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JACKIE MCLEAN
NEA Jazz Master (2001)

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Brower: My name is William Brower. I'm sitting with Jackie McLean at the Artists Collective in Hartford, Connecticut, on Friday, July the 20th, 2001. We're conducting an oral history interview for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project. The first thing I'd like to do is thank Mr. McLean for agreeing to participate in this oral history.

McLean: Oh, it's my pleasure. It's very important.

Brower: I want to start with what we were talking about before we actually started the formal interview and ask you to tell us about your recent trip to Europe, where you played, with whom you were playing, and then talk about how you're handling your performance – the performance dimension of your life – right now.

McLean: This most recent trip that I made – I made two trips to play with Mal Waldron. The first one was in Verona, Italy, a couple of weeks ago. That was a duo where Mal and I played for about 70 minutes solo, between he and I, duo. Then I went just last week over to the North Sea Festival in the Hague to play with Mal again, this time with his trio, with Andrew Cyrille, Reggie Workman, Mal, and I was special guest.

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But generally I've been playing with a select – I play with my son, René, and my rhythm section that I usually keep, which has Eric McPherson, Alan Palmer, and Phil Bowler, René and myself. That's one group that I'm playing with. I play with Cedar [Walton] – of course we lost Billy [Higgins] – with Cedar and David Williams. I also have been going out with the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Band, which gives me a chance to visit that old original music that came out in the '40s.

Brower: Who's in that group? Who's in the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Band?

McLean: Slide Hampton, Jon Faddis, James Moody, myself on the front line. The rhythm section swings between Cyrus Chestnut or Mulgrew Miller, and John Lee on bass. Drummers have been interchangeable.

Brower: Interesting. Each of those – each of the groups you're mentioning provokes different questions starting with the Alumni group. I can imagine that a Mulgrew Miller would probably be right in the pocket with the players that would have been more contemporaries in the front line. But how about a Cyrus Chestnut? Does he have that vocabulary the same way a Mulgrew or a Kenny Drew might have?

McLean: Yeah, he's got it covered. He plays very well. I was really impressed with his performances when he worked with the Alumni Band. Yeah, he had that in his pocket. And Mulgrew naturally does as well. But most piano players that are really great piano players have had to really study that music and really know it. We're talking about pieces like *Ko-Ko* and *A Night in Tunisia* and *Con Alma*, all of Dizzy's stuff and Bird's [Charlie Parker's] stuff, [Thelonious] Monk's stuff. Most of the musicians that are really great pianists, they have covered that. They know it. So they come, and they add a lot of their own things, plus the traditional stuff, to the music. It makes it wonderful.

Brower: It's a Dizzy Gillespie tribute ensemble. Most of the literature, and most of what I've heard to be associated with you, it's the relationship between you and Bird. Can you talk about your relationship with Dizzy, how you met him, what influences he may have had, any stories you might recount about interactions with Dizzy?

McLean: I first used to see Dizzy when I used to go down to see on 52nd Street and just run along the street and see who I can look in the window and see on the stage. Then I first saw Dizzy at the McKinley Theater in the Bronx with his big band. Bird was in that band as well. Then I eventually met Dizzy when I was about 16 or about 17 years old and sat in some place in the Bronx. But I just never had a chance to – I went with Miles's band, and so I was with Miles [Davis] off and on for a number of years, and then after that had my own groups. I never got back to really having – Dizzy never called on me. Put it like that. He was never calling on me to play these gigs with him.

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After a while, when I got really – 20 years went by. 25 years went by. I eventually went to Dizzy and said, “Hey, man, I’m out here. How come you’re not calling me, man? Every time you call the same cats. You either call Phil Woods or James Moody. Both of them are great, and you should, and I have nothing to say about that, other than, what about giving me a little bit? Let me wet my beak.”

So the first time he called me, he called me and Sonny Stitt, ironically, to come down to Wolf Trap and play with him. That was the first time he had called on me to come and be on the front line with him. Then after that, different times he would call me. I went to do a thing with him in Paris, and thank God I recorded with him, just before he passed, at the Blue Note one night. That was very important to me, to be able to play with Dizzy in that context. It was two altos and trumpet on the front line, Paquito D’Rivera and myself and Dizzy. A great rhythm section. So that was a very important recording, as well as when I got Dexter [Gordon] to record with me in Copenhagen. That was a very important recording for me.

Brower: I’d like to – because I think there are a few, like the one you did with Ornette [Coleman], and probably the one you did, a couple of those, as we move through the chronology. But that’s interesting. I think more than many musicians have been able to, you’ve been able to realize some of those, maybe goals you have. But I’m interested to know. In the ’40s, I understand you went with Miles and so forth. But were you ever in an informal relationship with Dizzy, where he shared things with you or you got a chance to be around him? Or was it just not that available to you?

McLean: No. We gave him an honorary doctorate at the Hartt School, the University of Hartford. I was with him that whole day. That was a great afternoon that I spent with him. And one time in Austria, I went up to his room. We were both on this same show. I was with a different – with my band. I went up to his room with him. He was very upset over something that had happened. I don’t want to mention it in the Smithsonian interview. But it was about another musician that wanted Dizzy to be in his video. Dizzy was saying, “Ain’t this something, man? This guy wants me – they want me to be in this man’s video. What about mine? What about doing some things with me?” He sat there, and then he was talking about – he said, “You know, we as musicians, man, we have our wives back at home. It’s really a drag to be out and away from somebody you care so much for.” He said, “We really are not” – he says, “It’s rotten. We live a rotten life,” and he started crying. It choked me up, got me choked up in the room with him. That was a close moment I had with him, a sensitive moment. I asked Dizzy, can I have a copy of that letter that he didn’t like? He said yeah. I went down and made a copy of it and put it in my stuff, because I’m a big fan of all those guys. I’ve always admired and ran around behind certain musicians that I loved and wanted to be around.

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But I think perhaps, when you talk about the '40s, my mind goes to Bud before anybody, Bud Powell, because it was Bud that I met when I was about 15½. It was that next two-, three-year period that I was around Bud a lot that I really absorbed a lot of understanding about the music, just being in his presence.

Brower: I'm going to come back to Bud Powell too. But just to stay on this . . .

McLean: With Dizzy.

Brower: . . . the groups that you're playing with, for the moment: what are the differences that you experience between playing with a Cedar Walton-driven trio and a Mal Waldron-driven trio, a Billy Higgins and an Andrew Cyrille, David Williams . . .

McLean: Reggie Workman.

Brower: . . . and a Reggie Workman? These are musicians who are from different generations. I mean, Waldron was from your generation, but the rest of that trio is coming from a different place than – I don't know if I can say it or not. But Higgins's got his thing. Cyrille's got his thing. It's different things. And bass players got different things, and piano players have got different things. So how's the repertoire different, and how's for you playing different?

McLean: Billy Higgins, I guess I have to pull him out of the pack first and separate him from everybody, because what he brought to any band was a groove that was unmistakably his, and it was – it put the musician, like myself or any guys playing in the front line, taking a solo, in a very wonderful place, swinging and really having a groove while you're playing. So Billy Higgins had that. I know when he passed that I would never experience that again and I'd have to listen to records to revisit that. But I was fortunate that I played with Billy right up to the end. We had been playing together in Cedar's trio for a number of years. So I had been playing with him every year annually at the [Village] Vanguard. The last few years, after his operation, was just magical, being with him and playing with him.

David is another special, very special bassist, his sound and his melodic concept and his dancing solos, because he actually dances through his solos. It's incredible. Of course, Reggie's a wonderful bass player too, but Reggie's more free form. I mean, he's more of a free player when he wants to be. He can play changes as well as anybody and swing as well as anybody, but he also can wear that other suit and be like an astronaut and get out there in space and play.

Andrew and Billy, there's no comparing anything about the two of them. Andrew is a separate entity. He plays great. He's very musical and very talented, and I enjoy playing

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with him in another context quite different from when I played with Billy. I don't expect to have that groove when I'm playing with Andrew. I'm looking for something else to inspire me, coming from him.

Cedar is a piano player that's set in the tradition from the whole period that he represents. He's not going to put on an astronaut's suit and go out in space and wander out there and free form that much. He could do it if he wanted to, but I don't think he's interested in that. So when I play with him, we're more or less playing traditional pieces that are standards and other pieces that he wrote, pieces that I wrote, in the repertoire.

Mal is another story altogether. We had our time together in [Charles] Mingus's band, where we all had suits on, because Mingus was always pointing out into space, getting closer, getting away from stuff that was more traditional, things that were more in the bebop idiom, that language. Mingus was looking for something different. I was in that band, and Mal was in that band. So when I go play with Mal, I know that there will be some music that we will play that will be structured, like some of his pieces, like *Soul Eyes*, or he likes to play some of Monk's stuff sometime. But other than that, I don't know what's going to happen when I step out on stage with him, because I don't know where he's going to start, or where he's going. I know where he's going to end up, because we usually plan that. We usually say – if we go out on stage, and we have an hour and 10 minutes, we say we'll play for an hour, and when the hour comes, that's when we go into *Soul Eyes*, because we're getting ready to close down. Then, when they call us back, we play *Monk's Dream* or something like that, and it's over.

Brower: Are the duo things with Mal different than the things with the full trio?

McLean: Oh yeah.

Brower: In terms of how you - towards repertoire and so forth?

McLean: Yeah, it's different, because we don't have anything to rely on but each other at that point.

Brower: Do you tend to play instantaneously, or without preset repertoire, in that situation? Or are you once again playing through repertoire and ending with *Soul Eyes*?

McLean: End with *Soul Eyes*, even in the duo context, but before that, there's nothing that's set or planned or anything like that, except maybe I might say to him, just as we're getting ready to walk on the stage, "Where are you going to start at?" So he'll tell me, "I'm going to be in A," or "I'm going to be in D." He'll just call a key like that. Then I'm really not sure if that's where he's really going to be until we get out there and he starts in fact playing something, chords or something, clusters or something, on the piano. But we

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get into a lot of different things rhythmically and melodically and atonally, all kinds of stuff. So it's fun to play with him in that context.

Brower: The other group you mentioned are basically all students of yours, some students, and the students' students. It's something else I want to explore as a theme, all the musicians you've touched and brought into the music. But just reflecting on that particular group of musicians that you're working with, Alan and McPherson and so forth – and Phil Bowler, who I guess is one of your earlier students . . .

McLean: Yeah, he is.

Brower: . . . other than . . .

McLean: René.

Brower: . . . the group that you started growing in your house along the side, René and them. But just reflect on that group of students and why it's important for you to maintain a creative relationship with them.

McLean: It seems as though when I'm trying to – when they come to me in the university, they fall under my influence. For instance, I guess that one of the best examples I can talk about would be Alan. When Alan arrived at the university, he really had just a little bit of piano technique. But I could tell that he had a good ear and that he could – if he didn't know what he was doing, he could put some nice chords together. So I had two good piano teachers on my staff. I had Hotep Galeta, from South Africa, who immediately stepped in and started with Alan, working with him. And then I had the maestro, Jaki Byard, there, who was like a dream to have at a university. So he went and studied with Hotep for about a year and a half, two years, and then he went and started studying his junior and senior year with Jaki Byard.

But in studying with me – the whole time I was in the background, giving him some things that I meant for him to try and do for me. One of them was, I told him – I said, “I don't want you to start looking at all the piano players that are currently out there playing and making records.” I said, “I want you to go back, and I want you to start with” – by listening to the earlier piano players, the Art Tatum and the Jelly Roll Mortons, sometimes listening to some of them and getting to be familiar with some of their works – “but I really want you to do an in-depth study on Bud and Thelonious together,” because the two of them fit together like a puzzle. Even though their styles are different, there's something that's very closely related between Thelonious and an outgrowth of his style, which is Bud. So Alan did this religiously for two years and really learned a lot about Bud's music and a lot of tunes that Bud wrote. I sent him with Walter Davis, to sit with Walter and learn some things from Walter. Sent him to sit with Bishop, learn some

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things from Walter Bishop. So he's blossomed into a piano player that has some things to offer. I thought he was very – I think he's very talented.

Brower: You mentioned – in that sound, where – how much are you an ear musician versus a paper musician?

McLean: I'm 98% an ear musician and 2% a paper musician.

Brower: What do you think? Is that a function – well, it's a function of how you developed. But, in developing musicians, where do you place the emphasis?

McLean: I'm fortunate that I have people on my staff that can cover all the bases. So if they come with me, they come to – what I call, to develop a concept. That's what I give them. I help develop their concept by letting them experience what I experienced, what I heard, what I listened to, and what made me begin to develop. I bring it to them. Same recordings, same stuff. All the recordings that I first listened to, from the first one, which was *Just You, Just Me*, with Lester Young, Johnny Guarnieri, Sid Catlett, and Slam Stewart. I say, "Listen to this. This is what I first heard. It gave me a wakeup call." I take them through that piece and bring out to them what I – what excited me about the recording, so they can begin to visualize some of the things that I had. And take them through the Billy Eckstine big bands, through Thelonious's music, and Tadd's music [Tadd Dameron], that whole period. Of course Bird, Sonny Stitt. I just try to help them develop a concept that will be really hip and together.

Brower: Let's go back to the beginning. Oh, there's one other thing. There's a jazz festival in Hartford this weekend. Have you played that festival before?

McLean: Never. I've never played that festival.

Brower: You care to comment on it?

McLean: Because most of the time it's at a time when I'm either busy doing something else, or they just couldn't work it out with Dollie to get it done. I'm not opposed to doing it. I'd be very happy to do it.

Brower: I saw it had kind of a fusion format or soft jazz format.

McLean: Yeah, well, that's what they're doing. What we're trying to do here at the Artists Collective is just continue to do what we've been doing over 30 years. They just started doing this festival 3, 4 years, 5 years ago. But we've been bringing Dizzy and Sonny Rollins and Dexter and all these people here for 30 years, and we're just continuing to do that. We just had the Heath brothers, gave them a tribute, Dr. Billy

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Taylor, Toots Thielemans, a variety of musicians, Mulgrew, Michael Carvin, different people.

Brower: You were born in 19 . . .

McLean: '31.

Brower: Is it '31? I read '31. I read '32.

McLean: '32 was a farce. That didn't really happen. I just happened to be – the story behind that is this: Donald Byrd and I are competitive musicians. We compete with each other all the time. So we were at a record date, and Ira Gitler was there. He asked Donald what year he was born, and Donald said 1932. Then Ira said, "What year were you born?" I didn't want to be older than him. So I said I was born in '32 as well, and it went down. That was it.

Brower: Yeah, that fiction – I saw '31 in maybe one of the early things I got, and then I started seeing '32.

McLean: Yeah, yeah. It's '31.

Brower: Tell us about your family. Tell us about John McLean, your father.

McLean: It's very important I'm able to reveal this for the first time in this context. My mother never told me who my father was until I was 40 years old. Then she told me that who I thought my father was, wasn't my father. She came out with these pictures of a man that I looked and saw myself, and told me the story.

John McLean was somebody that she was associated with and married to early, when she first came out of North Carolina to come up to the North here to make a life for herself. But in doing so, she met this other guy who was going to school in New York for dentistry. He was from Panama. The two of them became very close, and I was born. Then he came and told her that when I was born, he was going to take me back to Panama with him, that he wanted to take me, because he was graduating. My mother wasn't going to have that. So she hid out and took me down South and gave me to her mother for two years. She took me down when I was almost a year old, left me down there. Then she came back and got me when I was three and brought me back to New York.

Brower: Where was down there?

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McLean: Greensboro, North Carolina. My mother went to school there. She went to Bennett College. She came to New York with dreams of being a teacher, but when she got there, in those days it was very difficult for black people to be teachers in the public school system. She had a hard time. So she had to take a job, all kinds of jobs, even jobs as a – cleaning houses – a maid. She finally worked in a laboratory on 125th Street for Dr. Eccels, spent many years working there. I never saw my father, and I don't know whether he's alive or dead now.

Brower: Did John McLean figure into your life at all?

McLean: I saw him once or twice at one of my aunt's houses, but he didn't really figure into my life at all.

Brower: When does Jimmy Briggs come into the picture?

McLean: My mother was raising me by myself during all these years. I had one gentleman that was like my godfather, named Norman Cobbs. From the time I was five years old, he was helping my mother raise me, in a sense, taking me to the Y[MCA], taking me – putting me in the Boy Scouts, taking me to church every Sunday, Sunday school, church. Went to Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he played the soprano saxophone in the church ensemble.

Then my mother met and married Jimmy Briggs around 1941. We moved from where we lived in – on Seventh Avenue and 114th Street, 1855 Seventh Avenue – we moved from where – my mother and I lived in rooms. We didn't have an apartment. My mother was working every day. So we would be living in somebody else's apartment in a room, rooming. At this time, when she married Jimmy Briggs, they were married and he got an apartment on Sugar Hill, and for the first time I had my own room. I was 10 or 11 years old. He was a great man. He helped to give me a life. I have a great deal of respect for him. Of course he's passed on since.

Brower: Your godfather, did he give you your first saxophone?

McLean: Yes, he gave me my first saxophone when I was 14.

Brower: And that was a soprano?

McLean: Soprano, a straight silver soprano.

Brower: Tell us about Abyssinian Baptist Church and what you recollect of – now that was Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.

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McLean: I was there when Senior was there, but then he didn't stay there that long. He retired. Then Adam, Jr., came in. I mostly remember Adam, Jr., for the years I went there. It was every Sunday. We never missed a Sunday. I had to go first to the Mt. Olive Baptist Church for a Sunday school, where my godfather taught Sunday school. That was right there. Then we split from there and went up to the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he went in, put on his robes, warmed up his soprano, went up, and got in the pit with the other instruments.

Brower: What was the music there?

McLean: The ensemble was interesting. It was a flute, soprano, a violin, piano, and then of course a big organ and the choir. So somebody was writing some music to go along with the services on Sunday.

Brower: Do you have any recollection of Powell, Jr., and his dynamism in the community?

McLean: Oh yeah.

Brower: How'd that affect you?

McLean: I had a great admiration for him as a very – as a young kid. I couldn't wait for the service to be over, so I could run downstairs and get in the line of people that's coming up to shake his hand. I used to remember that his hand was always wet on Sunday mornings, sweating. He would expect to see me every Sunday, because I would get on that line and come up and shake his hand. I was in the church every Sunday between the age of about six, until I was about 14, almost.

Brower: He married a jazz musician.

McLean: Yeah, right.

Brower: He married Hazel Scott. Did you have – as he evolved politically and you evolved musically, was there ever any connection?

McLean: No, it wasn't anything like that, except one night I was at the Royal Roost to see Bird. I must have been about 18, 17 maybe. We were at a table, me and my boys, just sitting there, and I looked up, and there he came in with Hazel Scott and got a table right up front to see Bird, him and Hazel Scott.

Brower: When did you stop going to Abyssinian? When did that shaping of your life – were you 17, still going there?

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McLean: No, no. 14 was the period on the Boy Scouts and church. I just came home, told my mother. I said, “Ma, I’m sorry. I can’t go no more, Sunday morning, all day Sunday.” I’ll never forget about it. And Monday too, Boy Scouts. “I’m through.” Of course this crushed my godfather, because he wanted me to stay there until I was 50. But I had to explain to him that I just didn’t want to do that anymore.

Brower: Did he have any – what did he do with you, relative to the saxophone, besides giving you a saxophone?

McLean: He gave me my first idea of how to play it, how to put the mouthpiece on, how to finger a scale, a C scale. Then he took me directly down to the New York School of Music and enrolled me there. He didn’t have to teach me anymore. He never taught me anything after that.

Brower: Tell us about your experience at that school of music.

McLean: That was – I stayed there for about maybe 6 or 7 months. But he – the thing that he did do was take me to the Apollo, my godfather, and take me to the Renaissance, places where these historical bands were playing. Of course I didn’t know what I was looking at then. I hadn’t realized what Jimmie Lunceford – I was all up on the stage, standing around the drummer setting his drums up. I was very inquisitive about the music.

Brower: He knew those – he had access in that way?

McLean: He would bring me in and get to his table with his friends and stuff, and let me go. I would be all over the place, running around. I would run up on the stage immediately, to see the musicians set up or whatever. He would take me to the Apollo, where I saw Charlie Barnet’s band and saw him play the saxophone. He influenced – had a great influence on me. And of course Lionel Hampton, with Arnett Cobb and *Flyin’ Home*, that whole thing. So I had – my godfather was helpful to me in that way, even though I guess he was just taking me out to look at some things he wanted to look at.

Brower: Some of those musicians actually lived in your community. I think . . .

McLean: Yeah, later on.

Brower: On Sugar Hill.

McLean: Yeah, on Sugar Hill. Arnett Cobb.

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Brower: So this precedes the Jimmy Briggs.

McLean: Yeah, this precedes it. This was when I was young, before my mother met Jimmy Briggs. We were still living downtown.

Brower: Tell us about Jimmy Briggs and what he did in terms of exposing you to recordings, what you were listening to in the home or in his record store. Tell us about the whole record store and all of that.

McLean: He primarily was a businessman. His business was the numbers in New York. He was high up on the – how can I say it? He was very important up on Sugar Hill with the numbers. He worked with Johnny Walker, who was the head man, who was the top man. Johnny Walker, Chink Cunningham, Ashes, all those guys were the major hustlers up in the Sugar Hill area, which my dad was controlling the numbers from 155th Street to about 163rd Street, between Edgecombe and Amsterdam [avenues] and even down to Broadway. All those numbers that were played there, all that stuff came to him, into my apartment where we lived, at 961 St. Nicholas Avenue.

Brower: Well, this isn't in the history books!

McLean: Yeah, right. Through him, I learned about things in the street. I learned about – to watch him do what he was doing. He wasn't hurting anybody or doing anything to anybody. He just would get up every day and go around to Amsterdam, get in a bar there and sit. Guys would come and be bringing him money or whatever.

Then he was also important in helping me understand the music, because he was a big Louis Armstrong nut. He loved Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Johnny Hodges, Billie Holiday. That was his stuff. So when I was hearing this in the background of my life from the time we moved on the hill, because every day he would come in and put on something. It would be Duke or something like that. So when I first started coming home with my records – my first record was a recording of Lester Young playing *Just You, Just Me*. I had a little windup machine. When I played that in my room, I had my soprano, trying to listen to that. He would come back and say, "Who is that?" "It's Lester Young." "Yeah, he's all right. But come here. Let me let you hear something." I'd go up front, and he'd play Louis or play Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges. So he and I right away had some stuff that wasn't going to work in the beginning, because then I came – then I heard Dexter Gordon. I went out and bought *Dexter's Deck* and some of those early things he recorded on Savoy. I was listening to that. Then he got the record shop. He went down – first he had a bar. He bought a bar and had that working. Then – no, first he had the record shop. He bought the record shop. He told me, "After school, you'll come down and work with me, work at the record shop. I

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want you to help me keep the stock” and do whatever. So I started working in the record shop.

Brower: What was the name of this shop?

McLean: It was just a record shop. I can’t remember. Briggs, or something like that. We didn’t even have a name. It was just a record shop.

Brower: Big as this room?

McLean: It was bigger than this. It was huge, about four of these rooms.

So he – I would be in there, opening up records. He would – finally I got an alto, when I was 15.

Brower: This came to you through your mother?

McLean: Yeah, and him. They bought me an alto.

Brower: Tell us – how did that – what was the thing? You just didn’t like the soprano?

McLean: No, I didn’t want the soprano, because after I went and looked, saw all these guys playing these big, beautiful, curved saxophones, man, I’d look at this thing. And then there were some guys in my neighborhood who played music, and they all had horns. I had this . . .

Brower: Yeah, that wasn’t a horn, because it didn’t have a curve in it.

McLean: No, man. It wasn’t – it didn’t count to me. Every time I even took it out, I was like, looking around. I didn’t want anybody to see.

Brower: See you use that toy.

McLean: Yeah, right. So they bought me a saxophone, an alto, when I was 15. Then . . .

Brower: Did you want an alto or tenor?

McLean: I didn’t know the difference at that point. I really wasn’t familiar. I just wanted a curved one, a gold one. So they bought me an alto, which was the most inexpensive one. Then I was in the back room, trying to play this record now of Lester Young and copy what he’s playing. My dad came in – my stepfather came in and said, “Hey, you can’t play that on that, man.” He says, “Here’s how you got to sound.” He took me out

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and let me hear Johnny Hodges. I listened to Johnny Hodges. I was like, yeah. Then he played Tab Smith, another alto player with a big, sweet, syrupy sound. Then he played Willie Smith for me. All of these people, I really – I wasn't drawn to. I was drawn to the tenor players.

So then one day we were down in the record shop. We opened up some records, and I pulled out a record and put it on, by Trummy Young, and that's when I first heard Bird. When I heard that, I told him – I said, "That's an alto." So he said, "That ain't no alto." He said, "No, that ain't no alto." So I said, "Yeah, that is an alto." Then when the record was over, he looked on there, and it's Charlie Parker. Then we opened up another box of records, and there was the Savoy recordings of *Now's the Time* and *Billie's Bounce*. So that's how I – through the record shop, I got introduced to a lot.

Brower: Is that how you came to be introduced to Bud as well?

McLean: I met Bud because his brother wandered into the record shop. I was playing Bud's with Bird on a recording. He piped up, after the guy bought the record and went out. I said, "Can I help you?" He said, "That was my brother on that record." I said, "Who?" He said, "Bud Powell." I said, "What's your name?" He said, "Richard Powell." I said, "You play music?" He said, "No." I said, "Aw man, you ain't Bud Powell's brother. Get out of here." So he – he was all dressed up in a painter's uniform, with paint all over his face and his clothes. He said, "Oh yeah. I'll come back and prove it to you, man." He said, "My brother's coming home Sunday. I'll come by here. I'll prove it to you." So I said, "Sure. I'll be here Sunday. I'll see you later." So he split, and I forgot about it. That Sunday, I was in the back of the store practicing, and he came in there and took me around the corner. That was the first time I met Bud.

Brower: How did that relationship unfold?

McLean: It just – I was frightened to death. I'd never seen Bud Powell. So I didn't know what he looked like anyway. And Bud was coming home from a mental institution on a weekend furlough. So Bud was out to lunch anyway.

Brower: What did – tell us the story, what you know about, what led to that situation with Bud Powell, what you came to know.

McLean: It's documented that he came to – he was in Philadelphia with Cootie Williams's band. Thelonious was down there with him, because Thelonious was writing some music for Cootie. Bud was playing the piano. Monk and Bud were very close, because Monk had helped Bud to reach a certain level of performance that he had reached, by letting him sit in at Minton's and a lot of stuff before he went with Cootie Williams's. So the police or something were harassing Monk over something, and Bud

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came to Monk's defense and said, "Hey, wait a minute," and interfered. One of the detectives pulled out a billy club and started beating Bud over the head with it, knocked him unconscious. His mother had to come and take him and drive him back to New York City from Philly. They couldn't drive the car more than 7, 8 miles an hour, because he would scream if the car accelerated fast. It was hurting his head. So I think it took them all night to get from Philly to New York, maybe 12, 15 hours to get there, driving at 7 miles an hour. They took Bud, took him to the hospital. Some kind of way he ended up in the psychiatric ward.

So when I met him, he was coming home on furlough. The first thing he said to me is, "You don't believe I'm Bud Powell." I was sitting in the room. I didn't know who he was. I'd never seen Bud. I was like, uh. I had my horn in a case right next to me. Man, I was like – and Richard was standing next to him, like – they had me trapped. Then Bud said, "You don't believe I'm Bud Powell." Then he looked over like that. The piano was over there. He went over and opened the piano and sat down and oh man, there was no question about it. Broke in – I was, like, devastated. Then when he finished, he turned around and he said, "Well, what do you got in that case?" I was afraid to say it.

Brower: But it's obvious what you had in the case.

McLean: Yeah, a saxophone. Yeah, I'm scared. He said, "Take it out. Can you play it?" I was like, "I know *Buzzy*," because I knew that one song. So he said, "*Buzzy*? What's *Buzzy*?" So I took it out, and I played [McLean sings the opening phrase], and he started playing. That was it. He was impressed, because I was playing – by this time I was playing two years and had been practicing and had been trying to play anything of Bird's that I could or anything of Pres's, Dexter. So he liked the idea that I was so young and that excited about the music. So he – his mother was very nice to me. Me and Richard became tight. I started Richard playing, because he wouldn't let Richard play the piano. Bud wouldn't teach him anything and told him, "No, you can't play the piano." Richard was younger than me, even, by maybe a year-and-a-half, two years. So I got Richard started playing. I said, "Man, you don't have to wait for Bud. I know somebody that plays just like Bud that will show you."

Brower: Who was that?

McLean: A guy named Bob Bunyan, a piano player that lived in Harlem. So I took Richard to Bob, and Bob started teaching him.

Brower: Bob Bunyan's a name that comes up, I guess, in A. B.'s text [A. B. Spellman]. You probably mentioned him. Tell us about him and what happened to him.

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McLean: I don't know what happened to Bob. I just knew that he was much older than me. He was about Bud's age and played good.

Brower: About 6 or 7 years older.

McLean: Yeah. Played good, and it was through going around to jam sessions and things that I met him and heard him play and played with him. But I was real young compared to many of those guys.

Brower: What was your interaction with Bud as it unfolded? Did you go over there frequently?

McLean: Oh man, every week. I was over there all the time. Mrs. Powell trusted me to go out with Bud when he had to go somewhere. She said, "Jackie, Bud's got to go down to the Royal Roost tomorrow afternoon at 4 o'clock for two hours. Can you take him down there and bring him back?" I said, "Yeah, Mrs. Powell, I'll take him."

Brower: Is that because he needed someone to . . . ?

McLean: Oh yeah. Are you kidding? He was – they had given him all that electro shock treatment and all of that. Bud was – he didn't know a lot of stuff. He didn't know who Sonny Stitt was. He didn't remember those recordings that they made. He was going through a thing. So I had a chance to take him places like that. Or if Bud wanted to go see Thelonious, Mrs. Powell said, "You can go see Thelonious if Jackie's going to take you down there. If Jackie will take you down and wait for you and bring you back, you can go." So I said, "I'll take him," because I wanted to go anyway, to be with both of them. I was eager. I was hungry to be in the company of these musicians.

Brower: Did he show you things harmonically.

McLean: He wouldn't. He'd make me play by ear. One day I went through – one day I told him I wanted to learn *How High the Moon*, *Ornithology*. So he showed me the melody by playing the notes, and I was picking them out. I had a good ear. Then I said, "But I want the chords, man. I want to learn the chords." So Bud, "But you don't know nothing about chords." I said, "But I want them. I know something about them. I know how to play." So he said – took a pencil and he wrote these chords out for me. He said, "When you come back again, you'll have these down?" I said, "Yeah." So when I came back the next time to his house, I had been – I didn't even look at those chords. When I went home, I put the record on and played with the record. But I never even looked at the chords. But I saw my other colleagues, young musicians, dealing with chords and stuff, and I didn't want to mess with them, because I could play by ear and could hear all this stuff. So when I came back the next time, I walked up and put the chords up on the piano,

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and I said, “I’m ready to play *Ornithology*.” So Bud saw the chords, and he said, “Oh, you know these?” I said, “Yeah.” So he started. We started playing the melody and then, when he started, then he knocked the chords off the piano. He said, “Keep playing.” I kept on playing, kept on playing, and kept on playing. Afterwards, he said, “You’re not looking at those chords, man. You’re just playing. Forget about chords.” That was – that came from the master’s mouth, you know? So when I went with Miles, I was spoiled, because it was Bud that got me to go with Miles. It was Bud that sent me down there to sit in with him, after I had been around Bud for two years.

Brower: Sit in where?

McLean: At Birdland. Miles had a hit down there, had his band down there. I went to see Bud. He said, “Miles wants an alto player. He wants to see you there. I told him that I was sending you down there.” He said, “You’re going down there Monday night and sit in. He’ll be waiting.” He said, “Your name will be on the door.” So man, that was like on Saturday. I practiced all day for two days and went down there and sat in with Miles. That’s how I got a gig with him.

My point is, Miles was trying to make me play chords when I first went in the band. I was saying, “I don’t need to. I play . . .” So he said, “What do you mean, you don’t need to? You got to learn how to play chords. Get out of here.” I was like, “Bud told me to . . .” “Man, get out of here. Bud told you. Look, man,” so and so and so. “You got to learn the piano too.” So it was Miles that didn’t put up with my being young. I told him, “I’m young.” “Man, get out of here, you’re young.”

Brower: That story – that kind of sentiment comes up about – in relationship to some recording sessions, and we could talk about the first session, if you wish, which was called *Dig*. Tell us about that session, who was at the session, and . . .

McLean: Right away, after I sat in with Miles on this Monday night, Tuesday afternoon I was at his house, because he gave me his phone number and address, said, “I want you to come by.” I went by. I showed him *Dig*. I had just written it. He picked it out and learned it. Then he asked me, did I know this, that, and the other tunes that he wanted to play. Then he hired me and Sonny Rollins to be in his band. We started playing dances at the Audubon Ballroom, different hits in different places, Birdland, different things. Then Sonny got in trouble and was away for a while, and I was just with Miles in a quintet for a while.

Finally it worked up to the time when we made the recording. I had been playing with Miles for about a year, or something like that. I remember the day that I went down to the rehearsal and the recording date. We didn’t have any prior rehearsal. We went straight down to the studio. That day it was funny, because all the major players in my musical

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life was in that building in that same moment, that day that I went down there. I was down there taking my horn out, and Mingus came in. Miles talked to him and introduced me to Mingus. And then he left. And Art Blakey was playing on the record date. Then when I went into the studio, there was Bird. That frightened me to death, the minute I saw him there, because he wasn't on the record date. He was just there. So when Sonny came, and Miles and everybody was ready, [Walter] Bishop[, Jr.] and Tommy Potter and stuff, I even asked Miles, I said, "Man is Bird going to stay around for the . . . ?" He said, "I don't know what Bird is going to do. Come on." I was nervous. Bird saw that. So he made sure that he came out – after we started running down the heads and stuff, he came out and said, "Hey, look. You sound real good, man. You're playing great. Keep it up. It sounds good." That's all I had to hear. Once he gave me that encouragement, I wasn't as nervous anymore. But he was there for that whole recording that day. It was incredible, the kind of pressure that I was under, just his presence there.

Brower: Was J. R. Monterose in the studio as well?

McLean: No. Not that I remember. I never even . . .

Brower: The second date that you did with Miles, he did two of your pieces, *Dr. Jackle* and *Minor March*. But you're not on the other tunes.

McLean: Right. I just walked out. I left the studio.

Brower: What was . . . ? – tell us that story.

McLean: Because Miles had – first of all, when I got there, I felt like I was an outcast in some kind of way. This is after I had been working with Miles for a number of years. Finally he said something. I kept running down, making a mistake on one of them tunes, *Itty Bitty* or one of them tunes there. I made a mistake once. They had to stop and start again. He said, "What's the matter with you? We'll start it again." Did it again, made a mistake. Then he said, "Hey, what's the matter, Jackie? You got to pee? Got to pee pee?" Aw man, when he said that, that really got me mad. So I said, "Yeah, and I'm going home to do it," and I packed up my horn and split, went out the door. That was it.

Brower: Tell us about your schooling, where you went to school, elementary school, high school. Walk us through that. Not to dwell on it, but just walk us through that.

McLean: My first schooling, I remember, was a little brown schoolhouse which was in a church on – around 137th Street and Bradhurst [Avenue], one of those churches over there by St. Marks Baptist Church. I went there for a while. Then I went to P.S. 46 – no, P.S. 113, which was on 113th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenue. Went there. We were living on 111th Street, my mother and I, then. Then I stayed in that school. We

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moved over to 114th and Seventh. I still was in P.S. 113. Then my last year in grammar school, we had moved to the Hill, and I went to P.S. 46. I graduated from there and went to junior high school, which was on 164th Street, Stitt Junior High School. Sonny Rollins went to school there as well. That was the first time I saw Sonny and heard him play. He was playing alto then.

Brower: What was his level of playing?

McLean: Aw man, he was bad, because he was . . .

Brower: And you were playing by that time?

McLean: Yeah, I was playing about a year or something like that, but he was playing a number of years by that time. He was ahead of me in school. So when I went into Stitt, he was graduating to go to high school. Then when I graduated from Stitt, I tried to go to [the High School of] Music and Art, for music. I took the test in both things. I took the test in music, and I took the test in art. They failed me in music, and they passed me in art. So I wouldn't go to the school, because I didn't want to take art. So instead I went to Benjamin Franklin High School, where Sonny Rollins was. I stayed down there for a year. But there was another saxophone that I loved, that played great. I thought he played greater than anybody in our neighborhood or anybody in New York City. It was a tenor player named Andy Kirk, Jr. When Sonny graduated from high school, I left Benjamin Franklin and went to the Bronx to school where Andy Kirk, Jr., was going.

Brower: Was that Roosevelt High School?

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: This brings up a couple of questions. Andy Kirk, Jr., is mentioned, and of course he's the son of Andy Kirk. I want you to talk a little bit more about him than what I've heard about him or seen about him in the literature. It mentions that he was a good player. I just want to know more about him and what happened in his life, as far as you know.

McLean: He was a tall, thin, young guy. A couple – maybe he was a year-and-a-half older than me, or two years older than me. So when I came into Theodore Roosevelt High School, he was a senior. So I was just there with him one year before he graduated. But I was around him a lot. I'd go around. He lived right around the corner from me. I'd go up and sit in his room and listen to him practice. He was the best saxophone player around, for his age. He played more than everybody, Sonny, all of them. None of them, to me, could touch Andy.

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Brower: Who was all of them, besides Sonny?

McLean: John Gill, Percy France, all these guys from around New York, everybody. Nobody could touch Andy, Jr. He was bad. Even Bird used to come up and sit in the room and listen to Andy practice, because I remember one night I was having dinner, and Andy called me and he said, “Hey Jackie.” He said, “If you want to come around here,” he said, “Bird’s going to be here in a little while. Coming up to see my dad, man, if you want to come.” I said, “Yeah, I’ll be right around.” So I ate, ran around, and Bird was there.

Brower: So the Bird connection to the Kirk family was from . . .

McLean: . . . when he played with Andy Kirk.

Brower: Yeah, right, back in those days, and then he discovers the son, who’s extraordinary.

McLean: Yeah, who’s bad.

Brower: Tell us about some of the other musicians that were either a few years older than you or your peers, but who were on Sugar Hill.

McLean: There was a guy named John Henry who played the alto, who was very good. He played very well. He was one of the guys . . .

Brower: John Henry or Ernie Henry?

McLean: John Henry, yeah.

Brower: Okay.

McLean: Sahib Shihab lived in our neighborhood as well, but I didn’t see him a lot. I saw . . .

Brower: Was that his original name?

McLean: I don’t remember his other name. I never knew him except as Sahib Shihab. But he was a great lead alto player and soloist that worked with bands. From the time he was 17, he was out on the scene, playing with important bands.

Of course the other musicians that lived in the neighborhood is like an encyclopedia of jazz: Duke Ellington, Don Redman, Arnett Cobb. Many guys who were in Jimmie

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Lunceford's band lived around on Edgecombe, 157th Street. [Jimmy] Crawford, the drummer, and different ones. Illinois [Jacquet] and his brother Russell lived around in that neighborhood. Nat Cole lived around the corner on Edgecombe Avenue. Of course Andy Kirk, Sr. Coleman Hawkins lived on 148th Street and St. Nicholas. So the neighborhood was loaded with these . . .

Brower: You were conscious of all these people.

McLean: I began to be aware of them as I began to mature, because I was in the street playing ball and running with my friends. I didn't – we used to throw snowballs at Don Redman. I didn't know who he was. Then I discovered years later. I said, dang, I was – this cat is a genius, and we was throwing snowballs at him. So yeah, they were around.

Brower: I really was referring to maybe . . .

McLean: . . . younger ones?

Brower: Yeah, Arthur Phipps, Walter Bishop, that . . .

McLean: Oh, Arthur Phipps, Arthur Taylor, Mark Fisher. Walter Bishop used to . . .

Brower: Who was Mark Fisher?

McLean: He was a drummer. He played real well. Played like Max [Roach]. Of course Kenny Drew. Little Lenny Martinez was a piano player. He was in the community at that time. And Sonny. Sonny was – and Lowell Lewis, a great trumpet player in our neighborhood. Lived right across the street from me. He was a fine trumpet player.

Brower: I read a story somewhere where there was a time when you and Lowell Lewis were in a club and Bud called you both up. You can tell us that.

McLean: We went down – Bud – we went down to listen to Bud play. Bud told us we could bring our horns. Maybe we'd get a chance to play something with him. So we took our horns and went down to Birdland. Bud called us up to play *A Night in Tunisia*. That was the first time I ever played in that club.

Brower: What happened to Lowell Lewis?

McLean: He had a nervous breakdown and just sort of faded away into the background. He was very talented and destined to be a great, great musician.

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Brower: Were there other young musicians who weren't living on Sugar Hill, were from that community, that gravitated there?

McLean: Yeah, but you know, New York and Harlem at this particular time, there was a jam session practically 5, 6 nights a week in different places. Like there would be one at Bowman's on – which was a bar on 155th Street and Edgecombe. There would be one on 125th Street on one particular night at the Baby Grand. There would be one at the Calypso Club on Seventh Avenue, 138th Street, at another time. So every night there was a different place to go and play. My mother could see that I was serious about this, playing the saxophone. So she gave me a time slot. "Come home from school. Do your homework. Eat dinner. You can go out. But you got to be back in here by 10:30" or something like that. So I would get down to the club by 8:30 and have my horn out, sitting next to the stage. When the first part of the jam session started, I was there to play for about an hour. Then I had to pack up and run, get home, because I had school the next day. So every night we went to a different place to play.

Brower: Who were some of the players? I imagine there was a certain sort of echelon of players who held down the rhythm sections in those places, and they're probably some people that the world's never heard of.

McLean: Ralph George was a great drummer. He used to play drums. McIntosh was a bad alto player that I used to remember, who used to be impeccably dressed at every jam session and had his hair gassed and could play swing. Nobody could play more than him. Technically, it wasn't his thing. It was rockin' the house. So somebody could come up there and play all the most incredibly technical stuff they wanted, and McIntosh would step up the stairs and bring the house down, the way he played. So there were guys from Brooklyn that would come over and play. Randy Weston. We used to go to Brooklyn, to jam sessions over there.

Brower: Was Max up on the hill at the time?

McLean: No. Max was in Brooklyn.

Brower: But I mean, did he come frequently?

McLean: Yeah, Max would come around, because he was an internationally famous musician. He was everywhere. But his main group of guys was in Brooklyn. That was where Max's stronghold was, with – what's the drummer's name? – Willie Jones and a guy – the alto player. I can't remember all their names. Randy, and different ones, Brooklyn guys. Ernie Henry.

Brower: So Ernie Henry wasn't from the hill.

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McLean: No. Ernie Henry's from Brooklyn.

Brower: Okay. Talk about Ernie Henry and whatever interaction you may have had with him.

McLean: Not a lot. He was one of the guys I admired greatly when he came out with those first recordings he made with Tadd Dameron. But I didn't have much of a – I ran into him a lot in the '50s, when he was nearly almost getting ready to pass on.

Brower: What about Elmo Hope? Was he playing?

McLean: Elmo I met at Bud's house when I was 15, 16. So I had a relationship with him.

Brower: That went in later to recording and so forth.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Was he up under Bud, the same way that you were?

McLean: No, because they were both peers. In fact I understand that Bud got a lot of stuff from Elmo. Elmo was the first to play a lot of things that Bud gets credit for. And they used to play classical together at Carnegie Hall, recitals and stuff like that. So they were very close as young guys together.

Brower: What's your recollection of the Depression? Do you remember it as a depression?

McLean: No, not at all. I used to be up and down 135th Street, but I had no realization of it being a depression or anything, because I was a little baby boy at that point. I had my area that I could play in, because my godfather, Norman Cobbs, lived in the Y. We lived, my mother – the first place we lived, when she brought me up from North Carolina, was 135th Street, between Seventh and Lenox. So the house that I lived in was here, and the Y was here, where Daddy Cobbs was, and I had a stretch of sidewalk that I could go in, when the sidewalk was light brown. Then it turned grey. Once it got to the end of the light brown, I couldn't go any further over that line. I had to come back, play down that end.

Brower: What about your recollection of World War II, of those years?

McLean: Yeah, I remember that, because I was, I guess, 11. I remember seeing Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. Cartoons, they were making them look funny. I just knew that

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they were bad guys that was doing something terrible to my country and that kind of thing that you have when you're a kid, seeing all those movies, with the Americans fighting the Germans.

Brower: Tell us about your mother.

McLean: My mother was great. She was an incredible lady. She was – she had a little bit of a show business background as well. She was in the Lafayette Theater with the dancers there during those years, I guess in the early '30s, '32, '33. She was in that dance troupe. She was there when Orson Welles was there, doing a – directing a play in Harlem. I forgot what play it was. *Othello* or one of those. So she had some – she was working at the Heckscher Foundation, which was a place that you could go. I was in a play over there. So my mother was connected to the theater and dance. But then it – after she got married and everything, it just wasn't really a part of her life. But she was wonderful, and she always strived to get the best that she could get for me. I never felt as though I was poor or anything like that, and I was. My mother worked, and we lived in a room. We didn't have much. Daddy Cobbs, my godfather, would take me around to the Boy Scouts and hunting, fishing. So I had some of that other exposure. My mother provided that. She said, well this man is going to be nice to my son; I'm going to support that relationship.

Brower: Tell us about her chocolate pie.

McLean: Oh man, Thelonious.

Brower: I noticed also on some liner notes that you did, where you're talking about, I think, Eddie Kahn, and you said, "He's like the whipped cream on the apple pie" – excuse me. Apple pie is my favorite. "He's like the whipped cream on the chocolate pie my mother used to make." He just adds that completion thing. So that let me know that chocolate pie is a bigger issue than the Thelonious Monk story. I want you to tell that story. But I want to know about that pie.

McLean: Yeah, my mother made – that was the only thing she could make in a dessert. It was a chocolate pie with whipped cream on it. She used to bless us with that every once in a while. It was just – but I mean, when I think of chocolate pie, I think of Thelonious, because one night he had a gig up at the Audubon Ballroom. I had met him coming out of the subway. I walked with him to go in, because I knew him. I knew Thelonious since I was real young. I was saying, "Oh man." I said, "I just finished eating, man." I said, "My mother made the most incredible chocolate pie." He was like, "Oh yeah? Your mother made a chocolate pie," he said, "and you liked it?" I said yeah. So the whole night went by. He played the gig. So at the end of the night, I was coming out with him. He said, "Where you live at?" So I said, "I live right down here on St. Nicholas." He said, "Is the subway down there?" I said, "Yeah, the subway is three blocks from my house," because

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we were up at 165th Street. We're way up. So we walked from 165th, down Amsterdam, and over to St. Nicholas and down to my house at 158th and St. Nicholas. So we go right there. I said, "Thelonious," I said, "you just keep going straight down to the" – he said, "Hey man, can I come up and get a piece of that pie, your mother's pie?" So I said, "Thelonious, it's 3 o'clock in the morning, man." I said, "I can't go in and take you in. It's my mother's house." So he said, "Well, ain't that where you can go in and cut a piece and bring it to me?" So there was – my bedroom, where my room was, was right adjacent – like this is my window from my bedroom, and there was a window here in the building here, and this window was in the hallway by the stairwell. So I opened the window, and I said, "You wait here, Thelonious." I went in the house, went in. So my mother got up and came out. Said, "What are you doing?" So I said, "I'm just cutting a piece of pie." "Where are you going with that pie?" So I said, "I'm going to give Thelonious Monk a piece of your pie," and she said, "Where's he at?" I said, "He's out in the hallway, at the window." So she said okay, and she went back in. So I cut the pie, wrapped it, and took it and passed it through to Thelonious. He said, "Thanks, man," put the window down, and split. Strange, Thelonious.

Brower: Talk about – you made a comparison between – someone else in the literature that I read – between Bud and Monk, and you've kind of, I think, described for us that Bud was kind of – had blinders on to the world, not of his own choosing, but as a result of all the things that he'd gone through. How was Monk's sense of the world? Sometimes you would think that he was detached from the world too.

McLean: He was in a state of grace, but aware of things, aware of things political. It's some kind of mother-wit that's just not from picking up the paper every day and reading it, not like that, but something he got from somebody in his family. He was very bright. Plus Thelonious went to one of the most incredible high schools in New York, Stuyvesant, one of those schools you have to test into, to have high brilliance in mathematics and all that. So Thelonious was very bright. Went to a wonderful high school. He was – but still, he was in kind of a state of grace, doing whatever he felt like he wanted to do without giving too much thought to the results of something. But Bud was almost helpless at some points in his life, where he needed somebody to be there.

Brower: What was your music relation? How did you meet Monk? Tell us about that, and what was your musical relationship with him, at least in the early days?

McLean: If I can recall, and I think I'm right, I think that somebody went down to Monk's house and took Lowell Lewis down there. Lowell went in, and Monk let them play on some of his music that he wrote out and put down there. Then Lowell told me about it, and I was like, "Really, man? You went to his house?" "Yeah, man." He said, "We're going down there again next week" at such-and-such a time. I said, "Can I come along?" So he was like, "I don't know, man. You can come. Maybe you can get in. I'm

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not sure, though. I ain't going to tell you yeah, man. It ain't my house." You know, all like that. So I went down with them, and of course Nellie let us in, let me in too. I met Thelonious.

Then Thelonious had a gig at the 845 Club in the Bronx, and I asked him, could I come and sit in? He looked at me. He said, "Yeah, man, if you want to," because I knew his saxophone player in his band. I couldn't play hardly anything.

Brower: Which was?

McLean: Coleman Hopkins, a tenor player from Brooklyn.

Brower: Coleman Hopkins.

McLean: Hopkins, yeah. So I went to the 845 that Sunday afternoon. It was a jam session, and Monk was playing with his quintet. They had just set up, and they were playing the first tune. I went up, and Coleman Hopkins said, "Come on. You can come up," because Monk didn't give me carte blanche to just walk up there. So I took out my horn and jumped up there. They started playing one of Monk's pieces that I knew, probably *Straight, No Chaser* or something like that. So the trumpet went out and played, and Thelonious was back there playing. Then the tenor player went out and played. Thelonious is playing. Then when Coleman finished playing and walked back, I walked out to the mic and I was playing, and I didn't hear the piano anymore. I was lost, because I needed the piano. My ears, I needed to hear that piano to find what I'm playing, because I was really totally an ear player. So I'm up there. I didn't want to look back and make Thelonious think I'm looking back, like that. But then I looked over at the bar, saw him at the bar, and I thought, aw man, he's not even on the stage. He was standing there at the bar. He had a drink. He looked back. I was scuffling at the mic. So then he walked back and sat down, opened the piano, and started playing. So that's all I can remember from that afternoon. I got off the stage right after that. I was gone. I went and sat down.

Brower: How did the relationship develop?

McLean: I just would see him at different places, and then I would be taking Bud down to his house to see him, and Nellie, I got to know Nellie well. So I just got to know him. Of course, my neighborhood produced a new bunch of young lions developing on the scene, like Andy Kirk, Jr., Sonny Rollins, Lowell Lewis. I wanted to be in that crowd. I want to be one of those guys, Kenny Drew. I didn't want to be with the next rank of guys coming up that don't play as well, because there was three or four levels of players in my neighborhood, and I went through all of them.

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Brower: We've mentioned Charlie Parker. How did you come to know him? Or tell us about seeking him out, where you'd see him, and how you came to know him.

McLean: When Jimmy Briggs's – my stepfather's – record shop – one day, after I had discovered him on a recording, a guy came by, and he was dropping these placards off to put in the window to announce these coming events. One of the placards he put in the window had "jam session, Lincoln Center." And it had Coleman Hawk – no.

Brower: Lincoln Ballroom?

McLean: Lincoln Ballroom at this time, before Lincoln Center. Lincoln Ballroom. It had Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker. I saw Sonny Stitt, Red Rodney, Fats Navarro, all these names on there that I was seeing on these recordings. Of course Bird's name stood out. So I got down there that day. It was Sunday. Lowell got in, because he looked older than me. Paid his \$2 and went in. I was on line. I put my \$2 up, and the guy said, "How old are you?" I said, [McLean hesitates] "I'm . . . 19." "Man, get out of here." So I went out the door. I was sunk. I looked up the street, and I saw Dexter coming. So I ran, ran up the street, and caught up. He was coming this way. I said, "Hey, Dexter, how you doing?" He said, "Hey, how you doing?" So I said . . .

Brower: Did you know him?

McLean: I had seen him a couple of times, but this was the – my last – I was desperate. I said, "Dexter." I said, "Look, man, I can't get into the jam session. They won't let me in." So he said, "Why?" I said, "Because I'm too young. Can I go in with you?" So he said, "Give me your money." So I gave him my \$2. He got to the door, and he walked by, and he said, "He's with me," and I walked in with him. I looked at the guy that wouldn't let me in, and I – jive turkey. I went in with Dexter. Followed him around until he was just sick of me. Then I saw Bird come in. I didn't approach him or anything. I just was like – it was a gas. Saw him play. Saw Sonny Stitt play. Freddie Webster, he was there that day. He played. Art Blakey.

Brower: Stop with Freddie Webster. His name comes up as having – describe his sound and what impact you think he had.

McLean: I saw him play twice. I saw him play that Sunday. His sound was like a big red ball, if you could imagine a guy with a trumpet like you'd blow a bubble from a bubble gum. You see a huge, shiny, red, beautiful ball come out of the front of his horn. Beautiful sound. Different than Fats or anybody. I heard him play like that. And then I heard him in Dizzy's band the first time I heard Bird with Dizzy up at the McKinley Theater. He was in that band. I heard him play that day. Yeah, he was incredible. And I

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can hear Miles's influence from Freddie Webster. I can hear it. It's very obvious that Miles was totally absorbed by Freddie's playing, as well as Dizzy.

Brower: Tell now – I took you off, but tell us how the rest of that day unfolded.

McLean: I watched all of this stuff that went down. I never – I went to see Bird at the McKinley Theater. In fact, that's where I saw Bird first, and then I saw Bird at the Lincoln Ballroom. Then I saw that he was at the Three Deuces with his own band, with Miles, Duke Jordan, Max Roach, Tommy Potter. So I asked my mother, could I go down there? She said, "What are you going down there for? You can't get in. That don't make no sense for you to go down there. Why you going down there?" I said, "I just want to go down there." "No, you can't go down there."

Brower: What was your mother's name?

McLean: Omega. Alpha Omega McLean, the beginning and the end.

Brower: Where'd that name come from?

McLean: From her mother. Called her Alpha Omega McLean.

Brower: Okay. Back to the story.

McLean: My mother used to give me times to come in and where to be. So I say, "Ma, I got to" – after I had dinner on a Friday night – my plans were already made. Meet my boys. We were going downtown. Nothing was going to stop us. We were going to 52nd Street. So I said, "Ma." I said, "I'm going out. I'm going out and hang out with the guys. We'll be down on Edgecombe Avenue, probably, somewhere around there." So she said, "I want you in here by 10:30. I want you in here." "But it Friday night." She said, "I don't care if it's Friday night. I want you in here by 10:30." So I went out at about 7:30, and she gave me three hours to go hang out. So I left and met my boys, and we went downtown. We hung around 52nd Street until we saw Bird coming. Saw him coming out the subway. We rushed up to him, fell in step with him, started talking to him. He went inside. Just when the band hit the first notes, we had to leave, because I had to go get back uptown. They didn't start playing until 9:30. My mother wanted me in the house at 10. I could only hear about 15 minutes from standing outside the door and the guy chasing us away from the door.

Then the next night we came down there again, Saturday night. Bird, same thing. Came out the subway. We fell in step with him. He looked down and said, "Where you all live? You live around here?" I said, "No, man." I said, "I play alto. I live up in Harlem, uptown." So he said, "Did you come all the way down here?" I said, "Yeah, I came down

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here to see you.” Said, “But you can’t come in the club or nothing.” So I said, “No, they won’t let us in. Got to be home in a little while.” Bird turned the corner. He said, “I’m going to start playing in a few minutes. I’m going to get them to let you stand by the door.” So we came in. Stood by the coat check woman. Let us stand there. He went right up on the stage, took his horn out, and called Miles and them up there. It was early. It wasn’t time for them to hit yet. It must have been about 9:20. Man, he busted into – I don’t know what he played, but it was . . .

Brower: Way up there.

McLean: Yeah, *Salt Peanuts* or something. He started playing. We started – we were in heaven. We stood there and listened to that, played with Max. Miles was having trouble in those days. It was new for Miles. Then, when the time – when it got to be quarter of 10, we waved. He looked at us, and we split, went out the door. We used to go down there every week when he was there. So this . . .

Brower: Was this when he asked you what you wanted to hear at some . . . ?

McLean: No, that was later. That was at another time in Birdland. Maybe it might have been that time too. I can’t remember. But he did ask. He used to ask me what I wanted to hear, too, because I had his records.

Brower: Why don’t we stop?

McLean: All right.

[recording interrupted]

Brower: I’m going to revisit the North Carolina thing, and I want to do so in this context: John Coltrane, High Point. Monk with a family background in Rocky Mount. Max with a family background in North Carolina. You with the family background in North Carolina. North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York. That’s a migrant stream. I’m interested in the idea of that flow. So I want you to reflect on other musicians that you might know that have – that are New Yorkers, that have a North Carolina background, and tell us about your experience in North Carolina, both as a young guy and then later, when you go back, I guess on two occasions, perhaps, to go to school on a collegiate level. You can vamp on all of that.

McLean: First of all, my first recollections of North Carolina didn’t happen in Greensboro. When my mother first took me down, when I must have been about a year old, we went to a city, a little small place, called Maxton – M-a-x-t-o-n – North Carolina. There my grandmother had a little house. I can remember being there with her and she

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taking care of me. I remember how that place looks. I don't know how I can recall that, but I can see it now. I was down there for another year or two.

Brower: Describe how it looks.

McLean: It was one floor. It was a small little house.

Brower: Wood?

McLean: Wood. It was . . .

Brower: Have a basement?

McLean: No. I can't remember a – don't forget, I was in the crib. I was very small. I didn't have freedom to run around or nothing. I could barely stand up in the crib. My grandmother would open the door from the porch and come in and see me there in that room. Then there was another room somewhere where I used to look out a window when she used to put me down to nap. I saw a barn with some writing on the side. But I don't know what that was either. So that's all I remember about Maxton, and also that there was train tracks not far from our house. So a train passed right there, very close to the house, because my grandmother used to be in her rocking chair, rocking me out there, and I remember the train going by. I can remember these things.

Then, when I came back down again, when my godfather drove me down to see my grandmother and my cousins and aunts and uncles again, maybe about five years later, when I was 6 or 7 years old, my grandmother lived in Greensboro, at 405 Laurel Street, which was right across the street from a junior high school campus. I remember going down there and actually meeting my cousins for the first time, my cousin Lois, her brother [?Landum], her other brother Junior, my aunt [?Earlie], my aunt [?Corlie], my uncle Len, who I'm named after. I'm – John Lenwood McLean is my name. I'm named after my uncle Lenwood. My uncle Jimmy, my uncle Alvin, and my grandmother. So it was a nice sized family. So I went from being – coming from just me and my mother, to a huge family of people, which I thought was great, all that company and activity going on. I stayed down there for that summer, when I was 7.

Then I went back up to – North again, to school, in the fall. The next summer I came down again to my grandmother. So it got to be an annual thing that I would go down for a month or two every summer, to be in Greensboro. Of course at this time I wasn't playing any music. So I don't have any recollections of any musicians. I do remember being down there when Johnny McLean died, in 1939, and having my grandmother take me to the side and say, "Johnny McLean is dead. Your father's dead, passed away," blah blah

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blah. So I don't know if my grandmother even knew about this other intrigue in my family.

I didn't go down there anymore, I think, until – I went down there again when I was around 12, 13, and I went down again, I think, when I was 14, when I first got my saxophone. I remember I was busy trying to learn notes and chords and writing down on pieces of paper some music. Then when I came back down again, I was – it was in 1954.

Brower: Let me stop you there. Did you have some recollection of going to church?

McLean: Oh yeah.

Brower: Talk about those experiences at the Pentecostal church, the music there, and then you can . . .

McLean: My grandmother was in a Pentecostal church. She used to put on a white outfit on Sundays and take us there. Of course, going in the car, she would always lay the law down. "Last time you were here, you started some giggling. I don't want to hear none of that today. I'm going to be listening out for it. So don't try it. And when we get inside, Jackie, you sit here, and Len, you sit over here." She had everything mapped, because when we were all together, it's . . .

Brower: A riot.

McLean: Yeah. There was so much stuff going on, people feeling the spirit and whistling and falling down and sweating. Nurses coming, taking people out, that pass out. The church was active. It had a band.

Brower: Contrast that to what you were experiencing at Abyssinian.

McLean: Oh man, it was totally different. Ladies used to yell out in Abyssinian. Like a woman would get the spirit or something and she would yell out "Amen" or something like that. Adam Powell would say, "Thank you, sister," and continue on with his sermon. But at this church – I had never seen anything like this before in my life. I mean, tambourines were going. When you came in, it was like an active rhythm going on. The vibe was alive. They'd be singing and clapping and carrying on. Then they would settle down, and the minister would come out. He – like a great saxophone solo, almost. He would start out and build and build, until he was – had the place up in an uproar, men and women. Then he'd go into a song. He usually would start the song himself, and other people would join in. There was always a drummer, tambourine player, guitar player.

Brower: Sounds like *Ascension*.

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McLean: Yeah, something like that. Very much so. Then when they really started going, people would be getting up now and jumping and coming into the center of the floor. It was just an incredible scene, compared to what I was used to in New York.

My grandmother would take us there, not every Sunday, but she would take us there a couple of Sundays a month maybe. The rest of the time we spent together going to the pool, which was a good walk away from where we lived. On Saturdays we used to go across the tracks and go to the theater, where only black people could go. It was a theater where they showed cowboy movies every week, every Saturday. It would be two films, both of them cowboy movies.

Brower: Who won?

McLean: Always the cats with the big hats. What do you mean, who won?

Brower: Cowboys and Indians.

McLean: It was cowboys against cowboys a lot of times too. But it's always the guy with the big white hat and the white horse that always won. Lash LaRue. Some of those guys' names I can still remember. Then of course, after we saw the movie, then we would come home, playing the movie, running along the railroad tracks, I'm this one, I'm that one, wrestling, falling down, all of that. Then we used to roll tires too. That was another recreation. We used to have these tires with no rims or anything in them, just the empty rubber tire, no inner tube. That was our horse or whatever. We would have – we would race with those, running up and down. Then we made sling shots, and we shot rocks at things. We were little kids at that particular time, doing things that kids do, running out and on the campus across from the house and playing over there as well, and going to the store for my grandmother. That was always an adventure. She says, "I want you all to go over to the store and get me a quart of buttermilk." Oh man, everybody was ready for that, because we'd all go get on our bikes and go across campus to this little store that was quite a distance away, pick up whatever my grandmother wanted, bring it back. So it was fun for me every summer to go down and be with them.

Brower: Do you think that the experience, or do you think that the Pentecostal experience and the way that – if you want to think of it as a performance. I know it's a religious experience, but do you think that that kind of experience, the way music happens there, the mode of expression and how people express themselves physically, the rhythmic energy, the collectivity of it all, has had anything – has anything to do with any phase of music as you've known it? And did you – have you ever incorporated that experience into your performance?

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McLean: It's like the – I know from just making a recollection and thinking about it, that it's at the basis of my understanding of music and rhythm, because it was captivating the minute you got in there and they started with the tambourines and the handclapping and the singing. It was very, very captivating. And the mode, the sound of the spiritual itself, a song like *Go Down Moses* or one of those songs like that, *We Shall Not Be Moved* or any of those pieces that come out of the church have a certain mode to it, very . . .

Brower: You mean mode in the sense of . . .

McLean: Yeah, mode, closely related to the blues. [McLean sings 3-2-1.] That kind of feeling was always there. So that was like at the root of my understanding what music was. Then of course the music that I heard in movies was classical music, but I didn't – I used to think of it as movie music, because that was quite different from everything I heard in my neighborhood in Harlem and everything I heard down when I was with my grandmother and those. When I went to the movies, it was another kind of music, and I thought – called that movie music, until later on that I found out that it was mostly classically – European.

Brower: Often bastardizations of classical pieces, simplifications of them and so forth.

McLean: Exactly. [McLean sings a cavalry charge]. All of that stuff for – depending on what's going on.

Brower: The rhythmic feel of that is actually classical, but we associate it with horses and . . .

McLean: And movies, me. But yeah, I think so. I think that that understanding of that, plus what I heard in Abyssinian as well. The choir there and the music there was also – had an influence on me.

Brower: I've read a statement that that experience – that you felt that that experience was brought forth consciously when you worked with Charles Mingus.

McLean: Oh, definitely so, because he wanted – he had some of that in some of those pieces that he wrote, *Saturday Morning Prayer Meeting* [*sic: Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting*] or some of those things that he wrote early on, definitely.

Brower: Somewhere I have that, but it's not important that we look at that now. Fast forwarding, you come back to Greensboro in '52 or '3.

McLean: Yeah, '4.

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Brower: Tell us for what purpose, and some of the things that happened around that.

McLean: I came back to go to school, to try to go, to please my mother, who wanted me to go to college, even though I had already recorded with Miles.

Brower: You'd already done *Dig*.

McLean: Yeah, and I was already playing down and around New York City, getting a name as a young musician. But she wanted me to go there real bad. So I went. It was there that I found out about Lou Donaldson, who came from that same area, and Dannie Richmond, the drummer that ended up playing with Mingus, and many of those guys that came from out of that area. T. J. Anderson, who's a classical composer now at one of the universities, he was a jazz pianist when I met him in North Carolina. But now he's been writing for – you know his name, T. J. Anderson?

Brower: Yes I do. Considered to be an important contemporary African-American classical composer.

McLean: Yes, that's right.

Brower: I understand that although people say that *Dig* was the first thing you recorded, you actually did something while you were there. Is that with the Charlie Singleton, *Camel Walkin'*?

McLean: No, that was another one. That was the first record that I ever made, period. That was a rhythm-and-blues thing with Charlie Singleton's band. I wasn't – didn't play any solos on it. I played baritone on that.

Brower: Where was that recorded?

McLean: In New York Street, at 125th Street.

Brower: This is prior to you going to – obviously, if it was before *Dig*.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: What year was that?

McLean: That was around 1947 – '47, '48.

Brower: Do you see anything to the context I tried to set for this, by mentioning all of the musicians that have North Carolina backgrounds? Do you see anything in that?

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McLean: Yeah, but it's funny. It's kind of, you're drawn into a – like a vortex, or you're drawn into an environment where everybody is after the same thing, everybody is trying to express something, and it just happens that these guys that you mentioned happened to come from one particular area, even though you could look around, look at Kansas City and say, Bird and them came from that particular place. But it all seems like everybody's trying to gravitate towards a certain thing.

Brower: New York certainly was a Mecca. I'm not trying to make this a determining factor, but I think, for example, you would see New Orleans musicians might end up in Chicago, or they might end up in California, or by Texas to California. There are certain definite migrant streams by which African-American musicians moved from rural areas to urban areas. I think there are patterns there that are interesting. I don't know what they mean. They could mean anything. But it's certainly a coincidental fact if not some kind of causal thing.

While you were at – in school, did you learn anything?

McLean: I learned that the school that I thought would be interested in my background as a jazz musician wasn't interested in it at all. They didn't want me to play any jazz at [North Carolina] A. & T. College. So therefore I gave music up. Played a little in the marching band. That was it. I focused in on history and then I just dropped out, because it wasn't – I said, what am I doing here?

Brower: You mentioned you were doing r-and-b in the area.

McLean: Yeah, I was . . .

Brower: Give us a little sense of that.

McLean: I was playing in some local groups that were playing in North Carolina at that particular time. We used to play at the ABA club every Saturday night and every Friday night. I remember B. B. King coming through there on some nights, some weekends. Of course he wasn't the big star that he is now. That's when he was – it was years ago, 1953. So yeah, I played in different bands down around there at that time.

Brower: Can you talk about – let's go to – go back to this idea of you being interested in the tenor, but playing the alto. Tell us, what were your earliest influences in terms of what you were looking for as a sound? And comment on the – what about Charlie Parker's approach to the alto set him aside from all the previous alto players?

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McLean: You see, I think that's what happened and what helped me develop the sound that I have that everybody talks about. They say, "Your sound is very distinguished. It stands out. I can always tell it's you by the first couple of notes." Because I tried very hard to make the alto sound like a tenor. I wanted to sound like Lester Young. I wanted to sound like Dexter. I did not want to sound like an alto player, like Tab Smith or one of those – Johnny.

Brower: Why?

McLean: I didn't like the timbre of the instrument. It didn't touch me. I didn't fall in love with the alto. I like Louis Jordan. He was one. I heard an alto player named Pete Brown that played like a boogie-woogie alto. I liked him too. But I didn't like the sweet alto. I didn't appreciate Johnny Hodges until years later. Of course now I just think he's magnificent.

Brower: Or Willie Smith.

McLean: Or Willie Smith. I think they're magnificent now. But when I was a kid, I didn't like that at all. In fact, I was totally against it. When I heard Charlie Parker, I just fell – and Sonny Stitt – I fell in love with that. Rudy Williams.

Brower: Is that because of the absence of vibrato in Bird? I've heard that.

McLean: That might be true. And also the absence of sweetness. The alto was . . .

Brower: You think it had to do with the time you were in and what you – just psychologically? Or just – was it purely a sound issue? Or was there a sort of an emotional, psychological component, associative component, with that?

McLean: It's like waiting on the right train to come, and then when you see the train pull in, you say, this is the one. You step in. Many saxophone players passed by me on that train track. I waited for the right train. I just knew I was waiting for something. When I heard Charlie Parker, that was it. And then of course, right behind that, I heard Sonny Stitt. Between both of them, him, and Rudy Williams as well, another alto player that a lot of people don't know about.

Brower: Savoy Sultans.

McLean: Right, exactly, especially when he changed. I mean, I never heard him play when he was with the Sultans. When I heard him play he was with Babs's Three Bips and a Bop on those Blue Note recordings that he did. But it was the tenor saxophone that inspired me. Like I said, my two favorites were Lester Young and Dexter Gordon. Then

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when I heard Charlie Parker, that really made me realize that I could keep the alto and be happy.

Brower: Did you have – you talked about what an important person Bud was, obviously, and also your relationship with Charlie Parker and what you were doing in that regard. But did you study with any saxophone players? I've heard two names, Foots Thomas and Cecil Scott. Can you talk about . . . ?

McLean: Yes, both of them. I studied with – Cecil Scott lived close to my house on the Hill, on Sugar Hill. So I used to go up to 165th Street and take lessons from him – 164th Street. He helped me. Foots Thomas, I went to him first. He was the first teacher that I went to. I stayed with him for about six months or a year, but I didn't feel like I was getting anything from him that I wasn't able to get from Andy Kirk, Jr., and other people who I was around.

Brower: Hanging out with.

McLean: Yeah, hanging out with. Then I went to Andy Brown, who was another saxophone player that played in Cab Calloway's band. Foots played in Cab Calloway's band, and so did Andy Brown. Neither one of them I felt like I couldn't get anything. Then I met a teacher named Joe Napoleon, right in that same building on 48th Street. I stayed with him for a while. He was a good teacher. I liked him. Then I just decided, I don't need a teacher, when I met Bud. I didn't want a saxophone teacher anymore, because there was nothing that somebody could tell me about how to play the horn to make it sound any particular way. Everybody that wanted to teach me how to play the horn was trying to get me to blow in a way that I didn't want to play it. I didn't want to use a stiff, classical embouchure with my lips all tight around the instrument. I didn't like the way it made the instrument sound. So I just dropped the idea of having a saxophone teacher and just tried to learn as much as I could from other people that were in my neighborhood and that were my peers.

Brower: I want to – we can come there at a different point. Let's talk about the idea of sound. There's the instrument, there's the setup piece, there's the reed, there's embouchure, there's different – there's ideas about timbre, and there's the whole emotional component. Out of all those things, talk about how you rifled through all those things, consciously or unconsciously, in terms of what you think are the most important components of sound, of having a sound.

McLean: I think that what happens, when you put your mouth on the mouthpiece and blow into an instrument, is a mystery. It's an enigma, because it's something that's structured in your face, your body, your wind that's coming up through – from your lungs, that causes your instrument to sound a particular way. So I definitely didn't like a

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lot of sweet vibrato and sweet sound. So I worked real hard at getting a sound that was closer to the timbre of a tenor saxophone. Then, of course, trying to play more like Charlie Parker or Sonny Stitt, like that. But those were – I think that's it. The rest of it is a mystery, because no matter what reed I put on or mouthpiece I put on, my tone always comes out the same. It comes out just like it always is.

Brower: What about different saxophones?

McLean: Doesn't make any difference. Doesn't make a bit of difference.

Brower: Do you have any favorites?

McLean: I have – do you mean, my favorite saxophone?

Brower: Yeah, to play.

McLean: I'm playing on a Selmer that I've been playing on for – since 1965. That's a good instrument. I like – the Yamaha is a good instrument as well. But it just so happens that right now and for the last number of years I've been playing on the Selmer.

Brower: Is that an endorsement issue? Or that's just what you're playing?

McLean: It's just what I'm playing on, yeah. And of course, they like for me to endorse their instrument. They'll give me an instrument if I ask them for it. But I don't want to keep getting instruments. I've got enough. I have – the instrument I'm playing on is fine. I just don't want to have a room full of saxophones. I'd rather for them to give me money than saxophones.

Brower: You mentioned Sonny Stitt. You mentioned him a few times. But off, when we weren't interviewing – the tape wasn't on – you said that there was a point at which you stopped listening to Bird and just listened to Stitt. So, did you know Stitt personally? How'd you meet, if you did? Talk about the circumstance under which you met him. And talk about that period.

McLean: I heard the recordings that came out on Savoy, called *The Bebop Boys*. It had Sonny Stitt and Bud Powell, Kenny Dorham. I think Max is on some of them, and Bud. I heard these pieces, and I heard this alto. I liked it a whole lot. I found out that I could relate to Sonny's playing even a little quicker than I could relate to Bird's playing. Not that it was easier, but it was just something about Sonny's style that I liked. I liked very much the way he phrased and the way he played off the beat. So I just stopped listening to Bird for a long period. It might have been a year or more that I didn't listen to him hardly at all. Then of course I reverted back to listening to him again, and Sonny Stitt.

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I met Sonny one time when up in my neighborhood somebody – I came out of my building, and one of the guys said, “Hey man, you know who that is standing over there?” I looked over on the corner. I saw this guy standing there. He said, “That’s Sonny Stitt.” I said, “Get out of here, man.” “No, man, I’ll prove it to you.” The guy took me across, and it was Sonny Stitt.

During this time, Sonny was having a very hard time. He wasn’t staying anywhere in particular. He wanted to come up to my house for a minute to change some clothes that he wanted to take off what he had on and change. So I told him to come on, took him up to my apartment, my mother’s house, took him in the room, gave him some stuff, and he changed his clothes. Went in the bathroom, cleaned up. Went back out again. Then he said he had a job that night and he wanted to use my horn. I told him I couldn’t do that, that my mother wouldn’t let me. I was too smart for that, because Sonny was having a hard time then. I was about to have the same experience, but I didn’t know it then.

So I was around him that day. And then I used to see him from time to time as the years went by, any time I could get a chance to go hear him play. But I didn’t have to come looking him up, because every time I played somewhere and he was around, he showed up with that alto, to come and give me a lesson.

Brower: He had this reputation of being like a gunslinger.

McLean: Oh yeah, definitely so, more than anybody I ever knew in the business.

Brower: Did you ever lock up with him?

McLean: Oh man, many times, if you want to call it that, because I mean, I used to go there and be a punching bag for him. That’s what I ended up being. But the last time we played together, we really locked up. Dizzy had hired both of us. It was at Wolf Trap. When I got to the rehearsal, I saw Sonny backstage, and I said to him – Sonny looked at me. He said – he’d talk real fast – he said, “You’re on this job?” I said, “Yeah.” So he said, “Man, I didn’t know that.” So I said, “Well, you’re playing tenor, and I’m playing alto.” So he said, “I ain’t playing no tenor.” I said, “What you mean?” He said, “I’m playing alto.” So I said, aw man, it’s going to be blood on the floor again. I’ll never forget. We played – Dizzy made us go out and battle on one tune. It was *Woody’n You*. We went out there and played.

I loved that guy. He was one of my favorite musicians. I had locked up with him in many towns. We locked up when I was with Art Blakey and the Messengers. He would come after me in that band. If wherever I was at a jam session playing somewhere, he would come in and wipe everybody out, all the saxophone players.

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Brower: What was his forte, from your perspective?

McLean: You mean?

Brower: What made him such a killer?

McLean: He just – I think he just wanted everybody to know that you got to be better than that. Oh yeah, you can do this? Good. What about this? “Well, let’s play it in A-flat.” “I don’t know. I can’t play it in A-flat.” “Oh.” That’s how that is.

Brower: He’d just keep going until he finds some stuff you couldn’t do.

McLean: “I want to play some blues,” and Sonny Stitt would say, “All right. Good, man. Let’s do it in D major.” “I don’t know D major. I . . .” “Oh, you want to play it in B-flat. Okay. Let’s play it in B-flat.”

Brower: With your sorry self.

McLean: Yeah, right, exactly. He was a taskmaster. And the other question he used to always ask me, and then he would call me dumb if I couldn’t answer it. Man, he used to make me so mad. “How many keys are on the saxophone?” He used to ask that all the time. I can’t remember right now how many there are. I’m glad he’s not here to ask me that. Perhaps he’s watching me. I’m sorry, Sonny. I think it’s 34 keys or 28 keys. But from the first time he told me that, he asked me – he said, “How many keys are on the saxophone?” So I said, “Gee, I never thought.” He said, “You should think of it, man. You’re playing it all the time. Dummy.” He says, “28 keys on there,” or whatever the amount. And then he would see me maybe 6 months later. He said, “Now, how many keys on the saxophone?” Again.

Brower: Never let you forget.

McLean: Yeah, right.

Brower: You mentioned Rudy Williams. Did you know him?

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Talk about your interaction with him.

McLean: This was like a one-day thing. I met him at Bud’s house one day. I knew of – his nickname used to be Bones. I knew of his – the legend of Rudy Williams. So I was

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very happy to meet him. I went down to get a gig with Oscar Pettiford's band. I went in there that day and really messed up on reading the charts. I came in there, and they had all this hard-ass music. I sat down, and I tried to get through it. Then of course Kenny Dorham and them were messing with me. "I can't hear the alto," and all of that. So Oscar Pettiford went to the phone and got his book out – he didn't say anything to me – and dropped a nickel in the phone. He was talking. Then he said, "Okay, let's go down and do it again." A few minutes later, in walks Rudy Williams, and Oscar Pettiford said, "Hey man, why don't you let him play that part?" I said okay, I'm finished. That was the end of that job.

Brower: Let's – I just want to run through a list of alto players. We can do it sort of like the – what's that test they give? They show you the picture, and the first thing that comes to your mind. Phil Woods.

McLean: Great alto player.

Brower: Moving right along.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Okay. Cannonball Adderley.

McLean: A great alto player, out of the style of Benny Carter, Charlie Parker.

Brower: Do you remember when you first met him?

McLean: Yeah, I met him in the [Cafe] Bohemia the first night he came to New York to work with Oscar Pettiford's band, and Oscar put us up on the stage together to fight immediately, that very first night he walked into New York. I tried to get off the stage, because I was on the stage with Herbie Nichols, playing with him. As I was leaving the stage, Oscar Pettiford said, "No, no, man. Don't go anywhere. Stay right there. I want you to meet somebody." And he introduced me to Cannonball. But of course by that time I didn't care about any of that. I had played on the stage with Sonny Stitt, played on the stage with Charlie Parker. I didn't care about anybody else. It could be Cannonball or meatball. Didn't make any difference to me, because I felt that I played well enough to play with those guys, and I could play with anybody.

Brower: You mentioned playing with Herbie Nichols. I had the impression that Herbie Nichols largely performed outside of the modern jazz context.

McLean: He did. He played mostly New Orleans style and dixieland type, what they call dixieland. This one particular night, he was playing – he asked me to play with him in

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there. I had left a job out in Copa City in Long Island. I came in. He was playing trio. He asked me to play with him the last part of his set, something like that. I came in and played with him. Then when I was coming down off the stage, that's when Oscar Pettiford was coming in with his band.

Brower: Did you have an appreciation for who Herbie Nichols was as a composer?

McLean: Ooo, very much so.

Brower: Then?

McLean: Yeah. I always looked at him with awe, not as a composer, but as a player. I used to look at him almost with a question mark over my head. He didn't look like a musician or act hip or act like what I think a musician should be like, and yet, and still, he had all this very deep music inside of him, yeah.

Brower: Do you see him as being related to Monk and Bud.

McLean: Definitely so, and Duke.

Brower: And Duke.

McLean: Duke Ellington and Monk.

Brower: Did he personally associate with them? Do you know?

McLean: I don't know. I didn't know him that well. He heard me play and liked the way I played. He came and asked me to play with him.

Brower: Okay. Do you know Earl Turbinton?

McLean: No.

Brower: Doesn't mean anything to you?

McLean: No.

Brower: Ornette [Coleman].

McLean: Yeah, I like Ornette. He's a good alto player. I like him because he stood his ground and took the slings and arrows when it was a real hard time for him to do what he did.

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Brower: Gary Bartz.

McLean: I like Gary a lot. One of my favorite alto players.

Brower: What – did you have a relationship with him? I know you recorded with him, but the . . .

McLean: Yeah, we had a relationship, because he – I used to let him sit in with me when he first was coming to New York and trying to make a name for himself. He would always come to my gig. He knew he could sit in, play with me.

Brower: Paul Desmond.

McLean: Yeah, I liked him. I respect him and appreciate him more now than I did when I was coming up. For that sound, I like Lee Konitz much more. But I liked Paul Desmond. He was a good saxophone . . .

Brower: You mean that sound like that light, almost airy kind of sound?

McLean: Yeah, the light approach to . . .

Brower: Which is kind of the opposite of the force that . . .

McLean: Right, that I play and that Bird played. But it's come back again. A lot of alto players now got that light, very – Gary Bartz. Not Gary Bartz. Kenny Garrett has a very light, airy sound, and so do a lot of alto players out there today.

Brower: Steve Coleman.

McLean: I like him. He's a fine young alto player. Yeah, I think he's a comer. Plays real good.

Brower: What about people like Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill?

McLean: I like them for their honesty and that they do what they do. I like Oliver especially, because Oliver will tell you in a minute that he tried to play like me. He tried to play like Bird. He used to say that he likes me a lot. Tried to get my records and play like me. He just couldn't do it. He said then he found a way to make his expression, and I think it's very – it's great.

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Brower: What about alto players that we may – nobody may have heard of, but you think are burners?

McLean: John Jenkins was a great alto player from Chicago. He and I made some records together. I liked John.

Brower: Right, with *Alto Madness* being the one that I know.

McLean: Yeah. He made some other ones on Blue Note. I liked them a lot.

Cee Sharpe, Clarence Sharpe. I thought he was a magnificent alto player. He made some records and did some things, but he never got the kind of recognition that I thought he should have gotten.

Brower: Maybe you were alluding to this before, but I want you to talk about heroin, how it came into your life and how it affected you as a musician and so forth.

McLean: That in itself was kind of like a phenomenon. I came up in Harlem. I never knew of any drugs or anything like that the whole time I was coming up, until the end of World War II. It seemed like from the minute World War II was over, 1946, '47, that it began to make its appearance in my neighborhood and other neighborhoods in Harlem, and, I guess, across America. In most black communities there was an influx of it. Of course the guys that I admired in my neighborhood were all doing it, starting to do it: Sonny Rollins, Andy Kirk, Jr., Walter Bishop, Arthur Taylor, Kenny Drew, Mark Fisher. All the ones that I named that I named to you before, they were all messing around, except for me and Lowell Lewis. We were the only ones that weren't doing anything like that. Consequently we were thrown together, because those guys are very clannish, and if you're not doing what they do, you ain't in, ain't going to be around them. Even when they practiced, they had rehearsals and stuff, we were lockouts.

Then when I used to go practice with Lowell, then one day I went to his house. He told me – he said, “You’re all alone, man.” He said, “I went down there yesterday to Sonny’s house and tried a little of that thing. It’s happening, man. I’ll see you later.” I was all alone. I had nobody to be with. So that dropped me down to another level of musicians. I went down, started hanging out with some little cats that were not playing as well as that group. One thing led to another. Then finally – I had different people ask me to try this, try that, and never did. Then finally one Sunday I went to play a job on 155th Street – was it 145th? 145th Street. I went to play a little cocktail-sip dance for a fraternity at our high school. There were some guys in the bathroom, snorting. I went in there, and they offered it to me, and I tried it. When I got on the stage and picked up the saxophone about a half hour later, I felt very relaxed. I just felt as though I was all right. I could do what I

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wanted to do with no problem. Nothing was a problem. That was my first introduction to heroin.

I had no idea that it would get a grip on me at any particular time. I mean, you never think it could happen to you. But I liked it enough to have the guy that had offered it to me, to go buy me some. He went to the pool room and bought me a couple of \$1 caps of it. I said, "Get me some of that, man. I'm going to take it home and use it when I practice after school." "You got to watch out for that, man. It'll get you." I said, "No, man. I ain't going to be doing it like that. I ain't – are you kidding, man?" You know. You always think that you got the answer to some certain stuff.

But that was my introduction to it, and for a period of time I was able to control taking it. But then finally I started doing it like over the weekends, like Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Then trying to lay off Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, like that. Slowly but surely, the days – I begin to add on days, like Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. I would try not to do nothing Tuesday and Wednesday. Before you know it, I was doing it all the way up to Tuesday. The next thing you know, I was doing a little bit of it every day, until finally . . .

Brower: What was the cost factor?

McLean: Cost? It was cheap, man. It was like a dollar for a capsule in those days. But a dollar was different then.

Brower: A dollar meant more.

McLean: Yeah, you can hardly get anything.

Brower: What else could you buy with a dollar?

McLean: Buy a lot of groceries with a dollar, two or three packs of cigarettes, a quart of milk, a couple of loaves of bread, whatever. You could buy a lot with a dollar.

But at any rate – you could take a dollar, go to Coney Island, stay out there, take rides, and have transportation two ways. It was only a nickel to get out to Coney Island, a nickel to get back. So you'd have 90 cents to spend. You'd get a hot dog, a root beer for 15 cents. Those days, a dollar went a long way.

Brower: You mentioned the cocktail-sip scene for – what did you call them?

McLean: Dances, cocktail sips.

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Brower: Was that a pretty prevalent form of employment for you?

McLean: Yeah, it was.

Brower: What was your compensation for that? What'd you make for one of those.

McLean: \$10, \$9, or \$12. In that range. \$8. It depends. Sonny used to have control of that, Sonny Rollins. Sonny was – I must say now that Sonny was an important part of my learning experience right during this particular time, because I looked up to Sonny.

Brower: We're talking '48, '49?

McLean: Yeah. I looked up to him as a player. He was playing so great. He went away for a while, for about a year, around 1947 or '48. Nobody heard from him. He was playing like Coleman Hawkins when he went away. But when he came back . . .

Brower: Where'd he go?

McLean: I don't – he went somewhere, upstate New York, somewhere.

Brower: Of his own volition?

McLean: Yeah, of his own volition. When he came back, he was playing – he had taken those Charlie Parker on tenor saxophone recordings and went away with them: *Half Nelson*, *Sippin' at Bells*, things he did – *Milestones* – things he did with Miles. When he came back, he was a whole different animal. He went through a metamorphosis. He was playing so great. He went right into Miles's band. He was in Miles's band ahead of me.

Brower: You said he controlled the cocktail sips. Explain what you meant by that.

McLean: Yeah, because he had – those jobs were given to Sonny first. They would call Sonny. Bowman's would call him. Different places would call him. So when he was – he had work all the time on the weekends. But then, when he got in trouble and went away, he gave those jobs to me and told me, "Jackie, I want you – I'm going to give these people your number, have them call you. But when I come back, I want my thing back." So I said, "Yeah, no problem."

Brower: Who were you using on these engagements?

McLean: Same guys: Arthur Taylor, Walter Bishop, Kenny Drew, Arthur Phipps, Percy Heath. Percy was now living in that neighborhood too.

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Brower: Today is Saturday, July 21st, 2001. My name is Bill Brower, interviewer for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project. I'm here with Mr. Jackie McLean, the subject of the oral history interview. The engineer of the interview is Sven Abow.

We ended yesterday talking about an unpleasant subject. I think what I want to do is not so much pursue that, but raise it at different points as we walk through history, and you can reflect upon – as you walk through your musical history and personal history, you can reflect upon how it was operating at a given period, what impact it may have had, or whatever.

Let's just return for a minute to Miles Davis. In a general sense, what did you get from your period with Miles, musically speaking?

McLean: I learned a great deal from Miles. I learned that music was something that you had to study and never mind trying to find maybe some shortcuts to a particular place. I never thought of playing the piano. It just never – it didn't even enter my mind at that young age. I was so busy trying to play the saxophone that I didn't even conceptualize the importance of knowing the harmonic structure and stuff from the piano, how important that was. I learned that with Miles.

I also learned that his – that he was greatly influenced by Lester Young. A lot of people don't mention that or talk about that. But Miles, to me, that was one of his enormous influences, and I could hear it in his playing, but especially the week that we played opposite Pres at Birdland, where I had a chance to hear Pres on a nightly level and see – hear the influence of Pres's playing, that week, on Miles, so much so that we used Pres's solo from *D. B. Blues* as our theme song, played the whole thing before he came on, as a kind of tip – Miles's way of tipping his hat to Pres.

So I learned a whole lot of stuff. Choice of notes: he was a master at choosing the right notes out of the chords. Economy: everything didn't have to be fast or high. Because when I was with Miles, he hadn't really totally mastered the high register, like he would years later. So he would be going up many nights to reach for a particular note, and nothing would come out. But his sound was so unique and gorgeous and bluish, that it – whatever he hit sounded Miles, gorgeous, the sound of his horn.

I always said that some kind of way with considering Dizzy and Fats and Kenny Dorham and all the trumpet players that came through during that period, it's hard to pick one that would be your favorite. But if I – I guess I would lean to Miles over everybody, just because I never get enough of him. I thought he was an incredible stylist. I learned a great deal from him.

Brower: Did he hang with the Sugar Hill gang, so to speak?

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McLean: During a period, yeah. There was a period when Miles would come up on the Hill. But there were a lot of cats up there, his peers, for him to be around. Roy Haynes lived up that way. So it wouldn't be strange to see Miles in the square where we used to hang out. He was close with Sonny. There would be a lot of people that would have a relationship with Miles in that area. Gilly Coggins was on the scene. He made the recordings that – I suggested that Miles get Gilly when he was looking for a piano player. There was Arthur Taylor, who Miles used from time to time, Kenny Drew, Walter Bishop. So we – that neighborhood . . .

Brower: What square was this?

McLean: The square was on 150th Street between St. Nicholas Place and St. Nicholas Avenue. It was just a little park right there. We used to sit on the benches in there.

Brower: Just talk and . . . ?

McLean: Yeah, went out. Like when I left my house and I would be going out after dinner or something, I would – that's where I would walk to, from 158th Street all the way down there to see if anybody's in the square. Sometimes it would be nobody. Sometimes be a lot of cats in there.

Brower: Did there come a time when you and Miles shared an apartment? What's that story?

McLean: Yeah, we were living with some friends down on 21st Street, yeah, at that particular time.

Brower: You organized – sometimes for Miles you organized the bands for him? How did that work?

McLean: Yeah. I was working with him. Off and on different periods, Miles would call me, and I'd work with him through a particular period. At this time he was doing real bad. He was strung out real bad. He was pawning stuff. We opened up in this little club called the Downbeat. J. J. [Johnson] on trombone. I can't remember the whole rhythm section. It might have been A. T. or somebody. But at any rate, somebody called his father. I don't know if it was the club owner or whatever. One night we were playing. Miles was standing with his bandstand facade. You know. Miles had such an aura about him. I suddenly saw his whole thing change up. He was like somebody had stuck him in the back with a piece of ice or something. He stepped over to me. He said, "Hey, Jackie, I got to get down." He said, "My father's here." He said, "You all close out the set, man. I'll be talking to you," and he walked off the stage. His father was standing by the door

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and got Miles's coat. He was talking to the club owner for a minute, and they went out the door. So J. J. took over the band for the rest of the week, and Miles went home to his father.

After he stayed down there and got his self together . . .

Brower: Did you ever meet his father?

McLean: Yeah, that night I met his father.

Brower: What kind of cat was he?

McLean: Very staid, straight. That night, he was there under some real stuff that he didn't want to be bothered with, I know, because he was a very prominent dentist where he came from, and this was the worst thing that he could imagine, that his boy was strung out and looking so bad, because Miles wasn't himself in those days. He didn't – wasn't together. He had – always wore a suit and looked presentable, but far from what he really was, yeah.

So after he stayed away for a period of time, he called me and told me – he said, "Jackie, I'm coming back to the city," he says, "and I got a hit already, in Birdland." He said, "But I need a band." Said, "I need a piano player." Said, "I got a drummer. I need a piano player. I need a bass player." He said, "I'll call you when I get home." So when he came to the city, he called me. I had already called Gilly Coggins and a bass player named Connie Henry to come down to Birdland.

Brower: He was also from your . . .

McLean: Yeah, he's from up in the neighborhood too. We went down to Birdland, and Miles had a quick rehearsal. He was pleased with what I had, but he was looking for a piano player to be out of the – have the technique and ability of somebody like Kenny Drew or Walter Bishop. Gilly's a different kind of piano player. He doesn't really have that. He's got something else that nobody has, and that is a palette for chords and coloring chords and beautiful accompaniments. Gil's the – nobody has it like him. Miles finally realized that, because at first he complained to me. He said, "Man, this cat don't play" so- and-so. I said, "Man, just play a ballad. See what happens." He walked up there and played *Yesterdays* or *How Deep is the Ocean* and man, the stuff around him, the chords. Miles could see that Gilly was very talented. But a different kind of piano player, not the kind of guy that's going to play them kind of Bud-type single finger things. Gilly played another kind of block chords and things.

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Yeah, so from time to time, he maybe would ask me to get somebody. One time he – I used to rehearse his band. When he had Trane and Cannonball and Red Garland, he would call me to come down and rehearse my tunes. He said . . .

Brower: Like *Dr. Jackle*.

McLean: Yeah, he said, “We’ going to play *Dr. Jackle*. We’re going to play [??]. Come on down and rehearse the band, and I’ll give you \$100,” or something like that. So I’d go down to Birdland and rehearse those three tunes.

Another time, I was in the hospital, and he tried to make me come out to go with him to California to open up in one of those – Blackhawk, or one of those clubs in San Francisco. But I was in the hospital, and I couldn’t leave. So he was saying, “Come on, man. You can come out, man. You’re all right. You’re strong enough,” and I said, “No, Miles. I got to stay here. I can’t go.” So he said, “You got somebody else you can give me?” So I said, “Yeah. Take Frank Strozier with you.” I said, “He can play, man. From Chicago. Call him up.” So he said, “Who is it?” I said, “Frank Strozier.” He says, “Wait a minute.” He got a pencil and wrote it down. Then he took Harold Mabern and Frank Strozier, and they went out to California, but he wasn’t happy with that band.

Brower: Have you read Miles’s autobiography?

McLean: Yes.

Brower: Are the representations he makes, or characterizations, you think, fair and accurate concerning you?

McLean: Miles gives his own interpretations of everybody in his own world. “Once upon a time,” by Miles Davis. That’s the way he is with everybody. Nobody comes up above a particular place, not even gods like Bird and Trane and those cats. It’s Miles’s own – I don’t want to even use an ugly word or anything like ego or make it bad, but it just is – that’s just the way he was. His assessment of me was accurate in terms of what it – historically, that it really happened, those things that he mentions in there.

Brower: Like his sort of prodding you over *Yesterdays*. You mentioned that.

McLean: Because I’m not afraid to tell about things that – I could have not said anything about that, when Quincy [Troupe] came to talk to me about doing the book for Miles. So but no, man. I thought that was a very important lesson that I learned from Miles at that particular time, because that one tune had almost got me fired, got me embarrassed on the stage in front of Duke Ellington and all these great people sitting in the audience. Miles got mad at me, went to the mic, and dropped a bomb on me, made me like a laughing

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stock for a moment. I hated it. It brought me to tears. I was waiting in the alley out there, all swollen up and ready fight. Miles [*sic*: Art Blakey] said, “What are you getting ready to fight about? Miles told you to learn the tune. Man, you didn’t learn it. So what you mad about? Go learn it.”

Brower: Who told you this?

McLean: Art. Art Blakey.

Brower: Oh, Blakey

McLean: Yeah, because Art was always like my big brother, somebody that I could learn a lot from. He always was like that with me.

Brower: What about Miles intellectually? Did you have much exchange with him on that level?

McLean: Oh yeah. I hung out with Miles quite a bit. We used to do – hang out. He’d come uptown. I’d take him up to my house. My mother would see him, meet him. My dad – stepfather. Miles liked families, to meet people’s families. But Miles was so arrogant. So he put his feet up on my mother’s couch. He went too far with that. She went and said, “Hey.” Said, “You go back in – take him back to your room.” Then Miles got up and we went back in my room, because . . .

Brower: He got a little bit too friendly.

McLean: Yeah. He stopped, looked at my – my stepfather was shaving in the mirror. He stopped by the bathroom door and said, “Oh man.” He said, “Look at that physique. How you doing?”, speaking to Jimmy Briggs, my stepfather.

I would take him up there. Then we would maybe go to the show, go to 42nd Street and go see a flick. And just hang out, get something to eat.

Brower: You brought a number of other musicians to him that really figured prominently, like Paul Chambers. Can you recount that?

McLean: Paul was working – he and I both were working with George Wallington’s band with A.T. [Arthur Taylor], in the Bohemia quartet. Later on, we hired Donald Byrd, made it a quintet. But at first it was a quartet, for many months. I enjoyed that, working with Paul and watching Paul develop, because at that point Paul just arrived in New York, and he was diligent at working on the music. It was incredible to see how he did it, because every night George Wallington would give Paul a feature. At the beginning of

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the week, he'd take a tune like *Body and Soul*, and night after night, that's what he would play, go out there and play the melody, play his solo, just go through it. Then change to another one, *Night and Day*. He just learned his repertoire right there in the club and developed his technique. He was really great.

So Miles used to come in to hear the band. Then we hired Donald Byrd, and then I started writing some music to make a quintet. Donald started writing. We did that album *Bohemia After Dark*, which was an important album from that period. Miles used to come in to hear the band, because we were playing some things real different, like some things I wrote, like *Snakes* and some of those other tunes, some of the things that Donald wrote. But he fell in love with Paul's playing, and he just came and took Paul. He just came, and Paul came back from a break and said, "Hey man." He said, "Miles asked me to come with him. Oh man. Miles asked me to come." You know. I said, "Man, then you get ready to go, I guess. You don't want to miss that."

Brower: So who replaced him in that?

McLean: Can't remember. I left right after that myself, and Phil Woods took my place.

Brower: You mentioned Blakey, and that's – actually, the next major artist you're working with is Charles Mingus. Is that correct?

McLean: I think I recall him being the next. You mean after George Wallington?

Brower: No, after Miles.

McLean: Oh, after Miles.

Brower: Did Wallington – Wallington was after Miles.

McLean: Wallington was after Miles, yeah. And then, after Wallington, I think I went – I'm pretty sure I must have gone with Mingus, but I'm not too sure that I didn't play a little with Art. I'm not sure. But I think I may . . .

Brower: That period between Art and Mingus kind of went a little back and forth, in and out of both bands? Or how did that work?

McLean: That – it was circumstances. I was working with – Art and I were close, first of all, since I was about 17. I used to go to his house on 117th Street over there when he lived in Harlem, over there by Madison Avenue – Lenox Avenue – Fifth Avenue. So I knew him for many years. He's always been someone that has advised me and kind of had an influence on me. Anyway, when I was with Mingus, and then Mingus and I had

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that altercation in Cleveland, when he hit me, and I got – and fired me and left me stranded in the town, me and . . .

Brower: Why did that happen? What exactly happened?

McLean: Because I had been working with Mingus for a period of time. This particular – he yelled and screamed on the bandstand and gave – shouted orders across the stage and stuff in the middle of your solo. A lot of times he was – anyway, this particular night he was really – so when the set was over and we were walking off the stage, walking out from behind the bar, I said, “Charlie.” I said, “Look, man.” I said, “I’m going to put in my two weeks’ notice.” I said, “Because . . .” – and he said, “What? You” – bam, hit me right in my mouth. So I went in my pocket. Willie Jones was behind me, and the bartender was standing there. I went in my pocket and took my knife out and opened it. I came at – I did like that and saw the blood come out of my teeth all . . .

Brower: You was going to slice him or stab him?

McLean: I was going to stab him. In fact, I cut him through his clothes. But Willie grabbed my arm, and so did the bartender. So the knife just went into his suit and just . . .

Brower: And pecked him?

McLean: Yeah pecked him, gave him a little dit. He was like, “Youuuuuu stabbed me.” Whatever. So I left the club and went back to the hotel. He fired me and J. R. So now we had no money.

Brower: J. R. Monterose?

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Why’d he fire J. R.?

McLean: He just fired J. R. too.

Brower: Got rid of the saxophone section.

McLean: Yeah. So we got back to the hotel. We had no money, and the snow was deep, and it was cold. We got in the room, and I said – me and J. R. was sitting there. I said, “Look, man, we got to get out of here,” I said, “And we got to sneak out.” I said, “So we got to make a plan. So here’s what we’ll do.” I wrote – I made a little diagram of the – you come in the front door, and the desk is right there. You go down that hall, you hang a right, and our room is right around the corner. Then there’s an exit to the backyard just on

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this side. So I said, “I’m going down to the desk.” I said, “I’m going to engage my man behind the desk in a conversation.” He was a big jazz buff, always talking about who’s playing and blah blah blah. So I went down, started talking to him. I said – I told J. R. to take the bags, go out the backyard, and throw them over the fence, because we had called our friend to come with a car, to be waiting for the bags and put them in the trunk. Then we would go out the front door, get in the car, and split.

Brower: Like you’re just going for a walk or whatever.

McLean: Yeah. See you later. So . . .

Brower: See you later.

McLean: So – but no, we had to dress it up. So J. R., I saw him go by with the bags as I’m talking to this – he can’t see down there, but I can. He’s back here, like where you’re sitting, there’s a wall there. So I see J. R. go by with these two bags. I’m talking to this cat. I’m just talking to him. All of a sudden I see J. R. come back there again and go like that and put the bags down on the floor.

Brower: No ride.

McLean: No, he couldn’t get them over the fence. I saw that. So I gave him the signal to go on in the room, man. Take the bags in the room. So I went – I told the guy, “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.” I went down the hall, went – I said, “J. R. Go out to the desk. Engage the cat in a conversation.”

Brower: You’ll throw the shit over the wall.

McLean: Yeah. I said, “Tell him we’re going to a jam session,” because there was one in a club very close to the hotel, “and tell him to come by later. We’ll be over there.” I said, “That’s just so we can get out the door.” Meanwhile I go down, go out in the backyard. The fence was up there. That’s why J. R. couldn’t get it over. So I spun around three times and whoosh, threw the bag, and it went over. I spun around, threw the next one over. My man said, “Okay Jackie.” Went around, came inside. J. R.’s out there, “Yeah man,” so and so and so. So I came out and said, “Come on, man. Let’s get ready to go.” So he said, “Oh, all right.” So we went down to the room. I said, “Look, we got a friend watching television in the room. So we’re going to leave the door open. We’ll be back in a little while. We’re going over to the session. We’ll see you over there later.” He was like, “Yeah, okay.” We left, went out the door, put a cigarette in the ashtray, left the light on, left the door cracked. We went out the door, went around the corner, jumped in the car, and whew, down to the bus station. Sit up all night in there until the pawn shops

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opened. Go pawn a horn, mine or – we flipped a coin. I lost. I had to put my horn in the pawn shop.

Brower: In Cleveland.

McLean: Yeah, in Cleveland. And we got back to New York.

Brower: You characterized the experience with Miles as being at the University of Miles Davis. You characterized your time with Mingus as sort of being under a drill instructor. Was there any love in that drilling?

McLean: Yeah, I loved Mingus. He used to make me mad, because he was so – just his – “These are my toys. If you don’t want to play with them my way, then you go home. You’re fired.” But not really like that, because he had some great – he was great. He was a great musician. He could write great music, and he helped me a lot to develop a concept that I wasn’t even thinking about at the time when I went with his band. That was to break away from what I was so involved in, in terms of I had done enough research and study on Bird and the whole bebop idiom. I had been involved in it to a particular level. By the time I went with Mingus, Mingus was saying, “Forget about all that, man. Quoting Bird and all that. Come on. You got your own sound. Come on. Do something that’s yours.” So it helped me.

That – but he was also very forceful and worked you to death, rehearsed for hours on end. During this particular period, he didn’t write anything down. Everything he taught us from sitting at the piano. “Jackie, these are your notes.” I’d pick them out. Then teach Bill Hardman his notes. Then inevitably the next day when I’d come in and play, he’d say, “I didn’t play it like that. I played it like this,” and he’d change something. I said okay. That’s how he was. But I learned a lot with him.

Brower: Was *Pithecanthropus Erectus* in any way a breakthrough performing experience for you?

McLean: It was a difficult piece the way Charlie wanted to perfect it. We played it so much. When he first wrote it, we didn’t play anything else in a club. We went to a club, opened up, first set, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, all the way through. Then he’d stop the band, look at the audience, and say, “That isn’t really what I wanted. That’s why I made this the Charlie Mingus Workshop. So let’s start this all over again. We’re going to run it through from a – play the introduction.” You know, have a rehearsal in front of the audience. We’d run it through again.

Brower: Those audiences, how did they react to that?

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McLean: They just sat there, because it still was making music. We're running through – run the whole piece through. Then it would be time to get off, and we'd split. Maybe somebody would say, "Let's wait around until the next set. Maybe he'll go into his stuff." He'd come back the next set: "*Pithecanthropus Erectus*." Do the same thing again.

Brower: His ideas about making programmatic pieces, such as that was – how did that influence your thinking about composition?

McLean: It was a new . . .

Brower: Or did it?

McLean: Yeah it did. Of course it did. It was a new experience for me, the way he'd pull a piece apart and do things. Take the chords and make them twice as long, or cut them in half and make them short. He was just very creative, and he had a great talent for writing for all kinds of ensembles.

Brower: What about in terms of his political consciousness and his racial consciousness?

McLean: I thought that was right on time. I was glad to be in his company when he was talking about things like that and reacting to things like that. Because I remember we were in the Bohemia when Emmett Till was lynched. All that night, he just beat the audience with that name. "Emmett Till. The next tune we're going to play is" so-and-so so-and-so, "but it's too bad that Emmett Till couldn't be somewhere to sit and enjoy something tonight." He'd turn around and play. Then after the next set, "I like that last tune we dedicated to Emmett Till. Hope they catch those motherfuckers that had to kill him up there." Oh man, he was – all night long he was on that Emmett Till. He was very political, especially about racist stuff like that.

Brower: Art Blakey.

McLean: You mean, how was it, being with him? It was totally different than Charlie Mingus. Art was more like my big brother, my boy. The whole time that I was with him, our two families were connected, in a sense. Art would come down to the house at lot. René and Vernon, Melonae, they knew Art. So Art was just – and then of course there was that whole thing that Art was very mad when Mingus hit me. He was cursing and saying, "I should go down and" – "Man, come on."

Charlie hired me again to go back in the band. This was after he had hit me. I had gone – the union wanted me to throw him out. The president of the union told me to come up to the union, wanted to see me. I went to his office. He said, "I want you to sign these papers. We're throwing Charlie Mingus out of the national. He won't work anywhere in

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the United States of America. All you got to do is sign this, because he's already hit somebody here in the union office. He hit a representative." Dah dah dah. "Now he hit you in the mouth."

Brower: Didn't he punch out Jimmy Knepper at one time?

McLean: Yeah, he hit him too. I said, "No, I'm not signing that, man. I ain't going to sign that."

Brower: Did you view that as kind of like a snitch kind of thing?

McLean: No, I just didn't think it was worth making Charlie so he can't never work. What is that?

Then time went by. Charlie was crying. I went up to Birdland. He called me. "Come up and see the band, man. That stuff we did, man, you can forget about that." So I took Dollie. Dollie didn't want to go, because she didn't want to be bothered. She was still mad at him. So I went up there. Then he called me on the break back, and he's hugging me. "This is what you did, man."

Brower: That little nick?

McLean: Yeah. Then he said, "Come out and play some saxophones." I said, "No man, it's a tenor out there. I don't want" – he said, "Come out and play some tenor." I said, "All right." So I went out and played with him. Then it was like about a week later, he called me. He said, "Come on, man. Come with me in the Bohemia, man. Come on." Mal called me. He said, "Come on, man. Charlie's sorry. He wants you back. Come on." So I went back and made rehearsal. He wrote a piece for me, *Portrait of Jackie*. He rehearsed it. So I felt that that was in the past.

Brower: So that came – that was on the album *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

McLean: Yeah, it was somewhere in there. I can't remember when it was.

Brower: So when he actually recorded was – he'd been playing that piece a long time.

McLean: Which one?

Brower: *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

McLean: Yeah.

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Brower: Before he actually went to wax with it.

McLean: Oh yeah, to record it, yeah. So one night I'm in – the second night. Like we opened on a Tuesday. That night, I come off the set, and Art is there at the end of the bar. I come down. He's [?]. "Man, are you out of your mind? You're back up in there again. The man that hit you in your mouth, stopped you from working for a year. Man, I can't believe this." He said, "I'm going to Pittsburgh tomorrow. I want you to come with me." So I said, "Hey man, I'm here working with this man. I just opened up tonight." So he said, "I understand that that ain't even your horn. He got a horn, and he just let you use it, and he takes it home every night and don't even let you take it to practice in the day." So I said, "That's true." So he said, "Shoot. I'll buy you another horn tomorrow morning, 9 o'clock. I'll come and get you. Pick you up in the car, take you uptown, and buy you a horn. Give Dollie and them a hug, and we be gone to Pittsburgh. Later for him. Hit you in the mouth like that. Jive . . ." Aw man, he just laid it on me. So then, when the night was over and I came out, he was parked down the street in his Cadillac. Blew the horn. I went up there and got in the car. He said, "Let me take you home." He took me home. He said, "So look, man, I'm coming back and pick you up in the morning, 10 o'clock." So I said, "Okay, Art. All right. I'll do it." So I went upstairs and told Dollie. Dollie said, "Aw man, this is going to be out." I said, "Well, too bad. I'm going with Art. He's buying me a horn. Later for Mingus."

Brower: He said it kept you from working for a year.

McLean: I couldn't play. I couldn't really – my teeth. He knocked my teeth back. All these teeth here were pushed back facing the back of my throat.

Brower: He hit you very hard.

McLean: Yeah man. I had to pull them every day. I keep pulling them and pulling them until they got back in position.

Brower: You didn't go to the dentist?

McLean: Yeah, I went. The dentist told me to keep pulling them.

Brower: Said you're doing the right thing.

McLean: Yeah. I called Trane up, because I knew he was having some problems. Sonny. I said, "How long should I lay off?" I said, "Because I can't even hold my mouthpiece on." Trane said, "Don't hold off. Practice with them bent. Keep – stay on it." Sonny said, "Yeah man, practice. Practice with them messed up. They'll get better." So I started to try to play a little bit. But then eventually it happened. My teeth kind of set.

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Anyway, but the kicker of this story is that we left for Pittsburgh, me and Donald Byrd, Kenny Drew, Doug Watkins, and Art Blakey, the Messengers. That night, Mingus comes to the gig and Mal said – Mingus said, “Where’s Jackie?” Mal said, “I don’t know, man.” I told Mal I was going. I had to tell Mal, because that was my boy. So Mingus said, “We got to start without him.” So they played the first set, and I didn’t come. He called Mal. “Come on, man. Let’s go over to his house.” So they jumped in the car, went over, beat on the door. Dollie comes to the door. Mingus said, “Dollie, open the door. I know Jackie’s in there. I want to – he didn’t come to work tonight.” So Dollie said, “Charlie, I’m not letting you in here. Jackie’s not here.” So he beats the door again. Then Dollie looks past him and sees Mal. She and Mal were very close. So she opened the door and let him in. He went and looked in the kids’ room, in the closets, looking for me everywhere. Dollie said, “He is not here.”

Then of course he got the wire that I was in Pittsburgh with Art. So he sent a nasty telegram to me there, that I was going to be in the East River if I ever came back to New York again. That’s one of Charlie’s threats. That was it. That’s how I left that band. I never went back with Charlie again.

Brower: Did you reestablish your personal friendship over time?

McLean: Yeah, we – you know.

Brower: Water under a bridge at some point.

McLean: Yeah. I had been out there. He had gotten his other bands together, one of his new bands. He had Rahsaan and all them cats. He had a – he wasn’t thinking about me or nobody then. He was in his next mode.

Brower: What did you get from Blakey about being a bandleader?

McLean: Everything, from – I couldn’t even – I didn’t even want to speak on a mic. I never had done that. When I went with Art’s band, I had never talked on a microphone to an audience. Art – we’re at the end of the set one night. He just called me over. He said, “Hey Jackie, come here.” He said, “Go up to the microphone and turn us off. Tell the people, “Thank you very much,” introduce the guys in the band, and say, “We’ll see you next set. We’re going on a break.” So I said, “Aw man, get out of here,” like, “I can’t do that, man. I never talked into no microphone.” Art said, “Man, what’d I tell you to do? Go turn us off.” So that was that. I mean, I’m working in his band. So I trembled up to the mic and made the announcement, the best that I could. Then Art, he – about a month later, he came to me and said, “When you talk into the microphone, take your time. You’ve got nothing to be scared of. You’re just talking to somebody, a bunch of people

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sitting out there. Turn us off tonight when we come off, both sets.” I was like, oh man. So he had me – he was training me.

Then he would always say things about the bandstand, what you should do or what you shouldn’t do, attitudes, being greedy, playing too long. Art was controlling those bands like that.

Brower: Did he have advice for you in terms of your style as a saxophonist, how you played?

McLean: Uh-umm. No. He’d say, “Oh man, I always liked the way you play. That’s why I hired you. I don’t like the real alto sound.” Said he liked my tone, my sound.

Brower: What about his consciousness? Was he a Muslim by this time?

McLean: He never was a Muslim that you always saw saying “insha’Allah” and whatever. He never related to it like that. I think he was very private, whatever his worship was. But he was a Muslim.

Brower: At the time you were with Blakey – this is ’56, ’57 – what was your club working life like? Where were you gigging? Were you just exclusively working with him? Or were you doing other things? Give us a sense of what your scene was.

McLean: I would – I think around that time I began to get a few gigs for my own band, because I was beginning to make records under my own name. So I would play a club like the Continental in Brooklyn from time to time, that club. But it was right during that period that I had the cabaret card fiasco. So I couldn’t go into clubs and play. So I – this guy named Jim Harrison formed the Jackie McLean Fan Club. There was – many, many people joined it. They would gather the dollars up and rent a hall and have a concert for me, the “Jackie McLean Fan Club presents Jackie McLean at” a particular venue. That was the only time I worked.

Brower: When exactly did you lose your cabaret card? And, for the record, explain what that means in New York to a musician.

McLean: At that particular time, if you got arrested for anything and got sentenced to a time in jail or something like that, you’d lose your cabaret card. It was a law tht goes back to the Prohibition days, to try to keep people with jail records from being involved with places that sell whiskey. So they just bent it a little bit and made it relate also to guys that played music. If you got busted and you couldn’t get a cabaret card, you couldn’t work in a club. So that’s what it was about.

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Brower: When exactly did you lose it?

McLean: I think in '56 or whenever I got arrested the first time, when it happened like that.

Brower: What were the circumstances of your arrest?

McLean: Nothing more than going out to purchase something and getting caught. That's all. I never got arrested for anything but that, going out to get it and getting busted while trying to get it.

Brower: How many musicians are you aware of that suffered under that burden?

McLean: Oh man. Jesus. We'll be here all day. Everybody. Everybody. There were very few cats that didn't get caught up in that thing, Dizzy being one of them. But the list – you could practically name anybody from that period. Trane, Sonny Stitt, Sonny Rollins, Kenny Drew, Walter Bishop, Arthur Taylor, Max.

Brower: What did it take to get your cabaret card back? How long were you without it?

McLean: I was without it for three years. But then the Connection came along, and I didn't need a cabaret card. It was during that period that I was with the Connection that I made an inquiry with a particular doctor that I had met, asked her to help me to get my cabaret card back, and she did. By that time, I had – I guess this was around 1965 I'm thinking about now. So a number of years have passed. It took a long time, man.

Brower: Almost 10 years.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Let me flip back for a second. I want to go back to Charlie Parker and just ask you a few things. Did you – I've read that you subbed for him. Did that happen on many occasions?

McLean: It happened, I think, twice. That's the only time that happened. But I played on a bandstand with him on a number of occasions. He used to come down and sit in at Birdland when I was with Miles. When he wanted to, he'd come down there, take his horn out, and just jump up on the stage. I almost had a heart attack when he first did that. But he immediately could see that I was nervous and came and said some things that calmed me down. Then we played.

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Brower: That sort of reminds me of a story you told about Eric McPherson and Tony Williams, when we were off-mic, that you see – when you opened, I think, opposite Tony Williams in maybe the Blue Note or somewhere – that Eric had a kind of trepidation, and you did something help him get over that.

McLean: I didn't – it wasn't so obvious. It's just that I felt that Eric would have to be under some kind of feelings, because of – you know, Tony's a very great drummer. So all I did was tell Eric to go up on the stage and play the introduction to this particular piece that we did called *Rhythm of the Earth*. It has an introduction of drums. So the first thing that we did at the beginning of the week, the first set, the first tune, was that. Eric steps up on the stage and opens up, and I mean, gets the audience up in an uproar, because it's a long solo. He just does some incredible polyrhythmic things. Then he set us up. We came in and played the melody. We played the tune.

Brower: Do you think that your own experiences give you the sensitivity to feel that for young musicians?

McLean: Yeah, because I want my musicians who's working with me to be comfortable and play in the best circumstances that I can provide for them, if I can provide some comfort for them on that bandstand. They're my students. I've been knowing Eric since he was 14. So I just did that to make him go ahead and hit, and when he did and got that great applause and we went on and played the tune, he was comfortable.

Brower: Did Bird – you said he said some things. But I've read that there were occasions when Bird would be in the audience and he'd make a point of applauding you, letting everybody know that . . .

McLean: He dug it.

Brower: . . . he dug it.

McLean: Yeah. Oh yeah. He stepped up. When he came down – when I saw him come into the club, Miles and I were playing, the quintet. We're playing. All of a sudden I look at the steps coming down. I see Bird. So we just keep playing. It wouldn't be anything strange to see him come into the club. But he had his saxophone with him. He walked around, and I heard the case open. I heard the snaps on his case snap open. The next thing I know, he was standing there with his horn hanging around his neck, and it frightened me. So then he steps up to me, and he says, "How you doing? How you feeling?" He says, "What kind of horn is that you got there? Oh yeah." Then he said, "Do you know *Groovin' High*?" I said yeah. He said okay. So we were playing. That was it. You asked me what he said. That's what he said. Immediately I was – felt okay. I didn't feel nervous. Because when he comes on the stage, he takes over the bandstand. Miles just

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waits. Bird came up and spoke to me, and then he said – told Miles, “*Groovin’ High*,” and played the introduction.

Brower: What about the pocket game?

McLean: He only did that a couple of times. He did that twice, I think. He’d just come up and just reached his hand in your pocket. “What’ve I got here.” Pull it out. “Man, I’ll get this back to you.” He’s gone. A \$10 bill or whatever. But then he would come and put some money in my pocket, if he saw me standing somewhere. He was good like that.

Brower: What about intellectual exchange with Bird?

McLean: Yeah, one day I hung out with him the whole day. I happened to run into him on Broadway. He asked me where I was going. I said I was just going down by the union. He said, “Come on with me. I’m going uptown to pay my respects to Lips” – to Hot Lips Page. His body’s up on 145th Street. So I said okay. So we went and got on the subway. We went from 42nd Street up to 145th, went by the funeral parlor, signed the book, and then Bird went up and looked into the coffin, stood there looking at Hot Lips Page. He commented on how beautiful his hair looked. Then we left. So then we were just walking. He said, “Let’s go by the Apollo.” We went up to 145th and Eighth and walked down. That’s when he said a few things that I thought were incredible, but simple things. Like an airplane was going by. He looked up, and he said, “I wish I was on that plane. I don’t care where it’s going.” We went across the street. He also looked in a fish store. All the fish were laying out on this ice. He just kept looking in there, saying wow, oh man, looking right – I thought, what the hell is going on? Dead fish, and they’re up on this ice. “Don’t you see them, man? Look at all the colors.” And suddenly, just like that, I saw all these colors, the reflections off the scales of the fish and the ice, the sun coming through the window. I didn’t see it before. It was just like a kaleidoscope, almost, of colors. Then he said, “Come on. Let’s go.” We went down the street. So I mean, that’s how he was. He didn’t talk about anything so much. Maybe boxing or some sporting event, his car.

Brower: What about music? Did he . . . ?

McLean: Never.

Brower: Never music?

McLean: Nothing. The saxophone, nothing. Never said – you know, “Want to try my horn?” I’d try blowing his horn, like in the dressing room, when he was in a club. Yeah, we never talked about any music.

Brower: What was it like when he left in ’55? What was that?

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McLean: You mean, when he passed?

Brower: Yes.

McLean: It was awful, because he and I didn't part on the greatest of terms at that particular time. He had pawned an instrument that I was using – he and I both were using. It belonged to a guy named Percy Knight. He had borrowed it from Percy, and Percy had given me permission to play on it too. So Bird and I were sharing this horn. Then he pawned it. He took it from me one night when I was getting in a cab. I was real high. I was getting in a cab, and he was saying, "Look man, you can't go home with that like that. Here, let me take it. I'll take care of it." I just saw the horn go through the door, and the door slammed. I went home. Then I was supposed to go to the club that next night to get the horn from him, because he had it. He was playing over in the Village. I went over there. When I walked in the door, I saw he had a different horn on the stage, a big old silver horn. I said, aw man. What did this cat do with the horn? I went in. That's when he – I had Dollie with me. She was pregnant. He was ashamed. He didn't want to let Dollie see him telling me about this pawnshop stuff. So he came and took me away. "Say Dollie. How you doing? Come here, man." Took me over, and he picked me up and hugged me, and he put me down. He said, "How you doing? You okay?" So I said yeah. He said, "Hey man." He said, "I had to put that horn in the pawnshop." I said, "I know it, man." I said, "But wait a minute. My mouthpiece was in the case. Did you put my mouthpiece in there with it?" He said, "Oh, I didn't know that." I said okay. My mouthpiece was gone too. But Dollie was angry with Bird about that. But he wouldn't rest until he went back there and sat and talked with her until she felt better about it. He liked her a lot.

Brower: When did you get married?

McLean: That's a secret.

Brower: Okay. When did René come along?

McLean: He came along in '46.

Brower: And Vernon?

McLean: In '48.

Brower: And Melonae.

McLean: '55.

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Brower: When in '48 was Vernon born?

McLean: When? In August.

Brower: That's my year.

McLean: That's your year?

Brower: Yeah. 1948 was a very good year.

McLean: It was a very good year. It was.

Brower: Let's take a break.

We've worked through the major musicians that you worked with early on and that influenced you and so forth. Now it's the mid-'50s, and you're beginning to emerge as a solo artist. Your first situation – recorded situation – was with Prestige Records.

McLean: Right. Can I just insert one thing here that I think is important?

Brower: Sure.

McLean: I did have a period where I worked with vocalists that helped me a great deal. Like Little Jimmy Scott hired me for – to play with him in Brooklyn when he was working in a club there. I found that to be real helpful to me. And also Arthur Prysock. I used to play with him sometimes out at the Copa City in Long Island. I just wanted to mention that, because that was kind of an important part of my learning.

Brower: What was – what did you learn? Be more specific.

McLean: I learned that it wasn't my set. I wasn't up there playing with George Wallington or anybody when it was Arthur Prysock. He was telling me. He got a chair. He said, "Quit standing back there like that, man, like you're waiting to do something." He said, "Let me give you a chair. Sit down, man. I'll tell you when to play." He put a chair back there for me. I sat by the drummer. Then he was mad. "You're playing too much behind me on some of them sections." He said, "Watch my hand. When I give you a signal, you come in and play some notes behind me" in a particular section of a song. But he – I learned a lot from him. Then he would give me a solo a couple of times a set, part of a tune, and maybe let me do about 8 bars. Then he goes [McLean sings loudly] "But I know," right back in it. I was gone. Sit back in my seat.

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Brower: Was working with Jimmy Scott different?

McLean: Yeah. Jimmy Scott used to let me just play all the time behind him, because he liked to bend those phrases out of shape anyway. That was a different thing. But I learned from both of them.

Brower: Jimmy Scott's a real interesting phenomenon.

McLean: Yeah man. I learned something about playing a melody, from him, that I also learned from listening to Billie Holiday as well.

Brower: You said you learned something. What's that something?

McLean: I just like the way that both of them approach a melody, in other words, without having to be right on the pitch all the time, like Sarah. Sarah's always – her notes are velvet, vibrant. Billy Eckstine as well.

Brower: Always on pitch.

McLean: On pitch. Nat Cole. Like that. But Billie Holiday, she kind of messed with the note a little bit. Gave it some other colors. And so did Jimmy Scott. I used to feel that – I still feel that way about melodies.

Brower: I think what's one of the things that – people discuss your pitch, the Jackie McLean. Nobody quite – I know one thing is always – your attack is – I think probably that your thing about – your attack has always been real virile, real strong, whatever. But that has to be an important part of what distinguishes you, is your approach to pitch. Did you have that . . . ? Where did that come from, other than . . . ? Did it come from them? Or was that already there, and you could even, by seeing someone else work with notes in that way, sort of enhance your own direction?

McLean: Yeah. It's like, when you listen to Coleman Hawkins play a melody, and then you listen to Pres play a melody, it's totally two different approaches to a particular way to play something, make music sound. How does music sound when this guy does it? Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster even. Don Byas as well. They play on pitch, beautiful vibrato. But Pres kind of lets the note hang out in outer space a little bit with not a lot of vibrato on it, and he bends it. I think that's why he was so compatible with Billie Holiday, because they both had that similar concept. I think I got that – began to get some of this from Pres in the beginning, because he was who I really – who really drew me to the saxophone. I wasn't really interested in playing saxophone until I heard him, and he just – I wanted to play the saxophone.

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Brower: What was your first interest in music? What's your first instrument that got you?

McLean: The drums, the drums. That was where I – my godfather, Mr. Cobbs, Daddy Cobbs, he used to take me to the – downtown to the Paramount to see Gene Krupa's band when he came to town and played down there. That was real exciting for me. I thought he was great, the way he approached drumming, and of course the way they set him up. They used to throw two spots on him. He would be a huge shadow of him over there. He'd be there. Then there'd be a huge shadow of him there, and a huge shadow there, and then one behind him, and all of his little antics and stuff. I liked him a lot, and his band, at that particular time. That was before I – I guess that was my first interest in something like that, music.

Brower: Have you ever actually played drums yourself?

McLean: Oh yeah. That's my other instrument. I started out with my mother's hatboxes and a pair of drumsticks. I must have been about 10, 11, when I started playing off of these hatboxes and stuff. But still had no desire to learn – formally learn how to play the drums or anything with music. It's just something I liked to do.

But then of course I had a lot of practice when Billy Higgins was with my quartet, because he would be late every night, and we'd have to hit at a particular time in the club in order for me to stay on friendly terms with the club owners. Billy was always late, and I always told him, "If you come in late tomorrow night, I'm really going to let you go. I'm going to fire you, man." But then he would be late the next night. So I'd have to go up and play, with LaMont Johnson and Scotty Holt. But I had already been playing drums, around Art and anybody. I could sit down on the set and play. But I got a lot of practice. Then I'd see Billy come in through the door. Every night he'd be late.

Brower: So you'd have to open up with the trio.

McLean: I'd have to open up playing drums. My saxophone, I didn't even touch that. I just played drums so that the thing would be together. I wouldn't be up there playing with bass and piano and no drums. I think drums are so important.

Brower: Would you ever consider recording your drumming?

McLean: Yeah. The kids up at the school like me to play with them sometime. They don't have a drummer. Steve Davis once, "Hey Jackie, come on." So I go on up there and play with them. I – that's my other instrument that I love, the drums.

Brower: How about piano? Where are you with piano?

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McLean: I play the piano as well, I mean, for my own . . .

Brower: For composing?

McLean: For composing.

Brower: Enjoyment?

McLean: And for my own enjoyment, like when I want to play some ballads and sing some things like that. I enjoy that. I never knew Sonny Stitt wrote so many beautiful songs with lyrics and everything to it. He came to the school. One of the things that . . .

Brower: Which school?

McLean: To the Hartt School. Sonny came to town. He was playing in a club here. So I went by the club to see him. I went to his room. He said, “Man, I’m here for a whole week, and you ain’t even asked me to come up to your school. You have all them other cats come to your school.” You know how Sonny is. “All them other cats coming up to the school. Am I coming up to your school? Man, I’m right here. You ain’t called me, come up to the school.” I said, “Sonny, I don’t have any budget. That’s why I wouldn’t dare come near you.” Said, “I don’t need no damn budget. Why don’t you come by and get me? Take me up to the school.” So I said, “Okay, man. I’ll do it.” I had a history course that I was teaching. We were studying the music from 1945 to the present. I went down and got Sonny and brought him up to the school. I did a – opened up my class by putting him in his proper context, his influences, playing some of his recordings. Then I turned the class over to Sonny. He sat there and talked to them for a while. Then he went up and got on the stage and sat down. I know you’ve heard him do this, play the piano and sing the songs that he wrote, like Nat Cole or somebody. Incredible. I was astounded. I had no idea he wrote songs with lyrics. Somewhere I got it on tape. I have it on tape at my house. I taped that class that day. I don’t know where to put my hands on it, but it’s in my house somewhere. He came up there and spent the whole time with me in the class. Had the kids come up and play for him, criticized them, told them what they should do, what they shouldn’t do. When he was through, I took him back down to his hotel.

Brower: I noticed on one of your – one of the programs that you’ve done here at the Artists Collective, that the jazz ensemble opened a program with one of Sonny Stitt’s tunes. It was in the package that Dollie gave us yesterday.

McLean: Yeah, that’s true, when Clinton was here. The thing that’s so interesting about . . .

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Brower: President Clinton.

McLean: Yeah, President Clinton.

Brower: That was in 1999.

McLean: '99, November 4th. I was downstairs when this happened. He came up here with Dollie and went into one of the rehearsal halls. The band was set up. They played the – aw man, what is the name of that thing? One of Sonny Stitt's tunes. So when the President was finally introduced – because downstairs we brought him in on a tune I hooked up to bring him in, which ended with [McLean sings *Hail to the Chief*].

Brower: *Hail to the Chief*.

McLean: Yeah. We did that. Then he came to the mic and he said, "Thanks a lot." He said, "I just heard the band upstairs, Jackie," he said, "and they played an old Sonny Stitt thing that I knew in college." Damn, man. He is the first black president. You know? He really is. Because he was so beautiful that day here with the kids, with Dollie, with the program. He was just magnificent.

Brower: It's 1956 . . .

McLean: *The Eternal Triangle*. That was the name.

Brower: That's it.

It's 1956, and you're in one of your incarnations with the Mingus Workshop when you start recording on your own with Prestige. One of the things I noticed is, you must have lived in that studio, it seems like, certain days. Here's a date: July 13th. You do Gene Ammons All Stars with Donald Byrd, Art Farmer, Mal Waldron, Doug Watkins, and either before or later you're doing your own date . . .

McLean: The same date?

Brower: Right, with Donald Byrd, Mal Waldron, Doug Watkins, and A. T. Then I see that pattern repeated. July 20th. Jackie McLean and sextet: Donald Byrd, Hank Mobley, Mal Waldron, Doug Watkins. Later that day, or that morning, Hank Mobley's with Donald Byrd, Mobley, McLean, Barry Harris, Doug Watkins, and Art Taylor.

McLean: Yeah. I remember that day.

Brower: Take us through some of those days at Prestige.

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McLean: That was – his thing was – it was like a factory, a music factory. He didn't approach recording the music the way they did at Blue Note. At Blue Note they were much more considerate. They were much more concerned with hearing what you're going to play before you actually record it. Bob Weinstock didn't really care about that. He just wanted to have the cats there go in the studio and hit. He knew we were going to play some music. So he didn't have to hear it first, because he sort of assumed that it was going to be something that he'd be able to sell. So that's how it was. It was much more like I said, a music factory. So I can see myself, yeah, doing two dates in one day, which – that's incredible.

Brower: What kind of bread were you making?

McLean: I wasn't making a lot of money. In those days, the going price for a leader for a recording was a \$300 advance. But you see, at that particular time, because of my circumstance, because you told me in the beginning of this particular interview today, that you wanted me to relate back to some of the problems with being addicted and that kind of thing. So that puts you in – I can sum that all up in one thing. I don't have to go to any particular period to speak about my problems as an addict at that particular – any period, because they're all the same. Once you are addicted, your day consists of first taking care of the gorilla. That's number one, that monster, because if you don't, you ain't going to do anything else. The body goes into withdrawal. You can't play. You can't do nothing but stay near a bed and a bathroom.

So on a daily basis, your primary movements are first, to get out, if you didn't bring it in with you the night before, so you could have it when you wake up, what we used to call a wakeup. That would be your shot for the morning. It's called a wakeup. You don't have that, then you've got to crawl out of bed, and God bless you if you don't have the money to go get it, because that means you've got to now go out into the world and get that money and then go get it.

So every day consists of that. So when I used to have day jobs as well as trying to play gigs, because I had this habit, you see, and I had a wife and three kids. I really – you can't contribute much to a family. Dollie McLean is a strong, strong woman, because she worked through all of this, and came home and fixed dinner, and went to the laundry on Saturday, and took the kids over to see the circus, and went over here to do this and that. She did all that. Went to school, see how they're doing there. I was in and out of the house. I was there, but I wasn't there. But I was there. The kids had Daddy there. They weren't involved with that aspect of it, because I wasn't the kind of – my sickness never allowed me to do anything in front of anybody in my family, take out works or take out – take an injection in front of somebody, or my kids see me doing it. I never did anything in the house, even if I have to go upstairs on the roof to do it. I wouldn't do it in the house

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unless nobody was home. Then I'd sneak around and do something. So I kept that away from them.

There's no particular period where anything was any different. I was always doing the same thing, getting up, going up to the record company, getting the advance that I'm going to get or doing whatever I'm going to do to get some money that day, get uptown, get what I'm going to get, and go on with my day.

Brower: Where were you living in this period?

McLean: Avenue – 484 East Houston Street.

Brower: So you were by '56, '57, on the Lower East Side.

McLean: Oh yeah. I was already down there.

Brower: Was there much of a scene there with musicians and artists at that point?

McLean: No, not hardly at all.

Brower: It was still the west Village.

McLean: It was still – yeah, everybody that was anybody living in the Village was living over there, in that part of town. Bird would come over on our side, to see – come to my house or visit some other painters or people that lived in that area.

Brower: You say you remember the September – the *Mobley's Message*, Jackie McLean Sextet day. What do you remember about that day?

McLean: I knew that it was a doubleheader, a day where I was going to be able to get some money. We had our stuff already rehearsed. So we went in and made that recording.

Brower: How long would a recording session take? As long as it takes to cut the tunes?

McLean: Yeah, it depends on . . .

Brower: I mean, two hours? One hour? Three hours?

McLean: Maybe three hours. If we had the stuff down and went in and did it within one or two takes, we'd be out of there in three hours or more. But if we ran into a problem, sometimes where – like I remember when Mingus made me record *Portrait of Jackie*

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maybe 12 times. After I did it the twelfth time, when he listened to it and the record came out, I say, “Charlie, which one of those takes did you take?” Right.

Brower: Number one.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: There’s something obsessive about Charles Mingus. Would you say?

McLean: Yeah man. “Do it again.” I was so sick of that tune. And I did them in a row. It wasn’t like he took a break and we did some other music and came back to that. I did 12 in a row, the whole thing, solo and everything. I was wiped. I didn’t want to hear that tune anymore.

Brower: At the end of a three-hour session, were you – did you feel taxed? Or, I could do another one? Was that three hours of concentration in effect a day’s work?

McLean: You didn’t have much to do with that. The monster made you do it. You knew you have to do it, get that extra money, so you can make your day tomorrow better.

Brower: He had a label that had a lot of people who had monsters.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Do you think he consciously used his knowledge of that?

McLean: I think so. I think that most of those record producers – Alfred [Lion] and Frank [Francis Wolff] did too, but their thing was, you got it. It’s your monster. I didn’t give it to you. I don’t even want you to use it. Because there were many people that he dealt with that didn’t have that monster, like Donald Byrd, Herbie Hancock.

Brower: Blue Note, or Prestige?

McLean: Blue Note. Not Prestige. Blue Note. Those guys didn’t use anything or do anything. But then he had his other group, which was me and Lee [Morgan].

Brower: That did.

McLean: Yeah, that did.

Brower: Prestige almost has a reputation, at least with certain people, of being a junkie’s label. Do you think that’s fair?

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McLean: Yeah. They didn't have the spirit that – the love for the music that Alfred and Frank had. Alfred and Frank had a heart about things. I could go – if I got in any trouble or anything, I could call Alfred up, Frank up, and say, "Look man, I'm in trouble. I'm here in Lexington, Kentucky. There's a state trooper across the street looking at me. Come on. Send me some money, man." He said, "Where you at?" I said, "I'm in the Western Union. I'm scared to go outside the door." So he said, "Stay right there. How much?" I said, "I got to get a bus to the next state and get an airplane to New York. That's what I need." He would send me the money, because I didn't want to be picked up for vagrancy in that town, Lexington, Kentucky. God, they send you to the chain gang for 30 days or something like that.

Brower: The circle of musicians that you were involved with at Prestige – Donald Byrd, Watkins, A. T. – they keep coming up over and over again. Mal Waldron. Was that a circle that you were active with beyond the studio? Was that your musical circle at the time? How did – what's the convergence between your musical circle and your recording?

McLean: I didn't have – my monster wouldn't let me have a musical circle. I didn't have no time to sit down with nobody and chat about something or do anything. It had to be about a rehearsal to do a particular project. Then we go rehearse it and do it. Then, "I'll see you later." I'm gone. Sometimes we were thrown together because of our condition, all of us strung out, a bunch of us. We get through and leave and go do something together like that. But other than that, it was – but those were the musicians that I liked, that I wanted to play with. Elmo Hope. Mal. I liked Mal's playing. I also loved Walter Bishop and all those guys. Arthur Taylor. He was one of my favorite drummers of all time too, Arthur.

Brower: There's sort of a – you've got a New York component, a Philly component, and a Detroit component. Do you see that, any sort of streams of cats coming in? Like Doug Watkins, and then you've got Paul Chambers, you've got Donald, you've got Barry Harris, and you've got Mobley.

McLean: Walter Davis from New Jersey.

Brower: Were cats conscious of these communities that were feeding the scene? Was there a consciousness about that?

McLean: I think that they all had – we were all related conceptually with the music. We all were children of Bud and Bird and Monk and Sonny Stitt and Dexter and all them cats. Everybody came with that all in place. They knew the tunes. They knew the – could play real good. Detroit produced many, many fine musicians, as well as Philadelphia and

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Chicago. But everybody gravitated to New York. So they said that the New York musicians had a particular feel, the cats that were born in New York. Like a lot of people say that about my playing. Say, "You play like a New York alto player, the city." Well, I don't know. To me, you have to come with that. You don't have to be born there to have that.

Brower: Were you conversely going to Philadelphia and doing things? Or going to Detroit and doing things?

McLean: Oh yeah. I was going to Philly more than I would be going to Detroit. I went to Detroit with bands. That's the only time I ever went to Detroit, when I either went with Mingus or with Art or with somebody. But Philly, I used to go down there by myself, because different people would call me down to work. Like Reggie Workman would call me and say, "Jackie, I've got a club that wants you to come down. All you got to do is let me get a rhythm section for you." So he would get young McCoy Tyner. McCoy was only about 18 then. I forgot who was playing drums at that particular time. And Reggie and myself. This guy named Johnny Splawn, who played trumpet in Philly, was – taught Lee. He was on crutches, but he could play. So I got a chance to go down and play with them, and I got a chance to go down there and play with Cee Sharpe and other saxophone players. They would put us together. They had like a battle of the altos on a particular Sunday in a theater. They had some very interesting things going on in Philly.

Brower: Between Philly and Jersey, was that – were you able to – I'm going to ask you, was the same thing happening, say, in Newark for you?

McLean: Yeah, I went to Newark to play, mostly though with somebody's band. I have gone over there, done some things with my group. But most of those guys hung out in the city.

Brower: I guess where I was going was, did those things make up for your inability to work in clubs in New York?

McLean: Yeah, if I got a chance to play in another town, yeah. I didn't have to worry about a cabaret card or anything like that.

Brower: Did that – how far down the East Coast? Were you going to Baltimore? Were you working in Washington? Were those . . . ?

McLean: Every once in a while, something would come up. We would be working somewhere in Washington. Like the week that Martin Luther King did his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, I was in a club. I was in the Caverns, when that was open down there.

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Me, Webster Young, Tony Williams, and Bobby Hutcherson, Grachan Moncur, and Eddie Kahn. I think that was the band that I used there. But it depends. It depended.

When '59 came and I signed with Blue Note – I left Prestige and signed with Blue Note, and then that very same year, the people from the Living Theater called on me to come there and look at this play called *The Connection*, see if I was interested in being a part of this thing. They were getting ready to start. They had hired Freddie Redd as their musical director, and Freddie had suggested for them to call me. So I went over and saw the play, the run through. They gave me a script. We sat around a table and went through the play. They would stop and say, this is where there's going to be some music, right here. Freddie would mark it. So we went through all of that, and then we went through rehearsals for a number of weeks, and then I opened up in that play. I stayed in that play for many years, four or five years. Made the movie and traveled to Europe a couple of times with it.

Brower: That was made into a movie?

McLean: Um-hmm.

Brower: That's not the *Jackie McLean in Space* thing?

McLean: No. There's a film called *The Connection*, by Shirley Clarke. You can get it in video stores. You can order it.

Brower: She made a great movie that I really loved, *The Cool World*, with Diz's music. She made – I didn't know she did *The Connection*.

McLean: Yeah, she did *The Connection*.

Brower: I want to go into that a little bit when we talk about the Lower East Side stuff. But are there any of these sessions – Prestige sessions – that you're particularly proud of? Or that you'd like to talk about or bring anything out about?

McLean: By this time I can't even – they're very vague to me. I can't even remember. I know that there were a couple of experimental things that I did that interest me. I did a piece called *Inding* – I-n-d-i-n-g – with – the date that has Elmo on it. That was a whole different concept of my writing, and it was getting ready to move some other place in 1957. But other than that, it's just a bunch of stuff all rolled together. I can remember the Blue Note dates clearer.

Brower: How about the John Jenkins date?

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McLean: I remember that date, yeah. That happened because I went to Chicago with Mingus. Before I left to go, Sonny Rollins saw me out in front of the Bohemia. Sonny came to me and say, “Jackie.” He say, “When you go to Philly” – I mean, “When you go to Chicago, there’s a bad little alto player out there waiting for you.” So I said, “Waiting for me for what?” He said, “You’ll see.” He say, “And he can – because he loves you, man. He loves you.” I said, “What are you talking to me about.” He said, “He can play too.” So I said, “Oh really? What’s his name?” He said, “John Jenkins.” So that name stuck in my head.

Sure enough, about a month later, we went to Chicago. We were up playing in the band, and there was this guy standing by the stage, kind of an unassuming little cat with his little saxophone case there. Somebody introduced me to him. John Jenkins. So I said, “Dang man, nice to meet you. Sonny told me about you,” so and so. So I went off on a break. When I came back to the club, I heard this alto playing. I wasn’t even on the stage. I don’t know. When Mingus started playing without me, he called this cat up to play, called John up to play. When I turned the corner, I heard the band playing. I said man, what are they doing? I hit the door, and they were off – I wasn’t even in the band anymore. John was at the mic. The place was going crazy. I said, oh man, and I heard him for the first time. Then when I went around – I was standing by the stage. Charlie was like, “Get your – go get your horn, man. Come on.” So I – trying to get somebody to start having a war. So I went and got my saxophone and came up there, and we played for the rest of that set.

So then when I came back to New York, before I left, I talked to John. I said, “Man, if I can possibly do it,” I said, “I’m going to try and get you to come up and do a record with me, two altos.” So he said, “Oh, I would like to do that.” [McLean sees the albums.] And then yeah, here it is. That’s right. So we – when I got back to New York, I went up and told the Prestige – Bob Weinstock about him, and he sent for him.

Oh yeah, I remember these. Yeah, it’s a long time ago, long time ago. I can hardly remember too much about this stuff. Johnny Meyers, Ray Draper.

Brower: Johnny Meyers. Was he from the Hill too?

McLean: No, Johnny Meyers. He’s a – he lives in California now. So many records.

Brower: What’s that look?

McLean: I’m just looking at all the different guys that were on the date. I see that Arthur Phipps is on there as well, Mal.

Brower: What happened with Arthur Phipps?

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McLean: He just kind of – he was also a photographer, as well as a musician. I think he got more into his photography and kind of dropped the music, just used it as a – to make some money on the side. But photography was his real love, I think.

Brower: Was it '58 or '59 you got away from Prestige? Were you . . . ?

McLean: '58.

Brower: Were you running as you left?

McLean: Yeah, I just wanted to get away from there. Especially I knew that my option – I had an option that I could have signed which would have extended my contract another year, I think. Then Alfred and Frank showed up in a club where I was working. When I came off on the break, Alfred and Frank said, “Jackie, why don’t you come up? Are you still signed with Prestige?” I said, “Not really, man.” So they said, “Why don’t you come up to the office, and let’s talk.” So I said, “You want me to make a recording for Blue Note?” So he said, “Yeah, sign a contract.” So I said, oh, okay. So the next day I went up there. That’s how it started.

Brower: A couple of musicians I do want to ask before we leave this. Ray Draper. How did he come – what was your hookup with Ray Draper?

McLean: I was working with Art at this particular time. I was playing in a club down in the Village, and this kid came up to me – a high school kid – came up to me and said, “Hey Jackie, my name is Ray Draper. Bob Weinstock told me to introduce myself to you and talk to you about making a rehearsal so you can hear the music I’m writing.” So I said, “Oh yeah?” I said okay. I called Bob the next day. He said, “Yeah, why don’t you get with him. See what he’s about.” So I got with him. I was very impressed with his writing and where his head was at, even though he couldn’t play that tuba at that particular time. He could play it, but he was having a – just at the beginning of learning the vocabulary. At the same time, I met Webster.

Brower: You mean the bebop vocabulary?

McLean: Yeah, just the general vocabulary, because all of that stuff extends back to Louis and them anyway. That music is overlapping and develops along the way. I can hear things in ragtime that are just the way you phrase it. Now it comes out on the beat, but the whole feel of it is the same, of a particular phrase.

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So that's the first time I saw Ray Draper. We did this record date, the first one that we did together. I guess he was just about 16, 17. Then I formed a band with them in it, with Ray and Webster and . . .

Brower: How'd you come to know Webster Young?

McLean: I met him through Ray. Then I put Gilly on it, and different people. The rhythm sections changed around a little bit. But I kept the front line the same.

Brower: We were talking a little bit about *The Connection*. Did you – were you aware of the Living Theater before they approached you?

McLean: No, I really wasn't. I wasn't aware of them.

Brower: What did you think about that scene when you saw it?

McLean: I was very interested in it. I was excited about the whole idea of being involved with theater, because I like theater and movies and stuff like that. But I mean, once I got there, the bug bit me, like when I went and sat through that first rehearsal, met the actors, even though at that time I didn't put any credence in what they did. I thought what they did was easy. What I did was difficult. Many times that was my attitude towards them, as we got to know each other, as the play began to develop, until I had some lessons taught to me, in the theater, that made me realize, hey, wait a minute, man. What they do is really some heavy stuff, to reach down inside yourself and bring out a character like that, and make it work. And how serious they were, serious about what they did as I'm serious about what I do.

Brower: They were a commune of sorts?

McLean: They were just a bunch of actors and people that are connected together through the Living Theater. Because they had kind of like a following, a cult. They were like gypsies. We traveled all over Europe together. We were like a band of gypsies.

Brower: There is a wonderful – well, I don't know if it's wonderful – story about one time you're supposed to go to Europe, and the snowstorm came up. You thought that you weren't going to Europe.

McLean: Right, because the phone kept – I kept calling up, and they kept saying, "Jackie, there's no cabs. There's no buses, no subways. There's nothing. So there's no way to even get over to get on the Queen Elizabeth. So you're all packed. Sit tight." This is one of the producers calling me. "Sit tight until we can let you know, because we got to get to the boat today in order to embark tonight." So I'm sitting there. All of a sudden the

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phone rings. “Jackie, Jackie, get ready to come out in front of your house. An ambulance will pick you up and take you to the boat.” So this big ambulance pulled up. The door opened, and there were the cats in there. I saw Carl Lee and the other guy. I got in and off we went.

Brower: You went first to London?

McLean: Yeah. We went to London and opened up at the Duke of York’s Theatre in the West End. It was a really big thing, like Broadway, *The Connection*. But it didn’t go over there, because they didn’t have that problem. They had solved that problem way back then. They had legalized drugs in London. So you didn’t have nobody selling no dope on the street and a lot of arrests and raids and all that. Junkies would just go into the pharmacy and, “Hello. How are you?” “Could you please let me have – fill my prescription. Please make sure – could you give me a little more cocaine this time? And let me see some hypodermics there,” and the guy brings them out on a tray.

Brower: You’re joking.

McLean: I swear. It’s true. Yeah. I mean, the addiction problem there didn’t exist.

Brower: Did you feel the play was an authentic representation of what being an addict was?

McLean: Stretched, made for enjoyment, yeah, but it was about that, waiting for the connection to come, because you got something that you need.

Brower: It’s been compared to a *Waiting for Godot* kind of . . .

McLean: Something like that. That’s true. They did a lot of Bertolt Brecht and other plays that – I really got introduced to theater through my experience with *The Connection*.

Brower: How much did the piece mutate, in a sense, over time, by your involvement and the involvement of the other musicians?

McLean: It depends on who was there at the time. Freddie Redd didn’t do a lot of adding to the lines and stuff like that. I did, because I like acting and all that. I would try to get into it, sometimes when I wasn’t even supposed to. They had to sometimes, “Lighten up, man.”

Brower: Like Prysock.

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McLean: Yeah.

Brower: “Do what I tell you. Come in when I tell you.”

McLean: “Go sit down.” Yeah. But one night that I remember, we – Freddie Redd couldn’t come. Something happened, and I got Walter Davis. So me and Walter went and got high before we came down to do the show that night. So Walter was coming. He was like, “Yeah man, I’ve always wanted to be on the stage. This is something I always wanted to do. This is a real thrill for me.” I said, “Yeah, but Walter, look. All you got to do is play the piano tonight, man. Don’t do anything, man. This is your first night here. Don’t . . .”

Brower: Check the shit out first.

McLean: Yeah, check it out. Don’t – he said, “But you got lines, don’t you?” I said, “Yeah, I got some lines that they gave me.” He said – so anyway, the play starts, and because the concept of the play is that it’s improvised, that you can drop something somewhere and people will react to it and make something of it and move on to the next scene . . .

Brower: Did they have people in the audience to provoke them?

McLean: Yeah, they were – there were some people set up in the audience too. But even on the stage, we had particular places that we went that were set lines. But in between there, some things could happen. Well God, before you knew it, Walter rose up from the piano, “Hey man. When is this cat coming? I’m sick.” He really got dramatic. So I’d get a signal from the window, where the backstage producer and director sit sometimes. They looked in the window. So I was like – so I went over, and I put my arm on Walter after he made that burst. I said, “Aw man.” I said, “He’ll be here soon.” So we sat down on the stool. I said [whispering], “Hey Walter” – the play’s going on now to another part. I said, “Walter, freeze man. Just wait until the music – wait until we get to the music. Don’t do that no more.” So he went off into a nod.

Brower: Because he was high.

McLean: Yeah, he was high. So he went off into a nod. “Hey man. Hey Jackie.” He cut right across the middle of the play. “Look man. If this cat don’t come soon” – aw man. So finally we had a break between the first and second act. We went back there. We took Walter in a room. We say, “Walter, man.” Washed his face with a cloth. I say, “Man, chew on this.” I say, “Man, be quiet out there. We only got to play these three tunes in the next part. Don’t say nothing else, please.” Then the director came and said, “Walter, you screwed up the play. Stop talking.” So Walter said, “But I thought you could say

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something. Jackie got some lines where he say something. What's wrong? This is my first night. Is it because it's my first night?" "No, man, it's not about that." That was incredible. I love Walter so much.

Brower: Did you do some gigs while you were doing – while you were in the play? Did you go away and . . . ?

McLean: Yeah, and then I had an understudy . . .

Brower: Which was – Tina Brooks?

McLean: Who was – Tina. Tina and I were making records anyway for Blue Note, for Freddie Redd. So I had – Freddie was the musical director. So I had no problem at when when Freddie said, "Jackie, would you mind if Tina was your understudy." I said, "Hell no, man. I'd love him to be my" – so I would go off and make these other gigs, and Tina would do the gig for me.

Brower: One of those gigs led you to Boston. Is that not correct?

McLean: Oh, to Tony. That's right.

Brower: Tell us about that.

McLean: I had this gig at Connolly's. I had it because of my condition. Again, I had a hard time getting out of New York. I had to run around and try to gather up some money and get myself set to leave town. I didn't want to go out of town and not be prepared to take care of myself up in Boston. I didn't know anybody. I had to – yeah, this is *The Connection*. Some wild stuff. That thing went on for years. That's a great album. One of my favorite albums.

So I went up and did – when I got to the club, Tony was standing outside the club. The cab pulled up. I was getting my bags out, and he said, "You Jackie McLean?" I said yeah. He said, "Oh, let me help you with your stuff." He helped me. The story's on the back of that first album. Then I asked him, "Are the guys here?" He said, "Yeah, the band is here." I said, "Who's playing bass?" He said, "John Neves." I said, "Who's playing piano?" He said, "Ray Santini." I said, "Okay. Who's playing drums?" He said, "I am." "You?," because he's about 16, I guess. I said, "You?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Oh yeah?" So we went down front. It was time to rehearse, and he went and got on the drums. So we started running through some tunes, and I could see that he could play. I could only hear the beginnings of it at the rehearsal. But by the end of the first set, that first night, I knew that I was with a great drummer, even though he was only 16. That's how that happened.

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Brower: You brought him back to New York?

McLean: Yeah. I went and met his mom. He wasn't in school, doing nothing. I called New York. I got the producers from *The Connection*. I said, "Look. I got another drummer." I said, "You got to get rid of my man." I forgot who they had.

Brower: Larry Ritchie?

McLean: No. It was somebody else. Larry got sick. Somebody else got that gig. I don't know how. Freddie got him on it or something. One of Freddie's friends. So I said, "Tell Freddie I'm bringing a drummer, and try to tell Freddie that we got to have this guy. He's got to be the drummer." I called them the next day, and they said, "Yeah, Jackie, Freddie said bring him." So I said, "Solid." So I went to his mother, and I told her. I said, "Look, if Tony's not in school or not doing nothing," I said, "he can live with me. I haven't even talked to my wife about it yet, but I'm sure she won't mind, and I have two other kids his age. He can stay at my house."

Brower: Which was René and Vernon?

McLean: Yeah. So I called Dollie and told her. I said, "I'm bringing home Tony with me." I said, "Because I want to use him in *The Connection* until he gets on his feet." So I brought him home Christmas Eve, that night. I had to sneak out of the hotel. I didn't have any money. I went and got Tony. He had his little bags to go to New York. I said, "Tony, the first thing you're going to do is help me get out of this hotel." I said, "Now, this is what I want you to do."

Brower: So you were like an expert in getting out of hotels.

McLean: Yeah. I said, "I want you to go get some big collapsible Christmas boxes that I can put presents into. Get some big ones – two big ones – and a couple of medium size ones, ribbons, all that shit, paper, and bring it to my room. So he went and got it. So I unpacked my bags and packed my clothes down in these Christmas boxes and wrapped them as gifts. I came out of the hotel. The guy was at the desk. I said – it was Christmas Eve. I said, "Got to go play Santa." Put the keys down. I had my horn. Tony had his stuff. We went and got in the cab, threw all that stuff in the cab. Then I went to the airline. Threw that stuff on the – put it on the plane and came to New York, brought Tony. One of them collapsible bags that I traveled with. I had the bag down in the box with the clothes. So when I got to New York, I just went in the corner and unwrapped them stuff and took the bag out, put my clothes back in the bag. Went home. I took Tony home with me.

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He stayed with us for about a month, maybe three weeks. He met some other young musicians. They had a loft. Then I called his mother. I said, "Tony wants to move." I said, "He's very mature. I think he can handle himself. I'm here if he needs anything. I'm not but 20 minutes, 10 minutes, 5 minutes away from him." So I said, "If you don't mind him moving over there, then I can give him permission to do that," because I was like his guardian when he first came. His mother said, "No, I have all the faith in the world in Tony. He's mature. He know what to do, Jackie. Thanks anyway." So I said, "Great. He's going to move." So he moved over. He was in the . . .

Brower: The mother sounds like a very interesting woman, to give him that leeway.

McLean: She had no choice, though, because Tony was very mature for his age anyway, and knew what he wanted to do. He was destined.

Brower: Weren't they a middle-class family?

McLean: I don't think so, so much. I really don't know that much about them.

Brower: His dad played?

McLean: Yeah. He played saxophone. But I never met him or know that much about him. But at any rate, I knew his mother, though, very well. So that's how that happened. I started using him with me and getting subs for *The Connection*, because when I would get a sub for myself, I'd also get a drum sub for Tony, take him with me and do work. So that was it. That's how I got him in there. Then Miles came and heard him. Meanwhile, I heard Jack DeJohnette about a few months after Tony was in the band. I was really impressed with him too. But I had Tony in the band. So I didn't even bother with calling Jack to do anything with me. Then Miles came and brought Philly Joe to one of my concerts and heard Tony. Miles came down and asked me for him. He said, "Jackie, why don't you let me take that kid." So I said, "Go ahead. I can't stop you from taking him." I went to Tony. I said – he said, "Miles wants me to come with him?" I said, "Go ahead."

Brower: What did Tony bring to the table that was different or revolutionary?

McLean: I think I just liked the energy that he used and his concept of time, how he didn't use the 2-4 on the sock cymbal all the time, just playing [McLean claps on 2 and 4], like that. I just liked his concept. It was more open, and found that he was open to doing a lot of interesting things musically that I was interested in.

Brower: Did you see him and Jack DeJohnette as similar in that?

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McLean: They're both young drummers that are thinking about some other ways to play the rhythm. So when I – when he went with Miles, I called Jack immediately. Had a rehearsal the next day. And he was bam, right there, in the band.

Brower: So were you, like, training drummers for Miles?

McLean: Nah. It seems like that, doesn't it? Yeah. It seems like that.

Brower: Because, did you tell Jack DeJohnette that he would be Miles's next drummer?

McLean: No, I didn't say – I didn't know nothing about that.

Brower: Somebody had construed a quote along those lines. Somewhere I picked it up.

McLean: I don't think so. I don't remember that.

Brower: *Jackie's Bag*. That's your first Blue Note recording?

McLean: No. The first one was *New Soil*.

Brower: Now, the musicians that – actually, *Jackie's Bag* is kind of like a – maybe a sort of a transition. But these would be the . . .

McLean: Yeah, this is the first one.

Brower: Did it go like this?

McLean: I don't know if it went exactly like that, but I know this was the first one. I can't remember. This was later on. When René wanted a monkey, I bought him a monkey for Christmas, me and Dollie. I had to end up training him and really spending time with him.

Brower: That was Capuchin?

McLean: Yeah, Capuchin. That's was the kind of monkey he was. Once we got him home – there's more to a monkey than just buying him. He's not like a toy. This thing was wild in the cage. [McLean screeches.] My wife was like, "Oh man, what have we done? This is terrible." Then they would have to go. Dollie would go to work in the morning, and the kids would go to school, and there'd be me and Mr. Jones left in the house. I had to spend time with this – I was with him. So I said, let me try to start working with this cat. He's vicious. So I would go get some grapes. I spent a lot of time with him. I'd put a grape at the doorway. He wouldn't come. He'd drop in the corner. I'd

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put the grape down and then walk away from the cage. He'd come down and snatch it and eat it. So then I just kept going until finally I would put my hand in with the grape, and I just said, I ain't moving, man. I'm going to stay here. You can take this grape, or you don't get no grapes. They're smart, man. They get the vibe. He'd snatch the grape off my hand. Then I would get the grape and go closer to him. Then finally I would put the grape up on my arm and hold it like this. He would get up on my hand and ease down and snatch it off and run off. So finally I got him so he would just walk up my arm. Then I just let him walk up my arm and take him out of the cage. Then, when I could take him around in the house, I would take him around to Melonae. Melonae – everybody started stroking him. Everybody except Dollie. Dollie said, "Keep him away from me. I don't want to see him." Then Jones began to put two and two together, like who's who in this house. Nobody's scared of me except her. Okay. I got this figured out.

So one day, I'm home – I'm at *The Connection*, in the middle of a play. I'm on the stage. The play is going on. The producer comes to the window. We had a prop bathroom that you could pretend like you're going to the bathroom, and when you went in there, you could go on backstage and leave the building, if you want. So I went back around to him. He said, "Jackie, your wife's on the phone. She sounds like something bad is happening." So I got on the phone. I said, "Dollie?" She said, "You got to come home right away. Jones is out." She says, "And he's threatening me. He's showing me his teeth, and he threw my money out the window. He took the sugar bowl and turned it upside down. You got to come home now, because I can't . . ." I said, okay, okay. So I ran downstairs. I said, "Man, I got to go home. I'll be right back." So I got a cab, and I shot across 14th Street over to Avenue D and down around to my house. I told the cab driver, "Sit right here, man." So I ran in the house, and when I came, he started [McLean whistles] acting all cute. Dollie said, "Look at that. Now he's acting like that. He was showing me his teeth." He was doing this. He was doing that. He was up on the top of the pole – the heating pipe in the kitchen. When I came in, he was like [McLean whistles], acting like he acts when you play with him. So I said, "Come here, man." He got on. I put him back in the cage. So I said, "How did he get out?" She said, "I don't know. I just thought I would be nice to him for once. Nobody was here." She says, "And I cracked the cage, and he snatched the door open and ran out and put his hand in the sugar bowl and threw some sugar on me, took my cigarettes and threw them out the window, took my money out of my wallet and threw it out the window." So I said, aw man. But then I got right back in the cab, went back, and back on the stage. People in the audience had no idea that that's what I did.

Brower: When you got to Blue Note – just looking at the titles of the things – did you have control over the images, over the titling, over the notes, over the repertoire? Did they give you control of all those things?

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McLean: Those are things that I would have thought of if I was an ordinary guy like Donald Byrd that didn't have the problems that I had. I didn't even care about that. I had control over the music. That's what I really cared about, that I had choice of the musicians. I could pick the musicians that I wanted, and then I could play the music that I wanted. All they wanted to do was hear it.

Brower: I noticed, though, a certain . . .

McLean: Like I didn't name *Swing*, *Swing*, *Swing*, and I hated that title when they told me they were going to name it that.

Brower: How about *New Soil*?

McLean: I named that. That was like a new place that I was coming to, to plant seeds. That was the whole idea of that. Left Prestige, and I was now on new soil.

Brower: You talked earlier about the significance of Pete LaRoca. We were talking about Tony's playing, and you said that Pete was interested in things that were related or similar. Do you want to talk about it?

McLean: I think that Pete – to me, Pete was into some things that Tony would arrive at later on, that he arrived at maybe not by hearing Peter – Pete – but just by whatever. But Pete was playing that kind of open concept drumming before I heard Tony, before Tony was even probably old enough to do anything.

Brower: Because this is '59, '58.

McLean: Yeah, '59.

Brower: And you're still working with – or you are working with at this point, beboppers or hard boppers. It's some of the same musicians that you'd been with.

McLean: They were my choice. Those were the choice musicians that I wanted.

Brower: I know earlier you said that the monster had you such that you didn't think about a circle. But at this point . . .

McLean: Well, there was a musical circle. Remember I said I didn't – not on a sociable level. I didn't have a circle of guys that I kind of hung out with after the date and we went over to a bar and sat down and talked or nothing. I didn't have time for that, and neither did anybody else there hardly. Walter and I were the ones that probably would run

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together out of that group, because we both were in the same thing. Donald was clean and healthy. So was Paul, and Pete LaRoca. Paul got involved later.

Brower: You're doing, I guess for the most part – what's the combination. Here's an album, the *Swing, Swing*. It's more like traditional things: *What's New, I'll Take Romance*. You're kind of going back and forth between standards and original material. When did you really get the . . . ? I guess you were writing all along. But it seems like there's a point where your writing really took a lift. When did that happen for you?

McLean: I think it was because I had listened to some other music that I hadn't experienced before. Like Bird told me early on to listen to Stravinsky, *Rites of Spring*, and I didn't pay that any attention at all. In fact, I thought he was trying to throw me off, send me off to listen to some of this Stravinsky. I couldn't even say the name, and I wasn't interested in listening to nobody but him and the people that I had been listening to. So when he mentioned that, I didn't pay it any mind.

But the day that he died, I went and bought *Rites of Spring* and listened to that, and that had a hell of an impact on me. It made me start looking at other composers from over in Europe that I hadn't paid any attention to, that Miles was really aware of and knew more about. I guess his – he got involved in that music when he was training in Juilliard for a period. But like Béla Bartók and some of those musicians.

Brower: What did you find there?

McLean: I just found another opening, another way to go, another feeling to have, another kind of sound to approach, another direction to move in. There were a lot of musicians that heard that and it had some kind of effect on them. Lennie Tristano was definitely one of them. In the '40s, when everybody was playing the regular bebop, standards and stuff, he was extending on Pres's music and really going out in another direction.

Brower: Is *Jackie's Bag* the first recording where a lot of your new ideas about writing begin to show themselves?

McLean: I had written *Quadrangle* before. I had written *Quadrangle* back in earlier times, but I kind of dressed it up for this record date.

Brower: Do you consider that to be your first?

McLean: That was one of them. This other piece I mentioned to you before, *Inding*, which was sort of – I think it was really what *Quadrangle* was based on. And

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Appointment in Ghana, Ballad for Doll. I just was writing and learning more about composition by doing it.

Brower: Self-taught.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: What was that process?

McLean: I had to learn something about the piano and how to voice chords. But I always did it by ear anyway. Most of those songs I wrote without really knowing what the chords were, just from by ear on the piano. But then later on, in about 1968, I decided it was time to stop doing that and started really learning how to voice real chords and harmonies and whatnot, and I went after it.

Brower: You're on the Lower East Side at this time. Is the musical community there beginning to establish itself? What role did you play in that?

McLean: Not any conscious one. First of all, I think that the fact that I started playing in Slug's on 3rd Street drew a lot of musicians to that part of town.

Brower: Tell people about Slug's. Tell us about Slug's.

McLean: It was just like a Polish bar with sawdust on the floor and peanuts on the bar and a bunch of blue-collar Europeans in there. Maybe a couple of brothers wander in and get a beer, something like that. But it was mostly Europeans in there, drinking beers.

Brower: So it was an ethnic bar.

McLean: Yeah, sort of like that.

Brower: On the Lower East Side.

McLean: Yeah, there were several like that on the Lower East Side. These two younger guys bought the bar. It remained the same. Then finally one day, they had – I think they had Charlie Moffett and somebody else playing in there one afternoon. I went by and saw that. I was shocked. Then the guy called me, saw me passing. Said, "Aren't you Jackie McLean?" I said yeah. So he said, "Man." He says, "You know, we're trying to do something in here, man. Maybe do some music or something like that." So I said, "Well man, it's the biggest secret in the world, because don't nobody know about it but you." I said, "If you want to do something," I said, "I would be glad to do it, if you would do a few things as well." So he said, "Like what?" I said, "Man, make some placards. I'll get

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the kids to take them out and spread them around. I'll get some people to go to Brooklyn and put them around, and uptown, and Harlem." I said, "And then maybe we can do something." So we started out with an afternoon cocktail sip on Sunday. We did two weeks advertisement, flyers and stuff, and man, the place was jammed on the first Sunday we tried it, 4 to 7.

Brower: What year was this?

McLean: About 1963 or something back in there. Then we did it the next Sunday. Then he wanted to do Saturday and Sunday. So by this time, the word had spread that there was music in the bar on the weekend. Then it went to Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Then he went back another day and started bringing us in on Thursday, Thursday through Sunday. It stayed like that for a while. Then he bumped off the other two days, and we were open for a week, Tuesday through Sunday. It was just my band for a good while, maybe a month and a half.

Brower: Who were you playing with at that time? Who was that?

McLean: I had – I think at that time I was using Woody Shaw, Scotty Holt, LaMont Johnson, and Billy Higgins.

Brower: What was the . . . ? – change the tape? Okay.

This is July 21st, 2001. My name is Bill Brower. I'm interviewing Jackie McLean for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project. Sven Abow is engineering.

We're talking about your time on the Lower East Side. Really we're talking about Slug's and how it came to be. It really was a legendary club. I think I came to New York for the first time briefly in 1967 or '66. The thing then was Sun Ra on Monday nights.

McLean: In Slug's.

Brower: In Slug's, yeah.

McLean: It went through many phases. I remember that I opened up there, and then I was there for a while. I had a gig in California. They wanted me to come out and play with Hampton Hawes. He had just come out of jail. They wanted me to open up in the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco with him. So the club owner said, "What about us?" – Slug's. So I said, "Look, man, I'm going to get Hank Mobley. So all you got to do is, my same rhythm section, Hank Mobley, and advertise 'Hank Mobley Quintet with Woody Shaw', the same band." So that was it. I split and went to California. I was out there for about three weeks with Hampton. We played three different clubs. Then I came back and

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went right back into the club with my band. By that time the whole band came out, and they came in with somebody else. I can't remember who it was, but they brought somebody else in. It was George Benson or somebody like that. I think it was George Benson.

Brower: When did you get the store on 3rd Street?

McLean: That happened . . .

Brower: A little bit later, maybe?

McLean: Maybe a year or so later. It happened because I wanted to take my sons, their money, and invest it in something and put some money to what they had saved and so something with it. What I did was buy this candy store and sell cigarettes and candy and malteds and ice cream and just generally – a candy store. Then I would sell it at Slug's, when I'd leave the stage. Say, "Ladies and gentlemen, when you're going on your break, just go right down the street, get yourself a refreshing malted ice cream sundae, buy a few candy bars, and be back for the next set." That's how I used to do that.

Brower: That was – talk about some of the other people that – beyond the musicians' circle – well, first of all, when did musicians start to come to the Lower East Side?

McLean: This is what I was saying. They started migrating down that way when the scene began to evolve down that way, because then another joint opened up over further, the Tin Palace or some other place, and another place somewhere else. Then sometimes I'd go across and work at the Vanguard. Max would call me – Max Gordon. I'd go over there and work with him. So Slug's became a real spot.

Brower: Was the Five Spot part of that? The Dome part of that?

McLean: Yeah, all those clubs. It's just another – that was the scene.

Brower: Who do you remember coming? Because that came to be associated with, I think, maybe a lot of avant garde players.

McLean: Yeah, [Ed] Blackwell and a whole lot of guys began to move down that part of town. I can't remember everybody. But there was a lot of people down there.

Brower: At this point were you interacting also with painters and writers?

McLean: Oh yeah. Bob Thompson and I were tight, very good friends. I was hanging out with him quite a bit.

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Brower: How did that begin to – was that shaping or influencing what you were doing artistically?

McLean: Yeah, I was influenced by Bob, the way he saw, the way he visualized the world, the way he painted, and we talked about a lot of stuff. I think I talked more with Bob about worldly things and the world of art and theater and politics and all that – more with Bob than with anybody.

Brower: What about the name Harvey Cooper?

McLean: Cropper.

Brower: Cropper?

McLean: Yeah. Harvey was somebody that was a painter that I knew back when I – before, like 1947, '48. I was hanging with a bunch of people that hung in the Village at that particular time too: Virginia Cox, the artist, and Harvey Cropper and a bunch of young poets and painters and musicians and stuff. We thought we had a scene, reading those books about the Village and Paris in the '20s and all like that. It was exciting to try to be a part of something like that. A lot of talent there too.

Brower: How active was your reading life at this time?

McLean: Reading? Eh, I would read, but I wasn't really an avid reader until many years later, until I went to the joint. That's when I started reading, because you didn't have anything else to do when you were confined.

Brower: When did you go to the joint?

McLean: '56, '57, '64.

Brower: Where? What joints? What are we talking about?

McLean: Rikers – The Tombs, Rikers Island, Hart Island. Those are the only three places that I went.

Brower: I remember that there was a guy I came to know, a guy named Big George. Tell me about – I just – I don't know how I came to know this guy. Maybe it was in Slug's. He was working with musicians.

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McLean: Oh yeah. He was part of the scene. He was like a musician. I knew George – Big George – from Brooklyn. He would go around and help to drum up people to come out to places to listen to the music.

Brower: Yeah. He's big too. He's about 6'- . . .

McLean: Yeah, he was about 6'5", something like that. He was tight with Trane as well. He was tight with me, tight with Trane. He would go on the road with Trane sometime, go out with Trane, help him on the road with his band. Then he would be with me too, coming around, helping me put my stuff together in clubs and different places. So he became – he and I became very good friends.

Brower: I was at my first festival – was a thing called [?Imbari] that we at Antioch, and it's through Big George that we contracted you and McCoy to play there. I don't know what you told us. But I remember being up all night.

McLean: I remember that night.

Brower: You were talking about The Tombs. I think Scotty Holt was in that band. I don't know who was playing drums. It might have been Higgins. I'm not sure. But I remember we spent – because you had to get a real early flight. We stayed up all night . . .

McLean: Stayed up all night.

Brower: . . . you telling. Wish I had a tape recorder, because I don't remember jack that you said. But I know it was around the whole – your experiences and stuff.

McLean: Staying awake.

Brower: Just keeping us going. What do you remember about that?

McLean: About what? That night?

Brower: That night.

McLean: Just a crowded room with a lot of cats in there, and the fact that they said, "Man, you might as well stay up," rather than try to go to sleep or anything. "We'll stay up. Let's just stay up. That's it," because it was already about 3 o'clock in the morning when we finally settled in that room. I had to leave early. That's all I can remember.

Brower: Did you know how enthralled we were with you? Did you have any sense of that?

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McLean: I don't think I had much of a sense of that.

Brower: We would be waiting for the next Jackie Mac record. It was – that was quite a thrill, because I can't recall anything either, other than probably sitting there with my eyes big as half dollars, not believing that I was in the same room with you.

McLean: Oh man. That's incredible.

Brower: I think there's a lot that you can maybe open up about what the Lower East Side was about at that time.

McLean: First of all, at one point I had to go all the way uptown every day to take care of my personal business in order to be well.

Brower: Still then?

McLean: Yeah. But then it began to change. It started coming – showing up down on the Lower East Side. So then it made it easier for me. I didn't travel quite as far every day to take care of this business. It was right there. That's one thing I remember happening on the Lower East Side. I can remember when it wasn't there, and I can remember when it was there, when it came.

Life on the Lower East Side was just like the same projects as everybody knows about, the whole story, the projects, a lot of kids. I was involved with kids. I had a drum and bugle corps. I rehearsed them, and I paraded them through the community. We used to march up and down Avenue D.

Brower: Was this something you did out of your own volition?

McLean: There was a program that Robert Kennedy started down in the Lower East Side called Mobilization for Youth. A man named Mr. Dunbar knew that I was a musician through René – he had René and some other kids he was involved – asked me to come and see him. When I came to see him, he said, "Would you be interested in starting a drum and bugle corps? Because we're going to buy uniforms and instruments and everything, and all I need to do is have you say to me that you'll take it over, and I'll get it going right away." So I said, "Yeah, I'll do that." We talked about money. That was it.

Brower: You worked with a number of René's friends at that point, or some people like – was that . . . ?

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Brower: Maybe Bill Saxton?

McLean: Yeah. They were all his friends. So it wasn't as much that I worked with them. I taught them. I taught Bill Saxton, gave him saxophone lessons. Took Fish and put him in the band, René in the band. So I was dealing with a lot of young musicians, because René was a young musician, right there.

Brower: So by this time René is 17, 18, 19?

McLean: Right. I had been getting him out to play and around from when he was 16, 15. I'd get him – after I taught him a few tunes, I'd tell him, “You come to the club” – like on a Friday night – “You get over there about 2, and I'm going to leave, and leave you on the stage with the band, Billy and them, and you close out and come on home. Let me go home.” So he'd say okay. He'd come over to the club. I'd bring him up – announce him and bring him up, and we'd hit one together. Then I'd play my solo. When he started his solo, I'd leave the stage and pack my horn and split. Billy and them would be looking at me, say, “Jackie.” [McLean whispers] “See you tomorrow,” and I'd leave René there with them. They would tease me. They'd say, “We didn't have no fun last night until René came. We was glad to see him. You going tonight? What time you going to leave tonight?” and all like that. But at any rate, René got some good training with those guys, and they liked him a lot. Billy, especially, was really crazy about René. That's the way it went. There he is.

Brower: Oh yeah, smiling Billy. Frank Mitchell is another one of them?

McLean: I remember him, yeah, but I didn't have that kind of close association with him.

Brower: So that was really just René's personal friends at that point.

McLean: Oh, Frank Mitchell, the tenor player.

Brower: Yeah.

McLean: Oh yeah. I recorded with him, with Lee, I think.

Brower: I think it was – where is it? Somewhere in here, there's that recording.

McLean: Yeah, I remember Frank Mitchell. He died a strange death.

Brower: Young?

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McLean: Yeah, very young. It was very – it was René’s age. That’s right. They don’t even have his name in here.

Brower: Maybe that’s not the right one, then. But I know you did it on one of Lee’s albums. Here it is. It’s on this one, *Sixth Sense*.

McLean: Yeah, that’s it. He was a young guy that came on the scene, that played very well.

Brower: When you said you gave these guys lessons, was it informal? Formal? Come see me every week?

McLean: Oh no. They were paying me for lessons. Sometimes they’d come up, come in the house. I’d say, “Give me the money.” They pay me. I’d say, “You all sit down and warm up. I’ll be right back.” Right out the door. They say, “Aw, man.” Then I come back and give them their lesson.

Brower: Were you playing with them? Or you had to take care of business?

McLean: No, I had to get out of there for a minute and take care of my business. Then I would come back and give them their lesson.

Brower: When did the monkey end? When did the monster end?

McLean: ’65.

Brower: ’65. And what brought it to an end?

McLean: I went to jail and stayed in jail for a six-month period. I got out in four months and 15 days on good behavior. Came home. Then I had a doctor that had been writing me letters and that wanted to see me. I went to see her. She was very helpful in getting me – keeping me together, holding me together with Dollie. That’s how it happened.

Brower: Was it sort of the end of the road kind of scenario? Were you . . . ?

McLean: I was just tired of going to jail. I went to jail three times, for nothing, over really . . .

Brower: A humble.

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McLean: Yeah, a nothing. \$10 worth or something. It's terrible, man. So I just – it was time to stop.

Brower: What impact did you think that had on your playing?

McLean: It had an impact on a positive side, because I had more time now to spend on thinking about music and doing stuff. And then of course John Coltrane died a couple years after that. That had a big impact on me. Not that John and I were real good buddies or anything like that. But musically I knew his importance. I just felt like I wanted to see where he was going to continue to go as a musician, and then it was just cut off like that. It was gone.

Brower: You felt that was a result of his prior addiction?

McLean: I don't think so. I think John just pushed the envelope. He played the instrument too much. Can't keep blowing into a thing that many hours every day. It's only a human body that you have. It ain't – he was practicing beyond, above and beyond anybody else's ability to blow that long and that hard. It just got to be crazy. Like he would go up on the – well, you know how he was doing. He was playing for an hour and 15 minutes on one tune. He would play one tune for the whole set, come down, and he'd leave the stage and go in the kitchen and do long tones until time to go back on. Never stopped. Then go home and continue to practice at home at night and all of that. Get up the next day, practice it all day. Very hard.

Brower: Butch Warren. Tell me about Butch Warren and your relationship with Butch Warren.

McLean: Butch was somebody that I think Webster told me about. He came to New York and came by my house. We had a rehearsal. I heard him. I was very impressed with him, and I hired him. We started – he moved into the city, and we started working, playing gigs together. Then he started working with other people, eventually ended up with Monk.

Brower: Are you aware of what happened to him?

McLean: Not really. I know he had some kind of problems. I'm not sure what they are. I know he has some kind of problem.

Brower: Yeah. He's still around.

McLean: I know he is.

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Brower: Every now and then he pops up.

McLean: Does he play?

Brower: Every now and then.

McLean: Can he still play?

Brower: I think he's probably a shadow of what he was. You found some of his writing interesting as well. You recorded some of his . . . ?

McLean: I think I recorded one or two of his things. I found his whole general approach to music very interesting, solos and time and harmony.

Brower: Did you see him as an extension of Paul?

McLean: Paul, yeah, definitely.

Brower: Your own music really – not really started changing, but there was these three albums that – I think this is the stuff that – this is where I came into really hearing you. Everything else from this point was going backward or going forward. You care to comment on *Let Freedom Ring* and *One Step Beyond* and *Destination . . . Out!*?

McLean: *Let Freedom Ring* was a quintet, originally a quintet album. Donald got sick on the date, couldn't play. So he left. Alfred was going to call the date off. I told Alfred to wait and let me talk to the band. I said, "That don't make sense, to call it off." So I went to talk to the guys. I say, "We can do this thing without the trumpet," and we did it. That was it. I went to Alfred. I said, "Man, we don't need the trumpet. We can do it without the trumpet."

Brower: One thing that hit me on that album is it's the first time I heard you go way above the natural range of the alto, almost into a place where you're whistling, a whistling thing. Was – what was . . . ?

McLean: That was me going back and borrowing from Illinois [Jacquet]. Illinois was doing that in Jazz at the Philharmonic. I just decided to try it, and did it. Particularly on that day it seemed like I just started doing it and kept on doing it.

Brower: Then you got the stuff with . . .

McLean: With Grachan.

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Brower: . . . with Grachan [Moncur] and Bobby [Hutcherson].

McLean: Bobby and them, yeah. That was nice. That was a nice band. We had a . . .

Brower: Tony was in that band.

McLean: Yeah. That was a good band. We rehearsed and put this music together.

Brower: Were you working?

McLean: That was a working band.

Brower: That was a working band.

McLean: Yeah, that was a working band.

Brower: Where would you be?

McLean: On the East Coast, just like you were saying. We played over in Newark. We'd play in Philadelphia. We'd play around New York, Long Island.

Brower: Did you play the Blue Coronet with this band?

McLean: With bits and pieces of it, yeah. It was not exactly that band. I played – did we play at the Coronet? Yeah, we played the Coronet. That's right. Yeah, we played the Coronet.

Brower: When did that club become important?

McLean: I can't remember the year, but back in the '60s. It was just the same guys: Bobby Hutcherson, Grachan, and maybe a different drummer, different bass player. But the front line, with Bobby, Grachan, and myself, that was the concept for the harmonic structure of the music that we were playing at that particular time. Grachan wrote some the music, and I wrote some of it.

Brower: How did you come to know Grachan?

McLean: I had met Grachan early on, when I was working with the Messengers. He used to come over. We used to go to Newark, up to play. He would come to the club. He would come to the city and come to the club. But then I had never heard him play until this particular period. Then we got together and started practicing.

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Brower: How did Bobby come into the mix?

McLean: Bobby had just come to New York. Somebody told me they heard this vibes player. I should check him out. So we went over to Brooklyn, had a rehearsal, invited him over. That was it. The minute I heard him, I fell in love with that whole idea, that sound, the vibes and the trombone and alto.

Brower: So you took out the piano and put in the vibes.

McLean: Put the vibes there, yeah.

Brower: What did that allow for you, musically?

McLean: Space and color. Because Bobby played a lot of colors, rainbows and things in his accompaniment.

Brower: Was he one of your favorite accompanists?

McLean: Oh yeah, definitely so. We've done a lot of duo things together and played a lot of things together that we can move from one concept to another, play standards, play this, play that. Bobby's open for everything, like me.

Brower: Later on you compare LaMont Johnson to him, what he provided.

McLean: Yeah, right. LaMont was also very open to space and color.

Brower: What other accompanists have had that, have brought that to your . . . ?

McLean: Herbie Nichols, definitely. He was one of the first ones that I heard that brought that kind of feel. But there are a lot of piano players that are around that bring different things. Cedar is a highly competent accompanist, incredibly talented at that.

Brower: But not in such an open way. More of a . . .

McLean: No, not in that way.

Brower: More straight down the pipe.

McLean: More straight ahead, yeah.

Brower: Tony goes out, and Roy Haynes comes in, playing in the same configuration. Did that change things?

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McLean: Roy is so great. Roy Haynes is like at the seed somewhere. He's in there in Tony's roots somewhere. Tony's roots go down, and you find Roy Haynes under there in the soil.

Brower: Do you think Roy had to change his playing to operate in what you were trying to do?

McLean: No, uh-uh, no, man. He's open to that. Roy is an exceptional drummer, great, great drummer. One of my favorites. There's so many drummers that I'm in love with, like Michael Carvin and Ronnie Burrage. Of course Eric is my latest, and then there's Nasheet Waits. Nasheet is bad. Louis Nash is another one of my favorite drummers. I love Louis Nash.

Brower: Around this time you start writing your own liner notes. You did it for a while, and then you weren't doing it. Are we still in the period when you still – the monster is still there? Or we've gotten past that?

McLean: If it's after '65, I'm through with that, yeah. But if it's before that, I'm still there.

Brower: These titles – these are your concepts?

McLean: *Let Freedom Ring* was mine. *Destination . . . Out!* Yeah, those three were mine.

I want to take a break.

Brower: Okay.

[recording interrupted]

I was asking you, and you can answer as you did, about what impact you thought Rudy Van Gelder had on the whole Blue Note scene.

McLean: I think it's just his – wherever he recorded at. I think that he had a style, a way of recording the instruments, that made his albums stand out. I thought the stuff he did on Blue Note, he captured what we were trying to do wonderfully. Later on – when I went back and recorded with him later on, I didn't get the same thrills that I got in the early – but that's because the whole technology had changed, and so therefore he gets lost in the mix of trying to add new things to what his original thing was.

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Brower: So when you did the date on Antilles.

McLean: Yeah, all of those things.

Brower: It wasn't the same.

McLean: It was – but I was waiting for something like, ah, back to Rudy again, and it just turned out to be . . .

Brower: There are a couple more musicians that you brought to the fore during the Blue Note time that I want to ask you about. One is Larry Willis, and the other is Charles Tolliver.

McLean: Larry Willis, I told you, we met him early on when he was in high school. I started using him back then.

Charles Tolliver, I was in the hospital once, and he came in with some kind of band that plays for people when they're in the hospital. He came in. It was a bunch of young cats trying to play *A Night in Tunisia* and a bunch of things. So I was sitting out there in my robe and slides with all the other sick people. I was sitting out there. He didn't even know me from Adam. Then the tenor player was there. So I came up on the break. I hadn't played in weeks. I'd been in the hospital. So I said, "Let me see that guy's tenor, man. What you all going to play next?" We played. Bam. It was like, "Oh man, who are you?" I told him who I was. He said, "Oh man. Can I get your number?" So I gave it to him. He called me when I came home out of the hospital. He said, "I'd like to bring my horn down and sit in whenever you're playing." I had some gigs in some clubs. I invited him to come and play. That was at the very beginning. He was learning how to get the language and stuff together. I just – that's how I met him. I started using him, because I've always – never had a problem with taking somebody that's not quite finished and putting him up there and seeing them finish off because of the environment that they're in, because that's what happened to me.

Brower: Push them off the high board.

McLean: That's all it is, because that's what happened to me. I went with Miles. I was not ready to get up there on the stage with no Miles Davis to do nothing except help him up on the stage with his horn. I really wasn't. I didn't think I was quite that ready. I wasn't ready like Sonny Rollins was. But I went up, and the environment carried me to the next level.

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Brower: At the end of your Blue Note – phase of recording for Blue Note, you did a couple of – well, before that, the album with Ornette. Talk about that experience, how it came about and what that meant to you.

McLean: That was Ornette playing with me. It was my date, and Alfred asked me what I felt like to use Ornette. I told him great, because I was thinking of Ornette playing the saxophone. But when it came time to do the date, he wouldn't – didn't want to play the saxophone. He only wanted to play the trumpet. So we went ahead and did the date anyway, with him playing the trumpet. But I was a little upset, the fact that he wasn't going to play saxophone. That was it.

Brower: What did you think of his trumpet playing?

McLean: I had a lot of guys who were mad at me, like Kenny Dorham and especially Lee. Lee was like, "What is your problem, man? Me, I ain't doing nothing. You can call me for dates. I call you for dates. And you call this cat to play on your date, play trumpet. Get out of here." All of them were beating me up about that.

Brower: Was he not accepted into the fraternity?

McLean: No, man, not as a trumpet player or violin player.

Brower: But you could find a way, in your idea of music, of the fact that he wasn't at their technical proficiency and command . . .

McLean: But I knew that he was a master musician in his own right, and I knew that he would bring something to the record date that would be worthwhile. And I always liked Ornette as a composer, as a saxophone player. So these other things that he wanted to do, they were okay, if that's what he wants to do. That's how that came about. That was about maybe the last date that I did for them. I'm not sure.

Brower: You made a couple of records with the band with Scotty Holt and LaMont, and then there's a thing with Rashied [Ali] on it. A piece of particular interest to me was *Conversion Point*, where it seems like that that's maybe as out as you got?

McLean: I can't remember that piece. I don't remember it right now. So I couldn't relate to it unless I heard it. But yeah, it wasn't like going anywhere except just developing the music and making the music change with your mind and with your feeling for sound and rhythm. So that's all I've ever tried to do. But that doesn't stop me from playing "Old rockin' chair's got me" or one of them beautiful old songs that Louis used to do.

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Brower: What's your feeling about things that weren't released originally, that then they – Blue Note – brings out later? Did you participate in any of that? Did they ask you, "Do you want to put this session out?"?

McLean: No, man, they don't ask you nothing. They don't even send you a record. They don't even send you a CD in the mail and say, "Thanks a lot. We're letting this out." You just hear somebody say, "Hey, man, I just picked up a new CD by you called" whatever.

Brower: *Vertigo*.

McLean: *Vertigo*. They're making these compilations of different albums, mixing and matching. They're going to be doing that forever. That's what they do.

Brower: So you don't – that's not acceptable to you? Or you're not happy?

McLean: There's nothing I can do about it.

Brower: Right.

McLean: It has to be acceptable, because that's what it is. I don't like it. I'd much rather be making money like they make money. They're making money for their families, their grandchildren, their great-grand – that's what they're doing.

Brower: I look at catalogs like an oil well. They just keep pumping.

McLean: Yeah, they keep pumping it out and selling whole batches of music to other companies. Some of my music is owned by Coca Cola and Company and all that kind of stuff. So you don't know where your music ends up. It may be called such – Ajax Music Company, but that could – behind that could be RCA Victor or any number of things, Coca Cola or whatever.

Brower: So Blue Note fundamentally changed after . . .

McLean: When I went in for the last conference with them in '68, when Alfred and Frank were getting ready to sell the company, I met the people. That was George Butler and a few other people who were going to be involved with the new company. I didn't like them. I didn't like George Butler. I didn't like what they were getting ready to do, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it. So I just told them, "I don't want to have no relationship with you. Forget about it."

Brower: This is about the time you decided to leave New York? How did that come about?

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McLean: Right. Trane had died. This was a year later. I was working in a penitentiary as a bandmaster, to try to keep my head above the water.

Brower: Which penitentiary?

McLean: On the West Side in Manhattan. There's a penitentiary there that they house addicts and other people that they haven't sent away to the bigger places, that are doing small amounts of time, 60 days, 90 days, four months, like that. Nobody in there doing big, long time. So they hired me as a bandmaster. I went in there and organized the music department and began to teach these guys something about music. Meanwhile, I was making a good salary. It was a good job, and playing at night. But then, finally, some people came down from Connecticut and approached me, asked me would I be interested in coming up and looking at this university? They wanted someone to come there and bring some African-American culture there, something that was more Afro-centric, and they figured that I could do that with the music. So I came up and met the dean of the school and some of the students from the black students union. That's how it started. I started commuting up to teach one day, two days a week, which led to three days. Then the Commission on the Arts here in Hartford wanted to hire me as a consultant. They wanted me to come into this community here and look for other artists that could maybe make a program for the youth that could – that's why this came about.

Brower: The Artists Collective.

McLean: That's where they started me on that. I went around and met Cheryl Smith, the lady you met yesterday, and a few other people, and Dollie and I. We started meeting. We started talking about – well, that's later on. First I started meeting some people and commuting back and forth. So I looked up, and I was here four days a week. I finally said to Dollie – I said, "You know, I wouldn't mind moving out of here," because we had a beautiful apartment on Avenue C and 13th Street. We lived at 1 Haven Plaza. We were up on the 27th floor in a nice apartment. Dollie said, "Where are we going to go?" I said, "We'll go to Connecticut. It's nice." I said, "I'm staying with some people up there that will let me stay at their house. I'll bring you up. We'll take a look at the town." Dollie's a staunch New Yorker, staunch. She loves to shop. She loves to go into all those museums and do all the districts and the galleries and keep up with dance and everything that's going on. That's her life. It's what she loves, as long as shopping is in there. She loves shopping. So – all ladies love shopping. So anyway – that's what we're talking about on the phone now. She wants to drag me down to Marshall's or one of them stores – but at any rate, I brought Dollie up here. When she saw this town, she said, "Are you kidding me?" She says, "Show me the downtown area." I drove down Albany Avenue, and there's two little stores, G. Fox and another one. I said, "This is kind of like the spot." She said, "Aw man, get out of here." Where's this? Where's that? I said, "They don't

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have that here.” She said, “No, I don’t want to live up here. This is tired.” So she went back to New York, and I was still commuting back and forth.

Then I came home one – I used to come home on Thursday night and stay Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and leave Monday, come back up here. I said, “Dollie, I’m going to look at a house.” I said, “And once I look at this house, if I like it, will you come up and look at the house with me? Just look at the house.” So she said, oh man. My kid’s like – this is at the dinner table. Melonae is like, “What?” Vernon is like, “What are you going to do, Dad? Look at a house? Oh man. What about all my friends?” and all of that. You know how kids are. So I came up and saw this house that I’m living in now, which is right up the street here, across from this park here. It’s beautiful. So I saw the house, and I was like breathtaken with it. I said, I can do this. So I came back down and got Dollie, brought her up. Dollie looked at the house. She went and looked out the living room window. She said, “This is a – we’re in the woods, man. Look over there. There’s a woods.” I said, “Dollie, that’s not a woods. That’s like Central Park.” I said, “It’s a park.” So she sat around. She said, “Nobody’s even out here in the street. I haven’t seen one human being walk by, not a dog or a cat. Nothing.” I said, “Dollie, Hartford is not like New York. It’s a different kind of city.” She said, “Nah, I’m not interested.”

So anyway, I finally had to make a bully thing. I finally said, “Hey look. Let me tell all you all something at dinner. I’m moving to Hartford, and anybody that’s coming with me, let’s get ready to pack up and get out of here.” I said, “I can’t do anything else here. There’s no more Slug’s down the street. Trane is dead. I’ve got a day job here that I don’t want to particularly be bothered about. I’m up here. I can get in the university. I can get a better school for Melonae to go to. There are better schools up there, private schools. Dollie, you will love it, if you get . . .” – so finally, I convinced Dollie.

What really convinced her is, one of my friends who I was staying with, Tony Keller, who was the director of the Commission on the Arts, who had a lot to do with helping me come up with this Artists Collective thing – Tony had a friend who was in charge of the museum downtown, the [Wadsworth] Atheneum. It’s the oldest museum in the United States, a very prestigious place. He said, “Dollie is smart. She works for a head pathologist in New York, at New York [?]. I would hire her to work for me up here. She’d be my liaison to the black community.” So I went home and sold that to Dollie. She kind of liked that.

So, to make a long story short, we moved up, and she started working at the museum. I was working – teaching at the university, plus I got a day job at the Hartford Dispensary, which was a place for addicts to come to get back their life and to kind of settle back into normal living. They needed counseling. They needed methadone. Whatever they needed, I was there to provide this kind of support for them. It was a good job. It paid about \$9,000 a year at that particular time. I took it. Between that and my job – part-time job at

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the university, I was working, and I forgot about playing. I said, the heck with that for now. I'm going to deal with this. So I started building that department up there. We started meeting to come up with the Artists Collective concept. And that's it. I built that department into a degree program. I founded the department, built it, named it. They have since changed the name from the African-American Music Department at Hartt to the Jackie McLean Institute. So they've named the thing after me. Then we got this started. We were in a little beat-up school there for about 15 years or more, and then we started raising money for this, and here it is.

Brower: It's a bigger story than what you've encapsulated. I want to go into it in some detail. But I want to ask you about musicians in prison. During the time you were incarcerated, were there other significant musicians there? What went on in those circumstances?

McLean: Oh man, it was a who's who on Rikers Island. The band . . .

Brower: I think this is what you talked about that night.

McLean: The band director was Ike Quebec. We had . . .

Brower: Who had been – who either then or later . . .

McLean: He was connected with Blue Note, yeah.

Brower: He was A & R for Blue Note?

McLean: Yeah. He never called me Jackie. He always called me Henry. I don't know why. But anyway, when I came in, I didn't even know he was there. I was coming in with my blanket, with the other prisoners, and I heard, "Henry, God dammit. What are you doing here, you fag?" I looked over, and it was Ike. He was locked in the tank. It was him, and Freddie Douglas, a great alto player from the Bronx, and several other guys: Roy Porter, the drummer.

Brower: From California?

McLean: Not that Roy Porter. What's this guy's first name? Not that Roy Porter. It's another one. Anyway, he was a good drummer. So there was a lot of musicians. We had a big band that was great. There were a lot of musicians in Rikers Island.

Brower: Tombs was different?

McLean: Tombs had no music. The Tombs . . .

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Brower: That's like a holding situation?

McLean: Yeah, Tombs is just what the name said. It was The Tombs. You just ain't dead. It's cold lockup so many hours a day. You're locked up about 19 hours a day, maybe 20 hours a day, maybe 21 a hour, because you only come out to eat. That's it. And then they don't even bring you out every time for that. Sometimes they'll feed you right in the cell, roll up a cart and pass a tray to you. But you ate your breakfast and your supper down in – most of the time, down in the cafeteria. Sometimes you ate three meals there.

Brower: You said at Rikers there was a big band.

McLean: Yeah, but all we did every day was get up. Everybody had to be on some kind of work gang. So either you were on the house gang, which took care of that particular cell block, mopping it, taking care of dusting it, and doing whatever needs to be done. Or you were in the coal gang. You went to the powerhouse and shoveled coal. Or you were in the dock gang, where you unloaded the boats that came in with the sugar and potatoes and stuff. That was like slavery, big bags, 50-pound bags of sugar and rice and things like that. Or you were in other jobs. In the infirmary, or you were working in the recreation unit. That's where I was. All musicians were in recreation. All we did every day is get up and go have breakfast, come back, clean up our cell, and then go out to our work detail, which consisted of us going down to the theater, getting our instruments out, and rehearsing until 12. Then we'd go eat before the other guys ate. Then we'd come back to the theater, and as the gangs came out of the – as the work gangs came out of the cafeteria, they came into the auditorium and milled around in there. We played for them, until time for them to go back to their second shift for the day, which was usually around 1 o'clock, 1:15. They went back to the coal gang, back to the bakery, back to all the different jobs that they had. We continued to play until about 4. Then we – they take us and lock us in from about 4:30 until about 6 or 5:30. Then we'd come out to go have dinner. Then after dinner you'd have a couple of hours to hang around in front of the cells or stay in the cellblock and go look at television down at the other end, or whatever, play cards or whatever. Then the whistle would blow about 7:30, 8 o'clock, and you lock in. The lights go out at 9. That's it.

Brower: Did you have – did you – do any of your compositions emanate from your time there? Did you do any writing while you were there?

McLean: No, man. It wasn't an environment that I was inspired to do anything in. Just play every day. Being locked away like that, it's – you always hear about some guy, "plays saxophone. He was locked away for five years, man. He ain't been doing nothing but practicing in there for five years." He ain't going to have much to do when he comes

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out. He'll have a lot of technique and everything, but his head, his environment, keeps him from being so creative.

Brower: In the circumstance when you were teaching, were these novices? Or were there other talented musicians that you had a chance to work with, when you had the job?

McLean: No, they were novices. I was even teaching trombone, any instrument. I'd just have a book. "I want to play trombone." "Okay, this is A and this is B," like that. "You go practice those tunes. I'll see you tomorrow. Okay? Next." That's what it was like.

Brower: I don't know. This is not in a way funny, but you're funny, you doing this. Have you done any more – other than the thing with Jack Gelber, have you done any other acting or put that part of yourself . . . ?

McLean: No. I never got a chance to. I always wanted to. When I was with the Living Theater, they saw that I was very interested in acting and that whole thing. So they always kept me as an understudy for any part. So we'd be like in France or something like that, and one of the guys who was an actor in the play got mad. We were over in Paris, and he said, "Aw, the hell with it. I'm going home." He was playing a Chinese bartender in one of Bertolt Brecht's plays or something in the city, or – I can't think of the name of it, the name of the play they were doing. But right away, Judith Malina came to me and said, "Look, Jackie, you're going to have to take his place. So here's his lines. We're going to make you up. You're going to be a Chinese bartender. You're going to have to do that too for us." So I said okay. So every night . . .

Brower: So this was a repertory situation.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: It wasn't just *The Connection* that you were doing.

McLean: No.

Brower: They were doing a variety of pieces.

McLean: Other plays as well. *Waiting for Godot* or one of those plays. I had a few lines. I had to run out and say something – "The stockyards are on fire" – as a Japanese or Chinese guy. They made me up and gave me all the makeup and stuff, pigtail hanging down and everything. I liked that. I enjoyed being in that company. Julian Beck. He always made me up every night.

Brower: What kind of guy was he?

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McLean: Very talented, brilliant, brilliant theater man. He started out building sets. That was his first introduction to theater. Then he just grew and became swallowed up, because it can do that to you. It did it to me. I was very involved and very loving to be in the theater.

Brower: Were there particular thinkers or writers or others that you came to know through that community of people?

McLean: Yeah, but a lot of them were young actors that would later go on to be very famous, like the one that played in *Godfather*. He was around there, sweeping floors and moping and carrying on when I was in the Living Theater. The one that played the son in *The Godfather*. What's his name? Michael, who went away to the Army and came back. You know *The Godfather*.

Brower: Movies are not my . . .

McLean: Anyway, him and a few other actors there.

Brower: But I meant ideas, books.

McLean: No, I was still dealing with my megillah at that time.

Brower: But you said you began to read in the joint.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: What did you begin to read?

McLean: I just read everything that came my way when I was in there. I was so hungry to have something to read. I remember reading about extrasensory perception. One of the first books I read was *ESP* and like that. But I didn't really start to read heavily until around 1970. That's when I started to really absorb a lot of literature, because I had to prepare myself for these classes I was teaching.

Brower: Khalil Gibron shows up in – as you quote him. When did that come to be . . . ?

McLean: When I read – someone introduced me to his writings somewhere in the hospital or in the joint somewhere. I started reading it, and I fell in love with the rhythm of it, just his writing. So that's why I wrote that piece for him, *Khalil the Prophet*.

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Brower: Let's come back to this. You condensed this. But this was quite a struggle, both to develop the department and to develop the institution, the community institution.

McLean: Oh yeah.

Brower: By the way, did Archie Shepp have any role in you coming to this?

McLean: Not to this school, but he had a role in telling me that I could teach in a university, no problem. Because when he first called me – he called me up around 1968 and said, “Jackie, will you come up to Buffalo with me and teach?” at this program – at this college, University of Buffalo. He said, “I’m going to have you, Ron Carter, and Grachan Moncur.” So I said, “Hey, look, Archie, I’m ain’t never taught in no – what am I going to teach in a university? I don’t even know how to think about that.” So he said, “Jackie, it’s nothing.” So I said, “No, man, I don’t want to put myself in that position. I can’t do anything with that.” So he said, “Look, man, will you at least come with me? I’ll pay your way up, put you up in a hotel. Spend the night up there and see what we’re doing. Just see how simple it’ll be for you.” And he said, “Just watch me.” So I went up with Archie. We went in. The first morning, picked me up and took me to his classes. He went up on the stage and talked about his record dates and about this and that and the other to the students. I thought, I can do that. I can really do that. I knew – I lived through that whole period between 1945 and the development of that whole school of music, modern school with Monk and Bud and all of that. So I didn’t have to read about that.

But that was where I ran into a wall, because when they actually hired me up here, and I started teaching a class from 1945 to the present, any time a student asked me about a musician that I didn’t know anything about, I would squash them. I would say, “Hey, we’re talking about 1945 to the present. Jelly Roll Morton doesn’t fit into this picture right now. So I’ll talk to you about that after the class. See me after the class.” I didn’t want to get anybody to trap – I want to know everything. I wanted people to think that I knew everything. But then that would send me running to the books, man. I had Jelly Roll Morton. I have to start – born in – you know, New Orleans and did this and did that and wrote these tunes. That’s what made me say, hey, wait a minute. I got to go back and really do some studying. So I called up [Amiri] Baraka and talked to him for a minute. He gave me some leads. I started reading these books and started just taking the musicians one at a time and finding out as much as I could find out about them and what they contributed to the music and went back, backwards, Jimmie Lunceford and all these guys, Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, of course Duke, Sidney Bechet, and listening to the music. I spent between 1970 and ’72 really studying very hard and not touching the saxophone at all. Between that and coming over here and developing this community program, it took up all my time.

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But I'm not sorry. As I look back on it now, I'm not sorry that I did it. I'm happy that I did it, because we did something in this town that was needed. We did it, and we did it without getting in trouble or having a lot of bad things around what we do, like stealing money or trying to be slick. Most community-based programs usually run into that wall. Somebody tries to do something, to steal something and get something for nothing. So we decided we were never going to go have anything like that happen. When we did hire people, and they stole from this program, all we did was fire them, get together, go in our pockets, and put that money back, so that we didn't have to even deal with that. We had a girl here who stole \$300. Once we found that out, we said okay. There were six of us, \$50 apiece, put that money back, get rid of her, keep on marching.

We went through a lot, especially this part, putting the Artists Collective together. It was a lot. There was other people that saw that we had started to put this Artists Collective program together and that we were serious about doing so. They started a cultural center, and they were going to compete for our – for funds that we're trying to get. We had a lot of that, and a lot of infighting here in the north end. The last thing I thought we'd have a problem was up here. This is where we had our biggest problems.

Brower: The north end?

McLean: Black community.

Brower: Right. This is the core community of . . .

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: . . . of the “ghetto”?

McLean: Yeah. People come and say, “What you all think you all doing? We got people here that play music and do music. We're starting our own program. We got a saxophone player here. He plays. I want to introduce you to Ed Bullins.” I say, “Man, I don't care about no Ed Bullins. You know who you're talking to? Ed Bullins? What did he ever do? Tell him to come out and play. When you hear somebody . . .” Oh man. Go back to school with that thing. Put that saxophone away. Go get a job. You know. I've been doing this all my life.

But people in small towns think that their world is bigger than it really is a lot of times. That was the problem we had here in Hartford, because Dollie and I came from New York, where there were 150,000 Jackie McLeans, Dollie McLeans, and people doing stuff. But you're not going to find that in the smaller cities like Bridgeport or Hartford or New Haven or any of these places. Sure, there's talented people, brilliant people, everywhere.

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But once people saw that we weren't giving up, we weren't going to be run out of town, and we weren't going to be belittled, and that we were going to stand our ground and fight for what we started to do – and that was to build this program – they backed off.

Brower: Why multi-disciplines? What's the theory behind that.

McLean: I just thought it would be – it would offer the kids more to choose from, basically, rather than to say, we're starting a music school. Maybe everybody don't want to be bothered with music. So music and dance, the visual arts.

Brower: Was your motivation to develop artists or to save youth?

McLean: To save youth and to give youth some direction. And at the same time – Eric LaSalle is the other guy I was trying to think of yesterday, the guy that's on *Emergency Room*, the brother on that show. He started here at the Collective, took his first drama lessons here. So we were serious about doing both things, saving the youth, giving them some direction, but at the same time, trying to draw out some talent and give kids some options.

Brower: From the musical standpoint, the world that you came up through, the way that you were able to be mentored and model yourself, and the access that you had to players, that world doesn't exist anymore.

McLean: No.

Brower: To what extent have you tried – through the Artists Collective, or the way you do things in the program at Hartt Music College – to offer something to replace the system that you came through, to develop as a musician?

McLean: By taking on a large group of people to mentor. Like I mentor all of my kids, every one of them, all of those that come through this program, that they come through the music department. Like those kids you saw over there yesterday. I'd go out of my way to provide them with whatever I can give them to help them. A lot of them want to be around me because I was on this record or that record, and have a rehearsal, have me play a melody with them. I do all of that, because Bud and those guys did that for me. So I try to provide them with as much mentoring as I can. Up at the college, I'm through with that now. I've already gave 30 years up there at that university. So they don't expect me to come up there now and do what I was doing 20 years ago, even 5 years ago. But I've developed people that are talented, that are there, that came through my program, that can do – Steve Davis. You know Steve. He's a magnificent player and composer and everything. He's up there as a bandmaster. Nat Reeves, the bassist, he's there. Rick

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Rozie, bassist, who both worked with jazz groups, avant garde groups, and he's in the Hartford Symphony. He's the principal bassist.

Brower: Does he have a – is he American Indian?

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: So he had a brother that plays saxophone?

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Lee?

McLean: Lee Rozie.

Brower: Where is he now?

McLean: They're up here too. They're around, still around. But some of them have gone back. Lee has gone back into the Indian community. He's gone back to his roots. He plays the saxophone and the mandolin. He's looking like more of an Indian than – his brother looks more like a regular guy.

So I've developed the talent up there, saxophone players that I've taught. They come in there and teach. Abraham [Burton] comes in, and so does Jimmy Greene and [?Waynus Goffrey?] and all the different young players, Chris Allen, Kris Jensen. All of them, they come back.

Brower: Did Cindy Blackman come through here?

McLean: Yeah, Cindy came through the Collective, took her first drum lessons here.

Brower: What other musicians came through the Collective as opposed to through the university?

McLean: There's some that you won't know about yet. Lummie Spann, who came through here and now went on to the university. That little bass player you saw yesterday. He's here, and he's coming through the university. He's a freshman. I don't know where the trumpet player's going to go, the big boy you saw blowing the trumpet yesterday. He may come up there, but he may go to another school. Who knows?

Brower: At this point, do you lecture? Do you do any active thing at the Jackie McLean Institute?

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McLean: Right now we're in a transition. I come there for one month during the spring semester and one month in the fall semester. Four weeks. I'm there for four complete weeks, and then they leave me alone. I'm out playing, doing what I want to do. That's what I told them. That's what they can give me. I said, you all gave me hell, the first years I was up here. I caught hell. I didn't have a place to hang my hat. Didn't have a place to – an office. Had nothing. I was a real stepchild at this school. But I understood that, because it was a college that was steeped in European music and opera, and I was a odd fellow out. I was a stranger. But I earned my way through there. I built that department to be one of – the pride of that school. They love that department up there. Now it's the most popular department in the school. The opera has disappeared from up there. We came in there like a virus, man, and just – you know. So now they just named the department after me. They don't want me to resign – retire – and take myself away from the program.

Brower: You know that the University of New Orleans is now naming their institute, their jazz program, to Ellis Marsalis.

McLean: Oh, wonderful.

Brower: And endowing him a chair. I was unaware that you sort of set the precedent. It's a similar kind of thing. He came there, attracted a lot of students as a stepchild, and now it's the pride of their university.

McLean: Right. That's what's happening.

Brower: How do you – it's a very different world. How do you think the university – and the university as populated by persons like yourself, who came from the performance world, made all the stuff that people look and study and go to stores and buy – how do you think the whole jazz education world – how do you think that's impacting the nature of the music and the kinds of musicians that are being developed?

McLean: The technology today and what is available to a young student is 50 times, 100 times more than what we had when we were coming along. We didn't even have any tape recorders. We had to – if we wanted to take something off of a recording, we had to take it off the record as it was. The mere fact that they teach this concept in music – in universities – is another day. We had nothing like that when I was coming along. So it has given the world 50 times more musicians. There's a lot of saxophone players out here now and a lot of piano players. Cities are flooded with young players. They're all coming out of these universities and coming out into the world, looking for their spot. It's just not that many spots out there. But if America will open up more, and the Ken Burns thing, even though a lot of people didn't agree with that, didn't like that show that much, but at

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least it did something. It brought the music to the attention of the Joe Sixpack, an everyday guy.

Brower: There was a – I went back and looked at at least one. I know you were in there a couple of times. How much of what you gave to Ken Burns didn't make it into the film?

McLean: I can't tell you that. I can't remember. I didn't give him too much more than – except what you saw. I refused to talk about things that I didn't feel I need to talk about, that it wasn't proper for me to talk about. Like they wanted me to talk about Trane. I said, "Look, man, if you want somebody to talk about Trane, sure, I can talk about Trane. But if you want somebody to talk about Trane, you go talk to Jimmie Heath, because they lived together when they were in Dizzy's band. They came up in the same city. So that's who you should go talk to about that." They never did. Instead they went to talk to Joshua Redman, who said that he heard John Coltrane on a record when he was 14. So what? How important is that historically? What has that got to do with anything? That made me sick about that, the people that they chose to be their consultants. Wynton [Marsalis] had so much to say about things that he had nothing to do with at all, no relationship at all, except through hearsay in books, when in fact they never even interviewed Benny Carter, who lived through that whole period, was with Fletcher Henderson's band, did record with Louis Armstrong, was around all those guys. Wynton wasn't even thought of. Wynton's father wasn't even around. So it didn't make sense. I have to – I take nothing away from Wynton. I have a lot of respect for Wynton, both as a musician and as somebody that's trying to expand the music and give the music to the kids and to do the things that he's doing. But I just think that, him and Stanley Crouch, that wasn't – to me, I thought they could have gone and gotten some other people involved.

Brower: You – one opportunity I had the privilege to be in your – working with you was when they featured you at – during the classical jazz at Lincoln Center, one of the early years of concerts. It was a situation in which various arrangers – I think maybe Curtis [Fuller], maybe Walter Davis, Larry Willis – were asked to take your pieces and expand them for a larger performance, 10 pieces – quintet pieces that were now heard and scored for 10 pieces. How important was that?

McLean: That was a big, big night for me, because I have so much respect for Slide [Hampton] as an arranger. Slide really did some beautiful things with some of my compositions. And Walter Davis, a genius, incredibly important in arrangements and things. That was just how it was. It was a big, important evening for me. I had never heard my music in that context.

Brower: Would you like to have that happen more?

McLean: Yeah.

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Brower: Did that satisfy that need? Or was that just whetting the appetite for an expanded presentation of Jackie's music?

McLean: Yeah, it whet my appetite. If it never happened again, then I was just happy that it happened that one time. But Wynton has since come to me and approached me on doing some other things. I just haven't had time to do them with.

Brower: Writing new music?

McLean: They wanted to take some of my other music and present it, like with Grachan and Bobby and those guys. But when I stopped and thought about it, I said, man, wait a minute. Bobby's out in California. Grachan isn't – I haven't seen Grachan in years. I don't know what he's doing. It's going to be kind of difficult to bring all these people back to one spot and have it done properly. It can't be no rush job. We got to be able to come together for a week, practice every day, and get the music down – back in some kind of shape, and go do it. So I just didn't agree to do that at this particular time.

And then they want me to come and teach down there in that program as well. I don't know if I even want to be bothered with teaching much anymore at the college level.

Brower: What do you think the challenge is to American cultural institutions? In my time in working there, there was a lot of – there came to be a point where there was a lot of negative response. I viewed it as crabs in a barrel, of people being jealous. You couldn't – I mean, if he was artistic director, you would expect him to showcase his people and showcase his sensibility. The real challenge was for other performance centers to decide, let's make Jimmie Heath artistic director, or let's make Cecil Taylor artistic – we'll make some – and then those persons would have the opportunity to bring their galaxy of – their circle to the fore and to present their music and music that they were really interested in. That seems to me to be where – the whole club is unable to frankly support artists of quality and achievement financially. You can't, with 150 people or 75 people or 80 people, pay a Jackie McLean what he's worth on a night. You'd have to charge people \$80 or \$100 a head. So it becomes a prohibitive environment. It seems like these – more performance centers, more cities – and they all have a signature performance center – need to be challenged to do what Lincoln Center does – is doing now, what the Kennedy Center's doing with Billy Taylor. How do you feel about that?

McLean: I think that should be high on the list of things that big cities should be trying to do. That's why we're here, doing this. We're doing it ourselves here. We're presenting concerts, dance troupes, artists, and different people – painters – coming into this building, into this place, and presenting their work, presenting their music, their productions, here. Also, we're hoping that in time this will be recognized here in the

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north and in the city of Hartford and in the country as being producers of wonderful cultural events, music, dance, what have you.

Brower: Do you have a sense that the funding environment – foundations, people with personal wealth are – that there are enough of them out there to support a flowering of this kind of thing? What's your reading on that?

McLean: Yeah, I think that there's enough money around. I think that there are enough people around with a large amount of cash and wealthy people that could provide this kind of support to institutions like the Artists Collective and other places that are trying to present cultural activities to the community and to the city. I think that it's just very difficult to garner that money. It took, like I said, Dollie 15 years to raise that money for this building.

Brower: How much was involved?

McLean: 8.

Brower: 8 million.

McLean: Yeah, 7.8 to 8 million, something like that.

Brower: You've been in the facility two years?

McLean: Yeah. This is the second year. We opened in '99. But we're well on our way now. We're still finishing this building. We haven't got everything in here that we want. We haven't got – haven't finished with the stage yet down in the theater, and we haven't got the mirrors up on the wall in the dance rooms. Things like that. We haven't got the sound studio together yet for recording. So we're still in the process of adding things, raising money. And of course the landscape. Out in the front, when the architect designed the building, the landscaping was part of it, the trees and the whole look for the outside. Well, it's just nothing but just big spaces out there now, and grass. We're waiting now. We just got the money together to now get the trees and bring them in, plant them and put them in place. So we're finishing up the building.

Brower: The house that Dollie built.

McLean: Yeah, this is what it is.

Brower: You're here. You said that there was two years that you kind of took out from playing. But then there starts the whole set of SteepleChase recordings around '73.

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McLean: '72.

Brower: '72, '73.

McLean: Right.

Brower: How did that come about?

McLean: Again, I seem to be on the ground floor of so much stuff. I went to Copenhagen to play in a – to teach in a school and play in a club. So I went and did that. There was a guy that was sneaking upstairs in a room above The Montmartre and recording me every night with my band. Somebody slipped the word to me. He said, “Man, there’s a cat up over the room . . .” So I went up there and busted him. It was Nils Winther, the guy that owns SteepleChase Records now – that used to own it. Kenny Drew and them knew about it. Kenny Drew and a few other people that were – Niels Ørsted-Pedersen – they knew about it. So they wouldn’t tell. Finally they told me. I said, “Man, why didn’t you tell me that this cat has recordings of me? Quality to sell in a record shop. He’s recording my stuff without my knowledge of it.”

So, to make a long story short, they begged me to give him a chance to put out a record, because they said, “Jackie, yeah man, all of that.” They said, “Jackie, if you let him put out a record, he’ll start a record company and it’ll help all of us that are here in Copenhagen. It would be a great thing for you to do. It would help us all.” So I went to him. I called Dollie and said, “Dollie, this guy wants to set a record out of mine – put a record out.”

The first one is not on here. There’s one missing.

Brower: I’m sorry.

McLean: There’s about four pictures of it.

Brower: I’m sorry.

McLean: No, I didn’t think of the first one. I forgot the name of that one. At any rate . . .

Brower: I’m just sorry I didn’t have it. I apologize.

McLean: That’s okay, man. Are you kidding? You got so much stuff here, it’s ridiculous.

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Anyway, he said he could pay me in a year if I record for him now. He could pay me one year from now. I called Dollie and told her that, and she said, “Now how much sense does that make? You going to get up there and let him release a record on you, and he ain’t going to pay you for a year, and then the amount of money he’s going to pay you is sad.” So I said, “Well, the guys over here begged me to do it, Kenny Drew and them. So let’s do it.” So I did it and started his company, did the first album for him.

Brower: That was with – basically, you went there as a single.

McLean: Yeah.

Brower: Of course you knew Kenny Drew from the old days.

McLean: Right.

Brower: Who was playing drums?

McLean: Alex Riel.

Brower: It’s all live stuff.

McLean: Yeah. Then, when Nils said to me, “Jackie, you can bring anybody you want to play these albums,” these two, man, I hurried up and told them to get Dexter, because that was who I wanted.

Brower: That’s these two. One you call *The Source*. The first one you call *The Meeting*.

McLean: Yeah. I didn’t name those. He named those. I didn’t name them.

Brower: How much did it mean for you to get with Dexter?

McLean: Ooo, that was my giant. That was my big giant that I always loved from the beginning. That was a great moment, for me to play with him, to record with him. I had played with him before. But to make these recordings – this cat is so bad.

Brower: So you made the things with Dexter.

McLean: Yeah, I made the two recordings, and I made all those records with that label.

Brower: Then you come – you must have made a subsequent trip for this material.

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McLean: This we made over there, me and Michael, *Antiquity*. This is a great album, one of my favorite albums. This, he came to New York to record this band, because I told him, if you want to come to New York and record a band, you need to come and record these guys that I've got in my New York band. So it was *New York Calling*, the Cosmic Brotherhood, with all these people in it: René, Fish, Billy Gault, Billy Skinner, and Thabo [Michael Carvin].

Brower: Talk about your relationship with Michael Carvin.

McLean: I've always loved Michael. I first met him in San Francisco when I went out there to play with Bobby Hutcherson at one of those clubs out there. I forgot the name of the club. But he was the drummer, and I just fell in love with his playing. We've been buddies ever since.

Brower: This is a very – there's not another record in your catalog like this record, like *Antiquity*.

McLean: Why?

Brower: You're singing. You're playing miscellaneous or traditional instruments, found instruments. It's dealing with chants.

McLean: Yeah, it's great. It's just the two of us. Yeah, he was the one that coaxed me into doing it, because I didn't think we could do it. I wasn't that – I was frightened, that whole idea of just two of us on a recording. How much stuff can we do? But we did it, put it together and dealt with it.

Brower: How about the recording with Gary Bartz? How did that work?

McLean: That just happened. Gary was in Copenhagen at the same time that I was there. I forgot which company it was. I don't know if it was the same. SteepleChase?

Brower: Yeah, it's SteepleChase. It's licensed to Inner City, but it came from SteepleChase.

McLean: Yeah, it came and did it. We put some music together. We recorded it right there in Copenhagen.

Brower: How did that relationship end, with you and Nils?

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McLean: With him being – trying to be exploitive, him trying to mess with the money and not send any royalties in and all that. The same thing that all them guys do – not all of them, but a lot of them do. So that’s what caused me to fall out with him.

Brower: There’s a record that I remember we hadn’t heard – meaning me, meaning we, meaning the community of people that dealt with – were your audience. We hadn’t heard from you for a long time. Then you came out with the record that we all went to the record store. We were so hungry for another Jackie McLean record, *Monuments*.

McLean: There it is. You just went by it. I knew you were going to say that. I like that record.

Brower: We were shocked when we heard that record. It’s like, “No, not Jackie, not you. They must have took him in a room and sucked his brains out.” I’m sorry, Smithsonian. I didn’t mean that. I got beside myself.

McLean: There’s only one – the thing on here that I love the most was the first track, *Monuments*. I love that. But it was just an effort to try to get a bigger listener audience, the same thing that everybody else tried to do.

Brower: Did people beat you up about it?

McLean: No, because I didn’t do it but one time. After I had the experience of it, and having them mix and patch my solos together – like none of these solos are done at one particular time. They’re all matched. I did a little today and a little tomorrow. Take that out and put this in. It’s Frankenstein, onto the legs of dead bodies. So I just said, forget about it.

Brower: The other day, I was going through playing all this stuff, and I actually played one tune over and over again. It was *They All Seem to Disappear*. You mention this guy, Walter “Jelly” Brown. Was that a fictional character?

McLean: No, that was my man Jelly, Walter Brown. He was a real guy. He was my running buddy. We were kids together. We both started playing music together. I started on saxophone. He started on the clarinet. But he never continued to pursue it. Both got strung out. He eventually died in Texas somewhere, messing with some stuff.

Brower: But there was a sort of sentiment there that must be ever more with you.

McLean: For Jelly?

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Brower: Not – beyond, because the first part was about Jelly, and then you played some, and then it was about, or at least they patched in the playing, according to your recollection of it. But then you start talking about Bird and . . .

McLean: All those guys.

Brower: . . . all those guys.

McLean: That was set up like that. *They All Seem to Disappear*. This guy that wrote the music on there, he had all that in his mind. But the thing that I loved the most on there is that very first track. It's so nice. That's my favorite recording – one of my favorite recordings, ever, because I like the instruments on there and everything. But all of that other stuff, *Dr. Jackyll and Mister Funk* and all of that stuff, that was some kid stuff. I took all my kids there from the program to be on it too. That's another reason I did it, because he let me use – you can't. There's no centerpiece.

Brower: Oh yeah. I left those at home with the – that's the one I said, well, there's information on this record jacket – not the jacket, but the sleeve. But I had to protect.

McLean: Then I also wanted to be dressed up like a pharaoh. So they promised that to me too. So I said, oh man, that's great.

Brower: I see you have – your jewelry has Egyptian themes, eye of horus and . . .

McLean: Yeah, and African themes.

Brower: Are those – are you particularly interested in Egyptology?

McLean: Yes, I am. I've done a lot of reading on that subject as well. I'm fascinated by all of that, pyramids and sphinx and the antiquity of all that stuff. Man, you start talking about 3,500 years before Christ. Whoa, man, that's going back. Then the latest research – I have to get out of the sun – the latest – want to pause for a second?

Brower: At this point I think I want to ask you to talk about some of your other interests. I started by noting your jewelry, introduced by the theme of this album. So you could talk about the Egyptology. But, just generally, what – there came a point when you began to be an avid reader, somewhat driven by coming to the university scene. But it seemed to have opened up much bigger vistas for you.

McLean: Right. My hunger for history is – I'm interested in history from so many different levels. I'm very interested in Napoleon and the things that happened in his life. I'm also – and Hotep and some of the ancient people out of Africa that I like to read

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about, know about, Hatshepsut and Thutmose and all of those people that – back in antiquity, as well as I’m very fascinated with the Second World War. The First World War didn’t grab me the way the Second World War did, because I think it had to do with – a lot to do with the way Germany just up and just took everything over from about 1938 on. It just seemed impossible for anybody to be able to do that at that particular time in history. For somebody to come along, to have that kind of charisma – and I’m speaking of Hitler – that kind of charisma and that kind of speaking talent, being the kind of orator that can get masses of people to just do or die for you. It just seemed incredible, and it seemed like that they had everything in place. The uniforms – they spent a lot of time on how to present themselves to the world. It was – it could grab you. Some of the ideas, the way they – on those nights in Nuremburg, when he spoke, the way Albert Speer directed those searchlights up into the sky, where it looked like huge pillars going up to the heavens, and between them, hanging these flags with the swastikas on, very captivating, and the way that the groups of soldiers were blocked off in divisions. It was thousands of people there, but it was – the order was perfect. Everything was just so together. Then finally, the concept of war – with the blitzkrieg, the way they just went in and devastated other countries, took their land from them, killed their people – just seemed like it was an incredible time in history. He seemed to have everybody he needed around him, and he was able to direct all of this stuff almost by himself. He had all of these people to work for him. Even when they captured Mussolini and nobody knew where he was, and he was very upset about that. He said, send for Otto Skorzeny. They sent for Scarface. You know who he is?

Brower: Yeah.

McLean: Yeah man, they sent for him. He came in. He said, I want to find the Duce. Find him, and find a way to get him here, get him out of there. So he posed as a champagne salesman, took a couple of his men with him and went down and hung around down in Italy, trying to find out where they were keeping Mussolini. He found out that they had him in a castle up on Mount Sasso. He went back with a whole plan, how to get to that mountain and get the Duce out of there and bring him to Hitler. I thought that was incredible, that kind of stuff that went along.

Then of course with their technology, as they began to develop those weapons, near the end of the war, like the Me [Messerschmidt] 262, that first jet they had, and some of those other little planes that they had, rocket planes and stuff like that. It was incredible.

So I was totally fascinated – I am totally fascinated – with that time in history and those people that were involved with the overthrow and how they finally got rid of him, to bring the world to where it is now.

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Brower: I really recommend to you the [Alex] Kershaw volumes, because I don't nearly – I can't recall all the names as you can. Clearly you've read and read and read, and it's emblazoned in your mind. But one of the things I found fascinating about Kershaw is, he really talks about how Hitler destroyed the state, in other words, the government ceased to function. There were no – everything, as you said, came through him, which was in the end probably the undoing.

McLean: The downfall.

Brower: Because he – the institutions of state – he'd invent councils, different ways of coordinating things, but they really were never allowed to function. And as he became more removed and detached and depressed, going through various mood swings and things, it made it difficult for them to function, in a sense, because everything was so dependent on him. I think the interesting thing about the Kershaw volumes is, what he's interested in is, how is it that this individual was able to – and you directed yourself to some of it, that is, his great charisma. But then it came to a point where he didn't speak, where he stopped speaking, where he – on the great heroes days and things, they would encourage him, and he – “No, I don't want to.” And still, he was able to keep this society moving along this path. So he's really analyzing, what is it? What were the circumstances in history? What were the elements of culture? What were the talents of given individuals? How was this – how was he able to exert this control? Particularly as he, in effect, dismantled the state to do so and had all these fiefdoms, oftentimes competing. He used the term – I guess the term was, “working towards Hitler.” Everyone was driven by the idea of working towards what they believed to be his desire.

McLean: His dream.

Brower: His dream. This – he was able to – actually, when I look at it, it looks like a madman. What fascinates me is, what would I have done? Had I been a 17-year-old living in München or any of these major cities, what decisions would I have made? Would I have been able to escape? Would I – if I had a different ethical/moral principle or objection to something, would I have stood up for it, knowing that they'll pull your fingernails out and take your penis and put it on a table and hit it with a hammer?

McLean: Oh my God.

Brower: You know, the kinds of things that they subjected people to.

McLean: They had these mini-guillotines too.

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Brower: What would – to imagine the pressures on an individual to have – to possess your own mind and think for yourself, if you could. And if you could, would you express it? And if you expressed it, would you act on it?

McLean: Not when you saw that hammer.

Brower: This is what – that’s what fascinates me about the period is . . .

McLean: Me too. Incredible, man. A lot of people were taken with the trappings, the uniform, the whole thing. That was incredible. I’m still reading about that. I have to get those titles. That other book, I don’t have the title to that.

Brower: We will attend to that.

What are some other interests that you have, beyond . . . ?

McLean: I’m very interested in African culture as well, like the Mali, the fact that – in those caves, that they have the drawings of the heavens, long before anybody knew about the Dog Star and those things.

Brower: You made a recording.

McLean: Right, about that: *Rhythm of the Earth*. Those kinds of things fascinate me, as well as the possibility of there being something else besides us somewhere out in this vast space, that there could be something else out there that might have some kind of intelligence that we could relate to.

Brower: Were you aware of Julius Hemphill’s *Dogon A.D.*? Do you know that piece?

McLean: Yeah man, I love that album.

Brower: Was there any relationship in that music and your interest? Or you had that interest independently of . . . ?

McLean: No, I had the interest independently, but when I heard that album – I heard that album maybe about in the mid-’70s sometime. The early ’70s I heard that album. I was very impressed by that whole idea of the cello and the rhythm of it. I thought it was great.

Brower: You have a kind of a South Africa connection.

McLean: Yeah.

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Brower: Talk about how that came about.

McLean: It came about with René. He went. First he was working with Huey Masakela. He spent some time with that band. Then he was offered – he went on tour with them through South Africa. He met a lady, and they married and had a couple of babies. So that began the connection between South Africa and my family and the McLean family in South Africa. I have two granddaughters there. I guess that's it.

Then we did a State Department tour over there in 1993. We traveled to six countries in southern Africa and did performances for the heads of state and the ambassadors. I insisted that they also allow us to go play in the communities as well, in the Bantu stands and all those places. We went and played everywhere. We played for the poorest people, and we played for the elite, for the kings and the royalty of countries, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Durban and all those cities.

Brower: Was Hotep in the band at that time?

McLean: No. I had Alan with me.

Brower: How did – talk about Hotep and how he came. Was that through Masakela and René?

McLean: Yeah, that's through that connection as well. I heard he was living in New Haven. I called him up and said, "You want to come up and do some teaching up this way?" and he said yeah. He came up, and I gave him a job that would enable him to move up here. So he moved up and stayed here. Then his mom got sick, and he left here to go back to South Africa. He's still there.

Brower: That was the band, Carl Allen, Nat Reeves.

McLean: Carl Allen, Nat Reeves, yeah.

Brower: How long was that band together, working?

McLean: That band was together for a while, maybe a year or so. *Jackie Mac Attack*, that album, that's one of my favorite recent albums that I made. We just happened to hit it off right that night.

Brower: What is your view of how you've been treated within jazz literature and history? I can – we've talked about Miles's book. But the first book that I know of that covered you extensively was *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, later *Four Lives in Black Music*. So let's start with that one. Give me a reaction to that.

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McLean: That book was done – I thought it was a great idea, when he came up with that idea for taking four guys and doing some research on them and some interviews with them and putting a book out. So I thought that one's okay. That was great. Then there's another book called *Hard Bop* that Goldstein or . . .

Brower: David Rosenthal.

McLean: Yeah, Rosenthal did, that I thought was a good representation of some of the things that I've done. Miles's book was as painful as well as it was a joy to be associated with such a great musician. But it was painful to go back through some of those years, some of those times that weren't pleasant times for me, struggling, trying to get myself together as a young musician. I really don't put too much credence into it. I can't control what people think of me or say of me or what they think I should be or shouldn't be.

Brower: What about *Talking Jazz* with Ben Sidran? That was another extensive treatment.

McLean: Yeah, that was – I thought he did a pretty decent job of putting his book out. I can't remember it now too well. I have it at home.

Brower: Another place where I encountered you, and I think it's an important thing to talk about, is your time at the National Endowment for the Arts on the music panel.

McLean: Yeah, oh man, right, those years. I did that mainly because I wanted to keep my connections in Washington with A.B. and all the people that I met down there on those panels. Plus I wanted to keep funds coming in to my program at Hartt and to the Artists Collective. So I was on the jazz panel, and then I was on another panel too that dealt with the more – I forgot the name of that committee.

Brower: Was that Expansion Arts? Were you on it?

McLean: Probably.

Brower: Is that A.B.'s one?

McLean: Yeah, A.B.'s. So I sat on both of those, for those reasons, to – I was the first one to get National Endowment awards at the University of Hartford. They never got any there. In the music school, they never got one dollar until I started – until they started giving me some money. Then they started funding other parts of the school. So I must have stayed on the panels down there for a number of years, maybe four or five years.

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Brower: Do you think that was – I mean, beyond your self interest, do you think that that was a productive process?

McLean: I think it was. I think that for them asking me to come down there to do that, it enabled me to help some other organizations and other groups get some funding. Even besides our group, there were other groups, like the Hartford Jazz Society. They wanted to kill that group. I fought for them like tooth and nail until I got them back in good graces with the National Endowment. That's all that I can remember about that.

Brower: Have you had any relationships with the Library of Congress and your music?

McLean: No, none at all.

Brower: What do you think should be the role of government institutions? Were you satisfied with the direction that the panel was taking in terms of how they were trying to – at that point, there were study grants, composers grants probably, and maybe performance grants. Were you satisfied that that was the right strategic approach for government's involvement in the field? Or do you think it – some people say that at least some musicians who couldn't get arrested in their own town will go to the Endowment as a way to develop. What are your thoughts about government subsidizing artists?

McLean: I think they should. Some of those countries – Holland and France and other countries – they put a lot of money into supporting musicians and painters and literary people, and I certainly think they should do it here as well, to give money to help produce younger musicians, develop younger musicians, and to keep other musicians that have been out here a long time, working. I think it's important, very important.

Brower: Do you think that the music of the same strength, energy, and vitality will – can come out of the situation? I thought the artists had to suffer to create great art. Do you think that's all bullshit?

McLean: I don't know. I think that everybody as an individual needs different things in order to be inspired to create. So I don't know. Maybe somebody needs to be somewhere where there's no food and no money and nothing. But that was never me. I want to have everything right now, and then I can create. I feel more like it. I don't want to be like dying somewhere, trying to think of a melody right that will bring me some money. I want to enjoy my life and be inspired through enjoying my life to create something.

Brower: So is it your view that the quality music that's come out of jazz has come in spite of adverse conditions and not because of them?

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McLean: Oh yeah, for sure, because they certainly have plotted and planned and tried to do everything they could to kill this music. They have done that. They've only used it like a whore most of the time, to exploit it and to use it for whatever they can use it for. But as soon as they can develop enough – first of all, because it was so many black people involved in the creative end of this music, and because we as black people have been creative in this – it's obvious that music is at the center of African culture. So it would make sense that we have retained a great deal of that over the years, right? But they – the racism prevents them from enjoying it, even though they have to have it. They won't let it go. They can't kill it, and they won't let it go. So now they can be a little happier, because a lot of more – of white kids are playing the music and are accepted on the jazz scene, as opposed to it was separated just like the apartheid: black musicians over here, white musicians over there. "You all can't swing. So don't even try to play it. Man, you all are sad. Leave it alone." That kind of thing was going on. But now, nobody's dealing with that anymore, because that's ridiculous. You find musicians that are talented, everywhere, all kinds of – from everywhere, from Europe, from anywhere, from the Far East. You're going to find people that are talented, that love this music. That's the main thing. They love it, they respect it, and they want to play it. They don't care if Louis Armstrong is a black man or if Bix Beiderbecke is white. Nobody wants to deal with that anymore.

Brower: Do you feel that jazz is becoming like the blues, in the sense that if you went back [to] a certain point, all the practitioners of blues are African-American? Then it starts changing, changing, changing, changing. Now, every now and then, there's either the old blues musicians who are still here and a few young black ones who are emulating them, and mostly whites who play. Do you find the same thing's happening with jazz?

McLean: Yeah, similar, very. But if they try to steal it, see, that's what's the thing that I don't like, is when they try to steal it right from under your nose, like to say – they say – yeah, I got a respect for Elvis Presley's voice. He's got a nice voice and sings well and does what he does well. But come on, man, there was some people happening, doing stuff before him. How can he be the king of something that he didn't create, or something that he didn't really play the biggest part in? They made him. They created him to be that way, the same way that Paul Whiteman – like you hear Eubie Blake talk about it. He said, "Paul Whiteman is not the King of Jazz. He is not the King of Jazz. James Reese Europe was the King of Jazz." That's what Eubie Blake says.

So you're going to always get these contradictions, because it always has been that they try to steal this thing that you can't steal. You can't steal an idiom, a music style. You can't steal what you can't see. You can't see notes. You can only hear them. You can't steal them. You can emulate them, but you can't really steal this thing. And nothing is going to stop the black community from being creative musically, because even when they took the music out of the school system, kids came up with the beat box. They made

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the rhythm and music anyway, rapping. That whole hip-hop thing came out of the period that developed with the lack of instruments being available to young people.

Brower: Do it bother you that the black community does not seem to be availing itself of – and I mean in general. I know specific persons are – but availing itself of the benefits of being involved with this music on a broad scale, the way they were in your youth?

McLean: That's more or less because the media has gone on a rampage to try to keep it back here. Look what they did with country western music and bluegrass music. They just took that. There wasn't – nobody followed that music that much, not such a huge audience as it is today. They created that audience. They built that audience. So they're constantly trying to put something else in the place of where this music, that is America's classical music, needs to be. It doesn't need to be there alone. I can understand them having cowboy, bluegrass, all that stuff as well. But certainly don't try to take and push to the side this great music that developed here on these shores. You can't do it. There's no way it's possible to do it. Plus the young people won't allow it, because they're going to always love Trane. They're going to always love Bird and Louis and all these great people, Billie Holiday and Pres.

Man, it's incredible, and it sets the style for stuff. Like Leroy [?Emamu] was talking about the niggerization of America. Everybody loves everything that the black people come up with: language, the dance, on the sport field, celebrating after a touchdown, all that stuff. All of that, everything, it's loved. Shaquille O'Neal. Everything that you can think of.

Brower: How do you relate to hip-hop musically?

McLean: I like a lot of the rhythm things that come out of there. I love the rhythm things that come out of there. I just don't – I'm just waiting for the next step to come with the music. I hear a little of it peeking through certain groups. Like I heard – I even changed up the rhythm, *The Rhythm of the Earth*. I set that up so it wouldn't be a straight-ahead piece. I set it up so that it would have some other feel to it that could relate to these other rhythms that are coming out of more recent forms of music. When I heard Roy Hargrove the other night, the pieces they played there went through a lot of stuff and got hit up into some rock kind of stuff for a minute, or some funk stuff for a minute, before it evolved and turned and went another direction. I like that.

Brower: Are you comfortable with the changing of generations and the changing of the guard in music?

McLean: I'm not comfortable with the younger generation and the way they're trying to change up some very basic things that have always been very important in the black

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community, and that is respect for your elders and family, the whole idea of keeping family together and all that. I don't like young people that cast that to the side, kids that are fresh. Man, I got some kid telling his mother, "Aw, talk to the hand," you know, put the hand up there in somebody's face. "Talk to the hand." I'll break somebody's hand if some kid tells me to talk to – have you heard that expression yet?

Brower: No.

McLean: Aw man. Kid's do it up here. Like if you're telling a kid something, so-and-so will say, "Aw, just talk to the hand." Like, in other words, don't talk to me. They put their hand up like that.

Brower: I'm glad you did that, because there's at least two instances where I – where there's one album where you have your hand up there like this, and then a recent publicity picture, where you're like – you got your horn, and you got the hand up.

McLean: That's my favorite number. That's why I keep putting it up there.

Brower: 5.

McLean: Yeah. That's my number.

Brower: You vibrate to the 5.

McLean: Yeah, that's my number.

Brower: Okay. All right.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

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