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**LUTHER HENDERSON**  
*NEA Jazz Master (2004)*

**Interviewee:** Luther Henderson (March 14, 1919 – July 29, 2003)  
**Interviewer:** Eugene Holley  
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(prep chatter...)

**Holley:** Today is April 28, 1993. My name is Eugene Holley Jr. and we're interviewing Mr. Luther Henderson for the Smithsonian Oral History Jazz Project. Mr. Henderson, I want you basically to state your full name, your occupation, your birth date, etc.

**Henderson:** My full name is Luther Lincoln Henderson, Jr. I don't use the Jr. anymore but generally go by Luther Henderson. And my occupation is composer, orchestrator and arranger. And what was the other thing?

**Holley:** Place and date of birth.

**Henderson:** Place and date of birth. Born in 1919, Kansas City, Missouri. March 14<sup>th</sup> as a matter of fact.

**Holley:** And your race?


**Henderson:** I am Afro-American.

**Holley:** Your place of residence?

**Henderson:** I'm presently residing at 340 West 57<sup>th</sup> in New York City, area code 10019.

**Holley:** I guess we can start ... I want to take you all the way back to your origins. This going to be pretty much a chronological process. I think it would be easier if we just go that route. Talk about ... but before I get into that, just some other questions I want to ask. What is your religious affiliation?

**Henderson:** I guess you'd say general. I don't uh ... uh how shall I say?... proselytize or go for any particular one church, we go for unity, we go for the ...120th Street

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**Billie Henderson:** Riverside

**Henderson:** Riverside Church. My folks, my mother and father, were both associated with Abyssian Baptist Church. I guess that's it... I'm open.

**Holley:** When you were a child, were you a Protestant?

**Henderson:** Oh, Protestant, yes. uh hm.

**Holley:** Marital status?

**Henderson:** Married, yes.


**Holley:** How long you been married, may I ask.

**Henderson:** We've been married eleven ... she's looking at me .... yes, eleven years.

**Holley:** I'm gonna start off going back to Kansas City, even before that. Talk about your mother and father. I understand your father was an actor?

**Henderson:** Well actually, simply maybe by way of, tangentially and by default. My father and mother were both school teachers. They resided when I was born in Oklahoma. My father taught there, I believe pedagogy at Langston University and my mother taught in the public schools there. And at the time that I was to be born, I like to say that we were big and upwardly mobile family. We had connections at a hospital. It was decided that I was gonna be born in a hospital, you see, rather than what everybody did. So we went to Kansas City. There was a cousin or someone there, I don't really remember it. (chuckles) I don't remember it. But that's how that happened. Now my parents, as I said, were educated in the school, in the schools in the South. My mother mainly taught the grades below, below the high school level, elementary grades. And from Langston University ... his next appointment, my father, was in Elizabeth City, State Normal College there. Now as was the custom with many of the colleges, the black colleges, Negro colleges in that time, funding for education was very hard to come by and many times they would entertain - they did various things during the summer to raise money at the various chautauquas and fairs and so forth like that. As I understand it, my father and his brothers and sisters, four of them, that had something, that had a quartet called The Henderson Quartet which they would, I guess, sing various popular songs of the day or what it would be, but anyway would take and tour the fairs and chautauquas in the summer time to raise money for this school. And after North Carolina -- ??? about how he happened to be ?????? because by the time he got to North Carolina, my sister - I have just one sister who is now deceased - became college age and it was decided they wanted her to go to have an education in a northern college and so they wanted to go to Columbia. Well at which point, she was too young. Both my sister and I were, what shall I say, we were either in classes taught by our parents or in schools in which our parents taught up until ... quite a while.

**Holley:** Couple of questions: What are the names of your mother and father?

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**Henderson:** My mother's name was Florence Henderson. Maiden name was Black. Florence Black Henderson. She was born in College Springs, Iowa. She was part of, um, the one black family that existed in that small college town. And my father's name was Luther, Luther Henderson, Luther Lincoln Henderson. And as I told you I was a Jr. and when he passed, I dropped the Jr and so forth.

**Holley:** And Langston University, what ...

**Henderson:** It's in Oklahoma City. Isn't it? Oklahoma, right? Langston, Oklahoma.

**Holley:** You mentioned your sister going to Columbia.

**Henderson:** Yes.

**Holley:** Columbia University in New York?

**Henderson:** In New York, yes.

**Billie Henderson:** Hunter?

**Henderson:** Uh, she ... you're right that she did go to Hunter College. She got her Bachelor's from Hunter College but she got her Master's Degree from Columbia University. That's where it was. Thank you, Billie.

**Holley:** And what year was that?


**Henderson:** Oh God. What year was that? .... That was ... well now let's see, we moved to New York when I would say, around 1924 and she would have had to have been at least a year in high school because she was only 14 years old when she graduated from high school in North Carolina and she was too young to be matriculated in a college, they thought at that time and so she spent a year in a high school, a few years in a high school, I think Julia Richmond High School, and then she went to Hunter College. So that puts it '25 ... 4 years, '29 ... I suspect she graduated from Hunter around 1930 and probably from Columbia University probably the next year, '31 or something like that, and then went into teaching.

**Holley:** And when you, when your family moved to Kansas City, your father was still teaching?

**Henderson:** Well we didn't actually move to Kansas City. We just took a little side trip. The way they used to tell it to me was kind of like, you know, a holiday weekend or something like that. We went over, they had me, and then they came back and so it didn't, we still lived in Oklahoma.

**Holley:** I see.

**Henderson:** People, when I say Kansas City, they say: Oh you know ... because so many famous jazz musicians particularly have come from Kansas City, that area ... and they hear the name Henderson ... and Fletcher Henderson and Horace Henderson ... I would say that there's a possibility that we may have been, let's say sprung from the same plantation. My sister at one time did a ... research on the family and I think she came up

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with the fact that we had, that my grand, my great grandfather, or somebody like that in that area were slaves on a plantation owned by the Hendersohns, s-o-h-n, who were Dutch people, and that they were, if you can think of such, I guess, benevolent slaves owners in a way of speaking because they freed their slaves. Something like that. I don't know the specific details. At any rate, that's how come Kansas City and Oklahoma, as I said, we lived in Watonga. I remember that because my mother used to show me these little photos of a little house in Watonga and she used to -- after I became of an age like 12 or 13 when I didn't wish to hear stories about when I was a baby -- she'd tell me how she would take me out and show me all the flowers and ... This is a little red flower, and all that, and this is a yellow one. She used to tease me, said: Did you know when you were about two years old, you said that when you grew up, you were going to buy me a yellow piano because I showed you a yellow flower. I don't know what that means, but .... (chuckles)

**Holley:** Watonga's a city?

**Henderson:** Watonga's a city in Oklahoma.

**Holley:** And point of clarification, what is a chautauqua?

**Henderson:** I've never been to a chautauqua. I would suspect that it is perhaps an Indian, American Indian derivation of a name for a fair, a place where people come and ... not exactly like an amusement park. I really don't know the exact definition of it, but I know it is a place that people go in the summer for an outing. I suspect there might have been Ferris Wheels. I suspect there might have been booths. I just often heard them used sort of interchangeable between chautauqua and fair. So you better not take my definition for it, but that's what I've understood.

**Holley:** Okay. Growing up. Excuse me ... (someone comes in and adjusts the mikes and recording equipment. chatter....)

**Billie Henderson:** I wonder about chautauqua. I made a note. What is it ... chautauqua? I never heard of that.

**Holley:** (?) My mother's talked about that. My mother's from Oklahoma.


**Billie Henderson:** She talked about chautauquas?

**Holley:** My grandmother was from Oklahoma, she talked about that.

**Henderson:** Yeah. Yeah. Listen, just so far as this interview's concerned, this is ... Billie will ask me questions ... on the tape, if you know that I may ask her some questions some time or she may prompt me, if you don't mind?

**Holley:** No problem. Okay. Great. I was asking you about your life in Oklahoma as you knew it. I really, before we get into that, I want to talk about your father as an actor. For someone in the arts, what effect do you think that that had on you?

**Henderson:** What effect my father being quote-unquote an actor? Um ... well let me see, how should I answer this. My father, as well as my mother ... as were most families,

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we were all active in entertaining ourselves. Now when we went to New York, my father did not come immediately and he became attracted to some of the musical activities that were going on then and one of them was a thing called Old Man Satan. At that time a play called Green Pastures had made quite some splash and a fellow by the name of Donald Hayward had written the music and the lyrics, I guess, to a thing called Old Man Satan which was supposed to be sort of like and now we give you, you know, this is a sequel, or whatever it would be. The point is that his involvement in singing and acting – and my mother's involvement in music – was sort of ... part of a way of life, I guess you'd say, so that it was natural for me to have that in my life whether I went to do it or not. I'm not sure whether I patterned myself after my father as an actor, how did he affect me as an actor. Actually, I think that the most profound way that he affected me, as I look back on it, was that he decided that he would give up his tenure at Elizabeth City State Normal College to come to New York and be in Old Man Satan. He was in the chorus. I don't think he had a speaking part but he was very excited about that, evidently, and much to the chagrin of the rest of my family, he just didn't go back home, didn't go back to work that September, you see? And so I think that maybe I'm kinda like that too, I don't know. It's such a gratifying activity to express oneself through the arts, particularly through music, I think. And I guess that his doing that in New York, his giving up the job in Elizabeth City, I guess the fact that the Henderson Quartet ... I just vaguely remember, I remember I couldn't have 3, 4, 5 years old ... but you would harmonize. I remember my mother and my sister and my father, we would have parties. They'd say: Okay, you take the soprano and you take the alto, you take this and so forth. And they would sing songs, you know. One was called Melindy Lou. I don't know why that sticks in my mind. Lindy, Lindy, Sweet as the melon vine. They would do this in harmony. The effect of my father ... I would say that you would call him more a singer than an actor. As I look back on it, I guess, I'm sure that I admired him sticking to his guns in spite of the fact that it was economically unfeasible for him to do so. But by the same token, he did then, because ... okay, this is another thing I just thought about ... it's rubbed off on me because I think that my father really thought that it didn't matter too much what or where he did or what, that he had the wherewithal to make it wherever he did. And where it was inconvenient, let's say, not to have tenure at the State Normal School, still this was something that he wanted to do and besides, he would just get a job in New York teaching if he wanted to do that.


[Conversation about the microphone's position, Luther getting to close.]

**Holley:** I just want to clarify a couple of things. Elizabeth City ...

**Henderson:** North Carolina.

**Holley:** Okay. And siblings. I want to make sure how many siblings you have.

**Henderson:** One. My sister Thelma. Thelma, who's now deceased, was ten years older than I.

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**Holley:** I want to ask you about your earliest musical memories from ... do you remember any of the so-called Territory Bands from Oklahoma?

**Henderson:** No. I don't think that I remember ... if we're talking about jazz, the only thing I can remember is ... is from New York. I'm in New York from age 4 or 5 and so that I wouldn't have any real memory of any personal experiences .... I never ... my first jazz recollections have to do with, I think with my mother trying to play some kind of rag time, I forget now what that was. My mother played the piano. She played piano in assembly in the public schools. She'd play the marches, you know ... dunt-da-da-da ... Souza marches and stuff like that. And she had a piano piece called ... I don't know, I think it's called Titania or something. It was bombastic, I know. I just thought it was wonderful ... probably ... anyway. The uh ... I forgot where I was going just that minute. What'd you just say?

**Holley:** I was asking you about your earliest memories of ...


**Henderson:** Oh yes, in jazz. Now the other part of it had to do with whatever we would hear on the radio or ... and I think that really my first important jazz memories have to do with the pre-teen ages and teen ages when I was living in New York and we were going to high school, junior high school, and runnin' with the block gang. On my block gang was a fellow by the name of Mercer Ellington whose daddy had a pretty good band at the time, if you understand.

**Holley:** Before we get into that, tell me exactly when you, where you moved to in New York. Where did you live?

**Henderson:** Where did I live? My first address in New York was 203 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street. And don't ask me how I remember that! Because we moved a lot of different places. And the next one that I remember was on what they now call, used to call, Strivers Row on 139<sup>th</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues. And for a while, I remember 204 Seventh Avenue because that was there also, big place was there. I've lived in lots of different places in New York. The biggest portion of my growing up came on what we called Sugar Hill, I guess, because we lived at 80 St. Nicholas Place and 79 and ... various places up there and that was the venue for my business with block gangs. We'd all get out in the back yard and play stick ball. At least they all did; I didn't, I wasn't so good at that, you know. But anyway.

**Holley:** We're talking around the period of 1924, '25 when you're first come in to New York?

**Henderson:** Uh, that's with, yeah, '24, '25. I guess we would talk about the next 3 or 4 years 'cause I seem to remember that by the time we moved up to the Hill, it must have been a matter of maybe 4 or 5 years. I don't remember exactly, but it seems to me that ... um ... my sister ... was ... her first job, got a job teaching in Texas ... and I think we were up on the Hill by the mid-'30s. I know that we were certainly there before that because in 1935 I graduated from Evander Child's High School and I'd been there four

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years. So we had to be there by the '30s, 1930s. Yes, I did four years there, so I suspect that we moved there to that section around 1929, '30.

**Holley:** What was it like, like most black Americans at that time, you're moving from a Southern environment to the Northern environment. What was it like, that great migration? And what effect did it have on you as a black person?

**Henderson:** Not a very good question, one which I don't really have very good answers for because ... (pause) my family seemed to be pretty complete. I never seemed to be quite ... we, my mother was a member of the Abyssinian and she belonged to the Negro History Club, uh, Association and we were, they were always entertaining people like W.E.B. DuBois. There wasn't, we really were not aware of the fact that we were from a race whose, who the rest of civilization had their foot on their neck, you know? That we understood, but that didn't seem to make any difference, do you understand? And I'm not quite exactly sure how to express that, other than that we were seemingly complete there with ourselves. We did whatever we had to do. It was completely understood, I remember, from one of the experiences and this is a family thing, was that this was what we did. We were of this echelon of society where, for instance, it was unthinkable for any child of Luther and Florence Henderson not to have a college degree. That wasn't part of reality. I make a joke about it sometimes; I tell people, I say: I had to go get a degree because if I didn't, I'd think I was gonna get excommunicated from **something**, I don't know what. But at any rate, the effect of moving ... see, I'm trying to think of what effect it had on me and I don't think ... I think it just had the effect of making me more ... self-assured in some way.

**Holley:** More exposed.

**Henderson:** Maybe so. ... I uh ... I must think about that sometime more. Billie, you were gonna say something, weren't you?

**Billie Henderson:** Well, yes. You were telling me that in your home, that you entertained many of the people involved in the Harlem Renaissance and it was quite stimulating.


(overlapping voices)

**Henderson:** Yes

**Billie Henderson:** and you didn't think about a wider society

(overlapping voices)

**Henderson:** Yeah. That's true. This is what ... and I'll tell you what else. Now it turned out later that one of our family's best friends was Eubie Blake. Now, you know, Eubie was quite a bit older than me (chuckles), you understand. He was part of my family's ... so that obviously jazz was in – when I say jazz, we're talking about music that was in that circle too – I don't think that my family was particularly thrilled about me going into jazz music per se or to music in general, but I must say, to their credit, that they decided since

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I wasn't going to be the mathematician that I thought I was going to be, that they would ... hm... that I was not a scholarship person, they paid my way to the Juilliard.

**Holley:** Two quick questions: You talked briefly about some of the people your family was around. You mentioned W.E.B. DuBois. How many other people from the Harlem Renaissance.

**Henderson:** One of the big ones, Woodard ... What's the great history?

**Holley:** Carter...

**Henderson:** Carter G. Woodson. Carter G. Woodson was one of the great ones. And of course ... I know that, as I said, W.E.B. DuBois who had the crisis and so forth ... uh ... there was an Adam Powell Sr. (chuckles), contrary to popular opinion, Adam Powell Jr. just didn't, didn't come on the scene, and my mother was very much involved in that area. Who are the other people. There were other people involved. You know when you're a kid, you sometimes don't, it's only in retrospect that you kind of remember the people were that who are now maybe in the history books and so forth that you were associated with.

**Holley:** Getting back to your earliest musical memories. When did you first start hearing this music and when did you first start noticing this was jazz; what kind of effect did it have on you?

**Henderson:** Well, I guess it was, I guess it was during the junior high school days and high school days with the gang and listening to Duke Ellington, Count Basie, our band, Andy Kirk would come through sometimes. We had what we called social clubs. I won't go into what that (chuckles) implied. But the point is that, for instance, the Templars were, when we got to high school – this was the name of our group – and we had ... no, this was The Personality Eight Merry Makers. Can you believe anybody was that ... (chuckles) ... but any rate.


**Holley:** Can you say that for me one more time?

**Henderson:** The Personality Eight Merry Makers. Now you ask Mercer about this. (chuckles) He was one of the chief ones. Anyway, we hired one of the most popular bands to play a dance at the Renaissance Casino. And the leader of that band was Charlie Barnett. And we were ... 'cause he had just put out Cherokee; it was a big arrangement at the time. And I don't know, but we may possibly have been, if not **the** first, one of the first black organizations to hire a white jazz band to come play in Harlem. That's an interesting thought, isn't it. I hadn't thought about that in a long time. And if I remember correctly, I have to ... I think that Honi Coles

**Holley:** Honi Coles, the tap dancer.

**Henderson:** And the group, what's the group?

**Billie Henderson:** Copacetics

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**Henderson:** Copacetics. They either taught us a routine or did a routine. I think Billy Strayhorn wrote some music, or maybe I wrote ... no, I don't think I was up to ... maybe I'm just confusing the times. But I do know that, speaking of the times, the music that was involved, Charlie Barnett may have been a little bit later than that, but I know that we hired him. I know that the music that we heard, that I was impressed with anyway, was, there was the jazz music where I was so impressed with Fats Waller, my god! And of course, later on when I started runnin' around with Mercer and we would, I get to go and hear the bands sometimes, you know, and different ones and musicians ... I don't know if Mercer ever went with me on this, I finally at some point during ... now I'm taking a block of time from like maybe from the time of 11 or 12 in through maybe 15 or 16 where I started listening to Coleman Hawkins and Basie and Jimmy Lunceford was one of my big favorites and like that. And whereas I took music lessons, you know, I took piano lessons most of the time. But I gave it up because I was enjoying that other and I didn't think that I needed to play piano 'til I realized that I was not going to skate through City College without studying a lot, particularly taking a course in mathematical analysis and differential calculus and all that sort of stuff. It did not go with staying out late at night and going down to the Village and listen to Boogie Woogie. You can understand that. That would be a conflict. Yeah, what were you going to say?

**Holley:** What I was gonna say was ... how old were you when you started, going back to, I'm trying to go back

**Henderson:** I understand.

**Holley:** when you started piano lessons. How old were you?


**Henderson:** Oh, I guess as a child, very early, as a baby, you know, 4 years old or something like that.

**Holley:** What kind of music

**Henderson:** Just, you know, things like little children's songs that you would get. I don't even remember. I was what you call a sporadic piano student. I was a good boy. It was considered ... Mudsin said: I've got a nice lady's gonna teach you the piano. So I went to piano. And I liked, you know. But I was not consumed with it. It was nice, it was okay, and it seemed to be fairly easy for me to do, so that I can't say ... and I did that throughout most of the life there I remember.

**Holley:** Can you just repeat what you just said?

**Henderson:** I said I did that throughout most of the life, my musical life, that I was starting and stopping piano lessons. I remember that the most memorable experiences that I have come through all of that period. I've got to lump it all from the time I'm 4 years old to the time I was 16 as the various things that I seem to have been exposed to by my mother and father too because by this time Pops has done Old Man Satan and he was with the Negro Black Opera Group.

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**Billie Henderson:** The National Black Negro Opera. No, the National Negro Opera Company.

**Henderson:** Something like that. And anyway, every once in a while she would take me to something that seemed to have made a difference, like for instance she took me to see Padereski. Padereski was appearing at Madison Square Garden at some point, I guess maybe early '30s.

**Holley:** Is this the classical pianist?


**Henderson:** The classical pianist, the one who is also, he was also ... was he the president of Poland? He was a ... but at any rate he came to the United States to I guess raise money for whatever. He was a fantastic pianist and he was a composer as well and one of his most famous compositions was sort of a ... music thing called Minuet in G. dum-dum-budley-um-bum. Now, I had been taking music lessons and I guess, I don't know, just conjecture, that my mother knew I guess that Padereski had written Minuet in G, she didn't tell me that, and she said: Oh we're gonna go see Padereski in Madison Square Garden. We sat way up in the seats and there was this one big spot light in the ring. They brought the boxing ring, it used to be there, big piano and this giant of a man seemed to approach it. He had a loooong mane of hair which was impressive to me at first. I thought, I imagined he looked like Jesus Christ, the one that I had been ... thought he looked like. And he played, I loved what he playing was nice, but then he did an encore. What was his encore? It was the Minuet in G. Boy, that sealed it for me. I said: Mudsin, he's playing my piece, playing my piece! And wow, that was impressive. That was good enough to keep me strong in music lessons for oh maybe a year, you know, before my interest sort of waned again.

**Holley:** Interesting, already at this point in your development, you're involved with European classical music and jazz.

**Henderson:** Yes.

**Holley:** Was it hard for you to go from one to the other? You learned European music through teaching but how did you learn jazz?

**Henderson:** By listening to the radio and records. Jazz (chuckles) is an atmospheric condition. You know, you're in it. That's where it is. The only way you cannot be aware of it is (pause) you'd have to be dead, I guess. You just can't be ... it's like air. You must breathe it. It's all around you. It's there. And it is to me a performance ... jazz is a performance tradition. One of my favorite treatises lately is that jazz is a verb. Everybody treats it as a noun. This one plays jazz. Now all this one does, in my opinion, jazz is something that's done. Real jazz. And I invented a word ... I didn't invent it but when I was teaching a course, I would call it that there were two different kinds of improvisation, 'cause that's what jazz is. One is called, I call one "jazzicalization," the other "classicalization." But the reason that jazzicalization is so popular is because it deals with straight, one-to-one, right from the roots, right from the ground communication. No refinement. It achieves its purpose without benefit of any societal

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refinements, maybe you would say. I'm not fully developed on this but I do know that the reason that jazz is so popular, the reason it affected me, now in retrospect I know, is because it is, is not just reflected, it IS the heartbeat of humanity in a way, because the cradle of civilization has been found to be, has been researched, not by black people, to be founded, the dawn of America, mankind, happened in Africa in the tropic zone where this drumbeat, this African sounds, these sounds of the earth, these things originated. So this is where it all comes from. It happens that that has stayed there, the people that have been there, that origin of birth, would be expected to be more fundamental exponents of that elixir of life or whatever you would call it. It's only natural. And it goes to other places. It goes up to Iceland, it goes to South America, it goes to wherever it be, and it becomes refined and redone and reinvented according to the needs and the communications involved in those different places. I don't want to go into a whole treatise here about these things, but the fact is that you're asking me about how I felt about the two things. I don't think that there is a separation. I

Tape #1, Side 2


**Henderson:** I think that the Minuet in G may be just as jazzy as Fats Waller's Jitterbug Waltz. Do you understand? They're both in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, they both have the same effect, and when I say effect, they have the same function. Happens that one is illuminated through a more basic ... well, I don't know ... through a more basically evident tradition, through a more primal emotion, through a more primal communication. I'm gettin' confused, but you know the communication is one-to-one and when it's primal – that's where I call it one-to-one – when it begins to be built upon and subdivided and moved around and used for different purposes. You use a piece of it for this, for this ... then it sometimes mutates itself, becomes a mutation and that particular development becomes in itself a wellspring, a thing. I think this is what's happened that we now call it jazz because it has sprung, we know that it has sprung from this root, but now it's in such usage and what I felt when I'm listening to the Minuet in G ... now all this in retrospect, I must say I wasn't quite so philosophical then ... is the same vision. I am listening to it through this black Afro heartbeat that we just discussed and the fact of a separation is unthinkable. It's like separating the mother and the daughter or the mother and the children. It can't be separated. Anyway, I won't go on.

**Holley:** That's great. So you're between ages of 6 to 14, you're learning both approaches to the same thing.

**Henderson:** I would say so.

**Holley:** From the jazz side, you mentioned Fats Waller. What about piano styles during that time? I know that you mentioned ragtime. What about Stride? What about people like Lucky Roberts?

**Henderson:** Well now there were all ... when I came up, what a lucky time, what a lucky time. There were people that did all kinds of things. You know stride piano, James P. Johnson and Willie the Lion were great exponents of that. Fats Waller I think studied

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with Willie the Lion or Fats Waller was taken under his wing. The piano styles were being developed. This was not the only one. There was Clarence Prophet who could stride pretty good. There was a fellow that played Anitra's Dance, I forget his name now, he's from New Jersey, played, did the the Anitra's Dance in stride style. It was Herman Chittison. There were a lot of these people. They were just all coming out of the woodwork when I came up. And so this ... and that's just piano people now. We're not even talking yet about the Charlie Parkers and the Dizzy Gillespies and drummers, Klook ... what's his name?

**Holley:** Kenny Clarke

**Henderson:** Kenny and all those people who were even more basically exhibiting this primal communicative thing that I was saying, but they were building, extemporizing, refining it and all that sort of thing. They refined it to such an extent, I mean, building particularly I think building horizontal, I mean building vertically with the chorus structures and so forth like that. And the influence of – how shall I say – the marriage that happened ... they were there, the children of the marriage that happened when slaves were brought here back in the slavery times and their culture, supposedly the European culture was impinged upon them and on theirs. As it turns out, it is the Afro musical culture which has illuminated and shaped and informed the entire structure of the European structures that have come up. I mean ... you've got to stop me when I start going off on to too many things.

**Holley:** I don't want to interrupt you 'cause I'm listening to what you're saying. I just want to get us back to specific points. I want to talk more about your career building at this point and some of your influences. We talked about the stride piano.

**Henderson:** Stride piano and mostly Fats, I loved Fats Waller and I loved Art Tatum. As a matter of fact, at one point when I, before I finished the Juilliard School, I was going down to a place called George's Tavern, working with a guy by the name of Leonard Ware who used to be, who was one of the, he had been hired one time by a group called The Six Spirits of Rhythm who ... I won't go into ... they were Virgil Scott and they were entertainers and people that did things with things at hand. Virgil played whisk brooms. You know whisk brooms is not listed in the list of instruments that people have but that's the way they played it anyway. They would take me and we would go to a place, particularly a place like Ruben's way after everybody finished. Ruben's after hours joint. Musicians would come down there maybe 1, 2 o'clock in the morning and just blow. And I can remember going down there and hearing Ben Webster, hearing Coleman Hawkins, all these people. I was not supposed to be out that late, you understand? But there I was, you know. And I remember hearing Art Tatum. Well Art Tatum is, he redefines the business of jazz piano playing. So he was a great influence. I think that one of the things he influenced me, believe it or not, to do was to write music rather than to play it because (laughs) no chance for me to get to play like this guy was playing, you know. But he was one of the ... the other influences that I have used, I use all those sources that came in on me at that time like there's Erroll Garner. Now Erroll Garner played little chunky-chunky-

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chunk style. But his was not like Fats Waller's but it was in my head the same thing. Yes, you were getting ready to say something?

**Holley:** In trying to interpret what you're saying for the people that are listening, would you say Erroll Garner's style was more chord oriented than Fats Waller was chord or more thicker?

**Henderson:** Uh ... ask the question once again.

**Holley:** Did you interpret Erroll Garner's style more chordal than Fats Waller?

**Henderson:** Uh ...

**Holley:** More impressionistic?


**Henderson:** No, I interpreted as more percussive than Fats Waller. I interpreted Erroll Garner's style as being more (pause) Basie rhythm guitar style.

**Holley:** Freddie Green.

**Henderson:** Freddie Green. I interpreted Fats Waller as being an outgrowth and including this stride piano which came from Willie the Lion Smith, so forth which in turn, I think, came from the imitation of a band, particularly the oompa band, the bands that oompa-oompa-oompa, maybe in the park and so forth. And the piano became an orchestra with the whole rhythm, the drum ... the stride is essentially a conversion of a rhythmic pattern and so is Erroll Garner's guitar style a conversion of a rhythmic pattern. In that fact, they seem to me to have a similarity and a kinship which I think I've proved to myself because when I was asked to do Ain't Misbehavin' knowing full well that I could not execute Fats Waller throughout the whole piece and that there are other things that I do, I used a little bit of everything. I used Fats Waller primarily every time I got a chance ... but I would put a little Erroll Garner in, I'd let a little Chunky Chunk go in because that was okay, I think Fats Waller would not have objected to that, and put a little Art Tatum in on some of the slow pieces because I don't think that Fats Waller would have objected to that either. I think they all kind of go together. But I don't know. Have I gone too far from your question?

**Holley:** I want to get back to your earliest gigs. What were your earliest gigs, who did you play with?

**Henderson:** Well let me see. Oh, I'll tell you one notable one. When I was in high school, I decided that I was gonna copy everything that Jimmy Lunceford's band did. I loved Jimmy Lunceford's orchestra. I felt I needed a band to do it so I got 9 guys together and we had a nine-piece band and we tried to get gigs around Manhattan. And we got one at some place called the St. Nicholas Palace on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, St. Nicholas Avenue, up on the second floor. And I had been rehearsing with some guys – can't think of their names now ... with the exception of this one guy who was my trumpet player whose name was Dukie Divine. And Dukie Divine got his nickname Dukie because his uncle was Bubba Miley and Bubba Miley was the first trumpet player that Ellington ever had and they

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called him Dukie. He willed that horn to him. Anyway plus which I would write these arrangements and Dukie was of such a nature that when we would rehearse, I'd say to Dukie: No, no this is the wrong note; do so and so and so; play me a C or so forth. It was not until several rehearsals later that I realized that Dukie didn't read a note of music. His ear was taking him through all of those parts. Anyway, at the St. Nicholas Palace, came time for us to work and Dukie was not there. And so, somebody suggested that there was a very sharp trumpet player around that maybe would do the gig. I had so much trouble with Dukie, I didn't think you could get somebody just go and sit in the gig and play it, you know? However, they got him. And he played it. And he was fantastic. And his name was Dizzy Gillespie. I find out later he turns out to be Dizzy Gillespie. At any rate, that was one of my earliest gigs. Some of the other gigs, people I've worked with, I don't know. I guess the earliest gigs had to be when I was in college really and they mainly were ...

**Holley:** I was gonna say, before we get to that one, I want to make sure, give me the name of the high school and when you graduated.


**Henderson:** Evander Child's High School in Bronx, New York. Graduated in 1935.

**Holley:** Okay. Now, something that's really stuck out in my research, you went to Juilliard. Tell me ... I don't imagine many black people went to Juilliard at that time.

**Henderson:** Not a lot, no.

**Holley:** Tell me how you got to Juilliard and what effect did Juilliard have on your development as a musician?

**Henderson:** How'd I get to Juilliard. I got to Juilliard this way. I was playing as I told you, playing music with Leonard Ware and his trio and with various people going around all this time during high school days. I happened to have gotten a hundred percent in a geometry regents in high school and I thought that that was a message from God. That meant it's okay, this is what I was going to do. So I didn't worry about it anymore. I kept on doing my little gigs and doing my little stuff and I got to City College. Plus which the fact is my grades were sufficient for me to get into City College which was a free college at that time. And that meant that I could do all the things my family had to do. I did not reckon with the fact that they were going to then give me integral calculus and differential calculus and things called mathematical analysis, along with things I didn't care about like history and all these sort of things. And it came as a rude awakening that I couldn't just go to class and listen to the lecture and come home and not do the homework and get back and do right, you understand? You had to study. And so, okay, it came to pass that I had to change this course or else run the risk of getting put out of City College. And a lady by the name of Carrie B. Overton – how'd I pull that name out? I haven't thought of that name in a long time – Carrie B. Overton who was a friend of my mother's, I went to her and told her that I had to go to Juilliard and couldn't she talk to ... she was a perennial student. You know what I mean by that? There are people, that's what they do, they study. And she must have been a pretty good teacher, I don't know, I didn't study

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with her. But anyway she talked to my mother and I had talked to her. I really wanted to go to music school and I investigated about how to get in and carry over ... evidently, did whatever investigation had to do about what the requirements were ... anyway, all I know is that because of Carrie B. Overton, my folks agreed to send me to the Juilliard at their own expense and the hitch was that I would have to pass, I would take a music education course because that was the only course given at the time that carried with it a Regent's degree, college degree. So, that being the case, at that time you were required to play a representative mini-concert, 25 minutes or so in your major instrument 'cause they were not responsible, anything you wanted to do further with your own major instrument, you did on your own, it was not included in your classes, you see? So, I went to the Juilliard - - and now thankfully - in default because I didn't wish to be excommunicated, you know? The transfer was made. I had to start over again because my record was at the City College was not the pristine, pure 89+ or 90 (chuckles) that it had been before.

**Billie Henderson:** You were a math major.

**Henderson:** I was a math major in City College but the major doesn't count. What counts is is it in the 90% percentile or not, you see?


**Holley:** And you were in Juilliard from when to when?

**Henderson:** From 1938 to 1942.

**Holley:** What effect did Juilliard have on your overall development?

**Henderson:** In retrospect I'd say it has an enormous effect. First of all, it gave me a working knowledge, cursory though it may have been in certain things, but a working knowledge of every instrument in the band because I was to be expected to teach these beginning courses in each one of those things, you know? It gave me a security, which I'm sure is what was in my family's mind, of having a college degree with which in case I didn't get any work as a musician, I could find work in academia. And this added to my security in my overall work, plus which as a more direct nature, if you look back on it, by this time now I'd been hangin' out with Mercer and the gang pretty much, and Ellington, so when I graduated from Juilliard, Ellington gave me my first real job which is ... Ellington didn't want, he didn't just want them to get up and dance to his music. You were supposed to listen to his music, I guess, I don't know, but whatever it was, it meant that he had to have a lot of arrangements of standards and other things like that so I don't think I was the only one. I think he hired other people to just fill up a lot of space, to write these 2 or 3 hours worth of music. I got to do about 4 or 5 arrangements. And so the point is that though having come to him that way, he then decided, or maybe he decided beforehand, that since I was a graduate of the Juilliard school that I should be his classical arm. That's what he used to call me. I guess that's what I was because 4 of his quote unquote larger works were things that I arranged, rearranged, reorchestrated and so forth like that.

**Holley:** We're gonna talk about that later.

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**Henderson:** But this what, the value of the Juilliard was that I got that classical education which I would have done without. Actually the truth of the matter, if I had to do it over, there would be only one thing that I would do and that would be that I would not have gone for a Regent's degree because I would have spent the time that I did learning pedagogy and all those things and the time that I did in my examination and something else like in composition.

**Holley:** Just so I can recap, from high school to Juilliard, the kinds of bands, just give me, just a brief overall view of what size bands you were working with when you were doing your early ...

**Henderson:** From high school to Juilliard?

**Holley:** Right.

**Henderson:** Okay. Longest range was the trio called The Leonard Ware Trio. Oh well that's before. In high school ... oh, in high school I had this 9 piece band that I was telling you about. And we played various places. You know, if they could only afford a trio, we play a trio at the Poussepattuck or whatever, you know, some place like that. Other type bands, I've played or wrote for ... this is, well I just can't get the chronology, excuse me, right but if you're gonna go from the time that I was in high school through 'til when did you say?

**Holley:** Your graduation from Juilliard.


**Henderson:** Then, I was written for ... (pause) I guess just that band. I'm trying to think what bands I did ... I didn't do much other than ... I'm trying to think whether or not Mercer and I got a band together. I don't think we had a band together then. But I guess the main thing was with the trio, Leonard Ware Trio, and in high school just my own bands, I think. We did some, not arranging, but I know that one of my block gang who was a lady name of Carmen McRae and she was gettin' around pretty good with some of the ... she was friends with Billie Holiday and so forth. And we wrote a song called "Dream of Life", the two of us, which Billie Holiday recorded for us back there in those high school days. That was kind of notable. Trying to think of anything else.

**Billie Henderson:** What about the Apollo Amateur Night?

**Henderson:** The Apollo Amateur Night, I think ... see the Apollo Amateur Night had to happen during the time that I was in the Juilliard.

**Holley:** It says here it happened in 1934.

**Henderson:** Okay. Now, I'll tell you why I have ambivalence about that because ... oh, it could have because I knew Tealeen at that time. I shouldn't even have used that word. That was my first wife, okay, which I won't go into, but (chuckles) ... uh, yes, that would possibly be because this would be then before I got out of high school and that's likely it because my two partners were Jimmy Brown on guitar, Teddy Thompson on saxophone and I remember that we played "Sweet Sue" in the key of B-flat and when it came time


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for my chorus, somebody said: Go on play it hunky. I was bent over, I guess, you know my bad posture. So it would have had to have been about that time. Now what about that, that was just again some member of my block gang, well yes my block gang and we would get together and try to play something. Everybody, you know, we liked to do that and we decided we would try out for the Harlem Amateur Hour. I guess, my memory is shady on that except that I know we won \$10 and an engagement at the Poussepatuck Democratic Club. I remember that name Poussepatuck (chuckles) because it was on Lennox Avenue and I know ever remember hearing any such name as that before or since.

**Holley:** Also, since Juilliard, talk about your experiences in the Navy band and Great Lakes in 1944, 1946.

**Henderson:** Okay, where shall I start. Well I'll just talk and you tell me when you get enough. First of all, my experience with the U.S. Navy Band was two things: wonderful and terrible. All right? First of all, terrible because I had just been hired by Duke Ellington to write music for his band which was the height of everything as far as I was concerned but I had to go to the Navy. Now, when I went into the Navy, I said Okay, that I would make the best of it. I guess I was kinda like my father at that particular point 'cause I just felt that I was pretty good, you know. I guess I had a really colossal ego when you come right down to it. But at any rate, it soon gets knocked out in the Navy, I'll tell you that. But anyway, what was bad about, that was what was bad about it, I had to do that and then I had to be part of what we called the Black Navy, the Negro Navy. It was segregated when I got in there. I was used to that. This is what we came up with but I thought that as long as I was doing something that would be, that the book said was if you get promoted for from Seaman 3<sup>rd</sup> Class to Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class to Petty Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class and so on up the line, that we're all right, just happened to be one in the Black Navy. However, that didn't happen because at the time when I went in, there is the Happy Hours, we were writing for bands that had ... this is the wonderful part, I'm gonna tell you the wonderful part ... I came in there with, they had a 30-piece, I don't know how many pieces we had like 7, 8 brass, we had about 6,7 saxophonists, all these separate ... and another section that was just clarinets, flutes and symphonic orchestration, we had a whole string section, all these were in our quote unquote jazz band. And we had to write music to be played there at our Happy Hours and when we, I guess they would travel around, but that's the one thing we had to do because there was a radio program every Saturday which we had to play for which this band, the Camp Small's Band play for. Also there was a band on the main side which was a white band and they also had a program. Now they had maybe 50, 60 people in the band. Whatever it was, I was asked to write music for them as well. And there was a program on Sundays with the Blue Jacket Choir and if I'm remembering correctly, and of course in that Blue Jacket Choir was also a young man whose name has become familiar to us. His name is Harry Belafonte. And in that program I was asked to play piano solos, which I did. Now, that was the good part, the good part was I got to write for. That's the best way to learn any kind of orchestration is that you write, you write it, this is what Ellington did, he wouldn't give his ?? 'cause he

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would write it. If he didn't like it, he'd just throw it. Same way with me. I would write whatever I wanted to write and comes Friday and have rehearsal, if you didn't like it, you'd just tear it up, throw it away. And if they didn't like it, your employers, they could fire you and that was okay too, you know. So the point is that this experience was great. But what was not great was being excluded from any elevation. I remained a Seaman either 3<sup>rd</sup> Class or 1<sup>st</sup> Class through the entire tenure in the United States Navy except for the last two weeks. Now, I felt this was most incommensurate with what I to offer. There was 10, 12-piece bands that would go to the bases, they would be on the ships and so forth and I decided after two waiting periods had come out, or more, they come out every month I think it is, and no black people were on it. They said first, they told me they couldn't make advancements in ratings because we were all in ship's company and the advancement raise meant for more money and that money that the Pentagon felt that they needed to pay and give to the people who are overseas who are in outgoing units and so forth like that, at which point having separated or divorced, don't know which one or both, from my first wife, I said that was fine with me. When and where do I sign up for the outgoing units? I said: I wish to have my name put up with what I had to do. No, we can't spare you from here, they said because you are doing – and I described what I was doing. I said this was bad. And I just winded up by saying that I decided to quit. I left and would not do any rehearse, any arrangements and I guess I put my CO on the spot, as he should have been as it turns out, because nobody believed that I wasn't going to just keep on doing what I was doing. And I signed my time in and out, went to Chicago, had a good time, come back the next morning and so forth. And after a certain period of time, there was a director assembling the band at the Camp Smalls. These two, one of the two Negro ensigns that had just been signed came over to find out what the unrest was in the ?? band. Well there was no unrest but it's just simply, it turns out, that none of the people in Camp Small's Band wanted to be transferred. I'm the only one that wanted to go OGU. Rest of them had brought all their families and stuff here. And the CO was not submitting names for promotion and that's how come I didn't get it. Anyway, I quit the Navy for a little while and then we finally did get our ratings two weeks before we came out.

**Holley:** Now you also went to the Naval School of Music in Washington, D.C. in 1944 to '46.


**Henderson:** Yeah, that's where I got ??, I was on the arranging, orchestrating staff there.

**Holley:** Just so I can clear up, this information did not have ... you went to New York University Graduate School of Music from '46 to '47.

**Henderson:** Yeah. Well when I came out of the Navy, I found that I had, was entitled to post graduate work to take further schooling and I elected to go to NYU to take a course with Rudolph Schramm in the Schilinger system of music and that's what that was about.

**Holley:** What is it?

**Henderson:** The Schilinger System? Gosh, you ask some long-winded questions, I tell you. Well, briefly Schilinger, Joseph Schilinger, I believe his first name was Joseph, was


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a mathematician who had a theory, which he went forth to prove, that the growth patterns, any creative effort, any creative endeavor, any creative evidence could be measured, synthesized and analyzed and synthesized according to a discernible mathematical formula. Meaning that in our quest to know why things come out the way they do, why is music this way and so forth, that he would have the answer to how you could do that. If you learned that, then you could learn and write any type of music that you wanted to, you see? Now that's simplistic. It turns out as my instructor Rudolph Schramm ... and I says: Well you know the truth of the matter is that he used to say that shows he was crazy (laughs) and I think he was because he did go to such an extreme that he tried mathematically to compose things. Now where the truth comes in is that there is an order to the universe, an order to its larger portion as we talk about the universe itself and its smallest component which is like the atom. And that order is measurable and recognizable. Maybe not in terms that we knew about then, but Joseph Schlinger was able to predict the creative impact, the creative progress of quote unquote popular or folk music from the year, was it 1946? whenever it was, through into the '90s. And his description of it, as we sit here, still has not been violated because he has relegated all to two things: to rhythm and rhythmic patterns as the basis of all music, the business of harmony and melody and all the other things are refinements. Also now that I'm speaking about it as a connotation in respect of the heartbeat, the dawn of mankind, the business of primal relationship being like that. So that's what I studied with him.

**Holley:** Okay. Now I want to get to your relationship going back from Mercer, Ellington and talking about, you mentioned briefly before about growing up with Mercer. Try give me like a path from Mercer to Duke.

**Henderson:** Well okay. Mercer's father was Duke Ellington, okay? Whether he liked it or anybody else liked it, that set him apart from everybody. You can understand that, right? But he and I seemed to hit it off. I must say that I was always loathe to freeload on him, although I don't think he ever thought that people did that. But the point is that we got to be pretty close and we would talk about various things. In a way of speaking, we kind of duplicated one another. When we went to Stint(?) Junior High School, I'm sorry, when we went to Evander Child's High School, we decided we'd go out for the track team. Now, I don't know how much you know about track but I think you can understand that when you go for your tests and you do a hundred yard dash and you cannot break 14, you're not movin' too fast. Do you understand that? Yes. Not moving fast at all. So (chuckles) I think he maybe broke 14 or so, 13 ... but that wasn't close enough to get on anything. However, Mercer was able to, he kept with it, boy, I must say he stuck with it. He went down to McCoomb's place, ran around that oval for a year. And next year ... not me, I gave that up ... and the next year, as I remember, he was on the relay team going to Pennsylvania. So that was one portion. The other portion of the relationship was that we talked about music and what, you know, he would, you know, the fact that his father was Ellington. I would get in on some of those sessions and stuff like that. And subsequently we got a band together. Mercer got the band together, I wrote for it, we kind of thought about it as our band. We did a couple of records. And when I took up mathematics,

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Mercer took up mathematics (chuckles). And I decided to switch to Juilliard, take up music ... I don't know if Mercer went to Juilliard but he decided to switch to music. So we kind of paralleled each other like that. After a while our paths began to part in terms of growing up, but we were buddies a lot. And we traveled when he first got his first – I wonder if he remembers this – his first, when his daddy got him a Mercury when they first came out, I think.

**Holley:** Mercury trumpet?

**Henderson:** Mercury automobile. And we drove to Idyllwild, Michigan, nonstop from New York to Idyllwild, Michigan. I don't know, it was 28 hours or something like that.

**Holley:** Now you mentioned earlier that when you graduated, when you were finished with Juilliard, Duke Ellington calls you into the band. Recount that for me.

**Henderson:** How did that happen ... let's see. I guess it just happened that, I guess I was pretty obvious about wanting to write something for the band, I wanted to be involved. And I graduated from Juilliard and I guess this was the first opportunity. I guess by that time I had been doing some things for Mercer. He just called up, as I remember it, just said: I want you to do some things for my band; we've gotta do some dance sets or something like that. Whatever it was, I didn't care what it was. Whatever it was I would say yes, I would do it. The only trouble was that when he called, it was like on a Monday that the next Monday I was scheduled to get on the train. I'd already been through the examinations and every thing. Now, I'm in the period of get your affairs together, you are gone, you understand? So I had to go to the, to, excuse me, I had to go to the Navy the next Monday. So I think I wrote about 4 arrangements between those times and I must have stayed up as many days, I guess, to do it. And they rehearsed it. I mean they put it in on the weekend. I think I heard, I think they played it that Sunday or something like that, played a few of them.

**Holley:** Do you remember what those 4 arrangements were?

**Henderson:** No, but one of them was Indiana – Back Home in Indiana. I don't know ?? because he recorded that one.

**Holley:** uh hm. I have some arrangements here but before I go into those, just so I can bracket the time, give me the time you began and ended your work with Ellington. 1940

...

**Henderson:** The time that I


**Holley:** The time that you started working with Ellington.

**Henderson:** It would have been the end of '42. Actually, 1943, I guess.

**Holley:** 1943 to when?

**Henderson:** So when did I work with?

**Holley:** When you stopped working with Ellington.

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**Henderson:** Oh, I didn't stop working with him until he died.

**Holley:** Okay. 1970?

**Henderson:** Yeah, 'cause the last thing I did for him was Three Black Kings and I was in the process of doing a symphonic version of it without the band while I was on the road with Polly Bergen, I think. And I got word of his death by way of the radio in Las Vegas.

**Holley:** Getting back to working with Ellington, what struck you about Ellington, I want to kind of break Ellington off in three different areas which is really impossible but for the sake of our interview, we'll do that. I want you to give me your impression of Ellington the composer first. And each time I do that, I want you to tell me what effect each individual aspect had on you.

**Henderson:** Okay. Ellington as a composer had a great effect on me because ... well first of all, I have to preface this, what I'm gonna tell you now is a result both of hindsight and of foresight. In other words I'm looking back on those days in somewhat more specific form or more than I would have at that particular time. So I'm gonna say that his compositions affected me by virtue of them being this jazz that I heard out on the street. This is the jazz that I, that you go around the village, you would go into wherever you would see or you could go and hear some Boogie Woogie or you could go ... it was jazz, there was people there ... He did that and he, it was always extending it into a form, a form ... he didn't just start writing the longer forms when he started with New World A-Coming, but for instance, he was interested in theater. In this respect he did "Jump for Joy" once which was a collection of pieces, some great stuff. I don't know what the story was about, I never did see it. But obviously his compositions affected me because I think it always had a dramatic content, a dramatic motion, a motion – and by dramatic I don't mean melodramatic – I mean something that it had ... it had a dimension of communication which made this communication an art that didn't necessarily need to stay within the confines of the 12-bar blues or within the confines of the 3-part song form or whatever it was. It always felt like he, his reach was a little beyond his grasp, thank goodness, because he kept reaching, do you understand? And it was this feeling, this persistence that I think affected me the most. Listen, I find it very cold in here. Is there anything we can do about it?

**Holley:** Engineer, want to stop for one second and try changing temperature? Let's take a break. Just a second.


**Billie Henderson:** Don't you have to go to the bathroom?

**Henderson:** No. I – it's very cold in here.

**Holley:** Hope my questions are not boring you, sir.

**Henderson:** Not at all. Stimulating.

**Holley:** Okay. It's like when you talk I don't want to interrupt you because everything you're saying is so (overlapping voices) but I have to bring you back.

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**Henderson:** I know you do. That's okay. I tell everybody ... because I go, I guess my head is not that disciplined that I'll stick with one thing. I keep things in my mind and as we sit here now and during the past few years, I guess it's natural when you get to be a certain age, you begin to redefine yourself and I think that's what I've been doing lately. The questions that you're asking all have to do with that redefinition, do you know?

**Holley:** I gotta take one break and I'll be right back. (chats w/ someone (male) about sound and also asks how his questions are coming across. Male says: You're doing a really nice job, Mr. Henderson sounds beautiful, it's going very nicely, you're being very, very thorough and it's real interesting.

(break – chatter...Eugene goes to move his car.)

**Holley:** It's unfair really to reduce him to three 'cause he's so multifaceted, you know.

**Billie Henderson:** Yes.


**Holley:** We were talking about the effects of Ellington, the aspects of Ellington, we're talking about Ellington the composer.

**Henderson:** Yes, well as a composer I think what his effect mainly has been, two things, that is, that I'm encouraged in using the ethnic expressions, our ethnic expressions in whatever frameworks we happen to find ourselves. I think that that's one of the things that he tried to and did do. And it didn't start, as I was gonna say, with just when he called me to do these various symphonic things for him, but even so, you know, he would do impressionistic, he would always ... the fact that he would always name his tunes. In other words he didn't just write a word about, he didn't write a word, he didn't write a tune called, you know, Alice Blue Gown, he called it The Clothed Woman. You know there's a whole different thing. He would not say This is a Localeze(?) Local Lass(?) in Blue. He says This is Bluesette. Or this is, you know, maybe that's not the ... Transblucency, for instance, he would call it. And this is already a dramatic aspect of his composing.

**Holley:** I have to ... you mention one of his tunes, one of his compositions, one of my favorite compositions, The Clothed Woman. That to me is like 4 different movements in one. It starts off very atonal, almost 12-tone kind of thing, then goes into a kind of a stride rhythm, then goes to a blues, then goes back to a stride. I want to talk about ... there are a couple of Ellington compositions that I want, I want to say the names of them, I want you just give me your

**Henderson:** Excuse me, just a minute, what you just said is perfectly representative 'cause if you take the word, the title “Clothed Woman” and talk about what you just said, first ... however you described those things, these are either the same lady in different clothes or different ladies, different clothed ladies and that's just what he is about describing, I'm sure.

**Holley:** He had an illuminative composition skill.

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**Henderson:** It doesn't simply have to do with making, being, stopping at each turn of the phrase and saying Oh look at wonderful harmony thing I can get, what I can do. No, it has to do with giving a specific message and so forth. I think that's what Ellington's compositions do.

**Holley:** I want to talk about 4 compositions associated with him for possibly another series that we're doing on Ellington and Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. I want to say what they are and I want you just to give me your immediate impressions of them. "Take the A Train."

**Henderson:** Take the A Train. First of all, we will have to understand that it is not an Ellington composition. We do understand that?

**Holley:** Billy Strayhorn. I meant to say Ellington compositions, compositions associated with Ellington.

**Henderson:** Yeah. Ask your question ... what do I ... my reaction? What about that composition?

**Holley:** Right.

**Henderson:** Well so far as what it says about Ellington, it says that he is discriminating and, and happily so in the talents that he chooses to do, to work in, what we used to call Ellingtonia. Billy Strayhorn is such an unusual talent and such an unusual choice, I don't think, I think it will stand in the history of music, not just jazz music, but the history of music altogether that there's never, maybe never will be such a combination wherein there is a meeting of minds that is so seamless and yet if you ... almost completely diverse in their origins, you know, from whence they are sprung each, do you know? So I think this is a testimony to Ellington's vision. As a composition, of course, it is purely and simply Billy Strayhorn.

**Holley:** What about "Black and Tan Fantasy"?

**Henderson:** Black and Tan Fantasy. Uh ... what can I tell you. It has, it introduces us ... as a composer, Black and Tan Fantasy uses the earth sounds – wha-wha-wha-wha-WAH-wah, etc. – he does this and again establishes a validity for using those earth sounds in a dramatic progression.

**Holley:** There's one, I think this is a Billy Strayhorn composition, "Mainstem"?


**Henderson:** Called what?

**Holley:** Mainstem.

**Henderson:** I think that's Billy Strayhorn, too. I'm not that familiar with that composition.

**Holley:** What about "All Too Soon"?

**Henderson:** All Too Soon. Wonderful. This is a composition that tells you a lot about how perceptive Ellington is about his instrument, his instrument being his band. Only

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Ben Webster, only Ben Webster could have inspired that particular song 'cause he does his little windy thing: whoo-who-who-who-who-who-who-hoo. You know he does that and of course he didn't just start doing it with that song. He did it someplace and that suggested it to, I'm sure, to Ellington. So again in retrospect it points up the fact that as a composer, as a composer Ellington transcends what other composers, particularly classical composers use. Most classical composers use the instrument in whatever its range might be. The standard sets of practices, that is, techniques that are known and that are done and so forth and the certain known frameworks, let's put it this way, that other composers feel that their works must, feel it has to be ... now, he has included then in his things from which he is selective to make his expression, he has included the person, the person itself. He didn't have a tenor player. He didn't just get a tenor player to play All Too Soon. He got Ben Webster. He didn't get Coleman Hawkins. He didn't get Prez. He got Ben Webster. He is selective – and this is what composition is, selective, selectivity of the elements around you put together in a fashion that has some meaning to, as an expression and to a person who would listen and so forth – this is a talent that Ellington has included in the business of composition that only has been included in classical composition when you call it quote unquote a concerto. Only then will we have that. But this is the norm, this is the norm for Ellington's composition which is I think one of the things that particular composition personifies.

**Holley:** What about Ellington the pianist? In my view does not get, not blown up in the proper context.

**Henderson:** Not in the proper context at all. Ask about Ellington as a pianist, you have to again decide in what context. If we say in the classical tradition of piano such as that from which has sprung a Horowitz or anybody like that, we would have to say that he's a very poor pianist. But if we say here's a pianist who is classified in the area of expressing his native, his ethnic roots on this particular instrument that happens to be at hand, then he is the only one that does this. He is, each one is ... as a piano player, he does his thing. He can stride, you know. He can stride and he plays his thing and in a way it's beyond comparison. There's nothing to which, that I know of, the nothing to which to compare it that I can think of.

**Holley:** Well it's been said that his piano style was influenced by James P. Johnson, Willie the Lion Smith.

**Henderson:** Oh, but everybody he ever heard, absolutely. No, he would be the first to say that because ... I remember one session, it was a recording session someplace, anyway he was talking, he was saying how he'd been interviewed and he says: This guy asked me something about the history of jazz. He says: Well you know I remember everything I hear, I remember all these cats and so forth, I remember everything they ever did, so I guess in a way of speaking you might say that I am the history of jazz. (chuckles) This is the way he played, he played everything he knew, everything he heard. And he could ... his memory was ... he would remember things that I wrote. He could remember Back Home in Indiana because ... but you know he couldn't remember a thing

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I wrote ... once he said: Do you remember that thing you did on so and so and so. Man, it had gone so far from my head, you can't believe it. But that's what he does.

**Holley:** Finally, I guess this is a continuation of the second part. Ellington as the artist with the orchestra as his instrument.

**Henderson:** Oh well, what's my reaction to that? That is, that's the description of who and what Ellington was and what his composition ... he composes on the orchestra, on his orchestras, not with or for. That's what I think that is.

**Holley:** So it's like saying that whereas one composer may articulate an idea in his own vacuum and give it to the orchestra, he composed his ideas with the orchestra in mind, with the individual timbre of each player.


**Henderson:** That's right. Plus, with in mind a specific message that he wishes to convey. Now I would say, for instance, that "Harlem," he wished to convey this message of what Harlem was. He wanted to say, I think, I don't know that this is true or not, but to my ... but yes Harlem is all these, this ... what you said, blues in the jungle: waa-waa, waa-waa, all that stuff. It's also bomp-bomp-bamp-ba-ba-ba-ba. It's also that. Little church theme (sings these words) that he does in there. And so he has to say: I want you to see that really black people live all facets of life even in our, even as we are Afro-American. We live it. We live all facets just as you do. We have gamblers, we have hookers, we've got preachers and we've got senators and we've got all that.

**Holley:** In other words we have a hierarchy.

**Henderson:** He chooses people to do that. He chooses people to do that. I mean that's part of his composition.

**Holley:** Now earlier you said that you were kind of a symphonic arm to Ellington. Elaborate on that further. What did you bring to the Ellington sound?

**Henderson:** Well it's more what, where did I bring the Ellington sound, the Ellington sound is the nucleus of everything. Now what did I do with it. I embroidered upon it to the extent that it could be put in the setting of the symphonic concert hall. Now how did we do that. We do that by assuming that this instrument, that Duke Ellington's instrument was his orchestra and as such that we were writing essentially several concerti for this instrument. And the thing that I attempted to do was to relate the sounds that he made to the sounds that would be, that naturally comes out of ???. For example, pizzicato section goes bee-bop-um-bee-bum-um – and what's this ... in "New World A-Coming," I think. And it's got a, I can't exactly hum it now but there's a sort of ... woodwinds do staccato, dop-bop-um-bop-bop-um-bip-bop-um-bap-bob-bo-bo-bo-bo-bu-bu-bu-bu-bup-um. His band imitating those symphony strings. So what do we do, we then take that, put that into pizzicato and then he makes a trans, he wants to go to another place, a transition. He doesn't know exactly what to get to and he gives us, he gives me a little leeway to go from this place to that place so that he can get now to the next phase, do you understand? So that this is, the Ellington sound, what I try to do with the Ellington sound is to remain

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as faithful to it as I can within and being expressed by instruments and elements that are seemingly foreign to it.

**Holley:** Okay. Now I have a, we mentioned two of the compositions that you were noted for arranging for Ellington, Indiana

**Henderson:** (chuckles)

**Holley:** I just briefly want to by

**Henderson:** I don't know if I was noted, I, it was ... okay, go ahead.

**Holley:** Okay, well please correct me if I get something wrong 'cause I've ... I want to go through each thing I have here as examples of some of your work with Ellington and tell me briefly how they were structured and what you did to illuminate them. Indiana.

**Henderson:** All right. Well this was one of my favorite jazz pieces and it happened to be a standard and it was one of those that I did during that one week that I first joined Ellington for dance music.

**Holley:** “New World A-Comin'.” This is an Ellington composition?

**Henderson:** “New World A-Coming” is an Ellington composition. It is one of his quote unquote larger works and tell me the question you put to it again.

**Holley:** The question is what, okay, specially, you know for the people listening, what did you add to “New World A-Comin'.”

**Henderson:** What I added to New World A-Coming was a symphony orchestra.

**Holley:** And when you say symphony orchestra, what type of instruments are we talking about?

**Henderson:** We're talking about adding strings, violins, violas, cellos, etc. We're talking about adding classical woodwinds, your flutes, your clarinets, your oboes, bassoons, etc. Basically we're not talking about adding too much brass 'cause Ellington's got enough brass for anybody, you see. But we do put them down because that's the ... and maybe some tympani and some toys to abet the Ellington percussion.


**Holley:** And the same thing for “Harlem”?

**Henderson:** Same thing for “Harlem.”

**Holley:** And Night Creature. Tell ... actually before we get to, before I get to that, are these on any recordings?

**Henderson:** They are on a recording, yes. There's something called the Symphonic Ellington. It's been done in different places. I'm not exactly sure. I know that Eric Kunzler did a record when Ellington was alive that had Ellington reciting these things and he did Harlem and he did, I think he did New World A-Coming.

**Holley:** That was Cincinnati Pops I believe.

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**Henderson:** Probably. Cincinnati Pops. That's right. Of course Perez has done all of them lately, I think, with the

**Holley:** How'd you say, sir?

**Henderson:** What's his first name, Perez?

**Billie Henderson:** Maurice

**Henderson:** Maurice Perez

**Holley:** Maurice Perez. Okay.

**Henderson:** has done some ... and

**Holley:** Well getting back to, I'm talking about your particular, your arrangements.

**Henderson:** Well these are again, I guess we would call them more orchestrations or re-orchestrations than arrangements, do you know? The principal arrangement that I had done which implies more reshaping, redoing, almost recomposing it and extending of composing of Ellington occurred in the "Three Black Kings" 'cause that was the last major work that Ellington did. And I was commissioned by him to do a symphonic quote unquote version of that and to fit it to the needs of the Dance Theater of Harlem which was supposed to have done it as a benefit and Arthur Miller was going to

**Billie Henderson:** Arthur Mitchell


**Henderson:** Arthur Mitchell rather was going to choreograph it. Not Arthur Miller. Arthur Mitchell was going to choreograph it. So I acted in my capacity as a dance music arranger much as I would have for, you know, Julie Stein, Richard Rodgers, any of the others I've written for on Broadway, so that I would classify that as arrangement and orchestration more than the others I would call just orchestration.

**Holley:** Now tell me about the creation and the subsequent broadcast of "Night Creature" for the Symphony of the Air and your part in that.

**Henderson:** Well this was, what year was that ... 1955.

**Holley:** Yes.

**Henderson:** Okay. Now I had been a few years away from Lena Horne because I was with her in late '40s, maybe '50s, something like that. Anyway, the Symphony of the Air, Don Gillis had, I don't know, been commissioned that he was to do these works which he was already doing with his band. I don't know if he was doing Night Creature. I think Night Creature may have been done specifically for that concert. But at any rate, and he wanted to perform it at Carnegie Hall with a, in a symphony setting. And this is when he called me and I guess that would have been ... it was done in 1955 so ... I don't know, I didn't have a whole lot of time to do it, you know, because ... but the point is that what I did was to follow him around the country wherever I could find ... in other words, he didn't do like we do, you know, you sit down and okay we're gonna have a session, we're gonna write some music and so forth. No, no, you'd go and you'd follow him to whatever

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his band thing was, where he was gonna play that night, and then after the gig is over, you go and get something to eat and somehow he would stay up and he would talk and play .. I have some little cassettes about how he would instruct us, what he wanted to do and stuff like that. So it came like that. And the, all three things were ... I had sketches and if I'm not mistaken, some spot tapes that he would take on the dates. I have to remember exactly how did I get all because it was very

**Holley:** He would record ideas for you?

**Henderson:** Well you know when he would do it on a, at a night club for instance and someone would be there with a tape. This was, you know we were past wire recording. We did have tapes at this time. Somebody put it on a tape. Also some of these things have been recorded just with his own orchestra, if I'm not mistaken, with the orchestra alone, without the symphony. So that may be how we got hold of a lot of this stuff.

**Holley:** But in any event you had a recorded framework to work from?

**Henderson:** Oh yes.

**Holley:** Which made the transposition or ideas a lot easier

**Henderson:** Oh yes.

**Holley:** What was Ellington like off of the bandstand?


**Henderson:** Off the bandstand? Oh gosh, suave, debonair, just as he is on. He was always on, I think, in a way of speaking. His more serious moments, I don't know, I would see when he would be, we would be discussing what, how something, how he wanted to do something. Even then he was always a little, what's the word, I mean he would, he was puttin' you on most of the time, do you understand? That would be one of his favorite things when we would meet, he'd be writing, he'd say: Oh, here's the music, says you know, every time the music knows that Luther's jumpin' ?? 'cause they know he's gonna put a lotta nice notes on this paper, you see, 'cause one of his things was that when we first started, our first, my first arrangement, I wrote out his drum parts and bass parts and everything like that. And he liked the arrangement. He'd call me, says: You don't want to write all those notes for my fellas.

(end side 1, tape 2)

**Henderson:** Billie's reminding me ... put this on tape too because a lot of people don't know that I lived with, had a room with Mercer's mother when I was in Washington, D.C. at the school of music. The Navy School of Music.

**Holley:** Oh, okay, I'll come back to that. When I got up I actually bumped this. Does it look fine?

Male voice- You're fine, both of you sound great.

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**Holley:** All right, get my paper situated here. We're talking more the vocal arranging you did. First of all, before we even get to that, how'd you go into, I understand you had a studio. Talk about that.

**Henderson:** Yes. What happened was that when I came out of the Navy, I decided that I would open a studio. I had ?? and she had a studio bass player by the name of Doles Dickens and do writing, you know write for special material and for singers and stuff like that and coaching. And it was during that time right after ... I guess, when did I come out of the Navy, '46 or something like that ... and I hadn't set up more than, not very long, for months of something. Anyway, Lena Horne evidently needed an arranger and music conductor and Ellington and Strayhorn who were very friendly with her suggested me. So anyway, I became, I went with, she came to my studio and we, she, I played something with her and so forth and she seemed to like it and all. Then we got together. I worked with her for about 3 years. Now your question was about vocal arranging. Having done 3 years or so, at least 3 years, it wasn't 4, it's was a little over 3 years with Lena Horne and having had that experience which I sometimes put down as a learning experience, she's so fantastic. I felt that I could, that I had enough knowledge to actually now pass on again the business of how to, of singing, of vocal, to be a vocal coach, do you know? So when we parted, I opened up a studio on my own with Doles. And it was during that time that Eartha Kitt, oh she opened up at the Vanguard, or some place downtown, and she wanted me to do a couple, I don't know that I did a whole lot of arrangements for her. I did a couple of arrangements for her. I'm sad to say I don't remember which ones now.

**Holley:** You said working with Lena was a learning experience. Exactly what did you learn?

**Henderson:** Okay, what I learned was more about the expression of, the primary expression, the one-to-one expression, this thing that I'm talking about that is basically human and happens to be prevalent and gets out through black people more because of the locale, which she would bring to it in a and with and cloaked through a kind of dramatic presence, a dramatic presentation that crystallized, was, that illuminated her, what she, message that she had to give to the audience. She was sensuous and she was angry and she was happy and she was all of these various things, but there was never, never a time that she uttered a lyric that did not have some dramatic meaning to it, some dramatic, perhaps even thought out. I don't know how her MO was I know good and well that if there was something, even if it was a matter of being coy, I mean Phil Moore once wrote a song for her called I Feel So Smoochy. I feel so smoooochy ... you know, she was being somebody. She didn't, she wasn't Lena. She was always being somebody through her, through Lena. Now this is, maybe I, I got this notion that's what she did and it was most intriguing and I felt that I was a part of it because this is, this is where an accompanist comes in. An accompanist does exactly that. It abets, an accompanist abets the subplot more than it does the actual expression that goes on.

**Holley:** More like a supporting cast.

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**Henderson:** That's right. I thought that I learned more about that with her because she was very, very definite about what she wanted (chuckles) and what she didn't want, believe me. And thank goodness.

**Holley:** How did you juggle performing and arranging and doing those other kind of things. Was it a hard thing to do? You know, do I want to be a performer/arranger ...

**Henderson:** Not really. How can I say ... I love to perform, I love to play the piano. I still do. But I became aware that after having taken this entrance exam in Juilliard and having this wonderful teacher Sonoma Talley who really socked it to me, I mean with this, learning how to practice and all that, really had me playing a 20 minutes, 30 minute thing ... I realized that for me to play like that, I wouldn't have time to do anything else. I mean I would have to get up in the morning and practice until lunch time and have a little lunch and go back and practice again. There would be no way for me to keep that up without doing that kind of work. Now it was probably different for people that like maybe Erroll Garner or for any one of these people that seemed to do it or Fats Waller or ... I don't know whether they had to do all that or not but the point is that I was not willing to commit myself to that ethic, that work ethic because I really wanted to, I got pleasure out of writing and having someone to do it right, you see?

**Holley:** I want to talk about some other people that you worked with as a vocal arranger. Marge and Gower Champion.


**Henderson:** Marge and Gower, gosh that wasn't really a vocal arrangement. Marge and Gower Champion were back, oh boy, you're reading from an old resume. Anyway this is a long time ago and Marge, first of all, I'd met Marge in Beggar's Holiday. Beggar's Holiday was a play written by John LaTouche, music by Duke Ellington. She played ... not Polly, what did she play ... anyway, she and Paul Godkin were the dancing duo, what do you can it, the prima dancers. And subsequently, she was doing this act with ... her husband ...

**Billie Henderson:** Gower

**Henderson:** Gower in which they were depicting a rehearsal studio and there was a number called "The Quiet Room." I barely remember the title of it. At any rate, I guess again because of Ellington probably, they needed an arrangement, a dance arranger, dance piece and I did this particular number for them for their nightclub act. And subsequently, seems to me that I did something else for them, but that was the main thing that I had done for them that time.

**Holley:** Were they, this is probably, forgive my ignorance but were they white or black?

**Henderson:** Oh! Very good question. Marge and Gower were both white. Gower Champion was notably the director for "Hello Dolly," for many various successful musicals. Marge was a wonderful dancer. She and Gower, I don't know exactly how they met but I know that there was a play called "Three on the Aisle" or ... you remember what that is Billie? Anyway, there was ... Harry was in it and he did a segment and

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Marge and Gower did a segment and somebody else. At any rate, now they were white. Interesting. Interesting that you should ask that.


**Holley:** Well I wanna kinda segue. I wanna get ... we're talking from maybe 1946 to maybe mid-'50s. You told me briefly about the way that your parents felt about black pride in the '20s and the '30s. Were you noticing a difference with the so-called bebop movement coming in from Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker from the early '40s 'til then, what was it like for black musicians coming up in that period because looking back, I'm only 32 years old so I can only judge by what I read, it seems like as they were extending themselves musically, they were also extending themselves as Afro Americans socially as far as consciousness. They were building upon what you knew with your parents being around people like W.E.B. Dubois and people like that.

**Henderson:** If I'm understanding you correctly, I'm not exactly sure that's the issue. I think that yes, I don't know that they were building like our parents, but I think that what they were doing was

**Holley:** They being the young musicians?

**Henderson:** custodian of what seemed to have been, come to them at that particular time. In other words, they were not going to do what had been before because obviously in this society, it was coming to no good end. Plus which, from a musical standpoint they were taking it, they were taking the rhythmic and harmonic aspects of jazz music all the way out to the end, to the bitter end. In other words there was no subdivision of rhythm that was not a possibility. There was no harmonic power that was not included. Whether it belonged or not. And this has to do with a kind of pride because this pride, this doing seems to me indicates that it's that ... yes, you've got your foot on us, you got the foot on that neck but we're not only, we're not down, we can do this better. We are better than you. We're gonna do so and so and so and so and I don't care what you ... it's a kind of, if you can think of it, a black backlash (chuckles) in a way of speaking because yes, they were doing things that not just ... I remember this very well because I was in the Navy in the early '40s, '43, '44, whenever it was I went in there, and I was playing with Leonard Ware's Trio on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, playing at Kelly's Stables and then when I had to go away, after the Navy and I came back on furlough and went to the Famous Door and Klook and Dizzy and Charlie Parker and different ones ... and my breath was taking away. I said ... I almost quit, I'll tell you the truth. I thought I have no clue. I'm from the old school in this way of speaking because I'm still out there ... I had no IDEA what these people were doing. And that they were going so far off. And actually I finally, when I was with Mercer's band, I wrote a piece called "You Name It" because I figured well if they're gonna do oopt-da-baba, etc., I'm gonna see what I can do with it and so I did a piece called "You Name It" except that I decided that what they needed to do was to put a little more steady rhythm so I had a Lunceford beat goin' with it, you see? Well, you never heard about it but that's all right. (chuckles)

**Holley:** Uh huh.

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**Henderson:** But the fact is, yes it does have to do with pride, not in the same way that we're talking about pride as we're going to be, we're going to educate ourselves and we're going to be intellectually superior or whatever it might be or culturally or ... it means that we are going to outdo you ... in a way.

**Holley:** With that evolution I should say, bebop musicians also came, this whole demise of young black men with the drug culture ... you were able to see some of this, I guess from a periphery. What effect did it have on your peers and how did you feel about seeing these young people dropping like that. Charlie Parker was 35 when he died. Fats Navarro was 26.

**Henderson:** I was there before they died and when they were doing it. And I guess I'll have to say that I must be a certifiable coward because I was not about to risk going through the things that I knew that were going to happen, which I heard would happen from all the things they were doing. I was under the impression that that was a very dangerous way to live. Now on the other hand, I knew people and still do, who so far as drugs – I guess you're talkin' 'bout pot, you know, mainly is what ... that's no longer – that was, that in itself seems not to be such a terrible thing but it would lead to other things from what I understand. I didn't try to partake. I couldn't. Somewhere Mudsins and Popsins reach back and say Come back here man, you know ... I don't know, I couldn't deal with it. That was it.

**Holley:** Lucky for you, you couldn't. You're still here. You know? I want to get some other things you did with vocals and people like that. You mentioned you worked with Carmen McRae. Tell me about that.


**Henderson:** Carmen, my old block buddy. Yes, well I guess the biggest thing was that we wrote this song when we were teenagers, I guess, 5, 16 years old, called "Dream of Life" which was recorded by Billie Holiday and through all these years, it's still lasted. I spoke to Carmen briefly when I was in California recently and she uses it when she appears now. She always used it. At one time I did an album or two with Carmen. What was it I did with her. I did something 'cause we ... it was an album. Isn't that funny. You know you'd think I'd remember more than I do, but I don't. Isn't that terrible?

**Holley:** It's cause you've done so much.

**Holley:** Well thank you. I'm glad you said that because that gives me some excuse, but at any rate, I think that Carmen is a very special jazz singer because she too, though not the entertainer quite like Lena Horne, is a person who will not do a lyric, will not do a song unless the lyric has some meaning that she is making a dramatic statement of some sort, you know? And too often I think that we get caught up in the fineness and fervor of the execution of a thing and become simply, you know, a spectator, become a spectator sport rather than a communicative one, you know?

**Holley:** At what, now this is some information I got from

**Henderson:** Yeah, some old, some stuff

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**Holley:** It's interesting you're making a segue ... also wanted to make a segue into some of the stuff you've done for television, like Playhouse 90 and the Helen Morgan Story. Tell me about those.


**Henderson:** All right. Playhouse 90 came about by my association with Polly Bergen. My association with Polly Bergen came about by being recommended by Irving Townsend to do her album called Polly Sings Morgan ... I forget what the exact title was. But at the time there was a script going around Hollywood and so forth ... her husband at the time was Freddie Fields ... was about the Helen Morgan story. Now are you familiar with Helen Morgan?

**Holley:** No, I was gonna ask you who she was.

**Henderson:** All right. Helen Morgan was what you would call a chanteuse. She was, she sang in the posh nightclubs. You picture Helen Morgan spread alluringly across a piano with a long cigarette holder in her hand singing My Man ... The Man I Love or singing some torch song or something like that, you see? This was what Helen Morgan ... she became very famous with that. And her life was quite interesting and so forth. Won't go through all that. But then her story was run. So evidently they wanted to do an album of her songs with Polly and subsequently to do something about achieving the rights to do a television program with it. Now what, I was recommended by Irving Townsend to do this album with Polly which I did, which incidentally came after my experience having done things for Andre Kostelanetz. Now maybe that's a name that people don't know, Andre Kostelanetz. Andre Kostelanetz was the Boston Pops of that era. He was the

**Holley:** Arthur Fiedler

**Henderson:** He was the Arthur Fiedler of that time, right. And so I had done a lot of things for him. Rodgers' album. I did Flower Drum Song. But anyway, the point is that obviously an area that was not jazz that I could do and Polly Bergen and I seemed to get along very well and so forth. Anyway, this is how that happened. Now Playhouse 90 came after much negotiation, I suspect. I don't know all those details but at any rate subsequently, the contract was landed, the rights to the book were landed, and Playhouse 90 was a very famous, was the very first dramatic television show. It was an hour and a half long and was all live. There was no instant replay or anything like that. And it was directed by a fellow name of George Roy Hill who, I don't know if he's done too much lately, but is one of the fantastic ?? but the fact is that I, who had such success with Polly during that thing, she felt very comfortable with me, but she insisted that I be her musical director on this hour and a half television program called Playhouse 90. Now it was a prestigious program. I don't know, Billie might be able to tell you more about how prestigious it was. It was a series that, I try to think of what ... I guess today it would have to be on public TV or something like that in order to exist. It was really considered an artistic pinnacle of things. And it was quite a plum. It was an hour and a half. And Luther to be the musical director and co-composer and chief bottle washer, whatever you call it. And I, Luther had only the television experience, maybe doing a few Ed Sullivan shows with Lena Horne, you know, but Polly insisted and her husband Freddie said:

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Okay she wants you and we're gonna get you and we'll give you all the help we can and so forth. The point is that it turned out to be a prize winner because it won an Emmy Award. Plus which, it also turned out that in order to get what we called source music – when there's a particular place, you know there's music behind back there – they needed songs that were of that era of that time, you know what I mean? But they didn't want to, I guess, to pay for these great standards, so I became a hero. How. Because I knew Eubie Blake, right? Eubie Blake was writing all the time between those things and so I called Eubie and he sent me a sheet with stuff. Here's what you want to use. And of course it didn't hurt his ASCAP rating at all. But the point is that I became (laughs) kind of a hero. And incidentally, now that I look back in retrospect, this is another instance of how the two cultures mixed. I mean, Helen Morgan had very little to do with Bandana Days, I will tell you that right now. But the fact of the matter is that this man who wrote this music, was writing music coming from his roots that were involved in the culture that we are in, and it was sought after. It was needed for a particular purpose. We weren't going to do a concert, we were gonna establish the atmosphere. We were gonna establish the venue, wherever it was ... and what did we use? We used this music which was created by Eubie Blake. And while the show didn't actually win an award for music, the show won an award and that music stands, not that we didn't use some of the other songs that he did, but, uh Playhouse 90...One other thing I'll tell you, when I got out to California, Columbia, CBS City or whatever they call it. I was the only one out there two days before the appointed day. I thought that I'd find everybody out there doing their homework and boning up. Not so. Not so. They were cool man. They were laid back. And I went out there with my pen dripping and everything, ready to go and nobody else was there. And I felt very anxious, as a matter of fact. (laughs) I felt very anxious. My wife is laughing because she know my proclivity for being on time and ready, you know? And so the truth is I developed, almost developed an ulcer because I didn't know what ... so I couldn't swallow oatmeal, so anyway, that's just another side. That's the Helen Morgan Story.

**Holley:** You were moving into areas, I guess mid to late '50s when this is all occurring, that were not the areas that most black musicians were moving into.

**Henderson:** No, I don't think that there were any at that time.

**Holley:** What did it feel like being the first?

**Henderson:** I have to answer that in retrospect as well. I didn't feel like I was the first. You know what I felt like? I felt like I had one hell of a job to do to get out of this 9 foot water that they had just thrust me in. I don't know if I know how to swim yet. You know what that feeling is? That's what you call desperation, you see? What we call survival. What we also call this is getting a credit. Yes, I understand that I was black, that maybe there were not that many ... but that wasn't, my principal concern wasn't that. My principal concern was that I would have the musical ability, the ability to musically make this come off. And in retrospect I will say that I had it to come off because, not because but I should say abetted by my African heritage, I was able to add something to that

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production that possibly no one else could have because they did not have the same set of credentials that I had – no matter whether their talent might be better, more or less than mine. So how did I feel about being the first black? I don't know. That wasn't the first time maybe. I also got into television through that because then I was her conductor, I was conductor for Victor Borge's first

**Holley:** Her conductor ... who you

**Henderson:** Polly Bergen. We did a special. We did a regular TV show here. I don't know, I don't think that there were any other blacks that were involved in that capacity at that time.

**Holley:** There are two things I want to have you briefly talk about. Your work with Anita Ellis.

**Henderson:** Anita Ellis. Ahh. That's interesting. Do you know anything about Anita?


**Holley:** No. Well, Anita is one of my oldest and dearest friends and Anita in the times of the movies, they used to do a lot of voice-under. She was the voice of Rita Hayworth and of Vera Ellen and of various people in these various musicals that they were doing in Hollywood. You know, "Put the Blame on Mame" and all these various things. And she came to New York because she wanted to become visible. She had quite a reputation as being the voice behind the actresses, you know. And we did, I thought it was an extraordinary thing again who created, who sang from strictly a dramatic sense of ... we used to actually talk about subplot and so forth. And we were able to interest, she came to me to do an act for her is what happened, and we did one at the Monty Prose's something ... he had a club ... Blue ... Red, not red I think, but ... what was the name of that club. Anyway we did a club act there and we interested Columbia Records through one of its subsidiaries, Epic, in letting us do an album called "I Wonder What Became of Me." Now it was a new concept. We had a story running through it. We had, what was his name, Glub, David Glub. I can't think of the name of the guy. But it was a story about a girl or about a person who had come through many things and distraught and so forth ... I wonder what became of me ... and various things that she went through and that album, it's still available, was sort of a landmark for both of us in this respect because it again was an artistic success, if I say so myself. Artistic successes have their way of not finding their way to a great many of the big marketplace sometimes, you know.

**Holley:** And it was an artistic success because of the way the album was presented from?

**Henderson:** Because of the way it was presented, because of the way Anita sang, because of the way I wrote for her, because of our combined efforts at having something to say is why I think it was an artistic success. I think this is true of any collaborative exercise. When you really stop to think about it, there's nothing we can do in this world that doesn't have to be done with somebody. Anyway, it's getting a little chilly in here.

**Holley:** I'm gonna wrap up in a couple of minutes. But I do want to get ...

**Henderson:** Oh I got plenty of time.

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**Holley:** You said the album was a landmark record. What have you heard since then that you can say was influenced by that? Or is it something that ... is the influence more pervasive than that?

**Henderson:** (pause) Influence. When I did an album for the opera singer named Eileen Farrell, she said that she wanted me because she heard "I Wonder What Became of Me," the album. Understand? People who frequent what we used to call the boites, in other words we did this album at the ... what was Jimmy's place? Bon Soir. And like that. And I think that its influence is probably not as great as the testimony to what this art could be. I don't know who else has done it more than that. Can't think right off hand. But for instance it's something that, if a person of the stature of Barbra Streisand decided that she would do something like that, I think it would have some effect.

**Holley:** I want to close this part of our session today, ending with your solo career for Columbia Records. Tell me about ... and I have to tell you, I've looked and I've looked and it's very difficult to find those records.

**Henderson:** I know.

**Holley:** 'Cause I was gonna bring some to have you sign.

**Henderson:** Oh really?

**Holley:** Yes.


**Henderson:** You talkin' about the Clap Hand series and that stuff?

**Holley:** Yes. Tell me what they were, tell me briefly what you were trying to do during that time.

**Henderson:** All right, what I was doing at that time, what I was trying to do, first of all, I was

**Holley:** I'm gonna say this is 1959 we're talking about.

**Henderson:** Right. I was musical director for Polly Bergen on a regular basis for her regular weekly show, or every two weeks, I believe it was. At any rate, and as such there was Peter Matz, Irv Kostel, various of us who were musical directors for these shows, were called upon by the various records companies to quote unquote cover the hit parade. In other words, we would put out an album of the hits of the day and it would be a gig for us, you know. None of us ever expected to make too much money out of it because ... but that was that gig. Now what I hoped to do was to take not hits of the day but some standard things which since I had that particular chance and I was involved in the television in that fashion and give them, give the audience something a little more than just pseudo-jazz to do. I thought what better than to clap hands. And so the first album was called Clap Hands with Luther Henderson. And then Clap Hands with the Westerns and Clap Hands .... see this is what the record company will do... I think they clap hands sold little bit. So then they found that they would have to just keep on doing more and more and more. And guess it finally petered out, you know what I mean? But this is what

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I wanted to do and the records, I have them and I'll tell you where I got 'em. I think I paid \$50 for one over at (laughs)

**Holley:** For your own record

**Henderson:** in New York at 49<sup>th</sup> Street. Was that?

[overlapping voices]

**Holley:** Colony Music. Wow. Okay. Well I want to stop here because tomorrow what I want to do is talk about, I want to kind of chronologically bring us up to your Broadway period and tell us how you got there and specifically about Ain't Misbehavin and your work with Fats Waller and Jelly's Last Jam. And I also want to talk about your career as a ... working with dance 'cause I see you've worked with Kathryn Dunham which is not in my notes and I definitely want to talk about that 'cause I'm a big Kathryn Dunham fan.

**Henderson:** I have a very checkered career. (laughs)

**Holley:** We'll make sure we play all the whole checker board tomorrow. Okay? All right.

**Holley:** I hope my questions weren't too boring.

**Billie Henderson:** It was wonderful.

**Holley:** I just wish I had more information. I went to the Library of Congress, I went to Martin Luther King Library and most of the information on you is mostly related to your work on Broadway. I consulted the ?? Encyclopedia of Jazz and that was it.

**Henderson:** Well that's why I welcome all this because a lot of times, you would be surprised how many people that do not know what I do for a living.

**Holley:** Right. And also tomorrow I want to talk about Canadian Brass recording.

**Henderson:** Yes indeed. I want to talk about them too.

**Billie Henderson:** Luther's giving his papers to Schoenberg.

**Holley:** Oh you are.

**Henderson:** Did you try the Schoenberg Museum? Schoenberg

**Holley:** No, I didn't try them.


**Henderson:** Well they should have them, that's true. They should have all that stuff.

**Holley:** As a matter of fact when I get up to New York, that's one place I'm gonna frequent on a weekly basis.

**Billie Henderson:** Oh yes.

**Holley:** Excuse me, I was wondering if I could look at these?

**Henderson:** Yes, you may keep them but you must bring them back. The one that's from my agent you can keep but the others, it's the only copy I have. That old one is marked up

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**Holley:** You talkin' about this one right here I can keep?

**Henderson:** Yeah, you can keep if you'd like.

**Holley:** Okay.

**Henderson:** The other one, it's the only copy I have. Unless you want to make a copy of that. You're welcome to do so but that's

**Holley:** No, I think this will suffice. I'll give this back to you. (shuffling of papers)

**Henderson:** The only reason I say that is because it ?? what specifically I did with each one of these people that are on the old one, you know what I mean?

**Billie Henderson:** I'll put it in the folder, shall I?

??- Please, thank you. So we'll be here at ten o'clock.

[end of Day 1 interview]

###

## **Smithsonian Interview – Day 2**

**Holley:** This is the second part of our interview, oral history with Mr. Luther Henderson, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Mr. Henderson, I want to talk about, yesterday we talked about your earlier musical beginnings, moving to New York, your work with Duke Ellington and I want to continue talking about your foray into Broadway. Tell me how you got into that.


**Henderson:** How it happened? Well, I'll start back with my, how my interest was gotten into it very much so was by having seen the first company, the first performance, not the first performance but during the first company of Porgy and Bess which was 1935, in that area. And I was so impressed with how the jazz music that I'd been hearing in the streets and around and in records and so forth, how particularly it was adapted and went in to the theater and the scenery and the progress of the story and so forth. I really was excited about it. Then subsequently, having gone through, you know time dissolved, having gone through Juilliard and having been patronized. I would say I called Ellington more or less my patron. He had recommended me to Irving Townsend of Columbia Records who in turn was involved with different people from the theater. And Carol Haney happened to be one of them that was not necessarily on Columbia Records; she was a director and a dancer. But she became a fan of, she was a fan of Ellington's and Strayhorn's and they introduced me to her

Male: Excuse me for interrupting but I am hearing that paper today.

[briefly interruption while sound is checked]

**Holley:** Okay, so Ellington was your patron.

**Henderson:** Yes and having done work with him and by virtue of my friendship with Ellington and Strayhorn and so forth, I was introduced to Carol Haney who at the time was not in, she was not in Steam Heat ... she'd Steam Heat ... from Pajama Game had been done ... Shirley MacLaine had already taken over the part because Carol had broken

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or strained her ankle or something. The point is that's how I got into the area of the theater via involvement with a series of industrial shows which also I was quote unquoted started out as the dance music arranger for Carol Haney, but was a series of industrial shows for Oldsmobile cars. This is way back, well I'll tell you the last show that I did was about 3 years ago I guess, something like ... anyway not recently. I had done 30 years worth of the show, you see.

**Holley:** When you say industrial shows, what exactly are you talking about?

**Henderson:** Oh, these are shows that are put on as a promotional for the actual people who sell the cars. It's not open to the public. It's not like an advertisement. It's a morale builder, it's a ... they have them still whenever they have automobile shows, they have electronic shows, and the dealers and so forth come in. This is now to excite the dealers. And it was quite popular back in those days and in it, many performers were involved. But I think that the most ambitious of those shows were the Oldsmobile show and the Milliken show. The Oldsmobile show, which was produced by ... uh ...

**Billie Henderson:** Frank Egan


**Henderson:** Frank Egan, was specifically different because Frank encouraged all its creators in music and dancing to do their thing for Broadway and he would for many years let us give performances that were devoid of the commercial sell that he was doing for the dealers and so forth that came there. But he invited directors and producers and so forth from the theater to sort of like a grand audition for everybody, do you know what I mean? And so this was a big, one of the big lead-ins for me too to the theater. I was with Carol. I did several of those shows. Past that, we did, she was called and I was called with her to do shows like Bravo Giovanni, like Flower Drum Song, etc. down the line. There were various other things and Funny Girl was one of the notable ones, as a matter of fact. So but I got drawn in through that area and also through the area of Ellington. I forget what year it was, but it was as we've talked about before, interested in expanding his music and he and John LaTouche, he wrote the music, John LaTouche wrote the lyrics to a thing, to a book, to a musical called Beggar's Holiday with which I was involved as a co-orchestrator. So the path into the theater was like that. And it got deepened by, what shall I say, the wonderful happenstance of my being thrown in with the giants like Richard Rodgers, like Jule Stein, like Arthur Laurentz who was a book writer and so forth. These people ... and of course Carol Haney and ... Bert Shaloff (?), etc., down through the lines of those things. One leads to another and so forth. So that's how I got into it, you see.

**Holley:** Give me a date of maybe your first full Broadway production.

**Henderson:** First full Broadway production. Date? (laughs) He says dates?

**Holley:** Well, around what year.

**Henderson:** Okay, let's see. Now let's go back. It would have had to have been after the first Ellington concert, the Carnegie thing. The Carnegie thing was in 1955, I think. So


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that I would say that ... Beggar's Holiday was the absolute first one. And I think that that was like 1959, in that area. And soon after that, the next thing I believe that was actually Broadway was I think Bravo Giovanni. It was either Bravo Giovanni or Flower Drum Song. That was like early '60s, I guess.

**Holley:** Now let's talk about the mechanics. You mentioned, how was it different working in a Broadway context as opposed to working with a jazz band. What did you take from jazz into Broadway?

**Henderson:** Right, okay. First of all, the fact is it's a matter of discipline. I use the word very broadly. Discipline in the jazz context has not only to do with improving one's technique and one's facility, let's put it that way, with one's instrument. It also has to do with improvisation particularly and specifically, using the material, using the vocabulary that's existing from the streets, from the blues, from the things, using that vocabulary mixed with whatever vocabulary that you may have gathered from the society in which you have been put. Now I'm talking about the African element of the jazz. And it is principally defined by its improvisatory nature. And by being so defined, there is an adrenaline that seems to be released with the knowledge of not knowing exactly what you're gonna do but using the vocabulary, you know, which is very infectious. Now when people hear this, this is again like a primal transmission that doesn't elude, doesn't, that appeals to everyone so that Dvorak, for instance, could hear it and hear "Goin' Home" ... very moved by this primal thing and into his discipline, into the classical quote unquote European discipline, he would incorporate it and come up with a symphony called "New World Symphony" which he wrote his impressions of this. The difference between the theater and of any other persuasion, any other practice of music other than jazz is the improvisational side. What we try to do when we transpose or translate or whatever we want to use to bring that adrenaline flavor from the first ?? into the more structured, disciplines ... uh, what we try to do is to capture the essence of that performance. I'll give you an example, like for instance, which I've had the pleasure of doing and lucky to do ... a show called "Ain't Misbehavin'" which is about Fats Waller. Fats Waller exuded what we call jazz. He was a stride piano player and so forth. Now the improvisations that he had in his things were things which we incorporated into the theater which is from a musical standpoint, had first of all to be consistent. Improvisation is also defined by inconsistency because usually you cannot improvise the same things the same time, so in the theater you have to pass this on. You have to have definite cues, you have to have the movement ... has to be more or less defined. It cannot be at random. So the trick is, taking this nonrandom venture and imbuing it somehow with this more or less random, free for all kind of expression which it really isn't but we're trying to imitate that and through it through our own efforts re-say it, redo it, tell it through our eyes, tell it through the proscenium arch, tell it through the whatever the media, through opera, through symphonic stage concerts and so forth. I don't know. If I'm getting to windy about this, you have to stop me. But this a process. I call it, I think of it, for instance jazz music as a kind of ... of which many of ... which Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, various other people that have come up, the blues people from New Orleans and back further and the works of

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all these, this ... this music that emerges from these spontaneous performances becomes a kind of a natural resource here in America. It's kind of like ... not only in America, it's every place ... because it is an expression of the people, an expression of the times, it is an expression of the movement and the shape and the pluses and minuses of the universal curve, of where the continuum is going. And so that therefore when we take of this particular thing and use portions of it for our own purposes, we're doing nothing more than taking a natural resource, like we take Niagara Falls as a natural resource, we use turbines whatever it is, and we translate it into electricity, you know. So turning on an electric light bulb is not necessarily equated with the falling of Niagara but it is a part of that natural resource.

**Holley:** Okay.

**Henderson:** So this is what it is. Okay ... (chuckles) I'll ...

**Holley:** Okay. That's great. I want to also talk about the musicians you worked with. You're coming from an era you're working with musicians who are used to that spontaneous composition, what kind of difficulties did you have in teaching non-jazz musicians that spontaneity and trying to get them to be spontaneous?

**Henderson:** Great difficulty. Great difficulty except that in the instances where I would take the jazz musicians or jazz substance, so forth, try to use it, let's say, in the theater or in a symphonic version, that I would try most of the time to hire people, 1 or 2 at least, whose expression would come from that natural source. In other words, there was a guy by the name of Dick Perry. He happened not to be black, he was a white fellow. Very, fantastic trumpet. And Jule used him, Jule Stine used him in all of his shows because he understood the improvisational nature of a thing, so if I would write for him—or anybody—a riff like for instance dat-duh-dat-dun-ta or whatever that might be, he would understand that this is not dit-dut-dat-duh. He would understand that expression had to be from a jazz standpoint. And so what we would do whenever we would have to deal with that, we would try to first of all choose musicians who could understand the basic thing. Also choose musicians who had the technical ability to read the notes as well as imply the music in between.


**Holley:** Hold on one second, I hear a beep.

**Billie Henderson:** Is that your watch?

**Henderson:** Oh that's my ... it's now 9:30 EST.

**Holley:** That's okay. Just so we can get a clean copy of this, let me just paraphrase what you just said. I was talking to you about the difficulty of non-jazz players playing in a fluid context and you were telling me about this gentleman.

**Henderson:** Yes, about Dick Perry. He's not the only one but I just take him particularly. And as I said, it's interesting the fact that he's not black. Actually I'll mention Jimmy Crawford who's a drummer, as a matter of fact, he was black. He used to be with Jimmy Lunceford Orchestra. And many Broadway producers wouldn't do a show unless Jimmy

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Crawford could play the drums for him because Jimmy had ... he read music and he could understand what was happening and he could deal with it. So the point is that what you do is you try very hard to pick the personnel for whom you're writing that will have this flair. If for instance you are writing for a symphony, you see if you can get a concert master ... what's his name ... Lukovsky(?)

**Holley:** Harry Lukovsky?

**Henderson:** Harry Lukovsky, violinist. You know Harry Lukovsky?

**Holley:** Yes.

**Henderson:** All right. Harry Lukovsky is a very fine violinist. He's not just a jazz violinist. As a matter of fact he's maybe, he used to be a concert master for me when I was doing the Polly Bergen show at one time. Because if I write for him, if I write for the string section something and I say "smear," this is not what you'd call a classical identification or a dynamic marking. No. I used to (laughs) when I would do scores, I would purposely make strange dynamic markings. With some of the Ellington things for the symphony parts, I would write: tempo di gutbucket. Now what is that? They'd stop and say: What is that? Oh, see I may have forgotten. The minute they ask the conductor what it is, thank god I won't be there, I won't be the conductor, and I say: Oh I'm glad you asked. Then I'll say: it goes like this. And we'll hum like we generally do.

**Holley:** So what you did in this context is introduce Afro-American vernacular in substitution for the standard ... like andante and largo and things like that.


**Henderson:** I think you could say that. And I must say that the degree to which it becomes identified and identical – or not identical, couldn't be identical – but the degree that it is comparable to that which comes directly from the source is remarkable. Mainly because the proponents of jazz music insist mostly, used to at least, that if it is to be jazz, it must be improvised. And it must have [break in tape?] because this is not produced in the same fashion. It is no non ... nonpressure. It has to do with great pressure. It has to do with ... because it said waaa-waaah. It can't possibly be European, you see? So therefore it can't ever have any of those ... it's like jazz and classics. I mean, opera singers. They must regroup their muscles if they are to go from, if they're gonna go from Puccini or Wagner, not Wagner, but from Puccini to Ellington or to Richard Rodgers, they have to regroup the muscles with which they work. Many are not willing to do that, so we have, you know.

**Holley:** What about, again I'm probably right in assuming this but when you are making your venture into Broadway, this is another first again, what kind of

**Henderson:** What's another first?

**Holley:** Well yeah. You were probably one of the few

**Henderson:** Well, yes I was. There was a fellow by the name of Charlie Cook. Charlie Cook was an arranger. He was not as well known and also, I mean when talk about

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venture into Broadway, I assume that we're not talking about, you know, Hot Chocolates or the black shows that were done for that particular purpose.

**Holley:** Quote unquote, legitimate Broadway, quote unquote.

**Henderson:** Quote unquote? Okay. (laughs) Oh, we won't go into that here, all right? But there were many, I think, I know of one Charlie Cook, for instance, who did orchestrations for different shows. An orchestrator, as you may or may not know, is one who does the final wrap-up of all the arrangements that the composer, that the arranger has done of the composer's material and actually takes the composer's works and assigns them to the orchestra ... he's the last bastion, he's the last reference before it is turned over to the hands of the performers. Now Will, not Will Marion, but Will Marion Cook also was from before too, but Charlie Cook did certain orchestrations. I don't think that there was that I can remember ... there may very well have been, I'm not sure what Will Vaudry did, whether he might have had some Broadway credits or not. The point is that in this era, past "Oklahoma" which was at the dawn of the new what we would say American theater, American musical theater, that I do not think that there were any other than I who were involved in it, in the various capacities that I was. I have to hedge that a little bit because I'm not absolutely sure but I know that I was certainly one of the first. Now again, you have to understand that a lot of these things were not a matter of going to be the first. You know you have a big list of ... I have been in this over half a century so I got a lot of lists of things. But you gotta realize a lot of those things down there, a lot of those things are gigs. You know a gig is something you do because you've gotta get some food in the house and you got to (chuckles) pay the rent, you know? Hopefully it's something that you like and that you can do. But it's not necessarily something you're committed to, like I'm committed to Ellington. Like I'm committed to the Broadway theater. Like I'm committed, let's say, to the Canadian Brass or whatever these things are. This is not things that are as important. But not necessarily that kind of continuity, do you know what I'm saying?

**Holley:** What I want to do to get this on tape. I want to ask you before we get into "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Jelly's Last Jam," I want to run down the list of, just so I can get this on tape, of some of the Broadway productions you've done. The first, Happy New Year, So Long (overlapping voices) 74<sup>th</sup>(?) Street, Flower Drum Song, Do Re Mi, Funny Girl, Hallelujah Baby, Purlie, No No Nanette, you mentioned Beggar's Holiday, Katherine Dunham's Tropical Review, Bravo Giovanni, I Had a Ball, Hot Spot, High Spirits, Golden Rainbow, That's Entertainment, Wild and Wonderful, Good News, Dr. Jazz, Rodgers and Hart, On Time. These are some of the things. Now I want to pick a couple of things before we get into the main ones. You mentioned you worked with ... what was your work with Katherine Dunham like?

**Henderson:** Okay, Katherine Dunham was a direct outshoot of my work with the Leonard Ware Trio. The Leonard Ware Trio is a group that I ended up working with during my last year in Juilliard. There was a place called George's Tavern down in the Village not far from Sheridan Square, a little south of Sheridan Square, and I guess just

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shortly after I had graduated, Katherine Dunham brought into town her, what she called tropical review in which there were various things of the Caribbean nation so forth and our trio, Leonard Ware's trio, I was a member of the trio, she didn't hire me, she hired Leonard, I happened to be part of the trio, to play in this particular thing. Also, she hired me to write some of the music, there was a quartet, oh my goodness, I'm going back here ... was Helen Dowdy and oh, there was a mixed quartet, male and female quartet that did things that were real ... of the ...

**Billie Henderson:** vocal

**Henderson:** the vocal things that I did. And so I got there because evidently she must have heard the Leonard Ware Trio or whatever, anyway they were, we were selected to play some of the music for her on stage as a group, you see? And that was my involvement with her.

**Holley:** For the record, so people will know, Katherine Dunham is a ...

**Henderson:** Is a ... what is Katherine Dunham. A, she is like

**Billie Henderson:** anthropologist

**Henderson:** An anthropologist, choreographer. She was the ... she educated the hip.

**Billie Henderson:** She was the first person to isolate the hip on Broadway.

**Henderson:** Isolate the hip. That's what I'm trying to say. Isolate the hip for Broadway. People like Jack Cole and Carol Haney all took from her lead.

**Billie Henderson:** And Pete Gennaro.


**Henderson:** And Pete Gennaro. Different ones to do that.

**Billie Henderson:** Jack Cole.

**Henderson:** That's right. Jack Cole was one of the first ones, yeah.

**Holley:** Now tell me about the genesis of this Broadway play, musical, Bravo Giovanni. I've never heard that. Tell me.

**Henderson:** Well it was ... this is what you call, it starts out as what we call a gig, right? Because we're doing, this is during the era of the really, I call them progressive Oldsmobile shows. We were, I forget what particular one, Frank would procure the rights to certain things like Anything Goes, like things from Gershwin, Porter, so forth, and we would do our industrial, our version of industrial. But I think if I'm not mistaken that the job to be the choreographer for Bravo Giovanni came from, as a result of the producer seeing one of those shows and as I was Carol's principal for her dance music arranger and also I think abetted by the relationship that I had with Ellington, the association with Ellington only has helped my entire career because ... so that when I was hired to do this. Now it turned out to be more than a gig in that Carol and I who hit it off were able to do something I haven't had a chance to do since that which is a ballet the music for which was purely percussive. (laughs) I managed to get them to let the trumpet players get to

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pass out various little toys in the orchestra, you know, like shakers and scratchers and various things like that, and we did this what we call the kitchen ballet. We had two percussionists and so forth. We had a complete, there were no quote unquote musical, what should I call it, melody instruments or anything in it. So that was a first we got a chance to do and that's what, I mean that's how, I won't go into all the details. It turned out to be, again, I think a very, an artistic success. I got to do an orchestral album from it which is a matter of ... what you say ... I told you like when you're in New York as a television or musical director, so forth, you get the call to cover the hit parade, you also get the call to cover instrumentally the Broadway scene. And I did that for Bravo as well.

**Holley:** Okay. I want to briefly touch on your off-Broadway and regional theater. I want to get this down on tape too. You worked with Ethel Waters, the Crystal Tree, Mahalia, Brown, Storyville, the All Night Strut, Cabin in the Sky. Is this the same Cabin in the Sky production?

**Henderson:** I'll tell you about Cabin in the Sky. It's very interesting. But go ahead.

**Holley:** Six Hundred and a Mule. Okay. Tell me about Cabin in the Sky.

**Henderson:** Well first of all, Cabin in the Sky was done in a place called Sea Cliff, Long Island, and it stars Juanita Hall and Josephine Cremise(?) and Nipsy Russell and the orchestra consisted of me, Luther Henderson and Billy Strayhorn, probably the only time in history that we have done a two piano version of Cabin in the Sky. What's interesting is that I think our collaboration, Strayhorn and mine, on that particular musical is what prompted us to decide that we would try to do something on our own which we never did get to do. Well we started on a musical for the two of us called "The Rose Colored Glasses" but I won't go into that. That particular show, Cabin in the Sky, was unique because of the stars that were involved and because of the fact that Strayhorn was with me.

**Holley:** I just want to ask you what year was Cabin in the Sky?

**Henderson:** My wife says that she was there. I didn't know my wife then but maybe she knows.


**Billie Henderson:** I saw that production. I'm not sure the year but I think it was the late '50s.

**Henderson:** I would say that's about right.

**Billie Henderson:** About '57. Sea Cliff, Long Island.

**Holley:** Now we touched a little bit on this yesterday, your work in television. We talked about the Polly Bergen Show. We talked about the Helen Morgan Story. You worked on, now you were the musical director for the Carol Burnett Show?

**Henderson:** No, on the Carol Burnett Show I was what's known as dance music arranger. Peter Matz was the general conductor and orchestral arranger. I did the dance

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music for the various, whatever sequences needed to come up. I did that for quite a while, a year or two years or whatever, I forgot now how long.

**Holley:** And you choreographed, well you worked on, did you do the same kind of work for *The Bachelor*?

**Henderson:** All right, *The Bachelor* was a piece on television, produced by Joel(?) Cates and which featured, which was done ... I don't think it was directed by Carol. At any rate it was again I think a first television musical. In other words, I've even forgotten the plot of it, but that was what it was. And I think that ... what was I on that. I guess I did the orchestrations. I'd have to check back on that. I either did the orchestrations and the dance music arrangements or one or both, you see?

**Holley:** Okay, once again I'm gonna go through a list and I'm gonna pick out certain things for you to comment on about your television work. We talked about the *Helen Morgan Story*, the first Victor Borge special, *Summer in New York*, *Home for the Holidays*, the *Carol Lawrence TV Special*, *The Entertainers*, the *Carol Burnett series*, the *Gary Moore Show*, the *Coliseum series*, *That's Life*, *America Pauses*, the *Bell Telephone Hour*, *Bob Hope Show*, *Hollywood Palace*, *Dan Marcus Special*, *Maude*, *The Shape of Things*. Now there are four shows that I want you to talk about because they are probably the most well known of your ventures in television. Tell me about your work with the *Ed Sullivan Show*.


**Henderson:** *Ed Sullivan Show*. I did several pieces for the *Ed Sullivan Show* starting with when they first, oh I guess maybe in the first year or so, when that became, the advent of the show, I was working with *Lena Horne* at the time and we did one of the first television shows that he did and my work with *Ed Sullivan* shows would normally consist of playing and conducting or playing or conducting sometimes for the star whom I was working for, would be working for like for instance *Lena Horne*. And sometimes actually producing, being commissioned to do a piece like for instance we were commissioned to do a quote unquote sequence with *Carol Haney* which we had *Milt Hinton* and *Teddy Summer* on drums and myself playing piano. We were to do a jazz sequence. The *Ed Sullivan Show* was a variety show on which various performers with whom I had worked would appear and I would adapt their arrangements for it or play for them on it. I did various things, whatever seemed to be necessary to be done I did, you see?

**Holley:** What year did you work with *Ed Sullivan*?

**Henderson:** Many years. I guess, gosh, I can't even say because

**Holley:** Mid-'60s?

**Henderson:** Oh, yes. We would be talking about that, be talking about the mid-'60s, I think. Through the ... when did *Ed Sullivan* die, I forgot now. But at any rate, through his tenure at various times and various circumstances I would work for him. I remember the *Carol Haney*, I remember *Lena Horne*, *Teresa Brewer* ... oh I remember that well because her big ... union hurrah about that ... different stars that I had worked for were in on that.

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[end side 1, tape 3]

**Holley:** And when did you work with Andy Williams?

**Henderson:** Same kind of thing. It was like ... that was with Polly Bergen. I didn't actually do stuff with him. He had a show and many of the credits you see down there are the kind of credits where this is the show that I was on and what I specifically did, not indicated on that schedule, but what for instance, Andy Williams, I don't know whether I was either doing the Polly Bergen television show or subsequent to the Polly Bergen television show when I traveled with her and we played Las Vegas and places like that, New York, and did various TV stunts and that would be one of the TV stunts that I did with Polly, I think.

**Holley:** Okay. And your work with a comedian I remember, Red Skelton.


**Henderson:** Same kind of thing.

**Holley:** Same kind of thing. And also you work ... so you worked with Red Skelton, Dean Martin, Bob Hope was the same kind of work.

**Henderson:** All the same. They are the ones, the name of the show was The Dean Martin Show or the name of ... you know what I'm saying? That's the kind of thing. Again, I don't mean to denigrate them, they were a big part of what we, what I wanted to do, but these constitute what I call gigs. You know? Not a concentrated or over a period of time thing, just something you do. You're a professional arranger, composer or whatever and you, what comes across your desk, you do it and you hope you get paid for it, that's it.

**Holley:** I want to talk to you a bit about the '60s. Now here you are, you've come up in the '40s and you worked with Ellington. As a musician working in television, working in Broadway, working with jazz ensembles, what was your take musically on the '60s. I mean Rock 'n Roll came into being and James Brown came into being and you know, we won't even get into the social thing. We'll get into that later. But as a musician, were those musical changes hard for you to work through? Did they affect your livelihood?

**Henderson:** Some were and some did. Some affected me musically and some did affect my livelihood. I will have to confess that having been through the heyday of the birth of jazz quote unquote as we know it today, having worked on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, having seen first hand the Gillespies and the Charlie Parkers and Duke Ellingtons and all that and Count Basies and so forth, shake, rattle and roll didn't seem consequential to me for some reason. Now I have grown older and am understanding now that shake, rattle and roll and all those particular pieces, they are all part and parcel of the same thing. So now, as I was going through it, I would try to do those things. I would go back a little bit further. I'm gonna skip back to my Juilliard days. I got this job with Leonard Ware down in the Village. I, who had been brought up on Minuet in G and so forth had to go and really woodshed to try to learn how to do boogie woogie. Boogie woogie wasn't a part of my natural training ... what I loved to do and to hear and so forth. But again it was not the

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thing. I think the '60s with the rock period and all the other things and so forth were a delineation of ... were fractional delineations of what, of the whole momentum, of the whole movement of the flow of the musical continuum. And I lived through 'em. I should tell you that I'm proud to say that I was called to do a television show called Miss Teen USA which was a beauty pageant which I did for 3 years which I must say, again, that it was very good pay, as those shows are, and I felt not totally qualified to indulge myself in that. But the point is that of course I realized that what I had to offer, how shall I say this, the lesson was that I did not have ... I did not have to do ... I did not have to go to the extremes that I would go to normally for the ... it would be sufficient if I'd just put down a few little chords and said: There. This is what they were buying. And so it was a leavening experience in a way of speaking for me that I appreciated very much.

**Holley:** What about socially, just as a person, what were the '60s like to you, just watching the upheaval of the civil rights movement, the president's assassination and all the Vietnam War and the different aspects of the drug culture. What did you, just as a person, what did that mean to you, how did you react to all of that?

**Henderson:** Well, different things in different ways. Mainly, sometimes with great horror and fright at what seemed to have been happening. I must confess not many with the degree that I'm feeling and expressing today with what we're facing with certain things in our society. But, how shall I say this, I will have to say that I was very insulated by virtue of the work that I was ... I managed to not involve myself with and that was probably a mistake. But socially, what did it do for me? What did I think about it. I don't know that I had any really cogent thoughts about it other than that I wanted to live life the best I could and try not to fall into these traps that I saw around me.


**Holley:** Do you think we, as black people, are because of what happened in the '60s, which is a continuation of things that have gone before, but things seemed to come to a head in the '60s. Do you think we are better off now? Do you think the '60s really made us better off as people?

**Henderson:** It's probably a necessary catharsis, I would say. It's probably something that now we may be prepared to understand and view in a more objective fashion than we were before. I think without it, I don't know what would have happened. I don't think that it was a possibility for life to progress without this kind of tension, without this kind of

**Holley:** release?

**Henderson:** Yes, tension and release that was involved. Are we a better people for it? I would hope so because I think that the living through and the adaptation -- physically, mentally, psychologically, emotionally and otherwise -- having found that we have arrived through it is in itself a source of a certain kind of strength.

**Holley:** We've got about an hour to go so what I want to do is I want to get your personal recording history before we talk about "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Jelly's Last Jam." I want you to talk about ... the one thing I saw here in your notes is that you worked on one of

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my favorite Duke Ellington records of all time. And that is “A Drum is a Woman.” Tell me about that specific recording, what you did, your impressions.

**Henderson:** All right. My impressions. I'll give you two. First of all, the numbers, I did one or two or three numbers, I forget how many. I did a couple. But whatever it was that I did, that particular session was involving that number and I arrived at the session, let's say it was you know, 11 o'clock or 11 or 12 o'clock. I arrived at a quarter of whatever it was, you know, and of course I was totally by myself. There was nobody there. Now the thing that I'm gonna emphasize is that Ellington didn't arrive until late, his band members didn't arrive 'til late. And when they did, they passed out things it seemed like it almost ... very non-committal or haphazard fashion but he insisted on just trying ... let's try to do this, so forth. And there in the control room, I now understand it, they were anxious to get their balances. They wanted to see the whole thing all the way through and so forth. Ellington would have none of that because once they took the first take, that was it. He never took more than one take. Sometimes we had to take two. I learned that much. The second thing is that ... and I'm giving these impressions in retrospect ... is that when I think about that session, I went to all of the sessions, even those that weren't mine, was the ... I didn't realize it then, at that time, but this was Ellington at action, playing on his instrument which was his orchestra, do you understand? He was improvising. He was doing his jazz on his instrument. And it can be a little nerve-racking because if you are outside looking in, you think surely he's not gonna do that. Are we gonna do so and so? Well, it comes up, it looks like it's not organized until after the fact. It's done and you say: Oh yeah, okay, I see. So this is where, that session, first of all, I learned, I don't know if I learned it or not, I observed the operation of Ellington. I also got the opportunity to write for for him. Of course I wrote, in spite of what he told me not writing all those notes, I wrote all my notes and he played all the notes. And they did it like his band, you understand? But so, I think I also realized at that time that Ellington and I probably were mutually beneficial to one another in that respect, you know?

**Holley:** I have this record. Now correct me if I'm wrong but are you listed as composer?


**Henderson:** Arranger. If I'm listed it's as an arranger. I remember one was “You'd Better Know It” is one. There was another one but I can't remember exactly what it was. You'd Better Know It. Ozzie Bailey, one of the things that Ozzie Bailey sang, I think, I did a couple and Strayhorn did a couple for Ozzie. Seems to have been another one and I can't remember what it was. I think I did two, two arrangements.

**Holley:** Now let me ask you about the whole idea of Ellington giving a gender to the rhythm of jazz. I thought that was very

**Henderson:** Giving?

**Holley:** A gender. A drum is a woman. I mean he talked about Caribee Jo and Madam Zaj, you know.

**Henderson:** What do I think about that?

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**Holley:** Yeah, I thought particularly in that time, we're talkin' late '50s I think when that album came out, that was very, he was well ahead of his time because you didn't have, from my research, it seems that a lot of women in jazz were like they weren't treated with respect.

**Henderson:** Oh I see. I never thought that.

**Holley:** Not a lot but some. Mary Lou Williams obviously and Adam Powell's wife, you know, they were treated with respect for the most part even if they were like novelties.

**Henderson:** I also thought that "A Drum is a Woman" that he meant, he used the word woman as ... as opposed to A Drum is a Man, for instance because of the image, connotation of fertility from which everything grew, from which everything was spawned, from which everything was generated. I may be reading too much into it but this is how I had thought of that story. And that you know when he goes to Caribee Jo, that's one of her children. A drum is a woman. She ?? out all these things and people out of this drum and what was the drum? The drum was the dawn of mankind and how mankind's first real contribution, first communication had to be percussive because what else was he gonna do but beat on this drum. You know what I'm saying? I guess that may be a little fanciful but this what I thought. I can't imagine that no one, particularly a dance person or choreographer person or even ... has, could not conceive of it that way. Now you're saying that is very interesting because it's a very literal thing. A drum is a woman. We think about man and a woman, about how a man would treat his woman, that he's not respectful, that he beats her, that he makes her his chattel in a way of speaking, that he's, you know, Adam's rib and so forth. I don't think ... that may ... look at that, it may seem that way but when you get around on the other side of things, you may look at it as a, it may look different, it may not look like using, it may ... it may look like developing. I don't know what the word I should use but the point is it does not have to be antagonistic. It is not necessarily

**Holley:** Mutual symbiosis


**Henderson:** Symbiosis is a very good word, a very good word. Wish I'd thought of it myself. But the point it, that's where I think ... "Drum is a Woman" is really, it's the kind of provocative thing that has always attracted me to Ellington. And he does this with his titles and with the prose that he's written and so forth. This is what he does. He doesn't separate anything, the music, the dance, the poetry, whatever.

**Holley:** It's all interrelated.

**Henderson:** All interrelated.

**Holley:** Now, tell me briefly about, so we get some kind of chronology, tell me briefly about what you did in the '70s. We've talked about all the decades but before I get into the big ... tell me about your career in the '70s. Just give me an overview.

**Henderson:** '70s. Now let's see, where would I be? By this time, it depends when television left New York. I was, when television was in New York, I was doing the '60s

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and it left and went to California, yes, sometime before the end of the '60s. So therefore what happened in the '70s was that I think was the concentration of my being in Broadway shows. I think that I, many of the, not only Broadway but off-Broadway shows, being involved in the musical theater and doing quote unquote gigs as you would say with the television and records and so forth was more like it. I would say that the '70s up 'til the time as you say '79 or '78 or '79 when “Ain't Misbehavin'” was, was involved mainly with the theater with certain side trips to various things like, oh I don't know, when did I do Eileen Farrell? I did an album with Eileen Farrell which I thought was very good called “I Got a Right to Sing the Blues.” She was a, I don't know, you know I forget people not as old as I am don't know that Eileen Farrell was a fantastic opera singer. She was a dramatic soprano, a good many years in residence at the San Francisco Opera and then when I met her, she was brought here by Rudolph Bing to play the part of Medea. We were both signed to Columbia Records. Columbia Records did some recordings. I have to try to ... I think that the main thing I was involved with in the '70s was theater. I think that was the bulk of it.

**Holley:** That'll make a nice segue into your involvement with “Ain't Misbehavin'.” Before we get to that, I want you to ... we talked briefly about Fats Waller. Did you work with Fats Waller before you got into “Ain't Misbehavin'”?


**Henderson:** No.

**Holley:** So your knowledge of Fats Waller was primarily from records?

**Henderson:** From records.

**Holley:** Okay. Now tell me about your involvement with “Ain't Misbehavin'” and what that did for your career at that particular time.

**Henderson:** My involvement, first of all, came about because Murray Horowitz and Richard had this record collection, a great record collector and he loved Fats Waller and he was also in the theater, doing theatrical things, got in touch with Richard Maltby who was doing things at the Manhattan Theater Center and said, you know, he looks into all the asides, this is what they started to tell me, all the asides that Fats Waller would have on his records. He would talk a lot to his he was an entertainer. And thought it would make a wonderful, entertaining, a wonderful evening for a musical review with doing all of his music. So they got interested in it and they took the things and made whatever things they could. And then at a certain point at the Manhattan Theater Club, they seem to have felt a lack of, I guess, maybe authenticity. Whatever the reason was, they weren't getting what they wanted from the musical people that they had there. And they asked me if would – incidentally it was just only done with just piano – and they asked me if I would write the music, would I do that. Well by this time, having lived through all those things, you know, this is, I thought, like a piece of cake for me, you know? Because I think I know all about, I tried to do all of Fats Waller's things unsuccessfully but I did try it. I mean I went through the whole ... and I know the era and so forth. So I said: Oh fine. I think I was hired as music supervisor and arranger. I got to the Manhattan Theater Club

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and found 5 people who seem to have literally sprung out of my past experiences. They looked like them. There was Irene Cara who looked kind of like Lena Horne who I had recently ... there was Nell Carter who ... oh gee, I can't think of her name ... a singer I used to work with here in Washington, D.C. ... uh not at the Crystal Caverns, one of these, one of these clubs

**Billie Henderson:** Bengasi

**Henderson:** Bengasi maybe it was. Anyway, there was Viola Jefferson, that was her name. I looked of course and there was Ken who is Pissari(?) who is Fats, you know, and Andre de Shields who is Snake Hips Tucker. Most people never heard of Snake Hips Tucker. He was a male exotic dancer. Armelia who, you know, was like Baby Hines. Baby Hines is another lady I worked with here in Washington when I was in the Navy here. So I came into this place knowing the music and surprisingly enough, looking at these people who looked like ... half of whom, more than half of them had never heard of Fats Waller which to me was almost incomprehensible. I couldn't believe this. But anyway, they got some footage, some film and stuff like that. So I became involved as the arranger and orchestrator for this production which I was, gotten up to the point of, they were gonna present it like in, you know, opening day was like maybe three days from now and the young man who was supposed to play ... was blizzard and he had to go down the subway and he slipped on the pavement, on the stairs, broke his leg, was injured badly. He could not make it. And there we were two days from opening, you see? And they had already because of Fats Waller's name

**Holley:** Already a lot of interest generated.


**Henderson:** It was sold out. You know, it's a grade B movie, you know ... who's gonna play the piano, folks?! You know? (laughs) I'm lookin' around like the rest of 'em, saying I don't know who's gonna play this piano. In the end of course I did it. And it was wonderful. I enjoyed doing it. I had to, indeed, practice what I preached. I had to adapt Fats Waller to my technique and my needs and that's what I did.

**Holley:** What was the hardest thing about doing that?

**Henderson:** The hardest thing was learning to play "A Hand Full of Keys." (laughs) Because this was stride, I was not a stride piano, stride piano, I was ... it's hard, you know? I made a joke that I, you know, this is one of these(?) I decided not to be a piano ... I'm a pretty good piano player, as a matter of fact, I think. But you know to be the kind of piano player that I would, it requires a dedication that I was not willing to give to it. I mean we're talking minimum 5, 6, maybe 7, 8 hours a day of practicing, of being at the piano doing that. And life has gotta be that. I was willing to give up the other part, you know?

**Holley:** Composing and arranging?

**Henderson:** And all that sort of ... so anyway, so that. I was in that. The only other part was convincing – and I didn't have too much trouble with it – convincing this 1970s doo

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wop group or whatever you call it. What was the principal music. It was not jazz at that time. That they needed to approach it from a different angle. That they didn't ... and also that it was something that had to be done the same way each time. I think that's hard, you know, for a person to give an improvisational-like feeling and do it the same way each time is very difficult. And it requires an acting job. I think it's one of the reasons that I also gravitate to the theater because in my estimation, whether it's playing instrumentally or otherwise, a dramatic subtext brought to life by virtue of your particular virtuosity whether it's singing or whatever, is the only thing that makes that message potent, you know? To that degree that you're able to deal with that, that will be the degree to which you will be effective and you will be received. And once of course you are received by people, you will get it back because somehow, whether it's through applause or just through a metaphysical combination of understanding of that you get it. You get it. You know that you've been received because you get the message back one way or the other.

**Holley:** So you're playing piano and are you aware of the tremendous interest that the show had generated. Did you know when you did this, it was gonna turn out to be the great hit that it was?


**Henderson:** No, we knew this much. We knew that Fats Waller, I'll put it this way, we knew that if we had, in any degree, captured the essence, the true subplot that was Fats Waller that emerged and became visible as Fats Waller, if indeed we were successful at that that we knew that we would be effective. Now one of the things that we also knew was that contrary to many expectations, Fats Waller was not forgotten, particularly by subscribers to the Manhattan Theater Club because a week or more, as soon as they announced that there was a musical based on the recordings so forth of Fats Waller, the entire subscription was sold out. And when we did it, we were received very, very enthusiastically. The degree of enthusiasm was such that it transcended any of our expectations. I mean, when you turn Jackie Onassis away because you can't get a seat for her, you know you figure you must have arrived someplace, right? And so did the Shuberts feel that as a matter of fact. That's how come we got off in such short order from doing a thing in the winter months, the latter part of '78 in November, December and coming up to and opening in March or whatever it was, next year. That's almost unheard of for any dramatic theater production to come up in that length, in 6 weeks, 6 months rather and then go in for the Tonys and win a Tony or two Tonys or whatever Tonys we won, you know. Most of the time we're talking about 6 years, rather than 6 months.

**Holley:** So it was on Broadway 'til time it won a Tony, how long was it running?

**Henderson:** Well, we opened, I think we opened just in time for the, I think we opened in April, couldn't have been ... you remember that?

**Billie Henderson:** March

**Henderson:** Was it March? It was around that time and so we had a couple of months before ... I know I had to get special dispensation from the union to play. I played the Broadway opening again because as we arrived, there's no other musical ... I'm all the

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musical departments, do you know what I mean? I'd be the orchestration, had to do arrangements, I'm playing the piano and now I do some arrangements for a small group, I did that. And there was copy. I did not copy the things. But other than that, so that there's a rule in the union book that I guess it's dissipated so that if you are involved in an area of music preparation, that you can't be in the music preparation and the music as a performer as well because that should be jobs for two people, not just for one, do you see? Anyway, so we got a special dispensation from the union for me to do that until such time as we could get a suitable replacement who played the show awhile for us whose name is Hank Jones whom you may have heard of. I said Okay if you're gonna get Hank, just don't ask me to play behind Hank! (laughs) No, Hank Jones was one of the, I really feel that he did it because of me. I feel very flattered that he, because most jazz musicians, particularly ... really do not wish this time constrictor, you know. They don't, they want ... and I understand it. You don't want to have to come in, do 8 shows a week and make them all the same way. That's not a part of the jazz tradition, you see? But we're asking you in the theater to make us think that you are doing, that you have the same adrenaline, that you have the same juice going as if you are just making it up each time. And that takes some doing. Everyone is not emotionally or physically prepared to do that.

**Holley:** Name some of the great Fats Waller compositions that you had the pleasure of playing.

**Henderson:** Ain't Misbehavin', Mean to Me, Hand Full of Keys, well of course Honeysuckle Rose is the piece de, you know. (mumbles) How many courses of Honeysuckle Rose.

**Holley:** Jitterbug Waltz?

**Henderson:** Jitterbug Waltz. Now it's interesting, a lot of pieces that are associated with Fats Waller were not actually written by Fats Waller. Like Feets Too Big was not actually written by Fats Waller from what I'm remembering. There were some other things that were not actually written by Fats Waller but which he performed and again it shows you that the performance, as a jazz artist, the performance is part and parcel of the composition and so that many times people will talk about you know Coleman Hawkins' Body and Soul. Well Coleman didn't write Body and Soul. Neither did the composer write Coleman Hawkins version of it.

**Holley:** John Coltrane, My Favorite Things.

**Henderson:** Right. That's right. So the point is that they all, they coexist together, the performance and the actual writing. That's the essence of the marriage of jazz and classics, I think. That we should strive for. That's what I strive for.

**Holley:** Now I want you to clarify something else for me. Did you actually ever in your life meet Fats Waller.

**Henderson:** I think I did because Strayhorn and I traveled around a lot together, you know, and I think that once at the Hollywood Café or whatever, right across from Dicky, not Dicky Wells... oh, chicken and waffles, what's the name of the place ... anyway ...

**Billie Henderson:** Well's?

**Henderson:** Well's. Well's Chicken and Waffles, was a bar and grill. I think I met him there once. Never knew him well. I'd also see him like down at the Rhythm Club which was at 132<sup>nd</sup> Street where the Lafayette Theater used to be, but I never was you know ... Hi, Fats! No, I was not on that basis with him.

**Holley:** When you did meet him even at a glance, what were your impressions of him?

**Henderson:** Awe, mostly, because I couldn't believe I'm there, this man who did these things. And he was, you know, he was havin' a good time, believe me when I tell you, at ALL times, all conditions, he was havin' a good time.


**Holley:** In your opinion, I've read certain things about Fats and one of the things that I read was that toward the end of his life, he was not happy with his image. A lot of people just saw him as entertainer and really did not give him his credit as far as being an artist. Do you think that was true?

**Henderson:** I think that was very true. As a matter of fact I think it's still true in many circles. People, for instance, did not know and I know the company when I joined didn't know, that Fats Waller actually wrote a Broadway musical called *Early to Bed*. And this musical was featured a lady by the name of Jenna(?) ??(sounds like "the gun") [Jeanne George?] who happened to have been, at the time, the wife of Phil Moore is how come I happened to have seen it. It didn't last a long time but there a couple of very good songs in it. Like *There's a Man in my Life* and a couple of ... I can't think of the other names. And Fats Waller was indeed a serious composer. Many people, particularly many musicians, particularly many black musicians, took exception to the fact that he took the way of promoting his talent of being what we call the buffoon. Now I would like to speak to that for a minute because I think that's absolutely wrong. I think that the essence of music or any art has to do with communication and anyway you can get it across is valid. And I think that this is what happens with the group that I'm working now, the Canadian Brass. The Canadian Brass Quintet, they are a classical group and they appear, the come to, they've walked on playing *Just a Closer Walk With Thee* in Dixieland style. And they walked out and they appear in tails and collars, white tie and collars and sneakers. And they go upon the band stage and people smile. All of a sudden the audiences are willing to listen to Pacabel. They want to hear the Four uh ...

**Holley:** Vivaldi. The Four Seasons.

**Henderson:** Four Seasons. Or any of the other things that they have transcribed miraculously.

**Holley:** Because of their willingness to involve the audience.

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**Henderson:** To involve the audience, involve themselves, and to demystify, to, not to make it so elite, to make this business of art and artistry not something of an elite nature that only the elite can follow, do you know? I think that's important.

**Holley:** Also important to the legacy of Fats Waller is the great lyricist Andy Razaf

**Henderson:** Indeed he is.

**Holley:** Did you ever meet him?

**Henderson:** Never met Andy Razaf but certainly met his lyrics, I'll tell you that.

**Holley:** It seems to me the musicians of that era, Ellington and Strayhorn, Andy Razaf, there was more mutual work by people as opposed to now. Mostly musicians are writers, composers, arrangers, instrumentalists at the same time but it seems in the '30s, '40s and '50s there was more collaborative efforts going on in jazz, in black music because you had this marriage of Andy Razaf.

**Henderson:** You mean in composition?

**Holley:** Right, in composition. Going back further, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. Why do you think that's not happening now?

**Henderson:** Because people are content to first of all to be content with what they can produce with three chords on a guitar and the people that they go, they play for are happy to have it and are not demanding any more. And I think that therefore that's a part of it. Now that may sound a little bit like I'm scolding. And maybe I am because it means that ah we need to be discriminating in what we do without being adversarial without putting down, in other words it is ok, wonderful, rock and roll, hard rock, iron rock whatever, fantastic, that's fine as long as we don't forget the source. The source, what they're doing is a piece of, broken, what's been gleaned, just a little piece. They're going to stick to it forever. Not only the performers, but the entrepreneurs. I think the entrepreneurs have a great responsibility for seeing to it that what they offer is not completely pandering to the lowest common denominator. What was your question?


Eugene: I was asking you about the collaboration

**Henderson:** The collaboration was more required. You're not required today to be a, to read or to know how to write music, to be a composer. Do you understand? You are only required to be able to sing or hum into a microphone and hand it to whoever it is you can get to take dictation from that

PAUSE

**Henderson:** I'm a ...

**Billie Henderson:** Andy Razaf in Ain't Misbehavin' I think it really, people got to really listen to Andy Razaf's lyrics.

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**Henderson:** That's right. I mean Black and Blue ...

**Billie Henderson:** Tore it up every night.

**Henderson:** Tore it up every night. But I gotta tell you, it was ... many people never really heard the lyric before, you understand?


**Holley:** It seemed to be in early, one of those early black consciousness songs, when I first heard it when I was young, I didn't really see it but that's what I got out of it, my generation, I looked at it like Strange Fruit.

**Henderson:** I've forgotten, Billy probably knows the story. Remember we were reading in the book about Andy Razaf, how it came into being because some gangster was  
(microphone adjustment by engineer)

**Henderson:** He meant it to be a commentary and without going into all the details, he kind of took a great risk because he was asked to write a funny song, I think. Wasn't that the story? And there was, it was funny, said Why was I born to be so, why was I, you know, mouses run from my door and all that and he said, Ah, isn't that funny. And in the middle part he turns around and says, you know, Deep down inside, I'm really white you know. And it wasn't what the boss ordered at all. And what the bosses did those days, they were mostly, as I say, gangsters, if you didn't do what they said they removed you from the scene, you understand. And so it's interesting how the reaction was in the theater. The first Black and Blue, there's a titter in the audience (makes a tittering sound). And then as it goes along, the titters get a little less and then they finally begin to get it. And by the time they do that last chorus, they have understood that black people have understood that we are not just making a joke about our thing like we usually do in order to ease our misery. White people have understood we have something to say to them, understand? We don't like the way you have been treating us. And they have, that statement has been made and when he's finished, everybody, they're all ... oh just loved it. The point is that collaboration did that. Nobody is required to collaborate today. Maybe it's getting back but it's still not, it's still too many people who are, too quote unquote composers who are being lionized and there's ... being lionized for what they've been able to get without benefit of the, what's gone before, without having a learning experience of their technique and all that. They're being lionized for it. And it rubs the wrong way sometimes on some of us who have had to pay for that, had to pay our lives for it to get what it is that we know. So I think it's returning. I think that we're getting back to it somehow.

**Holley:** When "Ain't Misbehavin'" won the awards and everything, many people saw that as an overdue recognition of your talents.

**Henderson:** Of my specific talents? That may be so. Many times people have told me that. Before Ain't Misbehavin'. They would say, Boy why aren't you this or how come this is not happening and so forth. I'm not saying this as something good but I just really didn't ever have too much time to think about that because I was doing something else. I


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had indeed had, you know I had the recognition of doing all these things that you are reading about in my resume there. But “Ain't Misbehavin” made what I do more visible to the general public. And so whereas within the industry, I think I have always had a certain amount of respect and understanding because ... well I've worked at it all this time. But outside of the actual industry, what people see are the headlines, what they see are the headliners. They don't see the inner, the inner workings. I mean you're asking people who go to the theater casually, ask them who Robin Wagner is or who Jules Fisher is. Most people don't know. They don't do what they're talkin' about in the theater. They are lighting and they do scenery. You'll go to the theater and you'll say, Oh we just saw Jelly's Last Jam. We saw Gregory Hines or we went to see so and so, we saw such and such. We see the headliners. So a lot of my quote unquote non-recognition, as you would say, may have been on that account. I prefer to believe it was on that account because and it may be partly my fault in that, maybe I need to push myself a little bit better but ... more But I've never felt that I needed to do that. I guess that's my background, my upbringing that it, that I was pretty good, you know? I think that was, may have been overdone. I know that I was, I guess I was over 30 years old before I realized that I couldn't just wait for the phone to ring; I had to go out and get a job if I was gonna get a job. It never happened to me, they'd always rung my phone before, you know? And maybe I wasn't so good because I wasn't up to ... what do I have to do to attract attention or whatever it might be.

**Holley:** Now let me, let's bring us up to date with your latest Broadway. Tell me about “Jelly's Last Jam,” the origin of it and specifically the challenge of bringing his music, 'cause I understand there some kind of problems bringing his music to that kind of venue.


**Henderson:** Yes, indeed. Problems. Well the history of it I guess you can get from various ... so far as the chronology is concerned. Sometime before ... I was brought on board in 1985. My contract reads that. And it had been put together or the rights had been gotten together by Margo Lyon and Pam Koslow who of course is Mrs. Gregory Hines. Now the evolution of this was that they called me this one summer day when they were doing this backers' audition and they put together a group who were going to more or less trace the history of Jelly Roll Morton through whatever the time was. It turned out this particular audition, this particular backers' audition was very exciting, very smashing because we had Gregory Hines and a cast that was fantastic, a fantastic review. They didn't need a book that was supposed to talk about Jelly Roll Morton. We didn't learn anything about Jelly Roll Morton very much. Now, and the producers to their great credit, even though the pledges were there, all the big people, the Shuberts, the Jansens, everybody was there, pledged enough money for them to go into production. They didn't because the book wasn't right. Now, subsequently through the many years, I was on a, what do you call it, music supervisor, they had a lot of trouble with me because nobody knew what to call me, you see? Because I did whatever and I also insisted that if I'm to be completely involved that I must be the boss ... music, you see? You know, pay my dues, that's what I think. The point is that whatever it was, we went through these various years talking to various playwrights and so forth and then I don't know what was it, 1989 or '90,

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somewhere right in there, came across with George Wolfe. And this is the essence of what this music was. First of all we've got a man like Jelly Roll Morton who I didn't know as much about, I must confess, when I started in as I subsequently learned. And what he did was an adaptation of the vocabulary and the things around him was quite phenomenal. None of it had the organization and the intent or agenda to be some or used in any respect under the proscenium arch. None that had the intent of being put in a sequence or to further ... most of it did not have any lyrics at all. And Susan Birkenhead who came on as George did, took some of his actual melodies and put some lyrics to it. Well, some of the melodies are almost not singable. Playable but not singable. Plus which there was variation, every 4 bars, every time it came to be repeated, there was something else again. Well, we can't have that in the theater because we have to have a continuity of thought. So the essence was first of all to translate what Jelly Roll had put together in terms of the dramatic progression of the proscenium arch. Secondly, I have to say re-compose and new-compose, do some considerable new compositions to make his music work with lyrics, intelligible, workable lyrics to fit the continuity of whatever the story was that George Wolfe was gonna devise. And the story he did devise we now see in Jelly's Last Jam but it involved taking a part Jelly's things, sometimes using the essence of the thematic material, sometimes not. Like in certain spots in the show, which are completely composed by me but which are to indicate, for instance when in his French Creole home, we are to indicate that there we have here French opera music, for instance, the really elite classics that they involved themselves in. But somehow Jelly Roll decided that he was gonna sorta suggest that this may have brought about the next number that we are going to do. So in other words, the music of Jelly's Last Jam had to be fashioned as though the composer were alive, here to re-fashion, re-compose, new-compose, do everything as this new book evolved. That fell to be my job. At first in this respect, because most of the work that I had done on Broadway, with Richard Rodgers and Gershwin things and so forth, all the great ... always started with a composer, always with a live composer, always with one that says Well look, you know, Richard, we need to have a night club sequence here but we don't have a song.

**Henderson:** And I remember this particular incident in which Rodgers said, Well what kind of a song do you need? And Carol Haney, who did the choreography says, Well we need a song that can be done in San Francisco at this Chinese nightclub and they're gonna be kind of jazzy. That's what they're up to. Well what would you do if you didn't have me, said he. And we named a song, Limehouse Blues ... thought that would be proper. So he says, All right, you make your choreography to Limehouse Blues. And he went home and the next day or two brought back a song called Fantan Fanny, which fit physically and everything the things that we had done. So now if Richard Rodgers had not been alive and on the scene and I had been the dance music arranger and they had decided, the director and the choreographer, that we needed a specific number thematically of which ... none of it seemed to exist before ... they looked at the dance music and said, Well why don't you make up something? And if I had done it as a work for hire, it would still have gone ... that it was the music by Richard Rodgers. You see? So I did this with Jelly.

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And as I said, this is the first time that it has been to that extent which is why that there was certain ... there was certain ... uh, trouble about how do you define me, you know? What am I? A re-composer, a co-composer? Or what? I won't go into what I prefer to believe about it because this is ... we've already settled all that stuff and so forth. But the point simply is this: that Jelly Roll's music is the essence, is the compilation of this vocabulary. It's a direct continuity from ragtime into what we call swingtime. I see a direct continuum into Duke Ellington. I think that the culmination that we have at the moment of the continuum of which Jelly was a part, resided in Duke Ellington. Which is why if you see Jelly's Last Jam, you will probably say, Oh that sounds a little Ellington. As a matter of fact, a couple of times George used to tell me 'sounds like Ellington,' doesn't sound like 1920-whatever it would be. This is what had to be done was ... I had to make Jelly Roll's music behave under the proscenium arch.

**Holley:** When you say ... say that phrase again?


**Henderson:** Under the proscenium arch. That's the stage. You're outside peeping into this particular situation. You're not in it. Now we have other kinds of stages now, the area stage and other kinds of stages. This is the proscenium arch, stage, where you are the audience. You are the spectator and you are expecting to see something which is one of the reasons that spectacles have such an easy time. You know, Cats or Phantom or any of the things that Andrew Lloyd has done, you know, are really spectacles. I mean, all this ... the English imports now, they employ things that ... you are there to see ... the only spectacle I think that even outdoes it was the old Radio City. It used to be you'd get this biiiiiiiig proscenium arch, looks like thousands of ladies dancing and kicking up their heels and so forth. This is a spectacle and it has its advantages, it has its meaning and all that sort of thing.

**Holley:** Compare the reaction, the crowd reaction from Ain't Misbehavin' and Jelly's Last Jam. Was it the same kind of appreciation? The reason I say that, there were some people who criticized Jelly's Last Jam on the characterization of ... some black people said Jelly Roll Morton, the way he's portrayed, is not proud of his heritage and some people say that wasn't true.

**Henderson:** Well, uh ... ask your question again.

**Holley:** First of all, did the audience take to it the way they took to Ain't Misbehavin'?

**Henderson:** If we're talking about acceptance and receiving a ... the message involved, I think both were successful equally. If we're talking about what the message was and what it meant, I would say that Ain't Misbehavin' was a stop on the road to being the total declamation that Jelly's Last Jam was. I think that Jelly's Last Jam penetrated a lot more deeply than did Ain't Misbehavin'. It involved, as did Ain't Misbehavin', accepting or taking the black condition, the black ethic, the black culture, the black situation and just as it existed, as it did exist and as it does exist, as we say, good and bad, warts and all, this is it, this is where we're at, so forth – but now we're gonna talk about the human values that are involved in here. We're gonna talk about denying the source, about


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denying your heritage. We're gonna talk about that in the same fashion that other people, when they talk about denying their specific heritage, and it goes further in the fact that this, what we're involved in in this time is a matter of racism. This is what we're involved in. Now we seldom talk about the racism or whatever you might call it, whatever it is, it happens in black Africa. It happens in European ... witness Bosnia and all those places over there. It happens all over the world where there is a kind of racism or separation, a conflict, a confrontational ... it happens by virtue of whether it's skin color or whether it's a certain class or whatever it might be. Now Jelly Roll is different because it was not a review. the Fats Waller thing was a review. The Jelly Roll thing is a book and so therefore the response to it has to be deeper and more colored, more faceted, multi-faceted than was *Ain't Misbehavin'*. And by virtue of the fact that it shows that people are the same all over. Jelly Roll indeed believed that he as a Creole was different from other people who had a black heritage. I don't think that can be contested. And he acted on it. Why did he act it out that way? We don't know. We have, however, speculated through the invention of George Wolfe, that this is how he might have come about it and this is how it might have been resolved. The events and the actual things ... there are things that were gleaned from historical things, from the Library of Congress, things from the books that were there. Lot of books were written and so forth. Now black people were resentful because what do they see? They see a black man telling another black man, You know there ain't nuthin' you can do for me but shine my shoes and clean my steps. Well that's inflagrating. What one does after that is get into an enormous fist fight. But it does happen, doesn't it? We're talking ethnic cleansing here. I can't go into all this stuff that goes on, but this is what this show, *Jelly's Last Jam*, is about. It's about that. It's about the human condition as it is expressed through the black experience. This is what my impression is of it. It has more to do with that than *Ain't Misbehavin'*. *Ain't Misbehavin'* was also about the human condition but it was not as spelled out. The black ... as it was expressed through the black condition, it turns out that here's a man who is essentially a buffoon. This is how he deals with it. He deals with this oppression by saying, Yeah ... you know, this is a good idea. But it turns out at the end that he says, You know I understand all this, I know what you all think of this, but you know, I can't even (unintelligible) what did I do? To be so black and blue? You folks must be kidding. You understand? Now that's as far as that went. This is what you do. You know what I'm saying? This is what *Jelly's Last Jam* takes a step further.

**Holley:** Just one last thing on *Jelly's Last Jam*, give me some of the Jelly Roll Morton compositions you adapted.

**Henderson:** The [OVERLAPPING VOICES] (Last Chance?) Blues was adapted. Of course the thematic material was King Porter's Stomp. Shreveport Stomp was, I think, taking ... there's two scenes in the second act where the gangsters come ... was a, you know ... duh un dut, etc. ... is the way the song goes. He plays it like that. That's the way it is originally. Which goes, Let me tell you duh un dut, etc. like that. You understand? We re-adapted the original material for that. There were a few others. At one point during our discussions we were having with various people about who did what and so forth, we

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decided to just go through the score and decide which piece was Jelly, which was Jelly and Luther, which was this and so forth. You know, an exercise in absolute futility for my concern. But the point is that we did come up with the fact that if we were to count it like that, that the estate of Jelly Roll Morton would be entitled to less than half of the score. Now if I were representing the Jelly Roll Morton estate, I wouldn't take that. So we arrived at something. But the point is that what had to be done with Jelly Roll's music was something above and beyond anything that I or maybe any other arranger or orchestrator or composer has had to do with another person's music.

**Holley:** As we close out this interview session, I must thank you for allowing me to be educated. I want to ask, What's ahead for you? Do you feel that you ... are there still some things you want to do that you haven't done?


**Henderson:** Absolutely. Absolutely. They say you shouldn't talk about things before they happen but I'm old enough now that I can. One of the things that comes very exciting on the scene is that I will have a chance to exercise my ideas about the back and forth between jazz and classical because I've been approached to do a concert and subsequent recording for and with Jessye Norman doing nothing less than the sacred music of Duke Ellington. Now that excites me. I'm very anxious to do that. Other than that, I am also doing what I've been doing for years is writing music for concerts and recordings for the Canadian Brass. I'm going next week to Florida where we're recording an album of Broadway music. And like that. I'm involved in other projects of my own. In other words, I'm considering doing a kind of a what should I say a vanity anthology of my own compositions which to now have not come to light, other than once in a while. A couple of my compositions were done by Ellington like, you know, Hey Cherie. A couple (of little ditties ... A Slip of the Lip Will Sink a Ship (chuckles) you know things like that. (laughs)

**Holley:** Mr. Henderson, thank you very much.

**Henderson:** You're welcome. My pleasure. And thank you for being such an effective interviewer.

**Holley:** Well thank you.

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