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FRANK WESS
NEA Jazz Master (2007)

Interviewee: Frank Wess (January 4, 1922 – October 30, 2013)
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Molly Murphy: Okay, I'd like to begin by just setting the scene here. It is January 10th, 2010. The microphone is now on so that's helpful. Mr. Wess, you were born in 1922 so you are currently 88. Is that right? Okay, and you just so we have this down, you were named an NEA Jazz Master in 2007.

Frank Wess: Right.

Murphy: So, today we are going to, as I just mentioned, we are going to pick up from where you may have left off in your original Smithsonian oral history interview.

Ken Kimery: Let me interrupt for just a second there, the levels are just a little bit low. Sorry about that.

Murphy: Anyway, we are picking up from where you may have left off six or seven years ago when your oral history was done in 2003 by Bill Brauer. So, to begin, we just had Dr. Billy Taylor in the room; I don't know if you ran into each other in the lobby there.

Wess: No, I didn't see him.

Murphy: (Laughs) That's too bad; he was hoping that he would run into you. Anyways, he and I were remembering when you and I went up to his place. It was probably about 2000 For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

and I was working on a program for NPR, for their jazz profiles series. I was doing a history of jazz in Washington, D.C. You and Billy had a great conversation, remembering the details, and Billy remembered situation after situation. You were able to fill all the names of the players, all the obscure clubs that ever-existed anywhere in Washington.

Wess: That was then; I can't remember anything! (Laughs)

Murphy: Time has passed since 2000. I saw that you did it again in some measure, for a program that was at the Kennedy Center in 2008. It was about the history of jazz in D.C. Do you recall that? I had thought it was a live program that you and Billy did but he said that, again, you were maybe filmed at his apartment. Do you have any recollection of that?

Wess: I think we were walking around Washington a bit, I don't know.

Murphy: Oh yeah?

Wess: We saw some of the places of where they were, or something, as I remember. But anyways, I know what you're talking about.

Murphy: And how often do you get back to D.C.?

Wess: Well, not too often. I don't have any reason to go there, really, unless Billy calls me for the summer. Other than that I don't have any reason to go to Washington.

Murphy: Can you describe when you do go back, and maybe it's a situation like for that filming. What's your experience when you walk down, say, U Street today?

Wess: Well, it's totally different. Washington has changed so much. U Street used to be in the black neighborhood but now it's not, you know? Everything is everywhere and there are not many black businesses left there now. I don't know if that industrial bank is still there, that was a black bank at 11th and U. I don't know if it is still there are not. All the things have changed since they...you know, had that...what do they call it? I've forgotten...desegregation, or whatever it was. There are no more black neighborhoods in Washington. So U Street is...

Murphy: So it almost seems kind of foreign?

Wess: It is because there's nothing that what it was.

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Murphy: That's too bad. Some of the remaining businesses, like the clubs, you know like the Lincoln Theatre, are still operating.

Wess: The Lincoln Theatre has always been there. You know, the Lincoln Theatre and the Republic, and the Howard Theatre is still there.

Murphy: And the Caverns, have you been to the Bohemian Caverns since they kind of reopened it.

Wess: No, I haven't been in there but I hear its still operating.

Murphy: Yeah, I hear that the actual basement part is still, pretty much, as it was. But, I think they started out trying to do a lot of jazz things when they re-opened it but I don't know how that has shaken out.

Wess: Yeah, I haven't heard anything about it.

Ken Kimery: They've actually been doing quite well.

Murphy: Oh good! Good!

Ken Kimery: Ron Carter has been in there. So, they've been making great strides.

Wess: I don't know any jazz groups that have played there recently, you know?

Murphy: Ken was just saying Ron Carter was there.

Wess: Oh he was there? I didn't hear about it. I don't have any connection with Washington other than Billy Taylor, you know? He's so different, you know? To me, nothing is ever quite right. It's close.

Murphy: A close approximation...

Wess: ...of being what it should be. When I was there I did [a thing] at the Kennedy Center. They sent a limousine to go, and this is less than a ten-minute drive. It took us an hour to get there. We passed by and there it is over there. We go to Arlington and come back and there it is over there. We go to Rock Creek Park and come back. You know, the limousine driver, it took us an hour to do for less that ten-minute drive.

Murphy: (Laughs) Now see, that limousine drive must have gotten his start as a cab driver. Just a cab driver in D.C. because you see that's how D.C. cab drivers are.

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Wess: The limousine driver was the wife of the limousine owner and she lost him, when she lost him, she was lost. So, you know, it took all that time. Another time, he sent a limousine for me and he went to the wrong hotel. I'm waiting, and waiting, and waiting and he's at the wrong hotel looking for me. It's always something. (Laughs) Just, not really. I think it's too close to sea level; it kind of affects you,

Murphy: It's the humidity in the summer.

Wess: It must be something...

Murphy: People can't recover from it.

Wess: ... it never gets quite what it should be.

Murphy: Well, speaking of Washington, we had Jimmy Heath in yesterday. He touched on the current administration in Washington. It's such a historic moment for the country with President Obama being in office. What are your thoughts about it and how did you experience this change in this country?

Wess: Well, you see now, I think it's a good thing because he's trying to do some good things but he's not getting much help. He's trying to go in the right direction, you know? He's trying to get us out of all this stuff that the former administration got us into, actually. You know, we are responsible for all of that, you know? Over the years it didn't just start, you know? It's been going on for centuries. In the 1800's England was trying to get that oil, you know? So, it's the same thing you know? Kuwait is an English colony, you know? They set up all that so you they'd block...you know, geographically, that's the passageway to Iraq and the oil. So, you know, this didn't just start; this is something that has been going on for centuries and they don't want to give it up so this will be going on.

Murphy: Did you follow Obama's, you know, race for the Presidency, and was that something you were following on television or taking note of?

Wess: No, not really. But, you know, I think, what it is, you know, he got in because he was underestimated in the first place. By the time they realized who he was, and where he was, he was already there, you know? Otherwise, I don't think he would have made it. But, that's the way this country is, you know? You still have millions of people who are listening to Rush Limbaugh, so that's what it is in this country. That hasn't changed. I mean, the clan is kind of in the closet now, they don't wear hoods anymore but they're very present in every walk of life in this country, you know? You can't ignore that.

Murphy: Right.

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Wess: They're made of the people that are against Obama, you know? They try to find every little thing, try to say what he meant when he said this, or try to put a twist on everything. He's trying to go the right way; I hope he gets the help he needs.

Murphy: You know, one thing that I'd like to look at is some of the recordings that you have made in recent years and I think that probably just before you did your original oral history, you did your first Hank and Frank, Hank and Frank recording. That was in 2002.

Wess: Hank and Frank? When was that?

Murphy: I think the first one was in 2002 and then the second one is more recent, from this past year. Can you talk a little bit about how those recordings came together, how you guys decided to pair up?

Wess: A friend of mine, who has been a planner to me, his name is Ilya Lushtak; he's a Russian young man. He grew up in the Bay Area, but actually, he's from St. Petersburg. He's there right now, he just left, and he'll be there for a while with his family. But anyways, he has his own record company. What do they call it?

Sara Tsutsumi: Lineage.

Wess: Yeah, Lineage Records, yeah. And so, Miles and I were playing together. He comes by my place and we jam for hours. Bass and drums, and we play; I have to play all the time. At my age, if you don't it goes as quick as it comes so I have to stay active. He comes back quite often and we play for hours. Having had his own record company, you know, he was friends with Hank Jones also, so he's the one that got us together for that particular recording, "Hank and Frank."

Murphy: Can you talk a little bit about with two such statesmen of jazz, and playing in...both of you, while your in your 80's Hank is in his 90's if I'm not mistaken.

Wess: Yeah, yeah.

Murphy: Can you talk about your musical dialogue in those recordings?

Wess: Well, you know, Hank and I go back a long way. In fact, we were in the Billy Ekstine band together in 1946. Actually, I have a photo of us standing in the bar in the Sudan Club with Hank Jones, Gene Ammons, King Kolax and myself. From 1946, we were in there nine weeks and Hank was the pianist with us. We go back that far, and we affiliate, off and on, in different situations with Thad or whatever, you know? We know each other.

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Murphy: And speaking of Thad, in 2005 there's a recording called, "One More: The Music of Thad Jones." Do you recall that recording?

Wess: No, who was that with?

Murphy: I don't know who else was on it, actually. It's a collection of various musicians paying tribute to Thad

Wess: Oh yeah, wait a minute, yeah! I think that was...maybe Benny Golson was on one of those.

Murphy: That sounds right.

Wess: Maybe Jimmy Owens and Eddie Daniels. Yeah I remember that, that was nice. I never got a chance to play some of Thad's music.

Murphy: And who organized that?

Wess: I don't know, really.

Sara Tsutsumi: That was Doug Louier right? He was the person who paid for the recording.

Murphy: You have to remember that person if they paid for it. Don't forget that name.

Wess: No, well I don't know. The musical director for the thing's name was Patterson. But I don't really remember who did what to whom. (Laughs) But I do remember doing it. I think we might have done two of those.

Sara Tsutsumi: Yes, two!

Murphy: Volume one and volume two.

Wess: Yes, I think maybe we did...yes. I think Moody was on one, possibly.

Sara Tsutsumi: Yes, Moody and Richard Davis maybe? Mickey Roker?

Wess: Probably Mickey Roker, I can't remember.

Murphy: Do remember the recording circumstance? Where were you when you were recording that?

Wess: I've forgotten

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Sara Tsutsumi: I think it was at a factory, no?

Wess: Maybe, I can't remember just where it was.

Murphy: Well, I just want to try and touch on some of the important recordings you've done. I guess, going back a little bit farther, and you may have spoken about this in the previous interview, but your recording, the big band recording, "Surprise! Surprise!"

Wess: Surprise, Surprise?

Murphy: I'm sure if I describe the cover to you, you'll remember.

Wess: Was that a big band?

Murphy: It was in '98.

Wess: Was that done in Japan?

Sara Tsutsumi: No, there are two separate different versions of it.

Murphy: It's the flasher cover.

Wess: Yeah, well, what happened was I had done a "Surprise! Surprise!" for a company in Oslo. I can't think of the name of it right now. And then I did this other recording on a ship, on a cruise, actually it was. You know I was thinking that one had Frank Foster and Jimmy Heath. That was then and they want to call that "Surprise! Surprise!" and I told them that I already had an album called "Surprise! Surprise!" why would they want to do that? But they went and did it anyway. You know how they are. Kenny, you know.

Murphy: And who came up with the cover for that? Do you know what I'm referring to? It's a caricature of you with your raincoat flashed open.

Wess: I don't know who did that.

Murphy: And your horn underneath. (Laugh)

Wess: Who did do that?

Murphy: Is the pained expression coming from trying to recall the details?

Wess: Well there's one with me playing the flute by myself on the back of the cover.

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Murphy: On the back, maybe.

Wess: That was done by, I can't think of his name right at the moment, Tom somebody. He was a guitarist in the ABC orchestra when I was on staff at ABC. Yeah, he did that caricature of me. (Laughs) You know, with both of the hands going this way or something. He was very talented, he could just look at you and capture the whole thing.

Murphy: Yeah.

Wess: So he did that and I used it. But, with the coat open, I don't know who did that. I don't know whose idea that was.

Murphy: It's comical.

Wess: Yeah, well they do things and they don't consult with me about things like that.

Murphy: That's interesting. You do not have an official manager and you haven't really used an official manager, is that right?

Wess: Well, I haven't had a manager cause now I don't feel the need for a manager. Sara helps me with a whole lot of things. If you got a manager you end up doing a whole lot of things that you don't want to do for him, or her or whoever it is. So I just, at this point, I mean people know me all over the world and they call me. They got my phone number and if they want me, they call me. I don't need a manager and I'm not looking to be travelling that much anyway.

Murphy: What is your general travel schedule these days?

Wess: Well, not much if I can help it. I've got, let's see, I think in February I've got to run down to Baltimore for some society down there. In March I'm doing three days at the University of New Hampshire. I've been there quite a few times with Zala, Dave Zala. He has a program there; have a very good program there. I've been there a number of times. I'm doing three days there in March and then in April I'm going down to North Texas State to do a tribute to David Newman, David "Fathead" Newman. I was just saying that, not too long ago, doing a tribute to a guitar player from St. Marcus...Durham, Eddie Durham. So, you know, in fact, he was the guitar player with Count Basie's band when I first heard the band; that's before Freddie Green. St. Marcus was his home so I did a tribute to Eddie Durham and St. Marcus at the college.

Murphy: Do you find yourself in a position of picking and choosing the gigs you want to take?

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Wess: Well...

Murphy: I mean, you said you try to, sort of, keep them to a minimum.

Wess: Well, I don't be travelling just to be travelling. I've had offers to go to Kansas City and different places for different things, you know? It doesn't mean anything. I'm really not looking to travel that much.

Murphy: Yeah, travelling is getting more and more difficult.

Wess: Yes, its ridiculous now and the airlines are not as safe as they used to be, nothing is. Although they say they are, they go through the motions but what can you do?

Murphy: Yeah, in this post 9-11 society.

Wess: Yeah, they need somebody to keep the CIA safe. They're supposed to be keeping us safe and they need somebody to keep them safe. (Laughs) it's very strange. It's not just this country, it's all over the world ,same thing. Wherever you go it's the same thing.

Murphy: Well, in speaking about all that business and safety in the world, can I ask you, were you around for 9-11 when the two towers were demolished. Were you in New York?

Wess: Yeah, I was right here.

Murphy: What was your experience?

Wess: Huh?

Murphy: What was your experience when that happened? Were you aware as it was happening, did you hear things?

Wess: Yeah, well you could smell it. I could smell it. I saw on television what was happening. But then, that night, I went in a bar on the corner there. It was a bar where I had been having lunch or dinner quite often and I had been going in there all the time; it's right on 8th avenue. I went in and the barmaids just kept looking at me and passing me by, and never coming. I just looked at them and they kept on serving. Finally, she came down and she said, "Can I help you?" I told her, "I'd like a beer." She says, "Sorry, it's too late." She wouldn't serve me so I haven't been in there since. I guess I look too much like and Arab or something to her, I don't know what it was. But at the time there was a black fellow, a really black fellow, in they're drinking with some of his friends. But for some reason she just wouldn't serve me. I sat there for 15 to 20 minutes waiting for her to come down and she

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never came. I haven't been in there since. Anybody that doesn't want my money, I don't force it on them.

Murphy: Yeah, that's unfortunate when it brings out the worst in people.

Wess: Yeah, there are a lot of people who get a bad attitude, business people, when they shouldn't. Whenever I run into that I just don't go there anymore, so I just don't worry about that. That happens.

Murphy: I'm trying to recall, I think you spoke to me a little bit about the demands of travelling, and especially international travel, and bringing your instrument.

Wess: Yeah, well you always have a problem, they want to take your instrument. Especially, if you want to use one of the smaller airlines to get where you want to go. They want to take your instrument and they think it's safe, it's really not. They say, "I'll put your saxophone in the cockpit." There's a little plane and when the plane hits the ground it hits so hard that it bent my whole saxophone. It cost me \$500 to get it fixed, and actually, when I got where I was going I couldn't play it.

Murphy: Oh my god! So what'd you do? What happened?

Wess: Well I just did the best I could and got it fixed when I got back. You know, the airline is not going to be responsible for that. They'll say it was like that at first, or whatever. You know, they want to...one time when I was flying I had a flute in a straight case and the stewardess was pulling on that, [she was] going to take it away from me. I couldn't put it up. She wanted to move just a small flute like that to put a bag or something ridiculous. So I just, I'd rather not be bothered.

Murphy: (Laughs) I'm trying to remember you telling me a story about, I don't know what it was, you had some kind of a stand and they were giving you a hard time, in security, about the stand. Do you know what I'm talking about? So, you told them that you have a different profession than you actually do.

Wess: Oh yeah, she saw my stand and she wanted to know, "What is that?" I said, "I'm a part time gynecologist, you know?" She says, "Oh you'll hurt somebody with that thing." Then I got on the plane and the stewardess is they're helping you get seated. She says, "What is that?" and I said, "I'm a part time gynecologist," and she hit me in the stomach. You get different reactions from a lot of people. (Laughs) Once, I was renting a car down here on 54th street somewhere. I had my instruments and so they asked me, she saw the stand and says, "What is that?" I said, "I'm a part time gynecologist," and she said, "Let me see your hands." You get different responses from different people, you never know.

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Murphy: (Laughs)

Wess: One really funny incident happened right in my building. I got on the elevator and I had this saxophone stand in there. A little white flute peg was on it, you know? A black lady on there, she asked me, she said, "What is that?" I said, "That's my instrument." She says, "No, I mean what is that?" It was just three of us on the elevator. It was a white fellow, he was kind of you know...and she said, "No, I'm talking about that, what is that?" I said, "Well, I'm a part time gynecologist." She said, "Oh, it's too bad that's white." He says, "Oh that was nice wasn't it?" It was very funny. She said, "Oh, I'm sorry." (Laughs)

Murphy: Well, it's really hilarious because of the notion of the part-time. Being part-time, that even adds to it.

Wess: Well, you never know what response you're going to get, you know?

Murphy: Well, you always know how to have fun, that's for sure.

Wess: Why not?

Murphy: You seemed to be having some fun when I called the other day .You said you were celebrating your birthday, having a birthday drink with Benny Powell.

Wess: Oh yeah, well like I say, the fellas come in and we play for three or four hours, we play everyday. So that day when you called...

Murphy: Everyday? Is that right?

Wess: Not everyday, but maybe once or twice a week. You know, whenever.

Murphy: And who comes over?

Wess: Well, different people. I have a lot of different bass players. David Wong, the French trumpet player, Fabian. I don't know, some Israeli bass players, Atell Ronan, Yonatan, a lot of them. Atai, you've never heard of Atai, but he's a fabulous jazz flutist. You wouldn't believe him if you heard him.

Murphy: Jimmy Heath was talking about David Wong.

Wess: He's in New York but he does a lot of Spanish things, you know the Latin thing. But he can really play some jazz, he's from Tel Aviv, too. Most of them, they came out from Ornette Lawrence, you know, Ornette Lawrence went over to Israel to live. They studied under him, they're very good. I had a couple of young Italian fellas come in, Luigi and

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Pasquale, they're brothers. I think Pasquale is about 19, he plays guitar and he's unbelievable. You play anything, you let them hear it once, and they got it and they're gone. There's a lot of them, a lot of very fine players. They come by the house and we play.

It started with Ilya.

Oh yeah, with Ilya, well Ilya knows all these people. Ilya is, what 34? We always have all these people come in. The neighbors, they never complain about the playing.

Murphy: It must resound throughout the building.

Wess: Yeah, well you can hear it but they don't complain. There's always been show people in that building, you know, musicians and aspiring theatre people, and hairdressers, and people connected in the business. Usually, they like the music.

Murphy: Jimmy Heath was talking about David Wong, yesterday.

Wess: Who's that?

Murphy: Jimmy Heath.

Wess: He comes into play with us. I have a lot of good bass players come in. They're all good musicians that come in. They can all play.

Murphy: He was saying he has to fight Roy Haynes for him.

Wess: (Laughs) You know how Roy is, he's got his own thing. He really has caught...

Sara Tsutsumi: Birdland

Wess: The Birdland 60th Anniversary. Roy Haynes' group was there at that time. He really did a wonderful set: I really enjoyed it. Yeah, David Wong was playing bass with him then. I forget the name of the alto player, but he was very good, the pianist...they were all very good. The way that Roy presents his music is very hip, I like it.

Murphy: Do you get out and about much in New York? Do you go to clubs, do you listen to music?

Wess: Yeah. Well, I have to, you know, and every time I go out I get a lesson in what not to do.

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Murphy: (Laughs) In what way?

Wess: In playing, in, you know, in presentation. You see so many things that people do wrong and you say, "Well, I don't want to do that." (Laughs) You just pay attention to what's going on.

Murphy: Do you have any favorite places to play, yourself? Any favorite venues?

Wess: I don't know. Birdland is always good and I like the Jazz Standard.

Murphy: That's a very nice room.

Wess: Yeah, and the people are very nice now. When they first started out they weren't very nice, but now I guess it's under new management and they're very nice. And then Dizzy's room; they're nice.

Murphy: Beautiful room isn't it, Dizzy's?

Wess: Yeah I'm going in on the 19th, the week of the 19th of this month with my nonet. I got some good players.

Murphy: I have the players right here. You have Ted Nash, can you mention all the players.

Wess: Yeah, Ted Nash, Scott Robinson, Frank Greene, myself, Winard Harper on drums, and Peter Washington is doing part of the week and then I have Noreko, she's a female Japanese bass player who plays with Diva. Then Michael Weiss is doing half of the week; he's usually with me. I've done a lot of things with Michael. The last three days Tomoko Ohno is going to play with me, she's worked with me before. I've taken her on gigs with me up in Connecticut and around. She's a very good player; they're both very good.

Murphy: It looks like Terell Stafford?

Wess: Oh yeah, Terell will be there. We've played a lot together; he's a wonderful trumpet player. Frank Greene is playing first trumpet.

Murphy: And that club is so unlike any other performance venue in New York. What do you think about the new Jazz at Lincoln Center location over at the Time Warner Center.

Wess: It's good; it's convenient. The people are nice. It's a good place to play.

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Murphy: You know, speaking of clubs, one thing I wanted to ask you about is, in performing, how do you relate to audiences and is it important for you to have any kind of intimacy with your audience?

Wess: Kind of what?

Murphy: Do you try to establish, you know, a connection with your audience or an intimacy?

Wess: Well, you know, that's what this music is—communication. You can play anything you want as long as you don't go off and leave the audience. You have to take them with you all the way. That's one thing that you learn, and you can tell by the reaction of the audience, what's going on. Just like, when I was with Basie, he might call a set and he'd play two tunes and he'd change it right there because he can tell by the reaction of the audience that it's not what he should do right then. The thing is, you know your repertoire, and you know what you have to offer. You have to try and present it in the way that it can be most appreciated by the audience, you know what I mean? I don't think you should try to force your music on anybody. You, kind of, let them be a part of what you're doing and they enjoy it more. The tempos are very important. A lot of fast, it goes as quick as it comes. You just have to realize those things and be able to pace yourself and try to judge where the audience is, what they're reacting to and what they're not. You know, that comes with experience.

Murphy: Yeah, I'm sure. You referenced Basie and how he measured what was going on in his audience. I remember you saying that you sat next to him. So, you tended to have the inside story.

Wess: Well, I was always on that side, usually by that piano so I know what was going on. I could tell by how he's reacting to the audience, or the players, or whatever.

Murphy: You know, and one thing that is certainly affecting your life in recent years, is your vision.

Wess: My what?

Murphy: Your vision, your sight.

Wess: Oh, well my health, you know, that's age. We don't want to get into that. That could be an organ recital. (Laughs) We don't have time for that one.

Murphy: Can I ask you, is it macular degeneration?

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Wess: Yeah, yeah but I've been to doctors, and doctors, and doctors and they all shine a bright light in my eyes and blind me and then they say, "I'm sorry, we can't help you. Be sure to see the lady on the way out." What can you do, they just don't have anything. I've heard of a stem cell program they have in Cologne, Germany but nobody seems to think too much of it, and it's expensive, and there aren't any guarantees of anything.

Murphy: Has that affected, you know, your process of communicating?

Wess: Well, it affects your income because I can't read any music. I can't...I haven't read a paper in two years. I just can't see it, but at the same time I can pick up a stray pin off the floor.

Murphy: Is that right?

Wess: I can see a stray pin and reach down and pick it up. But, I mean, I can't read music, or words, or papers. It's laborious. This, magnifying the field, is so small, it's hard to read.

Murphy: I would imagine that would affect any kind of writing of music.

Wess: Yeah, well I have to have somebody, I have to tell them what I want to right. Usually I have people that understand. Dennis Mackrel has done two things for me, for this next gig, and Anita Brown has done a couple of things too. I just explain to them what I have in mind and they know, pretty well, what to do.

Murphy: You mentioned, with all these people coming through your place and playing with you, having jam sessions, there are a lot of young people learning from you. What's your sense of your level of playing these days and the state of jazz education?

Wess: Well, you've got quite a few good players and then you've got some that they're not really in tune with the music. You see, people get the idea that jazz is improvisation, but it's a lot more than that. Actually, jazz is folk music. It's one of the many forms of black folk music. You got a whole lot of different forms and styles of black folk music and jazz is one of them. Jazz doesn't sound like anything else, really. But people all over the world, all musicians improvise every day. Indians improvise on the ragas, you know? Israeli people, they improvise on their folk music. Country and western, and they Virginian hoedown, everybody improvises, they always have. One music influences the other, in someway or another. You're influenced by whatever you hear, you know? It's not just improvisation. You can't just say cause somebody's improvising, they're playing jazz. I've been in places where you hear them start off with their jazz licks that they've been able to get together. Then after they get through with that, they go to improvising in their folk music style, from wherever their from. They get right back to the improvisation in that style, in that style of their folk music. Sometimes they call that jazz, but it's not. Sometimes when I listen to it, it

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seems like sometimes I have to show my passport just to get out of the joint, you know? Because it's really got nothing to do with jazz, but it's good improvisation and they're very good instrumentalists, good musicians. But, jazz is a special thing it's a way of life, it's a language, it's a slanguage, and it's got a different sound.

Murphy: Well, and in talking about travelling and travelling to Europe and Japan and other places, do you feel like you are better understood in some of those countries than you are at home by musicians? Do you feel like there's more appreciation for jazz?

Wess: Generally, jazz musicians are better all over the world, where I've been. You used to go to Europe of Japan or somewhere, and you have a problem finding a rhythm section but now you don't have that problem. You have a lot of good rhythm sections wherever you go. You can find a good jazz rhythm section. That's changed a lot, but as far as the combinations, the work is...it's much easier to travel in Japan than it is in Europe. In Europe, there's nothing that's convenient. You end up carrying bags up and down steps to get on this train and you got nobody to help you or nothing. In Japan, you just tell them what you want and its there. They take care of it, whatever it is. You know, if you're on dialysis and say I need three treatments three times a week, then three times a week it's there. They're there for you on time and they wont let you forget it. They got somebody to take you and bring you back, and see that all appointments are made. They just take care of you. Then when you get ready to leave they got somebody that sees you to get back. In Europe, when you get through playing you say, "Where did they go?" You walk in the airport and you got to go to baggage claim and there are people all over the place with carts full of bags, no planes are flying or nothing, you're just there. You say, "How do I get home?" You know they had to go to Italy, or somewhere, and that's the way it is. It's been like that I know when I was with Basie, the final payment was supposed to be made. They made the final payment in franc. So you can imagine what that was, the roadman had pocket and bulletin of franc. Then once we were down in Yugoslavia and we got paid, and nobody wanted the dinars, we had to take the money to Germany to get change. They didn't want it, they don't want nothing but dollars. The dollar's not that strong now but then, you now. They didn't want their own money. You run into all that crazy stuff travelling.

Murphy: Is that part of the business that you take on just, sort of, being your own manager?

Wess: That's the hard part of the business: getting to the gig and getting back home, that's the hard part of the business. Playing is not hard.

Murphy: But, you know, managing the finances of it and negotiating your fees and all that.

Wess: Well, you usually can come together on that. But, doing what you have to do to get the job done to get to the job, that's the problem.

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Murphy: The logistics.

Wess: It's getting to be rough, cause everybody's trying to save a buck, you know? You have to be careful about what accommodations you get.

Murphy: I wanted to ask you, in the next couple of days we have all of these NEA Jazz Masters events going on and you were named an NEA Jazz Master in 2007. This will be the third year you have been involved in these activities. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, the experience of being involved in this circle of jazz legends?

Wess: They have quite a program at the time that they have the awards and ceremony. You know, it takes up the whole day or so, doing that. It's nice, you get...I think last year Snooky Young got an award and Gerald Wilson and I presented. Like, you know, that was nice. We've all known each other since 1940, you know what I mean? It's like old friends, you get to know them.

Murphy: Yeah, that was a great presentation; you guys were funny.

Wess: Gerald, he remembers everything and he was acting like he was 19-years old, it was unbelievable. He's 90 something. I think Snooks is about 92.

Murphy: He is remarkable and he teaches, and he has some absolutely astounding number in his class. I mean, hundreds and hundreds of students in his one lecture class.

Wess: Gerald Wilson, he's something else, he really is.

Murphy: I'm remembering the year that you received your award, so the 2007 ceremony. When you accepted your award you told a really moving story about trying to, I think you were trying to get to a doctor's appointment, like the day before, and you were trying to hail a cab.

Wess: Well, I was coming from a doctor's appointment. I had to go see my cardiologist, I was up on 84th and Lexington. Sara and I were together and we were on the corner trying to hail a cab. This transportation truck, garbage truck, trash truck, coming down the street and I know it's going stop over across the street and I' still trying to hail a cab. I wasn't watching. The first thing I knew, the driver was tapping me on the shoulder saying, "Frank, saw you standing here trying to get a cab so I stopped to help you. Can I get a cab for you?" What's his name? He called himself dynamite or something.

Murphy: He was just a jazz fan and he recognized you?

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Wess: Yeah he was a jazz fan, and I've seen him since. He came to one of my performances at Dizzy's club and he told me who he was and everything. He's since retired from that profession, from sanitation. But, he came by and said hello as a jazz fan. That was really nice of him.

Murphy: That's amazing; your reach is far and wide.

Wess: Yeah, I speak to people all the time. I don't know who they are because I can't see well and everything is a blur, more or less. I can't see features; I don't know who is who. Somebody is always speaking, "Hey Frank!" but it's nice that people know who you are. I was in getting a manicure the other day and I saw some Chinese people from...where are they from? Anyway, they're all Chinese people in there. The lady, or the mamasan, or whoever you call it that's in charge, she was talking on the phone and I was sitting right at the first desk getting a manicure. When she got off the phone, she had a little card and she looked at it and said, "Are you Frank Wess, the jazz musician?" And I said, "Yeah," and she started dancing around. Somehow or another she found out who I was. I've been going there a long time, but I guess they found out who I was, they said, "Who is this that's coming in here all the time?" They do very good work so I go there.

Murphy: That must be your experience, you know, all over the world. You've been doing it so long you must have friends in every port, so to speak.

Wess: Yeah, I got a lot of nice friends. Although, I got fella who has actually transcribed all my flute solos. He's a musician and he's set up my website and everything for me. He comes over here once and a while, he's very nice that way.

Murphy: Do you still have your crazy answering machine message?

Wess: I had to put it back. You wouldn't believe it. I've been playing this music for—oh hell—damn near 75 years, and that's my hit. My answering message is my hit! I took it off because people just called and they rang my phone all the time just to hear the message. They don't want to talk to me; they just want to hear the message. Everybody's complaining, "When are you going to put the message back? Put it back!" So I put it back. So now the phone is ringing and, "I hope you weren't at home, I wanted to hear the message."

Murphy: I'll confess, I did that once.

Wess: They start talking to the message, you know?

Murphy: You have to describe what the message is.

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Wess: Well, it's just...I tried to cover all the things that I have to listen to all the time. Somebody's always trying to give you a story about this or that, so I just said, "Hi there, how are you doing? You're not going to believe this. I was just thinking about you. You must be psychic; it's so nice to have sensitive friends. If your call pertains to me doing a benefit for one of the, so-called, non-profit organizations by about my performance with one of the trendy necrophilia ensembles, I suggest you call my manager at: 1-800-I-8-1, or 1-800-I-Heard-you-ate-one-too. However, if you want a prompt response you can leave a short message, your telephone number, your sexual preference, your mother's maiden name, and your credit card number, and I'll get right back to you. Thank you." (Laughs) So you know like, Harry Edison, he's like, "You've already missed two gigs while I was listening to that message!" (Laughs) He says, "That's the longest message I've ever heard."

Murphy: Ah, Sweets.

Wess: Frank Foster he says, "I ate one before you!" You know, you can't tell what response you're going to get.

Murphy: That's always fun.

Wess: But, you know, those are sorts of things you have to listen to all the time. "We want you...there's a non-profit organization we want you to..." It's always something. I just tried to cover all the bases. You know, when I went out to Seattle once to do a concert and clinic with the Seattle Repertoire Orchestra, they had my phone message written up in the paper, in the newspaper. I got it at home somewhere, they wrote it up in the newspaper.

Murphy: Hey, whatever gets you business?

Wess: yeah, well that was the general idea in the first place. You know, if people don't see you, they forget about you. There's so many people doing the same thing. So people don't think about you—it's just a method of marketing, that's why I did it in the first place.

Sara Tsutsumi: Tell them about your nonet recording, and also about...

Wess: My what?

Sara Tsutsumi: Nonet recording because they didn't know, I think. Also, the "Flutology"; because those are the ones where it is your name.

Murphy: Okay.

Wess: I recorded an album called, "Flutology" with Holly Hofmann and Ali Reyerson.

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Murphy: And when was that recorded?

Wess: Four or five years ago.

Sara Tsutsumi: Yeah it's, I think 2004.

Murphy: 2004.

Wess: "Flutology", I recorded with two flutes and it came out night. And then I recorded, last year I recorded Nonet with the same group that you have.

Sara Tsutsumi: The recording was on twenty oh seven.

Murphy: The nonet is from 2007?

Wess: Was that 2007?

Sara Tsutsumi: Yes, and that was from your label.

Wess: Yeah, LaBeth Music.

Murphy: Your label is what?

Wess: LaBeth Music Inc.

Murphy: Okay.

Wess: So, I have those two out in my name.

Murphy: We have to wrap up in a few minutes but, in conclusion, maybe you could talk a little bit about where jazz is going in the future, and the state of jazz? We've been talking with a couple of people about how the state of education is so strong but there aren't that many gig for these great young musicians.

Wess: Yeah, well, competition is stiff wherever you go. Even if you're homeless, competition is stiff. That's what it is, there are more and more people in the world, there's supply and demand. Actually, the way a lot of things are going, I don't worry about because what I do is the way I've been doing it for I don't know how long and it's a way of playing that I learned to play. I didn't learn patterns in playing no changes, just one or two changes. That's the only fault I find now, you've got thousands of wonderful instrumentalists, they can really play their instruments but their music—it's just not that...A lot of them don't know how to start, they don't know how to develop anything, and they don't know how to

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end. They just play the patterns and it lies there, and it lies there, and when they get tired they stop. There's no climax or nothing. It's just one after another playing the same patterns on maybe one or two chords. It's nothing really that interesting rhythmically, harmonically, or melodically. And music is supposed to be pleasing to the ear.

Murphy: Why do you think that is?

Wess: That's the way they're taught. That's the way they've been taught, patterns and things. In the schools they teach you how to play, but they don't teach you how to stop. You see, so it's very important to know how to stop playing when you should stop playing. I hear it time and time again. Once, I was in the Vanguard and there was this saxophone player, tenor saxophone player, I can't remember his name and he really wasn't taking no prisoners. You could tell he had the whole audience with him and everything and when he got to his climax, when he should of stopped he kept on trying to play, you know what I mean? And what would have been a standing ovation ended up being a polite applause. It's like that. It's like once I was in Chicago I went into hear Coltrane and he played, you know how Coltrane played, and it's 35 or 40 minutes he's blowing. When he got through there 's a big applause and everything. And the lady next to me was applauding louder than anybody saying, "I'm so glad that man's not blowing that horn." You know what I mean? (Laughs) It's like that, so you learn how to play but you don't learn how to stop, and that's very important. I've heard like, even Dizzy's room, you know two trumpet players, they got together and they were playing and blowing together and they really got into something and they reached their climax and instead of stopping, they kept trying to play. That's what it is, when it's over, it's over. You have to know when to stop and you have to have a feeling when you should stop.

Murphy: It's timing.

Wess: Yes, and you have to have a feeling of when to stop and when to progress.

Murphy: As Sweets loved to say, "Less is more."

Wess: That's right, that's what it is. You have to be able to sense that, that comes with experience. But you just can't keep on, keep on, and keep on. Just say what you have to say and then say, "I'm through." You got so many kids coming out now, they got jazz degrees in jazz and they can't pat their foot to their own music. That I don't understand. It's very strange, but that's what happening. So, I don't know, but there are so many good players. You can't worry about that, jazz is in good shape.

Murphy: Well, you do a great job leading by example.

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Wess: Well, a lot of kids that are really listening, it's just like I said, there's a lot of good players and then there are some that are not. A lot of them are ego-tripping, so that happens and everything.

Murphy: Well, Mr. Wess, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure and you've got the driest sense of humor of anybody I have ever talked to. It's always fun.

Wess: Thank you.

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END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kyle Kelly-Yahner

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