



Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

JOHN LEVY
NEA Jazz Master (2008)

Interviewee: John Levy (April 11, 1912 – January 24, 2012)
Interviewer: John Mitchell with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date: December 10-11, 2006
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Description: Transcript, 99 pp.

Mitchell: My name is John Mitchell. I'm a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. Today is December 10th, 2006. We're in the home of John Levy and his wife Devra Hall at 1827 Coolidge Avenue, Altadena, California. We're here as part of the Smithsonian's Jazz Oral History Project to record John Levy's story. A former bass player, John has been managing the careers of music artists since 1951. In his musical prime he played the bass when jazz was at its heyday on New York's 52nd Street. Duke Ellington wanted him in his orchestra. Billie Holiday hired him for her comeback concert at Carnegie Hall in 1948. Then John put away his upright to sit behind a desk and manage the careers of artists. He had a rich stable of clients: George Shearing, Dakota Staton, Betty Carter, Lou Donaldson, Herbie Mann, Les McCann, Ernie Andrews, Randy Crawford, Brook Benton, Ahmad Jamal, Freddie Hubbard, Cannonball Adderley, Wes Montgomery, Joe Williams, Shirley Horn, Ramsey Lewis, Roberta Flack, Donny Hathaway, Eddie Harris, Johnny Hartman, Stanley Turrentine, Diane Reeves, Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson, and the list goes on. So much history. So many lives touched. We want to start at the beginning. So John, why don't you start by giving us your full name and spelling it for us.

Levy: My name, John Levy. I've been called John or Levy, and John Levy, Jr., but the usual name that I go by is John Levy.

John O. Levy.

Note: There is no middle initial on his birth certificate. Here is the explanation from page 35 of "Men, Women, and Girl Singers" –

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



By the time Michael was born in March of 1943, I had a temporary job as a clerk at the Post Office. I filled out the forms for Social Security with my name, John Oscar Levy, Jr. I didn't have a middle name when I was christened, but sometime during my childhood I had found a photograph of my mother and a man I didn't know. "Name's Oscar," Grandma told me. "Your Mama was married to him, but then he died." I didn't know Mama had been married before. Why I wrote John Oscar Levy on that form I don't really know. Maybe it gave me some sense of being a part of something that I wasn't really a part of. The name Oscar stayed with me for a long time—it's still on some old papers and a few reference books—but after a while I stopped using it and dropped the Jr. after my name. It was probably some insecurity in not being able to look at my father and say 'well you know, this guy's the most important male image in my life,' because he really wasn't. He had my respect and all that, but we just didn't have anything in common.

Mitchell: Your birth date?

Levy: My birth date? I was born April the 11th, 1912, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and moved to Chicago when I was about five years old, then spent most of my life – my early life – in the Chicago area before moving to New York, which was much later in my life.

Mitchell: Let's stay in New Orleans for a hot minute.

Levy: Okay.

Mitchell: What are your early recollections of New Orleans?

Levy: The most things that stick closer to my mind is the music, because that was the era [of] dixieland music being played, the funeral parades, the church-going, and the social things that were happening in my family at that time, which really helped me to establish myself later on as a musician. The main thing was the music. I recall that more than anything else.

Mitchell: Let's talk about family. Your mother and your father – give us their names and what they did for a living, and tell us about the home environment.

Levy: My mother was what was called a trained nurse and midwife. In those days, especially with the black community, they had midwives, which delivered the babies and did all of the health things for the communities at that time. This is what my mother was doing.

My father was a stoker for the railroad. His job was to go into the roundhouse, which is where the engines at that time – the steam engines – were started up. They had to build a fire each day – each morning – for each engine – each fire engine – to start the crews – before the crews came on to move the trains around – the freight around from the yard – the freight-yards. That was his job. That's what he did.

Mitchell: Give me his name.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: My father's name is John, so I was – that's where the "Jr." comes in for my name.

Mitchell: And Levy – what's the history of that name?

Levy: Levy, as far as I could discern – the periods that I traced it was through my father's father, who was part of a slave thing. All of the people on the plantation had the name of Levy. In other words, all of the slaves had the name of Levy. So that's where the name came from.

Mitchell: Was this in New Orleans? In Louisiana?

Levy: This was in – it was outside of New Orleans. The plantation that these slaves worked on was called Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. There was the slave owner – which a lot of time people said that the Jewish people never had any slaves, but these were Jewish – French Jews, and they did have slaves. This was from that slavery – from that plantation that the name Levy derived and followed through with my . . .

Mitchell: Do you know what type of plantation it was? What was grown? What was on the plantation?

Levy: No. I don't know what was grown on it, on a plantation.

Mitchell: What can you tell us about your mother – her name, her background?

Levy: My mother's name is Laura. She was the oldest of the two girls in the family. There was another girl, which was my aunt. That was Ida. My mother's name was Laura. There were, I think, four or five brothers. Let's see. There was Josie, Tommy, Sherman, and – that's it, I think. Yeah.

Forgot two of the uncles: Johnny and Nathaniel (called Nat)

Mitchell: Her maiden name?

Levy: My mother's maiden name?

Mitchell: Yes.

Levy: Laura.

Mitchell: Laura was her . . .

Levy: Laura. Laura Hagen.

Mitchell: Kagen?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Hagen. H-a-g-e-n.

Mitchell: Hagen.

Levy: Hagen, right.

Mitchell: Do you know when they were born, or what years, or any information about . . . ?

Levy: No, I don't have any information on it.

Mitchell: What about brothers or sisters?

Levy: I had no brothers or sisters.

Mitchell: Tell us about those early years in New Orleans and what it was like growing up as an only child.

Levy: I was spoiled. I was spoiled, and especially from my grandmother and grandfather. They – I could do no wrong with them. Being raised in a family where we all lived together – grandmother, grandfather, and even uncles and aunts all lived together – not everybody. Some lived in the same house, but the aunts and uncles, three or four of them lived in the same place that I was born in – the same house that I was born in.

Mitchell: Where was that house.

Levy: That house is in the seventh ward in New Orleans. It was 1240 Touro Street in New Orleans. It was in the seventh ward.

Mitchell: Could you spell that. Touro?

Levy: Touro – T-o-u-r-o. Touro.

Mitchell: Okay. Touro Street.

Levy: Yeah. It's in the seventh ward, and the house still stands.

Mitchell: Even with [Hurricane] Katrina?

Levy: Even with Katrina. I've been back there a couple of times. It's still standing, still there. It wasn't completely destroyed, but I can see – along the side of the house, I noticed the water mark – how high the water came up to it. I was never able to find anybody home there for me to go inside. Each time I went back to New Orleans I wanted to try to go in and see what the insides

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



looked like and see if I could recall anything from it. I know there was an upstairs – a staircase on the inside of the house that led up to an upstairs bedroom. But I was never able to go back in and check it out.

Mitchell: So you've even been back since the hurricane.

Levy: Yes, I've been back since the hurricane.

Mitchell: Do you go back because of the hurricane?

Levy: No. I went back – Nancy Wilson did a benefit concert for the university there, and we went back for that affair. That's when I – the most recent time that I went back.

Note: Nancy's performance was for Dillard University, June 30, 2006

Mitchell: You go by the house whenever you visit?

Levy: Yes. The other thing was the Heritage jazz festival. I was back there for that, and I also went – checked the house out.

Mitchell: That's usually in April? Am I correct?

Levy: I can't recall the exact . . . (*April 29, 2005*)

Mitchell: I believe it is.

Levy: . . . date of the Heritage festival. But there was two incidents. One was I went back for the Heritage festival, and the other one was for the university (Dillard).

Mitchell: Can you tell us about the feeling – what kind of emotions come up when you see the house, or the feeling that you have?

Levy: It brings back a lot of memories. Each time that I went back, when approaching the house or coming up to it, I – it brings back memories of certain things that happened to me when I was very young. For example, I had an uncle that worked in the – Sherman was this uncle – that worked in the – worked for a candy company. In those days they had a wagon driven by a mule – a mule-driven wagon. When I was a youngster, I would wait for him to come by the house for lunch. I would go up the street and meet him – up the block and get on the wagon and then drive the mule – sit at the driver's seat and drive the mule down to the edge of the street – to the end of that block, where then he'd put his feedbag on him and hook him up there for his lunch. Then he'd get out and come in the house. So any time I go there, I always see that picture.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: What is – your recollection of the neighborhood – what did it look like? What did it – visually – and maybe, how has it changed from . . .? How does it look today?

Levy: The neighborhood looks pretty much the same as it did then. When I went back for the Heritage festival, they had paved the streets. That's the only changes that had [been] made, because this was dirt road. The street was dirt. Dirt-road streets with gutters. Very – I wouldn't say primitive, but not very modern or anything. It was pretty much the same. The houses look pretty much the same. Still standing. Looked okay.

We lived in what is called – I guess it's called a two-storey – there's another name for it, but I can't think of what that – the title of that name.

Mitchell: Is it a duplex?

Levy: It's like a duplex, but we called it a half a house. That's what they called it, because half was one side and the other half was the other side. But you could hear people in the next house – next place. It was all in one. You had two separate entrances and the wall between them, but it was like one house split right down the middle.

Mitchell: What were some of the things you might hear from the other house?

Levy: You hear just about everything.

Mitchell: I don't know whether I should pursue that any further. Was there music coming from . . .?

Levy: Yeah, you could hear just about everything. I recall that.

The neighbor was a teacher, like a private school teacher, what we would call now kindergarten classes at a private school. That's what this woman did for a living. People left their children there – very young kids there, and they were taught there. I used to go over and sit in. I wasn't one of the – you might call the pupils that was hired – that the people brought over. I was much younger than most of the students that this woman taught, but I'd go over there and sit in class with them. I learned to read pretty young.

Mitchell: Do you remember in terms of what you learned? Was it your numbers? Your alphabet?

Levy: I learned numbers very well, and I learned the alphabets, like they were taught: a-b-c-d-e-f-g-h-i-j-k-l-m-n-o-p-q-r-s-t-u-v-w-x-y-z period. And from 1 to 100 and from then on.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: With being an only child and with both parents working, would you be considered middle class or would you be considered fairly well to do or certainly not wanting for anything? How would you describe your [?] in that sense?

Levy: In today's world it would be considered middle class, I would think, because you didn't want for anything. You had clothing. You had food. You weren't on any kind of a welfare. There was no – you had all of the things that were – that people had for that time. There was no electricity in that house. There was an outhouse. You cooked on a wood stove, that kind of thing. There was no gas. But everything was everything was okay.

Mitchell: I know this is early, but in terms of your recollection, what role did church play in your life in those early years?

Levy: Church played – church in that period played a very important part, because it was everything, really. It was your entertainment, and of course, naturally, it was your religion, and it was your music. Music was very dominant in the church with the choirs, with the different things that happened in the in the church

Mitchell: I'm assuming that you went to Sunday school there?

Levy: You went to Sunday school and you came back – then you went back again in the afternoon for what was B Y P U, which was – I'm trying to remember what that really meant at the time. But I remember that title. And then there was the morning service. There was morning service. There was evening – first there was a service before, for the children. Then there was the regular 11 o'clock in the morning service. Then there was that afternoon service. Then there was the night service. A lot of times children didn't go to the night service. That was the Sunday thing. Of course there was choir practice during the week. There was a lot of different things going on.

Mitchell: Do you remember the name of the church.

Levy: Right off the top of my head, at this point, I don't. I don't remember.

Mitchell: We can come back to that.

Levy: But I remember that one of my chores at the church was to ring the bell. There was a bell in a bell tower. Every morning, one of the things that I had to do was to go and pull this thing. It had a big bell – clanging bell, and it would go up and down. I did that. I recall that.

Mitchell: One of the interesting things – you left New Orleans at five, so one would assume that you may have had some early friendships, maybe some early confrontations, maybe some early flirtations.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: The only friendship or contacts that I recall – because I wasn't in public school yet – was the neighbors. The neighbors were Italian. Not at the half a house. This was down the block that I recall going to these neighbors. There were an Italian family. I remember the boy's name. Goodie was my age, so Goodie and I were pretty much – we'd go inside each other's house and they'd come in my house and we'd have – so I didn't really run into anything in prejudice that made me being alerted to what segregation was, because on that block, or in that particular area, it was sort of mixed.

Mitchell: So neighborhoods – it was probably typical for the South in that period of time – neighborhoods weren't segregated . . .

Levy: No. They weren't segregated.

Mitchell: . . . in the South.

Levy: No. That's right. Not in New Orleans, anyway.

Mitchell: Right.

Levy: Not in that area. I don't know about any other part of the South, but in New Orleans, it wasn't. The first sense of segregation, or that there was some form of segregation, came to me through my godfather, who was a French Creole, but very light skinned. He passed for white. He would take me into town to shop for me, for a birthday or for whatever holidays. I don't recall the exact holidays, but I do recall the incident of getting on the streetcar and him going all the way up to the front where the motorman was. There was a motorman and a conductor. They had these signs where you put up in between each section – you could move – for example, if there were more white people on the streetcar at the time, then this sign would be moved back. Each seat had a little hole in [it] where you could stick this sign in. I had to stay behind that sign, and he would go up front. Then he'd come back and make a joke out of it, but I realized then there was a difference, that me being black, I couldn't go past that sign. Whites sat in the front end of it and blacks sat in the back end of it.

Mitchell: Can you describe how you felt even at that early time about that? Or did you have a sense of anything?

Levy: I felt very hurt about the whole thing, because I felt that I wanted to go up front, like any kid would like to do: go to the front of the streetcar and stand up and watch the motorman or whatever. I couldn't do that. So I really felt – it gave you a feeling of rejection. That was the first time I realized there was a difference, because on the block and in the street, the neighbors and the grocery store we went to – later on – which is much later, after I'd come to Chicago – I went back to spend some time with my grandmother, who was still living there. Then I realized there was this segregation in the movie houses, where we had to sit way up top – on the top of the house. [We] couldn't sit on the main floor of the theater. It was like you being in the gallery.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: When you would come South to visit your grandmother?

Levy: Yeah. I only made one trip South. I must have been around 11 years old – somewhere around that time. I even went to school for a short period of time. I don't quite know why it was done that way at the time. All I know [is that] I went to visit and then stayed there for at least one semester of schooling.

Mitchell: This is around when you were 11 years old?

Levy: Yeah. I was around 11 years old.

Mitchell: What – how do you – when you think of yourself as a child, how do you picture yourself? Were you an antsy kid? Were you a thoughtful, pensive kid? Or somebody who was always worrying the elders because you were likely to get into stuff? Or did you regularly get “whippin’s,” as they . . .? How do you describe yourself?

Levy: I think I was . . .

Mitchell: Mischievous, or what?

Levy: . . . very well disciplined, because, for one thing, there were certain rules laid down for you. You had to follow those rules. For example, if I went out, I had to be back in the house before dark and I couldn't go off of my block, the block that I lived on. I could go from one corner to the other, but I wasn't supposed to cross the street.

Mitchell: You had boundaries.

Levy: Yeah. So that was rules. You had rules and those kind of things. So I wasn't into that much. I wasn't much of a – but I was spoiled as far as having, for example, the food you'd want to eat. They'd fix something special for me, because I didn't eat what everybody else wanted. I could eat red beans and rice every day, and plantains and that kind of stuff is what I – but I didn't like vegetables. Still don't.

Mitchell: No okra?

Levy: No. I didn't eat that stuff. I didn't even eat potatoes, except sweet potatoes. That was the only time – as what we used to call it, Irish potatoes – what we call white potatoes now. It was called Irish potatoes.

Mitchell: Devra has encouraged me on flipping streetcars. I'm not sure what that means, but maybe you can explain it.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Flipping streetcars? Streetcars had a little step on the rear end of the car. To enter the rear of the streetcar, there was a step. You went up on the step, then into the back of the streetcar where the conductor was, which he would take your fare and then you'd go and sit down. There was just a little platform at the rear end. That was where the step was, where you stepped to get on. The same thing was at the front end if you got out. The funny thing about thing: you could get off the streetcar on the front end, but you couldn't get on at the front end.

Mitchell: Okay. So what does flipping mean?

Levy: As the car's coming up to the station, you could stand in line along the way, and as the car is approaching, you could flip it: you jump on and grab the thing and flip it and get on ahead of the crowd that's waiting when the streetcar stops.

Mitchell: I see. I got you.

Levy: So that's what that means.

Mitchell: I want to get some sense of the early sense of music or where the roots of your music talents, in the sense that: was it the family? Was it in Thompson Methodist Church, where you used to go?

Levy: Yeah, that's it. Thompson's Church. Thompson's Methodist Church . . .

Mitchell: Thank you, Devra.

Levy: . . . was the church, yeah. I had forgot the name of it.

Mitchell: Where do you trace those roots?

Levy: The roots, really, for the music and everything else, actually came from the church – basically from the church. Of course we did have – I guess you call it a graphophone [*sic*: gramophone] that then you wind up. It had a horn and you had records. We had records of classical music.

Mitchell: You had records. Okay.

Levy: Yes, yes. We had records of – I can't remember the names of some of the classical people at that time, but we could hear all that type of music.

Mitchell: What about your mother and father? Were they musically inclined?

Levy: My mother was. My father wasn't.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Okay. How was your mother . . .

Levy: My mother was musically inclined. I had an uncle who sang in the choir, and as I said, they all went to church and sang – the whole congregation. But I had one uncle – the youngest uncle – Nathaniel, the youngest one. He was a bass singer. He sang bass. He was in the choir.

Mitchell: Your mother sang? Did she play an instrument or anything like that?

Levy: No. Nobody played an instrument.

Mitchell: People often talk about their being family gatherings in the South and singing at Thanksgiving or dinners. Was there that kind of – were those kind of things happening in your home, where people would gather and sing spirituals or anything like that?

Levy: No. No, I didn't have that. All the singing was done pretty much in the church.

Mitchell: And long hours in the church I think.

Levy: Yeah. You spent a lot of time in church. That was your social life, really, in the church. But I heard music almost every day, because practically every day there was parades and stuff.

There was also – a form of advertising was music. They had a float – they had floats to advertise different events, like fish fries that were coming up the weekend, the movie – in fact there was a regular movie float that came on with the whole side of – each side of this float was pasted like we call “billboards” now. It was pasted [with] a billboard of what was appearing at the movie that week. On the float was a group of musicians. They'd have a bass player, which was on the end, a trombone player, a trumpet player, and usually a clarinet player. That was your sound. That was where you got your sound to bring the people out. They'd be playing music as they came along. They'd be playing all kinds of popular music. You could run out and see what's happening and follow – I would follow them down the block – not past that corner – coming right back after that.

Also if there was a funeral on the way to the cemetery, the band would be playing, and the family followed behind this parade. Here again, I'd follow that to the corner. Then when they came back through the same street – they'd come back after the funeral – then they'd be swinging. I'd go out and watch them, check up on the floats.

Mitchell: This was pretty much the emergence of jazz that had started years before but was taking shape, I'm sure, in the years after 1912. This is still early jazz, I would imagine.

Levy: It was only music. It was called “dixieland.” It wasn't really – it wasn't called jazz at that time. It wasn't particularly considered jazz music. The beginning of the thing was more like what was termed “dixieland.” I don't know how that term came about, how they named it [at] that

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



particular time. But these people played a type of music which developed into what is today called jazz. These were the pioneers of that type of music. Right.

Mitchell: So you were a child . . .

Levy: I was fascinated by the bass player, because he was on the rear end of this float with a bow. He would hit his thing and play it. And the trombone player was on the rear end. That's why they call the trombone player ["tailgate"] – on the end, so he can have room for the slide, the trombone. These two people were on the rear. Then the other people were in the other parts of the float.

Mitchell: In essence, this was the early – your early sense – your curiosity of music. Am I correct?

Levy: Right. But by my parents listening to classical music and religious music, they decided to get me a violin. That was my first thing about music. They got a violin for me. I started some lessons very, very young, but I didn't stay with the instrument at all. But I did get a sense of the instrument, of what it was, and playing, but I didn't particularly care for it. I didn't like it.

Mitchell: Was this still in New Orleans?

Levy: This was in New Orleans.

Mitchell: You were first introduced to an instrument at that stage?

Levy: At a very early age, yeah. So here again it shows that my parents weren't exactly poor, because I don't know where it came from or who bought the instrument and all that, but you had to buy it, I'm sure . . .

Mitchell: Were there lessons as well?

Levy: . . . because nobody else was playing any instrument in my home at that time.

Mitchell: Were there lessons as well?

Levy: Yeah. I recall some lessons. Somebody came to the house. This is my best recollection of it at that time. They came to the house and [I would] take lessons, but I didn't practice very much with it. I didn't care much for practicing. But it stayed with me later on, when I started with the string bass, because actually a violin – the bass is just tuned – the strings are backwards – in other words, it's E – A – D – G [on] the bass. The violin was just the opposite [g – d – a – e], but in a different clef. It was bass clef and then standard [treble clef].

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Mitchell: I just want to go back to the family one more time in the sense of – it seemed like on your mother’s side there were plenty of uncles and aunts.

Levy: On my father’s side, practically – very little communication with them. My grandmother – my father’s mother – I never quite understood her, because she was what was called “patois.” She spoke a broken French. I never could communicate with her very much. She was real black as you could get, from that side of the family. I didn’t spend much time with them, because naturally children in most families go toward the mother’s side of the family. It’s usually the stronger side than the father’s side of the family.

Mitchell: Were there first cousins?

Levy: Yes. I had a couple of cousins, but I don’t – we didn’t keep a close contact with each other, ever. I recall there was two girls and there was two boys. I think there was a son, Paul – and Nelson. Paul and Nelson were the two boys I recall. I think there was two girls on that side from my father’s brother, but there wasn’t much contact.

Anything you want to say? I didn’t hear you.

Devra Hall Levy: No. I’m ready to move North. Do you want the names of things before you start?

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: Okay. We can move on. What I’m curious about at this point is the moment in time when the family is deciding to move North, what prompts that decision, and to what extent you as a five-year-old might be aware of what energies are going on, because you’re getting ready to start this journey.

Levy: Let me say this. There was not – there was only two people – that was my father and my youngest uncle – came up to Chicago first and established – came there to work. Then the family – other parts of the family moved up to Chicago. That’s when my aunt and my mother – but my father and my uncle went first. My father went into the stockyards. They both did. They both went into the stockyards.

The youngest uncle referred to just now was Uncle Nat.

Mitchell: In Chicago.

Levy: In Chicago. They had jobs offered them as soon as they got there.

Mitchell: What did they do in the stockyards? Slaughtering?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: I don't know what my uncle did, but my father worked in the hides cellar. He skinned the hides from the cow. That was his job mostly, working with the hide. He did that, after that, his whole life until he died – until he died or retired.

Mitchell: So at some point what you probably noticed – or did you notice that your father was no longer at home?

Levy: Oh yeah, but I was aware of what happened. I was aware that they were going away – that father and my uncle were going away, north to Chicago, because they'd been offered jobs. You could do much better. But I didn't have any thought about why they were doing it or why they had moved or any reason about it.

Mitchell: Was there a sense of his absence in the house?

Levy: With my father, there wasn't much difference, because there wasn't much family thing with my father. He went to work at 5 o'clock in the morning. When he came home from work, he ate his dinner and went to sleep – went to bed. I had very little communication with my father, period, over my whole lifetime.

Mitchell: Let's talk about the communication you did have.

Levy: He took me to the roundhouse one time, I recall, and showed me what he did, when I was very young. [He] showed me how he stoked the fire engines, so the firemen could get it, and showed me the roundhouse. [He] explained that to me one time. That's the only time I remember anything like that. I never went anywhere with him, never did any traveling or did anything. He never took me any places.

My father didn't have much of an education. He just barely could read and write, which was an odd situation, considering that everybody on my mother's side of the family was well educated. My mother had an excellent education. My uncles had an education.

Mitchell: Well educated for the time meant . . .

Levy: For the time. For the time.

Mitchell: . . . meant what?

Levy: As far as you could go.

Mitchell: Meaning high school? Meaning elementary school? Meaning . . .

Levy: Yeah. However it was graded. They all could read and write and communicate and all that. Where and how, I don't know.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: I understand.

Levy: I wasn't too familiar with the schooling they went through to get – where my mother went through to get her learning. To be able to be a nurse and to deliver babies and that kind of thing, you had to have some medical training in some medical school somewhere. I don't know. But I wasn't familiar with it and never bothered to try to find out later on in life. I'm not too inquisitive about things, in reality.

Mitchell: Throughout your whole life, you're not?

Levy: My whole life. Yeah.

Mitchell: Why do you think that is?

Levy: Because I'm just not. For example, people talk about – different subjects come up, and people say, did you know so-and-so's wife? or did you know this? No. I didn't know that, because unless in some way I was in a direct contact with someone about something or with a subject or a reasoning, I didn't inquire much about anything. I read a lot and tried to learn everything I could about everything from reading, and then finally when I got into school, but not very – kids are inquisitive. They like to find out about what makes this work. I didn't have any of that **going** on for me.

Mitchell: So you weren't taking the wings off of butterflies?

Levy: No, nothing like that.

Mitchell: And taking things apart and putting them back together.

Levy: I remember the only pet I had was a rabbit, and I didn't want to touch him. I came back in the backyard one day in New Orleans and the rabbit was dead. I started screaming and crying and going on about it. I remember that. But I didn't want to touch him. I didn't like the food they had him on.

Mitchell: Who handed the discipline – your discipline?

Levy: My grandmother.

Mitchell: So neither your mother or father disciplined you.

Levy: No. I got more discipline from my mother in the later years when in my teen age and everything. That was in Chicago.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Is it fair to say that in your early years you were closer to your grandmother than to either parent?

Levy: Absolutely. My whole – yeah. I was closer to my grandmother – as long as she was living – than I was to my mother – my grandmother and grandfather.

Mitchell: What was it about them?

Levy: They were the ones that practically raised me. The other people weren't around me that much. They were working or doing their thing. But I was every day with Grandma and Grandpa. I learned how to cook. I learned how to wash clothes. I learned how to clean house. I learned all of the domestic things that a person would learn from childhood from my grandmother.

Mitchell: Do we have your grandmother and grandfather's names? I don't think so.

Levy: My grandmother was Carolyn Hagen. My grandfather was Thomas Hagen.

Mitchell: What did Carolyn Hagen do, and what did Thomas Hagen do?

Levy: My grandmother did nothing. She was a housewife – took care of the house, took care of the kids, managed the family. My grandfather, when he was functioning, when he was working, was a longshoreman, which was the same thing a couple of my uncles did. They worked out on the docks unloading ships when they came in. That was the work they did, except the one that drove the candy wagon, one of the uncles.

Mitchell: Do you know approximately how long they lived.

Levy: Not really. No. My father lived to be about 72, I recall – in his seventies, but the uncles, I don't know how old they were.

Mitchell: And Mom lived how long?

Levy: My mother died when she was in her fifties. She died from pneumonia in Chicago.

Mitchell: And Dad was living in Chicago at that time?

Levy: Yeah. They were living in Chicago, living together. They were always together.

Mitchell: What do you recall and think about the journey to Chicago? I want to bring us to Chicago now. Do you remember that train ride, anything about it?

Levy: I don't recall much of anything of the train ride going from New Orleans when the family as a whole took, except I know we had a lot of food. I didn't pay any attention to the fact or think

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

too much about it. Later on, there was excursions that ran from Chicago to New Orleans. There – my mother participated in these organizations that had these train rides – there I learned a lot about what you could do and you couldn't do on a train, and the travel between Chicago and New Orleans. Along the way – we picked up people along the way on the way back – not so much on the way going, but on the way back. We had one – I remember we had one car with a piano in it, and drums and bass, and the people – it was like – that was a social thing. They ran these excursions just like we have excursions on ships now. You go on a ship – to an excursion on a ship – travel like we do today. In those days it was on the railroads. You travel – people had what they call excursions – train excursions – and organizations would somehow – I don't know how it worked – but they would rent these from the railroad. The railroad would have – you'd have so many cars for people and so many cars for entertainment. In one car would be – they'd [be] dancing and music would be playing and everybody having a good time. But it was in a sense private, because it was just those people from that organization. There was no other people on the train. This particular train would go to – we spent a lot of time on the sidelines letting the other trains go by, in order to get where we would go. It took us a long time to get to New Orleans.

Then coming back was where, whenever we'd stop, people would come along. We'd pick up people. Just come along. They'd stop and they'd get on the train.

Mitchell: The train would stop like a local stop?

Levy: Yeah, stop – local stop, to get water and coal and everything. When they'd stop at those particular stops, people would just get on the train and ride on back with us, back to Chicago.

Mitchell: To what extent were the trains segregated back then.

Levy: See, this wasn't segregated, because this train was hired. It was as if you hired your own bus, or you go on a ship and it's a jazz cruise, so everybody on there is jazz people for that cruise. In that way, everybody [who] was on the train was black. There was nobody else on there, except [the] conductor, a motorman, and the engineer.

Mitchell: And they would often be black as well.

Levy: No. No. They're all white. There was no black engineers, train engineers.

Mitchell: Okay, but there would be black porters.

Levy: No. The only thing they had was the conductor and a motorman, but they were white.

Mitchell: Would families bring their own food on the trains?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yeah. Oh, you'd bring a lot of food on the train. Everything you brought. We didn't have a dining car. No, we didn't have a dining car. They brought food on the train.

Mitchell: What kind of food?

Levy: What do you think? Fried chicken, ribs, ham – a lot of soul food. That was it. They'd have a good time, eating and drinking. They had big tubs of – where you had ice in there and all of the drinks were in there. I assume they had a little liquor going too, but being so young, I wasn't participating in that part of it. In fact the only reason why I was even on there is that my mother was a socialite. She was into this social thing.

Mitchell: What do you mean by social?

Levy: I mean she belonged to clubs and organizations – social organizations that black people had to communicate with each other and to have their parties and enjoy each other. Just like – in Chicago it was like – this is where the name the “chitlin’ circuit” comes – the name comes about, because every weekend it was a chitlin’ dinner in Chicago, now where in New Orleans it was a fish fry. Every weekend is a fish fry, usually on Friday. They socialize. They come there and they've got fish – they sold fish sandwiches. You would eat fish and drink. You had the soda. They'd make a little money off of that. Then the next week it's at your house. Then you make a little money off of it. That was the social thing. You had no ballroom you're going to go to do anything. That was the social life of these people at the time.

Mitchell: Clearly they were having fun.

Levy: They were having a great time.

Mitchell: What was life like for a five-year-old, traveling north? Were you bored? Were you . . .

Levy: See, I don't recall much of that first trip north.

Mitchell: Okay. All right.

Levy: I learned more about traveling on the road later on. After I – we came back and I made a couple [of] trips, then I knew about the segregated section and knew you couldn't go in the dining car and all of that. I knew that. But we always – when we got on the train, we got on with them baskets – baskets of food, and as I said, most of it was something that was – could stay over. You'd have baked ham, which – something that could last the two or three days you travel. Fried chicken. That kind of stuff.

Mitchell: So your father and uncle were already up there in Chicago . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yeah, and once they got settled and everything there – my uncle is very hip. He was well-educated [and] very hip. [He] got an apartment and everything for us. We all lived together. He had his wife come up. He and his wife – everybody – that's the way the whole thing lined up. When we came, we came to an apartment. It was there. That was it.

Mitchell: Do you recall that apartment?

Levy: Oh yes. I recall the first place we moved in was an apartment on 31st Street. It was in a building. In this building on the main floor was a nightclub, which they called a cabaret. In this cabaret King Oliver's band played, and it had the signs in the lobby of this building that we lived in. That's where I first heard or knew about King Oliver. We could hear the music when you came in. Like when the thing was going on, we could hear the music, go to rehearsals and that stuff, because it was right on the main floor. Part of it – this nightclub place – was on the main floor of this building that we lived in, the first place we moved in.

Then later on – I think after a couple of years there – we moved to a larger apartment, because some of the other parts of my family decided to come up. I think that's when my grandmother and grandfather and all them came up. See, actually, my mother and father and that part of it came up first. Then the older people came up much later. When my grandmother and grandfather came up, we were on Cottage Grove – 2934 Cottage Grove, which was between 31st and – it was the lakefront. We could walk to the lake. Just go past the railroad tracks, which was where the Illinois Central ran, and there you were right at the lake. The tracks and everything were right on Lake Michigan, right on the lakefront.

Mitchell: This is where the cabaret was?

Levy: No, no. The cabaret scene was in the first place, when we first – the first place I lived there.

Mitchell: Where was the Royal Garden Club?

Levy: That's it. That's where – it was in that building. That was the Royal Gardens.

Mitchell: What street was that on?

Levy: 31st and, I guess, Calumet.

Mitchell: Right. So basically you moved along 31st Street from – I think you said . . .

Levy: From New Orleans.

Mitchell: Yeah. From 2934 Cottage Grove . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Levy: No, I think it's the other way around.

Mitchell: From 31st Street to Cottage Grove.

Levy: To Cottage Grove. Right.

Mitchell: I'm assuming that that wasn't far. Each place . . .

Levy: No. 29 – 30 – 31. Three blocks. But, a few blocks east. Cottage Grove was a few blocks east of Calumet.

Mitchell: What did the few blocks east represent, in terms of . . . ?

Levy: It's just like . . .

Mitchell: A bigger place?

Levy: Yeah. It was three blocks. The blocks in Chicago going from east to west are long. North to south are short.

Mitchell: Do you remember King Oliver playing.

Levy: Oh yeah. I remember hearing him. I didn't go in. I was just a child. I wasn't allowed to go into the nightclub or see him at that stage in my life, but I could hear him.

Mitchell: Can you – what do you imagine the influence that had on your development as a musician?

Levy: They played a lot of the stuff that I heard as a child in New Orleans in those parades when – they played a lot of that music, because that was their music. They created that stuff. They played a lot of those tunes. Like one of the basic things – tunes they used to play coming back from the funeral – was *Didn't He Ramble*. I remember the title of that. That was like they were talking about his lifestyle, whoever was buried. They made all kinds of songs about somebody's life and sang and played tunes about this person that was buried. Most of the people were buried above ground, because of New Orleans being so low, as we've heard a lot at Katrina and all that – that level.

Mitchell: Often what happened with people migrating north, they tended to move from the neighborhoods where they lived in the South to specific areas in the North, so that the communities that they lived in were among – were folks from New Orleans, for example.

Levy: Pretty much. Pretty much.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Was that the case with you?

Levy: Yeah, and this is why – there was no segregation per se in Chicago. Say, you can't live here. You can't live there. You can't [do] that. But they tended to live in certain areas. They just did that, because it's like they wanted to be close to each other and close together and all that. So most of them that came up – and it was no big problem, because blacks were in a minority. There weren't that many black people coming up. They were coming up from the South. They were beginning to work in the stockyards, basically. It was one of the main places. Then later on, Gary, Indiana, and the steel mills and all those places came up – later on, for them to work in. There was another migration, which was much later. The original migration was basically to work in the stockyards, in the food industry.

Mitchell: So from New Orleans you moved to Chicago to a neighborhood that was kind of like a little New Orleans, in a sense that the people – the neighbors had the same kind of food. They listened to the same music. It sounds like King Oliver came up and the musician had a . . .

Levy: They migrated to Chicago for the same reason we did.

Mitchell: Right, right.

Levy: There was work for them there. They made money there. They recorded there. They did all the things. So naturally they had – that's where they came to play. People didn't – musicians didn't move around. You worked in a place, and you worked there for years. You didn't work there for two weeks here and two weeks there. It was this place, and you worked there for – you might work there for a year or two. Then another group came in.

Mitchell: Your first school – was it Drake School?

Levy: Drake was the second school. The first school, I can't remember the name of it, but it was for a very short period of time. It wasn't long. Drake was the basic school that I really . . .

Mitchell: Basic elementary school?

Levy: Yeah, yeah.

Mitchell: Willard Grammar School?

Levy: Willard Grammar School was much later, when we moved further south.

Mitchell: South in Chicago?

Levy: In Chicago.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Tell me about your early education in Chicago.

Levy: At Drake School, we went to school, and it was integrated in school, but there were more whites than there were blacks. We were only – I remember we had to cross – to go to school, we had to cross Cottage Grove, the street I lived on. Then the next main thoroughfare was State Street. Then the next thoroughfare was Wentworth. Once you crossed Wentworth, you ran into mostly Polish and Germans and that kind of immigrant – then you had to fight your way from there to school every day, and then fight your way out of there every day. But you weren't segregated in school. You were all there in the same classes. You went to the same – but there was so few of us.

Mitchell: How did you protect yourself from getting a butt whipping on your way to school.

Levy: Stayed together, ganged together, grouped together, but it wasn't like gangs like we realize now, because we weren't out there trying to do anything to anybody. We were just trying to protect ourselves. So we banded together. We'd all wait and come home together, and every day we'd walk and meet each other and go together.

School was a long period of time. It wasn't like schools they have now, where you go to school in half a day, or two [or] three hours. We went all day. Carried your little lunch bag and went to school – be there all day. Come home about three o'clock, four o'clock in the afternoon. You'd be up there about eight o'clock in the morning.

Mitchell: What do you remember about the classroom? Any early teachers or any ones later on . . .?

Levy: All white teachers. It was all white teachers I had, even when I got to Willard School.

Mitchell: How did they treat you?

Levy: Okay, fine. I don't have any problems with them. See, any time you have a society – I've learned that much in life – any time you have a society where the minority is not that great – in other words, it doesn't cause too much of a – make too many waves or cause too much of a problem – you don't have very many problems with that, with like segregation or anything like that. It doesn't come up, because you're not socializing with them. You socialize with your own little group. You live within your own little community. So it was actually no big problem. But when it gets to the point where there's a whole lot of them there, and they begin to take charge, or over – become more – there's more blacks in a school than there are whites – that's when you run into the problem.

Mitchell: What kind of student were you?

[recording interrupted]

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: We were going back through the schools. The first school was Douglas Elementary?

Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: That was when you just arrived, I would imagine.

Levy: That's right.

Mitchell: Do you recall going there with your mom or . . . ?

Levy: I remember being taken there with my – by my mother. It was my first winter in Chicago. I recall that it snowed so bad – so strongly and so bad, you couldn't see from one side of the street to the other. We didn't have these modern snow plows and all that. They had men out there with shovels trying to get you in and out of your doorways. This was – everything stopped. It wasn't – you couldn't go to school. You couldn't do nothing. But I recall that the winter in Chicago was something else. The snow was . . .

Mitchell: This was a blizzard, I would imagine. It was how – you were a small one. Do you recall how high the snow piles were?

Levy: They were so high you could not see across the street. I would say 10 feet – 10 or 12 feet high. I mean stacked up. They had men out there with shovels. They got paid. That's when the city would pay them with shovels, get the shovels to shovel the streets, so you could get through there. It was not too far removed from the horse and buggy days, really. It's really rough. The weather is something else.

Mitchell: But for you, you were fairly young and you were adapting to the weather?

Levy: Yeah. In fact, it was fun at first. Out there – I never saw snow before. Out there with the snow. I was well – here again, the family had to be pretty well – they weren't poor, because I was well dressed and well taken care of for it – for the weather. I was ready for it. I don't recall ever – sometimes people talk about how cold it is and you didn't have the right clothes to wear. We had – I had everything – everything was right. Never had any want for anything like that.

Mitchell: As far as school was concerned, what type of student were you? Were you always . . . ?

Levy: I was a fair student. I wasn't the greatest, but I was pretty fair on all the subjects in those days. They weren't as separate as – separated as much. There was a curriculum of standard things that were taught to you, period. That's what you – that's what the class is. You didn't move from one room to the other. You had your classroom and your teacher.

Mitchell: Do you recall the kinds of standard things that they were teaching? Was this like . . . ?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Mitchell: . . . McDuffy Readers kind of thing. Is it McDuffy Readers? I think it is.

Levy: Yeah. That was the reader, this McDuffy. Yeah. And there were certain named books. I can't remember the names now, what arithmetic book became . . .

Mitchell: So Douglas was the first elementary.

Levy: Then Drake.

Mitchell: Then Drake. How far away was that? That was on 26th and Calumet?

Levy: No, Drake was on Wentworth. It wasn't Calumet. Calumet – it couldn't have been Calumet, because it was on the west side of State Street. It couldn't have been Calumet. If it's in there that way, it's wrong. I'm sorry. If it says Calumet, he's wrong. Yes ma'am. That I know.

“If it's in there that way, it's wrong” referring to page 14 of “Men, Women, and Girl Singers” that reads: “I attended the Drake School on 26th and Calumet.”

Mitchell: Was there any exposure to music?

Levy: No, not at . . .

Mitchell: You spoke about hearing bands that would come from the South and bands that would play in Chicago, but was there anything in – any learning in the schools . . .?

Levy: No, no.

Mitchell: . . . or any private lessons . . .?

Levy: No, no.

Mitchell: . . . or anything like that? You had said that you took up the violin for a brief moment in New Orleans. My understanding is that you at some point began to look toward the piano as an instrument to learn.

Levy: No, that – we're way ahead of ourself there. That goes way – that's way up the road, as the saying goes.

Mitchell: Then let's back down the road. What was the early influence of music? Was it what? . . . in Chicago?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: In grammar school there was no classes for music or anything. There was a singing class. I remember that. We'd sing little tunes, like you do – what do you call that?, where each one would take – one row would sing, “Row, row, row your boat.” That kind of stuff. Singing in the class. We would do those kind of things. But [there was] no actual teaching of music per se until you got to high school. When you got to high school, that's when – like the schools that people like Nat Cole and Bill – William Hinton [*sic*: Milt Hinton] and all those different musicians that I worked with later on or were friends of mine later on. Those schools all taught music. They had professors teaching nothing but music. Then they had the bands – school bands and that kind of thing. But that was in the high school.

Mitchell: Before high school, in an academic sense, were there any teachers that stood out in your mind in terms of math or writing or any inspirations that you . . .?

Levy: Not until I got to Willard School was there any teacher that I can recall that I remembered, and this teacher in particular – I can't recall her name right now – was one that I remember very well. She was a big Irish woman. She was a very good teacher and nice to me. But she said to me I should not think in terms of higher education or getting into anything. She said just try to get in the post office so you can have a lifetime kind of a job and take care of your family when you get married. [I had] no ambition to do anything greater, but for some reason I had something in the back of my mind. I don't know where it ever came from, that I wanted to see myself behind a desk. So I was thinking in terms that I've got to do something more than that. That didn't interest me. I [wanted to] find myself behind a desk.

Mitchell: Let's go to the origin of that thought, because that – you mention that in your book, and it's mentioned in a number of interviews, that you envisioned yourself sitting behind a desk. I want to get a sense of where that stemmed from, where – how early do you recall that?

Levy: I recall that thought in my mind from grammar school. I don't know. Until today, I can't tell you. I saw nobody. I had nobody in my family or I hadn't been around anybody that way, and I can't for the life of me remember where I saw anybody sitting at a desk, except the teacher – teachers sitting behind a desk and then the class is out front. That was it. You went to the Principal's office. Maybe that's where it all came about. They were in charge, and I wanted to be in charge.

Mitchell: Anybody who was in charge generally sat behind a desk.

Levy: Sits behind a desk some way. So that had to be mine. I wanted to be in charge. That's how I ended up.

Mitchell: In those early years, what – were there – we're talking about radios. Did the family have a radio?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: My first recollection of radio was the little crystal set I had. You sit on – put your earphones on and then you sit and work this little needle over this crystal until you’ve found the station so that you get the broadcast from [it]. That’s my first recollection.

Mitchell: How old were you then?

Levy: I don’t know. I was in my teens, I guess.

Mitchell: Okay. So we haven’t gotten to that point yet.

In Chicago, in the late teens, you have the war going on. [Did] you have any sense of that? Your seeing that, or seeing soldiers coming home, or having a sense of what takes place in a country during wartime?

Levy: No. I think you mentioned that to me when we were talking before. I was aware of it, because I remember having a picture taken with me with a soldier suit on – with a little suit outfit with the soldier’s hat and all of that. Most kids maybe were Scouts or something, but I had this picture of myself being – as a soldier, because that was the propaganda of that time. I knew there was a war going on, but it in no way affected me, because neither my uncles nor my father went to war. I had nobody in my family that actually was in the war.

Mitchell: In 1919, when the soldiers came home – many of them – there was a horrific riot that . . .

Levy: The riot, from my recollection, started on the beach on 31st Street and the lakefront. That was more of a racial thing, because blacks were going to that beach, and the whites and they got into some sort of a fight. But I don’t recall it being anything to do with the war or soldiers coming back from the war or anything, except that probably a lot of people that got into this scrimmage were people who had been to the war and came back and couldn’t find any jobs. Being black, you couldn’t do this, and so they figured they went over there and fought and died for it, and therefore they had their rights. That – I’m assuming all this, because to actually know what was going on – I didn’t.

I also recall that my uncle and my father stayed home from work for a period of time, because to go to work, there was rioting, and if you got out of your neighborhood, you could get killed, because they were grabbing people off the street and doing them bodily harm, rioting in the streets. So we tried to stay pretty close to our little neighborhood where everybody knew each other and there was no problems.

Mitchell: As you progressed in school, at some point music began to – at what point do you recall music becoming more a part of your life?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Music was always a part of my life, in the sense that even – I think I even went back to trying to have some study of the violin, but never seriously enough to really get involved in that, because I just never liked the instrument. When I say I never liked it, I just didn't like the technique of playing a violin. It felt awkward. It's like golf. I never was able to get with golf, because to me it's awkward, the way you hold the club and swing. I want to swing [it] like a baseball – like a bat. Golf, you've got to hold it – to me – hold the club in such an awkward position and come down – for me. I never got together with that. [It's the] same thing with the bow up here and your chin holding the violin together. No, I didn't dig that.

Mitchell: So on the streets of Chicago, you played baseball? You did what?

Levy: Oh yeah. I did everything like every normal kid does. [I] played baseball, but I wasn't that good in athletics, so I wasn't a great baseball player. I wasn't a great basketball player or anything like that.

But music was always there, the thought of it. When I picked up – finally picked up the bass, that was high school – past high school, that I got into that. That's because the high schools had bands, and so you could . . .

Mitchell: Could you talk about either the first coming back around to music from those early years when you first learned a little bit of the violin, but now you're coming back. You're in high school. You're out of elementary school. You've got the memory of this teacher who told you that a good opportunity was the Post Office, and you're trying to figure, that's – you want to sit behind a desk and you want to do something more than that.

Levy: I'm trying to bring it into focus, exactly how a lot of this came about. I recall hearing from friends that a musician – I knew of Eddie Cole, for example, which is Nat Cole's older brother – I knew him, just from – like you know socially different people. I knew him. He was talking to us on the block. He was mentioning the fact that he was going to Egypt to play at the Alexandria Hotel with Noble Sissle's band. Noble Sissle, of Sissle and Blake – Noble Sissle was a society band in Chicago during that era – period of time that I'm talking about, when I'm a teenager. So I knew about the band. I knew about Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle and these people, although I wasn't professionally playing any music. But there were bands being played. For example, there was nightclubs where they were having broadcasts from. You'd hear bands coming from the Grand Terrace, and later on, the Benny Goodman band from the Congress Hotel in Chicago in later years. So all of that was a part of what I was hearing and learning. I was – that's when I realized, that's what I really wanted to do. I wanted to be a musician. If I wanted to do anything, it was to work at this. And I was good at that. I had the natural – it was – the bass, I picked it up and it was natural for me when I played. I had the uncle who used to sing – was singing bass, so my ear was attuned to the bass line, and that brought me into the feeling of the bass. Bass was an accompanying instrument. I felt strongly about the accompaniment of an instrument in a group. Whether it be a band, a trio, or in the background, the bass was the basic thing. It's the foundation of all of the rest of the music that – if it's the orchestra, or it's the vocal group, or

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



whatever, the bass is exactly what it says. It is the basis. It is the foundation. Then everything rises above that foundation. It's based on that. So I was always thinking in terms of accompaniment. As it turned out, my forté, or what was I best known for as a musician, was a bass player – was the accompanying part of it. I had the sense of rhythm and I had the sense of the bass line and what it meant to the soloist who was playing. So I was always thinking in terms and listening to what the singer was singing or what the saxophone was playing or what the trumpeter was playing – always thinking in terms of how can I best – what is the best note or what is the best way to accompany this person, to make what they're doing – accompany them. That's been the whole – my whole theory, as far as music is concerned.

Mitchell: What – how old were you when this began to surface, when you began to feel this?

Levy: I've always felt that. I felt that from the childhood things that I learned listening to that bass on those floats in New Orleans as a child. I'm hearing the bass lines. I'm hearing what they're playing. It just automatically registered with me. I didn't know I was going to become a bass player or anything. I didn't say – when I heard that in New Orleans, I didn't say, "I'm going to be a bass player." I just liked the instrument. I liked what I heard, and I felt that that was it. When I got into it – to play music was a means to make a living for a family. I got married very young, and to play – getting involved in music, was a means to an end.

Mitchell: What I'm saying is that at some point in those teenage years, you began – it began to crystallize for you. It began to take shape, and I want you to focus in on that period. Was it the music around you? Was it – are we talking about the groups that were coming North . . .?

Levy: No. It's always what you are privy to or what you hear, makes it – what develops you is what you hear and what you are privy to. You're able to hear certain things. It comes from all kinds of different things. But basically, at the teenage period of my life, before I got married, it was radio – listening to the radio and listening to the bands – the high school bands and people like that. You listen to all of their stuff, and you say, I like that. I enjoy that. Your love of music and your interest in music – music has just been a part of my life from the very beginning. As a child, as I said, we had this phonograph thing. We listened to Caruso sing operas. For a black person, coming up as a child, and you talk about listening to Caruso – most black people didn't know who Caruso was. There aren't any black Caruso[s]. He's an opera singer – great opera singer. And I heard as a child and listened to that. So it's all a part of it. Even now, I enjoy classical music. I don't particularly go for opera that much, but classical music, yeah.

Mitchell: At some point in there your mother bought a piano?

Levy: Yes. At the point – I recall them wanting me to take lessons on the piano – have a piano. Not only that. They socialized. They had friends come over when they had their little soirees and private parties – chitlin' circuit, as I call it – chitlin' dinners and all of that kind of stuff. They'd have a piano player come on and sit there and play. My uncle, who was the bass singer – he played piano a little by ear. He played a little bit, but I just picked that up. So that's why they

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



decided, we've got to get a piano. So my mother went down and tried to buy a piano – to Wurlitzer, downtown on Wabash Avenue in Chicago, to try to buy a piano. They'd sell her a piano, but they wouldn't sell it to a woman. She had to have my father – had to have her husband or a man to sign for it. Otherwise they wouldn't sell it to her. So my uncle went down and acted as my father, because my father couldn't barely sign his name, and he would – you would never have been able to get him to go down there and embarrass himself in any kind of way that way. So he didn't do it, but my uncle did, and we got a piano.

Mitchell: Was – is the piano . . .

Levy: But we got the piano. The style of the piano we got was piano rolls, where they had the rolls on the piano. You could play the rolls and pump it. You could see the notes going up and down the keyboard. That's what we had. That's the piano we bought in the house.

Mitchell: That gave you the first lessons in how to . . .?

Levy: Yeah. I didn't take any lessons, really. I just sat down there and started playing by ear and learning songs. Then later on in life, it became a part of livelihood, because I used to play piano on the weekends at – to tell the truth – the whorehouses. I was young, but I could go in there and sit down and play for the guests who would be sitting around waiting for their turn with the ladies. I played piano at these places.

Mitchell: How old were you?

Levy: One particular place in Chicago.

Mitchell: What was the name of that place?

Levy: I don't recall. It was an apartment. It wasn't a public thing.

Mitchell: How old were you then?

Levy: Oh, I don't know. Let's see. I had to be in my early twenties: 19, 20, something like that, or teenage. I don't – I know it's very young, but . . .

Mitchell: What I'm curious about in terms of school: at some point you stopped going? Or did you finish high school? Or . . .?

Levy: I never finished high school.

Mitchell: Did you stop going and get a job? How did that . . .?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: I did all kinds of jobs. I worked at all kinds of jobs during the Depression. [I] worked in a hotel as a bar porter. I was a doorman. I was – in the meantime played music on the side.

Mitchell: Post Office?

Levy: Post Office, right.

Mitchell: When did – how old were you when you started working for the Post Office?

Levy: I first worked at the Post Office as [a] special delivery messenger. They had special delivery messengers who worked in the Post Office. It was kind of a political job, because your – what do they call it? – alderman – no. It wasn't alderman. It was – I forget what they call the city political person, but he was in your neighborhood, so you were in direct contact – would recommend you. Then you'd get a job in different things. So as a teenager I got a job delivering special delivery. I worked out of the main post office in Chicago. I did that for a period of time.

Mitchell: So around what age did you stop going to school?

Levy: Sometime in my teenager – I don't . . .

Mitchell: Okay. Then you started working?

Levy: Yeah. I just started.

Mitchell: Picking up a variety of jobs?

Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: You were working at the Post Office and developing an interest in music at the same time, or the desire to play music was growing.

Levy: It's a means of a living. I could do it, and I knew how to do it. It was natural. It came natural to me, so I didn't have to do too much except hustle out there and try to get a job.

Mitchell: Can you give us a sense of how you're entering into the world of music, how that began to – those early years began to change your view of things? – how you began to see music as a way to make money, as a way to get that spot behind the desk?

Levy: It's kind of hard for – your question. But anyway, music, it was just a means to an end. It was a means to make an extra amount of money to take care of a family once you got married. It was just a means. I wasn't – there's no special plan or no special idea about it. It was just – I could play a bass. I picked it up. I could play it. Then I had certain musicians help me, who were well schooled, like Milton Hinton and Truck Parham, who at that time – Milt ended up with Cab

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Calloway and became a great, great player in the studios – great musician. They helped me. They taught me. In those days, musicians would help each other. If you heard something, they'd show you how to play it and how it worked, the fingering and all that sort of thing. I had books. I studied the books and practiced at home, but I didn't really go in to have formal lessons. I was able to read, because having those lessons from the violin taught me time and all that, as far as notes were concerned. It was just in a different clef. It was in the bass clef, which was different. But once you learned that, it was easy. There was no big deal about it. It just came natural. So it wasn't any plan or any idea, or you heard somebody who came along. It was just: that was part of you making a living. You were doing that to make a living. Just about everything I did basically started out as, I'm thinking in terms of this as a way to make a living. This is a way to take care of my family and then still do some good for somebody. So when I got into the music end of it and finally developed into the managerial end of it, then naturally my instincts were, what can I do to help from what I – from my knowledge of the inside of the business that I'd learned from being a musician – what can I do to help artists to reach their particular goals? That basically is what my managerial job turned out to be.

Mitchell: Can you talk about the Depression, in particular your mother's death?

Levy: The first sign of [the] Depression – that I learned about [the] Depression – I would say was probably a long time after my mother's death. My mother – when my mother died, I had been – I had had one period of time working in the Post Office, but that came about – a lot of the things happened after her death, because what . . .

Mitchell: When she died you were about 17, 18, or what?

Levy: 17, I believe. Yeah, I think I was around 17 years old when my mother died. What happened was, from insurance – the way I understood it – there was a certain amount in my grandmother and whatever they got, and they did get me – I got this job in the Post Office, special delivery messenger – and I got a car out of that. From that I got this Ford car. Was it a down payment on – of it? – basically, to buy a car, to – then I could go outside of the main areas. It helped me to be able to take on more territories to deliver mail in. I could go in and pick up a route that took me – made more money for me, because I could carry more mail for that particular route, being – having a car and able to get around and make my deliveries. So that was my reasoning to get involved with buying a car.

Mitchell: When she died, you quit high school?

Levy: Yes. I'm trying to think now whether I had already quit high school before my mother died. I'm not sure about that now, as I recollect. I'd have to go back. It's documented in a book more correctly. Now I can't . . .

Mitchell: So you were working in the Post Office. You were also beginning to play an instrument in that sense, for a living. Was that – were those things happening at the same time?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: I think at some point, you – how old were you when you got married?

Levy: 19, I think.

John and Gladys married October 22, 1932; John was 20 years old.

Mitchell: Can you tell us about meeting Gladys?

Levy: Gladys was my wife – first wife – was at Wendell Philips High School. She was a very athletic young girl. She was president of a club. In those days, here again, the social life of a lot of the black people at that time was through clubs. Each – just like my mother. She was – had these clubs and they'd have these affairs. Gladys belonged to a club that had an affair – money-raising affairs and everything, and a social. There was a social. A group of the girls that were together at Wendell Philips High School formed this club. They wanted to have an affair. They advertised the affair. There was a column in the *Chicago Defender*, the black newspaper, of these different affairs that these clubs would have. To the best of my recollections, through trying to contact her, either to be a part of it or to do – right now I can't quite recall whether it was to play for her organization or whether it was another part of it. I'd have to really go back [?] to the social organization, because that's the only time I knew about [the] Depression.

Mitchell: I just want you to explain a little bit more about when your mother passed away, what that did to your life in terms of how you felt and what it did to your family.

Levy: Hold everything for a minute. Let me try to explain something to you. The death of my mother didn't change anything that much in my life, because, as I recall, I wasn't – I was not that close to my mother and my father. My grandmother and grandfather were still living, and they were still the closest thing to me when it comes to parents, so I wasn't – not that I didn't love my mother and everything, but it didn't change anything very much in my life, except from the insurance money, the way I understand it, that they got from her death. There was a few dollars here and there, and they – my grandmother and they got together to give me the down payment on this – to get a car, because I was doing this special delivery messenger thing. But I wasn't in school or anything at that time. I had dropped out of school before that.

Mitchell: And you were already working.

[recording interrupted]

So, your mom passed away, and you were not in school. You were already hustling. It was around the time of the Great Depression. My understanding is that you were running numbers. What is it about a turkey raffle?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: I was doing a little bit of everything that was possible to earn money. I was hustling every way you could in that time. I was – one of the things was numbers running. But I didn't even do that as – that strongly into it that much. It was something extra to do. Meantime, I was trying to promote dances. I was trying to promote – with these organizations, I was trying to put things together to make some money and hustle in every kind of way that I knew. I got in trouble with the numbers thing. I got arrested. Never got persecuted. I never got charged, because they just didn't show up. The cops didn't show up at the trial. They just kept me in jail over a weekend. The numbers, they paid off the police. They let you out. There was no problem. You had no problem, except that unfortunately, nobody knew where I was for about three or four days. No-one could find me in that particular experience.

Mitchell: You would play the piano on this player piano, and some of the music that you would play on the rolls – what was some of – what were some of the songs that . . . ?

Levy: I don't recall the titles, but it was the songs that were popular at that particular time. I'd listen to those songs. Whatever was popular at the time was what I would be trying to play – what I would play on the piano. [?] songs.

Mitchell: What was generally popular at the time?

Levy: What was . . . ? – I don't know.

Mitchell: Was it Fats Waller, maybe?

Levy: Oh, the piano roll people. [It] was Fats Waller and a guy out of New York. Fats Waller was one of the major players, but there were two or three piano players who made these piano rolls.

Mitchell: You used to play for tips, my understanding is, right?

Levy: For tips?

Mitchell: Did you play for tips?

Levy: No.

Mitchell: No. I thought I read that.

Levy: I don't know where you got that one from.

Mitchell: Was that . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Hall Levy: In the whorehouse.

Mitchell: . . . in the whorehouse?

Levy: What?

Mitchell: In the whorehouse.

Levy: Oh, [?] tips. You got paid to do it, but you got tips. Just like when you – when I had the band at the – when I had the band in a nightclub. You'd get tips. Somebody would come up and tip the band like that, but we weren't playing for tips. We got paid a certain amount, but the tips helped in any kind of entertainment thing. That was probably what you were referring to.

Mitchell: Yes. Was there a moment when in this environment Duke Ellington came to dinner at a house or at . . . ?

Levy: That's after – my wife and I lived with my aunt. My aunt had a friend, a very close friend, and she lived with us. Her daughter was married to Duke Ellington. Whenever he came to town, he'd always come to the house and have dinner. I met him long before I got involved musically, but I got to know him from him coming to my aunt's house to have dinner. I met him for the first time that way. Then later on, when I moved to New York and got to know him – had been around the band and seen him at broadcasts and all that kind of thing – and I was in the middle of it. I was on 52nd Street then. I was in the class music, with the same class of all these people – that he offered me a job. He sent his – I was living on 129th Street in New York, and he sent his road manager around to ask me to join the band. He had – at that time he was using two bass players. He had made me an offer – told me what he was offering. I couldn't afford it, to go and play with him. As much as I loved his band and his music, I couldn't afford to leave 52nd Street for what I was making, to go work with him, because it was much – his offer was much lower than what I was earning with the trio on 52nd Street.

Mitchell: Let's get to 52nd Street. But in Chicago, as you were beginning to play, can you talk about that, before you went to 52nd Street, the early . . . ?

Levy: You want to talk about my career in Chicago?

Mitchell: Yes. Early – the early part of your career in Chicago.

Levy: Chicago – I started – picked up the bass, started playing bass. Here again, my hustle – social hustle – was to try to play for clubs that were having affairs with a group. The group that I was closely associated with was Tony Fambrough's group. We played for all kinds of social events at that period of time. I looked up the clubs. We'd find organizations that were doing things. You know – get a gig. For that period that we're talking about, in Chi – as an early

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



player, I – it's hard for me to relate to some of these things and to remember all of the different things.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: Okay. It's 1932 and you . . .

Levy: 1932. I got married in the middle of the Depression. I did not have a job. My only income was when I could hustle up a gig playing music. So I had to think of something – try to think of some way to earn a living. So I went to this bakery place to get a job delivering bread. In those days you had people deliver stuff to your back alley. They'd come down the alley delivering milk. They'd deliver your bread. They'd deliver all kinds of vegetables. Carts and trucks would pull up. You'd go down and get your vegetables and all that. I came up with the idea. So I went to this company that was – a small company that was trying bread. This man was scuffling, but he was in the business of making bread. He didn't have a slicer – a bread slicer, to slice bread. That was just coming into vogue. I made a deal to get a bread slicer. That was my job. I got the job, because I had [?] believe that I had the bread slicer. I took this bread slicer and sold him the idea to him. He gave me a job and gave me the bread slicer. I did the delivery of the bread through the alleys and the streets like that. So that's what the bread – that's where that particular thing came about, as far as when I first got married and [was] trying to do.

In the meantime, I was never – during all the different periods of time that we're talking about, where music was involved – music was always somewhere there. I was always doing something musically to make a living. But you couldn't make a living out of music alone. It's almost as bad as it is now. You could not make a living out of music alone at that time. So you had to hustle every kind of way that you could. That's what I was doing.

Mitchell: So, you're slicing bread and delivering bread. One would assume that that's a daytime gig.

Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: Then at night you were . . .

Levy: If I could get a job as a gig, playing, yeah. But it wasn't that much that I could depend on that, because if it was, I would have never got involved in any daytime activity, because when you did play, you made more money than you did on a day job, period.

Mitchell: My understanding is that your entry back into music was – and I say back into music . . .

Levy: Yeah. This is where you throw me a little bit, because I never got out of the music.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: To playing, to playing.

Levy: I never . . .

Mitchell: The piano roll . . .

Levy: I was always trying to do something in music, if it was playing the piano, which I wasn't that great a piano player, enough to make a living out of that. So this was a hustle on the side of anything else that you would try to do.

Mitchell: When I say coming back into it, what we've established here is that you had a violin early on, or you took violin lessons. But we haven't come back to any instrument after that, except that your parents bought a piano. That was, in my understanding, you're coming back to your passion. Now if I'm wrong . . .

Levy: No, you see. No, no.

Mitchell: If I'm wrong, let me know.

Levy: It wasn't my idea, that I wanted to play a piano, to have it. That was a social thing for the home.

Mitchell: It happened to be in the house, and your mother – there were social things going on. You began to play it, and you began to see it as a possible hustle. My understanding is that you started playing.

Levy: That's right. I just picked it up.

Mitchell: Okay. Now I just want to get to the bass.

Levy: Yeah? What happened as far as the bass is concerned, is that – let me back up to the picture of how I got involved in that. Hold it a minute.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: In the early '30s, we've got the end of Prohibition. We've got – you're switching to the bass and you have met Gladys. Can you give a sense of how that period of your life began to take shape?

Levy: I met my first wife through social events that I had participated in one way or the other, either in terms of playing music for an affair or promoting an affair or trying to come up with a promotional social event that would create some sort of income. That's how I originally met her.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



After we got married, right away there was the very early period of having a child – born very young. So this put a lot of responsibility on me at that particular time.

Mitchell: Can we – I don't want to skip the meeting of your first wife. I do want to get the magnetism of that meeting, in the sense of, what happened? Was it a dance? Was it something? Did you – a little bit more, in the sense of, what happened?

Levy: My first meeting with Gladys was at her home. I went there to meet with her to discuss her organization and her club becoming a part of a promotion I was trying to do, which was a turkey raffle, so it had to be close to the Thanksgiving period. I met her for the first time. I'd never – I didn't know who she was. [I] just got it out of the newspaper that she had this social club and they were having events, so it . . .

Mitchell: What was the name of the social club? Do you remember?

Levy: What?

Mitchell: The name of the social club?

Levy: Her social club? No. I don't remember the name of it. Yeah. I think it was Éclat. É-c-l-a-t, a French word. I think that was the name of the club that her girls and friends . . . But anyway, I met at her house. I got a chance to meet her family. We sat and talked. We hit it off pretty good right away, but there was no sparks flying. I saw her and fell madly in love, or none of that.

Mitchell: What did she look like?

Levy: She was a fine looking lady.

Mitchell: Describe her.

Levy: She was a fine looking girl. Of course. Great, great. She looked good. Please believe me.

Mitchell: Tall? Thin?

Levy: Tall. Beautiful. Very attractive. Educated. Spoke well. Had her act together. Everything's fine. Right away, I said, hey – but it wasn't like, as I say, madly in love. But I thought – I figured her to be very interesting and I wanted to have a social contact with her.

Mitchell: More than a turkey raffle.

Levy: More than a turkey raffle. That's right. As time went on and we worked on the project and she became a part of it – I had to deliver tickets to her and then sell them. Just hit on her and stopped talking. The next thing you know, we were going together, socializing and hanging

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



together. Eventually it led to a relationship that finally led to marriage. I got married at her home – at her apartment, but I had the pastor of the church that I belonged to, perform the ceremony. We just had friends and a very small gathering – just friends – a few friends of hers and mine. That was the beginning of that relationship. From that relationship we had a son, Michael – no, Vincent. From then on, the rest of my life with her, as far as family was concerned, it seemed to have children in ten-year spans – spaces. First came Vincent. Ten years later, it was Michael. Then practically ten years later it's Pamela. I had them spread out.

Mitchell: Clearly at this point you were hustling and you were trying to make ends meet. You were even under more pressure to do that, I would imagine at this point, being a young married man as well.

Levy: Yes. It was a very difficult time for me as far as trying to make a living and live up to the level that I was accustomed to, and also that I would want to have my family – to look out for my family level. That's one thing. I had been very well schooled by my grandmother and mother and all that part of my family about what your responsibilities are if you marry and if you take on this thing, and if you have children, what you – expected of you as a man. So I was well schooled in what a man should – responsibilities that you take on when you marry.

Mitchell: Were you living in your own place? Or were you . . .?

Levy: I lived with my aunt for a long time at the very beginning. Then finally we broke off from that. I lived with a friend who was married, a young couple, the same as us. We lived together for a while. Then finally they wanted their own place. They went one way and I went another way – not as far as friendship was concerned. They were beginning to have a family, and I was having a family, so we just went in different ways.

Mitchell: As we're picking up the music end of it, you're at this point playing the bass and beginning to go to the musicians' hall, right?

Levy: Yeah. I'd go every day to the musicians' union and hang out down there [?]. Plus you could pick up a gig here and there. Somebody would come in and say, "I need a bass player tomorrow night" for something. You'd go and make the gig, get to know everybody, and know the people that are working, who they were and all that.

Mitchell: Who were some of the early influences? Because you're really catching up to speed on the bass and . . .

Levy: Yeah. I had great help as far as my development on the instrument from very, very, very competent musicians, bass players. The main two that I – that were very important in my life – was Milt Hinton and Truck Parham. They were both excellent bass players, and they [were] patient and good teachers. They realized that I had a lot of natural ability, so it made it easier for

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



the training I got from them. They helped me in every way. They're working. Something came up. If they thought I could handle it, they'd call me.

Mitchell: Who were your role models in terms of the bass at that point? Who did you – I would imagine they – you looked up to them, but also . . .

Levy: Also would be Oscar Pettiford and people like that that I knew of – great bass players. Slam Stewart. [I] knew about them. And of course, later on, [Jimmy] Blanton with the Duke Ellington band. He was the youngest of all of them. I didn't ever know him or get to – I only heard him play in person once. I never got a chance to meet him or talk to him, but I heard his records, the stuff that he played on records. He revolutionized the style of the bass in the band. After that came people like Ray Brown and all those other people that became great soloists, but he was way out in front. As you see I have a picture of him on my wall.

Mitchell: Can you talk about some of the bands that you played with at this time? This is now moving to the '30s.

Levy: I played with a lot of different local bands and worked with different groups.

Mitchell: What kind of gigs were they?

Levy: There was Tony Fambrough. There was – I worked with – Earle Warren had a band that worked in a club that Joe Louis fronted. That was with Earle Warren's band. Then there was another group that I worked with in a nightclub setting.

Mitchell: Hi-Ho Club?

Levy: What?

Mitchell: Hi-Ho Club, in Cicero?

Levy: Oh, that was my own thing, my own nightclub band that I went out and worked . . .

Mitchell: I'm jumping ahead.

Levy: . . . in Chicago. That was my own thing. I worked at Joe's Deluxe with that band, with that group.

Mitchell: I'm just thinking about that party that you worked at, where you talk about a group of young men coming and keeping the band to work late.

Levy: In Chicago, outside of – the south side of Chicago – not the south side. I mean the west side, way west, in Cicero, which is adjoining to Chicago, like a suburb, there was – gangsters had

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

a nightclub there. I worked at this nightclubs. We – it was one of the better jobs at that time that I had as a group. I was the group leader. We played at this club. On one occasion – we normally got off from work about four o'clock in the morning. We worked from about seven or eight o'clock at night until about four o'clock in the morning, just one set after another, playing in this club. In this particular night, it was about – we were through. It's four in the morning, and we were through. We were just getting ready to fold up – put your instruments away and all that – and a group of gangsters came in. There were three or four of the gangsters in the Chicago area and their lady friends. So the owner of the club said, "We'll put on a show for them. We have to do another show for them." The show ran about an hour, where they had dancers and singers and the whole thing. We played for these people. I said to him, "We're through. It's four o'clock in the morning. We've got to go home – catch the subway – the El, and go home." I said, "We're not going to play any later," and I started putting the cover on my bass. Somebody tapped me on the back. When I turned around, I was looking down the barrel of a 45, and the guy said, "Hey, kid, take that thing off. We're going to have a show. Take that thing off. You're going to continue playing." I took that thing off in a hurry, and we played another show. At the end of the show, we got paid more money than we got by the week, in a tip from him. That's maybe the thing you're talking about tips. At the end of the show, we each got a \$100 bill. That was like – that was almost like four weeks of working in that club, because I think we were making about \$25 a week – something like that. It was a great experience, but it's kind of scary. That's just one experience I had with the different experiences when you worked in Chicago and worked for gangsters, because they controlled the entertainment field completely. They owned the club, or if they didn't own them, they controlled the entertainment that went into them. A lot of the top names in the business of that time period were under contracts with the gangsters who owned their contracts with the clubs.

Mitchell: Who was coming in and around? What bands were coming in that you followed in Chicago?

Levy: During that period of time, it wasn't that much travel – about bands traveling, coming and going. You had places where these musicians worked. They stayed in that one club for over a year, sometimes as long as two years. So you had Joe Glaser's club, Sunset Club, where the bands like Fletcher Henderson were. They worked there for – and Earl Hines – they worked there for long periods of time, and they were on the air broadcasting every night. Benny Goodman worked at the Congress Hotel for over a year, working every night in the clubs and broadcasting. You had broadcast coming out of there. Then there were smaller clubs. Like I worked with – the group that I worked with that went to New York together – with Stuff Smith. We worked opposite Red Allen and J. C. Higginbotham in a club. We both worked there for a long period of time. We didn't work there as long as we could have, because we got an offer to come to New York on 52nd Street. That was again Joe Glaser's club, owned by him, a gangster. He was a part of a gangster system in Chicago. In fact, that's how we got to – how I got to meet him for the first time, because I took over the responsibility of managing the group, paying them and taking care of whatever.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Which group is this? This is the . . .

Levy: This is the trio. This is Stuff Smith's trio, the group that I came to New York with.

Mitchell: In terms of this era and that time, you had Duke Ellington coming in to Chicago, and Jimmie Lunceford, and who?

Levy: Yes, they came, but that was – they came into Chicago to play ballrooms, like the Savoy Ballroom, and play theaters, like the Regal Theater, in that period of time that you're speaking of, when their bands came in. But the local groups worked at these clubs for long periods of time. They stayed in one club for a very long period. But the big bands you're talking about, like Ellington and Lunceford and Benny Goodman – there were a lot of ballrooms at that time. Ballroom dancing was a thing. So you had bands that played these ballrooms that had name bands that came in and out of Chicago that were white groups. But the black groups, the only traveling bands was Lunceford and Ellington, probably, at that time. [Count] Basie was – hadn't quite gotten into that thing yet with him. That period of time hadn't come up where the Basie band was a part of that thing. That came on a little later.

Mitchell: You were playing – you had your own group? Or you – can you . . .?

Levy: At times I had my own group. At other times I worked with other groups. Boyd Atkins, I worked with for nightclubs on the south side of Chicago, and as I said, Earle Warren at the Joe Louis club on the south side in Chicago. Then I had my own group that I worked at Joe's Deluxe.

Mitchell: Who was in your group?

Levy: I don't remember all the names. Goon Gardner. I don't remember names that worked with me at that time.

Mitchell: How did you connect with Stuff Smith?

Levy: The president of the black musicians' union called me one day. He said, "You know Stuff Smith?" I said, "Yeah, I know of him, but I don't know him personally. I know who he is." He said, "There's an offer for him to come into Chicago to work at a club, but I won't allow him to work at any club here unless somebody is working with him who's going to take care of business," he said, "because he is too flighty and he's liable to do anything – not pay the guys and cause trouble. I won't allow him to work. But if you're interested in working with him, I'll put together a group and you play with him, if you take charge of the business end of it." I said, "Fine. I'm not doing anything." I think at the time I was working at a hotel, doing – working as a doorman sometimes, whatever. So I said, "Yeah, fine. I will take it on."

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Raymond Walters was the piano player that – Harry Gray was the name of the president of the union – that Harry had put together with – Raymond Walters was a great piano player. I knew him, but I had never worked with him before. Then there was Stuff. That was the trio. But as we worked along, Raymond decided to go with another group called Burns Campbell. He was a local group too, a guitar player, Burns Campbell. They went together. They got together, so he left, and I brought in Jimmy Jones to take his place, because I had worked with Jimmy Jones and knew him well. I'd worked with him with Tony Fambrough's orchestra. We'd done dates together. So I brought in Jimmy Jones. That's how we started the Stuff Smith trio. That's how it stayed together, came to New York together, worked for over a year in the Onyx Club on 52nd Street, and then all the other things developed from that: the Shearings and the Billie Holidays and all the other stuff that I did from then on all came from that particular situation where we came into New York to the Onyx Club on 52nd Street.

Mitchell: When you arrived on 52nd Street – and I guess this is your first time?

Levy: First time in New York, yes.

Mitchell: First time to New York – you were disappointed, I understand, with 52nd Street.

Levy: I was disappointed with the club the first day I walked into it. This little greasy looking joint, in the middle of the day, and I said, oh, no. A little bitty bandstand. The clubs we played in Chicago were much nicer clubs and better rooms than – I said, so this is New York, this is 52nd Street, and this is the Onyx Club. I thought, wow, this is a real dump. I met the owner, a very nice man. I said, okay, we're going to be coming in there the following week, I think it was.

But I was pretty – surely was disappointed about New York City when I came in and saw all them clothes hanging out on lines as the train came into Grand Central Station. We should have got off at 125th Street, but instead we went all the way downtown, because I didn't know anything. It was my first time in New York. I did have a friend – my wife had a friend there who went to school. She was one of the members of the club – the original club that – where I first met Gladys. She belonged to that club. She's one of the members of that club. She was living in New York. Her father was a superintendent of a building. So we had an apartment in that building. It was available to us. That's how – where we started to live. When we came in – where I was going to live – when I came in – Gladys wasn't with me. This is my first trip, just with the trio. We went walking down 125th Street – not 125th Street. Lenox Avenue, on our way to catch a train to go up to where Jimmy was going to stay. He hadn't even settled. I settled first. Then we went out. I was going with him up to where he was going to live in New York. We came out on Lenox Avenue. This is now about 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning. Hot. August 10th, I think was the date. It was steaming. People were hanging out of the windows. I looked at Lenox Avenue. I started – I said, "Jimmy, something's wrong. Something's happening. All of these people on the street." I went running down – we went running down the street to see what was going on. The further we got, closer to 125th Street from 129th, the more people we were walking into. Just people. I never saw that many people in my life on the street.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Even from Chicago?

Levy: Yeah. We didn't have no kind of – that many people on the street, out there and hanging out the windows. Excuse the expression: I haven't seen that many black people together in my life, up to this point. Anyway, we went on down towards the subway, went uptown to 155th Street where he was going to be. He was going to live up there on Sugar Hill. The black folks up there had money. He's staying with his uncle, who was a hustler or whatever he did, and his lady friend, which is another story, about what happened with that. It has nothing to do with . . .

Mitchell: We're listening.

[recording interrupted]

Money. Coming from Chicago, this is the first gig in New York. How much more money were you making in New York than in Chicago? Did this represent a substantial increase for you?

Levy: Oh yeah. It did, and the period was contracted for. It was a longer period that I had anything happen in Chicago or any place else. The money was substantial.

Mitchell: Do you recall how much money?

Levy: No, I really don't. Maybe three-, four-hundred dollars.

Mitchell: A week?

Levy: A week, yeah.

Mitchell: This is what year?

Levy: 1944, wasn't it? Yeah, 1944.

Mitchell: \$400 a week.

Levy: Yeah, about \$400 a week.

Mitchell: For how long a period of time.

Levy: It was for – 40 weeks I think it was, the contract called for.

Mitchell: 40 weeks meaning Monday through Fri – Monday through Sunday? Is it seven days a week?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: No, you had one day . . .

Mitchell: Can you describe the week?

Levy: No, it wasn't seven days. You had an off day. I think it was one day off, I believe, but the hours were long – long hours: about 9 to 4, something like that – 4 in the morning. It was long hours. You just played one set after the other. But we'd play a set and then go across the street and play a set with somebody else, and somebody would come in our club and play while we were off the stand. Each club had a couple of acts. In other words, so there was never a dull moment, you might say, because when we finished, there's another group came right on and played behind us, then we would be back on in the next hour or so. So every hour on the hour, we would make these changes. But in the meantime, when we were off for that hour, we'd go across the street and sit in with somebody else's band. The same thing would happen with us.

Mitchell: How many members in this group?

Levy: Trio.

Mitchell: Trio. Can you tell us about each member?

Levy: Jimmy Jones was a graduate of Kentucky State University. He came to Chicago. His family was – his aunt was – he was living with his aunt in Chicago. He had come to work with a group, a trio where he played 4-string guitar and sang with a group. It was a trio. I forget the name, what they were called. That's how musically he played. Piano – he sort of picked up piano. Harmonically, he is one of – he had one of the most perfect pitch – he had perfect pitch, perfect – he had a sense of harmony that was just amazing harmonically. He wasn't much of a technical person on piano. His stuff was more like accompaniment. This is my whole thing, so we fitted beautifully together, because he was an accompanist, and I was an accompanist. Neither one of us were much of a soloist, but together, we were pretty good. In fact, we set a blaze on that street. People were coming from all the other clubs to hear us when we opened, because they couldn't believe what they heard when they heard just a bass player and a piano player play behind a violin player. They knew Stuff Smith. He'd been in the Onyx Club in New York before. He'd been with Jonah Jones and worked with – and Clyde Hart – and worked with a group of New York musicians before. So he was well known. But never with – he'd always worked with a much larger group than that, a unit. But with this trio, just that trio, they heard us play. They came in. They just couldn't believe what we were doing with that trio. It was so – Jimmy and I were so tight together musically, and the rhythm – the beat was there. I was always noted for a rhythm section player and an accompanist. Then we'd have Ben Webster come in. They hired Ben to come in and do some sets with us. We played for him. That's when I first met Ben Webster.

Mitchell: And he played?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Tenor saxophone. Ben Webster. [There was] nobody like that, nobody like him, in my estimation. I learned so much from him.

Mitchell: Tell us some more about Stuff.

Levy: Stuff, he had a reputation as one of the greatest jazz violinists. In my estimation, I haven't heard anybody to compare with him yet, not as a jazz violinist.

Mitchell: What would he do? What would he do, for example, that would amaze you?

Levy: He was a great jazz violinist, just played – he played violin like trumpet players blow a horn or something. He didn't play it like the instrument is created for. He would – there was Eddie South, who was also a jazz player, but he was like a gypsy violinist. He played the classics. A lot of the so-called jazz violin players were more like gypsy players on the violin, but Stuff Smith was just an out and out swinging jazz player, harmonically, in every kind of way. Nobody played the violin. Nobody attacked it. Here again, he was a guy who didn't study anything. He didn't read any music or study anything about the instrument. He just picked it up and started playing it.

Mitchell: The Onyx packed would have about how many people?

Levy: The what?

Mitchell: The Onyx Club, a full house.

Levy: I would say if you had 50 people, that place would be running over out into the street – a small joint, a really small joint. It had a bar and a table.

Mitchell: Kitchen? Did they have a kitchen?

Levy: No. They didn't have any food delivery in there.

Mitchell: Did people go and get food and bring it in?

Levy: No, they didn't eat any food in there. It wasn't a club with any kind of food served in there at all. Just music and drinks. That's all. They didn't serve any food.

Mitchell: A waitress? People serving?

Levy: Waiters. They had waiters.

Mitchell: I'm just trying to picture it visually. Did – what did it look like?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Levy: It's in the basement of a brownstone. That's the way 52nd Street was set up. Most of the clubs were in the basement or street level of brownstones in that particular street. There was only one club that I recall – two – one was 21, which is still there, and there was another club that was set up as a comedy club. I can't remember the name of it. But there was only two standard clubs that weren't part of an apartment – part of a brownstone or were set up to be a club.

Mitchell: People lived above it?

Levy: Yeah. People lived above.

Mitchell: Cover charge?

Levy: I don't think so.

Mitchell: So you pay for the drinks and there would be no . . .?

Levy: I don't recall too much about any kind of cover charge being on in there. You just came in, and they play a set, [?] drinks, and you were served.

Mitchell: 9 to 4 would be how many sets?

Levy: Roughly you played maybe about 5 – 5 or 6 sets in a night.

Mitchell: The place would be packed?

Levy: Oh yeah. They'd be packed and jammed every night. It was during the war, so there was a lot of sailors, because we were near a naval base there in New York. There were more sailors than soldiers, but we did get some soldiers and marines. Then we got a lot of people – musicians from the symphony orchestras would come in in most of the clubs. A lot of them would come in to hear Stuff's violin. Across the street, a lot of people would come in to hear Slam Stewart on bass, bowing that bass. A lot of the symphony bass players would come in just to watch him, because he was unbelievable, like Stuff was on the violin. He was – he didn't finger anything right. He didn't do anything right on it, but just blow you right out of the place on everything – just amazing.

Mitchell: So my guess is, at some point you were not disappointed.

Levy: Oh no, I wasn't disappointed.

Mitchell: I mean, remember when you said you first . . .

Levy: Oh, I was disappointed how it looked. Even before that. When I went back at night, it took on a whole different thing, but in the daytime, to walk in any of those joints, you'd say, I don't

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



believe this – like a dump. But at night, it took on a whole aura of – I don't know. It was altogether different at night, and you realized how important those clubs were.

[recording interrupted]

I went down to get a bass. I was going to try out just – I knew I needed a bass, so I went to, here again, Wurlitzer, which is downtown. They have new pianos and new basses. They had basses all in a rack – on a rack, about maybe 12 or 13 string basses. I went along and tried each one of them and played a little bit on it, fingered it. I came to this white bass. Nobody was playing any white bass nowhere. I'd never seen one before. I picked this thing up. It was a little heavier than the other basses. I said, this thing feels a little heavy. But when I started to play on it, and then I put the bow on it, I said, wow, this thing sounds great, but it doesn't look right. Everybody, when I finally – to make a long story short, I took that bass. It was cheaper than some of the other basses that were lying at the place. So I took that one, and that was it. I got this white bass. Everybody was teasing me about it, with the white bass. But I got more out of it and stayed with it right through my whole career. I never bought one of these real expensive instruments. People would say, how do you get that out of that thing, this plywood bass? It's just wonderful. It turned out a wonderful instrument. I ended up – even Israel Crosby after a while, I think. What did I do? I finally gave it away to a guy that his son was taking lessons. He [?] beside me. He was learning to be a bass – I gave the bass away to him.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: I'm John Mitchell. Today is December 11, 2006. We're at the home of John Levy and Devra Hall. We're here as part of the Smithsonian's Jazz Oral History Project to record John's story.

When we left it off yesterday, we were talking about Harlem – what life was like in Harlem. I'd like you to go back into that and give us a sense of what Harlem was like on 52nd Street and what you saw and were experiencing back in the early '40s.

Levy: 52nd Street was an experience that can only happen once in a lifetime, because the setup on 52nd Street, the entertainment lineup on 52nd Street, was the most amazing and most progressive as far as jazz was concerned. The way the street was, if you're not familiar – one is familiar with the lineup – it's the only time that I can recall where a group of nightclubs were all on one street, on both sides of the street, at least five or six major nightclubs that hired the top jazz talent in the world to perform there, was performed on 52nd Street. We had the top vocalists, the top instrumentalists, and the top groups – small groups of that time. Now there wasn't a big-band thing like the Ellington band or the Basie band or any of the large bands played 52nd Street, because most of the clubs on 52nd Street were in brownstones. They usually were on the main floor or in the basement of the brownstone that the clubs were located in. They all were very small. You would think that they might have been much larger rooms, but they weren't. They were very small rooms seating about the maximum of maybe 50, at tops 60 people

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



in any one of these rooms. They had excellent turnover and were busy from the time they opened until the time they closed at 4 in the morning. The groups that played there were, as I said, some of the greatest players – jazz players – of that era, of that time period.

Mitchell: Like on any given night, what would you have, in terms of playing? You would be playing with Stuff Smith and down the street . . .

Levy: Oh yeah. I would be playing with Stuff Smith and with special guest Ben Webster. Across the street would be Art Tatum playing with his trio, Slam Stewart and Tiny Grimes. Then there would be Bobby Tucker with Lucky Thompson and his group, and all the sidemen were well-named – well-received, well-named musicians of that time period. Practically all of the groups, their sidemen were all-stars. Some even later on went on to have their own groups. Everybody was top-notch in that field. Billy Taylor was down the street in the second block. There was actually two blocks, between Sixth Avenue and Fifth Avenue, which [had] the major number, but a couple of other rooms were on the other side, between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. Billy worked in one of these rooms. I can't recall the exact name of the room that he worked in, but it was a major room. A lot of people played there. Billy played there for a long time. In fact I worked there with him a period – short period of time.

Mitchell: Some of the artists you knew from back in Chicago, because at this point in your career you were – what? How would you describe yourself? A journeyman? You were . . .

Levy: Sideman.

Mitchell: Sideman, but you had been playing in clubs for a number of years.

Levy: Yes. I started. Actually my club experience started right in Chicago, of course. Then come to New York. Then in New York is where I played mostly clubs or did concerts. We did jam-session concerts all over the place. Every weekend there were concerts – extra concerts that we worked other than the full engagements of the club to fulfill your commitment to play your club engagement. We worked six days in the club scene and then had the one day off. Of course during the day there was recordings with different people and other kinds of engagements: radio . . .

Mitchell: In New York, like throughout much of America, it was fairly racially divided, but along 52nd Street, how could you describe or how would you describe the racial atmosphere among jazz lovers and jazz enthusiasts? These clubs were open to anybody, am I correct?

Levy: 52nd Street was open to anybody, everybody. It wasn't – there wasn't any restrictions on who could come in or who could – if you had the money, you came in and sat down, and that was all that was needed. But basically there's more whites turned out on 52nd Street than blacks. A lot of blacks didn't come downtown as much as you might think to see these kind of people play. Most of the blacks stayed up in Harlem, where here again was another group of people

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



playing – musicians playing – that a lot of people went to see. They would go up to Harlem to see these people play.

Mitchell: What were some of the clubs in Harlem? I know they had Smalls' Paradise.

Levy: Smalls' Paradise.

Mitchell: There was one that was . . .

Levy: Another room especially that Basie worked in, and a room that was an organ group – it was a room that played mostly organs. That's where Shirley Scott and – even Basie played organ in there – this particular club – with a small group, before the big-band – all his big-band experience, which came later on.

The uptown, or Harlem, clubs catered to more of especially creative things. In other words, they did more shows where they would have a comedian and a singer and then a tap-dancer or something. It was more like production shows that were being done in Harlem, more so – 52nd Street was strictly music. There was no dancers – no dancing. There wasn't anything. It was strictly listening.

Mitchell: I want to jump back to Chicago a little bit, because we – the Garrick Stage Bar. That's where you had hooked up with Stuff.

Levy: That's where we were with Stuff Smith.

Mitchell: On Randolph Street.

Levy: That's correct.

Mitchell: Talk about a couple of those clubs. We'll go back, because you knew some of the artists from those places, those clubs, like Garrick and the Sherman Hotel. Then when you went to New York, you were seeing people, with – some of them you had played in Chicago with, am I correct?

Levy: Yes. I had met just about everybody that came through Chicago. We would go to see them if we weren't working. Before I even began in the club scene, I would go to see a lot of these people when they came to town to perform in the theater or in the clubs that did hire outside people. But basically there was about three or four rooms that local musicians worked steadily in. That was the Garrick Stage Bar, which was where Red Allen and Higginbotham had their group. I worked there with the Stuff Smith trio. The Stuff Smith trio worked two clubs basically in Chicago before leaving for New York. The first room we worked in was where the first engagement that I worked with Stuff Smith. Then the second one was when we went into the

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Garrick Stage Bar. The longer period was at the Garrick Stage Bar than any other room in Chicago.

Mitchell: Which was the place where Dinah Washington . . . ?

Levy: That was the Garrick Stage Bar. It was owned by a man by the name of Joe Sherman, which was a real character. He used to stand out in front of the club and try to drag people in. He was a hawker. In the coldest of weather, he never had on an overcoat or anything. He stood out in front of the club, and he would just yank – almost yank you into the club. You’d be out there. “The greatest show on earth is in here. Come on in and see these people perform. This is Red Allen and Higginbotham, and we have the Stuff Smith trio, the greatest thing in the world. Come in here and see it.” He was like a hawker, out on the sidewalk. He was a real character. He was the one that originally named Dinah Washington Dinah Washington, because – from her original name. I can’t remember what her name was originally, but he named her Dinah Washington, and it stuck with her.

Mitchell: You had mentioned there was something unique about her style of speech, her . . .

Levy: Dinah Washington was, in my estimation, the most articulate vocalist of any time. She sang – each syllable was so perfect, and her diction was such that it was just amazing. You [don’t] figure someone from the South or black, especially at that time period, to speak like Dinah did. Her diction was perfect. Her English was just perfect. The only other person that I think he learned from her, was Joe Williams, because they worked together with Lionel Hampton’s. From that – they worked together as the singer – the male and female vocalist with that band for a short period of time.

Mitchell: Joe Williams was playing around that time at the Sherman Hotel and . . .

Levy: No. Joe Williams didn’t play at the Sherman.

Mitchell: Oh, he didn’t. Okay. Was there something about Art Tatum at the Sherman Hotel?

Levy: Art Tatum was at the Sherman Hotel, yeah, but he was playing solo piano. He was just playing solo piano. He didn’t have a group. He was playing solo piano. If he finished, [he’d] come to the Garrick Stage on his way uptown. Then we would all get in a cab and we would go uptown to a club up there where we would hang out. That’s when he really would play – where you really want to hear Tatum play. That’s the time he really opened up, because all of the musicians would come and hang out there. All of the piano players in Chicago would be there to hear Art Tatum play.

Mitchell: For you at this point, it must have been an advantage, because you’re coming to 52nd Street, you’re new to New York, but you know a lot of the musicians. You knew Tatum. You knew a number of folks who basically you could play with.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Levy: Yes, I knew most of the playing musicians of that people. I knew them either from experiences I had with them, playing with them or jamming with them or being in their company or going to see them. It was a great community. Jazz was such a great social thing with the musicians. Everybody knew each other. It was a friendly – there was not a competitive or a cut-throat kind of a thing. Everybody looked out for each other and advised each other and helped – the older musicians helped the younger ones. It was a wonderful era.

Mitchell: This era was – at the same time you had World War II going on. Did you – were you at any point called in for the draft? Maybe you can share some of the stories about the Signal Corps.

Levy: I was called up for the draft. Actually, I tried to enlist, because I was thinking in terms of what I would do – always, everything I did, really, if you look at my whole history, everything that I tried to do was in terms of thinking what this would do, or what I could do to maintain a decent living to take care of my family, because that was the paramount thing about everything that I was ever involved in, once I became a father or became a husband and married. Before that, it was – of course, before I got married, a lot of things I did was just for fun, for the hell of it. But once I became a husband and a father, I was interested primarily in thinking in terms of my future, being able to take care of a family. So I tried to enlist in the army during the war. I took a test for the Signal Corps, an examination for the Signal Corps.

Mitchell: This was back in Chicago.

Levy: That's in Chicago. That's right. I was thinking in terms of what I could do in the communications business. I could see the future of that. To be able to have that training in the Signal Corps would give me an up on being able to get a position after the war. So I just decided I would sign up for that and take the examination. I took the examination and passed with a very high grade, but when I went for the interview, they realized – they didn't realize the name John Levy, because they didn't ask you in those days whether you were white, black, or whatever. So the name John Levy just automatically, I assume – they thought I was a white person. So when I came up for it, they said, "Oh, no. You can't. We're not taking any blacks in the Signal Corps, no matter what. That's just not – we can't use you." So I was relegated to just wait in the draft until I got called up.

Mitchell: Where were you when you got called up?

Levy: I was in New York. When they finally caught up with me, I'll say. I was in Chicago, and they had to follow to catch up with me. Finally they caught up with me in New York. I went for the interview to be inducted. The war was practically over at that time. This was in '45. It was the end of the war. But anyway, when I came up, I was pretty bitter about this thing, because I felt that I had let myself out to really do something for this country. I respected it and all that. I had a love of it. I realized what it meant. I wanted to be an important part of it. When I came up

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



for the interview for – the appointment, or whatever, to be brought into it, I was talking about what would happen. They were asking me about what would I do. I said after – I'd passed everything even with those examinations until we got to the physical. When we got to the physical, they start talking about what I would – what my thoughts were and what I would want to do. I said, "The first thing I want to do is, as soon as I learn how to use a gun and have the rifles and get all that training, and they put me in, the first thing I'm going to do is try to look up the top person in the army that I'll have to work with, and that's the one that I'm going to waste. I'm going to put him away." They looked at me like I was cursed – "You mean you would commit murder?" I said, "Yeah, because I've already – I'm not going to fight somewhere, to fight somebody that I don't know what they did to me. Nobody did anything to me in Germany. So I'm not interested in that." I said, "I offered, and you people turned me down." I said, "So I'm not interested. If you're going to try to make me go in the army at this stage, and I've got a family, and I'm doing this" and all that. He looked at me and he just stamped "reject." That was it.

Mitchell: At this point – it must have been, you said, in '44 or '45?

Levy: This was in '45.

Mitchell: So your family was already in New York, living. Where were . . .

Levy: In New York. Absolutely, yeah. I had already brought them to New York.

Mitchell: In fact you brought them a year earlier or something like that.

Levy: Yeah. I brought them pretty early. Once I was established there and everything was working right, then the normal thing that I wanted was to have my family with me in New York.

Mitchell: At this point Vincent and Michael . . .

Levy: That's right. Michael was a baby and Vincent was a child.

Mitchell: You were playing in the clubs and still with Stuff Smith.

Levy: I only played in one club with Stuff Smith in New York. That was the Onyx Club, the one that I went into New York with him. We did jam sessions or we did radio shows. We did all kinds of things as a group. We were hired to do a lot of things, to back up other people, to go into a show. I think it was Milton Berle had a show we were on. We did a lot of things like that, and we did some recordings. Not much. I think we did just the Asch things which we [?]. There wasn't a lot of stuff recorded with that trio – a lot of material, I mean. There were a lot of recording sessions with that – Jimmy Jones and I recorded with a lot of different people other than the Stuff Smith trio during the period of time that we were at the Onyx Club. We worked with all kinds of different groups, recorded with them and played with them on a night off. Then

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

after we left – I left first. So I worked with a lot of other different people. Jimmy stayed on with Stuff for a short period of time, not very long.

Mitchell: There was a point when you worked a little bit with Duke Ellington. You were called in to do some fill-in?

Levy: No, I didn't work with Duke. Actually what happened – the only actual playing that I ever did with Duke Ellington was a radio show, a CBS show. Duke had a regular thing where he'd come on in the afternoon and play. We would go to the studio – Jimmy and I would go to the studio to sit and listen to the band, watch the show go down. On this particular broadcast, I was in there. We were sitting there. Everybody was there to play except the bass players. One by one, Duke – when the show went on the air, the full band was not even on the stand. They wandered up on the stand while Duke was vamping at the piano, and the opening credits – they were talking the opening credits of it. By the time the band was ready to hit, everybody was on the stage except bass players. He had two bass players, Junior Raglin and – I can't remember the name of the other bass player, but neither of them was there. The basses were sitting there – were up on the stage – were put on the stage by the road manager. So Duke beckoned to me from the audience – we were sitting there – to come up, and pointed to the bass. So I did. I went up, picked up the bass. The music was all set up, what they were going to start with. So we started. But the music ran out. I said to Johnny Hodges, "What happens now?" He said, "You just keep playing." I found out that was pretty standard with Duke Ellington. When the music ran out, it just ran out, and they just kept going. They just had – they had been together for so long that they could improvise or do whatever, and Duke would make changes while you were playing. He did a lot of directing, in a sense, to what soloists and all that – change it around, change the arrangement around. His main thing – one of the great things about Ellington – was his arrangements were catered to individual musicians – soloists. Every instrumentalist in the band, there were certain solos where they soloed primarily – were written especially for them by Duke Ellington. And of course [Billy] Strayhorn is instrumental in a lot of that. A lot of people learned much later on about his help in doing this.

Mitchell: Did he offer you – did he contact you again?

Levy: Later on. He contacted me to join the band later on, but at that time it was – I was still working on 52nd Street when that happened, and I was working on 52nd Street at the time when we used to go to the shows. We used to go – we had nothing to do in the daytime. We'd all hang out in the day and go listen to music or go the bars and stand there. We'd meet everybody coming in and out. Then they hang out in the daytime. They would go home and eat, come back, go to work that night. That was the social thing.

Mitchell: So you're saying that he offered you a job?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yes, he offered me to join the band. At the time, what he offered – the money he offered me – I couldn't afford to leave 52nd Street in order to work with the band. As much as I loved the band, as much as I would have been happy playing with that band, I couldn't afford it.

Mitchell: What did he offer you?

Levy: I think it was \$100. I think something like that. It was very low compared to what I was making. And there was no negotiations. I said, "This is what I'm making. Can he come up to that?" And Jones, he said, "Duke's not going to pay that kind of money to you as a sideman. He don't pay that money to a sideman." I said, "Everybody in the band is a sideman. What are you talking about?" He said, "Yeah, but the soloists – you're just – in the rhythm section we don't pay anybody that." Sonny Greer was a part of Duke's band at the very beginning, so he was more like a co-leader, and he acted like a co-leader. Please believe me. In fact most of them acted like they were leaders in that band. That band – there's a lot of stories about Duke's band and how it operated. It's one of the most amazing musical organizations, I think, that was ever – that ever came about, especially in jazz.

Mitchell: Anything else you'd like to share about that?

Levy: No.

Mitchell: Was there something – you said that he's not going to pay that to a sideman. Was there something lesser about a sideman?

Levy: Most of the bands, members of the rhythm section – except the pianist, who in most cases was the leader – got less money than the soloists, than, say, like Johnny Hodges was – I think was the highest paid in the alto section. Then came Carney – Harry Carney. Everybody else made less money than these top soloists. These were the main soloists. Lawrence Brown was on trombone. Your key men, like the top trombone player. The trumpet player at the time – Cootie Williams. They had special solos they had recorded. They were stars. These people were stars in their own right. Most of them did record with their own groups. Cootie had a group for a while. Johnny Hodges went out on his own. I think Carney was the only one that didn't really – to the best of my knowledge, I don't ever recall him having his own group, but I know he played with Johnny on a lot of things and played with other different people, but these other guys had their own – Johnny had his own group for a while. I remember Jimmy Jones playing piano in it. He had called me for it, but I had to do something else. I can't remember what now, but I was doing something else at the time.

Mitchell: One of your early recordings was as bass – playing bass with Erroll Garner. Do you recall that? I guess it was his first recording as a leader?

Levy: That's right. That was his first recording as a leader and his first recording on a record label, which was Savoy. That was the first thing he'd ever recorded. He did – I understand he did

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



some solo things before that, but this was with a group – with a trio, in other words, so it was bass and drums. [George] DeHart, I think, was the drummer's name. I never knew where he came from, never knew how he got on the gig, never saw him after that, and never worked with him again. That was the strangest thing. I never – and being the type of person I am, I didn't question it. I didn't – he played fine. I said, okay. That was it. I never thought any more about it.

Mitchell: Where was this? This was – it was obviously in New York.

Levy: It was in New York, yeah. The studio was on the 40th floor. This was at the time of an elevator strike. So when I came to play the gig, I called upstairs to [Herman] Lubinsky, who was the owner of Savoy Records. I said, "I'm not going to carry this bass up 40 flights of stairs to play this gig unless I get paid something extra for doing it." I think I was getting just the scale for doing the thing. I insisted on getting an extra amount of money. I think it was either forty or fifty dollars, or something like that, which was a lot of money to ask of that, because normally we just went and played, did the session, and got paid scale for doing it. Anyway, to make a long story short, I walked all the way up to the – carrying that bass all the way up to the thing and did the session, and Lubinsky said he never would hire me again, because I held him up for more money. But a couple of weeks later I was on a session with Don Byas for Savoy Records, and I didn't have any problem with that. So the boycott didn't mean anything. But that was an experience, to carry an instrument up. And they had nobody to help me. I just [?], just walk up there.

Mitchell: What – obviously, from the club, from the Onyx, and now picking up doing jam sessions and also doing recordings, how would you measure or describe the quality of your playing?

Levy: I think I was – I think most of the things we did was because of the rhythm section, the style of the rhythm section together. We got hired a lot of times for that, for the rhythm section, for being together, and what we played together and the reputation we had established in over a year working at the Onyx Club. So everybody knew, if you're looking for a combination – if you want Jimmy Jones and John Levy and Denzil Best, you've got a rhythm section here. These three people will accompany you and will work together and do their best to make whatever you're trying to do, happen. So producers or people who – a record company, who, when they were looking for somebody to work with somebody else that was one of their other stars or a lead person, they'd look you up. Also, there was a shortage of top-notch musicians at the time we're talking about, because the war was on, and a lot of musicians were in the army or the navy. Some of your best musicians, like Clark Terry and all those guys, they were in the navy or the army. Some of the best musicians in the country were in the army. Shelly Manne – he used to come in, sit in with us, from the naval base in New York.

Mitchell: But you had a good reputation.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Excellent reputation. You know you're going to be there on time. You know you're going to take care of business. That's it. You have a reputation.

Mitchell: But somehow you didn't – in your book, you describe your play as not top-notch and not . . .

Levy: I wasn't a great soloist. I wasn't a great bass player in my estimation. I was better than a lot of them that were – that was there on 52nd Street when I got there, who had big names, and I couldn't figure out why. I'm not going to name them for the world, but I was very disappointed, because I thought, hey, to work on 52nd Street, you had to really be something else, but these guys were popular because they were friends of somebody. It was the politics of the business, who they worked with. But I had all the work I could handle. I had plenty of work. I wasn't short of work. I did a lot of sessions. In fact, when we started to write my book and Devra looked up a lot of the discography of – I was surprised at the number of people that I had recorded with. Then to top it off, for this particular individual thing that we're doing now for the Smithsonian, through Ken I have found out that I did a lot of things with Billy Taylor that I didn't remember. That's not in my book. I didn't even remember that. So it was [?] together. And that group – here again, that was with Billy Taylor, but it was Denzil Best and John Levy.

Mitchell: That was the core of the group that Billie Holiday was – I noticed that . . .

Levy: That's right.

Mitchell: . . . Bobby Tucker, Denzil Best – you were there.

Levy: That's right.

Mitchell: Remo Palmieri.

Levy: And Remo.

Mitchell: Can you tell us about that, how she got in touch with you? Or how you . . .?

Levy: She didn't get in touch with me at all. I knew Billie, because I'd seen her work before on 52nd Street. But it was through Bobby Tucker, who was her accompanist and who did the arrangements for her and worked for her. When she came out of Lexington, which was the rehab place while she was away for dope – when that was over, that period was over, and she was allowed to – out to work again, she came – stayed at Bobby's home. She was very close. He was like family with her, Bobby Tucker. Bobby wanted to start rehearsing for a Carnegie Hall concert which was set for her by a promoter who was trying to get involved in managing her. She had been managed by Joe Glaser before she was incarcerated. When she came out, there was another person involved in the original Carnegie Hall concert, who was trying to take over Billie,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



which turned out it didn't work out that way, because Joe was a gangster, and when the gangsters got through talking to this man, he was no longer a part of the picture.

Actually, this time Billie had been in prison, not rehab. The following explanation, based on an interview with Bobby Tucker is excerpted from page 71 of "Men, Women, and Girl Singers" – "When Billie had come out of a rehab program at a mid-town hospital the year before, she had stayed at Bobby's house. She couldn't stay clean and when she got busted a few months later, they sent her to a women's prison in Alderson, West Virginia. The newspaper reports and interviews with Billie say that she "spent 10 months in a West Virginia hospital." Bobby said that it wasn't true. It was too late for hospitals. This time it was prison, and she had served her time.

Anyway, Bobby called me to ask me if I would join the group to accompany Billie at this particular concert. That was just for this concert. It wasn't to work with her. I knew nothing about anything else, except the concert. I said, hey, I'd be happy to do that, and especially to work with him. So that's how that came about. We spent time – Denzil and I would go out to his house. We would rehearse with Billie. We worked out the show, how it would go down. The only person that wasn't there – Remo wasn't able to do a lot of the rehearsing dates. I think there was only one day that Remo was with us for a full rehearsal, but we went out there for maybe a week or so before the actual engagement.

Mitchell: And the engagement didn't conflict, I guess, with your gig at the Onyx? Or was that going . . .?

Levy: That's after.

Mitchell: Oh, this is after the Onyx.

Levy: I was just working freelance.

Mitchell: Okay. So at this point you were just working.

Levy: I was working with anybody, everybody, at that time.

Mitchell: This is '48.

Levy: This is '48.

Mitchell: What was the concert like at Carnegie Hall?

Levy: It was completely sold out. In fact, they had to put seats on the stage for this concert. [It was] completely sold out. We did a show for them. It was so great until – they had another concert set up later on, for a repeat concert.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: You were talking about Billie at this point and Carnegie Hall, but just so that it's clear, you had already had a parting of the ways with Stuff Smith?

Levy: Yeah, the parting of the ways with Stuff Smith came about exactly in a sense like it started, realizing that Smith was not a dependable person. Stuff was kind of – you might say, kind of a nut, in a way. He was a great musician, a great player, but he was screwy. We fell out when he went to the union and collected money from the recording things we had done, which was – we had our checks were sent through the union. He collected money of mine and he kept it. When I asked him about it, I said, “You owe me some money. You collected my money.” He went into a whole thing, “I didn’t do nothing.” We got into an argument and almost a fight. There was a fire axe hanging on the wall in the Onyx Club. I took the fire axe off the – out of the rack and went for him with it. Of course they grabbed – people got in the middle of it, grabbing my – but then I was through. I gave him my notice right then. I didn’t want to work with him any longer. I left.

Mitchell: Was that the last time you saw him?

Levy: Last time? Oh no. I saw him with somebody else later on in years. I didn’t – but I didn’t work with him again, no.

Mitchell: From that point – that was maybe 1946? 1945?

Levy: ’45. Closer to ’45.

Mitchell: Maybe you can take us to Billie, in terms of what you were doing in that maybe two years or so, because the concert . . .

Levy: In that two-year period I was doing all kinds of things with all kinds of different people, working with different groups during that period of time. After working with Billie – come back into New York – but [George] Shearing comes along, but that comes along like 1948, ’49 – the end of ’48 and ’49. Billie, I didn’t stay with her that long. So in between that period I worked with a lot of different groups and a lot of different people.

Mitchell: What was different about Billie, or being a bass man for Billie?

Levy: To begin with, it was like working with someone who was the top of her game and also was practically the top female vocalist in jazz at the time. To work with somebody like that, and to work with Bobby Tucker and Denzil and people, it was just a pleasure. It was a pleasure to work. [I was] just happy to go to work every night to play for her. She asked no questions, just stood up there and let it go, singing. She was wonderful to work for, because she didn’t give you any static. You got paid well. There’s no questions – at the time before. Later on, in that same

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



period, when she got involved with the other John Levy, who became her manager, then all the getting paid right and getting paid on time and everything, changed. That's when I left that group. Bobby stayed with her for a while longer than I did. I left.

Mitchell: What do you recall about her voice that was unique?

Levy: She was a stylist. She had a style and a feeling for a melody. You felt that - when you heard her sing, you felt that she had lived that lyric, whatever it was about. Most of her material was that type of material, a story material about her life. It was like she was relating - she had lived it. It was part of her whole thing. That was what it was. She was no - didn't have a great voice or range or anything like that, to sing, but she told a story when she sang.

Mitchell: So you were with her for not quite a year?

Levy: Not quite a year, no. Maybe 8 or 9 months, something like that.

Mitchell: So from Carnegie Hall you went and you did a number of gigs, and then you got a call to come and join the group for a while? How did that go?

Levy: No, the sequence is - I'm not sure of the sequence. I know that there was a couple of other things that I did before we started on the road, because we had the two concerts. That was the main thing that went down. We didn't even have the second one when we did the first. After we did the first concert, then there was a demand for it. I think a couple of weeks later we did the second one. Then came up other engagements, but in the meantime I did a couple of other things in between, so it wasn't like - but once those things came up that I did, I became a part of that trio - Denzil and I became a part of that trio. We went on to work with her from then on.

Mitchell: Where would you go to? Where were some of . . .?

Levy: We played clubs. We played a short stint for a Broadway production show with her which Billy Taylor was on. Billy Taylor worked with an organ group - organist. Slam Stewart I think had - his group was on it. There was two or three groups, like they took a package and put it together with groups and called it a revue or something like that. Billie was the star of this revue. That's how that went down.

Mitchell: With other singers? Was it like . . .?

Levy: No, it wasn't with other singers. Billie Holiday was the singer, but it was a group - as I say, it was Billy Taylor with an organ player. I can't remember his name, but it was an organ thing. Billy did that. Then there was Slam Stewart. I don't know whether Slam and Tiny Grimes was working together at that time or not. But anyway, there was two or three different groups that worked on that show that was put together for Broadway.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

From page 74 of “Men, Women, and Girl Singers” – “On April 27, 1948 I made my Broadway debut. Actually it was Billie's debut as the star of a small revue called “Holiday on Broadway” at the Mansfield Theater on Broadway. Al Wilde, who I think was Leslie Uggams' manager at that time, put on this show. The lineup featured Billie backed by the Bobby Tucker Quintet; Slam Stewart playing “Play, Fiddle Play” backed by piano and electric guitar; the organ and piano duo of Bob Wyatt and Billy Taylor; and Cozy Cole. The Bobby Tucker Quintet consisted of Denzil along with Mundell Lowe on guitar (Remo couldn't make it), Tony Scott on clarinet, Bobby and me. Billie sang 15 fifteen songs in all, including “Strange Fruit,” which closed the first half. I'm sure we also did “Lover Man” and “Them There Eyes.” “Billie's Blues” was her final number.”

Mitchell: What ultimately led to your leaving Billie?

Levy: I left Billie because John Levy wouldn't pay me on time. When you get through working, and you had to wait for him to show up, maybe some time on the next gig – after you've gone to the next gig, you have to wait for him to show up with the money to pay you. They were getting ready to go to California. I said, I'm not going any further. I think we were in Chicago at the time. I said, I'm not going any further with this thing. This guy don't pay me enough. And don't want to have to – I'm very violent about money, about somebody not paying me. My worst – it's unbelievable, because I lose it completely. To be a person that's pretty even-tempered and pretty calm, I've had some outbursts about money that really is scary, because I lose it completely. So I didn't want to get to that stage as far as that with him. I just said – just quit, before I got there.

Mitchell: And Chicago wasn't a bad place to quit . . .

Levy: Oh, no.

Mitchell: . . . because you were home.

If you can tell us about what you did, because my understanding is that by 1949, you were playing with Shearing, so . . .

Levy: You have to get to, before you get to Shearing.

Mitchell: That's what I'm saying.

Levy: Yeah. Before I ever got to Shearing, there was some other things that I did in between that. In sequence, I can't quite recall putting them together, the sequence of things I did. But some of the things I did I think happening with the Phil Moore thing. There was that session that I worked with Phil Moore – with the Phil Moore Four. I did some things with – I don't know whether the Cabin Boys came in there. No, this is another period. This is a different period. This is much later. But Phil is one of the people that I worked with.

Mitchell: Lucky Thompson. Pete Brown.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Levy: Yeah, that's right. Different work with Lucky. But that was back on 52nd Street. That was probably right after leaving the trio.

Mitchell: Kelly's Stable? That's a local spot.

Levy: Don Byas. I did a thing with Don. I worked with Don Byas for a while.

Mitchell: And he . . . ?

Levy: I worked with Lucky Thompson for a while. I worked with Don Byas for a while. This is all on 52nd Street. I worked with Pete – the saxophone player Pete – Pete Brown, yeah. Of course I did some sessions, like with Al Casey. Denzil and I worked with Al Casey, did some gigs with him. I worked with a lot of different combinations and people. I worked with the blind piano player, before Shearing – what's . . . ?

Mitchell: Tristano?

Levy: That's right, [Lennie] Tristano. I worked with him and recorded. I did a recording session with him. I got that gig through Jimmy Jones. He had called me and said he's looking for a bass player and that would be a good – and then he knew me, though working – yeah. This is after Shearing, because I had worked with Shearing, I think. This doesn't come before. This comes . . .

Mitchell: So here you are. You've left Billie, arguably the top female jazz artist. You're now trying to regroup. You're in Chicago. You go straight to . . .

Levy: I don't stay in Chicago.

Mitchell: You go back to New York.

Levy: No, I'm in New York.

Mitchell: Okay. And basically begin playing again at various clubs and spots?

Levy: Yeah. That's all. Just whatever gigs came along. When I got the call which led to Shearing was from Jimmy Jones calling me to come and sit in with [the] Buddy Rich big band, which was working opposite Jimmy Jones and Sarah Vaughan's group. George Shearing was in there also. This is the way it used to work. You had three or four different groups playing at a nightclub. At that time, this was Buddy Rich with a big band, Sarah Vaughan with her group, Shearing and Buddy DeFranco, all worked in the same place. We all were on that same bill. Every night we did the sets together.

Mitchell: Where might that be?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: That was in – that was at Birdland – no, at the – they called it the Clique. That was the Clique, before the name changed to Birdland. It was the Clique. Jimmy was working there with Sarah. Naturally, when something came up where a bass player was needed, he called me. I was at home doing nothing. [He said], “Can you come down and play with Buddy Rich? This bass player had to leave.” Fine. Picked up a bass, went down, start playing with Buddy Rich. I finished the week up. Buddy was on the last week of the engagement. I finished out the week with Buddy Rich. That’s how Shearing got to hear me, because every night he would sit down, right beside the bandstand – when he wasn’t playing, he would sit there at a table. They had him seated right by the bandstand, and he would listen. So when the next week after the Buddy Rich deal, his bass player that was working with him, had to go. Something – his mother was very sick and he left. There was something wrong – some illness or whatever. I never really got the full story, and as usual, I didn’t ask any questions about what’s happening. I didn’t care. Just go on to the next thing.

But anyway, he asked me to work with him until this guy came back. Fine. I wasn’t doing anything. It was the end of the Buddy Rich date, and [I] started with Shearing. Again, talking about temperament and temper, I had a problem with the end of the Buddy Rich payment. Buddy Rich’s road manager was taking – withholding money from the week that I worked there. I said, “You don’t have my social security number. I know I never gave you anything.” I just came and sat in and started playing, and the agreement was x number of dollars. “Now you’re telling me about taking out for withholding.” I said, “No way.” We were about to get into a heated argument, and Buddy said, “Pay him. Forget about that. Pay him.” Because Buddy wanted me to continue working with the band. But I didn’t want to go on the road with that. No, I didn’t want to go on the road with that. And then already Shearing had – I sort of knew that I had this offer with George to . . .

Mitchell: How did you know?

Levy: I just had the feeling that I – I didn’t know, because actually his bass player – it didn’t happen until after that bass player left, so that was a week after.

Mitchell: For you, did Shearing represent a departure of the types of groups that you had played before?

Levy: Just another gig. George Shearing was another gig. Buddy Rich was another gig. Phil Moore was another gig. That’s all.

Mitchell: What do you think they saw in you?

Levy: I know what they saw in me, as far as that: a great accompanist. It’s what I keep saying all the time, that I wasn’t a great bass player as a soloist, but when it came to accompanying and working with a rhythm section – and we had a rhythm section. Once you had Denzil Best and

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



myself together, you had the nucleus of a great rhythm section, period. That's what it was all about.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: What I'm looking at is, what did they see in you at this point?

Levy: I think for the time, what actually was in my favor was I never got involved in drugs and even in alcohol – even in drinking. On very rare occasions – and never when I was on a gig or worked on a gig, that I got – drank so much that I couldn't play. I couldn't do my job. I would take a drink while I was working, but never – it was always to a certain point, and that's it. Even today, I can take it just so much and then that's it. I don't – no excesses of anything. Everything is – I was reliable. I could play, put with the right combination, as I say. A rhythm section – once I had Denzil Best and Jimmy Jones, they didn't come any better. We knew each other so well and worked together. So we were hired whenever possible, whenever – unless a pianist was involved. Then of course the piano – like George Shearing, the piano. So then it was myself and Denzil. He had already hired Denzil. So it was just me coming on. This is another reason why I say it was kind of like a part of what I knew – had a feeling, because if anything was going to happen, George would be interested in somebody like myself, because of that connection with Denzil Best.

Mitchell: Right. So you had – where was Shearing at this point in terms of his career and popularity.

Levy: He was just starting out. He was another guy here from England – pianist from England. He was trying to get started here. He got a recording session deal. He had some things going for him. But he didn't have any – he wasn't no big star. He was the lowest thing on the totem pole in that package that was in that thing. He was the least one.

Mitchell: The least one in which package are we talking about?

Levy: The package with Buddy DeFranco at the Clique when I first got involved there. Buddy DeFranco – when he used Buddy in his group – Buddy along with him in his group. The top-notch person – name person at that time in the group was Buddy Rich. Buddy Rich and his big band was the star. Then came Sarah Vaughan. And then came George Shearing. So he was just trying – [?] another gig.

Mitchell: You mentioned Sarah Vaughan, and I just don't – as we hear the names of women singers, I want you to give your thoughts about her and her sound at that point. This would have been in the late '40s, right?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yeah. This was just her beginnings too. It was just the beginning of her career. This was just a step in her career, in the building of her career. She was coming up – her and Shearing, they were coming along in their careers. They were just playing a gig.

Mitchell: What did her voice sound like? Because when I hear her voice – recordings of her voice at that point as opposed to later – when you heard her voice, what did you think?

Levy: I thought what I thought from the whole period of time that I ever saw her or heard her: one of the greatest voices I ever heard. In fact I used to say, this woman, if she were white, she'd be an opera singer. She's got the range and she's got it all. From the very first time I heard her, it was the most amazing voice and sound, but she wasn't a class person. She was – at that time. She didn't have any class. That was one of the things.

Mitchell: What do you mean by that?

Levy: She was one of the guys, and she pretty well stayed that way almost through her whole career. She was one of the fellows. She never – she had to be built up to the stature she finally ended up at before her death. That was built up over the years, how great she was. She was put with the symphony orchestras and all of the other great combinations that she worked with. But this was the beginning. This was the beginning for all of us, really.

Mitchell: What did the beginning mean? When you talk about the beginning . . .

Levy: It's like your roots, how you start out, what – if you are in communication with and you are working side-by-side with people like that, it's bound to develop you into – to get the very best out of you. Also, your stature – you came along with these people and you rose with these people, so their successes – you became successful. I didn't continue my success as far as a musician is concerned, because I got involved in the business end of things, which is really where my head was all the time, thinking in terms of how I can make a better living and a guaranteed living to take care of my family.

Mitchell: So even as a bass player, you were looking beyond?

Levy: Absolutely. And one of the greatest things to happen was to be involved with a person like George Shearing, who was on his way up and needed somebody like me to work with him and advise him.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: So the question is . . .

Levy: Yeah. Hold it a second, because I'm trying to remember again. I was doing a gig. None of it was thought of how important it was or how important those people were going to be and how

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



I would fit, because none of them were that important, that big or anything, as far as I was concerned. I was, here again, doing a gig. But once I got in the Shearing picture, then there was a need for me to do other things, other than play bass, because then George depended – I just out of the clear sky started offering suggestions. When it came time to make certain moves, I would say, George, if you're going to do this, this is what you have to do and this is what has to happen. He began to realize, hey, this guy knows what he's talking about. He – not only is he a good bass player to work with. He's a person who has a knowledge of what's happening in the business.

Then Leonard Feather – who was a jazz critic, was his close friend, had brought him here from England – knew my reputation. I had worked with – done some things for him – knew my reputation, went all the way back with me from Chicago. So he knew me. So it was like, hey, this person is the kind of person you want to work with you, because he's straight.

Mitchell: The issue of being around people who you could trust was probably very important to somebody like Shearing.

Levy: Very important to everybody, really, but the problem was that a lot of people who had great talent couldn't be trusted, because they were dependent on dope and stuff. They might show up. They might not show up. You couldn't depend on them. Years later, when I brought Philly Joe [Jones] on drums into Shearing's thing, I said, "Let's do a try on this. This guy's straightened up now. He's not using dope. Let's give him a break and see if – to work with us." He needed a drummer at the time. I remember having to go with Joe from one pawn shop to the other on Eighth Avenue, picking up parts of his drums for him to have a drum set to go to work, because his drums were in pawn. His snare drum was in one place. The bass drum was in another place. The cymbals was in another place. So we went along Eighth Avenue and bought back his instruments in order for him to play. It worked out pretty well for a while, but you can't break those habits. He was very good with us for a short period of time, but it just couldn't – [he] began to not be on time for this or you couldn't depend on – we couldn't deal that way. We had to have somebody that was going to be there that you could depend on all the time, so other drummers came in after that – different ones.

Mitchell: So you hooked up . . .

Levy: But this was after Denzil, because I think Denzil left for – I'm trying to remember exactly what he left for. But he left before I did, as far as playing is concerned. I was the first one that stepped out from playing – Al McKibbin took my place – to go into road managing. But then later on I think Denzil left. Then George had a lot of different people after that we hired and that George worked with.

Mitchell: Where were you playing with George? What are some of the spots that you were playing at? In and around New York?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: We did everything. We went across country, pretty much. I played with him in all the major cities and major venues that we played. In those days you went straight across country. There was jazz clubs – major jazz clubs – in every major city.

Mitchell: So where did you . . . ?

Levy: We just did that. We did what is called the circuit. We did the thing – going to leave in New York. Go into Philadelphia, then to Washington, D.C.

Mitchell: Where in Philadelphia? Where in Washington?

Levy: At the top jazz clubs. I don't remember the names of all of the different clubs for that particular time. I know it was the Downbeat in Chicago. Joe Sh – what was his name? I'm trying to think of the name of the guy who owned that club. Then we'd come across, play a date in St. Louis. There's a club there. Then we'd play Kansas City. Then we'd end up in Denver. If we took the northern route, there was one group of clubs. Or we took the southern route. Then we come into Los Angeles first, coming from, say, we'd do Texas dates. We'd do some dates in Texas.

Mitchell: So you played in L.A. along Central Avenue?

Levy: No, no – yes, we did. Yeah, George did. We did that, I think the first time. Oasis, I believe, was one of the rooms we worked in when I was playing with him, yeah. When – later on, when I got into the managerial end and we made that trip again, then of course, it was different people [who] worked with him at that – who came back in. Then we started working on the main drag, which was – we started working on Sunset Boulevard, the top rooms in this area.

Mitchell: At the Apollo – was Shearing at the Apollo?

Levy: Yeah. We worked together at the Apollo Theater.

Mitchell: Was there anything experiencing what was . . . ?

Levy: We worked together at the Apollo Theater. This was a very interesting lineup. The lineup was Harry Belafonte, Ruth Brown, and the band was the band from Kansas City – I don't remember the bandleader at that time, but he was a popular bandleader that traveled with a – he had one of these traveling bands. It was like an r-and-b band. And the Shearing quintet. We played the Apollo Theater with that package. The singers – the male singer was Harry Belafonte. The female was Ruth Brown. Can you imagine where these people went from there, the different directions that was taken. At that time, that was the package. And the comedy team was Skillet. You would never have heard of these people. They were blackface comedians. That's how far back this goes. They were on the bill. That was the standard setup for the Apollo Theater at that time. It was a group which had – Pot, Pan, and Skillet. That was the name of it. There was an

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

acrobatic group, did some acrobatics. And of course George Shearing, and, as I said, Harry Belafonte and Ruth Brown.

The other group was a big band led by George Hudson from Texas.

Mitchell: What was some of the music that you were playing?

Levy: What was the music?

Mitchell: Yeah, some of the tunes that . . .

Levy: We were doing whatever our recordings were at the time: *September in the Rain*, which was the hottest thing. We had to play that everywhere. Anytime we played, we had to play *September in the Rain*, because that was what he took off on. That's what – when his record of *September in the Rain* came out, and his arrangement in that piano-guitar-vibes voicing was unique. It was different. We took standard songs like *September in the Rain*. Of course George wrote some songs, but the popularity was based on – really, that was – our hit song was *September in the Rain*. Then later on we recorded with the quintet *I'll Remember April* and some of those other songs that were the standards of – what were the successful songs that George Shearing had on his . . .

Mitchell: What was the most successful song that he wrote?

Levy: *Lullaby of Birdland*. *Lullaby of Birdland* was the most successful of George's songs that George wrote. He wrote a lot of instrumental songs that had different titles, but none of them reached the popularity of *Lullaby of Birdland*.

Mitchell: Were you playing at the time when *Lullaby of Birdland* – or were you managing at that point?

Levy: I – it wasn't in the original things. I think that came along later. *Lullaby of Birdland* came along later.

Mitchell: How did you transition from playing to managing? How did that come about?

Levy: I realized that – after we made that first trip out and we were doing a lot of dates where we were working with a guarantee and a percentage – that – and I was acting as [the road manager] – Shearing's wife was the road manager, considered the road manager, road person, but she had no experience at all and was at times very temperamental about things, really not suited to handle things like that. But in the meantime I was very close to her and advised her on everything. When she was doing the job, I was right there, telling her what to do or trying to explain to her how it went down. But she wasn't equipped to do this, to go out at that box office and go through the tickets and fighting with these people and all that. I realized that I couldn't continue playing

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

bass and help them do this, that I needed to be – he needed to get somebody else to play bass and for me to become the road manager. He tried to get a road manager while I was the bass player. Cliff Arenson was one of them. He was an agent – Cliff Arenson was an agent for Joe Glaser that had helped do some of the bookings and was a very fine young man, but he didn't want to go on the road. So he said, "Why don't you have John Levy do it. He's doing it. Why don't you do that?" George said, "Yeah. That's fine, but I just thought it would work well if you wanted to do it." But he didn't want to go on the road with him. So that's how it came about that I became a part of it.

As things went on, that first trip out and all the different – the first trip out as me being the road manager – and all the different things that went down, all the travels and experiences we went through with club owners and with disc jockeys at different radio stations where we had to go and do interviews, was part of a lot of the things that – the stories and different things that are in my book about it, because we ran into all kinds of different problems. But George turned everything over to me. In other words, anybody that had to talk about anything in regard to the engagement and what was going on, had to discuss it with me. In some cases, the club owners or the disc jockeys – people didn't know I was black. When it came up, face to face – I'd be there, and I'd say – for example, we were in Omaha, Nebraska, at this club we were playing. The setup was there – we played over a bar. People were seated all around. The piano was in a certain setting on this stage which is raised above the bar. I was standing there at the rehearsal and sound-check, just standing there. I hadn't made myself known to the club owner. He was there. He was talking to George. He didn't talk to me at all. He just talked to George. George said, "Talk to John about that stuff." He looked over. John. Yeah, okay. So the piano, he said – I was telling him, "You need to move the piano, because this isn't the way George works." I said, "You need the piano moved to the other side of the stage and turned" a certain way. This club owner said to me, "Look. You just the road manager, a flunkie, or whatever. We don't change this. This is our setting." I said, "I tell you what. If you want him to go on that stage tonight and play, you move that piano." I said, "Otherwise, he ain't going on stage." We went over and talked to George. George said, "He's the manager. Yeah. Whatever he says, that's the way it is."

That went all the way. We went to St. Louis. A disc jockey wanted George to come out front and sit with him when he came on the show. George would not sit in a club with the audience in a segregated place or in any city where his musicians weren't allowed to do the same thing. He just refused to go out and sit with the audience. They had to come to his dressing room or interview him. He wouldn't go out. This particular disc jockey was upset because I said, "George will not come out and sit with you. You're going to have to come back to the dressing room if you want to talk to him, or we'll come to the radio station, or whatever, but he's not going to come out and sit with you." So his saying was – he didn't see me. He didn't know me. We just had a conversation – phone conversation. He said, "This Jew that George Shearing's got working for him . . ." He said, "This Jew is trying to tell me how to run my station – how to do my job on the station and refused to have George come out and socialize with us." But he didn't know. He's talking about "this Jew." That was such a joke with all of us. We still laugh about that.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



I had a lot of little incidents like that that happened. We got to Salt Lake City. Everything was all set. We were doing a big concert there, the first time in Salt Lake City. The first that happened, we drive up to the hotel. We've got Denzil Best, Al McKibbin, Chuck Wayne, George Shearing, and myself. Traveling with us was George's wife. Chuck Wayne's wife was traveling with us. We traveled in two station wagons. We had reservations in this hotel in Salt Lake Hotel. We pull up to this hotel. It had a long lobby – a lobby – from the front door to the lobby to the registration desk, a long hallway to it. George went in first, he and his wife. Then Chuck Wayne and they all went out. It comes time for Denzil and Al McKibbin to come in. This guy at the desk said in a very loud voice, "We do not allow niggers and dogs." The dog scene was: Chuck Wayne's wife had a little poodle that she carrying along – we had to travel with it. "We don't allow them in this hotel." So George turned around and said, "Fine. We don't stay at this hotel." Came back out. We called the promoter. Said, "We're getting ready to leave town and go to the next gig." They got it straightened out quick. We didn't stay in any major hotel, but we did stay where the Pullman porters stayed – there was a main dining area – at the Union Station . . .

Mitchell: It was a rooming house?

Levy: Yeah. This is what we did. George did stay in another hotel. They [Chuck and Margie] stayed in another hotel, a different place, Chuck and all that. But we didn't stay in that place. There was no – this is one of the times that we ran into that kind of a situation. . .

Mitchell: Where was this?

Levy: Salt Lake City, Utah. But we didn't mind, once we got started, because our situation was so much greater. It was like – George would have insisted and not played the gig if we hadn't agreed to go and stay with these people at a different home– where the Pullman porters stayed with different people. We stayed at these places. But you've got to know, we had it good in a sense, because our food was great – it was like family, staying with families. It wasn't – the situation wasn't great, but we ran into a lot of different combinations of problems like that during our trips on the road.

Mitchell: So at this point you were road manager . . .

Levy: Road manager.

Mitchell: . . . and manager? Or you were road manager and . . .?

Levy: His wife was the manager, but she was – didn't have much to say about anything.

Mitchell: How did you then become the manager from . . .?

Levy: I got off the road [to perform as manager]. We got to have another road manager, so he hired Ed [Fuerst] – he hired a friend of his [George's]. . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Fuerst?

Levy: Ed Fuerst. He hired Ed Fuerst, who had been like one of these groupies. He'd go on the road with us, hang out with us everywhere we played, travel with us. [If] he enjoys a certain food, he'd take George to the – he knew all the restaurants all over the country. He had money. He was well off. And he liked – he wanted to be the road manager. He turned out to be a very good road manager. He knew business, and we work well together. Ed Furst became the road manager, and I, manager. We opened offices in New York. That's where the quintet and then John Levy Enterprises – later it was the publishing companies that we established and all of that for each one of the artists that we represented. We were in partnership with it at the very beginning, but after a while, George wasn't involved in the managing end of it at all. That was a separate thing for me, and his thing was a separate thing.

Mitchell: Did you – was the transition difficult for you? Did you miss playing?

Levy: No, no. I was doing it anyway. I was the one that caused the transition and the change, because I couldn't do both things. I had to either do one or the other. We tried finding somebody else to be the road manager to begin with. That didn't work, and I ended up being the road manager.

Mitchell: So at some point then you left the tour and opened up the offices.

Levy: No, no. It wasn't at some point. We decided to do it. Once we came back off that tour, [we] finished up, went into New York, set up our business entities, because we had to set up corporations. I thought of the publishing thing, because I had that experience of seeing how these people gave away their tunes at record sessions, so we set up publish – and George had material. We had to have a publishing company for George. I insisted that he have his own publishing company. This is how *Lullaby of*

Mitchell: *Birdland*.

Levy: George Shearing's *Lullaby*. That came about, because Morris Levy, who owned Birdland, had a record company. He [insisted] – everybody that played Birdland, he wanted them to record a theme song for Birdland. So he wanted – he named it *Lullaby of Birdland* – he didn't name it. He just – it was going to be a theme song for his club. Everybody who worked there had to record a song. So he came up with a song and gave it to George. George said, "I could write a song better than this. I don't want to record this." At the time, George was the number one artist there. We had moved up to number one from the period at the Clique and back to those days. It was over a year or so, the period I'm talking about. This was maybe a year and a half later. So he said, "Fine, but it has to go in my publishing." Morris Levy said, "It's fine. You write a song, but it has to go in my publishing." So George took this song – actually, the chord structure of *Love me or leave me* – and wrote *Lullaby of Birdland* in about 15 or 20 minutes. If you sing *Love me*

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

or leave me – if you know the song and you sing it with the chord structure of *Lullaby of Birdland*, you'll see where it came from. That's how that was written.

Mitchell: So he didn't publish it himself? It was actually published by . . .

Levy: It's published by Morris Levy, yeah. It had to go into his company. So *Lullaby of Birdland* is not in George Shearing's Shearing Music. It's not in Shearing's publishing, but everything else he wrote is in his own publishing firm.

Mitchell: For you, New York – where was the office that you set up?

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: We were talking about the first artists that came on board. You had George Shearing. Who were the first artists that you then represented, that you managed? Was it Ernie Andrews and Dakota Staton?

Levy: The first, no. The very first – when we started the management thing – George and I would get together. There was a female vocalist that George liked. He wanted to be involved with managing her. She never went anywhere. She had a nice voice and was a very nice person. I can't recall her name right now, but that was really the first person. But we went – I went for instrumentalists, and to the best of my – the first female vocalist was Dakota Staton. There was just one girl before Dakota Staton. But we didn't do anything with her. She was out of Boston. I'll think of her name. I can't think of it right now. Other than that, the first artist that you would know was Dakota Staton. That came about through her recording – her working with Capitol Records and me being introduced to her by Dave Cavanaugh of Capitol Records. He was working with her, producing her records (her name is Teddi King).

Mitchell: Were you asked to represent her?

Levy: Yeah. He wanted – he said she needed somebody to take care of her career and manage her, so that's how. He introduced me to her. I met her, and she was, "Okay, fine" – flighty, but fine.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: Tell us about Dakota Staton. You began representing her initially. How did it go?

Levy: I started – Dakota Staton was through – I met Dakota Staton through Dave Cavanaugh. It was at his suggestion that I – he said, "Talk to them. They need somebody to represent" – he says, "because I can't do business with her and talk to her. She needs somebody to be her businessman." So I talked to her. We came up on an agreement and talked. But I wasn't that keen on being involved with singers at the time. My thoughts were more like – I – my first

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

management, I think, was mostly instrumental people. I know it was, definitely, mostly instrumental people: Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, and later on Cannonball [Adderley] and people like that. So I was interested more in the instrumental people than I was in any singers.

Mitchell: What was wrong . . . ?

Levy: The Dakota Staton deal came up, so I got involved with Dakota. In her – she'd already done a session – one recording session – before I got into the picture. That was the session of *The Late, Late Show*, which was the first – that album took off for her. That really made her to the general public. She was just an r-and-b singer. She used to – her main – her show, when I first met her, was, she was an impersonator – in other words, impressions. She did impressions of different people. She could sing anybody. She'd do Ella. She'd do Sarah. She'd do Dinah Washington. All of the different singers – black singers – she could do. She'd take one of their songs and do it. That was her whole show. I said, "Look, you've got a talent. Do the stuff that you made on your record. You made a record – got a record out there, and it's a hit." So I worked with her and put together a background – a group of musicians to work with her. This became very difficult, because she finally keyed into a guy, or he keyed into her. I don't know how it all came about, but he was a Muslim and a trumpet player. His name was Talib Dawud. That was his name. He was a third trumpet player in Dizzy [Gillespie]'s big band. He had another name, his regular name. I can't remember it now. Anyway, I don't know how he got connected up with her, but he immediately got involved in her career, trying to tell her what to do. She just went overboard with this Muslim thing. Then the problems began. I stayed with her as long as I could and still work and function, because she came on with the idea that she didn't have to pay any taxes, because it was – she belonged to this religious organization. He was married with a family living in Philadelphia. He took her on and they made so much money . . .

Mitchell: As a second wife?

Levy: . . . and they bought an apartment [house] uptown in Harlem, up on 154th, 155th Street. He took over everything, to try to run everything. So we just couldn't see it eye to eye. In fact we did one – I did one recording session with her, with Benny Carter doing the arrangements. Benny Carter had to have me go in, because he kept interfering. Benny said, "If you don't get this guy out of the studio while I'm doing this thing with her," he said, "I'm going to break his neck." Benny Carter meant exactly that. Benny Carter was one of the strongest – physically – persons that I know. He and Ben Webster were very strong, and showed it at times. He was another very quiet one, but when got upset, he could be pretty bad. He could really take on somebody, because he was strong enough to do it. I went in the studio, and I just pulled this guy out of the studio altogether. I said, "Look. You can't be in the studio while this is going on." And I told Cavanaugh, "This is it. We can't record this album." So we finished the album, got rid of that, and then right after that I got out of the picture altogether.

Mitchell: She was represented by someone else?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: I don't know who – what else happened after that. I know she got in a lot of trouble with the IRS, the government. They took all of those properties and everything else from her. She got in a lot of trouble. But she wasn't really that bright. She had a mental problem. I didn't know it at the time, but her brother later told me some of the things that she did before she was in the singing business. Like she was a maid, and she was to go clean some lady's house. This is in Pittsburgh, where they lived. He said that she didn't show up, and so they called the house. She was in bed. She didn't have a nightgown on or nothing. She was in the bed in the nude. Her brother told her – he said, "You forgot. You're supposed to be on the job. They just called for you." She ran out of the house with no clothes on. He said he had to grab her and take her back in the house. He went through the whole thing. I didn't see this. I didn't see anything. This was told to me by her own brother. He told me about a lot of other different things about her and her career. I know she did some pretty crazy things. The trio that she had working with her was a bass player that had been working with Ahmad Jamal – was [in] the original Ahmad Jamal trio. She cut his bass strings. They got into some kind of an argument. She was going with him. This was before Talib Dawud, before her career with Capitol Records. This was while she was working and he was accompanying her as one of the musicians. He told me this story himself, that she cut his strings. I said, "I know what would have happened if I had been the bass player." But she did a lot of crazy things, and then she became very anti-Semitic, very strongly. "All these Jews is" – with me, it was like the Jews was ruling me, and so she didn't want to hear what I had to say. It went into a whole thing. I said, I can't deal with it. I just walked away from her. I had a contract and all the stuff, but I just walked away from it.

Mitchell: At that time I believe you were already representing Ramsey Lewis, Betty Carter . . .

Levy: Oh yes.

Mitchell: . . . Shirley Scott, Cannonball, Billy Taylor, and Ahmad Jamal. They were the initial wave of artists who came in to John Levy Enterprises. How did they – how did you make arrangements with them? Because you had a reputation of not having contracts or making a deal with a handshake.

Levy: That came about maybe a little bit later. Originally I did have agreements – written agreements with Ahmad Jamal, with Ramsey Lewis. But I soon found out that it didn't make any difference. This is why I changed that complete thing and just said, look – because it's like a marriage. If you're not going to respect each other and you're not going to get along, and you have no respect for each other, then I feel that you can't work together. You can't do anything constructive. It can only be a lot of hassles with legal fees and lawyers being involved. So I just walked away from all of those. I never pursued any of it in court. I had contracts on her. I had a contract on Ahmad Jamal when he left, a contract on Ramsey. I didn't pursue anything with them, with the contracts. Once the thing didn't go down right, we didn't get along, I walked away from it. I said, "I don't want to be no part of it. I just want to get out. Let someone else handle it. You do whatever you want to do." We remained friend. I see you and shake hands.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



I did other things with Ramsey Lewis later on, after the separation, but I never got involved in his career any more after that. I didn't – we both were on Columbia Records, and he did some things with Nancy [Wilson], because he and Nancy became close friends. That how – it was a continuation of me having anything to do with Ramsey Lewis from that point on.

Mitchell: Maybe you can tell us about those early artists, what your impressions are about them were at the time. Ramsey Lewis . . .

Levy: To begin with, most artists didn't know anything about personal management. They had to be booked, so they knew booking agents, but they didn't know actually what a relationship with a personal manager was or should be. So in most cases, when they were coming up and things were starting, they were just – anything I said – all my advice was accepted and was thought to be the greatest. But as soon as they became – I had a saying for it at that time. I said, as soon as they reach – at that time, it was \$5,000 – I said, as soon as they reach \$5,000 – a period where they're earning that amount of money at that time . . .

Mitchell: Per show?

Levy: Yeah. Then you no longer can talk to them about anything. They know it all. So you have to finally say, hey, you've got it. Most of those people like that, I cut out of them before they reached – before it became – before they made any kind of big money in this thing. I started out with them. In some instances I did things after. For example, with Ahmad, in packages and stuff like that, I represented the package and worked with him on different things and did make – I made earnings on his recordings, so I did do fairly well. I'm not saying that financially I lost, but in all of the cases like them, I was not there when they finally got to where they considered themselves at the top of the success heap.

Mitchell: But Cannonball stayed with you.

Levy: Cannonball, and Nancy pretty well through – just one period when her husband got involved and we had to split up for a period of time, about a year, during her career. But it was never a knock-down, drag-out with any of them. I just left.

Mitchell: How did Cannonball come to you?

Levy: Through Miles Davis. Miles Davis told him – called him. He was talking to Miles. He needed somebody to represent him. Miles said, "You got to go get John Levy," although I never managed Miles. But Miles recommended a lot of people to me. There were a lot of people he recommended to come to me for management. Some I took. Some I didn't. Cannonball definitely was the main one that was – so that's how I met Cannonball. I talked to him. I told him what I thought he needed, what – he said he had a group. His brother had a group that had been working with him in Florida. I arranged for them to come up and play Philadelphia and New York – two engagements. The [Village] Vanguard, I think it was, for New York. It was – Philly – I forget the

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



name of that club in Philadelphia, but it was a famous club in Philadelphia, a jazz club in Philadelphia. Everybody worked there. You played behind the bar – stand behind the bar. If you played jazz at all, you played there. They played a lot of organ trios and that kind of stuff at this club.

Anyway, they came there and played that, but the group wasn't up to par. In Philadelphia at that time, there was what – you had an opening on Monday. The opening was a matinee – at a Monday matinee – that's the way the show went down, because there was no Sunday playing in Philadelphia – the blue [laws] – you didn't work on a Sunday. So the shows usually opened on a Monday afternoon. People – right after people came home from work, like at 6:30 or something like that. The afternoon was your first show. Then you did two or three shows that day.

He brought these young men up from Florida. They didn't make it. Right from the get-go, when the show opened, they – I said . . .

Mitchell: What was wrong with them?

Levy: They just weren't of the caliber of musicians to back him up. But he was loyal, a very loyal person, and they had been working with these guys in Florida for several years. These guys were their friends. They played these little clubs around Florida, mostly r-and-b stuff, not so much jazz. It was mostly rhythm-and-blues stuff – all the different hits that came along for that. That was the way Cannonball's group was.

Mitchell: The first time you heard him.

Levy: The first time I heard him, he played at jazz clubs.

Mitchell: What did he play? Do you recall . . . ?

Levy: He played at Cafe Bohemia. He played there. There he was sitting in for my wife's ex-boyfriend, Jerome Richardson. He was sitting in for Jerome. Everybody heard him then for the first time. Everybody said, wow, this cat's – first thing they did was associate him with Charlie Parker, because he played that style. But he was more funky than Charlie Parker. He was just down to earth. But he had the technique. So I assumed when he told me he was going to bring his own group up – and I had heard his brother. His brother also came up. I'd heard about him. I hadn't heard Nat. But anyway, I said – figuring the way he's playing, [?] group, this might be fine for him to have his own group that he'll feel comfortable with. But these guys just didn't make it. There was no – it wasn't there. After the first set, I pulled everybody off to the side. I said, "We're going to have to send these guys back home. They're not going to make it. I'm going to have to hire some people here."

The wife referred to above is Devra Hall Levy, not John's wife at that time.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Just that cold.

Levy: Just that cold, yes. It was very cold. They looked at me like, wow. If they hadn't had such high expectations of me and I hadn't been recommended so strongly by Miles, I think they would have cut me loose right then and there, because they say, wow, this is – the way I came on. I didn't come on strong, like, "You got to get rid of these guys. They ain't no good" or nothing like that. No. I very quietly – we went in the dressing room and I said, "These guys could play. They're nice players, and they seem like nice young men." I said, "But they're not going to make it here."

Mitchell: You're talking to Cannonball . . . ?

Levy: And Nat.

Mitchell: And Nat.

Levy: I said, "They're not going to make it here." I said, "You're going to have to get somebody else here." I said, "because you're going to get write-ups about you here, this week, and we're depending on this Philadelphia engagement – people to hear about it, so when we get to New York, the Village Vanguard, that's it."

Mitchell: Were you at Pep's in Philly?

Levy: Pep's, yeah. Nat said, "We can't do – how are we going to do this?" I said, "I'll talk to them if you want me to." I said, "I'll do that." I said, "We'll pay them." I said, "I'll pay them for the week, and we'll send them home. We'll hire [?]. We'll go into rehearsals tomorrow." We hired – I don't remember off the top of my head exactly the musicians, but I think if you can recall who they were . . .

Mitchell: Junior Mance?

Levy: Junior Mance was the major one, as a piano. We need that.

Mitchell: Sam Jones?

Levy: Sam Jones – yeah, that's right – who eventually stayed with him for a while.

Mitchell: And Jimmy Cobb?

Levy: Yeah, Jimmy Cobb. So you know how strong that was. But they lived – they were there in Philadelphia. In fact they were sitting there at the opening day. I right away – "Hey man. We got to get – you want to work with this thing and go to New York and play this engagement? Finish here, and then go to New York to play." I didn't hire them on – continue

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



with them, but that was the beginning of the Cannonball Adderley – so I put together the instrumentation – the musicians of the original Cannonball Adderley quintet when they got to New York for the first time. Then later on there were certain changes that they did.

Mitchell: You talk about, from time to time, people giving you goose bumps and getting goose bumps when you hear . . .

Levy: I'm very emotional about music – about everything, really. I get very emotional about things, and music especially. When I hear certain musicians play or I hear certain singers, I get emotionally – I get what is called goose bumps, because they really are. You can look at yourself and see. It's like you're coming out of the cold or something. You see these little bumps come up on you emotionally, sometimes even to the degree that I cry. It's so emotional, sometimes just even thinking about it, especially Ben Webster. It's a feeling that I get. I can't explain it. It's just a feeling that I get when I hear the voice. The first time I heard – I listened to Nancy Wilson for the first time. She sang Dinah Washington. She sang – sounded like Dinah and she sounded like all these different people that she copied. But the minute she got into *Guess who I saw today* and started this story and started telling – then emotionally, I could see where she was coming from and what she had, and it really moved me. With Ben, *Danny Boy* is standard for me to go into my bag. With Ben Webster doing it, I don't think that anybody can reach me emotionally more than that.

Mitchell: And that became your measure?

Levy: That became my measure for pretty much – I had to have that kind of an emotional feeling of what everybody that I had to work with was doing. I had to get an emotional contact with them. Some things weren't that emotional, but the people were the kind of people that you could work with or that I felt that needed to be – needed to have some help in what they were trying to do. When they came to me, I accepted them, took them on, or they were recommended to me by somebody like Cannonball. Because Wes Montgomery came from Cannonball Adderley. Different people like that came on to me from . . .

Mitchell: And Nancy also, didn't she?

Levy: That's right. That's part of it. But it was also by Chuck Taylor – who worked for me as an agent – who knew her in Columbus, that I knew about her before Cannonball ever met – I had heard about her. But I wasn't that much interested in girls as singers at the time she came along. I wasn't – I had worked with singers, but I wasn't that interested in continuing my career working with singers.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: So Miles recommended Cannonball, and then he became quite influential in bringing in additional talent. How did that work, or what was it personality that you can . . .?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Cannonball's personality and his knowledge – you have to realize that Cannonball had been a teacher. He'd been a professor, a college professor, at Tallahassee – in Tallahassee – at the University of Tallahassee. His mother and father were both teachers or professors. He came from a family – a very well-educated family. He was a very well-educated and articulate man, and an excellent musician. So he was highly respected in the business as all three of these things: as a musician, as a well-educated and articulate person, and an honest, very much loved human being, by everybody who came in contact with him. So, for me, he was my musical – you might say, conductor. He was the person who worked with me in my agency. I didn't do anything or get involved in any way with music, without him being involved somewhere along the line with it. In other words, his advice – if it wasn't his advice, it was his actual participation in helping me do certain things. When I went into the – changed my – put on my promotional bag or my bag of being a producer, he was the musical person who worked with me to put all the things together to make it all work. It was that kind of relationship. We were like a family. It became like a family relationship with us. So it was more than a business. There was – after the first beginning, there was no contracts. There was a business entity we went into, which was Cannonball Adderley Quintet, Inc., and John Levy Enterprises. We formed a bond between us on that. They owned stock in me. I owned stock in them. The music publishing business, we all worked together on that. Each person that we brought in to the publishing business – I didn't manage all of the people that came into the publishing business, but he recommended certain people to come to our particular publishing end, which was Gopam Enterprises, to work for this company, which was basically our company or our endeavor in the music business – the publishing business, to work with us.

Mitchell: Talk about the publishing. Speak about the publishing business and why that was an important aspect of your business, and where it came from in your experience.

Levy: My first experience as far as the publishing business was with George Shearing. From the very beginning, he was the first person that I could establish a relationship with in terms of – thinking in terms of the publishing business. He wasn't aware of what was going on, and none of the other people who joined us later on knew anything about the business. What I learned about it was – I noticed that whenever we went into a studio to record – no matter what group I was with – when a song came up, I noticed that the producers would always say, "Who wrote this song?" or "Who publishes?" They would say, "I wrote the song." Nobody ever said anything about publishing the song. So, they'd say, "Okay. You wrote the song. Sign right here. We'll publish it for you. That's it. Sign your name here." You just signed away your publishing rights to the producer or the record company or whatever entity that you were working with at the time. I said, you're giving away something, because there's earnings to be made from the use of this material by yourself and by other people.

Now, I didn't go to school. I didn't find anything about – I found out about this the hard way, or, you might say, by experience. I did know people like Phil Moore, who knew the insides of how it all worked, because he was really on top of – he's the only person that I had any contact with

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



that knew something about this before I got into the picture with him as a player, as kind of like a straw boss and road manager with him.

Cannonball was the key to bringing in all of these different people and being able to explain to them the advantage of us handling their material and how it was going to be honestly handled. Nobody was going to beat you out of anything. That's how this whole thing started. He knew the ins and outs about how – we explained to each one of the people that we signed with, that there was a company above us who recorded everything that was done, who was the clearing house for all of this, which was the [Harry] Fox agency. We worked through them. We explained to them how there were foreign entities who collected money for you for – it was a percentage – and how it all went down.

I don't have all of the details at hand to me, now to explain it, because I turned it over to people who I trusted, who worked for me, and who really went into the business and learned every aspect and still work with me on this same thing: Laurie Goldstein in New York and Fran Amitin, who is here on the [West] Coast and has her own business entity. These people are the people that really did the legwork, and still do take care of the things that I'm involved with in music, in the publishing end of the business.

Mitchell: Cannonball sounded like he had a lot of energy.

Levy: He did. He had a lot of energy, and he used up a lot of his energy helping people. He was constantly . . .

Mitchell: What was his schedule like?

Levy: Into everything. I don't know. His schedule – he was doing something all the time, and he was being called on for all kinds of different projects. A lot of projects that Cannon worked on, I was not a part of. I didn't collect commissions on everything he did because we were a – when he went with Miles, for example, that was to me a key – a growing – because Miles called me and said, "I'd like to have Cannonball. Is it okay with you?" We talked about it. I didn't want to – I didn't get involved with any of the negotiations or the whole thing with him. I said to Miles, "Fine. I think that'll be great for him. I think that will help him, because we're not getting anywhere with the Cannonball Adderley quintet, with the group as a whole," because in the first place, we couldn't record with just that group. Everybody wanted us to do something different or they wanted to – and even with the contacts I had at the time, for some reason we just could not get that group recorded as a group. They didn't feel the name was big enough, or something. They always figured you've got to be with somebody else with a name to sell the records. Nobody wanted to start from scratch and try to build this thing, except me. So when it came down to anything that went out, I said, I don't get any commissions for this. I'm trying to build Cannonball Adderley and the group, and that worked. So he did a lot of things that I didn't even know about or wasn't privy to, but I know that he worked on a lot of different things with a lot of different people on a lot of different projects.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: He was one of the influences that brought Nancy . . .

Levy: Yes, that's right. Influence . . .

Mitchell: . . . Nancy Wilson to you. How did that happen?

Levy: The first – one of the first recordings. We just decided – after she got her Capitol Records deal and did a couple of albums on Capitol Records, then we decided to do a thing with him. It was an idea to put together that package. They came up with the idea – between them and the producers – came up with the idea to actually do this thing.

Mitchell: And she was one of the ones – one of the singers who gave you goose bumps?

Levy: Yeah.

[recording interrupted]

Mitchell: George Shearing. We'll come back to George Shearing in a little bit, and Nancy obviously is key, and Joe Williams. In terms of Nancy, the Morocco Club . . .

Levy: Nancy Wilson was recommended to me – speaking about Cannonball, which is one of the people that was recommend to me – Nancy Wilson was recommended to me by Cannonball. He thought she was a very good singer and that I could be interested in working with her. She knew about me, more about me than I knew about her at the time. She was going to be appearing in New York, in the Bronx, at the Blue Morocco. She was appearing there to replace a singer who was sick, I think, at the time. So she invited me to come up and hear her. She was already here in New York, working as a secretary, to wait for her chance to get started and get a recording deal. So she was in New York. She decided to come from Columbus, Ohio, to New York for the purpose of meeting me. As she said, she came definitely for me and to get a recording deal [at] Capitol Records, where important people were that she wanted to be with.

To make a long story short, my wife and I went up to the Blue Morocco to hear Nancy Wilson. She came on. She sang her Dinah Washington book, her tunes. She sang different hits of everybody. She sang all these different songs. Had a good voice. Didn't really – I said, she can sing. She's good. She's got a voice. And she looks good – a very pretty lady, shapely and all of that. She's very – all of that was in her favor. And then she started to sing *Guess who I saw today?* And I said, oh, that's it, because I began to get that emotional feeling. That and a couple of other ballads she did. I said, this is where she is. She ain't with all of that other stuff. She's been doing the Dinah Washington thing. They're fine, but she did them all. Somebody else had done that already. But here's her. This is – I felt that was it.

Mitchell: What is that? What is that it?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: That is her. It was her. It wasn't somebody else. I had never heard – I didn't know the song. I had never heard anybody else, although I heard that Carmen McRae was the original person who first sang it. I hadn't heard Carmen McRae sing it. Then later on somebody else was considered to be the person who brought it to life. But Nancy Wilson was the one who made it popular, and it was what made me realize that I wanted to be involved with her.

Then when I met her, got to talk to her, and decided I would take her on, she came to my house in Teaneck (New Jersey) and met my wife. My wife at that time, Gladys, my first wife, took charge of her as far as dress and all, because she didn't have the clothes to wear, to appear in. She had a couple of gowns, but nothing very good – my thought right away was, here, we've got to build a class act out of this lady. She's got the looks. She's got everything, so it's class. So my wife took her out and bought her first outfit for her to work in. We had pictures made. I got Ray Bryant to come in and meet with her and go over some things so I could get a demo – so I would have something to present to Capitol Records to show them. I told Dave Cavanaugh – I talked to Dave Cavanaugh about her. I told him about her, and I sent him a copy [of the demo] that we made of the – we went in the studio and made a demo. He said, "Okay. I'll take her. But don't do anything with her. I can't get around to it right away to use her to do anything, because [of] the time and what I've got on the fire. But don't go anywhere. I'll take her."

It took almost a year before she went in the studio at Capitol to record. In the meantime, I worked out a thing to send her on the road to get some experience performing, because she hadn't been – she worked with Rusty Bryant, some jazz groups, and some people around, but to know how to walk on the stage and to perform and to have some experience as – where my head was going – to be another Lena Horne. That's where my head was. Or, there was another young woman out at the time. I can't remember her name right now. But she was – these two were examples of what I wanted, which was really classy black women performing, and not rhythm-and-blues or blues or anything like that. That was my thinking. Whether she would reach that potential, I didn't know, but she had all the qualities to do that. So this is what I was preparing her for, and it worked very well, because she fitted pretty well into it.

In the meantime, she traveled. She went to Australia with a group, traveled all around. We got a chance to get her booked with different groups and different people all around the country [actually, around the world]. We didn't appear in this country. By the time we got back and got into the studio and had something recorded, there was already a certain demand for her, because – before she ever hit the stage. It was a certain buildup. In other words, it was well thought of. The sequences may be a little different than I'm recording to you at this particular time, but it was well thought out, [a] step-by-step thing, working with people like Dave Cavanaugh and also, here again, with Cannonball standing there and people like Jimmy Jones there, to work with me on these things. It was all a part of a thing we had together.

Mitchell: I guess you could say now that you created a buzz about her. You just . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Definitely.

Mitchell: You build up some – there was a lot of talk about her before she . . .

Levy: Before she ever hit the set. That's true.

Mitchell: But there was a period also when you broke with her for a little while.

Levy: That's much longer down the line. It's much further down the line. That's after her [being] established at the Coconut Grove, to be a big star, go to Las Vegas, and doing her own show. That's much later – three, four years later.

Mitchell: So at that period, she was the main person you were working with. Who else was coming on board.

Levy: I still had my staff of people that I was working with and had people – Chuck Taylor was still working with me, working with people. I still was managing people and handling other things. She was just a main – she became the main purpose of my thing, because I could foresee in Nancy – she had all the qualities of being a class act, where she could do movies. I pictured all that, and to some degree she did do it, but we got sidelined four or five years into her career by her husband. That has happened to a lot of artists. That changed things around for a while. We had to start all over again four years later.

Mitchell: Cannonball Adderley was also important – instrumental in bringing Wes Montgomery?

Levy: Yes.

Mitchell: How did that . . .?

Levy: He just said, this guy . . . he just was instrumental in bringing him in. He said to Orrin Keepnews at Riverside Records to do him and for me to get involved in the management of it.

Mitchell: Had you heard of Wes Montgomery before?

Levy: Oh, yeah. I'd heard of him. Then when I heard him playing – man, this guy's something else.

Mitchell: Tell us about his playing and what was unique about . . .

Levy: The unique thing about Wes Montgomery's playing is he had a style different from all guitar players. He didn't play – his solos were mostly in octaves. It wasn't so much single-string guitar, which was the way most solo guitar players were, their single-string things. But he

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

developed a style of playing in octaves. In other words, just as George Shearing came with that style of – the quintet style of his playing that made him successful as a group – because it was different. Wes Montgomery was completely different. He had been out with his brothers. They had a group together. He had two brothers, Monk and Buddy Montgomery. They had been out and done some playing together as a group, but they hadn't been that successful with it.

Mitchell: Wes was on dates with Cannonball. Am I correct?

Levy: Yes.

Mitchell: His fame – his life – at what point did you begin repressing him? Then he had this tremendous run-up, and then of course he passed away. Can you . . . ?

Levy: He was at the top of his game when he died. He was constantly improving, as far as – constantly growing as a big-name artist. He was very popular all over the world. He would travel all over, and everybody was talking about this guy's playing. But he was a very introverted person. He wasn't outgoing. And he had this fear of flying that really limited the amount of how you could do a tour or how you could work with him. Also, he wasn't easy to talk to about – in business, a lack of business, of how you could – I think I was taking him too fast, too far for his way of thinking. He wasn't interested in moving that fast or going that far. He was more or less just laid back and didn't realize what was happening. It was happening, and it was moving so – to where he was becoming so big, he didn't feel comfortable, I think, with that. I think I was thinking more of where he should be than he was thinking where he should be. From the business end of it, I set up the music publishing. I set up all his things to do – so many different things. I was thinking in terms of commercials. I'd got to – with Quincy [Jones] – I'd been close friends with Quincy, so Quincy was in that business where we'd talk about commercials and ideas for his material to be used in the movies. All kind of things like that, I was going with. Wes wasn't ready. In fact, just before he died, I met with him. He was playing an engagement . . .

Mitchell: In Phoenix, was it?

Levy: . . . in Phoenix, Arizona. I had already set up a business entity for him with a couple of people to set up this corporation and to set up where he was going to be a unit, in other words, something where people could invest in what he was doing and set up his business entity in such a way that he would have stock and own things and get properties through this corporation. But it didn't – we talked to him about it. He met with these people, but he didn't really register anything. [I] went back home, and two weeks later he was dead. That was the end of that.

Mitchell: I think after his death, some of his work – one of his records topped the chart? *A Day in the Life*?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: He was at the height of his career when he died. Everything was going up. Money was going up. Engagements – more – engagements were going up. The difficulty I had with him is – I think if there is anything that you might say might have been a mistake, it was trying to move him too fast, too much into – things were happening too fast for him to absorb and go along with. And I did not know he had a health problem. I did not know that he had had a certain – that [he] had had health problems with his heart – heart problems. I didn't know that at all, anything about his physical problems.

Mitchell: You mentioned Quincy Jones. When did you meet Quincy? How did you meet him? How did – I'm assuming that you knew him . . .

Levy: I just knew Quincy as a musician first. That's my first thing to him. Then later, when he became an executive in the record business, I first met him, because Cannonball worked things with him or did things for him. I got to know him altogether from that time. But I knew him as a musician, as a player, when he [was in] Lionel Hampton's band, and I knew him when he went out on the road and got stranded in Europe with the band. Some of the musicians that played were in the band. This is how I got to know him. Then as he grew, we continued a relationship. He was instrumental in the Shirley Horn things – we went on his label – the Shirley Horn records. He was the producer on them, although he didn't show up. I ended up being the producer.

Mitchell: You were also neighbors? Were you neighbors?

Levy: Yeah, later on. We both lived in – we both were big shots – big Hollywood big shots living up there when my wife was – when I was married to the television star Gail Fisher. We lived up there in Hollywood up on San [Ysidro], and he lived just a little further over the hill, back of me. Big stars. We were big shots, Hollywood folks.

Mitchell: Let's go back. Joe Williams you knew early on.

Levy: Joe Williams I knew from almost as a youngster. We got to know each other pretty much as youngsters. But his singing – I knew him more like a person who – he liked to sing these ballads, these really pretty things. I remember him working in clubs where we'd have production numbers. There was a production – shows. He'd be in the background. You'd never see him. You'd just hear his voice. He's singing *A pretty girl is like a melody* and these girls would all be walking out in these costumes. You'd hear his voice. He'd sing – he worked at this club, and nobody ever saw him for maybe a couple of years, off and on. He'd work with different productions, and nobody would even see him. A lot of people didn't know he was – he ended up being – at the Regal Theater, he ended up being back stage where – a doorman at the back stage where everybody came in – the stars came in to work. He got to know – a lot of people knew him for that, especially stars – big, big people. He was always another one that was never really out there where I felt that he had his thing going. That was partly his way of doing things.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: How did you begin to manage him? He called you?

Levy: I got to know Joe and followed up. We became friends. He later on – which I had nothing to do with – got with the [Count] Basie band and started getting popular with all those hits. Things happened with him. I'd see him when he came to town, hang out with him. We were close friends. When he decided to leave Basie's band and go on his own, and things started happening, he called me up, and said, "Hey, man, take this telephone out of my ear." That was our management agreement. "You take over this time, because I – this is getting to be too much for me. You're my manager. You handle all this crap." That was it. He turned over everything to me. I became his manager and confidant, and worked with him.

Mitchell: Your agreement with him was with a handshake?

Levy: Handshake, yeah. No contract, no deal.

Mitchell: That was in '62.

Levy: Yeah, that's about the right time.

Mitchell: What was he doing then? What was . . .?

Levy: He was playing clubs and concerts and doing engagements and had a group. He had a group that he was working with. And a lot of times Joe would do things on his own. When I mean on his own, he would just go into a city and work with a local group. He did that for a while. I kept trying to discourage him from that. You need to get a group together where you've got to work with. When I met him – first met him – he would work anywhere, all over the country. He'd work with this one or that one or the other one. I said, "That's rough. Every time you go into town, you've got to rehearse with somebody. They can't ever accompany you or play right for you. You need to have a group together." This is how we hit upon a group with Norman Simmons, Sweets Edison, and different people that he put together for his group.

Mitchell: Did he – he had his own group in the '80s?

Levy: Yes.

Mitchell: In Christmas of '63, you divorced – you got divorced from Gladys?

Levy: Around that time, yeah.

Mitchell: What was life like at that point for you? Pamela was born – I guess she was about 10 – your daughter?

Levy: My youngest daughter?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Right.

Levy: Yeah. My youngest daughter was about 10 or 11 years old. Something like that.

Mitchell: What was – how did the divorce affect you?

Levy: The divorce – me divorcing her came about through – in the first place, my relationship with Gladys had, in a sense, soured before my daughter was born, because she was pretty satisfied to remain – she thought we were very, very successful and everything was just fine. Living in Teaneck. We had our own home. We each had our own car. Everything was roses and doing okay. But I was steadily trying to do more things and get involved in more things that began to happen for me. I was traveling a lot. I was on the road with George. She wanted me to cool it – just come home and be the husband and stay there. That's it. So we began to have problems with that. She had a social thing going and got into a thing where we really weren't getting along, and worse, on the verge of doing – me not being there. I was on the road and came home. She had had an accident in trying to close the garage door or something. We started into – almost like starting all over again. We were going to try again in the relationship. That's how she got pregnant with my daughter. Then, it was the obligation after that. You're not going to leave. You're going to stay there, because she's got this daughter. You've got to be a father to this daughter that you're trying to raise. So that's where I stayed there until – really until Gail Fisher came into my life through my relationship with her. When she became pregnant, then I decided I had to divorce.

Mitchell: Where did you meet Gail?

Levy: Gail was introduced to me through Chuck Taylor, who was working for me. He knew her. How he knew her – I don't even remember how that all came about. But I was looking for a secretary. He introduced her to me as a secretary. She came up, a nice fine looking lady, but I didn't think anything with her, because I was – my mind wasn't going in that direction. I wasn't thinking about it. She came into the office, and she worked. It was close to the Christmas holidays. I said to her to transfile everything for the new year. We start the new year, so we start new files and transfile everything. I went out to lunch. When I came back from lunch, every waste basket in the office was full of papers. She had just taken things out of the file and dumped them into wastebaskets. So her thought of what transfiling meant was to throw away the whole file and set up some new files. I said, "That's it. Get rid of her. Get her out of here. Get her out of filing." So I did. I didn't see her any more for quite a while, a period of time.

Somewhere along the line later on, she came into the office and invited me to a play – later on, she was an understudy to Ruby Dee. She became an understudy to Ruby Dee.

Mitchell: This is *Raisin in the Sun*?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Yeah. She came into the office to invite me to catch a show. Like most people that I lose contact with or that I fire or I no longer manage, I don't have any – our relationship is good. If I saw them, it was, "Hello. How are you?" I didn't – I'm not mad with you or "I don't have to speak to you" or whatever – know you in life and all that kind of stuff. I didn't carry those kind of grudges. She wasn't much of a secretary, so it's fine. I didn't have to hire her no more as a secretary, which I didn't. How she came into my life was just through a series of things where you meet somebody and you start going in – the next thing you know, you're involved. I don't know, really. To be honest with you, it just happened, because I had no intention of going in that direction. It just happened.

Mitchell: Who were you representing around this time? This would have been the early '60s to the mid-'60s.

Levy: I don't know. I had quite a stable. I know that. I had quite a few people that I was managing. That's why I had a staff – an office staff of people.

Mitchell: How many in your staff?

Levy: I had people in the publishing end, which there was – I think there was a couple of people in the publishing end. Then my secretary, my main secretary – person who was the office manager really, and secretary – was Joan Shulman, who I had met through George Shearing. She was married to a blind pianist. They came over to this country to – George knew him in England. They came over to this country for her to – she had a son born to them – for them to – who was born too. He wasn't born blind. He had a problem with his eyesight, and it was hereditary from her husband. So they came over here to see a doctor who was a famous doctor. They came over to this country to – that's how I got to meet them. [I] got involved with her and needed a secretary, needed someone to hire, and hired her. She was just – she'd been a secretary in England and really a smart woman. She just took over. Then after that, anything that had to do with hiring anybody in my business from then on, she was the person you went through.

Mitchell: How did you bring the business to Los Angeles? You moved to Los Angeles in '67, so I'm assuming that the business came with you?

Levy: No, it didn't. I still maintain an office in New York. The office stayed in New York. I just opened an office in California. I moved out here because of Gail coming to get into the movie things or whatever – get into what her career was headed for. She'd been an actress. She'd worked at Lincoln Center and did some things before we left New York, some local things as an actress. Then we're coming to California. Once we got out here and got an agent and all that, then along – Mannix happened. We made a complete move through our move, physically everything but my office – I mean my personal life. We moved the apartment – from where we were staying, we moved everything to California.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Mitchell: Your business during that period, while you were in L.A., were you traveling back and forth?

Levy: Yes, traveling a lot. A lot of traveling, back and forth to the office in New York, back and forth with the artists on different things, different projects, yes.

Mitchell: Who do you – do you recall who you represented during that period?

Levy: It was pretty much the solid stable of the main people who I was still managing at that time, which is the list we were talking about. That pretty much was it.

Mitchell: At this point Michael was on staff on the road with Ramsey?

Levy: Yes.

Mitchell: Michael, your son.

Levy: Yes, my son Michael. That was during the period of time also Sarah Vaughan – he was on the road with her, working with her. He worked with this boy – the singer that we had.

Mitchell: Billy Paul?

Levy: Billy Paul, yeah.

Mitchell: You were still representing Shearing, and Joe of course, and Nancy?

Levy: Yes, yes.

Mitchell: And Les McCann with *Swiss Movement*?

Levy: Les McCann came in on the California end. That's through Atlantic Records, because he brings in – he was the one that brings me Roberta Flack. He's the one that turned on Roberta Flack – you need a manager to – John Levy – through Atlantic Records. I had excellent relationships with Nesuhi and Ahmet Ertegun. We knew each other from way back when the record company first started. It was all like – things just happened. No plan. They just start happening.

Mitchell: I don't know if I can believe that or not.

Levy: It just happened.

Mitchell: I'm moving pretty much to the '70s at this point.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: It was a great move. It was really the continuation of me – it continued my career. As my wife says, and I tell her about her career, pretty soon life is – you go along and all of a sudden you get the green light. I felt when I got there in California and all these things started happening where I was out there at NBC with a show with Cannonball and later on Nancy, and I'm meeting all these people, I figured I had got the green light. That was it.

Mitchell: This is interesting, because you're coming to Los Angeles around the time when the movie industry – the record industry is moving out here big time. Motown is moving out. All the record – it's leaving New York. Am I correct?

Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: So you're cutting edge in that sense, because you're already here or coming around the same time.

Levy: And I knew the agents. I'd done business with people. I knew who the top people were. I knew – some of the top people were in my corner to help me do anything I was trying to do at that time. I was highly respected. They said out of all of the people, the managing people, they liked to do business with me, because it was a simple thing to do business with me. I knew enough about the insides of different things, just from listening, learning, being around, reading, that I felt I could talk to them. A lot of them thought that I was a lawyer, that I had some legal title – all I had was those books up there. They're still here, some of the books that I used to get in and read from cover to cover about how this is done and how that's done. But I had no legal education.

Mitchell: There was something special about your relationship with Joe Williams.

Levy: Yes it was. It was like brothers. It was a personal relationship. We loved each other like brothers. He would call me, no matter where he was, every day at 5 o'clock. That's martini time. That's when we have a drink. Out of all the males – people – men in my life, Joe Williams was the closest person, I think, in my life, as a male – men friends. I didn't have many friends. I had a lot of acquaintances and people that I dealt with. Cannonball and Joe Williams were the two people – the two main people that were my friends. They were really – I was very close with them, more so that I would say probably any other people, until I got out here. Later on, Sparky Tavares and John Collins, whom I had knew and worked with years, were friends. But the closest people to me, the male friends, were Joe Williams and Cannonball Adderley.

Mitchell: Sparky being Nancy's manager.

Levy: Sparky was Nancy's road manager. I met him after I came to California. But before that I knew him as Nat Cole's road manager. I knew him before he started working for Nancy.

Mitchell: Can you talk about the concerts you began to produce in the '70s?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Levy: Yes, I produced – called *Black Music*. *Black Music*, in '63, I think, was one of the years. One of the first, I think, was '63. '63, or was it '69? I don't remember the exact date now. But I did a series of shows like that, where they played the Apollo Theater first, went to the Howard Theater in Washington – no, in Philly, to the theater in Philadelphia and then to the Howard Theater in Washington, D. C. We played those venues with this package, which included people that I managed at the time. It was Ramsey Lewis. It was Stanley Turrentine. It was Nancy, of course. We hired comedians. I hired Red Foxx, and I hired Bill Cosby. I hired Bill Cosby before that, in working as the opening act for Nancy Wilson once she got to be big. He was an opening act for her. That's why we still have the kind of relationship we have today with him. I helped with him, although I never had anything to do with his career, managing. I used to say things to him that I thought he was doing wrong, but as far as . . .

Mitchell: What was Cosby doing wrong?

Levy: He was in a position to elevate black people, some talented and good people, into his organization, but he didn't. He started out with a friend of his who had been a college friend. That was his manager, who didn't know nothing about the business – was his manager. When he became successful, he didn't hire any black people close to him for nothing. He did later on. He started in – I think his wife was instrumental in doing that. But this is – see, I was never able to understand that with most of the people that became successful at that period of time. They – sure, you do not segregate. You don't go into segregation where all you want is, everybody who's going to work for you has got to be black. But you've got to at least bring them in. I try, at least. Every time – I had a lot of different black secretaries. They just didn't work out. I just got somebody better, and that's how it ended up being white. But it wasn't because of who they – I hired the person because they were good. But I tried to bring them in to learn – those that weren't capable – to learn. This is where, even beginning with Gail Fisher, back in those days. And I had other secretaries. I had one I think would have made it, but she died – I think would have been capable all the time. She was pretty good. But none of them compared with Joan, Laurie, and those people, because they were just superb: honest and straight-ahead and thinking in terms of how they could better the situation for you. In other words, they worked for you and your interests, period.

Mitchell: You in '72 either did some events for PUSH or an event for PUSH? Jessie Jackson came out of Chicago. I don't know if that had anything to do with your relationship with Jessie Jackson, but maybe you can talk about your relationship with Jessie Jackson.

Levy: I had a relationship with Jessie Jackson in operation PUSH. My son and I worked with him to produce the show that he put on in Chicago for that year for PUSH, which was the opening big thing for PUSH. Jessie had the contact with all the different entertainers. He had a rapport, a way of – a relationship with them, which they would gladly come on and do things, but nobody in his company and his staff had any organizational qualities, how to put a show together, how to bring people on and off the stage, how to coordinate things, how you have to

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



meet people at the airport when they flew in and make sure of the hotels and line up all that. We set up all that kind of thing and worked with my son and I. I stayed in the background. He tried – he did try to push me up front with all the business people that we – all of these big business people that ended up working with him to help him with PUSH – some doctors and some other people in the record business. I can't name any. I just took care of the arrangements for that PUSH thing. I worked with the Jackson Five and everybody that was on the show. When the whole thing was over, I made the mistake of asking him for a report on the finances and how it came out.

Mitchell: Jessie Jackson?

Levy: Yeah. That was a big mistake I made. From then on, I wasn't part of anything with Jessie Jackson, anything to do with, because I wanted to know, what happened with the money? We got all these people [who] came in, worked for nothing: Sammy Davis – you name 'em. Everybody was there doing all this stuff for nothing, or practically nothing.

Mitchell: But that says something about you then, but it also, if you go back to your arguments with Stuff, it was . . .

Levy: Yeah, but I wasn't – no. I wasn't hired to be paid anything. I didn't have any agreement.

Mitchell: I understand that. But you always wanted – you were interested in – and your profession as a bass player: you're always interested in the bottom line.

Levy: Yeah, right. Why have all these people there? His thing – he's trying to build an organization to help black people, period – that was the idea – to help them get jobs, to help them get into certain things that it was very difficult for black people to get into. So here I'm helping somebody who's going to be helpful to them. Fine, and he was to a great degree to a lot of different people at that time. But there was money coming in, and it's a lot of money made on that thing. People paid a lot of money to go to that thing. The whole city was behind him and did all these things. So there was – all I wanted to know was – I didn't want him to report to me how much dollar-for-dollar this is or give me a report of this is what it cost me, this is how I did this, and this is what I paid. None of that. All I said to him was, "How did you come out with the money? How much – were you successful in that?" He said, "That's for the committee. There's a committee that takes care of that." I said, "Yeah, I know, but that's why I'm asking you." I got nothing – no answer about it, so that was it, and I wasn't involved with another Jessie Jackson project after that.

Mitchell: You went to Ghana . . .

Levy: I went to Ghana.

Mitchell: . . . with Les McCann, Roberta Flack, and Donnie Hathaway?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: That's right. That was a project that I was involved with because I was managing Les McCann and I was manager of Roberta Flack at that time.

Mitchell: This was the same year as the PUSH event?

Levy: I don't think so. No, I don't think so.

Mitchell: But it was around that time.

Levy: It might have been, but I don't think so. No. I can't – anyway, right off the top of my head – we can get the dates to that.

Mitchell: What was it like being in Ghana?

Levy: I went to Ghana, which was an experience. I wanted to see this Soul-to-Soul package – going to be a movie. That was the idea. They were going to make a movie in Ghana, and they were going to use some native people, but then they were bringing people from America – black artists from America was going to be on this show. Part of the group was coming from California and part was coming from New York, so they hired – the company that put it together – the man that put the whole package together was in the record industry. He was a record person. He was interested in doing this thing and put this whole package together.

Mitchell: Dick Bock?

Levy: Dick Bock, yeah, put this whole package together. I was just a part of it. I was the manager of a talent, so I went over to manage my talent that was over there and to make sure that everything was right for them in whatever was happening. This is my reasoning for going. In the meantime, I shot a lot of pictures and so did Les McCann. I was close with Les McCann. He and I were together most of the time over then. Then he also was with Roberta and Donnie Hathaway and with the other people that were involved in the show. That was the main thing in the show. We did the package.

Mitchell: That was Tina Turner and Mavis Staples?

Levy: Yeah. Ike and Tina Turner. It was . . .

Mitchell: Wilson Pickett?

Levy: Who?

Mitchell: Wilson Pickett?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Wilson Pickett – this is the strange thing about that whole package. Wilson Pickett was the best-known artist in Ghana of all of the people that were there. They didn't know anything about Tina Turner. They didn't know anything about any of the other artists. But Wilson Pickett for some reason – his records or something had been over there, and they knew about him. Believe it or not, when we got to Ghana, we were hearing records of white artists like – the big band like – not Benny Goodman, but he was – we did hear a couple of Benny Goodman things, but the records that were being played on their – when they could hear it. They didn't all have a – the way it was in the village, up on a pole was a speaker. This is how they got their music. The music came in over the speakers. Nobody had their own radios at home and all of that in the village. These people [were] living in tents, and in the village it was all – but in each village was – up on a pole was a speaker. That's how they communicated with all of the natives in that village in Ghana. So we didn't hear nothing about any of the things that we did until we came over there and then tried to play the stuff and let them hear what we were about. They didn't know what we were about at all. The audience just didn't know who the heck we were. But the minute Wilson Pickett got off that plane, it was "Wilson Pickett! Wilson Pickett! Wilson Pickett!" They were bowing and scraping. They did a whole dance for him out at the airport. We couldn't – everybody else, they didn't even know who the hell we were and didn't pay attention to any of us. Through that whole tour, Wilson Pickett was the main man there.

Mitchell: Coming back to L.A. [and] your relationship with Joe Williams – you represented him. You were friends. He introduced you to Devra, am I correct?

Levy: Introduced me to who?

Mitchell: To Devra.

Levy: Devra, yeah, yeah, yeah. I didn't hear what you said.

Mitchell: Tell me the story.

Levy: He introduced me to Devra, yeah, right. End of story, That's right. Takes care of that, doesn't it? From then on, you know who's boss.

Yeah, it's wonderful, wonderful. You see, this is what I mean about my life. Nothing's planned. You keep saying – you're thinking in terms, you had to plan this or you had to think in terms in what your next move was. I didn't think in terms – none of that. I just – things just happened, and they happened for a reason: I was there at the right time, the right place, the right situation, and was able to work with it or handle it, or it worked fine for me.

Mitchell: But there's also a quality that seems to me that whatever you were doing, you were always looking to do something to . . .

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: To improve on any situation I'm with, yes, yes – to do everything I can to improve that situation or to make it work better than it's working. Yeah, I still – that's part of me. I can't just be satisfied to sit down and say, "Yeah, Joe. Everything's doing great." I'm still thinking all the time of doing something better, or trying to do something better, or trying to do something for somebody who I think needs some help or needs to be given some help through my knowledge of what's happening in the business or what is in the business.

Mitchell: You've even said that you're not particularly happy with even the notion of you just being a manager. There was something else that you wanted to do in the music business.

Levy: Something else other than a manager in the music business?

Mitchell: Yeah. Didn't you say arranger?

Levy: Oh, if I came back – a lot of times you're asked, if you came back on earth, what would you like to be? I've always said, whenever that question comes up, I would have liked to have been like Quincy Jones – to not be like him as a person, but I would like to have been able to arrange and compose music. I wouldn't want to come back as an artist manager to manage talent or do what I'm doing now. I would want to do – my next thing – and I'll be back – and that thing is going to be that I'm going to have the talent to really go in and do the music, because I believe that's the next thing in the hereafter, is music – compose and put all the things together, because what has happened from the time that I started out in this business, the whole business has made such a drastic change – talent – the acquiring of talent and the way talent is brought into the music business today is so much different than when I came along. When I came, we had the music business – music, which was the writers of Broadway shows writing the music; the publishers – publishing companies of the record companies that the artists that were on the record label usually wrote some of the music, but we used – most of the music from composer of Broadway shows or composers who were writing the things for a movie or composers who had the experience of writing great songs. This was how it all came down. We had the talent to be able to interpret the meaning of these songs over and above what was happening on Broadway – when you went to a show on Broadway, how these songs were interpreted. It was interpreted according to the story line of what the play was at the time that you went to see it.

What happened is, when I came along, artists in the recording industry took these songs and made a completely different story about them. They took these songs and sang them or played them and put a whole new thing onto the meaning of the song, because in most instances, these people that started out – these artists that were developed during the time that I came along and that became big stars, like Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, you name – there's only – there's very few left. Tony is the only one left out of that real male thing that went down. He's the only one left that was still around, and he was just a youngster coming along when that kind of music was coming up that we used. These artists – all of the different people that were developed at that time – had the talent to be able to interpret these things and went on out in their lives to do concerts and to do movies and to do all kinds of things.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Today, we have the money on Wall Street developing the talent that they can control and that they have in mind to be the stars of today. So we've got the kind of shows on television that represent people who are not the best in the business as their talent. They're not the best talent in the world. They belong to a certain category. That category is under 18 years old, mostly white, mostly female, mostly sex, that represents what it is in our music. On the black side, it's the hip hop and the people that there's no songs developed. It's rhythms developed to the dance scene of these people. The dances are not like the Charleston. We have no dances developed like the Charleston or the different dances that were done, or the waltz, or any of these kind of talented things to be done with artists. The artists are developed for other reasons, which is altogether different from when I started in the business. I could never be a manager or a part of what these young people are brought in to do, because it's – they're done like a product of, let's say, between 15 to 20. We use these people who fit a certain category, and it has to – it is produced by people who have investments of Wall Street to put these things together. Since all of your means of communication is owned and controlled by a very small group of people – all your recordings, all of your radio, your television, is very tightly controlled. The same people that control that are the same people that work with the people that put together the kind of acts and the kind of things that we see and hear today. We have no choice. We do not – the general public – have a choice, because the choices are chosen for us by people who control the industry.

Mitchell: So you're talking about – one of your points is – jazz women singers, for example, not necessarily women singers who were developed out on the road and in clubs and things like that, but selected in – maybe you can explain.

Levy: They're selected differently. Exactly. You're exactly right. What I'm saying is, they're not developed from . . .

Mitchell: Female singers.

Levy: Female jazz – so-called jazz singers today are not developed the way they were in my time. In my time they were developed from experience, being on the road, working with jazz musicians, learning their craft, and being able to sing the material from the Broadway shows and from the movies, themes and that thing – being able to sing these things and do them well in a jazz vein and with jazz musicians backing them.

Today they are picked and chosen by a group of people who are in control of all of this. They're in control of the movies. They're in control of the radio. They're in control of television. They own all of this. They control it. They're only looking for one type. They take that type – in that age bracket – and they, what I call, run it through the mill. They use it. They use it up real fast. As you notice, we have turnovers today – one period of time. You're here for one year. Stars the next year, they're gone. These young people are gone. They're used up, and another group comes in, because this way you get the turnover with how the people earn the money, how they can completely control this whole business. They're in complete control of it. There's no way an

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



outsider is going to get in or break into it, because they control the whole mechanism. They control how it's developed. They control the people that they choose to be – and it is in a certain category, a certain look. As I say – I'll be very frank – it's young white singers. The way they first get in, they don't compete with the really great white singers like the Barbra Streisands and the Celine Dions and those people who can really sing and who are really talented. They come in as jazz singers, because most of the jazz singers are black singers. The ones who can really sing jazz, are black, because it's that natural thing that comes from the element of the blues and moves into the movement of jazz. So most of them are black. You have a few – we've had over the years – we've had a few white singers who – they just had the natural thing. A young lady who just died recently, who did the festival with George Wein.

Mitchell: Anita?

Levy: Anita O'Day was a natural. She was a natural thing. You don't have – today they develop them and they make them. The way they bring them in – they bring them in through the jazz thing. They make them jazz singers. Then they move up to be the top jazz singer and then go on to be pop artists. This is the way it works. This is very controversial. I mean, I'm speaking of a can of worms and saying it as it is. These are the things that are happening in the industry today. The difference in the time I came along, you could be black, white, green, yellow, no matter – if you could sing, or you could interpret a song, you had a chance to be popular. You had a chance to become somebody in your field. Today, that's not the case.

Mitchell: Even if you're talented.

Levy: Even if you're talented. If you're talented [and] you happen to be talented, white, and 15, 16, 17, and 18, that's so much the better for you, but you don't have to be talented to do that. You just have to have a certain look and setup. Physical attributes are very important in today's system.

[recording interrupted]

The same person who promoted the top white artists, Peggy Lee and whoever – Frank Sinatra – was the same person who went out with Nancy Wilson's records. That was a whole different thing. Then, all of a sudden, it got to be you had to have a black department in the record industry. But that's a whole other story. That's what I mean.

Mitchell: Are we talking about today, talent? You came out of a period of segregation where the music industry wasn't as segregated as it is now? Is that what you're saying?

Levy: Yeah.

Mitchell: That in essence, with hip hop, the current scheme of record execs is to color-code everything?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: Oh, it's been that way, yes, yes.

Mitchell: Even more so than in the past?

Levy: Yeah. This is what I'm saying. When I first went to Capitol Records with Nancy Wilson, [there were] the same promotional people for the Beatles, for Frank Sinatra, for Peggy Lee, and anybody else at Capitol Records. [They] had people at the head of the promotional department and worked in different divisions. In other words, one worked the Midwest, the South, and the East. But it had nothing to do with their color or their race or anything like that, or the material even. All of this started later with what was called black music. Then every record company all of a sudden had a black music department. Capitol joined that too, as well as – that's when Nancy got transferred over to the black department.

Mitchell: When was this?

Levy: The period of time when they hired black people to be in their promotional department. This is how it was developed, because they had artists like Nancy and Nat Cole, so they wanted to bring – to give these people a job in the department, rather than just bringing them in – Sidney Miller, and – what was the boy's name that screwed up with me with the – I can't remember his name. But anyway, Sidney Miller I know was one that got in the record business that way.

Mitchell: So today, how does that play out?

Levy: They developed a black music department with every record company. When I originally started out in this thing, there was not any black departments.

Mitchell: How does that hurt the artist today?

Levy: Today it hurts the artists because you don't get the same budget for promotion. You don't get the same nothing. It's altogether different.

Mitchell: So black artists are marginalized.

Levy: When I was handling Randy Crawford, and her contract came up for Warner Bros., a lawyer said to me, "This is a black contract. This is a contract for a black artist." When you have a lawyer who works with Warner Bros., and you get that – yeah.

Mitchell: Today you have artists like Dianna Reeves and – who else? – Cassandra Wilson.

Levy: I don't know what – I'm not familiar with the record companies either of them were – or what the system is with them at the time. I'm only telling you what was going on when I began in the business and what has changed. This is how people like Sidney Miller and people like

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



George Butler all got into the record business, when they opened up what was known as a black department. Capitol, they didn't have any black department. Columbia didn't have any black department. But in order for them to, I guess, justify the fact that they were putting a black person in charge of a department, they had to form a black department. I don't know what their thinking was about a department. I know they were being pressured to hire more black people in the executive branches and the other branches, because basically, all the record companies were completely all white, altogether. There wasn't any black person there. When I went to Capitol Records, there was not a black secretary working for anybody. The only black person in Capitol Records was the – now they call it superintendent – it was the janitor. He wasn't even called a superintendent. I remember going to Nat Cole and saying, "You know what, man. There ain't no black people in Capitol Records, in any department, as secretaries or anything." Dave Cavanaugh was the first one in the department that hired a black secretary, which later became Freddie Hubbard's wife.

But I don't know that you want to go into all that kind of history of this thing that I'm going on for. This is a whole other thing. I don't know how far you want to go, or what you want to talk about.

[recording interrupted; it resumes in mid-sentence]

. . . of being the person's [?]. Then when you go into the agency business – we're talking about Joe Glaser. Then there's Billy Shaw. All of these people are all important entities in what was the success of my thing, and helped me – speaking about who helped me get where I got. All of these people. I want to talk about Marty Klein, his [?] agency.

Then if want to talk about the promotion of these people, how they were promoted from my end, who helped me do this, who were the promotional people who worked with my clients, who are my people outside of the record company, [if] you want to talk about that. All of those things . . .

Mitchell: What do you want to talk about?

Levy: I want to talk about what the subject of – the reason for doing this and where I come in and what – the Smithsonian thing – what things that should be said about it, and what it covers – what it should cover. I'm leaving that up to Ken to tell me what – how much you want. To help any at this stage is very limited, because of the system, the way the system is set up. I don't fit in that category, to help anybody, to really – I can advise somebody how best, if they are chosen – one of the chosen few – to advise them how to try to do the best things in their career, but there's no formula or format in today's world that I think that I would fit in trying to manage anybody and manage any talent that isn't already – unless they're already there and they come to me for advice or something like that.

Hall: You still believe in a long-term vision. You still coach people to think beyond a hot hit.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Levy: I do, but that's like false advising you or something that doesn't exist anymore. I'm going to advise you how you should think long-term, how you should do, when that is not the system of today. The system of the day is, turn it over as quick as possible. Get it in there, and get that shot, bang, bang, and go, and belong to that inner circle of power structure, which is all about the bottom line, money, and Wall Street, period. I'm not kidding myself. I'm not going to kid myself that I'm sitting here and have any kind of ability to do that kind of a thing for somebody that I did years ago, because the machinery is no longer there. It's not there.

Mitchell: You said that.

Hall: You said it all.

Levy: I keep saying that.

Mitchell: NEA Jazz Master. Can we talk about that, what that means to you?

Levy: Yeah, that's something. I think the greatest honor – out of all the years in my experiences, I think the greatest honor that came to me was to be honored as a National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Master. The category was especially set up in this organization to honor persons like myself, who have been a musician but no longer are active musician. My contributions to jazz and the music business in general came about from my managerial abilities. To have a special category award – for me to receive this award, is the greatest thing. I couldn't ask for anything more in my life. The people who I work with, who are responsible for my success over the years and the things that have helped me be successful, come from the agents, come from the promotional people like for example my present wife, who is instrumental in most of the things in my later life, of tying all these things together with my ability, with the book – with the publishing and the writing of a book about my life. I'm just sorry that it was written even before I got a chance to get this great honor, because that's not spoken of in this book, but we are planning on another book at this time, which will definitely make sure that the National Endowment of the Arts is very well represented in everything that I do from this point on in my life. That's it.

(Transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

