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**FORESTSTORN “CHICO” HAMILTON  
NEA Jazz Master (2004)**

**Interviewee:** Foreststorn “Chico” Hamilton (September 21, 1921 – November 25, 2013)  
**Interviewer:** Dr. Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery  
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**Brown:** Today is January 9, 2006. This is the official Smithsonian Jazz Oral History interview with Chico Hamilton in his home on 45th Street in New York City. This is a partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters program. Good afternoon, Chico Hamilton. If we could begin by you stating your full name and your date and place of birth, please.

**Hamilton:** Oh, I’m not going to tell you that, man. Okay, my name is Foreststorn Chico Hamilton, aka Chico Hamilton. I was born in LA in 1921, September the 21st or 23rd, 1921.

**Brown:** 21st through the 23rd?

**Hamilton:** Well it was either the 21st or 23rd, but I go for the 21. It’s easier to remember, 21.

**Brown:** Why is there a discrepancy of the date?

**Hamilton:** Well there was a discrepancy at that time in LA. You know, I don’t know whether you can remember that far back but because I guess my ethnic background in

regards to that being from sort of a multi race family, you know, mixed, so, you know, but anyway –

**Brown:** Were you born in a hospital?

**Hamilton:** I was born upstairs by the kitchen sink and you're supposed to ask me how do I know, I heard the water running. No, I was born in the hospital and everything is cool. My mother was Mexican, Indian, German-Jew. My father was Afro American and Scottish, and, you know, Duke's mixture. As matter of fact, that was so beautiful about the neighborhood that I was born in, grew up in, in LA.

**Brown:** Which was?

**Hamilton:** Which was the east side over near Long Beach. You know, you remember the railroads, the streetcars used to go from downtown LA to the beaches?

**Brown:** Definitely, sure.

**Hamilton:** In that area.

**Brown:** So is that where you were born?

**Hamilton:** That's where I was born.

**Brown:** Do you remember the address or what area, or cross streets, or anything?

**Hamilton:** No. I was born in the hospital. Cindy B., what's the name of that hospital out there? You know, it really doesn't matter man, the fact that I was born. I'm born, I'm still here.

**Brown:** Well this is just for the official record.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, but, you know, I don't remember.

**Brown:** What neighborhood was it?

**Hamilton:** Well it was like -- it was on (unintelligible) side, which consists of -- you've heard of Central Avenue?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Okay, everything south of Central Avenue.

**Brown:** So you're talking about Compton?

**Hamilton:** Compton, you know, Hooper, anything south of Main Street, on the other side of Main Street, which was, you know, down in that area.

**Brown:** Were you as far as Carson?

**Hamilton:** No, no, no.

**Brown:** Lynwood Hills?

**Hamilton:** No, we were closer in then Compton and Lynwood Hills. It was --

**Brown:** Well then there's Watts.

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** You stopped at Watts?

**Hamilton:** No, we were east --

**Brown:** East of Watts, so you're going to Lennox, (Unintelligible), Englewood.

**Hamilton:** Keep going.

**Brown:** Keep going east?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, keep going towards the City Hall.

**Brown:** Oh, City Hall, okay.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** That's getting by Exposition Park and down there.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** Yeah, that is central LA.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** You go east, you go to Culver City.

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** If you go too far east.

**Hamilton:** It was central LA at the time, which was very hip. As a matter of fact I went to Lafayette Junior High School.

**Brown:** Lafayette Junior High School.

**Hamilton:** And while in Lafayette -- as a matter of fact, my neighborhood -- as a kid in grade school, right, -- incidentally my best friend who is still my best friend and he was best man at my wedding, was Jack Kelso and Jack and I met when we were about seven or eight years old. And we both went to Nevins, which was the grade school, and that's where my mother was a dietician for the Board of Education there. She ran the cafeteria. But in the meantime, Jack got a clarinet and he started taking clarinet lessons from Cochi Roberts who was a well known saxophonist, reed man in LA at that time. So due to the fact that my best friend had a clarinet, I wanted to play clarinet but my folks -- we had to wait because in order to rent one it cost two dollars and we were so poor man, it was like, you know, unbelievable.

So finally after about six months, I finally got a clarinet, rented a clarinet and started taking lessons, right.

So we went in the school orchestra. I just barely knew how to hold a horn, you know. My brother, older brother, his name was Orian, he played the drums and, you know, he just kept time.

So when he graduated from grade school I figured well since he's my brother I'll play the drums, and that's when, you know, I put the clarinet down and picked up some sticks.

**Brown:** About what age was this?

**Hamilton:** How old was I?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** I was about eight or nine years old. And funny thing, not a funny thing, but Lionel Hampton was, you know, from LA and I'd see him at the Lincoln Theater. And Lionel would take the sticks and play all over the floor, and the wall, and all over and I imitated -- I could do that. I'd imitate Lionel, right?

So when we were in junior high school there was a piano player by the name of Chooie Reyes. He was a piano player who later became a Mexican piano player who later became very famous. His name was Chooie Reyes. He and I teamed up together and we went to the Follies in the burlesque house there. They had an amateur hour and strangely enough man, we won first prize. It was \$50 and I had \$25. Man, I had never seen that much money before in my life, right?

In the meantime while I was in school, in grade school, from grade school to junior high, I used to shine shoes, man. I had my little box and that's when you could shine shoes, a nickel for a shine. And man I'd stay out all day long on Saturday until I made myself a dollar. I never had any problems making money. And I'd make my dollar and I'd come home. During the week I'd go out on Wednesdays and make 35 or 40 cents, something like that, enough to have enough money to buy lunch. You could get a plate of beans for three cents, stuff like that, and a piece of pie, you know for a nickel. Anyway to make a long story short, when I won the contest, well my mother, she let me -- I bought my first drum. I bought a lady snare drum. I still have that drum.

**Brown:** You do?

**Hamilton:** Yes, it's out at my house. And that drum is like -- it's a big 12-inch, you know, fantastic.

**Brown:** It's a parade drum.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man. Well it wasn't quite a parade but it was -- as a matter of fact, I carried that drum with me when I got drafted.

**Brown:** Well let's back up. I don't want to get all that far away. Let's go back.

**Hamilton:** Okay.

**Brown:** You mentioned that your mother was a dietician.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

- Brown:** If we could just get your parents names.
- Hamilton:** Okay. Her name was Pearl Gonzales.
- Brown:** Pearl Gonzales was your mother's name.
- Hamilton:** And my father was Jesse.
- Brown:** Jesse Hamilton.
- Hamilton:** Hamilton.
- Brown:** Okay. And you mentioned an older brother. How many siblings do you have?
- Hamilton:** It was six of us all together. My sister just passed away as a matter of fact. My brother Bernie, the actor, do you know him?
- Hamilton:** Bernie Hamilton?
- Hamilton:** Do you know Bernie Hamilton, the actor?
- Brown:** Oh, the name, sure. I don't know him personally.
- Hamilton:** My younger brother. My older brother was Orean.
- Brown:** How do you spell that?
- Hamilton:** O-R-E-A-N, Orean Thomas. My sister was the oldest.
- Brown:** She was the oldest, okay.
- Hamilton:** Jesselee Orean, and then me, Foreststorn, and next was Adair, and Bernie, Renaldo, and my baby brother is Don, Don Wesley.
- Brown:** You came from a multi-cultural family. Did you learn Spanish in the household as well?
- Hamilton:** A little bit. I learned all the bad --
- Brown:** Well you were in Los Angeles so you were going to --

**Hamilton:** I learned all the words that you -- (unintelligible).

**Brown:** So was it mixed culturally in the house?

**Hamilton:** Oh, man, well the neighborhood period. Period, man. At that time strangely enough man, I guess up until I was 21 years old, I had never seen over maybe 100 black people together at one time in my whole entire life.

And when I got drafted at 21, they sent me down to Fort McClellan, Alabama, and man I saw 35,000 black dudes. It wiped me out, man. It did. I had to go to the -- I had to get re-brainwashed. I had no idea it was that many black people in the world, man. It was amazing, you know? Anderson, Alabama.

**Brown:** Well we'll talk about the military. I'm a vet too so we'll talk about the military. But let's go back and talk more about your neighborhood growing up.

**Hamilton:** But growing up, man, you know, it was Italians, Chicanos, Japanese.

**Brown:** Really?

**Hamilton:** Japanese.

**Brown:** Before the internment?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** Before that, because they got moved out.

**Hamilton:** Listen, man, at any rate where we lived it wasn't anything but lots, vacant lots and a house -- every now and then a house, you know, neighborhoods and everything, but it was all spread out, you know, and it was just a Duke's mixture. It was dynamite, you know.

Strangely enough, man, everybody knew everybody or you knew somebody that knew somebody, you know, that knew you, you know, so you really had to watch your P's and Q's. You couldn't, you know, goof because somebody would tell your mother or tell your father. That type of thing.

**Brown:** So it was a close knit neighborhood?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, very much so.

**Brown:** So what were some of the other social institutions that helped create that cohesion? Was it the church, was it community centers, the schools, what was it that brought everyone together? Just living together?

**Hamilton:** Just being poor.

**Brown:** Being poor. So what was your father's occupation?

**Hamilton:** My father's occupation, man, he was a professional waiter at the University Club in southern California. Now in order to become -- if you wanted to get into politics you had to become a member of the University Club. When I was a kid, man, I met -- who was the governor that just became --

**Brown:** Reagan?

**Hamilton:** No, man.

**Brown:** Pat Brown, or way before them?

**Hamilton:** Way before then. He was a Supreme Court --

**Brown:** Not Earl Warren.

**Hamilton:** Earl Warren, I met Mr. Warren. I met Earl Warren, I met Nixon, I met all these people. What happened was, every Christmas they used to have -- the help were invited to the club for a Christmas party with the kids and things like that. And that's how I met, you know, these people.

I'm a stone cold republican, you know. And my father had a room that would feed about 15 or 16 people and they would come in and, you know, Jesse what do I want to eat, and he'd tell them what to eat, you know, all that kind of thing. And he was there for 49 years, man, 49 years.

What's amazing, man, he used to leave two dimes, 20 cents, on my mother's dresser every morning and my mother used to take those two dimes and feed six kids, feed us, make fantastic meals, man.

**Brown:** What was an average meal, what was a dinner meal like?



**Hamilton:** Dinner meal?

**Brown:** You know, you might have some tamales here, and some black-eyed peas, and some corn bread?

**Hamilton:** We didn't have black-eyed peas. I didn't know anything about black-eyed peas but we had tamales. As a matter of fact, when we'd grow the corn and we shucked the corn, and my mother would hang the corn, shucked -- some on the line and let them dry out and, you know, all the way. Some of the best tamales. Anyway typical -- and ate a lot of soups, you know, things like that. And we ate extremely well, man.

**Brown:** So your father was gainfully employed for 49 years.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** But you say you were still raised poor. Is it because there were so many children or what?

**Hamilton:** Well we were poor. You know, it was just that he wasn't making that much money, you know what I mean?

**Brown:** I mean Duke's father was a professional butler too.

**Hamilton:** You know, it was like everybody was sort of -- I mean everybody was going - - there were no virtually wealthy people in my area that you could, you know, shake a stick at, that type of thing. As a matter of fact, what the hell is his name? Wood Stroller lived right across the street from me, you know, came out of the same neighborhood.

**Brown:** What elementary school did you go to, do you remember that?

**Hamilton:** I went to Nevins.

**Brown:** Nevins Elementary School and then Lafayette Junior High School.

**Hamilton:** Lafayette Junior High School and then Jeff.

**Brown:** Okay, so you were third in the line of the children.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So your day -- and you said you had a shoe shine -- so you're already starting to work, you're picking up music at eight and nine.

**Hamilton:** I was working, man. Let me tell you something, man. When I graduated from junior high school, I started buying my own clothes when I was 11 years old.

**Brown:** From the money you were making.

**Hamilton:** The money I was making.

**Brown:** Okay, so let's go back and look at your involvement with music. You say you picked up the clarinet because your buddy Jack was playing it. What kind of music were you listening to and what kind of music were you playing?

**Hamilton:** There was only one kind of music at that time, which was dynamite, was swing. Man, I'd wake up every morning going to school listening to Benny Goodman, right, (musical sounds) Don't Be That Way, and Gene Krupa used to (musical sounds). First of all man, that was the beautiful thing about LA, the educational system. The requirement you had to take some form of music, either it was playing an instrument, whatever, music theory or whatever, listening or whatever. You had to be involved with some kind of music before you could graduate even from grade school. And what they used to do, when all the bands used to come to LA, Duke, Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Benny Goodman, they used to let us out of school to go down to the train station and meet the bands, you know, and it was super.

**Brown:** So what did you do when you went to meet the band? You would stand on the platform when they came off?

**Hamilton:** You know, just idolized them, you know.

**Brown:** Did you run up and get their autograph?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. No, I didn't get an autograph. I was too bashful for that but we used to go down --

**Brown:** To see that on tape, Chico Hamilton, bashful, back then.

**Hamilton:** Back then. As a matter of fact, when I was in high school, when I started at Jeff, there was a very famous music teacher there, Samuel Brown. Samuel Brown did not do anything for me period. As a matter of fact, he didn't like me.

**Brown:** Why not?

**Hamilton:** Well I often wondered about that. I think in a sense man, I wasn't the right color, complexion, for Sam Brown.

**Brown:** Too light?

**Hamilton:** Too dark. You know, just to be honest about it but, you know, --

**Brown:** Well he's not around anymore.

**Hamilton:** I know that he's not around anymore but he took a lot of bows about me.

**Brown:** Did he?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, from what I understand, you know, and I had nothing to do -- man, the only reason why I got in the band -- Jack was already in the band but I got in the band because I got a sweater. That was the only time I had a letterman sweater from Jeff with the big J on it. That's the only reason why I got in the band because you got this sweater free.

**Brown:** Well let's back up. I mean, you know, earlier we were talking about you making the switch around eight or nine from clarinet to drums because your older brother played drums, graduated from elementary school, so you figured well you'd just followed in his footsteps.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So let's talk about how you started to develop as a drummer. As you said already, you're listening to big band swing.

**Hamilton:** When I actually got into drums, I, you know, really started digging them, I had to be maybe 12, 13, something like that. I guess I was around, 12, 13, 14 years old at least. And Jack and I -- there was a trumpet player, old man Myers, a trumpet player who was a family band.

One of the sons played piano, one played trumpet, and one played bass and he had Jack and I -- Jack was with a saxophone. By that time Jack was playing alto and myself on drums, right?

And this man, old man Myers, was totally, totally responsible for me playing brushes. Every time I'd pick up the sticks he'd say put those sticks down boy. He wouldn't let me play the sticks. He had me play brushes.

**Brown:** Why?

**Hamilton:** That's what he wanted to hear. Hey man, we played in places -- the average place we would play, the sign would read, all colored orchestra, all up and down, from LA to Azusa & Cucamonga, you know, and this was before they had roads, highways, you know.

A lot of them were just cow pastures and many a time man, we virtually had to fight our way out of the joint. You know, people get -- Saturday night man, they get to drinking, for some unknown reason man they hate the band, you know, All us black dudes.

**Brown:** Some unknown reason. Well let's backtrack.

**Hamilton:** But anyway --

**Brown:** Okay, go ahead.

**Hamilton:** He wouldn't let me -- and every gig I ever had that paid me beaucoup of money was because I could brush, you know.

That's been my forte is using brushes. I used, you know, -- shit, I guess I spent about 15, 16 years playing nothing but singers, you know, that type of thing.

**Brown:** Okay, let's go back to your early training. Apparently this old man, as you said, he must have been hiring you so you're working with him, but who was training you? Who trained you on your instrument? You said you bought a snare drum and then you say you had a drum set. There's a big difference playing snare drum and drum set.

**Hamilton:** I'm more or less self-taught. I'm self-taught. I guess when I was about 15 or 16, I took lessons from Lee Young.

**Brown:** Prez's brother.

**Hamilton:** Prez's brother.

**Brown:** We interviewed him already too.

**Hamilton:** Lee?

**Brown:** Yeah, he's funny.

**Hamilton:** Anyway, I started taking lessons from Lee because Lee was playing with Lorenzo Flennoy at the time, the band, with Red Callender, Lee, Red Mack, you know, those guys. Anyway I'm in high school and all of a sudden Lee had me to sub for him every now and then.

**Brown:** Because you had been studying with him, he knew you could handle it.

**Hamilton:** Well, you know, he taught stick controls.

**Brown:** Did he have you read out of books?

**Hamilton:** No, he didn't teach me how to read.

**Brown:** So when you say stick control, is he working --

**Hamilton:** Little (unintelligible).

**Brown:** So he's working with you on a snare drum, he's not working with you out of the kit?

**Hamilton:** No, just --

**Brown:** So you're just working technique and stick control.

**Hamilton:** Technique, yes.

**Brown:** But no reading?

**Hamilton:** Oh, no, I didn't know how to read. I didn't know how to read. I couldn't read one note of music. Everything was here and here. I'd play an arrangement down, then one time I knew it. I had every record Duke had out. I had every record Jimmie Lunceford had out. And when Basie came out, when we heard Basie it really messed me up, man. Turned everybody around.

**Brown:** What was it about it, the music that messed you all up?

**Hamilton:** Well Jimmie Lunceford was a two beat thing. Crawford played that (musical sounds). That was Lunceford, right? (Unintelligible) thing was (musical sounds), straight ahead kind of thing. Man, when Basie came out, Jo Jones did (musical sounds) started

singing on that (unintelligible) man, that just wiped me -- not only me but everybody else. Turned me completely around, man.

He became my hero. I worship him, man, and first time they came to California, Lee Young who was real tight, you know, because Prez was -- asked me did I want to meet Jo Jones, and he took me to the Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue. I was about 14, 15 years old.

**Brown:** I'll take a look at it because I don't want to have interrupted you.

**Hamilton:** No, that's cool. I was saying when I met Jo in the Dunbar Hotel.

**Brown:** How was he dressed?

**Hamilton:** He was cool, you know. He was dynamite.

**Brown:** So he takes you up to meet him.

**Hamilton:** Lee took me up to meet him.

**Brown:** Were you up in his room or were you down in the lobby, or where?

**Hamilton:** No, up in the room. We went up to the room.

**Brown:** You went up to his room, okay.

**Hamilton:** And he told me, he says stay in school kid.

**Brown:** Chuckle hair.(?)

**Hamilton:** Stay in school. He told me to stay in school, you know, and that was cool. So in the meantime, Lee was playing with Lorenzo Flennoy and they were playing at the Club Alabam, which was the number one club there, which was equivalent to the Cotton Club here in New York.

They had a line of girls, chorus line, singers, dancers, and entertainers, you know, comedians, and I started subbing for Lee playing the show.

In the meantime our band that we used to have, we took a gig at the Follies and Buddy, myself, Jack, Eddie Taylor, Mingus was on that band. And I learned how to play for strippers, you know, doing the kick. I learned how to kick --

**Brown:** Sing that pattern, the kick pattern for the strippers.

**Hamilton:** (Musical sounds).

**Brown:** That's the one.

**Hamilton:** That's the one. And catching them kicks, man, kick some hits and I became good at it. So in subbing for Lee, I out sung him. Lee was sort of like a pitter-patter kind of player.

**Brown:** Are we just tipping?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, you know. Hey man, you know, I dug in, you know. And the chorus line, they all dug that man because I'd make them kick, I'd make them work, man, I'd make them shake their ass, you know. I'd play so heavy so I put on -- and they got hooked -- they loved me, you know, loved my playing.

And doing that, that's how Lionel heard me one night and he offered me the job on his band. That's the band with Eleanor and Marshall (Royal) here again, man, I couldn't read a note, but he wanted me on the band so he came over to my house to talk with my mother. And I was 16. I was getting ready to graduate that year. I'd be graduating from high school at 16 years old, and I promised my mother I would finish school, I'd get my diploma if she let me go on the road with Lionel and she did.

And I went on the band. I lasted three weeks and Gladys fired me and it was like I couldn't cut it. I couldn't read the music. The charts that I memorized were cool, but he was getting a whole lot of new music at that time and Jimmy Mundy was writing for the band. So I couldn't cut it so they let me -- you know, we were rehearsing at the Club Alabam and when they -- and Marshall Royal was really down (unintelligible) man.

You know, he knew I was struggling and he was really kind to me. So they let me go and it hurt me. I had tears in my eyes.

And as I was walking towards the door -- there used to be a big time pimp in LA by the name of Black Dot McGee. I don't know if you ever heard of him.

**Brown:** I know the name, oh, yeah.

**Hamilton:** Black Dot stopped me, said Junny Flip, they used to call me Junny Flip.

**Brown:** Like Flip Phillips?

**Hamilton:** No, Junny Flip.

**Brown:** Junny Flip.

**Hamilton:** Junny Flip. He said Junny Flip, he said, I know you feel bad but this is probably the best thing that could happen to you. He talked to me, man and, you know, I listened to him because that was other thing, man, coming up like I did on the scene -- that's the reason I said a lot of those guys don't know anything about Central Avenue. I was on Central Avenue, man. I used to burn matches and make a mustache so I'd look old enough to, you know, be on the street.

But I evidentially must not have been too bad looking of a dude because, you know, I had a thing there man where I didn't know whether I wanted to be a pimp or a musician, you know. I think all dudes go through that at one time or another.

**Brown:** If they look good.

**Hamilton:** Well evidentially I looked -- I always dressed because like I told you, I started buying my own clothes when I was 11 years old.

**Brown:** What stores did you go shopping in?

**Hamilton:** I went to all of them, hand me down stores, second hand stores, you know.

**Brown:** Okay. You were going to tell me you went to Delansky's West --

**Hamilton:** No, you know, I've got some pictures of me man, you know, where I was voted best dressed man in --

**Brown:** Roy Haynes? I'm just playing with you. Let's go back. I know --

**Hamilton:** Speaking of -- I'm going to present Roy with his Beacon of Jazz award next month.

**Brown:** Oh, great.

**Hamilton:** Well he presented me with mine.

**Brown:** Well I was going to say, you know, turn around. Well I want to go back because, you know, since we're in a room full of drummers, that transition from playing a snare drum to the full kit is a significant transition, conceptually,



technique, and I'm just trying to get as much as you can tell me about your earliest experience with this instrument. And plus, in school, what kind of music are you playing in school?

**Hamilton:** Just jazz.

**Brown:** Just jazz. They let you play jazz in school?

**Hamilton:** I only played in the band, marching band, one semester and I told you why, just to get my sweater, you know. In the meantime man, I'm working, I'm playing the joints.

**Brown:** So you're not really playing music in school as much, you're playing outside.

**Hamilton:** I'm not playing music in school period. I was working with groups. Fifteen, 16 years old, man, I was making gigs, and I mean big time gigs. As a matter of fact man, when I graduated from Jeff -- oh, I came back and graduated. I was 19 years old. I was making more money than my father. Man, I was making around \$27, \$28 a week.

**Brown:** Well I was going to ask you how much was Hamp paying you for the three weeks. How much was he paying you?

**Hamilton:** I don't even remember.

**Brown:** It was just the thrill of being in band, right?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I don't even remember.

**Brown:** So again, you earlier stated that music was an integral part of your education.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** But for you, you were not actually performing music in school, that was something you did outside of school. So school really didn't have an influence. As you said, Sam Brown, no real influence. The experience at Jefferson --

**Hamilton:** You know what, in school I majored in English. I was going to be a writer. Dexter Gordon and myself were the only two guys, Hambone (unintelligible); we had the toughest English teacher in the whole entire school -- Jefferson. We were the only three dudes that got -- I got an A in English, man, believe it or not.

**Brown:** I believe it.

**Hamilton:** Dexter got one, myself, you know. We used to talk about it all the time.

**Brown:** When did you meet Dexter? How old were you when you met Dexter?

**Hamilton:** We used to call him Big Stoop.

**Brown:** Big Stoop.

**Hamilton:** Remember Big Stoop in Terry and the Pirates, that cartoon strip?

**Brown:** Oh, yeah, yeah, Terry and the -- okay, yeah, okay. With Big Stoop, huh?

**Hamilton:** We used to call him Big Stoop. Can you imagine a 12 or 13-year old kid being six feet tall at that time?

**Brown:** He was long tall Dex already.

**Hamilton:** You know, Dexter grew up in -- his family was wealthy.

**Brown:** Oh they were, okay. So he wasn't --

**Hamilton:** His father was a doctor, you know, and I think he grew up on the west side or something like -- you know, but he was cool.

**Brown:** But you met in high school?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, I met -- yeah.

**Brown:** And he was already playing?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, but now he had a clarinet at that time.

**Brown:** Clarinet, okay.

**Hamilton:** Everybody had a clarinet.

**Brown:** So you met Dexter. Because many of your biographies published say you went to high school with Dexter Gordon, with Illinois Jacquet, with Charles Mingus, Buddy Collette.

**Hamilton:** Right, and Jack Kelso.

**Brown:** And Jack Kelso. And they all said that you played in bands so let's go over each one of those folks. We already talked about your meeting Jack Kelso. We just talked about your meeting Dex. How about meeting Mingus?

**Hamilton:** Mingus, I met Mingus man, through Buddy.

**Brown:** So let's talk about Buddy. Buddy seems to be a real key figure.

**Hamilton:** Buddy had a group and they were out in Watts. And one night, I think it was Saturday or something, I went out there to hear them. And I didn't know Buddy, Buddy didn't know me.

So they were playing a dance you know and he had his -- I can't think of his name, but anyway Charlie Drayton's brother-in-law, Red -- I can't think of -- you know Drayton, trumpet player, Leslie Drayton?

Well anyway to make a long story short, I come out there, right, so Buddy said he saw me. He said man, I saw this dude. I was sharp then. I was dressed, you know. So I asked could I sit in, you know, and he let me sit in and, you know, well who's this dude, you know. So I came back home in LA.

Next thing I know we have a gig. We make an audition to play the Million Dollar Theater, play in a show with --remember (Unintelligible) McKinney?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** To play a show. So our group played an opposite audition, opposite of Buddy. Buddy had his group and so some kind of way the two groups came together and I ended up being the drummer with the group and that's how we virtually in a sense got started.

**Brown:** So this is how you met Buddy, and you met Mingus at the same time?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. I think at that time Mingus was playing cello.

**Brown:** Playing jazz cello.

**Hamilton:** No, he wouldn't play no jazz cello, he was playing cello. I mean Buddy turned him on to that, plus the fact when Mingus started studying with Red Calendar. That's when -- well when we all got in the band, high school band, that's when we all you know -- that's when everything began to come together.

**Brown:** Did you know Red at this point as well, Red Callender?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I did. Red and I worked quite a bit together. As a matter of fact, Red Callender, and myself, and Dudley Brooks, piano player, we were on staff at Paramount Studios. This was later.

**Brown:** Yeah, this is much later, okay. We jumped way ahead now.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Strangely enough man, I had no idea Red was as young as he was, but Red was already a name, you know. He was working with everybody, all the places. But I guess from 16 on, that's when I was making my living playing. That's all I was doing.

**Brown:** So earlier you said you went back at 19 to finish up high school. So you actually didn't take Papa Joe's advice, you didn't finish high school.

**Hamilton:** I did finish high school.

**Brown:** You did finish high school.

**Hamilton:** I did finish high school. I graduated when I was 19 years old.

**Brown:** Okay, but you said at 16 --

**Hamilton:** No, I took his advice until Lionel took me --

**Brown:** Okay, so that's when got you out of high school, okay.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And then what happened after Lionel fired you? You were with him for three weeks. And then what happened?

**Hamilton:** I started working around LA, I started gigging, you know. I was making all the sets and everything.

**Brown:** And there was no problem with your age, only being 16?

**Hamilton:** Nobody didn't know how old I was, man.

**Brown:** You had your blackened mustache and you were ready.

**Hamilton:** I was ready, you dig, and I dressed -- you know, I always had a shirt and tie on, you know, stuff like that.

**Brown:** Did they have Stacy Adams back in those days already?

**Hamilton:** Huh?

**Brown:** Stacy Adams, did they have Stacy Adams back then?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, the Stacy Adams shoes. Yeah, I got some fedoras up there man. You think I'm kidding?

**Brown:** No, I don't. I believe you.

**Hamilton:** Anyway this takes me up to -- I'm playing LA. I get married.

**Brown:** Okay, you were 16 last time we talked about leaving. Then you went out and started --

**Hamilton:** I come back. I was 19 years old when I came back.

**Brown:** So you actually left LA then. You were doing touring?

**Hamilton:** I was just working all over but more or less on the west coast. It was all west coast stuff. And I got married, right.

**Brown:** At what age, and where, and to whom?

**Hamilton:** I got married in LA and we had to get permission to get married because I got drafted.

**Brown:** What age are we talking about now? So you must be 18 if you were drafted.

**Hamilton:** I would be 19, 20.

**Brown:** Okay, I'm trying to get the chronology because you left high school, then you said you came back. So you came back, you re-enrolled in high school to finish up.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** So if you were 16, maybe junior, senior year, so you had at least a year to finish up?

**Hamilton:** Yes.

**Brown:** So you came back after -- now you're a professional musician up and down the coast playing. You come back to LA and you're 19, so that's over two years gone.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So now you're back in LA, you come home and you get married. So is this somebody that you've known for a while?

**Hamilton:** My wife.

**Brown:** Yeah, but we don't -- she's not in any of the pictures. You said you met her at 13.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, well when I started back to school we had a class together. It was either a math class or some kind of class. We had a class and we got to be friends, and she was the only girlfriend I ever had.

**Brown:** You start at the top. You can't go anywhere else.

**Hamilton:** And it sounds funny -- it's not funny, but you know who played at my wedding? Nat.

**Brown:** Nat King Cole?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

MR. BROWNE: He played for the wedding reception. That's an (unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** Yeah, when we got married, Jack was my best man. You know, to make a long story short, after the wedding I did get drafted and man they sent me to Fort McLellan, Alabama.

**Brown:** Okay, let's stop before we -- because the Army is a whole other thing. You got drafted so if you were 19, that's 1940.

**Hamilton:** Right, and I got drafted I think in '40 or '41.

**Brown:** Okay, so maybe early '41 before you turned 20, you were drafted.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So we're talking about 1940. America's not even in the war yet.

**Hamilton:** Huh?

**Brown:** America is not even in the war yet.

**Hamilton:** The hell we weren't. We were in the war.

**Brown:** In 1940? Well Pearl Harbor is December 7, 1941.

**Hamilton:** It was '41 then.

**Brown:** So then you were 20.

**Hamilton:** I was 20.

**Brown:** You were almost 20, okay.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, almost.

**Brown:** So December 8th is when America declares war on Japan and Germany.

**Hamilton:** Whenever that time was. You know, the point is this, whenever war was, I was working with Lorenzo Flennoy at that time. You ever heard of Joe Comfort?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Me, and Joe Comfort, and James Nelson, Hawk, Lorenzo, myself on drums and Doris Lathy on guitar. Anyway to make a long story short, I got drafted. There was only three of us. They sent us to Fort McLellan, Alabama. Me, Joe (Unintelligible), I forget this other guy's name, but anyway they sent us there. Like I said, it's the first time I'd ever seen that many black soldiers.

**Brown:** Because there's still a segregated army if we're talking about the early '40s, right.

**Hamilton:** On this side of the mountain, Straw Mountain was the black troops, on that side of the mountain was the white troops. Well when I was in there the drummer with Claude Thornhill's band -- damn, I can't think of his name right now.

**Brown:** I can't think of his name either. Claude Thornhill, Jesus that's --

**Hamilton:** Anyway he heard that I was in the -- oh, I'll go back there a minute. When they drafted me, in our company was like a 125 men, something like that, and out of 125 soldiers, me, and Joe Dauer, and Frank, we were the only ones that could read and write. As a matter of fact it was in Life Magazine, the troops, they just let all these guys out of the chain gang down south and put them in this company, my company that I was in.

I've got my drum with me, man, right, carried my drum with me to let them know hey, I'm a musician, you know, that type of thing. So they make me a company clerk. Well first they make me mail orderly.

**Brown:** Mail orderly.

**Hamilton:** To handle the mail, which is the worst job, man. Let me tell you something, man. I ended up, man, carrying my roscoe because man, these people -- oh, they wouldn't put in the band knowing my whole life's been music.

They had a 35, 40 piece band. They had about four or five drummers and none of them could play. Half of the guys in the band couldn't play, (unintelligible) instruments yet they wouldn't put me in the band. They put me in -- made me company clerk, mail orderly and put me in the drum and bugle corps. You ready? They wouldn't let me play the drums. They made me play a bugle.

**Brown:** Sounds like the army, just messing everything up.

**Hamilton:** So anyway man, being a clerk, I'd give these guys their mail and the average letter would read, I am sending you some money. Man, these dudes thought that -- I'm sending you some money, you know, not here's some money; I'm sending you some money.

**Brown:** Not enclosed there's some money but I am sending you some money.

**Hamilton:** Man, I got hit in the mouth with a rifle butt and I had to start carrying my weapon man, because it was unbelievable, unbelievable man. I had to -- so this went on for almost a year.

I had to figure out a way how to get out of it. Have you heard of Colonel Frye March, (musical sounds)? I had to play that sucker. Plus the fact that I was the bugler so I had to wake the --



**Brown:** They're going to make you bugler. Now did you show any proficiency on the instrument?

**Hamilton:** What the trumpet -- I mean the bugle?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** I played revelry. So I figured man, I had enough of this, so I didn't play a couple of mornings and the colonel got pissed with the captain, the captain got -- so they took it out on me, right?

So anyway to make a long story short, just when that began to happen, a big time USO show came through there.

**Brown:** You're still at Fort McLellan?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. And none of the drummers could play the show. So they sent for me.

**Brown:** Oh, they sent for you, oh, good.

**Hamilton:** Sent for me. So to make a long story short, they didn't put me in the band but they attached me to the band. I was still in my company but I was attached to the band and ended up, you know, playing the shows, all the shows, and went out on bond drives, everything, man. Just, you know, made a lot of money for them.

**Brown:** What kind of music were you playing?

**Hamilton:** At that time?

**Brown:** Yeah, what were the shows, was it like a variety show where they danced?

**Hamilton:** Variety show, just a variety show. You remember the act of Forrest Tucker?

**Brown:** Oh, yeah.

**Hamilton:** He and I hooked up.

**Brown:** Well that reminds me. I know this is going to have to be a -- how much tape do we have left?

MALE SPEAKER: About eight minutes.

**Brown:** Okay. Let's go back before this first reel is out. Let's go back to the origin of your name Foreststorn, and if you can discuss that and then discuss how you got the moniker Chico.

**Hamilton:** Foreststorn is an Indian name.

**Brown:** What tribe?

**Hamilton:** Well, Apache.

**Brown:** Apache, Foreststorn.

**Hamilton:** La buskie (?), you know, trees, the forest. And it became easier for people to say Chico, which meant little boy, then Foreststorn.

**Brown:** And who named you?

**Hamilton:** My mother.

**Brown:** Your mother named you.

**Hamilton:** My mother.

**Brown:** So was she of Apache descent?

**Hamilton:** Like I said, man, she was everything. She was all the losers.

**Brown:** Where was your father originally from? I know LA but --

**Hamilton:** No, he was originally from Austin, Texas.

**Brown:** Texas, okay.

**Hamilton:** Very interesting history but I don't want to go into that.

**Brown:** Why not?

**Hamilton:** I don't want to go into it.

**Brown:** Okay, that's your prerogative. It might be historical.

**Hamilton:** No, man, well it's not beautiful. It's cool, man.

**Brown:** How about your mother?

**Hamilton:** I know very little about her also. They were very quiet, very secretive, you know.

**Brown:** But as long as you were in the house your parents were together?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, man, oh, yeah.

**Brown:** Now when did you pick up the nickname Chico? Was that family, or was that school, or was that in the musicians?

**Hamilton:** Well, somewhere between me and the army, somewhere.

**Brown:** Somewhere, okay. Did they just call you Foreststorn?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, my mother did. I mean people -- you know who called me Foreststorn, Julian Adderley

**Brown:** Julian "Cannonball" Adderley That's what I thought because --

**Hamilton:** He used to delight to say Foreststorn and I said Julian. He'd get his kicks calling me Foreststorn. We had a good rapport, man. He was a dynamite dude, man. The same thing with Miles, man. You know, Miles and I were very close. We were good friends.

Anyway getting back, doing those army days was really something, every -- period. Everything that was wrong with this country was because of the army in a sense.

**Brown:** Give me an example.

**Hamilton:** Well in the army, if you weren't from the south forget it. All the good jobs, all the good things -- you know, if you'd been either from the east coast or west coast, you didn't get them. No way, no shape, form or fashion. You know, you had to be good old southern boys.

**Brown:** But then you were in a segregated army so I know at least all the sergeants, and all the privates, all the noncoms were all black and you must have had maybe a white company commander, maybe some lieutenants.

**Hamilton:** The noncoms were black but all the officers -- we only had one officer who was black, who eventually became the band director.

**Brown:** Do you remember his name?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I ain't going to call it. He was gay, which is cool. But anyway when Jo and Prez came through there, do you know they wouldn't allow them to get into the band? Man, I had nothing to hurt me so bad as the fact that they -- and they got guys in this goddamn band that can't even play -- didn't even know how to finger the instruments.

**Brown:** You're saying you were at Fort McLellan and Prez showed up. He was stationed there as well. So you were stationed together.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. Prez and Jo Jones both.

**Brown:** Jo Jones too.

**Hamilton:** Jo Jones. Oh, let me tell you. The hippest thing that happened to me there, damn near had his name then, but anyway, the drummer that was with Claude Thornhill, I can't think of his name right now but it will come to me. I'll tell you tonight. But anyway we used to meet. We hooked up in the middle of the two hills in the woods. He would bring his book and a practice pad and I would bring my practice pad. He taught me how to read music, drum music. Taught me how to read drum music, man.

**Brown:** So there was one good thing about the army.

**Hamilton:** Huh?

**Brown:** So there was one good thing about the army.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. And I was in there for five years, man.

**Brown:** So when you started at Fort McLellan in the army, you got your basic training and then you have your AIT, Advanced Infantry Training. So were you re-stationed anywhere or did you serve your whole time right there at Fort McLellan?

**Hamilton:** I was stationed in Fort McLellan but I was all over the country.

**Brown:** What was your MOS, your Military Occupational Specialty? Do you remember what your job assignment --

**Hamilton:** Musician.

**Brown:** So you did get that --

**Hamilton:** Yeah. I became a corporal. They didn't want to give me a sergeant because they knew I was going to get -- I tried every day to get out, man. Some guys were just lucky and some guys -- I wasn't that lucky.

**Brown:** How come you ended up being in five years because your enlistment is only two years. How did you end up being in there --

**Hamilton:** Hey, man, they needed somebody to play them shows.

**Brown:** So you stayed in since you were playing music.

**Hamilton:** It wasn't a question of staying in, I couldn't get out. I couldn't get out, man.

**Brown:** So what years were you in the army, from when to when?

**Hamilton:** From '41 to '45.

**Brown:** Okay, so you never had to see combat so that was a blessing.

**Hamilton:** Well, no. All my brothers did, you know. All my brothers -- man, all four of us were in the service. It was combat down there, man.

**Brown:** Yeah. But you didn't have to serve overseas?

**Hamilton:** No, during that period.

**Brown:** And so were you part of the USO or were you Special Services back in those days?

**Hamilton:** Special Services.

**Brown:** So you toured to the posts in the United States.

**Hamilton:** Wherever they said go, go.

**Brown:** So you went all over.

**Hamilton:** All over.

**Brown:** So you were all over the south. You went on the east coast. Did you get up to Fort Dix?

**Hamilton:** Hey, man, I was at a lynching and didn't even know it.

**Brown:** Where was that?

**Hamilton:** Down in Mississippi. Man, when my wife came to see me down there, I went to the station for coloreds and my wife wasn't there, wasn't on the train, you know. She had to get off at the white section. They thought she was white.

**Brown:** So you got married to your wife before you went into the Army?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So you had to have automatic separation there because I know they weren't letting privates go as any kind of accompanied tour. So you got married, then you got sent to McLellan. Can we get your wife's name on tape? Go ahead and get that stated. Her maiden name was what?

**Hamilton:** Her name was Elizabeth Helen Hamilton, Helen Henry.

**Brown:** Henry was her maiden name?

**Hamilton:** Maiden name, yeah.

**Brown:** I'm going to ask you for the tape, what was the date of your marriage. We can come back and splice it in later if you don't remember so you don't get in trouble.

**Hamilton:** I got married on 16 of August because her birthday was on the 20th of August.

**Brown:** So it would be '41 I guess.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, something like that.

**Brown:** Is that it for the tape? Okay, so we're going to have to break every hour so he can change the tape.

**Hamilton:** Okay.

**Brown:** Interview with the Chico Hamilton in his house, conducted by Anthony Brown and engineered by Ken Kimery. This is tape two and I just wanted to --

**Hamilton:** Let's refer to my studio.

**Brown:** In his studio, because we're not in East Hampton where his house is. But that's another story and we'll get to that a little later. So I just wanted to go back. As we were talking before we started running the tape again, the whole point that you had focused on brushes early on. Who were you listening to, to get that style, because I can't imagine anybody was teaching you how to play brushes? Or is that wrong?

**Hamilton:** No, I would just listen to everybody. Anybody that played, I listened to them. Just like today, I still listen to anybody.

First of all let me just say this. It's totally impossible for two drummers to play alike physically because of the physical aspect. You have long arms, I've got short arms. You've got long legs, I've got short legs. And so you sit at a different height or position, you know, and there's something that you can do that I can't do, and there's something I can do that you can't do, you know. I found this out.

So as a matter of fact, this is I suppose -- as much as I was fascinated with Jo Jones and his playing, I could never play like Jo Jones. You know, I could never be a Jo Jones. I knew that.

Speaking of Jo Jones, man, we were together a whole lot but I got a lesson from him. Every time we were together I'd get a lesson, but we never talked drums. Never talked about drums but I got a lesson from him.

**Brown:** So you got life lessons.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So like what life lessons since we can't talk about drum lessons?

**Hamilton:** Well, he taught me how to become a professional musician. He taught me how to become a man, a dude, and he taught me how to respect myself. He did. And these are the things that unfortunately a lot of young players today have no idea about, you know?

And I've always been -- I've been very fortunate, man. I've always worked. I've never had really -- I always got a gig. As a matter of fact, man, when I was --more or less put it like this.

After I came out of the service, I went back to LA. In the meantime I go back to LA and this is 1945, and the world of music has completely changed, man, completely. Be-bop scene was on the scene. Everybody was out there, from Miles, Diz, Bird, Errol Garner, you name it, Lucky Thompson, everybody, was out in LA and Central Avenue, you know, during that period when I got out of the service.

And I come out man, I had a wife and two children and I enrolled in school, LA Conservatory of Music, right, and I'm in school and I get a gig. I'm playing on a gig, I think it's paying me around \$88 a week, which is a lot of money, you know, which was cool. I'm making this gig, right.

Oh, when I first come out, there's a band by the name of Floyd Ray. Floyd Ray has a band and in that band is two brothers, two twins, one plays bass and one plays trumpet, Addison and Art, the Farmer brothers, right, and the piano player was Hampton Hawes and Jody Williams, a (unintelligible) player.

Anyway Floyd had a 15 piece band and it was cool because it was on the semi Luncelford kick, which I was cool with that. And we played, we did gigs around LA every now and then and we did mostly for shows.

So I then got a gig, got this gig paying around \$88. And I'm in school. And one morning the doorbell rings in my house. I'm living with my in-laws on 32nd Street and the doorbell rings and I go to the door, open the door, maybe seven or eight o'clock in the morning right, and it turns out it's Jo Jones.

So he said Youngblood, come on and go with me. So we go down. So Basie's in town and they're going to play the Lincoln Theater. They're opening the Lincoln Theater downtown, which is on Central Avenue.

So I go up and catch the first set, right. So I'm standing there in the wings and Cole and Atkins, the Barry Brothers, Jimmy Rushing, Helen Humes, and Pot, Pan, and Skillet, that was the show. That was the show.

And I'm standing there in the wings, right, caught the show. Jo comes in the wings where I am and he takes his sticks and he puts them in my hand. He says, you got it. I got it? And he leaves.



Well about 15 minutes before the next show, Basie's all upset, everybody's really shook up so they sent for Jesse Price. Remember Jesse? So Freddie Green tells Basie, he says essentially the kid -- if Jo said the kid can do it, let him do it -- because they knew Jesse. And I went on and did the show. I played the shit out of the show, man, and there was not one stitch of drum music but I knew everything, I knew every chart, I knew every solo everybody played on that band.

I could sing all their solos, you know, (musical sounds), and me and Sweets became real tight and as a matter of fact, Sweets really hit me up on how to play to catch the licks, you know, play the first trumpet player's first trumpet part as opposed to the regular drum part chart, you know. At least you get where the hits are, you know.

And man, I stayed on the band maybe a couple of months and man, we went all the way up to Seattle, all up and down the coast right, and Eleanor had just left the band. Paul Gonzalves was playing on the band at that time, and did you know Paul Gonzalves was a hell of a guitar player?

**Brown:** I think his father played bass.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Anyway we come back and we have a rehearsal at the Club Alabam and Jimmy Mundy brings in some new charts, right. Man, I read those things like they was going out -- a lot of the cats in the band were scuffling and everything. Man, I just -- things like Queer Street, you know, all those -- I played all those charts, man. But anyway it was cool.

I stayed on the band a couple of months and Jo came back and I was cool. In the meantime, I'm working around LA now gigging, you know, just playing -- I become house drummer for Billy Berg, you dig? And I'm playing for everybody, you know, that type of thing.

**Brown:** Who else was in the band?

**Hamilton:** Where?

**Brown:** In Billy Berg's. You were the house band right?

**Hamilton:** I was the house band. Every now and then -- the rhythm section -- you know, every time somebody came in, that's how I played for Lady, (unintelligible). In the meantime I get a call one afternoon and they said, would you make an audition for Lena Horne. I didn't even know who Lena Horne was, man.

**Brown:** Being in the army you didn't know who Lena was?

**Hamilton:** No, I didn't know.

**Brown:** She was the poster girl.

**Hamilton:** Well first of all let me explain something. I've been surrounded by beautiful women all my life. My mother was a gorgeous looking woman. I was married to a gorgeous looking woman.

**Brown:** Still am.

**Hamilton:** My sister was a gorgeous looking woman, you know. You dig? Anyway to make a long story short, I get this call and I said yeah, I'll make it. So the next thing I know, I hang up the phone and my phone rings again and it's Charlie Drayton, the bass player. Charlie can't drive so he said, did you get a call from Luther Henderson? I said yeah. He said are you going?

So we set it up. So I pick up Charlie the next day, we go out there and there's a gate at the house, everything. Knock on whatever, and here's this really dap, sharp looking dude man, black dude comes, very polished, very smooth, very -- you know, looked -- intelligent type of thing. And he introduced himself. It was Luther Henderson.

So we come on in, right, and so we go into the house and we go into this room where the piano is and I set my drums up. Charlie takes his bass out and everything and Luther starts passing out some music.

In the meantime there's a little guy, little white guy with painting clothes on. You know, he's a painter, cap, white jeans, whatever, and a paint can. He was walking around like that. Every now and then he'd stop, cock his ear in the doorway, you know, listening to what we were doing.

So this went -- we rehearsed about six or seven hours. Came back the next day, same thing. This went on for a whole week, man, almost ten days. And all of a sudden this little guy painting -- still listening.

So maybe about the ninth or tenth day Lena's manager comes in and he introduced himself to us and says we're going to Vancouver. We would like for you to go with us, would you be interested? So, yeah, you know, sure. So he tells me how much they would pay me, paid me \$125 a week and I'd have to pick up my own room, board, you know, things like that. But \$125 a week, in 1947 man, was good loot right. So I said sure, I'll go. So I go get me a tuxedo. Charlie's on the group, right.

So the next rehearsal all of a sudden man, here's Lena Horne. We meet and this little guy turned out to be Lenny Hayton.

**Brown:** Her husband.

**Hamilton:** Her husband. Man, my life turned completely around. Being a street urchin, I was introduced for the first time to show biz, which I knew nothing about on that level, on that scale, you know. And my whole life turned around, man. And I was with her for eight years.

Her husband & Luther -- and then he taught me how to play chess, taught me how to eat lobster, taught me how to drink cognac, all that, you know. It was dynamite, man. All of a sudden man, it was like I was on a first name basis with everybody from Frank Sinatra to Duke to -- you know, all the guys, everybody. And they dug me, I had their respect, you know. And I was cool.

As a matter of fact at that time man, it was in my smoking days, and Lenny told her -- oh, who is the singer that (Unintelligible) married, the dancer, singer? She was a comedian. Anyway she was the one that turned me on later -- on to me.

She said I know -- her and Lena were good friends and she says I know a little drummer that plays his ass off but he gets high so -- but in the meantime Lenny told her, as long as that was cool, that was cool.

And I only missed one gig man, in eight years and it wasn't my fault. We got caught up in the traffic going out to the racetrack and couldn't make it. It's the only time I ever missed a gig in eight years. But anyway that's how I got that gig.

And brushes, there's plenty of brushes, right. And working with Lena, swinging for Lena man, was very unusual because the way we set up -- no other singer set up like that. If Lena was here, I was right behind her on the floor with her and then the band was behind me, you dig?

And I never did see her from the front. I saw her from the front one time and that was when we played Madison Square Garden. I was down in the pit and I saw her for the first time and I told her, I said, goddamn you're good looking.

I had no idea, but man, I could tell you, man the way she would use her keester and move her neck, I could tell every move she was going to make just by watching you know, and she was the most unpredictable singer that -- out of all the singers that I played for.

Ella was a piece of cake. Incidentally man, I made my first record with Ella, with (Unintelligible)(Slim?) and Slam . That was way back in --

**Brown:** How did that come about?

**Hamilton:** Well I was playing with Slam Stewart, Slim Gaillard in my freelance days, you know, but Ella -- I could phone my play in. If Ella said (musical sounds) at the end of the eighth bar, she's going to do that every time so you know what it is, you know what I mean?

Lena, you never knew what the hell she was going to do next, you know, what was she going to do. And she never sang anything in the same tempo twice. She could case a room man. She could case a room and she knew whether or not it should pick it up or slow it down or both, you know. She was something else.

**Brown:** Did you work in a large orchestra format or just the trio format?

**Hamilton:** Large orchestra, always a large orchestra, but a trio, mainly the trio, she kept Charlie Drayton, and myself, and Luther.

**Brown:** How was it to work with Luther?

**Hamilton:** (Unintelligible)?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** Dynamite, man. Luther was a gentleman, really one beautiful dude, man.

**Brown:** Did you learn anything about arranging and composition from him?

**Hamilton:** From he and Lenny both. They were both musical geniuses. Luther did a lot of stuff for Duke, which Duke took the credit for. Duke was (unintelligible), but anyway he was good. As a matter of fact I just -- Jim Hall's daughter, Devra, she's going to interview me on Wednesday and she's doing a book on Luther. Do you know Devra?

**Brown:** No, but I knew Luther. I interviewed Luther for the Oral History.

**Hamilton:** Oh, okay. Yeah, Luther too.

**Brown:** Did you want to say something about Devra?

MR. KIMERY: I know Devra (unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** Yeah, yeah. That was a shock. I mean that was a shock. That was a surprise, man. Devrea, goddamn. I saw them out in LA -- I mean Long Beach, right. Yeah, they were there.

MR. KIMERY: (Unintelligible).

**Brown:** Well let's go back to that first recording sessions. Were you nervous? Whenever a musician makes their first recording it's usually pretty memorable.

**Hamilton:** My first recording?

**Brown:** Uh-huh, when you recorded with --

**Hamilton:** George (Unintelligible) and Paul Robbins, where?

**Brown:** Well you tell me what. According to the official record, your first record was done with Slim.

**Hamilton:** Under my name or --

**Brown:** No, no, as a side man, Slim Gaillard.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, with Slim.

**Brown:** That was even before you went in the military, correct?

**Hamilton:** I've never been nervous. I've never been nervous when I've got to play. That's what I do. Ain't nothing to get nervous about, you know.

**Brown:** Were you excited about making your first recording?

**Hamilton:** I guess I was. You know, I don't intend to sound so blasé about it but, you know, it's like -- I'm a strange dude, man. I mean I'm a funny kind of dude. I mean it has nothing to do with ego. It's just this is what I do, you know, and I've been blessed man, because I'm able to do it my way. I'm still doing it, you know what I mean?

**Brown:** Definitely. So we were talking about Lena and the experience with Lena. I had asked you about --

**Hamilton:** It was a tremendous experience man, because it took me -- all of sudden man, you're in the top echelon of show biz and it's a different world out there. A lot of money, you know.

I would say the only things I sort of -- we'd go from -- the places we would play, I would always stay -- I'd have to stay downtown. I never stayed on the reservation, you know, so I didn't get an opportunity to see too many black people, you know, in all these cities, right. And I remember being in Chicago. We were at the Chez Paris and I looked out and there was -- unbelievable, man. There was a black couple sitting at the Chez Paris, so after the show man, I made it a point to go out and say hello to them.

So I went out there man, and this dude thought I was trying to hit on his old lady, but I was just -- it was amazing to see them because black people didn't go there, you know. I didn't get a chance to go on any of the reservations. And the same thing when Sweet Pee was with us, you know, we became good friends. After Luther and Gerry Wiggins, I got him on the gig. George the Be-Be,(?) I got him on the gig. All of a sudden man I got -- and I ended up being the head of the group.

**Brown:** So seniority huh?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. And a lot of things happened to me during that period. As you know, Lena and Lenny was a mixed marriage, right, and her manager was white so there were times man when neither one of them could go with Lena to various places, you know, for either appearances or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

And as it was for quite a while there, I was the only black dude in her entourage, right. So I would have to go with Lena and doing so man, they put all this money in my hand, in my pockets -- and kept everything.

And the next thing you know, man, I began to get a reputation as a mac, you know, which I don't know whether Lena -- the man or a woman, or what, but man the reputation, you know people would see me with Lena man, you know, chipping heavy and everything, doing it right. And I was sharp, always stayed sharp.

I was hanging out with Joe Louis and all these -- you know, just all the big wheels, you know, and man my reputation, all of a sudden I began to get a reputation, right. Man, when I left Lena I was still doing that same stuff, but I was spending my money, man. So hey, no I can't afford this. Man, it was funny, but anyway it was good times, good times were had by all, man.

**Brown:** So you had a good rapport with Lena?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, we're still friends. I don't see her, but she was cool. She had her good days and bad days like all them singers, you know.

So I'd advise any young player to go play for a singer, lady singer. Don't pick up her bag to help out. Don't pick up because man, that's what you'll be doing, which is cool. And man I played for, you know, Lady. Lady and I, That Lady Sings the Blues at Carnegie Hall.

But the heaviest time I ever laid man was when we played – Hamp, Wardell, and myself, and Curtis Counce, at the 331 Club in LA. Is that the name of it, 331?

**Brown:** You tell me. I guess we'll check it out. We'll double-check that.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. We played for Lady there, which was dynamite.

**Brown:** How was she to get along with?

**Hamilton:** well the Lady was cool, man. You know, she was cool, man. I felt sorry for her though man, because she had her luck with men. She had some crunchy men, man. She got all the bad dudes, man, bad dudes. You know, take advantage of her, you know.

But we got along good. We got along. You know, that's the only thing you can do, you know, when you play for a lady singer. As long as you keep that distance it was cool, you know. Otherwise man it becomes a drag.

Unfortunately man, at that period man, during that period I was making good dough and that's why I was there, you know that type of thing.

The year, what was it, '50, I guess it was '50, '51, whatever year that was, I decided I wouldn't go to Europe. Oh, first time I went to Europe with Lena, the French press made a mistake. They said Lena had a French drummer but we had a French bass player, Monsieur Pierre Michelot.

And they thought -- so subsequently man, everywhere we went man in Europe I got a bad time. In Paris, they thought I was Martinique and they hate them. In Belgium they thought I was from the Congo, they hate them. In England they thought I was Indian, they hate --

**Brown:** You were hated for all the wrong reasons.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man. I used to have to wear my passport. At first it was funny but after a while it got to be a drag.

**Brown:** You said they hated you. They were so open as far as their hostility?

**Hamilton:** Their hostility towards those people. You know, they were their subjects, Belgian Congo.

**Brown:** Imperial colonials, you know.

**Hamilton:** And you want to know something, I looked like all of them.

**Brown:** Uh-huh, that will do it. As do I, we look the same.

**Hamilton:** I look like I could be any one of them and it was --

**Brown:** It was rough.

**Hamilton:** Rough, because especially to be over there in 1950 and not being in uniform because they had the select duty over there -- was in uniform, you know. You know, dap street clothes but anyway that's --

**Brown:** So what year did you go over with her that first time?

**Hamilton:** The first time?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** It must have been '50.

**Brown:** How long were you over there?

**Hamilton:** If I knew. I guess we were over there four or five months, something like that. And we sailed, we sailed on the --

**Brown:** When you got there, you traveled by train?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, here we traveled by train. I had my own compartment. It was first class all the way, first cabin all the way, which was cool. I guess later on, '55 or '54, or whenever that was, I decided I didn't want to go back to Europe so I stayed in LA and I started working with Charlie Barnet's band and every night we were on the strip somewhere. Gerry Mulligan came into town and he was flat on his ass and he used to come in and hang out at the bar because he did some charts for Charlie at one time, you know. And we became



friends. We hooked up and I would take him home to my house and Helen would make dinner, you know. We got to be pretty friendly.

So as a matter of fact, he told me, he said if I was Charlie Barnet I'd fire your ass. He didn't like the way I was playing with Charlie but I was doing a whole lot by that time, right. Oh, I've got to tell you this. This was after I left Lena. Oh, before I went with Lena, I was with Floyd Ray's band and we went up to Oakland to play the T&D Theater and there was a show called Sugar Chile Robinson. I don't know whether or not you remember him but he was a little midget. He wasn't a midget, but he was eight-year old kid who played boogie-woogie on the piano and we accompanied -- the band.

Floyd had a big 15-piece band, right. Mingus was on the band. Buddy, myself, and who else -- well anyway to make a long story short, while we were there playing -- oh, Will Masten Trio, Sammy Davis Jr., right -- and the Masten trio.

And man they just loved the way I played for them, right. Well man, when we were up there that week we heard that Billy Eckstine was coming to town, the band was coming to town, so that Saturday night we all went to hear Billy's band, right. That's when he had Jug, Dexter, and Art Blakey.

Well man let me tell you, that turned me completely around. Art Blakely turned me -- he messed me up, man. I had never heard anybody play that way, man, because I was still (musical sounds) right, but man I never heard nobody drop and bump, kicking (musical sounds) and keeping that time going up here. You know, (musical sounds). Man I couldn't believe it, you know. I never heard -- he turned me completely around, man. It was unbelievable.

So the next morning, go to the show, we've got what an eleven o'clock show, first show, something like that, first set, first show and I'm playing for the Will Masten Trio and I'm keeping time right.

All of a sudden I decided I was going to try to drop a bomb, I said (sound). Man oh man, Will Masten stopped. He looked up at me saying, what are you doing? Man, after the show he said, young man come here. Come here young man. Come in my -- I want to talk to you. What are you doing? He said you've been so good for us. What are you doing? But Art Blakely turned me completely around man. Oh, man.

**Brown:** Did you go talk to him?

**Hamilton:** Art?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Did you go back and say man, what are you doing?

**Hamilton:** No, I just -- you know, how are you doing man? And then later on man, we became very close. We were good friends but man he turned me completely around. And he knew he did it.

Man, it was like -- here again man, I ended up -- I only play me. I don't know anybody else that plays like I do, whether it's bad, or good, or indifferent. When I'm playing I'm doing the best I can. It might sound terrible, but I'm doing the best I can, you dig? Which is the way I like it, you know.

But anyway that's what started it, and the year that I didn't go to -- at the year for Lena, that's when Gerry and I hooked up and we had the first rehearsal for the quartet with Chet Baker, Bob Whitlock and myself in my living room right there on 6th Avenue.

**Brown:** Okay, so you've now moved to New York. No, you're still in LA.

**Hamilton:** I'm still in LA.

**Brown:** Okay, all right.

**Hamilton:** I left Lena there. My mother became ill and I decided to come home, and as it was she lingered about seven or eight months before she passed. But when I left Lena I came back to LA and I was going to get a trio together. I was going to get Gerry Wiggins, but all these guys, man they had their own thing going so that just 86'd that. So I got myself together and got started with Jim Hall.

**Brown:** Now we're really getting into the -- we're going to stop. So, you know, during the break I just wanted to, or now that we're off break I wanted to come back and fill in a few more of the chronological gaps.

One of the biographies mentions when you got out of the military, that you actually joined Jimmy Mundy and then got stranded in Salt Lake City.

**Hamilton:** That's right.

**Brown:** So is that a story you want to fill in some gaps first? It says here it was 1946.

**Hamilton:** Okay. After playing with -- who did I say I did the show with? Floyd Ray's band -- it was Jimmy Mundy?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Jimmy Mundy organized a band and I got a call from him and he wanted me - - and I joined his band and the show was the 4 Step Brothers. They were the headliners and singers, and, you know, the whole package, and our first gig was in Salt Lake City.

**Brown:** First gig.

**Hamilton:** The first gig with the band. And the money ran out so we got stranded there, man.

**Brown:** In Salt Lake City.

**Hamilton:** Salt Lake City, and if you've ever been black in Salt Lake City --

**Brown:** You won't go back.

**Hamilton:** Especially during the '40s, '46s -- what was that in, '46?

**Brown:** '46.

**Hamilton:** In '46, man --

**Brown:** It could be 2006. I don't think it's going to make any difference.

**Hamilton:** Man, let me tell you, at that time man, those people -- their religion said the reason we were black is because we sinned. That was God's curse on us.

**Brown:** The mark of Cain.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. So anyway we went -- there was seven of us. Everybody left, but there was seven of us left, me, Hawk, the tenor player, the piano player. In other words we had a group, and we laid around there for three or four days and somebody came up with a gig.

There was a place outside of Salt Lake, outside of whatever it was, but it had to be -- it was a black club strangely enough but it wasn't in the town, I mean, you know, in the city, and the guy hired us to play there.

And I went two days without eating man, and I found a nickel.

**Brown:** The money ran out so you didn't have any money.

**Hamilton:** I didn't have any -- none of us had any money.

**Brown:** None of you had money.

**Hamilton:** None of us had any money, man. And I found a nickel -- this is the truth man, I found a nickel on the ground and I bought an ice cream sandwich. So we made this gig man, and this dude -- Hawk the piano player asked to do -- you know, after gig was over he said man, we want our booze, right. This dude said your booze? Hawk said yeah. So he pulls out his gun, he pulls out his Roscoe man. He pulls out his gun and he says, I'm going to (unintelligible) you.

So man, finally I called my sister and she sent me some money, train fare -- bus fare rather, and here it is me and all these drums. You know, I had cases -- I made my way back to LA. That was an experience.

**Brown:** Okay, so that's why that's in there. And now we know the rest of the story.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Okay, the other one is, and this is one that Ken emphasized for me, and that was your meeting with Herb Jeffries and how you ended up working with the Ellington band.

**Hamilton:** Well we were at the movies, my wife and I.

**Brown:** And what year was this? So you were already married.

**Hamilton:** No, we weren't even married. We weren't married. One of the rare times I took her on a date, took her to the -- we went to the theater, went to see a movie and on the way home, I got to her house, her mother came out on the front porch, she said Forest, there's a gentleman here waiting for you, to see you, to talk to you. And just then Herb Jeffries got out of the car, came up on the porch. He says Sonny had an accident. They want you to play, come out and play in the band.

**Brown:** Herb Jeffries is waiting out in the car, waiting for you to come back so he can tell you to come sub for Sonny Greer. Herb Jeffries.

**Hamilton:** Herb Jeffries.

**Brown:** So you had a reputation.

**Hamilton:** I went out there. It was at Casa Manana out in Culver City. Man, we got out there, went through the back stage door. Man, the band was popping and man all of a sudden my mouth failed me because I know damn well they had a drummer up there because the band was swinging so hard, right. Got in there and he told me, climb on up there. That's when Sonny sat up on the pyramid, you know.

**Brown:** It's the Empire --

**Hamilton:** Empire. I got up there man, and started sweeping and Jimmy Blanton was down in front, looked up at me and said yeah, you know. And that's when everybody was on the band, Tricky Sam, Johnny -- you know all them guys. That was it. I stayed there -- oh, I must have played about a couple, two or three weeks until Sonny got well.

**Brown:** I know you weren't nervous. You already told me you don't get nervous.

**Hamilton:** I wasn't nervous. I was just, you know, a little excited maybe but I wasn't nervous because I knew everything that we're doing.

**Brown:** And Sonny didn't have a band book because it was on charts so you didn't have to worry about that.

**Hamilton:** It was on charts. So it was cool.

**Brown:** And you got to meet Duke. What did he say to you? You've got to remember what Duke said to you when you first met him.

**Hamilton:** Hold it a minute will you?

**Brown:** He's going to get the verbatim transcription.

**Hamilton:** Duke Ellington was unbelievable man. As a matter of fact, he had a way with words that was really unbelievable man. If you wanted to say no, Duke made you say yes. If you wanted to say yes, Duke made you say no. Man, he had that extra sense of perception going, unbelievable. He was a master. He was something.

Man I never will forget the first time that Duke, Lenny, Lena, and Sweet Pea, we were all in the same room and man you talk about a conversation. It was unbelievable. Just unbelievable man, and I'm sitting there just taking it all in, you know. Every now and then I'd say something just -- but these people were unbelievable, unbelievable.

Their vocabularies were -- well Lena read a lot. She was an avid reader and Lenny was a very intelligent man. You know, to have all four of them in the same room at the same time was unbelievable. Tremendous experience. Tremendous experience.

**Brown:** Do you remember any of the subjects that were --

**Hamilton:** We'd talk about everything, everything. Nobody was sacred. We talked about everything and everybody.

You know, Duke was unbelievable. Have you ever heard about anybody sending out Christmas cards in July? Duke did it, you know. He was original. He was an original man. A little bit of Duke rubs off on you in some shape, form, or fashion. It rubbed off on Luther. It rubbed on me. It rubbed off on Sweat Pea, you know, it was -- you dig?

**Brown:** Uh-huh. What was Sweat Pea like?

**Hamilton:** Sweat Pea was dynamite.

**Brown:** Billy Strayhorn?

**Hamilton:** Billy Strayhorn, Billy was -- he was a wonderful, beautiful human being, man, and he was -- we became very good friends. I knew he was gay but he never laid a hand on me, you know, that type of thing. We just became good friends. Matter of fact I just recorded Something To Live For, you know, and Sweet Pea -- he was Sweat Pea and everybody loved him, man. He was dynamite, sharp, cool, intelligent and a cognac drinker and he liked martinis.

He used to carry his little compact martini kit, make up. And Lenny Hayden used to make the best martinis. He used to take a bottle of Vermouth and a bottle of Vodka and set them side-by-side. He let them stay them about an hour, then he'd take the Vodka and just pour it in. Oh, man, he was something. We had a good time, good time. But Sweet Pea was -- he was Duke's alter ego really in a sense I'd say.

**Brown:** And you got to watch them interact so can you characterize what that might have been like, like conversation or --

**Hamilton:** Say like Duke would be in California and Sweet Pea would be here in New York and they're working -- say like they're working on the same tune, they ended up writing the same things, note for note without even talking to each other. That's heavy, man.

**Brown:** Yeah, they definitely hooked up.

**Hamilton:** That's heavy, that was heavy, you know. Sweet Pea was something else. Sweet Pea and Lu-two, Duke, Lena, Lenny, that was my world. You know, my whole world changed around.

All of a sudden, you know, I was meeting people on a first name basis, you know. I just saw last night on TV Sheree North who just passed away, right. I used to keep time for her man, her and Marilyn Monroe when they were starlets at the Paramount Studios. I was the rehearsal drummer, me, and Calvin, and Daily Brooks during that period.

And I used to work for Bob Hope, he and his brother, Jack Hope. I used to have to go -- I used to make these -- every time they'd do a benefit or something I had to go play for them, right, keep time for them and man, there was a period when you flew from LA to San Diego, which was the roughest piece of air in the whole continental limits of the United States. Man, you just danced all over the sky, man.

You know, unfortunately it was never a big plane, you know, never -- speaking of that man, we did a -- well this is later when I had my first group, the quintet, the original quintet. We were on a tour with a show called Jazz for Moderns that was sponsored by -- what the hell's his name. He used to own Birdland.

**Brown:** Ross Russell?

**Hamilton:** No. What the hell's his name? Anyway the show was called Jazz for Moderns, right, and on that show, man, was my group, Dave Brubeck, his group, Maynard Ferguson's dream band, and Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, right, and Gerry Milligan. No, Dave Brubeck. That was the package and we were in Michigan and had to fly. They had this private plane. It was an old B-25.

**Brown:** Props.

**Hamilton:** Prop job. Man, it was snowing so bad that the pilot hadn't flown in the states in years and the stewardess, she was pregnant. She got knocked up by the pilot. And the snow -- ice running up and down the runway, right, so finally they got enough snow off of it and, you know we had to get on the plane, right.

We got on the plane, man. I think we got to Texas, some place in Texas and man we're flying and all of a sudden man, the plane does this, just drops and I had a cup of coffee, the coffee went all up in the air. And man it shook me up so, man I didn't believe it, right.

So I went up forward, you know, to see the pilot, to ask him what the hell, you know, was going on, and there was Joe Morello sitting at the controls and he's blind as a bat man.

**Brown:** Oh, Lord.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man. That's the truth, man. He's sitting at the controls. Oh, we were on our way to St. Louis and it was a --

**Brown:** I lean back and I thought maybe I --

**Hamilton:** My wife just did that, just broke that. She's cool. That's priceless, man.

**Brown:** That's a famous picture.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, that's original. I got the original.

**Brown:** I'll come back here later. Me and my boys are coming back here later.

**Hamilton:** I got a lot of good stuff in here, man. Anyway, man, St Louis, right.

**Brown:** So you made it.

**Hamilton:** We made it. So we get to St Louis man. Miles said, I want Chico to go in there. I want you to meet my father. So we go to East St. Louis, right, get over there man, and the barn burned down. Miles said what is wrong with you letting the --

**Brown:** He's talking to who?

**Hamilton:** His father.

**Brown:** He's talking to his father like that?

**Hamilton:** Man, let me tell you man -- anyway to make a long story short, we played the small room in wherever that stadium is and Elvis Presley played the large room and that's where I met him, you know.

Anyway to make a long story short, we leave there and we're working our way back up north. And this is not for the record. You can cut it out. But every place we went man, Jon Hendricks had a baby. Every place we went man, this dude had a child.

Man, we get to Detroit. I go on, I do my act, my thing, right, and at that time the manager I had messed up. He hit an usher wherever we played and the guy sued me. Sued me, didn't



sue my manager. Sued me and kept me out of Detroit for years, man. There's an old servitude law, the master is responsible for the servant. That's what they got me on. So anyway to make a long story short,  
Detroit --

**Brown:** The free (unintelligible). Okay, anyway.

**Hamilton:** The prosecutor was a black dude, I forget his name, but anyway years later he hung out with me and he said, Chico, if I had known you were this cool, I wouldn't have pushed it like -- but anyway to make a long story short, I do my thing.

I'm coming off and all of a sudden the promoter runs up to me and says, Chico, you've got to help me out. I said what's that? He said, man, they just arrested Jon. A cop came and got Jon, and they're going on next, right, -- for non-support. So man, Lambert, Ross, and Hamilton.

**Brown:** This is your singing debut?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. And all of a sudden, you know, -- well I knew all the licks. All they were doing was singing Basie's charts at that time, (musical sounds), which, you know, I knew. But I sang --

**Brown:** Lambert, Ross, and Hamilton.

**Hamilton:** And Hamilton. Next time you see -- isn't he supposed to be here at this thing?

**Brown:** Isn't Chico supposed to be on the gig?

**Hamilton:** No, isn't he getting an award?

**Brown:** Jon Hendricks? He's gotten it.

**Hamilton:** No, I think he's one of the --

MR. KIMERY: Wasn't he a (Unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Like you?

**Hamilton:** This year?

**Brown:** He received it.

MR. KIMERY: He's already received it.

**Brown:** He might be getting another award. I know he got an award -- he got a Grammy award. He got a Lifetime Achievement last year. He did and Benny Golson and Horace. Well anyway, so the next time I see him what?

**Hamilton:** Tell him I met Chico (unintelligible).

**Brown:** Are we good on tape? We're going to end on that one, okay

**Brown:** Chico Hamilton, Foreststorn Chico Hamilton, and we are about to continue in his life discussing the fifties.

Again I was referencing a biography where it was mentioned that in early '52, you are a member of Gerry Mulligan's original pianoless quartet. So let's talk about your relationship with Gerry Mulligan. You talked earlier in this interview about basically kind of helping Gerry when times were rough for him.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And so that I believe is the beginning of that friendship. You were working with Charlie Barnet. You said that he would come in and hang out at the bar. So here now it's about five or six years later and now the biography entry lists you as a member of his quartet. So if you would like to talk about how that relationship with Gerry kind of evolved over time.

**Hamilton:** Well, as I found out later, Gerry had been looking -- you know, decided to form a group and by the time he told me about it he had already decided -- he had talked with Chet Baker already and he already had Bob Whitlock, and so it was just a question of me and me being available. You know, I said sure.

So we had to have a place to rehearse so we started right there in my living room on 6th Avenue and from the first thing we started playing it happened. And here again man, to make a long story short, we just happened to be four guys at the right place at the right time. That's the only -- this is what I feel, this is what I think. Probably other people would say well, we did blah, blah, blah, we did this, we did that but man, it just happened to be at the right time.

You're a musician, you understand what I'm saying in regards to when it's happening, it's happening. If it ain't happening, it ain't happening, you know, so you don't waste words or time or whatever, you know. If it ain't happening, it ain't happening. Regardless of how much you might put into it, if it's not meant to be it's just not meant to be and it takes a hell of a long time to be able to make that kind of decision.

**Brown:** So the emphasis as far as the historical perspective shouldn't be placed on the fact that this is a pianoless quartet. You're saying it's really, these four individuals, these four artists came together and that's what formed the concept of the group.

**Hamilton:** Right, because it was nothing new in a sense about not playing with a piano. I jammed a lot of times whatever, you know, with guys, when we didn't have no piano player, that type of thing. But it wasn't done in the format like Gerry came up with. Gerry had a completion. Well he came up with the format for the simple reason that not only as a player, he was an arranger and an orchestrator, which is one of the things I stress in my classes, teaching my ensemble class is that we've got 12 tones to play with, 12. Don't limit yourself just with a chord, the whole scale, you know, the whole scale. There's no such thing as a bad note.

When you go into that 12 tone system, you know, think in terms -- that's what you think in terms of. There's no limit, you know. That's the reason dudes who limit themselves, you know, who are very chordal conscious become very limited, you know.

Plus the fact man, there's no such thing as new music because somewhere at some time somebody has played that note, has played that same C chord, C, E, G, B natural, have played that over and over again all over the world. They may not know it was C, E, G, B but that sound is there.

The only possibly different thing that it can be is the rhythmic aspect of the articulation. That's the only thing that can be different, and also the fact that they were virtually in a sense only two things virtually played on the rhythm, played rhythmically and everything is a derivative of, and the one thing is (musical sounds).

The other thing is (musical sounds). That's it. Everything derives from that, those two licks. You dig? So until somebody invents or creates an instrument that plays a quarter, of a quarter, of a quarter, of a quarter, (unintelligible), you know, everything is still the same, man. So when people talk about the new music, that's crazy, man.

**Brown:** Okay, well then let's talk about -- we read earlier a passage from your forthcoming autobiography about how you conceive of jazz. So most knowledgeable people about this music, when they hear Chico Hamilton, what they think of is your groundbreaking quintet.

Let's talk about why is it that you're forming a group at this point that has this particular combination of instruments. I think that that's something that historians would love for you to be able to express.

**Hamilton:** In all honesty that happened just by sheer accident. How I come about with the original quintet is that at first I wanted to get Gerry Wiggins, get a piano trio, but all the piano players that I liked, man, they had their own thing going so I decided to try something else.

So I don't know how I got in contact with Jim Hall. As a matter of fact how I come about with the original quintet is that at first I wanted to get Gerry Wiggins, get a piano trio, but all the piano players that I liked, man, they had their own thing going so I decided to try something else, Jim Hall wasn't even playing at that time. He was working in a music store and somebody turned me on to him and I contacted him, and then I contacted Carson Smith who would end up, you know, with Gerry and I, and then I had Gross, the French horn player, John Gross, he was a well known French horn at that time. And the first day of rehearsal we were going to have, John had a heart attack and he passed away. So the next day I was going to do a thing with Fred Katz and I forget the singer that he coached. Anyway I just was going to help him out.

Fred for a while toured with Lena, with us, with Lena, so I told Fred, you know, what happened, he says well why don't I bring my cello. So I said well Fred why not? Why don't you bring your cello? I called rehearsal. I already had Buddy. You know, talked with Buddy.

And I had a gig. The gig was in Long Beach, which was about 25 miles before the freeway. Also man, at that time Long Beach was stone cold redneck country.

**Brown:** Navy base.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man, nothing but sailors. The place that we played started -- now it was virtually a whorehouse in a sense, a joint, and it had sawdust on the floor and everything, right.

**Brown:** Sawdust on the floor.

**Hamilton:** Sawdust on the floor, man, and a funky joint. And can you imagine me coming in there, two black dudes, me and Buddy, and all the rest of them were white, right, and coming in there with a cello, and a flute, and a bass, and a drum, and a guitar. And, man,

the gig was supposed to last a week, right, so Harry Rubin was the name -- Harry had a joint that I worked for in LA on Washington Boulevard before he went out there.

But anyway to make a long story short, we went out there. We lasted a week and man, it used to take us at least two to three hours to drive from LA to Long Beach at that time because there was no freeways or no nothing.

And anyway we got out there, man it was -- you were taking a chance every night, especially going home man. You know, you didn't know whether you were going to have to fight your way out of there or not.

But it ended up with one week, two weeks, the next thing you know man, people began to -- you know, all the sailors, they didn't stop coming in but a lot of people started coming in, right, so all of a sudden man, he put in a wire and Sleepy Stein the disc jockey started broadcasting, you know, and man, next thing we know man, people from all over, they were leaving (unintelligible), Howard Rumsey to come see us, you know, things like that -- Shorty Rogers.

They'd come hear our group, you know. Hey man, the place got packed and stayed packed. We were there for about six or seven months as a matter of fact, and one night Art Mardigan was supposed to come out like on a Wednesday and he didn't come out.

And Dick Bock came out and that's when, you know, Dick wanted to record the group because Dick had given me a shot with my trio, with George Duvivier, and that's when I made the trio record, which was the first time a guitar, bass, and drums had recorded as solo instruments as opposed to a rhythm section at that time, and that thing still holds up, man. It's dynamite.

I don't know whether you ever heard it, it's a trio, and George Duvivier was a monster. Hasn't been a bass player like that since and I've had some good bass players, but George was something else. As a matter of fact, you know, I gave Ron Carter his first gig.

**Brown:** His first gig.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. It's strange he never said -- you know, all the stuff you read about Ron Carter, I took him right out -- we graduated from Eastman College, man. I gave him his first gig. He was on the band when Eric Dolphy was on the band, you know. But anyway, let's leave it here. I'll tell you about -- these guys, you know, are making me famous.

**Brown:** Yeah, making you famous. So the original quintet was going to be Jim Hall on guitar, your drums, Carson --

**Hamilton:** Carson Smith on bass and Buddy Colette on reed.

**Brown:** On reed, and a French horn.

**Hamilton:** And a French horn.

**Brown:** Now that would have been really -- wait a minute, how did you hear French horn in this?

**Hamilton:** Well I heard it. I heard the sound. You know, I know what French horns sound like.

**Brown:** French horn and flute or sax.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, right. Plus the fact I knew how this guy played. He could play, he could get a good sound, you know.

**Brown:** So I know when you started recording, you started recording a lot of your own tunes but you had to start somewhere. You didn't start with original material? Did you start doing some --

**Hamilton:** What's that?

**Brown:** The band, the repertoire for the band.

**Hamilton:** We all started with original stuff.

**Brown:** That was it.

**Hamilton:** That was it.

**Brown:** Just figured, we've got an original group, original sound, we're just going for original material.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** No wonder you've made history. (Unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** Okay, so you became a hit because of the radio broadcast initially.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

- Brown:** And you get a recording contract.
- Hamilton:** Right.
- Brown:** You're on Atlantic.
- Hamilton:** No, I'm on Pacific Jazz.
- Brown:** Pacific Jazz. Then Bud came and said (unintelligible).
- Hamilton:** Yeah. (Unintelligible) regretted it too, you know.
- Brown:** Yeah. So now you've got your band. You're documenting -- you already did the trio, now you've got -- and this is a successful band.
- Hamilton:** Got the original quintet.
- Brown:** Are you starting to get national press for this now?
- Hamilton:** Got national press. Not a good press. As a matter of fact, when we came east for the Newport, that was the year that Duke Ellington did --
- Brown:** Oh, yeah, the Diminuendo & Crescendo in Blue.
- Hamilton:** The reason for that -- now this is the truth man, they've got it at the Library of Congress. They got it, somebody's got it. It's the Library of Congress I think, got the performance. Man we had played -- we left that stage so hot for Duke.
- Brown:** You were right on -- he followed you.
- Hamilton:** He followed us.
- Brown:** Okay. Was Papa Jo in the wings too with you?
- Hamilton:** That was down -- he was sitting down in front, right down in front.
- Brown:** So he was in front for your group too?
- Hamilton:** Yeah, he was sitting -- you know, and man we had left that stage so hot man, and Duke said -- matter of act when we did Blue Sands, a tune that Buddy had wrote and

then put that drum thing underneath there, when we got through you could hear a pin drop and all of a sudden man, people went crazy. It's recorded.

People just -- it was unbelievable man, unbelievable. The response was just, you know -- and I had -- that was about the second time that I had actually got the zen -- I became the drum. It happened to me once before in Long Beach where one night I was playing and man I just got -- all of a sudden I was the drum. Have you ever experienced that feeling? It's unbelievable man.

So this is what happened and then Duke came on and they had to play. After that man -- I also was up in Connecticut for the Symphony. I opened up for Duke. I forget -- the Connecticut 9 ( the Hartford? ) Symphony, anyway to make a long store short, my hot record was Satin Doll at that time and we played it. I made the mistake of playing it.

Duke got so pissed off man, when am I going to hear -- I wasn't thinking, you know. I just -- it was one my things, it was one of my hit records so I just played it and man that really teed him off.

**Brown:** What did he say?

**Hamilton:** You know, what am I going to play? You keep playing all my music. So he went on. Man, he wasn't speaking to me for a while. But anyway it happened. But we had a thing man, there was group -- the success of the group was absolutely fantastic. We virtually started the west coast/east coast -- that thing that started the east coast jazz, west coast.

You know how that came about? It came about because of me and Max Roach. We both played -- when Basin Street opened here the first time, they booked Max and they booked me and so they wanted, you know, for publicity -- so east coast versus west coast. That's how that whole thing began, you know.

And we came east and that's the first time Buddy turned left on me, didn't come, and fortunately I got Jerome, your boy, Jerome filled in for me for that week and man every night was like this. Max -- that's when he had Clifford and --

**Brown:** Richie and George.

**Hamilton:** Richie. We closed on a Sunday night. I was going to Pittsburgh, they were going to Chicago and Richie Powell's wife was driving the car and a truck ran them off of the road, on the turnpike around -- anyway, that's what happened. Ran them off.



**Brown:** So it was when they were leaving that gig?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, leaving that gig, man. Max had already gone, the flute -- you know, was already in Chicago.

And it was just like, man, in Birdland, me and Miles were sharing the bandstand. I'm on the set. I'm playing, right. Miles goes upstairs to take -- what's her name, what's the writer, I can't think of her name. The writer -- all these bad guys.

But anyway, Miles took his old lady upstairs and put her in a cab and this cop comes up there, didn't dig it so he grabbed Miles, you know. Well Miles just moved in on him, you know. Of course that's when he clubbed him all over the head because at that time, man, we were both working out with Sugar Ray Robinson at the gym, man, you know. That's just kind of being a little (unintelligible), you know.

**Brown:** Well those are two historically significant events. You play this gig, a double billing and then one night Richie and Clifford are gone. And that's the time when Miles gets hit by a cop and gets on the front page of a major publication.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So these people helped make you famous again.

**Hamilton:** Short changed, man. You know, I've just been fortunate, man. I've been blessed, that's what I've been. I've been blessed, man, because, you know, I've only had a publicist once. That didn't last too long but anyway, I don't have -- maybe I should be getting one now because --

But the philosophy -- I use Louis Armstrong's philosophy. You convert fans into friends. Fans are fickle but you become friends, man, they'll support you period. Because after Pops chops were gone, everything -- people still came out to see him because man, it's Pops, you dig? And we're cool. So this is what I've done.

**Brown:** Well let's go back to your appearance -- you know, they documented it on Jazz On A Summer's Day up in Newport and you have Eric Dolphy on there. I know you mentioned that you started with Buddy, but when Buddy turned left on you brought Jerome Richardson out.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** But on that film there's Eric Dolphy on stage with you.

**Hamilton:** Eric is on that film. And between that time after Buddy, I think it was Paul Horn, yeah, and after – Paul, Eric.

**Brown:** So how did you come to meet Eric and how did he --

**Hamilton:** Well Eric and my brother and his ex-wife, they all went to school together, you know, LA Junior College. You know, they all went to school together. Also Eric lived in the neighborhood, in the area, you know.

**Brown:** Are you talking about Jefferson High School or are you talking about junior college.

**Hamilton:** No, junior college.

**Brown:** Would they have gone to Los Angeles?

**Hamilton:** LACC.

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, whatever it was. But anyway, when I needed a player -- I think Gerald Wilson told Eric, you know, to give me a call, you know, and right away we hooked up.

**Brown:** Did he come out and audition for you or did he just come in and do a gig?

**Hamilton:** No, he just came out and we started -- came in and started rehearsing, you know, that type of thing, which was cool. And it's funny, not funny, but in a sense -- because Eric Dolphy man, was one of the nicest persons I have ever, ever known. Number one, he was a perfect gentleman and he was total music, total music. We'd be traveling, he'd be sitting back in the backseat of the car, he'd have his horns out. He wouldn't have his mouthpiece going but he'd be fingering his horns. He was totally music all the time, man. And the way he went out man, was really too bad, you know. He was a diabetic and those fools over there thought he had been shooting up, the Germans, right. But Eric was dynamite, man. Beautiful dude.

**Brown:** So he now is a mainstay of the band because there's so many recordings with Eric.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, oh, yeah.

**Brown:** And you start to do his tunes as well.

**Hamilton:** Yep.

**Brown:** How would you describe Eric? I know you described him as a personality. How would you describe him musically? He definitely has his own sound or did he come into it?

**Hamilton:** Well Eric was original, and I can truthfully say just about two thirds of all the guys that come through my groups have been original. Just like Charles Waters (?) had his own sound, Gabor Szabo had his own sound, you know. Albert Stinson had his own sound, you dig? I just -- George just came here and recorded a couple tracks with me, Bohannon, and he had his own sound.

So a lot of guys had a chance to develop, plus the fact I gave them an opportunity to develop their own sound. You know, I never bug anybody about their playing, you know, just the ensemble work. I put (unintelligible) ensemble. I'm not interested in what they do solo wise. You go for yourself. But as long as my ensemble work is happening, which is cool, you dig?

**Brown:** Eric had just what is obvious in his playing, and in his choice of repertoire had a lot of classical training.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, Eric is one of the finest flute players. His sound -- did you ever hear the With Strings Attached album, his first album he did with me?

**Brown:** I don't think I have that one.

**Hamilton:** I'll play it for you before you guys get out of here.

**Brown:** Okay.

**Hamilton:** You wouldn't believe, man. You wouldn't believe it.

**Brown:** So it must have been hard once Eric left. I mean how long was he with the group, because next thing I see is Eric is in New York playing with Trane.

**Hamilton:** Uh-huh. Well he came -- I left him here. I broke the group up.

**Brown:** Why?

**Hamilton:** I broke that group up. I disbanded the cello group. The reason why? I had had it. The sound got to be -- I had had that sound and I had had me. I found myself imitating myself, you know.

In a sense when you can be truthful with yourself, hey what the hell is happening self? But it got to the point man where I was just imitating Chico Hamilton, man, I wasn't being me, you know. So that's when I decided, you know, I had had it. It had run its course, played itself out. Just like -- you know, Miles was the same way in a sense.

**Brown:** Now you went through other personnel changes too.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** Did this help to reinvigorate the sound or did you feel that after a certain point --

**Hamilton:** Well when I broke that sound up, I changed completely. That's when Albert Stinson, Gabor, and myself and George Bohannon, you know, got the (unintelligible) band, which was --

**Brown:** (Unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** You do.

**Brown:** So how did you then conceive of your next band or was this also a happenstance, it just came together as well?

**Hamilton:** Well first of all, I changed up because I wanted to change. I didn't play any of the old music. We started from scratch, you know, getting ideas from each other and things like that and creating moods. As a matter of fact, we actually -- we didn't create any music, we just created moods.

I was doing stuff, you know, stop and start stuff really before Miles and them were doing that kind of stuff. We were playing opposite in San Francisco, he was at one club and I was at the other, which was two doors apart.

**Brown:** Which two clubs were those? Was it the Black Hawk and the Jazz Workshop?

**Hamilton:** It was on the beach, now which one --

- Brown:** You're talking about in San Francisco?
- Hamilton:** Frisco, yeah, in North Beach.
- Brown:** Oh, in North Beach, yeah, yeah, right. So you had the Matador, you had Black Hawk, Jazz Workshop.
- Hamilton:** Yeah, too was at the Jazz Workshop.
- Brown:** The Hungry I.
- Hamilton:** Which was right up the road. Two or three doors down was another club. They were all on the same street.
- Brown:** I think the Matador was up there because I think Black Hawk was down at the Fillmore.
- Hamilton:** Hey man, speaking of that, did you know -- what was her name the --
- Brown:** Mia Angelo?
- Hamilton:** Did you know Mia?
- Brown:** I met her but I didn't know her back then.
- Hamilton:** You didn't know her then.
- Brown:** I heard she was something else. She was a dancer and all kinds of stuff.
- Hamilton:** Hey, man, listen. You know I haven't seen her. I'd like to see her. I really would like to see her again. I haven't seen her since she became famous but man, you talk about hanging out. Remember Pony Poindexter? What was the name, Jimbo's?
- Brown:** Yeah, he's still there.
- Hamilton:** Yeah, man. Those were the days man. Mia lived on a barge.
- Brown:** Yeah, right, right. She called it a houseboat. So that was the scene up there.
- Hamilton:** Oh, man, we were the scene.

**Brown:** So you're at one club and they're at another club.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, and Miles was at the next club. You know, but we were -- well all those records, Foreststorm Records, you know, we were hot. We got hot.

**Brown:** Well let's go back to the quintet. Let's say if Buddy or even if you wrote a piece and you wanted the group to play it, did you write out individual charts? How were the pieces rehearsed, how were they created?

**Hamilton:** I'd write out charts. I make a lead sheet, let's put it like that. That's what I do now. I make a lead sheet and I decide -- I don't know exactly what I want voicing wise so I'll bring it to rehearsal. We play around with it and I decide what instrument I want to use, what kind of sound I hear, who I want to feature on it.

That was the hippest thing about Duke. Duke knew who to give the tune to, to play the melody, and that's why you always identify Duke's music with a certain instrument, you know?

**Brown:** So you were very democratic about it?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** So if it was Buddy's tune, he would lead that rehearsal about his tune -- as a leader?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. Everybody that brought anything in, they suggested how they wanted it played. If it worked it worked, if it didn't work, just do it over. You know, we all just decided hey, well let's do this or let's do that. And here again man, like I said, the only thing that could possibly change anything would be the rhythm.

**Brown:** I'll pull out one of the CDs that I was listening to and there's such a mix when you talk about moods. I think that's a perfect way to describe much of what's going on. The Truth album, you know, there are pieces on here with titles like Little Lost Bear, and Lullaby for Dreamers, I mean --

**Hamilton:** What is this? Where the hell did this come from?

**Brown:** Maybe you better turn off the tape so somebody doesn't get in trouble. It might be a compilation. You know how they go back -- yeah, because that's probably a Prestige recombination.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Somebody put this together man. I don't know anything about that. I've never seen that before.

**Brown:** It's probably a compilation of -- well I don't know. This is the only version I've seen. This one they still sell so that means you're probably not getting anything from it.

Oh, well, okay, so anyway -- but my point was is that on that one CD you're all over the place. You can play Straight Ahead, you've got some very good mood stuff and (Unintelligible).

You have so many different things, so this to me reflects not only an openness on your part as a bandleader to just let folks bring in theirs, but it really demonstrates a breadth, even giving that people would say, oh it's a very unique instrumentation but, you know, you're able to paint using the full pallet.

So was this conceptual, was this premeditated, or just an evolution of the group?

**Hamilton:** Anything that I play you're going to know it's me regardless of whose music it is. I just recorded four of Gerald Wilson's old tunes, Yard Dog Mazurka and things like that, but you're going to know --when you hear it you'll know it's me.

**Brown:** How would you describe what it is that is you on the drums?

**Hamilton:** It's the way that I play. It's the sound that I get. That's the whole bottom line, man, is getting the sound. The only way you can get a sound is by developing a touch.

**Brown:** So is that the same thing as feel, other people say the feel, okay.

**Hamilton:** Develop a touch. And developing a touch you'll get a sound, regardless of what instrument you play on, it doesn't matter. It can be the worse set of drums, tubs in the world, but you get your sound. When you sit down and play they know it's you.

This is what I teach; this is what I stress when, you know, young players come for lessons, things like that, you know. Get your own touch. You know, how many sounds are in a cymbal?

**Brown:** Beaucoup.

**Hamilton:** Uh-huh, uh-huh. I'll show you. You want me -- but we're talking right now.

**Brown:** We'll show it tomorrow. I'll take a microphone over there. You can definitely show it. We'll do it tomorrow though.

**Hamilton:** Matter of fact, I'm kind of talked out a little bit.

**Brown:** You want to go and play? Do you have to set up. I mean we can put it on --

**Hamilton:** No, I just want to go show you something.

**Brown:** Okay, go on.

**Hamilton:** Okay, let's cool it for a minute huh? (Musical sounds). You can swing a 100-piece orchestra. (Musical sounds). That's what you call -- (musical sounds). That's getting a sound. (Musical sounds). You hear that. (Musical sounds).

Young drummer, young players today don't even know about this. They don't know anything about that, right? Even if they were going to play (musical sounds), this is the rhythm. (Musical sounds). The only thing (musical sounds) See, touch. It's a song, dig?

**Brown:** I feel you. Now all these rubber bands, is this for a particular reason?

**Hamilton:** No, I just put them all there to -- do you want to do some brushes?

**Brown:** Do I want to do some brushes? Do you have left handed brushes, (unintelligible)? Listen we're getting close to about four so this is good, this is good. So should we come back the same time tomorrow?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, sure.

**Brown:** Should we pack this up so we get it out of your way or can we just kind of put it off to the side somewhere.

**Hamilton:** You can put it off to the side.

**Brown:** We can put the mics over here? Like right over here in this corner.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Okay, that will be great. That will save us. When we get here tomorrow we won't have to move the set up.

**Brown:** Today is January 10th. This is day two, tape four of the oral history interview with Chico Hamilton at his home on 45th Street in New York City.



The interview is conducted by Anthony Brown, engineered by Ken Kimery and this interview is made possible by the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History program and the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters program.

Good morning, Chico Hamilton.

**Hamilton:** What do you mean morning? It's the middle of the night, right?

**Brown:** Spoken like a true jazz --

**Hamilton:** Grad school, man. The morning is good. Every morning is good.

**Brown:** Yeah, with the ultimate blues, I didn't wake up this morning.

**Hamilton:** Well that's the hippest thing that could happen to you, you know, is to wake up.

**Brown:** So, you know, during the night off, I wouldn't consider it a night off, but the interim time between our sessions, I thought of a few things that we should go back and fill in for the historical record.

First of all the gentleman who was the drummer who worked with you when you were in the army, we did go back and research and found that was William Exner.

**Hamilton:** Billy Exner, yeah.

**Brown:** Yeah, Billy Exner, who went on to play with Tony Bennett. I guess that was his biggest claim to fame but he obviously was a man of big heart to share his talent in time with you.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, first of all man, he was a dynamite dude. I mean I can't say enough accolades, good things about him. But as well as being a fantastic musician, he was fantastic drummer man and he could swing.

And at that time man, the most important thing is -- you know, like from the beginning, if you could swing, if you had a beat, you had that pulse, you get that pulse going, that's all you had to do, you know. And you'd work all the time, you know.

And Billy was fantastic man, plus the fact man, taking the time to climb that mountain, man, to come over there. And we'd meet in the middle of this field with nothing but trees, and snakes, and things like that on the ground, and man he taught me how to read drum music.

He taught me, you know, about the notes, note value, quarter notes, eighth note, sixteenth notes and he showed me what they looked like and from then on man it's dynamite.

**Brown:** Did he show you technique as well?

**Hamilton:** No, I had the technique. I had the technique because I had gotten the technique from Lee Young, you know, as far as stick control. I could already do -- you know, I could play. As a matter of fact I could play exceedingly well but, you know, learning by ear is dynamite, but by the same token, today I would suggest every musician learn how to read music because you never know what you're going to have to do, you know.

**Brown:** Sure, sure. Well let's go back. You know, we talked about your early childhood and what it was like growing up in Los Angeles. A couple of things. You talked about Lee Young. Who were some of the other drummers that were around that you might --

**Hamilton:** There was Oscar Bradley.

**Brown:** Oscar Bradley, okay.

**Hamilton:** Oscar Bradley and Lee Young were the two number one drummers -- oh, Red Alton.

**Brown:** Red Alton, okay.

**Hamilton:** You know his daughter, Avria Redd who plays saxophone?

**Brown:** Vi Redd.

**Hamilton:** Vi Redd, right. Her father was a drummer. He had his own band, group, and Prince, Wesley Prince, I think that was his name, who was the brother of the bass player at that time that was with Nat Cole, with Nat. I can't think of -- the early trio. But anyway those guys were -- they were the number one guys around town at that time, you know.

**Brown:** So you got a chance to see really good drummers.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, very definitely, you know. But I didn't have any kind of rapport with them though or they didn't have any kind of rapport with me because I was -- you know, I was the kid, you know, that type of thing and it just -- coming up that way, the rapport I had was with guys like Jimmy Owens. We used to call Juicy. Hell, I can't even think of him, Bill Douglas.

**Brown:** Oh, okay.

**Hamilton:** As a matter of fact I have a drum that Bill made for me, you know, and there weren't that many drummers on the scene in LA at that time. Young guys, you know. And it was cool. And mainly, you know, like I said I was self-taught, just dug everything I could. You know, I would always try something.

**Brown:** Now you talked about when you were growing up and we were talking even before we began running the tape about how, you know, you basically were poor but it just meant you didn't have -- you weren't materially wealthy in that regard but, you know, there was a real sense of community. Now were you born and raised in the same community? Did you move around at all?

**Hamilton:** I guess we moved often.

**Brown:** You did, okay. So you had different houses but did you stay in the general area?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So you just switched houses?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. We moved because my father, you know, he couldn't pay the rent, you know, things like that.

**Brown:** But he had that steady job?

**Hamilton:** He had the steady job man, but he had six kids.

**Brown:** Okay, enough said.

**Hamilton:** You know? And it was just -- you have to understand something. You know, I'm what they refer to as a Depression baby. The Depression was still on in the, you know, late '20s and early '30s, up to '40.

The Depression was very much on, especially on the west coast because number one, there was industry there. Even the movie industry wasn't established. The shipping, Kaiser and all those people, that stuff happened after the war started, you know. But out there in LA it was just like I said, it was nothing but fields, lots.

**Brown:** When I interviewed Art Farmer, he talked about when he first arrived in Phoenix and he said yeah, well we had wooden planks for sidewalks. It wasn't that bad in LA though.

**Hamilton:** But, you know, it was -- and funny thing though man, there was only one ghetto and the ghetto was Boyle Heights.

**Brown:** Boyle Heights.

**Hamilton:** And the ghetto consisted of -- that's where all the Jews lived and when they became wealthy they're the ones that started establishing Beverly Hills, you know. And there was no such thing as black -- we didn't have reservations.

**Brown:** I like the use of that term reservations.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, we didn't have a reservation because, you know, black people were just scattered all over the place.

**Brown:** But as you said there wasn't really that many.

**Hamilton:** Wasn't that many man, you know.

**Brown:** Yeah. But you weren't concentrating in --

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** So you saw actually the whole South Central development. I mean you were there so you saw the influx of --

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, very much so.

**Brown:** And that probably was during World War II when they started really --

**Hamilton:** No, before World War II.

**Brown:** Before World War II.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So when did you see the major influx of black population into --

**Hamilton:** In LA?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** Well after I came back from the war.

**Brown:** Okay. So well that's my suspicion because the same thing happened in northern California. You saw a lot of recruitment come out from the Gulf states , Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana.

**Hamilton:** People came out there looking for work.

**Brown:** Well they were actually recruiting a lot too.

**Hamilton:** And you know, the place opened up, you know. And they went down south and got all the rednecks to come out there and become cops.

**Brown:** Yeah, well that's what precipitated the Black Panthers but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

So looking back again at your early childhood in Los Angeles, I know that your wife Helen was mentioning, you know, Charles Mingus, her experience with Charles Mingus in Sunday school and she said that, you know, he was a bad boy, the AME Methodist.

So you didn't mention your first meeting. You did talk at length about meeting Eric but we didn't talk about your meeting with Mingus and Illinois, Jack, Ed, and Buddy Collette, and Brit Woodman. We kind of left those four -- those early meetings.

**Hamilton:** First of all I grew up with Mingus, I mean, you know, from the time I guess 14, 15 years old when he used to hang out with Buddy, you know.

**Brown:** So you met them both about the same time?

**Hamilton:** About the same time, about the same time. I didn't know my wife when she was -- you know, when they went to Sunday school together, that type of thing, but Brit, I knew Brit because of the Whitman brothers, the band that they had. And whom else did you mention?

**Brown:** Well I mentioned Illinois.

**Hamilton:** Oh, Illinois. When Illinois came from Texas, man, from Houston, you know, he came in -- I think he came to one of our rehearsals. A saxophone player by the name of

Eddie Taylor who was from Houston also and knew Illinois brought him to the rehearsal. And Illinois was playing alto then, he wasn't playing tenor.

And he took his horn out and he played something on his horn man, it just made everybody flip. Jack Kelso, Buddy, damn who's this -- you know, and we became good friends. As a matter of fact, Illinois, Joe Newman, and myself we became the unholy three.

As a matter of fact just before I got engaged to my wife, we were all hanging out. We would always hang out together and Illinois, Joe Newman, a trumpet player, which was cool. But man I was very fortunate man because I always have been sort of in the right place at the right time, you know, and with the right people.

**Brown:** When you say Illinois did something that knocked you guys out, do you remember what it was? What was it, his sound, what he was playing --

**Hamilton:** He played a lick, you know, he played a lick, a hot lick on his horn that, you know, evidentially it must have covered the whole -- you know, damn near all the keys, all the notes on the horn.

**Brown:** About how old were you when this was --

**Hamilton:** I guess we were about 15 or 16 years old, something like that.

**Brown:** And Mingus, did you see the promise or the potential when he was that young and to what he was going to become as far as a composer, arranger?

**Hamilton:** Not really.

MR BROWN: Not really?

**Hamilton:** Not really. We were sort of on par with each other. I mean, you know, we dug playing with each other and man, when we were in Oakland on Floyd Ray's band, man I did my drum solo, right, I was doing my big number, man, Mingus went off stage and got a hammer and came back and he started hammering on the bandstand on where my drums were and he did some dumb shit. He was just mischievous, you know, just mischievous, man.

**Brown:** So Helen was right, he was a bad boy.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, man he was --as far as I was concerned man, Mingus was always out to lunch.

**Brown:** Okay, well I guess that's what I was really looking for, you know, early impression. Well how about Buddy? You know when Mingus wrote his book --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, Buddy. Well Buddy even today -- Buddy's always been conservative. I mean, not so much that he's cool but he's very conservative, but I guess you would call that cool too, you know, laid back but --

**Brown:** Yeah, well, you know, Mingus talks a lot about Pops Collette, you know, hanging out at Buddy's house and knowing his dad.

**Hamilton:** Buddy was the first one of us young guys, first of all to be successful, man. He had a car, bought a brand new Pontiac. You know, when we were still in our teens, you know, he had a gig. He worked with C.P. Johnson, big band. You know, Buddy was making big dough. Buddy's always been successful as a musician, you know.

**Brown:** Why do you think that was?

**Hamilton:** Well first of all, Buddy is still a good -- I mean he's a fantastic musician. He's probably very well underrated. I would say he was a brilliant musician, good player. He was a good writer.

But I don't know what sort of kept him from being -- I used to try to encourage him to come east even after he left the group and everything. You know, felt he should put in an appearance here on the east coast maybe once a year, you know, just like everybody else because he's of that quality, as opposed to just laying out there, staying out there in LA. I get disappointed when I go home with the guys, especially my contemporaries. You know, they're doing the same thing they did 1000 years ago and, you know, that's one of the reasons why I stay here on the east coast man, because the energy is here.

**Brown:** Yeah, that's true.

**Hamilton:** All the young players that come here, man, you know, they bring something, you dig?

**Brown:** Uh-huh. Well we'll come back and talk about Buddy because I know you and he have a long association and plus the quintet.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So we'll return to talking about Buddy. Let's see, why don't we fill in a few more things in the army. You said that while you were at Fort McClellan that Papa Jo and Lester Young --

**Hamilton:** Yes, that's right.

**Brown:** Now were they stationed there or were they just there for training?

**Hamilton:** They were there for training. Basically Fort McClellan was a basic training camp and from there they shipped you out to -- as a matter of fact man, I had signed up for the Air Corps but they wouldn't --

**Brown:** Go ahead.

**Hamilton:** I had volunteered for the Air Corps, right, but they were going to send me to the tank -- wanted to send me to Arizona, at the camp in Arizona with the tanks and man I turned left on -- no way.

But anyway Fort McClellan was a basic training camp and you had, what was it, 13 or 14, whatever it is, 16 weeks of basic training and from that they shipped you out to different outfits.

**Brown:** So you say when Prez and Papa Jo were there they weren't playing music. Do you know what they ended up doing?

**Hamilton:** Carrying a rifle, taking their training. Prez, man it was pathetic, it really was pathetic, you know, they're carrying that gun man; they're carrying that rifle. We all had to go through it, go out on bivouac and all that, you know.

**Brown:** But here you had Papa Jo. I mean he's already, you know, world famous because he's been with Basie's orchestra and Prez --

**Hamilton:** They were both world famous. Both world famous.

**Brown:** They didn't take advantage of them and have them playing Special Services.

**Hamilton:** That's to show you, you know, what kind of people -- I told you what kind of people they were man. If you weren't from the south, forget it. I know they're not going to like to hear that but that's the way it was man.

**Brown:** That was the truth and it probably could still be considered the truth. Now you said that when you got in the army, you got to Fort McClellan in Alabama, you said that was the first thing you saw, a great mass of black people.

**Hamilton:** That's right.



**Brown:** And you said you had to go through, what was it; you got some sort of treatment?

**Hamilton:** Oh, man I had to go to the psycho ward.

**Brown:** Really?

**Hamilton:** Really. It affected me. And that probably sounds strange coming from, you know, a black dude but it was just -- that's the affect. I'm being honest about it, you know. As a matter of fact I can talk about it.

**Brown:** Please do.

**Hamilton:** I mean I'm saying, you know, I'm cool now about it but it was unbelievable man. And I found out, you know, a lot of things about being a black man and I found out man, that we had a lot of brilliant people man, a lot of brilliant people were black.

**Brown:** So the psycho ward -- I mean obviously if you're in the military and as a vet I guess I could probably speak with experience, if you're sent to the psycho ward you're going to probably speak to either a social worker, or a psychologist, or a psychiatrist.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And back in those days, you know, I want to say --

**Hamilton:** They were all white.

**Brown:** White psychologist, and you're going to tell them; I have problems being around so many black people. Was it helpful?

**Hamilton:** Well I stayed in the hospital for about two or three weeks.

**Brown:** Really?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Then they returned me back to duty. I got put in the stockade because I refused to -- we were on the field, we were practicing and the drum master, I forget his name, he was an fool. Anyway, to make a long story short, I refused to do something that I was ordered to do and I started dragging my drum, my field drum across the field and I got a court martial for it.

**Brown:** Got court marshaled?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So you were discharged from the army?

**Hamilton:** No I wasn't. I wish the hell they had discharged me. No, they just threw me in the stockade. I got court martialed and had to do some time, you know, and they put me on the garbage detail.

**Brown:** Did that cure you of dragging your parade drum around?

**Hamilton:** I got cool about it.

**Brown:** So it doesn't sound like your military experience was --

**Hamilton:** No. As a matter of fact, man, was it Sunday? Yeah, it was Sunday. I got a call from -- well my manager had called to ask me if I knew a McDonald and he says this guy from Gary, Indiana, had been calling me, wanted to know can you -- wanted my phone number.

To make a long story short, Mac was Sergeant Galloway's brother-in-law and Galloway ended up marrying Mahalia Jackson, right, Sigmund. And man, you know, we were all very close and he told me that, you know, he practiced medicine for 30 years in Gary and now he lives in Phoenix, some place in Arizona. Anyway it was good to hear from him. But anyway, he's dynamite.

But he just reminded me of Galloway. I mean, you know, Sergeant Galloway was the drum major and man we had a hell of a group. The band eventually ended up being a fantastic band, you know, the marching band.

**Brown:** What was your unit designation?

**Hamilton:** 173rd whatever, band. But the marching band, you know -- and man, I remember yesterday I asked you did you know that Colonel -- (musical sounds). Man we used to march every morning to a railhead and march these troops to the train to be shipped out. Anyway, that was all part of it. But nevertheless, they didn't let Jo Jones or Prez no where near the music.

**Brown:** The army's loss. Well okay, and then you said when you got out of the army you had two kids.

And we know that you were stationed at Fort McClellan and you worked with Special Services so you traveled around. Meanwhile Helen stayed in Los Angeles living with her parents I presume.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And you had two children. We didn't get their names.

**Hamilton:** My son was named Foreststorn, Jr., and my daughter was Denise. My son passed away a couple of years ago. You never heard of Forest Hamilton?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** What was that hamburger joint?

**Brown:** Well you had Wendy's.

**Hamilton:** No, a burger in LA. You know, what was the name?

MR. KIMERY: There's Tommy's.

**Hamilton:** No. Fat Burgers. That was one of his products. He managed Isaac Hayes. He was responsible for Isaac getting an Academy Award. Watts Stax, you know, he did all that. He was in management.

You know, he was a millionaire when he was 21. His first group was Love and by the time he was 21 years old, man, he had made a million dollars.

**Brown:** Was he the manager or was he in it?

**Hamilton:** The manager, he was in management.

**Brown:** He was a manager, right. It was Arthur Lee.

**Hamilton:** Arthur Lee.

**Brown:** Right, right, Seven and Seven Is and My Little Black Book, right. So he was the manager of that group.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Well he more or less put it together, you know.

**Brown:** Uh-huh, integrated group, mixed group.

**Hamilton:** He also put the Staple singers, Isaac Hayes.

**Brown:** So he left LA and went to Memphis?

**Hamilton:** Well he was, you know, all over. He filed bankruptcy three times and came back three times to become a millionaire, you know.

**Brown:** 21 years old, he's a millionaire.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** As a manager in the music industry, Lord. He really must have been something.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, well he was very well respected for one thing. He was a hustler, you know.

**Brown:** He had the namesake didn't he?

**Hamilton:** And my daughter lives here in New York. As a matter of fact she lives in the same building here. She retired from IBM. She's in real estate now and that's, you know, the name of the game.

My granddaughter just told us she's going to have twins. She's married to Lester Connors, you know, the basketball coach.

**Brown:** Really. I didn't know that.

**Hamilton:** So he's with Milwaukee now. And that's about the size of the family.

**Brown:** Okay. Well then that brings us up to where we left off yesterday, where you had just disbanded your world famous quintet.

**Hamilton:** Right, and I told you why.

**Brown:** Yes, you did say why. But what I want to talk about was, you know, the quintet itself went through different personnel changes.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** You started with Fred Katz and then --

**Hamilton:** (unintelligible) Gershwin.

**Brown:** Right. Why did Fred leave, do you remember?

**Hamilton:** On his own volition. You know, Fred got famous and started writing, you know, doing a lot film stuff and decided to stay home in LA, you know. The road can get to you, you dig? So it kind of got to him, you know, and here again man, Fred was -- you know, we were both about the same age. He was no young dude, you know. But I'd been on the road all my life, you know, that's all I know is the road.

**Brown:** And then you started with Buddy. You founded the group with Buddy Collette and then, you know, you had several personnel changes. You went through Paul Horn, Eric Dolphy, and then, you know, you had Charles Lloyd. So the same reason for Buddy, why he left the group?

**Hamilton:** Buddy stayed on because he was making money and, you know, he had a family to support.

**Brown:** And what about Jim Hall, because that was your founding group.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Jim lasted, you know, to the point -- Jim might have just got bored. I don't know.

**Brown:** Of course then he goes on to play with Sonny but that's later.

**Hamilton:** That was way down the line. He started with -- well he got to do some deals with Jimmy Guiffre and he dug that so -- plus the fact he wanted to stay east, you know.

**Brown:** And how did Paul Horn get into the group?

**Hamilton:** Somebody recommended him, you know, and I heard him and, you know, gave him a shot.

**Brown:** So when you were bringing in new musicians were you looking for anything in particular?

**Hamilton:** Well first of all they had to be able to read because we did a lot of chart work and if they had a good sound, that's cool. And whatever weaknesses they had, that's what I would play to. I always play to a dude's weakness to help him subsequently become stronger, you know. That's one of the keys of being successful in regards to getting your ensemble together.

**Brown:** You might want to repeat that for the historical record then.

**Hamilton:** Well if you know the weakness of a player, this is what you play to as an accompanist. You know, I gave my playing up to make him stronger in his weak points as opposed to putting emphasis on his strong points. Like he may have a hell of a tone, hell of a sound but he doesn't swing, he doesn't know how to flow so I'll make him start flowing.

Most guys don't realize that, you know, when you play, regardless of whatever you're playing, you should always personally think in terms of composition. Whatever the melody is, always think in terms of, a counter melody, you know.

And so when you solo as far as I'm concerned, that's what you should be doing, not just playing a bunch of notes, you know, or making sounds, sort of come up with a counter melody. This way it will happen, the swing, you dig? Because most guys if you move (musical sounds), okay, you've moved. Then what's the next thing, most logical thing to do? That is to soar after you move, (musical sounds), you dig?

**Brown:** That's a composer talking there.

**Hamilton:** Not (musical sounds), you start (musical sounds). That's one of the beautiful things about Prez's playing, you know, you dig?

**Brown:** So how do you translate that to drums?

**Hamilton:** To drums? (Musical sounds), you're playing drum licks (musical sounds), right? (Musical sounds), right?

**Brown:** Okay, we could probably devote the rest of the tape to this. I mean we should, and if you want to continue -- but I have a question for you now.

**Hamilton:** Go ahead.

**Brown:** All the licks you're singing, I mean those are all be-bop licks and you told me when you came out of the army, you came back to LA, you went aw, man, the world has changed.

**Hamilton:** It's changed completely, man.

**Brown:** So what was your reaction when you heard this music be bop? I mean every lick you just sang came straight out of the be bop era so --

**Hamilton:** I got into it, man. I got into it man, and Howard McGhee, Maggie had a sort of a workshop and man I went to it, I attended it, you know, listened to it. Maggie turned me on to -- you know, really got me into it.

As a matter of fact at that time Roy Porter was out there. You know, he was the so called be bop drummer, but I didn't particularly care for his playing. It didn't affect me like Art Blakely's playing did because Roy's playing was just -- in a sense didn't have anything to do with the music that they were playing. He was just, you know, more or less soloing all the way through, you know, no space.

It's just like a bad piano player that won't allow whoever it is he's accompanying, an opportunity to think of anything to play. That's the reason you get locked in with these piano players man, that play all these chords and you've got to go where they going because he's not going to listen to you. It's very rare when a piano player listens to you.

That's why Miles had success with his groups -- you know, the people that played for him because they knew good and well, let Miles have some space, you know. It's just like the secret to accompanying. Say it's a singer. You have to have an understanding -- the singer has to have an understanding with the accompanist in regards to say, well, okay if you hit the chord then I'll come in, I'll get my cue from you, but if I hit the chord you wait and let me hit it, then you come in. Is that too deep?

**Brown:** Oh, no, that's not too deep. I'll process that all day. Oh, no, definitely, definitely. Well I think that we talked about that yesterday, you know, you learn what not to play.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So when you got back to LA -- now we know that Bird and Diz came out to Billy Berg's in December of '45 I believe it was, and so you didn't see that. You weren't out of the army at that time or were you?

**Hamilton:** In '45?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** I came out in '45.

**Brown:** So do you remember that, when Bird and Diz came to Billy Berg's?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, they were already there.

**Brown:** They had already come through.

**Hamilton:** They weren't at Billy Berg's at that time, they were on Central Avenue at the Downbeat, a local club, you know. Central Avenue was where all the action was.

**Brown:** But the historical record says that they played at Billy Berg's.

**Hamilton:** Oh, they did play at Billy Berg's but that was before -- I mean not before then, but Billy Berg's didn't start until -- well after the war, maybe '46, '47.

As a matter of fact, Manny, nobody ever talks about him, but this man was responsible for bringing all the jazz, especially to Hollywood because I worked for him at the Club Capri at Pico and (Unintelligible) when I was with Lorenzo Flennoy. That's where when Prez left Basie, that's where they played. That was the club, that was the joint. As a matter of fact man, Mickey Rooney when he was dating Ava, we used to have sessions there every Sunday, and what's his name, who managed Ella?

**Brown:** Norman Granz.

**Hamilton:** Norman Granz man was like a gopher. Norman was -- you know, just helped everybody, you know.

**Brown:** The Capri Club, that was the place, that was the joint.

**Hamilton:** Club Capri that was it, man. And that's where I used to go to get my -- hang out with Lee to get my lessons, things like that.

**Brown:** So when you got out of the army you came back to LA and the guys that you knew, the be bop was already being played or was it just on the recordings?

**Hamilton:** No, no, it was being played.

**Brown:** So you heard be bop.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** You didn't hear it before on any of the records? You didn't hear Salt Peanuts, you didn't hear (Unintelligible), you didn't hear Ko-Ko?

**Hamilton:** I heard that after I came out of the service.



**Brown:** So the first be bop you heard was live so you didn't hear the recordings of Mac --

**Hamilton:** The first record I heard, Bird, was with, what's his name?

**Brown:** Jay McShann, Tailor ( Hootie or Dexter Blues? ) Blues.

**Hamilton:** Jay McShann. There was a tenor player that used to play with him, T.J. Krump (?) was in the band, got drafted and they sent him there and he brought the record with him and Bird's solo was on there and he used to tell us about Bird and that was it. That was it until I came home and heard all these guys, man it was --

**Brown:** So Howard McGhee, and Roy Porter -- Dexter I guess was still around when you got out of the army.

**Hamilton:** No, Dexter --

**Brown:** He hadn't gone with Louis Armstrong that early had he?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, Dexter was in the east at that time.

**Brown:** He already left, okay. So when you came back in LA, the guys you knew were playing be-bop.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Now you'd been gone three or four years.

**Hamilton:** Not my cronies. I mean not the guys I came up with. This is a whole group of whole new players.

**Brown:** So Howard McGhee.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, McGhee.

**Brown:** Roy Porter. I'm just thinking of all the guys that you were hanging out with.

**Hamilton:** Sonny Criss.

**Brown:** Sonny Criss. Were hanging out with Bird when he came out.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, you know, all those guys.

**Brown:** Because Red Callender, you know, when they did the Dial sessions --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, that was old hat. I mean Red was from the old school.

**Brown:** But he could hang. And then Errol Garner was recording.

**Hamilton:** Errol, yeah.

**Brown:** So you actually heard the music live and it turned you around, you just -- immediate convert, said I got to get into this?

**Hamilton:** Got into, you know.

**Brown:** Because you said at this point, you know, you've been influenced by Papa Jo so you're working that high hat (musical sound).

**Hamilton:** Yeah, but by doing that man, I learned how to dance.

**Brown:** You learned how to dance.

**Hamilton:** I learned how to dance, you know. I did my tap dancing, you dig? So I learned how to keep that cymbal going and in the meantime I learned how to do the left and the foot, you know, (musical sounds), play all the licks.

**Brown:** So you were learning all this before you saw Boot because you said when you saw Boot, that really messed you up, but you had already heard some of that change because, you know, this is what --

**Hamilton:** This was all in '45?

**Brown:** '45, '46, right, because Boot was still in the army too and he's stationed overseas so he hadn't come back and he hadn't started making records yet either.

**Hamilton:** You dig?

**Brown:** Yeah. Okay, but it's a major transition because, you know, be bop drumming goes from being a basic dance accompaniment to, you know, basically chamber music primarily and, you know, it's a big switch in the function. You're no longer playing for dances, you know, you're playing for each other and --

**Hamilton:** Well like I said, after I heard Art Blakey, I got turned around. I started --

**Brown:** Yeah, so he was significantly different then what you heard up to that time as far as what people were dealing with modern drumming.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Okay. Well then that's good, that's good that we're able to -- so Max had no impact?

**Hamilton:** I didn't even know Max man.

**Brown:** You didn't know who Max was?

**Hamilton:** I didn't meet Max until I came to New York in '47 with Lena Horne.

**Brown:** Okay. What was that first meeting like and where was it?

**Hamilton:** At the Capitol Theater, and Charlie Drayton like I said, was the bass player. Well Charlie and Max were good friends. They were both from Brooklyn and they both played with Benny Carter.

And Max came to the theater to see Charlie, came backstage, and Charlie introduced me to him. We met and the next thing you know, man, within a matter of five or ten minutes man, we were both sitting down playing on chairs with sticks, you know.

And Max was the first east coast musician I met and we became friends and we've been friends ever since, you know, that type of thing. As a matter of fact, there was -- word got around about me here in New York, right, about my (unintelligible) playing, you know, and I heard that Max told some of the guys, some of the drummers here that man you don't mess with Chico man, Chico will take them sticks away from you and kick.

**Brown:** Max helped you get your rep.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. So it was like -- he was a dynamite man. As a matter of fact when I heard -- this was in '47, we went to the Royal Roost, which I think became Birdland eventually, or was it -- well it was in that area.

Anyway, we heard Diz for the first time, right, and Teddy Stewart was playing the drums at that time but Monk was intermission and they had John Simmons on bass.

Well John was from LA. Matter of fact, John was from Jeff. John was one of the first young musicians to come east, you know, west coast musician to come east. He came with Louis Armstrong so we knew each other, you know.

So during intermission when they were off, they came over to the table where we were sitting. You know, I was with Lena, you know, all that.

He told me, he says, man, I've played with piano players who have played on all the black keys. I played with piano players who've played on all the white keys. He says, but I ain't never played with no one who plays in between the cracks. You know, that's the way Monk -- he was talking about Monk. But it was something else man.

As a matter of fact, Johnny Hartman was on the band, singing on the band. My favorite singer. He could sing his keester off.

But during that period I had a chance to meet -- I met Miles on 52nd Street and I just started hanging out every night. After I get through my last show at the Copa, I'd head right to 52nd Street and hang out all night, you know, getting high.

**Brown:** Did you meet Klook?

**Hamilton:** Klook, well, I knew Klook well. As a matter of fact man -- this is off the record man.

**Brown:** Okay.

**Hamilton:** Came here (unintelligible) and we hung out, we would hang out all the time. As a matter of fact when Lee left the MJQ -- I forget the manager --

**Brown:** Monte Kay.

**Hamilton:** Monte. Monte wanted me to come on the group but by that time I had started my thing so --

**Brown:** Yeah, because then you would have been doing your trio.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Right, because that was in '52 when --

**Hamilton:** Yeah. But I'll tell you something man, when I went to Paris in '50, we played the -- oh, what the hell is the name of this place? Anyway, Bernard Hillard had the band. Klook was in the band and the big number one club --

**Brown:** I know the (unintelligible) --

**Hamilton:** No, I forget the name of it. It was the number one club. As a matter of fact, Edith Pierce had just played it and we followed Edith in there, right.

**Brown:** So you were there with Lena?

**Hamilton:** I was there with Lena. So opening night, I mean opening week, right, we're going to (Unintelligible) on the left bank, you know, where all the joints were, right, so me, and Klook, and Gerry Wiggins we're hanging out, right.

So across the room man, there's this dynamite looking lady, right, and she's just looking and smiling and everything. I think she's looking at me, right. I didn't know who she was. Klook played it real cool. He didn't -- you know, I said hey, you dig this, man? You know, what's happening? So to make a long story short, man, it turned out to be Annie Ross and at that time man they were married and I didn't know that.

I met Annie Ross man when she was 11 years old, you know, when I was with Lena because Ella Logan and Lena were good friends and Ella Logan was Annie Ross' aunt, and come to find out, that was Annie Ross, right.

So man they were in bad shape. They didn't have any money so me and Wig did a record. I did a record over there, an album over there, and we gave them all the money. We bought them things like soap and, you know, things like that which they couldn't even afford to buy at that time. You know, they were in bad shape. You know, people were poor. And like I said, man, at that time one of the few dudes over there out of uniform.

**Brown:** Right, right. Do you remember how much you were getting with Lena? Do you remember what it was?

**Hamilton:** At that time?

**Brown:** You can tell me whatever time.

**Hamilton:** I started off with \$125 a week and, you know, it gradually went up, went up.

**Brown:** Was it more if you went on tour like overseas?

**Hamilton:** No, it was sort of a steady kind of thing, you know, and it was cool, you know. But I was always able to manage my dough.  
I mean, you know, I had a lot of help from my folks. My wife was in the hospital at that time and she was very ill and she stayed ill two or three years and my folks took care of my kids for me, you know, that type of thing and I just -- you know, God is good man, I was able to work.

**Brown:** Your kids basically were raised in Los Angeles?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Brown:** So you had to do a lot of traveling. So you're out running around the road, then you'd come back to LA.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** Okay, if we can just go back to the chronology. So you just disbanded the group in the late '50s I believe. Do you remember the last date or recording you made with your quintet before you switched the --

**Hamilton:** No, I don't know which one it was.

**Brown:** And then you had Wyatt Ruther come in and play bass.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Now I knew him up in the Bay area so how did he get into your group?

**Hamilton:** I knew Wyatt. I mean, I'd seen, you know --

**Brown:** Was he based in LA at that time? He must have been. I mean that would have been a heck of commute.

**Hamilton:** I think he happened to be, you know, in the area, which is cool. Also -- what the hell -- bass up in Seattle?

**Brown:** Up there now, Leroy, Leroy Vinegar?

**Hamilton:** No, not Leroy. I can't think of his name.

**Brown:** Still up there you mean?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, a little short guy.

MR. KIMERY: Isn't Gary up there?

**Hamilton:** No. Anyway, I'll get to him. He's on one of these albums. But anyway, Wyatt --

**Brown:** So that brings us up to where we cut off yesterday. So you decided you did what you felt you could do with the quintet, the original quintet. We call it, you know, your original quintet, and you wanted to change it up. So let's pick it up there. You're reforming the group.

**Hamilton:** Well what happened was, it played itself out because like I said before, I found myself just imitating myself. You know, I was imitating Chico Hamilton. I wasn't coming up with new ideas. I was acting more like what everybody said I was like as opposed to just me being myself, you know.

And I realized man, you know, it wasn't happening so I just disbanded and I went home and decided to change up, change up my style and everything, and doing that, get new people. I got new people, found new people and took off again. And I was fortunate man because every group that I've had, every time I've made a change, the group has made an impact on somebody, you know.

**Brown:** So what's the configuration and personnel of your new group as it stands, the quintet?

**Hamilton:** Of now?

**Brown:** Yeah, at this point.

**Hamilton:** At this time I'm using two horns, two reeds. Between the two reeds man they play -- I have a tenor, alto, flute, clarinet, baritone.

I've got a couple of -- I (unintelligible) freely, I cover the waterfront. And my rhythm section is the same, Kerry DeNichols is still with me, Paul Ramsey is with me on bass, and there's a young man, a young student of mine, he's a drummer, I'm converting him into a percussionist so he's becoming a conga player, things like that.

So that's it. It's a happening. You'll dig it. You'll dig it. So I'm very happy with -- I'm pleased with it, you know, because using the two horns, melodically I can get the melodies over and I'm putting the emphasis on the ensemble playing as the most -- then solo work.

**Brown:** So are we talking about the current group or are we talking about the group that comes right after --

**Hamilton:** We're talking about the current group right now.

**Brown:** Okay, so we jumped -- I was talking about the group that came right out of the quintet.

**Hamilton:** Oh, the group I had with Charles Lloyd and --

**Brown:** Yeah, Charles Lloyd, you had --

**Hamilton:** Albert Stinson, (unintelligible), yeah, that group was --

**Brown:** So you still have a guitar, you just got rid of the cello.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I always had guitar.

**Brown:** Why is that?

**Hamilton:** I found the guitar playing was very conducive to my playing, the sustaining power of the guitar as opposed to keyboard. Keyboard has no sustaining power, you know. The guitar can say (musical sound). He can hold a note for almost two bars -- I mean a sound.

**Brown:** Uh-huh, with diminishing.

**Hamilton:** Right, you dig. And since I dance I need that sustaining power as opposed to a keyboard would be choppy. An average keyboard player, a piano player, if he's got this foot on the pedal, he's not swinging, you know what I mean?

**Brown:** Oh, yeah. Well you brought up a couple things that make me want to digress again, about dancing, because when you said that's when I got into my tap dancing and you were gesturing -- but for those of you who can't see what Chico was doing, he was basically imitating playing the drums.

But when you say dancing and this is again as a drummer talking, when I think of dancing on the drum set, of course Papa Jo, but then I also think of Roy Haynes. We had Roy Haynes coming east, so the first time you encountered Roy Haynes?



**Hamilton:** Roy and I, our careers have been very similar. First of all we were introduced by the one and only, Prez. Roy was with Prez. Prez brought Roy to California, right, and when they brought Roy to California they played up north, right, I guess Frisco and places up there before they came to LA. And Roy told me that people used to call him Forest Hamilton.

So when we finally met, we met at the Club Alabam as a matter of fact, and Prez said, Miss Hamilton, Miss Hayes and we became friends and we've been digging each other ever since. Now the reason why I say our careers have been similar, Roy spent a lot of time with singers. I spent a lot of time with singers, and then when we left and went on our own, you know, he's always had good groups, I've always had good groups.

We don't play anything alike, I don't think, you know, but, you know, he's got his thing going and I've got my thing going, and he's contemporary and I consider myself contemporary, plus the fact he's a dynamite little dude, man.

**Brown:** You both have got that satirical stand (unintelligible).

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Now is that something about drummers in particular, I mean because we can go back and look through from Papa Jo, Sonny Greer, you know, all the way up through you, Roy, you know, and then you've got Philly Joe. I mean the drummers have always set a standard as far as the sartorial presentation, but you were early on so what was your -- first of all to answer the question, do you think this is something common to drummers and do you feel that you maybe contributed to that?

**Hamilton:** Well, you know, I've been complimented. You know, I've been complimented, let's put it like that. But I've always been my own man. You know, I've been into dress, the clothes.

**Brown:** Why?

**Hamilton:** Well when you come up wearing hand me downs, all of a sudden, you know, decide you want something for yourself, you know, and I don't want nobody's hand me downs, you know, that type of thing. And like I told you earlier, I started buying my clothes when I was 11 years old, you know. Went to all the thrift shops and things like that.

**Brown:** Were you modeling yourself after somebody? I mean did you -- was it the musicians, you know, all were always clean, or the movie stars?

**Hamilton:** Just stay clean, you know. Just stay clean and sharp, you know, because all the musicians that I knew at that time were sharp.

**Brown:** It wasn't the pimps that, you know, were really dapper? Was that an inspiration at all?

**Hamilton:** Well the pimps were cool too, man. That was cool. You know, during that period, those days, that era, everybody dressed. My father dressed. He wore a shirt and tie and suit every day and he was just, you know, a waiter, right, but he went to work sharp, plus the fact my father was probably one of the cleanest men I ever knew. Every night man he'd wash his socks and underwear out, you know. He was dynamite. He was cool.

**Brown:** So it sounds like you had some good modeling right there in the house.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So what about drummers. Do you think there is something -- is it a trait about drummers?

**Hamilton:** First of all man, I've come to the conclusion that you've got to be a little out in left field to be a drummer, you know, because you've got to be able to absorb. You've got to be able to take a whole lot of shit. I mean shit, really bullshit. And I'll explain it.

You take a 15 piece orchestra, which means that they're 14 musicians in that band other than the drummer, and all 14 people have got different time, concepts of time and what the tempo is.

And you've got to be strong enough to say, hey, this is here. It's right here. Here it is. You ain't going nowhere, it's here.

You've got to be that strong and in order to be that strong man, you've got to have ego that won't allow you to do anything else or go anywhere else, plus the fact you constantly -- you make decisions, split second decisions, whether to hit the cymbal, whether to hit the drum, or whether to hit this cymbal or hit that drum. You know what kind of sound you're going to get before you even do it. Does that make sense?

**Brown:** Oh, yeah. Out in left field, that explains that left field.

**Hamilton:** That's right. So there's got to be something wrong with you.

**Brown:** We can handle that, there's something wrong with you, okay.

**Brown:** This is tape five of the Chico Hamilton interview. Please continue.

**Hamilton:** You know, being a bandleader, a lot of bandleaders don't know how to kick a band off. You know, being a drummer as you know, every drummer you know that has a group, even yourself, right, the (unintelligible) have been clean, the hit, that precision. The clean players, you know, the ensemble work is fantastic.

Like when you get ready to kick the band off, would you say one, two, one, two, three four, that's how the band's going to come in, you know. If you want them to hit, you can say (musical sounds) boom, you know, they'll come in with that energy, you know. You start with that energy man, the hippest thing as far as I'm concerned as a player.

I like to play in the danger zone, intensify it at volume, at a very low volume. This way you can hear everything, but that thing is there, that energy is there, you know. And this basically I guess would be the key, the bottom line of what I do.

**Brown:** Well I think it's very interesting. I'm going to let you go ahead and continue but I want to come to something that I think you're bringing up. Were you finished?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, go ahead.

**Brown:** You know, when we're talking about the early '50s, you just mentioned, you know, when Klook left the Modern Jazz Quartet and then a couple of years later, a few years later, you're getting your seminal quintet together.

On the east coast you've got along with John Lewis, you've got Mingus, teaming up with, you know, classical composers like Gunther Schuler and that's starting to create this idiom called third stream, mixing western concert music, jazz and coming up with some new type of music.

You weren't part of that because you were out here on the west coast and they were developing it down on the east coast but I have a sneaky suspicion if Monte Kay is looking to get you to play in the Modern Jazz Quartet, which I feel is perhaps one the seminal groups of this new idiom, you were already there.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** You had already tried that path of what you're talking about, that intensity, that energy but not, you know, bowling you over.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. No, you know, I had developed that style in a sense by playing with the singers, you know, being an accompanist, you know, staying out of the way, but in the way, but out of the way, but having that pulse going at all times, you dig?

And using the bass drum Now, you know, I had developed that style in a sense by playing with the singers, you know, being an accompanist, you know, staying out of the way, but in the way, but out of the way, but having that pulse going at all times, you dig?, man, that's the key. That bass drum, I used to kick Lena with that bass drum but that would just make her play and make her sing, you dig? But that was it. That was the key with Jo Jones, that bass drum. Between a high (unintelligible) and that bass drum, you know --

**Brown:** Well we remember what you did with that bass drum with the Will (Unintelligible). You hit with that bass --

**Hamilton:** Exactly, but that's virtually the key. Man, being on the west coast, we did a lot of things man that the east coast people had no idea, you know, about it until I came east.

As a matter of fact, and when I'm saying me, it has nothing to do with ego or anything like that but there hasn't been anybody, any group to come out of the west coast since me other than rock and roll groups, you know, pop group sing like that, but jazz people, I'm the last of the Mohicans man as far as being -- you know, coming east and doing it, you know, establishing my sound.

**Brown:** Well we can talk about Ornette.

**Hamilton:** Well that was later.

**Brown:** '58?

**Hamilton:** You know, that was later.

**Brown:** Did you know him before -

**Hamilton:** Ornette, no I didn't know him before he came east.

**Brown:** Okay, so you didn't see him on the scene. He wasn't on the scene in LA?

**Hamilton:** No, no, not when I was there.

**Brown:** Or Don Cherry?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** How about Blackwell, how about when Blackwell came?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** No? That was a little after I guess.

**Hamilton:** You know, I virtually in a sense left LA in '47 when I came east with Lena, you know, and I was --

**Brown:** Yeah, but your quintet was --

**Hamilton:** Well my quintet was in '55, you know, but we were in LA for about, what eight or nine months and then boom, we hit the road. Hit the road Jack. Do you know, man in those days, I stayed on the road -- we worked at least 48 weeks a year, out of the year. I mean that.

**Brown:** You only had a month off then.

**Hamilton:** And I'd take off during Thanksgiving and I wouldn't go back to work until the first of the year. I never played New Year's Eve.

It was like during that period -- for instance you take Ohio, you could play Ohio man, you could stay in Ohio almost two years because at that time all the joints, man you were booked for four or five weeks at a run, you know. It was no one night or two nights and things like that. You stayed in a joint two or three weeks at a time, you dig? And like I said man, you could stay in Ohio.

Between Cleveland, Cincinnati, you know, you name them, you could stay in Ohio, which I did, which we could, a long time. As a matter of fact man, when I joined Mercer Ellington's band, he was headquartered out of Columbus. You didn't know I played with Mercer, right?

**Brown:** I was going to ask you, what year was that? For how long?

**Hamilton:** Well not too long because I was with Lena at the time and we were off and they needed a drummer, and Luther and Mercer were boon coons, you know, so I went out there. Hell man, when I was in the service, man I played with King Colax. I played with Nat Toles. I took off -- I played with all them junk bands, you know.

**Brown:** Did any other musicians come through in the army that you remember? I mean, you talked about Prez and Papa Jo, and you talked about the one from Kansas City, the

new Bird, but did any others that came through --because, you know, I mean a lot of folks came through the army for training and all --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, well, there was Galloway. Let me see, none of the guys in the band that I was in, you know. Most of the guys -- fortunately most of the guys in LA, they all went to the navy. Gerald, and Jack, and Buddy, all of them were in the navy.

**Brown:** Did you know Benny Carter while you were still in LA?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Did you work with him or you knew him?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I worked with Benny, did some things with Benny.

**Brown:** Before you got in the army?

**Hamilton:** I might have. I might have. I worked with everybody before I got in the army, man. Hey, man, I've done some things with -- these country and western guitar players -- who's the guy down there?

**Brown:** Alvino Ray?

**Hamilton:** No, no, man, country and western, I mean -- name some of the, you know --

**Brown:** Not Bob Wills, not the Texas Playboys?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** You're talking about country and western.

**Hamilton:** Stone cold country and western. Who was the head of RCA Victor, the record company down there at one time?

**Brown:** You got me. I mean we just saw Paul -- unless Paul has --

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Well no, I didn't, you know -- hey I recorded with Bonnie Castle, George Van Eps, recorded with --

**Brown:** Oh, yeah, a guitarist, so you had this long association of working with the guitar.

- Hamilton:** You know, as a matter of fact I knew Charlie Christian.
- Brown:** Well that had to be a very short window of time.
- Hamilton:** Yeah.
- Brown:** So you had to meet him before you went in the army.
- Hamilton:** Oh, yeah this was before --
- Brown:** Would he come through with Benny or did he come through on his own?
- Hamilton:** No, I think he was there with Benny, with Lionel, you know, Benny and Lionel. Lee Young introduced me to him. But anyway, getting back to -- where were we?
- Brown:** Well we were actually talking about, you know, you said you could go to Ohio and --
- Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.
- Brown:** But that brings up a very important chapter, at least as far as musical history. Where did you meet Hale Smith and how? Was it in Cleveland?
- Hamilton:** No. I met Hale here in New York come to think about it, and he and Jim Hall knew each other because they were both from Cleveland and he came to a rehearsal we had and we hooked up and, you know, stayed friends ever since. And Hale did some charts for me, you know, but Jim Hall was the reason I met Hale. I think we were at Birdland at the time, you know. And he was here in New York.
- Brown:** Was that how he and Eric got hooked up or do you know how that relationship came?
- Hamilton:** He met Eric through me, through my group, and when Eric decided to stay in New York, he started studying with Hale, you know. So he went to school.
- Brown:** I'm holding a double reissue of Chico Hamilton Three Faces of Chico and Gongs East.
- Hamilton:** Gongs east.
- Brown:** And on Gongs East we have couple arrangements by Hale Smith.

**Hamilton:** By Hale?

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Hamilton:** Good.

**Brown:** So this is when I realized that that relationship goes back at least to 1959 if not earlier.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** 1958, excuse me, 1958. So how did you engage him to do the arrangements? Did you ever hear of his work?

**Hamilton:** Very easily.

**Brown:** You heard his work or did you --

**Hamilton:** Well Jim Hall, you know, told me what a fantastic musician he was. If Jim Hall said he was cool, he's cool, you know, that type of thing.

And I met him, I liked him, we liked each other, you know, and he said he'd like to do something for me, you know, for the group and he did and we went on to do a whole lot of things after that, you know. As a matter of fact we did a couple movies together.

**Brown:** We'll return to that when we get to that stage of your career.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. It's a funny thing, we went to California to do this film, right, and the film was with Dean Martin. I can't think of -- oh, man, my memory's gone. Anyway it was a Dean Martin film.

**Brown:** Was it the How to Succeed -- was that the one?

**Hamilton:** He played the part of a, you know --

**Brown:** The ones I've got are Cool and Groovy, The Sweet Smell of Success. No, neither one of those?



**Hamilton:** Okay, Dean Martin -- Mr. Rico. Mr. Rico, right. So we go out there and we go shopping, right. Hale's with me and I see a shirt that I like, right, silk shirt. So I think I paid about \$100 or something for it.

Hale flipped. I said, Hale let me -- you know, now you think that was extravagant, yeah, you know. I said, well hell, you smoke \$25 cigars. So what's the difference? You pay \$25 for a cigar; I pay \$100 for a shirt.

**Brown:** Which one is going to last longer? One of the things when I look back at your career, I look at the fact that you've been -- as you've said, you know, you've been a pioneer and I actually talked --

**Hamilton:** I didn't say I was a pioneer.

**Brown:** Okay, maybe I used the wrong word but I want to get somebody whose kind of on the cutting edge, somebody who --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, well I've been different; I mean put it like that.

**Brown:** What would you consider yourself then if I'm using the wrong word?

**Hamilton:** Well you use any words that you want to, you know.

**Brown:** But you didn't use the word pioneer?

**Hamilton:** No, I wouldn't consider -- you know, I don't consider myself a pioneer.

**Brown:** You know, we're all out in left field because we're drummers.

**Hamilton:** I might consider myself maybe a little different but, you know, not a pioneer. I'm not a -- you know, well I don't look at myself as that. But you can call me (unintelligible) if you want.

**Brown:** Not in your house. I'd never do that. But what I'm trying to get at is the fact that your historical at least documents -- that you've been very comfortable working in a period where, you know, segregation, and separate, and unequal, they're (unintelligible). This is the law of the land and here you are traveling around in a mixed group. I mean going on back to Lena Horne, you're traveling around in a mixed group. You have your group, you're working in mixed -- of course you come from a mixed family. You live in a mixed neighborhood but America is still not accepting of this.

And you got -- you know, well like you said, you got down to Fort McClellan, you needed some treatment, you know, both ways, you know, dealing with this whole racial climate in America. Can you talk about what that was like and any concerns or apprehensions about, you know, the feeling of this?

**Hamilton:** You know, in all honesty I think the most important thing is the fact that what I realize -- the difference between me and other black people, let's put it like that right, is my sense of humor was entirely different because what I thought was funny wasn't funny to them at all.

**Brown:** Such as?

**Hamilton:** You know, when I played Philadelphia for the first time -- did I tell you about this?

**Brown:** I don't think so. I don't remember.

**Hamilton:** There used to be an Afro American paper called the Pittsburgh Carrier, do you remember that one?

**Brown:** The Courier or Carrier?

**Hamilton:** The Carrier, whatever. When I played Philly for the first time, man, the headlines on the Pittsburgh Carrier said. "Chico Hamilton and his all white orchestra".

**Brown:** I mean this is for your quintet anyway, right?

**Hamilton:** Well there was a hell of a long time when I was the only black dude in my group and it wasn't the fact that I was prejudiced or anything like that, I went for the sound of the instrument and if a dude could play, I don't care whether they were chartreuse, it didn't make me any difference. If he's got the sound that I wanted, that was it. I'm still that way.

**Brown:** Okay. And of course the historical record shows that you have been very progressive in that regard, but the business and the rest of American society and culture weren't with you.

**Hamilton:** I've had my keester kicked. Man, I've had my keester kicked. The first time we played -- where was that? Delaware some place like that. I couldn't stay in the same hotel my band stayed in, you know. Right outside of St Louis, stopped to get some gas, the

dude poured the gas on the ground and he made me pay for it. You know, I've walked on some tissue paper, man, you know? So it's cool.

**Brown:** Now when you were with Lena --

**Hamilton:** With Lena?

**Brown:** Yeah, with Lena, did, you know, her success and the echelons that she was in, would that help kind of ameliorate or kind of, you know, keep that at bay, or are you still confronted, because Lena talks about some horror stories about her career.

**Hamilton:** I was there. I was there with her.

**Brown:** So it didn't matter how high you got --

**Hamilton:** It don't matter how high you get, you know.

**Brown:** You've still got to go in the back door.

**Hamilton:** They did. They wouldn't let Nat Cole in through the front door, you know. That is all about what this country is all about and the sense -- it's not only just this country man, I found out the whole world is like that.

For some unknown reason that's the way people are. So what you have to do -- you know, I might be your color but I'm not your kind. That's what Benjamin Davis told me, the old man, General Davis.

**Brown:** Yeah, Benjamin O. Davis, sure, I know who he is. He's a general.

**Hamilton:** Benjamin Davis. They had a meeting with all the non-commissioned officers and that's the first thing he said. I might be your color but I'm not your kind, which virtually is the bottom line. And it's always going to be like that, man, because people are people. The funniest people I know are people.

**Brown:** I hope so.

**Hamilton:** You know, so you've just -- you know, what you do -- see at a very early age man, I found out who I was, and personal as a kid, young kid in my family, right. I was the darkest one in my family and my sister used to call me blackie. We never ever, ever used the N word. Never, it was taboo. You never used that word, you know, but the fact that she used to make me feel like inferior --

**Brown:** Because of color.

**Hamilton:** Because of my complexion.

**Brown:** Because of your skin tone.

**Hamilton:** You dig? Well man, you know, after it stopped hurting then I realized, that's her. You know, I'm who I am. I'm what I'm all about. I know me.

**Brown:** Were you actually darker than your father as well?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** Yeah? Genetics is something else isn't it?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, you dig? They used to think my mother was -- my mother used to carry me in her bucket. They used to think I was the maid's baby.

Man, when I got drafted, leaving to go to San Pedro, my mother came down to the train station to see me off and this sergeant kept going around, Foreststorn Hamilton, Foreststorn Hamilton, and every time he'd pass me I'd say here. He just walked on by.

So after about at least a half a dozen times man, he finally -- I said to him, I'm Foreststorn Hamilton and man this dude turned red as a beet. He said, you're mother wants to see you. He didn't believe, you know, that was my mother. But anyway, that's just --

**Brown:** Have things changed as far as you're concerned?

**Hamilton:** I don't know whether things have changed but I've changed. I have no problem with it. If you've got a problem with me being what I am, that's your problem, it's not mine and if you don't believe me, if you're going to mess with me, you'd better come with something because man I'm going to hurt you because I know you only have one intention, that's to do me bodily harm.

**Brown:** Okay, let's bring it on into the '60s. Now that we've set the stage and we know where --

**Hamilton:** Okay, but you understand where I'm coming from? I'm not the great I am or anything. I'm not the only dude that's -- you know, it's like the younger generation man, they have an opportunity -- that's one of the things that bothers me, just like it bothers Sharpton, Jessie Jackson, all those guys.

I can't get with these young dudes that want to refer to, where this -- the rappers. They have no idea, man. They have no idea what their forefathers went through to get to where they are now, you dig? You know?

**Brown:** A lot of them don't have fathers.

**Hamilton:** That's beside the point. That's beside the point, man. Poverty is a state of mind. You don't have to be poor, man. You don't have to be poor, man. You can get more with a thank you and a gun then you can --

**Brown:** I like that, and a gun. That's a big qualifier there. As opposed to a -- you get a thank you and a gun as opposed to -- please complete that statement, Mr. Hamilton.

**Hamilton:** No, that's it.

**Brown:** That was it, right. Enough said.

**Hamilton:** But anyway, it's my daughter's generation. Her offspring. They're the ones - - and man opportunities -- man, have you any idea how much money these rappers make?

If I ever made that kind of money, man, it would be just bull, you know. And really from what I can see in here, it's nothing but bull. And the young white people, guys, girls, they ain't no different.

**Brown:** They're going to be like --

**Hamilton:** Hey man, let me tell you something. Let me tell you, when I catch the bus coming home, sometimes I come across town. I'm on 14th and 6th Avenue. I come across town to 1st Avenue. I get on the bus and all of these kids, Catholic with the uniforms on, girls, get on the bus, right? I'm sitting down, right, there's about two or three of them standing right behind me, right, conversation, of this m-f -- white girls.

**Brown:** That's a heck of a qualifier there.

**Hamilton:** This is the truth, man. I didn't believe, you know. I don't know whether they know what the word means, they're just -- you know, it's talk. But this, you know, that's what you're into now, man. Don't you have it out your way?

**Brown:** I have a 15-year old daughter. You know I'm fighting it.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah. Man I have a lot of compassion for you people that have teenagers man, because the competition is so keen out there man, that you've got to -- you know, I don't know how you can keep control over -- you know, it's not a question of keeping control but, you know, I'll hip you up to something.

At this particular time in your life, with your daughter being 15, you know what you do, you become her best -- forget being her father, become her friend. Become her friend and don't get involved with her and her boyfriends. Stay cool regardless of whether you want to, just stay cool and you'll always get along.

My daughter now is 50 years old and we're still good friends. I've never bugged her about none of the dudes that she's been -- you know, did that the hard way. I mean you learn that, you know, and you stay cool and we're friends.

**Brown:** I appreciate that believe me.

**Hamilton:** Really man, try it.

**Brown:** Thank you, I'll take that to heart.

**Hamilton:** It works because when you keep that father stuff going, you bug them. Well, you know, they talk to their friends and their friends hate their fathers so they start hating.

**Brown:** That's definitely a word to the wise.

**Hamilton:** That's what happened, man, with the love child thing, beginning of rock -- the thing when the young people -- they wanted young people to start listening to the jazz. They didn't listen to jazz because their folks listened to jazz and they hated their folks. But they didn't know that a family that listens to jazz together stays together.

**Brown:** Let's take a break on that one. Thank you again for those life lessons and the benefit of your wisdom. I will definitely take that back to California and make sure my daughter understands that I'm in her corner.

**Hamilton:** You owe me a quarter.

**Brown:** Gladly. So now again we're on to that very transitional and pivotal decade of your career, the 1960s and you reformed a new group and the historical record likes to reflect that as -- it's more as they say, "adopted a gutsy blues and swing style". So maybe you might want to comment on that and the direction of your new group and how it's doing, its reception.

**Hamilton:** This particular group?

**Brown:** Yes, the one right after the quintet.

**Hamilton:** Okay, this is a group with Charles Lloyd, Gabor Szabo, and Albert Stinson, and George Mahana (?) was in that group. It said bluesy and what else?

**Brown:** “Adopted a gutsy, blues and swing style”.

**Hamilton:** Well number one, I don’t know what gutsy blues is.

**Brown:** Okay.

**Hamilton:** That’s number one. We were just making some music, man. I was just playing. We were swinging, that’s all. You know, the beat was there, the pulse was there and tonally we were in a very musical sort of arrangements, that’s all.

**Brown:** Well it would seem to me perhaps this biographical entry is referring to the fact that you’ve now replaced the cello with brass.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** So maybe it takes on more of a conventional timbrel presentation, jazz timbre presentation.

**Hamilton:** Well, you know, I’ll tell you something, man. I’ve always had a thing about - - whatever you wanted to call what I was doing is all right with me because, you know, I just consider, we’re making music, that’s all. I mean in all honesty, I can’t say we were this or we were that, you know. So it was just being myself, man, the way I felt about it. You think that’s kind of a dumb answer but it’s a fact, you know.

**Brown:** Well again, you know, one of the interesting features of your band is that you like trombone players. You bring in Garnett Brown.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So is that accurate?

**Hamilton:** Well the bone, I’ll tell you, the bone -- you know why? Trombones are about the closest instrument to the human voice that there is. I didn’t know whether you knew that

or not, did you, or realize that, but a trombone is very close to a human voice, especially when its played by people like, you know, Garnett, George Mahana and all these hell of a trombone players, JJ and people like that.

You know, trombone is a hell of a sound. I just -- you know, I like the sound of a trombone. I like the sound of the combination of a trombone and horn. I like the trombone with a flute. I like trombone with tenor. I like trombone, you know, with alto. I like the trombone.

**Brown:** You like trombone players too?

**Hamilton:** Trombone players, yeah.

**Brown:** Whitman and --

**Hamilton:** As a matter of fact man, I had a trombone band at one time. I've got the record here, man. I had four bones, and a singer, and a horn player, alto player, and a bass player. That was it.

**Brown:** Who wrote for that? Who arranged for that?

**Hamilton:** Well me and Jimmy Cheatham.

**Brown:** Oh, Cheatham, Jimmy Cheatham, there you go.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I got a record over here. But anyway, it's cool. You dig?

**Brown:** Okay, all right. And so you're touring with this group. What's the reception? Are you encountering, you know, why aren't you doing the old stuff? Why don't you have cello anymore? Or were they saying, oh, Chico got a new direction, let's stay with him.

**Hamilton:** You said it.

**Brown:** It was more the latter?

**Hamilton:** Well some people -- at first it took a little time for them to get used to it, let's put it like that, as my sound. There were a lot of people who, you know, at first were disappointed because I didn't have the cello but then the second time around, you know, they said hey, what's happening, you dig? So it was happening, you know.

As a matter of fact it ended up being really hip. You know, we were very contemporary and I was just as contemporary as anybody else that was out there, you know, with the groups, which was cool.



**Brown:** And then in 1966 you rejoined Lena for a tour of Europe.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** And this time she hires you and your band basically to back her up.

**Hamilton:** Right, yeah.

**Brown:** How did that come about?

**Hamilton:** How did that come about? She needed a group.

**Brown:** And she called you.

**Hamilton:** She needed a group.

**Brown:** How long had it been since you had last worked with her?

**Hamilton:** Quite a while I guess. You know, a long time as a matter of fact because I had established myself, you know, with the quintet and everything, so it had to be at least two or three years, something like that, right, and when Ralph had set it up, which was cool because we played the Talk of the Town over there, the nightclub, and at that same time I was there, is when I did the film with Roman Polanski, Repulsion.

And all that happened when I was there with Lena at Talk of the Town. And I would go to the studio in the daytime, be at the studio at 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock in the morning while Roman was shooting. I'd come home and write that night after -- with Lena, play my gig and try to compose some music, right, and this went on for what, at least a month or so. So when he finished the film and I got ready to record, to do the score, the English union wouldn't let me use my group and man I had to use all English musicians, dudes that I had never heard of, you know.

Incidentally man, at that time -- or before that time when I first went to England, I was the first American musician to be able to play in England in 25 years because of the union. I broke the barrier because Lena and them insisted, you know, they couldn't do without me so I was one of the first American musicians to play in England because the union -- they went to war or something, you know.

**Brown:** But you were singled out of the group? I mean the rest of the group was American too, right?

**Hamilton:** At that time when I first went to --

**Brown:** Working with Lena.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, it was just me and Gerry Wiggins.

**Brown:** The first time that you went?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** But she wasn't allowed to take her whole group?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** This was not the group with Luther and -- no.

**Hamilton:** No. But getting back to -- now in '66 I did the film, right?

**Brown:** Repulsion. Now is this the beginning of your film-scoring career?

**Hamilton:** Well yeah.

**Brown:** So you hadn't done anything in Los Angeles prior to this?

**Hamilton:** Did we do some -- I had done Sweet Smell of Success I think before I did --

**Brown:** Oh, yeah, you've done stuff in the mid '50s, Cool and Groovy and The Sweet Smell of Success.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, okay.

**Brown:** And then you said Mr. Rico.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. I'm there, we do the film. We close. Before we close I get a call from a creative art director from (Unintelligible) Advertising by the name of Mike Walman. He asked me would I do commercial for him and I had never done a commercial before in my life.

I didn't know what a commercial was but what happened was, he had heard -- there was a series on TV, CBS, called Gerald McBoing-Boing, the series you know, and they used my tune, Morning After as a theme song, (musical sounds). They used that and he loved it.

And he found out who it was and he calls me in London and asks me would I do the commercial and I told him, you know, sure. I have no idea what -- so to make a long story short, I came from London. I came here to New York and I stayed at the Scota Hotel where I always stay and I had my first meeting with Mike Walman.

And he had this storyboard. It was a cigarette -- cigarettes were on there, Spring cigarettes, (musical sounds). So I looked at the storyboard, the first time I ever saw a storyboard, and I came up with this idea of this melody.

Well to make a long story short, man, I ended up being the composer, the arranger, and I produced it. He made me the producer and as a producer I was contractor, I put the band together. I got paid for doing all of that as well as a salary for producing and bringing the thing, delivering it.

Man, I made so much money, man, I had no idea there was that much money in the world and all of a sudden I realized -- he says, he had something else for me to do and there were guys, you know, Clark Terry, all these guys that were here in New York, they were doing commercials but they were just side men. None of them were producing.

Automatically man, I just, you know, came in and started producing. I had no idea what it was to produce. I started my company. I was here for about three or four months and Mike Walman, my friend, we found this apartment. This street here, Film Row from river to river, used to be known as Film Row.

All of the production houses were on this street, 45th all the way across, and all the advertising companies would come on the street. If you wanted two blocks over they wouldn't come -- the business anyway.

So the next thing I know, man I'm doing commercials hand over -- I get Jimmy Cheatham who was in the service, we were together. I bring him in and between the two of us man, we formed a company called Wide World of Music and man from then on I did -- oh, hell, Chrysler, I did Revlon.

As a matter of fact when IBM first went on the air, that was all my music all that stuff. And I became very successful at it. I ended maybe being the second largest music company, supplier on the street during that period.

And as a matter of fact this producer called me to do -- wanted me to do Ivory Soap and when I went to the -- I forget which agency it was, but my first meeting at the agency, man, when they found that I was black they didn't want me to do it, the ivory soap, you know, white, pure white.

**Brown:** 99.99.

**Hamilton:** But the producer insisted that I do it and I wrote a commercial man, a spot for them, that they're still playing today. (Musical sounds), ivory, (musical sounds. And man they were shocked. They didn't know a black dude could write this kind of music, you know. But everything is cool.

**Brown:** So that all started because Mike Walman heard your theme song you wrote.

**Hamilton:** Right.

**Brown:** And that led to everything.

**Hamilton:** And brought me to Madison Avenue. That brought me to here. I stayed on the street at least eight or nine years until I got up to here with it.

**Brown:** Up to here with what?

**Hamilton:** Well I got burned out. TV can ruin you man. TV can suck all your talent, take all your talent. You know, for anybody to last on TV is amazing in a sense because man it can really burn you out, you know.

I got to the point man where I would pigeonhole things. I was just doing things for money, which I guess nothing's wrong with that but you reach a point where you find yourself repeating yourself. I wouldn't even listen to the radio or nothing because I didn't want to be influenced by anything, you know. I want to be original, you know.

**Brown:** Let's talk about the development of Wide World of Music. So the first thing you did was you realized you had an opportunity so you bring in a close partner, Jimmy Cheatham. So are you equal partners or is he working with you, working for you?

**Hamilton:** He's sort of working with me. I did all the hustling. I did all the hustling.

**Brown:** Well that was what I was going to ask. So how do you start to develop your staff and how do you start to develop this business, just for any other entrepreneurs?

**Hamilton:** No, Jimmy was the only one -- you know, I did the composing, he did the arranging. And I went out and got the jobs, I went out and hustled the spots. I went out and, you know, hung out and did, you know --

**Brown:** So you didn't hire a publicist, you didn't have a manager?

**Hamilton:** No, no, I did it all myself, man.

**Brown:** So you had to at least have an admin, somebody, a secretary?

**Hamilton:** No, I did it all myself, man.

**Brown:** Everything.

**Hamilton:** I did everything. I learned how to drink in the daytime, martinis at lunch. I had never drank before evening time.

**Brown:** Was it because that was part of the business, you meeting folks?

**Hamilton:** Three-martini lunch. You always had martinis at lunch. Advertising people is something else, man, you know. My whole lifestyle changed, man, I became -- I didn't hang out with musicians, I hung out with producers, writers, and people like that, art directors.

**Brown:** Such as, do you remember --

**Hamilton:** Well, you know, Jerry Schatzberg. Name some of the -- you know, I hung out with all the photographers, Bert Stern, people like that, writers like Don Stewart. He and I became very close. He won the Academy Award for Missing -- the writer. I just hung out with people, you know, in the advertising world.

**Brown:** But a different breed of animal.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man.

**Brown:** Different from the musician milieu.

**Hamilton:** Completely different, man, completely different. But they were my eyes to a whole lot of things, you know, different -- but they were different.

**Brown:** What was an average day like during this period? You say you were hustling so what was it like? You started your day at what time, what are you doing?

**Hamilton:** Well it all depends on what kind of meeting -- if I had to go to a meeting.

**Brown:** A lot of meetings.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, man. As a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons why I quit. My last meeting I went to I think it was at Benton and Bowles. I was there at eight o'clock and the meeting lasted to about noon. And the last thing they said to me was, Chico we'll call you and I said cool.

And they were the 30th floor, man, and as I was walking to the elevator, waiting for the elevator to come up man, it hit me, don't call us, we'll call you and I said forget it and I came home, I came here. Helen will tell you, I said hey I've had it. I'm through, I've had it. I'm going to start doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm supposed to be playing. And that's when I decided to start getting my groups back together and start getting back out there on the road to play.

But I was very successful man. I made enough money to build a home, build a house, you know, things like that.

**Brown:** That's the one in East Hampton?

**Hamilton:** That's the one in East Hampton, you dig? But it was cool man because there wasn't that many black dudes on the street at the time, on Madison Avenue, you know, but I was recognized.

**Brown:** So let's say you have Revlon. So what does Revlon do? So they say okay we want you to do the music for the commercial. Can you take us through the steps, what that process was?

**Hamilton:** Well first they had a storyboard, you know, the storyboard. They had it all laid out. A lot of times I would either pull score or pre-score, it didn't matter to me. I could pre-score. I could make music from a phone call. You describe what's happening, I'll capture their action.

**Brown:** So sometimes they call you, describe what it's like and then have you come in and --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, yeah, and then you know, I sing a few bars, you know, whatever. You know, as a matter of fact, you heard (musical sounds). I'm the first one to do that. Quincy Jones took that and made millions of dollars off of it. But I did a spot with Mike Cimino and that's all I did. Had the bass player playing (musical sounds).

**Brown:** It's your voice?

**Hamilton:** It's my voice, you dig? I started that.

**Brown:** And Quincy took it?

**Hamilton:** Well Quincy used --

**Brown:** Didn't Quincy use that in Cold Blood or something. He probably just took the idea.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, you know, he heard it. You know, somewhere down the line, somebody used it again. I've had a lot of stuff lifted of mine, you know.

**Brown:** You still get a healthy royalty check?

**Hamilton:** From years ago. Man, last year, you ready, did you see the movie Oceans Eleven.

**Brown:** I saw Oceans Eleven, the remake, yeah. The original -- not the remake, yeah.

**Hamilton:** The remake.

**Brown:** Okay, I didn't see Oceans 12.

**Hamilton:** They lifted some of my music.

**Brown:** Hope you have a good lawyer.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man we found out about it, man. It messed me up, man. Messed me up completely because man, I got a check that was just -- and I had to give it all damn near to the government it was so heavy but, you know, my man found out, we found out. I've got the best music lawyer. My lawyer is very hip. Anyway we found out and they paid off but, you know, there's so much thievery going on as you know.

**Brown:** Let's backtrack because you're getting in the film career. Obviously it started much earlier than '66 so let's start with how you got hooked up with Roman Polanski doing Repulsion.

**Hamilton:** I hooked up with Roman Polanski with -- Jerry Schatzberg introduced me to Roman. He and Roman were good friends and Jerry -- I don't know whether you're familiar with Jerry Schatzberg's work. You ever seen Panic in Needle Park, Al Pacino's first movie? That was Jerry Schatzberg.

**Brown:** Oh, yeah, that's right, that's right.

**Hamilton:** And the Downfall of -- with what's her name who played -- anyway that's Jerry Schatzberg. Jerry started off as fashion photographer, still, and went into cinema photography as a director. He and I became friends.

Funny, I reopened the Vanguard years ago and he was there opening night and people were so goddamn noisy, when I come off at intermission I went back to the bandstand and he asked me were we going to play anymore. I didn't know who he was. I just said I don't know, I might not, just like that.

And somehow or another we became friends and he introduced me to Roman when I was in London and Roman knew I was there and asked me to do the film, do the music.

**Brown:** What was he like and what was it like working with him?

**Hamilton:** Who Roman?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Man, let me tell you something about Roman. Man, Roman was perhaps the best director that I have ever worked with for the simple reason man, I had 25 music cues in that and we only had discretion about one, one, in which he says okay, we'll do it your way.

But he left me completely alone and that's -- funny thing, when you're going to do music, you know, score for a film, all of a sudden man, you know, they hire you and they pay you all this money, right, to do it, but come recording time or operating time, all of a sudden man, the producer, the director, everybody forgets why they hired you. All of a sudden they become the music director, they become the musician, you know.

And you set up the cues, you already know -- everybody knows where music -- where it's supposed to start and where it's supposed to stop, but all of a sudden, man, these directors, man, they start playing these films back, looking at the screen, you know, all of a sudden man they realize how weak they are, how weak the scene is.

And as a composer man, you know, two things -- I think the most important thing, music for a film, the most important thing is when not to have music, which means you don't want to anticipate a scene before it happens. Nine times out of ten you're going to bail the scene out. If you have to do that, you have to do something exciting or something so different that people are going to forget what they looked at. I know, man, I've been there. As a matter of fact, the music I did for Mr. Rico, as far as I was concerned was so dynamite man, I had to call three or four record companies to come to the screening.



And I left and came back to New York and man I had no idea that the director had changed everything. I was so embarrassed man I couldn't even look these people in the eye when the film was over, you know. They had fouled up my music so bad, you know, put it in the wrong places and, you know, it just taught me a lesson.

That was really -- they got to me, they really got to me, but knowing what you can do to help -- you either help a film or you can destroy a film. In *Repulsion*, man, I only had a quartet but it sounds like a full orchestra.

There was a scene in there, man, where when he slashes her -- when she slashes this dude with this razor, Roman cuts to her negligee and the blood splatters all over, right, splatters all over her nightgown, or whatever she had on.

Well man I did something there man -- you know, that started something. I used one instrument and when he cut to them, I had this piccolo just say (musical sound), you know, and man that just made that -- you didn't forget that scene man with just that one sound (musical sound), you know, piercing (musical sound), right.

And then when she's walking on the bridge, fooling with her nose, you know that she's out of her mind, right. I had that rhythm going (musical sound), same rhythm I used for *Blue Sands*.

**Brown:** Signature.

**Hamilton:** It got a lot of awards, man, you know, it was a hell of a film.

**Brown:** So that was in '66?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** When was *Mr. Rico* made?

**Hamilton:** After that.

**Brown:** It was after that, okay. So let's go further back. Let's go when you first got started in the filmology in *Cool and Groovy* in '56 and *The Sweet Smell of Success* in '57. How did you get into film, presumably in Los Angeles?

**Hamilton:** On *Sweet Smell of Success* man, they had followed me -- what I'm saying, me and my group, they had followed us for six months all over the country just to see if we

were clean, because the story, you know, had to do with marijuana, right, and they wanted to make sure, man, that we were clean, you know.

And I don't even recall how it happened but, you know, we got the call and it was dynamite man because Burt Lancaster and Hill -- I forget the partner's name. Anyway Hill was a little reluctant about letting us do the score. That's when he brought in that other dude -- but after we had done a hell of a lot of the music, Fred and I, you know, he brought in this -- you know, to play it safe.

But man on the set Marty Milner, you know the actor Marty Milner? Marty played the part of the bandleader. He played my part and he played guitar, but Marty didn't play guitar so what they did -- James Warmhow was our cameraman. What they did, they set Marty on the stool and John Persanto was my guitar player, put his arms through there, hidden behind him and did all the finger work and it actually looked like Marty was playing the guitar, right.

So man, one day man, I put my hands up there on the guitar, broke everybody up man. Here's this white face with these black hands.

**Brown:** You're right, you're back to that sense of humor.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man, it was fun. Man, the next day Burt Lancaster had a headline, a Los Angeles Times headline printed, "Chico Hamilton Busted". Oh man, we had a good time.

**Brown:** We ended on that tape already?

**Brown:** This is tape six of the Jazz Oral History interview with Chico Hamilton on January 10, 2006. We're talking about the film industry, but go ahead, you can pick it up where you'd like.

**Hamilton:** I think I mentioned earlier in regards to I guess before the war when I was on the staff at Paramount Studios.

**Brown:** Right, let's go back there.

**Hamilton:** And there were only three of us, myself, Red Callender, and Dudley Brooks who was the pianist. And we were the only three black musicians in the whole entire Hollywood studio scene at that time, and what we did, what I did and what we did, like a rehearsal piano player, I was the rehearsal drummer.

I had to play -- I kept time man, for Marilyn Monroe. I kept time for Sheree North, who just passed recently. I just saw on the screen -- and all these starlets that at the time the studios had that starlet scene going.

And I worked out of Jack Hope, Bob Hope's brother's department and I had to accompanied them a lot of times when they went off to do things, up and down the coast. And that's what I was doing.

It was dynamite man. I was making dynamite loot. I think I was maybe making maybe \$150 a week or something like that, but every week it was cool, you dig? However, soon I got, you know, I got tired of it, it got boring and I quit.

But Red Callender, and myself, and Dudley Brooks, we were the only three guys on the payroll of a major studio. Some of the films I worked were -- I did all the drumming on the Road to Bali with Crosby and Hope and, you know, all of those.

**Brown:** How did you guys get in?

**Hamilton:** Huh?

**Brown:** How did you get in to the -- I mean you were talking about pre-war so you're talking about early '40s.

**Hamilton:** well Dudley Brooks was always doing something, you know, at the studio as an independent and he called me. I got the call from him, you know, because at that time, you know, I was freelancing and I was sort of like one of the top drummers in LA during that period, which is cool. But I made my film debut man when I was eight or nine years old in LA.

**Brown:** Okay, better change the historical record.

**Hamilton:** You know all the Tarzan movies; they used to pick up us kids in a truck, a flatbed truck. We met on the corner. I forget which corner it was, on the east side. It was about no more then five or six of us, right, and we met on the corner and they'd pick us up and they'd take us out to the lot. They didn't have any studios.

I mean they took us out to the lot and they stripped you down and if they painted you, if you wore paint, you got \$14 a day. If not, \$7 a day and all you had to do, you know, look like you were in the jungle and run across. All those Tarzan movies --

**Brown:** So I've got to be looking for a little Foreststorn.

**Hamilton:** Right. We got hip, man. We got very hip quick on that because if you're in front of the camera they couldn't use you so man we used to hide and be the last ones on the camera. We did everything, you know, to make a buck but it was funny but, you know, it happened, it was like that, which is cool.

As a matter of fact, going back to those days, when I was in high school, Jack Kelso and myself and I don't recall who else, but anyway we used to play for Dorothy Dandridge's mother. The Dandridge sisters, right, we were the orchestra for her at that time, you know, so I'll tell you man -- but getting back, becoming a contemporary again.

The key to how -- making movies is fantastic but man it can break your heart. You know, you can get your head handed to you. It's really an unbelievable cutthroat business, you know. And it's changed tremendously.

As a matter of fact, there hasn't really been a movie that I've seen here lately that they've actually had a good score. Everything's lifted, you know. Records -- they play everybody's tracks, things like that, but to have a score for a film, I haven't seen one yet. They're probably out there but I haven't been to a movie in a long time.

**Brown:** Well the first entry in your filmography is Cool and Groovy. Do you have any recollection of that?

**Hamilton:** No, I don't even --

**Brown:** Don't remember that one.

**Hamilton:** I don't remember that one. It might have been a different name, I don't know. I don't remember that one. But then that's just like a lot of albums I've seen come from Europe. It shocked me man to see -- when did I do this, right?

**Brown:** Okay, so we'll back into the timeline. We're in the '60s. You've now formed Wide World of Music.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Now since the early '50s you've been a bandleader and you probably just cherry picked the assignments that you would serve as a sideman. So Lena when she went to Europe you took that one, but at this point is it pretty much in your mind that you're a leader, that's your identity?

**Hamilton:** Well I'll tell you something man, when I did my first record, my trio record, when I started recording for myself, I never recorded for anybody else ever. Haven't been a sideman, ever. Everything I've done, it's been me.

You know, I was hip to that period, you know. Everybody that wanted me to record with them, you know, which before then I recorded with anybody, you know, but once I started for myself, that was it man.

**Brown:** Why?

**Hamilton:** Well several reasons. Number one, I wanted to play my music. Number two, I owned my music. I publish my own music. Does that tell you why?

**Brown:** Complete control.

**Hamilton:** Complete control. So that's why.

**Brown:** And you were lucky enough or fortunate enough --

**Hamilton:** Fortunate enough.

**Brown:** To team up with record companies that allowed you to continue.

**Hamilton:** To do that.

**Brown:** They understood your vision, they supported you.

**Hamilton:** Right. Well I sold records.

**Brown:** You made them money.

**MR.HAMILTON:** I made them money. I made them money, you know. You know, you talk about, Miles getting a lot of money from Columbia, man, when I went with Warner Brothers, George Avakian, right, I got a \$30,000 advance you know.

**Brown:** You're talking about what year, the late '50s?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Dang, so you beat out Miles and he got chump change coming --

**Hamilton:** But anyway, you know, they got it back.

**Brown:** Oh, yes. What was it like working with George Avakian, because he's still around?

**Hamilton:** George is still around, yeah. George is cool man. We're still good friends. We're still good friends. We talk every once in a while. Every once in a while he'll call me or I'll call him. We've been cool, you dig?

**Brown:** That's good. I mean, yeah, the last time I talked to George he talked a lot about, you know, his relationship with Miles, you know, and why he did certain things and wouldn't do certain things with Miles.

**Hamilton:** Man, I got to tell you , when I signed with Reprise -- oh, I just read George Jacobs book. Do you know who George Jacobs was?

**Brown:** Uh-uh, which book is that?

**Hamilton:** Was Sinatra's valet for 15 years. The one on top there.

**Brown:** So what did you get out of that? What did you glean from that book?

**Hamilton:** Well man, I know George. George played an important part in my life, man, in getting my release from Frank Sinatra. When I signed with them, right --

**Brown:** Reprise records?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. We went on the set. He was doing a movie, A Hole in the Head -- Frank, right. And man there must have been about oh, at least 2,000 or 3,000 people that day on the set, right, on the lot -- they're shooting.

And when they told him that I was there, he stopped shooting, man and walked all the way across the lot man to where I was standing to greet me, Frank Sinatra did man. And people say, who in the hell is this, you know?

**Brown:** This is just because of your Relationship -- because the signing was -- or did you have a previous relationship?

**Hamilton:** No previous relationship. I just signed with him. I had met him when I was with Lena, years ago when I was with Lena and then I saw him, you know, from time to time, you know. He's a dynamite dude, man, unbelievable. And we signed with Reprise but they weren't ready for jazz, you know at that time.

But anyway to make a long story short, but, you know, after a while when nothing was happening, I realized nothing -- you know, I wanted out.

And I was playing at the Vanguard and Sinatra was in town. He was doing that thing at Carnegie Hall and George came down to the Vanguard to see me and I told him, George, I really want to get out of my contract. He says okay, I'll talk to -- come on, you want to see the boss? I said yeah.

So after the gig man we come on up to Jilly's, right, we go into Jilly's. You can't even get nowhere near there man, people are just like this, you know, and they see George, they let George and me in.

Man, in the back room, it's like this, ladies, guys, you know, everybody was hip and there was a riser and Sinatra was sitting in the middle, people on every side of him, right, and man they were having a ball, you know.

So George went up and told him, said boss, Chico's here. Chico wants to say something to you and so he reaches up out of his chair to lean over to shake my hand and he falls. Man they grabbed -- they grabbed me. He said, no, no, he's -- you know, everybody took their hands off of me but they thought I had done something.

But man, I told him, I said I want out, can I get my contract? And he was loaded man. And he didn't say anything and I left. And about a week or ten days later man, my contract was in the mail. He was a dynamite dude, man. I dug the hell out of Frank Sinatra. He was very respectful to me and he was very respectful to -- every time I'd see him, you know, very polite. So it was cool.

If you get a chance, read that book because you aren't going believe that, you know. Funny thing man, the chapters that he's got in there about Sammy, I felt the same way about Sammy Davis. So I won't tell you but I got the same impression about Sammy.

**Brown:** George Jacobs, Mr. S., My Life with Frank Sinatra. Okay, we'll definitely check that out.

**Hamilton:** So other than that, where were we?

**Brown:** Okay, so we were in the '60s, going towards the end of the '60s. Now you and Jimmy Cheatham have Wide World of Music.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** You're getting burned out. You decide you need to get out of that because I guess during this period you really aren't playing, you don't have a group, you were basically off the jazz scene.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Nobody knows what happened to Chico and then you come back and this is where I'm going to pull out an LP, and I'm not sure if this is the beginning of your comeback, but this is Peregrinations and on the back, the line notes by Stanley Crouch says, "Chico, Chico, where you been?"

So this came out I believe in '70. It was probably recorded in '72, but I think it was released in '75. This is Blue Note. So obviously you had come back to the scene before this. So can you talk about leaving, working in advertising, working outside of the jazz field and coming back in, making that transition?

**Hamilton:** Well coming back in, I just put together a group, man. You know, I started putting together a different group. Like I told you, I had that trombone group, trombone choir, right? Jimmy Cheatham, Jimmy Cleveland, and people like that. And we made an album, which was good and from then on I just started fooling around, you know, did different groups and started booking myself.

I didn't have an agent at that time and I eventually, I think did I go back -- who the hell -- I went with somebody. I forget who the agent was but anyway I got an agent and we started doing it, you know, started booking it and I started playing again.

In whatever the time, I got a call to play the University of Indiana and I hooked up with the guy, the promoter that was doing it. It turned out to be a young dude, man, a student. So I went out there. Now this is the group I had, Arnie Lawrence and those people, that group.

**Brown:** In this group then. Arnie Lawrence is on here.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, Arnie Lawrence IS on there?

**Brown:** Arnie's on here, Steve Turre.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, okay, I had Arnie and Steve. Yeah, it must have been that group, or Arthur Blythe or whatever.

**Brown:** Arthur Blythe, uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Anyway, had that group, so we went out there and played the University. And I met this young dude student who I was very impressed with and I told him, I said, you know, hey listen, when you graduate if you ever come to New York, look me up, give me a call.



Well he graduated and came to New York and we've been together ever since. That's about 15 years ago. That's Jeff Kaye, my manager now. And he's the last word. If he doesn't want to work, I won't work. And I'm his only client. I mean he runs his family business. They make truck bodies. They're in Indiana and he's dynamite, man. We're family, you know and here again man, I got lucky.

**Brown:** So, yeah, you talked about this group. You had Jimmy Cheatham, Tom MacIntosh on trombone, and then two saxophones, Steve Potts and Arnie Lawrence. But you know there was a very similar recording made before that, *The Dealer*.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, where I introduced Larry Coryell, yeah.

**Brown:** Right, let's talk about that recording. That's pretty funky.

**Hamilton:** Larry Coryell used to come here when we played Seattle, played the Playboy Club in Seattle. Larry was too young, he couldn't come into the club but he used to come to the window and put his ear up against the window to listen to Gabor. Same thing with George Benson. Same thing in Pittsburgh. George flipped over Gabor. Well Gabor, man, was unbelievable, original, original, you dig? But anyway I got back to LA and all of a sudden Larry came into town and he called me and I put him on the band, you know, playing with Gabor, you know, that type of thing. So he wanted experience and that's how that all happened. He ended up with -- we got to New York when I recorded -- Gabor left and Larry and Arnie came on the band and that's how we did *The Dealer*.

**Brown:** So can you talk about that project? What was the inspiration for that project? Was that something that was your idea, your concept?

**Hamilton:** What, about *The Dealer*?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** I didn't have an idea about the title. George -- what's his name, who's the producer on that? Bob Thiele's idea, because I was smoking in those days, cigarettes, and that's the reason they've got the cover with me smoking on it. There you go, look like a dealer.

**Brown:** That's sometime in '66.

**Hamilton:** Is that when that was?

**Brown:** Uh-huh.

**Hamilton:** Goddamn, '66, okay. I'll tell you, that music stills holds up today don't it?

**Brown:** Oh, it definitely does. Yeah, it's just as fresh as the day you waxed it. I'm holding another one, Chico Hamilton, The Man From Two Worlds.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** This introduces Forest Flower with Charles Lloyd.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** How did you hook up with Charles Lloyd?

**Hamilton:** I gave Charles his first job man when he graduated from USC, you know.

**Brown:** He was already into --

**Hamilton:** No, he wasn't the musician he was. He developed while he was with me. You know, he was just a young player. As a matter of fact, people hated him in the beginning.

**Brown:** Because?

**Hamilton:** They didn't like the way he played. He played alto, you know, he was an alto player.

**Brown:** With some influence by Trane.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, after he got this tenor.

**Brown:** After he got this tenor, okay. So alto, he was not impressive?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** What about the Gabor, how did you meet with him? He's Hungarian, correct?

**Hamilton:** Gabor heard us at the Newport Jazz Festival and he loved the group, the sound, and he made it a point of introducing himself to me and when he came to California he made sure that I met him, you know, and one thing led to another. He and Charles hit it off, and Albert, so, you know, here again man, we happened to be four guys in the right place at the right time.

**Brown:** Let me since I brought up John Coltrane, you know, we inevitably have to talk about Elvin Jones because, you know, you talk about these very crucial periods in your development.

**Hamilton:** You know, John told me -- we were sitting on the bandstand at the ID Club in LA. You know, John Coltrane, John c, the original godfather, and it was on a Sunday afternoon, man, a matinee.

I went to see John. I went to see Trane rather and we were sitting on the bandstand and we're talking man, and Trane says, Cheeks, I've played myself into a box. And I asked him, I said what do you mean? He says well, there's just so many places I can play. He says whereas you play all over. You play in Chicago, you play the London House, you play all that. I can't play those places. They won't hire me. And that was a fact.

**Brown:** Do you remember about what year this was for Trane, for you I guess I should say, but I'm just trying to think about --

**Hamilton:** Well it was -- I don't remember. Off the top of my head I can't tell you but shortly after -- well Elvin was with him, you know.

**Brown:** So it was still the original quartet?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah the original.

**Brown:** Okay, so it had to be before '65.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. But in Detroit they played all the funky joints. You know, he didn't play any of the classy rooms, which was the bottom line of what he was saying, whereas I could play all the big time rooms, which meant, you know, big time, you know, good dough type of thing. But I understood what he was saying, you know. He was a very nice man. Man, he was a really dynamite dude and very sincere.

**Brown:** Did you see any similarities between your experience with Eric Dolphy and with Trane? Did you see similarities in personality at all? For one thing they always practiced, but beyond that?

**Hamilton:** They were both totally music. They were both totally music, you know. I don't know what kind of businessman he was. You know, I mean what kind of business he took care of, nor do I know what kind of business Eric Dolphy took care of, you know, but

fortunately or unfortunately man, you know, I assumed the responsibility when I decided to be a bandleader. I took on that responsibility. I had to do it, you know.

So the first time I had a manager, I got a friend of mine to be my manager, right. Man, this dude who shall remain nameless, took a whole year of tax money of mine and never paid it and when the government came out, they were going to take my house. My wife, if she had seen him, she would have killed him but this dude for a whole year man did not pay my taxes and I'm deducting taxes every week from salary, you know. You dig?

**Brown:** The business. Well let's go back to listening to the John Coltrane quartet. What was your impression? I mean you probably heard Elvin before that.

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, man. I was very impressed with Elvin, man. Elvin did things man, nobody else could do. He'd played (unintelligible) rhythms as they call them, whatever, he crossed rhythms man.

I remember hearing him one time man; they're playing a ballad, right. All of a sudden man, old thunder (unintelligible), man he played some that was just -- you talking about out of left field, I mean -- and came back in. Goddamn, it worked. But to hear, I mean all of sudden, you know. Elvin was something else man.

Well I was close with all my contemporary drummers, man. You know, always had affection towards, an appreciation -- everybody was doing -- because everybody was doing something different. I didn't try to play like Max or Elvin, I couldn't, you know, and they didn't play like me. Everybody did their own thing, which was cool.

**Brown:** There was a CD that you had yesterday where it starts out talking about how Philly Joe Jones, that you were --

**Hamilton:** The guy made a mistake.

**Brown:** He (unintelligible) apologized for that.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Yeah, that's what I figured but I wanted to make sure you could clarify --

**Hamilton:** No, man, some English guy wrote that. It really ticked me off when I read it.

**Brown:** But you were cool with Philly Joe Jones?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, Philly and I were --

**Brown:** Because you probably ran into him in England too.

**Hamilton:** No, man, I ran into Philly when I first came to New York man. He was on his back He used to come out and hang out with me every night, man. He was something else man. We were cool.

**Brown:** You talk about the fraternity of drummers and, you know, when we look at it through the historical perspective we know that Papa Jo -- you know, when you came to New York you had to come to Papa Jo's house, you know, and there seemed to be a real fraternity and real nurturing.

You know, we know that drummers as you're the first to admit, you know, kind of out to lunch to be drummers and sometimes there's some competition, you know, people, you know, got their turf, but then there seemed to have been a history or a legacy, more of a fraternal --

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah, for instance I'm the first one to record Topsy with a small group, right. Cozy Cole recorded Topsy and made a zillion dollars, it became a hit, right.

**Brown:** When did you record Topsy because --

**Hamilton:** Oh, years ago.

**Brown:** Really, with a small --

**Hamilton:** As a matter of fact, he heard me playing it and he --

**Brown:** That's the biggest selling drum solo record ever.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, right. He heard me playing it. He didn't know anything about Topsy.

**Brown:** But he was doing (unintelligible) solos. That was his thing back in the day.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. But Cozy and I -- just like Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich -- did I ever tell you about the time I had to follow Buddy Rich?

**Brown:** I don't remember you telling us about that.

**Hamilton:** It was in LA, man, and there was joint that opened up on the strip, small place, only held about 90 people and Dave Pell and his octet, Buddy Rich Quintet when he had Sweets, and Sonny Chris, my group, and Slim and Slam.

**Brown:** We're back in -- wow how far back -- we're going back early '50s, late '40s? How far back are we going?

**Hamilton:** The night of the day that Elizabeth Taylor and Nicky Hilton got married, they spent part of their wedding night in there, okay?

**Brown:** Okay.

**Hamilton:** Man, let me tell you something, Buddy Rich played and them people, they applauded about a half an hour. I mean they went crazy, right. And I had to follow him, my cello group, right and me.

So we played, we followed him, and I did a brush solo. This is the truth. Man, by the time -- before I was in the middle of my solo you could hear a pin drop. Man this ticked Buddy off, he got so ticked off. Man he wouldn't even speak to me.

But later on man I heard him on an interview where he acknowledge me as one of his favorite drummers, you know, and my brother Don who was in the liquor business and his sister -- his daughter's husband was in the liquor business and they knew that -- they exchanged -- and she said Buddy often, you know, would talk -- was very complimentary of me, but man he was something else, man.

Then Gene Krupa was just the opposite. I mean Gene was dynamite, very nice man. We got along beautifully, you know. But Sid Catlett, Sonny Greer, you know, I got along with all of them man.

**Brown:** Can you talk about Sonny because not that many people -- you know, as a drummer if you talk about Sonny, or, you know, just personally.

**Hamilton:** Sonny was sharp, man. He stayed sharp. And a classy guy, real classy. Even when he was -- after he left, you know, was here in New York, wasn't on Duke's band, he played with a little trio in an old joint up here on 1st Avenue. And he used to come to work every night in his tuxedo, you know, every night. Classy guy. He was virtually the first percussionist man that there was. You know, he wasn't just a drummer. He was very musical, very, very, very, musical.

**Brown:** Yeah, he very much orchestrated.

**Hamilton:** He had that (musical sounds), had that forward motion going all the time, you dig? Whereas Crawford was (musical sounds), right. And Sid sweeps his ass off. He was a brush man as far as I was concerned. Sid, you know how big he was -- size? Huge, huge, but man he had a touch.

You know what he used to do, he used to reach all the way over to the drums and hit the bass drum, the front of the bass drum with his stick. But man he had a touch, the sound, it was so delicate, you know.

Cozy, I wasn't impressed with Cozy's playing at all in a sense. He was straight up and down. He didn't play any syncopation, you know, kind of licks. His things were all straight (musical sounds). Everything was on a downbeat.

This is the thing I try to get my young students that I teach drums to, to get involved with anticipation because anticipation is the only thing that's going to make it swing, you know. You can't swing playing just straight right on the head, (musical sounds). You've got to put some anticipation in there and when you read anticipation you always look -- the eighth note is always on the left side of the quarter note, right. So, you know, where you (musical sounds), you dig? So, okay, anybody else?

**Brown:** Well I mean we can go through the whole line. I mean we didn't talk about Papa Jo.

**Hamilton:** Jo Jones, man, invented the high hat.

**Brown:** Okay, what about Papa Jo? Okay, let's do Papa Joe.

**Hamilton:** And not only that, (musical sounds), he had that -- it sang (musical sounds). That enabled Basie just to say every now and the, (musical sounds). You know, there hasn't been a piano player in the world man to play with two fingers like Basie, which was dynamite, and it enabled bigger (unintelligible) to walk (musical sounds, a walking bass line, you dig, with Jo (musical sounds), with Freddy doing chunking (musical sounds) with some dynamite sounding chords, fingering, you know. That was it man. That was -- it still hasn't been an orchestra period that out swung that -- even today could out swing that group, you know.

**Brown:** Kansas City feel.

**Hamilton:** It was unbelievable, man, unbelievable.

**Brown:** You were probably too young to be influenced by Chick Webb but I'm sure you've heard a lot about Chick Webb.

**Hamilton:** Oh, man, I was impressed with Chick Webb.

**Brown:** Especially as a bandleader too.

**Hamilton:** Well not only that man, you know, he (musical sounds) all them next to Gene Krupa would play, that was Chick Webb's licks, Buddy Rich. They're from Chick Webb's school, you dig.

I've never had a thing about being fast, you know, speed, you know. My thing has been more into creating a sound, getting a sound out of an instrument, you know, and getting the right sound and the right time, you know, that type of thing.

And also my thing has always been forward motion as far as the pulse is concerned, you know. I guess the closest kind of playing rhythmically that I do without it being absolutely (unintelligible) is close to maybe Latin playing because the accent is always on your upbeat, (musical sounds). So man with my lick (musical sounds) I'm scooping. That's got that forward motion going all the time, you dig?

**Brown:** What about some other drummers like probably more contemporary of you, maybe Shadow Wilson.

**Hamilton:** Shadow was dynamite. We were good friends. It was shock man when he got -- what was it a taxi?

**Brown:** Is that how he died?

**Hamilton:** I think so, a taxi accident. Shadow could play, man. All them dudes could play, man. Teddy Stewart could play. Who teaches at the school? Charlie Percip. They all could play man. At that time -- every drummer that was on the scene could play.

**Brown:** Did you know Joe Harris from Pittsburgh?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I know Joe Harris.

**Brown:** Because he's still alive and --

**Hamilton:** Yeah, sure. Joe, he was a good player, man.

**Brown:** He was in Dizzy's band.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I know Joe. Oh, Pittsburgh, that was the town, man. Pittsburgh was the party in this town, in this country, man. Them people came out of them foundries, you know,



and on the weekend's man, they partied, especially on the hill there, the Crawford's Grill. They partied. They would party.

The bar was like almost a block long, a long bar. And the bandstand was up on a riser, just above the bar at the end of the bar where there was a little seating area for tables, you know. And people would come in there man, this is the truth man, they'd say run them and the bar would be like this, two and three deep and man they'd pour, buy everybody a drink. I mean, you know, sportsmen.

Man, as a matter of fact, man, I hit the numbers in Pittsburgh when we were there. I played my car license plates and they had two houses and I hit both houses at the same time and everybody knew it, which meant I had to buy everybody a drink in the joint, you know, that type of thing. It was something else.

But Pittsburgh was always a good party town, man. Good town. Good town for jazz. A lot of good players came out of there man. Good players.

**Brown:** Mary Lou, Klook, Errol Garner, Boo.

**Hamilton:** Billy Eckstine, yeah they all came -- you know, good players. What was the trumpet players, the brothers, and tenor player, trumpet player.

**Brown:** Turrentine.

**Hamilton:** Turrentine, the Turrentine's come out of there, you know, Sweet Pea come out of there.

**Brown:** I'm going to try to get there to interview Joe Harris that's for sure. You were talking about Alan Dawson, how about his sterling student?

**Hamilton:** Alan, man, I was very impressed with Alan. Alan was a clean player, man. Everything he did, he made, he had tremendous finger control, man, and stick control. He got a good sound and rhythm man. He was dynamite, you know.

**Brown:** And a great teacher.

**Hamilton:** And a great teacher, man. Very nice guy too, you know.

**Brown:** A gentleman.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, he was. That's a good word, man. He was a gentleman, you know, which is cool.

**Brown:** How about his most famous student, Tony Williams?

**Hamilton:** (Unintelligible) Tony. Let me tell you about Tony, man. I see Tony one night and man he's so happy to see me here. Where was he, Birdland? Went to Birdland, right, and about a week later, I'm gone and I come back and on my answering service Tony called me, but in the meantime man, he had passed away.

**Brown:** In '97.

**Hamilton:** Which it was strange to hear his voice and knowing that he had passed.

**Brown:** When did he pass? I know it wasn't '97?

**Hamilton:** Well I met Tony in San Francisco when he was with Miles. He came out --

**Brown:** All of about 19, 18.

**Hamilton:** No, he wasn't 20, he was 18, something like that. And I was kind of one of his heroes, you know. He was cool.

**Brown:** How about some of the other drummers that came out of LA like Frank Butler? He's younger than you?

**Hamilton:** Frank Butler was a good player. I didn't get a chance to hear that much, just like I didn't hear what's his name?

**Brown:** Lawrence (Unintelligible)?

**Hamilton:** Oh, I know Lawrence, but who just passed -- had a club --

**Brown:** (Unintelligible), no.

**Hamilton:** No. I think the last thing he did, he did with Charles Lloyd. What's his name? He's supposed to be the most recorded drummer.

**Brown:** That goes to Bernard Purdy saying he's --

**Hamilton:** No, not Bernie.

**Brown:** Earl Palmer?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** You were there when Earl Palmer came though?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Most recorded drummer.

**Hamilton:** He always smiled when he played. Billy Higgins.

**Brown:** Billy Higgins, oh, yeah, Higgins. So you didn't see them coming up?

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** No, you'd already -- yeah they all came out and that's our next wave after you. Well Lawrence I guess is kind of in between.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, well I heard Lawrence when he was --

**Brown:** Yeah, and then there's Billy Higgins, yeah. Again, trailblazing, you were the first one to come out and fly that coop. Okay, well let's see, a teacher. Let's talk about the Parson School and getting involved in teaching.

**Hamilton:** In teaching. Arnie Lawrence who was in my band, orchestra, one of my groups, wanted to start this school and he and Davie Levy who are friends -- David was the dean at Parsons at the time and they got together and put this thing together, the foundation for the school, right.

And Arnie used to call me every day, Cheeks, I want you to start -- would you teach, you know, would you teach a class at the school, before it got started, you know, would you teach, would you teach, you know. I told him Arnie, I don't have time, you know, blah, blah. So finally about a week before they got started he called and I said okay Arnie, I'll come down. And I came down to the first -- we had the first faculty meeting. So who was it? It was me and, I don't recall who all was there at that time but anyway, Reggie -- none of those guys were there.

MR. BROWN      ?Abe Anglan, those guys weren't there?

**Hamilton:** No, none of them were there. But anyway it was Dave Levy, myself, Arnie, and boom, boom, boom.

So the first class that I taught -- the school started. I taught a rhythm class. That's what Arnie wanted me to do, right.

And I started teaching, and from the first class that I taught my first session, I realized that a lot of these people, they couldn't keep time and that kind of got to me in a sense because I'm saying, what are they doing here in the music -- you know, how are they getting in school? But then on the other hand a voice came to me and said, they're here dummy because they want to learn. The voice also said this is your opportunity to give something back by teaching them.

And so help me, that did it because music had been very good to me all my life and the only way I could give something back to it is by helping other people because all I had to do was to start thinking about people like Jo-Jo and Prez, people like that, the ones who have helped me grow.

This is what I'm supposed to do and that's why -- and I'm still there after 16 years, helping people to know the difference between the downbeat and the upbeat.

As simple as that sounds man, it's very difficult for some people but man when you have -- like my last class last semester, I had eight singers in the class, eight singers. And none of them could keep time -- singers.

And I couldn't stress to them, you know, how important it was to be able to keep time. And by the time the session was over man I had them doing (clapping sound), they could clap, they could keep -- they could talk, they could tell me at the same time, right, and keep that time going, right.

Not only could they do that, they learned how to read. I had them using syllables to distinguish the rhythmic articulations. You take an eighth note and two sixteenth, and a quarter note, right.

So as opposed to (unintelligible) that, just say (musical sounds), I let them do this, look at it, look at it. Is it on a downbeat or is it on an upbeat? Everything that comes up, it's got to come down. Teaching this method man, people learn. People that have no idea they can learn. But it takes two things, patience and fortitude.

**Brown:** Is that how you came up with this technique? After so many years you realized this is what you have to get to?

**Hamilton:** Uh-huh, yeah. Because all God's children --

**Brown:** Got rhythm somewhere.

MR. HAMILTON; Somewhere, but they have to realize, you know, that all they've got to do is feel their heart, beat of the heart, right.

MR. BROWN; So here you are, you're giving basic, general rhythmic conception and lessons, but are you getting drum set students as well and are you mentoring anybody we need to keep our eyes and ears open for?

**Hamilton:** Well every now and then I'll mentor somebody but I've very discriminating in regards -- you know, and the only reason, I don't have the time, you know. I don't have the time. If I had the time I would but I just don't have the time. As a matter of fact, at this stage of the game man, I'd like to spend some time with myself, you know. I'd like to spend some time practicing. You know, I just got to the point where I could read again, read a book.

**Brown:** So you said you'd like to read book.

**Hamilton:** You know what a luxury that is?

**Brown:** To have the time to read a book?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** No, I don't know what that luxury is anymore.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, you know, we're so busy doing what we have to do that to be able to have a little time for yourself, take some time out for yourself, that's a luxury, man. That's a reward.

**Brown:** I may have talked about this on tape but if I haven't I should go ahead and get it documented. Now, you know, you're song titles, Man of Two Worlds, you know, The Three Faces. So you've had so many different facets and we've covered almost all of them, but one that we didn't, particularly that was featured on the Three Faces of Chico Hamilton, is your role and your career as a vocalist.

Now I was listening to those cuts last night and man you sound good, you sound really good and as you qualify in the notes, it's about phrasing.

**Hamilton:** That's all.

**Brown:** And you were working that phrasing. I mean, you know, the enunciation, and I know you go on to reference you learned it from all the singers you backed up.

**Hamilton:** I learned that from Nat.

**Brown:** Nat King Cole.

**Hamilton:** I learned that from Nat, man. You know, Nat didn't have a hell of a voice but he could phrase his keester. He had a sound and he knew how to phrase and I just, you know, sort of copied stuff.

I sang man, I sang when I was a kid, I mean, you know, in our school band. I did all the vocals. I did all the songs that (?)Dan Wishon sings in (Unintelligible). (Singing). I should do more. (Singing). You heard that one? (Singing). I did all the singing in the band for one thing, you know, and I've been singing ever since I was a kid so singing has never -- I never declared myself a singer but, you know, I know how to sing.

**Brown:** Well, it's well documented. I'm just surprised, you know, you didn't balance it like Grady Tate. You know, shoot, I'm going over there. You know Grady?

**Hamilton:** Oh, sure. Do I know Grady? Next time you see him, ask him.

**Brown:** What's he going to tell me to tell you?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, ask him.

**Brown:** And you've been using the name Cheeks. When did that come -- yet another nickname.

**Hamilton:** Well that started out -- it got real prevalent when I was in the service.

**Brown:** Cheeks?

**Hamilton:** Cheeks. Well that's the affection side. You heard of cheeks, you know, when guys are close.

You know it's a funny thing, at the school man, not only at the school but all over, people don't know whether to call me Mr. Hamilton, or Chico, or, you know, that type of thing so I

just let everybody relax and say Chico with the school. That breaks all stereotypes, anybody -- you can't make me old, man; I get old when I decide.

**Brown:** Well again, looking back, what we discussed the last two days, you had such an enormous career. Is there anything else you would like to continue, other than finding time for yourself to read?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, anything I want to do, continue --

**Brown:** Is there anything you haven't done that you want to do?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, I want to do some more of it.

**Brown:** Okay, keep going on.

**Hamilton:** My last birthday, people asked me what did I want for my birthday. I want another one.

**Brown:** I'll have to remember that one. And your current band, you said they're going to be here, rehearsing right here.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, we rehearse right here.

**Brown:** Don't have to worry about piano. But you've got a whole rig over there. What have you got? You're still composing?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yeah.

**Brown:** Still composing for the group. Who's in the group right now?

**Hamilton:** Same guys.(?) Same guys I told you. Kerry Denigress on guitar, Paul Ramsay on bass, Ebon Swann on reeds, Jeffrey Contrabandon reeds, and Jeremiah Goodman, percussion. It's cool.

**Brown:** And they're rehearsing here, and you're performing where on Thursday?

**Hamilton:** Where, in the (?)Mayco Room? I've got it written down over there somewhere.

**Brown:** Part of the upcoming International Association of Jazz Education conference.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. You've got something else there now where we can get a little more contemporary? I don't know.

**Brown:** Well I was just going to ask you about, you know, you've received so many awards, to ask you what they mean to you, particularly the NEA Jazz Masters Award. Do the awards mean anything to you? Is there something else you wanted me to cover? Did I not cover it?

**Hamilton:** I don't know. You know, the first time I played LA in a long time was it for the hospital? You know, wasn't fair to bring in everybody. What's that hospital out there in Watts? It's a big thing locally. Anyway, I think it was about three or four years ago we were invited to play, we come back, right. And they -- what's the name --

**Brown:** Maxine Waters?

**Hamilton:** Oh, Maxine was there. Anyway, the other one.

**Brown:** From down there or the one--

**Hamilton:** No, down in LA. She's -- her manager is a wealthy, rich guy. She's the supervisor.

**Brown:** I'm up in San Francisco. I'm sorry.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. Well anyway she's a big wheel. I mean, you know, a big heavyweight, you know. Anyway man, before I played, all these people came on the stage man and gave me all of these awards and I was actually shocked.

So they asked me to say something and my exact words, I told them, I said, you know, the only time anybody ever gave me anything here in LA was a traffic ticket.

**Brown:** You had to say that.

**Hamilton:** So I told them how much I really appreciated it. I was shocked man. So I'm trying to ask you a question in regards to the award that --

**Brown:** The National Endowment for the Arts, Jazz Masters.

**Hamilton:** I was shocked about that, man. I had no idea. It came as a complete surprise to me but then on the other hand -- which the following year I was on the board, I had to pick somebody and I realized that it's all political. You don't have to keep that in but, you know, this is off the record.



**Brown:** But is that any different then your experience, your 80 plus years on this planet has taught you anything --  
This is tape seven of the Chico Hamilton interview. So we can continue talking.

**Hamilton:** You were saying about the reunion.

**Brown:** Yes in 1998, you organized a reunion of original quintet.

**Hamilton:** You can't come back.

**Brown:** You can't go home again.

**Hamilton:** You cannot come back man. I mean that very sincerely, man. Not stepping on anybody's toes or anything, but you can't capture those moments. They are gone. They are gone, man and they are not coming back. The time, the place, the feeling, the emotional aspect, especially when you play emotionally, you know. And I play very emotionally because every time I play, like I said man, I am doing my best. I might sound like shit but I am doing my best. You dig? But you can't come back.

I had some very unfortunate experience over it -- with the original group over there. Man by this time all those guys, you know they had all become very successful, et cetera. And I am used to -- I was used to playing -- hitting with my group -- we opened man -- we opened like -- we opened, you dig? Well man these guys, we would come to someplace, a town, they would be so interested in the arts, they would go to the museums and things like that. They spent all day out. When it came time for the gig they were so damn beat they couldn't play, you know.

And man we're playing places -- I had to follow groups like -- who is the piano player with the electric bass player?

**Brown:** This was in 1989 right?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, who is the hot bass player -- he had a cord on his bass, -- he would walk all in the audience.

**Brown:** Something like Miller.

**Hamilton:** Yeah something like that.

**Brown:** One of those guys?

**Hamilton:** Anyway, they are playing, you know, a different kind of -- and I had to follow them with a cello group.

**Brown:** And they are tired.

**Hamilton:** And they are tired. It was unbelievable man.

**Brown:** How long did that reunion last?

**Hamilton:** I couldn't wait to get off the road. Man I almost sent for my guitar -- for Larry to come out there and hang out with me. I didn't even hang out with them. I couldn't hang out with them. We were years apart. All respects to them man, we just -- I wasn't in that -- that's not my bag anymore, completely, you know. It was terrible. It was unbelievable man. But you know we recorded.

**Brown:** But you maintained, I mean when I listened to it again -- and even in the deal you got the funk, you are staying current, you are staying contemporary. So you know it seems like you keep moving forward and I can't wait to hear your group. So is there something -- is there an inspiration now that is guiding the direction of the band?

**Hamilton:** Yeah, trying to be good. Let everyone be themselves. You know how do you feel, this is what we do. On this particularly tune we will do it your way. I want you to be you. I don't want you to be me, be you.

**Brown:** Well at this stage, you have advantage of hindsight looking back at your life. You are Chico Hamilton and you will continue to contribute to this art form. And when you look back at you -- when I look at you I mean of course I see different thing because I can't see you through your eyes, but I see a person, multifaceted who really as a drummer brought musicality and a real compositional sense when I listen to again your Three Faces and you have your three solo spots. It is a real distinct musicality. You are conscious of this. You actually talk about you has to have a shape to your solo. You have to have -- as you say you have got to keep that into space. You got to -- you also are colorless. You are concerned about all the tumbrel possibilities of your instrument and you explore them, you exploit them.

So what I hear when I think of Chico Hamilton as a drummer if I am just focused on that, this is a gentleman who really focuses on what he could do with his instrument. He was really concerned about what -- not whether he could impress anybody but what sounds he could get out of his instrument.

Am I accurate at that and do you have anything you would like to say about how you see yourself? Lets just talk about as a drummer because that is the first credit you will get in an

entry, drummer and then we go on to band leader, composer you know all these other careers, you have helped to create a standard.

**Hamilton:** Well I don't consider myself a drummer.

**Brown:** You consider yourself a musician?

**Hamilton:** A percussionist, in a sense of the word. It is just like I consider Sonny Greer was a percussionist and Jo Jones was a percussionist. Max was a percussionist. Roy is a percussionist. Elvin Jones is a percussionist. People who I consider drummers unfortunately or fortunately, I consider Gene Krupa a drummer, Buddy Rich a drummer not because they are white or anything like that, but that style is drumming to me. But the guys, the people that I have named, they were beyond that. They created and invented sounds. They invented rhythms. I consider myself a percussionist as opposed to just being a boy drummer, which is nothing wrong with it.

**Brown:** But you always saw yourself as much more than that?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So you recognized that there was much more to this than what other people were doing?

**Hamilton:** Yes. Now I didn't come to see the circus. I am the circus.

**Brown:** There is a lot of stuff in that circus. So let's go on to the rest of the dimensions of the circus. So let's talk about composing. You talked yesterday -- you mentioned moods. So again, colorless. It's not about licks, it's about setting the mood, so could you expound on that concept.

**Hamilton:** Well musically sound wise, I know that the sound has always been here. It's been out there. It's just like which came first the chicken or the egg, right? Or which came first, rhythm or movement. So whatever it is, it is a very thin line. It's like I have always been interested in wanting to know, you know when you take a match, you strike a match, what happens between the time it lights, ignites, and the time you strike it? This is what a lot of people would -- I guess I am out in left field anyway.

**Brown:** We all are. We are drummers, go ahead.

**Hamilton:** So I have always been curious about that. So I realized that drumming -- there is nothing in the history that states -- that takes in the period of the stone age -- if there was

some drumming going on then, no one has ever said anything about it or talked about it. You dig? So we don't know whether movement came first or the rhythm came first. And this is the way I feel about sounds. That is the reason I said it earlier about being involved in the 12 tone system in regards to the fact -- I don't think there are no such thing and something new because it has been played or done before by somebody. Somebody did it, somewhere, someplace, sometime.

So what I try to do, I try to collect what I hear and what I feel and try to create a mood with it to effect you in regards to -- when I play my tune How's your feelings? Not how do you feel but how's your feelings, that is what it is all about. I can create a mood. If I can get you in a frame of mind to do something, then I am going to do it. In other words, to use in an educational technical aspect of it, its having ESP musically, and extrasensory perception which was virtually in a sense created by the University of Chicago. You say one word, to make somebody tell you exactly what he or she feels. All you have to do is say the right word and they will tell you.

Well when you create a mood, all you have to do is create the right mood, and there you go. Man it's like for years I had people come up to me and tell me that my Funny Valentine that I recorded, responsible for them having their first baby.

**Brown:** I know Duke is responsible for half the population of this planet but that is beside the point.

**Hamilton:** So that was the mood. Here again, it was simplicity and continuity because all we did was the melody. You know to me you couldn't play nothing that was going to equal that melody. Does it make sense?

**Brown:** Absolutely. Again maybe this is what caught other people's ear about your music that they could see that you would have a perfect relationship with the visual being in film.

Now when I listen to one of your records from the 50's from your original quintet, you guys are all over the map. It is not something that someone is going to say, we're partying, we are going to put this record on, because it's not a dance record. You really have to engage this music. So you are requiring a lot of the listener and you have found that this is what you continue to do. You want that person to really engage your music. Is that a fair assessment of that?

**Hamilton:** Here again man, I don't make music for people, for the listener. I make music for music sake. I've been blessed so I am able to do that and that's why I am doing it.

**Brown:** So let's talk about your craft. Does it come out of you, do you work at the music, are you the one that gets there and does various sketches or do you hear the music in your head and you just capture it on paper? Can you talk about that as well?

**Hamilton:** Both.

**Brown:** And more.

**Hamilton:** I am self taught. I taught myself how to chord, how to keyboard, to play. I can't do all that but I can play you some changes -- I know every change that I play. I hear a melody and I duplicate it. I got -- when I got my computer I got that system, that music writing system to go into it, but it took me so damn long to learn how to do it I could do it quicker by hitting the notes and writing it down myself. So I threw the system out.

**Brown:** It took too long to learn the tool. You never got any work done.

**Hamilton:** Exactly, you know about that?

**Brown:** I do.

**Hamilton:** So you know I take my time, I play it, if I don't like it, I redo it. That's another thing man. I have been able to I guess -- well maybe it's the professionalism in me, or whatever the commercial aspect in me or whatever, but I am able to give up a note, do you know what I mean by that?

**Brown:** Please explain.

**Hamilton:** You know how some guys, composers write and somebody says man that's you ought to change that note to a B flat as oppose to a B natural. Oh man it is B flat, that's what I hear, man B flat. If it's B natural and you are paying me, I'll make it B natural. Maybe that's prostitution, I don't know but I am able to give up a note to get the flow going. A lot of composers won't, you know.

I am still learning man. I am still a student. I am -- if you look on my thing man, you will see three books up there, one on arranging, one on composing one on you --

**Brown:** We should go get those titles but we will do that.

**Hamilton:** But you know I am still learning.

**Brown:** But you know what you say about still being a student, still learning, this is exactly what Red Callender told me about 20 years ago. He said when you get into the music profession, you are always a student. He said I have never met a musician who I have admired you says oh I know everything. So you all came out -- you all really set a standard there, you and Red.

**Hamilton:** I'm still learning. Nobody has got the answer, which is cool, which is where it should be because if everybody played alike it would be sad, you know. It wouldn't be -- how does that thing go variety is the spice of life, which is cool.

Which reminds me man I will tell you a story about these two lady booking agents in Las Vegas. And at sunset they were walking in the desert, you know talking business. And as they were walking in the desert in the sand, one of them looks down and she says oh look there is a little frog. And they walk over to where the little frog was in the sand and the little frog looked at them and says kiss me. You kiss me I will be the greatest musician in the world, jazz musician. I'll play Miles, I'll play Mulligan. Kiss me.

So she reaches down and picks him up out of the sand. She is holding him in her hand. And the other girl says well aren't you going to kiss him? And she says are you kidding, I can make more money off of a talking frog then I can a jazz musician.

**Brown:** The life in jazz. Well are those your parting words? Like you said humor and being able to give a note.

**Hamilton:** I got one more for you.

**Brown:** Go ahead, we got the tape running.

**Hamilton:** There is this guy having a drink sitting in a bar, in the corner all by himself. And nobody is in there but the piano player and the bartender. And the piano player has got a little monkey that is running all up and down the bar, right. So he runs down to the end of the bar and he sits on this guy's drink. So the guy says, hey piano player you know your monkey has got his balls in my drink? The piano player says no but if you hum a couple of bars I might be able to play it.

**Brown:** So what we are engaged in now is something that seems to be a tradition in the jazz field, musicians get around and they tell jokes. That's it, I mean Ken works with David Baker you know you can't be with David Baker -- hi David and the jokes are out. Is this something that you remember from the very beginning when you got into jazz or is this something that developed over time?

**Hamilton:** Telling stories?

**Brown:** Jazz musicians and jokes are within the first five minutes --

**Hamilton:** I have got some stories that can't be recorded.

**Brown:** But is that something --

**Hamilton:** Oh yeah. Everybody always come up with a joke.

**Brown:** So that is part of the tradition.

**Hamilton:** You dig?

**Brown:** So is that another key, I mean to longevity, to success in this business, being able to --

**Hamilton:** Well not first of all if you are able to laugh at yourself, with a sense of humor, man it's cool. And the only time you take yourself serious is when you are doing something. I don't fool around on my instrument. I don't play around. I am for real man when -- I am very serious about that because I believe you shouldn't fool over your instrument. Music -- you should always -- music demands to be played well because number one we can end with this -- I believe that music is one of God's will and God's will well be done.

**Brown:** Well I was going to ask you one more question.

**Hamilton:** Go ahead.

**Brown:** When you were in the Army you came in as a drummer having had some experience on the clarinet but they make you a bugler and you are playing the bugle for the Army so there must be some other musical -- you have a lot of musical aptitude there working. I mean how long did it take you to learn how to play the bugle?

**Hamilton:** Not long, I mean just practice; Carnegie Hall.

I wrote a little story about a little drum, how a little drum became famous. And it ended with the Carnegie Hall thing. This little drum wanted to be played by a jazz musician. And he went around and he looked up a hundred -- and tried to be played by a jazz musician. So the first drummer -- the first thing he did was he talked to the bass drum. The bass drum told him how to go about getting played by a jazz drummer. And he makes all the moves and finally one day a jazz drummer finds him. And practice, practice and this is how he ends up playing in Carnegie Hall.

**Brown:** Well one thing that we did have you state before we actually set up all the equipment when we first got here, is we were talking to you and we met Helen and Ken asked -- the key to your success, you have been married you said 60 years. So anything you can offer, those of us following in your path, about how to -- keys to success, at least in so far as longevity, staying healthy, staying happy, keeping your mental health.

**Hamilton:** You know, I am very fortunate in more ways than one because my wife is the best thing that ever happened to me and happened for me. And that is very unusual for the simple reason it takes a fantastic, tremendous amount of woman to be able to be married to a musician, who understands that -- we lived in one room, my drums were in the middle of the room. How many women would go for that, you know that type of thing. You know what that is all about.

So it takes a tremendous, fantastic woman to -- and my hats off to anybody, anyone woman who is willing to pay them kind of dues. It is not easy man, because you have got to learn -- we have lived off of five dollars a day, five dollars a month, five dollars a week, five dollars a year and five dollars a second. It has always been feast or famine.

**Brown:** I know that. In my own personal experience, you know having a family, you know with the music life, takes you away from your family. Is this something that you felt as well about your --

**Hamilton:** One thing for sure, I was gone quite a bit. But by the same token when I was home, I was always at home. I was home completely. We didn't go out. We stayed at home, ate dinner at home. I tried to make my home very pleasant for my family. When I was in L.A. I lived on 6th Avenue. I put in a pool, you know did a lot of things man like that. I had the house remodeled, did dynamite things. I made it very comfortable for them. And when I was there, I was home. I was the father. I was the master of my house with my family. And we entertained, we enjoyed, you know that type of thing. And when I was gone, my wife took care of them, the school. I would report in every other day or every night -- you know if I was traveling, you know let her know that I was there safe and everything was cool. We stayed in touch. That's all she has every known. That's -- I have been a musician ever since -- I was a musician when she met me and I am still a musician. That's what I do. That's my life. That's my livelihood. You know that is my craft.

**Brown:** Did Helen have to work as well?



**Hamilton:** She worked because she wanted to. She did have to but she did. She just retired -- she just retired four or five years ago here. She was with one of the largest financial companies in the world. She was very well respected.

**Brown:** So you say you have a house in the East Hampton?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So you divide your time between here and Manhattan and East Hampton.

**Hamilton:** Yes.

**Brown:** Do you have any other abodes? Do you still have a place in Los Angeles?

**Hamilton:** I had a dynamite place in L.A. I gave it to my son. I had a dynamite place in L.A. I think if I was able to get another place it would probably be in Italy.

**Brown:** Why Italy?

**Hamilton:** Why not?

**Brown:** Okay.

**Hamilton:** I like Italy man. Italy has soulful people, man. Have you ever been over there?

**Brown:** Oh yeah.

**Hamilton:** Soulful man. I prefer Italy to France, you know. They are just soulful, man. Plus the fact they dig me and I dig them.

**Brown:** They love jazz. They know. They are in tune.

**Hamilton:** They made a wine for me, you know.

**Brown:** We need to get more of this information. Where is that winery?

**Hamilton:** What the hell was it --

**Brown:** Was it northern?

**Hamilton:** I don't know they were so many all over that place.

**Brown:** And you are a world traveler, is there any place in the world that you have not been that you would like travel to?

**Hamilton:** Not necessarily, which is really strange because my brother, my younger brother Don, this dude goes all over the world for jazz concerts. He is going to Australia in a couple of weeks. He takes the tours, him and his wife. That is all they do. He can afford it so that is all they do. But at this stage of the game man, you know the only time I want to go someplace is if I am working. I have never been interested in historical events or that kind of thing. You know I go there to play, do my gig and get out of dodge. I have always been -- I don't know maybe I should take a little time to smell the roses but that is not what I am all about.

**Brown:** You envision yourself, claim yourself a percussionist, did you ever investigate or did you have any interest in other percussion other than the drum set other than say western percussion, say --

**Hamilton:** See that drum over there?

**Brown:** The hand drum.

**Hamilton:** My nephew gave me that. His father is a very famous Indian musician. I can't pronounce his name.

**Brown:** Native American or are we talking about East India?

**Hamilton:** East India. I am not fascinated with hand drums because you virtually can do anything with the hand drums because you are just using your hands. But man when you sit down and got your left foot doing something different from your right foot and your left foot is doing something different from your right hand. And you are doing all that at one time, that is a happening. That is something that most people don't realize what that is. The hand drum, you are right here. Congas, you are right there, but doing this -- trying to figure out what Elvin did when he heard -- he thought he had ten hands. You dig?

That's why I like them -- I am not impressed with them let's put it like that. Yeah they are good, they are supposed to be good. But as far as I am concerned it doesn't surpass any drummer of what they call the sit down set, when you sit down and got to play and keep that going, you know. I could be wrong but that's the way I feel.

**Brown:** How's your feelings?

**Hamilton:** You know. Do you feel that way about them?

**Brown:** I do -- I won't take up your time on the oral history. The drum set is probably the most challenging of instruments and it was something that was developed here on this soil by our forefathers because that's what they had available to them. They had a sound in their head and they wanted to get it out and they just assembled the instrument so they could create it. And that goes back to be DB Chandler, you know back in New Orleans. But anyway so unless there is something that I forgot or there is something that you wanted to add to his historical record.

**Hamilton:** No.

**Brown:** I just want to say on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and the NEA and myself as a drummer and of course Ken we just want to thank you for inviting us to your house, allowing us to participate in the sharing of your life history.

**Hamilton:** Well I hope we got enough.

**Brown:** Well we are on our seventh tape so we are doing okay. But again, this is heartfelt from me and from Ken as drummers, we recognize and understand and appreciate and value your contribution to our craft and our artistry but more so to your contribution to American musical culture, you know the many different roles --

**Hamilton:** My man you are very complimentary.

**Brown:** I am just trying you know, like they say give credit where credit is due.

**Hamilton:** That's cool man. I felt good. As a matter of fact, I'll get a copy of that right?

**Brown:** Oh yes, no problem.

**Hamilton:** Which is cool. I guess we covered all bases in regards to -- I don't know -- unfortunately I really don't know too much about what the scene is today, the so called jazz scene. I listen to that program on BET here which is a jazz station on T.V. but they have a lot of people on there that got nothing to do with jazz. They call it jazz.

**Brown:** Well you are here in New York so you have seen the entire development of Lincoln Center. What do you think of that whole development?

**Hamilton:** Well I am glad you asked me that.

**Brown:** I am glad I asked you that too while the tape is still running.

**Hamilton:** For someone unknown reason why, they have never invited me to play there. Those people have never invited me to even attend. Those people -- plus the fact I think that so called Marsalis Jazz Orchestra -- they need to bring something new in there, something different. If they were to give me a shot, I would be different in there. I have never been invited. So -- as a matter of fact I have never been there. I have no idea what it's like.

**Brown:** I am shocked to be told that. I am absolutely shocked

**Hamilton:** What is that festival that they have up in San Francisco?

**Brown:** San Francisco Jazz Festival?

**Hamilton:** Is that the festival?

**Brown:** Monterey is down there.

**Hamilton:** I have never been invited to Monterey ever.

**Brown:** That is impossible.

**Hamilton:** I have never been invited.

**Brown:** I mean Monterey they are celebrating their 50th year.

**Hamilton:** I have never been invited man.

**Brown:** I find that flabbergasting.

**Hamilton:** That is the truth. I have never been invited.

**Brown:** Do you have any suspicion as to why -- I mean Monterey or --

**Hamilton:** Somebody doesn't dig me. Somewhere along the line --

**Brown:** You must have ruffled someone's feathers.

**Hamilton:** I probably told the wrong person to kiss my butt, you know. You got to watch that.

**Brown:** When you are striving to be your own man sometimes you have to, you know -- but I am surprised at that. Here is Stanley Crouch writing the notes --

**Hamilton:** They never invited me over there man.

**Brown:** And he is from California.

**Hamilton:** Never over there. Never invited me.

**Brown:** That is unbelievable. Maybe we sent them a copy of this.

**Hamilton:** I have learned -- I am cool about it. It bothered me at one time but it doesn't bother me now because they lose. But you know the stuff that they play, that I hear, that they play, it's -- I ain't going to say nothing about it because --

**Brown:** I think we understand what you are saying or what you are not saying. What about the Ken Burns jazz, did you see that?

**Hamilton:** That sucked, man.

**Brown:** Thank you.

**Hamilton:** That sucked. I read in this book, -- you know what he said about me, the only thing he said about me, Chico Hamilton had curly hair.

**Brown:** That was the entirety of your entry?

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Brown:** So we know that the jazz business is pretty bad dealing with it, but the history is eschewed. What could fix this? We are looking at probably one of the greatest gifts that mankind has bestowed upon his fellow man, this music that allows you to celebrate freedom. I mean that is what Duke said, this music is freedom of expression and yet nothing can be done right about this music. You can't document it right, they can't present it right. Chico Hamilton you have been here 84 plus years, can you lend any insight?

**Hamilton:** Man it's like you know, I have to revert back to my youth, my early days, right.

**Brown:** Just keep doing what you are doing.

**Hamilton:** They don't bother me anymore. I do what I do. I am blessed because I am still able to do it, you dig? My ego tells me, like I said I didn't come to see the circus, I am the circus so that's cool. That makes up for it. Man it's like, I have been my own man, my own person, I have handled my own affairs, I have been my own businessman.

**Brown:** Maybe that's it. You are just too strong and too sure of yourself you know too strong perhaps. Well I think it is a criminal oversight, whether it is deliberate or not. But that Chico Hamilton has never played the Monterey Jazz Festival and that Chico Hamilton hasn't even been invited to Lincoln Center.

**Hamilton:** You know there has been a lot of rumors out about me, you know, and strange enough man, I am a straight ahead straight up dude. But I used to get booked into the rooms because I attracted women. This is the God's truth. Some of the places I played, the only reason why they booked me was because I would bring in the ladies. And bringing in the ladies meant the guys would come in. You dig?  
And a lot of times things like that would -- dudes would think I would be hitting on their -- you know. I wouldn't be hitting on nobody's old lady. I need that like I need a hole in the head, man.

**Brown:** A hole in the drum.

**Hamilton:** It's like I said when the dude was playing for a singer, don't you pick up that bag.

**Brown:** That's on my list of Chicoisms out there.

**Hamilton:** But anyway man, you know, I have made as many friends probably as I have made enemies of people that dislike me, which is cool. And most guys -- people who dislike me is because I have either told them buzz off or whatever that type of thing. I am cool now man because I am not the bad guy anymore, Jeff is my manager. I don't have nothing to say to promoters or club owners or anything I work for other than good night, good morning or good afternoon. I don't talk to them which is cool, you dig?

**Brown:** Okay that will do it.