

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

John Handy
VISIONARY JAZZ SAXOPHONIST, BANDLEADER AND COMPOSER

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Cooley Crawford
in 2006-2007

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John Handy (press photo, courtesy John Handy)

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SERIES PREFACE

The American Composers Series of oral histories, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1998 to document the lives and careers of a number of contemporary composers with California connections, the composers chosen to represent a cross-section of musical philosophies, cultural backgrounds and styles.

The twentieth century in this country produced an extraordinary diversity of music as composers sought to find a path between contemporary and traditional musical languages: serialism, minimalism, neoclassicism, and back to some extent to neo-romanticism in the last decades. The battle of styles was perhaps inevitable, as well as the reverse pendulum swing that has followed, but as the *New York Times* stated in a recent article, "the polemics on both sides were dismaying."

The composers in the series, a diverse group selected with the help of University of California faculty and musicians from the greater community, come from universities (Andrew Imbrie, Joaquin Nin-Culmell and Olly Wilson), orchestras (David Sheinfeld), and fields as different as jazz (Dave Brubeck and John Handy), electronic music (Pauline Oliveros), spatial music (Henry Brant), and the blues (Jimmy McCracklin). Also in the series is an oral history of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic*, commissioned by San Francisco Opera for the 2005 season, and an interview with David Harrington, founder of Kronos Quartet, which commissioned more than five hundred new pieces in its first three decades. Various library collections served as research resources for the project, among them those of the UC Berkeley and UCLA Music Libraries, The Bancroft Library, and the Yale School of Music Library.

Oral history techniques have only recently been applied in the field of music, the study of music having focused until now largely on structural and historical developments in the field. It is hoped that these oral histories, besides being vivid cultural portraits, will promote understanding of the composer's work, the musical climate in the times we live in, the range of choices the composer has, and the avenues for writing and performance.

Funding for the American Composer Series came in the form of a large grant from art patroness Phyllis Wattis, who supported the oral histories of Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and subsequently from the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to tape-record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to California history. The office is headed by Richard Cándida Smith and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

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The American Composers Series
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

JOHN HANDY—Interview History

When John Handy appeared on the UC campus for his first interview, he was instantly recognized, a vigorous and handsome man with his signature shaved head and dark glasses, a jazz musician for the ages.

Handy is known for his work with bassist Charles Mingus in New York in the late 1950s, for his pioneering collaborations with blues and jazz artists, Indian classical musicians, and others, and for his own compositions, among them “Hard Work,” “Spanish Lady,” Concerto for Jazz, Soloist and Orchestra and “If Only We Knew.”

Handy was born in Dallas, Texas, and moved at age fifteen to the Bay Area, where he joined three bands at McClymonds High School in Oakland and was soon playing in the finest of Fillmore District’s 30-plus nightclubs. He played at the Booker T. Washington Hotel, performed at the Primalon Ballroom with PeeWee Crayton, and jammed with musicians like Kenny Dorham, Art Tatum and John Coltrane at Bop City.

“Bop City,” he says, “was like a second home. Musically, for me, it was my first home. At times I was part of the house band. Bop City was not just a club; it was more than just that. So much more.” Bop City was also a West Coast home to Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Chet Baker, Charles Mingus, Dexter Gordon, Ella Fitzgerald and many others.

It was at the Five Spot club in New York City that Mingus heard John Handy and invited Handy to perform with his band. Listening to Handy play that night, Mingus announced to the crowd: “Bird is back! Bird is back!”

Like most saxophonists, Handy was influenced by Charlie “Bird” Parker. “He brought to me the use of chromatic skills—half-tones—like nobody else. He...expanded the sound and made the music bigger.” His time with Mingus was short but fruitful. Handy performed all over New York City, the United States and Europe, attracting large audiences. He recorded eight albums with the band, including *Mingus Ah-Um* on Columbia Records, *Blues and Roots* on Atlantic Records and *Alice’s Wonderland* on United Artists Records.

In 1962 Handy returned to the Bay Area, where he and his wife bought a home in the Western Addition and became involved in the civil rights movement. In 1964 he performed with Charles Mingus at the Monterey Jazz Festival and founded the Freedom Band, which played benefits at the Fillmore Auditorium and elsewhere to raise funds for the movement. The jazz scene had nearly disappeared by then, because of the advent of the rock-and-roll phenomenon and the redevelopment of the Western Addition. “The great life that was Harlem-ish for us was destroyed by the redevelopment process,” according to Mayor Willie Brown. “The entertainment world for African Americans virtually ceased to exist in San Francisco.” Handy eventually gravitated to the East Bay, where he enjoys living, composing, and performing.

The scene in San Francisco has been good for John Handy. He organized several innovative bands. For twenty-three years he performed with his ensemble, John Handy with Class, which included three female violinists/vocalists. His recordings with Columbia made waves, blending

the avant-garde with bop. He taught at San Francisco State University, bringing Bill Evans, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and the Herbie Hancock Sextet into his classrooms there, at UC Berkeley, Stanford, Cal State Hayward, and elsewhere.

In this oral history, Handy reflects on the music and musicians, and on the rewards and inequities of the times in which he has lived. He reviewed and edited the text slightly, remembering and adding details about a long and rich life in jazz.

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Music Historian
August, 2009
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Interview 1: November 17, 2006
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01-00:00:00

Crawford: We're recording. It's November 17th, 2006. I'm interviewing Mr. John Handy for the American Composers series. So let's get started, and maybe you could tell me something about your parents and when and where you were born.

01-00:00:16

Handy: My parents were in Dallas when they met, in N.W. Harlee grade school. That's N.W. H-A-R-L-E-E, in Oak Cliff, which is in Dallas, Texas. They met, I believe, when she was eleven and he was thirteen. And so they got married in their late teens, and had me in February, 1933. And eighteen months later they had another child, my sister Shirley. And that was in Dallas, in August, 1934.

Crawford: How did they come to Dallas?

01-00:01:05

Handy: How did they?

Crawford: Yes, how did they come to Dallas?

01-00:01:09

Handy: I really don't know how they got there. [chuckles] You know, I don't believe my dad was born there. But my mother was. And that's where she grew up. We moved many times. That's what I'm told. In later years, after I'd started to grow up, we lived in a lot of different districts in Dallas. Most of the districts that I grew up in were white districts, from the time I was about three years old.

We lived in an area called Highland Park. Oh, that was when I was very young, three or under. My parents were very young, and they split up very early. Mama started to work for an Italian family in Highland Park, which is a fashionable part of Dallas. I don't believe I have the name totally correct, but it's like De Genaro. The De Genaro family. Turns out that Angelina De Genaro, the oldest daughter, married Joe Alioto, who became the mayor of— [laughs]

Crawford: San Francisco.

01-00:02:52

Handy: San Francisco. And so I didn't know this until years later, who these people were. I remember Angelina, I remember her. I was less than three. I recently met the daughter, the lawyer. I forget her name, but—

Crawford: Angela?

01-00:03:18

Handy:

Angela, Angela, yes. In recent years, I saw her. She and Willie Brown were talking to each other. We were at the de Young, one of those museums, where my wife was, at the time, a trustee. I'd seen her, but I'd never got a chance to, you know, just grab her ear. She's younger, and I just walked up to them and I said, "I don't want anything, I just want you to hear this," and I said, "I believe you will probably know about this place in Highland Park." And she turned around and looked and I said, "My mother worked there, for your family, before you were born." I described the house as red brick. And there was a garage that had two or three doors, for three cars. And I remember the cars were so much bigger than I was. And her eyes— [laughs] We've never talked since then. I didn't want people to think I wanted something; I don't, you know.

I saw Joe Alioto once after the premiere of *The Cotton Club*, the movie, here, years ago. It was at Enrico's. A few of us left the theater in North Beach and went to Enrico's, and I saw him there. I had met the mayor before, because I was a member of the Interim For the Arts Committee, a committee for the arts, which he inherited from Mayor Shelley, I believe. So I had lunch with him and Angelina. But it didn't ring a bell for me that she was my mom's friend in the De Genaro family.

Crawford:

Oh, you didn't know that at the time because you didn't know her maiden name?

01-00:05:03

Handy:

Yes, and I didn't know she was from Dallas, either. I found this out, by the way, because her name was in the paper, and my mom saw it, with a little biography. And my mom said, "That's Angelina." And then I remembered Angelina and Michael and Manuel, her brothers. I remember those names.

So I approached him and I told him who I was, and I said, "My mom used to work for the De Genaros." And he corrected me, so I'm not saying it correctly. It was not De Genaros. It's something close. I said, "She worked there. My mom's name is Pauline." And he said, "*Pauline?* I remember her! She had two children." I said, "I'm the oldest." [laughs] So—

Crawford:

Oh, that's remarkable.

01-00:05:55

Handy:

Yes.

Crawford:

He loved music, didn't he?

01-00:06:04

Handy:

Well, obviously, he was interested in the arts. And I'm not sure music, specifically. But he did have that group. He met with us several times, in regards to art and music. The arts, period.

Crawford: Well, that's interesting.

01-00:06:26

Handy: Yes, that's quite a story.

Crawford: What was the music in your family?

01-00:06:41

Handy: Oh, it was kind of typical of what happened for people of my background and generation. You know, there was some church. My mother wasn't an avid churchgoer, but we did have a period in our lives where we went to a number of churches of different denominations, which had black audiences, you know, African-Americans, and I heard the music. Like the Church of God in Christ, which is probably the closest to what we understand as the most African-influenced.

Crawford: Methodist?

01-00:07:16

Handy: Yes, it was their music, and the kind of fervor in which they get involved in the services and with the music. There's nothing quite like that in most of the other African-American churches. So I experienced probably more of that than Baptist or Presbyterian. Even for some of the events, we went there. Just to check it out, I guess. Then we moved to L.A. when I was ten. And there was a guitar there that I tried to play, but the strings hurt my fingers as they were made of metal.

Crawford: Where did you find a guitar?

01-00:08:02

Handy: My first step-dad had one. He had one before, when I was three and four, but they hurt. [laughs] I had these little fat fingers, and I almost got blisters, you know, so I'd leave it alone. I could always find a tune with one or two strings. And so I had heard lots of music through the years—swing, Count Basie's band—via broadcast. I had heard a lot of music, I knew enough names to—

Crawford: You liked music very early.

01-00:08:36

Handy: Oh, yes, music was wonderful. Going back even earlier, when I was learning to talk when I was only nine months old, I remember one situation where I was singing to somebody around me—I was in bed, sitting up—*I shall not be moved*. And I was saying something like “I sha' rot she 'roo.” [they laugh] So yes, music was attractive to me. And as it was, my mom played piano, some piano, as all the kids in the family did.

Crawford: And your sister, as well.

01-00:09:15

Handy: Yes, for a very short time. I never heard mom play until I was twelve. She had talked about it; there was no piano around.

Crawford: Where did you play? And where did your mom play?

01-00:09:23

Handy: Well, she *had* played. She just didn't play all those years. And so we were in L.A. for a short while, then we moved back to Dallas. Somehow, we went to somebody's house, and my mother [chuckles] started to play the piano. I was so delighted. I felt like I could fly! I couldn't believe my mother. She was carrying a bass and everything and—I was just so tickled and so happy to see that she could do that.

Crawford: You didn't know.

01-00:09:53

Handy: No. She had talked about it. And she never did it again. There was never a piano around.

Crawford: So she didn't play in church, piano or organ or anything like that.

01-00:10:04

Handy: No. No, she didn't do that. Well, in church, not at all.

Crawford: Where did she learn?

01-00:10:12

Handy: With her brothers and sisters. She was the fifth child of six. I think just about everybody played some piano, and her brother, the brother just ahead of her, was around from time to time. He used to come with his guitar, and he would play the guitar. He didn't sing much, but he'd play the guitar. And my step-grandfather was around for a very short while, and he played the guitar. His playing was very unusual [laughs]. He would make faces and grimaces and moved when he played. He'd go like [laughs] this.

So these little things happened. I didn't think of playing in those days at all. I don't recall. But then we're [in] L.A. during World War II, 1943, summer of August until February. I was there for a while, went to mixed schools. And it was kind of confusing, because it was during the war, and sometimes I'd go to school at eight o'clock. I've gone to school as late as one o'clock, and leave at four. They moved kids around because there were so many. But I enjoyed the mostly Mexican neighborhood. I got to know most of the kids.

Crawford: What do you remember of the neighborhood?

01-00:11:42

Handy: It was on Kohler Street, K-O-H-L-E-R, between Seventh and Eighth, right off Central. We were downtown. Of course, I didn't know it at the time.

Crawford: A lot of music there!

01-00:11:52

Handy: There was a lot of music! We did go to the Million Dollar Theater and saw Benny Goodman. We also went to the Central Theater. I saw my first stage show there, with Pigmeat Markham. [laughs] There was always music, and so that was— I did that about— well, I was treated to that about three times. No musical influence in that, it was just comedy, mostly, that was presented.

Back to Dallas. Well, about the time I was eleven and twelve, in between there, some kid showed up with one of these little whistles that has— it was red, white and blue, and it was like a plastic bugle. You could play taps and stuff. And you know, he played like a kid; he was just playing. So I picked it up and I could [scats a rhythm], and I could even triple-tongue. It just came, I knew how to do it. And from that, I was attracted to getting more horns, a little whistle with more holes. So I got one, a little German whistle that had six holes. And the quality was pretty bad, you know.

Crawford: Yes!

01-00:13:03

Handy: [laughs] I didn't like it, so I went upscale, a plastic one with seven holes.

Crawford: Was this in school that they had these?

01-00:13:15

Handy: No, it was a recorder. I still have it. And I could play. I learned to play almost all the popular songs, pretty much. And then to half-hole it. So I just found out, I taught myself how to play it. And I wanted a saxophone by then. And I didn't get the saxophone, but eventually I was given a clarinet by my mom. And that's where—

Crawford: So she encouraged you?

01-00:13:50

Handy: No. I just kept bugging her. Not every day. But she surprised me with it. You know, she didn't tell me about it, that she was buying it. We were living in a place called Beverly Hills, part of Dallas. [laughs] It was out beyond Oak Cliff, which was a huge area. And we lived basically between Dallas and Forth Worth, it seemed. It was really far out.

Crawford: Oh, yes?

01-00:14:22

Handy: Yes. So our neighbors next door, Caucasians, opened a meat market. Fresh meats and all, seafoods. And we went and visited, and it had a clarinet [on the] counter. They were selling it for a neighbor. And the guy had played before on it, so he took it, put it together. It was one of these metal ones that didn't come apart except for the mouthpiece. He corrected his false teeth and [laughs]

played a few little notes. And it sounded wonderful. So one day I came home from school, and it was there. I knew it was there. I knew it. I came home, I knew it was there! Just spiritually, something happened. And I went home and I said, “Where’s my clarinet?”

Crawford: How did you know?

01-00:15:16

Handy: I don’t know. During that time, we went to school way on the other side of town. And for some reason, my sisters had stayed home. Oh, and I came in, I said, “Where’s my clarinet?” She and mom looked each other. They knew I hadn’t seen it, and I said, “I know it’s here.” She had put it under her bed, and I pulled it out, and they just looked at each other with their mouths open. [they laugh]

Crawford: That’s amazing.

01-00:15:46

Handy: So, you know.

Crawford: You took to that instrument.

01-00:15:49

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: Who had you heard play?

01-00:15:52

Handy: Oh, lots of radio. Lots of radio music. From the time I was very young. I was five days shy of thirteen when I got the clarinet; I was becoming a big kid. And we were going to St. Peter’s Academy, where there was music. I heard older kids playing jazz at St. Peter’s Academy, and mostly classical music. We went from kindergarten through high school in that school, and you’d hear these advanced students playing Prelude in C-sharp minor. Really playing and singing these wonderful arias and—

Crawford: How did that happen to be? Was that common in the schools?

01-00:16:35

Handy: Our teachers were nuns, most of whom seemed to have come from Ireland, and a few other places. We were taught what they knew. And they were taught before I was into music. But they had a band, a concert band, and of course, I joined the band right away with the clarinet. There were only girls playing clarinet, by the way. [they laugh] A couple were younger than I, but then the rest were in high school. I was a sixth grader then, and I was excited. I didn’t read music and didn’t know anything.

Afterwards I went to the director and he said, “You don’t read?” and he told me to buy two books. He gave me the name of the Rubank Method, R-U-B-A-

N-K, so I went and bought the book. The big book had a chart to show you how to find the notes.

So okay, I did that, and the book of songs was the book with all the “Washington Post” and “Stars and Stripes,” et cetera, in there. I knew what these notes were because of the recorder. So I started to study it. And the next week I was back and before the rehearsal was over, I was sitting next to the best player in there, playing first, sharing first chair. When I came back, I was first chair.

Crawford: You had a very developed ear.

01-00:18:26

Handy: I have a very good ear, yes, I had a good ear, but I taught myself how to read. I felt I could read, and my ear helped a lot, of course. But I played first chair from the second rehearsal onward.

Crawford: What grade was that?

01-00:18:45

Handy: I was a sixth grader. We had high school girls who had been playing for years. So I’m playing first chair, and always did. I could always improvise. As a matter of fact, going back to the second day I had the clarinet, I didn’t know how to put it on right, and I found out later the reed was up on top and it should’ve been down—

Crawford: Oh, [laughs] okay.

01-00:19:13

Handy: The second day after I had initially gotten it, my mom came home at about five. I got a lift, came home early, two-thirty, from school. By the time my mom got home at six-thirty or so, I could play almost anything I had heard, you know. So yes, I just kind of played.

Crawford: You had been working on it a long time before you had that instrument.

01-00:19:36

Handy: Yes, it was in my head all this time. And so we stayed there for another couple of years, almost two years, working, learning. Yes, for two years. Then we decided to move. My mom moved back to California. And for some reason, and somehow, [laughs] we left the clarinet. [snaps fingers] We came very fast. And this is the school year; I was a tenth grader. And we were here in Oakland, and I found myself at McClymonds High School, enrolling in late November, around this time, almost, like the 18th, I remember. Somewhere between that and the 22nd. Actually, now, I think it was the 22nd, because—18th is when I later went to Cleveland. That was in October, 1950. But this was November, 1948, I’m in Oakland at about the 22nd.

I went to a concert this kid took me to that was given by the McClymond's High School jazz band. I never heard students play on such a grand level as those players.

Crawford: As you found here at McClymonds?

01-00:20:52

Handy: Yes. They had a whole *band*. At St. Peter's we had smaller combos. I never saw them in person, I could just hear them when they were rehearsing. And some of those guys graduated four and five years ahead of me, and left before I even got to know who played which instrument.

Crawford: But it was a musical environment.

01-00:21:12

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: You said Prelude in C-sharp, are you talking about Bach?

01-00:21:16

Handy: No, no. Who does that? That's Rachmaninoff, isn't it?

Crawford: Yes. I thought Bach—he knew about jazz, I think.

01-00:21:29

Handy: [laughs] Yes.

Crawford: So it was classically oriented, where you were.

01-00:21:38

Handy: Yes. I had to put that together later. I knew it wasn't jazz, when I heard Prelude in C-sharp minor. I'm just trying to think of Beethoven's—*Moonlight* Sonata. You'd hear those themes at St. Peter's Academy.

Crawford: So there were students that were playing solo piano and—

01-00:21:59

Handy: Yes, they were students. These kids, some had been in that school since they were in grammar school. I mean, in kindergarten. And when they were in high school, they'd been playing all those years. And they were excellent piano players, *great* piano players. You know, so I'd hear that music, and sometimes it would interrupt my concentrating on my [laughs] classes, because the music was so beautiful.

Crawford: What a great experience for you.

01-00:22:25

Handy: Yes, it was great. Now, at McClymonds, here in Oakland, I heard this music and with the beautiful instruments. You know, the brass instruments looked

like gold. And these kids were my age, and they were playing very well. And of course, I wanted to get in that band.

Well, I didn't even have a clarinet and I'd picked up the saxophone maybe four or five times at St. Peter's Academy, but I'd never played it or taken it home or anything. So the kid, Victor Green, who took me, I said to him, "I really wish I could play." He was a drummer, and he said, "You can borrow a horn from school." "What?"

Well, I was there the next day to borrow one. I went to the band rehearsal, and the instructor Joe Pason, who's legendary; a little guy about [chuckles] this tall, he was having fun with me. He's just screaming, "*You wanna get in the band? Can you play?*" And you know, I told him I played clarinet more years than I actually had.

Crawford: Oh. [laughs] Fudged a little.

01-00:23:35

Handy: And I put in, "I played a little saxophone." I picked up the saxophone [laughs] that didn't belong to me, when nobody was around—I wasn't supposed to have it—at St. Peter's Academy. So [laughs] he eventually stopped shouting, because he was really joking with me. And he said, "Well, do you have a horn?" I said, "No." He said, "What the hell did you come in here for then? Do you have a mouthpiece?" "No." [laughs]

So some kid said, "I'll give him a mouthpiece," one kid said, "I'll give him a reed." And so they handed me the saxophone, asked me to read something. Well, it was some stuff I'd never seen before, and I kind of tooted around. So he took it from me and he was honking [makes sounds], you know, not very musical, and played from a music book.

Crawford: He was good?

01-00:24:19

Handy: Not really! So he handed it back to me, and I played it right [chuckles] where he stopped. That was Wednesday, and on Saturday, I played my first gig.

Crawford: I read that! [they laugh]

01-00:24:32

Handy: The kid who took me, Victor Green, who took me to the concert, had a gig. He was a drummer. And he hired me, and we played for a dance.

Crawford: Where was that?

01-00:24:43

Handy: New Century Recreation Center, in Oakland, which is on Sixth and, I think, Peralta. Fifth or Sixth and Peralta. Maybe Third or Fourth and Peralta. So I started. That was it, I never stopped.

Crawford: And you were brand new in Oakland then.

01-00:24:57

Handy: Totally.

Crawford: You were about fifteen years old.

01-00:24:59

Handy: Yes, I was fifteen.

Crawford: A professional already.

01-00:25:04

Handy: There were kids my age—a little bit older, most of 'em, but anyway, sixteen to eighteen, on up, they were already playing in bands. There were guys there who were driving— a couple of guys [chuckles] were driving Cadillacs, because they were working with professionals. Yes.

Crawford: What halls do you remember? Were you talking about Sweet's and Oakland Auditorium?

01-00:25:28

Handy: Well, I played my first gig at New Century, and the next place that I played , I was really sitting in. It was at a legendary club. It became legendary, because it was one of the nicest clubs for African-Americans in West Oakland.

Crawford: Slim Jenkins?

01-00:25:50

Handy: Slim Jenkins was the second place I sat in, with Naomi Gray and her trio, and her husband was the saxophone player. And they let me sit in and I lived only a half-block away. And my mother didn't—she'd stop bothering me when I started playing saxophone. So I sat in with them six or seven times. They were very gracious to let me do that. I didn't see her again until, oh, God, it was probably '82, '83. She was playing at Josephine Baker's, a restaurant in San Francisco, where they had a piano and entertainment.

I remembered her name, but I didn't remember her face. I went to her and I told her. [laughs] She had let me sit in. She knew who I was, because my name was— you know, somehow she'd heard of me. But she didn't realize that she had let me sit in when I was a kid.

Crawford: What a good story.

01-00:26:59

Handy: Yes, it was a great memory, a great experience, to thank her.

Crawford: What was Slim Jenkins like?

01-00:27:10

Handy: Well, I had nothing to do with it, other than to get on that bandstand and get outta there. I was a kid, and I thought like a kid. And I knew I was a kid, and I did not want to make waves or bring attention to myself, because I was so afraid; I was afraid I'd get kicked out.

It was very sophisticated. The people dressed very well. I really didn't see them very much. I didn't see a lot. I just went to the bandstand and played. A kind of a habit that I acquired early, because I didn't know the music. Everything was new to me, and each time I went on the bandstand I learned something different, something new. I closed my eyes. [laughs]

So even now, since I wear dark glasses most of the time, when I'm playing my eyes are almost always closed. You could come here [laughs] in front and do this. Because that's how I started playing to keep from being distracted. And so that's why. I played at a number of places like Slim's, but I don't remember anything other than—I saw the people on the bandstand.

Crawford: Oh, that's funny. We have lots of photographs of Slim's. I like the one of you with Coltrane on the cover (*Harlem of the West*, Chronicle Books, 2006).

01-00:28:29

Handy: The picture with John Coltrane was taken at Bop City in San Francisco, in 1951. I got one, by the way, from Slim Jenkins, when I got out of high school, when I played a gig there in 1951.

Crawford: That's right. What about the rest of Seventh Street? Talk about that a little bit, if you would.

01-00:28:45

Handy: There were bars up and down Seventh, and businesses of different kinds. And I went to a couple places, the names of which I never knew, then or now, [chuckles] where we had impromptu jam sessions. And there were some guys who had gone to McClymonds High School, where I went, who could really play. One was Burnett Sutton, a trumpet player, who was about twenty-two when I was seventeen or so, and Skippy Warren, who's a bass player.

When Dizzy Gillespie would come to town, Burnett Sutton, who became known as Little Diz, would hang out with him. He was an excellent trumpet player, around Miles Davis' age, and played on that level, at that age.

So I learned from all people, and right away I played with kids my age. I went from that to the young adults, to older adults, to older people, period. There

was another place that I remember, Walker's, I think it was called. Walker's Louisiana Playhouse. And I moved next door, when I got out of high school. I was, you know, on my own; my family was in Cleveland by then. That's something I left out.

Crawford: Your mother had moved?

01-00:30:20

Handy:

We had moved, I actually moved to Cleveland, too. So I'm jumping ahead now. You asked me about the clubs. But we moved to Ohio, Cleveland, during the early stages. We went in October, school starts in September, right? And October 15th, we moved to Cleveland. We hadn't been here quite two years. I didn't want to move at all. I'd started playing a little football. I was really— [laughs] But the music was it, you know. I was always a little afraid of getting hit in the mouth [laughs] playing football. But I didn't.

We went to Cleveland, and it was so cold there I didn't want to *see* a football. You know, to go outside. I met this other kid that was a senior, trumpet player, Bill Hardman, who would later play with the Jazz Messengers. Bill Hardman, and it was wonderful being around Bill.

Bill knew a lot about music. In this music that we play, we relate to the piano keyboard, harmonically. Bill could play all the chords to everything, to every song. I learned from watching him— I was only there for three-and-a-half months. Oh! Central High School was a huge school. It was very cold. So we never went outside, you know. [laughs] We had a big, noisy lunchroom, and I would play the piano through the lunch hour.

Crawford: How huge?

01-00:32:01

Handy:

I don't know. I think we had over two thousand students. Somewhere there. And in Oakland, I think we had eight hundred. St. Peter's Academy had five hundred.

Crawford: Small classes.

01-00:32:18

Handy:

So yes, it was a big school. I never knew hardly anybody but Bill and a couple other guys. But there was nothing to do, and there was a piano there. And the kids were all busy doing— you know, making noise. I sat at the piano for the whole lunch hour, and nobody ever interrupted me. I started putting these little things together. And I found myself enamored, and learning songs, learning them correctly. I wasn't academically astute, but intuitively I understood, and somehow it turned out right. But Bill Hardman was an influence to a degree— Oh, his voicings. I was learning to voice, basically, chords, other than just triads.

Crawford: So you picked up voicings from just listening to him—

01-00:33:17

Handy: That was the beginning, uh-huh. I just watched him do it. Things like “How High the Moon,” which were very popular for jazz musicians. It was very basic stuff. I started, “Well, if you can do that, you can add this.” I listened to other people play, as I did saxophone players. I never took lessons. I just watched their fingers.

Some guys played wild like this. I noticed that—mostly white guys who were trained—because they were trained—and a few good black guys who took lessons, they played like *this*. And it didn’t make sense to me. I always thought the closest distance from any given point is a straight line. And if you played like this, you’d have more facility. It’s smoother. And it looked better; it’s kind pretty. [laughs] I watched, and I listened, and I tried to take characteristics of anybody playing well, that I thought was playing well. And that’s how I learned.

Crawford: You left Oakland fairly briefly. But how was the scene in Ohio, where you went?

Handy: It was very strange there. The kids were very much unhip. Much more unhip than our kids here, on average. Our kids here and in Dallas liked jazz. These kids, the kids in Cleveland, didn’t.

Crawford: Hadn’t been exposed to it, maybe.

01-00:34:52

Handy: Oh, yes, they were. Cleveland’s much bigger, you know, much closer to New York. And the musicians there, some of them are great. Bill, at seventeen years old, knew everything, and there were a few other people there who were excellent players. And great folk came out of there, like the great trumpet player Benny Bailey, who played with Lionel Hampton, and whom I got to know later, was just *incredible*.

We had Benny Miller, who moved here, whom I heard on the last night that I was there. Bill Hardman and I got kicked out of the club. We were underage, and they found out we were not quite eighteen, and we were supposed to have been twenty-one anyhow.

Yes, there were some very fine players. But it was kind of underground, it seemed. I went to a couple of shows, dance concerts, and I wasn’t interested in dancing anymore; I used to dance in Dallas quite a bit. Soon as I moved to Oakland, that was over.

Crawford: What kind of dancing?

01-00:36:00

Handy:

Oh, we were doing the jitterbug and other—I taught the students at McClymonds how to do the bop. Some guy had gone to New York, and across the street from St. Peter’s Academy was a little coffee shop, soda fountain. And this guy was standing there doing this stuff in front of this jukebox, you know. Just moving his feet.

Somebody said, “What are you doing?” He said, “I learned this in New York.” And one guy asked him, he wasn’t in school with us, and he said, “This is called the bop.” And it was very, you know, very minor. I saw him do it, and it was very simple, and I got into that, and you know—if we have a theme of some kind, African-Americans, you know, we recreate it. So we learn something, and we take it, do it our way, and that’s what we do.

Crawford:

That’s interesting, at that very young age, that there was dancing in the school there.

01-00:37:10

Handy:

Yes. Well, when I came here, they were just beginning to do it. You know, they were doing it here at the dances. Now, not at school, but Defemery Park is where the dances were. And the New Century, and other places that I started to play in. YMCAs and YWCAs in Berkeley. There’s one on California and Russell; I remember playing there when I was a teenager. And, you know, they danced. Most of it was dancing with kind of different takes on the bop, James-Brown style.

Crawford:

This was still in the fifties.

Handy:

Yes, I came here in ’48, came here in November ’48, left in October of ’50. Came back in February of ’51.

Crawford:

And was that because your family came back, or—

01-00:38:13

Handy:

No. No, I was prompted to leave for some reason. I never figured it out. I mean, there was no fight—

Crawford:

You just came.

01-00:38:22

Handy:

And I came back to Oakland.

Crawford:

Was there other family that traveled with you or lived with you? Aunts, uncles—did you know your grandparents?

01-00:38:30

Handy:

Yes. I knew my mother’s father, whom we called Daddy.

Crawford: And what was his name?

01-00:38:37

Handy: Foster Conner. I'm half-Conner. That's my other half. John Handy would be John Conner if mama had not gotten married. [laughs]

Excuse me. C-O-N-N-E-R. Foster Conner. And his wife, my grandmother, my mother's mother, with whom I was very familiar, Big Mama, was Inez Shumate originally. Maiden name. I think it was changed to Shoemaker. And then I used to know my maternal grandmother's father's name. Daniel Shumate was my great-grandfather; I don't remember her mother's name.

Crawford: But they figured in your early years?

01-00:39:32

Handy: Yes. My mother's mother talked a lot about, quite a bit about her parents. She was the baby of a lot of children.

Crawford: Also from Texas?

01-00:39:44

Handy: I assume. I really don't know. I think my grandmother was born in Dallas, too. And then my dad's mother was Martha Bookman. But then Handy, Martha Handy and—no, she was a Miller originally, because I got to know two of her younger brothers. She was Martha Miller Handy, then Bookman.

But my Dad's father, John Handy the first, I never got to meet. I spent a little time with my paternal grandmother one summer, when I was twelve. Stayed with her when I was younger, didn't realize I had been with her then. But I know a lot about my mom's mom.

Crawford: More on your mother's side, but you were named after your father.

01-00:40:49

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: When you came here in 1948, you made your way to Bop City pretty quickly.

01-00:40:58

Handy: I started going over there before it was called Bop City. It was called Vout City.

Crawford: Oh, Vout.

01-00:41:06

Handy: V-O-U-T. It's in the book there, by the way. Because Slim Gaillard, the entertainer, the guy who wrote "Flat-Foot Floogie (with the Floy Floy)," "Cement Mixer, Putty-Putty"—all these nonsensical— [chuckles] And he was so hip he invented his own language, which was called Vout.

Crawford: I never heard of it!

01-00:41:26

Handy: Well, *voutie o-rooney*, you know. [laughs]

Crawford: Do you speak it?

01-00:41:31

Handy: No. I don't know if it was something you spoke. It was kind of like scat.

Crawford: Yes.

01-00:41:36

Handy: Scat, you know. And he was a great entertainer, so that's kind of how he—well, I didn't know much about him, you know. I only saw him—I was sneaking over there, and I was not supposed to be in San Francisco. My mom was very strict, despite the fact that I could say I was some place when [chuckles] I started playing professionally, but I was home, if I wasn't there, around— you know, at a given time, or I was in trouble. But she didn't know I was sneaking; she didn't know where I was—

Crawford: How did you get there?

01-00:42:10

Handy: I went there with some older musicians. Somebody who had a car. With someone who had a car. But there were very exotic looking places, always damp and rainy and cold. So we stopped in this little joint—and that's what it was, a joint. I was never comfortable in any of these places. I was just there for the music and—

Crawford: So you had a lot of drinking—

01-00:42:34

Handy: There was some of that. Later, some of the guys had later acquired some problems, you know, including drug problems. I just— I didn't see them do it. A little drinking. But I never saw anything else. I finally saw somebody smoking, you know, marijuana. But it was just not— I wasn't there.

Crawford: You weren't there for that.

01-00:42:57

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: The pictures show such happiness in those clubs.

Handy: Yes. There was that. You know, we loved the music and it was the greatest thing. And the best thing that happened to me, because there was another reason for getting into this when I moved here. I could make spending money. I was used to working at some jobs after school and during summer in Dallas,

that black kids didn't get here. And that really upset me, because I was used to making some money on my own.

Playing gigs was wonderful. I made more and for less hours, and doing something that I really enjoyed. And the more I did it— I was on a treadmill. Every time I went some place and sat in or listened, I learned more and more, and I was all ears and intake. And so Bop City was Vout City before.

I went there in '49, when Slim had it. And I don't believe I went back that year. I went back the next time in '50. Yeah. And it was Bop City. Same place, a little better, a bit more upscale. And I think the next time I went there, oh God, some of Duke Ellington's [laughs] men were playing, sitting in. Like, Paul Gonzales, a great tenor player; some of Lionel Hampton's people were there; Kenny Dorham, who played with Charlie Parker, who still has relatives here. Benny Bailey was in that band, whom I'd already found out had lived in Cleveland. And Pony Poindexter was in here, one of the mainstays, was playing. And Kermit Scott—that's the man who was responsible for letting me sit in, in a lot of these places—was a great tenor player.

At one point in New York, I was told he was very close to coming in second or third to Lester Young as a prestigious saxophone player. So he was my dad's age. And I used to sit in with him, through Burnett Sutton, Little Diz. Little Diz used to play with him, and so he told me where they were playing, and I went up to Richmond, where they were playing, and they let me play.

Crawford: You were all over the place.

01-00:45:27

Handy: Yes, they always let me play. I never got kicked off. [laughs]

Crawford: What was the Richmond scene like?

01-00:45:34

Handy: That was just that one little club somewhere, I have no idea where it was because we spent the first two weeks in Northern California when we moved from Dallas, not to Oakland, but to Richmond.

Crawford: Oh, you did move to Richmond?

01-00:45:48

Handy: Only for about two weeks. But I didn't enroll in school or anything at all. We were staying with cousins, first cousins, who were my age. And they went to school and I didn't, until we moved to Oakland. That's why I was so late, coming in November. They stayed there. So remember, we left Dallas in October. It's just, you know, a very small, narrow place, with a bandstand, and there weren't very many customers [chuckles] most of the times that I went in.

Crawford: But there was Savoy Club and several other clubs, weren't there? Were those mostly blues clubs?

01-00:46:28

Handy: Savoy?

Crawford: The Savoy Club in Richmond.

01-00:46:31

Handy: Oh, I later played at some of those places. Yes, okay. A little bit later, I started to play in Richmond, North Richmond. Tapper's Inn, the Dew Drop Inn. Mostly Tapper's. And the Dew Drop Inn, something like that.

Crawford: The Dew Drop Inn.

01-00:46:51

Handy: You've heard about it?

Crawford: Jimmy McCracklin—

01-00:46:53

Handy: Yes. Right.

Crawford: —owned several of those clubs, or at least was involved.

01-00:46:59

Handy: Yes, I think so. I'll have to get around to telling you, I played with him one night. [laughs] But I knew of him when I first moved here, and I remember it was because our drummer, Willie Lockhart, a kid in school, my age, played with him. He played drums, and he was driving a Cadillac. He played with Jimmy McCracklin on weekends. So he was making some money. [laughs] I'm glad you mentioned that. The blues were wonderful, but I didn't want to stay there. You know, it just wasn't that interesting.

Crawford: What did it look like to you, the blues?

01-00:47:46

Handy: I love the blues. I like the Fillmore, because I know a little bit about that. You know, it was where people worked. I won't go totally into it, but I know that I didn't want to be there. [laughs]

Crawford: Is that a generational thing? Because you're so much younger than Fulson and McCracklin.

01-00:48:01

Handy: It wasn't just that, it was also cultural. I was lucky enough that I'd also been exposed in some ways to a life, even if it wasn't mine totally. There were finer things, and I didn't want to be in the fields working and living in situations that I saw a few people live in for very short periods, more like visiting. And so those people, like Fulson, they lived it. I saw some of it. There was also, to

me, a dictated kind of lifestyle and an attitude toward life, and a lifestyle that didn't help to get you out of there.

I thought right away, early in my life, that education was very important in anybody getting out. I read biographies and stories about people overcoming whatever they were in. If you wanted to change, you educated yourself out of it, including educating myself in music. And that's what I started to do.

I also noticed something about kids in school, those who played music, some instrument or instruments, tended to be a little bit more ahead. And their families, who acquired those instruments for them, seemingly had more going for them on their jobs, because they could afford to buy these kids instruments. And those of us who couldn't have 'em, because— some of the reasons were the parents didn't make enough money to give you extra things like that.

It was kind of disappointing, on the other hand— and especially when I moved here. The bebop thing was the new music, and it appeared to me that the musicians, the black musicians especially, were a little ashamed— including some of the ones who were recording, some of the people who were our heroes, and not so heroes [chuckles] sometimes—that some of the boppers became a little ashamed of the music, and instead of really singing the blues, they kind of played with it and toyed with it. And the diction was different, and it wasn't good. That didn't turn me on.

Crawford: The beboppers?

01-00:50:14

Handy:

Not the singing blues that they did. You know, the bop, the music, I mean, the way Charlie Parker played it and the way Dizzy played it, and Miles and those guys, and some of the people here, like Kermit Scott and—Scotty—a tenor player, the older man, who was about thirty-four or -five [they laugh] years old; the way they played it and incorporated it into their music was fine. But I think a lot of them seemed to have been ashamed of singing lyrics of these people who were more rural, less sophisticated, basically, to kind of put it mildly, in things in life, period.

I can't say that I was totally free of it. Didn't want to be identified with it, like a lot of people don't want to be identified with the Holocaust. Well, most of them are gone. But there are a lot of people who were from the Depression era, who came from the Dust Bowl areas, don't want you to know; they won't say anything, unless you know they're from there and it comes up, and they can't hide out of it or pretend they weren't there. You know, so I think it's kind of natural that people don't want you to always know the misery that they have encountered.

Crawford: Right. Well, when you first came here, what kinds of bands were you hearing?

01-00:52:00

Handy:

Well, I heard— Most of the music that I heard, [chuckles] I was involved in. I was there playing. And there were some other teenage bands, like Billy Brown, this kid in school, a trumpet player, who's still around. Not playing. They had a band, and they did popular songs, mostly standards, and some blues, bebop tunes.

Even our blues were a hit. We were doing Gene Ammon's "Red Top." [hums it; sings] *My little red top*. You know this? Yes, she remembers. You know, she was really much younger, but she heard it, you know. It was still there. My wife. And "Now's the Time," Charlie Parker. That was very popular— because it sounded like "The Hucklebuck," which was a popular song. "The Hucklebuck" sounded a little bit like [hums it].

Crawford:

Yes.

01-00:53:09

Handy:

Yes, so—our kids, our peers danced to it. And some of the adults were dancing to that. So that's the music we were playing. Popular songs, lots of beautiful ballads. "The Harbor Lights." [sings] *I saw the harbor lights*. That was popular, and that came here, and we played that. [hums] "Maybe You'll Be There." [sings] *When I see a crowd of people, like a fool, I stop and stare. And I know it's not the place to look for you*. That was popular.

Crawford:

And people did dance to those, didn't they?

01-00:53:50

Handy:

Oh, yes. That was what they waited for. That was *the* music that they danced to. I'm getting—oh, "Stardust." All the standards. We played all those. Yes.

But speaking of Jimmy McCracklin, he was known as a blues player. I played a lot of that, and I was just bored with it, because by the time you played—the musicianship, many times, didn't go much farther than the leader could go— whoever had the gig—and it was usually the singer, who didn't know *anything* about the music, generally, unless he was a pianist or guitarist. We were limited to what they could do, and so we kind of just held notes, you know, while they sang.

People like him, you know. And not to put him down, because it was—that was where we all come from. But I finally—I'm jumping a bit here—when I was twenty-five, I got a call. I was married, I'd been playing with everybody, and been in the Army and out. I got a call to play baritone saxophone with Jimmy McCracklin, down in San Jose. This is a big horn, you know. And he had us choreographed! I finished, my neck was sore and hurting. I sold that baritone, so nobody would ask me [laughs] to play any gigs.

Crawford:

[laughs] Too heavy.

01-00:55:22

Handy: That's right! I did like playing it sometimes, but if I didn't have it, I couldn't play it, right? [they laugh]

Crawford: In your last years in high school, how did you divide your time?

01-00:55:40

Handy: Well, we were only here twenty-three months, from Dallas, before we moved to Cleveland. I was there three-and-a-half months, approximately, and I was back here.

Crawford: Were you? Would that have been your junior year?

01-00:55:58

Handy: No, senior. Senior.

Crawford: Senior, yes.

01-00:56:00

Handy: Yes. I'd started the first semester senior year at McClymonds in Oakland and finished it in Cleveland. I came back here and finished the second semester senior year at McClymonds. I attended McClymonds twice. I went to four high schools— three high schools in three states, but McClymonds twice, so it was like almost four high schools. So I came back here. And when I came back alone, I stayed with my grandmother.

Crawford: In Oakland.

01-00:56:46

Handy: Yes. Had it not been for the gigs that I got, you know, I would've been in big trouble. And luckily, I had acquired some rather steady employment, as such, with a guy called the Mad Genius, Vernell Glenn. Vernell Glenn, the Mad Genius, was a pianist and singer.

He had a number of steady gigs [chuckles], especially in Vallejo. I liked a lot of the music he did. He did lots of standards. He was from New Orleans, and was a real character. Good singing, and decent piano playing; it wasn't the hippest all the time, but there was a challenge there for a few weeks, so I could hear and learn.

Because of the Mad Genius, the income from those gigs, I was able to buy everything that seniors needed for graduation, and I took part in all the activities. The senior parties and your gowns and your ring and—because of that gig, I was able to do that. I didn't go to my prom. I went to a couple of proms, one in Dallas and one here, before I was a senior. I didn't go to my own prom. I had a gig. [they laugh] And so I played the gig.

Crawford: They paid well?

01-00:58:36

Handy: Well, you could manage. They paid more than I would've made otherwise. But yes, I bought a few things. And depending on the gig, you know. And steady coming in and, yes, I was able to buy some clothes and things that I needed. Food. Yes.

Crawford: Were you a member of the union yet?

01-00:59:01

Handy: Not yet. Wait a minute. I joined the union at sixteen. Actually, I was. But still, most of the gigs were not union scale at the time. Some were even more. But I moved to San Francisco, a year out of high school, '52, during September. Let me back up. Before I moved over there and I got out of high school, the day that I was graduating, I got a call from the post office, where I had taken the exam, because I needed money. They normally call you a month later. However, I took the exam on Wednesday and they called me on Friday, my graduation day, to come to work on Monday.

So I started working there, long hours. Then my gigs started. I started getting union scale, so [laughs] I was making more money than most adults. You know, when I was eighteen, just out of high school!

Crawford: More money at the post office?

01-00:60:37

Handy: No, both together. I had the post office income and my gigs. I started playing union gigs. I was in the union at sixteen already, I was still playing gigs here in the East Bay. Then I started to make more acquaintances in San Francisco and other places. They paid more, you know.

Crawford: I think it was Earl Watkins who told me that he had trouble with the union. They said, "You have to have a job to join the union." And the union said—you know, it was a round robin.

01-00:61:11

Handy: No, I didn't have that trouble.

Crawford: You'd been playing so long.

01-00:61:14

Handy: Yes. You know, and a lot of people knew me, a number of people knew me at that point. Earl Watkins, I remember seeing Earl years ago—that guy is ageless. [laughs]

Crawford: I go to Scott's to listen to him still.

01-00:61:27

Handy: Yes, he's still there. You know what? We have never played together. We played at somebody's memorial. We've never played a real gig together.

Crawford: Would he love that.

01-00:61:39

Handy: Yes, he and I should do that.

Crawford: Well, okay, let me break here.

Begin Audiofile 2 11-17-2006.mp3

02-00:00:00

Crawford: All right, recording tape two. We're talking about John Handy's graduating from high school while he was playing professionally and working at the post office.

02-00:00:13

Handy: Well, I got fired after four months at the post office, [laughs] because— I still think they were wrong. You had to learn these schemes as a postal clerk, to throw the [mail] in specific places. You got three turns, and people said, "Well, just go ahead and tell them whether you're ready or not. But you have to pass the third one." When I went in and told them I wasn't ready for the first one, [chuckles] they fired me in two days. And I couldn't believe it!

Crawford: Why weren't you ready? It's not like you don't have great motor skills.

02-00:00:57

Handy: I'm eighteen, and the older people told me how to do it and, you know, I was seldom the guy in school that studied ahead of time, because I didn't do much studying; I just kind of knew I'd get it. And I did get it. But this time, [laughs] they got rid of me. And so, okay. And two weeks later, I started working at the Naval Supply Center, as a warehouseman. I was an eighteen-year-old kid, and I liked it much better.

Crawford: What was that like?

02-00:01:28

Handy: It was working in these huge warehouses. I worked in a couple where there were house utensils, dishes and culinary equipment and all. But where I stayed for most of that time was actually in the warehouse where they had these cables and rudders for ships, and huge cables for the bridge, Bay Bridge and Golden Gate bridges, I assumed. They had these huge cables there. You could only handle them with heavy equipment. And we had things so small that you could hardly count them, they were so small you could easily drop them and lose them. I enjoyed doing that for about four months. What I'd forgotten is that I really wanted to go to college. And the only reason I hadn't gone immediately out of high school was because I kept forgetting the entrance exam days, so I missed it.

Crawford: What was the entrance exam?

02-00:02:39

Handy: I wanted to go to San Francisco State. And—

Crawford: And you did.

02-00:02:43

Handy: I didn't think about coming here to Cal, because they didn't have a music performance program that I knew of. I heard on occasion they had, you know, classical music that somebody had written, and even then, sometimes they'd have to get ringers, because they didn't have enough students to perform.

Crawford: More academically oriented.

02-00:03:02

Handy: Yes. And so I chose to try entering there or City College. And I heard City College over there was not very extensive. I was used to going to schools where they had bands. Of course, I wanted to be a college grad.

Crawford: Why?

Handy: I wanted to elevate my self-esteem, to be honest, that's basically— I just wanted to be a college grad. That way, I felt I would qualify and satisfy that yearning to know. I knew I'd learned a lot in school that was way beyond— Schools that were large enough to offer so many different subjects. And it was up to me. I wanted to be a music major, but I didn't HAVE to be a music major, because I could already play. I knew that. I had that gift. But before I got out of high school, I started to understand harmony and theory, and I started to know about composers, because I also heard the Dallas Symphony when I was still a kid.

Crawford: What do you remember of that? You didn't mention it.

02-00:04:27

Handy: Oh, it was incredible. I was fifteen years old. It was the year, I think, we left Dallas. Same year we left. Maybe a year earlier. But it was an experience that radio couldn't give you. I heard symphonic music on the radio, but there was nothing like a live performance of an orchestra that was on that level of performance. That was, like, so beautiful. I won't say other worldly; it was another dimension. A dimension of music I had never experienced, except for that very short time we were in there. We didn't stay long; they were kind of rehearsing, I think. It wasn't a formal concert. The Negro children— [laughs] We never got close to the orchestra. We were in the back watching, and it was kind of like a field trip.

Crawford: You liked classical music—

02-00:05:25

Handy: Oh, yes. Well, you know, and on the radio, we had so many classical themes. And after all, *The Lone Ranger* came on with the *William Tell* overture[they

laugh; hum it] Yes. But I was aware of a number of musical themes, from the works of some of the European giants. And so back to here. I went to San Francisco State. That was why I was a year late going to school, I kept forgetting. I was on my own. I was a kid. I was eighteen, new, and had lots of money for a kid that age, and I bought lots of clothes, lots of musical instruments, and saved my money. I didn't have anything else to do, other than that. I was on my own, you know, I called my own shots.

So I finally made the [chuckles] exam. Got up, after having played a gig in Richmond some place, I believe, and I made it over there. I don't think I had two hours sleep. I was *so* tired. I fell asleep— actually, I got very sick on the exam. I was afraid I was going to really mess up, and had to leave the room where we were all taking the exam. And so I didn't finish it. But when they all left, the examiner allowed me to finish it in his office while he was grading papers. I passed and was accepted. As it turned out he was my English professor. Yes.

Crawford: What did you major in?

02-00:07:14

Handy: Well, when I started school, I wasn't majoring in anything. What I started doing was right away taking academic requirement courses in biology, physical sciences, English, etc.

Crawford: Regular liberal arts. But they've always had a great jazz faculty and great a great jazz program, haven't they?

02-00:07:40

Handy: No, not at all! It was very conservative at S.F. State. No formal jazz was there at that time. Not in the early 1950s. We had a bit when I returned from military duty in the late 1950s. Jazz and jazz faculty came much later.

But there was a guy there who was in the band [laughs] with me, as a freshman, at San Francisco State, at the old campus, which is in the Haight-Ashbury District. He was a French horn player. And he told me that at the time, our San Francisco State symphonic band was rated number three in the country. I didn't know that, of course.

Crawford: The symphonic band.

02-00:08:23

Handy: Yes, not the orchestra.

Crawford: Who was there? Do you remember?

02-00:08:27

Handy: Oh, there were some people there who played—as a matter of fact, [laughs] on that first recording that I did, which was with Lowell Fulson, Peter

DeVideo was the first chair solo clarinet player, and he played some jazz, and we had become friends. They needed another saxophone player, and he must've played alto, because I had the baritone. Que Martin was the arranger, who worked things out with Lowell, did the arrangements—he was older, you know—and also played tenor saxophone. It was 1953. We were let out of our classrooms to go and do that recording with Lowell. I forgot that for years, that I'd actually recorded first with him.

Crawford: You remember—

02-00:09:24

Handy: I don't remember any of the tunes.

Crawford: —what happened to it?

02-00:09:27

Handy: Yes, well, Que Martin absconded with the funds [laughs]! We were in the union, too. I was, you know. I went in the union in '49; that was '53. And somehow, it did go through the union. But as the leader, he got the money. I'm told that was characteristic of him. He moved back to Hawaii, and I never saw him. He died over there. He had been living there before.

And I never saw Lowell again—I had no connection with Lowell on that session at all. I just remembered his—well, put it this way, that I was not enamored with singers, because I realized more and more what they didn't know. He had no way of knowing how to put that music together. And he couldn't explain—

Crawford: You're talking about Lowell Fulson.

02-00:10:24

Handy: Yes. He couldn't explain what he wanted, because he knew nothing about the music terms—how to communicate what he wanted. He'd say, "Well, you know, [makes rhythmical sounds]." And I couldn't wait to get out of there!

Crawford: He knew the singing line.

02-00:10:42

Handy: That's about all he knew. He was very knowledgeable of what he was doing. But again, it wasn't in European terms that we are used to hearing, even on whatever level. It was not something that he had grown up with and it was—

Crawford: He didn't have the exposure that you did.

02-00:11:20

Handy: No. No. And yes, that's it. I forget that sometimes, you know?

Crawford: Well, who else was there during your years there?

02-00:11:28

Handy:

I don't remember anybody else, to be honest. I only remember the saxophones. I'm not even sure I knew who the rhythm section was. And we didn't hang out afterwards. We left and went back to school. Those guys were not in school, see, and school was still, to me, more where I was most comfortable.

Crawford:

You were focused there. And who was on the faculty there then, do you remember?

02-00:11:54

Handy:

In the music department, the band director was Ed Kruth. Edmund Kruth, K-R-U-T-H. And he was there until—God—I taught there from '68 to '80; he was there when I left. I think he left some time during the eighties. I was a clarinet major in college, and he was my clarinet teacher. I took my first lessons in Oakland, about two sessions on clarinet, and it was insulting, what the teacher, Jack Phile, gave me.

I was a professional musician, no matter how young I was. He gave me some kindergarten stuff to read and so I didn't go back. I took the saxophone once, and he did the same thing—Jack Phile—not F-O-W-L, F-I-L-E, I think, something; or P-H-I-L-E. I will never forget him. I never took the saxophone back, and I never took it to anybody. I just taught myself. Besides, there was no saxophone major in most music conservatories, colleges, or universities.

Crawford:

No? Why?

02-00:13:12

Handy:

I don't know. It was an instrument that wasn't considered a classical instrument, I guess, and there isn't, or wasn't, very much literature for it in the symphonic orchestra, European orchestra as we understand it, and it was seldom included. There was very, very little literature for it. And so—it had been associated with jazz and black [laughs] people had their hands on it too often.

Crawford:

So what was a clarinet major?

02-00:13:45

Handy:

Well, you have to learn European classical music literature just as you would as a piano major, a violin major—

Crawford:

Like a conservatory.

02-00:13:52

Handy:

Yes, like that. You learn the basics, how to get a good tone—preferably in a classical sense—that would blend with the orchestra. You learn how to play with the orchestra. Then you do lots of scales and etudes, and that would prepare you to play the orchestral parts.

Crawford: That was okay for you?

02-00:14:18

Handy: I took it. Yes. Anything that was musical was attractive to me. I'd heard some classical music on the radio. We had recordings. Friends of mine had music. I don't get all these dimensions, but I heard music here and there, and I had preferences. I like Bartók, I like the classics by Mozart and Beethoven and—

Crawford: Did that change your playing at all, your approach?

02-00:14:55

Handy: Not totally then; it did later. There was an influence in that way, mostly after Korea. After I was there and back. I was drafted, after my first year in college.

Crawford: Okay, we'll have to go to being drafted, then. I would've thought you'd be exempt.

02-00:15:22

Handy: Exempt? I thought so, too, especially with being legally blind on the right side. Something I didn't put in here, though, was that in maybe '47, about the time in Dallas, at St. Peter's Academy, I was already in music. All the oldest kids had graduated, and we were the older kids now, fourteen to eighteen.

And so we started an athletic program, so to speak—just played ball, softball, football and basketball. Then we started boxing. My mom wouldn't let me play football; she thought I was too little, and I would get hurt. But somehow, for some reason, she let me box. I won an amateur featherweight title there. [laughs] That's how I became a featherweight champion.

Crawford: For a musician to *box*! I don't know.

02-00:16:37

Handy: [laughs] I came here with that, you know? I had good hands, and yes, I could fight. And I'm good. I used to be, anyhow. Very fast, that's what it is. I learn fast, and I learned how to get out of the way. First of all you learn how to get out of the way. You have to try to not get hit, that's the way you do that. And so yes, I enjoyed it, I really did, for a while.

The first kid I boxed had fought in preliminary bouts, professionally. I beat him. When we had the tournament to determine who was going to fight, we had three fights. I only fought one. And I knocked the kid out so fast nobody else would box me, so they just handed my trophy to me.

Crawford: What age?

02-00:17:27

Handy: Fourteen. Yes. A lot of people didn't know that for years that I had boxed. And you know, coming here, to what was considered a tough school, McClymonds. Except for some reason, they boxed the first day I was here,

and someone kept asking me to box, and I started with people from here at the school— [chuckles]

Crawford: Oh, they knew at McClymonds that you had boxed—

02-00:17:56

Handy: No, they didn't. They didn't know that. No, first day I was there, they didn't know me. I didn't know anybody. But they were boxing in the gym class. And the day that I was there, there were fifteen kids boxing. I had on my shirt and tie and coat and stuff, and somebody kept saying, "You wanna box?" And I said, "Okay." I took it off and then started with somebody this size, and I got up to the biggest guy that was beating up everybody, and I bloodied his nose.

It turned out he became my best friend, and later, my brother-in-law. [they laugh] Henry Browning, this very brilliant young kid, who was a big kid; he was a hundred-eighty-five pounds of muscle, and very intelligent, and one of the funniest people in the world.

When I hit him in the nose—I wasn't trying to hurt him—he looked at me and said a dirty word, and everybody started laughing, including myself. And it turns out that he was a saxophone player, and a very *good* saxophone player. I learned things from him. I learned quite a bit.

Crawford: He married your sister.

02-00:19:09

Handy: Eventually. Yes, he married my sister a few years later.

Crawford: Right out of high school?

02-00:19:12

Handy: Just a couple years later. Yes, about three years later.

Crawford: What a great entrance you made.

02-00:19:18

Handy: Yes. [laughs] So I learned a lot from him musically. Some of the things that I learned from him, I'm using now.

Crawford: What things, specifically?

02-00:19:31

Handy: Well, what he actually did, he was a very aggressive kid. He was big. He was six feet, and he weighed a hundred-and-eighty-five, at fifteen years old, and was all muscle, you know? When he was seventeen and had a job during the summer, he bought *beautiful* clothes. Two *wonderful* suits. And he looked like an adult.

So he started going to Bop City, hanging out with people. And he got to know Billy Eckstine and Kenny Dorham. And he got some music, some chords from Kenny Dorham. He gave them to me. And I didn't use them until I was closer to thirty; I had them, I kept them. They were a pattern, blues chords, that Bud Powell used in a piece of his called "Dance of the Infidels." Very advanced stuff. I tried playing them from time to time. I collect a lot of things, and I may never see them for another twenty years, because I'm busy doing it my way.

Crawford: So those chords would be a specific blues sequence?

02-00:20:47

Handy: Yes. Based on the twelve-bar blues. But so different, you know? And I still learn from that. I've learned from that, and gone in so many other directions with that. There're things there that I'm really disappointed in, still, that some people can't play. Right? And they've been playing for forty years.

Crawford: In your band.

02-00:21:09

Handy: With other bands that still don't know how to play this. They're getting better. There are a lot of people who're doing wonderful things now, because there are so many— there's so much more available to them than was available to us, in school, when we didn't even have a saxophone major, as I just said earlier.

Crawford: Yes.

02-00:21:29

Handy: Yes. So I had to be a clarinet player, a clarinet major, flute, oboe or bassoon, if you're going to play a woodwind instrument. I chose the clarinet, since I'd already played it before.

Crawford: That must be very, very rare, I think, though you still played gigs and everything—

02-00:21:57

Handy: Yes. Most of us wanted to play the saxophone. They didn't [want that] yet they had four saxophones in the concert band. I never played in the orchestra. But you know, some of that music was just as challenging as the orchestra.

Crawford: Oh, sure.

02-00:22:19

Handy: Instead of the violins, we played clarinet.

Crawford: Would you ever have been an orchestral player?

02-00:22:25

Handy:

I decided very early that I didn't want to be an orchestral player. I realized that the constraints, the limits, I felt that right away— unfortunately, many of them had a haughty attitude. I felt, first of all, many of them weren't as talented as they thought they'd be, simply because they were playing [classical music]. Some of them weren't even talented; they were trained.

Crawford:

Yes.

02-00:23:02

Handy:

I found out very early some of them couldn't hear *anything* musically. They knew what intonation was. However, some of them didn't play in tune. With those students, many of them had lessons through the years, and some were very good. Well, the orchestra players didn't even talk to you. The voice majors didn't even speak to you. They didn't even do that, some of them, when I was an instructor at SFSU.

Crawford:

They looked down on jazz players?

02-00:23:33

Handy:

Yes. Jazz players or people who played in the band. Some did play in both.

Crawford:

With envy.

02-00:23:40

Handy:

Well, no, they were haughty. Some have learned later that they really weren't very good basically. You know.

Crawford:

The natural music talent isn't always there.

02-00:23:56

Handy:

Most of the world is still playing that way, in spite of the orchestras that we have. And the attitude toward music is changing. It's changed quite a bit, and is changing, with orchestra players. I have some political viewpoints about European classical musicians, and I don't have to mention certain countries, where they made better soldiers than musicians. [laughs] People who were in the orchestra could've made good soldiers, because they took orders like this. There were never any questions, and there was never any personality projecting.

Orchestras could be a hundred-plus people. And the only person who was dictating anything is the conductor, along with the composer. I've started to even feel sorry for some of the genius that we could have been, as people, as a culture—could've benefited from some of those folks, because some of them could possibly have been—many of them, I'm sure—composers, improvisers and composers, because improvisers are basically composers, you know.

Crawford:

For sure.

02-00:25:14

Handy:

You just learn how to notate, which is what I did. I forgot to tell you, in Oakland, I went to a conservatory for a couple weeks when I was in high school. Candell. C-A-N-D-E-L-L. Which was a conservatory that a number of the World War II vets had attended and were attending. It seemed to me that the man was really ripping people off, even on my level of understanding what was going on. Most of them wanted to play jazz, that I knew. People that I knew. And so I dropped it after two weeks. I was still in high school. I forget sometimes, my education, the on-the-job training, but I did have that exposure at the conservatory.

Crawford:

Were you there for a year?

02-00:26:15

Handy:

No, only a couple of weeks.

Crawford:

Oh, just a couple of weeks. It wasn't for you.

02-00:26:16

Handy:

It wasn't just that it wasn't—I could see right there that he was holding up there guys who were much older, and I knew they couldn't play very well, most of them. And they weren't learning very much from this guy. At my level of understanding music, and the music that they wanted to play, I could've taught them better— at least [chuckles] on a higher level than what they were getting from the conservatory. He was just taking their money for a long time. It just disintegrated real soon thereafter.

Crawford:

Well, after a year at SF State, you got your draft letter.

02-00:27:01

Handy:

Right in the midst of the summer, I was drafted. And if I'm to be honest, I didn't have great grades. I was playing Bop City and other places, to put myself through school, playing with some of the greatest musicians in the world, starting at two in the morning till six in the morning.

Crawford:

[laughs] How did you do it?

02-00:27:21

Handy:

You know. And I'd fall asleep, especially early, in the biology class. And that was the worst thing to have, at seven-forty in the morning, still smelling like the club. People smoked. And I couldn't stand it. I was dressed up. I was the only kid in there with a suit on, and books—

Crawford:

Oh, I bet they looked at you askance.

02-00:27:48

Handy:

You know, they finally just—they finally just gave me the seat the closest to the door. There were a hundred-fifty people in there. And Professor Gustafson started with—sometimes I was on time—and he would start to fade out. He'd

get farther and farther away. I'd wake up, and I was embarrassed but tried repeating the course. [they laugh] But I was playing with some of the greatest people in the world during my freshman year.

Crawford: Everybody was there!

02-00:28:21

Handy: Yes. John Coltrane was a young man then. Stuff Smith, Sammy Davis, Sarah— not Sarah, but Ella spent three nights hanging out there, and I played with her. Art Tatum, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Quincy Jones. And then biology in a couple of hours! [laughs]

Crawford: What was it about Bop City?

02-00:28:51

Handy: I think it was just—there was music going on all the time. That wasn't all over the area, but in San Francisco. I just had been going there since I was a kid. And people knew me. I didn't know many of them. Believe me when I say this. I never hung out with them. Handy, they called me. Little ol' Handy. The owner Cousin Jimbo was on the— “Hey, Little ol' Handy, get out there and play.” [laughs]

Crawford: He liked you.

02-00:29:18

Handy: So you know, like in the picture here—[the cover of *Harlem of the West*, shown with John Coltrane and Pony Poindexter]. I was eighteen years old here. I believe I still lived over here, in Oakland.

Crawford: You lived in Oakland, yes.

02-00:29:32

Handy: Yes, I believe I was still here. I believe I was eighteen. If it was nineteen, I was there. Pony Poindexter, who was a fixture here, and a wonderful player—he didn't like me very much, and I didn't like him very much, but—

Crawford: Why?

02-00:29:45

Handy: [laughs] I'll tell you.

Crawford: A little rivalry?

02-00:29:49

Handy: He's gone, so I can say it. Yes, I was younger. And I started taking his gigs. People were *giving* me, you know, his gigs.

Crawford: Oh, that had to be hard.

02-00:29:56

Handy:

He was playing with Johnny Hodges [pointing to John Coltrane], and he was a little older player than I. We talked a little; I'll talk about that later. This is Frank Fisher, whose eightieth birthday party my wife and I just attended. He's still around and still playing. They're the same age, probably twenty-four, twenty-five here. Pony Poindexter was probably two or three years older.

Crawford:

Why was San Francisco such a vital scene?

02-00:30:39

Handy:

There were things going on, again, that I kind of just left alone, because when I was over there I was in school. I had no social life. Virtually none.

Crawford:

You said that wasn't what you were looking for.

02-00:30:54

Handy:

No. And when I went there, I only knew a few people; I was still new here. I hadn't been here two years, before we went to Cleveland. And then I came back. I saw a few people. I know them better now than I knew them then, but we were in school together, we were never close. Because I wasn't there. But in San Francisco, I didn't know virtually anybody. They were older. Some guys had families. Some people had social problems that, even if they had been available to me, I wouldn't have been around; I didn't want to be around it. There was that, that I didn't do— drugs and like that. And hardly anybody was in school, jazz players.

Well, during the first year in college, my best friend from Dallas was here, Billy Roy Clark; we were roommates. He was a trumpet player. But I thought we were going to hang out, have our own band one day. I had to drag him to one jam session he went to on the campus at school, and it took me months to get him to go to Bop City once. He never played anymore.

Crawford:

Why?

02-00:32:07

Handy:

I don't know. It really disappointed me tremendously that he didn't play, because he turned me on to a lot of music because he had record players and stuff and recordings that I never had. I listened to Howard McGhee and Flip Phillips, and I'd hear him talk about arranging music. He had private lessons. I'd never been to a teacher. But I always had big friends who were, like, six feet, and they were very bright. They talked about music; and I put them in into practice. That's basically what happened.

Crawford:

That was a really good exposure for you.

02-00:32:51

Handy:

So that was over there, in San Francisco. I moved there, and that worked. I was starting to work all kinds of gigs, some dances. There were lots of dances. But I worked at parties sometimes, some parties of different— people of

different ethnicities. I got to hear some of the music that they liked, and learned to play it. Italian parties and Jewish parties and African American parties. Most of these were dance parties.

Crawford: At homes? Or in clubs?

02-00:32:30

Handy: In clubs. They would rent a hall. And Filipinos. I played much of the summer of '50, I believe it was, with a Filipino band, family band. They were playing mostly standard songs, everything in the key of C. You know?

Crawford: No problem there.

02-00:33:53

Handy: No problem there. [they laugh] Fathers and a couple of sons played, you know, three or four of them. Along with Willie—the name has probably come up— Wild Willie Moore.

Crawford: Yes.

02-00:34:04

Handy: Well, he was just Willie Mo then. He got me that gig with the Filipinos. And so my experience became quite broad—aside from school. And of course, in school, you were exposed to a lot of music in the concert bands. I'd been playing in concert bands since I was in the sixth grade, you know. As we progress, at McClymonds, Joe Payson, P-A-Y-S-O-N, introduced us to so much music, music that we probably would've never been exposed to. *The Student Prince*. I know I'm going to forget most of that. But a lot of classical and semi-classical pieces that we played, and musicals.

Crawford: You played from scores?

02-00:34:58

Handy: Yes, we played that music. At San Francisco State you're expected to. There were a lot of vets coming from World War II in that band, who were highly trained and experienced, and that's why that orchestra had such a high level of competency.

Crawford: Must have.

02-00:35:21

Handy: You know.

Crawford: Well, did you play from American composers such as Cole Porter and Gershwin?

02-00:35:25

Handy: Everybody. We did Broadway, and of course, I was playing those pieces on the gigs, anyhow, you know, playing the songs the way they were written.

Crawford: Those were concerts without singing, without singers? Or were they staged?

02-00:35:45

Handy: Generally, without singing.

Crawford: So they didn't have staged performances.

02-00:35:49

Handy: No. Well, later on, I actually did *Guys and Dolls* one time—I did that after I was out of Korea, and out of the Army and back. I played about four instruments [laughs] to do that, as they do it on Broadway. And I realized I didn't really want to do that.

Crawford: You didn't want to be in a pit band.

02-00:36:10

Handy: Not at all. Well, I'm glad you mentioned that word pit band. I learned early that I didn't want to look up singers' nostrils [laughs] when I was in the pit band.

Crawford: I never heard anybody put it quite that way.

02-00:36:25

Handy: Yes, that's what you are, you're looking right up somebody's nostrils, up there. And they're not in charge. I love good singing. I love good singers. But I started to question the place of movie actors—especially with their singing—and I love some of the songs. It's my history. I love some of the musicals. But in the movies, when an actress or an actor would sing, start a song, and there's a whole orchestra, sometimes a symphony orchestra, behind them, they didn't have the decency and the courtesy to even show anybody's face but the singer. That's discrimination!

Crawford: That doesn't seem fair.

02-00:37:15

Handy: That's not fair at all. And with all those years of experience, of practicing, and they insult the whole orchestra. I wouldn't play. I would starve before I'd play like that. And I'd sometimes get angry with people—

Crawford: That's a good point.

02-00:37:31

Handy: —who do that. Because we don't have to be treated that way. Just don't play. You know? You're not going to die. You're not going to starve. Don't let someone treat you like that. And so yes, that's why for years, I didn't even use a singer, although I admired a number of people, and I had a singer in my band for about twelve years, who's deceased now, Buddy Conner. But they get away with murder on the actor's side. They are *way* out of—way beyond—

Crawford: You mentioned that you were so impressed with Ella when you first heard her.

02-00:38:09

Handy:

I was very much impressed with her. Aside from her being a star, and I'd known of Ella since I was a little kid, because Ella was only a year younger than my mother. I didn't call her Miss, but I would've. I never had to address her but once. I knew intuitively, without understanding what was going on with singers, something about her—even when I was a child listening to “A Tisket, a Tasket”—she was different. She was very musical. She was much more imaginative in her delivery. Not only in the lyrics, note choice, but also in rhythmic imagination.

Most singers are so limited, because they don't learn from musicians. They copy other singers' techniques. And most singers are not musicians—they're only using a fraction of the notes and the rhythms that are available. Mind you, they are somewhat hampered in some ways with lyrics. But a lot of it is just the lack of imagination, the lack of being exposed.

They really should learn music, as when we get around to talking about my experience with Indian musicians from India, where the singers ARE musicians, first. Our people here are embarrassingly—I'll put it this way: There's a guy who promotes an Indian jazz festival called Jazz Yatra. I don't know if he's still doing it. Everybody in North India knows him. He says as far as jazz is concerned, he thinks jazz singers should not even be on the same bandstand with jazz musicians. And it's true. On average. Even the better ones, they're embarrassing, they make me sick. They don't know anything about what they are doing.

Crawford: Surprising to me.

02-00:40:02

Handy:

They have no idea what's going on. And if you walked off, if the musicians left the bandstand, if they're doing something wrong, they never can correct it. They don't know jack! And don't even get into the more commercially successful one. They're not in charge, with very few exceptions.

Crawford: Yes, I was going to say that bandleaders such as Jack Teagarden, for instance, I think often had wonderful singers. HE sang.

02-00:40:27

Handy:

He's a musician. You know. And his late sister, Norma.

Crawford:

I talked to Norma.

02-00:40:36

Handy:

Yes, Norma. They are musicians. Stevie Wonder's a musician. Aretha Franklin is a musician. Diana Krall is a *fine* piano player. Nat King Cole was a pianist. Sarah Vaughan was a pianist. Carmen McRae was a pianist. They

know that, and even when they sang straight, they had options. These other people don't have options, because they're ignorant of the music. And just get away with their shortcomings.

Crawford: Get away with murder?

02-00:41:05

Handy: Yes, music murder that is seldom musical. Oh, my God! So you know, that's a pet peeve with me. [laughter]

Crawford: Let's talk about your service time.

02-00:41:14

Handy: Okay, I was drafted after the first year of schooling. By the way, I was exposed, during that last year, or after having moved to San Francisco, to some of the great people who had moved to the area. Joe Wilson, who was a trumpet player/composer, singer with Jimmie Lunceford, was here with his big band. Mingus was in the area, whom at the time, I did not meet. Dexter Gordon was here for a minute.

Crawford: They lived here.

02-00:41:47

Handy: They had lived here, they were living here for a while. Teddy Edwards, great tenor player, who actually recorded the first tenor saxophone solo, bebop tenor saxophone solo of that era. He didn't get the credit for it, but it was Teddy. And he became a very good friend, wonderful friend of mine, until he died a couple years ago.

So these were guys who were thirty and under, but a little ahead of me, and that I learned from and listened to. Teddy was always at Bop City. I think I'm probably holding his tenor saxophone on the cover of that book.

Crawford: Oh. [laughs]

02-00:42:23

Handy: That's not my horn that I was holding. So I had all of these great— some of these great players, who had been recording, moved here. I was around them when I wasn't in school. Frank Morgan was my age; he was born the same year. Wonderful alto player who moved up here. Still around. Sonny Clark, wonderful pianist, young, twenty-two. Kenny Drew, the late Kenny Drew was here at twenty-four. Richard Wyands, who is from here. These guys were around, and I got a chance more and more to play [with them]. Ernie Lewis, I can't forget this—he was the man who was a union official, was a piano player, and he started hiring me, along with these good players.

That was a great time for me, for both learning and making more money, during my first year over there. I needed the money, because I was a student.

Then I was drafted, during the summer. August of '53. I did my basic training in Ft. Ord, California. I spent a year in Korea. The war, thankfully, was not raging when I got there. They were scared of me. [they laugh]

Crawford: Watch out.

02-00:43:44

Handy: They hadn't fought for eleven months. The same truce that they agreed on is still in force. But they had broken all the other truces, everybody was apprehensive about being in Korea, because we thought the truces would be broken, and we were going to fight at any point. So I spent about ten months over there. And I didn't get in the band when I got in the Army, when I got out of basic training. They sent me to supply school. [laughs]

Crawford: You didn't go in the band?

02-00:44:22

Handy: No.

Crawford: Did you want to?

02-00:44:23

Handy: Of course.

Crawford: Well, why not?

02-00:44:26

Handy: I'm not quite sure, because I don't really know. I hadn't even been assigned a to basic training unit; but on a Sunday, the first Sunday I was there—I think I went in on Monday—the following Sunday, I had some time off. I had my new clothes, so I found a jam session. I heard that they were having one at the NCO club, non-commissioned officers. And you know, I could play. I'd just come right out of playing with great players.

So they took a picture of me, and I looked at that picture—it was in the Army paper, on the base—and I looked like what people look like when they're really stoned. I didn't drink; I only drank Coca-Cola, and it was just a shot—and I thought about that. Maybe they might've thought I was messed up, but I wasn't. You know, I had these funny eyes, and I was playing.

There were some people in charge of some of the training units, whom I'd met earlier that year, who were in Stan Kenton's band. We jammed together. And I don't want to call their names, but they knew I was there and they didn't let me in. They didn't make an appeal or anything, so I went to Korea. And the first night I was there, I found the jam session. They had some guys playing at the club, NCO club, and I went and sat in. And the next morning, as I was dressing just after reveille, a warrant officer came up and said, "You're going to start a band."

So I started a combo there, and I played that for about five months. Four months, five months, until they froze rank with us, as people became jealous of the musicians. And so I dropped the band and tried to get my extra stripe, my corporal stripe. And then all of the units there, including my unit, were sent home to the States. They kept twelve of us there, and I was one of the twelve who didn't get to come home in November. I didn't get home until I was supposed to come home, in March, 1955.

Crawford: Because of music?

02-00:46:51

Handy: No. No. I wasn't even playing music, I was doing supplies again. And they just sent everybody home. It was a combat engineers group that I was attached to. Air Force and all kinds of different Army were all mixed. So they came home, and they left twelve of us. And I was one of those.

Crawford: You had no options?

02-00:47:30

Handy: No, I just went along with stuff. I just went ahead to try to get out of there. I didn't volunteer to go, and legally, I don't think if I'd put up a stink— I could have stayed out, possibly. But I was on guard duty in Korea. A young white guy my age had a cataract—totally clouded one eye—and he was there. But he was poor and from the Ozarks, and we were on guard duty. [they laugh] They took us out there, drove us out. Guard something. Some big vans, like the trucks where they put supplies. There were about six or eight of them, and we were not close to anybody. And there we were. We both had machine guns that we'd never fired. [laughs]

Crawford: Would you have known how?

02-00:48:38

Handy: Yes, I would've. In training, I'd handled small weapons. And I knew how to fire and repair them. But I had never shot one. [laughs] There's a difference.

Crawford: But that wasn't a combat zone, you said.

02-00:48:53

Handy: It could've been. People were being knocked off here and there. People would go hunting sometimes or walking some place, and you didn't see them again. By the way, this guy wasn't a very nice guy, either. Throwing some rocks at where I was practicing, in a little shack.

Crawford: The man you were serving with?

02-00:49:12

Handy: Yes, I knew he was the guy who threw, and he could've really hurt me, because a rock came through, and that stopped me from practicing. I did consider taking him out. [laughs] But I didn't. We started talking, and I knew

he was a kid, a young man like myself. We both were there for reasons that we didn't want to be.

Crawford: So how long did that last?

02-00:49:37

Handy:

I got there April twelfth. Oh, in Japan. I went there first. I went over there on the Breckinridge, the USS Breckenridge, from San Francisco to Yokohama. And that's where I saw remnants of World War II—natives—some of the citizens were begging. That was from World War II. Fighting in Japan had only ended a few years earlier. This was '54, and there were still poor people begging.

I had never seen that. And my heart went out to these people. We all were doing this, Americans, all of us were throwing candy or whatever, and money, even, to the people as we were passing them in the countryside, especially when the train would slow down so we could see faces. We just gave, you know?

Then we went to Tachikawa, which was a holding station, for twelve days. And we didn't get off that base. They had an NCO club, and I heard this music. It was *wonderful* jazz. *Bebop!* It was a Japanese combo, with a *gorgeous* woman singing like Sarah Vaughan. [laughs] I couldn't believe it. I was there every night. They played great jazz!

I was there twelve days, and I talked with them, but I didn't play, no. I don't think it was allowed. Something was kind of weird. But I was surprised at this woman who looked like "that," and that "*they* looked like that," and they could *play* the way they were playing. She was better than the musicians were. She was absolutely tremendous.

I nearly broke my back the day before I left, and I still have an injury; I fell by playing, out of boredom, sandlot football with a deflated football. I fell and I couldn't move. They took me to the doctor, or the dispensary, and he said, "I'm not convinced you're hurt." It hurt me His comment was so insulting that I didn't want him touching me. Even if I was dying, I didn't even want him to touch me. They took me back, and the guys and I were sent to Korea the next day. I couldn't even pick up my luggage, my horn. They took it for me. And when I got there, I was better. I'd had a problem with my heart earlier, in Fort Ord. I had pains.

Crawford: Your heart?

02-00:52:51

Handy:

I had what they call pericarditis. They didn't diagnose it until I'd been in the hospital two weeks. I was in the hospital for two months.

Crawford: Is that a serious thing?

02-00:52:54

Handy: It *felt* serious.

Crawford: Is that where the heart casing gets inflamed?

02-00:53:01

Handy: Yes. The sac, there's scar tissue on the sac that surrounds the heart. And I had pains during basic training, down in here. I'm saying, I'm twenty, I can't have a heart attack; and I'm in pretty good shape. I didn't sleep. I still don't sleep very much. But I think it was just too much with this training, not sleeping, running and doing stuff. I was the company drummer for the marching and all that in the training.

So I went to Japan, and they sent me to Korea the next day. I was so depressed when I got there. There was mud up to my neck, it seemed. [they laugh] And I thought *that* was bad; they took us to something worse, and that's where they dropped me off.

But they had an NCO club, and that's when I went and sat in, and that helped a lot. And I started a band the next day. A combo. We played for the soldiers there and other places. So that was a godsend. I think I would've just done anything to make them send me back home. It was *so* depressing.

And then I thought about the poor guys who'd been there, who were fighting in this. It was still cold in April. Especially at night, and then it became as humid and hot during the summer, the spring and summer, as it became cold—five and six, ten degrees below zero. I experienced Thanksgiving and Christmas over there. So— [laughs]

Crawford: You'd never experienced that kind of cold.

02-00:54:46

Handy: Not like that. Well, we had cold weather in Dallas, believe it or not. My first snowman was in Dallas. And Cleveland, forget it. Cold weather was the reason I left my family when we moved from Oakland to Cleveland.

Crawford: Oh, Cleveland.

02-00:54:55

Handy: So there I was in Korea, stationed at K-6 for seven months. Then I was sent to K-55 to another base, a bigger base, where I played a lot more.

Crawford: That was good.

02-00:56:23

Handy: But some of that other stuff got to be boring. This guy Sergeant Caesar Thompson had several recordings from home. We became friends. He invited me to come in and listen in his tent. He was the company clerk, and he sent me home a month earlier than I was supposed to have gone. So I came home

in March, I got here in March. And Charlie Parker died nine days later. Which was a big letdown.

Crawford: You knew him.

02-00:57:02

Handy: No. I'd only heard him once here. It was in San Francisco, at a place called the Say When. On a Sunday afternoon. Charlie Parker and Flip Phillips played with a local rhythm section. They were less than bad. [they laugh] It was really bad. I played his horn that day. He went to the dressing room and Flip Phillips came in, and I went to the men's room. There was nobody in the dressing room when I passed it, and I saw this saxophone sitting in the chair, and nobody was around.

Crawford: You knew who it was.

02-00:57:59

Handy: I knew it was his horn, I'd seen him play it, you know. He wasn't around, so I went and picked it up and played it a little bit. I was afraid he'd hear me, so I put it back and left.

Crawford: Did it sound pretty good?

02-00:58:17

Handy: Yes. Well, you know, I really primarily just got a sound or so, because I didn't want him to come in and see me playing his horn. It might've been insulting, so I left. I put my hands on that saxophone, and blew it. [they laugh]

Crawford: It's like playing Mozart's piano, isn't it?

02-00:58:40

Handy: Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, I saw—was it an organ or something? Was it an organ or a piano? I think it was an organ, in Vienna, that Mozart had played. I was on tour. And I was treated to that. Yes. In a little church—

Crawford: There's one in Prague I know about too.

02-00:59:00

Handy: There's one in Prague?

Crawford: Where he played. Did you play it?

Handy: No. Actually, I did, I believe. I did play some chords and—

Crawford: That would've pleased him no end. [they laugh]

Well, we're right up to two hours.

02-00:59:20

Handy: Okay.

Crawford: Shall we end for today?

02-00:59:24

Handy: Okay, we can stop—

Crawford: We can go on, if you want to. How are you doing?

02-00:59:27

Handy: Are you okay? [to his wife, Del]

Crawford: Are you learning a lot that you didn't know?

Del Handy: Yes, I've learned a few things, yes.

Handy: Yes, I've told her a few things, and you know, when you're talking like this, you're limited because of the lack of retention in your brain.

Crawford: A lot comes out that you hadn't thought about for a time. People are always surprised.

02-00:59:57

Handy: So let me get out of Korea. I came home in March, and I had a thirty-day furlough, when Charlie Parker died. It was very depressing, the winter weather here. It was just gloomy and it prompted me to think about being a music major when I returned to school, which was only a few months later.

When I got out of the Army and was back in school, my heroes were not making a decent living, according to what I was hearing. Only a few people were working. I was told that during one of those years, Miles Davis made eight hundred dollars.

Crawford: Gosh.

02-00:61:01

Handy: You know. [laughs] You know? So it was depressing. I also knew that Charlie had some problems that might have been attributable to that. He was only thirty-four, and thirty-four was young, even when I was twenty-two. Still young. Some people don't think so when they're twenty-two, but that's pretty young. You know.

So, here I was, back home. After the furlough, back to Ford Ord for only a few weeks, and they sent me to San Francisco Presidio for the last two months. I got out in June. I was supposed to have been in there until August. So I was already enrolled in some extension courses. I was taking a class with my former physical science professor from San Francisco State College.

Crawford: Which would apply to your degree.

02-00:62:11

Handy: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I started taking classes in the summer, so I was going to SF State—I was still in the Army, full-time. And I took that class. I was still in that class on the Presidio. I started back at college again. Then I went to City College. I'd gotten kicked out of State; I didn't know I was.

Crawford: Why?

02-00:62:40

Handy: I wasn't doing my work when I left, and I didn't know that my grade point average had dropped so low. Those gigs and late hours had caught up with me. My playing with great musicians did not help my study habits.

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03-00:00:00

Crawford: Got your bling-bling?

03-00:00:01

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: Oh, let's see. [they laugh] Wow. Well, this is interview number two with John Handy, for the Regional Oral History Office's jazz series. I thought today we would start with your New York years. Tell us how you came to go, and how you made the connection with Mingus, and what you left here.

03-00:00:23

Handy: Oh, okay. What I left here was my wonderful wife. [laughs] Well, I had been married two years, almost. And my wife and I, well, we saved enough money so we could go there, to be able to support ourselves for several months. We'd heard what it's like moving to another city like that, and you had to sustain yourself. So I did. Saved money that I was going to [use to] either buy a new Volvo [chuckles]—a '58 Volvo. Well, that particular one, I liked that because it reminded me of the 1948 Ford, I think the first Ford that they built after World War II.

Crawford: Was that that beautiful flat design?

03-00:01:14

Handy: It looks like a little bug—you know, kind of rounded. Or take classical piano lessons. So instead of doing that, we went to New York.

Crawford: What would have been the classical piano objective?

03-00:01:33

Handy: It's very important for a person like myself, in what I do as a musician and jazz player, improvisational music, as well as composing, especially with our Western concept of chords and scales. And it behooves one to know the piano keyboard, because most of your composers are piano players, especially in symphonic or in classical fields. And so for my own education and entertainment, I was thinking [of it]. But I haven't done it yet.

So yeah, I didn't do that, we went to New York, and did what most people do when you're there, when you don't have relatives living there who can give you a place to live, temporarily, at least.

So we went to the Times Square hotel district, where most of the newcomers lived. We spent two or three days in the West Broadway Hotel. I remember that as soon as we got there it was very hot; it was early June. No, June 18th. July 19th. 1958. And we got a paper as we went to our room, to see what was playing, [laughs] and we found out that Miles Davis was playing that

afternoon, a matinee at the Vanguard, Village Vanguard. Yes, the Village Vanguard.

Crawford: On 7th.

03-00:03:22

Handy: Yeah, on 7th, there. Yes, in New York. So we immediately changed, dressed. You know, bathed, dressed, and went there, and there they were. We'd just only seen him recently, just a few weeks earlier.

Crawford: Here?

03-00:03:45

Handy: Yes, in San Francisco.

Crawford: At Bop City?

03-00:03:49

Handy: Yeah. They were there. Yeah. That's where I met John Coltrane, at Bop City, five or six years earlier, or seven years earlier. And they had been out there that year. I think only a couple weeks, actually, earlier. And when we walked in the club, it blew our minds, because Philly Joe wasn't playing; Jimmy Cobb was playing drums. And Bill Evans was playing piano, not Red Garland. And Cannonball Adderley was added, the saxophone player, alto player. I knew him from out here; I met him out here a couple of years earlier.

And so they were playing beautifully. Miles still had Paul Chambers on bass, and John Coltrane on tenor saxophone. So you know, they were surprised to see us, and we all said hello and other good stuff. And so there we were. I remember, though, coming from out here, it was not unusual to have a Harris Tweed sports coat on. But this was July in New York. That's all I had at the time.

Crawford: You were under the pavement, too, at the Vanguard!

03-00:05:10

Handy: Yeah, yeah, right, uh-huh, so that was the beginning. And we stayed, as I said, in a hotel for a short while, in Broadway Central, it was. Then we moved uptown to the Flanders Hotel. We entered at 47th or 48th, either side, between 6th and 7th. At the time, Blue Mitchell, the great trumpet player, was there, coming from Florida. Blue Mitchell, the Three Sounds, they were brand new in town, we were all living there. And Harold Ousley, a tenor player—O-U-S-L-E-Y—from Chicago, a sax player. We stayed there from July until January.

We're right in Times Square and after two or three days, I found out where the jam sessions were. I started to go to the Continental Club in Brooklyn. And I started meeting guys, and there were a few people I already—Elvin Jones was there; so was Harold Vick, Wayne Shorter and Archie Shepp.

Crawford: How did you know where they were?

03-00:06:58

Handy: Well, word of mouth. Musicians know musicians, and I knew people. You know. I called Milt Jackson; he knew I was in town. I'd known him for a long time.

Crawford: So those relationships from the West Coast were good.

03-00:07:15

Handy: Yes, Bop City was the meeting place where I met most of those guys. Milt had visited us, me and Bunky. He likes to cook, so he cooked for everybody. [laughs]

Crawford: What did he cook?

03-00:07:41

Handy: He was a soul food cooker. Mostly ham and eggs and, breakfast stuff. But he would've cooked dinner, had he had time. He likes the greens and the cornbread and stuff like that. So we're in Manhattan trying to meet people, trying to make connections. And at the jam sessions, that is what you did; you played and exchanged phone numbers, addresses, et cetera.

After a short while, I met Idrees Sulieman. Trumpet player. Probably at a jam session. And I believe it was he who introduced me to Randy Weston, with whom I worked first. We did two or three casuals, and including a weekend at—what's the name of the last—Small's Paradise. The last, probably the last significant jazz club in Harlem.

And so we played a weekend there. I was disappointed to see that as you came into the door, there was a big, round, kind of oblong, egg-shaped bar. Everybody stayed there, and nobody came into the back room, where we played. I mean, literally nobody. And when our forty-five minutes was up for each set, after each set, they'd turn on the jukebox, right? [laughs]

Crawford: Was that the practice?

03-00:09:41

Handy: I suppose, I don't know. I suppose it was. But I never cared to play there again. And I didn't.

Crawford: Was that the only Harlem gig that you had?

03-00:09:50

Handy: I played once at Ruby's Shalimar Bar or something like that, across the street from—or very close to there. I played one engagement there. And then there were jam sessions again at Count Basie's Club in Harlem. So I made it there, and that's where I met more people. I never saw so many terrible musicians; just like here.

We were talking to New Yorkers and others who have been to New York, and they'd say, "Well, man, you can go to New York and see a guy with a shoeshine stand, and he'll go in the back room and pick up a paper bag with a saxophone in it, and play like Bird, like Charlie Parker." Well, that wasn't true. At least it wasn't what I experienced. [laughs]

Crawford: So the quality wasn't what you expected, generally speaking?

03-00:10:57

Handy: No. No. As a matter of fact, about the shoeshine person, most of them couldn't shine shoes worth a damn. Besides not playing saxophone, they didn't shine shoes very well, so— [laughs] There were shine stands and parlors in Midtown there. So yes, I heard some wonderful players, too; but I heard two of the worst saxophone players I ever heard in my life who were in those jam sessions in Harlem, at Count Basie's. And I won't name one of them, [laughs] who's become quite—

Crawford: Uh-oh.

03-00:11:36

Handy: —well known. [laughs] He plays very well now, though.

Crawford: But you left for a bigger world, obviously.

03-00:11:43

Handy: Of course. I went to seek my musical fortune, you know. But certainly, I was pleasantly surprised; one night, there must have been, at Count Basie's—there seemed to have been at least twelve saxophone players, with a trumpet or two here and there. There was this guy who looked almost like a kid. He started to play, and I was expecting not very much. And the more he played the better it got. He just kept playing and just creating, it sounded better and better. And I was really turned on by what he was doing. That was Wayne Shorter.

It turned out it was Wayne Shorter. We were born the same year. He looked like a little boy to me, he was so young, and so creative, and all that was coming from him. So yes, it was great to hear. I remember that. And people like Archie Schepp were there, and he was very new and very young, and just beginning to play the saxophone.

Crawford: And there was enough occupation, enough gigs to go around?

03-00:11:54

Handy: Well, I played a few, and I even somehow—I don't know how I got this gig, but I played a big band date with Kenny Dorham, who had gotten the date, I believe, through some African American fraternity. And it was right there, fairly close to the musician's union.

It was an all-star band. Wayne Shorter and Hank Mobley were both playing tenor saxophones. A guy named Jay Cameron was playing baritone. Gigi Gryce and I were playing the altos, and I played lead in that. And the trumpet players were—I can remember two of them—Richard Williams, whom I'd met out here, who was a wonderful, wonderful player; could read, play anything. And Don Ellis, [who] turned out to be an important bandleader. The other two, I can't recall.

Matthew Gee was one of the trombone players who played with Dizzy, and then two or three other guys, we played in other big bands. A guy named Clarence Scobey was on drums. He was a young guy like myself. But Max Roach came in and played the whole gig. [laughter] He just sort of took over.

And Kenny Dorham, the trumpet player, was leading.

Crawford: And this was for a private fraternity affair, you said?

03-00:14:40

Handy: Yes. Right in Midtown, yes.

Crawford: Where was the union?

03-00:14:44

Handy: The union was on 52nd, between Broadway and I think 8th or 9th, whatever that street is, going west.

Crawford: And you'd belonged to the union here.

03-00:14:56

Handy: Yes. Oh, yeah. I joined the union in '49, here in San Francisco. But I wasn't a member there. It took a year, I believe, of residency, before you were able to get your union card. But I'll talk about that later. I did get mine as soon as I started playing with Charles Mingus, only a couple of months or so later. So there we were. I remember it was very cold, and unfortunately, somebody stole Don Ellis' overcoat. It was terrible for that. Otherwise, it was a memorable gig.

Crawford: You liked living in New York?

03-00:15:39

Handy: Well, it was new. It was very hot and uncomfortable at first. And we shared a suite, by the way, with a very good friend of both my wife's and myself. We had independently met this lady who was there working on becoming a model, a fashion model, Rose Howard. We shared expenses, and so we had a nicer place, as a result, in the hotel.

Crawford: Where was the hotel?

03-00:16:13

Handy: It was in Manhattan, in Times Square.

Crawford: Very convenient, too, close to the jazz.

03-00:16:18

Handy: All the theaters were there. Not that we were going there, but you know, it was in walking distance from Birdland, and the subways were right at 6th and 47th, 48th. And if you went out on the 48th Street side, just to your right, at the door, was Manny's, Manny's Music shop. And everybody'd go in there. He had a collection of pictures for generations, on that wall. And that's where many of the musicians congregated and bought all their music materials, and socialized.

I saw a lot of people whose faces that I'd seen on recordings and in books, right there in Manhattan, and in Manny's sometimes. And then there was the Brill Building very close by. That's where people hawked their songs—Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, and rhythm and blues. That's where the Handy Brothers Music Company was. I went around there to meet him. W.C. had died earlier that year, so I knew he was gone. But I went to—

Crawford: Did you know him?

03-00:17:41

Handy: No, I never met him. I never met him before he passed. But I went in, and he had a younger brother there, Charles Handy. A little short man, about my height, maybe a little shorter. He was very friendly. And I talked and told him where I came from and all. It's amazing. Our arms—my arms look like his, and the hairline— [laughter]

Crawford: Really? Some connection there.

03-00:18:10

Handy: Yes, it was—so we talked a little bit. They had a family tree there on the wall. I didn't see my dad and my grandfather on it. They were from Texas, as far as I know. I never really met my grandfather, my father's father.

Crawford: Where were those Handys from?

03-00:18:41

Handy: Well, according to the W.C.— I did talk to Charles Handy. We didn't talk much about our possible relationship, but we talked just kind of about current times, and music. He was quite a bit older than I. He was probably in his early sixties then, or maybe older. And I was twenty-five and from out here, right out of school.

And so I didn't stay very long, I didn't tarry. I learned more about them by reading about them. But soon after I started playing gigs, and especially when I headlined at Birdland, which was within about a year-and-a-half, I got

Christmas cards a couple of times from him, in congratulations. He said, “You’re a Handy.” [laughter]

Crawford: Nice. Well, let’s go to Birdland and other venues.

03-00:19:43

Handy: I’m sorry?

Crawford: Describe the clubs in New York during the time.

03-00:19:47

Handy: Well, at the time, Birdland was the most famous jazz club. It was in Midtown, as I mentioned earlier. The Village Vanguard, which is a place I didn’t go to again until almost—just before I left New York. Oh, I had gone in there first, to see Miles.

Crawford: The first day—

03-00:20:13

Handy: Yes. But I never really—I don’t remember going in there very often.

Crawford: You didn’t play there.

03-00:20:18

Handy: No, I didn’t play the Village Vanguard until ’67. I played almost every major club but there with Charles Mingus, and mostly with my own band, later.

Crawford: How did the Mingus connection get going?

03-00:20:34

Handy: Well, okay. I was beginning to get around, as guys do. I was playing tenor saxophone mostly then. I’d bought an alto before I went. I’m known as an alto player, but for three years after Korea, after I came home, I bought a tenor saxophone. And I played it exclusively, until I bought one an alto saxophone around May or so from a bandleader here, an African-American guy whose name is Buddy Hiles, from Detroit. He had this very nice band. And I found myself playing in that. He had an alto, brand new. And he wasn’t playing it.

I went to his band to play tenor saxophone. Somehow the first alto player didn’t show up. Buddy Hiles heard that I played alto, and I borrowed his. He said, “You play better than the other guy.” So that’s how I got the horn, I bought his. And when I went to New York, I was still more comfortable with the tenor. So I played that at all the jam sessions. But when I started to work with Charles, he wanted me to play alto and tenor. It was a little uncomfortable at one point, because I don’t like playing both horns on the same stand on the same night.

Crawford: When you say uncomfortable, talk a little bit about that.

03-00:22:19

Handy:

Well, you know, switching from one instrument to another. There are lots of us who play saxophones and play all four or five, or however many they can find. Some guys play them very well, some don't. A lot of people don't get good sounds. I'm fortunate, because I tend to get a decent sound, a good sound, on both. I was encouraged here by older musicians, to play the tenor. I never really wanted to play the tenor.

But I was kind of—I kind of did this. I enjoyed it; I can't say I *didn't want* to play the tenor. I liked playing it, because I would borrow Teddy Ebbett's horn at Bop City. And as a matter of fact, in this book on jazz I mentioned, *Harlem of the West*.

Crawford:

Yes. I have it right here.

03-00:23:11

Handy:

With the photo. I'm holding *somebody's* tenor saxophone.

Crawford:

That's what you said, "That's not *my* horn."

03-00:23:15

Handy:

It's not mine! And so anyhow, I'm in New York, and I really want to go back to the alto. But my gigs with Randy were with tenor. With Kenny Dorham, alto. I was right out of school [with a] clarinet major. I really never really wanted to play the clarinet seriously, but you have to affect a good European, preferably German, sound of playing.

I think I didn't have a very good sound for the symphonic music that was played in the orchestra, so whatever training I had, which was in college, on the clarinet, I transferred it or adapted it to saxophone, if I did it at all. And intonation, Ed Kruth was our music instructor, our director at San Francisco State. The guy who conducted the concert band was a stickler for good intonation and good tone.

So I did take some clarinet lessons from him, in the studio, and another guy named Green, who was in the San Francisco Symphony. He played flute in the symphony, but he was a very good clarinet player. I studied privately with him, too. Yes, I have had some classical instruction, traditional instruction.

Crawford:

You often went for the classical. You said you were in conservatory for a little bit, but it really wasn't for you?

03-00:24:59

Handy:

Well, in that conservatory, it wasn't classical at all. He was primarily doing so-called jazz. And I didn't think he was really giving very much information.

So I'm back in New York playing different gigs. I played some casuals with Don Freedman, Scott La Faro and Teddy Kojic and Bill Evans, which wasn't

his gig either. Teddy Kojic was a bass player, who Charlie Parker said was his favorite bass player. We were all young people trying to make a living in New York.

Don Freedman, a pianist who later played with my band, was originally from San Francisco. So yes, I was working here and there fairly soon. But then a month-and-a-half of being in New York, I started working with other folk. And I played some gigs with other people, whose names at the moment, I don't recall. But a lot of those connections came from people like Idrees Sulieman. You know, if you play with someone, if someone is impressed with your playing, they'll tell other people. And that's how it happened.

Crawford: When you played with Bill Evans, who has such a distinct style, how did that work out for you?

03-00:26:38

Handy: Well, we're musicians; we know pretty much enough of the same repertoire that we have no trouble. We decide the key, do the introduction; we know the piece; and we know the chords, we know the scales and we'd go in as professionals. We were not inexperienced.

Crawford: And there was a lot of mutual respect, I'm sure, for the high level of playing.

03-00:27:05

Handy: Yes. We were all—I'd been playing ten years professionally, even though—

Crawford: I keep forgetting, as young as you were. [they laugh] Started out early.

03-00:27:18

Handy: Yes, and they had, too. Bill was just a little older and had been through the same kinds of experiences musically. This is significant. In those years at the Flanders, during that time at the Flanders, some guy offered us, through Idrees Sulieman, a job to play in Morocco for six months. I decided, as much as I'd like six months of steady work, that this was some kind of a resort, and that didn't turn me on. But six months of work in a foreign country, even if I'd done very well financially, I would've had to have come back to New York and start all over again.

Crawford: In a way, yes.

03-00:28:28

Handy: So I chose not to go. We were new, and I wanted to make my mark there, and so I didn't go. And within two months or so, the drummer was back, and I think somebody else. But Idrees Sulieman never came back, I think, from there. He probably went—and for the rest of his life—to Scandinavia, Sweden. I saw him later in Stockholm. The pianist Oscar Dennard was on the gig in Morocco.

Incredible pianist. One of those very rare people like Phineas Newborn, and even in some ways, Art Tatum. Oscar contracted something over there, some kind of disease, and died, and I understand they didn't ship his body home.

Crawford: Would that have been a common kind of a thing, to perform six months in a foreign resort like that?

03-00:30:04

Handy: Not to my knowledge, though some people had those jobs; I never did. And I never really wanted them.

Crawford: It seems kind of artificial, a little bit contrived.

03-00:30:13

Handy: Yes. Well, it turned out the guy was not telling the truth about everything, the guy that trying to get us over there. Buster Smith, the drummer from New Jersey, came back soon thereafter. And let's see, Idrees Sulieman was on trumpet; George Joyner, who is now Jamil Nasser, went there. And I don't remember—yes, he was a bass player.

Anyhow, I might not have all the names together at this moment, but 1961, jumping ahead a couple of years, I was on my first European tour. And one of our hosts took me and the bass player, Julian Euell—to play where Chet Baker, with Buster Smith and Jamil Nasser, bass, were playing. This is where and how that six-month gig in Morocco ended.

Crawford: You're glad you didn't take that one.

03-00:31:56

Handy: Oh, I'm glad and happy.

Crawford: And you were doing well, so you didn't need to.

03-00:31:58

Handy: Yes, I was—things were beginning to happen and I didn't want it. I'm glad I didn't, especially when you consider the fact that we lost Oscar. Nobody ever saw him again. I believe they didn't ship his body home. He was misdiagnosed, and I think it's something that everybody knows about, doctors would know. At the moment, I can't seem to recall what it was. I never would say anyhow, but it was something that I think it was probably curable, but misdiagnosed. We lost one of the greatest of our young pianists.

Crawford: How old was he?

03-00:32:38

Handy: At the time, Oscar was probably twenty-eight or -nine, at the oldest. He made some recordings. I believe—I thought it was on Verve Records, on Mercury, some company like that. But they didn't release them, and I don't believe they

ever have. Oscar is still a conversational source. He was one of a kind. He could also sing.

Crawford: Sure.

03-00:33:16

Handy: Just an incredible piano player. Great left hand.

Crawford: He came from somewhere else.

03-00:33:29

Handy: Yes, I believe he was from some place in Florida. My wife at the time became my manager. And somehow, she did well. She went on and acquired a recording contract for me with Roulette Records. [pause] Yes. And she was also managing a couple of singers who didn't do anything but break us. They didn't come from California with any money, so we were supporting them. [laughs]

Crawford: They didn't do well?

03-00:34:16

Handy: Well, she didn't know what she was doing with them, and they weren't really tough professionals, you know. So that was part of the chapter that is kind of disastrous. But I won't go into it, it's not worth going into. They came back home a few months later.

Crawford: How did you manage?

03-00:33:49

Handy: [chuckles] Because I was the only one getting some gigs. And so things got a little bleak there money-wise, as Christmas drew near. Just before Christmas, I went out and—I'd never done that before; I was never in that position. I went out to look for a gig. I dressed up in my blazer and my horn-rimmed glasses, which I wore then.

Crawford: You did, for Dizzy.

03-00:35:14

Handy: I went out to the Five Spot, which was the well-known club that Monk really put on the map, especially he and John Coltrane, in '56 or '57. I later played there, and for quite a while, too. I heard there was a jam session. Actually, it wasn't a jam session. On the off nights, like at Birdland, lesser-known musicians played there.

So that night, they were featuring Frank Foster, the great tenor saxophone player, who was with Count Basie, and [a] great trumpet player/arranger—they both are great arrangers, by the way—Thad Jones. I went there, and they were not there. They were late. And I happened to recognize George Joyner, the bass player. I'd met him out here. So he and Roy Haynes, and the great

pianist Phineas Newborn. Well, they're all great players. Roy Haynes and George Joyner are *still* playing.

So they were the rhythm section. I sat in with them, I really went to them looking for a gig. I didn't ask anybody, just got up and played. And we played a number of songs. And Frank and Thad showed up. I think Idrees Sulieman sat in, too, that's right. They showed up. Sonny Rollins was in the audience, and Charles Mingus came in. I knew Mingus, because Mingus had asked me to play with him when he came to San Francisco in 1957.

Crawford: I knew you'd met him, but I didn't know that he had made you an offer.

03-00:37:21

Handy:

I met him, and then he asked me to go with him in 1958. Fifty-seven. I was a senior in college and married, and wanted to graduate. And my son had just been born. So when Frank Foster and Thad came by, I got off the bandstand. I was sitting at the bar along with some customers and musicians. At one point, Charles Mingus walked in and he didn't appear to be friendly.

We were listening to the band. When they finished, in between one song, Mingus spoke up very loudly. "Hey, why don't you all let this guy play?" You know? [laughter] Everybody there knew I had played amply before he came in. I said, "Well, I've already played." Frank Foster said, "He can play if he wants." He knew me from Bop City. And so did Thad, actually.

So I decided [to] play, since I really needed a gig. I went to the bandstand and started playing. After each solo, Charles would say, "Man! Bird is back!" [laughs] I was so embarrassed. "Bird is back," you know.

He ran out those saloon doors. Charles is this big, and he hit those doors, you know. Anybody else would've bounced backwards; but he hit both set of doors and went out. And then everybody's looking at Charles making this kind of commotion. Sonny Rollins was there, and Charlus Mingus said, "Man, Bird is back! Sonny, did you hear that?" And I saw Sonny say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, Charlie. Yeah, yeah." [they laugh]

Crawford: Oh, my. He liked you a lot.

03-00:39:31

Handy:

Yes, I guess he did. Then, at one point, he said—we were standing there and they were about to play a piece, and he said, "Hey, baby, are you working anywhere?" And I just looked at him. He said, "Well, you open here with me in two weeks."

Crawford: Really?

03-00:39:50

Handy:

Yeah. So that's what happened there.

Crawford: Aren't you glad you went out that night! [laughs]

03-00:39:56

Handy: Oh, I was very happy that I went in that night. And so in two weeks I opened opposite Sonny Rollins, who was, of course, one of my heroes.

Crawford: At the Five Spot.

03-00:40:32

Handy: At the Five Spot, at the Five Spot.

Crawford: Did you have a formal contract?

03-00:40:37

Handy: I suppose Mingus did. We were there for a month, six nights a week. Which was *wonderful*, because I had only worked two weeks, I believe, the longest I'd ever worked on a jazz gig in the Bay Area. Oh, I had some other gigs that were primarily jazz. But in New York to get a gig for four weeks working opposite Sonny Rollins, working with the great Charlie Mingus, and Danny Richmond on drums, and Horace Parlan on piano. Yes. So in a way, I was on my way.

Crawford: I would say. When two weeks was over, what happened?

03-00:41:27

Handy: Okay, you know, let me tell you what happened. Actually, as I recall, that job started Christmas week of '58. The last week in '58. I believe that's when it was. I'm almost certain that's when it was. During that time—I'll talk about this later, about how Charles kind of mishandled the thing, getting on the bandstand and staying too long. And so Sonny was not given the amount of the time that he should've had—

Crawford: Were there hard feelings?

03-00:42:13

Handy: Yes, I think so.

Crawford: There were hard feelings.

03-00:42:14

Handy: They weren't spoken, but I felt really uncomfortable.

Crawford: What do you do in a case like that?

03-00:42:20

Handy: Well, he was the leader. I just felt bad, I couldn't do anything. So at one time within the week, within the next week, I believe, it was bad weather, it's winter weather. Charles came in and said, "Get your instruments, put on your coats, people. We're going up the street." We all put on our coats. We're

supposed to—Sonny was on. I *think* he was on. Because sometimes Sonny didn't show up, after about—

Crawford: What was that about?

03-00:43:03

Handy: I don't want to talk about that. Okay. That was something between him and Charles. I think Charles precipitated it. I don't think Sonny engaged in it, and he was a real gentleman to not make an issue of it. We stayed on the bandstand much too long, really.

Crawford: Wasn't management there?

03-00:43:25

Handy: They didn't do anything. They didn't say anything. And a lot of people didn't want to approach Charles. No matter who, even managers, even owners didn't always want to. Because he could blow things way up.

Crawford: Temperament?

03-00:43:43

Handy: So we found ourselves walking about three or four blocks in that slush and cold weather and wind. We went upstairs, and it turned out to be full of people, in this art gallery. The Nonagon Art Gallery. I just saw the name of it in the book. And we did a concert there, and it was recorded, and that's where my first recording, jazz recording with anybody took place.

Crawford: What was the name of the album?

03-00:44:23

Handy: *Alice's Wonderland*, originally. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Alice's Wonderland*. We just played. We not only played at the club, we went in and just kind of set the place on fire, and walked out and went back to the Five Spot. [pause] It was recorded on United Artists. And it's been on a number of other labels, and known by different names, that same album.

So that was my first exposure—and it was very positive—to recording. Write-ups started to take place, and I got a lot of wonderful exposure with Charles, and that helped me a lot. Whenever he got a write-up—and he got lots of them, I got a write-up or special attention. Some of the reviews were in raunchy “skin” magazines.

Crawford: Oh, they weren't women's magazines, per se!

03-00:45:36

Handy: No. No, no, no, no, no. Women, you know, displaying. But they'd have jazz, and I felt a little—I appreciated the exposure, but I felt a little embarrassed that it was this kind of magazine; but you take what you get. Fortunately, I got each time almost as much of a write-up in the write-ups as he did, and in the

New York papers. We started early, before the gig—auditioning with some recording companies, in his apartment. So between January and May, 1959, we recorded three albums.

Crawford: That meant a lot to a musician.

03-00:46:39

Handy: Yeah, yeah, the exposure. He promised to feature me and my name, John Handy. Which he never did. But I was there, anyhow.

Crawford: How, feature?

03-00:46:52

Handy: Well, you know, “Charles Mingus, featuring John Handy,” that kind of thing.

Crawford: Oh, I see.

03-00:46:56

Handy: Give you a little extra billing. And which he never did. It was just as well, because I couldn’t wait to not play with him. After that job, I didn’t play with him. I didn’t play in February. I really didn’t want to be with him.

Crawford: What was it?

03-00:47:18

Handy: It was his personality, and the way he talked, and the way he handled the musicians, castigating them right in public.

Crawford: Oh, that’s very bad.

03-00:47:33

Handy: Yes. He didn’t do that to me.

Crawford: I didn’t realize that about him.

03-00:47:34

Handy: He never did that to me. For some reason, he never did it. But he did it to this piano player, right there on the first job. Our drummer was gone, after the first week, on the Monday off. The next week, we went through about six drummers, sometimes two or three in one night, it seemed. He couldn’t just tell the guys thank you; he had to say something unkind, and right in front of everybody, and embarrass them, and stop them in the midst of a piece. I thought that was cruel.

Crawford: Did the rest of the personnel stay with him?

03-00:48:15

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: They did. Who played sax after you?

03-00:48:19

Handy:

Booker, and—they had played with him before. They were with him before I was. I believe there was at least an attempt to show that [they weren't] pleased. And that was when we did that concert in the art gallery. Apparently, the pianist knew about it, and he didn't show up for the gig. And Mingus got a replacement, a guy from here, Richard Wyands, who's a wonderful player. He sight-read that, which was a real feather in his hat. He sight-read that music. And he did a wonderful job.

Crawford:

On that recording.

03-00:49:13

Handy:

Yes, *Alice's Wonderland*. Because it had all these crazy things in it, and he sight-read it. San Francisco State graduate, by the way.

Crawford:

Yes. Is he still around?

03-00:49:23

Handy:

He's in New York. And he's been there since—he went there about a year ahead of me.

Crawford:

I haven't heard of him for years.

03-00:49:29

Handy:

I have his phone number. I got all the numbers.

Crawford:

He's good. So you did just the original gig then, with Mingus.

03-00:49:39

Handy:

That was it. And it turned out, with all the other drummers that he rejected, Roy Haynes—the great Roy Haynes—sat in, and he finished the job with us. And so that was my Five Spot debut, and kind of my New York debut.

Crawford:

Your star was high, I would say.

03-00:50:02

Handy:

I was very lucky that the opportunity was there, and that I was prepared enough. And mind you, I was just right out of San Francisco State, and only with a few other gigs, if you will, and I was able to do the kind of job that he was interested in doing. I started to pull him to the side and tell him what I thought, that it was just basically *wrong* to speak like that and act that way.

After the gig, that was it. Well, we finished that gig. I got a call again.

By the way, Milt Jackson, who was a very dear friend, before the Mingus gig—as a matter of fact, it was just a few days before that, Christmas Day—he showed up. There's a call on the phone. We were in the hotel, mind you. Milt Jackson. This is Christmas morning. It's about ten o'clock or so. He said, "Get dressed."

He had us get dressed, and we went downstairs, and he and his fiancée took us to Diahann Carroll's apartment. At the time, she was married to the guy who was their manager, Monte Kay, who later managed Flip Wilson, George Carlin, and he had the Modern Jazz Quartet, from its inception.

Crawford: Oh, my.

03-00:51:49

Handy:

So my wife Bunky and I were there, at eleven o'clock or so, at Diahann Carroll's apartment. I knew who she was. She's a year or two younger than I am. I knew she had been in *Flower Drum Song* or something like that. You might check that [editor's note: she auditioned for a part in *Flower Drum Song*]. And I'd heard the recordings. So there she was, her mom, father, and younger sister.

Miles Davis was there in the apartment. And so we did some small talk and they started to introduce us. Milt Jackson knew I knew Miles, and so Miles said, [whispers] "Oh, I know him. You know, I know them." [chuckles] That's the way he said it.

So he took Milt and me to his apartment, which was on the same floor, to hear an acetate copy of one of the albums that was coming out. It was either *Porgy and Bess*—I believe it was *Porgy and Bess*—or *Sketches of Spain*. But I think it was *Porgy and Bess*.

And so I heard the beginning of that recording on Christmas morning, at his apartment. Then we left there, and went to Dizzy's house. [laughs] Milt took us to Dizzy's. We'd had had some eggnog at Diahann Carroll's house. I found myself getting sick from that eggnog. I was just about to pass out in the taxi in Central Park. I barely made the gig on time, at the Five Spot.

Crawford: What a day!

Handy: Yes. [laughs]

Crawford: Christmas Day. Never matched that one again?

03-00:54:04

Handy:

No. No, that's one—I knew Dizzy, too, because I'd met Dizzy before.

Crawford: When did you first play with Dizzy? You met him in the fifties?

03-00:54:16

Handy:

I met him in 1950 here, but I didn't play with him. At Bop City, again. I asked him about music schools, and he said, "Don't take music, take embalming." [laughs]

Crawford: He said that?

03-00:54:31
Handy: Yes. He basically said, “Music is not S-H-I-T. He said, “No, don’t take music.

Crawford: What did he mean by that?

03-00:54:40
Handy: Well, basically, music was not a substantial endeavor to take care of yourself, financially. I assume. You know, so take embalming; you’d always work, [laughs] you’d have—

Crawford: Plenty of business.

03-00:54:55
Handy: Yeah, right. [laughs] In the meantime, Milt Jackson got married. And he gave my wife and I his apartment, where he lived for, I think, sixteen years. It was a very small place. But it was fine. It was totally, totally furnished. Including bedding, dishes.

Crawford: Just, “It’s yours?”

03-00:55:30
Handy: And one month’s rent paid. I’ll never forget it [laughs]

Crawford: Where was it?

03-00:55:36
Handy: It was in Harlem, on Morningside Avenue and 115th, right on the corner.

Crawford: So you felt at home.

03-00:55:49
Handy: No, I never felt that, at the time. It was new. Everything was still new. The apartment—I never lived like that, you know? With that many people around. I’d never been to a place as big as New York, except once in Los Angeles. I wasn’t comfortable yet. I never fell in love with New York.

Crawford: It was never the most exciting place for you.

03-00:56:25
Handy: Of course, at times, but there are so many negatives for me in New York. The people, noise. The living condition of many people is terrible.

Crawford: Musically, though, you were all set.

03-00:57:23
Handy: I went there with my whole book of music, my own repertoire. I had my own arrangements. And so all I needed then was some engagements of my own. I had my own music for a quintet. And I expected to play with Richard Williams, a trumpet player whom I mentioned earlier. And we did, for a while. A very short while.

So that was basically it. With Mingus, we finished in January. And in March he called me—I was living in Harlem now—to play at Minton’s Playhouse, which is the place where, virtually, bebop was born. It was where Dizzy, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk had played at those great jam sessions. And oh, Kenny Clarke, Max Roach. You know, you name it. Miles Davis, all those people.

Crawford: Was everything bebop, pretty much?

00:58:31
Handy:

Well, no. I mean, there again, that’s what I was interested in. But I played some of those casuals; we played pretty much bebop. But I did a date where we played some place with Scott La Faro—and Don Friedman—in Queens, where we played in a club, and we just played standards and kept it pretty much close to the melody. Many of those guys, many of us have those skills; we can play all kinds of things.

Crawford: Were audiences pretty sophisticated?

Handy: Hm?

Crawford: Audiences pretty sophisticated?

03-00:59:05
Handy:

Well, not all. New Yorkers get credit for being more sophisticated sometimes than they really are. [laughs]

Crawford: Really?

Handy: Yes, I think they do. We had squares everywhere. And you know, they were “squares,” as such, meaning: not really receptive and as attentive. You didn’t always have their ear. The weekend crowds were usually loud, like they were here and most other places I’ve played.

However, when you consider how big New York is, and how many people are there, they have more sophisticated people; but proportionally, not any more than in some cities in the U.S., and foreign cities.

Crawford: Than audiences here.

03-00:59:49
Handy:

No. We’re getting pretty bad here. We just kind of a bummed out our intellect aesthetically, in the sixties. With young people, when they stopped listening to older people—not only to their parents, but musically, artistically—and now many of them are in their fifties and sixties, and they have pretty much learned from each other, you know. And it’s still kind of embarrassing to hear people who’ve been playing forty years and more play on the level that

they're playing, no matter how rich they are. And some of 'em are not rich at all. You know, they play like that, and they share.

One thing they did is they kind of shared whatever success they had. I think they did, more than we did, because with my group and older, you know, many times those who had really worked much harder and paid a lot more dues and with luck and hard work to become somebody. I don't think it's fair that that never comes up. That younger player is going to make the same money and share everything like some of the kids did in the sixties, with rock groups. Nobody had any more experience than the other guy. And I think it shows.

Crawford: It was just a middling effect.

03-00:61:34

Handy: Kind of the blind leading the sightless.

Crawford: Good break, right there.

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04-00:00:00

Handy: Where were we?

Crawford: I think we had just finished with Mingus.

04-00:00:05

Handy: Yes, well, we were about to get into Minton's Playhouse.

Crawford: Where bebop was born. Let's talk about that.

04-00:00:15

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: Maybe you could talk a little bit about bebop and why anybody who defines bebop defines it quite differently. How much flatted fifths, how much—

04-00:00:32

Handy: Well, one of the things that I remember reading, [chuckles] and probably in *Down Beat* magazine, one of the older players of the swing and pre-swing era referred to the difference between Charlie Parker and the bop era and theirs, he said that the boppers flatted their fifths, and they drank theirs. [they laugh]

Crawford: I think there's a book title in there somewhere.

04-00:01:11

Handy: Yes! [they laugh] That's the music that particularly turned me on at a certain point in my life. Swing was the music that was blues and mostly swing is what I remember as a child. I enjoyed most of what I heard, much of what I heard

on the radio. And then we had a record player and all of that, and one of these— [laughs] even though we had electricity, but we had an old Victrola type console. And I listened to Louis Armstrong, some old tunes by somebody, “Girl of my dreams, I love you,” and yes—

Crawford: They had words, didn't they?

04-00:02:15

Handy:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And [sings] *Ramona*, *da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da*. I remember those songs, when I was a little boy. Belmont, which is a district, white district, that we lived in in Dallas, was where we had that record player. And we had some blues, Big Maceo and Lil Green, “In the Dark.”

I remember I heard later that she was just a girl, singing those songs. And we had Jay McShann's music. We had some of his music. “Hootie Blues” and like that. And later, when we moved to L.A., soon thereafter, we had, I remember, Private Cecil Gant, I believe he was called, with Jay McShann accompany on piano on “Confessing the Blues.” And so, years later, I still remember the solo. I was just a kid. All the entrances and all, I can still hum them.

But they had this guy there named Charlie Parker. And I didn't know who Charlie was— he was a good saxophone player I liked. That solo that he did in “Hootie Blues,” later I found out they did them in Dallas soon thereafter, and we had those recordings.

And then I found out later that during, I believe it was '42 —1942 to '44, give or take a year—because of that feud between the musicians union and the recording industry, a lot of recordings were not so-called “legit.” But I believe that's when Jay McShann and those guys recorded at that time.

So we got to hear things like that, and we got to hear a lot of recordings by African-Americans that were probably not [legitimate]—and I guess, other stuff. We got those recordings that were not supposed to have been made.

Crawford: But they were distributed, even though they weren't commercially distributed.

04-00:04:27

Handy:

Yes. Yes, I had no idea what was going on until not too many years ago. So back to bebop. I was listening. So he was playing those solos then. And then we started to hear Louis Jordan, who was a singer/saxophone player, who had some pretty hip arrangements. They're a little different, a little bit, you know— they weren't the kind of stamp that you would get, that swing and things; they were a little different, using different chords and some different rhythms. Although they were highly blues influenced.

Then I heard Earl Bostick, et cetera. And Lester Young. Especially Lester. To me, he was a little different, very attractive. I didn't hear a lot of him, but I

heard enough. Count Basie Band. And it was not until around '47 that I recall that I really can say that I started to hear the music as such. We didn't have a record player between Dallas, Los Angeles and back to Dallas.

Crawford: So it was mostly radio?

04-00:05:46

Handy:

Yes. My best friend, with whom I'm was still in touch with from time to time, from the fifth grade, had music by Howard McGhee and Flip Phillips. They were playing somewhat a little beyond swing, a little different. And then when I was at St. Peter's Academy—we were there at that time, in Dallas—just across the street there from St. Peter's Academy—they had a juke box, and I heard "Bloomditto" by Charlie Parker. That was really advanced. And "One Bass Hit," Dizzy Gillespie's big band, and "Ool-Ya-Koo." I heard those.

So I was turned onto that music, because what they were doing was just grand stuff. It was beautiful. It was different, and it was good. And so I'd rather than try to define it—I don't know what the hell it is, even now, you know. But when music is great, it takes care of itself. And when people attempt to try and say what it is—I feel I could verbalize something that would be inadequate.

Crawford: I think that's why the definitions are so varied.

Handy:

And there are too many variables in that music, especially music that is constantly changing, like bop does. Because each time we play, someone who's serious about what they're doing and trying to do their best job with whatever they're playing, you're trying to play it different. We're limited to it, because we're human beings. But it is our desire to always play a little something different. Don't play the same solo.

So I can't verbally say this is it, because it keeps changing, and people who are writing about it, no matter how adept and clever they are with words, I know they don't get it. I can't get it, and I've been doing this almost fifty-eight years. And I think I'm pretty good at it. And if I can't—if I don't quite know how to—you know? I kind of know what I'm doing at certain points. And then again, I don't. And so we play—we have rules, very definite rules that we follow from time to time, till we learn how to break them.

Crawford: Yes, that's right. [they laugh]

04-00:08:53

Handy:

You know? So yeah, I don't think I would even attempt to try to say what bebop is. Like Fats Waller said, "Lady, if you have to ask, 'what is it', don't touch it" or something like that.

Crawford: Just stay away from it.

04-00:09:15

Handy: Yeah, just leave it. [laughs]

Crawford: You must've had a great variety of experiences in New York.

04-00:09:22

Handy: I did. Well, I didn't play with a lot of people as some people did. I went to New York, [chuckles] to present my own music. And I only played with Charles for a short while. A few months.

And from to time I'd go back and maybe one gig or so, and record. I recorded with a guy in New York City, a rhythm and blues singer/guitarist. Donald Byrd on trumpet; trombone player, Benny Green. And Howard McGhee on trumpet, and myself on alto; and I don't remember the other people. It wasn't a union recording, we just got paid and that was it. And I didn't do anything else. I didn't do a lot of jingles or—they used to do those audition recordings.

Crawford: Voiceover kinds of things?

04-00:10:30

Handy: Yeah. But I did a minimum of that. And when I did, I usually did it for one or two people. I didn't want to write for singers. I could've done that. I had the training, and so I— My income was really from playing, performing, and doing writing pretty much for myself.

Crawford: You did compose.

04-00:10:54

Handy: Yes, I went there with my own music. All I needed was a gig. I had bands here, combos, small groups I played a lot. I started leading bands in San Francisco, the Bay Area, before I went to New York, so all I needed was just an opportunity. And it came with somebody else for a while. I played a few casuals, parties; and gigged with Kenny Dorham, a few things with Randy before Mingus. And then, so we played Minton's for a month. For March, 1959. Except for three days that he fired me. I called him on being very nasty to Horace Parlan.

Something happened, he said to Horace, "I only hired you because you're handicapped." And I almost, I nearly—I yelled at him. I felt like hitting him with my horn, to be honest, but I waited until everybody left, and I called him on it. He started crying. He was so embarrassed.

But then [laughs] he called me back the next day and said, "I think you should let Jimmy Knepper (trombone) play, finish the gig," you know. So we had about two weeks left at Minton's, I think. And fine, you know.

Crawford: And that was it?

04-00:12:30

Handy: He called me on the third day, and I went back and finished Minton's. We played the whole month of March, 1959.

Crawford: Oh, so you stayed.

04-00:12:40

Handy: Minton's was a bar/club in a seedy hotel. There was nothing special about it. It was smaller than Bop City, by some. And we never had very many people there.

Crawford: Why was that so important? Or why did the great players go to Minton's, if it was—

04-00:13:04

Handy: They went there for the music. Somebody was probably getting paid there; possibly the rhythm section. We were there for a month.

Crawford: And it paid well.

04-00:13:09

Handy: It wasn't great, but I was paying my rent and feeding basically four people and buying a few clothes.

Crawford: Mm-hm. And you seem as if you were never apprehensive, really, about your life and your future.

04-00:13:29

Handy: No, I have to say that I've been very lucky, and blessed with, in a way, dogged determination. But I never thought of it as being dogged, because something seemed to always kind of happen. God has never let me suffer very much, he just made me work for it.

Crawford: Yeah. [they laugh] Well, so you were happy in New York, and you played on.

04-00:13:54

Handy: There were some lean moments, but we managed to get along. And you know, we never went under a certain level of existence there. And I never had to get the tin cup or go out and play on the street. [laughs]

Crawford: How long did you stay?

04-00:14:21

Handy: Overall—let's see, I left in June. I left a month shy of four years. And so we did that. And then I got called. I promised myself I'd never play with him again after that, and he called me the next month, on Sunday morning, April, to play a concert. And he was almost pleading, in a way, and I went.

It turned out I didn't do the concert, because he made me very, very, very angry before the concert. It was about one or two in the afternoon, in the

YMCA, in the area where Lincoln Center is now built. I left before I played, but I found out [laughs] that they didn't get paid. So—

Crawford: You left a big hole.

04-00:15:19

Handy: [laughs] Well, I don't think it was because of my leaving, it was because the venue was so precariously put together. It turns out that the guy who had actually put it together was someone that I got to know in New York, and I liked him. He was a bass player and he moved here.

Twenty-five years later, he gave me ride from a cultural center; we were meeting for something. And he said, "John, are you still angry with me?" I had no idea what he was talking about. And it turned out that he was the guy who was doing a puppet show, and Mingus' quintet was supposed to have gone on afterwards, and he said, "Well, I know nobody got paid." I said, "I didn't even know you were the person responsible."

Crawford: Oh, because you left before this all happened.

04-00:16:11

Handy: Right. I never saw him there. Leslie Girdridge.

Crawford: That wasn't the last time that you played with Mingus.

04-00:16:25

Handy: Oh, no. Oh, no, no. Actually, in March, while we were at Minton's, we did a second recording. And that became one of the best known— at the time, the best thing, and we got the most mileage out of that. It was the Mingus *Ah Um* album, A-H-U-M, that one. And that was when he did things like "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," which has become a classic, and "Better Get It in Your Soul." The tenor saxophone, the solo on there is John Handy's. Many people don't know that's my solo.

Crawford: But you're on the album.

04-00:17:07

Handy: Yeah. It wasn't obvious, because on the album it didn't say who was playing what. There are three saxophone players and they gave the credit to everybody but me, because nobody knew me in New York. They said Shafi Hadi played alto on that, but he did no solos on the whole album, and then they said Booker Ervin. But only Mingus and I are soloing on "Good Bye Pork Pie Hat."

Crawford: And you weren't credited?

04-00:17:33

Handy: No.

Crawford: Oh, that's not fair.

04-00:17:35

Handy: No, well, Mingus' girlfriend was trying to throw a curve at the critics. And my new name for them is cridiots. Not all of them, but some really don't know jack about the music.

Crawford: Well, that's what I wanted to ask about. I don't know how much you want to get into that, but there have been some fine jazz writers.

04-00:17:58

Handy: Well, Diane Dorineck was a friend of his. She did the liner notes on that album. Booker and those guys had been at least in New York longer than I and Shafi Hadi, who had made an album with him, they assumed it was he. Or one of them. So even till this day, that was never corrected on that album. It's already on the liner notes. So yeah, thanks, Diane. [they laugh]

Crawford: That's, no, that's unacceptable.

04-00:18:43

Handy: Yeah. Yeah. She was young; she was my age at the time, and new. I think it was probably the first time she ever wrote any liner notes, and she didn't think about it. She was wanting to make a statement, and she made one for herself. [laughs]

Crawford: He wouldn't have reviewed that?

04-00:19:00

Handy: Charles? I don't think he— you know what I think about this? I'm glad you took it to this length. On the album, when referring to me, Charles basically said he saw me in the Five Spot. Basically, that's it. And that I looked so square, the guys wouldn't let me sit in. Which is a lie and which [laughs] is not true. I'd already played before he arrived at the club, and I knew them. And he didn't remember that he'd asked me to come to New York with him a year earlier in San Francisco.

Crawford: Well, you were shortchanged.

04-00:19:43

Handy: Yes. You know, because it was not true. People read what they read, and it's been in the history books from time to time—I told you I had the horn-rimmed glasses and I was professorial looking, or student looking. And a lot of guys—Gigi Gryce dressed like that, and Benny Golson did, and Jerome Richardson, and Dizzy. That's the way we dressed. Maybe he thought I looked square, whatever that seems to imply. He hardly ever dressed up.

Crawford: But that was the explanation, in any case.

04-00:20:22

Handy:

Yeah. Which I never accepted, because the people who said someone looked or was square—many of them were druggers, and you know, druggers have no prestige or nothing going for them but their drugs. And whatever a square was, they certainly might've been, would've been better off, had they been a little squarer, and many of them [would have] lived a lot longer.

Crawford:

Was the drug scene pretty evident?

04-00:20:46

Handy:

Not for me. For years, starting here when I was about eighteen—seventeen, even, but especially when I got out of high school—I was on my own, because my family was in Ohio. Cleveland. I always did prefer people who had a certain amount of self-respect and self-presence, and who cared about themselves, and people who wanted to learn and give and be part of something that's positive.

And all the music I loved, that I started to love and become more involved in, I was very disappointed when I heard about marijuana and reefer, whatever they called it in those earlier days. I was very disappointed when I found out that they weren't doing it just to celebrate, maybe on the weekend or a big gig. [laughs] When I found out that these damn fools were doing it every day, it was a big let down. I found out that all these guys were getting high every day and that they were listless. And then, for someone who could hardly learn his own name, to call me a square, I wasn't going to take that. I usually ignored it and walked away from it. When I went to New York, I was twenty-five years old.

Crawford:

I think that was part of it, don't you?

04-00:22:15

Handy:

Yeah, you know. And I was square, as they say; I went to school. I didn't really go to school because I had to, or because I went there to learn how to play bebop or symphonic music; I went there to elevate my own self-esteem. I just wanted to learn. My interest was music, but I took courses in everything, many things. Science, mathematics and all kinds of literature, humanities, etc.

Crawford:

Well, you were rare. You were rare in the music field, weren't you, really? And people would've picked up on that, because you're so articulate.

04-00:22:53

Handy:

Well, that's why I want to try to get back to that question about the drugs. The most I ever saw drugs was between eighteen and nineteen, when I moved to San Francisco. While I was enrolled in school, there were some people who were becoming well known. Some of were well known. Ben Webster, Gerald Wilson, Ernie Lewis, and like that. Mind you, I didn't see them do anything like that. But there were some younger people who were my age and some were using heroin.

All I had to do was just see what they were like. There were a couple of musicians who became friends of sorts, and we joked and talked and wrestled like kids. I found myself, as small as I was, and as young as I was, able to pin two guys my age, and one was a lot bigger. Something's wrong here, you know. I'm not that strong. They were using heroin. Not that I would've done it anyhow, just—this was very sad.

One of them is dead, let's see, three years later. He was only a year-and-a-half older than I was. One of those particular guys was Sonny Clark. And so by the time I went to New York I had a clean reputation. Addicts can look at you and tell you are not a user.

Crawford: I'm sure that made it harder for you, because you stood out.

04-00:24:36

Handy: Well, many of the people who were famous and had gigs were drug users. You know, they didn't always call you. Charles didn't use. Charles Mingus was not a druggie in that way. He tried to dredge up a nickname for me, because there was Bird and there was Dizzy. He called me the Penguin. [they laugh] Well, I didn't accept it, you know.

Crawford: How did you not accept it?

04-00:25:17

Handy: I didn't want the name "Penguin" because —penguins are slow and always look like they are wearing tuxedos, and I'm very physical, not slow and love clothes.

Crawford: Very elegant.

04-00:25:25

Handy: Well, [penguins]—that's what our tuxedos look like, but—[laughs].

Crawford: That's true. So you never were nicknamed.

04-00:25:38

Handy: Oh, no, no. No, I wouldn't accept it. John Handy's fine. And oh, my nickname at home, with the family, I'm Jim.

Crawford: Oh?

04-00:25:49

Handy: It has nothing to do with James or John, I'd rather— But yeah. Suffice it to say that I found my way in New York. There were many guys like myself; I'm not unique totally like that. There're are wonderful people in New York and the world over, who are wonderful, wonderfully talented, great players, who have raised families, pay taxes, and are awake and who could play their asses off. Clifford Brown was one. People didn't have to do what Charlie Parker did, and it didn't make them play any better. Mr. Parker didn't tell those guys

to make damn fools of themselves or to use drugs. He told them *not* to use them.

Crawford: Mm-hm. Well, so what happened after that?

04-00:26:50

Handy: After Mingus? I really stopped playing with him pretty much, only for special things. I did play with him to open the Village Gate. First jazz there, I believe. We played the Village Gate, probably in 1960. I played a week or so there. And then we played in a place called the Showplace. That was around 1960, also. That's where *The Fantasticks*, the musical, developed, in that club.

The jobs with him were very far and in between. Altogether, I probably played with him four months, four-and-a-half at the most. I'd do recordings. We did a number of recordings. We did a TV show, *Frankie and Johnnie*, for the Robert Herridge Theater..

We did actually, the music of *Frankie and Johnny*, if you recall; Charles wrote music for the theme *Frankie and Johnny*, with Melissa Hayden, the ballerina. She was a star dancer in that. [pause] And during the interim, I recorded my first album for Roulette Records in '59.

So I already had my recording going. We recorded the second [], after the Miles Davis Quintet. The San Francisco Bay Area musicians could not grasp the concept.

Crawford: And who was on that recording?

04-00:29:16

Handy: My recording? My first one?

Crawford: Yes.

04-00:29:18

Handy: Richard Williams on trumpet; Roland Hanna—he wasn't Sir Roland Hanna at the time [chuckles]—Roland Hanna, on piano; George Tucker, bass. Robert Fuhlrod. Is that it? Five? And myself on alto and tenor saxophones. And Bob petered out. [laughs] Roy Haynes, also, on drums.

I worked the whole summer of 1959 with Randy Weston. Four months, I think it was. Sixteen weeks, starting in June, at the Five Spot, with Randy Weston. I really played with him before I did with Charles, and I played a little more with him, because it was six nights. And we played there for a long time, opposite Mal Waldron's trio. He was there eight months. [chuckles] He would back up different people coming in. They always had a guest or two. Pepper Adams or Donald Byrd would come in and play. Pepper Adams, a great baritone player; Donald Byrd, a great trumpeter. I think they were all out of Detroit.

Crawford: How was life for you when you were playing so intense a schedule.

04-00:32:18

Handy: Well, it was wonderful, especially with Randy. It was like a breath of fresh air. I could breathe. I was playing with a maverick. He played different music. I enjoyed his music; it wasn't crazy. It was different, but not crazy. With Mingus, things could sometimes [be crazy]. When something was working, he'd make sure it didn't work. [laughs] You know.

Crawford: What a bully.

04-00:32:41

Handy: Yeah, he was a bully in many ways.

Crawford: You mean to say that when something got polished, he would turn it around?

04-00:32:48

Handy: He would sometimes, when you were playing, he might stop playing right in the midst of accompanying you. Or he might change the rhythm with no notice, nothing. And he would sometimes even stop and have you playing by yourself, alone. So you never knew emotionally or artistically where you, rather, where he was, or what he might do.

Crawford: And that's plenty uncomfortable.

04-00:33:15

Handy: Yes, it was uncomfortable. And besides, he never gave us the music. We never knew what the hell we were doing. We had to simply go by what we heard. And it was, to me, insulting, because I went there as a musician who was preparing himself—I wasn't the most experienced, but I knew the format, by which we all played. That's why they became much more academic, in that they knew the notes that belonged there, and it was up to you to create and bring some emotion to the music.

With Charles, there are times that it was okay, you could hear some of the stuff, but a lot of it was very difficult. Sometimes it was beautiful. But if it was beautiful, he made sure it didn't stay there very long. It didn't last—

Crawford: What was that?

04-00:34:20

Handy: I have no idea. I felt, in my layman's evaluation of it, [it was] a mental illness. I thought he was mentally ill. I thought he was carrying a lot of baggage. I had heard a lot about him, and expected some of that. But seeing him, playing with him and talking to him—Charles had problems. There's no doubt about it. He was carrying a big bundle of baggage.

Crawford: Did writers pick up on that?

04-00:34:53

Handy: No, they didn't seem to. As a matter of fact, they seemed to have admired his antics. That's why he's so famous. The perversity of a lot of what we're interested in seemed to have started then. They seem to have admired somebody who was doing something crazy. I'd like to think of myself as being able to [chuckles] try and not follow that same format in my own behavior. I don't do that at the expense of people playing with me, where I feel I could say anything to them, and try to push round pegs into square holes.

Crawford: Sounds troubled.

04-00:35:58

Handy: Yeah.

Crawford: But Randy Weston was a different sort.

04-00:36:00

Handy: Totally different. Wonderful. He didn't want me to play alto, though. I couldn't play alto with him; I had to play tenor. I was back strictly on tenor saxophone. I realized I was substituting for somebody for two weeks. And the guy wasn't able to get his union card, so I got the gig. He kept me, and it became the focal point. We were at the Five Spot all that time. And everybody came in there and played. Thelonious Monk was in at the club at least once a night. [chuckles] Along with the Baroness [Baroness Pannonica "Nica" de Koenigswarter, friend and patron of many jazz musicians].

Crawford: Did you play with Monk?

04-00:36:44

Handy: No.

Crawford: No, you never played with him.

04-00:36:44

Handy: No, never. I got very close, it appeared that I was going to after he got his cabaret card—[but] he lost it. He had lost it, and the people at the Five Spot, the club that he had actually put on the map, they worked for about three years, I believe, to help him to acquire it again. And they did.

Crawford: What did it take?

04-00:37:19

Handy: It took all kind of things—money, legal maneuvers, etc., that I don't really know, because I wasn't privy to any of it. So I wasn't involved in it. I knew Monk. And Monk was different, too. I think I told you—he paid me a high, a great compliment during that engagement with Randy.

Anyhow, they were so successful with that club that they were able, thanks to Monk opening that club a couple of years earlier, to open a bigger and much nicer club, only a few blocks away, called the Jazz Gallery.

As it turned out, Monk was scheduled to open the new club, as he had just gotten his card. He hadn't played for years in a club. And of course, he was their opening act. So again, it turns out that my to-be-second-wife was doing a little bookkeeping, for both clubs, as just kind of a lark.

She found out about this, and let me know about it, and spoke up for me and said, "Well, you know—" Monk was one person I did want to play with. Monk or Miles. For maybe two weeks. [chuckles] Well, he was interested in me, because he had complimented me very highly while I was with Randy Weston a year earlier. So this was '60 or '61, September 16th. I think you can quote me on that. So it turned out that instead of playing with Monk, I was able to open for Monk, with my own band, which I preferred anyhow.

Crawford: When did you form your own band?

04-00:39:22

Handy: I'd already been playing gigs earlier with my own band. I was in New York, I'd played the Five Spot and Birdland with my own band. I had a recording contract too. The first job we played was Birdland, which is, like, the club to play. My first gig was there. It was '60 or '61. I'd opened there with Dinah Washington and the Bill Evans Trio, and the John Handy Quintet. So I'd already been there, you know. I was just beginning to be a bandleader.

Crawford: And that was '61?

04-00:40:16

Handy: I believe that was '60. I know it was '60. But Monk—this is very funny. This is August, right? The time was August 16th. Summertime, in other words. Everything was ready in the nightclub but the cooling system. [laughs] And so they opened the club. It was sweltering. People were standing in line, almost a half-block long. So I went on and I started to play, and finished what I thought was the set.

I'd started to take an intermission, and the owner came up and said, "Monk hasn't shown, would you play a couple more pieces?" And we did, reluctantly. We played them and got off. I didn't ask. I didn't care. I got off. And I walked up the street, where I knew there was a soda fountain. It was very dark, and it was very cool and nice.

I walked in and there was only one person in there. I could see this white hat. It was Thelonious Monk [laughs] sitting in the soda fountain. And he said, "How many sets have y'all played?" I started laughing, I said, "Man, you're supposed to be on the bandstand." Nobody was in there but the two of us.

Crawford: What was going on?

04-00:41:52

Handy: He was doing what he wanted. He didn't want to be there at the time. He was being cool. [laughs] So I sat there—I think he walked out before I did. I had something cool, and I went back to the club. And Monk wasn't on the bandstand, so I went in and I didn't say anything about it. I don't think I saw him up there, but I know he went that way. So we went on again. And we played a couple tunes, and the guy came and said, "Monk is here." So he went on and played a set. I don't know whether we played again that night. But it was the funniest thing.

Crawford: Was that typical of Monk?

04-00:42:42

Handy: I don't know if it was at that time, but it became somewhat part of—I won't say his act, because he and Miles went through periods of not showing up. They were apparently drawing crowds who came to see if they *would* show up.

Crawford: Right. People do like the excitement factor. [they laugh] Will he or won't he?

04-00:43:06

Handy: I'd never work again, if I ever did that. And then after he went on, I couldn't believe this; it was great. I wanted to hear him play. I don't believe I'd ever heard him play before, in person. So you know, I was really entranced.

Monk played the first piece. And after they played the melody, Charlie Rouse, the saxophone player, started to take a solo. Monk got up and started dancing. And I'm thinking, all this hot weather, he's doing some spastic, creative moves that were unique.

So I'm here on the floor laughing. [laughs] I loved Monk. Monk was, you know, a very sweet, seemingly innocent person. I never knew of him having been mean to anybody.

Crawford: Oh, that's good to know.

04-00:44:02

Handy: Yeah.

Crawford: And such a distinct style. There's nobody like him.

04-00:44:05

Handy: Oh, totally unique. And so he was there, and whenever they went on, I sat there and listened, because it was a "listen in creativity" whenever he played. We loved him. And it would've been an honor to play with him.

Crawford: But it just never happened.

04-00:44:26

Handy: No, I had my own gigs. I didn't want to play with him that much. [laughs] No, I didn't really go to New York, as I said, to play with anybody for long. Luckily, I did very well for myself.

Crawford: Were you touring during this time?

04-00:44:44

Handy: No. I hadn't toured, I'd played a few things out of [town]— I started playing little things in colleges. And for some reason, with some of the write-ups that I was getting, there were guys who were in schools who were jazz fans or becoming jazz fans. So I played some concerts. In Lafayette College, for instance.

My first real touring was in '61, when I went to Europe with John Mehegan, a guy who wrote one of the earliest, most comprehensive jazz books, the book that I would've written, so that's why I never wrote. [they laugh] Never wrote a book on jazz improvisation. His book was very much like what I would have written.

Crawford: Well, you had taught, but were you thinking of writing then?

04-00:45:50

Handy: Oh, yes, because it was revealed to me in a number of ways what was going on with the music and how to understand, how to approach the chord progressions, the harmonies, and corresponding scales to chords.

Crawford: Who's written the best book about that?

04-00:46:17

Handy: Well, he had then, but after he did it I was still pretty young, just getting into New York and trying to get myself together, my career. John did it. John Mehegan had already done it. He helped to convey the concept. I guess.

Crawford: What about the tour?

04-00:46:37

Handy: Okay. John Mehegan was a pianist/teacher, was teaching at Juilliard, teaching a jazz course, mostly for piano players. It was through his connection there with Pan Am Airways that the tour came about. It involved the U.S. government, the Grey Tours Line, Greyhound Bus Lines. This was when Kennedy was president.

Crawford: One of those State Department tours?

04-00:47:10

Handy: Yeah. But his connection, I believe, was with a Pan Am exec who was, I believe, a student at Juilliard, in that jazz piano class. And then in the Gray Line tourist buses in New York. The Gray Line, you would take the tour buses

throughout the city. The intent for this tour was to lure European tourists to this country. To lure them here. [laughs] It was a five weeks tour. We started in England. We took a real Greyhound bus. That was when they were advertising ninety-nine days for ninety-nine dollars, on the Greyhound bus.

Crawford: Really, that's what they told you, that they wanted you to attract tourists?

04-00:48:09

Handy: Well, no, they didn't. You know, they would never be that open and honest.

Crawford: [chuckles] You were goodwill ambassadors.

04-00:48:16

Handy: Yes. You know, we were goodwill ambassadors, which again, we weren't getting goodwill ambassadors' pay, so that's one way of not paying you is—we were only part of the whole package. Mind you, we were flown over by Pan Am to England. When we got there, we had the Greyhound bus. And we had a Texas Cowboy, Jack "Tex" Maddox, who was an All-American basketball player, and foreman for a 250,000-cattle ranch. So we had a beauty queen, we had customs and immigration officials, national forest rangers, et cetera.

Crawford: Who was your sponsor?

04-00:49:15

Handy: All of those that were named, apparently. And we had a representative from the president's office.

Crawford: Kennedy was very big for this, wasn't he?

04-00:49:27

Handy: I think so, because he did, I believe, have the first jazz, or at least modern jazz, group in the White House. The guy who led that band was one of my students, Paul Winters.

Crawford: Did you play in the White House?

04-00:49:43

Handy: No, no.

Crawford: In the Kennedy White House?

04-00:49:43

Handy: I didn't, we never went there. We went only to Europe.

Crawford: That's good, that's interesting.

04-00:49:49

Handy: So we had the Jazz Quartet, John Mehegan was the leader, and he had just married a blueblood lady. Well, he was on his honeymoon on the tour. So we

had Julian Euell, our bass player and a good friend of mine. And our drummer was fourteen years old at the time, Barry Miles.

Julian actually became the director, the first African American, I believe, to direct a major museum, an art museum. He was here at the Oakland Museum for three or four years.

Crawford: What's the last name?

04-00:50:45

Handy: E-U-E-L-L, Euell. Julian. He was a fine bass player. He's on my third Roulette Records album. As a matter of fact. Julian grew up in Harlem and when he got out of the Army, he acquired a masters degree from Columbia. [He] raised two sets of twins. They were born when he was about seventeen, and he raised them. And he's retired. He went to the Smithsonian for thirteen years, before he came here. So we talk. We're still in touch.

Crawford: Interesting.

04-00:51:27

Handy: So where was I? Oh, we're in Europe. So we toured England, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Holland.a

Crawford: Denmark?

04-00:51:48

Handy: No, not with that group. I left that tour when I finished, and went to Scandinavia alone. But we went to seven countries in five weeks. We spent two-and-a-half of those weeks in Germany alone. It was very interesting, because we'd only been out of war sixteen years with them.

Crawford: Did you go to Berlin?

04-00:52:28

Handy: No, I didn't go then. I saw the bullet holes from the fighting years later.

Crawford: And how was the reception?

04-00:52:41

Handy: Well, understand this, they didn't feature the jazz group. We were the only thing, pretty much, that they *didn't* have in Europe. Jazz. They had jazz, too, but it was "come to America," you know, "visit." We had the national park ranger, who showed pictures of our national parks. It was impressive.

Crawford: Oh, it was a package, more than just jazz.

04-00:53:10

Handy: Yeah. And those were the people a tourist was going to deal with at customs and immigration. A beauty queen and even a greyhound dog were with us! [laughs]

Crawford: I certainly hope you have photographs of this tour.

04-00:53:21

Handy: I do! [they laugh] We went to Amsterdam and saw the ladies of the evening sitting in windows in the neighborhoods. I couldn't believe it, but there they were. We finished in five weeks. In some ways, it was a very nice introduction to touring Europe. We musicians had *carte blanche*; we were treated royally.

Crawford: They love jazz, don't they?

04-00:54:02

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: Did that get you more invitations to go back?

04-00:54:15

Handy: Actually, not really. During the interim, before I was on that tour, I had gotten a call from a young guy from Stockholm, Claes Fellbom, C-L-A-E-S F-E-L-L-B-O-M. Well, Claes was eighteen years old, and he had been making movies since he was fifteen. They'd been shown on Swedish television. He took a composition of mine, on my second album, *Boo's Ups and Downs* was the name of it. It was kind of portraying the tragic life of a very talented musician, female, who used to live here.

Anyhow, he made a movie the length of that composition. And he called me, and it just so happened that I was going to Europe, and he acquired about six concerts for me in Scandinavia, six or seven. So after the first tour, the one that I was on, the U.S. tour, I went to Scandinavia and played there. I was there for two weeks.

He also got me bookings in Denmark, about three or four there. I didn't see him again, though, until the early eighties, when I went on tour over there. He's a very well known TV personality. His wife is now a symphony conductor, and they did *Aida*.

Crawford: What's the name?

04-00:56:04

Handy: Oh, I don't remember her name. Claes Fellbom. They did *Aida*. It's a *mammoth* undertaking, and his wife conducted the orchestra. It was *just* incredible. I went to their house and they showed it to me. I was glad to get the first tour over with. It was pleasant enough, because we were treated very

well, generally, the musicians were. And everybody else was, too, I guess. But after five weeks, you get a little tired.

Crawford: Hotel living.

04-00:56:44

Handy: Yes. Seven weeks of it. I remember coming home on Thanksgiving Day of '61.

Crawford: I think we're going to stop there. That's the end of our second hour, believe it or not.

04-00:57:00

Handy: Yes, I'm almost out of New York. One more year, and I'm out of New York.

Crawford: One more year in New York. All right. Well, wonderful. But more to do.

04-00:57:09

Handy: Okay.

Interview 3: December 15, 2006
Begin Audiofile 5 12-15-2006.mp3

05-00:00:00

Crawford: This is December 15th, 2006, interview number three for the oral history jazz series, with Mr. John Handy. Last time, we had you coming back from New York, 1962. Was it an automatic decision to come back to California, and to San Francisco?

05-00:00:18

Handy: No, actually, to come back here was a decision that I— Well, actually, it was not a decision that I made to come back. I only came back for what I thought was three weeks, from New York, to visit my family.

And more importantly at that time, there was something strange about my having not received my diploma from San Francisco State, which I should have received in 1958, when I left. Later I found out that they said I didn't graduate, and I'd have to come back to school and all that. So I did. Twice.

I came back out here twice, and to New York City College. They said, "But you'll have to come and apply in person." And that's why I came out. And so then by the third time— they still didn't give me my degree.

Crawford: What was the problem?

05-00:01:22

Handy: I'll put it this way. I was not a great student. But I had, under that system, qualified with the grade point qualifications and had the units I needed. So I'll put it this way, without getting into it. Normally, you graduate with a B.A., with 124 units. I finished with 172. I'm still angry about that. I'm very angry about it.

But that's why I ended up here, back here in the Bay Area, because I went back to school. I said I would stay there until I took every damn course in the music department, until I got my degree. I finally did, in 1963, instead of '58. And so I stayed here and started to—as early as '62, the summer of '62, I started to perform. Because at that time, I had a few of my own recordings, and of course, those with Charles Mingus. And that makes you employable, it makes you— you know, it gets you publicity.

Crawford: New York made a big difference. Did it?

05-00:02:43

Handy: It made a big difference, yeah. So I came back as a, quote "name" unquote, as a performer, a jazz musician, if you will. I started to play in Berkeley. I played jobs that I didn't get before in the Jazz Workshop and what later became the Both/And, then called the Stereo Club. And I played there for quite a while. And casuals.

People were still dancing to the music, social dancing. I played a number of dances for friends, people with whom I'd gone to school, college, university there, here in San Francisco, SF State. And they would hire me to play dances. I played standard songs, jazz, even jazz bebop tunes by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. They were dancing, in those days still, to that kind of music. And so I decided to stay here after I'd started going back to school, from '62 to '64. I always played in the concert band at the University. I enjoyed that all the time.

Crawford: Oh, you talked about that, yes.

05-00:04:11

Handy: The summer that I came out and attended SF State when I was still unofficially a resident of New York, I came out and took some courses to do what they had dictated to me, the administration part of the college, during the summer, the band. I loved always playing in the concert band. I remember in that course, we went through a lot of literature, sight reading a lot of different composers' music. And I really enjoyed that.

Crawford: Where you composing then?

05-00:04:53

Handy: Not for a group that large. I had my own music for smaller groups like the quintets, mostly. So that's what I did, and my first composition for a large concert band—90 pieces—was actually in '63, early '63. I forgot about that.

Crawford: Talk about that.

05-00:05:21

Handy: Well, I didn't make the first deadline, as part of the concert band. And since I was John Handy and a mature musician at that time, compared to a lot of other people, and I had a name, so to speak, to an extent, and I had toured with the San Francisco State University band, which took place in between semesters each year—by the way, I did my first tour between '52 and '53.

But it was now '62 and '63. I was featured. I had an emergency operation, so I couldn't finish my composition. So a friend of mine, who was a fantastic arranger/composer, the late Jerry Cournoyer, C-O-U-R-N-O-Y-E-R. Jerry arranged "Stella by Starlight" for concert band. And it was wonderful. It was beautiful. It was a flag waver for San Francisco State University wherever I played with them. I even did it on their formal concerts, at least two or three times here in town.

Later that semester, I composed my first piece. A large piece for that band. It was dedicated to a Swedish lady who was the mother of a young fellow whom name I mentioned earlier, Claes Fellbom. His mom was a pianist/painter. Going back a couple years now—when I first went to Sweden, he booked me. I stayed in an apartment in his father's office. He had two great apartments,

and one was empty. I was there for two weeks. And they used to invite me to dinner almost every night. So after dinner—she was a great cook, and the family was just wonderful, a close-knit family—Claes’s older brother played cello, the mom played piano. I had my flute with me, and I used to do duets with her. And I got to know quite a bit about Swedish music.

I found out later about “Dear Old Stockholm”—which is the name of a jazz piece that Miles Davis and Stan Getz did, but Miles made it very famous with an arrangement that he had, with a great quintet a little while earlier—the name of the piece was actually “Varoomland.” I used to play things with her, just to the delight of— just ourselves. So what happened is she painted a beautiful picture of flowers for me. Her name was Birgitta.

I still have this painting of flowers. A lot of blues, and yellow flowers. And so I wrote a piece “A Portrait of Birgitta.” We performed it at school that year. And I was surprised. It apparently impressed a lot of the young composers there who were taking composition as a major. And some of them wanted to take private lessons from me, and it was because of that piece. I did it because I’d had orchestration and counterpoint.

Crawford: You hadn’t studied that formally, had you, orchestration?

05-00:09:33

Handy:

I’d studied the semesters, yes. So although I was a clarinet major, since I was short on graduating, I took a lot of courses. I took composing and counterpoint and orchestration. I did all that. Basically, what they taught there was for one to become a music band teacher. Orchestra or band.

Crawford: That was the focus of the program.

05-00:10:17

Handy:

Yes. Because of that, I’d taken woodwind classes, brass classes, string classes. Almost all the instruments that are in the orchestra, except harp and organ. I even had vocal and piano classes. So yes, I took a range. More than a lot of people did. And when we had to write in the style of a particular composer, I would do that. But I wouldn’t transcribe one of their compositions for orchestra, I would do an original piece. I thought I’d learn more by doing that myself, writing my own music.

And so as a result, it paid off later. I’m going to skip ahead for a minute. In 1970, Martin Snipper, who was the president of the San Francisco Arts Commission, Martin and I were trying to make jazz the official music of the San Francisco political situation, of the city. I’m not saying this quite correctly, but you get the gist, city government. For visitors or for special holidays, instead of just having a concert band in the park, they would have jazz.

We got within, I believe, two votes from the supervisors. I know who one of them is, and he's gone. So the idea didn't happen. But during the time we were conferring on this, I went in the office one morning, and Martin said, "Guess what, John? We're gonna have jazz at the Pops." Something like that. That's how he put it.

Crawford: The San Francisco Symphony Pops.

05-00:12:46

Handy:

Yes, with the symphony orchestra. Arthur Fiedler was the conductor then. And I said, "Well, fine. Great. Who you going to have?" [laughs] He said, "Well, Al Hirt or Herb Alpert." I said, "If you're going to have jazz trumpet players, why don't you get somebody who's a *great* jazz trumpet player?" And he said, "Who would you suggest?" Those guys were fine players, both of them fine musicians. But they certainly weren't in the class—they'd be the first to [admit that]. And of course, Al Hirt's gone, unfortunately, a great trumpet player, technician and all.

But I suggested Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Freddie Hubbard, in that order. And he asked me, "What would they play?" I said, "Well, I don't know." Because most of us guys who do what I do and what they do normally don't have a composition that would feature them with a huge orchestra, a symphony orchestra. So I didn't know. I said, "There are lots of other people who could probably do that." And he said, "Who else would you suggest?" I said, "Myself." [chuckles] He said, "What would you play?" I said, "I'd write something." He gave me a quizzical look. And I said, "By the way, this Saturday, the San Francisco State symphonic band is playing a composition that I wrote, if you'd like to come by and hear it."

So he did. It, I think, took place Saturday night. So the next Monday morning, I believe it was, I got a call from him. He said, "Do you still want to do that, compose a piece for the Pops orchestra?" I said, "Of course." I said, "Sure." And he said, "Well, you have it." So that's how I got the commission." And of course, I waited till the last minute, the last two weeks, to write it. I almost went blind.

Crawford: How long a piece was this?

05-00:15:11

Handy:

It's approximately twenty-one minutes long.

Crawford: And Fiedler was the conductor.

05-00:15:17

Handy:

Arthur Fiedler was the conductor.

Crawford: Did you consult with him?

05-00:15:21

Handy:

Oh, yes, we did. Arthur Fiedler was not, to be honest, very nice. Not nice at all, to be honest. He was really very uncomplimentary and not accommodating. And he didn't want to do it. He was afraid of it. It was new, and there was improvisation in the music, a lot of it. Or most of it, I'd say.

Crawford:

What is the format of the piece?

05-00:15:49

Handy:

Well, there are three movements. And a full orchestra. Everybody was involved, at some point. We had a verbal meeting, and he went into the dressing room and looked at it, and he was really—I don't want to say a bad thing, but he was not nice, to the point where I was really pushed in trying to be respectful to the guy, who was at the time, almost forty years older than I. I think he was seventy-six; I was thirty-seven. He kept pushing, saying things that didn't pertain to that.

Crawford:

Did he find it difficult?

05-00:16:36

Handy:

Well, I'll put it this way. He was scared by it, that's what it was. I was told by some of the managers here that he didn't like to try new things. I can understand it; he was seventy-six years old. For music where every note wasn't written—but the whole format was there. There were parts that I had written, and some parts that I improvised. But the orchestra was always his; he had something to do right through all of it. He was the conductor, and I understood that.

He had an engagement, I believe, before the actual concert, and he told the concertmaster, Jake Krachmalnik, to take over. I heard him say, "If it doesn't work, we won't do it." He pushed the wrong button with me, to be honest. I didn't care who he was, to talk the way he did, in that manner, to me was not right. I told some of the managers, and I said, "I'm a guest, as he is. I'm not in the orchestra, and I don't want to be treated that way. I'm trying to be as respectful as I can." So Jake took us through it, when he wasn't there. And [snaps fingers] right through it—no glitches!

Crawford:

They had it.

Handy:

Totally. Yes. And Jake understood it. So he told him, apparently, that it was fine, and just before we started to rehearse, he and I went into his dressing room, and he starts, "*Look at this! Look!* The bars are too close." There were two bars out of a piece that lasted twenty-two minutes! I spoke up and I said, "Mr. Fiedler, I know you're musician enough to know that's a hand-written score. This is not [done by] machine, and I know you can do it. Those bars are not a problem." I said, "You're musician enough to understand that." And he's losing a little patience. Then at one point, he said, "Speak English." And that did it. He said, "Speak English" to me. And I said, "Mr. Fiedler—

Crawford: What did he mean by that?

05-00:19:06

Handy:

I don't know, but I know what I felt, what I thought he meant. I didn't care what he meant. It was not what he was supposed to have said to me. I said, "To my knowledge, my ancestors came here as early as 1639. And I believe you're a foreigner." I said, "I speak English. I can speak the King's English, if I choose." But at this point, I said, "You speak with a German clip. So let's just not get into that." And he said, "[makes barking sounds]."

So he stopped, and we went on to start to rehearse. He had his baton ready to go, and he stopped the orchestra. I was up front as a soloist, and he turned around and he said, "I don't really like Louis Armstrong." I'm the only African American there, and I'm looking at this sea of at least a hundred musicians and other people on the side. Well, I'd just gotten tired of him. I said, "Well, I *love* Louis Armstrong." I said it loud enough for people to hear it. I said, "Louis Armstrong has done more for American and world music than a lot of people I know." I looked at him when I said it. [laughs] I turned and I saw people kind of looking down, but they could see.

"By the way," I said, "not only is his trumpet playing innovative, but also his singing." I said, "Brass players," loud enough— "Do you know what a lip slur is?" And I know anybody who plays brass, and especially trumpet, trombone and French horn players know [that]. I said, "Come on, man!" I just said it that way, because there were about six people there who took classes with me at SF State, so I knew some of them. Well, the first horn player, Sabatini, held up his hand, and he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, you have Louis Armstrong to thank for that."

Fiedler started again. Stopped another time. And in the third movement, there was a slow part in there that he said, "Mm. It sounds very Jewish." [chuckles] So we did the concert, and I'm told that we broke all attendance records at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium for the Pops Concert Series, which was in its twenty-fifth year.

Crawford: That's what you said.

05-00:21:35

Handy:

Yes. It was at the Civic Center, Civic Auditorium.

Crawford: *Civic Auditorium*? That's even bigger than the opera house, isn't it?

05-00:21:41

Handy:

Civic Auditorium. It's quite a bit bigger.

Crawford: It was done again.

05-00:21:45

Handy: And it was done here. It was very successful. You know, people, we turned away—

Crawford: What were the years?

05-00:21:55

Handy: 1970, July 16th. 1970. There were dignitaries from the city who came, in fact. I've never had so many people come and congratulate me. I think we got four standing ovations. Like Monterey. Same four. We had some words just before the concert. [laughs] I came in, and I didn't wear a tuxedo, I wore a well-tailored suit. It was on a Thursday night, I'm not part of the orchestra, and I don't know, I was still youngish and maybe a little arrogant in some ways, and not even realizing it. I won't say arrogant, and I didn't do it to be defiant—nobody told me I had to wear one. So I wore a really fine tailored suit. The doorman who let me in, by the way, he didn't know me. He said, "What do you want?" And I said—

Crawford: "I'm only the composer." [laughs]

05-00:23:09

Handy: I finally said, "Well," I said, "I'm John Handy." He was an older man, and he said, "Oh, Mr. Handy. Well, *come in*." You know. So it didn't bother me. I came into the dressing room, Arthur was there—there are three dressing rooms—he was in the open area. And he said, "Mm. You're not wearing a tuxedo." I said, "No, I'm not." I said, "I don't like tuxedos. They look like penguins." [laughs] That's what I said. Then I thought, I didn't have to say that. But that's what I said. We both sort of went close to the stage, and we could see. "We have a full house," he said. He said, "We sold out. And they all came to see you." Well, I thought he was really kind of putting me in my place. I really kind of thought that. So I didn't say anything to that. As it turned out, I suppose some did come to see me.

:

And when we came off, after the standing ovations, after the four, we came back to our dressing rooms and they took me to take three bows. The orchestra was to go on for the third set. Well, during the interim, the little man that didn't want to let me in, came in and he said, "Mr. Handy, would you please come out and say something to all these people?" I looked out in the hallway, and I'm pretty good with numbers. I think there were at least 350 people in the hallway, waiting to congratulate me. And the orchestra still had another set. So by virtue of that, it was one of the most successful performances—the most successful pops concerts in San Francisco.

Joe Scafidi was the orchestra manager, and I was told that he recommended my playing the composition, to perform with the New Orleans Philharmonic. And I did. I played it. And I played it with the Santa Barbara Symphony, the Stockton Symphony, at the jazz festival, and at a number of colleges, and with the Bohemian [Club] Symphony Orchestra. [laughs]

The Doctors' Symphony—I played it three times with them, including our collaborating with the L.A. Doctors' Symphony.

Crawford: Where are they located?

05-00:25:58

Handy: Here and in Los Angeles. The local orchestra is now called the Parnassus Symphony.

Crawford: Okay. Oh, sure, I know. I know that. And you've written other things for them, I think.

05-00:26:07

Handy: Well, I premiered another concerto with them in June, 2004. [Del Handy: "Wasn't that the UCLA Doctors Symphony?" "No, USC. The concert was at USC, but it's the L.A. area Doctors Symphony."]

Crawford: Well, when you came back to San Francisco, did you move back to where you had been, your old neighborhood?

05-00:26:34

Handy: Basically, my old neighborhood. I came back, got married, and we bought a house. Although I still felt I lived in New York; we still had an apartment in New York. We eventually let somebody take it over.

Crawford: The Fillmore and the Western Addition, were they changing then?

05-00:26:57

Handy: Well, they were changing, but I wasn't aware of much of it. I really wasn't. I was so busy. I got very active, became very active in '63 to early '65, in the civil rights movement.

Crawford: Talk about that.

05-00:27:15

Handy: My wife and I both did. I believe we were with the first eleven people arrested for civil disobedience. To fight for fair housing for minorities, for African Americans and others. And jobs.

Crawford: What form did your protest take?

05-00:27:40

Handy: Picketing and sitting in. [laughs] There was a lot of that.

Crawford: That was the times.

05-00:27:53

Handy: That was the times, yeah. I think I was with the first eleven people arrested.

Crawford: And the arrest, what did that amount to?

05-00:28:05

Handy:

Well, it was mild, compared to anything down South or maybe even in California. I expect it would be because we were arrested for four hours—we were held for four hours only. And while we were in jail, an earthquake took place. [laughs] And the whole place started shaking. I thought it would be my damn luck the thing falls apart, and I can't get out of here. I don't ever want to be in prison. I went once more, for eight hours, late in '60.

Crawford:

For what, specifically, was that?

05-00:28:53

Handy:

Same thing, same kind of situation. This time it was something else. The first one was for housing. The second one was for employment. Lack of employment especially for African Americans in a number of industries. Almost everything. As it is now. Employment is not fair. We're excluded. And so that's what I did.

Crawford:

Really? And you think today it's equally bad?

05-00:29:35

Handy:

Not quite as bad. I don't know, I'm also not as aware politically. I'm not as active, and I'm not as aware of things as I was then. I'm hearing lots of complaints, and have been for a lot of years, that things are getting worse every month, it seems, for African Americans now, and others. Especially African Americans, I'll have to say. You know, as far as employment. Or across the board. And we can see that. There're hardly any African Americans in San Francisco. There're so few that you really have to kind of seek them out.

Crawford:

That's surprising to me, because San Francisco has to be one of the most open cities.

05-00:30:24

Handy:

Yeah, we like to believe that.

Crawford:

We hear.

05-00:30:25

Handy:

Yeah. I remember when I went to San Francisco in '52 to go to school. I think the job of choice then for African Americans was trying to get employment as bus drivers, MUNI bus drivers. And they said our feet were flat, so we couldn't drive buses.

Crawford:

That's unimaginable.

05-00:30:50

Handy:

San Francisco doesn't have a glorious history, as much as I love my time living in the Bay Area, and in that town in particular. There were some wonderful things that happened for me. And some wonderful people, relatives

included. Some very dear lifetime friends. There've always been these undercurrents that have been there. And there's a lot of hypocrisy here, and it has been for a long time. There are people who have those racist problems. And they're who they are.

Crawford: Is there a movement getting through that, that you see?

05-00:31:35

Handy:

There are people who are always fighting. And in my own way, I'm not on a picket line or anything, but if I encounter it, I speak up. I always did. Even in Dallas, to a point. I didn't go in, and pull the "for colored only" signs down in Dallas, but I physically fought back when I was as young as six years old. I lived most of the time in Dallas, in white districts. And the last place we lived for three-and-a-half years, there were catcalls, and that was the most demeaning and disturbing of anything I'd ever encountered. We lived about four blocks from the bus stop, and the first block is where it would happen.

I started staying at school later. In high school I had reached the age of fourteen and I was coming home at the same time as some of the Caucasian kids from across town. We lived in Beverly Hills, a long distance out. It was damn near in Forth Worth, some people said. [chuckles] Those kids took all the seats. They even took all the seats in the back, so there was nothing to do but stand.

The kids were usually noisy, and I was only fourteen, so most of the older ones were eighteen and bigger. I became very quiet one time, and some guy had his foot near my rump. I turned around and looked at all of them. Just like, "Why?" I just gave them a look that if they had any brains at all, they knew what I thought of them. They didn't touch me, but they might have. They might have kicked me and then— So I stopped going home at the regular time; I'd go home late.

Crawford: Well, here, there was all the housing discrimination, there was a lot of housing discrimination. But at least that was overturned, wasn't it? Those practices were prohibited.

05-00:34:11

Handy:

Yes. It was racism in renting or selling. There were actually laws on the books, even in San Francisco.

Crawford: Where was that?

05-00:34:32

Handy:

On Baker Street. Everybody knew about 618. A lot of people did. They still know the address of it. Because I was there so long, and I had some great parties. There was live music all the time. Great musicians would come by. Students, you know. So anyhow. There were restrictions, restricted rentals, just across the street from where I bought my house. In the earlier years. I

remember those restricted rental signs. “Rooms For Rent—Restricted.” Not “White Only,” but “Restricted.”

Crawford: It said “Restricted.”

05-00:35:12

Handy: Yeah. Meaning—

Crawford: Even in the sixties.

05-00:35:16

Handy: Late fifties or early sixties. I bought the San Francisco house in '63. I don't believe I saw them then, but I saw them in the late fifties. Like '58. Because they were around the corner, in my block. Yeah. So—

Crawford: Did the clubs begin to close in those years? The clubs, the Fillmore clubs and elsewhere.

05-00:35:54

Handy: Well, a lot of it had to do, I'm sure, with integration; it had a lot to do with African American clubs losing business because a lot of African Americans began to patronize white clubs, and other businesses. They were more attractive, and they were new to us. And as a group, we would patronize and rent rooms from hotels and some of the social clubs. There were a lot of 'em. And it was a main source of entertainment for certain black people, and especially those who tended to be more middle-class. So they would rent a hall that was not in black neighborhoods.

Once they opened the hotels up, whites found out they made more money [chuckles] from black people than they did from whites, because we spent more. We kind of waited for a special occasion to go there. So rock and roll came in and it didn't hurt black people that much, because by the time rock and roll started to happen, the jazz clubs were—jazz clubs had more or less moved out of the black areas. A kind of an exodus took place. African Americans took advantage of the “new public freedom.”

Crawford: Did redevelopment close a lot of them then?

05-00:37:39

Handy: Well, I was right there, and I really didn't see a lot of it, because I sleep late. [they laugh] And I play at night. I really didn't see, physically, much going on. I thought I'd see something going on, but when you're busy you don't see a clear picture of many local things going on.

My career took off in the early sixties and mid-sixties. As it had done earlier in New York in the late fifties and early sixties. From there, it started to happen, especially at the Monterey Jazz Festival in '65.

Crawford: Talk about Monterey in '65. That was a huge thing.

Handy: Okay, let's get there now. So I had different groups, played with different groups of my own. Oh, in '64—this is significant—I started a band I called the Freedom Band.

Crawford: Yes, I wanted to ask you about the Freedom Band.

05-00:38:42

Handy: Okay. We averaged about ten musicians in that band. And we primarily played, in the early stages of it, to raise funds to help the civil rights movement. And it was a pretty good band, I have to say.

Crawford: Who was in the band?

05-00:39:04

Handy: Well, Eddie Henderson, who has made quite a name for himself, was one of our trumpet players at one time, Dr. Eddie Henderson, who's actually a physician; Mel Martin, a local well-known saxophone player, when he came here from Sacramento; the great Noel Jukes, on saxophone; Art Lewis, a fine drummer.

Crawford: Where did you play?

05-00:39:52

Handy: We played mostly for civil rights rallies, fundraising, and sometimes at demonstrations. We didn't get into demonstrations with our instruments, [chuckles] but we played for causes. We played a number of times at the Fillmore Auditorium, different auditoriums, outside, etc., the Jazz Workshop.

Crawford: And the proceeds were donations?

05-00:40:24

Handy: Well, at one point. The civil rights movement was kind of slowing down. And in some of the jazz clubs, I paid the guys. But most of it was just donated. Yes.

Crawford: What a great thing. How long did the Freedom Band go on?

05-00:40:41

Handy: Well, we started in 1964. It had started to take off a little after a year-and-a-half. And strangely enough, the band developed into a good group. But we never got much media coverage.

Crawford: What's the reason for that?

05-00:41:01

Handy: I have no idea. Just, you know, when you're on the West Coast like this, and the further back you go, the less publicity you got. Most of the publications

were eastern. Chicago and even L.A. had a few, but we didn't have the exposure.

Crawford: We had jazz critics, Ralph Gleason and—

05-00:41:18

Handy: Well, Ralph Gleason never attended one of our performances— neither Ralph nor Phil Elwood. There was Russ Wilson, Dick Hadlock, and they're all gone now. Russ Wilson, I don't know whether he—well, somebody did, maybe just once, Dick Hadlock? I don't know if he was writing then.

Crawford: That was because it was politics?

05-00:41:54

Handy: Well, they never showed up. And if they did, I didn't know it.

Crawford: They were invited, but they didn't show up.

05-00:41:59

Handy: Well, I didn't call them. I can't say I called them. But you know, Ralph was politically conscious—they all were. I can't say why they didn't. Maybe it was just happenstance, they happened to be some place else each time we played. There are a lot of people now, most every time I play, they don't show up, unless they need something from me.

Crawford: Well, media coverage is way down now, in all forms of music.

05-00:42:31

Handy: Mm-hm.

Crawford: The newspapers just aren't doing as much. Well, talk about Monterey in '65. That was a huge thing for you, wasn't it?

05-00:42:39

Handy: Yeah. Well, you know, my acquaintanceship with those people came after I played with Charles Mingus at Monterey—excuse me—'64. And the day after Monterey, I had an engagement in Vancouver, British Columbia, and I took a train up. First and only time. And during the interim, a half-hour before I was to arrive in Vancouver, I had this idea in my head. It was a musical idea that is now known as "Spanish Lady." And it was something that had been there for two years, and we played it first up there.

I was very impressed especially with the pianist and drummer. We were doing a trio, backing me, and the bassist became ill. At the last minute, I got a call that he was ill and couldn't make the concert. So our pianist said, "Well, I play bass. I can play bass." So he—the other guy was a wonderful bass player. Well, this guy was a *terrific* bass player, [laughs] the piano player.

Crawford: Really?

05-00:44:09

Handy:

Yeah, it was Don Thompson. So at the end of the engagement, we came back home to San Francisco. I started doing “Spanish Lady” here and there, with various musicians, including Charlie Haden, who’s well known. Charlie Haden was a resident here—and Jerry Granelli was the drummer. They were excellent players.

I used them on gigs, until the next year, ’65, I was invited to go up to Vancouver, B.C. again. I started to use Michael White, the violin player, with whom I’d gone to high school. Although we were doing lots of pieces, but “Spanish Lady” was special, even then. So I took him and a pianist who had just moved here from New York, whom I’d heard play with Mingus and Sonny Rollins—Freddie Redd. I took them up in Vancouver, and used Terry Clarke on drums and Don Thompson on bass. And people couldn’t believe the music that came from that band. So I was able to get them into the [United] States. With help from the musicians union, I got them through immigration. So we were able to get them through, and they stayed for almost two years. So that was my band. Oh, yeah. An engagement came up, the Both/And. It’s B-O-T-H and—

Crawford:

Oh, sure.

05-00:46:00

Handy:

Well, the Both/And owners, the two partners came to my house one day, unannounced and without a telephone call. I knew the club had opened; I’d never been to it. And they said, “We need a band. You know, somebody with more of a name than the guys that we’re using.” And so they asked me if I’d do it. I thought about those guys in Canada and the two here.

We made a deal. We can work there, basically, when we’re not working any other place, which was cool. And we agreed on a salary. It took two weeks to get those guys down here from Canada. But they needed me then. So I hired another bassist and drummer. The late, great Wyatt Ruther on bass, and Pete Magadini, who’s a wonderful drummer. We opened at the Both/And for two weeks. And they were fine—

Crawford:

They weren’t who you had [in Canada]?

05-00:47:07

Handy:

Yeah. So they came. And when those guys came, the fire started, you know. [chuckles]

Crawford:

What made the difference? All fine players.

05-00:47:16

Handy:

Talent. Talent, imagination. Imagination. Skills. Which they had, all of this. Terry Clarke was not even twenty years old when he first came down here. And we were filling that club, without having a recording or anything. But

things started to wind down a bit. Ralph Gleason came in one night. I knew who he was. He had written about me a few times, only because I went to New York. And in fact, he said, “John Handy’s going to New York to try his great talent.” [laughs] That was my write-up.

Crawford: It made a difference, didn’t it?

05-00:48:05

Handy: That I just left and went to New York, yes. And then he reviewed my first album. And it was positive. But again, that was ’60, ’61, somewhere in there. So here we are.

Crawford: That was Roulette Records?

05-00:48:23

Handy: Oh, you remember. [chuckles] So we were— two of us had the flu. We were very sick on the bandstand. And it was a night that hardly anybody was there. The weather wasn’t great. I saw this guy, well, two guys, walk in. And I found out only last year that the other guy was Warren Herman, who was one of the owners of the Half Note, which is just up the street. I didn’t recognize him at the time. But Ralph came in.

Crawford: Yes.

05-00:49:01

Handy: And I told the guys, I said, “There’s a jazz critic in here, and we should—” Everybody woke up. And Ralph said the place literally lit up. He wrote so glowingly about the John Handy Quintet that people started standing in line to hear.

He really made it happen for us. And persuaded Jimmy Lyons to bring us to Monterey. And the rest became history, in fact. In ’66, there was a jazz magazine that was very popular for a while. It wasn’t *Down Beat* or *Metronome*. But in a poll they had, we were only two points from tying with Miles Davis, and he had the top jazz group. And we had never played any farther west than Arizona and Colorado. So—

Crawford: Your star was launched.

05-00:50:15

Handy: Yes, for a second time!

Crawford: Has that been one of your most popular recordings?

05-00:50:30

Handy: Yes, at that time. It sold well. We played Monterey with that band, in September of ’65, so it came out in March ’66. It sold well, and it still sells. It has created a kind of ‘cult’ following.

Crawford: It's been reissued, hasn't it?

05-00:51:01

Handy: It was reissued four years ago. At least reissued by Koch, K-O-C-H, Records. I don't know if they still have the lease, but I'm sure Columbia still owns it. I know they do.

Crawford: You've recorded a *great* deal, it seems to me.

05-00:51:25

Handy: I did, but a lot less than a lot of people.

Crawford: Look at this list!

05-00:51:30

Handy: If I'd fulfilled all the contracts that I had, I would've had lots more recordings. But I refused to.

Crawford: Are you talking about with the Mingus group?

05-00:51:45

Handy: No, with my own.

Crawford: Your own. Why?

05-00:51:47

Handy: Because most every company was full of thieves. They're such greedy pigs. Just pigs, and in some cases—bullies.

Crawford: Still?

05-00:52:00

Handy: I don't know, because I haven't even tried anymore. I don't want to record for people who are like that. I'd rather not record at all. And that's what happened. I just simply stopped recording.

Crawford: Not worth your while.

05-00:52:12

Handy: No, it really wasn't. I just couldn't. It is for some people, it's different. Still, people think you're a star, and they don't realize that those recordings that they bought don't benefit you. The best you get out of it, generally, is the publicity from the recordings that they buy.

Crawford: Oh, that's terrible.

05-00:52:40

Handy: Unless it happens to be a hit that's so big that they'd be stupid not to give you something. In comparison, if you get something good, it's only something,

compared to what they take. And I don't care who you are, and how big you are.

Crawford: What about Fantasy Records? Did you work with them?

05-00:52:57

Handy: They're the worst people I ever worked for in my life. As a matter of fact, it took three years to collect sixty-three dollars from them for a guest spot I played on a Charles Mingus recording. The same time, three years, it took to collect for a concert they sponsored at UCLA—

Crawford: But they did bring San Francisco up, didn't they?

05-00:53:08

Handy: I guess they did, [but] I know it took me three years to collect sixty-three dollars from them. You know, they were the cheapest bastards I've ever encountered. However, I did a recording on their Milestone label in 1989. It was a tax write-off. Saul Zaentz seemed to have the most humanity of the lot, I think.

Crawford: That's just awful.

05-00:53:18

Handy: You know. And in the sixties, if you recall, there were no black bandleaders. Not to my knowledge.

Crawford: Here.

05-00:53:31

Handy: Yes, with Fantasy Records. There were black sidemen, but no black leaders. In the fifties, into the sixties. I remember going there to try to collect, to shame the guys into paying me, you know, the sixty-three dollars. They were in downtown San Francisco, in some little alley. Some guy who was there had a bald head. [chuckles] I remember that. And he almost kind of laughed at me and was like, "Oh, you want to get your money?" I really wanted to punch—I had to walk away. That's twice I really walked away, to keep from punching somebody. Because I would've punched him. You know. It wasn't Saul.

Crawford: It wasn't Saul.

05-00:54:29

Handy: No. It's another bastard, some bastard, not Saul. Saul has his hair.

Crawford: Terrible.

05-00:54:37

Handy: They were. And then I did a concert at UCLA for Fantasy Records in '66 or '67, that they sponsored, I'm told. And it took me about two years to get my money. You know? So—

Crawford: So you just put that aside.

05-00:54:51

Handy: Yeah. But then in '89, I did one recording for them, and it was because I really wanted to get this band that I had recorded with the three female violin players.

Crawford: Class.

05-00:55:11

Handy: Class. So I took a chance with them, and it wasn't a smart decision. And that's the last.

Crawford: Talk about writing for violin. That's such an interesting idea. You said you could make a violin sound like a sax. [they laugh] How do you do that?

05-00:55:29

Handy: Well, first of all, you have to get a violin player who has a good ear, and can hear well, and has talent, some imagination. I love violin. I love strings, the orchestra, as such. I had a chance to use Michael White in '64, whom I had heard at a jam session in the fifties, '55, '56.

Well, he showed up some place, and there we were. I'd never heard him play before. As I've said, we were seatmates in high school. And so he showed up, and I had some gigs, and I got him to play. And he sounded great. He wasn't that well versed in bebop, and some of the more adventurous types of music. But he could play. He was not a beginner. He sounded fine enough. But on the modes, the things like "Spanish Lady"—that whole band, as a matter of fact, sounded better on the modes. The mode, meaning not song forms as we know it, with just playing the same key, basically. [laughs] If you're in C, you stay in C.

I found out by playing with him, by using certain techniques, that I could get the most of out his sound. I'd listened a lot; when he was playing, I really paid attention. And then later, because of that, because of how I wrote the music I wrote for us, and other compositions where I use strings—when I had Class, I knew what to do.

Crawford: What were you aiming for with Class?

05-00:57:44

Handy: Actually, it was more of a political and artistic, equal-employment thrust. Because there're so few women in jazz music. Particularly in jazz. Most of them are singers. Maybe a piano player. You know. Very rarely a bass player, horn player, or percussionist.

Crawford: And it's not that they're not there—it's just that they're not chosen.

05-00:58:18

Handy:

Yes. One, if they're flute players, they play in the orchestra. They play flute or violin. I'd heard only two women play the jazz violin well. I was a featured guest in a concert band. There were four violin players. There were fourteen or so players, but all you could see were [laughs] their bows moving. Couldn't hear anything. They weren't amplified. I hadn't a band, as such, at the time. I had been using a quartet, featuring myself.

I thought about it. I had a party in the Russian River area, where I had a house. I had a place in Cazadero, California. I invited them to come to the party, and I invited lots of other musicians. And there were four violin players, three women and one man. So they came to the party, and you know, I was listening. Two of them tried to sit in. And you know, they weren't ready. [laughs]

Crawford:

They weren't up to it.

05-00:59:50

Handy:

No, but there was talent. There were possibilities there. So I invited them to stay over till the next day. We had lots of room. After we had breakfast the next day, we went out on the deck up there. Luckily, it was nice and warm. I did some experiments—played a little bit with my horn, and they played. I had asked them to play certain notes, certain riffs, certain rhythms. And so then I realized where they were. But there was potential there.

Crawford:

They were not jazz players?

05-00:60:25

Handy:

Not as such. One of them, who had a good ear—Tarika—she'd been listening to Noel Pointer, who was a young violinist who had been recording. So I invited them to the San Francisco house, and started to play things on the piano and have them play.

Then I started to write a bit, little songs; listening to recordings, exposing them to black music that they'd never heard—especially two of them—and suggested certain recordings to listen to, and what to listen for. And I started giving them theory lessons, harmony lessons and—so we went from there. By the way, the young guy never showed up, after the party.

Crawford:

No?

05-00:61:24

Handy:

Only the women showed up. Sam, who at the time, I thought was the best player of the four. But he never showed up again. So they showed up. They lived here, you know, in the East Bay, and we went from there. I was really impressed with the fact that they came to all the rehearsals. And the more we rehearsed, the better we got. I started writing very difficult stuff. And right away, not only did they play it, but I had them memorize it.

And it went on, and we got a gig fairly soon—we were at the Great American Music Hall. We made our debut there.

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06-00:00:00

Handy: I need glasses to read.

Crawford: Well, we were talking about collaborations, and you have done amazing work with string players.

06-00:00:13

Handy: Yes, with Michael White. I hadn't played with somebody of his talent and his innovation, if you will, on violin. I'd played with people in New York. And going back to Bop City, when I was a youngster, I was impressed with Stuff Smith. [chuckles] I sat in, and we did some jamming together. So I was aware of jazz violin, of going back, and having heard Ray Nance, the violinist with Duke Ellington, Joe Venuti, and Eddie South. I knew all those people, you know, what could be done with the violin. I had an idea.

Crawford: And you wrote a great deal?

06-00:01:09

Handy: I started, yes. I wrote quite a bit with Michael White. I wrote some music that has not been played, too. Even before Class. In 1968, for the Haight-Ashbury Clinic, for their first benefit, I was commissioned to write a composition. August. I just [laughs] recently saw the poster, after all those years. To raise funds. The first fundraiser, I believe. Or maybe it was even the opening of the Haight-Ashbury Clinic.

Crawford: I'll bet it was.

06-00:01:59

Handy: Mm-hm. And it was at the Palace of Fine Arts. We were playing on a gravel floor. I used twelve string players from the San Francisco orchestra. And I think that was the greatest—

Crawford: From the symphony?

06-00:02:21

Handy: San Francisco Symphony. There were about three things that I played with him, but the one that I'll never forget, I entitled the piece, later, *Erica*. I didn't have a title for it. But there was a violin player in there named Erica, and I thought it was a nice woman's name. I needed a title when I recorded it, so I called it *Erica*, later, the recording. But it was maybe the greatest concert, as far as I'm concerned, that I've ever done. The string players were great. We didn't record it. You know?

Crawford: What made it so great? I wouldn't guess that would be a wonderful venue.

06-00:03:20

Handy: Oh, it's because of the way I had done it, how I wrote, the harmonies and the rhythms. It was in five-four rhythm, I remember that. And I was impressed with the fact that they really sight read it so well. [laughs]

Crawford: They can read.

06-00:03:34

Handy: They can read, yes. And in tune. Once or twice through.

Crawford: Not much rehearsal?

06-00:03:43

Handy: Three.

Crawford: Three rehearsals. Well, that's pretty good.

06-00:03:44

Handy: Yes! I had Larry Hancock on drums, Dr. Willis Kirkon [on] tympani and vibes, and Rudy Salvini played one of the trumpets, along with Forest Buchtel. Prince Lasha played clarinet. I had a working quartet, who was the backup. I didn't have Michael White that time, I had Mike Nock on piano.

Crawford: Don't know him.

Handy: Piano player. He and Michael White, after they stole my band, [laughs] made a couple recordings, with a group called Fourth Way. Yeah, he's back in New Zealand. Anyhow, that was a wonderful concert.

Crawford: And was that piece done again? What was the history of it?

06-00:04:52

Handy: Never did it again. No, I never did it again. I still have the music, and one day I hope to do it. That was *Erica*. And so, ok, that was '68. Now coming back to '89. When did I meet—I met them in '82, that's right. '82 is when I met the violin players. And so we started performing, rehearsing. We did lots of rehearsing. Then finally, when we ran into another opportunity, I took the opportunity to record for Fantasy, because it was nearby.

We'd already played New York. And I wanted, you know, to see how people reacted to it. Musicians first. Women, of course, loved it. And I thought it was good. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it. At the last minute, during our recording for Fantasy, I thought of asking them to play and sing scat simultaneously, and in some cases, a different note than what they were playing. Sometimes it sounded like we were ten or fifteen people.

And what happened too, once we did tapes and recordings, great musicians, men and women—especially men, who've been around a long time—when they heard the recording when it was released, they would ask: "How many

horns did you use?" They didn't think they were violins; they didn't know they were violins.

Crawford: How do you do that? You did that.

06-00:06:47

Handy: I did it, yes.

Crawford: But how do you produce a horn sound?

06-00:06:52

Handy: Oh, well, that's a trade secret.

Crawford: Ok. [they laugh] That's amazing. I can't imagine it.

06-00:06:57

Handy: It's a how you write. You know?

Crawford: What? The range of writing?

06-00:07:08

Handy: It's the range, but it's all of it. You have to know the instrument pretty well. Both, you know.

Crawford: Uh-huh. Ok.

06-00:07:15

Handy: You have to know the instruments. I didn't have virtuoso players. So in that sense, if I had virtuoso players, I think it would've been even greater. [chuckles]

Crawford: Solo players?

06-00:07:31

Handy: No, no. Well, both. Improvisers and people who could read. And they read.

Crawford: They must be pretty good.

06-00:07:38

Handy: Yeah, they were pretty good. They weren't classically trained to the hilt, as [are] some people in the symphonies, but they did play in symphonies as younger people. Two of them had become housewives, had children and had come back. They had stopped playing for about ten years.

Crawford: I see.

06-00:07:57

Handy: I caught them on their way back in. Only one had played—Julie Carter had played all the way through the years. Sandi Poindexter was the other. Tarika Lewis, Sandi Poindexter, Julie Carter. And then at one point, we did have a

fourth violin player, a woman named Susan DeLucci. Susan was there only for a short while. And then we had Yehudit—I've forgotten her last name, but she's in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra now. I saw her performing with a blues group recently, but she played with us for a while. So we have had four at times.

Crawford: Well, let's—

06-00:08:42

Handy: Oh, wait. Electric violin. They played most of the time, electric violin (Zedas), which gave them a fifth string, a low C. So they virtually had the range of a viola, because of that extra string.

Crawford: Ok. They could be heard.

06-00:09:04

Handy: The power. Yeah, that's why they had the volume. Of course, being electric certainly helped.

Crawford: And that was a good sound?

06-00:09:09

Handy: It was good, but you sacrifice quality. I really prefer—

Crawford: Acoustic.

06-00:09:17

Handy: —the acoustic violin sound to electric.

Crawford: I know what you mean. Well, let's talk about some of the other collaborations. You worked with Ali Akbar Khan?

06-00:09:32

Handy: Ok, we'll have to back up ten years, eleven years. Well, even before that, I first heard Ravi Shankar in concert here, in 1964, at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco. And needless to say, I was totally just amazed at the depth of his music.

Crawford: Had you been exposed to Indian classical music?

06-00:10:07

Handy: Not really. I'm sure I'd heard some. I can't remember being conscious of it, but I'd heard gypsy music that had that cry. Jazz has it, in some of us. Charlie Parker, Coltrane, especially, with that kind of wail. In some of the African American churches you'll hear that.

And there it was, played on a string instrument from India, so exotically different. Playing from up here. And sitting on the floor. His drummer, Allah Rakha, this tabla player, was just incredible. And it so happened the next day,

I found myself invited to a party given in their honor, which was very close to my house. I was able to bring guests. I brought my wife and a friend from Canada. Dizzy Gillespie was invited.

Dizzy came much later, so I had a chance just to—we were talking. Everybody stopped, and Ravi Shankar and I were sitting on this mattress. They sit in the lotus position. And I was there dying, with my legs being crossed, so— [they laugh]

Crawford: Who can do that?

06-00:11:51

Handy: I don't know. It hurt every time. I remember asking one of the Indian guys later, about sitting like that. I said, "Does it ever hurt?" He said, "It hurts every time I do it, [laughs] and I've been doing it since I was a child." So we had a lot in common, as we spoke about music, Ravi Shankar and I. And we had the place enthralled. Everybody stopped. There were some students, some grad students that I was having classes currently with. They were there, and they apparently had gone to the library to look up something, to get some info on Indian music. They were asking academic questions like that. So I think he realized that, and so—

Crawford: Did he know much about jazz?

06-00:12:51

Handy: No. But I think he kind of is like me, as a person, and what I was saying and what he was saying. So just the two of us were talking. And we had this wonderful thing going on between us. Finally, Dizzy showed up. And with his big mouth, he came in and the atmosphere was Dizzy's. I love Dizzy. [laughs] Because there was nobody like Dizzy. He was wonderful, brassy, and sometimes very tender and all that.

But this time, he came in like a hurricane and just killed the whole group atmosphere. Everybody started laughing at him, because he's a clown, a beautiful, very genius of a clown. You know, he knew when to stop, too. But he was late, and he was a little embarrassed, so he was able to [laughs] turn it around to, like, a joke.

Two weeks later, I was invited to attend a concert in Santa Monica, that Ravi Shankar was giving. He got accommodations for myself and my guests. And the Indian guy, who was one of the promoters who brought him here. So we rode down in my friend's car, and they had the hotel rooms for us. I was invited to sit onstage during the concert, and my legs died!!

Crawford: Oh, you had to sit there, okay. [laughs]

06-00:14:42

Handy:

I remember trying to get up during the break, the intermission, and oh! Somebody helped me up. I was pretty young then, still. [laughs] And so the next day, Ravi Shankar invited me to his apartment. He was staying at somebody's apartment nearby. This was in Hollywood. And he gave me two lessons in Indian ragas, Indian music. Two lessons with him, for a couple of hours. And I understood it, because it was something I'd understood very well already. We had the breakthrough in modes—

Crawford:

You mean how the ragas are composed?

06-00:15:30

Handy:

They're basically modes. Another word, synonymous for modes, ragas. You know. There are mixed ragas, too.

Crawford:

Aren't they set pieces?

06-00:15:49

Handy:

They're set intervals within a scale or a raga, or a mode, if you will. He showed me this in five-four time, and I knew what it was. I'll put it that way: he gave me a lesson. He gave me two lessons. And so it was until '71—this was '64—that I found myself—there was a phone call to know if I'd like to do a concert with Ali Akbar Khan. I'd hardly even heard of his name. But then he told me what he played, and that he was in Fairfax. His home was there. So I went to his home.

We had a concert at the old Harding Theater, on Divisadero and Hayes in San Francisco. I used to live a half-block from there. Same street. I went to his house to rehearse something, whatever we were gonna do. As soon as I sat down and started playing with him, it was as if I'd been playing with him all my life. You know. There were nuances, a lot of nuances.

I can't say I went right in and started playing Indian music. I didn't try to play totally like the Indians. Because I'm not. I didn't grow up with that culture. But first of all, I knew the notes, and the phrasing was—just to hear him play a passage would tear your heart strings out. It's just so beautiful.

Crawford:

When you say you knew the notes, you weren't looking at notated scores.

06-00:18:01

Handy:

Well, when he told me what the raga was—I had acquired that kind of knowledge already, by myself, [chuckles] starting at St. Peter's Academy in Dallas when I was a kid. And then I've mentioned earlier, I tried to communicate this and play modally with musicians here, before I went to New York. And I couldn't seem to convey the idea to them. They didn't seem to understand.

And then when I was in the midst of my last rehearsal for my first recording, someone came in with *Kind of Blue*, that album that Miles Davis did with all those modes. And I said, “That’s what I was trying to tell people,” trying to get people to do in San Francisco. I showed them how, and as a result we recorded the second modal jazz on record, I believe.

So I’d had experience with that. And here I am at this time, with Ali Akbar Khan. And the basics were clear—I understood it very readily. But again, he’s playing a string instrument. That’s what they do, that’s what they’ve done for two thousand years, or twenty-five-hundred years with that music. And John Handy or nobody else was going to come in in twenty minutes and do it with authority. [vocalizes] It’s just—you can’t do that right away. But anyhow, I thought I did a decent job of it, and I think he thought so, too. We played off and on for a number of years, and internationally. And we recorded two albums.

Crawford: You toured. How was that received in different places?

06-00:20:04

Handy: I’ll tell you, Caroline, I’d never seen an audience react, well, as spiritually, enthusiastically, aesthetically, in church. Never. No place, in any concert, no matter who played. I’ve seen John Coltrane get six and seven standing ovations in the course of one solo. I’ve never seen anybody react to music in the way, the beautiful way that they reacted to us when we played. No matter where. .

Crawford: East and West.

06-00:20:45

Handy: Yeah, East and West. And when we’d finish a piece, they’d have to wait. They didn’t just start screaming. [laughs] People were in a trance, before they realized we weren’t playing. You know. So it was special. This was special magic. And to play with him— He is the world’s greatest sarode player.

Crawford: Yes, he said so, too; he said how special that was.

06-00:22:10

Handy: *Just so special!* We played the UC Berkeley Jazz Festival. That was one of the big ones. We played at San Francisco State University, etc. We played lots of concerts here, and we went to Europe in ’75 and toured much of Germany, Austria, Switzerland. We toured again in ’80-81. Berlin Philharmonic Auditorium, we played there together.

Crawford: How were those concerts arranged for you?

06-00:21:48

Handy: Somebody booked us over there. A lot of the ones in California, especially here, primarily came from me. I had some concerts, and I just invited him and

Zakir Hussain, the great young tabla player. I invited them to play with me. And then later, I was invited to play, through him, on some of his concerts here, and at the University of Pennsylvania.

Crawford: Playing microtonally?

06-00:22:26

Handy:

Some. Well, jazz players do that, to an extent, anyhow. You'll hear it, if you listen closely. But our instruments are basically manufactured by Westerners, who try to tune everything as closely as they can to the A-440 piano. It's hard to get those microtones. On some notes, it's much easier than on others. Some are almost impossible. But strings are much easier. Guitars and violins and like that. And trumpet, in some situations.

In '80, I went to Bombay. And they had "jazz yatra." I believe translated, it means "jazz pilgrimage." It was their second jazz festival in Bombay. I heard a young Indian saxophone player playing Carnatic music. I think [laughs] he was the only one in the world, and he was playing on a saxophone that looked like the first one ever built. [laughs] It was so ancient looking.

Several of us volunteered to try to get him another saxophone. And he didn't want a new one. About three years later, Javeri, J-A-V-E-R-I, who organized the jazz festival in Bombay, was able to get him, myself and a percussionist, who was known as TVG, Dr. TVG, Professor TVG, from Madras, India.

The three of us collaborated on a concert for the Berlin Jazz Festival. And Golpanath, this kid—he's not a kid; he wasn't a kid then, but he looked so young, he looked like he was about sixteen. I think he was actually about twenty-seven or so. [laughs] He looked like a kid to me. But he's a wonderful saxophone player. I heard some records by him about ten, twelve years ago, and he'd grown so much. He's from some remote village in South India, I believe. I don't believe he's been in the States.

Crawford: Is jazz much appreciated in India?

06-00:25:48

Handy:

Well, when I went to Mumbai, I was there six days for the festival. And I met some musicians who were playing very good jazz. Louis Banks was one of the guys, a keyboard player, who's Indian. And he had a tenor saxophone player. I think one of them had a wife who scats like no scat singer that I've ever heard. They were playing very good jazz. And there were some players whom I heard who, yes, they were great. They've got the bug.

Crawford: Mm-hm. [chuckles] Got the bug. Well, I'm interested that you've played all the famous jazz festivals.

06-00:26:43

Handy:

Well, a lot of them.

Crawford: You played at Montreux, didn't you?

06-00:26:47

Handy:

I played there with the Mingus Band. It was the same year that Charles died. But it was one of his necrophilia bands. [they laugh] His wife had organized this, the first group. And because I had really received quite a tremendous boost when I played with Charles, despite the fact [chuckles] it was uncomfortable at times in retrospect, things aren't as bad as they are when they're happening. I knew he had been ill for a long time. As a matter of fact, I even had booked his band at San Francisco State, during my early teaching tenure there.

And so I never had a chance to really say thank you. I didn't want to say goodbye to him, but I knew he was ill. And then he passed. I had just gotten [out] from under a recording contract. I thought I could lend something, having achieved the notoriety that I had. So in the meantime, Sue Mingus was trying to get in touch with me. It just happened that I was trying to find out how to get in the band, and she called me. I think it was Todd Barkin who owned Keystone Corner, who mentioned this to me. He said, "She's interested." And so that's how we got to Montreux, with the Mingus band.

Crawford:

Where was that?

06-00:28:49

Handy:

The festival in Mumbai was the beginning of a three-month State Department tour of India and the Mid-East. I forgot that was part of it. Then we went to, oh, about eight or nine Arabic countries, after we left India.

Crawford:

How were you received there?

06-00:29:10

Handy:

Our U.S. rock and roll and the stuff that we'd been putting out there via recordings, movies, etc. made people think we were peripatetic performers more than jazz players.

Crawford:

They don't do those tours anymore.

06-00:29:24

Handy:

Well, I don't know why. But I think Joe Williams and another troupe had gone ahead of us, because some people remembered them. But you know, they weren't jazz fans, as such. Except for India. Where were we? We were in Egypt, where we played at a university. And a number of people there were aware of the music.

A friend of mine, who went to San Francisco State, had been over there somewhere for years. I hadn't seen him, and I didn't know where he was. I asked somebody about Mack Spears, and they knew him. He'd been there at the university. So yes, there are some jazz people.

Crawford: When you traveled on this State Department tour, for instance, in places where jazz is not well known, did you modify your style? Or was it still very modern?

06-00:30:24

Handy: No, I wouldn't. I would never do that. The audience there was mixed in their reaction to the music. I don't recall having people really totally understanding it. There was polite applause, response. And of course, that tour had as much to do with U.S. propaganda, probably, as anything else—I knew a little bit about what was going on, and what our history [laughs] is--and was, in 1980—in those regions.

Jordan wouldn't even let us in, even though we had visas. They wouldn't let us in. It's the *only* country that didn't let us in. I realized why I was there in the first place, because of who I am and what I look like. I'm a little kind of a buffer between the people who are trying to do business, doing private enterprise, and our government. I was totally aware of that, although nobody said anything. We weren't called diplomats or ambassadors. But we were.

Crawford: Sure. It's kind of damage control, isn't it, to send our best out as an export?

06-00:31:55

Handy: Mm-hm. It was worthwhile, in that we were able to collaborate a few times with some musicians over there. I remember when we went to Damascus, we collaborated. We were there for about six days. The first night we were there—I've got to tell you a little about this tour. As we were coming in, I saw jeeps—which are military, you know—outside our hotel, the hotel we went into.

This was probably ten-thirty, and we were all very tired, and went to eat, about five of us together. We asked for separate checks. And the head waiter apparently was annoyed at that. He walked away and sent over, basically, a bus boy. So we tipped him highly. [laughs] You know, heavily. And I could see the guy was sorry that he didn't wait on us.

So I went down to my room. I was starting to undress and get ready to go to bed, I heard machine gun fire. [laughs] And I thought, oh! That was very uncomfortable. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to call to see if everybody else was okay, but I was afraid I might bring attention to myself, that I might not have, had I kept quiet.

Well, I was still alive the next day, the next morning, fortunately. And I went to the meeting that we were supposed to have had with our ambassador, or representative or whoever he was. And I said, "Well, what was that about?" And he said, "Well, that's the way people over here sometimes settle grievances."

We had to stay there, I think, five more days. But that next day, we were on our way to rehearsal, we were underground, going to the rehearsal hall. And a young fellow from a business, a little barbershop, with that little sign, that thing—looked like a candy bar. He was on the other side of that. I was standing alone, turned his direction. I was standing with the musicians; they were facing me. And I saw him beckon me, and I thought, [chuckles] “You got a nerve. You’re a lot younger than I am—bring your ass over here.” [laughs]

So I thought, “Okay, I’ll go over.” It’s just a little across the way there. And I walked over, and he said, “You all have any Jews with you?” I thought silently, “Oh, this is not good.” But I didn’t react. I was very cool. We did have a Jewish bass player. But it so happened that he and the drummer, who was black, had the same surname! [laughs] So that made it cool, you know?

I never told the bass player that. I didn’t want to scare him, upset him. But that was something that I experienced and I just sort of kept it to myself. And I thought I’d cooled it out by simply saying what I did. “No, we don’t have any.” We did a concert in a hall that held eight hundred people. We had about thirty in attendance. And about twelve of them were Rhodes scholars, U.S. students who were there. They totally kept the publicity from getting out. So that was Damascus. And each night, there were anti-American speeches on television, given by the president of Syria.

Crawford: Did you think they shouldn’t have sent you there?

06-00:36:38

Handy: I didn’t want to be there, after I got there. I didn’t think it was going to be that severe. But on the streets, people were *fine*. There were some shops, a record shop I went in, and some places where we were taken. We went sightseeing and shopping with American students, Rhodes scholars. I went about four times to the souks. And it was fun. Actually, it was another experience. You read in our Bible about those places like Damascus, and here it is! The dirt is still dirty and— [chuckles] It’s a very modern city. And the people are just people. I won’t deal with the government.

Crawford: That’s what you learn. Are you still touring?

06-00:37:33

Handy: Some. Yes, I do some touring. We had a concert in, I’ve forgotten which country, but for thirty young children who were grammar school to junior high. I thought the kids were a lot more disciplined over there. They were really out of control a few times there when we played our concert. I was surprised and disappointed.

Crawford: Which concert?

06-00:38:01

Handy:

It was on the tour, the Mid-East part of the tour—I don't remember which country. We saw some beautiful sights. I remember being in— [chuckles] It's a country that you can see from some part of France, southern France.

Crawford:

You mean Morocco or Algeria?

06-00:38:29

Handy:

No, it's not that one. No, it's neither of those. It'll come to me in a minute. But anyhow, I remember passing a bay of water there, and how blue and beautiful it was. And I was thinking, "How beautiful this place is." I said, "But I live in San Francisco and the Bay Area." It's as beautiful, if not more beautiful where we live. [laughs]

Crawford:

Isn't that the truth?

06-00:39:05

Handy:

And I realized how beautiful it is *here*. I *live* in one of the most beautiful places in the world. You know? And we have a lot more than they do, in that way. We have a lot more options.

Crawford:

That's what we have in this country.

06-00:39:19

Handy:

We have so many options.

Crawford:

Well, let me concentrate a little bit now on your compositions, other of your works that you've done, and that opera you're going to do.

06-00:39:35

Handy:

[laughs] Well, most of the large compositions for large orchestra, I've mentioned. I've got two or three other things that I've not had performed yet. And I've got about half of two major works that I haven't finished, that I was commissioned to write for the Doctors Symphony, which is now the Parnassus. I didn't finish; I got a cold or the flu.

But instead, several years later, I was commissioned by the same symphony, and I wrote a new piece altogether. So I still have that half I'm going to finish. I did some writing recently, earlier this year, that was performed at the Bohemian Club. I guess I can say that. For jazz band and strings. And it's wonderful! We have some wonderful musicians, and they played it well.

I have a number of scores for various venues, two scores for musicals, a piano and viola piece, and many assorted pieces from solo to medium-size ensembles.

Crawford:

What is your process of composing? What comes first for you?

06-00:41:04

Handy:

Oh. Drudgery. Procrastination. You know? I say this quite often. I work in two gears, slow and stop. [they laugh] It's an undertaking, because I have impaired vision, blind on one side, this side, my right side. And I'm a right-handed person. I never really experienced eye strain to any large degree until I did that first concerto. I waited late to finish it. And I remember getting pains here, in my good eye.

Crawford:

From writing?

06-00:41:50

Handy:

Well, from concentrating. I did get a blister on that hand, because of writing. I hadn't held a pencil that long since I was a kid. But I had terrible pains here for a while. After I finished, it was okay. I also got quite a bit of eye strain on this last concerto. First of all, the music that I prefer doing is not music where I have to sit down and write for a bunch of people who don't know music—

Crawford:

So composing really isn't your foremost thing.

06-00:42:24

Handy:

Yeah. Well, I compose with what I do. You know, improvisation is composing.

Crawford:

Yes!

06-00:42:31

Handy:

And the other thing is simply being able to notate so people who are not talented in that way, proficient in that way, can play with you. We need them. We need good readers. I think everybody should definitely know how to read music, but also be creative, if it's in them, if they have the ability to create.

I think the classical field is very remiss in not doing that. It's, like, one of the dumbest things they could ever do is to render someone incapable of understanding how music is put together. Because they don't. They simply give them—I mean, not simply, but they tend to know their instrument and to read the written note. That's all they've ever been exposed to.

Crawford:

You think the creativity is dismissed by teachers? You either read or you have a good ear and you're creative.

06-00:43:29

Handy:

Yeah, it's totally dismissed. I started to hear about this years ago, in New York. I was reading an article on the plane, one of their publications. And there are some people who are well into their professions, and generally successful enough to take time to do something else. They're musicians, and are taking this class from this guy, some were taking private lessons. People who had taken music and really wanted to be musicians, but they were afraid that they wouldn't make it, be able to make a decent living.

So there they were, coming back, learning to compose, which they had never even thought of, and to read music, and to understand the mysteries and magic of improvisation. I'm getting a little off of where we were, but—the kinds of musicians that we can produce—look at Wynton Marsalis. You know. Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, John Handy, all down the line, some of these who are—

Crawford: That's right. Rare, though. Rare.

06-00:44:59

Handy: You know. But it's happening more and more, that there are lots more names, too—John Lewis, Gunther Schuller, who didn't improvise, but he is still able to create wonderful music.

Crawford: Gunther Schuller's an interesting one.

06-00:45:14

Handy: Very. He's one of our most prolific composers of major works. Conducts with one eye, [laughs] impaired vision, by the way!

Crawford: Oh, does he? Does he?

06-00:45:28

Handy: Yes.

Crawford: He has been very involved with the Contemporary Music Players here. Have you written for them?

06-00:45:34

Handy: No, I get their literature, but I just never got involved, you know.

Crawford: All of your major works have been commissioned. You've been asked for them, you haven't written them on your own. Is that right?

06-00:45:55

Handy: Yeah, most of the major works, yeah, I was asked to do them. I don't consider writing a bunch of things, a lot of music, and just having it float around. It's important to have it played while I'm here. Otherwise, it doesn't mean anything to me. Wouldn't mean the same if I'm gone. I don't care. I don't know what it's like to be dead and hearing that. [they laugh]

Some of the deceased great composers might, you know, be happy with listening to that; but I like to hear it now. I'm primarily a saxophone player who enjoys playing the saxophone, more than I do writing. I really do.

Thelonious Monk said this, and I might have said this earlier. He gave me advice once when we were talking. I was very surprised—it just sort of came out. He said, "Play your horn for fun." And of course, your horn could be a

piano or singing. Your main instrument. Play your horn. Write for fun. Basically, compose when you feel like it. You know.

Crawford: Well, what's the Stravinsky story?

06-00:47:17

Handy: Oh, okay. I was told this by Joe Weber, who was a friend of his, who was a band mate at San Francisco State, and who was writing large works then, when he was about twenty-one. Joe called me a couple of times before he called me and told me this story. He said it was late, or early in the morning. He said, "Stravinsky—you didn't know this, but," he said, "Stravinsky just mentioned you and one of your compositions in a lecture yesterday. Or last night. And he said it was the best fixed and improvised music that he'd heard."

Crawford: Oh. High praise! What was it?

06-00:48:07

Handy: It's called *Scheme Number One*. I wrote that in 1962. I had presented that at Carnegie Recital Hall, with a quartet that included Bill Evans on the piano; Julian Euell, who was at one point here as the director of the Oakland Museum, first African-American; and Charlie Persip, the drummer, did all he could to ruin the concert, and he almost did. [laughs]

He decided, at the dress rehearsal, I don't know why, because I didn't know him very well. But I knew he could read and he had gone to Juilliard and was a disciplined musician. And he waited, at the end of the last rehearsal, the dress rehearsal, and said, "I want to put my drums up front. And if you don't let me, I'm not going to play." And he proceeded to play as loudly as he could. And we had acoustic instruments—no microphones. I never said this before, but I want this to go on the record, that he did that.

Crawford: Oh, that's dreadful.

Handy: Yeah.

Crawford: Well, how would Stravinsky have heard this piece?

06-00:49:41

Handy: I have no idea. Oh, wait! The piece was recorded on *The Second John Handy*, on Columbia Records. I listen to him sometimes, maybe he was listening to me. [they laugh]

Crawford: Stravinsky said once that every time he sat down to write music, he was terrified.

06-00:49:51

Handy: Terrified? Is that right?

Crawford: That's the opposite of what Monk told you, I guess.

06-00:49:55

Handy: Well, you know what? For something large, I don't think of writing something just for the heck of it. As I said, there has to be a reason, a concert coming up. Otherwise—I've got a lot of stuff, a lot of pieces all over the place. Little tidbits here and there, that haven't been developed fully, both for large orchestra and concert bands, string quartets, et cetera.

Crawford: Opera. An opera would be wonderful. They're doing a lot of new operas now. They are writing a lot of new ones, and performing them.

06-00:50:29

Handy: Yeah, I heard some real bad ones. [laughs] Writing an opera is not totally out of the question.

Crawford: I'd love to see what you would do.

Well, we should say something about teaching, because you taught for a long time in a lot of places.

06-00:50:47

Handy: I started teaching privately for a number of years. Probably as early as eighteen years old, and continually after I was discharged from the Army. That was when I was twenty-two. I taught privately quite regularly until '75, both here and in New York. In '75, I became very disappointed, and had been for years, with the attitude of most of my students. During the sixties, with few exceptions, with some exceptions, the younger people, who didn't trust anybody over thirty—and I was thirty, and some of them were thirty—came with attitudes that were just something I don't cope with. I can't say, "I have trouble coping with [that]"—I *don't* cope with [it].

They had the biggest egos. They were some of the least talented people, and some of the least intelligent people that I've ever met. There were some who were very bright. As I understand music and love and appreciate it, I refuse to accept somebody who comes to me, and I can't think of *anybody* that they want to learn from, and walk in the room feeling nine-feet tall, and tell me how they want me to teach them. "I want to learn this from you." There's a respect factor there. I can't teach somebody who comes in, who feels that they know as much as I do about what they want.

Crawford: Did you find that everywhere?

06-00:52:51

Handy: Most places. There's a case in point in New York, where this young kid came to me. You know, he was only about five years younger than I, but he acted like a kid. I understood, I was told he was rather wealthy. A French kid who

had moved to New York. He played trumpet at a jam session, where I played. He said he wanted to learn more. He came to me for help.

When he came in he said, “Hey, man, I don’t want to play like anybody else.” I didn’t even look at him, and I said, “You know, at this point, at this stage of your playing, nobody wants to play like you.” And he turned quickly [they laugh] and he looked surprised. He said, “What? What?” Well, he took a lesson, but he never came back. I’ve had some wonderful students. But I had a few who had attitudes that I don’t like.

It’s kind of characteristic of our Western culture. Having played with Ali Akbar Khan, and knowing beforehand what their discipline was like, and in other parts of the world, attitudes toward experienced older people that I agree with, I’m totally turned off to teaching [just] anybody. So that’s why I stopped teaching in 1975. On rare occasions I help somebody, I don’t charge, generally. I don’t charge, actually. That is when I like the musician.

Crawford: Seems to me you can’t really teach, once the technique is learned.

06-00:54:50

Handy: I can help a lot of people. I can steer a lot of people in the right way. But I don’t have the patience for lack of discipline. I taught on the university level for fifteen years. And I should’ve stopped earlier. I met some wonderful people, I have some wonderful friends because of that, both as instructors and former students.

But overall, I really think we’re in trouble, with our attitudes. I think we’ve reached the point that parents can’t teach their own children, will not teach—the children will not even allow them to teach, or will not allow them to parent. I’m disappointed in people who are parents, because they don’t have the guts to parent. Most of us. They don’t have the guts.

Crawford: Is there the discipline out there to master an instrument? Do you see much of that?

06-00:55:51

Handy: There are people who are playing well. There is always talent. Intelligence. I mean, nobody has a cap on it. But again, it’s very difficult to teach it. I don’t see the real mastery. I see and hear people who specialize in certain directions and styles. But overall, we should be producing more. It’s embarrassingly low, our appreciation and understanding of quality music.

Crawford: I wanted to ask you about “No Coast.” How would you describe your own style?

06-00:56:49

Handy: I couldn’t. Well, I’m varied. I appreciate almost any expert, any person, or any music that’s been mastered to a high level of performance, and let’s say an

aesthetic development, and a spiritual—all of that. Some of these words, sometimes I don't think really mean that much. We think things about, oh, in the heart. We now have plastic hearts, so I question heartfelt things, too. [laughs]

Crawford: We have a plastic heart?

06-00:57:33

Handy: Well, you know, we've got artificial hearts, come on. Some people have them now. You know. We think about things being heartfelt, and I kind of question that, because if you've got a heart that is mechanically produced, you know what I mean? I don't quite understand. I don't think anybody else does. It's a kind of verbiage. They talk about it, but the music doesn't come out. There're a lot of people who produce some kind of sounds and rhythms, and I don't think it's music. I don't think there's much talent there.

Crawford: Are you talking about the new forms of rap, music coming out of rap.

Handy: I think many of those raps should be rapped over the head. [laughs]

Crawford: What does it represent?

06-00:58:28

Handy: I have no idea.

Crawford: Rap is taken seriously in places like Cuba, as a form of young people's expression, so important that the government has a "department of rap."

06-00:58:39

Handy: Well, you know, young people could be impressed; they don't realize when they're being impressed. And they were impressed, especially going back to the sixties, when they thought they were so hip, this university not being an exception (University of California, Berkeley). They felt they were smarter than their parents. And yes, parents sometimes *were* a drag.

In the meantime, they didn't replace it with anything any better. You know, even when their parents owned Dow Chemicals, you know? [laughs] Most of them didn't do anything but steal somebody's flowers from someone's yard and give them to somebody else. Something they didn't cultivate. When they wanted clothes, they went to their parents or their grandparents and tried to steal those styles. And rappers are doing basically the same thing, looping older people's music. Because they don't have their own music. What do they bring here?

A young girl told me years ago— She was a Jewish girl from Berkeley, who'd gone to a black college in the south. It was in my classroom, and she was talking about rap. She'd heard some black fraternities kidding each other. This is something they did through generations, making rhymes and teasing

each other about their sorority girlfriends. It was just in fun, and it was something she never heard. I said to myself, and to her, “You know, that could very easily become a very popular thing; all people have to do is refine it a bit and add rhythm—drums, etc.” Because it’s fairly easy. It takes some imagination and practice.

It also showed that African-Americans are a lot more talented, and have skills with the English language, even though sometimes it’s not the King’s English that they use. And some of them have mastery of that. They’re very creative, no matter how poor they are, and how rich they become. They’re still very creative. And they’re coming up with things that a lot of people with a lot more money haven’t come up with. I’m sorry that they’re exploited so, and that now they’re exploiting themselves and all of us. The results are very negative.

Crawford: Well, that’s a very good place to stop today.

Interview 4: November 15, 2007
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07-00:00:10

Crawford: Today we're talking about your heroes, the people you've mentioned in the course of the interviews. Who comes to mind?

07-00:00:19

Handy: My heroes in music, or overall?

Crawford: In music.

07-00:00:23

Handy: In music. Well, there are so many—but some come to mind right away. Of course, I'm going to leave out some simply by not remembering, and knowing that I have only a limited amount of space here, and time.

Some of my early heroes were singers, actually, in the beginning, because singing is almost always more accessible in all of our lives.

I remember a young man named Pepper, who sang blues while working—picking cotton in Plano, Texas. I'm surprised I even thought about him. Then my sister and I stayed one time with my grandmother Inez Smith, before we moved to L.A. I remember we used to go to church a lot with her on Sundays, and they had great singing there. There was a man who sang, "I'm Grazing in That Sweet Old Clover Field." He was fantastic. That song always moved the congregation.

There was Elder Stevens, the pastor. He sang quite well. There were some individuals who did solos, whose names I never knew. They were wonderful. We also had recordings of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who was a young guitarist, a gospel and blues singer.

She later did some duets with Sister Marie Knight, whom my mom Pauline actually said she believed we were related to. We never met her, though. Rosetta Tharpe was just incredible, with her sense of phrasing and the notes that she chose—the melismatic timing was delightful!

The gospel people—[I] could go on and on. There are many characters whose names I don't remember. But then jazz, blues, like Big Maceo. I heard him sing on a recording. The Song was "Keys to the Highway." I didn't like Pinetop Smith that much, but we had some of his recordings. Peetie Wheatstraw, the "Devil's Son-in-Law." We had one or two of his recordings.

And by the way, in Dallas, there were at least two guys named Howlin' Wolf. One was Frank Hutchinson, who was a friend of the family. He played piano and sang blues. That was during my early years, until I started to hear and recognize jazz. Well, I actually heard that before. I have to back up.

07-00:04:03

I heard some big bands when I was as young as four and five years old. I recall the music. But the Rosetta singing was when I was nine and ten years old. And after that we moved to LA, so I didn't hear her again until just very recently. Now I have a couple of her CDs. I didn't realize she was a teenager when she made those early recordings.

Lil [Lillian] Green's "Romance in the Dark" became a classic. I remember that. She was a teenager. Then of course, we had Louis Armstrong—some very early recordings of him. I got to appreciate him later, through both his music and his contributions, because we had some of his music—"I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You" and "Sposin." They were more kind of novelty tunes, I think.

And we had early Louis Jordan. Now, that was one of my heroes. He was a saxophonist/singer. He was an influence on a lot of jazz players. Charlie Parker was with Jay McShann, I believe, in '41, when they recorded in Dallas. And of course, I didn't know that, but we were listening to Jay McShann as early as 1941. I remember that. I can hum all those solos and the arrangements. Private Cecil Gant, who actually was accompanied by Jay McShann on piano, doing "Confessin' the Blues." That was a big hit in my house. Those were the early war years.

Crawford:

You did a lot of listening.

07-00:06:12

Handy:

I heard a lot of music. I also heard Count Basie and I heard Duke Ellington's music. I was attracted to those solos by Charlie Parker, with Jay McShann, Lester Young with Basie, and Johnny Hodges with Duke.

Crawford:

What attracted you? What makes the greatness?

07-00:06:27

Handy:

I don't know. It's like, what makes you like the taste of vanilla? [laughs] Vanilla cake and ice cream. I don't know—it's because [there's] something in it that just sounds so good and you're very attracted. It moves something inside your head, and seems to go from your head into your body and it feels good all over. That's what attracted me. Let's say it just made me feel wonderful.

Soon I started to see pictures of these guys. The Dorsey brothers in movies, Benny Goodman in movies, Harry James. People like that. And you saw those gold-colored instruments that looked so rich and attractive. They appeared to be very successful; they were very beautifully dressed. And I thought that was a great thing to do and to be.

I saw lots of movies, too, and I had my fantasies about possibly doing that later. But before that, that was not much of a reality to me at heart. I didn't think of doing that at that age. I wanted to be a painter.

Crawford: Were you painting?

07-00:07:57

Handy:

I did a little bit in school, painting for our art teacher. I did some things for the classroom that she put around on the wall, I did several of those, and then I started drawing. I started making toys, carving. That scar right there, is from when I was from five or six years old, done with a knife. I'm right-handed, but I was using the left hand, and I kind of sliced my middle finger a little bit. Still, I have the scar.

Then we moved to LA when I was ten-and-a-half, and I joined the All Nations Boys Club. They had woodworking, they had a workshop in there. I started right away making toys, scale models of tanks, planes that we saw in the movies, and that were part of our weaponry in World War II. So I did those. You painted them after you carved them out, using a drill press and all of that. So I have another scar over my right eye, because of forgetting to put the safety on, and I got whacked here. [laughs] Oh, it hurt.

When we left LA, I never had a chance to do that again. It was such a high level of accessibility. You could go there, and they had the wood, they had the paint. That wasn't [so] in Dallas. There we were in a Black community, living with my grandmother. And that was a good thing, because we'd never been able to walk to school before in Dallas.

So from there, for two years, I was able to walk. No, not for two years, just for finishing a semester, because that's where we finished my fifth grade. And the next semester was spring semester. In the fall, we had to take the trolley and bus to St. Peter's Academy, which was on the other side of town.

Crawford: You started music at St. Peter's.

07-00:10:12

Handy:

Yes, about a year later.

Crawford: Well, back to heroes—

Handy:

Louis Jordan was really the instrumentalist that broke through with me. And Lester Young, some of his solos that I would hear from time to time on radio. Then I became acquainted more with Charlie Parker. Flip Phillips and Howard McGhee were recording together. My best friend, Billy Roy Clark, whose family sent him some recordings, would play them for me when I visited him after school.

Crawford: You said so.

07-00:11:31

Handy:

So I started listening to those musicians. They didn't become my heroes, but they were good, I liked them, but I knew that there were people I liked better.

After a few years, we moved back to California when I was fifteen, here in Oakland. Here, I really heard much more of Charlie Parker, so I really got turned on to his music here. Didn't know who he was then, but years later, I realized he was the guy playing the solos in 1941, when we had the [recording of] Jay McShann Band playing "Hootie Blues." I remember the solo. That was Charlie Parker then.

And then Dizzy [Gillespie]. Actually, I became more acquainted with Dizzy, come to think of it, sooner than Charlie, as a youngster, as a teenager, in Dallas. I thought he was a brilliant trumpet player. And as a matter of fact, I tried to write some music based on— Well, it was inspired by Dizzy's "One Bass Hit". He was using augmented chords and scales. That's when I stopped [laughs] attempting to be a composer at that age, so I didn't do it again. That was when I was thirteen. I didn't try it again until I was eighteen.

Crawford: The augmented chord was daunting to you?

07-00:13:03

Handy: It was way over my head. And if I'd pondered with it, I could've heard it. But I'm that way. It hurt too much.

Crawford: I would say that was pretty advanced, you were trying to write already.

07-00:13:13

Handy: Yeah. So [hums]. These are whole-tone scales. Then I started to hear him, Charlie Parker, Miles, and just a host of wonderful people—Gene Ammons, Kenny Dorham, Bud Powell, Don Byas. Illinois Jacquet was entertaining but not as inspiring. He was a Texan, also; he was from Houston.

Anyhow, I did what I did back then. Once I got here, I played real soon after I enrolled at McClymonds. I borrowed a horn on Wednesday, and played my first gig Saturday. So I can jump from here back over to New York, I think.

Crawford: It's interesting to hear you talk about the early people, because I never heard you mention singers before. And you never talked about your own singing, really.

07-00:14:19

Handy: I think I could've been a very good singer, to be honest, because I used to sing. My buddies used to say, "Sing!" And my best friend, especially, Henry Browning, he loved the way I sang. He was a talented saxophonist, actually.

I remember in Cleveland, when I had a job in a restaurant and it was kind of late, I'd sing sometimes, just by myself. The men that I worked with would say, "Man, you really sing very well." But once I started to play the saxophone, all of that went out the window. I didn't want to sing, because I found the instrument so much more interesting, and I could do so many more things.

With singers, my heroes were Nat King Cole, Louis Jordan, and some of the blues singers, but they kind of faded, especially when I picked up the instrument. Despite that I found myself playing with some of them here, like PeeWee Crayton and Roy Hawkins, and even Jimmy McCracklin once, but that was when I was a young adult. I was pretty hip by then, so— [they laugh]

Crawford: You were.

07-00:15:33

Handy: Yes, I had advanced quite a bit beyond what I thought was advancement. And Sarah Vaughan just totally knocked me out. And Ella before that. I'd heard Ella since I was a very small kid. She was always great. Carmen McRae was very good. Nancy King, Diane Reeves, Perry Como, Billy Eckstine were favorites of mind.

Crawford: You said something about Ella—that she was the most intuitive singer.

07-00:15:56

Handy: She was very intuitive. I don't think she ever necessarily knew academically about chords and scales. But she knew them intuitively. She had so much talent and imagination. And she just knew where to put things. They always fit. They were so logical. It was like, yes, perfect. It's like someone who could build a house without having ever taking carpentry or geometry.

Crawford: A natural.

07-00:16:34

Handy: Just a natural. That's correct. And then later, Sarah just totally floored me with her singing, because she knew where to put it—the same thing. I could hear that she was inspired by, I'm sure, Ella. And then Ella, in turn, I think, was inspired by Ethel Waters, whose singing I got to know a little bit later. I thought she was great, too.

I thought Bing had a wonderful baritone voice, [Bing] Crosby. And Perry Como was one of my favorite singers. I was playing by then, when these guys were still around. There was Andy Williams, Dick Haymes, all these were wonderful crooners. There were a lot of the young women singers at the time. I can think of Margaret Whiting and later, Chris Connor. She was younger. Doris Day, Dinah Shore, etc., were some more female singers that I heard for years.

Crawford: You didn't mention Billie Holiday.

07-00:17:41

Handy: I didn't like Billie then. There was something so painful about her singing. I heard Billie at a very young age, but I didn't turn on to her until much later. And then when I started to know a bit about her life and how hard it was—I had not known what she'd gone through.

When I did, I realized I'd probably be much worse off myself if I had lived through what that poor lady went through. Musically, she was another one of those who just put the right ingredients in her music that were just perfect for what she was doing.

Then the youngsters, younger people came along, who were closer to me—the Coltranes and Miles. Just a lot of people who were my peers, some of them, I admired their playing. Like Curtis Fuller, with whom I just received an award; Jackie McLean, Donald Byrd, Frank Morgan, who lived here for a minute. And some kids I went to school with here in Oakland; Wakefield Taylor, Sonny Simmons, Henry Browning, and Burnett Sutton, trumpet player, bassist Skippy Warren. I heard Art Tatum said to him, “You’re the greatest bass player I have ever heard.”

Crawford: High praise!

07-00:19:28

Handy:

Yes. He used to give me rides to Bop City. Well, these guys were playing fantastically. Pianist Stanley Willis, the wild man, who came through here, hired me on a few gigs. I learned a lot from him. Saxophonist Kermit Scott was my father’s age. I still play the high notes that I first heard him play. I’m still trying to play them higher. Thanks to him.

Kermit was an influence, and there are lots of people I’ve worked with and whose music I became more appreciative of later. Some I didn’t work with. But again, as I mentioned earlier, I didn’t really go to New York or anywhere that I was going to go and stay to play with somebody for a very long time. I never expected to even meet Charlie Mingus, much less play with him.

Crawford: Well, that was another question. West Coast jazz—Ted Gioia talks about you in his book, *West Coast Jazz*, as somebody whose star was high because you went to New York. Do you feel that way?

07-00:20:46

Handy:

Yeah. Because New York still is the headquarters of mass media, as far as being exposed or being interviewed or being reviewed, whether you’re playing in a dump or playing in one of the big halls—Carnegie Hall or at Lincoln Center.

So it really has a lot, if you happen to be there and the right person. Chicago and Los Angeles were better than the Bay Area for exposure, I think. Some of us were playing very well, and had I been in New York, I would’ve had a chance at recordings and could’ve been playing, and probably influential, even at a much younger age than some of the people that we got to know, like Miles, Trane and Charlie Parker. We were all playing at early ages.

Crawford: You were playing early. You said that Ralph Gleason had covered a concert, and then not again.

07-00:21:59

Handy:

Well, I was in my early thirties by the time Ralph caught that date. Now, Ralph reviewed an album that I did before I was thirty. One of the first albums that I did, he reviewed it and he said it was good, but it wasn't earth shaking. He didn't say any more than that it was a good album.

It was not until he heard the band in the mid-sixties that I had—and it was a great band—but I had other great bands. Some of the players were more talented, but not as a whole cohesive group. As a matter of fact, after that band that supported me so strongly I had another band right after that that I think was more talented, as far as actual gifts.

Crawford:

Who would you single out in that group?

07-00:23:03

Handy:

Bobby Hutcherson, vibraphonist. [laughs] Bobby Hutcherson, the late Albert Stinson on bass. Miles used him in '68, then something happened with his bass player, here on the campus. He asked to use our bass player. Not “my” bass player, but we say that—the guy that was in our band, Albert, who was a twenty-two-year-old kid, was a genius.

Pianist/vibraphonist Buddy Montgomery is just incredible. He's one of the most talented and creative musicians that I've ever known. And I've known other people like him. Sonny Greenwich, a guitarist that I had in the band, who was from Canada. He is an African Canadian who looked like a miniature Abe Lincoln.

Crawford:

[they laugh] Oh, that's interesting. Well, you were active in the Civil Rights Movement. And in your interview, you said that employment is still not very fair. Where do you see that?

07-00:24:39

Handy:

Well, right now. Just since we've had our last interview, there was a lot of media coverage of some mostly African Americans, spearheaded by some Caucasians, who saw the need to step in and at least declare the fact that, even on the level of local musicians, how unfairly the employment is distributed in favor of whites here.

Crawford:

You're talking about music?

07-00:25:21

Handy:

Yes, performing, making a living with music. Yes, the little clubs are—

Crawford:

Who's responsible for that?

07-00:25:29

Handy:

White people. [laughs]

Crawford: When I talked to Earl Watkins, he was at the union as the person who got together bands upon request, and he said the same thing.

07-00:25:49

Handy: To be honest, a lot of times it's embarrassing, because we all have white friends. [laughs] We've got mixed kids and all. And it's embarrassing to bring it up. But the real truth of the matter, and anybody who's there, even the people who're guilty of doing it, know the disparity between blacks and whites is very wide, when it comes to hiring.

Crawford: Who's doing the hiring?

07-00:26:17

Handy: White people.

Crawford: At the musicians union?

07-00:26:19

Handy: I can't even relate to the musicians union anymore. I left them years ago, because basically, they were just taking most musicians' money regardless of race; they weren't giving us any work. They were benefiting simply from you giving them dues. They never got you a job.

Crawford: Was that based on discrimination? Was that race discrimination?

07-00:26:39

Handy: Well, put it this way. We had two unions when I joined.

Crawford: Sure. San Francisco was one of the last to merge its black union and its white union. That was 1960, wasn't it?

07-00:26:49

Handy: I think it was '59.

Crawford: But late.

07-00:26:52

Handy: Yeah. I joined the union in '49. And '59, I was in New York when they merged. When they merged here, Local 669, which was the African American union, was taken over by Local 6, the white union. They took all of our assets, our money, and access to the gigs. People would phone in for a performance, for musicians. We never saw any more of that. For a while several of our former officials in local 669 were given positions in local 6. Vernon Alley, Curtis Lowe, and Earl Watkins were those men. After a few years, they were dropped.

Crawford: So it was better before the merger, better for you.

07-00:27:32

Handy:

Yes, no doubt about it. Because people get in there, people bring pals and buddies in there, and so only certain white guys got the gigs; not all of them were getting gigs fairly. But however, it was always them, and not us.

Crawford:

And that's still the case today, you think?

07-00:27:53

Handy:

Oh, no doubt about that. As musicians, we don't usually get our jobs through the musicians union. You hustle your own gigs. There are many of us who are integrated musically in our bands. I'm not saying every club or venue is being discriminatory. Sometimes it's just that you start to hire people that you know and that associate with you. They're more accessible when know them.

Crawford:

It's easier.

07-00:28:28

Handy:

Yes, it's easier. White musicians have to be reminded from time to time. They might not have very much, but we have nothing. They are taking the music. They have taken the music. We used music as a means of making a living. Now they have come in and taken everything. They had other means of income; now they've got ours. And I think a lot of people overlook that. We don't have much left to market. When your music is everything that you've got, and it's taken away—

Crawford:

Do you need representation to get good gigs?

07-00:20:10

Handy:

I would think so. I'd say yes and no. I used to be pretty good at it, but I'm in a position and a stage in my life that I'm living okay, and it's by almost a fluke, I suppose. But I've certainly had some lean times.

I've lived well enough. So I don't consider myself within the norm of black or white musicians. I'm certainly not wealthy, but I live better than most of these guys do, and whether they have families who support them or came from wealth, I'm doing better than most. Some of that is because I've bought real estate here and there when I could.

Even when I was using music only, as a means of paying my bills and living on whatever level, I was never part of the jazz scene, per se. I didn't socially hang out with blacks, whites, or anybody. I've kind of been alone and with my special friends, most of who are not musicians. I'm just used to kind of being alone and not with them. I know a few, but I've had only a smidgen of personal close jazz friends, people who are in the business.

Crawford:

I'm glad we covered that. Well, I wanted to talk more about your compositions because we haven't covered everything, and we can't cover everything. But how would you rank your works?

07-00:31:02

Handy: Well, rate or rank it? [chuckles]

Crawford: Whatever. How do you feel at this point about your creations?

07-00:31:12

Handy: Well, I could certainly have composed a lot more, in terms of large compositions. But my attitude is basically— [laughs] I'm not interested, so far, in leaving a lot of music behind that I've never heard. Composing a lot.

Crawford: Oh, but most of your things have been commissioned.

07-00:31:40

Handy: Well, that's why. And people usually come and find me. It's hard to sell yourself. Representation, I've had good and bad, big companies and small agencies, individuals, etc. But I have not had a representative in years and years. What is it now? Probably at least thirty years, and I don't miss it. Most of them have turned out to be people I don't like anymore, they're not friends. Sometimes being on those big rosters is more prestige than it is income unless you're really very lucky. You'd be a damn fool not to exploit your position, however, if you have sold millions of records or hit somebody on the head and the paparazzi makes you a national, international icon, or a newsworthy person.

So it has so little to do with music, whether you play very well or not, or you write well. Again, to reiterate what I've said, I tend to write large or extended compositions for the occasion. I've got one coming up now. I'm working on a composition that is part of an overall celebration of an abstract Expressionist, Surrealist, Enrico Donati, a very important painter and sculptor who is about to turn ninety-eight years old. He was in there, along with Salvador Dali and I think, Chagall and some of these very creative people. He left Italy, getting away from the Fascist and Nazi regimes, and moved to the [United] States.

Crawford: What are you writing?

07-00:34:07

Handy: I don't know yet. His art is just incredible. There is an exhibit at the de Young Museum. My mind is still blasted [chuckles] from what I saw of his art. I don't know how to describe it. He's very unique and wonderful.

Crawford: Sounds challenging.

07-00:34:31

Handy: It is so. I'm not supposed to really talk about this yet, especially for the Bohemian Club.

Crawford: Do you want to say something about the Bohemian Club? What it has meant to you.

07-00:35:13

Handy: I'm not sure I want to talk about that either, except I've met some wonderful people there. I found out about seven years ago that there are a number of members in the club with whom I went to college.

Crawford: SF State?

07-00:35:41

Handy: SF State, yeah.

Crawford: Who's around?

Handy: Oh, there are a number of us in there.

Crawford: Okay, I won't press. On another subject, it was interesting, another thing that Gioia said in *West Coast Jazz*, that SF State was an oasis in a Dixieland town.

07-00:36:07

Handy: Things might've been better for a while after I left. Sometimes you're right here and don't really know, because I wasn't on campus for about eighteen years. I left in '80. From '80 till '98— I went there on very rare occasions. But it did develop a jazz program right under my nose.

I lived in San Francisco, but I didn't know that they in fact had a jazz program until I was invited by Dr. Dee Spencer, who spearheaded the establishment of a jazz department there. I was honored and given a nice trophy in appreciation for my contribution as a teacher there.

Crawford: Beyond the jazz program at State, Gioia was saying that San Francisco's been traditionally a Dixieland town. Is that true?

07-00:37:22

Handy: It might be. I really don't know. During that time, I wasn't as interested in that music as I later became; therefore, I didn't hear it. I later took an interest in it. I knew about Lu Watters and Bob Scobie. But I never heard them play.

Crawford: Turk Murphy?

07-00:37:39

Handy: Turk Murphy. I got to know Turk, and he was a beautiful person. I wasn't a great fan of the music, I was a fan of Turk Murphy as a person. He played with a wonderful spirit. I forgot that. I did hear him. I went to the club. But I went to the club when he had a guest, who was Captain John Handy, who played my same instrument. I went there to hear Captain John Handy.

I had met Turk before. As a matter of fact, I had Turk's band in my classroom during the big strike that we had when we were negotiating to create the first Black studies program in the U.S. at SFSU. Channel 4 and 5 called me to get

my permission to tape Turk's band as they played in my classroom. They came, taped the concert, and left.

So when I went home after class, I turned on the TV and my classroom was used as a contrast to what had gone on earlier. It was news to me, too. I had no idea the SWAT team had been on campus, or anything [they laugh] as exciting as that. I had wonderful people come there. Monk was in my classroom with a quartet.

Crawford: You could just call them in and they would come and perform?

07-00:39:41

Handy: Bill Evans Trio, Charles Mingus Sextet, Sun Ra and his fourteen-piece orchestra, with dancers. [laughs] I had all of that in my classroom.

Crawford: I hope you taped that. Did you tape the class?

07-00:39:58

Handy: No, I didn't. I couldn't. I really didn't have time, no. It's like the music. The magic happens when you're there. And if it's not captured, it's gone.

Crawford: Yes.

07-00:40:17

Handy: But I know it was there. Oh, Milt Jackson came and played two or three different times. Sonny Rollins didn't play, but he came on campus and hung out with us, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk came and played. Yeah, those who were there in the classroom were blessed, and so was I.

Crawford: What a gift to your students!

Well, some of those pieces that you wrote, I'm interested in the performance history. For instance, the one that Stravinsky heard. Is that *Scheme Number One*?

07-00:40:56

Handy: Yes, that was *Scheme Number One*.

Crawford: You played that at Carnegie Hall, I think.

07-00:41:01

Handy: At the Carnegie Weill Recital Hall. That was the premiere of that piece.

Crawford: With a pretty outstanding band.

07-00:41:05

Handy: Yes, yes. Bill Evans was the pianist. Julian Euell played bass, and Charlie Persip played drums. I believe that was in 1961.

I totally forgot that. Bill Evans heard me perform years later with another band. We were playing opposite him in New York at the Vanguard. And I was a little surprised when he said— He was very soft-spoken. He said, “I believe that’s the best of that kind of music I’ve ever heard.” It wasn’t until I was talking to you that I remembered that.

Crawford: What did he mean by that? “That kind of music.”

07-00:41:35

Handy: Well, it certainly wasn’t what he was doing. He was referring to the so-called avant-garde at that time. People were playing pretty far out, shooting all the lights out and turning them back on. [laughs] Musically. And I don’t know if he remembered that he actually had premiered that piece with me when I lived in New York. He might have.

But at least on the recording, we had microphones on all the instruments. Jerry Hahn was able to do some things with the guitar, make some sounds that you can’t make on a piano, of course. And we had the drummer playing a glockenspiel in some places. I even forget sometimes what the instrumentation was. It was controlled, not just emotional playing.

Hopefully, we were playing with some skill, of course, and then with feeling, and communicating in that way. But we didn’t go on with it all night, either. Some people played only that way. And it’s okay if that’s what they wanted to do. They run me out of town most of the time with that kind of playing.

Crawford: What do you mean by that?

07-00:44:02

Handy: Some of it is so harsh and disconnected to the point that there is noise. And that’s why I think Ralph Gleason got angry with me when he said— [laughs] We were on campus here at the University of California, Berkeley. It was during a celebration event. That weekend was pretty much dedicated to Duke Ellington. I think that was the festival of 1967.

We had a symposium, a panel of people talking about music, jazz. Bill Evans, Ralph Gleason, Leonard Feather, myself, and somebody else. So Ralph was in favor of the avant-garde. Overall, most of us weren’t in agreement. Ralph said at one point, “Well, if somebody slams a door and it knocks me out, so be it.” And I said, “Ralph, there’s still noise.” [they laugh] And he stopped writing about my music.

I played the festival that night. It was one of the most fantastic performances we’ve ever done. When I walked in on the stage, the whole audience stood up. I’d never had that kind of reception. I still have never had the whole audience when I walked in. I had Bobby Hutcherson and Pat Martino, two great young players in my band.

Bobby had rehearsed the band for me because I was in this symposium and all. The band's playing was incredible. Ralph basically said we were "there," and that's what he said. I couldn't believe that he did that, because he was our main cheering section.

He never wrote about me again. I didn't intend to insult him, but I thought I was right in saying I didn't agree with him, I have to say. I didn't put him down, I just simply said, "There's noise." Slamming a door to me is noise, it's not music. And he got off my bandwagon there, and I never apologized for it.

Later, when he got involved with—I'm telling another story—that magazine, *Rolling Stone*, I wanted to do something. He asked me to bring him a tape, and I just got a real cold feeling as I went to his desk. It was kind of like putting me in my place, I think. So be it. If that's what it was. Noise is noise.

Crawford: That's unfortunate. Well, where are you going to now?

07-00:46:40

Handy: Where I am, I'm enjoying it. Wherever I go. I've got a couple of concerts coming up, one on the twentieth, which is only a few days from today.

Crawford: Yerba Buena?

07-00:46:51

Handy: Yerba Buena. I just played one, by the way, the Oakland Art & Soul Festival. That went very well. It was very hot that day, so it's good that you weren't trying to sit in that sun. It was very, very hot that day. I'd like you to hear the band that I have, the group. We played together at Jazz at Pearl's. And friends who've known me for a long time and have heard different groups that I've led, say "John, this is the group."

Crawford: I was there when you played at Jazz at Pearl's.

07-00:47:31

Handy: Okay. Well, I hope it was a good night.

Crawford: Great. I didn't know you then.

07-00:47:34

Handy: Right. [laughs] Well, I have the same people, except for the pianist.

Crawford: Who's the pianist?

07-00:47:43

Handy: Dave Matthews was the one that you saw. We used Glen Pearson Saturday, in Oakland.

Crawford: The fine bass player?

07-00:47:53

Handy:

Marcus Shelby. Carlos Reyes was on violin and harp, string harp—and the vibe player is Roger Glenn. I enjoy playing with these guys. It's one of the best—oh, and the drummer was Akira Tana. And he played, too. All of those players lead their own bands.

Crawford:

We haven't talked about hip-hop.

07-00:51:00

Handy:

Well, I'll put it this way. I shouldn't say I have no use for it, because I haven't listened enough to some of these guys and women. I'll put it this way—being whatever ethnic group we find ourselves associated with, or [chuckles] not wanting to be associated with—being poor doesn't necessarily stop you from being creative. And some of these young people are very creative.

First of all, they've shown us that they're not illiterate. They're sure as hell not illiterate. They're smarter than most people who speak very good English, who are illiterate. Very fertile minds are doing this stuff. The ability to even articulate, enunciate some of these rapid-fire lyrics—many of them can do it on the spot. There is something to be admired there. It is much like free jazz. It's almost like we, as black people, improvise daily in our life styles. Some other people do this, too—but we particularly know that it's an approach to the life that we have. We readjust to whatever the day presents to us.

It happens in our speech, in our social lives. We have a structure. But then there's so much for the individual. So much is left up to you, the individual, to make something of it. If you care to. You could go on and be just one of the guys. But you can also distinguish yourself, make yourself known, make yourself admired, even, with your creativity.

Crawford:

It's a recreation, in a way, isn't it?

07-00:53:00

Handy:

Creation, more than recreation.

Crawford:

Creation, all right.

07-00:53:03

Handy:

Yes, we're more into creation than recreation. That's basically what it appears to be to me. With our schools, we have a modus operandi, we have an approach. We are trained to think a certain way. I know that. I know that it's happened to me, musically. Because of my exposure and training to the Western world, I'm not as spontaneous as I would have been otherwise, because I stop and try to think, instead of just doing it. I tend to want to know what it is that I'm doing and having more control over it. But sometimes that is not always the most creative way. I can see why these young folks are doing what they're doing. Boundaries would lock them into known paths.

So no, don't count me as saying I don't like them at all. I have always heard something in hip-hop. I don't like some of the philosophies of all the flower children, many of who are not much younger than I. In earlier years, I have not at all agreed with them. I still think it's some of the worst music ever created. These men and women are now in their sixties, and they play just as bad as they did when they were sixteen.

When you're twenty-five, twenty-six, you should be playing very professionally. But they weren't. They've got a mutual admiration, built-in peer group, who follow them no matter how bad they are, because they could never judge them. They were against more advanced, more mature anything, including musicians. They didn't listen to anybody but themselves. And it's kind of sad, because we've got people on a level intellectually and scientifically and doing important things, but their music is childlike, or like almost mentally ill people. I'm seeing stuff now that I can't believe, and the audience is listening attentively as if there is something important to listen for.

Crawford: But we are listening to the hip-hop artists, poets.

07-00:55:38

Handy: They have had many years to get their creations together, all of them. Some are emerging who have something to say—I think. Our young people need more time to mature.

Crawford: Who's doing good jazz right now?

07-00:56:16

Handy: Well, there're some wonderful players. Lots of people. Right here in my neighborhood, I love Josh Redman. Dave Ellis, Peter Apfelbaum, Dave Matthews, Glen Pearson, Andrew Speight, Hafez Mirdezabeh [sp.?]. These guys are wonderful. Kitty Margolis. Singer. I love Kitty. Sometimes Madeline Eastman is very good. Mary Stallings, Clairdee, Kenny Washington, etc. We've got wonderful musicians. But less and less black kids are in the music. We're losing out.

Crawford: Why is that?

07-00:57:26

Handy: White people are taking everything, basically, that's why. They just simply take it.

Crawford: You mean they've taken the performance opportunities?

07-00:57:34

Handy: They've taken the performance opportunities, they've taken the music. There are a lot of reasons for that. Black people have been sidetracked much by so much crap coming into their communities. And black people are probably the most easily exploited, in terms of thinking whatever happened yesterday is not

new. Because we're very spontaneous, creative people. Whatever is the latest, we want to see and hear that. They don't realize that much of what they like is not very good, that the music they hear is not done to challenge their range.

Music has been taken out of the public schools. White people have much more access to private schools, if they choose. They have better public schools, too, with music and sports. Music has been a great vehicle for African Americans to learn and to excel in. Sports are important to us also.

One of my buddies from McClymonds High School discovered two unknown elements and put them on the periodic chart, right here at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. James Harris contributed numbers 104 and 105. We can do that. We can do all that. Look at rock and roll. Many of us have been here and watched the transition of how that music was taken, and it's as hard for a black person to distinguish himself—even get hired as a side person—in rock and roll as it is for them to get a job with a symphony orchestra.

Crawford: Really?

07-00:59:38

Handy:

It's amazing how fast that happened. In the sixties, it was right under our noses. I was the first headliner at the Fillmore Auditorium. But in a couple weeks, the next thing you know, [laughs] most people wouldn't have listened to me, because they put in some of their own, undeveloped musical peers.

And after a short while, I heard, "It's our music." The hell it's their music, because I was right here. I played with people who created that music. I helped to create that music, too. I played lots of rhythm and blues. I think one of the reasons white people are so eager to take it is because it has given them a rhythm that they've never had or understood. They're becoming acquainted with their bodies. They wanted the beat. They didn't have the beat.

Crawford: How can we remedy this?

07-00:60:31

Handy:

By not being so selfish and greedy. [laughs] They are used to taking stuff from most everybody on the planet. They do it and it's like, I haven't taken it. Well, what do you do? You've taken the clubs, you've taken my music. I don't get the gigs, you've taken my gigs. There's nothing left.

Crawford: But white people love the music and they go to the clubs.

07-00:60:55

Handy:

They love the music, but they love it enough to take it. They don't share it. Once they get it, they don't share it. They don't share it the way they got it. They take control of it. Like rock and roll, all the entrepreneurs—not only did they take the music, they won't even *hire* black people. This is amazing, what happened, with all the liberalism in the sixties.

Crawford: That's when it happened.

07-00:61:25

Handy: In almost months. What happened to the Chambers Brothers? Not even a token amount of jobs for African Americans from all these rock and roll people.

One of my friends—well, three now—have done research. Most of the country western All Stars, people in the Grand Ole Opry, their inspiration, people they listened to, were black. And yet you would never know that. There are a lot of black people who like country western, including myself. I remember Bill Boy and the Cowboy Ramblers in Dallas, and the Light Crust Dough Boys. Not one black face in there. Years later there was Charlie Pride.

Crawford: That is very, very sad.

Well, I wanted to ask you about something you said. You were talking about your Freedom Band. And you said, "Jazz opens minds. It's democratic."

07-00:48:54

Handy: It can. I won't say it always does. Yes, it can open minds. Jazz can open minds, and it usually seems to work better with minds that are already open. [laughs]

Crawford: Talk about the democratic part.

07-00:49:13

Handy: Well, musically, everybody is pretty much equal in jazz. It depends on your talent, your preparation, your inspiration, your dedication, the time that you really spent on all points. Hopefully, you're at a good point, creatively, when you're performing. And everybody gets to do his or her creativeness at a given time. Sometimes, especially on the part of rhythm sections who are backing the soloists— It's very democratic in that way; everybody gets an equal chance and time to perform. You can be a nobody or you can soar to unlimited heights if you're capable of creating something fantastic. Nobody gets in your way, nobody tells you what to do, or how to do it.

We coexist. We're all equal. You can sometimes create to the point that people in the band will love you, or other times, people playing with you can be bored with your playing. And especially if you reach a point that you start to play a phrase and they can finish it for you, because they've heard it [laughs] so many times.

Crawford: Beautiful. Thank you.

[End of Interview]