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**HARRY EDISON**  
**NEA Jazz Master (1992)**

**Interviewee:** Harry “Sweets” Edison (October 10, 1915 – July 27, 1999)

**Interviewer:** Ed Berger with recording engineer Duke Marcos

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**Berger:** Just for the record it is now August the 20<sup>th</sup>. It’s Friday and I have the great pleasure of sitting with Harry “Sweets” Edison in Los Angeles beginning our oral history interview for the Smithsonian. And “Sweets,” we appreciate your taking this time.

**Edison:** Well, you know you’re one of my favorite people, Ed, and I couldn’t wait to get back from Europe because I knew we had made this appointment for today. I hurried up and got here because I didn’t want to disappoint you and I know I would’ve had to give an account of myself to your very good friend, Benny Carter (laughs).

**Berger:** Well, by tomorrow you may be rushing back to Europe after a couple hours of this (both laugh) but anyway, I just want to start before we go back into the chronology of your illustrious career. I want to start with a more recent event. Did the City of Los Angeles honor you?

**Edison:** They did, yes.

**Berger:** What was that like?

**Edison:** They did. Oh, it was fantastic. The Los Angeles Jazz Society, every year someone gets the honor...it’s a jazz party. It’s a very big event and they select someone every year. Ray Brown’s going to be the one this year. I was the first recipient of it and the next time they give

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me this big award at Mayor Bradley's office. So I was honored by the City of Los Angeles and it was absolutely....well, what can I say? What little that I have done for the music business and the art...jazz...I am absolutely just elated over the fact that they think that much of me to give me some kind of award of appreciation. Because I've been at it a long time and all these things that happen to me are surprises because I know there are a lot of other guys just as deserving and I feel like I'm one of the chosen few, Ed, I really do. But it was absolutely fantastic...Councilman Woo...oh, it was [a] fantastic affair. It really was absolutely beautiful. It was put on by Terry and Al Aarons who are the founders of the Los Angeles Jazz Society and they really did do it up, it was wonderful.

**Berger:** To get back into beginning our look at your history in the music business and outside the music business even, can you just for the record give us your birth date?

**Edison:** Yeah, October 10...do I have to say the year? (Laughs)

**Berger:** Give us a year.

**Edison:** I was born in 1915, October 10.

**Berger:** Your daughter cautioned me on the phone to make sure you gave us the right year (Harry laughs), so I assume that is the right year.

**Edison:** She talks too much.

**Berger:** (Laughs) Maybe I should be interviewing her.

**Edison:** She talks too much.

**Berger:** And, you were born in Columbus.

**Edison:** Actually I was born in Kentucky, Beaverdam, Kentucky, but my mom and pop, they separated when I was six months old and she took me to Columbus, OH. At six months old you don't know where you are, so I just adopted Columbus, OH as my home because I've been there all my life, finished school there and everything else. But in Kentucky, I did go back there, my mom sent me back there when I was five and I stayed with my uncle until I was 12. He was the one who taught me the scales on the trumpet, because he loved music, loved jazz, well he just loved music, period. Jazz was about all that we heard in Kentucky at that time, the blues, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly...Oh, it was an array of blues singers

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that you would never, I don't think a lot of people nowadays have even heard of them. But he taught me the scales on the trumpet and that has been my musical education ever since.

**Berger:** How far back do you know about your ancestry, like do you know your great grandparents, was it told to you who they were?

**Edison:** Well, my dad was an Indian and, let's see, my folks, their name was Schultz (spells it). In fact, there were so many of them in the little town in Kentucky, they call the town "Schultztown, Kentucky." So, I never did delve in my family background. My mother used to tell me quite a bit about what a hard time they used to have. My grandmother was a slave. My mother's mother's sister, she lived to be 108 and that was just what they said she was because in those days, they didn't have any birth certificate. You were just born, you were born, you know. And my mom, she passed away two years ago she was 92. So, she never did, well...they always tell you about your family background but you forget when you get out on the road. I went out early from Columbus, OH when I was about 19 years old.

**Berger:** What did your father do?

**Edison:** Well, that I don't even remember. I don't even remember seeing him but once or twice in my life. I wouldn't have known him when I got grown, I really wouldn't have known him if I had seen him on the street, because they divorced at such an early age, I was only six months. I have my mom to be grateful to because she really did give me a good background--my mother and my aunt and uncle. I had a lot of books at my house and all the relatives were in the Bible and I used to look at this Bible and ask who this was and who this is, who was this, Mama? But most of that I have forgotten. Most of my folks were in slavery. Well, that's nothing new because we all were in the olden days, there was nothing but slaves, so my folks were victims of being a slave. But Kentucky was very bad, so I only stayed there from the time I was five until I was 12 and then my mother came and took me back to Columbus, OH and that's where I finished school.

**Berger:** Can you tell us a little bit about your life in Kentucky from five to 12...you went to school ... it was a rural community, I guess.

**Edison:** Yes it was. It was the epitome of a rural community because they were all farmers and I couldn't wait to get out of there because I worked hard. I worked my buns off. In fact, everybody there worked hard. Everybody there was farmers. My uncle wanted to teach me the scales on the trumpet. That was the least of what I wanted to be, a trumpet player. I didn't want to learn music.

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I wanted to be out there in the field playing baseball with the rest of the guys. But he was very stern and he said “You’re going to have to play the trumpet or some kind of musical instrument.” I started on the piano and I played piano and organ in church and my uncle played the bass and my aunt used to sing in the choir, so that’s the form of training I had in Kentucky, plus riding a horse, everything a farm boy would do. That’s what I did and I couldn’t wait to get out of there, I couldn’t wait.

**Berger:** Did your uncle have his own farm, his own land?

**Edison:** Yeah, he had his own land, he had his own farm.

**Berger:** So, you would help out on that?

**Edison:** Oh, did I, gee whiz (laughs), yeah, that’s one thing a boy has to do when he’s born to a farmer, he’s going to have to work and believe me, it’s work from sun-up until sun down. I used to lie in bed and say, “Gee I’ll be glad when I get old enough to leave here.” I was tired. But it was good for me.

**Berger:** How did he get his musical interest? Where did that come from? Seems he would be so occupied with making a living on the farm, that....did he work professionally?

**Edison:** He was a coal miner. And everyone there was a coal miner. And he used to listen to records. I think Bessie Smith was the most popular one there. And Mamie Smith. And I got interested in one that Louis Armstrong made with Bessie Smith. He made quite a few I think, him and Earl Hines and Coleman Hawkins. And that attracted my attention, and I began to listen to Louis Armstrong and from then on after I heard him play on these records I had no doubt in my mind I was going to try and be a trumpet player. I still am. And he’s still my idol. I think that Louis Armstrong was the greatest trumpet player ever lived. He was absolutely just amazing. The late Dizzy Gillespie and I, we were great friends for about 45, 50 years and he used to say, if you’re going to play a decent solo on the trumpet you’re going to have to play something that Louis Armstrong has played. Now that is the truth. He has done everything that you can do, that can be done on the trumpet. I remember when he first came to Columbus, OH, after my mom had brought me back to OH to go to school. She was a maid in a hotel downtown and everybody liked her. And Columbus, OH was very segregated. We did go to a mixed school, but other than that, the restaurants, the hotels, everything was segregated. But they liked my mother downtown where she worked. And they had printed in the paper that it was impossible to do what Louis Armstrong was doing on the trumpet, you know, to play so high. And even the studio musicians,

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they had some that worked on the radio and they had a symphony band around Columbus, OH--no blacks--so they were saying it's impossible to play that high. And, the night of the performance he was in the Palace Theatre downtown and I got to go backstage and they said he had a trick trumpet, he had put chewing gum in the little hole in the mouthpiece. They used to do that, they'd make a smaller hole with the chewing gum so that would make them play higher. But they looked at his mouthpiece, it was just like you would buy it out of the store. So they played his horn and they gave it back to him and they were absolutely sure that he had just a store-bought trumpet. At the performance that night--he used to play "Tiger Rag"--he says, "Tonight I'm gonna hit 200 high C's." And when he finished playing the trumpet--oh, I never heard a trumpet played like that before in my life. He ended up on a high F, over the high C, and the lights shattered. Gee man, he was just amazing, just amazing. And it was just absolutely such a thrill to listen to Louis Armstrong.

**Berger:** Did you get to meet him at that time?

**Edison:** No, I didn't get to meet him because they hurried me from backstage, I wasn't supposed to be there anyway, because this was an all-white theater but black performers used to perform there. Like, they used to have the Cotton Club Revue there downtown, and we weren't even allowed in the balcony. The Cab Calloway show used to come there from the Cotton Club. Duke Ellington's show used to come there from the Cotton Club. Don Redman and his band used to come to that theater, the Connie's Inn Revue. But if they didn't play a dance before or after the theater we would never get to see them. They had a ballroom there in Columbus, OH that I used to sneak in to hear Louis Armstrong and hear all the big bands, the Ogden Ballroom [*Note: the Lincoln Theatre in Columbus, OH, was originally named the Ogden Theatre and Ballroom, built in 1928 to serve as a cultural and entertainment center for the African-American community*] and another ballroom on Long Street. I'd sneak out of the house because I used to sleep downstairs. I'd open the window and sneak out and I'd go to the dance. I did that quite a few times 'til I got caught, and I had to pay the price. But I used to hear all the bands coming through there. I heard Benny come through there one time with the McKinney's Cotton Pickers.

**Berger:** Benny Carter

**Edison:** Yeah, him and Coleman Hawkins, that's in the reed section. Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter. What a band, I think it was Hilton Jefferson, or Russell Procope, one of the great saxophone players. But Columbus was a great dance town. When you think about those days when you used to go to the dance halls around there. It was the country club there that all the bands used to go play and about three or four years ago, they gave a "Harry Edison Day" there in

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Columbus, OH. They gave me the award in the same hall that they wouldn't let me in, so I made them remember the days when I used to stand on the outside of the fence. They had a wire fence on the outside and all the musicians used to stand on the outside there and listen to all the bands, Ellington and all the big bands, because Columbus was a great dance town. The City Council, they were there, and I told them, "I never thought I'd get to appear in this dance hall because I used to stand on the outside of the fence, there, and listen to Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Moten, Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, and just to show you how times have changed, here I am, you are honoring me at a place I couldn't even come into when I was growing up."

**Berger:** Must have made it even more satisfying to get an award there.

**Edison:** (Laughs) Yeah, it was. I had my mother there and she was excited, and all my schoolmates were excited, but at that time I really did appreciate the award that they gave to me. I still have the plaque up there on the wall from Columbus, OH. It was great, I enjoyed it, but you know when you go back to your home town, sometimes you don't expect to see it so improved. So, it was such a thrill to be honored in a place that refused entrance to me. It was quite a surprise.

**Berger:** Just to backtrack for a second, the early Louis Armstrong records that you heard with Bessie Smith, did you know it was Louis on there?

**Edison:** Yeah, oh yeah.

**Berger:** And you knew this was the same person that was coming when you saw him in Columbus.

**Edison:** Oh yeah, he was the only one that people listened to in those days. There was only one trumpet player, that was Louis Armstrong. And I think they had the names of each musician on the record, and it was Earl Hines, I'll never forget, and Louis Armstrong, and Coleman Hawkins. And man, gee whiz, it still sounds good. It still sounds good. Pops was just absolutely, he was amazing, such a wonderful guy.

**Berger:** How close were you?

**Edison:** Yes, we were so close...I never thought I'd get to Europe at the time because the Basie band had broken up because of economic reasons, and so I never thought that I'd be going to Europe. I saw Pops one night, I think I went out to his house...he cooked up a big tub of red beans and rice, so I told him I'd like to have a watch back from Geneva. I wrote him a letter and

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told him not to forget it through Joe Glaser's office and when he came back, I happened to be in New York and Lucille called me and told me to meet him down to the Hickory House on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street for dinner. So something happened, Pops couldn't get there but anyway, Lucille told me that Pops said anytime a letter can catch up with him as much as he traveled on the road, as much as wherever he's been, that I must have really wanted this watch. It was a Patek Phillipe. I had dinner so...I wasn't doing too kosher at the time and New York wasn't doing too good, and she said the only thing Pops wanted was just the duty he paid on it which I think was \$268. So I told Lucille, "I don't even have \$268 to give him you know, because I'm not working, and I'm going out of town with Coleman Hawkins." The following week I was going to Cleveland, OH, and I said, "I'll reimburse him after I come back to New York." So she made a telephone call to Pops and he told her, "Just tell Sweets to take the watch and wear it in good health," you know, and what a thrill, what a thrill, what a thrill. I went to Switzerland, Geneva, and the day he bought the watch and everything is still recorded, the time and everything when he bought the watch right there, his name is signed by it, you know. But then I made a record with him at one time... let's see, Sy Oliver wrote the arrangements. This was the big band here in Los Angeles. And it was just a thrill just to play behind him, just a thrill. He had a good band, studio band.

**Berger:** This was in the 50's?

**Edison:** 50's, yeah, in the 50's.

**Berger:** Can you give us some insights as to how he worked in the studio, was he a fast worker, did he do a lot of takes?

**Edison:** No, he didn't do too many takes. He knew what he wanted to do before he got there. Evidently, he had gotten with Sy Oliver before the record date and Sy wrote the arrangements according to what Pops' ideas were. So, we just ran through them, he didn't take no time. It didn't take any time at all for him to do that. I wouldn't have cared anyway if he had taken 10 hours because I was having a ball up there, watching how he played. He used to come to hear me play when he'd come to California here, I had a little gig over at a place called the Memory Lane, it was about three or four years, and he used to come in. I liked to play, still do like to play on a Harmon mute, and after I'd get through playing a set I'd go over and sit down. We'd talk and he'd say, "When you gonna play open horn, when you gonna take that mute out of that horn?" I'd say, "Well Pops, I just like playing the mute." He'd say, "Well I like to hear you play open, I like that trumpet open." So we used to have some good conversations. When I did the Hollywood Palace show about four years on ABC, he did it a couple of times and he would--I was the only black musician there--so he would come over and talk to me all the time. Mitchell

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Ayres was the musical director. He used to come over and sit down and tell me a lot of jokes, 'cause he and Basie were very good friends. He and Basie were very, very, very good friends. I didn't know that so many of the older musicians were as tight as they were because the road was the only life that we knew. And I remember when Duke was very sick, they were making this "I Love You Madly" TV show here at Century City and I went out there and I was sitting with Basie and I found out that he and Duke had been sending each other birthday greetings for about 50 years. I didn't even know that they were that close but I should have, because older musicians, they keep in contact with each other. It's a closely knit family and we had more respect for each other in the older days. We had a lot of feeling, it was a lot of intimacy there between the older musicians. I would say that there was a lot of love, more than there is today.

**Berger:** Was there sort of a feeling like you're all in it together?

**Edison:** All one family.

**Berger:** And you have the same problems.

**Edison:** Right.

**Berger:** You have the same obstacles.

**Edison:** Yeah, because we never got to see each other too much anyway. Of course when I joined Count Basie's band in 1938...when I first went to New York and joined Lucky Millinder's band and Lucky had a good band and I enjoyed playing...he had Don Byas in the band, he had Charlie Shavers, Billy Kyle who later joined Louis Armstrong and...oh he had a good band, Walter Johnson was on drums, wonderful drummer. And some reason or the other, Lucky fired me for Dizzy and that's when I went with Basie's band because I had played with Jo Jones and Walter Page in St. Louis with a band called Jeter-Pillars, it was James Jeter and Hayes Pillars. Jo Jones and Walter Page was playing the band and when Benny Moten died, he sent and got Jo Jones and Walter Page to join his band and Sidney Catlett and Jimmy Blanton took their place in St. Louis, so I had played with Jo Jones and Walter Page in St. Louis. We were staying at the same rooming house in New York and this little trumpet player named Bobby Moore, he got sick, what a trumpet player he was. And Jo Jones and Walter Page recommended me to the Basie band, and that was my beginning of a career with Count Basie.

**Berger:** Before we get too far into Count Basie, one question before we leave your early background: you said your uncle had taught you the scales, the trumpet. How did you actually learn to read music, was that from him as well, or...?

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**Edison:** Well, it takes a professional to really teach you the finer points of music, how to read the dynamics in music. He wasn't that equipped because he had never been formally trained himself. But he taught me the scales and he used to send and get John Philip Sousa's books of marching and I never had an Auburn, from Herbert Clarke or from Schlossberg. None of those books that taught you how to...you still had to have somebody teach you how to read. But he taught me how to read the scales, how to read the chromatic scales, Db scale, C scale, and that's my beginning of learning how to read.

**Berger:** Did you have any formal musical training?

**Edison:** No, never have. Never had any formal training. I have often wished that I had because a lot of things that I do wrong I could have been taught how to do them right and it would have been much easier. It's easy to play right, it's hard to play wrong but you get accustomed to playing wrong so it's easier to you. But in those days, Ed, there was no need for a black musician to get a formal training in music because where was he going to play? You couldn't...lot of the musicians they look forward to playing on the staff in those days, they had staff bands you got paid whether you worked or not at Fox Studios, MGM, Paramount, all the big studios, Metro Goldwyn Mayer. They had probably I don't know how many men but they were on call all the time and you got paid whether you worked or not. So consequently it paid them to study, they looked forward to...they had radio bands in those days, that you could be on the staff.

**Berger:** or a symphony...

**Edison:** Symphony orchestra, you could look forward to doing that, but what was the use of studying diligently and then you'd be refused? So, first thing you'd learn how to do was play a solo so you could go to a nightclub or one of these joints and get you a gig, working a night club. So, I think that's why black musicians become great soloists because they concentrated on playing solos.

**Berger:** Because the other avenues were closed. One question about a lot of musicians that I've talked to especially those with very deep religious backgrounds--their families were dead set against them not necessarily becoming musicians, but playing "jazz" or hot music, the devil's music. I gather that was not the case in your family.

**Edison:** Not in my family, no. I played in church and my family was very religious, Baptists. When I got to Columbus, OH, my mother bought me a trumpet—she paid 50 cents down on it—the trumpet was a Cornet, a York, it cost \$12.50. And I'll never forget it. She paid 50 cents down

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on it and she used to tell me years later it took her so long to pay for that horn, paying 50 cents a month. She said, “I thought I’d never get it paid for,” but she finally did and that’s what started me off on the trumpet. Then after I began to get into it, I always had a feeling for my mom because she was a mother and a father to me, except for the time I was with my uncle. And she worked so hard, I remember she worked for 10 cents an hour in the glass factory in the south end of Columbus, OH, and then she would take in washing and ironing at night time. I said, “If I ever get a chance, I don’t want her to work this hard.” I left home, finished high school, and I left because I knew it would be easier for her to take care of herself than to take care of me.

**Berger:** Did you have any brothers and sisters?

**Edison:** No, no brothers and sisters. So I feel like that I attributed to her that longevity because I was never a problem, no trouble. She never got a call that I was in jail, it was always a pleasant call when she got a call from me. I was never in trouble. One time I got stranded in Cleveland and I called her to send me bus fare. Instead of sending bus fare, she caught a train and came over and she said, “Well, if this is the best you want to do, you might as well come on back home.” She didn’t ask me did I want to go back home, she gave me the orders, you just come on back with me. So I went back and finished school.

**Berger:** What was her name?

**Edison:** Kitty. Her maiden name was Kitty Borah and her folks were named Schultz. And my father’s named Edison, naturally. But she was always proud of me.

**Berger:** And she lived you said up until just about...

**Edison:** about a year ago, she was 92.

**Berger:** So she obviously was aware of your success, did she come hear you play?

**Edison:** Yes, every time I was close to Columbus she would be right at the dance hall, I’d go get her. Because I never stayed in the hotel, I always stayed at home with her.

**Berger:** I read in one interview that when you joined Basie and you came through nearby, I guess it would have been Kentucky that your aunt and uncle came.

**Edison:** Yes, they drove over in the buggy. And we played in Hartford, KY, that’s the capital. I looked up and there they were, both of them, my aunt and uncle. He just couldn’t sit down the

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whole night, he was just so amazed. And he'd walk up on the bandstand and tell Basie behind the piano, "I taught him that."

**Berger:** And it was really only a few years earlier that he'd been teaching you the scales.

**Edison:** Yeah, he said, "I taught him that." Everybody in the band, they just fell out. We thought you were from Columbus, OH, man, you from way down here? I said, yeah, you got to be from some place, sounds just as good as Red Bank (laughs).

**Berger:** You still have any relatives in either Kentucky or Ohio?

**Edison:** I have a few cousins but most of...I never see.

**Berger:** Did your mother live in Columbus her whole life?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, when she left Kentucky, she left for good. She left there when I was six months old and she stayed. She did come back to see me just about every year but one time she was called, I was very sick. I had typhoid, and at that time there was no antidote for typhoid fever. I don't know how I attracted it, I was about eight years old or nine years old, but the fever was just doing me in and the doctor had given me up. He said I've tried everything as a country doctor that he knew. So my grandmother, the one that lived to be 108, she said, "Well I know something else that I'm going to try." So she got some fresh cow manure and made a tea out of it. And I drank and drank that and kept drinking it and drinking it and the next day my fever began to come down. And the doctor said, "Well that's something I didn't know about." But those old people had some medication that no one ever knew about. The herbs and all that sort of thing they used to give you. And they had certain times of year they would go out in the field and dig up something and let it dry in the smokehouse. In the wintertime you'd drink it for tea and all that. But my mom used to tell me all the time, I thought I was going to lose you then but thank God I'm still here. And what a wonderful mom I had, she was just absolutely a mother and a father. I used to tell her so many things about when I was going to school, different things about girls and everything. She had to be the father and tell me. Because I was scared of girls. Then too there was quite a few musicians around Columbus, OH, especially the first band I played with. His name was Earl Hood. In fact, he passed away last year at 98. He had a saxophone player that played with him called Paul Tyler that lived next door to my mom. And I used to practice and Paul had been out on the road with Captain Wormack's band, he was a good musician, a good saxophone player. So, he talked to Earl Hood and Earl Hood gave me a chance to play in his band. So I went to rehearse and he liked me and I joined his band. Then he said I had to get a

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tuxedo. So my mother bought me a tuxedo. And on weekends we'd go to all the little places around, I used to play a lot where the Mills Brothers were born in Pickaway, OH. We'd go to all the little neighboring places around Ohio and I never got paid. Most of them were getting 35 cents for the night and he'd pass over me, so when I'd get to my mother, she'd say to me, "Where's the money?" I'd say, "I didn't get paid." She said, "When does he intend to pay you, you're working?" So I said, "He said I'm playing for experience." She said, "No, no, after I bought you a tuxedo and paid for that tuxedo, you got experience enough to be in the band, you got experience enough to be paid." So she called him and said, "I bought this tuxedo for Harry Edward"-- that's my middle name, Edward—" and experience don't put anything on the table." There's nobody but her and I and whatever I made on any little job I'd have, I'd have to come and give it to her, to help take care of the bills. So, he finally started giving me like 35 cents for the night. But that was the beginning of my career in a jazz band in Columbus, OH.

**Berger:** Every city seems to have had some legendary figures, some great musicians who never left or never made it who are always recalled with great affection and admiration by people who knew them but were as good as the people we later go to know but for one reason or another circumstances prevented them from either leaving or making it. Were there any local legends like that you might tell us about?

**Edison:** Columbus? There was Joe Thomas who played with Jimmie Lunceford, he was from Columbus, OH. Sy Oliver, he stayed around Columbus, OH for years but his home was right outside of Columbus, OH. Not Youngstown, that's too far. But he's a Buckeye—everybody from Ohio they're called Buckeyes—but he stayed around Columbus for years. Nancy Wilson is from Columbus, OH.

**Berger:** These are all people that made it. Were there any that were great musicians but for one reason or another never left?

**Edison:** Yes, there was a trombone player, fantastic trombone player. Maybe you've heard of a band that was in World War I, Jim Europe.

**Berger:** Sure, military....369<sup>th</sup> regiment

**Edison:** I've heard they amazed the people in Europe how they used to play. And they had a trombone player named Archie, I can't think of his name. Anyway, he had a chance to join Duke Ellington's band...everybody begged him to leave Columbus, OH and he would never leave. But he was fantastic.

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**Berger:** Why didn't he want to leave?

**Edison:** I don't know. I never delved into why he didn't want to leave there. But he used to play with the same band that I played with around there when I was 14 or 15, playing with Earl Hood. His name escapes me right now but I always speak of him. He was one of the guys that was around there that never wanted to leave. And a saxophone player that I was telling you about that recommended me to Earl Hood, Paul Tyler. He was a great musician. He had been to New York. He was in the same band in Buffalo, NY, with Jimmy Crawford who played with Lunceford. There was a band in Buffalo called Captain Wormack. And Paul Tyler had played with him but evidently he got homesick and came back home to Columbus, OH, but I can't recall too many musicians around Columbus.

**Berger:** The band you were playing with there, Earl Hood, what sort of music would that band play? Was it written arrangements, was it mostly improvising?

**Edison:** It was just stock arrangements. We had two trumpets and a trombone and the other trumpet player, he used to play all the solos, play all the firsts and I was just sitting there. So, one night, we were playing at this Masonic Hall on Long Street and when his time came to play he was having a drink at the bar, so I took his solo. From then on, gee whiz, every time he'd get ready to take a solo, I'd say, "I got it." That was my first solo on Limehouse Blues, I never will forget it. Gee whiz, that was a thrill to jump up and stand up and playing a solo at 14 years old. I didn't know what I was playing but I was blowing loud, that's for sure. But his name was Bob Price, I'll never forget and he was another good musician that wouldn't leave Columbus, OH. Great first trumpet player. He went to New Jersey and he had a chance to go up to New York and join a band there. They had the big bands in those days, I don't know which band it was but he went back to Columbus. A lot of guys didn't want to be on that road, Ed, that road is a tough assignment. I remember a time in the Basie band, we used to do 260 one-nighters a year. We always did over 200 one-nighters a year. There are only 365 days in the year and we'd do like 250, 260 and the other time we'd play in the Apollo-- they'd call the theatres the beginning of around the world. There was the Apollo Theatre, the Earle Theatre in Philadelphia, the Royal in Baltimore and the Howard in Washington. That was four weeks worth, you had a week at every place and from then on, you wouldn't get back to New York for about three or four months doing one-nighters. We might get back to play the Savoy for two weeks, something like that, but it was hard. The playing was easy, but the bus rides, those bus rides were just absolutely....when you're young, it's fun but the road is taking its toll as you get older. I still feel the symptoms of doing all those one-nighters right now, they were hard. One incident happened one time, I don't

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think very few people know this except the older guys, Earl Warren, Buddy Tate and myself, we're the only ones left of the Basie band. They remember, but John Hammond, he was responsible for the Count Basie band, period, because he brought Basie to New York. They had, you remember, the Camel Hour, and all the bands used to do it. The [radio] broadcast, that was a good gig you could do it for a month at a time, two months. Benny Goodman used to do it for the whole summer. John Hammond, he talked the President of the Camel Company to hire Basie and we were in Chattanooga, TN when we got the news that we were going to do the Camel show. So, we got on the bus and rode all the way from Chattanooga, TN to New York and John Hammond picked Basie up to go to wherever the Camel cigarettes office was downtown New York. And when they sat down, I guess the impresario of the entertainment, he asked who Count Basie was, he didn't even know Count Basie. So, he said, "Well, I'm Count Basie." And his face fell, Basie said he was just speechless. He said, "I just can't sign a contract for you to do the Camel Hour because we'll lose business all through the South, people won't buy cigarettes. We just can't have a black band to do the Camel Hour." And he didn't say it remorsefully, he just said it like, this is it. What a downer that was. And Basie had the swingiest band in the world.

**Berger:** Hadn't Hammond clued him in?

**Edison:** John didn't know that the man didn't know Basie. He just assumed everyone in the world knew Count Basie. People over in Europe and everywhere knew Count Basie. But this man evidently wasn't aware of what was going on in the music business. He was just hiring people because...Benny Goodman, he had heard of Benny Goodman, he had heard of Artie Shaw and he just thought Count Basie was another white band. So, Basie was really hurt. Oh, he came back and told us and said, "Well, got to hit the road again." But to live through things like that you got to love what you're doing, you really got to love to play because we played under duress really, we played sometimes under conditions that nobody would even want to be in and here we are sitting up on the bandstand playing in those conditions.

**Berger:** You're still on the road probably almost as many nights as you were. Of course, I guess the conditions have somewhat improved.

**Edison:** Yes, much better, first class travel, airplane, the hotels...and I don't travel as much now as I used to. I go out for a month and I'm home for a month. But the Basie band, this was every year for the whole 14 years I was with the band straight. Well, it got better after I left. But when I joined the band it was \$9 a night we were making, Basie was only making \$15, so you really have to want to play to do that. We never had a steady job like the Ellington band used to go in the Cotton Club for six, seven months. Cab Calloway, he was Mr. Cotton Club--he'd go in the

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Cotton Club like eight or nine months. Jimmie Lunceford used to go in the Cotton Club. We never had a job, anything like that happen to us. And we had the best band too, we had a band.

**Berger:** Looking at the itineraries, I don't know if you've seen that book by Chris Sheridan, the Basie Band a biography about two million pages long, he's got the itineraries, I'll bring it tomorrow. It's frightening to look at what you guys were doing, jumping from one small town in Kentucky to another one in Tennessee and the next night you're in Ohio.

**Edison:** 400 miles was nothing for us to do a night. And in those days, we'd play from 9 to 2. You'd play from 9-12, a dance, and you'd have animation from 12-1 and then play from 1 to 2. Then you'd jump back in the bus and you'd get in the next town about 2 the next afternoon or 3:00, sometimes 4 in the afternoon. Then you'd have to scrounge around to find a room in a rooming house or in somebody's home. Oh, it was hard, it was hard.

**Berger:** Now you almost always stayed in private homes. Were there any hotels that would take you anywhere?

**Edison:** No. Well, in the larger Southern cities, they had black hotels. Like Atlanta, they had a hotel there. And they had a wonderful theatre and they had restaurants, oh the restaurants, you couldn't wait to go to eat. And then Texas, Houston used to have a hotel called the Jim Hotel, and Dallas, I don't think there was a hotel there. That was about the only town in Texas that had a black hotel that catered to the musicians, or to anybody that was going through there. They did have a hotel in Savannah, GA, that was....incidentally, the woman that had the hotel in Savannah, she used to be the maid for Marie Dressler, the old movie star. But she built a hotel in Savannah and it was beautiful. Most of the places we had to stay at private homes.

**Berger:** Was it up to each individual musician to find their own lodgings or was nothing pre-arranged?

**Edison:** Oh yes, once you went through there, you establish yourself with that house that you stayed in and whenever you came back through there, they would see the placards, Count Basie would be here at such and certain date, they would have your room ready. Sometimes doctors and the lawyers, the higher echelon, would have nice homes for you to stay in, especially Basie, he would have a nice room to stay in somebody's house. The promoter would make sure that Basie had a nice place to stay. But, like, in my hometown, we couldn't stay in no white hotels there. They had some beautiful hotels downtown in Columbus, they had the Plaza Hotel on Long Street which was a black hotel, it was black-owned. And all the establishments on that street

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were black-owned. Sometimes I wondered whether desegregation was good for us because at least they had their own at that time. When desegregation came into effect, that put all those establishments out of business, so the black businessman, he got lost. But in those days they had some nice hotels. And then some places down South, we'd stay at the Y. The YMCA was going good, very popular at the time.

End of CD #1

**Berger:** Alright, we sort of got into Count Basie but before we do that in full swing, I just wanted to talk about your brief period in Cleveland. I guess after you were with the Earl Hood band in Columbus and other groups around there, you did do some work in Cleveland, is that right?

**Edison:** Yeah, I did. I went there with a band that was formerly Alphonso Trent Band. It has been quoted that I played with Alphonso Trent but I never did. He had taken ill up in New Hampshire and they took him back to Fort Smith, AR, and some of the guys kept the band together. So, they came to Columbus, that's the first time I left Columbus was with this band. They had a trumpet player named Chester Clark and my mother told him, "Be sure and take care of my son." He was a nice guy. I went to Cleveland with that band. That's when I got stranded and had a little difficulty with my mother. But I stayed in Cleveland for about two or three years, working at a place called Mammy Louise's Chicken Shack on 71<sup>st</sup> and Central. Then I worked at a place on 55<sup>th</sup> and Central called Sunset. In fact, when I was working there, that's where Basie's wife was working, Catherine, she was dancing. The hotel where we were staying, the Majestic, on 55<sup>th</sup> and Central, they had a bar in there called the Heat Wave bar and I used to work in there. But I stayed around Cleveland about three or four years until the band went to St. Louis and that's where I met Roy Eldridge was in Cleveland. He came through there with McKinney's Cotton Pickers, and the trumpet player, he's still there, named Emmett Berry. Some great musicians came out of Cleveland. Tad Dameron, he was from Cleveland, and Freddie Webster, another trumpet player. We all met in Cleveland, we were all youngsters at that time. Of course, Roy Eldridge had made a name for himself, he was wiping us all out.

**Berger:** Just to ask a little sidebar here on Emmett Berry—he's still living...

**Edison:** Yes, he is.

**Berger:** Do you know what his situation is?

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**Edison:** No, I really don't, I think Clark Terry's about the only one that talks to him because he doesn't want to talk to anyone. I know quite a few guys that have been through there and he won't answer the door. So I don't know his circumstances, I don't know how he's existing or whatever, but he's still living.

**Berger:** 'Cause he just seems to have disappeared from the music scene.

**Edison:** He did, he just went completely off the scene. I don't think he ever wanted to be contacted anymore because he never contacts nobody else. I think he had some kind of marital trouble. That's what sort of did him in. That can do you in anyway, marital trouble.

**Berger:** I guess he and Lucky Thompson are the mystery men.

**Edison:** That's right.

**Berger:** So, for the record, we'll state that contrary to what's been written you never played with Alphonso Trent's band but there were some members left from that band that you played with.

**Edison:** Right, trombone player named Snub Mosely and Chester Clark, trumpet player, alto player named Lee Hilliard and James Jeter, and Hayes Pillars and Charles Pillars.

**Berger:** Was Snub Mosely playing his slide saxophone even then?

**Edison:** Yeah, even then. I've never seen anybody play it since. He was playing the slide saxophone. In fact, he was amazing on that thing. He used to thrill me playing it and he was still playing at that time. I think he played it until he passed away. He was still playing the slide saxophone. In fact, most people didn't know what kind of instrument it was. Nobody knew. But he didn't play it like a saxophone, he played it like a trombone. He took his mouthpiece out of his trombone, and put it in the saxophone and he would...the slide would go up and down on the side. It was an instrument that I don't even know whether it's still in existence.

**Berger:** Doesn't seem to have caught on like wildfire.

**Edison:** No, it didn't. It was a sort of novelty instrument. But it was fantastic the way he played it. And he was a good trombone player too. Great trombone player, in fact that was a good little band we had.

**Berger:** So that was the beginning of your association with the Jeter-Pillars.

**Edison:** Yes.

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**Berger:** You mentioned Roy coming through and you heard him. Were you still a Louis man at the time?

**Edison:** Yes, always have been and always was. Still am.

**Berger:** And how did Roy's playing strike you in contrasting it with Louis?

**Edison:** Oh, he was exciting, there's no doubt about it. He never did get tired. I played 'til 4:00 in the morning on my gig and there was after hour places there where you could go play, and he would play until 10, 11, 12, 1:00 in the daytime. Then we'd go over and hear Art Tatum play. Art Tatum was playing at a place called Val's in the Alley in Cleveland after he left Toledo. And we'd all go over there and listen to him if you could get in the place cause the place he played was about as big as this apartment here. And they sold whiskey by the half pint. Oh, you couldn't get in the place it was packed. Oh Art Tatum, he's another Ohio artist, from Toledo, OH.

**Berger:** Did you get to jam with him much there or play with him?

**Edison:** I don't know too many people jam with Art because he plays so much, all you could do is listen. You couldn't add; he just played so much there was nothing you could do. But, he finished the School for the Blind at Columbus, OH, it was right across the street from where I lived, I was small. But I only met him in Cleveland, never met him in Toledo. But when he went to Cleveland, every place he went he set the place on fire anyway. Nobody like Art Tatum. Nobody like Louis Armstrong. Those are people that will never be duplicated.

**Berger:** And then you mention that you played in the Jeter-Pillars band, eventually got Jo Jones and Walter Page in it, right? Before that, they had Sid Catlett and Jimmy Blanton?

**Edison:** No, after Jo Jones they had Jimmy Blanton and Sid Catlett.

**Berger:** What was Jimmy Blanton like at that very early stage, did you hear something special in his playing even at that time?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, he was great. I think he was very young when he passed away, he was only 24 when he passed away, so he had to be a youngster when he joined the Jeter-Pillars band because he joined Duke when he was 21 or 22. He only played with Duke a couple of years before he died.

**Berger:** Was he soloing like he eventually did with Duke?

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**Edison:** Oh yeah, he was soloing then, he was soloing while the band was playing. But he soloed in a way that he still was swinging. And he was just with Jeter-Pillars for a short time. Then Ellington came through there and snatched him away. At that time the big band used to come through St. Louis all the time, they were taking everybody. Later on, they got Harold Baker, Shorty Baker. He went with Don Redman first, then he went with Ellington. That's the way I got to New York, really. It was really funny how I got to New York because Lucky Millinder sent for Hal Baker and a tenor saxophone player from Cleveland named Harold Arnold. But Lucky didn't know that Harold Baker had already gone to Don Redman's band, so Harold, the tenor player, said, "I got two tickets to New York, man, why don't you come on and go to New York, man?" I said, "He sent for Harold Baker, it's not right to do that, to take somebody else's assumed name." So, Harold Arnold, he was a funny guy, he drank a lot of juice, so he said, "Well, Lucky Millinder won't know the difference, we all look alike." So, he said, "This is your chance to get to New York, man, come on and take this ticket." So I took the ticket, I got a bag packed and told Jeter-Pillars I was leaving, going to New York. So, I took the ticket and took a train and went to New York. Lucky was amazed to see me because he had sent for Harold Baker.

**Berger:** But you didn't try and go under the name of Harold Baker.

**Edison:** No, that's right. But in the beginning he was mad because he could have got a refund on the ticket but I used the ticket to go to New York.

**Berger:** So, did he give you an audition?

**Edison:** No, I just went ahead and joined the band. But he got even later because he fired me.

**Berger:** Was that your first trip to New York?

**Edison:** First trip. Never been in New York in my life.

**Berger:** Do you remember your impressions as a youngster for the first time?

**Edison:** Oh Ed, that was the most exciting city I had ever been in my life. It was absolutely... when I got off the train, it just seemed like you were in a different world. And I got a room up on 130<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. At that time, there was nothing downtown, everything was in Harlem, all the clubs and everything was in Harlem. There was a club called the Birdcage on 132<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, that's where Art Tatum played every night. And I couldn't get no rest, I couldn't go to sleep. I lost so much rest, I just fell out on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue one night, they had to take me to Harlem Hospital.

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**Berger:** You mean, because you were just going around trying to take everything in?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, you could stay up all night and all day.

**Berger:** Do you remember some of the other groups you heard, bands you heard right on that first couple of days when you arrived?

**Edison:** Art Tatum...I walked up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and there was Ellington walking up the street and the next thing you know Claude Hopkins is walking up the street. Louis Armstrong, I'd see him on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They'd all walk up and down 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Oh man, I said, gee, can you top this? I'm standing there just looking at them because most of the times I had seen them was on the stage and I'm out in the audience and here I am just about ready to shake his hand. Oh my goodness. After you get through work, you go up to Monroe's Uptown House and play. Or Dicky Wells, not the trombone player, this was another Dicky Wells, he was a dancer that had a night club. And 138<sup>th</sup> street there was a place called the Yeah Man club where Billie Holiday was singing. Tomorrow's Paradise, the Savoy, there was a place right next to the Savoy where Louis Jordan used to play at the Rendezvous. Oh, the Red Hut, the Red Indian, the Red Onion, they were on Lennox Avenue, there was just joints all over. How are you going to sleep? And there's somebody playing at one of those places every night. Roy Eldridge, he would go to all the joints and play every night. Red Allen...

**Berger:** Were you sitting in much or just listening?

**Edison:** No, I was scared. What was I going to sit in for, I'd probably have got blown away and want to go back to Columbus, OH. Had another trumpet player named Rex Stewart, he was fantastic, Taft Jordan, Bobby played with Chick Webb, Bobby Starks, great trumpet player. There were so many great trumpet players around New York at that time. There was one big guy used to play trumpet, there was just so many, Louis Metcalf. It was just amazing the musicians you could run into there in New York, with no job. They would just go and jam every night. But there were so many big bands, you weren't out of work too long, because there was always a band going out on tour. Tiny Bradshaw, one of the unsung heroes of the music business, he was a wonderful musician, good director. Claude Hopkins, Benny Carter, his band.

**Berger:** How did you fit in as a youngster, this was your first real name band, how did you fit in with Lucky's band?

**Edison:** Naturally, they had a boy in there from St. Louis, Tab Smith, I knew him. And I knew Harold Arnold who enticed me to go to New York on this fake ticket under somebody else's

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name. But I was still scared of Lucky, the way he would talk. He didn't know anything about music, one note from the other, but he was a great director. He would hear something arranged one time, he would know where he wanted the dynamics put. As you followed him, it was a beautiful show.

**Berger:** Did you find that your reading skills were up to the job at that point?

**Edison:** After going with Jeter-Pillars band, they had music. We played in St. Louis at this Plantation Club, they had big shows. They had chorus girls and they would have different acts, coming in, big acts come that, we had music. They used to take a lot of time to show guys, to show me how to read this and read that.

**Berger:** So by the time you got with Millinder, you were pretty knowledgeable...

**Edison:** It was pretty cool, yeah.

**Berger:** What parts were you playing mostly?

**Edison:** I did a lot of first playing in those bands and a lot of solos. But I always wanted to play a solo, never did want to play first, even in the Basie band.

**Berger:** How about with Lucky Millinder?

**Edison:** Well we had a good first trumpet player in there called Carl Warrick, we called him 'Bama. He was a great first trumpet player. And they had Andy Gibson who was a good arranger, he played in the band. And Charlie Shavers....fantastic trumpet player, fantastic. And every time I'd hear a trumpet player, he'd be better than the other. Gee whiz, I was so excited, I don't know, it was a thrill. You'd go hear Art Tatum up on 132<sup>nd</sup> street, go across the street to Connie's Inn to hear Don Redman, go to the Savoy to hear Chick Webb, the Savoy Sultans. Go to Rendezvous and hear Louis Jordan. And then after 4:00, you go to the Red Onion, all the guys would be there, Billie Holiday. How in the hell were you going to sleep, man? You couldn't go to sleep with all that going on. So I just fell out, and went to Harlem Hospital. I had a woman doctor, she says, "Nothing wrong with you, son, you just need to go to bed. You just need to go to bed and get some rest, there's nothing wrong with you." So I had to get some rest then, but after I got enough rest, I was right back out there again. Gee whiz, what an exciting city that was.

**Berger:** Did you get any solo space with the Millinder band?

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**Edison:** Not too much. Charlie Shavers took most of the solos and I don't think Lucky liked my playing anyway. That's why I got fired. Charlie and Carl, they had played with Dizzy at Bordentown, right outside of Philadelphia. So they had played in a band together. So I think there was a conspiracy to get me out of the band anyway, because they wanted Dizzy in the band. So they fired me, Lucky did. And I just went right on and joined Count Basie, Lucky did me a favor.

**Berger:** Was there a period where you were in doubt as to whether you would stay in New York?

**Edison:** I was off for a while. I started to go back two or three times, but I was having so much fun, I forgot about being broke.

**Berger:** You were with Lucky Millinder in 1937 for about six months. Then, how long were you out of work before Basie...

**Edison:** I would say about three or four months.

**Berger:** So the end of '37 you were going into Basie...

**Edison:** End of '38

**Berger:** And that happened because of your association with Jo Jones and Walter Page...didn't Lucky try and get you back?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, he asked me back in the band two or three times.

**Berger:** Was that before you were with Basie or after?

**Edison:** After I had joined Basie. He wanted me to come back in the band and after I had made a few solos on the records with Basie, like, "Sent For You Yesterday," that's the first record I made with Basie, "Every Tub"...

**Berger:** You arranged those...

**Edison:** Yeah, "Every Tub" and "Sent For You Yesterday", those were my arrangements.

**Berger:** And how did you learn how to arrange, I mean you wrote out the parts?

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**Edison:** I just wrote out the melody and I would hum what I would want everybody else to play, you know “Boop boo.”

**Berger:** Each section.

**Edison:** Yeah.

**Berger:** Did anyone write it down?

**Edison:** No. When I first joined the band, they didn’t have no music. We used to take turns in carrying the whole repertoire which was in one little portfolio. Everybody would carry it but Prez. Prez wouldn’t carry it. Then I sort of got depressed playing with Basie’s band, playing with Lester and Jo Jones and those guys, that was the epitome to me of musicians. They were amazing every night. Prez played something different every night, Buck would play something different. It was just amazing. God blessed me when I went with Basie band because that was the greatest experience I ever had in my life. Never had no experience like that in my life, never will. Because all those guys are gone, like Lester. So I told him one night, I said, “Basie, I’m not advancing myself at all in the band because I thought you were going to have a lot of music for me to learn how to read.” And he said, “Well, you sound good.” I said, “But, I certainly would like to learn how to read real good.” I said, “The arrangements that we play every night, the guys have played them before with the old Benny Moten band.” So they knew just what notes to get and here I am scuffling trying to find the note. Wasn’t but three trumpets, Buck, Ed Lewis and myself. I said, gee whiz, he’s got some music I can’t even find the notes to sometimes. He said, “Well, if you find a note tonight that sounds good, play the same damn note every night.” So, I couldn’t top that. So that’s the way it went for years.

**Berger:** How long were you with the band before you started to feel this need for something...

**Edison:** Learning how to read? I guess about seven or eight months. Because it’s quite difficult when they’re playing...when Basie would start the band off every night. It was difficult learning how to come in because he never gave a downbeat. He would just noodle around on the piano, noodle around and noodle around, and first thing you know, everybody would come in. And here I’d be sitting with my horn on my lap waiting to come in. So, that and everybody would have their notes and they had those notes way before I joined the band because they all played with the Benny Moten band and here I am, trying to scuffle, trying to find me a note and even out the window, swinging the blues, no music...you know...

**Berger:** Do you remember what your first night was like, getting up there with Basie?

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**Edison:** I was so excited I didn't even give a damn. I was so excited.

**Berger:** You remember where it was?

**Edison:** We had a little rehearsal at the Woodside and he just told me to come on, find you a note, whatever they played.

**Berger:** The first night, did anyone hand you a book of any kind?

**Edison:** No.

**Berger:** So how the hell did you play anything?

**Edison:** Well, that's when I got kind of disgusted. And the next night, they would play some things that they didn't play the first night.

**Berger:** Do you remember where this was?

**Edison:** The first date I played with Basie was, that's an interesting question....it was a one-nighter someplace, I can't remember where it was. I've got to find that out because that's an interesting question.

**Berger:** We'll look at that when I bring that book tomorrow, we'll check that and see if anything rings a bell from that period.

**Edison:** Is it a list from 1938?

**Berger:** Everything.

**Edison:** Oh yeah, I could remember that.

**Berger:** Alright, well we'll take a look at that tomorrow.

**Edison:** Quite an interesting question, because I know it was unforgettable.

**Berger:** What about your audition?

**Edison:** No.

**Berger:** No audition?

**Edison:** Just had a rehearsal.

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**Berger:** Just a rehearsal at the Woodside...well what kind of rehearsal, if they had no music, what was the rehearsal like?

**Edison:** Basie would play something on the piano and he said this is the melody. Now, the trumpet section would go upstairs in the Woodside and get some riffs together to this and the saxophone players would go up in Prez' room and they would get a melody to what he's playing. And the rhythm section--we got ours-- and so, like "Every Tub," like "Jumpin' at the Woodside," those were all head arrangements, we just went upstairs and took the derbies [*hats used for trumpet mutes*] (sings) dump e dum, doop e doo....that would be the first chorus and then on, Prez would take three or four choruses. That was one feature about Basie's band that no other band had because we didn't have any music so consequently his band was based on solos. Prez, you could play as many solos as you wanted because we had no specific time to come in on an arrangement, like the Ellington band, the Lunceford band, they had so much music. So, like Joe Thomas or one of the soloists would play eight bars, then they'd have to sit down and play the music. Nobody would stand up to play no eight bars. You say if I'm going to play eight bars, I don't want it, Basie you got it, you take the eight bars. Then we'd set riffs behind Prez.

**Berger:** How did you even remember the riffs that you would rehearse, there must have been a lot of them coming at different places. Did anyone, when the sections were rehearsing separately, did anyone write anything down?

**Edison:** No, nothing.

**Berger:** And who decided at what point that riff would start during a performance?

**Edison:** Usually, after Prez would take two or three choruses, then we'd set a riff behind him. Sometimes we'd just start it on the bandstand and just pass it along. That's how "One O'Clock Jump" was originated. Jack Washington is the one that set the riff, (sings) boop e doo, bee doo dee doo dee doodle doo, and there was beee dah da da, (etc. singing) he was the first one to set that kind of riff, period. And then the trombone would say "boooooo, beee doodle (etc.)" Nobody could write that, nobody could even think about writing that. It was just amazing how guys could think up something like that that last today. If you don't play that on "One O'Clock Jump" now it still isn't "One O'Clock Jump." (sings the riff). I think the only time it was written down, Buster Smith wrote it down. Alto player that first came to New York with Basie.

**Berger:** That same phrase was on a record earlier, a McKinney's Cotton Pickers.

**Edison:** Oh, it was? Never heard that.

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**Berger:** That particular riff. I don't know Don Redman incorporated it there or what.

**Edison:** Oh really?

**Berger:** Yeah, it was funny because it materialized later on.

**Edison:** First time I ever heard it was with the Basie band (sings riff again). Might have been, but the first time I heard it was with the Count Basie band (sings "bee doh l'doh").

**Berger:** Yeah, that part was not on there. So, you'd string all these things together. How about solo space, I mean you were the newcomer, did you have any trouble getting solo spots?

**Edison:** I just got up and took me a solo. I just gorilla'd me a solo. They had no music so what the hell, I'd just go take me a solo. And if he was playing, Basie would never object to you taking as long as you would be playing something because I remember a couple of trombone players came in the band and Prez had like a school bell right beside him while he was playing and trombone player didn't sound too good and Prez picked the bell up and rang the bell and he was gone the next day.

**Berger:** That was like giving him the hook.

**Edison:** Oh yeah, that was the hook.

**Berger:** So, he never rang it while you soloed.

**Edison:** No, (laughs) never did. In fact, I played two, three solos and played on mute one night and that's where the name Sweets came from. He nicknamed me Sweets. He called me Sweetie Pie, then cut the Pie off and from then on, it was the name Sweets. And Basie was such a funny guy—I'm speaking of him because that's the only band that I ever knew, was the Count Basie band. They had a trumpet player from Buffalo that joined the band, named Frank Beard or something like that. Every piece he would jump up and take a solo, just jump up and take a solo. And one piece there, it was Basie's solo, and he jumped up and took a solo on Basie's solo. And Basie said, "That's the first mistake you made, playing on my solo." So, he was there one night, that's all there was, he was fired after that.

**Berger:** Who in the band was helpful to you when you first joined, did anyone try and show you the ropes since you had no written arrangements, did anyone try and cue you in as to...

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**Edison:** Well, there was not much you could cue, because there was no music. If there was music you could say, Basie's going to play this eight bars and then you come in here on this second ending and then lay out and then you come in another part of the arrangement or something. That's very easy to tell somebody to do. But when you sittin' up there waiting to come in and don't know when to come in because there's no music, you just wait 'til the band starts and you find your note. But that was fun.

**Berger:** So, who were you tightest with in that band?

**Edison:** Well, Prez and I was roommates when I first joined the band. He was a funny guy, funny roommate. It was my first trip down South, he had already been through there so he knew where to go. And he got a room one day after we got out of the bus before I could get my stuff out of the bus, he was coming back from the room. He told everybody, "Don't go in there, because the woman going to take 50 cents instead of charging 35, she's going to charge 50 cents." So that was one of the pleasures of joining Basie's band, everybody...the room was 50 cents, and when the room was 35 cents and the lady went up 15 cents, nobody stayed with her. So I think I was tight with Buck...oh, everybody was such good friends in that band, we were all like brothers in that band. You didn't have no special one to hang out with, everybody...if you wanted to hang out, you just go hang out with whoever you wanted to. There was no plan in there or nothing like they have in a lot of bands, they have a clique you know, because we didn't have no time to have no clique. When you get through playing and ride 500 miles, you sleep. Too tired to have any clique. And we had a bus so small, we had to change outside on the inside and on the outside, because of the leg room. You sit on the inside, your legs would cramp and you'd punch the guy next to you and say, "OK, it's my time now to stretch."

**Berger:** You'd take turns using the aisle?

**Edison:** The aisle, yes.

**Berger:** Who travelled with the band other than the band members?

**Edison:** We had a manager named Maceo Birch, he travelled with the band, and Billie Holiday travelled with the band for a while when she first joined the band. Then, Jimmy Rushing he travelled with the band.

**Berger:** Did you have any band boys to help out?

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**Edison:** Yeah, we had a band boy named Wilson. He left Kansas City, later on to see Charlie Barnett's band, stayed with him 'til he died. And Wilson...he was the valet. He did all the packing of the instruments, drums, bass, everything by himself. And, a singer we had, Helen Humes after that.

**Berger:** How was it having women vocalists on the bus?

**Edison:** They didn't like no women in the bus. They didn't like no woman singer period. There was a time when bands didn't have no singer. If you did, they'd sit up there on the bandstand, never sing, probably sing one tune a night. Because bands wanted to play and while the singer was up there doing their thing, that's taking time from you doing a solo. So, singers weren't too popular. They were popular but they didn't get to sing too much with the big band. Billie Holiday, she was just like one of the boys. A fantastic woman to travel with because she never complained. Most of the women that travelled with the band, we did a lot of gambling on the bus, shooting dice, playing poker, whatever. We'd do that all night long and Helen Humes, they'd be right in the middle of it doing the same thing, shooting dice, playing 21 whatever. We had a lot of fun on the bus. You had to keep yourself from going crazy, you know. You'd look at your list, one night in Nashville, next night in Atlanta, next night in Texas, that's about 1000 miles you'd cover there in a couple days. So, we did other things like gambling, we never had no rehearsals, not on the one-nighters, not on the trips like that. It was a pleasure trip, all pleasure trip because we had so much fun together. We looked forward to getting out of the bus and playing. It was just great, just absolutely great.

**Berger:** Did you ever feel after one of these trips and you'd stagger into a town, did you ever have to drag yourself onto the bandstand to do a show?

**Edison:** No, couldn't wait, couldn't wait to get onto the bandstand. Because Prez had as many favorites as Basie, his audience was just as big as Basie's audience. Jo Jones, his audience was just as big as Basie's, Buck had quite a following, Herschel Evans had quite a following. And Earl Warren had a pretty good following because he made a couple of good records singing. But put them all together, they drove (a) big crowd.

**Berger:** So you were treated as celebrities by the people coming to hear the band?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, they give you a lot of respect. And it was a different...people had a different view of a musician then. Because nobody used no dope, drank a lot of alcohol but who didn't.

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Everybody knows they was drinking a lot of whiskey but you weren't leaving needles around in peoples' houses. If we left anything, it would be a whiskey bottle.

**Berger:** When you travelled, was it always by bus?

**Edison:** Always by bus.

**Berger:** Never by train?

**Edison:** When the war started, that's when we started travelling by train, because gasoline...

**Berger:** Do you remember when you first took a plane trip with the band?

**Edison:** Oh, I never took a plane trip with Basie.

**Berger:** Oh, never?

**Edison:** We all rode the bus all the time. All the time while I was with the band. The bus got better, we started getting Greyhounds. Because there was a bus company in Jersey called Lerf, Charlie Lerf, he had a lot of them old busses, they'd break down before you got out of New York, most of them. I remember one time I took a plane with the Basie band and the whole band didn't take the plane. It was Shadow Wilson, myself and somebody else took a plane from Cincinnati to New York, because the band was going to the Roxie and taking a bus from Cincinnati to New York is a long way, so I'd never been on a plane before. So I got on a plane and went to New York. But most of the guys in the band, they rode on the bus. But after that, shoot, I got hooked on the airplane. I'm still not an enthusiast but it's the quickest way to get someplace. But the bus, I will say, now is most convenient when they have those big Greyhound busses, they have a lot of room, they have the bathrooms on the bus and some of them have sleepers on there, two or three bunks where if some of the guys get sleepy, they take a nap, doze off. But when I started with Basie in '38, the bus was so small, it was just about as big as a nine-passenger station wagon, it was the smallest thing you'd ever seen in your life.

**Edison:** And you had everything in there....

**Edison:** Yeah, bags were on top.

**Berger:** Jimmy Rushing

**Edison:** Yeah, there were two bags there.

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**Berger:** Were there particular people who were practical jokers, entertainers on the bus?

**Edison:** Yeah, I was one of them. Anything happened on the bus they said Sweets did it.

**Berger:** Do you remember any of your particular triumphs as a practical joker?

**Edison:** Oh, some of them I couldn't tell, most of them. Prez, Lester, he used to love to shoot dice, he was just absolutely...he couldn't rest. He'd get on the bus and everybody would be sort of relaxed and dozing. He'd get the dice and shake them in everybody's ear and say, "Sweet music, sweet music, sweet music," and everybody would say, "Well, what the hell. He ain't gonna win, no way, might as well take his money." And in about 10 minutes, he'd be asleep.

**Berger:** He never won...

**Edison:** Never won. He'd start the game and be the first one asleep. But I guess that was his form of relaxation, to go to sleep being broke. Cause he never did win, but "sweet music"...

**Berger:** Was there ever a seating order?

**Edison:** Yeah, he sat in the back all the time. That was his boudoir, his bedroom.

**Berger:** And Basie?

**Edison:** He sat in the front.

**Berger:** Did Basie always travel with the band?

**Edison:** Always.

**Berger:** What did he do to pass the time?

**Edison:** Gamble with us. He'd be the first one in the game. He'd gamble with us until we get to the next stop and then I remember when we first took a train to California. We had, during the war, we had one-nighters, we'd have the train side-tracked, the Pullman and then we'd get off the Pullman and take a taxi and go to the dance hall and go back to the Pullman and the next day they'd just hook it on to the train. That was absolutely a thrill to do that. We were on our way to California to play in the Palladium, was it the Palladium? No, the Palomar where the Palladium is now. And we were playing at Omaha, Nebraska and we got on the train coming to California and somebody told us they had burned the Palomar Ballroom down because they didn't want any black bands in there. So, they burned it down and they, the office out here, got busy and arranged

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us to go into the Paramount Theatre for three weeks which was downtown. And we stayed in there for a couple of weeks, then the World's Fair was in San Francisco in a place called Treasure Island, a manmade island there. And we went there and stayed for two weeks on Treasure Island. And we played a couple dances around Oakland and San Francisco. And we came back to L.A. and played a couple of ...they had some dance halls around here, in fact Tommy Dorsey owned one out here in Santa Monica. We played that ballroom, we stayed around here for about two months.

**Berger:** Was that your first trip out West?

**Edison:** Yes, first trip.

**Berger:** Did you have any notion at that time of ever settling here?

**Edison:** No, I couldn't stand it

**Berger:** Really, what didn't you like about it?

**Edison:** No way in the world after living in New York after all these years that you could like California. There wasn't nothing out here compared to New York. New York was busy all the time. There was really a place when you wake up it's busy and when you go to bed, it's busy in New York. Out here, it wasn't as, well, New York's a mecca of show business. No way in the world you could compare California with New York. I never thought I'd settle here in California but I started playing out here with...I came here and got this job, I was playing in Vegas, I had a band there at the time, at the Thunderbird, and the contractor for the Hollywood Palace show came in and asked me would I like to be on the staff, Mitchell Ayres directing it on ABC. And I said, yes I would, so he gave me a starting time and at the time that he gave me, Basie needed a trumpet player. I got sick leave from ABC and I think I stayed with...he said, "I want you to stay for about two or three weeks and come on back." Two weeks passed, three weeks passed, a month passed, two months passed. After a while the contractor said, "You're going to have to start." So, I left Basie up in San Francisco. He almost cried and I did too because I didn't want to leave.

**Berger:** What year was this?

**Edison:** I guess it was about '65, because my daughter was born in 1965. It was about 1962, '63, something like that. I had a band...'55, '56, '57, '58, I had Elvin Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Jimmy Forest, and Tommy Potter. I had that band for about four or five years.

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**Berger:** Were you based in New York with that band?

**Edison:** Yes.

**Berger:** You travelled a lot with them?

**Edison:** Yes, in fact when Joe Williams left the Count Basie band, Basie's office was my manager and they were managing Joe Williams too, so they put us together on his first tour without the Basie band. And we stayed together for about three years. And about four years we travelled together.

**Berger:** Before we get into that period where you became a leader and left Basie, the first time you left Basie after your long stay, I wanted to return to life on the road for a second and ask, logistically, how did you deal with the whole problem of segregation, of where you ate...you already talked about how you stayed in private homes, but how did you stop on the road with the bus and find a toilet, find a restaurant?

**Edison:** If you found a toilet, they wouldn't let you use toilets, you just had to go in the field. And restaurants, we had to eat out of the grocery store. Sometimes they'd let you go in the back and get something. Sometimes, a few times, if you wanted milk, you couldn't take the milk out in a bottle, they'd give it to you in a can. And there was no such thing as going to a restaurant. That was absolutely out, going to a restaurant. Until you go into a big southern city like Atlanta as I said before, or Memphis, Birmingham, someplace like that, they had black hotels and wonderful restaurants for you to eat in. But when you would take little towns, like you play in Yazoo, Mississippi, Hilton Head, North Carolina which is one of the garden spots now for people to go to. They didn't allow blacks in the city. Louisiana, even in New Orleans, they had black restaurants and a black hotel for you to stay in, but when you would do those one-nighters in these little towns, getting there, that was the problem. I will never remember all those little towns, getting to those gigs, because there were so many little towns and a lot of times you'd have to get the bus driver to get you a cold sandwich, a cold something like that.

**Berger:** So you had a white bus driver?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, had a white bus driver.

**Berger:** Were you ever hassled much by the police?

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**Edison:** Oh yeah, one time the police led us out of town, and told us not to come back. We were late playing on a job in Bunkie, Louisiana. And because the bus broke down, we had no choice but to get there late. So, Jimmy Rushing, well he used to sit in front of the bandstand and he used to wear white socks all the time. And some guy out there in the audience made him take his white socks off. And after the time we were supposed to quit they made us play later. So you had no choice because they had pistols and guns, would make you play. It was difficult, scared....

End of CD #2

**Berger:** We left off, Sweets, telling some tales of the road with Count Basie and some of the troubles you got in with police harassment.

**Edison:** Well, not only police, civilian harassment, all kind of harassments. You know, it's a funny thing, I can't understand it. White people didn't want to be bothered with us but they'd come to the dance and stand behind the rope and listen to us play. They'd come to the black dances. They would have to sit upstairs around in the balcony. They would have a rope around the dance hall where the blacks would be dancing and the whites would be looking. And it would be packed, absolutely packed, Ed, those old tobacco warehouses, down in South Carolina, Durham, North Carolina. Those places would be absolutely just packed. And when you get done playing a dance in there, you'd be coughing for a week because they have the tobacco all hanging up, I guess they would call it curing the tobacco. But anyway, all around the balcony would be packed. And they would be able to come to the black dance but when we'd play a white dance, the blacks couldn't come. So they, as usual, had the best of two worlds, they enjoyed your dance and they enjoyed theirs too. But gee whiz, it's hard to understand why they would want to listen to your music and when you get out on the street, they want to hang you. Freddie Green and I, we were walking someplace in Mississippi and they made us get off the sidewalk and walk in the streets. So many incidents that have happened down South, it's unbelievable. Some people wouldn't even believe that a human being could be treated like that. When you live through that and come through that without a scar, you live forever.

**Berger:** How did you manage to come through this without a degree of bitterness?

**Edison:** I love music and if you feel better, it comes out in your playing. If you're happy, you can tell it in your playing. You can tell how a person's personality is through his horn. If he's bitter, he either retires or quits. It comes through some kind of way. Like Lucky Thompson, what a wonderful saxophone player, he's one of the great ones, and his bitterness just led him astray. He doesn't even play anymore. Last time I heard of Lucky, he was on a corner begging in

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Seattle. So, he was bitter, I don't know what for, what his problem was, but I would never let myself go to that point where I would want to quit playing. I wouldn't care what, God gave me this talent and he's the only one who can take it away from me.

**Berger:** Were there any guys in the Basie band who particularly were hit harder than others with these horrible experiences?

**Edison:** Some of them...when you were born in the South, you know what to expect. Born in the North, naturally you'll go down there and do something stupid not even knowing that you're wrong, 'cause who's who to say who's right and who's wrong. Who are they to say you can't go in this place, you can't do this, you got two bathrooms to go to, if you go to the white bathroom you get clubbed by the police. That's so stupid. But there were a few musicians...Lucky Millinder got beat up down there one time. Policeman just really...he got a terrible whipping. And you can't help him because there are too many around watching and if you jump in then all these guys, then you can't win, there's a no-win situation. So, the next thing you know, they'll just do you in, 'cause it has been done. But we survived and most of us that are living today are living to tell the experiences that they've had down through there and it has been some horrible incidents. They had a bandleader in my hometown, Columbus, OH, wonderful trumpet player named Pete Prince, he had a good band, Sy Oliver used to play in his band. And they went South and while he was playing the trumpet up in front of the band some white fellow came and hit the bell of his trumpet with his fist. The mouthpiece and everything just went into his mouth. He never was able to play anymore, it just knocked his teeth out. This trombone player I was trying to remember a while back, his name was Archie Hall, and he was.

**Berger:** Was with Jim Europe.

**Edison:** Yeah, Archie Hall. You can read about him in the Black Almanac. I have one. I bought it for my daughter when she was going to school. I don't think she even looked at the first page. There's Archie Hall, he was one of the fine trombone players of that time. He could do anything with a trombone and as I was reading about it in Europe, they went over there to play, they just absolutely amazed the people in Europe. The Jim Europe band, the 369<sup>th</sup>, they had such an organization, people were amazed at how they could play like that. And this trumpet player that got messed up down South, Pete Prince, he was with Jim Europe's band. But there were so many incidents. I'll tell you, after that first trip down South, if you go back again in those days, you would really want to love to play your horn. I know a lot of guys after that first trip would never go back. They couldn't stand it. Because to subdue your passion like that where you're less than a man, some guys wouldn't stand it.

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**Berger:** And especially as you said, the guys who were not used to it, you were from Kentucky and you knew what was happening, but it must have been like a foreign country to people from New York where things were fairly open.

**Edison:** It was a terrible ordeal. Your only outlet for a good feeling the whole day would be getting on the bandstand. That would be the epitome of, that would be the echelon of the whole day is getting on the bandstand, because you couldn't wait to get up there because you've been refused, you been abused all day, you're hungry most of the day because you can't go in a white restaurant and there are no black restaurants to go into. Go in and get you a can of sardines through the back door and then you eat that and then you got to go on the bandstand to play. Naturally when you go up there, all that's forgotten, the only thing you want to do is play.

**Berger:** Were there any white jazz, real devoted jazz fans in the South? Now when you go around the world, people give you a stacks of albums to autograph and they ask you things about yourself that you don't even remember probably...were there devoted fans like that that would come up and know who you were individually and what solos you would...I mean in the early days with Basie, did you ever find that kind of people that were actually studying the music and following it very closely, or were these mostly dancers and they liked the sound of the band but they didn't particularly recognize you as individual artists.

**Edison:** A lot of musicians used to come around, especially from those colleges, a lot of guys down there that were studying music like Southern University, University of Texas, the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech... played in Florida and they had some white musicians down there that would come and sit on the bandstand because they were white, naturally they let them sit on the bandstand at a black dance. But, they were interested. And some of them would say, "Man, how can you stand it, how can you endure something like this?" Well, it's part of trying to make a name for yourself. In the music business, if you don't make a name for yourself, you got a lot of experience, you got a lot to say because you been through it. It was hard, but now I look back at it and say I enjoyed every minute of it except the abuse that I took. I didn't enjoy that but just to be able to say you have kept your cool, because it was a no-win situation if you'd get in some kind of confrontation with the white police. They would probably never find you and the band would get all misused and abused. Not only are you jeopardizing your own life, you're jeopardizing Count Basie's life, the rest of the guys in the band. It's hard to explain how you can endure that, but my ancestors they endured worse than that, being sold as slaves down in North Carolina. They endured humiliation, I don't know what it was that they didn't endure. If they could endure to get them where they were, I appreciated my mom enough to endure....say,

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“Well, Mom, I’ll take it from here.” Course, it wasn’t near as hard as when she came up, no way, no way, because that’s hard to exist all for ten cents an hour, take care of two people. So, she made it, so I made that trek down through the South many, many, many times, all of us did. I don’t think there was a black musician in those days didn’t go down South. It was the only place you could go to work. So, when you get in the bus in New York to go South, you primed yourself to be less than a man because you couldn’t express yourself no more than on the bandstand. If somebody stepped on your toe or kicked you or something like that. I remember I was using the telephone in Florida, a couple of white fellows wanted to use the phone, so they just broke in the door and as I was walking out, they kicked me right in the butt. So, what you gonna do? The band is standing right there in the bus. What you gonna do? Turn around, we all had pistols but if we had killed a couple of them down there then we never would get out of town.

**Berger:** You all carried pistols on the Southern tours or all the time?

**Edison:** On the Southern tours. Just for protection. But we were jeopardizing our own lives when we did that because there is a whole town, a whole police force against you down there.

**Berger:** You recall ever having to pull it?

**Edison:** No, never did.

**Berger:** It was a last resort.

**Edison:** Last resort, yes, we all had guns.

**Berger:** Let me ask you about some of the personalities in the band. You talked a little about Lester Young. Did he have his unique way of speaking, his own language?

**Edison:** Yeah, he had his own vocabulary. He had a lot of words, they had different meanings. He called Basie “Holy Man” because at that time Basie used to carry the money. Naturally, he named Billie Holiday, “Lady Day.” Named me “Sweets.” He named Buck “Green Eyes” because Buck had green eyes. There was “La dee dah,” he used to say that all the time, if you got broke and shot your last money and you didn’t have any to bet again, he would say, “La dee dah, that’s all for you, la dee dah.”

**Berger:** You said he had the bell and he could get people to gong...was he looked up to as a leader?

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**Edison:** No, he wasn't looked up to, he was just funny.

**Berger:** Who other than Basie would you say was like the straw boss type in that band?

**Edison:** I don't think...I finally worked up to be in the straw. I used to hang out with Basie all the time and he fired me and hired me back.

**Berger:** You were the straw when?

**Edison:** The 50's.

**Berger:** Oh, this was after your first period.

**Edison:** We came to California, around 1940, just before the war—I was the straw—'cause this was when Prez went to the army out here. And Jo Jones, they had taken him off the bandstand and put him in the army. He was up here in California somewhere. And I think he was the king of the AWOL [*absent without leave*], Jo Jones.

**Berger:** What was your function...

**Edison:** I would just start the band off if he was late getting on the bandstand. We were all sitting there ready to play. I would call something and start the band off. I remember one time we were playing at the place out here in Watts, I think it was called the Plantation, it was the only thing out there in Watts at the time. And Art Tatum was in town, he was playing at the Streets of Paris out there is Hollywood. And the place was packed that night, Ed, it was just jammed. And Basie was at the bar, oh, he was throwing his head back, drinking and having fun. So, we were all on the bandstand waiting for him to come and start off. So, Art Tatum was sitting right by the bandstand so I told Art, "Come on and play with us." So, I stomp the band off, we started playing "9:20 Special" and man, Art was fine on that piano. And Basie heard that piano and all of a sudden, you could see the people getting out of the way, they were getting out of the way and Basie walked up to the stand and grabbed Art by his collar, back then, snatched him off the bandstand and said, "Don't you never do that, your name ain't Count Basie. My name is out there in front," man and the names that Basie called him, he said, "Don't you never sit in my band no more." He gave me hell for bringing him up to play. Yeah, I was the straw there for a while, in fact I was the straw for a long time. But Basie took a liking to me when I first joined the band, I guess he was like a father to me. He introduced me to, of course he was from Red Bank, New Jersey and he had lived around New York a long time before he went out West. He introduced me to Duke, him and Duke were very good friends. He introduced me to Louis

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Armstrong. He introduced me to all the greats. Claude Hopkins, he introduced me to. He introduced me to Buck and Bubbles [*a vaudeville partnership between John W. Sublett (stage name John W. Bubbles), known as the “father of rhythm tap” and stride piano player Ford L. “Buck” Washington*]. He introduced me to James P. Johnson. He introduced me to everybody that you read about in the history of music, he introduced me to those people. And we used to hang out together. He would call me and say, “Well, we hanging out together.” I says, “Well, I got something to do, Base.” He says, “You ain’t gonna have more fun out there than you gonna have with me ‘cause I’m gonna spend all the money.” So I said, “Well, OK” just like that, “I’ll go.” But he took me to spots in New York that he had frequented when he lived around New York. And he introduced me to Sonny Greer. Him and Sonny Greer were cousins. And he introduced me to Alma Williams. So many great musicians that Basie knew before he left here and when he left and came back, they were still here.

**Berger:** Did you meet Fats Waller at all?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, he introduced me to Fats. That was his idol, Fats Waller. He told me how he got the job, he was stranded in Kansas City and Fats Waller was playing at a theatre there called the Eblon Theatre playing the organ and then Fats got this call to come to California to make a movie. And he asked Basie did he want the job. And Basie said, “I don’t know how to play the organ, I’ve never played an organ.” Fats took him to the theatre, showed him how to play the organ and Basie got the job. Fats and Basie were very good friends. And every time I would see those people they would all speak because they loved Basie.

**Berger:** They associate you with him.

**Edison:** Yeah. And Teddy Wilson, he introduced me to Teddy Wilson. Well, Basie had a popular band anyway and everybody loved him because he was just down-to-earth guy. He would be hanging out in New York, maybe he’d go to sleep in his car on 126<sup>th</sup> Street, we’d be playing at the Apollo and nobody would bother him, say, oh that’s Count, look after him. He’d shoot craps with the guys on 126<sup>th</sup> Street, everybody loved him.

**Berger:** What was his role as a leader, it sounds like he was one of the guys. Could he discipline the band if necessary?

**Edison:** Everybody respected him as a leader. We didn’t have to be disciplined. I never heard him discipline nobody. Because we had respect for him. He was Count Basie and it was a joy to play with him. Everybody felt the same way. Because he could stomp off the greatest tempos of

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anybody ever lived. Everything that he played was swinging. It could be a waltz but it would be swinging. He had the greatest feeling for tempos, oh he was fantastic. And a lot of times, a couple of times when he was the Famous Door, he would noodle around on the piano, just keep noodling around 'til he would get the right tempo and he would make this certain little passage and we know when to come in. But he was noodling and noodling and noodling and nobody came in. He made the little passage two or three times. So, he finally stopped and asked, "What the hell's wrong with everybody?" So, Herschel Evans says, "Well, when you get the tempo right, where it's gonna swing, then we'll come in." He said, "Well, OK," so he kept playing it and kept playing it 'til he got it right in that spot and we all hit it. He never reprimanded nobody.

**Berger:** What sort of musical control other than setting tempos did he exert? Would he take a very active role in saying "I think this section should be softer, I want to hear the trumpets more here, I want to hear a riff behind here" or did he let things evolve by themselves?

**Edison:** Mostly, he knew what he wanted to hear. He had to know what he wanted to hear because he was successful. He knew the tempos that an arrangement was supposed to go over, regardless of the arranger would bring in in there, we would rehearse it and get the notes down and Basie would say, "Now I got it from here on, you've made the arrangement, now get the hell out." So, he would play it the way he wanted to play it. If there was some notes in there that he didn't like, he would say, "Take them out." He was a master at playing a few notes and being very effective. He believed in putting the right notes at the right place at the right time. His timing was perfect. It was not how many notes that you made in your solo that made it popular, it was how many notes you'd leave out. The fewer notes you made, the better he liked it because that meant that you were thinking, you were putting your notes at the right place at the right time, you were swinging. I've heard him tell the arranger some of them, that he didn't want the arrangement because it was too modern. A lot of these deep chords he didn't understand. I guess you've heard how "Li'l Darling" became popular. It was Neal Hefti's tune and when he brought it to the band, Neal wanted it fast (sings). Basie rehearsed it and told Neal, "That's too fast, let's play it where I want it. This is my band, I want to play it where I want it." Oh, he would tell you that in a minute, and he would exert that kind of authority. Because it was his band. And he's paid you for the arrangement, he could take it and burn it up if he wants to, he's paid for it. So, (sings "Li'l Darling" at the slower tempo) and it was a hit. The way Neal Hefti wanted to play it was fast. So, he knew what he wanted, he knew what he wanted to hear. And he hand-picked most of the guys in the band. He knew exactly what they could do and how far to let them go in a solo. He was...I would say, to be a man that has never been...he couldn't arrange, he was no, what you would say, a hell of a musician like Ellington, Carter or Don Redman who wrote

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everything, they'd sit down and write a symphony if they wanted to. But in his way, he was just as smart, he was just as equipped to be a bandleader as Ellington and all the rest of them because he knew just what he wanted just like Duke knew what he wanted to hear in his band.

**Berger:** Were you conscious of an evolution in his piano playing? As you said, he started off as a disciple of Fats Waller and James P. Johnson, two-handed stride, and his early recordings show that. When did he start cutting things down to the minimum and getting that spare but very effective style with accents and perfect placement?

**Edison:** When the band started getting popular, especially the soloists—of course, Lester Young was always popular and Buck and the rhythm section—he quit playing a lot of piano and started just putting the right notes at the right time because a lot of his piano playing didn't fit a lot of the arrangements. And he would just play this one note on a chord instead of playing the whole chord but as I said before the note was in the right place at the right time. He invented this “plink, plink, plink, bam,” (sings traditional Basie ending) that's strictly Count Basie. He'd been doing that for years. And everybody in that band, they were so original. Everybody in the Basie band had their own style and their own sound. They didn't emulate nobody, they wanted to be emulated. They wanted to be originators. And they were, because nobody sounds like Lester Young, nobody. Nobody sounds like Buck Clayton, he had a sound. Nobody sounds like Basie. And of course, Jo Jones was one of the greatest innovators on drums. A lot of things that they say in the bop era, Jo Jones was doing way before they called it bop. Everybody wanted to be original. Dicky Wells, he had his own sound. Benny Morton, trombone player, they all had, everybody had their own sound. There was nobody that played like each other. When you'd get up to play a solo, you could distinct who it was.

**Berger:** Let's talk about your own solo style and how it evolved. When you first started soloing with Basie, were you trying to find a style of your own or did you feel that you already had something and you refined it or...

**Edison:** Well, Ed, I tell you, I never played anything I thought was great. I just did the best I could. How can you think that you've really played the greatest when you follow Lester Young or somebody? That's the way I always thought. If I'm going to follow Prez, I'm going to do the best I can, I'm getting paid so I got to play.

**Berger:** But it seems that your style when you first joined, even though he named you Sweets, it seemed that you were almost brash, at least on the recordings that survived...

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**Edison:** I know what you mean.

**Berger:** And then as time went on, you sort of did a Count Basie number on the trumpet and evolved that personal style that's based on absolute perfect placement of the note and not trying to dazzle everyone by playing thousands of runs, high notes and all that...

**Edison:** Well, I never could do that.

**Berger:** Telling a real story. It seems that when you first joined you weren't really doing that.

**Edison:** I don't really know what I was doing. I know the first record I made was "Every Tub" (sings). I made that.

**Berger:** I mean you come in with a lot of energy on that.

**Edison:** Yeah, you must realize I was only 22 then, you got a lot of energy then.

**Berger:** You got tired later.

**Edison:** You got that right. You make the notes count as you get older. Like Dizzy used to say, his chops ain't what they used to be, and he doesn't get ahold of that horn like he used to. I said, "Well, I told you a long time, Birks, you know, as you get older, you're going to have to slow down." And you know it does, you slow down. I never have wanted to play fast, dazzle as you say, with your ability to get over your horn, because guys wasn't doing it when I was coming up. Louis Armstrong, he wasn't dazzling anybody with how many notes he could make in a solo, he was dazzling everybody by his endurance and his ideas. His ideas were so far ahead of everybody else's and his sound was such a definite sound. And that dazzling and all the...on your trumpet, I think Dizzy made that popular. He was absolutely a phenomenon when it came to getting over his horn. He knew his horn perfect, like Charlie Parker. That's an art. Everybody's still trying to do it but they don't do it like Dizzy did. Then here comes Miles, he has the cool sound, you know, and Clifford Brown, great trumpet player. I liked him better than I did Miles. I was a Clifford Brown fan. And so many great trumpet players. Fats Navarro, Freddy Webster, Red Allen, Rex Stuart, there was just so many great guys you could learn from. But there was so many that you could learn from, you didn't know what to play if you didn't think for yourself.

**Berger:** You managed to arrive at this style which is something that is one of the players where you hear two notes and you know immediately, no matter what the setting, it could be on a

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Sinatra record, it could be on a sound track, it could be on a jazz recording and you know immediately it's you.

**Edison:** I've tried to be original and as I said before, everybody in my era, they were identifiable. Nobody sounds like Benny Carter, he's got a sound of his own. Nobody sounded like Chu Berry, nobody sounded like Art Tatum. Nobody sounded alike in that era, period. You can't name anybody that sounded alike in that era that I was coming up. So, I was just following a trend, I was just trying to be original myself, trying to play the only way I knew how and that was, like Basie used to say, "If you don't know the chords in what you're doing, just make a chromatic scale and you'll find a note there somewhere. When you get that note, just do a lot with that note." Like Hot Lips Page used to do, he could take a note and do more with it than the average trumpet player take a thousand notes, they all play all that thousand and Hot Lips Page would take one note and just thrill you with that one note.

**Berger:** Could you say that Basie's piano actually had some effect on your developing this trumpet style.

**Edison:** No, not necessarily. Because when I first joined the band he was playing. Basie was a good piano player. People nowadays think he couldn't play, this generation, Basie could play. He's got some records out, he could stride.

**Berger:** His later things, he would throw in a few bars....

**Edison:** Sometimes he would throw it in. Like I made a record date one time out here under my name and Norman got Basie to play the piano in my band, you know, so before the date, he asked me, he says, "I'm working with you today," I says, "Yeah", and he says, "How much you gonna pay me?" I says, "I'm gonna pay you the same thing you been paying me, scale." We had a big laugh. But I played something and man, he started striding...he really...I said, "Remember, my name's on the record, not Count Basie. I don't care how much you play on the record, you're not gonna get no more than your name mentioned in little letters. My name's gonna be outside on the album--Sweets."

**Berger:** That was for Pablo?

**Edison:** Yes, for Pablo. So, he could play but I think Basie just...when he started playing a few notes, we used to be hanging out sometimes and I'd say, "Base, you ain't playing as much as you used to play on the piano," and he said, "That's the reason why I got you, that's the reason why I got Prez, that's the reason why I got Jo Jones. So, you all doing the playing now. My name is out

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there, Count Basie.” So, that brought a big laugh. He would be telling you the truth, he’d be crackin’ but fackin’. He’d say, “That’s the reason why I got you guys to play, so I don’t have to break my neck no more and do this.” And right then, I asked him for a raise, I said, “Can I get a raise? Can you sweeten that nightly thing that you give me?” He didn’t give me but \$9. That’s the reason why everybody loved him. He was just a lovable man. We’d do anything for him because if we failed, if he could ride in a bus 500 miles and get out and do it, we could too. He didn’t catch no train, he stayed right in the bus with all of us all the time. A couple of trips, he bought him a new car and he would have the valet drive his car sometimes and sometimes on a short trip he would drive, otherwise he’d get in the bus right with us and sit right there and suffer with us. Imagine Count Basie going in a place and they make him go to the back. It was hard enough for us but here’s a man that’s the bandleader. You go back and get some sardines. Sometimes they’d open the can and put them in the sack for you. It was so humiliating, it was just taking all your dignity away from you. All your pride. But we endured it and we came out unscathed and I don’t have no malice toward nobody. I don’t hate nobody, because that’s a miserable life when you have hate somebody and I don’t see how they can do it. White people, they hate black people. I couldn’t live like that hating somebody. That would make every day miserable to me to live. Because there’s so many blacks, you can’t get rid of us, so what are you going to do? You might as well get along. And we’ve contributed a lot to the growth of this country, America, in wartime, inventions, and everything else. In fact, spirituals, blues and jazz are the oldest form of art we got here in America. The oldest form of art is the Indians. But they have just about given up trying to gain respect. So the oldest form of art that’s prominent now in America is all over Europe is blues, spirituals, and jazz.

**Berger:** It’s America’s most lasting export.

**Edison:** It sure is. And now, the spirituals are beginning to really be so popular in Europe. They have a guy named Willie Liezo over in Switzerland, all he books over there is gospel singers. The people over there love it, gospel churches, they love it. You couldn’t even sell them over here. Over there, he’s really doing it and it’s becoming so popular over there.

**Berger:** Not to mention Japan.

**Edison:** Japan, they’re jazz fans over there. Oh, they love...and there are great jazz fans in Europe. That’s the reason why a lot of black musicians went over there and stayed. Died over there, Ben Webster, Don Byas, Oscar Pettiford.

**Berger:** Bill Coleman.

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**Edison:** Bill Coleman, Stuff Smith, Kenny Drew, Kenny Clarke, Johnny Griffin is still living but he's still over there in Europe. You get some much, you're appreciated so much over there.

**Berger:** Were you ever tempted to settle there permanently?

**Edison:** No, I've never had the least idea of leaving America. I was always glad to get back home. But Ben Webster, he was just so depressed and so disgusted. He couldn't get arrested over here. And what a sound, what a player, what a man he was, what a talent he was. To be ignored over here and to go to Europe and be respected like he was...it's not right, you're not appreciated in your own home town, you have go someplace else 6000 miles away before they say, this is Ben Webster, he deserves this, he deserves that. Over here, he don't deserve nothing.

**Berger:** You probably couldn't make a living playing jazz in Los Angeles today.

**Edison:** No, I couldn't. I don't play here. I just come here. I could live anywhere, New York, wherever, it doesn't make any difference now. My daughter's grown and I'm not married. I have a girlfriend, we've been closely associated with each other for about 21 years but that's the only tie that I have so far. Wanting to go to New York I see her in Pennsylvania and this apartment, I don't know why I have it, it's just a place to come and sleep. I could stay in a hotel because when I'm here, I don't do anything, play some golf or get my checkup, try to stay healthy and thank God, he's blessed me with some pretty good health.

**Berger:** It sounds like from some of your relatives, you could be the next Eubie Blake, or beyond.

**Edison:** (laughs) I don't know but I'm a firm believer in God and I think when he has something for you to do on the earth you want to finish it before your time has come. Evidently, he has something in view for me to do. I'm doing my best to be a good trumpet player, be a good musician. Whatever I have contributed, what little I have contributed to this art form, it's gratifying to do this, to let people know who you are, that you have paid your dues, that you have the respect of your peers and I think I do because I never want to disengage myself from this business, the music business, because I love it. And thank God, he blessed me with this talent. And I'm grateful to you to even ask me to be your guest on this program that you are presenting. I never thought I would deserve but evidently, you and I are such good friends you say, "Well, let Sweets get on here too." (laughs)

**Berger:** Well, I don't think it's hardly that...it wasn't difficult to sell the idea since you're at the top of the list of people that they wanted to get their memories down and everything. Before we

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leave the Count Basie, there's just a few things I wanted to fill in, one of which is the rivalries that went on, first between Basie's and other bands and next, within the Basie band. Maybe we can start off within the Basie band. Was there any, I don't mean rivalries in a pejorative sense, but I mean were people challenging each other, like Lester and Herschel Evans for example and inspiring each other to greater heights within each section.

**Edison:** I can understand you asking that question because Basie's band was built around Herschel and Lester, and he always kept something going between the two. They loved each other. They respected each other. But Prez liked nobody's playing but his own. And Herschel was a Coleman Hawkins disciple. He loved Coleman Hawkins. Everything he did, the sound and everything he tried to get like Coleman Hawkins. When he used to play a solo, Lester wouldn't dig it at all. But he loved him personally and respected his ability to play. But when Prez would play, oh man, he loved his own playing. In fact, that's what made him original, that's what made him have a sound of his own. He liked his own playing. And if you don't like your own playing, then who in the hell's going to like it? So, he promoted himself.

**Berger:** So, their rivalry was purely musical, not personal.

**Edison:** No, it wasn't personal at all. But Basie had them following each other. Prez, he would take the first series of choruses on something and when he would get through, he would walk by Herschel and say, "You think you can follow that?" Kept something going. All bands during those days had a rivalry with each other. They used to have the Battle of Bands. They used to take tours all through the country battling each other and it was just like a prizefight. I remember we had a battle of music with Benny Goodman one time and he had Harry James, Gene Krupa and all of them. This was when he had one of his greatest bands. And, at the Madison Square Garden, they had us in the rain, back toward each other. And Benny got through playing and we played. And I'm telling you, the way the Basie band played that night, wasn't no way Benny Goodman could get back on. No way, because the band was absolutely, oh...you never heard anything like this band was playing it—Herschel, Lester, Jo Jones—we had four trumpets at that time, we had Al Killian, myself, Buck Clayton and Ed Lewis. After we finished playing, Benny Goodman told his band they can go and he finished the night playing with us.

**Berger:** What band came closest to giving you a run for your money, do you remember?

**Edison:** All the bands could swing, all of them. We had a lot of respect for Duke.

**Berger:** Was there ever a time where you went face to face, a battle with the Ellington band?

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**Edison:** I can't say that we did. We did with the Lionel Hampton band. He always wanted to choose Basie because he said his band was better than Basie's band, we could swing better and everything. So, we just had it out at the Savoy one night. And he never did do that anymore. But you were well entertained when you would go to the Savoy and you had Chick Webb, Teddy Hill, and they had a little group up there called the Savoy Sultans and they'd wear you out. There was only about eight of them but they sounded like 80. They'd wear you out. But they made you play. If you didn't get in there and make those Lindy Hoppers dance, you didn't have no job the next day. But that was during the Swing era, that's the reason why they called it the Swing Era, because everything had a beat and it was a beautiful era. All the bands, Artie Shaw's band, Lucky Millinder's band was swinging, Don Redman's band, Teddy Hill.

**Berger:** And you were playing virtually exclusively for dancing, correct?

**Edison:** That's all.

**Berger:** Do you remember the first time that you gave what might be called a concert where you sat in a concert hall and played for people who were just listening, attending a concert?

**Edison:** I wasn't in the band then. When I was in the band it was all dancers, it was a dance hall. That's when the era was good because a lot of the music that they play nowadays you can't dance by it.

**Berger:** A lot of it you can't listen to.

**Edison:** (laughs) Yeah. 'Cause then if you didn't make people dance you didn't have no job. There was no need for you to go out on the tour because every place that you played you played in a dance hall. But the small groups made your concert playing popular. Then the big bands, it got to the point where people couldn't pay them. You had 17 or 18 pieces, the bandleader couldn't afford the transportation, the bus bill, the government was taking so much of your money, they just couldn't afford to keep the band together. The only one that stayed together was Duke. And Duke was such a composer, he had so much money coming in off royalties he could afford to keep the big band...

**Berger:** Even if he lost money...

**Edison:** Yeah, he was fortunate. But that's when places like Birdland opened up. Of course, Kelly's Stable on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, they had live music in there. They had Nat King Cole trio, Coleman Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, they had everybody. And Ben Webster, Don Byas, they were

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all playing in there at one time. Then you'd go down the street to the Hickory House, there would be Billy Taylor and his trio, Buddy Rich would be playing with Joe Marsala, I think that was the band he played with.

End of CD #3

Then you go to the Famous Door, there would be the Count Basie band. Across the street there would be Ryan's, Jimmy Ryan's. There would be Wilbur de Paris, brothers, they would have a band over there. Next door would be the Three Deuces, John Kirby. Oh, it was so much music in New York in those days.

**Berger:** Can you talk a little bit about the function of the great Count Basie rhythm section with Walter Page, Jo Jones and Freddie Green, and what that meant to the band and how it brought different feeling, the different sort of swing that band had from any other?

**Edison:** The rhythm section is the backbone to any band. 'Cause, if the rhythm section ain't swinging, there's nothing you can do. The only thing for you to do is suffer, 'cause you're not going to reach a level of togetherness the whole night. If the drummer ain't swinging, the band ain't swinging. Freddie Green was really the backbone to the rhythm section. 'Cause Jo Jones used to do all the fooling around back there on the drums. Freddie Green, he would be keeping the tempo, him and Walter Page. So, whatever Jo Jones did didn't make any difference because all you had to do was listen to Freddie Green and the bass. Basie was a beautiful piano player for solos. He never got in your way. He never played so much that it would overshadow your solo. Because whoever's playing a solo, they are the ones that are in front and everybody else is accompanying. So, Jo Jones and Freddie Green, they used to be called the All American Rhythm Section anyway. They would form an alliance back there that, gee whiz, it was just absolutely...well, as you've heard the records, it's unexplainable how they could get together and do it. But they did do it. They kept the band poppin' all night. It was always on fire. So, Jo Jones and I would say, Freddie Green and Walter Page were the backbone of the rhythm section. And Jo Jones was the inventor of so many things that the drummers do now. Like they call it "droppin' the bomb," with the bass drum. Jo Jones was doing that many years ago. And with the brushes, that's a lost art almost, with brushes. Jo Jones was just an innovator.

**Berger:** What was he like personally?

**Edison:** Crazy.

**Berger:** I met him in much later years and he was crazy.

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**Edison:** When you met him he was crazy and when I first met him he was crazy. That was years ago. But, a wonderful guy. He knew what he wanted to hear and he knew what he wanted to play. You accept it if you want to. If you didn't, you didn't have to but he was going to play it anyway. He was a great drummer.

**Berger:** He used to mention a drummer named A. G. Godley.

**Edison:** That's right, he played with Alphonso Trent.

**Berger:** And you played with him.

**Edison:** I played with him.

**Berger:** He mentioned him as an innovator. What was he doing that was different at that time?

**Edison:** Yes he was. He was doing the same thing that the drummers are doing now. I didn't get to play with him too much. Not being a drummer, I don't know what he could be doing at that time. Whatever he did was unusual on the drums.

**Berger:** You noticed something different that he did.

**Edison:** Oh yeah, he had a style on the drums that he played. I guess, you could say that drummers have a style that they play. I don't know how to define drummers too much because the only thing I know is a lot of them swing and a lot of them don't.

**Berger:** You know when you hit a bad one.

**Edison:** You got that right, you know when you hit a bad one. But I would say, that was the greatest rhythm section that has ever been. In fact, Benny Goodman wanted to fire his whole rhythm section and hire the Basie rhythm section. It was around 1940 or something like that. He wanted Lester Young, he wanted Jo Jones, Walter Page, Freddie Green and Teddy Wilson was just going to play solos, Basie was going to be the band piano player. He tried to break the band up, Benny did. And he almost had Basie convinced at one time, but he was telling himself, man, if he wants it and it's that good, why not keep it for yourself? Sure...he used to say, "Well, instead of doing all these one-nighters and everything, I think I'll just go on over here with Benny because he's playing at the Pennsylvania Hotel for three months and going to the Congress in Chicago for three or four months..." I said, "Well, man, why don't you get Basie's band doing that?" But at that time, they didn't have no blacks going into them hotels.

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**Berger:** Did Goodman ever try to recruit you?

**Edison:** No, I think he tried to recruit Buck. I'm not sure. I know Buck wasn't going there, that's when he got Cootie Williams.

**Berger:** But you worked with Goodman occasionally over the years.

**Edison:** Oh yeah.

**Berger:** Well I guess I would be remiss in asking, do you have any Benny Goodman stories.

**Edison:** (laughs) No, I don't have any Benny Goodman stories. I played with him a couple of times...did a concert at Lincoln Center with him just before he passed away, and it was great. I had a nice concert with him.

**Berger:** I remember that, he was in good form that night.

**Edison:** Yeah, in fact, he didn't want to quit playing. He wanted to play more. But I had played the amount of time for the amount of money I was going to get, so I was through. My contract called for one set. The money was paid for one set. It didn't say two sets, or play a jam session with Benny Goodman. So, if he had wanted to play more, he would have had to play without me. Let's see, there's been some good drummers I've played with. Sidney Catlett was a great drummer. Great drummer. And Kenny Clarke, he came through St. Louis and played with Jeter-Pillars for a long time, came from Louisville. Came to St. Louis, played with Jeter-Pillars and from St. Louis, he went to New York. He was one of the first members of the Modern Jazz Quartet, MJQ.

**Berger:** Speaking of drummers, this is slightly off the chronology that we're following, but you spent many years and still spend much time travelling all over the place as a single, just as a featured soloist and playing with local rhythm sections. And you're kind of at the mercy of whoever they have...

**Edison:** It's not "kind of" – you are at the mercy of whoever they get for you.

**Berger:** Have you ever been pleasantly surprised and found local rhythm sections somewhere in the middle of Morocco that...

**Edison:** No.

**Berger:** Never (both laugh).

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**Edison:** No, I never have been surprised in that way. I have been surprised most of the time if they could play. Because travelling as a soloist as I do, you're at the mercy of whoever they get for you. In Europe, I've played with some groups that knew nothing but the blues. So, I've played the blues fast, play 'em slow, medium, waltz, you know, make a concert out of it. Up in Wales, I had a rhythm section, the piano player was a motorman on a streetcar, the drummer did something in the daytime, the bass player, I don't know what he did. But it's really an experience, believe me. Believe me, it's an experience because after you get out of London or the big cities like that, you are at the mercy of the promoter. London you find some good drummers, some good piano players, some good musicians. Denmark you find some excellent musicians. You can't find a bad bass player in Denmark. And Sweden, you find a couple, most some good piano players. But when you go to places like Stockholm, Trent, Manchester, Halifax, Oldham, Blackpool, Liverpool, Southampton, all places like that. And up in Cardiff, Wales, you can't expect to find no musician up there that's going to be the caliber of musician that you expect.

**Berger:** How do you handle a situation....do you try and shut them out when you're playing, do you try and tell them anything...

**Edison:** You just think about when you get back home, you're going to spend the money. (Laughs). That's the best thing to think about, when you get through, you're going to get paid. And they've done the best that they can do. I've never felt any ill feelings toward them, 'cause they're thrilled to death that they're playing with you. They're absolutely just thrilled to no end to play with, not only me, but anybody from America. What are you going to do, say, "Well, man, I don't want to play with you, you're not playing what I want to hear," insult them like that, I would never do that. So I always find out what they know. Whatever tune they know, and whatever key they play it in, I play it in their key and the tune that they know. I never say, "Well, we're going to play this in this key" because I know that I've had more experience than they've had and I'll just play it in whatever key they want to play it. And it has always turned out to be a wonderful evening. Sometimes when the evening's over, you say "Woof, oh man, gee whiz, what a night." You go right for the bar. But a few times, but most of the times it has been nice. And I've truly met a lot of friends, a lot of guys over there that I've met. When I go back, we have wonderful moments. We have wonderful memories. They say, "You remember when you played so-and-so and I changed keys, I didn't play it in the right key" and there's a big laugh.

**Berger:** I would have loved to be there when you gave that whole concert of the blues in every possible tempo and permutation.

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**Edison:** Yeah, every way it could be played.

**Berger:** I remember you once telling me you played with a pianist in Europe who has since become very well-known but at the time he didn't know any tunes. And you said you asked him, "Do you know 'Honeysuckle Rose'?" and he said no, "do you know 'Cherokee', anything, and 'How High the Moon'," and he didn't know any of them and you said, "Well, what do you know?"

**Edison:** Yeah, I remember that happened in Sweden. That happened in Stockholm. I finally asked him, "Well, do you know 'Sometimes I'm Happy'?" He says, "Yeah." Me too. Sometimes I'm happy too. There was a piano player, then after I found out he was the bandleader I stopped kidding him then. He was the bandleader. I asked him, "Oh man, what the hell do you know if you don't know 'Honeysuckle Rose,' 'Out of Nowhere,' do you know 'Mean to Me,' do you know 'Perdido'?" He didn't know none of that. I said, "Well man, how did you get in the band?" He didn't know nothing.

**Berger:** Well, on that happy note, maybe we should call it day for the moment and resume tomorrow.

**Edison:** I'd appreciate that, alright.

[Next Day]

**Berger:** We're continuing with the interview with Harry "Sweets" Edison. It's now August 21 and we had left off with a discussion of Sweets' period with Count Basie and we're going to finish up Count Basie and move along to more recent activities here in Los Angeles and elsewhere. We were talking about how the Basie band had started off as a band of soloists, but then the arrangers began to take a more and more important place in the band's repertoire. Can you describe that process and how the band evolved?

**Edison:** Well, the young arrangers began to appear on the scene like Tad Dameron, Buster Harding...then too, Don Redman used to write quite a bit for the band. And Hugo Winterhalter. But I think Buster Harding did more writing for the band and Eddie Durham used to send some arrangements to the band. But I remember when we opened up in a club called the Royal Roost in New York—that was before Birdland—Tad Dameron made some arrangements for Basie. Basie liked the tune "Good Bait" (sings a little) and Basie told him to make an arrangement on it. But Basie was never too keen on hearing those chords that the newer arrangers were writing. They were pretty deep. So, we started rehearsing the arrangement and Basie was sitting at one of

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the tables out in the audience. Finally, he just walked up on the bandstand and tore it up. He just wanted something he could understand. At that time, he was very reluctant to some of the new sounds that were by the new arrangers. Because naturally his arrangements were, like Buck...Buck you ought to write for the band. Because Buck and Basie used to sit down in his apartment or wherever, and Basie would play on the piano what he wanted to hear and Buck would write it on the paper, put in the arrangement. He'd been used to hearing that sound, the placing of the instruments, Basie's ear had gotten used to it. Both his ears had gotten used to hearing certain sounds, certain notes and he was reluctant to have...well he just didn't get with it for a long time. But before I left the band, James Mundy used to do a lot of writing for the band. And he made some hard arrangements, like "Queer Street" and "Tempus Fugit" which was very hard. We rehearsed that thing all night in California. We were playing at the Avedon Ballroom. And we finished playing the dance that night and Basie called the rehearsal because we were going to record the next day. And Shadow Wilson was in the band. We had a good band but it took us all night long to rehearse that thing. It was very hard to us because we hadn't been used to playing that many notes in our arrangements. But after we got it down, it was one of the best records Basie ever made, "Queer Street." And "Tempus Fugit," which was a great, great arrangement by Jimmy Mundy. He made quite a few things with Basie. It was a piano player used to be with Don Redman, I can't think of his name, it was so long ago. I'm doing good thinking of these names that I'm thinking of, it's been so long. But he was a pianist for Don Redman. He wrote some fantastic things for Basie. In the Famous Door, hell, everybody used to come in there at night time because we played from 9 to 4. And mostly like Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, Ray Noble—they had the hotel jobs, they were off about 11:30, 8:00 'til about 11:30 or 12. I remember one night Ray Noble came in and he told Basie he had a fresh tune that he wanted to record and it was "Cherokee." Basie was the first band to record "Cherokee." Pleasant moments like that you can remember because everybody that came into the Famous Door, they were well-known musicians. All you had to do was say that Paul Whiteman was in the audience, everybody would know who he was. Benny Goodman. And Ellington came in one night after he finished his Cotton Club, after he finished work over there. And Basie asked him to play. He sat down and he played this song that he had just written (sings it while trying to remember the name)...

**Berger:** "Prelude to a Kiss."

**Edison:** "Prelude to a Kiss."

**Berger:** He had just written it.

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**Edison:** He had just written it, yeah. And he sat down and played that, gee whiz what a thrill, because he loved to play with Jo Jones and Walter, Freddie Green, anyway, everybody wanted to play with that rhythm section. And that was the first time that he had played that melody where everybody could hear it. “Prelude to a Kiss,” yes, that was the name of it. Memories like that are unforgettable. That’s the reason why I say that New York in those days—you never knew who was coming in. There was always somebody out there in front—Harry James used to come in, Artie Shaw. It was a small place. A lot of the movie stars used to come in. George Raft used to come in. Paul Robeson used to come in. It was a great place. In fact, John Hammond, he took the loss for the band to be in there because after we got in there I don’t think it would hold but 75 people. We made \$50 a week and the government took \$2 so we’d get \$48 a week. But it was such a pleasant engagement, Famous Door. Just being there on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, Tin Pan Alley, it was a noted street. And it was just a thrill. You know, most of my life, I’ve had so many great pleasures, playing with different people that I never thought I would even meet. Other than playing with, which was my greatest thrill, Count Basie’s responsible for me giving you this interview because if it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t be sitting here because he gave me a chance to play. And I was fortunate enough to be liked by a lot of people, so I’m blessed. Playing with Duke Ellington, I always had the desire to play with Duke. I used to go out on tour with this “Golden Men of Jazz” and Clark Terry’s one of my closest and dearest friends, I tell him all the time he’s had the best of two worlds because he played with Count Basie for about five or six years and he joined Duke and played for him about six, seven years. So I say, “You really went from one extreme to the other, from a band who didn’t have many arrangements in the band and most of them was head arrangements. Then you went to Duke Ellington who was such a master.”

**Berger:** Well, you did record with Duke on that wonderful back to back...

**Edison:** That was one of my greatest moments. Norman Granz called me and wanted me to make this album. I said, oh man, did I want to do it, what a thrill. There was Johnny Hodges, I’d never played with him, never played with Duke. Jo Jones was on the record date and Joe Benjamin had played with my band when I first went to New York in the Birdland so I had played with him. But they were all beautiful friends of mine, but to be playing with Duke Ellington, gee whiz.

**Berger:** Do you remember that particular date, how it was to work with him in the studio?

**Edison:** Oh man, I was wondering on the way to the date, what am I going to play, what is he going to play? To myself, I hope I do good, you know, I hope I don’t mess up anything. Because you’re always very conscious of what you’re playing when you have looked at somebody in awe

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for years on the bandstand and he had written so many tunes and I had played a lot of his melodies, stock arrangements. And here I'm getting ready to play with the man, gee whiz, what a thrill. So, we did an album of W.C. Handy's tunes which I was very happy to hear that because W. C. Handy wrote a lot of blues and a lot of the blues he had written, there were different changes in them and that I didn't know. So, I'll never forget, Hank Jones came in before we started recording...Norman had told him to stand by in case Duke got tired or something like that. When Hank walked in, Duke asked him, he says, "What are you doing here?" He says, "Well, Norman told me to come in case you got tired." He says, "Well I'm not thinking about getting tired." He says, "If you got another date or someplace else to go, then you do that, because I'll be here." And he did, he stayed there all day, and he played some wonderful piano. One of my great thrills, in fact, I had two or three of the albums and somebody ripped them off, I don't have one now. And they're hard to find.

**Berger:** Has that been reissued on CD yet?

**Edison:** Yeah, it has been reissued. I've been putting the word out, thought maybe somebody might send me one in the mail, but so far everybody's keepin' 'em.

**Berger:** Well, I'll keep my eye open if I can locate one.

**Edison:** But that was such a thrill. The next one was Art Tatum. When you're playing with him there's nothing for you to play. What are you going to do?

**Berger:** I think you found something.

**Edison:** I found a few notes but I was so busy listening to Art, all I could do was play the melody. Oh, what a monster he was, oh man. They're still trying to figure out the things that he was playing back in those days, they haven't figured it out yet. But as I said before, my career has been just absolutely--so many incidents have happened---just unforgettable, unforgettable. I never thought that I would be in the company with such stellar personalities that I've been in. Like when we first came out here in 1939 to California, Nat King Cole, that's before his trio, knew this guy Glen Wallach who later owned Capitol Records. He had just a little room up there on Sunset and Vine, a little music store and a studio in the back, very small. So, Nat Cole asked one night when we were in Club Alabam or some place, "Oh, we should make us a little tape." So, he called up Glen Wallach and we went the next day with Dexter Gordon, myself, Nat King Cole, a drummer named Clifford Owens and Red Callender. We went up and made this recording at Glen Wallach's. Next thing I knew, Glen Wallach had Capitol Records and Nat was

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big. His trio had been such a tremendous success. I used to go hear Nat down on 7<sup>th</sup> Street there some place where he had a trio in there. And I never thought that I'd make an album with him and after he really had such tremendous success, I made many records with him at Capitol. Well, Frank Sinatra, I fell with him for about 13 years, 10 years. And Basie is the reason why, because I had started with him and what little success I achieved, I can attribute that to meeting Count Basie, playing in his band.

**Berger:** Why don't we discuss how you ended up leaving Basie and going out on your own for a period. Was it the handwriting on the wall that the big bands were dying out and did you have much warning that Basie was going to disband?

**Edison:** Yeah, because the crowds began to diminish in all the dance halls. And Basie, he kept his band as long as he could and he lost a tremendous amount of money trying to hold it together until he said it's just impossible. The little bands were taking over and the smaller night clubs were taking over. And five or six pieces in a night club, like in Birdland, it was way before Birdland, there were places in Chicago where you could work with a small group. We had a southern tour as usual and our last date was in Chattanooga, TN, and he said he didn't think he would be able to continue with the big band, this was in 1950. He had borrowed a lot of money to keep the band going and he was just going further and further and further in the hole. So, we got to New York, he said he was going to try, but if we didn't hear from him, to try to find something else to do. That was a blow because for all these years, you never had to worry about work because when we'd come back to New York, we'd get a call for the next three or four days to have your bags packed and go on another tour. You didn't have to worry about work, you didn't have to worry about where you're going on your next gig. You can have a lot of stress worrying about where you're going to work. Somebody else was doing all that worry, like Willard Alexander's office. Even Basie wasn't worried about where he was going. Because he'd be having fun at a bar and he'd say, "Well, we're leaving tomorrow, going on three months tour." So, to be thrown out that suddenly, it was quite a shock, quite a blow. And we didn't hear from him. The next time I heard about Basie after about two or three weeks, he was in Chicago with a small group.

**Berger:** Was that kind of a surprise to you that he ended up with a group of people...well, Clark Terry was in it, but I guess he was the only one...

**Edison:** Yeah, nobody didn't know. He was the only one. Freddie Green didn't go...

**Berger:** Even Freddie Green.

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**Edison:** Buddy DeFranco and Serge Chaloff. Well, Gus Johnson had been in the band before, in the old Basie band in Kansas City. But he had a bunch of guys that weren't affiliated with Count Basie so far as the public was concerned at all. And he did get a lot of static at places that he played. Not that the guys that he had playing with him weren't capable but they were just so used to seeing certain faces up there, like Buddy Tate...

**Berger:** Did you have any insight as to how he ended up choosing that or how it was put together for him?

**Edison:** No, I don't have any idea.

**Berger:** Was there any resentment on your part or on the part of some of the other so-called veterans of the band that he didn't pick a group made up of some of the....

**Edison:** A lot of the guys resented it but I looked at it like I gave him all the...there was no doubt in my mind that he did that for a reason. Because all of us achieved more by what he did than we would have by staying with his band. I always thought that he thought, "Well, these guys have done enough with me, let them go on their own because they deserve to be on their own instead of playing in my band behind me for the rest of their lives. Now they have a chance to be a bandleader and to assume the responsibilities that I have had for all these years." But a lot of the other guys, and I was blessed by being a soloist...some of the guys that were in the old band weren't soloists so they were just out of a job, period. Guys like Buck Clayton, he had left the band anyway after he came out of the Army. Prez, he had gone on his own. I think that's about the only ones that had gone out of the band, well I think Clark Terry was on his own. But that's about the only ones that had sort of made a little name for ourselves with the Basie band. I had no doubt in my mind that Basie had something in mind for us that he didn't take us with the band.

**Berger:** He felt it was for your own good to cut the strings. So, how you're freelance...

**Edison:** For the first time in my life...

**Berger:** Did you have any plans?

**Edison:** I didn't have no plans, I just had a ball. I was having a good time. Because I was living on 122<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and that was right in the heart of everything. That's a couple of blocks from Sugar Ray Robinson's place, right around the corner from the Apollo, Theresa Hotel, there were so many places around there. And I had made so many friends that weren't even in the

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music business, they were just Basie fans. I'd be sitting out on the stoop in front of my building there, 2040 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, somebody would say, "C'mon, Sweets, let's go to the bar and have a taste," you know, and I'd get up and I'd have a good time with them all night. Coleman Hawkins, he had come by and I remember the first time, I was sitting on the stoop and he said, "I got a gig in Cleveland, come on get in the car, get your bag and make this week with me." I said, "Well, how much you going to pay, Bean?", because he didn't want to pay no money. He was very closely built. He said, "Well, we'll talk about it on our way." I said, "Oh no, we gotta talk about the money now." He said, "We cool, we'll be alright." I said, "Yeah, you are, I know you are, but what about me?" So, he says, "Come on, you're not doing a damn thing." So, I went upstairs and got my horn, put a few things in a bag. And, I was married to my first wife at that time, she was a show girl, a chorus girl. So, I left a note to her that I was going to Cleveland with Coleman Hawkins. So I got in the car and we stopped for a red light on the way to the Holland Tunnel, you had to go out to go to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. So, I said, "Before we get to the Tunnel, Bean, how much are we going to make? I want to know because I can get out here and catch the subway and go on back home." So he says, "\$150." I said, "Oh man, I'm opening the door..." He says, "Oh no, wait a minute, come on and help me drive." I says, "That's gonna be extra money if I help you drive." Because we had been on Jazz at the Philharmonic together and I used to ride with him in his car and help him drive, so he figured I'd help him drive to Cleveland. So I said, "Can I get a draw now before we get out of New York?" He said, "Yeah," so I got \$200. I said, "I know I'm gonna make more than this." He said, "Oh, don't worry about it." I said, "Well, I know you, Bean, and I worry about how much I'm going to make." But I went to Cleveland with and the only way I made any money I had to draw. He never said how much he was going to pay me. So, every night I'd draw 50, 100, something like that. I ended up with a nice little salary. But we hung out together. What a time we had going to Cleveland. He drove some and I drove some and we talked about the times, a lot of good old times that we had together. That was before I went with Jazz at the Philharmonic because I went with Jazz at the Philharmonic around 1951.

**Berger:** So, this was a little earlier.

**Edison:** A little earlier than that, this was right after the Basie band had broken up in 1950. So, then I ...Herbie Fields at the time. I was just freelancing, I played with everybody.

**Berger:** You were based in New York.

**Edison:** I wasn't thinking about leaving New York. And I get a call to come to the Apollo to play with the Four Brothers, there was [Gerry] Mulligan, Zoot [Sims], Stan [Getz] and I forget

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who else was the Four Brothers. But I worked at the Apollo quite a few times with different bands. I would play at the Park across from Manhattan there, Palisades, play there for a week. I just played all around New York.

**Berger:** Did you work with Buddy Rich?

**Edison:** Yeah, Buddy Rich, 1951, he got a band together, he had a five piece band, with Zoot Sims and myself, a piano player later ended up with Patti Page, his name was Rocky Carluccio, a bass player, Teddy Kotak, and I can't think of the guitar player's name. But we played all up in Boston at the High Hat, oh, we played all over with Buddy. In fact, the first time I heard Philly Joe Jones we were playing in Philadelphia at a club called the 721 Club up on Wyalusing and Philly Joe was playing right across the street. I played with Buddy quite a bit. We became very close friends. Then, I got a call from Norman to do Jazz at the Philharmonic and that was, what can I say, what a thrill. The world's greatest was on there. Coleman Hawkins, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Brown, Oscar Peterson, Hank Jones, Buddy Rich, Bill Harris on trombone, Roy Eldridge, myself. In fact, Norman Granz was the first one to give the musician a lot of pride. Everything was first class—the money he gave you was first class. Good pay for two months, six to eight weeks, he would do a concert all over the world. Fly first class, all hotels were first class. He really give us something...me personally that I'd never had, that first class treatment like that.

**Berger:** And he wouldn't put up with any discrimination

**Edison:** Oh no, if there was any kind of discrimination in any hall, quit. There was no conversation with the promoter at all, that was it, we were gone. And the money was no object, we would get paid. And there was no microphones all over because he went around in the hall, especially over in Europe, and looked at the wires, sometimes he'd just pull them out of the walls. He wasn't going to let us get mistreated so far as making some tapes and selling them later on. Some of them might have gotten through but I doubt it because that teed him off when somebody would put a microphone in there, not even talking to him about remuneration, just guerilla cassette. The next thing you know, you hear it, it's been sold. That was quite a thrill.

**Berger:** To stick with Jazz at the Philharmonic for a moment, was this your first experience, I asked yesterday about playing concerts versus dances. Was that the thing that you think really started jazz as a concert music and something that people just came to a big auditorium like you would a classical concert and listen to it rather than playing for entertainment for dancing or in a night club?

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**Edison:** Well, I think a lot of the music that they began to play wasn't danceable. When there was a dance craze, it was called the "Swing Era." Everything was swinging. It had a beat, it was fresh. The soloist that people come to see, it was great. The first concert we played in a hall was Carnegie. John Hammond put that on, "From Spirituals to Jazz."

**Berger:** Oh right, "From Spirituals to Swing"

**Edison:** That was the first time we had played, with the Basie band, that was the first time we had played in a concert hall.

**Berger:** Were you aware that this was something special or was it just another gig at the time?

**Edison:** It was special to all of us. Because Carnegie Hall, gee whiz, that's where you go to hear Marian Anderson, and hear *La Traviata*, and Leonard Bernstein. That's the epitome of music, going to Carnegie Hall. That's another echelon, that music.

**Berger:** Do you remember that event particularly, were there rehearsals for that...?

**Edison:** We didn't have to have too much rehearsal because we played what we had been playing every night. We didn't have to play for nobody because everybody was self-contained. The blues singers, they accompanied themselves with a guitar. It was a tremendous success. And John Hammond was the first one to do that. But right after that, we started playing dance halls again. They had like the Savoy Ballroom, they had a Savoy, they had the Roseland in New York, a Roseland in Brooklyn, they had a Roseland in Boston. They had a chain of Roselands. Up in Massachusetts, I think they had about five Roseland Ballrooms up in there. And they also had small clubs like the High Hat, places like that where they had small bands playing there was a great band up there Sappy Lewis' band. And he played in a club for years and years. But they still had a lot of dance halls. And I think the trend of thought changed for people. They began to think that going to a nightclub and just sitting down and listening to music was more apropos than going to a dance hall and getting all sweaty. So I don't know why people stopped going to dance halls, I'll never know.

**Berger:** As an artist, how did it feel to you? Did you prefer one over the other, playing for dancers or playing for people in a concert setting—did one appeal more to you than the other?

**Edison:** I would say most of the big bands played for the dancers and I'm a big band fanatic, I love that sound of the big band. There's no sound that you can duplicate—five pieces is certainly not going to sound like 18. I love to play with a big band. When you're playing with a small

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group, you're more free to do what you want to do, 'cause I've been travelling by myself for 18-20 years, longer than that, just as a soloist. And sometimes I wish that I had enough money to take a big band with me because some of the musicians that I have played with, they just weren't capable. Maybe I sounded just as bad to them as they did to me, so we had a good (laughs) concert. But some of them as I said before, they didn't know tunes, and I would just absolutely wish that I had enough money to sponsor a big band. Then you know what you're going to play every night, you know there's going to be a good performance because you got 18 men who are going to play together. But, there's not too much togetherness when you got a small group. Like Eddie Davis and I, we travelled together for about six, seven years. But we had been with Basie for many years. We tried to fashion our quintet after Basie's 18 pieces. Then too, if it's two of you and you're playing in Europe where you're going to have a pick-up band, if the guy don't know it, at least you two can go ahead. Like, Jaws, he would stomp off a tune and call it, and he would already be almost ready to play, I said, "Jaws, this piano player don't know the tune." He said, "Tell him to lay out." (laughs). He was business, you know. A man is paying us to play we can't stand up on the bandstand for 10 or 15 minutes and ask, "Do you know this, or do you know this," it's very unprofessional. So, if the bass player didn't know it, he would say, "Tell him to lay out." The drummer, stroll, you know, whatever, and we would start out on it. But that's the perils of being by yourself. And I've never had the privilege of having a band that I could tour with. I had a band for six, seven years here in New York and I travelled all around...

**Berger:** But not a big band...

**Edison:** No. Then I never had the pleasure of having even a small band to travel in Europe with me, I always travelled by myself. My name wasn't big enough to demand the kind of money that I could say, well, for my band, I want to take over there.

**Berger:** Was the closest you got the band that you and Frank Wess led not that long ago, was that over in Japan?

**Edison:** Yeah, Japan. We got the band together just for that engagement and after that when we got back to America, everybody went their own way.

**Berger:** But at least for that tour, you were able to....

**Edison:** It was a good band. It was a fantastic band and in fact, we had more Basie men in that band than was in the Frank Foster band. We had Al Grey, Snooky Young, and myself. Billy Mitchell, Eddie Jones, Marshall Royal.

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**Berger:** It's like old home week...

**Edison:** Yeah, in fact, people had bought tickets for the Frank Foster concert and after....

**End of CD #4**

**Berger:** Sweets, you were just telling us about the tour to Japan with the band that you and Frank Wess co-led and had many Basie-ites in it.

**Edison:** As I was saying before, Frank Foster's, the Basie band, they had already engaged in a tour of Japan and a lot of the people after they read the brochure of the Frank Wess band and myself, they went and exchanged their tickets to hear our band.

**Berger:** It's more authentic Basie.

**Edison:** The Frank Foster band is not really a Basie alumni. Bill Hughes, Frank Foster, that's the only one. But it was a good band, it was a really good band. We had a really good time over there and the album sounded terrific. But that's the only engagement that we've had. And if we don't get that again, we won't have no more big band because there's no place to play. Frank has one every now and then in New York, but I don't participate in it because I couldn't go from Los Angeles to New York just to play one or two gigs. If I lived around New York, naturally it would be a different situation.

**Berger:** And the big bands on the West Coast here in Los Angeles like the Juggernaut Band, Bill Berry's band...

**Edison:** I go hear them but after a tour I feel like just laying on the couch. In fact, I put my horn here where I can look at it and I know I should practice because it's laying right there but invariably I'll pass by it and work the valves or something and hit one note. But that's not enough practicing to do. You get so tired.

**Berger:** Well, according to what Basie told you, you hit that note and play the same damn note every night (both laugh)

**Edison:** Yeah, he was a good teacher

**Berger:** I want to get back to Jazz at the Philharmonic for just a second before we move on to some other things from Los Angeles, your early days in Los Angeles. What about the musical

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policy of Jazz at the Philharmonic—how did you feel about that format of all the all-stars getting on the stage and playing those very long solos, very competitive kind of thing?

**Edison:** Loved it.

**Berger:** You thrived on it.

**Edison:** Yes, we loved it. Because, there was no rehearsal. On the first night out, somebody would say in the dressing room, let's play so and so and everybody would agree on it and then you go from there. And you play one fast tune, one medium tempo, then everybody would have a solo. Then you'd go to the piano player and tell him what key and what tune you wanted to play. And that would go on for ....let's see, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Flip Phillips, Bill Harris. After that, have an intermission and Ella Fitzgerald. I had quite a thrill on Jazz at the Philharmonic because on tour, there was Roy Eldridge one time. We had met in Cleveland many, many, many years prior to playing in New York. And every night, he would just blow me away. Blow me away. Well, we were blowing against each other. I didn't feel like that I was in any way, shape, form up to playing with Roy Eldridge, you know, like eights or fours, something like that 'cause gee whiz, he was a tremendous trumpet player. But one night in San Francisco, we had rooms next to each other in the hotel and he had been partying all night and all day, he was partying. So the concert started at 7:30 and it was about 3:30 or 4:00, he says, "Wake me up in about an hour." So, I had practiced that day trying to get myself together and I said, "Well, this is my time to get Jazz." So I woke him up about 6:30, the concert went on at 7:30. Oh, he was furious, furious! I had to tell him through the door at 6:30, "Man, let's go." He started raving, he was going on. He had just enough time to get dressed and go to the concert. When he got there, I was ready. It usually took him about two hours for him to warm up. He would get there two hours before the concert, any concert, and he'd sit there and he would loosen his chops up, get his valves... this day, he didn't have time to do nothing. In fact, when he got there, the curtain was going up. I'll never forget, we were playing "Indiana." Man, I was poppin' that night, I was poppin'. When it came to Jazz, he couldn't hardly get a note out. Oh, he was scuffling with that horn, trying to get a note out. In the meantime he was cussing me out. Hit a note or something and cuss me, calling me everything. Oh man, I was taking charge. And even everybody in the band says, Prez says, "Lady Jazz, Lady Sweets is getting next to you tonight." I says, "Yeah, I got something for him tonight." So, at intermission, even Norman came over and said, "Jazz, Sweets is just tearing you up tonight. This is not your night with Sweets." So, after the concert was over, he was just about getting himself together. And they had an after-hour joint in San Francisco called Jimbo's and after the concert, he says, "Hey Sweets, let's you and I go around

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to Jimbo's and play something." I says, "Noooooooo, no. No, no, you remember this night, Jazz, I got to you tonight." But it was just a ball to be on that Jazz at the Philharmonic. And then too, after that I got a band together in New York. I had Elvin Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Jimmy Forrest, and Joe Benjamin. I had a real good swinging band too, oh we were really doing it. I kept that band together for about six years.

**Berger:** When did you start with that band, start putting it together?

**Edison:** I think it was around 1955, 56, or something like that. I had it for about six years.

**Berger:** Had you settled in Los Angeles by then or were you still based in New York?

**Edison:** No, I maintained an apartment in New York on 372 Central Park West. I maintained a apartment there for years until I gave it up. And I stayed out here for three or four years, then I went back to New York. Then I came back here, that's when I started doing studio work.

**Berger:** Before we get into the studio period, I just wanted to ask, this was your first real extended period as a bandleader. How did you handle that? How did you feel about now you were doing all the stuff that had been done for you in the past, it was all on your shoulders.

**Edison:** Well, I had a manager. Basie's office was booking me. So I didn't have that problem to look for work. We were making all the spots that all the other bands were making. We came out here to California and played the Cloister Club, we played in Las Vegas in the lounge at the Thunderbird, we played Pep's Showbar in Philadelphia. Birdland, we were there all the time. We went all over the States, wherever there was a club.

**Berger:** Were people now asking you for a draw?

**Edison:** Yeah, in fact at Birdland I had Tommy Flanagan playing with me. And he calls me and he says, "I got a substitute coming in for tonight, his name is Roland Hanna." I said, "Man I never heard of him." He said, "Well, he's a good player." So I said, "Has he been around New York long?" He said, "No, I think he just came in from Washington or something." When I went to club he was already there. He says, "Man, I'd like to get a draw." I said, "Well I haven't even heard you play, I don't even know whether I'm going to like your playing, you want a draw before I hear you play?" He says, "Man, I got a family and I haven't had a gig in quite some time and I need a draw." I said, "Well man, that's the only thing that saved you was your family 'cause I wasn't gonna give you no dough unless I heard you play." Because Tommy Flanagan

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was such a great piano player and Elvin Jones--he left my band and went to Coltrane. And everybody after the band broke up went someplace else. Flanagan, I had Jimmy Jones

**Berger:** Roland played with you for...it wasn't just that one period. He stayed with you for a while.

**Edison:** Yes, he played with me off and on. Then, after that I went with Josephine Baker.

**Berger:** Can we backtrack a little and discuss how you settled in Los Angeles and how you ended up making this your home.

**Edison:** When Josephine Baker first came to New York, I was playing with Buddy Rich and they hired Buddy Rich's band to accompany her in the theatres in New York, I think it was the Strand. And she suggested that we do a little act together. So, she showed me on this little tune (sings)... it's got a little Latin beat to it. And she says, "I want you to come down when I start singing and you make a few little notes on your horn and I'll do a little dance to that and few little notes again.." We rehearsed it and got it down very well. And she would go around me and dance while I would play the trumpet. And it became part of the show. When we left New York, Buddy Rich didn't leave with Josephine Baker. I did. And she got with her piano player and I forget who else. Wherever we'd go to a theatre, we'd get there earlier and get a studio band to play her music. And we came to California and she had an engagement in Argentina. I didn't want to go to Argentina anyway. It's a long flight and a long way to go. I had no intentions of staying here in California, I was going back to New York. But I started to work around here and I went back to New York, and came back to Las Vegas with a band. That's when I got in income tax trouble. So, I came to California after that and stayed around here, started playing in a club called the Memory Lane, Larry Hearn. Johnny Fresco, he used to contract the Hollywood Palace show, he asked me if I wanted to become a staff member and I said I would love it.

**Berger:** What year was that would you say?

**Edison:** It was around 1963 or 64 because my daughter was born in 1965 and I was already ensconced in California at the time, in the studios.

**Berger:** But you did some studio work earlier, not as a staff musician...

**Edison:** No, made records.

**Berger:** What about your connection with Nelson Riddle?

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**Edison:** That was after I had joined ABC.

**Berger:** Oh, it was.

**Edison:** Yeah. I started making some records...I think the first record I made with Nelson was with Frank Sinatra, I think the record was "Wee Hours". I think that's one of the best he's ever made. I think that was just absolutely a fresh album, his voice was fresh. Then we became very close friends and he always wanted me on his albums. When we first started, Nelson would write me a couple of bars behind him, fill-ins you know. Then it got to the point where he would have five trumpets instead of four and I would just put on the earphones and just be on the side and come in wherever I thought I should.

**Berger:** So you wouldn't have to play a part, just be a soloist and play obbligatos.

**Edison:** Right.

**Berger:** What was he like to work with, I've heard he's quite a perfectionist.

**Edison:** Absolutely beautiful. He knows what he wants to hear. He thrives for that sound that he wants to hear. He's not talking off the wall when he tells you what he wants to hear because he's had good training from being with the big bands. He was with Harry James, he was with Tommy Dorsey who was absolutely a great trombone player. He was more than great, he was just absolutely a fantastic trombone player. He had had that training from being with the big bands. 'Cause he used to say that's how he learned most of his breathing, he was one of the greatest in breathing. Tommy Dorsey, he could breathe and you'd never know he'd taken a breath in between. Frank was just great, we became very dear friends, still are. We're still great friends.

**Berger:** Before we get too far chronologically into the '50's and your studio work and that period of your life, I'd like to just ask you about the evolution of your own trumpet style around this time. Now a lot had taken place, beginning in the mid 40's obviously with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and the whole bebop era. And then of course the so-called West Coast Cool sounds and Chet Baker and all of that. Did this have an effect, either conscious or unconscious, on your own playing?

**Edison:** No. After surviving New York, you can survive any place. Coming out here was like a piece of cake. They say West Coast jazz, there's no West Coast jazz. Jazz is jazz. Most of the guys that are out here are from the East Coast. Benny Carter, born in New York. Ray Brown is an East Coast musician. Everybody out here is from the East Coast. Most of the studio musicians

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are from the East Coast, so that was just a term they use to sort of have controversy between the East Coast and West Coast musicians. Chet Baker, he was a Miles Davis disciple. And Quincy Jones, he's from the East. Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, there are so many guys out in California and all of them are from the East Coast. I had gotten advanced with my style of playing, so I would never change my style because somebody else is making it with their style. There are many jobs around, I don't care how great you are, Sweets is gonna work someplace. So, I never was jealous of nobody because they were doing their thing and I was doing mine. I've been blessed, I don't think I've ever been out of work. Just for a few weeks or something, or when I was in IRS trouble, I took off so I could get it straight to pay them off which I did, thank God. But I've never had any problem working.

**Berger:** So, you never felt any need to adapt your style.

**Edison:** I didn't feel no draft at all. Because after coming up in New York all those years with all those different guys that are so much greater than those were so-called great stylists, they were, but they weren't no Coleman Hawkins, they weren't no Lester Young, they were no Benny Carter, they were no Johnny Hodges, they were no Louis Armstrong, they were no Roy Eldridge, they were no Count Basie, or Ellington. So, I have been associated with the best.

**Berger:** So, you weren't going to change with any fad.

**Edison:** No, whatever anybody's doing that's their thing, I'm not going to try....the old saying in New York used to be, they would rather be the world's worst originator than to be the world's greatest imitator. Which I agree with. Because if you're an originator, I don't care how bad it is, it's your sound. And if you stick with it, somebody's going to like it. And if you're an imitator, you'll never surpass the one that originated that style that you're copying, that you're emulating. You can never capture nobody else's feelings. You have a different feeling than I do, everybody has a different feeling. So, if you play the way that you feel, regardless of how it is, that's you. That's what I tell the youngsters now, when I do have the opportunity to talk at some of the schools. I always tell them, "Don't listen to somebody to the point where you can't think for yourself. You got to play what they're playing. They had to think for themselves, so how come you can't think for yourself? Find your style to play. Have an idol, yes, but just don't idolize your idol to the point where sooner or later you won't be able to play nothing of your own. Everything will have to be what he has played." So, originality, there's no substitute for it. I always tell the youngsters, "Don't copy Charlie Parker. Don't copy Dizzy, don't copy Miles. Listen to their records and get an idea of which direction you want to go and then go from there." But nowadays, if you hear one alto player, you hear them all. Cannonball, he was a great

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influence on the alto players. If you hear one tenor player, you hear them all. They're all Coltrane disciples. All of them are Charlie Parker's disciples. There was a few things that Charlie Parker played the melody wrong, so everybody started playing the melody wrong because he did it. And, Dizzy, I remember when Dizzy used to play just like Roy Eldridge, exactly just like Roy Eldridge. But he got to the point where he was going to think for himself, like Roy thought for himself, so he created him another style out of Roy Eldridge's style. And it takes an ability to do that.

**Berger:** Have you heard any younger musicians, particularly trumpet players, and some of them are fabulously endowed with technique and very competent on the horn, but have you heard any of this originality that you're always seeking in anybody that's come up recently?

**Edison:** Naturally I think Wynton is the best youngster that has come up in a long time so far as technique on his horn. He's trying everything that the old timers tried and he's doing that diligently with the plunger and with different mutes. He's seeking like we did and he does give the old timers a lot of credit for what they've done. And he's a great technician on his horn.

**Berger:** But is he original?

**Edison:** Well, I don't think he's what you call an original. Because he's a Miles Davis disciple. But he's playing his horn, he's getting distinctive.

**Berger:** I've even heard some things where he sounds a bit like Sweets.

**Edison:** Well, we get together sometimes and he says, "Show me how to do this." And, I'm quite honored that he would give me that much respect to ask me to show him a few little things on the horn like the valves and the little smears and the delayed things that I love to play. But he's recognizable.

**Berger:** I've often thought about this that... I don't know if it's kind of putting you on the spot for an explanation of something like this, but the time you and Buck Clayton, and Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young and people that came up in that era...by the time you guys were 25 or 26 years old, you knew immediately who you were listening to. Why is it that can't happen today? Or, it doesn't seem to happen.

**Edison:** Ed, I don't know. I don't have no answer for that. The only answer that I can say that they're just trying to play like somebody else and not like themselves. You know, when I was coming up in New York, I say all the time it was a different era. Everybody didn't want to play

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like nobody. And there were so many that were great, like Chu Berry and all those guys were just the only ones. So, there were so many playing their style, so you'd get confused. Tonight you would hear Lester, the next night you would hear Chu Berry, the next night you would hear Coleman Hawkins, one night you would hear Roy Eldridge, the next night you would hear Rex Stuart. There was too many for you to say, "Well, I want to play like that." You would never learn how to play at all what you want to play, 'cause you'd get confused. And there's not that many nowadays that you can listen to and you have a choice. Because as I said before, there was Miles, a great influence. There's Dizzy, great influence. And those are about the only two that the younger trumpet players have to choose from.

**Berger:** When you had an influence and other musicians coming up in that era, like yesterday you expressed your idolization of Louis Armstrong, and almost every trumpet player did at that time. But you took it and made something your own out of it. Nobody could ever mistake you for Louis Armstrong, even the people that were directly influenced, like Joe Thomas, a trumpeter—he was a Louis man, but he had something of his own too. Or our friend Benny Carter who was obviously a Louis Armstrong disciple on trumpet.

**Edison:** He has a sound of his own.

**Berger:** Yeah, and so many of you guys came up with your own sound even though you were directly inspired by someone like Armstrong. Today it seems that they may be directly inspired by Coltrane, by Parker, by Miles, but their original conception never seems to actually come to the fore. They can't get away from the influence.

**Edison:** I grant you that. But there are a lot of saxophone players who would have been great on their own had they not listened to Charlie Parker. They emulated him to the point where they were...everybody knows he was an addict...they emulated him to the point where I've heard them say, "Well, if it makes him play like that, it will make me play like that." I think that's absolutely just somebody that's weak that says things like that, because a lot of would-be great saxophone players, had they not listened to Charlie Parker, they would have been living today. That's one thing that he introduced to the business although he was a great saxophone player, there's no doubt his ability is unmatched by anybody. His style...he was just absolutely fantastic, but what the dope scene what he introduced was absolutely a musician's destruction, the younger ones. Because they emulated him to the point where as I said before, if he played the melody wrong, they played it wrong. A lot of would-be great saxophone players, they would have been great on their own had they not listened to him. Let him be their idol, yeah, but not to emulate his lifestyle.

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**Berger:** What about someone like Sonny Criss who I think you worked with.

**Edison:** Oh, he was a great saxophone player.

**Berger:** He had something of his own . . .

**Edison:** He had a style of his own, he had a sound of his own. It was unfortunate he had that accident that killed him. There's Lou Donaldson, he's out of the Charlie Parker school, but he's a good player. There are a lot of good alto players now. There are a lot of good tenor players now. Got one here called Rickey Henderson here in Los Angeles. Good player, youngster. And he doesn't play like Coltrane. There are a few that are coming. And the desire for narcotics is diminishing. It's not as prevalent as it used to be.

**Berger:** Is that Rickey Henderson or is that Rickey Woodard?

**Edison:** Rickey Woodard.

**Berger:** I thought you were talking about the baseball player.

**Edison:** Well, I was thinking about somebody that makes a lot of money (laughs)

**Berger:** I knew Rickey Henderson was versatile but I didn't know it extended into music.

**Edison:** No, I just said that because I like to mention people that are making millions of dollars because I don't think musicians get in that bracket. But Rickey's a great tenor player. There's Red Holloway, Teddy Edwards. There's some great guys around here that they're stylists, that have a good sound. I just think that the business has gotten to the point where it's just a matter of how much money am I going to make. A lot of guys ... and the youngsters now, they make so much money. They make more in three months than I used to make in a whole year.

**Berger:** Do you feel any, not resentment, but just the irony of something like Columbia seeming to sign every young musician almost on the basis of youth. It seems that you have to be under 25, even if they're of marginal talent but just the fact that they're young and can play, I mean it's not that they're completely incompetent but they all sound alike, do you sort of resent the attention that's been focused on this younger movement in jazz?

**Edison:** No, I don't resent it. I never have been resentment of nobody who's successful. But I do think they should make an allowance for anybody that's got the talent whether they're young or old. 'Cause I hear some of these youngsters can't play near as good as some of these old-timers.

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In fact a lot of these youngsters are trying to play like the old-timers. No, I think that's absolutely not fair to any musician to deny him the pleasure of success if he can play regardless of age. Because...J.J. Johnson, he's not a young man. He signed good contracts, still is. Of course it is controlled by the youngsters. There's a young trumpet player, Roy Hargrove, only about 23 years old, he just signed a big contract for more money than I've ever made all my life. It just makes me stronger.

It opens the way...I think Wynton Marsalis opened the way for a lot of trumpet players. And the time was right for him to play what he's playing, but he's a fantastic concert trumpet player. On the piccolo trumpet, he's great. But a lot of the write-ups, some of them say he was the first black musician to deserve that because he graduated from Juilliard and places like that. But there were other black trumpet that were capable as well as anybody else that played in symphonies but they had that color barrier was there, they had the wrong paint job. There was Russell Smith who was one of Herbert Clarke's great students. He was a fantastic legitimate trumpet player. There was Wendell Culley who played with Count Basie. He was one of the finest students that [Max] Schlossberg had. And his ambition was to play in the Boston Pops, Boston Symphony Band. Because he was born in Boston. That never happened. Like our friend Joe Wilder, when he went to take trumpet lessons in Philadelphia the teacher told him his lips was too big. But he ended up playing first in the youth band, the symphony band...some great director that used to go around the country and pick musicians out to play...

**Berger:** Symphony of the New World?

**Edison:** Well, this has been years ago...Tchaikovsky? One of the great directors. But he ended up playing first in that. The time was just right for Wynton to do that. There was a color barrier when we came up, what was the use of .... Russell Smith, he had all that learning, he ended up playing with Fletcher Henderson all his life. And I played with Count Basie, I never had no learning. There's Wendell Culley ended up all his life playing with Count Basie and Noble Sissle.

**Berger:** It's not that the talent or the ability wasn't there, it was the opportunity.

**Edison:** It was the color. But the opportunities now for the youngsters, they can do whatever they want to do and be successful. If they do it the right way and stay off the dope. That's why I have a lot to say for Wynton, he's a clean liver. He doesn't advocate drugs. He's always immaculate in his dress. He gives you the appearance of a professional and that's what he is.

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When he gets on the stage, you don't see him in Levi's and tennis shoes and all that. I have complete admiration for him for doing that.

**Berger:** He's not quite as resplendent as you are on the stage but not bad.

**Edison:** Well, (laughs) I learned from the old-timers like he is. Like you never saw Duke Ellington get on the stage unless he was the epitome of sartorial splendor. Benny Carter, he comes out and he's always dressed. Basie, all the great old-timers when they walked out on the stage they were a fashion plate. Before they even hit a note, you admired them. And now, I see some of these youngsters come out, man, in Levi's, some of them in tennis shoes, shirt open, some don't even have a shirt on, playing in just the skin. Oh, I think that's horrible, that's horrible. How are you going to get respect when you're playing half naked in front of people? I don't advocate that at all.

**Berger:** And our friend Joe Wilder who sleeps in his suit...

**Edison:** You never see him without a tie, never see him without a tie. I think it's great to have a lot of pride in your profession, you know, when you go to a symphony to hear a symphony band, Boston or over in Europe, go to hear in Austria the band there, they're doing a concert of whatever, Ravel or whatever, they all have their tuxedos on, they look the part of gentlemen. So, the jazz musician, if they're going to demand that sort of respect, you have to respect yourself.

**Berger:** Well certainly, Wynton's had a lot of accomplishment in that direction.

**Edison:** Oh, I agree.

**Berger:** We left off with your early studio years and I want to get back to that and explore that area. When you first came out to Los Angeles, you were just mentioning the barriers in classical music, well the barriers in studio work were pretty rigid at that time. How did you first break into the, I don't mean going on staff, but even getting calls, how did that first come about and who were some of the conductors that were more open to having black musicians work with them?

**Edison:** Well, the Hollywood Palace, ABC, and I think that they were looking for somebody. It didn't have to be me, just thank God it was me. And I was blessed. Mitchell Ayres was the bandleader. I was the first black musician to be in the band on ABC and the time was just right. I think they were looking for a black musician.

**Berger:** They wanted to integrate.

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**Edison:** They wanted to integrate. They wanted somebody to inject a sound in their band that they wanted to hear. They had a reason, because you do put a different flavor in a band, especially when you're a soloist. It doesn't have to be a great soloist, I'm not, but they just wanted to integrate the band with somebody that people know, and a style.

**Berger:** You could add an identifiable sound as you did to Sinatra's recordings, he obviously felt that too.

**Edison:** Right. When I first joined the band out there, they used to rehearse all day because they had some of the hardest acts. Everybody played as the host at the Hollywood Palace, I guess you've seen it, it was a fantastic show. My music, they had more music on one page than I had the whole 20 years I was with Basie. So, I immediately told the guys in the band and the director, I said, "Now, this is not One O'Clock Jump. So, I'm gonna do my best to play it the best I can." But that got a big laugh instead of me walking in like, I'm gonna really just be like they were because they had been doing that for years. That got a big laugh and we were all close friends. Had a trumpet player named Manny Klein who was a great first trumpet player. He'd been in California for years doing movies and the bands. So I used to ask him before rehearsal, I'd pick out a passage that looked hard to me but to him it was easy because he had been taught to do that. And I would say, "Manny, look here, I don't want to get to rehearsal and the band start playing and I'll have to stop and tell Mitchell Ayres I got to rehearse this, you show me how it goes and when we get to it, when the rehearsal starts, I can just run through it just like everybody else." They were all so nice in showing me how to read. So was Snooky, Snooky Young, great musician, great reader. Conrad Gazzo, Ray Triscari, and all those guys, they were a part of my success because they taught me a lot of dynamics and music symbols that I didn't know anything about. One day we were at rehearsal, a record date with Nelson Riddle and underneath one of the lines there, he had "colored" on there. And I told him, "Oh Nelson, man, what are you doing? This is an insult you got "colored" there." And everybody laughed, "That's just a musical term, "color."" I said, "Well, you was making me pretty mad there for a minute...you had a little undercurrent way to insult me." So, I had a lot of fun.

**Berger:** That's like Louis Armstrong when he first joined Fletcher Henderson, the famous story—he was playing in the big band, reading the part and he sees the symbol, "pp" and he hits it real hard and he's shouting over the whole band and they said, "What are you doing, Louis?" And he says, well he thought it said, "pound plenty."

**Edison:** (laughs) Pound plenty. Oh, there are so many incidents that happen in life that are unforgettable but everybody in the band, they just fell out, they just absolutely fell out. He was

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getting ready to give a downbeat and I says, “Wait a minute, Nelson, I see a term here that’s sort of insulting to me, ‘colored’. What do you mean by that, are you trying to tell me something?” And everybody fell out, Johnny Ardito, all the guys. He said, “No, that’s a musical term, you know, ‘color,’ ‘color it.’” So I said, “Well, I didn’t see that in ‘One O’Clock Jump.’”

**Berger:** So you kind of put everybody at ease, but did you, not necessarily on that occasion, but in other studio jobs, did you encounter any resentment?

**Edison:** No.

**Berger:** Nothing?

**Edison:** Never. If they did, they didn’t let me know anything about it. Because I had a lot of fun with all the guys that I recorded with, every one. We had big laughs. When I see some of them now, they all reiterate something funny, some incident that happened, something that I was a part of. So it was great.

**Berger:** Do you remember any particular music that was among the hardest to play, any conductor that use to really present a challenge on his dates?

**Edison:** Well, I did a lot of the rock and roll dates for Motown. I was on first call over there, I did a lot of things with Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Temptations, Smokey Robinson, Jackson Five, Michael Jackson...they had an arranger, I forget his name, but it was hard. It was notes all through it. But, Nelson Riddle wrote very pleasantly, Don Costa wrote not too much in an arrangement. Beautiful. And Frank used to have another arranger, beautiful strings. Then, the bandleader out here who had a band for a long time, he arranged, “I’ve Got the World on a String,” he had a swing band, a trumpet player ... Billy May. He wrote very easy. Of course I did a lot of things with the King, Benny Carter, his things were just laid out so perfectly, all you had to do was just play the notes. There was no one out here that wrote anything that you couldn’t play. Well, everybody was good readers anyway.

**Berger:** Your reading must have improved...

**Edison:** Oh yeah.

**Berger:** And you never did really any formal study, it was all on the job.

**Edison:** Yeah.

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**Berger:** I read an article in the mid-50's, a big article about you contemplating trading lessons with Rafael Mendez?

**Edison:** Yes.

**Berger:** Did that happen?

**Edison:** No. I was doing a movie for Fox under the direction of Lionel Newman and there was a spot in there they wanted Rafael Mendez to play. And I told him, "I'd sure would like to play like you play, know a finer point of the trumpet." And he said, "I'd like to play like you play." So, that's all that ever happened to that. And I did go to a teacher here one time. I wanted to learn how to sight read. He was recommended to me by Manny Klein. And I made an appointment and I went to see him and naturally he had me to play for him. I told him my purpose for the visit and I played and I played and played and he said, "I don't know what you want to take any lessons for." I said, "Well, I want to learn how to read." He said, "Why do you want to learn how to read when you can play that way?" So I never had the chance. I can understand what they said. They could understand what I'm talking about too. But it's embarrassing when you sit down to make a record and the guy puts the arrangement there in front of you and then you're holding up the whole band because your eye-sight is bad. But I never was embarrassed like that because I would always get there early on a record date, a couple of times I was late on Nelson Riddle's date, it was a Frank Sinatra date. I just overslept. And when I got there, they had been recording and they told me, "What happened?" I said, "I got engrossed in the World Series and I forgot the time." So, they says, "What game was it?" I told them and they started laughing and said, "That game was yesterday, Sweets." [both laugh]

**Berger:** It wasn't gonna work.

**Edison:** It wasn't gonna work. And one time, I was rushing to the date. I had done one date and the traffic was bad. All of a sudden I heard the sirens behind me, it was a police car. And they said, "Where you going?" and I said, "I'm going to do a record date with Frank Sinatra." And they said, "Oh, come on now, come on, come on." They said, "You were doing like 50 in a 15 mile zone." I said, "I was trying to get to the record date for Sinatra, see my horn and my mutes and everything?" So they said, "Where's he recording?" I said, "He's recording at Capitol out there in Hollywood." "Oh, OK," I guess they were going to catch me in a lie and really sock it to me, see? So, when we got to the record date there, they walked in with me.

**Berger:** Oh, they followed you.

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**Edison:** They followed me. So, we all walked into the record date together and Frank Sinatra, “Sweets with the heat!” So, the police started laughing and I introduced them to Sinatra and they said, “Well, just send us a half a dozen albums apiece.” So, they sat there and listened to the date for a long time. So, it was quite a thing, quite a thing. But, those kind of experiences, the youngsters don’t get a chance to enjoy like that. I don’t think there are any of them coming up today that can give you some highlights of their lives, incidents that were funny. I know they can’t give you no incidents like the one-nighters that we had in the South because that doesn’t exist anymore. It exists, prejudice exists but not like it did when we were going down there where they had the black washrooms, toilet, white and black, drinking fountains were white and black. They will never be in a position to give you that kind of... in their way, they might have a few things but not experiences like the old-timers.

**Berger:** I guess with the demise of the real big studio scene, that whole genre of playing...it’s always intrigued me, stories that musicians tell about the thrill of actually going in and not knowing what you’re going to face every day. Did you find that a challenge or was it nerve-racking?

**Edison:** Nerve-racking. But after I had made friends with so many guys, like all the players, most of them you would see on the same date. Contractors had their ones that they called, like Manny Klein’s brother, Dave, he kept me working. I had something like two or three record dates a day. And movie calls. I would get there early so I could look over the parts. And if it was anything difficult in there, I would always ask the director or somebody, “I’m not equipped to decipher this, would you show me how that goes?” I was always humble.

**Berger:** You didn’t try and just gloss over it and fake it. You tried to learn it.

**Edison:** No, you can’t do that because you got two or three more guys who know that you’re telling a lie on your horn because you’re not playing it right. So, I would always get there early and as I said, we all became good friends and we had a good rapport together, toward each other. Sometimes I would get a first part to play which would make me nervous because you have to be so precise when you’re playing first, you’ve got to be dependable. A couple of times I played the first part but that was my stick. So I’d tell the first trumpet player like Conrad Gazzo or Ray Triscari or Snooky Young, “This is your stick, give me the second, third or fourth part.”

**Berger:** How would it be decided who would play first, I mean when a contractor put together the trumpet section, would he have in mind hire him for first and...

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**Edison:** They had different guys for different parts.

**Berger:** But you would sometimes change things around at the session.

**Edison:** Oh yeah, we'd decide who was going to play the first at the session. The contractor wouldn't hire just the first trumpet player because there might be a solo in there or something on the date somebody would have to play. Or like Rafael Mendez, there was a part in there that was absolutely intricate part to play and they hired him just for that special. The record dates, they just hired you for your ability and when they hired a trumpet player or any musician, you were supposed to be equipped for whatever they wanted on the record date. We never had no problems, those were all enjoyable days.

End of CD #5

**Berger:** You hear a lot of stories about the cut-throat business of the studios and it's not so much what you can do but who you know.

**Edison:** Oh definitely. There's politics and politics. But I didn't know that many people to be in politics. I didn't know how to play no politics in the business. They either called me for what I could do or they didn't call me at all. What little reputation that I had, it preceded me. They knew that I had been with Jazz at the Philharmonic, I had been with Count Basie, I had made so many records behind Billie Holiday and all that. My career had superseded a lot of these guys in the studio. And what little reputation I do have, what I did have then, they had heard about me. I didn't just come in there because I thought I could just control or just take charge or nothing. Then too, they knew that if I didn't do this I was always able to get me a job in some nightclub as a soloist.

**Berger:** You said once you finally broke this barrier, you didn't feel much resentment or too many things closed to you because of racial barriers, but what about that reputation of being from the jazz world, did that work against you ever?

**Edison:** No, because all the musicians in the studio wanted to be a jazz musician.

**Berger:** So they envied the fact that you had been with Basie...

**Edison:** I envied them and they envied me. Because they had something that I wish I had had the opportunity to grasp and I guess I had something that they had wished they had, too. We all got

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along. It was great, it was absolutely just fantastic. It was a great experience and if I had it to do all over again, I'd do it the same way.

**Berger:** And when did the studio scene, the heyday of the studio start to fall apart?

**Edison:** When all the electronics started getting popular. That's when it started falling apart. The synthesizers...how many instruments you can play and sound like a whole band. That knocked out a lot of the musicians. Just like they don't have any more big musicals in the movies anymore like they used to have, so that knocked out the big bands.

**Berger:** And beginning in the '70's, you became more active again on the jazz scene and I wanted to ask you about your association with, well, you mentioned, with Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, you toured all over the world.

**Edison:** He was looking for a partner and I was too. Somebody that was compatible because Jaws had been with Count Basie, stayed with him a long time. And we had the same idea of how it's supposed to go, so we made a good team. And it got to the point where we wanted more money, because we had pioneered as a duo all over Europe and everywhere just to get established. And after we got established and we started asking for a certain amount of money that they couldn't afford. So Jaws said, "Well, we better split up then." So, we paved the way for each other—"you can go in Ronnie Scott's by yourself and I can, we can go to these clubs by ourselves." So, that's what we did.

**Berger:** You mentioned Frank Sinatra of course, and Billie Holiday. Maybe we can talk a little bit about about some of the vocalists that you've played for. Of course, you're very much in demand for that special sound you can put behind a vocalist. Who were some of your favorites to play behind and what did you do to accommodate to their specific styles, I mean, with your own playing to adapt to what they were doing?

**Edison:** Billie Holiday was one of my favorites because when you come to do a date with her, she would just sit down 'til you were ready and then we would record. She never had nothing to say. She just wanted to sing. She wasn't one of those kind of artists like some of them I had come in contact with. I wouldn't want to do that again with some of them I recorded with. Because, they made it so hard, they were so uncomfortable, and they thought they were greater than what they were. And when you get somebody like that, you can't wait until the date's over to tell them, "Well, I won't be back tomorrow" if you got two dates. Billie Holiday was great.

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**Berger:** You recorded with her in the '30's and again in her last records for Norman Granz. A lot of people for a long time would put down the later recordings and say that the ones from the '30's with Teddy Wilson were really the epitome of her accomplishment. But, now I think there's kind of a re-appraisal of the later period going on and people are starting to recognize the greatness of her voice at the end even though it was a lot different. How would you assess the two periods in which you worked with her?

**Edison:** In my performance I always play something that she's done and I always play something of Ellington's. Because I don't think that you can play a complete concert without playing something of Duke Ellington's. And I know that Billie Holiday would want to be loved in her day like she's loved today. I know that she wished, right now wherever she is, she wished the people had loved her as much when she was singing, regardless of her personal life. That didn't have anything to do with her ability. She was still a great artist. And a lot of entertainers of every race have been through that, but they haven't been condemned as much as Billie Holiday. But I know she wished she was loved. I wish that she had been loved when she was singing, when she was living as she is today. Because everything--you can see more of Billie Holiday, little cards, everywhere you go you see something with Billie Holiday's picture on it. That didn't happen when she was living. That might have prolonged her career if people had loved her that much. A lot of people loved her but not near as many as they do now. A lot of youngsters are aware of Billie Holiday that didn't even care nothing about her when she was living.

**Berger:** How was she to work with in the studio, particularly in the later recordings?

**Edison:** Great, just fantastic. I made her last album with her, *The Lady in Satin*. She was just like she was when I made the first record date with her. There was no difference in her personality. In fact, we were such good friends until, after the first date I had a couple of engagements out on the road with my band and she wouldn't finish the date until I got back in town. She said, "I'm not going to finish until Sweets comes back." And she did, and right after that she passed away. Most of the old timers are no problem. Even Frank Sinatra, I don't care what they say about him, he knows what he wants to hear and he wants to hear what he wants to hear. It's nothing outrageous because he knows music. He's not saying, "Well, I'm Frank Sinatra and do it like I want to do it." He does because he has a reason, that he has something that he wants to hear. He is one of the nicest guys, I've never been treated any nicer. We used to kid together, I was just one of the boys. Nat King Cole was a great guy to record for. Naturally, he was a great musician, he had a perfect ear, he had a perfect pitch. He knew what he wanted to hear. He didn't make too many suggestions but the suggestions that he made was, you could see it on the paper.

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**Berger:** He was also a pianist before he was a singer.

**Edison:** An arranger....sure. Most of the singers of my era, they were great to record with, they were just great. But when I was doing a lot of studio work here, some of these youngsters, they were just—whew . . . After the first recording with them, I never did want to go back. They would take all day to make one side. Everything was wrong, this is wrong and all that’s wrong. The arranger had to rearrange this... it was just chaos in the studio all day.

**Berger:** Speaking of that, I wanted to ask about the difference in making records when you first started out, say with Count Basie for example. Let me ask you one thing about the difference between what you would play in the studio with Count Basie and those the 78’s, the famous Decca things, “Every Tub” and all that, as opposed to what you were doing in live performances. How much different were the things we hear now that people study and emulate and musicologists are studying them as representative of the Basie band of the ‘30’s? These were very short performances by necessity and how much different were they from what you would be doing in a dance hall or nightclub at the time?

**Edison:** Well, most of it was prepared at a dance hall or a nightclub. Preparing for a record date, if we had some arrangements that Basie wanted to do, we’d play it on the job. When I was with the band, we would record in studios and they’d have only one microphone. So that came down right in the middle. And you could hear everybody with that one microphone in an old studio called Liederkrantz in New York, that was the most popular one to record in. It was an old mansion but it had a great sound in there. So, I don’t think there’s any difference in what you would prepare for at a record date than what you would prepare for at a concert.

**Berger:** What about the length?

**Edison:** In those days, it couldn’t be over two minutes and, never no three minutes because you couldn’t get air time if you played it over three minutes. Now, you can play some 20 minutes on one tune.

**Berger:** But at the Savoy, if you played the same arrangement, would you be playing only three minutes?

**Edison:** No

**Berger:** Would there just be a lot more solos?

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**Edison:** There would be less solos on the record date, but get to the dance hall, at the Savoy, like “Every Tub” or something, one of those arrangements which was two minutes and 30 seconds on the record. When we’d get to the Savoy, Basie’d say “Well, you go for yourself,” when you play now, you play four, five, whatever you want to play.

**Berger:** So you take however many...

**Edison:** You take liberties. But you couldn’t do that at a record date.

**Berger:** How did the band look on recordings, were these something that you looked at at the time, I mean in the ‘30’s with Basie...were these looked at as something that this was going to be the band’s legacy, this was something that you realized, did you ever think that 50 and 60 years later people would be returning to these as invaluable historical documents of great art, or was this just another thing that you did along with you played in the Savoy, then you went and did a record date and it wasn’t a big deal?

**Edison:** Well, no one ever thought it would be a legacy like it is today. We had no idea, I know I had no idea that I would have you interviewing me about those days. It never entered my mind that I would ever do something like this this evening. And I’m quite sure everybody in the Basie band, most of those if they were living today, they would have no idea that you would eventually or someone would eventually ask them to give an interview for the Smithsonian Institute for their archives. No, we never had that in mind. All we had in mind was just making a good record.

**Berger:** And I guess similarly, you’re sitting there with Chris Sheridan’s bio-discography which you were looking through earlier and you seemed quite astounded that someone would compile your everyday itinerary, for example...

**Edison:** Yeah, I don’t know how he got it, unless he got it from the office, probably Willard Alexander’s office.

**Berger:** And I guess using the press and things like that.

**Edison:** Yeah, because I know nobody in that band would even think about keeping the itinerary. Only thing you’d be thinking about, how to get some rest when you got out of that bus. You wouldn’t be thinking about putting down, saving it everyday because a lot of us didn’t even know where we were going. We just get in the bus and get out and it’s time to play. Get back in the bus and say, “where we going now?” It was nothing like that.

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**Berger:** When we were reading through the itinerary for 1938, your early days with the band, it was tiring just reading it, never mind going through it.

**Edison:** Whew, oh, go from Jamestown, New York to Boston back to Jamestown... Johnstown, New York, then to Pennsylvania somewhere, then back to New York, just criss-crossing.

**Berger:** I want to ask you about one other tenor player. We talked about Lester Young and Jimmy Forrest and Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis with whom you worked in groups. But your great friend, Ben Webster, that’s another person I wanted to have you give us your thoughts on.

**Edison:** Well, there is not much you can say about Ben, we all called him “Frog,” because his playing preceded him everywhere he went. There was a sound like we were talking about a while ago, that all musicians wanted to be identified by a sound. When you hear his horn you know it’s him on the record. There’s nobody can duplicate that sound. Ben Webster, he was a great musician, good piano player, that’s what he was in the beginning, a piano player. Incidentally, Coleman Hawkins was trained to play cello, he was a good cello player and piano player. Ben Webster was just absolutely indescribable. He had a sound that nobody else could ever duplicate and he was just a wonderful guy, a beautiful guy, a wonderful man, one of my close friends. But he had to go to Europe to be appreciated. All his life he had wanted to make a record with strings and he had to wait until he got to England before he could make a record with strings over there. And he stayed over there until the end. Then, he moved over...another tenor player that was his nemesis, that was his mentor, in New York, Don Byas. Don Byas lived in Holland and Ben lived in Copenhagen. Ben used to live in Holland, he stayed there a long time, but he moved to Copenhagen and everybody loved him in Copenhagen, everybody loved him. The peers in the government loved him. Taxi cab, he used to get loaded and get in the taxi cab and they would all take him home, they knew where he lived. He was absolutely just great, Ben Webster. I did a good album with him called, “Ben and Sweets.” Yeah, that was a great album, great album.

**Berger:** Talking about another great tenor player, Lester Young, I wanted to ask you about that tremendous film that you made with Lester Young...

**Edison:** *Jammin’ the Blues.*

**Berger:** *Jammin’ the Blues*

**Edison:** Yeah, that was made in 1940, I think it was 1940.

**Berger:** Was it 1944, I think. That’s usually the date given.

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**Edison:** I thought it was made before Prez went in the army.

**Berger:** Well, it could be...

**Edison:** 'Cause he was in the army. He stayed in the army until....let's see, the war started in '41 didn't it? This was done in 1940.

**Berger:** Really?

**Edison:** Because Jo Jones made it and Jo Jones went to the army.

**Berger:** It couldn't have been right after they were discharged?

**Edison:** He didn't come back to the band, Prez didn't.

**Berger:** Was it something put together when they were no longer in the band, is that possible? 'Cause Norman Granz had something to do with it...

**Edison:** He was the one produced it. And the photographer for Life magazine did all the work in there, the lighting. In fact, that short won a first prize. Gjon Mili was the guy that was the cameraman and took all the photographs and had all the lighting so wonderful. I think it was done before '44 because Prez didn't come back to the band after he came back out of the army. Neither did Jo Jones.

**Berger:** Can you describe the process that went into making it?

**Edison:** There wasn't too much process, it was just get up there and play. And the hardest thing was, after we had made our solos, we had to duplicate the solos the next day, which was hard to remember what you played the next day.

**Berger:** For the camera.

**Edison:** For the fingering, for the camera. It would have been better if they had photographed while we were in action. Because we did the sound track one day and the next day we went back and everybody was saying, "Damn, what the hell did I play yesterday?" That was the first time, I think, that we had done something like that, then you can't just hold your horn up there, you got to put some air in it because when you see it on the screen, nothing is happening.

**Berger:** It wouldn't look realistic.

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**Edison:** Yeah, that was the hardest thing to do.

**Berger:** Did they play you the soundtrack back so you would know what you were doing?

**Edison:** Oh yeah, many times, many times. But it was still hard to realize the notes that you had played, it was really hard.

**Berger:** How long did it take to make it? Was there a lot of starting and stopping and reshooting of different things?

**Edison:** No, it went down absolutely with no hitch at all. We had a dancer in there, a singer, Marie Bryant, she was in the movie. And Archie Savage, who was a dancer. It was no problem, in fact everybody out there in the studio was surprised that we got through so early. It was fantastic.

**Berger:** I don't think any jazz film since has gotten the acclaim.

**Edison:** No, in Europe, they charge to see it. We're not getting any of the money, but they charge to see it. I know we got paid some money 'cause Norman Granz wasn't that type of guy. He always paid you more than what you would ask for. But that movie is a classic. I've seen it any number of times, it was great. Let's see, Illinois Jacquet, myself . . .

**Berger:** Jo Jones...

**Edison:** Sidney Catlett, Marlow Morris, piano player, Red Callender and John Simmons, both of them [on bass]. And Dickey Wells...

**Berger:** Barney Kessel.

**Edison:** Barney Kessel.

**Berger:** There's one interesting phenomenon and that's that Barney Kessel is obviously playing but you never see his face, you see his hands.

**Edison:** Oh, really?

**Berger:** I suspect that must be because at that early period, they didn't want to show an integrated band. I assume that might be one of the reasons, but maybe not. Was anything said at the time?

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**Edison:** No, I'd forgotten that Barney made it.

**Berger:** Well, he did solo and you do see his fingers, but you never see his face.

**Edison:** I don't think it was a matter of integration because we were all making records together out here.

**Berger:** Well, I know recording but this was for...I don't want to read...

**Edison:** You were speaking about the screen. No, I have to check that out the next time I see it. I sure will.

**Berger:** Take a look and see if maybe [it was] just a coincidence. You were talking about your travels in Europe and elsewhere. What particular places impressed you the most? I know that you're an avid walker and explorer, you don't just go and stay in a hotel room.

**Edison:** No, I like to see, I like to look. As I said before, I'm so blessed because a lot of places I never thought I'd see, that I read about in school, now I'm right there looking at a historical place you would never think that you would be walking in Notre Dame in England, walking in the Louvre in Paris, seeing all the Napoleon artifacts, Queen Victoria artifacts. And going to the British Museum. I like Paris, and I like Denmark, but it's more to do in Paris so far as the music scene is concerned. And I like England—London, because there's no language barrier in England. Well, there is, some of those people you can't understand what the hell they talking about, but I like England.

**Berger:** How about Kuwait?

**Edison:** Kuwait? Well, I had a good time there.

**Berger:** I heard.

**Edison:** I had a good time there in Kuwait. Yeah, I had a nice time in Kuwait. And I had a nice time in Istanbul. I went over there with Benny Carter in 1976 I think it was...the Bicentennial. I was with your father.

**Berger:** That's how I got to know you.

**Edison:** Yeah. And... Morroe?

**Berger:** You corrupted him.

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**Edison:** Yeah (laughs). He used to come and say, “Sweets, talk to me.” I’d say, “Well, what the hell you want to know about Morroe?” “Tell me something I can go back home and say.” And I liked a fellow over there, he’s a drummer, and he came to see the concert because he had a band on a television show. I still see him.

**Berger:** Was this in Turkey?

**Edison:** In Istanbul.

**Berger:** I think his name was Tuna Otenel or something like that?

**Edison:** I can’t think of it, but I see him every time I go—he brings back the memories of when I was first over there. I had a good time with him.

**Berger:** From what I heard of the impression you made on that tour, I thought it would solve all the problems of the Middle East.

**Edison:** No, it just started it (laughs). That was just great...to be walking around the pyramids, what an experience.

**Berger:** And you found that the audience, many of whom were not sophisticated jazz fans by any means, they obviously responded to what...

**Edison:** No, they did but I’ll tell you. Every place that we went, everybody would say something about Satchmo. He’d been over there years ago, in fact I don’t think there was no place on this earth that he didn’t go. He was the greatest ambassador that ever lived for this art form, for American art form. In fact, when we played in Cairo, the University, they have a library there, nothing but Louis Armstrong. And the ambassador wanted us to play with the Egyptian musicians, they had some jazz musicians there and we said, “OK.” No rehearsal or nothing. When they came up on the bandstand after the concert for the jam session, they couldn’t speak English and we couldn’t speak Arabic, so the translator asked them what they wanted to play and they wanted to play “Caravan.” When we started playing you’d never know that we couldn’t mediate to each other. I didn’t know what they were saying half the time and they didn’t know what I was saying but we all played the same thing. A note is a note in any language. C, D, F, G, all of them is the same. So, we had a good time.

**Berger:** Speaking of playing notes, I would be remiss if I didn’t ask you some technical data about what kind of horn you play, what kind of mouthpiece you use...

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**Edison:** I been playing a Selmer, a French Selmer for about 25 years. And I have the same mouthpiece that I started to play with. It's a Holton Heim, model number 2. It's the first mouthpiece I ever had. Not the first, 'cause I remember in the band in Columbus, OH, the trumpet player that was sitting next to me, he liked the mouthpiece I had in my horn and I liked his mouthpiece so we just traded. And I still have the same mouthpiece.

**Berger:** Wow, that's the same one that you've been playing for about ...

**Edison:** 60 years, probably a little longer than that, I don't want to date myself.

**Berger:** You mentioned that you have the horn sitting here, open and you wave at it as you go by. What is your ideal practice schedule these days?

**Edison:** I have no ideal, no special way to practice, no special time to practice, nothing special to practice. Whatever I feel like I want to play, I just play it. I usually just start out with holding tones. I've had some dental problems here lately, and that's the worst problem for a trumpet player, anybody playing a brass instrument, that's the worst problem they can have. But it's working out, I have to work at it and thank God it's happening in a day and age where they can fix things so you'd never know it. So, it'll be alright. But I've got the same horn I've had for about 25 years and the same mouthpiece I've had for all these years. Both of them have lasted this long, so no need to change it now. They're going to last the rest of the way.

**Berger:** Do you feel that the fact that you never relied on the pyrotechnical style with the tremendous high notes and all that, that your style is different from that, has that allowed you to continue virtually undiminished for so long?

**Edison:** Well, I would hope so because there is some art to playing in the stratosphere and I never could, like Cat Anderson, Maynard Ferguson, John Faddis...there's a lot of trumpet players, they have stamina up there that I would never possess. I know I could never do that so I would rather play down in the register in my horn where I feel comfortable. I think playing in the register of your horn where you're not screaming is much more listenable. Playing up in the air like that is exciting. If you hit one note up there, people just start screaming. But I would rather do that than to be straining, trying to do what I can do. Of course, you do experiment on a lot of things, but I wouldn't dare experiment with an idea that I know it's impossible for me to do.

**Berger:** Did you ever find yourself in a situation playing more avant garde styles or context? Were you ever at all attracted to that kind of music when it first hit the scene. For example, Ornette Coleman, the so-called free jazz....

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**Edison:** Well, who am I to say what's right and what's wrong? I never could get with that music, so I would never reiterate on it because somebody likes it, 'cause he works quite a bit and he makes quite a bit of money, so I just don't know what they're playing. It's above me. So, I like the simpler things. They're great musicians, Ornette Coleman, the one they call the Doctor... Bowie?

**Berger:** Lester Bowie?

**Edison:** Lester Bowie.

**Berger:** So, you think it's a valid form of expression...

**Edison:** It's what they like to do.

**Berger:** It's just not yours.

**Edison:** It's not mine. I go to hear them because I don't want to be antiquated and say that's not the right thing to do, that's not the right way to sound, that's not the right way to play, because they're playing the way that they feel. And it must be interesting because we're talking about it. Whether it's bad or whether it's good, it's a conversation. So that will make them be listened to more when people talk about them. It's not the way that I would want to sound. I like the Johnny Hodges, and I like the Benny Carter, I like Charlie Parker. I could understand what Charlie Parker's doing. 'Cause he could play, he could swing, oh, he was mean. There are a lot of good alto players that I like.

**Berger:** What about the so-called contemporary black music scene, which seems to have almost skipped jazz entirely and gone from soul to rap, from R&B to soul to rap. Do you feel disappointed that younger black audiences in the mainstream are not interested in jazz?

**Edison:** Well, it's not them, it's the people that promote it. I've seen jazz festivals with no jazz musicians in it at all. Like Aretha Franklin, she's not a jazz singer, like Ella Fitzgerald or Gloria Lynne or Carmen McCrae. She's not a jazz, she's mostly a spiritual singer. And, well, there has been some festivals given here in California, like jazz festivals without a black musician on there. And, what the hell, when you say "jazz," that automatically says, that's a black heritage, jazz. So, I've seen them give festivals out there without being a one in there. So, what are you going to do, campaign? A lot of people know the difference because a lot of them approach me and say, "What do you think of that festival out there without even asking you guys to do it?" But there are some bands in this town don't even have black musicians in there. I don't care.

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Doesn't make any difference. I'm not going to worry about it. If that's the way they feel, I don't have no malice, I don't have no qualms at all.

**Berger:** What do you think, this is yet another form of discrimination which you had fought earlier?

**Edison:** Yes, it is. Because I know there are some black musicians out here can play.

**Berger:** These are jazz bands?

**Edison:** Yeah. They haven't approached a lot of good black musicians out there. They've made records without even---jazz records--and I know there are good jazz players out here. Good ones. So, when they give some of these festivals---rap---I don't understand it. I don't understand anything that doesn't have a melody in it, that has just got drum in it beating and you're reciting a poem. That's not music. I don't know what that is. All they're doing is reciting poetry to a drum. And making a fortune with it. They're making so much money. The kids are making so much money. And what is the rap? I remember years, it's not new. They used to do it in New York years ago, same thing. Stand on the corner and make up poems and rhyme (claps), things like that, you know. But I don't understand it. But who am I, as I said before, to say what's right and what's wrong? They must be doing the right things because they're getting rich. And I'm doing the wrong thing because I'm not getting rich. There's just so much now...rock, gee whiz, they just about run that in the ground. It's not jazz, it's not music. You take a rock song or a rap song or something like that. In the next couple years, you won't hear of the song anymore, whatever they're doing. But Duke Ellington's melodies will linger forever. George Gershwin's will go on forever. Hammerstein, Oscar and Hammerstein, they will go on forever. Benny Carter's music will go on forever, the tunes that he wrote. They're just not here today and gone tomorrow, they'll be here forever.

**Berger:** The same with your solos, which have proven themselves over half a century, some of them, and are still being studied today. I doubt if you can say that about almost any contemporary popular music, that fifty years from now, who's going to be paying attention?

**Edison:** Won't even know anything about it. They want to know, what is that, but I don't think that some of it, there's a lot about it that I don't understand, this new music, the new generation.

**Berger:** Speaking of the new generation, you mentioned that you've been appearing at some schools...have you ever taught, given trumpet lessons one-on-one?

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**Edison:** No, never have. I've often wanted to but nobody ever approached me, so consequently, I've never gone out and hung my shingle out, "Trumpet Lessons."

**Berger:** That's hard to believe. What do you charge (laughs)?

**Edison:** (laughs) I don't know. But before Ellington died, Yale University, there was 20 of us got a Duke Ellington Fellowship there. And that Fellowship, we could go back there and teach whenever we wanted to. But I've never approached...I've gotten letters from the Dean, and Willie Ruff, who is head of the Jazz Department there at Yale. Dizzy used to go up there and teach for a while because he was near in New York. When he was off, he could go up there and teach. Mary Lou Williams, she got a job before she passed away, at Duke University to go down there. And a lot of the guys that got the Fellowship, they did take advantage of it but I never did. Maybe I should do that.

**Berger:** I think it would be helpful for the new generation to be exposed to you.

**Edison:** I've thought about it many times, Ed, but by the time I have my mind made up to do that, a festival would come up and I went for the money.

**Berger:** Well, there's certainly no money in universities, I can tell you that. Speaking of honors that you've had, you received one of the most prestigious a couple of years ago with the NEA Master's Award...

**Edison:** Oh yeah.

**Berger:** And I'll never forget--I happened to have the pleasure of being there when you received it from Mr. Frohnmeyer to whom you gave a piece of your mind. Could you reiterate the message that you passed along to him when they handed you the check?

**Edison:** Oh, let's see. I think I told him they were just giving me some of the money back that I paid in taxes.

**Berger:** I believe you threw in a "read my lips"...which had everyone in the aisles.

**Edison:** Yeah, sure did, read my lips. That was quite a thrill to get that.

**Berger:** That was the first of many troubles of Mr. Frohnmeyer was that awards ceremony..

**Edison:** Yeah, the next thing I knew, he was being replaced.

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**Berger:** I think giving you that award and listening to that speech was the beginning of the end for him.

**Edison:** I don't know why, but I thought he was a nice man. I thought he was a nice guy. Then I played at the White House for the Bush reign there. They gave the awards out for Lifetime Achievement. They honored Paul Newman, Lionel Hampton, Ginger Rogers, Paul Newman's wife and some dancer, I forgot who it was. But that was quite a thrill. We went there, the Golden Men of Jazz, we all did, it was real nice. There was a lot of people there, notables that a lot of people would enjoy being around because they were nice, they were very nice. In fact, they just sent me a picture of Bush with all the recipients of the Lifetime Achievement Award. But the NEA, the National Endowment Award was one of the most prestigious things I've ever received.

**Berger:** They haven't given out that many.

**Edison:** No, I was just lucky for my name to be called there, you know. Of course, I've been blessed all my life, that was another blessing that I've been awarded. Because I know a whole lot of guys that are just as deserving, I would think, but I was the fortunate one to get that.

**Berger:** You recently, you mentioned Lionel Hampton and the Golden Men of Swing...

**Edison:** Golden Men of Jazz...

**Berger:** Golden Men of Jazz, excuse me. Can you tell us a little bit about that group and working with it and where you've been with it and how it is getting together with some of these contemporaries so many years?

**Edison:** Well, I don't know who had the idea, but it sure was a good idea. I don't know whether it was Hamp or whether it his manager, Bill Titone, or who it was, but whoever it was, it was a good idea. Because when we opened up the first time in New York, it was Hank Jones, you can't get any better on piano, Hank Jones, Milt Hinton, the Judge, Grady Tate, Buddy Tate, James Moody, Clark Terry, Al Gray and myself, Lionel Hampton. So, we're all bandleaders in there, you know, and every place that we have gone, it's been a success, a tremendous success. And it's not hard but it gets tiring sometimes over in Europe because where else you going to play except Europe and Japan to make the money to pay these guys off because they do pay very well, very, very well.

**Berger:** As all being leaders and stars in your own right, were there any ego troubles on something like this?

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**Edison:** No, never had any personality clashes at all. We were all good buddies, we ain't got no time for that personality clash. We're trying to go out on the job and have some fun. Mostly, that's what everybody does anyway, go over there and have some fun. And that's about the size of it. Come home and get some rest. Go back again if they call you.

**Berger:** Does Hamp still play "Flying Home" for four and a half hours?

**Edison:** No, he doesn't even try that with these guys.

**Berger:** He'd be up there alone.

**Edison:** You got that right. He doesn't do that because these guys are all professionals and they know when they have played a good performance without overdoing it. And he used to overdo that, overdo it. There's no need for that. He's just making the musicians dislike you, because he's playing too damn much. But he's cooled down.

**Berger:** I've got to ask you one thing about an added aspect of your career that's been blooming recently—you've accompanied so many great vocalists, and now you're accompanying yourself as a vocalist. How did that happen, was that something you wanted to do for a while or was it a momentary impulse?

**Edison:** (laughs). I was touring Europe and a gentleman in Paris called me when I think I was in London and he said, "Would you like to make an album?" and I said, "I'd love to." I said, "How many instruments?" I wanted to know the personnel, how many horns he would get and I said, "Have you any idea what you want?" and he said, "Yeah, you don't have to bring your horn." I said, "What do you want me to do, you gotta be kidding." He said, "I just want you to sing." I said, "You gotta be kidding. That little thing in your ear, if you got one, it must be off." He said, "No, I just want you to sing." I said, "OK, how much, what kind of deal we gonna make." He said X amount of dollars, I said, "You got it."

**Berger:** So, it was well paid.

**Edison:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Berger:** So, you would have tap danced for that.

**Edison:** I got enough in front because I know it's not going to sell. But I think it sold a few copies.

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**Berger:** Had he heard you singing before that?

**Edison:** No.

**Berger:** How did he get the idea you could sing, not that you can't, but you had never sung in a club?

**Edison:** No, never had no experience being a vocalist.

**Berger:** So, he was taking quite a chance.

**Edison:** Well, he had made an album with Doc Cheatham singing, so I guess from that he gathered all trumpet players could sing.

**Berger:** But I mean, Doc has been singing in his act for almost three years now.

**Edison:** Yeah, him and Vic Dickenson, they used to have a little duet singing.

**Berger:** So I mean he had a history of doing it but just all of a sudden out of the blue...

**Edison:** Well, I made it.

**Berger:** It turned out very well.

**Edison:** Well, thank you, Ed, I think you're just being nice.

**Berger:** Not at all. As I told you, I gave our friend, Mr. Carter a blindfold test and he thought it was Sinatra...

**Edison:** Oh, no, I know he knows better than that.

**Berger:** But, are you now called upon when you appear, to sing as well?

**Edison:** Yeah, some of them ask me when am I going to sing, and I always say, well, after the gig is over and everybody's gone, then I'll sing. I don't profess to be a singer but I love singers. Well, most of the songs I did were the songs of Billie Holiday's. Hers were very easy and very simple and I think they were apropos. I just love the way that she sang and her singing was easy to imitate. It's not her but the way that her words flowed, it was very easy to do. So I did most of the things that she did.

**Berger:** Now that you've made an album as a vocalist...

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**Edison:** I haven't gotten another call since...

**Berger:** They said, don't put away the trumpet.

**Edison:** I know when to quit.

**Berger:** Is there any project that you have not yet done that you still want to do? Or anyone you haven't recorded with yet that you want to?

**Edison:** You know, I've never been one to sit and say, well, I hope this happens, I hope I'll be able to do this, I hope something like this. Because, I just take life as it comes. If it happens, I'm surprised and I love surprises. So, I just take it and enjoy.

End of Cd #6

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