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JAMES LOUIS “J.J.” JOHNSON
NEA Jazz Master (1996)

Interviewee: James Louis “J.J.” Johnson (January 22, 1924 - February 4, 2001)
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Baker: This is Saturday, February 26, 1994 and we are in the home of J.J. Johnson in Indianapolis, Indiana. This is Lida Baker and the other two people who you will hear on this tape are J.J. Johnson and David Baker. We’ll be starting now.

Johnson: Okay.

Baker: J.J., to start with, could you tell me a little bit about your dad, what he did and what his interests were and if he had any particular interest in music.

Johnson: My dad was quite a man. I remember him with a great deal of love and what not. He worked very hard at the freight house. They called it the freight house. It was really like a freight station where freight was transferred from one large freight car to another large freight car. Railroads were prevalent in those days and what not. His actual manual labor was that he would – on these very large industrial dollies, they would load them up, almost like – it looked like to the ceiling and pull – manually, physically, pull these loaded dollies from one freight car to another freight car, transferring merchandise and boxes and large cartons and crates of industrial tools or whatever from one freight car to another. He did that for, I’d say, a good fifteen, twenty years. Finally, he was kicked

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upstairs – da-da-da-dah – so that he was like a platform supervisor with a clipboard, whereas the other guys did all the pulling of the dollies loaded with heavy freight. He just stood there with his clipboard and checked things on and off and what not. So he did better in his last years before retiring at the freight house.

He had no musical interests that I can recall, other than I think at one point he sang in the church choir. He was very active at First Baptist Church. I believe that was the name of the Baptist church that he was active in for a number of years. [It was New Baptist Church.] The interesting thing, if I can inject this right here, is that my mother was Methodist [and] my dad was Baptist. The churches that they attended were right across the street from each other. I always thought that was interesting. My mother went to this large Methodist church – Phillips Temple – and they both were very active as far as going to church on a regular basis. They would both go to church. My dad would go across the street to the First Baptist Church, a small church, and my mother would climb up all these stairs to Phillips Temple. But in any case, my dad had no particular musical interests whatsoever.

He was an excellent horseshoe player. He and his cronies played horseshoes. He loved to play horseshoes, and he was very good at it. Another thing he was very good at that I recall with a great deal of fondness is that he was a good skater. As a matter of fact, he went to Douglas Park Skating Arena and he was a skating instructor there for a number of years. He taught people how to skate. That was one of his hobbies and sideline activities, Douglas Park Skating Rink. Other than that he was just a hard-working man who did his work and came home. He would take vacations and take us on trips periodically – the family, that is – because being a railroad worker, they got free passes to travel. We traveled a lot in my childhood because my dad was able to get these free documents that entitled the workers who worked for the railroad to travel – by train, of course. This is the New York Central. We went many, many places just on that premise. Many times we didn't even know anybody in the city where we were going. We were going just to be going on the train, and it was a great deal of fun.

Baker: Where was your dad from?

Johnson: My dad was a native Indianapolis. He was born here in Indianapolis, Indiana. My mother was from West Point, Mississippi. My dad was born here in Indianapolis. My best recollection is [that] his dad and mother were born here in Indianapolis.

DAVID BAKER: Jay, let me ask you, when your dad traveled and you guys [the family] traveled, how did that affect having to travel in the Jim Crow car? Were you exempted from that as a result of your dad having the passes?

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Johnson: No. The Jim Crow thing was the Jim Crow thing, and my best recollection is [that] we just accepted it.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, well, there were not a lot of alternatives.

Johnson: No, there weren't *any* alternatives, right? So the black people were in one section and the white people were in another section. It was just a way of life.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Baker: How did your mom and your dad meet?

Johnson: Hmmm. I'm not quite sure that I ever knew the details of that question, Lida, I'm sorry to say. I'm sorry to disappoint you there.

Baker: Oh, heavens. It's not a disappointment. I was just wondering if your mom came to Indianapolis from Mississippi when she was an adult or if she was a child when she came to Indianapolis.

Johnson: You know what's interesting? I'll tell you who knows and we should find out from her – my sister.

Baker: Rosemary?

Johnson: She's very good on family history. I'm terrible. My memory disappoints me so often and so many times it's embarrassing. My sister is very sharp on remembering things like what you are asking about. How did my mom and dad ever meet? She'll tell you. I've got to find that out myself.

Baker: And once your mom and dad married and settled down and started a family, you were the first child in the family to be born?

Johnson: Right. Uh huh.

Baker: And where did you live in Indianapolis at that time?

Johnson: My earliest recollection, if you want to call it that, of living anywhere was 2337 Indianapolis Avenue. I don't think I was born there, but I remember that because we lived there a very long time at 2337 Indianapolis Avenue. Later on there's another address that – we moved four or five times in my lifetime that I can recall as a family. The only two addresses that stick out in my mind are 2337 Indianapolis Avenue and 1825

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North Capitol, in later years. Right across from the hospital.

Baker: Tell me a little bit about your mom – what she liked to do and if she had any interest in music.

Johnson: My mother, again, was very active in the church. She did not have an interest in music, per se. She was an excellent seamstress. She liked to sew. That was her passion, if you will. She was very good at it. She made all of her own clothes. She made all of my sister's clothes. She made clothes for many members of the family because she loved to do it. She was very good at that. What she did to supplement my dad's income was she worked as a domestic for wealthy people who lived out here on the north side [of Indianapolis]. They thought very highly of her, and she thought very highly of them. She did that type of work until she was not able to physically handle that kind of activity any more. Other than that, her main interest was sewing. That was her thing.

Baker: Did you have a lot of family here in the area?

Johnson: Ah, yes, my aunt – my Aunt Ida Mae, who is really the only sister still living. She's the matriarch, as a matter of fact, at the moment. I have a lot of cousins that are here right now, even. My mother had what? – two sisters here in Indianapolis: Ida Mae, who is the matriarch – still living – and Ruth, who passed away a number of years ago. The other sisters lived elsewhere. Leona lived in Chicago and passed away in Chicago. Four brothers, all living elsewhere other than in Indianapolis. As my best recollection, only my mother Nina, Ida Mae, and Ruth lived here in Indianapolis.

Baker: And your father didn't have any family here in Indianapolis?

Johnson: My father came from a rather small family. He had no brothers or sisters, for openers. His mother lived with us for a number of years. As a kid I remember my grandmother living with us for a number of years until her death, as a matter of fact. She lived right with us. He had an uncle who was in show business, as it were. He was an actor. Uncle Johnny, we called him. Once in a while in old, old, old vintage movies we'll see Uncle Johnny as a butler. [He] always [had] parts as a butler – a very dignified, elegant butler with a very, very impressive demeanor about his role as a butler. We were always proud of Uncle Johnny when he saw him in one of those old films as the butler. Uncle Johnny was the only person in my family on either my mother's side or my dad's side, as is my best recollection, that was even in the entertainment business, shall we say.

Baker: What is your earliest recollection of hearing music? What kind of music did you hear when you were a child, in the church or from the radio or what have you?

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Johnson: The radio for sure. The church for sure. Phillips Temple had a large pipe organ. Phillips Temple is a very large church. The pipes went all the way across, and it was impressive – it was almost intimidating. And the sound of this organ was intimidating. I recall being affected emotionally, psychologically and whatever, even at an early age, by this organ music. We were fortunate in having a very good organist who really could do a number on you, shall we say, as far as her repertoire and as far as the kind of music she would play while the pastor was speaking, before he spoke, [and] at the end of the service. She was also a piano teacher on the side, and my earliest lessons – music lessons – were piano lessons from this lady whose name escapes me at the moment. Again, my sister will fill all this [in], if it's important. So the first music that I can recall that had a very powerful impact on me was church music in Phillips Temple with that large organ and this wonderful organist. I was listening to the radio and the big bands and what not, but they weren't – I hadn't really tuned in yet. It was later that I began to tune in to the big bands. I think you want to stay in the childhood thing for a while.

Baker: For a little bit.

Johnson: Okay.

DAVID BAKER: What about the [radio] programs? Were there available – *Wings Over Jordan* and that kind of stuff on the radio? Do you remember any . . .

Johnson: My best recollection is that yes, they were, and some other situations similar, even. Like the Mormon Tabernacle goes way, way back and my memory goes way back. I remember being powerfully affected by this wonderful music from the Mormon Tabernacle Sunday broadcasts. I looked forward to that always. I don't know why, because I wasn't really into music yet. But I thoroughly enjoyed that music.

Baker: Was it your idea to take piano lessons, or did someone suggest that that might be a good thing for you to do?

Johnson: My mother suggested it. It was my mother's idea. In those days it was like a little bit of a, shall we say – da-da-da-dah – a status situation to have your child taking piano lessons, whether he wanted to or not. [laughter] I took piano lessons from this wonderful organist. I remember enjoying those piano lessons. I hated practice, of course. You would rather be outside shooting marbles. At that age you were shooting marbles, not shooting basketball or anything like that. But she was a wonderful teacher.

Baker: And you were about how old when you first started to take piano lessons?

Johnson: It would be in the range of seven or eight years old, roughly. Let's say between

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six and eight.

Baker: Did you take piano lessons for very long?

Johnson: No. I'd say all of two and a half years, maybe. Maybe two to two and a half years, approximately.

DAVID BAKER: Was there any curiosity to experiment at the piano or was it just straight ahead?

J.J. JOHNSON : No, it was very strict. It was by the book. It was the regular literature or piano literature that you start beginners at, so there was no creativity. There was no – not yet. [laughs] Not at that early stage. You went by the book.

DAVID BAKER: Okay.

J.J. JOHNSON : "Do as I say do." [laughter]

Baker: Did you have a piano in your house where you could practice at home?

Johnson: Yes, yes. We had an old upright piano where half the keys did not play. [laughter] It was in dire need of repair, but I did have an instrument on which to practice. I sometimes wonder how we happened to have a piano in the home, but we did.

DAVID BAKER: It wasn't a player piano, though.

Johnson: It was an upright, but it was not a player.

DAVID BAKER: Okay.

Johnson: I don't recall it being a player piano.

DAVID BAKER: I just wondered because [for] so many black families, that was part of it, too.

Johnson: Yeah, right. A player piano was a wonderful device. It still is.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: I go out to Castleton [Castleton Square Mall] once in a while. They have one on the floor up there where the food . . .

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DAVID BAKER: Electric now, though.

Johnson: That's right. It's electric. But it's amazing. You see the keys just flying and this wonderful music coming out.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Baker: Were either one of your sisters interested in learning to play the piano?

Johnson: No. I was the oddball at that time. I don't recall. I can't say that with any degree of certainty. I'm not sure that my sisters did not also take piano lessons. As a matter of fact, I began to wonder about that, to be very frank with you.

Baker: Did you learn to play any church hymns or anything on the piano, or was it pretty much out of the little piano repertoire book?

Johnson: Mostly exercises and some chorales, I guess that you would call [them] – or church type repertoire, literature.

Baker: I just was wondering, with as strongly involved as both your parents were in their respective churches, if they were anxious for you to learn to play some little church pieces as well as what you were learning.

Johnson: No, not really – just to learn how to play the piano.

Baker: [Just to] learn to play the piano.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Baker: When did you get interested in starting to learn to play an instrument other than the piano?

Johnson: That happened way after, a long time after that. In other words, let's say there was a long cycle where there was no activity whatsoever or particular interest in music other than listening to the bands on the radio. That got to be more and more of a thing with me. I began to get more and more enjoyment from listening to the big bands of the era and what not. The next time that I personally took up a musical instrument was in high school. The first instrument was baritone saxophone. That didn't last very long. It was in very bad shape, and it was so unwieldy and difficult to try to play that that didn't last very long. It was shortly after that that I took up [the] trombone. All that happened,

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as I recall, during the high school years. I started to play the trombone in high school, playing in the high school band and with Norman Merrifield and with Dr. Newsome. Merrifield has passed lately, but I think Newsome is still around. I'm not one hundred percent sure. I saw him about two years ago. It was interesting that he told me he was still active as a musician, playing in a community orchestra.

DAVID BAKER: Playing in the [Indianapolis] Philharmonic.

Johnson: Yes, yes. I thought that was wonderful that at his age he still plays and keeps his chops up, shall we say. I think that's super.

DAVID BAKER: While we're there, let me just ask you something about [something else]. We were talking last night. Was Dr. [John] Morton-Finney already at Attucks [Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis] when you were there?

Johnson: My best recollection is that there was a Dr. Morton-Finney at Attucks.

DAVID BAKER: He's 104 years old now and still practicing law. I saw it in the *Star* [Indianapolis Star newspaper] yesterday.

Johnson: That's remarkable!

DAVID BAKER: And fact is, [he] learned six languages. He just got a degree recently in something else.

Johnson: What?

DAVID BAKER: Yes, Dr. Morton-Finney.

Johnson: One hundred and four? That's fantastic!

DAVID BAKER: And in good health.

Johnson: Oh, that's –

DAVID BAKER: They had a picture of him with a cigar and . . .

Johnson: And still sharp.

DAVID BAKER: He's still taking cases.

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Johnson: What?

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: That is the most mind-blowing scenario I have ever heard of.

DAVID BAKER: Lida asked me if he was there when you were there because, like I said, at one hundred and four he says he reads voraciously. He says he's a biography nut. But I just wondered if he was your teacher like he was the rest of us.

Johnson: That's remarkable. Well, you know, the name – I was telling Carolyn [Carolyn Johnson, J. J.'s wife] this just a few days ago. I don't know how it came up between Carolyn and I about the name Morton-Finney. But in any case, I told her what I remember most about that name was [that his daughter] Gloria Ann Morton-Finney was a sharp, sharp dresser. She dressed to kill.

DAVID BAKER: He lives with her. He lives with his daughter.

Johnson: She's still alive and he's living with her now?

DAVID BAKER: He lives with his daughter.

Johnson: She was one of the sharpest dressers at Crispus Attucks. Gloria Ann Morton-Finney.

DAVID BAKER: She was my substitute teacher. I remember her, too. Yes. I remember her well.

Johnson: I remember her well, too. I remember because she was always such a fashion plate.

DAVID BAKER: Yes.

Johnson: [laughs]

Baker: You had access to some really exceptional teachers at Crispus Attucks High School. Would you like to talk a little bit about Mr. Merrifield and Mr. Newsome and some of the teachers who even weren't music teachers but who were special or important to you when you were in school?

Johnson: I would have to say this in retrospect and in hindsight, which has twenty/twenty

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vision, that when I look back – as a matter of fact, it's a shame in a sense that it's now that I realize how qualified and how wonderful all of my teachers were at that time. It's too bad that I didn't realize it then, but I didn't. But now I look back on it and say, "Wow! These were heavyweight teachers who were dedicated, committed and highly qualified and wonderful teachers." I remember Dr. Merrifield with a great deal of fondness and what not. He impressed me as a man who was committed, dedicated, and passionate about the art of teaching. He was an excellent teacher. The same is true of Newsome. These were good teachers. All of my teachers I recall as being really excellent at the craft and the art of teaching.

I can say this and feel good about saying it, that even today, I hold teachers in very, very high esteem. I don't take it lightly, the art of teaching. Not everyone is material for teaching. Not everyone who is a brilliant musician is necessarily material for a brilliant teacher. And the reverse is true. Some of the best teachers are not necessarily great players at their instruments. I am in awe of people who have mastered the art of teaching because it is an art unto itself. I have a great deal of respect for all the teachers I had traffic with as a high school student because they were all good teachers. They all knew the art of teaching.

Baker: We know, obviously, that you became very interested in music in high school, and we'll talk about that in a minute. Did you have other interests while you were in high school?

Johnson: The normal interests as a kid, as a boy – basketball, I'm in sports, what not. I was in the ROTC, in the ROTC band. But a particular interest? No. I don't believe so. I remember I had a little fling with boxing.

Baker: Really?

Johnson: Of all things. But once I got hit up side of my head pretty good once, that ended that forever. [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: That took care of that. But other than that, no – no particular interests that would be of interest here.

DAVID BAKER: Was there other subject matter in school that attracted you on the level with music or whatever?

Johnson: Art. I forget who the teacher was, but I liked going to the art class. I enjoyed

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whatever it was that involved that class. History, I was a normal person who – eh [Johnson shrugs], or math – eh [Johnson shrugs again]. But art – umm, that’s interesting. I enjoyed going to the music classes. Going backwards in time and before going to Crispus Attucks, I went to School 43, I believe it was. I hope this is accurate. It doesn’t matter, because what’s important is I remember looking forward to going to this class that was really several classes all in one where we sang. There is nothing more spine-tingling than a large body of people singing. Even today it will send shivers up and down my spine. There is something about the volume of voices singing, sometimes a capella, [Johnson sings from *Lift Every Voice and Sing*] “lift every heart and sing, da, da, da”, whatever. That was the kind of literature that we sang. And it was just wonderful. I remember looking forward to that with great anticipation every week – whatever this period was called where all these classes got together in this large room and sang these songs together. It was mind-blowing.

DAVID BAKER: Was Dr. Carroll your history teacher? Was he there, because I remember . . .

Johnson: Dr. Carroll was one of my teachers at one time, and it must have been history, right? Because that was his bag.

DAVID BAKER: One of the first people to teach black history.

Johnson: Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I just wondered if . . .

Johnson: He was very intense – a brilliant, brilliant man, but very intense, and a hard – he ran a tight ship.

DAVID BAKER: You got that right!

Johnson: He ran a tight ship, a very tight ship. He was a very severe, serious person with no sense of humor whatsoever, [laughs], but a brilliant man.

Baker: I understand once you started getting interested in music you found some companion souls on the path, so to speak. You had some friends who you hooked up with who were also very much interested in learning to be good instrumentalists.

Johnson: Oh, yes. There was Eldridge Morrison. There was Vincent Stewart. None of them ever stayed with the music situation other than myself. Erroll Grandy, of course. There was a trumpet player whose name was Merrill Laswell. There was a fella whose

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name was Stafford, Bill Stafford. Remember Bill Stafford?

DAVID BAKER: Sure. I remember him very well.

Johnson: He plays alto saxophone.

DAVID BAKER: Stafford was actually active until – may still be, if he's alive.

Johnson: Really?

DAVID BAKER: I heard him a year or two years ago.

Johnson: Uh huh. We all trafficked in and out of LaVon Kemp's band . . .

DAVID BAKER: I was about to ask about LaVon.

Johnson: . . . LaVon Kemp, yeah, playing for social situations around Indianapolis – dances, mostly, and social functions. LaVon Kemp and Jimmy Coe. Did Jimmy Coe have his band at that time, or that was later?

DAVID BAKER: I think it came a little later.

Johnson: A little later, yeah. Because I played in Jimmy Coe's [band], on some situations with Coe and his band. But that must have been a lot later because LaVon Kemp was long before Coe.

DAVID BAKER: Yes.

Johnson: Because Coe played with LaVon Kemp, even, didn't he?

DAVID BAKER: Exactly. And so did Eldridge.

Johnson: Yes. That's true, yeah.

Baker: And this is while you all were still in high school?

Johnson: For the most part, yes. Eldridge was an interesting guy – very bright, very sharp, very intense, very much interested in music. He was the chauffeur, like a chauffeur for the principal of the school. That was his main gig, shall we say – chauffeuring for the principal.

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DAVID BAKER: Was it Nolcox or Lane?

Johnson: Lane. He was Lane's chauffeur.

DAVID BAKER: You know, Lane lived right down the street from where you were on Indianapolis [Avenue], because we lived in that same block.

Johnson: Uh huh.

DAVID BAKER: And Dr. Lane's house was on the corner.

Johnson: Uh huh. Yeah. The teacher [that] I remember that all the guys had their eyes on because she was such an attractive, stately, statuesque woman was Mrs. Hamlin, our Spanish teacher. She was a real looker, a real traffic stopper. All of the guys had their eyes on Mrs. Hamlin because she was just a gorgeous woman. Just an aside.

Baker: [laughs]

Johnson: Just an aside.

Baker: A happy memory that just flitted across.

Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about something at the same time. I played in the YMCA band, and I remember running across music with your name written across the top so it evidently had been your part. I'm wondering if you remember much about the Senate Avenue band [the YMCA was located on Senate Avenue] because I remember the little man who played the trombone, and he used to tell me that you sat up under him for quite some time in that band.

Johnson: That was a wonderful period in my life as far as getting my feet wet in the domain of music. It was the YMCA band. I looked forward to going to those rehearsals and playing all those wonderful Sousa marches. It was really important and exciting, and I couldn't get enough of it. Yes, the guy who was the lead trombone player, I think his name was Haughton.

DAVID BAKER: I think you're right.

Johnson: Charlie Haughton, I believe. Charlie Haughton, a wonderful trombonist who, in a manner of speaking, took me under his wing in that I would go to his house on

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Sunday afternoons and take a lesson from him. I looked forward to going to his home on Sunday afternoons taking lessons, trombone lessons. I looked forward to going to the rehearsals where we played all these fantastic Sousa marches. *Stars and Stripes Forever* is one that comes to my mind. There were a zillion of them. That's the only one I can think of. I know David [Baker] appreciates the fact that these Sousa marches always had interesting trombone parts. It was contrapuntal to the rest of whatever the orchestra was doing. They always had something else to do, and it was just wonderful.

DAVID BAKER: I tell you, it was such a thrill to see your name written at the top of those parts, 'cause then everybody fought to try to get the part that J.J. had played.

Johnson: [laughs]. I have fond memories of playing with the YMCA band.

Baker: How often did the YMCA band rehearse?

Johnson: My best recollection is a couple of times a month, something like that. Yeah, on average, I'd say about twice a month.

Baker: And did you play –

Johnson: All of the members had day jobs doing something else, so this was their passion on the side. What they did for their enjoyment was to get together and play in the YMCA band. But they all worked in the post office or for the government or in some plant or [at] Eli Lilly or whatever – [at the Army] Finance Center or what have you.

Baker: Did the YMCA band also perform?

Johnson: Once in a great while they would perform at Douglas Park or at one of the other white parks] – not often, but now and again, yes.

DAVID BAKER: And it's interesting to realize that J.J. and them had to go across town, 'cause Douglas Park was my neighborhood. That's out at 25th and Martindale. Fact is, I was going to ask you, man. I guess Crispus Attucks [High School] became a school in 1938, 1935 – somewhere around there when they built that school. [Crispus Attucks High School opened in 1927.]

Johnson: Uh huh.

DAVID BAKER: What did they do? Provide tickets for you guys to come across on the bus? Were you bused to school? I can't remember whether it was that you walked to school, 'cause you were coming from clear out from the . . .

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Johnson: We *walked*. I walked from the north side to Crispus Attucks every day. That was a long walk, but it was a piece of cake for some reason. We walked to school.

DAVID BAKER: I didn't remember what happened when they first segregated the schools.

Johnson: You know, it's interesting that I don't have a vivid recollection of [that]. I certainly don't have an accurate recollection of the racism that was rampant in Indianapolis during my early childhood years. It was rampant, but what it means is I didn't have much traffic to come into contact with the horror of racism. I don't know why I was so insulated from it, because we lived on the north side. I walked to school every day. We went to the movies – a segregated movie – on occasion, but I don't remember many situations of violence on the racial situation. Indianapolis was certainly, and Indiana was certainly segregated for sure and racism was rampant, but I don't recall personally having any traffic with incidents of violence or blatant hostile acts towards me or my family. I just don't. Yet I know all this went on. We all know it went on, for sure. I just didn't come into contact with it very much.

DAVID BAKER: 'Cause I guess the whole world, too, was in that area where you lived and the area from Crispus Attucks down to Lockefield Gardens . . .

Johnson: Right.

DAVID BAKER: . . . so you didn't have a lot of exposure, I guess, to white people, period.

Johnson: This is true. This is very true. We were a self-contained community.

DAVID BAKER: I often wonder –

Johnson: Yeah, uh huh.

Baker: Getting back to the trombone just for a minute, I understand your father was the one who got you your first instrument once you decided to switch from baritone saxophone.

Johnson: Yeah, my dad. I think he saw or heard about one at a pawn shop . . . [laughter] . . . that it was a good buy, and as I remember, he went and got it for me. We went together and he picked it out and said, "Okay, here." [laughter] "Here. Here! Play! Do something with this!" He was a staunch supporter of whatever I got involved in. I

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recall that once I really got involved, I got really good support from both my mother and my father. Encouragement is what I'm trying to say, really. I was blessed to have their support all along with the music situation.

Baker: When did you first feel like this might be what you wanted to do as your life's work?

Johnson: It was during the cycle of activity that involved Vincent Stewart, Erroll Grandy, Eldridge Morrison, Merrill Laswell, and these people that we are recalling. We were all Lester Young addicts. We were Lester Young-oholics. We knew all of his solos on every record, note by note. All of us, any of us could sing any of Lester Young's solos. By now I was really hooked on Lester Young and people like Lester Young – the other prominent, outstanding soloists of that era – and it was then that I knew that somehow I would make music my life's work and make the trombone my life's work. It was during that same cycle I was becoming aware of Trummy Young, for example, with [Jimmy] Lunceford – [Trummy], who I remember with a great deal of fun. He was such a wonderful trombonist, such a wonderful person and such a wonderful personality. Vic Dickinson, recordings of Vic Dickinson.

There was a wonderful trombonist who never really made a mark except, you might say, in a cultist kind of a way. Some of us knew about him, but he never made what they call the big time. His name was Fred Beckett. He was a brilliant trombonist. He played with a band that was a Midwest – they called them territory bands in that they mostly played in small venues and in situations in the Midwest. They never went to the West Coast, they never went to New York or what not, so they called them territory bands. This band, Harlan Leonard and His Rockets, was one of those Midwest territory bands, and Fred Beckett was the lead trombone player with the Harlan Leonard Rockets. They did make a couple of recordings, one of which I remember in particular, where Fred Beckett took this phenomenal trombone solo that had either a two or four bar break in it.

DAVID BAKER: I know that solo.

Johnson: *My Gal Sal*?

DAVID BAKER: Yes.

Johnson: *My Gal Sal*.

Baker: [laughs]

Johnson: I had never heard a trombone play that kind of linear conceptualizing and that

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kind of articulate approach to the trombone. It was remarkable, and it left an indelible mark on me – Fred Beckett more so than any other trombone.

DAVID BAKER: [Were there other trombonists you liked?]

Johnson: Well, of course Vic Dickinson, and of course Trummy Young, and of course Juan Tizol. All of these wonderful trombonists. But somehow Fred Beckett left a mark on me.

DAVID BAKER: After you mentioned that in an interview with somebody, I think virtually every trombone player in the business went to try to find those records.

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: I think it might have resulted in some of the reissues, because that was the band that Tadd Dameron wrote for – *Dameron Swing* and *Dameron Stomp*. Also, that's the band Budd Johnson was playing in. I can't remember the lead alto player's name, but I remember you created a whole interest in Fred Beckett . . .

Johnson: He was a *monster* player. [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: . . . after you said that he was one of the people who influenced you.

Johnson: Yeah. He finally went with Lionel Hampton after Harlan Leonard's Rockets. I think there was a band in between, then Lionel Hampton. Then he had a bout with alcoholism – a terrible, terrible bout with alcoholism. It was a tragedy because he was such a talent. He was such a gifted trombonist that it hurt most of us to see him go down with alcoholism. He finally passed away, unfortunately.

DAVID BAKER: Very young.

Baker: Yes.

Johnson: Yeah, at a relatively young age.

Baker: Thirty or something. [Fred Beckett was 29 when he died.]

Johnson: He was going to be a force to be reckoned with, no question about it.

DAVID BAKER: Fortunately there are about seven or eight cuts on that album, because that's also the album that had – not *920 Special* – I can't remember what the other one

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was . . . [It was *Southern Fried*.]

Johnson: *920 Special*. Boy. You're bringing back some memories.

DAVID BAKER: I can't remember.

Johnson: Yeah.

Baker: After you graduated from high school, was that when you had your first professional engagement, or were you working professionally while you were still in high school?

Johnson: My best recollection is [that] there were a few bucks to be earned playing with bands like LaVon Kemp and Clarence Love, who was kind of active in this area. I played with him on occasion. But I don't have a clear recollection of compensation on a professional level until after graduating high school and leaving Indianapolis. I can't be very accurate about playing for money, shall we say, here in Indianapolis. And yet I do recall – I have a vague recollection – yes, there were some situations where we were paid for playing at a dance, for example, or playing a social function, for example, or what not.

Baker: In terms of the kind of music that you would be playing with a band like LaVon Kemp, let's say you were playing for a dance. What kinds of pieces would people expect to hear you play at that time?

Johnson: Obviously dance music. A lot of it was music that was prevalent by big name white bands, shall we say. For example, let's take Glenn Miller's [Johnson sings the opening measures of *In the Mood*].

Baker: *In the Mood*?

Johnson: *In the Mood*, *String of Pearls*, and things like that. LaVon Kemp and bands similar to LaVon Kemp's would have arrangements of these very well-known and very popular tunes of the day as played by other more prominent big white bands.

Baker: Would these . . .

Johnson: Plus some things by people like Sy Oliver or Lunceford and the other – it was a mixture of things, a mixture as far as repertoire.

Baker: Uh huh.

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DAVID BAKER: The piece I was trying to think of with the band was *Southern Fried*.

Johnson: Ah, there you go. Things like that. Yeah. *Tuxedo Junction*. What was the name of that band? *Tuxedo Junction*.

Baker: That was the . . .

Johnson: They were big in this area.

Baker: Erskine Hawkins.

Johnson: Erskine Hawkins. He got big outside of this area.

DAVID BAKER: Fact is, I saw him in the Catskills. He died earlier this year.

Johnson: Oh, really? Was he still active up until his death?

DAVID BAKER: He had a quintet up in the Catskills.

Johnson: He played trumpet.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. "The Gabriel of the Trumpet."

Johnson: "The Gabriel of the Trumpet." Isn't that remarkable.

DAVID BAKER: Carolyn and I were just talking about that sense of community that existed when we all had to go to Crispus Attucks High School. We had the same teachers. We had come through [schools] 37, 26, 41, whatever. Even [though] there were so many pluses when they integrated the schools, [there was] the whole notion of what it meant when there was that sense of community, whether it was Indiana Avenue or Lockefield Gardens or whatever.

J. J. JOHNSON: Uh huh. I can relate to that. I can relate to that. I recall enjoying that and feeling good about that. I look back on those years and realize that it was the good life. It was the good life. It really was. There were certainly areas of poverty and there was a ghetto at that time, but it wasn't prominent is my best recollection. My family was not a well-to-do family or any of that, but we got along okay. My dad worked hard and made a decent yearly salary. I don't recall there being any terrible, terrible financial difficulties ever. We lived on a very small scale, and yet I remember having a lot of fun – a lot of enjoyable times. As a result of this thing you just mentioned – this community type syndrome, this community's feeling about things – those were good days. They

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really were.

DAVID BAKER: A moment ago you were talking about the fact of your cousins and everything. The whole notion, again, that when you moved, you didn't move out of town – you moved across town, you moved two blocks [away] from where you used to live . . .

Johnson: True.

DAVID BAKER: . . . and you knew your cousins. I wondered if any of them were involved in music, or what they thought when all of a sudden you decided that you were going to be a professional musician and go out with the Brownskin Buddies or [Count] Basie or whoever.

Johnson: None of my cousins or relatives in that area were in music or the arts or entertainment whatsoever. I was the oddball, I guess you might say. I think some of them considered me to be a little bit odd. Some of them accepted [it] as being, well, that's what he wants to do and I wish him well. Others wondered, hmm, that's very strange. Why would one want to be a musician? There was a mixture of feelings amongst my relatives about what I was up to when I decided to become a musician.

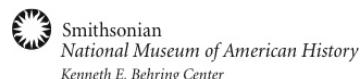
Baker: Was the first actual professional group that you worked with then when you went with the Clarence Love Orchestra?

Johnson: I'm trying to remember whether it was Clarence Love. It was probably Clarence Love, which came before Snookum Russell. That would be about right.

DAVID BAKER: I think that's right.

Johnson: Yeah, I think it was Clarence Love. I think it was LaVon Kemp, I think Clarence Love was the next situation, and then Snookum Russell. The Snookum Russell thing was important. It was a very good band. They traveled a lot. It was in the Snookum Russell band that I met Fats Navarro, who was certainly to become one of the giants of jazz in later years. Fats Navarro and I were road buddies. We rode side by side. We'd sit side by side on the bus. We roomed together. We were true buddy- buddy buddies. Fats was a big fan of Roy Eldridge and also Howard McGee and yet, even at that time, Fats had his own unique way of improvising on trumpet. I remember with a great deal of fondness that he was just an outstanding trumpet soloist, even with Snookum Russell's band. Snookum featured him now and again as an improviser, and he was outstanding. Snookum played pretty good piano and was a good bandleader. He was fun to work for. He had a wonderful sense of humor and [was] a pretty good businessman. He did fairly well as an area big band, playing in this area pretty much. Then after that, the next

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situation was Benny Carter, I believe.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, we've got records of those.

Johnson: Yeah. I think Benny Carter, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I think that was what? '44?

Johnson: Roughly.

DAVID BAKER: We transcribed some of his stuff for our concerts [with the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra].

Johnson: Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Charlie Shavers was Fats's cousin.

Johnson: I didn't know that.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: He was a demon trumpet player, Charlie Shavers was.

DAVID BAKER: All you got to do is listen to the John Kirby Sextet to bear that out.

Johnson: That's for sure. It's chronicled. It's documented. Right.

DAVID BAKER: Did you guys play any of the places like – I don't know if the Ferguson brothers had . . .

Johnson: The Sunset Terrace?

DAVID BAKER: The Sunset Terrace and the Ferguson Hotel.

Johnson: I may have played the Sunset Terrace only once or twice with Clarence Love or Snookum Russell. I don't remember that we did, that I ever played it at all, for sure. Not for sure. Yet that's where all the bands played. One of the bands that came there quite often that was a good band, had good musicians, and I know that this will give you a charge: Tiny Bradshaw.

DAVID BAKER: Good Lord, have mercy – yes.

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J. J. JOHNSON: A good band.

DAVID BAKER: A super band.

J. J. JOHNSON: They were sharp, handsome, good-looking guys, and we were in awe of these shiny instruments and these good-looking, handsome guys and what not. The music was good. He had a one-armed trumpet player. One of his trumpet players had only one arm.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I remember that.

Johnson: It was cut off as a result of some serious accident, as I recall it.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, Tiny Bradshaw.

Johnson: Tiny Bradshaw, yeah. I'm trying to think of the thing that he made that made a little bit of noise. *Jersey Bounce*?

DAVID BAKER: [He had] the *Jersey Bounce*, but he had a piece called *Soft*, too.

Johnson: I only remember the *Jersey Bounce*. Why is that?

DAVID BAKER: I remember Tiny Bradshaw, and I'm trying to think if Tiny Bradshaw also – he might have also had a hit with *Honky Tonk*.

Johnson: He had a pretty good trombone player that played pretty good jazz, David. Do you remember him?

DAVID BAKER: I remember him, but I can't remember who it was.

Johnson: Yeah. I can't remember his name. He would play good jazz.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Yeah, Tiny Bradshaw had some good soloists in his band.

DAVID BAKER: That one and Earl Bostic and a few [others] like that all had them jump bands.

Johnson: Oh, yeah. Those were good bands.

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DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Very good bands. With good books [of arrangements], good writing, good soloists in them. Yeah.

Baker: When you went down to the Sunset Terrace to hear these different groups, how old were you then? Was there an age under which you weren't allowed to come into places like the Sunset Terrace?

Johnson: There probably was, but I don't remember the details of that situation. [laughter]

DAVID BAKER: [You] probably didn't let it bother you anyway. You did like everybody else. You got in . . .

Johnson: You managed to get in because you wanted to get in to hear these bands, yeah.

Baker: There were a lot of great clubs along Indiana Avenue along that time. Did you get a chance to go to any of those places when you were a young person?

Johnson: No, but I knew that they were there, and I knew that there were interesting things happening there, both legal and illegal. [laughter]

Baker: Let's talk about Indiana Avenue a little bit because that's an amazing story in and of itself.

Johnson: Oh, it was quite a street. Oh, yes. That was *the* street where all the action was as far as entertainment and what not. And bands and music and bars and things like that, some of which we won't even mention here. [laughter]

DAVID BAKER: The Cotton Club

Johnson: The Cotton Club – that was there. The Cotton Club was on "The Avenue" [Indiana Avenue], yeah. That was one. Let me see – [the] Sunset Terrace, [the] Cotton Club . . .

DAVID BAKER: 'Cause there were quite a few of them down there. Honoré's came after you left, I think.

Johnson: Uh, yeah, I guess so.

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DAVID BAKER: The Walker Theater was already there.

Johnson: Oh, yeah. The Walker Theater was always there, right. There were a lot of clubs – or bars and joints and whatever you want to call them – up and down Indiana Avenue. That stretch was a few blocks, from the outskirts to the downtown area on West [Street] – would that be going northwest on it? Indiana Avenue ran in a northwest . . .

DAVID BAKER: And then [it] angled. It was from West Street and Ohio [Street] all the way down where all the pawnshops were, and when it got to the Walker Theater, it turned left and went all the way down to Lockefield Gardens.

Johnson: Okay, Right, okay. It all comes back to me now. It has changed so through the years, really, Indianapolis [has]. Its configuration, its whole thing has changed through the years, so much so that at times when Carolyn and I drive around, I don't recognize Indianapolis. It's so different now. There were no freeways and [Interstate] 465, none of that. It's just different now.

DAVID BAKER: Was the Walker Theater a force when you were there as a place to go and hang out?

Johnson: No. The Walker Theater was where we went to see movies, when we went to see the westerns on Saturday and the serials. [laughter] You gotta to go next week to see where it left off this week, and that was an ongoing thing – it never ended. The Walker Theater. My best recollection, David, [is that] it was primarily a movie house that we looked forward to going to.

DAVID BAKER: They didn't have the diner yet, 'cause it used to be the theater was one place and then you went down in the front door and there was a place where you could go, one of two places blacks could go to eat and have a nice Sunday meal.

Johnson: I think that came later, I believe. It was primarily a movie house.

Baker: I understand there was some consternation on the part of your parents when you wanted to go with Snookum Russell because of the traveling and what have you.

J. J. JOHNSON: And leaving home.

Baker: They were concerned about you being away.

Johnson: My dad was the most concerned and the most reluctant to have me indulge in

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this enterprise. My mother took the stance that, well, we may as well support him in this because he's going to do it anyway. Since we can't stop him, we may as well go along with the program and endorse it. Finally my dad came around and said, "Well, yeah. You're right."

Baker: What was it like traveling with a band at that time?

Johnson: Tough. We traveled a lot by bus. As a matter of fact, we traveled strictly by bus. There was lots of travel involved. And it was slow sledding, to say the least, traveling by bus from city to city in the Midwest territories. But in those days you took it with a grain of salt, the rigors of travel. It just went along with the territory, shall we say, and therefore it wasn't so bad.

Baker: How about accommodations and food and all those other concerns when you were traveling? Was that difficult?

Johnson: I don't recall it being especially difficult. Somehow the bands that I traveled around with during that cycle, someone had already made arrangements ahead of time. Mostly we knew where we were going to stay when we got to a given town, so there wasn't much of a problem there. There were always good black restaurants in the black area where the food was excellent and the price was right. So that all was a given. It was taken for granted that we would stay where we stayed and eat where we ate.

Baker: Did you stay in one place for any length of time, or were these mostly short engagements and then you went right on to the next?

Johnson: Mostly short engagements. Now and again we would settle in at a given venue and play a week there, for example. In Cincinnati there was a place that had shows with dancing girls and acts and comedians and what not that we would play on occasion with Snookum and with – mostly with Snookum. We played a lot of tobacco warehouses where they would convert the tobacco warehouse into a dance hall type situation. We played a lot of those. We traveled a lot and, yes, now and again we would settle in for a few days on a situation – a nightclub type situation where they had comedians and other acts and a big band. The band would play for the dancing girls and for the comedians. They would play the whole bloody thing, pretty much.

Baker: So you had to be able to read fairly well then because you had a lot of different music to play.

Johnson: Right. This is true. This is very true.

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Baker: How long were you with Snookum Russell? Do you remember?

Johnson: You know, for some strange reason, Lida, it seemed that things went in two to three year cycles for me. I was with Benny Carter for about two or three years. I was with Clarence Love for about that same length of time. I was with Basie about two years. I was with Benny Carter for about two or three years. I don't know why it worked out that way, but it did.

DAVID BAKER: Did you meet George Russell across this time? I can't remember if George was on . . .

J. J. JOHNSON: Yeah, I met George Russell with Benny Carter. He was Benny Carter's drummer for a while and a very good drummer.

DAVID BAKER: He said 'till Max [Roach] made him give it up.

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I was trying to remember.

Johnson: Yeah, that's when I first met George Russell, when Benny hired him as a drummer. [He was a] good drummer. I knew nothing about his writing during those days. It was later that I learned about his . . .

DAVID BAKER: I think he began writing after that.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Baker: It's my understanding then that Snookum Russell's band broke up. Did you go directly to Benny Carter after Snookum Russell's band broke up?

Johnson: No, I came back to Indianapolis and just kind of wandered around as an unemployed musician. I recall that I was able to sit in with – I don't know who was prominent or active, I should say, at that time as far as Indianapolis bands were concerned – but I remember playing with either [Jimmy] Coe or maybe LaVon Kemp was still around. I don't just remember. I'm a little fuzzy there.

DAVID BAKER: Was Syd Valentine here? And the alto player who later on owned a hair place? I just wondered if those were . . .

Johnson: That name does not ring a bell. No, it doesn't.

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DAVID BAKER: Beryl Steiner.

Johnson: Oh, that name rings a bell.

DAVID BAKER: I wondered if you . . .

J. J. JOHNSON: A good – an excellent player.

DAVID BAKER: Yes. A first-rate player.

Johnson: A beautiful player.

DAVID BAKER: I wondered if that was somebody you encountered, because he was playing here.

Johnson: Beryl Steiner. His approach and his style reminded one a lot of the – what was the lead alto player with Lunceford?

DAVID BAKER: Willie?

Johnson: Willie.

DAVID BAKER: Willie.

J. J. JOHNSON: Willie Smith. He played with that kind of approach.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I remember that.

Johnson: Did he not? Yes, he did. He did. I think he patterned himself, he wanted to pattern himself after him.

Baker: When you were between working with Snookum Russell and before you went with Benny Carter, what kinds of things did you do to support yourself and yet be able to stay musically active?

Johnson: I lived with my mother and father. I didn't support myself. I lived in their house and ate their food. [laughs] That's how. That's how that came about. I lived with mom and dad.

Baker: [laughs]. How did your opportunity to go with Benny Carter come about?

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Johnson: It seems that Benny came through Indianapolis, to perform in Indianapolis or something like that – I'm not clear on that – and needed a trombonist. Someone, I never knew who – someone or some faction got his ear and said, There's a kid here in town that you may want to consider." I got a call from Benny Carter's manager to come to a rehearsal and try out for the job. I went to this rehearsal a nervous wreck, to try out for this job and how I got through and managed I don't know, but Benny hired me.

Baker: I hear it Earl Coleman might have been the one that put the bug in Benny's ear.

Johnson: That's a possibility. You know, I think you're right. Earl Coleman, the singer. Yeah. Yeah. I believe so.

Baker: [Earl Coleman] knew of you and suggested that he might want to get in touch with you while he was . . .

Johnson: Your information is a lot more accurate than mine. Let's face it. Your sources of information are a lot more accurate than my memory, let's put it that way.

Baker: Did you leave town right away with Benny Carter?

Johnson: Oh, yeah. He wasn't here very long, and I had to hustle and hurry up to get my leaving town mode together. But I managed and I left town with Benny Carter, and it was all beautiful. It was a wonderful experience playing with Benny Carter.

DAVID BAKER: That must have been a quantum leap. We listened to and actually played some of this music with the Smithsonian [Jazz Masterworks Orchestra]. That may be some of the most difficult music for a band I've ever seen in my life, so you must have really been at a very advanced state, reading and everything else.

Johnson: No, I had a lot of trouble. [laughs] I had to take my part home and study it and practice it to make sure, and to be able to cope with the situation. It was difficult music to play and demanding, and it wasn't a piece of cake at first. The funny thing about that kind of a setting and that kind of environment [is that] it will accelerate the learning curve for you. Learning to read and learning to perform in an ensemble setting is perpetuated and accelerated by the excellence that you're thrown into. All of a sudden you come along at a faster pace than you normally would have.

DAVID BAKER: Yes.

Johnson: You have to. [laughs] You have to develop.

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DAVID BAKER: I remember your solo on one of the things that – was it [with] Savannah Churchill?

Johnson: Uh huh. Savannah Churchill, the singer with the band.

DAVID BAKER: That may be the first solo I knew of yours, because [the recording] was one that was still in print. Evidently Benny gave you chances to play because . . .

Johnson: He did.

DAVID BAKER: . . . because there are a number of solos on those recordings.

Johnson: He did. He did indeed. He was a source of encouragement, and I began to get my feet wet as far as improvisation is concerned with Benny Carter. That's true. He was a wonderful person to work for. He was a role model in that he was a brilliant performer and a brilliant alto saxophonist and a wonderful trumpet player himself. The record certainly is documented [as to] what a fantastic arranger and composer he was. I know, Dave, you recall that he wrote arrangements that have saxophone section scenarios that drove saxophone players crazy.

DAVID BAKER: Still do.

J. J. JOHNSON: A thousand notes. [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: Still do. Those things are daunting.

Johnson: Complex saxophone sections.

DAVID BAKER: [That's the first time I] ever saw our saxophone section [in the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra] have to have sectionals. That's some of the hardest music, even today.

Johnson: I'm telling you.

DAVID BAKER: But then the brass writing. Like I said, man, I listened to what you guys were doing on there, and that trombone section was pretty fierce.

Johnson: [laughs] Yeah. We had to dig in because Benny wrote music that was demanding. His charts were demanding. They were good stuff.

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Baker: Was he a role model for you as a leader as well?

Johnson: Benny Carter was a role model for me as a musician, as a bandleader, and as a human being and as a man. All of the above.

Baker: Very exceptional.

Johnson: Plus Benny Carter is a very special person in my life and he is a very special person, period.

Baker: Would you like to elaborate on that a little?

Johnson: I said it all. He was a role model, he was a brilliant musician, he was a brilliant arranger, a brilliant composer, a nice person to know. He exuded professionalism in his demeanor. When he would just talk to an agent or a musician or to you about your part, or – at rehearsal he exuded this air of professionalism and dignity and courtesiness (sic) that was quite extraordinary. He was an extraordinary man and still is.

Baker: Do you still keep up with each other?

Johnson: We talk once in a while. I called him recently to tell him that we were going to record one of his little-known compositions, a lovely ballad called *People Time*, with [Robert] Farnon, on the Farnon thing that's coming up soon. [This was released on the CD *Tangence*.] He was very pleased. I told Benny that I was having trouble getting a bona fide lead sheet on *The Meaning of the Blues*. He said, "Oh! Bobby Troup. I'm going to see Bobby Troup in a few days. I'll tell him that you're looking for that, and I'll get a lead sheet for you." I had been looking for weeks to get an authentic, original lead sheet of *The Meaning of the Blues*. We had Miles's version, of course. What's interesting is that when you finally get a lead sheet . . .

DAVID BAKER: How different it looks.

J. J. JOHNSON: Oh, it's got nothing to do with what Miles played. Miles created an original melody of his own on Bobby Troup's tune.

DAVID BAKER: [Michael] Brecker did that, too, on [the recording] *Don't Try This . . .* I can't remember which album it's on that he does *The Meaning of the Blues*. [It's on *Now You See It . . . (Now You Don't)*.]

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Johnson: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

DAVID BAKER: It's very beautiful.

Johnson: I didn't know that.

DAVID BAKER: But I'm sure it's very different than what Bobby had in mind.

Johnson: Miles's interpretation – it's a classic. It's a classic.

DAVID BAKER: Like what Miles did with [Baker sings *When Lights are Low*].

Johnson: Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's Benny's tune.

DAVID BAKER: And Miles played the same thing up a fourth as the bridge.

Johnson: That's right, and that's not the bridge.

DAVID BAKER: No, I know.

J. J. JOHNSON: No. Benny wrote a wonderful bridge, but Miles ignored it. [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: [sings Benny Carter's bridge]

J. J. JOHNSON: Miles went his own way on the bridge.

DAVID BAKER: I that says something about you, the fact that you go back and try to find what the composer had [in mind]. That's because you're a composer, too.

Johnson: Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Go back and find out what the composer has in mind when you get ready to record a piece.

Johnson: Yeah. Yeah, that's true.

Baker: Who were some of the other people who were with Snookum Russell at the same time you were?

Johnson: Unfortunately, Lida, Fats is the only one I remember by name. I'm sorry about that, but I don't remember the other band members. I don't remember their names.

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Baker: Who all was in the Benny Carter Orchestra with you that you remember?

Johnson: A few names come to mind if I try hard. There was the alto saxophonist, whose name was Porter Kilbert.

DAVID BAKER: Lord have mercy.

Johnson: There was a tenor saxophone player whose name was Bumps Myers. The lead trombonist, a wonderful lead trombonist, a little dude. In order to be seen he had to sit on a stack of telephone books in the orchestra. What was his name? [John "Shorty" Haughton] He was a wonderful player. He could do the Tommy Dorsey style approach to ballads beautifully. I can't think of his name.

DAVID BAKER: I know it and can't think of it either.

Johnson: Yeah, you'd know him.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Oh, he had it down, that articulate vibrato in the high register. It was wonderful. It was beautiful. And Max [Roach]. We're still talking about Benny Carter?

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: Max played drums with Benny Carter for a very short time, in addition to George Russell.

Baker: And that was when you met Max, also?

Johnson: My best recollection is [that's] when I first met Max. Miles played with Benny Carter for a hot minute.

Baker: Really?

Johnson: Somewhere along the line. I wish I could be more accurate chronologically about when that happened, but it's documented somewhere. I read it, even. I recall it, but I don't know if I was there when Miles was with Benny Carter. Who else was with Benny at that time? I wish I could think of the other, because it was a good trombone section. [Possibly Alton Moore and John "Shorty" Haughton] I enjoyed that trombone section. The bass player, Charles Drayton. Bass player, Charles Drayton.

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DAVID BAKER: We can actually look on the [album cover], 'cause we have the album from it. [It] says simply *Benny Carter 1944*. There's a picture of you in the trombone section. Fact is, in this particular picture there were *four* trombones.

Johnson: Oh, wow, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: That was really unusual.

Johnson: Yeah, Benny was a four trombone leader for a while.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: It was economics, obviously. To have four trombones was a luxury in those days unless you were Basie or Lunceford or Duke or what not. But, yeah.

Baker: And you did your first recordings with Benny Carter?

Johnson: Yes, that's true. That is true, yes. I think the one with Savannah Churchill . . .

DAVID BAKER: That's your first solo on record.

Johnson: . . . I think my first solo ever, on record.

Baker: I understand you even recorded for Armed Forces Radio with that band as well as for commercial release.

Johnson: Yes. I can't remember any details about that, but that did happen.

Baker: Moving from a band like Snookum Russell's which was a territory band to a band like Benny Carter's which traveled everywhere, what kind of changes did you notice as you were going around the country? Did you find that it was more difficult to travel when you had a band that went everywhere?

Johnson: Somehow the travel conditions improved somewhat. There was a level of making arrangements for the band, let's say. We stayed in better places. The travel conditions weren't as rigorous or as strenuous with Benny Carter. Things in general improved.

Baker: Were you still traveling primarily by bus at that time?

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Johnson: A lot by bus. Sometimes by train. By all modes of transportation with Benny, as I recall.

Baker: Were you playing much original music of Benny Carter's in addition to the dance music of the time?

Johnson: Some of Benny's original music, yes. I wish I could think of some of the names. He wrote some beautiful original compositions, and I can't recall what they were at the moment. I think we'll have to research that.

DAVID BAKER: We did a lot of them the summer before last. We must have ten or twelve things that we had transcribed [for the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra], so if you'd like, I can give you [those].

Johnson: Okay.

Baker: You were in the movies, too, with that band.

Johnson: Benny's band was in one movie. What was the name of that movie?

Baker: *As Thousands Cheer*.

Johnson: *As Thousands Cheer*.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: Right, that's true.

Baker: Was that the first time you had been out to the West Coast?

Johnson: It could very well be. It could very well be. Another thing that stands out in my mind about the West Coast is that Benny played for almost six or eight months at a place while I was with the band in Los Angeles called Billy Berg's Swing Club.

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: I remember it well. It was a nice club in the Hollywood area with a clientele that were friends of Benny's for the most part and people he knew. He knew a lot of people. He was a very popular person on a business level, on a professional level, as a bandleader, and as a musician. He knew a lot of people, and a lot of people knew him. It meant that the club did good business with Benny there for six months, almost like a

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house band, if you will, for six months or four, five, six months – whatever it was. It was the longest I had ever stayed at one venue with a band. It was the first time. And there was something nice about that. You settle down, going to work every night and going back to your place to sleep and what not, knowing where you were going without getting on a plane or a train or a bus to go there.

DAVID BAKER: That's where Bird and Diz opened in '46, at Billy Berg's.

Johnson: At Billy Berg's.

DAVID BAKER: Bird, Diz, Milt Jackson . . .

Johnson: Was it called the Swing Club? [Was it] still called Billy Berg's Swing Club?

DAVID BAKER: . . . and it had Milt Jackson, the drummer Stan Levy . . .

Johnson: Oh, my goodness.

DAVID BAKER: . . . and O.P.

Johnson: Oscar Peterson.

DAVID BAKER: Pettiford.

J. J. JOHNSON: Pettiford. Bass player. Pettiford.

DAVID BAKER: They opened there in 1946, so they were still keeping the flag flying.

Johnson: How about that. I'll tell you, I would like to recall this incident that happened while we were at Billy Berg's Swing Club. We heard about a place where a trio was playing that was a mind-blowing experience, to go hear this trio.

DAVID BAKER: I know who you're talking about, yeah.

Johnson: Yeah. We went to a club called the Three Sixes, 666, and the trio was the Nat "King" Cole Trio. And the word was true. It blew our minds. The musicality and the beauty of this trio. The complex arrangements they played. Nat and that wonderful voice and what not. He was quite a pianist.

DAVID BAKER: That was his main thing.

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Johnson: His main bag was as a jazz pianist. They did a lot of instrumentals and very few vocals, as a matter of fact. But he did sing once in a while at the Three Sixes. This is before he had made his mark. This is before he hit the big time. He was just another trio in Los Angeles playing at a venue in Los Angeles, but something special, something very special. It could have been projected or predicted that this is going to go someplace. As we all know, history will show that it did indeed go someplace.

DAVID BAKER: It must have been very attractive when with Jazz at the Philharmonic he was the piano player behind you guys on a lot of those things.

Johnson: Oh, man, he was some piano player. He was some accompanist, rather.

DAVID BAKER: I remember those Jazz at the Philharmonic recordings with you, and Nat's playing piano on them, man.

Johnson: Yeah, yeah. For sure.

Baker: Back to the Benny Carter years, what was the repertoire that you were playing with Benny Carter?

Johnson: Benny's repertoire included standards and his very unique personal arrangements of standards and some of his own works, shall we call them. I don't recall the names of them.

Baker: Was this still pretty much playing for dances?

Johnson: Not just playing for dances, but mostly. I wish I could think of some of the tunes we played, other than *Sleep*.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I remember that one. Yeah.

Johnson: *Sleep* is the one that had the complex saxophone section with a thousand notes. You know, it's a funny thing. They associate [John] Coltrane with this term "sheets of sound." Little do they know. Benny Carter [laughs] was the originator of "sheets of sound" for saxophone *sections*, not just one guy.

Baker: Where were some of the other types of venues that the Benny Carter band played besides just for dances?

Johnson: Well, Lida, I guess we have to acknowledge the fact that it was during that cycle that – what do they call those variety shows in theaters?

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DAVID BAKER: Vaudeville.

Johnson: Vaudeville. That's the term I'm looking for. Thanks, Dave. Vaudeville was still big, [but] it was on the wane. You saw the handwriting on the wall for vaudeville and the whole vaudeville syndrome, but there was [still] a lot of action, a lot of activity. All of the major cities had theaters where you'd have a band, and a big name singer, and an act, and a dog act or animal act, and a comedian. This was vaudeville. They were variety-type shows. This was still very prevalent.

DAVID BAKER: Was this like the T. O. B. A. [Theater Owners' Booking Association]? Like Sammy Davis, Will Mastin, the kind of things they were doing?

Johnson: Definitely. No question about it. Peg Leg Bates.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Do you remember Peg Leg Bates?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, and Butter Beans and Susie.

Johnson: Oh, yeah. The Nicholas Brothers.

DAVID BAKER: So this was that . . .

Johnson: This was that . . .

Baker: That circuit.

Johnson: We're talking in that cycle of time now. That was one of the major forms of entertainment for blacks and whites alike, for that matter. It was vaudeville. Vaudeville was big yet, though on the wane. I said that to say that Benny played a lot of those type venues where we were the band on the bill with the singer and a comedian and dancers and you name it.

Baker: I'm trying to remember the picture that you are talking about. Did you all wear uniforms with that band?

Johnson: In the movie?

Baker: No, just as a part of your normal . . .

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Johnson: Oh, the photograph that you have?

Baker: Uh huh. As a part of your normal appearance where . . .

Johnson: Is the question did Benny Carter's band wear band uniforms?

Baker: Did you all wear uniforms? I know a lot of the bands did.

Johnson: Oh, certainly. I'm sure we did. I'm sure we did.

Baker: Because some of those were very, very stylish, wonderful . . .

Johnson: Oh, yeah. Most bands of importance and even not of importance had [them]. It was the order of the day to have band uniforms. Yes. Yes. It was expected. It was very prevalent.

Baker: That was an integrated band, from what I understand. [Johnson and David Baker look surprised.] No, that was not an integrated band?

DAVID BAKER: No.

Baker: Okay. I'm looking at Louis's [Louis G. Bourgois III] dissertation here, and he talked about the fact that [it] was an integrated band and [that] there were some problems as a result of that.

DAVID BAKER: On the picture it was not.

Johnson: I don't recall . . . you mean Benny's band?

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: I don't recall there being any white members of Benny's band. That's not to say that Benny's band never included a white musician, but while I was there, there was never a white musician. That I can say with some accuracy. During the two or three year stint with Benny that I was there, it was not an integrated band. We'll have to speak to Bourgois about that. [The Bakers laugh]

Baker: Did you find that there were problems with discrimination in traveling with that band, just as there had been earlier with the other bands that you had been with?

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Johnson: Much less. Minimal. It was there, yes, but minimal.

Baker: I was wondering since you went to larger cities and more supposedly cosmopolitan areas, if you encountered the same problems that you did in the smaller towns on the other kinds of circuits.

Johnson: Much less of it. It was there, but not as prevalent. We didn't come into contact with it as much.

Baker: [World War II] was on when you were with Benny. Were there any effects of what was happening with the war on what was going on with the music business, and specifically with the kinds of music that you all were involved in, the kinds of things that you played?

Johnson: Lida, I believe that the war and the whole world climate, if you will, was [affected]. [It] affected all phases of life including music, including jazz, and including – how could it not? It was such an important part of history and it had such a dramatic impact on our lives, on our psyche, and on our thinking about life and everything. I could not articulate to you how it affected Benny's music or anyone's music. All I know is that it did.

Baker: I was thinking in terms of was it more difficult to travel because materiel was needed for the war effort like rubber –

Johnson: More than likely that was true, Lida. That's a good bet that that did happen.

Baker: And possibly personnel, difficulties with getting personnel because people were being drafted and what have you?

Johnson: This is true, but Benny didn't have personnel problems as a result of the war situation, to my recollection.

Baker: I understand that while you were with Benny Carter was when you also got hooked up with Norman Granz and took part in some things for Jazz at the Philharmonic.

Johnson: This is true. Norman Granz came into our lives with his whole Jazz at the Philharmonic enterprise that was quite innovative at that time. No one had ever done what Norman Granz wanted to do. And for the record, getting ahead of our current cycle of time, you may or may not know that in the next few weeks there's going to be a tribute to 50 years of Jazz at the Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. [telephone keeps ringing]

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Baker: Okay. We might want to fade out until the phone . . .

Johnson: . . . if we do, it'll be a very distant sound.

Baker: Let's see. Shall we pick it back up with Jazz at the Philharmonic? You were just saying about the 50th anniversary. Could you say that again?

Johnson: Yes. In the next few weeks – as a matter of fact, the exact date is April 6, 1994 – there will be a celebration of 50 years of Jazz at the Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall – a black tie, high profile, prestigious event. They are even calling it the musical event of the year at Carnegie Hall in 1994. We'll see about that. But a lot of people are excited about it. I will be involved. Illinois Jacquet, who was certainly a part of Jazz at the Philharmonic, will be there. A lot of people are on it that were not a part of Jazz at the Philharmonic, to make it a very high profile, prestigious event. I'm told that Shirley Horne is going to be . . . Carolyn, who are some of the other people who are going to be on the Carnegie Hall thing April the 6th? Shirley Horne and who else?

CAROLYN JOHNSON: Abbey Lincoln.

Johnson: Abbey Lincoln. A lot of people. A lot of people. I have the article here. I'll show it to you. It's interesting. It can explain in much more detail about what April the 6th at Carnegie Hall is all about than I can ever do. We saved it just for that purpose, 'cause I've tried a couple of times to explain to people and they say, "I don't know what you're talking about." [Then I say,] "Here, read this." [And then they say,] "Oh! Now we know what you mean."

DAVID BAKER: You and Illinois sure were huge contributors to the phenomenon. I can remember Illinois Jacquet, Flip Phillips, and Willie Smith at one time or another. Nat Cole . . .

Johnson: Finally Lester Young . . .

DAVID BAKER: Lester Young. And Lee Young . . .

Johnson: Lee Young, oh yeah. Norman had this unique way about him of getting people who he had great admiration for, or people who he considered to be the top jazz musicians of the day. His whole concept was to put unlikely combinations of musicians together and just let the sparks fly, as he would say. He got some interesting concerts recorded as a result of that. Oh, you have the article, there? Carolyn found the article that's about the April 6th event, and you can take a look at that. I will never forget that . . . well first of all, Norman and I became very friendly. He wasn't an easy man to be great friends with, but

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in any case, we became very friendly. Norman once told me – and it's mentioned in this article that Carolyn's found and Dave is reading now – that we were standing in the wings listening to another one of the acts. I had either performed or was about to perform. Norman and I were standing there together, and he said to me, "J.J., the only meaningful music is jam sessions and the blues. All other music is pure bullshit."

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's great!

Johnson: It says it right here.

Baker: What did you think about that?

Johnson: He meant that. He meant that. Norman meant that. Norman was a very honest and sincere person about jazz and about music. He didn't mince words. He was opinionated, and he had a fierce loyalty to the Jazz at the Philharmonic people. Like Illinois Jacquet is on, what? Four or five of them. He brought you back.

DAVID BAKER: Roy Eldridge.

Johnson: Roy Eldridge, oh yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Charlie Shavers.

Johnson: Charlie Shavers, oh yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Trummy [Young].

Johnson: Trummy, oh.

DAVID BAKER: *Bell Boy Blues*.

Johnson: You name it, they've been on Jazz at the Philharmonic at one time or another through the years. Through 50 years of Jazz at the Philharmonic he's probably had every musician.

Baker: What were some of your more memorable experiences as a part of Jazz at the Philharmonic over the years?

Johnson: The one incident and/or concert and/or event that comes to my mind at the moment is the one that got a lot of attention for the two of us [Stan Getz and myself]: Stan Getz and J.J. Johnson Live at the Opera House in Chicago. That album made a little bit of

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a noise and was a successful seller for Norman and for us. It was fun to do. Stan Getz and I had never worked together before. We didn't even know each other very well. This was typical of Norman Granz's penchant for putting strangers together, or a tuba and a piccolo, maybe, and just throw it up there and say, "Well, let's see what happens." That was his fun, just to stand by and say, "Well, we don't what's going to happen but we'll find out." He recorded this. "Let's find out. This might not work. Let's find out." And the record will show that sometimes it didn't work out so wonderfully. Not every Jazz at the Philharmonic recording is wonderful. They are all very good, well-produced, well thought out and all like that; but the musical content in some few cases left something to be desired. It was just a little bit more daring than was possible. That was Norman. He lived on the edge of the envelope as far as programming and as far as putting groups together.

DAVID BAKER: That was –

Johnson: He did not play it safe.

DAVID BAKER: That happened to be great. He had a rhythm section that didn't – they're playing background only – Oscar Peterson, Connie Kay and Ray Brown. And boy, they provide – I remember [Baker sings the first 2 bars of *Blues in the Closet*] *Blues in the Closet* . . .

Johnson: Oh, my goodness.

DAVID BAKER: . . . and a whole host of those things – *It Never Entered My Mind*. It's been reissued, you know. Or did you know?

Johnson: I did not know that.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. It's been reissued.

Johnson: The reissue market in general is difficult to keep up with. I'm always surprised when somebody's telling me, "You know, your thing you did on so-and-so is [back]." I didn't know it. Sometimes I don't know it until I go to Europe and see it in a record store in Europe. I say, "What? I didn't know this was out." The reissue world, that's a jungle. That's a jungle. That whole reissue syndrome is a jungle.

DAVID BAKER: It's a windfall for the historians and people who were . . . it was a good marriage with you and Getz, man. You guys played really, I thought, beautifully.

Johnson: We didn't know how it was going to turn out, and Norman didn't know how it

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was going to turn out. We are fortunate that it turned out well.

Baker: Did he choose the repertoire for those things, or did you all decide among yourselves what tunes you wanted to play?

Johnson: We talked it over and decided amongst ourselves, that is, Stan and myself. Another feather in Norman's cap: he never got involved with choice of material or anything like that. He would decide who he wanted to play with whom, but that's as far as he went. While you were rehearsing and/or discussing the material or let's play this in that key, he was reading the stock market report. That's Norman. He didn't get involved with musicians and their domain. That's something nice to be said about Norman. He did not interfere in the artistic and the creative part of what he put together.

Baker: Why did you leave the Benny Carter band? I know that was at the end of one of your two-to-three-year cycles.

Johnson: [laughs]

Baker: Was there something in particular that you wanted to do, or did you just want a break from being on that kind of touring schedule, or do you remember why you decided to leave when you did?

Johnson: Lida, my best recollection is that an opening in Basie's band happened, occurred. I was approached, and I made the switch from Benny Carter's band to Count Basie's band. That's my best recollection. I don't think there was a gap in between the two. I don't think so.

Baker: I don't think so, no.

Johnson: No. I think I went pretty much from one right to the other.

Baker: That must have been very exciting for you . . .

Johnson: It was indeed.

Baker: . . . because there were still some people in there who you had listened to . . .

Johnson: You mean in Basie's [band]?

Baker: . . . and had really [admired], in the Basie band.

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Johnson: Oh yeah. Unfortunately my hero wasn't there. Lester Young wasn't there. He had some monsters in Lester's place in the person of Don Byas, a killer, *killer* saxophone player, and Illinois Jacquet. They all came along after Lester. He still had some of the holdovers, like Sweets was still there – Harry "Sweets" Edison, that is. I first met Joe Newman in Basie's band. Dickie Wells was still there. I held Dickie Wells in very high esteem. Dickie Wells was a unique trombonist in that less is more. Simple is good. His playing, in his approach to jazz improvisation, was the personification of less is more and simple is good. With just a few choice notes he could say volumes. It was just his unique way of playing those few choice notes that was uniquely Dickie Wells, and his persona would come through in those few choice notes. It was nothing virtuoso about his performance, ever. Always a few well-chosen notes played with his particular unique way of playing those few notes – with a little blues tinge, something earthy about the way he played that was wonderful.

DAVID BAKER: Almost a talking sound.

Johnson: Yeah. He was a very handsome, tall guy. It was something magic about sitting in the band – a greenhorn, J.J. Johnson, and this handsome, tall guy standing up. He seemed to tower over the orchestra with his trombone, and with these few just [Johnson vocally imitates Dickie Wells's playing].

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, that talk.

Johnson: That talk. That was his style, and it was *wonderful*!

Baker: Could you talk a little bit about your memories of Count Basie as a leader, as a pianist, as a person?

Johnson: Basie in some ways was, you might say, enigmatic in that he was not accessible to his sidemen. Yet if you happened to run across him, you'd always have a good laugh. He always had something fun to indulge in, just by way of an aside or a commentary. But he did not hang out with his sidemen, per se. He had an entourage, as most bandleaders of his stature had at that time – the road manager, the "this", the "that." There were the people who took care of the equipment, the people who handled the library. I think in some situations his attorney traveled with him and what not. His booking agent would travel with him on occasion. But as far as hanging out with the musicians in the orchestra, he did not do that very much.

He imparted something in the Basie syndrome that's difficult to articulate because he was not a virtuoso pianist by any stroke of the imagination. Basie also was a personification of "less is more" in his style of playing. "Plink-plink-a-plink-a-plink" is what people

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called Basie, and yet it was uniquely Basie. [There] was something magic about this plink-plink-a-plink-a-plink that transcended virtuoso playing. It was more important than virtuoso playing and a thousand notes and playing like Horowitz or anybody. His few notes were the cornerstone of that orchestra style for reasons that are difficult to articulate. Could you articulate on that, David? Why is it that plink-a-plink was so magical and so wonderful and made the Basie Band tick? Plink-a-plinky made the Basie band tick.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

J. J. JOHNSON: That's how the Basie band was born. A few plink-a-plinks on the piano is what the Basie band was all about.

DAVID BAKER: I think, like Basie said, it was where he placed the plink-a-plinks that made it work.

Johnson: [laughs] It worked. It worked like a charm.

DAVID BAKER: Jay, can you recall the reaction to that first solo with him? What was it? *The King*? I can't remember if that was it.

Johnson: It may have been *The King*.

DAVID BAKER: But I can remember reading the reviews. There were all kinds of arguments on the part of Leonard Feather and others. They said, "Nobody can play that fast on the trombone. It must be a valve trombone."

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: [I was] just wondering what your reaction was because it was in *Metronome* [magazine] and *Down Beat* [magazine], and it was [as] though somebody had – people went ballistic . . .

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: . . . because this was the first time they had heard you in a setting that was an international kind of band.

Johnson: Uh huh. I don't remember what my feelings or reactions were about the reviews and about the commentary. I just don't have any recollection. If anything, I might have been puzzled by it all because I didn't think it was a big deal. I wasn't trying

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to set the world on fire. [laughter] I was just trying to do what I was hired to do, and it came out well and that's all I can say about it.

DAVID BAKER: 'Cause that would have been my next question, whether you were really cognizant of the fact that you really had transformed the aesthetic with regard to that instrument – the fact that there was virtually, notwithstanding your idol, that [there] was almost no precedent for playing the instrument the way you played it.

Johnson: Other than [Fred] Beckett.

DAVID BAKER: I mean other than Beckett.

Johnson: Other than Beckett.

DAVID BAKER: Notwithstanding, and he . . .

Johnson: Notwithstanding. Okay. Right. Right. Right. Well, I guess, David, I'd have to just say that Beckett planted the seed, and he did indeed plant the seed. I can say that in all honesty.

DAVID BAKER: Because it was something that caused a lot of comment for years after that.

Johnson: I don't have a recollection about ever trying conscientiously to play fast, fast, fast, fast. I do have a recollection of trying to be articulate, and I think there's a difference. I was hopeful that I could play with clarity and make a statement that had no ambiguity about it. It was the Lester Young influence, I guess, because there was nothing strange or ambiguous about Lester Young's solo that we all knew by heart. It started someplace, it went someplace, and it ended someplace; and all of the places that it started and went were wonderful and articulate and it's like speech. It's like semantics, if you will. I think we'll all agree: jazz as practiced by the pros is a question of jazz semantics. It's like words -- placing, using, [and] choosing the right words to go with other words. The same thing [is] true in jazz. There is a thing to say in jazz, and there's a thing that's the wrong thing to say in jazz. I always defer back to Lester Young – studying and analyzing his solos with a clinical, analytical ear and discovering the logic of his approach to linear improvisation. There was such a wonderful logic there. If anything, when I [was] in the early stages of trying to be a jazz soloist, it really was not a preoccupation with fast, fast, fast and trying to play like a saxophone or anything like that. The preoccupation was to try to make sense and try to put logic into my lines, if they were lines. That was the preoccupation, to make a statement that was clear, articulate and with logic. Not with speed.

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DAVID BAKER: I think that was part of the reaction, though. I can remember one reviewer said that you played with the clarity of a piano player, and the piano player they mentioned was Bud Powell.

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: I think maybe, more than anything else, what you did [was] put in the consciousness the fact that there were no limitations about what the instrument was capable of doing. Coming that early in your career, as young as you were, that had to be mind-boggling, even though you may not have been all that conscious that [this was] what was going on around you. But certainly going back and looking through the reviews, looking through the critiques, and even the sometimes hyperbolic writing that went on a record jacket, it seems to me that [that this] is what you did. [You] established an articulate way of viewing the instrument.

Johnson: I hope. [laughter] I'm still preoccupied with trying to be articulate and clear and to approach jazz improvisation with logic. I'm still very much preoccupied with that. I am not at all preoccupied with speed. Not at all. I am preoccupied with timbre. I do long tones and still do the first thing in the morning. When I first get out of bed, the first thing I do is a few long tones. Not a lot. I call it keeping in touch with the instrument. I practice scales and sometimes it gets a little bit of a head of steam. But there's never been a preoccupation [with speed]. There never has been and I don't know if there ever will be a preoccupation with speed. It just hasn't been. If I've managed to get up a head of steam, so be it. Thank God. [laughs] But I'm just saying that was never a priority. That's the point I'm trying to make. It never was. The tendency is to think that perhaps at some point that *was* a preoccupation. It never was. I'd like the record to show that it never was.

Baker: When you were with the Basie band, was that the first time you played outside the United States or had you been outside the country prior to that?

Johnson: The answer to that question, Lida, is intertwined with the answer to the question of what year was it that I went overseas with Oscar Pettiford and a quintet to entertain servicemen in the Korean Conflict. We did so. Oscar Pettiford was the leader of this group, and it included Rudy Williams on saxophone, Howard McGee, and Keeter . . .

Baker: Betts?

Johnson: . . . Betts – on something – guitar?

DAVID BAKER: Bass?

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Baker: Bass?

Johnson: Bass, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: No, 'cause Oscar Pettiford was playing bass.

Baker: Oh, that's right.

Johnson: Yeah, you're right. You're right. Pettiford on bass. There was no piano. There was no keyboard player because we were going in places where there was no piano – in the field, entertaining servicemen. So we had guitar, who was . . .

DAVID BAKER: Keter.

Johnson: Keeter. Right. Right. Right. There it was. There's the quintet, right there. So I don't know which came first, going abroad with Basie or going abroad with this quintet with Oscar Pettiford and entertaining the servicemen in the Far East.

DAVID BAKER: I'm almost certain it was the Basie band first . . .

Johnson: Maybe. Yeah, I kinda think so.

DAVID BAKER: . . . because I remember the line-up for the other [group] because there were some altercations between Howard McGee and Oscar Pettiford on this trip.

Johnson: I'm not at all surprised. It was easy to have an altercation with Oscar Pettiford. [laughs] Wonderful human being, a wonderful bass player, but he had a bit of a temper and he had a little bit of a drinking problem and the two of them combined presented a bit of a problem as far as human relations go.

Baker: [laughs] Did you find – and this could extend to the traveling that you've done since then -- that you were treated differently outside the country than you were here in the country?

Johnson: My best recollection, Lida, is then as well as now, let's just say they rolled the red carpet out for jazz musicians more in other countries than they do in the United States. That's a strange phenomena, but it's the truth. They make a bigger deal of it. It's kind of taken for granted here in some quarters. In other quarters it's treated as a stepchild, and in other quarters it's just flatly rejected in this country; whereas in some of the other countries, as a matter of fact, in most other countries, it's a big deal and, again, they roll

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out the red carpet and they treat musicians with a great deal of respect, if you will. Adulation. Adoration. They make a bigger deal out of it. Right.

Baker: Did you find much difference in the traveling and working conditions between the north and the south when you were working with the big bands?

Johnson: I don't recall there being much of a problem in that area, Lida. Are you referring to the racial situation?

Baker: Yes.

Johnson: There were certainly incidents, and there were certain unpleasant occurrences, of course. But I haven't held any in my memory bank as being outstanding. Just the norm.

Baker: Well, I was wondering –

Johnson: Whatever was normal.

Baker: I know there was one incident in St. Louis when you were with Benny Carter where you were actually physically attacked by someone. I didn't know if that was an isolated incident or if members of bands that did a lot of traveling in one section of the country as opposed to another, or actually all over the country, had to face the threat of physical violence or just – what am I trying to say?

Johnson: Psychological violence?

Baker: Yes, psychological violence. That's about the nicest way I can think to put it. I was struggling for a nice way to put it.

Johnson: My exposure to violence in any shape, form or fashion was more exposure to psychological violence than physical violence. This one incident, I don't recall the details of it. I'm sure it happened. It's just gotten away from me. I don't know what that says about that incident if I don't remember it, and it was – physical violence is terrible! That's pretty horrible, and it's not clear in my mind as to just what happened, except that it did happen and I don't remember the details of it.

Baker: Well, maybe it's best forgotten.

Johnson: Could be, could be.

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Baker: Sure. Then I understand that . . . I'm sorry, David. Did you want to say something?

DAVID BAKER: Nope.

Baker: Who were some of your good friends in the Basie band when you were with them? Did you have anyone you were particularly close to?

Johnson: Joe Newman. Dickie Wells and I would hang out together. Illinois Jacquet. Jo Jones, the drummer – the Basie Jo Jones, not the Philly Joe Jones.

Baker: [laughs]

J.J. JOHNSON: Those persons come to mind. There was a trumpet player, Snooky Young, [who] was in Basie's band for a while. We became very good friends through the years and we still are, except I haven't seen him in quite a long time – since moving from California, as a matter of fact. He was really a good buddy of mine, Snooky was [a] sweetheart of a person, a sweetheart of a musician. Those are the persons that come to mind.

Baker: I'm wondering if we should move on to New York City and 52nd Street, or if there anything we need to go back to about the various bands or whatever. I understand that it was while you were with the Basie band – and actually while you were in New York with the Basie band – that you started getting very interested in what was going on on 52nd Street and had the opportunity to meet some of the musicians like Dizzy Gillespie who were involved in beginning to evolve a new style which was interesting to you. Would you like to talk a little bit about how you first encountered Dizzy Gillespie?

Johnson: I really don't remember where it was and how it came about that we met. Inevitably we did meet, and it was a wonderful experience. I was in awe of him, obviously. Same thing with Charlie Parker. I inevitably met him on some situation that I don't recall the details of. And again, I was certainly in awe of Charlie Parker. I was in awe of Bird and Diz, shall we say, as many people were. I first heard Charlie Parker's style on a Jay McShann recording. Ahhh – what's the name of that thing?

Baker: *Hootie Blues*

DAVID BAKER: *Hootie Blues.*

Johnson: *Hootie Blues. Hootie Blues.* I was in awe of that. It was just so wonderful to hear something, the likes of which you had never heard of in one play like that before. It's

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true that during the final phases of my stay with Basie, I had become more and more curious about what was going on in New York City. Inevitably I left Basie's band to settle down in New York – to live in New York and to learn as much as I could about what was going on in jazz and this so-called new approach to jazz that finally got the tag "bebop." As I understand it, Dizzy Gillespie created that word, "bebop." I think even recently I've said in print and in interviews that I've had some trouble with that term "bebop" and I still do. The trouble I have with the word "bebop" is, even though Dizzy created it, Dizzy Gillespie, in my opinion, is much bigger and much more important to the evolution of jazz and the evolution of jazz trumpet than the narrow confines of that little box that's labeled "bebop." It is a box that has a label on it that says "bebop." It's much too confining for anyone as important and as big as Dizzy Gillespie was. I can only hope that I, too, escape the narrow confines of that little box that's labeled "bebop." I hope. I can't say that I did, but I hope that I did. That's the only problem I have with that word. It tends to confine and constrict and constrain to one little area, and that one little area is that little box that's called "bebop." Diz was much bigger than that. Bird was much bigger than that. Miles was much bigger than that. All of the people who were accused of being aligned with bebop hopefully were much bigger than the narrow confines of that little box that's labeled "bebop."

Baker: What were some of the clubs that you went to where you were first hearing the new styles or the experimentation that would lead eventually to "bebop," quote-unquote?

Johnson: Well, there was Minton's Playhouse, of course, where all the musicians gathered to jam, shall we say. Jamming was very prevalent in those days. Too bad that it finally disappeared because some wonderful things happened in impromptu jam sessions in places like Minton's Playhouse. Some of the other places were on 52nd Street. There was the Three Deuces. The owner, Clark Monroe, once hired me to work under one of the most peculiar circumstances that I have ever encountered as a jazz musician. At the Three Deuces, the star attraction was Coleman Hawkins. "Bean." Coleman Hawkins, the gilded hawk. Coleman Hawkins was a very, very wonderful soloist as we all know, a wonderful jazz musician – fantastic, mind-blowing performances always. He was always dapper, always sharp. He always wore a hat. He had a strange quirk. We all have our quirks. Coleman Hawkins's quirk was to never, never, never start on time as per contract.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: It was a religion with him, so much so that Coleman Hawkins would be in the White Rose, I believe was the name of this bar, which was right around the corner from the Three Deuces. He would stay there at the bar having a beer or such until such time as *he* felt he should go on the stand and play. That may be a half an hour after the starting time. It could be as late as an hour after the starting time or as brief as ten minutes after

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the starting time. But to start on time was against his principles. He just did not do so. So Clark Monroe hired me to play nightly, just until Coleman Hawkins got there.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: When Coleman Hawkins got there, I left. During a three or four week stint, I only played with Coleman Hawkins who invited me, I think, on one or two [occasions]—"Hey, Jay, play a tune with me or so," and I did so. Mostly I went home after Coleman Hawkins arrived, which again would be fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, a half an hour, sometimes as long as an hour. He would be right around the corner at the bar.

Baker: Isn't that something.

Johnson: That's an unusual quirk, isn't it, when you consider that we all have our quirks. Lord knows, I have some strange ones, I'll tell you right now. Ask Carolyn. [laughter] No, don't ask Carolyn because she will tell you. We don't want to put this on tape.

DAVID BAKER: There were a number of records that were reissued [and] came out a little later – one called *One Step Down [Half Step Down, Please]* and the things you did with Coleman Hawkins at that time. What was it? *Tossin' the Bean?* *Meeting the Bean?* [It was *Bean and the Boys*.]

Johnson: Oh, yeah. Something about "the Bean."

Baker: *Feedin' the Bean?*

DAVID BAKER: No, it wasn't that.

Johnson: Yeah. Yeah. I know the one you're talking about, and "the Bean" is in the [title]. Yeah. Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I thought the playing was really superb. It's funny because he was still thinking in an older style and the rest of you – you and Fats [Navarro] – had already embraced the new language and everything. And yet there was a compatibility.

Johnson: Umm. Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: That's been reissued and I assume that it's . . .

Johnson: Another reissue yet!

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DAVID BAKER: No, this one is five or six years old.

Johnson: Oh, this is a five or six year old reissue. I see. Okay.

DAVID BAKER: Maybe it was *Feedin' the Bean*.

Baker: Yeah, I think it was.

Johnson: It could have been. That sounds familiar. The "Bean" part of it definitely sounds familiar. I'm just trying to think of the other part of the title. *Feedin' the Bean* might have been it.

DAVID BAKER: It was such a nice juxtaposition with him on the one hand and you and Fats on the other. Was this about the time you recorded with Charlie Parker, too, because I remember that [tune] – [Baker sings the opening measures of *Crazeology*] *Crazeology*.

Baker: Yeah, that was – *Crazeology* is 1947.

Johnson: Yeah, in that time frame, that time cycle, yeah. All of those situations took place, and that's where it gets fuzzy as far as chronological accuracy.

Baker: *Bean and the Boys. Bean and the Boys.*

Johnson: Ah, *Bean and the Boys*. There it is.

Baker: That's what it is.

Johnson: Good for you, Lida. *Bean and the Boys*. Okay.

DAVID BAKER: Is this also the time of your first date as a leader, with *Coppin' the Bop* and those things?

Johnson: Hmm.

DAVID BAKER: Because those quintets – of course, they've been reissued a number of times, the ones with both John Lewis and Bud [Powell].

Johnson: That would be about . . .

Baker: It is.

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Johnson: That would be about right, Dave. That time connection is about on target.

Baker: Yeah, because *Coppin' the Bop* is '46, so that should be around that time.

Johnson: In that time frame.

DAVID BAKER: Those were two remarkable quintets, the one you had with John Lewis on some of the things and Bud Powell on the others.

Johnson: Oh, my goodness.

DAVID BAKER: *Jay Jay* and *Jay Bird*. Fact is, the trombone player with Lionel Hampton on one of the recordings played your solo, the one from *Jay Bird*. [Baker sings the opening measures of the solo.] I remember thinking, "This is really wild," because it wasn't the standard thing, like they did later on with – what's that group that plays Bird's music?

Baker: Supersax.

Johnson: Supersax.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, but it was a really nice feeling. Then I heard Neal Hefti play that same solo on a record with another one of the big bands. It's amazing how already that influence was so pervasive.

Johnson: Wow.

DAVID BAKER: The Neal Hefti [recording] – that one was *really* strange, hearing a trumpet player play it.

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: So this would have been around that same time.

Johnson: I think so, yes.

Baker: Tell us about the jam sessions at Minton's.

Johnson: They were mind-boggling to say the least – most of them – because you would have the top practitioners of the genre, shall we say, stopping in just to have some fun. I think the one that stands out in my mind over all the others was, on this particular

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occasion, the night for trumpet players to have a go at it. On this given night there was Dizzy, Freddie Webster, Fats Navarro, Miles Davis, and a fifth trumpet player – it may have been Howard McGee. Words could not ever describe what happened on the bandstand with these five trumpet players having a go at it. It was something not to be believed. I *still* don't believe it. It's too bad it wasn't recorded, and it wasn't. The jam sessions that took place at Minton's, I don't [know that] they were ever [recorded]. Are there any recordings, like jam [sessions], [that] you know of?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. Wire recordings.

Johnson: Wire recordings. Oh, not actual recordings under ideal conditions that we would know about of jam sessions that took place, [recordings] at those wonderful, wonderful jam sessions.

DAVID BAKER: They released quite a few of them.

Johnson: There would be a tenor saxophone night. There'd be a trumpet night. There would be a night where piano players were . . .

DAVID BAKER: Charlie Christian on some of them – 1944 with Monk and Dizzy.

Johnson: On a wire recording?

DAVID BAKER: Yes. Released later, but done with a wire recorder.

Johnson: It was some guy in the audience.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Unauthorized.

DAVID BAKER: Because it was such a new phenomena, guys would just set the big old recorder up, just like Gene Fowlkes.

Johnson: They were hiding it, yeah, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: So that would have been around this time. Was it common for other trombonists? I can't imagine any other trombone players showing up at those sessions because that was pretty fast company, I mean, to try to play those tunes.

Johnson: I don't remember there ever being a trombone night. I'm not saying it didn't

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happen. I have no recollection of it. I don't recall there ever being a night where the trombone players of the day were having a go at it. I don't remember there ever being such a night.

DAVID BAKER: I don't think there were many equipped to handle the music, [especially if someone would] call a tune like *Bebop*.

Johnson: Oh, my goodness, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Everybody had to go to the bathroom. Right quick!

Johnson: [laughs] Yeah.

Baker: Did everybody know the tunes pretty much that came to sit in?

Johnson: Yeah. For example, on the trumpet night or the saxophone night, inevitably you'd play things like *Groovin' High*. We all knew *Groovin' High*. It was a popular jazz classic, if you will. We all knew [Johnson sings *Blue 'n Boogie*]. Everybody knew that. [Johnson sings *Billie's Bounce*.] We all knew that. We all knew how many wonderful blues heads that Bird created. God, they were endless! You would think, "How can there be another one to create?" He would create another one on blues chords. There was a certain set of tunes that everyone knew, let's put it that way. [Johnson sings *Woody'n You*.] *Woody'n You*.

Baker: *Woody'n You*.

Johnson: *Woody'n You*, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: That's on that same one [recording] with Coleman Hawkins, too.

Johnson: *Would'n You*. Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Probably one of the earliest . . .

Johnson: Some people call it *Would'n You*.

DAVID BAKER: . . . [it was called] *Woody'n You* because it was written for Woody Herman.

Johnson: I didn't know that . . .

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DAVID BAKER: Dizzy . . .

Johnson: . . . or if I knew it, it got away from me. Oh, it was intended for Woody Herman.

DAVID BAKER: Woody never recorded it, but he [Dizzy Gillespie] wrote it for him.

Johnson: Oh, I see. And yet most people call it *Would'n You*.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. Yeah. Well, on the records it still comes out sometimes *Woody'n You*.

Johnson: You mean spelled out *Woody and You*.

DAVID BAKER: Dizzy [spelled it with] apostrophes.

Johnson: Oh, I see. Okay.

DAVID BAKER: Do you remember the album from this same time, the one [that had] one of the most imitated solos [of yours]? I remember Slide and I learning this solo – and just about everybody else – your solo on *Don't Blame Me*.

Johnson: Wow.

DAVID BAKER: To this day I can sing the bridge on that solo.

Johnson: *Don't Blame Me*.

DAVID BAKER: You did a lot of playing, you know, mixing it up with mutes and things at that time, too.

Johnson: Yeah, yeah. I know that I recorded *Don't Blame Me* some years ago. I don't remember that solo, no. Maybe I *should* learn it. Maybe I *will* learn it. [laughter]

DAVID BAKER: It was the first time I heard somebody play consistently when you got the bridge [Baker sings from the solo] to the flat five [Baker continues to sing from the solo] and then restating the melody again.

Johnson: Oh, my goodness. I wouldn't *dare* attempt that today.

DAVID BAKER: And also your solo, the one we were talking about on *Crazeology* . . .

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Johnson: Oh, wow.

DAVID BAKER: . . . because that's the only recording you did with Bird, I think.

Johnson: To my knowledge. To my knowledge,

DAVID BAKER: That's the first time Bird had ever recorded with a trombone player.

Johnson: To my knowledge, uh huh.

DAVID BAKER: Fact is, I'm not sure, until they did the big band things with Bill Harris, that they ever got onto that again.

(BEGIN CD-3)

Baker: It's also about this time that you win your first major award. You won an award from *Esquire Magazine*. You were the new star on trombone in their Jazz Critics' Poll in 1946.

Johnson: That's my best recollection. We have some plaques around here that would verify that.

Baker: You've won so many awards from the critics' polls and the readers' polls of magazines and publications from all over the world. Would you like to comment a little bit about your thoughts about polls and possibly even critics?

Johnson: They are a breed apart from all other breeds, to say the least – critics. Obviously they are opinionated. I don't always agree with them. I haven't always agreed on those occasions where I was fortunate enough to win. But they have a job to do. They are paid to be opinionated. One of the strangest situations I've ever encountered as far as critics and commentary and critique was concerned: Andre Hodeir once did an in-depth review. I think a part of it ended up on a portion of album notes on one of my later recordings. He's commenting about J.J. Johnson's style and technique, et cetera, and he uses a word, a French word. It turns out this word cannot be translated into English. So until this day I don't know whether he was saying something nice [or] something horrible. Frenchmen and people who are well-versed in translating say you cannot translate that into English.

Baker: It's amazing.

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Johnson: It's remarkable because there is no such word. Any French word, there is an English equivalent of it. Not this one.

Baker: Isn't that something.

DAVID BAKER: What about Leonard Feather at this time, because he put one of the solos [one of Johnson's solos] in the book *Inside Bebop*. Fact is, [he] had it stacked up with four other versions of people playing *How High the Moon* [including], I think, Charlie Parker. What is your thought about a critic like Leonard Feather, inasmuch as he was probably the premier critic in the '40s?

Johnson: I don't know. I think the critics run hot and cold. Some of them are . . . again, they are strange birds. I've had problems with what I've read. I've read things that critics said about other musicians that I questioned and I didn't agree with it. I'll go that far. I've seen polls results that I've questioned how it could turn out that way, let's say. And yet, we have to take into account that the critics' poll is just that, a critics' poll. The readers' poll is just that. Readers vote on their favorites and what not. So if we get up in arms about something, we have to put it in the right context before flying off the handle, shall we say. I don't have any strong negativisms in general about jazz critics or critics in general. I take each situation on its own merits and what not. I agree or I don't agree with some parts of it or all of it or I'm in complete agreement. It depends. It just depends on who the critic is and what he says.

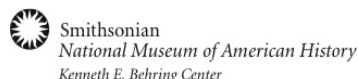
DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about something. I wonder how you feel about [this]. For a time – 1948 and 1949 – *Metronome* put their money where their mouth was. When they had the *Metronome* poll, they not only chose the winners but they then chose to record the winners.

Johnson: That's true.

DAVID BAKER: *The Local 802 Blues* or whatever that was. I remember you and Kai Winding both being on it, as well as Dizzy and Bird and Miles. I wonder if that was a good idea in your mind, because it did preserve for history what people thought – Charlie Ventura and whoever. Even though it was not prevalent beyond those two years that I know of, [I wonder] if it was something that you felt was a good thing, when you were brought together and all of a sudden all of you who had been judged by your peers to be the best people in the business had a chance to play together. I wonder what kind of experience that was.

Johnson: I remember more of how I felt about the outcome of those gatherings than anything else. The results were not always what I would have imagined would happen.

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As a matter of fact, the results mostly left something to be desired as far as the quality of the music that came about as a result of these sessions. I could never figure out why that was. You have all these towering geniuses together on the same situation, playing music created just for that situation, and yet the music never turned out to be something memorable, in my opinion. In my opinion. I don't recall any music that came about as a result of those gatherings that in my opinion was something valid and worthwhile and wonderful. Strange.

DAVID BAKER: I remember Pete Rugolo had written the two pieces that you played on one. I think Lennie Tristano had a piece. What I consider from the historical standpoint is that it was a documentation of that time and that period. I happen to think that particularly both you and Kai Winding came off very well. I thought the trumpet players tended to get into, you know, screaming and carrying on.

Johnson: Pyrotechnics.

DAVID BAKER: Pyrotechnics. If I recall correctly, fortunately that stuff is still available. Did they bring you back to New York? Well, you were already in New York. But I guess they brought people in once you were –

Johnson: They brought people in just for the occasion. You said it all when you said they put their money where their mouth was. They spent money on these projects, and I don't recall that any of them were ever big, big sellers.

DAVID BAKER: No.

Johnson: As a matter of fact, they were very poor sellers. I think one of the reasons was the results were not always so wonderful, which is strange. I still don't know why. There have been some theories advanced as to why the music that came about from these settings was less than wonderful. I don't recall the particulars of these theories. It seems that a Lester Young and a Coleman Hawkins and a Lee Konitz, if you will, in the same saxophone section doesn't necessarily mean that that saxophone section is going to sound wonderful. In the first place they are so different, how could it sound wonderful? So if you got eighteen wonderful musicians whose styles are so personal and so different one from the other, then it would take a miracle for it to come off as being something wonderful.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I hear that.

Johnson: As a unified effort.

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We take a break in the interview.

Baker: Where we left off was in 1946, talking about the new star award that had come to you from *Esquire*. Subsequently we discussed a little bit about the *Metronome* All-Star bands. I would like to go back a little bit in 1946 and pick up the subject of your first opportunity to work as a leader and how you put your first group together, and then the recordings that you made with that group with the addition of Cecil Payne. I wonder if you would like to talk about that a little.

Johnson: As I recall it, Lida, my first exposure as a leader was – it was a small combo. But even that early on, I became aware of the responsibility that that role carries with it. At first it didn't seem such a heavyweight issue, but the more I began to prepare for the realization of this recording, I became aware of the weight of the responsibility that it carried. It made an impact on me, and I never forgot the importance of that aspect of being the leader. There's a tremendous responsibility associated with filling the role as leader of anything. I have fond recollections of that experience. I don't mean to imply that it was a negative experience. As a matter of fact, it was a positive experience. It was a learning experience, if anything – a very timely, welcome, learning experience.

DAVID BAKER: How did you choose the members? It may be obvious to you, [but] it may not be so obvious to all of us. How did you happen to choose the players for this album?

Johnson: There was a camaraderie amongst the practitioners of that genre at that time, and there was a kind of a – what would we call it? – a pipeline of dialogue. You would inquire about a person you had heard about. I've heard about Max Roach. What about Max Roach, blah, blah, blah? You would get dialogue from your friends and your co-workers. At that time the names Max Roach or Bud Powell or Thelonious Monk weren't as well-known as they would finally become, so it was a good thing to inquire about someone who would impress someone. You wanted the inside story on that person. I think I did a measure of saying to a dear friend, a fellow musician, "What about so-and-so?" and "Should we try so-and-so?" "Oh, you love so-and-so" and blah, blah, blah. Let's try that combination of elements and see how it works out. It came about in that fashion.

DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about just one person on there. Cecil Payne would become later much better known as a baritone saxophonist, particularly with Dizzy's band and with other people. At the time that I bought the record, it was not a name that was familiar to me as an alto player. I knew about [Sonny] Stitt, I knew about Bird and some other players, but I didn't know about him as an alto player.

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Johnson: Right. That's interesting because, as you indicated, he became known as a baritone saxophone player and yet he was a very proficient soloist on alto saxophone. How he happened to himself perpetuate his image as a baritone saxophone [player] is interesting. I don't know the answer to that. I guess he just decided to focus on the baritone sax. I think finally he only played baritone sax, didn't he? In his final phases, yes.

DAVID BAKER: Yes, uh huh. Just one follow-up question, Lida, and then I'll get out of the way. Were these among your first recorded compositions, because I remember thinking, "Boy, this is some hell of a writing," and I had really not known much about your writing. Is this the first experience of you recording your own tunes?

Johnson: Yes. Right. For sure. I think prior to that, the only incidence of having my compositions, if you will, performed or played [was] with Basie, a thing called *Rambo*.

DAVID BAKER: I remember that.

Johnson: A very simple little melody that had a little flow and a little charm to it that Basie liked and people liked. As a matter of fact, a singing group did it lately in the last few years.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. What's that group?

Johnson: Umm –

DAVID BAKER: Manhattan Transfer.

Johnson: Manhattan Transfer has recorded it lately.

DAVID BAKER: Yes.

Johnson: That was a nice royalty statement because it was a big seller for them, that album that included *Rambo*.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I remember.

Johnson: The interesting thing about *Rambo* is that Sylvester Stallone did a picture, a big, big mega-hit called *Rambo* that had nothing to do with my title *Rambo*.

DAVID BAKER: It would have been nice if they used your music. You would be a zillionaire by now.

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Johnson: [laughs] Yeah, how about that. The situation with Basie was, as I recall it, my first ever chance to have an original of mine recorded.

Baker: Bud Powell and Max Roach were also a part of that same group with Cecil Payne. Could you reminisce a little bit about Bud Powell? Tell us a little bit about your experiences with Bud Powell.

Johnson: Bud Powell was a very interesting jazz musician all the way down the line. Even in his years of failing health, he was still Bud Powell. Bud Powell was always Bud Powell. We can make no bones about that. He was dapper, always dapper. He always wore a shirt and tie. We were all casual. Bud Powell: shirt and tie any time, any day, any time of the day. That was interesting. Very bright, very sharp, very alert, a wonderful sense of humor, a spontaneous sense of humor. He would have a big laugh about the most trivial situation. Of course, we don't need to talk about his genius. That's been heralded and chronicled and documented. We know about that. As a person he was just a fun person to be around. He enjoyed life, and he enjoyed a joke, and he enjoyed musicians, and it was a pleasure to be around Bud and to have Bud in the band or to be in Bud's situations or whatever.

DAVID BAKER: There were two quintet albums made in close proximity to each other. Bud was on one [and] certainly was among the real luminaries. On the other was John Lewis, another luminary but represents a completely different way of looking at the piano. I notice the difference in the way you react as a player, your feeling about playing with one and the other. Obviously you and John go on for years after that.

Johnson: Yeah. Bud had his own way of approaching a particular jazz situation. John Lewis's [approach] was a little more studied, if you will. Bud was freewheeling, more so than John was. John Lewis was anything but freewheeling. Anything he did was studied, precise and very formatted, if you will, whereas Bud was "let the chips fall where they may" and "stomp it off and let's just blow, man, blow." "Don't talk to me about anything else. Just do your thing." John's thing was a lot more organized, and I think the MJQ [the Modern Jazz Quartet] and their format, and their manner and style of playing projected this discipline and this organizational approach to jazz which had its own inherent beauty. What can you say bad about the MJQ? Each recording, each note of each recording is a gem. It's something to be treasured.

Baker: In that vein, could you speak a little bit about Max Roach and your experiences with him?

Johnson: Max Roach. We were very close friends. We were buddies. He lived in Brooklyn, I lived in Brooklyn. Cecil Payne. There was a Brooklyn syndrome going for a

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lot of years where a lot of us lived in Brooklyn. I don't know how that came about, but it did. We played on a lot of gigs in the Brooklyn area as well as in New York City. Max – what can we say about Max? Another guy who was a fashion plate, dapper, always sharp – not the shirt-and-tie kind of sharp but always just very well-dressed and immaculately attired and well-groomed. Another very articulate, intelligent person with a very charismatic persona. You felt his presence even if he didn't say a word. If he was in the environment, you felt Max's presence. Obviously on drums he was a brilliant, brilliant technician and person to have in the rhythm section. He was characterized then as he is now as a *musical* drummer. He made *music* on the drums as opposed to just accompanying, fulfilling the role as an accompanist. He made music with his approach to drum playing and jazz drumming, shall we say. Thank God he still does that and he always will. That's Max Roach. A nice person by the way – a very, very nice person. As we all have had our down cycles and our cycles that we would rather forget, Max had his questionable cycles on one level or another. We don't need to go into that. History will document that. But in the main, Max was always a frontrunner as a drummer and as a jazz musician – lately even as a composer. It's interesting that this group called the Uptown String Quartet that includes his daughter – what's her name?

Baker: Maxine.

Johnson: Maxine. Yes. Yes. Max is their manager. To get that quartet you've got to go through Max, and he rules with an iron fist.

DAVID BAKER: Yes, he does.

Johnson: He runs a very tight ship. If you want the Uptown String Quartet you've got to talk to Max Roach about that. He is not so generous about dealing with you about the Uptown [String Quartet]. He really guards them.

DAVID BAKER: Very much.

Johnson: Very much. So, that's Max Roach.

Baker: Another important small group that you were working with around this time was the band of Illinois Jacquet. Would you like to tell us something of your experiences with that group?

Johnson: That was an interesting cycle. Illinois Jacquet, as we all know, was another freewheeling, free spirit who made his mark by being – some people called it a bit of an exhibitionist in that when he played, he put on a little bit of a show. It was fun to watch and fun to hear. The irony of it is that there are those who characterize him as being a bit

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of a clown in his performance, and yet what was coming out of the horn was good saxophone playing and good jazz. Playing in his band was an interesting experience. We traveled a lot. I remember we traveled a lot in Jacquet's car. His brother was in the band a lot, off and on, when I was with the band. Russell [Jacquet] was the trumpet player. As a matter of fact, the band I have fondest memories of, because we traveled so much together, included Russell on trumpet; Illinois Jacquet; for a while Leo Parker on baritone sax, when you could get him; Shadow Wilson on drums a part of the time, an excellent drummer; the bass player – Luke, something Lucas [Al Lucas] – a good bass player. We played a lot of theaters. We are still in the vaudeville area, if you will, as far as bands. By now even the smaller organizations such as Jacquet's band were playing as a featured artist or with featured billing on a given presentation at a theater, for example, like the Apollo. With Jacquet we played the Apollo a couple of times with a lot of other acts – a dancer or a singer or a comedian, et cetera et cetera. Illinois Jacquet himself [was] very personable; very, very outgoing; very gregarious; nice to work for; fair and square. He had an interesting repertoire, the music we played. Some of it came about as a result of some of his material that was associated with him, [such as] *Flying Home*, for example. Everybody identifies *Flying Home* with Jacquet. He played a tune that was always fun to play on, kind of a laid back thing called *Robbins Nest*.

DAVID BAKER: *Riffin' at 24th Street*.

Johnson: [Johnson sings the opening measures of *Robbins Nest*.] Yeah. Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I bought that one.

Johnson: Yeah. It was fun to play with Illinois Jacquet's band.

DAVID BAKER: I can remember Slide, myself, [and] Gene Fowlkes hearing you [in Indianapolis] either at the Sunset Terrace or the Cotton Club with that band. Somebody also taped it illegally.

J. J. JOHNSON: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: A wire tape. That's still in existence.

Johnson: Wow.

DAVID BAKER: But I remember later on you would use Leo Parker in one of the versions of the small group. We'll come to that a little later, but anyway I'll remember that as soon as we get there. You have a continuing friendship, of course, with Illinois

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Jacquet, don't you?

Johnson: Yes. I haven't seen him in a long time. I haven't talked to him in a long time. I'm looking forward to seeing him April 6th or that week at rehearsal and for the performance because I know he'll have a high profile there. I'm looking forward to seeing Illinois because we are old, old buddies. We go way back. We performed together a lot, and I'm looking forward to renewing our acquaintance in New York on this event that's coming up soon.

Baker: Continuing to talk about the different small groups across this time that you worked with, this was also a time when you were working with Coleman Hawkins or recording with Coleman Hawkins.

Johnson: Not a lot. On some few occasions, yes. I don't even remember the details of those occasions. I just remember that I worked with "Bean", as we called him, a few times. It was an interesting experience to play with Coleman because he was such a brilliant saxophonist. His style was different from all – even what was in vogue at that point in time, and yet there was something wonderful about it. I guess it was so uniquely his own personal style that that in itself gave you reason to enjoy playing with him. He was a nice person to know on a social level. A wonderful human being, Coleman Hawkins. Very bright, very sharp.

DAVID BAKER: There were a number of things that came out on RCA Victor, *Half Step Up, Half Step Down* [*Half Step Down, Please*] with that band and you. I don't remember if Mary Lou Osborne was on those or not, but I remember those were some things which were kind of cult records because it was such a wonderful juxtaposition of the young Turks and Coleman Hawkins who was well-established and kind of a senior person in the field already. I have such fond memories of that RCA Victor record that came out with that stuff, called simply *The Small Groups* [*The Greatest of the Small Bands*, vol. 2].

Johnson: My memory is not too sharp in that particular area that Dave is referring to at the moment. I just have a hazy recollection of that.

Baker: This same time period was when you recorded for Dial Records with Charlie Parker and maybe you could tell us a little bit about being around Charlie Parker, getting to know Charlie Parker – what your impressions were of playing with him and being around him.

Johnson: Charlie Parker was a person who – it was not a simple matter to get to know him. He kept you at arm's length and yet he was friendly and warm and generous and

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gregarious and fun to be around. But there was a point past which you couldn't get close to Charlie Parker. I don't think there was ever anyone you could characterize as being buddy-buddy-buddy with Charlie Parker. [It was] not possible, not possible. He maintained a degree of privacy that he was entitled to. I mean, how dare you get closer than that? It wasn't done in that spirit. It was just a part of his persona that you knew how far to go as far as trying to be buddy-buddy-buddy with Charlie Parker. [He was] another brilliant person. He didn't have to play saxophone to be brilliant. He was a very sharp, well-versed man in many areas. Contrary to the image that he projected with his problems and what not, he was really a very bright, intelligent person – another guy with a tremendous sense of humor and an outgoing personality, up to that point that we're talking about. I couldn't say that we were, that we ever partied together or socialized together because that was not to happen with Charlie Parker, not with *anyone*. No one ever got that close to Charlie Parker. I think he was entitled to that, don't you?

Baker: Sure. How about playing with him?

Johnson: How about playing with him? Charlie Parker was such a genius that playing with him could be an intimidating experience and *was* an intimidating experience. You wondered what could you do that would be on the same level with what he had just done, and invariably he would play first. [laughs] Oh, boy. It left you in pretty bad shape. It was interesting and educational to play with Bird.

Baker: Around this time was when you also met Dizzy Gillespie and began doing some infrequent sitting in with his group. Could you talk a little bit about your recollections and impressions of Dizzy Gillespie, both with the long personal relationship you had with him as well as Dizzy the musician.

Johnson: Yeah, Dizzy. Unlike Charlie Parker, you could get very close to Dizzy. Dizzy was very accessible throughout his life. The wonder and the beauty of the situation with Dizzy was that he was so accessible. He would embrace you on any level and make you feel right at home [He] wanted you to be comfortable in whatever environment that you found yourself in, if Dizzy was in the same environment. He was a source of encouragement to me. I can recall a few situations where at rehearsals he would be warming up and I would be warming up. We would get together and just chat about the horn and about brass playing and about warming up and what not. I learned a lot just by asking Dizzy questions about brass playing and about the technique of jazz playing and what not. He was so generous in his commentary and his answers to my questions. Interestingly enough, one or two times he showed me things on the trombone that I was surprised that he knew. Somehow he knew the trombone. I have never figured that out. He would say, "J.J., try this in that position – so-and-so," and sure enough, it worked. [laughs] I don't know if Dizzy played the trombone ever. I sometimes wonder, because

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his suggestions would be right on target.

Baker: Isn't that something.

Johnson: Isn't that something.

Baker: You played in both a small group and a big band situation with him.

Johnson: With Dizzy? Both. That is correct. In the big band situations I was playing in the trombone section along with people like Comegys [Leon Comegys]. Yeah. Most of the repertoire was big band versions of Dizzy's compositions – *Birk's Works*, *Manteca*, *Con Alma* – things like that. They were always well-arranged by persons such as Gil Fuller or Tadd Dameron and people of that ilk.

DAVID BAKER: The small group things included one of the most exciting recordings I remember – that blues in A-flat, *The Champ*.

Johnson: Oh, wow.

DAVID BAKER: I remember you flying. That baby was fast.

Johnson: [sings the melody of *The Champ*, joined by David Baker]

DAVID BAKER: And then it went up by half steps on the last chorus, yeah.

Johnson: [sings] Right. Yeah, yeah. *The Champ*.

DAVID BAKER: Of course, I don't know, Lida, quite how you've got it planned [where you're going at this point in the interview]. [Jay], the blossoming of your relationship with him [Dizzy] would result later in larger works and, of course, him considering you one of his confidants. I've talked to him so many times, and you would always be at the front of his mind about writing and everything else. So, I don't know, [Lida]. Is that coming later in your [interview questions]?

Baker: I think maybe this would be a good time to talk about *Perceptions*.

Johnson: *Perceptions*. *Perceptions* came about [in this way]. Dizzy had heard at some point the piece that I had written for this large brass ensemble called *Poem for Brass*. He liked *Poem for Brass*. He and Norman Granz, who was managing him at the time – in a way of speaking, sponsored him, if you will – commissioned me to write a piece for Dizzy along the lines of *Poem for Brass* but featuring Dizzy Gillespie as principal soloist

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throughout the piece. It was quite an undertaking. I don't know why, but it took a long time to write the work. I spent a lot of time on it. I lost a lot of sleep writing it. [laughter] Well, if you're writing a piece for Dizzy Gillespie, I think you might lose a little sleep. [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: Thank you.

J. J. JOHNSON: You wonder what to write, and you're not quite sure. I got through it somehow, and Dizzy liked *Perceptions*. I did write *Perceptions*, and it did get recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's studio, with Gunther Schuller conducting. One nice thing that came about, having written *Perceptions*, was for Gunther Schuller, who had a classical music background, to give me a nice compliment about the harp writing on *Perceptions*. I used two harps on there, and he was very generous in his comments about how I approached the role of the harp in the context of all that brass. I felt very good about that.

DAVID BAKER: At this time, it was not very often that Miles Davis appeared as a sideman for anybody, but I remember [him] on *Poem for Brass*. The reason why I recall it so vividly is [that] it hasn't been two weeks since I played this piece, and I . . .

Johnson: *Poem for Brass*?

DAVID BAKER: [Baker sings a few measures of *Poem for Brass*.] And to hear you and Miles, and Miles in that context because Miles was not very generous about playing as a sideman after he . . .

Johnson: This is true.

DAVID BAKER: . . . after he became who he was. But obviously he held you in such high esteem that he was not reluctant to be in on it. And it turns out, I think, to be one of the finest pieces in the Thirdstream tradition, if we're going to call it that since Gunther named this whole movement.

Johnson: Yeah. Right.

DAVID BAKER: I just wondered about your continuing relationship with Miles. We're going to get to him around '53, '54 because I've got some real questions then. But that wonderful relationship [you had] with two of the premier trumpet players who are so different: Miles and Dizzy. I wonder how in *Poem for Brass* you were able to come up with the choices for your soloists, particularly you and Miles, Miles being the other main soloist on there. Or if you recall it.

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Johnson: My best recollection is we thought we'd take a chance that we could get Miles. I don't recall whether I made the call to Miles or whether Gunther or whoever made the calls. But when Miles found out what it was all about, he was generous enough to consider [and say], "Yes, I'll do it." He showed up and he performed brilliantly, and we were thankful for all of that. The other three pieces [on that recording] were one by Jimmy Guiffre . . .

DAVID BAKER: One by John Lewis.

Johnson: One by John Lewis, and on the flip side of the album was this long classical work by Gunther Schuller, a wonderful work.

DAVID BAKER: *Symphony for Brass*.

Johnson: *Symphony for Brass*, a good piece. A difficult piece to play. Gunther even told me that it was a difficult piece to play.

Baker: You also made some wonderful recordings with Babs Gonzales – *Capitolizing*, *Professor Bop*. Would you like to talk a little bit about Babs and some of the other people that were also on that recording with you?

DAVID BAKER: Jay, let me fill you in with it, just to get you going. This is 1949 she's talking about. This is the Capitol recording which had you and Bennie Green, and it had Sonny Rollins on his first recording date. This was his very first one. It had the French horn player, Julius . . .

Baker: Julius Watkins.

Johnson: Oh.

DAVID BAKER: And Babs, of course, singing all those funny little tunes of his. So that puts it in perspective.

Johnson: Okay, yeah. I'm a little hazy as to the situations and occurrences and events or anything like that. By the way, we are in an area where there was a flurry of activity. Jazz – and so-called contemporary jazz, if you will – was thriving and evolving, and there was lots of stuff going on, making it more difficult for me to delineate occurrences and meetings with people because there was a lot happening, a lot going on. It was beautiful. I didn't mean that in a negative way, I mean that in a very positive way – as a matter of fact, a very healthy way. That was, in my opinion, one of the healthiest of jazz's many cycles. We all know that jazz has gone through some cycles that were more productive

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and more healthy than other cycles. That was one of the ones that I like to look back on because there was so much activity. But at the same time, it makes it a little more difficult for me to pinpoint. I only have a vague recollection of this Babs Gonzales scenario. I do recall, but it's very, very vague.

DAVID BAKER: Do you remember much about perhaps one of the few other trombone players trying to do anything at the time? Do you recall much of your meeting of Bennie Green, who really was a kind of a bridge from an earlier style but who was starting to try to move into this area? I thought it was a wonderful pairing of the two of you on this album.

Johnson: Bennie Green was a super duper guy to know and a fun person to be with – a good musician, a wonderful trombonist. Interestingly enough, Jay and Kai was originally supposed to be Jay and Bennie Green. The person who was the creator of this idea of two trombones and a rhythm section was an entrepreneur/producer/hustler/street dude [laughs] – da-da-da-dah – whose name was Teddy Reig. He weighed about five hundred pounds. He knew every good restaurant in New York, and he looked like it.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: A *wonderful* dude to know. Even though he was a streetwise impresario and entrepreneur, he was honest with musicians. He respected jazz musicians. It was Teddy Reig's idea to pair two trombonists with a rhythm section. The original game plan was for Bennie Green and J.J. Johnson to team up to do a two trombone and rhythm section situation. As luck would have it, and as fate and destiny would have it, Bennie Green was enjoying a measure of popularity with a recording he had on the market at that time that was making a little bit of a noise.

DAVID BAKER: [It was] called *Blow Your Horn*.

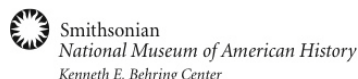
Johnson: Is that what it was, *Blow Your Horn*?

DAVID BAKER: It went [Baker sings *Blow Your Horn*].

Johnson: There you go. There you go. Well, Bennie wasn't thrilled with Teddy Reig's proposal of two trombones and didn't project any interest in it, at which point Teddy Reig, being the free spirit and freewheeling, said, "Well, if we can't get Bennie Green, we'll get somebody else. How about Kai Winding?" So it turned out to be Jay and Kai and not J.J. and Bennie Green. We can thank Teddy Reig for all of that.

DAVID BAKER: While you're there, have you any feeling – because later on you guys

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would become close friends and record together – about this brash new young tenor player? This was his very first record date. Sonny Rollins.

Johnson: Sonny Rollins was a very outgoing fun person. I'm saying that about so many guys. They were fun. All these were fun people. All I remember is that Sonny had his own way of playing, his own style of playing that really caught our fancy, and that it was just great just to be involved in his coming on, bursting onto the scene, shall we say. And burst on the scene he did. Sonny, that is.

DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about one other thing while you're here [in this time period]: the very first recording of *Afternoon in Paris* with Sonny Stitt, because Sonny played tenor on that. It was you and John Lewis and Sonny Stitt. I remember now, going back, it was a very square version the way they played the head [the melody] at that time, considering what it was going to be a little later on. I wondered if you remembered much about the date because the two Sonnys, Sonny Stitt on *Afternoon in Paris*. I'm trying to think. It seems like there might have been *Elora* or one of those tunes on the other side of it. I bought it. I think it was on Savoy Records. I don't remember. It was a purple record.

Johnson: [laughs] A purple record.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, and I remember it might have been *Elora*. [Baker sings the first measures of *Elora*.] Anyway, Sonny Stitt. I was just wondering if you recollect much there. I know he would use him later on that television show.

Johnson: Yeah, it's hazy, David, I don't really remember much about that situation. I remember that it happened, and I remember those tunes, of course – *Elora* and what was the other thing you mentioned? *Afternoon in Paris*.

DAVID BAKER: *Afternoon in Paris*.

Johnson: Yeah. [Johnson sings the opening measures of *Afternoon in Paris*.]

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. [laughs]

Johnson: I don't remember much about the chemistry or the environment of the situation.

Baker: How about maybe commenting a bit on Sonny Stitt, because I know you all worked together again later on.

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DAVID BAKER: And toured Europe.

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: Right, right. Free spirit personified, Sonny Stitt. [laughs] Freewheeling, free spirit, ready to blow at the – all you got to do is say, "Sonny, let's go jam" and boy, he'd be the first in line. He *loved* to play. He just loved to play. He played beautifully. He was accused, and rightfully so, of being a Bird clone. He made no bones about his attempts to sound as close to Charlie Parker as he could. And he did. He came very close to being Charlie Parker as far as the style of his playing was concerned. We did travel together quite a few times. I think Sonny's birth sign is the same as mine. I'm an Aquarius. I think Sonny is also an Aquarius. We had a lot of fun together. We had a lot of laughs together. We buddied around quite a lot. Sonny was a dear friend – a real, real dear friend. We played a few times in some of the jazz venues in Chicago. There was a place on the south side of Chicago where jazz was presented on a regular basis for a long time. I forget the name. Joe Segal was involved with it.

DAVID BAKER: Yes. I'm trying to think of the name of the place.

Johnson: Yeah. They played the real deal. They played nothing but jazz for many, many [years]. The Beehive?

DAVID BAKER: The Beehive.

Johnson: On the south side of Chicago, right. Kai and I played there a few times, and I played at the Beehive off and on through the years with some other personalities that I don't recall at the moment. That was one of the important jazz venues in Chicago at that time.

DAVID BAKER: That and Frank Holstein's place, the Blue Note.

Johnson: The Blue Note, right.

DAVID BAKER: The reason why I'm asking you [about this is] because I'm sure it's going to come back again [later in the interview], particularly when you assembled the tribute to Bird on the English T.V. station.

Johnson: The BBC?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah – you, Stitt, Howard McGee, Tommy Potter, Walter Bishop, Jr. and Kenny Clarke.

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Johnson: Right.

DAVID BAKER: I just know that evidently you and Stitt had a really long, long relationship.

Johnson: We did.

DAVID BAKER: You even featured him on one of the pieces. He did *Lover Man* . . .

Johnson: Oh, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: . . . and you referred to him as your saxophonist [Baker pronounces the word saxophonist with the emphasis on the second syllable, as Johnson did on the television show when introducing Sonny Stitt]. [laughter] That's great.

Johnson: Yeah, Sonny was indeed a dear friend.

Baker: Around this time also was when you met Miles Davis. Had you met him previous to being contracted to do the two tracks on *The Birth of the Cool*, or was that your first encounter with him?

Johnson: No, I had met Miles before then. I first met Miles Davis while he was going to Juilliard. He was a student in Juilliard when we first met. We became very good friends. I don't recall under what circumstances that happened, but it did happen. Even though Miles was going to Juilliard, he found time to go out and jam and for us to buddy-buddy around with the other musicians who were available to buddy around with at that time. We would get together and compare notes about the changes of some of the more complex – the more advanced harmonies such as tunes like *Confirmation*. It was a challenge to get together and compare notes about how to approach improvisation on that kind of sophisticated harmonic approach, and it was fun to do. I found Miles to be funny. Miles through the years projected an image of aloofness and you might even say indifference to some social situations, and yet for Miles to be one of your friends you couldn't have a better or closer friend. He would give you the clothes off [his] back. If you were one of Miles's friends, you had a true friend in Miles Davis. I feel fortunate in having been in that column of people who we characterize as friends with Miles.

DAVID BAKER: In his book he talks about coming to your apartment [at] two or three in the morning, asking you about the changes to some tune.

Johnson: I think it was *Confirmation*.

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DAVID BAKER: Yeah. [laughs]

Johnson: He did mention that in his book.

DAVID BAKER: I called you and asked you to verify it, and you said, "Yes, he did."

Johnson: [laughs] Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I know you had a very special relationship. First of all, you named a piece *Little Dave* [for him]. I remember him being so ecstatic at your playing as was Art Farmer. More importantly, I remember your concern when he was approaching death. We talked a few times, so I knew that you were close to him.

Johnson: Yeah, a very dear, dear friend. It's interesting that he was the most concerned person when another person was in bad health. I'll never forget. I happened to be with him. He was living in Malibu in California. We were both living in California at the time, and I was visiting Miles just buddy-buddy style on a given afternoon. Someone called Miles to tell him about Clark Terry being in poor health. Miles grabbed the telephone and called somebody and said, "Get me Clark Terry." He had trouble getting through to Clark Terry. He told this person, "Find out what the situation is with Clark Terry and whatever Clark Terry needs, you see that he gets it. And if there's any problem, you call me about it." He was very concerned about Clark Terry's health and about Clark Terry's welfare, and he issued orders and demands. "You check this out and find out what's the story on Clark Terry, and you make sure he's taken care of. If he needs any money, you let me know."

DAVID BAKER: That is so [beautiful], and see, that's a picture that you never see.

Johnson: You'll never hear that about Miles. All you'll hear about Miles is him turning his back on the audience and pointing his horn towards the floor. But he was one of the most generous human beings alive to people he loved, and he was a dear, dear friend.

DAVID BAKER: That is so beautiful, man.

Baker: Are there any other groups or players that you'd like to discuss before we get into the period where you stopped playing on such a frequent basis for a little while and took the job with the Sperry people, doing blueprint work?

Johnson: You know, Lida, I've [laughter] recently in print characterized my career as being "off again-on again." [laughter] There have been periods when I found it necessary

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to get outside of the arena to have a good look inside the arena, from the outside looking in. The first occasion was when I got out of jazz, in a sense, and took a job at Sperry Gyroscope for economic reasons, of course – to have an income and to be a responsible husband, shall we say, or a family man, shall we say. I was glad that I did. Every time [that] I've stepped out of the arena, I've felt good about having stepped out and then stepped back in, having had a good look at what I was doing relative to what was going on. I guess you might call it a cycle or a period of self-evaluation or of assessing the climate, assessing the times, assessing what was going on in the music world, especially what was going on in the jazz world. Where has it been? Where is it going? What are the indications? What does it look like? It's necessary to get outside sometimes to take those things into consideration. At least, for me that's the way it worked. So when I said "off again-on again" career, it's true. I've gone in and out of the door of jazz a few times during my career to do just that – to have a good look at it and to have a good look at what I was doing and why I was doing it and what could I do differently and should I do something differently and, if so, what?

Baker: What kinds of answers did you come up with to those kinds of questions during this particular time?

Johnson: I shot a lot of blanks, but I got some answers. I think if you put yourself in that kind of a position to ask that many questions of situations like that, you are going to shoot some blanks. You won't get well-defined answers, in some cases. In some situations you will get very well-defined answers. I got some well-defined answers that I wouldn't be able to articulate to you at this time, but I recall that I felt good that, "Well, I figured that one out. And this one's okay. That one I'm not so sure what I'll do about that. On this one, I know that I'm going to cancel that and not do that any more." Or whatever the case might be.

DAVID BAKER: It's interesting to hear you put it in that frame because I would have raised the next question about what caused such a really big change in the direction and thrust in your playing. In 1951 you did – there are some air shots that have surfaced within the last ten years with you. One set of things was you, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Kenny Clarke, and the rest of a rhythm section. You are playing *Woody'n You* and *Half Nelson*. Miles [is] playing with energy in a sustained way that he had not before. It's almost like the three of you were real soul compatriots because that's some of the most intense playing. On the next set, the same. 1951. It's you and Getz and Miles. Until you said that [about the questioning you did], it never had occurred to me about what might have been the things that caused this intensifying of energy and direction in your playing.

Johnson: Uh huh. Uh huh.

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DAVID BAKER: So maybe that explains it. You know the dates I'm talking about?

Johnson: Not clearly

DAVID BAKER: It was from Birdland.

Johnson: [It's] a little hazy. A little hazy.

DAVID BAKER: It was from Birdland and air shots.

Johnson: Oh, air shots from Birdland.

DAVID BAKER: So I'm assuming it was more of a jam session kind of situation.

Johnson: Piracy type air shots?

DAVID BAKER: I'm sorry?

Johnson: Piracy type air shots?

DAVID BAKER: I don't know whether they were at that time.

Johnson: I don't want to step on anybody's toes here.

DAVID BAKER: They're there and they are very well-recorded. It's you and Rollins and Miles, and it don't get much better than that!

Johnson: [laughs] Thank you.

Baker: Was it during this period also that you began your long friendship with Jimmy Heath? I understand you all were doing a little bit of playing, you and he and Miles were playing together. Symphony Sid had put together a group with you and Miles, Jimmy Heath, Milt Jackson and John Lewis to tour under the title of *Jazz, Inc.* . . .

Johnson: Yes.

Baker: . . . or the tour was called *Jazz, Inc.*

Johnson: Something like that.

Baker: I was wondering, because you and Jimmy have been so close and are still such

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dear friends, if maybe this was the first encounter that you all had with each other.

Johnson: As I recall, it was. During those years I found occasion to play in Philadelphia a lot. The Heaths lived in Philadelphia, and they would come to our performances. I got to know Jimmy as a result of those appearances at this club in Philadelphia called the – was it called the Blue Note? Was there a Blue Note in Philadelphia?

DAVID BAKER: There might have been.

Baker: There might have been. I can't remember.

Johnson: I think it was the Blue Note or something like that in Philadelphia that was a prominent venue on the jazz circuit. When you toured playing jazz, you would inevitably play at that club. One of the most interesting experiences I ever had at this club was I came through Philadelphia touring with my own group – quintet, quartet or whatever the case might have been. Miles was appearing at this club, and it was exciting, as you would expect. Lockjaw was in the audience. I had never heard Lockjaw play. I knew about Lockjaw and I knew his reputation for being a wonderful jazz player, but I had never heard him live. Miles said, "J.J., I'm going to try to get Lockjaw to play a tune with us. Have you ever heard him play live?" I said, "No." He said, "Wait 'till you hear this, J.J." Sure enough, he got Lockjaw – Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis – to play *How High the Moon* about one hundred miles an hour, and it was a screaming, mind-blowing experience.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: [laughs] What Lockjaw did was just – I'd never heard Lockjaw play that way, before or after.

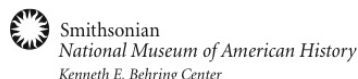
DAVID BAKER: That's wild.

Johnson: It was just a brilliant situation that I have never forgotten.

DAVID BAKER: Let me follow through on that with Jimmy Heath. There are two sessions that you did, actually three. First of all, I'm sure you are already aware that what you did with the three horns on these two sessions set the tone for Gigi Gryce, Benny Golson, Quincy [Jones], and all of them. The album I'm talking about [is] the one where you used Jimmy Heath, where you do *C.T.A.* and *Dear Old Stockholm*. [*Miles Davis, vol. 1. Blue Note BLP 1501*]

Johnson: Oh, wow.

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DAVID BAKER: My question is this. You played with two of the major drummers. One was a carryover from your earlier experience, Kenny Clarke. The other was Art Blakey. By the time of the Art Blakey ones, you were using Jackie McLean. The question is this. I'm going to quote you [somebody's writing] from *Down Beat* magazine. I wonder what this person must think, looking back. It said, "J.J. Johnson's group was on fire." I'm paraphrasing. It said, "And it was an all round great experience except the rude, unswinging drumming of Art Blakey."

Johnson: Oh, wow.

DAVID BAKER: You played with both of them. I'm wondering about your feelings about Blakey, because that must have been early on. No, Blakey was the drummer on the thing from the air shots, too. [What were] your feelings about Blakey [and] about those two groups, because your writing crystallized that three-horn kind of writing— your feeling about the writing, about Blakey, [and] about those two sessions, if you remember.

Johnson: First of all, it blows my mind to have someone make that kind of negative commentary about Art Blakey. [laughs] I don't know who he was listening to. [Johnson continues laughing.]

DAVID BAKER: They never heard of him again, I'm sure.

Johnson: [laughs] That is quite mind-boggling. I don't remember much about that occurrence that I can articulate to you, David. I really cannot. Again, there was lots going on. I was changing direction as the winds blew, as we all were – kind of fishing around for a way to go and a direction to go and what not. Things got a little fuzzy on occasion.

DAVID BAKER: Let me put it in another perspective then.

Johnson: By the way, I don't want to forget this. I'm taking two or three steps backward in this conversation. Do you mind?

DAVID BAKER: No, fine.

Johnson: Lockjaw.

DAVID BAKER: Okay.

Johnson: Did you ever hear a recording that Lockjaw made in some context – I don't remember the instrumentation or anything – called *Hollerin' and Screamin'*?

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DAVID BAKER: I've got it. That's with Fats Navarro.

Johnson: I'd love to have it.

DAVID BAKER: I'll run you a copy off.

Johnson: I would love to have it.

DAVID BAKER: It's Lockjaw [and] Fats Navarro, and they do *Hollerin' and Screamin'* and about six other pieces. I will be glad to run it off for you.

Johnson: I'll be so happy to get it. Now let's get back on track.

DAVID BAKER: Playing with Blakey, because Blakey might have been the first drummer to put the drums in your face. I wondered how you . . .

Johnson: He did put them in your face.

DAVID BAKER: . . . because you were on fire on there. I just wondered, just about playing with Blakey in general.

Johnson: Blakey would put you on fire. The beauty of it was that he did it in such a wonderful spirit that you responded by being on fire if you had any kind of apparatus with which to light a fire. There was something about his drumming that was saying, "Get in there. Do it." Like the current, wonderful Nike commercial that says "Just Do It." Art Blakey was the quintessential personification of "Just Do It." His drumming behind you said, "Just do it. Don't talk to me about anything. "Just do it. When your turn comes to play, *play!* Just do it." You played hard as a result of his approach and as a result of how he would accompany you and your turn to perform.

DAVID BAKER: The other sextet album at the time: you, Clifford Brown, Jimmy Heath again. [*The Eminent Jay Jay Johnson, volume 1*] You play the cycles on the second chorus of this *I Got Rhythm* tune. John Lewis is the piano player. You taught me those cycles in 1959 and 1960. The piece is [Baker sings the opening measures of Johnson's composition *Turnpike*].

Johnson: *Turnpike*.

DAVID BAKER: *Turnpike*.

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Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: [Do you remember] much about that date, because that was some superb writing, too. Was that the only recording with Clifford?

Johnson: That I recall, yes. I don't think there were any others. *Turnpike*, wow. [laughs] I've thought about reviving that and breathing new life into it. At some point, perhaps I will.

DAVID BAKER: Clifford Brown – because this is the same time you just got through working with Miles – and working with the two of them.

Johnson: Unfortunately I never got to really know Clifford very well. I got to know him [only] a little bit because shortly after I met Clifford and played on one or two situations with Clifford, he and Max teamed up in a very . . .

DAVID BAKER: A quintet.

Johnson: . . .yeah, in a very precise format that excluded all other activity except their own world with that – that is, Max Roach, Clifford Brown, and who was the tenor saxophone player at that time?

DAVID BAKER: Harold Land, and then Sonny Rollins.

Johnson: Right. Right.

DAVID BAKER: I just wondered because, particularly from an historical standpoint, the fact that you would have had the two of them, the two laser beams of the time – Miles on the one hand and Clifford Brown on the other – as part of the group you were recording with.

Johnson: Yeah, laser beams. I like that terminology.

(BEGIN CD-4)

Baker: Was this also the time when you first met Charles Mingus, or does that come at a later time?

Johnson: More than likely it was during that cycle that I first met Charles Mingus. I don't remember the circumstances or the incident in which I met Charles Mingus, but I did meet him at some point. I never worked a lot with Charles Mingus. I don't know that

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I ever recorded with Mingus. Did I?

DAVID BAKER: Yes. You did. The one time. It was the trombone workshop album. [Reissued on CD as *Four Trombones: The Debut Recordings*.]

Johnson: Trombone Workshop. Oh, yes, yes, you're right. Yeah. But that wasn't Mingus's band, was it?

DAVID BAKER: No, it was an all-star band.

Johnson: [An] all-star band, uh huh.

DAVID BAKER: You, Bennie Green . . .

Johnson: That comes back to me, now that you mention it.

DAVID BAKER: But that's the only one.

Johnson: Uh huh. Okay.

Baker: Would you like to comment at all about Charles Mingus and your activity with him, your relationship with him, your impressions of Charles Mingus?

Johnson: My first impression of Charles Mingus, as I recall it, was the impression that remained with me throughout my friendship and exposure to Charles Mingus, in that it was that Charles Mingus marched to the beat of his own drum and to the beat of no other drum. He was a maverick in the classic sense of the word. He did not speak with forked tongue. He was oftentimes categorized as being controversial. He was even characterized in some factions as being a troublemaker. He was a guy who had strong opinions, for example, about the racial situation in this country and the racial situation in the world. He injected some of this opinionated feeling about that matter in some of his compositions, with lyrics to some of his compositions that made commentaries about the racial situation in the world and what not.

DAVID BAKER: *Fables of Faubus*, of course.

Johnson: Yeah. I loved his title that I can't even pronounce – *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

Baker: *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

Johnson: Yeah. It's a wonderful title.

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DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about an album which has been characterized as the album that started the whole hard bop movement. [Miles Davis All Stars: *Walkin'*] This is 1953 [1954], and maybe you can comment on a couple of people you haven't mentioned before. One of them is Lucky Thompson. This is the album that produced *Blue 'n' Boogie* [and] *Walkin'*. Fact is, I believe it was the first recording of [Ike] Carpenter's piece *Walkin'*. It's you, Lucky Thompson, Miles Davis, Percy Heath, Kenny Clarke, and Horace Silver. Was [this] the first time you worked with Horace Silver and Lucky Thompson? If you have thoughts about that album – or side. It wasn't an album.

Johnson: Yeah. Was it just one cut?

DAVID BAKER: No. You guys did *Blue 'n' Boogie* – two takes on that – and you did one or two takes on *Walkin'*.

Johnson: That might have been the first exposure to – who did you mention?

DAVID BAKER: Horace Silver.

Johnson: Horace Silver.

DAVID BAKER: And Lucky Thompson.

Johnson: Lucky Thompson. I knew about Lucky. I had heard about Lucky, and I had heard him. I don't know where I had heard him perform. I knew his playing was different from anything I'd ever heard. It was a very personal style of his. I heard that he was a little bit of an odd person to get to know. He was friendly, outgoing, warm, and yet there was a little bit of a quirk that you could not put your finger right on. You could only characterize it as that he had – what would you call it? – a cross to bear, and it had to do sometimes with the racial situation. He, too, was very, very opinionated and very concerned about the racial situation in the world in general and the United States in particular. He could be very cynical and very bitter sometimes. It would come out in his personality. Yet he could be just as warm and as generous and as outgoing as the next one. I wonder what's happening with Lucky now. Is he still alive?

DAVID BAKER: I believe he is. I asked Nathan Davis. Nathan said he doesn't know what he's doing, but that he's alive.

Johnson: He is alive, uh huh. I lost track of him completely for many, many years. I don't know anything about Lucky Thompson. He seems to have disappeared into the woodwork.

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DAVID BAKER: What about Horace Silver? Your first time playing with a guy who would be synonymous with that second generation of hard bop, of bop?

Johnson: The first impression I had of Horace is a very strange one. I loved the tapping of his feet as much as his playing.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: He has the most rhythmic foot tap of most musicians. [laughs] The whole ball and toe of his shoe would come up about six inches off the floor with every beat of the piece. He was a one-man rhythm section in that sense. Yet he could swing. We all know how hard Horace Silver could swing. He had an East Indian look about him. His hair would be falling down in his face and the perspiration would be falling down on the keyboard and swing, swing, swing, swing, swing. Beautiful. And a *wonderful* person, wonderful persona.

Baker: And what about Kenny Clarke, as long as we're on this particular group?

Johnson: I didn't get to know Kenny very well. I knew him. We worked together on a few situations. The most I got to know Kenny Clarke, as a matter of fact, was on an occasion when I went to Europe to play at a club on the Left Bank called . . .

DAVID BAKER: Le Chat Qui Peche.

Johnson: What's the name of it again?

DAVID BAKER: Le Chat Qui Peche.

J.J. JOHNSON I believe so. I believe so.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, that was the main club where Kenny . . .

Johnson: Right. Right. He and a bass player were the house band.

DAVID BAKER: Pierre Michelot. Yes.

Johnson: I went over there. What was her name that owned a record company? She and her husband owned a record company for many years. [Eddie and Nicole Barclay. The name of their company was Barclay Records.] Anyway, she had me come over there. She was, you might say, like my boss because she paid my expenses and paid my salary

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over there while I appeared at that club. I can't think of her name at the moment. She had a record company. She and her husband had a record company. The name escapes me. Anyway, I played. I think I did two or three weeks at this club on the Left Bank that we mentioned with Kenny Clarke in the house band. It was a lot of enjoyment to work with Kenny. He had his own personal style of drumming that was typically, uniquely Kenny Clarke. It was a wonderful style of play. I wrote a head arrangement, you might call it, or a line, if you will, to the changes of *Confirmation* that gave the drummer a high profile, and Kenny Clarke *loved* to play that tune. He would play it two or three times a night, the thing that we ended up calling *Commutation*. [Johnson sings the opening measures of *Commutation*.]

DAVID BAKER: That's on one of your quartet albums.

Johnson: Yeah, we do it even now.

DAVID BAKER: It's on the album, I think, called *First Choice [First Place]*.

Johnson: Drummers love it because the drummer has a high profile in the theme of it. It's four bars band and four bars drums. Right.

DAVID BAKER: I think it's called *First Place*, if I remember.

Johnson: I believe so.

DAVID BAKER: I've seen the cover of the album.

Johnson: I believe so.

DAVID BAKER: [Can we take a] break?

Baker: 1954 seems to be the year I keep running into in sources and interviews as the year that you came back on the scene after your self-imposed introspective period, shall we say.

Johnson: Shall we say.

Baker: What was it that made you decide to come back at that particular point?

Johnson: The cycle of inactivity led to a cycle of restlessness. Every time, in every case where I step outside, I finally get restless to get back inside, and I finally do get back inside.

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Baker: This marks the beginning of one of your best-known associations, one of your best-known groups – the Jay & Kai Quintet.

Johnson: We've talked about what was originally intended and did not happen. But what did happen, I guess, was meant to be because it came off very well. Kai and I did get to team up and form a partnership. It was a partnership in the classic sense that we split up all responsibilities, all income, all everything evenly down the middle. He was a wonderful person to be associated with, to be teamed up in a relationship such as that one was. We split the responsibilities for personnel, choice of personnel, material, choice of material, et cetera, et cetera.

We toured about, mostly by automobile. This I recall: the very first time I ever bought a car. The first car I ever bought [was] as a result of the relationship with Kai Winding, and here's how it came about. Many of us musicians, by habit, have to warm up before we perform. I cannot perform unless I first warm up to perform. That warm-up can be as short as fifteen minutes or as long as forty-five minutes, even an hour. I prefer to have it an hour because I like to warm up slowly, stop, and then warm up some more, and then stop, and then warm up some more. There are some musicians who don't have to warm up at all, and they don't warm up. As soon as they get the instrument out of the case, they are ready to start playing. Some of them don't play a note until they hit the stage. Kai Winding was a person who did not warm up. [He] did not have to warm up and did not warm up. Kai was also a person who got to the job pretty much close to hitting [starting] time. We were driving, [and] we were mostly traveling by way of his automobile at the time. He had an automobile. I did not. It was early on in our relationship where I knew that if I was going to survive in the relationship of Jay & Kai, I would have to buy a car because Kai does just fine without warming up but I don't do well at all without warming up. So I did buy a car for that reason, and that was the origin of my first automobile – by the result of Jay & Kai, and Kai's penchant for not warming up and my penchant for warming up.

Baker: What kind of a car was it?

Johnson: It was a Roadmaster Buick, vintage Roadmaster Buick.

DAVID AND Baker: [laugh]

DAVID BAKER: You [and Kai] had such a long-running relationship. The group was revisited a number of times. The one you did that had the electronics – I can't remember which album that was. [It was *Betwixt and Between*.]

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Johnson: Oh, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Then you revisited the one where you did *Mack the Knife* in the two keys.

Johnson: Oh yeah. Wait a minute. *Mack the Knife* was with André Previn, wasn't it?

DAVID BAKER: Yes. That was the two trombones, wasn't it?

Johnson: No, no.

DAVID BAKER: Okay. The two trombone one was the one where you used some of the amplification and stuff – made it more interesting.

Johnson: Yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Then the last one that you had together with the TV production from . . .

Baker: . . . from Switzerland at the Aurex Festival.

DAVID BAKER: The Aurex Festival.

Johnson: That was Japan.

Baker: Oh, oh, sorry, yes. Japan.

Johnson: The Aurex Festival was Japan. As a matter of fact, it was the most shocking thing. We came back from the Aurex Jazz Festival, and within a matter of a week or ten days I got this call from Kai's family that he had had a massive brain whatever. I've forgotten what it's [called].

DAVID BAKER: I remember reading about it.

Johnson: Yeah. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Wait a minute. I just left Kai when he was playing up a storm. as always. What are you telling me?" It was the truth. He had had this massive brain hemorrhage or something like that, as I recall it.

Baker: Aneurism, I think.

Johnson: Aneurism. I believe it was an aneurism, a double aneurism. It was very, very

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severe. It was devastating news and devastating information to get. He had a tough time of it. He struggled and struggled against this, and finally he succumbed. It was a devastating situation.

DAVID BAKER: Let me ask you about something. Is this the only time that you played trombonium? I remember you guys playing that instrument.

Johnson: We got up enough nerve to not only practice on them but to feature them on recordings sessions – on *a* recording session, I should say. That's the one where we had *Tromboniums for Two*.

DAVID BAKER: *Tromboniums for Two*.

Johnson: *Tromboniums for Two*, yeah. The trombonium was an instrument that was like a cross between a baritone horn and a flugelhorn, and a cross between a euphonium . . .

DAVID BAKER: And a mellophone.

Johnson: And a mellophone, right. It looked like a small euphonium or a small baritone horn. It was played with a regular trombone mouthpiece. We were on good terms with the King Factory – King Musical Instruments – and the guy that dealt one-on-one with the jazz players. His name was Clem Frak. Clem was kind enough to let us wander around the factory and try out different things. We fumbled up on the tromboniums, and he said, "Hey, you guys. Take them." And we did take the tromboniums and learned how to play them and recorded with the things.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]. That was great. I thought you both sounded great on it. I just thought it sure took a lot of . . .

Johnson: It took a lot of nerve . . .

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: . . . to record. It took even more nerve to improvise on the euphonium because neither one of us were really valve instrument players. But we practiced a lot . . .

Baker: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: That's great.

Johnson: . . . enough to get by even with improvising.

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DAVID BAKER: You know you started a whole new school, of [a] way of looking [at this]. For a long time, wherever there were two trombone players, they had already transcribed the Kai & Jay [things]. Everybody could play [Baker sings the opening measures of *Don't Argue*].

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: It was a tour de force. Then you guys did one with more trombones than that. Or maybe it was Kai that did that. Eleven hundred trombones. No, I'm kidding.

Johnson: Well, let's see now. We did *Jay & Kai Plus Six*.

DAVID BAKER: Yes, that's right. *Jay & Kai Plus Six*.

Johnson: Eight trombones. *Jay & Kai Plus Six*.

DAVID BAKER: That takes a lot of guts, to put six trombones as stationary targets.

Johnson: [laughs] It was a wonderful experience, that *Jay & Kai Plus Six*. Kai did half the writing. I did the other half of the writing. The arrangements worked out very successfully, much to our surprise. We didn't know what was going to happen with these arrangements. I *certainly* didn't know what I was doing. [laughter] It worked out very well with the eight trombones. I recall my approach on one of the tunes was to treat it like two quartets, like a double quartet thing, so that four trombones were playing [in] mutes while the other four were playing open, answering each other with an interplay between open and muted. It came off quite well.

DAVID BAKER: Palestrina. Antiphonal writing. Tower music.

Johnson: [laughs] Tower music.

Baker: Did you and Kai know each other before the group was put together?

Johnson: A little bit. Kai came here – by the way, it was Kai [pronounced Kay] or Kai [pronounced Kye]. He was Danish. His origins were Danish. He personally preferred Kai [pronounced Kye], but he didn't object to people calling him Kai [pronounced Kay] because many people called him Kai [Kay], and they called us Jay & Kai [Kay]. Rarely did they call us Jay & Kai [Kye] or Kai [Kye] & Jay. They just called us Kai [Kay] & Jay or Jay & Kai [Kay]. It worked out. I first met Kai before Jay & Kai. He was with Kenton.

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He was with [Stan] Kenton for a very long time. He traveled with one of Kenton's high profile bands. Some of Kenton's recordings featured Kai on trombone.

DAVID BAKER: [On] the best known recordings of the Kenton band, he was in there at the same time.

Johnson: They were brilliant trombone solos.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Oh, yes, yes, yes. That's where I became aware of his playing, was listening to those Kenton recordings. Shortly after that, he came to hear me perform at Birdland or wherever and introduced himself, and we became friends.

Baker: How did you decide [whether] it would be Jay & Kai or Kai & Jay?

Johnson: We never did. It would flip-flop. It would flip-flop from engagement to engagement.

Baker: That group was together for a comparative good period of time. Two years – something like that?

Johnson: A little better than two years, uh huh.

Baker: Were there any particular performing experiences or recording experiences across that time that you would like to share with us?

Johnson: Hmm. None that stand out. We both enjoyed the format. It was fun to look forward to going to work every night. It was fun to record and to write. We were both writers. Kai was a good arranger. We shared the writing chores and what not. It was always a nice experience to look forward to performing with Kai and recording with him. And the audiences responded to the sight of two guys up there on the stand, slides going crazy. It was a visual experience. People found it to be a visual thing that they enjoyed.

Baker: How did you decide to disband the group, because it was obviously a very popular group among jazz audiences and it was something that you [both] enjoyed very much. Was that the end of one of your famous cycles?

Johnson: I became a little restless of that format. I knew it had a lot of potential. As you said, it began to enjoy a measure of popularity. But even so, this restlessness began to take over. Then Kai became a little restless. It was a mutual thing. We decided, well,

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we'll go our own separate ways. We parted company on the best of [terms], as dear friends. The Aurex [Festival appearance] came about *long* after we had split up.

Baker: Oh, sure.

Johnson: We maintained our friendship and relationship right along as friends and what not.

Everyone takes a break.

Baker: We'd like to move on to the 1959 Monterey Jazz Festival and to two of your large works, *El Camino Real* and *Sketch for Trombone and Orchestra* that were presented as a part of the festival program that year.

Johnson: I had heard about the Monterey Jazz Festival. Jimmy Lyons who was the entrepreneur and producer invited me to perform on that Monterey Jazz Festival and to write works for orchestra – well, jazz band, shall we say. I wrote those two works. One was *El Camino Real* which translated, I understand, means the king's highway.

DAVID BAKER: The king's highway, yes.

Johnson: Right. The king's highway. And the other [was] *Sketches for Trombone and . . .*

Baker: Orchestra.

Johnson: No, no.

DAVID BAKER: Yes, *Sketch for Trombone and Orchestra*.

Johnson: Yes, *Sketch for Trombone and Orchestra*, yeah. It didn't enjoy repeat performances as *El Camino Real* did. For one thing, I never performed it any more, and I don't know why. *El Camino Real* has remained a part of my big band library. When I ever have occasion to do a big band scenario, I usually include *El Camino Real* in that situation. All I remember is that Monterey is a beautiful jazz festival. It's near Big Sur. It's in a beautiful part of California. It's all outdoors, and people enjoy it for its scenic beauty as well as the music and the jazz ambiance.

Baker: And those were commissioned works from the Festival?

Johnson: Yes, from the Festival, right. They were indeed.

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DAVID BAKER: Maybe this would be the time – even though it goes a little out of order, Lida, with what you're doing – to look at the other larger works, particularly the works that comprised the two big band albums you did where you did *Stratusphunk* and those things. [Let's] talk a little bit about your writing for the bigger ensembles, either the larger works in the sense of *Poem for Brass* or the big band works that comprised those two albums – *Little Dave*, *Swing Spring*, *Stratusphunk*, some of those things. [The albums are *The Total J. J. Johnson* and *J.J.*!]

Johnson: Was that *The Total*?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, *The Total J.J.*

Johnson: On RCA?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. Actually there were two different albums. Then it came out again under just *J.J.*

Johnson: Right. Oh yeah.

DAVID BAKER: It had a lot of stuff on it. Fact is, you do *Stolen Moments* on that.

J. J. JOHNSON: Right. Oliver Nelson's *Stolen Moments*. Right. The producer on those occasions I remember was Jack Somer, S-O-M-E-R.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, right.

Johnson: He said, "J.J., on this recording project I would like for you to write all the material and to primarily feature yourself, so it's really J.J. Johnson's baby." Da-da-da-dah. So I did sit down and write all these arrangements and whatever originals came out of that scenario.

DAVID BAKER: There were quite a few.

Johnson: Wasn't one *Eurosuite*?

DAVID BAKER: *Eurosuite*. That was the second album. [*The Total J. J. Johnson*]

Johnson: That was the second album, yeah. *Eurosuite* came about under interesting circumstances. Classical pianist Friedrich Gulda was also a very good jazz pianist and had a keen interest in jazz, even though his forte was as a classical musician and as a

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classical pianist. But he put together a jazz band to tour in Europe. I don't know what year that was. [In the discography of *The Musical World of J. J. Johnson* by Joshua Berrett and Louis Bourgois III there is a listing for two days of recording on September 13-14, 1965 in Vienna, Austria by Friedrich Gulda and His Euro-Orchestra; both J. J. Johnson and Freddie Hubbard are listed in the personnel.] Dave, what [was the] approximate . . .

DAVID BAKER: I just remember you and Freddie [Hubbard] were two of the main soloists on it.

Johnson: And Ron Carter.

DAVID BAKER: And Ron Carter, yes. Sorry about that.

Johnson: Oh, wait. It wasn't Freddie. It was Art Farmer.

DAVID BAKER: Art Farmer. Thank you.

Johnson: Beautiful, beautiful Art Farmer. The three soloists from the United States were myself, Art Farmer, and Ron Carter. The work featured the three of us, for the most part. Friedrich Gulda wrote a wonderful piece. I wrote my piece called *Eurosuite*, which was a suite in four or five movements, for that occasion. I re-recorded it under the circumstances that you just spoke about.

DAVID BAKER: On the second album. [Two excerpts from *Eurosuite* were released as *Euro #1* and *Euro #2* on the album *The Total J. J. Johnson*. Art Farmer is on this recording.]

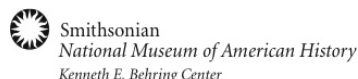
Johnson: On the second album, right. I re-voiced it even, because interestingly enough, that wasn't your standard big band.

DAVID BAKER: No.

Johnson: It wasn't. It was big band, but not your standard big band. Whereas the standard big band has five saxes, four trumpets, four trombones, [and] a rhythm section, the band that we are talking about now had three saxes, two trumpets, two trombones, and a rhythm section. It was quite a challenge to pare down and yet try to project this big band image. It was a challenge that I enjoyed, working on that. The arrangements worked out very well.

DAVID BAKER: The thing which I thought was so distinctive – and maybe already

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looking toward Hollywood – is how coloristic the writing was. The use of vibes [and] orchestral bells and these things showed up throughout there, the splashes of color that you don't usually associate with the jazz band [but] more with orchestral writing.

Johnson: Dave, I had by that time really started to pay attention to classical music, per se. I loved classical music. That started during the so-called Thirdstream cycle in the evolution of jazz where I became very friendly and closely associated with the activities of Gunther Schuller on the one hand, John Lewis on the other hand, and a person who – it's strange how he was involved in my becoming interested in classical music to the point where I developed a love for classical music. Thank God! It came back to me just this instant as to what happened and how this individual is involved – Johnny Carisi.

DAVID BAKER: I was about to say, I bet you, with *Israel* and other pieces . .

Johnson: Johnny Carisi. I remember that on an occasion he had some musicians over to his home just to socialize – just to, as we say, hang out. He played for me – the first time I had ever heard [it] – Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: It blew me away and blew my mind. It had nothing to do with jazz. I said, "What is that?" *The Rite of Spring*. From then on I was a convert and a Stravinsky addict and a classical music addict, as I still am today.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: And will always be. I began to listen to Stravinsky's other works. Then I became aware of Ravel and Bartok and became a real addict of these persons in particular: Stravinsky, Ravel, Bartok, Prokofiev, Richard Strauss, people of that era. I must have five different recordings of *Le Sacre* [*Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky]. I must have five different recorded versions of [Johnson sings the opening measures of the *Firebird Suite* by Stravinsky].

Baker: *Daphnis and Chloe*?

DAVID BAKER: No, that's Bartok. *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Johnson: *Firebird*. *Firebird*.

Baker: *Firebird*.

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Johnson: *The Firebird Suite*. I may have five or six different recordings of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* and one of my favorite works, a cello scenario, Ernest Bloch's *Schelomo*.

DAVID BAKER: *Schelomo*. Yeah. Yeah.

Johnson: *Schelomo*. Right. Wonderful. Tear you heart out.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, yeah. Truly.

Johnson: [It will] tear you heart out, just tear your heart out. That opening cello note will tear your heart out.

DAVID BAKER: That sounds almost like spirituals. It's so powerful.

Johnson: Yes. Yes. For sure. Right.

DAVID BAKER: Johnny Carisi also wrote one of the pieces on that *Birth of the Cool* album, his piece *Israel*, which may be the strongest piece of all those pieces.

Johnson: That's very good. It's a candidate, right, and it's a *strong* candidate.

DAVID BAKER: It's held up, when you play it now.

Johnson: It has stood the test of time. Right. Right. So that was my introduction to classical music.

DAVID BAKER: All of these pieces across this time start to show a lot of those influences, like those two albums which have been reissued several times. Now they are on CD. The coloristic writing, the expansiveness of the writing where it seems to be bursting its seams, a lot of different things. I assume you did all the arrangements, even the things like *Stolen Moments*.

Johnson: That's my arrangement, yes.

DAVID BAKER: I assume, then, that all the writing [was yours]?

Johnson: Yes. Right. That was a condition of the recording commitment. Jack Somer [told me], "You will do all the writing, you will do all the arranging, and whatever [the] composition is you will do that. You will feature the trombone or yourself, for the most part." That's how it came about.

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DAVID BAKER: I know George Russell was so impressed with *Stratusphunk*. That's not an easy piece to think about . . .

Johnson: It isn't.

DAVID BAKER: . . . with its intervallic structures and what you made it into. And I could see the seeds of the things that you did with the three horns on *Stolen Moments* – the use of the minor third and the major second, like G, E-flat, D, B-flat and planing those colors up and down. This was a very fruitful period in your life in terms of your writing because you had a chance to do so much.

Johnson: I would say so. Right. I was beginning to discover the joy and the commitment of arranging and composing and the whole writing syndrome. There is a down side. Gerry Mulligan and I commiserate, if you will. When you're in the throes of a heavyweight writing project . . .

DAVID BAKER: Your playing goes . . .

Johnson: . . . your playing goes down the tube and your practicing goes down the tube.

DAVID BAKER: Of course.

Johnson: When you are in the throes of touring and performing, your writing goes down the tube. There [are] not enough hours in the day to do both. There are not enough days in the month. There [are] not enough years in your lifetime to do both. [You] feel like it's a curse to be able to do both because you're so frustrated when you are writing. You know that your playing is suffering something terrible, and you worry about that when you really should be thinking about what you're writing. So it's a blessing on the one hand and a curse on the other hand, but a wonderful curse.

Baker: Maybe we could go [now] to the group that you had with Freddie Hubbard.

DAVID BAKER: Actually it was with Nat Adderley.

Baker: Nat Adderley first, right. Let's go to that group first.

Johnson: I had heard about Nat, and I was so impressed with Nat. Then Nat and I became neighbors. In a cycle when I lived in Teaneck, New Jersey, Nat and his wife Ann also lived in Teaneck, New Jersey. We really became fast friends then and there. When I thought about formulating a different texture quintet-wise, I thought I would try trumpet

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and trombone instead of the usual saxophone and trombone. I didn't know for sure that it would work or how well it would work, yet Nat made it work and it did work. I have fond remembrances of our traveling around together and performing together and recording together.

DAVID BAKER: Was this the beginning of your association with Columbia Records?

Johnson: Yes.

DAVID BAKER: I thought it was.

Johnson: Right, right. It led to a contract, an exclusive Columbia contract, right. You are on target.

DAVID BAKER: Some of those pieces – masterpieces like *Walkin'* and the things that you did on there – I thought pointed the way to others. Fact is, [you've] been associated with a number of those oddball starting groups, like the two trombone group . . .

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: . . . or a group of trombone and trumpet.

Johnson: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: Those are not your B-flat groups, that's for sure.

Johnson: Not really.

DAVID BAKER: Then Freddie, moving from Indianapolis, had come through Sonny Rollins. I remember him telling me one of his goals was to play with J.J., and he was definitely going to do this. I don't know how this came about, but I know that the first time I saw you in New York after Freddie moved there, it was at the Vanguard and Freddie was playing with your band.

Johnson: Yeah, he was playing as brilliant then as he always has played. That's the miracle of it all, and yet he was relatively unknown at that time. It was nice working with Freddie. It was good to have him as a member of the ensemble. He was reliable, dependable, concerned, committed, dedicated and an asset for sure. And a brilliant soloist. I regret that I only made one recording with Freddie, while Freddie was in my group. [The album is *J. J. Inc.*]

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DAVID BAKER: That was [with] Clifford Jordan. Was that the tenor player?

Johnson: Yes, Clifford Jordan, Freddie Hubbard, myself, and the rhythm section, right.

DAVID BAKER: It was a very, very good band. I don't remember if that was Tootie Heath on there or not. I can't remember for sure. [It was Tootie Heath on that recording.]

Johnson: I don't remember for sure either.

DAVID BAKER: But that front line, 'cause your writing – that's when you were trying a lot of things – *In Walked Horace* and that twelve/eight piece.

Johnson: Oh, yeah, *Aquarius*.

DAVID BAKER: *Aquarius*, yeah. And *Flat Black* or one of those – *Fatback*, *Flat Black*. I can't remember which one . . .

Johnson: *Fatback* . . .

DAVID BAKER: *Fatback*, yes.

Johnson: . . . was with the sextet, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I'm sure Freddie reminded you that he was from Indianapolis when he had a chance to try to get in your band.

Johnson: He did. He did indeed.

Baker: It was around this same time also that you were teaching at the Lenox School of Jazz.

Johnson: This, too, was an outgrowth of the alliance with Gunther Schuller and John Lewis who were a part of a faction that brought about this thing at Lenox. They brought me into the fold on the level of teaching, and that's how that all came about and how I first met your wonderful husband, David Baker. I had heard about David, but I think that was the first time we had encountered each other on a one-on-one basis.

DAVID BAKER: That was one hell of a school. I was telling Lida and them that it was the prototype of what a school *could* be. There has since never been anything like that because they were never able to assemble the kind of people that they had at that particular school – to have you and Max, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and Gunther and all of

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these people who had all these huge reputations. The only way it could have happened would have been in the summer.

Johnson: Are you aware, David and Lida, of the attempt that Bob Brookmeyer made just recently to have such an environment?

DAVID BAKER: In Europe.

Johnson: In Europe, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I talked to Bobby.

Johnson: Yeah, sponsored by the Rotterdam government or something like that. It looked very good for him for a while. Then it fell through the cracks, for reasons I never understood.

DAVID BAKER: I was with him in January.

Johnson: Oh, really? Did he run by you what happened? Its downfall?

DAVID BAKER: No, he was pretty dejected. This was in January at IAJE [at the annual conference of the International Association for Jazz Education]. I talked to him at length. I think the expense involved and the fact that Bobby was also trying to do it by bringing a lot of American musicians at pretty good prices because of carrying [them] over there [might have been part of it]. But I thought that what you guys did there [at the Lenox School of Jazz] was something that revolutionized a lot of young people because it was like Who's Who [in] the student body at those things, too.

Baker: Then you went on to work with Miles again?

Johnson: What setting was that?

DAVID BAKER: 1964.

Johnson: 1964?

DAVID BAKER: You and the guy from Philadelphia, the tenor player.

Johnson: Jimmy Heath? No, not Jimmy Heath.

DAVID BAKER: Hank Mobley.

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Baker: Hank Mobley.

Johnson: Hank Mobley.

DAVID BAKER: Fact is, I came to see you in Louisville with that band.

Johnson: Hank Mobley. Hank Mobley, what –

DAVID BAKER: And P.C. [Paul Chambers] . . .

J.J.JOHNSON: Oh, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: . . . and Jimmy Cobb.

Johnson: Oh, wow.

DAVID BAKER: And, I think it was Wynton Kelly. I always regretted [that] you were under contract with Columbia, and Miles was under contract with Columbia. Why did no record ever come out of that alliance?

Johnson: Isn't that weird? That's weird. I don't know. I wonder. That's a strange happening and a strange occurrence. Yeah. I, too, wonder.

DAVID BAKER: That would have been a real natural. How long did that last? I remember when I heard you guys in Louisville. We drove down to Louisville, and I remember just being stunned because Miles hadn't had a trombone player in the band in ages. Or maybe never.

Johnson: Maybe never.

DAVID BAKER: In a working band, yeah. I don't know how long the tour was or anything.

Johnson: I was with Miles between a year and a half to two years, I would say, roughly.

DAVID BAKER: [whistles]

Johnson: Very, very roughly. We toured all over. We didn't record at all.

DAVID BAKER: You didn't record, not one record.

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Johnson: Not one record did I make with Miles during that cycle. I don't know why. It will never be know why we didn't record *that* particular group. It was a wonderful experience. Miles and I just got closer, even more so with that relationship.

Baker: Were you writing for that group as well during this time?

Johnson: No, I didn't do any writing for Miles. I didn't do any writing for the Miles group. None at all. That was one of my down writing cycles, shall we say. I wasn't doing any writing. My writing cycles have been like my playing cycles, off again-on again. [laughs] Long dry spells.

Baker: You had a group around this time with Sonny Stitt and Clark Terry, a group that toured Japan. You spoke a little bit about Sonny Stitt. I know you have very warm feelings for Clark Terry, and I was wondering if you could speak a little about him.

Johnson: Clark Terry?

Baker: Yes.

Johnson: The *brilliant* Clark Terry. The first time I ever heard about Clark Terry was the word of mouth that was getting around in jazz circles that he sounded like a combination of Dizzy, Miles and Clifford Brown all rolled into one. I couldn't *imagine* such a player. And yet, when I first heard him, I thought, "That's pretty accurate. That's pretty on target." He is a cross between Dizzy, Miles and Clifford Brown. Yet he has his own persona and his own style that is uniquely Clark Terry that transcends this combination of Dizzy, Miles and Clifford Brown. It was a wonderful experience to finally hear him and meet him as a person because, as we all know, he is a fun guy with a *tremendous* sense of humor. A real sharp guy. A real bright guy and I'm told, by reliable sources, a very good jazz educator.

DAVID BAKER: One of the best.

Johnson: One of the best. The word is that he really does a number when he does a clinic or a workshop or a master class. It's masterful, shall we say. Da-da-da-dah. To hear you say that, Dave, just seconds the motion as to what I've heard by word of mouth, that he is one of the best.

DAVID BAKER: He was on the ground floor of the whole movement.

Johnson: That's wonderful. That's wonderful.

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Baker: Would this be a good time to go on to the discussion of your activities with MBA [Mark Brown Associates], starting to move into a writing cycle again with jingles and commercial music, and beginning to get your feet wet a little bit in that area?

Johnson: Um, yes. I was living in New York. We were living in New York. I had been traveling on strenuous tours that kept me away from home for very long periods. That began to wear thin. I decided I should just get off the road, disband and stay in New York for a while, just to kind of settle down and let things get into a groove. In doing so, I found myself taking odd jobs around the city and doing studio work, doing studio calls – typical studio calls of that era – recording sessions and what not. I met a man named Mark Brown who had a production company that wrote music for television commercials. Tommy Newsome, who was to [become] known as the second man in command with the old *Tonight Show* band with Johnny Carson, was working for Mark Brown at that time. There was a Herman Levinsky (sic) also working for Mark Brown at that time who was a very good arranger. Mark invited me to come in and talk with them about coming aboard as a staff arranger and composer. I liked what I heard. I liked the environment. I liked the ambiance [and] the friendship that I struck up with Tommy Newsome and [name?]. And sure enough, I joined the staff as one of three or four staff composer/arranger/orchestrators for Mark Brown Associates, writing music for radio and television commercials.

It was interesting in that I knew inevitably I wanted to get involved in film composition, and this was like getting a foot in the door. In writing music for jingles and on television commercials the same apparatus is used, the same methods are used, the same ground rules applied, and the same principals apply as in feature films. One thing led to another. Interestingly enough, that was my first hands-on exposure with synthesizers. The production company headquarters were on East 48th Street in New York City, right in the heart of the downtown area, the Fifth Avenue area, as it was. In any case, Mark bought a Moog synthesizer. No one knew how to operate the daggone thing. Moog synthesizers were in vogue at that time, and all the production houses around town – jingle companies as well as other production companies – were all buying Moog synthesizers. Mark Brown said, "J.J., we are going to send you up to Trumansburg, New York where the Moog factory is and let them give you a cram course so we'll know what to do with this bloody thing that we've paid all this money for." Sure enough, I was dispatched to Trumansburg. I was there for two days. I got to know Bob Moog. He's a charming man. He took me under his wing, and he got me up and running, shall we say, on the Moog synthesizer so that when I came back, I was able to plug it in, turn it on, put patch chords in and out here and there, and get a sound out of it. We even used it in some of our commercials, as I recall. That was my first hands-on experience with synthesizers. It created a monster in that I became a synthesizer fanatic. I had been an electronics fanatic

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for a number of years, and it was only amplified by this new discovery about synthesizers which blossomed into all kinds of wonderful and crazy things in the electronic world [and] finally led to MIDI, which I am involved in now. That was the origin of that whole syndrome.

With Mark Brown I began to get more and more curious about film composition. Quincy Jones came through New York during that cycle to do the music for a feature film, *The Pawnbroker*. I played on that call in the trombone section, and I was very much in awe of Quincy's display of authority and professionalism as a film composer. I had never seen this before. It was fascinating to watch film projected in the recording studio – to see what it was he was doing with his music, to see the music matching the film, and to see Quincy huddling with the producer about a problem or something that the producer may not have agreed with. It was a big movie. Rod Steiger was the principal in it. Quincy and I developed a friendship. Lalo Schifrin also was beginning to become active in film composition in California and came to New York to do one of his film projects. Just socializing, they said, "J.J., why don't you try a hand at it? Did you ever think about coming to Hollywood and writing for film?" I said, No." [They said,] "Well, you might think about it." I *did* start to think about it. To make a long story short, I left Mark Brown Associates in 1969 or thereabouts and in 1970 moved to California to get involved in the whole film writing thing – film composition.

Baker: Did you find things very different in California than New York?

Johnson: Oh, yes – a whole new world, shall we say. At first, I just went around and observed on film recording sessions. It was quite fascinating to see film projected on a large screen, and to watch a conductor give a down beat and see the music matching the film. I got more and more interested in that, and I got my first chance to try that out early on. Good things began to happen. I enjoyed film composition. During that whole stint I worked on about five feature films and several television series projects. *Six Million Dollar Man* was one I worked on. *Harry O* was one I worked on.

DAVID BAKER: *Mike Hammer*.

Johnson: *Mike Hammer* was the very last one I worked on, as a matter of fact.

Baker: *Barefoot in the Park*.

Johnson: *Barefoot in the Park* early on. I met up with Earle Hagen, one of the veteran giants in film composition and film composing, and we became very friendly. He was teaching. He had a class that taught film composition. He did this just for the love of it. He was an excellent teacher. I went to this class, and we became friendly. He gave me a

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shot at working with him, and we became very closely associated on several film projects. As a matter of fact, the last project on which I worked as a film composer, prior to moving back to Indianapolis, was the *Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer* series on which Hagen and I were co-composers. We split the composing chores right down the middle. That was interesting to do.

DAVID BAKER: [The *Mike Hammer* shows] were still in syndication as late as two years ago. In Bloomington, at eleven o'clock every night, they would come on again. I would always look. I got to the point where I would know which were your scores. I would set them up and make sure that I got those covered, so I would learn what you were doing. Any other mentors beside Earle Hagen while you were there? People who were particularly helpful?

Johnson: Earle Hagen, for the most part. Jerry Goldsmith was very friendly. I would go to his sessions and he would say, "Come into the booth." The recording booth is, for the most part, a no man's land or a no-no for outsiders or strangers. Jerry Goldsmith is one of the giants, as far as film composers. I went to his sessions as an observer. I would be standing in the corner and he would say, "Come on in the booth here, J.J." And I would. He would show me his scores and what not. I thought that was very nice of him. One of Jerry Goldsmith's monumental scores of all time is not well-known and never will be. That's too bad, because it was a brilliant score, [for] *Planet of the Apes*.

DAVID BAKER: With Charlton Heston. Yes.

J.J. BAKER: A brilliant score – all kinds of oddball textures and percussion instruments that he used in that film score.

DAVID BAKER: Did you have much contact with some of the other black composers [in Hollywood] like Benny [Carter]? Benny was trying his damndest not get involved with the actual orchestration so [he] wouldn't get labeled [as only an orchestrator]. But Benny, Quincy, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson . . .

Baker: Oliver Nelson.

DAVID BAKER: Oliver Nelson.

Johnson: I don't recall that Oliver ever had a chance to do a feature film. His forte was mostly television. He may have done one.

DAVID BAKER: He did one.

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Johnson: Did he?

DAVID BAKER: He did one with Lena Horne and Yul Brynner. I can't remember what it was called. [*Death of a Gunfighter*]

Baker: Oh, yeah.

DAVID BAKER: I think it was *The Gunfighter* or something like that. But that was his only feature [film].

Baker: *Death of a Gunfighter*.

DAVID BAKER: That's it. *Death of a Gunfighter*.

Johnson: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. *Death of a Gunfighter*, yeah. I didn't come into contact too much, other than with Quincy. I ran into Quincy once, and played on a couple of his film calls in the trombone section.

DAVID BAKER: Ah ha.

Johnson: I got to observe at close range . . .

DAVID BAKER: What he was doing, yeah.

Johnson: . . . how he operated as a composer on a film project. One comes to mind. Ohhh. I can't remember what it was now 'cause I played on two or three of Quincy's film scores. I played on a couple of Lalo's film scores in the trombone section. [It] was good to get to observe how they dealt with a film score.

DAVID BAKER: And look at it from inside, too.

Johnson: Oh, yes, yes. [To] look at it from the standpoint of the players. It was really an education.

DAVID BAKER: Can you speak, aside from what you were doing there, about your playing, your performing career at the same time you were doing all the scoring and stuff?

Johnson: I had to put my performing and my playing on the side burner, shall we say. I practiced and I tried to keep my chops up, as we call it, shall we say. It took a bit of doing because I wasn't doing very much playing at all, other than some minimal studio playing

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from time to time and especially when we were really heavily involved in film composing. The truth of the matter is [that] my career as a performing artist took a back seat at that point in time and for that length of time, sixteen [or] seventeen years.

DAVID BAKER: That's wild.

(START CD-5)

Baker: I know the Hollywood situation for film composers wasn't exactly a real congenial environment as far as black composers were concerned. Would you like to talk a little bit about your experiences in trying to break into that situation?

Johnson: I was fortunate to have a good agent. To be a film composer in Hollywood, you must have an agent. There is no such thing as going it alone, without an agent. I went with Al Bart, who was one of the best in the business. The truth of the matter is that Al had a great deal of difficulty getting projects for me, for one of two reasons. He was very frank and candid and honest about it. He would tell me in every case where there was difficulty, either [they would say,] "He's a black composer, and we're not interested in a black composer"; or "He's a jazz musician, and this isn't a jazz picture." It never occurred to these people that this man might be able to write a score that isn't jazz. "If he's a jazz musician, obviously all he can write is a jazz score and we do not want a jazz score." The film community has a bit of tunnel vision, in a manner of speaking, as far as their choice of film composers is concerned. Yes, it made things a little tough and, in some cases, very tough. There are no, even as we speak, black film composers who do major films such as *The Firm* or *Jurassic Park* or megabucks film projects like George Lucas's *The Empire Strikes Back* or *Star Wars*. It never did happen, and it never will. It's not about to happen. Yes, there are some black film composers. We were just talking this morning about Terence Blanchard and the fact that Spike Lee is using him a lot. There's a new picture coming out soon that Terence Blanchard has done the score for. But it's mostly tokenism as far as film composition is concerned and the film production community. They do not want black composers, and black composers won't break that barrier, I don't think, ever. I don't see any change in that attitude on the horizon. It comes with the territory. You accept and you don't – that doesn't give you a reason to be hostile or bitter or angry, and I'm certainly not hostile or bitter or angry about it. I accepted things as they are. You don't fight City Hall. You make the best of a bad situation.

Baker: Was it easier writing music for television than it was writing music for films? I notice on the film credits [that] these are primarily films that were aimed toward a black market in the black community, films like *Cleopatra Jones*. I'm just wondering if it was any easier to get work as far as television writing than it was writing for feature films.

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Johnson: Yes, it was easier. Al Bart had an easier time of getting assignments for me for television than for feature films. If the truth be told, there are only a few feature film composers who do most of the films in Hollywood. It's a very self-contained little clique of composers. It's Goldsmith and Schifrin and Pat . . .

DAVID BAKER: Williams.

Baker: And John Williams.

Johnson: I'd say you could name between fifteen or twenty – and that's it – who do most of the films. That was the way it was then. I don't know how it is now. I have been out of that situation for a number of years. And far be it for me to characterize what the attitude and the climate or the environment is now as far as the selection of composers for a given film project by a film production company. I really can't say.

DAVID BAKER: If you look at the credits on the film, it's the same.

Johnson: It's the same.

DAVID BAKER: Yes, 'cause I see the same names. The only one who has emerged that's probably bigger than life is Williams.

Johnson: John Williams?

DAVID BAKER: John Williams.

Johnson: John Williams. Oh, yes.

DAVID BAKER: He's bigger than life.

Johnson: He's *much* bigger than life. Yeah. Right.

Baker: There must have been tremendous time pressures involved, not just in working with a television series where new episodes have to be produced every week but even with the shooting schedule on a feature film. Was that difficult to adapt to?

Johnson: At first, yes. It was quite difficult to adapt to because of that element, the pressure of meeting a deadline. Film production companies are notorious for fussing with a film forever in the editing process while the composer is standing in the wings, waiting for them to release it so that he can write his music. He's promised six months to write a given major film production score, and he's lucky if he ends up getting three

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months. They'll usurp three of his promised six months by just continually editing, editing, editing, editing, re-shooting, rewriting, re this, re that. It is a pressure cooker. Film composers deal with the pressure cooker situation on a continuing basis, in feature films as well as television films – more so in television films. On feature films, especially on a big budget film, those film composers have a lot of elbow room and breathing room and a lot of time to work on their project. In the main.

Baker: I remember you telling me one time that a film composer wasn't worth his salt until one of his scores had been thrown out. [laughs]

Johnson: Yeah. It seems that it's one of the quirks of film producers and directors to somehow have a miscommunication with the composer and end up not liking what the composer wrote, paying him his full price, and then throwing out his score and getting another composer to write the score. I'm told on pretty reliable and pretty accurate information that that's happened to a lot of *name* composers. [There is] one that I can mention in particular, because everyone knows that Alex North wrote a brilliant score for *Space Odyssey 2001* [*2001: A Space Odyssey*]. Stanley Kubrick hated North's score, threw it out, paid him this huge fee that he was promised, and used whatever music he ended up using – some of it existing music like [Johnson sings the opening measures of *The Blue Danube Waltz*]. What is that?

Baker: *The Blue Danube Waltz*.

Johnson: He used that.

DAVID BAKER: And also [Richard] Strauss [from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*].

Baker: Strauss.

Johnson: Strauss. He got this Ligeti [Gyorgy Ligeti] person to do some incidental music. But they threw out North's brilliant score.

DAVID BAKER: One of the *giants* of film scoring and every other kind of writing, too – Alex North.

Johnson: Of course. Of course. We all know it had to be a monumental score.

Baker: You told a wonderful story once about Igor Stravinsky's experience with being asked to write a film score.

J. J. JOHNSON: [laughs]

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Baker: Would you share that with us? It's a charming story.

Johnson: The story goes that Igor Stravinsky was approached to write a film score and had a meeting of minds with the power structure and the powers-to-be on the film project. They proceeded to tell Mr. Stravinsky, "Mr. Stravinsky, here's how it works. We shoot the movie. We cast the movie. We go on location and shoot the movie and film it. Then we spend a great deal of time editing that movie. That's a very complex, time-consuming process. After that, we call you to write the music for this movie." Igor Stravinsky says, "Oh, no. That won't work. I will write the music first, and you will shoot the film afterwards. Your film will go according to my music, not the other way around."

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's great. That's really great.

Johnson: No, that won't work. Music first, film second.

Baker: [laughs]

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's great, man.

Baker: I'm just wondering if this was also the time when you expanded your interest in technology to include all the items of use in the studios, the film studios – all the electronic equipment and what have you. [Did] your interest that was originally sparked by the Moog synthesizer began to grow as all these items became available for your use as you were working in film and TV scoring?

Johnson: Yes and no – yes, because I had considerable exposure to these electronic devices and film composition. In scoring for *Buck Rogers and the Twentieth Century* I used synthesizers quite a bit. But what turned me on to the whole concept of electronic music, shall we call it, was a recording that I heard a few years back by a Japanese composer whose name is Isao Tomita. He's a brilliant composer. He produced a recording called *Snowflakes Are Dancing* that enjoyed quite a nice popularity here in the United States. It was a big seller for RCA Victor, as I recall it. He did orchestrations of major works such as Debussy's this-and-that-and-the-other and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* using all synthesizers, Moog synthesizers by the way – the kind you had to use zillions of patch chords to just get a sound. I was intrigued by this technique and this know-how and this technology. It was *Snowflakes Are Dancing* that led to my becoming an electronic music fanatic.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

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J. J. JOHNSON: Tomita, it's all your fault.

Baker: I saw that sign in your studio.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah.

Johnson: Yeah, I have a sign in my studio saying, "Isao, it's all your fault." It's all your fault that I have all this gear here. And it is!

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] I love it.

Baker: Then, at some point, you made a decision to leave all that. Let me ask you one other thing before we go on to that. How difficult was it for your family to make a move from the East Coast to the West Coast and get into the whole pressure cooker situation in Hollywood that you were experiencing?

Johnson: It really wasn't that difficult in that Vivian, my first wife, felt the need of a change about the same time that I felt the need of a change. She began to get a little restless and weary of the New York syndrome, shall we say, so that we were in unison and in harmony with our decision to move to California for two reasons: for a change in our lifestyle and for a change in our lives, and for J.J. to get involved in film composition which he had been wanting to do for some time now. So we accomplished both missions, and it worked out very well.

Baker: That's wonderful.

Johnson: Uh huh. [It] worked out beautifully.

Baker: Then you made the decision to leave California and move back to Indianapolis. What was in your mind as you were making that decision? What kinds of things led you to want to do that?

Johnson: The film production situation and the business of composing music for film began to get a little fuzzy and out of focus. Synthesizers, those beastly instruments, began to take over pretty much. Musicians were, shall we say, running scared that wow, these synthesizers are going to replace musicians. In some situations they really did. It was a combination of that and the fact that things began to get tougher as far as getting film assignments. All kinds of radical changes were taking place in the arts, in jazz, in pop music, in pop culture, and the whole thing. Film scores began to take on the personality of pop records. Film production companies were comprised of people who had come along in the – what is that cycle of time? Woodstock.

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DAVID BAKER: Yes. Rock and roll.

Johnson: Most of the film producers and directors came out of that era, and they wanted that kind of music in their films. A lot of films projected that kind of music. One of the first and notable examples of that was the picture called *The Graduate* where Simon and Garfunkel did their brilliant score, a brilliant score that fit that picture beautifully. After that there was an onslaught of films using pop artists, films using pop and/or rock music verbatim. In some cases [it was] rock music and pop music created for the film. In some cases the production company would go right to the publisher and say, "Hey, we want to use Simon and Garfunkel's 'this' or we want to use Aretha Franklin's 'that' in this movie," and pay the going price that the publishing company would charge for them to use it and give a credit at the end of the film – main title sung by Aretha Franklin, courtesy of so-and-so records, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. That became the order of the day and still prevails, by the way. You'll see a lot of the major productions, not all of them, but a lot of the big megabuck productions have pre-recorded music by the big pop stars of today. It's still very prevalent. There are the pictures that are done by the John Williamsses and the Jerry Goldsmiths still, of course. That didn't go away, and it won't go away.

But the handwriting was on the wall, in a manner of speaking, so I and my first wife, Vivian, decided that it was time for a change. Having lived in California for eighteen years, we decided "Well, we lived in New York for a long time, we enjoyed it, we have no regrets. We lived in New Jersey for a long time, have no regrets. We lived in California all these years. Now where do we go?" The logical place was to go back to our roots, Indianapolis. Vivian was from Indianapolis originally. So was I. That was the logical conclusion to that question of where do we move next? Why not move back to home? That's that story. As they say, that's the name of that song.

Baker: Then you decided to resume as much of a full-time performing career as you wanted to make a commitment to do at that time.

JJ. JOHNSON: It wasn't quite that cut and dried – almost that cut and dried. Having moved back to Indianapolis it was, "Okay, now what are you going to do?" I didn't have a band yet, but I began to get some phone calls and what not to perform hither, thither and yon. I recall going out to L.A. Having moved back to Indianapolis, I got a call to go out to L.A. and play with Ray Brown and Gene Harris at a club called the Loa, and I did that. I got a call to be involved as one of the artists to play at Dizzy Gillespie's tribute at Wolf Trap, [a] high profile event, [a] wonderful event. It was like a Who's Who in jazz as far as who played on that event. To make a long story short, Slide Hampton performed brilliantly on the Dizzy Gillespie tribute at Wolf Trap and is documented on videotape, thank heaven, for all the world to hear. Slide and I had been friends through the years. I

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was talking to Slide after his brilliant performance and telling him that, "Slide, I'm about to get back into the arena again, hopefully on a broad scale, just to get back out into the deep water again. I should consider an agent or a manager." Slide said, "J.J., that's good news. I wish you well." And I said, "Well, Slide, do you know anybody who I should consider as a manager?" He said, "As a matter of fact, I do. I would highly recommend that you talk to this person who is really a very good manager and good agent, a hard worker. I think she would be good for you. Her name is Mary Ann Topper. The name of her agency is The Jazz Tree." Sure enough, I called Mary Ann Topper. That was the beginning of the alliance of J.J. Johnson and The Jazz Tree. Shortly after I hooked up with Mary Ann Topper by phone, we got to meet in person in New York. We talked about forming a quintet. The first person we chose was Cedar Walton, who I had known for years and had played in one of my bands. We certainly had no problem there. We engaged Cedar Walton to give us some feedback and input as far as the other members of the band were concerned. That was a very fruitful move and a very fruitful decision, because it ended up in us having a dynamite quintet as a result of the feedback and input of Mary Ann Topper in conjunction with Cedar Walton and of me getting feedback from other musicians. That quintet was born, the one [that] involved Rufus Reid, Victor Lewis on drums and Cedar Walton, of course, on piano. Our first saxophonist was Tom Gullion, a product of Indiana University who stayed with us quite a while. We recorded, and since then there have been some minor changes in personnel. But the first J.J. Johnson Quintet after the Hollywood stint was that creation by Cedar Walton, Mary Ann Topper and The Jazz Tree, and myself.

We take a break.

Johnson: We were talking about the J. J. Johnson quintet and its creation with Mary Ann Topper and what not. We began to tour. Things began to look up. We toured all over. We were in Europe. The band got tighter and tighter and more coherent and more cohesive and what not. It just felt good to go to work every night. We went on a tour through Canada, starting on the west part of Canada [and] coming across to the east part of Canada. By the time we got about the mid-point on Canada, a little light bulb came on that said, "J.J., you'd better record this quintet. It ain't going to get any better than this. Your chops are not going to get any stronger than this. So you will be remiss if you don't record this quintet. As a matter of fact, you are going to New York next Monday, having finished the tour in Canada. You are going to open at the Village Vanguard for a week there. You should seriously consider recording live at The Village Vanguard because now is the time, not later."

I called Mary Ann Topper. I said, "Mary Ann, we must record next week in New York." Mary Ann said, "J.J., you're crazy. That's too soon. We can't pull it together that quick. There's a lot to be done. There's a lot of groundwork to be laid." I said, "Mary Ann, I

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don't care how we do it. We must record next week at The Village Vanguard live." [She said,] "Well, J.J., I'll see what I can do." Mary Ann pulled all the elements together, made the thing happen. Sure enough, we did record the following week, following that tour in Canada. We opened at the Village Vanguard, and the last two or three nights of that week we recorded an album that inevitably came out called *Quintergy*. We recorded enough material to get two albums out of that situation. The second album came out shortly after *Quintergy*. [It was] called *Standards*. They came out on [the] Antilles [label], which was one of the companies owned by Polygram, and did very well. We felt very good about it. It was recorded and came out *J.J. Johnson Quintet Live at the Village Vanguard*.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, and to great acclaim. I can remember trombones players from *everywhere* lining up to get in for the return of J.J. [laughs]

Baker: That was a tremendously thrilling thing, for everybody to see you coming back.

Johnson: It felt good. It really felt good, and I look back on that with a lot of satisfaction and pleasure.

DAVID BAKER: I can remember, just when the rumor was [out] that you were ready to come back out, Joe Segal – who had been one of your real champions – [was] already trying to make plans that far in advance to have you at the Showcase [the Jazz Showcase in Chicago]. He said he felt that he was the last keeper of the flame there, and he wanted to go with the cats who were the creators of this wonderful, wonderful music we think of as contemporary jazz.

Johnson: Joe Segal was one of the crusaders in that, of jazz club owners. A wonderful dude.

Baker: You have done several more recording projects with different configurations . . .

Johnson: You mean since then?

Baker: . . . of your group since then.

Johnson: Not several. Some.

Baker: Some.

Johnson: Some. Right. The most recent recording was *Let's Hang Out* on Verve/Polygram. In addition to the quintet, we added Terence Blanchard on trumpet on

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two cuts; and we switched tenor saxophonists on one or two cuts from Ralph Moore, who was my regular saxophonist, to Jimmy Heath, who is a dear friend. That came out as *Let's Hang Out*. That's the current release at the moment.

DAVID BAKER: And the one that led into that – the wonderful album called *Vivian*.

Johnson: The Concord album *Vivian* came about – my first wife [Vivian] passed away in 1991. I had been touring in Japan for the Concord Jazz Festival. One of the high profile persons in the production company [was] Carl Jefferson. As a matter of fact, Carl Jefferson's recording company was very involved in the annual Concord Jazz Festival in Japan. We had been playing on a given night in a given city in Japan, and I had played a couple of ballads on my set that Carl Jefferson was very impressed with. I was coming offstage and going through the wings, and as always, Carl was standing there watching the proceedings. He said, "J.J., you got a minute?" and I said, "Yeah." He said, "Did you ever think about doing an album of all ballads?" I said, "No, I've never thought of doing an album of all ballads." He said, "Well, think about it." I said, "Okay, Carl, I will." I didn't think about it right away, but after we got back to the States I did think about it. I called Carl and we talked about it. My best recollection is [that] I said, "What I'd like to do is to include in the title that it's a tribute to the memory of my deceased wife, Vivian." Carl said, "J.J., not only do I think that's a wonderful idea, let's call the album *Vivian*." I said, "I like that even better." Sure enough, we did that album and it came off quite well. I was concerned for a long while that it would come off as a maudlin kind of thing – you know, a "poor J.J." kind of thing. I didn't want that to happen. We were fortunate that it did not turn out that way.

DAVID BAKER: No, it did not.

Johnson: It didn't turn out that way at all. People enjoyed it for what it was, just a tribute to Vivian.

DAVID BAKER: [It was] an album with great sinew and muscle to it. It had a lot of strength. It did not get maudlin.

Johnson: Yeah. I didn't know for sure that I could bring off an all-ballad album, and yet it felt good to do. It felt good to do.

DAVID BAKER: You picked the tunes very carefully.

Johnson: And the personnel. It didn't hurt to have that strong supporting cast of Rufus Reid and his trio. Actually it was his trio – Rob Schneiderman and Akira Tana – with the addition of the brilliant guitarist . . .

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DAVID BAKER: Ted Dunbar.

Johnson: . . . Ted Dunbar. What a sensitive, beautiful player. He isn't terribly well-known, is he? Or is he?

DAVID BAKER: Ted's been teaching at Rutgers for a long time. Ted studied with me here. He came [to Indianapolis] to be around Wes [Montgomery] and to study with me from Port Arthur, Texas. He graduated from Texas Southern [University] with a degree in pharmacy.

Johnson: What?

DAVID BAKER: He worked here for two or three years in the area, and studied and did pharmacy across from the Walker Theater. There was a drugstore there.

Johnson: What a remarkable story.

DAVID BAKER: He's so dedicated, he doesn't feel any need to push beyond what he is. He's recording frequently, but, again, it's always low profile.

Johnson: Uh huh.

DAVID BAKER: But let me tell you, this was the high point in his life . . .

Johnson: A sensitive player.

DAVID BAKER: . . . being on that record with J.J. He still says that's one of the most important things he's ever done.

Johnson: Wow. Rufus recommended him.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, he's a beautiful man.

Johnson: Rufus recommended him highly. I said to Rufus, "I need a sensitive guitarist."

DAVID BAKER: You got it.

Johnson: "He doesn't have to be a virtuoso. I just want him to blend into the ambiance of what we're trying to do." Man, he hit it right on the money.

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DAVID BAKER: And with the thumb of Wes. And he was playing that way before he moved here, with his thumb like Wes does.

We break for J.J. to take a phone call.

Baker: Another thing that I find very exciting about what's happening in your life now and what's been happening since you moved back to Indianapolis is your interest in teaching.

Johnson: Uh huh. My first exposure in that area of endeavor was the National Association of Jazz Educators. A few years ago they held their annual bash [conference] in Detroit, and Mary Ann Topper managed to get me involved in a situation. I was one of the guest performers and clinicians at that meeting of the National Association of Jazz Educators. That was the first time I had ever done a clinic, I think, unless the first one was in Boston with Tom Everett and Phil Wilson. I did one there. One or the other was the first I ever did. Needless to say, I was a little nervous about doing that. I had never done that, but it worked out. Wendell Logan at Oberlin [College] called me to tell me that he would like to offer me a residency, the Emil Danenberg Residency. It was interesting for him and for all concerned that this residency had been going on for quite a number of years but always with classical musicians, never with jazz musicians; and [that] they would like, for the first time ever, to extend an invitation to a jazz musician to do this residency. I accepted, and it was a challenge – a fun thing to do. It was great to work with Wendell, who was a brilliant jazz educator in his own right. We all know what a high profile music school Oberlin is, with a very, very good, strong, and stable jazz studies program. That was getting my feet wetter yet in that whole arena.

Then I had an occasion to speak with Bob Cowden at Indiana State University. They were looking to expand their horizons in the field of jazz. We struck up a relationship and an alliance. I made a contractual commitment with Indiana State University that lasted for about two years. I went about twice a month during the school year to do master classes, clinics, [and] tutor trombone students one-on-one. That worked out quite well, and it looks to me as if I will be doing more and more of that kind of activity from here on in. We've had some offers that we are looking at, and Bob Cowden and myself have talked about my coming back again to do some things there, so it looks like I will be active again in that arena. It will, obviously, have to be on a selective basis because I'd like to pursue traveling and touring with my quintet and recording with my quintet, so one has to accommodate the other. We'll work out the details and the logistics of that situation as we go.

DAVID BAKER: And of course, you were also at Ball State. That's another school too. Yeah. Remember? You were at Ball State, what? Once or twice?

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Johnson: Ball State?

DAVID BAKER: Yeah. That's where Larry McWilliams is. Or maybe you just came up that one time because that's where I saw you.

Johnson: I came up there to observe.

DAVID BAKER: To observe.

Johnson: And to talk business.

DAVID BAKER: Yeah, I remember.

Johnson: No, you are right. There was a prospect. They were interested, I was interested, and I came up there to talk to them about that interest. I saw you perform there, on a concert there. It didn't materialize. It didn't work out. But, yes, Ball State was interested at one point.

Baker: Before we get to the end of our interview, there are several other areas I'd like to cover. The first is just to get your comments and reminiscences about of several other musicians, some of whom you may not have worked with but some of whom I know that you knew. For example, Thelonious Monk.

Johnson: A maverick.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: A maverick who marched to the beat of his own drum and who was a true trailblazer in the evolution of jazz. One of a kind.

Baker: Duke Ellington.

Johnson: Another maverick . . .

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: . . . who marched to the beat of his own drum and heard, listened to his own inner voices. And whose music was uniquely – it had Duke's personal touch [in] that you heard just a few seconds of it [and] you knew immediately that that's Duke Ellington. Couldn't be anybody but Duke Ellington and sure enough, it wasn't anybody but Duke

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Ellington.

Baker: And you recorded, I believe, with John Coltrane?

Johnson: If that happened and it probably did, I don't recall the circumstances or the situation. It could have been a one shot, isolated situation.

Baker: I think it – there was some . . .

DAVID BAKER: What piece was this?

Baker: I don't know. There was something listed in there [in the discography] which I thought was kind of surprising. Do you remember anything like that?

Johnson: I don't recall recording with Coltrane ever.

DAVID BAKER: No.

Baker: Maybe you might just reminisce a little bit about him, or give your impression of him as a musician.

Johnson: Coltrane was one of the prime movers, obviously, in the evolution of jazz. He was a practice-aholic, we might say.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: I think his genius reflected the fact that he was a practice-aholic. One experience I witnessed with my own eyes was an occasion when Coltrane was playing with Miles Davis – one of his high profile bands that was recorded beautifully, the band that included John Coltrane, Miles, Philly Joe Jones, Paul Chambers and . . .

DAVID BAKER: Red Garland?

Johnson: Red Garland. I caught that band live at a club in the Village in New York on an occasion many years ago. I can never forget that they would play about an hour-and-ten-or-fifteen-minute set. Then they would be offstage for about forty-five minutes. As soon as they came offstage for their break, Coltrane would go into the basement area and practice until time to go back onto the bandstand, which meant he was literally playing all night long without a break.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

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Johnson: So when we talk about blinding sheets of sound as is associated with Coltrane, we know how he came about this virtuoso-type approach to tenor saxophone improvisation. It was a step beyond virtuoso playing. Virtuoso playing is insufficient. The word is quite insufficient and not applicable to John Coltrane because his level of genius transcended the word virtuoso.

Baker: Both of your sons have shown a considerable talent for music. Given the fact that your parents were very supportive but were somewhat reluctant to see you take up a career as a professional musician, how did you feel when you began to realize that they both were very talented in that area and that they might also want to someday pursue that?

Johnson: Billy was interested but never really got into it, shall we say. He wanted a tenor saxophone. I got him a tenor saxophone. This is when we were living in New Jersey, I believe it was – Teaneck, New Jersey. I got him a tenor saxophone on the premise that he would take lessons and learn how to play it. Not too much came of it, and he eventually gave that up. Kevin, on the other hand, showed a different kind of interest – not very intense at first, but it became intense in increments and in small stages. Eventually Kevin took up drums. I got him a set of drums. He got very good. He studied. He learned how to read music. He became a professional musician, inevitably. He traveled on the road with Les McCann for almost two years as Les McCann’s drummer. I took a band, a quintet, to Japan a few years ago, and I took Kevin with me as the band’s drummer. It’s documented on an album called *The Yokohama Concert*, [which] I believe is where Kevin is playing drums, on this two-record set. He was quite a good drummer. He became a little disenchanted with the unpredictability and the uncertainty of the whole jazz syndrome, and he had a daughter to raise and what not. He decided that he should have something to back up. He became an engineer and, even as we speak, he’s an engineer at Naval Avionics. He’d like to get back into drumming on a – as a hobby; but I think, if the truth be told, he would really like to get back into it, period. He won’t admit to that. He says, "Oh, I’d just like to do it on the side as a hobby." We’ll see.

Baker: Speaking of hobbies, do you have hobbies and interests that are apart from your musical activities? I know you are an avid fan of professional football.

Johnson: That’s about it. I do enjoy professional football. I follow professional football. The Super Bowl is a time for a lot of fun, a lot of merriment and what not. Other than that I don’t have any hobbies. I don’t golf or bowl or any of that. If I have any hobbies it’s in electronics. I think you saw my music studio. It’s set up in such a configuration that it’s like a U-shaped affair. On one side of the “U” is the work area. That would be the computer and the music and the software programs that reside in that computer, and the printer and the external hard drives and what not. In the bowl of that “U” is the keyboard

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and the other side of that “U” is a bunch of synthesizers and expander modules et cetera et cetera, that when I get restless or want to indulge into my own private world of enjoyment, I indulge in the world of MIDI. Those initials M-I-D-I stand for the terminology Musical Instrument Digital Interface. That’s a whole ‘nother world that I enjoy just dabbling in, and experimenting in, and composing in and what not. That’s about the only hobby outside of professional football that I have at the moment. There is one thing that I do once in a while. Carolyn, the woman I’m married to now – now and then we go to the movies. I enjoy the movies. Once in a while we are fortunate enough to find a movie worth going to, and we’ll go see a movie. That’s about it.

Baker: When you are listening to music for your own enjoyment, apart from working on something or what have you, what kinds of things do you like to listen to?

Johnson: Mostly classical music. Again, Stravinsky – Bartok. I went through a cycle of the Polish avant garde composer . . .

DAVID BAKER: Penderecki?

Johnson: Penderecki [Krzysztof Penderecki]. I went through a big Penderecki cycle. I still have four or five of his outstanding recordings. Jazz – of course, jazz. I was impressed and intrigued by the rave reviews in the last – I’d say this would be within the last year and a half or two years – I read these rave reviews about Shirley Horne’s album with strings that Johnny Mandel did all the writing for, called *Here’s To Life*. And about the same time I read this rave [review] – many, many, not just one rave review – about Joe Henderson’s release at that time called . . .

RECORDING ENGINEER: *Lush Life*?

DAVID BAKER: *Lush Life*.

Johnson: *Lush Life*. Rarely does my curiosity get to the point where I’ve got to go out and get that and even buy it. But I did so. I went to Rick’s Records and bought *Here’s To Life* and Joe Henderson’s *Lush Life* and came home and listened to them both. Then I knew what all the rave reviews were about. They were *brilliant* productions. Beautifully recorded. And Joe Henderson – we all know he’s long overdue for recognition. It’s just so wonderful to see him getting the kind of recognition that he should have gotten many, many years ago because he is playing as brilliantly now as he has always played. He has never played any other way but brilliantly. He’s just coming into his own as far as recognition as a result of his recording of *Lush Life*. Well-deserved recognition.

Baker: Here’s a hypothetical question you might have some fun with. This is a favorite

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question to ask composers particularly, but also performers and that is, if you were given unlimited time and finances, do you have something in mind that you might like to do?

Johnson: Unlimited time.

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: Unlimited finances.

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: You mean, in the area of music?

Baker: Anything. Anything. It doesn't have to be music, necessarily.

DAVID BAKER: If somebody gave you any amount of money you wanted and any amount of time and said, "This is yours. Do with it what you will."

Johnson: Well, I can't tell a lie at this point. I know one of the first things I would do would be to buy a Ferrari.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's great.

Baker: What color?

Johnson: As red as they come.

Baker: I knew it!

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Baker: You impress me as a red Ferrari kind of guy.

Johnson: Let me tell you the origins of that little secret passion. While working with Miles Davis and his band as a sideman, we played at a club in Philadelphia – this same club, the Blue Note. We're still stuck with that title until we find out that it was some other title, but I believe it was the Blue Note. Anyway, we were nearing the end of the run there. On this night Miles said, "J.J., let's go back to New York and come back and finish up the gig." I said, "Miles, we've both been drinking quite a bit tonight. That's not a very good idea, don't you think?" "Aw, let's go to New York. I'll drive. We'll go in my Ferrari." I said, "Well, okay." So, we got in Miles Davis's little red Ferrari, and we got as

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far as the toll booth that leads to the outskirts of Philadelphia, leading you out of Philadelphia onto the highway. [Miles said,] "J.J., I can't make it. I can't drive any further. *You* have to drive." I said, "Wait, Miles. Me drive this Ferrari?" "Yeah, you got it. I'm going to sleep." He went to sleep. I drove the Ferrari. I got a speeding ticket on the New Jersey Turnpike. When we got back to New York City and I got to Miles's home, I said "Okay, Miles. Here's your car. I'll find a way to get home. I'll call Vivian, and she will come pick me up or whatever." "No, take the Ferrari home with you." I said, "Oh, Miles. You've got to be kidding." "No, go ahead. Take it home with you." I kept the car about two weeks . . .

DAVID BAKER: Wooo!

Johnson: . . . at which time he said, "When you get tired, just let me know. Call me and bring it back." I kept the car two weeks, and I've been a Ferrari addict ever since.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's a great story.

Baker: [laughs]

Johnson: I can truthfully say, there is no sensation that one can experience with all of his clothes on . . .

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: . . . that comes anywhere close to the sensation of depressing the accelerator pedal of a Ferrari.

DAVID BAKER: Wooo!

Johnson: Words cannot approach the sensation of applying your foot and pressure to the foot pedal of a Ferrari.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs] That's great, man. That's beautiful.

Johnson: I kid you not.

Baker: I love it.

Johnson: I kid you not.

DAVID BAKER: I have to check out Ferraris myself sometime.

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Johnson: If you think I'm exaggerating, multiply what I'm saying by a factor of about one hundred and you'll be fairly close to what I'm *really* trying to say.

DAVID BAKER: [laughs]

Johnson: You only have a *vague* idea of what I'm trying to say. If you multiply that by a factor of about one hundred, you'll be fairly close to what I'm really trying to say about the sensation of driving a Ferrari.

Baker: That's great! We wanted to ask you about a couple of your favorites as well. One of the favorite things we thought we would ask you was where – in your long, long career did you have a specific venue that was your favorite place that you played?

Johnson: As far as large concert halls, I certainly have a favorite, hands down. I make no bones about this. It is the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. I played there twice. The acoustics are such that if you whisper, the person sitting in the last row of this enormous, gigantic venue will hear "whooo" with the same velocity, the same intensity – no more, no less. That's the kind of acoustics there. You can play without microphones, and every person in the venue will hear you just as clear as a bell. It's a *wonderful* place to play. I loved the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam. That's my favorite concert hall to play in, of all the places. Unless they've changed the configuration through the years, which is a possibility, the configuration then was that the main stage where we performed as jazz artists was kind of like almost a theater-in-the-round in that you had audience all around you. There were as many people behind you witnessing your performance as there were in front of you. There was something wonderful about that. Wherever you looked, there was audience – rows and rows and rows of audience – behind you, to the side of you, and in front of you. And the acoustics were just unimaginable.

Baker: What's your favorite of all the recordings that you've played on over the years?

Johnson: I'm fairly harsh as to being a critic of my own output, and I have some difficulty listening to my own records, in the main. I have found that I can sit and listen and even get a measure of enjoyment from listening to *A Touch of Satin*. I can get a measure of enjoyment out of listening to *The Total J.J.* [*The Total J. J. Johnson*]. I enjoy very much some parts of *Eurosuite* that scenario, but that was a part of *The Total* [*The Total J. J. Johnson*], wasn't it?

DAVID BAKER: Uh huh.

Johnson: Some parts of *Live at the Village Vanguard* I think came off very well and I

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enjoy listening to. That's about it. Again, I'm my own worst critic.

DAVID BAKER: That's beautiful.

Baker: David will ask you about some other recordings in just a minute, but I have another favorite that I want to ask you. Out of your numerous, numerous compositions over the years, do you have particular favorites among those?

Johnson: Not really. Not really. Taking two steps backward, getting back on this other thing we were talking about, Jamey Aebersold came to me a few years ago and said, "J.J. I would like to publish a book of your solos on your recording projects. What I would like for you to do is get all of your recordings out, listen to them very carefully, and pick out ten of the solos you consider to be your best efforts ever." It was the most difficult project I have ever undertaken. Listening to your own solos over and over and over and over again and critiquing your own solos is a very painful process. Pretty soon you can't stand to hear your own self play. You're going back and forth – playing this one again, saying, "Well, this one has a slight edge. Oh, this one has a clam in it. This one I didn't hit that high F." It was difficult. We came up with ten, and he published them – ten transcribed solos of J.J. Johnson in a book. It was tough.

Baker: Does a particular performance event – at a festival or in a club – does a particular performance event or several performance events stand out for you as you look back over your career over the years? [Do] any of them seem more special?

Johnson: Two come to mind. If I thought about it in great depth, which we don't have the time for, I could probably come up with seven or eight, five or six. Two come to mind. The first one that comes to mind is an occasion where I was in New York, just floating around in the Village to hear good jazz. Alone. I happened to go by this place, this dumpy little jazz club where Thelonious Monk was appearing along with John Coltrane. Words cannot describe the sensation of what this combination of these two divergent talents [produced]. All I can say is I never heard, before or after, Monk play as he played; and I can truthfully say that I never heard John Coltrane play as he played, before that or after that. Something wonderful and magic – there was some magic that came about as a result of that combination of divergent geniuses playing together.

DAVID BAKER: That was the Five Spot, I'm sure.

Johnson: It was probably the Five Spot. It's too bad it wasn't documented by being recorded, because it was something to hear. That was one. On another occasion that I can recall – that stands out in my mind, and I like to look back on it and think about it – I was playing with Miles's band as a sideman. We were in Chicago at a theater on the south

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side of Chicago. The Regal Theater?

Baker: Uh huh.

Johnson: Where they had shows from time to time. We did two or three shows per day, the first show being about one o'clock in the afternoon. There was a show about four o'clock and a show about eight o'clock. Something like that. This was the first show on this particular day, and on this first show I heard a Miles Davis that I had never heard before and never heard again afterwards. Never. I don't know what happened. It's a mystery. I never heard him play . . . I've heard some great Miles Davis, live and on records. This transcended all of that. It wasn't recorded. It was one show of several shows that week where he just, I don't know what happened.

DAVID BAKER: It's in the ether.

Johnson: Is that what it is? 'Cause I can't figure it out.

DAVID BAKER: No. You don't know how to even call it.

Johnson: No. It defies understanding. It really does. There's no understanding it. I stopped trying. It was an exercise in futility to figure out, well, what happened? What? Why? Why?

Baker: [David,] would you like to take us to the desert island?

DAVID BAKER: Yes. If you were going to a desert island – and this is a favorite question of everybody – and you could only take five – I'm going to be really liberal. Instead of five records, [you can take] five albums. You can take five albums with you, and you have to live with them for the rest of your existence. What five albums would you take? I know that's a hard one, and I'm hoping that it's not one where you get a chance to prepare [your list]. You've got to make it off the top of your head.

Johnson: That is a tough one. I know two or three, but five is tough. Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* would certainly be one. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or *Firebird Suite* would be one. *Miles Ahead* would certainly be one. I'd have to think about the rest. Now it's getting tough. It's getting tough now because there are so many – I have so many now that I need, you need to give me about fifteen, twenty more choices. I don't have them. I only have two or three more choices. So it's tough. It's tough now because I can think of a few, and that exceeds your limit.

DAVID BAKER: Well, three speaks volumes. Three speaks volumes. Let me just run

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some names. Just one-line responses. Just names. These are non-music people. Malcolm X.

Johnson: A man who happened when he should have happened.

DAVID BAKER: Okay. Sugar Ray Robinson.

Johnson: He was the Charlie Parker and the John Coltrane of fisticuffs.

DAVID BAKER: Dr. Martin Luther King.

Johnson: He was the John Coltrane and the Charlie Parker of rhetoric and oratory.

DAVID BAKER: That leaves a hell of a gap for this next one. Muhammed Ali.

Johnson: [Laughs]. He was the greatest because he believed he was the greatest.

DAVID BAKER: [Laughs]. Okay. Sounds good. Man, I think we've got a hell of a –

Baker: Thank you, J.J., so much.

Johnson: Thank you. I'm flattered and honored to have been invited to do this.

DAVID BAKER: Boy, it's been beautiful, man. [laughs]

(END OF AUDIO FILE)

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