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RAMSEY LEWIS
NEA JAZZ MASTER (2007)

Interviewee: Ramsey Lewis (May 27, 1935 -)
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Brown: Today is September 28th, 2011. This is the Smithsonian oral history interview with NEA Jazz Master Ramsey Lewis, pianist, composer, arranger, media personality, and entrepreneur, conducted in his home in Chicago. Good afternoon.

Lewis: Good afternoon. How are you today?

Brown: I'm fine. If we could just start by you stating your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Lewis: Ramsey Emmanuel Lewis, Jr. Chicago, Illinois. May 27, 1935.

Brown: If you could tell us your parents' names and any information about their background, where they were originally from.

Lewis: My mom's name is Pauline Lewis. She's from around Jackson, Mississippi. Her family was born out in the county, but the closest city was Jackson. In fact her brother eventually opened a funeral home in Jackson, Mississippi.

My dad is from Georgia. Once again – I heard him talk about Atlanta. I heard him talk about Macon. But I think once again that he was out in the county and never identified the exact place where he was born.

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They met in Chicago at church. Didn't know each other, but ended up at the same church. One thing led to another, and they got married.

Brown: What church denomination was that?

Lewis: I don't know what church they met, but I do know that we were brought up African Methodist Episcopal, A.M.E.

Brown: A.M.E., the first one, the first one in America.

Lewis: Dad was – he wanted to be a singer. He had a great voice. He ended up doing something he dearly loved, and that was leading the gospel choir at our church. Mom sang in the gospel choir at Wayman A.M.E. Church, on the near north side, not far from where we are today.

I was approaching being 9 years old. Dad said – he used to call me Sonny – “Sonny, you're going to start playing for the choir next week.” So I went to rehearsal and learned what that was all about. It's interesting. When I was 9 years old and he said you're going to do this, all I could see was it taking my time away from shooting marbles and whatever. But now that I look back, to be 9 years old and to be able to play for the gospel choir and eventually play the whole church service – there was an organist, Ellora Carter. She knew the whole service. So actually I had to just follow her for the service, and my main responsibility was to play for the choir. But I think it was quite an achievement for Dad to say, “Next week you're going to play for the choir,” and I'm able to pull that off.

Brown: You must have demonstrated some proficiency at the piano for him to request that.

Lewis: As I said, Dad, he just wanted to be a musician. Not only did he have a great voice, but he had a piano in the house. He would sit down at the piano. It was – I forgot the name – it was an old – I think first we had an upright that he would sit at and do-re-mi-fa-sol. He'd pick out things. Eventually he bought an old – it must have been a 4-foot-10 or a 5-foot-1 Stark – I'll never forget [?] Stark – baby grand piano. He would buy sheet music and figure out what the notes were. He'd sit there.

When I got to the place where I could read music fairly well – he wanted somebody in the family to be a musician. I have an older sister, Lucille, Reverend Lucille Jackson, retired. She was co-pastor of our church, James Memorial A.M.E. Church in Maywood, Illinois. She was six years older. At the time, I was four.

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I have a younger sister too, Gloria Johnson. She's retired, Chicago public school system. She wasn't on the scene yet, but Lucille was. So Lucille – I heard them telling her, you start your piano lessons next week. I'm on the floor shooting marbles or doing something. All I could hear is, she's going to get to do something. Piano lessons to me sounded pretty exciting. Why? I don't know. So I wanted to do this. I want to take lessons too.

At the time, I forgot what Dad's job was. I knew he worked at – we called them junkyards in those days, where they bring old scrap and old iron. It has to be separated and ra-da-da. He eventually moved on to W. F. Hall Printing Company, which printed phone books and other things. But at that time, he said, "I can't afford it – we can't afford but one lesson. So it's got to be Lucille. She's the oldest." That didn't make any difference. I kicked the wall, kicked the floor. I learned by then that you didn't do a lot more than that, because Dad and Mom ain't going to stand for you to do a lot more than that. But I made enough noise where finally Dad said, "Okay, okay, okay. You can go." I started my lessons with Lucille. I was four. She was six.

After a couple lessons with Ernestine Bruce – at the time, Ernestine Bruce was the church organist, before Ellora Carter. This was at Wayman A.M.E. Church. So Ernestine was the neighborhood piano teacher. All the kids in the neighborhood would go. So they took me to start my lessons with Lucille.

The first lesson is easy, because you're just there to find out what's up. She writes out – "Tell your parents you need to have this music book. If they have any trouble, I can get it for you." Blah blah. We came back with the book next week. "Here's middle C" and all that. I'm like, this is a piece of cake. "Put your hands like this," such and such.

By the third lesson, she said, now you've got to learn this and that and the other, but it took a little practicing. I didn't practice. So when I came for that lesson, third or fourth lesson, she was not happy, because in her eyesight the assignment was not that difficult, and I'm sure it wasn't, at that level, at that time. But she wasn't a happy camper. She said, "Okay now, you must do this."

Ernestine Bruce sat there beside you with a ruler. If you didn't get it right, pap. I didn't get it that time, but the next piano lesson, I got it. I came home. I told my parents, I don't think I want to be a piano player. I thought you could go once a week and sit there with the teacher and that's it. You become this piano player. I didn't know about this every day practice stuff. "No," my father said, "you start something, you finish it. You are going to take piano lessons. You are going to practice."

What does one do under those circumstances? He's a little bigger than me and a little older than me. It was a hardship, because we were living in – at the time it was the Cabrini homes. Those were the low-rises, two stories, front yard, flowers, bushes, grass,

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fence, backyard. Most of the parents put some vegetables. That later became known, when they started building the high-rises, which were 20 stories or more – became known as the Caprini – Caprini-Green is what it became known as around the country. That’s another story.

So from four to nine years old, I would practice, and as we started talking earlier, I must have gotten pretty good, because he said, start playing for church when I was nine. From nine to 12 years old, it was still not so much a hardship now, because I finally now have accepted this is going to be part of my life. Might as well roll with it, right? By 12, Ernestine Bruce, my neighborhood piano teacher, says to my parents, “I think I’ve taught him all I can. But he has talent. He should continue.” My sister Lucille had long dropped out. I don’t know how she got to do that and I didn’t get to do it. I never figured that out. But she wanted to be into public speaking, dramatic speaking, not necessarily acting, but public speaking, and they sent her off in another direction. Eventually she became a minister, a very dynamic minister.

Something unusual happened when I was 12, 13 years old, when my parents took me down – because they said, where should we take him? Miss Bruce said, “Take him down to Chicago Musical College.” Chicago Musical College has since become part of Roosevelt University here in Chicago. I don’t know how we ended up with a teacher. She must have been about 4-foot-10, not even 5 feet. Her name was Dorothy Mendelsohn. That lady’s presence will stay with me until I die. She’s with me right now. A little lady, little hands, but she could play the biggest classical works. When she was demonstrating or showing me something, she could have the piano almost trembling. How does this lady do this? And then she could play so beautifully.

Anyway, it was Dorothy Mendelsohn who said, “Play something. Sit down. Play for me.” I played for her. I figured, I’ll dazzle her with a little of this. “Yeah, yeah, oh, technique, okay. You’ve got a little technique there. Good. Play something else.” So I did. Afterwards, she says, “Okay, I’ll accept him. Yes. We’ll take him as a student. When you come back,” she told some Bach and some music to come back with. As the lessons went on, after the third or fourth or fifth lessons, whatever, she started saying things like, “Listen with your inner ear.” I found that very interesting, because I didn’t know where your inner ear is. I started thinking about my ear and in my brain. But she says, “No, just within.”

This is interesting. The reason I found this interesting, because now I’ve been playing at our church from nine years old. I didn’t stop until I was 16 or 17 years old. But now I’m playing at our church for three years or more, not only Sundays, but at least two or three days during the week, and listening to mini-sermons, etc., all the things that go with being in a church environment many times a week. Nothing had happened, all the preaching and all this, that made me think that there’s something other than the physical

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being, that made me think that there's something other than the brain, which memorizes 2 times 2 is 4 and Abraham Lincoln and history and all that stuff. That was the world, physically, physical and mental. You play baseball, and you memorize your tables. That's it. You memorize music, and you do what you're told. So, when she said, "Listen from within," that sparked something.

The other thing that stays with me to this day – I was 12 years old. I'm 76 right this moment – was, "Make the piano sing." Make the piano sing. Now I know she didn't mean, "La-dah-dee." I know she didn't mean, make the piano sing. But what did she mean? She sat down. She says, "You play." I played whatever it was. She says, "Now let me." She played. I said, ahhhh. She said, "Yeah, there's a time – there's a way to play legato, and then there a time for phrasing that you might play staccato. But whatever you do, make the piano sing, and listen, listen from within."

From that day on, I decided that I wanted to be a piano player. At that age, I didn't know anything about awards, medals, honors, Grammys, gold records. I didn't care. In my world, back in those days, there was nobody in my neighborhood to tell me about it anyways. All I knew was, these 88 little monsters, I want to learn how to play them. I want to learn how to be a part of this world.

So I went from practicing 20 minutes, half hour a day – she says, "That'll never do." What do you mean? A half hour, 30 minutes, that's a lot of time out of one's life, 12 years old. I think by then I might have been practicing an hour a day. But she says, "Minimum two hours, minimum." I said, "Homework," this and that. She said, "Minimum." Eventually she got me up to 3, 4, 5 hours, maybe not all at one time, but practice, go do your homework, come back and practice, eat your dinner, come back and practice. She entered me into mini-competitions and recitals. I just loved that world.

My parents were happy. Dad was ecstatic. Every chance he would get, at certain church services, "I think my son wants to play a solo." "I didn't say I wanted to play a solo." "I think – it's a Sunday afternoon musical, and we're having guest choirs come over, and I think he wants to play it." "Okay." "Sonny, what's that piece you're practicing?" blah da dah. "Play that." I didn't make – it didn't make any difference. I noticed that too, and my sisters reminded me, that I have this quality of, if I'm playing for two people or if I'm playing for 20,000 people, once I start playing the piano – so, that became – I don't want to jump around here, but as I look back, playing in church, those years, and then playing classical music all those years, I developed a love for both gospel music and classical music. By then, Thomas A. Dorsey had come into the gospel world. Our senior choir – why were they called senior? I don't know. They weren't any older or younger than the gospel choir, but they would do mostly the hymns and the semi-classical pieces. The gospel choir was expected to be a bit more emotional. I'm playing for the gospel choir. I think that has a lot to do with the style that I have. For many years, people would ask me,

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“Tell us about your style. Explain what you” – how do you explain your style? I don’t know. “When we hear you on radio, we know that’s Ramsey Lewis. We can tell that’s you.” I don’t know. It’s only within the last 10 or 15 years that I was able to put all that together and say, what people hear as – some people say, “You’re that funky piano player.” Some people say, “You’re that bluesy piano player.” Some people say whatever, whatever. It came to me. That’s actually the gospel feeling that’s coming out through my music, as well as the classical, coming out through my music, because as – when I first started recording – I must have been in my early 20s – let me go back to 16, because that’s an important – 12 – 9, 12, and 16 are important ages for me. 12, because I started discovering me, other than the physical and the mental, there’s this other. 9, because that’s church, the piano. 16, Dad now had moved to be the choir director at another church, and of course he brought his piano player with him.

I’m trying to think of the name of the church. It was in Englewood, which is on the south side of Chicago. I can’t think of the name right now. The other church musician was Wallace Burton. They had two pianos. He played piano on that side of the altar. I played piano over here. After church one Sunday – Wallace was in college. Wallace says, “Hey man, we have a band. We play on weekends. Our piano player is about to leave us. So we’re going to need a piano player in a few weeks.” I said, oh. He said, “I don’t know if you want to play with us.” Well now, how exciting does that sound? Right? 16 years old, and here’s this college guy saying, “You want to play in our band?” So I said, oh, okay. He says, “Sarah Vaughan heard him play.” Stuart Kincheloe – Kirk Stuart was his show name. Now that should have been a signal to me, when he said, “Sarah Vaughan heard our piano player, and she’s taking him on the road.” I should have said, if he’s good enough to go on the road with Sarah Vaughan, am I good enough to take his place? But I lived in my own world. I didn’t compare me to him, or him to Sarah Vaughan, or me to Sarah Vaughan. All I knew was Wallace Burton saying, “I want you to play in my band.” Great. In fact he said, “We won’t have time to rehearse before our next gig. Can you show up Friday night at Union Park Temple?” I said, “Yeah, I can do that.”

By now, I’m taking classes, or I had a piano lesson. For some reason I see myself leaving Chicago Musical College and getting on the bus – I think we were supposed to start at 7 or 7:30; 7 to 10 was the dance, or whatever, high school, college kids – I see myself getting there early. I sat on the side. I was doing homework. It was in like a gym – it was a fieldhouse, and I sat on the side. I was doing homework. Finally the band started showing up. People started showing up, a seven-piece band. He said, “Okay, time to hit it.” We all go up on the bandstand. It hasn’t dawned on me yet, even during the four or five days that I had between inviting me to be in the band and the play date, to say, “What are we going to play?”

All seven of us are on stage. Wallace Burton played alto saxophone, tenor saxophone. He also played piano. He’s the leader of the band. Dinky played tenor saxophone. I can’t

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remember all the names. Francisco played guitar. Redd Holt played drums. Eldee Young played bass. And here I am on piano, seven pieces. Booker Porter played the other tenor saxophone. “Okay, let’s take – let’s open some – about here. Let’s play a Charlie Parker piece. Ramsey, it’s just based on B-flat blues. Don’t worry about it. You start it off.”

Now, when he said B-flat blues, that rang a bell, you see, because Dad – now let’s go back when I’m 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 years old – Dad had brought home Avery Parrish’s *After Hours*. Dad brought home Duke Ellington. Dad brought home Teddy Wilson. Dad brought home Meade Lux Lewis playing *Boogie and the Blues*. When he said B-flat blues, I thought of Meade Lux Lewis playing [Lewis sings the prototypical boogie-woogie line]. I said, I can do that. So he says, “You start it,” and I started [he sings it again]. He said, “No, this is a Charlie Parker piece.” I said, “It’s B-flat blues.” He says, “No, no, no, no. We’ll start it.” I think they played that tune. I sat there, because I didn’t know B-flat blues. It’s not a gospel piece, and it’s surely not Frederic Chopin or Beethoven.

After that piece, he said, “Let’s play a standard.” Standard? “Let’s do *These Foolish Things* or *Body and Soul*. Do you know either one of those, Ramsey?” “No.” “What about *I’m in the Mood for Love*?” He named two or three more. “No.” So Wallace said, “Why don’t you go sit over there? We’ll finish the set.” I did go sit where I was. I finished my homework.

At 10 o’clock – he had to drive me home, because my parents said, “You know, he’s 16 years old. You got to make sure he gets back and forth.” On the way home, Wallace Burton says, “If you want to learn this music, I’ll be glad to teach you.” I said, “Yeah, I’d like to learn it.” He says, “Okay. Can you come over to my house?” – whatever day, the next day or two days later, whatever it was. I did. I went over to Wallace’s house. He wrote out, “Now here’s blues changes. You can play them in any key. You can play them in every key. And here’s what we call *Rhythm* changes,” kind of based on *Fine and Dandy*, kind of based on – anyway, a lot of jazz songs are written on these. If you learn those two, you’re 40% home. The other 60% are learning standards, *Body and Soul*. There’s about a hundred songs or more at the time that bands were playing. These songs are from Broadway, from movies, from various places, that jazz musicians adopt and say, we like to play on these chord changes, and they become part of the jazz repertoire.

“So how do I learn those, Wallace?” “Well, some of them I have the music to, but to help you, you should go down to Lyon and Healy” – now, Lyon and Healy was a music store. I think there was more than one in Chicago, but the one I knew about was on Wabash [Avenue] and Jackson [Boulevard]. In those days, you could take LPs into the booth. I think you could take up to four or something. You can’t take a stack, but you take them, and you listen. So he says, “Go down and listen to George Shearing. Go down and listen to Oscar Peterson. Go down and listen to Bud Powell. Go down to listen” – and he told

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me, “And listen how each one of them plays *Body and Soul*, or see how each one of them has their own style. You get an idea of what it means. So when I give you this music, you’re not just playing the notes.” Well, first I had to learn the notes, and that’s what I did for a while. But had Wallace Burton just taken me home that night and said, “It was great, man, but it’s not going to work,” I would have [said], “Okay,” and I don’t know where I would be sitting. I’m sure we wouldn’t be – I’m not sure. I don’t know what I would have done.

I don’t know where to go from here.

Brown: Let’s go back and fill in some of the rest of your upbringing, your childhood. We talked about – off mic – about the milieu. Maybe talk about your school experiences, where did you go to school?

Lewis: You have to ask me questions and make me start talking, because if you tell me too much at one time, I won’t remember it.

Brown: All right. Let’s talk about your neighborhood. You said it was called the – what was it?

Lewis: Cabrini.

Brown: Cabrini. Segregated or integrated at that point?

Lewis: Where we lived when I was growing up, 4, 5, 6 years old – before that, we lived in a neighborhood not far from the Cabrini homes – they called them at that time – just called the Near North Side. We were low-income folks. I remember for a few months we lived with somebody. Then Dad came home one day and said, “We can get our own place now.” At the time it was two kids. That was on the Near North Side. What do you mean by Near North Side? There’s the Loop. The Loop is what we call downtown Chicago. Anything within a couple miles east – not east, because that’s the lake – but a couple miles north, west, south, you called Near North, Near West, Near South. So Near North was just within not too many blocks of downtown Chicago.

They tore down this area. Before we lived there, it was all white. I don’t know what ethnic group that lived there. Whatever it was, they tore it down and built these homes. You lived in these homes. They weren’t separate homes. There were about 1-2-3-4 – maybe 8 homes in a block.

Brown: Like row houses?

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Lewis: Yeah, row houses. That's the word. Your income had to be of a certain level. You couldn't make over this amount, because if you make over this amount – so it's for low-income people. There you go. We moved in. It was 80, 85 percent white. We were one of the few black people that lived there. But we noticed each year it got more and more black and less and less white.

But I must tell you, the difference between low-income housing then, and low-income housing that happened shortly after that, is like night and day, because, as I said earlier, we did have a front yard with grass. Each one of the places had a front, and each one of the places had an area back there that you could make barbeque, or you could [grow] vegetables, or whatever you want to make back there. There was a lot of pride. It was a clean area. The families knew each other, and if one family saw – “Dickie, your mama won't want you knowing that you're doing that. I'm going to tell your Daddy on you.” Each family – “Does your mama know that you . . . ?”

Eventually, though, Dad made – Mom was working. She was a domestic. Between them they began to make more money than they should have made if they want to continue living there. But since they'd rather make more money, they moved, still in the Near North Side, but 1142 North Orleans. I'll never forget that address. I don't know why. Well, I know why I won't forget that address, because when they started tearing down the Near North Side, in the last 20 years, that was the last building. It's amazing. They had torn down almost every building on the Near North Side and put up new structures. These were mixed income. There were some homes in these buildings for the people who were displaced because they tore their buildings down. But then there was medium income, because the idea, they said, they didn't want to put all low-income people in one place, because they learned from the Cabrini homes that were row houses, and when the first Mayor Dailey, Richard Dailey, came in, he and Councilman Dawson got the bright idea: we need more low-income housing. We can't use up a lot of land and build build build build. So they decided to go up, 20 stories. They built several buildings. That's when they became Cabrini-Green. I don't know what the Green part was.

But that wasn't a good idea, because it was one thing to have low-income housing spread out, and each person have their own section, their own front door, their own back door, their own upstairs and downstairs, their own garden, their own whatever. It's another thing to have several hundred low-income people in the same building, going in and out, sharing and sharing, etc.

So these homes were built, and the neighborhood began to corrupt. There were too many guys standing on the corner. That's when we moved to 1142 North Orleans. We lived there for many years. As I say, it was only 20 years ago – I left there, got married, long before they started tearing the neighborhood down. But the reason that that building stays in my mind is because in the last 20 years, you drive by there, and it's all these new

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buildings going up, and that block was the last block to go down, and that building was the last building to go down. I used to take my kids and drive by and said, “I used to live there.”

When I was in school, there wasn’t a lot of time for hanging out. My parents didn’t believe in hanging out. My parents believed that idleness is the Devil’s workshop. “Do you have homework to do? Did you practice? Did you clean up your room? Did you do your other chores? Have you” blah blah blah? During the week, it’s time to go to bed, after all that. Sunday, I’m in church. At least one or two nights a week is choir rehearsal, or we’re going to visit a church somewhere and do – there was some Saturdays – I say some Saturdays, because Saturday mornings I was going to the Chicago Musical College prep school. You’re in high school, but you could take ear training, history, and a couple other classes to prepare yourself to go to college when you graduated from high school. So Saturday morning I’m doing that.

So occasionally Saturday afternoon, and occasionally there might be a Sunday afternoon, after I’ve been to church, that we might see a movie. Now, do you have your show fare? Oh, I didn’t tell you. I was working too. Oh yeah. I remember two jobs I had. I remember three jobs I had. One was delivering engraving plates, Superior Engraving Company. After school for two or three hours, five days a week, I’d go to Superior Engraving Company, and they’d give you these plates. You have to take this to advertising agencies, because they have to look over this before they put it in the newspaper, whatever, or they’re going to send some back. Those were not what they wanted. So bring those – leave these, bring those back. That’s Superior Engraving Company. I did that.

The other job was at Harvey’s Grocery Store, delivering groceries after school. Several summers, once my father got a job at W. F. Hall Printing Company – huge company, huge – I would work there during the summer.

There was a third job. Anyway, after all these things, there wasn’t time to hang out, and if there was, I couldn’t anyway. So I didn’t really – I can’t remember any real friends that we were regular when I was in high school or grammar school. I do remember from high school, however, Bob Holmes, who is my friend to this day, he and his wife Edwina. I met them because my first wife and the mother of my seven children – Geraldine Taylor was her name. Of course she became Geraldine Lewis – she lived near door – on the Near North Side, on Larrabee – to her girlfriend, Edwina. I forgot Edwina’s last name before she got married, because she is Edwina Holmes now. Bob, who went to the same high school, would visit her, and next door I’m visiting Geri. So about 10 o’clock, when we both got kicked out of – when their parents said, “You got to go home. You can’t stay here,” we would end up leaving – he would end up leaving her house, and I, “Hey Bob, how you doing? Going?” “Yeah, I’m going home.” So we turned the corner and walk to a certain place together and then split out. This is in high school. To this day – in fact,

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we're going to dinner with him in the next couple weeks, with Bob and – we call her Bean, but Edwina. So he was a friend. I'm sure there was maybe one or two other friends, but I don't have a social group now, and I think that's because, in high school and college, I didn't – I wasn't into group hanging out. I'm not a hanger outer.

Brown: What about your academic career? Were you a good student? And what subjects were you interested in?

Lewis: Until Dorothy Mendelsohn, around 12 years old, piqued my interest in piano playing, I thought of math, I thought of science. Fortunately, before I had to decide, make a decision, Dorothy Mendelsohn came into my life, and it became music. My grades were average. I wasn't an exceptional student at all, as I recall. I recall teachers saying, "Ramsey, you got to get your homework in," those kinds of things. I don't ever recall anybody saying, you're on the honor roll. I don't ever recall anybody saying, here's a certificate for being number one in math or number one in history. I was inquisitive, because I like to know what makes things work, what makes things go, etc., but not to the point where in biology or chemistry or any of those subjects I was an outstanding student. Besides, homework wasn't my thing. My parents would have to say, "Don't you have homework?" So I got my homework done, but it was either working part-time, or it was either practicing the piano or whatever else I did.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: Do you recall the names of any of the schools you attended and in what neighborhoods they were?

Lewis: I attended Schiller grammar school, I think just for kindergarten and maybe first grade, or third – second. I went to Jenner grammar school. These are all in the Near North Side. I know by the time I was fifth grade I was at Jenner school, finished grammar school at Jenner and then went on to Wells High School. Wells High School is out of the neighborhood. We had to take public transportation to get there.

Brown: Integrated school?

Lewis: It's interesting. Both schools were integrated. The grammar schools began mostly white, and they ended up mostly black, as with Wells High School. When I first got there, we were in the minority, so much so that the kids in the neighborhood weren't happy with us coming into the neighborhood to go to the school. One day it was rumored around the school that some of the guys that lived in the neighborhood, who had long since dropped out of school, white guys, were going to beat us up, because we had to walk either north or south down Ashland Avenue, north to get to Division Street to take public transportation east to our neighborhood, or south to get to Chicago Avenue to take

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public transportation east to our neighborhood, either way, depending on where you – so, they were going line up on either side of the street with baseball bats and stuff. This day was looming. Then, word came that some black guys from the South Side would be coming over.

It's interesting, because these gangs – I forgot their names, a couple of them from the South Side – had a reputation of being rather rough with those people who were in their way for whatever reason. They too were dropouts, but they didn't like the fact that we were being challenged.

When word got out that they were going to show up that day, it fizzled. Those 20 or 30 white kids decided, maybe we won't do this, and from that day on, we didn't have any problems. But here too, again, as time went on, the school went 85% white to 85% black/Latino, which speaks to not only Chicago, but it speaks to any large city in the United States to this day. I'm talking about when I was a teenager. I'm 76 years old, and the same issues are present. It seems like we as a country, as a nation, haven't learned anything on how to live as a nation, live as Americans, rather than separating ourselves, living in separation. I think – when I say separation, I don't think there's anything wrong with – we have an area we call Little Italy. We have an area we call Little whatever. But it's all part of Chicago, and we're all part of America. But we have problems believing in the major title, the major heading, the major name of our country, America, and saying, "I'm American." So back in those days, it's the same as it was – same as it is now.

Brown: It's gone full circle.

Lewis: Yeah, well, I don't know if we've gone full circle or if we're marching in place. To me, it's more like we're marching in place and talking the talk. We think we're walking the walk, but we're marching in place in terms of this race thing.

Brown: I wanted to underscore this racial dynamic, because Martin Luther King, when he came to Chicago, said he thought he was challenged more here in Chicago than he was down South.

Lewis: That's true. When Martin Luther King came here, there was an element in the white area that actually had hate in their face and hate in their eyes. How dare you come into our city and tell us how to live? Tell us how to live meant, to them, if we don't want them in our neighborhood, they can't come and buy a house in our neighborhood. We can go buy a house anywhere we want to buy, but they can't come in our – so, it's this ownership of America. "It's my country," as if, because white people got here first, it's their country.

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This isn't the general thinking, thank God, or we'd probably would be having race riots as often now as we used to. But there were racial fights back in our neighborhood. Now that I'm thinking about it, there were times when – usually – you know, it's funny. Most of those fights were kids who had dropped out of school. Very seldom did this start in school. I'm trying to get to my math class. Whether you're white, blue, or green, I'm trying to get to history. I'm trying to get to this. Very seldom was there any kind of racial issue in the school. It was always as you're leaving school or on the way to school, other kids who had dropped out or whatever reason – they don't even go to the school, but they live in the neighborhood. They were troublemakers.

We could talk a long time about America and the racial issue, and about politics in these United States, and I don't want to spend a lot of time doing it, because I'm beginning to see the light. By that, I think the best way to explain it is the fact that we think that we're marching in the right direction, and we're actually marching in place, thinking that we're marching in the right direction. It's too much separatism.

I remember I was going to high school and they had begun cutting out biology, because we didn't have – we worked from the textbook, but we didn't have the room where you do the experiments.

Brown: Lab.

Lewis: The lab. They cut out chemistry. They had them when we got there. They cut out chemistry totally, because without the lab, the chemistry book – when we first got to the school, when it was 85% white, there was girls chorus, there was boys chorus, there was mixed chorus. We had three choruses. We had ballet classes. We had modern dance class. We had mechanical arts, and we had – I forgot the name of it, but – creative arts. We'd draw. One of the things that was great about the school was at least once a year these departments came together. The fine arts class would draw scenery. The mechanical arts would make the scenery. The choruses would sing. We had a symphony orchestra, small as it was. We had a marching band. We had concert band, and we had a jazz band of sorts. I know a lot of youngsters from my neighborhood, that the draw to school was to be involved in the music or art department. Once they got to school, of course they had to get at least passing grades in other things. Once they got to school, the teachers would help them and encourage them, but we all knew the reason they came to school was to get that saxophone in there.

Oh, that's the other thing. All the instruments were supplied by the system, the public school system. So as I look at the public school system from when I was going to school, to what it is today and how the first thing they cut is the arts, long since cut chemistry lab, biology lab. We used to take civics. Now why did – and social studies. Now what is that? Civics taught us about our country. It taught us what government is, what the judicial

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system, what Congress, the Senate. What is Washington? Voting, how important it is for this. They cut that out. They don't need to know that. They don't need music. They don't need to know anything about civics. They don't need social studies.

Sandra Day O'Connor was here. She spoke. We were complaining about them cutting out music and the arts. She was complaining about cutting out social studies and civics. To this day, it seems that the work is never done. Starting back when I was going to school, they started cutting all this stuff out, and to this day, as you and I sit here, they started saying cutting budgets is the first thing. We're going to have to close this school. We're going to have to drop x number of teachers. We can't – that's what I mean when I say marching in place and we think we're getting somewhere. How in the world do you think this civilization, this American society, is going to get from here to there, from 2011 to the next 50 years, if we don't prepare those people who are going to be running our country 50 years from now? It's like you're going to go cross country, you got to have gas, and they say, "You're not going to be able to stop and fill up. So you're going to have to fill up your tank. You got a tank big enough. We made you this big tank. You can pull it behind." They started out filling that tank up. "This'll get you there." As time goes on, "We can't fill your tank up." "How am I going to get cross country?" "We'll figure it out. By the time you get to Pittsburgh, we'll think of something." Well, we got to Pittsburgh, and nothing happened. Then something happened where, "Here's some more gas. This'll get you to Chicago."

As I see it now, as a country, I think we've gotten as far as maybe Chicago, and we got a long way to go. Same thing with education. As we knock off teachers, as we say, you got to cut budgets, it just galls me. It just makes me so upset to look at the inner city, where more talented people in all the fields have come from the public schools across the country, than from the private sector. Not to belittle the private sector, because those are great schools. Because they're given all the attention and all the help they need, a lot of great people have come from private schools. So I ain't – but because of the sheer number of kids who go to public schools, great singers, great orators, great scientists, Grammy – you name every field, maybe not in the last 10, 15, 20 years, because the school systems have been steadily knocked down, but surely before then.

They ask, why is pop music not as melodic? Why is pop music not as interesting harmonically? Why is pop music not . . . ? Look at your school system. God bless the children who took what they had. What did they have? They had rhythm. They had the ability to make up words. They put it together, and they came up with bare music. What could some of those kids have done if they were introduced to what harmony is, and what's a melody? How do you develop a melody?

Brown: Before we return to your academic career, I asked you about Dorothy Mendelsohn, and that she opened the door for you to be self-reflective, to look at

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something beyond, to look at the spiritual. Were you getting any of this out of the church as well, since you were raised basically in the church?

Lewis: No. Prior to Dorothy Mendelsohn, I looked at things, either the physical aspect of it, materials, or mentally. Does it stimulate your mind? It wasn't until Dorothy Mendelsohn that it even – what she said affected not only the way I looked at music, but the way I started looking at life, and the way – I remember as I became – later in my teens I started buying books of various religions and various spiritual and religious thinking and outlook, to try to figure out why – because I'm growing up in this religious community – why haven't all the religious people gotten together and stood up together and say this is right and this is wrong?

Oh, I know what I was going to say. I was in high school when – I forgot the name of it, but the order came down that schools should be integrated, that you should be able to go to any school you want to go to. I thought this was the greatest thing in the world, because by now our schools were beginning to be cut short in the black neighborhoods. I thought, if they're all equal, all the schools, and you can go to any school you want to, that this is going to be one of the greatest things not only for students, but for our country. I was so disappointed when – now, I'm just a teenager, but I'm hearing on the radio and reading in papers that there were people that were against it. That disappointed me. But you know what disappointed me more? – don't forget. I'm coming from a religious background – that the rabbis, the preachers, the priests, those people who knew right from wrong – maybe I was naive. As I look back at that, I'm a teenager – why they didn't speak up and say no, this is the law of the land, and it's not only that, but it's the right thing to do. I was very hurt to find out – it's funny. Each week I thought, next week somebody's going to – next month, somebody's going to – I know somebody's going to stand up and say, let them go to school with them. Years went by, and nobody ever did. So that made me more and more curious about what is religion. Not with what is spirituality. because I think that spirituality is something that each person on his own has to deal with, but organized religion. What is that really all about?

[end of tape 1; the recording resumes in mid-sentence.]

Brown: . . . the alleged purpose of the church, that is, to somehow inculcate or to instill these religious values. But none of the musicians talk about that. We can hear it come out in the music, but we don't hear it insofar as any kind of cerebral or spiritual manifestation.

Kimery: We're running.

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Brown: We're running. Okay. So we can pick it up again where you were reflecting on the impact of religion and the difference between religion and spirituality and how that was developed in you, this spirituality versus a religious orientation.

Lewis: I think – as I mentioned earlier, I come from a very religious family. Religion was very important to us. I'm sure my parents in their own way were very spiritual. I didn't learn about spirituality or the Spirit. You hear about the Holy Spirit, but that's over there or up there or in the book. But it was when Dorothy Mendelsohn said, "Go inside and listen with your inner ear."

As I mature, and I'm still maturing, I feel that spirituality and morality is something, two things, that people don't seriously look at, they don't seriously investigate. They're not curious as to, is there a difference between religion and spirituality? I think most people think that religion and spirituality is one thing. Religion is on – it's come from a culture. That's why you have different religions. Each culture has their own religion.

What's interesting to me is to find some people in these religions – not all – some people thinking that their god – now, many religions have other names for the supreme being, but their god says it's okay for them to think and feel this way about you. My god says it's okay for me to think and feel this way about you. How they, being grown adults, don't question that, don't question the fact that how can there be 18 gods, or 180 gods, and each one having different viewpoints on who's right and who's wrong, who's up and who's down?

I think that over time, in America especially, maybe the world – although I travel all over, I spend more time in America than anywhere else – it's obvious to me that religion in many ways is something you do. You do it on Sunday, and you forget about it on Monday. You're holier than thou on Sunday – no, you're holy on Sunday, but I'm holier than thou on Monday.

Here we are, 2011, and I'm thinking of in the '50s, when I said the school thing, and the religious leaders didn't speak up – but here we are now in 2011, and once again, those learned, those experienced, those spiritual and religious leaders throughout the world – I don't use the word allow, but for lack of a better word – I can't think of a better word than to say they allow this kind of thinking to go on.

I know that there are organizations throughout the world where religious leaders get together from all the various faiths. But for whatever reason, their presence as a group or as individuals is not felt throughout our society, throughout our community. If you look at our country today and how there's certain areas of our country that are being brought out of the past kicking and screaming and dragging their feet as slowly as possible. But you go to any one of their churches on Sunday, and they're talking about God cleansing,

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God help me to be a better person. I think in their own way they're sincere. I think so. But Monday is business as usual. "No, we can't allow them" – they – they, them, they, them. What happened to us? Us, as in humanity? Is it religion, is it spirituality that can help us gain this oneness? Because it's not until – we speak of the deficit. We speak of all the problems of our country growing, on one hand, how we're being surpassed by other countries in certain areas – but it's not until we come together as Americans and as human being that we'll really make progress. I would think that through religion, through spirituality – the difference to me actually is that religion is separate, segmented in various cultures, but spirituality, there's only – to me, there's only one spirit, and that's the spirit of the life blood that's in you. That life blood is common to all of us.

People can't see beyond color. People can't see beyond the language you speak, which is different from the language they speak. People don't see that, except for the skin on the outside of the finger, it's the same finger. Except for whatever, we're all the same. Where is this that says, "I can be a good . . ." and then you fill in ". . . Christian," then you fill in ". . . Jew," then you fill in ". . . Muslim," then you fill – "I can be a good . . ." and you fill it in on holy day, but other than holy day, you guys are no good.

It causes me great angst – when this is being taped, we're leading up to a political climax in the next 12 months – to see how separate we are as a people, as American people. I'm wise enough to know that I don't have the answers. I don't have a solution. I don't have those words to speak to make the masses stop and say, oh, he's right. We all have a lot more in common than we have in differences. I can't say any more than that. That's been said many times by a lot of people, but our society, our culture, feels some security in being separate. Maybe that's what it is. Maybe psychologically, I feel there's strength – or they feel there's strength in numbers. My group feel this when we feel together. Don't we feel this? Yeah. Here's why we feel this. We talk to each other. Yeah, we're right. Then this group is, well, we feel this. Then we have all these groups, and nobody says, do we have anything in common with that group or that group? Is there a common denominator? What is the common denominator of humanity? Hmmm. It's just a question. I wish I had the answer. To me, it's obvious, but it must not be obvious.

Brown: I would love to return to this. Here we are, sitting in Chicago. We have a black President from Chicago. We're going to return to this, the political dialogue, but I wanted to go back. Let me just use this as a segue. Instead of "My country tis of thee," how about "Our country tis of thee"?

Lewis: That's a beginning.

Brown: On that note, you said you were investigating some books – other books on either spirituality or religion.

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Lewis: Oh, this is when I was much younger.

Brown: I know. But what were those books?

Lewis: I don't know.

Brown: You were just a teenager.

Lewis: I don't know. I would go into – when I was much younger, especially when I got into my '20s, I started questioning what's going on. I would go into a book store that dealt with religion or a general bookstore, a Borders type – Borders wasn't around then – and go in the religion or philosophy department and pick up books to see if there were answers that could help me in coming to an understanding of why things are in such disarray, while people are saying, oh no, we're okay. You're not okay.

I don't remember those books. I don't remember the names of them.

Brown: One of the reasons I asked is, I remember from a musician, someone recommending Khalil Gibran.

Lewis: Oh yeah, sure. That was one of them. That was one of the first.

Brown: It usually figures in, and that seems to be passed on in the musical community, because it speaks to a broader humanity, his works.

Lewis: Yeah. Khalil Gibran was one of the first books, but that first – that book that I remember that made me inquisitive and curious was a book my mother gave me, called *As a Man Thinketh*, so shall he be. The book was *As a Man Thinketh*. It was one of the first books to make you look inside. But yeah, I don't remember those books that I bought in those days.

Brown: So the A.M.E., the scriptures and the teachings and the dogma, the A.M.E. church didn't seem to have a shaping force as far as your spiritual development?

Lewis: I think that the experience that I got in terms of spirituality came from my family, mother, father, and sisters. In a general way, being involved with the church and church folk so much, so often, kept bringing questions to mind. Why? I went through a period in my life where that word, why, stayed with me in many ways other than just religion and spirituality. It was, why? Why does it have to be this way? Why haven't those people who are authorities in this area seen the light or done something about it?

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Brown: Let's go back to the chronology. You've had your experience with your first dance band. You didn't get fired. You were encouraged. You put in your homework. Did you have aspirations to go to college to continue your educational career? Or were you then, at that point and juncture of your life thinking, maybe I'll be a professional musician without the college training?

Lewis: I was in college when my girlfriend at the time – we met when we were 13, 14 years old. I saw my best friend Bob Holmes. We were next door to each other – got pregnant. We decided – I had a big decision to make. I was very close to being 18 years old. The decision was how to handle this situation. It was my decision to get married. I felt we could get married. We could raise a child. I could go to school part-time rather than full-time. Get a job. She already had finished high school and was working. We felt we could make this work and I could finish school.

I didn't finish school. We did manage, with the help of her parents and my parents, to keep our heads above water. But something began to happen. Number one, we continued to have more kids. What's causing this? The water? Lake Michigan! – on one hand. But on the other hand, jobs, musical jobs, began to come around more often.

The Korean War broke up the band. Redd went off to the war, Wallace. Half the band went away. Eldee and I were left. So we got this drummer, McCants – I forgot his first name [Walter] – to play drums with the rhythm section, with Eldee and I, until Redd got out of the army.

We were playing at this club called the S.R.O. Room, on [West] Goethe [Street] and [North] Clark [Street] in Chicago. Daddy-O Daylie, who at the time was a huge radio personality in Chicago, he heard us play. He kept tabs on us. That became a multi-night-a-week job, which was good for me, because I had a family to support. One thing led to another. We're moving around the city, playing – in those days, there were a lot of places to play in Chicago: Cloister Inn. We played many nights there.

Brown: Are these nightclubs? Or . . .

Lewis: Yeah, nightclubs. London House, Kelly's, many places to play. But we ended up playing at Stelzer's. Stelzer's was a restaurant on this side, bar on this side, and in the bar, they had music. They hired us to be a trio. While we were there, Daddy-O heard us again. He said, "You guys are pretty good." "Thank you." He says, "You should make a record." He introduced us to Phil and Leonard Chess.

I'm trying to – I think by now Redd is out of the army, because he's on that first album. Also, we're playing 4, 5, 6 nights a week. Things are getting better for us in many, many ways. But it was when Daddy-O Daylie introduced us to the Chess brothers and Phil

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auditioned us and eventually we made our first album, that things began to get much better.

Brown: When you say auditioned, what does that mean? Did you have to go to the studio and perform? Or did he come to see you?

Lewis: Yeah, no, no, no. The Chess brothers owned a stationery shop on [East] 48th [Street] and [South] Cottage Grove [Avenue] on the south side of Chicago Avenue. They had already been involved in putting out blues albums. So they had a piano in their shipping room. Daddy-O said, “They want you to come over and play for them.” So we took our instruments. They already had a piano. Went over and played in the shipping room. Leonard Chess – he was the older brother – he didn’t show up, but Phil Chess, the younger brother, he came. I don’t if he was quite sure of himself or not. I do remember, after we played a little while, he called Sonny. Sonny was in the shipping room, boxing up stuff. “Come in here.” He asked Sonny to listen to us. “Play some more.” He asked Sonny, “What do you think of them?” Sonny said, “I think they’re pretty good.” So they signed us.

It took a minute for them to record us. It wasn’t right away. Then after we made the first album, Daddy-O Daylie had to go by there and knock on their door for several months for them to release it, because they had a lot of experience with blues and such, but maybe they were hesitant in terms of putting out jazz, although before our album came out, I think they recorded live Ahmad Jamal. I think his album might have come out. But they were having great success with Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and all these people.

For 17 albums – in those days, you would record an album every six months. Don’t ask me why. But six months after you put the album out, you’re thinking about, what are we going to record next? Nobody told us any different. We did this, that’s how we got to – that’s how I recorded so many albums. We had done – I guess we recorded the first album in the middle ’50s. By 1965 we went in to record – I think it was our 17th album.

We had gotten in the habit of putting on what we call a fun song in the last three or four albums. Here’s the serious stuff. Here’s the meat and potatoes. Here’s something that’s just fun. On this particular album, we – Eldee, Redd, and I were sitting in a coffee shop in Washington, D.C. It was across the street from the Howard Theater, because we were playing at the Howard Theater. That’s when the Howard Theater had shows during the day, live music shows. We were figuring out what we were going to do on our album. The waitress came over and asked us what we were doing. She said, “Have you heard this song by Dobie Gray called *The In Crowd*?” I hadn’t heard it. Redd and Eldee had heard it. Said they liked it. She said, “It’s on the juke box.” That’s when they had juke boxes in coffee shops. So she went over and played it. I said, “Yeah, that’s easy. Yeah, that’s nice, a nice little – we can do that.”

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So I went and bought the 45. I carried a player around with me. That's when they had – we went back to the hotel, and I wrote out a couple things. That was a Monday, I think, because we recorded on Thursday. We recorded Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. We noticed the first time we played *The In Crowd*, people started clapping and having fun with it. I found this interesting, because it was at the Bohemian Caverns. In those days, in Washington, D.C., the Bohemian Caverns was a place where people like Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Johnny Griffin, the hard-boppers, played. We weren't hard-boppers. But they asked us to play there, and the people just started getting with the music.

At that time, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, I think we did two or three sets – at least three – each night. As they got with that piece and started clapping their hands, we just thought that was nice. That's great. They like it. We figured we had the meat and potatoes, and that was what was going to sell the album, that this was a fun song. After all, we had put so-called “a fun song” on the last three or four albums and didn't make it a big hit. Each one of our albums sold a little more than the last one. So that was always encouraging to us, as each one of our jobs from year to year paid a little more than the last one. So we always had something to make us feel, this is worth hanging in with.

But we put that album out. I think it was June of '65. By August, September of '65, we got a call from the Chess people, saying, “I think you guys got a hit record.” “What to you mean?” My first, “What do you mean, we have a hit record?” “No, your album. You know that song you did called *The In Crowd*. People are really buying it.”

That was a major turning point in our career, major in many ways. The two most important – one was very positive, and that is, our income jumped sky high. Maybe we were making \$13-, 14-, 15-, 16-, \$1700 dollars a week.

Brown: The group? The trio?

Lewis: The trio – to us starting getting offers making \$2,000 a night. Oh boy. And to be on festivals. I remember the first one with Sonny Stitt. It was – anyway, that was meaningful, because we had to always pinch our dimes. What hotel are we going to stay at in L.A. or in wherever? You called them. What are their rates? What's it look like? What neighborhood is it in? Because you couldn't go to the major chains. You couldn't go to Hilton or Sheridan, because those were out of our league. You always had to shop around.

The same thing with restaurants. When you go out to eat, “Where are you going?” “I found this restaurant that you can get a good meal for” – “Really?” So it was great – there were restaurants in certain cities, Washington, D.C., others, that I always wanted to go to,

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and there were hotels I always wanted to stay in, we could never afford. So one of the first things we did was go to a couple of those restaurants and didn't look at the prices. Just looked over here. And there was a hotel. I can't remember it. We would pass it on our way to – what's that park in Washington, D.C.? There's a song out about it. Everybody knows it. But we'd pass it, and they'd say, "Ella Fitzgerald always stays there." I said, "One of these days." So we stayed there, at that hotel. Other things like that were very positive.

The negative thing – it was major – was that as a trio we split everything in thirds, except I was \$200 a week to be the – I think that's right. Maybe it was \$100. I can't remember now – spokesman, interviews, writing music. But after that \$100 off the top, whatever was left, expenses – and after expenses are paid – three ways. We were happy campers. Life was good, especially income was going up, and now we got this hit record.

We got the news that we had a hit record in August, September? By October, November, there were grumblings in the group. The guys would come, and I noticed their attitude had changed. I remember one time we were playing in Seattle, I think. Eldee – we were playing *The In Crowd* – Eldee put his bass down and walked off the stage in the middle of the song. That was a shocker. The next time, we were in Houston – you notice these things stayed with me – and Redd did it. In the middle of *The In Crowd*, he just stopped playing, walked off stage. So we're in the dressing room. "What's going on?"

Come to find out, the wives had put pressure on them. "Why is it named the Ramsey Lewis Trio? Why is his name always talked about? What about you guys?" They allowed that to influence their performance. Now, if they had said, "Why is he making so much more than you guys?", they might have made some sense. But they couldn't say that. It just – our relationship got worse and worse. So finally, I quit. I said, "I can't handle this." Because music was my life. Let's go back to when I'm 12 years old. Piano playing and music is what it's all about, and making good music was great. Now that we're really accepted, it's really great. And now that we're making money, making music, this is it, and what's the problem? "Your name." Well, I didn't name the group me. Daddy-O sat with us at least three or four nights in a row, and we write down names, the Buzzards, the Cats, the Flowers, the – you think. We had a million names. He finally said, "Listen, it's a trio. It's the Billy Taylor Trio, the Oscar Peterson Trio, the Erroll Garner Trio. Piano trios are usually named after the dominant instrument, which is the piano. You're splitting the money three ways. So let's give this up. Throw these things away. It's the Ramsey Lewis Trio," and everybody said okay, and said okay gladly, because we were moving, and we got that out of the way, and 17 albums later, we're still happy. But when this one became a hit record, we broke up.

Good things happened after that. Eldee and Redd formed a group called Young-Holt Unlimited. Had a big hit record. They had two hit records. One was *Wack Wack*, and the

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other one was *Soulful Strut*. Two big hit records. They broke up. Now don't ask me why they broke up, because I don't know why they broke up.

I needed a drummer and a bass player. I had met Cleveland Eaton at – I think it – I don't know where I met Cleve. He was a schoolteacher in Chicago who played a whole lot of bass. He was playing around Chicago. I said, "I'd like you to play with my group." He said, yeah, yeah, because he knew I worked all the time. I've been fortunate to work all the time, even in those days.

Chess producing, like other record companies – Decca Records, Capitol Records, Columbia Records – they had staff arrangers, staff musicians, staff producers, on staff, because some artists might need a band. Some artists might need some arrangements. Some artists might need a producer. So they had – one of – the staff drummer that they had at Chess, his name was Maurice White. At least two or three years prior to my asking him – at least a couple of years – to come with the band, the trio, we would see him down there. I would see him down at the studios, and we'd stop. "Hi." He's very soft-spoken, very humble. "Hi, Ramsey." He'd almost whisper. "How you doing? Okay." He would ask me questions about the business. "So you have a booking agent?" I said yeah. By then, Daddy-O Daylie had got us a booking agent. "What do they do?" That was one thing.

Another time he would say, "So you got a publishing company." He said, "What do they . . . ?" – he had all these questions about, "How is it on the road?" Da-da-da. "Okay. See you later." So finally I said, "Hey man, I need a drummer." "Oh yeah." He loved – so he joined the group. That was a big plus, because Maurice had a way of playing drums that was unique, very rhythmic, and Cleve was a hell of a bass player. So it was a wonderful trio. We went on to make hit records. We made *Wade in the Water* together.

The group with Eldee and Redd, the original Ramsey Lewis trio, didn't actually break up until after January, because I remember now, there were rumblings and grumbings through the holidays. We went to the West Coast to play somewhere. It was on the West Coast that I decided enough is enough. I'm going to have gray hairs before it's time if I stick with this.

We had recorded. I think we recorded live at Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse in – I think it was October of '65, because we put out – after *The In Crowd*, we put out a record called *Hang On, Ramsey*, which had a single on it called *Hang On, Sloopy*. That became a big hit with the original trio, but we already recorded that by the time we broke up.

The next record that came out, in '66, was a record that I made with Maurice White and Cleveland Eaton called *Wade in the Water*.

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Brown: I'm looking at your discography. You recorded at the Lighthouse October '65.

Lewis: There it is.

Brown: So by January '66 the group was dissolved.

Lewis: Right.

Brown: Can we go back to a couple things? One, when you first – before the band had a hit, were you doing all the business? Like you say, calling all the hotels, calling . . . ?

Lewis: Yeah. I was the lead guy in terms of – I would write all the music and do all the interviews. I can't recall if I was also calling hotels and lining up rental cars. I think they took care of the rental cars, because I didn't get my driver's license until after we were together and we were on the road. So the duties were split among all three of us. I was satisfied, just doing the music.

Brown: When you said you did your audition for the Chess brothers, and you said Sonny came in, which Sonny? Who . . . ?

Lewis: He was just a guy that worked in the shipping department. I never got his name, because they always just called him Sonny.

Brown: Okay. The reason I brought that up, I didn't know if it was Sonny Boy Williamson or . . .

Lewis: Oh, right.

Brown: Which you couldn't – because I heard they had Muddy Waters out there painting their house.

Lewis: Right.

Brown: So I didn't know if Sonny might have been working. They had everybody working.

I'm looking through your discography. I wanted to go back and fill in some of the earlier recordings that you did before. You're looking at *Ramsey Lewis and his Gentle-men of Swing*. But this is . . .

[recording interrupted]

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The earliest one that I could find back in the days when there were LPs, and here we are. Got the Ramsey Lewis trio in their, shall we say, ad hoc uniforms? Your cashmere sweater.

Lewis: I don't know how they happen to have on red ones and I happen to not have on a red one. I think it was just a fluke.

Brown: This is from 1959. You were – as you said, you were quite prolific. In looking over your discography, I wanted to go over some of the earlier ones, a couple when you weren't a leader. That was in Chicago, October 8th, 1958, Lem Winchester, *A Tribute to Clifford Brown*. If you could talk a little bit about that as a quartet recording. How did that one come about, and particularly for Clifford Brown?

Lewis: Lem Winchester's from Delaware, and . . .

Brown: Oh. There we go.

Lewis: . . . he knew Clifford Brown. I don't know how he wound up with the Chess people, but they immediately suggested that he make an album with the trio. We met him. He's a very nice guy. He had known Clifford. Clifford was very close to him. So he said, "Do you mind if we make a tribute to Clifford Brown?" I said, "Of course not." He's a wonderful player, as you can tell.

Brown: A vibist, vibraphonist.

Lewis: Yeah, vibraphone. He left us all too soon.

Brown: What happened to him. He's – his name doesn't really show up.

Lewis: He's a very playful guy, very – always laughing. He's a wonderful guy to be around. They said that he was performing somewhere in his hometown – I don't know if it was his hometown, but he was performing. Either it was after hours or whatever. He went behind the bar to get some water or whatever, no big deal, and he opened whatever, and there was a gun. Playful, a very playful guy. He took the gun out and was playing, and put the gun up to his head, and was playing, laughing, and shot himself. Of course it was a shock to everybody, because once you meet Lem Winchester, you love him, because he loved life. He was this happy guy, a wonderful guy to have in the room, besides him being such a wonderful player, having such a big career ahead of him, and to be as young as he was.

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It's interesting that in some cases, that which is one's forte, a fun-loving person, sometimes that being fun-loving, whatever that is, can be a downer. In his case, he was just inquisitive. What's this? What's that?

The session went very smoothly, because we wanted to be there with him, and he was such a great player, all we had to do was just play the music.

Brown: Did you work as a working unit as well?

Lewis: No, no. We just made that album together. We never played any gigs. That was the whole existence of the relationship.

Brown: Then another recording, not too long after that – let me scroll down and get that exact date: a recording with Max Roach in Chicago. Could you talk a little bit about that date?

Lewis: Once again, Max Roach came to town to play the Blue Note in Chicago. The Blue Note to Chicago was like Birdland was to New York. That was the jazz place. There were many, but that was head of the class. It was after the accident.

Brown: I'm showing January 4th, 1958. The accident was in '56.

Lewis: Max was traveling. I think Kenny Dorham was in the band. Daddy-O Daylie knew Max Roach very well. Leonard Chess talked to Max and said, "I want you to do an album." Daddy-O talked to Leonard Chess and got Max to do an album for Leonard Chess. I think it was Daddy-O that suggested that I play piano on the album. I think that I was awestruck. To this day, I don't remember what I played, because there's one of the people that, I mean, was a god. Max Roach? The Max Roach, who played with Charlie Parker? I don't – to this day, I just remember being with him. I remember him sitting on the drums, and the piano was – he'd look over at me, and it was just a wonderful thing. I'll always remember that.

Brown: I bring up these two because, given your extensive discography, these are among the very few where you're a sideman rather than a leader.

Lewis: Yeah. There's another one, once again on the Chess label, that they re-released it on CD and I happened to pick it up. On the liner notes, they said Leonard didn't put enough information in the box where the tapes were, because they took it from when there were LPs, to make them CDs. But they could identify everybody but the piano player. The guy who wrote the notes, he says, "I'm pretty sure it's Barry Harris." It was me. Well, wait a minute. Barry Harris? The great bebop piano player? Ramsey Lewis,

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who's hardly a bebop piano player. I forgot who wrote the notes, but he's supposed to know what's going on.

I took that as a compliment, even though he got the name wrong. I'm the only one who knows. But that was a wonderful thing.

Brown: When Wallace first introduced you to jazz repertoire, who were some of the artists that you feel influenced your direction?

Lewis: No doubt, the Modern Jazz Quartet. I think the reason was because of John Lewis and the classical thing, and Milt Jackson and the blues. So, there it is, classical and gospel. Milt Jackson, gospel, right? So that was just a natural.

But then, Oscar Peterson. Oscar Peterson beat me up. Whoa. It's like getting on a bronco. I'm trying to hold on. I'm not even playing, but this guy – not only is he playing with such clean technique, but he's swinging so hard at any tempo. A medium tempo, there he goes. A tempo that you can't even pop your fingers, there he goes. And it's swinging. That was enough to say, I don't think I want to play jazz, but rather, it became an inspiration.

Later on, when I played London House in Chicago – London House was a piano room, the restaurant, not unlike the Embers in New York. It is a steakhouse and a bar and a piano trio on stage. Marian McPartland, Erroll Garner, George Shearing, Oscar Peterson. We were the house band. Oh boy, to sit there, night after night, and see what he could do to an audience and see what he would do to the piano was truly an inspiration.

One of the other musicians who played there, Eddie Higgins, told me that Oscar told him that, "Find your own niche, and stick with that," because it was easier – easy, after Oscar Peterson played, for you to go up there and try to – and that ain't your thing. But you see what he did to an audience. He said that to Eddie Higgins, but he didn't have to say that to me, because I was impressed with him, but I didn't figure there was any way I could be Oscar Peterson or anywhere near Oscar Peterson. I didn't care to be Oscar Peterson.

I liked the smoothness of George Shearing, and he had a couple hit records. They became very popular. Wallace Burton liked Oscar Peterson – I mean, liked George Shearing. So *Roses of Picardy*, *East of the Sun*, and some of – he says, "Learn those, because we're going to play them," because he wanted to have featured songs in the set that we played for dancing, where the horns leave the stage and it's just the rhythm section. So he says, "Learn *East of the Sun*" and dah dah dah dah.

Bud Powell I admired, but the influence wasn't there, because I came up listening more to the Nat Cole kind of piano playing, more to the Teddy Wilson kind of piano playing. It

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took me a while to get into Bud Powell and even longer to get into Thelonious Monk. In those early days, I guess I'm talking about the romantic piano players. Erroll Garner, George Shearing, Billy Taylor. But then I liked Red Garland, and I like Wynton Kelly, Phineas Newborn, Jr. There were some that didn't have their own big name, but – Bill Evans.

Brown: Ahmad Jamal was already working in this area as well.

Lewis: Ahmad Jamal we liked. I'll never forget. I had been out to see Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing, in fact. I just loved his trio. We were playing at the Cloister Inn. That was in the Maryland Hotel on Delaware and – up the street from where we are right now, [East] Delaware [Place] and [North] Rush [Street]. I had been – this must have been a Tuesday night. No, this must have been Saturday. I think I had gone to see Ahmad either that Wednesday or Thursday, or Tuesday. I was so impressed with his piano playing that I told Eldee and Redd, I said, "Hey, let's play this tune. I heard Ahmad play this." We started playing it, and then I was kind of doing some Ahmad stuff. I looked up, and who should be sitting at the bar but Ahmad Jamal? "Hi, Ramsey." Shoot. Busted. I was so embarrassed. We came off stage, and he was just grinning. He was just laughing. It was fun.

What I liked about Ahmad Jamal and John Lewis was their use of space. Of course, in classical music, you use every device available, including silence. I liked that about Ahmad's playing and John Lewis's playing.

Brown: When you talk about classical piano repertoire, obviously as a student you learned the basics, but did you go beyond that? Were you exploring, say, Debussy or any more contemporary types of piano?

Lewis: Every – we had to learn music from the baroque era, music from the classical era, music from the romantic era, and music from the contemporary era. We had to do that. So, yeah.

Brown: You're saying, as a student of piano? Or you're saying . . .

Lewis: Yeah, as a student of the piano, Dorothy Mendelsohn.

Brown: Rachmaninoff, that gets you to a certain level. But are you getting . . .

Lewis: Yeah. Tchaikovsky, yeah.

Brown: But are you getting to any of the more – are you getting into Schoenberg? Are you getting into anything from the . . . ?

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Lewis: Scriabin. No Schoenberg, but Scriabin.

Brown: Bartok?

Lewis: Bartok, yeah. Dorothy Mendelsohn saw the whole spread of the history of the music.

Brown: What did you like? Did you have a preference for any particular – or maybe particular composers rather than styles?

Lewis: I think – yeah, I liked the Beethoven sonatas. I liked Chopin. I liked Bach. During that period – of course my taste now is much broader and much wider, but as I recall the things that I was studying with Dorothy Mendelsohn – I liked Brahms.

Brown: Intermezzos?

Lewis: Yeah, the intermezzi, as such, but I – the B-flat major piano concerto, which is momentous, I learned that, and I played that with a college symphony orchestra. I can't remember which one it was. We were about to do the D-minor Brahms concerto. But all of it – composers in all the areas.

I would – as I today – right on this piano is a stack of music, and if I went through it, there would be at least seven or eight classical composers. To this day, sometimes when I walk to the piano, I just grab one of those books, put it up there, and just play through it, because I just love the music. Any one particular? No. Depending on what mood I'm in, I'll go to a certain composer, but not because I like him better than him, or I don't like him as good as him.

I probably do not play – I think contemporary, including Ravel and Debussy, was as far modern that I would come. When it got into too much dissonance and more or less avant-garde classical music, as with avant-garde jazz, there's something in me that needs to have dissonances turn into harmonic consonances, turn into – dissonance to me heightens the . . .

Brown: Tension?

Lewis: . . . tension, and I need to be resolved. But in much avant-garde music, in much really modern music, I guess in the composer's mind it's resolved, because he or she will say, well, right here. But I don't feel it. So I go as far as Ravel, Debussy, some Bartok.

Brown: What happened when you heard Monk? How did you . . . ?

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Lewis: The very first time I heard Monk, I didn't think he knew how to play the piano. The very first time I heard Monk, I thought he hadn't practiced very well. But you have to learn to understand Monk. Monk does not come easily. Once you understand and appreciate him, you end up owning most of his CDs, as I do now. Bud Powell came slowly. But Bud was not as – to me at that time, was not as – if you want to use the word avant-garde, using dissonances, as Monk. Now I can hear certain influences in both of them. I can hear the Duke Ellington influence on Monk.

Brown: I was going to ask about Duke as a pianist.

Lewis: Yeah. Because of my dad – in Chicago, when I was a kid, the major movie houses also had stage shows. It was towards the end of the big-band era. At the Chicago Theater, State-Lake Theatre, Oriental Theatre, the Garrick Theatre – mainly Chicago Theater, after the movie, Stan Kenton one time, Duke Ellington another time. Dad was into the big-band stuff.

Then I got to meet Duke – I think we were in Tokyo when I met Duke Ellington. We were outside the hotel – and was very impressed with him as a person. You've heard him on radio and talk, and you've seen him on television and movies, and you hear his music, but to be in his presence and for him to be a kind gentleman as he was, left a mark.

Brown: Was he familiar with you and your work?

Lewis: He complimented me. I didn't ask him, which ones have you really heard?

Brown: Yeah. That might not have been apropos.

Lewis: But he had kind things to say. That was important. As did Nat Cole. That was important.

Brown: How about Count Basie, since you brought up the element of space, and drive and swing.

Lewis: We used to go hear Count Basie's band at the Blue Note. That also is like getting on a horse that you couldn't control. All you had to do is just hold on, because you sit there in the Blue Note and that band would strike up, and Basie with those – he knew how to get the most out of the least – using the least, and rhythm. I loved Count Basie and his band. When he got Joe Williams, who's from Chicago – right? – we all were like, yeah.

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Brown: How about, also associated with Chicago, but maybe a different generation, Fatha Hines?

Lewis: Earl “Fatha” Hines was in my life because of my dad. Earl “Fatha” Hines, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson – my dad brought all that into my life, and that’s how – that’s also the Nat “King” Cole. If you go – if you follow Nat back as a piano player, you get into Teddy Wilson, you get into Earl “Fatha” Hines. To realize that he was one of the first piano players to not use stride a lot. Up until him, stride was the thing. He was one of the first piano players to take out the stride, just play chords, and his right hand was like a horn. So I really appreciated him.

I got to have dinner with him a couple of times. A friend of his was a friend of ours and had him over for dinner. Called me. “Ramsey, you want to meet Earl ‘Fatha’ Hines?” “Yeah.” So I went over. But I remember – fortunately there were several people at the dinner table talking and conversing and asking questions, because I was so taken aback with the fact that there he is, sitting right there, I couldn’t think of anything to say to him, except pleasantries. And of course that wasn’t the time anyway to say, how did you do that when you played that song? He also was quite the gentleman. He was very pleasant.

[end of tape 2; the recording again resumes in mid-sentence.]

Brown: I don’t . . .

Lewis: He’s such a sweet piano player.

Brown: His piano playing reflects him as a person, truly. But that’s so amazing. You talk about all these folks that we know as – they’re larger than life figures – and they’re all – they’re gentlemen. They have that humanity. There’s something there, either in the music or the musical culture, that seems to, if not nurture it, at least keep it alive. I think that that’s one of the things that attracted me to the music, and I think that it makes the music universally attractive to a lot of folks. Not everybody. Not everybody likes jazz. We know George W. Bush didn’t have no jazz in his iPod. But we got Obama with Coltrane in his. So there is – to me, this music that we call or know as jazz has such a foundation of humanity in it. I think that – when I talk to – when I teach my students, I say, this music comes out of the spirituals. It’s got a spiritual base. So, you can talk about blues, yeah. You can talk about ragtime. That – but it’s the spiritual. What’s the first thing that we talk about when we talk about New Orleans jazz? *When the Saints*. Can’t touch it.

This will be a recurring theme during the course of this interview, because that’s one of the things that I feel is being lost or somehow not emphasized enough in this music, to keep that element in it, because it’s being taught in the universities. Perhaps we can talk a little bit about that later. But just so we don’t lose track – you were talking about Kenny

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Barron – are there any artists today that have caught your ear? I mean, there’s a plethora of musicians. Jason Moran has got a lot, and there’s . . .

Lewis: Yeah, there’s all of those, but I don’t know enough about them to talk about them. I like Jason Moran, and I like – the bass player’s son.

Kimery: John Clayton?

Lewis: John Clayton’s son, and I like – there’s two other piano players that are around that same age that I like. In time, I think they’re going to develop into something unique. They’re different. I like the fact that these guys – I can’t remember their names. You just named one of them – besides Clayton is the one you named.

Kimery: Jason Moran?

Lewis: Jason Moran. Then there’s one or two others.

Brown: If I think about – at one point there was an influx of a lot of Latin players, like Danilo Pérez . . .

Lewis: Whom I love.

Brown: Gonzalo Rubalcaba . . .

Lewis: Whom I dearly love. But they’re a little older than . . .

Brown: That’s true, they are. We were talking about Jason as the next – the younger generation. Then Vijay Iyer now . . .

Lewis: That’s what I mean. When these younger ones get as old as Danilo and Rubalcaba, they’re going to be even better. I like them, even now, but I can hear youthful things that need a little polishing here, a little polishing there. When you’re young, sometimes it’s “Ma, look, no hands.” I think you have to grow out of that. When you’re young [*sic*: older], you can say the same thing with less notes. It’s like if you’re making a speech, a verbal speech, and it’s a wonderful topic, a wonderful subject, and you look good, and you present it well, but it takes you a long time to get to the point. You look out at the audience, and they begin – they’re not in that class. I shouldn’t have taken that. But what I’m saying is, I can see that in time, there are certain things that they are going to refine and be the next generation, after Rubalcaba and Danilo Pérez.

I think that the issue that we’re addressing – trying to address nowadays, though, is the disappearance of places to play. That’s how you get the kinks out of it. I can’t think of a

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better word. A musician, not matter what he plays, needs to perform. You can practice in your hotel room or in your practice room in your house 10 hours a day for 10 years, but if you don't get the experience of sharing that and getting the experience of how it was accepted or not accepted, or what was the feedback – and the feedback can be the audience – you can feel when you have an audience. You can feel – you can look at their body language. In the old days, people sitting around the bandstand, if your thing wasn't right, they'd turn their back to the bandstand and start talking to – and you're playing whatever. So that says, oh, okay, all right. But you need that, because the practice room tells you, wow. Then your buddies coming by the practice room, listen to you, say, wow. But not until the strangers sitting out there in Cleveland, Ohio, or "Podunk," Iowa, wherever it is, and you get up there and do what you do.

So I think that's so important. But we're running out of places for people to perform, and that's not good for the music. What happens is the music gets a little too academic, because it gets into just learning how to play jazz. It gets into, I have a degree in jazz. It gets into playing for each other. That doesn't help the music evolve. That doesn't help the music propel forward. That doesn't help those youngsters today – youngsters meaning teenagers and those youngsters in their 20s that have finished school, that are beginning to come into their own – it doesn't help them move into, who's the next Herbie Hancock? Who's the next Kenny Garrett? Who's the next? They're out there, but we have to hear them. They have to have that period in their life, in their career, where they can get up in front of people, do what they do, and get that response, or non-response, to say, oh, this is where I lost them. Why did I lose them?

You might say the air conditioner broke, and so they were – that might be the case. Their mind was somewhere else. But after so many audiences in a row, when you get to this certain song or this part of your solo or whatever, and you get that same reaction of, ummm, that tells you something. Back to the drawing board.

This goes back into education, because kids don't understand about this music we call jazz. Kids don't understand about the blues. Kids don't understand about gospel music. Kids don't understand about New Orleans. Kids don't understand that this music we call jazz is our contribution to world culture. We can't say ballet. We can't say opera. We can't – what do we got? We have jazz. But we're getting to the point in the history of this music where we're unconsciously disowning it. That group of people that the music was spun from – although anybody can play it now, if they've done their homework – that group of people that the music was spun from, those people, that group now, they're saying that they don't need music in their schools. In fact, they don't need as many teachers as they got. They don't need. They don't need. So there are less kids coming into jazz from the African-American standpoint. There are probably more people playing jazz now that are not African-American, than are. I think that has a lot to do with our education system.

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But it still doesn't address what's happening today. There are enough musicians of all colors playing jazz that need a place to play in their hometown, places to play. I don't know if churches should open up their basements and say, come play here on Saturday night. Come play here on Friday night. I don't know if community leaders, especially musicians and educators, shouldn't make a deal with YMCAs. I don't know if the park districts should – but see, it's got to start with community leaders. Well, it's the damn community leader's that's allowing the politicians to say, you don't need art, you don't need music, you don't need as many teachers as you got. So this thing sort of feeds on itself, and it's the same people who throw up their arms and say, how come? – how come we all . . . ? – and they don't realize that they are part of the answer, but they are part of the problem. How do we change this? Why can't we see it?

Brown: This is the quandary that we are faced with. We are practitioners and purveyors of an art form that is – has consistently not been appreciated in the place of its birth. At least, when it got into the mainstream, as long as it was in the community, it was appreciated. Now that it's in the mainstream, it has lost its foundation, I think what I was trying to refer to, as far as its humanity and its speaking to, again, those things that you admired in Duke Ellington as a gentleman, Count Basie, or Fatha Hines, any of these people who were there when it was being created, who kept the human spirit in it, that kept the essence of the music.

When we think of Duke Ellington, he went back later in life. He always was very spiritual, but later in life, he wanted to make sure that he was expressing that in his music, and he foregrounded that in his sacred concerts.

It seems like – I'm jumping ahead, but it seems like that's something that's coming out in your larger works. We'll talk about that when we get to it, because you seem to be dealing with philosophical and broader concepts, themes, in your music. It seems like you're reaching out through the music. So we'll talk about that.

But this is a recurring theme, and I'm really grateful that you're able to articulate that, so that young students coming up and even players that are active today can understand what the essence of this music is about and why it seems to be undermined.

I wanted to return to the chronology, but this subject is so dear and near to my heart, because we – I'm approaching 60. I've invested 30 years in this music, and now I'm trying to teach it. What I'm trying to teach the students is how to appreciate where it came from, not just the notes, but what was the impetus to create this music. That has a cultural grounding as well, but we have to look at the American experience. We're back to "My country tis of thee" versus "Our country tis of thee."

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What – through you watching and being an active participant in the music – what – maybe I shouldn’t even ask this question, because I think you’re already doing it. Like I said, you in your music now, in your larger works, you are addressing these larger themes. You are incorporating a spirituality, even though it’s not blatant, it’s not didactic, but it resonates with me when I see the *Colors* – the concert – when I see you do the *Proclamation*, the dedication to Abraham Lincoln 200 years, you’re bringing these . . .

Lewis: How did you know about *Colors*?

Brown: How do I know about *Colors*? The one that you premiered at the Blue Note in Tokyo and that – you’re talking about that? How do I know about it? Well, I hope I did my homework. Otherwise, I shouldn’t be sitting here.

Lewis: Shut my mouth.

Brown: We’ll take this opportunity to come back and talk to this meeting, this relationship with Maurice White. Of course Maurice goes on to form Earth, Wind and Fire, moves them out to Los Angeles, becomes the supergroup of the ’70s. What was your relationship? You talked about him being a nice guy, and he was always picking your brain for how to deal with the business or how to deal with the music. Could you talk a little bit more about the relationship? Because it’s an ongoing relationship, whether it was consistent, but it still seems to be ongoing. *Sun Goddess*, that became an anthem when I was in college. So, that – if you could talk about that, I think that would be something that . . .

Lewis: Maurice and I also became brothers in the search, the search for meaning, the meaning of life, the meaning of spirituality. When we meet each on the road, or phone, he would say, “Have you read” this book? I would say, well, “Have you read” this book? He would expound on how he felt this person was really getting to the essence of what spirituality means. We had that sort of relationship. Were we on the phone every week? No, no. But we stayed close.

It was on the phone that – if he had not called me in Washington, D.C., there wouldn’t have been a *Sun Goddess*. As he left the group, my group, as things progressed, he would call me. “Hey, Ramsey, we got a record deal with Warner Bros. Yeah, we’re going to do the – I’m going to move to L.A. now. Hey, Ramsey, . . .”

I’ll never forget the time he was so exalted, he was so – he said, “We open for” – they were in Philadelphia at the Spectrum or whatever, the big 20,000-seater, and they opened for Sly [Stone]. He said, “We killed them.” He said, “We burned the stage down.” He was like . . .

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I'm recording this album in Chicago, and I knew that we had to stop for a couple days, because I had a concert to play in Washington, D.C. So we did. We went and played this concert. Before we left Washington, Maurice called. "Hey, what you doing?" "I'm in Washington. Actually, I'm recording an album." He says, "You are?" He says, "We're in New York. We just played" – I think Madison Square Garden or somewhere, because that was during the time when they were huge. He was headlining. So he was excited about that. But he said, "I got this tune. It's instrumental. We're not doing a lot of instrumentals now. We're definitely into vocals. But it could be a hit." I said, "Really? I'm interested." He said, "No, you don't understand. This could be bigger than *The In Crowd*." I said, "What?" He said, "Ramsey, I'm telling you. This" – he says, "You want it?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "In fact, I'm going back to the studio when I leave here." He said, "If you want, we're in New York. Some of us – I can bring Philip and Verdine and Johnny Graham. We'll stop in Chicago and record it with you." Does it get any better than this? I say, yeah.

So that happens. He comes to Chicago. We spent about three days on this tune, because he wanted it to be – he wanted the rhythm just right. He wanted – finally, he said okay, this is your next record. It was happening. "What are you going to name it?" He says, "It's called *Hot Dog It*." I said, "*Hot Dog It*. Okay." It was bad. He says, "Oh, oh. I have this other melody. It's just a 16-bar melody. That's all I got. But it's got nice chord changes, and it's got like a Brazilian r-and-b rhythm. But to make up the difference, you can just have people solo." Donald Myrick lived in Chicago. "He plays saxophone. We can have Donald come down and play on it. You play on it."

It ended up being a nine-minute tune. So we just put it on the album. But he said, "Still, it needs some words. We don't have any words." He said, "But the human voice." He said, "Me and Phil are going to go out. We're just going to say 'way-oh, way-oh'." I said, okay. It went out there. To this day, the beginning – they went out and put the voices on, but to this day, the beginning of that song, people hear him say "on the solo," but they think he's saying, "I want a solo." But he's out there overdubbing the clave, and Paul Serrano, the engineer, is asking, "Where do you want to put it?" He's saying, "On the solo." They leave that on there.

Okay. So he doesn't have a name for it. He had a name for *Hot Dog It*, but this one, he hadn't even thought about it. So he hadn't named it. Granny [Granville] White, who used to be the r-and-b, jazz – he used to live in Chicago – promotion guy for Columbia Records, his son was there. His son said something about sun or goddess, one of those words, and Maurice said, "We'll just call it *Sun Goddess*. Besides, you got the hit, and this is nine-minutes long. No way."

The rest is history. We put *Hot Dog It* out as a single, sent it to radio. Three stations played it. My mother and my father bought copies. The stations stopped playing it. But

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the album was running out of stores. People were coming and buying the album like it was a single record. It was just, couldn't keep them in stock. What's going on? People – some jazz stations could play longer cuts. So they were playing the long cut of *Sun Goddess*, and people started buying it. Of course, the rest is history, as they say.

Brown: You got two historical peaks – at least two, if not many more, but definitely *In Crowd* and then *Sun Goddess*. It's like, whew. And then that reference to "on the solo," you put it out on your recent re-make. You still begin the tune with that.

Lewis: I'm over in Japan last year, and we play the Blue Note there. We've been playing it for some time. He says, "Ramsey, I want you to come back next year." I said, "Great." He says, "But have you ever thought of putting your electric band back together?" I've been playing with a trio – there was a trio, and then there was this period in the '70s, because of *Sun Goddess*, that I put the electric band together to be able to play *Sun Goddess*. I kept the electric band, and others – I needed voices too – I kept it together for 4, 5, 6 years. It just – I went back to the trio. So maybe for the last 15 years I'm playing trio. I get to Japan last year, and he says, "Do you ever think . . . ?" I said, "I'll think about it."

Got back to Chicago. I mentioned it to my wife. She says, "Well, it's not a bad idea," and I say, "I'll think about it." Two weeks later, my agent calls. He says, "Ramsey" – now this is last year – "we're thinking about 2011, 2012. We've been talking to some performing arts centers and presenters and producers, and *Sun Goddess* and/or your electric band keeps coming up." I said, "Have you talked to Rio Natsume in Japan?" He says, "No. You know, that's Marilyn's territory. I don't talk to her territory." I said, "That's really interesting." I said, "Let me think about it."

Now we're approaching the holidays. After the holidays, I got some guys together, electric guys, and we went – I said, "Let's just play. Let's just jam. Let's just see what happens." We did that, and it felt so good, so good, that I decided I would do it. So I said, okay. He says, "What's coming back to me is that *Sun Goddess* period." I say, "Really." I said, "What" – he says, "You should call the tour the *Sun Goddess* tour with Ramsey Lewis and his electric band." I said all right. Whom am I to tell him . . . ? – he's selling me. He's giving me gigs. Who am I to tell him, don't call it that. If he feels he can get a bunch of gigs calling it the *Sun Goddess* tour . . .

I'm sitting here. My son was sitting there. We're talking about what's going to be on the album. We said this song, that song, this song, the next song. Then my son says, "You know you got to put *Sun Goddess* on it." I said, "We can't record *Sun Goddess*." I mean, who – I'd be a fool to take a band, a group of guys, into a studio and record *Sun Goddess*, and Earth, Wind and Fire – we've already done that. We can't top that. He says, "Yeah, you can." We went back and forth, back and forth. Finally, we looked at each other and

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said – the light came on – we’ll license the original and put that on the album, and that legitimizes the *Sun Goddess* tour. So that’s how it ended up on there.

Brown: But there’s a 2000 release where it says *Sun Goddess 2000*.

Lewis: Oh right. Urban Knights. That’s Urban Knights. That’s not – I don’t think that’s Ramsey Lewis. That’s Urban Knights, right?

Brown: Um-hmm.

Lewis: Yeah, that’s him again. That’s my son. He had the bright idea that there could be a *Sun Goddess* re-recorded. We found out the hard way that there’s only one.

[recording interrupted; it resumes in mid-sentence]

Brown: . . . an extended relationship with Chess Records, Argo, Cadet, and all those. But here’s one of those classics. If you could hold this one up, we can talk about *The Best of*. What captures me about this picture, other than your family, is the way you’re dressed. It looks like you have a reverend’s collar on, but I’m not sure. Is that a Nehru jacket, or what?

Lewis: That was during a period – a very short period – that the Nehru jacket was popular. I don’t know why I chose to put on a Nehru jacket. Then I had on a white, fake, mock turtleneck. Yeah, it comes off very religious.

Brown: But I presume, as we mentioned earlier, that this is your family at the time. The title of this record is *The Best of Ramsey Lewis*, which is probably most apropos, as it’s family. I guess this is the seven kids, with one right here. That’s all of them.

Lewis: Yeah, exactly. Those are the seven, and I have 13 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Brown: What about the relationship with Phil and Leonard Chess. A lot of people soured on that relationship. They talked about certain things. But some people have different relationships.

Lewis: I don’t know what you mean, soured on it.

Brown: Some people – what I referenced earlier, that Muddy Waters was out there painting his house when – I think when Keith Richards came to visit. Come to Chess Records to pay homage. He comes by, and there’s Muddy Waters, painting. And the

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assumption – you mentioned Sonny. Maybe that’s Sonny Boy Williamson, working the stockroom. So I don’t know. But perhaps you just shared . . .

Lewis: I think that Daddy-O Daylie – Holmes Daylie was his name. His personality, his radio name, was Daddy-O. He was an advantage to us in many ways. Our business with the Chess people, fortunately Daddy-O, not that he was our business representative, but he would always say, “Make sure you” and then he’d fill in the blank. “Now when you do the” – “make sure” – it was always “make sure.” I learned early on that I’d rather have a royalty statement than a Cadillac. I learned early on that I’d rather have a royalty statement than a new watch, that kind of stuff. Daddy-O advised us. Because of his position with media – on-air personalities couldn’t manage and be in cahoots or connections with record companies, but he could advise artists. We didn’t know anything about it. He said things like, “I think you guys should get an advance on your next record. Go in and ask for \$60,000.” “Really?” In those days, \$60,000 was – right now, it would be like going and ask for \$300,000, or something like that. Or, “What was your last statement? Maybe you should get \$100,000 advance.”

So it got to the point where our business relationship was healthy, because of what went on before us. We didn’t know. Maybe without Daddy-O, maybe we would have taken a car. I don’t know. When you’re coming up in those days. I know a lot of artists down there did.

I think that Phil and Leonard came from humble means also. So their business dealings were not as if they had gone to MIT. They just wanted to get it done. So I don’t have a horror story to tell about Chess people, any more than what I heard also. We didn’t encounter anything that I could say went amiss.

Brown: That’s good. I wasn’t looking for a horror story. I just wanted to know what your relationship was, given the longevity of your . . .

Lewis: Yeah, we were there for – 19 years? I was at Columbia 19 years. I think I was with one of those companies 16 years and another company 19 years.

Brown: You started recording with them in ’56, and then you go on Columbia. I’ve seen two different accounts for Columbia. I saw the earliest discography said 1970, but then the Columbia reissue *Best of Ramsey Lewis* says it starts in ’72.

Lewis: I think it was ’70, ’71.

Brown: That’s what the discography shows, right?

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Lewis: Yeah, '70, '71. So between those two companies, that was my major – because I think I've only been with, now, maybe five record companies in the 60 years that I've been in the business.

Brown: Columbia, I guess, that would have been the George Butler era? No

Lewis: Yeah, yeah. I was there when George Butler was there.

Brown: Dr. George.

Lewis: Dr. George, indeed.

Brown: Was he instrumental in bringing you in? Or was . . . ?

Lewis: No. I got there before George Butler.

Brown: That's right, in '70.

Lewis: Yeah, I was there. Clive Davis brought me in.

Brown: Still close? Or still . . . ?

Lewis: No, no. I haven't talked to Clive in years. I didn't know him well then. Somebody suggested to him, this is a group that should be on our label. So, "Ramsey, this is Clive Davis." From that point on, I think I might have seen him two or three times. Somebody else took over.

Brown: But with George, when George came on board, George Butler came on board . . .

Lewis: He was the guy. He was the head of the jazz department. Very – George Butler was very easy to work with, very helpful, very well dressed, very well mannered. George was a nice guy.

Brown: I know his sister, Jackie Hairston, in Oakland.

Lewis: In Oakland.

Brown: She's very well mannered, very well dressed.

Lewis: Yes.

Brown: It runs in the family.

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I noticed in reviewing your discography that in 1983 there was the reunion record, speaking of Columbia, that brought the old trio back together.

Lewis: Yeah, right. It had been some energy put behind us coming together to do another album. Finally, everybody agreed. It came off very well. I wish we had put more time into rehearsing and writing some new music. But I think everybody was busy. So we got together. In fact, I think we played – we might have played a couple jobs together.

Brown: The recording itself is a live recording.

Lewis: Okay.

Brown: At George's, it says.

Lewis: Ah, that's how that happened.

Brown: Live at George's, Chicago, 1983.

Lewis: Right.

Brown: So you're back where you started.

Lewis: Right. That was fun. It was fun getting back with the guys. As I listen to that, some of the original trio records, there was a unique sound there. There was a unique – the three of us had a sound. We were in it. We didn't realize what that sound was. But now, every now and then, a record will come up. I have an iPod. I've got some things on there. One of those will come up, and I'll say yeah, it was – the three of us made some good music together.

Brown: Are they both gone now?

Lewis: No, just Eldee passed away. In fact I talked to Redd last week – the week before last. He's doing fine.

Brown: Is he still playing?

Lewis: Yeah. He's plays regularly every week. He's playing over at East Bank Club, and he's playing over at Bandera's on Michigan Avenue. He's doing well.

Brown: Good for him.

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We saw the missus just came in. So we can probably wrap this up shortly, not keep you from your family.

In looking at some of the credits on your recordings – this one is the *Songs from the Heart: Ramsey plays Ramsey* – I notice the assistant producer. Is it Frayne Lewis? Did I pronounce that correctly?

Lewis: Um-hmm.

Brown: Could you talk about – I presume that’s a blood relationship?

Lewis: That’s my son. He’s the producer on the one – *Taking Another Look*, yeah, that one. He’s produced eight or nine of my albums.

Brown: How did he get in the business? Did you mentor him like, say, . . .

Lewis: Frayne used to play bass. Then, he has a brother named Kevin Lewis. Kevin used to produce commercials for radio and television.

Brown: Are both of these on there?

Lewis: Yeah, there’s Kevin, and there’s Frayne in the lap. That’s Frayne.

Brown: Oh. So he’s the baby son, I guess.

Lewis: No, the baby is Bobby. Bobby’s not here yet.

Brown: Okay. So, second youngest.

Lewis: Bobby was still in heaven. Frayne is on my lap.

So he got a taste of being in the control room because of his older brother. Then, when I started doing things, he would hang out. I forgot – on some record, I said, okay, you can produce this tune or something. Anyway, it went well. I said, okay, you can do these tunes. It got to the point where I said, you can do the whole album. He has a good memory. He has a good feel for sound. He knows me, because he’s been hearing me all his life. And he’s not afraid to say, “Dad, I think you could do a better one.” So he’s a good person, and he protects. I don’t think my father would like that. He’s . . .

Brown: Did any of your children follow in your footsteps as far as being pianists?

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Lewis: No. I gave all of them piano lessons, and they all stayed in there for a couple years, three years, or whatever it was. They all went in another direction.

Brown: How many pursued musically-related careers?

Lewis: Frayne – and Kelly. Kelly wants to play. He’s in school. He went back to school. He’s getting his degree, and he loved to play, but he doesn’t have a career.

Brown: Speaking of school, I saw one reference in a biography. It said that you completed your degree at DePaul. Is that correct?

Lewis: No.

Brown: Okay, good. That what we – that’s one of the reasons for the oral history, is to correct the historical record.

Lewis: No. Dorothy Mendelsohn left Chicago Musical College, which became Roosevelt University. When it became the university, I think she stayed there a minute, and then she went to teach at DePaul University. I followed her. So DePaul owns me. Roosevelt University owns me.

Brown: It’s nice to be loved.

Lewis: You know what I mean?

Brown: Okay, we can stop on that. No, that’s one of the reasons for this, because they’ll put – people will say whatever.

Today is day two, September 30th [*sic*: 29th (confirmed by Kimery)], 2011, of the NEA Jazz Master oral history interview with pianist, arranger, composer, educator, media personality, and humanitarian Ramsey Lewis in his – returning to his home here in Chicago.

Are you feeling all right this day?

Lewis: I feel good.

Brown: You look good, look like you’re ready for another interrogation.

Lewis: I am. Now I’m ready for you. I didn’t know what to expect yesterday. You’re very thorough.

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Brown: This is the official record. This is the Ramsey Lewis story. So when people want to know about Ramsey Lewis, hopefully they'll come to this, rather than some of that – some of those other, as we have come to know, are flawed historical documents about your life. We have to get it from the source. That's what we are trying to do today. We would like to focus on some of the things in the latter half of your career, not to say that your career is finite, because as we know, you continue to be a multi-disciplinarian, and we want to talk about all the facets of your career.

I think we left talking about that Redd Holt is still holding down the fort, still playing.

Lewis: Yes he is.

Brown: I think that's where we left off. Off mic we were talking about someone who looms large in the legacy of the jazz tradition, and that was Billy Taylor. So we might want to start with talking about Billy Taylor and of course the duet album that you both performed on, *We Meet Again*. So maybe we'll talk about the first meeting, and then we can bring it to this CD.

Lewis: One of the piano players that I chose to study and listen to when I was 16, 17 years old, to get a feel for "what-is-this-thing-called-jazz?" was Billy Taylor. I was impressed with his approach to the piano, his ability and technique to get over the piano with ease, his harmonic sense, which is gorgeous. It's beautiful. That went on, listening to his records, for 3, 4, 5, years.

In my early 20s, I guess it was, we got an opportunity to make an album with Chess brothers. We talked about that and how Daddy-O Daylie set that up. Once again, all the jazz musicians who came to town would say hello to Daddy-O, pay respects to Daddy-O, or he'd go see them, or whatever, because he was the man. Since he had helped us along and got us this date, while Billy was playing London House, headlining London House, our date happened. Daddy-O called us and said, "I'm bringing Billy Taylor by the session." For maybe a few seconds, I was like, really? It's the first record session, the first affair. But then I relaxed in, Ramsey, you can only do what you can do. Who you are is who you are. So there it is.

Billy was such a nice person. It was my first time meeting him. The complete gentleman. He knew it was our first session. So he was very encouraging and very supportive. One thing that got my attention, he says, "Let me check out the piano you got here." He sat down. We had been playing – one of the songs we were going to play was *I'll Remember April*. The traditional key that everybody plays *I'll Remember April* in is G, although you experiment playing all songs in all keys. But you end up playing one that's most comfortable for you. Billy sat down and played *I'll Remember April* in the key of B. Well, in those days, early on, many musicians did not play – especially piano players – in

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the key of B. Or if you went to the key of B, you didn't stay there very long. Okay? *I'll Remember April* goes through various chord progressions. He just went through the whole song solo. He says, "Oh yeah, this is a pretty good piano. Yeah." So thanks Billy. Thanks a lot.

But then he went on to be very encouraging, very supportive, knew that we were going to make a wonderful album. Then we were wondering, I wonder if he's going to stay? Here's this giant, and it's our first album. He was kind enough, "I can't stay. I'd love to stay, but I've got to get downtown" and do this, that, and the other, "and wish you the best."

That was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. That was in the '50s. Whenever Billy Taylor came to town, we would go see him, just a wonderful guy. Years went by like that. If I had an occasion to play New York, he would come, Village Gate, Village Vanguard. Billy Taylor would come down. He had us up to his house a couple times for dinner and met Eudora, a wonderful lady.

Things went along that way until I had an opportunity to be on the radio. I'd never – other than interviews, I never had my show. What is that? But I knew Billy Taylor had. So I called Billy Taylor. He was not only supportive, but instructive in a very simple way. I'll never forget. I think about it all the time now. He says, "Ramsey, if you've been a good person, and you are, if you're true to yourself, and I know you try to be, you can only be who you are. Whether you're on radio, whether you're walking down the street, whether you're sitting at the dinner table with your family or at the dinner table with strangers, you can only be who you are. So get comfortable, if you're not already, with who you are, and let that be who your radio audience says hello to as you say hello to them." That was so comforting, that I didn't have to think about, how do you talk if you're a host? Can you be yourself and be casual? How do you? How do you? How do you? So that was so very helpful. He called later and says, "How'd it go?" I said, "It went well." He said, "I knew it would."

We would talk. We began talking. From that point on, which goes back maybe 20 years or more, we began talking more often, just in general principle. So I got to know him a little more personally, his family. So the next time he was very, very helpful. We began doing the two-piano concerts, and he said, "Okay, we're going to do this thing."

How it happened, Billy Taylor had a t.v. show on Bravo. The show consisted of him being the host and a pianist, and he would invite other pianists to be interviewed, and then, "Let's play something," he would say. That went so well – it was a half-hour show, and we did enough actually, he said, for two shows, if he wanted to do that – but it went so well that we both – after the shooting was over, we were both saying, wow, that was fun. That was really fun. He said, "Yeah, maybe we should do something together." We

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said, why don't we? So he said, "I'm going to call my agent. You call yours, and they'll get together." They did that.

Our first concert was in Kansas City – Kansas City, Missouri, I think. Or was it Kansas City, Kansas? It might have been Kansas City, Kansas.

Brown: Was it Gem? Was it Gem Theater?

Lewis: No.

Brown: No, this is long before that.

Lewis: No, no. The city was giving a free jazz concert out in the park. When we got there and saw this expansive park that people were going to come to, first of all – fortunately, still in those days, jazz was very popular. We figured we'd draw a pretty good crowd. But in a park, where people are coming with their coolers and their sandwiches and their kids, we were wondering, do we need drums and bass and something to give the people – we got over there and we said, well, once again, we are who we are, we do what we do. Let's go do it.

I'll be darned if we didn't have thousands of people quiet down. They got into our music, so much so that we had a ball playing. We had a ball communicating with them. He began helping me there, because up until then, with my trio, I didn't talk to the audience much. I would say good evening, glad you're here. I don't even know if I would say the first song. I would say, "We're going to play for you." Throughout the show, the presentation, I'm sure I introduced the guys, but I didn't have a developed repartee with the – Billy said, "Ramsey, you can talk about the music, the composer, or what the song means to you," because he said, "We should introduce each song, and we should alternate. You introduce one. I introduce one."

Not only in our first – after – that fun concert was out in the park. The next concert I think was in Minneapolis at the Guthrie Theater. After the concert, he says, "Ramsey, you don't have to do that. We're equals up here." Because during the concert, I said how great it was to be able to play with the great Billy Taylor – something like that. He bowed, and he was kind and all that, but afterwards he says, "We're equals here. You don't have to go there." That helped me a lot. Then introducing the pieces, if it's Cole Porter, if it's Duke Ellington, whoever, you say a bit about that, and here we go. That was very helpful.

Then came the television shows, a few years later. Once again, I called Dr. Billy Taylor. Before he got his doctorate, I knew him many years. As people began calling him Dr.

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Billy Taylor, I respected that, but I still called him Billy Taylor, which he didn't mind. Whatever you called him, as long as you didn't call him bad names. He's a nice guy.

With television, he says, "Now Ramsey, this is not too much different than radio. You got to remember that the camera's on you. So you might want to check what you're wearing out, and you might want to have a pleasant smile and get your hair cut. But once again, the work that you've done with yourself, with your life, with your relationship to people, your family, what you feel, is all you are. You can't be more than that, and you can't be less, because that's what it is. So be comfortable with that and let the camera see that." And it worked. I relaxed. I had already been interviewing people, because I had a radio show before this. So interviewing was no problem. But it's a little different interviewing someone with the camera on. After the first couple shows – we did 13 shows – after the first couple shows, it was very easy to do. We had people who had stories to tell. Dave Brubeck. We had – not Return to Forever, but Chick Corea. All the big names, Nancy Wilson, lots of good people.

He taught me that an important part of interviewing is listening. He says, "Occasionally you're going to run into people who are going to answer your question with 'no' and 'yes.' So be prepared to move on. But most of the time" – and he was right – "most of the time you ask the question after you have done your homework, and then you become a listener." He said, "You don't always have to follow your script. If you have ten questions, but this person seems to have a viewpoint or an interesting opinion about something, you might want to go off in that direction and let that person express what that is." He's right. He was totally right. That all worked so well. Many times, interviewing, I just dropped the last three or four questions, because we used it just following the person being interviewed. So that worked very well.

Then, as I got into composing – Billy Taylor is a great composer. I don't know if he's composed thousands of songs. Probably. But he's been writing for a long time. He just loves to write. He's passed on now, but I still think of him in the present tense. He would just write because he felt like writing. One time we were playing a concert together. He brought something. He says, "I'm not finished with this yet, but this is for Art Tatum." The name of it was *Art Tatum*. He'd written an arrangement of it for two pianos. It was just thrilling.

When I started getting into long form, I wrote the ballet, and I sent him the music. Once again, he was so supportive. "Oh, wow," this and that. Coming from him, as an experienced composer, it was very supportive, very encouraging. It was part of that encouragement and part of that acceptance as a composer by Billy Taylor that said, all right, I think I can do this, and I moved on to a couple other long-form works, which now – I used to write a song or two depending on a project coming up. I have an album to do. So I'll write a song or two. At the end of the year, maybe I wrote three or four songs. But

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now, composition is an important part of my musical life, maybe, I was about to say, equal to – but maybe even equal to performing, because composing, in certain instances, is performing slowed down. You think of these ideas. When you're performing, they come and go like that, and it's gone. Either it came off the way you wanted it to, or it didn't. But it's too late. It's gone.

In composing, you want to write this wonderful melody. You write it. The next day you come back and you play it. You have the opportunity to say, not quite what I wanted. You have the opportunity to play with and change it. It still comes from that same source, that same spigot, if you will, that if you're fortunate, you can turn it on. Sometimes it will, and sometimes it turns itself on. You have to get up during the night and say, I don't want to lose this. I can't tell you how many times – I stopped doing it – how many times that something came to me, and it came so strongly during the night, that I'd lay there and I'd sing it to myself over and over and over and over and over again, and I'd go back to sleep. Next day, I'd run to the piano, and it wasn't there. It wasn't there. So I've learned now that either get up and write it down, or – now because I compose so much during the day, little things come, but they're feelings. They don't come as notes. So I don't wake up during the night with these notes that I must write down. Feelings are easier to retain. What group of notes support this feeling? Where am I trying to go with this?

So Billy Taylor in many ways was a wonderful friend and very supportive of what I do. I was fortunate enough for the family to ask me to speak at his funeral. It wasn't a funeral. It was a memorial service. I wasn't surprised to see thousands of people in the church, standing outside the church, and everyone only had the best to say about Billy Taylor, and of course I was one of them.

Brown: Thank you for sharing your experiences with Billy. As everyone in this room, we are all jazz musicians, and we all have been touched by the grace of Billy Taylor, because he was such an advocate for the music, such an astounding performer, artist, everything. And here we are sitting in the room with Ramsey Lewis, who to me is cut from the same cloth as Billy Taylor.

Lewis: One other thing about Billy Taylor is, we started this two-piano thing. He says, "Okay, I'm going to take a chorus, and you take a chorus." I tried to change a bit, because his chorus was who Billy Taylor is. He said, "Wait a minute, Ramsey. Just play the way you play." He says, "What I hear in your music is that classical training, that gospel training. Don't try to do what I'm doing." Now this is only 25 years ago, and I've already established who and what I am, but with Billy Taylor, and him playing, he says, "That's what's unique about you, is what you bring to the table."

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That freed me up in many, many ways, because when I first started recording – it’s funny. From album 1 through album 16, we were the new breath of fresh air on the scene. Album 17 became a huge hit. That had *The In Crowd* in it. All of a sudden, the jazz police were like, “Who are these guys? What do they think they’re doing?” But Billy Taylor encouraged me to just continue, because they couldn’t pigeonhole us, as I recall, even the first several albums, because of our music. Fortunately, both Eldee and Redd like gospel music too. We didn’t play gospel albums, but you could hear this in our music. A lot of them called it the blues and funk and all this other stuff, but actually, especially Redd was definitely into gospel music, and I was into gospel music.

And I was into classical music. Redd and Eldee said, yeah man, go on and write that piece. It sounds real classical, but we’d love to play it. So those first several albums, there were times when critics just didn’t know what pigeonhole. They needed to put you – is it post-bop? Is it bebop? Is it swing? When it didn’t fit, sometimes they would say nice things. But Billy Taylor explained what that was all about. So, thanks to him, I think I became so comfortable with myself, that that’s how these long-form works, I was able to compose them, and when they went off in that direction, that’s the way I felt, and I don’t care who doesn’t feel it. Here it is. Thanks, Billy. Thank you so much.

Brown: Yeah, we all pay our respects to Billy.

I wanted to return to those late ’50s, when you are bringing your gospel influence into the piano. Recently the Smithsonian jazz anthology came out, and I was asked to write some of the articles about some of the pieces. I chose *Moanin’*. So Bobby Timmons, and Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. I had to do some research on what became known as soul jazz, Jimmy Smith also coming out. Did you feel you were in that same company? Or was that you felt was just happenstance, or perhaps there’s a relationship, but it might just be coincidental or tangential to what you felt your . . . ?

Lewis: To this day, and even in those early days, I never categorized me and said, oh, put me in this group. I never, as I contemplated a new album or contemplated writing a song, said to myself, okay, I’m a gospel-classical guy. So I got to make sure this is gospel-classical. I don’t think that way today, and I didn’t think that way then. I just felt what I felt, wrote what I wrote, and played what I played. Others decided to say, oh, these guys belong together over here, and these guys belong together over here, which might help in terms of retail stores needing bins and categories. But I always felt that listeners should make up their own minds as to how they felt about music, and they didn’t need to be told how this is soul, this is pseudo-soul, and this is whatever. So, during those years, I never approached my music with any thoughts in mind as to, now, where will this go?

Brown: I was referencing pretty much the gospel influence that was coming. We look at Ray Charles. Already by 1956, *Hallelujah, I love her so*. Just that one pronoun changed it

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from being a gospel tune to being an r-and-b tune. So there seemed to have been, if not a zeitgeist, at least an influx of the gospel church influence into the music, and Jimmy Smith.

Lewis: Ray Charles was an influence. I think the reason he was an influence is because early Ray Charles, he was doing Charles Brown. He was doing Nat Cole. Right? But then he found this thing. He took gospel music as a source, and he did it so well. You're right. Those songs, *Drown in My Own Tears* and *The Nighttime is the Right Time* and – the list goes on and on. I bought all of his records, because I think he touched me in that place where, when I was playing in our church and the people would testify, or they would sing, and I was so young. He touched something there. In fact, I recorded a song called *Salute to Ray Charles*, a long time ago.

Brown: Did you get to know him?

Lewis: I think I met Ray Charles once, but no, I did not get to know him.

Brown: Let's go back to the beginning of your media personality career. How did you get to become a radio announcer or personality?

Lewis: Good. Yvonne Daniels lived in Chicago. I think she was from St. Louis, but she lived in Chicago. She had been in radio down there. She moved up here, and she became a force in radio. This is after Daddy-O Daylie. She had a morning show. As I recall, she was on a station that played George Duke, Wes Montgomery, all the great players, before they brought in smooth jazz. So she was able to play Oscar Peterson. She used to play good stuff. She couldn't – morning show, and she was popular. She would not go as far out as Monk or Bud. But she played good stuff.

I had this album on. I forget. It's called *Tequila Mockingbird*. We wanted to promote it. I knew her well enough, because she was a friend of Sid McCoy, and I knew Sid McCoy very well from the Daddy-O Daylie days and just knew him very well. So it was set up that I should go to do her show, and I did. We – being that she's a jazz lover, I'm a jazz lover, and I had known her a bit, it was more of a conversation than an interview. We not only talked about my music, but we talked about other people's music and just things in general, and music. We just had a good time.

It was after that that the station manager said, "I really enjoyed your interview with Yvonne." I said thank you. He said, "Have you ever thought of being on radio?" "No." It was so foreign to me. To me, performing in concerts and nightclubs in person, that direct communication with the people sitting out there that you could see and almost touch, was quite different than talking into a microphone with the producer sitting there and maybe

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the engineer sitting over there. But you're talking to hundreds of thousands of people, as the case is in Chicago. I just couldn't – I couldn't fathom that.

So I said, "I don't know." He says, "Think about it. Let me know." I thought about, and I didn't let him know. But he called me, and he said, "What did you think?" I told him. I said, "Even if we tried it, my concerts . . ." – I went out and played concerts on weekends, most weekends, and every now and then, when you go to Europe or Asia, you're gone more than that. So I said, "My schedule. I" – he says, "We have ways. Technology has advanced to the point where we can take care of that." I said, "I'll try it." He says, "We want to have a show called Jazz: Ramsey and Yvonne. It'll only be on weekends. You and Yvonne will do the show, the three-hour show," or was there two? Two- or three-hour show.

The station was new enough where they didn't have a wide library, and most of the library was more contemporary, not contemporary as you hear in smooth jazz. It wasn't – it was much more advanced than that, although there was Joe Sample, and there was Grover Washington. There was people there. But there was also Sonny Rollins, and there was also – so, they didn't have the library. So they said, you can bring your own library. So Yvonne and I, every week, she'd walk in with a shopping bag of 15, 20, 30 albums, and I'd walk in. Literally, we'd sit there, and I'd have mine on the floor over here, and she'd have hers on the floor over there. We're sitting there, listening to this music. This technology is advanced, but it wasn't advanced to that point. It actually took us – to do a three-hour show, it actually took us two-and-a-half hours, because we're listening to the music, and as we're listening, we're saying, okay, this is like this. She says, "What do you want" – she says, "Do you want to stay upstairs?" I said, "Let's stay upstairs." "Do you want to go medium?" I said, "Let's go" – and I reached down, and I pull – and she – I said – she said, "Let's go" – so we – as the shows progressed, it's almost like you're playing. We played this. Then she says, "What do you want to play next?" "That was a ballad. Let's do this" – on the stage – we were performing this show.

We got really good ratings for that show, although it was on Saturday night, from 7 to 10. It became so popular that we started getting phone calls from – the first station to call was a station in Orlando, Florida. Then other stations. We got up to – we weren't syndicated, but people had heard about it, and they called from different cities. We were up to 12 stations and still not syndicated. The radio station would tape it and for a fee send it to them, just to get the show's name out there.

Unfortunately Yvonne passed on. She developed cancer, and they asked me, did I want to stay on? By that time, it was working out in terms of my availability, and I had gotten a taste of what it meant to contact – be in contact with several hundred thousand people at one time. Then, when people from all over the country, you're talking – that was meaningful. I thought it was a good opportunity to – when you get people to listen to

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Grover Washington, for them to know about Ben Webster, and they allowed me to do that. I just had a ball doing that kind of thing.

So the show continued on weekends until a company from New York called and said, we know about your show. We know there's several stations. We'd like to syndicate your show across the country. Had I known then what I know now, it probably would have remained *The Ramsey Lewis Show*. But I didn't mind it being called *Legends of Jazz*. So we syndicated that show across the country. But if it had not been for Yvonne Daniels – before her, of course, Billy Taylor – those two people, I wouldn't have had a radio show.

Brown: Then you went on to become the host involved in “Legends of Jazz” on television. Is that a progression that we can . . . ?

Lewis: Yeah. The *Legends of Jazz* radio show I think grew up to 80 or 90 stations across the country, whatever it was. The question was, what do we do now? I had a bright idea of a *Legends of Jazz* tour. One of our sponsors was Cadillac. Before I called Cadillac, I talked to Larry Rosen. Larry Rosen had been – he and Dave Grusin, the owners of GRP Records. I knew Larry was an astute businessman. So I said, “Larry.” He says, “Oh yeah, we get *Legends of Jazz* down here in Miami.” He was – Larry would live in New York summer, but he'd winter in Florida. I said, “One of my sponsors is Cadillac. Maybe we could have a tour.” He and I were just thinking a *Legends of Jazz* tour.

The local people in Chicago said, if you want to do a national thing, you have to talk to the national people in Detroit. It's not Cadillac directly. There's a company, whose name escapes me at the moment, that handles Cadillac's promotions, marketing, and they would – so we went and had a meeting with them in the Cadillac offices, but they had not only Cadillac people here, but their advertising and marketing people. They were quite honest. They said, “Love the show,” but even then, radio was beginning to be second to television. People want to see. They said, “If this were television, we'd sign on the dotted line right now, but we'd like to think about it.”

They thought about it too long. But meanwhile, that rang a bell with me. I knew the people at WTTW in Chicago. That is the Public Broadcasting station for the Chicago Midwest area. I went to talk with them: Nicolette Ferri, Dan Schmidt. They said, “Ramsey, we like the idea.” We talked. How would it go? How many guests? How much playing? How much talking? One thing led to another, and it got a green light. The rest is history. We did 13 half-hour shows, of which about 22-, 20-some-odd minutes were actually content. It did so well that as we speak, now, plans are in the works to do, instead of 13 shows, to do 6 or 7 one-hour shows, where there can be more performance – conversation, but it can be much more performance. That's how *Legends of Jazz* t.v. grew out of *Legends of Jazz* radio.

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Brown: LRS Media. I think we want to try to talk about your entrepreneurial ventures. How did that come about?

Lewis: LRS Media stands for – let’s see, Larry Rosen, Lee Rosenberg, and Ramsey Lewis – something – we tried to get our initials. We all had Ls, and we all had Rs. So that’s how the name – we figured, with a radio show, with a television show, there should be merchandise. There should be CDs, and there should be DVDs and other things. So we formed this company to sell merchandise in cahoots with – not a very businesslike word – with the television and radio show.

Brown: Is that still a lucrative or at least worthwhile venture at this point?

Lewis: No, no. At first it started out very well, but whether in the merchandise or marketing or whatever, it wasn’t lucrative enough for us to stay in the business. So we did not.

Brown: Also as far as your television or televised career, you were working with BET. Could you talk about that as well?

Lewis: Yeah. This goes way back. Where do you find this? This goes way back. Every now and then I’m going through the t.v. – you know how you scroll and you look. I would always check out BET, see what’s going on, because I had met Bob Johnson casually somewhere. Once I had met him, I started checking out what he’s into.

I noticed they had this concert that I had taped in Montreal in the ’80s. I think it was 1980. Because they played it fairly regularly, I was tuning in to see if they would play anything else, but over the course of a year or more, that’s the only concert they would ever play of mine. So one day I called BET and asked to speak to Bob Johnson. He got on the line. I said, “Bob, I really appreciate you playing that concert from Montreal. Thank you so much.” I said, “Do you have anything else you can play?” He said, “Maybe so, maybe no. The next time you’re in Washington, why don’t you stop by?”

I stopped by his office, and we sat and talked. He said, “I’d like jazz to have a better presence on our channel. So what do you think about hosting a show?” This is before Billy Taylor. This is before the show on PBS, although I did call Billy Taylor about this one too. But it was a much lower budget than the PBS show.

However, we did start the show. I think for at least 4 or 5 years – maybe 3 or 4 years – I forgot how many years, I would fly to Washington and spend two weeks there. During those two weeks we would do more than 13 shows, because sometimes we would do two shows a day. We would do a lot of shows. The budget was low, but I think with the

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budget we had, the musicians and guests that came aboard, it was a great effort, and I enjoyed working with BET, with Bob Johnson at that time.

Brown: It's a different animal nowadays, isn't it?

Lewis: Totally different.

Brown: Since you brought up Billy Taylor again, let's talk about your appearance on his *CBS Sunday Morning* show when you were a guest with him. Do you remember that one?

Lewis: Yeah.

Brown: It was in November of '97. It was a while ago.

Lewis: Yeah. I'm trying to separate now from others, but I can't bring the actual performance to mind, because I keep mixing it with those other – with the ones on Bravo, and then the ones we did after that. That particular event – I know I was very, very impressed and honored that he called, asked me to do it, because at the time it was Charles Kuralt, and *Sunday Morning* with Charles Kuralt had become one of my favorite t.v. shows, as it is now with Charles Osgood. It's still one of my favorite shows. I knew for a long time Billy Taylor had this segment that, if not every Sunday, many Sundays, he would present jazz. So when he asked me to do it, I was just thrilled, thrilled, thrilled.

Brown: Some of your other entrepreneurial ventures: Mapenzi Recording Company? Is that something we can talk about.

Lewis: Yeah. I decided that the music business, thanks to Napster and other situations, the record industry had become very deluded. Companies had become less effective than they were in the past, so much so that the companies didn't know which way they wanted to go, could go, or should go. Those first few years they spent time trying to figure out what to do about Napster and this, that, and the other, rather than coming up with a different business model.

At the same time, it brought to our attention how many millions of dollars was going into the pockets of the executives. If they had spent some of that money on research and development, in looking at how to change this business to fit the needs and demands of the record-buying public, because stealing music wasn't new. China and other places have been taking music for years and years. Then the deal they made with – I forgot which company, where you can buy one song off an album for 99 cents – as jazz musicians and as classical musicians, we put out a body of work. We put out an album, and that album has different components. Together they make up this CD. I didn't think that was a wise move.

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One thing led to another, where we decided to form Mapenzi Recording Company. As we did our homework, however, and found even more so how the record business is just in total disarray, we decided not to become a record company as other record companies already established, and it's the blind leading the blind out there, but that Mapenzi Recording Company would produce my masters, own my masters, and license my masters to distributors. To do this, we would sign with a record company, but it's to sign with them to distribute your music. We intend to, in a very careful manner, sign other artists and, once again, record, produce the artist, and license the master to a distributor.

With that kind of control, you can license it to the best distributor in the United States, who may not be the best distributor in Asia, who may not be the best distributor in Europe. You have control then to shop your master to who is the best distributor in Asia, who may not be the same one as the United States, which is a huge market. The United States is a huge market. Japan is number two. And Europe.

So there's much more control, owning the master, and owning the master is where the money is, too. Money is owning the master. The money is accumulating masters. Owning your own master is investing in yourself, in that it charges you with keeping your main career relevant, so that the masters retain their value, so that my kids, my grandkids, my wife, whoever I leave masters to, won't be sitting there with a couple dozen masters that are worth \$2. That keeps it interesting too.

So marketing, promotion, selling merchandise, the business side of the record business, the business side of the entertainment business, becomes very important. How do you reach the consumer? Because you can't reach the consumer thoroughly only through radio, because radio is no longer relevant. Television is the new radio.

Anyway, Mapenzi has a bright future. I have a son, Frayne Lewis, who has his own company, but he's a producer. Together we intend to produce some music to license.

Brown: When did you establish Mapenzi, and what was the inspiration for the name?

Lewis: Last year. I think it was the beginning – no, no, it was late last year, when I knew that I was going to go into a new venture and not sign with a record company. I had begun using Swahili names back when – the first album I did for Columbia Records was called *Upendo Ni Pamoja*. That means, love is together. Mapenzi also – I don't know the exact interpretation, but it has some meaning as to reaching out, togetherness.

Brown: There was a club in Oakland named Mapenzi back in the '70s.

Lewis: Oh really?

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Brown: Yeah, a jazz club.

Lewis: Interesting. I didn't know that.

Brown: Perhaps there was some sort of zeitgeist or kindred spirit there.

You were with Narada for a while. When we look back at your discography, of course Chess, Argo, and then Columbia, and then a lot of releases on Narada during the '90s.

Lewis: Narada was a label that I went with after GRP. Let's see. It was the Chess people for 17, 18 years. It was Columbia Records for 17, 18, 19 years. Then it was GRP with Larry Rosen for 4 or 5 years or 6 years, maybe more. Not too many more than that. The label I went with after that was Narada. I think their distribution was Universal also. They're close by. I'm in Chicago. They were in Milwaukee. They came down to my studio, Ivory Pyramid, to talk, and I liked what they said. I played some music for them that I'd recorded. They liked that. The music – the first album, *Appassionata*, that I gave them, was by no means directed at a broad audience, because, as I recall, it was one of those albums that I've done since then. I drew – maybe that was the beginning of the larger works, but it wasn't one large work. But I drew heavily on my feeling, experience, in classical and gospel music. They loved the album, and they did a good job with it.

Brown: You mentioned Ivory Pyramid Studios, which I believe was established in 1995. We were at the hotel, and we were talking to the concierge about the places to dine. She said, "Oh, Ramsey Lewis." She said, "My mother-in-law, Shirley Evans, worked in his office back in the early '70s, from '72 to" – do you recall Shirley Evans?

Lewis: That rings a bell, but I can't remember.

Brown: I bring this up because you had an office.

Lewis: Yeah.

Brown: You've had this business . . .

Lewis: I've had this desire to – they call it show business, and I had this desire to get more involved in the business end of entertainment. So we formed this company called Ivory Pyramid Productions. We leased some space near the Loop, near downtown Chicago. We had a major studio A, studio B. We had offices. We were up and running for business and made some major connections with Columbia Records and a couple other companies. But I – this is the one time I did not have the time. I'm in and out of town. I thought I could do this. Jan, my wife, who we'll talk a lot about later on – she's

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very important in everything I do – has great natural business savvy, but had little experience in the entertainment music business. But business is business. She did her best to help keep it afloat, but it didn't maintain itself. So we were forced to let it go.

Brown: Let's take a break here.

In 1992 you became artistic director of Jazz at Ravinia and later developed the jazz mentor program. Could you talk about that please?

Lewis: I was very honored to have the Ravinia people give me a call to be the artistic director for jazz. Ravinia is the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It's in Highland Park, Illinois, which is about 35 minutes, 40 minutes north of Chicago. It's at least 65 years old. They've always included jazz. Gerry Mulligan was the artistic director for jazz before I was, but he lived on the East Coast. So they asked me if I would be.

It's been a great experience, because not only do we continue to bring outstanding jazz performers to perform throughout the season – the season starts early June and goes through early – middle September. At one of the meetings – I'm trying to think of his name. He's not the current – it's important. Let me go get his name. I need to stop.

[recording interrupted]

Pick it up?

Brown: Just pick it up from there. You guys do editing, don't you?

Kimery: All right. We're running.

Lewis: I was very, very honored to become the artistic director for jazz for the Ravinia Festival. At the time, Zarin Mehta, the brother of Zubin Mehta, was the director of the whole festival. We had our meeting. Penny Tyler was there, the jazz coordinator for the festival. Being that it is a little north of Chicago – during rush hour, it could take an hour or more to get there – we weren't getting as many people, especially from the West and South Side, downtown Chicago. People who lived in the North Side of Chicago were closer to the festival, but we weren't getting deep into the city as much. So we were brainstorming. How can we get people from downtown Chicago and the South Side of Chicago to come?

We came up with the idea of having a Ravinia band that we would put together, some of the top musicians in Chicago, and call them the Ravinia All Stars. They would play at Ravinia, but they would – during the course of the year when the festival's not running,

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fall, spring, and winter – perform at certain civic functions or charitable functions, whatever, just to get the name Ravinia Jazz downtown Chicago.

One thing led to another during these meetings. I don't know if it was Zarin or Penny or me or whoever came up with the idea. "Listen. If we're going to put together these top-notch musicians that have played around the world with various bands, sometimes in their own right with their own band, maybe we should take advantage of their services and have them teach." Teaching one student? Or teaching a group of students? We decided that maybe they would visit high schools in the inner city and support the band director. That was when most high schools still had bands and band directors, music programs.

It became quite successful. We started out with, I think, 5 or 6. We call them mentors. Now we have 11. Throughout the course of the year, these 11 mentors – there are still many high schools that still have music programs. These students – these mentors go out and support the school's music program in demonstrations, in teaching about jazz history, the fundamentals of music. In so doing, they listen to the band they have. In listening to the band, they come up with who might be the outstanding musician or musicians in the band. They become the band itself, and we have them perform at Ravinia.

The program has grown to where we are in contact with up to 400 students a year. It's grown to the point where many kids stay in school because of music. We are now forming – have already formed a committee to follow some of these kids as they graduate from high school, encourage them to go to college and following them through college, to see or to help them, or encourage them, to finish school.

So it's quite a developed and sophisticated program that's supported by Ravinia. They've always had a classical program, the Steans Institute, which goes back much longer than the jazz program, but we're very proud of the program in two ways: in going down into the public high schools, and then encouraging those – a lot of kids are in band because socially it's great to do it and because my buddy's in it, but there are a few kids in band that want to go ahead and make that – music – their career. We seek those kids out and help them to proceed.

It's very rewarding. The very first time that we went into the school system, I accompanied a group of musicians who went to Englewood High School. The band director told us that they didn't think we were going to show up, that the kids in the inner city have been disappointed so many times by people saying we going to do this, we're going to do that, we're going to help you. It wasn't until we actually walked in the door that they were surprised that we were there.

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We stayed there for a session. Maybe the session was a little more than an hour. It was a band of children, maybe – students – maybe we had about 12, 15 students or more. They were so inquisitive and they were so receptive that we, as mentors, left there with more, I think, than we gave them, and they, assuming by their reaction, felt that we had given them quite a bit.

So it's quite rewarding. That takes me back to a subject we touched on earlier, and that is how important it is to youngsters to have music in their lives, not only music from the standpoint of them enjoying it or performing it, but the spiritual side of music. As you know, music opened up my spirituality. I can't quote these tests, but nary a week goes by that you don't pick up a magazine or a newspaper that says the university of whatever did these tests and feel that kids who are involved in the arts in some form, it helps them in their academics, that it's a marriage. I don't understand why the powers that be, the school boards, etc., politicians, don't get it. We talked about that already. Sorry.

Brown: That's okay. We can still continue to talk about it. Why they don't get it? That could be a dissertation.

Lewis: Indeed.

Brown: Let's talk about your actual teaching career. You've taught at Roosevelt University. Is that correct?

Lewis: No, no, no. I do master classes. I have been invited on many occasions by many schools to come and do one or more master classes, or spend a few days, or whatever. I do that. But I've – I've been offered a formal position at a very well-known music department of a very well-known school. It was just too demanding. I feel that if I'm going to do something, I need to be able to contribute the time and effort and whatever it takes to make it a success. My wife and I talked about it. I think I'm better off taking these one-offs or two-offs or a week off or whatever it is, going and being with the situation, the students, whatever it is, 100%, than it is to promise over a semester or over a year, I'm going to show up here and I'm going to show up there.

Not to belittle that, because I know a lot of jazz musicians – I've been able to arrange their schedules – where they have accepted part-time and sometimes full-time teaching positions at some of the top music schools in the United States. So it's a worthwhile and a very worthy thing to do. I – at some point maybe I can arrange my schedule where I can do more and take a regular position. But right now, it's very comfortable to, as I put my year together, see that I'm going to teach a day here or a master class here.

What I have begun doing, that really, really works well for me, is, when we play concerts, we have a sound-check rehearsal during the afternoon. I've invited, through the

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promoter and producer, to have music students from high school or music students from college come to our sound-check rehearsal. They sit through that. Then afterwards I go down, and I'm with them for a half hour, 45 minutes, talking to them, taking their questions. I have a wonderful time doing that.

Brown: You've been awarded at least three honorary doctorates.

Lewis: Yes.

Brown: University of Illinois, Chicago; Loyola University; and . . .

Lewis: I think it's DePaul.

Brown: . . . DePaul. Insofar as education, those awards – what do those awards mean to you? They recognize your achievement as an artist. But do you feel that your contribution as an educator, even if it is master classes, workshops, and things like that – do you feel that they've honored that as well, or recognized that as well?

Lewis: I don't get the question.

Brown: The question being that, we know you're an educator. That you didn't take a position doesn't necessarily translate into a non-commitment . . .

Lewis: Oh, I get it.

Brown: . . . or not a passion of yours. But you obviously, through the course of this interview, express a great deal of interest and passion about education.

Lewis: The way those honorary doctorates came about, someone at each of those schools heard me talk or whatever and invited me to the school to do something and speak to the kids. Over a period of time, they decided that they'd like to – I don't charge for those things. I don't charge for my – it's part of my giving back. I appreciate what the community gives to me. That's one of the ways I give back to the community. So those schools decide that what you've given to us as an institution and what you've given to the kids as an institution, we would like to honor you with this. I really appreciate that, because it's not just about sitting down at the piano, playing, and reaching people that way. It's reaching people in yet another way that shares my knowledge and experience about music.

Brown: Sitting here in your living room, we see that you have received other awards too, those being the three Grammys that are on display.

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Lewis: That's because of my wife. Those were in another room. She says, "Get them out of the boxes." I said, "Eh, people come and visit us. First thing they see . . ." So Jan – we'll have to talk about Jan before this is all over. She's responsible for them being there. But I'm sorry. I cut you off.

Brown: That's okay. And then you received the Governor's Award. I used to be a trustee for NARAS [National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences]. So I understand. There's a lot of deliberation, a lot of politics. But when you receive one, it means that folks want to recognize your achievement.

Lewis: It's meaningful. I cut you off regarding the Grammys and stuff, but those are material things that represent people's attitude and people's appreciation, what people think of you. Since many people can't thank, or many people can't communicate with you, then there are these material things like awards and whatever, that represent what people feel about you and what you're doing. That's meaningful. I take that seriously.

Brown: In 2007 you were awarded the NEA Jazz Master Award. Did that have a significance as well?

Lewis: Yeah, because if anybody looks at the list of previous Jazz Masters, many of those gentlemen and ladies were amongst those who had a lot to do with the development of my career as a musician, and those that didn't, I recognize what their contribution was to the music. I accept the fact that jazz is an ongoing, very live art form. It's kept alive, it grows and evolves, because of contributions. As I look at that list, these are people who've made a contribution. It's like standing on somebody's shoulders. I'm standing on his shoulders, and it just continues. That's what keeps this music alive. That's what keeps this music living through these hard times, whether they're economic times or whether they're times when the politicians say cut this and cut that, cut this and cut that. If the music has any value, then there is still this, if not underground, then surely this group of people which numbers into the hundreds of thousands, that still love the music and still listen at their homes and listen wherever they can, and practice the music. So to be recognized by these leaders, by these founders, by these people who early on made the music what it is, it's a high honor, and when you go to accept it, it's a high honor. It's an emotional honor. It's very meaningful. It's being accepted by your peers. It doesn't get much better than that.

Brown: You say the music survives because people such as yourself, artists, keep the music alive. But behind every artist, or beside every artist, there's somebody who makes that artist, who inspires that artist, keeps that artist motivated and keeps them moving. You mentioned Jan earlier.

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Lewis: The lady Jan, my wife, is meaningful to me in many ways. Not only does she remind me – now it’s become a habit. I always like vegetables anyway – “Eat your vegetables.” She’s a health – “When are you going to go down to the treadmill? You didn’t go yesterday.”

She’s so wonderful, and we share so many things together that life is great. In terms of my music, these long-form pieces that I’m getting into now, had not Jan done one thing, I don’t know where we’d be. I’ve told the story about Welz Kauffman, the most current. He’s been there for some time. I’ve sure he’ll be there for some time. Everybody loves Welz Kauffman.

The Ravinia Festival suggested I do something with the Geoffrey Ballet. Eventually it came to the point where the ballet said, we’ll get the choreographer if you write the music. I’m like, “Sure. I’ll write the music.” Yeah, I write music. What’s the big deal?

I came to the piano, sat down, and all I heard was music of Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, the great composers of ballet music. This is not going to work. I tried to just clear my head and think. I had my pencil and the manuscript, and it’s blank. A couple times I put a couple notes and erased those. It was a hardship.

Jan, she came in this door. She had been shopping. She said, “How’s it going?” I said, “Not well.” She said, “Yeah, I know. The last few days, you haven’t been too happy about it.” She said, “I tell you what. Why – I’ve seen you a thousand times, if not more, go to the piano, sit down and just play, with nothing on your mind, no agenda, no – you just sit down and start playing. A lot of what you do is quite beautiful.” I said, “Yeah?” She said, “So put” – I had a Walkman – she says, “Put a Walkman over there somewhere, and just sit down and play.”

I did that. This is now two or three days later. She comes in. She’s been shopping, and I was playing something. She says, “Oh, what’s that? That’s nice.” I hadn’t named it yet, but looking at her, I said, *To Know Her is to Love Her*. She said, “That’s a beautiful piece. Have you written that one out?” I said, “No.” She says, “Write that one out.”

I wrote it out. I continued for another couple days, listening to my tapes, and I got this feeling of, I can do this. It got to the point where, after a couple songs – there are eight in the suite. I wrote more, but eight ended up in the suite – I turned the tape recorder off, and I was able to go to the piano, pick up the pencil, turn to a clean page, and things would just start coming. It’s that way today. Had not Jan said what she said . . .

Jan has everyman’s ear. She’s not a musician. She hasn’t studied music. She’s an artist. In fact, she’s designed some jewelry. She has her own company. That’s another story. Let’s interview her for that. But as I write these long-form pieces and I end up with this

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material and that material, I ask her to come and sit there. I say, I'm here, and I'm here, and I'm thinking about going here, going there. She'll listen. She said, I think you should go there. I take that, and sure enough, it fits and I continue on.

We were in Washington, D.C. I had a piano in our suite. I'm writing Abraham Lincoln, *Proclamation of Hope*. This particular piece was about the first time Abraham Lincoln witnessed a slave auction. I did a lot of research on this. I read books. The first time he witnessed this, he was on a boat going down the Mississippi. They pulled over to the side. There was this family of four, a father, a mother, and two children. He witnessed the father going off in that direction – somebody bought him – and the mother going over there. Somebody might have bought her. The kids went off. Somebody bought them. He felt terrible.

I'm writing this now. I'm trying to get this feeling. I'm playing it. She says, "Where are you now?" I said, "I'm trying to write this." I explained to her. She says, "It seems to me it needs to be deeper." When she said deeper, I thought she meant deeper, more – she said, "No, on the piano, lower." Sure enough, I moved everything down a couple octaves, and it was much more effective. The piece is one of the outstanding pieces in that suite.

So, she's my muse, no matter what I'm writing, whether it was the *Colors* or the ballet suite. I run things by her. I get on a long tear of creativity, and things just go, go, go, but many times if I seem to hit a wall – sometimes I can just get up and walk around, or go out and walk around, or get up and eat a piece of fruit or something, and go back to the piano, and it'll start up again. But then, sometimes not. She'll say, "Let me see what you got." I play. I'll say, "Every time I get here . . ." – she says, "Yeah, but this – go back." I go back. She says, "Why can't that be over here?" and dah-dah-dah-dah. "Let me try that," and it works. I said, "Thank you, dear." She says, okay.

So she is a team in many ways. As we sit here and talk about me, it would be amiss of me if I didn't credit Jan in every way, not only in my music, but in life in general. This must be love, because what I read, the songs say it's supposed to happen, it happens with this lady. I could go on and on and talk about her. Maybe – it's supposed to be about me, right?

Brown: We are talking about you.

Lewis: She buys my clothes. She comes in. She says, "I saw this jacket. Try it on." I haven't bought – I might buy my shoes. For the last 15 years – well, she was with me when I bought these – the last 15 years, she brings home suits and shirts, and they're me. And then the health. And then we read a lot. Before we go to bed, we talk about what we're reading. "Why did you think that . . ." – we get into this. It's such a wonderful

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relationship. It feeds my soul. It feeds my very being. It feeds me physically and mentally and spiritually. I just wanted you to know that.

Brown: How long have you been together?

Lewis: 21 years.

Brown: The magic's been working for 21 years.

Lewis: Yes.

Brown: Wonderful. What was the reason for writing *Proclamation*? Was it a commission?

Lewis: Yes. The Ravinia Festival, being in the state of Illinois, and Abraham Lincoln of course spent a lot of time in the state of Illinois, although he wasn't born here, but he spent a lot of time in the state. Celebrating the anniversary of his 200th birthday, the whole state was doing things, Chicago Symphony, in every city, everybody. So the Ravinia Festival, of course it should do something. He said, "Let's do lunch one day." I had no idea what was on Welz Kauffman's mind. At lunch, he says, "I want you to do a piece on Abraham Lincoln." I said, okay. Up until then, I was – my pieces were an hour long, several movements, up to eight movements, but they were about an hour in presentation, and someone else opened the show. But this time he said, "No, I want you to take the whole evening." It's a two-hour concert or longer, with intermission. I said okay.

I set out to do the research. Went down to Springfield, where he has a library and where he has a memorial. There's a museum here in Chicago. I read I don't know how many books. That prepared me to do *Proclamation of Hope*. Also there was a lot of research done by Guthrie Ramsey. Guthrie Ramsey is a professor of African-American music at University of Pennsylvania. I collaborated with him to make sure I got the history right. He was very, very helpful. He wrote the program notes.

I'm very proud of that work. It was a big work, in that prior I had only written for the trio. *Colors* and the ballet piece was for trio. But *Proclamation of Hope* was for 23 pieces, all horns, no strings, all horns.

Brown: And vocals too.

Lewis: There was Dee Alexander, one vocalist. I took a page out of the book of Duke Ellington. She didn't sing any lyrics. Where I had her voice come in, either she made up her vowels or her lyrics or whatever she wanted to use to color this music.

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Once again I'd be amiss if I did not tell you about the name of the conductor, because I can't recall it now. Can we stop here, or what?

Kimery: Sure.

[recording interrupted]

We're live.

Brown: And the conductor's name is?

Lewis: The conductor's name is Scott Hall. Scott Hall not only conducted the piece, but he arranged and orchestrated the piece. I had in my head what I thought the sound could or would be, but he's – because I wrote it at the piano – but he's the one who took the music and orchestrated it.

Brown: How was that process? What was that process? You just handed him the piano score, and he just came back with the whole orchestration?

Lewis: Yeah. I handed him the manuscript, but he also came over with a tape recorder – a digital recorder, and I sat at the piano and played and talked, like, here's what I hear here, and this is what I hear here, and it seems like this should go well here if we do this. He took notes, and he listened to all that. It came out wonderfully well. We're a good team.

Brown: The reason why I asked is because there are so many different processes of orchestration or arranging. For example, Gershwin – because we mentioned him perhaps off-mic – when he was writing *Rhapsody in Blue*, he'd write a segment and give it to Ferde Grofé, and he would orchestrate that. Then he'd write another section and give it to him. So it wasn't a dialogue. It wasn't this exchange.

Lewis: Yeah. He wanted – Scott wanted to get it right. So not only did I give him the music, but we talked about it.

Brown: You also wrote another piece which perhaps was influenced by Jan, *Muses and Amusements*, that was performed at Ravinia.

Lewis: My goodness. That's true. I was invited to – by Welz Kauffman again – to perform a work of my own on the same bill with Dave Brubeck, who chose to write some music for big band. So, when I knew that he was going to do big band, I figured I didn't

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just want to do solo piano or the trio, that I should add something. I decided to write a piece for jazz trio and string quartet. The string quartet was the Turtle Island Quartet.

My only – it went well, but we had limited rehearsal time. New music needs rehearsal. So although I was pleased, there were sections of it that I thought could go better if we had better rehearsal time.

But writing that piece of music, I learned a lot about – I think that there are sections – and I won't say which sections – that I became too intellectual and didn't let the spirit guide me. I feel that my best writing is when I just let the pen go, or let the fingers go, or let whatever it is go, and just – it's almost like dictation – take it down. I think that when I get to a point in a piece – and Jan can tell when I get to these points – where I say, oh, an augmented fourth with the dah-dah-dah-dah. This would go good here. I've never used that chord. Oh, since I got this chord, oh, oh, yeah. I'm impressed with me now, right? I'm glad that I remembered that chord.

Fortunately I came out of it. Some of it stayed. But I was learning. I think this was my second long-form piece. What I did learn from that was, if it gets to the point where the intellect takes over, it's time to go for a glass of water or maybe stop for the day, that it has to flow from a greater source. Some composers, I imagine – no, I don't want to imagine. I was going to say, some might be able to sit down and write from the intellect, but I don't think so. I think that sometimes you might start with the intellect, saying, oh, I like these six chords. Okay. Now what can you do? You fumble around, you mess around, until something hits. You can tell when it hits. It's – uhhh, and then from that point on, you're sailing. It's a beautiful experience.

Brown: When I think of long form in the jazz tradition, of course we have to think about Duke and Strayhorn. Did Ellington and Strayhorn – did they figure in any way as far as your . . . ?

Lewis: I've always admired Duke Ellington, and I'll always admire Billy Strayhorn. I would never utter my name as a composer in the same book with their names. I admire their work. But, as I said earlier, the coloratura vocal that we did on *Proclamation of Hope*, not using words, but asking Dee Alexander to improvise. Sometimes I'd give her a suggestion. That was definitely Duke Ellington.

Brown: *Creole Love Call* or *Heaven*?

Lewis: So many, so many pieces. The other comparison is just the way it is. In reading about Duke, how much he enjoyed being able to write something tonight and then tomorrow at rehearsal, hear what it sounds like. I love that. I love to be able to write it, and even if there's not a rehearsal, I'll call the guys, "Rehearsal tomorrow, guys." "Okay,

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we'll come over." I give them the music, and we play. This band that I have right now, they're really – Joshua Ramos on bass and Charles Heath on drums, Henry Johnson, guitar, and Tim Gant on keyboards. Many times I'll just call the rhythm section, the bass and the drums, over, to see how it feels. They are beautiful in interpreting my music. Every now and then, he might say, "You know as a bass – doing this on the bass is a little more difficult," because, you've got to remember, I'm writing on the piano. "So I would probably do it" – so I change it. But those are minor things. The main thing is being able to hear, the very next day or the next couple days, what you just wrote. Sometimes I change it here and there, and sometimes I don't.

Brown: Perhaps you know the name Jesse Stone.

Lewis: Yes.

Brown: When I went to interview him at 92 – this was almost 15 years ago – he had a fully computerized studio setup. This is the guy who was *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, or early stuff, maybe even – what was it? *Prohibition Blues*. Writing since the '20s, but at 92, in the early '90s, he was working . . .

Lewis: At keyboards?

Brown: At a keyboard, and had a computer.

Lewis: Yeah, that's the way those keyboards came into being, that they were originally made for composers to hear what strings sound like, to hear what this sounds like. They became – the rock-and-roll guys took them and said, oh, I don't have to go to school. I can just make a trumpet sound like this. I admire composers who can work with the keyboards, because I can't. I'm a manual guy. Setting up the keyboards is just not my style, but I admire those composers who can use that, because that's what it was for.

Brown: Maybe we could talk about the piece that seemed to be most representative of your philosophy or your humanitarian outlook, and that is *Colors*. Talk about that piece, how that came about, and how you feel about that piece.

Lewis: *The Evolution of – Colors: the Evolution* [sic: *Ecology*] *of Oneness* – actually, Guthrie Ramsey came up with the name after I had been talking with Michael [?Kochs], who is an artist-designer in his own right, with his own company, who works with me sometimes. He – Michael – had asked me, what's going to be your next? I felt that bringing people together was important to me. To write some music that inspired people to think in terms of themselves as part of the human race, rather – first, before they thought in terms of culture and color and these things. In talking with Guthrie Ramsey and – here we go again. There's a name I'm reaching for. He's on the staff of Loyola

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University. We sat there, Guthrie and the gentleman from Loyola, who's going to kill me when he sees this and I didn't use his name. Stop, because this – I got to do it.

[recording interrupted]

Kimery: We are running.

Lewis: I must say that the gentleman whose name escaped me just came to me. It's John Hart. John Hart was sitting there with Guthrie Ramsey, Jan, and myself, when we were thinking about how, through the use of music and text, to bring our message home in terms of togetherness, in terms of thinking of us as – of us and we rather than the pronouns you and them.

One thing led to another. John Hart put his two cents in, and Guthrie threw his two cents in. We ended up with the text that everybody – in this area, this time, everybody contributed. There wasn't one text written by Guthrie. There were thoughts and comments, and quotes from other people in the program. But I have to attribute the name of the piece to Guthrie. We had *Oneness* – oneness, together, us, but he's the one that said, *Colors: the Evolution of* . . .

Brown: *Ecology*.

Lewis: . . . *the Ecology of Oneness*.

Brown: How did he come up with ecology?

Lewis: Yes, *the Ecology of Oneness*. Guthrie has a way with words. He can find words that are maybe used in a different manner, that fit in other ways. He's the guy who said *the Ecology of Oneness*. It just feels good and sounds good. That's how that came about.

Brown: We've mentioned Guthrie Ramsey. He also wrote liner notes for you. I met Guy Ramsey back when we were both graduate students here in Chicago in 1990.

Lewis: Really?

Brown: Oh yeah.

Lewis: Is this a small world or what?

Brown: I was remiss that I didn't – once I saw that he had written your liner notes, that I didn't call him and say, what questions should I ask Ramsey? So that's on me. Guy, I'm sorry. How did you meet Guy Ramsey?

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Lewis: Oh, wow, how did I meet Guthrie?

Brown: You call him Guthrie instead of Guy.

Lewis: Yeah, see, I wasn't around his friends and cohorts and hear people call him Guy. Oh, Larry Rosen, who worked with me at LRS and putting together the CDs and DVDs for *Legends of Jazz*, was working on another project which I was not involved in. He needed someone who had credentials but also could express himself when it comes to African-American music, because Larry was working on this project that addressed all kinds of music, and he wanted authorities on all kinds of music. So he, through asking around, investigation, and research, found this gentleman, he told me, called Guthrie Ramsey, and he was very pleased with him. I just kept his name, because I kept his name, and Larry was so impressed with him. That was the end of that.

It was later that I was doing this, and for some reason – I don't know if it was Jan suggested, or somebody suggested, that he might be helpful, that I call Guthrie. He was. He started talking, and this and that. I said, "We should get together." He came to town. That's how Guthrie came into my life. What a wonderful gentleman too. He's also a musician. He also plays piano – I don't have to tell you about him – and very knowledgeable, and use of the language, use of words, is special to him. So, *the Ecology of Oneness* is a Guthrie Ramsey phrase.

Brown: You premiered this at the Blue Note in Tokyo? Is that correct?

Lewis: Yeah. I had premiered most of my works – all of them, to date – at Ravinia. But the way the year was falling – and I wanted to start performing, because I had finished writing it – I had already played Ravinia. The Blue Note in Tokyo was coming up. They were saying, what are you going to do? I told them about this new work. They were excited about it. In fact, they televised it in Japan. It was a wonderful affair. It went very well.

Brown: *To Know Her . . .* is a suite. *Proclamation of Hope* is a symphonic poem. What is the structure or form of *The Ecology of Colors* [Colors: the Ecology of Oneness]?

Lewis: The same. I found this form of writing a piece in eight segments, eight movements. It seems to serve me well, because for whatever reason, in writing for each piece, there seems to be a minimum of eight different feelings or songs or ideas that come, in fact more than that. So instead of 2 or 3 or 4 movements, or one long one, I find it serves my music better to write it in eight pieces. I'll probably be dealing with that and stay with that a while, because in my mind now, the next thing that I'm going to write, will also be in eight movements.

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Brown: How did you arrive at eight?

Lewis: I don't know. It just happened. It happened with the ballet piece. That was the first one, the first one I wrote, and I didn't know if it was going to be 3, 6, or whatever. But I started writing. I could kind of see them dancing to this. I got 5 pieces, 6 pieces. I could see them dancing to this. Then, oh, I don't have a piece that has this feeling, or this motion, or this. It ended up with eight, and eight felt good. When I sent to them, I had apprehensions about – oh, I didn't tell you about that.

Brown: No, I didn't know that you had any apprehensions. Let's talk about that.

Lewis: I almost didn't send that original music.

Brown: You're talking about *To Know Her* . . . ?

Lewis: Yeah, because I said to Jan – I said, Jan, so many people think of *The In Crowd* and *Wade in the Water*. They think of that kind of music when they think of me. So maybe when the Geoffrey people said, we'll get the choreographer, in their heads was that kind of music. So I had gone so far as to make a CD of some of that kind of music, to send to the choreographer. No, I did make the CD, and I was about to send it to the choreographer, Donald Byrd, renowned choreographer. Jan said, "You're crazy. You should send him this new music you wrote." I said, "But it's so different than *The In Crowd* and *Wade in the Water*. That's where their heads are." She said, "Then send both."

So I sent both to the choreographer, to Donald Byrd. I waited a couple days, and I didn't hear from him. I said, oh boy. It's like sending something to a publisher. He finally called. I said, "Oh, good to hear from you." I said, "So which music did you like? Which CD did you like?" He said, "I've always liked your old stuff and *The In Crowd*." He says, "But without a doubt, the new music you're writing moved me. It almost immediately gave me ideas for the choreography. As a matter of fact, I think we should name the ballet *To Know Her* . . . , and the first piece is *To Know Her is to Love Her*." That was encouraging. That – because he had choreographed for many ballet works, and he was the first person besides Jan to hear that new music. He went on to say, this reminded me of this. This piece – and he just – and I said, that feels so good.

Brown: Were you thinking dance and movement while you were writing *To Know Her* . . . ?

Lewis: Yes and no. Yes, movement: slow, medium, animated, but not so much so that that dictated what I wrote. I just had that in the back of my mind, that this ballet company

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is going to be dancing to this music, and I had to shut out Tchaikovsky and the rest of them, because when you think of a ballet company dancing to music, you start thinking about the great ballet composers. Fortunately I got into a flow of my feeling to have a variety of movements, a variety of rhythms, a variety of tempos. It ended up very well.

I must tell you: at the rehearsal – we sent them the music. They said, “Give us a couple weeks to rehearse, and then you can come to the first dress rehearsal.” I said okay. No, it wasn’t – it was before the dress rehearsal. Sorry about that. It was before the dress rehearsal. Jan and I went. They put the CD on, the music started playing, they came out of these doors, and they started dancing. Tears, tears to the eyes, to hear my music, but then look and see these professional dancers doing what they do. It was a moving experience.

Brown: We can return to *Colors: the Ecology of Oneness*. You mentioned that there was a text. Is it a sung text? Or is it recitation in there?

Lewis: Oh, no, no. That’s in the program.

Brown: So, it’s just descriptive.

Lewis: Yeah.

Brown: Are there any subtitles or titles of the eight movements in there that also reflect this.

Lewis: Yes, that I don’t remember. You write something, and you wrote it, and then you move on. If I had known that you wanted it this moment, I would have gotten it and had it available.

Brown: You say move on. Where are you moving on to after *Ecology* and *Colors*? Where is Ramsey Lewis now?

Lewis: After *Ecology* and *Colors* was *Proclamation of Hope*. Now, in my mind I haven’t yet really addressed in the way I want to bring together African-American folk music – meaning gospel to me – and jazz and classical music. I haven’t really brought that together. I think classical music, because there will be moments where the harmonies and the use of space will be obvious, and I’ve learned that from classical music. Jazz, because of the improvisation and what jazz did to these European harmonies. But since Gershwin, I haven’t heard anything that I feel, the last word has been said in terms of maintaining that African-American experience that spawned this music called jazz, the roots of it, not bebop and not dixieland and not ragtime and not swing, but the roots of the music, that feeling that sometimes we say not only it don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing, but

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it doesn't mean a thing if it doesn't have that feeling. You can't define jazz, but you know it when you hear it. You can't define it, but you know it when you feel it. When you're hearing it, if you don't feel it, then you leave with a question mark.

So I want to write a work that intentionally draws on that. My older sister Lucille, she'd say, "Sonny, when are you going to write something that's gospel?" Well, it's not going to be a gospel piece, but there'll be music in there that, without a doubt, people will say, there's that old-time religion.

Brown: Do you have a sense of what you want to score it for?

Lewis: No. I go hear – as I think about it, I hear a choir. Choir throughout? No, but a choir. Do I hear Dee Alexander doing what she does? Yep. Do I hear other instruments that might take us to a place that reminds us of those early times? Maybe. Which is not too difficult, because Charles Heath is not only a trap drummer, but he plays other percussion.

Brown: Orchestral as well as hand drumming?

Lewis: Yes. And Joshua Ramos plays all kinds of – the upright, the electric. So all the elements are there. I just have to get here and start organizing in my mind. I don't want it to be unwieldy in terms of numbers of people, because one of the issues I ran into with *Proclamation of Hope* – I'm glad I wrote it, and I'm so proud of it you'll never know. But in these economic times, many performing arts centers say, "It's too big. We can't afford to hire the 23 musicians," and this, "and all the things you need to present this work." So it's been heard at the Ravinia Festival. It's been seen and heard at the John F. Kennedy Center. My agent tells me there are many people that want to do it until he says it's 23 musicians and here's what it's going to cost. So I have to be careful there. I think probably a gospel choir in most cities won't be that expensive, and then I'll bring my own musicians.

But who knows? Music is full of surprises. Once I start writing, I don't know where it will go. We'll see.

Brown: It sounds like you're going to be reaching way back.

Lewis: I reach back, and I bring what's there to the present, not unlike the Lincoln work. I did the research, which takes you back, but then you've got to come back. While you're writing, you can't keep your mind back there and say, let me see. How would they have done this? They already did that. They did it very well. But it'll have to be a work written from today's experience, from where I am today.

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Brown: There is a lineage of African-American composers in the concert tradition, starting with William Grant Still, and we even look further back. We want to look at [R. Nathaniel] Dett and other folks like that. There are – I mentioned Ollie Wilson maybe off-mic, but he's one that has been mining spirituals and bringing them into a very contemporary or concert tradition. Perhaps I'll try to get some of those for you. But – and we talked about this yesterday – the spirituals are the wellspring of African-American music. By drawing on the gospel tradition, you've already been once removed from that, because of Thomas A. Dorsey, who we talked about yesterday. That was a contemporizing, if that's the right word, of the spiritual tradition in an urban – taking it out of the original context, the slave context, and bringing it into an urban – African-American urban context. Do you see any kind of scheme or legacy, what you're doing with this, or conceiving of this work in this lineage that we have?

Lewis: You mean a continuing of . . . ?

Brown: Either a continuum or – for example, Anthony Davis, whom I've worked with and know, he writes operas. He writes – and when I worked with him on *X*, for Malcolm X, he had Gershwin scores all over his piano. So he was mining that. But there are others who are working in the African-American tradition, African-American composers, who are going back to the source, what I consider the wellspring of our musical tradition, and bringing those into a contemporary concert expression. So – but you're coming also from this continuum, but obviously with a different perspective, not trying to conform to say, an opera, operetta, or oratorio or anything like that. You're using more – you're creating more in the tradition of Ellington, who would create his own forms. Yes, he would call it a suite. Whether they were harmonically connected all the time? Not necessarily. Were there thematic developments throughout? Not necessarily. So it sounds like this one is really – what you've been mining is a jazz sensibility and bringing it into a concert presentation as well. I guess what I'm asking you is, have you thought about this practice of conforming to existing structures or architectures?

Lewis: No.

Brown: And thereby perhaps expanding them.

Lewis: No, no, no. I will not – the kind of research I did for Abraham Lincoln was because I wanted to make sure I nailed what he was about. This piece that I'm about to compose is not about who has looked at the structures and these chords and this history prior to me. This is my own personal feeling of what I feel about that music in those days, and the history of where it came from and where it is now, and my experience in performing it, my experience as I understand it. What I've learned also is it's very difficult to put it all into words. We try to say, here's what I'm going to write, and here's

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what I hear. But my experience is, once you actually start writing, and once I sit down at the piano and start exploring, only the Good Lord knows where it's going to go.

Brown: Have you conceptualized a title or perhaps a theme for this forthcoming work?

Lewis: No.

Brown: You just know it's coming out. It's this fusion of these influences, these experiences, these sources for you, that you're going to create another extended work. See, I get to be on the front end of this and see – so I'll be able to look back. When it's developed and premiered, I'll say, ah.

We were talking a little bit off-mic about the importance of music in the African-American tradition. Given the conditions of slavery, when you're divested of everything that you own, to include your language, your family, as you talked about with the auction block. You have another religion imposed upon you. You're forced to conform to another way of life, a life of servitude, a life of hardship. That music became the reservoir of the humanity, the expression of humanity, for African-Americans.

How do you regard music?

Lewis: It's difficult for me to see a world, my world, without music. Maybe if I had come to music later, then there's a point of comparison, of life with music and life without it, other than on radio and television, where everybody else hears and sees it. But having started at four years old, and falling in love with it at 12 years old, I can't imagine life without music, and I mean being actively involved in music. I can't imagine not going to the piano as often as I can to practice. These days, it's not as often as I'd like to. I can't imagine now – there was a time I wouldn't have uttered these words, and they are, I can't imagine now not writing music.

I think this is only natural, though, because from the very beginning of humanity, there's the rhythm of the beating of the heart. From the very beginning of civilization, there was communication, and much of that were sounds. We call it music, but sounds and rhythm have been with us as a race – human race – forever and ever. As cultures and tribes and groups formed their – as they came mainly for protection, as they came together for whatever reasons, they developed various sounds, various languages that they used.

The African-American, the way we were dispersed across the country, can only go back to the sounds of slavery, to the sounds that our parents, grandparents, ancestors heard on Saturday night, when they were having fun. Uttering words about the social life in slavery, uttering words about personal feelings for each other, having fun Saturday night. Then Sunday morning, recognizing that, because of the conditions of the slave masters,

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as a holy day, pretty much sang those same melodies and made those same sounds, with a different meaning. Saturday night was more physical. Saturday night was about life on this Earth: but for right now, we're going to party. Sunday became significant as life beyond this Earth, life beyond the universe. If there is a heaven, I want to be there.

Those sounds developed into sacred music on one side, non-sacred on the other side. Eventually, some of the European instruments were picked up, whether it was a trumpet or a violin, and sounds were made on these instruments. But the feeling from Saturday night and the feeling from Sunday morning continues throughout this race. I don't care if you were able, because of your family's well being, affluency, to go to a private school from kindergarten through Harvard University. There's some that might try to deny it. But this feeling is there.

I accept this feeling. I express this feeling through music. Music is the most common language, whether there's words or not, whether there's just moaning, whether it's just humming.

But the African experience – African-American experience – can be expressed through painting, through any art form, to bring that feeling, for you to hear a song, for you to see a painting, to watch a dance, or any creative art form, and be able to say, “Um-hmm, um-hmm, okay. They've done their homework,” or they have allowed that which is real within them, to come forth.

As this music became an art form, it has arrived in certain places that have denied this certain feeling. There are times – I have mixed emotions about it. This music that people danced to, to forget their troubles in the '20s and the '30s, as my brothers were still being lynched in the '40s and the '50s, as we were denied our freedoms, as we were denied education, as we were denied, denied, denied, this music lived through all this pain, sorrow, degradation. Some people call it the blues. You don't call it the blues on Sunday morning, but if you hear that same person who sang the blues Sunday [sic: Saturday] night, put on his certain tie or her dress and her hat – “Sister Jones, testify through your music” – same sound.

There are moments, as I've gotten older, that, as I say, I have mixed – I started to say, I regret, but I can't use the word regret. But there's too – there's a lot of music out here now that claims to be jazz. All right. What's the origins of jazz? Well, here we go again. We just went through – that's the music that was happening on Saturday night. You don't play jazz on Sunday morning. Same music, though. You dance a certain way. You wiggle your hips a certain way on Saturday night. You do a certain movement and dance on Sunday morning, but not quite the same. So there's this experience, there's this honesty, there's this expression of pain. On the other hand, we're always known how to party, how to laugh, and how to have fun and forget our troubles.

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This music stays with me. How would Ramsey feel about life without music? Ramsey doesn't know life without music. I'm glad my parents didn't listen to me when I said, "I don't want to take piano lessons anymore," and they said, "Yes you are." But every time I get to this point in my talking to you today, I go in another direction, because some of the music that we call jazz today, I don't feel. I don't feel that continuity, that this person who is playing it or wrote it, really has done his or her homework.

Now, maybe it's because we in this country like to categorize stuff. There's nothing wrong with somebody waking up one morning and composing some music, and he or she doesn't call it anything but "some music I composed." But because of those people who categorize music have to put it somewhere – "I don't know what to put – we'll call it jazz. That's jazz." Well, is it?

We don't want to go into, "What is jazz?" We don't want to go into that at all. But, I am glad that my parents brought me up the way they did. I appreciate the music. I do regret, however – there, I said it – that people don't dance to jazz anymore. I regret that. There was a point, up until the '60s, where jazz served every purpose. There was jazz you could put on in the background and have dinner. There was jazz you listened to. There was jazz you danced to. There was jazz for every walk of life, every moment of life. There was jazz that made you think, but be careful if that piece ends without making you feel. Duke Ellington was good at both, making you think and feel.

But as jazz grew more and more of an art form, there are times when a piece will be played, and I say, "Oh, that was nice, but what is that?" "That's jazz." "What makes it jazz?" Some of the pieces have no improvisation. In the past, the distant past, whether it was Saturday night or Sunday morning, there was improvisation. During the church service, they improvised. Saturday night, they improvised. As the music progressed through early 1900s, improvisation, improvisation. The music was like – maybe we even brought this over from our African ancestors. There are musics for every event in Africa. Every event, there's some music. As I recall, growing up, in most of our neighbors' houses, there was music always going on. This music suited and fit the life of the average American, whether you are a postal worker, whether you dig ditches, whether you teach at Harvard, whether you whether whatever. Everybody knew this music. You didn't have to have Jazz Education 404 to figure, what is he doing? The life of this music was perpetuated and put forth by those people who worked hard, 40, 48 hours a week, and he grabbed his wife or his girlfriend, "Honey, let's go hear some jazz." They don't know from flatted 13ths. They don't know from superimposing chords. They don't know from extending melodic solos so that this chord has nothing to do with that chord. They don't know from that. They sit there, and they want to be moved by the music.

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How would those people now react to some of the concerts they say, “This is jazz”? Much of the music that I hear would be perfect for a jazz class who wants to dissect and see how far things can be stretched, see how far out into the universe this harmony can be superimposed. Then, some people say, “Ramsey, there’s a place for both.” Unfortunately, we don’t have both. Unfortunately, Saturday nights are no longer, where do you go hear jazz? Where do you go dance to jazz? Where’s the live jazz performing?

Why is it that our most recent ancestors – do you remember the time when black people were trying to get so upty-dupty? In a lot of the biggest cities – bigger cities – “We don’t play the blues in our house.” “We don’t play those artists.” What was that all about? When did it become stylish to disown your heritage? You ashamed of it? Are you ashamed of your own music, your own heritage, your own ancestors, to carry this music on? When did the death of this music, as it once – as we once knew it, as a feeling, to be a part of every waking moment – when did it start? Who’s to blame?

I don’t know. But I regret that it’s at the point where it is, where this music we call jazz is not a major part of the soundtrack of American life. If you ask someone maybe 50 years from now, maybe 300 years from now, to so-called “Put me something together that represents the musical soundtrack of life in 2011 on Earth,” I don’t know if during the course of listening to that music, one would even say, “Oh, so this is about those African-American people that started that music back before” blah blah blah. This is how it sounded in 2011.

Some people have said, “Ramsey, isn’t that what rap is about? In Africa, telling stories about everyday life.” Yeah, yeah. Is that what our kids are into now? Yeah. But does that tell the whole story about the history of African-American music? No, no. So when you ask me the question, how would life be if you considered how life would be without music?, I can’t answer that for myself, but I regret that a lot of young people – a lot of older people, now that we’re in 2011 – don’t have any idea of the contribution that African-Americans made to this great country’s culture.

Brown: *Proclamation of Hope.* Do you have any hope that jazz will once again reclaim its birthright?

Lewis: They say what goes around comes around. I don’t know. So far, we are about the business of still taking apart and destroying. If we were about the business of cutting school budgets, about firing teachers, about getting rid of art and music, there would be chance for there to be in some music history class in high school or junior high school, especially in the African-American community, contributions by Billie Holiday, and hands don’t go up, “Miss Young, who is Billie Holiday?” “Well, I just so happen to have a record here. Now this is Billie Holiday.” “Miss Young, who is . . . ?” – but we’re not at

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that point yet. We're not at the point where the arts have been restored in most schools, where teachers have been restored.

I hear in some state – is it Texas? – that they want to take certain cultural references out of textbooks. Hello? What? We're like a salad, and certain people are taking pieces out. We don't need this. We don't need this. Who gives you the right to say, this is unimportant? Who gives you the right to say, as my kids are growing up and developing, they don't need music, they don't need art, they don't need? That's not part of their – they only need math. Well, I got to tell you, you're not doing a good job in math, because here in 2011, the United States is far from the top 25% of countries – the Western civilization – in math, in reading. Hello? What's going on? Was it Marvin Gaye? What's going on? What kind of society are we actually building here?

You know what I get mad at? I get mad at the average everyday Joe and Jane, for giving up their part in democracy to a handful of people. Those 545 people in Washington, and then in each geographical area, there are those who become leaders, who can make themselves leaders or have the money behind them to make themselves leaders, to say, this is what our country should be, this is what our country should look like, these are the people that should be in certain positions. The rest of us – not me. I vote – sit back and listen to news opinions on radio and think that these opinions are the truth. I heard on the news yesterday that we're supposed to be doing this. Okay, I'm going to start doing this. I heard that he's learned. His opinion – he went to Harvard. He said this is the – “Did you vote?” “No. I was busy. I didn't vote.”

Your question was, do you think this will ever come back around. It'll come back, because everything comes back around. History taught us that. Everything comes back around. Will it be soon? I don't think so, because the destroyers are still about the business of destroying, and they are in the minority. You would think that these destroyers are in the majority. Wake up, America. Wake up. Stop letting a handful of people tell you, this is the way you're supposed to think, this is the way you're supposed to live, this is what you're supposed to accept.

Your question was, how would life be for me, if there was not music, or music as I know it?

[A siren sounds nearby.]

Sorry. It made a liar out of us. This is a big city.

[recording interrupted]

Just wanted to make you feel at home.

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I'm through. I think you know where I was going with that. It angers me, though.

Brown: And rightly so, because you've seen seven-plus decades of the evolution of this country.

Over – when I look over on this other wall around the corner, there's a picture of you with another Chicagoan in the White House, who is the first one to be in that White House to come from the African-American community in Chicago, yet alone any African-American community in this country. There's a picture of you with him. When we talk about leadership and we talk about this country . . .

[The siren resumes.]

Lewis: Do we need to stop again?

Brown: I guess we're not supposed to talk about this.

[recording interrupted]

When we see now that we have somebody that you know personally, how does this impact your views, your perspective on the leadership and the direction of this country?

Lewis: First of all, I don't know Barack Obama – President Barack Obama – personally. I know him, but I don't know him personally. But I know enough about him to know that he expected more cooperation. He went into this thing thinking about everybody just waiting an opportunity for a guy to say, "Let's make this country better." He was thinking that if not a majority of politicians, surely the country would rise up and say, "How do we make the country better? Show us the way. We'll pressure the politicians who are saying no, no, no, no, no." The country stood by.

I don't want to bring the race card into this. But several Presidents before Obama – I'll give Clinton his due. He left us with some money in the bank. But those who are practicing the art of no, their representatives, including Reagan, including Bush, preached that bootstrap thing, and give the money to them and they'll drip it down, and when it drips down, they will pull themselves up. Not only did it not happen, but they left the country in debt. Now here comes somebody. He says, "Let's work this thing out. Let's get it together." It seems to me he's being told, it'll be worked out, all right, but we're not going to help you work it out. It'll get worked out all right, but we're going to do that after you. You are out of here.

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Okay. The game of politics. That's the way it's played. We got to get our boy in. I don't care if he's black, purple, green. We got to get our boy in. Just what happens if you're black? Does that have anything to do with it? Oh no, oh no. But we got to get our boy in.

Where are the American citizens? If all these people saying these terrible things that are tearing our country down, then surely there would be – say a million of them are saying. There's 299 million – let's take the kids away – there's 200 million people sitting there on their hands, saying, tsk, tsk, tsk tsk, they just won't let the man alone. They ain't going to let him do nothing, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk. Maybe we'll be different, once they get him out. Now, uh-oh, what?

What happened to this American way? What happened to so-called democracy? What gives us the right to go away from these shores and talk to people? "You all should be practicing democracy. That's the way to go. Everybody should have a vote." We have the vote. We don't use it.

Our schools are crumbling physically. Our grades on an international level are tumbling. You can't say, "We've taken the arts away, but look, we're number one in reading, number one in math, number one in science, number one . . ." We were number one – well, we're still number one in terms of our country's might, in terms of money. China's kicking our butt, though.

So I think – it concerns me where our country's going. [?] want to say about that, that those people who – it's discouraging that those young people who helped Obama get elected, many of whom are very well educated, so many of them can see through this fog that's being blown over the minds of American people. Where are they? Why is everybody just sitting back watching the show? Why aren't these people speaking up? Why are people letting this happen?

I say I don't want to play the race card, because you'll say, "He's black, and he's President. If they didn't want a black President, he wouldn't have been President, because it took a whole lot of white votes to make him President." Okay? Where are these people now? Why are so many people sitting back and not voicing their opinions and letting television, radio – and opinions. That's what galls me, is people think a 22-minute news show is the word. People think that a guest on a news program who says this, is the word. They don't think for themselves. They don't read newspapers. They don't research. They don't discuss among themselves. Parents don't talk to their kids. Parents don't ask their kids, "What are you thinking?" Kids don't ask their parents, "What are you thinking? Mom, why? Dad, why? Son, you go to Northwestern, you go to Harvard, you go to Berkeley. What do you think?" What's going on with America?

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Things will turn around. I'm an optimist. I've always seen the glass half full, always, as far back as I can remember. But my patience is being tried right now. This thing about states' rights. Give me a break. Give me a break about this states' rights bullshit, this thing about the Republican's saying, we don't want Federal money. If you do just a little bit of research, you'll see where all 11 of the Southern so-called states and some of them not in the South that say we don't want any Federal money, not only are taking it, but asking for more. But it sounds good. Reagan said, we need smaller government. We left with bigger. Bush said, we need smaller government. We left with bigger.

When does it not be Democrat? When does it not be Republican? When does it just be American? When does it just be, what's good for our country, no matter who says it? If you don't understand what he's saying, do a little research. Find out what he means. If you feel it's good for the country, step forth. To many of us say, I got to go wash the car, I got to go grocery shopping, I don't have time, I don't know, I just don't have time.

Well, you're going down the toilet, and you don't have time to save yourself. I don't mean that, because I'm an optimist. I don't think we're going down the toilet. But I think we're going to hit a new low before we start rising again as a people.

There are more poor people in the country now than there ever was in the country. Unfortunately, most Americans think that most of those poor people are black or Latino. If you research the facts and figures, you'll see that also there are just under 50 million white people – families, girls, boys, children – that are suffering. I say to myself, why don't some of these people speak up? Why do they let it look like, "Those Latinos and those blacks, they're the ones that are dragging us down, they don't want to get a job"?

There are more children dying from poverty in this country than ever before. Why? When somebody tries to address it, people act like, I'm busy, I gave at the office. They don't even want to address it.

Why are jails now big business? And as big business, why are a majority of the people in those jails blacks and Latinos? Why can blacks and Latinos get put in jail for having an ounce of cocaine on them, and white-collar guys on Wall Street can cause this country to almost fall to its knees, because they found a way to sell fraudulent instruments? What's going on? Now I understand there's an investigation going on, but how many of those on Wall Street that knew they were selling fraudulent instruments to honest people, to foundations, to school funds, to this, to that – how many of them are really going to go to jail? None of them. When all this was brought forth, it was brought to us to say, look at this, look at this. This guy got \$20-million in bonuses. This guy got \$90-million in bonuses. This guy – the bank is suffering, but he still drew down his 100-and-something-million-dollar bonus. What's wrong with this picture? Most people don't understand

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what's going on, because they either don't want to know or they don't take time to know what's good about our country and what needs improving in our country.

You asked me about music coming back, and jazz, and the African-American experience. It'll come back, but there are things to be dealt with, I think.

Brown: We have seen some – what, as an optimist, that gives me hope, a glimmer of hope, and that is we've seen members of the working class in Wisconsin stand up. We've seen now that they're having demonstrations down on Wall Street. I remember when Obama – shortly after he was elected, he quoted FDR – Franklin Delano Roosevelt – saying – who had met with A. Philip Randolph. A. Philip Randolph was trying to get him to get on board with desegregation. He said, "Make me do it. You make me do it." That's what Obama said to the American people.

So, for the first – since the beginning of 2009 – here we are in the fall or summer of 2011, and we have people in the streets. We have people demonstrating. Of course it's the working class.

When I was young and much more optimistic, I was in the streets, when I was a student in the '60s. We were saying we need to tear down the system, because the system's what's corrupt. So we do get someone like Obama into office, and we see that he has these goals and he has America's interests at heart. But it seems to me that the system has prevented that from happening, because they want to maintain the status quo, because, who benefits? All those people you were talking about, getting those bonuses. All those corporations who are shipping the jobs overseas and drawing more and more profit. It seems like, from my perspective and the perspective of people who are open and searching, they're seeing that corporations are basically calling the shots through their lobbyists, through their influence in Washington, and they're not going to let that change. They're not going to – they're going to continually have divide and conquer as the plan. Get the working class – okay, so you have the public sector. You got the private sector. This creates some contention there, as they're doing. We're seeing them breaking down the unions, because that benefits them. They don't have to unionize. They don't have to take care of people. They can get bigger profits. So it seems to me that that seems to be what's going on here, at least from my perspective, and probably is shared by others in this room.

But how do we change the system? We tried in the '60s, and we saw what happened to our leaders in the '60s.

Lewis: I think the system is bigger than we think it is. I think we don't really know where the system is. I think – I read a book some time ago that there are 400 families around the world – I think it was fiction, but it was based on fact – 400 families or 400 groups

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around the world that have a lot of money and/or power, and they're able to maintain this system while we go through the motions of change. But the system is so huge and so powerful, and the corporations have so much money to send to Washington through lobbying and all this other business, that even while we think that we're going through change, it's staying the same. That's what – I'm not saying that's the case, but it seems to me, because as you talk and I talk, and we go back many, many, many years, it just keeps repeating itself. It keeps repeating itself. But if you look at the big picture, it's not getting better.

Brown: It's getting worse.

Lewis: We're fed enough to pacify us for a minute or two and say, oh, okay. We got Obama in, or whatever. We're pacified for a minute or two. But then when the smog clears, it's wait a minute. We're not that much better off. So now that you've raised that issue – but who are these people? Maybe this is all made up. Maybe it's all made up. I don't know. When you got people like Warren Buffet saying, "I got a lot of money. I want to pay more taxes." Then there's others now raising their hand, saying, "I got a lot of money. I want to pay more taxes." So it's not the Warren Buffets of the world. And this guy in Greece or wherever – not in Greece. He's somewhere. He's very, very wealthy. They meet in Wyoming once a year. These kinds of people.

Brown: George Soros?

Lewis: Yeah, these kinds of people.

Brown: But they're in the minority. They are people who are the entitled class, who really do have their country at heart.

Lewis: Then who – if the Warren Buffets of the world, if this Soros, of them – of the world – if you get to that level of money and power, and they can't make change . . .

Brown: They're outnumbered.

Lewis: By?

Brown: All those corporations, the ones like Dick Chaney and Halliburton and all the war industry and the prison industry. Those folks aren't interested in that. I presume they're not. I hope they're not. But, as we see, those people who are getting those huge bonuses, those people who have sold all those fraudulent instruments, soon as the housing market blew open, they said, blame it on those people who shouldn't have bought those mortgages. Well, who sold them those mortgages? Those are the folks who [?], I would say.

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Lewis: So you're saying then that it's not necessarily a bunch of very wealthy people around the country. You're saying it's people that's down in the system that band together, just have things their way, to control the system.

Brown: No. I would say that those people that you just identified are being controlled by another group, and that group is that entitled group. They have the Bilderberg group and all these – Tri-Lateral Commission. There are these . . .

Lewis: Tri-Lateral Commission. Yeah, I've been hearing about them for a long time. So you're saying that there's a group bigger and more powerful and with more money than the Buffets and that group.

Brown: I would say that the Warren Buffets and the George Soros are hugely outnumbered by people who are into gain, profit, and at whatever expense.

Lewis: That's what I'm saying. If the Buffets – if they're up here with their power and money, there are people down in the system that, even though they may have – maybe they only have hundreds of millions rather than billions . . .

Brown: But at this echelon up here, and above them, are people who have greater influence. Warren Buffet does not own Halliburton. He does not own Raytheon. He does not own Lockheed.

Lewis: Halliburton is a bunch of folks.

Brown: Right.

Lewis: So you're saying it's that bunch of folks multiplied by that many corporations around the world.

Brown: The people who are reaping benefits – being warmongers and reaping benefits.

Lewis: So they are the ones who impress Washington.

Brown: I would say they are the ones who are financing their representatives and lobbyists to make sure that their agendas are carried out.

Lewis: Exactly. That's the way to impress Washington.

Brown: I don't know how else that these folks at this upper echelon, who have the power that we talk about, are able to influence.

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Lewis: The only way this can happen then, and this – I read this somewhere recently. I don't know if it was the *Wall Street Journal*. No, it wasn't the *Wall Street Journal*. It must have been the *New York Times* – that if this continues, the have-nots are going to take to the streets.

Brown: That's what I was trying to say earlier. The working classes are already starting to get . . .

Lewis: Once they take to the streets and they start throwing firebombs, and we're not going to take this anymore, and the police start beating people up again, is that going to change? Or is that all part of this big picture? Every now and then they say to each other, they're going to take to the streets. Every now and – but it's over in a few weeks, and it'll be business as usual. The Halliburton people and all the rest of them, yeah, let them get it out of their system.

As I say, to me the glass is half full. You're saying the glass is half empty. It's getting less and less, and the glass is going to be totally empty and break in a minute.

Brown: I'm saying that hopefully, as the glass becomes less and less full that, as we see globally now – we are seeing people take to the streets. We saw what happened in North Africa. We see what happened in Egypt. We see what's going on in Spain, in Greece. People are rising up. So this is my optimism. I'm saying . . .

Lewis: I'm talking America here.

Brown: In the '50s we saw the decolonization, which impacted on what was going on in the '60s. We saw that Africa was fighting to take off the yoke of colonialism. It had a direct impact on what was – on the politics and the world view among African-American leaders. Who was Martin Luther King's major influence? Mahatma Gandhi. What did he want? Throw off the yoke of colonialism. Throw off the yoke of oppression.

So I think it has to be a global zeitgeist, and I think we're getting some inklings of it now. That's my glass half full talking. But my Anthony Brown without any rose-colored glasses is looking at the reality, and that the American people are being basically sold.

Lewis: Yep.

Brown: I wanted to ask you in terms of – let's just switch gears, because we're not going to be able to solve – as you said, I have the wisdom to know that I don't have the answers.

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Lewis: Exactly.

Brown: But we at least identify what the problems are, and maybe through that we can continue dialoguing and sharing this with others, as we're doing now.

What I wanted to ask you: are you listening to any other music around the world. I know you . . .

Lewis: No. I mean, I have music from various places around the world, but have I studied by sitting down and saying, "Let's see what they're doing? How can I use it?" No, I'm still dealing with American music by way of the African-American experience.

[recording interrupted]

Brown: When I first even entertained the idea of being a jazz musician and started to have the opportunity to meet some of the musicians backstage, coming off the bandstand, I was always so impressed, as you were when you were younger, with how well they carried themselves and that they took the time to say, yeah, youngster, there's room for you. What I found out, from jazz musicians, is that, perhaps because of their worldly travels, because of whether it was their upbringing or whether it was their life experiences, they always seemed to have a much broader and more global perspective on life, and they seemed to be able to impart – be willing to impart the benefit of their experiences to we youngsters when we first came in. That's what I felt like. This is something very special, to be among these artists, among these people.

Through our conversations during the course of this interview, you have reinforced, and, I would have to say, restored my faith in jazz, the jazz tradition, and folks who have made this profession their life as well – that you, through this conversation, have shared that which first attracted me to becoming a jazz musician, being able to be honest, to valorize integrity, to valorize being yourself. The things that you shared with us during the course of this interview were all the things that I admire about jazz musicians, about people who chose to make this art form their life. On behalf of myself and everybody else who's been inspired by your music and all our progenitors in this tradition, I want to say thank you. I want to say thank you from my heart for being so honest, not only with your words but with your music, and sharing them so generously. I'm at this point – even though I might have been verbose earlier – am somewhat speechless, but can only say, on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Smithsonian Institution and anybody else that has made this possible, that this interview is among the most heartfelt and what I feel is one of the most important ones that are being conducted, because you shared with us the essence of what makes this music so powerful.

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Lewis: Thank you. I'd like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts and the Smithsonian Institution for taking this time out. It actually humbles me to feel that whatever my contribution is, is worthy enough to be documented in such a way. When the National Endowment for the Arts let me know that I was going to be a Jazz Master, very humbling. When I got word that you were going to come, representing them and the Smithsonian, very humbling. I don't know any other way to say it. I know the heroes that I've looked up to, both in the music business and in other areas, that remain heroes of mine. To feel that my contribution is worthy in some way, is very humbling, and it only encourages me to continue to, as Billy Taylor said, do what you do best, and I will continue to do that.

Brown: Thank you for doing that.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

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