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MELBA LISTON
NEA Jazz Master (1987)

Interviewee:	Melba Liston (January 13, 1926 – April 23, 1999)
Interviewer:	Clora Bryant
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Transcriber's note: This interview of Melba Liston dates from 1996. Liston had suffered a stroke in 1985. Thereafter she had some loss of memory and some difficulty speaking. Quotations appear below in the normal manner found throughout transcripts from the Smithsonian's series of jazz oral histories, but exceptionally, for those passages in which Liston has difficulty responding, square brackets identify a summary of contents standing in place of a full quotation.

[The recording commences in mid-sentence:]

Bryant: . . . Jazz Oral History Program, and today's date is December 4th, 1996. We're here at the home of Miss Melba Liston – here in Los Angeles, that is – and we're going to do an interview about her life. My name is Clora Bryant. I will be doing the interview with Melba, and we have Matt [Watson as recording engineer].

First we want to start out by asking Melba where she's from originally.

Liston: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and my grandparents lived in Kansas City, Kansas, so I was between both of them.

Bryant: You stayed – during the week you'd stay with your grandparents and then on the weekends you'd stay with your mom.

[Liston went to school in Kansas City, Kansas, while living with her grandfather.]

Liston: [Her mother's name was Lucille Liston. Her grandparents were Virginia and John Clark. Liston could not remember what her mother and grandparents did, but recalled that her mother went to college]. I think maybe that's why we moved out here, because she wasn't getting no business in Kansas.

Bryant: She was overqualified for the work that she was getting.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: But you have no sisters or brothers.

Liston: No.

Bryant: At your home, I know you said you had a piano – a piano-roll piano. So you were exposed to that. And you had a radio, and you were exposed to the music that you heard that was being played around Kansas City. And also, your grandfather listened to – did he have records or something?

Liston: No. We didn't have records at that time. We had the player.

This is my – this is the same piano.

Bryant: That's the same piano. Wow!

Liston: But it had legs on it. It had really big feet – lovely feet on it. All that stuff.

Bryant: Did you sit there and pedal it.

Liston: Yeah, and my aunties would dance.

Bryant: Thelma too?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: But your mother? Did she dance too?

Liston: Nah. I don't think so. I don't remember her dancing.

Bryant: [asks about the family's economic situation in Kansas City during the Depression.]

Liston: [cannot remember]. But we didn't have no problems.

Bryant: All of you attended church.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Did you sing in church? Is that where you started singing? Because you do sing.

Liston: Once in a while.

Bryant: Okay. But when you were little, did you sing in the children's choir or something?

Liston: No. Not in no choir.

Bryant: No. Just sing in church. Okay. With the congregation.

Liston: Yeah. And when I'm home, the radio.

Bryant: You sing with the radio?

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: Most jazz musicians started in church. That's why I'm trying to get to that.

Watson: What church were you in?

Bryant: [names various denominations.]

Liston: Unity.

Bryant: [asks about music Liston heard, including Count Basie and Cab Calloway.]

Liston: My pop's favorite was Cab Calloway. My auntie's loved [Jimmie] Lunceford and Basie.

Bryant: [asks about Liston starting music at the age of 3 or 4.]

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: [At the age of 7 Liston saw a trombone and asked her mother to get it that same day. Bryant had the same reaction to the trumpet. Did her mother spoil her?]

Liston: No. I've got a record – I mean a tape with my mother's voice on there, and she's talking about when I first got my horn.

Bryant: Really? You should have let me hear that. [Bryant states her intention to hear this tape before the interview resumes the next day.]

The other day I mentioned about the system that you had, that you – where you could pick out the melody of songs by the number of the note or the scale, and that your teachers thought you were a genius, and the church members too thought you were a genius, because you could do that. But it's something that your little mind told you – which was great. But you say that you like to puzzle things, because you like math.

Liston: I like mathematics, but I used to like to hear things, and I would say "2 - 4 – 6" or something.

Bryant: [inquires into this method, but without much response from Liston. Bryant inquires about Liston's friends.]

Liston: I got a whole lot of friends, I guess, but I didn't go around with anything. I was with my grandpa on the back porch, playing the trombone.

Bryant: [Liston said she was playing *Deep River* and *Rocking the Cradle of the Deep*. Were these her choice or her grandfather's?]

Liston: I heard them on the radio.

Bryant: [Liston said the day before that she was playing these melodies five months after she got her trombone.]

You found that you couldn't reach the sixth and the seventh position on it, but you overcame that by . . .

Liston: . . . turning my head sideways. I had to do that until I come out here to California.

Bryant: And then your arms became long enough, or what?

Liston: I was growing. I guess I grew out of that before I went with Mrs. Hightower.

Bryant: [Liston had a teacher in Kansas City that she didn't like.]

Liston: I told my mother to cancel him. So we didn't stay – two or three lessons, that was all. [She cannot recall the reasons why.]

Bryant: In 1937 all of a sudden the family moved to California. You and your mom?

Liston: No. My mom and me stayed over, and my grandma and my aunties moved out here. Maybe four or five months later, we came out. I don't really know the exact times.

Bryant: [asks about the trip to California.]

Liston: [remembers only that it was a train ride.]

Bryant: When you got here, then you enrolled in McKinley Junior High School.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: But yesterday you were saying that the teacher's were – you passed a test to be in the ninth grade?

Liston: Yeah. They couldn't put me in the ninth grade. They put me in the eighth grade anyway, but I was only 10 or something, so they couldn't put me. I could have passed a test for [. . .] going on high school.

Bryant: You're kidding!

Liston: But I couldn't go there, because I was too young. But there's a lot of things that I didn't know, anyway. Growing up, you don't know about a lot of things, and I had to learn about self things and all of those things before I got to high school.

Bryant: But in music – they had music there, and you had a teacher?

Liston: Oh yeah.

Bryant: He was good?

Liston: Mr. [(name inaudible) ?Doddard Deal].

Bryant: First time I heard the name.

Liston: I looked it up. He was good. He didn't mess with me. He just was a good teacher for all around. [Liston has difficulty describing his musical specialization.]

Bryant: But he wanted to adopt you?

Liston: He wanted to send me to some places, and I didn't want to go, but he wanted me – he would have to adopt me to send me to all of these places. I can't remember now. Anyway, I told him, "No. I want to stay with my mom."

Bryant: When you guys got out here, you did continue your church affiliation, right?

Liston: Yes.

Bryant: You started playing your horn in church?

Liston: No.

Bryant: Not right away?

Liston: I didn't play my horn in church, unless they were getting some Christmas and New Year's and all of that stuff. I didn't play every Sunday.

Bryant: We forgot about your radio show in Kansas.

Liston: [cannot recall details.] I was a little star.

Bryant: But it was just you and the piano then?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Back to L.A. At school you met Minnie Hightower?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: And she was the one that told you about Mrs. Hightower.

Liston: [cannot recall.] I met her, and she was thrilled with my playing the trombone and all that. We had a good thing going for many years. We played everywhere. We practiced at the Ross Snyder playground. [At night in the summertime they played in the parks.]

Bryant: Do you remember some of the people besides Minnie and Vi Redd?

Liston: Alice Young. Those three, we were close. I don't think no other girls were in there at the time. And boys . . .

Bryant: Were you the only trombone player?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: I know in the pictures you're the only one. You have the pictures. [Bryant refers to describes a photograph in which Liston and Vi Redd are wearing socks.]

But when you went to the fair – I wanted to ask you about that.

Liston: We rode up and back in a truck in the back seat – I mean the back of a truck. Miss Hightower and the truck driver was up in the front. We made it. I guess that was my first time on the road. We played – I don't know what year that was.

Bryant: You remember the name of the group, though.

Liston: Melodic Dots. Miss Hightower and the Melodic Dots. Oh dear.

Bryant: Was 1938 something like the year?

Liston: Uh-huh.

Bryant: What-all did Miss Hightower teach you guys?

Liston: Everything. Everything dancers do. Everything horns do. Everything everybody did. We did dancing and – tap dancing and hula dancing. Did everything. Everything that was on the stage, she taught us

Bryant: You did skits?

Liston: Yeah. I can't remember who. Paul Robeson or somebody. She would take us through things like he did, or somebody like that. [Liston cannot remember details.]

Bryant: But she taught you theory, harmony?

Liston: Not harmony. Theory, yes. A little bit of it, anyway.

Bryant: But she taught you to read?

Liston: I was reading already.

Bryant: But I mean the kids in the band?

Liston: [cannot recall.] I remember she would let me go out and play or something while she would do some other things with the kids. [Again, Liston does not recall the details.] But she didn't teach, because I was reading all the time.

Bryant: Miss Hightower seemed to have had quite an attachment. She thought you were just the greatest.

Liston: I don't know about that.

Bryant: It's been said.

Liston: She was nice to me. I stayed with her until 16 and I joined the union and started to work at the Lincoln Theater. I think she was kind of pissed off with me then. But anyway, that started me on the road to where I am now.

Bryant: But at the Lincoln, some of the other kids went there with you, from the Melodic Dots?

Liston: Alice Young. Her name's Mrs. H[?(inaudible)] or something now. But she – nobody else.

Bryant: But there were – you said that when Bardu [Ali] thought you . . .

Liston: I guess he thought I was from college or something, because the acts that would come in that didn't have any music, he would say, "Girl, write the music for it," and I would write it. So I started writing.

Bryant: You started that in high school.

Liston: I think I did some writing in high school, but not for a band like that. I was writing for bands – 12, 13, 14, 15 pieces, something like that. That was the start of my writing career.

Bryant: That was the beginning of that.

Bardu had been with Chick Webb?

Liston: Yeah, he did.

Bryant: So did you guys play any of Chick Webb's music in the band?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: [read that somewhere.] But you had mentioned yesterday that you would do some skits sometimes with Pigmeat Markum?

Liston: Yeah. Pigmeat Markum was always there. He had the run of the show. When he had some skit to do that wasn't around the action on the stage, I would go on and do them. But Miss Hightower taught us how to do that anyway, so it wasn't no big thing. I wasn't thrilled about nothing. I just did everything that you could do when you're on the stage or in the pit band.

Bryant: You had said that sometimes there was an actor who would come on and do a serious type of skit and then Pigmeat would come along and . . .

Liston: [Laughs]. Oh yeah. He would come on and do it afterwards. Oh dear. That was something else.

Bryant: Like slapstick or something?

Liston: Yeah, something like that. I don't know how you could call it, but he would come on and really just do it up.

Bryant: He destroyed the legitimate thing.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: That must have been an education, working with him.

Liston: Yeah, it was. And Dusty Fletcher. He and Dusty Fletcher had a run all the time. Singers – I can't remember all the singers.

Bryant: What's the girl who was with Lucky Millinder, married Marl Young? Didn't she sing – I saw her there. Not Joya Sherill.

Liston: [knows Marl, but cannot recall the singer's name.]

Bryant: [asks about Valaida Snow.]

Liston: [cannot recall details.]

I had a year or a year and a half there, so everybody came through there.

Bryant: Herb Jeffries?

Liston: Yeah. That was it in 19 – whatever it is – 40. We had our thing, and then whitey had his thing.

Bryant: You mean downtown at the Million Dollar and all that.

Liston: Um-hmm. Sometimes they would work downtown and then come to the Lincoln and do it. It was nice.

Bryant: Then when Gerald Wilson . . .

Liston: He says he stole me out of the band.

Bryant: That's what he said.

Liston: So I guess he did. I worked with him. I was saying 5 or 6, but he said 8 years. That's a long time. We worked everywhere. We worked Chicago, New York, and everything. I was the copyist and sometime I would do the arrangements.

Bryant: You learned a lot from him?

Liston: Yeah, yeah. He said he learned a lot. We just had a good thing going.

Bryant: Back and forth? But your first job, you said, with him was at Shepp's Playhouse.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Remember how that came about?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: [gives Liston prompts naming bandmembers who came with Liston from Bardu Ali to Gerald Wilson: Vernon Slater, Jimmy Bunn, Floyd Turner. She asks if they left Shepp's and went on the road.]

Liston: [They went to New York.]

Bryant: [They played in the same show with Jimmie Lunceford.]

Liston: [But they were never as prominent in California.] I don't think it's jazz orientation. I'm going back to New York. [laughter]

Bryant: To get that feeling again.

Liston: Yes, indeed.

Bryant: Do you think by following Jimmie Lunceford, that's why you guys played so good back there too?

Liston: No, we just had a good band.

Bryant: Competition, I mean. Do you think competition . . .

Liston: No. We just had a good band. We didn't have no competition with nobody. We just had a good band, and we knew it. We knew we had a good band. Maybe we got a little over-pretentious or something.

Bryant: Egotistical.

Liston: No. We just had a good band, and we knew it. That's all. I would go out and sing and blow my horn.

Bryant: On the show at the Apollo?

Liston: Yeah. Everywhere we went, because they would say, "Let the girl do something." Gerald said, "Melba, write something up and do it." So I did what he said.

Bryant: When you left New York, was that the time that Dizzy [Gillespie] asked you to come up and play? The first time? That wasn't the time?

Liston: No. That was a year – years. We had worked together for a long time before Dizzy. Gerald knew him, but I don't think we knew him at all up until almost the bebop era.

Bryant: So then you left the Apollo and came back to L.A. then.

Liston: Oh yeah. Stopped here and there. Maybe Chicago and Kansas and everywhere. We went to – I had a band that went to – Lady Day. We were . . .

Bryant: Billie Holiday.

Liston: . . . Yeah, behind Lady Day. It was in the South somewhere.

Bryant: South Carolina? Greens . . . Oh that's where – you got stranded there.

Liston: There wasn't nothing happening.

Bryant: They didn't like Billie?

Liston: I don't know. But she left and we were stranded on the bus, and Gerald took all the money that we had and gave it to the fellows to get back home, and we just had enought to get us to Kansas City. [Liston cannot recall what happened next.]

Bryant: Did you become disillusioned?

Liston: Not at that time. I had maybe 6 or 7 or 8 years before I was [disillusioned].

Bryant: But when you came back, is that when you had work with smaller groups and had to stand up and jam all night or something?

Liston: Oh yeah. That was a mess. Mainly, though, I would just stay in the background and play the parts, and saxophone and trumpet played the solos, but, like I said, the girl has to do something, so I had to do something once in a while.

Bryant: Was that after you and Gerald had been with Basie? When you came back from New York?

Liston: [cannot recall the chronology.]

Bryant: Gerald said that you recorded with Basie and that the record is out now, on CD.

Liston: [does not know about it or remember recording with Basie.]

Bryant: He also was saying that in – was it in his band, who he hired? No. After Basie, you guys went with Dizzy the first time? He went and you went together? That's when they had John Coltrane?

Liston: I went, and Dizzy found a spot for him to go, but that was in the wintertime. [She cannot remember the name of the club.] I didn't know how to get there. Gerald was out of town. I had finished my work. I said, damn, I got to get to see Dizzy. I don't want to have to sit down here and do nothing. So I asked somebody how to get downtown. I was living uptown. He said, "You go down in the subway, and when you get to 49th Street, you come up, and you'll be there." That sure was there. Right on the corner. Billy Eckstine was out front. He said, "…, where you been? We've been looking for you. Dizzy's had the chair empty for a whole week." I said, "Oh, man." And I didn't have my trombone. It was a thing. I had to – Dizzy had to rent a trombone or something, and I had to get the guys' uniform. I had to put that on, and it was leaning all – it was terrible. My mom sent my horn, and it worked out all right.

Bryant: Was that scary or exciting? Was it exciting?

Liston: Nothing was scary, or nothing like that. It was just a drag. He was looking for me, and I didn't know about it, and then had to go and get this horn that I didn't . . .

Bryant: Mouthpiece?

Liston: I don't know if a mouthpiece made any difference. And the uniform and everything like that.

Bryant: Is that the band with John Coltrane in it?

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: [asks if there were any resentments or jealously in the band.]

Liston: [does not think so.]

Bryant: [names other bandmembers: John Collins, Jimmie Heath, Specs Wright, Al McKibbon, Willie Cook, John Lewis. She asks about the bop style and about the other trombone players in the band.]

Liston: [recalls that one of the bandmembers told her some things about the bop style, but she cannot recall details. She does not remember the other trombonists.]

Bryant: I was just wondering, what chair did you take?

Liston: There were three 'bones. I guess we mixed it all up. [The bass trombonist played that part all the time; the other two switched parts.]

Bryant: [Liston said the previous day that the band stayed together for five months and then broke up.]

Liston: Oh yeah, because there wasn't no jobs for us. Nothing for us to do but come on home.

Bryant: Came back to L.A. Then?

Liston: Back to Gerald and all that stuff.

Bryant: He had come back already?

Liston: Uh-huh.

Bryant: Was that when you went into the Board of Education?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: Because you got tired of the road.

Liston: Not so much tired of it.

Bryant: The conditions, I mean.

Liston: Yeah, the conditions.

Bryant: Who encouraged you to take the exam.

Liston: Nobody. I was good at math and all that, so I said, I'm through with this road business. I'm going to take – I think I took it on my own. I knew I was going to pass. There's nothing new to me.

Bryant: [asks how Liston's mother felt about it.]

Liston: [Everything was all right.]

Bryant: [asks what Liston did there. Clerical?]

Liston: [Yes. It was night school.] I did take some gigs. I was gigging after a while, because the thing was envy, I guess.

[The conversation takes a confusing turn from Liston's Board of Education job, which may have been at Jefferson High School, to her high school years, briefly at Jefferson but mainly at Polytechnic High School, with Minnie Hightower.]

Bryant: [Liston worked at the Board of Education for three years.]

Liston: Maybe two, three years. But I would take off now and then for . . .

Bryant: For gigs, you mean.

Liston: Not no steady. Once in a while. Just a night or two. Then I quit that, and I went to playing again, and that didn't – no, it's not working. And so I went to work at the insurance company, Adams . . .

Bryant: Adams and Western? Golden State.

Liston: Yeah. I went there.

Bryant: I didn't know that.

Liston: And I would go – on my lunch thing, I would go in my car and listen to some . . .

Bryant: Feel the music.

Liston: [does not recall how long she worked there.]

Bryant: But before that we also forgot Dexter Gordon.

Liston: He and I were in school together. He was a bad, bad tenor player, all the time. He was breaking this record. I said, "I'm not – no, no." He said, "Come on."

Bryant: What'd he call you?

Liston: You know.

Bryant: His favorite word?

Liston: Yes sir. That was the first time I had played without any music. Oh, Lordy. That was terrible.

Bryant: You sounded good. [Does Liston remember any of the other guys on that session in 1947?]

Liston: [does not recall.]

Bryant: [Liston had not recorded before. The recordings with Gerald Wilson came afterwards.]

But back to the Golden State. You got unhappy with that.

Liston: No, I wasn't unhappy. I just – one day I said no. I quit that. Just me and music again. Then maybe Dizzy sent for me again.

Bryant: '49. I think '49.

Liston: I went back to New York to stay.

Bryant: But what kind of greeting did you get? You took music, right?

Liston: Yeah. The guys were cool, but the audience, said, "Girl, (murmur murmur)."

Bryant: Really?

Liston: Nobody had played no trombone. Nobody.

Bryant: Yeah. You broke the ice. You were the innovator.

Liston: Gerald, he started it. "She wrote the arrangement. She plays, she sings, and all of that stuff."

Bryant: He did? He told Dizzy that?

Liston: No. He would do that when we were working. Dizzy was the same. He followed up the same way. But the guys were cool.

Bryant: It was the other band – was that the '56 band with Dizzy, where the guys were saying, why'd you send across to the West Coast to get a you-know-what?

Liston: Yeah, but, they would do that now. It's just a man's thing. They wouldn't do that to me, but other girls, they would turn up their nose or something.

Bryant: Dizzy said it was because some of them had friends that they wanted to play, to take that spot, and he sent and got you.

Liston: He said, "Go on and take one of those arrangements out and see if they can play it." Two or three bars later, he said, "Now who's the …"

Bryant: Yeah, he told me about that, and he relished telling that story, because it confirmed what he felt about – the faith that he had in you.

Liston: He was so good. I was there until the band broke up.

Bryant: Was that when the work started falling off and Lorraine told him it was the band or her? Is that when the work started falling off for the band.

Liston: It stopped. Not falling off. It stopped. Then I met Randy [Weston] when I was playing with Dizzy, and he said he wanted me to copy or something for him. It turned out that I wrote . . .

Bryant: Randy Weston.

Liston: Um-hmm. It was a good thing. He took me to Jamaica. He was there visiting his relatives from there, and I was just hanging out.

Bryant: I heard how you got the kids to start to read music, to become interested in jazz, and how you got the school systems down there . . .

Liston: I didn't get the school systems.

Bryant: Yeah, but what about the . . .

Liston: The students I got.

Bryant: Right.

Liston: No sch . . .

Bryant: Really? How were you able to [?]

Liston: Because the leaders of the whole island dug me, but the school didn't.

Bryant: Really? See, that's what I wanted to hear too, because you stayed there four or five years, didn't you?

Liston: No. Five or six years, but when the leaders closed . . .

Bryant: Changed.

Liston: . . . I came on out. But I had enough of it.

Bryant: You had a lot of kids.

Liston: It was nice. I got a record by one of the students – I'll tell you tomorrow, I guess.

Bryant: I was wondering if you heard from any of your students.

Liston: Oh, I hear from them all the time. I'll play the record for you.

Bryant: [asks about Carole Kromer and Diane Gregg who encouraged Liston to come to the Women's' Jazz Festival in Kansas City in 1979.]

Liston: [does not remember their names.] Two women were anxious for her to come to Kansas City.

Bryant: Were you honored there?

Liston: [cannot remember.]

Bryant: [Did Liston perform there?]

Liston: [No.]

Bryant: You left there and went to New York, or did you go back to the islands?

Liston: I went back to the islands to finish the school, and then I came – I didn't go to New York. I went to St. Lucia.

Bryant: Oh. I see the parrot up there. What did you do there?

Liston: I had a friend who's there from [St. Lucia]. He was in Jamaica studying with me and so I went to his hometown and just hung out there for a while.

Bryant: You didn't teach or anything?

Liston: No. They had a symphony orchestra there. [Liston cannot recall details, but she did something with the symphony.] He had his family there.

Bryant: You stayed how long?

Liston: It was two weeks or so.

Bryant: And then you came back to New York?

Liston: To New York. Um-hmm. I had all my stuff sent back there while I was in St. Lucia.

Bryant: I see. It was there waiting when you got back.

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: And what did you do at that time. Was that still '79?

Liston: I bought me an apartment and settled down.

Bryant: Shall we mention the magic word?

Liston: What is that?

Bryant: Married.

Liston: [does not recall the date]. He just died a few months ago.

Bryant: He was a good guy.

Liston: Good and bad and all of that stuff, and I was good and bad and all of that stuff. I guess I was getting ready to leave him a long time, maybe three or four times before I actually left him.

Bryant: Was he a musician?

Liston: No.

Bryant: That's right. You said none of them were musicians.

Liston: Two husbands. One of them didn't last no time, because he was on some stuff or something, but my husband that I – I loved him.

Bryant: That wasn't hard to say, was it?

Liston: No. But you get tired or something. It don't matter too much.

Bryant: But you said he cared about you and he'd just call to see how you were.

Liston: He cared, and then he didn't care, and then I left him, and then he started up again.

Bryant: He started caring, right? He missed you.

Liston: Something like that. He used to come and see me in New York there. When I came out here he used to call me up all the time, and I'm sorry he's gone.

Bryant: When you had your stroke, did he come to see you?

Liston: Yeah. He was nice like that. Both of us just decided not to go through with the marriage no more.

Bryant: But he didn't resent your music.

Liston: No. He was glad for my music.

Bryant: Did he come to see you play?

Liston: Oh yeah. Now and then. [Liston recalls an incident in Washington.] We were all tired. I was coming back from somewhere. "We'll stop in Washington and rest and then go on to New York." All the guys were downstairs. I was in a room upstairs, and didn't have no clothes on or nothing. I was just getting ready to doze, and here comes one of the fellows. He took off all of his clothes. "You can't do that." I was trying to get him out of the room, and the baby's mama come, and I couldn't say nothing. "Get out. Get out. Don't you ever come." I don't know whether she's alive or not, but her husband's dead. I told him what happened, but she wouldn't hear it.

Bryant: She wouldn't believe you?

Liston: I didn't talk to her no more. I tried to. I tried to call her up. I talked to her husband, and I told him. But I think she's dead now. But anyway, that's what girls have to go through.

Bryant: That's right. That was the one thing that made me [?], because I know that's what we went through.

Liston: That's the only . . .

Bryant: . . . thing you're divulging. But do we get the name of your husband we were talking about.

Liston: Yeah. Nelson Harris. *Len Sirrah* – that's the name of one of my tunes is his name backwards. It's a nice tune too. I'm hoping to do that when I go back to New York.

Bryant: So you guys had – you had an apartment. But you guys had an apartment together though, didn't you, because you were mentioning something about . . .

Liston: I think I had it, and then we got married and he came in on it. Then I left, and he stayed.

Bryant: You said he's deceased now.

Liston: Yeah. He was in South Carolina visiting his mom. He died there.

Bryant: While you were in New York this time, at the beginning of the ’80s, was that when you started organizing your own group? And what about the group that you had with Boo – Boo Pleasant, when you guys went to – Bermuda?

Liston: We worked and worked all around New York and then we went to China. I don’t know what town now. But we went over there and then we came back and then I started weeding the girls out and putting some men in their places.

Bryant: That was after Dizzy’s – somebody’s band broke up and this agent said, “You don’t have to be without work. You take a girl’s group” to wherever, and that’s the way that started.

Liston: [does not recall how long they were together.]

Bryant: But then you did start another group for girls, and then you started adding guys, like Britt Woodman. But first you added, I think, a piano player?

Liston: Melba Liston and Company, that was all the time. So whatever my company was, that was it, but it was girls all the way and then I had Larry, I had [?]. I don’t know what happened to . . .

Bryant: Saxophone player, right?

Liston: Alto. And then Budd Johnson. [Liston cannot recall whom Johnson replaced.] Then I had trombone – Al Grey. He played trombone with me. He’d been everywhere I’ve been. He comes in there once in a while.

So we had a tenor, an alto, and two ’bones, and the rhythm. I got rid of the bass, because I wanted a upright bass, and she didn’t . . .

Bryant: What’s her name on bass, that sings too? I can’t think of what her name is.

Liston: But now she’s – I talked to [?Colby], and she’s playing upright.

Bryant: Upright? Because I never have seen her play upright. We better put her name on here if we’re going to talk about her.

Was Jean Davis in that group? Trumpet player.

Liston: No trumpets.

Bryant: No trumpet. Just sax and ’bone.

Did you write all the music or did anyone else write?

Liston: [No.]

Bryant: You wrote all the music?

Liston: Yes.

Bryant: Did you record any music?

Liston: We did, but they didn't release it or something like that. I didn't play you the first song that was on the tape. That was with my small group.

Bryant: That she just played from the radio date?

Liston: Uh-hmm.

Bryant: But I thought that was *My Reverie* from Dizzy's . . .

Liston: No. When she – the very first thing . . .

Bryant: Oh, that was just the introduction to it. I see.

Liston: . . . before she talked at all. Because Hale Smith – all of those things was talking about that tune that I did.

Bryant: Because I'd never heard that before.

Liston: I haven't done anything out here. I came out here when I had the stroke and everything.

Bryant: But you were playing up until that time, right?

Liston: Um-hmm. I don't know. I was conducting and stuff more than playing. I didn't play very much at that time. When I was in Jamaica, I had two horns, but I wasn't playing them. I just carried them around with me. They had a jazz festival or something like that. This was 1975. They had [Frank Foster]. Dexter came.

Bryant: Did Al come down – Al Grey?

Liston: No. He didn't come down there. Just saxophone players. That's all – telling them more about jazz and bebop and all of that stuff. So it was nice.

Bryant: Long, tall Dexter. How much time do we have? Because I want to bring up about your movie work.

Liston: That was just something.

Bryant: I know, but it was an important something.

Liston: You make too much of these . . .

Bryant: No, I'm not making too much. That's important.

Liston: [cannot recall how it happened.]

Bryant: Was first *The Ten Commandments*?

Liston: Yeah. I was with a whole bunch of people, so that – I couldn't see me as anything on that. But the next one . . .

Bryant: *The Prodigal*? Lana Turner?

Liston: Yeah. I was all through that. I was her maid or something or other. I don't see it on t.v. or nothing. I'm looking all the time. I'm looking for it.

Bryant: Why?

Liston: I want to see me.

Bryant: You say you were playing the lute or what?

Liston: No. I . . .

Bryant: You following her around playing the harp?

Liston: No. I'm her maid.

Bryant: Somebody got that wrong then.

Liston: Yes sir. I was her maid or something. No music. I was all through that one. If they show it and I didn't know about it, I'll tell you.

Bryant: Okay, because I haven't seen that movie, like you said. I haven't seen it in a long time. So I've forgotten. It was Lana Turner, and I forget the name of . . .

Liston: I was Lana Turner's old girl.

Bryant: You don't remember how you got it. That was one of the main things that I wanted to find out.

Liston: I can't remember.

Bryant: But continuing on with the girl groups in New York – what came after? Did you do some more stuff with Randy?

Liston: I've been writing for Randy. I'm still writing for Randy. I wrote for him up until I had the stroke. After I had the stroke and got over a little bit, I'm writing for him again. I think he pulled me out of it – helped anyway. I thank him very much for sticking with me, because nobody else did.

Bryant: My doctor said you find out who your friends really are.

Liston: Oh yeah. My friends really are Frank and all of those. They're arrangers too. I can't take nothing away from them. They'll be my friends.

Bryant: There was a bass player that . . .

Liston: Major Holley?

Bryant: Yeah, Major Holley. You're always talking about him. He talked about you the whole time . . .

Liston: He bought my first – the first computer that I had.

Bryant: That's right, but then someone had stolen it or something – you said stole your trombone?

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: Broke into your apartment and stole your stuff or something? When we were in New York—what? – '88 or something, he told us that.

Liston: He went with me and picked out my first computer.

Bryant: I think you had just bought it then, because he was telling me and Jeannie Cheatham about that.

Liston: I had the stroke already. I don't know if I was talking or not then. But he got me and we went downtown and bought the computer.

Bryant: Had you ever used one before?

Liston: No.

[end of December 4, 1996, interview session]

[December 5, 1996:]

Bryant: Melba, the first thing I want to ask you: who was your main influence on the trombone when you started? Was it somebody you really like?

Liston: No. Tommy Dorsey was – I didn't know too many trombone players, but he was on the radio, and I listened to him. But other than that, I just loved the instrument. I didn't need no inspiration.

Bryant: A lot of your arrangements, are they Ellington-inspired? I get some nuances in some of your stuff, the way you lay it out. Do you like Ellington's arrangements.

Liston: I loved them, but I don't have anybody – I do it all from my soul, and if it sounds like somebody, well it sounds like somebody. It's my inspiration. It's from my soul.

Bryant: When you write for your group, is it more swing-oriented or bebop? – when you had your group, like your 'Bones, Melba and her 'Bones, and Friends.

Liston: Melba and Friends or Melba and Company. I don't know. Swing or something.

Bryant: But did you ever write "outside," so to speak?

Liston: No. Not for my group. No. I don't think so, but maybe somebody else thinks differently. I don't know. But I don't think so.

Bryant: But do you like "outside" music?

Liston: No. I don't think so. It's got to be way "outside."

Bryant: Have you encountered any problems with the bands and the musicians that you have written for in regards to the way you write for the reeds or trumpets?

Liston: Yeah. A little bit, but three or four bars in they'd start over again, and everything's cool. Not recently or in the last 20 years or something, but before then I think there was some kind of animosity until they got into my arrangements, and they'd say "oo" and they'd start it over again.

Bryant: It's like teaching an old dog new trick.

How was it when you wrote with Oliver Nelson? He's a hell of an arranger too.

Liston: What?

Bryant: No problems there? He loved your writing too?

Liston: Yeah, and I loved his.

Bryant: No problems.

Liston: No, not with nobody. Arrangers, we all friends. Ernie Wilkins and all of us real close. I write the soul music, more or less, and they write the swing and bop stuff.

Bryant: What about [Thelonious] Monk?

Liston: Right there for me all the time. What about him? I don't know nothing about him.

Bryant: Did you ever play any of his music? Did you ever play with him?

Liston: No.

Bryant: Did he ever play any of your music?

Liston: Yeah, I wrote for him, but I didn't write no different. I just wrote from my soul. I just write what I write. If they like it, they like it. If they don't . . .

Bryant: But he liked it.

Liston: Yeah. They really don't ask me to do nothing "outside." It's always something like a original or one of their tunes, and it's a great honor – Monk.

Bryant: What about Diana Ross? How was she? That was at Motown?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: How was that? How was she to work with?

Liston: I guess okay. I didn't have no problem ever. Not with the singers and the instrumentalists that I wrote for. Maybe a bandperson now and then, but he would come in right quick. Not in the last 20 years. I haven't had none of that.

Bryant: What about Abbey Lincoln?

Liston: Oh, she's fine. I write for her now and then.

Bryant: John [?]. All that music over there.

Liston: I wrote for him. I haven't written for him since I had the stroke and all of that. I called him on the phone, but I couldn't reach him up there, outside of New York. I can't think of it now. He's – it's always fine. He lost a boy in that big thing, the airplane crash.

Bryant: She did? The same one that what's-his-name's wife – Wayne Shorter?

Liston: Um-hmm. That was when I was trying to call him, but I didn't reach him.

Bryant: But tell me about you and [Charles] Mingus. Tell me something exciting, because you know I know how Mingus is.

Liston: Not with me.

Bryant: I don't mean that way, but I mean I know how he is about his music.

Liston: That's what I mean. I don't know nothing about that other thing. Mingus was all music with me, but I haven't written for him in such a long, long time I can't even remember how he was or anything. He was all right

Bryant: But you knew him out here?

Liston: Yeah. That was a long time ago. He did all his writing. Maybe one or two things I wrote for, but not many things.

Watson: How was writing for Mingus different than it was writing for Monk?

Liston: All the world difference. Monk is Monk and Mingus is Mingus. They're too many things apart. Monk is a piano player and he does things with the piano that nobody else does, and I have to leave spaces and stuff for him. Mingus. It's altogether different for Mingus. Either you do or you don't for Mingus. I can't remember anything

negative about him. I write something and then I leave holes and stuff for him and then write something else to take it out, for Mingus.

Watson: What was most challenging about writing for Mingus?

Liston: I write for everybody, and they're all challenging. Anybody I write for, because I haven't had no training, so I have to dig down and do it from there. All my things are challenging.

Bryant: What are some of the challenges that you've found when you write for different people? Do they tell you what they want and lay it out, and then you go from there, from what you feel about that, or do you have to really think, like you said, and know the person and write from what you've got inside?

Liston: Some people, they ask for this and that and the other, and you have to write for them like a stage act, but mostly I write for bands, and they tell me go ahead, do whatever you want to do. Sometimes I'm writing for bands that have criteria and then sometimes I'm free to write. Randy, I have all the freedom I want.

Bryant: What's the criteria for writing for him then? Just whatever you feel? He gives you the song or the changes?

Liston: Yeah, he gives me the song and the changes, and that's all. But we've been together – what? – '56 to '96. How many is that? 40 years. He don't tell me anything.

Bryant: Because you probably already know before he says it, after 40 years.

Liston: He says I write like he writes.

Bryant: There's no challenge there. It is a challenge, but . . .

Liston: Not in the way that people think. I think about it and think about it and think about it before I write. I was writing, before my eyes got bad, a thing for the trumpet player and trombone player that sent me the horn, because I've got to send them something, so I was writing for them. Every time . . .

Bryant: You mean Susan? Susan Slaughter?

Liston: . . . Yeah – I go back over it, I'd change it. I tell you why. I'll be through with it one of these days.

Bryant: Before the next conference.

Liston: Yeah. The trumpet and the trombone and strings.

Bryant: What? She sent you a layout for it and then you . . .?

Liston: No, no, no. She don't even know about it. I just want to do that, because she was sending me the horn, so I got to send her something, so I'm sending her one of my compositions.

Bryant: Maybe they'll perform it at the conference.

Liston: I don't know. Maybe. Don't ever . . .

Bryant: I won't say anything, but that is great.

Liston: Just strings and trumpet and trombone. That's the first I've written for that. I've written for trumpet and strings. I hadn't written for trombone and strings before.

Bryant: You're really reaching down.

Liston: You've got to reach down on everything. I have to anywhere. I don't know where to go until I reach down and find something.

Bryant: What you come up with is good, all good.

How did you meet Randy? Was he playing – was it out here or in New York when you met Randy?

Liston: I was playing with Dizzy – I guess Birdland. I came out and did my usual thing. He stayed over and met me when I finished the gig. He said, "I have to meet her." We just hit it off right away.

Bryant: Had you heard of him?

Liston: Oh yeah. I hear of everybody. I didn't expect to see him or to write for him or anything like that. He said, "Can I bring some lead sheets up to your house and you make them for me?" I said okay. He brought *Little Niles* and all those things up to the house, and he said, "I think you should write these things for an album for me." And I wrote them. I think it's the best thing. Quite nice. It's the best thing. I'm on it. Johnny Griffin, and Ray Copeland. And he and probably Charli Persip – can't think of the bass player now. It's a nice album.

Bryant: I haven't heard it in so long. Did they re-release it?

Liston: Not yet. But they will. [Randy's newer things have been reissued.]

Bryant: Then that's the way it started, and it's gone on 40 years. There's an awful lot of CDs over there. How many of them did you write?

Liston: All of them, except the ones that he had playing with the rhythm or one horn, but all the things with three horns or more, I wrote. The albums that I used to – there's a whole bunch of them in my collection over there.

Bryant: Before CDs?

Liston: Yeah. I don't know what to do with them. I'm going to keep them. That's all I can do.

Bryant: I hope you do. It's your writing.

Liston: I've got a bunch of things. Johnny Griffin and all the things I wrote before CDs – I mean, before that.

Bryant: Before 33 and 1/3.

Liston: Yeah I think so.

Bryant: I think that Basie thing was on a 78.

When you go to New York, will you be writing with Randy?

Liston: Yeah. He's looking forward to my coming there, but so many others are waiting for me to come there too, to write or . . .

Bryant: That was obvious at the rehearsals for the Groove Festival. They would be waiting for you.

Does Charli Persip want you to write for his big band?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: When you get to New York, do you have any future plans?

Liston: Colby, she going to be my – so we're talking once a week or so now. She's got everything going, but I told her, Randy and then other things, because he – Randy pulled me out of the stroke, so I have to go with him.

Bryant: Because you used to say, whenever you would be sad or something, you're horn would bring you out of it, but now you can't depend on that, so Randy is your horn right now.

Have you fulfilled all your dreams and goals and stuff for yourself, or did you have any new come along? You've written for everybody. You played with everybody.

Liston: I haven't mad no money. So I could make some money now.

Bryant: That's probably what you'll do, going back to New York. Like you said, they'll be ready for you, and they won't be piddly-paddling with the money.

Liston: I don't like the music today, the music that the youngsters are doing today. I'm an old-fashioned broad, and I just want to do other . . .

Bryant: You don't like rap?

Liston: It's okay.

Bryant: Fusion?

Liston: What is the fusion?

Bryant: Fusion is where they mix the – they try to mix bop and rock-and-roll . . .

Liston: No. I don't think so. I wouldn't say. That's all right. It's that other thing. [Liston fails to identify the style she has in mind.]

Bryant: Melba, do you think that the kids are not – nowadays with their music, the direction they are going, that there is a – it's blah. It's not – as far as I'm concerned, there's no soul there. There's no meat, no bottom. What do you think?

Liston: It's nothing there. Once in a while a person comes along and has the business and soul and everything, but ordinarily, youngsters don't have nothing.

Bryant: Do you think it's because they didn't have like what we had when we came – we had places to go and listen and have the older people walk you through to where you – do you think that's missing? They don't have a common place to go, like we used to.

Liston: I don't think so. They wouldn't take it. They just want to do their thing, and I guess maybe they'll come out of it and go into something nice maybe 10 years or something, but nothing there – I don't hear nothing in the way they're doing it nowadays.

Bryant: But people like – we heard David Sanchez. He reached back to a lot of guys from Bird on up. A little of Ben Webster. But you're not saying that they have to be imitating or using – that's not what you're saying.

Liston: No. They just have to have some soul. That's all.

Bryant: How are they going to get it.

Liston: I don't know. They have it or you don't have it.

Watson: Do you think that the fact that many of the young musicians coming up today have not had the experience of playing in big bands has contributed to the fact that – do you think that the experience of playing in a big band gave you anything that they're lacking by playing only in small-group performance?

Liston: No, because they could have it solo-wise, if they had it at all. I don't know what it is that they're lacking, but I'm not well-schooled in the youngsters and everything any more.

Bryant: But don't you think that these colleges – they have the big bands and they have the workshops. The Berklee School of Music. They're turning them out. But there's still something missing.

Liston: Once in a while, one cat will – somebody came up with some school in the midwest. They were all white kids except one black boy, and he said, the black boy was the only one that had some soul in the whole school.

Bryant: Why? Different background?

Liston: Maybe they just got it and others don't have it and won't have it.

Bryant: But you don't think that by not coming out with the big bands, because you came in on the tail end of the big bands.

Liston: I was there for a whole – I guess it was a long time. But Dexter and all of those people, they were going around soloing, piano and bass and stuff, and soloing, and they had it.

Bryant: I wanted to ask you about Dexter. What did you think about his playing?

Liston: Oh, dear me. Everything good.

Bryant: He played like he walked. You went to school with him, right?

Liston: Yeah, junior high school. He came down to Jamaica when I was down there teaching and played for the kids. [Liston tries to recall the name of a drummer who was also there.] He had a band then and he had a band now, and he's married to a Japanese – Elvin Jones. Elvin came down with his group. I can't say all the musicians that came down – once in a while – and played for my kids and the school, and some of those got soul. It's nothing I can put my finger on. I don't know what it is.

Bryant: I wanted to ask you about those schools in New York that you – you helped to start a couple of schools. You helped establish the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra in Pennsylvania in 1964, and then you – the Harlem Backstreet Tour Orchestra. I'd never heard of these. The Pratt Institute Youth in Action. Do you remember those pretty good groups? You wrote music for them, or you rehearsed them? – in the '60s.

Liston: I wrote and I directed. Maybe sometimes they were just coming along with their instruments. They weren't about getting no arrangement and stuff. They were just starting on their instruments, so I would help them out with chords and scales and stuff like that. I was in Pittsburgh and Washington. [Liston points to (?a photograph) in the room.] I did a lot for them in Philadelphia and the person that was getting the students together, he came down to Jamaica and he was there when they took my picture. It was two, three years I went back and forth to Philly to do church things.

Bryant: What about the film, *The Marijuana Affair*?

Liston: [cannot recall details.]

Bryant: How did the record date come up with Melba and her 'Bones. On your first one you had Bennie Green, Al Grey, Benny Powell.

Liston: No, I had girls first.

Bryant: Really? I mean the record date, I mean. I'm speaking of.

Liston: I know, but I had the girls first, and we went all over the East Coast, and we went to China and came back.

Bryant: Is that the one with Bu?

Liston: Um-hmm. And I started weeding them out, one-by-one. I don't remember who was trying to get us a record date. But anyway, we got some records, but they didn't put them out, but they had them.

Bryant: Oh really?

Liston: So I don't think – oh, Leonard Feather. That's who that – yeah, he was still around.

Bryant: He always likes to dabble with the women. But he didn't put them out.

Liston: He was the one that got me the record date, but the record company was . . .

Bryant: Were you satisfied with the record?

Liston: No. Not – some of them. Some of the tunes. Some of them I didn't – I had to do one of his things.

Bryant: Oh, yeah. You always have to do that.

Liston: And one or two pop things or something, and I didn't – I don't know how I did them, but it was just me, and I don't like them today. I don't know if the tempos are wrong or something. I don't know what. But anyway.

Bryant: That's with the all girls.

Liston: No. I had them all changed about now.

Bryant: But you had two separate 'bone sections on two different record dates. One was around Christmas time – they both were around Christmas time – one around the 22nd, one around the 24th. One you had Slide Hampton, Frank Rehak.

Liston: Oh. That was a different Company altogether. I forgot about that.

And Randy, we had a date with him and the 4 'bones too. I'll play it for you when we get finished with this.

Bryant: Before we go to the music, I wanted to ask you, does it strike you funny, with all your experiences and your writing, technique, and expertise in doing so many – on your horn and everything – does it strike you funny or kind of sad that a large record company has never signed you to a contract? Do you think it's because of the gender or something?

Liston: I'm a woman. That's that. I don't know. I don't have a manager that pushes me out there and all of that.

Bryant: You never had a manager?

Liston: Colby. That's all.

Bryant: I meant . . .

Liston: Nobody.

Bryant: That is one of the problems.

Liston: But maybe it was good, because I wouldn't – I don't know if I was ready for that.

Bryant: When you were travelling on a State [Department] tour, where all – Middle East, right? You went to the Middle East and you went to South America, where some the dates in the Middle East, I think I read where you said that the women were amazed that you could be up there doing what you were doing, and they weren't allowed the freedom. How did the people – did you get more acceptance than anybody else in the band?

Liston: Almost everywhere I got acceptance. My applause and everything was always great, over there and here and everywhere, but some places – I don't know where – but some places women weren't allowed to do nothing but cook and I don't know. But I'm from the States. I'm always accepted, even though their women weren't allowed to.

Bryant: Did the women ever talk to you about that?

Liston: No. I didn't have – I didn't talk to – I was talking about music. I didn't talk to no women, nothing about no home life and all of that stuff. I didn't even know about it. That was a shame, because I should have talked to them.

Bryant: Could have gotten a different insight.

Liston: I don't know about that, but I should have talked to them.

Bryant: But do you think your reception was greater in other parts of the world?

Liston: Oh yeah. Everywhere except here, the United States.

Bryant: Especially as far as jazz is concerned?

Liston: Yeah. I think classical or anything, more accepted, more Europe and the Middle and South America than here. I don't know what it is about this. Maybe I'm not attuned to – I don't know what it is.

Bryant: What about China?

Liston: That was nice to us. They took us around and showed us everything and bought us a lot of things to send home for our . . .

Bryant: Souvenirs?

Liston: Yeah. It was a nice trip.

Bryant: The reception was very good.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Did you find that they knew more about you and the guys than the people here in the States?

Liston: I don't know. I should have talked to them. I don't know if they knew or if I was a surprise or anything. I don't know. But the heads of state or something knew we were coming. I don't know about the masses. I don't know.

Bryant: But it's been said over there, at the State Department – on a State Department tour, that your arrangement on *My Reverie* – no, *Anitra's Dance – Annie's Dance* would break the ice, because there was – they recognized the theme and they liked your arrangement – treatment of it. Is that true?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Dizzy and you had to play politics?

Liston: I don't know if – I was just doing whatever . . .

Bryant: He told me

Liston: . . . and he was just doing whatever. We weren't no – I wasn't doing any politics.

Bryant: I know. I know you weren't.

Liston: Dizzy, I guess, was doing it, but we didn't see it. I didn't know that Dizzy was doing everything that he was doing to keep us together and all that.

Bryant: What kind of – you wrote a compilation of music for this tour that included excerpts from Duke and Basie and all those people. You know what I'm speaking of? You put that together? You put – you remember that?

Liston: I can remember somebody saying, "Do this," but it was nothing. I mean, I played with all of them, so it was nothing for me to take a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Bryant: But I think this was – they were saying that you were asked to do this for that tour.

Liston: Yeah, but I didn't – it was nothing for me to do it.

Bryant: Right, because you had played with them. Right?

Liston: Yeah, or else I had listened to them all the time. I was the one – all the other guys – Ernie and – were there.

Bryant: Was Benny Golson there?

Liston: Yeah. And they chose me to do that, because I guess I listened to them all the time. But I can't remember. I did whatever they told me, and that was one of the things that they told me, and it was just another job for me to do. That's all.

Bryant: When you guys did the South American tour, did you do Cuba at that time?

Liston: No.

Bryant: Did you ever go to Cuba with Dizzy?

Liston: No, I don't think so. I got some work, but we weren't together.

Bryant: Where did you go in South America?

Liston: South of there. Not Cuba.

Bryant: That was Wynton Kelly and that group? Ernie Henry. You did a record with Ernie Henry, right? Good alto player.

Liston: Yeah. Wynton's a fine pianist. Oh dear. I think we were – I was supposed to marry him, but he died over there in Canada or somewhere.

Bryant: Yeah, he was a nice person. Last time I saw him he was pianist for Dinah Washington. Oh yeah – how was that? How was Dinah to work with? She gave you no problems.

Liston: No. Everybody – no problems. Nobody.

Bryant: You wouldn't stand for it? Is that it?

Liston: No. Nobody gave me no problems. I didn't have no problems, because they didn't give me no problems. If they gave somebody else a problem, I didn't know about it. They were saying, Ray Charles, turn off the lights and give this woman a fit and all that. I said, no. We were together – I worked for him for two or three years, and I . . .

Bryant: They were good experiences.

Liston: He was just always nice. So I don't know about these other things.

Bryant: Attitude and all.

Liston: Yeah. I don't know about those, because they didn't show me that.

Bryant: They had a lot of respect for you then.

Liston: I guess so.

Bryant: I've seen Ray and Dinah go off on people for no reason. You're better at music. You didn't have that problem.

Liston: No.

Bryant: You wrote for Sam Jones.

Liston: [can't recall.]

Bryant: We're going to change the format here a little bit, Melba, and do – let's hear some music, some of your arrangements, and we're going to comment on it. First thing I want to hear, Austin Cromer sings your arrangement of *If You Could See Me Now*. That was great. [The music plays.]

How did you write that arrangement, Melba? Oh man, and sit through them playing it like that? Isn't that a thrill? Do you get thrilled when you hear your arrangements?

Liston: Sometimes.

Bryant: Just sometimes? This should have been one of the times.

Liston: I watch you getting thrilled, and then I get a thrill from that.

Bryant: Because after you guys had done that, now who was it that came over and I played this and your *Reverie* and *Annie's Dance* and everything, and you should have seen the expressions on the whole – I'm trying to think who it was that they were – that came over. I was always there with somebody – somebody out of Basie's band, and we were playing that music. That was beautiful. What gave you the – who suggested that tune?

Liston: I guess he did. I wrote it. I don't know. I don't think Dizzy had anything to do with it.

Bryant: But you two got together. When you were getting it together, do you go to the piano?

Liston: I used to. Yeah. Now it's that electric thing over there.

Bryant: The keyboard.

Liston: But I used to.

Bryant: But anyway, there's a keyboard involved.

Who was the bass player? Was that Paul [West]?

Liston: I think so. Maybe it was . . .

Bryant: He was in and out of that thing.

Liston: I forget.

Bryant: Because I like the bass player too. But I liked the way you do your shadings. The trumpets blare out and you drop it down and the reeds are under, and then the trumpets are – that's – to me that's kind of a lost art in arrangement.

Liston: I guess so.

Bryant: You haven't noticed that?

Liston: I still write like that.

Bryant: I know, but you haven't noticed that other people have lost that art? The shadings.

Liston: I don't know of anybody that's doing that, but I don't hear Benny Golson's and Randy – I mean Ernie's – I don't hear those things, so I don't know whether they're doing that or not.

Bryant: But did you use that with your colleagues – your bands down in Jamaica? Did you – you taught them about shadings and . . .

Liston: Oh, yeah. But that was the very end. I was busy trying to lay – tell them what the notes were and all of that. But they got it.

Bryant: But doesn't that go back to when Mrs. Hightower was teaching you – I know she taught you. That's an old-school type thing. You had to have – you start off high, where you going to go? That was one of my teacher's favorite sayings. You can't start at the top of the tower . . .

Liston: And go anywhere. No, you have to start from scratch.

Bryant: And when you're directing your tunes, you make sure that – you notate that on your arrangements, right?

When you're writing, have you had a problem with drummers doing the shadings and things?

Liston: No so much. I would tell them – I wouldn't . . .

Bryant: Notate it?

Liston: The parts – I wouldn't note it on the parts, but I would tell them.

Bryant: In your directions?

Liston: Yeah, and they were good.

Bryant: Charli [Persip] seemed to have been well versed in that. He knew a lot – shading and dynamics and things like that.

That was in the '50s. We're going to do another thing from that same album. We're doing – *You'll Be Sorry* – this one's going to feature Melba, singing and writing it and arranging it. [The music plays.]

Who decided that?

Liston: I don't know. I did. I don't know. I wrote it, so I decided it.

Bryant: But I mean for this record date, who decided they would put it on the record date?

Liston: Dizzy, I guess all the tunes.

Bryant: But you had been doing this with the band?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Did you do it over – undoubtedly over in the Far East.

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: Oh, great. That's a cute little tune. And boy, you had your wind power there. You get a long stretch without a breath there. I kept waiting for you to breathe.

Liston: I used to – no problem there, when I was young.

Bryant: And then one phrase there you really sounded like Billie Holiday.

Liston: Oh yeah?

Bryant: During the first part of it. [Bryant sings the melody quietly.] I'm trying to think of it. I think it's around the fourth bar of the first 8. It's some word, and your nuance was strictly Billie and you had that kind of little – Billie had a way kind of like [Bryant vocalizes] – yeah, you had that. You have that.

But that arrangement, you – your – those things you have – the fill-ins behind the phrases of the words and then behind Dizzy when he's playing, that's perfect. Just beautiful.

Liston: Thank you.

Bryant: Did it take you long to write that down?

Liston: I don't think so.

Bryant: Because you were writing for you.

Liston: It was – when I was writing, I was writing those in matter of days. I can't write like that no more.

Bryant: That's good then. That was good. So we've seen two sides of you. Now we're going to see another side of your writing. We're going to try another one of Melba's arrangements with Dizzy's band, a little something different. It's – she calls it *Annie's Dance*, and it's a play on the semi-classical tune called *Anitra's Dance.* [The music plays.]

That is really a beautiful arrangement on that.

Liston: It's still good.

Bryant: Yes, it's still good. The interplay between the sections, and when Charli Persip with his – he sounds like somebody tiptoeing on the drums, tap-dancing or something. Your shadings and everything.

Liston: Yeah, that's good.

Bryant: Did you write – you wrote that before you guys went over, right?

Liston: Oh yeah. We were at Birdland.

Bryant: That's where you tried it out? You tried it out at Birdland?

Liston: I didn't try out.

Bryant: No, what I mean, you try something out before you go over . . .

Liston: No.

Bryant: You played it. I mean you played it.

Liston: We were . . .

Bryant: Working there.

Liston: . . . working there, wherever we were, before – we didn't know about . . .

Bryant: Birdland? The tour?

Liston: . . . when I wrote it.

Bryant: Oh. Okay.

Liston: Some things you just – you got to write some things. So he told me to write some things, so I . . .

Bryant: That's one of the things you wrote.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: That's – we've heard three different styles of your writing, because everybody refers to you as a ballad-type person, melodic and all that stuff, but you've thrown in the blues, and then you've thrown in this production.

Liston: I thank you.

Bryant: I wanted you to talk about how you put it together, whatever, when you were putting it together.

Liston: I can't remember. The same as I do now. You sit and think about it and think about it and then you start writing it. My 'bones – I have interplay with the 'bones, but saxophones – the trumpets too. They have interplay. Maybe two of them play and then two of them play after that. Something like that. I don't know. But it's not a planned thing. It's just a thing that . . .

Bryant: It's just what you hear.

Liston: . . . you happen to go on with where the arrangement goes, and you say, oh, this one will go right.

Bryant: When you're writing, do you write your arrangements like down straight through, or do you write this and hear something else down the line and write that in?

Liston: I write almost straight through and then I go over it and then no telling what happens. Like this one I'm writing now. I've gone over it two or three times, and then each time I said, no, and I change it. I don't know. It's just . . .

Bryant: You edit a lot.

Liston: That's the word.

Bryant: When you edit it down, boy, it's together. Whatever you take out, I don't think it belongs in there. Whatever you leave in, it goes. Because I like the way the accents –

like when Billy Mitchell came in on that saxophone, you had set it up. He came in, and Dizzy. Whew. He came in. And I noticed that the drums accent with the trumpet. Do you do that a lot? Do you write for the drums too?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: I noticed on that arrangement, that he catches all of those licks

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Okay, we're going to move on, and is this *Little Niles*?

Watson: *My Reverie.*

Bryant: Oh yeah, *My Reverie.* Oh yeah, Melba, *My Reverie.* The first time I heard that – wow. That is – honestly, and I've told two or three people that, and I'm getting goose bumps just thinking about – that is one of the most beautiful things you've ever done – especially the haunting sound that you get on your trombone and what you write behind what you're doing. Let's listen – hear what I'm trying to say. [The music plays.]

Hey that's so pretty it makes you want to cry, Melba. And you know you used that [wah-wah sound], and you know where Dizzy uses the last time he played on record, on that record he did with kids up in 'Frisco? What are they called? And the last – on his favorite song that I love – He wrote the song. And he used to – when I'd go up to the club, he'd stop the band. They'd play this song. *I Waited for You.* Remember he did that on the end of that? I think he must have been thinking about Melba, because I – that set the whole thing for me.

What were you thinking about when you . . .

Liston: I don't know.

Bryant: Yes you do. You have to. When you are playing something like that, Melba, or you're writing something, you've got to have – you've got to – either your old man was something or other.

Liston: No

Bryant: Come on.

Liston: No.

Bryant: You just wrote that off the top of your head like that and played that like that?

Liston: I played whatever . . .

Bryant: Came in your mind?

Liston: Yeah. That particular time. I don't know if I played it the next time like that or not.

Bryant: That's what I'm saying.

Liston: So I don't know. But it wasn't about nothing.

Bryant: No? Melba, you can 'fess up.

Liston: About nothing – about the notes. That's about the notes. That's about the notes. That's all.

Bryant: Anybody plays like that, got to be thinking about something. Melba?

Liston: I got to be thinking about the notes, man. I got to be thinking about the notes – the notes, man.

Bryant: And the arrangement – you set yourself up so good.

Liston: Maybe I was arranging, I thought about something. I don't know. But blowing, I don't think about nothing but the notes.

Bryant: Is that right?

Liston: That one, anyway.

Bryant: Okay, clean it up, Melba. And I've heard guys say that when they're playing, like a ballad, they're usually thinking about some situation or some woman or something that really makes them put a little more oomph into it, a little more edge, a little more soul. I mean, with some of those notes you were playing on there, especially on the tag – you know when you're going out, and you kept going up [Bryant sings the trombone melody.] Something was goosing you.

Liston: I don't know. I don't know what it was.

Bryant: Okay. I'm trying to get it out.

Liston: I don't really – I'm just thinking about the notes. I mean, really.

Bryant: Okay. Okay. All right. Well, you're one in a million.

Liston: Oh, boy. If I could do that that now.

Bryant: Yeah. Wouldn't that be something?

Liston: Yes indeed.

Bryant: Don't you miss it?

Liston: I'm going to blow it two or three years from now, I guess, or something, but I'm going to blow it.

Bryant: Okay. That's a promise?

Liston: Yeah, that's a promise.

Bryant: Because I want to hear you again Melba.

Liston: I'm blowing it every now and then, but I can't get but two or three notes on the thing.

Bryant: Those two or three notes, you can take them and do something magical with them.

Liston: Yeah, but I got to – I have this arm. I don't know what to do with this. I tried to turn the thing around and blow it like Slide Hampton, and I can't . . .

Bryant: You can't do nothing.

Liston: No, man. The thing comes off. It just – I can't do nothing. Oh, man. So I had to turn it back around, because I don't want to . . .

Bryant: Is this the hand you hold it with or slide it?

Liston: No. Sliding.

Bryant: Oh, man. Are you exercising it every day?

Liston: Oh yeah.

Bryant: You're doing more than you were doing.

Liston: But I don't know – I think I'm doing . . .

Bryant: You are doing more than you were doing. I know you are. Definitely.

Liston: Yeah, so maybe . . .

Bryant: In less than in two years.

Coming up right now, we're going to do one of Randy Weston's tunes, a song that was recorded for the first time I think in 1956. It's called *Little Niles,* and it's Melba Liston's arrangement of it, and this is another one of the styles and different ways that Melba writes. We want to hear this. *Little Niles.* [The music plays.]

I like the way the bass comes in.

Liston: Yeah, that was featuring the bass.

Bryant: And the – it had a flavor of . . .

Liston: Of Monk?

Bryant: Yes.

Liston: Randy likes Thelonious much.

Bryant: He does [Bryant vocalizes].

Liston: Yeah. He does that.

Bryant: I don't get to hear Randy's work that often. That a 1956 version of that.

Liston: Yeah. You want to go on and hear [?] or this one – the strings?

Bryant: Oh yeah, because I haven't heard you do strings arrangement.

Liston: Or else I can do the one that I'm featured on.

Bryant: Yeah. You said that was next.

Liston: I think it was next.

Bryant: Can you cue that up for us? But you were on this one too.

Liston: Yeah, but I didn't know. I forgot. The other one is more ballad and it's easier.

Bryant: You don't know the name of it.

Liston: [cannot recall.] I think it's the next one on the box there.

Bryant: This is another one of Randy Weston's tunes. It features Melba on this one, and we've searched and searched, and we can't find the title of it, but maybe later on we can cue Matt as to what it is, and he can put it – fill it in, but let's hear – I think it's a ballad. [The music plays.]

Liston: [while the music plays] So that – don't stop it, but that's about all that I can say, that I'm featured on it. That little bit. But it's nice.

Bryant: That was – he seems to 3/4 time or 6/8 time.

Liston: Yeah, 3/4. All the waltz – that album was all 3/4.

Bryant: Oh, okay. You kind of wove in and out of the [?]. It was – [Bryant hums to herself] I'm trying to think. It reminds me of something. That's your arrangement?

Liston: You always thinking who or where or something.

Bryant: Yeah, I do. I really do, because I've been – I get programmed like that from the radio shows that they usually mess up, so I start thinking ahead of them.

But anyway, this one, we don't have a name to, but do you know how your solo – was it – because it didn't feature Ray. It was – was it written with you in mind?

Liston: Yeah. I wrote it.

Bryant: Oh, okay. Because that was a beautiful solo, Melba.

Liston: Thank you. I was – we were in Baltimore – no, Canada. What's the name of the town?

Bryant: Montreal.

Liston: Yeah, Montreal. I wrote it here in L.A., and I did some things outside of New York. I can't think, but the record was done in Montreal and they were all Montreal strings, but Randy and bass and drums are from New York. Paul . . .

Bryant: Who was that?

Liston: The conductor. He was conducting. He was playing bass on the records that – with Dizzy he was playing bass, but on . . .

Bryant: Paul West, you mean?

Liston: Yeah, but on that he was conducting. He was conducting quite well.

Bryant: You wrote this in a different style. It is *Little Niles,* but it has a classical flavor. You think so? It sounds great.

Liston: I don't know.

Bryant: Let's listen to it and see what you think, 40 years later.

Liston: But it's not that much different. It's the same thing as far as I'm concerned.

Bryant: But strings – to me that makes a difference. [*Little Niles* plays, in a version for strings and jazz combo.] That was beautiful.

Liston: Randy tells me how many choruses he's going to take and where violins come in, but nothing else.

Bryant: That's all he tells you?

Liston: Um-hmm.

Bryant: You sure knew what to do. And your voicings on those strings. That's beautiful. It's the first time I heard you write for strings, Melba. That's beautiful. And I've heard a lot of people try to write for strings, and it doesn't have that kind of sound.

Liston: You heard Gloria Lynne?

Bryant: She had strings on it too? I've heard it. Is that later – a late one too?

Liston: No, it was way back there.

Bryant: I don't hear it.

Liston: It's not up there. It's over here in the . . .

Bryant: That treatment of *Little Niles* is very unique. It's different and it's good. It's bad. It's bad, Melba. Very good. I like that. I've never it heard it done like that.

Liston: I didn't hear anything different than . . .

Bryant: You have to.

Liston: The horn parts and the string parts are the same. The horns played what the strings are playing there.

Bryant: But wasn't most of that just the rhythm and strings, on this?

Liston: No.

Bryant: On the other version . . .

Liston: But I had horns, and they are playing the same thing as the strings are on this thing.

Bryant: I see what you're saying. On the other record the horns are playing what the strings are playing on this. I get that. But it's just the sound, and like you say, the voicing was the same on the horns, but the voicing on the strings made it a completely different thing, to me.

The last version of Randy Weston's *Little Niles* that we just heard, with strings, was from a new CD that hasn't been released yet. It's called *Earth Birth*, and of course the arrangement was by Melba Liston and the strings were out of sight. Wasn't that beautiful. Okay.

We going to jump back in time and hear another version of *Little Niles* by Randy in Melba's arrangement. We're going back to a 1973 version from a CD called *Tanjah.* Melba, you want to say anything about this before we start?

Liston: No. I'll say it afterwards. [The music plays.]

Bryant: That's what you call percussion for days. Yeah, that is a different version.

Liston: Today they could program it much better than it was on that, but you could hear it, but if they were to do it now . . .

Bryant: You mean they would re-mix it a little different?

Liston: Yeah. That would be . . .

Bryant: It had that Indian – East Indian flavor to me, with a little African thrown in some of the phrases that you had there. And then, what was that on top? A piccolo?

Liston: No.

Bryant: Or a whistle? Way up there.

Liston: It was . . .

Bryant: Fife?

Liston: It wasn't none of those things.

Bryant: Okay. At first I thought it was a trumpet. Somebody's screaming up there. Jon Faddis or somebody.

Liston: It was a mouthpiece.

Bryant: Oh really?

Liston: I think so.

Bryant: But that was – how many versions have we heard of it? Four? Heard today?

Liston: Three. Wasn't it three?

Bryant: We heard the original, and the strings, and this one, and they're all completely different. You arranged all of them.

Liston: Not quite different.

Bryant: To me, they're different.

Liston: I think there's some more, but I won't mention those. I can't remember where they were anyway, so we'll go on to . . .

Bryant: But he – but Randy uses his song *Little Niles* in all these different versions kind of like Dizzy used *Manteca* and like you did. He changes it up, but it's still the same song, in different clothing. And that's great.

Liston: But *Pam's Waltz* and *Little Niles,* he goes – every time he record, we'll do those things. So anyway . . .

Bryant: Yeah. All right, then. That's what a lot of people do. That keeps the money rolling in too.

Liston: Oh yeah.

Bryant: You're getting royalties and all – air play and stuff. That's great.

So that was 1973. Fantastic.

Right now we're going to a little bit more of comparing two of Randy's tunes at different eras to – this first one we're going to play would be – is that 1973? – and the tune is called *Hi-Fly* – h, i, fly. And then we're going to listen to – just an excerpt of that – then we're going to listen to the 1996 version of *Hi-Fly* with Melba's arrangement, on a new CD that's not out yet. It's called *Earth Birth.* Right now it's 1973 again. [The music plays, during which Bryant queries the identity of the trumpeter whose solo follows the statement of the theme.]

Liston: [does not recall.] Okay. You can stop it now. [A slow version of *Hi-Fly* commences.]

Bryant: I never heard it done like that. It's beautiful, with the strings and everything, and then I see Randy likes fourths and seconds. I do too. You write a lot of [?] fourths in the harmony, but that – I like the way you wove in and out with the strings – that's the last one, but Randy was doing so much stuff with the – I mean he was creating so much stuff, but the strings is really a completely huge dimension to your writing that I'd never heard before, Melba. How long have you been writing? This is '76? No, this is '96.

Liston: Yeah, but I've been writing for strings as long as I've been – not as long, but once a year . . .

Bryant: Gloria?

Liston: Gloria Lynne's thing.

Bryant: And that was '59.

Liston: So I've been writing for strings as long as I've been writing for horns.

Bryant: I heard it. I just didn't know that was you writing it then.

Liston: Yeah. I guess not.

Bryant: But that *Hi-Fly* version – see, that's two completely different versions of *Hi-Fly.* One's with all that Latin – with all that rhythm, and it sounds like Eastern here and then African rhythms in there, and then we come up with the strings and the beauty, and then he gets raunchy a little bit. How did he tell you to do with this one? He said to you, "I'm going to solo so many choruses."

Liston: He doesn't say nothing about the soloing and all that. He wanted it long, and he said, "This chorus I'll take by myself. This chorus you can do some backgrounds or something."

Bryant: Okay. You guys are so in tune to each other, you don't need – he doesn't have to tell you anything anyway.

Liston: I don't think so.

Bryant: That's like the [?]. That's understood. He doesn't have to spell it out. But that's really unique, that version of it, and that's from the – that one is from the new album, right? *Earth Birth.* And the one we heard before was from *Tanyah,* and that was 1973.

Now we're going to hear something else from . . .

Liston: No. Let's leave Randy alone now and listen to Gloria Lynne's *Hi-Fly.*

Bryant: What we're going to hear now is one of Melba's original tunes, a beautiful ballad that she did – Gloria Lynne sang it in 1959. The title of the ballad is *Love, I Found You. I* or *I've*?

Liston: *I've.*

Bryant: *I've Found You.* And it's strings. It's beautiful. Just give it a listen. [The music plays.] That's beautiful. *Love, I've Found You.* I won't even go there. But Melba, do you find it different to write for voice and for – with strings, or just regular instruments – just for band with strings?

Liston: Yeah. I guess so. Not really, but really.

Bryant: But you do have to think a little about it.

Liston: A high voice or a low voice or a in-between voice and all of those things, but then you just go on and write.

Bryant: Dig deep down and write. That's a beautiful tune, Melba.

Liston: Thank you.

Bryant: Did you do an album with strings with Dinah [Washington]? What did you do with Dinah?

Liston: [cannot recall. She does not have the recordings.]

Bryant: That flavor of your writing for strings sounds like something I've heard on one of her albums, and you have written for Dinah.

What – Gloria approached you about writing?

Liston: Yeah, and I was sick, and the day of the recording date, I was out of it, so I called Quincy [Jones] and he conducted for me, but all of the arrangements are mine – almost all of them.

Bryant: Okay. That was 1959.

Liston: You want to [?] or more of hers?

Bryant: What else is on there? Or did you mean another CD?

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: We're discussing Gloria Lynne's record, and you – he was asking you, how did she come to get the – you said you brought it to her and you taught her some of the songs.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Because that's what we want to get through first. Then we'll get into the difference between the two. Okay?

Liston: Dinah – soul, soul, soul, but Gloria's soul too, but it's a different way. They come after me differently. I don't know how to say it. When I write for Dinah – uh. And when I write for Gloria – it's oo. Or something like that.

Bryant: That tells the difference right there.

Right now we're going to listen to a tune by Gloria Lynne that Melba wrote – an original tune with strings. It's called *We Never Kissed. Ain't That a Shame*? [Actually *We Never Kissed, What a Shame*; the music plays.]

Liston: The difference is who picks what songs. Dinah picks some soul songs. Gloria picks some . . .

Bryant: That's strictly a ballad.

Liston: . . . ballads. Soulful, but not the way Dinah does. Still, writing for them demands what tunes you are going to write. I would write the same way for Gloria Lynne – if I wrote for Dinah – one of those arrangements for Dinah, I would write the same way for Gloria Lynne, but she would sing it differently.

Bryant: Would interpret. Their interpretations would be different. I see what you're saying.

Liston: I guess. I don't know.

Bryant: I know they would. Dinah wouldn't sing that like that.

Liston: No, but I don't know if Gloria – I'm saying now I would write the same, but I don't, when I get to the piano or get to writing, it'll be different. I feel like it's the song, not the singer, makes the difference.

Bryant: Yeah, because they're going to put their own flavor into your arrangement anyway.

We have some pictures here that Melba's going to be looking at, from her childhood, that she's never seen before. Who do you see on there that you recognize, Melba?

Liston: Everybody except the drummer, and I don't know who the tall saxophonist is, but the rest of them I know. That's me. Minnie – Minnie [?Moore ?Morris].

Bryant: That's Prince.

Liston: Yeah, there's Prince.

Bryant: Prince Harris.

Liston: And Elvira. [Liston cannot recall a trumpeter's name.]

Bryant: But he was a trumpet player?

Liston: Uh-huh. His mother and my mother used to be friends. [They fail to identify another trumpeter in the photo.]

Bryant: [They identify Melba and Buddy Redd.] Elvira – Vi Redd's brother. Do you know about when this was?

Liston: That was 1930-something?

Bryant: Yeah, probably was '38 maybe? No, '39 or '40, maybe, because you came out here in '37, right?

Liston: Yeah. It was '38 or something like that. [Liston fails to identify another man in the photo.]

Bryant: [asks if it was in a picture studio.]

Liston: [cannot recall.]

Bryant: [shows Liston a second photograph.]

Liston: This is Ross Snyder. [Liston tries to identify a second man.] I liked him. Not then. Maybe 15 years later. I can't remember his name.

Bryant: [identifies Lorenzo.] Do you remember how he played trumpet? Because he's a saxophone player. He's playing trumpet.

Liston: Yeah, I know. I don't know how he's playing saxophone, because I know him as a trumpet player.

Bryant: Really? He's a darned good saxophone player.

Liston: Yeah?

Bryant: Yeah. Alice worked with him all the time. Alice Young. Up until he died, she was his piano player.

Liston: I didn't know that. [Liston and Bryant identify, in this photograph, Minnie Hightower, her mother Miss Hightower, Vi Redd, Liston. They fail to identify a man in the photograph. Liston thinks it is Robert Ross, but Bryant pulls out a photo of a different man whom she identifies as Ross.]

Bryant: You know Clifford Burden, right?

Liston: Oh yeah. He and Minnie both dead, huh?

Bryant: Yeah, that's who Minnie married.

Liston: I know.

Bryant: Her son – their son, Clifford, Jr., is a preacher now, and he's the one that had the pictures in that box from Minnie's ex-husband – widow. [They discuss getting copies made for Liston. In a third photograph they identify South Park, Minnie, Alice, Robert Ross, and Clifford in a pseudo-Hawaiian setting. Bryant implies that Matt Watson is photographing or videotaping this portion of the interview, and she states that she intends to use these three photographs in her own book.]

Melba, looking around the walls here and seeing some of the many things – many awards and tributes that people have given you, have you reached the goals that you set? Or did you set any goals for yourself when you were coming up?

Liston: No. I just went on and did whatever they told me to do. But I would like to – I haven't written for films – just films that doesn't say anything.

Bryant: It's not political. Just a beautiful film.

Liston: Yeah. I would like to do that.

Bryant: Would you say that would be your heart's goal right now?

Liston: It doesn't matter if I do or if I don't. I think maybe something in New York is waiting on me now.

Bryant: When you were coming up, you never said, "I want to be the best" or whatever?

Liston: No.

Bryant: You never had that kind of . . .

Liston: No

Bryant: You just knew that you were going to be the best. You didn't have to say it, right?

Liston: I didn't know.

Bryant: Yes you did.

Liston: But I have to be the best that I can do. I don't know if it's the best.

Bryant: I'll say for you: you have been the best, Melba. You've been a guiding light for a lot of people, including me, and I want to ask you what advice you would have for some of the young girls coming along who are musicians? What advice would you give them?

Liston: Study. Go to school and learn everything that you can in school, and don't stop there. Get what you can out of school, jamming and everything. It's about learning and about doing. It's hard now. It's still hard for girls, but . . .

Bryant: But they still won't have it as hard as you did.

Liston: Oh no.

Bryant: Was there any particular school that you think that they could go to that would really qualify to do what you said, go and learn, not just . . .

Liston: [cannot recall any school to recommend.] But wherever they go to school, college and stuff, make them teach you as much as they know how. And go on, like we did at nighttime – go to other places and get some knowledge there.

Bryant: And do you think that they should pick someone as their model – not particularly role model, but as a model that they would listen to, like I've heard Charli Persip say he went to whatever the college was that he went to, but he finished from the Gillespie University. You know what I'm saying?

Liston: Yeah, I would say that. Yes indeed. Get someone that you like to have. Horn players, get someone to take a pattern off of. Everything that's out there, they can have somebody older to pattern off of . . .

Bryant: Yeah, they need someone to latch onto.

Liston: . . . and maybe after so many years of that, you can go and get someone else to . . .

Bryant: Yeah, right. Move on up to the modern day, or whatever.

Do you find that they're more – the children and young kids coming up, male and female, on the East Coast, seem to be the ones who reach back in – I mean who reach up and take a role model's hand and try to pattern themselves at the beginning, until they get where they can walk on their – in their own shoes, and then they still want to

recognize where they came from? Because out here on the West Coast I don't seem to find that.

Liston: I don't see where that's happening out here.

Bryant: No, I don't either.

Liston: But East Coast . . .

Bryant: I wonder why that is.

Liston: I don't know, because you know better than me. I don't get around too much, and I wouldn't get around if I was able to. I would be back in New York.

Bryant: You wouldn't even be here, Melba.

Liston: I would come here on occasions.

Bryant: But that bothers me, that the kids – they're not – you know what. It seems like they think the music starts and ends with them, that they – nobody was here before them, so they don't have to recognize – I really don't hear kids doing that.

Liston: I don't know what these kids are doing.

Bryant: But those schools that you helped organize and stuff like that, the kids wanted to learn, and they came there to learn, and they did learn, because you guys were teaching them.

Liston: Yeah. Back there. In the West Indies, St. Lucia, everywhere but here.

Bryant: Right. Isn't that funny? In Japan, in Europe. But it's so funny that we – on this Coast, we cannot get it together, as far as I can see. And you're not going to stick around and try and help us get it together.

Liston: I've been here six, seven years or something. I'm going to go back there and get a new start or something.

Bryant: "I'm going to change my way of living. If that ain't enough, I'm going to change the way I strut my stuff." Because Melba you've really overcome the stroke that you had. I think you've made a long stride, bettering yourself to overcome that, and I think when you go back East, you'll do even greater, because like you said, those people back – they recognize you for who you are back there.

Liston: I was afraid to go out and see everybody – anybody, until six months ago or something like that, because . . .

Bryant: You'd sit in this room.

Liston: . . . I didn't want them to gloat over me or something.

Bryant: Feel sorry for you and then pity you and all those kinds of things.

Liston: Yeah, but it's not like that.

Bryant: But see it's your attitude that keeps it from being that way. You don't have that kind of attitude so you not going to get . . .

Liston: No.

Bryant: . . . so you won't get that kind of a treatment from people.

Liston: I know that.

Bryant: Because it's like Matt says, you've taken it – your stroke in stride. I know a lot of people who've had it, and they've had that attitude, "Oh, woe is me."

Liston: I must have done that when I first . . .

Bryant: When you first had it. Sure, but farther on down the road . . .

Liston: Yeah, I got to get on up.

Bryant: You got to turn [?] loose.

But what did you think after you had your stroke? What did you think? Did you think you would be able to play again? What?

Liston: You don't think. It's a long time before you can think. You learn how to eat with . . .

Bryant: It's the learning process all over?

Liston: Yeah, but I think Randy pushed me along.

Bryant: Before you even – before you came out here?

Liston: Oh yeah.

Bryant: But when you got here, your mother was still alive. Did she push you too?

Liston: Oh yeah, but Randy helped me to get started writing, and so I'm doing it. I'm not writing as fast and all of that as I . . .

Bryant: The quality is there though, Melba.

Liston: . . . I used to, but maybe I'll get that back in New York, but I don't have to go as fast, anyway.

Bryant: If they want you to write fast, say, "You better get somebody else. If you want something good, then you take me."

What about after your stroke and then you begin to move around and so forth? What did you think about not being able to play your horn? Or did you think about it?

Liston: No. The horn was stolen.

Bryant: Oh, that's right.

Liston: So I didn't think about it, because . . .

Bryant: Because it wasn't there.

Liston: Susan . . .

Bryant: Susan Slaughter?

Liston: Right – got me this horn.

Bryant: [?inaudible]

Liston: Maybe.

Bryant: You had it about a month ago.

Liston: A month ago. Yeah.

Bryant: Susan Slaughter from the International Women's Brass Conference in St. Louis.

Liston: Yeah, but she works with the . . .

Bryant: Symphony. Kansas – St. Louis Symphony. Trumpet. First chair trumpet and female too. She's been there how many years? 30? But I thought that was such a nice idea for them to get the trombone and send it to you.

Liston: She said, if you don't do nothing else, but just sit up and look at it.

Bryant: Like you did in the window. It's sitting up there like a mannequin in the window.

Liston: But I do play it – blow two or three notes on it now and then. But this arm here, I got to get going. I don't know anybody here. Maybe I'll be doing something on it. But it's a girl with Ray Charles's band now.

Bryant: Playing what?

Liston: Playing trombone.

Bryant: Oh really? Oh please. I haven't seen her. You just don't see – there was one girl that was from 'Frisco that was playing with – that was playing in the band when they played your music at the conference. I can't think of her name, but she was with Diva when they came out here, but I don't think she's with them now. I think she went back to school. But she was very good. And then there was a girl in Chicago was very good. She took some solos that night too on some of your music, and she was quite good. Out here on the West Coast, I don't know of any. But if you said – is that girl with Ray Charles – is she from the West Coast?

Liston: No. She's just playing jazz about two years, because she was playing symphony before that.

Bryant: That's what the girl in Chicago did too. She was – but she does both now, and she's quite good. But I've got to check the girl out with Ray Charles.

Liston: She's white. A white girl.

Bryant: Is she?

Liston: He's got three trombones.

Bryant: You didn't talk about Janice Robinson?

Liston: No. She was with me. She called me the other day.

Bryant: Did she really?

Liston: She was talking about taking up the horn again.

Bryant: She got married and put it down.

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Such a beautiful trombonist.

Liston: I told her I was coming back there and I would call her when I came back there. I'm going to get somebody to – not teach me, but sit with me.

Bryant: Right. Walk you through it, so you can get back to where you were.

Liston: I don't know.

Bryant: Try to get back to where you were. As long as you make the effort, there's always a possibility of succeeding. In other words, your future will really begin when you get back to New York. You think?

Liston: Yeah, I guess so. Another phase of it, anyway.

Bryant: Because so to speak it's been at a standstill since the six or seven years you've been here. You've written some.

Liston: For Randy, but nobody else.

Bryant: Didn't you write something for Al Grey?

Liston: Things that I did for me or somebody before.

Bryant: But you did five things for me that I haven't been able to see. I've got to get that transcribed.

Liston: [?] is doing them.

Bryant: Oh really?

Liston: She says . . .

Bryant: I know she gave you a smart answer.

Liston: "How much is I getting?"

Bryant: I'm going to pay her. What does she want?

Liston: I said, "You're going to have to ask" . . .

Bryant: Clora.

Liston: Because I was giving . . .

Bryant: Tell her to come to me and ask – and tell me what she wants, because it's very important that I . . .

Liston: She doesn't know about musicians.

Bryant: And friendship.

Liston: You've got to get your things out all over the place, and maybe one or two people will do it, but you don't – paying is not the – that's not it.

Bryant: That's not the issue.

Liston: It's not the thing. It's getting them out as fast and varied.

Bryant: Like you said, she's – if they're not musicians, they do not understand. There's no way they could understand. And you know what? There's no way the young girls today can understand the way we understand either.

Liston: I don't think they want to. But anyway, I may be wrong.

Bryant: No, because, see, they're in a position where they don't feel like they have to go – they know they don't have to. They're not going to go through what we went through to get – because there's almost – we almost put it in their laps.

Liston: There are some girls that are very good. The bass player . . .

Bryant: Oh yeah. What's her name? She played with the Harper brothers and [?] when she was much younger.

Liston: Now and then a girl comes along.

Bryant: Right. That's true. I have two young girls coming along that's come to me for private things, and the main thing is to tell them what's what, who was there, [?], and they understand.

So you're leaving us when now Melba?

Liston: I'll be back in New York for Christmas.

Bryant: Oh my goodness.

Liston: I'm hoping that I'll be back there, but I might not. I might be here for Christmas. I don't know.

Bryant: But you would like to be there for Christmas. You want all that snow and ice, right?

Liston: Yep. That's all right with me.

Bryant: You've got your friends back there to keep you warm. You have some dedicated friends back there, Melba. No jive. I know I'm dedicated, but you've got a whole big bunch of them out – back there.

Liston: That's wonderful.

Bryant: You know what to me, Melba, is people worry about having critical acclaim and all that kind of stuff, but to have my peers recognize me means more to me. I don't know about you, but it's always meant more to me than the critics, because I know my peers understand more than the critics do.

Liston: Definitely.

Bryant: I wanted to get your idea about that.

Liston: Your peers – the critics . . .

Bryant: Because your peers are not going to leave you like critics will. They'll praise you one day and the next day, if they're not feeling too good, they'll dump you or dump on you or whatever.

Liston: I don't care about the – what do you call them? Peers or something. But my friends – all the guys are my friends. And the girls . . .

Bryant: That's what I mean. I call them my peers, because we're doing it in the same business. We're dedicated just like they are, even though we're female.

Liston: The girls now – Bu?

Bryant: Pleasant?

Liston: Bu Pleasant – a saxophonist.

Bryant: Wilene Martin?

Liston: No, but she – all the . . .

Bryant: Fostina Dixon.

Liston: Yeah. All them. They're – we got to get – they're having a bitch of a time. We got to get something together for the girls. I don't know how, but we got to get two or three girls here and two or three girls there and things and work it out that they're out front sometimes and all of that stuff. But I don't know, because here, it's not happening, but they might be doing it in New York, Chicago, and places like that. But the girl bass player . . .

Bryant: Out here? The one we were talking about?

Liston: Um-hmm. And a drummer . . .

Bryant: Teri?

Liston: Yeah.

Bryant: Teri Lyne Carrington?

Liston: And who else? I know they got to get out and go back East.

Bryant: But Teri left back East. She was there, and she left, and she lives out here now. And I don't think – I can't think of the bass player's name. I don't know if she's quite ready to leave her mother. She's old enough to, but there's a bond there. Saxophone players? Hmm. Trumpet players: Stacey Rowles. Jimmie's daughter. And what's-her-name that has the big band? [Ann Patterson]. The reed person that has the – what do you call them? It was Roz [?Crans] band first, and then this girl took over the band. She had been doing pretty good with it, because they went to Japan a couple of times. She plays all the reeds, and she's working somewhere this weekend with that group called the Bandleaders group, or something like that. Everybody in it is a bandleader – Maiden

Voyage – that group. I don't know any trombone players, [inaudible], but she's not from out here, you said. Piano players? Young ones? I don't know. You know, it's a shame. But really, Melba, it wasn't that many when we were coming along either, out here.

Are there any last remarks that you'd like to give to the young – not just the young girls, but mainly the young girls that are coming along, and young male musicians. I think they have their act kind of together. What do you think?

Liston: If they're going to study and do it, do it.

Bryant: Most of them are.

Liston: And if not, don't do it.

Bryant: Don't even go there.

Liston: That's all I can say. Don't get all hung up with nobody other than your music

Bryant: Let that be your old man or your old woman or whatever.

Liston: Until you know that somebody that's going to be yours and you're going to be his, and you're going to be lifetime or something together.

Bryant: And that is a hard nut to crack, learning the difference between lust and love. I have to go through that with my kids, my son. It's hard. Especially being in show business. You know how everybody's – we've been there.

Liston: But I didn't do a lot of things. Two guys are kind of [?], but other than that, I was not being low or something, and we made it for years, or something like that.

Bryant: Because the other night at the concert, my alumni, I kept talking about I had a crush on this one and a crush on that one, and another guy in the audience say, "Looks like you had a crush on everybody." I said, as long as I just had a crush, that was cool. You can look, but don't touch. But that is what I try to tell my kids that I'm teaching now. You can admire, but you don't have to fall for, or whatever, and that is really a big part of being a female in this business, because it's rough out there.

Melba, we're going to wrap it up, girl. It has been two fantastic days that I'm so glad that I was a part of, because I've been wanting to see a complete thing done on you. Maybe we didn't do it completely, but we almost made it. And I want to thank Smithsonian for giving me a chance to be the one to interview you, because you've been such a major part of my life, really, and I've just – goose-bump time, your whole

thing. Then when I start to think about how much I have admired you from afar – because you really didn't know how much until of late. Maybe in the last year we became bonded, but I've been bonded to you a long time, and I want – and I really appreciate the chance to sit here and tell you this and be a part of this, what I think has been a fantastic interview, from all the others that I've seen. Especially, since you've had your stroke, this is just fantastic, Melba, really, and I want you to go back East and get 'em, girl. You go, girl.

Liston: I'm sorry that I couldn't talk more.

Bryant: I know, but you've done – you've done it. You hear. You've done it to death. And I want to say thank you to Matt also for you and I.

Liston: What's your last name?

Watson: Watson.

Liston: Oh. Matt Watson.

Bryant: Yes. Tell Smithsonian we want to thank them for sending a young, handsome man out here, and such a talented one as far as trying to get us to get this interview together, and whatever we've done, we owe some of our thanks to Matt for helping us get it together.

Melba, you can take over from here. But this – my name is Clora Bryant, and I want to say thank you, Melba Liston.

Liston: Okay. And we'll close with a tune dedicated to my mom and her man, her husband, *Ben Loves Lu.* [The music plays.] I think maybe this song will be my theme song all over – big band, little band, whatever – if I get everybody to play it like that.

Bryant: Stay well, Melba.

Liston: Thank you.