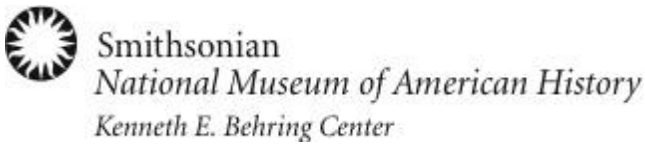

Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

JOE WILDER
NEA Jazz Master (2008)

Interviewee:	Joe Wilder (February 22, 1922 – May 9, 2014)
Interviewer:	Julie Burstein
Date:	August 25-26, 1992
Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Description:	Transcript, 129 pp.

Burstein: I wanted to start by asking you about your beginnings in Colwyn, I guess. [She pronounces it as "coal-win."]

Wilder: Colwyn, it's pronounced. [Wilder says "coll-win," as in collar.]

Burstein: Colwyn.

Wilder: Yeah, Colwyn.

Burstein: . . . Colywn, Pennsylvania, and about your family. Where were your folks from?

Wilder: My – I think – I know my father's family are from North Carolina. I think my mother's family were also from North Carolina. Apparently they had come North much earlier than my father's family, because my mother was born in Pennsylvania. My father was born in North Carolina. He left – my grandfather brought his family to Philadelphia – to Colwyn, as a matter of fact. That's something I don't really understand. I don't know how they managed to end up in Colwyn, but that's where they did. My father was 12 years old at that time. He's now – he'll be 92 in November – the 23rd of November.

Burstein: So this was in 1912 that they came there.

Wilder: Yeah, in 1912 he came – they came to Colwyn. There were – in Colwyn, I think there was my paternal grandparents and my maternal grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, and my family. I think there were four other black families in Colwyn. Most of

the people there were Pennsylvania Dutch. This is not far – this is just the outskirts of Philadelphia, near Darby, Pennsylvania. That's where we started out.

I started elementary school there. We had a fire that burned down the row houses that we lived in. It burned the whole row of houses, just completely gutted them. That's when we moved into Philadelphia. That's why we moved, actually. It's funny, because I had a schoolmate, Helen Gibbons, who was – we were in elementary school together. We had a habit of chasing the fire engines, because they had a volunteer fire company, and we lived close by the firehouse. So we could go there – when they would ring the bell to get the volunteers to assemble, they'd ring the bell, and we could go up, and we'd find out where the fire was. Generally we would run and get there before the firemen got there.

In this particular day, at lunchtime, we heard the fire engines, and we were running to go to the firehouse to find out where it was. As we crossed this little footbridge, we looked, and we could see the flames and everything. We didn't know where it was, but it was near the vicinity of the firehouse. When we got there, it was our house – my house – that was on fire. I still find myself trying to chase the fire engines today. I'm always concerned.

Burstein: Wow. Was everyone okay though?

Wilder: Everybody survived. It turns out – my youngest brother – we had kerosene lamps. He was playing with a stick or something, holding it over the lamp, and the stick caught on fire, or whatever – paper – whatever he had, and he threw it away. He threw it behind the staircase, and there was a gallon of kerosene there that exploded. That's what set the houses on fire. He couldn't – he must have been three years old or something like that, maybe. I would think about three-and-a-half. That's what caused the fire.

We lost everything. Everything. Everybody lost everything.

Burstein: Because it burned down the whole row of houses.

Wilder: Yeah, and we moved into Philadelphia. I think my paternal grandparents had already moved into [?Pasco], where I grew up, because when we did move, we moved in with them, I remember now. That's where it started. It had a schoolhouse there where – it's an old-fashioned schoolhouse. They had a thing: each class in the elementary school had a chance to ring the bell. Everybody in each class would get a chance to ring the bell in the morning or at noontime, after – when we came back to classes. It was a nice thing. I remember that. Such a big honor to get the bell in your hand.

Burstein: Were you in first or second grade when this happened?

Wilder: I was in – I must have been in second grade, I think.

Burstein: What are your earliest memories of music in your family?

Wilder: My earliest memories are my father. My father played – he originally played cornet. I don't recall – I don't remember him – that might have been before I was born. He played sousaphone. He studied the tuba and played that. That I do remember, because he always had this sousaphone around his neck, and that was one of the things we lost in the fire, as a matter of fact.

He had been in World War I. He had put his age up. He claimed to be older than he was. He had a metal chest with a lot of bullets that he had brought back from overseas after the war. When this fire was going, these things were going whew whew whew through the room – the house. The firemen were afraid to go near them. That's what was happening.

But that's my first recollection of music. I was just proud that my father was walking around with this sousaphone. I didn't relate it to anything in particular. We knew he was a little different from most of the other fellows in the area.

Burstein: Because when you were little, music wasn't what he did for a living. He was – what did he do?

Wilder: No. He was a truck driver at that time. He drove a truck for a stucco company in Philadelphia – in Colwyn – and then later on, when we moved into Philadelphia, he worked for a couple of coal companies. He drove trucks for them. But then he was beginning – he was playing music. He started playing music with some of the local bands. He was playing sousaphone then. Later on he took up the bass violin – studied bass violin and played the two of them.

Burstein: Would you go and listen to him when he would be playing around there?

Wilder: They used to – when we moved to Philadelphia, they used to rehearse at our house, some of the bands he played with. So that was interesting. That's really what got me interested in music. But it was my father who decided I should play cornet at that time. I had an older brother – I had three brothers, and my oldest brother, Curtis, was taking piano lessons. But he didn't like the piano very much. He preferred the bass violin and later on studied bass violin. We were the only two who played music, aside from my father.

Burstein: That's quite a few musical people in one family.

Wilder: Yeah. We were lucky.

Burstein: Do you remember anything else about Colwyn? I remember you telling me . . .

Wilder: About Colwyn? I know that we had a lot of friends there that I remember as a kid. We were very fond of all the kids that we had grown up with, apparently. I remember one of my eldest brother's schoolmates had a honey bear. We called him Honey. He had a bear as a pet, a little bear cub. I can remember that.

This one fellow, they were digging – excavating something in the schoolyard. Apparently he didn't see it. He fell head first into this pit and ended up with a fractured skull. That I remember very vividly, and I don't even remember his name. I think his name was Ritter, if I'm not mistaken. I think it was. I think his parents had the grocery store.

That's about – and of course the Givens family I remember very well. My aunt, one of my mother's sisters, went to school with one of the Givens girls, and my uncle, my mother's brother, younger, the one next to my mother – he and Bill Givens were very close friends. They went – they had gone to school in Colwyn. They went to elementary school together.

Burstein: Was it hard to move into Philadelphia when you did? Or was it an adventure?

Wilder: I guess it was a little traumatic, but actually, we were so young that it didn't have the effect on us, except for the fact that we had lost these friends that we knew so well. We used to go all – we used to make trips over to visit them. It was nice. We stayed in touch with them for many years. They moved up in the farm country up in Pennsylvania, and we lost track of them. My mother kept in touch with them for many years, but I never saw them after that.

Burstein: Was it – in both places, was it a community that was integrated? Or did the black families stay together and the white families stay together?

Wilder: In this case, it wasn't really a case of integration, because we were the only blacks in that area – in Colywn at that time. In the school, my mother's younger sister and her youngest brother, they were also in school. They're not much older than I am. I would say five, six years, or something like that. They were also in school. My mother's younger sister was – she was being trained as a secretary to the Principal. So they were – we had no problem with that at that time.

Burstein: What was it like when you – how old were you when you first started playing the cornet?

Wilder: I think about 11, either 10 or 11.

Burstein: Did your dad – was he your first teacher?

Wilder: My father started me, and he was very good, but he felt that he would not be as successful with me as someone else. He started me with – there was a fellow named Henry Lowe who played in one of the bands that my father played in. He taught me. He played bugle calls and things like that on the trumpet. That got my interest going.

Then my father had studied with a man named Fred Griffin, who was a cornet soloist. He was a black man and a very well-trained musician. He taught many instruments. He had taught my father cornet. My father decided that he preferred to play the tuba, and he taught my father the tuba. He was the one who taught me, a very fine teacher and a real

taskmaster. He was one of those teachers where, when you miss a note, you got slapped on the knee, to remind you that you had missed it, that it's not a C, it's an A, or whatever. We were practicing things from the Arban book at that time. I was one of his students. Oddly enough, I think the lessons were something like a dollar a lesson, and unfortunately the teacher was glad to get that. That's how bad things were at that time.

Burstein: This is in the early '30s, right?

Wilder: This is the early '30s, yeah. He was a fine teacher and pointed me in the right direction. Then I studied with another fellow for a very short time, a fellow named Cliff Haughton, whose brother was Chauncey Haughton. He played with Cab Calloway's band. He was an alto player. They were very well-educated people. He helped me a great deal.

Burstein: What were you – you were a kid, but were you studying – what kind of music were you playing then? Was it jazz?

Wilder: No. I wasn't playing jazz. My father would get a stock of some of the pop music or something and show me how to play that and let me practice that. I ended up – I played on a children's radio program they had for – they had a program for – Horn and Hardart had a children's program on which they had no black children. There was a tailoring company, Parisian Tailors, which was owned by Sam Kessler. His chief tailor was Eddie Lieberman. They both got the idea that maybe they should start a black children's radio program, and they did. They used to – their main thing was that they made uniforms for most of the main black orchestras at that time – Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford. All those bands, they made uniforms for. So they could see the idea of a black children's program. They auditioned several kids for different things. My father took me down, and I auditioned. I was the Louis Armstrong, because I played the trumpet. I didn't have any idea how great Louis Armstrong was, or wasn't even impressed by anything he did. So I was on that program with – there were kids like Stump and Stumpy, who became very famous as a dance team, Ida James, Moke and Poke, Mary Louise – people who later on became quite prominent in the entertainment business.

Burstein: What would you do on the show?

Wilder: We had a pianist who was the – she was the accompanist. Her name was Ruth Mosley. She was quite nice with kids and a very fine accompanist. She could play almost anything by ear. What the kids would sing, she would accompany them on. We played in the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia on Sunday mornings. All the name bands used to play at the – it was a vaudeville theater. They played at the theater – at the Lincoln Theater. In their contract – they had a blue law in Pennsylvania, where there was no entertainment on Sundays. So the orchestras would accompany us for that one hour in this theater on Sunday morning. They would improvise backgrounds for us when we played or sang or whatever. We had – that's how we got to see all the name bands: Duke

Ellington, Don Redman, Cab Calloway, the Mills Blue Rhythm – any of these orchestras – all the black orchestras played there, and they would play for us on Sunday morning.

Burstein: That's not in your bio, you know. It doesn't say, "played with Duke Ellington."

Wilder: There are many things I just never even thought to mention, but it's fantastic.

Burstein: I was going to say, that's interesting. At the age of whatever it was, 13, you were playing with Duke Ellington.

Wilder: Yeah. In a sense, yeah. And they were always – they were very encouraging. All those fellows – Count Basie's band, Erskine Hawkins and the Bama State Collegians – they would all – they would say, "Kid, you stick with it." And they remembered me when I finally became a professional player. They'd say, "I remember you from that children's program."

And Louis, he remembered me. He'd say, "I remember you when you was a little boy." He was great. He came to – I came to Witham Theater, and they introduced me to him. So he gave me a pass. He said, "You come and see Pops every day. Just show them this pass, and they'll let you in." At that time, I was interested – I wanted to play like Del Staigers, who was a cornet soloist. I was really impressed with that. I just didn't know what jazz was, basically, and I didn't know classical either, but I knew that I happened to like Del Staigers. So I wanted to play *The Carnival of Venice* and things like that. I only went to see Louis that one time, with the pass. I heard him, and I was impressed, but it never occurred to me to try to play like him at that time. Many years later, I began to realize what a great person he was. It's funny.

Burstein: But you had a different idea of what music was at that age. About how old were you when you were doing all of this, when you were playing on the kids' show?

Wilder: I think I played on there until I was about 15. Then it wasn't too long after that that I think they discontinued it. But it went for many years. It was at least a source for the young kids to get a chance to develop their talents.

Burstein: Did you get paid for it? Or was it – no, it was just more or less a talent show.

Wilder: No, we didn't get paid for it. As a matter of fact, it was just more or less an advertisement for the tailoring company, for Parisian Tailors, and it made them quite popular, too.

Burstein: When was it, when you were a kid, that you really started getting serious about music? Was it a game? Or was it always something that you really focused on?

Wilder: Oh, no. When I was in elementary school, on certain holidays, like the military holidays, the Fourth of July, or Armistice Day, or something like that, they would have

me play bugle calls in the hallway. I began to get a little serious about that. Then we had a little orchestra that was terrible, but it was typical of elementary school orchestras. At the junior high school, we had a very nice orchestra there. I played in that. That's when I really began to think seriously about it.

Burstein: When did you switch from cornet to trumpet?

Wilder: I switched . . .

Burstein: Or would you go back and forth?

Wilder: No. Oh no no no. Once – I don't remember at what point I stopped playing the cornet, but it was just that the cornet more or less wore out. It wasn't a brand new one when I got it. My father got a used trumpet, and I started playing that. I think it was a Holton trumpet that I started on. I played – I still like cornet. The cornet was a nice instrument. But there's not much difference between the two of them.

Burstein: What was it like – how did your family respond to you being really excited about music? Your dad was a musician. Were they encouraging?

Wilder: My father was a musician. My mother was very encouraging. My mother loved to sing. She had a beautiful voice. She had no musical training. But she was quite proud of the fact that my brother and I were going into music, and of course they were all proud of my dad, because he was pretty popular as a musician in Philadelphia. He was one of the better musicians there at that time.

Burstein: Who was he playing with? What kinds of bands was he playing with?

Wilder: He played with dance bands in Philadelphia, and nightclubs. He played with one band, Frankie Fairfax, who was a trombonist, and Dizzy Gillespie played in that band. I think that's when they called him – he got the nickname Dizzy, because Dizzy was always a prankster. He was always doing little funny things. My father, he's older. Let's see. My father's about 20 years older than Dizzy. Yeah. So most of these fellows were quite a bit older than him, and they had never seen anybody with this kind of humor. It was just unheard of. So they said, "This trumpet player, he's dizzy." They didn't say, "He's goofy." "He's dizzy in the head," or something. It became a nickname for him. It was Gillespie. "That Gillespie guy is dizzy." It became a nickname for him.

Burstein: That's funny. Would you go and hear your dad play? Or were you . . . ?

Wilder: Very few – I didn't hear him play very often, because we were kids and we weren't allowed into the clubs. But my father played – when he was playing sousaphone, they used to augment the Philadelphia Rapid Transit band that they had over there. They would add some of these musicians to it. My father was playing sousaphone, a big sousaphone. We would hear him like on Mummer's Parade. They'd march down Broad Street. So that was nice.

Then, after I got a little bit older, my father would take me on some of the jobs that he would play. They would be playing a dance. My father would say, "We have two trumpets, and there are three parts. You" – he'd have me take the trumpet with me, and he'd say, "What you do: you just sit there, and don't play anything if you're not sure you know how to – you can play it. You understand. You just follow the music that the other two trumpet players are playing, and if you think you can play something, then you play it. But otherwise, just watch, and you'll learn how to read the music or learn how to apply this." We did this a few times. There was a fellow, Mr. Beckett. Fred? Not – I can't think of this guy. I think his name was Beckett. Yeah, his name was Beckett. I'm not sure whether his first name was Fred or not. At any rate, he and my father were very close friends. He was the first trumpet player and a very fine musician. So my father used to take me on these things, and Mr. Beckett never said anything. One day, it happened my father was off someplace. He saw me coming, and he didn't realize how loud he was speaking. He said, "Oh my God, here comes Wilder and that blamed kid again." I used to remind my dad of that. And he's a friend. He lived right across the street from my father. I told my father, "Maybe I should remind him of that sometime." He said, "No." I never told my father about it until he – until years and years after I had grown up. But it was so funny, and I could think of him. I can imagine how it must have been annoying to these poor guys to put up with that. But it evidently helped me a great deal to develop my reading.

Burstein: Was that fun for you? Or was it a little scary, to go to these dates with your dad?

Wilder: No, I was always impressed with them, and I was of course proud of my dad, him being a member of the band. And most of them were very good bands. They were very good bands.

Burstein: When did you think, all right, this is what I am going to do for a living: I'm going to become a musician?

Wilder: I didn't really know whether I – music in Philadelphia was a little – it was a very difficult profession at that time, because there was no great volume of work, certainly not for most of the black musicians. My father was a pretty busy musician. So by those standards, they were kept pretty active. But in general, there wasn't that much work, in that most of the fellows did other work. My father drove trucks during the daytime.

Burstein: So that whole time he would be doing two jobs.

Wilder: For most of the time, yeah. Only in later years did it reach a point where music was the mainstay. When I was in – I went to the Mastbaum School. That's when I thought, maybe I could make a living as a musician, because at the same time I was in school, I was playing with a band, Jimmy Gorham's band. It was – we were the Count Basie, the Duke Ellington, the Fletcher Henderson, the Chick Webbs. Every – we had fellows in the orchestra who would transcribe these arrangements from records. We

played and imitated all those bands. I was a kid in the band. They used to call me Junior. Some of the guys resented the fact that I could come to the rehearsals late, because I wouldn't get out of school in time, and I'd get to the rehearsal maybe an hour after the other guys had been rehearsing. They really resented the fact that they had worked an hour before I even got there. Some of them really showed their resentment.

Burstein: What kind of things would happen in the band?

Wilder: They would say, "This kid, he comes in late. We've been here working all this time. How good is he anyway?" I'm sure I wasn't very good. I used to play – I admired Cootie Williams, who was with Duke Ellington. Cootie used to play with a plunger all the time. I remember we were playing – they told me to play *The Waltz You Saved for Me* [Wilder sings the opening phrase], a Wayne King thing. I was playing with a plunger [Wilder imitates that sound]. These guys were sitting there. They used to have these derbys that they used to play into, but they were metal – were aluminum. While I'm playing, they're throwing coins in the derby – clunk clunk clunk. They're passing the derby around, throwing coins. It didn't bother me. I was too young to be affected by it. I thought of it years later. It broke me up. But that's what they would do. Finally, one of the guys said, "Look, kid. When you play solos – ballads – you don't have to play everything with a plunger."

Burstein: Sometimes you can play it straight, and it'll still be good.

What was music like in school? Did you study music in school, in grade school and high school?

Wilder: Oh yeah. When I was in junior high school, we used to play orchestral things. Then when I went to the Mastbaum School . . . .

Burstein: What was the Mastbaum School? Was that a magnet school in Philadelphia?

Wilder: Yeah, that's one of the – it's a school like music and art, or art and design, one of the specialized schools. Their music department, they were quite famous for that. I was there with Buddy DeFranco, Red Rodney, and fellows like Arthur [Lannutti?], who went right from the school into the Baltimore Symphony. Robert Little went with the – I think the Dallas or the New Orleans symphony. Those were the kind of fellows they had then. All the music was classical. We didn't do any jazz playing. In fact, you were frowned on if they even thought you were playing jazz. We had a symphonic band, and we had a symphony orchestra. I played – in the symphonic band, I played third chair solo cornet. At that time I was not very good at double-tonguing and triple-tonguing. We had two fellows there – one, Ralph Clemson, who played many times – still does, if he's still active – with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Ralph was the solo – he was the first-chair solo, and Johnny Palma, who played second-chair solo cornet. We're all playing the same parts, but you were placed in the position of your reliability. I played third-chair solo cornet, because I was a little stronger. I had actually been playing more, I guess, than most of the fellows. Then we had first cornets, second, first trumpets, second trumpets,

third trumpets, in the symphonic band. We played orchestral excerpts that had been transcribed for symphonic band. I got a tremendous amount of experience there.

Sometimes – I didn't get into the symphony orchestra, because they had some fellows there who were far superior to me as a player, and had better teachers and everything. At that time I couldn't even afford a teacher. It was just more or less studying there and on my own. But they had a symphonic orchestra there.

One fellow, he's a pretty well-known avant-garde composer, Ralph Shapey. He was the concertmeister there, crazy as he could be. And we had some wonderful players, wonderful concert players there. I wish I could think of all their names. There was a girl percussionist who was the first one I had ever seen: Ruth – her first name was Ruth. She was the first female percussionist I had ever seen. She was quite good. Then we had Yolanda Pacucci, who was a child prodigy, a flautist. She was studying with [William] Kincaid. She was there. We had Arnold Jacobs of the Chicago Symphony. I don't think he was with the Chicago at that time, but he came. He was a friend of Ross Wyre, who was in charge of the brass program there. He was a tuba player. He came in as a guest soloist with the symphonic band. I met him years ago.

Burstein: What was it like for you? Were there other black students in the . . . ?

Wilder: There were a few. There were very few black students then. As a matter of fact, I think it's the York Band Instrument Company came in, and they wanted to take a picture of the symphonic band to use in their brochure as an advertisement for their instruments. I remember the director to the school got very – he was very perturbed when he saw me sitting in the first – in the solo cornet section and began to take me to task. "What are you doing sitting there? You don't belong there." I said, "This is where I've been playing. I've been playing here for a year." He said, "You don't belong there. You go down there with the third trumpet section where you belong," or something like that. I was really furious, but I didn't want to create a scene. I'm still a student. The other students, one of whom was – Leon Coleman and I were very good friends with Leon. Leon began to kick up a storm, as did most of my other friends and the other solo cornet players. Said, "He's been playing here with us all this time." Finally he gave in and said okay, and I ended up – in the picture, I'm sitting where I had been sitting. But that was a pretty disturbing experience.

I had a few others like that. We went to do a concert at Colony High School My father used to preach to me because – he said – when he went to work, it would annoy him that some of the fellow would show up late for work. This was a real sore point with him. He said, "If you ever start playing and earning a living, in whatever field you go into," he said, "just being black is no excuse for being late," he said, "and you want to think about that all the time and remember that it's better for you to be there one hour ahead of time than to come one second late." He said, "We have drummers who come. The job starts at 8 o'clock. They show up at 8:45 and know that they have to set up a whole drum set." He said, "What time do you think the job starts?" He said, "And this is terrible. People pay you to come to work" and so forth. At any rate, because of this, I showed up at Colony

High School about an hour before the band was to be assembled there. I thought, I'm here so early, I might as well go to the principal's office and tell them who I am and why I'm here. Who do I meet but the principal in the hallway. He's looking, and he said, "Hey. What are you doing in here?" I said, "I'm a member of the Mastbaum Symphonic Band. We're playing a concert." He said, "You go outside, and you wait until the rest of them come." Okay. He chased me out of the building. So, I had a few experiences like that. I look back on them and say they're so far behind you. But unfortunately you do remember them.

I remember, too, when I was in junior high school, I had a very fine music teacher there. Mrs. – Miss Lewis, she was – Alberta Lewis, at that time. Her name was – actually her maiden name was Alberta Schenbecker, and she married a professor whose name was Lewis. She was very fond of me as one of the kids in the orchestra – me and Rosario Pino, my close buddy in the trumpet section. We went to a Catholic school to play. Unfortunately, one of the sisters said to her, "Of all the kids you have in an orchestra, why did you bring a nigger in here?" It was something that got me – it rang like a bell in my ears, and to this day I'm not very religious. I have my faith, and I try to do what's right and so forth with people, but religions I'm not very impressed with. It was a very sad experience for me. Mrs. Lewis was so nice. She said something to this teacher, and she didn't realize that I had heard it, but she always made things so pleasant, it just took the curse right off of it. She's still a very dear friend of mine to this day. I just love her, and her husband.

Burstein: She made a real impression on you.

Wilder: Yeah, she did. She was one of the people who did so much for me, tried to help me get ahead musically. She thought I had some potential. She was a great help to me, and I always remember her for it. In fact, I guess it's about five years ago maybe, she invited me – she and her husband invited me to their 50th wedding anniversary. They were married 50 years, and I was a kid when they – I was there at school when they got married. Rosario and I were so perturbed over this. We loved Miss Lewis – Miss Schenbecker at that time. How dare he come in and marry our best – our favorite teacher. It's so funny to think about it.

Burstein: It's great to remember what it's like to be a teenager and have this teacher.

Wilder: I saw Rosario. I was doing a Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. His son Mario was playing at one of the casinos. So they came down. He knew I was there and invited me – took me to dinner. He and I started talking about that. It's just hysterical.

Burstein: Did you imagine yourself as a symphonic player? Was that something you had wanted to do?

Wilder: That was what I wanted to do. I wanted to play orchestral music. It's funny you mention that, because . . .

[The interview was interrupted by a telephone ringing.]

Burstein: We were talking about symphonic music.

Wilder: Yeah, you were asking me about that. It's funny. I had heard – I used to love to listen to orchestras. My father listened to all kinds of music from the time I was a little kid. He used to listen. On the radio, you had all these bands. We had an old Zenith radio. My father would switch from one station to the other. We'd hear the Baja bands – the Mexican bands, and my father would say, "Listen to those trumpet players! They have tongues like machine guns." [Wilder articulates a fast descending tongued line.] Double-tonguing, triple-tonguing all over the place. My father would say, "Listen to that!" I would listen to these things, and I would try to imitate it. The next day I'd recall some of these things, and I'd try all these different things.

We used to listen to bands, like there was the band Gus Arnheim. They used to say, "It's Gus Arnheim time." My father would call our attention to all these things. We heard all the different bands that played. Duke Ellington was his favorite. He used to imitate the announcer. The announcer would say, "The Duke is on the air," and my father, he could imitate this announcer. We thought that was great.

I had listened to all these different bands, and I also – he listened to classical programs too. I listened to this, and I was very impressed – I'd hear some music, and without knowing it, I was very impressed with Tchaikovsky. One day, we were playing in the symphonic band. We're playing the Pathétique symphony. I sat there, and in the middle of this thing, it struck me, here I am, in the middle of this orch – in the middle of this band, and I'm playing some music that I heard on the radio. I was so impressed with it. It just stirred me. I just – sometimes, even today, I get very emotional. I can listen to some music and it touches me so deeply, I end up with tears. For what? I don't know why, but I just find it so soul stirring, some of it. I love to play a lot of classical things, and fortunately I did get a number of opportunities to do it. It's such a joy. And I played some jazz things that have also moved me the same way, but my first experience with that was playing some classical things. It was Tchaikovsky too.

Burstein: It sounds like you really – I was a cellist, and I remember the experience of being inside an orchestra and feeling that . . .

Wilder: Here, absolutely. It's exactly what happened to me. I just – it's just, all of a sudden, they're playing, and we're playing along, and [Wilder sings a melodic line from Tchaikovsky]. This I heard on the radio with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and here I am, in this! Good grief. It was just great.

Burstein: Did you pursue that? Did you think, all right, I'm going to really try to get into the Philadelphia Orchestra and do something with them?

Wilder: I thought I could, but then I – my father would – he didn't discourage me or anything like that, but I would – through conversations I would hear with my father and

other musicians, some of whom might have been qualified if they had been given opportunities, because these were much older musicians – but they all said that you're not really going to get in the Philadelphia Orchestra, because that's a color thing. At that time, there was just no hope. They also didn't have black musicians playing in the Broadway – playing in the theaters, the legitimate theater thing, at that time. So they were channeled into playing in the vaudeville theaters, where they did play, or doing clubs – working the nightclubs or playing dances.

Burstein: It sounds like in high school you were playing Tchaikovsky in the band during the day and then you were also playing in a jazz band at night.

Wilder: Oh yeah, at night. While I was in school I was still doing that.

Burstein: And you said that you couldn't really talk about jazz in school. That jazz was a musical language that . . .

Wilder: The people in charge frowned on it. I remember Buddy DeFranco, who was as good a legitimate clarinet player as anybody we had in the school. He won a contest with the – I think it was Jimmy Dorsey's orchestra. They had a young musicians contest all over the country. In each city where they found – the contestant who won would get an opportunity to play with that orchestra. I think – if I'm not mistaken, I think it was Jimmy. I might be wrong. It might have been Tommy, but nonetheless, it was one of the Dorseys. He won in Philadelphia. He won big. Then he was a celebrity amongst all of us at the school, but with the directors there, he was a bum. "This guy, he plays jazz? We don't want jazz, people playing jazz at this school." It was that kind of a thing. It was so classical oriented.

When we played something, some of the guys would – at the end of a nice concert piece during a rehearsal, they would add a flatted fifth or a seventh or something, and the conductor would say, "Who did that?" It was like, everybody's breaking up, giggling and trying to look up. Such a silly thing was a major thing to them.

Burstein: Why do you think jazz felt so subversive to them? Why do you think that this music was so threatening to them?

Wilder: I think that basically it was a class thing. I really do. I think that people who were in the classical field wanted to feel that they were superior to people playing jazz. Jazz also was associated with prostitution and things in the old days, in the speakeasys and things like that. Not that the musicians had anything to do with it, but that was their way of making a living, and because they found themselves in those kind of surroundings, I guess people just associated that with jazz, like for many years they associated narcotics and all this: the only people who do these things are jazz musicians. While some jazz musicians did that, they were a very miniscule number of people who were involved with that, and yet it was generally applied to jazz musicians, period, black, white, or what have you.

People had a great deal of contempt for musicians who were playing jazz. There again, it might have been that they wanted to feel superior, and this gave them something to base it on. Because I know that for almost all of my life, I was extremely aware of that, and I always tried to deport myself in a way that would be counter to what – the image that jazz musicians had. And it isn't – as I say, it isn't only black musicians, jazz musicians, who have been put in that image. White musicians found themselves in the same thing. I think a lot of the respect that I got from musicians with whom I worked and grew up, was attributable to the fact that they knew that I was aware of this, and wherever I got an opportunity to go someplace, I tried to make people aware of the fact that we're not like that as a group.

I even feel and felt sorry for the individuals who got turned in the other direction, fellows like Charlie Parker and Fats Navarro and many other of the fellows that got hooked on narcotics. They did it, I think, more or less out of frustration. They knew that they were extremely talented people, and that they had something special to offer, and they weren't getting recognition for it. People would hire – would ask Charlie Parker to play for a dance, and I'm sure they'd offer him 25, 30 dollars a night. Here's a musician with that kind of talent, but that was the going rate, and, "Why pay him more? If he doesn't want to work for that, we'll hire somebody else." I think in their frustration – I don't know who led them into the narcotics-use thing, but somebody somewhere gave them the impression that, "Hey, this sets you apart from the other guys. Only we're doing it, and not them." And, before they knew it, they were hooked, like alcoholism and other things like that.

Burstein: How about for you? That was something that you never did yourself.

Wilder: I never got into it. I think the reason that I didn't – I was around fellows smoking – they used to call it gage, when I was a kid, and weeds and all – but they were smoking marijuana. Somebody would say, "Hey kid. You want a puff?" Somebody would say, "Don't do that to him. That's Wilder's kid. Don't do that, because his father will really just flip if you do it. Don't try to encourage him." So they had a great deal – I guess it was the respect they had for my father, that they didn't bother to try to push me into it. Some people would say, "Come on. It won't hurt you." But I just didn't bother with it.

Burstein: So your dad was pretty strict.

Wilder: Yeah. I'm just fortunate that people had such respect for my father, and due to that, they didn't push me. I'm sure I would have been probably as weak as anybody else, but I just didn't get into that group.

Burstein: It sounds like you didn't choose it either. That was really not . . . .

Wilder: No. I didn't drink either.

Burstein: What was it like when you were doing classical music and jazz at the same time in high school? Did you feel like they were two different things? Or did you feel that there was a lot that you carried from one to the other?

Wilder: Yeah, I found that from having done a lot of classical playing and studying a lot of that, that I probably had a little more finesse in some of the jazz things I did. I don't know that I was swinging like some of the fellows who played just jazz, because they were certainly far less inhibited. They did things without being concerned about the technical aspect of it, where I'm sure it inhibited me many times and caused me maybe not to play as freely as I should have. I think I play more freely now, because I'm at an age where I don't really care. But I think that that – it did make some difference. I find also – I did find I could go from classical to jazz. I could be playing a concert, a classical thing and then go someplace and play jazz, but I was never able to do it well the other way. If I were playing jazz someplace and then the next thing I had to do, the same day, was classical, I didn't feel that I had the edge, that edge that I had when I was going from one to the other, because classical playing, for me, required a little more discipline. I would find that when I had done it the other way around, I didn't have the discipline when I went into the classical thing. Certain things you do – when you're playing jazz, you're governed by your own feelings at the moment. You don't have to play 16th notes or 32nd notes or sustain something as long as you're required to do in classical playing, because it depends on your own personal feeling, and if you don't feel up to it, you just don't do it. When you're in a classical situation, you do it, or else. It's there, and that's the way it has to be. I don't pit one against the other, because they're two distinctly different things, both of which require tremendous musicianship.

Burstein: And it sounds like both of them, for you, have been very important throughout your career.

Wilder: Oh, I really enjoyed, I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed all of it, really. I've been very fortunate.

Burstein: So in high school, then, you were playing in the band and you were – what happened when you graduated? What did you decide to do?

Wilder: I started playing with – I got a call to go out. I played with several bands in Philadelphia at the same time I was in school. I played with Jimmy Gorham's band. The first band, oddly enough – I played with a man called King Coleman. He was a friend of my father's. He was a pianist. He had a little society group. It wasn't a band. It was a group. He gave me the first chance to start trying to play and trying to learn to improvise, which was – I didn't really understand, but I could read some of the melodic lines. He was the first one that said, "Okay, we'll let him play." Then my father had another friend who was Josh Sadler, who was a violinist, a very talented man. He had a society orchestra. I played with him for a short time, and he paid very well. In those days, I think $5 a night or something. That was big money, and me being a school kid. But his band was so society-oriented. They just played the Broadway show music and things. Jimmy Gorham had this band that sounded like Count Basie or Duke Ellington or you-name-it,

and they wanted me to join that band. I quit the other band and joined them. My father said, "Yeah, but you're not going to make any money over there, playing with Jimmy Gorham. You're working with Mr. Sadler, and he pays you well" and so on and so on. "No, that's not the thing to do. That's not hep enough for me." I had to go with this other band. So I played with them for a while.

Then I finished with them, and I played with a band called the Harlem Dictators. There was a fine trumpet player in there, Frank Galbraith, very creative, loved Louis Armstrong. He used to talk like Louis when he talked all the time. Frank left and came over, I think, to work with Chick Webb or somebody. Another trumpet player, Johnny Lynch, took his place. Johnny left, and they got – hired me to come and play.

I think while that – there's someone I never mentioned. His name was Lonnie Slappy. For some reason or other, many times people have asked me questions about my beginnings in Philadelphia, and his name – this man completely escaped my memory. It was probably the area in which I developed some style and some ability to improvise and to assert my kinds of phrasing that I wanted to play. That was in Lonnie Slappy's band. It was a very fine band with tremendous musicians, a little band: two trumpets, two saxophones, and a rhythm section, guitar. They played things somewhat like the John Kirby kind of things, not exactly like Kirby, but a little band like that, very clever. That was one of the bands that I had the most fun in as a kid coming up.

Then I went with – I got a call to go with Les Hite. That's why I joined the Les Hite band out in Lansing, Michigan.

Burstein: Before I ask you about Les Hite, I just wanted to ask: do you remember what it was like when you were learning how to improvise, after coming from a very classical read-the-notes background? What was it like to then learn how?

Wilder: It was rather strange, because I didn't really understand it. They would put the chords down, and I wasn't certain just how the chords should be interpreted. Many times I would be just playing chords in the rhythm of it [Wilder sings a chordal arpeggio] similar to the Arban studies that I had and things like that. It was very corny, actually. It wasn't until many years later I started listening to the guitar players, and I would look at the guitar sheet. I saw the chord symbols, and I finally began to relate the symbols to what was written down in the part itself. I began, very slowly, to learn to improvise harmonically, and I still didn't do that very well until many years later. But it was the beginning of the development of it.

Burstein: Was there anyone in the band that you admired or that you asked from? Or did you just do this on your own?

Wilder: I used to listen to many of the fellows that I played with. At the time that I was a kid, I loved Charlie Shavers, who was with the Kirby band. I thought he was – and rightly so – was one of the greatest players I ever heard. I had grown up with Billy Kyle's family. Billy was the pianist with him. So when they would come – he would come to

Philadelphia, sometimes Charlie Shavers would come to Billy Kyle's house. Billy would call me and say, "Charlie Shavers is here." I'd go around and see him. He was just great to me. Charlie was great.

I admired him. I loved Benny Carter, who played trumpet and saxophone. My father was always making me aware of these players. He'd say, "You listen to Benny Carter and Charlie Shavers and the guy" – he said, "Those fellows could play." He said, "You want to study and play like them and listen to them." And I did. I listened to – I used to listen to saxophone players, and I would try to imitate some things that they did, on the trumpet. At the time I was at the Mastbaum School, I didn't play in symphony orchestra, as I said, because they had some fine players there, but a lot of times they would have small groups, like they'd have a woodwind ensemble, and maybe the clarinet player – one of the clarinet players didn't show up, or the oboe player didn't show up, and they would say, "You can play with us if you don't play too loud." So I put a mute in, and I would go in, and I learned – began to learn to transpose, from playing with them, and I also learned to play very softly, because the woodwind players wouldn't tolerate it otherwise, and it was the only chance I would get to play some of these things. In the process of doing this, I developed the ability to play very quietly and developed a certain dexterity that I would not have had otherwise.

Burstein: And which many trumpet players never develop. So . . . .

Wilder: No, and it's unfortunate. But I wouldn't have been any different than any of the others if this hadn't happened to me.

Burstein: Was there – it sounds like there were a number of musicians who you admired for their phrasing and their technique and . . .

Wilder: There were so many, so many.

Burstein: . . . listened to a lot of different people.

Wilder: Johnny Hodges, I just loved the way he phrased and played ballads. It was so hard for me. I would try to play things on the trumpet something like he played on the alto.

There was another friend of mine, a fellow that I knew in Philadelphia, John Brown, who was an alto player who admired those fellows and was a very fine player. He became a very fine bebop player with Dizzy Gillespie's band. He was a talented musician. He was someone who sort of took me under his wing. He was trying to teach me to play the clarinet at one point.

So I had a lot of help, a lot of people, and I would listen. We used to listen to records at that time. I loved – Duke Ellington's band was my favorite, Jimmie Lunceford. Then we had all the other bands. I used to listen. I would hear things that the trumpet section would play. I would try to imitate them. I'd try to play it and see if I could play it the way

they played it. I used to take – I used to listen – when I was playing these woodwind groups, I'd get some of their books, some of the textbooks, like a clarinet – a Klosé clarinet book. I'd try and play these things, and always trying to remember the way I heard the clarinet player, with that same concept. It helped me develop a lot of things.

Burstein: Did you got to a lot of concerts? I know a lot of guys that I've talked to here in New York would talk about sneaking out of high school and going into the city to listen to concerts. And you lived . . .

Wilder: I lived out in the suburbs. I used to – because I was on this children's program, I used to hear the bands anyway. I could get into the theater for nothing. They used to let us go hear the first show every Saturday. Because we rehearsed on Saturdays, and on Saturday morning, when the first show went on, they would let us go in. The theater wouldn't be full, and we could go in and see the first show. We got to see all those bands. It was a thrill too. It was a thrill.

Burstein: Then you joined Les Hite's band. You were 19 years old.

Wilder: Yeah. I was 19 in Les's band.

Burstein: A young kid. What was that like? I've heard that you were a little embarrassed when you got on the bus, because your mom was there.

Wilder: My mother – I laugh – my mother was wonderful. She had a great sense of humor. She was very serious about things, a tremendous amount of family pride. My mother – when this Greyhound bus – going by bus from Philadelphia to Lansing, Michigan. My mother is standing outside the window of the bus. She's saying, "Now, Joseph, you remember. I want you to be a good boy, and I want you to behave yourself. I don't want you to do anything that's going to cause the family to be embarrassed." I'm shrinking down in my feet, saying, "Mother, I'm okay Mother. Okay, I'll do" whatever. And she still said, "And I want you to remember that."

Burstein: Oh boy. Was this the first time you'd been away from home?

Wilder: Yeah. That's my first time to go away like that.

Burstein: Wow. What was that like? What was the feeling when Les – how did it come about? How did Les Hite get in touch with you?

Wilder: Somebody had evidently recommended me. In fact, Earl Hines's band, I had met Billy Eckstine, Budd Johnson, Pee Wee Jackson, who was the first trumpet player, and there were a couple others – Keg Johnson and Budd Johnson. They were – they had heard me someplace play around Philadelphia or something. Somebody had said, maybe that kid might be good for the band. They said if anybody got a chance – oh, the drummer who worked with me in Lonnie Slappy's band, Rudy Traylor, had joined Earl Hines's band. He was an arranger too. He joined the band, and he recommended – he said

something to them, that they ought to try to get me. Then Billy Eckstine and Budd Johnson, they tried to do everything they could to encourage Earl Hines hiring me. So he said he would, first chance he had.

In the meantime, somebody – I don't know how my name got mentioned to Les Hite, but I got – Walter Fuller, I think, recommended me to Les Hite, and they called me and asked me if I would join their band. And I did. That's why I was leaving Philadelphia. I went to Lansing and joined them. Britt Woodman, the trombonist, he was first trombone player. His brother Coney was the pianist in the orchestra. They were a nice bunch of fellows. I joined them in Lansing, Michigan. It was strange, because it was the first time I was on my own, away from home. I had gone away to Annapolis, Maryland, one summer, with the Harlem Dictators band, played in a hotel down there, but it was always – home was so close. But this was a little different. It took me a while to get used to it. I found it fascinating, because we traveled. Now, all of a sudden all the geography I had had in school began to take on some special life. I've been trying to remember. I don't know whether it was in Lincoln, Nebraska. We were in the capitol of one of the states, and on the statehouse – this is something I remember to this day, and I've got to find out where it was. I can't remember – but on the statehouse, it said, "The success of the state depends on the people's idea of government." I have not been able to find out where it was. I thought it was in Des Moines, and it wasn't there. I still think it might have been in Lincoln, Nebraska. I'm not sure.

Burstein: It sounds like it made an impression on you.

Wilder: Because I've not been there – it had an old dome, and this was the inscription on it. 19 years old, and I remember that to this day.

Burstein: What was it like to join – you played in a number of bands, but here you were with Les Hites's band, and you were on the road. Was it frightening to you to think, all right, this is a lot of pressure?

Wilder: I was awed by him, because this was a band that was pretty well known. I just felt that I wasn't adequate at that time. They were very encouraging. They had had another fellow playing first trumpet with them, [?Geidner] Campell, who was very fine. He was sick, I think. That was why he was leaving. It was difficult, filling his shoes at the time, because I didn't have that kind of experience as a lead player. I hadn't been the lead player in the bands I had played, except small groups. So I didn't have a great deal of experience. But they put up with it until I began to acquire it. It didn't take long. I was fortunate in being able to read very well. That helped. They were amazed that I could sight-read so much of this stuff.

Burstein: I bet that there was a little jealousy about that at the very beginning.

Wilder: Possibly a little, and especially my coming in – when you come in, and you're the lead player, you come in with some authority, and everybody else has been there long

before you. It does bring up a little of that. But there wasn't – there was not real animosity.

Burstein: Then, after a while, didn't Dizzy Gillespie join the band?

Wilder: Dizzy joined the band after he and Cab Calloway had an altercation. He joined the band. He was a joy to be with. A lot of people are not aware, I think, of the tremendous musicianship that Dizzy Gillespie had at that time. Dizzy could sight-read as well as anybody I ever ran into, and in a section he was one of the greatest section players you could want. Whatever you did, phrasing-wise, he did. He lived and breathed whatever you did, as a section player. Many times, he would make suggestions as to how maybe it would swing better if we tried it this way, and he'd be absolutely right, and if you did it, he was there too. He had complete support. He was wonderful and taught me a lot of things about how to get around things on the road and so forth.

Burstein: Was he still a cut-up as he was when he played with your dad?

Wilder: He was a real cut-up. He would be telling me jokes and things. I had never heard – I hadn't been exposed to a lot of this stuff. I would sit there and start laughing, and the bandleader's counting off the tune. The band starts playing, and he's got no first trumpet. I'm sitting there trying to stop laughing, so I can play, and Dizzy's sitting there – to make it worse, he's looking straight ahead, as if he has no idea why I'm in hysterics. This is the kind of things he used to do. It was unbelievable.

Burstein: I read that both he and Walter Williams would get you going a lot of the time.

Wilder: Yeah. I don't know if you know this story. We were – Dizzy was in the band. He had been in the band a while, and of course the band took on new life with him in it. We went to Washington. We're playing at the Howard Theater. Les would have his sax – alto saxophone – strung around his neck, and he would sort of be dancing as if he were dancing with somebody, but he always had his back to the band. He'd be dancing in time to the music. Dizzy is standing up in the trumpet section – we were elevated – and he's imitating every move that Les Hite makes, you see. The people are – they're roaring in the audience, and Les thinks, "I'm really killing them. I've really got these people going." This went on for a couple shows. Finally – I don't know what caused it, but he just happened to turn around – each time he would get ready to turn towards the band, to give another cue or something, Dizzy would be sitting down with his horn, and people are still breaking up. He couldn't figure it out – he happened to turn before Dizzy could sit down, and he realized that all this time, they had been laughing at Dizzy making fun of him. He was so incensed that when he got off the bandstand, he said, "The whole band is fired. Everybody's fired. You're on your notice as of today. That's it. Two weeks from today, you're out of here." So, at the end of the week, we went to get paid, and as we went into the – I went in. He had said the same thing to the others. He said, "Look, that notice doesn't go for you. I don't want you to leave the band." He said, "I just gave you the notice." He said, "I want to get rid of Dizzy." He said, "I can't – I'm afraid to fire him, because you know what he did to Cab Calloway." He and Cab got into an altercation, and

Dizzy swung at Cab Calloway with a knife. So Les Hite assumed that if he fired Dizzy, they might have an altercation, and he might end up getting threatened with a knife, which of course wasn't true. But that's what he did. He withdrew the notice from everybody except Dizzy.

Burstein: Did Dizzy leave quietly? Or was that . . . ?

Wilder: Dizzy left. It didn't matter really to Dizzy. He had so many other things he could do. When I left the band, I didn't honor the fact that he rescinded the notice.

Burstein: Oh. You decided to leave also.

Wilder: Yeah. I came back to Philly.

Burstein: What was he like as a bandleader? What was Les Hite like? What was the character of his band?

Wilder: Of Les Hite's band?

Burstein: Yeah.

Wilder: It wasn't an out-and-out swing band. It was a sort of a Midwest – like a commercial-type band, more or less. They played some nice swing things, but they also played things that people liked to dance to. He was a nice man, Les was. Les was a nice – very low key, really nice man.

Burstein: How would you travel on the road? Did you travel by bus?

Wilder: They had a bus. He had a bus. He had a lady friend who was quite wealthy. She bought a bus for the band. She bought a bus. It was an old – it had been – it was an American Flyer, or something like that. It was All-American Bus Company or something. She bought a used bus from them. We used to use it. I remember, one of the first jobs I played with them was in Storm Lake, Iowa. We were coming on the highway. All of a sudden, we start onto this bridge. There's a sharp right turn onto this bridge. The bus driver was trying to slow the bus down, so that we didn't hit this curve, this turn on the bridge, too fast, and he found out he had no brakes. He managed to get the bus on the bridge. As we came off, the road swerved suddenly to the right. If he had turned to the right – we had equipment on the top of the bus as well as underneath – the bus would have tipped over. So he just kept the bus going straight. We ran right through the cables, the highway cables on the side of the highway, and hit a railroad track, a set of railroad tracks, that just took the axle, the front axle, halfway to the back of the bus. Just boom like that. The bus shot across, and the back wheels stopped us when we hit the track, when the back wheels hit the track. We were lucky. I forget – I wish I knew Joey – his name was Joey. He was a Polish fellow who used to always kid about the fact the he was Polish and he was strong. Very nice guy. He was the bus driver. Had it not been for his strength, we probably would have been in the obituary column, all of us, because if he

had tried to make that turn off that bridge, when he came off that bridge, following the road, there would have been no – nobody could have survived it. We evidently were doing 70, 75 miles an hour when we came down this hill and hit the bridge. It was fortunate. I'll never forget. That was my first experience in a bus with a band.

Burstein: What was life like on the road for you? Here you were 19 years old. You'd just been to Annapolis. What was it like to be in a band bus for all that time?

Wilder: It was kind of frustrating, because you were sleeping in different beds every night. That was the first time I experienced waking up and not knowing where I was or why I was where I was. You'd wake up. You didn't see anything that you recognized. I guess it was only a matter of seconds, but it seemed like 10 or 15 minutes before I'd get my wits about me and realize that I was traveling someplace. And some of the places we played in were less than decent – I mean, where we stayed, because we couldn't stay in hotels most of the time. We stayed in private homes.

Burstein: Because you were black.

Wilder: Yeah. We would stay with black families in different parts of the country, many of whom had made a practice of renting rooms to musicians or to people traveling. They were nice people. But some of the hotels were terrible: bed bugs and things like that. Just unbelievable. And it was usually difficult to get good food. I had problems with that. But there was a lot of camaraderie amongst the fellows in the band. They were quite friendly with each other.

Burstein: Did you feel you learned a lot? How long were you with the band? About a year?

Wilder: I was not with them a full year, because I left them and went with Lionel Hampton.

Burstein: How did that come about?

Wilder: Lionel Hampton's band, they were looking for someone to come into the band temporarily. The first trumpet player was Karl George. He was having – he was in the midst of getting a divorce in St. Louis. He had to go to St. Louis to take care of that. That was going to take two or three weeks, and they needed someone to replace him at that time. So I came. He was still there. He helped me with some of the things in the book. Then he left, and they decided that they would still – instead of replacing him, they would hire somebody else, and we would end up with four trumpets. He stayed for a while. So it was Karl George, Ernie Royal, Joe Newman, and me. We were the four trumpets in the band. So I was added, actually, but I did play a lot of the lead at that time. Not the high things. Ernie Royal was the king of that. That's how I ended up in that band. I'm not sure who recommended me, but it was because I was playing with Les Hite, and they figured I had some experience. So I was with him until I went into the Marine Corps. I went up in 1943. In April '43 I went into the Marine Corps. I stayed in the Marine Corps for three

years and came back and went back with Lionel Hampton. I stayed only a short time. Then I left them and joined Jimmie Lunceford's band.

Burstein: Let's take a break, because we've been talking for an hour.

Wilder: Oh really?

Burstein: Yeah, and I'll ask you about the Lionel Hampton band and the Marines when we resume.

So you joined Lionel Hampton's band. What was that like? What was playing in his band like?

Wilder: That was probably the most exciting band that I – probably one of the most exciting bands in the country, at that time. It was a really fascinating band. It had Illinois Jacquet. They had Dexter Gordon, Jack McVey, Ray Perry. I left out somebody, I'm sure. Maybe not. At any rate, it was a fantastic band. And Fred Beckett on lead trombone. Oh, and I left out Marshal Royal. I knew there was somebody I left out. He was the lead alto player. It was some band. Their arrangements were different than anything I had ever heard or played.

Burstein: Who was arranging then? Do you know?

Wilder: Milt Buckner was one of them. Jimmy Mundy.

Burstein: What was different about them? What made those arrangements . . . ?

Wilder: They were more modern than anything that – all the other bands stuck to a certain – they had certain routines in their arrangements that were somewhat similar. They didn't vary as much as this band did. This was a complete different approach to playing these things. There was so much excitement in it. I was really flattered to be a member of that band.

Burstein: Was it more harmonically, or rhythmically, or a combination of both?

Wilder: Both. A combination of both. Much more daring than the other bands had been. The other bands, by comparison, were very subdued. This was a very exciting band, and the guys were exciting too. They all had different styles. Illinois Jacquet and Dexter Gordon, they were exciting, but then you had Jack McVey playing baritone saxophone, who was as exciting on the baritone as Illinois and Dexter were on the tenors. Had Ray Perry playing third alto, and he played violin like most of the guys improvised playing on a wind instrument. I hear nothing about him these days, but he was fantastic. They had so – there was so much style in that band.

Burstein: Did you find you changed your own style to fit into the band?

Wilder: I think I did. In fact, I know I did. I had to, because, when I went in, I was playing some of the lead parts the way I had been playing in Les Hite's band, and Fred Beckett in particular would turn around and say, "What was that?" Literally made fun of it. Then I caught on to the style of their band, and it was a big help, but it took me a while to do it. I must say at that time I admired Lionel, but I didn't like the conditions that he created for the band. The band was treated like we were shackles or something. We were virtually in slavery, in a sense, because you were always being reminded that if you complained about something – and sometimes you would work so hard. We travel maybe two- or three-hundred miles and get to the town where we were going to play, and instead of just checking into the hotel, he'd call a rehearsal, which meant that now we go and rehearse, we're tired as we can be, we rehearse and then go play the job, and at the end of the job, he might play another 40 minutes or so overtime, for which none of us are going to be compensated. If you said anything about it, he was quick to remind you that, "Where else can you play? Don't forget. There's no place else for black musicians to play. If you don't like it here, I've got 500 other players who are waiting in line to play in this band." So you had that sort of a sword hanging over your head all the time. For me, it took a lot of the joy out of it. I loved the band and so forth, but I was very disappointed in that attitude. I must say that his wife didn't do anything to offset it. She, in fact, contributed as much if not more to that kind of an attitude – atmosphere. I find that I still feel it and resent it to this day, because it's been applied to other musicians, younger musicians who have come up and who have had to work under him, and there's no excuse for it, really is no excuse. He doesn't like – he tries to avoid paying the men what the jobs are worth. I always – it isn't funny, but I very often made a statement that if slavery were coming back, I'm sure he'd be one of the first idiots to vote for it. I shouldn't talk about that so much, because I just have no great affection for him, because of that.

Burstein: How long did you stay with the band?

Wilder: I was with the band – I must have been with them about six months before I went into the service. In April of '43 I went into the Marine Corps.

Burstein: It sounds like it must have been a difficult decision, because the band was the best band going at that point, but the conditions were such that you were miserable.

Wilder: Yeah. I didn't leave voluntarily. I was drafted. I had to go into the service. I was 1-A.

Burstein: You were drafted.

Wilder: Oh yeah. I was 1-A. The only thing about that was, after I was classified 1-A, I had been trying to avoid going in, period, by transferring the draft board from Philadelphia to California. We were in California. So they let me transfer it out there. But then, when I didn't go in out there, and we were back in Philadelphia, and they found out, they said, "Come down immediately." I went down. I was 1-A.

Burstein: You were 21 years old.

Wilder: Yes. Then it was – they did give me a choice of Army, Navy, or Marine Corps, which they had – they had just begun recruiting black Marines. They never had black Marines before. I was told that none of the outfits were accepting non-combatants. They weren't accepting musicians. They didn't need musicians. They needed people for combat. So I said, well, if that's the case, I might as well go into the Marine Corps. That's where they learn to fight, and that's it. That's how I ended up in the Marine Corps.

Burstein: Had your older brother gone in?

Wilder: No. My two younger brothers went in, and my father. My father was in the Navy.

Burstein: In World War II?

Wilder: Yeah. My father was in the Navy. My father had been in World War I by putting his age up, saying he was older than he was. He was 17 years old. Then he was in 1-A at the time of World War II, and having been in the Navy before, he said, rather than wait for them to draft him, he would sign up, because he had a better chance of getting what he wanted. He signed up.

Burstein: So he was in his early 40s then.

Wilder: Yes. So my father was in at the beginning. He was at the end of '42. My two younger brothers went in at the same time I went. They went into the Army. So we were all in the Service at the same time. They were overseas, my two younger brothers, in combat.

Burstein: How did your mom handle it?

Wilder: She went crazy. Stars all over the door. But we managed. We were lucky. All of us came back. None of us got shot. I wasn't in combat, to begin with. I became an assistant bandmaster at the Montford Point Marines camp in Camp Lejeune. So I was lucky enough to stay there during the whole time that the war was on.

Burstein: What kind of music did you play with the band?

Wilder: We had a dance band, in which I was not in charge of that. There was another sergeant in charge of that. I was a tech sergeant. I was in charge of the marching band.

Burstein: What was that like for you, to be playing in a marching band? Had you done that in high school? Or was this . . . ?

Wilder: Oh yeah. It was good. There was a lot of responsibility, because you played for special parades when they were giving people decorations and honors and things of that

type. You had to know – for instance, you had to know – we played the ruffles and flourishes. You played one for each star of the general's rank. [Wilder sings a phrase.] That would be one star. [He sings it again.] Two stars. [Again.] Three. [Again.] Four-star general. Or, if the President comes, you played four. But if you made a mistake, you were in trouble. You had to really remember these things, because that was part of your job.

Burstein: Who was three, who was four.

Wilder: Yeah, who was a brigadier general, a major general, a lieutenant general, or a four-star general, and you had to know their comparable ranks in Navy terms too.

Burstein: What was it like? You said they had just been enlisting black Marines.

Wilder: Oh yeah. That was the beginning. They were just beginning to enlist black Marines. My platoon brought the number of black Marines at Montford Point to ten hundred, the first thousand, which sounds like a big deal, but there were other guys who were the first 40. They're the ones that really caught the devil, because there was a great deal of resentment over having black Marines, period. They didn't want – the Marine Corps in general, and the Navy in particular, didn't want black Marines. They were making conditions really terrible for us down there. And we were in North Carolina, which was one of the seats of segregation at that time. It was very difficult.

Burstein: What kinds of things would happen?

Wilder: For instance, we had some fellows that went into town, in Jacksonville, North Carolina, the first guys that got liberty. They would go in – they went into town, and the police said, "There are no black Marines." They weren't as charitable about it as I'm being here. "There just are no black Marines. What are you doing with that uniform on?" They would insult them or threaten them, and so forth. The guys would challenge them, and they'd end up locking them up and bring them back – the MPs would have to get them and bring them back to the base. Then the commandant would explain, "This is the South, we have to try to make the best of it," and so forth. We got very little protection or sympathy from the hierarchy of the military there. It was really rough, because on our base – all the black Marines were stationed at Montford Point, which some of the more antagonistic Marines from the other base nicknamed Monkey Point. We had very little support. We did have some, to which I'll call your attention. But when we went to the theaters – in the theater, we had to sit in the back of the theater, on the black base. All the white Marine personnel were given priority over us. Even a PFC had authority over any of the black Marines, no matter what his rank. All this went on. It caused tremendous dissention. And we had no officers at that time. We had no black officers. When I finished my third year there, we had one fellow who had gone to OCS, and he was the first black officer to get a commission. He was given the opportunity, the choice of either signing up for another four years or leaving. He chose to leave, but he was the first commissioned black officer. You have many of them now, fortunately.

But the conditions were really rough. We had some fellows who went, for instance, to Ohio, and met the same thing. They were – we were all proud. We were in a Marine uniform. Go home, you have the uniform on, and they were challenged by Army MPs. "What the so-and-so are you doing with that Marine uniform on?" The guy would say, "I'm a Marine." "Get a load of this." They would harass the guy. Of course, some of the fellows rebelled against it. One guy from Ohio spent his whole – I think he had two weeks of furlough or something, and he spent the two weeks in jail. They sent him back to the base after that. They said he had created a disturbance. These were the kind of things that we had to contend with, a great deal of that.

But then we had officers – I don't know if you're familiar with Bobby Troup, who wrote *Route 66*. He was my Captain. We had Lieutenant Allico, Allen Luther, and officers like this, and many others, including some of the colonels and majors, who did everything they could to eliminate the discrimination on the base, and they themselves were taken to task and given a rough time for doing what they were trying to do. But nonetheless, they did fight, and conditions today, that have become much better, began with their efforts at that time. Some of them were really badly treated because of their efforts to try to make conditions better, Bobby Troup in particular. I remember his first wife, Cynthia. I think she was within two months of giving birth to their first baby. He had been – he and his wife had been doing everything to eliminate the discrimination, saying, "These fellows should not have to sit in the back of the theater. It is the black base. Why don't we treat them all alike," and so on. We had a very fine baseball team there, with Dan Bankhead, who went with the Dodgers. Buddy Young was down there, the football player. They began breaking up our sports teams. On the headquarters base, they had guys from the Red Sox, the Yankees, and they kept them together as a team, because it was a morale booster. On our base, we had these tremendous ball players, and they kept breaking up our teams, because they were winning everything. They weren't a part of the Navy league. They were just considered – all their games were called exhibition games, so they wouldn't be a part of the regular athletic groups there. But then they began taking guys off the teams and sending them out with guard companies, sending them overseas with depot companies, and things like that. Bobby Troup and Al Luther and Tony Allico and these people got together and said – went to the commandant and said, "You're breaking up our teams. We don't – it's bad for the morale. We'd like to keep the fellows with them." The general said, "You want to keep your boys with you?" They said, "Yeah, we'd like to." He said, "I can't help you keep your boys with you, but I'll help keep you with your boys," and they sent them overseas. Sent them overseas in combat. That was the kind of pressure, the kind of thing you had to live under. It was very sad.

Burstein: You said when you went in, they weren't hiring any musicians – they weren't hiring. Hiring's not the right word. They weren't bringing in any musicians, but then you got to . . . .

Wilder: It was a while. When I first went in, I was in special weapons. We were all taking combat training at that time. Then, actually, it was Bobby Troup who began putting pressure. He said, "You got a guy here who's played with" this band and that

band, and "he's over there in a BAR outfit" or something. "Why don't we put him in the band?" So they transferred me finally to the band.

Burstein: What was the band like?

Wilder: The band was pretty good. It was good. We didn't have any name players. They were good players. Many of them were from the black colleges in the South. They were good players. We had a good band, really had a very good band.

Burstein: You didn't go overseas.

Wilder: No. I stayed there the whole time.

Burstein: What did your father do in the Army? What was he . . . . ?

Wilder: He was in the Navy. He was in a Navy band out at Pasco, Washington.

Burstein: Ah, so he was in a band there.

Wilder: First he was at Great Lakes. He was a first-class musician out there.

Burstein: And then your two brothers did see combat.

Wilder: My two brothers, they were in the Army overseas, Italy, France, and Germany.

Burstein: Did your older brother continue to play?

Wilder: He continued to play.

Burstein: He was a bass player.

Wilder: He was a bass player, yeah. He didn't go in. He was the only one that didn't.

Burstein: Was he a professional musician?

Wilder: My brother? Oh yeah. He was a – he played with Damita Jo, the singer. He was with her. He used to sing with her too. And he played with some other trios. But he died many years ago.

Burstein: I read that you two were very close when you were growing up.

Wilder: Oh we were. He was a good buddy of mine. I often think about him these days and think Jesus, if he had lived to see some of the things that I got involved with, I'm sure he would have been involved in some of them. How much fun it would have been to share it with him.

Burstein: Is your dad still playing music?

Wilder: He doesn't now. In 1988 or '89 – I think it was the beginning of '89 – I had a letter from my father. He said – he always called me Joseph – "Joseph, as of this date, I am no longer playing any more music." I will play no more music. I've had enough music. He named whatever number of years he had been playing. He said, I think that's enough.

Burstein: He just made that decision.

Wilder: Yeah. That was it. He was almost 90 years old, but he made it. He finally made it.

Burstein: Wow. He sounds like quite a character.

Wilder: He is. You'd be surprised. When you see him, you would not believe that he's 91 years old. You just wouldn't believe it. Very alert. He's always studying something. He said, "As long as I study, my mind keeps going." He took a course in mathematics from – a correspondence course from the University of Chicago. He took a course in sociology. He was just taking a course in English from the University of Pennsylvania, a correspondence course. He said – he called me. He says, "I did very well on the test."

Burstein: Was he proud of you? Was he glad that you'd become a musician?

Wilder: Oh yeah.

Burstein: Once you got out of the Army [*sic*: Marines], you went back to Lionel Hampton's band.

Wilder: I went back to Lionel Hampton. My temperament, I think, had changed considerably then. I didn't stay very long. I hadn't forgotten some of the things that I found offensive when I went into the service, and it seems that they had gotten a little bit worse when I came out. I didn't stay long.

Burstein: Had the group – had the personnel changed a lot too, because of the war?

Wilder: Yes, quite a bit. But it was still – he still had a good band.

Burstein: What was the difference in terms of repertoire between Les Hite's band and Lionel Hampton's band? Was it the same tunes, just different arrangements?

Wilder: No. Les Hite's band, we played more commercial music, like the kind of thing – not Lester Lanin type, but it would be more in that category than in a strictly jazz category, although the band played – we played a lot of jazz things that were really swinging things, but most of it was geared to the Midwest, where we played dances and things like that. And we played mostly for white audiences. Just a few times that we

played for black dances. They were very rare. The only time we played generally for black audiences with Les Hite was in theaters. We played the black theaters.

Burstein: What was that like, to be in a black band and have to stay in black homes, because you couldn't stay in the hotels, and play for white audiences?

Wilder: It was – we were aware of it, and there was in many ways a lot of resentment over the fact that we couldn't stay in the hotels. That bothered us. But it was a way of life at that time, and after all the other bands had experienced it, you didn't look forward to finding anything different. So it wasn't necessarily accepted, but that's the way it was, and you couldn't do anything about it. And most of the people with whom we stayed were very cordial. They were very nice. They were very happy to have us stay, because most of the fellows were so nice and were clean-cut people too.

Burstein: It's too bad they never got a chance to come hear you play.

Wilder: That's true too. That's true.

Burstein: Did you ever play for integrated audiences? Or was it usually in a black theater or a white theater?

Wilder: No. For the most part, it seemed – with Lionel Hampton, we did play for some integrated audiences, when we were in the North. In the South, we didn't, though. In the South, they made – the police made sure that they enforced the segregation things down there.

Burstein: Was there a great difference in playing in a theater and playing for a dance, in terms of the feeling of the band and how you play?

Wilder: Yeah, it's different. When you're playing in theater, it's more like doing a concert, basically. You play for the performers too. The orchestra would generally be either behind the scrim or back further on the stage.

Burstein: What other kind of performers would there be? What other performers would be in the theater show?

Wilder: You'd have comedians and singers and people like that – and dancers – that would be in the – it's like a regular vaudeville theater. You would be playing accompaniment music for them, and then there was always a spot in which they featured the orchestra. At that point – they had rollers under the bandstand, and they would pull the orchestra up closer to the front of the stage. The curtain would close behind you. Then you perform for the audience as a band.

Burstein: It sounds like a real show.

Wilder: It was. It was really good.

Burstein: What kinds of uniforms – did you have uniforms?

Wilder: Oh, we had uniforms, yeah. Each band tried to outdo the other. Every band had its own distinctive style. Cab's band, they wore tails. They were very classy. Duke, same thing. Real class. John Kirby's band, they wore white tails, black tails, and so forth. Some of the other bands had suits. They'd wear different suits. Everybody got the same ties and shirts and all.

Burstein: How about for Les Hite's band? What did you wear for that?

Wilder: In Les Hite's band, we had beige, dinner-jacket lapels on the jackets, royal blue trousers, and black shoes. We had royal blue trousers, these beige jackets, the black bow ties and tuxedo shirts. It was very classy looking.

Burstein: Very classy.

Wilder: Yeah, very classy.

Burstein: And in Lionel Hampton's band?

Wilder: In Lionel's band, I think – I'm trying to remember. We wore – we had uniforms. We had more than one, too, as a matter of fact. I'm not sure whether we just wore suits that were light. Somewhere at home I have a picture of the band. I can't remember.

Burstein: That's all right.

Wilder: I know we had uniforms. Every band had uniforms.

Burstein: And it sounds like it was a matter of pride to each band, that this was a . . . .

Wilder: Oh yeah. No sloppy looking bands. In fact, that's one of the things in the black community – when people went to see the band, that's one of the things they wanted to see, to see how the guys dress. It was very interesting.

Burstein: When you left Lionel Hampton's band, did you know what you were going to do next? Or did you just go? You said this was enough.

Wilder: No, I just left. I felt – in a way, I did it – I left that way, because I didn't think it would be right if I only left because I had something else to go to right away, because I was somewhat angry at the time I left. I just felt, I'll just leave and take my chances with whatever else comes up. That's what I did.

Burstein: Did you go back to Philadelphia?

Wilder: Yeah, but for a short time. Then I joined Jimmie Lunceford's band. I joined Jimmie's band there.

Burstein: How did that come about?

Wilder: One of my friends was in the band, Renauld Jones, who later played with the Basie band – played with a lot of bands. Jonesy recommended me. Jimmie had heard of – he knew of me. So he said he'd like for me to play lead in the band, and he hired me.

Burstein: What was that band like?

Wilder: That was a good band. It was in the process of rebuilding at that time, because prior to my going into the service, I think it was at that point that most of the guys had left. They were beginning to leave Jimmie's band: Trummy Young, Snooky Young, Gerald Wilson, Willie Smith, and all of them. They left the band. Willie went with – who did he go with? I think with Harry James. But they all left and went with other bands. Sy Oliver left and started writing for Tommy Dorsey. So Jimmie was in the process of rebuilding his band. It was almost – it was coming up pretty good. It was getting strong again and getting the style developed again. Then Jimmie of course had a heart attack, and we lost him.

Burstein: Were you playing with the band then?

Wilder: I was with them at the time he died, yeah. He was an awfully nice man, a very bright man, very dignified, well educated, and the epitome of what a leader should be. I had great, great respect for him.

Burstein: Why the epitome? What was he like as a leader? What made him such a great leader?

Wilder: He was a fine disciplinarian, very racially conscious. He knew that the black image was not considered a great image in the country at the time. He was always aware of that and would always call it to the attention of the guys in the band. If we don't get drunk, if we don't come staggering on the bandstand, and when we go to a hotel, we don't create a disturbance, and we deport ourselves in a way that people want us to come back, and things of that type. He wasn't doing it in a subservient way. He just knew that it was important. If anybody came on the bandstand, for instance, and he felt the guy was drunk or intoxicated, he'd say, "This one you're doing for the band." In other words, he would dock him a night's salary. He would hold the money in escrow, in an escrow account, and at the end of a couple months, whatever monies he had accumulated, he would take and throw a party for the band. He said, "This party" – he said, "Don't thank me for the party." So-and-so "you remember, he was drunk on" this night, and so-and-so "didn't show up on the bus when he was supposed to, and" so-and-so "came late," and so forth. He said, "That's where the money came from." He'd do things like that. He'd say, for instance, "the bus leaves" or "the train leaves at 8 am. That doesn't mean show up at 8:15 or 8:05. It leaves at 8 am. I don't care how you get there. Just be at the job. We start

tonight." He did that to many of the guys that were very tardy. They'd get there. The bus was gone. The bus would be – they could see it sometimes, two blocks down the road, and they were just arriving. So they'd have to go pay their own transportation and get there whatever way they could.

Burstein: I'm sure you never were like that. It sounds like . . .

Wilder: No, I was lucky.

Burstein: . . . punctuality was drilled into you.

Wilder: It had been drilled into me by my father, and I still think – I still feel that way.

Burstein: What was it like in the band when Jimmie Lunceford died? That must have been . . . .

Wilder: It was very sad. It was such a sad thing. We were – first of all, we had had a very disgusting experience the night before. We were in Seaside – he died in Seaside. We were in Portland, Oregon. We went into a restaurant. We were playing in a ballroom directly across from this restaurant. This was supposed to be a very nice restaurant. So, on our break, we decided we'd go over and have some pastry or something, coffee, whatever. We went over, and the woman who owned the restaurant wouldn't serve us in the restaurant. We sat there. We didn't realize that she wouldn't – why she wasn't serving us. So finally we said, "Can we get some service?" or something, and she just said, "No." Somebody said, "Isn't this state – aren't they supposed to serve anybody?" One of the other patrons said, "Yes, they are." So we said, "We'll just sit here." She went to the phone and called the cops, and said that she had a bunch of blacks in there who were causing a disturbance. The cops came swarming in the place. Before they could react or subject us to any more indignity, some of the other patrons, the other customers in the restaurant said, "Those fellows haven't done a thing. They just came in and asked to be served." At that point, somebody in the band asked, "Aren't they supposed to serve us in this restaurant – in this state?" The cop said, "Yes." The woman said, "I'm not serving them." He said, "If you're not going to serve them, you have to be closed." So she went over to the window – to the door and pulled the curtain down, and said, "Closed." She didn't serve us.

That was the night before. The next day we were in Seaside, Oregon, a resort town. We went to this – we were actually walking along the boardwalk or whatever it was there. A fellow came over and asked Jimmie – we were going to have a rehearsal. That's what it was – he asked Jimmie if he would mind autographing some albums that they had at the record shop for some people. So Jimmie said okay. He went over there. He was busy autographing these albums – records – and all of a sudden he just spun around and fell. They didn't know what it was. They got an ambulance. There was no hospital in that – in Seaside there. They took – they had to take him to Portland. He died. He died immediately.

We didn't know that he had died. That night we were going to play the dance. The people running the dance hall hired our valet, or tried to, and told him they would give him $50 or $25 or something to stand outside, and if he saw any black couples coming, to tell them that, "If I were you, I wouldn't go in there, because they're not going to treat you right," or something. They told him what to say, and he's supposed to address these people as a friend. He came in and told us what they wanted him to do. So I said, "Why should we play? Why don't we just forget about it?" I said, "In fact," I said, "I won't play." So nobody played over the first – about the first half hour, or for that hour or so, I just refused to play. I was the first trumpet player. We couldn't play without me. Finally, Eddie Rosenburg, who was the manager, came back. He had gone with Jimmie to the hospital. But he didn't tell us that Jimmie had died, you see. He said, "When Jimmie comes back, he – naturally, he wouldn't play, if he knew the circumstances. But if we don't play, then the contract becomes null and void. So why don't we just play, so that we fulfill our obligations?" At that point, I said, okay, and we played. It was at the intermission that he told us that Jimmie had died.

It was a very sad thing. They tried to keep the band together, but it didn't – we came back to New York, and we played a few dates on our way back that had been booked, but it wasn't the same.

Burstein: Who was leading the band?

Wilder: Joe Thomas and Earl Carruthers – no, Joe Thomas and Ed Wilcox, the pianist. The two of them were – became co-leaders of the band. It didn't last very long. Then I left them and went with – I think that was when I – I came back, and I went back to Philly again.

Burstein: Is that when you – here I've got Lucky Millinder, or maybe it was Sam Donahue?

Wilder: I joined Herbie Fields's band. Then I left them and went with Sam Donahue, and played with Sam just a short time. Then I joined Lucky Millinder's band.

Burstein: In Sam Donahue's band, were there any other blacks in that band?

Wilder: No, I was the only black musician in Sam's band, and I was the only one in Herbie's band too. I was in there with Frank Rosolino. He was a good friend, Frank, a lot of fun. And Rudy Cafaro.

Burstein: What was that like, to have gone from all black bands to – or to bands that had . . . ?

Wilder: I wasn't – I was not made aware of it by the fellows in the band or myself, but sometimes, the audience, you would hear – you would realize it, because somebody in the audience would say something, unfortunately, mostly something derogatory, and that would – it would remind you, uh oh, this is an integrated band. I wasn't – Herbie's band

was a small group: one trumpet, he playing alto, Frank playing trombone, and a rhythm section. We also had a guitar player. Rudy Cafaro was a guitar player. It was a nice little group. We played things like *Dardanelle,* that Herbie was famous for.

But Sam Donahue's band, I loved that band, because he was a Jimmie Lunceford fan. It was the funniest thing. I joined his band. It was like throwing a rabbit in a briar patch. Everything they played, I had been playing with Jimmie Lunceford's band. I came – I went in the band and took Doc Severinson's place. I just replaced him in the chair, not as a player, because I wasn't – he's far superior at what he was doing. But I did work with them, and I enjoyed it, because Sam was wonderful, and the guys in the band, they were just great. But we had some problems. We went to – we were up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We got there – the bus got there so early that – we weren't going to stay overnight. So we went to a pool hall, trying to kill time until it was time to go play the dance. I don't even shoot pool. I'm not a pool shooter. But I was there. So we all tried. In the meantime, while we're at the pool table, a black fellow who had been sweeping the floor came over and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "The manager said that he doesn't want you playing pool in here." I said, "Why not? This is a pool table. We're all together." He said, "Yeah, but he doesn't want you to play pool in here." I ignored him, and we kept playing. Finally the guy came over and said, "Hey, you want to play pool? You go up and" – he named the black section and some street in particular. "You go up to" Smith Street or whatever "if you want to shoot pool. You don't shoot pool in here." So we all packed up and left.

We had a couple of experiences like that. But in general, the band – as far as the band was concerned, the guys were just great. We went to Washington. That was when I joined the band. That was hysterical. We played at a place called the Cavacas Club in Washington, D.C. This place was famous for its cheeseburgers – pepperburgers: a hamburger with green peppers and everything, and onions on it. Very famous for this. So I went to the place. Again, like my father telling me to show up early, I got there early. I'm there almost two hours before the band was due. I didn't realize it. I walked in. All the people are sitting at the bar. Every head – they all turned around and looked at me. Who in the world is this guy? I'm the only black person in the place. So I went over. The guy beckoned me. "Hey. Come here. Who are you?" I said, "I'm one of the fellows in Sam Donahue's band." He said, "Yeah?" And I said, "Yeah." Now, I could see the wheels going. Is this a black band that's coming in here?, because we were going to play in this club. He said, "I'll tell you what." He said, "There's a band room back there in the back." He said, "You go back there. You stay in there until the rest of them get here." I said okay. I went back in the back, took out the horn, and started practicing.

Finally, the band came in. We went on stage – on the stand, and we started playing. When we took intermission, they had a roving photographer. So the guys went – now they want to get pictures of the band, each section. They went to this photographer and asked her if she'd take a picture of the trumpet section while we're playing. She said, "Yeah, okay." She took a picture of the trumpet section. She got – we were holding our horns up – she got it so the bell is – the bells of the horns conceal our faces. All you could see is from here up, and the bells. Our mouths, our faces, completely covered. Then the

one picture that she took where you could see the whole band, nothing was in focus, absolutely – and this woman was making a living walking around taking pictures. She didn't want to do it. She just didn't want to do it.

And when we went – oh, we went to the counter to get these pepperburgers, we're all sitting up on the counter at the bar. Guys said, "I'd like a pepperburger." "Yeah, I'll have a pepperburger," and so on. I said, "Yeah, I'll have a pepperburger." This guy looked down. He said, "Hey, now you know we're not going to" – he said, "You know we ain't going to serve you anything in here. You want a pepperburger? You want to eat something?" He said, "You go over to 7th and T," I think it is, in the black section. He said, "You know we ain't going to serve you nothing."

This was – and it was worse for the guys in the band than for me, because they were so hurt by it. I mean, not that I wasn't aggravated. I wouldn't pretend that I wasn't. It was just – it was infuriating, but it was still worse for them, because these fellows, they had never – they might have known about discrimination, but they had never been confronted with it, face to face, especially with someone whom they were fond of. It was just – it was rough thing, very rough.

But the band, again, was a good band, and the guys in the band, they were just great. In fact, the Faffley brothers, who live up in Westchester – I hear from Don and Bill Faffley every Christmas, and Bill and his wife, who's a nurse, I hear from them all the time, all these years.

Burstein: What was Sam Donahue like as a leader?

Wilder: Sam was great. He was one – he was probably the most amiable bandleader anywhere. First of all, he played – he was a fine musician. He wrote well. Played tenor. He played trumpet. He loved all the guys. He loved the guys, and he was one of the boys. It was just great. Such a nice guy. I think about some of those things, how lucky I have been to have been in the company of these guys, people like that.

Burstein: After Sam Donahue's band, you joined Lucky Millinder's band?

Wilder: Lucky Millinder, yeah.

Burstein: What was that like?

Wilder: Lucky's band was nice. He had an interesting band too. Lucky was a very innovative bandleader. He would try anything, anything that was different. His band was different than any of the other bands I had played with, again, not as daring as Lionel Hampton, but he would attempt things that other guys, other bands just seemed not to bother with. He also was very adept at hiring good players. He didn't mind spending a little extra money to get a better player, if he thought he could.

I used to be – when I was in the band for a time, I was the straw boss. I used to rehearse the band for him. He didn't read music, incidentally. He had tremendous ears, but he wasn't a musician – Lucky wasn't.

Burstein: How did he get into all that?

Wilder: He had been a dancer in Chicago and worked in clubs there, and I guess a singer too, probably. From that experience he became a bandleader. Someone must have selected him to front the Mills Blue Rhythm Band, which is what Lucky Millinder's band was originally. They had people like Red Allen, Billy Kyle, and people like that in the band.

He had a very fine band, a swinging band. It's a shame that there are no recordings of that particular band, or any of those bands during that era that he had, because he had fine players in his band. It was a good band. Fine singer. He had Bullmoose Jackson. Ernestine Allen was in – they were in the band as vocalists.

Burstein: What kind of chances did he take with the music? What kind of risks did he like to take in terms of . . . ?

Wilder: They weren't – he had some arrangers. It's too bad I can't remember – well, Andy Gibson was one. He wrote, I think, "I love you. Yes I do." Those things like that. What? – *The Hucklebuck.* I think he wrote *The Hucklebuck.* He had written a lot of other nice things too, but that one became a big hit.

He had arrangements like that. Then he had another fellow whose name I can't remember. He had a Muslim name. He had changed and joined the Muslims. He was a very creative writer. He wrote some very difficult things.

And he had other – he had two or three white arrangers that were with the band, that wrote for him. And beautiful ballad things we had, really tremendous things that nobody else had. It was so different. That was a good band to play in.

Burstein: Do you think it was the arranger who made the feeling of a band? Or the leader? Or was it a combination of the two? It was the leader . . . .

Wilder: It was a combination of three things: the leader, the arrangers, and the players, their concept and their interpretation of the music. It had a great deal to do with it. While I was with Lucky, there was a club up in the Bronx. I think it was called the 845, something like that. I think that's what – 845, something. I may not be right about the name of it. But they – he convinced these people that he could come in with two different bands. He'd come in with a regular dance band, and he – it was a large Latin population there – and he'd come in with a Latin band. So the guy said, "That's great. Let's have two bands." So Lucky splits up the band. I became the leader of the Latin band, just a small group of players. We played all Latin music, had arrangements and things for them. We wore ruffled shirts and tuxedo pants. Had these real ruffled shirts. We played all the

Spanish music. This went along pretty well for about two weeks. Hispanic people started inviting their bandleader – the bandleader of the Spanish band, who was me – my name was José Wildez: W-i-l-d-e-z. This is Lucky's creation. They would come up. They would be talking to me in Spanish. I don't speak a word of Spanish, or certainly didn't then. Finally, the people began to get a little annoyed with this band- – with this Spanish bandleader who doesn't speak Spanish. They were inviting me to parties and things like that, which I would never show up. Finally, it became a sore spot, and the guy took Lucky to task. So he had to lose – he lost the job.

Burstein: So you would just smile and nod as these people would talk to you.

Wilder: That was just about what we would do. Oh, funny.

Burstein: Had you played this kind of music before? Was this all . . . ?

Wilder: It wasn't really that new. When you're playing in a band – we used to play some Latin music anyway. Not as much as we played on this occasion, but we played some.

Burstein: How did he get his nickname, Lucky Millinder?

Wilder: It's my understanding that he had had some really close scrapes on many occasions, and he always managed to come out smelling like a rose. Somebody said, "He's lucky," and that name stuck with him.

I also understand that when he was a youngster, he used to run errands for Al Capone in Chicago. Somebody who was related to him knew Capone very well, I think. He got involved with that. In fact, he used to – I think he admired Al Capone, because he used to wear a fedora, and remember – you've seen some pictures of Capone. He had the hat sort of swirled on – swiveled – bent up on one side. He used to wear his that way. He was a nice man, Lucky.

Burstein: What was he like as a leader? I guess he was able – he took chances and . . . .

Wilder: He was okay. As a leader he was all right, except that you had to watch him with the money. He'd get paid, and he was always pulling stunts. He was trying to swindle the guys out of some money. You played in the theater – in the vaudeville theaters, you played four shows a day, and usually, in the theater, you were there seven days. It wasn't a five- or six-day week. Seven days. So you'd play 28 shows.

Burstein: How long would a show be?

Wilder: They would be about an hour, and you played four shows a day, unless you were with somebody like the Ink Spots, who were so tremendously popular. Then you might do six or seven shows a day. So each time you came off the stage, the half hour would already be in. So you had 30 minutes before you went back on again. In the meantime,

they would maybe show a couple cartoons instead of a full feature film. They'd get those people out and bring in more. It went that way.

We were in Louisville, Kentucky, I think. We played – this week, we had done about six or seven shows each day. You could play – I think you were allowed to play 28 shows or 30 shows during a week, because they allow an extra show on Saturday and Sunday.

Burstein: This is union rules.

Wilder: That was for scale. But after that, anything over that was an extra show. Lucky was trying to avoid paying some of the guys for the extra shows, and there were a considerable number. I told somebody in the band that they should get paid for the extra shows. They said, what extra shows? I explained to them how many they had done. He said, "Lucky didn't say anything about it." I said, "Don't tell him I told you." You are entitled to this number of extra shows. One guy went, and he got into an argument with Lucky about it. Lucky said, "The rule is, an unlimited number of shows in this theater, in this jurisdiction." He had a union delegate there, a black union delegate, who backed him up on this, because he'd paid the guy something under the table. This individual said, "That's funny. Joe Wilder told me that we have . . . ." The next thing I know, Lucky is beckoning me to his room. I went to his room. He said, "Look, Fess" – he called everybody Fess. He said, "Do I owe you any money?" I said, "No." He said, "When I pay you, I pay you for what you do here." He said, "It's not your responsibility to go and tell the other guys how many shows or whatever." He said, "That's not your business." I said, "Lucky, you're cheating the guys out of the money." He said, "That's not your business." And of course he was right. He was frank. I thought I was helping someone and never expected him to invoke my name in it. But then he did, and that was that.

Burstein: When did you join the union? Did you join when you joined Les Hite's band? Or even earlier?

Wilder: Oh, no. I had been in the union. My father put me in when I was a kid.

Burstein: Really? Because he was in the union, I guess.

Wilder: My father was already – he was a charter member of the union in Philadelphia.

Burstein: A charter member.

Wilder: Yeah. It was – I think 274 was the number. They had two separate locals in Philadelphia, a white local and a black local. He put me in. I guess I must have been 15 or 16 years old.

Burstein: Did it help? Did the union help in any ways? Like in a situation like this.

Wilder: Not really, no. It might have helped me in Philadelphia, in that I could play in some of the places I played in with those bands, and I didn't have a problem. But as far as helping you get work or anything like that, I've never known them to do that.

Burstein: Do you remember what scale was for your various jobs, like with Les Hite?

Wilder: In Philadelphia, I think it was – when I was coming in, when I first started, it was $3 or $4 a night. We're talking playing four hours, three or four hours a night. I remember one time creating some real disturbance in one band. We were all driving. They had three cars to transport Jimmy Gorham's band someplace, the local band. We were all going to this dance hall. In one car, the car I was in, somebody said, "Oh, by the way, how much does this job pay?" They got – three answers came up simultaneously, and they were different. That was it. The guy said, "Oh, so that's what the job is paying." They took the highest amount. During the intermission, the treasurer of this particular club that had given this dance, saw one of the guys in the band and thought he was the bandleader, and said, "I have the money, Mr. Gorham," and went off with him and gave him the money. He came back and divided it equally among all the players. This is the absolute truth. I was about 15, 16 years old – about 16 years old. He divided the money. The bandleader was livid. He was livid. I guess, after that, he let them wait until they got to wherever they got to before he told them what they were paying. But it was funny.

Burstein: So a lot of things were pulled on musicians in terms of . . . .

Wilder: Oh yeah. During that era, it was not unusual. You'd play a dance, a four-hour dance, and just near the end of the four hours, the president or somebody connected with the club that had sponsored the dance would come up and say, "Fellows, I have bad news." We'd say, "What is the bad news?" He'd say, "The treasurer ran off with all the money. We can't pay you guys." You're playing, and the place is packed with people. They've absconded with the money. Not really, but that was the way they could get out of paying the band.

Burstein: What was it like when you were on the road? Did you get paid weekly?

Wilder: Yeah, we used to get paid weekly.

Burstein: Did you have to take expenses out of that, like hotel and . . . ?

Wilder: Yes, we did. For instance, in Lionel Hampton's band, they didn't pay your hotel. You paid your own hotel, which was another thing that was rough. I remember, when I was with that band, when I had joined and we went to California – I'm just trying to think. There was a point I wanted to make about this trip to California. Oh, we went out, and we didn't realize – we hadn't expected to go to California. We were in Chicago, and we were to work our way from Chicago, playing one-nighters all the way to California. A number of us had accumulated some money. So we decided we're going to work our way to California. When we get there, we'll have a lot of money anyway. So we took some of the money that we had accumulated and started buying suits and shoes and things like

that. All of a sudden Lionel's wife decided that she didn't want to stay in Chicago and she didn't want to work playing one-nighters all the way to California. We would just leave, tomorrow, and go to California on the train. So that's what we did. We got – they called us in the rooms and said we leave, and we're going to California, tomorrow. We went to California. I got off the train with Wendell Marshall, Jimmy Blanton's cousin – first cousin. He was my roommate. We had never been to California. Didn't know anybody there. We didn't know where Lionel Hampton lived. There was nobody there to meet us at the train. The fellows who live in California, they just went home when they got off the train. The rest of us, who had never been there, we were left in the train station. We asked a redcap where Lionel Hampton lived, and through him we got in touch with Lionel Hampton's wife. She told us to get a cab and come up to the house. We went up there. She gave us some monies, like $20 or something, so we could go get a room and stay in somebody's house.

While – I was making $11 a night with this big band, traveling all over the country. I said – I found out somebody else – most of the guys were getting $15. So I went to Lionel. I said, "I'd like to get $15 like everybody else." He said, "I think the best thing for you to do is go talk to Mrs. Hampton about it." I said okay. I went to her, and she said, "Look, honey, the best thing for you to do, you go talk to Mr. Glaser. Talk to Joe Glaser. He's the manager of the band." So I said okay. With my little Philadelphia training, I get on the phone, and I call up. I don't go to his office. I made an appointment, called up and asked when I could come to his office. "You come over here about two o'clock tomorrow." "Okay." I went to the office. When I walked in, I told the secretary who I was. She sent me in. He said, "Yeah, what do you want?" I said, "My name is Joe Wilder, and Mrs. Hampton told me to come speak to you." He said, "What about?" I said, "About a raise." He said, "Oh, you're the guy. Who in the H do you think you are?" I looked at him and said, "Who in the H do you think you are?" Here I'm like 19, 20 years old. Come on. 21. And that's the way he spoke to me. I told him – I still told him what I wanted. He said, "I don't know what we can do about it. Nothing we can do about it." I said, "If I don't get it, I leave tonight. I'm going back home. I won't stay." Sure enough, when I got to the job, I told Lionel. I said, "Do I get the $15 or don't I?" He said, "Okay. You'll get the 15." But I was going to leave. I was just going to walk away. $11 a night, at a time when every hall we played in was packed to capacity.

Burstein: Did you ever record with any of these bands?

Wilder: With Lionel?

Burstein: Yeah.

Wilder: I recorded something. Someone recently told me about it – played something that I – sent me a copy, a cassette or something, with the thing. I did something, one record date with him. In California we did it.

Burstein: It looks like we're out of tape. So let's take another break.

I read that also in the ‘’40s you played with Dizzy Gillespie.

Wilder: Oh yeah. I played with Dizzy after I was with Lucky Millinder, I think. I think that’s the way it was.

Burstein: How did you get into his band?

Wilder: I knew Dizzy.

Burstein: That’s right, because you played with him.

Wilder: I knew Dizzy. I don’t remember. Somebody left the band, and I went in in his place, at Dizzy’s bidding, a good friend of mine. That was an exciting band.

Burstein: What was going on in the band at that time?

Wilder: It was different. Again, they were as different during that era as Lionel Hampton was when he first came in. Dizzy’s band, they went in for – they started a style that had not been heard of before, a lot of very hard music, a lot of very intricate music, and of course it had to swing, because it was Dizzy. That’s what it was. It was a very sharp, hard-hitting band with a lot of swinging things and very creative ideas, different than any other band around at the time.

Burstein: What were the pieces you were playing? Can you remember the repertoire at that time?

Wilder: I’ll tell you. When I went into the band, he had Chano Pozo, who was the conga drummer and bongo drummer. From what I read about him – there was an article in a *Life* magazine that said that he was one of the most celebrated musicians in Cuba at that time. He had had some altercation with some gangsters or something, and I think he got shot either three or four times, and survived each time. That’s why he ended up coming here. He was a composer. I think the altercation was over the royalties or something for music that he had written. He was in the band. Of course he brought with it the Cuban rhythmic things, that Latin influence. That, combined with Dizzy’s jazz ideas and a lot of things that were written by Walter Fuller, that’s what really developed the style of that band. It was an exciting band. It required a lot more technique than a lot of the other bands that had been around.

Burstein: Technique because the music was more demanding?

Wilder: Because the music was different and very hard, and enjoyable once you heard it together. It took a lot of work to get it to the point where we played cleanly, but it was an exciting band.

Burstein: Would you spend a lot of time practicing on your own, or was it mostly the practicing in the band that you would do?

Wilder: I used to practice on my own. I had to. In fact, a lot of things that Dizzy had in that band cause you to go home and practice anyway, because it was so different from anything else you had played.

Burstein: What was it like to change styles like that, to go from one band to another?

Wilder: It wasn't that difficult. You enjoyed it, because it took away the monotony of playing the same style all the time, and it was a challenge to see if you could adapt to that style. Since we were all younger at that time, you had that flexibility of adapting. It worked out pretty well. It was also good, because sometimes you could – for instance, when I went to the American Broadcasting Company, we used to play different styles. We'd imitate different bands. You could remember how they played. You could play that style from your own experience.

Burstein: Who else was in the band at that point, when you joined Dizzy's band?

Wilder: With Dizzy?

Burstein: Yeah.

Wilder: Dave Burns was in the trumpet section, Lammar Wright, Jr., Ike – I can't think of his last name. There were several people who came. Elmon Wright was in the band at one time. Al McKibbon, the bass player, was with him. Who played piano? I'm trying to remember.

Burstein: What was Dizzy like?

Wilder: Howard Johnson was playing alto with him. It's funny that I can't remember everybody that was in. But they had a bunch of fine players.

Burstein: What was Dizzy like as a leader?

Wilder: He was great. Dizzy was great. He had a lot – Dizzy was always – he was the entertainer. He was – he never lost his humor. He always had a great sense of humor. At one point he criticized the brass section in general, because we were just doing nothing. There was no life in the band. All we were doing was standing in the background, playing the parts. Lammar Wright and I, and Elmon, we decided, maybe we better put some life in the band. They had one of these carts for hauling trunks and things, in the back. We got this – the guys that worked in the Apollo were doing skits all the time. So they had a policeman's cap and a jacket. I got the policeman's cap and the jacket and a club. I come out wheeling – come across the stage while Dizzy's out front singing and dancing – wheeling Lammar, or Elmon, across the stage on this hand truck. We'd stay on the other side for a few minutes. Then we'd come back, and he would be wheeling me out. He's got the policeman's hat on and the club, and he's holding me Pink-Panther-style, on my

tiptoes coming up – the people would be in hysterics. So we kept this foolishness up for about three or four days. Finally Dizzy said, "Okay, you guys win. That's it."

People – we were doing so much that he'd have to give us the bow. He'd have the trumpet section take a bow. We had these big – Tappy they called it, an all-day sucker. It was about this big. I went out. We got some of those, so that when we'd stand up, take a bow, we'd just stand up, look stupid, and take these Tappy's and start doing it. Finally Dizzy said, "Enough." We kept trying to think of different things to break it up.

Burstein: He got more than he bargained for.

Wilder: He got a lot more. He finally said, okay.

Burstein: That's great. What was it like technically for you to move from – in the '40s you went through so many different bands, from Lunceford to Millinder to Herbie Fields – what was it like technically to adapt to those different styles.

Wilder: It wasn't so hard adapting to the music, because the music basically is the same language, but you would somewhat – you'd have to play a while and concentrate on the way they phrased different things in the band. You would have – for instance, if you had a figure that went [Wilder sings a relaxed rhythmic pattern], that would be like in Les Hite's band or Lunceford's band, but in Dizzy's band it would be [Wilder sings that sane pattern with each note shorter and articulated much more forcefully]. They'd get that kind of a phrasing out of it. It would be the same notes and basically the same figure, but the accents, the emphasis, would be quite different. You'd have to listen and learn where this applied and where it didn't. It's not that difficult. It sounds more difficult than it is, actually. After you're in a band for a while, you get it. It's like people speaking. You know another language, but you don't quite know the inflections. All of a sudden, you listen to the language long enough, you get the right inflection. It's the same thing.

Burstein: It's almost getting into the personality of the particular band.

Wilder: That's what it is. And the guys always helped you too. They would say, "We don't phrase that that way. We do it this way." Once you found out, the next time you saw a similar phrase, you'd know what to do with it.

Burstein: Were there some leaders who were more open to suggestions from the players than others? Or were bandleaders usually open if you as the first trumpet wanted to say, "I think we might want to try it this way."

Wilder: Usually, if you went into a band that was established already, like Lionel's band when I went into that band – that was a really – most of these bands were already established. So you had to more or less adapt to their way of playing. After a period of time – for instance, I like to play ballads, and I like phrasing ballads somewhat like the reed section, like a saxophone player would. So my ideas, my concept of playing that, might be different than what they had before. Over a period of time, you can get them to

bend in your direction with that. But, for the most part, you try to play the style of that particular band. But they give you an opportunity to express yourself too.

Burstein: How did your own ideas change and evolve through this time, just of your own feeling about the music, in terms of ballads, in terms of more up-tempo things? What was your own philosophy about playing at that point?

Wilder: In the beginning I used to find that if I have fast things to play – and I guess I still do it today – I tended to get technical. I tended to think in terms of the technical things I had played. It very often, I think, made some of the things I played kind of rigid. As I've gotten older, I've learned that you can be a little more loose. You can be looser with it, and you don't have to get that technical, and you don't have to fill up every bar with every thing you can think of. You leave a little space, and I find that you get through things. You can play things that are quite rapid without cluttering it up so much. I think that that's one of the things that I learned from playing with different bands and playing under different conditions . . .

Burstein: . . . is that you can let yourself go a little bit.

Wilder: Yeah, you can, without getting so technical that it sounds mechanical.

Burstein: Um-hmm. And how about in terms of ballads and slower things?

Wilder: Ballads and slow things, I just think you should – it comes from your inner feelings. You try – I try thinking and playing ballads like if I were singing it. If you know the lyrics, sometimes it influences the way you would play the ballad, because you're thinking of what the words are, and you're trying to think of something musical to enhance that feeling. That's what I'm trying to do anyway.

Burstein: I've heard a number of people say that playing music is almost like telling a story.

Wilder: That's a great way to put it, and that's what I used to hear when I was a kid. They'd say, "When you play, tell a story." Basically, what they're saying is, with the composers, they start off with a basic theme, they develop that theme, and then they embellish it with something. My way of thinking, and what I even do – I do it today – if the body of the piece in itself is rather active, then I feel that you have to play less, because then it becomes like two people talking into each other's mouths at the same time. It's like a cluttered-up conversation. If the background or the accompaniment is rather elaborate, then you should play something that's less elaborate, to accompany that, and if it's the other way around, then you can do a lot of embellishing, if you have a very placid background. I find that that works out better, because if you listen to a lot of symphonic music, where one section is playing something that's quite flighty, the under accompaniment will be quite simple, that embraces it, and vice versa, they do it the other way too. I think that's a good way to try to control your playing, especially when you're improvising.

Burstein: It sounds like contrast is a big part of it.

Wilder: Yeah, it's contrast, and there's a relationship too, between what the accompaniment is and what the solo, what the improvisation is. As I say, if the accompaniment is busy, then you can play less on top, but you try something that continually weaves it together.

Burstein: How about in terms of tone? I've read a lot about people complimenting you on the tone that you get out of the instrument, and I heard it myself in the Smithsonian Jazz Orchestra.

Wilder: When I was a kid coming up, that's one of the things that was stressed to me by Mr. Griffin, who had a tremendous tone. He was a powerful cornet player. He played solos. In fact, when he – in Philadelphia, he and Josh Sadler, the violinist, was someone who was probably capable of making the Philadelphia Orchestra. But he's the one that had the society band. They used to go down – he, and there was a pianist. The man's name was Franklin Hockster, I think. He played concert music. When a station – I think it was WPEN or WCAU, one of those stations, or WJZ – they would have a period during which they had no advertising. They would try to fill this in. They had nothing to fill it in. So they would call Mr. Griffin and have him play cornet solos, and Franklin Hockster was his accompanist. I think that's his name. He would accompany him on the piano, and he would play these solos. That's the kind of a player he was.

But he always stressed the quality and sound. You should have a nice tone, and it should be full. I think about that all the time. I always try to – I guess now I just do it, because I've done it for so many years. But I'm always aware of it. I try to produce a full sound and the quality of the instrument itself, because most of – so often, the trumpet sounds so shrill, no matter in what register you're playing, but if you put the right amount of air behind it, you get a nice full sound, and it gives you a nice cushion to work on.

Burstein: That is one of those things that is very personal. The tone of an instrument is almost the personality of the person playing it.

What other things run through your head when you're improvising a solo? What kinds of things do you think about? Is it the tone and the . . . ?

Wilder: I'm not really thinking so much about the tone. I try – usually, I'm trying to listen to see where the piece goes harmonically. Then I'll try to develop some kind of a thematic thing on my own that complements it. It's just something that I like to do. It's a challenge, and I've always tried doing that, which is one of the reasons maybe I – people say I sound different. But that's what I try to do.

Burstein: Do you think your training as a classical musician and understanding – I read that you did a lot of work in terms of counterpoint when you would ride on the train to high school.

Wilder: That has helped me a great deal. It makes you aware – it gives you an awareness of what you're doing, so that you don't just – it's not a matter – for instance, I don't like competitive playing. If the fellow next to me plays something, I don't want to get up and compete with him. I would like to play something that's comparable to what he's done, performance-wise, and I try very often. But I don't like to stand up and play and say, okay, now I'm going to do better than he did or make him look small or something. That's – I don't like that kind of playing. I see it on occasion with some players. But I just think that when you're part of an organization, you want to make a contribution like everybody else, but you want it to be something solid, so that you feel that you're a part of that organization.

Burstein: How difficult is it to make the balance between your own personality, when you're doing a solo, and the personality of the band? Do you find that when you were playing – particularly in this period, but even now – when you're playing with a band, the solos may be different, because you'll be playing with a particular band, and so the expression may be a little bit different?

Wilder: I know what you mean. No, I don't tailor a solo to fit what the band – in fact I tailor it so that it become a part of the piece we're playing. To that extent I do try to do that. But as far as thinking about the band, for instance, I think that when I'm playing, if I'm playing something that's in the Latin idiom, when I – if the piece itself – when I play a solo, I'll try to play a solo that also reflects that idiom. That I'm very aware of. I try to do that, because then it becomes a part of the overall thing. If I stand up and play a bebop solo in the middle of a tango, or something like that, it's out of place and doesn't work. So I do try to think about that. I think it makes a difference. It also is a challenge to you to be able to see if you can think the way this idiom goes.

Burstein: See how far underneath you've gotten, so that you can understand it.

Wilder: That's true. And music is so great. I wish that I had been able, during the times that they were doing live recordings, to make a recording of music of all nationalities. I would like to do it, because I know – I have enough Italian friends. I have a lot of Irish friends. I've had some Polish friends. I have a lot of Jewish friends. I have played a lot of this music of the different ethnic groups, so that I could play music that would be representative of those groups. I would like to play some of that music, just play it. It's like a way of saying, "This is what I think of you, and here it is." Hearing it, people would say, "I don't think of him as a black musician. I think I hear him as a musician, because he's playing the music that I'm – that is reflective of my particular group, the same way that I would play it, if I were playing it." I think – I'm always thinking in terms – I like to see people get along with each other, because my background, when I came up, I didn't – it wasn't always peaches and cream, but I grew up with a lot of people of different ethnic groups who were so close to us. They were like family with us, and we were with them, so that I don't have so many antagonisms that are a part of many other groups by virtue of their being separated from other people. I would like to make a

contribution in that direction, and there's no better way to do it than music, because people can listen to music and absorb those feelings.

Burstein: You said something about, someone won't say, "That's a black musician." Do you think that people have thought about you, or do you find that audiences respond to you, because you are black, in a different way than they would respond to you, say, hearing a record and not knowing who you are?

Wilder: Yeah, there are many times that people – I've had some black musicians who had never seen me, and younger people – not always younger people, but people who had heard my name, but they had never seen me. They had heard things. I've had them come in and say, "I didn't know you were black." It's comical, in a way.

Burstein: Does it strike you as funny? What is black and what is . . . ?

Wilder: When you think about it, because that's another thing. You say, okay, so-and-so's black. Music, in itself, has no color, really. There may be some music that you will say, it comes from a definite ethnic background, by virtue of what it is. You hear music of Africa, and it's definitely African music, because you don't hear it anywhere else except there, or Arab music, or Israeli music, which is indigenous to that particular region. But as far as music having a color, it really doesn't. You say, so-and-so can swing, and he swings because he's black. That's not necessarily true. There are a lot of blacks, and a lot of black musicians, as they say – Bill Cosby said something one night, that he found out that we don't all have rhythm. It's a fact. Come on. Just because you're black doesn't mean you can swing. It very often turns out to be just the opposite.

Burstein: In terms of your own influences, do you find that you're still influenced in creating the music by performers that you hear now? Or do you feel like your style is pretty much what it is?

Wilder: I guess it's pretty much what it is. I still try to be creative, but my creativity has become limited by virtue of my age. I find – I remember Joe Louis many years ago, when he had come out of retirement and he either lost a fight or came close to losing, he was saying that he could see the moves – he knew what moves to make, but he just couldn't make them. I've just played with Wynton Marsalis. I found myself trying to do a lot of things that I just cannot do, a lot of things that I wish I – that I felt, surely I could do it. It's not that difficult. But all of a sudden, you begin to go the other way. Your talents begin to diminish a bit. It's not a pleasant feeling, but it's also one that you have to accept. That's the way life is. If you retained all your faculties and your abilities to do the things that you did when you were 20, then who else would ever have an opportunity? If the people that were in the slot would remain in the slot, nobody else would ever get in. So I accept that.

Burstein: Is there anything that you find that you can – or that you understand better now than you did when you were 20, in terms of music?

Wilder: Many things, yeah.

Burstein: So is there another side to this coin of not technically being able to do everything you want, but having something else?

Wilder: I have a greater appreciation for things that I do – that I am capable of doing. But I also have tremendous appreciation for people who are doing things when they – like Wynton Marsalis, people like that. I listen to him, and I think of what I have seen in my time. I mentioned that I was an admirer of Del Staigers, when I was a kid. I never met Del Staigers and heard Walter Smith and Herbert Clark and people like that. I think of how impressed I was with the French trumpet player . . .

Burstein: Maurice André?

Wilder: . . . Maurice André, and the Russian [Timofei] Dokshizer, and then along comes Wynton Marsalis. They're all topnotch players. I listen to them, and I say, I wonder why I even picked up the instrument? When you hear the things they do, and the way in which they do it – now Wynton, being the younger of the three, he does the things that they have done in the past as well and in many instances even better than they. It's just the way life is. I have a tremendous respect and appreciation for everything they do. It's just fantastic. And I admire them as people too.

Burstein: What do you find yourself listening to now? When you go home and turn on the radio or turn on a record or CD, what do you listen to?

Wilder: I still – for some reason or another, I still find myself drifting to the classical thing. I just saw a repeat of a Bernstein concert yesterday. I turned it on. I had seen some of it before. All of a sudden, I just stayed there. The violinist is playing [Wilder hums the opening melody of the Tchaikovsky violin concerto]. I listened. I wanted to go to somebody else, and I couldn't leave it. I just could not leave it. I stayed until it was over. I guess maybe it's because it's like a dessert to somebody who never had enough dessert. I basically feel that I never got enough of it, as much as I would have liked to have had. When I was at the Manhattan School, I was lucky enough to have played principal trumpet there under Jonel Perlea, which was a great experience, but it also made me feel that I wish I had been able to get more and more of that at the time. Then I played with the municipal concerts orchestra here, and with the Symphony of the New World, and things like that. So I had a lot of exposure, but not as much as I wish I had. I guess that's what it is. That's what draws me to it when I do hear things.

Burstein: That there's something about it that still tugs at you, in terms of the music.

How did you get to the Manhattan School of Music?

Wilder: I was working at the Diamond Horseshoe with Noble Sissle. I decided – I had the GI Bill, and I hadn't taken advantage of any of it. I decided maybe I should go to school and get a degree. I decided to go to the Manhattan School. I applied and was

accepted. I had – you first had to write a letter to the Veterans Administration and explain to them why you wanted to go to school. I explained to them that I felt it would enhance my chances of getting more work in my field, if I had more education in music. That's why I ended up going to the Manhattan School.

I was at the Diamond Horseshoe with Noble Sissle's band. I was almost an outcast. I was the youngest guy in the band. All the other fellows were my father's age, and Noble, who was even older. I was sort of a Dizzy Gillespie in that band, because my humor was such that they had never seen anything like it. It was simple things. For instance, one night the piano player, Harry Brooks – he was also a composer – he was playing something, and he hit one bad note. Nobody in the entire place was aware of it, but I knew he had hit this one bad note. I wrote a note: "Dear Mr. Brooks. Would you kindly stop by the office and pick up your Social Security card at the end of the night?" I signed it "B.R," Billy Rose, who owned the Diamond Horseshoe. He – it never occurred to him that this was coming from somebody in the band being funny. This poor man's whole night was ruined. I didn't know it, because the piano was up above us in the back, and we're out in front of him. I never knew it. He spent the whole night in agony, thinking that Billy Rose had heard him make this one mistake and had fired him – wanted him to pick up his Social Security card, because he's fired. When the night was over, and he said something about going to the office, and I let him know that I had written this note, he was so angry with me, that if he had been able to get away with a lynching, I'm sure my days would have ended as of that moment. It was just unbelievable. I just couldn't believe that he couldn't see the humor in it.

We had a trombone player, Butch, who used to – I had a couple days off – a couple nights – I had a night off, and he had left the night before and had – I think he had a week off or something. He came back. When I finally came back, he said to me, "It's nice to hear you play again." He said, "Hearing you play is like old times." I said, "That's really nice of you." He said, "Yeah, you know, old times, 1919, 1922." This is my kind of humor. But the other fellows in the band would have none of it. Nothing I did they thought was funny.

Burstein: It was a generational thing, it sounds like.

Wilder: Yeah, it really was. I had a – people used to come in from the rural South. They'd come into that place. They'd say, "Hey, you boys. Can y'all play *Old Man River* with the verse?" The verse was – it used to be, "Darkies all work on the Mississippi" or something like this. I made up a list of – a price list. I had on there, we would – *Sleepy Time Down South* would cost $50. *Old Man River* by itself would cost $75, without the verse. With the verse, no price. I made up a whole list of these things that these people would come in and ask for. I made copies and gave the other guys. He sat and looked at me like, you must be out of your cotton-picking mind. But anybody else, when I showed it to other musicians, they would just fall on the floor laughing.

Burstein: That's funny. How did you get with this band? How did you start playing with Noble Sissle's band?

Wilder: Somebody in the band recommended me, because they had a lot of things where they needed – a lot of technical playing. They had – Wendell Culley was there. He was playing lead, but he wasn't always there, and also they needed somebody who could play – do the triple-tonguing, double-tonguing when it was needed, with him. So that's one of the reasons I was hired. I stayed there for a while. To his credit, Noble Sissle, who was also one of these people who was very aware of the black progress and so forth – I got called to do a Broadway show. I asked him if I – I didn't – I had to do it. I was called. "The week after next, we want the show to start." Ordinarily, you had to give two weeks notice to whatever band you were working with, and that wasn't two weeks. So I asked him if I could take off without giving him – without the two weeks' notice. He said, "Yeah, okay." He said, "I tell you what: if the show runs for more than four weeks, then I have to get a replacement, a permanent replacement." So I said, "That's very nice of you." The show ran – the first show I did ran five weeks, and he still let me come back. He let me come back to the band.

Burstein: Was that the first time you played on Broadway?

Wilder: That was the first time, and it was at his bidding, because he said, "You know, we have no black musicians playing in those Broadway shows, young man, and it would be nice if you can go over there and make it."

Burstein: What was that like to be the first, one of the first blacks to play?

Wilder: I don't think I was the first. There had been other black players, but this particular thing, it was nice. The musicians generally were very nice. The stage hands, they weren't too nice, a lot of them. They were – sort of like the Marines, when they first started with the black Marines – they were very resentful and very nasty in many cases. But, like everything, they weren't all that way. There were some fellows who, because the other guys were so nasty, they were just the opposite. They didn't want to be lumped in with that. But the musicians in general were very nice.

Burstein: How about the music itself, to go from playing jazz, where you had a chance to improvise?

Wilder: In the Diamond Horseshoe, we were playing all Broadway show music and things like that.

Burstein: Ah, okay.

Wilder: Yeah, that's what they played, basically. So that – without – until I'm just mentioning it, I didn't even realize – without realizing it, I was being prepared for this thing, because the music I was playing at the Diamond Horseshoe was all basically Broadway show music.

Burstein: So this was a chance. Then you went into a show. What I heard from other musicians is that it's kind of a shock after you play jazz, because you're . . . .

Wilder: Oh, it's just different. It's so rigid, yeah, very rigid, and by comparison, you might say it's kind of corny. It isn't really corny. It's just a completely different style of music. It's like doing club dates, where you go out and play these club dates. It's an entirely different thing.

Burstein: A club date is like a party or a dance or something?

Wilder: Yeah. It's like a dance. You play one thing after the other. You segue from one tune into the other, and different tempos, for the benefit of the dancers.

Burstein: How are you doing? Because we can keep going. I think we should . . .

Wilder: Oh, go right ahead.

Burstein: Are you sure? Because we could go a little bit longer.

So you were playing then on Broadway, you were playing with Noble Sissle, and then you started going to school, all at the same time?

Wilder: Yeah, I was going, because I was going to school while I was at the Diamond Horseshoe.

Burstein: I also wanted to ask you, in terms of – you spent a lot of years on the road with various different bands. What was that like personally, in terms of your own life? Did you . . . ?

Wilder: It was rough. But you see, I was married once before, my first marriage. I have a son from my first marriage.

Burstein: Aha. When did you get married? Hold old were you?

Wilder: When I was in – when I first got married was 1943. Did I get married in '43? Yeah.

Burstein: That was about the same time you joined Les Hite's band. Or a little bit after.

Wilder: When I was in the Marine Corps, yeah, after I was in the Marine Corps.

Burstein: So you'd gotten married, and then . . . .

Wilder: I wasn't – I didn't spend that much time on the road. I was very fortunate, and especially with my family now. I've been here for almost all of the lives of my children. I was lucky enough to be with them all the time.

Burstein: That's true, because then you were on Broadway and then at ABC for a long time.

Wilder: Right.

Burstein: But in your – during your first marriage, with your first family, were you on . . . ?

Wilder: Yeah, I was on the road a while. I was on the road quite a bit.

Burstein: Was that tough? Did it take a toll on you personally?

Wilder: Yeah, it's rough, and it causes a lot of families to break up, as a matter of fact. I knew countless friends of mine whose marriages just went completely down the drain. Mine went down the drain, but not because of my being on the road. But my second marriage – I've been married to my present wife – we go into our 36th year in June.

Burstein: Congratulations.

Wilder: Yeah. We've had a long, good life.

Burstein: And that coincided with your settling down in New York, . . .

Wilder: That's what it did.

Burstein: . . . your going to school. So you started going to school, though, before you met your wife, or was it about the same time?

Wilder: In the '50s, yeah.

Burstein: In the '50s. How did you meet your wife?

Wilder: I was – in 1954. I met my wife in '54, with Count Basie. We went on a European tour. We were playing in Göteborg, which we call Gothenburg here. We played there, and after we had finished a concert at the – I think it was at the Concerthaus in Göteborg, we were at the train station, getting ready to leave to go somewhere else. I happened to see my wife standing there with a girlfriend of hers. She was so cute. She was really cute. She had on a little – a leopard beret. She had a little beret. She had a leopard coat on, and a smile that would melt an iceberg. I just happened to look over, and I saw her. They were asking for autographs, different people. I was standing there, signing some autographs. There was a fellow who noticed that I looked over. When I looked at my wife, she smiled, and I smiled back. He said to me, "Would you like to meet her?" I said, "Yeah, I certainly would." He spoke German. I didn't speak Swedish or anything, and he spoke very little English. He spoke some German to me, and I had taken some German at the Manhattan School. So then I said yeah, and I went over. He

introduced me to my wife. I said, "It would be nice if I could write to you sometime," or something. "Could I have your address?" So she gave it to me. That was it. I wrote to her for about three years, back and forth. When I come tomorrow, if I think of it, I'll bring a picture of when we got married, from a magazine, a Scandinavian magazine.

Burstein: How wonderful. So I guess you had been to the Manhattan School before you went to Sweden with Basie?

Wilder: Right.

Burstein: So, what was that experience like at the Manhattan School? Did you study classical trumpet? Or did you study . . . ?

Wilder: Oh yes. I studied – I was taking orchestral repertoire with Bill Vacchiano, who was at that time first trumpet player with the Philharmonic. I also studied with Joseph Alessi, Sr., Mr. Alessi, who was probably – he was like a father. He was one of – his grandson is the first trombone player with the New York Philharmonic. He – his grandfather died when he was an infant. So he never saw his grandfather, never knew his grandfather. But this was one of the most wonderful men that ever lived. He was just great. I just loved him. When I was studying with him, he'd hear auditions for some of the symphony orchestras. He said – he used to call me Mr. Wilder, because I was older than the other students. "Mr. Wilder, there's an audition for an orchestra and I think you should take it." I'd say, "That would be fine, Mr. Alessi. Where is it?" He say, "It's the Dallas Symphony." I said, "Mr. Alessi, that's in Texas." He'd say, "Oh my God. Why do we have to go through that?" Then the next one would be for the New Orleans or something. You know, there's no sense even thinking about it. He was so disappointed, because I was one of his students. But he was just great to me, just great.

Burstein: Did you ever consider it? Did you ever think, "Boy, I did really want to play in a symphony. Maybe I could move to Dallas"? Or was it just . . . ?

Wilder: No, it was . . .

Burstein: It was impossible.

Wilder: The racial thing was impossible then.

Burstein: Ah, so that's what it was.

Wilder: Yeah. The orchestras were not in any wise integrated at that time. I used to get some calls when the Philharmonic used to do concerts up at Lewisohn Stadium [in Harlem]. They called it the Lewisohn Stadium Orchestra. I used to on occasion get calls to sub with them there. But by the time I got those calls, I was doing Voice of Firestone for ABC on Sundays at the same time. But I still got calls several times, and I was never able to do it. Then when [Pierre] Boulez was with the Philharmonic, and André

Kastelanetz, and Jimmy Holmes was – Jimmy Chambers, rather, was the contractor, he called me for a few things. That's when I – that's why I played with them a few times.

Burstein: What was that like, to finally realize that dream of playing with them?

Wilder: That was great. That was great. That was wonderful. It really was nice. I'm positive that he did that because he felt that I deserved a crack at it. I wasn't going to become a member or anything like that, but he just did it as a way of saying, "Look, this is what I think of you." The fellows in the orchestra, a lot of whom I knew personally, they were extremely nice. They made me feel so comfortable, guys like Johnny Ware and Carmen [?Funarato] and people like that. They were so wonderful, and they're first-rate players.

Burstein: When did that happen? Was that in the '60s that you played with them?

Wilder: It was in the beginning of the '70s.

Burstein: Beginning of the '70s.

Wilder: Late – the end of the '60s.

Burstein: What was it like at Manhattan School? Were you able to bring in your jazz experience to the Manhattan School? Or was that . . . ?

Wilder: No. In fact, that was causing me some problems. They had a conductor there. I auditioned a couple of times for the orchestra. He would say, very prissily, "Here in the symphonies, we don't play with that concept that you fellows play with in jazz orchestras" and so on and so on. One day, I was subbing, sitting in the orchestra, playing something, and he said that to me. I just lost my cool, and I said – I called him by his name, "If there's something I'm doing, and I'm not doing it the way you want, instead of criticizing me, why don't you just tell me the way you'd like to have it phrased or the way you'd like me to play it? Then, if I can't do it that way, then you can criticize me, say I'm a jazz player and maybe I can't do it." He said, "Oh, is that the way it is?" I said, "Yes." And he stormed off and complained to the office that I was a troublemaker or something. So that was the end of that. They finally decided that – other people had been having problems, too, and they decided to have auditions. In the meantime, they brought in Jonel Perlea from La Scala Opera in Italy. He came in, he was going to be the conductor, and he was a judge. Omer Simeon [*sic*: Simeon Bellison?], the clarinetist with the Philharmonic, and John Clark, bass trombone player with NBC. They were the judges. You just played behind the curtain or something. That's when they gave me the principal chair at that time. So that was a wonderful experience. Wonderful players in that orchestra.

Burstein: You focused mostly on orchestral playing? Or did you do some solo playing as well?

Wilder: I did a couple solo things. I did a recital, which all of us had to do, and I did the Brandenburg once.

Burstein: Was it difficult because you could bring – you couldn't talk about jazz there? Or did you think, all right, this is a different . . . ?

Wilder: Oh no, you weren't prohibited from talking about it.

Burstein: That's good.

Wilder: It's just that it wasn't – now they have courses there.

Burstein: Now they have a major in it.

Wilder: Sure, and fortunately, I guess thanks to my having been there, Max Roach, and people like that, and others. A lot of the white musicians who had played jazz were there too. I guess they finally realized that these people are coming through here, and they're getting degrees in whatever we're offering. Why not incorporate the jazz thing as a part of the curriculum. I think it's worked to their advantage. I think that it's good for the musicians to be exposed to both, because it makes better players out of them, it makes better musicians and, if nothing else, it makes them a lot more tolerant than people had been in the past, of both sides. I remember, when I was at the Mastbaum School in Philadelphia, the first time I had ever heard opera singers up close. We sat there laughing, because [Wilder imitates an operatic vocal flourish] they were doing their operatic adventures and so forth. We sat there laughing, we trumpet players and so forth. We thought this was funny, until somebody finally called it to our attention: "Do you know that they're doing with their voices things that you can't even do with your instrument there?" You were sort of ashamed of the fact that all I could see was comedy in the calisthenics they were doing. It really awakened me and made me stop and listen to what they were doing. Lily Pons was popular in those days. I used to hear her on the radio. Finally, I had a completely different concept of what opera was and how interesting it really was. To this – I still love it to this day. I never – it's the one thing – I wish I had had an opportunity to play a lot of opera. I never – because it's some of the most challenging music. I've got – someone I know, Mel Broiles at the – I'm not dropping names, but Mel, at the Met: I've heard him play some things, and I say, doggone it, that's what we need. That's the kind of thing that will bring us out as trumpet players, some of that music. It's challenging. It's really challenging. Even the ballet music is fantastically interesting and difficult, and I think that musicians should have a crack at all of this, all of it, and you end up in whatever field you're most qualified to serve in, but having an exposure to all of it, I think, makes you a much, much, much better player and a better person.

Burstein: I think you're absolutely right.

[recording interrupted]

In high school you had a friend . . .

Wilder: Yeah, I was playing with one of my best buddies. That was Rosario Pino, who was a trumpet player. He comes from a very fine musical family. His mother's people were Versaces. The Versaces, they were involved with the Board of Education in Philadelphia. He had an uncle who played with the NBC Symphony here. I think he did. Willie Versace. He was a flautist, very fine player. I used to go to Rosario's house when we were playing in the junior high school orchestra there. His grandmother used to make pizza. She made Sicilian pizza. It was the first time I'd ever tasted pizza. It was so fantastic. To this day I have not yet tasted Sicilian pizza like she made. She made a Sicilian pizza. It was so light, it would almost float away. Now I go to places, pizza places, where they make pizza, and it looks like the same – it's Sicilian pizza by name, but it would float right down to your feet, it's that heavy. The difference was fantastic.

This is – when we were coming up, I lived on one end of 70th Street and Rosario lived on the other. He had – his hobby was pigeons. He had homing pigeons. I used to go over and watch him train these pigeons. It was just great. His mother, his dad, and his grandmother, I was like a relative to them. I used to go and see them all the time. I think about some of the people that I came up with and the things that we experienced during that time. I mentioned – for instance, we had neighbors who lived next door, the Kopesburger family. They were German-Irish. We had – the Dalrymples lived around the corner. We had all these different groups who were in Philadelphia. We were all poor. So I guess that's why we were all there together. The Carusos lived right in my row, Mrs. Caruso and her family.

What we – during the Depression, things were so bad that you didn't know where the next piece of food was coming from, and we had a big problem with getting fuel. We had coal furnaces in the basement, and coal by any standards was pretty high at that time, especially when you had no income. Mr. Kopesburger was the engineer on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. He had the stoker on there, a guy who used – he said, "Tomorrow, at one o'clock, we'll be coming through Darby. We come up the grade. So we're going very slowly there." He said, "I'll have the stoker throw coal off the whole way up, until we get to the trestle." There was a trestle right down the street from our house, that they went over. But on their way, it was quite a way, and he would be throwing – he's throwing this coal out. Then you just come out with the buckets, fill up the buckets, and take the coal, and you have coal at the house. This is the kind of thing that people were doing. They were doing this during the Depression. Mrs. Caruso told my mother and all the other neighbors. People were saying, "What can I do? We need vegetables." She said, "We have" – up in the hills, up in Yeden, which was right up the hill from us, it was kind of wilderness there, a lot of trees and a lot of foliage. They had dandelions. She said, "We can go up. We can pick the dandelions and use the dandelion greens as a vegetable." She showed them how to cook the dandelions. My mother and them would grow potatoes in the back yard, tomatoes. They all would share whatever they had in these little backyard farm things. It was a fantastic thing, really.

Burstein: A different time.

Wilder: Yeah. I remember all that and think back, how even today I miss the people that I knew at that time, the families. They eventually all moved to different places in the city. But when my mother died, they had the Willihans, that lived behind us, and the Kopesburgers, as I said, that lived next door. There was a family, the Andersons. They were probably the wealthiest people in the area, because they had a Rolls Royce. They were a Scan – they were a Swedish family in fact, elderly people, but they had – during the '30s, they had a Rolls Royce. So they must have had – and they lived in this house which by – was like a mansion compared to the other houses we lived in, and it was a separate house. They were very nice people. When my mother passed away, the Willihan boys came. They were her pallbearers. And the Kopesburger boys, they were there too. That's the kind of a relationship we had there.

Burstein: Does your dad still live in that house? Or did it – has he . . . ?

Wilder: No, my dad doesn't live there. We had the house after my mother passed away. My mother and father were divorced, incidentally, when I was quite young. My father remarried. My mother never did. But we lived in that house until my mother – my mother lived there until she passed away. Then we gave the house – my youngest – my middle brother and I turned it over to my youngest brother, who didn't take care of the bills and whatnot, and lost the house.

Burstein: Did you live with your mom? Was this when you were a young kid when they divorced?

Wilder: Oh yeah. I stayed – we stayed with my mother.

Burstein: But you would still see your dad and take lessons from him.

Wilder: Oh yeah. My father and I were always close, because I had had such an association with him as a musician. But my mother was very dear to all of us. She was great. My mother had a great sense of humor. She was great. If you had ever seen her – first of all, she'd see you, right away. You would have become one of her daughters, that kind of a thing. All the – everybody – they called her – my mother's name was Augustine. Everybody – they nicknamed her Gussie. Everybody would call – all the kids in the neighborhood who knew her, the young girls, if they'd get married and they were going to have a baby, they'd come to my mother and go, "What should I expect?" and this and that. They called her Gussie. She was really popular.

Burstein: She was the center of the neighborhood.

Wilder: She was.

Burstein: I look forward to tomorrow and hearing more about your life.

Wilder: Oh, I must tell you one thing about Rosario, that I was talking about, one thing that I forgot to say. I had not seen Rosario for many, many years and had lost contact with him. In fact I didn't know where he was. I got a telephone call one day. Somebody said, "This is Mario Pino. I'm calling, because I want to find out" – oh, he called and asked my wife – that's what it was – where I was working. I was already downtown. He wanted to know, because he was in town, and he wanted to meet me. He had never met me. So she told him I was at A&R Recording Studio on 48th Street. He said okay, he'd go over there, and he'd meet me when I got there. I walked into the studio, and this young fellow came over and said, "My name is Mario Pino, and my father told me to look you" – he said, "I'm Rosario's son." I said, "You have no idea how wonderful this is for me." I said, "Your father and I were like brothers when we were in junior high school." I said, "And I'm so sorry I haven't seen him or been in touch with him." I said, "But when you see your dad, when you get home, you grab him and give him a big kiss from me." He said, "You can do it yourself. There he is."

Burstein: That's wonderful.

Wilder: And there he was. There was Rosario.

Burstein: Wow. Where had he moved to? He lived nearby?

Wilder: He lived in Wilmington, Delaware. I think he had some kind of a cosmetics business. But it was so funny that – we used to love each other. We were such dear friends.

Burstein: And it had been such a long time.

Wilder: And when he said, "You can do it yourself" . . . .

Burstein: How long had it been since you'd seen him?

Wilder: Oh, we're talking – it's got to be 40 years or more.

Burstein: Was he still playing?

Wilder: No, he doesn't play, but his son plays. His son was working at the casinos in Atlantic City as an alternate trumpeter down there.

Burstein: So it had gone to the next generation.

Wilder: Can you imagine?

Burstein: That's great.

When we stopped off yesterday, we were in the early ’50s and you were going to the Manhattan School. When you were in school, you were also doing a lot of Broadway plays, weren’t you? You started at . . . .

Wilder: For the most part – I did most of it during the time I was in the Diamond Horseshoe. Then I went into the theaters, and I was doing – I did a show called *Alive and Kicking,* which was the – that was the first show I ever did. That was a show – it had Jack Gilford, Carl Reiner, and David Burns. They were three of the principals. There were some others. I forget – I’m sorry I can’t remember the lady’s name, who was in the play. It was more of a revue. It wasn’t a typical Broadway show. It was called *Alive and Kicking,* and it was alive and kicking for only seven weeks. It closed after seven weeks.

Burstein: This was the one that Noble Sissle allowed you to go . . . .

Wilder: He allowed me to go. Then shortly thereafter – I went back to the Diamond Horseshoe, and shortly after that I got a call to do another show. Of course I went to him and said, “I got a call to do another show,” and he said, “Young man, I think maybe you should do it, but if it goes beyond four weeks,” he said, “this time I have to get somebody else to take your place.” I thanked him. He said, “Okay, I’ll let you go.” And I went. The show was *Guys and Dolls,* and it ran for three years.

Burstein: Whoa. So you were in the first . . . .

Wilder: The original *Guys and Dolls,* with Robert Alda, Vivian Blaine, Tom Petty, B. S. Pulley, Stubby Kaye. I can’t remember all the others, but those were some of the principals. It was a good show.

Burstein: Were you involved in it as it was working itself up? Were you involved in the tryouts and everything?

Wilder: No, I didn’t go on the road with it, but we did the tryouts here in New York. They would always come in, and you’d have three or four weeks, sometimes five weeks of tryouts. But that one was destined to be a hit even from the start. It was funny.

Burstein: Was there much change from the first rehearsal to the . . . ?

Wilder: I don’t think very much. Not very much. They would tighten up certain scenes that they thought maybe were too long or not long enough, things like that. And the dialogue of course they would get really tight, so it was one thing went right into the other. They segued very smoothly. It was one of the funniest shows I think I ever saw. And on closing night, after three years – it actually would have gone longer, but I think there was a hassle with the money. The people who were the principals wanted more money, and the people who were producing the show – I think were Feuer and Martin, who – in fact they were the producers of the show. It seems that their approach, their attitude was that the show was so strong, material-wise, that it really didn’t matter that much who the principals were. So why pay people a lot more money, which was

probably miniscule by today's standards, but they refused to do it. People, they just said okay. They just left. The show began to get weaker, and of course it closed. But it was still funny on closing night. We in the orchestra were laughing as loud on closing night as we did on opening night. It was a good show.

Burstein: That's remarkable after three years of watching the same jokes, to still be able to laugh.

Wilder: Oh yeah. Every night it was – you just enjoyed it. It was such a lively show, so much entertainment.

Burstein: What was it like to play a show night after night after night after night?

Wilder: I had never done it before, except when I did *Alive and Kicking*. That was the first time. What you had to fight was boredom, because you get to the point where you have nothing – there's nothing to really keep your interest as keen as it should be, and you tend to get a little lax. But then you start playing a game with yourself. "I'll go in tonight and try to play like I did on opening night." We would do that. The conductor would try that too. So there were very few points at which there was a letdown.

Burstein: Were you ever able to go out and do your own – were you still able to continue playing jazz after you got out of the show?

Wilder: During that time I didn't take off. They were very strong against musicians taking off at that time. I did not, actually. I stayed and did most of the work right there, except for things that I did during the day, when there was no conflict. I did some of those things.

Burstein: Was it partly because the work, in terms of the bands, had really fallen off, and that's why? I know a lot of players went into the Broadway shows.

Wilder: I don't know that it was just that. But I think a lot of them went into it because it was a better – there was a better guarantee financially than you had traveling around with the bands on the road. There was much more security in it, even though a show might close, like the first one I did, after seven weeks. But there were others that closed after opening night too.

Burstein: But to have *Guys and Dolls* be your second show. That's pretty wild.

Wilder: Isn't that unbelievable?

Burstein: Yeah, that really is.

Wilder: You talk about good luck.

Burstein: So this was what? 195- . . . .

Wilder: Yeah it was in the – I guess in 1950. After that, I segued from that show to the Cole Porter show *Silk Stockings.* That was – when I went out – when they asked me to do *Silk Stockings,* that was the first time they had ever had a black musician play a key chair with a Broadway show, to go on the road with a show. When they proposed me as the first trumpet player for that show to Cole Porter, his question – they asked if he had any objection to having a black trumpet player play lead, and he said, "Can he play my music?" They said, "He certainly can." He said, "That's all I'm concerned about." So it set the tone for it. It was quite nice. We had – we really had very few problems with it on the road. We went to Boston, and that was when we encountered our first racial problem there with the contractor at the Schubert Theater, who quite bluntly said, "Of all the trumpet players in New York," he said to our New York contractor, "how is it you brought a nigger up here?" With that, I started thinking, Jackie Robinson. I was infuriated, because he was saying – and he intended for me to hear it, really. I was so aggravated. I'm not very passive when it comes to that kind of a thing. But I said to myself, here we're trying – that has nothing to do with the people I'm working with or for. So I decided, I know that Jackie Robinson went through a lot of this foolishness, so I'll just try to be as calm and ignore it. And of course from the time we started the show until it finished, I never said a word to this guy. He tried to be nice to me, after he found out that I could play the music and so forth, but I never had anything to do with him. But that was the only really bad incident we had, and that was over in a hurry. I had no contact with him. He was in the violin section. I didn't sit near him or anything like that.

So I did that show. After that one – that was a very good show too, with Hildegarde Neff and Don Amache. Don Ameche was so nice. He loved the musicians. He used to sing Tchaikovsky, *Our Love,* just a couple bars of it. He could never get the right pitch on the first pitch. He would look over at me and say, like, is that close? He was such a wonderful man. And Hildegarde Neff was great too. We had to – we went to Philadelphia for a tryout. We got to Philadelphia. There was some private club or something. They decided that they would – we used a place called the Lulu Temple to do all the rehearsing in. When we finished, they decided they would throw a party for all the people who were traveling with the show. They sent a letter of invitation to the theater, to us, and it said, "Everyone is invited, but no negroes or Japanese." There was a black lady who was in the wardrobe department, and the head electrician – I forget his name. I'm not sure whether it was Suki. I think it might have been Suki. But he was the head electrician, and he was Japanese. They specifically singled out the three of us. They didn't want us to come. Don Ameche and Hildegarde Neff said they wouldn't go, and Sy Feuer and Ernie Martin, the producers, said, "Anybody that goes to that party is fired." So nobody went.

Then another place – we were invited after a matinee one day to come to a luncheon at a private club. When we got there, I was the only black person in the group. There were seven of us there. This was – what show was that? That wasn't *Silk.* That was with *Most Happy Fella.* Mona Paulee, Jo Sullivan, who later became Jo Loesser – she and some of the other people in the cast. We went, and they welcomed us. At the check room, the maitre d' was taking our coats and everything. He said, "How many of you are there?" We said, "We're seven." So he counts, 1-2-3-4-5-6. He gets – I'm on the end. He said, "I

only see six." So the other people in the cast, we're all naive. They said, "No, no, there's seven." They count, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7. So now he starts from the person next to me and goes the other way. He says, "1-2-3 – I only see six." He did this three times. We finally said, oh, we get the message, and we all took out coats and left.

But those were the only times we ran into that kind of foolishness, and it really had nothing to do with our working. It was just aside from what we were doing in the theater.

Burstein: It sounds like things hadn't changed that much since the tours that you took in the '40s.

Wilder: Yeah. It was annoying to all of us, actually, because we're now working – all of us are working together. They were some of the nicest people I've ever been around in my life. And so it was – again, like I said about Sam Donahue's band – I think it was certainly as offensive to them, if not more, than it was to me, because I – sometimes I anticipated things like that. But this was so blatant, and it just disturbed everybody. But we all responded to it in the same way, so that it didn't get very far.

Burstein: And you most of the time had support from the people you were with.

Wilder: Oh, we had complete support from the people we were working with, always.

Then after playing – in the beginning, some of the musicians were less than friendly, but they wouldn't say anything offensive. They would just shun you. Then, after a while, it became one of those things where you're sitting there playing together and began to think in terms of, "What are we doing musically?" And "If we can do this well playing together, why don't we just be friendly with it?" Then that's the way it ended up.

Burstein: Did this kind of treatment mean that you were always conscious that you were black, in whatever setting, and you were sort of waiting for this to happen? Or did you just say, all right, if it happens, it happens?

Wilder: No. It's funny, because when you're around people with whom you're really friendly, you tend to forget all about that until someone else comes along, who's generally someone from the outside of your own circle, to remind you of it. You don't even think of it. We're just friends, and that's it.

Burstein: I talked with Eddie Bert, who was often the only white player in black bands.

Wilder: That's right. He's a very dear friend of mine too, Eddie.

Burstein: Yeah. He's a wonderful guy. I interviewed him, and he said that it was interesting, because to him, "We were all just musicians."

Wilder: It's true. While we're talking about that, I have to tell you a story. It's rather funny. We were with Lucky Millinder. You mentioned Eddie Bert, and it made me think

of it, because Bert very often, like he said, he has been the only white player in many black groups that I've been around. With Lucky Millinder's band, we probably had – it wasn't the first integrated band, but it was probably the most integrated black orchestra at that time. We had – Sid Brown was playing baritone. We had Sal [?Detor] on alto. We had Porky Cohen – his name is Zalman, but his nickname was Porky Cohen – playing first trombone. Freddie Zito. They were all in the band. And we went to Charleston, South Carolina. We pulled up with the bus. We had no sooner stopped than up comes the sheriff and his deputy. He came up, and he said, "Who's in charge of this group?" So Lucky got off and said, "I'm in charge." He said, "I just want to tell you, ain't gonna be no mixed bands playing down here in South Carolina." Lucky said, "This is not a mixed band." He said, "This is not a mixed band?" Lucky said, "Why, no." He looked around. We're all standing outside the bus. He looked and he said, "You gonna tell me there ain't white men standing over there," and Lucky said, "No." So he went to each one of these fellows. Now mind you, Sal Detor had blond, and Eddie King, blond hair, blue eyes. He said, "You colored?" And he said, "Yes." He went to somebody else, and said, "Are you colored?" And he said, "Um-hmm." It went all the way down, and I'll tell you, we're all standing there with a straight face. He gets to Porky Cohen, who had a slight lisp, and he said, "Are you colored?" And Porky said, "Why thertainly." I almost swallowed my tongue, because it was so ludicrous. It was so funny, just because he said, "Why thertainly." He had changed – everybody else was saying yes. I tell you. We were shaking. It was so funny. Finally, he looked at the deputy and said, whatever his name was, "Ralph, I guess if they all say they colored, ain't nothing we can do about it, is there?" He said, "No, Sheriff," and they got in the car and drove off. It's hysterical. I'd see – I used to see Porky Cohen on the street. We'd meet on Broadway, and we would just – as soon as we'd see each other, because there would be long periods in between, we'd start talking about that, and just rolling.

Burstein: That's a creative solution to the problem of segregation. Were things different when you toured in Europe in terms of the way black players and white players were received?

Wilder: Yeah, it was different, in that, I think – people were curious, because we were black musicians, and a lot of people who came – like when I – the first time I went, I was with Count Basie's band in '54. People would come up. They would stare at you. I understood why they were doing it, because they were curious. Some people had never seen a black person. Some of the fellows in the band were very incensed over the attention they were getting, because people were staring. Had a couple of instances where someone came up and wanted to know if they could touch my hair or touch your hair or something. Here it used to be, years ago, you touch a black person's hair, this was like a good luck charm or something of that nature. So it was offensive to many people, but I understood that actually they were curious, and I said to some of the fellows in the band, if we were in the middle of the African continent, if somebody white came along to one of the tribal areas where we lived, we might be just as curious. Some people accepted it and others thought I was an Uncle Tom because I said this. I was just trying to understand why the people were doing it, because it was not maliciously done. They really weren't. For that reason, they were curious, but they were awfully – very nice too.

Burstein: How was the music received that you were playing? Were the audiences good?

Wilder: The audiences were good. They were very appreciative. To a lot of them, as far as they were concerned, the only people who really could play jazz were black people, you see. They would turn out in droves to see and hear the bands.

Burstein: How did you join Count Basie's band?

Wilder: I was playing – what was I . . . ? I was doing a show. What show was I doing? I remember I left the theater. I'm not sure whether I was doing – 1954. Was I doing *The Most Happy Fella*? Oh, oh no no. I think – I'm trying to remember now how I got there. Oh, I know. I got a call from Count Basie, because they wanted – Joe Newman was in the band, and he was playing most of the trumpet solos, all the improvising, and it was getting to be a little too much for him alone. The Count thought that maybe they should get someone else to help do some of that. That's when he asked me to join the band, in 1954. It's funny. I'm trying to remember what I was doing. I was working someplace. I think I was doing a show, and I left and went with the band for that tour.

Burstein: Just for the European tour.

Wilder: Yeah, just for that tour. I played with them a while before they went, and then, when we – in fact, I joined them at Birdland. We went on – we made the tour. We came back, and I played for a few weeks or a month or so after we got back, and I left the band, because I went back into the theater and did another show.

Burstein: What was it like to play with Basie?

Wilder: It was good. It was fun.

Burstein: What was that band like?

Wilder: That was a swinging band. This was a band that swung. If you didn't pat your foot or shake your head with this band, then you had nothing at all. You had no rhythm at all. It was a good band. Count was very nice, a very low key guy. He treated all the fellows nicely. It was a good band.

Burstein: What was he like as a leader, in terms of how did he inspire the band? What was it that he . . . ?

Wilder: He knew – he had a definite way that he liked to hear the music played. Sometimes an arranger might bring in something like *Li'l Darlin'*. I wasn't there when they did the initial thing, but that was – I think Neal Hefti wrote it. It was originally [Wilder sings the melody at a brisk tempo]. It was Count who, after they had run it over a few times, thought, I think it would sound better slow. He got it down to that [Wilder sings it at the familiar languid tempo], and it became – it just became a completely

different thing, with all that soul in it. That was typical of him. He had a tremendous sense of tempo and feel for those things. That was his great contribution as a bandleader in that band.

Burstein: Someone once told me – I think it might have been Clark Terry. He said that he had – that Count Basie said that what was between the notes was just as important as the notes.

Wilder: The space. It was the space. It was not, fill up everything. That's really – if you listen to his band, all the Basie bands, that was one of the things that was very noticeable in that band. There was always space. The band was swinging. There was a certain momentum that still carried over through the space that they left. They never lost you. It was a swinging band.

Burstein: That's something in your own solos too. You don't seem to need to feel to fill up the space.

Wilder: No, that's the idea.

Burstein: On that tour, where did you go? And was this your first time in Europe?

Wilder: In Europe, it was my first time. We went to – I think we went first to Germany, in Berlin. I remember. I had just studied a little German. The burgmeister, the mayor of the town, came and welcomed us: "Willkommen Sie, Graf Basie zu Berlin" or something. Count, of course, didn't understand what he – but he knew he was greeting him. He said, "Yeah, okay Pops" or something like that. It was funny.

We went to Germany. We went to France. We were in Belgium. We went to Scandinavia. Went to Sweden. We went to Denmark and Norway.

Burstein: Was the touring different than the tours you've done in this country? Was the kind of – did you ride on buses through Europe? Or was it a different trip?

Wilder: We rode the train, mostly rode the train. We did – we were in Switzerland too. I forgot to mention that. In Switzerland, I remember it was the first time I had been on a bus where they drove on the other side of the road. We'd be coming up these winding roads or something, up a hill, and we'd be covering our eyes, thinking we're certainly going to run into something. The bus driver was driving at full speed, full tilt, and yodeling [Wilder yodels]. Oh, good grief, he's going to kill us all. But we had a great time. It was a great experience.

Burstein: Did you play dances or theaters or both?

Wilder: We played in the concert halls, mostly.

Burstein: What was the repertoire like for that?

Wilder: We were playing the typical Basie charts, *One O'Clock Jump* and things like that. He had a lot of things that were in the idiom of *Li'l Darlin'* – not that slow, but we had things like that that we played, a blues kind of thing. They were good.

Burstein: So after you came back, you went back into a show.

Wilder: I went back and started working in theaters again.

Burstein: And you continued your correspondence with your wife, who you met on the train platform.

Wilder: Oh yeah, yeah.

Burstein: Did you get to go back to Sweden?

Wilder: Not at all, no. I didn't see my wife again until she came here. My wife came here.

Burstein: How long after you met her did she come to the States?

Wilder: Three years. It was three years afterwards.

Burstein: So you kept on a correspondence for three years.

Wilder: Oh yeah. We started – the letters began to become more and more numerous.

Burstein: So this was really a romance by mail.

Wilder: Yeah.

Burstein: So you then, in the '50s, after coming back, stayed in the shows, and then you started doing some work for ABC.

Wilder: I had – when I first started working at ABC, I was just working as a substitute. The person who was responsible for my even going there was Billy Butterfield, with whom I had done a couple record dates for somebody. We were accompanying a singer on one date, and we were switching – we'd all play some lead. I played lead on something, and Billy turned to me and said, "The way you play, you ought to get a lot of work in this town." He said, "If I get a chance to throw anything your way, I will." Just like that, very friendly, very nice. I said – it was just great. Within about six weeks, I got a call from Billy telling me that he was going to take off of a script show they were doing at ABC. It was just one trumpet. He had already spoken to Mr. Vagnoni, Frank Vagnoni, who was the contractor, and told him he wanted to take off. Frank said, "As long as you get somebody who can cover the chair." He said he knew somebody, and he had recommended me. So, with no further ado, he said, okay, you go up on this date to a

certain studio, and that'll be it. I said okay. So I went. I rehearsed with the group, and we did the radio show. After the thing was over, this gentleman came up – a very dignified man – he came up and said, "You come by my office when you get through," he said to me. I said okay. I thought he was one of the stage crew, and that he was putting me on. I thought he was kidding me, despite the fact that he was well dressed and everything. I didn't know who he was. So I went home. A few days later, I got a call from his secretary. She said, "This is Mr. Vagnoni's secretary. He told me to ask you if you're available." She gave me a number of dates, to see if I was available for those. I said I was. She said, "Mr. Vagnoni told me to call you." I said, "That's funny." She said, "He said he spoke to you." I said, "To be quite frank with you, I wouldn't know Mr. Vagnoni if I stepped over him. I really don't know him." She said, "That's funny. He said he told you to come by his office." And I said, "That was Mr. Vagnoni?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "Well, like I said, I would have stepped right over him and wouldn't know him." She told him that, and when I went in to do this work that he had called me for, he said, "Mr. Wilder, how do you expect to be successful in this business if you don't know a contractor when you see one?" He never let me forget it.

Burstein: That's funny.

Wilder: Isn't that cute?

Burstein: So you thought that someone had pulled on you what you'd done in Noble Sissle's band when you sent that guy the note, saying . . . .

Wilder: Yeah, I just thought – I really didn't know that he was the contractor. I had no idea, and he didn't introduce himself. He assumed that I knew who he was. He was just wonderful to me. He was probably the most wonderful person that any of us ever worked for, just fantastic.

Burstein: Why was that? What made him a good . . . ?

Wilder: He set a certain tone there. Everybody deported himself in a very dignified manner. The people who ran the American Broadcasting Company were highly respectful of him, and consequently they treated the musicians with great respect, and he, in turn, demanded that the musicians respect the job and so forth. It was fantastic. We were doing the *Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air.* I – at that point I was doing – I was the substitute trumpet player. Whenever they needed somebody, they would call me. You did everything. We played the *Metropolitan Opera Auditions.* We did *Voice of Firestone.* We did *Music for a Summer Night.* We did the *ABC Dance Party,* where we imitated all the bands, Horace Heidt, Glen Gray, Count Basie, Duke Ellington. We played all of their arrangements as authentically as you could play them on this Saturday night dancing party. It went for two hours on radio, and people at home would dance to this music. We called it the *ABC Dance Party.*

We did all those things. Then I later played with the brass quintet. They have a woodwind quintet, a brass quintet, and a string quartet that used to play on the FM radio program. I

played second trumpet in the brass quintet with – Ray Crisara was the first trumpet player. We did things like that.

Burstein: It sounds like there was a lot of work going on.

Wilder: There was a tremendous amount of work. At that time, when I first started subbing up there, I think each of the networks had 95 musicians on staff. Each had 95 men on staff.

Burstein: Toscanini had his NBC Symphony.

Wilder: That's right. They all had at least 95 men on staff, and then they would augment the orchestra, if they needed more. At that same time you had staff orchestras in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland. You had them all over at each of the networks. A lot of work.

Burstein: So what would a typical week – when you – you were hired full time in '57 for ABC? Was that when you . . . ?

Wilder: Yeah, about that time.

Burstein: What would a typical work week be like for you as a player? Would you be on one show?

Wilder: It depended on – no, you might do as many as three in the week. You might do a radio show or two radio shows, and you might have a television show to do. Or sometimes you just did one thing. You might just be assigned to one thing. You get your schedule. It would be posted. You'd go in and look at it before you left at the end of the week. It would tell you what you had to do the following week. It was very well organized. All networks worked the same way.

Burstein: What kinds of shows would you work on?

Wilder: I did – for instance, on radio, I did the Ernie Kovacs radio show.

Burstein: What was that like?

Wilder: That was great. Ernie was as entertaining to us as he was to the audience on the radio, and he loved musicians. He would come in – one morning, I remember in particular. It was the Fourth of July. The show was on the air from six in the morning until nine. So we would come in for rehearsal at five o'clock in the morning. Ernie then would come in when he was due. After we'd rehearsed, he'd go on the air. This Fourth of July he came in. Always there were – during the show there would be two featured spots where they featured the orch- – the little sextet. This morning he came in, and he waited until we started playing the band number. He had one of these big giant firecrackers. He lit it and put it right in the middle of the band while we're on the air. We were scrambling

away from this thing. It was one of those dummy things. It went zz-zz-zz-zz-zz-zz and of course it just went out. It's not a – it wasn't a real firecracker, but we didn't – he was in hysterics, with this foot-long cigar that he had. He was just cracking – that was typical of him.

Another thing, he had – one of the sponsors – I'm not sure whether it was Mrs. Murphy's Pies, but it was a bakery. This was one of our sponsors. Every morning they used to send over pastry for the band – for the whole crew, stage hands and all. Ernie would be talking about how wonderful this pastry was, and he would wind up, and he would be throwing it up against the wall while he's doing this. This particular morning, there was this very dignified, gray-haired lady sitting in the back of the studio with his secretary. When the lady wasn't looking, the secretary kept going like this with her finger, like don't – telling him not to say something, or whatever. Ernie couldn't figure out what she was talking about. So he just ignored her. He got down to this cheesecake. He said, "Mrs. Murphy's cheesecake is the – you haven't tasted anything until you've tasted Mrs. Murphy's cheesecake. It's the most wonderful cheesecake." He's got this cheesecake in his hand, and he wound up and threw this thing up against the wall, this whole cheesecake. The poor secretary, she's flush in the face, and this lady is sitting there with her mouth open, looking. She was the owner. Now, when he finally found out who she was, he thinks, there goes the sponsor. She thought it was the funniest thing she had ever seen. The funniest thing. And he did this every morning. He would be doing this.

Burstein: To wake up – I would imagine, for a jazz musician, to have to start playing music at six in the morning, before . . . .

Wilder: It was a little weird in the beginning, but we got used to it. It got to the point where that was the way I lived, and I'd go home and go to bed.

Burstein: Would you work every day? Or would it be depending on what shows you'd need to work?

Wilder: No, we didn't – when we were doing that, that was during the week. That was – I think we did that five days. It didn't run that long. It was on for a while, but it didn't actually run that long. Then he went to NBC, I think, and started. But it was fun. Then you just got into that routine of being there. I'd get up at 4 o'clock, 3, 3:30, or something and get ready to go to the studio. We looked forward to it, because he made it very pleasant. Buddy Weed was the leader. One day we're playing – there's a song, *Just Me, Just You,* and there's another one, *If Dreams Come True.* They both start the same way, and even today I'm sort of at a loss to say which one is which. But we decided this is what we would play. We all know the song. So we didn't rehearse it. Buddy said, "When it's our turn to play the band thing, this is what we'll play." So he'd knock it off – kick it off, and I started playing. I'm playing, and Buddy's at the piano, and he's shaking his head. Playing, but he's saying, "No, Joe." I read his lips, "No, Joe." But he's playing, and they're all following me. As soon as I got through that first chorus, I turned to Hank D'Amico, who was playing clarinet, and I said, "Didn't he say this thing was in B-flat?" Hank is playing clarinet, and he almost swallowed the clarinet. He starts laughing. I can't

– I'm angry with him, because I can't see what's so funny about the fact that I'm probably playing in the wrong key. It turns out I was playing the wrong tune. I was playing the wrong song. And that's what Buddy was saying. "No, Joe." But he's still accompanying me. When we got through, he said, "I thought you told me you knew this thing." It wasn't until then that I realized I had played the wrong song. Bunny [?Schalker] was the drummer. He'd meet me on the street, maybe six months, a year, after all this, and he'd say, "Joe, did you ever learn that tune?"

Burstein: It sounds like fun. You would play to accompany what was going on in the radio show, and then you'd also have a set piece where you could actually shine.

Wilder: This wasn't a script show, of course. Ernie was doing his things, his comedy things. He'd take routines. He'd see something in the paper that had happened, and he'd make a whole story out of it. He did that. But then there were some shows, like soap-opera-type things, where you had a script and the music was just accompaniment. Bobby Hackett wrote for a couple of those. During that time I also subbed for Bobby, because Bobby had some dental work done, and he couldn't play. He had a root canal. During those days, they didn't go through the root of the tooth to take the root out. They used to cut your gum and drill through the root of it. I had that done myself. So during that time that he couldn't play, I played the show that he con- – where he was the conductor. It was a script show too. Those were nice. It was great experience, because you had cues. You played short entrances and faded out, things like that, just to accompany – to create the mood of the script show.

Burstein: Live drama like that is very rare these days, to have things that are that.

Wilder: Yeah. I see it sometimes where they do the Garrison Keillor radio show. They still do a lot of that. So it's very reminiscent, and you enjoy it.

Burstein: That's right. You were with ABC for quite a long . . . .

Wilder: 17 years, actually on staff, and I worked there for almost two years prior to that as an outside player. During that time, when I as on staff, when we had nothing – if we had nothing to do, Mr. Vagnoni was very nice about that. He'd say – sometimes, for instance, you might be scheduled for something there, and it might be just one show. Maybe someone else had called you for something that involved two or three days. You'd go to him and ask for his permission to maybe take off and do the other thing. He used to kid me. He said, "How much will you make doing this other thing?" I'd say, "I don't really know." "What kind of a businessman are you? You're going to go and work someplace, and you don't know how much you're going to . . . ." He said, "At any rate, if I were you, I think I'd do it. You can go do it." He was really nice like that. Then, of course, we tried never to abuse that.

During that time that I was on staff there, I worked at NBC. I did the *Kraft Music Hall* with Peter Matz. That was at a time when it didn't interfere with the ABC schedule. And I used to do some things for CBS. I used to sub on *The Jackie Gleason Show* and on –

what was the other one they had there? – oh, *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I used to sub on those two shows.

Burstein: What was that like, to work on those two shows?

Wilder: That was fun, because you got to see a lot of people that would come and perform. They had a good orchestra. All of the networks, they had good – they had topnotch players. It was fun to go in there. You rehearsed during the day. You rehearsed a show. You did one rehearsal, then the dress rehearsal. Then you did the performance, and they're always live. So you're really keyed up for it.

Burstein: You would have to keep your chops up to be able to do that.

Wilder: Yeah, you did. You really did. But in addition to that, it became such a way of life, you were just fearless. You had to sightread something, and it had to be played live, and you didn't get the shakes. You just – that's what you did. So, we play it live. If you made a mistake, you made one, but there were never any glaring mistakes. People were just so keyed up for it.

Burstein: Then you were on *The Dick Cavett Show,* weren't you, for a long time?

Wilder: I did *The Dick Cavett Show* from the time it started until it went off the air. And I used to do – at ABC, on radio, we also did *The Merv Griffin Show,* when he had his show on radio. We did that.

Burstein: Was it different to play for radio and play for television? Would you be on camera sometimes for television?

Wilder: Oh yeah. When we were doing a television show, sometimes we were.

Burstein: Would you be paid according to whether you were on camera?

Wilder: No, no, no.

Burstein: It was just a straight salary?

Wilder: There was a staff scale, a regular scale for the networks, and that's what you were paid on a weekly basis. But you got that every week.

Burstein: Regardless of playing one show or five shows.

Wilder: That's right. That's true. You got your full salary. Sometimes, if, for instance – we had a tremendous string section on staff. Sometimes they would know in advance that for the next six months, they're not going to have a show in which they use strings. Then they would put them on what they call "sustaining salary," which was less than the regular scale that they got.

Burstein: But they could go off and do what they needed to do.

Wilder: Oh sure. They could do whatever they wanted to do, and they were still collecting the salary there.

Burstein: That sounds like, for a musician who lived an itinerant life, which most musicians do, this was a very good . . . .

Wilder: It was excellent. It was very good.

Burstein: What was playing on the *Cavett Show* like?

Wilder: That was nice. We used to play – they didn't feature the band very often, but whenever we'd go in and out of a commercial, we would be playing something. We had a chance to play – in the studio, we did a lot of playing. We entertained the audience. Dick always had very interesting guests.

Burstein: Did you have a chance to keep up playing your own music, playing jazz? Or was this pretty much – this was what you did, and your free time was . . . ?

Wilder: That was basically what we were doing. But we were doing – we'd do record dates and jingles. My mainstay, really, at that time was doing television jingles. We used to do – at that time, the cigarette commercials were so popular. I did one with Buddy Weed. I think it was for Young and Rubicam. It was the Kent cigarette commercial. It was the first strictly jazz commercial that had been done. It was called – it was a cool jazz – we were doing a cool jazz commercial. It was for Kent cigarettes with the micronite filter, or something like that. It got very popular. It was so popular that they made a recording of this thing, a separate recording of this jingle that we did.

Burstein: So you would get residuals from that.

Wilder: No, no. We didn't get residuals at that time. At that time, there were no residuals for musicians. It seems to me that – I think it was Darlene Zito who did the commercial with us. She sang. And I think – I don't want to give the wrong figures, but at any rate, she – on her thing alone, she got something – with her residuals, I think it came to something like $35,000 or $45,000 for that year. I think our scale was something like $45, or it was about $50 to do a jingle. That's what we got, and that was it. The only other thing we got was the satisfaction of hearing it played every day for a long time. But that was it. There were no residuals at that time for musicians.

Burstein: Was there a lot of resentment because of this disparity between . . . ?

Wilder: That's one of the reasons that they ultimately got around to working some kind of an arrangement by which we did get residuals. But that was some time after that.

Burstein: With being on staff at ABC, did that mean you got benefits and you were in their pension plan and all of that?

Wilder: Oh yeah. Yes. That was really a plus.

Burstein: Yeah, that is. That's a remarkable thing for a musician.

What was it like when your wife came over here? Did you get married right away when she came here?

Wilder: No, no, no. My wife came in January of 1957, and we got married in June.

Burstein: That's pretty quick, though.

Wilder: Yeah. We had decided we were going to get married. So it was just a matter – she and her cousin Ingrid came together.

Burstein: You had decided after the letters, that you were writing.

Wilder: Oh yeah. That's actually what this was all about in the papers, that she had come and we were going to get married.

Burstein: How did her family feel about that?

Wilder: My mother-in-law and father-in-law, they thought it was very nice. In fact, my mother-in-law, when she was a little girl – a young girl – worked for a rather wealthy Swedish family, and they were coming to the United States. They were emigrating here. They wanted her to come with them. She and my father-in-law had just gotten married, I think, or were going to get married. She decided she didn't want to come, and she didn't come. When my wife came here, we went over to the Swedish delicatessen on Second Avenue, Nyborg and Nelson. We went over there one day, just because my wife wanted to get some Swedish food. She was talking to one of the clerks. Someone heard her talking. This elderly gentleman came from the back of the kitchen someplace, and said, "Aha." [Wilder speaks Swedish:] "[? ? ?] Värmlandska." So my wife said, "Yes, I'm from Värmland." He said – he started talking to her. They were from Värmland.. It turned out that they were the people for whom my mother-in-law had worked when she was a little girl. They were quite old, this couple. There were three of them, the man, the woman, and Mr. – I don't if he was Nyborg or whether he was Nelson. But at any rate, he and his wife and the other chap, who were in partnership, they were still there. When we used to go over there, then they invited us back into the kitchen, and we drank coffee with them and everything. Greta Garbo used to go in there. We used to go, and we'd see her on occasion. We never spoke to her, but we'd see her. She shopped there. They were just so wonderful to us.

Burstein: So you learned Swedish, it sounds like.

Wilder: Yeah. I had studied Swedish here at the American-Scandinavian Foundation. Oddly enough, the teacher I had, she was what they call the bibliotekarie. She was the librarian at the American-Scandinavian Foundation. Her name was Gudrun [?Ebenfeldt], and she was from Värmland. So, when I studied with her, I – without knowing it – was learning the same dialect that my wife spoke.

Burstein: That's wonderful.

Wilder: Isn't that something! Very funny.

Burstein: In terms of recordings, did you do much recording throughout your early career? Not all that much?

Wilder: I recorded – I did a lot of recordings with people on records where I didn't play anything in particular. I had no solo things, but we used to – I did some recordings with Barbra Streisand, Johnny Mathis.

Burstein: So this was during the years you were doing jingles, in the '60s.

Wilder: Oh yes. I did a lot of things with Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte. In fact, that movie *Island in the Sun*, I play the muted trumpet solo in the theme of the film, and things like that. I also played – I had a solo on – trumpet solo with Anthony Quinn in the boxing movie he made. I don't know if it was The Champion [*Requiem for a Heavyweight*]. And another one with – what's his name? It'll come to me. I had to play – there was a trumpet solo in both – in two different films, and I had played those. Larry Rosenthal wrote the music for it.

Burstein: It sounds like you had to be almost a Renaissance man to be a musician during those days, where you'd play jazz and play t.v. and play movies.

Wilder: I guess, for me, it was fortunate that I came into the business at the time I did, because I had – I was straddling both sides of this thing, and that's the only reason that I was successful at it. It was one of the things that kept me going, because, oddly enough, if I weren't playing some jazz things or some of the commercial things, some classical things would come along. It just seemed that, for all my life, one thing would dovetail into the other, so that I kept busy doing things, without a great deal of fanfare, which was good too. I remember being chided by some of the fellows that I used to know in some of the bands I played in. They'd say, "I play at the Apollo Theater, and I get my name out on the marquee, and you're down there playing in the pit" and so on. I'd say, but I'm supporting my family and I'm making a living. I have an income every week. I get some money coming in. I said, when you play the theaters, you play the Apollo Theater. That's one week. Then you're off four or five weeks. Then you go to Baltimore and play the theater in Baltimore. You go to Washington, Chicago, or Detroit, or whatever. But in between these one-week engagements, you had tremendously long spells during which you made no money at all. So my choice of doing what I was doing turned out to be very advantageous for me.

Burstein: Was the choice because of the money, because of the security of it? Or was it because you also liked doing this kind of work?

Wilder: I enjoyed it as much as I did doing the other things, and the fact that I didn't have to run all over the country enhanced my acceptance of it. I just took it as it came.

Burstein: Especially, I can imagine, with small kids, and you wanted to stay in New York.

Wilder: Yeah. I was, and still am, one of the most fortunate musicians around here, because I managed to stay in New York and the kinds of work that I was doing kept me here. I was able – the best part of it is that I was able to raise my family and see my children grow up, in being right here with them.

Burstein: Are there things, when you look back, you wish you had done? Are there kinds of music you wish you'd played? Or bandleaders you wished you'd played with?

Wilder: Sometimes there are some things that I say, maybe I wish I had had more opportunities to play classical music, or something like that, but then, at the same time, when I look at it, I say to myself, but I've been fortunate. I've been blessed as it is. So I don't complain about it.

It's just like – I think too, when my mother and father separated and were divorced, it was a very painful experience for me and my brothers. A couple of my brothers, they almost hated my father because of it. I was – I had felt great animosity towards him at a time – for a while about it. Then, as time went on, I began to think, we were left dangling at that time, and yet I survived. I'm still here. In spite of all these things that happened and were traumatic for us, each one of us managed to survive, and we did very well. We're here and we're healthy today, so that we should be thankful for what we overcame and not worry about the other thing. So that, for myself, I just forgot about it, and my father and I are very good friends today.

So when you look back and you ask if I regret, I don't really. There are things that I might have had more fun doing, but it would have been on a limited basis anyway.

Burstein: But you think if the situation had been different when you were getting started as a musician, if black musicians were accepted in philharmonic orchestras . . . .

Wilder: Yeah. Then I might possibly have ended up in an orchestra someplace, not necessarily one of the major ones, but probably in an orchestra.

Burstein: I think when I spoke with Clark Terry he said the same thing, that he would have loved to play in an orchestra, had there been that opportunity.

Wilder: And he had the qualifications for it too. But, again, when you look at it, he's Clark Terry today because of the direction in which he went, and I'm who I am . . .

Burstein: You're Joe Wilder today.

Wilder: . . . for the same reason. So it's something that we just have to be thankful to God that it happened that way.

Burstein: And you're both extraordinarily well-respected both in terms of what you've done and the kind of music that you've pursued.

Wilder: Yeah, very highly. So, when you look at it, you count your blessings, and they are just that.

Burstein: What was it like when the *Cavett Show* ended? Was that about the time that they decided to do away with staff musicians?

Wilder: The staff. That's why it ended. It was very sad for us, in a way. Prior to that, we had one other experience that was really very sad for most of us, and that was when Mr. Vagnoni had to retire as contractor at ABC. He was replaced by Saul Shapiro, who turned out to be quite a nice person himself. But Mr. Vagnoni, we had – most of us had such a deep affection for him, and he had been so wonderful to us. It was – when I went on staff, apparently there was some friction, or people didn't think too much of it, or something. One day, I remember, we were doing a concerto program, all concerti. It had – Margaret Truman was on as a soprano. They had – George Ricci played a cello concerto. Arnold [?] played a violin concerto. They needed a brass thing. Jimmy Abato, I believe, played the clarinet thing. I did the Haydn. He said to me, "Now they'll know why you're here." Mr. Vagnoni said that. That's all he said. I understood what he meant by it. When he had to retire, it was so sad for us. He came in – they discovered, through looking at his records – they didn't know how old he was. He was beyond the required retirement age by maybe four years or five years. The accountants decided he had to go. They just – with no further ado, they said, "That's it. You're out of here at the end of" such-and-such a period. He came and told us. It was very sad for him. I remember that we all sat. We just couldn't believe it. It was almost like a funeral.

I mention that because it was almost that way when we finally – when the *Cavett Show* ended and we realized that there were no longer any more staffs, anywhere. There weren't just any more staffs. The only staff orchestra that continued, and they were no longer a staff, was the NBC *Tonight Show* band with Johnnie Carson, and then they all went to California. It was rather sad, because it had been a great livelihood for all of us, and the experience – it was so exciting, every day. You couldn't wait to go to work, because you had no idea what you were going to do that day. For whom would you be playing? Who will the guests be? Or whatever. What arrangements are we going to play today? It was really, really exciting. I look at it, and I think of the number of people throughout the world who go to work every day with dread in their hearts. "Now I have

to go do this again for eight hours" or whatever. We used to go, and you just couldn't wait to get there, because it was so exciting all the time.

Burstein: That's a lucky thing, to have that kind of a . . . .

Wilder: Yeah. It's a fascinating thing, when you think of it.

Burstein: We're almost out of tape on this reel. So let me stop, and we'll take a break.

It's interesting in talking with you and thinking about – you were just on the road with Wynton Marsalis. In a way, you did what Wynton did, 30 years before he came along.

Wilder: Yeah, to the extent to which it could be done. Yeah, to a limited extent. A lot of people have mentioned my name in connection with Wynton, which is a plus for me, oddly enough. He's probably one – he does things that are so phenomenal, but yet, in this era, he's doing things that we wish we'd been able to do. Like you mentioned Clark. The kind of things that we might have been able to do, not with the same facility that Wynton does, though, because we didn't even think that way in those days. You would never think of taking a violin piece or something that's perpetual motion and playing it on the trumpet. You just didn't do it, unless you were Rafael Mendez or somebody like that. Wynton is the Rafael Mendez and the Dokschutzer of this era. But he is actually doing those things. It's great.

Burstein: Do you find yourself looking at him and thinking, if things had been different when I was coming up, I might have been able to do these things too?

Wilder: That's one of the things that – sometimes I think that if things had been different, I would have liked to have been one of the people who did some of those things, but I will say, without hesitation, that I would never have been able to do them as well as he does. This is a fact of life. I listen to him. I told him. I said, "The things you're doing, I might have attempted." But I would have never come close to doing them the way he does them. It's a joy to hear somebody play like that. It's an inspiration, too, because I've been doing a lot of practicing since I left the tour, just to say, maybe I'm not going to come close, but I'm going to sure try.

Burstein: What was this tour? Let's talk a little bit about the recent past, and then we can go back to the '70s and '80s. What was it like? You were just on the road with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. What was that experience like? You were playing all Duke Ellington's music.

Wilder: It was nice. I'll tell you. They play the music so well and so authentically that you could almost imagine yourself sitting in the middle of Duke Ellington's orchestra. I remembered hearing them play some of these things. They had the same feeling. I could just drift back and remember how – when I was a kid, how impressed and how thrilled I was that here was Duke Ellington's orchestra, and I could hear them.

Speaking of Duke Ellington's orchestra, there was a young lady that I was rather fond of, who was on the children's program with me in Philadelphia. I think her name was Oralee Washington. We used to – it was that puppy love kind of thing. Her mother and father agreed to let me take her to a movie. She lived in Chester, Pennsylvania. I went down and I met her and took her. They said okay, have her back at a certain time. We're supposed to be going to the movies. We went to see Duke Ellington at the Lincoln Theater. We came back. She said, "You can't tell my mother and father that we went to the theater, because they're very religious, and they don't like vaudeville theaters" and so forth. This to them was a sin. So we went home. They were saying it was nice I came back with their daughter at the right time and so forth. She and I are sitting in there. Her mother's in the kitchen fixing some food. I started talking and forgot all about what she had told me. I said, "How about the way Johnny Hodges played" so-and-so. She's going like this. I'm totally oblivious of what she's referring to. I kept talking about how wonderful Duke Ellington's orchestra was. In the meantime, she's sitting there. She's gritting her teeth, and I hear her mother singing, "Nearer, my God to thee." She starts singing this hymn. She looked at me, and she said, "Now you got me in trouble." I never, ever saw her after that. I never saw her after that. I think in 1946 or something, after I came out of the service, I was in Chicago with Lionel Hampton or somebody. Somebody – she had married a doctor or something, and some way or another she sent word that she had seen the orchestra – I never saw her – but that she had been in the theater and seen the orchestra. That's the only time I ever heard anything about her. I think this was in the early '40s.

Burstein: Was that a common thing, that there were people who just within . . . ?

Wilder: There were people who just associated – the devil and jazz music were the same, one and the same.

I didn't mean to divert you from the thing about the Ellington and Lincoln Center.

Burstein: That's okay. I was going to divert myself even further by asking you, what do you think it was about jazz, and particularly in that time period, in the '30s and '40s, that led to its becoming the popular music of this country?

Wilder: I think it was a rebellion against the system as it was. There was more freedom of expression, musically. People who maybe didn't have the background that some of the classical players had, could at least express themselves in a way that related to the people for whom they were playing. I think that might have done it. That might just have been it. It was – they were rebelling against the system as it was. That probably is the thing that gave it its momentum.

Burstein: It's just because of the rebellion of the players.

Wilder: Yeah.

Burstein: Was there a rebellion in the audiences too, do you think, against . . . ?

Wilder: People treated it – this is our music. This is what we do. This is our thing. You listen to the music of Scott Joplin. It was quite different than anything else, in itself – in and of itself. It was a rebellion against the established norms of music, and yet most of his music has a great deal of classical feeling to it, because that's where he was coming from.

Burstein: What do you think contributed to the wane of the big bands and the swing era? What do you think – why do you think the craze and the real popularity of swing music died out?

Wilder: I think you can look at it and equate it with the way the Beatles became. The Beatles, there was something in their performances that touched the hearts of the people that embraced them at that time. I think that during the jazz era, it was the same thing, because they were coming out of the strictly classical and commercial aspect of it, which was still somewhat restrictive. I think that with this certain freedom, and the idea that you go and you can be yourself, you can just let your hair down when you go to a dance where the bands are playing and just be yourself and have a good time to the accompaniment of this music. I think that might have been the thing that made the bands so popular. I think in the black community, it gave them something to identify with, because they were isolated. They could go to the theaters where the black orchestras played and identify with this. Also, the musicians during that time were the modern-day troubadours. The information about what was going on in other parts of the country and other black communities, that information was carried from one place to the other by the traveling musicians, and white musicians as well.

Burstein: That's interesting.

Wilder: Yeah, it is.

Burstein: So the musicians themselves in a way were messengers for different communities.

Wilder: That's true. We were also – I say *we*. I mean *they* were also style setters, because when you went to see the bands, they didn't always wear a uniform per se. They would have – they might have suits on that were the style of the day. People would go – I remember my uncles, my father's younger brothers, went to see the Bama State Collegians, with Erskine Hawkins in that band. They had on these suits with a reversible vest. You had a vest. It was Sears and Roebuck. The coat was one color – the coat and pants were one color, and the vest – like you'd have a blue serge suit and a gray vest with a blue serge border on it. Or you could turn it the other way. It would be a solid blue serge vest or something. I remember them talking about that. They thought that was the greatest. Of course, as soon as they got enough money, they had something like that. That was another thing that the people went to see the orchestras for. What's the style of the day? It was great.

Burstein: Did you find when you were listening in those days, and when you actually started joining bands, that there were real regional sounds to the music? They talk now about the Kansas City sound and the Philadelphia sound.

Wilder: Yeah, there were. There were different sounds that were associated with the area from which they had come. It was distinctive. You could tell. It's just like the bands – when you used to listen to the orchestras on radio, you didn't always hear the theme. You could listen to them, and you knew what band it was, because there was a certain style. It either represented their style, or the Kansas City feeling, or New Orleans, or whatever. You could tell by the way they played.

Burstein: Would you listen sometimes and guess which band it was?

Wilder: We could tell.

Burstein: You could tell.

Wilder: We used to do that. My father, being a musician, would say, that's so-and-so, and he'd say, "Who do you think this is?" You could – after – we had heard them a number of times, and they each had their own distinctive style.

Burstein: Was there a Philadelphia style when you were coming up?

Wilder: There was somewhat of a Philadelphia style, because a lot of the musicians from Philadelphia ended up coming to New York and going elsewhere. They were sought after by a lot of the bands. They were probably not the best schooled, but they were better schooled than a lot of the musicians coming from other areas had been.

Burstein: What were the big influences, just in terms of sounds? Was it the influences that everyone had, Ellington and Basie?

Wilder: Ellington and Lunceford and Basie, of course. There was no question about it. But Chick Webb too, Chick Webb's band. Then I'm sure that a lot of bands were influenced by Paul Whiteman too, a lot of the – because I remember the band that worked in the Lincoln Theater. They had a house band. A lot of the theaters had what they called house bands. They would be the local musicians who worked there whenever there was a show. They played prior to the introduction of the big band that was going to be featured. Doc Haider had the band in Philadelphia. My father used to play with him on occasion. I'm sure that he did a lot of things that were in the Paul Whiteman idiom, because they wanted to be that kind of a band. That's what he – Paul Whiteman was getting attention, and they wanted to emulate that.

Burstein: Was there a feeling, do you think, of frustration among the black bands that often it was the white bands that got attention, like Paul Whiteman?

Wilder: No, I don't think so. I think they enjoyed the fact that they were quite different. They really were different, and because they were different, I think they gained as much attention almost. They didn't make the money. Now that they might have resented, because they knew that they were worth more than they were getting. But other than that, I don't think they envied the other bands.

Burstein: There was enough room for everybody at that point.

Wilder: Um-hmm. Yeah. And when you consider that during that period – the '30s and the '40s – there were so many bands. There were bands on the West Coast, just so many different orchestras. As I say, you could almost – you could identify almost every one of them: Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb, Don Redman. It goes on and on. Gus Arnheim, Andy Kirk. You stop and you say, my goodness, how many of them were there?

Burstein: What I find interesting too is that the musicians seem to float between one band and another too. There was a lot of movement.

Wilder: True. Yeah. There was a great deal of it. Some musicians would like one band better than they liked another, and they would do whatever they could to become members of that band.

Burstein: Were you a dancer, or are you a dancer? Was that part of . . . ?

Wilder: No, the absolute worst.

Burstein: Really!

Wilder: The worst. I wish I could dance. I have never been able to do it. To say that I am a dancer would be the biggest lie ever told. I just never made it. I worked in the Savoy Ballroom. I used to see people. I'd watch these moves. I could never get the moves right. I could keep the tempo going, but I'd be stepping all over my partner's feet or bumping into people. Just never made it, because most of the times when – I would be playing in the band. I never had a chance to go out and dance, actually.

Burstein: That's what a lot of the musicians that I've talked to say. "I never had a chance. I was always" . . . .

Wilder: That's the absolute truth. And since we were mostly playing, we never even thought about it until we found ourselves someplace where you're with your wife or somebody, and she said, "Can we go out and dance?" You get out and find out how clumsy you are.

Burstein: "How about I just pick up a trumpet, and you can dance?"

Wilder: Not a bad idea.

Burstein: All right. Let's go back to the mid-'70s, after the job at ABC ended. Did you then start making a living from jingles and doing all that?

Wilder: I did some of that, but I went back to the theaters. I went back and did *Lorelei,* the Carol Channing show. I did that, and I was working with one of my dear friends, Dick Perry, who was a first trumpet player. I did that show. Then what did I do? I did *Shenandoah,* and I did *Timbuktu,* the Eartha Kitt show. I also did *Peter Pan* for a very short time, when it opened. I did *Angel,* another show that folded. And I did the Liv Ullmann show for a short time. So that's where I went immediately after. I was lucky, because within – I don't think it was more than two weeks after the staff thing went that I started to play that other show.

Burstein: Wow. So you really didn't have much of a break at all.

Wilder: No. And I did *Man of La Mancha* with Richard Kiley the second time around. I did that.

Burstein: So that was what really kept you going in those years.

Wilder: Yeah, that did it, and we were still doing some jingles. But the jingle business had begun to go down.

Burstein: Did you continue playing jazz too?

Wilder: Oh yeah. I never – you know, it's odd. I never worked in clubs here in New York. I never really worked – during this whole era I was – for 22 years I did the Miss America Pageant every year.

Burstein: When did that start?

Wilder: That started in the '60s. I did that with Glenn Osser [born Abe Osser]. It's odd, because when he asked me to do it, I wasn't being hired to play jazz or anything. They had a lot of girls that used to come down. They'd sing the arias, the operatic arias, and most of the players that they had there were the fellows who had been doing club dates. They were good players, but they never had any experience playing these things. So Abe hired me just to play those things. It's sort of a twist, but it was really nice. I did it for 22 years with him. We did the last one in 1987. After that, they changed the entire regime there.

Burstein: What was that like, to play for the . . . ?

Wilder: That was nice. It was a challenge. It used to be awfully hard in the beginning, because we used to go on Tuesday. On Tuesday evening we'd start rehearsing. We'd rehearse all night and get up early the next morning and rehearse, and do the first

performance, the elimination performance, on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Then Saturday they did the show live on the air. It was a lot of work.

Then after that – because at that time, they didn't do any pre-recording. You really – you just ground until you were playing on your teeth, almost. There was so much music. Then, as the years went by, they began doing a lot of pre-recording, because they had a lot of things like production numbers, where it was impossible for these people to be running around with microphones on, singing and jumping up and down. So they would pre-record a lot of that stuff, which made it a lot easier. Then, towards the end, it got to the point where it was obvious that they were almost trying to eliminate the orchestra altogether. They would have the contestants come in. A lot of them came in with their own recordings. They had recorded the music in their own home states and come in and perform to their recordings.

But it was fun. They'd get keyed up on Saturday, Saturday night, and wonder who's going to win. It was also very fascinating for me too, because I was there when they had the first black contestant in a Miss America Pageant. The girls who early on were contestants, they had all the prerequisites for being Miss America, except that they were not beautiful girls. They were not that attractive, as were – some of the other contestants weren't attractive either, which meant that they didn't have a great chance, since it was still a beauty contest, basically. But then, when they had – towards – just before they had Vanessa Williams, they had a couple girls who were contestants who stood a very good chance. But when Vanessa Williams came, that year, there was – you could almost sense it. There was something in the whole atmosphere. This kid is going to make it. There's something about her. Even the runner-up – Suzette Charles, I think, was her name – they were both so attractive and so effervescent. There was so much they had going for them. Even people who heretofore had almost resented the fact that they had begun having black contestants, had a feeling like, I think something is going to happen here. It was really – it was just so heartwarming to see it, and then to have Suzette as a runner-up. It was just unbelievable. I think there were four black contestants that year, if I'm not mistaken.

Burstein: Do you feel like things have changed enough, or that much in terms of . . . ? I'm just thinking about this. This is not that long ago. And it's that the Miss America Pageant, almost an American establishment thing, took that long.

Wilder: The year before last, there was also a black Miss America. So it has changed drastically, because when I first went down there, there was even resentment that I was in the orchestra. I was one of the first black musicians who played the Pageant, because some of the fellows – there were a couple of black musicians who lived in Atlantic City or in Philadelphia, who had played. But there was a strong feeling of resentment, not only with some of the local musicians, but with some of the people producing it. They were more or less – it was Southern oriented at that time.

I remember too that we used to have a problem with some of the nasty policemen they had down there. I was with Dick Berg, and I forget the trombone player's name, from

Philadelphia. The three of us, we always had these i.d. badges that you had to wear when you were there. We went to the men's room. It was so warm in the hall that we had left our jackets on the chair and forgot to take the badges with us. So when we were returning to the bandstand, this burly cop came up and said, "What are you guys doing in here?" We said, "We're in the orchestra." He said, "How do I know you're in the orchestra? You don't have any i.d." We said, "We forgot. We left our jackets on the stand, because it's so warm." He said, "I don't want to catch you back here again without any i.d. You get that?" So we started off. When we walked away, the trombone player said to Dick Berg, "Jeez, I guess if we come back again and he sees us without them, he'll probably kill us." This guy, he heard it. He overheard it. He came back and grabbed him by the neck and slammed him up against the wall, and called him "You Jew" so-and-so. "If I" . . . . We went to Abe Osser. I told Abe. I said, "I don't think I want to come down here anymore. I don't think I want to come down anymore, because if we've got to put up with that kind of treatment, just because this thug is wearing a police uniform." So they took care of it. After that we never had any more problems. Can you imagine? This is a law-enforcement person, in a hall where we're legitimately supposed to be, and to come up with that kind of a racial thing. It just irked me.

A couple of other fellows – Al Brown, the viola player, was there. He's a black fellow. He never – he would never go again. He never went again. But in years – it began to get better after that. The atmosphere was better.

Burstein: When did you start playing with Benny Goodman? When did you tour with him?

Wilder: 1962.

Burstein: What was that like?

Wilder: That was pretty interesting, because we were going – it was a State Department organized thing. We were going for the State Department on the – that was the first cultural exchange between the United States and Russia. Then, when you think of it, it wasn't long after that that the Cuban Missile Crisis came up.

Burstein: How did you get to be a part of it?

Wilder: Benny was putting together an orchestra. They wanted the orchestra integrated. He had called Joe Newman and me, and Teddy Wilson. Joya Sherrill was the vocalist with us. So the band was very well integrated, a tremendous bunch of fellows: Zoot Sims, Jimmy Maxwell, Johnny Frosk. We had a great bunch of guys.

That was an interesting trip. It was very fascinating for most of us, because we didn't know what to expect. We had been told – coached by the State Department. Don't take any pictures from bridges. Don't take any pictures out of your hotel window. Don't do this. We had so many "don't"s that we finally ended up saying, why are we going? They had just about frightened us off of anything. When we got there, me, with my camera, of

course wanting to take pictures of everything I'd see. It got to the point where you just had to be very careful. And yet, the Russians themselves were not as – they weren't as mean about it as we had been led to believe. Because I was going across the Volga River, by the Kremlin. I was in a taxi cab. I said, "Can I take a picture from there?" – the gestures I made. He said, "I don't know." He pulled over the cab. There was a policeman on the bridge. He asked him, and the cop said go ahead. I took some pictures. This was a definite no-no as far as the State Department was concerned. But they were very nice to us there.

Benny was our biggest problem. The purpose was to show them how we lived here and how, in a democracy, everybody contributes. Benny sat at his own table. He didn't eat with us at our table. He had his own private table and things like that. So it worked actually contrary to what they had intended to do there. But the band – it was a good band, well received.

Burstein: What repertoire did you play?

Wilder: We played the things – the Goodman repertoire, Fletcher Henderson arrangements and things, and some new ones. In fact, we had one called – we didn't use the title, but it was called *The Vulgar Bulgar*, by Johnny Carisi. That's what we used to open up with. It was very exciting. Johnny just died. He just passed away.

Burstein: What was it like to be breaking that barrier, the barrier between the United States and the Soviet Union?

Wilder: We were quite proud of it, actually. We knew what it was, and we tried to be up to it. And everybody was, really.

Burstein: And the response was good.

Wilder: Yeah. The people were – as I said, they were very nice to us, although we didn't get to know anyone really on a one-to-one basis, because they were kept away from you.

Burstein: Did you meet any Russian jazz players?

Wilder: Yes we did. We met a few. They played – their jazz was similar to what you heard during the '20s and the '30s. It was that kind of jazz, that real stiff kind of a thing, sort of like – you've seen or you've heard some of Kurt Weill's music – that idiom. But they were really interested in everything we did, everything. I remember, we were down on a beach in Sochi. This Russian fellow came up to me. He was saying, "Look at this." He said, "You see people all colors, every day," he said, "not like the United States," and so and so. I said, "Look. There's no denying we have discrimination at home." I said, "But we're doing everything we can to eliminate it." There were some reporters there from *Time*, *Life*, or *Newsweek*. I was quoted in that paper. It said, "Joe Wilder" – it told them what he said. "Look, there's discrimination" and so forth. "Joe Wilder said, 'There's no denying it'," and that's the end of the quote. That was exactly what they said.

I was infuriated by that, really furious, because I understood what he was doing. He was propagandizing, and more or less at our expense, and I wasn't going to let that happen. I'm not anti-American or anything like that. I might resent discrimination that was more pervasive then than it was now, but I wouldn't have let a guy get away with this. But they – an American reporter stopped the quotation at that point. I – to this day I resent it. I never met him. I don't remember who he was, but if I were to run – to meet him face to face today, I'd really confront him with that and ask him why.

But in general it was a nice trip and a very enlightening trip. For instance, we went to Tashkent, down in central Asia. We had been told to expect flies and mosquitoes, and just to try to put up with the terrible conditions that existed there. When we got there – he said we'd stay in an old hotel. It would be so terrible, but try to put up with it. We got there. The place was very clean. We stayed in a new hotel that had only been open about three or four years. They had air conditioning in the hotel. We asked the question, "Why did you tell us it was so deplorable here?" Nobody from the State Department, I think, had been allowed in that region since the '20s or the '30s, and this is what they based their assessment of it on.

Burstein: But they had let you, the jazz musicians, go there.

Wilder: Yeah. They thought that that condition still existed. Of course it didn't. But they had not seen it. So they didn't really know.

Burstein: What was Benny Goodman like as a musician and as a leader?

Wilder: Benny was a fine musician. There's no question about it. He had problems socially. Benny – I think, unfortunately, he seemed to regard any of the talented people he had working for him as a threat. He seemed to delight in hiring people who were qualified and then trying to denigrate them in whatever way he could. For instance, in my case, we had a conflict with regard to the contract we were to sign. We had agreed to a certain salary, all of us, and then just before – the week before we left, he said, "The State Department said everybody has to take a $100 salary cut." We said, "Why do we have to do that? You agreed to pay us" this amount. He said, "The State Department said it has too much money. It has to be cut." I said. "I'm not taking a $100 cut." So he said, "How about $50?" I said, "Okay, if I have to, $50, I'll have to take it." I had to take it, basically, because I'd already, my family had sent to Sweden to be there during the five weeks we were going to be in Russia. But I said okay. We didn't have – they didn't have the contracts ready. So none of us had signed the contracts. This was a verbal agreement.

When we got to Russia, we were in Moscow. We were invited to the American embassy. We pigeonholed the cultural attaché there and asked him why we had to take a $100 cut. "Why all of a sudden, after having an agreement.". He expressed amazement. "What are you mean, a cut? What do we – we don't have anything to do with it." He said, "We pay Mr. Goodman a lump sum. He can do with it whatever he wants." Then we realized it was Benny who was trying to cut each one of us down for his own sake, to pocket the difference. I wouldn't sign the contract. I just refused to sign the contract. So he kept

threatening me that if I didn't sign this contract, he would not pay my travel pay when the tour was over and that he would charge me for being overweight on my luggage. These two things were like the Sword of Damocles hanging over my head. I said, "The only thing I can say is, I can't leave the country until you leave, but if you do this to me, I just won't play." So it went on and on. Then, while we're playing, since I hadn't signed the contract, I'd stand up there. It would be my turn to play a solo, and I'd stand up. When I'd stand up, he'd say, "Letter X" or whatever was the last chorus of the arrangement. I'm standing up getting ready to play a solo, and we go to the out chorus. He did it to me about twice. In the future, when he'd start playing – let everybody play, and he'd point to me, I would just wave to him. I wouldn't even stand up.

Jimmy Maxwell, who was our first trumpet player – we had a review. We went to Seattle, Washington. They reviewed the orchestra. They said the orchestra sounded great, but it sounded like 1938, which was understandable, because we were playing the same arrangements, and he insisted that we play them exactly the way they played in 1938. I kept – Johnny Frosk and I and a couple of other guys kept saying, "Why don't we try to just update the phrasings, change it just a little bit? It will still be Benny." Jimmy, being the first trumpet player and being complimented on the fact that we still sound like we did at Carnegie Hall, he wouldn't do it, and rightfully so, because Benny enjoyed it. But then, as soon as the critics said that it sounded like 1938, then it was Jimmy Maxwell's fault, and he began to dump on Jimmy. He told Jimmy – he said, "Jim, why don't you let the other guys play lead, because your style is too dated" or something. There was absolutely no reason for it, and of course it just dampened his spirits and it dampened the spirits of the whole band, because he's got one of the greatest lead players in the world, and he's telling him he shouldn't play lead.

Aside from that, the band, as an orchestra, did very well. It didn't destroy the morale of the band. We didn't let that happen.

Burstein: What do you think about taking music like that, that was written in the '30s and arranged in the '30s – how do you as a musician approach music that you heard in its original form but are playing today in 1992? What's your own approach?

Wilder: There are different types of phrasings. You try to play – you can play – they're the same notes, but you can just change the phrasing so that it sounds more modern than what it did in those days. I wish I could think of an example. Say [Wilder sings a brief phrase] something like that. In the old days, they might have played [he sings it again]. They'd play like that. In the phrasing today, they would try it smoothly, play a little more smoothly [he sings it with one note flowing into the next] or something like that, and it sounds more modern, in keeping with the way they play today, and yet it's the same song and the same notes. That's what the difference is. Sometimes you want it to sound like the '20s. In fact, when we do the Garrison Keillor show, we're playing music from that era, and we play just the way they played in those days. If you listen to it, you say, Jeez, there's a band from the '20s or the '30s. But you could also take that same music and change the phrasing, and it would sound more modern.

Burstein: So really it's the phrasing that gives it the era.

Wilder: It is, yeah. It's a concept.

Burstein: If you were to give me a quick lesson in the phrasing of the different eras, what would you say? Like, say, from the '20s versus the '30s versus the '40s.

Wilder: In the '20s and the '30s, I think the music that evolved then was influenced more by the military thing, the marches, because martial music was very popular prior to that. Then, after that, you had the romantic jazz music that came along. It was more commercial. Then, from that, it began to get – the jazz thing began to get a little smoother, instead of – not so much syncopation – hard syncopation and so forth. I think that's basically what they did. People decided, "I don't" – "It sounds" – they wouldn't say "corny." They would probably say, "It sounds dated. It sounds old-fashioned." Then deliberately they would try to find ways of playing the same in a different manner, so that it did sound different.

Burstein: Then in the '50s bebop came along and things got turned around again.

Wilder: Yeah. Right.

Burstein: How about today? What to you hear in the jazz – both the jazz that's being played today that was written then and jazz that's being written now? What do you hear as the style now?

Wilder: I hear a lot of technique, more technique than there was in the past, and a lot more daring. Fellows like Wynton and his group, they play things that to some people – me included, in the beginning – I thought was somewhat far out, and in a sense it isn't. What it is, is that they're a lot more daring than we were. They take chances and risks with the music that we just didn't dare do. You just didn't do it, because it seemed like that's going too far. But they do it because they have the ability, the technique, the endurance, and the will to just go and do it. "I'll try this. I may not make it the way it should – the way I'd like to do it," but in trying, they begin to go to a higher level with all these things. That's basically what it is. I think we – all the fellows now have to begin to listen to what they're doing and understand that that's the reason it sounds so much different from the things we did, because we, maybe not knowingly, put limits on what we did, but we did. I won't go beyond this point with it, and that was acceptable.

Burstein: Do you think the different styles are in a sense a reflection of the times that they came from, that the martial style in the '20s was coming out of World War I?

Wilder: It is, yes, absolutely. Like the blues and things like that. These things develop in an era of depression, when people felt depressed and it was the easiest way to express yourself. There was a great deal of sadness in it, but that was representative of the era. You take music from different nationalities, different countries, music that – Hispanic language is a romantic language, very fast. All the romantic languages tend to be very

swift, and the players – the music that comes from most of those places is representative of that. You get into other areas where the pace is slower, and the music is representative of that, as is the language.

Burstein: What would you say is the characteristic thing about jazz for you? Can it be boiled down into one thing? That may not be a fair question.

Wilder: It think that it arouses a certain rhythmic impulse in you. You listen to classical music, and it can pull at your heartstrings. But a lot of times, playing jazz, there's a lightness to it and it lifts you out of some of the doldrums sometimes. You just sit there and without even realizing it, all of a sudden your foot is patting or your head is going like this, in agreement with whatever is being played. I think that's what it does. And it reaches people who might not even be touched by music otherwise. I think that's where it serves best.

Burstein: Do you think that music is basically an emotional art, that it is reaching mostly to there?

Wilder: I think it is, because I've heard music that can almost make you cry, because of its beauty. Of course I've heard some that's so loud it almost makes you cry. But generally it is an emotional thing. Music is very emotional.

Burstein: What do you see as the future for jazz?

Wilder: I think it may – I think there's going to be a resurgence of it, judging from the response that we got with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, which was a tremendous response. The other side of it is that the majority of the people that we saw who came to hear the orchestra were younger people. When younger people are being exposed to this – it's something which is geared for – they hadn't even given any thought to – it evidently means that there's an awakening and a revival of something past, which won't – you're not going to be able to continue playing things of the past. You're going to have to update some of these things and continue in a modern sense what the idea of a modern orchestra, a jazz orchestra, coming and playing, is all of a sudden gaining a new audience. That's a good sign, because the thing – the fear that has now taken over the whole country. People don't dare go out in the middle of the night and so forth. When you went to dances, you came home at 12 o'clock or one o'clock or two in the morning, during an era when it was comparatively safe. Now, people are in the house at ten o'clock at night and won't even go to the corner grocery store that's open late. But I think that eventually, when things get back to the way they used to be and people feel more safe going out, they'll respond to that. I think there's going to be a resurgence. Of course it's been a long, long time since dance bands have been able to go out and draw people to come to a dance hall.

Burstein: How have you found with your own kids? Were they interested in jazz, your own daughters?

Wilder: They were into the rock thing for the most part, because they came up during the Beatle era, and the Jackson Five, and people like that. Now they have begun to discover jazz too, because they've gone to a few of these concerts where they heard jazz bands. My middle daughter, who came to Lincoln Center to hear this orchestra, she was quite impressed. She had never heard one like this before. I think, with that exposure, they're going to gain a lot of people.

Burstein: What do you think about the future of classical music?

Wilder: I think it will always be – classical music will always be okay. It's part of the world's history. It's like, you can't deny that there was a Rome or all these things that relate to the early history of the world. This music is the thing that puts you there and is reminiscent of those eras. It has a great importance. I don't think it will die. Some of it, if it's played too much, might cause people to shun it, but in general, I don't think it will ever die. It's too important.

Burstein: That's good to hear, for both of those things.

Wilder: Yeah, it's too good. Some of it – you get some people who are writing modern writing and doesn't have the substance that the older things have, but even out of that you're going to have composers who are going to come along who are going to write really fine music and be appreciated.

Burstein: After Goodman, was the next tour you took when you were with Benny Carter? Or was that here in New York?

Wilder: No, with Benny, I just did a recording.

Burstein: Did you do much jazz playing in the '70s and '80s?

Wilder: Not too much. I've been doing – some of the musicians, they have these jazz parties all over the country. They hire musicians to come and play at the jazz parties. They'll hire maybe – like the Gibson party in Denver, which was the original one. He's the one that conceived the idea of a jazz party. He was the manager of the World's Greatest Jazz Band. They used to work over here at the hotel by Grand Central. I forget the name of the hotel. Bobby Hackett, Billy Butterfield, and Bob Haggert. It was a tremendous group. Al Klink. He started with them and began to get a tremendous audience, a very wealthy audience, to come and hear these players. Then he decided it might be a good idea to start a jazz party to which he would invite patrons, people who would love to hear jazz, and hire a tremendous number of musicians and put different combinations together for the entertainment of these people. That's what he did. That became popular all over the country. It's still going on. I played a number of those things. They have them at the North Sea festival in Europe. They have a lot of those things. So you do get to play jazz on those. And I've been going up to Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania, the one up there. I was down in North Carolina. I went to one. Beverly Muchnic had one in San Diego, which is one of the nicest ones that I ever played.

Burstein: How long do these parties last? Just a couple days?

Wilder: Three or four days. They're either three or four days, and the people come all day long. They start at noon and go until two in the morning or one at night. There are different groups playing at different times. They have it all scheduled. You may be playing with a trio or quartet this time. The next time you're playing with a larger group. Sometimes they put together a big band. The people, they sit there and enjoy it and stay in the room the whole time, in the hotel ballroom or something.

Burstein: Is it fun for you to play?

Wilder: Oh yeah. It's fun.

Burstein: That does sound like a good time.

Wilder: You get a chance to play what you want to play with a lot of people you enjoy playing with.

Burstein: And play for people who really are getting a kick out of what you are playing.

Wilder: Most of the people who attend those things, certainly in the past, were older people who related to the old big-band era. That's the difference I see in the response that the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra was getting, in that younger people, much younger, college students and high-school people, were coming to hear these things, which means that now that group will ultimately be the supporters of this kind of thing.

Burstein: Do you think that's partly too because there are a lot of younger musicians in the . . . ?

Wilder: Right. They identify with them, which is good.

Burstein: What do you find about the younger musicians that you played with?

Wilder: I'll tell you. These musicians, all of them with this orchestra, were – they were very high-class people, well educated and very dedicated. They have a tremendous awareness of who they are and how they're being judged by people who come to see them, pay to hear the orchestra play. It's quite nice. In the old days, you always had a number of people who maybe would drink to excess, and they were the ones that everyone judged those groups by, those few who had some problems. But this is different. These are really clean-cut, athletic. Wynton and those fellows, they're kids that, when they get ready to eat a meal, they say a prayer before they eat. It's that kind of a thing. They're very dedicated, very sincere. So I enjoyed working with them. It was really nice.

Burstein: It sounds like it was a lot of fun.

What was it like to do the album with Benny Carter. Was he someone you'd played with before?

Wilder: That was nice. Benny Carter is one of the premier musicians of the world. I remember, when I was a kid, my father used to point at him. He said, "Listen. You want to be a musician. You want to listen to people like Benny Carter and Charlie Shavers." He was an admirer of all these people. He knew Don Redman quite well. He used to point that out. He admired Benny, because Benny could play saxophone and trumpet equally well. When I told him that I was going – it's funny, too. I was just thinking of that – told him that I was going to do a recording with Benny Carter, he said, "You really are somebody." He thought that was just great. And it was. It was a lot of fun with Benny, tremendous.

Burstein: So you did – was it *Symphony in Riffs*? Or, what was the . . . ?

Wilder: No, no, no. It's called *A Gentleman and His Music.*

Burstein: Ah yes. Okay.

Wilder: When I consider all the years that I was an admirer of Benny Carter and that I ended up finally playing on a recording with him, you can't do any better than that.

Burstein: How did that come about?

Wilder: We were doing – there was a jazz festival in California. It was for the same company that did the record. They decided beforehand that maybe we should record something after the date was over. That's how that came about.

Burstein: What was he like to work with?

Wilder: Who, Benny?

Burstein: What's he like as a leader?

Wilder: Benny, he's a superb musician. Whatever you want to do, you can do, as long as it's done with some professionalism, and Benny himself is setting the pace, because he's playing on such a high level that you try to match him.

Burstein: He's a remarkable – he's in his 80s, and he's still a remarkable player.

Wilder: A remarkable man and a dignified gentleman too, very bright. Benny had, I think, the first integrated orchestra, ever. This was before Benny Goodman. He went to Europe. I just saw this recently on a documentary about Benny. He had white musicians. He had augmented his band with white musicians. It was the first time.

Burstein: That's in the early '30s, probably.

Wilder: Yes. He's – what a talented man.

Burstein: What characterizes his music for you in terms of his compositions and also the way his band plays?

Wilder: I would say that the technical aspect of it and the theoretical aspect of it, that everything was harmonically correct. He's very – he's a composer too. So he's very adept at writing thematic material. There's a – he wrote – during the era of the big bands, they always had – they always featured reed choruses, saxophone choruses. He has written some of the most intricate things that were ever written during that era, and to play them today, they're just as – they stand up just as well today as they did in the '20s and '30s, when they were written. When you consider that he wrote them during that era, you say, my, what a mind he has and how far advanced his thinking was. What an amazing person.

Burstein: In the late 1980s you went to Japan. Was it with – what band was that with?

Wilder: That was on a Duke Ellington tribute.

Burstein: That was Gunther Schuller?

Wilder: Gunther Schuller put the orchestra together. He didn't go on the tour. Mel Lewis was sort of the leader of the band.

Burstein: What was Mel Lewis like to work with?

Wilder: He was quite ill at that time.

Burstein: Really? Already.

Wilder: Yeah, he was sick. Actually, I think he should not have been on the trip, because he was in such bad shape physically.

Burstein: He died the next year.

Wilder: He died shortly after that.

Burstein: Had you played with him before?

Wilder: Oh yeah. I played with Mel. We played on the – we used to do the Kraft Music Hall show together with Peter Matz.

Burstein: What was that tour like, bringing Ellington to Japan?

Wilder: It was nice. Most of these people in Japan, of course, they were mostly young people. It was well received, but the band was not a band of the quality of this Lincoln Center Orchestra. It was a good orchestra, first-rate players, but the feeling was a little different. They didn't have the real Ellington spark that this band had. This band almost sounded – except for some of the improvisations, which were a little more modern in spots, it really sounded like the Ellington bands had.

Burstein: What for you makes a band a band? When is it that you know, this is a band that's got a sense of itself as a unit, rather than just the different parts, the players?

Wilder: I think it happens after they've played together a while and you begin to understand – to anticipate what the other players are going to do. Like if a person is playing lead, you've played with him a while, you see certain figures that come up musically, and you know how – you can anticipate the way he's going to phrase that, and the more you begin to understand his way of playing, the more you become a part of it and the tighter the orchestra becomes. It's like, in a symphony orchestra, certain conductors have a certain way of demonstrating what phrasing they want, where they want [?], or where they want it more dynamic, and so forth. You get to associate certain moods with that conductor. Another conductor, you know his interpretation is different, and when he indicates a certain thing, you know what its meaning is to you. It's similar to that. It's something like that. You begin to watch, so you learn all the nuances of these individuals.

Burstein: It's interesting. In a classical orchestra, it's the conductor who sets the tone for everyone, while in a jazz band, you have to listen to everybody else, not just the leader.

Wilder: Yeah, you listen to everybody, but it's usually the people on the lead chairs who do a great – have a lot to do with it, of course in conjunction with the leader. He may say there's certain phrasings that he wants or certain things played a certain way. Basically then, it's for the first-chair people to interpret it that way, and the others follow, like "How long will he hold this note?" or "Where will we cut off?" or "Where will we bend this note?" and things like that. It's to decide, "I'm going to put a shake on this one" or "I'm going to hold this note for three beats or four – cut it off on four" and things like that, so we all do it together and it becomes more – the precision is more exact.

Burstein: So that everybody's personalities, while remaining distinct, have a similar flow to them.

Wilder: Right.

Burstein: We've gone for just about an hour. Let's take another break before we finish up.

Wilder: The stones you have in the window reminded me of something that happened when I was in elementary school in Philadelphia. I used to collect round stones like that.

Burstein: Like river stones or ocean stones.

Wilder: Yeah. I had one about this big one time. I had it in my jacket pocket, and we had put our coats in the cloakroom at elementary school. They had a fire drill. Somebody took the jacket – took my – the kids were grabbing jackets, and we didn't have – I didn't have time to get mine. So I went out without a jacket. But somebody got a hold of my jacket, and they were swinging it, playing fights with it. Somebody got hit in the face. I had one of those rocks in my pocket. Somebody got hit in the face with it. When they came back, the kid was bleeding in the face. They came back. They wanted to find out who did it. The kid didn't remember who did it, but knew it was the jacket that had a stone in it. They went in the cloakroom, and they checked. It was my jacket with this stone in it, and I was blamed.

Burstein: You got in trouble.

Wilder: No amount of explaining that I didn't even have a jacket on. Yes it was my jacket that had the stone in the pocket. I remember that. I was as guilty as sin, with nothing I could do to explain it. I wasn't even in the cloakroom.

I remember another incident that I had when I was in elementary school. There was a girl, freckle-face, red hair, Helen Bramble. I had a crush on Helen Bramble, and she had a crush on somebody else. I was writing on the wall, "Helen loves" so-and-so, but I – I was going to write that. I got H-e-l. I had just written the "l." A teacher came along and saw this. She thought I was writing an obscenity, in chalk this was. I got expelled from school for writing an obscenity on the wall, and no amount of explaining what I was doing made any difference. I was a terrible kid. All this brought this back. My goodness.

Burstein: It's funny, because I – to me, you would be the last kid I would imagine to be a troublemaker.

Wilder: I wasn't when I was a kid. I always had a sense of humor. I could see humor in things, but I actually never did stir up anything. But that just reminded me, and I said, I'll be darned.

Burstein: I have noticed in your bio that you played with the Manhattan Brass Quintet.

Wilder: Oh yeah.

Burstein: How did that – what did you do with them?

Wilder: That was with Bill Stanley, Bunny Barron, Arnold – Arnie, a trombone player. I'll get it. I'll think of his last name – and Dick Berg. We were playing one time. We were doing a children's concert. We were working for young audiences. Usually we – Bill Stanley was the spokesman for the group. He was explaining to the children that you hear marches and things, but there are little melodies within these things and maybe you can identify them. He said, "In the Sousa march, the *Stars and Stripes,* there's a bugle

call." He would say, "And the bugle call goes like this," and one of us would stand up and play [Wilder sings the melody]. One day, at one school, I would play it, and the next school, Bunny would play it, or vice versa. One of us would play it. So when he said that, Bunny Barron looks – he thinks I'm going to play it, because I grab my trumpet and he grabbed his. I thought he's going to play it. So we both put the trumpets back, and we're sitting. We hadn't played a note. Bill Stanley said – he's got his back to us. He said, "And the bugle call goes like this." Now we both grab our trumpets again and get ready to play, and each one of us puts his horn down again, because he thinks I'm going to play it. I think he's . . . .

Burstein: So what happened?

Wilder: This happened twice. Somehow, the third time, Bill says, "And the bugle call goes like this. Will somebody please play it?" He's perturbed. We both start playing. We both start playing the thing [Wilder sings the first three notes], and we look at each other. We start laughing. We can't finish it. The teachers are even cracking up, because they can see what's going on.

Burstein: That is so funny. The kids must have loved it.

Wilder: It was hysterical. We went into another piece after – we finally did play the bugle call. We're playing something else, and all of a sudden Dick Berg, who was a real culprit – he's a french horn player, superb player – he said, [Wilder makes a short snickering sound]. That's all he did, like that – [Again] – and that started the whole thing. We could not play. It was embarrassing. It was embarrassing. We had to just sit there, relax, and look away from each other for about two minutes or so, and then start the piece over.

Burstein: That's perfect for kids, though. It shows that musicians are human beings too.

Wilder: Oh yes. They used to love our group, because we weren't stiff. We were really – we were loose. We played the music as well as we could possibly play it, but it wasn't with that stiffness. We related to the kids. They enjoyed it. We had a lot of fun with that.

Burstein: Did you ever teach? Was that something you did?

Wilder: Some years ago I did. I taught a couple kids. At that time I was very busy. So when you'd have a lesson scheduled for today at two o'clock, and the night before, I would get a call at eleven o'clock at night, a jingle date or something at two, I'd have to call and say, "You can't come today." So I just gave it up.

Burstein: Did you enjoy it though? I can imagine you would have been wonderful.

Wilder: Yeah, I liked it. Especially if you had a couple of kids who were interested. But even so, I'd have a kid come for an hour. I would be explaining something to him. I didn't think he played it well enough. I'd just assume I hadn't explained it to him

properly or he doesn't understand. Sometimes you'd go an hour, two hours – hour-and-a-half or two hours, because I felt it was my responsibility to make sure that he understood before he left. I usually got a pretty good response from the kids.

Burstein: What was it like to go back to this music? Or did you – you continued to play music from the swing era throughout your career. What is it like now? You're playing – you've just played in two different bands that have gone back to this. What is your favorite approach in terms of playing the music of the swing era?

Wilder: I don't know. I haven't really given much thought to that. I try to roll with the punches. Whatever it is, I try to follow the concept of what it is and try to play it as best as I can. I've had no problem with it. It doesn't disturb me to do that. I'm sure there's some music that, if it were older music and had to be – I might not enjoy it as much. Because like on the Garrison Keillor show, we do play music from the '20s, the '30s, and the '40s, and some of that music is extremely difficult, really difficult. We really have to work hard to get it together so that it sounds right. If I had to do that over a really prolonged period of time, I think that would bother me, because it's so early in that idiom, that you feel like it becomes a little depressing sometimes. Also, I find that – even without thinking – that some of the music from that era is music I heard during the Depression, and I find myself with a certain sadness, a certain feeling of inadequacy. Where will I eat tomorrow? Or something like that, which I don't associate consciously with it, but all of a sudden I find myself thinking about it, because that music reminds me of that era.

Burstein: Were you – you were, what?, seven years old when the Depression hit – did you know what was going on at that time?

Wilder: During the Depression?

Burstein: Yeah.

Wilder: Oh I most certainly did. I was older than that. I was older than that. I remember how my father and all the other men, they just did anything they could. My father used to go collect trash up in Delaware – up in Yeadon up in Delaware County, where people would have a little more money. They'd put out newspapers. They used to get newspapers, bundle them up, and take them to the trash yard, the junk yard. I don't know how much he got for 100 pounds or 50 pounds or something, but you got a few pennies for it, and with that you could go and maybe get a loaf of bread or something like that. It was very devastating during the Depression for most people.

Burstein: How was music affected by the Depression. Your dad . . .

Wilder: Music?

Burstein: Yeah.

Wilder: People at that time, they had what they called block parties. They would get together. Somebody had – especially someone who had enough money to get a lot of recordings. They would have a record player with a speaker out there. They would play records that had – block off a street. I guess they'd get a permit or something. Sometimes they would have a piano player out there, a little group. They would play, and you paid – people paid a quarter or whatever it was to go into this block to party. That's the way people made money.

Then they had what they called rent parties too, where they would – somebody would have a party at his house and invite people. I guess they would pay a dollar or less, whatever it was. But there was a fee, and they paid that. That's how people would get money – they'd have food that they would sell, and drinks – people would get money to pay their rent that way. That was all during the Depression.

Burstein: So music was a big part of it.

Wilder: Music was a part of it, oddly enough.

Burstein: How about during the war years? You were playing with bands during the beginning part of the war. How did music – what part did music play during the war years, especially swing music?

Wilder: It was quite important, morale-wise, especially with the big bands. They were given permission – I know, when I was with Lionel Hampton before I went into the service, we could travel all over the country only as long as they promised, when they were close to a military base, that they would give a free performance. They used to do that, and they were rewarded by being permitted to travel in other areas. That was one of the pluses with that. The government obviously understood that as a morale booster, the music was important.

Burstein: And even in the Army itself there was a lot of . . . .

Wilder: Oh sure. Very important. That's why they had not only the military band. They always had a dance – a jazz orchestra or something aside from that.

Burstein: What were your thoughts when bebop started, when you started hearing people like Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie started doing . . . ?

Wilder: It was some of the strangest music I had heard, quite different from anything else, but it wasn't totally – it wasn't that foreign to me, because I had heard Dizzy Gillespie when he was in Philadelphia. His ideas and his concept of jazz playing was so different from everybody else's at that time, and Charlie Parker too. I knew Charlie Parker. I guess in 1941 – 1940 or '41, I went to Annapolis, Maryland, with this little band, the Harlem Dictators. He was there with a band – a guy named Banjo Bernie, who was considered a thief at that time. He used to put together an entire package of dancers, singers, and an orchestra. He would go into a club someplace, and they would perform.

They would pay him as the promoter for the whole package. The first week they would be in a place, everybody would get paid. The second week, they'd get half their salary, with the understanding that the management hadn't paid the full thing, but would pay them the next week. And the following week, he would abscond with the money.

But Charlie Parker was playing with him at the time I was in Annapolis, Maryland. He inspired a lot of us. We just had never seen a guy who was as studious as he was. Very bright, incidentally, and he was always practicing. He made us aware – not intentionally. Just through listening to him – that the reason he could do the things he did – he played – everything he did, he did it in every key. He would practice whatever this figure was, no matter how difficult it was, he'd practice it in every key possible. That's how he'd get such dexterity and was so fast with everything he did. I think that was before he and Dizzy knew each other, because he had been with Jay McShann, I think, at that time.

Burstein: That's right. Jay McShann discovered him in Kansas City.

Wilder: He was a nice fellow. They used to nickname him – they nicknamed him at that time "Indian," because at that time cigar stores always had a wooden Indian with the headdress outside, and he had a basket with wooden cigars in it. When Charlie Parker played the alto, he didn't hold it sideways like most alto – reed players do with a saxophone. He held it out in front of him and played this way. The guys used to say he looked like a cigar store Indian with his alto saxophone straight out in front of him, and they nicknamed him Indian at that time.

Burstein: So this is before he got nicknamed Bird.

Wilder: Yeah, this is before Bird. Yeah, this is before that.

Burstein: Do you know where that came from?

Wilder: I'm not sure. I'm really not sure.

Burstein: I've heard a lot of different stories.

Wilder: I wouldn't venture to say, because I don't really know, and I was rather surprised when I found out that he was Bird, when I first heard it.

Burstein: When you heard him in the early '40s, was he someone who you wanted then to try to play like? Or was his style so personal that you thought, this is not a style I can imitate?

Wilder: Oh no. We thought he was – he was a swinging player. There was no question about it. And there was a little saxophone player, an alto player, who was with the group that Frank Wess was playing with. Frank Wess was there, also, with another little group. Jimmy Golden was the piano player. He had a group, and Frank was the tenor player in that group. He had – Frank was in there. He had another – I think Frank was playing alto.

No, he was playing tenor. That's right. And little Gip – there was a fellow named Gip. They called him Little Gip, who played, oddly enough, somewhat similarly to Charlie Parker, although they had never seen each other. This is just a coincidence. They're coming from two different parts of the country, and they both had similar styles. They used to compete with each other. They'd lock horns and play. That was Jimmy Golden's group. That was when we first became aware of Charlie Parker. He was something.

And Chris Columbus. Remember the drummer with – his last name was – Sonny Criss was with Basie. His father was nicknamed Christopher Columbus. He was a great drummer. He used to play at Minton's nightclub. He was the house drummer there. He was also in Annapolis, playing with a band down there. I forget. I don't know whether he was playing with Banjo Bernie or not, but he was working there too.

They had a lot of guys that would work down there, because they had a couple clubs. We worked in the Leigham Hotel, the group that I was with.

Burstein: Who would come to – why was there such a lot going on in Annapolis? Was there an Army base there?

Wilder: No. It was close to Baltimore. I don't know whether they permitted drinking in Annapolis and didn't in Baltimore or something. It had something to do with that, because there were several clubs in Annapolis, and it seems that people were able to get away with things in Annapolis that they couldn't get away with in Baltimore, because most of the patrons came from Baltimore or Washington, since it was halfway between the two.

Burstein: Were there clubs in Philadelphia too, or was it mostly the Lincoln Theater?

Wilder: Oh there were clubs in Philadelphia. My father used to play at some of them. Billy Daniels was one of the big stars that used to sing in one of the clubs in Philly. There were a number of clubs in Philadelphia. Some of the black hotels also had bands.

Burstein: Were you in New York when 52nd Street was *the* street?

Wilder: Yeah, but you know, I never went to those places. First of all, I don't drink. But I never went to any of those places. I was never in one of those clubs. Sometimes, when people are talking about 52nd Street – of course I was in the service too, from '43 to '46, and that was when it was really at its peak. But even after that. I played in Birdland a few times. I played there with Basie's band, and I used to play in there sometimes on the Monday night, which was the off night for the big band. They would put together combinations.

Burstein: That's interesting. You never went to 52nd Street.

Wilder: No. It's funny, because, like I said, I didn't drink and even – first of all, I don't smoke, and the smoke used to drive me crazy.

Burstein: Those are two things that could be difficult as a jazz musician, is not to smoke cigarettes, because always at the clubs . . . .

Wilder: That's true, because most of – not most. I would venture to say about 65% of the fellows I worked with did smoke.

Burstein: This is kind of a tough question. What, for you, describes swing? What – when a band – with a swinging band, what would that mean to you?

Wilder: To me, like I said before, when the band is swinging, that's when you can't suppress the urge to shake your head or pat your feet. It isn't always the tune. It has a lot sometimes to do with the volume or the particular mood they're playing in. But, more than that, it has to do with the tempo, if it's the right tempo. Like when I worked at the Savoy Ballroom, they had the Savoy Sultans. This was a little rag-tail group. They played well together, but this was not a group of finesse musicians. They played raucously sometimes. The one thing that they had that nobody else seemed to understand, was that they knew just what tempos to play things in that would get everybody shaking his head or patting his foot and dancing on a dance floor. You could go in there with a big band that had a great name, and these five or six guys – six or seven, whatever the number they were – would out-swing everybody, because they had the right tempo. Some other band would be in there just blowing the walls down and wouldn't get the response that they got.

When I worked with Lucky Millinder there, that was one of – that was his forte. He knew the tempo. He might stand out there and shake his head, or clap his hand to himself, for a few minutes. He was making sure that when he hit that tempo and that band started, it was the right tempo. You could tell. Everybody would get up off the chairs and start dancing. It was tremendous.

Burstein: Wow. Can you – it might not be something that is easy to do, but can you give me an example of what a tune would sound like that was just a little off that tempo, and what that right tempo might be? Or is that hard to do as an individual?

Wilder: I don't know. Say, for instance, Erskine Hawkins used to play *Tuxedo Junction.* If they played – some bands would play [Wilder sings the main melody at a brisk tempo]. They would play it [Wilder sings it again at a more relaxed tempo], and – you're already – your head is going up and down. They would – that would be the difference. They would be playing the same notes.

Apropos of that, one time we were doing a Treasury commercial. Jackie Gleason's conductor, he was conducting this thing. They told him in the booth – Block, Ray Block – they said, "Mr. Block, we need about another two minutes of music. Could you play something that takes about two or two-and-a-half minutes?" Ray said, "Yeah. Get up number 68" or something. We got up 68, and he counted it off, 1-2, 1-2-3-4 [Wilder sings *Li'l Darlin'* at a very fast tempo]. It was *Li'l Darlin'.* He – to him, they needed two-and-

a-half minutes of music. It didn't make any difference to him. He didn't realize what the tune – the tempo. It was just so long as it didn't go over the two-and-a-half minutes. We were – in that band – Leon [?] was in that band. He turned around, looked at me, and said [Wilder gasps], and we just started laughing through the whole thing. Ray never understood until after it was over that this was supposed to have been at about a fourth of this tempo. But that's an example of what the difference is. And if you had that right tempo, it just got to everybody. There was just something about it, sort of like an electric prod of some kind that got everybody going.

Burstein: I could feel it just when you sang that. You're right. The first time it was like, this is nice. The second time it was . . . .

Wilder: Yeah. See the notes flying by, and the next time, it's just relaxed everybody. It was great.

Burstein: Is that something that as a musician, you would be able to – as a player, you would be able to contribute to? Or it was the leader who set that pace, and that was it?

Wilder: The leader can do it. Sometimes the musicians in the band might have a better concept of what the tempo should be, and they'll tell the leader. "I think we should play this a little faster," or "I think if we play it a little bit slower, it'll be more effective." Usually he'll take the word of the musicians.

Burstein: Does the rhythm section really drive the band?

Wilder: It can. It can drive the band, make the band really perform well, or it can drive the band up the wall if it's the kind of rhythm section where people in the rhythm section tend to go their own separate ways. You get a lot of that these days, because you have amplified bass violins now, the Fender basses and things, so that by the flick of a dial, the bass player can cancel the whole orchestra, if he so desires to do it. That is something I get a little frustrated with sometimes, because with the rock era coming in and all the amplified instruments, of course the bass became very important to that, and sometimes it goes to excess in the regular bands, because it's supposed to be a part of the band. It isn't supposed to be leading the band by the nose. If the bass is too loud, you don't feel the pulse of the band. It's out front. So you're more or less following it, rather than it being a part and giving you a boost when you're playing. That's one of the things that I – that disturbs me sometimes, when the volume is too loud. Or if you get a drummer who feels that he has to embellish every open space that there is. That's another thing that can drive you up the wall, because it doesn't make the band swing. It tends to make the band stumble and become somewhat erratic.

In this Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra we had, they had a rhythm section that was content – until their turn to solo or something came up, they just kept the rhythm steady, as steady as a rock. It's funny how you – it's such a solid foundation, that you, as an improviser – as someone who's improvising on top of it – you find that you're almost limitless in what you can do, because you're not impeded by interruptions of the rhythm

section, somebody hitting – dropping bombs, as we call it, and breaking up the flow of that simple rhythmic background. It makes a difference to me. It makes a big difference.

Burstein: To have that support rather than fighting it.

Wilder: Yeah. It's like you're building something, but the foundation has to be at least stable. If the foundation isn't stable, when you get to the top, it's going to topple over. A house will do that if it doesn't have a solid foundation. In an orchestra, it should be the same way. The rhythm section should be the rhythm section, and we build on that, rather than have the rhythm section play spasmodically and everybody doing his own thing whenever he decides to do it.

Burstein: If you think about a classical model too, that's the same thing. The cellos and the basses, they may not have the flashiest parts, but they . . . .

Wilder: They give the orchestra stability. They really do.

Burstein: Right. How about in terms of your own playing? Is there a different approach for you when you're a leader as opposed to when you're in a section, a different approach to how you're playing?

Wilder: No, no, no. Not really. I try to play, I think, the same way whether I'm the leader or just someone playing in a section. I try to think of something that's a little different, try to create something that might be different, might reflect my thinking, but other than that, it's basically the same.

Burstein: Are there moments that you remember from your career of nights where you were playing where it was just – everything was right?

Wilder: I have had a few of those. I've had a few nights like that and a few instances. I remember one time down in Sarasota. I was playing with John Bunch. We were playing *Georgia.* That's a very nice piece of music. At the time, while I was playing it, I was thinking, when I was in the service in the South, there was so much racial friction, there was so much tension, and I kept saying to some of the fellows that I knew, and thinking of my own, that one day, if we had a Southern president, it might make a difference in the country, that we would stop thinking in terms of the Mason-Dixon line as a divider of the North and the South. At this point, Jimmy Carter was the President. I was standing there playing this thing and thinking to myself how wonderful it might be if he can get some of his things going, because already things had begun to get a little better with him as the President. I started thinking in my mind, how can I make this thing nicer, prettier, and so forth. Everything I did, it just seemed, went perfectly. And John Bunch was – it was almost as if we were clones. Wherever I went, he went. We played it. When we got through, I was so overwhelmed, and the people were applauding like mad. Evidently they had understood the feeling of it. I couldn't face them. I just had tears pouring out, just running down my cheeks. This is the first time I've explained to anybody what it is. "Why? What's wrong?" It was too difficult to say to an audience that I was thinking

about Jimmy Carter and about the political thing in this music, but that was exactly what I was thinking. It was unbelievable. It seemed like whatever I wanted to do, I did, and it just came off right. And there have been other times when I've had that good fortune.

Burstein: Where what you've been feeling has communicated itself.

Wilder: Yeah, even with this orchestra at Lincoln Center. In the beginning I was having problems, because physically this was harder music than I had played in many years. I had been playing with smaller groups or playing at jazz parties, where even though you're a part of a group, you play what you want to play, and you're controlled by your own ability of the moment. If you can't play something, you just don't play it. You play something else. But here, you had to play what's there. Physically, it was a little rough at the beginning, but towards the end it got – I had quite a few nights where everything went just right. I would come off. I felt so good about it.

Burstein: What is it like now to play? You've had a career that's 50 years – more than 50 years long. Is it still something that gives you the same pleasure as it did when you started?

Wilder: Yeah, I still get a great deal of enjoyment out of it, and I still have a great deal of enthusiasm for it.

Burstein: I can hear that.

Wilder: I try to find things. You were asking me yesterday about the tone thing. I realized that when I was younger, I used to listen to violin players. I used to listen to Fritz Kreisler, and I would hear the way he phrased things. And I would listen to clarinet players. I noticed that they had this big, round, open sound. When I would practice these clarinet things that I had in the Klosé book and things like that, I would try to remember how I heard this clarinet player play, or some nice fancy thing that I heard Fritz Kreisler or somebody play. I would try doing those things. One time on the *Cavett Show* we were playing [Wilder sings a classical melody]. We were just playing around with it, because Yehudi Menuhin was on the show. Bobby said to me, "Improvise something." So I started improvising around it, but always trying to keep somewhat close to the original form of it. When we finished, Yehudi Menuhin said, "That's remarkable, to hear somebody improvise something like that." It was a very flattering thing to me. But when you're playing those things, you try to stay close to that idiom. That's what I was saying. Think in that idiom. I was playing with sort of a jazz interpretation of it, but not getting so far away from it that you lost the idea of what it was basically supposed to be.

Burstein: So that you have the thread of where you're going.

Wilder: Yeah. That's the idea. I go out – very often I'll go to Patelson's, or some place like that, and look through their trumpet literature and see if I can find some other things. Sometimes I'll find some oboe thing or something like that. I'll go home. I'll say, this

looks challenging. I'll go home and transpose it and practice it. It keeps my interest going, and it also reminds me that maybe I should practice a little bit more.

Burstein: That's a challenge, though . . .

Wilder: It's fun.

Burstein: . . . to take music written for one instrument and . . . .

Wilder: It's fun, and I don't get bored. Sometimes – I have a lot of – I play flugelhorn sometimes. When I practice the flugelhorn – I like the darker quality of the flugelhorn. So I have a lot of french horn books, a lot of french horn excerpts. I practice french horn parts, which also gives me a chance to practice the D trumpet things, and the E-flat and the F horn things, and all that. I practice those with a flugelhorn. Then I go to visit friends of mine, Margaret and Chappie Diederich. Margaret's a harpist. She was one of the busiest harpists here in the city. I take the flugelhorn and the french horn parts over there, she accompanies me, and I'm a french horn player. I have a great time.

Burstein: So it gives you a chance to be a little bit different than what you usually do.

Wilder: Yeah, and when I'm playing the flugelhorn, somebody will say, "That sounds different," because I'm thinking of french horn. I try to think that way.

Burstein: But what you were saying is when you are playing the trumpet, sometimes you're thinking violin or clarinet.

Wilder: Oh yeah. If I see certain passages that I have to play, and I think, how would a clarinet player phrase it? How would he play this? What kind of a sound would he try to get? Or the violin player: what kind of dexterity would he use in the flighty thing here? You try to get that lightness and relate it to that.

Burstein: When you are improvising, do you have a clear idea of where you're going, or do you sometimes surprise yourself in terms of . . . ?

Wilder: Sometimes I'll surprise myself. In fact sometimes I'll be playing something and it'll lead in a certain direction. Then I immediately try to say, how can I develop this?, which is what most players are doing anyway. You try to come up with something that – you've gotten off on a tangent that you didn't really expect to go off on, but then you try to say, how can I work back? How do I get back to this? It becomes a challenge. You have fun with it.

Burstein: You're doing it in the moment. It's not like you can . . . .

Wilder: Sometimes you play terribly too. You play very badly sometimes.

Burstein: But I guess that's all about taking risks. If you don't push yourself a little bit, then you never – and if you're not willing to fall down.

What technically has been the most challenging for you through the years, in terms of approaching your instrument? What have you found to be the most challenging thing to master about the trumpet?

Wilder: I think the endurance. I have always have somewhat of a problem with endurance. I guess it's because there are so many periods during which I am not playing at all, long gaps sometimes. I practice at home. There's a big difference in practicing at home and actually playing, because again, when you're at home, it's like being a weightlifter. You lift only those weights that you feel you can handle for the day. When it gets beyond that, you say, I won't bother with those. It's the same thing with my practicing sometimes. I practice, and when I get to the point where I get bored with it or I don't feel that I'm making any progress, then you put the instrument down. But when you're working and you're confronted with something that requires a little more physical stamina, you somehow get it or find it, and you're able to get through it. If you did that – if you were subjected to that often enough, it wouldn't be a problem. But that's one of the problems that I've had for many years.

Burstein: Just because you're not playing as regularly on stage.

Wilder: Yeah. When I was a kid, I had some respiratory problems. I think there's sort of a hangover from that.

Burstein: Was this something that helped the respiratory problems? Or was it a real . . . ?

Wilder: I think that playing a brass instrument, a wind instrument, did.

Burstein: I was talking to a doctor who does rehabilitation for musicians. He said he thinks the most important thing for music schools is to tell their kids to spend as much time in the gym as they do in the practice room.

Wilder: Yeah, that's true. That's another thing that Wynton's group does. These guys are athletic. They play football. They play basketball. They won't – they can't pass a basketball court or football field without – they carry a football with them. They're out throwing it. It's good. I used to play baseball. I played baseball in Central Park from the time – I was with the original Broadway show league.

Burstein: I was going to ask you, did you play in any of the jazz leagues or the Broadway show leagues?

Wilder: Yeah. I was in that when it started, when it was formed by John Effrat, who conceived the idea of having each theater have a ball team and playing in Central Park for fun. I was out there. I was with the Cole Porter show, *Silk Stockings,* and we won the championship that year. I got a batting trophy from Mel Allen. Some of the other guys on

the team did. We had some girls on the team too. Joe Harris was on the team. Artie Rubin, who could hit a ball out of the park on demand, almost. We had – Art Lund was playing with us. It was fantastic. We had some wonderful people out there.

Burstein: Did any of the bands you were with have baseball teams?

Wilder: Basie had a baseball team. We used to play ball. Harry James had a team. He was a baseball fanatic. We used to play even in Les Hite's band. We didn't have an organized time. We liked to play ball, and sometimes you'd meet another band on the road, and they'd say, let's have a scrub game. They'd have a baseball game. Cab [Calloway] had a pretty good team. He was a guy – he didn't like to lose. So most of his guys gave up after a while, because if they lost, they were in trouble.

But it was a lot of fun. I remember something very flattering for me. Basie's band was going up to Bear Mountain. We went up to Bear Mountain to play the bartender's at the Downbeat – at Birdland. I'm saying the Downbeat – at Birdland. When we got up there, Joe Williams – he was a good ballplayer too. I was playing – I had left the band, but Basie invited me to go along. So I was practicing at third base. I used to play third base or shortstop. They were hitting balls, ground balls, down, and I was in rare form. I was catching them. The guys, the bartenders said they didn't want me to play, because I was a ringer. That's a real flattering thing, that they thought I was a ringer. I wasn't that good, but evidently they were that bad. And I couldn't play. I didn't play the game.

Burstein: Oh, no, you had to watch it.

Wilder: But I had a lot of fun. I played ball in Central Park. I played even when the *Cavett Show* came on. We had a ball team. We played the *Daily News* team. These guys had played together for so long, they were like a professional team. One of the guys – I was playing second base this time, and one of guys spiked me. I said, that's it. That's not – he was just showing off. He ran into me and hit me with his spikes. I said, no more. I quit.

Burstein: Don't need that.

Is there something – this is kind of a crazy question, but is there something similar to the teamwork in playing baseball and the teamwork in playing in a band?

Wilder: It is, to a great extent, yeah, because when you're playing ball, the longer you play with the people on your team, the more you begin to understand what they move – what moves they make. Like, for instance, I used to play third base, and I would throw the ball to first base to Art Lund, who was about 6′-5″, and Art said – whatever – the way I would throw the ball, for some reason it tended to go up as – the closer it got to the first baseman, the higher it would be. Art said, "You're the first little guy I ever saw who can throw a ball and almost throw it over my head. When it starts out, it's at ground level, and it keeps climbing." He said, "What are you doing with the ball? Can't you just throw it straight?" But he got to the point where he knew how I would throw it. He could

anticipate where that ball was going when I would throw from third base to first. You do that. It's the same thing in music, the same way. The longer you play with the fellows in your section and in the band in general, the more you understand the way they phrase and the way they'll play in a section. You relate to it.

Burstein: Were you – did you ever take part in cutting contests where there would be two bands that compete with each other?

Wilder: Yeah. I've been a few times where the bands played opposite each other. I never really approved of that. I always thought it was kind of corny, because it tended to pit one group against the other. I never – I just didn't think music was that way. And yet they did it, and it was – whoever conceived the idea had exactly that in mind, that he's going to pit one band against the other. Then, at the end, somebody will say this band is better than that one, or this one is better. Actually, it wasn't always the case. There were some cases where Duke Ellington's band was certainly better than a lot of other bands, Jimmie Lunceford's band, but it wasn't always that they were so much better. It was that their styles were more distinctive than another one. It didn't necessarily mean they were that much better. Because Duke Ellington had Johnny Hodges. He had Lawrence Brown. He had people like that. Russell Procope, Barney Bigard, and all these different people. But then you had people like Benny Carter and the other players around who were certainly their equal. So you couldn't really say that they were that much better. They were so much different, is what it was.

Burstein: It sounds like you think the idea of competition and music just doesn't quite work.

Wilder: Yeah, I don't think it – to me, I don't like to think – because music is not physical. It's not something that should be thought of in terms of a competitiveness, although when you have an orchestra, of course, if you are in a symphony orchestra, you're trying to make that orchestra as good as it can possibly be, and if there's another orchestra that's better, you try to bring the level of yours up to them. But it's not a matter of just a pure competition. Like, for instance, the New York Philharmonic is one of the greatest orchestras, but then the Chicago Symphony is too, and many others. And yet, if you listen to them often enough, you can hear differences in the different orchestras.

Burstein: And that's – I see often in classical music, a lot of the competitions for pianist emphasize technique over almost anything else, because that's one thing that you can measure . . .

Wilder: Yeah, you can, right.

Burstein: . . . while the feeling of a band would be something that you can't compare the one to the other.

Wilder: It's completely different, right.

Burstein: I think in terms of my questions that they gave me and the questions that I had – ah, one last thing. I wanted to ask you a bit about what you've been doing the past couple of years. I know you've been playing with both Dick Hyman and with Peter Duchin. I wanted to ask you about what those experiences are like.

Wilder: With Peter Duchin, it's pretty cut and dry. We do basically the same things wherever we go. We have a certain routine, because the repertoire that he plays are the things that people dance to, and he plays them in a certain order. Sometimes he plays requests.

Burstein: So it's almost like playing a Broadway show, where you do one thing. You've got the order down.

Wilder: Yeah. It's sort of an order. We don't always play them in the same order, but we play basically the same music all the time.

With Dick Hyman, it's unpredictable. You don't know what Dick is going to write. Dick can come up with some very complicated things. He multi-talented and has an inexhaustible source of energy, and he's very creative. As I say, with Dick you don't know what you are going to play when he shows up. That's challenging. That's nice. It puts you to the test. And he has a great – he's very loyal, extremely loyal, and he's a nice person. He's got a wonderful wife, and I guess that is one of the things that helps him, his family.

I say – there's an expression that's something that I've come up with lately, and I just happened to be thinking of it one time with regard to these people whom I have so much affection for, that there are very few people who have experienced what I call the goose pimples of love and friendship and appreciation. There are some people who you love so dearly that when you see them, you get goose pimples. There are friends you have that when you come in contact to them, without even – all of a sudden, you've got goose pimples. And with your appreciation – you hear music or someone says something to you, and you get goose pimples from that. So I say that they're the goose pimples of love and friendship and appreciation.

Burstein: Yeah. I know what you're talking about. If you were to talk to someone who was getting started in music today, what would you want to say to them in terms of what a life in music is like?

Wilder: I would say to them not to be – not to judge what their possibilities are by what other people have experienced, especially during this era, when things are pretty dark. Because I've gone to some colleges and spoken to some students and to their parents. It's frustrating to see these people, who are on the verge of graduating with music degrees and knowing that there is absolutely no place for them to ply their trade. Most of them – in fact I just spoke to some kids at the University of Iowa, who were saying – a couple of the girls there were saying that they have jobs to go to, not in music. They're getting degrees in music, but because there's no work in music, they have some other source of

endeavor – endeavor to go into. You think about that. That's very depressing. It could cause a lot of people, even though they've gotten their degrees in music, to just throw it out the window.

But things will change. Things will get better. During these depressed times, people really want to be entertained, and music is one of the things that tends to soothe the rough edges that they have to go through at this point. So if you don't just give up, and especially not to give up on yourself, because a lot of the hardships that you'll encounter are not your own fault. If you have enough faith in yourself and enough diligence to continue pursuing what you set out to do, you can achieve it. There are dark days. I've told any number of people, just when it seems to be as dark as it can possibly get, don't worry, soon a light comes on. Things get a little bit better. Because all of us have seen some really bad times. If you just don't give up on yourself and realize that you can survive, you get through it. Then you look back on it and say, my goodness, I'm glad I didn't quit at that point.

Burstein: Were there times in your own career where you wondered, can I keep going? It seems like . . . .

Wilder: There were times. I remember times, especially when Jimmie Lunceford died. I was very depressed at that time, because that orchestra was one that I was fond of, I was fond of him as a leader, and it was just beginning to get a response from the audience where the orchestra had begun to come together and really began to sound like the Lunceford band should have. With that, it just came to a halt. It was like, where do we go from here? I had so much confidence in him as a person and a business person that I didn't even think of – it never occurred to me that I might have to go elsewhere and seek work or anything. I'm here. That's it.

I also think how I mentioned to him one time – I asked Jimmie for a raise, and I mentioned to him that I felt that I should get a raise, because at this point I was 27 years old, and how much longer do I have in this business? This is exactly the way I put it, and I'm sure he got a chuckle out of it. He gave me the raise too, incidentally, and said, "I think you deserve it, because you asked me for it, and I think you've been helping in the band." Often I've thought about that. I was 27 years old and complaining about the fact that I was so old. Now I'm 39 and I'm . . . [laughter].

Burstein: At 27 you only had another 45 years ahead of you.

Wilder: Right. It's so funny when you think of it.

Burstein: Just to get to where you are right now.

Wilder: I'm saying, because in this business, how much longer do I have as a trumpet player?

Burstein: What is it that you're hoping for? Do you hope to keep playing?

Wilder: No, not really. I would like to be someplace where – I may start playing at the church. I belong to a Lutheran church on Fifth Avenue there, the Swedish church, the Seamens Church. I like the atmosphere there. They have a few other musicians. We were talking more recently about the possibility of maybe getting a little group together to play there on Sundays or something. I would like to do that. And just some leisure playing, something that would entertain – give somebody else some joy from it. That I'd like to do. But I don't like – I will not do any competitive playing. I don't like going out where I've got to compete with people. I just want to play for the joy of it.

Burstein: You've given a lot of people a lot of joy over the years.

Wilder: I've had – they've given me a lot too. I really have had a lot of fun. I try to – whatever – if I speak to young kids or people like that, I always tell them, don't get involved with the narcotics things. Whatever you do, stay away from that. You try to call their attention to the fact that the fun they have is what they – is greatest when they're having it with their schoolmates and things like that, the little things they laugh about, the little jokes they play – pranks they play on each other. That's the joy of being what they are, not sticking a needle in your arms, smoking marijuana, or becoming a drunkard. That's not it. That's all detrimental and does nothing to enhance your life. It just tears you down. If they understand, as I say, that the fun is in what they're doing with each other and that kind of a thing, they may relate to that and realize, because a lot of the fun I've had has been just on that basis alone.

Burstein: You have a remarkably sunny view of the world and of your own – you are able to grab pleasure, it sounds like, from just about anything you do.

Wilder: Yeah, and I've been fortunate. I've really been fortunate. I've overcome a lot of adversity. I've been able to do it. You look back and say, let's not be mad with everybody, because here I am.

Burstein: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think you'd like to leave on this tape?

Wilder: I don't know. Maybe. I'm not sure. I had made a couple notes here, but they were just to remind me of some things, in the event that I didn't think about it.

Burstein: Take a look. If there's anything that I haven't – that we haven't covered. I'll put this on pause.

Wilder: I was approached by Herb Green, who was the conductor, and was asked, on behalf of the producers, if I would like to be the contractor of *Music Man,* that Broadway show. That would have been the first time they would have had a black contractor of a Broadway show. I was – at first was tempted to accept it, but I was told, make sure that I did not tell anybody that I had been approached about it. I said okay, and I never mentioned it to anybody. Within a week, I was getting calls from people saying, "I

understand you're going to be the contractor of *Music Man,* and could you hire . . . ?" These were – a lot of these fellows were fellows I had worked with in *Guys and Dolls* or in *Silk Stockings* and some of those things. I had been told specifically – I had been given a list of names of people that, if I became the contractor, that I should absolutely not hire, and these were some of the friends that I had worked with. Then I decided, it doesn't make sense for me to become the contractor, because supposing the show folds in a couple weeks or whatever, and I don't hire some of the people who have been helping me, who were good players, but for some reason or other they didn't want a lot of these fellows in the orchestra. I turned it down. I turned it down because of that.

Burstein: I can understand that, that that would just have been too difficult a decision.

Wilder: Oh, I was cutting my own throat.

I did – I don't know if I mentioned to you. I did – when *The Tonight Show* – I did that show as a substitute when – what's-his-name was there. Who was there? Before Jack Parr – Steve Allen.

Burstein: Steve Allen.

Wilder: When Steve Allen was there. He was in charge of it. I worked over there as a sub on that show. Then I . . . .

Burstein: What was that like?

Wilder: That as fun. Let's see. Who was conducting? Milton DeLugg was his conductor. Then I subbed over there when Jack Parr took over, with José Melis. Then when Steve Allen . . . .

Burstein: Was this when Clark Terry was in the band? Or did he . . . ?

Wilder: This was . . . .

Burstein: He joined later, I think.

Wilder: This was a couple times before Clark went on staff, he and Snooky Young. Then I was over there with Johnny Carson. I subbed on the Carson show with Skitch Henderson. So it's funny that I had done *The Tonight Show* from – with everybody that was on there. It's kind of amusing.

Burstein: And now Wynton Marsalis's brother is leading the band over there, Branford Marsalis.

Wilder: Yeah, Branford.

Then I used to do the United Cerebral Palsy thing with Tony Cabot. We did Howard Cosell's sports show with Elliot Lawrence. He had a television show. We did that.

Burstein: At ABC.

Wilder: Yeah. We did that. We used to do it at the CBS studio, at the Ed Sullivan Theater, but it was an ABC show. We also did – used to do – I did – what's his name?

Burstein: You know what I didn't ask you about? – I'm sorry. I should let you – . . .

Wilder: Oh no, no, no.

Burstein: . . . is your new album that just came out. You did one other album of your own.

Wilder: I did – actually there's two others.

Burstein: Two others.

Wilder: For Columbia Records. I did – I've done three, actually, because I did a couple for Savoy Records. Then I did two for Columbia. Then the one with Benny Carter. Oh, and I did one with Joe Newman. We also did one together. Joe Newman and I did one together. It's called *Together Again.* Then I just did this one.

Burstein: What's this latest one? What did you choose to put on that?

Wilder: We have a few things that – I cannot remember actually what. I should have brought that with me. I had it. There was one of them sitting on the table when I left. We did a variety of things. We did *Far Away Places.* We did *What a Wonderful World.* I would really like that as a tribute to Louis Armstrong, because I think the way he did it is so touching, so beautiful. We did *Answer Me, My Love,* the Nat Cole thing.

Burstein: How did you choose it? How did this album come about?

Wilder: Ed Berger and Benny Carter thought that I should make one, particularly Ed Berger, who's a very dear friend and one of the most compassionate guys in the world. He just kept saying, we've got to do this and we've got to do it, until finally we did it. Then he's been running around like a chicken with his head cut off, pushing this thing. If you knew the amount of legwork that he's put into it. I would have given up long ago. I would have said, "Look, Ed, let's just play it a home and forget about it." He has not given up a bit. He just stuck with it.

Burstein: What was it like to do? Is this a solo album? Or do you have a regular . . . ?

Wilder: I have – there are other fellows. It's a quintet.

Burstein: What was it like to put the album together?

Wilder: It was fun. We did it over at RCA on 44th Street. It was nice. I would like to do an album in the future where we took time – had more time for preparation. We didn't have as much time to prepare this as I had wished we had. I think it might have come off a little better had we had more time.

Burstein: If you'd had a chance to rehearse it.

Wilder: Yeah, but then it's hard to do that too, because people are busy.

Burstein: Yeah, and time is precious these days.

Wilder: Yeah, it is that.

Let's see if I – something I – I have two things here I should have mentioned. We talking sometimes about the racial aspect of some of these things. When we did – when I did *The Most Happy Fella*, Frank Loesser, who was, incidentally, one of the most remarkable people. He was the most down-to-earth – one of the most down-to-earth people I've ever run into, with that much talent. When we did *Most Happy Fella,* he decided that he should throw a big party at the 21 Club. They had never – they didn't have music in the 21 Club. So he sent me over as his emissary to find out where we would be able to put a small group of musicians. I was the contractor and the leader of this group. I went in. I went in the front door. When I got in, they said, "What are you doing coming in that front door?" I said, "I'm only here – I'm Mr. Loesser's contractor and bandleader for the party for the cast," whatever the night was. He said, "You go out of here. You go around that alley – that driveway there – that walkway, and you go through the kitchen. You come in here." So I said okay. I went around, went through the kitchen and talked to somebody. They were really somewhat obnoxious. So I got on the phone. I called Frank Loesser's office and talked to his secretary. He got – she got him, and he said, "Okay, don't worry about it. I'm going to make a phone call. Go back tomorrow." He called up and said, "Mr. Wilder is not only my bandleader and my contractor. He's one of my guests. If you don't think you can handle it, we'll take the party elsewhere." I went back, and it was like everybody was bowing and scraping all over the place. We just had a few musicians, and of course we went in like everybody else. That was the situation over there.

I had another thing when I was doing *The Barbara McNair Show* at ABC. June Valli, the singer, was on. They wanted – she was doing *The Man with the Horn.* They wanted [Wilder sings the melody]. I was to play next to her. All of a sudden, the guy producing it decided, oops, this is not going to look too good. We have a white singer and a black musician standing next to her. They decided that we couldn't do this. They decided that I should play behind a curtain, which I did, and they had the contractor stand next to her with a trumpet, pretending that he was playing. This is how stupid some of those things were. Here was a show on which Barbara was dancing with a choreographer who was white. Nobody even gave any thought to that. This was a performance. But I never got to play standing next to her. I was behind the curtain, playing this solo. Unbelievable.

Burstein: It really is unbelievable.

Wilder: But that was a long time ago too.

Burstein: Let's hope things are different now.

What was Frank Loesser like? I didn't ask you about him.

Wilder: Frank Loesser. He had a great sense of humor. He loved musicians, being one himself, and his brother was a first-rate musician. He just – whenever – as long as his music was played the way he thought it should be played, he was the happiest man in the world, the happiest man. He's so creative, and he was so nice to us. When we finished the show, and he saw it was going to be a big hit up in Boston, he threw a party. He came with Scotch, a carton of Scotch for the whole band. He was just tremendous.

Burstein: What is it like for you? – in the past year or so, *Guys and Dolls* and *Most Happy Fella* have been revived here in New York – to look at these shows that you founded . . . .

Wilder: I have not seen either one of them yet, though.

Burstein: Aha.

Wilder: I love both of them. The *Guys and Dolls* was one of the funniest shows I had ever seen or played, and *Most Happy Fella* was one of the most beautiful shows musically, because it was an operetta, and the music – it was orchestra music. It was such a joy. We had such a great time with that. The musicians had so much pride in that orchestra. Go in, and Tony – he used to be an oboe player. He was up at the Met. Why can't I remember his name? A wonderful musician. At any rate, he would say, "Let's do an opening night performance." Every night he would come in and he'd do that, and we would try. We'd really try. It was really a challenge.

Burstein: Were you there when the show was getting started? Did you go . . . ?

Wilder: I went on the road with it. That was the second show I went on the road with.

Burstein: Wow. What was it like to have a show actually being created? I mean, the score was there, but was a lot changed?

Wilder: Yeah. It was a lot of fun to see that, because you saw it begin – it begins to develop, and you'd see there were spots where it got weak and where it didn't seem as if it was going anywhere. They would replace some people. Finally, it began to come together. It began to get some strength. Then you could feel, it's got momentum. It's going to go the other way. But in the beginning, *Silk Stockings* – or rather, *Most Happy Fella* was kind of weak. It was kind of weak. We had – they had a fellow who was

replace by Art Lund. He was an opera singer. His concept – he would sing [Wilder sings, "Joey, Joey, Joey," and then hums the continuation of this melody]. That was the thing that he sang, but he sang it so prissily that it didn't have the effect that it was supposed to have. Because Art Lund, he came in, and here's this big, virile guy, and he's singing, "Joey, Joey, Joey" with this emphasis, and it just made a big difference. It was so romantic and everything. You hated to see someone lose the spot, but it made quite a difference. And they made a few other replacements too. Mona Paulee from San Francisco Opera was with it.

Burstein: With *Silk Stockings* you also went out on the road as it was being . . . .

Wilder: Yes I did.

Burstein: What was that like? Did Cole Porter go out with you when you were . . . ?

Wilder: No, he did not. He came to Philadelphia, I seem to remember. He had people who were working with it, to see that things went right. Of course you had Sy Feuer and Ernie Martin. Sy Feuer, who had been a trumpet player, he's a fine musician. He had his concept. He was a guy that could see where things needed to be pulled together, and he did. He was very instrumental in getting – in the success of those shows.

Burstein: Were there – when you were with some of the big bands, were there tunes that were new that you saw grow and turn into what they would be?

Wilder: I don't know. I think that I wasn't that aware of it. We would play some things that we enjoyed playing, and some things that we didn't like to play. They had a thing – in some of the bands, we had some guys that didn't like a certain arrangement. What they would do, they would take that part – take their part, and tear it up or throw it out the window of the bus as we're going along. We'd get to the next town, and the next time that tune was called, we'd go to play it. He'd say, "There are four or five parts missing." So we couldn't play it. That would be the end of that. They used to kid – this mythical figure was Johnny Barracuda. He was the one who would somehow descend on these bad parts and tear them up and throw them away.

If somebody wore a hat – like Lionel Hampton used to wear a hat. He'd have a hat like this. Instead of it going this way, he'd have it on his head. He wouldn't realize he had a hat on. Some of the guys would say, "I think before the night is over, Barracuda will have that hat." And sure enough, before the night was over, he'd go to sleep or something. They'd take that hat and throw it off the bus.

Dinah Washington one time was – she had just joined the band, Lionel's band. We were traveling. We were very conscious of the way we looked, traveling. She had these house slippers, bedroom slippers, like made of rabbit fur or something. The guys said, "That really is a shabby looking pair of slippers she has on." Somebody said, "Don't worry about it. Barracuda will have one of them before the night is over." The train is going 90

miles an hour, and somebody went to the door and threw only one of them off. They had such ridiculous things.

Burstein: It sounds like people knew how to have a good time wherever they were.

Wilder: They did. Hysterical.

Burstein: We're out of tape here. We've got two minutes left. Thank you so much.

Wilder: Aw, Julie, you're welcome. If this is a success, it's all attributable to you.

Burstein: Not at all.

Wilder: It really is.

Burstein: Not at all. This has been terrific.

Wilder: Great.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)