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**VON FREEMAN
NEA JAZZ MASTER (2012)**

Interviewee: Von Freeman (October 3, 1923 – August 11, 2012)
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Coleman: Tuesday, May 23rd, 2000, 5:22 pm, Von Freeman oral history. My name: I'm Steve Coleman. I'll keep this in the format that I have here. I'd like to start off with where you were born, when you were born.

Freeman: Let's see. It's been a little problem with that age thing. Some say 1922. Some say 1923. Say 1923. Let's make me a year younger. October the 3rd, 1923.

Coleman: Why is there a problem with the age thing?

Freeman: I don't know. When I was unaware that they were writing, a lot of things said that I was born in '22. I always thought I was born in '23. So I asked my mother, and she said she couldn't remember. Then at one time I had a birth certificate. It had '22. So when I went to start traveling overseas, I put '23 down. So it's been wavering between '22 and '23. So I asked my brother Bruz. He says, "I was always two years older than you, two years your elder." So that put me back to 1923. So I just let it stand there, for all the hysterians – historian that have written about me. Said it was 1922.

Coleman: You were born in Chicago?

Freeman: Yeah, at St. Luke Hospital. It was right down the street from where Fred Anderson has his place now, right down around, oh, I would say, 23rd [Street] and Indiana [Avenue].

Coleman: Because, you know, you can order birth certificates here in Chicago, but if the birth certificate's wrong.

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Freeman: Yeah, well, see, this one I made out. This was myself, because I was going overseas for the first time. So I had to have a passport. So I put down '23. The man went and got something. He said, "It says '22." I said, "But it's '23." He said okay. What difference does it make?

Coleman: So the official birth certificate is something you made up.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: You always lived in Chicago?

Freeman: Yeah, always. I was born on the west side of Chicago – I forget that address – and moved to 4909 Champlain Avenue on the south side, which is where I was until I was – went to Willard Grammar School [Frances Willard Elementary School], and I stayed there until – I almost graduated from Willard, but my family had moved to 5418 South Parkway [Boulevard], which is [Martin Luther] King Drive now. I kept going to Willard. I used to walk through the park every day. Finally, the principal called me and said, "Listen. You shouldn't be going here." He says, "There's a school right" – it was half a block away from me. I say, "I love Willard." He said, "We know you do. But you're going to have to go to Burke School." I said, "How am I going to graduate?" He said, "You can graduate from summer school, so you won't get behind." So I went to [Edmund] Burke [Elementary] School in the summer, and they graduated me. Then I went to DuSable.

Coleman: So you went into DuSable as a freshman there.

Freeman: Uh-huh.

Coleman: You were in the right district to go to DuSable? Or you jimmed the records a little?

Freeman: No, no. I had to tell some tales again.

Coleman: I thought so.

Freeman: Everybody was telling tales, like we used to call them, but they were bare-faced lies. But we would call them tales, that we lived in the neighborhood, because I did have an aunt that lived across the street, my Aunt Minnie, a relative of – my father's aunt. She was my great aunt. So I said, "Dad, I got to get into DuSable. I got to get in there." He said, "You can't get there, because you don't live in that vicinity." I said, "Dad, you got to work it out. Don't you have somebody somewhere?" Sure enough, he had an aunt living right here. His aunt was right across the street. So I wrote down her address. They all knew I was telling a tale, but they let me in anyway. Because all of us wasn't in that

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district, all of us that were in the band. Everybody wanted to be under Captain Walter Dyett, that great man that taught at DuSable.

But that's way down the line. I must have been 14 by that time.

Coleman: When did you start playing? And how old were you then?

Freeman: I started on this piano, this piano here in the living room, at 6917 South Calumet in Chicago. This is the same Stark piano that belonged to my father's sister, Aunt Margaret. She moved somewhere where she couldn't move this piano. So my dad said, "We'll keep it for you." She moved that piano in there, I guess I was – my father told me I was around one year old. I impressed her. So when she come by the house once, getting up on this bench and banging on this piano, she said, "That boy's going to play that thing one day." Oh, I was happy. I was banging on this piano. Which is so interesting, is that my brother, who is two years older than me, they had bought him one of these miniature violins. My aunt said between him screeching on this violin and me on this piano, she said, "Those boys are going to be musicians." At that time, musicians were highly prized. This is before baseball and basketball and all that. Everybody – the big shots were musicians and singers. Paul Robeson was the big man. He's singing with this big deep bass voice. My father loved him, had his recordings. So everybody wanted to be either a singer or a musician, play an instrument. So they were all enthused by Bruz screeching on this violin, which was really a toy violin, almost, and me banging on the piano. They just had to help me get up on that stool, and I'd – oh, I was taking care of business.

That went on. Meanwhile, my father had this Victrola. That's a record player, as they called them, back in that day. I was the chief winder. He would pick me up and put me on this bench, the same piano bench, because he had the Victrola right next to the piano, and I would wind up this Victrola so he could play his sounds, which of course was Fats Waller, Al Jolson, Rudy Vallee, and – let's see – Louis Armstrong, of course. Those were his four favorites. Oh, I knew his records. I'd crawl around for them and bring him his records. I was about three then. I was winding. I'd beg him. "Come on, Dad. Let's listen," so I could wind.

That's the same Victrola that when I was about 6, I took the head off of it and made a saxophone. He almost died, because he come home one day feeling real good. He says, "Ah boy, you're getting big now." He says, "But I want you still to wind some for Daddy on his sounds." My mother said, oh Lord. Because I went around and I – She said, "What's that thing you're blowing?" I said, "It's this . . ." She said, "You took the head off of your daddy's Victrola, boy!" I had made holes, a mouthpiece, and a reed. She said, "Your daddy's going to kill you, boy." I said, "Oh, I'll die happy, Momma." I'm just blowing, playing this thing. When he come on and asked for his sounds, and I had this thing that played the music – had the needle in it. It's shaped like a saxophone, somewhat, and I had bored holes in it. He lit a cigar, sit back, "Play it for me, boy. Put on one of them." The house got real quiet, because – my two brothers were shivering,

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because they knew what I had done, and my mother was shivering. Finally, I think it was Bruz that told him. Says, “That’s – he made that thing he’s blowing.”

My father didn’t really get this, because he couldn’t even imagine, because the Victrola was a very prize – it was two prize instruments. Well, three: the radio – those old fashioned radios – the Victrola, and the piano. Everybody mostly – because we were really big shots. We had this thing. Everybody else had piano rollers, a piano roll, and they were uprights, but we had a baby grand. I’ll never forget this. People used to come by to just look at it. My father used to take this piano and take off of work to shine it.

Coleman: He took off of work?

Freeman: Yeah, about once every six months he would just shine this piano, because he had a couple tunes that he could play, because he could rag a little bit. That’s ragtime music. He could sit down and really go to town.

Anyway, I survived that without being killed. We moved to 5418 South – it was called South Parkway then. That’s the street right behind us here. It’s called King Drive now. All through Willard School, I was coming home, bleating and blatting on this thing, because he wasn’t – by this time, he didn’t want me to be a musician. He was trying to discourage us, to get into these books. I finally talked him into buying me a saxophone, when we had moved. My brother went with me. We went to – we hit the pawn shops down on 51st and 47th street. They were just full of – in the neighborhoods, during that era, the pawn shop was the place to go. Everybody bought everything at the pawn shops, ice boxes, everything. So I got this first saxophone. I forget how old I was, but I was very young.

Coleman: A tenor or an alto?

Freeman: No, I got a C-melody. The guy gypped us. We gave him \$13, and he gave us this old ragged thing, but I said, “Bruz” – I said, “For \$13, let’s take this.” He said, “But this thing, will it blow?” The man said, “Listen. I don’t let nobody blow nothing.” He says, “If you want it, you got to pay \$13.” I said, “That don’t look like a tenor to me, Bruz. That looks like – I don’t know what this thing is.” The man said, “Listen. Do you want this?” He said, “For \$13, you can’t beat it.”

The funny thing about that, I could get – I wanted to blow the saxophone so bad. I didn’t know nothing about the saxophone. I started bleating and blatting around the house on this thing. My father said, “Maybe you ought to – maybe you should try to get into DuSable.” So that’s when I found out about his Aunt Minnie, my great-aunt. She lived right across the street. Actually I did get into the school through her address.

When I first met Captain Walter Dyett, I had a curriculum that didn’t have anything to do with band. I kept on begging my English teacher, who knew him personally, “Why don’t you put in a good word for me?” He said, “Yeah, when you learn how to spell and speak

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correctly, I will.” So I was fighting around with this English, and he was helping me. I didn’t care nothing about nothing in school, no sports, no nothing. I just wanted to blow that saxophone.

So I did. He set up a meeting, and I met Captain Walter Dyett. He said, “Kid, what kind of horn you got?” I said, “I got a tenor.” He said, “You know anything about it?” I said, “No sir, but I’m blowing it.” He said, “That’s worse.” He said, “You guys that come here, and all you have is bad habits.” I said, “Oh, Captain, please.” He said, “Don’t call me – call me either Mr. Dyett or Captain Dyett. Don’t call me no ‘Captain’.” I said, “Yes sir.” He said, “I told you what to call me.” He says, “Right away I see we’re not going to get along. You’re one of those wise guys.” I said, “No sir.” He said, “What’d I tell you to call me?” Boy, he sent me through those changes. But he sent everybody through that.

He says, “What I want you to do is come to school tomorrow, and after your school day is over, and if you get passing grades, I’ll listen to you.” See, I had no idea what he meant by “listen to me.” He says, “Now, are you listening to me?” I said, “Yes” – “Uh” – “Captain Dyett. Of course I’m listening.” He says, “That’s better.” He says, “Bring your mouthpiece.” I say, “My mouthpiece?” He says, “Yeah, that thing that fits on the end of your horn, and the reed. Bring it here tomorrow, after I check out your grades.”

So I went there with this mouthpiece. It was about 20 of us with these mouthpieces, making these noises. I said, “Captain, are we supposed . . . ?” He says, “Blow.” He went back in the band room and slammed the door. Left us out in the hall, making all that noise. Beep, beep, beep. Every now and then, after about three weeks, he’d call in a certain person. He listened to that beep beep. Said, “You’re in the band.” The rest of us went, “What . . . ?” He said, “Beep some more.”

I must have beeped for about three weeks. I was about to go nuts. Finally he called me in. He said, “What kind of horn you say you got?” I said, “I don’t know the name of it. The name’s not on it.” He said, “What kind of horn is that, without a name?” I said, “This thing doesn’t have a name.” He said, “Bring it. It’s a tenor.” I said, “Yes sir – yes, Captain Walter Dyett.” He says, “Okay.” He says, “And bring a piece of music that you’re going to read. This is my audition.”

I brought this Great Songs, that thing – oh, how could I ever forget it? Because I was really messing it up. But anyway, when I went in the band room, he had this fellow who played the piano to audition you. He says, “Now, you know how to tune up?” I said, “No sir – no, no Captain Walter Dyett.” He says, “When the piano hits A, you hit B. You know where B is?” I said, “Oh yes sir, I know the fingering.” See, but I didn’t know this was a C-melody saxophone. They’re made like the tenor, but they’re shorter.

So the class had heard about this hotshot, because, see, I had been playing all around the neighborhood. I was known as a back-porch player. I had been on everybody’s back porch playing, jamming. They said, now this guy’s good. He’d heard about this, one of the reasons he was so strict on me. I didn’t know at the time, why he was so strict,

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because he'd already put up with Gene Ammons, and Gene Ammons was a little hotshot around the school [?] at the time. Because he mentioned once, "Oh, another little hotshot."

So when I tuned up – which I had never done, because I just started playing with people. I was very gifted – so when this man hit A, naturally he told me to hit B. So I hit B. Everybody was waiting for this big tenor saxophone player from the other side of town, because I lived way over by King Drive. So I was a big shot. I hit this B as loud as I could, because I always played loud. It was a perfect discord. Everybody waited for a second. Then everybody just hollered, laughing. I didn't know what was wrong. He says – told the piano player, "Hit A again." Of course, I'm supposed to be hitting A with the piano player. I'm hitting B. It's a perfect ninth, and kind of out of tune at that.

So he said, "Wait a minute. What is that raggedy horn that you're playing? What's all the rubber bands stuck on this horn?" He looked at it. He says, "This is a tenor, all right, but it's a tenor in C," and the class just howled. He said, "Now Freeman," he says, "Come back tomorrow." So I went out with my tail between my legs. I was so hurt.

I come back the next day. I say, "I can't afford a horn." I said, "I thought I had a tenor." He said, "Well, you do. It's just – it's a tenor in C, not in B-flat." And of course nobody played a C-melody tenor solo.

Coleman: What was the name of that guy who used to . . . ? Frankie?

Freeman: Trumbauer.

Coleman: Trumbauer, something like that.

Freeman: He was about the only – well, he and Rudy Vallee. But, you know, I wanted to play like Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins.

Coleman: So you needed a real tenor.

Freeman: Yeah, because I was listening to their records.

He said, "Go to the [b ?]." There was one saxophone there. It was a bass saxophone. I had never seen a picture of a bass saxophone. The bass saxophone is about the same height I was. I said, "Captain Walter Dyett, what am I going to do with this?" He said, "You're going to play it." I said, "I am?"

The bass saxophone is this tall, but it doesn't have any kind of sound. It's very soft, and the mouthpiece is this big. I said, oh brother. So I fooled around with that a while. I was coming home so disgruntled. My daddy said, "Boy, I'm going to have to get you a real saxophone." I explained to him the problem.

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He knew a man who had a Conn saxophone, which was probably the best saxophone I ever ran into in my life. But it was silver, and during that era, silver was out. If you didn't – everybody, all the pros, had a gold horn. I said, "Daddy, I can't take this to school. Ain't nobody blowing no silver saxophones in school." He said, "Boy, you take that horn to school and be glad that you got it."

So I took this horn to school. What should have really awakened me was, Captain Dyett said, "Man, this is a great horn." He said, "You should really cherish this horn." But all my protegés and things, my peers, were standing around. They say, "Man, but it's silver." They said, "You just – it's not happening." I said, "I'll fool around here with that thing." That thing had a beautiful, deep sound. I remember that. But I couldn't wait to sell that horn and get a gold horn that didn't sound like nothing, but it was gold.

I think that first horn of my was a – what was the name of it? It was a beginner's horn. I forget the name of that thing. But it was gold. My father almost – he says – when I brought that thing, he said, "What happened to the horn that my friend gave you?" I said, "Daddy, it was silver." I thought he was going to kill me. But he didn't. He just said, aw. He said, "Let's hear the difference." Because even although he wasn't – he didn't play saxophone – he could tell the difference in the sound. The Conn had a – I didn't know then, it was a double B-flat Conn. They don't even sell them any more. You got to go to maybe Europe. You might run into one.

Coleman: I never even heard of that.

Freeman: It's a real deep sounding horn, one of the best tenors ever made

Coleman: You're talking about the silver one?

Freeman: Yeah, the silver one. It's called a double B-flat Conn.

That was me getting started on the saxophone, other than I was playing all of the porches, even before I had a saxophone. With this made thing, I was playing. I could get some music out of it. I was the leader of all these alley bands, they called them. I was run off a lot of back porches. Because if we knew a guy, we could go on his back porch and jam until his mother and father come out there and run us off there, or the neighbors run us off, because we had garbage cans and handmade basses.

Coleman: What were you playing? Just playing by ear?

Freeman: Of course. We were all listening to Count Basie. So we all knew [Freeman sings a riff from *One O'Clock Jump*]. We were all playing those – what do you call that thing? It has tissue paper in it? Something like a . . .

Coleman: Kazoo?

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Freeman: Yeah. We all – we had a handful of those. Just making a lot of noise, full of rhythm. Then we would be run off the back porch. We’d go to somebody else’s, go down, cross the street, get on the back porch. They said, “Get them out of here.” That was my early years, jamming.

Coleman: These records. Did – you all couldn’t have been buying records then. Were you – heard the records with your parents?

Freeman: No, everybody’s playing their parents’ records. But the parents were hip back in that day. The parents all had – Count Basie was in. Duke [Ellington] was in. Jimmie Lunceford was in. And Erskine Hawkins had some great records out. *The Joint is Jumpin’* [Fats Waller]. Everybody knew that. That’s one of the greatest, I think, swing records of all time, *The Joint is Jumpin’*.

Coleman: I’m going to get to that. I’m going to get to some of that stuff.

Freeman: We fooled around and played around. Walter Dyett was so great, until he just put up with all of this stuff and still tried to get you to learn the correct embouchures and to learn how to read correctly. Actually I gave him all the credit in the world, because we were all just full of nonsense, everybody trying to play like the stars of the day.

Coleman: So his thing was more discipline. He was trying to teach you the fundamentals.

Freeman: Exactly, exactly. He – to this day I credit him with any kind of intellect I have on the instrument or in music, from him. He was interested in raising men and women that had some control and discipline. It really comes in handy.

Coleman: Where do you think he got – was he – did he come out of the Army or something? Where did he get that kind of attitude?

Freeman: Yeah, that’s what – they said he was a captain in the Army. He taught at Wendell Phillips [High School] first, while DuSable was being built. Then they transferred him to DuSable.

Coleman: Because I’ve always heard about his discipline, a disciplinarian.

Freeman: Oh yeah. He’d go off. He’d stand for no kidding around, no – and just as hard on ladies as he was men. He just – but they all loved him. He was a good looking guy, and he was well mannered.

Coleman: The cat who taught me, he studied under Dyett too.

Freeman: Oh yeah?

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Coleman: Yeah, Alvin Lawson.

Freeman: Well, then you were taught well.

Coleman: He tried to use the same approach.

Your family, what kind of economic situation were they in? Were they middle class?

Freeman: Middle class.

Coleman: They – it sounds like, if they can buy a saxophone and stuff, had a radio . . .

Freeman: My father really didn't want us to play music. He changed after a while. At first, when we were real small, he took it as a nice thing to keep you out of trouble.

Coleman: To keep you occupied.

Freeman: But then as he – as we grew older, he changed. See, because my father was a Chicago policeman. So he – I guess he – because music – like I said, this was an era where the music was the thing. A lot of musicians were making, for that time, a lot of money. There was always a lot of ladies around. The hours were fast. Pot was just coming in.

Coleman: What was coming in?

Freeman: Pot. Reefer.

Coleman: I thought you said pop.

Freeman: I was just trying to clean it up a little bit, because one of the hit songs was “Dreamt about a reefer, 12” [five] “feet long.” Now you imagine, that’s on the radio. So he got kind of – he said, “Maybe you guys should be doctors or lawyers or something.” Naturally we – I was the only one in music, because my elder brother, he took the violin and tossed it aside. He was a good basketball player and a great golfer at an early age. So he kind of went into sports a little bit. Although I was an excellent football player and baseball player, I still had this horn on my mind. So I think he was trying to get us to not be so one-dimensional, not that he had any big thing against music, but he just – because he played trombone himself.

Coleman: But the main ways out of the – the main ways that people went back then, are you saying it was sports and music were the two big . . . ?

Freeman: Yeah, oh yeah. And of course singing was always very popular.

Coleman: I mean among black . . .

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Freeman: It was just mostly music then, because the big bands would come through. Some of them had these big colorful buses. We'd run behind the bus. And they all played baseball. Each band had a team.

Coleman: I'm going to get to that too.

Freeman: I won't get into that. Because that's kind of funny.

Coleman: I was going to get into that.

Freeman: But that's when I was in my teens, early teens.

Coleman: After high – you graduated from DuSable?

Freeman: Oh yeah.

Coleman: After that, you didn't go to college or anything like that?

Freeman: I went to Wilson Junior College for one year. Then I was inducted into the service.

Coleman: Okay. I'll get to that too.

I know that your older brother played drums eventually. He got . . .

Freeman: He was very late coming in. George even came in before him, although he was the elder of the family.

Coleman: George is two years younger than you?

Freeman: About four.

Coleman: But George started in music before Bruz.

Freeman: Oh yeah. Bruz was – because Bruz came to me one time and asked me. I think he was 27. He said, "Am I too old to play music?" I said, "Oh no, man, you can always." He said, "I mean, I want to play as well as you play." "Well now, that's another story." Because Bruz – I looked up. Bruz was with Sarah Vaughan after he played about two days. He was really gifted. He was by far the most gifted one of any of us. He picked up some drum sticks. I say, "Bruz, it's going to take you a couple of years." He say okay and looked at me. He's playing, and then day before yesterday, he was traveling with Sarah Vaughan and had hands. I said, "What? Bruz, what?" He said, "I always wanted to do something, but I never knew it was to play the drums." He was a natural. But that was later on.

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Coleman: But George picked it up just behind you.

Freeman: Yeah, and George – when I went into the service, George started playing. When I come back four years later, George is one of the leading guitar players in the city. He's working at the Pershing with Pres [Lester Young] and everybody. He was very gifted.

This thing, I guess – see, my mother's father was a very good guitarist and preacher and tailor. He worked at the Detroit Ford company for years. Boy, this man could look. That picture over there, that's he on the end and my grandmother, my mother's mother, on this side. He made all those clothes. So I guess that just ran in the family, and we didn't know it, music and tailoring and whatnot, because I ended up going to tailoring school and got a diploma. I got so I could make a suit in two or three hours, but I later – I went – I just kept on blowing this horn. Next thing I know, I've been in music for the past 50 years.

Coleman: Next thing you know. So what were . . . ? Let me get some of these people's names – complete names – on record. I guess we start with your parents' names.

Freeman: My father's name was George Thomas Freeman, Sr. My mother's name was Earle – E-a-r-l-e – but I was named after her – Karee – that's K-a-r-double-e. Grandberry was her maiden name. Of course she married my father, Freeman. Bruz's name is Eldridge Edmond Freeman.

Coleman: That's your older brother.

Freeman: Yeah. My name is Earl LaVon. But it's not L-a-v-o-n. It's L-a-capital V-o-n. capital L-a, capital V-o-n Freeman.

Coleman: Where did they get the LaVon from?

Freeman: That was my father's best friend. His name was LaVon. Because I asked himself, to how – where he get that goofy name from? He told me to hush.

Then, George, he's a junior, George Thomas Freeman, Jr.

Coleman: You know your grandparents' names?

Freeman: My grandfather's name was – the best I can do with him is William Grandberry.

Coleman: On your mother's side.

Freeman: Yeah. His mother's name was – I didn't know her maiden name. What was her first name? I should know that. She was almost a full-blooded Indian.

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Coleman: I always thought you had Native American in you.

Freeman: Really?

Coleman: Yeah, I could kind of see that.

Freeman: It might have come from her. What was her name? Boy, she – she'd slap me for not – oh, Janey – Jane. Jane, I'll say, Grandberry, because I can't remember her maiden name. They had eight children. My mother was the second. She was the second daughter. The one I was named after, that Vonski stuff comes from my mother's youngest sister. Her name was Teneski.

Coleman: Oh, that's where you got all that "ski"?

Freeman: She's the only one still living. Boy, if I told you their names, because the boy's names – dig these names. The elder boy's name was Picolla. Then the next one was Blanco.

Coleman: It sounds like cartoons.

Freeman: Yeah. Wait a minute. The third one's name was Saverra, and the fourth one's name was Farazil.

Coleman: Fanzil?

Freeman: Farazil. Now, the girl's names were a little bit better. My mother's eldest sister – because she was the second girl – her name was Viva. My mother's name was Earle. The next daughter's name was – oh man, it's – Baymeta.

Coleman: She has an imagination.

Freeman: And the last one, the one who's living, her name's Teneski. I used to be just in love with her, puppy love. I used to just follow her around, pull on her apron strings. They used to call me Little Ski. So that's where all that come from, from years and years and years and years back.

Coleman: And your father's? Do you know your father's mother and father?

Freeman: Oh yeah. Let's see now. You know, it's funny. Her name was Lila Freeman, and his name was Dave Freeman.

Coleman: Her maiden name was Freeman?

Freeman: No. I never knew her maiden name.

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Coleman: I can't remember my grandmother's maiden name.

Freeman: I knew it, but I just – I'd have to look it up or something. And then Calvin Freeman. That was my father's brother. His sister's name was Margaret Kendell.

Coleman: I'm not going to go real far into that, because I don't think we're doing genealogy here. Just want the grandparents.

You told me a little bit about the kind of music that they listened to in your house, at home.

Freeman: Oh, they were strictly swingers. Of course my father and mother – see, my mother loved church music. She's been sanctified all her life. Her mother before her. And my father's mother was sanctified.

Coleman: Would she listen to records of church music, too? Or just . . .

Freeman: At that time they really weren't recording church music, that music. That really started when they started gospel music. See, because actually the recordings that were made then – there wasn't but a handful of people recording at that time, to my knowledge.

Coleman: But they weren't into Bessie Smith and that kind of thing, blues?

Freeman: No. My father never was much of a blues person.

Coleman: Because I know Chicago had a big blues . . .

Freeman: It's so strange, and he was stationed on the west side of town, where the blues was. I used to ask him about that. He said, "Blues are fine," but he was crazy about Guy Lombardo. He'd play all this music. He had these – he's playing WGN, WBBM, and WMAQ. These were all stations that were playing all of the bands that were coming downtown.

Coleman: So these were all radio stations, before they became t.v. stations.

Freeman: Yeah. He said – because I used to ask him. I says, "You dig that?" He says, "Well, you know," he says, "I'm not one dimensional." That was one of his words. He said – and he loved concert music, which was kind of rare at that time. But his idol was – out of all of the guys, the idol's name was this great singer, Paul Robeson. Oh man, he was – when he come to town, everybody went to see him. He had this robust voice, this bass, nobody had heard too much. They heard a lot of baritone singers, but no bass singers. He had a bass voice. And I guess he was someone that they looked up to. So that was – the records that my father liked at that time – and my mother. Her tastes ran right

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on along with his – they all liked concert music, what we would call pop music now, and the bands.

Coleman: Had he ever heard James Reese Europe? Do you remember?

Freeman: I've heard of him, but I never had any records on him, that I can remember. Because I got all of his – well, it doesn't make any difference now, because the basement used to flood when we first moved here 50 years ago. I had all those records downstairs. One day I looked at them. They were under water and warped. I just dried them off and kept them. But they're not – they're unplayable. Because I brought his collection here, because he was so crazy about it. I even had his Victrola box, the box that the Victrola was in.

Coleman: The one you . . .

Freeman: Yeah, the one without the arm. I kept it for a long – it hasn't been too long ago that I threw it away, that and my mother's sewing machine. She had one of the foot pedal sewing machines. I never should have thrown that away, because I haven't bought a decent electric one since. That thing is so good. You pedal it. But it could really sew. I put it out in – simple – put it out in the alley.

Coleman: One of them big black ones, heavy iron almost.

Freeman: Yeah. They're worth big money now. Some things didn't get better, you know. Just faster, maybe.

Coleman: So as far as bands, like Fletcher Henderson and – your father loved all that kind of stuff.

Freeman: My father, he knew all the members in those big bands.

Coleman: Duke's band.

Freeman: He was crazy about musicians.

Coleman: Was Count Basie's band big then?

Freeman: Oh yeah. He used to come to the Regal. See, all the bands came to the Regal, and the Savoy, and later on, the Tivoli. The Tivoli didn't last too long.

Coleman: I never even heard of that, Tivoli.

Freeman: That's right between 64th and 65th [streets] on Cottage [Grove Avenue], on the east side of the street.

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Coleman: All these joints were on Cottage?

Freeman: It was a lot of them, but most of the places were on 63rd Street, from State [Street] over to the lake.

Coleman: The Pershing [Hotel] was around there?

Freeman: Yeah, the Pershing was on Cottage Grove also. It's starting at 65th Street. Then it went to about 66th. That was past the belt where everybody used to go, because one time the cabs – the jitney cabs, they called them – you could ride from 31st Street to 63rd Street. Those were two turnarounds, on King Drive and on Indiana [Avenue]. King Drive went north and south, and Indiana went north and south.

Coleman: It wasn't one way back then.

Freeman: No, and you could turn – now, when you got past 63rd Street, you were on your own.

Coleman: Why's that?

Freeman: That was the turnaround. They had a big park there, sort of like Riverview, called White City. Then later on that moved back further and further and further and further.

Coleman: So you mean a big amusement park out there.

Freeman: Yeah, and finally the big bands started coming there. But that used to be the turnaround.

McKee Fitzhugh was so forward thinking, who used to book bands. He got a lounge called the D. J. Lounge, and it was past 63rd Street. So he more or less broke the bar open. Then he started putting bands in the Pershing, because the Pershing used to be all one way, and they changed it. He broke – he just opened up things on the South Side. He was a great impresario.

Coleman: What was his name again?

Freeman: McKee Fitzhugh.

Coleman: Fitz-?

Freeman: F-i-t-z-h-u-g-h, Fitzhugh.

Coleman: He was a white guy?

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Freeman: No, no. He was light skinned, but no. He was a great producer and impresario.

Coleman: At that time, was there a status difference between light-skinned blacks and dark skin, something like that? Was there a little bit of that happening?

Freeman: I never saw too much of that, but it was always that – you know, this jazz music has been funny. If you could play, man, you could play, because it wasn't that many folks that could play, you know, that could really play. See, that's the reason why – like, a big band would have one or two big stars. Everybody knew them. Because if they came to town without – like if Count Basie come here without Pres, he might as well not come. Everybody's waiting for Pres.

Then they'd go out and play baseball, once or twice a week. Like they'd come in on a Monday, and play Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, on through Sunday, and they'd always play ball, maybe Friday and Saturday. Guys that never got up early would go out and watch, to see these guys play Club DeLisa. Club DeLisa's band was always the band they'd play against, Red Saunders's band. He was a big time local guy. He had the biggest name local, speaking of anybody, because he's playing at Club DeLisa. He'd been there for 25 years. Everybody knew he could have gone to New York. Red Saunders looked almost like he was white. He was very fair.

Coleman: What did he play?

Freeman: Drums. All the big shows came to Club DeLisa. He was on a par with the Grand Terrace and the Rhumboogie, all the big nightclubs that were here, and he had local guys. Sonny Cohn was in that band for – Sonny Cohn, I should say, was in that band for years. He had a great band.

He'd always play [baseball against] Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, whoever, Duke Ellington, and we'd go out there and watch, because they couldn't really play, but these were the stars. Pres was . . .

Coleman: You mean, they couldn't play baseball.

Freeman: Not really. Pres was a pitcher. Pres was something else anyway. He called everybody else Presarini. So he would pitch. He used to knock us out, because Pres would wind up and do all this with the ball and rub it down. "Ah, now Presarini is going to throw his fastball. Nobody possibly is going to hit Pres." Pres threw a pitch, and they would lose the ball. Everybody would die laughing. Because they hit Pres's ball. That's the hardest hit ball I've ever seen, and Pres is supposed to be this great pitcher. Aw man, those were some funny days, just great days.

Coleman: How old were you when you used to – you used to go to all these baseball games and stuff?

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Freeman: Yeah. I was about 14. I was one of the main ones. I was down in front, hollering his solos out, because we knew his solos.

Coleman: Pres is, what?, about 10 years older than you? Something like that? Or maybe a little bit more.

Freeman: No, Pres was the same, exactly the same age as my father.

Coleman: So your father must have had you pretty young then.

Freeman: No, see, my father died – got killed, actually. He was killed on the force. That's the reason why you used to see that picture up there. See that picture, with his star, retired? He was killed in 1949. He was 49. Pres died in '59.

Coleman: He was killed in '49? Or he was 49 years old? Which one? Both?

Freeman: See, he was 49. They were both born in 1900. So Pres was – he died in 1959, and he was 59 years old. My father died – got killed – in '49, and he was 49 years old. I might be wrong. He might have gotten killed in '47. I just can't remember. I hate to even think about it.

Coleman: I'm going to move on. That was the early stuff. They've got a category here, social influences. I'll skip some of these.

Freeman: That's all right. Go ahead.

Coleman: Talk about the influence and impact on you of different things. One is the Great Migration. By that I assume is meant the great migration of blacks from the South to the North.

Freeman: Oh yeah. I guess that had the same effect on me it had on everybody else. It was a beautiful thing to see, because you see, at that time they had a lot of work here, because the stockyards were going full blast downtown, and the railroad – Chicago at that time was the railroad center of the world.

Coleman: And shipping too.

Freeman: Yeah, and then the meatpackers were all downtown, Swift and all those different people that packed meat. So, between the trains and the stock market [*sic*: stockyards], everything was just – it was a lot of money brought into the communities, and it was a lot of work. Everybody was – that was one of the best periods.

Coleman: Was a lot of this stuff controlled by mafia, a lot of those things?

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Freeman: They said even the nightclubs were, but I never saw any of it, really, because by that time I was working in nightclubs. I started in nightclubs when I was 12 years old, not in Chicago, but in Gary, Indiana. Some funny stories concerning all that too, because that was – everybody was wondering. See, I picked up the saxophone, and I could play. It was eerie. When I was very young I could play. Because the man across – I was staying at 5418 South King Drive. It was in a big courtway.

Coleman: What was King Drive called then, again?

Freeman: South Parkway.

Coleman: South Parkway, okay.

Freeman: To make the story correct, I was staying at 5418 South Parkway. It was a big courtway building I was in. The man across the way was a drummer, which I didn't even know. At that time, I'd play my horn anywhere. I'd go out and sit on the porch, because I was so good at that time, I could play softly. The neighbors would enjoy it. They'd ask me to play, instead of saying, "Shut up." So I'd go out there and play. My mother said, "Bring that horn into the house. Out there showing off."

He heard me play, and he came over. He said, "Man, you play the saxophone like that?" I say, "Oh sure, I'm good." He said, "Yeah, well I know a man who – I think I'll hire you." He was another saxophone player. Sure enough, he came by the house and asked my mother. My mother said, "Of course he's not going to play in any nightclub." So I hung onto my mother. I always could get my way with her. I wouldn't even talk to Daddy. I hung on her. I said, "Oh, Momma, let me go. Let me go." So I asked the man how much it was going to pay. He said \$2. Man, that's \$14 a week, seven nights. I said oh, that was all the money in the world. My mother said, "What?" Said, "You're out – no." I said, "Mother, but think of that \$14." She said, "That does sound pretty good, because I didn't think you could make anything for blowing that little raggedy horn you got."

I asked my father. My father said no. So I went back to Mother. She said, "What time does this place end?" She was talking to me. I said, "Mother, I don't know anything about this job." She said, "You have that man come and talk to me." Now this man was a good-looking cat. He was Cuban, a real good-looking dude. He played alto [sax]. His name was Fred. Fred said – he talked to my mother and put his magic on, and she said, "I have to talk to his father." She said, "But I got to find out something from you." Say, "You're going to be certain that this boy, when he leaves that stage, go right in that dressing room." He say, "Oh sure, ma'am." Says, "You're not going to let him consort with any women." He said, "Oh no, no." Said, "You're not going to let him drink none of that whiskey or none of them bad cigarettes." He said, "Oh no, no, nothing like that." He said, "I'll watch him." She said, "Come back here tomorrow."

I'm on pins and needles, because I'm going to get this first professional job, making \$2 a night. My father sure enough said, "Earle" – that's my mother's name – say, "if you think

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he's going to be all right." She said, "I've got a good feeling about it, plus that boy, he's driving me crazy with that saxophone," say, "He needs to get out of here and blow some."

So, the first thing, she asks this man the same thing the next night, and he say, "Oh yes, ma'am. You asked me before." See, neither one of us knew what Mother had in mind. He said, "May I go now, Mrs. Freeman?" She said no. She said, "Here's a note. Sign this note." He say, "Note?"

Coleman: So you had a contract.

Freeman: Yeah. She had down there everything she had told him about not smoking, not drinking, not consorting with any ladies, and go straight to that dressing room. She had it down. She says, "Sign it." He said okay, and he signed it.

So, the first night I went there, the man just said, "You can't come in here." Of course he was back at the car, and I had – helping the drummer carry the drums. He said, "Son, you can't come in here." So he came, and he said, "That's our new saxophone player, going to play with me." This band was odd, because he had a trumpet, drums, and two saxophones. I ain't never played in a band like that. I say, "Where is your piano player and your bass player." He say, "We don't use those." I didn't know nothing about harmonizing. He said, "I'll teach you." He said, "And for Pete's sake, tomorrow night, put something on your lip." So next time I had to paint on this . . .

Coleman: A moustache.

Freeman: Yeah. He said, "That doesn't help too much." I guess – you know, I was 12 years old. But I was hip. I was fast. So I made it about four months out there, and then the club got raided and closed.

Coleman: So you got your first professional gig when you were 12.

Freeman: Coconut Grove. I'll never forget it, on Route 1220. Sticks out in my mind like it was yesterday.

Coleman: This thing with the Great Migration: one of the things I noticed, when I was growing up, was that there seemed to be a class thing happening in Chicago among the black people. There were this – this is just something I noticed from listening to people talking and everything – there seemed to be a kind of difference between the blacks who had been in Chicago a while, whose families had been in Chicago a while, been up North, who were second, third generation and all that, and the blacks who had just got here from down South. I don't know if that was – was that something that was happening at that time? Do you even know what I'm talking about?

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Freeman: Yeah, but you know one thing: I didn't really notice it. Like for instance, my father was a policeman. He was the kind of cat – my father was black on black. Then my mother looked almost white. You met my mother. So I guess between the two of them, they just evened things out, because he never talked nothing about race, and she didn't either. See, when we were living – especially 4909 [Champlain Avenue] – one of my best friends – although we fought every day, two times a day – was Elmer, and he was Polish. I had several other Irish friends, because we fought all the time. My father used to separate us. We'd kiss and make up, go play some more games, and fight some more. So we were – and then my father had a lot of white friends. So they'd come by the house. He'd go by their house. See, a lot of that stuff – at that time, times were so good, with the stock markets [stockyards] going, the railroads running, and the meat markets downtown.

Coleman: So you're talking about like mid-'30s.

Freeman: Yeah, or right after the crash.

Coleman: Right after the Depression.

Freeman: And then the Depression evened out a lot of stuff.

Coleman: Prohibition had been repealed at that time, by that point?

Freeman: Right. The Depression, like '26, '27, '28, and '29, that cooled out a lot of people, because a lot of people lost everything they had. It's just like, say, floods, like when they had all these floods in Texas and things. Everybody just got together, forgot about race, because the floods and things are bigger than anybody. You see mother nature come through and tear up everything, and all the hurricanes and stuff. People just forget about color. It's more about surviving against these terrific forces. So I think that's what happened.

Now I saw something like what you're talking about during [?], the '60s, when rock-and-roll came in. Rock-and-roll took out jazz. It was so many people playing music that didn't even know music, but if you could sing or do anything and get a record out there that was good rock, you had it made. This cause a whole lot of problems. A lot of musicians got to disliking one another, which was really silly, because times change, and when times change, time is greater than any man. When times change, hey, if you don't jump on the bandwagon, then you got to wait for time to change again. It may be – you may be long gone before it change, because who knows when – because I remember when jazz musicians were – people were running around, getting their autographs and stuff. When you'd play, people would invite you over for dinner. They had all your little records, if you didn't have out but two records. Everybody had a – that was a common thing. Everybody had all Count Basies, all [?]. Everybody had all the big bands' records.

Now, you go over to somebody's house, they may never play a big band. Times have changed. The rock cats came in. Another thing, they was keeping that beat. Everybody

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likes to move. Nobody has forgotten yet how to move. And what a lot of that listening music, with everybody doing like this, like in a trance, that was cool, but a lot of folks was out there shaking booties. That's what's happening now. Where this will end, I don't know.

Coleman: You went through several questions there, so I don't even have to . . .

Freeman: Oh, I did?

Coleman: Yeah. I can skip a lot of questions. I was going to ask you about the effect that you – because this question's down there, but you might have never even thought about this: the Harlem Renaissance. I don't know if that would have had any effect on you here so much.

Freeman: No, not really, because – the only thing, when I think about Harlem – of course I always did say that New York is the place to go to play music, if you're serious, real serious, because that's where all the record companies are, and if you – it's very difficult to get big in music without being with a big company. That's just the way the world is set up. I don't say anything's wrong with it or anything is that good about it, but it's just life. New York is, what? There's three million people here in Chicago. It's seven million in Manhattan. So hey, plus all the outlets, the distributors and things all over the world. So if anybody wants to stay in Chicago or any of these big cities, Cleveland, Detroit, whatever, and make it, they're going to have a hard way to go, if they're going to leave out New York. This is just not my opinion. This is just cold facts.

So, when I think about Harlem, I think about how everything was centered there at one time. And then when I looked up, and I see the Apollo on t.v. today, it's a whole different set up. They're doing a whole different set now. So, hey. But I don't knock it. I just say, that's what time is. So if you want to be like me and just suffer through it, that's one way of doing it. Or else you can get out there and join it. That's another way they're doing it. Or else you can sit back and gripe and complain, which is another way. I don't say any of those ways are the right way, because I don't know. I'm not God. I don't know what's really right. I'm flawed that way. But I do say this: that if you will look back at the history of music, in my opinion, things go in cycles.

Coleman: I believe that too.

Freeman: No matter how much you squawk. Like I remember when the first – not hip-hop, because – what was the first one?

Coleman: R-and-b?

Freeman: No, the first one concerning hip-hop.

Coleman: Rap?

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Freeman: Yeah, rap. I noticed that when cats was first rapping, I thought that was great, because to sit there and hear somebody just make up stuff. A lot of these cats didn't know music, per se, but to think of the mind it takes. I couldn't do it, with all of my training in music, sit there and just rap, rap, rap, rap. Then, when they diluted it and made it into hip-hop, then it seemed like it went very commercial and went somewhere else again. But that's what time it is. So, everybody who don't agree with what time it is, they can join forces. But they're not going to change time. I've lived long enough, my little 77 years, I've lived long enough to know that, boy, you ain't changing time. You can squawk, you can cry, you can pray, you can do anything else, but time is – when it's time for something, that's it. You can weather it, if you're strong enough or if you live long enough. A lot of people say, "You sound like you know what's happening. Why don't you get with what's happening?" I say, "If I could do it as good as the cats that's doing it, maybe I would." I say, "But I can't." Ain't no way in the world for me to go out there and rap, and I would look silly wearing those kind of clothes. So I say, see, I can't do it. If I can't do it – like I heard Pres and them, I figured I could add something to that, which of course was kind of foolish too. Bird, I said, maybe I can get good enough to add something to Bird's thing. Or Trane, I said, maybe I can add something, which is kind of foolish in a way, because really, you ain't going to add nothing. You can just put your stuff to it. So when I saw these cats with this new kind of music, with rap and everything, I said, I can't do that. I said, the only thing I can probably do is imitate it and be a poor imitation, because that's not my mindset. I'm hearing all these changes. I'm hearing all this other stuff. I can't go back to hearing no one change again. I just can't do it. I try to explain this to some people. They say, "Oh man, you can do it." I say, no. They say, "What are you going to do?" I say, "I'll just keep doing what I'm doing." Say, "Maybe it'll change, and if it doesn't change, so what?"

Coleman: This is – you're talking about in the '80s, when all this was starting to happen?

Freeman: Yeah, first was happening, yeah. So now it's been going on, what? – about 20 years. I hear cats. Boy, they – like, you brought some guys by the club, didn't hardly even know my name.

Coleman: Yeah, Kokayi and Sub-Zero.

Freeman: Those cats sit there and made up stuff about me, and it's just – and you were playing one of the latest tunes. You were playing, I think [Freeman hums the first phrase of *Mr. P.C.*] one of Trane's tunes, and these cats was doing it to death. Everybody said, "How are those cats doing it?" I said, "I don't have a clue."

Coleman: They really enjoyed that set too.

Freeman: Oh man, that was . . .

Coleman: They thought you were fantastic.

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Freeman: Really? Well, thank them for that. It was amazing to me.

Coleman: And they never – I had told them about you before, but that’s – me telling them is one thing.

Freeman: But they had never been in my presence.

Coleman: No, and they didn’t know that much about that music, but they were improvisers . . .

Freeman: That’s right.

Coleman: . . . and that was the connection, and they can hear rhythmically some things. So they just dive right in.

Freeman: I just thought that it’s one of the most remarkable things I ever heard, especially at that tempo that you set, and these cats didn’t miss a beat, and it was all rhyming. They did something about me. I said, for Pete’s sake. I went over and grabbed and hugged them and kissed them.

Coleman: Yeah, they start throwing your name in.

Freeman: Yeah, it was – now, as fluent as I am in what I do, I can’t do that. I wouldn’t even know how to go about doing it, because my mindset is somewhere else.

Coleman: That’s kind of a cross between poetry, in a way. It’s somewhat connected to that. It’s kind of a street version of it, but it’s somewhat connected to that. Also, there was a group out when I was younger. You remember a group called The Last Poets? They did a lot of things. It was more socially conscious stuff, although there are some rappers doing that too. They also – they did a lot of that stuff to congas and things like that, a lot of that same thing. Also, there were some people in r-and-b who would – they would sing, and then they would stop singing and then do a little rap here and there. Even when I was real little, I used to hear James Brown use the word “rap.” Then you had people were rapping their names and all this kind of stuff. A lot of these kids – I remember what happened in the ’80s is that there was this nostalgic looking back to a certain period. There was looking back to the ’60s. A lot of that developed – it was their version of that. They weren’t really living then, but the black exploitation movies, the *Superfly*, *Kung Fu*, and all of that stuff. They were drawing on that second hand, through their parents and [?] it up. The culture that came out of that was their version of that. Of course they can’t recreate the same thing. So they created something different.

That was one thing that was happening. Also, the thing that was – I was one of the last group of people, when I was in high school, where bands and things like that were really – with instruments, where there would be band rooms, would have instruments and all

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this, like what you were just describing. That went out, a little while after I left high school, because all over the country, the music departments start slashing budgets – the budgets started getting slashed in the schools, and music was one of the first things that go. So I talk to a lot of these young kids, rappers and stuff like that. They say, when they went to high school, there was no bands with instruments and all this kind of stuff. So they started, you know, beating on rocks, grabbing record players, or whatever they can do, to make music. They still had the feeling to make music. So a lot of what was happening in New York in the late '70s, very late '70s, early '80s, a lot of that stuff came out of the Bronx and all those places, because a lot of the school budgets were being cut and things like that. So basically they were just creating with whatever they could – whatever they had at their disposal. People throughout history have always done that.

Freeman: That's right. The same way that I did.

Coleman: Yeah, when you cut up your father's thing.

Freeman: That's right.

Coleman: The same concept, yeah.

Freeman: You know, Steve, the last time I heard you real good, other than when you came here, was when I heard you in Paris. Do you remember that?

Coleman: Yeah. I was just talking about it.

Freeman: He fitted right in this music. I was amazed. He's blowing this music to death. They're rapping and carrying on, and he's playing. I say, now wait a minute. Because I ain't hearing nothing.

Coleman: I hear what you're saying.

Freeman: I'm trying. Everybody's saying how advanced my brain is on this stuff. I'm saying, now wait a minute. When did this stuff get by me? And then when I thought back, I remember how a guy used to come and listen to me, and they would say, "What are you doing?" So it's the same thing, as these different eras pass you by. If you try to – see, he's almost a part of that thing, because the music was fading out when you . . .

Coleman: Just because of my age, yeah.

Freeman: When you try to do something that's not your thing, you generally fail, because I think that some things, when you perfect them to a certain level, they become classic. Then, that's it. It's like, for instance – of course this is – well, yeah, maybe it will work, what I'm getting ready to say – like, the Model T was a classic. They'd finally got this – it was the Model A, and they'd fooled around with it, Ford. Then they perfected the Model T. Now if you get out here and ride a Model T down the street, I say, "What's he

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riding a Model T down the street?” But that’s a classic car from that era. It was perfect. Of course Ford’s making a great car today, I guess that’s good for this era.

Coleman: I know what you mean. It was the highest expression of that particular thing at that time.

Freeman: When something gets to be a classic, it simply means that, in my view, that that thing has reached the epitome of where it’s going. In order for that thing to change, you – say, like for instance, I’ll say right now, okay, I’m going to explore rap and hip-hop. I would have to get a whole new hitching post. You see what I mean? And then maybe I might not succeed, because the way I’ve got this thing I’m doing now, I can pursue this, but I don’t know whether it’s going to go anywhere or not. It might go straight to noise, because if you mess around with a classical thing too much, I’m already writing these half-diminished and micro-diminished and things. If it gets too hip, it’s going to be like – nobody’s going to understand it. Plus, it won’t be new anyway. Because look at Chinese music. That’s all kind of semitones and microtones. When we hear it, we say, “What is that?” Well, maybe that’s an advanced form of classical music that happened maybe back in a billion years ago. Who knows? Maybe the music advanced so far, until it went past the human ear. You understand what I’m saying? So the way I look at the way music is going now, because it’s so – I remember when I first went to Europe. There were a lot of players there that were playing outside. People . . .

Coleman: You’re talking about in the ’70s?

Freeman: Yeah. People here didn’t really want to hear this. But now these cats are coming here regularly. Everybody’s, “Wow.” But this is something that Sun Ra and them did years ago, and he couldn’t make \$5 off it. This is – I’m merely trying to say that, who fights time and wins?

Coleman: One of the reasons I wanted to do this project with you is because there’s so many people who I know, people my age or maybe younger, who have really gotten a lot out of the things that you’ve done, the little sessions you run and everything. You may just think that you’re going ahead and doing your thing. But for us, we weren’t back in that time. We weren’t there. So in a sense, it’s like there – people like you are – in a sense, it’s like a chain link. You’re our link to that period. So it’s not only just that I’m listening to your music for you, but also for all the things that you’ve heard, that I’ll never hear, for all the things that you’ve experienced. Because I hear all that in your music.

Freeman: I understand.

Coleman: I don’t just hear you playing *What is this Thing Called Love?* or whatever song you pick. It’s not that I just hear that. I’m hearing the whole history of a certain thing. Naturally I can hear it from other people too, but when you get a really great player, you hear much – the music goes a lot deeper than just, well, a guy’s playing great

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today, and the next day, oh, he doesn't sound so good. I know there's some people sitting there drinking. They can say, "Oh yeah, Von sounds great today." Next day they come in, "He played better last week." I hear it different. I hear the whole thing of what you're doing as – it's a living experience. It's history, but at the same time, I hear you're still experimenting, still messing with the music, still doing things.

The thing that you mentioned about the hip-hop thing, it's interesting, because the sound that you're dealing with is your life. It's what you really know. If you just jumped and did something else, the same as if I just jumped and did something else, that's a different thing. But within this thing that you know, there's lots of room to experiment. There's lots of room to change things, or whatever, and I get a lot out of that. I could take it, and take it another direction. Another guy could take it, and take it another direction. It's like the thing you were telling me last time we spoke, when you said you've got some guy like Charlie Parker, and five guys could be influenced by Charlie Parker, but the five of them don't sound like each other. But you could still hear how they go back to Bird, because they may be influenced by different aspects of – each person hears it different.

Freeman: You put it so well, Steve. That's the truth.

Coleman: So the same thing is true of you. I hear one thing when you play, because it's being filtered through my experience. I hear a certain thing. Of course, I hear it different than you yourself hear it. Then another guy hears something else. When you heard us in Paris, so much of that is coming from you, even though you may think that you don't hear it. So it's just – this thing gets – there's this continuum that goes on. That's why I'm glad the Smithsonian's doing this, because when you get these histories and these stories of these people and everything, that's really, really important.

Freeman: I'm beginning to see clearer what you mean, because I was beginning to get – I don't know. I was beginning to lose it. I say, this thing, where is it going?

Coleman: You're talking about music.

Freeman: Yeah, and then people, because what good is music if nobody is listening, if you're not reaching people? Then you say to yourself – like, I'm a great believer in people, because people have hearts, and I know that it's a few things that are the same in everybody. That's their hearts and blood. All hearts are similar. All blood is red. So this is two things that are very similar in people. I noticed that – like, when I was in Japan, one man, he was just going nuts. I didn't think that I was having a good . . .

Coleman: While you were playing?

Freeman: Yeah. I didn't think that I was having a good night at all. He was just leaning on – he inspired me. He was leaning on to – I couldn't understand what he was saying. He was speaking in Japanese. But he was just elated. He had his son with him. Then he

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started following me and Chico. We was playing these different hours and places. I say, it's so strange. I know he don't know nothing about what I'm doing, musical.

Coleman: And you can't even talk to him.

Freeman: Yeah, and he's telling me. He had me shake his son's hand and everything. He's shaking my hand. He's saying, ahhhhh, ahhhhh. I'm sitting there. I'm saying, ahhhhh. I'm trying to file a reed. I wasn't at all pleased with my sound or nothing else. But it was just – and I run into this time and time again. So I say to myself, this thing is deep.

Coleman: You wonder – you find yourself wondering, what is really touching him?

Freeman: You say to yourself – if you can get past the money part of it. Some – I've seen some musicians who just couldn't.

Coleman: Most.

Freeman: Yeah, a lot of them, they just can't get past that money, and this is what it does to them: I think it closed the door.

Coleman: Yeah, retards their growth.

Freeman: It just closed that door, because creativity has nothing to do with money, nothing. It has nothing whatso- – it's the weirdest thing in the world, to go around and see. A cat can be poor as a church mouse and play glorious horn, glorious. Then I've seen guys get a hold of some money, and all of a sudden, they can't play. Kids that could play, was playing glorious, and all of a sudden, the piano player, his thumb won't work no more, or the trumpet player, he gets a big scar on his lip, the saxophone player, he gets one on his lip, teeth fall out or something, and you say to yourself, what force is it that is guiding creativity?

I've been out here long enough to run into some funny things. Once I was playing in Amsterdam. I had this horn going. I really had this horn going. I felt it myself. I said, boy. I said, this horn. I said, I got to stop, because this horn was getting to me. I was playing stuff, I didn't even know what I was playing. But it just sounded good to me. I felt free. This horn was just – I was free, great God all mighty. I was free at last. I had this horn. People were hollering and carrying on. I say, I got to stop. I just couldn't play anymore. So I stopped.

Now this is my right hand, the man above or the lady above, the man and woman above, that – Steve, I stopped. I wasn't drinking or nothing. I was free as a bird. So as far as I'm concerned, I stopped. A few people asked me in the group I was with, say, "Man, why did you stop? Man, you was doing it." I said, "I was full," because I could not blow anymore. Say, "It was beginning to be painful." I say, "If I had blown another note, I

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don't know. Maybe I'd have dropped dead or anything." I said, "I couldn't play anymore."

Okay. Now I come back to Amsterdam about – maybe about – oh, let's see. I was with the two tenor players. Who were they named? Anyway, I was with two tenor players. It was three of us. I came back. A guy came up and say, "I want to give you a tape of your best night." Said, "You probably never had another night." I say, "Oh man, I remember, I stopped playing." He said, "No, you didn't." I said, "Man, I stopped playing." He said, "No, you didn't." If that tape wasn't in a box with those other 3,000, I would find that tape and play it for you.

Coleman: Now you really are making me want to go get it.

Freeman: I kept on playing. The horn kept on playing. It turned me around. It mystified me. And it wasn't that I was doing that much on this saxophone. I've heard times I thought that I played better. But I was talking about my inner feeling and the way the people around me was screaming and hollering. I didn't stop. Or, at least, the horn didn't stop. I haven't figured that out to this day. I've got two or three events in my life I haven't figured out to this day.

Coleman: Did it scare you, or just . . . ?

Freeman: Oh, it scared me. It turned me around. Because I know I stopped, but it's on that tape. I finished that chorus, stopped.

Coleman: That would scare me too.

Freeman: I said, now, wait a minute. So this set me to thinking that when you are playing your best, creatively – because like what I said a minute ago, that wasn't the best playing I thought I'd done. But then when I went back and played some other stuff, it wasn't creative, what I thought was so hip.

Coleman: I know what you're going to say.

Freeman: So, creative playing, I don't even think it's you playing.

Coleman: Yeah, I knew you were going to say that.

Freeman: I really don't.

Coleman: Actually, Sonny Rollins said that in his book. He said it's just coming through you.

Freeman: Yeah, that's all.

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Coleman: It's not really you.

Freeman: It wasn't me fingering this horn at all. But I knew I couldn't stand no more.

Coleman: He said he was always trying to get back to this.

Freeman: I'm the same way.

Coleman: It's very rare. It only happened to me one time.

Freeman: Really?

Coleman: Yeah, one time.

Freeman: And I've heard you play beautifully a hundred times.

Coleman: Yeah, well, not like what you're talking about. What you're talking about is a feeling. It's something you feel while you're playing. It's not necessarily – when the guy played it back for me on the tape, I didn't even think it was me. It's just a feeling.

Freeman: That's that thing.

Coleman: Rollins was talking about that very same thing that you're talking about . . .

Freeman: I never knew that

Coleman: . . . that feeling of the music playing – he called it the music playing itself. That's what he called it.

Freeman: That's right. I figured that I wasn't the only musician who's ever had this feeling, because we're all playing – we're all trying to achieve the same thing, that freedom, just like we are trying to achieve, I would say – I've mentioned this many times to you – we're trying to achieve just like we're looking at these gorgeous ladies here, and we're playing. We're playing music the same way as we're talking. It's no strain for me to answer you or you to answer me, but of course it takes a lifetime to get that on an instrument, because you hold the instrument in your hand. But when you do get it, I don't think you're playing at all. I'm speaking of, individually. I don't know who's playing.

Coleman: He actually called it – Rollins actually called it yoga at one point. He said it's like the union of mind, body, and spirit . . .

Freeman: Sounds great to me.

Coleman: . . . where everything's just sort of on automatic, just going.

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Freeman: I'll second it. I could do it as well in expressing myself as he did. He said it perfectly.

Coleman: All I know for myself is, it ain't nothing you can just turn on.

Freeman: No, no, no. Oh no. You have nothing. Now that's another thing that we could talk for the next hour, because we've all gone to the bandstand and says, "Tonight I'm killin' 'em. I'm doing it tonight," and don't get nothing. Then sometimes you're dragging, and you say, "Oh man, I don't have it." You're playing – one of the worst things in the world, especially if you're playing a ballad, is if you're playing a ballad – I've run into this a million times, where the room is about – well, there's 50 men in there. The last thing they want to hear is you play a ballad. So you're playing all this "I love you darlin'," and look at these cats – because that's what start me wearing dark glasses – so you're trying to play this ballad.

But I have actually – what changed me on that was, I was on the road with Jimmy Reed. Now you know, I've been out there with Arthur Prysock and some more good singers that knocked me out. I've seen the ladies holler and scream, and the men would always be sitting there like this. Arthur Prysock would sing 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 ballads in a row. So when the cats, "Aw man, is he ever going to get done?"

So when I got up there with Jimmy Reed, and he's playing this hookup he got with his harp and playing [Freeman sings one bar of a slow blues riff], and I heard this man sing, he was knocking me out. I see a guy standing up there in overalls and faint. "Jimmy. Do it, Jimmy. Do it. Do it."

Coleman: A man?

Freeman: Yeah. I say, wait a minute. Now this – I say, he got to be one of the greatest of all time, to have a cat in overalls faint. Just jump up and fall, "Oh Jimmy, I can't stand it." I said, wait a minute. So I told him after the show. I said, "Jimmy, you got to be one of the greatest blues artists of all time." He said, "I've been trying to tell you that."

So I started noticing with these ballads, that if the spirit come, you move men, who really don't want to hear you play no ballad. Because I finally just got cold to it. I'd just go ahead and play the ballad anyway, because there wasn't no women in the place. A cat come up and say, "Man, you know some more of those?" I was shocked. I was so used to everybody want *Red Top, Flyin' Home*, or something. "Set the place on fire, baby."

Coleman: This brings up another question to mind. What do you think of women as musicians, as instrumentalists, not necessarily singers, because there's a lot of women singing?

Freeman: You find one that can really play, they can sure enough play.

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Coleman: Do you feel like they – the ones who can really play, do you feel like they bring something different to the music?

Freeman: Oh yeah, because see, when I saw you – I think it was in Frisco, wasn't it?

Coleman: Where? With who?

Freeman: These Japanese were playing on a concert that I was on. Yeah. You remember? It's been a few years back. This lady was playing – I don't know. It looked like a contraption she had made, but they tell me that they make them in Japan.

Coleman: Koto?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: I think you're talking about Miya Masaoka.

Freeman: Right. I'm sitting there being the devil's advocate, because I could see how this woman could be doing it. I said, "Play *Giant Steps*." She played *Giant Steps* backwards on this thing. You would have to see this instrument, because she's pulling stuff and fingering, and I'm sitting there with my mouth wide open, looking. I said, for Pete's sake. I said, play this, play that, and she'd say okay and play it. She almost couldn't get out on the stage for me holding her by the shoulder, because she had to play. She just – I was amazed.

Then see, for the last four or five years I've been using Joan Hickey. Have you ever heard her play?

Coleman: No. What does she play?

Freeman: Piano. I wish I had some of – last time I played the Showcase I used her.

Coleman: I've played with – I've had quite a few women in my bands over the years, and played with – and I brought some people by your sets: Fostina [Dixon], Geri Allen probably, and some other . . .

Freeman: Oh, the baritone player? Yeah, she was great.

Coleman: Yeah, the baritone.

Freeman: Now you know what I think of Geri. She's great. Geri Allen?

Coleman: Yeah.

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Freeman: Oh, shoot. She's something else. See, when you find – but conversely, a woman has to be twice as good as a man to get any kind of recognition, because this is a man's thing. I mean, not a man's thing, but this is the way everybody . . .

Coleman: They control it.

Freeman: It's like playing football or something. Look how long it took the ladies to really get anybody to watch them play basketball. Some of those ladies are great. They could play with any man. But they're women. So, conversely again, it's like a man who sews well or who can do – what's that fingerwork?

Coleman: Knitting.

Freeman: Yeah. You know. You see a man doing that. You say, what? He's doing pearl one, carry one, and what's making those things – because a couple ladies have made me afghans. I've never seen a man make one of those. You got to be – that's a certain skill that the average man just doesn't seem to possess. Maybe it's patience. I don't know.

Coleman: Yeah, it could be that. It could be culture.

Freeman: Or whatever.

Coleman: A lot of things. Just what people are used to doing when they are brought up.

Freeman: Jazz music was so hard in the beginning, until you had very few ladies that were playing it. But I noticed back – Louis Armstrong had his wife playing piano. And the other lady who was with Andy Kirk, she's been out here since the beginning of time almost. [Mary Lou Williams]. But that's just two ladies. And then Melba [Liston] plays the trombone. I mean, ladies played the trombone during that era. So it's always been some ladies in there, but they had to just be great, great, great, great, before the guys would accept them.

Coleman: Wasn't there a woman named Vi Redd that played alto?

Freeman: Oh yeah, alto. She's great. But everybody – she was billed good, because everybody was waiting for her to sing, because she could sing great. But she played a great alto. So it's always been ladies. Now, anytime I hear Ingrid [Jensen] play, I can't believe her. That's this lady . . .

Coleman: Trumpet player?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: Henson, or something like that.

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Freeman: She plays with the [J?] or something like that. You say, how can anybody that fine be playing all that trumpet? It doesn't – then Louis Jordan one time, he had a lady that wore high heels hitting high notes. She was tall and fine. It was so strange to see a woman say bam and hit those high notes.

Coleman: Because you don't see it all the time.

Freeman: No, hardly ever.

Coleman: That's true.

Freeman: Busting up the high notes and carrying on. She used to come down to the Trocadero, where I was.

Coleman: Were there any women besides Melba in those big bands and stuff?

Freeman: They always had the Sweethearts of Rhythm. That was a whole lady band, about 17 pieces.

Coleman: Okay. I didn't know about that.

Freeman: I could see [Valaida] Snow now. She was a beautiful woman that wore those – they were all wearing those pompadours. She'd be playing the baritone, Snow [*sic*: trumpet]. We'd all go down to look at Snow, because Snow was a beauty. She would just laugh at us. "Oh, stop it." We'd be, "Play something, Snow." Snow had this big baritone. Tiny Davis was the star of the band, playing trumpet. She played like Louis Armstrong. She was a great trumpet player. In fact there was four or five ladies, like that lady Vi [Burnside] – what was her last name? She could play tenor as good as any man.

Coleman: Not Vi Redd though. So another.

Freeman: No, no, no. This was another Vi. I might be messing up her name. But boy, could she play that tenor, and she could look just as ugly as the way I look when I play. So I said, oh man. Because tenor . . .

Coleman: Making those faces.

Freeman: Yeah. You can't look too cute playing that tenor. It's funny that you would bring that up. But they had a great band, all nationalities. I'm trying to think of the leader, because she didn't play an instrument. She'd come out and sing a few songs. She was a – well, they were all beautiful. I think George told me she's still living. George, my brother, keeps up with that type of thing. But she – if she's living, she's older than I am. She's got to be in her 90s.

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Coleman: What about the war, I mean, World War II? What effect did that have on – you went in the Navy or Army?

Freeman: That had a lot of effect, because they drafted just about all of the able musicians. They got me when I was 18, up at Great Lakes. I was trying – Captain Walter Dyett, again, he got me in that band, because see, after I went through boot camp – and I've always been an ex-boxer and all that stuff.

Coleman: You went in the service what year?

Freeman: 1942, I think it was.

Coleman: So that was right in the middle.

Freeman: Oh yeah. So Captain Walter Dyett gave me a note, and that's how I got in the Navy. Because I was silly enough there at one time – that's when I found out how great marching music is.

Coleman: So that's how you escaped all that fighting and stuff like that?

Freeman: Well yeah, and not only that. I was done, because they had me marching in my shirt. I had this great physique and all this. Every morning [Freeman sings a melody]. You get to march, and then they gave the gun, and then you go back in the barracks. "Show me the enemy." So when they started – so they sent around – they have this orientation class, where they ask you, do you want to stay? I was ready to say yeah. I'm ready.

Coleman: You was brainwashed.

Freeman: Aw man, brainwashed. The enemy. I didn't even know who the enemy is. But all that march music, and getting up – eating all that good food every morning, getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning. They don't let you near no women or nothing. Aw man, you're ready. You're really ready.

I said – I look up. I thank – I look up and I thank Captain Walter Dyett right today for that. He gave me a note. He said – he came up there. He says, "Boy, you're not in the band yet?" I said, "I don't think I'm going to . . ." He said, "What? You – where do you think you're going." I said, "I think I'm going in the Army." He said, "Are you nuts?" I said no. I was wrong. I was feeling good. I was strong as a bull, running around, lifting up everybody I'd see. I'd lift them up into the air, lifting weights. He said, "You better take that note and get in that Navy band, if you can." So I got in there. And of course I met all the big stars, because they were drafting them all. They were all up there.

Coleman: All the musicians.

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Freeman: Yeah, just about everybody that had the sense at all got in the band.

Coleman: Were they drafting cats like Lester Young's age? Or just younger?

Freeman: All of them.

Coleman: Everybody.

Freeman: Yeah, because I was – well, from 18 to 45.

Coleman: Whoa.

Freeman: And they didn't ask you, did you want to go? I told them my feet were flat. They said that makes no difference. Say, "March, brother."

Coleman: How did Bird and Dizzy and all of them get out of that? They're the same age.

Freeman: I guess they used – well, you know, Sun Ra didn't go, and his men. So I guess they all knew something. But what they knew, I know I didn't know it. It's silly, talking about, "Let's go. Show me the enemy."

Coleman: Was Sonny in the service?

Freeman: I don't think so. Quite a few guys just wasn't in shape. I told them about my feet, like I said, and they said, oh no.

Coleman: So the Navy band was stationed where?

Freeman: Great Lakes. There was three bands, A band, B band, and C band.

Coleman: I thought you went to Hawaii or someplace.

Freeman: Oh, that's where they shipped me out.

Coleman: Oh, okay. Is that the . . . ?

Freeman: The Hellcats, the Navy Hellcats.

Coleman: So you never got – at that time, there was no fighting there or anything like that?

Freeman: Oh yeah. We went on. They were still bombing. The war was pretty thick in '42. With the men, they just put us on the E deck – that's A B C D E – and then turned the lock. I said, boy. And then they have these alerts when you were in the E deck.

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Coleman: You mean the air raid things and all that?

Freeman: Yeah. You got in the middle of the Pacific. It was still going on. I said, I don't know, but anything for the country, baby. It's one of those things.

But I learned so much in it, because I run into Dave Young, a great saxophone player. He taught me just about all I knew, know now today about a saxophone itself. He took me under his wing. That's – a lot of people say that my sound is individual. Actually, I tried to steal his sound, because he had a sound right between Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins. I'd always admired those two so much. But in order to play like Hawk, you had to use a certain – almost a classical embouchure. And then to play like Lester Young, you had to use a loose embouchure. I didn't know enough about embouchures at that time to know that I was really messing up, trying to play both of them, until I run into Dave Young. He say, hey – he said, you can get an embouchure right between the two. That's what I ended up finally doing. That's the reason why some people say, some of your solos you sound Hawkish, some of them you sound like Pres, and some of them you sound like between the two, which I think most of the saxophone players try to get. I wasn't alone in that. All of them tried to get somewhere between the two of them.

Coleman: I think that that became more and more popular as time went on, especially among tenor players.

Freeman: Oh yeah. Well, you had a few diehards who just wanted to play like Hawk. Then you had a few diehards who just wanted to play like Pres.

Coleman: You mean people like Paul Quinichette or . . . ?

Freeman: Yeah, they just wanted to really copy him. I never was – I don't want to copy anybody, try to steal anybody's style. The sound was different, but I didn't want to steal anybody's style.

Coleman: Most of those guys who had a sound that sounded just like somebody else, they never really caught on, did they?

Freeman: No.

Coleman: Was that a big thing back then, to have your own sound and to have your own . . . ?

Freeman: Yeah, because I think everybody – jazz – if you look back, Steve, jazz started around the turn of the century. Jazz is not that old. Because my father knew all the jazz players, like Louis Armstrong, all these guys. When they come up, they got famous – like Louis Armstrong was born around the same time as my father, and he got famous in the '20s, started making records. This is just the year 2000 now.

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So jazz is not that old, really, as we know it. Because I was reading in *The Book of Knowledge* once where it said – and I haven't found it since. I think it's over in Romans or something – where it said that these – how did they put it? – these – what's that term they used?

Coleman: What are you talking about?

Freeman: Anyway, they had everybody jumping and screaming and hollering and crying, playing this hot music, it said. And that's way back, way back.

Coleman: What are you talking about? You're talking about somewhere in Europe?

Freeman: No, this is back in biblical times.

Coleman: Oh, okay. I see what you're saying.

Freeman: So maybe jazz didn't begin in 1900. Maybe it began – Sun Ra always said it began billions of years ago. Of course nobody believed him, but . . .

Coleman: Yeah, well they didn't believe a lot of things he said.

Freeman: Yeah, that's right. They didn't believe a lot of things he said, because he would put it out there, and he didn't ask anybody to believe anything. Just, he put it out there for your curiosity to work. Because he only spoke in millions upon millions upon billions of years ago.

Coleman: This World War II thing, did it just so happen that this recording ban happened around the same time as that?

Freeman: Yeah. When you couldn't record? That caused a lot of stuff to go down. That when singers came to the fore, because back when I was a kid, we'd go see the big bands. They'd always have some singers that would sit on the side. They might sing two numbers a night. One. Nobody cared, because we're all there to see Pres and all the cats in Duke's band. We'd see Ben Webster. Lunceford's band, we went to hear certain cats. All the bands we had certain cats that we all wanted to hear, and the ladies wanted to hear them too.

Coleman: Who were the top cats in Lunceford's band? Just as an aside.

Freeman: It was Joe – what was his last name? Joe Thomas was his saxophone player, and Willie Smith was the lead alto player.

Coleman: Yeah, I know Willie Smith.

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Freeman: Those were two, and then he had Webster playing trumpet. We were all crazy about him.

Coleman: Freddie Webster?

Freeman: Freddie, yeah.

Coleman: That's the cat that Miles said he was influenced by.

Freeman: There were four or five cats out of each band. I was crazy about Joe Thomas. I don't know. It's funny. Did you ever hear anything about Erskine Hawkins's band?

Coleman: Just names.

Freeman: See, he had a great saxophone player. This cat made some great solos. I'm trying to think of his name.

Coleman: Alto or tenor?

Freeman: Tenor. He had two great tenor players. One of the fellows ended up here in Chicago. He died not that long ago. His name was Paul [Bascomb]. He was famous for – he was executing, at that time. Paul – how could I forget him?

He had this great trumpet player, and then he had the great piano player who made *After Hours*. The trumpet player and the saxophone player, it seemed to me like that they were brothers. I just can't call their – I wish I had read up on this before I got into it. But we used to play the trumpet player's solo all the time. That's how I almost learned how to improvise.

Coleman: Actually, that's one of my questions.

Freeman: Because this solo was famous. *Tuxedo Junction*. It was like a story.

Coleman: So you learned it from the record, then.

Freeman: Yeah. Oh man, we were all – I could play every solo Pres ever made, and I was working on *Body and Soul* when I got drafted. I could almost play *Body and Soul* by ear.

Coleman: You mean the famous one.

Freeman: Yeah, Hawk's solo. Everybody used to have me play his solo. They'd say, "Man, how'd you ever learn that thing?" I say, "That's what I do." I sit up and copy the cats I like solos.

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Coleman: How would you actually go about learning them? Did you . . .

Freeman: Just by ear, and George could . . .

Coleman: You'd just play it over and over on the record.

Freeman: Yeah, and George could sing most of them.

Coleman: Do you have to slow the record down or anything like that?

Freeman: No.

Coleman: Just learned it.

Freeman: George had this great ear, and although he couldn't play this solo, he said, "Man, you're not playing it right." He's singing. I said, "Okay, George, thanks." That's a gift, but you can't carry it too far.

Coleman: Yeah, you get stuck.

Freeman: When I got passed that stage, I stopped. When I got in my teens, I stopped, until I got in the service, and guess what my feature was? Coleman Hawkins's *Body and Soul*.

Coleman: And you had to play his solo?

Freeman: I played his solo. I must have played his solo every day. That's right.

Coleman: Because the audience wanted to hear it? Or what?

Freeman: No. The drummer's name was Osie Johnson. He heard me play it one day in the barracks. He say, "You know that solo?" Like a nut, I said yeah.

Coleman: And that was it.

Freeman: That was it. He wrote the background, and they called it every day, because we – see, I didn't know anything about the bands in the service. I learned real quick. Your job is to play for the officers. I didn't know that. You played four or five times a week, and then you played a happy hour for the men every day from 12 to 2. That was your job, play for the officers at night, and the nurses, because at that time the different ladies hadn't gotten over there, like the – let's see. They had names, like the – I forget their names. WAVES and SPARS and whatnot. Each branch of the service had a lady corps that they shipped overseas. Of course we had to play for the officers, and they had access to these ladies. Enlisted men – because we played for them – they were just on the

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base. That was your thing, other than rehearse, and raise the flag every morning. At 5 o'clock you had to get up, raise that flag.

Coleman: When you played the solos, and you say that the solos taught you how to improvise, you learned the solos and you would learn the songs too.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: And then you would just notice the relationship between the solo and the song?

Freeman: Yeah. Then I found out, almost everybody learns that way, even the kids. Of course the difference is, I could hear Hawk in person. I could hear Lester in person. The young kids today don't have that advantage. They have to strictly get it from the record.

Coleman: There's a big difference.

Freeman: Oh yeah.

Coleman: We need to stop soon. I'm almost through with this section anyway. The only other thing I wanted to ask – I asked about the effects of World War II – was, when did drugs and stuff start coming in the picture big? And how did that affect the music scene?

Freeman: The drugs seemed to come in real heavy around – in my opinion – around – I was so fortunate that I ducked that, not through any greatness on my part. I just was lucky enough to have ducked it. It came in around – started getting real strong pretty early, around the same time as the war, in the '40s.

Coleman: Would you say that the war had some effect on the drugs coming in?

Freeman: It could have, because those were such stressful times. For a while, a lot – they were shipping a lot of guys overseas, and they wasn't returning. They were writing all those sad songs. Some of the greatest songs of all time were written right during that era, that we play right today. So I think the country was just – and the world, because Hitler was really doing it there for a while. He had everybody upset, because for a while it looked like that he might win. Everybody couldn't – boy, that was the unthinkable. So it sort of just went along and along and along and along, and it seemed like it grew and grew and grew and grew on up into the '70s, and then, smack, when it reached the '70s, it really got out there. Now it's what?, the year 2000, and with the advent of crack and everything, who knows?

Now – it's funny. I had on the t.v. and was reading the paper yesterday. The new drugs that you can buy over the counter, like Ecstasy and all those things, now that's somewhere else.

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Coleman: That alcohol was always there.

Freeman: That was always. That doesn't seem to be going anywhere. That was always a pretty bad hop that you had to jump over.

Coleman: Do you think that the music would have been – this is my last, final question for today – do you think the music, the direction of the music, would have been very different, and if so, in what way? – I mean, just your opinion – if it was for the conditions, some of the conditions, like the drugs, alcohol. You had racism. You had a lot of things that had a total effect on the development of this music, because the music had to develop under all this stuff.

Freeman: That's true. Now that you ask me, that's the way that I look at it. Like I was speaking earlier, when I spoke of rap and hip-hop. I feel the same way about that era, that it seems to be all part of a plan. Now what the plan is, I'm not near about wise enough to figure out. But it just seems like everything happens and goes off into something else. Why it happens, I'm not wise enough to know. Did it help the music? I'm not wise enough to say. Because, see, it's like a cigarette. I remember when the cigarette was out here, and everybody said, we'll use a filter, and it will help. But they found out later on that the filters just makes you draw harder. So the filter, maybe it didn't help, and maybe it's not supposed to help. Like maybe, had jazz music gone the way it was going, without drugs, so as to speak, maybe then other music wouldn't have come in, and maybe other music – there would have been more or less one dimensional, and that can't make it either, if you understand what I mean.

It's just like one time, the only music a critic would go see was concert music. Then it was concert music and hardly nothing else. But then that didn't make it, because it's supposed to be – music is supposed to be diverse. So maybe this is the way of putting it through the wringer. I don't know. But that's the best I can come up with, is that nothing is supposed to be one dimensional, no more than people are one dimensional. So I guess that's why things are as they are. I know that doesn't make much sense, but that's the best I can do.

Coleman: I hear what you're saying. You're saying that there seems to be some kind of – just from listening to you talk – master plan. I guess you're talking about on a spiritual level. The things that we go through, the problems that human beings go through, or whatever, whether it's drugs, wars, whatever, that this is part of some broader thing that we can't necessarily know what it is.

Freeman: That's right. See, because I've always said that . . .

Coleman: Because you have really big stuff. You have planets colliding. You have suns blowing up. You've got things much bigger than everything we're talking about on this planet. Who knows what happens when a star goes supernova? There's probably thousands of planets that go along with it. So that stuff happens.

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Freeman: That's true. I think some things are beyond our comprehension, beyond our knowledge. So whether or not we reach it, say, a thousand years from now, who knows? But I do know this: I think people will continue to – I know good is better than bad, and I know that good beats bad. That's my belief from my lifetime, that nothing surpasses good. I think the problem is when people try to get better than good or be badder than bad. Then we have some real big problems, because I guess bad is supposed to be just like good is. But the good goodies, I don't think they make it any – and the bad baddies, I think that's the problem.

Coleman: I know what you're saying.

Freeman: I need to shut up. I really do [laughter].

Coleman: Well, that's – we've been talking long enough.

Wednesday, May 24, the year 2000, 1:04 pm Eastern Daylight Time, Chicago, Illinois. Steve Coleman interviewing Von Freeman. I want to talk a little bit about the music itself. I'll get into it by asking – we talked about the recording ban and the effects that that had on the music scene. What effect do you think it had on the music, the development of the music itself? I mean, a lot of what Bird and Dizzy and all of those guys were developing happened during that period of time. So what effect do you think that had on the music itself?

Freeman: Again, Steve, I think it's a part of time. Like I was explaining to you before, my idea on time is that everything happens in its own time. I know that's sort of an abstract answer, but that's the way I think, that it was time for a ban. I haven't figured out yet why, what impact this would have, no more than I don't think it was necessarily a good one, because a lot of musicians lost a lot of work that they would have had at the time, because a lot of clubs were hiring musicians who cut records and things like that.

So I didn't see anything really good out of it, but it seemed like it was time, for whatever reason, for the musicians to stop recording.

Coleman: What I was thinking is that, had the music been recorded, then of course a lot of people would have heard it. I mean, one thing I noticed about that music is that it seemed to develop really fast on the East Coast and nowhere else in the country, at least during that period that it developed. Then, all of a sudden, like 1945 or late '44, whenever this ban was lifted, bam, this music was there. All these other cats heard it. It was like, where did that come from?

Freeman: That's right. So maybe that was the reason why that that went down that way, for the impact that it would have if it was suddenly thrust upon people. Because I know my father came home with a record of Bird, and he said, "Look how sharp you think you can play. Listen to this." Of course, Bird just turned me around.

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Coleman: This was the Jay McShann stuff?

Freeman: Yeah. But I first heard it, “Is that Lester Young playing alto or something?” He says no. But that’s the way I perceived Bird when I first heard him.

Coleman: That was the closest thing you could . . .

Freeman: Yeah, because he had a very good sound. It was round. He reminded me of Lester Young, because everybody else was using a whole lot of vibrato. Of course Lester always played more or less with a straight, round tone. So that was the way I was associating it.

I think that was what really helped the new music to hit as hard as it did, simply because what you said. It was known on the East Coast and nowhere else.

Coleman: Let me ask you this: you heard those recordings of Bird with Jay McShann, which is actually before the recording ban.

Freeman: Right.

Coleman: What was the next stuff you heard of Charlie Parker after that? Was it the stuff all the way in ’44, ’45?

Freeman: Yeah, those Dial recordings.

Coleman: So you didn’t hear nothing in between?

Freeman: No.

Coleman: It was like three or four years where you really didn’t hear what was happening. Were you shocked when the Dial and all that came out?

Freeman: Yeah. Well, when I first – there was a fellow around here – and I know he didn’t know anything much about Bird – Scoops Carry. Scoops was . . .

Coleman: Alto player?

Freeman: Yeah. Scoops was something else. He had a style, it was sort of like Bird’s, in sense, because he played a really good blues, but he played fast. He could skip real good. He never got a big name, because he’s playing with Red Saunders’s band here. But he was the cat that I was listening to, Scoops.

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Then there was another fellow around here named – he was writing for Jug, did a lot of arrangements for Jug [Gene Ammons]. Now what was his name? It was a heavysset, real dark fellow.

Coleman: What did it begin with?

Freeman: I can't – because I used to go to school, and he lived on my way to school. This cat had a beautiful sound, very similar to Bird and Scoops Carry, insomuch as he was playing without any vibrato. I'm trying – Ackerson was his name. They were calling him A.K. or something like that. Those were the two horn players that I was listening to, because the tenor players just wasn't saying anything. Everybody was copying Hawk and Pres. But these three men, Bird, Scoops Carry, and Ackerson, had another way, insomuch as the tone was straight and round, which eventually got to be the sound.

Coleman: That's funny how everybody had nicknames back then, Goon Garner and Scoops Carry.

Freeman: Yeah, everybody. That's the first thing they gave you. Just like baseball players. They gave you a little something that people could identify you by easily. And it always fit. Like Goon, he had this kind of look. Then there was one more guy. I forgot about him. His name was Lank Keyes.

Coleman: And he was lanky?

Freeman: Yeah. He wasn't really that tall, now that I look back, but he looked tall. He held – he had a garage. This is where everybody was jamming. He really impressed me, because I didn't play well enough at this time to go by the garage, I thought, not with a horn in my hand. I'd go by and just stand there and listen. He was into a big band, but there was no microphones nowhere. So you had to develop a tone. Lank Keyes. I'm trying to think. He was somewhere down toward 43rd Street, right in the alley. His garage had no doors.

Coleman: Jimmy Ellis had some place that they were jamming at when I was here, that was similar to that.

Freeman: He was down at 53rd Street, back in the alley, yeah. But see Jimmy, this is like a – almost a 50-year span. I'm talking about when I – before I went into the Army. It's around the last of the '30s and a couple years into the '40s. Lank Keyes was holding these sets.

The big tenor player around town then was Joshua Jackson. He went to DuSable, real light-skinned cat, very, very fair. He had all this technique. We all used to watch him, because he could hit high F and all this. He was an excellent reader.

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I can remember Lank Keyes playing and rehearsing this tune maybe three years.
[Freeman sings.] What's the name of that?

Coleman: Sing it again.

Freeman: [Freeman sings.] Oh, this concert tune in D minor – D-flat minor. [Freeman sings.] It was hip, because somebody wrote a jazz arrangement on it during that era. At school we had the jazz arrangement of it. It was something in B-flat minor. Concerto in B-flat minor, or something like that. It will come to me probably too late to – for this. But this was – he tried for three years to get cats to play this arrangement. I even have it back there somewhere, by a famous piano player. That's what I remember.

Coleman: You not talking about that [Coleman sings].

Freeman: Yeah. Now what's the name of that?

Coleman: Is that Beethoven? I don't know if you're talking about that. It starts off [Coleman sings the opening of the Rachmaninoff Concerto in C-sharp minor].

Freeman: It's a real heavy minor tune.

Coleman: And he made an arrangement of it?

Freeman: Yeah, it goes through a lot of changes. He had the original stock chart of it. It was written out on big paper, on manuscript paper. I remember him. He was very important in the development of jazz in Chicago, Lank Keyes.

Coleman: He played alto?

Freeman: Tenor.

Coleman: Tenor, okay.

Freeman: About my complexion and about your height, maybe a little bit taller. But he was so thin.

Coleman: This recording ban, it didn't have an effect on you personally, because you weren't recording then, right?

Freeman: No, right. Most of the cats around Chicago were not recording.

Coleman: So it had no effect on them.

Freeman: No. See, then, if you had a record, you were like in the big leagues, because record companies were only hiring touring bands that had big names and things like that.

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Coleman: Not like today, where everybody can make a record.

Freeman: Oh no. They're even burning their own CDs.

Coleman: What was the repertoire? All the songs were coming from pop music, from Broadway plays and things like that?

Freeman: Mostly. Duke Ellington and Jimmie Lunceford had some input.

Coleman: And Fats Waller.

Freeman: Fats Waller. Then Erskine Hawkins had two or three numbers that you had to know. *After Hours*. Every piano player had to know *After Hours*.

Coleman: We just heard that.

Freeman: Then he had *Tuxedo Junction*. Every trumpet player had to know it. [Freeman sings.] Everybody, even all the horn players, saxophone players, knew this solo.

Coleman: Then you had certain riff tunes that you had to know, like a *Flyin' Home* type thing.

Freeman: Yeah, *Flyin' Home* and . . .

Coleman: Basie's stuff.

Freeman: . . . all Count Basie's tunes.

Coleman: *One O'Clock* and all that.

Freeman: That was the standard repertoire that you had to know to play, because Dizzy hadn't really come on the scene with his tunes, nor had Bird.

Coleman: What about things like *Tickle Toe* and stuff like that?

Freeman: That's Pres.

Coleman: But you had to know that kind of stuff too?

Freeman: Oh yeah. You had to know all the Pres that you could possibly find. Of course everything he played was at – except [?] . To me that's one of his greatest tunes. That was kind of bright.

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Coleman: Yeah, but most of the stuff was the medium tempo. One time he did *Lester Leaps In* a little bit fast.

Freeman: During his first three or four years, when he was playing that [Otto] Link mouthpiece with that – that’s what made me like silver again, because he had this beautiful Conn that was silver and gold.

Coleman: Just seeing him with it.

Freeman: I’d never seen a horn like that. It was just beautiful. And he was getting out – getting that – whatever kind of sound you want to call it. Nobody, including him, ever got it again. He could roll those notes. Pres just – how a man could hold a horn up like this and still play something was beyond me. I was pretty strong, a cat with strong wrists, and I couldn’t do it. A few minutes. That was about it. So Pres – to me, Pres set a whole lot of stuff into motion that eventually became to be what’s happening. That’s my opinion, of course.

Coleman: Other than the popular music, like the Tin Pan Alley stuff and all that stuff was coming from the repertoire that the big bands were playing.

Freeman: And some tunes from Broadway and from cabaret.

Coleman: Actually, that’s what I mean when I say Tin Pan Alley.

Freeman: Oh, yeah.

Coleman: So that was the main thing.

Freeman: That was it.

Coleman: How did you go about learning these songs?

Freeman: I tell you, Steve, where I really got – I think, because a lot of people are amazed that I can do this, but see, I worked at Calumet City for about 20 years, on and off. Calumet City, you play behind a curtain. You play eight hours.

Coleman: It’s like a cabaret kind of thing – show?

Freeman: It was burlesque.

Coleman: You had dancers, people telling jokes, all kinds of different things?

Freeman: You had one emcee. He knew a lot of dirty jokes. The ladies were disrobing. Usually – invariably, you had this curtain.

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Coleman: So you all couldn't see the ladies.

Freeman: No. You just see images. That was the down part. Unless you worked up to you got this one big club where you were just seated over to the side. Everybody was trying to get to that club. But, other than that club, the rest of them you had to look through a curtain like that one. So naturally you couldn't see too much.

They would always do three tunes. They were always, invariably, three standards of some type from the 1900s on.

Coleman: But three different tunes.

Freeman: Yeah, and you had to learn these tunes, because you're playing them over and over and over and over. So, at the time, I was really drilled, but I wanted to play Bird and everybody. We had to play the melody to these tunes. So after a while it really came to me that it's very important to learn these tunes. Well, you had to learn them, because you play something. Finally you read them, you read. Then finally you don't need the music

Coleman: But you weren't improvising much off of those tunes in that situation.

Freeman: Sometimes you get inspired. Because the ladies would come back and say, "Now you kind of lost me out there. Will you please play my music?", which was over and over, reading it. You stuck in as much as you could. But you did learn those tunes, and you learned them correctly, by the correct chorus, because those guys out there were mostly musicians – at the time that I went out there, were mostly older guys who were just out there, because \$10 a night for eight hours? After a while, you got to love those guys, because all of them had piano. Never had a bass player unless Wilbur Ware came out and played. But you had a piano player and a drummer and either trumpet or saxophone. The way you took your intermission was, when the piano player left, I played the piano. When the drummer left, I played the drums. Of course when I left, they would just play, the two of them without me. So you get maybe – out of those eight hours, maybe a half an hour intermission.

Coleman: But they did enough different tunes that you could learn a whole lot of tunes?

Freeman: Aw man, they did all the tunes, all the tunes, all the nationalities. See, because the ladies were all the nationalities.

Coleman: This is for dancing though, right? This is for dancing though, mostly.

Freeman: They were dancing or whatever you might call it.

Coleman: So you're not really doing ballads there.

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Freeman: Oh yeah. See, they had this – the first tune, they would call – they had a name for it. I’m trying to think. Promenade. So they’d promenade for a chorus. They’re just throwing all of these things. They’re gliding. They’re throwing. Then the second number, it was say like this here [Freeman claps a medium tempo], and they’d take off a little bit more and throw a little bit more. Then the third number was a trailer, they called it, which was a kind of fast tune. At lot of them had their acts, where they would do different things, bring dummies on the stage or whatever. They were during the stars’ show. They had a complete set of music. Some of that music was very difficult to play, because you had to read it note for note. Some of the best drummers in the world I heard out there, and piano players.

Coleman: So you could read good back then.

Freeman: Oh man, I – well, see, I come out of DuSable, and when I went to college, I was playing clarinet.

Coleman: Okay. I didn’t know that.

Freeman: They put me in the symphony band, playing first clarinet.

Coleman: What college did you go to?

Freeman: Wilson Junior College.

Coleman: Oh, you told me.

Freeman: At that time, Major [?Sockins] had the band there. He had as big a name as Walter Dyett did, with concert music. Walter Dyett gave me one of his classic clarinets, because I was going to be the first black cat to play concert first chair clarinet. I played one rehearsal, and they stole the clarinet the next day out of my locker. I had come from DuSable, where they knocked the lockers out every day. So I figured – that school was right down the street here, at 69th and Stewart. I went there. I said [?]. Didn’t think. I come back, pull the locker door. It fell right in my lap. That was the end of my clarinet playing days. I haven’t played clarinet since.

Coleman: Did Dyett ever write any books or anything like that?

Freeman: I don’t think so. He was the type of man like Bird or somebody. Bird I don’t think ever wrote anything, did he?

Coleman: Not that I know of.

What were the popular musical styles that were out then? What were the things that the average people were listening to?

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Freeman: To me, two men set the style of the day. It was – of the jazz during that period. It was Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong. Now the Duke’s music was always great, but it was over most folks’ heads, because he’s using this minor ninths thing way back. But everybody knew his music was great, and everybody wanted to play in his band. I only heard his band when I went to the Regal. Then, you went to see him, you were very quiet and proper. Everybody else’s band, “Get into it, baby!” With the exception of maybe Jimmie Lunceford. He was another one of those dwelling in . . .

Coleman: High class.

Freeman: . . . concert music more or less, a lot of tunes written – paraphrasing concert music.

Coleman: Was Fletcher Henderson around then? Or that gig was finished?

Freeman: He was around, but I don’t really remember his band too well. I think he was a little bit before my time.

Coleman: Because I know that Benny Goodman stole – stole? – borrowed his arranger.

Freeman: Well, he’s arranging for him. He and Don.

Coleman: Don Redman.

Freeman: And Sy Oliver. Sy Oliver was with Jimmie Lunceford, and Don Redman had his own band, just like Fletcher did, but they were excellent arrangers.

Coleman: But their bands never really got off the ground.

Freeman: No.

Coleman: I just recently got this boxed set of Fletcher Henderson stuff, and it’s great.

Freeman: Oh man. See, at that time, everything was – jazz was getting so popular to the masses. Then of course there was a lot of clubs and things that the black cats couldn’t work. So naturally, in order to get that music out there, it had to take another vehicle.

Coleman: What other types of music were out there, besides what you listened to?

Freeman: They always had r-and-b, always. They were what they called race records, which was the blues cats. It didn’t seem to be that much separation in the music then, because . . .

Coleman: Was it a lot like Ma Rainey and stuff like that?

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Freeman: Yeah, and they had big names. During that era, one thing that I really noticed was musicians, with the exception of the guys that were very talented, like Louis could clown and dance and do everything, but that was just Louis. He wasn't doing anything but just being himself, and he did it whenever he felt it. That's different from somebody say, 1-2-3, I'm going to kick my leg out. If he felt like kicking his leg, he did. If he didn't, he didn't. Feel like frowning, he'd frown. He felt like going into his other thing, he'd go into it.

Because the greatest thing about what was happening then, I thought – I sat down maybe about two years ago, and I was analyzing all this stuff. I had a piece of paper and a – I say, why is it the guys then were so much different from guys now, because then, when you went to see a show, you had comedians. So the bandleader didn't have to be a comedian. You had singers. So he didn't have to sing, or she didn't have to sing. You had tap dancers. So he didn't have to dance. In other words, there was a format. It was a regular show. So when you went to see a show, you went to see the band, a great band, play music. So nobody had to dance or do anything, except just play those instruments to death.

Then with the advent, I think, of these cats realizing that they could make more money if they left so-and-so's band and front a band – but see, they didn't think it out. Because see, if somebody's paying \$1,000 and you want \$900, now what kind of guys – how do you get four or five cats, and you got \$100 left? Because a lot of those bandleaders were really sacrificing to have big bands and to have you as a star in their bands, because like Duke would write all these beautiful backgrounds, Count Basie had arrangements that set Pres up. They didn't realize how important this was. So when they left, and it come in with everybody – like you go see Count Basie, Pres is gone. Now you're drug. Then you go see Pres. Count Basie is gone, because Count Basie could really comp. He had just what Pres needed: Jo Jones, and Walter Page on the bass. He could comp just right for Pres.

Coleman: Freddie Green.

Freeman: Yeah, and Freddie Green. Now when Pres got out there by himself with just Joe Blow playing the piano and me playing the drums or something. Hey. So you had this era of stars with these bands. They went single with these backup groups, because mostly they were going from city to city, and you're the only sound . . .

Coleman: Pickup groups, you mean.

Freeman: Yeah. So, the next thing I know, jazz went out, because the big bands didn't have the stars anymore, and the stars were out there, didn't have the cats behind them. So the music just kind of said, boop.

Coleman: You know what this is comparable to? It's like when you have a group, good group of five people or whatever, and then everybody in the group wants to be a star.

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Freeman: Now there you go.

Coleman: So the group breaks up, and instead of having one strong group of five people, you've got five weak groups.

Freeman: Yeah, right. There you go.

Coleman: That happens with – it happens with everything. It happened with the Jackson Five. It happened – whatever. You have this group that's really strong, and then all of a sudden – we used to call it the whispers, when people start whispering, you could make a lot more money if you got out from under so-and-so.

Freeman: Steve, you got it. You're hitting it right on the head.

Coleman: “You need to be on your own. You a star. You need to” – then people start listening to that, and before you know it . . .

Freeman: I sat there and watched that, because I was in a couple of groups where – I won't name any names here, because it's kind of derogative. This cat would be so in power. He would have this group. He had his big name. He's cutting these records with stars up in New York, but then when you go out on the road, he got to use roadies. He would be so popular. To his dressing room, there would be like 40 women in there, pulling on him. Now how long is he going to last? Next thing you know, that poor man was through. He made the circuit three times intact. So I said, see – whereas before, the band was so popular, there was somebody for everybody.

Coleman: Yeah, that's what I was talking about. Like a basketball team. You can't win with just one cat.

Freeman: Same difference. It's just too much. So all those factors – it's weird, and of course we're laughing about it, but they were right mixed up into this thing. Like I said, it was the times. So now today – well, it almost wiped out rock too. You get four cats, and here's a thousand women pulling on them.

Coleman: It's definitely stagnated any music. Even if it doesn't wipe the music out, the music doesn't develop. You take something like rock. There ain't been no development in a really long time.

Freeman: It's very different, of course, because the volume came in. So instead of getting more talented, you buy another amp and pile it on. You go see four cats, and they make more – the sound is bigger than two or three symphony orchestras put together. And you look up there. It's four people, and you can't hear anything, because it's all these amps hooked up.

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The music got – the music has gone through a lot of different things, but invariably it's got to come back home.

Coleman: What about the regional stuff? Did you hear a big difference between like – at that time, it seemed to be more of a bigger difference when bands came from different regions, like a band that came from Kansas City area. It was a huge . . .

Freeman: Oh yeah, of course. Well, they lost that with the advent of records, everybody listening to the same records. Like when Trane came in, Trane wiped out everybody, because everybody said, "I've got to play like Coltrane." Everybody said, "But man, you're not going anywhere being a Coltrane clone." "I don't care. I got to play this." So consequently now, how many Tranes is it?

Coleman: One.

Freeman: Now there you go. People go to the record store, and they don't buy those clones, because what they did was, they made Trane more popular. They said, "That sounds good, but where's the cat that was doing the style on this? Oh, okay." So they buy Trane. And Trane's been gone since when? '67? He's more popular now than he ever was. The guys are finally realizing that, that they don't have to try to come past Trane, because they're not going to do that anyway. So just get whatever you dig about Trane, and then head out.

Coleman: What were some of the local bands around here that had a big impact on you? You mentioned Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and all those bands. But what were the local ones?

Freeman: There was only – really, the only three I can think about was King Fleming's big band, which I was in for a while. That's where Sonny Cohn come out of. You know of Sonny Cohn, don't you?

Coleman: Uh-um.

Freeman: He went with Count Basie and stayed there for – what? – 35 years. But anyway, he came out of King Fleming's band. Then he went to the big small band that was here, which was the band at the Club DeLisa. What did I tell you his name was yesterday? I was telling you his name. Red Saunders.

Coleman: Yeah, you mentioned him today.

Freeman: Which was the band that Scoops Carry was playing alto in.

Coleman: So that was another band.

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Freeman: Yeah. Red Saunders had this – it wasn't quite a big band, but it was eight or nine pieces, which was large. But King Fleming had a big band. We used to play all Count Basie's charts, Duke's charts, whatnot. Then there was Jimmy Brinkley. It's funny. Both of these guys were from the west side.

Coleman: Brinkley?

Freeman: Brinkley.

Coleman: What about [King] Kolax? All that came in later?

Freeman: No. Kolax come along about the same time as Earl Hines, because when Earl Hines left the Grand Terrace, Kolax went in with his big band.

Coleman: So you're talking about early '40s to mid-'40s.

Freeman: This is like '39, '40, '41. When Kolax came by the school to get the two little hotshots, which was Gene Ammons and myself, on tenor . . .

Coleman: He came by what? DuSable?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: Really?

Freeman: Yeah. Jug went.

Coleman: Really?

Freeman: Yeah. Jug went on the road with him, and Jug never came back, because Jug went with Kolax, and then he went with Billy Eckstine.

Coleman: How come you didn't go?

Freeman: I said, I'll finish school. Then I was interested – I thought at that time of leading a concert band, because the Captain was letting me lead the concert band. I'm playing this first clarinet. I'm into this clarinet. He was telling me, "You want to – because I've seen you play this clarinet at this level." Oh, I had this clarinet going, baby. But I told you about the story of how they stole the clarinet, his clarinet.

That's how I started arranging, because I didn't have the money to pay him for his clarinet. So he made me a deal. He said, "You make me 15 arrangements for \$10 a piece."

Coleman: Dyett said this?

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Freeman: Yeah. He used to play them. I was in his DuSablites band, and he used to play my little arrangements. He was just doing it because I didn't have any money to pay him. I got to about 12 of them and just gave out. He said okay, that's enough. He even – he didn't charge but \$150.

Coleman: So Jug went with . . .

Freeman: . . . with King Kolax and then with – to Billy Eckstine, because then he cut *Red Top*, and Jug never looked back.

Coleman: When Gene Ammons was with Eckstine, Parker had already left.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: So who was playing alto then at the time, with . . . ?

Freeman: I think Sonny Stitt.

Coleman: Sonny Stitt came in – he replaced Parker?

Freeman: I think so. I'd have to read the book on that. But I'm almost certain that he did. Because he had all the cats: Dexter.

Coleman: Yeah, I know almost everybody passed through his band.

Freeman: Yeah, everybody went, because he was . . .

Coleman: He was hip.

Freeman: That's where Diz got his band, was from Billy Eckstine's band.

Coleman: A lot of those guys were in Earl Hines's band before that, right? A couple of them.

Freeman: A couple of them, yeah. I think so.

Coleman: I know Bird and Diz were.

Freeman: And also I think that great trumpet player that ended up playing with my brother George. He was on Gene Ammons's *Red Top*. Gail Brockman. All these cats had big names. Diz just – when he started that greatest band of the century, he more or less got them from Earl Hines and Billy Eckstine and King Kolax. That was the nucleus. Chicago at that time had a big, big name. The cats were all here. New York was – it was all right if you wanted to go there, but . . .

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Coleman: What was the name of that guy that used to play that portable keyboard thing, come by your set, the harmonium or whatever it is called?

Freeman: You asked me once before, and I jumped right up and answered you. His name floats.

Coleman: Was it Billy something?

Freeman: Yeah, Billy is his first name. But he had this – but his last name was – I used to try to spell his name. One day I spelled it. He said no, because his name is not spelled the way that it sounds.

Coleman: The reason why I mentioned him is that he told me that Bird liked your playing. The exact quote is, he said Bird turned to him and said, “Man, that long-haired nigger sure can play that horn.”

Freeman: That’s true. He told me. He says, “What style are you playing?”

Coleman: Bird said that?

Freeman: Yeah. See, because I always did play kind of weird. I think that’s what he was talking about. He was the type of man that, I tried to get that. I got that from him. He gave everybody their due, let everybody play. Because the first time I played with him, boy, every horn player in America showed up. Now I’m on the gig. I standing back, saying, play Mr. Parker, play. These cats are trying to get on the bandstand and say they played with Bird.

Coleman: With Charlie Parker.

Freeman: I’m busy trying to learn something, and they were – oh man, they were pushing me. “Man, get out.” “Man, let me up here.” So I said, my goodness. He was very gracious. After him playing, I said, I wonder why they would want to play? He would play – out of all those cats, he would play like two or three choruses, never more than three choruses all night long, every time we played together. You – “Mr. Bird, please play some more.” He said, “Uh-uh. That’s enough.” And here come these cats. You’d have to – I had to pull them off the bandstand. They’d get to blah blah blah blah. I think he just set up so much into motion, the cats wanted – and then, see, I had never heard a tone like that, and I had been playing in the Pershing for a long time with different cats. I knew how hard it was playing there, because the microphone never worked.

Coleman: It was a dead room?

Freeman: Oh man, and it’s a half-block long. He – and wide – that man would come in there and play, boy. He never even walked toward the mic. The mic is about where Eve

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was sitting. He's standing there and play and fill up that Pershing. That used to amaze me. Because one day I walked behind him to see if he was wired. He looked around at me as if to say, what's . . . ? Because I said, this cat's got to have a wire or something. He's just playing. So I asked him one night. I said – because it hadn't never really been but two cats that really impressed me with volume and stuff on the horn, was he and Ben Webster. Because I asked Ben Webster once. I said, "Mr. Ben, are you wired or something?", because he was getting this great big pure sound. Bird was like that. Then I found out later on. One day, he and I were drinking together at the Pershing.

Coleman: You and Ben, or you and Bird?

Freeman: Ben, because Bird – let's see now. Bird died in '55. I went in there and had the Monday morning session in about '53. So Bird – wait a minute now. Now, because I was playing alto. Was Bird living? I'm trying to think. Yeah, Bird had to be living, but he was going through a lot of changes.

Ben was sitting there. I'm so in awe of the man that I don't know if he using me, because every time he'd turn around, he'd say, "Kid." I'd say, "Yes, Mr. Ben." He says, "It's about time for" – now see, in the lounge you played, and the liquor store is right there. He liked vodka. So he said, "It's about that time." I said, "For what?" He said, "We need another one, don't we?" So I said, "Oh yeah," and I dashed, because I was trying to find out his hookup. So he's using me, and I'm using him. Of course he's real hip to what I'm trying to do.

Coleman: He called you Kid?

Freeman: Yeah, he called me Kid. He says, "But don't you play tenor? They told me you was a tenor player." But I was in Calumet City at the time, playing alto, taking a cat's place. This cat had a beautiful Selmer. I loved it. So I'd always go play alto at the session. That's where I first got to really know him. This is when he laid something on me. He says – I say, "Mr. Ben, I hear something between you and Bird." He said, "There's a reason for that." I said, "What?" He said, "Lester Young's father taught instruments." He said, "Both of us studied with Lester Young's father."

Coleman: What do you mean, taught instruments? You mean he gave lessons?

Freeman: Yeah, he was a music teacher. I didn't know this.

Coleman: I didn't either.

Freeman: He said, "Have you ever noticed, I've got a lot of Pres in me?" I said no. He said yeah. He said, "You ever noticed Bird got a lot of Pres in him?" I said, "Yeah. I noticed." I said, "But I thought you was a Hawk man." He said, "Oh, I admire Coleman Hawkins." He said, "But I was taught by Pres's" – he whispered, "I was taught by Pres's"

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father, and so was Bird.” I said, “You’re kidding.” He said yeah. So see – he said, “I’ll tell you some more. We better go around the corner.”

Coleman: Get some more.

Freeman: I ended up buying at least three half pints. [?] It was costing \$1.30 a bottle. Oh man, it’s funny. But that’s what he told me. I said wow. He said, “I’ll tell you the truth.” He said, “I used to play just like Pres.” He said, “So did Bird.” I said, “I kind of heard it a little bit in Bird.” He said yeah. He said, “Bird was just a little kid, 7, 8 years old,” or something like that. Take it for what it’s worth, because he could have been just putting me on. I don’t know.

Coleman: But there is something similar about the embouchures.

Freeman: Yeah, very much, very much.

Coleman: So, who knows? It may be. There seemed to be a similarity. They had that really tight thing, smile, and not everybody – a whole lot of cats don’t have that kind of embouchure.

Freeman: No. Well, they can’t get the dexterity that they want with it, because you know, it’s an old saying, that in order to get the dexterity, you got to have your mouth so that the reed can vibrate freely. So that – that’s a myth.

But the embouchure that really puzzled me was Coltrane, and Johnny Hodges. It was a long time before I realized that they were playing double lip. Because, see, when I first went to high school, that’s the first thing that Captain Walter Dyett told me. He says, “You’re playing double lip?” I say, “Well, that’s the way I play.” He said, “Oh, you won’t play that way long.” I didn’t know what he meant, because he put me right into marching band with that bass saxophone.

Coleman: That stopped all that.

Freeman: Oh man. I stepped into a hole one day, and I bit through up here. He said, “I noticed you’re not” – about two months later, he said, “I noticed you’re not playing double lip anymore,” because when he wanted to be cynical, that’s the way he talked. “Oh, you’re not playing double lip.” I said, “No sir.” But the . . .

Coleman: This guy Alvin Batiste, you know him?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: Down in Louisiana.

Freeman: Yeah, the clarinet player.

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Coleman: Yeah, he teaches those cats double lip. So Donald Harrison and Branford Marsalis and all those cats.

Freeman: Oh yeah. You get a beautiful sound. You really do, much because your teeth are not on the mouthpiece. Because my teeth used to be beautiful. I was fooling around. The minute I started blowing with these Link mouthpieces . . .

Coleman: Metal mouthpieces will do it.

Freeman: Teeth divided.

Coleman: Teeth divided. Yeah, they'll do it to you.

Freeman: A lot of cats, their mouth is round like this, because those are hard mouthpieces.

Coleman: I always played hard rubber. I never played metal. I mean, I tried to play metal, but I . . .

Freeman: See, that – you just have to – it's an acquired taste.

Coleman: It's one of those things that certain cats were playing Links, and because of that, everybody – they wanted to be like them, get that sound.

Freeman: Right.

Coleman: So there was a period when Links were real popular.

Freeman: They're not that popular anymore.

Coleman: Plus they don't make them the same way. It's not the same.

Freeman: No, no, no, because my mouthpiece like is – what? – 50-something years old. Everybody said, man, you're still playing that mouthpiece? I say, I can't find a new Link that sounds like anything. I've almost bitten through this one.

Coleman: These cats who were here in this area, like – they're younger people, like Nicky Hill and . . .

Freeman: Nicky was wonderful.

Coleman: . . . and – what was the name of the alto player my father used to tell me about? Kind of Bird-like. I don't know if he got shot stealing a t.v. or something, or was

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that Nicky Hill? What was the name of that cat? He died young, alto player, in a Bird kind of mode.

Freeman: Let's see. Did he give you any kind of description about height or the skin color?

Coleman: No, no. I think he said that he got shot stealing a t.v. out of a church, but I don't know if he was talking about Nicky Hill or that guy.

Freeman: They had one cat that was really on Bird. He was one of the main ones playing up there one night when I was playing with Bird.

Coleman: What was his name?

Freeman: Uh – George is much better on names than I am, but this cat . . .

Coleman: I'll think of his name in a second.

Freeman: I know him very, very well. I'm certain that's the . . .

Coleman: Did he die young?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: Yeah, that's probably the cat.

Freeman: Everybody was – that was another dying period, redlining there. A lot of musicians got fouled up with dope and whatnot, and they went right out of here.

Coleman: What – didn't Sonny Rollins move to Chicago for a second in the '50s?

Freeman: Yeah. He was around here with [?clanky], which was an outside trumpet player. At that time, he was going to play outside.

Coleman: Who?

Freeman: Sonny Rollins.

Coleman: He said that – he has a book. There's a book that's out, that just came out, that has a lot of – he had a lot to do with it, interviews and everything. It's called *Open Sky*.

Freeman: I didn't know that.

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Coleman: He said that he was hanging out with – he was practicing in a Y[MCA]. He was trying to kick a drug habit. He was staying in a Y. He had a lot of jobs where he was lifting stuff and all that, and he was practicing a lot with Booker Little.

Freeman: Booker died very, very young. I know he was around 63rd Street. He was at the D. J. Lounge. He was working there for McKee, which is right at 63-something, Cottage. He called it the D. J. Lounge, McKee's D. J. Lounge. McKee booked him in there. He was there for quite some while.

Coleman: He was there. Then he went off with Max Roach and Clifford Brown, and they came back and played the Bee Hive at one point.

All these clubs, like the clubs on Cottage and all that stuff, when did all that stuff start phasing out? What period . . . ?

Freeman: Right when Bird died.

Coleman: Yeah?

Freeman: Bird signed it off. When Bird died, the music lost all its enthusiasm. See, first Clifford Brown died in this automobile accident thing, he and Bud Powell's brother. They came by my set, which is so weird.

Coleman: Clifford Brown died before Bird?

Freeman: See, he died in – what was it? – '53? It's something like that. Because Bird died . . .

Coleman: Because I'm almost sure Clifford Brown died in '56 and Bird died in '55.

Freeman: I might have it incorrect.

Coleman: But it's around the same period of time.

Freeman: I was at the Pershing.

Coleman: That was a big – the cats thought that was a big loss too, though.

Freeman: Oh yeah. Clifford came by and played. I had Billy Wallace with me, and he loved Clifford, just idolized him. I had him playing the piano. He invited Clifford by. Clifford came by and just knocked everybody out. He shot pool a lot too. He was a great pool player. They had a pool room back past the liquor store there.

Coleman: Because he didn't drink or nothing, right? He was real clean.

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Freeman: No, and I don't think Richie Powell drank either, because they were like kind of soul mates. We all hugged them and told them so long, and that's when they were on the highway and got killed. So I remember that very distinctly. I might have the dates mixed up, but I thought that Clifford – I thought he died before Bird, I thought.

Coleman: I'm pretty sure he died after Bird, because I've got some records that he made, and Bird was already – not that long after, though, like just around in the same period.

Freeman: I know Fat Girl – what was his name? –

Coleman: Fats Navarro. There's another bad cat.

Freeman: . . . he and Maggie, all those guys –

Coleman: Howard McGhee.

Freeman: . . . yeah, Howard McGhee – all those guys were such a big part of the Chicago scene, because they were all coming to Chicago all the time. They almost all of them dissipated around the same time.

Coleman: That's true, all in the early '50s.

Freeman: So the music just said bip. Of course Diz, the warrior that he is, he tried to carry on with it, but Diz seemed to me like he went into his big band thing and then into Latin, a lot of Latin music and whatnot. Then he would get these different kind of bands that – where he was strictly the only star in the band. So when you went to hear him, and hear him . . .

Coleman: Like what we were talking about.

Freeman: Yeah, the same thing that we was talking about earlier. So the music just said, blah.

Coleman: You think the bottom kind of dropped out.

Freeman: Yeah, it sounded just – and during that time, the singers were coming out.

Coleman: Plus you had the whole thing with Elvis Presley and all that starting to happen.

Freeman: Yeah, all that started to happen.

Coleman: The Chuck Berry thing was happening real early.

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Freeman: That's right. So the masses of people that were behind bebop and whatnot – of course Miles [Davis] got in there and saved a little something, because he and Gerry Mulligan put out progressive music. So instead of calling it bebop . . .

Coleman: *Birth of the Cool* and all that.

Freeman: . . . they called it progressive. Yeah, *Birth of the Cool*. Then when Miles decided to go into his other thing, that was like . . .

Coleman: That was really it.

Freeman: Yeah, because a lot of cats – like, I was working clubs. Cats were saying, “He’s on it. But what’s that that you’re playing?” They say, “Why don’t you . . . ? – you can’t be hipper than Miles Davis.” Miles was playing what they thought was like rock or something. So I said, aw, Miles, come on. Come back to jazz. Because one night I emceed for Miles, one of Miles’s groups. Boy, they were paying him a lot of money. He made all the money [?], and he’s playing this music. I’m looking at this great man playing this music. He was with – what was the real – the art woman that he was married to for about . . . ?

Coleman: Cicely Tyson?

Freeman: Yeah. She’s sitting over in the wings. You know how Miles used to act. He had a different act altogether. He was playing like nursery rhymes [Freeman sings a ditty]. Then he’d smile at her. “Come on, give us some sugar” or something. Then he – and something was wrong with his leg.

Coleman: A car accident.

Freeman: And man, he was tearing the house up with this music. Of course all the diehards were sitting there, “Aw man, aw man.” But the people were going crazy.

Coleman: It was a whole different set of people.

Freeman: Yeah, what I’m trying to tell you. What he had going, he had going. He had the guitar players, was outside. They was . . .

Coleman: He had a cat from here for a while. What’s his name?

Freeman: I just talked to him a week ago or two. I’ll never think of his name.

Coleman: Crazy playing cat.

Freeman: Yeah, he was [Freeman makes a warbling sound]. He had two or three drummers.

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Coleman: Jack [DeJohnette] played with him in that period.

Freeman: He had an organ setup, and every now and then he'd go and he'd play some chords. He'd do something. I'd say, well Miles, I, goodness – but I could see where he was getting over. But I was used to that other Miles, the one that was burning.

Coleman: Cats like – all those cats who came out of here like – you had a lot of cats: Andrew Hill, Herbie Hancock, Jack DeJohnette. Did all those cats come up through your thing too?

Freeman: Jack used to play piano with me. Herbie didn't, but Jack did.

Coleman: Where did Herbie come from? He came up in a different kind of way?

Freeman: Evanston.

Coleman: All right. Because people told me stories about him, and they always insinuated that he had a little money, or his family had a little money.

Freeman: Maybe so, but he came out of a thing where he didn't come up like the usual cats.

Coleman: Not through the clubs and stuff like that.

Freeman: Yeah, see, because they discovered him, and they made the hit *Watermelon Man*. He just – he started making movies, all kinds of different stuff. Of course he was with Miles Davis during Miles's big years, when he had – what? – Shorter with him and Coleman, playing tenor.

Coleman: Wayne Shorter. First George Coleman, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter, Tony Williams.

Freeman: The thing that really surprised me was when Sam Rivers was with him for a while.

Coleman: I was just talking with somebody. I was talking to Joe Bowie about that. Sam was with Miles for a second. Actually, I thought that that would be nice, a nice change from – because, you know, Miles had trouble finding another saxophone player after Coltrane. He didn't like Wayne Shorter in the beginning. Coltrane kept trying to get him the gig, Wayne, but he didn't like Wayne in the beginning, and he didn't like hardly anybody.

Freeman: That's true.

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Coleman: He tried Sonny Stitt. He tried Hank Mobley. He went through a lot of cats. Sam Rivers was one of the guys that he went through. George Coleman.

Freeman: The problem is with George Coleman, I think, because of the little hip drummer.

Coleman: Tony Williams. He didn't get along with George?

Freeman: Yeah, for some reason. He was in another bag or something. I don't know.

Coleman: He liked – he's the one who got Sam Rivers in, Tony Williams.

Freeman: He did?

Coleman: Because he used to play with Sam in Boston. So he brought Sam in. But I think Sam was too progressive for Miles. Sam had some other stuff.

Freeman: Have you heard Sam's big band?

Coleman: I just . . .

Freeman: Samski's out there, baby.

Coleman: We just did a record. Me and Joe were on it. This record got nominated for a Grammy, actually. I was shocked.

Freeman: Listen, Samski is out there, baby.

Coleman: I know, because that was one of the first people I hooked up with in New York.

Freeman: I remember that.

Coleman: He's got some wild – Chico, as a matter of fact. Your son took me by the – he said, "Can you read?" I said, "Yeah, I read a little bit." He said, "Come on over here. Let's check out Sam – this guy Sam Rivers." Man, I ain't never heard no stuff like this in my life. I was like, what kind of . . .

Freeman: I know, Samski, boy.

Coleman: Like Mars music or something. It's like the impact – it even had a bigger impact on me than something like Sun Ra. It was like, out there.

Freeman: I know. He – wasn't he on the fence last year?

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Coleman: He was here for a while, in Chicago, wasn't he?

Freeman: Yeah, Samski.

Coleman: What was he – was he playing clubs and stuff, or what?

Freeman: He was all over. Samski is doing it, baby.

Coleman: You know he's about the same age as you?

Freeman: I know.

Coleman: A lot of cats don't think that, because of his style and what he's associated with. He didn't come to the fore until the '60s.

Freeman: When I go to New York, I stay with Chico. He'd always carry me to and from the gigs and to the airport.

Coleman: Who, Sam?

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: I know he likes your playing a lot. He was talking – we've been talking about you.

Freeman: He and I hit it right off, and Bea, boy, she is a treasure. She is a treasure. She really is.

Coleman: She's crazy. They've been together for a long time.

Freeman: Ever since I can remember.

Coleman: Because they told me – they were telling me that they had Charlie Parker over for dinner. I was like – that means you all have been together for a long time.

Freeman: Yeah, past – I think it's past 50 years.

Coleman: Which is rare nowadays, especially for musicians.

Freeman: Listen. Tell me about it.

Coleman: Sam played with Dizzy too.

Freeman: Right.

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Coleman: He made the rounds.

Freeman: Listen, man, he's excellent on flute.

Coleman: Piano.

Freeman: He plays a whole bunch of instruments.

Coleman: So you started playing piano before you started playing saxophone. You were proficient on piano before saxophone?

Freeman: Sure, I could run up and down everything. They used to call me Runs. I was a great admirer of Art Tatum

Coleman: Who wasn't? Art Tatum was the man.

Freeman: You know something? I was playing a club on 55th Street. This club was a famous club, because Coleman Hawkins used to come there, back in his heyday. I got married. My reception was in this club where I was working, this famous club, right down from the Rhumboogie, going west.

Coleman: Where was the club at?

Freeman: There was an elevated on 55th, elevated station, and I was right to the west of this elevated station at a place – I'm trying – this place had three or four big-time names. All the big-time horn players used to come to this place. It was upstairs, a gorgeous room. You had to go up some long stairs. I remember distinctly Coleman Hawkins playing there. I think Fletcher Henderson's band played there.

I used to practice all the time, like 20 hours a day. I was living over this great piano player. I didn't know he was this great. His name was Prentice McCarey.

Coleman: Prince?

Freeman: Prentice. So I'd be banging on this piano. Oh, I'd go nuts. My mother loved it. So she said, "Play, boy, play." She'd be sitting on a chair. I'm just playing. Then finally I started playing the saxophone. He used to call up and say, "Please. Piano, maybe." "But," he said, "saxophone." He said, "I can't stand it. Stop."

The funny part about it was, years later, I got to play in this place myself, and guess who I hired?

Coleman: That same – that guy?

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Freeman: Prentice McCarey, one of my idols. He's a great piano player. Every time Coleman Hawkins came to town, he would use this cat.

He never practiced. He was the first guy to tell me – he said, “I don't practice any more physically. I practice mentally.” Just like I practice today now. He said, “Once I get it up here, I got it.” I used to say, “Really?” He said, “Yeah, you'll reach it, maybe 50 years from now.” That's what he used to tell me. And sure enough, I did.

Coleman: He was older than you then.

Freeman: Oh yeah. He's gone now, because he was somewhere around my father's age.

Anyway, one night we were playing. He said, “You know, kid,” he says, “I just listened to you playing the piano there,” because sometimes I'd sit down and pick up – this club had two pianos, two grand pianos, one up on stage and one by her bar. A lady had acquired this place. I'd sit down sometimes and just play. He says, “Man, you got a right hand something like Art Tatum.” I said, “Art Tatum!” I say, “Oh no.” I say, “I'm just jiving.” He said, “I tell you what. Tell you what I'm going to do for you, kid.” He says, “He's a good friend of mine.” He said, “I'm going to bring him by here.”

Coleman: He's going to bring Tatum by there?

Freeman: Bring Tatum by. One night, Tatum was in town down at the Three Deuces, and he actually brought this man by. This piano that was on the floor was kind of beat. It was a grand. There was three or four keys wasn't working. I said, “You're Art Tatum.” I grabbed and hugged him and told him how much I loved him. He said, “All right, kid, but what's happening with the bar?”

Coleman: Right. I heard he liked to drink.

Freeman: We had to get a fifth of Scotch. He set it down. I said, “Mr. Tatum, I think you ought to come up on stage.” He said, “Nah, nah.” I said, “But that's a much better piano.” I said, “This one's got three or four keys . . .” He said yeah. He took his hands. He said, “That's – oh, yeah.” He pointed, just like that. I said, “I know you want to play.”

We got off – this is the honest to goodness truth – we got off at 1 o'clock. We played from 9 to 1. And this man played until daybreak. The only time he would stop – but the piano never stopped. He'd take it, and get him a good swig.

Coleman: While he's still playing.

Freeman: Yeah. Sometime he'd do it with his right hand, sometime with his left hand. But this piano sounded like it had ten fingers on it. He played that piano. I was present here to tell you. I'm not lying. Or my brother Bruz.

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Coleman: I never saw Tatum, but I heard the records.

Freeman: Let me tell you. He played the piano – have you ever seen a real great typist? They used to have a man here, was the world’s greatest typist.

Coleman: Real smooth. They don’t even look like they’re typing.

Freeman: Yeah. That’s the way he played piano. His fingers like – just – I said – and he’s going from one tune – the only time the music would do anything was when he’s taking a sip. He played that piano until about 5 o’clock in the morning, nonstop.

Coleman: The time you heard him, did you feel like you were understanding what he was doing?

Freeman: I’ll tell you how – I thought I was in heaven or somewhere. I didn’t know what to think, because I just – I didn’t believe anybody could do that on piano – on anything. I got as much kick out of him as I did later on, listening to Bird once I understood something about music. But boy, I tell you. I said, my goodness. Prentice told me after, he said, “I’m going to take him on back now.” He said, “You got enough piano?” “Yeah,” I said. I said, “I may never touch the piano again.”

Art Tatum truly had to be one of the few geniuses of all time in music. He just played in any key, and you could tell he could just play anything he wanted to play, which is where – if you speak to people who don’t play instruments or into music that way, it’s like a great singer who can sing, got a four-octave range, just like this piano. They can sing anything they want to sing, anywhere, any key. That’s where he was on the piano. I’d never heard anybody with that proficiency, just be playing in one key, then start playing in another key, then play in another key with this hand. I said, aw man. He was unreal. Art Tatum. It’s a shame every musician in the world couldn’t have heard him play in person. Of course his records are out here.

Coleman: His records are shocking enough.

Freeman: Oh yeah.

Coleman: It’s not like you can’t – but I saw one short film clip of him playing. He’d do these runs. Like you said, it was like water. It’s flowing. It looked so smooth. It doesn’t even look like he’s touching the keys. It looked like his fingers are riding over the keys or something.

Freeman: He had the proficiency of – like one of the world’s greatest concert players.

Coleman: Horowitz or something like that. Actually they say Horowitz used to come and see him play.

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Freeman: Yeah, because Horowitz was so great, he didn't have to even play the music as written no more. That's how great he was. He was like a great soloist. But you knew that he could play the music like it was written, if he wanted to. But he was a virtuoso.

Coleman: He said in one of these interviews that Art Tatum was one of the greatest piano players he ever heard. Horowitz said this.

Freeman: I know just in my view.

Coleman: Said just a natural – people say natural a lot of times when they think about this music, because they think that people don't work. But I heard – as talented as Tatum was, I heard he practiced all the time.

Freeman: Oh yeah, sure. I talked with him after we got through. He said – I said, “How in the world did you ever play the piano with . . . ?” He said, “Practice.” He says, “That's where I got it.” But you could see that it was . . .

Coleman: It was something else.

Freeman: . . . it was 90% gift too. Sure man. Because, see, playing – I could see somebody reading music and learning and reaching that proficiency after they get 50 or 60 years old, but for somebody to be creating.

Coleman: When I send you this other stuff, I'm going to send you this interview I have of Charlie Parker. I don't think I gave it to you already.

Freeman: I've never heard him speak at length. I couldn't get hardly anything out of him.

Coleman: I've got a couple interviews. I'll send it to you.

Freeman: Really?

Coleman: One is an interview where Paul Desmond is interviewing him. It's a good interview. Paul Desmond asks him, how did you get this incredible technique and all this stuff and everything, and Bird, he said, practice.

Freeman: That's right.

Coleman: And then Paul Desmond starts laughing. He says, I'm glad you said that, because a lot of these young musicians out here, they think that you just are naturally like this and that you can just do this, it's just genius. Bird said, oh no. He said, at one point I practiced 14 to 18 hours a day every day.

Freeman: That's right.

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Coleman: He said that it's just like a good shoe, a fine shoe. When you polish it, it gets much better. He used that analogy. He said, anything can be polished up. He said, it's not done with mirrors and tricks. He said, it's just work.

Freeman: I'm glad he said that too, because one time when I heard him play, I just figured, this man just picked the saxophone up and started playing it. But I guess, no.

Coleman: Like you said, it could be 80% or 85% of whatever. There's got to be a lot of talent there, but on top, there's also – it's true there's a lot of people with talent that don't – never fulfill their whole thing, because they don't work.

Freeman: I saw – I was doing clinics for about five years. You probably never knew that. I was traveling all over.

Coleman: Recently?

Freeman: No, it's been maybe about . . .

Coleman: '70s?

Freeman: It was in the '80s, the early '80s, about from '85 to – it was somewhere back then. I was running into these real young kids, because I was doing grammar schools at one time. It was so interesting. Sometimes a little kid would come up, like 5 or 6 years old, that could really play. You know he ain't had no time to practice. You look at this kid, and you say – now your biggest worry is, is he going to grow up and lose all this? Because a whole lot of them do. The minute they get serious about the instrument or something, then they try to learn something.

Coleman: They take a wrong turn.

Freeman: Yeah, and then they lose whatever this thing is. So you say, aw man, I hope that you can keep that.

Coleman: So maybe the cases of the people – the Charlie Parkers and the Tatum's and stuff are people who just followed through and built on their natural talent.

Freeman: Right. That's the point I was trying to make, because if a guy is 2 or 3 years old and he can sit down at the piano and be running off some stuff, he didn't practice and get that. Like you might say, "Listen kid. So you think you're a hotshot." "Of course I am," he'll tell you. "Yes I am." You say, "Play [Freeman sings a complex line]. This cat's sitting there [Freeman repeats the line]. That's not practicing. That's into that other thing again, like I was speaking about yesterday. I still think that that's out here. I don't tell many people this, but I still believe that there's a lot of stuff that we as human beings do not know. Like, for instance, who knows where Bird's soul has gone? If Bird jumps

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into somebody maybe two or three years from now, and this cat is riffing off Bird, and he's 3 or 4 years old . . .

Coleman: That's mysterious.

Freeman: . . . he didn't get this from practicing. He's not old enough to practice, even if he practiced four years.

Coleman: So you're basically saying you believe in reincarnation or the transmigration of souls and all that?

Freeman: Yeah, because, see, like I said, I just go by myself. I know sometime I play things even around you, and you say, "Man, what'd you play?" I say, "I don't know." A lot of cats think I'm putting them on, but I really don't. I might get home and try to – if it's a tape – and analyze it or something. But at the time, I really am not conscious of this thing.

Coleman: So you say you can pull it from – something you're pulling from maybe another lifetime or something like that.

Freeman: Right.

Coleman: I believe – I definitely believe that. I've talked about it all the time.

Freeman: Because music is one of the main sources out here. I found that out. Like I told you the story about me being up there at Great Lakes and going through boot training. I was ready to fight. I was ready to shoot somebody. It's from that march music, *King Cotton* and all those great march tunes. Boy when they got [Freeman sings a melody from *Stars and Stripes Forever*], then I wanted to break out of the line and go get my rifle. I said, I must be losing it, man. I'm a peaceful man. Some of those guys, boy, they were ready.

Coleman: That's what that music is designed to do.

Freeman: Yeah, that's the truth.

Coleman: In fact, when you go in the supermarket, certain music's playing, doesn't it help you think about buying stuff?

Freeman: That's right. They got that – what do they call it? – Musak.

Coleman: Yeah. People don't realize how powerful music is. You go to the movies, and you to go to watch something like *Superman*, and they have this [Coleman sings the theme]. You get to rooting . . .

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Freeman: You might go flying just by – temporarily you have wings.

Coleman: You get into it. You get totally into it. But if you think about all that stuff with no music . . .

Freeman: It's something I was reading – I don't know whether you've read it – from *The Book of Knowledge*. They were saying when Joshua and these walls were – certain controls were hit.

Coleman: They blew down the walls.

Freeman: Certain notes.

Coleman: It's very mysterious. It's funny, because even comedians – Richard Pryor – did you ever meet him?

Freeman: Oh, I was on the road with him.

Coleman: He's a funny cat.

Freeman: One of the funniest cats in the world.

Coleman: He said people don't realize how much music is in everyday life and everything. He said that even – you watch all these movies, they have this music for everything: love music, army music, this, that, and that. He said he was in the service, the enemy was approaching or something, the guy didn't shoot. He said, "Man, how come you didn't shoot?" He said, "I didn't hear no music." You got to hear that enemy music. [Coleman sings].

Freeman: Yeah, before he'd shoot. I tell you, it's really something.

Coleman: The thing that amazes me about this music, about improvisation, is that you can have – all this stuff can happen in a passing moment, these different colors and flavors and things like that, in the course of one extemporization. You can pass through all these different moods and all these different things.

Freeman: Exactly. I witnessed it last night. You know I'm crazy about these two girls. You know when they asked me to play, I really wanted to play, but I had set up this other mode, and I've been doing it for almost 50 years, where when I think of my horses, I think of presenting them in the best light I can and me go somewhere and sit down and listen to them and encourage them to play. Once or twice in my career, I have tried to play, because people just say, "Look man, come on. You ain't that great. We're asking you to play, and you won't play." So I went up there and played. I couldn't get nothing out of the horn, because my mind was in another mode altogether. So I learned the hard way that when I set that horn down, don't pick it up. Leave that horn alone. Because all

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that's gone, the mode of what I'm playing is gone, and I'm not going to ever recapture it that night. So I learned, when I set that horn down, don't pick that horn up. Leave that horn alone.

Then a couple times I ran into some weird things by cats saying, "I knew this cat. His ladies done come in, or his big-time friends come in. Now he going to hog the show instead of letting us play." I never looked at it that way, but I guess that's the way it does look. Because I noticed my band men, they said, "Man, look. You bring them horses up there. Let us get off of here." I bring you up there, they won't leave. So I say, see, the minute somebody comes in great from New York, they want to play. Now this is when my horses really want to play. The horses are watching them, and they don't have nearly the respect for those cats that they have for me.

Coleman: I know what you're saying, because I've seen it.

Freeman: You see what I mean? Because they feel like these cats are in competition with them.

Coleman: Yeah, they're in the way.

Freeman: Yeah. Because my horses say, "Now look" – and some of them are watching their watch. They say, oh. They say, "Now, he's through." Like, if I play two notes, and I set that horn down, they say, "He's through." It's horses time. Really. I mean, cats will come from England. A couple cats come from London and said – the time was winding down – they said, "Look. We got to play." I said, "We thought that you called us. We met you when you come in." I said, "I thought you was going to come up and play." They said, "No." They said, "You're not going to call us?" I said, "Well, okay." So I got the [?] and called. They came up and played. They said, "We can't go back without playing." They come in here and said, "Look, I've been working all week long on this tune."

Oh, Billy Foulkes.

Coleman: Yeah, that's his name.

Freeman: I told you I was going to think of his name.

Coleman: You might think of the alto player next too.

Freeman: I am. So, when they – some of these guys, Steve, they wait all week.

Coleman: Henry Pride.

Freeman: Henry Pride.

Coleman: That's the cat.

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Freeman: I tell you, the mind is something else.

Coleman: Yeah, it just comes in.

Freeman: They'll call me up from overseas, and they say, "Get your notebook. I'm coming the second Tuesday in August." I already got a cat. He's called me. This cat's in Australia. He said, "I'll be there the second Tuesday," and he gave me his name. I got it written down. He said, "Now I want to play, because I'm getting my tune together now." Now what happens is, sometimes they come there, and the cats don't know their tune

Coleman: Oh, they're drug.

Freeman: Like this cat last night that was determined to play that tune. I say, they might – I said, "The cats, they're some of my horses." I thought he said – I think he's going to play that tune anyway. Then I find out that he didn't know the tune. I said, aw, man, this is . . .

Coleman: We've all been there though. I've been in that mode where you learn this tune, and then you want to come out and play this new tune.

Freeman: Yeah, you want to come out and do your thing.

Coleman: I learn to quit calling tunes. I just let other cats call them.

Freeman: I've seen John Young do some strange things too. Like a cat would say – oh, what's this tune? *Invitation*. This cat had practiced *Invitation*, he told me, for two years. He said, "Because I heard you play that tune." He said, "I got this tune. I have proficiency now." He says, "I'm going to play this tune." He said – he called me up. I was at the Enterprise. He says, "I'm going to play this tune." He says, "Now, I want to know. Were you playing that song in C minor or D minor?" I said, "I was playing it in C minor concert." He said, "That's where I got it." I said okay. It was kind of sad, because he had his chest all stuck out, and he called this tune. I like to think that John didn't hear him correctly.

Coleman: John could be funny though.

Freeman: See, John ended up with this thing in A-flat minor. Oh, and this man fought this tune and just burst out in sweat, because he had this tune ready, but it was in the wrong key. I said, boy. I didn't know what to do. So after I saw him struggling so, I said, I got to end his agony, but how can I do it and use my diplomacy? So it finally dawned on me to just go up and say – to cut the set off. It's the middle of the night, and I said that I got to go home. All of them is looking at me like – here's John. Everybody's looking. But I could think of no other way to do this. And the cat – I could tell the cat was real

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happy that I did this. I said, "Time is gone." So everybody said – so then I had to pretend that I was really tore up.

[recording interrupted]

So I had to stop the set, like I said. In stopping the set so early, I had to figure out a way to restart the set, once I got this song over with that he could play in this key. So everybody looking at me, because they think I'm getting ready to say goodnight, just call the set off. Then I had to play drunk, because I used to do that all the time. "Oh, what was I saying? Oh, excuse me, man, for cutting you off, baby, because I don't like to do anything like that, but let's change that tune and let's play some blues in F." So I immediately stomped off something else. That's the way I got out of that. But I've done that any number of times.

Coleman: You were pretending like you were drunk?

Freeman: Yeah, because I had to get out of certain things, and the best way was to act like I was tore up. Then everybody would say, "Oh, he's tore up. Come on, Vonski. Get it together, baby." I say, "I'm going to try to get it together." I went through that scene for hours. So everything was cool. I called the waitress over. Sometimes I even poured stuff right on the floor. Everybody said, "Boy, that guy could really drink." I wasn't really drinking nothing. See, when you have an open set, it's so many – and you don't charge at the door, and there's no bouncer . . .

Coleman: So many stragglers.

Freeman: So I got to be a schoolteacher, a guardian, a – what's that thing when you have children? – chaperone, doctor, lawyer, politician, and all these things, because I got – sometimes I had to throw people out.

Coleman: Yeah, I've seen you.

Freeman: But I have to throw them out, because sometimes they throw me out. So it's all kinds of different things that go on in these open sets. So I had to learn different ways to keep the set going and everybody be reasonably happy.

Coleman: This concept of the open set, like what you did at the Enterprise, El Matador, Apartment – there's a lot of places you did it, actually – when did that first start? Is that something that you started? Or is that something that you got from somebody else?

Freeman: I think that's just something that has always been. Maybe I'm doing it my way, because I used to talk a lot. And this would knock the ladies out: I used to sing a lot. Oh yeah. Oh man. I used to dance. I used to do everything to get these sets off the road. Now when I look back – because a lot of people say, "Hey, don't you even talk any more?" I say, "Very seldom," because my horses know just what to do nowadays, just

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file up and blow and come off. Occasionally you get a guy who plays too long, but now I've gotten to the point where I don't even mind anymore. They play a lot of times, instead of really playing, stand off on the side blowing. I used to stop all that. I found out that the people like it. "Look at that nut over there, just blowing to himself." A guy would be sitting there doodling. I found out all this is part of the ambience of what I'm doing. So it doesn't bother me. Of course I don't want anybody to take their pants down or something in there, but short of that, just . . .

Coleman: When did it start though? When did you start doing sets like that?

Freeman: Oh my goodness. It's better than 50 years.

Coleman: I know it's the only thing that I've ever seen, from the first time I saw you.

Freeman: So they don't call my sets "sets" anymore. They call them "parties." They really do. That's the way I put – that's the way I sign my contract. They say, "What type of music?" I say, "Party," "Partying," or something. Because you can come here with this and say, "We want to know what you're doing?" I say, "Partying." So they stopped calling me, because that's what I put down after every – they said, "We thought you was doing a concert." I said, "No, partying."

Coleman: I remember when you did the set with – I guess it was with Stitt, maybe at the Showcase, and you started calling us up, and Segal would get mad.

Freeman: Oh, he sure would. Boy.

Coleman: Joe Segal, the owner of the Jazz Showcase.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: He would . . .

Freeman: "I didn't bring you down here for you to bring that crap down here," he would say. I said, "Listen, this is good for your place." "No, it isn't." But he's softened up about it now. Of course he doesn't hire me too much, though. Because right today, when I play down there, that's what happens. So he says, "Here comes Vonski with that Vonski stuff." But I enjoy it, like hey, man, give – he's got the top club in the city, and as the cats expire more and more – in fact, if the cats keep on going the way they're going, he's going to have to hire my horses.

Coleman: Joe Lovano's down there tonight. You know him?

Freeman: Oh yeah, very well. We played a set together up in New York. He's a very nice man, nice horn player. I maybe can get down, but I just don't know. It's all according to what changes I go through here.

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Coleman: You mentioned before that you were on the road with Richard Prior. Was that
...

Freeman: Oh man, he's great.

Coleman: You said a lot. Because there was this whole period, I know, where he was opening up a lot for musicians, for Miles Davis and different things.

Freeman: Oh yeah?

Coleman: Was it like the kind of thing where he was opening for you all?

Freeman: No, he was – I was with Milt Trenier, and he was on the program.

Coleman: Is Milt Trenier an organ player? What did he play?

Freeman: No, he's a singer.

Coleman: Oh, okay.

Freeman: The Trenier twins and the Trenier brothers. They have acts.

Coleman: And you were just backing him?

Freeman: Yeah, they do comedy. I was in Milt's band: Joe Diorio on guitar and myself, and he had bass, drums, and piano, and Mickey Lynn was the singer, a real beautiful woman, and himself.

Coleman: Mickey Lynn?

Freeman: Mickey Lynn.

Coleman: Around when was this?

Freeman: Oh, they have a record out, strange as it may seem, that I'm on.

Coleman: No, no, I mean I just wanted to know around what time period was this? What year?

Freeman: It was in – let's see. I joined them in '65, and I stayed until '69.

Coleman: And what does Richard Prior have to do with this?

Freeman: He was appearing on different bills with us. He's a very, very funny man.

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Coleman: He wouldn't be integrated into the band.

Freeman: No, no.

Coleman: He was opening or intermission or something.

Freeman: No, he was like – it was hard to say what he was. He was on the bill, because he didn't have a real big name then. He was coming into his own. Then everybody realized how great he was, because he was truly great.

Coleman: Because a lot of those comedians back then did a lot of things with musicians, like Lenny Bruce and all these different cats, Redd Foxx. That was more common back then, wasn't it? Bill Cosby.

Freeman: They all could – they all kind of – either they were the star on the show, or else a special star, something like that.

Coleman: Who else did you go on the road with, as far as road stuff?

Freeman: Oh Lord.

Coleman: Some of the main people.

Freeman: Mostly I've been out there with myself.

Coleman: With a group that you put together.

Freeman: Or one of these booking agencies put together, because I was always – the guy would say, "As long as you going to be there, we don't care who you bring."

Coleman: When did the road stuff stop?

[door opens]

Freeman: That must be George. Somebody with a key, right?

I had mentioned that I had been out with Milt Trenier for about four years. And of course I traveled with Chico all over the world for two or three years.

Coleman: But that's recent. That was since the '80s or something like that.

Freeman: Really. Well, it started in '79 and went to about '85 maybe.

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Actually, I was always going out and playing, like when I went out with you, for example, for a couple of evenings. I came right straight back home, and . . .

Coleman: So it would be just these isolated hits.

Freeman: . . . and you kept going. Everybody was using me that way, called me. So I was gone a lot, but it wasn't with any group of mine. Whenever I played Paris, they always would hire the band. So I said, "Why don't you let me bring a band?" They said, "You're the kind of cat that can just work with anybody." I guess all these years and all these sets . . .

Coleman: In other words, they didn't want to spend the money.

Freeman: Yeah, well now you know I know that's why they were doing that. Because when I went to England and worked . . .

Coleman: Ronnie Scott's?

Freeman: . . . Ronnie's, that was with Chico's band.

Coleman: Did you feel like this lack of touring with a band or something like that, do you feel like it hurt you in any way, musically, or in your career, or something? Do you think it had any effect on you?

Freeman: You know, Steve, I have been very fortunate, because nothing hurts my playing. I just play the same way. I still have good nights and a whole lot of bad ones. So it's just – the only thing that really hurts – I think that it hurts my playing, if I could think of any one thing is that I got this – I have this thing about playing what I want to play. I simply refuse to spend my whole life playing what somebody else wants me to play. So I try to play 60/40, play 60% for them and 40% for myself, if I will equate the percentage. A lot of people say, "Well man, aren't you interested in pleasing people?" I say, "If I can please them doing what I'm doing," because I'm doing the best I can do. I can't be nobody but just me. Because I've seen a lot of guys try to be somebody else, and it doesn't work. It doesn't work for me either. So I figure that – then I got another thing going where I think, maybe it's wrong, but what will be will be. Of course maybe that's not true. But it seems to me like – like I told you the story about I got so that so many people asked me to play, because the minute I started traveling all over the world, people were coming from all over the world to see me. They would really be hurt if I didn't play. I mean physically hurt. They would – you could say, "Look. I got to leave in the morning, and I come thousands of miles to hear you play, and you're not playing." But I learned that if I'm not in that mode, I can't play. So I don't want them to go back and say, "This guy, man, I heard him, and this cat can't really play. He didn't do nothing." So I got to feeling that it would be best for them to just go home and play my records and keep whatever good thought they got about me, rather than me disturbing it or destroying

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whatever good thought they got about me. So I had to make that choice when I started all this jamming.

Then my brother George comes to me. He said, "I'm beginning to see the problem that you have, because they even called up here, and they think I'm you, and they really be wearing me out. I said, 'I'm not Von.' 'Oh yes you are,'" because we sound alike. "It's you, and I'm going to read. You didn't do" so and so, and "You ain't that great," and blah blah. "When I spend my good money to hear you play, I want to hear you play," and blah blah.

So he said, "Why don't you just get a gig and don't have no jamming?" I said, "George, great. That's what I'm going to do." So I got a gig. Next thing I know, everybody was jamming. I got two or three gigs, where [?] – he said, "Listen, I'm only hiring you because you told me you were going to play. I'm hiring you for five hours. I want three sets. I don't want to hear those horses."

Let me tell you something funny. It didn't work here. So then they hired me with Chico. They said, "Now listen. We want Daddy, but we're going to talk to Papa." So when I got off to New York, they called. "Papa, come here." They took me back in the office. Now this is the truth.

Coleman: Where? At the Blue Note?

Freeman: No, I was at Sweet Basil, you know, the one where they had all these bosses? There's three of them. They said, "Now listen, Papa. You're a nice horn player, and you're a nice man, very intelligent. We don't want none of that show-business stuff up there. We don't want you calling none of your horses, because we heard – we don't even know what that means, but we think it means you calling up guys." Say, "We're not going to have any of that. Now Papa, we're telling you in the beginning. Now we mean this. We will terminate this contract. We are not going to have any of that stuff." So I said, "Yes sir, yes sir."

I get up on the bandstand and get me about three or four tastes, and to show you about the mode, I go right straight to the mic and say, "Oh, it's marvelous here in New York City," and Chico said, "Oh Lord." I said, "It's beautiful, baby, up in here." I said, "Ooo, you New Yorkers, I love you." They say, "Yeah, man, play your horn. Yeah man." I said, "Oh no." I says, "We're going to bring up Vonski's horses." Chico like that – Chico run to the bar and got him a triple shot. Meanwhile, these cats started coming up there. I got to the bar with Chico. I said, "What's the matter, Chico?" He said, "Well, I guess this one's gone." "We haven't done two nights," he said.

So let me tell you what happened. These cats got to playing, and this set got so mellow, until one of the owners come over and said, "All right, Papa, you win. Just go ahead. Go ahead and do what you want to do for the rest of the week." Really. That's what he told me. He said, "It's all right." He said, "Try to do it just a little bit later in the night." These

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cats were playing. That's the first time I heard this lady play the bass. Now what's her name? Because I asked about you. She's crazy about you.

Coleman: A black woman or white woman?

Freeman: She's white. At that time . . .

Coleman: Melissa – something like that – Shokum or Scrocum or something like that. Slocum.

Freeman: At that time she looked just like Eve. She was about Eve's size. She was taller. Oh, she was a fox. She went up and grabbed the bass, and I said to myself, Lord, have mercy. I said, this woman's going to play. She took that bass and leaned back like this and went to town.

The next time I saw her, she was bigger than that chair. I said, "Melissa" – because I had been talking about Melissa for about three years or four years. Is she still big?

Coleman: Yeah, I think so.

Freeman: I said, Lord, have mercy. But she can play that bass, baby. At least she played it that night.

Coleman: She played with – she played in a band with Joe Henderson for a while.

Freeman: Oh really. Yeah, well, she – I remember her, and I remember several of the saxophone players. Man, they come out of the woodwork, and they're so glad to get up on that stage, because, you know, Sweet Basil is – they was kind of tight. Well, all the New York clubs, they sure didn't want no cat from Chicago comes in and start some stuff, jam sessions.

Coleman: You said the other day that you started playing when you were how old? Like around – did you say 12? How old were you when you started playing saxophone?

Freeman: 12. Well, professionally, I was 12.

Coleman: No, just . . .

Freeman: Oh, I must have been about 6.

Coleman: We talked about this once on the plane, but I think that in every cat's life, there's a point where you're not getting it, really, if you know what I mean. There's a point where you kind of – there's these certain humps that you get over in your life, certain points where you feel like, okay, I've made the leap from here to here, maybe like the first time that you are able to play through songs or whatever. Then you make another

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progression. Maybe you understand something deeper about harmony or whatever. I want to talk about these periods in your life when you felt like you got – you made these little leaps in understanding. In the beginning, everybody – most people can't play nothing, or everything's completely intuition and you really don't have ideas of what you're doing. You just kind of imitate the shapes and sounds. But at the point where you first could just get up and just play, even if it wasn't fantastic, but you could just get up and just make it through some tunes, when would you say that was?

Freeman: When I was about 12, because, see, I got with Fred, and he . . .

Coleman: Fred Anderson?

Freeman: No, this – I'm trying to think of his name. His name was Frederico. He was a Cuban, real good-looking dude. He's the one who . . .

Coleman: That's the guy that asked your mother.

Freeman: Yeah, asked my mom to let me play. He was excellent, but I really wouldn't call him a jazz player. He was an excellent saxophone player, and he knew how to harmonize. I didn't really know anything about that, because what he wanted me to do was second him, and I didn't know how to do that.

Coleman: Sort of like a Louis Armstrong–King Oliver type thing?

Freeman: Yeah, where you play a third under, or whatever you chose, but you kept that line.

Coleman: Harmonize his line.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: So he would take the main melody.

Freeman: And then he was showing me that it doesn't go by notes. It goes by form. Because I knew a little something, but not hardly anything about it, and I was strictly playing by ear, which is the way he was teaching me. But he showed me, when you're playing – like you say [Freeman sings two notes], well, when the chord changes, you still go [Freeman sings two higher notes in harmony]. In other words, you keep the same form, but you just change the chord – change the notes.

Coleman: The notes that match the chord.

Freeman: But you keep the same framework.

Coleman: The idea's – the melody's consistent.

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Freeman: It's just mental arranging, more or less. I didn't understand that at first, because he said, "Okay, now you play the melody, because you're pretty good kid, playing the melody." I could play the melody to most songs. Man, he could put that harmony there, just like you would write it. I say, "I got to learn that." He said, "I'm glad to see that you're interested." He said, "Because if you're going" He said, "See, I don't need us sitting here playing the same notes." He said, "I wouldn't need you." He said, "I had a trumpet player, but he stayed [?] all the time." He said, "I figured, if I get a young kid" He said, "Your mother already told me not to let you drink or do nothing." He says, "So all you got to do is just sit here and just second me."

So I learned. When I left out of there, because a lot of cats, I play a little now, they say, "Where'd you learn that?" I say, "It's just something I learned from a man years ago when I was just a kid." Because it's a certain – it's nothing hard about it. It's just knowing the trick. It's almost like a trick. So I got a lot from him, and that opened me up, like a can of sardines or something, into wanting to know more about harmony, because to me, that's really where music is.

Coleman: I tell you, it's interesting, because, like the thing you're talking about form just now, if you have an idea – let's say you get a shape in your mind [Coleman sings a melody] or whatever it is. You get a certain shape, but you play that in a certain spot, where the chords are changing underneath it. So, like you said, naturally you got to – the notes have to be adapted on a spot to be – to me, you're like one of the greatest – I mean, Bird too – one of the greatest players at that. I call it continuity of idea. You have an idea, and you can hear that it's the same idea, even though the chords are changing. You don't let the chord affect . . .

Freeman: I got that from him, because that's the way he played. Although it wasn't Bird.

Coleman: Yeah, I know what you're saying. I know what you mean, the basic idea.

Freeman: That's the way he played. I noticed it when he would have me play the melody. Man, I couldn't do nothing behind him at first. I was struggling back there with that horn. He said, "See, you don't understand what I'm trying to tell you." He'd just take me back in the dressing room. He had – I could tell it was dragging him, because he'd go out and party with the ladies during the sets, as long as I kept the door closed, because he sure wouldn't let nobody come back in that – I was just back there in that back room by myself. He would come back. He spent a lot of time, about two or three months with me, and I wasn't there but just four before the gig played out. Toward about the end of that – about the middle of that third month, I could really second him, and this is by ear. This is by ear. He said, "Because I don't have time to be writing out all these notes to all these songs." People were asking for all these songs. He said, "It's amazing that you even know these songs." He said, "But since you're out here, you might as well learn how to second people." Because at first – the first two or three months, he just played. He

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seconded me and let me play the lead. The parts that I didn't know, he had the music to, because I always could read.

Coleman: At what point did you go from this stage of being able to harmonize, to being able to do that in your improvisations?

Freeman: When I – actually, I learned so much when I went with Horace Henderson. But before that, I was with these two big bands I was telling you about, King Flemming and Jimmy Brinkley. Remember I mentioned those a little bit earlier? They had these big bands. I found out something, that I didn't know much about big bands, because when you get in a big band, your tone seems to be – it sounds smaller, because you've got four or five brass – three trombones and four trumpets back there [Freeman sings a loud riff]. You're trying to wait until they get through playing and put something in there. If you don't have a good sound, it doesn't sound right. So I had to get with that thing.

Then I learned that a lot of time they had head music. That's where that harmony came in, because the cat was telling me – this cat had four saxophones. I had learned two parts. He had music for three parts and didn't have a fourth part. I had to create the fourth part. So when I had to learn those sixths and sevenths, I said, man. See, but I had this earlier training.

Coleman: With harmony, with Dyett.

Freeman: Yeah. So I was incorporating all this. To show you how things worked together, see, that harmony opened me up, this man just giving me these little simple lessons on harmony, and I really didn't even understand what he was talking about, because he's just telling me – singing notes. "Play this. Play that." I could see the form. Nowadays I know what I was doing. I was learning how to put these components in place, just the same way you would do if you were writing music.

So, after I had been with these two big bands and started playing all these charts, I still – see, I wasn't more than about 13, 14 then, and along with Captain Walter Dyett, going through school and learning concert music. Also, then I ran into one of the most important musics, I think, of all time, that a lot of guys, I can tell when they missed this training. That's choral playing. Have you ever done that? That's like church music.

Coleman: I know, but you're talking about as a saxophone player or singing?

Freeman: Just music in general. It's good for piano players and everybody. It's three- and four-note harmony – two-, three-, four-note harmony.

Coleman: But you're not talking about Bach or something like that.

Freeman: No, this is just – Captain Walter Dyett had what he called . . .

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Coleman: Like church music?

Freeman: It's spirituals. It's like hymns.

Coleman: Okay. All right. Harmonized hymns.

Freeman: Yeah, and all those different – like if you listen to a great singing group, this is what they're really doing.

Coleman: I know what you're talking about, with the moving parts and things like that.

Freeman: Four parts, yeah. Man, this opens you up entirely, because you get a chance to hear all the variations of chords.

Coleman: Voice leading.

Freeman: Especially when you start pedaling, have your bass singer pedal [Freeman hums]. That music can go anywhere. You can use all the twelve tones, and it [?] up your creativity, because it's limitless. You can go anywhere, to the end of the world and back.

So, when I got into that part of it, I said, oh my goodness, there's so much to get together here. So I started really trying to find piano players and things that thought on the same lines that I did. That's when I run into Chris Anderson. He taught me . . .

Coleman: He was younger than you?

Freeman: He may be George's age. George is 73. They're something like around the same – or 72. He was very, very weak and sickly, but he's strong, because he's still living. He was blind, but a genius. He kind of took me under his wing, because he's a harmonical genius. I don't know whether you've ever heard him play.

Coleman: Oh yeah, I've heard him play. Actually, I heard him play with you at the Plaza something in New York. Jazz at the Plaza? What was the name of that? Plaza? Irving Plaza.

Freeman: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. He can sit there and just – he can't see that keyboard anyway – just play gloriously.

So I've had – then I run into Ahmad Jamal, had him for a while. He was – he learned a lot from Chris.

Coleman: They say that a lot of people picked stuff up from Chris. Herbie Hancock, too.

Freeman: Oh yeah. You were around here. Everybody, because he was worth studying. Then Andrew Hill. I had him for a while with me. Jodie Christian, John Young, Willie

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Pickens. All of the great piano players from Chicago have mostly been with me, and I was able to glean something from all of them, harmonically speaking, because my mind was always in there, because you know what I was telling you last night, that the tenor player just got to me, because once you get yourself home to a certain thing, it really – you have to go to the aspirin tablets, because it’s really – it’s just – to keep from being bugged. You realize that everybody has to start somewhere.

Coleman: Which tenor player are you talking about?

Freeman: Well, we won’t go into that.

Coleman: I got it.

Freeman: Because I know I did this to somebody at one stage in my career. Most of us had to learn.

Coleman: At this point were you able to play Duke Ellington things and things like this? Were you able to play these kind of songs and improvise through them and all of this, even at the age of, like, 15, 16?

Freeman: I was able to play them on the piano, which I taught myself how to play.

Coleman: I’m talking about, like, *Sophisticated Lady* and all these tunes.

Freeman: Oh yeah.

Coleman: Because these are relatively sophisticated tunes. Not a pun, but . . .

Freeman: And a lot of them I was playing by ear, because when I finally got the music, I found out I was playing some passages incorrectly.

Then too, I also found out something when I worked with Bird. I don’t know how come I couldn’t solve that then, because it’s just common sense. Bird would play his own songs the same way you play your own songs. You play them different every time you play them. So I can always tell just which book a cat has when I play. Like if I play [Freeman sings the opening phrase of *Confirmation*], I can tell in a minute who has a certain this book, who has that book. Generally I’m playing it the way I played it with him, which might have been the way he played it that night. See? So we all are playing this tune, but we are playing it differently.

I learned. Because at first I used to listen to some cats, and they would tell me, “Papa, you’re all right, but now you’re playing that incorrectly.” I say, “Oh, I am?” They say yeah. They say, “Of course we know that you played with Bird.” I said, “Do you know that?” They say yeah. I say, “But do you really know what that means?” They say, “No. What are you getting at?” I say, “That means I probably learned these tunes the way he

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played them.” I said, “See, you’re learning them out of some book that somebody – maybe some cat played his record and notated it, and that’s the way he played it.” I say, “Now if you would listen to Bird play different records at different times, all those songs are also different.”

Coleman: You’re right about that.

Freeman: It’s just a fact. You know, we’re not machines, especially great jazz musicians. Even when they play something – of course your ear catches, you say, “Oh, he’s playing the same thing.” But it not really the same thing. It’s the same thing, but it’s not really the same thing. You know what I mean. Same song. Because I know, my little songs, I play them all kind of ways.

Coleman: So you’re saying you picked that up from him then? Or you realized later that he was doing it.

Freeman: Yeah, I realized later that when I played with a lot of young cats, I can tell they’re playing something different from me, and they’ll be looking at me. But they respect me. So they’ll try to play it too. There’s a couple of tunes, I always play it by ear, and the cat – I say, “Listen, I really don’t want you to copy this, because I never heard them play this in person, and I never saw the music. I just kind of got it out of the air.” They say, “Yeah, I like the way you play it.” So when I got the music, I wasn’t really playing this song the way that it’s played.

I’ll tell you something that I changed altogether. [Freeman sings a bebop melody.] That song doesn’t really go that way. But all these cats around Chicago, from taping me, play it that way. I say, oh man.

Coleman: A lot – Miles did that a lot too, play songs his own way. You can always tell when a cat got it from Miles.

Freeman: Yeah, because he’s plays . . .

Coleman: . . . that Miles version.

Freeman: That’s the way I was looking for. So I’m really playing my version of the way I heard Bird play.

Coleman: But you find a lot of players who are really individuals, really individualistic, they do that, what you are talking about.

Freeman: I know that now. I didn’t know it then.

Coleman: They do things their own way.

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I don't remember when this was. Maybe it was when we were sitting on a plane, going to Amsterdam, and one of those conversations that we had. But at one point you told me that you felt like you developed late, in terms of – well, late in your career – in terms of really, really understanding deeply what you were doing, versus earlier on in your career.

Freeman: Oh, that's so true.

Coleman: Really understanding on a deeper level the things that you were dealing with.

Freeman: See, because I had this flair for playing what was in my head, that I hadn't figured out.

Coleman: You mean just going on intuition?

Freeman: Yeah, and more or less, until I ran into John Young, I never heard what I was playing, because I was recording. I wasn't being recorded.

Coleman: Ah, he started recording and everything.

Freeman: He would record every night, every time we played . . .

Coleman: I remember that.

Freeman: . . . and then he would give me the tape.

Coleman: He had a reel-to-reel tape recorder. He had that.

Freeman: He was just taping to have something to do, because he's restless. He doesn't drink or smoke or go around and meet people or anything. He's doing this just at the piano.

Coleman: Yeah, he's a real serious cat.

Freeman: So he would say, "Ah, here Free, here, listen at yourself." I say, "I don't want to hear myself. I know what I'm playing." It went on for about a year. So I just started – and then I started playing them and listening. That's when my playing really changed, because I saw a lot of my mistakes and things in what I was doing.

Coleman: When did he start – when did this start happening, this taping and stuff like that?

Freeman: 1972. About the time when you – I met you in '75, you and – what was the other saxophone player's name?

Coleman: Glen Burris.

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Freeman: Yeah, Glen, and then . . .

Coleman: . . . and Joe Hamilton is another one too.

Freeman: But the lady.

Coleman: Diane Ellis?

Freeman: Yeah, Diane Ellis. You – all three of you came out one night when I was playing with Sonny Stitt.

Coleman: Was that Ratso's? Or where was that? One of those places up north.

Freeman: Ratso's. Joe got so angry at me.

Coleman: Glen. Glen got angry at you.

Freeman: Oh, not that time. This was before that. Because, see, Joe . . .

Coleman: Joe Hamilton? Or Joe . . . ?

Freeman: Joe Segal.

Coleman: Segal, oh yeah.

Freeman: See, it was his gig. He was leasing Ratso's. He had billed this as a tenor battle. I said, "Man, Sonny Stitt has out a hundred albums. I don't have out nothing." I said, "To me it's a travesty for me to be sitting up there going to battle this great man." He said, "Oh, you play well enough to do it." I said, "I'm not even talking about the playing." I said, "To me, it's disrespectful." So I wouldn't do it. So I would go out – even though I knew he wasn't going to hire me anymore – I would go out and play. I told Sonny Stitt. I say, "And don't you come up there." He said, "What are you trying to do?" I said, "Just be cool." So I would play a couple – three tunes. Then I would announce him as the star of the show. Joe Segal couldn't believe this. He said, "What are you downing yourself for, man?" Blah, blah. I said, "Look, man." I said, "That man to me is one of the greatest living saxophone players." I say, "And that's the way you should have billed us, was Sonny Stitt and his band, and Von Freeman as special guest." I said, "That's what you should have billed this." Man, Joe, he didn't have me for years after that. But I felt strange walking up there. Here's a man with a household name. Everybody's got his records, maybe loved his records. I didn't have record 1 out. I said, aw man, I'm not going to do this.

Coleman: So around the time I saw you playing with Stitt was around the first things you did with him?

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Freeman: Yeah. Well, he and I – this man had tried to get me on three or four records with him, because I went with him two times, one when he went to Chess and one when he went to this other label that was in Chicago. Was it Columbia at that time? There was another New York label based here. And they wouldn't do it.

Coleman: You said you didn't have any records out. But the record that Rahsaan produced, you did that in like '72 or something like that. *Doin' It*.

Freeman: Well, it was in '72, but the only thing was, it wasn't on none of the jukeboxes or nothing.

Coleman: Oh, it didn't come out?

Freeman: No, and there was entirely no publicity.

Coleman: What was it called? *Doin' it Right Now*?

Freeman: *Doin' it Right Now*. That's the one that they just – that they claim is so great.

Coleman: Sam Jones is on it.

Freeman: Yeah, and Jimmy Cobb's playing drums.

Coleman: And John Young.

Freeman: And John Young.

Coleman: It is good.

Freeman: They was – it's supposed to be a classic now.

Coleman: But it's different. You're playing different on that than you were playing on the stuff I started taping.

Freeman: Oh, of course. Well, you started taping – what? – 20 years later or something like that?

Coleman: No, no, no. I – the first stuff I have is like '76, '77. Before I could play anything, I was taping you and trying to figure out what was happening.

Freeman: Oh. See, the guy at Atlantic, the A&R man told me, he says, "Now, Freeman, we're trying to sell records now. We heard that you can – you're kind of out, outish." So I say, "Oh, is that what you heard?" He says, "Yeah. We're still trying to . . ." – and then they didn't push the records.

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Coleman: Don't that kill you, though?

Freeman: Oh yeah.

Coleman: A cat hires you for what you do, and then here he comes telling you – trying to tell you what to do, and he don't play himself.

Freeman: That's right.

Coleman: That's always killed me. I'm like, why didn't you just get somebody that already does what it is you want? Why are you going to hire an apple and tell him to be an orange?

Freeman: And Steve, it was really weird, because I bought a tuxedo. I had never had a tuxedo in my life.

Coleman: You mean for the album cover?

Freeman: Yeah, because they told me that, "You are going to be on the cover."

Coleman: Oh, I know what you're talking about, because I saw the album.

Freeman: So I buy this tux with my last bread. I told him. I said, "I'm ready for this picture now, because I got my tux." He said, "Tux?" He said, "We don't want you in no tux." I said, "Well what do you want me in?" He said, "You got some old funky pants and stuff, and some funny looking shoes, and wear an undershirt that's cut out," you know the kind like this? I said, "Well, yeah. What's that for?" He said, "We're going to take you around in one of the alley's downtown," which they did . . .

Coleman: Yep. I got the cover.

Freeman: . . . and put me in the basement, and put this picture in 3-D. Now I know I ain't the best looking cat in the world. But I know I'm not the ugliest cat in the world. But in 3-D, nobody looks good. My head is this big, and my body is this – I said, now this is going to turn off all my foxes. When they see this picture, they may get to never playing this album. And that's what's on the album cover. I said, oh brother. So the album sold, what? My mother bought one, and my cousin bought one. So I guess it sold two.

Coleman: And I bought one.

Freeman: Yeah. So three. I said, for Pete's sake. A cat called me from New York, Clarence – what was the name? A saxophone player, good saxophone player. Clarence.

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Coleman: Clarence?

Freeman: Yeah, you know. He had the group called the Enforcers. Clarence? Steven knows him. I just can't think of Clarence's last name. He was a very good saxophone player. He had this group called the Enforcers. He had Lenny Lynn with him, and Tommy playing trumpet.

Coleman: I can't think who you're talking about. I think I know who you're talking about.

Freeman: Anyway, he called me from New York. He said, "I'm in the office at Atlantic."

Coleman: Are you talking about Tommy Turrentine? You said Tommy.

Freeman: No, no. This is Tommy – Clarence [Wheeler] – aw, man, how come I can't call his last name?

Coleman: Well, you'll remember it. It'll come to you.

Freeman: Right. So he called me. He said, "Man, it's a bunch – it must be 500 albums with your picture and your name on it."

[recording interrupted; it resumes in mid-sentence.]

. . . your own life. Because, see . . .

Coleman: So that's not coming into their music.

Freeman: Right, because I learned something. As I get younger, I'm learning a few hard truths. One of them is, you're not going to change nothing. It took me a long time to realize that. Basically, you're not going to change anything. You may change yourself and the way you think about it. But trying to change somebody else or change somebody, like the sun's going to come up, hopefully. It's going to rain sometime, it's going to snow sometime, all the seasons and whatnot. People are going to treat you badly sometime, good sometime, and whatever. But basically, you're not going to change anything, and the minute you get this through your skull, you begin to conform a lot to different things. People call it seasoning or age or whatever they want, maturity, or whatever. But it has come to me that one big truth is, which has always been here, that I'm not going to please everybody and it's senseless to even try. I'm not going to even please myself a whole lot of times. I'm not going to ever reach that state of perfection, because we're not supposed to as human beings, I don't think. We're supposed to live and try to always have something to go forward to.

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Like sometimes I'm afraid when I say, oh man, I'm just about to reach all I wanted to know – all I wanted, which is not everything, just all I wanted to know about changes and things. I'm almost reaching that phase now. But I feel like that if I do reach that stage, suddenly I'll grow old, because I won't have a quest anymore. I won't have any questions to ask myself or to ask people who are my peers, who I dig.

Coleman: Why do you feel like you're almost at that stage now? What makes you feel . . . ?

Freeman: Because I find myself approaching noise. See, after you get so much of this harmony and stuff together and start running so much of this stuff – like people tape me and hand me a tape. I listen. I say, man, wait a minute. Now I didn't need to go there. It was already mellow. I didn't need to expound on that, because I messed – it's like making eggnog. Have you ever watched and everybody come along with a flask or something and say, "Oh, this is not mellow enough. Pour a little sip more."

Coleman: Yeah and they go one too far.

Freeman: Yeah, and then the next thing, the eggnog doesn't taste like nothing, because it's too much ingredients in it. So what I wanted to do was, originally when I played music, I wanted to play music because I wanted to make people happy and be happy myself. I reached that stage, almost, just by – sometime I'm afraid to expand on it, because I found out when I expand on it, I get noisy. I go toward what I would call noise. It's not any clarity there. I imagine I'm not the first cat to reach this stage and do that, by any means. So that's what I think about now, at this latter stage.

Coleman: You said that your first goal was to make people happy and to make yourself happy.

Freeman: Right.

Coleman: Do you find that you've got another goal as time has gone on, a deeper maybe goal, some goal behind that, or . . . ?

Freeman: My current goal is to, whatever little knowledge I got by me being present around young cats, I can help them. That's my present goal, if I have one.

Coleman: To pass on information.

Freeman: Yeah, right, because a lot of music, a lot of jazz music, has been kept a big secret.

Coleman: You're telling me.

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Freeman: Actually – so you die with it. What good have you really done? To me, if you can impart – because nobody’s going to be able to play like Steve Coleman if they live a thousand years. That’s your way of playing. They can copy you to the best of their ability. But why does the world need another Steve Coleman?

Coleman: That’s true. Why?

Freeman: Why does the world need another Von Freeman? Why does the world need another John Coltrane? Whatever you’re doing, if it’s important, it’s important. But people have to move on, because one of the biggest truths I’ve just come to find out myself, since I’ve been doing this independent thinking, just sitting like when you sit with the lights out and just thinking, really meditating, really meditating, not trying to prove anything. I found out that you are not going anywhere that you can destin, that that’s where you will end up. You can say like – right now, you say, “T is going to get up and go to the hotel where she stays and lie down and rest. You may go out and go around the corner and meet a friend and decide to stop by a bar and talk until your plane time. So one of the big truths, I think, of life is that you have to do what you think that you can do while you’re thinking that you’re going to do it. Does that make sense?

Coleman: Yeah, it does.

Freeman: Or else it might never get done. Because we don’t have any idea of when we’re going to make the transformation. Nobody knows. Nobody knows when they’re going to take that last breath. So it’s facetious almost to be planning a lot of stuff that you really want to do. You might say, I’m going to call Steve Coleman tomorrow. Say, no, I’ll call Steve around Christmas. That’s if you’re going to be here and Steve’s going to be here. So you’re putting it into a form or shape that you know nothing about.

Coleman: Do you feel like too many musicians have left without passing along? You mentioned the big secret thing.

Freeman: Of course, sure, of course. What they don’t understand, that to me there’s a bigger power who’s not going to let anybody take what you give them unless they honestly want to use it and further it for the goodness of mankind. Because a good thing can only to me be used if it’s put out there as a good thing. To me, if somebody corrupts it, then it gets to be something else and it’s not going nowhere no way. So I think that if a good thing is good – and of course a lot of people do not think the way I think. Of course. This is just the way that I think. But I think something good is good, and something bad, you ain’t going to make it good. You can try, and you can do this, and you can do that, but if this thing has been decreed as divinely bad, you’re not going to make it good. You can try, and you can reason, and you can be logical, but all these things, to me, they’re not a science. They’re not a exact science, because you don’t know about tomorrow. I mean, you don’t know about the next minute, the next second. So how can you say, so and so, and so and so, is so and so, when you don’t even know if you can finish saying the sentence? So you know there’s something much stronger than you out here that’s

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governing what you do and who knows what the next instant is, who knows. Now maybe if you get divine enough or get into a realm where you're thinking divinely, well, maybe you'll know. But they're probably off you, because they think that you're crazy or something. If you start telling people what's going to happen tomorrow or something . . .

Coleman: That's dangerous.

Freeman: Yeah, they'll – "Get him out of here," or "Get her out of here."

Coleman: How do you think all this stuff that you're talking about now, do you feel like this has a direct effect on your music itself?

Freeman: Oh yes. That's the reason why I'm saying it.

Coleman: And in what way?

Freeman: I think that it's what gives me my power, and if I ever deviate from it, I won't have it anymore. I think this is what happens to a lot of great musicians that you go hear, then all of a sudden they can't play anymore. I think they crossed a line, whatever their line was, and they can't come back before they go into neverland. What happens is, of course, they generally die.

Coleman: Or they go commercial. The same thing.

Freeman: Or they go commercial, which is like death, because they have sold their soul to that bad band. The chances of them coming back is almost nil. They could maybe junk all their money, junk all their cars, junk all this, and junk all that, and maybe start at the bottom again, but 2-to-1 they'll be way behind everybody else.

Coleman: Way behind themselves.

Freeman: That's right. I think that it takes – when these truths start hitting you – like I said, the exact truth of what I'm all trying to say is that you either go up or you go down. There is no – there is never this.

Coleman: Leveling off.

Freeman: Yeah. You cannot be this. Like a cat was telling me, he said, "I'm just doing this so I can get in and get me enough money to do something else." I say, "But hey, wait a minute." I say, "Now why are you doing this? You're garnering a whole lot of forces that are behind you doing this now . . ."

Coleman: Energy.

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Freeman: “. . . that’s not going to allow you to turn this loose.” They say, “Aw man, please. Let me get myself a couple million. I can do – I can even come back and record you.” I say, “Yeah, right.” But these cats, they don’t never get back.

Coleman: No they don’t. I’m glad to hear you saying that, because at least in my life, I’ve seen that myself. I haven’t seen one case.

Freeman: Yeah, they just don’t come back, man. They just cannot get back, because these forces are much stronger than us.

Coleman: Momentum.

Freeman: Sure, man. You set something up a certain way, that thing is moving, whether it’s with the Devil or with the Lord. It’s moving. The Devil is strong, baby. You can’t handle him. You better go get some help, a whole lot of it, because he’s pushing, and he’s got all this stuff. He’s got all the money. He’ll give you everything you want, and he forgets to tell you that you got to die.

Coleman: I want to bring it down a little bit.

Freeman: Yeah, because I’m rocking.

Coleman: We haven’t talked about this yet, but I want to talk about this, because this is a big thing with you, your sound, your tone. Because you talk a lot about harmony. One of the things I learned from you, listening to you – I listen to the tape, and I try to do some little things you did and everything, and I say, well, it don’t sound the same when I do it as when Von does it. I mean, besides the obvious, that I’m not you, it doesn’t even get close. One of the things I noticed is that inside all this harmonic sophistication and all this rhythmic stuff and all this stuff that you’re doing, how important your actual sound is to the way it comes off. So it’s almost like the sound and the tone that you do it with becomes a part of the harmony, and without that particular sound or that kind of imagery that the sound is giving it, the harmony don’t even sound the same. It doesn’t even sound like the same thing in another situation. So I just wanted to ask you, is this something, this tone thing – how conscious are you? Because I think of tone as kind of an energy thing.

Freeman: It is. It really is.

Coleman: It just sort of derives over time. It’s something that just develops and comes from – all this philosophical stuff you’re talking about and everything, it goes into that. It’s not as conscious a thing as something like harmony or whatever. That’s just how I feel.

Freeman: No, I feel the same way.

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Coleman: I just wanted to ask you where you – how did you develop your tone? What angles, how you think about it. I don't even know how to ask the question.

Freeman: Wow.

Coleman: I know it's a tough one. People ask me the same thing.

Freeman: This is a very, very complex question, because it's almost like Shakespeare's "To be or not to be." It's a thing whereas you can answer it, but you're not really answering the question. You know what I mean. It's like a quest to get a more beautiful sound. What you're really trying to do – I know it doesn't come off this way – but you're trying to get it to be glorious, which to me is the greatest a sound can get. It can be beautiful, ethereal, but if you can get it to be glorious, it means it is expanding, or it is coming together, or it's going all four ways

Coleman: Do you mean glorious on a spiritual level, like heavenly? I don't know what you mean by glorious.

Freeman: It's not that so much as it is – it's heaven and earth. To me, a lot of people think of heaven, but they don't think of earth. According to *The Book of Knowledge* that I read a lot, it seems like the master's son said that when he comes, he'll come on a cloud, and he says, "Every knee will bend." Let's see, how did he get it? "Every knee will bend, every head will bow, and every town shall confess that I am the master."

Coleman: Are you talking about *Revelations*? What is that from?

Freeman: Yeah, that's part of it. But nobody really has an answer for whether they're going to be – whether it's going to be heaven on earth, too. That's still a mystery, and if there's going to be heaven on earth, there's going to be jazz musicians. It's not like anything – the only thing that will be changed is evil. There will be no more evil.

Coleman: So you consider this music as a force for good.

Freeman: Yeah, I really do.

Coleman: Like what Trane was saying.

Freeman: And it's too bad that it was named jazz and come out of the brothels and all that stuff. But God did not name it this. So I'm wary of anything that God or else Jesus didn't name.

That reminds me when a woman – she was arguing with me. I made some kind of statement. This woman is highly educated. She has three or four degrees in this and that. She was telling me that – oh, I made a wrong statement actually. I said, "You're not being logical, thank goodness." She took it another way. She said, "There you go with

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that man stuff again, with that logical. I can just be as logical as you.” I said, “I hope you wouldn’t be.” She said, “What are you trying to say? Now you’re saying I can’t be as logical as you.” I say, “Because, to me, logic is flawed. That’s some man-made stuff.” Then she went into, “No, you’re speaking about illogical,” and this. I said, “No, I’m just speaking about the word ‘logical’.”

Coleman: She missed . . .

Freeman: I say, “Now you have the greatest thing in the world. You have intuition.” She said, “What do you mean by that?” I say, “That’s a direct thing from the maker himself.” I say, “But see, you keep trying to lose it, because you want to bring that man side out of you.” I say, “Because every man is part man, part woman. Every woman’s part woman, part man.” I say, “Then see, the greatest thing about women” – and that’s why I love women so, see, because I can’t get along with the average man, because he wants to bring out logic on me, and I know, first of all, he doesn’t know enough to be logical. And secondly, I know that what he’s doing, he’s breaking down that female side of himself, where he doesn’t want to have any type of intuition, which women, when they’re really being a woman, got it. That’s why they don’t have strokes and the heart attacks that men have, and they can bear children. The Lord knew what he was doing when he had women bear children. The average man can’t stand a toothache.

When I got through with this woman, she looked at me and she says, “You’re really ruined.” She said, “I never heard so much crap before in my life.” I said, hey. Now she recently come back and told me – she said, “I’ve been thinking, because,” she said, “you can say stuff that” – she said, “You can’t be as dumb as you sound.” She said, “But I’ve been thinking about it.” Said, “I’ve been trying to be more feminine, the way you put it.” She said, “And I’m actually getting something out of this.” I said, “Thank you.” I say, “See, because intuition comes directly from God. It’s divine.”

Coleman: You know, in older cultures, the feminine aspect used to be pushed up a lot.

Freeman: I didn’t know that.

Coleman: That whole thing was revered.

Freeman: Sure. I’m telling you.

Coleman: But it’s only in recent times that – but anyway . . .

Freeman: I didn’t get into this until I brought my daughter here sick with this mania, the depression, because I had never been through nothing like that. I had never seen it. This child was so sweet, grew up sweet, just a sweetheart. When she contracted this stuff, boy, I found out there’s people that can push buttons on you and just change you around, if you’re buying it. Like say, for instance, you fall in love, man or woman. You can really be manipulated, and you have to really – because I watched the way that she was. Then I

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had a chance to see rage grow and come out, manifest itself. Man, it's almost like looking at a person and seeing horns come out of their head. It's just like getting a view of the Devil. And they can't do anything about it except react, be suicidal or whatever, hurt somebody or something.

So that started me to thinking, three months ago, really, really meditating. I said, as old as I am and as much as I've been through, I said, I got some work to do. I said – and then I found out what was really wrong with my music. I knew there was something wrong with it, but I didn't know what it was. It was that I wasn't letting the whole me come out, the female and the male side of myself come out, because I used to wonder why I used to go into a club and there'd be a bunch of men. Man, I just didn't want to play. I really didn't, because I couldn't see playing a ballad to a bunch of men, and I love ballads. I can go play 10 ballads and two jump tunes and be happy. But I say, oh man. At the Apartment [New Apartment Lounge], I've been there 19 years and women have finally started coming. Because it used to be a bunch of men, and all men, "Swing, jump, man, jump jump." I said, aw man. But see, I wasn't getting in contact with – and I really affect me a lot. Everybody was asking me to record. I did not want to record.

Coleman: I was one of them.

Freeman: Yeah, Steve just begged me to record. But see, I didn't want to tell him that I wanted to play some ballads and things, because the average person who's paying for a record, they don't want to hear that. They figure it's not going to sell.

Coleman: I was just talking about, record whatever you wanted to record. I wasn't about ...

Freeman: I know you were nice enough to say that, but like, I'm out of here. I knew what's – the way it is, I thought.

Coleman: No, but I'm serious. I was just going to – that's the way I produce.

Freeman: See now, in my present frame of mind, I understand. But I thought you was doing it because they say he's a nice guy and he needs to record. I had a lot of record companies that called me. But they said, "Now listen. I don't want any bass solos, any drum solos."

Coleman: Yeah, they start dictating.

Freeman: I said, "Man, a CD?" I said – "I don't want the tunes to be past five minutes." Well, if you've got a CD like that, you got to play about 12 tunes. Now what kind of jazz record is that? Just when the people get wound up in what you're playing, zip, that tune's over.

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So I had a lot of thoughts, and I wasn't letting that intuitive side of myself come out. I wasn't letting that – what's the Japanese, Chinese call it? Yin and yang? I wasn't letting that other side of me come out.

Coleman: The yin side.

Freeman: Yeah. I was gung ho. In fact, I'd blow two or three choruses and do this.

Coleman: Yeah, I remember that.

Freeman: I was defiant. And hey, that's easy to be.

Coleman: Especially as a man.

Freeman: Sure, yeah. I mean, you want to fight? Well, you can't play music like that. It comes out in your music. You're growling and all that other stuff.

So once I was around my daughter for three months, I said, whew. I said, "Girl." She said, "You're about to get to be a preacher, aren't you?"

Coleman: So this is another one of these breakthroughs that you made.

Freeman: Yeah.

Coleman: You were talking – actually, before the tape, before we changed tape, we were talking about the period between '72 and '76. Remember we were talking about that, after that album you did with Rahsaan? You were saying that you developed – you felt like you made some deeper developments during that period. That's another thing.

Freeman: Sure, because it's all really your soul that you're getting in contact with. Like as far as my little meager knowledge goes, it's there, and you have to try to discover it. We all do. So that's just, hey.

Coleman: We're getting that together.

Did you ever feel like you had an ultimate goal in music? Or the thing about making people happy and making yourself happy, was it always as simple as that? Or did you ever feel like you had an overall goal? Or does that change over time?

Freeman: I really, Steve, I tried to go back to that, because that was in my early, early youth. I used to be so happy to pick up my horn and go play. Then, after a while, it got so I wasn't happy anymore. It got to be a – I don't know. It just got to be a chore to go play that horn, and I hated that part, because I love to play. It just got to be a part where I went through all of that transition.

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Coleman: Around when? Around when was this?

Freeman: It was in the '80s. Everybody told me I was doing the best playing of my life. But see, they didn't understand what I was talking about. I was trying to expand my forces of love to a wider audience. I would find out I would run into all these reed problems, horn problems, mechanical problems that didn't have nothing to do with what I was trying to do, really.

Coleman: Sidemen problems or things like that?

Freeman: Yeah, all. It just kind of seemed like people didn't want to do what I wanted to do. I was getting to feel like that I wasn't fitting in. Like I was wanting to play a ballad, because I could feel this ballad in the air. You know how you can feel a certain essence moving through the air, touching people? Really, you sense it, because you don't have to – and then I could sense hard applause, which means nobody really cared whether or not you did what you did, but they figured they should applaud.

Coleman: What did you call it? What kind of applause?

Freeman: Hard applause. Then I kept wanting to hear that soft applause. I can tell, man, when people really dig what you did, and it enveloped them. They got something out of it. It meant something to them, personally. They felt better, or they thought about something wonderful that happened to them. It was that type of thing.

Coleman: Where you made a connection.

Freeman: Yeah. I kept trying to find it, and it seemed like I was getting more and more applause, but it didn't mean anything to me, because I wasn't – oh, it's hard to explain. It sounds silly now when I put it into words.

Coleman: No, it doesn't. It doesn't sound silly.

Freeman: I couldn't get that thing that I was really looking for. True feeling, I guess is the way to put it. I'm not trying to be religious or anything like that, because religion has its place too.

Coleman: So you're talking about the late '80s now, this period that you were going through.

Freeman: Yeah, going on to the late '80s, because in the '90s I really crossed, because that's the year my favorite uncle passed and then my daughter passed – my other daughter – and then my mother passed. So I was almost ready to stop playing. Because I'd go play and I couldn't even remember the tune we were playing. Like they say, "Vonski, are you going to come in?" I say, "What are you playing?" They say, "We're

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playing *I Hear a Rhapsody*.” I say, okay. Come in and play, and my mind wasn’t nowhere near on it. They say, “Man, you’re really playing.” I say, whew. I say okay.

Coleman: Have you ever listened back to any of that stuff on tape during that period?

Freeman: Yeah, that’s what’s so odd. Like when I played the fest for Chicago, and they gave me my 75th. I was going to turn 75 October the 3rd and the fest was September the 3rd. They gave me this big thing, and I went out and played. I did everything that I thought I could do right. It was my usual congenial, jovial self and all this. It went down. Now, to show you what I’m talking about, when I played – well, I noticed when I came out the mic started humming, feedback.

Coleman: That’s a drag.

Freeman: I had listened to all these acts, because I was the last act. I hadn’t heard feedback all night. Now I remember the little trumpet player. He’s a great little trumpet player. He’s a good friend of mine. What’s his name? From New Orleans.

Coleman: New Orleans? Not McGaha?

Freeman: No, the little sort of stocky . . .

Coleman: Nicholas Payton?

Freeman: Yeah. Nicholas played especially long. He was really getting over. He took like half my time, because I was the last act. I didn’t know why I was on this thing, because they were all with big record companies. I wasn’t with nobody, and they had me close the show. Anyway, I did all this. When I come out, the mic started humming, and the mics generally would hum. So when I played *I Hear a Rhapsody*, which, later on, when I heard it, man, it’s some of the best playing I ever did, best tone I ever had, but the mic is still humming. One time it got real loud, feedback. So when they had this – the festival’s over and everything – they rushed it toward the end and all this. Later on that year, right around my birthday, they sent me something from WBEZ saying, hey, we’re going to put all your great – the greatest things that we thought were on for the fest. So I was selected as one of them. Now I played the first number and played very little after that, of course. Guess what happened? The first number wasn’t on it.

Coleman: The first number. You mean *I Hear a Rhapsody* wasn’t on it?

Freeman: No, they cut it out. So then they sent another – they did another thing – program – and they left the first tune off. I like to think it was because it was all that feedback. But I was just wondering why there’s feedback? I played many, many fests. It’s always feedback. I say, what? I played one with my two brothers and my son Chico. It was called the Freeman something.

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Coleman: That's that one up there.

Freeman: Yeah. Full of feedback, feedback, feedback, feedback. I say, what is it about the feedback? So I never did get that together. But I was in such a form of mind, that I was feeling this. I was fighting something. I didn't even know what I was fighting.

Coleman: So you think there are a lot of times then, when, as you're playing, you feel one thing, but when you listen back to it, it's something totally different.

Freeman: Right, yeah.

Coleman: When you get outside of it.

Freeman: So I finally figured out that I wasn't going to change nothing. So the best thing to do was just go with the flow, as the saying goes, and keep your goal in mind, whatever that is, and if your time is coming for this thing, it'll happen, and if it's not, it won't. I know that's sort of a depressing way to look at things, really, because there's still a lot of people out here to say, oh no, no, you can change anything. Maybe you can.

But my tone, I think that's what you're hearing. I went way around the corner to tell you that. But see, you're hearing all these forces compressed, and my defiance. I'm battling with it. You can really hear this in singers, because many singers have gone through this.

Coleman: Like Billie Holiday and people like that.

Freeman: Yeah, their voices change with – and it's not necessarily with time. It's just with ordeals and happiness, unhappiness, happenings.

Coleman: Yeah, you can really hear it in Billie in her later records, especially.

Freeman: Surely.

Coleman: You can hear her whole life on those.

Freeman: That's right, and it's very appealing, and it will really get to you if you're hip to looking for that soul thing, of course which a lot of people are not looking for.

Coleman: You know that recording they talk about with Charlie Parker, the *Lover Man* one.

Freeman: Right.

Coleman: People talk about like that, and one of the cats – I think it was Red Callender – was saying, "I know Bird was very sick during that thing, and I know he didn't dig it,

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what happened, the record and everything,” he said. “But when you listen to that,” he says, “it’s nothing but soul.”

Freeman: It’s hauntingly beautiful. That’s the truth. So see, what we take as happiness may not be happiness, and what we take as sadness may not be sadness. We just maybe haven’t graduated to that level of seeing that what is out here is some – like we make the forces whatever they are, but we can’t change them. But we can assimilate these things that we want for us. And that’s what I think the quest is, to try to find the force. Like almost every man I know, he’s looking for a woman, the other part of himself. He doesn’t really realize it. When you play these horns or pianos or whatever, you’re trying to make that instrument a part of you, an extension of you. Of course a lot of people never make it. But I’m just saying, I think that’s the quest, is to have this instrument here, or saxophone, whatever you’re playing, just like your voice is you. You can make your voice soft. I found that out when my wife was divorcing me. Here’s a woman I had loved since I was a real young child, and all of a sudden I couldn’t say anything to her without my voice sounding harsh, and I could tell it was harsh. Sometimes I would try to – and she would try to talk to me in subtle tones, and she couldn’t. It would come out, “Ehhh.” So, hey . . .

Coleman: I think we better do this little playing thing, because time is getting on. Von’s got to get there . . .

Freeman: Yeah, I got to go. Oh man, it’s 4:20.

Eve: Thank you, Von.

Freeman: We’ll play some *Billie’s Bounce*. I’ll let Steve take four choruses.

Coleman: Aw, here we go. Here we go.

Freeman: Okay, Steve, we’ll take two apiece or something, because I play one, my daughter start crying or something. Because I don’t want to be . . .

Coleman: That’s what Eve wants.

Freeman: No, no, no.

Eve: I’m a woman. Come on.

[unidentified woman]: Thank . . .

Eve: Thank you, Steve.

Freeman: Listen, he gets – I tell you, he has . . .

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Coleman: Marathon session.

Freeman: Listen, nobody can [?] that he does. Oh man. He put those eyes on you, like this, and you got to come on in.

Coleman: So you're saying that those other interviews that you do are not like this?

Freeman: Aw, man, I've done some of the saddest interviews in the world. One man had to shake my knee and say, "Wake up, Vonski." I said, oh man.

Coleman: Wake up.

Now this is going to be a lot louder of course than us talking, as you know. It's going . . .

Eve: I'm switching mics.

Coleman: It sounds way louder in this room than it does in a club.

Eve: Oh you think?

Coleman: You just don't notice it in the club, how loud these horns really are. You only notice it when you're somebody's mother, and they're practicing.

It's getting hot here now.

Freeman: Yeah, that fan. I'm going to have to turn it up.

Coleman: No, it's just – I'm talking about outside. It's the weather.

Eve: That's a quiet fan, though.

Freeman: You know what? It's supposed to rain. So the humidity is very high.

Coleman: So Eve, this is what we call an exclusive . . .

Eve: I know, right. It's really . . .

Coleman: . . . like they do on *Eyewitness News*.

Eve: I know, right.

Coleman: "We have a Channel 5 exclusive."

[unidentified woman]: Are you going to tape this?

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Eve: Yeah.

Coleman: You going to use another tape? Set up a tape?

Eve: Uh-umm. I'll just put it right on the end of it.

Coleman: Oh, okay.

Eve: There's plenty of time.

Coleman: Do you want me to make a noise, so you can see how to turn this down? Because you're going to have to definitely turn it down.

Eve: Yeah, but you're not going to play into it, anyway.

Coleman: I'm not going to play into the mic. I'm just going to play . . .

Eve: It's going to be into the room.

Coleman: Yeah, but I'm going to put the mics up.

Eve: Okay. Thank you.

Freeman: Let me tell you, Steven. Last night I didn't have a strap.

Coleman: What?

Freeman: Yeah, I had someone [?] a strap for me.

Coleman: No wonder you didn't play.

Freeman: 4 to 6. That thing kept slipping.

Coleman: No wonder you didn't play. I wouldn't have played either, with no strap.

Freeman: It was the funniest thing. The strap was in the horn case, but it was in the pocket, and I don't never put the strap in the pocket.

Coleman: Ghosts.

Eve: Forces conspiring.

[**Coleman** and **Freeman** do sound checks, separately and together, for 5 minutes.]

Freeman: Okay.

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Coleman: Y'all ready? She just got set up.

Freeman: *Billie's Bounce*?

Coleman: Do you want to take it at a real mellow tempo?

Freeman: Yeah. [Freeman sings the opening line.] We'll play a chorus and then a couple fours, and then [?], because time is on me now. Eve, are you cool?

Eve: Yeah, one minute please.

Coleman: One moment?

Freeman: We're not trying to rush you, Eve.

[**Coleman** plays alone for another minute.]

[starting just over seven minutes from the end of the tape, **Freeman** and **Coleman** play a five-minute version of *Billie's Bounce*, playing the theme together once, trading solo choruses, trading four-bar phrases, and then playing the theme together again. They continue playing in a free-form ballad manner to the end of the tape.]

Coleman: You weren't playing *Embraceable You*, were you?

Freeman: I don't know. Something like that.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)