



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

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

CARLA BLEY
NEA Jazz Master (2015)

Interviewee: Carla Bley (May 11, 1936 -)
Interviewer: Ken Kimery
Date: September 9, 2014
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Description: Transcript, 60 pp.

Ken Kimery: My name is Ken Kimery. I'm here in wonderful Willow, New York. Blue sky; wonderfully clear air, with Carla Bley. Carla Bley, composer, bandleader, pianist, organist? Umm, doctorate? Umm, raconteur, vocalist, umm, guess I've heard you sing.

Carla Bley: You have? When was that?

Kimery: Well there's a couple of recordings that I've heard you sing on, so...

Bley: Oh my god!

Kimery: Umm...

Bley: Gotta have those destroyed!

Kimery: [Laughter] And, uhh, 2015, coming up 2015, National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master.

Bley: Isn't that amazing?

Kimery: Thank you very much for allowing me to invade your home here in wonderful Willow, New York, and for the next couple of hours to sit down with you and have you share with us your life story.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Okay.

Kimery: If we can start, if you could give us your full name, and if you don't mind your birth date, birth year.

Bley: Mhmm

Kimery: And where you were born.

Bley: Well, my full name is not the name I was born with. My real name that I was born with is, oh my god, I think I can say it. [Clears throat]. Lovella Mae Borg.

Kimery: Okay

Bley: And that was in Oakland, California in 1936.

Kimery: And if we could kind of look into the past and your family history there, could you tell me your father and mother's name?

Bley: Emil Carl Borg was my father's name, and Arlene Anderson, before she was married, was my mother's name. They were Swedes.

Kimery: And so were they immigrants, emigrates?

Bley: They were second generation.

Kimery: Ok, and how'd they find themselves in Oakland, California?

Bley: A bunch of Swedes moved out there, they got tired of Minnesota. [Laughs]

Kimery: And with that being the case, umm, what was the draw to, umm, California? To Oakland? I mean ---

Bley: Well, the weather of course.

Kimery: Okay.

Bley: The Swedes have suffered weather problems for their entire history.

Kimery: Oakland's a wonderful place.

Bley: Yeah, and the church we went to was almost entirely Swedish. I mean, in those days people weren't melding together very easily, and you just hung with your own.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Was there also a reason, umm, for employment in Oakland that also brought your parents to California?

Bley: No, my father was a piano teacher, so umm, he, uhh, did the same thing that he had done in Chicago where he came from.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And, he got I think seventy five cents for a half hour lesson, so he had to do about ten of them a day, and then he was able to live. He never owned a house or anything, but he had a car. [Laughs] That's the one thing I remember. His car had been rescued from the ocean under the Golden Gate Bridge where it had crashed. So he got a deal on it.

Kimery: Wow. Do, uhh. So for talking, cause this is pre-war. Pre-World War II.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Yeah, so we're post-depression. A little post-depression time there. It's interesting Oakland itself was going through a transition where of course it was farming but also it was known as the Detroit of the west, so you had car manufacturing and other industry. Were you aware of that industry as a young---?

Bley: No, absolutely not. Umm. I always thought Oakland was a very boring place to be from, now I realize so many things come from there, like the Black Panthers and the -- uhh -- what is that, uhh -- the motorcycle club, the uhh --

Kimery: Hell's Angels?

Bley: Hell's Angels.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: From my hometown, yeah. And a lot of musicians came from there. And, uhh, I got the key to the city finally, along with the Pointer sisters.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: And, so I'm proud to be from Oakland. I think it's a really interesting place.

Kimery: What was the denomination of the church that your father, family attended, participated in?

Bley: It was called the Evangelical Free Church. And so it was sort of undenominational. But closest to Baptist I think.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: And it was integrated?

Bley: No, all Swedes.

Kimery: All Swedes. Ok.

Bley: [Laughs]

Kimery: So some of the traditional literature in Swedish and also --?

Bley: A lot of Swedish stuff.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: But mostly just hymns.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And we didn't really speak Swedish. But they had, you know, the traditional Swedish Christmas, which was... What's that called? Umm, Smorgasbord!

Kimery: Smorgasbord.

Bley: Yeah, with smelly cheese and the half pickled fish, and--.

Kimery: Pickled herring?

Bley: Pickled herring and lutfisk.

Kimery: Mmmmmm.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: You still crave that on holidays?

Bley: Not at all.

Kimery: [Laughs] See, I would have never known or never thought of there being a Swedish community in Oakland, because, you know, many years later, seeing how Oakland has evolved. Of course, it's a very dynamic community and I think a lot of it has to do, once again, with the industry that was there. Of course you have the Mexican-American population, you have African-American population, and just a lot of communities coming together. The shipping industry was there also.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Oh yeah.

Kimery: So, uh--

Bley: And Jerry Brown made the thing happen, too.

Kimery: Jerry Brown, still there, still doing it!

Bley: Isn't that beautiful?

Kimery: So, and your mother?

Bley: She was sick all of her life. She had heart problems from having rheumatic fever as a child. So she was in bed constantly. I hardly remember her ever standing up.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: And my father took care of her and taught piano.

Kimery: Ok. Siblings?

Bley: No.

Kimery: Only one.

Bley: Mhmm.

Kimery: Ok. So you, there's, I had in my research, looked at or gone through some of the prior interviews, and of course one particular one with Ben Sidran, that talked about your pre-teen days. And also looking at your inclination for music. And, tell us about that, 'cause this is something that I think is very interesting to see at a young age that you already had the passion, or at least an interest in it.

Bley: Well my father was a piano teacher, so I learned to play as I learned to walk, you know. It's just so natural. My mother was also a musician, and gave me piano lessons.

Kimery: Oh!

Bley: So I had piano lessons from a very early age from two people, my parents.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And I thought I was a great pianist, but I found out later that I wasn't. But before I found it out I played at all the church things, like you know, Youth for Christ. I forget

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

some of the names. And, umm, the church was my life until I was twelve or thirteen. Then I discovered the rest of the world.

Kimery: In this interview with Ben there was this conversation about your singing also?

Bley: Oh yeah, that was my first recital as a singer.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: I was maybe, I don't know, three. And I sang This Little Light of Mine, and held out a tin cup, and people put money in it. But I had to give it to my parents.

Kimery: Ahh, ok. So, umm, you said your mother also taught you piano.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: What was some of the literature or what were they teaching there?

Bley: Just Wagner Book One.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: I mean very, very simple. My father taught people who could hardly play, you know. Early students. I don't know if I've told anyone this yet, but my mother taught me until I bit her when she made me get the right fingering. And she never taught me again, and she gave me to my father, who I never bit.

Kimery: [Laughs] I've heard of the opposite where the teacher has a ruler and smacks you on the hand, but never heard of the student biting the teachers, so that's one for the books there.

Bley: [Laughs]

Kimery: Your education, early education there?

Bley: Umm..

Kimery: The school?

Bley: School yes. I went to a Lutheran school. They wanted me to go to a religious school, but not a Catholic school. In my religion Catholics were sort of mystical, and too weird. So, the Lutherans were a little mystical and weird too, but that's the school that they put me in, until I guess the sixth grade. Oh no, I went to school for six months at a

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

regular public school but then I got into a fight with someone, and so they switched me to a Lutheran school.

Kimery: Was there any, at that particular time, any areas of study that were an interest of yours?

Bley: I liked drawing letters. You know, alphabet.

Kimery: Ok. Science, or any of that?

Bley: Music mostly.

Kimery: Ok. Was there, besides your parents, was there a music program in your school that you benefitted from?

Bley: No.

Kimery: So it was really all from home and church?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And was there at home, besides the live, or performances... well, I should ask, was there a piano at your house?

Bley: There were two.

Kimery: Ok. Was there also a phonograph where you heard music?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And what were you listening to?

Bley: I think John Philip Sousa was the only record on the phonograph.

Kimery: Really? Huh. That might, at a point down the road there when we talk about some of your recordings might be part of the reason for your...

Bley: Yes!

Kimery: Your, was it, very Parlive Very Big Band. What was that, what was that specific one that I was listening to that just knocked me out. Umm, United States? I think that was one.

Bley: Well I don't remember that piece.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: There's a little bit of a, kind of march tribute there.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And I thought that's kind of interesting.

Bley: So I never thought of that before.

Kimery: So John Philip Sousa. Huh. Interesting. Well with the history of this music, and this country, did you find later on that that had some value of bearing within your compositional approach or at least your taste in music, or?

Bley: I doubt it very much, because it was a wind-up Victrola, and so it sounded all wavy.

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: So I think I was just amused by it. I don't think I took it seriously musically.

Kimery: Do you recall, or had you heard any of the local musicians perform?

Bley: Well, you know, Selma Green was the organ player at the church, and she was very good. But that's about as far as I got. My father would play the classical composers like Rachmaninoff and Beethoven and Chopin and all those guys. So I heard that from my father.

Kimery: Mhmm.

Bley: But other than that, I didn't really listen to music on the radio until I was a teenager.

Kimery: Ok. So definitely classical music was also threaded throughout your...

Bley: Classical music and hymns.

Kimery: And hymns. So, your, umm, recall there's of course as taking piano lessons there's always recitals. Was there multiple recitals in your early days?

Bley: Yeah, yeah.

Kimery: Ok, and did you find pleasure or a liking to performing at that period of time to audiences?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: I wasn't stage frightened by being... ever. To this day I'm not uncomfortable on stage more than I feel right now.

Kimery: So you were born to be on stage.

Bley: Maybe if I stood up over there.

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: No, that's really silly because later on I will tell you that I don't enjoy it at all.

Kimery: Oh really?

Bley: I just can do it.

Kimery: Ok. That's kind of an interesting experience. So your formal education ended at one point, and you didn't cycle through the whole twelve years, you ended up leaving school at a particular time. When did you leave, and for what particular purpose?

Bley: I was fifteen when I left. It wasn't legal to leave at that age. So I had to go to a school for people who had dropped out early, which was teaching you to be a dishwasher or something. There's a word for that, what kind of a school is that? Teaching a person domestic work... I forget the word.

Kimery: It might come to me.

Bley: Yeah, it might come to me too.

Kimery: [Laughs] And in leaving school you found that it bored you, or?

Bley: Mhmm.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: I hadn't been going for a long time. I had been getting on the bus, but then taking the bus to the very next stop after the school, which was the zoo, where the zoo was.

Kimery: Ahh.

Bley: And spending the day at the zoo, walking back to the bus stop and going home with the rest of the children. But I never went to classes, I just went to the zoo.

Kimery: Did you find that the education did not challenge you, is that part of it? Or...

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: I just was bored by it. That sounds very crazy, I mean, I'm certainly not bored by education now. But at that age I really was.

Kimery: So you were fifteen, and what grade were you in at that time?

Bley: I was in the tenth grade, a couple of times.

Kimery: How did your parents take to this?

Bley: My mother was long dead by then, and my father let me pretty much do what I wanted to do.

Kimery: Ok. So you were going to, I'm sorry I can't think of the name, to a job training...

Bley: Yeah that's a good word. That's not what they call it but it's very close. A job... you're trained to do a... we'll get it...

Kimery: Yeah. So I assume there was some preliminary test or something like that to be able to identify, them to identify or you identify, what areas of interest and abilities or expertise that you might have, and what was identified at that time...

Bley: Dishwasher

Kimery: Oh! And how'd you feel about that?

Bley: I think that bothered me a little bit.

Kimery: Mmkay.

Bley: And I had to watch films about menial work of various kinds, janitorship and stuff.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: But I only had to stay there until I was sixteen, and when I was sixteen I was free. Then I got a job working at a music store, but it wasn't very musical work. It was selling sheet music.

Kimery: Popular sheet music?

Bley: Yeah, popular sheet music. Yes.

Kimery: Ok. Did you, at that point, besides selling it, were you curious about knowing the structure of composition or anything about it, or?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Well I had written music since I was... very young, I don't remember how old I was, but maybe eight. I had written a little opera called *Over The Hill* strangely enough, without the escalator in front of it. And then I had written a cowboy song or various things. I was writing music very young, and sort of stopped when I thought, well now I'm a teenager and I'd rather be a roller skater. I became a roller skater for three years.

Kimery: Like in roller derby? Or?

Bley: Like in freestyle.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And I actually skated in a California competition for freestyle roller skating when I was maybe fifteen, sixteen. Yes, fifteen.

Kimery: Was that in the Oakland area?

Bley: Yeah, it was right on the corner, two blocks from my house, at, let's see, probably about 70th and East 14th Street.

Kimery: Ok. Wow.

Bley: Roller skating.

Kimery: Roller skating. Ok. Well no this is California...

Bley: It's so Oakland isn't it?

Kimery: Yeah, it really is.

Bley: and I think of it when I talk about it, it's nothing to do with my life anymore. I mean, but I was in Oakland and that was my life.

Kimery: Yeah. This is funny, and California just has those wonderful elements about it that you discover and people look at it, and scratch their heads and say, huh, ok. Well... I guess you live in California.

Bley: [Laughs]

Kimery: So...

Bley: Well I left as soon as I could. I left when I was maybe 17 and I never returned. Oh yes, I returned to Los Angeles for awhile but that's different.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Ahh, wow. Let me pause for one second here.

Bley: And we're probably getting things out of order here too.

Kimery: That's ok.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Ok we're back so... umm... Roller skating. So we're looking at a point here where of course you're now sixteen getting close to a point where you're actually pondering, or at least pondering the idea of leaving Oakland.

Bley: Mhmm.

Kimery: As I recall seventeen was at that time where you actually decided that was for your best interest to travel across country and end up in New York. So can you lead us up to that point there, because right now you've composed at a young age...

Bley: But stopped.

Kimery: But stopped.

Bley: But stopped writing music, yeah.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Because I was more interested in roller skating.

Kimery: Ok. And what was it? There's something that happened that prompted you to say "Ok, my life now needs to transition to a different place. I'm hearing and seeing something different in my life here." And this obviously happened at a very young age which is very unique. What was it that led up to that and if you could kind of walk us through that?

Bley: Well, I think I became disillusioned with religion when I was about twelve.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And didn't think I was gonna go to heaven when I died anymore. And my father agreed with me. He thought I was definitely gonna go to hell.

Kimery: [Laughs]

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Cause I started being sort of wild. Not wild in the sense of doing damage, but having strange taste in what I liked to look at, listen to, and read.

Kimery: Ok. What were you reading?

Bley: Well, Life magazine...

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: I can't think of anything but Life magazine. National Geographic? Umm...

Kimery: So that was out of the norm for your family? For your father?

Bley: No. Yeah I think I have to take back the reading part. I think I didn't read anything I can remember.

Kimery: Now listening-wise, what were you listening to? Cause it was...

Bley: I was starting to listen to the radio to a kind of music we call Sepia in Oakland.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And it was, uhh, vocal quartets mostly. Always music with words by gospel groups who were not singing about religion but singing secularly, so it was African American totally. The groups were called the Silver Chalice or the... Blue Sailors... I don't know what they were called. But you know, they were... this kind of singing sounded so much, it just sounded like there was no difference between that and religion. All the music was familiar to me in the way that the popular music of the time wasn't. I wanted to hear those church harmonies.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And so I listened to that on the radio, some station, and that affected me a lot. Made me interested in gospel music in general, although it wasn't gospel music. But as soon as we would go to... My father would take me to a church where there would be the dancing and speaking in tongues, Pentecostal stuff, and that was very exciting. I liked that. The music of my own church began to seem stodgy, and yet it wasn't. There's Power In The blood, there's Onward Christian Soldiers, and stuff like that. It was really good music. It wasn't Bach or music written for the Catholic church, which is much more... I can't think of the word for that either... educated.

Kimery: Did you experience any black baptist church services?

Bley: Uhh, no I didn't. I think the Evangelists were all white, but the audience was

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

mostly black and the Evangelists were white, if I remember correctly. Another interesting thing about that part of my life, which was of course, nothing to do with me yet. This is all what was just happening to me. Was that my father wouldn't let me go to movies. Cause of the religion we were in, I didn't see a movie until I was... umm... maybe fourteen years old. And then I was only allowed to go see war movies. And they couldn't have women in them. They had to be war movies about men fighting in Japan or something, wherever the war was then. And I also could see news reels; was allowed to watch news reels but they were all about the war, so this must have been before 1946, so I was, you know, under ten years old at that time, when I was watching war movies. And sex was the big problem, my religion - they didn't allow anything - you weren't allowed to do anything that made you different from the person of the opposite gender. So, no lipstick, well, no that was a bad example. There was no dancing, so that's why that other example didn't work. Uhh, no dancing, no swearing... no swearing definitely. No; everything was very pious.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: But war movies were ok. [Laughs]. But my first movie that I ever saw then was Bob Hope... I was on vacation with a friend of mine, and I got to sneak in and see it, and my father never found out. So, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, when I was fourteen.

Kimery: Wow. Do you recall what that movie was?

Bley: Uhh, Road to Somewhere

Kimery: Ok. Gotta look at that one out there *CHECK THIS* (27:07 in). I'll be darned.

Bley: Yeah

Kimery: So music was threaded through that...

Bley: That's true.

Kimery: Ya know, you talk about... so that's interesting that you talk about this, how music was part of your life, but there was a lot of caveats or at least the notion of music, the dancing not allowed. So there seems to be a lot of...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: ... Elements of either restrictions or caveats there. So let's go back to this, to see if you can talk about this even further. You're writing early on, you wrote an opera.

Bley: A little opera. I thought I wanted it to be an opera. I mean, I didn't ever get the school performers in the kindergarten to perform it or anything, you know. But it had a

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

grand opening and finale, lost, I don't know where it is.

Kimery: So you never had an opportunity to actually have had it performed.

Bley: No. But it was written by an eight year old. Oh, I see, no, Mozart could have done it. Yeah.

Kimery: Were you exposed to any opera then, cause you say classical music...

Bley: Yeah, I was exposed to opera. I had a book of all the opera, Puccini, uhh... who wrote Carmen? Faust? No...

Kimery: Wagner? No...

Bley: No no no. Duh duh, di di di... uh...

Kimery: Yeah, I'm drawing a blank on that one. I've seen it, I've seen my mother sing that.

Bley: Yeah, many times probably. [Laughs] So I sang along with it and played the piano.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: All the famous songs from all the... this music came from my father, I guess he would pick up something and bring it home to me. And I had hymn books and I knew how to play all the hymns. I could read music from an early age.

Kimery: And then, so you composed from an early age, at least writing you understood the staffs, of the treble clefs and bass clefs, you understand...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Voices and the ranges, and everything that was part of it.

Bley: Oh yeah. My father, I remember how all that started. He was giving me a piano lesson and I said, "well now, this music that you're teaching me now, how did that come into being?" And he said, "well, a composer wrote it." And I said "well, how did the composer do that?" So he gave me a piece of blank paper and he said, "well, you just write."... This was really early, I must have been three, four, "you just put little dots for which notes you want to be sung or played." And then you put a little line on top of it. So I came back the next day with a paper just full of dots, and my father said "that's too many dots." And so that was the beginning of my style I think. I never put too many dots ever again. I'm sort of a simple writer.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So he then also taught you note values?

Bley: Sure, I learned to read music. I worked for, played professionally for funerals and weddings at the church. I played the organ for the funerals when I was eight, and I sang in the choir, I was the only person who could sing the alto parts. And I had to stand in the middle of the altos and lead them. I had a lot of musical ability as a kid.

Kimery: So it's starting to unravel, at least I understand now the depth of your childhood experience is starting to make a lot of sense here.

Bley: Wow.

Kimery: So let's now fast forward cause we're talking about sixteen going on seventeen and you're looking to go to New York. Had you been exposed to any jazz prior to that?

Bley: Yeah, I had seen Lionel Hampton at the Oakland Auditorium and just was... I went just crazy for the music. And not only the music, the spectacle of the band walking down the aisle playing "Coming Home, Going Home." What were they playing? They were playing some song and walking up and down the aisle. Maybe they were walking on to the stage or walking off the stage; that remained a big inspiration for me. Spectacle, and... I don't know how old I was, but maybe I was thirteen? Twelve? Twelve or thirteen.

Kimery: I know "Flying Home" was one of his...

Bley: "Flying Home!"

Kimery: Yeah, one of his iconic pieces there that...

Bley: That's it. "Flying Home," wow. Then, a friend of mine had older brothers, one of them was into jazz, took me and my friend to the Blackhawk to see Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker. That was really, I didn't understand a thing they were doing but thought this is very... this is very important.

Kimery: Can you tell us where the Blackhawk is for people that don't...

Bley: It's in San Francisco.

Kimery: For those of us who don't know...

Bley: Yeah, alright. It's in San Francisco. Famous jazz club.

Kimery: Now what was your first experience at the Blackhawk?

Bley: I sat at a table with my friend and her brother, and we were totally... we just

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

listened and we didn't talk or anything. And I think I had some kind of soda water or something. And it was the sanctity of it, it was really interesting. It was nobody talking. And I thought most night clubs were people that talked a lot. But the jazz clubs, they just listened. And I did too, and as I said it seemed that I didn't quite understand that kind of music. Whereas I understood Lionel Hampton, every note he played. Isn't that the strangest thing. But later on of course I came to like those two guys very much, Gerry Mulligan, he was a great writer. I just listened to his big band writing about five years ago. And I was totally knocked out, it was incredible. And of course Chet Baker turned out to be somebody that was on the scene that I saw all the time, and good singer. Good trumpet player. But Gerry Mulligan, boy could he write.

Kimery: Claude Thornhill, he wrote for Claude Thornhill's band.

Bley: I hadn't heard that yet. Not until I went to New York. When I went to New York that was a totally different story. It becomes a different... it's almost like the curtain opens right now. When I got to New York I stopped at Cafe Bohemia for Miles Davis and Philly Joe Jones, and I think Wynton Marsalis, no... Fred Karlin? And... oh I temporarily forget who the tenor player was... but Steve's favorite bass player....

Kimery: Was it Wynton Kelly on piano?

Bley: No, I think it was... no, maybe it was Wynton Kelly, I didn't know who the piano player was. I was just watching him... again as excited as I had heard Lionel Hampton.

Kimery: What year was that? Maybe I can fill in that?

Bley: Ok, and um?

Kimery: It's like Bill Evans maybe? Cause Bill played with the band...

Bley: no definitely not this was much later.

Kimery: Ok

Bley: Maybe '56?

Kimery: Oh '56, ok, cause '59 is when Bill, of course.

Bley: I was in New York by then, and I knew Bill because Paul Bley knew him. Yeah when he joined Miles I was already going to Birdland a lot.

Kimery: So back to San Francisco now, it's interesting. You're a minor at that time, going to a jazz club, so that Jazz club itself was supportive of having...

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Yeah!

Kimery: Having... making this music available for everybody. Which, in the other stories I've documented over the years, is that, a lot of jazz clubs, if you were a minor, you were drawing a mustache on or you're trying to sneak in, or you're listening through the window. So...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: This is a very unique setting here to be able to observe these masters.

Bley: Yeah. Well I lied about my age when I got to New York, that I was a year or two older than I was so that I could get the cabaret license, to be, and that goes into, as I said now the curtain opens.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: I went to New York. I had nobody there, I had to sleep in Grand Central Station on a bench. I fell in with some other homeless people and we would go crash at different people's pads. And some of us were mentally ill, and would have fits during the night, all kinds of things. And I was just totally California still, I had one little pinafore dress, green and white striped cotton; I didn't fit in with the bohemians there or anything. But I was where I wanted to be. I went to Cafe Bohemia, but I was seventeen and I guess I could pass for older then, and then when I actually started working at Jazz clubs I was suddenly nineteen.

Kimery: So there was at least an account here of when you moved to New York, the first time you moved to New York you were a cigarette girl at Birdland. Was that also...

Bley: That was my first job, that's what I should have gone directly to, because after I ended up... uhh.. I met Paul... oh wait that doesn't happen yet... wait. How did I get out of... how did I get a house? I met some boy, probably. And moved in with him. And rented a place, he rented a place on 14th Street, it was one of those things that you could rent by the week, and we lived there together, I don't even remember what his name was. But then I worked... I left that scene and got a hotel room when I got the job at Birdland as a cigarette girl. It's getting a little confusing right in there.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Yeah, but I met Paul Bley after I'd worked at Birdland, and I worked at Basin Street too, Basin Street East. Basin Street East? Yeah, and I worked sometimes in the cloak rooms. I worked at the cloak room at the Jazz gallery downtown, that was later. Forget that, that was later. This was Birdland, that's where I met Paul Bley and I ran away with him. And now, then I lived with him. Men were my, just mode of

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

transportation for many years.

Kimery: [Laughs] Speaking of that there was a mode of transportation getting to San Francisco from Oakland

Bley: Oh that was a boy. But we didn't have sex. He just didn't want to. And we would neck for awhile and then he'd go to the front seat of the car and I'd stay in the back seat of the car and we went all the way like that to New York and went to his house in Boston. His father was the concertmaster of the Boston Pops.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: And so I got to see that band. Nice Band! And went from there to New York City, cause I was on my way to the Cafe Bohemia, that was Cafe Bohemia or bust. That was all I wanted to do, was go there. And it was everything I hoped it would be.

Kimery: How did you know of Cafe Bohemia? I mean what was....

Bley: I don't know. The records I had heard while I was in California were... Teo Macero put out a record called *What's New?* And on it was, I remember, uhh... Phil Woods, it was a jazz record but it was really weird. It had a lot of techno goings on, like recorded voices or chants from priests and... check out that record Teo Macero *What's New*. Really interesting I loved that. And Dave Brubeck, but I didn't have a phonograph so I couldn't buy records in those days. I didn't have a phonograph until I was maybe 22 years old. My childhood was lengthy, and... but I was doing what I wanted to do so then I moved with Paul Bley into an apartment on Horatio and Hudson and listened to Symphony Sid every night at Midnight. And listened to a couple of the other jazz shows too, just listened to all the jazz shows. Then I was no longer working as a cigarette girl uptown, I was working downtown at a jazz gallery that was on 8th Street, and I would go to the Five Spot and places like that.

Kimery: Was there much of a Loft scene happening right then?

Bley: Yeah, oh yeah. The absolute Loft scene that you read about now. I'd go there and I was only a listener, never played. And I just listened to all the guys play.

Kimery: Do you recall any of the musicians you encountered at The Loft?

Bley: Paul Bley, Lee Konitz, umm... I remember Lee Konitz because I went there with a friend of mine, and she said to Lee "Oh Mr. Konitz, what kind of saxophone do you play?" And he said "Wurlitzer". And I went "Oh God, I've got to protect this girl." Don't let her out again.

Kimery: [Laughs]

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: So... but a lot of musicians were there. I don't know their names right now.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Oh, you know well there's... read the book, there were photographers, there was Eugene Smith, W. Eugene Smith...

Kimery: Yep.

Bley: The man upstairs, there was another photographer...

Kimery: Did you run into Sheila Jordan at all?

Bley: Yes of course! Absolutely.

Kimery: Cause I know Monk ended up crashing there at Sheila's place at times.

Bley: Oh yeah, and Sheila was such a good host to any musician that needed a place to stay, or a meal or anything. She was mom to a lot of people. Which was weird because she couldn't take care of herself very well.

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: But she could take care of other people.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: Yeah, I knew her from way back.

Kimery: How long did your stay at Birdland last?

Bley: I wonder, it seems like years. It seemed like my entire musical education. I saw everyone from Count Basie, almost weekly, to... I even saw Lester Young there. The only person I never saw there was Charlie Parker. Everybody else I saw there. Clifford Brown, well... I can't remember them all of course, but you can read about it.

Kimery: Was it Clifford with Max, or was it pre-Max?

Bley: Steve would know. I don't think I knew who was with him. I think he was playing opposite Oscar Peterson or somebody, Ray Brown was playing bass with that, I forget who was... I think it was Clifford's Quintet, I guess all the guys that were in it. It didn't last very long, must have been the same guys. They didn't live that long, I mean. But Max did of course. I don't know if he was in the band.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So were you... so you were experiencing all this incredible music. Were you still engaged in writing at the time? You were composing?

Bley: No, no. Nothing. I stopped writing music when I was maybe ten, or eight, because I thought life was better. I want to live life and not sit in a room. Now I want to sit in a room, but then I didn't and I didn't sit in a room until Paul Bley made me write music.

Kimery: Ok. And piano wise you also just stopped playing piano?

Bley: No. Well I stopped playing piano. I played piano a little bit, but I played really, really, with total ignorance of how to play the piano. That I didn't learn until I got together with Steve Swallow. I just played stupid stuff. A very stupid style. I don't have any recordings from then so you wouldn't believe how awful it was, cause it wasn't recorded. But I would play Monk tunes, but, probably, ahh I wouldn't have played them wrong, but I'd think I'd play the tune but I didn't know how to solo on it. I would, I had a gig at the Phase Two every Saturday, it was a coffee house, and I had the band and I would hire people to play with me. Well anytime anybody needed five dollars they'd come down and work with me for the afternoon. And I got a lot of really great people down there, a lot of good bass players, Charley Haden, Steve Swallow, Roswell Rudd and Steve Lacy playing Monk tunes, that's where I learned all the Monk tunes, but I didn't solo on them or anything, I didn't know how to improvise. I really didn't. I couldn't make anything up. I could just arrange it. If I were gonna play a tune I would just sit down and arrange it. But that was a long time ago. And I can't remember what the next thing is.

Kimery: So you met Paul, and you mentioned that Paul was the stimulus for you starting to write.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: So you saw Paul, but how did that connection happen? What was the...

Bley: How did he know I was a musician?

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Because I would never sell any cigarettes, I'd sit down there with the tray around my neck, and if someone asked me for a pack of Lucky's I'd say "Are you crazy? Shhh! You have to be quiet until the solo's over."

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: So he said "You're a musician." He bought a pack of cigarettes from me and he

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

didn't even smoke.

Kimery: Ahh!

Bley: That's how we met. He must have done it in the intermission, otherwise I would have yelled at him.

Kimery: Some give roses and some buy a pack of cigarettes. [Laughs]

Bley: Really that's so funny. And so he took me away from all that, because I couldn't make enough money to go back to Oakland. I thought maybe I could go back to Oakland but I didn't make enough money as a cigarette girl, and if I did... here's the interesting thing... If I didn't make enough tips, I had to make up tips out of my salary.

Kimery: Ooooo.

Bley: So I had to turn in all my tips and make up, so I had to get tips it was really weird. And that club that was, I forget who owned it, but I think it was Oscar Goodstein and, Mom... it starts with an M, Maury? No... Maury... another gangster. But I don't know what his name was.

Kimery: So with you and Paul, the relationship was kindled there of course, with... in New York for how long before moving back to L.A.? And what?

Bley: Well that was just, Paul Bley wanted to move to LA, I don't know why. Oh no, I think he went to, he wanted to go to Las Vegas. So he took his band, it was a trio, it was Lenny McBrown and Hal... Gaylor? And me, and we all got into Paul's car and we drove to Las Vegas. And the gig only lasted two nights, and Paul got fired. So there we were in Las Vegas and we decided to go to California cause it was closer. It's strange how you just can do anything you want to. You can decide to go North, South, East, West, it's just wonderful. You don't have anything holding you down, tying you down.

Kimery: Were you starting to, did you start at that point to write for Paul, or that came once you're in L.A.?

Bley: That came when I was in L.A. I wrote some really hard pieces like Donkey and... I wrote hard pieces... I don't remember what their names are. But they are very dissonant, my mellow style had not developed yet. I was just a total... I'm not a good talker.

Kimery: No, you're great.

Bley: I don't know a lot of words. What is it called when you have... they weren't virtuosic, they didn't... yes they did.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Yeah, sure they did.

Bley: They really required virtuosity but I didn't need it to write them cause I would think about each note very slowly. Come up with things that I thought were perfect and then Paul Bley would play them, or even Ned he would play them. Scott... what was the bass player's name, Scott...

Kimery: LaFarro?

Bley: Scott LaFarro would come and pick them up and use them as exercises on the bass; he would play those things.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: But he was just, he didn't care about it musically, he just wanted to stretch his chops.

Kimery: So they had a gig, a standing gig at the Hillcrest Club?

Bley: Yeah, the Hillcrest Club.

Kimery: So did they play your music at the Hillcrest Club?

Bley: No, no...

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Not that I know of. Yeah, when Dave Pike was in the band of course they did. Yeah they played two or three of my tunes. But when Steve fired Dave Pike and hired Ornette and Don, I think, Bill Higgins and Charlie were already in Paul's band. They didn't play my music anymore, because they played Ornette's music. That was the point of hiring Ornette, to be able to play that, and I just really enjoyed, putting it lightly, I just was, felt like I was... I had a religious experience and now I was saved, ya know. It was just totally mind boggling the way I felt about everything Ornette played or wrote. And Paul Bley was the same. And from that point on we didn't do anything but listen to that music, play that music, and hang out with those people.

Kimery: So what year approximately?

Bley: Ok. '55.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Yeah.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Or 56? No I was in New York, New York by then. I think the reason I'm confused by this period of my life is that it all seemed so important and lengthy, and it really collapses into half the time I think it was, the time that I lived in Los Angeles with Paul Bley, and went to the Hillcrest Club every night, so I had my own gigs in coffee shops and such. I couldn't play very well but I'd have gigs anyway. You don't have to play good to be, to have gigs. It seems like years, but it wasn't. It must have been only a year. Although we lived in two different houses during that time, maybe it was more than a year. And Paul Bley would have still been in Los Angeles. But his Green Card, his access to the country ran out, and so he said "well I'll have to marry you so I can be legally in the country." I said "Fine", but his mother said "no" so she flew in from Montreal and tried to talk us out of getting married, and I didn't care one way or the other. I didn't regard marriage as something interesting, so we defied the mom, and got married in Carmel, California in a church by the ocean. Wow. And then we went back to New York. Or we went to San Francisco first, or something, went back to New York. But as I was saying, these things take a long time, because so much happened so quickly and everything was so thick with inspiration and, mostly inspiration, education. I learned everything I ever knew working at jazz clubs and listening to the music. I never learned anything. I never studied music at a school in my whole life. I think the only studying I did was until I was about eight or something.

Kimery: Did you encounter any of the musicians on the West Coast like Shelly Manne or Conte Candoli or folks like that?

Bley: We were just talking about Shelly Manne yesterday. What a wonderful drummer and what an incredible listener. And what a great raconteur, you called me earlier, he sure could get some things together, you know, and then he had his own band there opening for all his favorite bands that he'd bring from the East, it was just great. I really liked him a lot. But the rest of the bands, I remember going to a Bud Shank concert and hearing cool jazz for the first time. And I thought, wow that is cool. I think I like the hot stuff a little better. But then later on the cool was more, I was more able to understand it. It required more reflection and patience, and you couldn't just be impatient and listen to it.

Kimery: So your period of time in LA like you said, I wasn't sure, but it was a year.

Bley: Maybe a year.

Kimery: Yeah, what was the reason to move back to New York.

Bley: I just followed... well... Ornette's old band went back, and we couldn't live without them at that point. We followed them to Lenox School of Music. I don't want everything to sound like I was poor. I wasn't poor. But I didn't have any money, so, me and Paul

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley slept underneath the piano at Lenox, on the stage at Lenox. And John Lewis had to get us out, and he wouldn't let us into the cafeteria cause we weren't students. So we left after about 3 days and went to New York City, and finally there Ornette and Don and Charlie and Billy, came to New York and starting playing at the Five Spot, and we just hung out there all the time. And we didn't have to pay to get in, somehow we managed to get into clubs free. Paul Bley always managed to get into clubs for free.

Kimery: Mhmm. Did you, you said, and I didn't realize you had experienced the Lenox School of Music for that short period of time, but do you, cause I know that was a first, and those who envisioned it. And you talked about Teo Macero too, that was actually prompted by Gunther Schuller to be involved or to help with this vision, and Tio bawked at the idea. But those who were there, those were students and those ended up becoming teachers, and those who teach like Gunther Schuller; David Baker was a student there and then became a teacher. Bob Birkmeyer was there. In that short period of time do you recall who was there at that time? Or you ran into? You mentioned John Lewis of course.

Bley: John Lewis, we ran into him in a bad way. Umm... Jimmy Jufrey? Umm..

Kimery: George Russell?

Bley: Prob... Oh yes, George Russell. Yeah, God everybody was there. It's nice. But we were only there for two days, I'm not gonna let that go out like an accordion or something.

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: We were there for two days, we didn't have a place to stay. And underneath the piano there'd be people coming into the hall to rehearse, and the drummer would start playing right next to us, and we'd awake violently. So we went to New York and got a place to live there.

Kimery: So, back to New York. You're composing more on a regular basis? And do you have an outlet for your composing also?

Bley: Yeah. I think I maybe wrote everything on Paul Bley's Solemn Meditations album, I'm not sure but I think maybe. Cause he said to me "I'm making a record, I need six tunes". So I wrote six tunes really quickly, and I think that was all that was on that album.

Kimery: And did he say "don't make it too hard?" I'm just kidding. [Laughs]

Bley: My father said... no my father luckily was not there. I could put as many little dots on the page as I liked. I started writing and then, certain musicians, the people that played my music and asked me for tunes were George Russell, Jimmy Giuffre, Art Farmer, Tony Williams, Steve Kuhn, who had just come to town, and he's still playing some of my

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

tunes. Who else, who else, that's all.

Kimery: So composing, had you found your desire to develop your piano skills at that time or no?

Bley: No, no desire for that at all. And no desire... the music I was writing which was very difficult music, every once in a while some really beautiful just plain beautiful tune would pop out of me and it would be very embarrassing, because I really wanted to be out there, totally, I was playing totally free at that point. I had no idea what a chord change was. So when Ida Lupino came out or something, that's a tune I wrote when I was writing all that very chromatic or dissonant or... out, free, music, Ida Lupino was a shock. A couple of tunes would come out and they'd have melodies and stuff. But I also wrote for the people that never played them, I would write for Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane and Cannonball, then I would give it to them, I'd say "here's a piece that I wrote for you" and they'd just say "wha..." they'd be nice, nobody was mean, and they'd always say thank you. Then I'd give tunes to people who played in those guys's bands, and say "give it to them. Here's a tune that I wrote for that leader, can you slip it to them? It doesn't work if I do it. And Paul Bley actually gave Sonny Rollins some of my tunes. And I think that was all... I don't think I ever... and I finally realized, I started losing my naivety. I finally realized, this is... you're living like a child, you don't know anything about what works and what people think of you or what you do. Man you're just a wildflower, and somebody's gonna spray poison on you and get rid of you; you just have to learn something. And it has to be something that other people understand, or you won't have any value to them. So I started writing down these more accessible pieces of music, and Paul Bley started playing them, and people used to play... I don't remember all the people who used to play my tunes, you know I have a list of it somewhere. And then I started... I think what would happen then was maybe even meeting Michael Mantler and starting the Jazz Composers Guild Orchestra. But no now we've left out years, I don't know.

Kimery: Well the jump. I mean we can... it doesn't matter if we go back and forth there.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: So I do have here in my notes, that once you're back in New York once again you're working in Basin Street and the Jazz Gallery, was that true?

Bley: No, I worked there at those clubs before I went to Los Angeles. When I came back from Los Angeles I worked at the Jazz Gallery.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And I think maybe, yeah I think that that's... I never worked at the Half Note or the Five Spot. I think I subbed at the Five Spot once in the cloak room, but it was such a small cloak room. I didn't like it.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: At Basin Street when you were there did you ever meet Phoebe Jacobs? Was she, no?

Bley: What, did she work in the cloak room?

Kimery: Well you know my memory might be a little wrong there but I remember Phoebe talking about Basin Street

Bley: Wow, maybe I did. I wouldn't have known her last name.

Kimery: So you were also, it's so interesting I was just thinking about this, like you said you saw Basie, did you also see Ellington's band?

Bley: No.

Kimery: Never saw Ellington?

Bley: I didn't like Ellington's band.

Kimery: Really?

Bley: I had something against him, what was it? Oh, I believed that he really hadn't written the music himself. And it was all done by umm...

Kimery: Billy Strayhorn?

Bley: Billy Strayhorn. Yeah. And so I had a grudge against Duke Ellington. And I also saw on the... this is not important but, I saw that on the credits it would be Ellington and some...

Kimery: John Hammond?

Bley: Either that or Joe Glaser? Somebody that wasn't a musician. They would put their names as a composer, and I thought "this is the world I don't wanna get into." It's really... at least Count Basie gave the credit to the guys who did his arrangements. He didn't claim anything, you know. He was.... I don't know how well Ernie Wilkins got paid for an arrangement and maybe he didn't get paid at all, but did it for the satisfaction, or wanted to hear how his tunes sounded or something. But I believed... I guess I was starting to get a political consciousness about fairness and what was going on in the music world that wasn't quite right, you know, and wanting to be revolutionary.

Kimery: Mhmm

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: And when the guild happened which was pretty soon probably... probably a couple of year after... and I was asked to join it by Cecil Taylor, I was very complemented and joined it. I was the only girl, I remember that. And then... I sat there and listened to all the guys argue, and shout, and yell, and I never said, I didn't dare say a word. I was just really thrilled to be there. And whenever I did say a word they would all laugh. So, I would say, "why don't we"... and they would just all laugh, and so I didn't... I tried to keep my mouth shut.

Kimery: Mhmm. Do you know, besides Cecil who were some of the other players in that jazz guild?

Bley: Archie Shepp, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Sun Ra.. mmm a couple of guys... I don't remember anymore.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: At the moment.

Kimery: Ok. So had you prior to that, I'd assume you had seen Cecil in a performance prior to being invited to be a part of the jazz guild? Or, I'm assuming...

Bley: Say that again.

Kimery: Had you seen Cecil perform?

Bley: Oh yeah, of course, definitely. I thought he was... well I didn't like anybody right then. I don't think I even liked Cecil. I didn't like anybody, I just thought everybody but me was off on the wrong foot. And that I really knew every note that everybody played, whether it was good or bad. And I would sit and listen and I would say... "that was good until the second chorus..." you know I just got all pompous about what I knew and what I could hear. I felt like, you know, I knew everything about music and I didn't know anything!

Kimery: [Laughs]. So do you recall kind of the year/period of time when this was all transpiring? Was it the early 60s?

Bley: Yeah

Kimery: Ok. Umm and the Jazz Composers Orchestra, did that come out of that or?

Bley: Yeah it did , because it originally was called the Jazz Composers Guild Orchestra.

Kimery: Ok.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: And so me and Michael Mantler used everybody in the whole guild in the orchestra. And, it was just something that you did, you played in the orchestra if you were in the guild. But, uhh, when the guild fell through, six months later.... arguing all the time, people just screamed. And uhh, me and Mike wanted to keep the orchestra going, that was what we were doing, now writing for a big band. Or, he... it was called orchestra but it's a big band. No it wasn't, it was two of everything. It was like Noah's Ark! Michael Mantler decided what it was going to be and I just wrote for it. And we wanted to keep writing for it so we kept it going. We played it actually in Newport with the Jazz Composers Orchestra with the word "Guild" missing... three, four months after the guild broke up.

Kimery: And you said at Newport, the Newport Jazz Festival?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: George Wein? Ok. And how was it received?

Bley: Oh, terrible! Everybody hated it. It was horrible.

Kimery: Mmkay.

Bley: Umm, it was... pretty much sounded like a bunch of dogs getting caught by the pound or something. It was... we were just crazy, screaming people.

Kimery: Yeah

Bley: And, um, I remember Milford Graves was the drummer, he played like he played with everybody, he played great. Umm, he didn't scream. It's the saxophones, those damn saxophones. I didn't scream, I just tried to, you know, fit in a note once in awhile when it seemed appropriate. And, that was... Billy Taylor refused to announce it. It was... we were so awful.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Billy Taylor refused to announce it. They had to get somebody else that was unknown to announce it. We were totally regarded with no great esteem. But neither was Sun Ra, he was just... people would say "what? what kind of outer space music is that?"

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: And Sun Ra loved that, "Oh boy outer space, is that what it sounds like? Whoop! That's good."

Kimery: So that's interesting, so I assume that the band itself, knowing George Wein and

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

the way he programmed them is probably something earlier in the day.

Bley: It was in the afternoon.

Kimery: Afternoon. Ok

Bley: Mhmm.

Kimery: Ok. Did it seem like those bands that he, maybe, weren't as popular or experimental or...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: ... didn't want to program it earlier and left it up to the... So how, with... who convinced George that, or how did it go about that George agreed to have the band perform there, was it through?

Bley: Well I don't know. I had played earlier at the Anti-Festival, you know there was maybe... there was another festival at Hilton at the same time and people who played like that kind of music were in it. It was in Newport in a tent, same town, same time, and we were having a festival to complain about the Newport festival.

Kimery: [Laughs] Ok.

Bley: So everybody that couldn't play at it were allowed to play. So how did I ever get to play? It must be that maybe it was booked when the Guild existed...

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: ... And the Guild had some kind of press going for it.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And then the Guild had broken up but these players were still the same.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: And the word Guild was gone, so maybe it was that. You know I don't really remember.

Kimery: Well my sense with George Wein was that he wanted, within his programming he wanted to have the broadest breadth of jazz represented.

Bley: Yeah.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: You know, and just through assumption...

Bley: That's fantastic.

Kimery: ... you know which is great.

Bley: And I got together with them later, and I wanted him to book my band but he said, "It was too expensive. I can get Count Basie's Band for \$1400..."

Kimery: Oh.

Bley: "Why would I pay you \$3000?" You know something like that. And I'd say "Yeah man I think you should get Count Basie's Band, I certainly would." You know.

Kimery: Wow, wow. That's... wow. Sign of the times.

Bley: Yeah well that was after Basie had gone, it was just, you know I think it was somebody else running the band.

Kimery: Oh so he was no longer part of the band. Ok.

Bley: Yeah. When they were getting that amount of money Basie was gone.

Kimery: Grover Mitchell may be running it or...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Something like that.

Bley: Yeah. And they would... they wanted to work a lot because they were used to working three hundred days a year. They just wanted to stay together so they took some cuts in the pay.

Kimery: Yeah I had the fortune of seeing Basie over in Europe and boy...

Bley: Nothin' better.

Kimery: Oh my god Basie...

Bley: Oh my god.

Kimery: Butch Miles on Drums and it was just, it was heaven. And that you know I wish I would have saw some of their earlier bands there but that was just treated just as royally

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

with this wonderful music. But...

Bley: Yeah it just was great no matter where he was. He could play the Hollywood Bowl and sound great. He could just be himself all the time. So great.

Kimery: So, Michael... do you want to take a break?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: You want to do that?

Bley: Yeah

Kimery: Since we've been going for an hour... (fades out).

Kimery: (fades in) And we are rolling. We are back. So you were talking about your father and pianos?

Bley: Well my father was a piano teacher and he taught in the house as well as he would go to people's houses, you know if they couldn't come to our house. And he would sit at one piano and the student would sit at the other piano. But the bad thing about this was he had the pianos tuned a half a step low. So that A was Ab, and can you imagine, like, playing a chord on the piano and it's... you play a triad, say C, E, G, and what you hear is B, D#, F#. That's how I was raised. I was raised with pianos that were tuned a half step low.

Kimery: What was his rationale for having them, doing a half step low?

Bley: To save money. It doesn't have to be tuned as often.

Kimery: Oh. Interesting.

Bley: How unmusical could you get.

Kimery: So this must have played havoc with the years to come just to kind of recondition yourself.

Bley: Still does. I have to adjust my brain all the time to my father's piano.

Kimery: Wow. I know that, was it, umm, who was it that had an adjustable piano, um...

Bley: Someone had an adjustable piano?

Kimery: Yeah. But it wasn't necessarily... Yeah, it was... oh god I'm sorry I was

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

thinking about it and it's coming to me...

Bley: Was it a piece of furniture or was it an electronic thing?

Kimery: No no no, it was a traditional upright piano there that was set up to be able to shift keys there in a way.

Bley: WOW.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Never heard of that.

Kimery: I'm kind of drawing a blank here. So...

Bley: That's all I wanted to say, I just wanted to mention that.

Kimery: So we are, we're in the sixties, correct?

Bley: Yes.

Kimery: Yeah, that's what I thought. Cause we were talking about, we started talking about the Jazz Composer's Orchestra, Michael Mantler, and... if we can, cause there was a musical relationship but there was even more there.

Bley: Yeah. Uh, we, that was the same thing that happened with Paul Bley. All of a sudden Michael Mantler's green card was no longer good, he had to return to Austria. So we got married, he asked me to marry him so that he could stay in the country and I said sure. I'll marry anybody! You don't have a green card, no problem! [Laughs]

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: So that's what we did. And live together for a long time, like 20 years or something. And had a child! So it became more than just a marriage of convenience.

Kimery: So with you and Paul, the marriage, it dissolved? Or...

Bley: I left Paul Bley to go with Michael Mantler. It wasn't even a day in between. So...

Kimery: And, now. Composition or composing is becoming a regular part of your identity, and you have outlets and you're kind of leading up, it seems to me you're leading up to that first, i would use the term commissioned, if that's appropriate, for Gary Burton. To write for his album.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Right.

Kimery: *A Genuine Tong Funeral*. Can you tell me about that and what was, was there already a relationship prior to that with Gary Burton that led up to that, or?

Bley: No that was through Steve Swallow.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: I've known Steve Swallow most of my life and he used to commission me to write a piece. He paid \$50 for every piece I would write. Just you know to support the arts, and, Gary... I had just, I had written a song called *A Genuine Tong Funeral*, and I tried everywhere to get it, a record company, to agree to record it. I went to Blue Note, I went to Columbia, I went to everyone I knew. And everybody said no. So it just sat there on the shelf, and all of a sudden Gary Burton wanted to do an album, and Steve suggested that I had this thing already written, that maybe I could write him into, and it would be a Gary Burton album. And I said yes, Gary Burton said yes, so I wrote Gary Burton's quartet into it. That was the one with Bob Moses, Larry Coryell, Steve Swallow and Gary. And we practiced it, we rehearsed it out in California I remember, and recorded it in New York. And all of a sudden, I had... this was before I had an album under my own name, I mean now I was a composer on Gary Burton's album. And then Charlie Haden heard that album, and said he wanted me to do *Liberation Music Orchestra*. So that one thing led to another, and now I had two albums where I was the composer or the arranger, and it wasn't under my name. But when Mike and I started the Jazz Composer's Orchestra association, when the guild already collapsed, we kept the name Jazz Composer's Orchestra. We raised money to do a couple of our own albums. First we did a Michael Mantler album, and then we did *Escalator Over The Hill*, this was a long time ago. Maybe 25-30 years ago. And now I finally had an album under my own name, but it was from my own label. I never got an album under my own name until two years ago when Manfred Eicher put out an ECM album. That was the first. Up until then, either I did it myself or I didn't do it, so I started my own record label.

Kimery: Can I go back to *A Genuine Tong Funeral* and the one thing I want to address here, makes me think that your, not just your composing life was continuing to grow and expand, but as a pianist was starting to become part of the factor there too. Because you're listed on here in the personnel, as... and maybe you're listed as... Well, it's Gary Burton, Vibraphone, Carla Bley, piano, organ, and conductor.

Bley: I had no idea I played piano and organ on those... that album. I guess I did!

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: Wow!

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Yeah. So...

Bley: I was not... no. It was just composer's piano.

Kimery: Ok. So this is the... the record is incorrect. And the rest of the band was kind of interesting too. It lists Larry Coryell of course, Steve Lacy, soprano saxophone, Gato Bobbieri?

Bley: Yeah. Those were the guys that I liked at the time.

Kimery: This is wonderful. Jimmy Knepper, uhh, Michael Mantler, Howard Johnson, Steve Swallow, and of course Bob.

Bley: It isn't that that's incorrect, your information. It's just that I played piano and organ on that probably and I probably also played chains and glockenspiel and anything else that was necessary.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: But I wasn't a serious piano player. I didn't practice.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Or learn anything.

Kimery: So it was what your composition called for but it was more, it was more... it was written out or orchestrated in a way that those were the parts that you're playing.

Bley: Yeah, I guess so.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: I don't think I played on everything. I might have played on a couple of tunes, I don't know. I haven't heard it in a long time. But basically if in the piece there was a piano part I played it if there was no one else there.

Kimery: So, a couple of other themes there that came up. Of course, Steve, Steve has been in your life for many years, and of course is presently... part of your life. So let's go back and talk about the early introduction with you and Steve in the musical setting there. So you and Steve... I'm just not sure of this, but you can hopefully clarify, Steve was playing upright bass at that time?

Bley: Well when I met Steve, not met him, but when I first saw him, he was only thirteen years old, and he played trumpet.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And I remember seeing him because I was working in Basin Street East as a cigarette girl I guess... I guess I was still a cigarette girl. Stuffed animal girl?

Kimery: Hmm.

Bley: I don't know what I was selling to the customers. But...

Kimery: One time I heard you say...

Bley: Camera!

Kimery: Rabbits? Rabbits at one point?

Bley: Stuffed rabbits, not live rabbits. [Laughs]

Kimery: [Laughs] Was there a hat involved? [Laughs]

Bley: No. There was a tray and I didn't do anything. I just stood there with a tray on my neck.

Kimery: [Laughs]

Bley: Umm, he was there with his father. His father... it was Gene Krupa... his father had taken him to see Gene Krupa. And I was working there at the time and I'll never forget this. This thirteen year old boy sitting in the front row with his father. And afterwards we found out that that was him.

Kimery: I'll be darned.

Bley: And that conferred to him to because Clifford Brown was the other band, and Steve became totally sold on being a musician, I think.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: But anyway, when I first met him in the city he was one of Paul Bley's bass players.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Paul Bley would snatch up any bass player that could play at all, you know, because he would just... he had good taste in bass players, let's put it that way. Steve...

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

they played a concert at Bard College. I went along just to listen, I was a listener then more than anything else, and there was Steve Swallow going to Yale. And... to become a Latin teacher. That's what he was majoring in.

Kimery: I'll be darned.

Bley: And played with Paul Bley free, totally free. He had no idea Paul Bley didn't have any tunes except for the little heads I would write. Just little tiny fragments, and... Steve became, at that moment, convinced that he just wanted to move to New York and quit school, and he did. He went back to Yale, quit, two weeks later he showed up at our house. Said "Here I am! I can be your bass player now." But that was totally Paul Bley's bass player.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Except for the times when Steve needed five bucks, and then he worked with me at the Phase Two. And Steve one day said "My girlfriend wants to get married, what do you think I should do." I said "Oh, well marry her." And he did. He's never forgiven me for this. And became a father of two children and had to work at Holiday Inns and... supporting two children! And he couldn't play the kind of music he wanted to play anymore. But he got the kids through everything and everything ended up ok. We'll get to that later but everything is ok now. But that's how... I didn't start playing with him until *Genuine Tong Funeral*.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And then I didn't hardly play on that. And I don't think Steve would... I think Michael Mantler used Steve. Everybody used Steve. When Steve was with Art Farmer he would take my tunes to Art Farmer. And he was always in my life. If I was ever in trouble I would call him and talk on the phone to him for hours. But that's all it was until later. So let's get back to the sixties.

Kimery: Ok. So if I may just... one last thing about *A Genuine Tong Funeral* here, there's a... definitely as a composer there's a thought-through vision here, artistic vision here. And I was looking at some of the title-wise, plus also some of the titles, the recording, but also the titles of the compositions... the opening: "The Shovels," "The Survivors," "Grave Train," "Death Rolls"... what was the inspiration there?

Bley: It was Bill... it was influenced by a Chinese movie. I don't know where I had seen a Chinese movie, but in the movie there was a... there was the fight between two Tongs. Tong is like a gang in a Chinese place. And when one of the leaders of the Tong was killed, the people in his Tong marched down the streets playing instruments like trombone, tuba, and these were the same instruments I used for *A Genuine Tong Funeral*. Except when Gary Burton came on board then I added guitar, vibes, and some other stuff.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

But that was how that was... that's why those titles are there. I imagined the kind of music you would play walking down the street in Hong Kong.

Kimery: Mmkay. So you drew inspiration from a variety of places in your compositions there.

Bley: Absolutely. Very visually too I think. Often I had, I really could see what was going on, like a story. *A Genuine Tong Funeral* was the first story. *The Liberation Music Orchestra* was Charlie's story, so I didn't have too much to do with that. But *Escalator Over The Hill* was a total story. It had not been a story, I was given poetry to write music to, and a story... the story came out. I knew the story, the guy who wrote the words didn't even know the story.

Kimery: Was that Paul?

Bley: Yeah. I just made a story out of it, you know.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And so I thought, in terms of when I wrote a piece I would say, "This is the kind of music you might have played in the '20s, if you were in a, let's say you were in a tavern. The musicians would look at me and say, "What? What is she talking about?" And I said, "Play it like you were playing in a tavern in the '20s." Some of them would do it and I liked those guys best.

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: They could get into the role of the character they were playing, and I would say "This piece you're playing the gangster," you know, and they would again... they would go along with it, you know.

Kimery: Yeah, they had to have a really theatrical element or, you know. It seems like those who were able to take your music and bring it to life had that ability...

Bley: They had that ability. And if a guy was just running the changes I didn't use him very much, cause like he couldn't act the role. I like people who could act the role. But you know I don't know if that's true anymore. I think I'd just write less theatrically now.

Kimery: That's interesting, cause you know, I'm thinking about going back to your exposure early on, or lack of exposure early on to of course the big screen. Umm, maybe it was a good thing cause it allowed you to have a sense of personal fantasies or you know, those...

Bley: Yeah...

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Those things were coming out of you in your composing, compositions...

Bley: Cause I didn't get to go to the movies!

Kimery: Yeah, you were creating it. Which is really quite interesting to see.

Bley: And you know, I thought *Genuine Tong Funeral* should take place on a stage, and everybody would be wearing hoods, and there would be guys carrying a casket, and there would be... I had a whole script written for it!

Kimery: Uh huh.

Bley: And *Escalator Over The Hill* was a total script-written too. These things were supposed to be movies. But I could never get into that world, and even have any hopes. Although I did try to do *Escalator Over The Hill*. Robert Stigler had some money that was stuck in India that he couldn't get out of India. So I said, "Well, I know what to do with your money. Let's go to India and record *Escalator Over The Hill!*" You know, and he said "Mmmm, maybe so..." and it didn't ever happen.

Kimery: Didn't ever happen. Didn't materialize.

Bley: No.

Kimery: Talk a little bit more about Charlie Haden of course, the *Liberation Orchestra*, *Music Orchestra*. What, you know... of course you knew Charlie from the Ornette days, right?

Bley: Yeah. I knew Charlie when he was only eighteen.

Kimery: OK.

Bley: He just came to Los Angeles. And we became good friends because we had the same taste in music. And he had that theatrical thing going too.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: If you'll notice the movies, records he made - the movies... [laughs], the records he made recently were about movie music.

Kimery: Mhmm.

Bley: And maybe that's why we both went to Los Angeles or something. We shared the same taste in music, we liked the same composers. We liked Shostakovich, we loved

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Shostakovich. And... who else did we like... Ah! Erik Satie.

Kimery: Satie.

Bley: Stuff like that.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Again, a bunch of very theatrical people. But we liked the same music, we liked the same notes. It came down to I liked E-flat, well I prefer D. No, D-flat is better. You know, we just... everything was just... everything we shared, or argued in the tiniest increment so that it was a sharing, to even the argument. So when he went with Ornette east, I came later with Paul Bley. And Charlie heard *A Genuine Tong Funeral* and called me, saying “I need you to do an album for me.” And I said, “Ok, great.” And he gave me the songs that he wanted to do. A lot of it in the “Spanish Civil War” and all that, and I made arrangements of them.

Kimery: And that first album was... 1969? *Liberation Music Orchestra Impulse*.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: I don't have the titles in front of me, do you recall some of the titles on them? It may be an unfair question to ask.

Bley: Well I... I think I wrote something called... no I don't remember. I don't know. I wrote a tune, and Charlie had a tune, and the rest was... just music that we did arrangements of, I think. I haven't listened to it in forever. I forget.

Kimery: You bring up an interesting point there. (Clears throat). Do you, cause I've heard from various musicians that some of them enjoy hearing what they've composed and hearing the way it's played, and some musicians really shelf it as a document. They can't listen to it. Do you enjoy hearing your compositions the way they're performed? Do you have any favorites there that jump out? That “wow, that's taken to a point that I could never imagine?”

Bley: No. I'm the other kind. Never listen to it afterwards. I mean after you've finished mixing it, and editing it, and all that, it's over, and you're on to the next piece. I have no... nothing that I want. But when I do, sometimes, hear a piece, I say, “wow, that was really good. I had no idea it was good.”

Kimery: Uh huh.

Bley: But I don't do it on purpose. Neither does Steve.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So you're writing, of course you're now writing for larger ensembles. At least with Charlie.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And...

Bley: Gary Burton.

Kimery: Gary Burton.

Bley: And then my own *Escalator Over The Hill*.

Kimery: Yeah. Are you, of course it's not necessarily the traditional big band ensemble.

Bley: Not yet.

Kimery: Are you drawing from those earlier exposures to help you in that process, of those big bands? Because if there wasn't really anything that I know of prior to that that had those formations of instrumentation that you're writing for.

Bley: No, I don't think so. I think that came later. And sometimes I think I'm being influenced by a kind of music, or I say "I stole this piece! That's the Perry Mason theme!" And then somebody says "no it isn't! You just think it is." You know. Somebody told me that "And Now the Queen" was the first five notes of the "Rites of Spring." I hadn't even heard "Rites of Spring." So I don't think I was influenced by anything consciously. But of course it's the big jukebox up in my head, it knows every piece that was ever heard by me. And probably a lot of stuff just came out. But it comes out in this screwed up way. So it doesn't sound like it was originally. That's what I've been told.

Kimery: Well you know it's interesting, screwed up way, but for me, as somebody who's a listener, I find it to be very, very refreshing. Very, very wonderful and unique. Very... there's a voice there, that unique voice there that really draws my ear to it. So as a fan, I see that, as you see it as in a screwed up way, I see this as wow, this is something that I wouldn't have imagined to have it presented in that way.

Bley: Hmm.

Kimery: So it...

Bley: Yeah I think I didn't get any schooling after I was eight, so I was pretty much free to not know things. But I still had the original talent. So a person who has original talent and doesn't know what's right and wrong has a free reign. I tried to do what was right but it always failed in a wonderful way. Like you say, I mean I know that it was not a failure,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

but it wasn't that I was trying to be anything. I was just writing what I thought was ordinary music. I wanted to be acceptable and ordinary. And it just never worked out.

Kimery: What comes to show, I mean if you look at the last twenty or so years within the academic world there how everything has been systematized, that it has taken away, not take away, but it's harder to have that unique individual voice. So your testament to so many who have not gone through that system there and has developed such an incredible and definable voice within music.

Bley: Yeah, but I don't want to make that sound like I wouldn't recommend people go to school, cause I would of if I had been smart. I would have gone to school. If I had made the right choices. But I just wanted to go to the zoo instead, I just made the wrong choices.

Kimery: Well education is important, so I...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: ... I do agree there. I think there's a balance there that has to be, one has to strike to figure out. The education side of it is still being able to develop your own voice there and it's a tough one, because of... You know. There are rules, and all those things that are saddled with having to fulfill. But it doesn't necessarily say "Ok, now who are you?"

Bley: Maybe you should go to school in an older part of your life, and when you're young and forming not be led astray by rules. Because now I spend my life studying music. But it's too late. I'll never learn how to do that stuff! But Steve is my teacher and I know chord changes, I can play Perdido, and I just take great pleasure in practicing every day, playing with Steve whenever he's around, playing all the standards, playing his music, my music, whatever. I'm still learning. I mean, it's endless what you can learn.

Kimery: That's the beauty of this music, but I think in general. But this music, it's an endless well of knowledge, or opportunity to learn.

Bley: Yeah. Hmm.

Kimery: And if you're thinking in those terms there, it's really exciting. So there is such a large body of work that you have penned over the many years, and I know in listening to Ben Sidran's interview with you he talked about, or you talked about at one point one of your inspirations also being the word, or words you used as you think of words the way they would formulate in a sentence how that would be a point of inspiration; that actually creating a song or composition.

Bley: Yeah.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So you looked at many different ways of being able to express yourself through music.

Bley: Well for a while words worked for me. If I was taking a solo, and I was, like, playing with somebody I really liked, I would just say to myself as I played the solo, “Speak to that person with words.” Only in my head, but notes taking the place for everyone else to hear. And like, the sound of words gave me ideas for phrases. It’s a language, music is, and when you’re speaking to make sense as though it were, you know, a sentence... a sentence is a beautiful form. Not every sentence, but I mean, the shape of words, what I just said right there, dah dah dah dah... That’s a nice sounding thing. But I don’t remember... I don’t think I’ve done that for a long time. That was just one little tiny tool, many years ago. I haven’t done that lately.

Kimery: Well in essence what we’re trying to do with our audience is also communicate with them so words are... translating music. Words are as music this important way to make that connection. How do you do it? You have run on sentences, you can speak very fast, very slowly.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: You can do all those things, there’s techniques in the way of doing it through the spoken word, that’s translating to music. It gets you closer to making that connection, your connection to your audience.

Bley: That’s interesting, I think I might try it again!

Kimery: Yeah! [Laughs] So, not wanting to blast through a bunch of your career here but there are so many things here that I see that are really critical. With Michael Mantler there’s an extended period of time where there’s this creative energy that is happening. In your... the discography shows that it’s not necessarily a large volume of output, though impressive, but not a large volume of output as I’m looking through it right here. There is, well I should say the Jazz Composers Orchestra, there’s stuff with Michael, there’s also Jazz Realities? Now that’s 1966. ’68 through ’71 you have *Escalator Over The Hill*, of course we talked about that. And then, seventies you see there’s somewhat of a robust period of time for writing for both the Composer’s Orchestra, and also with Michael. What... Was there a, I’ll call it a co-composing relationship or was there assignments that each had, or how did that work?

Bley: I’ve never written with anyone else. Nobody does that, unless they’re in the pop world, I think. A group will get together in the studio and offer. One person will play a phrase and someone else will say “I know what chord...” “I don’t know how to do that.” No it was completely separate. Completely separate. During that time while I was with Michael Mantler I did a lot of things that were socially interesting. Like forming our own

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

record company, like forming the Jazz Composer's Orchestra record company, forming the New Music Distribution Service, to take care of how to distribute these albums that we made, and also the albums that everybody else had made around that time. So there were a lot of social things going on, and there also was - I had a band that I wrote for for years and years. It was a six horn band, four rhythm so it was a ten piece band, and this is what I used on my recordings. The new record company, I think, after I think five of those records, that same band, six horns, four rhythm. And I just stated that. And when the opportunity came to write for a big band, I said, "I can't do that." This was a guy at Harvard, it had Tom... somebody, who had a big band at Harvard. And they were all little doctors and lawyers but they played music, you know to get a credit or something. And he said "You gotta write some music for my big band." I said "I can't! I don't do that!" So I got some teacher at Berkeley to write the arrangements to change my six horns into thirteen horns. And after he did it I said "Shit, I could do that!" So I never again did that. From that point on I was writing big band music. And then I spent ten, fifteen years writing big band music. So I write music for one band at a time.

Kimery: Ok. So you mentioned this, and I'm glad you did, cause that was the direction I was hoping to go in also. So WATT Records. Now we're talking about going from somebody who was a composer, dealing with artistic temperament, cause you mentioned that also too, we're trying to convey your ideas and your thoughts and your vision about the music, and we should get on part of that too, but you're talking about the business side.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: So you're venturing to the business side which is a... there's some very... it's a very controlled side of music that typically the industry doesn't want artists, especially at that time to control their intellectual property. Were you engaged in the nuts and bolts of it? Was it something?

Bley: No, I wish I could say I was. I was the face you saw. The nuts and bolts were done by other people. We had, like with New Music Distribution Service, there were people selling the records, packing the records, stocking the shelves. Mike Mantler had a very good business head. Well, not good financially, but he had a good head for the business of art, maybe...

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: ...you could say. I just put out the newspaper and did the... I went to dinner with people and I said everybody should make his or her own album. Don't give the music to the companies, and I would talk to the companies and say, "Everything you get you stole from us, so why don't you give the money now and I'll do more work with people putting out their own albums, and then you can steal from more records." And that didn't go over very big. Every business deal I tried failed, except that I put out my own records and had

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

complete control over all those twenty five years. More.

Kimery: And you understood early, or you knew early on too that copyrighting your own, publishing was important.

Bley: Yeah. I only had a couple of tunes that belonged to other people, and I got them back from those people.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: And now I own everything I ever wrote. And I thought that was important. I made that an issue for everyone, I tried to get everyone to do that. But it was not, I didn't... that's not nuts and bolts. This is visionary things. How should the world be? How should music sound? How should this person live? Then you get to the point of you're actually making the dull phone calls and doing the taxes and stuff. I never did that.

Kimery: You were able to insulate yourself from having to do that.

Bley: I had help. Yeah.

Kimery: That's great. I mean, it's one of those things that especially we see today with the artist who wants to be successful in this crazy business we're in. They really have to have a broad base of knowledge and exper... I wouldn't say expertise but they have to have a broad base of knowledge to be able to manage their career. And we've seen it so many times that those who are supposed friends in the business side, at times they've made some bad decisions and put the artist really in harms way. From Woody Herman to... you just name it. Even... you mentioned Ellington. Ellington, there was tax problems, and on and on and on.

Bley: Really?

Kimery: Yeah it was just... So there's a common thing. Having ownership of your... not just your musical product but your financial destiny and everything else. It's a tough one though because of the fact that you have to give up something there. Which means that a lot of artists these days find themselves being challenged with the sole thing they love, which is engaging with their art. So you're able to not have to engage in that. You knew to some degree, but you didn't have to engage into that point where you had to do taxes and that's...

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: So who else on WATT Records? Who else was on the label itself?

Bley: Michael Mantler.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Then when we developed... we thought we would... I guess it was when Steve... No. We started another label called XtraWATT. And we could record other people. We could pay for the recording and record other people that we liked. We started with the guy named Steve Weisberg. We went to Karen Mantler... we did three records with Karen. And eventually Steve Swallow. So I'm Steve Swallow's record company. And I made bad decisions all the time and they were creative decisions. I said to Steve, "you're the greatest bass player in the world. You could be really famous, just make a bass player album. And I made him take a really great looking picture they put on the cover. I said that this is gonna sell a million, and it never did. I was wrong about everything. I just liked the idea of doing business, but I was not a business person. I made the wrong decisions, I... because I didn't know that being/making money is totally different than making art.

Kimery: Yeah, but I assume at this point, having that wonderful document, the recorded document, is something that I assume that you're glad that is done.

Bley: Oh yeah. Yeah, glad that it's done. It's personal, but I can't afford to do that anymore, so everything I've written in the last five years has not been recorded, and probably never will be, because... The record business, as everyone knows, has gone belly up. It cost in the past, it cost maybe \$25,000 to make an album that's really good, well mixed, mastered, great musicians, well paid... you could do that for \$25,000. But your sales will be four hundred, and you'll make \$4,000. You cannot do this to make a living anymore. We're at a stage where we don't know what to do. What I have had to do, and it's almost like the end of the story, is become a piano player. Finally, Steve taught me how to play the piano. Not my father or mother. And I didn't bite Steve or anything. I just sometimes said "Steve, could we go outside now? I just don't wanna learn "Hello Dolly" you know or something like that. And he would say "No, sit here. What do you do with your left hand?" He was my teacher, totally.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: And now I'm starting to become the kind of the piano player - God willing - that... well someone just said to me last year... It was a guy from Austria, Christian Muthspiel - trombone player - he came to me after the show and said, "I've never in my life sat through an entire jazz concert without hearing a single cliché." And he really gave it up to me. He said "My God, how'd you do that?" I said "well I'm trying to play clichés, do you know one? Steve won't teach me any. He says I shouldn't learn them, but I... what do you do when you get to this chord? There's got to be some way to finish your solo with a flourish. Gary Burton always said "Finish your solo with a flourish." Well, what's a flourish? Is that something just fast? Do you make it up on the spot, or do you have a series of flourishes that...?" He said "yeah, that's what it is. You have a series of

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

flourishes, and if the tune is 'I Got Rhythm' you use one of your 'I Got Rhythm' flourishes for the end." I said, "oh no man, it's gonna take me awhile to do this." And he said "don't ever do it." And so I thought about myself. Yes, I play slowly, I play with a lot of mistakes. But I'm talking as hard as I can about, you know, something musical. And there's a certain audience there that says, "wow, I don't have to listen to somebody's strut. I don't have to listen to somebody go through a hoop. I don't have to listen to somebody telling me something so fast I can't hear it. I'm just here listening to somebody talk to me patiently, and just saying something." And I thought, "man, I maybe can do it." So I am at this point in my life trying to play almost as much as I write. And making great strides, great strides. And yet I don't know what to do. So I'm making it in a vacuum, there's nothing there that's gonna be anything but original. So I don't know what the end of this story is. I think I'm getting good. I think I could really be good, but I'm not sure, you know.

Kimery: Well I've listened to some of your duo recordings and trio recordings, and I love it.

Bley: Wow!

Kimery: I just, you know.

Bley: Well you're just one of those people that can...

Kimery: Yeah I did, to me, once again, I'm of the mindset too that space is beautiful.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Yeah. I have a difficulty sometimes with density. Density translates to certain things, but space to me... it becomes something that you can really sink your teeth into you know. And there's a thought that's being conveyed to you. So I'm being drawn into it in a way that I feel connected to it, and it really... As being a drummer when you have a duo or trio that's without a drummer there, and you're thinking "wow that says something there." Cause there's a musical... what to call it... intent that's going on, that is genuine and has a sense of care and camaraderie, and it's conveying a message. So whatever it is you're doing, keep it up! That's my story.

Bley: I thought you were going to say "Being a drummer, I can play along with it in my brain!"

Kimery: Well I can! I can but I don't!

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: I don't because it doesn't need to be there.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Wow.

Kimery: To me, I don't hear... What I hear is what is being presented, and it's just as beautiful.

Bley: Well we only do that because that's the only kind of music that you can tour with and make a living is a trio, and that's as large as your group can be nowadays. And we had, we loved playing with drummers. Steve Swallow, some of his best friends are drummers. He's always been the person who's told me the drummer to use. We can't afford a drummer. We just can barely afford Andy Sheppard, who is our tenor player. Before we had a duet, but that was too small. I couldn't get up on stage and play all the solos. I need a front man. I need a guy to stand up there.

Kimery: Though I read you did a solo concert there, more recently or not too long ago.

Bley: I have never... I don't remember ever playing a solo concert in my life.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: But I made, I recorded a solo piece in a studio, but with about 7,000 splices.

Kimery: [Laughs] So is Andy on the west coast?

Bley: Andy is in London.

Kimery: Oh, in London. Ok. Which leads me to a couple other stories, or at least questions. One is... ok... so... record label. We're sitting in a studio here so this studio, for WATT Records, was this already in existence and was this a part of that company or that recording label there?

Bley: Yeah, this was built by Michael Mantler, board by board. And we figured if we rented it out once a month for a week, we could use it for three weeks free. And we never managed to get that. That was a bad business model. We got some people... A lot of records were made here at first, but that's when the business was, you make an album and that's what you sell and that's how you buy food and clothes and shelter. And that doesn't happen anymore, so our business as a studio really went under. So we dismantled it, gave it away.

Kimery: So then let me ask this, cause there's... I only have a few of the many recordings, but there's a couple things that jumped out here. Of course there's *Dinner Music*.

Bley: Stuff.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Yeah, we talked about the earlier Stuff. I mean it's just a wonderful band and you can hear how that band, those musicians that are part of Stuff just absolutely groove like crazy.

Bley: Ohh.

Kimery: But was that done live, or were there overdubs that were happening during that?

Bley: They were overdubs.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: It was the rhythm section. And actually, you know it was Richard Tee that just took the session over. Even though it was my record, he just said, "ok now," and he would tell everybody what they're gonna do. "You're gonna play on the second chorus, and over here Eric's gonna play that thing over there." I just let him do it. And I was the organ player, and I played... I forget if my stuff was live. Maybe it was just Stuff itself, who played all the tracks, and afterwards they thought that I was a singer and that I was gonna sing over it all, cause that's what they usually do. They hire out, you know, for a singer. And afterwards they said, I remember Richard talking to me at a club later, and said "I had no idea that this was gonna be a trombone feature, or this was gonna be trumpet or... and all these guys are gonna be playing on it, and you're gonna be playing organ. I thought you were a chick singer!" I said "well unfortunately my voice is gone the way of many other talents."

Kimery: There's one particular, I mean I love them all. There's one particular tune on here that really captures my attention, it was "Song Sung Long."

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And it's really, which I thought was wonderful, was Bob Stewart on the tuba.

Bley: Oh!

Kimery: The opening tuba there, it's just a beautiful way, a very unique beautiful way to open it. It captures your attention. Was that something that you envisioned, or was that something that the recording session happened and said, "let's do this?" How'd that come up?

Bley: You know I don't even remember that album. I don't know a single... I don't have any... I don't know! But I think probably... for me to give that section of the rhythm section over to Richard Tee was something I had never done before, and never did again because I just loved the way he played so much. And to play with him was totally

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

incredible, oh my god. But I don't do that now. I think as soon as the horns came in it was me.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Prose... Yeah, the guys... No, no. I'm the leader of the horns. It's just that that was a special thing.

Kimery: Yeah, it was. It caught my attention there. There's another... So that, which I, you know was looking at the space in here, and you're talking about doing recordings, I kind of visualized that it would be very difficult to have all those bodies here recording live, and so I'm glad you confirmed that there were overdubs.

Bley: Well that record I'm talkin' about, we had a whole live album, made a big band, all standing in the three rows right at that wall. Trumpets, trombones, reeds, organ, piano, bass drums, in one room. And we did it all live. And then also the record called the *13 & 3/4*, those recordings were done with a chamber symphony orchestra right in this room.

Kimery: Really?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Hmm. Who engineered?

Bley: Tom Mark.

Kimery: Tom Mark. Ok, so he was the engineer for all those?

Bley: All those things, yeah.

Kimery: And you mentioned within... back to just *Dinner Music*, with Stuff, they were actually in town for a performance.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And you were able... you knew this in advance, and so you were able to negotiate with them to come here?

Bley: Oh yeah. We used to go see them wherever they were playing.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Yeah.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So you had a relationship with them prior to that.

Bley: No, we were just flies on the wall, we never even spoke.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Yeah, no we just... they were playing at the Joyful... Joyous Lake? Joyful Lake? Joyous Lake?... in town in Woodstock and I went there and after I just got up my courage and went up to Richard Tee and said, "you guys stayin' in town for a couple of days?" And they said "well I don't know." And I said, "I would like to record. I'm doing a record, I'd like to use you guys." And so I guess we negotiated the bread or something. They didn't know me. I didn't have any clout at all. And I don't think they played for the joy of playing it with themselves. I don't think they played glad at all to be playing with me because they didn't even know who I was. I just hired them. Afterwards we got together and had words about Stuff... Stuff... things, but at the time that was a one off. There were a lot of one offs. I didn't feel any need to because I had never been successful at anything, I didn't have to keep doing the same thing. Everything was totally off the wall. I was infatuated with it at the time.

Kimery: So when did that moment happen when you started there to look at having a band, and a larger ensemble with the musicians that you wanted to have in there, or at least start to identify?

Bley: Well I was a sideman in the Jack Bruce Band, and I had never toured or played in any sense of the word. And he called me to ask for Tony William's telephone number, cause he wanted to get Tony Williams to play with the band. But I said, "Jack, you have a band! I wanna be in your band!" He said, "Ok." And then Tony Williams wouldn't do it, so he got another drummer, but I just asked if I could be in that band and then he said yes. And I played Mellotron and many different types of keyboards. I don't even remember what they were called, but all the electronic stuff. Electric keyboards. Farfisa... probably a Hammond B-3, but maybe a fake one. And I just played the written music, I didn't take solos or anything. I sort of like orchestrated it. We never made an album, we broke up the day of the album recording.

Kimery: Oh no.

Bley: Oh my god, but I heard it once on *An Old Gray Whistle Test*. I heard the band, the band sounded beautiful. But we were all trying to sing into microphones, background vocals and you couldn't hear us. I don't even think I could sing. But great composer, Jack Bruce. Great bass player, great composer. So after I got home from that I had a taste for fine wine, cigars, limousines... I just wanted to go back out on the road. Find the greatest hotel in town, people lighting matches in the audience... I said "this is the life for me!" So I started my own band. Of course there were no great hotels, no matches lit, no fine wine, certainly no cigars. It was just horrible, you know the conditions. People would walk out,

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

people would throw things at me. People would throw bottles, apples, anything they had, I'd just get... I remember my drummer at the time was Andrew Cyrille. He would get so mad because his suit would be full of peaches after a gig. He said, "I can't go on like this!" So I'd go say to the audience, "you can't hit the drummer, you go ahead and hit me." Or I would say "bring the promoter up here," and the promoter would come out onto the stage and I would say, "ok, hit him." It was just like crazy, stupid stuff I was doing.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: But that's why I started the band. And we lost money for ten years, and I think any band leader will tell you you're gonna lose money for ten years. I remember Paul Motian saying the same thing. For the first ten years he lost money, and then he started making money. And we had maybe ten years where we made money and lost a lot of money too, you know. But made a lot, made a lot, lost a lot. Fine life, it was really fun. I got to see the world, and the people got used to me and didn't throw things anymore.

Kimery: Who did... who was involved in the management of it? Did you have any say in that or any...

Bley: Yeah. That was, I believe from the very beginning Thomas Stowsand.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Of Saudades, which is a company in Austria. And that was my only manager I think my whole career. He died now, but I still have Saudades.

Kimery: Did you have any state-side representation where the band played?

Bley: Yes, I had Ted Kurland for ten years, but he never got me any gigs. But I didn't want any gigs. I didn't like to play in person. Once I got through the Jack Bruce stage and realized it was not gonna be what it was, rock and roll had that to speak for it. But Jazz had the worst hotel in town, and eating whatever band slop was given to you by the club owner, and losing a lot of money by having excess baggage. But after ten years it was better. We actually made some money. And Thomas Stowsand stayed with us until we did make money, and made him a lot of money too.

Kimery: So who in those early days in the band, some of those players in the band that you can recall?

Bley: Michael Mantler. Bob Stewart. Or Joe Daley. Either one of those two guys. Vincent Chancey, he was even in my band when we sang. We had a singing band for a while. We all sang. Oh! That's the album *I Hate To Sing*. No it isn't... Yeah it is. But I had all the guys sing. Joe Daley would be singing! It was amazing what they did, what

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

we did. But I'm trying to remember the guys in the band. They were also in more serious bands. George Lewis, the smart trombone player from MIT. "Blue" Gene Tyranny from the classical world, piano player. Don Preston sometimes was the organ player or the synthesizer player. Bob, no. John Clark, French Horn. Gary Windo, tenor. Allan Braufman, alto. Sometimes Joe Lovano, tenor. Eventually Steve Slagle, alto. These are names I remember, I saw these guys hundreds of times, and wrote for them.

Kimery: So in Ben Sidran's interview with you, you indicated that when you created the band, and formed the band, your writing now took on the vision of writing also for the personalities and the individuals in the band.

Bley: Right.

Kimery: So were you going through, as you were bringing musicians in, you were thinking about what they brought to the table? Or was it a discovery once they came in the band?

Bley: Sometimes it would be a shock. Like if all of a sudden Gary Valente pulled out of the Japanese tour and got Ray Anderson instead. That music was not written for him. Those two trombone players were totally different. So that's a disadvantage now if you write for one person and all of a sudden they can't show up or don't show up. You're giving someone else their music, and it doesn't sometimes work out for the musician or for the arranger. But mostly I just kept everybody all the time. And eventually, Steve made me change drummers. I had D. Sharp as a drummer for many years, and he was not an accomplished jazz drummer. I caught him from the rock and roll road, I think he played with Jonathan Richman, which was a singer/songwriter. But he also could play... he had a great groove. It was just not as advanced as Steve needed. So once he just told me, "I gotta... I need another drummer." So I said, "well, who do you want?" He said, "Victor Lewis". I said, "no problem." And so I called Victor and got him! And then he would say, "for the conga player I don't wanna work with..." whoever it was I got him. "So who do you want?" And both Victor and Steve say "Don Alias!" "No problem!" I called Don Alias, I guess I did have a little bit of ability to make things happen. I wasn't all... those nuts and bolts things, hiring, calling someone you don't know and hiring them. So I did that myself with great enthusiasm. And Don at that time was in Montreal, he had sort of quit the music business, and I got him back in. It was really nice. It's amazing how many jazz musicians who are world class you can get if you just pay them!

Kimery: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah the old greenback does do magic there.

Bley: It's not cause they're greedy, it's just they gotta stay alive.

Kimery: Yeah, no it is... well.

Bley: It's just you can get 'em...

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: So you were talkin' about that band there, and of course I have the recording here, *The Very Big Carla Bley Band*. And, you know, I was listening to this and it just knocked me out, and I've heard Victor play many times live and also with Bobby Watson in a variety of settings. I actually... also was with Stan Getz.

Bley: Oh yeah.

Kimery: So when I heard him on this album, it was a different kind of, for me, experience of Victor. Cause I've never heard him in a big band.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And it was beautiful. But we were talking earlier, there's one particular piece here, and I've listened to the whole thing multiple times, one particular piece that has multiple sections and it's called "United States." It's a fifteen minute, over fifteen minute composition there. I wrote down here, I was listening to it and said... let's see if I have that folder here...

Bley: I don't have that tune even available, it's not even... it's not available.

Kimery: It says goes through... it goes through many changes. You've got patriotic moments, inflections of Mingus at times? I kind of get a, you know if there was Mingus influences there?

Bley: Definitely.

Kimery: Ok... has a choir section in it?

Bley: It does?

Kimery: Oh no a brass choir section. There's a brass choir section in there that I also... So it goes through all these modulations...

Bley: I've got to listen to that.

Kimery: ... modulations in there and I thought wow, that's, you know. I thought it was different pieces there and then when I looked at it I was still this, your vision, "United States," your vision about this country and its many facets there through music. I really liked it. But what knocked me out too is just the band itself and the music that you wrote. It, to me, once again, it seemed that the musicians were uniquely drafted for this band, because the music itself required a depth there where you weren't just reading notes on a page, you actually had to bring more to the table.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: And if I'm correct that this band was like that too.

Bley: It was, and again I ran into trouble because I had a reeds player, Roger Janotta who played oboe and flute and soprano, and everything. I wrote everything for him and then I never again got him in a situation where it was the stuff I wrote for him, you know. And I would write things for Michael Mantler who couldn't play the trumpet above middle c, you know. He had this tiny little range and beautiful sound, and the next guy who had to play that part was furious. And then I didn't know that the lead player doesn't take the solos of the trumpet section. I gave all the solos to Lew Soloff. And the next time I didn't have Lew Soloff, or even before I didn't have him, I had to change all the music. I had to say "Oh, I didn't know that the lead trumpet player didn't take the solos". And so I had to change everything to so now Lew was two and I needed a lead player. And so it gets you into trouble, that's what I'm saying when you write specifically for a person that you don't have under contract for the rest of his life.

Kimery: Yeah. Well this too, interestingly enough. This was recorded over in Ludwigsburg, Germany. So was the band on tour or they went?

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: That's how I made albums.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: Bringing with the big band. You'd have to have a tour to cover the expenses. You couldn't just go in and record a big band. I didn't do that until *Looking for America*. Then I just went into New York City and recorded that with a band. But it's not financially possible to do that without a tour, and now we don't have tours with the big band anymore.

Kimery: So being mindful of the time, cause I don't... be mindful of the time. There are still a variety of things I do want to ask here, but I'm gonna try to do it in a way that will give us really an insight into your mindset here on a variety of things. One is... I went onto your website and I've never encountered a website the way it is, and it... once again it speaks uniquely of you.

Bley: I have no idea how to make a real, regular way website.

Kimery: You know, and so the whole prison element of it. What was... was there... what was the mindset behind that?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: Well I didn't know if it was gonna be a prison or not. I thought I considered it a castle.

Kimery: Ok.

Bley: It sort of was like a video game. I want it to be like a video game where you like castles and dungeons and... some of those original video games. I wanted a location and my daughter is also a person who loves prisons. We both have a thing for prisons, me and my daughter. I don't know why. But we like to go to them, and we're fascinated by them. We could never live in one but we're fascinated by the horror of being in prison. So we said that ought'a be fun, and so my daughter and I work on this website together. We have just little brainstorming sessions and we get in the car and I'll say "why don't we all wear uniforms, ok?" And she'll say, "and I escaped, I'm not in my cell, I escaped." And then I say "and you're in the tunnel" and... we just have a lot of fun with it, you know.

Kimery: Yeah I actually printed it out.

Bley: Oh my god.

Kimery: I printed it out because I said, "you know, this is..." Like I said, never been to it, so it just struck me as very unique there. Now when I was going through there, what I saw also that really showed me a sense of the business side, albeit through you or your daughter or Steve; all your big band arrangements there are listed and the opportunity to purchase them. I thought, wow. That is... So... having that business acumen sense that, you know, there is a value in let's make this music accessible. Was that something that you brought to the table, or this was a collective approach between you and your daughter and Steve, saying, "Look, we want to create this website, and all this?" No?

Bley: No. I think Steve is always sort of said, "this is a one joke website, you know. How are you going to think of something?" He wasn't in favor of that at all. And Karen just does what... well, she and I just said "we know what the problem is and we solve it together." But the problem itself exists without teamwork. The problem exists, the solution maybe uses a team. But... no. I can't think of anything other than that. That's my website.

Kimery: Do you get a lot of interest and purchases for your compositions there?

Bley: Yeah, but a lot of them are the big band. Every city, every school has a big band. And that's how... by furnishing them with things with the exact instrumentation of the band they already have, they order it. And then sometimes a lot of people want to do *Escalator Over The Hill* and they just do it by buying it. But that's not a money making thing. That's just the cost of labor involved, it just covers the cost of the labor and the postage.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Kimery: Does this also provide the opportunity for you to be a guest artist with ensembles around the country? Around the world?

Bley: Well I've been the guest conductor and composer with many big bands in Europe. But I think only one in the United States. Oh, two. One in Texas, one in Vermont. But Europe basically has a lot of big bands. Radio big bands, not only schools, radios, cities, god, bands all over the place. And they buy the stuff and play it.

Kimery: Are you finding yourself being asked for commissions from someone like the GDR/DDR Radio Bands in Germany or any of the... is there?

Bley: GDR, no. All the other ones, yes. And let's see. The last commission that I got was two years ago and that was for the Boys Choir big band piece. It was played in the Morris Festival and that was like 80-90 people.

Kimery: Wow.

Bley: And the commission just about covered the copying cost.

Kimery: Did they record it?

Bley: No.

Kimery: Videotape it or anything?

Bley: Yeah I have a cassette of the videotape of it. The Boys Choir was insanely great. I want to do this piece over here. I used a German boys choir and it's sort of a little bit confusing cause it's about people learning how to speak French. So there were so many languages going on. I want to do it with the American Boys Choir and my own big band. So when I become a billionaire I'll do it. Just waiting.

Kimery: [Laughs] You know, anything's possible. The other areas I quickly wanted to talk about is that - we talked briefly about it - the duo and trio. And I love the trio with Andy Sheppard, you, Steve. That to me is a very creative music moment that's happening there.

Bley: That's continuing. That's all I'm writing for now is the trio.

Kimery: Ok. And Andy is the reed player, there's nobody else that subs for him.

Bley: No.

Kimery: Ok. So it's a defined unit that either that unit goes out or it's not happening at

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

all.

Bley: I know. We can't play in the states because getting him over here with a visa would be too hard. We did it once and it was months of paperwork and cost, so we only work in other countries.

Kimery: Are you finding that a lot of your performances are happening abroad versus in the...

Bley: Yeah, totally. All of them.

Kimery: Any of the universities you're finding yourself and here in the United States engage in any...?

Bley: No. One high school, there was one high school... no that was different. No I haven't. I think maybe that thing I talked about in Vermont. Oh yeah. That was... there was that and then there was Ohio, something in Ohio. You know at that big university in Ohio. Anyway I can think of two things. Oh yeah and then there was the Texas... Over the fifty years of my career there were maybe three or four universities that... Oh Harvard! I forgot Harvard!

Kimery: Yeah.

Bley: And then there... I just got that award at New England Conservatory. And they did my music. You know, I'm wrong, I've got a lot of American stuff.

Kimery: Ok. Do you find that it's happening within the last five to ten years it's becoming more?

Bley: No.

Kimery: Or you think it's something that's always been there?

Bley: It's always been there, but I think it's dying down. I don't think I've had a university experience where I wasn't just given a doctorate or something. I got two doctorates in the last couple of years. One from a university in France, and one from a school in Boston.

Kimery: The Berkeley School of Music?

Bley: No, the New England Conservatory.

Kimery: Ok.

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Bley: But maybe this new award, this NEA award will make it possible to get some exposure that doesn't frighten people off. I mean, to be accepted by your own kind, I never expected it. I don't even expect it. I haven't even earned it. I don't know who would have had the audacity to suggest that I get this award. I sure wouldn't have given it to myself, but getting it might help me, you know, to become taken seriously.

Kimery: Well you think about it, you're very much, and I hope you take this term as a term of endearment, you're a trailblazer there. With a big band, there's only other... female big band, there's only one other big band that was happening at that particular time, Toshiko Akiyoshi had her big band.

Bley: Yeah.

Kimery: So you're really forging new territory there and in a pretty major way there, that was not typical.

Bley: Yes, but the music was influenced by everything from Indian ragas to a drinking hall ballads. You know, the purity of the player in the jazz world is always been the main reason we hold that person in high regard. We can learn from that person. The purity is a relief, it's nothing... there's no baggage in it. And that's why I'm just humble as the recipient of this thing. I just... It's a blast to get it. It's just such a blast, because how come I got it? I mean, I was never doing the right thing and never shaking the right hand, I was never... I had no regard for anything that was correct. And this came out of it. It just is crazy. I'm just so... actually thrilled. I don't know what I can give back in return for this. But maybe I can keep in mind that this... somebody there... I have to stop. I can't even. I don't know what to say.

Kimery: Well you know I must say this, because we're coming to a punctuation of this, or at least a closure of this interview here. This country is about as I see: It's about opportunity, developing your own voice, being contributing to it in a way that shows the uniqueness and dynamic of this country and its peoples, and which your... what I see your contribution has been substantial. It's been in an artistic and a personal, humanitarian in many ways, and so the honor of NEA Jazz Master is well deserved.

Bley: Thank you.

Kimery: And more. You've given so much and we look forward to the many more wonderful things that you will bestow upon us. But it's... this is done, it's given not lightly, it's given with purpose because of the fact that they put a lot of thought, we put a lot of thought into... I shouldn't say we but they put a lot of thought of those individuals who are involved in it to who has made a difference, and you've made a difference.

Bley: Wow, thanks. But you guys are very unusual. I mean the regular American audience would not think that. I don't know. You know that's why I go to Europe. Why

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

can't we play in America? Maybe that's something we can work on.

Kimery: Yeah. Would you think about this, you think about some of those musics that are popular right now, will it stand the test of time fifty years, a hundred years from now? My opinion, no.

Bley: Yeah, not all of it, definitely.

Kimery: No. Well, as I look at those who have been identified as yourself as this body of people that have contributed to the identity of this country. It will be part of and identified for who we are for decades to come, because of the fact it is something that represents who we are as a country. These moments in time when somebody comes up with a one-hit wonder, ok that's great. The financial side of return, we'd love to have part of that or be part of that, but the reality is this: Our short time on this earth, if we can contribute something that's meaningful, it far outweighs quote unquote the monetary return. What you have done is contributed something that is far beyond that pop culture. It is of substance. It is of value.

Bley: Well I will try to accept it gracefully.

Kimery: [Laughs] And with that Carla I really thank you. It's been a pleasure, joy and an honor for me to be able to sit with you for this past couple of hours. We just scratched the surface of your voluminous career. It's been such a treat and heartfelt thanks and gratitude for you spending time with me.

Bley: Wow.

Kimery: And on behalf of the Smithsonian, and the National Endowment for the Arts, I want to thank you again.

Bley: Wow. Wow. You're welcome! [Laughs]

(transcribed and edited by Andrew Greene)