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GEORGE COLEMAN NEA Jazz Master (2015)

Interviewee: George Coleman (March 8, 1935 -)
Interviewer: Maxine Gordon with recording engineer Ken Kimery
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Maxine Gordon: Okay. Today is Tuesday, November 11, 2014. At the home of George Coleman, NEA Jazz Master. What time is it, 5 PM?

Ken Kimery: 4 PM.

Gordon: It's 4 PM?

Kimery: Isn't it 4?

George Coleman: Look at the TV, it'll tell you.

Gordon: It is 4:17 PM. Ken Kimery, Maxine Gordon, with George Coleman. Okay. George Coleman – can you state your full name and date of birth?

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Coleman: George Edward Coleman, 3/8/35 (March 8, 1935).

Gordon. And where were you born?

Coleman: Memphis, Tennessee.

Gordon: And your parents are, were?

Coleman: My mother.... I never knew my father because I was about three years old when he passed away. But my mother's name, and she's up there on the wall, alongside Carol, my wife, my departed wife. My mother's name was Indiana, like *Back Home in Indiana*, Indiana Coleman.

Gordon: Where was she born?

Coleman: She was born in St. Louis, I think.

Gordon: And came to Memphis or went to Mississippi?

Coleman: She came to Memphis.

Gordon: Direct?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: And you were born there? You know where you were born?

Coleman: I was born at John Gaston Hospital. I think that was the name of the hospital down there during that time. It's gone. In Memphis, Tennessee. John Gaston Hospital. I think that was the name of it.

Gordon: And do you have any siblings?

Coleman: I had a brother. He died recently. He was a musician also. He worked with Ray Charles, Little Richard, some of the R&B people. And I didn't find out this about him until later, when

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I went down there and had a little interview with him on video, which George has now for the archives, my son, and he said he worked with Ray Charles. Funny story, he says.... He had a little competition with Ray during the time he was in the band, and he said this girl liked him and Ray was very smitten with her. He wanted to have a relationship with her, so when he found out my that brother was in there, he swung on him [Laughs]. And that's as good as the story about Ray driving the airplane

Gordon: He flew the airplane, right.

Coleman: Yeah, he flew the airplane.

Gordon: So what was your brother's name?

Coleman: Lucian Adams. He had a last name because we had different fathers. He preferred to use his father's name.

Gordon: Was he older?

Coleman: Yeah, he was a couple years older than me.

Gordon: And your children?

Coleman: George Coleman, Jr. and Gloria Coleman. Those are the offspring, those are the kids, the parents – Gloria Coleman, the organist, who played with several people: Sonny Stitt. Oh, a lot of people she played with. She played bass with Sonny Stitt first.

Gordon: You're kidding!

Coleman: When she switched to organ. She played organ with him. She was a good composer too. She wrote songs. A good musician Gloria was. She died around the same time that Carol did. She loved him. And then, Harold Mabern's wife too. She passed away around that same time.09, I think she passed before Carol. And Carol passed on December 21st, the anniversary

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coming up soon. Sadly.

Gordon: Is there anything you would like to say about this NEA Jazz Masters Award?

Coleman: I knew that I may would get it. I might would get it, because you had told me also. You told me that there was a possibility that you should be getting it. You should be getting it, you know. That's always the case, maybe but sometimes it takes a long time 'til things like that to happen. I was never was too worried about it. You know, you know me; I'm always laid back, come what may. You know, I'm just happy to be a part of the scene, of the jazz scene and being the teacher that I was. You know, having communication with all these people all over the world. I had a guy here, young man, he was probably less than 19 years old, a very talented alto player, from Reykjavik, Iceland.

Gordon: Wow!

Coleman: And he proved to be a very good student, and I remember when I went to Ronnie's, years after getting together, he had an Icelandic group there. He was the leader, and it was a wonderful thing to see, you know, somebody that I had instructed and taught, that he had used all the things that I had given him, and had become a leader, and a very, very good saxophonist. And you know I had these things that happened to me from years, far years, people from different parts of the country. And I would hear from them, some of them, you know, so all of these things made me feel good about the award too, because with all the people I had been in touch with, yeah, like Dave Sanborn, he had come by in the old days when I was on 331 East 14th, over there. He had come by and a lot of people know that apartment. They don't even know this one. This one was '85, this came about in 1985. I came off the road and Carol had this place here. She said, "oh well I moved us" and we got this place, much bigger. A little place on 14th, you

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remember that?

Gordon: I do. When did you move into the place on 14th? Do you remember?

Coleman: That was around '62 I think. Yeah, somewhere around that, '62 or '63, it was in the 60s, circa '60. I remember distinctly when we moved here. It was 1985, and as soon as we came in the door of the apartment, and it had a TV, we put the TV on, and unfortunately, that was the Challenger disaster. That was the first one, you know, of the disasters involving the ships to outer space, you know.

Gordon: There is something interesting about your NEA Jazz grant in that it was a campaign, on line, which is really not how people receive it. I mean, there is a committee, they vote, you know, all over the world.

Coleman: That was a lot of guys that I found out that had the petition. It was a petition.

Gordon: It was a petition on line. I guess you know this. It was very unusual, and then there was some feedback, kickback, or whatever you call it, with people saying, "this is not the appropriate way because this is not how the decision is made." And then I said, and other people said, "Well let George know that people all over the world." George, remember when I called you and read it to you?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: All over the world people commented on, you know, why you deserved it, when they'd heard you, how much...

Coleman: I did know none of this.

Gordon: Because it was on line and you are not online.

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Coleman: Yeah. No I did not know nothing about all of this but I knew there were a lot of people out there that wanted me to get this, you know. Because they felt like I deserved it, not because of my seniority or the time I've been around and all of that. They just wanted me to get it because of my endeavor, and my time in the business, and all of the people that I knew and all the people who had come to the small apartment on 14th Street for lessons.

Gordon: But it's very nice for everybody, so many people who love you and...

Coleman: It was quite inspiring, to say the least, to realize there were so many people who had petitioned for this. And lobbyists, and all the people who were helpful in me obtaining this award. It was really wonderful.

Gordon: So, OK. Can we talk about your childhood, and when you first began to play?

Coleman: When, after I got out of high school. You see, I played football in high school

Gordon: What high school?

Coleman: Manassas High School. That incidentally was the high school that the guy - I can never remember his name right off. Oh, Jimmie Lunceford. Jimmie Lunceford taught at my high school back in probably the 40s. The great bandleader, swing bandleader of yesteryear - he taught at Manassas. Of course I think his - I'm trying to think of where he went to school - but that was way before my time. I didn't even know him. I used to hear about him though. Used to hear about Jimmie, a great bandleader. He flew his own plane. Notoriously cheap. He would try and get the musicians from Fletcher's band. He would, you know, try to get Fletcher's musician. And he would oft-times get them. But Jimmy was noted for stinginess. He didn't want to put any money in my

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hand. Of course there's some modern day Jimmie Lunceford's out there. Anyway, it was interesting to find out that that he was a teacher at Manassas High School. Back in the '40s, I guess, late '30s, early '40s. But he was quite a musician. He was an arranger, composer, saxophonist, you know. So he was a – everybody knew Jimmie. Jimmie Lunceford. Back in the day. Everybody knew Fletcher Henderson, because they talked about Fletcher, because Benny Goodman hired Fletcher, you know and they said that, Benny's - his career and his music was enhanced by Fletcher. Fletcher was one of the real big swing arrangers during that era. You know, you hear some of that stuff and it's quite intricate, you know, for that time period, or any time period.

Gordon: Who was the band director at Manassas?

Coleman: The band director at Manassas was a guy named Matt Garrett, who is the father of Dee Dee Bridgewater.

Gordon: Oh, no kidding.

Coleman: Yeah, he taught. I remember writing solos for him back in the '50s, the early '50s, when I first began to play. So I wrote a couple solos for him. He was not too much of an improviser, but he was a good reader, and he was the band director so he had to know about stuff like that.

Gordon: When did you start playing?

Coleman: When did I start playing? Well I'll tell you. My career began pretty much after I left high school. I played football in high school for one year. And along with doing that, I was playing in the concert band. Couldn't play in the marching band because I was playing football. I was out there playing football. So I began officially, I would say, I really picked up the horn in 1950, '51 or '52.

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Gordon: You didn't play before that?

Coleman: No.

Gordon: You play piano? You play anything? No music?

Coleman: No, I didn't play nothing.

Gordon: I didn't know that.

Coleman: No. I'd listen and my mother would sing lullabies to me. But that was basically – again, I was - she bought these little toy instruments. She bought the harmonica. And of course there was something called Woody Herman Sweet Wind. I saw Woody at Bradley's years later and we'd talk about that and I'd ask him, he was a nice guy. He told me about the bands that he had, The Third Herd and the First And all the guys. He had such great musicians with him. He had Stan, he had...

Gordon: Sal Nistico?

Coleman: Yeah, Sal was in the band later. Sal Nistico - such a wonderful player.

Gordon: Wasn't he?

Coleman: A nice player. A really great player. And, what I'm thinking about these saxophone players, Zoot (Sims), Stan (Getz), Four Brothers, and let me see, who else was there. Serge Chaloff playing baritone, and one more tenor. I can't remember who it was, but he had the four tenors there, and they were great. That Four Brothers thing was like a classic. A classic. It was really something. You know, awesome, with the saxophone players around on the scene during that time. I had never come in acquaintance to those guys in those days. But they knew me and I knew of them, but I didn't realize until later years how great they were, you know. Like Stan I knew because when I first started

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playing, I heard *The Way You Look Tonight*, that was a hit record out there during that time, only juke boxes, what they called juke boxes at that time.

Kimery: Al Cohn?

Coleman: Yeah.

Kimery: Was it Zoot and Al?

Coleman: It might have been Al Cohn. Yeah. Zoot, Al, Stan and Serge. Serge Chaloff, who was a great baritone saxophone player. So it was a wonderful get together. And in all the other years, all the latter years, it was so many young guys in there, you know, like Sal Nistico. All different instruments, you know, trumpets, tenors, altos - all a part of Woody's band. And I felt so saddened by the fact that the IRS laid that big tax thing on him, because he was struggling out there to keep the band together on the road and everything, but that's what happens when you don't pay the taxes. You know, that's what; a lot of people go through that.

Gordon: Who else went to high school with you? What other musicians?

Coleman: Charles Lloyd, Harold Mabern.. We were from the same High School – Manassas. Manassas High School, in North Memphis. I could walk out of my back door of where I lived, on Woodlawn Street, and go right to the school in about five minutes. So Harold Mabern, Booker Little, Charles Lloyd. He went to Manassas too. Phineas Newborn went to another school, in South Memphis – it was called Booker Washington. And they were rivals, Manassas and Booker Washington, rivals in sports and other activities. And then there was a guy named Mike Daniels, whose son is now teaching at the University of Ohio – Ohio State. He's been there for a long time too. Mr. Mike Daniels son. His name is Mike Daniels too.

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Gordon: What about Frank Strozier?

Coleman: Frank Strozier?

Gordon: He went to High School with you?

Coleman: He went to Manassas too.

Gordon: What about Jamil?

Coleman: Jamil went to Booker Washington, along with Phineas Newborn. They were Booker Washington-ites, if you will. But the Manassas guys were me, Mabern, Charles Lloyd, Frank Strozier. We were Manassas. Manassas High School.

Gordon: You and Mabern have a long history.

Coleman: Yeah. And then after I left, Mabern played with my brother. They played with R and B groups. I remember Ike Turner, of course Bobby Bland, who recently died, you know.

Gordon: So, did you have a band in High School?

Coleman: No. No.

Gordon: Where'd you play?

Coleman: I played at private gatherings. When I first started playing, I was playing with the guitar players. A guitar player, he was just learning. And he had a "fake" book, and we used to just play, just play at home, and it was a lot of standard songs in this book, which I learned. And then after that I moved down to Bill Street, a place called Mitchell's Hotel down in Bill Street, downtown, right on Bill Street, in Hernando. And I took up residence there, after I moved out of my house on Woodlawn Street. Woodlawn – 1216 Woodlawn. See, I can remember that address from fifty-some years ago. But, you know, I might not be able to remember something that occurred yesterday. Anyway, that

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was when I really began to get into it, when I moved to Mitchell's Hotel, downtown; I started playing every night.

Gordon: Did you play alto?

Coleman: I was playing alto. That was the instrument that I started on. And there was a gentleman down there named Bill Harvey, who was an arranger, composer, and a saxophonist. So being under his wing, that is when I really began to get involved in trying to arrange and write music, and stuff like that. There were several other great pianists down there. A guy named Robert Calley, whom I used to sit on the piano with him and he would show me all the chords and everything. When I was playing music for about a year, I knew most of the things, I knew a great deal of the stuff that people learned at Berkeley and places like that. You know, I knew the bebop stuff, I knew the lines, the bebop lines of that era, *Sippin' at Bells*, *Dance of the Infidels*, and stuff like that by those composers of that genre. And that's how I studied. Those guys taught me what I know. So when I was 17, 18 years old, I knew what a half-diminished chord was. They didn't call it half-diminished during that time. They called it a minor seven or a flatted fifth, which was the same thing. Dexter would probably call it that too because he was from that era. And I learned a lot just from these guys, and the guy who used to write and arrange had a great hand, and I remember, he would write notes and he was like a computer, you know, his hand was so great, like a music copying hand, really like a very neat, very neat and precise. So through that people all used to tell me, "Man you write notes right where they should be in." So you know, I grew up dealing with that.

Gordon: So it was totally segregated?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: Totally? There was no mixing it up?

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Coleman: Yeah. Well it was white and black, like on the toilets, colored – colored, white. And in the movies, in the theater down there, it was called the Malco, and the black people would sit in the balcony, and the white people would be in the bottom, in the regular section of the movies

Gordon: And the club where you played, the Hotel was all black, right?

Coleman: Yeah. That was all black. And I remember distinctly that some of the musicians that were with the white bands during that time, they couldn't play at the Peabody. They'd come in at anytime, and they'd have to sit out. They couldn't play.

Gordon: No it wasn't the Peabody, it was the other one – where you worked?

Coleman. No, this was the Peabody.

Gordon: You worked in the Peabody?

Coleman: No I didn't. But these guys, people like Charlie Shavers. I remember one night; he was playing with Tommy Dorsey or somebody like that. He couldn't play, so he would come over to where we were playing, and hang out.

Gordon: Right. Right. Cause he couldn't play in the Peabody.

Coleman: No he couldn't play. There was no mixture. No white and black musicians playing together. And then, of course there was that story that I recently saw in this Music Choice about Fats Waller being recorded behind a partition, if you can believe that. He couldn't play. Recording a record, he was behind a partition – you couldn't see his face. I could never figure out the reason for that, but I guess that was it. They could only take a picture of the white musicians playing, which was pretty nonsensical, wouldn't you think?

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Gordon: Wouldn't you? The Peabody Hotel was infamous in the history of Memphis for being –

Coleman: Segregated.

Gordon: Segregated. And for one of the things about the Peabody is that the ducks lived in the hotel, in the lobby. You remember?

Coleman: Yep.

Gordon: The ducks had a room. And at night, the ducks went to the elevator, and went up in the hotel and had a room in the hotel. So I remember we used to say that the ducks can live here, but black people can't come here.

Coleman: Tough scene, tough scene.

Gordon: Very tough.

Coleman: Things have changed slightly, but as you well know, prejudice all over the world rears its ugly head on occasions – everywhere you go. But we dealt with it, we dealt with it pretty good. During that time, I was just back of the bus, we were seated in the back of the bus, you couldn't sit in the front seats. But during that era, I never really felt that deprived that much, because, the way I looked at it, I didn't want to be with nobody who didn't want to be with me. You know, I didn't really care. As a matter of fact I really would have been uncomfortable if I had been sitting in a setting where there was nothing but white folks. I would have probably felt uncomfortable with that because of the segregated policies during that era. But we got through it. We managed to get through it without being destroyed, you know, or felt inferior. I never felt inferior, you know. I felt like I was as good as anybody. So it never had any psychological effect on me. None of that, you know. And we all had to deal with it during that time. I say we all because the black musicians, we had to accept that, it was

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acceptable of course until the Martin Luther King era came in. And it was about that time that we said, no more. We said, no more, this is not right.

Gordon: Can you say something about Booker Little?

Coleman: Oh, he was such a talented, gifted young man. You know, I don't even like to make comparisons, but the trumpet players of that era, in that time, Freddy Hubbard and Lee Morgan, they all took their hat off to him because he was such an proficient. I mean, his technique was phenomenal, and he had original style too, after being on the scene and listening to the Miles (Davis), and Clifford Brown, he still maintained his own style of playing, which is very unique. Very unique. His technique was phenomenal. And of course, he was playing. I was playing in the band with him, with Max Roach. Our repertoire was pretty much, fast, fast, fast. Everything we played was fast. We had about, I would say about, 85 percent of the book was fast tunes: *Cherokee Lover*, *I Get a Kick Out of You*, *Love for Sale*, *Tune-up*, all blistering tempo tunes. Everything was fast. Then, the only ballad I think we had was *Around Midnight*, and then we had the waltz, *Waltz Hot*, Sonny Rollins' composition. But that was about it. And then, maybe we had a medium *Blues Walk*, but other than that, maybe *Billy Bounce*... We played that maybe once or twice. All the other stuff was up-tempo stuff. Extremely fast.

Gordon: Who played bass, in that band with Max?

Coleman: We first started with Nelson Boyd, and Nelson was playing 2/4 because the stuff was so fast. He would always play boom, boom, boom, boom. He would never play do-do-do-do. He would never play that. Maybe for five seconds. But then when Art Davis came into the band... Art Davis was tremendous; he played 4/4 along with Max. He had great technique, and like when he was 17, he was playing in the Harrisburg Symphony. You know, the

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only black musician in there. So, but back to Booker Little...

Gordon: Did you know his family? Booker?

Coleman: Yeah, and as I said, Vera Little was an opera singer.

Gordon: Oh yeah, you knew his sister.

Coleman: ...and went to Europe. I did not know her that well, but I knew she was an opera singer. And she went to Europe and did quite well. And when he passed away, I met his father – he came up from Memphis for Booker's funeral. But back to Booker. I would be layin' in bed during his day – I feel ashamed sometimes, cause he'd be there, all day he was practicing. He practiced so much. Like most of the people playing during that day, their chops would give out because they practiced so much. Even Clifford Brown, sometimes he would have to slow down a little bit cause their chops. They played so great, and they couldn't stop playing, so their lips would get sore. But they.... it was a phenomenal thing. I don't even want to mention modern day trumpet players, but during that time, man, those guys, Kenner John, Booker, Lee Morgan, so many other great trumpet players.

Gordon: Tommy Turrentine.

Coleman: Tommy Turrentine.

Kimery: Clark? (Clark Terry)

Coleman: Richard Williams, Clark you know – Clark is the perennial. You know.

Gordon: Lonnie Hillyer.

Coleman: Lonnie Hillyer. Now Clark now see, we know about Clark's situation of course – double amputee and all that stuff. I was just telling our friend Katherine, I was trying to tell her about

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his situation because she told me he's living at home.

Gordon: He is, I heard from his wife.

Coleman: He's back at home, not in the nursing home. Because when you get to that nursing home now, that's the last final straw. That's almost like hospice, you know. You remember the place that Jim Harrison and I used to go, go down to see Fanny. I would go there to see Carol, and of course, that place is gone now. But during that time, those trumpet players that I mentioned, they were all out there and they were great. And somebody else's states was there of course. Joe Wilder, you know, studio musician, and of course...

Gordon: Sweets (Harry 'Sweets' Edison).

Coleman: Sweets – who did a lot of recording with Frank Sinatra. He had all these guys. Roy Eldridge. Yep, so many. And they all knew Booker, they knew him as just a young, yeah. They acknowledged him as a phenom, because he was. Yeah, young man. Twenty-three years old when he died. For him to have accomplished... and it's amazing too, when you look back at the history. First of all, you start out with Charlie Parker. He had a world of knowledge in his heart and his soul. He died at thirty-four. And you ask yourself, how can a guy accumulate so much knowledge, how can he be such a fantastic technician. How can he play like that and with such a short amount of time? It's a phenomenon. It's even hard to even imagine. And when he came, 1945 and '47, when he did that "Ko-Ko" and I was talkin' about that revolutionized jazz and brought into being the Bebop era. It's amazing how he could have, and then they said it was a quote by Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy said, "Well if you think that all the records he made, of course the masterpiece "Just Friends"" and I think he only took about two takes, because after that, he couldn't play no more. He was so high. Dizzy said, "Man, if think how Charlie

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Parker played great on all those records, you should have heard him when he was sober when he would have no heroin or nothing in his system.” He said that was something. Dizzy had to know because Dizzy was back there with him all that time, and those lines that Dizzy and Bird did during that time, it’s remarkable, I mean the technical difficulties and the technique that you had to have to play that kind of line, the figures that they played was phenomenal. The modern day instrumentalists now, trying to figure out how to finger that, how to finger those notes, and at that breakneck speed... I think there was some classical musician, I can’t remember who it was that said, Bird played, Charlie Parker, he said, “This has got to be sped up because they can’t play this fast in regular time,” but it was regular time. But that’s the whole thing: they were playing really extremely fast on those tapes. And that’s why I feel good growing up in that era, getting the tail end of it, but I was right toward the end of it because, you know... Max, when I joined Max, our course, he was carrying on a tradition. So Max Roach helped my career tremendously. Fortunately for me, I was pretty much ready for that because back in Memphis when I was growing up, that’s what we played. We played tempos, you know, we were playing fast around there. We played fast things, we played *Avalon*, *Cherokee*, *Lover*, all the fast up-tempo stuff, so I had occasion to become involved in that. And of course, key signatures and keys - stuff like that that, which I am supposed to be noted for, I learned that when I was 17 years old -18 years old. The first couple years I was experimenting with keys and tonalities because first of all, it was a necessity. We’d go on these country places where the piano would be a whole step flat, or a half step flat. So rather than the piano player changing, you had to change over the key.

Gordon: That’s why you can play in any key!

Coleman: Well that was one of the things that I studied at, you

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know.

Gordon: Wow, that's great.

Coleman: You had to play like that to get in tune with the piano, because the piano was so flat. Which means that you would have to be a step off of what you would normally play, or a half step off of what you normally would play. And that would be that strange key that people wouldn't want to say, but R&B in itself would dictate stuff like in different keys, so the E flat would be E natural, or A, instead of A Flat. It would be... well G was one of the popular keys, so you'd play in G, but that wasn't the big deal, the A naturals, the F Sharp, Es all guitar keys, R&B guitar keys, because that's what these guys would be playing in that stuff. F Sharp. King Curtis was a great practitioner of that because he would record for these people in the studio and he would be in those keys – he would be playing in those keys. But during that time, that was the order of the day. Coleman Hawkins - all those guys would play in those keys. They would call them sharp keys or flat keys or whatever. But the standard keys, like A Flat, B Flat, F, G, you know, C... those were the standard keys, but when you start talking about C Sharp, you know, you start like A Natural, F Sharp, E Natural, B Natural, and keys like that which are somewhat difficult, especially if you have never played in those keys, you know, and you had to transpose to those keys. So in answer to your question, Maxine, that's how I learned how to play in those keys. Back early.

Gordon: That's great.

Coleman: Real early when I first started playing, I had to play in those kind of keys because of the pitch of the piano, which would be off, at least a half step or a whole step. And a whole step - that was when you were really in trouble, because that would throw your horn off somewhat. You couldn't tune a whole step off for a

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saxophone, because it would sound very weird. You could never get right within the pitch. So you would have to sharpen up and play in the keys of the bad piano. So that is how you would learn to play in those keys. But see, we were not playing only the blues in those keys, we were playing standard tunes, and complex standard tunes, like maybe *All the Things You Are*. So if you had to transpose *All the Things You Are* from the regular A Flat to the A Natural - that's somewhat of a feat. And a lot of players today would not even want to attempt that. They wouldn't even want to think about that. But that was part of it. That was the order of day during those times. It helped a lot too because later on, it helped a lot. It helped me playing other songs. Because if you are playing a song just like *All the Things You Are*, it doesn't take you to this... the tonality that is between A and A Flat, it goes with other tonalities. It goes with C, it goes to G, so you know you had to be very hip to transposition and knowin' where things move. It's mathematics too; it's mathematics, your ear, and all that. Basically your ear. But you know it's a thing that we all, during that era, during that time, it was great for me, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed playing in different keys, because I found that in any key, you're going somewhere else, especially if it's a song that has intricate harmony in it. It's not gonna stay right where it is, it's gonna go somewhere else. So if it goes somewhere else, it could be anything. You could play a song in C that would have a resolution in F Sharp, or you could play a song in B Flat, which would have a resolution in B Natural, or, you know... So it's all part of the game in music, learning different tonalities, different keys. It's all part of it. And when I was teaching, you know, that's what I would teach people. I'd say listen, to be in B Flat but you're going to a third, that's D, and the rhythm, *I Got Rhythm* bridge, that's what you'd do. You'd go a third from what the key is to start the bridge. So if you're in B Flat, you'd go to D for the D7 for your first chord, then after that, you'd go in fourths, and that's a rhythm bridge. But even today, there are some guys that have a problem with that. I'm not going to

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call their names. I'm not going to call their names, but in the old days, those guys, you know, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Don Byas, those guys were so great. And even... I've been listening to Glenn Miller, and people like that, cause they have that Music Choice songs. Man those guys that are great musicians, man. Glenn Miller's a hell of an arranger. Other arrangers... Benny Goodman, he was there and of course, he had Fletcher Henderson arranging for him, and then you had the drummer who was one of the innovators of that era. I used to hear Chick Webb, I used to hear them talk about Chick Webb. Chick Webb was handicapped physically, you know, he had a spinal condition, but man, when he would sit down on those drums, and he was the innovator of the so-called "sock" cymbal, you know that cymbal that's on your left side, where the sock comes with two cymbals, they call those the hi-hat. The two cymbals, and the pedal, they clash, they come down with the pedal, you know, and then you have the ride cymbal. He started that back in the 20s. And I didn't even know that until I started reading this trivia on musical choice. Ella Fitzgerald took over the band when he died. But he was in the Savoy Ballroom along with Duke and people like that in the Cotton Club up there in Harlem. I didn't even know about those places until later. The Club Baron; that was one of those latter clubs, where I worked.

Gordon: What about Phineas Newborn?

Coleman: Phineas Newborn, I can't, it's hard to describe him because he was so phenomenal. Phineas Newborn could play up-tempo with his left hand the same thing he played with his right in unison. And unison means together. His left hand and his right hand playing the same thing. Up-tempo. He had a fantastic technique and very in tune with the Bebop era during that time. He could play all that stuff, and of course, like Art Tatum, who came before him, he was right in there with that. He was one of the

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modernists. And I don't think there is anybody around today who plays with that two-handed thing that he played with back in those days. He was phenomenal. He had good harmonic knowledge of what to do, you know, the chords, how to voice them and everything. And he played a little bit of saxophone, and trumpet too. He could pick up a saxophone and a trumpet and play that. He was just really amazing. Phineas Newborn. He could write, you know, and a very good reader because he used to play all those etudes, those classical etudes and all that stuff. He could play anything.

Gordon: Did you all come to New York together? Who came first?

Coleman: No, no. I'm not sure about that. I think they came up because Jamil was in the band. Jamil Nasser. He was in the band with Phineas. And they made a tour up to New York before I arrived. Because when I left Memphis, I went to Chicago, this is circa '50, right after I came off the road with B.B. (King) So it was '56.

Gordon: How long did you work with B.B.?

Coleman: One year, one year. As a matter of fact, a little bit of trivia here, I was never with anybody for over a year. I was with Miles (Davis) a year, Max (Roach) a year, Bee more than a year, B.B. a year ... Who else did I play with? Lionel Hampton, I was with him about a year. So all the bands that I played with was never more than a year. They'd say well why did you leave this, why did you go that, I don't know. It was like that. It was the way it was. You know, I wanderlust. I never was somebody that could stay at any place for any length of time, you know, for one reason or another. Sometimes there may be other reasons that I won't go into, but I never made it more than a year with any of the bands that I played with. Which is good. It was cool. Because in that

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years' time, I learned a lot, I had a great time playing in the band, and I played in Lionel Hampton's band, and of course Lionel Hampton had a book, big band. I played in his big band. Played in Clark Terry's band for a while, you know, but I never did travel with Clark. But I did travel with Lionel Hampton, who was a great, phenomenal musician. He was really something. His stuff dates back to Benny Goodman and all that. But he was wonderful. And in his band, I got a chance to play a lot. You know, not a lot, but he liked the way I played solos so, he would give me a feature on his clips like *Stardust*. I never did play on *Midnight Sun* though, because that was reserved only for the king, for him! But I did play on *Stardust*, he would feature me on *Stardust*, then on a couple of band features, you know some original stuff. And of course, we played *When the Saints Go Marching Home*, we played that, I remember playing that through the keys one night. We took it through the keys.

Gordon: How long did you stay in Chicago?

Coleman: I was in Chicago from '56 - and it felt like it was much longer than that - '56 through '58. I joined, I left Chicago in 1958 around my birthday and met Max Roach in Pittsburgh. And that was somewhere around 1958. And that's when I joined the band. Kenny Dorham was in the band during that time and we had a great relationship. So it was a really wonderful experience, all the things that I've had - I've been through throughout my career. Then I arrived in New York City in 1958, being with him, moved to New York City. Stayed over there in Brooklyn in Kenny Dorham's house.

Gordon: Oh, you did?

Coleman: Yeah, that's when I first arrived. Got involved in physical fitness over there. Went to a little community center over there that had weights and stuff. And that's when I began that. And

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I used to carry that stuff on the road, which is kind of crazy. And I remember this guy trying to pick up my suitcase one time, and I had all these weights. And I must have had about a hundred pounds of weights in there, along with my clothes. So he went out and tried to grab my suitcase and the weights just pulled him over. He was trying to pick it up. “Jesus Christ, what have you got in there?” I didn’t want to tell him it was dumbbells and barbells.

Gordon: You took them on the road?

Coleman: Yeah. I had the bar. I had my horn in one and I had this long bar for the barbells. The barbells would be inside of the suitcase. And the collars, what they call collars that you would put on the bar to keep the weights together, keep them from falling off, I’d had those in there. And the weights of the collars themselves weighed about five and ten pounds. So I was out there carrying that stuff around. So that was quite an era man, quite a time for me. But I wanted to keep in shape. I did not feel good unless I could pick up a weight every day. And of course, you know, as the years went by when I came to New York, I was able to chill out in New York and joined a gym. And that was great. And I did that until the back started giving out on me. When the back gave out on me, there was nothing else I could do after that. But I enjoyed it while I was doing it. Probably accounts for my longevity somewhat. You know, I wouldn’t have been 80 now if I hadn’t been doing that stuff I’m sure. Course, there was a time of dissipation of course, when we would do things that we were not supposed to do, against the law, like most musicians would go through that. Fortunately for me, there came a time when I said, this is it. This is the final straw. I’m not doing this anymore. Just like I’m having my very unusual drink, here, you know, whereas when I was playing out in the clubs every night, you’d be doing this, and that and the other.

Gordon: So you came to New York in what year?

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Coleman: 1958, when I joined Max's band.

Gordon: And then, what I wanted to ask you about, so the other Memphis musicians, Strozier, Jamil, Howard Mabern, they came after?

Coleman: No they...

Gordon: Around the same time?

Coleman: Yes, sort of, because they went to Chicago before I did. Frank went to school there. He was at Roosevelt. He studied at Roosevelt. Harold went there but he didn't stay long. I don't know if it was because of the tuition or what. But he went there, and I know he was in school with Frank for just a short while, and then he dropped out. But they went there to study. They came in, and so we had a wonderful accumulation of Memphis musicians. And the guys from Chicago, they were all stricken by us. They said, "Where did these guys come from?" It's these Memphis guys.

Gordon: That's what they said in New York.

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: The camaraderie is one thing, but we used to say about the Memphis musicians, we can't understand what they're talking about because they have a kind of code, right?

Coleman: Yeah. We used to have all the kind of colloquialisms from that era.

Gordon: Harold Mabern would say something and you all would just laugh so hard. And he'd say a name.

Coleman: And no one would know what we were talking about.

Gordon: And he would mention something -

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Coleman: and no one would know what we were talking about -

Gordon: And then you stayed friends all those years.

Coleman: But some of the old Southern things, you know, that Southerners would know, like instead of relish, you would call it cha-cha. That cha-cha, that stuff is good, man, but it was relish, more than relish, pickle, whatever was in there. Then there were other things, slangs like, yesterday, yes-tiddy, yes-tiddy. Everyone would say yes-tiddy.

Gordon: And you and Harold Mabern still play together.

Coleman: Oh of course. We played -

Gordon: Last week.

Coleman: Last week we played together.

Gordon: So nice.

Coleman: We've been playing together for fifty years. And so finally, we're getting a chance to maybe, he may get the award too. He deserves it.

Gordon: Doesn't he?

Coleman: He really deserves it.

Coleman: So the wheels are in motion. I can get some petitioners, you know, and get together, like you all did for me. But I found out a lot of guys, I was talking with Bill Saxton the other night. "Yeah, I'd sign a petition," and Russell Malone says, "Yes, I'd sign a petition." So this petition, must have had a thousand different signatures on it. You know all over, people on the web, from Europe, so I guess the inevitable is at hand. Sooner or later, I was going to get it. But I said I'd probably be six feet under or burnt to a crisp before I get it. So I never really worried about it, Ken. To

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tell you the truth, Maxine, I never really worried about it. You know me, I'm just trying to keep moving. I always had a few bucks in my pocket and I would always rather help somebody if they didn't have any, so that was one of the things that I was known for too. Yeah, he's always got a hundred dollar bill out there somewhere. But I never really did make any money. Teaching or otherwise or nothing, playin' or nothing. I made enough to survive and that's really all I need. All I wanted was some money to bring here so Carol could take care of all this stuff that we had, which wasn't that much. When we bought this place, it was probably \$77,000, and that was paid off a decade ago. We probably had a thirty-year mortgage or something. And I had some lean years in Chicago, but I had some lean years in New York too. But I was able to survive. I had some help and didn't need much. Because I really was never really strung out, like a lot of guys. Every nickel and dime they had went to the jones, whatever it was, coke or heroin or whatever. And the only time I was coming up, I had people, that if I really needed a little something, I could always get something from them, and I didn't have to spend all that money that guys were spending during that time. But none of that was really that important to me. I was always trying to get with the music and make a few bucks, and give somebody something if I could, as far as knowledge of the music. And they always came to me for it. I would get people from all walks of life.

Gordon: When did you start teaching?

Coleman: Oh man, I started teaching when I started learning. My first year when I was playing the saxophone, I was teaching. Everything I learned I would impart to somebody else. And as I say, they would reciprocate. These people that I was telling you about, piano players and arrangers that I used to hang out with, they would always let me know what was going on. And when I would find out what was going on, I would transmit that to

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somebody else that did not know what was happening. Well, you'd do this and do that, and this is a B and this is a C and this is a D Flat, and this is a... you know. Incidentally, there is something in the works now, might be going up to Harvard to do one of those clinics. That would be nice, you know. We just did one in Memphis, Mister Mabern and I. We did at a place called Rose College. And a few people have been down there to do that. And it was a nice little engagement. Unfortunately, well I won't say unfortunately, but the people, they were very inexperienced young men down there and a few young ladies. The things that I had for them were a little bit more advanced than what they could handle. But I made the necessary adjustment and, because I started out with people who knew hardly nothing about music, you know. The people that used to come to me, they could hardly even hold a horn. And I would show them, and again, or either that, listen, you need to go to first, and find out a little about the techniques for saxophone, because the stuff that you want to learn, its gonna require that. You're gonna have to have some technique. You'll have to know a little something about the As and the Bs and the Cs. You know, you're gotta need to know a little something about that before you really want to come to me to find out what's going on with this, which is jazz. You need a little more technical academic stuff, you know. And I've had a great career for as far as doing that, teaching and what not. A lot of really great people have went on to do things in the business. A few of them, you know, you don't know about. Charles Lloyd, he mentions it sometimes, that I was his teacher. And I do remember one time, he had this thing in Southern Cal, that's where he went to school, and there was a contest down there, and he needed a solo in April, and he said "Can you write me out a solo?" So I wrote him up a solo in its entirety, 32 bars, and sent it to him. He played it and he won the contest. Yeah, he said, I won, yeah man.

Gordon: Is he younger?

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Coleman: Charles, he's a little bit younger, not that much. We were all pretty much...

Gordon: Do you remember what...You interviewed him right?

Kimery: Yeah.

Coleman: He's in March too – I think he's a Pisces. Do you remember what he said his age was?

Kimery: I'm embarrassed to say I don't have it on the tip of my tongue

Gordon: A little younger.

Coleman: Yeah. He was '36, '37, maybe I was '35. Mabern was '36.

Gordon: Strozier?

Coleman: Strozier was about two years under me ('37). Mabern was one year and Strozier was a year under him. So.

Gordon: Remember when you had that octet?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: Can you talk a bit about that band, because that was really, really a great band.

Coleman: Well you know, I went to Jim Harrison. Jim Harrison and I were good friends, and I told Jim, I said, "Jim, I'm thinking about this band that I want to put together." Of course I had...

Gordon: '38, he was born in '38.

Kimery: Yep. Pisces also.

Coleman: That was pretty much... So he's three years. Three

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years.

Gordon: A little younger.

Coleman: Yeah. Anyway, what were we talking about?

Gordon: Jim Harrison. You went to...

Coleman: We were talking about Jim Harrison. Jim was working...

Gordon: What year was that? Seventy...

Coleman: Circa '74. That's when we started with that.

Gordon: That's forty years you know. Forty years. Isn't it? '74 would be forty years?

Coleman: Yeah, I think so.

Gordon: Oh my goodness.

Kimery: Oh my goodness.

Coleman: So we started. So I asked him, I said, "Yeah man, I'm getting this band together". He said, "Yeah? Well I'll work on some dates for you. Jazzmobile." So he calls me and says, "Well I got those dates all set up for you for your band, for your octet." And I said, "Man, I ain't wrote one piece of music," so I had to get busy right away. So you remember, there were not too many arrangements in the book during that time. So I started off with a few small things. And *Now's the Time*, and there was another quickie that I did. Anyway, I did about two or three quickies, about four arrangements, real sketchy, there wasn't a lot of background to them. Just something real sketchy. So I got it together and then we did our date, up at somewhere, in Harlem probably. We started playing and then we started doing things at Boomers. That was the old club here in New York. And we started doing things there and

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then we branched out and did a few other little clubs. Boomers was a real high tech place, real small bandstand.

Gordon: Do you know about Boomers?

Kimery: I do not.

Gordon: Tell us about Boomers.

Coleman: That's where we started, Maxine.

Gordon: George Coleman was the artist in residence. That was his spot.

Coleman: Yeah, we did quartets and octets in that little place.

Gordon: He worked in Boomers all the time, with different groups.

Coleman: And then we moved to the Tin Palace and started doing some things over there. As a matter of fact, I've got a tape, of me, Barry Harris, Gene Taylor, and Philly Joe.

Gordon: From the Tin Palace?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: Wow.

Coleman: Yeah. And to tell you the truth, that's one of the few things I really feel good about when I play, when I'm not playing on it because I was happy with the results.

Gordon: Why don't you put it out?

Coleman: It's not out.

Gordon: Why don't you put it out?

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Coleman: I'm thinking about it.

Gordon: Give it to Paul. He'll put it out.

Coleman: The fidelity is not too bad.

Gordon: They could fix that. Put it out George.

Coleman: They could probably fix it, yeah. Yeah, that would be nice. Guess I need to check with Barry. Because everybody else is gone. With me and Barry on it. One of these days I'm gonna let you hear... it's around here somewhere. I'll find out where it is. But you would like it.

Gordon: What about - when did you play with Harold Vick and Shirley Scott, and Billy Higgins?

Coleman: Oh yeah, that was back in the '70s. You know, Shirley and I, we were on the road with Johnny Hartman. And of course I did a recording with Johnny Hartman, probably the only other saxophone player that played with him besides Trane (John Coltrane). Did you ever hear that record?

Gordon: I don't think I ever heard that. I'll look it up.

Coleman: It's called *Johnny Hartman Today*. It was me, Herman Foster, the guy from the islands that played guitar - trying to think of what his name was. I'll remember him later. But he was one of the people. It was a nice little record man. Did *Folks Who Live on the Hill*, and *The Modern Thing*, *Donny Hathaway* and *Roberta, Where's the Love...* We did beautiful, beautiful things on there. Herman Foster played great, you know. You remember him the blind...

Gordon: Yeah, I remember him.

Coleman: Really great.

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Gordon: But you went on the road with Shirley.

Coleman: I was with Shirley. We went to St. Louis. That was some great times. She and I played a lot. We played in Philly, a few. We played Philly and...

Gordon: Little Miss Half-Steps.

Coleman: Yeah, she was phenomenal though. Shirley Scott was phenomenal. I listened to some of the things she did with jaws (Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis). Oh man. Didn’t hear too much stuff that she did with Stanley (Turrentine, her husband). A few things, but the stuff with Eddie Lockjaw, ooh, man, something else.

Gordon: She could play in all the keys too.

Coleman: Oh yeah. Shirley was proficient. She was something else.

Gordon: When you, Shirley, Harold Vick, Billy Higgins played on 110th Street... remember that?

Coleman: Yeah. We had some other drummers there too. I think Mickey Roker played with us for a while. And some other young drummers that you wouldn’t know. We played with them. And of course Juini (Booth). We played with him, and Barber John. Excellent drummer. Singer too man, the guy could sing. You remember that?

Gordon: Of course. Of course I remember.

Coleman: They said he was doing a lot of singing somewhere over in Europe. But we had some great times, she and I.

Gordon: Yes you did.

Coleman: And I heard her just recently. I remember, stuff we used to play. As a matter of fact, I probably learned a few tunes from

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her from songs we used to play. What was that thing she recorded? That Latin thing? What was the name of that? [George hums a bit of the tune]

Gordon: She write it?

Coleman: Yeah. Something called Bossa.... Something, with a Latino name. You remember that? What was the name of that? You got it somewhere

Gordon: Yeah, I got it. I know what you mean.

Coleman: Yeah, I can't remember the name of it though. It was really wonderful. You should do...

Gordon: There are a lot of great bands that George played with over the years that have not been recorded. So one of the problems with jazz history is sometimes jazz history is written as recorded music, you know, they're the people, they tell me they made this record or that record, but there was a lot of stuff in between that was live.

Coleman: That's what I was telling you about that tape.

Gordon: Yeah.

Coleman: Nobody knows about that tape. And we made a couple of tapes from different clubs here in the city, and those haven't been released yet. I'm going to try and compile all those, and put it in. Some of those guys are gone, too. Billy's gone. He was great.

Gordon: Wasn't he great.

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: And was your friend.

Coleman: Yeah, he was something else. I loved Billy. He was just

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phenomenal. Such a natural musician. You know he played guitar?
Sang?

Gordon: He took the guitar on the road.

Coleman: Oh yeah! He was really amazing.

Gordon: So do you want to say something about the year you worked with Miles Davis?

Coleman: Yeah. It was a rewarding experience to be in his band. Because, I still wanted to play the so-called mainstream stuff. I hate to use all these terms you know. Bebop, mainstream, all that. But I wanted to do that. I wanted to continue to play because he would leave the bandstand all the time. And then a lot of times, he wouldn't show up, because his hip thing, you know. He was in pain. And a lot of times, he just didn't want to come to the gig. So that would leave me out front, not intentionally masquerading as him, but people thought I was him if you can believe that. Mr. Davis, he was so wonderful. Here I am, 250, 6 feet, playing the saxophone, nowhere physically resembling him, but they thought I was him, because I was the only one standing out front because he would take the night off. And then, I was left there with Tony Williams, Ron Carter, and Herbie Hancock. Two neophytes - three neophytes, who wanted to be hip and play the new thing. So I was like considered old-fashioned to them. I had to deal with that. I had to suffer under their watch, shall we say. And they wanted something more modern, they thought. But I would always try to play the repertoire, play *Blackbird* and stuff. And *Autumn Leaves* and all of that stuff. They didn't want to do that. They wanted to play something else. So they kept needlin' me and giving me a bad time, so one night I fixed them. I said - you know I hate to tell this story because I've told it so many times - One night in the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco Miles kicked off this fast *Walkin'*. He plays the solo and leads the band and goes to the bar to have his

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usual champagne. So I think Herbie played his solo, and then came time for my solo. So I had my mind made up, I said, "I'm just gonna show these little..." I had some names for them which I won't repeat. So this night I stepped up. I started playin' out for them. And you know, it worked out fine, because it was swingin', you know, but they had never heard me play like that, and they looked at each other and said, "Yeah, man! Yeah! Yeah!" All of them. Even Ron Carter. And then Miles heard this, he rushed up to the stand and said, "What the F- was that?" Cause he had never heard me play out either. It's in the book too, I got a book. The book was up there, he wrote that in the book. It's all there in the book. So this particular night they couldn't believe what they were hearing. So after that I didn't play it no more, I still went back to playing chord progressions right after that, you know. As a matter of fact the next June I went back playin'. But I just wanted to show these guys that what they were doing was not so hip and it hadn't been done before. You know, I was the guy back in Memphis who could play like Ornette. That was the guy down in Memphis whose name - he was with a Minstrel show, and we used to call him Popeye. He would be playin' - sometimes he would clean out the club playin' the out stuff. And people went "whoo!" They couldn't stand that! But this guy was playin' like, you know, and then he used to tell me. And another guy is like, "Yeah man, you should go to New York and play with Bird, man." Then I found out later that they had a name for him. His name was Demon. He said, "Yeah man, Demon is here." He used to sit in with Coleman Hawkins, Bird, Don Byas, and all these bad cats. And he'd be playin' that stuff, you know, before Ornette! As they said, there's nothing new under the sun. Those guys are playin' that. There's a little story about that too, an interesting little story that you can chuckle. Roy Eldridge said, when this so-called avant-garde came around, John Lewis and all these guys were out there talkin' about "yeah, this is it! This is the new thing, man! Ornette Coleman, this is the way jazz is going." Roy said, "Man, you guys gotta be kiddin'." He

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said, "Man, this stuff." And he said, "Ray Brown and all those guys..." "No, this is really the hip stuff man, this is it!" So Roy said ok. So Roy said he went in that room one day and took his tape recorder. He said there was a piano in there. So he said he sat down at the piano and started just hittin' and bangin' on the piano. Doing all kind of strange stuff. So he put it on tape, and he brought it back down and said, "Man, you know somethin'?" He said, "There's a young guy out here man that's playin' piano, you gotta hear this!" So he said he put the tape in, said, "Listen to this!" and he put the tape on, and when they heard it they said, "MMM!" They said, "Yeah!" He said, "Yeah, he's only fourteen years old, man. This guy's playin' piano on this piano!" They said, "Who was - what's his name?" He said, "It's me, you dumb m-f's!" It was shock! It was him, but they had told him about, "Oh man, that sounds wonderful. This guy playin' all his stuff," and he said he was just bangin' on the piano, runnin' his hands over the keys and everything. And it's a real authentic story because LeDon told me, cause he used to play with Roy. So Roy set him up for that. Just like in my case, you know, I said, "Fine. I'm gonna show these guys a thing playin' something just so out you know that it can't be done!" There's nothing so unique about it, and then Tete Montoliu, the famous Spanish pianist, he said, "Man, there's no such thing as avant-garde." He said it's just a bunch of m-fs who can't play. That's how he summed it up. He said they just can't play. Of course you know Dexter was really totally bebop, you know, and he used to say - oh man, just like that story you told me. He said, "Miles, why don't you go in there and play some music?" Miles said, "It's too hard." He didn't want to go back. He got to the point where he really didn't want to think or do the stuff that Charlie Parker laid down for him. But I've had a lot of situations where I've had to deal with... But none like the ones when I was in the band. That's why I left. That's one of the big reasons why I left the band. Because they didn't like me playin' Bebop in the band. Miles loved me, he was crazy about what I played. I found out

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some things from Wallace about that too. Wallace said, “Yeah, he didn’t want you to leave.” But I’d had enough of that, you know. They were not friendly with me until after the gig, when the ladies would be at my room, and they’d have none, so they’d be knockin’ on my door. So you know, I would let them in. But that’s the only time when they really liked me, you know. They’d come around late at night after the gig was over, knockin’ on my door, trying to find some female companionship. Because they knew it was gonna be in my room somewhere! If there was any woman around, she’d be in my room. But with them, they couldn’t find nothin’.

Gordon: Did you know Wayne Shorter? Were you close to Wayne?

Coleman: Well no, I wasn’t really close with Wayne, but I’ll tell you what happened at the Red Sea in Israel. He was comin’ from Brazil with his wife. So his wife came up to me and said, “You know, Wayne doesn’t have a horn. Can he borrow your horn?” I said, “Sure, yeah!” So I played my little gig, and then I let him have my horn, and he never forgot that. He always mentioned - “Yeah man, thank you. You let me use your horn.” And I’ve done that on numerous occasions with different people. You know, people don’t like to lend their horns out. I remember when I first came to New York I let Hank Mobley have my horn.

Gordon: How’d that go?

Coleman: Well, it went fine cause Gloria, my wife during that time, she came to the gig and sat there all night until the gig was over. And when the gig was over, she packed up my horn and brought it back. Cause I wasn’t too worried about it, which I should have been though, because my horn would’ve probably wound up in a pawn shop.

Gordon: That was a great player, Hank Mobley.

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Coleman: Oh, wonderful. One of my favorites. You know, he and Joe Henderson and - there's several others, but he and Joe Henderson and Hank, they were two of my favorites. Of course, you know the others. You know Dexter and Johnny Griffin and...

Gordon: What was it about Joe Henderson?

Coleman: Well you know, strangely enough, I met Joe when I was out there with B. B. King. But I didn't know it was him. He had to remind me. I said, "Yeah Joe, I saw you" and blah blah blah. He said, "Yeah, but the first time we met was in Limon, Ohio, where my hometown was. You came through with B.B.'s band." So I remembered this little guy, but I didn't know it was him. I didn't notice it was Joe Henderson. He came up to me and said, "Yeah, man. Sounds good" and blah, blah, blah. So when he mentioned, he said, "Yeah, I met you back in... Don't you remember that night when this little guy came up?" I said, "Yeah! I remember you!" I couldn't remember his name. I couldn't remember his name was Joe Henderson but I do remember the event and I said, "Wow, yeah." Of course, after I heard him play with Horace, and I said, "Damn, who is this guy?" I was always an admirer of his.

Gordon: But he loved you.

Coleman: Oh well you know, this guy, boy he was something else. He was fantastic. Joe Henderson was really a very special player, and very innovative too. He had his own stuff going on. But you know, unless it was somebody that was totally outrageous... But even now if it's somethin' I don't like in a player, I don't say nothin'. But what I will do, maybe sometimes I'll come in and maybe discuss it with some of my friends who think the same way sometimes I do alone. You know, critiquing musicians. But I don't like to get too involved with that because most of the time I can find something that I like. I don't care who the player is. Some of the weirdest stuff I can find, I say, "Damn. Yeah I kind of like that.

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I wonder where he got that from?” And sometimes it’s by accident. Some of these guys get that... I say, “No, that’s gotta be an accident.” But I like it, I said, “Yeah, this is somethin’. It’s valid.” At least in my mind it is.

Gordon: Let me ask you something. So now at this stage of your life, what do you want to do? Anything you haven’t done?

Coleman: Well there is one thing I’d probably like to do. Maybe do a big band with string arrangements. There’s a friend of mine - one of my students - who writes Hollywood stuff. He’s a saxophone player but he’s a great arranger. You know: Strings, woodwinds, and all that kind of stuff. He said he wanted to do it for me, but he had tried to get some money but couldn’t get no money, you know. So it’s a matter of economics. Maybe sooner or later - maybe before I split, I would like to do that. That’s one of the things I aspire to do. Maybe a big orchestra with strings. Playing ballads and stuff.

Gordon: Well I think you could do that!

Coleman: If you get somebody who wants to produce it, you know, who wants to come up with the money. And I would want real strings, you know. I wouldn’t want that stuff, that computer stuff. I wouldn’t want to do that.

Gordon: Have you told the few people you know?

Coleman: Not really, not too many. I haven’t told that many people about it.

Gordon: That’d be great.

Coleman: Yeah, if you guys have said it they will. Did Dexter ever do anything with a big orchestra, string orchestra?

Gordon: He did in Copenhagen with this arranger and trumpet

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player, Palle Mikkelborg.

Coleman: Oh yeah, ok.

Gordon: But there were only four strings and then they overdubbed, so it sounds sixteen.

Coleman: Oh, uhuh. Alright.

Gordon: But very nice arrangements. You've heard that? Do you know?

Kimery: Yep.

Gordon: He always wanted to do that too with strings, but... Oh yeah, I think you could do that. But other than that, you're pleased with the way things are going?

Coleman: Well, yeah. It doesn't take a hell of a lot to please me, to tell you the truth. I was never one who would pursue something that I felt like would put me on the map or put me in Down Beat or one of those things. I didn't care about that. I really didn't, never have. I haven't had a couple of things - plaques up there, from 1958 - I think there was one from '58, where I got Honorable Mention as a new star. That's the only time they ever put me in Down Beat. They never listed me as a saxophone player in Down Beat. You know, I never made their polls, which I never cared about, I couldn't care less. But one time Maher asked Mulgrew Miller the same thing. He said, "Mulgrew, you know those polls in Down Beat? You're never in the polls! You got all these piano players nobody knows about and you're never there." He said, "Well Mr. Maher, I guess I ain't no poll cat!"

Gordon: [Laughs] Too busy practicing or playing music!

Coleman: So people were trying to figure out - well, what is a poll cat? It's a skunk! I guess I ain't no poll cat.

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Gordon: Mulgrew, wow.

Coleman: Mulgrew used to come up with great quips like that. Just like... the trombone player...

Gordon: Curtis?

Coleman: Curtis. Curtis would come up with these strange things out of the earth. Oh boy.

Gordon: But you never tried to do that. I mean, you didn't pursue that.

Coleman: I never pursued it. Well, you know...

Gordon: As a matter of fact, you un-pursued it!

Coleman: It is so much stuff out there happening. You know, those guys who got that, they make a date and the leader gets five hundred dollars. Or the sideman gets five hundred dollars, the leader gets maybe a thousand for the whole date. It was just so much of that and so many people out there trying to make dates, trying to get on. I never worried about it really. Strangely enough I got probably more notoriety just by being on other people's dates. Because whenever my name is mentioned it's mostly, "Yeah, he was with Miles Davis." But I tell you, one time though, that video that they had on Miles? I was nowhere mentioned on that. Do you remember that? Nowhere, place on that I was mentioned. They even mentioned the record sellers, and my name was not on it. *Seven Steps, Four and More*, I was not mentioned. And all the time I said, "Could it be that he cancelled me because of the time I left the band?" Because you know, he was vindictive like that. He might have said - "Well don't you want him?" and he said "No, don't put him on there."

Gordon: No, probably... I don't think it was him.

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Coleman: Well...

Gordon: I think it was whoever made the movie was trying to use certain people to promote it along with them.

Coleman: But they should have at least mentioned that I was...

Gordon: Well yes, it's incorrect.

Coleman: They could have at least mentioned that I was in the band. They didn't have to say a lot about me, but I was nowhere mentioned on that video, and it was a long video too, if you remember! It dated back to... They even mentioned Sam Rivers on it! And I think Sam Rivers was in the band for about two weeks. And of course for Tony Williams, cause Tony Williams wanted to hear that strange sounding stuff. Plus, Sam Rivers was one of his boys up in Boston too. So he recommended him for the job, and I of course was a mistake. I think he stayed in the band about two weeks. Cause I never went to Japan with Miles either. This was something from Japan.

Gordon: Did you ever see him after you left the band, Miles?

Coleman: Yeah, they had a tribute for him where he brought in some of the guys. You remember that thing they did? It was one thing that they did - it was a private party for him. And then there was another - it was a concert. Bill Cosby was there, I remember that. And JJ played, Cicely Tyson was there. There was one time in Italy - I was there, and we were in the same hotel. I had a chance to go and see him, but Alberti's sayin', "Well you know how he is. I don't think he wants to be bothered with anybody." So I didn't even call him. So I saw very little of him after I left the band.

Gordon: Alberti, say who that was.

Coleman: Yeah, I loved him, he was a good guy.

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Gordon: Alberto Alberti.

Coleman: That's Alberto Alberti!

Gordon: He was the promoter for Italy when he went.

Coleman: He was the promoter for Italy.

Gordon: He was Italy.

Coleman: You know Julio now? The guy?

Gordon: Yeah, I don't know him.

Coleman: I didn't know him either but Ray Mantia - he brings him around whenever he comes in.

Gordon: Alberto Alberti brought George with the Timeless All Stars, I guess, and also he brought Art Blakey. He was a promoter that loved jazz.

Coleman: All the bands.

Gordon: He loved jazz. He loved musicians. He loved George. He could find a gig in Italy for George Coleman. Right? Am I right?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: Six weeks, right?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: Six weeks at a time. He was a lovely guy, a lovely guy.

Coleman: And when the money got short and I didn't want to be over there tryin' to make no money, so that's when he used to bring the other guys over. And he surely felt... But I never had any feelings about it. I know he couldn't come up with the money for me, you know. He was great, man.

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Gordon: He was a lovely guy.

Coleman: I remember talkin' to him a few days before he died. I called him.

Gordon: Oh good.

Coleman: And I got a chance to speak with him, and I told him we loved him. Cause he had... these things people do to hasten their demise... Most of the guys have done it. With me, I don't know whether I stopped in time or whether... you know. I just knew what I have to do to try and keep everything together with myself health-wise. With so many guys that got involved with the happy stuff: dope and alcohol and all that. I did a little bit of that, but never to the point where I had a problem. But I said to myself - one night I got so sick and I came here, and Carol was waiting up as usual. She started saying things like, "I'm gonna change the lock" and all that stuff. I knew I was hurting myself cause as soon as I would get off the gig doing all that stuff, hanging out late, I would go right back to the gym. I'd go right back in that gym man. I always felt good about doing that. Gettin' back in the gym. I did it because I really wanted to and it really made me feel good and things like that. But this particular night I came home, I was really sick man, and I got so sick. I had too much coke, I had too much cognac, I had too much beer, I had too much smoke. You know, I never did use heroin though. I never messed with heroin. Coke and marijuana and cognac and beer, you know, I was loaded with that. So I spent about seven hours in the bathroom on my knees throwing up until I couldn't throw up anymore, there was nothing to throw up. So that particular night I said to myself, "Well, this is it." It was '90. 1990. I gave it up then, and I haven't had a taste since. Twenty-plus years. So I knew when it was time to stop. I knew it was time to stop. First of all, I was making things bad for Carol, cause she said, "I don't know when I'm going to have to come down in the morgue to identify your body or somebody's

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gonna call me and tell me you had a fatal heart attack.” Cause I had all those problems then. I had high blood pressure but I was takin’ medicine, and I was in the gym. And then of course I was diabetic too. I had all these problems man, so I was lucky. I was very lucky. I could have had a stroke or a heart attack on any given night. Cause some of those nights I was doin’ a lot of stuff. But I was takin’ my medicine and being in the gym and everything. This particular night I got so sick I said, “I ain’t gonna do it. I’m so weak.” Probably didn’t have food for a whole week, lost about ten or fifteen pounds. In a week! So after that, that particular night when I got deathly ill, I said, “This is it. No more.” That was it. No more.

Gordon: You know what I didn’t ask you was when did you switch from alto to tenor?

Coleman: Well I was playin’ - Oh! That was necessity. When I went with B.B. that’s when I switched to tenor.

Gordon: Oh.

Coleman: 1955. I had been playin’ alto for maybe a couple of years, so you know I wound up playin’ both tenor and alto. But that was really the time - if I hadn’t went with B.B. I’d probably be still trying to mess around with alto now.

Gordon: You still play alto sometimes.

Coleman: Yeah, once in a while.

Gordon: You’ve heard him play alto?

Kimery: Never heard him.

Gordon: Oh! He can play the alto.

Coleman: But that’s when I started. 1955. When I went with him

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he said, “I need a tenor player.” So he bought a tenor for me. He bought me a Martin tenor, and I played that horn into my jazz career, until when I got with Max. I said, “this is a little bit slow. I need somethin’ that I can move on. These tempos, this Martin, it’s not holdin’ up well.” So I remember going to Sam Nash in Brooklyn and tradin’ it in for that tenor that I have now.

Gordon: The same one? You’re playin’ the same one?

Coleman: That’s fifty plus years old, that saxophone I’m playin’.

Kimery: Wow.

Coleman: Probably older than you, Ken.

Kimery: Wow. Yeah, just a couple years.

Gordon: Wow. And what kind is that?

Coleman: That’s a Mark VI.

Kimery: A Mark VI, yeah.

Gordon: And what kind of mouthpiece?

Coleman: It’s an Otto Link on there. That was the preferred mouthpiece that Dexter had. Most of the tenor players from that era - they use Otto Link and Selmer saxophones.

Gordon: And what reed do you use?

Coleman: Well I’m playing a Bari, cause I get them for free. That place over there in the corner, that’s loaded with reeds. And they give them to me, you know.

Gordon: What number?

Coleman: 3 soft. I’m playin’ 3 soft.

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Kimery: That's a soprano.

Coleman: Because I've got an open mouthpiece. So you use softer reeds with an open mouthpiece. So I'm playin' a 3 soft now. But I've had others. Through the years I've had... Ricos have been my reed of choice through the years. But I've played other reeds, Vandoren and all the others.

Gordon: So you've had other tenors but this is what you play. You've had others over the years?

Coleman: Well I've got others, you know. Right now I have a Rex Mark VI, I have an old Conn, which is one of the things - a vintage Conn - that people love. I'm gonna try to sell it too one of these days, cause I don't play it. But it has this big sound. Some of the older players used to play these. This has been basically the one, for over fifty years.

Gordon: Wow.

Coleman: It's one that I play, one that I like to play. I'd like to get something else because - first of all, these songs get to the point where the metal starts wearing out. After fifty years, you know. Fortunately I've had this guy in Boston who's been taking care of me and Stan Getz and others. And Sonny Rollins. Sonny Rollins, me, and Stan. He keeps these horns together for us.

Gordon: You go to Boston? You take the horn to Boston?

Coleman: Well I've had people take it up.

Gordon: Oh, take it up for you?

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: What's his name?

Coleman: Emilio Lyons, and he's retired from the store now.

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Things got funny at the store so he's just doing his work from the house now. He was just come back - he's probably home - he came back from a conference in Turino. You know Turino, right?

Gordon: Uh-huh.

Coleman: Beautiful little city.

Gordon: Yeah! You never went to Saul Fromkin?

Coleman: Yeah!

Gordon: Remember Saul?

Coleman: Saul was the first guy to overhaul this, I think. Yeah.

Gordon: Saul was a saxophone doctor.

Coleman: Yes, Saul Fromkin.

Gordon: He made house calls. [Laughs] Right?

Coleman: Yeah, he used to take things to Dexter.

Gordon: He made house calls.

Coleman: Only for Dexter though. I don't think he made no house calls for anybody else.

Gordon: Oh. Well, ok!

Coleman: No, that's the real deal. I would always go to the shop to get my repairs. He's gone now.

Gordon: He's gone yeah.

Coleman: He went to Florida.

Gordon: Yeah, he did.

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Coleman: He retired to Florida. Yeah he was one of the guys that used to take care of my stuff. In recent years, the last twenty years, it's been Emilio Lyons.

Gordon: Yeah, he's famous.

Coleman: And he, you know, he took pleasure in doing me and Dexter and...

Gordon: Sonny?

Coleman: I don't know whether Dexter went to him.

Gordon: No, I think Sonny.

Coleman: Sonny Rollins.

Gordon: Right.

Coleman: Sonny Rollins, yeah. Me and Sonny Rollins and Stan.

Gordon: So George, is there anybody that we haven't mentioned that you think on this interview that will be forever - when we're long gone, people can listen to?

Coleman: Well, Frank Frosty was my man.

Gordon: Oh yeah, good.

Coleman: He and I, we played with Elvin Jones, and he's just such a tremendous talent. You know, writing and arranging and playing. When I was in the band with him with Elvin - he and I, we had almost what you might call extrasensory perception. Because I would play somethin' and he would play somethin' and we'd harmonize it. Just instinctively. We could do that, it was almost... without even rehearsing or nothing. But he was just like that. He was a great player and a great arranger. I just did an interview with a gentleman that came by because they're doing a documentary on

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him. So I talked about him on that. Before his death I would call to Chesapeake, Virginia, where he lived. We would talk, you know, because he had a hell of a sense of humor.

Gordon: Didn't he?

Coleman: Oh he was something else.

Gordon: Did you interview him?

Kimery: Yeah, we went down. Well, we did two interviews. When we went down - a catch-up - and down at his house. And Cecile? Is that the right name?

Gordon: Cecilia.

Coleman: Cecilia, yeah.

Kimery: Cecilia, yeah. Because I didn't realize she was a cousin of Elvin's.

Gordon: Yeah! Yeah, she's a Jones.

Coleman: That's right! That's in the family.

Kimery: And shortly before he passed away he finally got the rights to *The Shiny Stocking*.

Gordon: Yeah. Did you know that? He got the rights back.

Coleman: Ain't that somethin'. I didn't know that.

Gordon: Yeah.

Coleman: I didn't know that. Can you believe that?

Gordon: He got the rights to his song back.

Coleman: I guess Basie's name was on it, right?

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Gordon: No, somebody else. Whoever had the publishing.

Coleman: Really?

Gordon: It wasn't even about Basie. It was about... you know.

Coleman: About somebody takin' your music. Yeah.

Gordon: Yeah.

Coleman: Well I'm happy that he did that.

Gordon: He was happy about that, right?

Kimery: Oh yeah, oh yeah. He was a great guy.

Gordon: Great, he was great. Well I'm glad you remembered to mention him.

Coleman: Oh yeah. I couldn't...

Gordon: And Jamil! What about Jamil?

Coleman: Jamil was the guy that was from Memphis too.

Gordon: What was his name in Memphis?

Coleman: His name was George Joyner. It was - as they say - his slave name. Cause he's a Muslim. He and I, we worked together in B.B.'s band. He was the bass player. As a matter of fact, he was one of the first guys that played the electric bass. You know, the Fender bass. He and Jimmy Murray. Remember Jimmy Murray from Philly?

Gordon: Sure, played with R.A.U.

Coleman: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Somethin' else. Jimmy Murray, I don't know, I think he's still around.

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Gordon: Really?

Coleman: Yeah, I think he's still around. Hangin' in.

Gordon: Wow.

Coleman: But he was a little bit odd, you know. There was so many guys, you know. But geniuses! Really.

Gordon: Bass players tend to be a little...

Coleman: Well, I don't know. You categorize 'em but there have been some oddballs on pianos and saxophones and everything. Yeah, even some harmonica players are probably out, you know. Yeah, there's a lot of people with idiosyncrasies, shall we say.

Gordon: We love our people.

Coleman: Yeah.

Gordon: I think that April 20th, it's April 20th, is a great day for jazz, and for Memphis, and musicians, and for all the people that have watched your career and heard you play and... you know.

Coleman: Well you know some of my greatest allies are people who have really... It's been my students and my fans.

Gordon: You kept all your friends and fans George.

Coleman: The media has not been so happy with me, you know, through the years. But I never worried about it. I never worried about it because I had friends and fans. Once in a while an article, you know. But most people - they didn't know me and never knew me. They probably know me from movies these days - movies that I've made. As a matter of fact, Montoya called me just a day or so ago to tell me that Susan Sarandon wants to use me in a movie to tell some young player - I think the story line's supposed to be I'm talkin' to some young player, tellin' him about what he has to do to

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learn the saxophone. I don't know whether it's gonna come to or not or whatever.

Gordon: What other films did you do?

Coleman: I did *Preacher's Wife*, with Whitney and Denzel. I had a bit part there, you know. Camera scene where she's singing and I'm standing on the side of her. So I get a lot of shots! It's a nightclub scene. Then before that I did a thing called *Freejack* with Mick Jagger and Emilio Estevez. I did that whereas I had this one little scene. I'm playin' on that, though. I'm playin', but the stuff that I'm playin' is weird. It's like on end, it cost Jean Arnette.

Gordon: Oh really?

Coleman: And David Murray. Cause he just said, "Look, I don't want you to play nothin' that makes any sense. Just play some, you know, play some free stuff." Then I made another movie for him in Australia, which probably won't come out here, and I did the same thing. I played, you know, some out there. He wanted me to play out. Nothing in. But he was a good director, a guy named Geoff Murphy. You know, he's a New Zealander. That's about the extent of my...

Gordon: And what about Bill Cosby? What'd you do with him? Did you do some TV?

Coleman: I did a little TV show, yeah, a little TV thing for him. He didn't come up with no money though.

Gordon: Oops.

Coleman: I shouldn't mention that. Maybe you should cancel that. It's been about... You know my movie career has not been that flourishing. But a couple of things, and strangely enough people see me and say, "Man, I saw you in that movie!"

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Gordon: Being in a film is quite different from being on a record, as I know.

Coleman: Yeah! Yeah it is.

Gordon: As we know, that changes...

Coleman: Of course with Dexter and the great job he did on the thing. That was a great thing for him as an actor. Cause he could have probably been an actor. Yup.

Gordon: So is there anything you want to say to the young musicians about the future?

Coleman: Yeah. Just keep practicing, but learn the rudiments. Learn the bebop. That's what I want to first tell them. Learn to bebop, because if you learn how to play bebop, you can play anything after that. Because those guys who were playing bebop, they could play other things. Lee Morgan, he played classic, you know. If you can play bebop, you can play anything as far as jazz is concerned. You don't want to start out saying, "What I want: to do my own thing and I want to be free. I want to play the free jazz." If you want to start out in jazz, first of all you gotta get a good sound, you gotta get a good sound on the instrument, and you need to learn the harmony. Which, a great thing for a young saxophonist is to learn a little something about keyboards. You know, I never studied piano but I used to hang around these guys down in Memphis - when I was first coming up - and they would show me the chords. And I had a little book you know that I could look in the book and find out how to structure chords. So I learned a lot of stuff on my own. Everything I would say pretty much. Nobody really taught me anything, sat down and said, "Well I'm gonna show you this and I'll show you that." I just sat there and comprehended all the stuff that was going on around me, you know, with the chord progressions, with arrangers being in bands,

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with people who wrote and arranged. I learned from listening. The ear is your greatest ally when it comes to that for this jazz music. Because back in the old days when we used to transcribe this stuff, you know, *Now's the Time*, and simple stuff like that. But then there was some complex things that we had to learn right from the regular time. Cause sometimes - back in the old days, you got the stuff right off the 78s. Cause you couldn't slow it down. Then later on came the LPs and you could kind of slow it down a little bit. Most of the transcription during those days was right from the records. You could take it and put it back if you couldn't get certain voicing or anything. I remember trying to get Sonny Stitt's solo at one time, a double-time figure. And I kept turning it back and finally I picked up. I got it. But that was all out of date. Transcription was it. You transcribe all the bebop tunes. So transcription is out of order today too, with young players coming up. Transcribe, try to emulate, you know. Maybe not for the rest of your life, but it doesn't hurt to play a figure of somebody playin' Dexter or Charlie Parker or Johnny Griffin. But I've had people come to me and say, "Well man, I transcribed your solo" and blah, blah, blah. Transcription is a great thing, in a way. You can listen to somebody play something and figure it out and put the notes down. Even before we were putting notes down we'd have the figure - we could play the figure.

Gordon: Ok Ken?

Kimery: Yeah?

Gordon: Do you have anything you want to add or ask?

Kimery: No, I think you've kind of covered it all there.

Gordon: You think we covered it all?

Coleman: I would think so. Anyway what we didn't cover will remain unsaid?

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Gordon: We'll add it to it!

Coleman: It will remain...

Gordon: We'll let it hang!

Coleman: Yeah! We got enough.

Gordon: Thank you George.

Kimery: Thank you George.

Coleman: And thank you.

(Edited and transcribed by Andrew Greene)