the trip.

Brower: Bad head and all.

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Foster: Bad head and all. I was sicker then I had ever been in life, regurgitating all over the place all night long and all morning long. So the determination was that I had to make the trip, because I was the only one who could play lead alto and the music was all in my head. We rode in one of those old-fashioned buses that you open the windows. During the whole trip I kept my head out the window for two reasons, which are fairly obvious, one of which was to get fresh air. I won't discuss the other one. On that trip I survived, and I was able to make the engagement, which was a dance at the Sunset Terrace. It so happened that Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic was in town the same night. When the Jazz at the Philharmonic concert was over, all of them came by Sunset Terrace to hear this college band, the Wilberforce Collegians. Among them was Sarah Vaughan, Dexter Gordon. Billy Eckstine was the headliner, Red Rodney, Stan Levey. I forget if he's a pianist or a drummer.

Brower: Stan's a drummer.

Foster: Stan Levey the drummer, and I said Red Rodney, and there may have been a couple of others. And they all came and they sat in with the Collegians. They must have liked the way we sound and they sat in with us. Sarah Vaughan sang, Billy Eckstine sang, Dexter played, Red Rodney sat back with the trumpet section and played, and Stan Levey played drums. There was a pianist too. I can't remember his name, but he was known in the jazz field. Anyway, while Sarah Vaughan was singing, there was something I played behind her, which must have impressed her. She turned around and looked at me and smiled. My whole world just fell apart [laughs]. That made my year to have --

Brower: And she was Sassy then.

Foster: She was Sassy then, yeah. Yeah, we're talking about 1947, '48. To have Sarah Vaughan turn around and smile at me for something that I did just -- hey, I was in 12th heaven.

Anyway from that engagement, when Basie was looking for a tenor saxophonist in 1953, while I was still in Korea, which we'll get to subsequently, Jimmy Wilkins, who had been my leader at the college and his brother Ernie, we were both members of the Basie band in 1953, and Billy Eckstine, who remembered that night in Indianapolis, suggested that they find me to replace Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, who was planning to leave the band. The word was that someone said, "We don't [know] where he is, but if you can find Frank Foster, he would fill this chair very nicely."

When people say, "How did you get with the Basie band?" -- I'm jumping ahead just to talk about this one night -- I always consider it having been a miracle, because it was a trip that I almost didn't make because of getting sick. If I hadn't made that trip, I

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wouldn't have been heard by Eckstine and Sarah. Very possibly that recommendation wouldn't have been made, and I wouldn't have gotten with the Count Basie orchestra, and this was something that happened five years previously.

Brower: But then you would have gone in another direction.

Foster: I certainly would have gone in another direction, because I was going to stay in music, but I just call that the Basie miracle.

Brower: Yeah, because we kind of talked about that tension in your career earlier.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: But let's go back and really cull through the Detroit experience. Why did you want an excuse to stay in Detroit? What was it that made you want to use the fact that you lost those instruments as a reason not to go back to Cincinnati and not to go back to Wilberforce High [College]?

Foster: Ostensibly I was going to aid the detectives in the search for these instruments, which was just useless. They could have looked for them without my help. But I found so much going in Detroit that I fell in love with the city immediately. I met Kenny Burrell. I met Tommy Flanagan, a very young Tommy Flanagan, who had a head full of hair, a 17-year-old Kenny Burrell, and I met Donald Byrd, Sonny Red Carter.

Brower: He's a saxophone player?

Foster: Yeah, the late Sonny Red. And some musicians in Detroit that should have gone on to greater things, because they were of that caliber. Edwin Youngblood Davis, a trumpeter. Willie Wells, a trumpeter who played a trumpet with rotary valves instead of the valves you see, piston valves. And saxophonists around the corner. Lamont Hamilton, a tenor saxophonist. The guy they called Moon Mullins, another tenor saxophonist. Warren Hickey, another tenor saxophonist. Billy Mitchell was around at the time. The Jones Brother[s], Thad, Hank, and Elvin. I didn't meet Hank at that time, because he had already left for New York, but I met Thad and Elvin in Detroit. And I just --

Brower: What about Lucky Thompson? Was he around?

Foster: I think he had left. I had seen Lucky Thompson come through Cincinnati earlier with Tiny Bradshaw's band, so I knew about him.

Brower: Was he an influence at all?

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Foster: Not really. Only marginally, because I grew to admire his style and sound, but he was like sort of one of the -- I placed him in the category with Ben Webster and Paul Gonsalves, Don Byas and that group, but with great admiration.

Brower: Was Milt Jackson around or had he left?

Foster: Milt had left, but there was another vibraphone player there, Abe Woodley, who was Milt's peer. There were legendary tales of these two locking horns every now and then in sessions. I played with and heard this Abe Woodley. I considered him to be every bit as capable as Milt Jackson. Stylistically, he had his own thing going.

Brower: Does Willie Anderson mean anything to you?

Foster: Yes, Willie Anderson. I had known him in Detroit and Cincinnati, a pianist.

Brower: I'm just going to throw some names at you. Was Roland Hanna around?

Foster: Roland Hanna was around. There's an interesting story about Roland -- well it's not all that interesting. Guys, Donald Byrd, myself, and a couple of others, went to see Roland Hanna. We were just in the neighborhood. We thought we'd drop by to see Roland Hanna. Instead of saying, "Hey fellas, what's happening? Come on in and sit down," he said, "I don't know why you all want to come around while I'm practicing." He resented visits from contemporaries, because he was practicing.

Brower: Oh, you were going by his house and he'd come to the door?

Foster: Yeah, yeah, just to pay him a surprise visit.

Brower: How about Paul Chambers?

Foster: Paul Chambers was around, very young, snappy dressing, eyelet-collar-wearing Paul Chambers playing his cakes off. And Doug Wakins, another -- Herman Wright, the late Herman Wright. A drummer by the name of "Jacktown," Lawrence Jackson, who came from Cleveland, I think, originally. All these guys --

Brower: How about Yusef?

Foster: Yusef Lateef was there. I had seen him with Dizzy's band when he was still referred to as Bill Evans.

Brower: Tate Houston.

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Foster: Tate Houston was around. I had seen him in New York when I went there with the Wilberforce Collegians. He was with Lucky Millinder's band, but he'd come back to Detroit. Wardell Gray as well.

Brower: That name is brought up as Wardell Gray's sound being in your sound. Was there a relationship with him?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: Did you shed ["woodshed," to practice] with him?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: Who did you shed with?

Foster: A lot of time I shed with my friend Wobble Head in Cincinnati, Clarence Johnson. I didn't shed with Wardell, but there was this place called the Bluebird Inn where I got the job, because Tate Houston got fired and I happened to be there. The leader of the group, Phil Hill, said, "Where are you working?"

Brower: Phil Hill was a piano player.

Foster: He was a pianist.

Brower: Yeah, see now that's some inside stuff, Phil Hill. I met his brother through [Cong.] John Conyers. because the woman who was married to the cat who had the Bluebird, Edons -- was his name Eddings or Edons? Something like that. It was the guy that had the Bluebird. Clarence Eddings.

Foster: Clarence, yeah, right. I never knew Clarence's last name, believe it or not.

Brower: They tried to bring it back, and Phil Hill's brother is the doorman, something, something, something. Eddings's wife is still there, and I think her sister or his sister. He just regaled me with stories, but that was the bebop joint.

Foster: That was the bebop joint.

Brower: In Detroit.

Foster: In Detroit, yes, on the west side, Tireman and Beechwood. Phil Hill had a quartet there consisting of himself on piano, Jimmy Richardson or Beans on bass, who's

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the brother of a Rodney Richardson who played bass with the Count Basie orchestra at one time. And Detroit had a large --

Brower: Speaking of Beans, did you know Beans Bowles?

Foster: Yeah, Beans Bowles, I knew him.

Brower: What was his role around Detroit at that point?

Foster: He was one of the stalwarts in -- I think he was in Maurice King's band at the Flame Show Bar as far as I can recall. He was a local baritone saxophonist of considerable degree of merit. He was good. He's still there, but he played mostly the joints like the Flame Show Bar with the house bands and that kind of thing. He wasn't heavy on the jazz scene like for instance Tate Houston or Billy Mitchell.

There was a large Armenian community in Detroit, and there were several accomplished Armenian jazz musicians. One of them was a drummer named Jack Tian [?spelling]. Another was a drummer named Art Mardigan, who was the drummer with Philip Hill at the Bluebird. So Philip Hill, Tate Houston, Art Mardigan, and Beans Richardson. That was the quartet, the Philip Hill quartet.

Brower: Phil Hill I understand was a Bud Powell-type cat. Would you --

Foster: Not really. He was more of a --

Brower: That was his brother's claim anyway.

Foster: Did someone describe his playing like that to you?

Brower: Yeah, that's his brother's claim, but give me --

Foster: No, Phil Hill wouldn't rate with Bud Powell. He didn't have the same harmonic knowledge nor the same type of creativity. I don't think he would have been one of the heavies on the jazz scene had he branched out. But he was adequate for this job in this place, and he was adequate as an accompanist.

Brower: Does the name Parky Grote mean anything to you?

Foster: Yeah, Parky Grote was one of the white musicians who came around and played with -- sat in with black musicians all over Detroit. I think he played -- I'm forgetting if he played a saxophone or a trombone. Do you have him listed as a --

Brower: I just have the name.

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Foster: He was one of the ones that was fairly popular with everybody.

Brower: J. R. Monterose, was he --

Foster: J. R. Monterose, I don't remember him from Detroit. I met him later, the New York scene.

Brower: Terry Pollard?

Foster: Terry Pollard, yes. We shared lots of experiences together. She played vibes and piano. She was traveling with Terry Gibbs while I was with the Basie band.

Brower: Bess Bonnier?

Foster: Bess Bonnier was a blind lady pianist. Terry Pollard was black, and Bess was white. I mention racial identities purely for the sake of identity. Bess had a lovely personality. She was talented. Every time you'd meet her, she'd say, "Oh, Frank, nice to see you." I liked that about her.

Brower: Earl Van Dyke.

Foster: Earl Van Dyke, a pianist in the Earl Hines tradition who played -- last time I saw him he was playing with J. C. Heard's band.

Brower: J.C. Heard, was he around then?

Foster: No, he'd left. He was working with Cab Calloway or somebody. I can't remember with whom he was playing, but he had left.

Brower: Was there evidence of Betty Carter or whatever her name was at that time?

Foster: Betty Carter had left too.

Brower: Anna May [Lillie Mae Jones], whatever her last name was.

Foster: At that time she was Betty Bebop with Lionel Hampton, I think. But all these musicians. I thought wow, man, there's so many musicians in Detroit, so much happening, so many clubs on the west side, on the east end, and on the north side.

Brower: If you could -- I think that one of the reasons Detroit is so significant is because I think it was the largest city -- put it this way, at the time of the '60s riots, it was the largest city with the majority African-American population, probably of some

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millions, anchored by the auto industry, which was where -- large black working class involved with that.

Give me some sense of your impression of the city, of the black community in that city, and if in any way you think that's connected to the musical vibrancy, at least of the era from the '40s into probably the early '60s.

Foster: I definitely think that that's connected to the vibrancy, as you say. There was a large black community. I used to ride for blocks on a bus or a streetcar down one street, and for ten to 15 minutes I'd be riding through a black community. I would be amazed, because in Cincinnati, if you're riding on a bus, after two minutes you're in and out of a black community, unless you're riding through the west end, which I was afraid to go down to the west end, so I didn't hang out around too much. I was afraid of getting attacked by gangs who were jealous because you met with their girls or whatever.

But in Detroit, riding for blocks, and blocks after blocks after blocks, and seeing nothing but black people, I'd say, wow, there sure are a lot of us up here man. Up Rush Street or down John R --

Brower: Okay, *John R. and Garfield*.

Foster: *John R. and Garfield*.

Brower: That's one of your song titles. What was that about?

Foster: There was a hotel on Garfield, near John R., near the corner of John R., called the Mark Twain. There was the Flame Show Bar. There were a couple of nightclubs and a couple of hotels, rather sleazy hotels where junkies were known to hang out on that particular corner. One could purchase anything one wanted in the way of drugs. So much happened around there. The police were always busting people in that area. I didn't frequent the area, but in observing what happened, I was inspired to come up with this title for this song.

Brower: So it would be fair to say that someone reasonably familiar with Detroit in that era, and you do a tune called *John R. and Garfield*, this is going to resonate to [with] them?

Foster: Yeah. Somebody who was not familiar with Detroit at the time or who didn't know would think that John R and Garfield were two people, but anybody who knows, knows that was a notorious corner during the late '40s and early '50s on the Detroit's east side, which was where the heaviest concentration of black people was.

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Brower: You mentioned the Flame Show Bar and of course the place we just got finished talking about on the east side. Forgive me. My memory's failing me. Eddings's place.

Foster: The Bluebird. The Bluebird was on the west side. The Flame Show Bar was near east side.

Brower: What about the Valley, Paradise Valley or --

Foster: The Valley, that's where the Club Valley was where I went to work with Snooky Young. It was an enormous place. It could hold I imagine 400 or 500 people. It was made into an elaborate nightclub with a stage for the bandstand, and dancing and singing.

Brower: Was that a bebop environment or more a swing show?

Foster: That was more of a show time, show place there. But the Valley itself is a small area of about a three-block area, which contained several clubs. One was called El Sino, where a tenor player named Paul Bascomb, who used to be with Erskine Hawkins, a famous band, played. There was another place called the -- Sonny Wilson. That was another nightclub where a small group played. That was -- the first place where I saw Kenny Burrell was a place called the Club Sudan. It was a teenage club where they sold just orange juice and stuff like that. That's where I first saw Kenny and Tommy Flanagan. It was decorated like -- it reminds you of the Sudan when you walk in there. This area called the Valley contained several clubs. There were more clubs than I have named, some whose names I've forgotten, but it was a heavy concentration of musical activity going on down there.

Brower: Was Barry Harris around?

Foster: Barry Harris was around. Barry and I and Donald Byrd, Sonny Red, we used to hang together a lot during those days.

Brower: I think a couple years back I remember you getting an award -- by the way did you know John Conyers at that time? Was he on the scene?

Foster: I didn't know Conyers, but the Conyers family had about three or four brothers. I used to hang out with one of them, Nathan Conyers.

Brower: That's the one that owns the car dealership, that's where you guys --

Foster: Oh, yeah? He and I used to --

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Brower: In fact he's one of the premier -- he has one of the largest -- African-Americans -- one of the largest car dealership businesses in the country.

Foster: Is that right? I hadn't seen him since that period. I hadn't seen him all through the '50s, '60s. I never saw him again after leaving Detroit.

Brower: Was he on the music scene or you just kind of knew him?

Foster: Well he was one of the so-called hipsters, the guys who appreciated the music, as was John. There was another brother whose name I can't recall. We just hung out together.

Brower: You were describing the musicians. Were there some bands that you typically played in while you were there?

Foster: The only band that I spent any length of time with was Philip Hill's quartet at the Bluebird. There was a big band that was organized by a drummer named Charlie Johnson. They only did two or three engagements. There was another band at the club called the Royal Blue. There were places I'd go sit in. There was a Webster Hall, I think, at Wayne University, where there were regular jam sessions. It was like a student union building. There were regular jam sessions in there. But there was no band that I played with on a regular basis after Snooky Young broke up and they left town, Snooky went back to Ohio, until Philip Hill's band at the Bluebird.

Brower: How would you characterize your period in Detroit in your development? What did that interval of time, how did it serve you?

Foster: It served me very well in that that's where I learned about and how to swing. Before Detroit I was just a good young musician, an accomplished young musician who knew how to read music, who knew how to improvise, and learned how to write, compose and arrange.

Brower: How did you come by this understanding of swing? Did you, all of a sudden you saw a bright light? How did swing come talk to you?

Foster: No, no. It happened very naturally and very gradually over a period of time. It started with seeing something that I had never seen in Cincinnati, people sitting in the audience popping their fingers on two and four, two, three, four [Foster snaps a backbeat rhythm], and musicians doing the same thing. There was a different kind of feeling in the musicians from that which I had experienced in Cincinnati.

Brower: You mean you were playing with bands that were emulating Basie, which is the ultimate in swinging?

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Foster: I said emulating. That's the key.

Brower: Okay, but you really found that -- what is swing? I mean, give me your definition of what swing is.

Foster: My definition of swing is the feeling in the music that inspires one to want to tap their foot and/or shake the head and/or snap the fingers on two and four, in a 4/4 measure of music. It's something that gets you moving. You can hear some music, and you could say, "That's very nice" --

Brower: "But it ain't swinging."

Foster: There's no movement in your body. You're not inspired to move. You might like the colors and textures in the music, but you don't go like this.

Brower: So swing allows music to be a unified mind/body experience. It's a Zen thing.

Foster: I would agree with that, although I think it just --

Brower: My tongue is in my cheek.

Foster: It goes in another direction or goes beyond that.

Brower: Because it's so hard to -- what is swing? From a standpoint of feeling it and playing it, did you just take so many hours of attempting to make music with other people to find that place where swinging -- was it all those hours of doing this adding up to where you found that threshold?

Foster: It was doing it and also listening. It wasn't just doing it, but it always was with the involvement of other people who had been doing it before me. It may have been something that was in the aura of the community. I know it was something that I was not aware of the entire time I lived in Cincinnati. It may have had to do with my age. I left Cincinnati at age 20, but by the end of my 21st year, I was swinging.

Brower: Did people perceive you differently? When you felt you got to that point, did you feel that other musicians recognized something different in your playing?

Foster: I didn't consciously think about that at the time, but looking back, I think probably so. There was a point I was going to make about swing. There was a pianist by the name of James McCarthy who played with Snooky Young's band. He was from -- I'm not sure if he was from Toledo or somewhere in Ohio, or if he was actually from

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Detroit, but I first heard him on the campus at Wilberforce. This McCarthy, he knew every chord change that had ever been invented. To me he sounded somewhat in the Art Tatum family. I was amazed at his technique. I was amazed at his harmonic knowledge. I was amazed at the range and scope of his playing. I thought, wow, this has got to be the greatest piano player that was ever born to woman. This was during my college days. Okay, he played with Snooky Young's band, and I thought the same thing.

After I had been in Detroit for about -- I lost track of McCarthy. I'd been hanging with Detroit musicians. When I got wind of this swing thing, I heard McCarthy again, and I found his playing dull and uninteresting. I said, "What is it?" I thought McCarthy -- at one time I thought he was the greatest pianist since Art Tatum.

Brower: No swing.

Foster: No swing. The swing wasn't there.

Brower: Did you know Claude Black?

Foster: I knew Claude Black. He was one of the fellows hanging around, yeah.

Brower: Now from Detroit did you -- as a piano player -- did you venture out like to Toledo or wherever from Detroit? Did you do some run-outs?

Foster: At one time I went to Cleveland to play with a trumpeter whose name was John Wilson. He's short in stature, so he called himself Little John, and he called his band the Merry Men. Little John and his Merry Men. We played a theater in Cleveland for about a week called the Globe Theater. There I met -- there was a singer and a comedian on the show. I had had -- I was not in possession of an instrument. I didn't own an instrument, because all mine had been stolen. Little John liked my playing and wanted me to play with his band so badly he bought me an instrument from a pawn shop and took me to Cleveland. That's the only time I really ventured out from the Detroit for any length of time. I'd gone to Toledo maybe once and to other suburbs of Detroit, you know, Mount Clemens, some of those other places, Pontiac.

Brower: We asked this about Cincinnati. Did you think of Detroit as having a sound? If so, how would you characterize it, at least for the scene that you were involved, which was the bebop?

Foster: I definitely thought of Detroit as having a sound. It came out of the so-called bebop genre as far as I was concerned. I had never determined that Cincinnati had a sound, but always looking back I see where Cincinnati might have been the more related to the Kansas City thing.

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Detroit with my limited big-band experience -- mostly every endeavor was with small groups. It was all bebop. The musicians in Detroit seemed to have a sound that I could associate with Detroit alone. Judging from the number of musicians who have left Detroit and gone on to better things, we go to New York and we find that there are more big-time jazz players from Detroit than from almost any other city with the possible exception of Philadelphia. Maybe Pittsburgh is somewhere in the running too. Cincinnati is not even close [laughs]. New Orleans here of late is in the running, but you'll always find --

Brower: But it wasn't even in the picture in the period that we're talking about.

Foster: Yeah, right.

Brower: I mean basically.

Foster: Right, yeah.

Brower: It was in the picture, but not in this picture.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Not in the renewal -- where does the term? -- I associate with that Detroit thing the term "hard bop," which I guess generally gets affixed to players who emerged in the early '50s as opposed to players who emerged in the middle to late '40s.

Foster: Uh-huh, yeah.

Brower: How does that term strike you? Is that something that we could affix to the Detroit sound. Be as technical as you can in this. How would you distinguish what that generation of players in Detroit that you came to be involved with did from what Bird and Diz laid down?

Foster: First of all let me begin by saying that I have been labeled as a hard bopper by one or the other of the critics. I could see hard bop as being synonymous with Detroit, because a lot of players from that era played with that Sonny Stitt kind of feeling. Sonny Stitt, to my way of thinking, if we must be pinned down with labels -- Sonny Stitt, I would say, was the ultimate hard bopper. Hard bop to me means strictly advanced bebop lines in which every note is -- I'll have to use this expression again -- crystal clear, a style that -- in which the notes are separated. Whereas earlier players in the '40s played more legato lines [Foster sings a slurred, indistinct melody], but the hard boppers [Foster sings a sharply articulated melody]. In other words, the hard boppers -- there was more separation in their notes.

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Brower: So it's that articulation. Articulation is an important component.

Foster: Articulation, yes, yes. Now I never had hard bop defined, but that's my personal definition of hard bop.

Brower: What about harmonically, melodically? What are the differences, or what differences do you see?

Foster: Hard bop continues with the so-called bebop-type harmonizations, which are characterized by heavy use of extensions and alterations, such as the flatted fifth or raised eleventh, flat nine, raised nine, and the thirteenth, as opposed to just one, three, five, six, or one, three, five. The major seventh really got to be in heavy use during the so-called bebop period, whereas most major chords in the swing era were major sixths. I don't know if -- do you know anything about the piano keyboard?

Brower: Uh-huh.

Foster: C, E, G, and A, that's a major-sixth chord. That has a certain sound. C, E, G, B is a major-seventh chord. That has a certain other sound that's a little more progressive sounding than the sixth. The seventh, it's warmer and seemingly hipper. Then you put the ninth on top of it, and you've really got a nice little sound. Raise the eleventh on top of that, and then you have -- you're propelling into a more modern era.

So the hard-bop genre, so to speak, seems to really fit the approach of Detroit musicians to that music. Hard bop differentiates itself from the '40s bebop in that the approach seems to be a little more cut and dried, a little more -- with a combination of almost a macho feeling, a heavy virility, manhood. That might have been one thing that made some women kind of back off, because to them it might have just sounded too macho. We hard boppers -- by saying "We hard boppers," I'm giving my consent to having been categorized thusly, because I liked the sound of the term "hard bop." I'm a bopper, and I like to be thought of as hard. Yeah, okay, I can go with that.

Brower: If it could be said, who were the leaders on the Detroit scene at that point? I ran through my laundry list of musicians that I know of, of that period, or that could have been around, but who were the leaders? Who were teachers and leaders?

Foster: At a very young age Barry Harris was one of the teachers. There was a tenor saxophonist named Lefty Edwards who to me was another -- who epitomized the hard-bop approach. His lines were like Sonny Stitt's lines. Sonny Stitt definitely, who was a native of Saganaw [Michigan]. That's the Detroit area. He can definitely be considered one of the teachers and the leaders.

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Brower: Was he on the scene while you were there?

Foster: No, he was traveling around. He fell through a couple of times but he was already out in the world.

Curtis Fuller, a perfect example of a so-called hard-bop trombonist. Let's see. There were some others whose names you won't recognize, like Willie Wells, the rotary-valve trumpeter. I could classify Tate Houston as one. Billy Mitchell. I don't want to waste more time trying to think of names that have difficulty coming to me.

Brower: We can move on after this or we can revisit this. It may seem like an off-the-wall question, but from what was going on in Detroit then, could you see Motown coming? Could you see other things, other elements in the Detroit music scene that were significant -- become such an important city on other levels for black music or for American music, shall I say?

Foster: I couldn't see it at the time, but I can perfectly understand now retroactively to 1965, how Motown would come out of that.

Brower: Can you just say how you can retroactively see that, or what do you see now that makes that sensible to you?

Foster: Because of the vibrancy of the musical scene in Detroit. It seemed to be so much more alive than the scene in Cincinnati, and so much more alive than anywhere else I'd been. I hadn't been to New York. Everybody in Detroit was talking about New York. Go to New York. Got to get to that Big Apple. Go to New York. I'm saying, hey, I'm already in heaven.

Brower: Let me ask you this. Were people in Cincinnati saying, "I've got to get to Detroit," for example?

Foster: No, all they were saying was, "I've got to get out of Cincinnati" [laughs].

Brower: Okay.

Foster: It didn't matter where. Maybe I'll go to Dayton. More was happening in Dayton. But in connection with what you said about Motown, I can easily see how the Motown thing happened, or whatever is going on now. Any musical revolution or any musical movement, or any change of styles, or any advancements, or however you want to refer to them that are going on nationally as far as the entire United States, they're going to be strong in Detroit. Okay, Detroit gave us Motown. What did Cincinnati give us? I don't hear about no Motown in Cincinnati or even Kansas City, or even New Orleans, or even Los Angeles. Philadelphia, they had --

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Brower: There was Gamble and Huff.

Foster: Gamble and Huff, okay. What did Atlanta give us?

Brower: Baby Face.

Foster: [laughter] Shut up. What did Hartford, Connecticut, give us?

Brower: In New Orleans, there's the whole Dave Bartholomew, Fats Domino. But anyway, I think Detroit is one of the most dynamic cities culture for blacks in this country. I think it's overlooked. I really do.

Foster: Yeah, it is.

Brower: And you know what really hit me in this regard is there's a series about the civil-rights movement that was out on PBS some years ago, *Eyes on the Prize*. One of the shows focused on the Detroit riots. I'm from Toledo, right next door. It made me see the city in a different way. Really it's a very, very significant city nationally, a place where you have a lot of -- just like Chicago, certain migrant stream feeding it because of density of population, because of the economic opportunity afforded to black working class, the ability to build up, an originally segregated city, therefore a city in which a large amount of cultural entertainment, other kinds of institutions existed, providing work opportunity and so forth, all operate to make it a very rich and competitive place where lots of musical ideas could bubble up and find fruition.

Foster: If I may interrupt you right here, Detroit not only had a wealth of musicians, but there were people who admired the musicians and who I referred to at the time as hipsters, people who loved the music and the musicians.

Brower: There's money. It's a hustling life [laughter]. You've got black people and white people making money in a tremendous industry, so you can have some hipsters. No jobs, no money flowing, no hipsters [laughter]. That's the rule, I think. What do you think? Do you think that's accurate?

Foster: Definitely, but the point I'm trying to make is, there were other people who had other ideas for culturally expanding the genre, people who wanted to give stage shows, stage presentations, who wanted to feature bebop musicians in stage plays and musicals. There was a guy named Larry Blaine who was a singer in a Billy Eckstine tradition. He had visions of putting on musicals.

Brower: In the '40s?

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Foster: No. This was in the '50s, 1950.

Brower: Okay.

Foster: He actually organized this musical. It featured a bunch of us young musicians. We had singers. We had dancers. We had -- I wrote -- he wrote a script, and I wrote background music. What I am trying to say is there were people who loved the music and wanted to culturally expand the image beyond just playing --

Brower: In joints.

Foster: In joints, right. To bring it to concert stage and colleges or local auditoriums or whatever.

Brower: Can you think of other examples --

Foster: And this didn't happen in Cincinnati -- huh?

Brower: Can you think of other examples of that kind of activity that either you participated in or knew about?

Foster: No I can't think of other examples. It is certain that it has been thought about in New York, but there was always lack of funds.

Brower: Louis Hayes, you said he was around Detroit? And then we're going to figure out how you got from Detroit -- why did you join the Army? But Louis Hayes? Is there anything you want to say about him?

Foster: I didn't know Louis Hayes well until after I'd gotten in Basie's band.

Brower: So he was just another cat around?

Foster: Yeah, because he was very young. He was one of the young ones like Paul Chambers. I really wasn't aware of him until --

Brower: So these cats were in high school?

Foster: Yeah, and Curtis Fuller even.

Brower: Right.

Foster: But my generation was Barry, Tommy Flanagan, and Kenny Burrell. There were others that were older.

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Brower: Was Joe or Leon -- was Leon Henderson around? Joe must have come later. Leon's his brother -- Leon.

Foster: Yeah, they did come later. Leon, yeah.

Brower: So how did you get to the U.S. military? Why did you do that?

Foster: The draft notice came. The Korean War was in full swing. This is 1950, and a draft notice came to my parents home in Cincinnati. They sent it to me. I played musical cities with the Army for a few months, because I said, they'll have to catch up with me in Detroit.

My parents gave the draft board my Detroit address, and they sent me a draft notice to Detroit. I then moved back to Cincinnati and changed my mailing address to a Cincinnati address, whereupon they sent another draft notice to that. So I moved back to Detroit. The next time they sent me a notice in Detroit. I said, what the heck! They've got me. So I went down and took the physical. I was encouraged by the fact that I was classified with third-degree flat feet. All my friends said, "Third-degree flat feet. Naw, ain't no way you're going in the Army. You've got to have good feet, because they march you all over the world. You've got to have some good feet to get in the Army." I was encouraged. Okay, they'll probably just call me 4-F and that will be it. I won't have to go.

I got this notice that I had been accepted. My physical -- although I was classified with third-degree flat feet, I was still classified 1-A. I was inducted into the Army in March of 1951. I went to Fort Custer and served there for a few weeks from where I was supposed to --

Brower: Fort Custer is in?

Foster: Was in Michigan. I guess from your hometown they ship you to the nearest army base in your home state where you spend a transient period. Then you're sent to where you go through basic training. While I was at Fort Custer I met Buddy Montgomery, who's one of the fabulous Montgomery brothers, Wes, Buddy, and Monk. He was my bright spot during my early days in the army, being the brilliant pianist that he was. We had some nice jam sessions there at Fort Custer.

Orders came for me to leave, to be shipped to Georgia, Camp Gordon, Georgia. I had a white sergeant friend who said, "You don't want to go to Georgia, man. You know what that's all about." This sergeant said, "Look, man" -- he wasn't a hipster. He wasn't a musician. He didn't even relate to the music, but he related to me personally.

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He said, “You play sick, because you don’t want to go to Georgia. That’s the heart of the South. You don’t want to go down there.”

So I actually for the first time in my life played sick. I was so convincing. He helped me along. He said, “Can’t you see he’s sick? He can’t be shipped out.” So they changed my orders. The next time orders came through for me to be shipped out, they came through for California. I said, California sounds better than Georgia. So I was shipped to California for basic training to a place called Camp Roberts, which was located about midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. No army camp is a paradise, believe me. I liked the sound of California. I had never been there before, but Camp Roberts didn’t endear me to California, anymore than I had ever been before. Training was 14 weeks. It was rigorous, and during that entire time I never touched a saxophone.

Brower: Has there been another 14-week period in your life where you never touched one?

Foster: Never, not since I took it up. I didn’t perform for three months. That was the longest time I --

Brower: But that can’t be very tough on you. It’s just a saxophone.

Foster: Right, right, right. If I just didn’t use my right hand for three months, it wouldn’t affect me, right?

Brower: Is that a rhetorical answer to a rhetorical question?

Foster: You got it [laughs].

Brower: Okay.

Foster: California was most interesting, because I was wondering, whenever we got a weekend pass, should I go to LA? Should I go to San Francisco? Because I know most of these metropolises should have a jazz scene, but I didn’t know which way I should go. I figured if I go to one, that will be it.

It so happened that during basic training there was a guy who was a native of Hayward, which is near San Francisco. This guy’s name was Charles Watkins. He wasn’t a musician, but he owned a Cadillac. He said, “For \$10 round trip, whoever wants to go to San Francisco, I’ll take you on Friday evening when we get off. You can spend your time wherever you want.” Then we’d meet at a certain place Sunday evening to come back. I thought that was very reasonable. Because of his offer to transport people so

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reasonably from Camp Roberts to San Francisco, so he could go home to his town that was near San Francisco, I thought, San Francisco it is.

About four or five other guys chipped in. We paid \$10 a piece for the round trip. He'd let us off at this destination in San Francisco. We'd each go our separate ways, and we'd meet in the same place Sunday evening to go back in time to report for duty all bright eyed Monday morning, because the schedule was really rough.

Anyway, San Francisco ended up being a very good choice, because I was directed to Bop City, Jimbo's Bop City, which was the jazz night spot in San Francisco at the time. It was a place where -- during the normal hours it was just a little place to hang out, but from one o'clock until five in the morning, there was always a jam session every night. Some of the California or San Francisco area musicians I met were a bassist named Vernon Alley, a drummer named Roy -- what's Roy's last name? I'll think of it sooner or later. And a pianist named Stan Willis. This guy was so unique, and he didn't want people to steal his ideas, so he would play with handkerchief over his hands. You haven't heard that one before.

Brower: I've heard of trumpet players doing that.

Foster: No, this is a pianist. If he knew somebody else was around and they were looking at his fingers, he would stick this handkerchief over his hands so they couldn't see what he was doing.

This place, Bop City, is where I first met Dexter Gordon. I had my uniform on. I was persuaded -- I mean someone persuaded Dexter to let me sit in on the strength that I had played with Sonny Stitt in Detroit, which was a lie. I hadn't played with Sonny Stitt, but I just told this guy, yeah, I knew Sonny Stitt, and I played with Sonny Stitt, and that got me on the bandstand with Dexter.

Brower: Do you remember who else was on the bandstand?

Foster: Let's see. Probably this bassist Vernon Alley and I forget --

Brower: Who else.

Foster: Who else. There was an alto saxophonist named Pony Poindexter. Have you heard of him?

Brower: Uh-huh.

Foster: It was the first place I met Phineas Newborn. Phineas Newborn was in a band led by his father, Phineas Newborn, Sr., and his uncle who played -- he had guitar.

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Brower: Calvin?

Foster: Oh, Calvin. He played the guitar. I forget what -- I think Phineas's uncle might have been a drummer or something.

All manner of musicians came in there. I became known as the soldier boy when I was able to stand toe to toe with Dexter and not be blown away.

Brower: I read this. What was the tune that he called?

Foster: *Cherokee*. He asked me what I wanted to play, and I suggested *Cherokee*. So we led into it. When it was all over he knew he'd been in a fight. In other words, I just about held my own and gained a little respect around town then. Nobody knew my name, so everybody said, "Soldier Boy." That's what I became known as. Even got written up in *Down Beat* by the late Ralph Gleason. I don't know if you remember that name?

Brower: Yeah, certainly. That incident was written about?

Foster: Yeah, or other incidents after that.

Brower: How many trips were you able to make to San Francisco?

Foster: Oh, about I think over ten, because basic training lasted 14 weeks.

Brower: So every weekend you'd do this?

Foster: Just about. Not the first couple, but then after that. Then after that we went through a school, which is called Leadership School, during which time you couldn't go anywhere. That was -- they gave us some kind of test, and I qualified. I figured this would keep me out of Korea a little longer, so I went for it. They give you an extra stripe when you graduate. You go in as a private, and you come out as a PFC, private first class, which is one stripe. At the time it was one stripe.

After that I flew home to see my parents in Cincinnati. I came back, and I was scheduled to go to the Far East. FECOM, they called it. Far East Command, which just meant a little while in Japan and then on to Korea to the war zone. I went on this one pass, weekend pass, and I stayed and I went AWOL in San Francisco. I knocked around between this one girl's house and this hotel that was across the street from Bop City, and wherever else I could find to bed down. I stayed AWOL for 39 days, over Christmas and New Year's, just hanging out, blowing at Bop City, just having a grand time. The lady I was going with, she said, "If you don't turn yourself in, I'll never see

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you again, because they'll come and get you, and they'll throw you in jail for life." I said, "No, they ain't going to throw me in jail for life." She said, "Please turn yourself in." A lot of people were saying, "Turn yourself in to the chaplain and explain to him why you went AWOL and what's happening."

Brower: Why? Maybe I missed something, but why did you go? Because you just wanted to hit, you didn't want to go to Korea?

Foster: Why did I go?

Brower: Why did you go AWOL? What was the mental process?

Foster: Oh, I was just putting off the inevitable, that's all.

Brower: You knew, "I'm going."

Foster: Yeah, I didn't want to give up this good time. I knew that there was going to be some price to pay, mainly time in the stockade, which is the army jail, the army prison. But I was just, as I said, putting off the inevitable. I stayed in San Francisco, having a great time, blowing and playing.

Brower: Besides Bop City, what was there that you could frequent, or was that it?

Foster: That was about it. There was no other place that I know of. I did go on a trip for a couple of days with Lionel Hampton's band. A young 18-year-old, Quincy Jones was playing with the band, playing trumpet. I hung out with them for a while.

One time in Bop City -- here again there was another incident where Jazz at the Philharmonic was in town. All the musicians or most of them who participated in the Jazz at the Philharmonic came to Bop City. I just happened to be playing that night, and someone told me Lester Young is in the audience. I said, "Lester Young, oh, yeah." So I tried to show off and play all I know within the space of five minutes, trying to impress Lester Young. Later on I asked somebody, "What did he think about my playing?" The answer was, "He didn't like you. He said you played too many notes." But that experience was a great experience.

Brower: Did you turn yourself in?

Foster: Yeah, I went and turned myself in. I went to the chaplain. I explained that I was a musician and that I just got carried away, didn't want --

Brower: Got you swingin' on a riff for 39 days [laughs].

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Foster: Right, over Christmas. My parents didn't know where I was. My mother had sent a great big old -- what do you call them? -- pound cake. Not pound cake. A fruitcake, to me, and I wasn't there to accept it.

The chaplain said, "Son, what kind of music do you play?" I said, "I'm a jazz musician." He said, "Oh, that's not good." He said, "It's good to play church music and hymns and holy music, but that jazz is no good." He said, "You'll have to give up that jazz, son." That's the title of one of the chapters of my autobio, "You'll Have to Give Up that Jazz."

I saw where the visit to the chaplain was not going to do me any good, so I just turned myself in. I got sentenced to 39 days in the stockade. After five days I was taken out and sent to the Far East, to Japan. I went through some additional training in Japan.

Brower: What was your mission? You were infantry?

Foster: Infantry rifleman, yeah, combat infantry. But they had seen on my records that I had a musician's MOS. I scored high on a certain test that they gave. They determined that I had an aptitude beyond combat infantry, so they sent me to a supply school, which took place in the southern part of Japan, on an island called Eta Jima.

During this time -- I thought, this is that much longer I'll be able to stay out of Korea. I didn't play at all during this time. In fact when I first arrived in Japan -- you have so much army gear, the horn was too much to carry. I had to carry all this other gear and my horn. I sold my horn to a young Japanese for about the equivalent of \$2 in American money, the horn that Little John had bought me from the pawn shop. So that was the beginning of the three-month period during which I wouldn't play a note.

Brower: I got a bit confused. It wasn't the period when you were between San Francisco and L.A., because during that time you were working on the weekends. It was the period when you were in Japan getting specific training.

Foster: Right, and thereafter in Korea.

Brower: Right, that you didn't touch your instrument.

Foster: Right. I didn't have an instrument to touch.

Brower: That's a good reason.

Foster: I may have mislead you earlier when I said something about not having instruments. I played on borrowed instruments in Detroit after having had mine stolen. I was able to borrow an instrument almost immediately to play.

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Brower: People must like you, because a saxophone is not something that you generally -- it's very personal. It's like your tongue. It's like an extension of your mouth. Can I borrow your tongue?

Foster: There you go.

Brower: I don't think. So you must have had some good esteem with people. People must have liked you.

Foster: I suppose they respected my playing ability.

Brower: Which one did you borrow? Just curious.

Foster: Which one did I borrow?

Brower: Uh-huh.

Foster: There was a guy named Al Cafagna [correct]. He wasn't well known. He was a musician. He owned a tenor saxophone. He wasn't that good a player. He thought, "I might as well let this guy use it."

Brower: Somebody use it that could do something with it [laughs].

Foster: Right [laughs].

Brower: While you were in Korea, at some point were there opportunities for you to play? What other musicians -- there had to be some musicians there.

Foster: I was in a supply company of an infantry regiment working supply. I did that for a couple of months. Then I went to audition with the division band. I hiked about ten miles down a Korean road just to audition for this band. I passed the audition, and I was transferred from this supply company to the band. That's when I had chance to -- I started playing again. While there I met Pepper Adams who --

Brower: A Detroiter.

Foster: Yeah. He's another one whose name -- we finally got to him. He was in another outfit. We just happened to meet. I don't know. I guess the two outfits happened to be in the same place at the same time. We hung out for a while together. I didn't meet any other musicians of note during that time, but I did meet an excellent alto saxophonist by the name of Bernie Peacock who had played with Basie. He was playing at -- what do you call them? Not NCO. USO show. There was a guy who

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played what's known as a slide saxophone. His name was Snub Mosley. He was very well known.

Brower: Yeah, I know that name.

Foster: He invented this instrument. A funny sounding horn, a slide saxophone. It has a trombone slide with the sound of a saxophone.

Brower: Yeah, that's something that Rahsaan [Roland Kirk] probably would have picked up on.

Foster: I saw him, but there were no other real musicians, musicians that you would know about or whose names you'd recognize.

Brower: What about just good musicians?

Foster: There were good musicians, yeah. We had a jazz combo in the army band, in the 7th Division Band. We had the marching band, we had about a 14- to 15-piece dance band, and we had a jazz combo. In this jazz combo there was pianist named William Boone, who was a native of Brooklyn. If it hadn't been for him I would have just gone completely out, because there was hardly anyone else to play with.

Brower: You mean at your level of ideas?

Foster: Yes, at my level certainly. I'll agree with that. There were several musicians who wanted to, but they just couldn't hang with us [laughs]. We had a bassist named James Legrange. He was from Cleveland. And a drummer named -- if I can think of his son. His son is a well-known trumpeter. He's from Indianapolis. Whitted. Farris Pharez Whitted is the trumpet player, a young trumpeter. His father was the drummer in my --

Brower: That's interesting.

Foster: We played a lot of engagements, mostly for other enlisted men in the army, officers. The band played for new recruits coming in. We play formations when another general came to review our outfit, a visiting officer from another outfit or something. We played a ceremony.

Brower: I'm curious. Were you getting records? Did people send you records? What were guys listening to?

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Foster: We were listening to -- somebody had a record by Thelonious Monk. I heard *Three in One, Straight, No Chaser*, for the first time. And we had some Bird records and Diz records and Miles records.

Brower: So did you feel that you were getting enough to feel that you were still contemporary?

Foster: Yes, I wasn't worried about losing that aspect. I was just worried about losing my life over there.

Brower: Did you see combat?

Foster: No, I didn't see combat, but every night we could hear small arms fire going, machine guns.

Brower: What did the experience of being, and I guess you're getting to this, but how did it feel being in a war? How did it affect you as a human being?

Foster: It didn't feel good at all. I did not like it. I did not like the Korean countryside. I hated the army experience of getting up early in the morning and having a long day, a long hard day, and finally getting to bed at night and getting -- we'd get a pass to go into a local village. All you could smell was fertilizer when you went into the village. It seemed like our only recreation was going into the village and uh --

Brower: The great "uh."

Foster: Yeah, the great "uh."

Brower: Uh.

Foster: We did discover marijuana stalks growing in the fields, marijuana stalks that grew to six feet in height. We'd cut them and pluck the branches off the main stalk. We'd hang them upside down to let the essence flow to the leaves. Then we'd fill an empty cake box, like if somebody's mother sent them a fruitcake. As soon as we finished the fruitcake, we'd fill the cake box with dried marijuana leaves. That was our best recreation.

Brower: What did you do, look at them?

Foster: I'll let you guess [laughs].

Brower: Let me make the inference?

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Foster: I'll let you make the call.

Brower: You'll let me induct, deduct, and redact, okay [laughs].

Foster: We would empty cigarettes. We didn't have what you call cigarette papers. We would buy conventional cigarettes.

Brower: Was it boring?

Foster: Huh?

Brower: Was it boring? Did you think it would end?

Foster: Strangely enough it was not boring. I thought it would never end, yeah.

Brower: You thought it seemed endless.

Foster: It wasn't boring, because -- we did have some music to listen to. We won a tape recorder in a contest. We would record our own music on this tape recorder, and we would --

Brower: Were the units segregated?

Foster: No, no. The training unit at Camp Roberts California, was segregated. The army on an overall basis was integrated by that time in the early 1950s, but the integrated status hadn't gotten to Camp Roberts yet. So we trained as a segregated unit, but as soon as I got to Japan everything was totally integrated. All organizations, band, every area was totally integrated.

Brower: Now I want to maybe make the transition to how you got from there to Basie, unless there's some other aspect of your time there or the military experience that's either musically or personally significant to you.

Foster: Yes. In February of 1953 -- I was scheduled to be released in May, so in February of 1953 I got a hold of a *Down Beat* magazine. I saw a picture of the Basie orchestra with inset photos of Paul Quinichette and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. I remember saying to myself, "Man, I sure would like to be in that band," not realizing that less than four months I would be sitting in that band. I got out in May. I went back to Detroit, and I freelanced around Detroit. I played with Kenny Burrell.

Brower: So it seemed like Detroit was home now.

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Foster: Yeah, I had totally abandoned Cincinnati. I wouldn't even go back there other than to see my parents for a while. I was staying with a pianist named Will Davis, who was another one of Detroit's stalwarts. Will Davis, he had four fingers on one hand and completely used the other hand. He was as original in his own way as Thelonious Monk to my way of thinking. Anyone else who's from Detroit and knew Will Davis might agree, hopefully.

I was walking down the street just very casually one day, and I ran into an old Cincinnati acquaintance who said, "Count Basie's looking for you." I said, "Count Basie's looking for me? Nobody knows I'm here."

Brower: That's a hell of a grapevine.

Foster: Yeah, one hell of a grapevine. I said, "No one knows I'm in town." He said, "Count Basie's playing over at the Graystone Ballroom tonight, so why don't you go over there and check it out?" Surely enough I went over there, still dressed in my army uniform. I found out that Count Basie was looking for a replacement for "Lockjaw" Davis. Ernie and Jimmy Wilkins were both in the band. They recognized me. They said, "Oh, hey, man, we recommended you for the band."

So Basie auditioned me. I played two songs, *Body and Soul* and *Perdido*. Then Basie said, "We'll be in touch kid." I waited three months, through the rest of May, all of June, and most of July. I finally got a telegram from Basie, and I got a one-way ticket to New York. On the 27th of July 1953, I flew to New York to join Count Basie.

Brower: The 25th of September 1998. I'm William Brower, talking with Frank Foster. Recording is Matt Watson. This is for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program.

Can you describe your coming to meet Basie, what the actual moment -- do you recollect that moment when you're summoned and you come and you meet him? What happened? Describe that moment.

Foster: When I first joined him? You don't mean the time I auditioned in Detroit.

Brower: I want to hear the audition, and I want to hear the first gig.

Foster: I think I've already said that I walked into the auditorium -- not auditorium, but dancehall. The band was playing. I walked up to -- Ernie Wilkins and Jimmy recognized me immediately. They -- I suppose introduced me to Basie. I don't remember the moment I was introduced to Basie. All I can remember about that is I played two tunes. They played two tunes, and I was featured as soloist. I remember

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Mr. Basie saying to me, “We’ll be in touch kid.” That’s the extent of my memory of that evening.

Three months later, when the telegram came with the ticket to New York from Detroit, I flew to New York. I had that memorable evening during which I sat in with Charlie Parker at Birdland. The next morning I got up. The bus was supposed to leave at 6 a.m. from a place known as the Woodside Hotel, for which the song, *Jumping at the Woodside* is named.

Brower: What went on at the Woodside Hotel? What was the significance of it?

Foster: They must have had a small dancehall inside and just guest rooms, but it was not a fancy place. It was in Harlem. It was around 141st Street and 7th Avenue at the time.

Brower: Did musicians stay there? Or why was that the point of departure?

Foster: I think it had been a place where the musicians had stayed, and probably the band had played there in former times. Nothing like that happened at this particular time, because we’re speaking of like the late ’30s and the ’40s.

Brower: The ’30s versus the ’50s.

Foster: The hotel was just a landmark at this time in July of 1953. One of the band valets stayed there. He was called Papa Jack. I didn’t meet Mr. Basie until I got on the bus. He was probably the last one on the bus.

Brower: Where did he sit on the bus?

Foster: He sat in the front seat on the right, not right behind the driver but on the first seat just behind the stairwell. It’s funny. I don’t remember our first meeting. All I remember is some days later we were in Chicago at another landmark called the Southway Hotel on Chicago’s south side.

Brower: Southway? Southland?

Foster: Southway Hotel. We were in the lobby checking in. Mr. Basie looked over. He was about as far away from me as you are now.

Brower: Five feet or so.

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Foster: Yeah. He said, “Morning, Frank.” I said, “Huh?” He said, “Morning.” I said, “Oh, oh, good morning.” I was so much in awe of this man that when he spoke to me I would almost melt through the floor.

Brower: At that time, about how old was Basie?

Foster: Basie had to have been about 57, 58, somewhere in there.

Brower: And you were 20-what?

Foster: I was 24.

Brower: It’s interesting. How was the bus? What was the bus like? Just a regular old bus?

Foster: It was a regular old Greyhound-type bus that you could grab the windows and just push them open like that.

Brower: Could you recline the seats?

Foster: Yes.

Brower: Was there anything unique or special about it, or it was just a bus?

Foster: Just a bus, right.

Brower: Did people have places they sat? Was it --

Foster: Everybody in the band had a designated seat in which he or she sat. They had a female vocalist named Bixie Crawford. I think she sat right behind Basie.

Brower: When you joined the band who was there at that point?

Foster: In the trumpet section were Joe Newman, a gentleman by the name of Paul Campbell -- they used to call him Uncle Cam -- Wendell Culley, a very distinguished looking and acting person from Worcester, Mass., who spoke perfect English and was a gentleman and always wore a suit and tie. I said Joe Newman, right? The lead trumpeter was a person called Renauld Jones. Trombones were Henry Coker, Benny Powell, and the composer-arranger Johnny Mandel. The saxophones were Marshall Royal, Frank Wess, Ernie Wilkins, Charlie Fowlkes on baritone, and myself.

Brower: So at that point Jimmy Wilkins had left the band?

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Foster: Yes, he had left the band before I joined.

Brower: Okay. So --

Foster: Wait a minute.

Brower: Sorry.

Foster: On bass was a gentleman by the name of Gene Ramey I think, either Gene Ramey or Al Hall. My memory is hazy there. And of course Freddie Green, Count Basie, and Gus Johnson was the drummer. Now proceed.

Brower: Who did you ride with?

Foster: I think I inherited Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis's seat, so I had a seat by myself. At the time rookies coming into the band were generally unfortunate enough to have a seatmate. A few weeks later -- not a few weeks. A few months later Eddie Jones joined the band and --

Brower: He was a bass player?

Foster: Yeah. He was rather large, if you remember, and he and Ernie Wilkins had to sit together. Ernie's a veteran, and he had the unfortunate incident of having to share a seat with Eddie Jones. I can remember one incident in which they were trying to get comfortable in the seat. Ernie Wilkins looked at him and said very indignantly, "You're too big," and Eddie Jones said, "I'm sorry." [laughs]

Brower: Can't do nothing about it though.

Foster: [Laughs] It was always the point of view, somebody being sorry for being too big.

Brower: So you were lucky in the sense that you didn't have -- you could stretch out more, relax a little bit more.

Foster: I don't recall whether or not I had a seatmate. I think I had a seat by myself. Eventually I did have a seat of my own. I supposed we perhaps got a larger bus a little later down the line.

Brower: Was there someone that -- I don't know. You're new in the band -- adopted you or schooled you to the band? Or how did that work? What relationships did you develop early on to bring you into the band's culture in a sense and educate you about how things --

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Foster: The first relationship was, on the very first day we left, being passed a pipe by Johnny Mandel and being too well bred to refuse. I accepted this little pipe. In the first chapter of my -- or the chapter of my autobiography in which I describe joining Basie and leaving town, the last line of this chapter says, "And Frank Foster left New York higher than a mother-fucker." [laughter].

Brower: Hit the road. Where were you headed?

Foster: Jamestown, New York, was the first gig I played with the band. It's a little town in western New York State.

Brower: How long was this tour, this first tour?

Foster: The tour was about three to four weeks. It took us all across the country, as far as Los Angeles. In Los Angeles we had three days, a weekend, a Friday, Saturday, Sunday at a place called the 54 Ballroom at 54th and Broadway in Los Angeles. There I met the lady who became my first wife.

Brower: And her name was?

Foster: Vivian.

Brower: I guess you said yesterday that relationship lasted roughly concurrently -- was roughly concurrent with your years with Basie.

Foster: Right, a year in --

Brower: In between.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: How did that relationship end? It did end so --

Foster: It ended after I left the Basie band, after 11 years. It was pretty stormy when I came home. I hadn't been a very good boy. I had already met the lady who is my present wife. It's a case of I just couldn't hang anymore.

Brower: If you can answer this, if it is typical, what was the typical amount of time -- during the time with Basie, what was a typical year in terms of how many nights you were out versus whatever time you had off?

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Foster: A typical year was at least 30 weeks on the road, 30 weeks of one-nighters. It usually included a two- to three-week tour of Western Europe.

Brower: Separate from the 30 weeks? As part of that?

Foster: No, that's included, yes. Tours usually took us to most of the states in the union but more often to Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City, places like that. Now and again to Dallas, Houston, Atlanta.

But the second tour that I went on with the Basie orchestra was one that featured Sugar Ray Robinson. He was like -- he had gone into show business. He was dancing and representing himself as sort of a sex symbol, because everywhere we went the ladies screamed and hollered.

Brower: Could he dance?

Foster: Yeah, he was a pretty good dancer. He had a sidekick named, I think, Scotty Robinson, who was a straight man. They had a little comedy routine.

Brower: And he was the butt of all the jokes?

Foster: Yeah, or maybe it was the other way around. Sugar Ray was the butt of all the jokes, and Scotty was the funny man.

We had some vocal quartets like -- I call them "bird groups." Not the Orioles. Not someone that big in stature, but -- oh, we had Billy Ward and the Dominoes, and a lesser-known other group. This tour took us all down through the South: Macon, Georgia; Raleigh, North Carolina; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta; Richmond, Virginia; Dallas, Texas. I can remember in Texas -- now this, I'm talking about 1953. We played to not -- we played to segregated audiences, and we played dances. I'm not sure if it was on this tour, but at least around during this same time period we played in places where they had the sides roped off --

Brower: To separate the races.

Foster: On one side of the rope were the whites, and the other side were the blacks. I'll never forget this one place. It was like an auditorium -- not an auditorium. A balcony on either side. The blacks were allowed to sit in the balcony, and the whites were on the floor dancing. I was thinking, here's a place where black folks could come but could not dance [laughs]. As much as ya'll -- we -- love to dance [laughs].

And the band -- some of the band members became angry, annoyed at Basie for accepting these types of engagements that allowed -- where the policy was segregation,

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but the reality of the situation was that if these engagements weren't accepted, the life of the band was in jeopardy. We might have had to disband if we didn't accept some of these engagements.

Brower: How often did you tour the South? Was that something that happened as part of every year, or there just were particular years where this was a part of the focus?

Foster: It seemed as though it happened every year or every other year. As the years wore on our sphere of activity in the United States sort of narrowed, and we --

Brower: When was that perceptible that it was narrowing? In other words, when did you --

Foster: In the late '50s and early '60s there were certain places that we seemed to travel to less. The western boundaries seemed to be around Kansas City or St. Louis and sometimes Omaha, Oklahoma City. Then from there we'd jump to Los Angeles and Seattle and San Diego.

Brower: But not stopping in between.

Foster: Things started to get better in the South. We stayed at some hotels downtown as far as I can remember, during my latter period with the band.

Brower: Meaning the early '60s.

Foster: Yeah. In '57, when we first went to Las Vegas, the band members had to stay in a section of town called the Dust Bowl, which is tantamount to Las Vegas's Harlem. They called it the Dust Bowl, because that's just what it was. We couldn't stay on The Strip, so to speak. We played on The Strip where the clubs would be, big hotels, the Flamingo, the Dunes, *et cetera*.

Brower: By this time were you doing stuff with Frank Sinatra, by the time --

Foster: No, that didn't come 'til later.

Brower: In the early years, how would you characterize -- if you were to classify the kinds of places you played in, in sort of categories -- we did ballrooms. We did clubs. We did sororities, fraternity dances -- if you were to try to breakdown that 30 weeks, how would it break down in terms of the kinds of venues and the kinds of audiences that you were playing to? I know this might vary by section. You've already described something about the South but --

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Foster: Until the advent of jazz festivals such as the Newport Jazz Festival, all engagements were either ballrooms or jazz clubs like Birdland. The list of jazz clubs that we performed were Birdland in New York -- and these engagements always lasted at least a week, from one to three weeks. Birdland in New York, the Blue Note in Chicago, Storyville in Boston, the Crescendo in Hollywood. There might have been another one. There was a black establishment in Atlanta, Georgia, called the Wallahage [?spelling]. I think we played at least three days in there, perhaps a week. And the Riviera in St. Louis, which is a dancehall. There was another place in St. Louis. I forget. We played dances in and then we -- another place where we played maybe a weekend. We lived for the jazz clubs. We had great times at the dancehalls and ballrooms. The audiences were mixed racially. The age groups were from about late teens to maybe people in their sixties and seventies. But everyone loved the band. Wherever we went, the band was wildly received.

Brower: What was your principal venue in Chicago?

Foster: The Blue Note.

Brower: And what about Detroit?

Foster: Detroit. We usually played ballrooms in Detroit. There was no club in Detroit where we had what I call the sit-down engagement. I guess they didn't have a suitable place for that in Detroit, which is surprising given the vibrancy that I told you Detroit had going for it.

Brower: What about Philadelphia?

Foster: Philadelphia, there was a place called Pep's Bar on Broad and South.

Brower: Did Pep's.

Foster: Yeah. It was not your -- it was a jazz club, yeah. The bandstand was located up over the bar. It was an interesting place. People from Philly were very appreciative.

I was going to speak of someplace else. In Los Angeles we did a place called Ciro's, and in San Francisco we played a place called New Facts. All these were clubs. On the road cities all across the country, north and south, it was ballrooms.

Then once the jazz festivals started, pretty much in the summer we were performing at jazz festivals in open air in the stadiums. In Europe during that same period, the early '50s before the jazz festivals began, all our venues were concert halls.

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Brower: I wanted to ask you in particular about Washington. Do you have any particular experiences?

Foster: Yes, we loved Washington. Washington was one of the stops on the itinerary that we relished, we waited for, because Washington and St. Louis, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, were our favorite stops. In Washington we played a club that I can't remember the name of. It was up on the second floor. All I can remember is I first met Betty Carter there. I can't remember the name of it. And then there was the Woodner Theater [Woodley Park Hotel or Wardman Park Hotel] in Washington. Do you recall that name?

Brower: No.

Foster: It was an open-air theater where we played a concert on the same bill with Louis Armstrong. What was so great about Washington and Chicago was Basie fans invited us into their homes for dinners, parties, or what have you. The whole time we were there they played our own records for us.

Brower: I guess this was after the Howard Theater was doing much jazz. Do you remember doing the Howard Theater?

Foster: Oh, yes, we did the Howard Theater on several occasions. That was another series of venues, the Howard here, New York's Apollo, and the Regal Theater in Chicago on the south side, and the Uptown in Philadelphia. There was another theater in Baltimore that I can't remember the name.

Brower: The Royal?

Foster: The Royal. There you go. Yeah.

Brower: Do you remember a place called Turner's Arena here?

Foster: Turner's Arena. We played Turner's Arena several times. We played the Uline Arena [Correct]. We played a place somewhere on the beach in Maryland. I can't remember the name of that either.

Brower: Wilmer's Park?

Foster: What's that?

Brower: Wilmer's Park?

Foster: Probably that was it.

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Brower: What about the Lincoln Colonnade?

Foster: Lincoln Colonnade, we played there.

Brower: Now this is a particular thing. Do you remember any differences between the Colonnade as a venue and Turner's Arena as a venue, that were perceptible to you?

Foster: They were pretty much the same. In other words, the crowd was pretty much the same in both places.

Brower: If I were to say, no, it's been told to me that Turner's Arena was more of a working class place and the Colonnade was more of a society place where some of the more prominent social groups might give an event at the Colonnade. A sorority, a fraternity, some prominent organization in the community, a cotillion might be there. I imagine you played for some cotillions and things of that sort.

Foster: Yes, we did, we did.

Brower: That was more likely to be at the Colonnade than the audience that would be at the Turner's Arena. Does that register?

Foster: That's probably pretty fairly accurate. You sparked my memory on one event that happened. I was going to say this probably happened at the Colonnade, but it probably happened at Turner's Arena. Now do you remember the layout of Turner's Arena at all?

Brower: No, I do not. I just know that --

Foster: Anyway, there was a place where -- say the bandstand is right here in the center of floor. There might be a bar somewhere around the front doors here. Behind the bandstand were some grandstands for people to sit. The dance floor was right in front of this high bandstand. It must have been seven or eight feet off the floor. We were playing one night. The place is crowded, and the grandstands behind the band were crowded. I don't know if there are grandstands on either side of Turner's Arena, but I remember this grandstand back here. While the band was performing, we heard a whole lot of rumbling going on behind us coming from this grandstand. I remember Charlie Fowlkes, the baritone player, turning around, looking back there, and saying, "Here they come." Some brothers had gotten into a scuffle. It was --

Brower: They were throwing it.

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Foster: Yeah, they were really slamming. They brought the crowd in the grandstand with them. It was like a landslide. They came down all across the bandstand and ended up on the floor. Actually, one fell on the floor off the bandstand, and one was lying on the bandstand. I remember somebody in the band just kicked him off the edge of the bandstand [laughs].

When these guys got up off the floor, they got up duking, rumbling, but in the meantime all the music had been just dispersed all over the place, and all the bandstands had been flattened. It was such pandemonium that we had to stop the dance. We couldn't play anymore. Our music had to be re-sorted out. I had a clarinet on an instrument stand. The force of this avalanche, so to speak, had split my mouthpiece into two pieces, and that instrument was no longer playable. So this must have been the working class. [laughs]

Brower: I know about the venue. I know where it was. I'll have to get somebody to describe it physically for me.

Moving between two things, we talked about a lot of major cities, but what about some of the secondary, what we think of as secondary cities, like a Harrisburg, or like a Richmond, or like a Toledo, or I guess like a Dayton, like an Akron. Were you hitting all those places?

Foster: Yes, we were hitting all of them. The venues mostly were ballrooms or old-fashioned dancehalls. Very seldom the clubs, the nightclubs. These places just didn't have jazz clubs that could accommodate a group of that size.

Brower: How did the repertoire or the things that were selected to play on a given night vary with the club versus if it was a ballroom or a dance?

Foster: Played the same repertoire every night, ballroom, dance, nightclub. Count Basie played the same numbers for a concert, for a dance, whatever. There were probably more for a dance because every dance we played was four hours in length. We played two-and-a-half hours straight through, then took half an hour intermission, and then came back after that and played the final hour. Most concerts, when concerts started happening, would be two hours, so there was a lot more music played at dances. There was a select group of tunes from this entire repertoire that was played at concerts.

Brower: We've talked about the traveling situation. How was pay?

Foster: Pay must have been pretty good for the veterans, the guys, Marshall Royal and Henry Coker and Joe Newman and Renauld Jones and Freddie Green, of course. To me, one who had not been a professional, but fresh out of the army -- I don't consider that a professional musician life. New in the industry, \$150 a week was adequate, and I

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got two raises. Once I got a \$10 raise after a few years, to \$160 a week. Then I got another raise to \$175 a week. When I left the orchestra in '64, I think I was making about \$200 a week. One benefit was that whenever we went to Europe, salaries were doubled. In other words, while I was making \$150 a week in the States, on a European tour the salary was doubled to \$300.

Brower: Of course dollars meant something different in 1955 or '56 than they do now.

Foster: Right, right, exactly.

Brower:: One wouldn't want \$150 a day now.

Foster: Right.

Brower: You could do a lot when you could do -- did you have a family at that point?

Foster: I was married in June of 1954.

Brower: Did you have children is what I mean.

Foster: I didn't have -- my first-born didn't arrive until December of 1957, so I went for roughly four-and-a-half years without a family, without children. I was just a year in the band before getting married. Then in '59 my second child was born. I think it was about that time I got the second raise.

Brower: So were you able -- one way of gauging the meaning of those dollars that you made was at that time, given your family responsibilities, were you able to maintain yourself without any kind of undue strain on that?

Foster: Not adequately, no. The only thing that helped bail me out was income from arranging. At that time I was making from \$35 to \$50 per arrangement. And royalties from recordings, which were very minimal, but still they helped a lot.

Brower: So you're saying if you -- I think I've seen the figure. 150 arrangements you did for the Basie band.

Foster: That figure is not necessarily accurate. I don't know how many I wrote. I would say close to 100, between 100 and maybe 120.

Brower: Okay. Of course you did other -- if you were involved with Basie 30 weeks out of the year during this time, what did you do with the other --

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Foster: No, I was involved with Basie 52 weeks out of the year. The 30 weeks were the road, when we were on the road. The other 20 were in sit-down gigs, like two weeks here -- no, I'm sorry. The other 20 were the total that we spent in the New York City area, greater New York, either at Birdland or maybe short hops to Hartford or something like that.

Brower: So Basie kept you busy 52 weeks a year pretty much?

Foster: We generally had two-week vacations as well, without pay.

Brower: So how were you able to do the other recordings and things that are evident during the '50s?

Foster: People would adjust their schedule to my schedule. If they knew I was going to be in town for two weeks, they'd arrange a recording session.

Brower: So you could do those things while you were in town.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: You're at Birdland at the nighttime. You go and do something for Prestige in the day, or whatever.

Foster: Right, exactly. And I wasn't signed up with any recording company, so I could record with the Basie band. I could record with anybody, Prestige, Blue Note, or whatever.

I was going to say something else. We did a number of television shows at the time. *The Jackie Gleason Show*, *The Dinah Shore Show*, *The Garry Moore Show*, *Carol Burnett*. We did a bunch of TV shows. Those paid very well, so I had supplemental income that really --

Brower: So it's like a pie really.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: There's what you get from being a bandsman. There's what you get from arranging for the band. There's royalties from recordings. There's rates on top of rates, because you're on tour, because you're doing television.

Foster: Right. There were also a few movies. *Cinderfella*, Jerry Lewis. *Sex and the Single Girl* was another movie we did with Jerry Lewis, and a couple of other ones.

Brower: Did he like jazz, Jerry Lewis?

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Foster: Loved it. He came to see us at Birdland. He would insist on directing the band on *Après in Paris* or something.

And other income. We recorded with Sarah Vaughan. We recorded with Nat “King” Cole. We recorded with Ella Fitzgerald. We recorded with -- I don’t think Lena Horne came ’til later. Frank Sinatra of course came -- that was later in the ’60s, but these recordings paid well as well.

Brower: So this is adding -- then there’s your work totally outside of that domain.

Foster: Right.

Brower: Did you have to be a workaholic? It sounds like you had to be an absolute workaholic to make any of this make sense with a family in New York.

Foster: Sometimes getting up early in the morning, getting up at 5 a.m. for a studio call while doing a movie, that was kind of rough. My punctuality habits weren’t the best, as any who knows me and knew me at that time can tell you.

Brower: Did Basie have things like fines if you didn’t do this or didn’t do that?

Foster: Yeah, he had to institute a system of fines after so many offenses. But one thing that he used to do for anybody who came late or anybody who came somewhat inebriated, he would call their feature number. Like if I came late he would call *Jumping at the Woodside*. I would have to come in cold and play an extended solo on *Jumping at the Woodside*.

Brower: Wake-up call.

Foster: Most of the time I rose to the occasion. I remember -- I have to tell this one on the late Henry Coker, who was a wonderful lead trombonist, a wonderful solo trombonist, a great all-around musician. He played piano. A wonderful personality with a dynamite sense of humor. But he did like his scotch. One night he came fairly tipsy, as they say. He had a feature on *Moonlight in Vermont*. The first note was a high note on the trombone. He starts out with just him. Anybody listening who knows anything about music or the trombone knows that a B-natural four ledger lines above the staff is pretty high for the trombone to have to start cold. The solo starts right on the melody in *Moonlight in Vermont* [Foster sings the opening notes of the melody]. No piano, no guitar, no nothing, just --.

Brower: Naked.

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Foster: Naked, all by himself. This night [laughs] he comes in. He's leaning at half-mast and about a 45-degree angle. Basie notes this, and he says, "Moonlight." So Coker had to stand up. He stands up to play this solo. He stood up, and he said [Foster makes a blowing noise] and that's all that came out [laughs]. Naturally the band, we all just laid on the floor. We couldn't -- we were unable to perform after that.

Brower: What did Basie do?

Foster: Same thing. Fell off the stool laughing [laughs].

Brower: Do you remember -- I'll come back to that. Just two questions. Describe for us or characterize for us how Basie exerted his leadership, and identify persons who had particular roles as lieutenants or whatever for him, and how one got status, or achieved tenure, or knew that one had achieved that.

Foster: We'll start with Basie himself. One finger was all he needed to lead that band. He raised this finger and he might -- when he brought that finger down, music came from everywhere.

As far as being a disciplinarian, he was very easy. He didn't crack the whip. He wasn't an a-h to get along with. He was wonderfully easy going. We could practically get away with murder as long as we came on time, dressed neatly, played 100 percent, and conducted ourselves as gentlemen on the bandstand. He didn't have to put up with any nonsense. He was very fortunate in that he had 15 men who basically didn't offer any nonsense. We all knew how to act. We acted the way we knew how to act and very seldom had a disciplinary problem with anyone.

Marshall Royal was the designated straw boss. Marshall took control, command at rehearsals and did all the duties of a leader at the rehearsal. Basie might be sitting over in a corner reading the racing form or something. Then finally, after we had hashed out the rough points in a song, Basie would come sit at the piano and do his little role. So Marshall Royal was a straw boss. He exerted his authority over the new boys, like myself.

Freddie Green was the wise old sage and also like a sergeant at arms, so if anybody got a little off in their conduct, Freddie Green would get on them, and Basie wouldn't even have to say anything. Freddie Green would say, "Wait now. Watch your cues, boy. Be cool now. You're messing up." Only he wouldn't use the word "messing." So Freddie Green -- Marshall Royal straw boss, Freddie Green sergeant at arms.

No one else assumed any official or unofficial role, but it was like a great, big, reasonably happy family. Every now and then Joe Newman would get on me for lateness. He would say, "Man, you know that's not right. You've got to learn how to

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come on time, so why don't you just go apologize to the chief?" We all called Basie "the Chief." Nobody in the band called him -- referred to him as "Count." It was "Chief" or "Bas." Only outsiders called him "Count."

So I began a system of apologizing to the Chief. One time he said, "Man, you're always sorry." I think after that my habits cleaned up a little bit in the area of punctuality.

Brower: Do you remember when -- oh, the point about like achieving status or tenure in the band. How did one do that, or how did one know that one was there?

Foster: This band had a good record of longevity. The people that joined the band generally stayed in the band for years. I was there 11 years. Benny Powell was there a good ten or 12 years. No, I think Benny Powell was there about ten years. Joe Newman was there forever. He was there at least ten years. Henry Coker was there for almost the same length of time.

There was only one or two chairs that had quick turnovers. One was that tenor chair, the other tenor saxophone chair that was ultimately occupied by Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Eric Dixon, Jimmy Forrest, even Oliver Nelson at one time, and Harold Ashby, and one or two others. There was something about that chair -- Billy Mitchell.

And the second alto chair next to Marshall Royal, where Ernie Wilkins was when I first joined the band. Then we had Billy Graham. Not the evangelist Bill Graham. The alto saxophonist, the late Billy Graham, and a couple of others who came after I left. Most of the trumpet chairs, the trombone chairs were permanent, stable, and of course Freddie Green was there forever. The bass chair, once Eddie Jones occupied the bass chair, he was there for years. Before him there was Al Hall. There was Gene Ramey, and Ike Isaacs. Buddy Catlett after Eddie Jones. But one gained tenure -- if you stayed about two or three years, you could consider yourself to have tenure, so to speak.

Brower: I guess there weren't --

Foster: You outgrew the status of new boy. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Brower: Because there was that tenure, how was the job being in Basie's band perceived by the musicians? Was it a coveted position to have?

Foster: Definitely it was a coveted position. Everybody there enjoyed being there and enjoyed the glory that the band was receiving. We liked being adored by audiences and cheered by audiences. We enjoyed that.

Brower: What about things like uniforms and stage presentation?

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Foster: The band generally had two uniforms. One was a suit, a dark suit. When I first joined the uniform was a dark blue suit with straight tie, white shirt. Later on, when we started working places like the Waldorf Astoria, the Starlight Roof in the Empire Room in the Waldorf, we got a second uniform, which was a tuxedo-type uniform. It was generally beige in color with brown shoes and a tucked shirt. We presented ourselves very admirably. We looked good on the bandstand.

Brower: Do you remember when Frank Wess came in the band?

Foster: Frank Wess came a few weeks before I joined. At the time I joined I didn't know how long he'd been there, but I know it couldn't have been too long, because Paul Quinichette had been in that chair before

Brower: It seems like out of the band you did a lot of recordings in small groups situations. Talk about the particular relationships that you formed with certain members within the band that afforded you other recording and performing opportunities.

Foster: Joe Newman was the first one in the band to offer me a recording opportunity. There was a recording session entitled *Jazz Studio One*, which was my very first recording. No one knew me at the time. Hank Jones, Eddie Jones, Benny Green, and a number of -- Paul Quinichette -- a number of stars were on this recording. Joe Newman recommended me and said that I would be an asset to this recording. They were still making 10- and 12-inch records, shellac, whatever you call them. On one side of this was *Tenderly*. On the other side was a number called *Let's Split*. This was when I made my recording debut in New York City. This was about 1953 or early '54. That recording happens to be one of the best that I have been on, as far as my own personal performance.

Benny Powell and I, being pretty much in the same age group, formed a sort of alliance of youngsters in the band. We were the only two members still in our twenties. I used him on the first recording I did under my own name, *Here Comes Frank Foster*. I used him on that. Then there's another one where I had -- I think it was myself, Frank Wess, Henry Coker, and Benny Powell.

Brower: And there's no drums -- is that the one that has no piano on it?

Foster: No, piano, yeah. It's called *No Count* Basie.

Brower: What was the other one called, *East, South, North* --

Foster: *North, East, South, Wess*. Those two were part of the same recording session. Most of the originals -- all of the originals were mine, but somehow the producer

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wanted Frank Wess and myself to share leadership responsibility, so he gave Frank this one album. There're still all my originals. *The No Count* was mine. *East, South, North, Wess* is his.

Frank Wess and I had a good relationship as the Two Franks. We inherited that moniker after Neil Hefti wrote the song by the same name, but actually when we recorded that song, he didn't have a name on it. It just featured us, and it just ended up being called *Two Franks* for lack of a better title. Let's see.

Brower: That's a relationship that's endured pretty much over your recording career. There's three, four, five or so recordings that include the two of you and play on the Two Franks idea.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Often times the music is somehow attributed to Basie, but the notes at least for these recordings always go to great lengths to say, but there's more to them than Basie. So I'd like you to talk a little bit more about your relationship with Frank Wess, the musical relationship, or to what extent the relationship is driven by musical issues and to what extent it's driven by the fact that this is something that has played well in the jazz public, in the jazz-buying public and so therefore is good for marketing. How much, and what is it?

Foster: To begin with, it's a marked contrast in playing styles. I came out of the hard-bop school. Frank Wess, who was from an earlier school, one of his most admired idols was Gene Ammons. I'm sure that in his younger days he must have emulated Gene Ammons in much the same way as I emulated Sonny Stitt. But of course Frank Wess had no problem asserting his own personality. I would just say whereas I came out of Sonny Stitt, he came out of Gene Ammons. So this contrast in styles, it was good for Basie, because I stood out on fast numbers like *Little Pony*, *Jumping at the Woodside*, *et cetera*, and Frank Wess starred on ballads. He played a beautiful version of *You Are Too Beautiful*, and *Body and Soul*, and things of that nature. Every now and then he would play something that had a little tempo on it, because he was featured on the *Whirly Bird*. I wanted the solo, but he was the man in that instance. So the contrasting styles -- and even though we shared the same first name, there was contrast in personalities as well. While there was compatibility, there still was -- he has his individuality. I had mine.

Brower: What's the contrast in personalities?

Foster: I think he might have been a little more outgoing, much more knowledgeable in world events or personal affairs. He knew a lot more about life and how to handle himself in public than I did. I was still plagued by a certain type of immaturity and I

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didn't work on punctuality the way I should have. But he was just a little more sophisticated in a non-sophisticated way, if you can understand what I'm talking about.

Brower: I know part of the traditional Basie band was a contrast in the saxophones between the two tenors. That manifested itself for you in the Basie band in a number of kind of contrasts and with different players, but it seems like you explored this really with Frank, not so much always with two tenors, but just the notion of matching your different instruments, flutes and alto and the different things. Maybe you could talk about that and also maybe talk about or comment on whether or not the difference in how you are as people finds itself in how you play.

Foster: He had an extra dimension in that flute. He's credited with reintroducing the flute into jazz, which is to say that he wasn't the first flutist to play jazz, but it had been years before. It had been way back in the late '30s, I think, when a gentleman by the name of Wayman Carver played the flute, but I never heard any recordings by this Mr. Carver. I don't even recall with whom he played.

Brower: Chick Webb.

Foster: Chick Webb, okay. There were a great number of years in which the flute was not heard of after Carver's presentation of it. Frank Wess reintroduced it, and it became a very, very popular instrument, as you all know. He was very proficient on the flute. He wasn't just -- it wasn't something he just picked up and started playing. He had been working on the flute. He was an excellent flautist, so he had that dimension going for him.

My extra dimension was my composing and arranging. In that area I contributed widely to the band, which is not to downplay the fact that Frank Wess himself is an excellent composer-arranger. Some of the most wonderful music to come out of the band was composed and arranged by Frank Wess.

I'm speaking of a song by the name of *Half Moon Street* and another song called *Summer Frost*. There were other songs that probably didn't gain too much prominence, because Neil Hefti's arrangements and some of mine -- and Thad Jones was also another heavy contributor, by way of arranging, to the band's repertoire.

Brower: I just want to ask one more thing about the two tenor thing. How did Basie orchestrate an evening by sequencing things? What role did those certain features, where maybe there might be -- the two tenor thing might be happening -- where did that fit in?

Foster: Basie was an excellent programmer, especially when we played dances. He would feel the audience out. He would observe what was effective with the audience,

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what got the people on the floor dancing. We weren't paying any attention to it. We just played whatever he called. He programmed his dance presentations according to the moods of the people. He would follow one slow piece with another if it called for it, or he would go from slow to medium to fast, back to slow, medium, fast, or whatever, according to how the crowd was reacting, even though he had pretty much a program of the same 15 to 20 songs that were played at dances and the same 10 to 15 songs that were played at concerts or in clubs. But he knew how to program without writing a single thing down, without saying a word, because for the most part when Basie hit the introduction on the piano, we knew what the song was going to be. He developed a certain stylistic introduction for each piece that was played, except for the pieces that Marshall Royal as straw boss had to maybe stand up and count off. Basie even had similar introductions for two different pieces. He would play the same notes, the same phrases, but according to how he played these same notes and same phrases, you knew whether or not it was *Down for the Count* or *Plymouth Rock*. It was amazing.

Brower: I'll read you two quotes from Gunther Schuller's book on *The Swing Era*, and get your reaction to them as a way of you talking about your work as an arranger for the band. One of them is, "What this new sound meant, and Basie owed that as much to arrangers Quincy Jones and Frank Foster as anyone, was that the relatively transparent loose-limbed linear approach of the early Basie band cushioned and floating on the rhythm section had been exchanged for a heavier tight-bodied vertical sound anchored in the rhythm section." That's quote number one. The second quote is, "Because it took all of those many years to take the transition from a small Midwestern nine-piece improvising group to a big brassy eastern style arranger's band." That's not a complete sentence, but it contains in it the notion that the band that was developed in Kansas City was of a certain character and the band that came in '50s had a different character, a different kind of dynamic, a different way of massing and directing the sound of the band. And then additionally, Thomas Owens in his book *Bebop: The Music and the Players* credits you with bringing "bebop ideas into the band." So with that as a background, those notions as a background, talk about your contributions as an arranger- composer for the band.

Foster: I'd like to start with a comment on Gunther Schuller's reference to vertical placement. That to me speaks on my harmonic concept in which I've always been in love with slick chords. I've always detested chords that were too -- like triads and straight seventh chords.

Brower: I wish they could see your face. Say a triad again, and I'll take a picture of it.

Foster: Triads [laughs]. I like the extensions and the alterations, whereas the earlier Basie band was highly improvisational, played a lot of head tunes, tunes that everybody just played from the head and didn't have too much orchestration, written orchestration,

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until Buck Clayton began to contribute, or Eddie Durham, or somebody. I don't know my Basie history as thoroughly as I should.

In the '50s the band was referred to as a polished, well-oiled machine, not so highly improvisational as the earlier group, as the Old Testament, so to speak, band. The New Testament band was characterized mostly by heavy colors and textures in the orchestration, with the emphasis not particularly on the improvising solos, although there were excellent soloists in the New Testament orchestra: Joe Newman, Thad Jones, Frank Wess, Benny Powell, Henry Coker.

Brower: Frank Foster.

Foster: We can add him if you'd like. And Marshall Royal himself. All excellent soloists but most critics say that the greatest soloists were with the Old Testament band, the Lester Youngs, the Buck Claytons, Harry Edison, Earle Warren, Jack Washington on baritone and saxophone, Buddy Tate, Don Byas, even Illinois Jacquet, who was with the Basie band for a minute. Most critics seemed to favor the old soloists, the Old Testament band.

Brower: What do you think about that judgment?

Foster: I don't agree entirely. I think we had some excellent soloists. I never make the mistake of comparing myself to Lester Young.

Brower: I mean, with the exception of Prez, who was on another planet --

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: I think there's some fair equivalence.

Foster: There's a lot of argument that can take place in favor --

Brower: It's at least arguable.

Foster: It is at least arguable. The orchestrations -- of course I have always been a fan of sophisticated orchestration with varied colors and textures. I like to consider myself a master of linear writing as well as vertical. In order words my melodies --

Brower: Your melodies.

Foster: I like to think of my melodies are as good as *9:20 Special* or *Shorty George* or *Avenue C* or what have you.

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Brower: What are your favorites of the things that you contributed to the Basie repertoire?

Foster: My favorites of things that I contributed? There's one called *Didn't You*, which is a take off on Dizzy's *Woody'n You*. I like my *Shiny* [*Stockings*], and there was one called *Back to the Apple* that I like. It had a little loping rhythm to it. Another one called *Who Me?*, and a blues called *Four, Five, Six*. Then one I wrote in 1957 called *Blues in Hoss Flat*, originally entitled *Blues in Frankie's Flat*.

Brower: Who would Hoss be?

Foster: Hoss was Hoss Allen, a disc jockey in Nashville, Tennessee, who wanted to use the song for a theme on his radio show. Teddy Reig, the producer at Roulette, asked me to allow them to change the title for the recording, *Blues in Hoss Flat*. I thought that they just wanted to use the title for the recording, but it turned out that it was used throughout history. People ask me for *Blues in Hoss Flat*, and I say, "Originally it was *Blues in Frankie's Flat*."

Brower: Frankie being?

Foster: Me, yeah. To myself.

Brower: You say *Didn't You* was a take off on *Woody'n You*?

Foster: Right, the same harmonic structure, same chord changes in other words.

Brower: Does this relate also to Owens's concept that you were bringing bebop into the band?

Foster: I don't want to take all the credit for that. Ernie Wilkins deserves just as much if not more credit for bringing bebop. He was arranging for the band before I got there, and he arranged for the band after I arrived. Some of his things are just as beboppy as my things. And of course Thad Jones could also receive a portion of that credit, and Quincy.

Brower: What's the proper -- there's a lot of arrangers. When you think about just the people you've named who are band members, and then people like Johnny Mandel, who left the band and was, I guess, still contributing things -- This weekend, the 26th and 27th you're participating in a presentation with the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra that is featuring the arrangements of Neil Hefti, who came to the band while you were there. He played a lot of them. Where do you place his contribution in the scope of all the other arrangers? Was it more critical or more seminal, than any others or just -- not just, but a contribution among contributions. How do you weigh that?

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Foster: I place Neil Hefti's contributions pretty high on the list. His arrangements, particularly *Plymouth Rock*, inspired me when I first joined the band. I got a formula by listening to some of his contributions, his arrangements, and he seemed to --

Brower: Let's stop on this unless you intend to come back. What was the formula? You got a formula. What was that?

Foster: It was an adopting of blues-like phrases in melodies and use of the brass back-to-back of the reeds in a certain way. Not that I think Neil Hefti had a better blues concept. I think that Thad Jones, Frank Wess, Ernie Wilkins, and myself had the absolute greatest blues concepts of any arrangers that ever wrote for this band, with the possible exception of Buck Clayton and Jimmy Mundy. But when I say formula I mean the sequence of things that happen during an arrangement, starting off with saxes. Then maybe a short piano solo. Then a trumpet solo with trombone or sax background. Then the out-chorus, a soft out-chorus, and then a shouting out-chorus with a blazing ending. That's what I speak of --

Brower: His way of building the piece.

Foster: Yeah. I use that as a framework.

Brower: Do you see this, the formula that you're crediting Neil Hefti, this way of organizing how the band moved through a given piece, how its resources were set against each other and built upon each other, do you see this as an extension or building on some essential qualities that were already in the Basie tradition?

Foster: Yes, definitely. These qualities were already built in the Basie tradition, as you say, but they were very clearly defined in Neil's writing and in my initial arrangements for the band.

Brower: So is he codifying things that people were doing, I don't want to say intuitively, but from their head and then bringing a composer's touch to it?

Foster: I would agree with that. I would think so. It's not that he was the only one to do this, but he did it in such a way that it simplified it for a youngster like me coming into the organization and wanting to get started.

Brower: To really see it and trying -- for your content.

Foster: Yeah.

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Brower: Did Basie's choice, because ultimately it's his choice -- what do you think he was responding to? Was he responding to a need to have a new sound? Was he responding to something going on in popular music, to what he felt the industry was demanding? Or was it purely a natural evolution that he found people to do for him?

Foster: I think it was closer to a natural evolution. Basie himself responded to anything that played down easily and swung. That's your number one ingredient, swing. Does it swing? Can the rhythm section play around on top -- I mean, can he play around on top of it himself with the rhythm section just able to swing up under all of it and these little band figures perfectly complimentary to what the rhythm was doing, and Basie just soaring, floating around playing. He had a child-like enjoyment of his band and the music. If things were too busy and too frenzied and too hurried, he couldn't deal with it.

Brower: It's interesting, because your own -- first of all your own involvement in bebop and hard bop, which means all the harmonic issues of verticality, yada, yada, yada, extensions, substitutions, all the things that you like to do, did you need that formula in order for you resolve your tendencies to make them work for that band?

Foster: Yes, I needed some kind of framework to --

Brower: To harness you?

Foster: Yeah, because the only -- I'd written for my own band in high school. I'd written for a dance band in the army very minimally. I had done some writing in Detroit prior to joining Basie and that was also very minimal. I didn't do a great body of writing until I joined the Basie orchestra, since writing for my own band in high school. At that time I had no concept of sequence or what came after what. I just copied what I heard big bands doing. Formula -- I had no sense of formula, formulaic writing, what to do after the ascent, so I needed quiet lessons. In other words, by listening, I was taught what to do. Then after gaining a little more experience, I devised my own formula.

Brower: Can you give some examples of how those lessons, those quiet lessons point to some places where it would be obviously -- those lessons being applied, those quiet lessons.

Foster: Well I already have in stating what I said about the soft ensemble chorus preceding the --

Brower: I mean selections.

Foster: Selections?

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Brower: Yeah, pieces that you say, here's a good example of this formula at work.

Foster: Start off with a piano solo, and then a saxophone solo, saxophones stating or making a statement, and then maybe a trumpet solo with saxes or trombones, or ensemble background.

Brower: You cited some things that were favorites that are in the repertoire, so what I'm asking is, taking some of those pieces, pick one and describe it in terms of this formula and why it's a successful arrangement, or why it excessively [successfully] applies the Basie principles as codified by Hefti, as given life by Frank Foster. How does *Shiny Stockings* do it? How does *Four, Five, Six* do that? Walk me through one of those in terms of what you've been saying.

Foster: Now are you saying, walk you through one of my own compositions like *Four, Five, Six*?

Brower: Yeah, or *Shiny Stockings*, or pick one.

Foster: Okay, let's start with *Four, Five, Six*. That starts with a unison brass with a heavy pedal point by the lower pitched instruments [Foster sings this melody]. That's like an over-used blues phrase. I wanted to start out by getting the flavor of the blues. I want to get you into a blues feeling [Foster sings a bit of this same melody, but with a bluesier articulation].

Brower: No mistakes there.

Foster: Yeah. And the pedal point underpinning [Foster sings an oom-pah rhythm], that's going on while -- I am sorry. That's going on while we're -- that's anchoring that blues phrase in the ground [Foster sings it again].

Brower: Right.

Foster: Then a pause after that's all over [Foster sings a fragment of melody] to let the piano say [Foster sings a leaping riff, reminiscent of *Salt Peanuts*] or whatever.

Brower: That's the space you have got to leave for Bas?

Foster: Yeah. Always leave that little space for Bas to do whatever he feels in that. He'll be inspired to do something. He will definitely do something there, if it's one or two little notes [Foster sings another leaping riff] or whatever [Foster sings a different type of piano riff]. He'll do something that definitely fits. Then follow that by a blues

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based melody with unison saxophones, which is almost a restatement of the introduction [Foster sings this saxophone melody].

Brower: Do that little [Brower sings the “doit” at the end of the melody that Foster just sang].

Foster: [Foster repeats the doit.] Yeah. That’s one of those -- that’s called a doit, in which the instrumentalist does a natural thing with the mouth that causes the note to curve up, curl up.

Then after that initial statement of the theme, we have the brass entering to back it up, to answer it. So we have [Foster sings the call and response between the saxophone melody and brass punctuations]. The brass is making a statement of its own, as if to say, “What you talking about? Here we are. You need some help, so here we are.”

Then after that a saxophone soli in harmony, which is one of the stronger crypts, I might say, of a big band music [Foster sings a lengthy portion of the saxophone soli]. That says, “Here we are coming at you.”

Brower: We were talking about the *Four, Five, Six*.

Foster: Right, and that sort of formula. After the saxes make their statement, they throw us into a trumpet solo. That carries the story a little farther along. Thad Jones did that very, very admirably on this particular piece.

Then we have -- after the trumpet solo makes a statement with some unison background from the saxes, which is all in the bebop vein, a phrase that I got from Dizzy Gillespie [Foster sings this borrowed phrase]. Then after the trumpet makes his solo statement, in the last part backed up by trombones, then the band, the entire ensemble comes in and prepares us for the tenor saxophone solo that’s going to take us out.

In Basie’s band it seems like it was an unwritten tradition that the strong tenor sax is going to come in and finish it off for you. After everybody else has said their say, then the president takes over, whoever happens to be in the president’s chair at the time. In this case it was Eric Dixon. The idea is to push him along, to jug him with a background that really swings, that pushes him into making a heavy, strong statement. So the little interlude that comes after the trumpet solo and precedes the sax -- or throws the saxophone [Foster sings this passage], which is -- the band does a little shake. You got to have that in there somewhere, that shake [Foster sings a shake], where they -- instead of playing a note straight [Foster sings a steady pitch and then sings a shake between two pitches]. It’s making two notes out of it, which you can’t identify [laughs].

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Brower: Is that half-valving on trumpets, or what are they doing?

Foster: It's a combination of -- it might be half-valving or actually fingering two notes very rapidly [Foster sings a shake] that are a short interval away from one another.

Then the tenor saxophone comes in and says, "It's my turn now, you all. You said what you all had to say, but I'm finishing it out." After that, the shouting ensemble that goes out with the tenor. He's playing up over all the shouting, and bring it to a blazing climax, and hey --

Brower: There you have it.

Foster: The audience --

Brower: Goes crazy. Did they throw stuff on the stage? No, I'm sorry.

Foster: [laughs] If they did it would either be money or bouquets, no eggs or tomatoes. Have I sufficiently answered your question on this?

Brower: No, I mean that describes an example of how you approach this.

Foster: And each selection, each composition, arrangement has its own series of statements and its own private formula, but there's an overall similarity.

Brower: It seems like the notion of narrative is really strong in how you approach what you do.

Foster: Yes, it is. It is.

Brower: Talk about *Shiny Stockings* for a bit. There must be a *Shiny Stockings* story, stories, or whatever. Before you do that, I want to read you another thing that I got from Gunther Schuller, which is, "*Shiny Stockings* for Basie has come to be regarded as the progenitor of a certain kind of slow tempo, open-spaced jazz piece".

Foster: "Slow tempo, open-spaced jazz piece." I didn't look upon it as a progenitor myself, because it's in that same groove that so many pieces have been, which is almost like the typical foxtrot or maybe just under a foxtrot, very danceable and at the same time very listenable. It's funny how he refers to that as slow tempo. I refer to it as medium tempo. Different people have different ideas --

Brower: Slow, medium, and fast.

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Foster: Of what constitutes slow, medium, and fast in tempo. In the Basie tradition a slow tempo would be *Little Darling* [Foster and Brower sing the melody of *Little Darling*, Brower a bit more slowly than Foster] Yeah, right.

Brower: I wasn't to that part yet.

Foster: Oh, sorry about that [laughs]. And so your *Shiny Stockings*, *Plymouth Rock*, *Cherry Point*, those are maybe medium slow. I'll grant that, medium slow.

Brower: Yeah. You've mentioned the shake as a device to build --

Foster: We mustn't forget the inspiration for *Shiny Stockings* now, while you're talking about what you're saying. But I'll talk about the shake.

Brower: No, no, go to *Shiny Stockings*, because that was the question. There's a lot to say about *Shiny Stockings*.

Foster: But you should hold that one, because I do -- I want to talk about the shake.

Brower: Okay. What I was going to ask about the shake, talk about that and other devices that were -- I won't call them a bag of tricks, because that's sort of like -- well, let me just throw that in the thing. It's not quite that.

Foster: No.

Brower: But there had to be, there must be a range of things like the shake, which you described --

Foster: Yes, there is.

Brower: That in a sense you say, okay, at this point in the formula -- we know that the formula is always a little different, because it's not always pat. It's not a pat formula.

Foster: Right. It's not pat. No.

Brower: So talk about the shake and some other things like that.

Foster: Okay. The shake is mostly characterized, used by brass instruments, trumpets and trombones, although entire ensembles, including saxophones, shake as well. The shake is little more than a guttural trill. A trill [Foster sings a trill] -- a trill is a rapid playing of two different notes in which both are fingered. One is the principal note. The other note, which is either above or below, gives the linear -- gives the line a little wiggle [laughs].

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The shake has got some more grease on it [Foster sings a shake]. This is a characteristic -- I don't know who started this, how long ago. Black bands and white bands have used and will use the shake. There are some shakes that are narrow shakes like [Foster sings a narrow shake]. Then a lot of bands like Kentonesque-type bands would [Foster sings a slower, wider shake] use a wider shake. But it's a device that creates excitement. It caused the listener to go, "Oh, yeah." It's almost like, if you could imagine --

Brower: It's like a cue in a film, like a sound cuing a film. Something's getting ready to happen.

Foster: Yeah, right. Actually, when you hear that shake, something *is* happening. The fall off is another [Foster sings a phrase ending in a fall off]. That's another device that used in moderation is very effective, as is the doit [Foster sings a phrase ending in a doit]. These things are of different lengths. You can have a short fall [Foster sings a short fall off] or [He sings a long fall off]. You can have the short doit [Foster sings a short doit] or you can have the long one [Foster sings a long doit]. All these are --

Brower: They really called it a doit?

Foster: Yeah [laughs]. At different times these, as I say, used sparsely -- if every time you heard somebody [Foster sings a phrase with repeated fall offs within it], you'd get sick of it. Just as the use of a triangle in the symphony orchestra -- if every two seconds you heard a triangle [Foster sings a melody interrupted by "bings"], you'd say --

Brower: I'm sick of this bing shit.

Foster: Put that triangle away [laughs]. Sick of this -- yeah, you're right. All these devices are very effective when used sparingly.

Brower: It's a very interesting notion of being musical. Would you say these devices are signatures of the Basie orchestra, or they're devices available, used by many big bands?

Foster: They're devices that are universally available and used by every band in existence, but --

Brower: Are there any things that are particular signatures of Basie?

Foster: The particular signature of the Basie band is mostly contained in Basie's little statement, clink, clink, clink. You know where that came from. But these devices that are universally used have a special impact when used by the Basie -- it seems like the

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Basie band uses them with more effect or more impact than anyone else alive. When they're done by the Basie band, there's something special about them.

Brower: What do you attribute that to? Is that Basie? Is that the arranger's taste? Is that the band's practiced execution?

Foster: The band's practiced execution, the band's personality. When the Basie band says [Foster sings a fragment of climactic melody], you know it's the Basie band. A thousand bands could do that, but none of them would sound like the Basie band.

Brower: A lot of people can slide across the stage on one foot, but there's only one James Brown doing it.

Foster: Right.

Brower: There are certain things that no one can emulate.

Foster: There you go. You just summed it up.

Brower: In terms of the formula that we've been talking about, or not the formula, but the notion of building the pieces using certain ways, your learning this with Basie, how did that influence or did it influence, or find its way into your writing outside of Basie?

Foster: Yes, it did. It got me into the frame of mind of staying inside, of always swinging, because for a while there I tried to join up forces with the avant-garde and tried to think in terms of going out, and going out there, and voicings in colors and textures and then in varying rhythms. I found that I didn't want to stay out there too long. I always had to come back. I went and listened to some groups that started out and stayed out and ended up out.

Brower: Of work?

Foster: In addition. Hello [laughs].

Brower: Outside in the cold?

Foster: Yeah, right. I just said, "That's not where I want to go or remain." My second tour of duty with Basie, the Basie band as its leader, that really solidified my philosophy of just, hey, I'm in out of the cold. I might as well stay inside and leave the outside to the outsiders, to the bonafide outsiders who came up in that tradition. I came up with swing and then went to bebop, so now I'm going to keep those two married. As I have said, no matter what the rest of the world does, I'm going down swinging.

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Brower: Would you care to contrast your approach to arranging to those approaches used by Ernie Wilkins, Frank Wess, Quincy Jones, or Thad Jones?

Foster: First I'll contrast my approach and Neil Hefti's approach, since this seems to be Neil Hefti week. Neil Hefti to me has always approached it with a lighthearted feeling. A lot of his music seems to contain this. I can't describe it any other way than just to use the word lightness. Very seldom do I hear the saxophones in wide, heavy chords, where the bottom of the baritone is [Foster sings a low note], way down, and the inner harmonies are such that you have a feeling of wideness in chords.

In Neil Hefti's writing I hear a feeling of a lot of block chords. He's capable of wideness and heaviness, but he seems to want to concentrate on a lighter, brighter approach in which even when the brass is shouting, you get that feeling of brightness. I don't want to say narrowness, but not as wide in texture as some of my stuff, or some of Thad Jones, or some of Frank Wess, Ernie Wilkins. As long as it's lightly swinging, it can express what he feels. For instance, take the song, *Cute* [Foster sings its principal melody]. That's like a little light melody. It's light and frivolous. It skips along like I'm happy and I don't care about the troubles of the world.

Brower: It's cute.

Foster: And it's cute. It's just what the title says, even the saxophone soli [Foster sings a lengthy portion of the saxophone soli from *Cute*]. That's very well written, very well conceived, very light hearted.

On the other hand, my saxophone soli on *Four, Five, Six* [Foster sings a lengthy portion of this saxophone soli], it's a little heavier in content. It's a little greasier. If you get up under it, it's going to drip grease on you.

Brower: A little harder.

Foster: And harder, yeah. A little more heavily textured. Neil Hefti is capable of those heavier textures. You hear that in *Pensive Mist* [Foster sings one melodic phrase]. You hear that in his saxophones in there, so you know he's capable of these, but he likes to keep it on a light plane. I like to get down inside the thing and get greasy and funky and sweaty and smelly and swingy. These are the words that I can best describe the difference.

Brower: Do you have mirrors in your bedroom? Got video cameras?

Foster: [laughter] Come to think of it, we've got a great big mirror the whole length of one wall, opposite the bed in my current residence.

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It's very difficult trying to describe differences and approaches, because I know that the parties of whom I'm speaking all have the same capabilities, so it's all up in here. It's all where the head is at. Neil Hefti has found that certain formulas worked for the Basie -- his Basie presentations, his Basie charts, and he's used them. His melodic concept, and the harmonic concept and rhythmic concept are vastly different from mine, from Thad Jones, or from Ernie Wilkins. We're all individualists. We all have our certain ways of looking at this thing.

Brower: So are you contrasting Neil's style with all of those other styles?

Foster: I am basically. I could also throw Johnny Mandel in there, who is closer in his conceptualization of harmonies and rhythms to the rest of us, which leaves Neil out there by himself. One thing about Neil's melodies, they're simple melodies, and they're catchy little phrases. That's what I've been trying to arrive at, simple melodies and catchy little phrases. This always scored heavily with Basie. Neil knew how to keep it simple. Whenever he brought in something that defied that principle, it didn't get played. There are some Neil Hefti compositions in Basie's book that you never hear, because they were, strangely enough, too busy.

Brower: Do you think this was Basie's taste or Basie's sense of what would be even more popular?

Foster: It probably could be a combination of those two factors, both his taste and a knowledge or feeling of what would be more popular. I think Basie was quick to accept anything that he thought his audiences would love. Most of his audiences loved the work of Neil Hefti. A good many critics as well as laypersons considered Neil Hefti's work to be in the forefront of that which propelled the Basie band into the great popularity it enjoyed in the '50s. These are not necessarily the opinions of the speaker.

Brower: What's the speaker's opinion?

Foster: I think that Quincy Jones, Thad Jones, Frank Wess, Ernie Wilkins, Frank Foster, and Jimmy Mundy deserve as much credit as Neil Hefti. They were all in the same club. The volume of work presented by Neil Hefti far exceeds that by, say, Quincy Jones or a Jimmy Mundy, and perhaps myself and Frank Wess. Frank Wess didn't write that much, but what he wrote was very powerful. It took me a week to write an arrangement. It took Frank Wess a year. But when Frank Wess laid his music down and set it in front of us, there was a strong statement being made there.

Brower: I saw that comment. I thought the best liner notes I read, the most informative of anything I came across, was the notes to, I guess, a reissue of the stuff -- I guess that was Savoy, where the *North, East, South, West, No Count* -- he talks about that. He said that -- I guess it was your quote that Frank Wess is a very deliberate

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writer. It took a long time for him to finish something. Just as an aside, is that indicative of his personality? Is he a person who is very fastidious or --

Foster: I would say so, but it's a little deceptive in that if Frank Wess makes a decision to do something, he doesn't hesitate. He gets right on it.

Brower: He's decisive.

Foster: Yeah. So it just may take him a long time to get around to writing an arrangement, because there may be other pressing matters that he considers more important. I'm not saying this is an actual fact that I know. This is the way I feel, the way I conceive it. I think that Frank Wess has put a lot of duties or obligations or activities in front of arranging. Then finally, when there's a little time, "I think I'll sketch this out." Then he takes his time. Never has a Frank Wess arrangement had to be recalled and redone. When he brings it to you, that's the way it stays. That's the way you play it. There are never any alterations or changes necessary. I've had a few of mine called back. "Take that home and bring it back, kid. Take some of that pregnant nineteenth out of there. Bring it back tomorrow, and let's see how it sounds."

Brower: Interesting. Over time, how did your relationship with Basie develop? You fall into your imitation of him, how you look up and where you're throwing your voice, but talk about how your relationship evolved with Basie, the interaction. Was he always with you just a person of few words and gestures? Did there come a time when you had access to him on another level, where he talked about things?

Foster: Mostly when I had access to him on other levels, so to speak, we might be talking about an arrangement he wanted me to do.

Brower: It was all about music?

Foster: Yeah. Then he would be detailed in a simplistic manner. He'd say, kid take it here. Do this and so and so. Then I want this little figure in there [Foster sings a melody]. Then have a little piano solo. Then shoot yourself in there a little bit. Give yourself some action. Then have this little [Foster sings a brief melody]. Then the rest of it, go for yourself. Do what you want to do on the ending".

Brower: He'd done about 80 percent of it [laughter].

Foster: This relationship was very -- I had a very wonderful relationship with the Chief. It got to the point where I felt at ease calling him Chief or Bas, although I was always -- even up to the time I gave him my notice that I was leaving the band, I was always in awe of him and always respectful.

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Brower: Why did you decide to leave?

Foster: I was being pressured by my first wife to come off the road. I had two young children that I wasn't seeing enough of. I also was becoming disillusioned with the road. Tours weren't the same as they had been. A lot of the excitement was gone of traveling on the road. Even traveling to Europe wasn't as big a thing as it had been. Audiences in Europe seemed as though they were coming out of curiosity to see -- instead of the old died-in-the-wool fans, it seemed like some of the audience were coming out of curiosity. "I've heard about the Count Basie band. Let's come see what they're about."

Hassles were coming in. You'd check into a hotel, and the rooms wouldn't be ready, or similar hassles to that -- and just getting tired of traveling.

Brower: Did it seem like an era was over? Did these things --

Foster: It seemed as though it was the end of an era. The glory days that extended from 1956 to 1962 were at an end. In '63, the assassination of President Kennedy, believe it or not, that was like a big downer that just made the whole world another place. And growl, growl, in 1964 I had just had enough of my then-wife's harassment. "Come off the road. Come off the road. Come off the road. Come off the road," and wanting to know my children a little better and wanting to play more. I wasn't getting to play enough. The band would be swinging so awesomely --

Brower: Ferocious.

Foster: And song after song after song, I'd be sitting there not soloing and maybe have one solo. Then the solos on the same old songs, *Little Pony*, *Jumping at the Woodside*. The same songs in the same key. That sameness was beginning to get to me. I was beginning -- and getting a taste --

Brower: And the other things weren't providing enough to overcome it.

Foster: No.

Brower: The audiences, all those things weren't compensating.

Foster: Right. The audiences changed. The Beatles had hit the scene. Rock-and-roll was a big thing now. It was a combination of all that. And I have to reiterate, the assassination of President Kennedy just seemed to put a capper on all of this.

Brower: Why? Because Bas cared about it personally? Because you cared about it personally? Because it seemed to --

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Foster: Because I cared about it personally, and life under the Democrats seemed -- well here I go politicizing -- seemed -- it was happier days. I won't say anymore about that, because you must know from that much how I feel about the other side. But all these factors played a part in my leaving. But especially wanting to play more, wanting my then-wife's harassment to come to an end, and the glory seemed to be gone.

Brower: Do you think this was a feeling held by others in the band at that time?

Foster: Possibly so. There was a trumpeter named Don Rader who quit the same night I did. He probably had the same reasons, because he had a family of youngsters. He had two very young children, and he might have wanted to play more. You play a whole set, like an hour set, and you play maybe one or two solos. You go home and you say, "What have I done tonight?"

And then a lot of arrangements from other arrangers were coming in to the band that I didn't consider that all that -- all of that. Joe Williams was singing, and we had some arrangements from arrangers outside the band. We had agreed, all of us -- Thad Jones, Frank Wess and myself agreed silently -- or most of the guys in the band, that the best arrangements with the exception of those written by Neil Hefti were written by guys in the band. Neil Hefti was practically in the band, because he was at so many rehearsals. He contributed so many arrangements, and he knew us so well. He was almost a band member. But these outside arrangers, especially these guys out in Hollywood, oh, goodness.

Brower: Talk a bit about writing for Joe [Williams], your contributions in that area and what particular challenge that might have been or what approach you felt he needed.

Foster: Writing for Joe was pretty much a snap, because he was better known as a blues singer than anything else. I considered myself a master at writing blues, especially Basie-type blues, so writing for Joe Williams was easy. The challenge was to couch his voice in phrases and passages that would just enhance his vocal statements.

Brower: Can you give me an example of how you did that, or where you think that was particularly successful?

Foster: Well I think it was particularly successful on the *Comeback*, the flip side of *Everyday* [*I Have the Blues*]. That great arrangement by Ernie Wilkins on *Everyday* will stand as a classic forever, through the millennium. I was happy to be the arranger of the *Comeback*, which is on the record, the flip side of *Everyday*. The little devices that I used in the trombones and the saxes and the brass, this is a formula that can be used in most writing for vocalists, to use phrases that complement what the singer is conveying in that vocal message, phrases that convey the spirit of the song [Foster sings

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blues motifs]. Joe Williams says, “When the train rolls up.” You can hear a train [Foster sings a phrase evoking a train]. “My baby when I come walking out [Foster sings a rhythmic riff]. These phrases seem to paraphrase what he’s saying in the lyrics. That’s one thing that we try to do in vocal arrangements, and all the time keep the band swinging, never lose the swing for even one fraction of a second.

Brower: Go back to *Shiny Stockings*, which was after we started talking about shaking.

Foster: Yeah. Okay. The title *Shiny Stockings* was inspired by a scene back in 1955 when my first wife -- whenever I talk about *Shiny Stockings* to an audience, I say, this was written in 1955 BP, before pantyhose, when stockings still came -- when two pieces was one pair of stockings instead of one piece. I would watch her put her stockings on -

Brower: One your favorite times of the day probably.

Foster: [Laughter] Definitely. And smooth them out. When the stocking encased leg was at a certain angle to the light, the sheen of the stockings became quite evident. That was the inspiration for the phrase *Shiny Stockings*. The song itself, it’s a matter of the chicken and the egg. I don’t know which came first, the title or the song, but I think the song.

The initial melody, the first statement of the melody [Foster sings the first four bars of the melody to *Shiny Stockings*] was something that I thought I heard Snooky Young warming up on. He was warming up in a hallway one day before the gig. I heard him play this phrase. I thought that was the phrase that I heard. When he played it, I thought that it was an excerpt from an old jazz, old swing tune. I asked him some time later. I said, “Snooky, that phrase, the first, the opening phrase in *Shiny Stockings*, is something I thought I heard you warming up on.” He said, “I don’t know. Might have been.” I said, “Is there a song, an old song written back in the ’40s or ’30s, that goes like that?” He said, “As far as I know, there’s no song that goes like that.” I not only asked him. I asked other people, “Is there some song back from the early ’40s that goes like that?” [Foster again sings the opening bars of *Shiny Stockings*]. Everybody I asked said, “No, I don’t recall anything.” So I said, “I guess it really is my original.”

The rest of the melody, which is based on a series of harmonic sequences, I do credit myself for the rest of it [Foster sings bars 9 through 15 of the melody to *Shiny Stockings*], because I -- early in my musical career I grew to love the idea of sequences, melodic sequences. Musical sequences, phrases or segments of a melody that follow one another, based on different tonalities. In other words, one phrase might be in the key of C, followed by another that’s the same intervals but relative to the key of D major, and another with the same linear structure in the key of E major. My playing has always been characterized by the use of sequential patterns, one phrase that sounds like another

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but based in another tonality [Foster sings the first eight bars of the melody to *Shiny Stockings*]. Those are two melodic -- [Foster sings bars 9 through 13 of the melody to *Shiny Stockings*]. Again, the same intervallic relationship between the notes in the one phrase, only each succeeding phrase is based on another key or a tonality. I like playing like that, and I like writing like that. I think it adds color to music, and it adds some difference to the sameness. It makes songs more easily memorizable and very hummable, to my way of thinking.

Brower: How often in your work as a arranger or composer, I guess more as a composer, are you utilizing things like you thought you heard with *Shiny Stockings*, that is, you're elaborating, embellishing, renewing, tinkering with, however you want to say it, with various variations here, some kernel of an idea that you heard somebody fiddle with?

Foster: I suspect more often than I might even realize, because things that I put forth as my originals contain phrases that I imagine that I came up with myself, but they must have come from somewhere. When I first wrote *Blues in Hoss Flat*, that opening statement by the trombones [Foster sings these four bars] and the trumpets [Foster sings the trumpet punctuations and then the trombone phrase again]. That sounded to me like a fairly trite phrase [Foster sings the trombone phrase again], but I said, in spite of its seeming triteness, I don't know where I got it. Years later, I heard this song by Horace Silver. On the very end of it [Foster sings the identical phrase at a slower tempo]. Now what song is that? *Sister Sadie* or something? It's one of those Horace Silver compositions. I said, oh, that's where I got my melody to *Blues in Hoss Flat*.

Brower: How typical do you think that is in music?

Foster: Very typical. I think we all do it, sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly. Let's see. There was another song of mine, *Four, Five, Six* [Foster sings the first seven bars of the melody]. Do you know I hummed that song to myself in my mind for a period of at least four years before I wrote it down. It occurred to me while I was walking through Central Park one day. I was just walking through [Foster sings the first three bars again]. "Yeah, I ought to use that." But I kept saying, no, somebody's written that. That's a song. That's a song. That's too trite to be original by me.

Years passed. I kept humming it to myself. It wouldn't turn me loose. It just hammered in my brain. Every time I turned around, I'm thinking [Foster sings the first three bars again]. I'm saying, no, it can't be mine. Somebody's written a song like that. One of these days I'm going to hear it.

I never heard it. So in 1960, after four years of playing with this little trite sounding melody, I said, the heck with it. I'm going to write it, and I wrote it. I still haven't heard anybody else's song.

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Brower: We were talking about the structure of making a living doing what you're doing. At this point in your life, with all the music that you're written, all the stuff that's in the Basie book that other people are playing, how significant are royalties to you?

Foster: That's a very interesting question. I'm going to give you a very interesting answer hopefully. If I get a royalty check for \$5,000, \$2,500 to \$3,000 of that came from *Shiny Stockings* alone. The other \$2,000 to \$2,500 came from about 40 other compositions together, including *Four, Five, Six, Back to the Apple, Rare Butterfly, Miss Lovely, It's about that Time, Mama Dev, Didn't You, Lady in Lace*, and about 20 others. In other words, at least half of all my royalties come from the one song, *Shiny Stockings*. The other half or less than half come from a combination of at least 40 other songs. Some of them on a royalty statement, some of them might account for \$1.20, \$2.47, \$10.80, \$15.30. I'll have statements where -- okay, for instance *Manhattan Fever*, \$20.07, *Shiny Stockings*, \$150, *Lady In Lace*, \$2.37, *Shiny Stockings*, \$450.

Brower: How often do you see a royalty statement?

Foster: There are different types of royalties. ASCAP is broadcast royalties, broadcast and telecast royalties. There's statements from the Harry Fox Agency, which represent compiled statements from different recording companies. I don't get a separate statement from each recording company. One company gives me a blanket statement for several recording companies. I see royalties about eight to ten times a year, from different sources, ASCAP, Songwriters' Guild, Harry Fox, and Windswept Pacific and other --

Brower: Are they significant?

Foster: It's six of one, half a dozen -- a lot of them are significant and some are very insignificant. I might get a royalty statement from Harry Fox for a total of \$4.50, another one from Lenstorm or somebody for \$500, one from ASCAP for \$2,500. There are many significant ones and many lesser significant ones, but it's never enough.

Brower: But it is part of your pie?

Foster: It's part of that pie, yeah.

Brower: I'm speaking of your first tour of duty, if you can think of a few incidents, a few stories, a few things that might be landmarks or high points of that. It can be stories about yourself, about the band, about Basie, things the band did that in your mind are really meaningful, revelatory, humorous, or historically significant. Pick some things and go for it.

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Foster: Okay. In 1957 we did a command performance for the Queen of England at a place called -- I think it was the Palladium. I took a picture of -- I took photographs of July Garland, Mario Lanza and a few other people. I actually spoke to Judy Garland. She said, "What's this for? Is this for a newspaper, or a magazine, or what?" I said, "It's just my personal collection." "Oh, okay." Just that moment of speaking to Judy Garland, that was a big thing with me.

I spent a few minutes in Fred Astaire's dressing room, just talking and taking photographs of him during a TV show. That was special because he was a beautiful person and very amiable.

It was pleasure appearing on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. He was real regular. He talked to the band and all that. Jerry Lewis, the movie *Cinderfella* -- I forget if it's *Cinderfella* or *Errand Boy* -- premiered in Chicago. I was in the lobby of the theater. The band wasn't there. I had my mom with me, and I was trying to get in the theater. Somebody said, "Do you have a ticket?" I said, "My name is Frank Foster. I'm in the Count Basie orchestra, and I'm appearing in this movie." "Yeah, but do you have a ticket?" So Jerry Lewis walked out into the lobby himself. He says, "What's the matter? Are you having trouble?" I said, "Yeah, I'm trying to get in. My mom would want to see the movie that we made with you." He says, "Come on. He's a member of the Basie band. Let him in." That was like a special moment.

A couple of humorous incidents. Those uniforms that you see on the cover of the *Chairman of the Board*. That was the beige tuxedos. We were [laughs] playing a concert in Manchester, England. We traveled by bus. It's getting worse [laughter].

Brower:: We ain't got long to go.

Foster: We're traveling by bus. I had misplaced my uniform shoes. They were a pair of brown dress shoes to go with that uniform, and the only other pair of footwear that I had were some very dirty blue and white sneakers. So either somebody had stolen my dress shoes temporarily, or I had just permanently lost them. I couldn't find -- I didn't know where they were, so I had to play the concert with that uniform on, wearing these blue and white sneakers. I thought, if nobody -- dirty blue and white sneakers. I said, if nobody sees the shoes, they won't know the difference, because my music stand's in front of me, and that's that. The audience will never know the difference.

It came time for my feature on *Jumping at the Woodside*. Now in all concerts wherever, a featured soloist comes out from behind his music stand and goes to a microphone, which is in the center of the front of the stage. When it came time for my solo on *Jumping at the Woodside*, I chose not to go out obviously. I stood up in place, where my feet couldn't be seen and played my solo.

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Charlie Fowlkes, a baritone saxophonist, got the bright idea that I shouldn't get off this easily, so he removes my music stand from in front of my feet. There I am with the spotlight on me in this big auditorium, and at least 2,500 people watching me playing my solo in that gorgeous tan tuxedo and these blue and white sneakers. So everybody -- there was enough -- some titters in the audience, but with 2,500 people tittering [laughs] you're going to hear it, and the guys in the band broke up. Basie fell off the piano stool. Everybody just died.

Brower: Did you maintain your concentration?

Foster: Yeah. Hey, I was featured. I was playing a solo. I couldn't stop playing. I played my solo and sat down [laughs]. Then he put the stand back in front of me, but my secret was revealed in front of everyone.

Brower: Did you get him back?

Foster: The next day I found them strangely in the place where I had left them, up on the shelf, up on the rack in the bus.

Brower: But did you get Fowlkes back?

Foster: Did I get him back? No, I didn't. I don't recall.

Brower: Did that kind of thing go on in the band, pranks? Somebody does something and then somebody --

Foster: Yeah, yeah. A lot of little pranks went on, but mostly on the bandstand -- There was this fictional legendary character by the name of Johnny Barracuda. If somebody brought a hat, a cap, or anything that looked ridiculous that nobody in the band -- everybody -- "Where did you get that from?" The word would get out, Johnny Barracuda is looking for that hat, and sure enough Johnny Barracuda would get that hat [laughs]. It would disappear. Anything that was ridiculous or --

Brower: We can't have this in our band. You're bringing us all down.

Foster: Yeah, we can't have this, so Johnny Barracuda's going to get that.

Another time in Chicago we were playing the Birdland All Star, which featured Billy Eckstine, Sarah Vaughan, I think Chet Baker, Bud Powell, and a few others. The Basie band was the backup for all this. We were featured on the show. I had a feature on a song, a Neil Hefti song by the way, called *Dinner With Friends*, in which I had a

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lengthy solo. This song usually opened the second half of the show after the intermission.

When we arrived in town that day at the Chicago, at the Southway Hotel that I told you about before, an old south side landmark, I had prior to arriving called this young lady. I was still being a bad boy. I called this young lady and told her to meet me. When we arrived at the hotel, we were all checking in at the front desk. She walked into the lobby, and the baritone player said, “Aw shit, there goes Frank Foster.” The lady and I went upstairs.

The concert was supposed to start at eight o’clock. I woke up at 8:30 p.m., and I looked at my watch. I’m a half hour late. I got dressed, called for a taxi ,and went down and got to the auditorium -- it was at the Chicago Civic Opera House -- just in time for the second half of the show. I was frantically -- the intermission was just about over, and I was frantically unpacking my horn, putting it together, trying to wet the reed and everything. I was too late, because they started the second half, and they went into this song, this Neil Hefti song. It goes through the melody and then the ensemble. Then there’s an interlude that precedes the tenor solo, which is -- there’s a break in which two measures open, and the tenor takes a break. I was looking on the stage, and I saw Frank Wess getting ready to take the solo. The band was playing [Foster sings the melody that occurs in advance of the break]. By that time I was out on the stage, just in time to take my break for the solo. Frank Wess was like, “Where the hell did he come from?” Everybody again fell off their seats. But I got a thorough tongue lashing from Basie, which was well deserved. But I got there in time for my feature.

Brower: Did he say more than five words?

Foster: Did he say more than five words? I think he did, yeah.

Brower: But you can’t recall them?

Foster: I can’t recall, and if I could, I’m sure I wouldn’t want to repeat them.

There were so many incidents, so many amusing incidents. It would be a whole other interview to tell all the incidents, but I’ll tell this one other one. Joe Williams, he loved to sing ballads and torch songs. He not only sang the blues. So he was singing. I forget what the name -- what club it was. It might have been the Blue Note in Chicago. He was all tuxed out, clean. He was singing this song, and he wanted to get a little extra torchy. You know how in the old days the torch singers used to jump up on the piano, the top of the piano? They’d jump on the piano to sing their blues song.

Brower: I thought mostly ladies did that.

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Foster: Mostly ladies did, and it should have stayed that way. Joe walked over to the piano with the microphone in hand. He was singing, and he was trying to get up [laughs]. He tried about three or four times, still singing [laughs], and he never made it. Needless to say, the band, we just fell apart [laughs]. Describing this scene is nothing like seeing it. If you could have seen some 200-plus-pounds of Joe Williams trying to jump up on this piano to get torchy, you would --

Brower: He wasn't Jimmy Rushing, but he was still big.

Foster: Yeah. He was tall and muscular, yeah.

They were just too numerous to mention.

Brower: Frank, would you talk about your musical life that was concurrent with your first run in the Basie band, that 10, 11 years, whatever it was, and some of the high points, highlights of that, what was significant in that to you in terms of recordings, musical associations, people you 'shedded [woodshedded] with, people that you related to musically, and what your thinking was musically, what you were thinking about, what you were wanting to do independent of the Basie orchestra during that period of time?

Foster: First of all, most of my associations were carried on during vacations or off days with the band when I had free time. During these times I would meet other musicians. I suppose I met Elmo Hope like this. I would see people like Kenny Burrell and Tommy Flanagan. I'd be asked to do recording sessions. For instance, there's one recording session that Art Blakey was the drummer. I met people like Percy Heath and Gildo Mahones and people like that.

During off days with the band and even during periods when we had sit-down gigs such as two weeks or three weeks or maybe four weeks at Birdland -- if we had recording sessions, musicians would come into these recording sessions to hear the band play, and we'd meet during those times. So there were plenty of opportunities to meet musicians with whom I would be working during off periods. One of these was the time I worked with Thelonious Monk, and recording that album with him, which contained the four selections, *Hackensack*, *We See*, *Locomotive*, and *Smoke Get in Your Eyes*, right. That was one of the easiest sessions ever. You would think that working with Thelonious Monk might present some difficulty, but Thelonious Monk, he would just tell us what to do, and we would do it.

I recall we played the song *Well You Needn't* I think, or I don't know if it was that same [Foster sings a fragment of that melody]. There was a phrase that actually was not on the saxophone. It's what we call altissimo or in the altissimo register, which are not on -- they're freak fingerings that are not really on the saxophone, the conventional

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fingerings of the saxophone. He told me that these were the notes that he wanted me play and I played them as though they were normal notes on the saxophone. He didn't react as if, "Well, you can do that," because he figured if that's what he wanted me to do, I should be able to do that. The fact I did it was no big thing. I really -- that endeared me to him as well as enjoying the recording session.

Most songs were done in one take, whereas on most recording sessions you do one, two, three, four, five, six takes before you get a good one. There weren't too many takes on Thelonious Monk recordings. I enjoyed that much more than some of the other recordings I did.

But another high point was in Birdland when Miles Davis asked me to join his group. I was afraid to give up that \$150 a week with Basie that I knew was secure. I think my first wife was pregnant with my first child. I had to find a slick way to refuse Miles Davis, and that wasn't the easiest thing to do. I found out that shortly after I had turned him down, I remember not how, but Coltrane was playing with him, and I said, "There for the grace of God go I."

Brower: Do you remember the name of the Monk recording? I have it here as *The Golden Monk*, but I think this is a reissue.

Foster: No, it was something else. I don't recall. I think it was just *Thelonious Monk*.

Brower: Yeah. I may have it somewhere. I think I came across --

Foster: It didn't contain the title of any of the four selections that we recorded.

Brower: Did you approach the tenor the same way on the Basie bandstand as you did in these recordings?

Foster: No. When I recorded with other artists such as Elmo Hope, Monk, George Wallington, Julius Watkins, Donald Byrd, and on my own, I played like a more definitive Frank Foster. In other words, the hard-bop thing really came out to the fore. Whereas with Basie, at one point I would try to imitate Lester Young, another part I'd try to emulate Buddy Tate or Don Byas. I remember one incident during which I did a tongue-in-cheek imitation of Ben Webster, that sound and that style with a little growl. Basie loved it. Basie even made the remark, "I wish you'd play like that more often." I liked to do that as I say, for a laugh, as a tongue-in-cheek thing. but I wouldn't follow up on it. because I didn't want to diffuse my style of playing anymore.

Brower: Implicit in this is the idea that to some degree you did have to sublimate your personality for the sake of the sound of the band. You made the comment there, but for the grace of God go I.

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Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Which I take to mean, as much as the Basie experience was important, has helped define your place in the music, as many contributions as you made to jazz, to the band, that maybe you feel that you lost an opportunity as a soloist making your statements as an individual in order to make the contributions and statements you made as a player within the band, as part of the Basie experience.

Foster: I definitely thought I lost an opportunity by not going with Miles, because I'm sure he would have encouraged me to do whatever I did, however I wanted to approach it, or else he wouldn't have asked me in the first place. He must have heard me and liked what I did. He must have heard me in another context. I don't know if he heard me with Basie or not.

But the confusion that resulted playing with Basie, trying to sound like Lester Young on one hand and then like Ben Webster on the other, really -- and in mostly trying to simplify my playing. In other words, to play down the complexities of the hard-bop approach --

Brower: The verticality in your soloing?

Foster: Yeah, the verticality. You can use that expression.

Brower: Because what I hear you saying is you did not go as deep into the harmonic dimension.

Foster: The framework of the band didn't allow you to.

Brower: Didn't allow you to do that.

Foster: Basie didn't play like McCoy Tyner. When he'd comp behind solos, he didn't sound like Tommy Flanagan or Hank Jones or John Hicks or whoever you might like to think of in a modern vein. When he played it was a very harmonically limited style as far as the bebop idiom was concerned. He's still back in 1937 with his comping and his chord structures.

Brower: So he's not laying out, just to regurgitate what you're saying. He's not putting it under you to play off of, and his conception isn't going in that direction anyway.

Foster: Right. No, I can't use all those extensions and alterations. I can use them but they won't --

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Brower: But you were hearing all that.

Foster: I was hearing them.

Brower: And were attracted by it.

Foster: I could use them. but they wouldn't be compatible with what he was doing.

Brower: Are there some examples where you tried it and it was obviously not compatible. that exist on wax?

Foster: Perhaps on a song like *Sixteen Men Swinging* by Ernie Wilkins. There may be others. But the point I really want to make is that in trying to play down the verticality or the complexities of the hard-bop style reminiscent of the Sonny Stitt approach, trying to simplify my playing, I wasn't very successful in coming up with a concept that was compatible with the Basie rhythm patterns. I suffered, and I lost a lot. I had to regain all this once I left the band.

Brower: During that period, who were you listening to, or were you listening to anybody else?

Foster: I was listening to Sonny Stitt and listening to Dexter Gordon and John Coltrane, still listening to Bird, and then listening to other instrumentalists that were their contemporaries as well.

Brower: Talk about Coltrane for a minute. Did you know him personally? Did you have interactions?

Foster: Yes, I knew him personally.

Brower: Just talk about Coltrane for a minute.

Foster: I didn't know him on an intimate basis, because we never got together to talk at length, but we knew each other to greet each other in public. I took some photos of him when we were on tour together. We were on tour together. We were on a single concert in Hamburg, Germany, at one time.

The most significant thing about John Coltrane, my memories of John Coltrane, was the time John Coltrane was playing at the Village Gate or the Five Spot. The Count Basie orchestra was playing at the Jazz Gallery during that same week and we knew where he was. The two clubs were located within blocks of each so O. C. Smith, and Benny Powell and I -- O. C. Smith was our singer at the time -- took off during intermission in

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the direction of this club where Trane was playing. We were rushing. We wanted to get there so we could have time to hear him for a few minutes and get back before our intermission was over. Halfway between the Jazz Gallery and I'll say the Five Spot where Trane was playing, we ran into Trane and a couple of his fellows. They said, "Where are you guys going?" We said, "We're coming to hear you." He said, "Oh, shit, we're coming to hear you." So it says that Trane himself was listening -- while I'm listening to Trane, Trane was listening to Count Basie, and we were all listening to one another.

I saw him a couple of weeks before he passed. He had this gig at Pookie's Pub -- I guess you remember, you're smiling -- with Elvin Jones and myself and Sonny Fortune -- working with Elvin. Trane came in and was sitting at the bar. We exchanged a few courtesies and words of greeting. I thought he looked very good. He looked robust and healthy. I was really shaken up to learn just weeks later that he had passed.

Brower: Yeah, that was something.

Foster: I had to shake his influence similarly to the way I had to shake Bird's influence, but I didn't shake Train's influence by switching back to alto saxophone, I just had to --

Brower: What was his influence? What was it that he was doing that --

Foster: The style of playing or the element of his style referred to as sheets of sound, which I myself describe as flurries of notes from one register of the instrument to the other, that were not just flurries of notes, but they had a definite pattern or a definite series of patterns based on certain modes or chords, and they were all meaningful. A lot of people might --

Brower: Is this parallel to your idea, to your interest in things like sequencing melody? Is it a similar --

Foster: It could be related, yes, but I'm not speaking in terms of sequence of phrases, of similar sounding phrases. I'm just speaking of single phrases consisting of these flurries of notes that go from -- especially from the lower register of the instrument to the higher register, to the extreme upper register, which were based on certain lines or modes or tonalities. I fell into this, because I fully understood what he was doing. I liked it, and it fit in with my concept. I used it and used it, but I realized that I was becoming one of a number of tenor saxophonists who were sounding like Coltrane. At the age of thirty-something, approaching the age of forty, I said, it's too late in the day for me to be sounding like someone else, so I purposefully fought these Trane-like phrases and tried to really define myself as myself, but that was some kind of fight.

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Brower: How did you come to play with Elvin?

Foster: I had known Elvin in the early '50s. I met Elvin when I lived in Detroit. He and I hung out together a few times. He knew my ability, and I think -- shortly after leaving Basie I formed a big band with him the drummer. He wasn't able to hang with it, because he was quite busy traveling. But he just asked me to play with him. I said yeah, let's go.

He incidentally is my wife's Cecilia's first cousin. Her father was Elvin, Hank, and Thad's uncle, and there was always a close feeling of family between us and the Joneses. He used to make an announcement, "I'd like to present Frank Foster, my cousin," and I'd be sticking my chest out.

Brower: Did you find working in his band -- now at that point when you formed your band, you weren't calling it the Live [Loud] Minority?

Foster: No, no. It was just Frank Foster's big band.

Brower: Did you find in working with him -- you did a fair amount of recording with him, certainly not as much as you did with Basie, but probably as much as you've done with any other single artist --

Foster: Yeah, I think so. At least four recordings with Elvin.

Brower: Did you find there a venue for you to not only play differently, but compose differently, for some of your harmonic ideas to be more fully heard?

Foster: Oh, yes. It was a totally different avenue, approach. I thought in a more contemporary fashion, in less of a big-band format. Everything I composed for Basie had to be thought of in the context of a big band with figures, trumpet-section figures, saxophone-section figures. I didn't have to think like that writing for Elvin. All I had to do was think of melodies, linear statements. Of course there was always the harmonic structure that had to go in there, but these were melodies of a more contemporary nature.

Brower: But you could also think of exploring rhythms, and in this case the holes weren't for clink, clink, clink, but they were for thunder.

Foster: Right, right. Yeah.

Brower: Thunder plus Candido. Double thunder.

Foster: Thunder plus, yeah.

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Brower: Any other combinations of instruments, you playing other things besides tenor?

Foster: I had the E-flat alto clarinet. Most people thought it was a bass clarinet. It's similar to a bass clarinet, only it's smaller. But there weren't too many other instruments involved. There might be another tenor saxophonist, and soprano sax or a flute involved, but the writing was much smaller than for the Basie orchestra, but much more contemporary.

Brower: To me I hear a combination of the devices I think of as avant-garde with really a strong sense -- you talked earlier about, you'd go out but you'd come right back in, that you were sort of marrying more of things that came from post hard bop with really locking some grooves, and swinging, but not always in a straight swing sense or a straight bebop swing sense, like swinging rock even, or swinging funk. Yes, no, maybe?

Foster: No [laughs].

Brower: Okay.

Foster: For a while I lost that total swing mentality. That was during the period with Elvin. But I didn't consider myself to be an authentic avant-garde player. When you want to talk about avant-garde, you're talking about; Albert Ayler, Pharoah Saunders, or one phase of Archie Shepp, and Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Anthony Braxton, or people like that, the Chicago Art Ensemble, Joseph Jarman, and those people. I think of some of these folks as authentic avant-garde players. I didn't consider myself authentically avant-garde, just like I wouldn't consider myself an authentic Dixieland player. I play to much bebop to be convincing as a Dixieland player.

Brower: But I still hear things that clearly came into the music even just at the level -- I don't think there's anything more avant-garde than Elvin and Trane linking up in those saxophone drum duets. I don't think there's anything more intense. I don't think anybody pushed a saxophone any further than Trane did.

Foster: Yeah, I don't think so either.

Brower: And half of those other people that you mentioned, the so-called avant-garde - - there was Coltrane, there was Coltrane, there was Coltrane.

Foster: You see Coltrane, he's way up here on another level. He was constantly exploring, constantly -- I think he was trying to find a purer state of being, and this may have led him --

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Brower: Like for example Bill Barron I think of as a player who's obviously a bebop player.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: But I think heard aspects of where the music was being pushed and brought some of that into what he did. I think there are a number of players that --

Foster: Jackie Byard.

Brower: Jackie Byard. Who aren't avant-garde in that -- when you start talking about Joseph Jarman and all of that. But I'm thinking about the avant-garde as coming out of the early '60s, up to '64, '65. Part of it has to do with how they approached form, the level of interaction of group improvisation, pushing the instruments past what were the conventional ways to play them, and the sheer force and energy of the music, which some people perceived as almost violent.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: I remember -- think my favorite thing [Amiri] Baraka says was about killing the popular song. It was actually that that was happening, like the song form --

Foster: One key word you said a moment ago was form. I could never get used to the idea of deserting form. I had come up with form in the swing period. You can't get any more form-oriented than composition from the swing era. Bebop was concerned with form, line and form.

Brower: But were you concerned with bringing new colors, new textures, new combin[ations]- into forms and pushing the forms?

Foster: Yes, I was concerned with that.

Brower: Where were you drawing -- what was going on mentally with you either purely Frank Foster, or these are the other influences that were giving you the new information, or the information that you were bringing into the forms?

Foster: I suppose I was trying to be contemporary. I suppose I wanted to be part of the new movement. About this time the black awareness, civil rights-activism was getting to its height. I wanted to be in on the new revolution, so to speak. I wanted to be on the cutting edge of things, but I still had this feeling of not being convincingly authentic as an avant-garde player. I could not desert form totally. I couldn't start off with a piece that had no rhythm and continue that way throughout the piece, ending with no rhythm.

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I couldn't do that. My swing and bebop and Count Basie and rhythmic orientation was too strong. Eventually I began to see it, as you said, as violence, anger. I wanted to show some love in my music. I was too full of love to show anger, although I was angry at the so-called white backlash to the black civil rights movement. I was angry at Governor Faubus. I was angry at George Wallace. I was angry at the late George Wallace. I was angry at Senator Bilbo and Senator Eastland, but not so much that I just wanted to play angry music all night long.

Brower: So what did you think of -- I know we've got to go, but what did you think about Charlie Mingus?

Foster: He was an innovator. He was one in the forefront of whatever. He had his place. I appreciated it. I wouldn't dare try to usurp on that.

Brower: As soon as you say Faubus --

Foster: Yeah, I know, *Fables of Faubus*. There's just some people out there that I'm not concerned with getting as far into it as they were, Miles and Mingus and Monk. They had their special place that nobody can invade.

As I said before, there's too much love in my music and too much joy and happiness. I love the idea of playing happy music, happy jazz, happy swinging jazz. That's what Basie was all about. That music was happy. That's why people were enjoying it so much. One reason, it swung, it was happy. It made them forget their troubles. That's what -- I don't want to remind people of how much hatred and anger we've got going. I want to relieve them of it. So I had to back off the avant-garde thing. But with Elvin, I really enjoyed going out there, because he was special. That was a special experience.

Brower: Can I just ask another question? Kenny Clarke, you played with Kenny Clarke. You played with Boo, Art Blakey. You played with Elvin. But what was playing with Kenny Clarke like?

Foster: It was great. I loved it. I played with Kenny Clarke with one of my -- he was on my first recording session, *Here's Comes Frank Foster*, done in 1954. I played with him on a couple of other subsequent recordings. I'm ashamed not to remember, but it was a good experience. But no experience will stand out like that of playing with Elvin. That was --

Brower: Why?

Foster: The sheer energy, along with the challenge of trying to measure up to that energy level, as well as maintain the type of musicality that I would like to be associated with, and just taking in all that excitement. It was just exciting, highly

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exciting playing with Elvin. He didn't like real fast tempos, but he didn't have to. We didn't have to play breakneck tempos. We could play medium tempos. Playing with Elvin was just -- you got that feeling, whatever the tempo was.

I know you have heard of "knowing where the one is." Like, okay, a measure of music was one, two, three, four. The one is very important, because it's the first beat in a measure. If you don't know where one is, you're likely to be very lost. When you speak of drummers who don't know where one is, you're saying that their rhythmic concept is out to lunch.

With Elvin sometimes, we'd go so far out there that I couldn't hear where one was. I would lose the one, but everything would be so exciting that I could just say, I'm going to pick a spot where I want one to be. I would say -- way out there, I would say, right here, boom, that's going to be my one, and it would end up that I was always right [laughs].

Brower: You mean one as a point of resolution?

Foster: One as a point of, yeah, of a beginning, of a beginning point.

Brower: When you're going to come out from being out there, you can only come back by finding one.

Foster: That's one way of looking at it.

Brower: That's why I made my point of resolution.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Mr. Foster, it's been a great pleasure and good opportunity to get some education and some history and a music lesson or two or five or six, to spend two days talking with you about your career. I hope that in a month or so time, when you return to Washington, that we'll have an opportunity to pick this up and talk more about your musical life after your first tour with Basie, talk about your second tour with Basie, talk about your marriage and music and business and career with Cecilia Foster, and anything else that you would like to share with us about the life and times and creations of Franklin Benjamin Foster the Third.

Foster: Thank you William Brower. It's been mostly my pleasure I'm sure, and I will happily return to discuss further aspects of my career and life. It's all been very rewarding. I found out things that I didn't know I knew, and it's always a pleasure talking with you. It's been a most enlightening, pleasurable interview. I look forward to completing it.

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Brower: My name is Bill Brower. I am interviewing Frank Foster for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program. The date is November 22, 1998, and serving as engineer for this session is Jean-Marc Shimonga.

Maybe at this point a general comment about what your desires and motivations and plans were, what your objectives were, at the point you decided to leave the Basie band. What you saw for yourself. Then you could flow into how you have realized some of the things that you wanted to do at the point you decided that it was time to leave the Basie band.

Foster: One of the primary motivating factors was a desire to be with my then-family. That was the family by my first marriage. I had two young sons.

Brower: Whose names are?

Foster: Anthony and Donald. Anthony Keith who was born in 1957, and Donald Benjamin, who was born in 1959. Around 1964 I was being pressured by my first wife, whose name was Vivian, to get off the road. The engagements that the Basie band was playing weren't as exciting as they had been in the earlier years. The late '50s was the absolute best period with that band, from about '56 to '60. Around '64 things started being less exciting. The road tours were less exciting. The audience didn't seem to be dyed-in-the-wool Basie audiences, especially in Europe. It seemed as though there were whole families coming to hear the concert, because they heard about this Basie orchestra and they wanted to see what it was all about, but all the real hard-core Basie fans, we weren't aware of their presence anymore. So the jobs weren't as exciting and the tours were a little lackluster. Plus I wanted to play more. I wasn't playing that much. I wasn't getting chances to solo very often. And I wanted to hear more of my own music. My arrangements were being played extensively by the band, but there was a lot of other stuff being played, including Neil Hefti, and then the others. I wanted to hear more of my own music, and I wanted to play more. So these factors led me to finally terminate myself in July of 1964.

As it happened my 11-year stint with Basie was almost concurrent with my 11-year [laughs] duration with the first marriage. I got married in June of 1954, whereas I had joined the band in July of 1953. I left the band in July of 1964, and my marriage terminated in the following year, 1965 -- my first marriage that is.

But during the interim I had organized my own big band and was doing all the writing for it. It wasn't yet called the Loud Minority. It was just the Frank Foster Big Band,

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and I had a Frank Foster quintet, which consisted of trumpet and tenor saxophone on the front line, and piano, bass, and drums.

Brower: Who was that -- who was in that band?

Foster: At that time I had --

Brower: Was that the Al Dailey --

Foster: Al Dailey and Virgil Jones, and whenever possible the late Alan Dawson on drums, and either Richard Davis or Bob Cunningham, someone like that on bass.

Brower: Who were some of the players in the Loud Minority at that time, when you first --

Foster: I had saxophonist Norris Turney -- was my lead alto player.

Brower: He goes back to Ohio with you.

Foster: Right. I had the late Tate Houston on baritone. I had an old, straight-ahead, middle-of-the-road tenor saxophonist named Russ Andrews, who I think is now deceased, and for a while I had Roland Alexander playing tenor. I had Benny Powell, Henry Coker and -- it wasn't Al Grey. Who was it playing trombone? Man, my memory fails me as far as the complete roster is concerned. I had Martin Banks, Virgil Jones, and Johnny Coles on trumpets. There were more whose names escape me. I don't want to take up too much time trying to remember these names, but those are the principals.

Brower: Did you work with a certain constellation of musicians at that time, if I can call it that way, a certain circle of musicians that may be coming along?

Foster: Yes, there was a certain circle of musicians that I worked with. Incidentally most of them were black, because I was laboring under the philosophy that not too many black musicians get a chance to play with big bands often enough. While they play a lot with small groups and in the context where they don't have to read music, they're often criticized for not being able to read well. I thought I would single-handedly try to change this situation, this condition. So I had mostly blacks. I did have a few white members, a guy named Ronny Aprea [correct] playing alto saxophone with me for a time. But I wanted to give opportunities to black musicians, especially younger musicians coming up who didn't have much big band experience, the opportunity to play with a big band and to polish up their reading skills, so that they would be well equipped to deal with studio and Broadway gigs that might come up, that they might qualify for gigs that required lots of reading. I didn't want to see this

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situation continue where black musicians were largely criticized for not being able to read music. I put some hard music in front of these brothers. I don't know to what extent I affected this situation, but I would like to give myself credit for having made things a little better for some musicians who may later have been qualified to work in Broadway shows or other jobs in which a lot of reading was required and in which not too many blacks were being hired.

I didn't really start to realize any of my strongest ambitions until I would say around the mid '70s, but I'm still working on those ambitions.

Brower: If you could, what were they?

Foster: To have a big band working on a regular basis. I realized that economic conditions in the country were largely prohibitive to that, but since big bands were so strong in my blood, I just wanted to hear this big band. I loved the big band. I have to have these immense sounds around me. Quartets and quintets are okay. but there's only so much of a statement I can make with a quartet or a quintet. I can make my largest statement with a big band, 16 to maybe 20, to 23 members.

The Loud Minority, that name came about around 1970. The civil rights movement was in full force in the late '60s. I kept hearing about the silent majority or those who put up with the civil rights movement, but who weren't really in sympathy. That's the impression I got of the so-called silent majority. I got so sick of hearing about that and the backlash and all that mess, 'til I said, I just found a name for my big band, the Loud Minority, as opposed to you know who. I named one of the earlier recordings, my only recording with -- not Red Lion, what's --

Brower: Mainstream.

Foster: Mainstream, yeah. That's the only recording with that company, as most of my recordings are the only recording with any given company. That's called *The Loud Minority*, but it didn't consist of my entire big band. There were about 15 or 16 people in total on the recording.

Brower: Do you want to refer to it?

Foster: But they weren't there all at the same time, and these weren't the regular members of my big band, except a couple who were pictured here: Ted Dunbar, the late Kenny Rogers, who just passed away, Charles McGhee on trumpet, and Dick Griffin on trombone.

This was an attempt to make a statement, a social reform statement, which seemed to fall flat. Once I heard it, I didn't really like it. It was just -- I had Dee Dee Bridgewater

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on there. Instead of having her really do some substantive singing, I had her shouting and screaming about [laughs] about the Loud Minority.

I wasn't very proud of this recording. I had some dynamite folks on here, like Elvin Jones and Cecil Bridgewater, Gene Perla, Jan Hammer, Stanley Clarke, [Unintelligible], Hannibal Marvin Peterson. Ernie Wilkins was there. The musicianship was okay, but I was trying to combine the elements of jazz and funk. I never heard any public comment about it, or I never saw anything about it in print. Never even saw it reviewed. It seemed to go the way of all Frank Foster presentations [laughs]. Pure anonymity [laughs].

Brower: I have it. It wasn't anonymous with me.

Foster: The fact that you have it raises it above the level of --

Brower: Pure anonymity.

Foster: total anonymity [laughter]. But what I was going to say is the actual Loud Minority big band was formed after that, after that recording, which didn't consist of too many of the folks that were on there.

Brower: Is there a recording that you feel represents your writing for a large ensemble for Loud Minority that you would rank higher than this one?

Foster: Oh, yes, but it would happen a considerable period after that. In the late '70s I did two recordings for Denon. One was called *Shiny Stockings*. The other was called *Manhattan Fever*. These represented my big-band writing at the time. The selections are very few and too long. Most of them are eight to ten to twelve minutes in length, the tracks themselves, but they more closely represent what I was really about at the time than that Loud Minority recording, which came out in 1970 on Mainstream.

Brower: What is your big-band conception? That's asking the question as if the conception is fixed and has been developing, but if you could characterize it, what your approach is and how your approach to writing -- and the uses of the resources of large ensembles was different from what you did under Basie, and why in order for you to express yourself you had to have a form that you were controlling. What is it in your conception that could not be expressed in the Basie format. Talk about your approach, and maybe cite some compositions or some pieces that you feel are good examples of your thinking for using large ensembles and resources thereof.

Foster: Okay. With Basie it was largely shouting brass, blasting ensemble, which was all good, and the saxophones, the trombones, and trumpets were each used autonomously in spots where they took turns being in the spotlight. But the entire

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ensemble, the total ensemble was really the big thing about the Basie presentation, along with the pulsating rhythm.

My concept sprang from that and retained many of the elements that were used in the Basie context. One primary difference was I wanted a lot more solos, a lot more solo space, and a lot more solo backgrounds by ensembles, and I didn't really want my pieces to be that much longer. I wanted them to be more than three, three-and-a-half, four minutes, but I didn't want them to stretch out into ten- and fifteen-minute pieces, because that way you only get to play about four songs in one hour whereas the Basie band could play almost ten tunes in one hour. I didn't want the heavy use of the guitar or too much of the Freddie Green effect, because I didn't want it to be conceived that I was copying the Basie format. So I did away with that Freddie Green-type guitar approach, one -- four beats to the measure. I had my guitarist, when I had one, play more with the sections as almost a member of one of the wind instrument sections, and to play the figures that the band played rather than just do the 4/4 thing.

Of course I wanted totally my own concept about big-band arrangements, because I was thinking beyond Basie. This doesn't mean better. It just means different, in which I used each section, each wind instrument section, the trombones, trumpets, and saxophones, separately from one another, in that they all had prominent spots to display themselves and their abilities, and yet when the entire ensemble came together I wanted to have a Frank Foster sound rather than, oh, that sounds like Basie.

I didn't want to have a definitive Basie sound. I wanted to have a definitive Frank Foster sound, which meant that the lines would perhaps be more along contemporary lines and the figures would be less of that '40s kind of swing with the band shouting [Foster sings a characteristic riff of that ilk]. I wanted a lot of more modern-sounding figures in the brass, in the reeds, and in the rhythm. I wanted not so much of just a straight-ahead rhythm, plunk, plunk, plunk, plunk, throughout. but I wanted the rhythm to be more of a modern bebop concept.

Brower: What would be -- what -- how would you -- what are the works of yours that you think exemplifies --

Foster: Okay. There is a song called *Manhattan Fever*, another one called *Thruway Traffic*, another called *Simone*. I had an updated version of *Shiny Stockings*, which disappeared. I don't know where it is now, but it didn't sound anything like the original *Shiny Stockings* by the Basie orchestra.

Oh, another thing. I wanted to experiment with different time signatures, 3/4 and 6/8 and 12/8 and all that. Basie was always straight 4/4. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. That was it. The Basie context never went beyond the 4/4 thing to my knowledge. I wanted to broaden my concept in that regard, whereas I don't have a lot of 3/4, like jazz waltzes in 6/8 and 12/8, but I have some, and I plan to have more.

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I don't -- my idea was not to go out in space and do the avant-garde thing. Not at all. But I did branch into that. I bordered on that. Let's see. I had an arrangement of John Coltrane's composition *Impressions*, and I skirted the avant-garde in that.

Brower: How so? What devices or procedures that were --

Foster: Dispensing with rhythm altogether and just having energy, no specific tonality like B-flat major or A-flat minor, whatever. Just everybody playing free, and a collective improvisation where everyone in the band is playing his own ideas without regard for any ensemble format.

Brower: Would this be in the context of the composition? How would you incorporate these things in your compositions? Would you have passages or --

Foster: I would have sections or segments of the arrangement or the orchestration where I would have it indicated. Just go for yourself. Play what you feel. Or I would have maybe within the context of a certain scale or mode, play whatever you want to play within this mode. In other words, I would restrict them in one regard, but leave them unrestricted in another. Finally, I would have everyone come back in an orchestrated ensemble setting where we were all together.

I had a composition called *Look to the New World* in which I did this. I also had one that really almost went totally out. It was called *Karmageddon*, a combination of the words "karma" and "armageddon." In this one, it starts out with a stated melody in the saxophones. The trumpets and trombones are accompanying. Then midway down in the piece it goes totally wherever it wants to go and wherever who wanted to take it. And then finally it ends up with everybody coming together, but still more an expression of energy than an orchestrated, contrived orchestration.

I had another piece that I wrote after leaving Basie, called *Disapproachment*, which was based on a minor mode. It didn't go outside, as it were, but it stayed within a certain mode. In the bridge it had a set of chord changes that were reminiscent of something inside, as opposed to outside. It had a structure, but it was very difficult to negotiate, because it was a set of what I call "double ii - V changes" based on bebop formats. Then after that it goes back into the modal thing. That represented a vast departure from the Basie idiom.

I wanted to be a little broader in my scope and not just be shouting and swinging all the time. Sometimes I wanted to be shouting and swinging in a mild sense, and then in a vastly energetic sense. At times I wanted to go totally out and then come back in. But I never had the concept of being totally avant-garde without ever coming back inside. I

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couldn't deal with that. When I rejoined Basie as its leader in -- I know I'm jumping years --

Brower: Go ahead, that's fine.

Foster: But I want to make this statement about that. In the nine years that I had led the Basie band, I was totally cured of any avant-garde leanings. In other words, I fell in love with swing all over again. Now I just want to swing until everybody's laying on the floor.

Brower: You've cited on many occasions John Coltrane as being a seminal figure for you, influence for you. Talk a bit about that, both in terms of -- let me back up a second. Talk to me a little bit about your approach to harmony. Although I think you've applied this, but also your -- we've talked about certain aspects of composition. We'll go further into that in terms of your ideas about form, forms that you like to work in, your ideas about harmony and where you have tried to take that, where you think it can go. Then also sum up the commissions that you've had and you think are important or you'd like to cite for the record.

Foster: Okay. As far as harmony and orchestration is concerned, I really wanted to go beyond Basie. In the Basie format ninths, elevens and thirteenths, the extensions, are used quite a bit, especially in the modern era with Ernie Wilkins, Quincy Jones, Oliver Nelson, and Neil Hefti, but there were always for the most part conventional harmonic structural arrangements. I wanted to get beyond that and deal with modes. I became aware of modes about the time I was observing John Coltrane and his sheets of sound approach. I wanted to incorporate that sheets of sound format into my arranging and harmonizations. Those sheets of sound that were referred to by critics or writers or whoever talked about that effect, consisted mostly of certain placements of notes that formed certain scales or modes from the bottom of the horn to the top of the horn and back down again. I began incorporating these modal harmonizations into my writing, in that I wouldn't just be 1-3-5-7-9 in my approach to harmony in building chords in thirds, in conventional thirds. I started using more cluster writing, like 1-2-3-4-5. Instead of 1-3-5-7-9, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7. I would have these very clashy kind of harmonies very often inserted into my arrangements. And also --

Brower: So where, to dissonance?

Foster: Heavy dissonance, yeah.

Brower: And atonalities?

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Foster: Atonalities and all that. I would always come back to a certain given tonality finally, but I would just go through as many as possible different tonalities while on the way to that, on the way back home.

Brower: To some resolution. How does this relate -- you spoke earlier of liking massive sounds. Is that part of this? Is the clustering also related to massiveness, sheer power in any way?

Foster: Yeah, because I might have a root at the bottom of all this, or a root tone, which was like a tonic, and I'd have all this heavy density on top of it, which would produce a monstrous sound. I had that in the composition *Thruway Traffic*. I had a little bit of it in *Disapproachment*. I had it somewhat in the composition entitled *Karmageddon*.

I was going to say linearly, the horizontal approach or melodic -- I would have a lot of hip Coltrane-type melodies, Coltrane-type lines. It wouldn't be so much the old blues lines or jazz lines of the '40s and early '50s, but I was trying to incorporate conceptually more modern lines that I might find Coltrane, or Wayne Shorter, or some later Miles, or whatever, into my writing and these harmonies underneath the linear approach, which were thick with dissonance and all these closely voiced notes like one step and half steps away from one another. I'm not a pioneer in this regard. There are so many people out there that made their trademarks in those approaches to harmonic and melodic writing. I'm trying to cite a name, too. Gil Evans was one of my influences there. He had a wonderful approach in that regard. I'm trying to think of some people that were even farther way from the center than he.

Brower: How about George Russell?

Foster: George Russell, of course. George Russell, Don -- the trumpet player that passed away.

Brower: Cherry?

Foster: Not Don Cherry. A white writer.

Brower: Don Ellis?

Foster: Don Ellis, yeah. I'm not speaking of emulating these people. I'm just saying that their approach was already in that same idiom more or less. I wasn't trying to emulate any of them, but I was trying to come across a concept of my own that utilized those principles of heavy dissonance, chords voiced in small intervals, half step, step away from --

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Brower: I take it that this was both for programmatic reasons as your writing is very -- you often talk about storytelling as being a fundamental dimension of the jazz process, whether it's a solo, it's a song, or whatever, lyric, and you were clearly striving in your music to have commentary on the times.

Foster: Yes, definitely.

Brower: I'm asking, is it fair to say that it's self evident or evident that your efforts in this area were driven both by your being attracted and curious about pushing the harmonic envelope, as well as because you saw this as a way to most effectively tell a story you wanted to tell at that time?

Foster: Exactly. I wanted to extend my musical horizons beyond the conventional 1950s, '60s swing thing, and I wanted to make a social commentary. I was heavy into the social reform thing, black civil rights, *et cetera*.

Brower: Do you think that's incumbent upon black musicians to do?

Foster: Certainly.

Brower: Today as well as then?

Foster: It's a different climate out there today. There are so many movements and so many groups that refer to themselves as minorities. In the '60s and early '70s, I thought it was incumbent upon myself and others to make these statements. Right now all that is in the past. I would like to just make a strong statement in favor of goodness on the part of human beings.

Brower: Humanity.

Foster: Humanity. Just treating each other humanely and trying to bring the whole human race together in -- I don't want to use the word tolerance, because I don't like that word, but in --

Brower: Mutual respect?

Foster: Mutual respect and love. That would get it. You see there are some movements out there now that I'm not in total sympathy with, but I'm not out of sympathy. I don't believe in anyone being mistreated, no matter what their orientation, sexual orientation or ethnic orientation, nationality, race, color, creed, and all that.

Brower: Would it be fair to say that you don't believe that it's necessary to diminish someone else's humanity in order to affirm your humanity?

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Foster: I would agree with that, yes. It's not necessary. I want to take a total statement in favor of humanness or proper treatment or proper respect of everyone for everyone else. Although I see it as an impossibility in this modern world, I'd like to go on record as one of the ones who's trying to bring it about. I won't give up on it, even though I look at the picture of today's society, and I think, how can it ever get right?

Brower: I want to have you reflect on John Coltrane, what he means to you. We can talk about saxophone technique. We can talk about where he took -- what standard the playing in his ensemble set for subsequent ensembles in terms of virtuosity of group interaction, form, extended form, and also some assessment in terms of what impact you think he's had on the post-Coltrane jazz. So feel free to range with the Coltrane thing.

Foster: In regard to the last part of your question, his effect on the post-Coltrane era, I think Coltrane's effect and influence can be felt almost throughout the entire musical arena, even in the so-called what I call "Tweety Bird era," where these guys all seemed to sound the same now, with Kenny G being one of the leaders of that type of movement.

I hear people talking about the Michael Brecker sound, which I think came out of John Coltrane and maybe a fusion of some others like Junior Walker and Hank Crawford or whatever, some other people. But I think John Coltrane's influence is felt throughout the entire musical arena.

His influence on me was that of -- I was in total awe and admiration of his musical and spiritual convictions. He seemed to be striving for something that was almost unattainable, and yet he seemed to attain it, or he was on the way to it when he left us. I'm sure he was on the way to it. Had he lived a little longer, he would have reached a level that is probably unimaginable to most of us. He was on a level -- at the time he left, he was on a level that had left our sights. We couldn't even see where he was. He seemed to be a fanatic about always practicing, always striving for this total, total perfection. I'm speaking of musically and spiritually. He was heavily spiritual. He seemed to be striving for this purity in all aspects of his life, and he was taking it out on the tenor and soprano saxophones.

Brower: Did you have much personal interaction with him?

Foster: Not a lot, but some. Interestingly enough my wife Cecilia had more personal relationship with him than I did, because she being a first cousin of Elvin, Thad, and Hank Jones, when she first came to New York, she sought out Elvin as her cousin who was playing with Coltrane. She got to hang out with the group for a while, and she got to talk to Coltrane, and he got her thinking about this music. She wasn't heavily into jazz at the time, but she had the capacity for a great appreciation, which she has

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developed through the years. Talking to Coltrane got her really started on that path, and I took her a little farther into where she is now.

But she would -- for instance Coltrane would ask her during an intermission, "What did you think of the performance?" She would say, "I liked it. I thought it was great," and he would say, "What do you think was great about it?" In other words, what did you like, or what did you hear that you thought was exceptional? She was hard put to answer some of his questions, but it started her to thinking that, "I can't just tell him that I like it or I think it's great. I have to be prepared to tell him what it was about the performance that I liked, what he did that I thought was exceptional or outstanding."

This gave me a clue as to the extent of his involvement with this music. He was completely involved with the music, so much so that he couldn't talk to anyone unless they were able to come up to his level of involvement. You can't just say, "You played a great solo." "What was it about my solo that you thought was great?"

The average person -- not the average person, any person -- I've received thousands of compliments in the past thirty years, but if I had stopped and asked any one of these people, "What was it about my solo that you liked?", I dare say that one in a hundred could have told me, "In the third measure of this song you played a substitution that was really dynamite," or you did so and so and such and such that was really slamming. I don't think, as I said, one in a hundred could tell me what I did. They just viewed the overall performance as something that they thought was great.

Coltrane had an obsession with the totality of the music. I don't imagine he could talk to too many people, because they wouldn't have been able to satisfy him as far as their own involvement with that totality. I was in awe of this. I just thought Coltrane was almost a deity to me.

People would speak of going by his house to visit him while he's practicing. They would say that if he was resting he would have his horn on his chest. He'd get up and start practicing again, and he'd practice until the inside of his mouth bled. I never dreamed of practicing that long. He couldn't even take his horn out of his mouth long enough to talk to somebody. They'd be talking to him. He'd be blowing and talking out of the side of his mouth, "Hey, what's happening? How are you doing today? Yeah, where did you go today?" He was so obsessed and preoccupied with striving for that perfection, always practicing, a fanatic about practicing, a fanatic about perfecting the music.

That kind of fanaticism is what I'm striving to achieve. I'm almost to the point where I don't want to listen to anybody else but my own music because I want it to develop to the point where I think I belong with it. I'm almost to the point where I don't want to even go hear others play or perform, or I don't want be bothered with other things in

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life. I don't want to go to museums. I don't want to go to presentations, plays, musicals. I don't want to go do things that a lot of people think they must do to make their lives complete. I want to have a pinpoint concentration on this music so I can bring it to where I think it ought to be. I don't consider myself correct or right in this feeling but thinking about how Coltrane was, I'm almost obsessed with the idea of becoming a total recluse or hermit as far as staying where I am and being involved with this music, not watching Matlock on television or not going out to see a baseball game. I just want to deal with this music.

I think that I might make myself very narrow and very uninformed by doing this, because I feel a compulsion to listen to the news every day. As bad as it gets, I still think I have to listen to it, just to keep up with what's happening in our society, but I get sick of watching the news and watching what horrible things man's doing to his fellow man. I think I ought to be concentrating on that music, but I've almost lost total interest in all other things except pro football [laughs]. So right now it's music and pro football. I don't want to know about nothing else. I don't know if that's good or bad, but I seem to want to emulate Coltrane's fanatic total involvement with the music. I'll never come up to that level as far as practicing my instrument, because I don't do that much practicing, but I do stay involved with the writing of the music, the composing, and the harmonizing, and putting things together. Coltrane has influenced me to that degree.

Brower: How much music do you have that hasn't been heard?

Foster: Enough to fill this room.

Brower: Can you talk about that body of work? Are there operas, symphonies?

Foster: It's not operas. It's not symphonies. It's single arrangements, orchestral arrangements for a big band. I have some things that I wrote for an orchestra, a 45-piece orchestra with strings, harps, woodwinds, French horns, *et cetera*, that have not been heard in the United States, were just recorded in Holland for radio broadcasts over there. I have some arrangements that I wrote for an orchestra in Germany that were produced in Germany and recorded for sale there, which have not reached the United States. Eventually they may. But I have a whole body of work that has not been heard.

Brower: Do you have a log of that work or some index of that work? I think it would be an interesting addition for the record, for this interview, if there was some index or log, or listing of your compositional opus, particularly that's not in the public record by virtue of recording. Is that something that you could --

Foster: I'm in the process of documenting all these things now. I'm not finished though, just to know all of what I have and where it's located. Most of it's at my home,

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which is now in Chesapeake, Virginia. A lot of it's in storage, but I have to -- I'm in the process of logging it. At some point in the future I'll make this available.

Brower: A couple of subjects that you touched upon as we've talked. One is your current wife. Maybe you could tell us how that came to be and particularly the role that she plays as a kind of partner in your career, some of your efforts and entrepreneurship and so forth.

Foster: Okay. I met her through her cousin, her first cousin Thad Jones, who was together with me in the Count Basie orchestra. This was in 1960 or '61. She came from Pontiac, Michigan, and Fort Wayne, Indiana, and moved east. She was caught up in a bad marriage out there, and she got a divorce. She wanted to totally remove herself from that area. She threw a dart in a map and it ended up -- the dart landed at Newark, so she adventurously came to Newark and ended up in New York.

When Thad introduced her to me I was still married to my first wife, but we had developed a relationship. My first marriage was on its way out anyway. Cecilia and I married in 1965 -- '66, I'm sorry. I got my first divorce in 1965. My divorce, period [laughs], in 1965 from my first wife, and Cecilia and I married in 1966.

She had great experience in the corporate world as a secretary, as a personnel manager, and almost everything that you could imagine in the corporate world. She brought that experience to our marriage and became my manager and agent, which she is now.

Not only is she instrumental in booking me on engagements and seeing that I get paid, *et cetera*. She's also become somewhat of a musical authority in that she feels qualified to tell me who can and who can't play [laughs]. Strangely enough, anybody who -- I was almost able to weed out all the non-players from my band, thanks to her. She says, "He can't play. You don't want him." Although this strongly opinionated approach sometimes hits you like a dart piercing your heart, it hit home quickly. There were certain people that I had in my band that I really didn't want, but I didn't know how to get rid of them. She made me aware of the fact that I should just move, act, get all the dead weight out and handpick my own group. So she helped me raise the level of quality of successive Frank Foster bands.

But she's a most intelligent person who is caring and is totally in my corner and sees to it that I'm -- she has my back. We compliment one another in that all her strong points happen to be mostly some of my weaknesses, and her weaknesses are in areas where I have strong points, so we feel that we perfectly compliment one another. I feel very fortunate to have her as my wife, manager, partner, lover, everything else.

Brower: About your association with Elvin Jones.

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Foster: That began in the late '40s when I first met Elvin back in Detroit. We were buddies back then. I didn't see him that often, but whenever we saw one another, we hung out. Then I didn't see him for a long time when I joined the army. When I got out of the army and got in the Basie orchestra, I'd see him off and on.

When I left the Basie orchestra, he was in one of my first big bands. I decided that he should be my drummer. I remember we went to Baltimore for the Left Bank Jazz Society. You're familiar with them, right? In 1967 -- and we tore that place up.

Brower: North Charles Street.

Foster: North Charles, 16 North Charles Street. We blew the roof off of that place with Elvin Jones playing drums.

Brower: That's probably, in my experience, one of my favorite places to have heard music.

Foster: It was a good setting. Everybody there came to listen and party at the same time. The musicians had a ball. We ate and drank all we wanted.

Brower: Went out in the alley when you wanted.

Foster: Right [laughter], exactly. And came in --

Brower: Someone needs to do a real documentary on that place.

Foster: Perhaps if there are photographs, they would help, and documented recollections, that would really help.

Brower: But anyway, Elvin.

Foster: He formed his own group, the Jazz Machine. I was on and off with that group from about '69 on through the mid '70s. I made several tours, at least two tours of Europe and two tours of the Far East with Jones, or maybe I'm confusing with the Thad Jones -- Mel Lewis Orchestra. I made at least one tour of Japan with Elvin, one tour of South America, and one tour of Europe. That's a playing experience that any saxophonist would treasure, would feel that something was missed if they didn't play with Elvin at least one time.

Brower: Why is that?

Foster: Because of the extent of his dynamism on the drums. He wasn't always -- he wasn't into real fast tempos but it was always a high-energy performance, whether it

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was a ballad or medium tempo. It was just -- he has a particular energy that seems to be peculiar to himself, that envelopes everything around it, the audience, the rest of the musicians.

Brower: Does he represent -- as a drum innovator -- does he represent some significant new level in how he played and how he approached his instrument?

Foster: I suppose he does. I've been told about his polyrhythms and all that. I suppose I experienced them. I had to have experienced them playing with him, but what I remember most is the energy and the groove.

When he played with the big band, I have never in my life had a band to swing so hard as when Elvin played with the band. He can play as loud as you need him to play, and he can play as softly as you need him to play. People think -- a lot of people may think Elvin can't play soft, he's always loud, but that's not true. He can take up some brushes and fan those brushes and be as soft as anyone you ever heard. You can hear his humming above the drum. He'll be playing with the brushes [Foster makes a grunting rhythmic sound] and that will be louder than he's playing.

Brower: You had a pretty interesting drummer last night.

Foster: Dave Gibson, yeah.

Brower: I'd only heard him in a big band setting. Didn't know that he played like that.

Foster: Yeah, he's good in big or small groups. He's strong, steady, swings hard, and imaginative, intelligent approach. He's got everything that you need in a drummer. He's got that power too.

Brower: Lots of power. He was very relaxed last night, but he brought some thunder, I thought.

Foster: Oh, yeah.

Brower: Was that a working band?

Foster: That is a working band. The bassist, believe it or not, is a sub for the regular bassist, who's Earl May, but Gerald Cannon is the number one sub. When he's there, it sounds like he's the bassist with the group.

Brower: He had a different concept than Earl May, though. I can't imagine Earl would have played the same things he would have played.

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Foster: No, he wouldn't. Earl is mostly a section player. He doesn't play too many solos.

Brower: Rock. He's a rock.

Foster: Yeah, he is a rock. So Gerald Cannon just does it all. He plays with the section, and he's a wonderful soloist.

Brower: Danny Mixon was --

Foster: Yeah, he's the little orchestra in ten fingers.

Brower: Yeah, he dropped three or four -- made three jokes in every solo he took.

Foster: Yeah, he's what we call the quote master.

Brower: Yeah, name that tune.

Foster: Right, name that tune [laughs].

Brower: I think Vanny Cook was comparing it to the way that Dexter used to do that in the course of his things, making all these references.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Over this weekend there were a couple -- I think I want to get your reaction to some things as a way of tying into some other concerns. On Friday you did a workshop at Suitland High School. I know one of your major interests is jazz education, working with young people and seeing the culture transmitted. Give me your reaction to your experience on Friday, how you assess it, what did it suggest to you, what it made you feel.

Foster: I had a mixture of feelings, but the most positive was a feeling of encouragement about some of the youngsters that were in that group. I was especially fond of the girl who was playing lead trumpet and a little alto saxophonist who was playing lead alto. The trombonists all seemed to have -- they had really strong sounds and a lot of potential there. There was potential in a couple of other members of the saxophone section.

Unfortunately the guitarist didn't have a cord to attach to his amps, so he couldn't be heard, so he didn't bother to play. It wouldn't have been effective had he played because he didn't have a cord to attach to the amp.

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But I heard some vast potential in at least three members of that group. Almost the rest of them are write-offs as far as being musicians in the future are concerned. However, I look at all persons in groups like that, who don't intend to pursue music as careers, as potential good listeners and potential members of future audiences who will appreciate what they're hearing because of the little knowledge they're acquiring while in that setting of a high-school band.

But I really hope that that girl that played lead trumpet intends to go on and pursue a musical career on that instrument, and the lead alto saxophonist, and a couple of the other saxophones, and a couple of those trombone players. I didn't ascertain whether or not they intended to continue in music. but they've got these strong, vigorous sounds. They were playing too loud at one point, and when I pointed it out to them, I said, "You need to play a little softer when you get here, because the alto saxophonist is soloing on *Sophisticated Lady*, and I can't hear him, because you guys are playing so loud." They showed me that they could play softer, which means they do have some sensitivities. But they have strong sounds. I hope that -- there are at least about five members of that band that I hope continue in music.

So I was encouraged there, as well as the reaction I got from people who were attending the workshop. I don't know if they were just applauding because somebody said, "Give him a hand," or if they were really sincere in their appreciation of what I was doing. I was trying to drill the band in the fine art of jazz phrasing. They showed that they can improve so that was encouraging.

I'm always gratified when I deal with a group like that and I see a capacity for improvement and I see potential for future involvement in the music, especially when I find females on instruments that are not normally associated with females. It used to always be the girl played the piano, the girl played the flute, the girl played the clarinet, which she stopped playing after a while, or she sang, or she played cello. You didn't see girls playing trombone, trumpet, and saxophone, baritone saxophone. Now you see girls playing all these instruments that have been associated with masculinity before.

I've got a girl baritone saxophonist in my current Loud Minority orchestra, Fostina Dixon. She plays that big horn just as strong as any man I could find playing it. So I want to see more involvement by ladies in the profession. This young lady playing trumpet with that high-school band, her embouchure was correct, her position was correct, everything was correct, and when they tuned up she had such a firm A on that horn. Most kids you say, "Okay, tune up," and you hear [Foster sings a succession of ugly sounds]. She came out with a firm tone. She said [Foster hums a note], right on it. There was no scratchiness or no infirmity in the tone. It was just a pure tone [Foster sings a note]. I said, "Hey, I hear something there."

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Brower: Was what you found there pretty typical of what you encounter when you got to high school situations?

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: In terms of the preparation of a band? I was disturbed that I didn't think some of the instruments were up to par. It didn't seem that they were actually prepared to receive you.

Foster: That was on someone there. I don't know whose area that was. They should have had the music out. They should have been ready to perform their best pieces for me.

Brower: Maybe I could ask it this way. I've asked -- and let's put the last thing I asked you, which was, was that typical of what you encounter, and combine that with a question that goes like, what is your assessment of how we are providing young people with an opportunity to know (A) about music and (A) about significant American music that is jazz via the educational process. Are we doing a good job and to whatever extent we're doing the job, what are your thoughts about how the job ought to be done?

Foster: We're doing a good job in certain areas. In certain others we're not. Now I didn't want to get too much into the black-white thing during this interview, but I find that there are many predominantly white schools, one of them is in I think Upper Marlboro, and they're scattered throughout the country, where they have a full line of equipment that's regularly maintained, instruments. They have storage rooms that are under adequate lock and key. They have instructors who are versed in jazz. Whether or not they've been out there in the trenches they know what jazz is about. They're imparting these ideas to the students. They are bringing educators, jazz educators, from the trenches, people like Cecil Bridgewater, Jimmy Heath, myself, and John Faddis every now and then as artists-in-residence for periods.

I've only found a few situations where schools are predominantly black in which all these conditions were adequately met. That situation the other day was one such. They do have storage rooms for the instruments that appear to be under lock and key at the right time. I was impressed with the fact that they had a string ensemble. I'd never even seen a string ensemble in a predominantly black school before and these kids were sounding good on these violins and violas. I think they had a cello or two and a bass, and an instructor who seemed dedicated.

The principal instructor of the jazz band was out of town on a vital mission, which included someone in the family, so they couldn't be there. I understood that. They called and apologized. I couldn't attest to the condition of all the instruments.

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Brower: Like the drum kit wasn't fully functional. Hi-hat wasn't working. I thought the piano was a little -- wasn't in tune.

Foster: Right. Yeah. That's true, and there was no bass player. A former instructor had to sit in on bass. I saw these few little lax -- but that was as good a situation as you'll find in the average predominantly black school. There are some in certain areas of the country that have everything they should have, but too many are understaffed, under-equipped and security is lacking. In other words, you'll find instrument storage rooms broken into and instruments stolen and not replaced. This is really an American tragedy here.

Brower: How much of your time is involved as a clinician or educator?

Foster: A considerable amount of my time. I do at least one such clinic type situation at least once every two months, and at least three or four artists-in-residencies during a school year, which consists of clinics, workshops, rehearsals that extend for a period of two to three days in various locations throughout the country.

I'm extensively involved in jazz education. I'm not one who gets all the volumes written on the subject, volumes written by the Jamey Aebersold and Dan Hearle. There are so many volumes out now, but I just use my own experience to teach from. Sometimes I get on the computer, and I generate things that I intend to use in my jazz education projects.

I like to go from my own experience mostly because most of us are saying the same things in different words. There's a pretty well defined set of standards that apply to jazz composition and jazz performance, which I've been dealing with for over one generation, at least a quarter of century, and past that.

With the Jazzmobile in New York, I started out in the late '60s as part of that organization, which had a public school opened up to them where they had Saturday workshops. The student body there grew to be over 200 people, coming to study all the instruments and voice, jazz techniques, performance, composition, arranging. And Jazz Interactions in New York, which is now defunct. but still were about the same thing. In other areas of jazz education, I taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo for four years and Queens College for a year.

Brower: Let's stop and let's look at some of these. During the time you were at Jazzmobile, were there particular significant experiences or students that you interacted and worked with?

Foster: Yeah. A lot of students ended up being professionals. One who started out as a student ended up being a member of my band. Then he also became supervisor over

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the Jazzmobile activities, the late Kenny Rogers, who passed away during the recent cruise of the SS Norway. My big band was on there. We were pretty much the talk of the cruise.

Brower: He was on the cruise with you?

Foster: Yes, he was playing baritone saxophone in the band. On the last day of cruise he had a heart attack while on the beach at the last island, the last stop of the cruise before returning to Miami. He suffered a heart attack while he was snorkeling and right on the beach passed away. So that was the thing that put a blemish on the cruise, a big one. But prior to that the band had been pretty much the talk of the entire cruise. But this same Kenny Rogers, who had changed his name to Kennon I. [?spelling] Rogers, he started out as a student in Jazzmobile, and his picture's on that Loud Minority --

Brower: Yeah, I know that --

Foster: He became an instructor at the Jazzmobile and subsequently the director of the Jazzmobile workshop. Many students came out of there and are now leading professional lives.

Brower: Any others that you could cite by name?

Foster: A saxophonist named Kenny Forsh, who is active on the New York scene. Another saxophonist named Sam Furnace who I think played with Mongo Santamaria.

Brower: And Sam Rivers.

Foster: I don't know about Sam Rivers. I don't recall knowing Sam Rivers as a student.

Brower: No, but I think Sam Furnace may have played with him.

Foster: Oh, perhaps so, yeah.

Brower: I know his name is in some of Sam's ensembles.

Foster: Yeah, I think he played --

Brower: He's an alto player, right?

Foster: Yeah. Let's see, I know there are others.

Brower: What about out of the Jazz Interactions experience?

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Foster: I don't recall anybody in the Jazz Interactions experience who came out and -- there probably are folks, but their names I can't recall at the moment.

Brower: Before I stopped you to get specifics about those particular periods you were -

Foster: Oh, I had mentioned that I taught a year at Queens College.

Brower: And as you go through talking about State University of Wisconsin or whatever, if there are particular aspects of those experiences, including students that you may have worked with or that are significant, we want that for the record.

Foster: Yeah. At Queens College there was a guy who came off and on and sat in with the band, but I guess he was too busy at that time, a trumpeter named -- his first name is Tom. Maybe you can enlighten me. I've forgotten his last name, but he went off into jazz fusion.

Brower: Tom Brown?

Foster: Tom Brown, right, yeah.

Brower: *Funking in Jamaica* I think was his big thing, on Arista.

Foster: Yeah, I wanted him to be there more often, but at that time he was just getting ready to get busy, so he couldn't come around too much.

At Davidson College of Rutgers University I was one of the jazz professors under Larry Ridley, with Ted Dunbar, Kenny Barron, and the late Freddie Waits. We had a quintet called the Jazz Professors. We went to Senegal -- not Senegal. Lesotho in southern Africa -- on a two-week educational tour and concert tour in which Dizzy Gillespie participated and the late Monk Montgomery as well.

There were some students to come out of there that are fairly active on the musical scene. There was a guitarist, an exceptional guitarist named Josh Thompson. I don't know if you ever heard of him. He's into producing now. He's just so broad-based, but he was a phenomenal guitarist and composer.

From the Buffalo experience, SUNY at Buffalo, there was an alto saxophonist named Joe Ford that --

Brower: Joe was at Central State when I was at Antioch.

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Foster: Oh, yeah.

Brower: He was in Wilberforce, Ohio. Wilberforce is like ten minutes from the other school systems where Antioch was, so I know Joe Ford from those days.

Foster: Yeah. All right, but Joe Ford actually wasn't a student.

Brower: But he's from Buffalo.

Foster: Yeah, so he was around, and then I got acquainted with him during that time.

Brower: Did you know a drummer up there named Nasar Abadey.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Well he's here now.

Foster: He's here? Yeah, right, that's right.

Brower: That's my instructor, my teacher.

Foster: Is that right? Yeah, I knew him well. In fact he went on a tour with me to -- he went to Senegal with me as part of that Club Med thing. Or did I meet him -- I think I met him over there. He didn't go with me. Someone else went with me, but I met him over there. We've played several times together. Nasar Abadey, yeah.

So there have been some prominent students to come out of all these university settings in which I've taught, who are now professionals. Someone told me that Najee -- if you're you hip to Najee?

Brower: Uh-huh.

Foster: -- was one of my students at one time.

Brower: One of the things, I've worked with Najee a lot, because he used to open for Freddie Jackson, and I would -- what's the little diminutive singer who did the Whiz? The little, short --

Foster: Oh, Stephanie Mills.

Brower: Stephanie Mills, and he opened for her. I would be a stage hand at those gigs. It became a little joke with us, because he would always quote -- in his performance he'd always drop in *Confirmation*, some bebop or hard bop little thing. It would be a

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moment, and he segue into a spirituals thing, and then he'd go on to something pop, but he'd always dropped that somewhere in his performance, so I think -- I've always felt that he could play in a different context.

Foster: Yeah, he could have, I'm sure.

Brower: How do you compare the experience that you had as an educator with -- two questions, how do you compare the experience that you had as an educator with the experience you had as a student yourself in the university level, and how do you compare what students get in these collegiate level jazz programs with the university that you went to, not meaning Wilberforce but the university of the streets, if you will, in terms of, are the universities able to replace that piece that's missing now? When you came along, and you were getting your training, there was a much more vibrant and viable club circuit, touring circuit. There was a much more viable apprenticeship training system for musicians that was tied to the club life, the touring life, the availability of big bands. That piece isn't there now.

Foster: No.

Brower: To some degree these university programs are some kind of a substitute for that. Do you get the two questions I'm asking?

Foster: Yeah, I get it. The universities now are not an adequate substitute for that training that I got in those days. I was not trained by an educator who was on staff, who was on faculty at a college university. My educators, so to speak, were older musicians who played in bands, who traveled on the road, and who gave me pointers as they came through town, or older musicians with whom I played in the local bands and told me not by writing on the blackboard or on an overhead projector, but just word of mouth. "Hey, man, what you're doing, you're doing it wrong. You've got to do it like this." That's all there was. I didn't learn about modes and stuff until this period of jazz education became very prevalent, but I learned all I needed to about chords, extensions, without the language of the jazz educator. I learned it in the street language, street vernacular.

Brower: Aren't the educators simply describing a phenomenon that already exists.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: In other words, their language and their vocabulary is something that exists after the fact of the invention of these ideas.

Foster: Right, but they're coming from a much more codified format. They can explain it and write it on the blackboard, and put it in an overhead projector, and

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computerize it, whereas when I was coming up the brain was the computer and the software was somebody talking to me.

A lot of these educators on the high school and college level are musicians who were trained in that same context and who haven't been out in the trenches. Some of them are intelligent enough to bring guys like us, Jimmy Heath, Cecil Bridgewater, Stanley Cowell to their schools to talk to the students about our adventures in the trenches and the way we got the knowledge.

I'm getting off the track now. I'm trying to really pin it down, how the two eras differ. My classroom was a dancehall or a nightclub. My teacher was a musician who took time out to talk to me between chasing girls. He wasn't on staff and he wasn't receiving a salary as an educator. So while he was chasing skirts, he might stop to talk to me for five minutes and tell me the difference between a C-minor seventh and a C-dominant seventh or something like that.

Today we don't have the nightclubs, the dancehalls and the jazz clubs where musicians just get together in session. Sessions have to be prearranged. They have to be in a hall where there's nothing else going on at the time, or they have a piano over in the music building, maybe we can go over there and jam for a while. But the setting is not the same. The settings were really exciting back in the '40s and the early '50s where you would go jam before an audience of people who were just there checking everything out. They arrange things like that now, but it's just not the same.

When I talk to a bunch of kids that I hope some of whom will continue in music, I'm wondering all the time, am I giving them some information that they're never going to use because they're never going to have a place to go? When they graduate from this university or community college or whatever, where are they going? Are they going to be just teachers giving this information to some more people who want to graduate and be teachers? Are we just training a successive generations of teachers or will some of these people actually be out there in the trenches playing jazz, recording jazz, performing jazz? So I'm wondering, where will they have to go once they get this information from me? Is there going to be a place for them to put it to actual use?

Brower: Do you have some sense of -- in your view is the music taking on some quality, significantly different quality, because it's being learned in a different, if you will, a sterile setting as opposed to a setting which is infused with life experience and directly tied to community?

Foster: You can check out the number of groups that are out there now. You have your exceptions like the Marsalises and the Terence Blanchards and the Nicholas Paytons and all that crowd that came from New Orleans and are inundating the jazz

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scene now, but how many groups do you have like the old Jazz Messengers, like Horace Silver, and Miles, Coltrane, and --

Brower: Charlie Mingus.

Foster: Charlie Mingus, Art Farmer and the --

Brower: The Jazztet.

Foster: Jazztet, the Jazz Modes, Benny Golson. There are lots of talented people out there now that are composing, arranging, performing their own jazz presentations, but I don't know if they're based on the same jazz linguistic principles that some of the old timers came out of.

What I'm saying is I see a lot of sameness in some of these modern -- these youngsters who are coming out. Maybe they're going to mature into great jazz artists who find their own paths through this, but I don't hear the variety that I found back in the '40s and early '50s, groups that had their own identity. You hear one phrase and you say, "Oh, that's the Jazz Messengers," or "That's Miles" or "That's Trane" or "That's Dexter," or that's whoever." Now you may hear somebody and you think, "Who is that? That's so and so. No, that sounds like so and so. No, that's sounds like so and so." There was more definition in the presentation of --

Brower: Is that simply a fact that we were earlier on in the development of the music?

Foster: Perhaps so, and the fact that we received our education in a different way. The schools I guess are good for jazz, but they seem to be turning out --

Brower: Clones?

Foster: Mass producing -- you might say jazz clones. I don't want to make light or knock anybody out there who's really a talent. I've seen some talents come along that were exceptional and that I'm sure are going to develop into the so-called giants of tomorrow. But I think we're mass producing some jazz clones that are not going to come up to the level of Art Blakey, the Jazz Messengers, Horace Silver, Benny Golson, Art Farmer, *et cetera, et cetera*, Wes Montgomery.

Brower: You mentioned some of your educational things. I think you can probably talk more about Jazzmobile. I know that you had some commissioned work with them. That's probably one of the most, if not the most successful, at least during its heyday, not-for-profit in jazz, particularly one that had black leadership. If there are other things you want to say about Jazzmobile in that regard and respecting some of the -- particularly the *Lake Placid* piece.

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Foster: That *Lake Placid Suite* was a significant commission from the Jazzmobile. It didn't receive much prominence, because in the setting of Lake Placid, most of the people who were there, their musical orientation was not jazz. Kenny Rogers, the Kenny Rogers of pop music fame, and Tanya Tucker and all those types of folks have -- and even Chuck Mangione, they had much more prominence than say the Jazzmobile orchestra under the direction of Frank Foster.

But that commission was for a suite of music that was to be an hour in duration. Out of that came seven compositions, each of a different nature from the one -- from the others. I'm using several of them right now in my present band as part of my presentation now. So the best thing to come out of that commission is that they are pieces that I'm still using.

Brower: Which are?

Foster: One's called *Mirror Lake*. One's called *Victorious Blues*. One is called *Old Games, New Faces*. One that's called *White Face Mountain*. One is called *Placid Moments*. One that I used with the Count Basie orchestra was *Sugar Hill Slalom*, which I combined the name of an athletic event with a once-swank part of Harlem. All those pieces that I can use now didn't get much play at all back then. One recording for Public -- PB --

Brower: NPR.

Foster: NPR. But I can still -- I can use those now. That's the advantage of that.

There was one other -- two other educational settings that I failed to mention that were significant, one of which is going on now. That's NYU [New York University]. I'm an adjunct professor at NYU at the present moment. I'm -- I teach jazz ensemble and private instruction in saxophone. But the New School [for Social Research], I taught there a couple years ago. There I found an abundance of young talent, some of which -- two of which are in my band at the present time, a young saxophonist named Keith Loftus and a trumpeter named Kenyatta Beasley. They were students at the New School. I just plucked them out of there and put them in my band. I also ran into a young pianist named Carlos McKinney who's just absolutely brilliant.

Brower: Out of "Destroit."

Foster: Yeah, out of "Destroit." I don't know if he's still playing with Elvin, but he had -- did play with Elvin for a while. He's even so busy you can hardly catch up with him.

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Brower: He's part of the McKinney clan.

Foster: Part of that McKinney clan from New York -- from Detroit that keep producing -- each new generation, they come out with somebody, the McKinney Clan.

Brower: Did you know Harold McKinney?

Foster: Yeah, I played with Harold back in late '40s and '50, and his brother --

Brower: Kiwane?

Foster: Kiane Zawadi --

Brower: The euphonium and trombone player?

Foster: Yeah, yeah. And Ray McKinney the bassist. So all -- there's a new generation of McKinney's.

Brower: And there's a Gayelynn McKinney, who's his daughter.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: [Harold]'s daughter is a drummer with the group Straight Ahead. They've got an all-female group.

Foster: Straight Ahead. I sat in with them a few months back. Reggie Workman's daughter is in that group too, and so I --

Brower: What's Workman's daughter play?

Foster: Cello or violin, I'm --

Brower: Then she might have replaced Regina Carter, who had been the violinist in that group. She left. So maybe Reggie's daughter replaced her.

Foster: Yeah. And the Jackson family in Detroit, they produced -- Ali --

Brower: Ali the drummer.

Foster: Yeah.

Brower: Are they cousins? Because him and Carlos, seemed like they came to New York together or around the same time.

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Foster: They came out -- they're in the same generation. They -- but Ali Mohammed Jackson is from that Jackson family.

Brower: He's playing with, the last time I saw him, with Dee Dee Bridgewater. One's a trumpet player too. They got a trumpet.

Foster: Oh yeah, Kha -- let's see, it might be Khalid. I'm not sure. Kahlil, I think. Kahlil Jackson. I think that's the trumpeter. Ali Mohammed is the drummer. Yeah, that Jackson family and the McKinnys, they keep churning them out. The Jones family has some young Joneses there too that are -- they haven't left the area yet to come to New York, but they're there.

So the New School is one of the most significant developers of young talent right now, but they've got a staff that's just so -- they've got -- a lot of the stalwarts on the New York jazz scene are at the New School now. Benny Powell, Cecil Bridgewater, Joe Chambers. Who used to call himself Ken McIntyre. I don't know if he's got a..

Brower: Or Ken Makunda, something. [Makanda Ken McIntyre]

Foster: Makunda [*sic*: Makanda], yeah. I forget what his --

Brower: He was at Central State with Joe Ford. He was the first jazz instructor, I believe, at Central State [Wilberforce, Ohio].

Foster: Is that right?

Brower: That's when Joe was -- he came around -- it had to be '67 when Kenny McIntyre was there. Some other cats. Stan Strickland, who was a tenor player from Boston [Originally from Springfield, Ohio], was there then, and Sidney Smart, a drummer out of Cleveland was there, but anyway.

Foster: Now at NYU I'm there five times a semester. I have a -- I rehearse the jazz ensemble. I hope to recruit some more black students for that jazz ensemble. I'm one of the first African-Americans on the jazz faculty. Maybe we'll pull some more of us in there soon.

Brower: What about some of the things, and I think of Jazzmobile as having -- I want to segue into your involvement with things like National Endowment for the Arts, the whole public funding of jazz, some of your thoughts about that. How significant or important that might be. Any experiences you might want to cite in there. But even beyond that, some things that have more to do with advocacy, or -- I don't know

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whether you'd call -- consider the Collective Black Artists in that vein, or Jazz and the People's Movement, but some things along those lines.

Foster: We'll start with the Jazz and People's Movement. That was a brainchild of the late Rahsaan Roland Kirk. They successfully disrupted a television show. I'm trying to think whose show it was. Maybe you remember. It wasn't Dick Cavett? I'm not sure whose show it was.

Brower: It's somewhere in my notes, which I don't feel like rifling through.

Foster: But they started making these musical noises in the middle of the show, and they disrupted the entire show. The idea was to affect a larger involvement of jazz musicians and jazz music on network television. Sorry to say that the end result was no more than one television shot for a group under my own direction. I got on that same show, I think it was some months later, with a group that I was leading, that wasn't my regular-size group. It was just a -- I put it together for that occasion. I premiered a work entitled *Look to the New World*, which I told you a while back was one of my excursions into -- skirting the avant-garde. It was a sort of a modal piece.

But anyway, nothing much happened with the Jazz and People's Movement after that. I think Rahsaan's relative incapacitation was too much. He couldn't be too involved with things.

Brower: Had he --he had had a stroke by then?

Foster: I think so, or shortly afterwards. Anyway -- and the same with the Vibration School of Music. His health didn't permit him to keep that going. That was a short-lived entity. He had a staff of three people, including myself and a fellow who taught percussion. I think I was over there -- I taught one session. Then it just fizzled out so it didn't have any impact at all.

Rahsaan may have taught a couple of sessions, but his health was the reason for the fact that he couldn't continue. The Jazz and People's Movement tragically enough fell apart too, because once they made that one concession and they had my group on there, I don't suppose they had much feedback, or they must have found reasons, that's the end of that. It's like, "We gave you people one shot. What more do you want?"

Since then I don't know what has been -- every now and then on a major network we may have a presentation with a major jazz artist, with perhaps a Wynton Marsalis or someone, but other than that there's still not much jazz as you know to be found on network television, much straight-ahead jazz or much jazz of any kind [laughs]. I don't see it.

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But I'm not even worried about where that branch of the media goes with it, because I've narrowed down my scope. I'm not concerned with mass media. I don't think jazz is for everyone. I think one in ten people might appreciate jazz, and in that one person, I'll zero in on. The other nine, I don't know if there's any prospects of their becoming jazz-oriented.

Brower: Any more than they're oriented to serious classical music, serious painting, serious dance, serious fiction, or serious anything else.

Foster: When you mention serious classical music, you struck another nerve in regard to the National Endowment and other granting organizations. It seems they have been stripped of all their guts in the present day. When I was involved with the National Endowment, substantive grants were given to musicians of merit, jazz musicians who were able to do quite a bit. But since they lost all their teeth, they have no more bite. I don't even know what if possible can be done as far as grants to musicians.

Brower: What do you wish?

Foster: You seem to want to dwell on the CBA for a while. There's not much time to be spent there, but what little is significant -- CBA stands for Collective Black Artists and basically was an ensemble of jazz musicians, some prominent jazz musicians and some most talented musicians who weren't among the most prominent in New York, but who were on a high level of ability and talent, such as Kamau Adilifu -- they called him Charles Sullivan then -- a trumpeter and arranger, composer, and Roland Alexander and others. Just mentioned his name a few minutes ago.

Brower: Reggie?

Foster: Reggie Workman. They had a purpose in mind I guess to bring more attention and more prominence to talented black musicians who seemed over exploited and underexposed. I was happy to be a part of it, but as most other movements that had that theme, they seemed to be relatively short-lived -- short lived, however you say it -- and didn't really accomplish that much. While I was happy to be a part of it, it didn't serve my purposes either, because I was on a mission to perform mostly my own music. While I appreciated performing the music of Charles Tolliver, Stanley Cowell, Cecil Bridgewater, Jimmy Heath, Roland Alexander, and myself, I still wanted to be spending time with something, some entity that would be performing my own music, an entity under my own direction. I never left the CBA. We just fizzled out. We ceased to exist.

My philosophy, as I said to you a few minutes ago, is not about the clenched fist and black and proud thing. It's just to quietly go about doing my black thing, if you will, and being noticed and appreciated for that which is being accomplished on behalf of all people, not especially black folks.

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Since that whole civil rights movement -- We don't have the Malcolms and the Martins around now. I don't even know whom to designate as a so-called leader or spokesman at the present time.

But I think making my own statement in my own way will achieve what I'm out to achieve. I'm going to continuously be involved in education, jazz ed, because I think there are young talents that need to be brought out and exposed to the music. Since the clubs or the types that existed back then and before are no longer in existence, we have to turn the classrooms into clubs, or the private studios into jam-session places, the rehearsal halls into places where we help the young musicians develop their talents, so that the art form which we call jazz and which some people don't like to refer to as an art form -- I'm not going to be a part of that argument.

But we're going to develop these people so that we have a future for the music because the music as far as I'm concerned is worthy. It's worth perpetuating. I intend to do my part by educating the young with my own methods, and with my own groups of my choice, which must be a large ensemble or a big jazz band, a medium-size orchestra, which I have one called Swing Plus. That's a ten-piece dance band, but it's still about the music, swinging, and of course the Non-Electric Company quartet or quintet, which will be the small-group arm of my presentation.

But I want to make the biggest statement with the biggest group, the big band, because that's just something that's in my blood from the time I was coming up. It has never left. I don't care what the economic conditions of the nation or the world become or how they affect how we live and work and whatever. I have to make a statement with a big band or there ain't going to be no statement.

Brower: What's the personnel that you're currently using in your big band?

Foster: I have trumpet section consisting of a lead trumpet whose name is Tony Marrero. I have Derrick Gardner. Kenyatta Beasley, who was one of the students I plucked out of the New School, and a guy named E. J. Allen, and Cecil Bridgewater. So that combination of youth and experience in that section as well as others. In the trombone section, Derrick Gardner's younger brother Vincent is one of my prominent members. Charles Stephens, a veteran of the original Loud Minority that goes back to the 1970s.

Brower: Another Central State guy too.

Foster: Charles Stephens?

Brower: Yeah.

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Foster: I didn't know that.

Brower: Yeah.

Foster: Why [laughs] didn't he tell me? William Lowe, a bass trombonist, and Bob Trowers, who came out of the Basie band with me. In the saxophone section I have Bruce Williams playing lead alto. Joe Ford is my regular second alto saxophonist. Bill Saxton, who's a stalwart and veteran of one of the earlier Loud Minority bands. I have a lady playing baritone saxophone, as I told you earlier, Fostina Dixon. On the other tenor saxophone is Keith Loftus, another young giant that I plucked from the New School. In the rhythm is the rhythm section you saw last night: Danny Mixon, Dave Gibson, and Gerald Cannon, if Earl May isn't available. That's it. We have a couple of vocalists that we like to work with. The male vocalist is Dennis Roland, who is a veteran of the Basie organization. He's based in Scottsdale, Arizona, so we don't get to do much, but he was on tour with us in Europe last year. He also worked the cruise with us recently, the SS Norway jazz cruise. On the female side there's Marlena Shaw, who is a wonderful talent who should be more widely recognized and for whom I hope I can help to bring that about, although on her own she should have the recognition, much more recognition than she has. That's just another one of those things. This society -- we fail to recognize some of our greater talents. That's it. That's the Loud Minority family.

Brower: What about your mid-size -- you have two mid-size bands, don't you? Or just one?

Foster: There was -- once there was Living Color, which was in -- that was in '70s. That was intended to be a bridge between the jazz and the so-called popular music. That was going to be my semi-commercial jazz-funk group, which played some straight-ahead-jazz and some more commercially styled music. That was abandoned. Then later on there was a group called Twelve, which was supposed to be a twelve-piece dance band. I think -- oh, my joining the Basie orchestra as leader just abolished all that. Then after I came out of the Basie band in 1995, when we reorganized, I decided that my dance band would only be ten pieces for economic reasons. It's easier to work ten than it is to work a larger number.

Brower: Are these ten people just ten people out of Loud Minority?

Foster: Exactly, yeah. Bruce Williams, Eddie Allen, Cecil Bridgewater, Vincent Gardner, Bill Saxton, Fostina Dixon, and my regular rhythm section and myself. That consists -- that's what the Swing Plus dance band consists of. So Swing Plus in effect is a descendant of Twelve and Living Color.

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Brower: What's the particular projects or plans that you have, or commissions or anything like that, that you can --

Foster: I don't have any commissions working at the moment, so my plans are to develop these three groups with the emphasis on the two larger groups, the big band, the Loud Minority, and Swing Plus, to expand their repertoires, and to make total musical statements through those groups, and to try to make some total theater presentations in which I have an old fashioned stage show with comedian, singer, dancer, big band. My daughter, Andrea Jardice may be of some help in that regard because she's a dancer. She's an aerobics instructor now, but she still wants to pursue a career in dance. She and a group of her choosing might be a part of this total theater concept that I'd like to explore.

I'm ambitious as far as writing new extended works like jazz suites. I'm working on a jazz mass as my tribute to God. That's an ongoing thing. And if time allows, maybe a jazz opera or a jazz -- of some mammoth jazz presentation with an extended ensemble, the jazz orchestra augmented by strings and instruments associated with a symphony orchestra. That's something special I really want to do.

I have somewhat of a minor connection in that regard. There's a German virtuoso clarinetist who commissioned me to write a string quartet piece, an arrangement on a string quartet piece featuring him in a jazz context. He's a classical virtuoso, and he wants to combine jazz and classical music. He's in the process of trying to learn how to play jazz solos on the clarinet. I wrote one string quartet arrangement of a jazz piece, *Tune Up*, for him. I'm hoping to receive a commission to write an extended piece for one of the German symphony orchestras, augmented by either a jazz quartet or a big jazz band.

Some of my more significant commissions recently have been by John Faddis and the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band. I've written several arrangements for that group, including two John Coltrane compositions, *Countdown* and *Giant Steps*, and about three or four other commissions for -- that's a repertoire orchestra that does tributes to either one musical period or one -- of some musical giant who had a lot to do with the development of American popular music. They have commissioned me to do several arrangements for them. That's quite a challenge, because that's a group of excellent musicians under the direction of John Faddis, who's the epitome of modern musicians, as far as I'm concerned.

But my largest ambitions focus around my own groups and what I'd like to do with them, so I'd like to commission myself. I don't expect that any of the granting organizations will ever be able to give me or anybody else like me a sufficient fellowship to do what I would like to do. I can't have a few thousand dollars and accomplish much at all -- pay for a few rehearsals and one performance.

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I need mega bucks to do what I'd like to do, but whether or not these mega bucks are forthcoming, I'm still going to keep working with my own original music and my own arrangements of music of the masters, such as Monk, Ellington, Coltrane, *et cetera*, Bird, and have this music available, so if somebody comes up, some philanthropist comes up and says, "Frank Foster, here's \$500,000. Take it and do what you will." So I'll --

Brower: You'll have a body of work available.

Foster: Yes.

Brower: How busy are you now touring in a given year? How much are you out on the road?

Foster: I'm not out on the road that much. It's just that I'm in New York so much, I can't go home to Virginia. As I said before, I'm at NYU five times a semester. That involves roughly two days, two to four days in a given month. Then I may be performing at Sweet Basil, or the Iridium, or Birdland with a group of my own, and sometimes perhaps the Blue Note. I don't go out on the road that much.

Brower: I guess what I mean by the road is, if you were looking at your calendar, out of 30 weeks that you're either some place as a clinician and your adjunct professor, or as a guest soloist, or working a club somewhere. How busy are you?, is my question.

Foster: In that 30-week period I'll do about eight to ten total artists-in-residencies, or working in a jazz club, or adjunct professorships, and at least -- seven or eight times I'll be out for a period of two to four days doing an artist-in-residency somewhere at some college, university.

There's a movement afoot at an institution called the Southwest Texas State University to have a Frank Foster Institute of Jazz Studies, which means that a couple of times a semester I would go down there and officiate over a jazz-education program. I don't know if it's going to happen or not, because I haven't been able to deal with it lately. I've been quite busy. Ever since moving to Virginia things have really opened up in the New York area, which seems to prevent us from getting home, which is bad in one sense and good in another sense. It's always good to be busy.

Brower: Are there areas other than what we've covered that you want to speak to before we bring this to a conclusion?

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Foster: I thought that you hadn't asked me about the second Basie period from 1986 to 1995. Actually I thought we had covered parts of that period in previous interviews, but if we haven't I'll talk about that.

Brower: Please.

Foster: When I took over the Basie orchestra in 1986, of course that meant a temporary end to the Loud Minority and the Living Color and Twelve, and the Non-Electric Company, because the Basie orchestra is a full-time thing. They're on the road almost 35 weeks a year, so there was no room for involvement in anything else.

That was rewarding in some respects and then in other respects it was unrewarding to the point that I finally had to leave after nine years. The rewarding aspects of it were the fact that I was working most of the time, receiving a regular salary, and working with an excellent group musically that was able to perform better than adequately anything that I might put in front of them. They're a wonderful group of musicians. Even with the personnel changes that have happened down through the years, they've remained a top caliber organization.

When I first joined I realized that I was -- the late Freddie Green was still alive. It was about upholding the Basie tradition and keeping it going. I came out with a philosophy that I wouldn't attempt to play anything -- to put anything in front of them that I didn't think that the old man, Basie himself, the Chief, would not have liked.

This philosophy lasted for a while, but then my creative juices got stirred up. I wanted to experiment a little more and write some things that could have been referred to as not typically Basie. There I had trouble with certain forces within the organization. That touched off a little feud that lasted almost until the end of my tour of duty with that band. It seemed that there's a core of old diehard Basie fans that want to hear only the old stuff. They want to hear *Corner Pocket*, *April in Paris*, *Little Darling*, maybe *Shiny Stockings*, and one or two other of those Neil Hefti things that everybody was so crazy about.

Brower: They want to hear the '50s Basie. They're even going back to the '30s and '40s.

Foster: Yeah, right. They want to hear the '50s Basie, the New Testament Basie. They thought that anything new or different was sacrilegious and just couldn't hang with it. On the other hand, there were critics and people who liked to see the band moving forward conceptually with new material, new compositions, new arrangements. I did a good many of those. One commission was even the *Count Basie Remembrance*, a suite of four pieces that were very much in the Basie vein that I have the advantage of being able to send all them out to schools and colleges. That was the best thing to come

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out of the experience besides just the reward of hearing a bunch of great musicians performing night after night. That was one of the best things.

But eventually the road got to me. I got tired of traveling and two and three flights a day. Then if you get on the bus you go 12 hours. All that got old real quick, and being away from my current family, I just didn't really -- I couldn't like it. Unlike the days of the '50s when we had clubs like Birdland and Storyville and Pep's in Philadelphia, and there was a place in D.C. where we'd come and play two and three weeks at a time, there are no places like that now.

Brower: Call it sit-down jobs?

Foster: Sit-down gigs. No places for sit down gigs. The most you can do now is two days, a Friday and a Saturday or a Monday and a Tuesday in one place. The rest of time you've got to be moving around on the road.

So with all these disadvantages, plus people writing me letters about, "Just play the old stuff. We don't want to hear none of that new stuff. Stick to Basie." You can't talk to a creative individual like that. You can't restrict somebody who wants to continuously create, so I decided I'm not the best leader for this band. This band needs somebody that can lead the band, but who doesn't need -- doesn't have to be creative all the --

Brower: It's almost like you were revisiting the very same issues that caused you to make the decision to leave in the beginning.

Foster: Right, exactly, yeah, only they were magnified in the fact that I had the disadvantage of being out front, having to program the music, and I didn't have the advantage of playing the piano. When Basie wanted to set a tempo, he'd doodle around on the piano until he found the tempo, so there was always music going on. When I'm standing out there, I have to count 1, 2, 1-2-3-4. So there were periods when there was a musical lull. That was a distinct disadvantage.

So all these, and what I call the war going on in the back streets of Basieland about these old versus the new --

Brower: Was this within the band itself, or are you talking about within aficionados?

Foster: It was within the band and from outside the band.

Brower: Do you care to be specific about it, or just leave it at a generalization?

Foster: I suppose the listening public would like to know the specifics.

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Brower: This is not the public. This is the historical record. To the extent -- if you think it is significant for the record, indicate who was thinking this way, that way, or --

Foster: There was one member of the band who really thought that I shouldn't stretch out doing new things and should stick to the Basie. That was a trumpeter, Sonny Cohen, who was the road manager. He actually almost harbored an attitude of not wanting to turn loose the reins. He felt like he was in control, and there were certain things he felt he had to do to maintain control. He would probably dispute these remarks now, but this is the way I felt. I finally -- it got to the point where I felt I had to have him terminated, because I didn't relish the idea of being in a power struggle.

Brower: You didn't want to have to watch your back with these guys. You wanted to pursue music if you were going to do it.

Foster: Yeah, yeah. Four years before I finally quit, he was terminated, but the battle kept going from without -- from outside the band. This is not to discredit him. He was the road manager. He had been the road manager for years, the road manager within the band. As such he probably developed a feeling of power and control that he may not have wanted to relinquish. I heard that Thad Jones, the late Thad Jones had problems in this regard.

I just didn't want to -- I don't like administrative problems, and problems -- they stand in the way of progress. So I eventually terminated myself, because I didn't want to be part of a group that didn't move forward. My own group -- I want to move forward. When I get tired of playing something, I'm going to play something new. It's just going to keep on evolving like that.

There are certain things in the Basie repertoire that have to continuously be played, because they were so-called hits of the '50s. *April in Paris*. You go somewhere, and you don't play *April in Paris*, you get run out of town. You don't play *Little Darling* or *Corner Pocket*, some critic says, "The band didn't play *Corner Pocket*, didn't play *Little Darling*. This is not the Basie band."

Then there's another band out there led by Illinois Jacquet that some critics thought sounded more like the Basie band than the Basie band. Not to discredit Mr. Jacquet, but I got tired of all this controversy and all this, what is Basie and what isn't Basie?, and who's Basie and who's not Basie? I said, I know I'm Frank Foster. There won't be any question of who my band belongs to, so I --

Brower: So did you regret going back to the band?

Foster: No, I didn't regret it. I wouldn't change that experience for anything in the world, because there were some wonderful experiences and some wonderful times.

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Brower: You mentioned that you fell back in love with swinging.

Foster: Yeah, that was one thing that happened. I started all over my love affair with swing. I decided once and for all on a definite path that totally excluded anything smacking of avant-garde.

Brower: In a big-band concept.

Foster: Yeah, right.

Brower: Because I would say -- I don't want to call what you played last night avant-garde, and I'm not saying it didn't swing, but it certainly had the force, the intensity, the dynamics that I would associate with -- because I think the avant-garde brought not only instrumental techniques, new procedures, new approaches to improvisation, that is I think bebop -- the improvisation process was based on certain variables that were typical in form, harmonic vocabulary, a body of songs, an approach that when the [inaudible] said, okay, we're going -- as you were saying earlier, we're not going to deal with time signatures, or we're not going to have -- or it's going to be purely spontaneous, or we're going to set up new -- we're going to create within the composition new problems. It's almost like new sets of problems or challenges for improvisers, new context, new arrangements out of which we're going to create. This will lead us towards some new music by simply changing -- either omitting procedures or changing the parameters of the procedures, or whatever, as a way of getting to some new ways of speaking and some new music.

But another thing that the avant-garde brought to the table was a certain level of intensity, almost ferocity, if you want to say it.

Foster: Yeah, both.

Brower: Yeah. A level of ferocity, a velocity, intensity, and a certain, can I say, lack of willingness to deal with bubble-gum type emotions, bubble-gum type -- I mean, like, we ain't taking no prisoners here. We're going down for the count.

Foster: Do you consider bebop coming out of bubble gum --

Brower: No, but I think it was -- no, I don't mean that at all, but I do think that Coltrane upped the ante. I do think that that was -- that point in the late '50s, something else jumped off. No, I don't think it was bubble gum, but I do think that his intensity, the standard he set -- you talked about the practice of lengthening the solos, the intensity of it, unrelenting. That kind of thing, I think, presented a whole 'nother level to musicians. I do think that's the case.

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Foster: A lot of that rubbed off on me, because I want to maintain intensity. I want to achieve the intensity. I want to be as gentle as a kitten in one measure --

Brower: That can be intense.

Foster: And roaring like a herd of lions in the next, but I don't want to get too far into the --

Brower: And some of it might be -- last night you played some bossa novas. They were almost a relief in the course of the program. I'm not going to say it was a welcome relief, because I wasn't objecting, but they served to balance some of what happens in your program. Say when someone says -- you come in with two scorchers, and you say, "Now it's time to play a ballad." But during that period with Trane, it might not be no ballads [laughs]. It might be him and Elvin for 30 minutes.

Foster: Right

Brower: There was some of that happening on the stage last night. I think the music as a consequence -- was a lot of what we thought of avant-garde -- after all, that was 30 years ago, 40 years ago, with nine -- sixty -- 1960, so it was almost 40 years ago when they fired those salvos that I think changed the serious music forever.

Foster: It did change it, but one thing I thought was that I viewed avant-garde as having been initiated by some people who couldn't deal with bebop, or who couldn't deal with harmonic structures, chord changes, because I heard these guys playing. I'm not going to name any names. In this instance I refuse to name any names, but I heard people playing, and it just didn't seem to relate to chord changes at all. Having come up in the bebop idiom, I couldn't hang with that at all. I said, there's got to be some chord changes and some structure to a song, and I have to be as free as I can be within that structure. But I didn't feel hampered. These guys felt hampered. They felt imprisoned by chord changes.

Brower: That's an interesting proposition, because it was clear that Coltrane came out of that experience. He had the training. He had the grounding, but it was almost as if he had exhausted -- that the sheets of sound seemed to be almost the final stage in exploring -- let's play every possibility we can on these changes. To do that you have to develop the facility to do that and the harmonic ear to move it through every key, every version --

Foster: Every tonality, yes. Coltrane was followed by a lot of people who didn't have that same ability to deal with those harmonic structures and chord changes. He had the background. He had the foundation, but a lot of people who tried to follow him didn't

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have that foundation, and their efforts didn't have the validity. I couldn't go along with them at all.

My second tour of duty with the Basie orchestra just solidified this concept. I've got to have musicality and what I consider to be musicality.

Brower: But yet don't you think that many of those devices and procedures and so forth that came in in that period have now become part of the vocabulary that musicians who are grounded take as -- even some who at that time objected to these musicians and called them charlatans? One of the things about jazz history is that it's always -- from hindsight seems to be a friendlier, more familiar -- familial process than it was in the time it actually happened, when it was quite contentious and it got personal.

Foster: Everything develops. Look how much better rap is now than it was when it first started out, or how much more advanced, or how much more involved, or complicated or whatever. Anything that stays around gets nurtured. People who come into the genre, who have a foundation, can take it further, can take it along, can nurture it.

Brower: Let me ask you this: do you think that your second period with Basie resolved the conflict within you? Because I sense that there was -- that in Frank Foster there was a struggle between the need -- out of profound respect and appreciation for the achievement and the tradition and the leadership of that orchestra -- to do everything that you could -- I'm sure there were points where you pushed the envelope, but pretty much did everything that you could and still be Frank Foster, to do what that required, but all of the time suppressing a whole other personality.

Foster: Yeah, I was suppressing a whole 'nother personality that was straining to get out. When people were saying, "We don't want to hear this new stuff. We just want to hear the old Basie," that was something -- I couldn't accept that, because my creative urges were just bulging. They're trying to get out. Whereas I learned to appreciate swing more and more, and I wanted to continue swinging, I realized I could not remain within the context of what could be termed as strictly Basie. It had to move out of there.

Brower: What did you feel when you heard that the old man had died? What was your reaction?

Foster: I felt like it was the end of an era and that there was a big hole in the music industry as a result. The fact that the band carried on -- and his right arm was still there, Freddie Green. That gave it some validity that carried it, or some momentum that carried it past --

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Brower: Some sense of legitimacy.

Foster: Yeah, past that period. But that stylistic presentation that he had at the helm, that was gone forever.

Brower: Tee Carson couldn't do it?

Foster: It was simulated adequately by Tee Carson. He gave it enough authenticity to keep it going. As long as Freddie Green was there, you had Tee Carson, then it could continue. They had already -- Sammy Nestico had already established himself as the Basie writer of the '70s and '80s. I didn't have a full appreciation of that, because I didn't think that his writing was typical Basie. I'm like people outside who thought my writing wasn't typical Basie, so I'm looking inside at him and I'm thinking, that's great stuff, but that's not my idea of what would be typical Basie. But that was -- with that in force, Sammy Nestico's arranging, Tee Carson at the piano, and Freddie Green still strumming the guitar, that was enough authenticity to carry it forward. Okay, when I took over --

Brower: Just one other thing, how much of a personal loss was it for you?

Foster: It was as though I had lost a relative, because I felt like he was a father in a sense. He used to call me "Junior" all the time. So he gave me a feeling of being one of his sons. He called Joe Williams -- he would refer to Joe Williams as his number one son. I almost thought of myself as being his number two son, because of all the things that he was able to teach me without actually teaching, but just through example and telling me, "Keep the pregnant nineteenth out of there and make it simple." That was how Basie schooled me.

Brower: Run that past me again now. Keep the who, what --

Foster: In the writing arrangements he would say, "We don't want too many of those pregnant nineteenth in there," and what he meant was that the thing is too busy, just being too busy.

Brower: Right. You got too much shit in this chord.

Foster: Yeah, too much going on. That's how he put it. "Pregnant nineteenth and keep it simple. Give me a simple life. It's the little things that mean so much." Those were -- that's the way he would -- that was his textbook.

Brower: So in other words, his instructions were succinct, but yet as pithy or substantive as his -- the little stuff he dropped.

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Foster: Right, right. They were simple and to the point just like everything else, like his statements, his musical statements and personal statements. A man of not a lot of words. So the personal loss was great.

When I heard the band under Thad Jones, I wondered how it was going to do. I wondered how long it would last. Thad took it in another direction, because Thad's arrangements were some of the most progressive of anyone this century. Thad kept it going until his health failed and he had to resign.

I thought when I took over I would uphold the Basie tradition. The fact that I wasn't overly successful in my professional life up to that time -- I was very unfulfilled. I didn't get to hear my band but once every seven or eight months, and I had -- just having a rehearsal was like pulling teeth to get everybody to come to a rehearsal. Was it a rehearsal for a particular gig? "Aw, no, there's no gig, I just want to rehearse the music." "If there's no gig in sight, why do you want to rehearse?" "I just want to hear the music." "I'll try to make it by, but I can't guarantee."

Brower: So it's too frustrating.

Foster: I was highly frustrated and just doing little gigs that didn't have anything to do with my ambitions, just to make money to pay the mortgage. Doing a gig, a club date or a gig with some guys who couldn't play that well, just for that \$150 or \$200, and going doing a workshop and a clinic and playing with some students --

Brower: So what kept you from snapping?

Foster: I had a good marriage going, a good marriage and a good partnership. She was encouraging me, "Do what you want to do. Do what you do best." She didn't say, go out and play some rock-and-roll, or go out and play some funk, or write some commercial stuff for this whatever. She encouraged me to do whatever -- what I wanted to do, what I did best.

So when I toured with the Basie band, I said, here's a regular job in front of a good organization that was going to play the music well. So I was all gung ho about upholding the tradition, not writing anything that the Chief wouldn't like. After about a year of being in this power struggle, I was beginning to get weary and frustrated again, but still even so I had these excellent musicians in front of me every night, playing this music very well and very satisfactorily, not playing it sloppy and not having me have to make speeches. "Man, you all sounded -- you all sucked. You all sounded horrible." It was no more of that. Because I had cursed my own band out several times about sounding bad and sounding sloppy. That's because I had too many mediocre musicians in there with the cream, and they took the level down.

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With the Basie orchestra I had a bunch -- everybody in there was the cream. So I got accustomed to this quality, while being unaccustomed to this power struggle and all these things that were restricting me from being creative. That became a point of more and more frustration as time went on.

But still I was falling in love with swing all over again and deciding that when I get out of this context and back into my own, the numbers are not going to last 20 minutes and a half hour for one number. I'm going to keep my numbers inside of five minutes, six minutes, and still have everybody playing solos and have a whole lot of ensemble going on, just the same as in the Basie orchestra, because in the Basie orchestra no tune lasted more than five minutes and most of them were over in three and a half, four minutes. I got accustomed to that. I got to liking the fact that you could play 10 to 12 pieces in an hour instead of just two to four pieces.

I used to hate it when I'd go into the Village Vanguard on Monday night to replace the Village Vanguard orchestra. They might have a road tour. The late Max Gordon would say, "Frank, bring your band in there on Monday night." I'd go in there. I'd open, and the first tune would take 15 minutes. In an hour set I played three to four tunes. I'd have about 12 to 15 pieces in my book, but not get a chance to play half of them in two sets. I hated this so much. I had too many open-ended solos, too many soloists, mediocre soloists playing too long.

So the Basie band came as a relief from all that. I was with the Basie orchestra long enough to be determined that when I get back into my own setting, there's going to be shorter solos, better solos. Get rid of the mediocre musicians. Hire me some good musicians and play this music right. Shorter songs, but still my concept, expanding on what I'd done with the Basie band.

Some of the pieces that I wrote for the Basie band, which were "non-Basie-like," I've pulled those out of the book. They're now -- they're the -- they are the -- they make up most of my present book, or a good bit of it. There were some songs like *Hampton Strut*, *Major Butts*, *Derricksterity*, and *Just the Way You Look Tonight*, Frank Foster-style arrangements that couldn't be classed as strictly Basie. I didn't let them stay in the Basie book and gather dust. I said, I'm going to pull all of them out. I said, I know the leader who comes behind me are not going to use these. So I pulled all of them out, and now they're in my own book.

Grover Mitchell, the current leader of the Basie orchestra who's doing a wonderful job and has got the band still sounding like a top-notch group. That's just as it should be -- I don't know how long the Basie band can endure, because when I lost Freddie Green in 1987, I said, oh, that's the end of the authenticity.

Brower: The last link.

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Foster: Yeah. That was the last link to it. The fight got harder from that point on. But now all it is, is to try to stay afloat with my own. I can go wherever I want to with my concept, with my group. I've got a bunch of wonderful musicians to help me get there, many of whom are leaders in their own right.

That's another difference between today's orchestras, the jazz bands, and those of the '50s and the '40s. When you had a band back in the '40s all the musicians were regular members of that band. None of them had bands of their own. That was their regular job. You worked however many weeks a year, and that was it. Now most bands consist of musicians who are all leaders of their own groups.

When I'm not working, Cecil Bridgewater is with somebody else. Eddie Allen has a group of his own. Bill Saxon has a group of his own. Dannie Mixon has his own trio. Dave Gibson plays with Diane Shurr and anybody else that will hire him. Bruce Williams plays with Stanley Cowell.

So most of the musicians in any given big band are either leaders of another group or are sidemen in another group. Some of them are leaders of their big band, but they all come together when whoever needs them calls. "Hey, I've got a gig, and I've got a series of rehearsals," and they all come together. That's the way it has to be. It can't be any other way now. You can't have -- because bands don't work often enough for a musician to have just that job. Freddie Green had that one job for over 40 years, but that's all over with. That was the end of an era when Freddie Green left here.

I don't regret that it's like it is now. I'm just happy that I have such a reservoir of wonderful musicians to pick from, because if I can't get somebody in particular I want in a given spot, I can find somebody else almost as good and in some cases better to replace him, because of the great reservoir of musicians out there now, some of whom are from the old -- from the '50s and the '60s, and '70s, and some of whom were youngsters like Kenyatta Beasley and Keith Loftus from the New School. That's why I will always help develop younger musicians, because I'm developing a farm team for the Loud Minority. There you have it.

Brower: Anything else?

Foster: I guess that's about it. As I said before, my main thrust will be with a big orchestra, with a big jazz orchestra, and trying to go into total theater with the old fashioned shows, singer, comedian, dancer, band, and maybe even a jazz opera if I get around to it.

Brower: It's 3:28 p.m. on

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Foster: November 22nd, the anniversary of --

Brower: The 22nd of November 1998. I guess we'll put a pin in it until further notice. Thank you, Frank Benjamin Foster. It's been a education to me to have a chance to dialogue with you about your life and your career. Thank you.

Foster: My pleasure.

[Transcribed by Barry Kernfeld from a digital copy of the tape reels]

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