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BENNY CARTER
NEA Jazz Master (1986)

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Berger: Okay, I think we're running. Just for the record, I'd like to say that it's August 6th, 1992, and I'm Ed Berger, and I'm sitting in the living room of Benny Carter. We are about to begin an oral history interview for the Smithsonian Institution. I guess the best place to start, Benny, is at the beginning.

Carter: Let's see. I suppose the beginning was, oh, August 8th, 1907. That's when Mama brought me here. Not literally California, but I was born in the Bronx in New York. I believe the address was 90 Prospect Avenue, or maybe number nine, even. I don't remember, but I'm just going from my birth certificate. My father at the time was listed on there as a janitor. Later he became a postal clerk. But when I was about a year old, I'm told, my family moved from the Bronx down to West 63rd Street, the area which is known as San Juan Hill. Gee, I don't remember too much of my years between two and five, but . . .

Berger: Most people don't.

Carter: But following that, I went to school to PS 141 on 58th Street, just east of . . . that was still Tenth Avenue. I think it didn't become Eighth Avenue until . . . no, was it Eighth Avenue or Ninth Avenue? It didn't become . . . I've forgotten, didn't become Ninth or Tenth. I think didn't become Tenth Avenue until 59th Street, and that's also . . . no, Ninth



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Avenue became Columbus Avenue, and, gee, I think Tenth Avenue became . . . oh, boy, I'm confused. Well, anyway, that's easy. I know that Eleventh Avenue, which is where I lived close to, that became West End Avenue, going on uptown.

As I say, I went to PS 141. Gee, I think I went there until I was about . . . I believe I must have been fourteen years old, and I got embroiled in an altercation with another pupil, student there, and we got into actually I guess you would call it at the time physical combat. One of the teachers who came upon us at the time, and in order to break us up, he struck me and kicked me, doing no such thing to the other participant in the fight. I guess I threw a punch at him, too, whereupon I was expelled from school, and I never went back, unfortunately. I say unfortunately because I think I could have done well with attendance at an institute of higher learning, such as ones at which I conducted some activities many years later, such as Princeton University and Cornell [University] and Yale [University] and Rutgers [University].

Berger: Glad you got that in. [laughs]

Carter: I'd better.

Berger: Can I go back for one second before . . .

Carter: Please do, yeah.

Berger: . . . I forget, and ask you, just for the record, you mentioned your father. His name was Norrell?

Carter: Norrell Wilbur, [spells first name]. Norrell Wilbur Carter, and the Wilbur was W-i-l-b-u-r.

Berger: And your mother's name?

Carter: Sadie Bennett.

Berger: Just not to go back too far, but did your parents tell you anything about your ancestry before . . . obviously, your ancestry was before, but did you ever ask them about your earlier heritage?

Carter: Well, my father was born in 1873. My mother was born in 1877. So I think even by that time, having both been the offspring of slaves, they didn't know too much about their ancestry. There was not too much that they could tell me, other than that my mother was one of thirteen children. My father was one of, I believe, five children. Gee, on my father's side,



I don't believe there were any musically inclined members, other than my father himself, who played the guitar, by ear, of course. I don't know how good he was at the time, you know. And my mother played piano and organ in the local church. My father had a brother named . . . I should know; he was my uncle. Saunders, Saunders. No, that was my mother's brother, Saunders Bennett.

He was very musically gifted, and one of his children, "Cuban" Bennett—whose name was Theodore; I don't know where he got the nickname of Cuban—but he played a beautiful trumpet, and he actually inspired me to a great degree to want to play that instrument. I finally went to work for a dry cleaning establishment, dry cleaning and laundry, just as a delivery boy. By that time I had seen a saxophone in the window of a pawn shop, and I purchased it. At least I went in and asked how much it was, and they said thirty-three dollars, and I started paying on it for a dollar a week. Took me three weeks . . . no, thirty-three weeks to come into possession of the instrument. What else should I say about prior to that time?

Berger: Well, you mentioned Cuban Bennett. I wonder if we could talk about him for a while, because he was a legendary figure that many other musicians have mentioned, but so little is known about him that he's never mentioned in the history books. He never recorded. Can you tell us, when do you remember meeting him for the first time?

Carter: Well, I met Cuban first about nineteen twenty . . . oh, I met him when I was eleven years old, because my folks sent me away from New York to McDonald, Pennsylvania, which is where my mother's brother, my Uncle Saunders, lived. He was the father of Cuban, as I said, and they wanted to get me away from what they considered the bad environment of the New York streets. So they sent me to this small town, McDonald, Pennsylvania, where I went to school for about a year. I stayed with my aunt there. Her name was Alice, Aunt Alice, and her husband, whose name was Brooks [phonetic]. So then I came back to New York and entered school there, to which, as I said before, I attended until about the age of fourteen.

Berger: And Cuban Bennett was living in McDonald at the time?

Carter: Cuban Bennett was living in McDonald, and he was playing around there. He played a very, very beautiful instrument. It had a wonderful sound, very liquid and very lyrical, and very full and round. I wanted to sound like that.

Berger: He eventually went to New York, himself. Is that true?

Carter: Yes, he eventually went to New York, and, gee, he played around New York for quite a bit. Unfortunately, I don't know that he ever recorded. If so, no recording of his has



ever surfaced. But I know that people such as Roy Eldridge and some other people that were familiar with him at that time and had heard him, some of whom had played with him, spoke very wonderfully about him. But unfortunately, there's nothing of his recording available.

Berger: What did he do in New York? He certainly didn't play in any of the known big bands. Did he support himself solely as a musician?

Carter: Oh yes. Yes, he never did anything else but play music. I don't know. He never played with any of the big bands. I don't remember. This was in the mid-twenties.

Berger: By that time you were already sort of in your, you might call, it apprentice period.

Carter: Yes, and unfortunately I never played with him.

Berger: Never.

Carter: No. I don't know. I can't explain at this particular time why.

Berger: He seems to have been outside the mainstream, if you can use that word.

Carter: Yeah, that's the way it seems.

Berger: About his style, I mean, it's hard, of course, to describe it to someone who's never heard it, and as you said, there are no records. But people like, as you mentioned, Roy Eldridge, and I think Rex Stewart mentions him.

Carter: Rex Stewart, of course.

Berger: Said he was doing things in the twenties . . . I think they maybe oversimplified it, but said he was like playing bebop in the twenties.

Carter: Well, I wouldn't call it bebop, but . . .

Berger: Or some of the things that . . .

Carter: I would liken his sound and his style more to a sort of a Clifford Brown, which I guess some people would call bebop, but not to that extent. I wouldn't have called it bebop then, nor would I now.

Berger: Did he talk to you about music? Did he show you anything on the horn?



Carter: Not too much. He was sort of a loner, and, I might add, he was sort of a tippler. That may have had something to do with his not playing with other groups that I knew of. But he used to play at the clubs around New York, mainly in Harlem. But I don't know that he ever played with a band.

Berger: Did he continue to play? I think he died at the age of sixty-three or something.

Carter: Gee, I didn't think he died that old. I thought he died much younger.

Berger: Anyway, he died in 1965.

Carter: Nineteen when?

Berger: '65.

Carter: '65? Are you sure?

Berger: I think so.

Carter: Oh, I don't think he was around until '65.

Berger: No?

Carter: No.

Berger: He was five years older than you, I believe.

Carter: Probably, yeah.

Berger: So as far as you know . . . well, if he did, I can check the date, but . . .

Carter: Gee, I . . . oh, I think . . .

Berger: But he was certainly not active in music [unclear].

Carter: No, he wasn't active. I think he even moved to Philadelphia or something. But, gee, I don't think he died in '65.

Berger: Really.



Carter: Well, I'd have to check with the family to find out, you know. There are those that know, you know, still in McDonald.

Berger: Okay, well, if anything else occurs. I think Cuban Bennett's name will come up again. Well, maybe we should deal with that now. Did you play with him in Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania], with Earl Hines?

Carter: Oh yes. Yes, I did play with him in Pittsburgh, but not after he came to New York. Yes, that was in 1925. Earl Hines had a sextet in which I played baritone saxophone. Yes, yes, Cuban was in that, but after he came to New York . . .

Berger: So that was the only time you worked professionally with him in any capacity?

Carter: That's the only time I remember, you know.

Berger: What was he like personally? I mean, was he difficult to get along with or . . .

Carter: Very easygoing, very easygoing. Never difficult to get along with. A rather quiet personality and a great sense of humor. No, he wasn't difficult to get along with at all.

Berger: Did he realize that he was doing anything out of the ordinary as a musician, or was he . . .

Carter: I don't think he did. I think he just enjoyed it, and that was it. But, see, he was from a family that they all played something, almost all of them, you know. But he was especially gifted. He was a very nice guy, yeah.

Berger: To get back to your own career, I think we had left you just having been thrown out of school after that altercation.

Carter: Thrown out is a term I would not have used, but I was thrown out. [laughter]

Berger: Or expelled or . . .

Carter: Well, I was literally almost kicked out.

Berger: Kicked out, okay. Was there no effort made to reenroll you, either there or elsewhere?

Carter: No, I think, as a matter of fact, my mother tried to get me to go to another school further uptown, and I just wouldn't go to school. No, I was never picked up as a runaway,



but by that time I had become enamored of the saxophone and the music, or rather of the trumpet I had become, that's it. Well, that's right. Now see, I've gotten a little confused, because I had a trumpet first.

Berger: That's the trumpet you saved, when you worked in the laundry, to buy.

Carter: Yes, that was the trumpet.

Berger: But then you returned it.

Carter: Well, I returned it. I picked it up on a Saturday and returned it on a Monday. You know, I thought I was going to be an instant Herbert Clark or somebody, or at least a Bubber Miley or something. But then a neighbor of mine, who was a saxophone player, named Harold Proctor, he said that if I bought a saxophone, I would find it much easier than the trumpet, and he would give me some free lessons. So I went back and got the saxophone, which was a C melody saxophone. I think it must have been the same price as the trumpet, you know; I just traded it. He gave me a few lessons. He was sort of limited, himself. He was not a professional musician, but he had a saxophone and played it, you know.

After he taught me what he thought he could, he suggested a teacher for me, and I got a teacher and went on from there.

Berger: Before we talk about your budding musical career, now, this happened when you were thirteen or fourteen. Already you obviously knew you wanted to be . . . that music was going to be your career.

Carter: Well, I was about fourteen, and, oh, I think after I had the instrument a number of months, I had one gig, an afternoon gig that Rex Stewart took me on, too, because they were lacking . . . something had happened to their saxophonist. It was a matinee at a club on 135th Street. He said if I could do it, he'd recommend me, and they would pay me a dollar and a quarter for the afternoon, you know, two or three hours. So I did that. I don't think they were too happy with me. But anyway, I continued on, continued with a teacher.

Then shortly thereafter, Willy "The Lion" Smith offered me a gig with his trio. Now, his trio was the bass drum and saxophone. And, of course, the players of that time, the pianists didn't really miss the bass and didn't think they needed one, you know, the bass players, because they had that very steady-stride left hand. So I played with Willy Smith, and he used to give me some very, very good tips on harmony and whatnot. They finally told me that if I was going to ever play with a band, I'd have to give up that C melody saxophone and get an alto saxophone. So after a bit I realized that he was right, and I spoke with my parents, who until this point had not yet taken me seriously. You know, they were wondering, I suppose,



like the old thing, “When’s he going to quit music and get a job?” You know. But when they realized how serious I was, and they had reason to feel, by somebody talking to them, that I might have some talent, so then they bought me a brand-new alto.

Berger: I just want to backtrack a little bit again. What did you hear? What’s the first music you remember hearing at all?

Carter: Well, the first music I remember hearing that impressed me was a fellow that lived across the street. A boy that lived across the street from me was having rehearsals of I think it was about a six-piece combo, and I think in that combo was Buster Miley . . . oh, boy, Bubber Miley on trumpet, Cecil Benjamin on clarinet, and Jake Porter on trombone, Teddy Kaypert [phonetic] on piano. Who was the drummer? Joe DeFosset [phonetic] on drums, and Harry English himself on violin, see, and I used to listen to them, you know, rehearse. That was sort of an inspiration to me, too, that they were all pretty good players, you know. To me, a young beginner, a young wannabe, you know.

Berger: This was before you had gotten an instrument, or you already had an instrument?

Carter: I think it was before, and then they continued, because they used to play gigs in the neighborhood, and they used to play gigs out of the neighborhood, you know.

Berger: As far as . . . so what they were playing was, quote, unquote, “jazz.”

Carter: Oh yes. Yeah, that would have been considered jazz at that time, and they considered themselves a jazz orchestra, you know.

Berger: Right. Your parents, I gather from past discussions, were not overly enthusiastic about your getting into that type of music.

Carter: Well, no. They thought it was, you know, undignified and demeaning to the black race. At that particular time, I think they even called it “devil’s music,” you know, “music of the devil.” Of course, my parents, being churchgoing and God-fearing, they really did not care for the music. My sister, who was taking piano lessons, and I’d, you know, fooled around at the piano some. On Sundays you would not play anything at the piano unless it was a hymn, you know.

Berger: So they sort of encouraged you in music. They seemed to very accepting of that. They just didn’t care for that particular direction.



Carter: They didn't care for jazz, and they really didn't care for the saxophone, because the saxophone at that time was jazz, you know, considered jazz. But my mother wanted me to be a violinist, and she would liked for me also to have been a theologian, you know.

Berger: Well, the jazz historians have made you a theologian, in retrospect.

Carter: Yes. Yes, yes.

Berger: But we'll get to that later.

Carter: We'll get to that. That's another story.

Berger: Just to talk about your early teachers, you mentioned Harold Proctor as the first person who gave you some free lessons when you bought the C melody.

Carter: And as I remember Harold Proctor, I don't even know if he read music or not, but he knew the instrument.

Berger: Can you remember any of the other people that you worked with early on?

Carter: Actually, the teacher that he recommended first was a professor, Eugene Michaels, who had been in the army or whatever service, some military service, and, considering I was a beginner, he had his assistant teach me and spend as much time with me as Professor Michaels himself did. His assistant was Rudy Powell, who came to be known later as a very great, fine lead player with some of the orchestras around that time.

Berger: Let's see. Did we mention . . . we didn't mention Arthur Reeves at all?

Carter: Oh, well, that's . . . oh, I couldn't go on without mentioning Arthur Reeves, because after a bit I decided to change teachers, because I had heard of this wonderful teacher, Arthur Reeves. I went to him, and he took me on, and I certainly got much out of him that kind of structured what I do and how I sound today. He was a fine teacher. He was a fine entertainer, as you had to be in those days unless you were what they called a hot jazz player, you know. He did parties and weddings and all of that, and dances. He was also a very good singer, but he was a beautiful saxophone player, not . . . he wasn't a jazz player at all, as we would call him today, or as we'd even call him then, a jazz player.

Berger: At some point you also discovered some books, I understand, that you've used to . . . I believe, told us in the past that you found some, you know, saxophone method books or music theory books or something, whatever you could get your hand on, and you did some studying of your own, just on [unclear].



Carter: Oh, I bought a book, particularly, I guess, at his suggestion, called the *Ben Vereecken Saxophone Method* [*Foundation to Saxophone Playing*], which I still have. As a matter of fact, that reminds me, I should be practicing it today. But it's a very good book, and a number of older saxophonists with whom I have spoken, you know, remember it. Many of them use it. But I didn't get much into much theory until much later, you know, and composition and stuff like that.

Berger: Now, just to put this into some sort of perspective chronologically, were you working with these teachers at the same time you were beginning to get these professional engagements, the work with Willy "The Lion"?

Carter: Oh yes, yeah.

Berger: This was all simultaneous.

Carter: All simultaneous, yeah.

Berger: And this would be in the mid-twenties or early twenties.

Carter: Early twenties, yes.

Berger: '23, '24 or something.

Carter: Right. Yeah.

Berger: You mentioned some of the other musicians in your neighborhood, they had this group, and we should say that was San Juan Hill, I guess it was known as.

Carter: Yes, indeed. That was San Juan Hill. None of those musicians gained any prominence, you know, really, outside of their immediate area.

Berger: Except Bubber Miley.

Carter: Except Bubber Miley, of course, but he was one of the better ones and especially gifted, as we know.

[recorder off]

Berger: About some of the other musicians in the area that you grew up in, was Russell Procope in that general vicinity?



Carter: Russell Procope was in that vicinity, indeed. He just lived around the corner from me. Oh, at that particular time, I guess he was studying the violin and the saxophone, but I don't remember having heard him play at that time. But I know that he was a student of music.

Berger: What about Bobby Stark, was he also . . .

Carter: Oh, Bobby Stark, yes, he was a very fine trumpet player. He lived around the . . . actually, he lived on 62nd Street, which is the same street, I think, Bubber Miley lived on, and maybe even Thelonious Monk, but Thelonious came along much later. Oh, and who's the other . . . another pianist named Ramirez, Roger.

Berger: Oh, Roger, yeah.

Carter: "Ram." Ram lived in the same neighborhood, you know.

Berger: Did you know him growing up?

Carter: Yes, I did. Yes, I knew him, but never played with him, either.

Berger: What about Freddy Johnson?

Carter: Oh, Freddy Johnson, yes, I knew him. He lived on 99th Street. He didn't live on San Juan Hill. Now, we got to play together quite a bit in those days, because one thing that I was always able to get were jobs in the dance halls, you know, the dime-a-dance places. Usually it was me, Freddy Johnson, and Walter Johnson, the drummer, because the trios at that time didn't use bass players. You know, the pianists always, as I mentioned before, had a pretty sturdy left hand, and with the drummer, they just didn't need a bass player. As a matter of fact, Teddy Wilson, who was one of the younger guys, didn't really like a bass player. He preferred to play without a bass. But he did a lot of playing with bass players, as we know. But that . . . well, gee, as we think of it, with the Benny Goodman Quartet there was no bass player.

Berger: Right. Right.

Carter: Am I right? Yeah.

Berger: Or the trio.

Carter: Yeah, or the trio, there was no bass player. That's right. Yeah.



Berger: By this time, you must have . . . if you're in these dance hall engagements, this required reading, I would assume.

Carter: Well, it wasn't necessarily required, reading, but it was required knowing the tunes, no matter how you came unto them, as long as you knew the tune. But it was required playing melody. That's what was required, you know. The dancers had to be aware of what you were playing, and that's what got them onto the floor. Usually it was one chorus or one chorus and a half, and I think, if I remember correctly, never any more than two choruses, because, you know, it was a dime a dance, you know. [laughter] Every time you played a tune and stopped, that was another ten cents.

Berger: You were eventually . . . well, your family was about to move to Harlem, but before you did, you were already going up to Harlem, I gather, and sitting in. Do you remember any of your earliest opportunities to sit in?

Carter: Well, I went up to Harlem quite a bit because there was no place in San Juan Hill, where, you know, in my area, that I could go and sit in. One of the people who was kindest to me when I really wasn't playing very well was Bill Basie. Now, he later became known as Count Basie. But he played at a club called Leroy's on 135th Street and Lennox Avenue. It was Count Basie—or Bill Basie, I might say—me on alto, and then a drummer, whose name I forget at the moment. But it was just . . . that was the trio, and again with no bass player, because Basie had that same left hand, you know.

Berger: Do you remember what sort of things you'd be playing in an engagement like that?

Carter: Strangely enough, it was mostly melody, with a little improvisation. But, you know, it was more melodic than they play today, you know.

Berger: Do you remember what Basie sounded like in those days, his playing style?

[Doorbell rings.]

Carter: Who could that be?

[recorder off]

Carter: Basie's style at that time was pretty much like most of the Harlem pianists, Fats Waller and, oh, was it J. P. Johnson?

Berger: Right, James P.



Carter: Yeah, James P. Johnson. There was also a J. C. Johnson, wasn't there?

Berger: Yes.

Carter: He was a songwriter, mostly. Basie's playing was very much in that style, and very good in that style, which I think we haven't heard too much of other than . . . oh, what was that thing that Neal Hefty [phonetic] did for him? *The Kid from Red Bank*, where he played some real strides, you know. But it certainly showed that he was well versed in that style.

Berger: While we're discussing these Harlem stride players, maybe we could go through several of them that I happened to just job down that you could give us your impressions of or reminiscences about. We mentioned Willy "The Lion" and his relationship to you. Fats Waller, you just brought up, and when did you get to know him?

Carter: Gee, I don't know exactly, but just being around Harlem at the time. Oh, let's see, it was probably the late twenties, maybe in the mid . . . late twenties, I would say. Then we recorded together for the McKinney's Cotton Pickers, you know, the thing with Don Redmond, and . . .

Berger: That . . . go ahead.

Carter: Other than that, I don't think we ever played together.

Berger: That tune that you collaborated on, which was . . . as early as 1927 that was published, I think, *Nobody Knows*.

Carter: Oh, that's right, *Nobody* . . . see, I'd forgotten that.

Berger: How did that come about?

Carter: Gee, I . . . who was the lyric writer on that? I've forgotten his name.

Berger: That's a good question. I forgot his name, also.

Carter: Buddy somebody, was it? But, oh, boy, I've forgotten his name, and I can see his face before me, too. But anyway, yeah, Fats had this tune, but he didn't have it completed, and he asked me to work on it with him, and that's how it came about. Yes, I'd forgotten that, but that's . . . gee, that's so long ago, in addition to which, I don't even know how the song goes now. I haven't a copy of it.



Berger: So he must have known you then, that early, if he . . .

Carter: Yes, yes, of course he did.

Berger: . . . if he asked you for help on that.

Carter: Yeah, well, he probably wasn't that much older than I was. Gee, Fats Waller, huh?

Berger: Bud Allen was the lyricist.

Carter: Bud Allen, that's right. Gee whiz, yes, Bud Allen. I wonder what ever became of Bud Allen. I used to see him around Harlem now and then, but I didn't know what he was into, and I don't know any other song to which he wrote the lyrics. So that part of my memory is a little clouded.

Berger: You mentioned once, and I have to admit I'm embarrassed that I've forgotten the gentleman's name, but you said there was a stride pianist that used to come over from Brooklyn or from . . .

Carter: I believe it was from Brooklyn, and his name was Sam Weber [phonetic]. And, if I'm correct, he was blind or partially blind. He was quite a pianist. He used to sit in with Willy "The Lion" Smith and Fats Waller and all of those guys, and he could always hold his own, you know, with them. I believe he was Jewish, Sam Weber. I don't know what ever happened to him. I don't know if he ever recorded. It's a shame if he didn't, you know, because he was quite a player. Oh, boy, I just don't . . . I don't know what happened with him.

Berger: This is a name I've never heard anyone mention, other than you.

Carter: Really. You know, I don't know, but I remember him quite well. Have you ever heard anybody mention the name of Seminole?

Berger: Yes, yes.

Carter: Oh, really?

Berger: Another one of these legendary pianists.

Carter: Yep, that's right. Now, I don't know if he ever recorded or not.

Berger: I don't think . . . do you remember seeing him?



Carter: Oh yes, I remember seeing him, yes, and hearing him. Yeah, in Harlem, of course. He was a fine player. Do you know the name Putney Dandridge?

Berger: Yes.

Carter: Oh, you do.

Berger: The singer?

Carter: No, a piano player.

Berger: I know. Well, and he also made some vocal records.

Carter: Oh, did he make some vocal records?

Berger: Yeah, yeah, sort of like the Bob Howard style.

Carter: Oh, gee, I don't remember. Yeah.

Berger: Was he in that stride company?

Carter: No, actually, his name came to me at the moment because I thought of him; I just don't know quite why. But I knew him in Pittsburgh. That was about 1925.

Berger: How about the pianist Abba Labba [phonetic]?

Carter: Who?

Berger: [laughs]

Carter: Abba Labba?

Berger: Doesn't ring a bell?

Carter: No. Where does he come in?

Berger: Another one of these . . .

Carter: Legendary characters?



Berger: . . . people that never recorded.

Carter: Abba Labba. In New York?

Berger: I believe so, yeah.

Carter: I don't know the name, no.

Berger: Duke Ellington was very much influenced and was sort of a part of that school, you know, as a kind of a novice at the time. Do you remember him at any of these piano functions?

Carter: I don't know. I didn't attend many of them myself, but I would doubt if he would have been part of that, you know. He was into another thing. He was into writing, and although, you know, he could play stride piano, as we well know, but I just don't know about his involvement with that set of people.

Berger: Can we go back to Willy "The Lion" Smith for a brief or not-so-brief moment?

Carter: Anytime you like.

Berger: [laughs] Could you tell us some of the things that he would instruct you to do in his working in the trio? I mean, you were what, about sixteen, I guess?

Carter: Well, one thing that I can remember [laughs]. You know, he was a very, very sort of brusque but not abrasive, not abrasive character. Sort of brusque and, you know, but a tough papa kind of thing, you know, but very warm and lovable once you got to know him. Having played the C melody saxophone and then gotten to the alto, I wasn't used to playing in the concert keys . . . I mean, in the other keys, other than the concert key, the same key in which he was playing. You know, so when I would be playing in C on the tenor—I mean on the C melody—he'd be playing C, so then when I got the alto, then I'd be in A. When he was in G, I'd be in E, you know, and I wasn't used to these. The only sharp key with which I was familiar at the time was G, which was only one sharp. But when you kind of got beyond that, you know, which you got into many times when you picked up the alto. He used to tell me, "Stop pulling that." I used to pull the mouthpiece out to adjust it to another key, you know, an easier key. [laughter] He made me stop doing that. He said, "If you're going to be playing alto, you've got to learn to play in these keys." And I did.

Berger: Do you remember some of the places you worked with Willy "The Lion"?



Carter: Not by name at the moment. One thing stands out in my mind. I know that we played in what we called a spaghetti joint in Brooklyn, and what we think were some mobsters came in one night and kind of shot up the place. I think I got out of there, but Willy found or sought refuge in the gents' room and stayed there until, you know, the thing was over. We used to kid him about it, you know. But everybody was dodging and trying to get out of their way.

Berger: The image of the music business in those days, through films with like *The Cotton Club* and things like that, they always emphasize this, the whole mob scene and the gangsters. Was it really that much a part of . . . as you remember it, that much influence in the music business?

Carter: Well, as I remember it—I wouldn't know, you know—I used to see these people up in Harlem. I know when we played Connie's Inn, I think it was Connie Immerman and his brother George. They ran the place. I don't know that they were gangsters nor mobsters or what. But there were certainly a lot of stories that got around about the Cotton Club and a couple of other places. There was one place that opened there. I've forgot what the name of it was. Was it the Plantation or something? I don't know. I won't go into it because I've got my facts all mixed up in my mind. The mobsters, I don't know who they were, are supposed to have gone and, oh, shot up the place or something, some place that was down on Seventh Avenue that was supposed to have been competition for the Cotton Club, and they always claim that the Cotton Club mob had done this to put them out of business. And that's exactly what they did.

Berger: Going back to your own development as a professional musician around this time, and now we're in the mid-twenties, I guess, you began to work with some of the name orchestras in Harlem.

Carter: Yes. Well, let's see, who were they? Charlie Johnson, for one that had the orchestra at the Smalls' Paradise. Prior to that I played with the sextet of June Clark, who was at Small's smaller place. When Edwin Smalls opened his Smalls' Paradise over on Seventh Avenue, then he put in the big band, Charles Johnson, and I was asked to join them, which I did. That was a nice gig; we enjoyed it; had a lot of fun, a lot of fun guys. Charlie himself was a delightful man to work with, and to work for, I might add.

Berger: Billy Paige's orchestra, that was earlier for you.

Carter: Billy Paige was an orchestra called I think the Symphonic, Syncopateds, or something. They came to New York to play at a club called the Capital [phonetic], Capital something. I've forgot the name of it, but I know it was between 140th and 139th Street on



Lennox Avenue, on the west side of Lennox Avenue. Gee, I must have been quite young then, because I worked with them at this club. What did I say the name of the club was?

Berger: The Capital?

Carter: The Capital. I think it was the Capital something. Well, anyway, they had come from Pittsburgh, and when they finished the engagement there, they wanted me to go back to Pittsburgh with them. That's how I came to go to Pittsburgh at that particular time, although earlier I had been in McDonald, which is a suburb of Pittsburgh, you know, where I went to school for about a year. But at this time, oh, Billy Paige had to come and talk to my parents about me going with them, because I think I was not yet eighteen. So they gave their consent. They decided that I was not going back to school there, and they thought maybe if they let me go and have my way, musically, I would come to my senses. [laughter] So I went to Pittsburgh with Billy I think it was the Broadway Syncopators. Billy Paige and the Broadway Syncopators, yes. Yeah.

Berger: And that's when, I guess, we talked about, when you played with Earl Hines . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . around at that time, also.

Carter: That's right.

Berger: And Cuban Bennett . . .

Carter: That's right.

Berger: . . . and when you played baritone [unclear].

Carter: Yes, that's true.

Berger: I think the next major association we should talk about is your meeting up with Horace Henderson and the whole Wilberforce Collegians period.

Carter: I met with Horace Henderson in Pittsburgh. He came there to play. Oh, did I play with him one night? I don't even remember. But he invited me to come join the orchestra. He thought it might even be a good opportunity for me to go to school if I was so inclined, but, of course, I couldn't have gotten into a university at the time, because I didn't yet even have a high school diploma, nor had I even matriculated there. But so anyway, I did join the orchestra. I went to Wilberforce and they found me lodgings on campus in one of the



dormitories. No, it wasn't a dormitory, because I had my own room. But it was on campus, and the orchestra . . . gee, shortly thereafter they left for the summer to do a summer tour.

The orchestra was doing so well on these tours, and I think Horace had reason to believe that his brother Fletcher would help them do something in New York. They had already had gotten a job at a club called the Club Bamville [phonetic], which I think was around 129th Street and Lennox Avenue. So we went in there, and the guys were going . . . some of the guys who were not graduating were going to go back, you know, to school in September. But after seeing how well the band was being received, those who had not graduated decided that they would stay with the band rather than return to school. So that's how that went.

We did a lot of touring and, oh, just a lot of hard traveling and hard gigs and very little money for the time, even. But we all, you know, were full of that stuff and vinegar, and we were having so much fun at it, everybody said to hell with school, you know, let's go on. They thought going to New York was going to put us on the big time. So then, oh, a few other dates. We went to a place I think called Blue Island Casino out of Detroit [Michigan]. Something happened there that Horace had a falling out with the members, and he just unceremoniously left and just went back to wherever he was going.

Being it was sort of a cooperative thing anyway, the guys got together and elected me leader. I had never aspired to be a leader, but here I was. So we already had, I think, a contract to go into the Savoy Ballroom. See, this must have been 1928, then.

Berger: Well, I just wanted to try and straighten out the chronology of this, because it's kind of confusing to me.

Carter: It's confusing to me, too.

Berger: It seems there may have been two periods when you may have been associated with Wilberforce, with the Collegians. Is that possible? Like in 1926, or in 1925, you went to Pittsburgh, and you met Horace. He invited you to join, to come to . . . what was the town? Is it Xenia, Ohio?

Carter: Xenia, Ohio, yeah.

Berger: Then you went there, and I believe you must have gone back to New York and then played with Charlie Johnson in the interim.

Carter: That sounds like . . .

Berger: Is that possible?



Carter: Yeah, it certainly is possible, and probable. Yes.

Berger: Then I think you went back with Horace and the Collegians on this tour, which ended up electing you leader, and then ended up in 1928 at the Savoy Ballroom.

Carter: I think that's right, yeah.

Berger: I think that must have been what happened.

Carter: Yes, I think that's right. I am, you know . . . my memory isn't what it used to be. It never was that good, but, you know.

Berger: Well, I mean . . .

Carter: It has been better.

Berger: You did all these things. There's no reason why you have to remember precisely what came in what order. But I think that makes sense as far as . . . because in between you had a fairly long tenure with Charlie Johnson, which . . .

Carter: That's right.

Berger: . . . I want to ask you about, also. But while we're with Horace Henderson and the Collegians, and you mentioned they elected you leader, I want to ask you about one occasion that was kind of a legendary thing in jazz history, and that's when you were in Detroit at the Graystone Ballroom. In one of these proverbial battle of the bands, the Collegians, which by then was under your leadership, came up against the McKinney's Cotton Pickers led by Don Redmond. Do you remember this?

Carter: Was it McKinney's Cotton Pickers? Yes, I think you're right, yes.

Berger: I think so.

Carter: And I have the trophy, the cup, right now.

Berger: So we know who won here. [laughs]

Carter: Well, at least somebody thought we did. They presented us with the cup, which I think says "King of Jazz" or something, you know, because . . . so that was until Paul Whiteman became King of Jazz.



Berger: “King” in quotes.

Carter: Yeah.

Berger: Let’s see. Why don’t we go back to Charlie Johnson for a moment, since he sort of came in between all of this, and Smalls’ Paradise. This is a period where you made your first documented recordings in January of 1928 with Charlie Johnson. Now, we’ll get to the earlier recording that you remember doing but has not been located yet.

Carter: You mean with some singer?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: Yeah, I can’t remember.

Berger: But in any case, the first real recording was in 1928, and on that occasion two of the four tunes were your arrangements.

Carter: Oh, they were?

Berger: Yes. [laughs]

Carter: *The Charleston Is the Best Dance After All*, and what else?

Berger: Right. *You Ain’t the One*, I think.

Carter: *You Ain’t the One*. I don’t remember that.

Berger: I think you have identified . . . you have claimed them, so . . .

Carter: Yeah, I guess.

Berger: But I think at this point we’ve talked about how you developed as a saxophonist, to some extent. We should backtrack and figure out how you suddenly in 1928 were already an arranger, and the process by which you learned that craft. First of all, what made you decide that you wanted to arrange? Was there something you weren’t hearing in the music that you felt you wanted to hear?

Carter: You mean something I can improve on? No, not at all. [laughter] No, just that I wished that I could just do what I was hearing and do what other people were doing, not



feeling that I could, of necessity, do any better. But gee, I don't know. I'm not sure, but I think Archie Blyer [phonetic] had a lot to do with that, if the time is right, because we played a few of his arrangements, you know, the stock arrangements, and Arthur Lang [phonetic] and other people, I think, who . . . Bob Herring, Paul Weirich [phonetic]. What other names were there that were doing stock arranging? Jimmy Dale, Jack Mason. I collected their stocks, you know, and I used to spread the parts out on the floor and study it, each one, and I started arranging like that without benefit of a score; you know, part by part, which I found out much later was really the hard way. [laughter] But I didn't know any other way. That was it.

Berger: And this was during that period with Charlie Johnson, around '27 . . . '26, '27.

Carter: Yes, I guess so, yes.

Berger: '27, I guess.

Carter: Yeah, '27, yeah.

Berger: Then did you start bringing things in for the Johnson band to play? Or when was the first time you actually remember taking something in and having an orchestra play one of your arrangements?

Carter: I think the first thing, I just did some things for the saxophone section, things with which I knew the rhythm section was already familiar, you know? As my recollection goes, that's what I remember doing. Then following that, I guess somebody asked me for a score, and I said, "What's that?" They opened my eyes and ears, and my head generally, and I learned to write a score.

Berger: Did you, in the way that you went to some teachers formally and informally, was there anyone other than studying the stock arrangers' works . . . I mean, you didn't talk to them personally.

Carter: No, I didn't know them.

Berger: Was there anyone that you turned to, as far as arranging goes, at that time for any kind of tips or assistance?

Carter: No, I didn't, and I don't know why, because there were people I admired. I used to like Don Redmond's work, that he did for Fletcher Henderson. There was also an arranger that did a lot of things for Fletcher Henderson before Don Redmond. His name was Charlie Dixon [phonetic]. And, gee, there certainly must have been others that I heard, but I guess I



was, you know, too embarrassed at the time to ask anybody, you know. Of course, hindsight being what it is, I should have just gone to a good teacher, gotten one.

Berger: Well, hindsight being what it is, it all worked out. [laughs]

Carter: Well, to some extent.

Berger: So now you're, by 1928, obviously, you were writing full arrangements, not just saxophone parts.

Carter: Oh yes, sure. Yeah. Well, the things I did with Charlie Johnson were all full arrangements.

Berger: Right, and also you started contributing to Fletcher Henderson's library.

Carter: Yes. Yes.

Berger: We'll, of course, discuss Fletcher Henderson, who you had a couple of stints with earlier, I think.

Carter: Actually, I think I had had one. I was playing with Billy Fowler's Orchestra at a club downtown. If I remember correctly, Donald Redmond's father died, and he had to go back to Piedmont, West Virginia, or Virginia, wherever Piedmont is, and Fletcher asked me if I could come and work in . . . substitute for Don Redmond while he was gone. So I think I asked Billy Fowler, or maybe Fletcher approached him directly, I'm not sure. But Billy said sure, it was okay. He allowed me to do it. And because it was really something I wanted to do, you know. When you can get the stamp of approval from Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra, you had it pretty well made in New York then.

So I went and worked with Fletcher for maybe a week or two—I don't remember the duration of it—during which time Billy Fowler found someone to replace me in his orchestra. At this point, I don't remember whether I went back to Billy Fowler after that, or whether he even had a job, you know. [laughs] I just don't remember. But interestingly enough, I think in 1926 I played with Duke Ellington for two weeks . . .

[Begin File 2]

Carter: . . . at a place called the Richmond Club, and that was also substituting for Harvey Boone [phonetic], who was ill at the time.



Berger: Before we get to the Duke Ellington one, about the Fletcher Henderson [phonetic], so this . . . in 1926 already Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra was considered sort of the pinnacle of the . . .

Carter: Oh, sure.

Berger: . . . of the day.

Carter: Sure. Well, you've got to remember, I think [Louis] Armstrong joined them in 1924, was it?

Berger: Right.

Carter: Well, you know, there was a big to-do about that, you know.

Berger: Did you see that orchestra firsthand with Armstrong at all?

Carter: I don't remember that I did, no.

Berger: Did you see Armstrong in any time that you recall that early in your . . .

Carter: I don't remember that I did, no.

Berger: Did you go see Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra without Armstrong before you joined it just to . . .

Carter: I don't know. I must have, but at the time they were playing downtown at the Roseland Ballroom, and I don't know when they ever played in Harlem. We couldn't go down there and listen to orchestras, you know. The white musicians could come up to Harlem and sit in with us, but we couldn't go down there, not to sit in, but just even to listen to them, buy a drink and sit at a table, you know. So they had more access to us than we had to them.

Berger: When you replaced Don Redmond [phonetic] for that brief period with Fletcher Henderson, that happened, oddly enough, to be at a very major event, which in retrospect has been blown up to be a very major event, but you may not recall it as such. It was billed as, at Roseland, the Battle of the Century, another one of these battles. When Gene Goldcat's [phonetic] band . . .

Carter: Oh, sure, yeah.



Berger: . . . came in opposite . . .

Carter: Was that during the time I was with him?

Berger: Supposedly.

Carter: Oh, yeah, I guess so, because I remember the Goldcat Band from that.

Berger: So that was one of the premier encounters, I guess, in jazz history, was that night, and that happened to be during the period you were replacing Don Redmond. Any details of that event come to mind after all this time?

Carter: My greatest impression as of this moment was . . . oh, boy, one of the arrangements.

Berger: Their arrangements.

Carter: Their arrangements. What's the arranger's name, anyway?

Berger: Bill Chalice [phonetic]?

Carter: Bill Chalice, yes, yes. Some excellent arrangements, I thought. I was very impressed with that, yes. And, of course, I was very impressed with the Charlie Dixon [phonetic] arrangements and the Don Redmond arrangements, which I was . . .

Berger: Which you were playing, right.

Carter: . . . playing, yeah.

Berger: The personnel of Gene Goldcat's band at that time supposedly included Bix Beiderbecke and Frankie Trumbauer. Do you remember seeing him?

Carter: That's strange to me, and it must be true, but I don't know why I wouldn't remember Frankie Trumbauer and Bix, but especially Trumbauer, because that was the first interest that I heard, or the first playing on record that I heard of a saxophone that made me want to play the instrument, you know, although I went to the trumpet first, but I guess saxophone was sort of my second interest, and it wasn't hard for me to change from the trumpet, from the weekend trumpet player that I was.

Berger: Now, when you first heard him . . . I think this is a good time for a digression on the whole influence of Frankie Trumbauer on leading you to the saxophone. Had you already



switched to taking up an instrument at that point, or had you heard him and that was one of the factors that led you to the saxophone?

Carter: It's hard for me to remember that, but . . .

Berger: Because you always cite this at one specific recording.

Carter: *I Never Miss the Sunshine (I'm So Used to the Rain)* by the Don Bestor Orchestra of Chicago [Illinois], or was it somebody else?

Berger: Benson Orchestra.

Carter: Benson. Benson Orchestra of Chicago.

Berger: Right. Now, that was 1923 that was done, so you had to hear it sometime after, in '23 or later, so I guess . . .

Carter: Well, maybe I was already into the saxophone.

Berger: You probably would have already been playing.

Carter: Yeah. I probably was, but . . .

Berger: Maybe that gave you a new direction or something.

Carter: Yeah, maybe it gave me something to pattern after, because prior to that I hadn't . . . gee, I can't say that I'd heard anybody play the saxophone that really moved me to want to play the instrument, other than just wanting to play the instrument.

Berger: What was it about Trumbauer that was different for you?

Carter: When you say different, different from what?

Berger: Where that made that impression.

Carter: Well, I just liked the sound of the horn, the way he played. He had a sort of a almost a delicate touch to him, which I seemed to have heard in later years in Paul Desmond, slightly. Gee, I don't know how to explain it. I just don't know how to explain it. But I liked it. I heard him play *Singing the Blues*, and I think *Old-Fashioned Love* and a couple of other things, and I started copying his solos from the record.



Berger: It was his sound, I guess. Was it his sound or what he was playing or both?

Carter: I think both, and he did not play a lot of notes, but he could get over the horn. Every now and then he'd let you know it, you know. [laughter] Yeah. But he had command of the instrument. I liked his approach.

Berger: What about any other saxophonist that might have made an impression on you, and, of course, we're talking about 1923 or '24. Really, it's hard to think who might have been around.

Carter: Well, you know, I can't remember that there was anybody that influenced me. I know that I used to like the sound of Wayne King, the instrument, you know, the sound he got out of the instrument, and he was the melody player. Gee, I don't know.

Berger: Some quote, unquote "jazz musicians" have mentioned that Rudy Wiedoft inspired them, not what he was playing so much as just what could be done on the instrument. Do you remember him?

Carter: Oh, definitely. He let you know what could be done on the instrument, and he let you know that he could do it, you know. It was purely technique, which was a dazzling technique for the time. Gee, I mean, there was also a player around at that time that I think came from Lexington, Kentucky, another one that nobody around today would probably remember or would have heard of, and his name was Leonard Fields, and he was a fantastic player. Gee, he got over the instrument like crazy and, gee, I don't know that he ever recorded. If he did, I'd like to find the recording.

Berger: You mentioned that many of the white players would come in and sit in, and you were not afforded that same reciprocal opportunity. Did you hear Jimmy Dorsey at all?

Carter: Yeah, Jimmy Dorsey, Jack Teagarden. Those two stand out in my mind, those two particularly. There were others that I can't think of by name at the moment.

Berger: Was there a feeling among the black musicians, any animosity because of the barriers, that this could not be a two-way street when these people came?

Carter: No, I don't think so. I think we didn't even think of it. You know, we were just glad that they wanted to play with us, and, you know, we welcomed them, and probably had the society been a little different, they would have welcomed us, the musicians themselves. Yeah, you know, but that was the tenor of the times.



Berger: Okay. Yeah, I think before we move on to Fletcher Henderson and your longer stint with him, which came later, just touch on that . . . you brought up a short stay with Duke Ellington, which was also in 1926. I think it was a little earlier than your subbing for Don Redmond with Fletcher Henderson.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: How did you get the gig, so to speak?

Carter: I don't know. They needed a saxophone player, and Duke contacted me.

Berger: You obviously must have known each other by then, to some extent.

Carter: Yes, in . . . you know, I don't know. I don't know when he'd heard me, because I had heard his group, oh, gee, they played at a place called the Kentucky Club, and I think they had Sidney Bachet on soprano. Now, how I got in there, one of the musicians must have taken me or something, but I remember going there, you know. I was probably backstage or something, or hidden behind a curtain or something, or maybe waiting, wearing a waiter's uniform and carrying a tray or something. [laughter] Not really, but, you know, I wasn't there as a paying guest at a table. But I remember being there. I wonder who could have taken me? Oh, was Bubber Miley playing with them there? That would have been it. That would have been it, of course. Yes, yes, at the Kentucky Club.

Berger: So you heard Bachet there.

Carter: Yes, Bubber Miley, Bachet, Charlie Irvis on trombone. That was before Johnny Hodges.

Berger: So . . .

Carter: Did Bachet and Johnny Hodges ever play together?

Berger: I don't think they were in the same time.

Carter: I don't think so, either.

Berger: What sort of impression did you have of Bachet? This was a very kind of different . . .



Carter: Oh, it was different. Well, it was exciting, you know. I probably didn't know enough about music to analyze what he was doing, you know, in a broad sense, but I liked it, you know. He was saying something.

Berger: When you played with Ellington . . . well, first, before we talk about that, we discussed what it meant to play with Fletcher Henderson in 1926, being a sign that you had arrived as a musician and you were accepted. What sort of aura did the Ellington band have at that time among musicians?

Carter: I don't know. Of course, the Ellington Orchestra was the most original of its time, I think, you know. But I think musicians looked up more to the [Fletcher] Henderson Orchestra and its players. Couldn't tell you why, but I think that was the feeling.

Berger: Do you remember anything about the music that you played with Ellington? Was it his own mostly?

Carter: Oh yes, it was his own mostly, but gee, that's . . . I don't remember. I don't remember.

Berger: And where, which hall or club was this?

Carter: It was called the Harry Richmond [phonetic] Club on 57th Street.

Berger: This was not Cyro's [phonetic]?

Carter: Well, I don't know. I may be wrong, but I keep thinking it was Harry Richmond's, but, you know, my memory is faded. [Interviewer laughs.] But I've always thought it was Harry Richmond's. I don't know.

Berger: I don't know where I got Cyro's.

Carter: It might have been Cyro's. It doesn't sound unfamiliar, you know.

Berger: All right. Why don't we talk a little bit about Fletcher Henderson and how you came to join him on a regular basis. You had, in fact, recorded with him in '28, but I believe in . . .

Carter: You mean, but I wasn't a regular member of the band?

Berger: Well, if you were, for briefer periods [unclear].



Carter: And I did record with them during that brief period?

Berger: Yes, and also arranged for them. Now, was there a time that you remember being commissioned to write arrangements for Fletcher's band when you were not in it? Does that [unclear] at all?

Carter: I don't know. Is there a record of my doing something when I wasn't in the band?

Berger: There's one arrangement that I think we some time ago played and tried to see if you remembered, called *PDQ Blues*, which we thought it rang a bell. It was before you joined the orchestra.

Carter: Yeah, but I couldn't remember for sure which one. Who wrote it, Fletcher?

Berger: To tell you the truth, I don't remember.

Carter: Yeah, I don't remember, either.

Berger: But by 1930 you were now a regular member of Fletcher's orchestra for the longest period, I believe, for about fourteen months or so, and by this time Don Redmond had left.

Carter: To go with McKinney's Cotton Pickers [phonetic].

Berger: Right. So was it sort of understood that you were now going to handle most of the arranging? Was that sort of . . . it went along with the job, or was that a more informal [unclear].

Carter: I think it was quite informal. I don't remember any particular commitment being made, you know, any agreement along those lines.

Berger: Did Fletcher ask you to arrange particular pieces?

Carter: Oh yes. Yeah.

Berger: I'd like to talk a little bit about arranging and the Henderson orchestra and sort of who fit in where. You mentioned Charlie Dixon, who is not often credited as being the . . .

Carter: I don't know how much of his things were recorded by Henderson.

Berger: That was in their early, really early period, and then first Don Redmond did the bulk of Henderson's arrangements, and then . . .



Carter: Yes, yes. But there were a couple of other arrangers, too. There was someone named Ken Macomber. Do you know that name?

Berger: [unclear].

Carter: I don't know how much he did for him. There were some other people. There was Joe Glover, who . . . gee, I don't remember all of them, but there were some other arrangers.

Berger: What about John Nesbitt? Do you remember him as . . .

Carter: Did he do anything for Fletcher Henderson?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: I didn't know that.

Berger: You don't remember him at all as an arranger.

Carter: Oh, sure, but for McKinney's Cotton Pickers.

Berger: But not for Fletcher.

Carter: Gee, I don't remember at the moment, no.

Berger: Well, we sort of touched on this question, but I'd just like to repeat it. As a player, obviously people would compare notes and, you know, musicians would compare what they're doing and show each other things and help each other. Was there anything going on like that with people involved in this growing arranging as arrangements became more and more necessary as larger orchestras came into being and the stock arrangements would no longer suffice? Was there any interaction among arrangers as far as comparing notes and how you handle particular situations, or were people working pretty much on their own?

Carter: Gee, I don't know. I can't remember much of that. I don't know. Do you have any names you might suggest of the period?

Berger: Well, for example, you and Don Redmond seemed to be locked in sort of a progressive . . . you know, you were following him sort of from various . . . in and out of various bands and things. Did you ever remember sitting down with Don Redmond and discussing anything?



Carter: Discussing anything? No. No, I don't.

Berger: How about Fletcher's own arranging? Now, when you were with the orchestra, was he doing any writing?

Carter: I didn't know him as an arranger when I was in the orchestra. I think that's something Benny Goodman brought out in him, you know.

Berger: Right. Do you recall any work that Horace Henderson, his work as an arranger or any of his writing?

Carter: Yeah, some of the things that he did was very interesting, and they sound even good today. Of course, so does Fletcher's, you know. *Big John Special*, that was Horace's. Oh, boy, there were some other things, but I can't remember the titles.

Berger: Was he known to be writing much for Fletcher's band while you were in it? I mean, were there a lot of Horace Henderson charts in the books?

Carter: I don't think so, but there may have been, you know.

Berger: So when you joined, what was the book like? Was it things that Don Redmond had done before he left, primarily?

Carter: Yeah, mostly, for the most part, and there were things, as I said, that other arrangers had done, too, you know.

Berger: There seems to have been a development of arranging; seems to have been almost quicker than the development of the soloist in jazz. If you listen to arrangements from 1927 or '28 and then listen to things that you were doing in 1930, there's a tremendous rapid development, and I'm just wondering how this, you know, in a two-year period . . . I mean, today, you think of a musical development that it would happen over two years, you can't really think of any, at least anything worthwhile. But it seems in this two- or three- or maybe four-year period from the early . . . and the same orchestra, like Fletcher Henderson's, playing arrangements in 1924, '25, '26, and then something like you had done in 1930, that *Keep a Song in Your Soul*, which has always been cited as a landmark in swing arranging, things like the rhythm switching from two-four to four-four, or an implied four-four and then actual four-four. I'm just wondering sort of which came first. Was the soloist kind of pushing in that direction so the arrangers would write things to accommodate them? Or did you as an arranger pull the soloist with you? I don't know if I'm making this clear.



Carter: No, you're making it quite clear. The only thing is I guess I went into this with not too much thought. I just did it, you know, and that isn't really the best answer, but that's the best that I can say. You know, it wasn't any great planning. I'd just sit down and I'd, you know, start at the top of the page and see what would happen. And even today, I don't make a sketch. I start writing and it just goes along as it flows, or as it refuses to flow, which it oftentimes does. [Interviewer laughs.]

Berger: A lot of this whole arranging development seems to have been coming to grips with the problem of incorporating the soloist someplace in all of this. Do you remember you know having a conscious effort to decide, you know, well, we have these great soloists in the Henderson band. We have Coleman Hawkins, we have Rex Stewart or whoever, Buster Bailey and . . . do you remember grappling with this problem? You know, how do you fit them into a written score and have them be [unclear]?

Carter: Well, I think all arrangers at that time, even still, you know, went through that. You know, how to place a soloist, how to frame him, you know, where to place a solo within the arrangement. That was never a really big thing with me. Just as I say, I just sat down and did it, you know. If I heard this, well, I would write this. If I heard that, I would write that. [laughs]

Berger: It almost seems like—at least, following again the Henderson band as sort of the model of this evolution of arranging—that it almost seems that the arrangements were trying to pare themselves down into not more simple but less choppy or, for example, the early Redmond arrangements seem to have . . . you know, if you diagrammed them, you see there's four bars of this section, and a two-bar interlude, and then it switches keys two or three times, and there's a brief solo section. There's a lot going on, and all kinds of clarinet trios and then trumpet duets, and, you know, like they're almost saying, gee, I'm writing it, trying to see how much I can cram into one three-minute recording. Then it seems to be an effort to smooth things out. Do you remember anything about this process of . . .

Carter: Unfortunately, I don't, you know. I think I know what you're saying, but I don't remember that too much. I can't say that I do.

Berger: It just kind of flowed out of him.

Carter: Yeah. Then, of course, I don't know what Don Redmond or anyone else of the period was thinking about. But, as I say, I just sat down and took a piece of paper and pen in hand—not pen, excuse me—pencil in hand. I hate those guys that write with ink. [laughter] I wish I could do it.

Berger: Well, there's always white-out.



Carter: That's right. That's right, yeah.

Berger: Now there are guys who write with computer.

Carter: Oh yes, that's another thing.

Berger: It's even easier to erase than a pencil.

Carter: [laughs] I'm not familiar with that at all, but I've seen some of the stuff, and it looked beautiful on paper. Well, I had some music copied recently, and the guy did it on computer. Just looked like actual print, you know. I don't know.

Berger: Well, here's another question. I'm sure you're not going to be able to come up with anything concrete, and I don't expect it. It's sort of another one of these relation of your own thought process, and which you're obviously not paying attention to. You're just doing the . . . the creative juices are flowing, so to speak, and you're not expected to stop and analyze why am I doing this, why am I doing that. But in retrospect it's always interesting to try and analyze these things, or just to arrive at the conclusion they can't be. But the relation of your own playing to your writing, particularly early writing, in those, you know, the saxophone ensemble passages that you began with as an arranger and have always incorporated to some extent, how much of that is actually based on your conception of solo lines? Or is that another subconscious . . .

Carter: Yeah, well, it could be. I think that anyone that writes like that, it kind of dictates itself as solo stuff. As long as it's being improvised and not melody, because what you write down then as the improvised content of the arrangement, that becomes the melody, you know?

Berger: Right.

Carter: But I don't know. That's a little confusing, isn't it? To me, too, even as I voice it. [laughs]

Berger: Well, it's a complex process, I guess.

Carter: Yeah, yeah.

Berger: There's no simple . . . I mean, it's not as simple as saying . . . you would think what you would play on a particular piece; say, "Okay, I'm going to score that for four saxophones or five saxophones." That didn't occur to you that way.



Carter: No, no, but if I hum something to myself, it might be something I very well might have played. Yeah.

Berger: Also, I guess . . . well, I guess it could be that you would . . . the same melodic mind that's working, obviously, it's the same person, so if you conceive a line that you might play, you could then look at it and say, "Well, this won't work. It's either too complex or too fast for it to be played as an ensemble." But then you could adjust it.

Carter: Anything that I could play could not be too complex. [Interviewer laughs.] If it's complex, I can't play it. [laughter] If it's too fast, I can't play it.

Berger: Well, I think the recordings belie such modesty. But, in any case, why don't we move to another association after Fletcher Henderson, and that is Chick Webb.

Carter: Oh, yes. Dear, dear Chick Webb.

Berger: Do you recall the circumstances of joining that great orchestra?

Carter: No, but, gee, what . . . I don't know how I happened to go . . . well, I guess he just offered me the chair in the orchestra. It's interesting that Chick was not the musician that Fletcher Henderson was, but he had an uncanny feeling for good musicians, and everybody knew that, and you were really . . . oh, you were given a feeling of importance when he asked you to join his band, you know? And that's with me, too. He had very good taste in music and in musicians, and he was some other kind of drummer, as you well know.

Berger: Could you contrast sort of the different musical styles of playing or the different demands on you playing in the two orchestras? Does anything come to mind that . . .

Carter: No, because I think if they called upon me to play something, they wanted me to play it the way I played it, you know, and I would attempt to also play it as the music is marked. As far as solos went, no one ever told me how to play a solo or even suggested, you know. I wish they had. [laughter]

Berger: Even I haven't done that, and won't. [laughter] Chick Webb is a drummer. You just alluded to his drumming.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: What comments on his style can you make?



Carter: Gee, Chick was . . . I don't know who I could say sounds like him today. He had a thing of his own, you know. I know that a lot of drummers tried to do what he did back then.

Berger: When you joined him, was there again some understanding you would be contributing arrangements as well?

Carter: Well, I don't know about an understanding. It might have been a tacit understanding, you know, just knowing that I could write, you know, and maybe I went into the band assuming that I would probably write if asked to do so, or that if I took something in, they would play it. In those days you didn't always wait for someone to ask you to write it. You'd want to do something on a certain tune, and you'd make the arrangement, and you'd take it in and hope they would listen to it, and hope that if they listened to it, they'd like it, and hoped that if they'd like it, they would play it. And if they would play it, you hoped they'd play it the second time.

Berger: And that someone else would play it.

Carter: Yeah, right.

Berger: An arrangement that you did for him, like *Liza*, for example, which was really one of the greatest features for him as a drummer. Do you remember if he asked you to arrange that for him, or did you decide . . .

Carter: I don't remember. It might have been something that I just thought up to do because I liked the tune at the time. It was very interesting at the time. It still is, of course.

Berger: I want to backtrack again just for a moment and go back to that period before Fletcher Henderson, when you had been elected leader of the Wilberforce Collegians, previously led by Horace Henderson. You came back on tour with them to New York, went into the Savoy Ballroom in 1928, and do you remember anything about that particular engagement?

Carter: Mostly I remember after Horace left the orchestra and I was elected leader, we had to have a pianist, so we got a pianist out of Detroit named "Gabby" Rogers [phonetic]. I don't know what his first name really was. I'm sure Gabby was a nickname. He was a very fine pianist, and he came to New York and he played at the Savoy Ballroom with us. How long he remained with us, I don't know, but, gee, strangely enough, I've never come in contact with him again since that time, nor have I heard of him nor have I seen him. But Gabby Rogers, I'd like to know what actually became of him.

Berger: We'll ask Bill Shaff [phonetic].



Carter: I don't know that he ever recorded. He may have recorded; I don't know.

Berger: The name doesn't . . . other than that association, I don't know. The Savoy Ballroom, of course, became known later as the "Home of Happy Feet" and one of the prime venues for swing and dancing. But not that much is written about it that early, in 1928. What was your impressions of the actual hall at that time?

Carter: Well, it was a great place to play in and nice, spacious bandstands, of which there were two. Lovely hostesses. Gee, did they . . . it wasn't ten cents a dance. I don't know how they operated financially for the hostesses, whether they paid them or what. Because, you know, we could play a pretty long, full arrangement, three, four, five minutes, so that would be worth more than a dime even at that time. But, gee, I don't remember, but it was one of the nice ones. It was probably about the nicest ballroom in Harlem; indeed, it was, by any measure. But it was just fun playing with two bands all the time, you know. When we played there, there was usually on the other bandstand opposite us the Savoy Sultans, Al Cooper's Savoy Sultans, which was a little band you always hated to have to follow.
[laughter]

Berger: Was this as early as 1928?

Carter: Maybe it wasn't.

Berger: Or was that later when you came back?

Carter: Maybe it was, yeah. Well, we had to play opposite somebody in 1928, even. Maybe it was Fess Williams. Before that there had been a band there called Leon Abbey [phonetic]. I don't think we played opposite them. I think they played before we were there. But definitely Fess Williams, yes.

Berger: What was the book like of the . . . which was now billed, I think, as Benny Carter and His Playboys?

Carter: Savoy Playboys.

Berger: Savoy Playboys, which was the former Collegians, the Wilberforce Collegians.

Carter: That's correct. Correct.

Berger: What was the book that that band played like?



Carter: Oh, I don't remember. Some things by Horace that he left in the book; some things by me. As a matter of fact, I think Fletcher had even given us some of his arrangements, you know, probably that he no longer played or something. But I don't remember too well.

Berger: The audiences in the Savoy that early . . . this was primarily dancing, now. This was not . . .

Carter: Not concert style. No, this was primarily dancing, yes.

Berger: This is what they came for.

Carter: That's what they came for, and to listen to the orchestra, because there was always a crowd around the bandstand, just looking up at the orchestra and listening and not dancing.

Berger: So it was similar, then, to what the Savoy in its heyday, in the thirties . . .

Carter: Oh yes.

Berger: It was pretty much the same.

Carter: Quite. Quite the same, yes.

Berger: Why don't we move to your next association, I think major one, and that would be McKinney's Cotton Pickers, which again was another instance of you sort of following Don Redmond, who had been musical director. How did you hook up with McKinney's?

Carter: Well, I guess Bill McKinney had invited me to join the orchestra and wanted to know if I would come to Detroit, which I did. It seems to me that Hilton Jefferson and I were in the orchestra together. Were we? Gee, I don't know what makes me think that.

Berger: I don't think so, but it's . . .

Carter: Maybe not.

Berger: . . . possible. Do you think Don Redmond had suggested you? Is that possible?

Carter: I don't know. He may have, yes. I think he might have, because I didn't know Bill McKinney.

Berger: You had been hired as the so-called musical director.



Carter: Yes.

Berger: A term . . . I'm not sure what that meant. You weren't really the leader, I guess, but what did that . . .

Carter: No. Bill McKinney was not the leader, either. He was the owner and the manager and the booker and the employer, but there was a Roscoe Simmons, I think his name was. He was the dancer and singer and something, but at that time they thought they needed somebody to front the band, other than just the player, you know. That was Roscoe Simmons.

Berger: Do you recall the type of music that . . . you were musical director. Did that give you free reign as to what the band would play, or were you under any constraints as far as what McKinney wanted himself or what the bookers felt they needed or . . .

Carter: Well, I guess all of that played a part in what we did. In addition to that is the fact that they had quite a book, you know, when I joined them. How much I contributed to that book, I don't know at this moment.

Berger: It always seemed to me there wasn't much, I mean, in numbers.

Carter: No, I don't think there was, too.

Berger: I'm just wondering why that was.

Carter: Well, they already had a sort of expansive book, you know.

Berger: The music, at least the recorded music of McKinney's, I don't know how to describe it. It's very different from a band like Fletcher Henderson's or Chick Webb's at the time. It's almost . . . sort of almost nostalgic; I don't know; it's the word that comes to mind . . . even for that time, you know, of something earlier. Maybe it's just more quote, "commercial," unquote. I don't know.

Carter: Maybe, yeah.

Berger: Did you get any feeling of that, that this was a different kind of . . . they were looking for a different kind of market or something with this band?

Carter: I don't know.

Berger: Then again, the recordings may not be indicative of what was played in the . . .



Carter: Certainly not of everything that was played, no.

Berger: Sure. I want to ask . . . I think, chronologically, this fits in around this time, but it may be a little earlier, and that's your return to the trumpet, which you had abandoned after a weekend many years earlier.

Carter: My return to the trumpet came, I think, after I left McKinney's.

Berger: After McKinney's.

Carter: Yes, because Doc Cheatham was in the orchestra with McKinney's, wasn't he?

Berger: Right.

Carter: After I left McKinney's, I had a job at the Empire Ballroom with my orchestra, and I managed to get Doc Cheatham to play with me in that orchestra. He knew that I was interested in the trumpet, and so he encouraged me to, you know, play. I told him, well, I was afraid to play it. I was afraid it would impair my embouchure for the saxophone. He assured me that it wouldn't, because he had also played saxophone. Of course, he didn't say why he had given up the saxophone, you know. But he was such a wonderful trumpet player, and had a beautiful sound and a beautiful way of playing a melody. At that time, he never played any improvised solos. He just played lovely melodies and led the section with that beautiful, authoritative sound of his.

I remember that he used to talk to me about the trumpet and encourage me to play it at the mic. He'd hand me his trumpet, with the mouthpiece and everything, from up where he was sitting, and me with no chops or anything. I would just take it and try to play it. You know, most guys would not want that. You know, I mean, most guys would not be offering you their instrument to maybe become at some point a competitor, you know.

Berger: Sure, sure.

Carter: But he encouraged me, and he insisted, "Oh, you want to play the trumpet? Here, go ahead, play it." He taught me a lot of things about the instrument, after which I decided I would get one and stick with it.

Berger: Now, this was when he was in your orchestra . . .

Carter: Yes.



Berger: . . . in 1932, when you first formed that orchestra.

Carter: That's right, at the Empire Ballroom.

Berger: As far as you remember, with McKinney's, when you were together, you did not play trumpet then at all.

Carter: Oh, no, no. I might have talked with him about it, though, you know.

Berger: But you weren't even fooling around on it or anything.

Carter: No, no. I didn't own one at that time. But he knew of my interest.

Berger: Why don't we talk for a moment about the forming that orchestra in 1932, which was really the first of your own great orchestras, not one that you inherited or anything like that. This was one you put together.

Carter: Well, I hope you have the personnel, because I don't remember who was in that orchestra.

Berger: Well, yeah, we have at least at some stages of it. But when did the germ of an idea of becoming a band leader come to mind? Was it that 1928 . . .

Carter: Experience? Maybe, yes. Yeah.

Berger: . . . stint that might have put the seed in your mind about it?

Carter: Yeah, I think so. Yes.

Berger: Then you made the plunge and this was around the spring of 1932, I think, was usually the . . .

Carter: I think some agent must have approached me about going into that ballroom, I'm sure. I can't remember it all.

Berger: Was there a period that you formed this band without any regard to work, I mean, just as something to play music?

Carter: Yes. I'm wondering if that might have been during that time or whether it might have been after that time. I know that I did have a rehearsal band, and Chu Berry and . . . I think that was around 1933, though. Did I?



Berger: Well, I think by 1933 the band was already working and recording, and I think this rehearsal period may have been that earlier stage in '32.

Carter: Before, huh? It may have been, yeah. Cozy Cole, and at one point Sid Catlett. The only reason that I'm saying it . . . it seems that Teddy Wilson couldn't have been in that rehearsal band, because he didn't come to New York until 1933.

Berger: Right. By the time you went to get him, I think it was with actual engagements in mind.

Carter: Engagements, yeah, I think you're right.

Berger: Otherwise, I don't know that . . . because I think you had Nicholas Rodriguez as pianist . . .

Carter: Yeah, yeah, piano, that's right. Sure did.

Berger: . . .in the original band. So the musicians you recruited for your own first real orchestra in 1932, they were all working and having other engagements, I guess, at the beginning, before you got on somewhat firmer ground.

Carter: Yeah, I think so.

Berger: Do you remember doing a lot of writing to get a book together for this new aggregation?

Carter: I must have done some, but I don't remember the extent of it.

Berger: Well, you asked about the personnel. Let me give you what we have from . . .

Carter: Okay.

Berger: This is August, September. I think that's . . . the first confirmed personnel of that band would be, on trumpets, Leonard Davis; Lewis Bacon [phonetic], Dicky Wells on trombone, Chu Berry, Hilton Jefferson, and Wayman Carver on reeds.

Carter: Now, is this the one that was at the Empire Ballroom with me?

Berger: Well, this is the personnel that was in Boston [Massachusetts] with you, which was . . .



Carter: Where in Boston?

Berger: . . . for a review, the *Cocktails of 1932* review.

Carter: Did we go over this with Morroe?

Berger: I think so, yeah.

Carter: Tell me about it.

Berger: Well, it was a review in the *New York Age*, so it was in print that this band appeared under your leadership.

Carter: In Boston.

Berger: With Ralph Escadero, Bernard Addison . . .

Carter: Tuba, Bernard Addison.

Berger: . . . and Sid Catlett.

Carter: Gee whiz, I . . .

Berger: So that may have been one of the earliest paying engagements of this orchestra, but . . .

Carter: I don't remember at all. In Boston. Jesus, I don't remember that.

Berger: But you recall an Empire Ballroom engagement around this time.

Carter: Yes, I think so.

Berger: That's with your own band.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: I think the chronology that Morroe had done shows you opening the Empire Ballroom in February of '33.

Carter: Yeah, I said thirty . . . oh, 33', oh.



Berger: So that's a little later. All of this that we're talking about, this Boston thing . . .

Carter: Then the Empire Ballroom was '33.

Berger: Right.

Carter: So that's when I was trying to fool around with the trumpet, and Doc Cheatham gave me the mouthpiece.

Berger: Yes.

Carter: Yes, then it was '33. See, I . . .

Berger: Well, I think this rehearsal band . . . so we'll call it the rehearsal band for the . . .

Carter: Was earlier.

Berger: Was '32.

Carter: Yeah, but Doc wasn't in that, Doc Cheatham.

Berger: Okay, so by the time you started playing the trumpet was even later, maybe even 1933, which you . . .

Carter: Yeah, it was later.

Berger: And you, several months later, were already recording on it.

Carter: Oh, really? What did I record on it?

Berger: When you did *Once Upon a Time*.

Carter: Oh, that's right. That was 1933.

Berger: So your development on trumpet was even in a shorter period than we originally thought.

Carter: I'm messed up with the time, really.



Berger: Well, Doc Cheatham was not in this band, at least in August or September of '32, so . . .

Carter: No.

Berger: But he could have been in and out; it's also possible, you know.

Carter: I don't think so. I think the first time he worked for me after McKinney's Cotton Pickers was at the Empire Ballroom.

Berger: Well, we can fortunately still ask him. [laughs]

Carter: That's right. I hope he remembers. He's done a lot of things, too, you know.

Berger: Yeah, one or two since then. [laughs]

Carter: That's right.

Berger: Why don't we talk about that Empire Ballroom engagement, which we now know was around February of '33. The Empire, I guess, was sort of a competitor to the Roseland.

Carter: Yeah, supposedly. Wait a minute. I'm . . . the Empire Ballroom. Is that in the book?

Berger: Yes.

Carter: That's not the same place. The Empire Ballroom was across the street from the Roseland, upstairs. And where was it that Doc Cheatham played with me that I'm talking about?

Berger: Well, I think that earlier, that by 1932 personnel may have been [unclear].

Carter: Yeah, but I'm trying to think of the name of the ballroom.

Berger: The only other engagement I think we have in the chronology of that band earlier, before the Empire, was a week at the Howard Theater in Washington [D.C.]

Carter: No, there was a ballroom. Do you have . . .

Berger: The Lafayette Theater, maybe.



Carter: No, it was a ballroom downtown on Broadway, and it had two bandstands. The other bandstand was Mal Hallett, and then the one that I thought was the Empire Ballroom, the band on the other stand was Paul Whiteman.

Berger: That was the Empire Ballroom.

Carter: That was the Empire Ballroom. [unclear].

Berger: What about the Central Theater?

Carter: No, this was a ballroom I'm talking about.

Berger: Okay.

Carter: Yeah, it was a ballroom. Gee. Oh, I don't know then.

Berger: Well, I'll see if I can look that up in more detail.

Carter: Gee, but . . .

Berger: But in any case, the Empire Ballroom engagement, which was opposite . . . opening night was February 9th, '33, with Paul Whiteman opposite.

Carter: Yeah, yeah, that was the Empire.

Berger: Do you remember that evening? [laughs]

Carter: Not really.

Berger: It's only been sixty years ago, I don't know why you wouldn't.

Carter: Yeah, that's right. No, I don't remember.

Berger: What about, while we're on Paul Whiteman, what about Paul, Paul Whiteman's Orchestra?

Carter: It was a good orchestra. It was a dance orchestra, for that time. I don't know whether it was his regular number of men. Didn't he have a pretty large orchestra?

Berger: Well, yeah, he had, you know, a string section and [unclear].



Carter: Yeah. So I don't remember that. Then I guess it was a big orchestra, yeah. Thirty people, that many? Something like that.

Berger: Sure. Even more, sometimes.

Carter: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Oh, he just had the dance orchestra on the other bandstand, yeah. Yes, that's right.

Berger: Did you ever meet him, talk to him, either on that occasion or . . .

Carter: Maybe, but I wouldn't remember it, you know.

Berger: Around this time John Hammond sort of comes into the picture. He was following the band and its formation, and was a big fan of yours and it. He began writing various pieces, particularly in the *Melody Maker*. Do you remember your first meeting up with John Hammond, or did he just start appearing around?

Carter: No, I don't remember how we met, you know.

Berger: He said that you kind of took him in hand and showed him where things were happening uptown, which he . . .

Carter: Yeah, I showed him around Harlem.

Berger: . . . wasn't aware of that much before that.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: That's true, then.

Carter: I think so, yeah.

Berger: I guess as 1933 progressed, and you began to get some more work with this band, and it began to look like a more solvent kind of enterprise . . .

Carter: But it never became that. But go on.

Berger: But it looked like it. [laughs]

Carter: Yeah, yeah, it looked like it. You're right. You're right.



Berger: It had the potential, maybe.

Carter: Never became solvent, but go on.

Berger: You made a very important addition, and that was, of course, Teddy Wilson.

Carter: Teddy Wilson, yeah.

Berger: Can you go over that again, how that . . . [unclear], I guess, or hiring [unclear].

Carter: I think we'd better pick up on that tomorrow.

Berger: Okay. We will.

Carter: Yeah, I think we'd better call time.

[Begin File 3]

Berger: This is the second tape and the second day of our interviews with Benny Carter. It's now August 7th, 1992, the eve of Benny's eighty-fifth birthday. We left off with his first real big band around 1932, 1933, but before we pick up on that, I'd just like to digress on a couple of things that have occurred when I listened to things you said earlier that I didn't follow up on. One was we went through the episode of how you left school involuntarily before finishing the eighth grade and never went back for formal education. But obviously there's been a lot of informal education taking place, and just the fact that you're so well read and seem to have spent large portions of your life just reading, not about music, about everything. I'm just wondering, did that start that early in life? Already when other people were going to elementary school, were you continuing to educate yourself informally?

Carter: Oh, I don't know. You might say it like that. I was probably trying to make up for what I might have missed, or what I had surely missed, you know, in the way of formal education. But, gee, I don't know whether . . . as I say, nothing I have done has actually been planned. It just . . . I've always just gone along with the flow, and somehow or other it has, I don't . . . brought me to the other side of the river.

Berger: So you never set out and said, "Gee, I'm not going to school, I'm going to look at this in this kind of book," but . . .

Carter: I don't remember that I ever unconsciously, or consciously, rather, entertained those kinds of thoughts.



Berger: Do you remember going to libraries, though, just informally or [unclear]?

Carter: Oh yes, yes. Yes, that I did.

Berger: On your own, just . . .

Carter: Yes, pretty much on my own, sure.

Berger: And what, would you just browse through things and pick out . . .

Carter: Yeah, and I would borrow books, you know, of course.

Berger: And not in any . . .

Carter: And I might add that I would return them. [laughter]

Berger: Well, if you still have any, the fines could be enormous at this point.

Carter: No, I have none that I borrowed.

Berger: Because I know in the past you've mentioned a couple of books that you remembered from your childhood, really, that you were interested in seeing again. I just was wondering how you came upon them in the first place, and I guess it was part of this process of you would just go to a library, browse around, and find something that struck you.

Carter: I guess so. I don't even remember titles at the moment.

Berger: So obviously you were a prolific reader even early on in life, and still are, obviously. Did you ever try and write anything? I know you've written many, many lyrics. Did you ever try any creative writing or even poetry or anything along those lines?

Carter: Well, a little poetry and probably some song stuff without music and written mostly to my wife, Hilma.

[recorder off]

Berger: What about any sort of prose? Did you ever try your hand at . . .

Carter: No, I never did. No, I wrote a letter here and there, but that's about . . . [laughter]

Berger: I've seen some of your letters, and I think that some of them are publishable as is.



Carter: [laughs] Did you say publishable or punishable?

Berger: Publishable. Just turning the subject completely, but still dealing with the early years, we talked about the sitting in, the jam sessions that you were participating in, and that brings up two questions. First, you mentioned one engagement; I think you were brought along by Bubber Miley. The proprietor was not too impressed with you and, you know . . . got through it, I guess, but he wasn't all infatuated with your playing. Do you remember any other instances? Many musicians recall, you know, trying to sit in on jam sessions, being over their head and older musicians letting them know it. Do you remember any rejections of this sort early on?

Carter: No, gee, the musicians were pretty kind to me, I must say, and the word would probably be *tolerant*, particularly in the case of Bill Basie, who used to . . . you know, I never actually worked with his trio, but he would always welcome me when I came in with my horn, and, you know, "Hi, kid," you know. "Come on," you know, that sort of a attitude. But, no, I can't remember actually that I was ever really, you know, just shoved aside and thrown off the bandstand, so to speak.

Berger: In jazz lore there are all these tales, and many involving you, among others, of these epic jam sessions and people trying to carve each other up. I know that is very far removed from your concept of music or just life in general, but were you ever part of those things? Are any of these stories true, of you going head to head with so-and-so or . . .

Carter: Well, partly the stories are true. I don't know about having gone head to head with anyone, which, of course, maybe is something you could not avoid doing, you know, if you were part of a jam session. In that day, I guess they did call it a cutting session, you know, and oh yes, I was involved in many of those.

Berger: Do you remember any ones in particular where you really, much as it was against y our basic nature, you felt that there was a sense of competition and there was a . . .

Carter: You mean locked horns, so to speak?

Berger: Yeah, any particular things come . . .

Carter: No. I'm sure there were occasions, but none of which I can say, you know, with any accuracy and name any names. I just don't remember. That's many years ago. We're talking about the early thirties.

Berger: Sure, or even the twenties, in some cases.



Carter: Yeah. Yeah, even the twenties. That's right.

Berger: All right, we were talking about your 1933 band and how it moved from a rehearsal band to an at least somewhat employed band.

Carter: You mean finally we found a gig, huh?

Berger: Right, one or two. You did a benefit for the Scottsboro Boys [phonetic] and some paying engagements, and then we remembered the name of the ballroom, fortuitously.

Carter: I think it was the Rocklin Palace [phonetic], and that was something that we did for or with John Hammond.

Berger: Right. Right, in that very well publicized case of the young men in the South who were accused of rape and were being railroaded.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: Can we talk now about the very important personnel change you made by getting Teddy Wilson and how that particular discovery came about?

Carter: Well, I think—not I think; I know—we were playing. I was with Fletcher Henderson, and we were playing somewhere in maybe . . . gee, what's the big town in Rhode Island, Providence?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: I think we played Providence and . . . gee, I hadn't remembered before that I played in Fletcher's band with Roy Eldridge, but I must have, because I remember that one night we were off, and he said, "Come on, let's go over to Woonsocket." He said, "A band I used to play with,"—Snookums Russell [phonetic], was it, or something like that—he says, "and I want to go over and say hello to the guys." So we went over, and they had this pianist, Teddy Wilson, who just impressed me so greatly. I said, "Gee whiz, he's a fantastic pianist," you know. After that I always had him in mind.

At one point later when I had the rehearsal band, John Hammond was trying to help me put the band together and find some employment for me. He did not, however, invest any money in me, as he said in his book, not even five cents. Really, he did not. There was no money. I never asked him for money. There was no reason for him to give me any money. I had a rehearsal band. I wasn't paying the guys, and wherever we rehearsed, I'm sure that was a



venue that was donated, you know. So he didn't have to help. There was nothing for him to finance.

Berger: Right.

Carter: But to continue on the John Hammond thing, when I went—and this is jumping ahead, of course—when I did go to Europe . . . was it when I . . . no, it wasn't; it was just, oh, just some months later when I was putting my band together, and I think by that time I had an upcoming engagement. I mentioned to him that I had heard this pianist and I would like to get him to come to New York. I don't know what the conditions were that . . . I don't know. We couldn't talk him into coming, you know, through correspondence or phone or whatever. So I went to Chicago to meet him and talk with him, and this trip was financed by Hammond to the tune of, I think, \$150, or \$160, to hit the correct figure. I drove there with a friend of mine who had just bought a new Cadillac, a very dear and close friend, a most generous man, named . . . hmm, Jesus . . . George Rich. I'm saying all of this to say what?

Berger: About getting Teddy Wilson.

Carter: About getting Teddy Wilson. So we did talk to Teddy, and we convinced him to come to New York, which he did shortly thereafter.

Berger: Had you spoken to him when you saw him in Woonsocket?

Carter: Oh yes, I met him, you know.

Berger: You got to meet him and . . .

Carter: Sure, yeah, got to meet him, yeah.

Berger: What did he seem like personally to you? What sort of a . . .

Carter: What was he like then?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: Quiet, intelligent, a little unassuming, even a wee bit shy.

Berger: Do you think that may have been the reason he needed personal coaxing to get him to . . .



Carter: Yeah. Yeah, I think he didn't want to leave Chicago. That was his home base at the time, although he was originally from Tuskegee, Alabama, I believe. But he was doing well in Chicago and probably didn't realize what would lay ahead in New York, you know.

Berger: Now, by that time you had played with some of the greatest pianists of the day already, Fats Waller, Count Basie, or Bill Basie, I guess as he was known . . .

Carter: Yes, Bill Basie at that time.

Berger: . . . and many others. What was it about Teddy Wilson's playing that you recall was different, that struck you?

Carter: Well, I mean, just to hear him, you know what's different. How to explain it, I don't know.

Berger: I mean, at that time, I guess, coming out of the stride style . . .

Carter: Yeah.

Berger: . . . that was prevalent, and actually you'd played with Earl Hines, too, by then.

Carter: Yes, that's true.

Berger: So there must have been something that . . .

Carter: Well, I had also heard, although I hadn't played with, Art Tatum, and I felt at that time that Teddy Wilson was the closest thing to Art Tatum at that time, you know. Gee, I don't know. He had the taste and the technique and the fluidity and the harmonic sensitivity; many things about his playing all . . .

Berger: And when you came back, I believe the next day, you were already in the studio with Teddy Wilson back in New York.

Carter: Is that right?

Berger: I think it was within a day or two.

Carter: Yeah, that [unclear] . . . maybe that's why the sense of urgency with which we went after him, because we were . . . and actually, I think that was for a recording session that Hammond had set up and probably produced. So that's probably why.



Berger: Right. That was the Chocolate Dandies date.

Carter: Right, and *Once Upon a Time* and a couple of other things, yeah.

Berger: And his playing on that certainly made everyone understand why you were so enthusiastic about him.

Carter: Oh yes. Yeah.

Berger: While we're on those recordings, maybe we can backtrack a little to the first . . . those were in October, but in April you had done some recording with your band, actually the first other than that mysterious 1932 *Tell All Your Daydreams* anomaly, I guess we might call it, because it's not typical, I think, of what you would do.

Carter: No. Well, I don't remember that at all, really.

Berger: Right. It's clear that you're on it, but it's not clear what . . . about it or . . .

Carter: You can't understand why.

Berger: Yeah, okay. [laughter] Well, I was going to put it more diplomatically, but, well, strange things happen.

Carter: Well, yeah.

Berger: Anyway, your own band got to record in a much more favorable light in March, although the March one is sort of a strange date there, too. There are a lot of vocals, and this is before Teddy Wilson. This is with Nicholas Rodriguez on piano, but the band is pretty much intact otherwise. You have Chu Berry and Sid Catlett. Just to refresh your memory, there's *Swing It*, *Synthetic Love*, Spike Hughes' composition, *Six Bell Stampede*, and *Love, You're Not the One for Me*. Those have Benny Carter vocals.

Carter: I was hoping that you wouldn't bring that up.

Berger: [laughs] Well, I won't make . . .

Carter: Knowing full well I could rely on your doing so.

Berger: Well, I won't play them for you, if that's any consolation.

Carter: Play them if you like. I won't listen. [laughter]



Berger: But I'm just wondering, you know, this band had been rehearsing for some time, although . . . yeah, for about a year almost at this point, and this is your first opportunity to record them. I think this was another John Hammond production for . . .

Carter: I think . . . oh yes, surely.

Berger: . . . for English Columbia.

Carter: That's right.

Berger: But the repertoire seems a little strange, to do all these vocals, which I'm not sure whether you were . . . you were not then known as a vocalist, I don't think.

Carter: No, and I'm still not.

Berger: Well, I would say your vocal talents have come much more to the fore in recent years. But do you remember anything about how these particular pieces were done on that first date, and why?

Carter: No, I don't, to answer both of your questions, how and why. Well, why was, of course, we were . . . part of it, it was another gig.

Berger: Right.

Carter: You know, for every recording that we did, we got a check.

Berger: Sure. Was there a feeling that perhaps they might be more commercially acceptable or commercially viable?

Carter: Oh, of course. That always entered into it at that time.

Berger: With vocals.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: And with these sort of, you know . . .

Carter: Yes, that might have been it.



Berger: Well, just continuing with these recordings, then, sort of in 1933 in chronological order, the next were several sessions with your orchestra, basically for Spike Hughes, the English, or Irish, I guess he was, composer.

Carter: I think he was, yes.

Berger: He said in his memoirs that when he came to New York and he heard your band, he knew this was the only band that could interpret his music the way he wanted it. Was there . . . it always strikes me, listening to them, and he has said that your arrangements were an influence on him, especially the *Read Writing* seems to have a lot of Benny Carter touches to it. Did any of that occur to you as you were rehearsing his material with your band, that there was some affinity between the two of you and . . .

Carter: No, I didn't at the time see any. I respected his work and I thought there was such a freshness about it, you know, the writing. He was a very fine musician that did not seem to have had much output, you know, and it sort of surprised me, especially in following years, that I didn't hear more from him. But no, I didn't see anything in his writing that reflected what I had been doing.

Berger: Because I think he had written that his major influences were you and Duke Ellington, as far as writing goes.

Carter: Really. I think he had sort of an original touch.

Berger: He also just . . . not to dominate the discussion, but he also wrote that one reason he didn't ever try this again, really, was that he felt that he had reached a pinnacle in those recordings with you and with your orchestra, and there was nothing else to be said with this sort of . . . for him, you know.

Carter: Well, whatever he thought, I think he had much more to say, and he should have continued.

Berger: Then, now we return to that Chocolate Dandies date we mentioned in October of 1933, which was the first recordings with Teddy Wilson, and then a few days later . . . that was a smaller group of some members of your band and some white musicians, namely, Max Kominski [phonetic] and Floyd O'Brien [phonetic] and, reputedly, Mez Mezro [phonetic] banging on the drums somewhere, but that's not confirmed. But, do you remember, was this another idea of John Hammond, to sort of have an integrated recording unit?

Carter: I think so, yes.



Berger: Then your own band, I think in its first real flowering on a record, was a few days later, and that's October 16th of '33 with *Devil's Holiday*, *Lonesome Nights*, *Symphony in Riffs* [phonetic], and *Blue Lou*, some of which are being recreated by the Smithsonian Classic Jazz Orchestra, so we want to talk a little bit about those pieces.

Carter: I don't remember much about them, really.

Berger: I was afraid of that. [laughs]

Carter: Yeah, and then I haven't heard them in years. I don't really . . .

Berger: Well, let me ask you a couple of things that occurred to me in listening to them. Out of this really essential date, which has become—an overused word—classic, but it's true in jazz recording history, especially *Lonesome Nights* and *Symphony in Riffs*, which became standard pieces for big bands for years, and right up to the present. They are played by the American Jazz Orchestra and by now the Smithsonian and many other bands. They were also recorded, as you know, by Benny Goodman, Cab Callaway, Glenn Miller, Gene Krupa, and in your own arrangement, or at least adapted from your arrangement. But on this very important session, you hardly play at all as far as solos go. Any reason for that that occurs to you?

Carter: I have no memory about them. No, I don't know.

Berger: And on the two major pieces, *Lonesome Nights* and *Symphony in Riffs*, you don't solo.

Carter: No, I don't. That's right.

Berger: Is it possible that you were more concerned with leading the sax section? Both of those pieces, obviously, have very intricate saxophone ensemble passages. Is that something you felt you needed to provide leadership in the sax section and concentrate on that? Was that . . .

Carter: Possible. Probable. Yeah, you know.

Berger: But not confirmable.

Carter: No. Well, I don't know what I was thinking then, you know.

Berger: Right.



Carter: I couldn't tell you that now.

Berger: These pieces, specifically, *Devil's Holiday*, *Lonesome Nights*, *Symphony in Riffs*, were they things that the band had been working on before? Were these pieces that you had brought to rehearsals that you had played at engagements, part of your book, so to speak? Or were these things that you prepared specifically for these recordings?

Carter: I don't remember.

Berger: You don't remember whether you had . . .

Carter: No. No, I don't remember.

Berger: . . . a book that, you know, included them and . . .

Carter: I might have had, you know, yeah.

Berger: Particularly the reed passages on these two, *Symphony in Riffs* and *Lonesome Nights*, are things that, at least hearing modern orchestras doing them, requires a lot of rehearsal. You've worked with some doing it, and it's not something people just come in and play at a session. Was there much rehearsal before these, or were musicians just better then?

Carter: No, I think musicians are better today, as far as reading and instant interpretation. Musicians are definitely better today. There are more musicians with more formal training, more formal musical education. But I'm sure that we did rehearse beforehand, before going into the studio, yes. How long, I don't know.

Berger: From the first, the April recordings of your big band, the one with all the vocals and that earlier session, to October, this one with *Symphony in Riffs* and *Lonesome Nights*, the sax section is now expanded to four from three.

Carter: Oh, it was three before, huh?

Berger: Right. Obviously, that gave you more of a, you know . . .

Carter: You mean it was three without me or . . .

Berger: Three with you.

Carter: Oh, really. I don't remember that, even.



Berger: Well, then you won't know the answer to this question. [laughs]

Carter: No, no, I don't know.

Berger: How did . . . having four obviously extended the possibilities.

Carter: Well, what did I do with three saxophones, what songs?

Berger: That was *Love, You're Not the One for Me* . . .

Carter: Really.

Berger: . . . *Swing It, Synthetic Love*, and *Six Bell Stampede*.

Carter: I don't remember them at all, no. Only the titles, of course.

Berger: Right. But with the four-part sax section, obviously you made the most of it in writing these, well, what people have called complex block harmonies for saxophone.

Carter: They wouldn't call it complex today, no.

Berger: Well, as a gentleman from Switzerland said, just not more than an hour ago, he said they still are considered complex, and he's a saxophonist, which I'm not, so anyway.

All right, why don't we leave some things that you can't remember and move to something that you might remember . . .

Carter: Well, all right, I might.

Berger: . . . and talk about . . . oh, before we do that, we're still working with 1933 and your recordings, and it struck me, we mentioned there was one integrated session of the Chocolate Dandies with that title—anachronistic title, oddly enough; it was an integrated band—and later that year you also recorded with Mez Mezro and his orchestra. I believe that was an offshoot of some grandiose idea he had to tour with an interracial group, which never came to fruition, but this was sort of a spin-off from that. Then you worked with Charlie Barnet. You recorded with him a year later and sat in with his band, playing trumpet.

Carter: [unclear], was that one of the songs?

Berger: Right. Exactly.



Carter: I've never heard that, though.

Berger: Oh, really? Well, I'll have to play it for you. You don't solo, but you're . . .

Carter: No, I . . .

Berger: Then another session with Mez Mezro and with Bud Freeman, and a little later in 1934, so there was . . .

Carter: What did I do with Bud Freeman? I don't remember ever having played with Bud.

Berger: That was *Old-Fashioned Love*, *Apologies* . . .

Carter: Oh yes. Yes, of course.

Berger: . . . *Send in the Vipers* and *Thirty-fifth and Calumet*.

Carter: Yeah. I'd forgotten that. I always was fond of Bud, you know.

Berger: I think that's your only recording with him.

Carter: Yeah, I think that's the only . . . I've seen him a number of times, particularly when we went to Europe, and I think he was living in England for a while. Yeah, gee.

Berger: And that, incidentally, had Willy "The Lion" Smith on piano, which was, I believe, your only recording with him . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . and Chick Webb on drums.

Carter: Is that right? I don't . . . those at all.

Berger: Quite a group. But, again, these were integrated recording units. Now, obviously, touring integrated bands had not happened yet, but was this sort of a novelty for the time? I mean, there have been some in the past, but . . .

Carter: I didn't know anything about that idea of touring. I just did a record session, and that's all I remember. There may have been some talk otherwise.



Berger: But the actual recording, mixed recording group like that, was that something that seemed different at the time to be doing, or was this . . . I mean, obviously, you'd talked about playing with white musicians who were coming in.

Carter: Well, the thing is it might have been unusual, but I never thought of those things. I mean, I'm not trying to gloss over what the realities of what was going on in America at that day and, of course, as we know, still goes on, but I never thought in those terms.

Berger: So to you it was a perfectly natural one.

Carter: Yeah, you know.

Berger: If . . . compatible musically, then you can do whatever you want.

Carter: That's it, and we were, yeah.

Berger: I want to ask a little bit . . . now your band is getting some work. In fact, one important engagement was at the Apollo Theater in January, and your band was the first to inaugurate the new big band policy at the Apollo.

Carter: Was that 1934 or '35?

Berger: '34.

Carter: '34.

Berger: In January.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: And we might add we just learned of the death of Ralph Cooper . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . who I believe was then master of ceremonies.

Carter: He was Mr. Apollo.

Berger: Yes, as he was right up until recently.

Carter: That's right. He was, indeed.



Berger: That Apollo Theater engagement, was that something that brought more attention to your band and made it more commercially viable or . . .

Carter: Well, I can't think back to those times, but I would say that it would be, you know, because if we played to a rather large audience for two weeks, which we did do two weeks there, and maybe a . . . well, of course, I think every engagement you do, even to today, it broadens your audience, you know. You hope that there's always some in the audience who haven't been part of your audience before. But I think you would be correct in assuming that.

Berger: Can you describe something about what the band's function was at the Apollo and what the show was like and what the schedule was like?

Carter: Oh yeah. Well, I don't remember what it was at that particular time, but later it became very tight, you know. We used to do five, six shows a day, with maybe a half-hour film in between, you know. When you walk off the stage after the show, they'd call half hour, and that would be time for a short film, you know. But I don't remember what it was like at that time, because, I guess, we were part of initiating the policy.

Berger: Right. So there was no . . .

Carter: Yeah, there was no real format yet established.

Berger: There was also no theme song established at that time until you established one.

Carter: Yeah. [sings] *I May Be Wrong* and . . . yes.

Berger: Yeah, how did that happen?

Carter: I don't know, just picked a tune, you know, something we liked, and that was it. As a matter of fact, I think that's something I've never recorded. Have I?

Berger: I don't think so.

Carter: I don't think so. [laughs]

Berger: Not a bad one to put on the list.

Carter: That's right. We'll have to put it on the list.



Berger: But was that like a spur-of-the-moment thing, because did your band have a theme song of its own?

Carter: No. No, we didn't, no.

Berger: And they asked you for . . .

Carter: Yeah, we just did something, and we picked that out. Maybe somebody in the orchestra suggested it, but just exactly how it came about, I don't know.

Berger: And then it stuck for fifty years. [laughter]

Carter: That's right.

Berger: It was a good choice, then.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: I'd like to move to just some general observations about your bands, and we're going to discuss how this great 1933 orchestra began to, unfortunately, disband because of lack of work and, well, there's a lot of economic factors and other things involved. But a lot of people through the years, writers especially, have found it uneasy discussing your career in terms of commercial success versus artistic integrity and versus musical integrity and all of that. As you said just now, you don't really have a long-range plan or, you know, you just let things pretty much happen as they happen and deal with it that way. Many of the writers are always lamenting that your bands were perfect, musically. They had wonderful soloists, the greatest arrangements, and they're always lamenting the fact that they were not great commercial successes. And I think you said at one time that none of your bands ever made money, that you had to, you know, subsidize them through arranging and film work later on and things like that. But at times you did record things that were more, quote, "commercial," unquote, but how did you reconcile these two? Did you have a line beyond which you felt "I can't go" to make this thing a success, even if it means disbanding?

Carter: No, I don't think it was that. As I say, I just . . . I didn't think of it along those lines, but I will admit that there are times when I had someone other than myself or other than a member of the orchestra doing arrangement here and there, thinking maybe it could be . . . lead to some commercialism or some commercial success. As you know, Glenn Miller—I'm jumping ahead a few years.

Berger: Sure.



Carter: He was a very fine arranger, too, but his hits were all done by somebody else, you know.

Berger: One of the most renowned historians of jazz, Gunther Schuller, has devoted in his recent book, *The Swing Era*, has devoted quite a bit of space, sort of retrospectively trying to explain your—quote, unquote—“failure,” at least commercial failure. I’d just like to read what he had to say and see if you have any . . . I’m not looking for a defense, but a comment on it, if that’s all right.

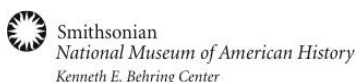
He said [reads], “It is possible that Carter’s talent, for all its awesome diversity, was not strong enough to assert itself in the public’s mind in the way that Ellington’s, Armstrong’s, and Callaway’s did, and I have here purposely cited three quite different kinds of talent and temperaments. It can be that in our musical society anyone as richly and diversely talented as Carter is to some extent rejected because the public and the music business prefer a single clearly identifiable, marketable personality, not a many-sided marvel who resists being fitted into the standard, predetermined professional slots.” How does that strike you?

Carter: Well, maybe he’s quite right there. I don’t know, you know. The only thing he may be a little strong on is what, something about me being so talented or something . . . I . . .

Berger: That your talent was too diverse to assert itself in the public’s mind.

Carter: Well, I don’t know that just my talents. I think the talents of anyone who does more than one thing, you know, reasonably well, it’s hard to find a niche for them, you know. What are they, you know? Gee, I don’t know. There are a lot of people that do what I do and do what I have done and . . . I don’t know. I guess to a certain degree they’re kind of cut into little pieces, you know, and not looked at as a whole. You know, like an Armstrong, he was a trumpet player and a singer, of course, and quite an entertainer. But, gee, I don’t know. There are other people that played more than one instrument and played them well, and wrote and composed and . . . I don’t know. But I think his observations are very, very correct.

Berger: Let me read you some more and see. He says [reads], “There are distinctions to be made . . .” Oh, let’s start a little earlier. “Two contrasting views of Carter’s orchestras run like a thread through his big band career. Musicians were almost always unanimous in their praise and respect for Carter, while at the same time his bands never achieved much public appeal. This has mystified musicians and many jazz writers, but the aural evidence of Carter’s thirties and early forties recordings, virtually all his own arrangements, bear clear testimony that Carter’s music lacked that element of memorability and individuality on



which success is based, artistic or commercial.” I think that’s basically the point he’s trying to make.

Carter: I think the point that he’s trying to make, and I think he makes it well, is that my orchestras, and I feel this myself, never had . . . a phrase I’m going to use, and it’s going to sound redundant . . . but an identifiable identity, you know. Gee, I don’t know. I think that’s well analyzed. Yeah, I really do, and I agree with him.

Berger: But on the other hand, you know, not . . . again, I don’t have to launch a defense of you. You certainly don’t need that from me or from anyone. But so many musicians have immediately heard something and said, “Oh, that’s obviously a Benny Carter arrangement.” Well, maybe it’s the arrangement they’re hearing and not the orchestra, now that you mention . . .

Carter: Yeah. Well, maybe that. Maybe it might be a identifiable, but not only identifiable. It’s more than that. It’s got to have the commercial appeal for the average lay listener, and that, obviously, was not enjoyed.

Berger: One more quote from Mr. Schuller. [reads] “Carter and his musicians never understood, I think, that producing a well-rehearsed band is in and of itself not enough to impress an audience. What counts is what happens, so to speak, between the lines, the excitement that collective music making can generate and the subtleties of nuances of blendings and balances of musical sensitivities and relationships which can be developed and achieved only over a period of time. If one observes with what extraordinary patience and creative stick-to-itiveness someone like Ellington nurtured his orchestra’s progress, though often stumbling and learning by trial and error, one can see the quality that Carter lacked.”

Carter: I have no problem with any of that. That’s his opinion, and much of it I agree with. Yes, really. I mean, I certainly don’t compare myself to an Ellington or anyone else. We’re different, you know. I have the greatest respect for Ellington and always have, as everyone has and should have. But that is something I don’t do. I don’t attempt to compare what I do to what someone else does. I do what I do, and they do what they do.

Berger: And the critics analyze what you do, and that’s . . .

Carter: Yeah. Yeah, you know, that’s their job, and for the most part, they do it well. I certainly think that Gunther does it well, exceptionally well, really.

Berger: While we’re on the subject of criticism, you had brought up before we started the interview today a recent piece in I guess it was *Jazz Times* or *Down Beat*, the blindfold test with Lee Conants [phonetic].



Carter: I think it was *Down Beat*.

Berger: *Down Beat*, in which they played for him one of your recordings.

Carter: Oh yeah.

Berger: And you said you appreciated . . . he sort of . . . well, maybe I'll just let you say what he said then.

Carter: Well, I think that what he said and the honesty he expressed I was greatly impressed by, you know, and I'd say that I've always known him and liked him and appreciated what he did. I even respect him further because of his honesty, you know. So I don't know what else there is for me to say about that. He said it, and I . . . you know.

Berger: Yeah. Well, actually, I think when we come to the forties and the Charlie Parker era and all that, we'll read the quote and maybe discuss it then, actually, because it does pertain to the influence of Charlie Parker on soloists and on you in particular, or lack of influence, whatever. So I'd like to deal with that . . .

Carter: Well, the influence of Charlie Parker has been just unprecedented, really.

Berger: But I guess not enough, according to Lee. [laughs]

Carter: No, no, no.

Berger: No, I know.

Carter: He didn't mean that. No, no.

Berger: No, I understand.

Carter: I know he didn't mean that.

Berger: But we'll read the quote again and get it exact and then . . .

Carter: All right, whatever you like.

Berger: While we're on the topic of commercialism versus artistic integrity and the like, I just wanted to raise a question that seems to come out in many of the recent jazz textbooks, again, one of these oversimplifications. Whenever they deal with the bebop era, one of the



things that supposedly distinguishes it from its preceding eras of jazz, is that now the artists are . . . well, the musicians are—quote, unquote—“artists” or “serious musicians,” as opposed to entertainers or people serving functional . . . playing for dancers and things like that. Is that something that . . . I mean, did it ever occur to you in the late twenties and in the early thirties, the period we’re speaking, or throughout the thirties, that you were not a serious artist, that you were an entertainer?

Carter: No, that never occurred to me, and I had no reason to feel that. I don’t know . . . are you using the word *artist* interchangeably with *musician*, or to differentiate?

Berger: Well, I think that the word *artist* implies somewhat something more elevated, that a musician could be a musician just serving a functional purpose, whereas an artist is a creator.

Carter: You mean if you’re playing for a bar mitzvah, you’re not an artist.

Berger: Right.

Carter: I see.

Berger: That’s not my notion.

Carter: But you’re playing at Carnegie Hall, you’re an artist.

Berger: Exactly.

Carter: I see.

Berger: There’s this notion that this idea of jazz music as an art form began in 1945. I mean, that’s the idea we get conveyed in many, if not most, of the textbooks that are written. Did you, Teddy Wilson, Coleman Hawkins consider yourselves artists?

Carter: Well, we never thought of the term. I don’t know how anybody else may have considered themselves, himself or herself. I just thought of myself as a musician, which I still do. But if somebody else wants to call me an artist, I suppose I am as well.

Berger: What about the word *serious*? They were always talking about “serious music.”

Carter: Well, that has no meaning, because I think every . . . you know, the guy that plays a harmonica, and I don’t mean like Toots Tillman [phonetic], I mean just the guy who plays the harmonica in a blues thing or something. I don’t know what . . . where are we? [laughter] What was your question again?



Berger: Jeez, I think I've lost it again. No, the idea of art versus commerce in music, I think that's sort of what we're nudging towards.

Carter: Yes, art versus commerce, or art versus commercialism, maybe, or something. I don't know. They can be different, and they can be the same. They can occur together, you know. But how to analyze and separate the two, I couldn't just right at this moment do it off the top of my head unless I had time to do a dissertation. But yeah, I know what you mean.

Berger: For example . . . you were going to say something. Go ahead.

Carter: Well, I was going to say that, speaking of artists and commercialism, gee, how do artists become multimillionaires if they're not commercial? You know, but the fact that you make a lot of money doesn't mean that you're not an artist if you're commercial, you know.

Berger: I guess the differentiation might be that somebody is changing his art or doing something in order to make money, as opposed to just doing whatever it is that the muse leads him to do and it happens to sell as well. Just off the top of my head.

Carter: Well, the muse, what's the color of the muse, green? [laughter] Okay, you know what the green muse is, the almighty American dollar. There's nothing wrong with going after that, because that's our society and what it's really built on.

Berger: But obviously you, if it wasn't a formal line that you drew, there was some kind of . . . there were some things you wouldn't do. Let's put it that way.

Carter: And an addition to that is there are some things I couldn't do, you know, of which I'm fully aware and have always been. [Berger laughs.] Were you going to say, "Such as?"

Berger: Well, I was going to just cite one example, something that is . . . I don't know what it means, exactly, but maybe I'll throw it out to you and you can tell me what it means, if anything.

Carter: I can throw it back, huh?

Berger: Throw it back, harder. The music you were writing in the thirties, these classic arrangements that we are discussing and have been celebrated, not just yours but things that were being written for Fletcher Henderson, for Count Basie, a piece like your, say, *Symphony in Riffs*. Now, I gather, *Symphony in Riffs* is a piece that was written in around 1933. You probably played it, if not . . . if you wrote it for a recording session or you didn't, certainly



your band then played it at dances and the regular venues that you were working, which were dances, ballrooms. I guess that's the primary thing for a big band at that time.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: Now some sixty years later you're taking the same piece of music, performing it in concert halls. It's being analyzed by musicologists, and it's become art, as opposed to . . . the music itself hasn't changed; it's the same piece of music. To me there's something . . . I don't know what it is, but there's something there. Does that change mean anything to you, that this music is now taken out of one context and has suddenly become the highest form of art, capable of dissertations, analysis, and performance in concert halls?

Carter: Well, I'm not one of the people who put the labels on the music.

Berger: In the first place.

Carter: Yeah, you know, so I think this has got to be something up to them. I can't answer that question with any degree of intelligence.

Berger: I'm not even sure there was a question there. [laughs]

Carter: Well, you know, yeah.

Berger: But is this phenomenon, is it at all intriguing to you, that things you were doing that long ago for a different purpose are now serving this new function?

Carter: Not particularly intriguing, I might say, but I must say it's gratifying, you know, of course. But, no, I don't know how to comment on that. I'll leave that to the Gunther Schullers.

Berger: All right, well . . .

Carter: And the Wynton Marsalises.

Berger: While we're discussing commercialism versus art, a name must be brought up and it occurs at this time in your career that we're covering right now, and that's Irving Mills and your relationship with him and his tying in with your band or with your publishing. What exactly was your connection with Irving Mills, when did it start, and what did it do for you, if anything?



Carter: Oh yes, I must certainly say that . . . I can't say that it didn't do anything for me, because he was the first person to be interested in my music. As a matter of fact, he came to a club and heard the orchestra playing some sort of . . . I don't remember what it was, but we had a little riff that we played, out of which I wrote a song called *Blues in My Heart*, and he heard it. Irving Mills was the first publisher that was interested in my music. I had not even tried to peddle anything, and he made the overture to me that he wanted to do this song. So following that, we did a number of things . . . I use the term *together* lightly, because, of course, other than that song, to which he wrote the lyric, other than that song, I don't know that he was actually involved in anything else that I wrote other than as the publisher, whether his name was on it or not.

But, you know, I'm certainly glad that he appreciated what I was doing and was interested in it enough to publish it, which I always say that Ellington was also a great recipient of Irving Mills' interest in his music, and I don't know how far Ellington might have progressed had there not been an Irving Mills that believed in him. I know there's a lot of talk about Irving Mills putting his name on music to which he had really not contributed anything, but he did make a contribution, in that he nurtured it, he . . . I imagine he financially assisted the band because of Duke's talent as a composer, which, of course, was beneficial to Mill as the publisher, and I think he was also the manager at the time. I think I have an old picture from *Fortune* magazine or something, when Duke arrived in London on his first trip there. Irving Mills was with him as the manager.

So, but as far as my involvement with Irving Mills, it was always cordial and, you know, as I say there, you know . . . he himself, I suppose, was not without talent, certainly not as a publisher. He was a fine publisher. But he didn't contribute much to my music.

Berger: You mean he didn't write all those tunes, huh? [laughs]

Carter: Uh . . . well, you can read between those lines.

Berger: [laughs] I mean, one view might say that this is pure exploitation, that he's a music publisher. Okay, he publishes music. He's not a composer. Why is his name on everything?

Carter: I don't know, but that still happens today. Even I understand that many, many artists, if they are brought a good song that they want to record, they want to put their name on it, or short of that, at least they want it in their publishing company. But in many instances, I'm told that there are names put on music to which the second name or third name really contributed nothing. But I can't say that I've ever had that experience, beyond Irving Mills, and I can't say that I am ungrateful.



Berger: Well, while we're on that topic, it seems to have become a common practice for bandleaders to add their name to a piece written by a sideman, particularly.

Carter: True.

Berger: Sometimes not just add it, just substitute their name.

Carter: Well, you know, I'm told that that's been done quite a bit, yes. I've never done it. Consequently, I've never had a hit. [laughter] They might have had a hit had I put my name . . . no, no, I'm wrong. No, consequently, the song maybe became a hit because my name wasn't on it.

Berger: Wasn't on it. I see.

Carter: Yeah, so I'm getting all mixed up here. But anyway, you know, I just think, to go back to Irving Mills, Irving Mills and Duke Ellington were both very lucky in each other. And the thing about Irving Mills is that he recognized what he heard as something extraordinary. There were plenty other publishers around, plenty of other managers. They didn't pick up on it. But Mills did, and Ellington has been a great beneficiary, as well, of course, as Mills himself.

Berger: Did you ever run across anything like that in any other area of music that you're aware . . . well, we'll get into film music, which is a whole different, you know, subject. But where you might have been working as a sideman; someone heard something and said, "I'd like to do this with the band, but I'd like a piece of it."

Carter: I've never experienced that, no. Never.

Berger: I notice when you play a song like in a club today even, you play a song like, I think, *Stompin' at the Savoy* or *Don't Be That Way* or something, you go out of your way to indicate who the true, original composer was and announce that so-and-so, whose name also appears on it, was not the composer. Is that . . .

Carter: Well, you know, that happens because . . . we'll take Edgar Sampson [phonetic] for an example. I was there when he wrote those songs, *Stompin' at the Savoy* and *Don't Be That Way* and *If Dreams Come True*, and Chick Webb played them. And I know that Benny Goodman, who had his name on them when he recorded them many years later, as far as I know, he had nothing to do with the tunes. But, as you say, you know, a lot of bandleaders and singers do that.



But another thing is that as good as the material is, it may not have had the wide distribution and all of the many performances and gotten to as many listeners if it had not been for the Benny Goodman performances. Whether it would have done as well without his name is another question, which I think it certainly would have done. I don't know that his name contributed anything to the success of the material. If he had said Irving . . . Edgar Sampson and George Gershwin, then that would have been different, you know, Gershwin having quite a reputation as a songwriter; or Ira Gershwin, as the lyricist.

Berger: Okay. Why don't we move on with your . . . we're still around 1933. We're discussing your orchestra, and unfortunately, the orchestra did not last much beyond 1933. Beginning in 1934, whatever engagements you had began to kind of dry up. Do you remember this period at all? Were you frantically working to keep this group together, or did you see the writing on the wall?

Carter: I was frantically working to pay the rent and keep up the payments on the car.
[laughter]

[Begin File 4]

Carter: But I wasn't frantically working to keep the orchestra together, although I certainly wanted to, but frantic is not a word for me. I was always looking forward and hoping better things would happen. But no, I was not frantically working to keep it together.

Berger: You began to do some arranging outside; well, you were doing that all along, but it seems that this intensified sort of as the band began to disintegrate or as work was beginning to become more sparse. I'd like to, since we did just mention Benny Goodman, one thing you were doing in 1934, you began to arrange for his first big band.

Carter: Yeah, that's when they were at the Billy Rose Music Hall [phonetic], before he even got the radio show. What was that show?

Berger: *Let's Dance?*

Carter: *You Need a Biscuit* [phonetic] or something? *Let's Dance*, huh?

Berger: *King Biscuit* or something?

Carter: Something. I don't know. Yeah.

Berger: And then the famous *Let's Dance* broadcasts.



Carter: Famous *Let's Dance* broadcasts. That's right.

Berger: Do you remember how that association as one of Goodman's arrangers might have happened?

Carter: No, I don't remember. These things just come . . . you know, they happen and . . .

Berger: What about your actual acquaintance with Benny Goodman? Had you already met him well before that?

Carter: Yeah, I think I met him with and through John Hammond.

Berger: When you began to arrange for the *Let's Dance* broadcasts, and this is something that seems to have almost been overlooked entirely. Everyone thinks Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson, that's it. But you actually arranged for the Goodman orchestra before Fletcher Henderson did, and were the first arranger for this orchestra that he took into Billy Rose and . . .

Carter: I don't know that I was the first arranger. I'm sure someone else was doing work for him, too.

Berger: And for the *Let's Dance* broadcasts, did he tell you sort of what he wanted, in terms of types of arrangements?

Carter: I don't remember that he did, and I think the reason for that is that he was still searching. You know, wanting to listen to what anyone would do, and then he could say, "That's it." So that's probably what happened with Henderson, Fletcher. When he heard Fletcher sing, he said, "Gee, that's it. That's what I want."

Berger: When you arranged for this Goodman orchestra, did you ever rehearse them on your material?

Carter: I was probably there, but I don't remember. That's a long time ago. [laughter]

Berger: Well, this is all a long time ago.

Carter: Yeah, that's what I'm saying, yeah.

Berger: As your band finally broke up, you . . .

Carter: For the umpteenth time, or the umpteenth time.



Berger: [laughs] And was to again years later, but we'll get into that.

Carter: Yes, indeed.

Berger: You yourself went from being a leader of your own orchestra playing in many of the leading venues, you went to becoming a sideman again . . .

Carter: That's right.

Berger: . . . this time with Willy Bryant.

Carter: Oh yes.

Berger: Do you remember your feelings at the time? Was this a letdown? Was this just another way of getting . . .

Carter: Just another step in some direction, hopefully, the proper direction, and good to have a job.

Berger: And what sort of band did Willy Bryant have?

Carter: I don't remember. I really don't. There are a couple of records available, which I don't think I've ever heard.

Berger: I believe you played trumpet, mostly, with [unclear].

Carter: Yeah. Well, I didn't play saxophone at all, I don't think. In that band, I was just in the trumpet section.

Berger: Was that one reason you joined? Did you want to work more as a trumpet player?

Carter: Well, it was one reason, but I guess the main reason was that I didn't have a job. [laughter] We can't escape that, Ed. We can't escape that.

Berger: Okay.

Carter: Yep.



Berger: Some of the musicians have implied, if not stated outright, that—I think Ben Webster did—that [when] you joined the band, you became musical director of Willy Bryant's band. Was that . . .

Carter: I may have. It was a very short stint, but Willy Bryant was not a musician. He didn't play an instrument. He didn't read music. He sang a little. So there had to be somebody giving him some musical guidance. It might have been me, I don't know.

Berger: But as far as you recall, it wasn't a formal arrangement [unclear] join.

Carter: No, no, indeed not.

Berger: I think the next step in the Benny Carter saga is your leaving for Europe in 1934.

Carter: '35.

Berger: Excuse me, 1935. This is after your final engagement in the U.S., which was with Willy Bryant, and you accepted an offer to join Willie Lewis' band in Paris [France]. Do you remember how that offer was tendered, as they say?

Carter: Well, it was tendered by my having received a telegram from Willie Lewis, actually, in Paris, offering me the job, you know, if I would like to come to Paris and play with his orchestra. I don't know how long it took me to think it over, but I decided I would like to do it, and I did.

Berger: Was traveling to Europe something you had had in the back of your mind previously, or was this sort of a new [unclear]?

Carter: It might have been, but not necessarily. But I guess we all, you know, think of going to faraway places at some time in our lives, and whether it was Europe or anyplace else. But it would probably have been the place I would be more interested than any other place at that time.

Berger: The word *expatriate* is often used to describe this group of American musicians who settled in Europe at various times from the thirties right up until, you know, probably the sixties and seventies were another leading period for that. I think you mentioned that word has always not maybe bothered you but puzzled you as to . . .

Carter: Yeah, it still does. I'm not sure what that means, expatriate, you know.



Berger: When you went to Europe . . . I think it implies sort of a rejection of your original country and an intent to remain in the new country.

Carter: That's the feeling that I kind of had. Of course, that's why it bothered me, you know.

Berger: That was not applicable to you?

Carter: Oh, indeed not. No, I . . . no, I went, and I stayed almost three years. When I returned, I had really intended going back, but, of course, Mr. Hitler interfered with that.

Berger: Did any negative feelings about . . .

Carter: I might add that I intended going back for a visit, not to become an expatriate, okay?

Berger: Right. Right. And you eventually did go back for many visits.

Carter: That's right. I'm going back next week.

Berger: Right. [laughs] While you did not, obviously, reject the United States and say, "The hell with it. I'm going to live in Europe for the rest of my life."

Carter: No.

Berger: Were there any negative feelings that may have helped you decide, "Yeah, let me try this for a while"? Negative primarily . . .

Carter: No, but there were negative feelings, but there are still negative feelings. But they don't overweight or they don't outweigh the positive feelings I have about this country of ours, you know, of which I am a member, proudly. But I guess I just wanted to go there. If somebody had said, "Will you come to China? Will you come to anywhere?" You know, anything would be a welcome exposure to another culture. At that time I hadn't been around the United States too much. I'd never been to California, for instance. So I went to Europe before I went to California, you know.

Berger: What sort of music did you find that you were playing with Willie Lewis, his band?

Carter: Well, Willie Lewis was a clarinetist and saxophonist who had gone to Europe with the Sam Wooding Orchestra. So, you know, it was sort of as a jazz orchestra, but we played mostly society music, because we played in a club called the Chez Florence and mostly



people who would today be considered . . . the clientele, at least, were people who today would be considered members of the jet set, you know. I guess those are the people we were playing for. We played for dancing. Primarily, it was a dance band, and you played a lot of melody, you know, with very little improvisation. You know, they played all the show tunes and things like that.

Berger: You eventually began to contribute some arrangements to Willie Lewis.

Carter: Yes, I did.

Berger: But those were anything but—quote, unquote—“society music.”

Carter: Yeah, yeah.

Berger: How did you get away with . . . did you sneak those in, or were those . . .

Carter: Well, you know, there were very few of those, really, in what we played. I mean, I wrote very few of those, and as you’re saying, we might have snuck them in, you know.

Berger: Was it possible they were mostly for recording, because they were recorded.

Carter: I don’t remember. No, I don’t remember.

Berger: You don’t remember if they were part of the regular repertoire of the orchestra.

Carter: No, I don’t remember.

Berger: When you got to Paris, aside from playing in this sort of society, more staid kind of thing, you also were jamming with people like Django Reinhardt.

Carter: Right.

Berger: Can you just tell us a few things about Django and your impressions of him when you first came across him?

Carter: Not much. There wasn’t much to know about Django. He was very quiet. He had very little to say. That’s being redundant, isn’t it? [Berger laughs.] But anyway, he was also maybe a little on the shy side, and maybe that was more because being around American musicians and not speaking English, and we not speaking French very well, you know, that probably was part of his feeling. But I couldn’t tell you very much about him, no more than you would read about him, maybe, certainly not as much, because the people that have



known him much better than I did have written rather widely about him, like, for instance, the Charles Delaunay's book, you know, on Django Reinhardt. But I didn't know him well.

Berger: What about your impressions of his playing? Was this sort of a revelation, that someone in your . . .

Carter: Oh, sure. Sure, it was a revelation, as it was to everyone. You know, it was most unusual, and especially with his, oh, what would you call it? His . . . I guess what you would call a handicap was certainly no handicap to him, and that meant the absence of the use of two of his left fingers on his left hand. But for some reason he overcame that and, boy, how he did.

Berger: Eventually you went to England, and that, I believe came about through your friend, long-term friend, Leonard Feather.

Carter: That's right. We had never met, and I got a cable from Leonard, asking me if I would be interested in coming to London [England] to work for the BBC [British Broadcasting Company] as an arranger. That was very interesting to me. I corresponded with him and answered, of course, in the affirmative, and he worked out a deal with the BBC for me to come there. I think I went there in March of maybe 1936.

Berger: The arrangements for the BBC were a somewhat different instrumentation than the so-called dance band or big band writing you had been doing. What sort of instrumentation was involved in your . . .

Carter: Oh, boy. It's kind of silly of me to say this, but I don't remember. A couple of trumpets, maybe three. I don't remember what the brass section and saxophone section and the rhythm section . . . I know that . . . I don't know. I don't know, but it was, you know, what was the radio staff band at that time.

Berger: And it had a string section at this time.

Carter: Yeah, it had some strings, yes.

Berger: You were not playing with him. You were just writing.

Carter: No, I didn't play at all.

Berger: Right.

Carter: I couldn't get a permit to play in England at the time.



Berger: So you were basically a full-time writer for the band.

Carter: That's right.

Berger: What sort of output did you have to [produce] for them for a weekly . . .

Carter: If I remember correctly, I think I did about three arrangements a week. [unclear] to something that I did on the *Lucky Strike Hit Parade* show later in 1941.

Berger: Do you remember your own feelings about undertaking this, which was, after all, very different from what you had been doing? Was there any sense of trepidation or, you know, moving into a new country, a new type of orchestra, a string section and . . .

Carter: No. For some reason, I've never known fear and trepidation. [Berger laughs.] But, you know, I just went in and found out what they wanted and did what I was supposed to do. [I] liked living in London, and I still like visiting there. It's one of my favorite cities on the globe.

Berger: A lot of musicians and, well, mostly writers have sort of I don't know if it's idealized, or if it's actually true, the reception accorded American jazz musicians in Europe. Certainly from at least the photos of your reception in various countries and the reviews, there seems to be something to that. Did you find yourself being treated differently as an artist in Europe, a feeling that might be different from that you . . . from audiences in the U.S.?

Carter: Well, of course, I did, but what I did was exposed to a much broader audience there, and my coming seemed to have created, in some circles, considered to be newsworthy and noteworthy, you know. I was treated with a great respect and given a very handsome welcome. I had a very, very nice tenure there.

Berger: We talked a little while ago about commercialism versus art, or entertainment versus art, and you said something about if you play the same thing in Carnegie Hall, then it's art. I'm just wondering, the first time that you actually played a concert, as opposed to a functional sort of . . . music being a function of something else like a dance or a nightclub or a stage show or a revue, would that have been in England or in Europe?

Carter: It might have been. I don't remember, but I think it might have been, yeah.



Berger: So this transition, did that . . . you were playing a lot of concerts in Europe, especially the famous one that was written up in *Melody Maker* at the Hippodrome [Theatre], which was sort of the culmination of your stay in England . . .

Carter: Oh yes, yeah. Yes, that's right.

Berger: . . . when you finally got permission to play . . .

Carter: But only for that one occasion.

Berger: . . . for that . . . Right.

Carter: That's the only time I had played other than, of course, in the recording studios.

Berger: But the idea of playing a concert, was it something . . . I mean, it's so long ago, but do you remember saying, "This is different. This is now . . ."

Carter: Well, I don't remember saying it, but I certainly must have thought it, you know, and that was also something that I think was engineered by Leonard Feather.

Berger: Leonard, of course, was very involved in your recordings over there, for Vocalion [Records]

Carter: Oh yeah, everything I think that I did, he produced, everything I did there.

Berger: Right. And we might mention one of the more historic ones, and that's the famous *Waltzing the Blues*, which . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . is the first time blues had been recorded in waltz time. I believe Leonard prodded you to do something like that.

Carter: That was his idea, yes.

Berger: The actual piece, is it completely improvised? Was there anything . . .

Carter: Oh, I don't think there was anything written on that.

Berger: There was nothing written.



Carter: No.

Berger: You mentioned the problems you had because of the work permit problem, which we won't get into, the reciprocity between the British union and the U.S. unions, and the reason for which you couldn't play, actually. You had to leave the country every three months.

Carter: Yeah, to get a reentry permit. We're going to wind up with more than six hours, though. I think we'll have to.

Berger: Fine.

Carter: Otherwise, we're into the . . . where are we now?

Berger: 1936, '37.

Carter: Well, okay. Can you stay until next Saturday?

Berger: Sure. [laughs]

Carter: Okay.

Berger: At this rate, I may have to stay until your next birthday.

Carter: That's right.

Berger: Moving along, however, I know we had discussed your education, you know, various self-education, teachers, and everything, and I know in England you had an aspiration of actually undertaking some formal study, which was sort of made impossible by this constant leaving the country. But could you tell us what that involved?

Carter: Yes. I had intended undergoing some studies there. As a matter of fact, I went to the Royal Academy of Music, and had an interview with a professor . . . what was his name? Oh, boy. I had it on the tip of my tongue, and now it escapes me. But anyway, the problem was that I had to leave the country every three months and reapply for an entry permit, and I just couldn't start any course of study that would be interrupted. He felt that it wouldn't work too well. So I just put it off, and I resumed many years later after I got to Hollywood [California].

Berger: And we will get to that, of course, eventually. [laughs] Maybe in about six weeks at this rate.



Carter: Yeah, that's it. Okay.

Berger: One person you did apparently receive some help from was Rosamond Johnson, is that correct?

Carter: Well, I must certainly say that I did receive help from him. I wish I'd been able to have spent more time with him, but he was very busy and so was I. But he was in London at the time. Just what he was doing there, I don't remember. But he was a very, very talented man. Oh, boy, there isn't enough about him known today or written, you know. But he was certainly a great friend and great inspiration and great . . . he helped me greatly at that time.

Berger: Did you go to him just in general or with any specific problems you wanted his advice on?

Carter: No, I think not for specific problems, but I think we were friends and we saw each other off and on there, and I guess during the conversation I mentioned that I was, you know, preparing to do some work for a British film. That was the first film work I did, and I asked for his help, or did he volunteer it? I don't remember, but whether I asked for it or whether he volunteered it, it was most welcome and most helpful.

Berger: You spent a couple of summers . . . well, you toured all around Europe. You did many recordings with . . . I think that's one thing that the historians point out is that your visit was so much . . . had such an impact because you were playing with local musicians and regularly working with them, not touring as, you know . . .

Carter: With my own unit.

Berger: With your own unit or just a guest soloist in and out. You actually had a British band that was formed and traveled with. Who were some of the musicians that particularly appealed to you as improvisers there?

Carter: Well, I think to begin with was the trombonist, the Scottish player who was living in London and recorded with me there, George Chisholm. Or was it Chisholm?

Berger: Chisholm, I heard, but . . .

Carter: Chisholm, Chisholm. Chisholm. But he is a name that still would be recognized today. The others, I don't think there would be too many known. Bertie King and, oh, gee whiz. Oh, I can't remember. York DeSousa [phonetic] at the piano, and Robert Monmarchet [phonetic], who was a [phonetic] drummer that lived in Paris. Lynn Harrison, who was a



British bassist. Sam Dasberg [phonetic], who was a Dutch trumpeter. Justi Barretto, who I think was Cuban, and he was a saxophonist. Louis Stevenson was also a saxophonist, both alto. Ray Webb, who was a guitarist, and there was another trombonist, who I think he was Dutch. His name I can't recall at the moment.

Berger: Many of these gentlemen were assembled for this special band at Scheveningen [Netherlands] for the . . .

Carter: Oh, they were all assembled for this special engagement, yes.

Berger: And I think Leonard Feather again had something to do with that, or didn't he?

Carter: No, I don't think he had anything to do with that.

Berger: But he has pointed out that, although no one made a big deal of it at the time, that in retrospect, this was the first unit of its kind, an interracial, international working band.

Carter: Well, it was the first one that we knew of. You know, you can't tell what's going on around the world, but it was certainly the first one that I knew of. And that wasn't the point. The point was getting the best musicians available who were interested in doing this gig.

Berger: This has now been . . . in retrospect, it's been pointed out that . . . but at the time, obviously, you've said you hired the musicians you felt were the best ones and the ones you wanted to work with.

Carter: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Berger: But once the band was assembled, was there any thought to, "You know, this is something. We have people from five, six countries and everything." Did that occur to people then, or is this . . .

Carter: It might have, but I don't remember any comments being made.

Berger: I would be remiss if I didn't bring up the historic recording session of April 1937 in Paris with the four saxophones, the first time you worked with just a saxophone group like that. Your friend, Coleman Hawkins, was the other American on the tape. Well, actually, there were two. There was Tommy Benford [phonetic] on drums.

Carter: On the drums, yes.



Berger: And then you were paired with the two French saxophonists, Alix Combelle and . . . who was the other one? André Ekyan.

Carter: Thank you. Oh, my memory failed me at the moment, too, and I was very fond of both of these guys. In addition to being fine saxophonists, fine musicians, they were fine fellows, as they would say over there. But they were lovely guys, and we spent a lot of time together. We developed a very lovely friendship with Alix Combelle and André Ekyan.

Berger: That specific recording, of course, has again turned into a overused word, a classic, and has been reissued ten thousand times and stolen and re-reissued and everything else. But I have to bring up something just to run it by you. This was Charles Delaunay—Delaunay—he thought up this idea.

Carter: Oh yes, he produced that date, yes.

Berger: Right, and this was the first recording for their new swing label of Delaunay and Hughes Panassié.

Carter: Oh, was it?

Berger: Yes, and regarding that session, I once asked Charles Delaunay about that session, which has become, as I said, a what they call “desert island item” of all jazz fans or whatever.

Carter: Oh, really, do they call it that?

Berger: I think so. You know, one of the top ten of this or the top five of that.

Carter: Oh, my.

Berger: But he recalls that when he contacted you to do this, to write four charts for two 78s featuring a saxophone quartet, that when you arrived, you hadn’t written anything yet.
[laughs]

Carter: You mean at the recording studio.

Berger: Right.

Carter: Well, I guess if you listen to the arrangements, you’re led to believe that, so it might be true. [laughter]



Berger: He said you quickly sketched out—brilliantly, he added—some basic ensemble parts for *Honeysuckle Rose* and *Crazy Rhythm*.

Carter: Yeah, I think that's all we had to do, because I think the rhythm section knew the changes. And who was the rhythm section? Louis Vola [phonetic] and was it Stefan Grippelli [phonetic] on piano?

Berger: Right. Right.

Carter: Yeah.

Berger: And Django, of course.

Carter: And Django. Yeah, they knew that.

Berger: Then for the last two numbers were a sort of informal jam thing. It says *Sweet Georgia Brown* and *Out of Nowhere*, and the last two you played trumpet.

Carter: On the last two?

Berger: Right.

Carter: On *Georgia Brown*, too?

Berger: The last two, right. So that just looking at the order of the tunes and, as you said, the amount of written material, you wouldn't deny that.

Carter: No, indeed not. [Berger laughs.] No, I'd hardly deny anything that Charles said, anyway, you know.

Berger: Okay.

Carter: He is just sort of a fount of information. He had the encyclopedic mind, as you have.

Berger: Well, I wouldn't put myself in Charles Delaunay's category, but all I can say is I've seen you write saxophone ensemble passages on very short notice, so I could understand that this could be produced in a short time.



While you were in Europe, how much news of musical developments in the U.S. was reaching you? Were you hearing latest recordings? After all, the swing era, which you had helped lay the foundation for, was now flourishing. How much news did you get of that?

Carter: Well, we were hearing records that were getting there; I don't know how much later than having been released in America, but that's about it, you know. It wasn't . . . as a matter of fact, during that particular period, I don't think there was too much, actually, too much development, as you call it. It was just going along sort of as I had left it.

Berger: Well I believe the Benny Goodman phenomenon had begun to take off . . .

Carter: Oh yes. Yeah, sure.

Berger: . . . and that sort of thing. A lot of bands were being formed.

Carter: Oh yes, we were aware of that.

Berger: You were.

Carter: Yes, surely.

Berger: On that, I should go back to the . . . on that recording in Europe, in Paris, we mentioned Coleman Hawkins, of course, was the other American giant paired with the two French saxophonists. You, of course, had known Coleman Hawkins probably at least a decade . . .

Carter: Yeah.

Berger: . . . before that. You haven't really spoken of him much. Maybe we should take this opportunity to talk about Coleman Hawkins, not just in this period but your earliest recollections of him and meeting him and his playing style when you first became aware of it.

Carter: Well, I don't know whether I can tell you too much about Coleman Hawkins, although we sat side by side in the Henderson Orchestra for quite a long while. How well we got to know each other is something else. He was pretty much of a private person—I guess that's the term they use, you know—and you didn't get to know too much about him. He was a very fine musician, which, of course, is historically known. He was a very nice guy to get along with. We never had any disagreements about anything. You know, he drank very well, and we drank very well together, if I drank, you know, which I drank very little at the time. But, gee, I don't know how much to tell you about him as a person.



Berger: You've often mentioned in regards to him that . . . said that everybody had somebody to listen to, but where did he come from? Who did he listen to?

Carter: He came out of himself. That's all I can say. There were no real role models on the instruments, you know, either on the tenor or on the alto. So I don't know where he could have gotten it, but there it is.

Berger: So you were not personally that close to him, although you worked much with him all through the years right . . .

Carter: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we weren't buddy-buddies, or as the old saying goes, "boon coons." [Berger laughs.] You've never heard that expression before?

Berger: No.

Carter: You're kidding.

Berger: That's a very old saying.

Carter: It certainly is an old one, yeah.

Berger: In Europe you recorded with him on that instance and then one more when he was sort of guesting with your . . .

Carter: In Holland.

Berger: Right.

Carter: That was also a recording that was produced by Leonard Feather.

Berger: And at that occasion you were the leader on this one; he was nominally the leader. Some writers have tried to make out that there was these two American titans wandering through Europe, and there was some, all during the same period, there was some rivalry there. Was there anything to that from your side?

Carter: I don't know how there could have been and why there should have been. No. If there was any, it was certainly in the mind of the person who imagines it. I'm sure it wasn't in Coleman's mind and certainly not in mine.



Berger: Did you meet up with him in Europe other than on these documented recording occasions? Did you see much of him there?

Carter: No. No, I did not.

Berger: Coming out of Europe and your decision to return to the United States, there were obviously several reasons. Not insignificant was the approaching world war. But I know you've said in the past there were musical reasons, that you were ready to hear your music played by American musicians. What weren't you hearing?

Carter: Well, it was really more than that. It was just wanting to come back home for a while and, as I said, when I came back, I had intended returning to Europe, you know. But I don't know. There was no big compelling reason, just sort of . . . just a matter of change and come home for a bit and go back, you know. That's about it.

[Begin File 5]

Berger: Just for the record again, it's now August 8th, and it's the historic occasion of Benny Carter's eighty-fifth birthday. He's chosen, for some odd reason, to spend it being subjected to another inquisition.

We were talking about your period in Europe from 1935 to 1938, and before we resume with that and your return to the United States, I just wanted to ask about a few people that you had encountered along the way that we may have either just mentioned in passing but not really talked too much about your associations with them and your musical impressions of them. We talked about your 1932 formation of what was the first real Benny Carter Orchestra formed from scratch, and that included Sid Catlett on drums. Can you tell us something about his style and what it did for your band and what attracted you to him?

Carter: Well, what attracted me was his style of drumming, which I certainly cannot analyze here. This is the sort of thing that I always say . . . I use the term *ineffable*, you know. I think it's got to be heard and felt. But he was a fine drummer and a lot of people, you know, later drummers, have tried to pattern themselves after what he did. But he was a big . . . as you know, he was about six-foot-two or six-foot-four, I don't remember, but what you might almost call a gentle giant. But a very fine drummer, and he was the drummer that I liked number one of that particular period, between him and Chick Webb.

Berger: Even recently, when you play with various drummers, you have been known on occasion to ask them if they had ever heard Sid Catlett, sort of . . .



Carter: That's true, and to my not surprise, but to my dismay, the answer was no. [laughs] That accounts for a lot of the lack of something that I hear in drummers today, that they . . . well, they probably heard Sid Catlett, but it was, you know, sort of old-time to them, you know. You know, it's a new world and a new thing, a new feeling about the music. But I would just as soon play with a Sid Catlett today.

Berger: Doing nothing but what he was doing then.

Carter: Doing nothing but what he was doing then. Absolutely. Or even a Cozy Cole, you know, whom, of course, I'd probably get him to lighten up on the bass drum, you know.

Berger: What specifically is missing in not all drummers, certainly, today, but in the numbers that you've encountered that you've found somewhat lacking in what you're looking for?

Carter: Well, you know, there's a saying that somebody initiated, I don't know whether it was Shelley Mann or maybe it was someone who wasn't a drummer, but the thing about so many drummers and so little time, which, of course, you've heard. They keep the time, you know, but it's the way they accentuate the time. AS I say, let me know where one is, and I'll find two on my own. But it's so rare to find a drummer that will let you know where one is, you know, and that kind of discombobulates me a little.

Berger: Are there any in particular that are working currently that you find more compatible to play with?

Carter: Oh yes, there are some who [unclear]. You know, I won't name them, because in so doing I'm certainly sure to omit someone else that I might even like better but I can't think of at the moment. But there are. There are drummers with whom I get along very well and I enjoy playing with. Oh, definitely.

Berger: What about drum solos?

Carter: Uh . . . uh . . . you hear me uh-ing, don't you? Uh, uh, uh, uh. That's just sort of a ticklish one. I'm not a great one for . . . well, short drum solos, yes. I don't know. I admire some drummers because of their great technique, but I don't know how to go into that.

Berger: In your own groups, you often will give the drummer a fairly long feature from time to time, so . . .

Carter: Oh yes. I still do. You know, but I hate to say this, but it's mostly for his enjoyment, not for mine. Which, you know, I mean, I prefer a briefer drum solo.



Berger: Right, and also the audience seems to be somewhat enthralled by drum solos.

Carter: Oh, absolutely. So you've got to please the audience, you know, and they seem to love it, you know, so that's your answer. We're playing for the public, so if they want to hear six choruses instead of five, it's okay with me.

Berger: Another musician from that band we really didn't get into too much was Chu Berry. Do you recall how you became aware of him and hired him for your band?

Carter: No. You just became aware of people by being on the scene. You hear them in some setting, or you hear of them and then you hear them. But this much later, I can't say how or when, you know, I met or heard any of these particular guys, other than Coleman Hawkins, whom I heard, gee, about 1923 with Mamie Smith's group, you know, I think Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds. But other people, you know, I didn't hear even much on the jobs at first, you know. Maybe somebody said, "Well, gee, you should hear this guy." I'd call him and he'd come to a rehearsal and, gee, I'd say, "Wonderful," you know.

Berger: Chu Berry's style when he was with your band, did you . . . I mean, how was he in relation to Coleman Hawkins, to their playing? Was he distinctive at that time?

Carter: Yeah, he was distinctive, because he was somewhat like Coleman Hawkins, but different, you know. He still had his own voice and his own style.

Berger: Another tenor saxophonist who you didn't work with very much—you recorded with on occasion—Lester Young. But I believe you heard him fairly early on.

Carter: Well, I heard him early on when he was playing alto. I had heard him in St. Paul, Minnesota. Gee, I guess it must have been 1932, maybe 1931, but I know I was with the McKinney's Cotton Pickers orchestra at the time. He was playing alto, quite different than he played tenor later.

Berger: I know it's hard to describe what his style was like, but what was his style like? [laughs]

Carter: Yeah, I don't remember, but it was different than on tenor. He played many more notes, more in the style, I might say, of Parker, who came along later. But, gee, I don't know. I don't remember too much of this.

Berger: But there was something that did make an impression on you, it seems.



Carter: Oh, indeed. Sure. Yes.

Berger: One more artist who we just mentioned in passing, but maybe you can elaborate on a bit more, is Roy Eldridge.

Carter: Oh, Roy, I played with Roy in 1925. He and his brother Joe had an orchestra in Pittsburgh called the Elyte [phonetic] or Elite Serenaders. I had occasion to play with them once or twice. But he was an original.

Berger: Even then.

Carter: Oh, even then, yeah. Even though he patterned himself pretty much after Armstrong and then went on after that, from that, and as everybody says, the tree then . . . the next branch was [Dizzy] Gillespie and so on. But, oh, I had a great admiration for Roy Eldridge, as everyone did.

Berger: Okay, well we did touch on Art Tatum a little bit, but could you expand on your impressions of him? I know you heard him early on, too.

Carter: I heard him in 1928. I don't know what I was doing in Detroit, but somebody took me to this club where Art was playing, and, of course, upon hearing him, I didn't believe it, you know. Gee, what can I say about Art Tatum? He's fantastic, and if you listen to what he did then, listen to it today and you're still dazzled.

Berger: You recorded with him extensively in a brief period of time for Norman Grants [phonetic], I guess in . . .

Carter: I think in the fifties, huh?

Berger: Right, in '54. It was one of these marathon . . . I think it was one day, and it was two albums' worth of material. It seems an incredible amount to have recorded in one relatively short continuous session. Do you remember the session at all and how . . .

Carter: Not much, no. At that time, it was just another session, and nothing memorable about it to me other than, you know, the pleasure of hearing him and being intimidated by his wonderful technique. But it was always a joy to be with him and to listen to him, and even to play with him.

Berger: Speaking of playing with him, if he was ever criticized for anything, it was possibly as an ensemble player or allowing other people to play with him. Obviously, as a soloist he



was beyond reproach and extremely virtuosic, so to speak, but playing with him, did you find any difficulties finding a place to come in sometimes?

Carter: No, because it was just that he had a different way of accompanying you. That's all I would think, you know. No, I didn't find it difficult at all.

Berger: Could you attempt to contrast . . . you heard Art Tatum in 1928, and then you played with him and were aware of his solo style towards the end of his career. Particularly in 1928, which is not documented on recordings, what impressions did you get of his playing then and what stylistic . . .

Carter: Oh, the same impressions I would have gotten had I heard him ten years later, because he was way ahead then and he didn't change. He just stayed, you know. As far as I know, he always played like that.

Berger: So it wasn't just that he was playing the prevailing style.

Carter: Oh, not at all. No, no, he was something . . . at that particular moment he outclassed everybody that I had heard up to that point.

Berger: Really.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: Okay. Just a throwaway here, did you ever come across Jelly Roll Morton at any point?

Carter: I don't remember that I did. I may have seen him in Harlem or may have met him, even, but I don't have any real recollection of having done so.

Berger: Okay, why don't we resume with . . . we were just having you leaving England. But that does bring up another digression. Sorry. But during your stay in Europe, especially during your recordings, you were often featured on more than one instrument, sometimes as many as three or four changes within a three-minute recording. Oddly enough, people that criticized you for not being a showman, etc., etc., as soon as you did something like that, they considered it flamboyant or exhibitionistic, if that's a word. What was your feeling about soloing on so many instruments, and was that something you . . . why did you do it? [laughs]

Carter: Oh, I guess it was something that the producers at the time, with Leonard Feather, probably suggested, you know, which I . . . I did not particularly want to do that, but I did it,



you know. I don't have any regrets about having done it, but it was fun to do, and maybe I was showing off a bit. Yeah, you know, I might have been.

Berger: Logistically speaking, I mean, because it's one thing . . . we've seen you in nightclubs or concerts many times where you'll take a chorus on alto, or a couple of choruses, and then the piano and bass will solo, or just one of them, and then you'll have a good four or five minutes to pick up the trumpet and warm up a little on it and then take a solo on that. But here you're dealing with a compressed . . .

[recorder off]

Berger: As we were saying, your picking up these various instruments on these three-minute recordings that you were doing, primarily during your European interlude, meant you didn't have three or four minutes or five minutes to warm up on each instrument. How did that work in the studio? Did you line them up in this arsenal?

Carter: I don't remember, but it wasn't too hectic. But, as I say before, I might have been showing off a bit, but, you know, it was usually suggested or asked that I do this, you know, so I guess they wanted to have me show off a little.

Berger: And frankly, you were playing with European orchestras, who . . .

Carter: Yeah. Oh yes.

Berger: . . . may not have had soloists of any real caliber often, or else they wanted to feature you as the guest.

Carter: Well, I think that was it. They wanted to feature me. I don't know who they had otherwise as soloists in the orchestra. I don't remember.

Berger: While we're talking about your multi-instrumental activities, we talked about the trumpet and how you began playing the trumpet. I just wanted to pick up on that for a second. According to what we discussed the other day, you really had been playing the trumpet virtually a matter of months before you already recorded on it and recorded a masterpiece such as *Once Upon a Time* and had already actually recorded one brief solo on the first Benny Carter Orchestra session of March '33.

Carter: What was it?

Berger: I think it was on *Synthetic Love*, kind of a melody statement.



Carter: Oh, did I play a trumpet on that?

Berger: Yeah, briefly. I think that's the first instance.

Carter: Gee, I don't even remember.

Berger: But this is really from the end of '32 when Doc Cheatham began passing you the trumpet.

Carter: Yeah, you can blame it all on Doc Cheatham. It's all his fault.

Berger: [laughs] But did you do any intensive practicing, away from Doc Cheatham, obviously?

Carter: Oh, I must have. Of course. Yes, of course. You don't pick up a trumpet and just, you know, cold turkey or cold chops. So I'm sure I spent some time woodshedding at home or something, you know. Yeah, sure.

Berger: Did you ever go to any other teachers, as you did with the saxophone . . .

Carter: No. No.

Berger: . . . other than working with Doc Cheatham?

Carter: No, the only teacher was Doc Cheatham.

Berger: How about method books or something? You mentioned a few for a sax that you might have consulted, but . . .

Carter: Method books, I don't know that I had even a trumpet method book at that time, but later I did come across and get the . . . what is it? Can't even remember the name of it now. Could have been Hubert Clark [phonetic] or someone other. I don't remember. Arbor [phonetic] or something. I can't remember the name of the book now, but I think it's a book that was kind of like the bible for trumpet players. Arbin [phonetic], I think it was.

Berger: Do you remember buying your first instrument, your first trumpet, other than the one when you were a kid and worked in the laundry?

Carter: Well, I don't really remember, but it was recommended by Doc, and I know that it was a Conn 22B. That's about all I remember.



Berger: We mentioned briefly Louis Armstrong, and obviously he was an influence on, I guess, not only trumpet players but everyone, especially in the early years, in the twenties and . . .

Carter: Well, he was certainly an influence on me, too, as a trumpet player, you know.

Berger: In what way? I mean, through records, through . . .

Carter: Yeah, well, through records, because up to that particular time, I'd never played with him, and when he was with the Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra, that was before my time with him. So, you know, only through records, of course.

Berger: You mentioned with the saxophone, you had copied some solos from Frankie Trumbauer [phonetic] . . .

Carter: Frankie Trumbauer, oh yes. Yeah.

Berger: . . . and learned to play them. Did you do any similar things with Louis Armstrong's records?

Carter: I don't remember that I did, you know.

Berger: All right. Can we move to another instrument?

Carter: Please do.

Berger: The clarinet.

Carter: Oh, my. Please don't. [laughter]

Berger: Well, many critics, in fact, all critics that have chosen to deal with the subject, have lamented that you gave up the clarinet relatively early. When did you . . .

Carter: Well, would you weigh that against the number of people who didn't lament it? [laughter]

Berger: Well, let's put it this way. No one who mentioned it said that they wish you had given it up sooner.

Carter: [laughs] That was really the point I was trying to make.



Berger: Well, before it gets too convoluted . . .

Carter: Yeah, that's right.

Berger: . . . and before we have you giving it up, how did you begin playing it?

Carter: I don't know, just . . . you know, at that time when you played with the orchestra, a dance orchestra, you usually had to play the clarinet, you know, as a double, and so I picked it up. And some time later I put it down.

Berger: Would the picking up of the instrument happen, just logically, around the time you began to work in some of these orchestras?

Carter: Yes, maybe. Maybe when I . . . yeah, went with Billy Fowler or maybe even Charlie Johnson, I might have. I don't know.

Berger: Because by 1928 you were already recording on it occasionally.

Carter: The clarinet, really?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: Well, then I must have started it when I went with Charlie Johnson.

Berger: And you continued to play it, I guess, into the forties, maybe late . . .

Carter: Yes, I guess so.

Berger: '45, '46. Was there a conscious decision at some point to give it up, or did it just kind of . . .

Carter: Just kind of tapered off, I suppose, you know.

Berger: How did you feel about the clarinet? We know . . . you've mentioned the trumpet was your favorite instrument. The alto was obviously your main instrument and the one you've continued on most . . . you talk a little about the role of playing lead? We talked about your philosophy of soloing or just how things came to you. Are there some tips for playing lead that you might pass along to young saxophonists who want to fill that role?

Carter: No, I don't have any tips for them. If they have a good teacher, and it depends on how they want to play, because after all, the lead player of any instrument in the section sort



of dictates how it is played, any particular phrase or any particular part. He dictates that to the rest of the section. But no, today I wouldn't give any tips on . . . you know, everything is so different now. What is a guy like me going to tell one of these young players twenty years old how he should play the lead in the music of today, if you follow what I'm saying? So I wouldn't attempt to do that.

Berger: Well, if they have a standard, so-called standard, big band instrumentation . . .

Carter: Well, I don't know what today's standard is.

Berger: Yeah, I was going to say, there won't even be . . .

Carter: You know, I think today's standard, as far as I'm concerned, means Marshall Royal [phonetic], you know. You know, that's my standard, yeah, but how many young players today can do that? So, I mean, and if a leader wants an alto player like that, there are none around like that, but he can always say, "Listen to this record with Count Basie and listen to Marshall Royal," and there it is. He's not the only one, but to me I think he's the outstanding lead player for the type of orchestra we're talking about.

Berger: I think his lead playing is very different from when you were playing lead, primarily.

Carter: Oh, I suppose so. Yes. Well, it's lead playing different from anybody's.

Berger: Yeah, but I mean, I think, at least listening to the recordings of your orchestra from . . . or any orchestra in which you played lead, there's not that feeling of, you know, predominance of the lead alto. It's sort of . . .

Carter: I wouldn't call it predominance. I would call it authority, because that's the way I always felt. I felt that when Marshall left Count Basie's orchestra, the orchestra lost some of its character.

Berger: Maybe this is a good time, although you have answered this . . .

Carter: For lunch? [laughter] No, okay, I . . .

Berger: You have answered this; in fact, you've answered almost everything before, but this might be a good time to talk about your stated preference for the trumpet, which always comes as a surprise for people who associate you primarily, especially recently, with the alto sax. They're always sort of shocked when you say the trumpet is your favorite instrument. Why is it your favorite instrument?



Carter: Well, that's interesting. I was asked that question at a . . . oh, just some time ago when I was doing a thing at the Virginia Commonwealth University. Someone asked me that, and my answer was that, speaking of a Marshall Royal, for instance, the lead saxophone, the first alto saxophone leads the saxophone section, right? The first trumpet leads not only the brass section, but he leads the orchestra, and we come to that word, *authority*. So the authority of the lead trumpet player is something that also contributes greatly to the style and to the feeling of the orchestra. I guess I feel that the trumpet has more authority than the saxophone. So, I don't know.

Berger: In a small group setting even, though, where if you're the only horn and all things being equal, would you still prefer playing trumpet, where there's no section to lead with either instrument?

Carter: Oh yes, because I like the instrument. Yeah, oh, sure, I would still like to play the trumpet. Yeah. But I don't, you know.

Berger: Well, you've been known to on occasion.

Carter: Yeah. Yeah.

Berger: There's something about some pieces that I think you seem to hear on trumpet that you often . . . when you are playing the trumpet regularly, and especially in clubs in recent years, I notice you will play that particular song on trumpet rather than on alto.

Carter: Right.

Berger: There are some songs you will almost never play on trumpet.

Carter: Yes.

Berger: What is there about a certain piece of music that lends itself more to your trumpet concept than others?

Carter: I don't know. I just hear it more on trumpet, that's all. I hear *Body and Soul* more on trumpet than on alto, and I guess one thing that gets into my alto, playing that particular song, was being so familiar with Coleman Hawkins' *Body and Soul*, you know, which I think that's a solo which has not yet been surpassed. So I don't know. There are many songs that I feel that I would like to play on trumpet rather than saxophone, and I don't play them today, but one of these days if I ever get any chops back, I'll pick up the trumpet and play them.



Berger: We've sort of covered all the instruments that you've played and recorded on, and some that you played and didn't record on. Are there any that you haven't played that you would have . . .

Carter: And will never play, huh? [laughter]

Berger: . . . or some that you have never played that you have a feeling you might like to try out?

Carter: No, I can't think that . . . no, I mean, if I was twenty years old, there would be things I might like to try out. But I don't know. No, I never had that feeling. Huh. No, no. And there are a lot of musicians that play all of those instruments. Not necessarily with the greatest ability, but they play the instruments, you know. So I don't think it's at all unusual.

Berger: I once saw you—I shouldn't say fiddling around—strumming around with a guitar.

Carter: You did? When?

Berger: A few years ago.

Carter: Where?

Berger: Here.

Carter: Oh, well, that's because it happened to be in the house, but if you look in there, you'll see a violin case, too, and believe me, there's a violin in it, I think. [laughter] I haven't opened it in a long time.

Berger: Did you buy it?

Carter: I did buy it, but I never played it.

Berger: Well, did you buy it with the intention of perhaps playing it?

Carter: I bought it with the intention of learning more about the instrument, for the writing.

Berger: Ah, I see.

Carter: Yeah, but never intending to really play.

[recorder off]



Berger: After several digressions, we're now going to attempt to bring you back to the U.S. from Europe in 1938. We talked about some of the reasons you came back. Did you all along have the idea of forming a big band upon your return?

Carter: I don't know. I probably did, yeah. I wasn't looking forward to sitting down in somebody else's orchestra, you know.

Berger: The band that you formed . . . well, before we get into that, do you recall the musical scene? You had been away for three years, and when you got back to the States, do you recall any impressions you had about how things had changed or were the same or . . .

Carter: Well, things hadn't really changed that much. You know, it was just a matter of three years or a little less. But no, I can't say that I had any great impression about great change, you know.

Berger: When you had left, and in fact one of the reasons you broke up your band, was the sort of a depression, and the economy and the lack of work, and now . . .

Carter: Mostly the latter.

Berger: And now by 1938 there were hundreds of bands criss-crossing the country, and certainly there were a lot more opportunities for this kind of music. Was that something that was readily apparent and a contrast to when you had left?

Carter: I don't know, because when I left America to go to Europe, there were still a lot of bands around, not all in New York or at the Pennsylvania Hotel. You know, this is a big country, and at the time I was aware of many regional bands, you know. But when I came back, what else was there? There was still Benny Goodman, you know, which I had known in 1934, even. And . . . gee. Of course, I mention Benny Goodman because this was the hot one in 1938. Then there were the Dorsey Brothers. I don't know how many had been added in my absence, but I didn't take counts, so I most certainly wouldn't remember now.

Berger: You've been quoted as saying that when you reformed this big band in, I guess, the latter part of 1938 and it really got going as far as regular work in 1939, had long stints at the Apollo and tours—not the Apollo, the Savoy—and tours, you were trying to do things, you said, with somewhat more commercial appeal. You were quoted as saying you were not playing or writing for yourself or for the band members, implying that you might have been doing more of that in the first band. Any titles come to mind that you felt might be more commercially appealing?



Carter: You mean from my [en?

Berger: Yeah.

Carter: No. No, nothing comes to my mind at the moment.

Berger: We talked about this of commercialism; that, to some extent, you were willing to do certain things that you felt might make your band more of a success commercially or popular in the eyes of the public. But one of the things that apparently you went too far was when you were recording for Decca [Records] and you did the session with the *Boogie Woogie Sugar Blues* and *By the Watermelon Vine*, *Lindy Lou* in that session, which caused you to break with Decca.

Carter: It did?

Berger: That's what you said.

Carter: Yeah, I guess so, but at this time . . . when did I say that?

Berger: Oh, a few years ago.

Carter: Well, it must have been, you know. I don't remember at this moment.

Berger: And you asked that these not be released, and they insisted on it.

Carter: Oh, that, yeah. Yeah, I remember, yeah. Now I know what you were talking about.

Berger: Right, and they released them anyway, and then . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . you moved over to Bluebird [Records]. So what was it about those particular things that crossed this line or invisible line?

Carter: I don't know. I'd have to hear them today to remind myself, you know. I don't remember all those years back of reasons for even . . . you know, for many things, you know, reason for many things that I did then.

Berger: Right. Well, despite some very favorable reviews, a lot of great records from your band in 1939 and 1940, it sort went the fate of the earlier orchestra. Eventually you pared down to a sextet, I believe, in 1941. Was it so much that there wasn't enough work, or were



there other considerations? Were you tired of the grind of touring and leading a band? Was there anything else other than just economic?

Carter: Oh, no. Had I had sufficient work, you know, and it had been financially feasible, I most certainly would have kept the orchestra together. But the main thing was lack of work, surely.

Berger: The group that you formed after this tour of 1941, which was the last with this particular big band, was a sextet . . .

[recorder off]

Berger: In 1941 you pared this big band down to a sextet, and that's the one that included Dizzy Gillespie.

Carter: Yes, that's right, at Kelly's Stables [phonetic].

Berger: Right. And also another musician who was to play a very important role in the developing bebop movement, Kenny Clark.

Carter: Oh, Kenny Clark. Yeah, Kenny Clark on drums and Sonny White on piano, was it? Yeah.

Berger: Right, and I think John Collins.

Carter: John Collins on guitar, yes.

Berger: And Al Gibson on . . .

Carter: Al Gibson on tenor and clarinet. Ross De La Reese [phonetic] . . . oh, no that was another time, yeah.

Berger: I think he replaced Dizzy briefly at some point.

Carter: That's right. He replaced Dizzy later, yeah.

Berger: But it was still in the same small group.

Carter: That's right.



Berger: Can you talk about Dizzy at this time and what impression he made on you or what he was doing musically that might have been different?

Carter: Well, what he was doing musically was certainly far advanced, and what he was doing on the instrument was, gee, unlike anything that we'd ever heard on the instrument then, things that you wouldn't think were possible. But he didn't know they were impossible, so he did them, you know, and he still does them. But, you know, what do you say about Dizzy that hasn't been said before?

Berger: Were there things that you frankly didn't understand, that didn't sound right to you, or did everything make sense that he was . . .

Carter: I don't know. I don't remember my first impression. I mean, I can't say that it didn't sound right to me. It sounded different. I mean, the fact that I hired him for my sextet certainly shows that I must have appreciated what he was doing. But gee, I don't know. Dizzy is Dizzy, and he was and he is.

Berger: This sextet, what sort of music were you playing? Were there arrangements for the group that you did?

Carter: Yeah, there were some small arrangements.

Berger: Do you remember any of the repertoire, because this is another one of these tragedies, that nothing was ever recorded or even broadcast by that group.

Carter: Well, if it wasn't recorded and wasn't broadcast, I wouldn't remember it.

Berger: Were there primarily originals or . . .

Carter: Yeah, there were some originals, yeah, and some popular tunes, you know.

Berger: Did Dizzy contribute anything as far as . . .

Carter: Not to my book at that time, no.

Berger: No, okay. You had mentioned before that you were under some pressure at one point to dismiss Dizzy, by management.

Carter: Oh, well, that was later when we worked together at the Famous Door. The . . . what's his name, the . . . Irving Alexander, I think was the guy, and he didn't understand Dizzy's music, you know.



Berger: How did you handle that? You didn't get rid of him, obviously. How did you handle the . . .

Carter: Oh, no, he probably left at some time because he, you know, had better paying offers, so I handled it by just ignoring the guy and keeping him on.

Berger: Was Dizzy aware of this pressure that . . .

Carter: I don't know. I think a lot of people looked askance at what he was doing, and I think he just went along with the flow and ignored it and all; did his thing, you know. And he's still doing his thing, as I said.

Berger: What about the audience? Do you remember how he was received? Was there any skepticism visible in the people that came to the club?

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

Berger: Nobody threw tomatoes at him or . . .

Carter: Oh, no, indeed not. No, indeed not. I think everyone thought they were, you know, witnessing something new, which we all were.

Berger: Did you play trumpet with him at all during that . . .

Carter: I wouldn't have dared.

Berger: In early 1942 you reformed the big band.

Carter: Yes, that's right. That's right, yeah, yeah. That's right.

Berger: Okay, that's sort of, well, a question, a statement, I don't know.

Carter: Yeah. No, that's right.

Berger: Then you toured in the summer and went on a western swing, which landed you in Los Angeles [California].

Carter: Correct.

Berger: Was that your first trip to the West Coast?



Carter: Yeah.

Berger: Ever.

Carter: Yep, first trip to the West Coast ever.

Berger: And you played in the Swing Club in Hollywood. Any impressions of the music scene in the West Coast at that time?

Carter: No, it was during the war, you know, and the only thing I do remember, I had Buddy Rich on drums for a couple of weeks while he was awaiting his greetings. [laughter] But beyond that, no, I don't remember anything. You know, naturally there were sailors and soldiers from time to time, but other than that the clientele was quite ordinary, the usual jazz lover or music lover. It was a nice room to work in, and the owner of the club was a nice guy to work for, Billy Berg [phonetic].

Berger: You mentioned it was during the war, and at this time you began to do a lot of work entertaining troops, making armed forces broadcasts. Did people approach you to do that or did you volunteer it or was it . . .

Carter: One thing that I've learned is never volunteer. So I was approached and asked to do it, and we did. No, we didn't volunteer. But, I mean, we did display our willingness to do it, you know.

Berger: This band, and we're talking now about the early forties, from '43 to about '45, and again there were all kinds of reports in the press; Benny Carter is the hottest thing in town. You were recording for Capitol Records, a new company.

Carter: That was my fifteen minutes of fame.

Berger: [laughs] Which has extended into 1992. [Carter laughs.] It's the longest fifteen minutes in history. And the makeup of your band began to change quite a bit.

Carter: Well, that's because Uncle Sam kept taking guys out.

Berger: At this point you got a lot of people in the band that were considered, for lack of a better term, modernists, that younger generation.

Carter: Yeah. That's right.



Berger: You just mentioned that a lot of people were getting drafted. Was that the only reason these people came in, or did you want to inject a different kind of sound or you were attracted to some of these younger musicians?

Carter: No, but, I mean, some of those I replaced because they went into the service. But, no, I don't know. Just, you know, J. J. Johnson joined me in Indianapolis [Indiana] and came to California with me. Now, when Max Roach came into the band, I don't remember. Miles Davis was in the band in '46, something, and he was with it for just a short time, maybe a matter of weeks.

Berger: You picked him up in St. Louis [Missouri], is that correct?

Carter: Oh, did I? I don't remember.

Berger: You don't remember that?

Carter: No.

Berger: I think that's . . . you joined . . .

Carter: No, I didn't know whether I picked him up in St. Louis or he came here.

Berger: I think he joined you.

Carter: He joined me in St. Louis.

Berger: Yeah, I believe so.

Carter: Well, he was from St. Louis. He was from East St. Louis, yeah.

Berger: Again, one of these, you know, useless questions that . . . open-ended, but what are your recollections of Miles at this period when he first joined you? Musically, what did you hear in him that may have been different from other musicians at the time?

Carter: Well, I just heard something different. I can't tell you what, you know, but I heard something different than . . . I can't explain what I heard. He had that sort of lyrical thing. He didn't do a lot of soloing in my group, and there was no way of knowing or being able to foretell what he was going to become.

Berger: Well, again, I hate to try and draw out personal observations. You obviously didn't know him that well at the time.



Carter: Not at all.

Berger: But did you get an impression of him? Was he quiet?

Carter: He was very quiet. Oh yes, he was very quiet, almost to say retiring, you know. No, he was very nice young man, you know. [unclear] he was well-bred, and he was a lovely man, you know.

Berger: In his book, his autobiography, which came out a couple of years ago, he mentions that he stayed in your home in Los Angeles. Is that true?

Carter: Yes. Yes.

Berger: Did he have no other place to go or you were just . . .

Carter: Well, I don't know. You know, he was a stranger here, and I had a house here, and there was nobody in it but me and the houseboy [laughs], you know, so . . . I shouldn't say "the houseboy," but someone that took care of the house and helped me, you know. I don't like the term *houseboy*, really.

Berger: Well, there's another word for it; I can't think of it at the moment, but the . . .

Carter: If it was a big house and a big family, you'd probably call it major domo or something.

Berger: Right. [laughs]

Carter: Is that what you're thinking?

Berger: Or the housekeeper or the something, whatever.

Carter: Yeah, yeah. But he was really a friend, you know. But [unclear] not much I can tell you about Miles, of that period.

Berger: How about of another period, a later period?

Carter: Well, we weren't part of each other's activities at a later period. He went on to New York, and that was it. Everybody knows what happened after that, much more than I do.



Berger: Were you in touch with him, ever, after . . .

Carter: No. No.

Berger: Not a single time.

Carter: No, no reason to be. No.

Berger: I believe when he was once given an award—I've forgot what award it was—you . . .

Carter: The Grammy Award.

Berger: Was it a Grammy?

Carter: Yeah.

Berger: And did he personally ask you if you would accept it for him?

Carter: Yeah, he called and asked if I would accept for him. That's right.

Berger: So he must have remembered . . . had some feeling for your association.

Carter: Well, he remembered and knew that I was here, you know.

Berger: How about . . . you mentioned J. J. Johnson, who was very young, I think. What, eight[een]?

Carter: He was eighteen.

Berger: Eighteen when he joined you.

Carter: Right.

Berger: You met his parents and did . . .

Carter: Oh, I had to meet his parents, because they had to okay him leaving home, you know, to go with me all the way to California from Indianapolis.

Berger: What assurances did they ask of you?



Carter: They didn't ask. I think they just wanted to see me and meet me and not really interview me, but sort of interview me and see what kind of guy I was that was offering to take her son, or their son, miles away, you know. I guess I passed scrutiny, you know.

Berger: Similar to your own circumstance, I guess, when your . . .

Carter: Yeah. Yes, that's true, yes.

Berger: . . . your mother or both parents . . .

Carter: My mother, that's right.

Berger: . . . or your mother went . . .

Carter: That's when I was going to Pittsburgh.

Berger: Right.

Carter: Yes, that's true. Quite, quite the same, yes.

Berger: How about J. J. Johnson's musical personality or other personality, did you get a feel for him? Was he as withdrawn as Miles Davis? Was he more . . .

Carter: No, he was a little more outgoing, and still a very nice, well-educated young man, you know. So [unclear] do you say about a person, you know? There's so many people I could say that about that it'll sound like a repetitious thing of mine, but these are the kind of people with whom I have come in contact during my whole career, young, decent guys.

Berger: J. J. Johnson went on to become a very talented arranger, and he contributed some charts to your band early on.

Carter: Yes, he did.

Berger: Did he come to you and, you know . . .

Carter: For advice?

Berger: For advice or for anything as far as arranging goes.

Carter: I don't remember that he came to me for advice. He may have, and we probably discussed music and arranging or something. But he had it then. He had it, yeah.



Berger: And the music that he brought you, you did some of them in concert. I don't think they were commercially recorded, but some of them exist . . .

Carter: They weren't recorded?

Berger: . . . in the armed forces' broadcasts, so obviously the band was playing his charts at the time.

Carter: Yeah. Oh, we were, indeed.

Berger: What impressions did you get of him as a budding arranger from the pieces that he submitted for your band?

Carter: Well, he was already an arranger, you know, then. He was well on his way.

[Begin File 6]

Berger: While we're dealing with some of these so-called young turks, I guess they call them, that popped up in your band in the forties, you mentioned Max Roach. You couldn't recall exactly how he joined, but . . .

Carter: No, I don't.

Berger: How about his drumming style and how it fit in with the orchestra? What was that like?

Carter: Eventually it fit in, but it was very strange to me, because it was one of those, at the time he was so innovative that it was hard to know where one was, as I said before, you know. Let me know where one is, and I'll find two on my own. But he had a tremendous technique then, you know, that has really developed into something by now.

Berger: Would you feature him at that time on drum solos much?

Carter: Oh yes, sure. Yes, sure.

Berger: And that's where you had trouble finding out where he was . . .

Carter: That's right. [laughs]

Berger: . . . coming out of the . . .



Carter: We had to sneak back in, you know, after one of his solos.

Berger: What about driving a big band? This was probably the first time he had been in that musical setting.

Carter: Oh yes, he did. Yeah.

[recorder off]

Berger: All right. It's now twenty-four hours later. It's August 9, 1992, and we're hoping to conclude this Smithsonian oral history interview with Benny Carter. At least he's certainly hoping we'll conclude it.

We left off discussing your big band when you reformed in about 1942 and moved out to Hollywood and settled here in Los Angeles with. Just in general, you basically made Hollywood or Los Angeles your base since then. What appealed to you about Los Angeles as opposed to New York, where you were formerly living?

Carter: Primarily, I probably think, the weather. I've lived in New York practically all of my earlier years, excepting the three years that I spent in Europe. But, gee, I like the pace of living here. It was a little slower than that of New York, a little less hectic and frenetic, and, gee, it was almost sort of a suburban life, even almost in the heart of the city, and I guess I kind of liked that. You know, sort of more easygoing, and of course, then when I started working in the studios, that was another incentive.

Berger: Right. So when you brought the band out here, you had no intention of staying. You were eventually going to go back.

Carter: No, I had no intention whatsoever of staying. As a matter of fact, we just were on tour, and we were on a tour of the United States that would bring us to California and then sort of to retrace our steps or to return, you know, maybe by a more circuitous route. But, no, I didn't intend staying here.

Berger: The tour that brought you here, touring with a big band at any time was pretty arduous, but this was during the war years, and there was a lot of transportation difficulties. How did you actually physically move the band from place to place?

Carter: Well, on the trip out on that trip, when we used to usually travel by cars and buses, on that trip we made mostly by train and an occasional bus trip. But, oh, what was I going to say? What was your question?



Berger: About the rigors of travel compounded by the war.

Carter: Oh yes, those rigors still exist, as you know, but they were much more serious and severe at that time. But we managed through it, you know. Then, gee, once I got here, we didn't do a lot of touring. We went out a couple of times, but, gee, I just don't remember. In addition to that is the fact that on the way out, I think a couple of things we played were sort of a little more than one-night stands. For instance, we stopped in Salt Lake City [Utah] just prior to coming . . . well, actually, we jumped from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. But there we played for two weeks at a place called the Rendezvous. You know, a dance date. So we were not too exhausted when we finally arrived in California.

Berger: As far as the jazz scene in California, when you first arrived here, was there a very active scene?

Carter: Yes, it was quite active, especially in Hollywood itself and on Central Avenue. In Hollywood, gee, I think . . . we played at a club called the Swing Club. Just sort of cattycornered from us was a club called . . . oh, boy . . . the Streets of Paris. There was Art Tatum with his trio; I think Red Callender on bass and Bill Douglas on drums. Gee, down on Central Avenue there was just any number of small groups and jazz clubs.

Berger: Was Hollywood or Los Angeles somewhat starved for this big band sound that you were providing, because you seemed to really hit a popular wave here of acceptance that you might not have even had in other locations.

Carter: There might have been part of that, I'm not sure, because I think big bands were coming in and out, you know. But gee, what other big bands were playing? Yeah, there was the Palladium, you know, the very famous dance hall here on Sunset Boulevard that had bands coming in all the time, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey, and what other bands were there? Others that I can't even recall, but they were coming. There were theaters, too, you know, theaters going that had stage shows. Oh, and there was also the Casa Mañana, which is where we played after we played the Swing Club, which I think before that had been . . . forgot the name of it. But where Louis Armstrong had played. Oh, somebody named Sebastians [phonetic]. What was his name? Would you remember that?

Berger: Frank Sebastian?

Carter: Frank Sebastian, yeah. That club, that was quite a large place and very popular place, and they always had a band coming there.



Berger: The band that you continued to lead after you settled in Los Angeles in the mid-forties, we talked about some of the young, upcoming musicians like Miles Davis, Max Roach, J. J. Johnson. One phenomenon that seems to have occurred at this time, there was a kind of a change in what was accepted as far as integration in bands, because you then hired a number of white musicians in your orchestra, including . . . well, you mentioned Buddy Rich earlier and then Al Schaeffer [phonetic], Art Pepper, Joe Albany, Bob Grettinger [phonetic], all worked with you for varying periods.

Carter: That's right. Right.

Berger: And they also occasionally toured with you, is that . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: What sort of problems did you encounter? Was there a negative reaction in places to that?

Carter: Actually, I never encountered any difficulty with that. I might just tell you one little anecdote about when we played at a club called the Plantation. I think it was in St. Louis, and Joe Albany was playing on the piano, you know, chair. Actually, he was playing on the piano, from the piano chair. [laughter] And as we were playing for dancing, a white couple danced around, and I could see they were sort of talking between themselves, and every now and then looking up at the band, and particularly at the pianist. So finally they danced up to the bandstand, and the lady said, "Mr. Carter, pardon me. Is your pianist . . ." I don't think she said "black or white," I think at that time it was, you know, "white or colored." I looked around at Joe as if I'd never seen him before, and then I turned to them and said, "Gee, I'm sorry. I never asked him." [Berger laughs.] So they seemed to be a little bewildered by the answer, because it really left nothing answered, you know.

Berger: Right. In his book, Art Pepper, who toured with you, mentioned that you reluctantly had to let him go or suspend him temporarily for a southern tour, because that would have been too much. It never would have been accepted. Do you recall that particular . . .

Carter: I read Art Pepper's book with great interest, of course. I don't remember the incident, but I won't say that it was something that was just not so, but I just don't remember it. I don't remember too much about Art's book, which I read quite some time ago, but there are a few things in there that certainly raised my eyebrows. But I will say that, giving him credit for a better memory than I have, maybe a lot of it is true.



Berger: One thing he mentioned was that you, even as the leader of the orchestra and playing the same instrument that he did, would often leave the stage just to allow him some solo space. Is that . . .

Carter: Oh, I allowed him solo space even if I stayed on the stage, but I saw in him a very, very interesting talent, and I was very glad to not only give him the opportunity to play, to listen to him myself, you know.

Berger: We'd like to get into kind of the transition into how you began writing for films while you were in Hollywood. In this time, early forties, '43 onward, it seems you were doing everything at once. You were working in film studios, playing, writing, and continuing to lead the band. How did you first get into the film studios?

Carter: Well, while I was in Hollywood, there was a friend of mine named Mike Gould, who had been a long-time friend, actually, and one of my closest friends. He was working for the music publisher, Irving Mills, and Irving Mills was, I believe, coproducer or in some important capacity on a film called *Stormy Weather*. The way, I'm told, they were in need of an arranger, and Mike reminded Irving Mills that I was in town and might be available. So he contacted me, and we made an appointment to go to the studio and have a conversation, which we did, which resulted in my starting to do some work on the film. So I was, oh, gee, I was still working at the club, and I continued doing that and getting up quite early in the morning and writing for the studio and for the film, and doing some playing on the soundtrack as well.

So that led to other things. I did a number of other things that . . . apparently they were satisfied with the first thing I did. I guess I decided this was very interesting and I can't avoid taking notice of the fact that it was rather lucrative, you know. So I was making more money doing that than I was making with the band at night. So one thing led to another, or one gig, one assignment led to another, and finally after . . . oh, gee. Well this went on off and on, because I still traveled a bit with the orchestra, but . . . 1946, which I think was probably the last time I played at the Swing Club, because I came back like annually. I played a gig in, gee, I think it was the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Boston, and following that, disbanded the orchestra.

Berger: Then that sort of began what we might call your film period.

Carter: Yes. Yes. Because I came back to Hollywood and started working more in film.

Berger: What technical differences did you find in writing for films and your previous work? I mean the actual technique of scoring for a picture, where they ask for very specific timings and things like that.



Carter: Well, that, of course, was a great part of the difference, the timing, the writing to a specific, oh, two and three-quarter seconds or one minute and forty-two seconds and a half or something like that, and the music had to be tailored, or the particular cue had to be tailored just to that length. Within that particular cue there were many things that . . . you know, bits of action, unless it was just dialogue, but there were many bits of action that had to be, as we call, caught, you know, or accentuated. You had to be able to let your music represent or echo the emotions that were happening on the screen. Gee, that was the primary difference, because if you were playing music for a dance band, you know, or writing for a dance band, you didn't have to think of any of that.

Berger: Did you find it at all constraining artistically? Now, obviously, a director is telling you, "We need this action scored on the soundtrack," and giving you specific parameters, timings and everything, whereas before, certainly, you couldn't write something that would last twenty minutes or something, but did you find this somewhat constraining or was it . . .

Carter: No, I didn't find it constraining nor constricting. That's what a director is for. He directs you, and when you have direction, it makes your job easier. You know, you don't have to sit and say, "Well, gee, I wonder what I should do here? What do they want here?" They tell you what they want. They cannot always explain it in musical terms, but they can give you the feeling, and you know where to get in with the music and where to get out. So, I mean, quite to the contrary; it made it easier for me.

Berger: So, in other words, I know there were some instances where you have described where you couldn't quite understand what the director wanted, so the more specific they were, the better, and in those cases where they're more general, then even leaving more up to you, those, in a sense, are harder to work on. Is that true?

Carter: Yeah, mostly. But when you get direct directions, it gives you a way to go, and you're not floundering in your own imagination.

Berger: I'd like to just ask you something about, again, the problems of the racial barriers in the studios that you may have encountered. You were often credited as being the first black musician-composer to break these barriers. I think there were some other people that were involved, like around the time William Grant Still, I think, was in Hollywood somewhat before you were there. Any other black composers or arrangers that you ran into who had been here doing anything before you began?

Carter: Well, there was Phil Moore, who was very busy in the studios. I don't know exactly what he did. Prior to him, I understand there was an arranger named Will Votary [phonetic] that, you know, that it was a little before my time here. Then I don't know that



they had any contract musicians other than Lee Young, the drummer-percussionist, that was under contract to Columbia Studios. Now, I don't know that any other musicians or composers were under contract. Of course, I was never under contract, as it were. But I can't say that I have to be credited for anything, you know, other than I'm credited for keeping alive and keeping my rent paid, gas in the car.

Berger: Speaking of your rent, just another tangent here, you encountered some difficulties with housing discrimination in Los Angeles. Can you describe what you faced there?

Carter: Well, I think the first was the difficulty in renting a house. I was not prepared to buy a house, but my dear friend, again, whom I mentioned again, Michael Gould knew that I was unhappy at the hotel in which I was staying, and he said, "I'm going to find you a house in Hollywood." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes, I'm going to do it." So he called me one day, and he said, "I want you to come with me. We're going to go look at a house." He had gone to an agency, the real estate agency, and spoken with someone there who agreed to show us a house. He told them about me; I'm not sure what he told them, but I guess it couldn't have been too bad. We went to see a house, and the owner was interested in renting to me, and I rented the house. It was on Vista Street in Hollywood, and I had no difficulty there and stayed there probably for about a year. It was a house that I understand had been previously owned by Tyrone Power. But it was a very nice house, and I enjoyed the . . . well, I guess I was there about a year and a half.

Berger: What about when you tried to buy a house?

Carter: Oh, well, there are a number of instances where you'd see an ad in the paper and you call about it, and then you'd go to see it, and, you know, oh, it had just been sold or something. Of course, this is all . . . nothing unusual about this. It happened all the time, and it probably happens still, I don't know. I haven't had to look for a house in a long time.

Berger: One of these instances resulted in an actual court case, which you won.

Carter: Yes, well, that was an instance where we had purchased a house, and after we purchased it, the members . . . what am I thinking of . . . some so-called Neighborhood Development or something . . . you know, we were not members, and none of the other members were black. So they sued us after we refused to move, and we answered their suit and we won.

Berger: But you moved, anyway, I think.

Carter: Moved, anyway, because I went on to another house, which was also . . . we weren't sued, but we were threatened with being sued, at least I was. By that time I was



divorced and bought this house on my own, and the owners had no difficulty in renting the house to me. They were quite interested in so doing. But after having rented the house and, oh, what did I do? I think the house was . . . gee, it was not purchased in my name; it was purchased in the name of my friend, Mike Gould, so that they folks in the neighborhood did not know that I owned the house.

Berger: With all these, you know, housing . . . I think they called them covenants or . . .

Carter: Yes. Actually, there's an interesting thing I might say about that. These restrictive covenants were in effect at the time, and especially, of course, in this neighborhood in which I had bought was in the heart of the Hollywood Hills, at the time a sort of posh area. The deed was recorded in the name of Michael Gould, I mention again, so the other people in the neighborhood saw me going and coming, but they didn't know that it was my house. But at some point they decided that I was the occupant, upon which they had me served with some papers by an attorney, to the effect that this was not proper, and I was breaking the law, and so and so and so. But anyway, to make a long story short—or make it longer, I don't know which—but I did fear another lawsuit, so what I did, I just told him that I was going to move as soon as I could find something else to buy. This was just a sort of a stalling, a what do you call it, a diversionary or delaying action, and I knew that there was pending in the courts a suit against the restrictive covenant thing. So I just hung on there until finally the restrictive covenants were sort of knocked down, and I recorded the house in my name, and there was no further problem.

One little side thing to that is I might mention there was a saxophone player that lived in the neighborhood, a rather well known saxophone player here at that time, and he was a saxophone teacher. He might have even been on the board of the musicians' union, I don't remember. But one of my next-door neighbors, who was the nicest Texans that you'd ever known, they had come to welcome me there even when they knew I'd moved in, but they didn't know if the house was recorded in someone else's name, so they made me feel very comfortable. Well, I had lovely neighbors on both sides. But Mrs. Goodman told me that this particular saxophonist or saxophone teacher or person had come to them with a petition, which they were asked to sign, to get me out of the neighborhood, and they shooed him away.

The interesting thing about that is that, oh, maybe a year or so later he had . . . I don't know if they had invented it or what, but he had done something with a mouthpiece that he was marketing, and he called me on the phone and wanted to know if I would try it and endorse it. [Berger laughs.] Well, I thought this was really the height of I don't know what, but anyway, when he saw that he couldn't have any effect on my residency. But anyway, that was very funny. He shall remain nameless. I think he's passed on now, anyway. So, anyway . . .



Berger: You didn't have anything to do with his passing on, did you?

Carter: No, I wouldn't have even if I could have. I'm not the type, I don't think. [laughter]

Berger: What about your relations? You mentioned neighbors on both sides were very sympathetic and friendly.

Carter: Well, in my immediate area, yeah, the neighbors were lovely, and the neighbor across the street, gee, Larry somebody. What was Larry's last name? I've forgot, but you know, we associated quite often. He came over to the house. We went over to his house. And the folks on either side of us were just lovely people, very fine neighbors.

Berger: So it was more of a theoretical opposition from people that did not know you.

Carter: Well, not necessarily people that didn't know me, it was just people who were just bigots, and these particular people on each side of me and just opposite me were not, obviously.

Berger: Was there any harassment of you?

Carter: No. No, there was none. No cross burning, no signs on the door, no shooting out of the windows. No, there was none of that. It was all kind of quiet.

Berger: Just lawsuits and things.

Carter: But when I got the letter from the attorney I knew it was sort of a group effort.

Berger: Yeah. Continuing on the theme of segregation, you found, of course, that when you arrived here, the local musicians' unions, there were two unions . . .

Carter: Yes.

Berger: . . . the black and the white locals.

Carter: Well, as there were in many cities in the United States.

Berger: And you were one of the leading figures in the amalgamation of the two local unions. Can you describe that process, how that got started and how you brought that off successfully?



Carter: Well, I don't know exactly how it got started. For all I know, it could very well have been started by just a group of . . . well, it was started by a group of musicians, black and white musicians, and gee, I think there was Buddy Colette [phonetic], George Cast [phonetic], Alfred Newman [phonetic], who was the head of music at Twentieth Century Fox and with whom I was working quite a bit at that time, was the first one that signed my petition. We were sort of circulating petitions, and after seeing his name on my petition, you know, anyone else to whom I would proffer it would immediately sign, you know. But, of course, they had to be good at heart to begin with. So I don't know the full extent of the goings on. But . . .

Berger: Was it . . . go ahead.

Carter: I don't know. We had a series of meetings and, you know, finally, I think it was Buddy Colette and Moral Young; I think he drew up the conditions under which we were to amalgamate. They voted on it, and it was passed overwhelmingly.

Berger: This is the members of both unions.

Carter: Of both unions voted, of course. Yes. Of course, that's all history now; that's 1953.

Berger: Right. You said it was overwhelmingly approved. So there wasn't, obviously . . . my next question, was there much opposition in the white local for doing this?

Carter: Well, that we wouldn't know, you see. All we know, all we can think of, are the affirmative votes. There was also a lot of opposition—or I don't know a lot; I don't know what percentage of it—but there were a great number of people who opposed it from the black unions, too, you know, from the black local.

Berger: What reasons would they have to be reluctant to integrate, specifically the black musicians?

Carter: Oh, I'm not sure. I'm not sure what the reasons would be on either side, you know. I'm not a sociologist. Well, really, you know, people, you don't know what they think or why they do some of the things they do. I don't know why I do some of the things I do. But I'm not sure. I would hesitate to say, because I could not articulately state it.

Berger: I mean, I don't know, and I can't articulately state anything, either, but it would seem that the white musicians would be, by having an integrated union, would be opening up themselves to some more competition, as far as work goes.



Carter: No doubt. Yes. Surely. Surely.

Berger: On the black side, I can't offhand see why anyone would really oppose it.

Carter: Well, I wouldn't, either, and I might say that I have a feeling that most of the opposition came from the offices of the black union.

Berger: Really. Oh.

Carter: Well, you know, they would be out of jobs. Of course, what happened later is that after we amalgamated, the jobs just came to everybody, anyone who was capable. So everything worked out just beautifully, and it's still working out beautifully.

Berger: As a writer, composer, and arranger, did you find yourself, in coming out of the world of jazz and being a black composer, did you find yourself stereotyped in the studios? Did they come to you primarily thinking, you know, "We need some jazz here. We'll get Benny Carter to do this," as opposed to coming to you and saying, "We just need some kind of non-jazz-related music, and we'll go to you as well." Was there this stereotyping at the beginning?

Carter: I don't think any more so than it would have been with a white musician that wrote so-called jazz. No, I don't think so. I'd rather not think that I was hired because I was black, you know, in any instance.

Berger: In each stage of your career, it seems, when you first began playing, you went to certain people; you mentioned the teachers that we've covered in New York, formally, informally. When you began the trumpet, you had assistance from Doc Cheatham. When you were doing some things for that first film in London, you went to Rosamond Johnson. Without any real formal arrangements with these people, necessarily. Were there similar, analogous people that you went to in the world of film composing when you were moving more and more in that area?

Carter: Oh yes, there certainly were. Probably a number of people, you know. We used to discuss this and that about music and about film tracks. I would ask advice of them. They would ask advice of me. Oh yes, there was sort of exchange of ideas, primarily.

Berger: And we've mentioned before, you always seem to have certain books that you could teach yourself from. Were there any particular ones that come to mind that you consulted regularly as far as . . .



Carter: No, no particular ones, but there are many. Yeah. That is not the ideal way of teaching, to be teaching yourself. You certainly get much further and much faster with the assistance of an accredited teacher, but, you know, that wasn't always available to me, or if it was available to me, I didn't always take advantage of it.

Berger: Do you feel that by getting into films and being presented with a lot of new musical situations, did that have an overall broadening effect on your own musical outlook, or was that pretty much set by the time you . . . you may have learned a few technical things that you needed, but the overall outlook was already there.

Carter: Well, I think it certainly had a broadening effect, and if it didn't, shame on me, you know. Once you have that kind of opportunity to expand whatever you're doing, you should certainly learn from it, and I hope I did. Not enough, of course, but something.

Berger: We've talked about films primarily, and then you began working with television, which was coming in. What sort of technical differences between the two media did you find, the transition between writing for films and writing . . .

Carter: Practically none. I don't see the difference. The only thing is that when you're writing for television, you just don't have the luxury of time that you might have if you're writing for theatrical film, because usually television shows, you know, they're ground out every week, and usually when the composer of the music is the last one to be consulted. And when he or she is consulted, they want it tomorrow, you know, so that was the toughest thing, the deadlines.

Berger: Yeah, I wanted to ask about deadlines and their effect on you. It seems like that must have been a very nerve-racking way to go about writing music.

Carter: Yeah, it was kind of stressful, but by the same token, they're things that you write that you would not otherwise have written. So it's very motivating.

Berger: While we're on this subject of composing, maybe we can go off on another tangent and just . . . you said that you prefer often not to write at the piano. Why is that?

Carter: Well, it's because the piano to me is really a crutch. I hear more things away from the piano than I do at the piano. I guess at the piano you can sit and you'll be doing one thing that you're getting ready for tomorrow or the next day, and all of a sudden you're wandering off into something else that you're creating, you know. But if I get into a real bind, then I go to the kitchen table or the dining room table and as far away from the piano as I can.



Berger: I wanted to ask, going back to your big band, I forgot to ask you one question about that. You were so busy in doing all the things we outlined in the mid-forties, leading the big band as well as writing for films and other studio work, you actually hired someone to arrange for your band, I believe, for the first time.

Carter: Oh yes. Yeah, sure. From time to time I'd buy an arrangement or commission an arrangement from someone else. Sure.

Berger: The primary source, I guess, of these outside arrangements was Frank Comstock.

Carter: Oh yes. Frank did some lovely things for us. As a matter of fact, very interesting thing . . . well, I won't say . . . yeah, I guess it's interesting. One of the best selling things that we had as of the moment, as of that time, was *Poinciana*. A lot of people thought I arranged it, and Frank arranged that, and he arranged some of the other things that we were very successful with; not much else that we recorded, but certainly that.

Berger: When you mention that people mistook it as your arrangement, there did seem to be some affinity for your style in his style of arranging, and that's often fooled listeners in jazz bands.

Carter: I don't know. I think a lot of people just wouldn't even think about it. They'd think, because I was an arranger, anything they heard was arranged by me, which was not always true.

Berger: To those of us not involved in Hollywood, we read and hear so much that how you get work is not always commensurate with your talents; it depends on who you know and how well you sell yourself. I think selling yourself has not been one of your primary activities. How did you actually get work during this time?

Carter: First I have to go back to a statement you just made saying that—what is it?—getting work is not always commensurate with your talent. By that what did you mean?

Berger: Well, I'm just saying what we have heard about studios in . . . well, not only studios; I guess that happens in every area that . . .

Carter: I would disagree. I would disagree with that, because I think the studio musicians in Hollywood have all been at the highest height or degree of talent or proficiency or whatever you'd call it. There were some that would certainly get more work than others, and there were certainly many who were just as good and did not get the work. You know, speaking of a clique, if you were on a certain contract as an A-list, you know, your first allegiance was to him, because you know he's going to call you for any date that he had, and



he, if he's a very popular and successful contractor, he would have many. But I can think of no musician that I recall who wasn't up to the task of what he was called upon to do.

Berger: I wasn't thinking so much of the players, the musicians, the studio musicians, so much as composers and for films.

Carter: Well, even composers in films, I'd . . .

Berger: Did the best person who would create the best possible score for a picture necessarily be the one that was chosen always?

Carter: Well, it's not for me to say, that's number one, and I wouldn't know that. But I know on occasion people who have been very, very successful with musical scores for film had had their scores rejected, after even having been recorded. Some other composer would be asked to do it, to do another score. It would mean that the first composer was not capable. He just didn't get what the director wanted. But what he had written for that particular film might have been very acceptable to someone else, and might have also been very effective to the viewer.

Berger: Were there any particular films to which you contributed that you were particularly proud of your work on that you can cite?

Carter: I don't know. I wouldn't say that. It was all a gig, and I was happy to be able to do it and happy if they were pleased with it. If they were pleased with it and I was displeased, I figure they had the bigger vote.

Berger: Were there any films or television work that occur to you that were particularly arduous to complete, some that may have given you the most trouble?

Carter: Any one no more than the other. Yeah. They were not all easy jobs.

Berger: When you were composing for a film or a television score, and you said that something else might occur to you as you were working on it, especially sitting at the piano. Were there times when you said, "You know, this would work for this film, but I'm going to save it because I want to use it for something"?

Carter: Oh, no, no. If I thought it would work for the film, it would go in. It would go on the paper. But other things might occur to me that weren't for the film, so I'd just scratch them down on another piece of paper and keep them for later treatment or development.



Berger: It seems that the best background music, almost, is music that is not noticed and that fits in so well with what you're seeing on the screen that it doesn't jar you or call your attention to it.

Carter: That's it. It's supposed to be felt and not heard.

Berger: But it seems that the music then is sort of a secondary purpose and that a lot of great melodies that you may create for a film are not wasted, but in a sense, not given their full appreciation as they might were it just a medium concentrating on the sound. Could you then later sort of rescue these remnants from a film score? Did you ever do that and say, "Gee, I'm going to use this for something later"?

Carter: No, not really. In many cases, though, many composers have. I mean, think of all the good songs that [Henry] Mancini has done that came from film scores, and one notable song, along with others . . . what's [unclear] name? David Racks' [phonetic] *Laura*. There have been many of those. I don't think I've had any.

Berger: Was your piece, *Blue Star*, originally from any kind of a . . .

Carter: No, that was never used in a film.

Berger: It was never a film?

Carter: No.

Berger: Or a television thing?

Carter: No, never.

Berger: So there's nothing that comes to mind along that . . . a melody that you had used in a film that you then based a song on later?

Carter: No, not at all. Yeah, no.

Berger: One phenomenon that's always discussed in relation to writing for films is the "ghost writer," quote, unquote. In a lot of your biographies and articles about you, they sort of take it for granted Benny Carter did a lot of work for which he was not credited, and the word *ghost writer* comes into frequent use in many of the articles about you. Was this actually the case? Did you . . .



Carter: Work for which you are not credited, which means, I suppose, that you aren't given screen credit for, is that what you're talking about? Or that somebody else put their name on it?

Berger: Well, I guess both. I mean, we can discuss . . .

Carter: Oh, no. Well, no, you can't be both. They're both different.

Berger: Right. Well, I mean we can discuss [unclear], right?

Carter: If you've written it and your name is not on the screen, that only means that your name is not on the screen. But if you've written it and somebody else says "composed by," and it's somebody else, then that's ghost writing.

Berger: Did that happen to you?

Carter: No, it did not happen to me, no.

Berger: But the other is a common practice and is not necessarily a negative.

Carter: Oh, not necessarily a negative. That's quite right, yes.

Berger: How would that work, as far as . . . they would hire you to contribute to that film in different ways, with the understanding you're not the composer of that particular score.

Carter: Yeah, that's right. Certainly. In many instances, or most instances, you're just working, developing the original thematic material by the composer, you know, and which in most instances, you're really, although you're composing somewhat, you're really the orchestrator.

Berger: Did it ever bother you? I mean, it always bothers me, and I'm not in composing or playing or anything, but when you hear a film score and you either hear a beautiful instrumentalist playing a solo throughout the entire film, and then at the end, the credits come, and they mention the person who's brought the coffee in, the person who is . . . every possible technical assistant, assistant to the assistant producer, and everyone's mother-in-law and brother get mentioned, and the person who you've been hearing for two hours playing a beautiful solo on whatever instrument, you haven't got the slightest idea. There's no credit given. How did that happen? And it happens so regularly.



Carter: Oh, I don't know. I think in many instances if . . . I don't know if it's really prominently heard through the film, a lot of times they give the player credit. I've seen that. I don't know too much about the other.

Berger: I think you continued with film writing, television writing, as your primary enterprise, really, through the fifties and sixties. How did you feel about your playing at this time? Well, in the fifties, of course, you were recording regularly, as in so-called jazz settings for various labels. But in the sixties, it was very few and far between, and I don't think there was much playing as far as touring. Well, and for jazz in general it was not a great period. But did you have the feeling that you would want to increase your playing activities much during this time?

Carter: As far as a feeling, I just went along doing what I was doing.

Berger: Whatever was in demand.

Carter: Yeah, whatever it was, with no worry about the future and without saying, "Gee, I should be playing more." It didn't matter, as long as I was involved in the music industry.

Berger: Benny, I'd like to cover a few, well, they're not exactly nonmusical activities, a couple of them, but you got into a few business ventures during the fifties and sixties, and one of the most intriguing was, I think it was, a theater that you opened to feature jazz and poetry, is that correct?

Carter: Yes, it was called . . . what was it? L. A. Concert, L. A. Jazz Concert Hall or something. But we rented and refurbished a theater over on Crenshaw Boulevard that had been closed for a while. The idea was brought to me by an agent friend of mine named Jack Hampton, and he and I became partners in this particular venture. We thought it would be a good idea to have a place where young people could come and listen to jazz in sort of a concert setting, and no alcohol being served, just soft drinks and maybe sandwiches and popcorn and what else. You know, like a regular movie theater, but just with jazz attractions. Oh, we didn't stay open very long, just a matter of weeks. Well, that just says that it wasn't a success, the success that we had hoped it would be, and we were undercapitalized, so couldn't really carry on too long, you know.

Berger: Was the feeling to try and give young people a chance to hear music in a non-nightclub setting where they . . .

Carter: That was the feeling exactly, yes.

Berger: And, I mean, that's a problem that exists today, I think, still.



Carter: Yes, that's right, and the young people can hardly afford clubs. But still they can afford the Bruce Springsteens and the rap artists and in the large venues, you know, so I don't know. It depends on what they're drawn to and how they want to spend their money, what they want to spend it on. But it seems to me that the money is really there.

Berger: Sort of bringing an end to this Hollywood phase of studio writing and arranging, a lot of factors were changing in the film industry and, specifically, the demands for music that began to limit opportunities for studio musicians and for the regular writers and arrangers for films. What sort of changes did you observe that were really bringing to a close this era of the great film score and all these writers that we've been mentioning?

Carter: Oh, I don't know. I think it came about with the changes in the tastes of the young people. So many of the films were done with records, you know, a great deal of that, and small groups, as they called, self-contained groups, and they didn't feel that they had the need for the Bernie Hermans [phonetic], the Max Donnas [phonetic], the David Rackses, the Hank Mancinis. Of course, Hank has always been very busy and much sought after. But there was a change that came about, but I wouldn't know how to explain it too well.

Berger: What about the advent of electronic instruments like synthesizers and . . .

Carter: Well, of course, much of that, as we well know, a score can be done with just one musician, you know. But I don't know too much about that end of it.

Berger: You did, on occasion, use a synthesizer in your writing.

Carter: Well, in the very early days, yes.

Berger: The early days of the synthesizers, right?

Carter: Yes, of the synthesizer.

Berger: Not your very early days.

Carter: No, not in my early days.

Berger: Because then you'd be even more ahead of your time than I thought.

Carter: Indeed.



Berger: How did you find it as a creative tool? Obviously you weren't completely opposed to it, since you did use it.

Carter: No. No, I'm still not opposed to it. I think a lot of things are happening with the synthesizers and what is it, the drum machines. A lot of good effects are brought about.

Berger: What circumstances to you find it a favorable tool to use that you might . . .

Carter: I guess it can be used in any circumstance, but I don't know. I don't use them.

Berger: Before we leave the whole era of your main film participation, we had traced all the instruments you've played one by one earlier in this chronology, and I realize we neglected one that you did record on, and that's the C melody saxophone, the instrument you began on in the twenties and then returned to for one brief occasion in 1957 for the film, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and we just want to get that on the record.

Carter: Was that with C melody?

Berger: Yeah, I think. I was going to ask you, do you remember that, and from the tone . . .

Carter: No, I don't remember playing C melody on it.

Berger: It's on the soundtrack album.

Carter: *Snows of Kilimanjaro*? I didn't even know there was a soundtrack album.

Berger: Yeah. There was a Paris twenties scene, and I believe they wanted a more what they thought authentic . . .

Carter: Gee, I thought I was playing alto on that.

Berger: I think we have played it for you, and I believe you did acknowledge.

Carter: Yeah, well, okay.

Berger: But, well, then there's really not a question here, because you don't remember it.

Carter: Yeah. No, I don't remember playing C melody on that. I remember playing C melody on something, but . . .



Berger: All right. Well, just to put it in the record. We didn't want to leave out any instruments on which you had recorded. I think we're going to now move into more recent times, at least the things I even can remember, and talking about the 1970s when a couple of things occurred in your career. One, you began to tour and play again as an active playing soloist. The other thing, you've called the seventies your education decade, and you began to pass on your knowledge in a more formal setting at various institutions. Why don't we talk about the playing aspect? What sort of led you back into what became regular worldwide touring by the end of the seventies and an active recording career as a jazz soloist, so to speak?

Carter: I don't know. I started working less and less in the film industry. There were two reasons for that. One was that Stanley Wilson, who was head of the music at Universal [Studios] had passed away. After he passed away, there came a new regime with their own people, you know. Following that, or together with that, was that I was getting a little worn out with the—what is the word I want?—the deadlines, because, as I said earlier, [unclear] music for television the composer is always the last one consulted or assigned, and usually they want it tomorrow. Together with that I was getting offers to play and to do concerts, solo stuff, and I started picking up on that and did less and less of the film scoring or television scoring.

Berger: So it was a combination of less work . . . well, we discussed the different types of music they were using and limiting it, and also the rediscovery in the seventies of jazz, I guess.

Carter: Of being wanted. [laughter]

Berger: How about education? You began residencies at several institutions.

Carter: Well, that was all started by Morroe Berger at Princeton, as you . . .

Berger: I think I'm somewhat familiar with him. [laughs]

Carter: Oh, good. Oh, okay. That's what I wanted to be sure that . . . so as I say, he was your dad, and it all kind of started like . . . what's the word I want to say? Not necessarily a bolt from the blue, but it wasn't a bolt. But I had a call from him, in California, from Princeton, and he introduced himself and told me that he'd been familiar with my work for some time and also said he was an admirer. He told me that he was going to be doing some concerts or some lectures and whatnot, and he was hoping that I would be able to join him. I said, "Well, gee, I'd certainly like to talk about it." I was very surprised at the time and didn't know quite how to reply to his invitation. So he said, "Well, if you're interested, I'll come out and talk with you." We made a date. He flew out to California, and we spent a day



together. He was someone that I admired and liked immediately. I had no feeling of rejecting the offer. I was just very, very hopeful that nothing would happen to change it.

So I think we started together at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, after which he had arranged for me to be at Princeton for a period. Some other things as well; Cornell University . . . I can't remember other places, but there were some, following which we did a Mideast tour together. Oh, where did we go? To Iran, Damascus—that's Syria, isn't it?—Pakistan, Islamabad, and a couple of other places, names of which escape me at the moment. Cairo, which was in Egypt last time I was there, and a few other places. But, gee, then I was back at Princeton again a few times, during which he and his son, Ed . . .

Berger: Who? Oh.

Carter: Ed. Ed you-know-who interviewed me for a book they were working on, which was released, or published, I should say, in 1982, I believe, and the book is called *Benny Carter: A Life in a Music* . . . or wait a minute, *Life* . . .

Berger: *In American Music*.

Carter: *Life in American Music*. Thank you.

Berger: We should make it *Global Music*, maybe.

Carter: Oh, well. And passed away in 1981, and the book was published in 1982.

Berger: All right. I think as we near the end of this particular tape, we'll continue, and thank you.

[Begin File 7]

Berger: Okay, this is now the tape number four, continuing on August the 9th with Benny Carter, and we left off discussing what Benny has referred to as his education decade, the 1970s.

Just about your personal feelings about when you first entered the classroom, so to speak. Now, here, of course, we come to the point where I began to harass you personally, so I saw a lot of these occasions, was able to witness them, and I sensed there was some bit of apprehension, at least at the beginning, on your part. You had never really done any teaching before, as far as I know. How did you feel about this, entering this new phase and this new activity?



Carter: Well, I guess I was made to feel comfortable by Morroe, because when I got there, as I explained to them, I had no degree myself from an institute of higher learning. Actually, I didn't even have a high school diploma. But he explained to me that on the basis of what experience I've had, you know, I would just work on that. I said that I didn't even know how to structure a curriculum, and he reassured me that we could, together, make it work, which we did.

Berger: Let me ask you, it seems almost odd that in all those years you had never had any students. I'm not talking about formal, you know, teaching a course at an academic institution. But many of your colleagues, illustrious players, especially those with your theoretical knowledge of harmony, arranging, composing, aside from playing, would take on students, and many of them do. I know that you had been approached occasionally. Why did you never feel that this is something you should do, to teach one-to-one to someone on something?

Carter: Well, for one thing, I never felt that I had the time nor the tolerance. I don't think I would have had the patience that Arthur Reeves had with me. I did not want to work with beginners, and if they weren't beginners, they were too smart for me. [laughter] So you see I was beaten on both sides.

Berger: I remember one incident. You said you never really think about what you're doing in the overall sense, you know, how it fits into the universe or something like that. I recall one incident when a young saxophonist who was playing in your orchestra on one of the tours to Japan came to you and asked you about fingering, and he said, "When do you use this particular key?" or whatever. And you said, "I never use that key." And then he said, "Really?" And then you showed him something else, and then he went away, and you told me, "Oh, wait a minute. Go get him back, because I can't understand how I said that." [Carter laughs.] "Because there's no way I could be playing these notes. I do use that key; I just didn't know I used it."

Carter: I did. I just didn't know it. That's right. Well, it becomes automatic, you know.

Berger: So the instrument is so much a part of your . . . it almost seems to become a part of your anatomy, I guess, to you.

Carter: Well, it becomes that, surely. Yes. It's just an extension, you know.

Berger: So you were never really one of these people that was interested in various ways of attaining a particular note. It seems that you, you know, it just lays naturally to you. You don't think about the theory behind it. Is that true?



Carter: No, indeed not. No. No.

Berger: When you finally did start teaching students, and you weren't really giving them saxophone lessons; I mean, you were discussing music theory on occasion, doing workshops, listening to students play, critiquing their work. But not so much unless they had a particular problem, they would come to you, but you didn't have a Benny Carter method that you were presenting to them.

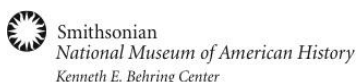
Carter: No.

Berger: But what sort of things do you feel you can impart and do you try to impart when you do get in a classroom situation?

Carter: Well, when you say "do," you mean "did," because I'm not really doing that anymore. I don't have the time, and what time that I do have, I devote to performing, you know. I'm slowing down considerably, I guess, as I should do at eighty-five. But I don't know. There are different things, different problems, and what we'd try to deal with one on one. As a matter of fact, I always had the attitude that there were many things that I could learn. You know, teaching is really a learning experience, and I think we all realize that. Many times a student would have a problem about something and he'd want to know about something, something which I may have known or I may not have known, and I'd say, "Well, gee, that's an interesting question or a problem. Let's look it up together," and I'd pull down one of the many books that I had with me, and we would look it up together. He would realize that I was not really the know-it-all that some teachers are. But I think for the most part that we all realize that we don't know it all, and we all realize that we can learn much from students.

Berger: I think that was brought out at the recent concerts you gave at Rutgers, where you were dealing with a combined . . . professional jazz musicians, some student musicians, symphonic musicians. One of the points they made when I talked to them afterwards, the students, particularly, was that they had never worked with anyone who asked them so many questions about how they wanted to play something. Is that something you do to make people at ease, or to honestly solicit their opinions?

Carter: To honestly solicit their opinions and honestly to learn something from them, you know. I think if you give them a part in whatever decisions you make instead of saying, "Now, you've got to play it just like this. You've got to play it just like that," well, many times they know and have a feeling for it, because of what it is and how it lays on the instrument, that can make the overall result much more interesting. So I like to enlist their assistance and their ideas.



Berger: I've noticed at some of the workshops and master classes that you've given in recent years that the first activity you have the students engage in is when they play for you. They may jump up and demonstrate tremendous pyrotechnics on whatever instrument they're playing, and you will stop them and say, "Could you just play a melody?" Or after they've finished this dazzling display, you will just ask them to play a melody. Why is that?

Carter: Well, I want to see what kind of soul they have, you know. I mean, all it takes to develop a fantastic technique and, as you call them, the master of the pyrotechnics . . . pyro? Not necessarily pyro; well, I guess so. They're making fire. But it's just practice, practice, practice. But practice doesn't necessarily give you feeling or, as we say, from the heart, and I just want to see how they would interpret a melody, what their feeling was toward the music, as well as toward the instrument.

Berger: Do you find that melody is being lost? Is that in . . . that you hear today, the appreciation of playing and interpreting a melodic line, with or without embellishment or improvisation?

Carter: I don't know whether it's being lost, but it's certainly not being accentuated, you know, because there are many musicians that you hear them display this fantastic technique and dazzling display, they can turn around and play a very nice melody, and you're surprised, you know.

Berger: You just mentioned practicing. I'd like to ask you, you work quite regularly, but there are often large spans of time where you're either writing something and you're not playing, or you're relaxing and not playing. Then you'll do periods of intensive touring, and then long periods again of inactivity as an actual player. People are always marveling at how you are able to come back after these layoffs seemingly without losing anything. That sort of belies the advice you're always giving to students about having to practice all the time. What are your practice habits and what sort of things do you do to prepare for an engagement if you haven't been playing for a while?

Carter: Well, I don't know. I used to practice quite a bit. Now I don't practice other than when I'm going to do a performance, and then I practice maybe a few days ahead of the performance. I should do it more often, but I just can't. I can't bring myself to practice alone. It's kind of difficult. I'd like to say something about someone. I don't know who it was that said if I don't—ooh, what is it? If I don't play . . . if I don't practice for a number of days . . . do you know anything about that one?

Berger: Not really.



Carter: If I don't practice . . . oh, boy. Oh, if I don't practice for . . . gee, sorry I don't remember this correctly, but it's like if I don't practice for some length of time, I know it, and if I don't practice for . . . oh, I don't know it. I can't remember it, but it's first I know it, then you know it, and then everybody knows it, you know. Then the audience knows it, you know. [laughter] So I don't know about that one. It will come to me immediately when this interview is over.

Berger: It reminds me of a line that you once delivered when you decided you were going to play the trumpet in a club, and I believe you said you hadn't even opened the instrument for six months or so. I think the results were not exactly what you had expected, so you picked up the mic and said, "You pay as I learn," to the audience. [laughter]

Carter: Oh, that was a little while ago.

Berger: When you do practice, do you have a regimen that you follow? What do you actually play when you're by yourself?

Carter: No, I'd probably put on a record and play with it. Mostly that rather than scales and exercises.

Berger: I heard you once tell a student . . . you got into a discussion about development of jazz and important innovations that you've been aware of, and that you had a rather spirited discussion, because you made the statement that you had heard nothing really original, that you found an original contribution, since Charlie Parker. This particular student was a great John Coltrane admirer, and you said, "Well, he was a great technician," or something, and you even said that you sometimes have practiced by laying transcriptions of his solos.

Carter: Of whose solos?

Berger: John Coltrane's.

Carter: I said that?

Berger: Yes. Never?

Carter: I couldn't possibly have said that.

Berger: No?

Carter: No. I couldn't possibly have said that, because it's not true.



Berger: Okay, maybe I misunderstood.

Carter: No. I have some Coltrane records that I never play but I have certainly listened to at one time or another, but I probably haven't played in years. But I've never practiced with one of his records.

Berger: Well, do you have any of his transcribed solos that you ever looked at?

Carter: Yes, I've got a lot of them that was done by Andrew White in Washington [D.C.], and I marveled at them, because I don't know how he did all of this, you know. No, I've never tried to play any of that. I've looked at it, of course.

Berger: The statement that prompted all of this . . .

Carter: But now that you've mentioned it, maybe next time I practice, I'll pull them out.

Berger: [laughs] Well, it might make an interesting engagement. I want to come to the one after that.

Carter: It would make some interesting practice, I'm sure, because that stuff is so intricate and very interesting. Yeah.

Berger: You say it's interesting, but the statement you made to the student, would you stand by that and say that Charlie Parker was the last innovation that you found to be a true departure or a true . . .

Carter: For me, yes. For me, yes, Coltrane notwithstanding. I'm sure he made a valuable contribution, but, you know, I think Parker did it. I'm still amazed by it.

Berger: While we're on the subject of Charlie Parker, you did work with him on occasion in recording situations, and I believe you said you did have an opportunity to talk to him and have a conversation with him.

Carter: Rather brief, but nonetheless we did, yeah.

Berger: And the image you got of him was somewhat different than the one conveyed by various films and some of the jazz literature. Is that true?

Carter: I'm not sure about the others, but I know my impression was most favorable, and I would like to have known him much better. And I would like to have heard him in person much oftener, too.



Berger: As far as his influence, the cliché has it that nobody that ever played the saxophone could not come to grips with Charlie Parker, and you, of course, had established a style well before Charlie Parker came on the scene. A lot of people have said that while continuing to maintain that basic style, which is certainly evident, that some things rubbed off. Was this an unconscious thing, if it occurred at all?

Carter: Well, unconscious, of course, but I hope it did rub off something. When Parker came along, it was a little late for me to try to be a Parker clone, and I was not prepared to put in the hours of practice that that kind of playing really requires. Well, not only that, I had no desire to sound like Parker, you know. I had my own thing, no matter how, you know, old-fashioned it may seem to some people. But that was me, and that's all I was concerned with. But I certainly enjoy listening to Parker, and I say again I marvel at the things he did.

Berger: Getting back to this John Coltrane I won't call it debate but the discussion you had, why was what he did, in your mind, at least, not as significant as what Charlie Parker was doing?

Carter: You mean to me or to others?

Berger: To you.

Carter: I don't know. I just found Parker more interesting. That's all, you know, but Coltrane had his thing, which just didn't appeal to me that much. But I think to me Parker was more creative, much more.

Berger: Just going a step further, you were once given a blindfold test by Leonard Feather, and he played you some Ornette Coleman, which was yet another development maybe beyond Coltrane on the continuum, I guess. Your reaction was not favorable at all. It was one of the strongest reactions I've seen in print from you. Was there nothing in that period or that type of music that you found, personally, anything worthwhile in?

Carter: On that particular blindfold test, I think he also played something of Phil Woods'.

Berger: Right.

Carter: And Phil Woods and what's his name, Coleman?

Berger: Ornette.



Carter: Ornette Coleman, that's what you'd call unfair competition. So I shall go no further with that.

Berger: Okay. I'll continue here with a little digression again. Someone just brought up the I guess we could call it an oxymoron, maybe, of rap music.

Carter: What, what? [Berger laughs.] I wouldn't expect you to say that. There's no such thing, as far as I'm concerned, as rap music. There is rap, and much of it is quite good, you know. But I've yet to hear one with any music to it. The beat, rhythm is there. I think that's what's very, very attractive to the kids. But rap music, as you say, that is an oxymoron.

Berger: As we draw to the end of this six-hour marathon, and just celebrating your eighty-fifth birthday, this may be a nice time to reflect on just some general, universal questions. Do you ever think about your place in—quote, unquote—the history of music and something like that? When people look at the history of music, is there something that you'd like to be remembered for more than anything else of all the things you've done?

Carter: No, all I would like to remember for is having been here. Whatever contribution I may have made, if any, is to be made by others, not by me . . . to be recognized by others, not by me. I don't know that I've made any real contribution. I've done what I set out to do, and that was have fun with the music, enjoy it and perform it and listen to it, to other people. I must admit that I have, to my satisfaction, achieved much that I had not even thought of. Of course, there's much left that I would like to do, but just what, I'm not sure. But I would just like to continue what I'm doing, you know, until the next eighty-five years.

Berger: Well, we're already planning the hundredth celebration, so . . .

Carter: Well, that's just around the corner.

Berger: That's nothing.

Carter: Yeah, that's nothing.

Berger: You mention that you're satisfied with what you've done. Would you have changed anything specifically in retrospect?

Carter: Oh yes, I would have. I won't say what, because there were opportunities I had that I think I goofed, and I can't blame anybody else for.

Berger: What aspect of music did you enjoy the least?



Carter: Rap. [laughter]

Berger: Of things that you actually were forced to do, engaged in and . . .

Carter: Oh, things I was involved in? I don't know. I enjoyed it all, you know. I can't point any particular high spots. I just enjoyed it all.

Berger: Is there anyone that you would have . . . I mean, you played with virtually everyone in so many fields of music, but was there anyone that just comes to mind offhand that you would like to have worked with that you never had the opportunity to?

Carter: Not that I can recall at the moment.

Berger: As far as the future goes, you're still planning tours. You're still planning recordings. Are there any particular things you'd like to accomplish or particular projects that you would want to work on?

Carter: Nothing I can think of. Well, I'm playing next weekend with Claude Terry [phonetic] in France and I'm looking forward to playing with Dizzy on his October cruise. And there are others, I mean, that I hope to play with again before I play with Gabriel. But no, I don't have any . . . nothing outstanding.

Berger: You still enjoy, obviously . . .

Carter: Oh, indeed.

Berger: . . . touring.

Carter: Yeah. Well, I don't enjoy the touring. I enjoy being there and performing, but the touring itself, which is getting there and preparing to get there, no, I don't enjoy that anymore.

Berger: How about the . . . I know you don't like to single out younger musicians that have appeal to you, or you don't want to slight anybody. But, in general, the music that you helped to create, nurture, shape, and get to the point that it is today, are you confident about its future?

Carter: Oh yes. Yes. I mean, not only its future, but its present. There are a lot of good things going on, a lot of things that I enjoy, and many young players that I think are really on the way somewhere, but not only that, they've really arrived. I won't go into names, but there are many. So, in other words, I feel that the music itself is in good hands.



Berger: Okay. Is there anything you'd like to add or any message to people that may be using this interview in years to come or any small piece of advice y you would impart?

Carter: Well, all I would say is, to the budding musician or the instrumentalist, is try to find your own voice with respect to everybody that has gone before you or everybody who is here now. But try to find your own voice and say your own thing.

Berger: Okay. Well, you've certainly said yours very well. Thank you.

[End of interview]



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